

CONVERSATIONS WITH ALICE

by

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A THESIS

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ANALYSIS: Conversations with Alice

Margaret Durbin is a single parent. She has moved far from the white-pillared house of her marriage; now, she and her two sons live in a tiny apartment in an impersonal low-rent suburb, and survive, somewhere near the poverty level, on her salary as a cocktail waitress. Peg has learned to juggle bills, change spark plugs in the rain, and, regrettably, forget that the word "neighbor" was ever synonymous with the word "friend." Life has become a backyard with a fence: to hurdle, or to kick holes in. Peg is determined to hurdle. By night, she cocktails; by day, attends college classes to better her lot. Then life throws one more curve: the landlord presents her with an eviction notice.

Enter Alice. Alice and her son live in the other half of the cockroach-infested duplex in the new neighborhood. Peg's first impression of Alice is not favorable; in twenty minutes of non-stop rambling, Alice relates the history of the neighborhood, the history of PTA, the history of Alice, the history of motherhood, the history of history. Peg learns about all she can bear to learn. She wishes that Alice would go fall in a ditch. She wishes that Alice would go have an affair with a hooker. She wishes that Alice would just go away, so she can get busy and get on with more important business than neighborhood gossip. But

"wishes are like dreams: ashes and dust;" Alice rambles on.

And then, quite unexpectedly, Alice offers the one thing which Peg desperately needs.

STRUCTURE

Conversations with Alice is a series of episodic short stories unified by character and setting. On a literal level, the stories deal with mundane topics: children, mothers, babysitters, fleeting alliances with the opposite sex. But each story also imparts its own bit of insight into the human condition. Peg, for example, initially feels superior to Alice, because her sons are well-behaved, while Alice's son is not. Then Peg learns that boys will be boys (and, by extension, all children will be all children) and the only way for a mother to survive motherhood is to give it her best shot and roll with the punches. In chapter three, Peg's mother drives Peg crazy, and Alice's mother drives Alice crazy. Then Peg and Alice realize that, in some ways, they are both just like their mothers. Perhaps this "insight into the human condition" is best exemplified by Samuel Rosenthal's call to the nebulous gods of the universe when the fruits of his vegetable garden are not forthcoming: "Why did I plant hybrids? Why did I hoe them and water them all summer? Why did I cut up garbage for mulch? What is the meaning of

life?" he wails. Peg and Alice know that things don't always work out like you plan them; tuna surprise does not always contain tuna, and life is not always predictable.

The chapters, or stories, can be read independently. Each, however, has a certain order within the whole, and when read consecutively, the importance of friendship emerges as the overall thematic concern. Webster's says a friend is someone you know, like, and trust. Peg's definition goes further: "A friend is someone who helps you change a flat tire in the rain. A friend takes wet laundry out of her own dryer because yours is broken, and you are desperate to dry a skirt to wear on a date that night. A friend gets off work early to pick up your kids after school because you have a dentist appointment. A friend helps you clean your house when company is coming." A friend, in other words, is there with you to weather the unpredictable.

FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

I did not choose the structure of Alice; rather, it seemed to evolve as necessity warranted. The short story, "Kids," for example, was first written as a Wr. 201 assignment. Although it didn't receive rave reviews as a paper assignment, Alice (the real, not the fictional) and I got a kick out of reading it. I continued to write these short stories, using the same characters and setting. When

I decided to write a novel for my thesis, these stories seemed a natural starting point: they didn't take long to write, the genre is easy, and besides, I already had three done. Simple, right?

Wrong. Although the stories continued to trip blithely from "idea" to fingertip, I wanted to thread some kind of unifying theme throughout the work. When I hit on one (friendship), it became obvious that I was going to have to rewrite all the short stories with this perspective in mind. Characterization, too, had to be reconsidered. And unifying development added between the stories. And...and...

FACT/FICTION:

THE EFFECT OF CHANGING TRUTH

We have all had occasion to think, "I wish I would have handled that differently...I wish I would have said...."

Fiction reflects, through a funhouse mirror, the nebulous outlines of reality. Through the medium of fiction the writer can handle the situation differently, can say what he wishes he would have said. He can, in effect, rewrite history through the retelling of a story, not as it was, but as it should have been.

By extension, the writer can also create the story itself, shaping so that it strikes some cord common to

humanity. "The writer is on a search for himself," says Donald Murray in *A Writer Teaches Writing*. "If he finds himself he will find an audience, because all of us have the same common core. And when he digs deeply into himself and is able to define himself, he will find others who will read with a shock of recognition what he has written."

FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to appeal to a wide general audience, so on a literal level I wanted to write about simple, common things to which everybody can relate. I wrote four-letter words, short sentences, dialogue as it is spoken -- with plenty of asides and digressions. The "morals" of the stories aren't earth-shattering, just tiny first-person comments leading, hopefully, to some universal insight(s).

That's what I wanted to do. It seems, however, that something else evolved along with the structure -- I'll call it, for the sake of diplomacy, "voice."

I was shaping stories from smatterings of personal experience, so, of course, a lot of "me" went into them. Alice and Peg were single mothers (like Alice the Real and me) who got into predicaments and then, somehow, managed to dig themselves out again. But as I merrily tripped along, writing satiric funny little stories, my silent "voice" kept surfacing. I didn't recognize it at first; it didn't

sound like me, and it didn't sound like what I was writing.
My "voice" was angry.

It recognized the difficulties of raising children in
a single-parent family.

It recognized a landlord who appeared only when rent
was due, not when a ceiling sagged or a weed-infested ditch
produced a bumper crop of marijuana.

It knew poverty on an intimate basis.

It knew discrimination.

It knew futility.

"Without humor," says songwriter Stan Freeberg,
"satire would be rage."

