

Abstract

Silber, Janet Vivian, Back to the World.

Under the direction of Angela Davis-Gardner.

Back to The World is a collection of twelve short stories. They may be dark, but I believe the dark places are where we gather up our humanity and our power. We all have challenges: the ones that are given us and the ones we make. My stories are filled with ordinary people dealing with the lives they have, with dignity, hope and the pain and messiness that goes with being human and alive.

Back to The World

By

Janet Vivian Silber

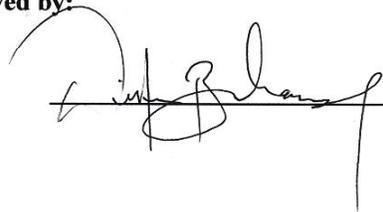
**A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State
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for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.**

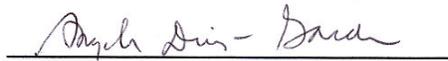
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Approved by:







Chair of Advisory Committee

For Ken Cory and Rebecca Sonoma Silber

Biography

Janet Silber has always been an eavesdropper, a voracious reader and the possessor of what some might call a family bible memory. In other words, she hears and remembers the things most people would like to forget. She believes these ingredients, along with a quirky imagination, have formed the basis of her writing self. Janet has had many chapters in her working/creative life: she has been a licensed general contractor, a housing planner and now a writer, among other things. Born in Texas and, raised in Los Angeles, Janet earned her bachelor's degree in Architecture and Historic Preservation from the University of California at Berkeley. She and her husband moved to Raleigh in 1978 and have a nine year old daughter.

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Kafka's Stay at Jungborn

*I must nourish, strengthen, fatten this body.
Oh, it is too thin to build the blessed warmth, to hold the inner fire.
But were I to eat too much,
stuff myself like a sausage and swell up from the sun,
my writing would not go.*

*For I have written in a tepid bath,
my writing as cold and thin and dreary as a tomb.
My writing must be naked,
for I am made of words
and nothing else.*

*It thrives, it seems on a tender diet
that makes the body ever thinner, lighter, less substantial
until it channels music.*

- Janet Silber



Snowfall

It was the third month of a winter that had been far too long and far too cold. Sara stood on the little triangle of grass where he'd promised to meet her. She shouldered her purse and drew her coat tightly about her, but the wind was brisk, and her feet began to feel wet through the icy slush.

She glanced at the clock on her cell phone—4:45. They were supposed to have met at 4:30. She flung back her long blonde hair, and in an effort to stay warm, began to pace the small park. From the corner to the bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson, to the garbage can and back to the oak tree—a kind of home base.

The streetlights turned on at five o'clock, and still she waited, now munching on a handful of lint-covered M&M's she'd found in her coat pocket. He said he'd meet her at 4:30, and he'd told her that he loved her. She hugged herself. The old stone buildings that surrounded Jefferson Square grew more colorless and ill-defined as the sky began its inevitable darkening toward night.

She sat down on the statue's stone pedestal and lit a cigarette. She'd only known him for three weeks. They had met in the bread aisle at the grocery store, and she'd recommended cinnamon swirl. *Daniel*. He'd been wearing a thick wool sweater, worn khakis and old weejuns—no socks. Money. His hair was cut just so—gently ruffled. He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Just thinking of him now, made her want to throw off all her clothes and rub her breasts madly against him. Only a few more minutes, she thought, exhaling a breath of smoke, and he'd be driving by in his little blue pick-up.

She sighed, remembering last Sunday morning together, eating waffles, sitting in the sunshine by his kitchen window, an earthenware mug of bitter black coffee in her hand, everything cozy and out of focus. For that moment her life seemed all that it should be.

It was 5:15. The sky was nearly dark; the clouds hadn't allowed for a sunset. She leaned hard against the statue's knees, huddled close, her black-toed boots flat on the cracked concrete, toes touching. Just the tip of her cigarette glowed; she felt her body disappearing into the night.

He wasn't coming. His rough curly hair, his blue eyes, his work-worn jeans. She had been left. He wasn't coming. She might as well face it. It wasn't as if it hadn't happened before. *Dumb Bitch*. She pulled out her cell-phone and punched in Daniel's number. Hard. Two rings, his voice. *Hi, it's Daniel with Richardson Design/Build. Leave a message....*

"Daniel, hey, it's Sara. I've been waiting for you at Jefferson Square since 4:15. Weren't we supposed to get together today? It's already 5:30, and I'm freezing my butt off. Call me!" There, she thought. I've done it, so I should go home. I feel like an idiot. She stood up, her pants coldly damp from the stone. She could hear the swoosh of cars going round the square. It was time to go, but her body just stood there. Waiting.

Last month her sister Laura had delivered her third, perfect, plump baby; this one was named Nancy in memory of their mother. And now, here I am, Sara thought, twenty-six years old, waiting at a statue, for God's sake, waiting for a guy I've picked up at the fucking grocery store. Or the gym, or an AA meeting, or a photo shoot. When was she going to learn, she thought, dusting cigarette ashes off her lap.

Laura didn't understand anything, she thought. She could even be fat with those huge dimply thighs, having babies one after another like a cow, and people still loved her. Or respected her or something. No, Laura didn't know what it was like; she wasn't the one their mother had given away. Laura had always been the dutiful daughter— responsible goody-goody-- hadn't she even been in marching band? Then college. And now Mr. Software and their three kids. Sara had been the one with the diagnosis, dragged to counseling, hanging out in front of Larry's Liquors with her friends, trying to get someone to buy her Tequila and Camel cigarettes. Sometimes returning the favor.

Back then she thought that everyone made love with anyone that turned them on, made them feel special. Like a princess. It didn't take much to feel like a princess in those days, she recalled, someone stroking her hair gently, telling her she was beautiful, telling her she was hot. She'd been too young to know that sex could be special. Not that she should have saved herself, but she shouldn't have given herself away. Like she was still doing, damn it, she thought as she ground out her cigarette on Jefferson's knee cap.

She pushed her hands deep into her pockets and felt the little wad of scrunched-up paper she always carried. A copy of the letter her mother had written to Aunt Barb so many years ago. Sara had been going through her mother's desk, searching for some change when she found it. She hadn't meant to read it, hadn't meant to take it. By now she'd read it so many times that the paper was soft as old linen. She walked over to the streetlight, and read it once more--

Dear Barb,

Sara's in trouble again. I don't know why I'm writing you about it, there's really nothing anyone can do. This time it's shoplifting (sweaters at The Gap)—I just got her out of jail. They were keeping her in a holding cell (with the rest of the criminals), and sometimes I think she belongs there. I'm so sick of the whole thing I can't see straight! She's flunked all her classes, uses the house like a hotel and she's high all the time. Having her around is like living with a fifteen year old donkey. If only Elliot hadn't died....

That was when the really bad hollow feeling started. She had wanted to crush the letter in a tight crumpled ball and throw it into the trash can. Throw in a match and burn down the whole damn house. She wanted to leave her life. Just get away. If they didn't want her, then fine, she'd leave. She'd just leave and screw it.

But she was only fifteen. She was already banned from her best friend's house. She didn't have any money. She had nowhere to go. Her mother, her own mother, didn't want her anymore. Didn't want her enough, anyway. Just wanted to get rid of her. Maybe she'd never ...if only Daddy hadn't died.

Sara glanced at her cell clock again. 5:40. Tried Daniel's number again. *Hi, it's Daniel Hi, it's Daniel....* "Hi, it's Daniel," she mimicked to herself. I wish I could slam down this cell phone, she thought, clicking off doesn't cut it. But she'd stopped throwing things too. She stood up and stretched her legs and tied the belt of her black leather coat more tightly. She pulled her gloves from the jacket pocket, the insides soft with rabbit fur, and began walking to her car.

Maybe she'd visit Laura tonight after all. She was always asking. Sara always promised she'd be over soon; before the kids turned twenty-one, she always joked. By then she'd have her own career, not just working as a lousy photographer's assistant. Laura could probably use some help. Brian was always working. Sara could offer to hold the baby or peel potatoes or play Fish with Emma. She walked to the corner just as a truck turned and stopped in front of her. The window rolled down.

"Hey, baby," Daniel said, leaning out, "it's good to see you. I was wondering if you'd still be here."

"I've been here since 4:15," she snapped, "and it's almost six now. Didn't you get any of my messages?" It was stupid, but she felt like she was going to cry. She was just so damn cold.

"Sorry, Sara, I got held up at work—we were trying to get the footings poured before it snowed and it got too cold for the concrete to set up." Daniel was only wearing a faded blue-jean jacket over a tee shirt, she noticed, but he looked warm and toasty in the cab of his pick-up. "Come on, get in and we can go grab a beer."

"I don't drink," she said slowly, pushing back a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Don't you remember—you know, my fucked up childhood and all that?"

"I remember you said you didn't drink, but I thought it was one of those New Age-y things," he said. "My last girlfriend was lactose intolerant. She couldn't eat ice cream." He looked at her face. "You're not really serious about that twelve-step shit are you?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "I am. I have to be. I've only been sober for six months."

“Well, it won’t hurt you to drink just a little bit,” he said reaching out the window and rubbing the inside of her wrist with his thumb. “You could do with a bit of relaxing.”

“I’ve been waiting out here for two fucking hours, Daniel. I’m just about frozen solid.” She tried to pull her wrist back, but he just held it more tightly. She got that funny feeling again. As if her body had just been filled with anti-freeze, top to bottom.

“What are you getting all upset for, Sara? Daniel asked. “I thought you liked it rough.” She stared at him. “Maybe you’re thinking about somebody else, Daniel. Get your fucking hands off me!”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said. “Maybe I got the wrong message. No problem, no problem at all, Sara. There’s plenty of fish in the sea,” he said, powering up the window so fast he nearly caught her wrist. “Fucking cunt,” he growled, as he tore off, tires squealing around Academy Street.

Her breath came fast and frosty in the cold moist air. It’ll probably start snowing any minute now, she thought, as she started walking--fast--boots clicking on the sidewalk. Her shiny red VW bug, the only thing of value she really owned, was just where she’d left it at the corner of Academy and Magnolia. She climbed in gratefully; its familiar smell of old chocolate bars and cigarettes that felt like home. She took a deep breath; she’d come so close to screwing up again. But, she hadn’t, she thought. That was the truth this time.

She pulled down the visor and looked at her face in the little square mirror. The tight lines around her mouth. Her fair skin barely covering the veins. Her tired eyes. She glanced down at her wrist, the purple bruise beginning where Daniel had grabbed her.

She began to shiver. She started up the car, turned the heater knob all the way to hot, but she was shaking and couldn't stop. She threw off her gloves, breathed on her cold hands and stroked her head over and over again. "It's okay, baby," she murmured to herself. "You're okay, now, you're okay, you're okay." Finally the shaking stopped.

The snow had come thick and fast. The windows were opaque and diffused the light from passing cars. She felt sealed in, curiously safe, in her own white world. She rolled down the window and looked out. Wet snowflakes blew in and stuck to her cheek, settled on her shoulder. Nowhere to go. Again. She could barely see and the street lamps were pale glows. She couldn't visit Laura tonight. Too many babies. An AA meeting? No, fuck that. Fuck those fucking meetings. She closed her eyes and sighed. Daniel, oh, Daniel-- she could see him right now, leaning against the kitchen wall, drinking a mug of coffee, phone in hand--sweet-talking his customers one more time, his voice low and sure. He was always so sure. She rested her head against the steering wheel for a minute, then pulled out her cell phone before she could change her mind and punched in his number.

"Hi, Daniel," she said softly. "It's me."

Moonstone

Lisa lay back on the cool silk pillows. She always liked to lean on them, touch the smooth materials, the color of coffee with cream, and braid the long tassels. The brown nubby couch she sat upon had always been there. A low wooden table topped with thick green glass squatted before it.

“You have become such a *hübsches, junges Mädchen*, Lisa. Such a lovely girl,” said Great Aunt Sophie. She sat on the other end of the couch, and absently fingered the silken tassels. Her large hands glowed with rings. On her right hand she wore a moonstone ring. The stone was enormous, luminous and milky white. When she was a little girl, Lisa used to rub it and make wishes. She’d always wished for a sister; now fifteen, it hadn’t happened yet.

The room was a room for dreaming and wondering. It was long and low-ceilinged with immense windows at one end that overlooked a sweep of green lawn and the San Bernardino Mountains when it wasn’t too smoggy. There was a terra cotta bust of her Uncle John as a young college graduate, a treasured set of Shakespeare folios, a statue of Shiva, and a picture of Blue Fudo, a Tibetan god. A framed photograph of Carl Jung sat on the side table. His glasses shone like headlights.

Lisa stretched and sighed. “A penny for your thoughts,” Great Aunt Sophie asked. Her aunt was a large woman with breasts like a shelf. Thinking of the real flesh beneath her sweater always made Lisa a bit queasy. Aunt Sophie’s eyes were large and owlsh, as if she could peer right into your brain. A protégé of Jung’s, she knew more

than she should about the inside of a brain. Lisa stared at the floor, keeping her face stolid and expressionless.

“Aunt Sophie,” she asked suddenly. “Where did you get that ring?”

“It was a gift from Wilhelm. He gave it to me when we had been married just a year. I had just lost... you know--I had miscarried and Wilhelm, he gave it to me, so, I feel better. I could not stop crying.”

Lisa held her breath. Aunt Sophie never talked about her old life in Germany. Especially not in front of the children. Which was why Lisa was now listening as hard as she could. Her parents had left her with her Great Aunt Sophie and Uncle Otto for the weekend, while they went to Palm Springs. She never knew what she might find out while they were gone.

“But I thought Wilhelm was Uncle Otto’s brother,” said Lisa.

“No, Wilhelm, he was my first husband, before I married your Uncle Otto.”

“But I thought you were always married to Uncle Otto.”

“No,” said Aunt Sophie. “Otto is my second husband. First it was Wilhelm. I knew him from the time I was a young girl in Berlin. He was my brother Rudy’s friend. I got to know him after the war. We married when I was just eighteen.”

Lisa wondered what else she didn’t know about her family. Probably everything. Her mother’s side of the family drew together like a hive of buzzing bees whenever she went outside to play with her cousins. When they returned from their games, the lights were dim, the relatives’ voices were low and hushed, their faces nodding and hunched over cups of schnapps or cold glasses of seltzer. Lisa knew her relatives talked of the old days in Germany, about the people who were no longer here.

“How come I never heard of Uncle Wilhelm before?” she asked finally.

“Why remember what happened in the other country? We are here. We are Americans now.” Aunt Sophie’s dark glowing eyes focused somewhere only she could see. She reached out for the little glass of sherry she’d allowed herself. “It is not always good to remember.” Lisa had never seen Aunt Sophie drink alcohol before, except the Manichewitz blackberry wine she served at Passover. Maybe that’s why she was talking so freely now.

“So what did Uncle Wilhelm look like?” she asked.

“He had the *Schmiss*, the how you say, the dueling scar, on his cheek. All the young men used to have them. He had the broadest shoulders, like he could carry the world on them. I thought he was so handsome.”

“Do you have an old photograph of him, Aunt Sophie?”

Aunt Sophie waved her hand. “I have one somewhere.” She pressed her lips together.

“Lisa,” called Uncle Otto from the doorway. “Come. The light is beautiful. I was just hoping to take a picture of you before it gets too dark.

“I can’t go right now, Uncle Otto. Aunt Sophie is telling me some of the old stories, about when she was young.”

Aunt Sophie stood up and walked over to the huge windows. “It is such a clear day. You can almost see the mountains.” She turned to look at Lisa. “I need to make dinner now.”

Lisa trailed Uncle Otto into the backyard. The sun had just begun to set. Pink and orange clouds streaked across the sky. The classic California sunset, her father always said, that only the smog of L.A. could create.

Uncle Otto strung the camera around his neck and peered at her through the lens. “Lisa, Lisa,” said Otto. “Don’t look like that. Your picture will be grumpy. Such a beautiful girl,” he sighed. Lisa was grumpy. She hated having her picture taken. And it would probably be another one of those terrible photographs where she looked like she was crying, and all you noticed was her glittering braces and her wild frizzy hair.

“Too late, the light is gone,” said Otto. He walked down the hill and plucked a few figs from their enormous tree in the yard. “Would you like one?” he asked.

“I’ll try it.” She bit gingerly into the pulpy fruit. “How come I never knew about Uncle Wilhelm?”

“Oh, Wilhelm. Has Sophie been talking about Wilhelm? When we leave Europe we leave our memories. We leave our old life,” he said firmly.

“Aunt Sophie said something about a photograph.”

“Hmmm.” He took another bite revealing the dewy pink insides of the fig. “Well, Lisa,” he said. “Wilhelm, he was a most brilliant man. He knew all of King Lear by heart and he spoke, let me see, so many languages--German, French, Yiddish, some Hebrew, Latin and English, of course.”

It must run in the family, Lisa thought. Uncle Otto, she knew, was something of a Shakespearian scholar himself. He was always writing for this journal or that. Last year he’d even had a book published on King Lear.

“But how did you know Wilhelm?” she pressed.

“So many questions, Lisa.” He shoved his hands into his coat pocket. “We had just returned from the Great War. Wilhelm and I were in the same unit, but Wilhelm had been a prisoner of war in London. We all met every Friday night at the *Café Storch* to read and discuss. Sophie too. We were all so fascinated with the ideas of Freud and Jung. Ahh, Sophie, she was a great beauty. We were all a little in love,” sighed Otto. He smiled down at her. It is getting chilly, Lisa. I go in. Perhaps your Aunt Sophie will have my tea ready.”

There was something so Jiminy Cricket-like about Uncle Otto, Lisa thought-- his sharp, quick movements, his bright black eyes. She watched him as he nimbly climbed back up the hill. Thanks to his daily laps at the “Y” he was in better condition than her own father.

The blue jays circled and squawked outside the kitchen window. Each day, at dawn and dusk, Uncle Otto fed them and snapped their pictures while they begged for peanuts. They were much more photogenic than she ever was.

She sat down on the dewy grass and pulled her knees to her chest. Sometimes she just wished she had come from the South, like in *Gone with the Wind* or something. A house and land that her family came back to each year for reunions, with lots of icebox cakes and fried chicken. A little cemetery with tiny granite tombstones marching back through time. Cousins, cousins once removed, (whatever that was) cousins that married each other. Land that filtered the memories. But she had none of that. Most of her relatives had died at the hands of the Nazis; their homes and businesses seized, their possessions stolen. Their stories were just part of history now, if anyone was still alive to tell them.

“Lisa,” Aunt Sophie called. “It’s time for dinner!” She got up, sandals dangling from her fingers, her toes curling in the wet grass, and walked back to the house.

“Your parents just called,” Aunt Sophie said as she handed Lisa the water pitcher. “They’re out by the pool, sunning, palm trees. Such a life.”

“I wish they’d taken me too,” said Lisa. Or at least, she thought, not left me for the whole weekend with *them*. She still didn’t know why she couldn’t have stayed with a friend.

“Sometimes parents, they need some time alone.”

Lisa rolled her eyes and let out the smallest of sighs. “What’s for dinner, Aunt Sophie?”

“We are having turkey and stuffing. I am practicing for Thanksgiving.” Sophie spooned some stuffing onto Lisa’s plate, alongside the dried-out turkey and green beans. Uncle Otto was nearly finished eating already and was studying the evening newspaper.

“Look, Lisa, this *Hair*, this naked musical, is coming to Los Angeles.”

“I know, Michael is taking me to see it for my birthday.”

“Your parents would allow you to see such a thing?”

She sighed again. “Aunt Sophie, what’s in the stuffing?”

“Oh, it is something very good. It is hamburger mixed with goose liver, it is very good. You will like it.” Ugh, thought Lisa as she probed the stuffing-- dark and dense as a brick—with her fork. This looked worse than the goose fat they imported to spread on their rye bread. And there was no way she would ever *ever* eat that.

“I see you are not that hungry tonight.” Aunt Sophie whisked away Lisa’s plate. She brought out a fruit salad and leaned over the table to serve them both, her upper arms shivering with loose skin, the folds as translucent as filo dough.

“Sophie, get out the cookies—you know, the ones that Lisa likes,” Otto said, his face breaking into a greedy smile.

“Here, Otto.” She handed him the coveted Pepperidge Farm cookies. “Just a few for Lisa. I think she’s looking a little *zofitig*.”

“I don’t want any cookies, Aunt Sophie,” Lisa said. She pushed back her chair. “And next time my parents call, I want to talk to them--okay?”

“Of course. I am sorry. I did not realize you would miss them already so much. They're only gone for a few days.”

“Sophie, I go upstairs to work on my article. The editor he wants it in just ten days,” Otto grumbled. “I don’t know why I bother to do this anymore.”

“So, Otto, quit, just stop your complaining.”

“He loves that work. Come, Lisa,” said Sophie. “We go and sit outside.” Lisa followed Sophie onto the balcony. The night was warm and windy and full of possibilities. Aunt Sophie’s voice was quiet and full of sweetness. The night spread velvet black, except for the twinkling lights of Los Angeles before them. Aunt Sophie gently and most uncharacteristically smoothed Lisa’s curly hair. They stared unblinking at the stars.

Lisa woke up suddenly, her heart pounding in her chest. She switched on the bedside light. She heard a sound like knocking or shuffling. Through her half-opened

door she could see Great Aunt Sophie pacing up and down the hallway in her purple robe and slippers.

“Aunt Sophie?” she called out. “Are you okay?”

“Ah, Lisa. I am sorry I woke you. It is very late, child; go back to sleep.”

“But why aren’t you in bed?”

“I had the nightmare,” she admitted. “I can’t sleep.” Lisa had heard her mother talk about Aunt Sophie’s dreams. How for years after they came to America, Aunt Sophie could only sleep during the day.

“Is it because I asked those questions about Wilhelm?”

“Don’t be silly. It is the memories I carry like an old rag. They cannot be gotten rid of so easily.” Aunt Sophie looked gray and trembly.

“Let’s go in the kitchen and I’ll make you some tea,” Lisa suggested. She put her arm around Aunt Sophie’s shoulders. The house was shadowy and silent. They walked downstairs and Lisa turned on the kitchen light.

“Everything looks better with light, ja, Lisa?” Lisa set the tea kettle on to boil and sat beside Aunt Sophie. She looked so different in the middle of the night, her long gray hair in a braid, her eyes soft and blurry behind her glasses.

“So, who is this young man, this Michael?”

“Just a boy,” said Lisa. “Just a boy from my math class.”

“So, it’s serious with Michael?”

“Well, I like him a lot. He’s good in math.” They sipped their tea companionably.

“He is really cute too,” she said.

“That does not hurt,” said Aunt Sophie. “Just remember you need to have more than the good looks.” She went to the cupboard. “I think we need some cookies to go along with the tea,” she said. “I will forget my diabetes just this one night.”

Lisa curled her fingers around the hot tea cup. She licked the chocolate slowly off her cookie. It was weird being up in the middle of the night, she thought, you didn’t really have to say a thing.

Aunt Sophie yawned an enormous yawn. “Let’s go to back to bed. I feel better now. I do not think I need to wander any more tonight. I think the dream will sleep too.”

“Lisa, Lisa, it is time to wake up,” Aunt Sophie called up the stairs. “It is time for breakfast.” Lisa stumbled down the stairs to the kitchen, still wearing her favorite UCLA Bruins tee shirt.

Aunt Sophie looked her up and down. “I think we must do some shopping today. What happened to those beautiful nightgowns I bought for you? People will think you are a beggar child!”

“They itch,” said Lisa. “But I could use some new jeans,” she said hopefully. She reached for a glass of orange juice and a poppy seed roll. “Good morning, Uncle Otto,” she said. “Are you better?” she asked Aunt Sophie.

“A little tired, but I’m okay.”

“She didn’t sleep that well last night,” Lisa informed Uncle Otto.

Aunt Sophie refilled Otto’s coffee cup. “We had a quite an adventure last night. I had the dream again; you know, the Black Crow dream.” Otto and Sophie’s eyes met across the table.

“*Die Traum von der schwarzen Krähe?* It has been years since you’ve had that dream.”

“It’s been years since I told you. It comes and it goes. I guess talking about Wilhelm woke it up again.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I didn’t want to upset you,” she said. “There is nothing you can do. Lisa and I had some tea.” She refilled Lisa’s glass with orange juice.

Lisa touched her hand. “But what is this dream, Aunt Sophie?” she asked.

“Would you like some blueberries? They are fresh, just this morning your Uncle Otto picked them up from Jorgenson’s.” She sat down heavily.

“The dream. We always call it the *Black Crow* dream. I had it so many times before we leave Berlin. How it tortured me. Always I wake up, terrified. I do not know what it means. I talk to Wilhelm, but he is so sick by then. He has the *Nervenkrankheit*, you know, the nerve disease.”

“He had Multiple Sclerosis,” said Otto.

“Otto, the doctors they did not know what it was.”

“It was MS, Lisa; she just does not want to admit it. Wilhelm, he had trouble walking, sometimes he fell, sometimes he said it was like fire running through his arms and legs. He could not grip the pencil, and his stomach always sick. We did not know what was wrong, and neither did Dr. Schwartz.”

“And then Hitler was elected,” said Aunt Sophie. “At first we weren’t too worried, why should we be? Hadn’t our family lived in Germany for four hundred years? Our friends they all say, don’t worry, he is crazy. The German people will not support

him. This will all, how you say, blow over and that crazy man, he will go away. And then I started to have the dream.”

“What was the dream about, Aunt Sophie?”

“Ah, it is always the same. I dream I am in a beautiful dark forest with deer and birds and a little pond. The water is so clear and blue, and I am sitting on a huge rock beside it. I am so safe, content. Everything is so peaceful. Then a huge black crow flies down from the top of the big trees and circles around me. It goes around and around. It looks at me with its beady black eyes and caws and caws and caws. The fringes of its wings brush my face. I feel the wind....and then I wake up. My heart is beating through my nightgown. The only thing that calms me down is the walking. I walk up and down the hall. I walk and I walk and I walk.”

