

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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A THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK	1
SOME THINGS CHANGE	6
APARTMENT 4D	17
A LETTER TO SARA	27
EPILOGUE	34

I Don't Know Where to Look

I shove my hands into my jacket pockets and walk. I walk the same street as always. The street is crowded. I don't know where to look. I don't want to look down and I don't want to look at any faces. I don't want to recognize any of them. It is always such a dilemma walking down crowded streets, deciding where to look and not to look and always avoiding something. The sky is the kind of grey that fills everything, makes the air hard to move in. Everything is in sharp focus. I am muddle-headed.

I am at the intersection. The taste of soot settles in the back of my throat. The road is caked with mud, the cars push through the crowd.

A young woman stands bouncing a bright yellow ball. Her socks are crumpled at her ankles. She walks a few steps, bounces the ball, high, above her head, and catches it. She holds the ball loose in one hand, walks a few more steps. Her steps are slow, her eyes vacant. She turns to the wall, bounces the ball against it, over and over, in one motion. People rush past.

I stop in front of a cafe. A man sits on the step sipping coffee. The door opens and I see the wall hung heavy with art, I hear the crowd. I turn away.

My feet scrape the sidewalk and I wonder where I am going. I left my apartment after the phone call. After that voice, my father's voice, after ten years. I saw his mustache, his hand on his hip, the cigarette burning down. 'How are you?' I could hear the voice cracking. 'Fine.' I twisted the phone cord, knocked my roommate's notebook off the table. I couldn't feel

my legs. I heard him say he missed me. I heard him tell me I was still his little girl. How did he get my number? I held the phone away from my ear. The voice was smaller. I hung up, stared at my hand on the receiver. The phone rang. I felt the receiver in my hand burn with the ringing. I left, the phone still ringing. My feet keep moving. The sky is full of rain.

The rain hits the windshield, echoing in the dark car. Dad laughs as he pulls me onto his lap. My legs barely fit under the steering wheel. He turns the key, the engine roars, his legs pump the pedals. He grabs the wheel, pulls us from the shoulder onto the road. Rain crosses the headlights. I am caged between his arms. I ball my fists into my shirt. His cigarette glows orange. I watch the tip move from the wheel, to the gears, it disappears behind my head, back on the wheel. I feel the hot smoke in my ear. He tells me to grab the wheel. I sit watching the windshield wipers erase the water. 'Grab the wheel'; he yanks my arm. I feel his right leg tense. The road curves. I watch the lines, trying to keep the car between them. I glance down, 50. Clench the wheel, 60. He laughs, 70, rolls down the window. Rain hits my face. I bite my lip, try to keep my eyes open. Daddy. Hot smoke. I stare at the edge of the headlights, at the line between light and darkness. My cheeks are numb.

I pass the businesses that were once small houses, out of place among the trees. A door jangles open and a woman steps out clutching a small brown bag. She turns up the street. Two little girls play on a porch. I walk until I reach the mall. A group of boys spit angry words. I quicken my step, tighten my shoulders.

The stores meld together: brick glass brick glass. I look in at pearl bracelets between cardboard faces. The fountain is on, water falling on water. I stop at the toy store. I look around at the dinosaurs and marbles, the crayons and science kits. A doll-house sits on a shelf. I had one just like it when I was young. Plastic, with plastic walls and bright yellow paper siding and furniture bought in cardboard and cellophane packages. After a few months it lay forgotten in the back of my closet.

"May I help you?" The sales clerk asks from behind the counter.

I am standing in the middle of the store staring at the house. "No, no thank you." The door jangles closed behind me.

The sidewalk is full of puddles. I splatter my jeans with muddy water, until I come to the Side Street Cafe. I see only strangers. I look to see if there's a table near the back; there is. I order hot tea and sit. My feet are tired. I hear the clink and clatter of cups, the thick humming of voices broken by laughter, the whirl of machines, the opening and closing door. I stare into my tea.

Shadows of light under my door. I turn my face in to the pillow. The knob turns, a cup rattles on a plate. The door closes. The cup scrapes on the night stand. Dad's strong hand on my back. He shakes me, whispers my name. I tighten my eyes. He rolls me over. I see the orange tip of his cigarette glowing, fading, glowing. 'I've brought you some tea.' I nod. He brushes the hair off my forehead, sits on my bed. I hug my bear. The cigarette glows. He rubs my shoulders. I look in my closet for shadows. He crushes the cigarette out on the night stand. His hand is on my stomach. I look out the window. The sky, dark blue, not black the way

night is supposed to be. It's black in here. I look for stars, pretend I'm outside the glass, out where it is dark blue, where the wind might be blowing.

Dad fumbles in his pocket, finds his cigarette and lighter. 'Sit up, drink your tea.' The lighter scratches on. I see his blue eyes. He doesn't see me. He hands me the tea. His hand is shaking. I take a sip, it's cold. I hold the plate, take another sip, watching my father. He scratches his eyebrow with the tip of his thumb. He's looking at his knees. I look at his knees. He stands, puts his hand on my head, 'Goodnight.' He ruffles my hair. I nod. I watch his shadow under the door, then darkness. I put the cup down, stand, scrape the crumpled cigarette into my hand. The window is cold against my cheek, I open it, throw the ashes outside. I crawl under the covers, look once more for shadows and bury my face in the pillow.

I sip my tea. It's cold. I go through the cafe, past all the tables, to the phone. I call my roommate, no answer. I call another friend, get a machine. I walk back to my table, someone has cleared away my cup.