I was writing funny stories, but in actuality some of
the situations hadn't been so humorous when Alice (the
Real) and I'd had to face them. Sometimes "voice" got a
little sharp; I had to reel it in and rewrite delicately.
It was only through this shaping -- this alteration of fact
or truth -- that I could attain a semblance of
universality. My stories, cloaked in humor, spoke to Alice
and me. My "voice," cloaked in humor, spoke to humanity.

Conversations with Alice

Judy Corkery

To Ian and Evan, who lived through it all.

And, of course, to Alice.

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T Street

It wasn't our choice to move.

The apartment had ratty brown carpeting, mashed in heavy traffic areas to a mottled gray, which vacuuming never seemed to improve. A foot-sized hole in one bedroom door -- the result of a domestic dispute between previous tenants, no doubt -- provided an interesting view to any nefarious activities which might take place within. And the single tiny bathroom demanded a companionable sharing of personal hygienic functions during peak rush hours.

But, on the plus side, a working used-brick fireplace added what charm was possible to the cramped living room, and a (sometimes) working dishwasher hummed sporadically in the kitchen. The apartment even had a tiny, private, fenced back yard: a mixed blessing, as we were obligated to mow the grass ourselves, necessitating the purchase of a beat-up garage sale weed-eater. The east Springfield neighborhood was relatively safe (most residents dutifully chugging off with lunchpails to Weyerhaeuser every morning and returning, exhausted and grimy, to television sets every night) and relatively well-kept (mature evergreens, strategically spared chainsaw annihilation, lined white-white sidewalks, with here and there a leafy hedge

breaking the monotony of flat front yards). The houses were painted pretty neutral shades, tans and beiges and grays, so, if we squeezed our eyes real tight and wished and wished with all our might, Sean and Mickey and I could almost forget we were living in half a tiny duplex in rainy downtown Oregon and dream we were still living in our big, white-white pillared house in upstate New York, in a real neighborhood, with real neighbors who were friends and not just the people-who-lived-next-door; neighbors who socialized and had barbeques and parties sometimes, where everyone could get together and the kids could play ball, and everyone have a nice time. But that wasn't the kind of neighbors we had run into in Oregon.

It wasn't, as I said, our choice to move. However, my youngest son, Michael, took the rap for kicking a hole in the neighbor's fence, and we got evicted.

"I didn't do it, mom," Mickey sobbed, burying his flushed and teary face in the hollow of my belly, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it. Randy, that stupid kid across the street," he sobbed, shoulders heaving in despair, "did it. I told him not to, but he said..." he sobbed, "he said his stupid dog was..." he sobbed, "...was trapped in that...that stupid back yaaarrrrd!" Mick wailed into my belly.

My arms encircled his sweet, thin shoulders, hugging tight. I watched, face aflame, as the departing landlord

marched self-righteously to his Chevy van, then chugged away in a cloud of oily fumes up the street. Life, I thought, fighting tears myself, is a sobbing child. Life is a sobbing child.

But life cannot be a sobbing mother.

Life for a single mother is a back yard with a fence -- to hurdle, or to kick holes in. Like a cat hurdles a fence, a single mom must hurdle life, balancing reality (cocktailing at night to make ends meet) while stalking her prey (that means to effect greater input into life's choices, a college education). A mother must not kick holes in fences. A mother, like a cat, must hurdle them.

No one ever accused life of being fair, I thought angrily, crumbling the eviction notice in one sweaty palm and swallowing salt. If we had to move, then Randy should have to move. There was, of course, no chance in hell's bells that Randy would have to move; the landlord's departing fumes attested to that. Randy came from a "nice" family -- a daddy, a mommy, and Randy, and Randy's little sister. They even had a dog. We were the only tenants in the neighborhood who didn't have a "nice" family. We are only a mom and two boys.

There are good days, I reminded myself, a fragmented semblance of balance returning, and there are bad days. I ruffled Mickey's hair and bent to kiss his hot ear. Remember, there are good days.

On good days, fences are lower. Then, life is having family -- my mother, father, brothers, sister -- close. It is a Sunday checkbook balance of \$27.29, but feeding the boys for a week, putting a couple of buck's worth of gas in the car, and still being in the black the following Saturday -- although not by much, I grant. It is learning to change spark plugs or add a quart of oil in an Oregon downpour. It is starting college with the rent money, and Father Brennan coming to the rescue until Financial Aid kicks in. It is three years of a "higher" education, and, finally, attainment of Senior status in the Honors College.

PTA, I thought, flinging a last angry glance in the direction of the retreating landlord. Poop on That Ass and the horse he rode in on.

I squatted to eye-level with Mickey.

"It's okay, honey," I comforted, holding him at arm's length and staring unwaveringly into his teary brown eyes. "We'll find a nicer apartment, I promise, with a big back yard to play in." I ruffled his hair again -- baby fine, and soft; so soft, like his daddy's -- and kissed first one blotchy cheek, then the other. "And no fences. Don't worry: everything will be fine. Maybe this will turn out to be a good thing for us. Everything will be fine." And I hugged tight, and he hugged tight, so tight we couldn't tell who was doing the most hugging, and then we both laughed a little bit, and smiled a little at each other,

and I prayed that everything would be fine.

So Sean, Mick, and I cruised around town for a few days after school, looking for just the right place. Our requirements were few: a place that would take children, a place with a low deposit, a place with no fences. Our options, it turned out, were also few. The university hasn't added any student housing for a couple of years, and cheap apartments are at a premium. Finally, late one hot afternoon when I had about given up hope for the day, and was thinking about packing it in and suggesting ice cream at Baskin Robbins, we spotted The Projects.