“But what did the dream mean?” As long as Lisa had known her aunt and uncle they each kept a notebook on their night table to record their dreams. Otto, she’d heard, even woke up in the middle of the night to capture a particularly insightful dream.

“I didn’t know. I could not tell its meaning. So I go with Otto to the psychology club. We all knew something evil is happening, because everyone reports these dreams-- these dark and unsettling dreams. One man dreams he is playing chess with a monkey. Another dreams he is on a train, but the train always breaks in half.” She sighed. “It was my unconscious trying to tell me something.”

“I know we must leave Germany. But Wilhelm, he does not want to go. He does not want to leave his mother-- so old, so frail. He does not want to leave the business, even though he is too weak to work. Everyday he cries—‘*just leave me, take Gabby and go.*’”

“What did you do?”

“I did not know what to do, Lisa. So I did nothing. We waited.” She took a deep breath, and settled herself on the chair. “Then one day, I come back from visiting some friends, and Wilhelm, he is not at home. It is a rainy day and I do not know where he goes, for he can’t go anywhere alone anymore. He has too many falls, it is far too dangerous. I look all through the house, I look in the garden, by the pond, the stables, I ask the servants. I call his work. I ask everyone: *‘Have you seen Wilhelm? Have you seen Wilhelm?’* I am frantic. He is so sick. A week passes, no sign of him anywhere, no sign at all.”

“I am afraid to my heart that he has been taken. Maybe poisoned or murdered by those Nazis. And then Otto calls; they have found him. They have found the body....” Sophie’s voice rose higher and higher. Lisa could hardly breathe.

Sophie’s great hands plucked at her silk print dress. “Otto, he takes care of everything. He says we must leave Berlin now. It is far too dangerous to stay. I never see Wilhelm again, Lisa. And so we go -- Otto, Gabby and me-- we go. We board the train for Switzerland and we go.”

Aunt Sophie’s words poured over Lisa like a wave; her skin went cold and shivery, as if she had swallowed a bucket of ice cubes. “I need to be alone for awhile,” she whispered. She fled to the guest room and pulled the pillows over her head. She lay still for a long while in the dark, conscious of nothing but the quiet and the musty smell of the chenille bedspread. She woke up a few hours later, cold and disoriented, and went downstairs to the kitchen, her head still swimming with darkness.

The house was silent and empty. She saw the blue jays circling outside the sliding glass doors, still waiting for their morning handout. She rummaged through the cupboard and got out the peanuts, threw them in the air. The birds swooped and fought over them. She stacked the breakfast dishes and put away the bread, the butter, the jam. The house felt uneasy, as if its great heart was slumping.

She wandered into the living room, curled into the couch. The morning sunlight streaked red, blue and green through the stained glass that hung before the windows. She heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Uncle Otto came in and sat beside Lisa. He placed an old book on the table, then took off his wire-rimmed glasses and cleaned them with his handkerchief. He looked at her concerned face. “You do not need to worry about us,” he said. “We will be okay.” His hand touched her cheek. “It is complicated.”

He picked up the brown leather album from the table. “I show you the pictures now. I show you Wilhelm.”

Lisa spread the album on her lap and touched the crumbling black pages. She looked closely at the picture he pointed to. It was a photograph of Sophie and Wilhelm when they were young. They stood in a garden beneath a trellis with small white roses. Sophie was wearing a pure white dress, her dark hair a coronet around her head. Wilhelm held her arm gently. His other hand rested on a wooden cane. His eyes looked tired and stared straight at the camera. *1919*, it said in white script. He hadn’t been back from the war long. She leaned over the album and inhaled the dusty scent of the old paper, rubbed her finger across the soft pages. “Sophie was pregnant already,” Otto said. “With the first baby, the one she lost.” He took a deep breath. “Lisa, there are some things you do not know yet.”

“Is this you?” she asked, pointing to a photograph of a young man in a tuxedo.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “my Fred Astaire days.” He took the album gently from her hands and closed the cover. “Wilhelm, he was not murdered by the Nazis as everyone thought. They did not take him away. I was so in love with Sophie. And she with me. It is hard to understand, but these were such difficult times. I was so afraid Wilhelm would not die in time. That we would never leave. I tell Wilhelm that his wife and child will die because of his stubbornness, that I have connections in Zürich and can help them escape.”

“How did Wilhelm die then?” Lisa asked. She looked up; his brown eyes were watching her.

“He shot himself.” His voice broke. “Beside the lake. The servants found him and called me at the office. I didn’t know what to do. His note, it said, he did not want to be a burden. I make the arrangements-- he is buried quickly, in the family plot at the Jüdischer Friedhof. Nobody knew but Sophie and me. The rest of the family, they never knew. He was a war hero, you see. We must preserve his honor. I loved Sophie so very much,” he said, his eyes filling with tears.

He leaned against her. She pressed her cheek against his, felt his skin, cool and scratchy, his skinny shoulder blades. The blue suit he always wore was wrinkled and she could see his scalp through the sparse gray hairs. She heard Sophie come into the room, her footsteps quiet and heavy.

“I heard,” she said. “After so many years, it is good we tell someone. I think it is right we tell Lisa.”

“She is so young,” said Otto.

“I was only two years older when I married Wilhelm,” she said. “And I was pregnant by the spring.”

“Yes,” said Uncle Otto, “I remember.”

Aunt Sophie sat down between them and picked up the album. She looked at the garden photograph for a long time. Dimples that Lisa had never seen before appeared beside Aunt Sophie’s gentle smile. She closed her eyes. “I was such a beautiful young girl,” she said.

She twisted the moonstone ring on her finger and pushed it over her knuckles, the silver band thick and dully gleaming. She held it out to Lisa. “I meant to give this to you for your sweet sixteen. But today, I think it is the right day.”

Lisa took the ring and slowly put it on--it was heavy and much too big. She held out her hand. The moonstone glowed like an eye. “I won’t forget, Aunt Sophie,” she said.

Cold Comfort

“I don’t know how she got into the refrigerator,” said Tracey. “I called you the minute Eddie discovered her.” Tracey, the manager of Tuttle Senior Housing was rattled, her red hair in a tangle, and she seemed even more breathless than usual. She pointed to the refrigerator; Eddie opened the door and I looked in.

There she was -- my mother-in-law, Sara or Mama Sarrey as she had me call her, neatly folded into the refrigerator, her knees bent, and her back against the wall.

“She was a very small woman,” said Tracey. I stepped closer. Fortunately, the thermostat was adjusted to its coolest setting and Sarrey appeared as she always did, her face paler and grayer than the average, but not unusual for a woman of eighty-five who rarely went outside. Her long white hair was in her favorite style, the bangs arranged in a frizzy puff and her lipsticked mouth was bright red. Most people get old; Sarrey had just shriveled.

I recognized her clothes immediately--the bright purple dress she’d made to wear to our wedding in 1975. Mother-of-the-groom. I opened the door wide and saw she was wearing her terry cloth slippers, the blue ones she always wore to accommodate her deformed feet. Raised during the Depression, she rarely got new shoes, and her feet were like a long ago Chinese maiden's, twisted and painful and very small. Tucked beneath her wild gray eyebrows, her large blue eyes stared into mine, bright and wondering as a baby’s.

“She didn’t show up for bingo or Miss Ponder’s craft class, and you know she never ever misses the food shuttle,” said Tracey. I nodded. “If Mrs. Perkins hadn’t called me, I don’t know when we’d have found her.” Mama Sarrey and Mrs. Perkins were a team. They both helped distribute the surplus food that was dropped off each week for the elderly residents.

Tracey led me to the rocking chair. The chair I sat on to nurse Jessica when she was a baby. I didn’t think it would all affect me so much--it wasn’t like there was much love lost between me and Mama Sarrey-- but I couldn’t stop shaking. Tracey handed me the box of Kleenex.

Thank God Denny was out of town and didn’t have to see this, I thought. Denny was my husband, her son and the light of her life, though all he really did was come over and eat dinner with her every Sunday and take a nap on the couch after supper, but that was enough.

Whenever Denny and I had one of our fights, there she’d be fluttering around, letting him know her couch was always available. While I was recovering from my mastectomy, she brought containers of food over every night. “I just want to make sure they get one good hot meal,” she’d tell me, as she stuffed my refrigerator with casseroles and pans of Jello-- then served up dinner for Denny and Jessica.

As Tracey tripped out of Mama Sarrey’s apartment that afternoon in the pointy high heels that would have her in powder blue slippers one day, the police unfortunately trooped in. I say unfortunately because I feared I was a prime suspect, having killed Mama Sarrey so many times already inside my head. While the crime scene was being investigated, I found myself gently ushered into my mother-in-law’s bedroom for a

preliminary interview. The bedroom was dark and the sunlight barely threaded between the thick gold draperies, even though it was well past three o'clock. Sarrey never turned on an overhead light, or a floor lamp for that matter, until the sun went down.

A Sergeant C.J. Mingo pulled out a small notebook and asked my name. For the record, it's Priscilla, "Peaches" Malone. I supplied him with all the usual information-- address, phone, occupation (loan officer at the B of A, downtown branch) -- and sat down on the pink ruffled chair that went with Sarrey's vintage dressing table. Sergeant Mingo remained standing. He was very young, with a shaved head and a thick weightlifter's neck. His shiny black eyes stared down at me. I pulled my blue dress tightly over my knees. "This should only take a few minutes," he said. "How do you know the deceased?"

"Sarrey?" I stammered. "I've known her since college. Since Denny, he's my husband, introduced us."

"And where is Mr. Malone this afternoon?"

"He's down-East, out near the coast. He does these WWII reenactments," I said. "He's supposed to be out there all week." Sergeant Mingo made a note.

"And what is the nature of your relationship with the deceased?" he asked.

"She's my mother-in-law." Our relationship? I tolerate her and she tolerates me. I try not to call her *the woman* when I complain about her to my friends. Like I can't believe *the woman* would let our daughter Jessica spend an entire afternoon with her hand in a can of Pringles watching *The Terminator* while *the woman's* out there smoking on the back porch. And that's when Jessica was only in kindergarten.

"See her often?" He tapped his pencil impatiently.

“Every blessed week!” I said. He was not going to label me a neglectful daughter-in-law. “Every single week we take her somewhere. Out to dinner at the fish house, over to P&M Fabrics, the bank, the Food Lion.” Every holiday, every school performance, every trip to Atlantic Beach. We hadn’t vacationed alone in years and it showed. *The woman* was a crafts maniac. There wasn’t enough material or thread in the universe to keep her hands busy.

“When did you last see her?” I thought a minute.

“Wednesday,” I said. “I took her to the hair dresser’s. She always goes the first of the month when her Social Security comes in.”

“Did she have any problems with her neighbors or friends that you’re aware of?”

“Problems?” I repeated.

Perhaps, I mused, Mama Sarrey had practiced some obscure method of suicide by self-refrigeration. Maybe she’d gotten a frightening medical diagnosis and realizing that Medicare would never pay for her medication and not wanting to be a burden to her loving family, she had put on her best dress and lipstick, hopped into the refrigerator, grabbed the shelves and pulled the door shut. Not likely, since she hadn’t even been to the doctor in ten years, preferring to self-medicate with drug store remedies. “No life-saving measures for me,” she’d say, as she chewed her pot roast. “Remember what happened to Gram and her cancer? They just cut her up piece by piece until there was nothing left.”

“Do you think it could possibly be suicide?” I asked.

“The cause of her death has not been determined yet, ma’am,” he said. There was a knock on the door. A face peered in.

“Hey, Mingo, can I talk to you a minute?”

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back, Mrs. Malone.”

I picked up Sarrey’s silver-backed comb and brush set, the bristles woven with long white strands, then wandered around the room, opening and shutting drawers packed with underwear, fabric, skeins of yarn, old letters. I shouldn’t be touching anything, I thought and slammed the drawers shut, then examined the photographs of her children and grandchildren Scotch-taped to the dresser mirror and looked at our wedding portrait propped against the wall. We looked so young. “Ma’am?” I jumped. Sergeant Mingo pulled out his notepad. He was just so damned young. I remember when Denny--

“Sorry about that,” he said, his pencil poised. “Do you have any reason to think she might have committed suicide?”

“No, not really.... I don’t know,” I said. “It’s all just so bizarre anyway.” I got up and pulled open the drapes. The maple saplings, skinny as pencils, were just beginning to turn from green to orange and yellow out in the courtyard. “I mean, she wasn’t what I would call a happy woman, but she seemed satisfied with her life. As far as I know, she was in good health. A lot of people would call that happiness.”

I sat down on her queen-sized bed, and leaned against the pile of terry cloth throw pillows she’d made from towels. “She was an elderly woman. She lived off Social Security--five hundred and fifty-six dollars a month, plus a little savings. Her life insurance was worth maybe \$10,000, just enough for her funeral and to pay off the Visa.” I brushed off the layer of fluffy gray dust from the edge of the headboard.

“Sarrey was always busy making something for somebody. She made my teenage daughter lots of things: doll clothes and dresses when she was little, quilts, hand-knit

sweaters.... And she's always so thoughtful. Just last week," I said, "she gave my husband a box filled with low-carb snacks. He's on the Atkins Diet."

"And?"

"Well, it was probably about one hundred dollars worth of snacks if you had to buy them at the store. But Sarrey always got extra food for us when the food shuttle came. Anyway," I continued, "these snacks, these pizza-crunch things, my husband was so excited—only fifty calories and no carbs. Then I read the ingredients. The main ingredient? Cellulose. You know; sawdust. Does he let me throw them away? Never. We can never throw away anything she gives us. Like it's sacred or something. They're still sitting there on top of the dryer, except a load of my panties is thrown on top of them."

I looked at Officer Mingo sideways, just to see how panties affected him. "Well," he said, "she sounds like a real family woman."

"She was." I nodded. "She loved to help out her neighbors too. She practically moved in with Miss Jennings when she had the bladder cancer. She made her cabbage soup, changed her Depends, changed her bed, everything, until she passed. Her relatives were so grateful. Sarrey got to pick out anything she wanted from the apartment. She choose a winter coat with a fur collar. It was a little big, but Sarrey never minded that." Sergeant Mingo was beginning to twitch in his chair.

"Can we boil this down?" he asked. "Do you have any idea why someone might want to kill her, or why she might want to harm herself?"

"No, sir," I said. "I don't." I'd begun to suspect she might live forever, just getting smaller and smaller, her ancient cheeks spider-webbed with wrinkles like a paint-by-number set.

Sergeant Mingo stood up. My interview was over. “Okay, Mrs. Malone. Thank you. If you think of anything else, here’s my card with the case number. We’ll need a copy of her will, her life insurance....Call any time.” I looked down and noticed my right leg was doing that old jiggle dance it does when I get nervous. I pressed my knees together.

“Now, how can I get in touch with your husband?”

I gave him Denny’s cell phone number. “I’m not exactly sure where he is,” I said. “The group rents some land that’s part of an old plantation outside Halifax. When do you think you’ll call him?” I asked, my voice small. I dreaded telling Denny.

“It should be sometime within the hour, ma’am.”

“What will you do with the body?” I asked.

“They’ll do an autopsy. We should know something in a day or two.”

It was time to go and I was afraid of what I might see. I did not want to have to pass that little refrigerated corpse again. Her claustrophobic apartment was closing in on me. I swallowed hard. At least it wasn’t steamy hot like she kept it. Someone had turned off the heat.

I walked out through the living room-- tripping on the rag rugs she’d laid over the carpet, past the knick knacks and jars of sticky peppermints. The apartment was still packed with cops, talking on cell phones and radios, measuring, photographing, inspecting. I glanced into the kitchen. The refrigerator door was still open, but the body was gone.

Nobody watched as I opened the door and slipped out. The corridor was thick with elderly ladies. Miss Molly, the self-anointed queen of Tuttle Senior Housing, pushed

ahead, and nearly pasted me to the wall with her walker. “What’s happened?” she asked in her loud raspy whisper. “They won’t tell us anything.”

“I have some sad news,” I said in a low voice. The ladies shuffled in closer. “Sarrey is dead. Her body was found in the refrigerator. The police don’t know how she died, so they’ll be questioning everyone. Maybe somebody saw something.”

“I didn’t even know the refrigerator was big enough to fit a person,” Miss Molly said, twisting her platinum wedding ring. “And we just have the small refrigerators; they’re only sixteen cubic feet, I believe.”

“She was such a small woman,” said Mrs. Henderson. “Lord, we’re going to miss her. Sometimes she was the only one to go to crafts and bingo. And she was always fair about the food distribution too.”

“That’s true,” said Mr. Snow, who had just joined the huddle. “She couldn’t be bought.”

“She should have been teaching that class,” Mrs. Henderson added. “She gave me the most beautiful toilet tissue cover. All crocheted, purple with pink edging. People just don’t know how to do that kind of work any more,” she sighed.

“I wonder where they put all that food from her refrigerator,” said Miss Molly.

Mrs. Henderson held my hand between her two warm ones. “And to think I was home the whole time, honey--right next door and didn’t hear a thing.”

The group trailed me down the hall as I walked to my car. Between the still gray form of Sarrey and the smell of collards and fried fish that hung in the hallway, my stomach was churning. The parking lot was full of police cars and I could see TV 14

pulling up. Eddie, the handyman, was in his truck, eating a sandwich. He opened the door when he saw me. I backed up the car, turned around and squealed out.

I called Denny the moment I got home. My mouth was dry and I kept feeling like I might laugh. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her little folded up body again, those staring eyes. Denny didn't answer his cell phone, so I left a message and hung up.

Then I gathered up all the stuff she had given us: the boxes of noodles and low-carb snacks, the bags of potatoes and green-cheeked oranges, the glass canning jars filled with cherries and peppers and okra-- their pale forms like fetuses in formaldehyde-- the Santa Claus coffee mug, the Folgers's coffee crystals we kept on hand for her visits, the stack of empty Cool-Whip containers, the crocheted dolls with plastic heads, the embroidered dish towels, the almost Beanie Babies from the dollar store--all of it. I carried it outside and piled it on our back deck like some crazy moonlight yard sale.

I sat myself down with a glass of wine on the old pink metal chair-- the kind that bounces, and just rocked a bit, the sweat making the back of my neck cold and clammy. It was the end of September, but still warm. The tall pecan trees that surrounded our property made the dark come early, so I just sat and sipped at the wine, let it curl over my lips, making them buzz. The mosquitoes were congregating on my ankles, but I didn't care. I get like that sometimes. Stuck. I couldn't summon the energy to move and my backside was sweated to the chair bottom, so I sat and let the darkness fall around me while the cicadas started their nightly tuning up.

I was startled by the sound of the phone. I ran up the stairs and caught it right on the tenth ring. “Hello.” I said. “Hello? Is anybody there?” I had just slammed it down when it started ringing again.

“Hello!” I barked.

“Peaches? Hey, it’s me. I just got a very disturbing call. A Sergeant Mingo. He says Mom... he says Mom,” Denny stuttered. “He says they found her-her- BODY stuffed into the refrigerator.” There was a long silence. I could hear him breathing.

“I know, honey, I know. I’m so sorry.”

“This Sergeant Mingo, he called the minute I got back to camp. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I couldn’t get you,” I said. “I didn’t even know where you were.” My voice thickened a minute, and I felt the tears coming. “I wish I could have been the one to tell you, honey. I know how close you were.” *My son ...my son...my son*, no matter what he did. Even after my mastectomy. Like she was sad for him in advance. Just in case I didn’t make it, she’d still be there for him. I felt the flat place where my breast was supposed to be. It had been five years. That was supposed to be a cure.

“They don’t know what really happened yet,” I said.

“Right.”

“Denny?”

“Who would do a thing like that?” he asked. “What kind of a fucking freak?” I could feel his hands clenching through the phone line. “Mom was never a bother to anyone. She always helped everybody.”

“I know.” I swallowed hard. I carried the phone into the living room and sat on the edge of his recliner and looked up at the mantelpiece. The picture she’d had made for our Christmas present stared at me, her blue eyes shimmering behind the thick glass. I slipped the photograph behind the antique clock.

“Do they have any suspects, Peaches? Do they even know how long she’s been dead?”

“I don’t know. The whole apartment is secured. The police were everywhere. I wish you were home,” I said. My stomach hurt. I plucked at a loose thread in the carpet. It was a brand new carpet.

“Peaches...” I could barely hear Denny anymore, his voice was so quiet, and our connection was getting all fuzzy. “I’m just about packed up. I should be home around nine. Maybe we’ll know more by then.” We kiss-kissed into the phone the way we do and hung up.

I don’t know what possessed me next; you might think I would have called somebody--Jessica at college; Sarrey’s sister, Martha; my best friend, Kate. Instead, I headed straight to our bedroom, pulled on my tennis shoes, ran down the back steps and shoved all that junk sitting out on the deck into five or six big garbage bags and carried it out to the alley. Garbage pick up was the next day; and with any luck at all the stuff would be gone before Denny missed it.

I dragged myself back upstairs and opened the refrigerator to get some iced tea. The refrigerator gleamed with emptiness and the cold air swept out across my legs. The shelves held only a pitcher of tea and the remnants of last night’s Sunday dinner at Mama Sarrey’s --meatloaf, potatoes, peach pie-- tightly Saran-wrapped on a paper plate. Cut-

glass bowls of deviled eggs and olives and pearl onions stared at me from the shelves.
Green grapes, glistening and shiny. And somehow the figurine from our wedding cake.
Two love birds-- yellowed with age--cooing beneath a spray of pale-blue flowers. If I
closed my eyes, I could almost hear them sing.

Someone Else's Water Lily

“Ni hao. Hello! Come in. Table for three, non-smoking, right? Hi, Benjie.”

“Our usual table, Li Ming,” said Joseph, smiling broadly, his teeth shining in his bearded face.

“He’s not a baby anymore,” the hostess said, patting Benjie’s shoulder. “Follow me,” she said with a graceful flutter of her hand; her ebony hair flowed down her back like water. “What you like to drink—the same as usual? One water, one ice tea, one hot tea?”

“Yes,” said Eva, propelling Benjie toward their special table. “The same as usual.”

Every Friday night they had dinner at Bamboo Gardens. After passing through the heavy glass doors of the restaurant and beneath the dragon archway, Bamboo Gardens was pretty basic-- Formica tables, worn brown carpet, fluorescent lights, a Mongolian grill, long steam tables, a fish tank. The only wall decoration was a pair of enormous photographs of a harbor in China surrounded by craggy blue cliffs.

Li Ming set down their beverages and smiled at Benjie. “How old your son now?”

“He’s five,” said Eva.

“Oh, I remember when he was tiny baby. So tiny.”

Joseph and Eva exchanged a glance. No one could call Benjie tiny anymore. He’d gone from a petite baby to a stocky little boy-- "all boy," his grandmother had said. Benjie slid out of the booth and bounced off to the steam tables to get his dinner.

Once upon a time Eva had thought he'd never stop nursing, and now he was starting kindergarten next week. Next week! She remembered that last day she'd pulled up her shirt to offer him the breast and he looked bored. That was it. She had loved nursing him, the perfect peacefulness, the exact fit of her body to a task. She had cried every night for days.

Eva breathed in deeply, took in the spicy warm smell that relaxed her shoulders and the hard knot inside her stomach. She kicked off her navy heels under the table. Soon, she reflected, Benjie would be swallowed up by school buses and homework and hordes of wild noisy boys. He would never be hers in quite the same way ever again. It had been so different when she and her sister were kids. Her mother had seemed relieved at every step they took away from home; she practically pushed them out the door.

Eva looked up at Joseph. He looked tired, the forehead furrows deeper by the day. More lay-offs at work coming up, he'd told her the other day.

“Want some tea, honey?” she asked.

“Thanks.” He looked out the plate glass window and patted his shirt pocket, feeling for the spot where he used to carry his cigarettes.

“I'm back, Mom.” Benjie squeezed in beside her. As usual, his plate was filled with potatoes and green onions.

“We should have called you Spud,” Eva said, smoothing his hair. “He gets it from you, Joseph.”

“Yeah.” Joseph picked up his plate and headed over to the steam tables.

Suddenly, last night's dream came flooding back to her.... She was nursing a baby; its smoky gray eyes looked deeply into hers. She felt the heavy rush of her milk letting down. Finally-- her eyes closed with gratitude-- finally, another baby.

“Mom, aren't you going to get anything to eat?”

“What? Oh, in a minute,” she said, wiping his greasy chin with her napkin. She wondered if the longing for another child would ever go away. It was just biology, that's what the books said. Hard-wiring. The closer she got to forty, the more her body longed to be pregnant again. She couldn't help it; it was the species' drive to renew itself. In the end, she was just an animal, after all. Just like a chicken or a red snapper, no better; no worse; no more evolved.

Joseph slid back into the booth, his plate precisely divided into sections for each food type: rice, vegetables, meat. Once an engineer, always an engineer, she thought. She liked to watch him eat, swallowing one huge forkful after another. Grains of rice dotted his beard, and a large splash of brown sauce landed on his tie.

She got up to survey the evening's dinner selections, not that they ever changed. She always chose the same thing-- stir-fried vegetables and rice-- but she liked to look at all the options anyway. The sight of so much food made her feel full: the egg drop soup, lo mein with shrimp, General Tso's chicken, steamed buns, bins of fresh vegetables and meat ready for stir fry, Jell-O, grapes, little cakes. She handed her bowl of vegetables to the chef to be cooked, watched as he pushed them around on the spitting grill with the steel cleaver, wiping back the sweat with his forearm. She added a scoop of rice and carried her plate back to the table.

“Hey, Mommy, have you ever had one of these before?” Benjie asked. Eva looked at the small translucent wonton on his plate. Her skin prickled. That day with her mother. That dark Chinese restaurant in downtown L.A. The pot-sticker on the edge of her plate.

Eva and her mother had been sharing a pot of jasmine tea. She remembered that. Eva’s fingers had surrounded her cup, warming her hands. The steam had flushed her face, and when she took a big gulp, it burned her tongue. Inside, she still felt shivery and papery and fragile. Her plate had been white, almost full-moon-white, edged with a gold border. Their table was cluttered with serving bowls-- enough food for a week: vegetables, shrimp, barbecued spare ribs.