I walk behind old buildings, past sagging houses. The pavement echoes in my knees as my feet hit. The street wet, wet and with cars hissing by. Sharp, staccato, ripping through the water. I can feel my heart pounding. I stop. Listen. Remember to breathe. I turn down an alley between two tall buildings of old cement and plaster. I walk, dragging my hand along the wall, feeling my fingertips. There is only the wall and the scrape of my fingers. I lean my head on the wall, feel the throbbing in my fingers, now in my pockets, pushing at the seams.

I stop at the light, wait for the cars to pass. The sky is the grey dark of

dusk. I walk back through the mall. I stop again at the toy store. I look in, see my reflection staring back, wet hair, faded grey jacket. I step closer and disappear. A stuffed clown in the window holds a balloon.

I shove my hands into my jacket pockets. I walk the same street as always. I don't have to worry what to look for: parking meters and their shadows. The sidewalk is orange from the street lamps. The wind blows. I stop across from the apartment, fourth window from the left, top floor. The window is lighted. I cross the street, shoving my hands deeper in my pockets. I climb the stairs, see the water dripping off the steps. Kelsey is sitting on the couch, watching T.V., feet on the coffee table. She looks up. I close the door, walk to my room. My clothes feel heavy. I peel them off, change into something dry. I sit on my bed, watch the light under the door, listen to the hum of the television. I walk into the living room.

"Hi." Kelsey watches me walk across the room.

"Hi." I lean against the divider between the kitchen and living room.

"You okay?" Kelsey turns off the television.

I nod, look down.

"What's the matter? What happened?"

"My father called today."

"Oh, Carin. Are you all right?"

I shrug. "I think so." I sit down. I look around the room, at this place that is somehow different. Kelsey sits in the chair reading. She looks up. We smile. I put my head back, close my eyes, and listen to the stillness, listen for footsteps. I go into my room. The rain hits the window, the glass feels cold against my cheek. I close my eyes and listen to the wind beyond the pane, wonder where the shadows hide.

Some Things Change

Elise slows the car as she approaches the house she is renting for the summer, a small yellow box two blocks from the beach. A man in a rust colored rain jacket is slumped on her front step. Andy. Elise wonders, but it can't be Andy. He's in school. The gravel pops under the tires as she pulls into the driveway. She creeps up on him.

"Andy?" he shifts his weight. "Andy, wake up." Elise pokes him on the shoulder.

"What?" Andy pushes the hood of his jacket back, rubbing his eyes, "Elise. Hi."

"Hi yourself. What's the deal camping out on my steps?"

Andy stretches while Elise opens the door.

"You can come in or, if you prefer, I'll throw you out a blanket."

"Thanks for the compassion." Andy hugs her from behind, lifting her off the floor, setting her down.

"How'd you get here anyway?" Elise turns on the living room light.

"The old fashioned way." Andy sticks out his thumb.

Elise turns to him, seeing his red-rimmed eyes, stubbled chin. "The old heap collapse again?"

"No, it still runs. I decided to take a walk that's all. It's good to see you."

"I'm surprised to see you. Aren't finals next week?" Elise tries to catch Andy's eye. He shrugs.

Andy walks farther into the house, past the squat couch. "What's the big idea hiding out at the beach all summer anyway?" He sinks into a chair, his knees level with his eyes.

Elise shuts the door. "I'm not hiding, at least not well enough since you managed to find me." Elise goes into the kitchen. Andy smiles then closes his eyes and leans back.

"What the-" A small grey cat kneads his chest. "Elise, who's this?" He strokes the cat's head.

Elise peers around the corner. "Oh, that's Farley. I sort of adopted her."

"She. With the name Farley?" Andy laughs.

Elise shrugs. "Want anything?"

"How about the couch?" Andy stands up, spilling Farley onto the floor.

"It's yours, lumps and all." Elise leans on the back of the couch.

"What a hostess. You know just how to make me feel right at home." Andy winks.

Elise goes to the closet for sheets. Andy notices the books stacked on the table, the wilted flowers on the mantle, the fireplace piled with ashes. He picks up a blue notebook lying open on the coffee table, empty except for sketches of trees and feathers around the edges.

"If you'd given me some notice, I'd have pitched a tent out back. It'd be more comfortable than this thing." She thumps the couch.

"Are you writing again, Elise?" Andy set the notebook down and walks toward her.

"Not really. Just trying to draw the perfect feather." She sets the sheets down. "I'm thinking of a series, Feather in Three Positions. Here, I'll help you make up the couch." Elise throws a sheet at him.

"Where were you coming from anyway?" Andy drapes a sheet over the

couch. "Big night on the town?"

"Grocery store." Elise tucks the corner of the sheet in.

"Where's the food?" Andy unfolds a blanket.

"I didn't buy any." Elise holds the pillow in her mouth, struggling with the case.

"Nothing?"

Elise shakes her head.

"Okay. Is this your normal Thursday night entertainment?"

Elise throws the pillow at him. "That and letting strange men in my house." Elise rumples his hair. "I'll let you get some sleep. Enjoy the couch. The bathroom's in the hall."

Elise turns on her bed stand lamp. The room smells of rotting wood and stale sea air. She peers out the window, picking the paint from the sill. She hears Andy shuffling around. A tree framed by a screen of clouds shivers in the wind. She and Andy met in high school when they were paired to work on a project together. They spent half an hour in detention that day for laughing too much in the library. Andy was so upset, afraid he had ruined his future. They went for milk shakes and she convinced him he would survive this. She smiles at the memory of his frantic face, his eyebrows arched, his cheeks red. She remembers the day one of her friends dropped out of school; she cornered Andy in the hall and convinced him to skip the rest of the day. They spent the afternoon at a park, climbing trees, playing tag, spinning around until they fell on their backs and could feel the earth turning.