Springfield really isn't big enough to have Projects, but if it were, then I, U, and V Streets between Pioneer Parkway and Fourth would be The Projects: row after row, street after street of identical two-story wood-frame duplexes. Buildings squash shoulder to shoulder, allowing for construction of an extra house or two at each end of a block, thus increasing rental output and affording inmates the opportunity to overhear all neighboring squabbles. A few scraggly trees -- the landlord's magnanimous stab at landscaping -- fight the odds of making it to Big Oak status. Junky cars -- or maybe just junked -- and pickups with over-sized tires line driveways and crowd the narrow streets.

We requested, and received, a Grand Tour. The apartment, to phrase it delicately, was not much: a tiny

kitchen (no dishwasher, working or otherwise); a miniscule dining room big enough for a card table and as many bodies as could crowd around it to "dine;" a non-descript living room with tired institutional carpeting; a half bath, ceiling sloped from six feet down to four, tucked beneath the stairwell. Upstairs, a child-sized bedroom, another as big as my closet in New York, and a "full" bath, so described, I suppose, because there was a bathtub.

On the plus side: kids OK, deposit payable in installments.

I stood and gazed out the dining room slider. A small creek -- reality check: a drainage ditch -- sliced the block in half between T and U, making a fence impossible. The result was a huge, grassy area between facing back yards, with the ditch meandering through the middle. At the far end of the block, I glimpsed a small playground -- rusty swing set, rusty teeter-totter, small cement basketball court with one rusty hoop. Directly behind the house, the open area widened, and grass -- lots and lots of green, unfenced grass -- waved in the gentle breeze.

Sean and Mickey bounded out the slider and across the field to check out the ditch. Behind me, the landlord hovered.

"It's lovely," I said, staring out the window. Then, turning with a smile, "May we take possession this weekend?"

My brothers, Jerry and Greg, and three of their friends moved us in to 140 I on Friday night. On Saturday, they moved us out again, so the exterminator could have a better shot at the cockroaches. On Sunday, we moved back in.

Sunday was a nice day. Friday and Saturday had been rainy, as only May in Oregon can be rainy, and it is no fun to move twice in one weekend in the rain. But Sunday morning the deluge ended, the clouds parted, and blessed sunshine peeped through.

It was during one of my many trips between pickup and duplex on Sunday that I met Alice. As I struggled to dislodge my card table from a jumble of folding chairs in the truck, I glimpsed this tiny little woman and a boy (her son, undoubtedly) pop out the front door of the other half of the duplex and head for the car parked in their half of the driveway. She glanced over, then turned around and disappeared back into her house. A moment later she popped back out, juggling her pocketbook and a scrawny diffenbachia with four puny leaves. She made a beeline for pickup and me.

"Hi," she smiled nervously, eye glasses slipping ever so slightly down her unpowdered nose. "Edmund and I live next door. I guess maybe you could figure that out by yourself. This apartment has been vacant for quite awhile. I just hate to live next door to an empty apartment, don't

you?" she bubbled. "I always think burglars are more apt to break in if an apartment is empty. Or if there's an empty one next door. And in this neighborhood you can't be too careful. Not that I want to scare you off. It's so nice to have someone living here again." She surfaced briefly for air and grinned at me again.

"Hello," I replied politely, returning her smile. "We're very glad to be here." I had a lot of work yet to accomplish before the sun set, and I find small talk chitchat time consuming and, in general, quite boring. But I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with a new neighbor. I bent to dislodge an errant table leg; with a resounding clang, the damn thing broke off in my hand.

Jerry came out the front door, quickly assessed the situation, and shook his head in disgust.

"Hey, Peg, time to knock off for awhile," he said sympathetically. "We've got the tv hooked up: time for a beer." He nodded, neighborly, and smiled at the woman.

"Hi." She smiled again and ducked her head in greeting. "Nice to meet you. I live next door. I was just saying how nice it is to have neighbors again. Your apartment has been empty for quite awhile, and I was just saying how nice it's going to be to have neighbors again. You know, somebody nice to borrow sugar..."

"Nice to meet you," Jerry acknowledged, holding out his hand, "but I'm not going to live here." The woman

juggled the diffenbachia and buried her slim hand in his firm grasp. "I'm Peggy's brother, Jerry Marshall. Just helping Peg move in."

"Nice to meet you," she smiled widely, dimpling. "I wish my brother could have helped when I moved in, but he lives in San Francisco. That's pretty far to be of any help way up here. Any practical help, I mean. Of course, he's very good about helping when we're able to plan ahead. And it's very nice to know that he's there. I mean, not that he's in San Francisco. That I have a brother at all, I mean. As I was just saying to your sister -- Peggy, right? --" She smiled inquiringly at me. Mentally, I sighed. But I pasted on a smile and nodded back. "...it's really quite...."

"Um, think it's about time for the Mets to take the field," smiled Jerry. "Nice to have met you. Come on, sis; time for a break." He smiled again and deserted, disappearing through the front door with the broken card table and its unanchored leg.

"So he's not your husband?" piped the lady as the door banged closed. "My, he's good looking. I was trying to figure out which one was your husband. There are so many men over here helping you. Boy, you're really lucky. I didn't have anybody to help me when I moved in. It took forever. I've lived here for four years and I'm still not unpacked. Which one's your husband?" She smiled at me

over the top of her glasses.

"Not married," I smiled back, teeth grinding. "Guess I'm just one of the lucky ones."