The semester was finally over and she was home from college. Christmas vacation. 1975. She felt like such a fraud, sitting with her mother, listening to her prattle on about her boring job at the nursing home, while her stomach was still cramping with a low dull throb.

“There’s something different about you, dear.” Her mother cocked her head.

“I cut my hair,” she said. “I was wondering when you’d notice.”

“Your beautiful hair. Oh, Eva.”

“It was time for a change,” she said defiantly. All of her friends had long hair. She just wanted to look different. She glanced down at her peasant blouse and worn jeans. She knew she looked like every other child of the seventies: silver and turquoise earrings, macramé choker and all. Her thick black hair had streamed down her back. Her hair was short now, cut thick and blunt, it hung just below her ear lobes.

“No, there’s something else.” Her mother took a bite of noodles, and looked at her thoughtfully. “I can finally see your beautiful face.”

This last abortion had been the worst. The doctor had inserted some kind of seaweed up her to help dilate the cervix, and it had really hurt, though he’d promised it wouldn’t. A little tool like a mini-vacuum cleaner had sucked the fetus out. She was supposed to feel bad, she knew, really bad-- Catholic bad. But mostly, she felt relieved. Twenty was way too young for her to be a mother. A sunbeam slipped between the black threadbare curtains, and shone on her face. She could feel how stolid, how stiff it was, like a mask.

“Would you like some more tea?” Her mother held the teapot aloft.

“No thanks, Mom, I’m fine.”

“You know,” her mother said, “Wing-Wa’s is the Chinese restaurant that my father used to bring me to when I was a girl. But that was back in the thirties, when there was a real Chinatown in L.A.” Wing-Wa’s was the real thing, Eva thought, dark and spicy-smelling, mysterious, filled with the quick chatter of waiters and crammed with families.

“Do you remember the Canton House, that place we used to eat when you were little?” her mother asked. “Remember the owner? One time, right after your father left us, I took you girls there by myself. I had to go to the restroom; it was way in the back, down this long dark hall that smelled like rotten cabbage....” She paused.

“Um hmm.” Eva nodded.

“Mr. Chow followed me down the hall, and then he put his arm around me.” She smiled. Eva wasn’t quite sure what the expression meant -- gleeful; lustful; exhilarated;

triumphant? She could not imagine anyone flirting with her mother-- not the middle-aged owner of the Chinese restaurant, or the owner of Junior's Deli, where they went for bagels on Sunday mornings. Norm, her mother claimed, had pressed her hand with his moist fingers a little too long as he passed a poppy seed bagel to her, still warm and wrapped in crisp waxed paper.

She glanced at her mother. She had polished off the shrimp and had moved on to Eva's spare ribs, tearing off each shred of meat until the ribs were bare. She was sucking happily on the shiny bones.

"Hey, Mom, those were mine."

"Sorry. I'm going to order something really special for you," she said to Eva. She snapped her fingers at the waiter passing by. Eva wanted to disappear. "So, what are you taking next semester?" she asked.

"I've still got to make up calculus from last term, and then I thought I'd take an art history class, and...."

"I wish you were still going for pre-med, dear. I wish I'd gone on to med school, and not just settled for being a nurse, you know how important--"

"Mom, there's something I want to talk to you about, I--"

"Ahh, here they come. Pot-stickers! My father always ordered these for me." Her mother plucked the top from the steaming silver bowl and scooped some onto her own plate.

"Here, try some." She plopped one on to Eva's plate. It clung there, hanging on the edge beside the rice. Eva probed the pot-sticker with her chopstick. It was square and

translucent, and she could see the shadow of something pink inside; something fragile and shiny and wet.

“Now, what did you need to talk about?” her mother asked.

Eva’s stomach turned. She threw down her chopsticks. “Never mind!” She skidded her chair back, rushed past the crowded tables and pushed open the restroom door. A red velvet bench was just inside. She dropped down and slumped against the wall. Took a deep breath. Her stomach was whirling like a Ferris wheel. Her underwear felt damp and sticky.

She saw her face reflected in the gilt-edged mirror across from her. She stood and looked at herself, her nose nearly touching the glass. Large brown eyes stared back. She looked the same. No one knew she’d just aborted her second baby. No one had to. Her mother would freak out. She’d had three miscarriages before she had Eva. She’d try to understand, but she’d be so disappointed in Eva. Every time Eva made a mistake, her mother breathed in the blame.

It was better to keep it to herself.

She stepped into the last bathroom stall, unbuttoned her jeans and sat down on the cold toilet seat. Her skin was embossed from the top button of her jeans. She cradled her stomach with both hands. It felt round and warm. She rocked back and forth on the toilet seat. Tears choked inside her.

“Eva. Eva!” a voice called. “Are you in there?”

“Yes, Mom. I’ll be out in a minute.” Couldn’t she ever get a fucking moment alone? She stood up to flush; dark drops of blood floated in the water. She closed her eyes, listened to the swirl of the water.

She unhooked the door.

“Hi, dear. Are you okay?” Her mother reapplied her lipstick in front of the mirror--the red Joan Crawford color she always wore.

“I’m fine.”

Her mother pressed her lips together to spread the color evenly, then brushed her short auburn hair. Her stocky peasant body was clad in yet another orange polyester outfit.

“Are you ready to go, dear?” She pushed through the door and Eva followed. “They’ve boxed up all our food; we can have pot-stickers for dinner tonight. Here, I saved you a fortune cookie.”

“What did yours say?”

“It’s somewhere down here.” She dug in her cavernous black bag. “Here it is--*You long to see the Great Wall of China.*”

“Well, you have always wanted to travel.” Eva broke open her cookie and snorted. “Mine is really stupid. *Alas, the onion you are eating is someone else’s water lily.* What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, dear. Did you know that fortune cookies were invented in California by a Japanese man?” Eva shook her head. “They’re not really Chinese at all.”

“Wow, Mom. You really do know everything,” said Eva dryly. They walked out of the restaurant, blinking in the bright sunlight and climbed into the car. Eva slammed the car door and crumpled the fortune in her hand. The drive back to the apartment was quiet. She leaned her head against the window and didn’t think at all.

Eva shook her head; the sun was shining straight into her eyes.

That girl, she thought, was almost twenty years ago. Now she was a mother, juggling her work at the hospital and peewee soccer and feeding the dog and tripping over Legos. She'd forgotten her old wild-girl self, packed so deep, so far away.

"I don't know what those things are, Benjie," she said, giving the pot-stickers a good poke with her chopstick. "Why don't you try one and see if you like it."

How old would those babies be now, she wondered. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen? College students? The same age she was when she got pregnant. She shivered, rubbed the goose pimples on her arms.

She used to think all her friends had been promiscuous, willing participants in the sexual revolution. But mostly, she'd learned, they hadn't been. It was strange; she had never been into drugs, or alcohol, but she had been into sex. She couldn't wait to peel out of her Levi's-- one of those murky places she never understood about herself at all. And now here she was nearly forty, and she still didn't understand why she'd been so careless with her passions, her birth control, her babies.

It was like they were still floating around somewhere, she thought, waiting to be born, waiting for their turn to be real. Each dream was so vivid: the positive pregnancy test, her amazement over her expanding belly, feeling the baby turn inside her. She was engulfed with such relief and joy; that she could still bear children; she wasn't too old; it hadn't been too late.

Then she woke up.

The years had ticked by. Joseph was forty-eight when they got married and after Benjie was born, he hadn't wanted any more children. His two older girls were still in college, and money was always tight, even with them both working full-time.

She had one beautiful child, was it so selfish to want more? Maybe she had just used up her allotment. Is that why she didn't fight harder? One thing she did know, she would not bring a child into the world that was not wanted by both its parents. She'd never seen her own father again, not after he left that summer she turned eleven. No cards, no birthdays, no college tuition, no nothing.

And still her body waited.

"Benjie," said Eva, glancing at his plate littered with half-nibbled pot-stickers and one of everything else. "I think you've had enough to eat."

"Can I go look at the fish?"

"Stay where we can see you," Joseph said. He looked across the table at Eva.

"What's wrong, honey? You've hardly said a word all night."

"I had another one of those baby dreams," she said in a low voice.

"Oh," said Joseph, glancing down at his plate.

"I just wish--"

"I know," he said. "I *know*."

"It's not too late for me. Lots of women over forty have babies these days." She looked up as a heavily pregnant woman pushed past, trailed by a toddler and a tiny girl with stringy blond hair and bright pink sandals.

He stood up. "I've going to check on Benjie," he said.

She swallowed. Looked at the photographs on the wall: the ocean, the blue cliffs, the sailboats. She just wanted to float away.

Li Ming set down the bill and a plate of fortune cookies. "Are you finished?"

Eva looked up at Li Ming, saw her kind black eyes. "We're done," she said clinking the plates together and handing them to her.

She picked a fortune cookie from the plate and broke it open, pulled out the slip of paper. *You have always longed to see the Great Wall of China.*

She could see Joseph and Benjie watching the fish, their bright bodies swimming back and forth. She could hear the lost children knocking at her door, introducing themselves. *You don't know who I am, but I know you.* She pushed her hair back behind her ears and took another sip of the lukewarm tea.

Road Trip

Elton kissed his daughter goodbye again, and got into the old pick-up for the trip to Myrtle Beach. His mother held tight to her hand, as if she thought Casey might fly into the truck. Elton and Casey hadn't been separated but one night since Sheila died of the lung cancer that took her in seven weeks from diagnosis to death-- yellow, fragile as old crumbly newspaper, right before their eyes.

He cranked down the window, reached out an arm and pulled her close, smelled her little girl smell of strawberry lip gloss and Hershey bars—eight years old and turning nine next month. How could God make the daughter look so much like the mother? Her glossy blonde hair and high round cheekbones-- and both females so long and thin, stretched out like rubber bands? Casey's deep blue eyes were his though, shiny and bold, thick-lashed and a little bit hurt.

“Gotta go, girl, it's already lunchtime,” he said, as he turned the key and gunned the engine. The old truck had been a hard worker, but that was one clutch, one generator and one brake job ago, and he'd spent the last few days snout-deep inside the engine replacing parts and going down to Auto Zone every few hours for hoses and gaskets and another damn water pump. Wreaked havoc with the business. *Mr. TV* didn't mean much without wheels, and no work didn't pay the bills.

Casey raced down the sidewalk along the fence, waving one last time. She didn't seem sad enough, he thought, as he watched her through the rear view mirror as he chugged away. Saw her funny knock-kneed run-- knees in, feet kicked out, nearly

smacking her butt when she ran so hard. But her bones weren't hollow, and she was too heavy to fly, though God knows she tried. Off the swing, off the high dive, forty fucking feet down-- and she was never afraid-- the Ferris wheel, the rope swing from out of her tree house; she perched up there for days after Sheila died.

He lit his first cigarette and merged onto Highway 40, fiddled with the radio until he reached WKNC, *all country all the time*. He felt the clay urn, hidden under his Levi jacket on the passenger's seat. The day was shimmering and it shouldn't take long to reach Myrtle Beach. That's where they used to go camping when they first met. That's where he'd promised to spread her ashes.

He remembered that Fourth of July they'd bought up all the fireworks from that junky place at South of the Border. Sheila loved to shoot fireworks out over the ocean; she'd do that all night long. Sometimes they'd have bottle-rocket wars. She'd laugh that snort-laugh through her nose every time she hit him. One time, he remembered, she hit him on the shoulder and set his shirt on fire. She never laughed so hard; while he was rolling in the sand and she was pouring beer all over him to put it out. He still had the scar. He took a gulp of the tea he carried with him everywhere he went, in the big plastic cup from Burger King. Mixed with some whiskey, it smoothed things a little.

It had been a year since Sheila had died. April and spring just ending. Watching her eyes roll back, time after time, living for weeks with the dread that today would be the day. His mother came to help out last spring and never went back to Florida. Mom had handled almost everything while Sheila was dying--Lysoled every inch of the house, and rid it all of that cigarette smell, mopped up Sheila's vomit, washed the clothes, warmed up the meals neighbors dropped off, made a little nest for him and Casey around

the kitchen table in the sun, helped Casey with her spelling. But she couldn't handle his dad's drinking again.

She'd kicked Dad out a hundred times when they were growing up. Finally he'd joined the church and stopped drinking. It had been like a miracle that his dad never lost his license. And how had his mom supported all six kids? And they'd all turned out okay too. He had his own business, Bill had a convenience store, Jake joined the army. Only Ellie had turned out bad, strung-out, with too many children to count, each from a different man.

Now his dad was going to throw everything away, after twenty years dry. He'd worked at the mill forever. After the heart problems last year, he'd had to go on disability. His doctor wouldn't sign the form to let him go back to work. And then after a few months of walking the mile loop each morning at the Spring Mill Mall, and doing a little yard work, he'd started drinking again. Nothing they said could stop him. Got so he spent all day in the shed working on lawnmowers and other broken stuff from around their sorry property and drinking from the moment he got up until he passed out after the eleven o'clock news.

And now his mom lived with them. She had a little money saved up and he was thinking about converting the garage into a little apartment. Just so he could have some space. She had her stuff spread out everywhere, dish towels strung through the cabinet handles and ironing everything-- even his tee shirts-- pouring his liquor down the sink, like he wouldn't notice. She just wouldn't let up on him. Her voice was like some damned cuckoo bird in his head.... *So, what about your drinking, son? Then, what about your drinking? You can get some help. It's nothing to be ashamed of.*

“If you don’t like it here, then go back home, Mom. We’ll be okay.”

“And let my only granddaughter grow up on nothing but Happy Meals and fish sticks?” She’d fold her arms tight across her chest. Then she’d go back to cleaning and scrubbing. That’s all she was good for sometimes, he thought: scrubbing and nagging, nagging and scrubbing.

Friends came by while Sheila was dying; they dropped off lasagna and meatloaf and batches of peanut butter cookies, and patted Casey on the head, and then got the hell out. It was his tragedy. Sure, he understood that. They couldn’t wait to leave. *How’s she doing? She’s in the back room*, he’d gesture. *Sheila would love a visitor*. But mostly, if they stayed, they’d sit out on the deck with a beer, or ask if they could take Casey to a movie, or thrust flowers into his hands and rush out.

Flowers--he’d planted a yard full of them for her, smoking like an old coal-fired train the whole damn time, so she could see the colors from her window while she lay in the spare bedroom, propped on the metal hospital bed, a little less of her everyday, until she was only eyes and couldn’t even eat the puddings and banana smoothies anymore, or the segments of tangerine he peeled for her, her voice a rusty whisper. Could only pee bloody water and watch C-Span. Couldn’t pay attention to people anymore. Only her eyes were alive.

There never had been time for a family picture, her hand on his shoulder, his hand on Casey’s, decked out in her velvet princess dress, or for Sheila to tell Casey about becoming a young lady. He would sit with Casey, her cuddled on his lap on the deck after dinner, the sky just turning dark, and he’d have a few beers and they’d talk, and he would

explain things to her. He tried to be honest. How her mama was sick and how she was going to die, but that they wouldn't give up hope until she stopped breathing.

He exhaled through his nose, the truck filling up with smoke and he didn't have to care about polluting Casey's lungs. He cracked open the vents. He knew what everybody thought-- why the fuck was he still smoking, with his wife dead of lung cancer? For the whole drive to the beach, he could smoke all he wanted—not be a good example, like he'd promised Sheila. He didn't know shit about raising little girls; he was barely making it himself. He checked the rearview mirror, saw his eyes all curved down at the sides and red. Even though he'd shaved just a few hours ago, he looked like a bum.

At night, those last weeks, he'd sat beside her in bed; they'd made plans. “Promise me you'll save for her college, so she won't have to struggle so hard like we did. No Coca-Colas at every meal, and cut off that damn greasy ponytail of yours,” she'd said, breathing hard through the oxygen tubes clamped to her nose. “I do not want to have to look down from heaven and be pointing you out to my new friends and have to be embarrassed.”

At first, they hadn't even told Sheila the truth about how bad the cancer was. Reverend Parker said it would be a sin to take away her hope. Hope built a strong spirit, he'd said, and that strengthened the immune system, and who knew what miracles God might perform? “Those VA doctors don't know everything,” the minister had scoffed.

They'd never thought they'd have kids, not after twenty years together. They'd tried in the beginning, but then when things didn't work out, and him being shipped out to Kuwait and all, it just seemed like they gave up. Sheila was forty-three when she found out she was pregnant. She'd always been so skinny, but she was beautiful pregnant. God

damn, she even had breasts! and her hair all glossy and her patting her stomach all day long. They'd almost bought out Toys 'R Us; everything had to be new. "I don't want no hand-me-downs," she'd said, "not for this baby." He was thirty-nine, pretty old for a father, but not too old. He could still roller skate and throw a ball, and he knew how to tell a good story. No, the way he looked at it, Sheila had had the hard job. He'd videotaped the whole delivery. Casey had watched it a million times.

Elton drove with one hand now, blue eyes slitted against the afternoon sun. One more town, and he'd get out, stretch his legs, buy him some lunch. He took a long pull on the tea, and lit another cigarette. Sometimes she worried him, Casey did. Seemed like she was okay and then she'd start those screaming fits when he wouldn't let her wear her party dress to school. And that frozen look on her face. "I'm just thinking about Mama," she'd say, looking out the window.

The lung cancer was already at stage four when they found it. "Give me all you've got, Doctor," Sheila had instructed her oncologist. "I've got a little girl." But she was too weak and too skinny to tolerate the chemo or the radiation, though at first she tried. They'd both known that something was really wrong that Sunday he carried her all the way to Fort Bragg from Clayton, a two hour midnight run so they could use his VA insurance, not have to pay out cash. He threw them both in the truck and took off. Sheila could hardly breathe and coughed up so much blood it soaked through the towels, and Casey was terrified, her head clutched in her arms, her nose pressed to the window.

The truck was making that thumping noise again. Probably the front end. He sighed. It was three o'clock already, but he was making good time. He wanted to be at the

beach by sunset. He pulled off for a burger, fries, iced tea. He didn't even know where he was--the fast food forest that grows beside the highway.

Elton loved to drive, could drive all night. He'd just pack Casey into the truck and they'd drive, the two of them, down to Fort Bragg to visit his old Army buddies, up to New Jersey to visit her cousins. He'd catch a few hours sleep beside the truckers parked at the rest stop, his head tucked down like a pigeon, his jaw dark with whiskers, Casey sprawled asleep beside him with the plaid picnic blanket pulled over both of them; Casey had got so she could sleep anywhere.

He rolled the windows down, the sweet summer smell of honeysuckle floated in off the tangled pine forest that lined the interstate. He was getting close to Sheila's favorite part of Highway 381 where the road got hilly. He wondered how fast his old pick-up could go. He hadn't put that big 302 in her for nothing. Sometimes driving back to Fort Bragg, late at night, they'd go so fast the tires would fly off the road.

He accelerated, up to seventy now. He could smell a storm coming up, could see it in the gray clouds up the road, the cool air streaming in through the open windows. Seventy-five miles per hour and the hills coming up, just beyond that stand of pines. He touched the urn again, nestled beneath his jacket, its smooth round sides pleasing to his fingers, cool and hard. Eighty miles per hour.

It's not like she was there, he knew that, but he talked to her all the time, anyway. *Sheila, our girl is doing fine. She misses you, but the hospice lady says Casey's working through it. She'll be okay. Seems like all I do is wash dishes and fold clothes and help her with her homework. And you never seen the bathroom so clean. Casey, she can't get*

sick. He took another sip of his tea, rubbed the urn with his palm, rolled it from side to side. Heavy. He didn't think it would be so heavy.

The storm was coming up and he turned on the headlights. Big drops splattered the windshield, making the dust jump off the hood of the truck. The hills were just around the bend. Ninety now. The front end was shaking, the steering wheel vibrating hard in his hands. The windshield wipers worked double-time and he could barely make out the road, but he couldn't take his foot off the accelerator. Just one hill for Sheila.

His shoulders tensed, he leaned his face close to the windshield, grabbed his mama's old dish towel and rubbed the glass, tried to make some clear spots, took another sip of tea. He felt under the seat for the whiskey, gave the bottle a pat. The hill was coming up fast. Ninety-five over the hill. *This one's for you, baby*; he felt the tires leave the ground.

The front end went loose and wild. *Shit*. The rain coming straight down in a curtain. His boot slammed down to the floor, he pumped the brakes, water poured through the window; the cigarette chewed down tight between his teeth, his hands gripped to the steering wheel, the rain just bearing down on him.

The truck started to slide-- hydroplaning on the slick pavement, water rushed all around the sides of his truck and the truck spun. He was pinned back against the seat, his heart up in his throat, beating so hard so hard, he saw that little swinging doodad thing that hung from the mirror, some little beaded thing Casey'd made for him. It swung back and forth, the red glass beads just swinging. He felt the wheels go bumping down across the shoulder of the road, stopping, finally, just stopping sideways in the drainage ditch. The keys swinging in the ignition. He grabbed them and shut off the truck. His arms

around his chest, shaking, just shaking. He touched his head where it felt wet. Water. He tried to open up the door. Still raining like a mother fucker. Looked at the bloody smear on the window. He had a nasty gash on his elbow. *Lord, Casey!* What if something had happened to him? *God damn you Sheila for leaving me all alone!*

Outside the truck, the ditch was full of nasty stuff swirling by-- candy wrappers and cellophane from Nabs and beer cans and cigarette butts floating like dead fish. He walked around the truck and kicked the tires, leaned against the front panel, his whole body pressed up against the metal, elbows on the hood, palms pressed against his forehead...*God damn. God damn. God damn.*

Patches of blue showed through the shredded clouds and the wind was dying down. The rain just drizzle now. Elton opened up the truck door and climbed in, wiped down his face. He was cold...*Holy Shit! Sheila!* The urn, broken in big jagged chunks, ashes spilled out all over the black floor mat, mixed and gritty with the tea, all gray and chunky. Now there was nobody left.

He circled around to the passenger's side, opened the door wide. Kneeled down there on the wet grass, picked out the biggest chunks of pottery and threw them into the filthy ditch water, grabbed his cup and scooped up the ashes. He tried not to look. The smell of the whisky made him sick. He wiped down the truck seat with the towel and shut the door. His stomach churned. He swallowed hard, tears stuck somewhere inside his cheeks, the back of his throat. *Lord, what a fuck-up I am.*

It was exactly a year ago, April 25th, when they had all come to the house for the memorial service: friends, neighbors, people from her job, the church—sitting on

couches, kitchen chairs, leaned up against the doorways of the little brick house—the air stuffy with sickness and closed windows.

She was already gone, he'd wanted to yell at them. Ashes! That's all she was. That's all she wanted. No funeral. No fancy ceremony.

“Look out the window,” the minister had said. “This man's wife said she wanted flowers. In the dead of night, while she slept, with her little girl tucked into a sleeping bag on the floor beside her, this man planted violas and Johnny jump-ups and impatiens, all night long he planted.

“Usually it takes flowers awhile to get settled, to sink down roots, make new leaves and buds and flowers. But look!” he'd said, striding over to the window. “All of those flowers that Elton planted last month,” he'd spread his arms wide, “today, they're blooming purple and pink and yellow. Today, her flowers are blooming,” his loud voice proclaimed. Everyone crowded over to the plate glass window to look at that flat grass garden, to stare at the blossoms. Damn, if that minister wasn't bound and determined to have a miracle no matter what. The flowers were blooming next door, too, and his daughter plucked off every last petal the next day and threw them down the toilet.

Damn, he struck the side of the truck with the flat of his hand and rubbed the top of his head. A brush cut. It still felt funny so short, the back of his neck all naked and itchy feeling. He'd got it cut last week, just like he'd promised her. Thank God he hadn't brought Casey with him today. The hospice lady said it would be good closure for her, whatever the fuck that meant. Casey had begged and begged to go, so he bought her that video she'd been begging for. He wanted to be alone with Sheila on their last trip. He'd

saved Casey some ashes in a little mustard jar. They'd spread the ashes somewhere special when he got back.

He started the engine. How the hell was he going to get the truck out of the ditch? The tires were bald. And not a single car had gone by since he wrecked. At least the whiskey bottle wasn't broke. He reached for it under the seat, unscrewed the top and smelled it strong and sharp; tipped it back. He gunned the engine and pressed gently on the accelerator; the tires spun, sinking deeper into the mud and the slippery weeds.

"Need some help, son?" The cop stuck his big head into the cab. A trucker saw you out here and called it in. Whew, you got some trouble," he said, sniffing and there wasn't much detective work needed when he saw the bottle lying on the seat. "Come on out. You're pretty banged up. It's a good thing you couldn't get the truck out. I'll call the wrecker," he said.

"I've got to take Sheila," said Elton. He held up the plastic cup. "It's her ashes. I got to spread her ashes down at Myrtle Beach."

"Is there anyone I can call?"

"You can call my Mama," he said. "But please don't tell my little girl."

"We're going to get you some help, son. You call your little girl, and then I'll talk to your mama." The cop opened the door and Elton slid into the back seat of his car. He took a deep breath and punched in his number on the cell phone. Casey answered on the first ring. *Breathe, man, just breathe, you can do this.*

"Hi, Daddy!"

“Hey, honey,” he said, his voice low and steady. “What are you doing? Um hmmm. Did you eat all your supper? Are you minding Gramma? I’ll be home before you know it, sweetie. Now, let me talk to Gramma a minute.”

The car started up. They were going to book him in Bennettsville. It’s wasn’t like he’d never been to jail before. He sank down deep into the seat, his chin against his chest, the plastic cup tight between his hands. He looked out the window and stared at his truck sunk to its knees in mud, the sorry piece of shit.

The police officer wasn’t young anymore, but he drove with his right arm around the seat like he had a special girl with him. He was talking on the radio, arranging for a tow truck. Elton couldn’t understand a word the radio spit out.

He squeezed the cup harder, looked into the mixture of gray powder and little fragments of bone as if he could see his fortune there. The sun was setting now and he’d been so close, but they would still reach the sea. He’d promised.