Elise picks up her photo album from under the night stand, sits on the bed. Opens it to a picture of her and Andy at their Senior Homecoming.

Elise winces. They had double dated and her date kept making passes at Andy's date who clung so tight to Andy he could barely breathe. When Andy did pry himself free long enough to dance with her, they planned their imaginary escape. Elise reminded him he was such an irresistible guy that the poor thing couldn't help herself, and that he was responsible for them being there in the first place. She had wanted to ditch the date idea and spend the money on a moonlight picnic near the river. Andy stepped on her foot reminding her how much more fun they were having at the dance.

Another picture shows them both covered in shaving cream, a desperate ploy to cheer Andy up after yet another unsuccessful relationship. They went through several cans of shaving cream that year.

Elise glances through the book at the images held behind plastic. The last picture is of graduation. The two of them standing together, Elise showing the tardy slips taped to the inside of her cap, while Andy rolls his eyes and sticks out his tongue. She closes the book. Standing by the window, Elise looks at the clear blackness. She can't forget the times the camera didn't record. She and Andy always managed to pull the other one out of slumps, but now, she shakes her head, now things aren't that simple. Farley rubs against her leg. "Okay, I get the hint. Enough reminiscing." She picks the cat up, plops her on the bed. "It ruins everything anyhow." Elise changes and climbs under the blanket. Farley curls on her stomach. She watches the shadows grow faint on the ceiling.

Elise crumbles the last cracker. The birds screech as she walks away. She bends her head back, feels the sun creeping through the heaviness of the morning. Streaks of blue behind veils of grey. Elise walks along the edge of the water listening to the muffled thud of the waves. Her shoes are wet. Two dogs play ahead of her. They run in circles until one turns and tackles the other, rolling dog over dog until, with sudden dignity, one stands and walks away. The other sits and watches, then sprints to tackle the first and the whole thing begins again. Elise laughs. The dogs continue until one escapes up an access way. Elise walks farther along the beach and sits down. Resting her chin on her bent knees she traces the horizon with her eyes, expecting to find something there. She scoops up sand and lets it funnel through her hand. The last time she and Andy went to the beach together was two years ago at the end of their senior year. Andy told her he had decided to go to school out of state to study architecture and would be moving there in July. They'd watched a storm come in, a vertical mass of black clouds threatening to draw like a curtain across the amber sky. Elise leans back on her arms, the weight of her body sinking in the sand.

She and Andy had sometimes talked about the two of them getting together, what their children would be like, who would stay home to watch them. Andy was trying hard to be progressive, planning to work short hours at his own architecture firm, possibly even doing work at home. Elise had a hard time projecting herself into that future or any future. She couldn't imagine what she would be doing, what her place in the world would be like. She could role-play with Andy, but for her it lacked the substance, the security that Andy seemed to find. She was always scared by

the lack of future she felt. She figured she was young, that in college she would discover what was missing, but the purpose and the plans all her friends were so confident in making seemed as nebulous to her as the horizon where sky appeared to meet water.

"Hi." Andy places his hand on her shoulder and sits down. "I figured I'd find you here."

"Can't fool you" Elise turns to him. "Andy," she pulls her hair over one shoulder, "Why are you here? What's up?" She touches his knee.

"Nothing." Andy crosses his legs. "Nothing at all. I just wanted to visit." He plays with the cuff of his jeans.

"Come on, Andy."

"I don't know. I came home from the studio on Tuesday, looked at the stacks of books and paper around the room, the mock-up on the table. I had to leave. Somehow I thought seeing you would help."

"I'm glad to see somethings haven't changed. You're still a slob."

Andy laughs and looks at her from the corner of his eye.

"Andy." She touches his arm. "You know what I like to do sometimes when I don't have to work during the week? I go to the movies in the afternoon. While everyone else is busy being something I like to sit in a dark theatre with a box of popcorn and be nothing at all."

"Is this something like grocery shopping at one in the morning for nothing?" He elbows her. "Elise, don't worry. I'm okay. I'm just tired. Everything seems so complicated, so..." He pushes his hair back. "Things were so easy with you," He touches her shoulder. "I was never lost."

Elise flicks sand on his shoe. Andy retaliates with a handful on her

knee. Elise pours sand over his head. He tackles her, covering her with sand. She squirms, still pitching sand until they both roll on their backs laughing.

Andy spits out sand, "Elise, you're crazy."

"Thanks, Mr. Sane." Elise grabs his hand and they pull each other up.

Elise comes into the room, toweling her hair. She watches Andy standing at the window. His body seems weighted. She looks down at Farley. "Farley, is Andy that boring?" Elise ruffles her fur. "You should be more polite."

Andy turns from the window. "Don't be too rough on her. I have that effect on women."

"Glad to see you haven't lost that special charm of yours." Elise settles on the couch. She pulls Farley onto her lap.

"So, when do you start back to school?" Andy returns to the chair. "I'll help you move if I can."

Elise looks at the cat. "I'm not going back." She shifts her weight, and scratches Farley's head.

"What?"

"I said I'm not going."

"Why?" Andy sits up in the chair. "What are you going to do?"