"Me, neither. Who needs them, I always say, except to take out the garbage." She laughed over the top of her glasses again. I pictured cockroaches slinking into my apartment from her garbage. "It'd be nice to have one around once in awhile, like the first of the month when the bills are due, I guess. A man, I mean. Around. But other than that, they're more effort than they're worth, I always say. I'd rather read a good book. So he's your brother. Likes beer, does he? I enjoy an occasional beer myself. How about the other ones? Is one of them your boyfriend? No? ALL of them? No? Gosh, it's so great to have you move in. Personally, I have nothing against boyfriends -- I have them myself occasionally. But the lady who lived here before was a hooker, and I didn't think she was a good influence for Edmund." She smiled briefly down at her son. The kid gave a gap-toothed grin. He looked like a child who might have enjoyed the former neighbor's influence in a couple of years. Maliciously, I pictured the kid with the hooker.

"I was glad when I found out she was moving. Edmund says your kids go to the same school as he does." The kid smiled again. Freckles dot-to-dotted his face. "Edmund spotted them right away when you came to look at the

apartment. I'm so glad you're moving in. There aren't many kids his age in the neighborhood. Maybe they can play together. I hope so. Being an only child, Edmund demands a lot of attention. Frankly," she said, looking seriously at me, "he's driving me crazy." The kid Cheshire-cat grinned again.

"Oh, really?" Smile cemented in place, I examined the child like Sean might examine one of the bugs under his microscope, then sadly shook my head. "Sorry, I don't recognize him." I batted my eyes at her, smiling regretfully (I hoped). "I haven't had much time to hang around school and be a PTA mother, I'm afraid." I pictured Sean and Mickey throwing the kid in the muddy ditch water. My smile brightened.

"Oh, I understand. Perfectly. Me neither," she replied quickly, shaking her head back at me. "It's not that I don't want to do my share. I tried going to meetings for awhile, but they kept wanting me to be on committees. The Bingo Committee. The Album Committee. The Room Mother Committee. I couldn't take it. I'm pooped when I get home from work. I just want to collapse on the couch and read a book in peace and quiet and not be on any stupid committees. So I stopped going. Now when I go to church on Sunday, all those PTA ladies ask me where I was on Wednesday night...."

Right, I smiled, nodding. My face ached. I thought

of all the boxes left to unpack. I thought of school on Monday. I thought of all the homework I hadn't done. I smiled (fondly) down at the kid. I willed his mother to be with the hooker. I willed his mother to be in the muddy ditch. I willed his mother to be anywhere but here.

"The Used Textbook Committee."

"Right," I murmured, slumping down on the fender and smiling.

"PIA," she huffed. "They don't understand. They don't have to work for a living. They all have husbands to support them. They don't have anything else to do but wax their kitchen floors and go to PIA meetings and be on committees. PIA," she huffed, shaking her head crossly, "Poop on Those A...." She bit off the last word and peered at me, embarrassed.

"...and the horses they rode in on," I finished, smiling serenely at her.

She blushed, then giggled nervously. I've hit bottom, I thought, smiling. When a hyper weirdo swears like I do, I've finally hit bottom. I grinned with all my vacant gap-eyed might and willed her to just, please, go away and leave me the hell alone so I could just, please, get some of this crap done in peace and quiet (my one and only card table was in pieces) and maybe squeeze in a nap (I'm so tired), please, before I had to go pick up the boys at my mother's, please, what a dreamer I am, ha-ha, ha-ha, I

smiled.

Ashes and dust: stuff of dreams.

She, tentatively, smiled back.

"My name is Alice," she said softly. Her reedy voice sounded, surprizingly, almost shy. Then, glancing down at the wilting diffenbachia, she seemed to notice it for the first time. She juggled her pocketbook again and offered the plant in outstretched hands that trembled slightly. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

Kids

Jerry and Greg and "all those men" finally got the truck unloaded about eight o'clock. They set up the bunk beds and I paid them off in beer and waved an exhausted, napless good-bye from the driveway. Then I fetched the kids from mom's. Mickey dug through the boxes labeled "kitchen" and found a pan. He heated a can of Campbell's while Sean helped me set up the computer, and I finally got them tucked into bed about ten. We were, for all practical purposes, settled in.

About the computer: our Commodore is not a luxury item. Professors do not prefer assignments written in longhand, and as an English major with about a billion papers to write, I had gotten smart fast. The monitor is an old black and white t.v. that mom lent me when Sean and Mickey and I first moved to Oregon. I had picked up the keyboard at a garage sale for twenty-five bucks. Gradually, we had added disk drive and power pack. And then, three months ago, when things were going smoothly and before I'd known I was going to have to cough up the deposit on a new apartment, I had made my first credit card purchase: a shiny, brand new, Star Gemini II printer. The Gemini doesn't have letter quality capability, but so far,

none of the profs had complained.

Next morning, it was business as usual. Sean, who is ten years old and a straight A fourth grader, was acquainted with Edmund.

"He's in fifth grade," Sean confided over breakfast, "but he'll never make sixth, mom. He lives in the principal's office. He shot a rubber band at his teacher. He hit her right in the butt."

"Doesn't sound terrif," I muttered, buttering a slice of toast, "but it doesn't sound fatal, either. Now stop telling bad tales out of school and eat."

"He erased all the homework assignments. Nobody in his class did homework. Boy, was his teacher mad."

"Eat. We'll be late for school."

"We're in the same math class. He hid Mrs. Thompson's book in the boy's lavatory," Sean persisted.

"Come on," I urged, grabbing my back pack off the bottom stair and rifling fingers through my dirty-blond hair. "We'll be late."

"In a toilet."

"Yah," chimed in Mickey, chomping a last bite of Captain Crunch. "This kid told me Edmund drew boobs on the picture of the Blessed Sacrament." Mickey is in third grade, so he only knew Edmund by reputation.