Thirsty

What you have heard about me is true. I go to Book Galaxy to escape. To drink green tea. To see him. He dresses all in black, his long gray hair in braids like Willie Nelson; wears a Blue Devils baseball cap and glasses; sometimes. He is always busy, writing furiously-- his table piled with lined yellow pads and books he's borrowed from the shelves. He cocks his head when he writes, the sunlight streaks across his high cheekbones.

I know he comes here for the same reason as I do: the solitude. Sometimes he crumples up a sheet of yellow paper and throws it in a little pyramid of such papers. I do that too, sometimes, when a good idea has gone bad for me. We both have low levels of frustration. His name is Basil or Nigel, just like mine is Jonquil.

We're both tea people. I can't drink coffee. I don't need any more caffeine, amphetamines, cocaine, the sugar-rush. I do calming things now. Deep breaths. Hot baths. Saunas. Things they say are good for me.

We both love how it's like a library here, only better, with all the newest books-- their covers crisp and glossy, their pages smelling of fresh black ink, so new it's almost greasy. Occasionally, we look at each other and smile our tiny pocket smiles-- when my laptop boots up with its annoying jangle, like a rooster crowing-- in this solemn place of reading, writing, drinking and making subtle business deals. The cafe hums with Gregorian chants--peaceful music that gets under your soul and tries to lift it up.

I see him conferring in busy whispers with young guys, their hair dyed black and their skin dead white. He's working on a spy novel or maybe one of those weird pulp fiction- sci-fi -gothic things. Every day he wears the same black pants and shirt, like a Ninja writer; like writing is a profession, like a plumber or maybe a UPS driver; only with the UPS guys, you can see their fine tan hairy legs.

I can't work at my house anymore, the light is too dark, and the phone rings too often, the mess beckons, and I am a slave to the chaos. I don't, won't pick up my piles of limp underwear or wash the greasy dishes, so neatly stacked by my significant other. Donald. When I'm having a creative day, I can't do any hands-on work; it destroys the passion. Donald knows that, but he doesn't care.

Basil and I would live in a sun-filled house with enormous windows that face the sea; in constant danger of white caps overwhelming our tiny weathered cottage. We would have matching desks, the wood shining honey brown in the morning sun and our pens would scratch together in time with the tides. We wouldn't have email or newspapers or telephones, except when we needed to talk with our agents. We would eat what we could catch, what we can find --sea things, salty things, mollusks-- full of iodine and nutrients that made our blood grow rich and strong.

Donald put a list on the refrigerator. We have our special jobs. My jobs are washing dishes, doing the laundry and feeding our cat. Donald says I have a special flair for folding things. He cooks and handles the finances, the car, home repairs, grocery shopping, garbage, works doing some computer thing at Tech-Tronica. Every Friday night he doles out my allowance. I get twenty-five dollars a week. I like to spend it here

at Book Galaxy on books and journals and green tea. I sip the tea slowly through my teeth. It tastes like spring.

Every Wednesday morning at ten, I come here, and he's already bent low over his work, his pen scratching away. His voice is low and a little bit rusty. He speaks like he doesn't use it that often, but I've heard it when he converses with the other regulars. The old lady with the coronet of braids and the German accent; the black man who wipes down the tables; the young guy with the blonde brush cut and the laptop and the cell phone and the attitude. I must be the only person who doesn't have a cell phone.

Basil only writes with an emerald green fountain pen. I can see the gold of the pen nib glint from where I sit typing on my laptop, here by the window. Today the sky is thick with clouds. The winter sunlight is lemony and pale and cool. My mug of tea is on the wooden window sill beside me. Sometimes I wrap my hands around the mug. His hands would be warm and supple.

His name is really Jim. I overheard the cashier when he handed Jim the change and his cup of tea. And he drives a beat-up blue Mazda. Jim- not- Basil. My name is Barbara- not- Jonquil, named for my mother's sister, Babs, who died two weeks before I was born.

I'm sure Jim's book is very good. It's hard to be an artist. Jim and I know that. We have to be able to recognize each other. Sometimes when I go to a poetry reading and see some older matron, her hair a faded brown, her complexion blotchy and a set of gold reading glasses strung around her neck, I wonder, where's your sense of drama? Can a real artist look so plain, so forgettable? And then she reads her poems and her words just knock me out.

*High in the upper regions of my body
this gloss is spun, high up
under the overhanging ledge where the
light pours down the cliff night and day. **

Jim-Basil's skin would be hot and he would taste salty. His arms would wrap around me; he would be pale because he burns badly in the sun. He would make my nipples ache. My hair is thick and red and curly. People would remember me if I just had the right words.

These are all important things to ponder, my therapist says. And I know that Jim would agree. If he would only talk to me. If he could only see me. My poetry professor says that if I write just one poem a week, in a year I'll have enough for a chapbook. I'm going to call it *Thirsty* or maybe *Dry*. I haven't decided yet.

Donald says I'm going to have to get a real job after I graduate.

I sip from my thick white mug. Jim is looking at me. His eyes are black like olives. I know he would understand.

* Sharon Olds, "A Woman in Heat Wiping Herself"

Good Samaritan

Marian could tell by the length of the grass that something was wrong; maybe Mrs. Talley was sick again. The grass was golden-green and lustrous; so tall it waved in the wind like wheat; so long you could comb it. You certainly couldn't mow it. Mrs. Talley would need a scythe at this point. Did they even make those anymore, she wondered. Perhaps scissors would work best. She, herself, had actually trimmed the grass around her coleus beds with scissors, so she knew they did a really good job when a close cut was called for.

She peered through the rusting wrought iron fence which enclosed the property and its ornate antebellum home. The whole yard really needed some work, she thought. Mow down those ratty cedars and the straggly roses bushes that lined the path to the house; ditto for the yew hedges that always smelled like cat pee in the summer, and the volunteer bushes scattered on the grass: dark green and so neglected they needed dusting.

Mrs. Talley could probably use some help, she thought. Too bad she wasn't a Good Samaritan, the kind of bouncy person who could naturally, cheerfully, respectfully offer assistance and not feel stupid or self-conscious. Marian had always wished she had an easier personality-- the kind that people with freckles had, the kind that were nicknamed "Sunny." But best to know one's own strengths, she'd rationalized, and years ago she'd stopped trying to be helpful, because it seemed to embarrass other people as much as it embarrassed her.

Even when she brought over lasagna and a bag of organic oranges to her college friend Ruthie after her breast cancer surgery, Marian didn't know what to do next. While other women would confidently stride into the kitchen and wash dishes, fold clothes or change the baby, she perched on the edge of Ruthie's bed, chatting stiffly about work or things they used to have in common, and escaped before the walls began to press in upon her, before she became conscious of some embarrassing convalescent smell of fluids or worse.

She wasn't an unkind or selfish person, she told herself-- just intense: private, shy, introverted-- whatever you want to call it. And she wasn't without some personal insight. Her sister was often sick as child, before they really knew how to treat Crohn's Disease, and Marian couldn't quite forget those rushed hospital visits: the long shiny corridors and the IV poles, the sloshing bed pans and sharp green smell of disinfectants, her sister's small face. There was never time for questions.

Marian sent out prayers as often as possible and hoped that counted. Not that she didn't want to do the right thing, but she didn't do good works in the world well: collecting for charities, helping with political campaigns, tutoring small children, saving pandas, dolphins, orphans. No, she pretty much stuck with change begins at home. "*Act locally, think globally,*" as the saying went, and in this case, locally meant her.

Three days later, Marian walked past the Talley home again. The lawn had just been cut, except for a pie-shaped patch beside the front walk. Had the lawnmower broken down or run out of gas, she wondered. Did Mrs. Talley get tired or did she think she'd mowed the majority of it, and could leave well enough alone?

Marian wouldn't have believed Mrs. Talley could still struggle with that old gas mower, but she'd seen her pushing it, dressed in a mauve wool skirt, cardigan sweater and stout leather walking shoes, Jojo, her miniature poodle, bouncing along beside her. Marian always gave a little wave, but Mrs. Talley never seemed to notice.

She looked through the bars again. The house was set way back on the deep lot, and she could make out the hint of heavy draperies obscuring the view within. Perhaps Mrs. Talley, her support-hosed legs aching from mowing all afternoon, had whistled for Jojo. Maybe she was reading a romance novel on the naughehyde couch in the den, Jojo tucked in beside her, an afghan covering them both through the long afternoon.

Marian had been in the house only once during a historic homes tour, and Mrs. Talley and Jojo were nowhere in sight. The entry hall was the only room in her deteriorating home that had been restored and it was breathtaking: enormous and echoey, like a ballroom. It still even had the original heart pine flooring. When she gazed up she saw the oculus-- a miniature tower of windows-- each pane a different color glass: red, green, blue, yellow. The sunlight streamed rainbows on the thick cream-colored walls.

The home had once been the centerpiece of the Montague plantation, circa 1860, according to the brochure the Preservation ladies handed out, and was a wonderful example of Italianate architecture, they claimed. In the early twentieth century, the bulk of the farm was sold and developed into a subdivision of Queen Anne and colonial-style homes and then later, bungalows. Each house was sheathed in clapboards, with broad porches, small neat lawns, and enormous oak, elm and pecan trees that guarded their property like sentinels. At night you could hear the whistle of the trains as they rumbled

beneath the bridge leading into the neighborhood. It was a comforting sound, Marian thought. She always knew she was home when she crossed the bridge.

Now the Montague plantation was home to one old lady and her poodle. Her husband had bought the house in the late fifties, so the story went, from the Haven Free-Will Baptist Church. It had needed a lot of work then; and when they were young, apparently, they could do it. But now, despite Mrs. Talley's sporadic attempts at maintenance, the stuccoed walls peeled like sunburnt skin as soon as they were painted. The historic neighborhood was waiting patiently for Mrs. Talley to die. Then they would pounce upon this property and restore it to its proper elegance.

Marian was positive the house had lots of secrets. Perhaps there was an old family graveyard hidden among the bushes, bodies buried under the floor or a wine cellar with champagne from its glory days, stored and forgotten in a cool basement catacomb. Caches of bones, bottles, marbles, Blue Willow pottery shards, musket balls-- who knew?

She looked through the metal bars again, her eyes straining to pierce the opaque window draperies.

Mrs. Talley and Jojo would share beanie weenies for dinner. It would be kind of embarrassing, but nobody would see them do it, so they ate the beans right out of the can. Sometimes Jojo might try to eat Mrs. Talley's share too, if she left her share unattended or turned for a minute. Then it would be time to clean up, but Mrs. Talley might not feel like it. She would feel like lying down and watching TV. She would take off her shapeless cardigan and drape it over the arm of the couch and lay down. Jojo would tidy up the kitchen floor as usual, her pink tongue lapping up the beans that had dripped onto the

linoleum. She'd crawl, contented and full, under the table for a snooze, her dirty pink stomach rising and falling with each breath.

Mrs. Talley had fallen asleep now, her breath raspy and jerky. Every now and then her breath would stop and Jojo would look up at her. Sometimes she walked over on her stiff little legs and licked Mrs. Talley's crinkled face, her stubby tail wagging hard. She would push her head into Mrs. Talley's hand and whimper, jump up on the couch and snuggle up to her warm stomach. The house was dark and cool, and it was only three-thirty in the afternoon, but the sun never quite reached the inner rooms, and to them it might have been midnight.

On Monday, Marian tramped home from work, tired and dispirited from another long day in the finance department at the City. Her running shoes slapped against the broken sidewalk. Lost in thought, she forgot to check on Mrs. Talley's grass. She turned the corner and came to her own house, a trim green bungalow framed in holly bushes. Her lawn was looking tidy. She had mowed it a few days ago with the hand mower. She always cut it precisely to the centerline where it joined her neighbor's property. Elizabeth, she noticed with snide satisfaction, had not mowed her side at all.

Marian changed into her black leggings and tee shirt and drove to the gym. A sweaty young man brushed past her as she went inside, letting the thick metal door bang against her shoulder. "Thanks a lot," she muttered. He was long gone, talking on his cell phone a mile a minute, trotting over to his Lexus, probably.

She stopped a second, breathed in the smell of sweat, and the rubbery tang of the indoor track. The gym looked like it always did. Same ancient gym rats, working out to scare away the next heart attack. Same Cybex weight-training equipments, rows of bikes

and treadmills, stacks of free weights and exercise mats, surrounded by the track. Dusty kites hung from the steel ceiling trusses, and lithe, well-muscled exercise specialists demonstrated crunches.

Marian did her shoulder rolls, trying to ignore the inner clicks and crackles, then began her warm-up laps. She'd made two or three rounds before she spotted Mr. Eddy sitting in the lounge watching TV. She probably would have seen him sooner if she had not been trying to avoid looking at herself in the wall-sized mirrors that surrounded the gym.

"Hello," he called. She sped up a bit and took a few more laps before the guilt caught up with her. "Over here, sugar," he beckoned, his hands like sticks, his black eyes glittering. She walked over, torn between her desire to help, and her memory of his claw-like grip. Mr. Eddy was tall and rawboned. His face was large and narrow, etched by deep vertical grooves which ran down his cheeks. His white hair was like a duck's wing with a kind of swoop to it, and his straight back was just beginning to bend with pain.

"How are you?" she asked, doing a few leg stretches, hoping this little duty conversation wouldn't last long.

"The cancer's back," he said. "Haven't been feeling too good." Marian came a bit closer and before she knew it, he was clinging to her hands. His hands were frail, yet warm and friendly, with age spots like continents. He might have been dying, she thought, but there was plenty of life left in him yet. Maybe too much.

"Don't look so sad, darlin'," he said, still smiling. "I ain't dead yet." His breath smelled like old cabbage and his teeth were dark around the edges. "Have a seat?" He

patted the spot beside him on the black vinyl couch. Marian perched on the edge of the cushion, her toes tapping out an impatient rhythm.

Maybe, she thought with a kind of relief, this would be one of those days that did not go according to her plan. She was notorious among her friends for living her life “by the list,” and it was true she got everything done--the bills, the birthday cards, the taxes, even rebates were mailed on time, but sometimes, she thought, perhaps she had left herself off. The list. It was a relief to step from the page into her own life, such as it was. And it wasn't much, she admitted, since Lydia had moved out. She had thought they were getting ready to talk about buying a timeshare condo at the beach, and now Lydia was busy sharing someone else's condo, some young girl from the landscaping company where she worked. “Kimmy is just so much fun,” Lydia gushed as she shoved her mahogany dresser onto the bed of her pick-up truck. “And no goddamn lists!”

Over the last few months, Marian and Mr. Eddy had struck up a kind of acquaintanceship. They'd met on the exercise bikes, but now he was too weak for that. He had been a teacher, a molder of boys, she'd decided. He'd grown up on a farm in the mountains of West Virginia, with a hard Daddy. His wife died of ovarian cancer twenty years ago and he had two sons who lived in California. Each spring all the daffodils and narcissus bulbs and dogwoods his wife had planted blossomed pink and white and yellow and it was like a little Eden in April. His home, she pictured, was a nest of papers he was sorting through-- magazines, correspondence, insurance forms. He'd tried all the herbs and vitamins that the little lady down at Wellspring recommended for his condition. He was not out of hope just yet.

She sighed, felt the despair that crouched and breathed in her stomach. Who was she kidding? She was the one who needed a life. Mrs. Eddy was alive and well, walking slowly around the track as she did three days a week. Another woman in his harem had pointed her out to Marian last week.

Mr. Eddy squeezed her hand. “We were just meant to be,” he winked. “So, what are you thinking about?”

“I like to invent lives for the people who work out here,” she admitted, looking around the gym. “I’ve named everyone-- there’s Mr. Green Jeans, the Judge, the Salesman, the Lady of Death, Salt and Pepper.”

“Salt and Pepper?”

“You know that little short couple that always exercise together? They’re exactly the same height, only she’s plump and he’s wiry.”

“Oh, Edna and William,” Mr. Eddy said. “I’ve known them forever, since we taught together over at State College. And what do you call me?”

“Jed,” she said without thinking. “From the Beverly Hillbillies.”

“I can see that,” he chuckled, and his breath flowed over her. Her nostrils drew back at the sour smell. “Lean over a minute. I want to tell you something,” he said. “You are a beautiful woman. Beautiful. Don’t let anyone ever tell you different.” She smiled inside. She didn’t want to admit how good this man could make her feel or how sadly susceptible she was to his ridiculous compliments. He was, she knew, just an updated version of a dirty old man. Only he was really old.

“Honey?”

“My name is Marian,” she said, her smile suddenly tight and fake. She’d caught a glimpse of herself in the gym mirrors. Her body, which seemed disciplined enough when standing, spread out like a river delta when she sat down.

She’s lost it. Her pheromones, she realized, had flown away. She felt sure that everyone knew she wasn’t having sex-- that bit of sparkle, the butterflies beneath the skin, that breathless awareness of bodies around her--it was gone. Lydia had taken what little was left. That’s why no one, man or woman, at the gym or the bar or the grocery store tries to catch her eye or gazes at her appraisingly anymore. That look has always scared her, but now that it is gone, shut off like a leaky tap, she misses it.

She is not ready to become invisible just yet, and being visible has always made her nervous. It isn’t her fault she’s over forty—that’s what happens, the natural result of continuing to live. Is she supposed to disregard her own nice soft roundnesses or pretend quite politely that she doesn’t have them anymore, fade into grayness, politely trim her hair into the matron cut and step aside? And who says so? She is no longer jealous of lustrous thick wavy hair or bland unlined foreheads, tender young stomachs or some perfection of body. She is jealous of their cache of plump swollen eggs, the potential waiting to be born.

“It’s all biology,” Ellyn, her work buddy from Inspections said at lunch this week, as she chomped down a cheeseburger. “First you’re a bleeder, then a breeder, and then if you’re lucky, you can be a leader.”

“Or a crone,” Carol chimed in.

“Oops!” said Marian, slapping her forehead. “Babies. I knew there was something I forgot to do.”

At least her hair still looked good-- long and thick, only faintly threaded with gray. A bit like tinsel. She still had a year or two to go before she needed to think about dyeing it, if she was that sort of person. She wasn't sure she wanted to commit herself to Saturday mornings getting highlighted.

"Sorry, Mr. Eddy," she caught herself. She stood up. "It's good to see you, but I need to finish my run and get home. I've still got the grass to mow before it gets dark."

"A beautiful woman like you doesn't have a man to help her out?"

"I'm between men," she said shortly. She stood up and turned to leave.

"Don't go," he said, grabbing tight to her hand.

"Mr. Eddy, it's time for your class in five minutes," announced Marva, the exercise queen. Her petite hand patted his drooping shoulder. Slender and small, she was as neat and compact as a pony.

"She ain't no bigger than a minute, is she?" laughed Mr. Eddy. "And how much exercise can a bunch of old geezers hooked up to oxygen tanks do anyway?" He looked up at Marian. "Meet me here tomorrow?" he asked.

Marian had turned to watch the TV. The evening news. War, war everywhere and the usual nightly slaughter on I-40-- God's way of keeping the population down in Research Triangle Park, she supposed.

"Marian," he said. "It's okay to ask questions." She sighed without even knowing it. It seemed like something heavy had been lifted. Her questions fell out.

"Is the cancer terminal?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Isn't there anything they can do?"

“Not much,” he said popping a peppermint into his mouth. “I’ve had the surgery, the chemo, the radiation. Now I just enjoy every day the best I can, and take the pain pills when there’s a need. I’ve given away all my clothes that don’t fit anymore. You know, I used to be a pretty hefty old bird, but the cancer’s taken a big bite out of me.”

Marian felt queasy. She imagined a bright yellow Ms. Pacman racing around inside him, chewing, chewing, chewing, until she was all done. She tried to keep listening, to stay focused; present. Should she hold his bony hand? Look into his eyes? Say how sorry she was? She longed to run away like a stampeding horse, run far away behind a canyon wall where no one could ever find her.

“Hey,” said Mr. Eddy, tapping the floor with his cane. “Pay attention here. Attention must be paid to an old man. *Death of a Salesman*. Arthur Miller.”

“I thought it was ‘attention must be paid to such a man.’”

“Touché.” He tapped the floor with his cane again. “You’re good, Marian.” He closed his eyes, and for a minute she thought he looked dead. She took a deep breath, and kissed his cheek, prickly with silver stubble.

“Can I tell you something?” he whispered. She looked up at him.

“I think I love you.” His lips grazed the top of her ear, and he breathed his warm breath inside her. “Now don’t forget me,” he said.

“I won’t,” she said. He squeezed her hand, then laid his head against the cushions and closed his eyes.

“By the way,” she asked, “what’s your wife’s name?”

“My wife? Ah, ah...it’s Hilary,” he stuttered.

“She’s a lonely woman,” Marian said.

She started her laps around the track. Her legs felt good, springy, the muscles strong and liquid. Her legs stretched out, long and limber, and she pretended she was a race horse, training for her big moment. Something had loosened inside her, come undone.

She kept grinning. It felt good to be noticed, she thought, even if he was an old lech. Even if she was an old lesbian. Even if he said “I think I love you” to every woman at the gym, every grocery clerk, every blue-haired lady at church, every live female between twelve and a hundred. His pheromone radar was a little off, she thought, but God knows, it was still humming.

She nodded to the Judge, the CEO, the Salesman, yakking away as usual; Salt and Pepper were on their treadmills, walking side by side; the Glamour Puss, elegant and attenuated and beautiful, was lifting her three-pound weights in front of the mirror. She turned as Marian passed, her violet lips curving into a smile. Marian peeked into the exercise room. Mr. Eddy was holding Marva’s hand tightly in his, whispering into Marva’s beautiful shell-like ear.

Marian glanced at the clock. It was already six-thirty, but it wouldn’t be dark until after eight. Maybe she could bring her lawn mower over and offer to help Mrs. Talley with that last bit of grass. She’d have to open the rusty gate and walk through it. She’d have to knock on the door, and she hated little smelly poodles, but still but she thought she could do it. She hoped she wasn’t too late.

Staying Alive

“Oh, no,” I sighed to myself, as I pushed open the heavy restroom door. Some fifteen or twenty other women were piled in like cordwood in front of the restroom’s four stalls. I stooped over and peeked under each door hoping no else had checked before me, and I could just saunter ahead and pee, but all the stalls save one were occupied--a pair of fantastic red cowboy boots, some strappy black sandals and a little girl’s swinging Mary Jane’s. The corner stall was totally disgusting; the faded black seat drizzled with urine, the commode stuffed with used toilet paper and the floor covered with an inch of murky water. Best not to think about it too much. I was wearing my grey suede ankle boots, so I quickly backed out and resumed my place in the vigil.

The door opened again as yet more women squeezed in. Black women with great flamboyant swirling gowns and glorious hats, small elderly women in ancient red Chanel suits, stockings and pumps, young girls in jeans and shorty tops. Each time the restroom door opened, we were assaulted with a blast of cold air, dissipating the close, perfumed, wooly-smelling atmosphere. As each woman entered, we all groaned. But it was a group groan, borne of years of patiently waiting in line-- a bovine kind of patience, and knowing that some things cannot be rushed, no matter how urgent the cause. Even the blinking of the lights, letting us know that the Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe for which we’d each paid at least thirty-five dollars, was about to resume, did not budge the line.

With nothing better to do, I was forced to look at myself in the cold, ungodly large mirror over the sinks. As usual, under the sputtering fluorescents, my skin looked

green. Those rogue grey hairs had risen to the top of my head like cream, and the odd one here and there stuck up like antennae. I was wearing a beautiful wine-colored velvet top and skirt which clung a little more tightly to my body than I was comfortable with, but thanks to generous gym time, and walking the damn dog every day, or rather my husband John's damn dog, there was nothing to be ashamed of. I passed, except that I was out and about alone again and there was no way these women could know that.

The woman in front of me was obviously a dancer, with that kind of tightly muscled organized body that clothes simply, gratefully cover. She was wearing a deep-blue sleeveless silk dress that barely touched her skin. Cut low in front, and even lower in back, it seemed to float over her body. What I wouldn't give for five minutes to test-drive a body like that. Just to feel sleek and stream-lined, instead of earthbound and Rubenesque--ah well.....

"I love your dress," I said to her, chatting as I often did, more comfortably to complete strangers than to friends. Something about being trapped together with a common cause, I guess.

"Fucking restroom. What is it with these lines? I paid fifty fucking dollars to be here and then seven fucking dollars to park, and five fucking fifty for a fucking coke and you'd think they could have more than four fucking stalls!"

I strained to see her face. She had that fair, lightly freckled skin and pale blue eyes that redheads seem to have, and the neat finely-formed features that seemed to go with that body. The beginnings of lines were showing up around her lips and her eyes. I guessed she was about thirty.

“It is kind of a long wait, isn’t it?” I offered, hoping to suck a little wind out of her sails.

“It sure is. I’ve been waiting here in this line since 9:25 and now it’s 9:42, and it hasn’t moved one bit. What is their fucking problem?” There was something oddly charming about her use of the word “fuck”. Perhaps I should have been scared off by her anger, but instead I was intrigued, curious even-- a trait that had gotten me into no end of trouble as a teenager. I liked to be near danger, try on different lives, but in the end I always got scared, and scuttled back to my own safe habitat. Conversing with this girl, made me feel kind of innocent. At forty-five, that emotion is rare.

“Are you enjoying the dance troupe?” I asked.

“God, yes,” she exclaimed. “I haven’t seen so many good looking guys in years. And when they were wearing those little yellow Lycra shorts-- I mean ummm, ummmm, ummmmm.... There was nothing left to the imagination. Her green eyes danced greedily. I wondered if I’d missed something.

I looked at some of the other women washing and spritzing and preening before the mirror--subtly inviting the rest of the women to admire them-- their slender, firm arms, muscled backs, rounded calves and I sighed. If I ate two ounces of turbot, one small baked potato and a serving of broccoli for every meal for the rest of my life I wouldn’t look like these lissome women. How did I end up in this Gen-X hell?

On the other hand, I thought, sizing up some of the larger women, their bulk artfully concealed in caftans, I should be grateful. I have a body that works and I can do almost anything I want with it. Or could if John would cooperate. We didn’t sleep apart; it just felt like it sometimes. But that was another story, I sighed to myself. I continued

ruminating, analyzing, comparing, considering, sinking lower and lower into a state of frowsy self-centeredness, when I heard a thump and then a sliding thud.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It sounded like something fell.” We all waited politely for somebody to do something. “I think that’s a foot sticking out,” I said. I could clearly see a foot crisscrossed with patent leather straps and spike heels, sheer black hose and the edge of a green knit skirt sticking out from under the stall.