"Stay here. Work at the bookstore. I'm not really sure."

"I don't understand. You seemed so excited about school."

She looks up. "It doesn't seem important right now."

Andy moves to the edge of the chair, resting his arms on his thighs. "So you're going to hide out at the beach." He stands and looks out the window.

"I'm not hiding, Andy. I just need a break."

"You can't quit." Andy shakes his head.

"I'm not quitting." Farley squirms from under her hand. "What difference does it make to you anyhow?"

Andy watches the tree in the backyard tremble in the wind, then closes his eyes. Elise stares at the outline of Andy until it blurs. She sighs, pulls her legs up, watches the sky through the window.

Andy moves from the window and puts a tape in the player. He holds up his hands. "Want to dance?" Andy pulls her up from the couch. He presses his hands against her back, rests his cheek against her head.

Elise relaxes and presses her face to his shoulder. He smells of sea salt. They shuffle around the coffee table, turning small circles. Andy rubs her back. The outlines of the room soften. The tape clicks off. They keep dancing. Andy's shirt scratches against her face. She listens to his heart beat, feels his breath warm in her hair.

Andy steps back, rubs Elise's cheek with his thumb. She rests her hands on his waist. He pushes her hair behind her ear, she looks up. Andy touches her eyelashes, Elise leans forward. He kisses her, his hand behind her neck. Elise closes her eyes, feels the prickle of his beard.

Elise opens her eyes, steps back. "Andy." She looks down, "We can't." She walks into the kitchen. She opens the refrigerator, pulls out the milk. The living room is quiet. Her hand shakes as she opens the cupboard. The bowls clatter as she sets them on the counter. She pours cereal and milk into the bowls, takes a deep breath, walks back into the living room. Andy sits in the same place, unmoving.

"Hope you don't mind cereal." Elise sets the bowls on the coffee table. Farley noses the table.

Andy shrugs.

"I don't have anything else. I have this problem with shopping." She sits on the couch. Andy looks up, smiles a little.

Elise picks up her bowl "You had me worried there. I was afraid you had turned to stone."

Andy relaxes a little. "Elise-"

"You better eat that." Elise raises her spoon to her mouth. "It'll get soggy or Farley will eat it, and I don't have any more."

Andy picks up his bowl. "Sugar Pops? I thought you were into health food." Andy crosses his legs.

"I am. Why don't you put on a tape?"

They pay close attention to the rise and fall of the music.

"What's the cat doing?" Andy points to Farley who sits with her head cocked in front of the tape player.

"She'll sit there for hours if she likes the music." Elise set her bowl on the table.

"That's great." Andy scratches Farley's ears, offering her the last of the milk from his bowl.

Elise carries both bowls to the kitchen and washes them.

Andy is standing by the fireplace when she comes back. "Elise." He shifts his weight. "Thank you-"

"It was only cereal." She stops behind the couch.

"I think I'll leave tonight." He looks at his feet.

"Andy." Elise climbs over the back of the couch. "You're not leaving because of what happened are you?"

"No. Yes. Kind of." Andy makes an empty gesture. "Not really. I shouldn't have come here in the first place." He walks to the chair. "It wasn't fair to you." Andy sits on the edge of the chair.

"I'm not mad or anything." Elise shifts her weight. "It's just...we were never uncomplicated."

"I know." Andy shakes his head. "Do you miss high school?"

Elise looks at him, he seems so small against the chair. "I miss some of it I guess." She pulls her legs to her chest. "But we can't go back."

Andy sighs. "I guess not." He claps his hands together. "Now, I've made a mess of this." He rubs his hands on his legs.

"No, you haven't." Elise rests her cheek on her knee. "It'll take more than a lousy kiss to do that."

"Lousy?" He sits up, tries another smile. "I still better go. Some silly thing about finals." He stretches. "Is there a bus station close by?"

"Sure," Elise gets up from the couch. "I'll drive you. I don't want you to wear out the old thumb." She reaches for her keys on the table.

The bus station's sterile white light spills into the empty parking lot. Elise pulls into a spot and shuts off the car.

"You don't have to get out." Andy turns to her.

"But-" She starts to unbuckle her seat belt.

"Please." Andy touches her hand. "Look." He opens the door. "I'll see you, okay?"

"Okay." Elise grips the wheel and looks at him.

Andy leans into the car "Thanks for everything." He pulls his bag out of the car.

"Andy." Elise turns to him.

"Listen." She rubs her hands on the steering wheel. "Tonight. It wasn't lousy." She shrugs. "Fair."

Andy laughs. "Always so picky." He stands up. "Take care, Elise." He smiles, picks up his bag.

"You too, Andy."

Elise watches him disappear into the stark light of the station. She drives home along the coast, with her window down, listening to the waves crashing below.

Apartment 4D

Jordan walks down the street slouched within her blue rain jacket. The sky fades, lengthening the shadows from the streetlamps and focusing the neon signs of the bars and shops lining the street. She fidgets with the keys in her pocket, bouncing them in her hand. She holds two boxes of Chinese food in her left hand. Jordan catches her breath remembering what happened today. Robert. Robert happened today. She was packing a box of video tapes when Robert stopped beside her and started handing her the tapes. Robert is a part-time worker, but they have talked a few times in the break room. Robert handed her video tapes and asked her how she was. Fine. Jordan is always fine. He told her about the movie he saw last weekend and asked if she had seen it. No. Jordan hadn't seen any of the recent movies. Robert was quiet and continued to help her pack boxes. Then Jordan asked him. She had never asked anyone before. She asked him to dinner. Tomorrow. She doesn't know why, but before she knew it she had stuttered something about him coming over for dinner. He was quiet, handed her another stack of tapes. She was afraid he might say yes, which he did with a smile. Jordan smiled. The smile felt crooked. Dinner it was. He suggested a movie after. Jordan gave him directions to her apartment.