"Hearsay evidence," I admonished with a quick frown. I checked my appearance in the bathroom mirror. Dark

circles ringed brown eyes: I'd look terrific tonight at work. Customers don't tip cocktail waitresses with dark circles. I'd have to plaster on an inch of makeup; I needed those tips. "Not admissable in court. Now, let's hit the trail, pardners. Let's head 'em up and move 'em out."

"There ARE boobs on the picture, mom," concurred Sean, dumping his dirty dishes in the sink. He grabbed his book bag from the stairs. Mickey carefully buttoned his sweater and we headed out the door.

"He has this rubber snake. He coiled it on Mrs. Thompson's chair. She screamed," said Sean. "He had to go to the principal's office again. He LIVES there, Mom."

"He 'lives' next door. Hey, so don't play with the turkey if you don't want to!" I responded, slamming the car door and backing carefully out the driveway. "The kid sounds like bad news."

"Are you kidding?" replied Sean indignantly. "He's the most popular kid in school!"

"Yah!" agreed Mick. "We're really lucky to live next door to him!"

A week passed, then two. The boys got to know Edmund on a first-hand basis, for which I was not sure I was grateful. And I got to know Alice. My feelings toward her mellowed. After all, she didn't like working Bingo, and she did like plants: she couldn't be all bad. And, I

found, she did understand about "things," which just kept rolling along.

The power steering fluid leaked out of my '69 Toronado by the quart. No leak in the hoses, said the guy at the garage. Leak's in the box itself. I can order the part from Los Angeles, said the guy, leisurely gnawing a toothpick. Three hundred seventy-five, eighty bucks.

The rent -- plus installment payment on the deposit -- was due in two weeks.

Right, I said. Forget it, I said. For three hundred bucks, I can add a lot of power steering fluid.

"I know just what you mean," said Alice with a sigh when I told her. "I have a tire that keeps going flat. I have to add air every morning on the way to work. The guy at the station says why don't you just buy a new tire, lady? I don't even talk to him anymore. I don't even look in his direction when I pull in. Rent is almost due, you know?"

Sean and Mickey brought candy bars home from school to sell for some worthy project.

"Do you think it's safe to let them go out selling in this neighborhood, Alice?" I asked.

"They'll be fine. Just make them stay together. You never know. And tell them not to go to 204 I. The guy who lives there is our friendly neighborhood drug dealer. He'd probably buy a lot of candy bars, though. And tell them

not to go on Second Street; the traffic is terrible. And tell them to skip that little part of R Street where it dead-ends. That's where the high school kids go to smoke. And probably and lot more, who knows, you know?" She considered. "On second thought, maybe you should go with them."

Imaginative Writing 202: Short Story. A major assignment -- first person narrative -- was due, but they'd changed my shift at work and I had to close for a month. That meant waiting around 'til two forty-five a.m. to hussle out the drunks. And a regular customer (who was in the habit of making passes after his third Manhattan) got a little bold one night after only two. He pinched my tutu. I wasn't expecting it. I dumped his drink in his lap. He was unhappy. If a customer is unhappy, my boss is unhappy. I got a warning.

"I know just what you mean," said Alice with a sigh. "A guy at work wore tennis shorts yesterday. I just love seeing hairy legs once in awhile; breaks the monotony on the line, you know? I got a warning, too."

"I have to write this damn paper," I wailed. "I can't concentrate!"

"Why don't you go see your professor? Some of them are very understanding," reasoned Alice. "After all, some of them are human, too. Or know someone human. Maybe she'll let you turn it in late."

So I stopped by to see my understanding professor, Shelly Jellins.

"Give me eight to ten pages," she ordered. Piles of papers, neatly stacked, crowded her desktop. I had heard that English professors are notoriously overworked: how could she possibly want eight more crummy pages to read? "Write about something -- some incident -- that's happened at home. Put in a bit of dialogue. Check your spelling."

"Something that's going on at home?" Cripes. A case of power steering fluid in the trunk; a case of candybars in the hallway; two weeks and rent was due. Something that's going on at home?

"Certainly," she encouraged, rubbing her eyes and smiling tiredly at me. "It's due Friday," she sighed, putting on her glasses and bending over the nearest stack. "I don't do late papers, love."

Understanding, right.

...On Kids

Sometimes my neighbor, Alice, froths at the mouth. Poor Alice. She's a good-hearted person, but sometimes her kid, Edmund, drives her crazy. Like last night, Alice came over frothing.

"You know what Edmund did?" she spouted as she burst into my kitchen. "He super-glued the phone together. Now why would he do something like that? Why? That's all I

want to know. Why?"

Alice is a little hyper. She rants and raves and tears her hair and beats her breast. Then she goes home and grounds Edmund and tries to unglue the phone with fingernail polish remover. Of course it doesn't work, so she ends up buying a new phone and taking it out of Edmund's allowance. Except Edmund has Alice's number; he knows all the right buttons to push and the right moves to make. Edmund has already collected advances on his allowance. If he lives to be ninety-three, he might get the phone paid for. But I doubt if he'll live to ninety-three; Alice will undoubtedly kill him long before then.

Alice and I aren't much alike in temperament. I am a pretty cool mother. My children are intelligent, well-behaved, quiet little role models for Edmund to emulate. Sean writes "Choose Your Own Adventures" on the Commodore and Mickey aspires to be an altar boy. I am well-satisfied with them. Sometimes, especially when I think of Edmund, I feel downright smug. When Sean asks a totally ridiculous question like, "How high is up?" I patiently take him upon my knee and explain in great detail about atmosphere, stratosphere, outer space, the Milky Way, the cosmos. After about an hour Sean says, "Thanks, mom." Then he goes away and doesn't ask me any more ridiculous questions for awhile.