Someone should do something, I thought. I always wait for someone else to take the first step, and it seemed I wasn’t the only one. A leader finally emerged, as the woman in the blue gown shimmied out of her dress and threw it to me. “Hey, I don’t want to get my dress dirty,” she yelled “It cost five fucking hundred dollars!” She scooted, crablike under the door, clad only in her surprisingly functional white bra and underwear. A few moments went by, and then I heard her voice. It was subdued and flat.

“Call an ambulance,” she said quietly. She unlocked the door and backed out quickly. “Somebody needs to get the manager, fast!” Thirty efficient index fingers pressed cell phone keys. An officious-looking woman with a gray hair, cut short and smooth as a ball field, walked briskly out to notify the office.

“Here’s your dress,” I said. “What happened in there?”

“Take a look for yourself.” She pushed open the door.

I looked in the stall, and found myself staring down at a young woman. She was wedged between the toilet and the partition, her head beside the commode, her long black hair covered with crusted blood, her legs bent at the knee. She was wearing an antique

locket around her neck. I wanted to see if she was still breathing, but I knew I shouldn't touch her.

"She's dead," the blue-gowned woman said. I wanted to scream or throw up or run away, but for some reason I stayed. The rest of the ladies left the room as quickly as roaches when you switch on the light.

"Wow, what's their fucking problem? Haven't they ever seen blood before?" she asked.

"What kind of work do you do?" I asked, as she washed her hands methodically--whole hands, between the fingers, over the wrists--and then slithered back into her blue gown.

"I'm a nurse," she sighed. "Surgical. At Duke. I always seem to be around when the shit hits the fan." Her blue dress was splattered with water drops, but she didn't even seem to notice. At least it's not blood, I thought. The stall door swung open and we both looked again at the body. She looked so young.

"Are you sure she's dead?"

"Oh yeah, I've seen my share of stiffs. Plus, I checked her pulse. We'd better wait until the police get here." She sat down on one of the green easy chairs in the lady's lounge, the little waiting room before the restroom. It was decorated with faux Victorian furniture and gilt-edged mirrors hung on the walls. I sat down next to her. She lit a cigarette.

"Would you mind not smoking?" I said. "I'm allergic to the smoke."

"Yeah, you and the whole fucking world," she said, stubbing it out in the sink.

"Why are you still here, anyway?"

“You look like you don’t need to be alone,” I said. “And besides, I’m a witness too. I identified the foot, remember? And another thing, your lips are trembling, and you’re so pale I’m afraid you’re going to pass out.” She drew her legs up into the chair and seemed to shrink.

“I am a little shaky. My name’s Farrah,” she said, extending her hand. Each nail was blood red.

“Meg,” I said, and extended my hand to meet hers, each nail short and unadorned. “Farrah, like Farrah Fawcett?” I asked.

“Just like—I was named for her. My mother loved Charlie’s Angels. She still wears a shag, but now it’s frosted. I was supposed to be a blonde. I was blonde as a baby. But now look at me now.” I looked. Farrah’s hair was short, coppery-red and stylishly spiky. Each ear was ornamented with a row of silver rings. I wondered what would happen if you pulled them.

“What’s taking the police so long?” I asked, checking my watch. It was ten o’clock already. I’d heard the police were slow to respond, but this was ridiculous.

“And the manager hasn’t even come in to check either,” said Farrah. “It’s kind of creepy babysitting a corpse.”

“Well, here he comes now,” I said. The door was flung open by a short balding man wearing a pink Izod shirt, khaki pants and Gucci belt.

“I got here as soon as I could.” He mopped his forehead. “What a night. First the popcorn machine breaks down. Try calling Adams Vending on a Sunday night. Then a lady was having some kind of epileptic fit in the center section and I had to call the EMS.

Anyway,” he breathed heavily, “the police would like you ladies to wait until they get here. They may have some questions for you.”

He pulled his cell phone from its holster and dialed ‘911’ again. “Hello, this is Chambers over at the Carolina Theatre. Where the heck are the police?” he asked. “We’ve got a dead body here! They’ll be right over, yeah-yeah, yeah.” He walked into the restroom; we could hear him flipping open all the stall doors and then the sound of retching.

He wiped his face with a wet paper towel. “I’ve got a weak stomach, I guess. Can I get you ladies something? A cup of coffee?” he asked hopefully, staring down the front of Farrah’s dress.

“You know what I’d really like?” Farrah said, her tongue licking her lips, “a great big box of Milk Duds. Chocolate might just help me.”

“I’ll get it pronto, sugar,” he said. “By the way,” he told Farrah, “my name’s Bob, Bob Matthews, in case you need to get in touch with me later. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“What a jerk!” said Farrah under her breath. What I really wish I had is a drink,” she said, stretching her arms back over her head. Everything she did looked graceful, like some kind of old ballet exercise. “This has been some night and I never got to pee either, come to think of it.” She walked over to an empty stall.

“Are you going to go to the bathroom right next door to it?” I asked.

“Well, sure. Can you come with me and keep me company?”

“Okay,” I said. No one’s asked me since elementary school, I thought--except my son when he was little. He never did like to go in to the bathroom alone.

I leaned my hand against the door. Just as Farrah began to tinkle, the police began to pour into the restroom, followed closely by detectives, a doctor, the photographer and even a German shepherd from the K-9 Corps. Farrah flushed hurriedly and came out still pulling down her dress. She pointed to the stall.

“In there,” she said and began to wash her hands.

“Did you find the body, ma’am? I’ll need to get some information before I can let you ladies go,” he said. “Lieutenant Barclay, homicide. Have a seat. The detectives will be checking out the body.”

“What do you need to know?” Farrah asked, sitting down on a green velvet couch. I sat beside her.

He pulled out a pad and stub of yellow pencil, so short it looked like he’d lifted it from a miniature golf course. “Let’s start with the basics-- name, address, phone number, place of work...”

“I’m Farrah Cates and I work at Duke. I’m a nurse. I live at”

“And I’m Margaret Ann Peterson.” I chimed in. And my phone is 733-1905. I’m a social worker for Wake County. Raleigh, that is.”

“So you’re both Raleigh gals, huh?”

“That’s right,” said Farrah.

“Now who discovered the body?”

“Meg saw something sort of unusual under the partition, and I crawled under to investigate.”

“What did she see?”

“I saw a foot sticking out under the door,” I said firmly.

“What time was this?”

“I think it was about 9:45,” I said.

“Think or know? This could be very important.”

“It was 9:45. I specifically remember checking my watch because I didn’t want to miss the rest of the performance.”

“Did you notice anything or anyone unusual?”

I thought for a minute. “Well I don’t see how she could have been killed with all of these people around here. And the corner commode had overflowed too. Perhaps someone was trying to dispose of something?”

He nodded. “And you, miss?” he said turning to Farrrah.

“Well this might be nothing at all, but the way the blood had almost coagulated on the top of her head, it made me think she’d been dead for quite awhile. Maybe she didn’t die here. Or maybe it happened much earlier today.”

“Mystery buff, huh?”

“Nurse.”

“Sorry. Long night. I thought I was going to get home before midnight for once this week. This is our twelfth murder this month. I’m bushed.”

“Lieutenant, I think we’ve found something you’ll be interested in,” shouted one of the detectives.

“I’ll be right there. Here’s my card in case you think of anything else that might be important.” He handed us each a card with the case number on it.

“Wait a minute, Lieutenant Barclay “demanded Farrah. “Who is she? What the hell happened here?”

“We don’t know yet. Even if I did, we can’t release that information. She may be a minor. We’ll have to try and ID her, and then notify her parents-- if we can find them. You girls can watch the news tonight. If we find out anything, it’ll be on the tube. Okay, now I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

We passed two husky men with a stretcher as we made our way out. Glittering chandeliers still shone from the lobby ceiling, and fluorescent lights glowed from inside the candy counters, but it was eerie and dark and the carpet absorbed any sounds our shoes might have made. TV vans with their homing antennas whirring were lining up on the street outside the theatre. Mr. Matthews waved a limp good-bye through the glass doors, a box of Milk Duds clutched in his hand.

“So, where do you want to go to get that drink?” asked Farrah. Now I don’t drink much and I don’t go to bars. Well, not at all. Alcohol is bad for the liver, and I hate getting smoke in my hair. Also, I’m terminally inhibited and men never try to catch my eye anymore anyway....so, what is the point?

“Wherever you say,” I said.

“How about the Wayfarer down on Broad Street?”

“Okay.” I wondered if I should give John a call and let him know where I was going, but then remembered he said he was going to bed early. He’d never notice I was late anyway, not with the amount of tranquilizers he took each night to sleep. “I’ll follow you,” I said. “My car’s just across the street in the parking garage.”

It was 10:45 when we finally reached the bar. It was a brutally cold night and the lights inside promised the anonymous warmth of the best kind of seedy bars at night.

Things were dead, except for a few of the regulars. “Hey Farrah,” waved one of the guys seated at the bar. He was wearing a Durham Bulls cap and empty beer bottles were lined up before him like bowling pins.

“Hey, Farrah. Whooooo, I love that dress. Sit next to me, Baby.”

“No such luck Rick; we’re getting a table.”

“Who’s that with you?”

“Rick, this is Meg.” Rick extended his hand, so I shook it. It was tough, and the skin felt smooth and calloused. I looked around, just taking in the place. It was paneled in dark pine, scarred with the carvings of a thousand lovers. Dart boards, foreign beer bottles and mugs from around the world were displayed on the shelves behind the bar. The pine floorboards were sticky and the place reeked of cigarette smoke.

“Let’s get a seat, Farrah,” I whispered. “I still have to pee.” I was beginning to feel kind of desperate. She led me to a dark corner near the window, right under the broken Budweiser sign. It went on and off sporadically to a rhythm of its own.

“Bathroom’s over there,” she pointed. “What do you want?”

“Some bottled water, whatever they have.”

“At a bar? Whatever you say.” Farrah sashayed over to the counter to get our order. If you wanted to get drunk here, it was strictly a do-it-yourself affair. When I got back to the table, Farrah was already nursing a tall glass of Long Island Iced Tea and a basket of fries. “Here’s your pure water,” she said.

“You know, I haven’t been in a bar since 1985,” I said. “My husband had a convention in Charlotte and I went with a bunch of friends from work. We ended up joy-

riding all over town, until the axle of Mike's old Chevy Nova broke. They blamed it on me. Of course, it could have been me; I weighed over 200 pounds at the time."

"Really?" said Farrah, appraising my body as objectively as a butcher.

"Really," I said, wondering why I'd just told a perfect stranger the truth about my body. "Yeah, really. I come by it naturally; everybody in my family's got a weight problem."

"Well, you look great," said Farrah. Great for a middle-aged once fat woman, or really great, I wondered.

"So what's your story?" she asked. "How come you were watching Alvin Ailey all by yourself?"

"My husband was supposed to come with me, but at the last minute, he said he wasn't feeling up to it."

"Was he sick or something?"

"Bad back. Job stress. It's always something. He goes through more illnesses in a month than I hope to go through in a lifetime. I couldn't get a friend to come, so I came by myself. I don't miss things I want to do anymore," I explained.

"Hell, men don't have to be sick to do that. My boyfriend was the same way. Anytime there was work to be done around the house, he was gone. Or watching TV. Or helping a friend paint. Something. He was just never there. It got so I'd be lying in bed with my red silk nightie on, ready to do it, you know, and he'd just flip to the Bass Fishing Channel or something. Some nights I just fingered myself."

Boy, were we traveling fast down a conversational path that made me want to crawl under the table. "Are you still together?" I asked.

“Fuck, no. I moved out last week. Now he’s got the TV, the DVD player, the coffee maker-- pretty much everything that’s worth anything, but at least I’ve got my life back.” She took a long slug of her drink, and I could tell by her drooping eyelids that she was beginning to relax. “Maybe next time I’ll find a man who appreciates my talents.”

My bottle of water had condensed all over the table, and I was busy drawing little hearts with my finger in the frosty water. “So, how old are you, Farrah?” I asked.

“I’m twenty-eight,” she said.

“So, you’ve got plenty of time,” I said. And clearly, she had a lot of talents.

“Time for what?” she asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Well, time for husbands, kids, family—you know....” Oh, shit, I’ve really stuck my foot in my mouth now, I thought. I don’t know one thing about what this girl wants.

“I’m ready to go home,” she said abruptly and pushed back her chair. The wooden legs scratched hard against the floor.

“Hey, I’m really sorry if I offended you,” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. Her skin was ice cold.

“If family’s so great,” she said, “then where’s yours?”

I swallowed hard. “My son died of leukemia a few years ago,” I said. “John and I are both still kind of crazy.” There was a silence. Farrah took another sip of her drink.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I just go shooting off my big mouth. You’d think I’d know better.” She reached over and covered my hand with hers. I tried to count the freckles.

“Thanks,” I said. “John hardly leaves the house anymore, and I can’t stand being around him. He’s so depressed, it’s like living in a black hole; sometimes it’s worse than

being alone. It rubs off like charcoal.” I have lots of friends, I thought, solid middle-aged women with kind hearts and solid solutions-- leave him, get counseling, adopt one of those darling Chinese babies--so why am I telling her this?

“Hunter had just turned eleven,” I said. “He’d just started middle school. It took me forever to get pregnant and he was always such a difficult kid. One of those really hyper kids that’s great at sports. We wondered how he’d ever make it through high school, much less college. Then he got sick.”

“Sometimes you have to shed a skin, Meg,” she said.

Rick slid all the way in beside her. He nuzzled her neck with his lips. “Look,” Farrah said, pushing him away “the news is on.” Rick’s hand disappeared under the table. Miriam Thomas was explaining Durham’s latest apparent murder.

“Here’s Bob Davis on the scene, in Durham, at the Carolina Theater. What can you tell us, Bob?”

“It’s the coldest night of the year, Miriam, and the last cold night this young lady will ever have.” Bob was wearing a squall jacket with no hat, but his curly hair remained firmly anchored to his skull; he looked cold. “I’m at the Carolina Theater in Durham, where tonight, the body of an as yet unidentified young woman was found in the ladies’ room.”

“The police have released only a few details, Miriam. She was Caucasian with black hair, wearing a light green dress and cowboy boots, and appeared to be in her late teens. The police have no clear motive. She had no ID and the police are searching through their missing persons files right now. This is the 20th murder in Durham this year, and it’s only February.”

Rick and Farrah were kissing now; embarrassing liquid kisses, and I knew it was time for me to go home, but all of a sudden I couldn't bear the thought. My heart hurt and so did my head. I couldn't see what his hand was doing under the table, but parts of me were waking up that had been asleep for years. The way he was doing whatever he was doing was as close to sex as I'd gotten since Hunter died.

I remembered the time my best friend had kissed her boyfriend behind the couch for hours at my fourteenth birthday party, while I'd played Twister in the family room. I thought about that poor crumpled girl in the bathroom stall. Somewhere, somebody was waiting for her. I swallowed hard. Rick was dropping a little trail of kisses down Farrah's chest, and her eyes were closed. I felt the familiar thrumming start deep inside me, solid as a heartbeat. The Budweiser light had finally spritzed out and it was dark in our corner of the bar. I slipped out of the booth. I'm not sure if they noticed, but I waved goodbye.

Scrambled

“All I can think of is *The Bride of Frankenstein*,” said Celia. “You know the scene where she’s on the operating table and he attaches the wires and her hair is totally spazzed-out?”

“It’s supposed to be perfectly safe,” said Kate.

“I didn’t even know they did electro-shock therapy anymore,” said Rachel.

“Only when nothing else works,” said Celia quietly. She stared out the bay window into her mother’s garden, and wished she could be anywhere but here. It was 11:30 already and the hospital said they’d be calling mid-afternoon. She had only managed to graze her breakfast of toast and strong coffee, and the tattered purple crusts lay across her plate.

The sisters sat together in the breakfast nook of the old house where they’d grown up. Their mother’s kitchen still looked like 1975, and there was some comfort in that, Celia thought-- the harvest gold appliances, dark pine cabinets, scratched laminate countertops and green and yellow flower-power wallpaper. The only uplifting thing about the room was the huge window that faced the backyard and the old apricot tree. Eating breakfast in her mother’s kitchen always reminded her of Nestlé’s Quik and strawberry Pop-Tarts.

That’s what Dad let them eat after Mom was hospitalized for the first time. Celia used to feel guilty eating Pop-Tarts, because she knew that Mom wanted them to eat healthy foods like shredded wheat or natural-style peanut butter or raisins, instead of

sugary snacks. Late at night, Celia would mix up strange concoctions of peanut butter and brown sugar, eat raw cookie dough or Nestlé's Quik right from the can, the fluffy dust making her cough as she licked it off the spoon. Dad didn't care what they did, as long as he could sleep with his latest girlfriend. Sometimes he didn't come home at all, and then Kate would make her do her algebra, iron her blouse, help her do something with her hair.

"You look really tired this morning, Celia," said Kate, taking another sip of the bitter coffee.

"I am. Yesterday was pretty rough." Celia was still wearing her threadbare flannel nightie with the unicorns, the one her grandmother gave her in high school. After the struggle yesterday to get Mom into the ambulance, and Mom screaming and kicking at Celia and yelling "*Don't let them lock me up again, don't let them take me prisoner!*" Celia felt like spending the rest of her life in pajamas.

"I can't believe you still have that nightgown," said Rachel. She had finished her breakfast and was touching up her nail polish.

"I like it," Celia said. "Why throw it away? It makes me feel cozy." She was happiest when she was comfortable-- sweatpants, soft faded tee shirts from places she'd been or hadn't. "I know I'm a mess," she said looking at her sleek sisters. She gazed at them across the old Formica table.

The youngest, at twenty-two, Celia had always been the victim and the beneficiary of her sisters' schemes. Looking at them now, she felt the peril of being the little sister again. Somehow Celia had missed all the grooming lessons, though she

suspected it was because she was only twelve when their mother went certifiably nuts, though Aunt Rose always said she could see it coming. Anyway, Mom wasn't much of a role model herself; just a slash of lipstick and that was it.

Celia looked the most like their mother-- her golden brown hair, the curls, the Slavic nose, the long narrow eyes, brown with gold flecks. Though Celia was slender, her mother was the peasant type—short and stocky and very strong. It was always a little scary seeing flashes of her mother staring back at her from the mirror. She used to want to look just like her mother.

The first day she realized something wasn't quite right, was the day after Dad left. "I just want you girls to know your father has moved out. Again," Mom informed them that morning at the breakfast table." Celia had looked up from reading the back of the cereal box. Her mother was still in her pink robe and hadn't brushed her hair. It stuck out funny all over her head, like the tail of a bird. Then Mom had let them eat Dad's Frosted Flakes.

"What do you mean Dad's left?" asked Rachel accusingly, as she spooned up the soggy flakes.

"Your father's gone," she said in a dull measured tone. She slumped, her elbows on the table. "I don't know where he is. I assume he's moved in with Sherry."

"Sherry?"

"Sherry." She sighed. "She's about twenty-five and lives in Zuma Beach. That's all I know. It's 7:45; it's time for you girls to be off to school." Her face looked like it was going to melt. Celia didn't know what else to do, so she slung on her backpack and grabbed her flute and went off to school.

When she came home that afternoon her mother was crumpled on the front steps, crying, right where everyone could see her. She'd pressed up close to her mother's stiff body, and held her hand and passed her Kleenexes, but her mother just kept crying.

"You girls don't understand," she'd wept. "He didn't leave us any money. I don't know how to work anymore, how are we going make it?" They finally got her in the house, but the next morning she wouldn't get out of bed, wouldn't talk, just stared at the ceiling. Kate hustled Celia out the door to catch her bus, like being late would matter. Kate was just mad because Celia looked messy, her shirt untucked, and her frizzy hair floating in the morning fog.

Celia ran home from the bus stop that afternoon, and had just rounded the corner of their block when she saw the ambulance. All the neighbors were gathered across the street from their house in a bunch and were staring. The rotating light on the ambulance roof was like a giant strobe light in the late afternoon, making their house light and then dark, light and dark, and then it took Mom away to the hospital.

Great Aunt Rose moved in for awhile, with her bottles of cologne and her make-up case, her dangling earrings and her almost live-in boyfriend, Michael. "Just for a few weeks, girls," she said. "Just until your mother's herself again, girls," she said. At night she would snuggle with Michael in their parents' bed, but he would always go home at midnight. Dad moved back in a few months later, but they hardly ever saw him.

Celia got through seventh grade, though she was a total dork, and she almost failed algebra, when math was her best subject and nobody even noticed. Rachel mainly got into trouble at school and Dad finally found a family friend to take her in. Kate just kept on going, always in style, always popular, as if nothing had happened.

Mom kept going in and out of the mental hospital while the doctors tried out new drugs and therapies on her, and every now and then she'd come back for a little visit and bring home one of her craft projects from recreational therapy. Like the time she made each girl a jewelry box with a mosaic tile top with their initials. Celia's was pink, Rachel's was green and Kate's, blue. Celia hated hers, hated the toothy white grout between the tiny pink tiles. The box looked like something she'd made at camp. She shoved it deep under her bed where she'd never have to see it again. Rachel used her box for dope.

Finally Dr. Brenner sat the whole family down--the girls all in a row on her scratchy couch, their father in an easy chair--in her high-rise Beverly Hills office. "Sometimes," she said, "people are just determined to commit suicide and there is nothing you can do." She stood up and looked out the window, her short red hair glowing in the sun. "Even though she has three wonderful daughters, your love can't keep your mother alive if she doesn't want to live," she said her hand on the doorknob. The sisters just sat there, numb, until she asked them to leave.

Celia threw up for a week, and tried to forget she had a mother. She refused to talk about her, refused to talk to her on the phone, refused to go to school. In the meantime, miraculously, Mom started to do a little better. She started eating regular meals and sleeping, asked questions about them, the house, her strawberries. Dr. Brenner took her off some of the heavy anti-depressants, the ones that made her walk so slow--the zombie drugs, the girls called them-- and she moved into a half-way house.

“Let’s go outside.” said Kate. “The gardenia is blooming. I could use some sun.” Celia followed Kate outside and lay down on the redwood chaise longue. Kate brought out a chair from the kitchen. The rest of the backyard furniture-- two massive chairs supported on cracked redwood wheels and one picnic bench-- was too rickety to sit on anymore. Celia inhaled deeply; the air smelled sweet. She heard the screen door squeak open and Rachel appeared in hip huggers and a shirt just short enough to show off her diamond belly button stud.

“Wow, that must have hurt, Rachel. Admit it.” Celia winced.

“I admit nothing,” she said, grinning. “I’ll be back in a little bit. Call me on my cell phone if you need me.”

“I wonder where she’s really going,” said Kate.

Celia lay back and gazed at her sister. Kate was wearing lime-green shorts. Kate believed this was a good color for her-- with her dark hair and ivory skin--and it was, Celia thought, if you wanted to look like a traffic light. “It’s so beautiful out here today,” Celia said, turning her face to the sun. Except that their mother was undergoing shock therapy, and might never be the same again, whatever that meant.

Celia hadn’t really wanted to understand the procedure, although the doctor had tried to explain, had cited statistics and possible side effects. All she could think about was electricity. Sparking, shooting, burning through her mother.

Although they never talked about it, all of them were afraid they might one day end up just like her. That’s why Celia never slept late. She was always up with the sun. Only depressed people stayed in bed all day. She was not depressed.

“Why don’t you let me brush your hair and give you a little trim,” said Kate. “Your hair’s full of split ends.” She held up their mother’s old silver-handled scissors. Celia sat up dutifully; her sister had always liked playing with dolls. Kate combed her fingers through Celia’s hair gently and then picked up the rosewood-handled hair brush. Celia had curly bug hair, that’s what her sisters always called it. Her hair was long and golden, frizzy and alive with energy. Kate had made a business of trying to tame it, tame her. Nothing worked, not the hair straightener, the bad perm or even ironing it. Finally, Celia had accepted it. Her hair was how it was supposed to be.

“Umm. The brush still smells like rosemary. Remember how Mom always used to sprinkle rosemary on the hair brush so our hair would smell sweet?” asked Kate.

“I always thought it smelled like salad,” Celia said. “The hospital said they’d call around two or three, after she’s been up for awhile.” The garden was surrounded by old apricot and orange and avocado trees. Though they were in a suburban neighborhood, on a quiet morning like this one, the illusion of privacy was complete.

“I’m just going to trim a little, okay?”

Celia nodded. “Just an inch.” Being around her sisters brought back those old feelings of wanting to be sleeker, tougher, more in control. She tried to relax, but she felt so agitated. Waiting was the worst and then what? Kate and Rachel would be long gone, and she would be left with Mom; with whatever was left.

“The garden is really looking nice this year,” said Kate. “Did you get any strawberries?”

“The slugs ate them.” Celia said.

“So what happened this time?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really understand it. You know how Dad got her alimony reduced after he retired? And then that little bit of money Grandpa left her was running out. She finally had to get a job and it scared her to death. She was so afraid,” Celia said softly. Things Kate would know if she ever came to L.A., Celia thought, instead of holing up in San Francisco with her fancy condo and her fancy accounting job and her married boyfriend.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Kate said. “She owns this house outright and in the L.A. real estate market, it must be worth nearly half a million dollars. I’ve explained that to her time and time again.”

“That would work if she was rational. But you know and I know that she’s not. So she got this job at Penney’s, in the lingerie department, the *Foundations Department*, she called it.

“In retail?”

“Yes, Kate. Retail,” Celia said. “She kept going out on interviews, and she’d really get her hopes up, and then nothing. Sometimes they didn’t even call her to let her know what happened, so she got the job at Penney’s. She even got some of those tweed suits and put her reading glasses on a chain and a tape measure around her neck, almost like she was playing a part,” Celia said. “It was really creepy.”