Jordan stops in front of her building and looks up. Four stories of brick with a sagging plaster facade of columns and arches, and windows filled with drooping plants and yellow light. She climbs the front stoop, opens the heavy door into the hallway that smells of perfume and Lysol. Jordan glances at the row of mailboxes on the wall, at the names neatly printed on

their fronts; hers is blank. She starts up the steps, head down, hand back in her pocket. A smudgy line of grey from dirty hands runs along the off-white stairwell. Jordan climbs the stairs faster and begins to think of what she will have for dinner tomorrow. She doesn't have to work so she has time to cook; American, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, Swedish, Lebanese, Canadian, Spanish, German.

She pokes her key into the 4D knob and opens the door. The dull light from the hallway adds form to the darkness. Jordan closes the door and stands still for a minute. She switches on the light in the living room, the kitchen, and her bedroom. She sets the food on the table along with her keys. Jordan takes a plate from the cupboard, sets it on the table. While she eats, she thinks of Robert and dinner. She pops the end of an egg roll in her mouth and sits back. She looks at the pictures on the table of her mother, father, sister all in silver frames sitting among empty frames of gold and ceramic.

Jordan clears the table and sets the dishes in the sink, puts the white boxes in the refrigerator beside two similar ones. She turns off the kitchen light. Jordan goes into her room, grabs the black sweats off the end of her bed and changes clothes. She turns off the light in her room. She turns off the lamp in the living room. Jordan sits in the rocking chair by the window. She can see the entire street; the bar lights winking, the blue white light of the telephone booth on the corner. A couple walking arm in arm. A vagrant leaning against a wall. A dog turning down the alley. The trees hiding the moon. Jordan watches the change in characters, which always seems to be a part of the same play.

Jordan sits up, startled awake by the blast of a horn. She blinks, the light coming through the window stings her eyes. She looks down at the cars and people filling the street. Jordan stands, stretches, and shuffles off to the shower. As the water beats her neck and back, she tries to remember falling asleep last night. She hates spending the whole night in the chair. Jordan turns her face to the shower head, filling her mouth with water then spitting it out. Robert. Robert is today. She leans her head on the wall. Dinner. Italian. Jordan twists the water to cold and turns around once, then shuts the water off. She grabs her towel, "Shopping. I've got a lot to do today." She mutters as she steps from the shower. Jordan towels her hair, while she stares at her clothes. She grabs jeans and an over-sized white sweater.

Jordan locks the door behind her and checks her bag once more to make sure she has her money and her list. She skips down the stairs. She stands on the front stoop taking a deep breath. The street is almost pleasant during the day. She jumps the rest of the way to the street. She buys spaghetti and sauce from the small grocery on the corner, and two loaves of bread at the bakery. Jordan pokes a piece of bread in her mouth. She passes a dry cleaners with the revolving conveyor of plastic wrapped clothes. She goes into the bookstore. She hardly buys books anymore, but she likes to look, to read the names of authors she knows and the titles of books she doesn't. She runs her fingers down the spines of a few books imagining what they are about. Jordan resettles the weight of the bag and leaves. She walks past her street. She tears another piece of bread. Jordan peers into a vintage clothing store, at the limp clothes on hangers and the

dingy tile floor. The wind picks up leaves and spins them around like small children swung by their parents. Newspaper bins are chained to lightposts and a bicycle lies in the middle of an alley. She stops at the movie theater on the corner and looks at the posters. The matinee is an old film. Jordan shifts the bag to her other hip and buys a ticket. She likes the black and white films about people and times she knows nothing about. Jordan finishes the loaf as the lights go down.

She closes her eyes, pictures Robert next to her, he takes her hand, squeezes it. The movie opens with a woman standing on a cliff, silhouetted against the fading sky, her dress billowing in the wind. A letter flies from her hand, she grabs for it, watches it float toward the sea. Jordan watches the woman eat at the cafe where she last saw her lover before he went away to war, turning each time the door opens. Watches as the woman throws away, one by one, his gifts, his letters, until only his picture remains. Waits, while the woman waits, sitting alone at night, listening for a knock. Jumps when his knock does come, and the lover stands in the doorway, leg bandaged. Cries as they embrace and fade away with the music.

Jordan walks out of the theatre and lets her eyes adjust to the murky light of the afternoon. Still lingering in the feeling of the film, she turns down her street, looks at her watch. Only three hours to Robert. Jordan stops at the butcher's for chicken.

She sets the things from the bag onto the counter, gets her recipe for chicken parmegiano and pulls the other ingredients out of the cupboards and refrigerator. She washes her hands, looks at the rectangle of the spaghetti box, the smoothness of the sauce jar, the whiteness of the butcher paper, the green parsley, the skin of the garlic, the roughness of the bread

loaf. Jordan goes into the living room. She picks up the black and white picture of her mother, father, and sister standing in front of a house she never knew. She picks up a photo she took of them one Christmas. She rubs the frame. That was the last time she had been home. Jordan sits on the couch, sets the picture down. She stares at the empty television screen. She crosses her arms, draws her knees up. She closes her eyes and presses her face into the hardness of her knees.