Edmund and my children go to the same school, O'Hara Elementary. Last week, they all brought home giant chocolate bars to sell for some worthy fund-raising project. Sean and Mickey formed a team and went out knocking on doors together. Edmund decided to tag along. When they got home, Sean and Mick sat down and counted their money. Twenty-two dollars! They were tickled.

"How many did you sell, Edmund?" I asked, interested also in this child of my neighbor.

"None."

"None?" I was surprized. "But where are your candy bars?"

"I ate them."

"You ate them?" I couldn't help it; I know for the sake of discipline I should't have laughed, but I did. Actually, I howled. Edmund is such a creative child.

Awhile later, Alice came over.

"You already heard what Edmund did, didn't you?" Alice looked at me over her eyebrows. "Where's your beer?"

We sat and talked as Sean and Mickey quietly played with their transformers.

"Now, Alice," I moralized, "stop to think about it for a minute. We both know what Edmund did is wrong," she nodded her head in agreement, "but in a way it really is pretty funny, Alice."

Alice took another sip from her glass.

"I know that. I see that. In a way, I realize that," she agreed seriously, "but WHY?"

Edmund had to pay for twelve candy bars, but it didn't seem to bother him very much. He got an advance on his allowance for that one, too.

I must admit that my little darlings are not always perfect, but through infinite patience and understanding, I've come to handle certain situations with some degree of elan. Sean, for instance, has the bad habit of teasing Mickey, and Mick has the bad habit of screaming in reply. Mothers refer to this as the old Tease-Scream Syndrome. Sean's favorite tease is to call Mickey "fey," a word derived and watered down from the original, "fag," which word was previously banned from Sean's vocabulary. Then, Mickey's scream was, "Maaa, Sean's callin' me 'fag.'" Now Mickey's scream is, "Maaa, Sean's callin' me 'fey.'" I went through a period where I would say, "That's nice, dear," until a vote of the family council deemed this response inappropriate (two-to-one against, mine being the dissenting opinion). Now, I generally just ignore the T-SS, unless there is blood. I have nerves of steel. I am a pretty cool mother.

Not like Alice.

Knock knock. Two a.m. With a yawn I open my front door.

"Hi, Alice. How're things?"

Alice storms in.

"I'm a wreck," she says, stomping for the table. "What did I ever do to deserve this? Don't answer that: I swear I only did it once. One lousy time. The kid is driving me wacko. Break out your milk," she ordered. "I gotta talk. Do you have any chocolate? You aren't going to believe this."

But of course I am. Sean and Mickey have briefed me.

Edmund likes this girl named Stacy who lives on U Street. He has traded Mickey an Insecticon for a G.I. Joe guy that Sean wanted. Then Edmund traded the G.I. Joe guy to Sean for a ring from Sean's costume jewelry collection. Edmund plans to give the ring to Stacy.

"I just got a call from Cheryl, Stacy's mother," says Alice, stuffing Doritos in her mouth. "Edmund is out in their yard throwing rocks at the window. Cheryl said she asked Edmund what he thought he was doing. He said he thought he was throwing rocks at Stacy's window; he has a ring he wants to give her."

"It's two a.m., Peggy. I thought he was in bed asleep. He was asleep when I went to bed. At least I thought he was asleep. What am I going to do, knot him to the sheets? Why? WHY is this child doing these things? That's all I want to know, WHY?"

Alice and I have personalities which complement each other. I let Alice rant and rave for awhile, offering

sympathetic "hmmms" and "umms" where appropriate. Then I warmed two small glasses of milk and sat her down again at the table (She was pacing. It makes me nervous.) for a heart-to-heart.

"Alice, what Edmund did was against the rules," we both nodded at each other over the rims of our glasses, "but Edmund is merely a victim of circumstance: he threw rocks at the wrong window. What he did wasn't really so terrible, and think how romantic it would have been to have a boy wake you up, throwing rocks at your window, with a nice ring? Now, Alice, wouldn't that have been romantic?"

Alice wasn't buying it.

"He's eleven years old. Where does he get these ideas? I never did anything like this to my mother. I never drove her crazy. Well, maybe, ONE time, I did go with some other kids and we knocked over outhouses on Halloween, but I really didn't knock anything over, the other kids did. Well, maybe I did help a little. And we were home by midnight. I think we were home by midnight," she said, scooping guacamole dip with her finger. "But those were different days. Things were safer then. He could have gotten mugged. He could have gotten kidnapped. The landlord could have seen him. What do I have to look forward to? What's he going to be doing when he's twelve?"

I refrained from saying, "Don't ask." After all, friendship will bear only so much.

I made a motion as though I were digging her in the ribs and let a twinkle gleam in my eye.

"Can't you just picture him, Alice? It must have been SO funny!" and "At least he's not out knocking over 7-11's," etc., etc., ad infinitum, jollying her out of an imminent stroke. We sipped some more, and eventually Alice calmed down, attempted a few strained smiles, and went home, and I went back to bed.

Paybacks are hell.

1. Mickey has one pair of tennis shoes. I am forever after him to tie his shoelaces for fear of an accident, but I guess it's cool to let them drag in the mud. Anyway, that's what Mickey does.

2. Mick also plays soccer. I am forever after him not to play near the house for fear he'll break a window, although he never has. So this afternoon he took the soccer ball and went to play by the new neighbor's house.

My doorbell rang. It was the new neighbor man with Mickey's soccer ball and Mickey.

"I've called the resident manager," he said. His mouth was drawn in a wide smile, showing plenty of tightly clenched teeth between tightly drawn lips.

"Your son's soccer ball just bounced off my coffee table and knocked over my Budweiser." His hands clenched, too. "I was watching the first game of the season."

My brain did not seem to be functioning at top speed.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry. But how did the ball get in your living room? Was your door open?"

"No," he grimaced down at me, "and neither was my window."