“I just can’t picture it,” Kate said. “Remember those old bra ladies? The ones that would say *now let’s just place your breast into the cups, dear.*”

“Yeah, and always open the door just when you were naked with your shirt up over your head. Anyway, Mom said she got tired of seeing so many perky breasts and nursing breasts and saggy breasts and women with no breasts at all. She lasted about two

weeks, and then I got a call from her. Her whole voice just went dead, flat, like there was no expression at all. It reminded me of that last time....That's when I called you."

The sight of her mother in bed... lying on top of the rumpled blue blanket -- not moving, not eating, not even going to the bathroom-- would not leave her mind. She had covered her mother with an afghan. Her breathing was so shallow, Celia couldn't even see her chest move up and down. *Catatonic*, the doctor had called it.

"I still can't imagine Mom at Penney's," said Kate. She was paying close attention to her scissors work now. Stretching the curls between her fingers and snipping.

"It just feels so weird that we should have to handle it this time. I mean, that we're the adults," said Celia. "I almost wish Dad were here." She sighed. "I really thought she would she would make it this time."

"Wasn't she taking a drawing class?"

"That was last year. But she still played tennis and had coffee with the girls after church."

"We'll make ourselves crazy trying to figure this out," said Kate. "At least she got the house. At least the judge made Daddy do that."

"And she has us."

"Yeah."

Celia stretched. "I think it might be time to get dressed," she said. She returned a few minutes later in her favorite cut-off jeans and purple bathing suit top, carrying a bag of chips, a bowl of tiny carrots and a bottle of sunscreen.

"I just don't see how you can eat all that junk."

Celia shrugged. "It's in the genes." She saw the pile of golden curls behind the chaise longue. "You sure cut a lot of hair! What were you thinking?"

"Sorry, it'll grow back. I just got a little carried away--"

"Celia, Kate, where are you?" They turned at the sound of Rachel's voice.

"We're out back!"

Rachel swung open the wooden side gate and sauntered through. "I forgot my house key. It's so weird being back at the old family homestead. I don't think one room has been repainted since I left! Everything is still that parasite green color." She pretended to put her finger down her throat.

"Do you want some chips?" Celia tossed her the bag. "Carrots?"

"God, doesn't anyone around here eat normal food? Those carrots always remind me of little fingers. Well, have you heard anything? Shouldn't we call the hospital and check on Mom?" Rachel's face was flushed and her eyes were slightly unfocused. "Hey, the phone's ringing." She returned, slightly breathless. "Telemarketer. Hey, interesting haircut, Seal," she said, as she made herself comfortable on one of the old chairs.

"I know, I know," said Kate. "The scissors just kept snipping and snipping. I'm going inside for a drink. Anybody need anything?" They shook their heads no.

"How long are you here for, Rachel?" asked Celia.

"Through the weekend. When do you think they'll let her out?"

Celia sat up. "I don't know exactly. This time they're not going to release her alone. It's too risky. She has to have somebody stay with her for awhile."

Rachel squinted into the sun, and rubbed some suntan lotion on her arms. “I can’t take much leave from my job right now. I’m up for a big promotion this fall. They were really pissed when I came home this week.”

“Dr. Tristell said Mom has to have supervision and structure. That’s the key. And someone to make sure she eats and takes her meds and drives her to outpatient.”

“Yeah, so she can make some more jewelry? Maybe I’ll get the seahorse earrings this time,” Rachel said. “Look, can’t we just hire someone?”

“We are the someone. Her insurance won’t pay for a companion to live with her, you know. It’s not like she’s a dog that we can drop off at the kennel.”

Rachel paced around on the brick patio, her spike heels getting stuck in the sand between the joints. “Oh fuck!” she said, throwing off the shoes. “Don’t you remember the time she tried to strangle me? I had to run out of the house in nothing but my underwear. Maybe you weren’t there. I don’t remember. I was sleeping and something woke me and she was creeping up on me. I felt her hands, squeezing around my neck.” She paused and swallowed. “She didn’t even know who I was. I had to stay with the neighbors until the guys in the little white truck came.” She tugged at her shirt collar. “Anyway, I’ve done my time.”

“And you got the best of her too,” said Rachel. She sat down cross-legged on the brick. “You got to live with her all through high school, when she was sane for a while.”

Celia shook her head. If Rachel only knew what the best of Mom was really like. What it really meant was that she was a virtual adult at fourteen. That she did whatever she wanted and Mom was just too drugged out to notice. She wouldn’t even eat unless Celia cooked for her. Mom never checked her homework, or taught her to drive, never

met her boyfriends, or noticed when she cut class or smoked dope in the bathroom or whether she'd signed up for the SAT. She'd been having sex since she was fifteen and Mom never noticed a thing. Just said stuff like, *you girls, you get to be so free, I really envy you*, like high school was some kind of dreamy trip to Hawaii or something. It wasn't until that date rape with Ian in her sophomore year that Celia got it; that she would need to raise herself.

Which was why four years later Celia was managing the Unique Boutique at the mall, driving a Ford Escort, and living in a cramped ratty house with three room mates who drove her nuts. Not to mention a ferret. And that had been Sane Mom, not Crazy Mom. She'd been on call for Mom for the past three years. Ever since Rachel had taken that fancy job in Manhattan and Kate had gotten divorced and moved to the Bay area.

"I wonder what's happened to Kate," mumbled Rachel. "I mean how long does it take to get a drink?" The screen door slammed, and Celia's shoulders shook at the noise. They both turned to look. Kate was standing at the door, gesturing with the phone in her hand.

"It's Mom!" she yelled. "It's Mom." They ran up to the house. "Here," said Kate, thrusting the old green phone at Rachel. "It's your turn." Rachel took the phone inside and sat down on a stool at the kitchen bar, twining the phone cord around her foot.

"Hi, Mom," she said in a low voice, spinning the stool so she could look out the window. "No, it's not Kate, it's Rachel." She was silent for a few minutes. "I love you too, Mom." She held the receiver a few inches from her head and studied her nails. She made a face at Kate. "I can't understand you, Mom. I've got to go now. Goodbye, Mom. Goodbye. I've got to go now. I don't know. No." Her voice was silent for a moment.

“Yes, I love you. I love you. I love you. I do. I do....Goodbye.” She handed the phone back to Kate and took a deep breath.

“What did she say?” asked Celia. “How did she sound?”

“Well, she could talk at least. But all she kept saying was *I love you, I love you... Do you love me?....* You know, in that really drugged-out zombie voice.” Celia felt cold all over. Rachel looked at her sisters and shook her head, bit her thumbnail. It must have been bad, Celia thought. Rachel never chipped away at her perfect grooming.

“Here she is,” said Kate. She passed Celia the receiver.

“Hi, Mom,” she said. “It’s me. Celia.”

“Who? Rachel, is that you?”

“No, not Rachel. Celia.”

“Katie. Katie baby. Honey. I miss you so much. When am I coming home?”

“No, I’m not Kate. I’m your youngest. I’m Celia,” she said. “Celia.”

“Celia? I don’t know Celia.” Celia dropped the receiver. It fell with a thunk.

Rachel reached over and hung it up.

“Does anybody want some tea?” asked Laura, opening the cupboard over the sink.

“She’s got peppermint and cinnamon and Lipton’s.”

“I’ll take the Lipton’s,” said Rachel. “Anything with caffeine.” She looked at Celia. “Do you mind if I shape your hair a little more, Celia? It looks like a pyramid.”

“Whatever. I don’t understand how Mom could forget me. Maybe they shouldn’t have let her call us until she was coherent. I mean, how could she forget her own daughter?” She leaned back in the chair. She felt completely drained, translucent.

“That just means it’s working, Celia,” said Rachel. “It scrambles their brains so they can forget.”

“I didn’t think she was going to forget me.”

“Just tells you how sick she is.” Kate began rinsing the dirty breakfast dishes and loading them into the dishwasher.

“Did they say when she’d be released?” asked Rachel. Celia could hear the whispery sound of her hair falling on the floor.

“I guess we’ll need to call the doctor,” Kate answered.

“This is it,” Rachel said, as she trimmed around Celia’s ears. “The final touch.”

“Great. By the way,” Celia said, turning to face her sisters, “I am not going to take care of Mom alone. Not this time.”

“No one expects you to,” said Kate. “Rachel and I have already discussed it and we are prepared to help you out. I can come every month or so and relieve you. All you have to do is keep up with her meds and make sure she goes to therapy.”

Celia looked at her sisters. Sitting there calmly, drinking tea, washing dishes, cutting hair, for God’s sake, like it was any other day, like nothing was happening at all. How did they get to be like that? So oblivious. Like cats, lying in the sun, licking their fur.

“And who do you think is going to get groceries and do laundry and sit up nights with Mom when she gets scared and anxious?” asked Celia. “What if she won’t take her meds? Or turns violent? She weighs twice as much as me.”

“God, you’re so dramatic,” said Kate. “You act like she’s a criminal or something. She’s just a very nice, somewhat depressed, sixty-year-old woman.”

Celia took a deep breath. She'd known this was going to be hard. "Jim and I are moving in together. He's been accepted at Sonoma State. We're moving to Sebastopol after Christmas."

"Jim?" said Kate. "You're still dating Jim?"

"The point is, I won't be here. I'll help for a few months until we move. That's it. Then we've got to figure out something else."

"Little Jim? I didn't think he graduated from high school," said Rachel.

"He did."

"So, you could both move in here," said Rachel. "Save some money. You could have some privacy, drive the Olds, maybe go back to school yourself." She stretched out her long legs. "Anyway, my plane takes off Sunday at one pm and I plan to be on it."

"Well that's just great," said Celia. "For you."

"Doesn't Mom have any friends that could help?" asked Kate. "What about Great Aunt Rose?"

Celia sighed. Great Aunt Rose? She must be eighty years old. There were no friends left. Mom had worn everyone out. They'd have to sell the house to have enough money to hire the specialized help Mom needed. Social Services wouldn't get involved because Mom still had too much money. Ditto for the non-profits. There was a support group for family members of the mentally ill and that was about it.

Celia felt so tired. How had it come to this? That her life was total shit and her stupid selfish sisters got everything they wanted?

"Relax, Celia," Rachel said. "Maybe Mom will succeed one of these times, before she spends all the money, and we'll all be off the hook."

“You fucking bitch!” yelled Celia, jumping up from the chair. “And what did you do to me?” she cried, catching sight of herself in the window. Her golden mane, her magnificent frizzy curly bug hair was gone, her hair was just a sleek cap of curls.

“There’s nothing left! Now, nobody will know who I am.” She slammed the back door and ran out into the yard. At least she knew where she stood now. Her heart was beating so fast she could hardly breathe. Her whole body was shaking. She reached up and picked an apricot. It was soft and golden and warm like flesh. She aimed carefully and threw it. Threw it at the bay window. Threw it at her stupid sisters. At her father. At her mother. She threw and she threw and she threw.

For Sale

He was the type of homeless man you don't see anymore. A little trembly, with a whiskey scent, but polite, his wet gray hair still bearing the marks of a comb. He was potato-pale and skinny, as if he drank all his meals. He asked me for spare change in a gentle voice, but didn't demand my nickels and quarters and said always said, "Thanks, young man," after I shook the change out of my pocket into his hand. I'm not saying he wanted hamburgers; I'd tried that tack—the "buying the bum something healthy" strategy. No, he wanted his liquor, but after passing the latest crop of homeless people on College Avenue-- the black man doing his spastic Hopi dance; the ragged woman who squatted on the sidewalk like a frog and stared with bulging green eyes, the edgy men streaming out of the plasma centre-- I realized Jim was a classic of a sort.

I worried about him when the weather changed and got cold. His territory was the corner under the metal awning a few doors down from Starbucks. He seemed to have one pair of green pants, a pair of leather work boots, a few button-down shirts and a faded Levi jacket. Sometimes he wore a baseball cap. He also didn't do anything, which is an art in itself. Hopi man did his strange manic dance endlessly and Fiddle Man played his repertoire of high mountain tunes for hours. Gentleman Jim specialized in humility, shrinking against the brick, sipping from his one cup of coffee from daylight to sunset. I don't know where he took showers, or where he went when the sun went down, or where he finally rested his head.

That's why it was surprising when one day last fall as I trudged by-- bent double under the weight of my backpack-- he gestured to me. It was a small gesture, a little wave, but I got it. I ambled over; not too quickly, mind you, because I don't ever want to seem committed or overly interested in a homeless person. They sense that too, and the next thing you know they're on you like a tick. As usual, he was leaning up against the wall, one knee bent, and he was smoking. A lot of people get pissed off when they see a bum smoke, like if the man could buy cigarettes, then he could buy his own food, but I'm pretty sure he bummed the cigarettes too.

"I've been watching you," he said, sucking so hard on his cigarette, his lips caved in around it. "Every day you come down past me and near about every day you drop in a quarter or two. Which I appreciate. And I ain't going to ask you for money today." His tired blue eyes looked at me. "Don't be scared. The truth is," he paused to gauge my reaction, "I need your help."

Sometimes the young are the only ones dumb enough to help the helpless; I was young enough that day, and old enough. I was twenty-six and in the third year of a PhD. program in psychology, between girl friends and living on fumes; no car, just my trusty bicycle and my roommate's rusted-out Toyota pick-up to bring home the groceries.

"What do you need?" I asked in a brisk voice-- the voice that says, "I'll listen, but don't waste my time either." Not the voice my ex-girlfriend Natalie once called my faux-compassionate voice, but then she hadn't thought much of my career plans either, having spent years with a therapist. She said he had cesspool eyes. You could dump anything in them, she'd say with a laugh, and it would disappear. I hadn't expected her to disappear,

but she had. She said she needed an action man. I was Gumby man: loose and flexible and unfocused.

I looked down at Jim. The harder I looked, the lower he got. I had a dog like that once, and it wasn't making me feel any better. "It's like this, young man, I need some help. I have something I need to do and I have something I need to sell to do it." I looked at him more closely. If ever a person looked like they were scraping the bottom of the barrel of life, it was him. If his raspy voice and liquid cough were any indication, even his blood was worthless.

"What do you have to sell?" I asked. His back slipped slowly down the brick wall until he landed in a languid pile on the sidewalk.

"Come closer," he gestured. "I haven't got much voice today." I didn't really want to get within touching or smelling distance. My one week helping out at the local men's shelter over the summer had taught me that. "Sit down, son," he said. I plopped my butt down on the sidewalk and slung my backpack on top of the pile of gum that was glommed onto the dirty concrete. Students streamed by us like a river around a rock.

"I've been thinking. There's only one thing left in this world I want. "Sorry," he coughed wetly into a clean white handkerchief. "The doc down at the clinic says I got bronchitis. At least I've got plenty of handkerchiefs," he said, stuffing it back into his jacket pocket. "Junior League. They give 'em to all of us. We're a project. 'The old men,' they call us. You know homeless veterans.

"Anyway," he continued, "There's just one thing I want and that's to see my daughter again. I haven't seen her since I left Saigon, and that was in '72. I haven't been

right since. I come back a different man after Viet Nam, and seemed like nobody liked that man.

“But I’ve got a daughter,” he said his eyes brightening. She’d be about thirty-three, thirty-four. She’s somewhere in the world and I want to see her, want to leave her something before I go. She’s the only thing I got left.

“I want to sell my life, son. I figure I should be able to get \$50,000 for it, if I sell it to the right person,” he said cagily. His blue eyes shone with sudden life, and then shut down again. He had wide sparkling teeth--another Junior League project? He seemed lucid.

“What have you got to sell that would be worth that kind of money?” I asked. He grabbed my hand and shook it. Visions of TB bacilli danced through my brain. I rubbed my palms against my jeans.

“They need tissue, brain tissue; that’s what my buddy down at the Vet Center said. It’s for a project. They’re looking for how Agent Gray affected the cerebral cortex, that’s what Ham said, and they have to have fresh brains. It has to be a Vietnam Vet. The thing of it is they need the whole brain. It’d be like selling my life to science,” he cackled, “only they have to kill me first.”

I raised my eyebrows. Okay, he’s a whacko. Why do I always have to attract the weird ones? Jim grasped my hand harder. His cold raspy fingertips rubbed against my bones.

“Agent Gray?” I asked, knowing I should get up and go. My Uncle Bob had been in Vietnam and he’d told me stories about the amphetamines, the downers, the grass, and

the heroin, but I'd never heard of Agent Gray. Agent Orange, sure. My uncle was exposed to that shit, and he broke out in weird rashes from time to time. Still....

"Agent Gray," he repeated, nodding his head. "It was a little gray pill to help us in combat, help us pull the trigger. To keep us from thinking about what we were doing. It's not so easy to kill a man, you know?" He took a drag from his cigarette. Now, he didn't sound whacko at all. It sounded like the sort of thing the military might come up with.

"Its real name was *Neurodon*, or something like that. It was supposed to take away the ghosts. helped you kill like a mother fucker is all I remember. Trouble was, most of the guys who took Agent Gray killed themselves instead." Against my better instincts, I was getting sucked into his story.

"So, what happened to the drug?" I asked.

"Don't know. We couldn't get it anymore." I stretched my back and my vertebrae crunched and crackled all the way down.

"But what's the VA doing in the middle of all this?" I asked, probing in, kind of wishing I hadn't, but totally unable to help myself. "I don't think they'd tell you if they were going to kill you."

"Don't you know they'll do whatever they need to make this new war work? At least this way I'm going to get some money for it. They said to call when I made up my mind. They couldn't wait long." Jim scratched his head. Lice? I moved back a bit. "They said I met the profile." He looked up at me, his eyes vulnerable and wet.

The longer I talked to Jim, the more confused I got. I take back what I said about him having no special talents, because clearly the guy had a great imagination. And he needed more help than I could give him. He hands were starting to shake, and the skin on

his whiskery face was almost violet. It was lunchtime, so I pulled him into the Barbecue Shack and bought him a fried baloney sandwich. “When’d you last eat?” I asked.

It was a few days ago, he told me, as he chomped into his sandwich. Over at the soup kitchen. They’d served vegetable soup and turkey sandwiches. His choice of a red or a green apple or a banana, and one of those cellophane packs of cookies. “I don’t really like sweets much,” he said, “so I traded a guy for some smokes.” Jim wiped his gray lips with a napkin. Thin grimy lines encircled his neck. He saw me looking.

“I’m afraid to take showers in them places. There are some crazy guys there; they’d steal my stuff as soon as look at me.” I wondered what kind of stuff he had. I never saw him carry anything. Probably one of those steel combs like my grandfather had, and a worn black leather wallet.

“Would you like to see a picture of my daughter?” he asked. He opened an old brown leather wallet, and shuffled through the foggy plastic sleeves. “Here she is.” He handed me a creased black and white photo of a little girl. The child looked Asian to me. Big black eyes, brown hair. But who could really tell?

I glanced at my watch. It was twelve forty-five and I’d already missed my appointment with my dissertation director, Dr. Bass. That was not good. We weren’t getting along too well anyway, and the week before that I hadn’t had any new research to show him. I could feel his frustration. Soon, I’d be in a remedial PhD. program, rolling up sushi at the local health food store, my skin inscribed with tattoos and body piercings. I finished my third cup of coffee, put my elbows on the table and looked at him.

“You look tired,” I said. “Did they give you anything for that cough?”

“I got some kind of little white pills down at the clinic, but I lost ‘em. They didn’t help much.” He emphasized this last sentence with another wet cough, which he caught neatly in a napkin.

I crumpled up the tissue paper from my barbeque sandwich and stuffed it in my coffee cup. A man in a greasy white apron tapped me on the shoulder. “Gonna have to ask you gentlemen to move along,” he said apologetically. “You know, the lunch rush.” I looked around. We were the only people in the god-forsaken empty place, lit up with yellowish florescent lights and jammed tight with little aluminum tables and matching chairs that fell over if you so much as touched them.

“Right, man,” I said. “It’s time to go, Jim.” He pushed himself up from the seat. The uneven table legs rocked and he nearly fell. I steadied his elbow. “Let me see that picture again.” He flipped open his wallet.

“So you’ll help me, boy?”

“I’ll do what I can.” Jim held out his hand for some change and I dropped in two quarters. “That’s all I got. Watch yourself, Jim.”

I slung on my backpack-- harnessed myself again to the student life-- and walked home. It felt good to lope along in the sun. I’m tall and skinny and might have made a good marathoner if I weren’t so lazy. I like to walk long distances, which was good because my apartment last year was a good three miles away from campus. I needed the time to think. Mostly, that afternoon, I thought about Natalie, and the way I liked to twist her curls around my fingers after we made love. The way the sun lit up her hair and took away all the bitchiness. I thought about calling her, and not hanging up the minute I heard her voice, like I’d been doing all week. Gumby man would do shit like that.

Then I took a long hot soapy shower.

A few weeks later I spotted Jim from across the street. Despite my promises, I hadn't done anything. The oak trees were dropping red and golden leaves and acorns all along the sidewalk and the squirrels were mad with excitement. Jim looked even more crumpled than usual. I jammed a Lotus Bar in my mouth and kept on walking. Natalie and I were together again. We'd gone to see Casablanca at the Rialto the night before. She'd never seen it.

My research had been going much better too, and Professor Bass was ecstatic. "This is really good stuff, Peter," Dr. Bass said when I showed him some early study results. I was compiling data on the effects of color therapy for young trauma victims, and some of my research was actually original "It might almost be time to send out some feelers," he said. "The APA conference is coming up in April." We walked down the glossy halls together. He took me out to lunch at the Chinese place. It felt good to be back in his good graces again.

That afternoon, over some lattes at the Bean Brain, Natalie and I celebrated our first week of official cohabitation. I hoped it was going to last. I was telling her about my lunch with Dr. Bass, when I saw Jim walk by. "Shit!" I whispered. "Don't make eye contact." I lowered my head; he came in and shuffled past me to the kitchen. He appeared a few minutes later clutching a brown paper bag.

"Hey, son," he clapped me on the shoulder. "Did you forget me?"

"No," I mumbled, looking into my drink.

He leaned in close. “Don’t forget me, now,” he said. No teeth that day. I could smell his bitter breath.

“Who’s that?” asked Natalie.

“That’s Jim,” I said, and then I had to explain the whole thing to her.

“Are you nuts?” she exploded, spewing latte froth all over the round wooden table. “You believed that shit! You don’t have enough to do? Now you’re going to help out some poor old schmuck?” Natalie was planning to become a social worker or a lawyer or a journalist; she hadn’t decided yet. She was quiet for a few minutes. She was thinking. I shouldered my backpack.

“I’ve gotta get back to the lab,” I said. “We have some candidates coming in and then we’re meeting with some potential research subjects. I won’t be home too late.”

She was breathless over dinner that night. “You’ll never guess who I talked to this afternoon,” she said.

I was tired. Every piece of the study had to be approved by the Institutional Review Board, and it was wearing me down. I unlaced my Nikes and threw them under the table. “Who?” I asked wearily, massaging my toes.

“My cousin, Joe.”

“The OB-GYN?” I asked. Everyone’s a doctor in her family. A medical doctor. That’s probably why she was holding out on declaring a major. She can never decide if she should take up the family profession or do what she wants and take the abuse.

“No, that’s my Uncle David. Joe does some contract work for the military. He’s a psychoneuro-biologist. He laughed his ass off when I told him the story, I felt like a total

moron. He said he'd heard that story twenty years ago when he first started consulting for the Army. But," she added, "they wouldn't tell us anyway, would they?"

"What a jerk," I said.

"Well, he married my Aunt Sue, so what do you expect?" I hadn't met Aunt Sue yet, but Natalie had told me all about her—how she raised some kind of Japanese show dog and only left the house for dog shows or trips to the vet.

"Your guy Jim, he's probably delusional," she said. "But, seriously, Peter." She leaned closer. I breathed her in. Coffee and soy sauce and jasmine oil. "What if he does have a daughter out there somewhere? A lot of soldiers did, you know."

"I know."

She was rubbing her foot up and down my calf under the kitchen table. I took a long gulp of beer. We didn't talk about Jim or missing children any more that night.

The next morning Natalie and I had breakfast at the pancake house. "I googled Agent Gray," she whispered, pouring blackberry syrup on her waffle. "While you were still asleep."

"And?"

"Well, there wasn't anything there. Not that that means anything."

I poured a stream of milk into my coffee and stirred it slowly, staring into it like that would tell me something. "I keep thinking of the picture he showed me," I said. "Of course it could be any kid, or anybody's kid. Just some photograph he found somewhere."

“I also called Senator Dole’s office, the Vietnam Embassy, and the VA in Atlanta.” She took a breath.

“You’ve been busy.”

“I got curious,” she said. The senator’s office gave me some contact numbers. For the children.” She held out a scrap of paper.

“Thanks.” I took another bite of my biscuit.

“I’ve got an eleven o’clock class.” Natalie stood up. “Want the rest of my waffle?” She leaned over the table and kissed my cheek. “Sweet.”

“Library, tonight?” She nodded and hurried out.

I scuffed up the leaves with my sneakers as I walked from the pancake place to school. I decided to look for Jim, check on him, see how he was making out. I scrunched the paper she’d given me into a tight little ball.

I was thinking about my study. We’d met with some terrific kids the day before: bright, verbal and unfortunately, very traumatized. Their parents were eager to get them into the study and I just needed to put the finishing touches on the consent forms.

The light finally changed to green and I crossed the street, but not before some ass-hole kid in a red SUV nearly took off my toes. Jim wasn’t in his usual spot, so I walked up and down the sidewalk to see if maybe he’d changed locations. Nothing. I walked back to his corner. There was a dark greasy patch on the concrete where he usually sat beside the Starbucks, and what looked like his jacket bunched up on the brick window ledge. I picked it up and don’t ask me why, I smelled it. It smelled like sweat and

dirt and cigarettes, but nothing more sinister than that. I turned the soft material over in my hands.

“Hey! Hey, you!” a rough voice yelled at me. “Don’t touch that! That’s Jim’s. He give it to me!” Frog Lady quickly waddled over to where I was standing and grabbed at the jacket.

“Where’s Jim?” I said. “I’ve got something for him.”