Keys jingle; doors open and close in the hallway; horns blow and brakes screech; people laugh and dogs bark beyond the window. The noise settles as people leave the street for home.

The room has faded to grey. She looks at her watch. Forty-five minutes to Robert. She goes into the kitchen. She stuffs the food back into the paper bag and shoves it into the refrigerator. Jordan goes to the phone in the living room, pulls the phone book from under the chair. Pizza, she orders one to be delivered. She runs to her room, combs her hair, brushes her teeth. She turns on all the lights in the apartment, then turns some off. She looks for candles. She straightens the living room, the kitchen. She sits on the couch, then the chair, at the table, back to the couch. She goes to the window, moves away. Jordan walks to her room, looks at the closet, tries to decide if she should change. The door bell rings. Jordan walks to the living room, stops. A knock. Jordan stands in front of the door, closes her eyes, grabs the knob.

"Hi, there." Robert smiles.

"Hi." Jordan opens the door wider. "Come in." She steps back.

"Thanks." Robert walks in.

Jordan shuts the door.

"Here." Robert hands Jordan a bottle of wine. "I brought this for dinner."

"Thanks." Jordan takes the bottle. "I hope you don't mind, I ordered pizza." Jordan sets the bottle on the counter.

"No. That's fine." Robert takes a few steps.

"Pepperoni and mushroom." Jordan leans her hands on the back of a kitchen chair.

"Sounds good." Robert puts his hands in his pockets.

"You can take off your coat if you want. Let's sit in here." Jordan walks into the living room.

Robert shrugs out of his jacket and lays it over the back of the couch. They both sit down.

Jordan follows Robert's gaze as he looks around the apartment.

"This is a nice place." Robert leans back. "It feels comfortable."

Jordan nods. She likes the way he looks in his tan pants and burgundy sweater. He always wears jeans and t-shirts to work.

"I live in a place a couple of miles from Wesley college. It's small."

"I went to Wesley for a couple of years." Jordan sits back.

"Really?"

The door bell rings.

"Pizza for Ashley?" The delivery boy asks.

"Yes." Jordan smiles.

"Eight fifty."

Jordan hands him the money and closes the door.

"Ashley?" Robert looks over the back of the couch.

Jordan sets the box on the coffee table and goes to the kitchen for napkins and the wine.

"Is that your middle name?" Robert opens the wine.

"No." Jordan sits down. "I never use my real name." She opens the box.

"Why?" Robert sits forward.

"I don't know." She pulls a piece away and places it on her napkin.

They talk about Wesley college. Jordan asks if he knows any of her professors. No, but he does impressions of his math and history professors. Jordan laughs and is amazed that he seems so comfortable. Robert explains what his plans are for next term.

Jordan wonders if they would have met if she was still in school. She plans on finishing, but she isn't sure when. They talk about people at work, both agreeing their supervisor takes the job too seriously. Jordan watches as Robert finishes the last of the pizza, watches his green eyes until they meet hers. She stares at her hands, at the napkin crumpled between them.

"Thank you. That was really good."

Jordan nods. Robert shifts his weight. "Do you want anymore wine?" He sits forward on the couch, reaching for the bottle. Jordan notices how long his fingers are, "No, " she shakes her head. She watches Robert's shoes bounce up and down and shift side to side.

"This your family?" Robert picks up the picture from behind the couch. Jordan looks up, nods, then stares at his shoulder. She remembers the movie this afternoon, but doesn't know what to say about it. Robert puts the picture down. She looks at his chin and smiles. They both laugh.

"How about the movie?" Robert looks at his watch.

Jordan nods. "There's a theatre not far from here." Jordan motions with her hand. "We can walk."

Jordan gets her coat from her room. Robert takes the pizza box into the kitchen and puts on his jacket.

Jordan turns off the living room light. "They usually have a ten o'clock show, I think."

Robert opens the door. Jordan turns out the kitchen light, closes and locks the door.

They step outside. They can see their breath in the dark. Jordan exhales hard, starts down the steps.

"When I was a kid I used to pretend I was a chimney when it was cold like this."

Robert pulls her close to his side. "I used to pretend I was a fire-breathing dragon."

"With his pilot light out, right?" Jordan laughs. She stares at their shoes while they walk

The running yellow lights flash across their faces as they wait in line. Robert squeezes Jordan's hand, their fingers interlace. Jordan clicks her thumb and forefinger together on the other hand. They enter the darkened theatre. The room rustles with people shifting in their seats and crunching popcorn. Robert picks two seats mid-way down. He takes Jordan's hand again.

"I'm having a really good time." He whispers.

He squeezes her hand. Jordan stares at the screen. The previews play. Robert leans his head to the side. The movie starts. Jordan steals a glance

at Robert. She smiles, leans her head against his, gives his hand a quick squeeze. The movie plays on. Robert turns his head, kisses Jordan on the cheek. Jordan turns to him. She feels the warmth of his breath, the tenderness of his lips against hers. She turns back to the film. She grips the arm of her chair.

"I'll be right back."

Jordan stands in the lobby trying to catch her breath. She pushes the bathroom door open with her shoulder. Jordan grabs the sink, looks in the mirror at the grey eyes staring through her. She looks until everything is out of focus. Jordan shakes her head and leaves. She looks at the red patterned carpet in the lobby, the heavy leather door to the theatre. She pushes the cold glass door. She runs to the front steps of her building. She stops, takes a breath and climbs. She pulls the door, runs up the stairs. First floor, Second floor. Jordan takes the steps two at a time. She scratches her key into the handle and slams the door behind her, clicks the lock. Her breathing echoes in the dark. She walks to the window, sits in the chair. Her chest burns from the cold air. Her breathing slows.