Before I could compose a suitable reply, our resident manager drove up in his El Camino.

"Is that the one what broke yer gutter?" he yelled out the window before the car had come to a complete stop. He came puffing up the sidewalk.

"No," my neighbor replied, rictus in place. "This is his brother, the one who broke the window."

"You mean the gutter?" I croaked. "The gutter in the street? How can you break a gutter?" My already tenuous grasp on reality seemed to be slipping even further.

The manager looked at me in disgust, my neighbor with that big immobile smile.

"No, lady, the drainage gutter, up along the roof."

A police car drove up, blue light flashing, but thank God, no sirens. Out of it emerged a policeman and the complex's maintenance man.

"Mickey, where is your brother?" I nervously whispered while the men's attention was diverted.

Mickey had been looking fairly abashed, but now he brightened considerably.

"He ran when the gutter broke," he chirped happily, gladdened for a chance to be out of the limelight. Mickey

enjoys all opportunities available to make his brother look bad.

"I don't want no police," snarled the resident manager. "Did you call the police?" He put on a smile similar to that worn by new neighbor.

"I didn't call the police," said N.N., smiling. "Who called the police?"

"Good afternoon, ma'am," the policeman smiled, too. Everybody standing around smiling. "I'm looking for Sean Durbin."

Panic, hovering ever nearer the surface, finally set in.

"Is he all right? My baby! Where is he?" I lunged for the policeman's lapels.

"Now, now, take it easy, ma'am. He's apparently fine," said the policeman, raising his arms to ward me off and backing away slightly. "At least he was the last time this gentleman," he nodded in the direction of the maintenance man, "saw him. He was stealing this gentleman's," he nodded again at the M.M., "sawhorse."

For awhile, no one spoke. Somewhere, far away, sun shone and birds sang in trees. But not on I Street. The men eyed each other, then eyes swiveled towards me.

"But...but..." I sputtered, "they've only been outside five minutes!"

I guess the only way to explain this situation

rationality is to do so in chronological order; that is, as we were able to piece it together.

Mickey had gone out to practice getting some height to his soccer kicks. His shoelaces weren't tied. He missed the ball. His shoe flew off and onto the neighbor's roof. Sean said he'd climb up and get it. He spotted the sawhorse and dragged it across the lawn to the corner of the house, where the roof is lowest. He reached up and grabbed the gutter, which broke.

Meanwhile, Mickey had not been idle. He practiced his kicks left-footed, using Sean as a moving target. He missed Sean. He got the window. Window broke. Gutter broke. Mickey froze. Sean ran.

We aren't getting evicted. Nobody's pressing charges. And it certainly was an interesting way to meet a new neighbor. But after everyone had gone, I found my feet trudging blindly in the direction of Alice's house.

Knock knock. Alice opens the door. I collapse in.

"Alice, have you got beer?" I gasp. "You are not going to believe this."

"Why, of course, Peggy, dear," she says, batting her eyelashes sweetly. "Do come in."

And Alice gives me this beaming smile, and I notice a gleam in her eye, and Sean cowers around from behind her, and I realize that yes, indeed, Alice will believe it.

So I handed in the damn assignment Friday. Bright and early Monday morning, Jellins cornered me after class.

"I see you as another Ellen Goodman," she said, clearing her throat. She plucked my assignment from the top of the pile of papers she carried. "Interesting. However, this is not exactly a first person narrative; it's more an expository piece."

"You said write about something I know," I smiled, trying to appear agreeable. She frowned at my paper. "I put in dialogue," I said, smiling. Her lips pursed. "I hope you'll accept it," I pleaded. "It's really all I had time for." My paper dangled from her fingertips. Slowly, she returned it to the pile. "Thank you," I said, smiling. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I turned and walked down the echoing hallway.

Power steering fluid, I thought, knees knocking together. Candy bars. Drunks. And who the hell is Ellen Goodman?

Mothers

"I wrote a story about you," I confessed sheepishly.
"I hope you don't mind."

Alice and I were sitting at my dining room table -- not the card table; Jerry had been able to wire it together, but that one leg would never be the same -- sipping a Sunday evening glass of wine. Sometimes, beer will do. Other times, only wine seems appropriate.

Folded tee shirts and blue jeans rested neatly in a laundry basket beneath the table, awaiting their ride up the stairs to dresser drawers. My jungle of plants crowded the length of one wall on their homemade board-and-brick plant shelves, adding a warm touch to the otherwise bare room. I love plants; they are such a cheap way to decorate. My sister, Kate, gave me the hydrangia as a housewarming present when we moved to Oregon. My sister-in-law contributed the spider plant. They're doing great. Here and there, I've accumulated starts of Creeping Charlie, jade, wandering Jew, mother-in-law's tongue, string of pearls, elephant's ear, and assorted others. And, of course, Alice gave me the diffenbachia. I'm proud to say that I didn't buy one of these plants: I've purchased too many in other lifetimes and lost custody of

every one. Outside the slider, I could see Edmund, Sean, and Mickey kicking the soccer ball at one another.

"Was there swearing in it?" asked Alice timidly.

"I don't think so. I don't really remember."

"I hope not. I've got to be careful. My mother would have a stroke if she thought I swore. Not that she'd ever read your story. She won't," said Alice, eyeing me over the rim of her glass, "will she? Read it, I mean?"

I laughed.

"Your secret is safe with me," I assured her, leaning comfortably back in my chair. "And I always put a disclaimer on my stories, anyway: 'This is nothing but simple fiction.'"

"Of course, I don't swear," said Alice, sipping her wine.

"Of course not."