“I know where he is,” she said, the spit shooting through the gap in her front teeth. Her green eyes glinted with something I couldn’t quite interpret—anger, glee, madness? She held out her hand. It looked spongy and white and very clean. I dropped in some change.

“They took him,” she said. “Two women in a big pink Cadillac, they took him. I seen the whole thing.”

“What?” I shouted, but she was gone. She walked off fast, cuddling the jacket, stroking it like a pet kitten.

“I got his comb, too,” she yelled. “He give it all to me!”

Something fluttered down in front of me on the sidewalk. I picked it up. A photograph.

“Hey, man,” a voice said. “Did he show you the photograph too? I think he showed everybody that damn picture.”

I looked up. Fiddle man stopped playing for a minute. I looked into his bloodshot eyes. “A lot goes down on this street,” he said. “Did he tell you about that Agent Gray shit too? He was always looking for one person to believe him.” He swept his bow across the A and E strings and pulled off a quick fiddle lick, high and lonesome, just short of

squeaky. "I've known Jim for years," he said, tucking his fiddle under a fat hairy arm.

"Long as I known him he's been showing people a picture of a baby.

"Name's Phil." He extended his bow to me; I shook the tip.

"Peter."

"His sister came out here one day looking for him. She's a big woman." He drew his rendition of her breasts in the air with his bow. "Big. A country woman. Still lives out near Spivey's Corner. You know, the Hollerin' Contest." He sighed.

"So he has a family?"

"Yeah, well, she comes up here looking for him every month or two. Slips him a few bucks. Tries to talk him into getting some help. Last time he took the money, the minute she turned around, he spit at her. A big glob, too. Nearly hit her shoe." He exhaled a breathy chuckle.

"Do you know her name?"

"Nah. Lemme see that picture a minute. That's a new one," he said. "Every month or two he goes down to the library and rips out another picture to carry around. Course he's never going to find her."

I looked at the picture again and turned it over. Read the ad for Pediacare on the back. "Did he leave a little girl in Viet Nam?" I asked.

"Way he tells it, he left a lotta little girls in Nam," he laughed. "But not the one he's looking for."

Fiddle-man leaned his hairy face down close to my ear. "He shot his gook girlfriend and their baby. Just totally flipped out. Got shipped back to North Carolina in a hurry. His sister said he spent years in Butner. She told me the whole story one day, while

we was sittin' out here waiting for him to show up. Had me play *Bonaparte's Retreat* and *John Hardy* and *Forked Deer*. She give me a twenty dollar bill. She was real partial to fiddle music," he said.

I leaned my back against the warm rough brick and pulled my knees in close. I didn't know what to believe. Jim was probably never in Viet Nam anyway. I shoved the picture in my pocket and watched the stream of students passing by, spawning like salmons.

"Hey, fella." A guy tossed me a quarter. "Buy something good for you, now," he said. Fiddle man-Phil began to play again, something half-way between *My Old Nellie Gray* and *My Wildwood Flower*. The music surrounded me, its scratchy tunelessness etching a line into my gut.

I flipped the quarter into Phil's battered instrument case, then threw the rest of my change in too. It must have been five bucks. I hefted my pack and walked across the street. The fall leaves seemed really bright that morning, the way they do when the sky is gray.

Waiting

“Name, please?”

“McElwin, Leroy, ma’am.”

“Your social security number?”

“It’s 542-71-7721.”

“Address?”

“3521 Pine Avenue, Clayton, North Carolina,” he recited.

“Rank and serial number?”

“Lieutenant, Retired, US Army. 25th Infantry, G25-43257155.” He still puffed out his chest after announcing his rank, even though he’d retired twenty years ago. The gesture didn’t really go with the plaid shorts and crisp white polo, but his long career had left its mark.

“Please have a seat, sir.” The receptionist pointed to the waiting area of green upholstered chairs, filled with other people waiting to be seen at the VA hospital. “And then take a number,” she added. “The machine is over there by the drinking fountain.”

Leroy walked over, bouncing on his toes a bit -- a memory of the lovely fresh morning outside-- and took a number: sixty-four. He ran a hand across his smooth bald head. Not too bad, he thought. Not for 8:10 in the morning. He and his wife had gotten up at 5:30 to eat breakfast, beat the traffic, and navigate the complexities of the VA Hospital, starting with the parking lot.

“Hey, honey,” he said. “Maybe it won’t be as bad as they say.”

“Maybe,” said Helen, perched on the edge of the chair, her placid face flushed from the long walk to the waiting area.

“Fat chance!” said a wild-eyed young man waiting nearby in a souped-up purple wheelchair, both legs amputated midway up his thighs.

“What’d you say, son?” asked Leroy.

“Name’s John Ramson—call me Jack.”

“Good to meet you Jack, I’m Leroy, and this is my wife, Helen,” he said putting an arm around her soft shoulders. One thing about the military, Leroy reflected, friends were easy to find.

“Now, we just sit and wait,” said Jack, “and watch for that red light blinking over yonder, and then look at that screen. It’ll flash a number. When it flashes you go to one of those booths down the hall, and they do an intake on you. They aren’t the doctors,” the young man confided, “they’re just there to make sure you really qualify.”

“I should,” said the man. “Joined up in 1952, served in Korea, and even a tour in Vietnam, in the early sixties. Didn’t retire until 1982. Served thirty years, all told. But I’m having some trouble with one of my molars, and Helen said we should come down here to the VA hospital, seeing as how I earned it.”

“Well, good luck to you, sir,” said the young man. “There goes my number. Be seeing you around,” he added, as they shook hands. He spun the chair around and disappeared down the hall. The back of his wheelchair was decorated with bumper stickers like *Normal People Worry Me* and *I’m Out of Bed and Dressed, What More Do You Want?*, an American flag and a wire basket filled with personal items. Leroy and Helen watched until they could no longer see the wheelchair, and then settled down to

read some of the well-worn magazines. Time ticked slowly by, punctuated only by the temporary excitement of a young man who appeared to be drunk or crazy or both, being dragged away by security.

“Helen,” said Leroy, looking up from his copy of *Field and Stream*, “I wonder what’s keeping them. It’s 10:30 already. I’m going to walk over and check.” He walked briskly over to the admitting desk, his old man legs still muscular and hairy, as they sometimes will be if an Army guy stays active, and doesn’t spend his retirement in front of the TV, or drinking beer and smoking cigars with his buddies.

“Miss,” he said through the frosted glass panel. The intake staff, each clad in a uniform of pale blue, continued their conversation behind the desk. Leroy could only catch a few words, something about a dog.... “Miss,” he said again more loudly to the woman seated behind the computer screen.

“Yes,” she replied, twisting toward him, her red hair glowing under the intense work lights.

“How much longer will we need to wait here, because....”

“We’ll call you when it’s time, sir. Why don’t you go down to our cafeteria on the ground floor, and get you something to eat?”

“Where is it?” he asked. “This is our first time here at the VA.”

“It’s easy to find, sir. Sounds much worse than it is. You see this corridor? You go to the end of it, and then go right through the double swinging doors. Follow the exit sign and you’ll be in a waiting area. You’ll see a bank of elevators. Take the one all the way at the end, and push G, that’ll take you down. Then when you get there, turns left, and then make a quick right across from the PX store, and there you’ll be!”

Leroy returned slowly to his chair. “Helen, do you have any of those butterscotch- rum lifesavers in your purse?”

“Here you go,” she said, after digging through her enormous white patent leather bag. “Let’s just sit. It can’t be much longer.” Leroy could tell from the sound in her voice that it had better not be. But he’d been in the military long enough to know that this might be just the beginning. He didn’t want to depress Helen, and had just about decided to start talking about one of her favorite subjects, bearded irises, when he spotted a familiar face.

“Hey, isn’t that Bob Cranburg? It is Bob...” Leroy got to his feet and thrust out his hand. “Bob, that is you-- isn’t it? Bob?”

“Leroy McElwin-- I cannot believe my eyes!” said Betty, Bob’s wife. “And Helen, how nice to see you both. We’re just here to pick up some new meds. Bob had a stroke last year and he’s lost his speech. I’m sure he remembers you, though. Don’t you, honey bear? Remember Leroy?” she said, bending down to make eye contact with Bob.

“I am so sorry,” said Helen, looking at his drooping cheek, his pale face.

“Can you believe our luck?” asked Betty. “Number 1033! That means we might be seen by Wednesday. That’s not too bad, not too bad at all.” Betty shook her head of purplish-gray ringlets and pursed her red lips with a satisfied air.

“What do you mean, Betty?” asked Leroy. “Today’s Monday.”

“You must be a first-timer, Leroy. 1033 is a good number. We only have to wait three days. See...” she pointed. “We’re going to be cozy as bugs in a rug. We’ve brought our mini-refrigerator, hot plate and extension cord and bedrolls. We just camp out here until our number is called. You never know when that might happen. It could be in the

middle of the night, so we don't dare go down to the cafeteria for food. If they called our number and we weren't there, we'd have to start all over again, and depending on how busy it is....One time we missed our number, and had to start all over again, and it was six weeks before we were seen. "Care for some fried chicken?" she asked, holding out a wing.

"Look, Leroy, your number is flashing!" said Helen. "Maybe it won't be so bad after all. It's only 2:00." They got up, stretched a bit, and began walking down the hall, her permanently-waved white hair shining under the fluorescent lights. The walls were smudged and streaked with handprints. The flooring was old terrazzo waxed to a dull yellow glow. Way down at the end of the hall they saw a tiny blinking red light.

"That must be it, hon. Let's head for that light." Huffing and puffing, they finally reached **Intake Station 1A-B**. It had, apparently, been recently remodeled. The walls were painted a soft violet, and the laminate counters were a soothing peach color. Leroy could see a long line of privacy cubicles, each staffed by an intake specialist.

"We're here, finally." Leroy sighed, gratefully sitting down at Intake Cubicle #105.

"Yes, good morning, sir. Your name, please, sir?"

"It's McElwin- that's M, little C, like McDonalds's, Elwin, McElwin, Leroy."

"Got it, sir. Your social security number?" she asked.

"542-71-7721."

"And your address?"

"I live in Clayton," he said. You know it's about an hour away from here. The wife and I we left at 5:30 this morning...."

“Your address, sir?”

“Oh, sorry, it’s 3521 Pine Avenue, Clayton, North Carolina.”

“Rank and serial number?”

“Lieutenant, Retired, US Army. 25th Infantry. G25-43257155. Korea, Vietnam, Germany, Japan. You name it, I’ve been there. Not to mention Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That was the most dangerous posting of all!”

“How can we help you today?” the tired brunette asked, her thighs spilling over the edge of the Army-issue swivel chair. B.B Benson, according to her name tag.

“Well, I figured since I served Uncle Sam for thirty years, that now it’s time for him to start serving me.” Leroy grinned, flashing his toothy mile.

“Well, every veteran thinks that, sir. But first we need to be certain you fully qualify.”

“I’m here for dental care, miss. I thought I’d let you start with my teeth, and if you do a good job with my choppers, well then, you can have the rest of me.”

“Oh, teeth sir. To use our dental clinic, you need only to go to the Fourth Ward and sign up with the **Emergent Computerized Medical Relay System.**”

“What the heck is that, ma’am, pardon my French?”

“To utilize our services, you have to be signed up in the medical system-at-large, first. Did you bring your DD-214? Good, because we’ll need proof that you’ve been honorably discharged from the military. But first you need to go to **ECRES.**”

“Let me direct you. Just go down the hall about one hundred yards, just past the women’s restroom, and then take your third right after you pass through the double doors. You’ll see a waiting room on your left, go past it, and then right down the hall. Then

you'll see a bank of elevators. There are some twenty elevators at Station B, so be sure you get on the correct one. You'll need to take number five to go to the Fourth Ward. When you get off, you'll see the intake area, you can't miss it. Oh, and here's a map, if you get lost, you can always push one of the emergency buttons, the big orange buttons located on the walls, and Robby, our friendly robotic, will be right out to help you. This can be such a big, confusing place." She smiled.

"Whew, we'd better get started, Helen."

"I wish I'd worn my Easy Spirits," she said smoothing down the legs of her violet-colored pantsuit.

"Oh, one more thing, ma'am, how late are they open?"

"Oh, you've got plenty of time," she said, looking at the ornate ladybug watch she wore around her neck. "They're open until 11:00 p.m. for the convenience of our customers. When you're done, come right back up here to the **Intake Express Window**, and we'll take care of you."

After about forty-five minutes of twists and turns, they arrived at **ECRES**. They stepped off the elevator and stopped, awestruck. **ECRES** took up the entire basement of the hospital. Neat gray metal desks were meticulously arranged row upon row by map coordinates. The letters and numbers were stenciled on the walls, and each individual unit was linked to a coordinate. Five separate tracks were painted on the floor-- yellow, green, red, blue and orange-- for each branch of the military.

"I guess we follow the green trail, honey. Our card says we're to process in at station DAC-44. Let's see, let me orient myself. I feel like I need my old Army compass," Leroy joked.

“That’s no lie, honey. Look at this place; it’s bigger than the Super K-Mart and noisier too.” The clatter of typewriters filled the air, though Leroy did spot the occasional computer. Finally they oriented themselves and located their intake officer.

“Well, whooey, here it is,” said Leroy munching on an apple he’d had in his jacket pocket. Thank goodness he’d nabbed it from the fruit bowl this morning or he’d be perishing by now, he thought.

“Can I help you, sir?” asked Specialist Taylor.

“Yes ma’am,” Leroy said. “I surely hope so,” and he sat down heavily. There was just the one chair, so Helen perched nearby on an empty desk. The air was stuffy and thick with smoke. Hadn’t they outlawed smoking in hospitals?

“Ma’am, I’m here to take advantage of my dental benefits. I have a tooth, one of my molars, that’s gone and broke on me, and it hurts like a son of a bitch, pardon my French. My regular dentist, Dr. Fetzer, says I need a crown, but we just can’t afford it, so that’s why we’re here.”

“Well, that’s fine, sir. We just need to have you fill out these forms. Then it goes to processing, and we’ll give you a customer service ID number. Then you just take that right back upstairs and you’ll be in the system.”

“Great, ma’am. I knew once things got rolling around here, we’d be taken care of just fine.” He turned to Helen, “Let’s get a bite to eat before we go back upstairs, Helen. I’m starved. It’s been a long time since that sausage and egg biscuit at Hardee’s.”

They rode back on Elevator # 4 and followed the arrows to the cafeteria. Like most cafeterias, it sold plain food-- cheap. Leroy did have to wonder if the eggs were powdered or not; you could tell if they looked a bit greenish, he’d discovered through

long experience in chow lines. Best not to share that thought with Helen, for she was remarking that the food looked surprisingly good and fresh, from the breakfast bar to the sandwich station.

“Hi, how are you? Still being processed?” wild man Jack asked as he idled his wheelchair in front of the check-out line. “Don’t eat the roast beef, folks, it’s been sitting here so long it’s a pet. I only go for packaged stuff myself,” he said. “You know like yogurt or peanut butter crackers or potato chips.”

“You seem to really know your way around here, young man.”

“It’s Jack to you, sir,” he said. “Well, I should. Got caught in an oil fire during the first Gulf War, seems like I’ve been here ever since.” His curly black hair and impish black eyes could not quite dispel the puffy pouches beneath his stare, or the occasional wince of pain when he moved his hips. He handed the clerk a fifty dollar bill.

Helen laid two hermetically sealed ham and cheese sandwiches and some chips on the tray, Leroy paid and they followed Jack over to the drink machines.

“Good choice, ma’am,” Jack approved.

“We’d be mighty honored if you’d sit with us,” said Leroy, squirting the carbonated beverage into his paper cup. “Sounds like you saw some real action.”

“Not real action, sir,” he said leading them into the dining room. “Just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Was medivaced out to a navy ship. Had both my legs then, just some bad burns. But infection set in back in the States. I wasn’t much good for fighting anymore, so I was discharged, moved back home to Sanford, and received treatment here at the VA.” He slid his chair under the table, while Helen and Leroy squeezed into the upholstered booth. “So, I guess you could say I’ve been here for a

while,” he said spooning up a serving of blueberry yogurt. “Easy on the digestive tract,” he winked. “You wouldn’t believe all the things that don’t quite work right anymore.”

“I don’t eat yogurt and I don’t eat cottage cheese” declared Leroy. “No offense, I just like my food kind of solid.”

“Know what you mean, sir. I used to love a great big steak. Well, the infection got right bad—I know this isn’t proper dinner table conversation ma’am,” he said to Helen.

“Honey, I’ve been an Army wife since I was twenty-five. You just go on and say what you need to say,” she said, patting his shoulder.

“Well, they said they’d have to amputate the right foot to prevent more tissue damage. ‘Cut off my foot, you’ve got to be fuckin’ crazy,’ I said. But they said there was nothing else for it. And if only I hadn’t waited so long to seek treatment, they wouldn’t need to operate. Then the infection spread some more, and they cut off my leg at the knee. They told me not to worry, that I’d get everything I needed to resume a normal life—prosthesis, wheelchair, scooter, vocational rehab, recreational rehab, psychological services.... But things continued to get worse with my other leg, and they commenced to amputating it bit by bit too. At least now they match,” he said, scooting his wheelchair back from the table and looking down at his new jeans, neatly pinned over his stumps.

“Here, I want to show you folks something,” said Jack, as they disposed of their plastic wrap and paper cups. Helen and Leroy hesitantly followed him down the hall to a narrow corridor behind the kitchen faced with green ceramic tiles. It led to a thick metal door, with bold letters stating **Danger, Only Authorized Personnel Allowed**. “Can you give me a hand with this door, sir? It’s mighty heavy.”

As Leroy opened the door, a rush of cold, stale air shot up his nostrils. The hairs on his bare forearms stood up. He gazed into a vast frost-laden space, cold and damp as a meat locker. But instead of large cuts of beef dangling from huge steel hooks or boxes of oranges from Florida, dozens and dozens of arms and legs hung from hooks suspended from long sections of pipe. Each limb was labeled with a tan-colored card, which was fastened through the tissue with a short length of black wire. In the glare of the fluorescent lights, it was one of the most horrifying scenes Leroy had ever beheld. Leroy put out his arm to shield Helen, but he was too late. She gasped and covered her mouth, and fled down the hall as fast as a seventy-five year old could, her shoes clicking madly on the floor.

“Kind of scary isn’t it?” said Jack grinning his wolfish grin, his teeth glowing greeny-white in the freezing room.

“Well, Jack, if I’d a known, I’d have surely worn my parka. How long has this been going on?”

“Long as I’ve been here. Fella name of Lance showed me, before he died. Now I’ve shown you.”

“What are they doing with all these, uhh...parts?” asked Leroy.

“Don’t know. Some kind of experiment, I think. I hear they sell the tissues to Dreyfus University—they use them for some of their studies; they’re trying to generate a new kind of cartilage for sports injuries and such.”

“The VA sanctions this?”

“No, no, man, you got me wrong. This is a deal between the **Limb Removal Team**, and some of the folks that work in the cafeteria. The kitchen provides the space and then everyone gets a little extra bonus at the end of the year.”

“Doesn’t the hospital know?”

“Don’t know. They don’t seem to pay too much attention to what happens in the Underground.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a low moan at the back of the room. Leroy shaded his eyes so that he could see, for the dull lights and the chilling air had turned the room into a foggy mist. Leroy saw a woman lying on top of what appeared to be a pile of fur coats with a fully-clothed man pulled to her chest. He wasn’t moaning, but seemed curiously stiff, a cane propped against the wall nearby. The woman was staring at the ceiling where the limbs hung so neatly, her mouth wide open, her dark brown hair in disarray.

“Let’s go man,” said Jack. “I don’t like to watch that hanky panky. She’s a therapist here. She has a thing for combat vets--she has to make everyone she treats. Sometimes she tells me about it, when I let her. Although that shit really makes me sick,” he said cheerfully.

Leroy pushed open the heavy door and found Helen waiting nearby on a low bench. Leroy was chilled to his very marrow. “Let’s go, Helen,” he said and pulled her up from the bench. Her hand was cold and her nose was red. Following Jack’s wheels, they returned to the gleaming bank of elevators and entered number seventeen. After disembarking, Jack led them up one hall and down another, pausing at an empty nursing station to give them one last piece of advice.

“Sir,” he said, herding them into a small bathroom, barely bigger than a handicapped phone booth, and smelling unpleasantly of disinfectant, “if you don’t remember one piece of information I’ve told you today, remember this.

“At the VA Hospital there are three kinds of doctors. There are green coats, short coats and long coats. Whatever happens, don’t let a green coat work on you. They’re just interns on rotation for Dreyfus University, and we’re no better than free guinea pigs to them. A short coat, they’re residents. They might know what they’re doing, but they’re arrogant as hell. A short coat did my first chop. Now long coats, they’re real doctors, and they work for the VA. That could be a good thing and that could be a bad thing. It’s good they’re real doctors, but it’s bad they work full-time for the VA. Might mean they couldn’t get a job somewhere else.

“But every now and then, it means someone really wants to work with us, is here on purpose, is really interested in our medical problems and cares about us. Those are the ones to get.” His eyes went a bit misty.... “Like Dr. Zifferman, I’ll never forget her. She was doing a study on the effects of double amputation on fluid levels in the body. Her hands were so kind, so gentle....” He sighed. “...even when she had to hurt me.

“Well, see you around,” he said. “It’s time for my biofeedback session. Just head straight down this hall, turn right where the exit light is blinking, and you’ll be back where you started.” Turning a wheelie, he tipped his baseball hat and was gone in a flash. They could hardly follow him with their eyes, as the cold glare from the fluorescents overhead seemed to make the light diffuse and they had to blink very hard to see at all.

“It’s 6:15,” said Leroy, looking at his Timex. “I think they said they’re open all night, so we should be fine.”

“Yes, dear,” Helen nodded. “There’s the waiting area.” They sank down gratefully on the worn chairs.

“Hi there, Helen,” said Betty wiping her lips delicately. She appeared to be eating a pork chop dinner. The smell of the warm meat was irresistible. Helen fished in her purse for a mint, but all she could come up with was a fresh pack of Kleenex. She settled back against the chair, with yet another issue of *Knitting and Crocheting World*. The copy was three years old, all the way from April 2000, but apparently not an issue she’d read previously. Fortunately, afghan patterns are sort of immortal.

“Honey, I’m going to check back in with **Intake Express**, and see what I need to do next,” said Leroy, as he ambled down the hall.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked, her large brown eyes married to the computer screen before her.

“Yes, ma’am, I surely hope so. I was here earlier to sign up for my dental benefits, and you sent me down to the Fourth Ward to get processed into the main system and get my patient ID. Which I did, so I’m back.”

“Wonderful sir, we’ll just have you completely enrolled in just a jiffy. Last name and your social security number?”

“I think you already have that,” he whispered. “I don’t like everyone to hear it—you know identity theft, it could happen anywhere.” Meanwhile the receptionist pressed buttons on her computer furiously, her short red fingernails flying. Leroy could hear a

mad clicking and whirring as if the effort was digesting the very workings of the computer itself.

“Never learned how to work one of those fellas,” he said. “Now I’m probably too old to learn.”

“Never too old, sir, never too old to learn. Ah, here it is, you’re in!” she said triumphantly. “Number 6696. That’s a fantastic number. Our system is completely random, there’s no favoritism here.” Leroy glowed with relief. “Let’s see,” she said pulling up the appointment calendar. “You’re Number 6696 on the waiting list. That means the dentist will be able to see you on September 21, 2007, that is unless we get an earlier cancellation.”

“2007!” Leroy said. “There must be some mistake ma’am. I have a broken tooth now. I’ve been in two wars. I demand to be seen now!” he shouted.

“Sir, I must ask you to control yourself. We only have one dentist, Dr. Gupta, and two hygienists and he sees some sixty patients a day, and even allowing for overtime, because he works weekends too, and of course the hygienist and dental students do what they can, but they need supervision, which just takes more time for Dr. G., you can imagine there’s only so many people we can see. Veterans too, they tend to neglect their mouths so much, sir. By the time they come here, what could have been a mere flossing difficulty or a plaque problem, has turned into crowns, root canals, dental surgeries, consultations and major extractions. And if things have gone too far, as they quite often have-- dentures. You should see the waiting list for new teeth, sir.”

Leroy sat down, despair pressing him tight to the chair. Helen came over and sat beside him, stroked his freckled hand. “What’s wrong dear?” she asked.

“They can’t see me until 2007.”

“2007! That’s an outrage. This man is a veteran, Miss,” she said, pulling open the glass panel separating them. “I’m sure there’s been some mistake. Who else can we talk to about this?”

“I can assure you there’s been no mistake, ma’am,” she said. Suddenly the intake booth, which had been empty, filled with staff people.

“She asks too many questions.... we’ll need to ask her to calm down, now... maybe we should call security....” their voices murmured. Helen slunk back to her seat, her face flushed with embarrassment.

“Honey, let’s go,” said Leroy. “There’s nothing else we can do here today.”

“Or any other day,” said Helen under her breath. Leroy looked back at the receptionist. She was on the phone. He could just make out her words -- *“whackos, wild ones, might need hospital security”* -- as they walked quickly toward the exit. They found themselves totally and irrevocably lost, and too flustered to even think. When they finally stopped, darting in one direction and then another, they found themselves in front of a small wooden door marked “Chapel.”

It was 9:00 as they stepped into the small room. In the distance a large quadrangle of candle flames glowed in the simple wooden altar. Leroy climbed a few steps to a low balustrade and leaning over it noted the baskets of artificial lilies.

Beside the altar was a small pulpit. A golden cross and a Star of David stood side by side, and over that a sanctuary lamp dangled annoyingly in the way. A large painting of a young girl surrounded by a flock of sheep hung behind the altar. It was the sort of landscape Leroy associated with the paint-by-number pictures that Helen used to be so

fond of when the kids were little. It was covered with a thick film of dust that so obscured the bright colors that the sheep appeared to be nearly gray. Leroy took out his handkerchief and gently wiped the surface of the painting. Although it was illuminated by a large bronze light, the painting shone with a yellowish glow. Taking out his keychain with the flashlight, Leroy was just able to read the inscription: *Donated to the Brave Men and Women of the Dreyfus VA, by the DAV Auxiliary, 1963.*

Leroy stepped back down the carpeted steps and in a corner where he hadn't even noticed anyone, he saw a small desk. In the light of the little candle, which fell far short of the opposite wall, a middle-aged man in a suit could be seen sitting on a wooden bench.