The phone rings. Jordan grips the chair. It rings again. She rocks in the chair. The room is silent. A cat jumps on a garbage can in the alley. A couple walks into a bar. Jordan goes to her room, pulls the blanket from her bed. She watches Robert climb the stairs. The cat jumps from the can. The lid clatters in the alley. Jordan hears footsteps.

A knock. The streetlights hold rainbows. Another knock. "Jordan. Jordan, are you there?"

Jordan gets up. The blanket falls to the floor. She rests her hand on the knob.

"Jordan? Are you there?" Robert knocks again.

Jordan rests her cheek against the door. "I'm sorry, Robert." She says through the door.

"What? Are you okay? Let me in."

"I'm okay. Don't worry." Jordan walks away from the door.

"Jordan, what happened?"

A taxi stops in front of the bar. She hears the rustle of her jacket as Robert hangs it on the knob. She listens to his footsteps.

The taxi drives away. Robert turns the corner. The neon lights reflect on the street. The street grows quiet except for the echoes of horns in the distance. Jordan watches as the scene plays itself out until only the shadows of shadows passing remain.

A Letter to Sara

Dear Sara,

The first thing I did was climb the hill behind the University to the concrete "S" and watch the town wake up. Silver Creek was just as I remember it, set among a circle of hills, in what I imagine as the center of a dormant volcano, the town clustered in the middle, spreading finger-like into the hills. I hadn't visited Silver Creek in three years. After my parents moved to Colorado, I had no reason to come back or so I thought. I followed an impulse I had when I crossed the stateline on my post-college cross-country trip. Whatever the reason, I found myself in Silver Creek just before dawn. The streetlights blinked out, pulling the light from the east. Silver Creek had just begun to show the first signs of life as people picked up their papers and the night shift made their way home from work. The "S" is still cluttered with cigarette butts and empty cans just like the first time I came up here with you.

The sky was clear, the stars highlighting the blackness. You climbed the path a few paces in front of me, yelling back trivia about the "S"; telling me how it was the town's idea of civic pride, a concrete greeting to the airborne visitors. When I first moved to Silver Creek, two years earlier, I thought it was a silly thing to put on a mountain. You thought it your duty to show me the view. Being sophomores we had earned the right to spend time up there. When we reached the "S" you turned with a sweeping gesture as if to say, "Here, see what you've been missing!" Silver Creek sparkled in the night. The traffic lights winking green, yellow, red. The

businesses switching off their signs one by one. You sat down and sighed, "This is so cool. I love to come up here at night. The town seems so unreal."

I watched a car's tail-lights disappear at the far edge of town. You struck a match, the light dancing off your face. As you lit the cigarette I watched you inhale and then try to blow smoke rings. The cigarette looked awkward in your hand as you leaned back, "I think we should start a band. I could play guitar, you keyboards and we can find the rest of the members somehow."

I laughed lying back in the grass. You were always coming up with wild ideas and I played along for fun.

"Then we could tour around the country playing great songs. I know we can write better songs than some of the stuff on the radio."

"No kidding." I followed a satellite.

"You write the words. I'll write the music."

"Sure, because I write so well."

"You do." You crushed out your cigarette and lit another one. I wanted to believe you, but I knew better. I'd read the poems you had written for fun and they were really good. You didn't seem to care about them. That was your way.

We sat on the side of the hill that night, watching the lights below, making up stories about what we saw. We sat up there like we would so many times in the next three years talking about relationships, politics, music, but never again with the same ease. That night there was nothing unspoken between us.

The sun's edge topped the mountain, slowly burning the sleep off the town. Silver Creek stretched as the streets became crowded, the pace of the day beginning. I remember the morning after I found out you were in the adolescent treatment center. I watched the sunrise. I could see the hospital and I tried to imagine what was happening to you. Your mom told me you had some sort of chemical breakdown. She took you to the center because she was afraid for you. I was afraid too. Scared for you; scared for me. I watched the town, expecting to see a difference, an indication that something had changed. The town looked the same. I went to school and even there nothing seemed disturbed. Our friends didn't comment on your absence, which I guess wasn't too strange since you'd been absent so often. None of our friends were to know. That's how you wanted it, so we made up a story about you staying with your grandmother for awhile. I carried your secret with me and still don't know how many of our friends know the truth.

Mr. Kendall, our English teacher, asked me to stay after class and told me he knew what was going on with you. I stared at his shoes wanting to ask him if he understood what was happening. I figured he would know. He asked me if I knew of anything he could do to help you. I shrugged saying I hadn't seen you yet so I wasn't sure. He said maybe he'd lend you a couple of books. I suggested Salinger, remembering how much you liked Catcher in the Rye, how you read it when the assignment was Moby Dick. Mr. Kendall asked me to keep him informed and then put his hand on my shoulder and asked how I was. "Fine, I guess." I said, because I didn't really know.

I keep playing everything over and over again, trying to understand what happened. We never really talked about it. Even when I visited you in the hospital you told me about the pranks you had pulled and how dumb you thought art therapy was. I told you about the impossible history assignment we had and yet another example of the ineptitude of the dean's office. Between us we decided the entire adult world, with a few exceptions, didn't have a clue as to what was really going on. What I didn't tell you was that I didn't understand what was going on either. What I didn't tell you was that I wanted to join you, to find out what was making things so difficult. You got out of the hospital that summer, I don't remember when exactly and we tried to pick up our friendship where it had left off. We acted like you had been away on vacation, nothing more.