"Helen, look! It's Dave Hawkins!" said Leroy. "Dave, what are you doing in here?"

"Just needed a quiet place," he said squinting up into the light. "Hey," he said. "McElroy, can that be you? How the hell are you?"

"Came to get some dental work done, Dave. I broke a tooth last week cracking some pistachios. Crowns are so high dollar, I thought I'd come down here to the VA to get the work done."

"Oh," said Dave. "I've heard about you—hospital grapevine. You're the biggest drop of the day."

"Biggest drop?"

"Yeah, every day me and the boys make bets. I won \$150 just last Monday. See what we do, Leroy, is bet on who will have the longest wait, given the seriousness of their condition and their age. Just today there were three poor suckers. Eddie, an ex-

special forces guy, fifty-six-- see he's waiting for a heart transplant up in the cardiac wing. They tell him it'll be probably three to four months, but he's got to stop drinking first. They don't expect him to live more than a month, anyway. So he's a 5-1 or a *Drop-4*. Then there's this Army nurse....They discovered a suspicious lump on her mammogram, but it's suspected to be a slow-growth type of cancer. She's fifty-eight. They have her pathologist's report and he's recommended radiation. That's scheduled for next November-- six months. So she's a *Drop 6*, but combined with factors for her age and health, all told a *Drop 15*.

“But you, man-- Leroy, you're the bomb. Here you are, a seventy-five year old man with most of his teeth. In good health. Needs a fairly routine crown, and probably, if I know you, you even floss. I think anyone would agree that you're well worth the effort. But your appointment's not until 2007. That's a *Drop 47*. You're the biggest drop we've had this year! I made eighty bucks on you. Here, just because I'm a good guy, I'm going to split it with you.”

“Thanks,” said Leroy. “I'm going to need it. I'll put it in my dental fund, because I'll probably be dead before they get to me.”

“Ah,” said Dave, chewing on a toothpick he'd pulled from his pocket. “Now you're getting it; that's the point. You don't seem to have a very good overview of the VA system yet.” Dave had spread his legs wide and was tapping his toes on the floor. “But since you qualify completely, maybe you won't need one.

“The rules for receiving services are complicated. The only reason I understand them is because my Dad was a vet too.

Helen had long since stopped trying to pay attention. At first her eyes were merely glazed, but now Leroy noticed, she had retreated to a spot in the corner, and lay stretched out a bench covered with an old red shawl. Her head rested on her purse, and she was snoring gently.

“She’s a good sleeper, ain’t she?” said Leroy.

“She’s a beauty,” Dave said. “Now, son, pay attention. This is where it all gets tricky. There’s three ways to get medical services here: the run-around, the squeaky wheel, and pulling some strings. The goal is to keep you in the system, feeding you false hope, so you feel like something’s happening. Finally, the average just plain Joe gives up and leaves the system, and tries to get medical care at home. But most times, he’ll be back, because whatever hospital he goes to, once they find out he’s a vet, they return him to the VA. Anyway, he knows, by God, that good treatment is his right. It says so right here on this wall -- *You’re entitled to the best medical care your country can provide.*

“The squeaky wheel -- the guy who is a real pain in the keester-- he calls the patients’ rights advocate, files a grievance, calls the newspaper....This can work, but it’s damn risky. You’re going to make the VA mad, and then all of a sudden, you can’t get services at all. No, squeaky wheel is not the way to go. I don’t know anyone who ever got oiled.” Leroy nodded his head obediently. Wheels, oil—it was all making him sleepy.

“The secret,” said Dave, punching him in the shoulder, “is political. If your condition is serious, then you must play your aces, visit your friendly senator’s office and file a complaint, and if your case is truly worthy, you’ll get your services inside a month!”

“How do they know if a case is truly worthy?” asked Leroy, shaking his foot. It had fallen asleep.

“They say it can be seen in the eyes. They see that thousand-yard stare and faster than you can say ‘Jane Fonda,’ they fall all over themselves to get you your services, before some old GI Joe decides to mow down the staff.

“Ever noticed all those little red eyes watching you here? That’s security; because they are paranoid, see. The average drop for the entire VA is 5-1, where out in the civilian world it’s 2-1. That means that every year at this very hospital, five hundred people die that would not have died if they’d just been treated decently. You know, regular doctoring like people on the outside get every day. That’s five hundred people, man!”

“Why doesn’t anyone do anything?”

“It’s simple, son. We’re afraid. We don’t want to be in the system, but we are. They make it so hard; veterans just give up. Saves the country a lot of money. The insiders call it clear-cutting. Can’t you just hear that old saw starting up, getting rid of some dead wood?” He laughed and clapped Leroy on the back.

Leroy’s gaze fell upon the flickering candles, which had somehow managed to flame throughout the entire night. In the distance he thought he heard the steady whomp whomp whomp of a chopper, but that was impossible. A single white light beamed in through the stained glass windows-- so bright, then dark again.

The door opened silently and two women stepped in. They seemed to be twins, their hair in French braids, green dress uniforms, stockings, black pumps. “We’ve come

for you, sir,” they said, holding out a paper. As far as Leroy could tell in the dim light, the paper was blank. He blinked. This must be the new Army, he thought.

“Are you lost?” he asked. They gestured to the paper. They’re not prepared for questions, Leroy said to himself, and went to get his jacket. He kissed Helen; she was still asleep on the bench, her face pressed up against her sweater, her knees bent like a girl’s. The women wanted to take Leroy’s arms as they walked down the hallway, but Leroy kept his arms close down by his sides. They walked next to him, shouldering his body down the halls, through the metal fire doors, onto the elevator and out of the building.

As they walked through the long glass tunnel from the hospital to the parking structure, they took hold of his body in a way Leroy had never experienced, except once in Korea. They each wrapped their arms around Leroy’s torso, squeezing him between their hard hips. He had never realized women could be so strong and perhaps it was then that he noticed their pistols. He walked along stiffly between them; now they formed such a close unit that had even one of them tripped, they would all have fallen in a heap.

The parking structure was cold and damp with the smell of oily concrete and exhaust fumes. The few lights that flickered were yellow and illuminated only a small circle around them.

Leroy regarded the women more closely. Their faces were set and fierce in a way he’d never seen before in females. Their heels sounded like hammers on the slick pavement. He imagined the careful hand that had put on the blue eye shadow, the mascara, the smudge of rouge and lipstick. “Who are you?” he asked. “Where are we going?.... Why me, then?” The women didn’t reply; they simply increased their grip and pressed him forward.

Suddenly Leroy heard a whizzing noise beside him. He tried to turn to look, but was prevented from even moving his head by the tight pressure of their bodies against his. He had never known women to be so hard. He saw it was Jack wheeling by; Jack's head nodded slightly and he touched his fingers to his forehead in a salute.

They were out of the parking structure now, its low heavy ceiling giving way to a parking lot lined with new pansies and budding impatiens waiting for summer. A small group of men in white hospital uniforms were leaning up against the walls of the building like a receiving line, the air filthy with their cigarette smoke. The only thing I can do now is try to keep my mind calm and neutral, Leroy thought. The broken molar pounded in his jaw and he wondered if Helen was warm enough under the red shawl, and if he would ever see her again. Had she even noticed he was gone? He shook himself. This is just a couple of old gals out on some Army maneuver or something. We didn't do anything wrong. I didn't ask for nothing I wasn't entitled to.

Their feet crunched down a path of sharp gravel; they passed the parking kiosk and the attendant waved them on and out of the VA complex. The shrubbery lining Morgan Boulevard rubbed against Leroy's body as they walked three abreast down the sidewalk. The group turned left at the corner and continued past the brick hospital buildings and the University eye clinic and then into a small residential neighborhood of bungalows and run-down millhouses.

They soon walked by Dreyfus Gardens, a place he and Helen had often visited on a spring day. He knew the ponds, the sundial, the lush water lilies. He looked longingly at the wooden benches just inside the entrance. The women pulled him along, and he noticed how tired he was. Seventy-five years old is not young, he thought, no matter how

much golf you play. These women's muscles were like hard rubber balls beneath their skin. He knew they would never have to stop.

Soon they were beside the expressway, and they led, pushed, pulled Leroy down an eroded dirt path that led beneath the highway bridge. Leroy could hear the cars going past and could see the graffiti painted on the bridge supports. Here, the women halted. For the first time since they began this march, Leroy was free. He sat down on a coarse chunk of concrete and wiped the sweat from his face.

The woman with the birthmark on her cheek went up to Leroy and loosened his belt. His mind went soft and blank and the air shimmered with heat. They were gently pulling off his shoes, then his socks, his shorts, his underwear. His pink penis dangled like a child's play toy among the sparse white hairs. He lifted his arms up like a child as they pulled the shirt over his head.

They seemed to be arguing then; one gestured and the other grinned, but he didn't know what it meant. High above him he could hear people talking, but he didn't understand Spanish. He was thirsty.

The smaller one had out the pistol now and he saw her rub it against her dark-green skirt. The sky was beginning to cloud over. "We've got to hurry," she said. "They'll be expecting us."

"You couldn't pay me enough money," the other woman said.

Leroy looked up at the sun. It was almost blinding. He thought about all that he had learned. He thought about his wife: a friend, a good person, someone who cared, who had always helped him. Leroy considered his fate, his old age, his cracked molar. Finally his eyes turned dim. He didn't know if it was really getting darker, or if his eyes were

deceiving him, and yet, in the darkness around, he now saw a radiant light stream before him. And in that light, he thought he saw Dave grin, a hollow hellhole of a grin-- a grin, most horrifyingly, a grin with no teeth at all.

Back to The World

Claire veered off sharply onto the grassy shoulder of the road, parked and jumped from the car before she could change her mind. She snapped on her fanny pack and struck out across the field toward the forest, about a quarter of a mile through the high weeds, following a trail of trampled grasses that led her to the edge of the woods. When she reached the forest she hiked down a thin brown path covered in pine needles, with milkweed and winterberry growing beside it. The path led into the deep woods and her worn hiking boots made no noise at all on the softly padded ground. She had always loved the dark quiet of the woods and the feeling of being sheltered from all sides. She could hear a woodpecker tapping high above her head in a tulip poplar tree and somewhere the sound of an airplane taking off.

She consulted the directions, hastily scrawled on the back of a grocery receipt—*walk along the trail for about fifteen minutes until you reach the big granite rock. She was there. Look for a silver pie plate about twenty feet from the ground and follow the trail below it.* She spotted the pie pan twisting in the pine trees, and a bit of trodden ground, and after gulping some water from her bottle, she continued walking. *Another twenty minutes,* the note said.

I should be scared, she thought. Way out in the woods, getting ready to see a man I haven't seen for sixteen years. He was crazy then and there's no telling what he'll be like now. She stooped to look at a wildflower beside the trail. It was a small flower, its

bulbous throat a brilliant orange surrounded by fluttering white petals— a jack-in-the-pulpit. A turtle walked across the path. It stopped when it saw her, looked and continued on its way.

She wondered if anyone else lived in these woods or if it was just Matt. She hoped not; she didn't want to run into anybody else way out in the middle of nowhere. She felt for her cell phone stuffed inside her pack, like that would matter. The day was warm and she could feel her face starting to sweat. Her eyes flickered over a fallen log, as a blue-tailed skink raced around the edge.

Suddenly she came upon a small clearing and stopped. The clearing was surrounded by a crude board fence topped by rusty spirals of concertina wire. She couldn't see a gate or any kind of opening. Inside the enclosure was a ranked-out trailer overhung with cammy tarps strung out to the trees. She could hear the chugging of a generator and there was a fire pit surrounded by blackened rocks. A wooden chair carved in the shape of a man squatted in front of the trailer. All around the perimeter of the clearing were totem pole-like figures; stacked crows, eagles, cows, pigs, chickens. The grasses in the clearing were singed black as if there had just been a fire. In front of the trailer, a porch had been fashioned out of used pallettes and found lumber. A small tangled garden of tomatoes, sunflowers, pole beans and corn straggled on the plot of ground beside the trailer.

There was no doorbell to ring, so she just stood for a moment, looking. An old husky limped over to the fence and sniffed. Then it began to wag its tail wildly and licked Claire's hand through a gap between the boards.

“Oh, my God!” she said. “It’s Cucchi! It’s you, girl, isn’t it? I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Hi, Claire,” a voice said from behind her. Her heart jumped. “Don’t look yet.” She whirled around.

“Matt, it’s you!” She was astounded and yet she wasn’t. His hair was long now and streaked with white, and he wore it down below his shoulders. His neck was covered with wintry sprouting whiskers, as if he shaved on a schedule known only to him. His eyebrows were thick, and his face, weathered and alert, seemed to be at peace. He didn’t look unhappy, she thought, or really crazy or even unkempt, considering.

“Aren’t those the shorts you bought at Al’s Army Surplus in Winston-Salem?” she asked.

“Girl, you have got the memory. No need for a lot of new clothes out here.” She felt him gazing at her and clasped the little gold heart she always wore around her neck. His eyes held hers for a long moment. She knew she looked like hell, her once thick, curly hair straggly and streaked with gray, her eyes red and puffy, her body that had spread like pudding. She hadn’t really cared what she looked like since Jackie was killed in Iraq; since his convoy was blown-up outside Fallujah.

“Thanks for coming out to the forest, Claire. I hardly leave it anymore. Seems like the older I get the harder it is with people; even when I know them.” He scratched Cucchi on the sweet spot at the base of her tail, then raised his arms and stretched. Claire saw a long pink scar across his stomach. It looked new.

“So?” His piercing blue eyes looked up at her.

“So,” she said. “Are you going to kill me now or later?”

“Later,” he laughed. “After I take you back to my lair.” Her stomach clenched.

“It’s a joke, okay, Claire?” he said touching her shoulder.

She flinched, shaking off his hand like a deerfly. “I got your note, Matt. I still don’t know why you wanted me to come. I don’t even know why I came out here,” she said. Jack, she thought, he looks so much like Jack. Something about his cheekbones and the way they spread wide across his face. She tried to swallow.

“Why don’t we go in?” Matt led the way, moving noiselessly in his broken red flip-flops. “Just be careful not to step right here.” He pointed to a patch of ground. “A mine might explode.” She looked at him. “Just kidding.”

“Here’s the opening.” He pulled apart the tangled wire and showed her how to crawl through. “Watch yourself now,” he said, and led her through and up to the porch. The porch was broad and spanned the length of the trailer. It seemed to be a combination living room, kitchen and workshop. “Have a seat. I’m gonna get a coke.” He walked over to the refrigerator at the edge of the porch. “Want one?” he asked, throwing her a can. She caught it neatly, pulled the tab, and drank for a long minute.

“This is really cozy,” she said, noting the TV and the workout machine.

“I like it. I’ve got a good deal. I keep an eye out for the developers who own this land, and they pretend not to notice me.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve sort of lost track. Maybe eight-ten years.”

She sat down in the easy chair. It was surprisingly comfortable, wide and deep, and her favorite color for living room furniture: hunter green. “Didn’t we used to have an easy chair this exact same color?”

“Damned if I remember. Mad Dog-Bob found it for me outside one of those fancy furniture stores. It had a big burn mark on it, so they threw it away.” He perched low on his stool, his legs folded up by his shoulders like wings.

“Bob knew you were out here?” she asked, her voice puzzled. “When we were nearly starving, when I couldn’t even buy Jackie’s asthma medicine? Bob knew you were out here?”

“We lost touch for a long time. He found me again just a few years ago. It was like a miracle seeing him after so long, Mad Dog and me.”

Matt rubbed the cold can against his forehead; Claire could see right through the thinning front hairs to his scalp. She hated it when a man’s hair got thin and somehow she could imagine an army of ants living in there, wandering among the hair stalks like a jungle. Bob and I even made love a few times, she remembered suddenly, like a dream. Well, maybe more than a few times. Everything was still so hazy from those bad years. After Matt’s skinny ribs it had been nice to feel a solid man again, to feel a man hungry for her body.

“I’m not surprised he checked up on you,” she said. “After you left, Bob kept tabs on us too. He’d come over, never even knock on the apartment door, and just open up our refrigerator. He’d yell at me. *You call me when you have no food!* And then he’d take us down to the Winn-Dixie and get us milk and fresh fruit and even some of those mint-filled Oreos for Jackie. Jackie loved those...” Her voice trailed off. She still had those big bags of cookies she’d bought on special, hidden deep in the pantry. And what the hell was she saving them for?

“I almost hired a detective to find you, Matt, and then I thought screw it, we’re better off alone anyway.” Cucchi laid her head in Claire’s lap. “It’s amazing she still remembers me.” She stroked the dog’s soft fur.

“Bob told me when it happened, Clarabelle,” he said quietly.

“He told YOU?”

“He told me last month, when it happened. He drove out here the minute he heard. That’s when I knew I had to see you...to talk to you... Goddam Iraqi motherfuckers!” His voice was loud like it was supposed to be, but she couldn’t feel the emotion in it.

Claire looked at Matt, her cheeks stiff with pain, the pit opening up inside her. “Then where were you, Matt?” she asked. The silence lay thick between them. She heard Cucchi whimper at her feet.

“Are your breasts just as heavy as they used to be?” he asked. I haven’t hardly held a breast or sucked tittie since Jackie was born. Wasn’t he always sucking them? Seemed like it was always his turn.”

Claire stared at her hands. “Is your dick just as soft? Seemed like you never wanted to do it after Jackie was born.”

“Whew, I’m sorry.” Matt stood up and smoothed his hair back. “I’ve been out here too long. Anyone could see that...I just wish I couldn’t see your nipples through that pretty pink shirt, Claire,” he swallowed. She stood up and walked over to the garden, her back to him. The garden was filled with tiger swallowtails, weaving in and out of the corn stalks.

“Remember how I always had that thing about eggs?”

“How could I forget? Your collection’s still in my sister’s garage, along with all that old army junk.” Claire’s favorite egg had always been the onyx egg from Mexico, a foggy white stone, with light brown veins running through it. She’d unearthed that one and Matt’s Purple Heart, and his army boots with the dog tags strung through the grommets, and given them to Jack, just so he’d have something from his father.

“Did you ever tell Jack about me?” he asked, scratching a scab on his knee that was brown and corrugated like beef jerky.

“Of course I told him about you. And your parents, they still have a virtual shrine to you—your old airplane models, your high school graduation picture, snapshots from Saigon--”

“Well,” he interrupted, “it’s just he didn’t seem to know much when he came out, is all Claire, so I wondered.” He rolled up his shirt sleeves. Claire could see the skin, brown and dry, covered with freckles. “You know, he looks a lot like you.”

“Who?” she asked.

“Jackie does. Did. Whoa...” he said sputtering out the words. “Look at that heron.” He pointed. “On the way to the pond, thinks he owns it.”

“You saw Jack? You met Jack? When?”

“Last year,” he said, adjusting his balls in his shorts. “You know, when he was having all that trouble with his girlfriend. What was her name anyway? Trudy? Courtney? You remember that little chick he got pregnant?”

“Pregnant?” She sat down on a ragged stump and put her head in her hands. Nothing felt simple here. “Bob brought Jack here and Jack had a pregnant girlfriend?” she repeated.

“That’s the way I remember it. He felt really bad about knocking her up.”

Claire was having trouble talking. It was as if her life was being rewritten before her eyes. “Why would Jack tell you about a girlfriend? He hardly even knew you. You’re the father who abandoned him to do what? Live way the fuck out here on Easter Island!” She flung her hand out at the circle of blackened totem poles. They glowered back.

“You couldn’t give Jack everything,” Matt said quietly. “I’m his father. He needed me sometimes. I tried to be a father. That’s why I told him to join the ROTC. That kid had a gut on him....”

“You! - You!” she spit out. “You got him to join the ROTC! Some kind of real father might have stuck around and helped him grow up, not disappeared into the woods like some kind of overgrown leprechaun!”

“Maybe it was wrong. Bob asked me one day, right after that big ice storm, if I’d like to meet my son, and I said yes.” Matt walked back to the refrigerator and grabbed another coke. He sat down on the porch steps, slapping at the mosquitoes. “Gotcha!” he said, leaving a bloody splotch on his leg. Claire sat down beside him.

“Was the girlfriend really pregnant?” she asked, looking at his face.

“Yep.”

“I wonder what happened to the baby.”

Don’t know.” He shrugged.

“When was all this?”

“Oh, it must about the end of winter, early spring. She probably had an abortion. That’s what I told him to do. Gave him a couple hundred bucks.”

Claire sighed and stared out at the ring of totem poles. “So, what did you all do out here?”

“Well, he told me about himself. About school. We cooked out. Mad Dog always dropped off some food when he came. Hot dogs, stuff like that. Used to be the only meat I got was road kill. Possum’s better than you think, when you’re really hungry. Sometimes Jack helped around the place. He always wanted to know about Nam. One day he brought an old photograph album. Another time he came with Bob and they were all set to take me to the VA.

“‘Dad,’ he said. ‘Maybe you can get some help, get better, be like a normal person again.’ ‘What’s normal?’” I yelled at him. “Why the fuck does everyone want me to be so goddamn normal? Christ, I didn’t want to let him down.” Matt got out his old pocket knife and opened the blade and began to clean the line of grime from beneath his nails. “The thing is, I’m not gonna be normal again. Not in this lifetime.” He flipped the blade shut and looked at the sky.

“You know, sometimes late at night, I take out one of my rifles and pop--shoot up at the airplanes as they fly overhead.” She couldn’t help it; she looked around to see if there were any large silvery objects hidden in the woods. The kudzu was thick and lush and could hide anything. “Don’t worry.” He held up his big hands. “No ammo.”

“I just don’t understand what he saw in you. Why he’d sneak out here to see you.” She shook her head and stared at the bare dirt in front of her, her boot drawing circles in the red dust.

“I didn’t volunteer to go to Vietnam. I didn’t ask to step on that land-mine, you know. Don’t you think I’d be normal if I could?” he asked, his voice rising. “To tell you the truth, Claire, I’m kind of glad he died there. I wish I’d died there too.”

Claire stood up and grabbed his shoulders hard. “But you’re still alive! It wasn’t your sweet body blown to bits. I can’t even see my son to say good-bye! He’s in fucking, rotting pieces. Did Bob tell you that too? There is no boy. Just bloody rotten meat!”

Claire looked down at her hands; her body was hot and trembling. She saw the ragged nails; the tiny silver ring she’d worn since Jack was weaned from her breast; the blue-green veins crossing like interstates on the back of her hands.

“I wish,” Claire said, suddenly cold and numb, “that you could have come to the funeral. It was a full military funeral down at the church, all the family was there. They had the seven-gun salute and then they handed me the flag and Bob played *Amazing Grace* on his bagpipes. He even wore that stupid kilt.” She looked down at him. “Why weren’t you there, Matt?” she asked, her eyes filling with tears. “Why weren’t you there? You couldn’t even be there for his death!” She beat at his chest, hit him with her balled-up fists. Hard, solid thumps.

“Here, I want to show you something,” he said gently. He pulled down her hands and wiped her wet face with the edge of his shirt. He got up and she followed him slowly to the edge of the clearing. “See this?” he asked. He pointed to the last totem pole. It was tall, maybe twenty feet high. She tilted her head back to look. “Jack and I, we made it together. He was the crow and I was the eagle and see--see, he even carved you. You’re the rabbit.” She could see the totem pole was topped by a rabbit; the ears stood straight

and tall as a radio antenna, the face of the rabbit washed in a light pink. She sighed and reached down to pat Cucchi's furry head.

They walked back to the porch and he bent over to pick up a piece of wood, a weathered chunk of wood that he used for a doorstep. "This is the first thing Jack carved, don't know what it's supposed to be," he said. "I made him practice on the little stuff. Learn to use the tools-- the knives and chisels--before we did the real totem pole. When the boy was here, it was like I wasn't such a fuck-up. Like I could teach him a few things, you know?"

"Like go to war?" Claire muttered. She took the object from his hands and turned it over and over in her own. The wood was gray and weathered. On the bottom, *Jack 2002*, was carved in the crude chops of an ax. The piece was amateurish and rough. It was supposed to be a rabbit; she could see that, although its ears were short and stubby and there weren't any feet.

"I'd like you to have it, Claire. Something to remember the boy by." She felt the splintered wood with her thumbs. No feet. Jackie had no feet. No arms. No head.

She threw the rabbit down so hard it bounced in the dirt. "I don't want this fucking rabbit; I want my son, and you can't get him back."

"Damn you," he breathed. He picked up the rabbit and held it to his cheek. "Don't you get it, Claire? We all got fucked." He laid the rabbit down gently on the porch and he reached for her hands. He pulled her in close and she let him. He smelled, she thought, like a man who didn't bathe too often or brush his teeth, but he smelled like a man. His cheek was rough -- so far from the peachy young cheek she remembered, but the smell was the same-- a little rank, a little musky. She felt him press himself against her and she

stepped back. It was getting dark and the tall pines were turning gray. She looked into Matt's eyes.

"It's way past five," she said. "I need to be heading home."

"We'll walk you. Come on, Cucchi-girl."

The hike back was quiet. Claire and Matt walked ahead and Cucchi wandered along behind, sniffing out squirrels. "You know, you're the first woman who's ever been out here," he said. Claire could hear the spring peepers and little scuttling noises in the dried leaves beside the path. She would be glad to be out in the sunshine again.

"Hey, where's the kid buried, anyway?"

"At the little cemetery beside the church," she said.

"Might get Mad Dog to take me sometime."

"He knows where it is."

"Well, here's the end of the trail. You be sure to check for ticks when you get home now, Claire." She nodded, and he shaded his eyes with his hand, looking at something in the distance she could not see. The field was golden and shadowed in the setting sun and alive with tiny green and yellow grasshoppers.

"Good-bye," she said, without looking around. She stepped high through the tall weeds, and as the forest closed black and deep behind her, she walked back into the world.