The sun was well above the hills when I climbed down the hill. Now that I was in Silver Creek I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I thought about calling some friends and trying to get together for dinner, but I wasn't in the mood for a reunion. I drove past my old house. The tree in the front yard is gone and the driveway is covered with river stone. I lived in that house for seven years and now it feel likes a stranger to me, no different from any other house in the neighborhood. I left before the Neighborhood Watch people could get suspicious.

I pulled into the parking lot at the high school and considered visiting Mr. Kendall, but I didn't want to hassle with the front office, knowing how much they like visitors and I wasn't sure what I would say to Mr. Kendall anyway, "Hi, I'm back. I graduated in June, worked all summer. Now I'm trying to decide what I want to do, so I'm driving around until I find it.

Don't think I'll find it here at old Lincoln High School, at least I hope I don't." I would like to talk to him, to hear him say something that would help me make sense of all this, but I think it's time to go it alone. I watched some students sneak out of the school. Some things don't change. I left the school glad it no longer had any control over me.

I drove through the middle of town trying to pick out the things that had changed. Most of what I noticed was subtle, a new sign, an empty building. Driving through town I got the feeling I was meeting an old friend who I didn't recognize right away, but whose name came to me once she smiled. I stopped at a phone booth, looked up your number and called. Your answering machine picked up. I stood there a moment, then hung up. I didn't know what to say. The last time we had talked was so awkward. We met at McDonalds. I was leaving the next day to go back to college. You had dropped out of high school for the last time. You told me about the last job you had in an artificial tree factory. We shared the irony of using real wood to make fake trees. I admired your ability to stand on your own. You asked me how college was. I said it was all right. Some of the classes were interesting, but school was school. I sipped my coke. You ate your burger.

"What are you going to do now?" I hoped I didn't sound accusatory.

"Look for a job. One of my friends works for one of the cable stations. He said there might be a job opening there." You sat back in the booth and played with your cigarette box. "I'm thinking of getting my G.E.D."

"Cool" I said trying not to sound too excited. I was always trying not to do something. Always trying not to alienate you or judge you or hurt you. I believed in you and I wanted to believe that you'd show all the people who

told us we had to follow their rules in order to be successful that you could succeed on your own terms. I wanted you to prove it to me, because I knew I was too afraid to find out on my own.

You told me about your trip to Boston and we talked about new music groups. I wondered if you were happy. I didn't ask and I couldn't tell, but there was something tired about your eyes. We said good-bye, promising to keep in better contact, knowing we probably wouldn't. You lit a cigarette and I was surprised how natural it looked.

"Till later." You waved and drove off. Your expression reminded me of the time we planned the turn-of-the-century New Year's Eve party and when we filled the back of your mom's pick-up with water, pretended it was a pool and had pizza delivered.

Outside the main part of town, I turned left into Memorial Park Cemetery. I had forgotten about Tyler until then. I had a hard time believing he was dead. I was shocked when Stephen called me at school to tell me Tyler had been killed in a car accident. I had wanted to call you, but I didn't know what to say. I've tried to imagine him dead, forever twenty, but I find myself wondering if he's still studying music. I stopped at a building that looked like it might be an office. The thought had never occurred to me that someone might need directions in a cemetery. The woman inside gave me directions to the Reed plot where Tyler was buried. I found the grave that corresponded with the "X" on the map. I don't think I want to be buried anyplace with a map. I looked at the headstone with Tyler's name dug deep in its surface. The flowers were fresh and I

pictured Mrs. Reed visiting her son. Even then it didn't seem real. I saw Tyler the Christmas vacation of our freshman year in college. He told me he had a good chance at going to a music school in Chicago the next year. He played a new song he had written.

I ran my fingers through the groove of his name. I had worried about this in high school, that one of my friends would die. I was scared for all of us. I breathed a sigh of relief at graduation thinking we had all survived, maybe not without injury, but we were alive. What had I been thinking, assuming we were all safe until old age?

I stood up, looked at the rows of headstones. I wondered where your dad was buried. I never thought about that till just then. You never talked much about him. I know he died suddenly when you were young. I remember the black and white picture you had on your wall of him showing you something he had found. Only part of his face was visible. Do you visit his grave? I never asked. So many things seemed too private to ask about, but I think we needed each other to ask. I wish we had.

I sat in my car, Sara, and thought of all the time that has passed between us. I can look back now, piece the moments together, pretend they make sense. I try to find the one thing I can do or say to make us like sisters again, but nothing can be done. We'll always be sixteen together. I started the car, drove through the cemetery, past all that used to be.

I headed toward the interstate, passing pay phone after pay phone. I left the past to another time, hoped you'd understand the silence and the click on your machine. I headed east on the interstate, watching Silver Creek shrink in the rearview mirror. Till later.

Epilogue

I have chosen to include the fourth story in this collection, "A Letter to Sara," despite its unfinished nature. At this stage the story has several problems, namely time reference and a lack of tightness in the imagery and most likely a few that are not apparent to me at this point. Perhaps this story's shortcomings will provide insight into the problems one confronts as one tries to bring a story to its finished form. I feel the story warrants inclusion because of its quality even at this unpolished stage and because it stands as an example of the progression of my writing history. I know I could not have written this story a year ago when I began this thesis so it has earned its place at the end, pointing to the future.