"It's just that my mother drives me CRAZY, and she'd have a stroke if she thought I swear. Why just yesterday, she wanted me to take her looking for washing machines. Why, I'll never know. She has a perfectly good washing machine. It's only three years old. There's nothing wrong with it. 'It doesn't match my kitchen,' she said. 'Why don't you get a new kitchen?' I said. Cripes, if I had a washing machine that didn't sound like a 747 during the spin cycle I'd think I'd died and gone to heaven. So, anyway, I picked her up when I got off work. There we were,

in the appliance department at Sears, you know? And...."

I let Alice rant on: it was good for her. But I felt like ranting myself. My boss had hired a new cocktail waitress, and I suspected she was pocketing some of my tips. I'd have to keep an eye open, maybe tally up tickets myself. And Sean had play practice every night after school. That meant picking up Mickey so he'd make it to soccer practice on time, then an extra trip back to O'Hara to pick up Sean. And it was almost finals week: I didn't know if I'd make it through. I had five finals scheduled -- two on Monday, which wasn't bad, and one Tuesday, but two on Friday, and I had to close Thursday night. At least the writing class didn't have a final: only one more damn paper. I'll make it a short one, I thought as Alice rambled on, short and sweet. Then, baby, it's summer, and I'm out the door. But what the hell can I write about?

"...so she bought the couch," said Alice. "I can't believe it. Seven hundred dollars. And she never even goes in her living room. And she expected me to take it home in my car. 'It costs twenty-five dollars to have it delivered,' she said. 'I'm not going to waste money on a delivery charge.' What am I, a U-Haul? I couldn't even lift the damn thing: it's seven feet long. Can you believe it?" I realized Alice was pausing for a response.

"Right," I said, pulling myself back from the clouds. "I know just how it goes," I said. "My mother drives me

crazy, too. She called me Easter morning. 'Happy Easter,' she said. 'Uncle Riley died.'"

Alice looked at me.

"Wellllll," I explained, shrugging, "he was my favorite uncle."

"Right," she said, nodding in agreement. "I understand. Here we are, two responsible, sane, fully-grown women with children of our own, and we still kowtow to the idiocies of our mothers. You'd think they'd realize we're grown up and stop hovering over us all the time. I'll never hover over Edmund. When he turns eighteen he's out the door and I wash my hands of mothering. History does not repeat itself. The buck stops here, I swear. I'll never do to my child what my mother does to me. After the week I've put in with my mother, I can't believe I'm not a blathering idiot. Why...."

...On Mothers

Alice and I are two relatively well-adjusted, rational, sane, adult women. If we have trouble with bills, kids, or cars, we always manage somehow. We are fortunate enough to have two wonderful, lovely mothers, Marion and Edith, who live in the same town as we do. It ain't big enough.

MONDAY

"It's Monday," I said. "Hi, Alice. What's up?"

"My mother is going to visit Aunt Minnie," said Alice. "She hasn't seen Aunt Minnie in eighteen years. Minnie lives in Atlanta," said Alice. "Mother is going by bus. Alone. Thirteen hundred miles. Where is your wine?"

"That's nothing," I said. "I'm taking my mother to get a haircut."

I poured.

TUESDAY

"My mother called from Salt Lake last night," said Alice. "She got off the bus because she didn't like the bus driver. He called her 'honey.' I had to find a place for her to spend the night. Long distance. I had to arrange for new bus connections."

"My mother decided to have her hair colored," I said. "It's blue."

WEDNESDAY

"My mother called from Los Angeles last night," said Alice. "She got on the wrong bus."

"My mother hates her hair," I said. "I took her back to the beauty parlor. She cried," I said. "The operator cried. My mother had her hair recolored. It's platinum."

"I called Greyhound," said Alice. "I asked them if

they had any kind of help for Senior Citizens. Senile Senior Citizens," said Alice. "They don't."

THURSDAY

"My mother made it to Nashville," said Alice. "Nothing was wrong. She just wanted to let me know how she was doing."

"My mother loves her hair," I said. "She wants me to take her for a permanent."

"I wish she'd stop calling collect," said Alice.

FRIDAY

"My mother made it to Aunt Minnie's," said Alice. "Her luggage got lost."

"My mother had her permanent today," I said. "A lot of hair fell out," I said. "The rest of it frizzed. She wants to sue."

"How do you track down lost luggage?" asked Alice. "Mother wants to know."

SATURDAY

"My mother hates Aunt Minnie," said Alice. "Aunt Minnie watches 'The Young and the Restless.' My mother says now she remembers why it's been so long since she's seen Aunt Minnie."

"My mother took the boys shopping with her today," I said. "The owner of the beauty parlor called. She wants to refund all of mother's money."

"My mother wants to come home," said Alice. "She's only been there two days."

"The police arrested mother for picketing in front of the beauty parlor," I said. "She didn't have a permit."

"She asked me to arrange bus connections home," said Alice.

"They arrested the boys, too."

"Oh, no," said Alice. "What are you going to do?"

"What are WE going to do. Edmund was with them."

SUNDAY

"Edmund was really impressed with the jail," said Alice.

"I know. So were the boys. Mick says now he has a good topic for 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation.'"

"Mother leaves Atlanta today," said Alice. "She's taking the train."

"The nuns are going to report me," I said. "I'll lose custody."

"Aunt Minnie's coming with her," said Alice.

"My mother is talking about redecorating cells," I said. "I've made the boys promise to stifle me if I ever

start acting like mother."

"I've made Edmund swear to check me into an old people's home," said Alice. "Isn't it remarkable how quickly the wine disappears?"

Cats

The garage sale was in full swing.

"I can't believe I moved with all this junk!" I called across the driveway to Alice. "Why didn't I have a garage sale BEFORE I moved here?"

"Because then I wouldn't have had anybody to have a garage sale with!" she called back. She made change for a lady who'd just purchased an ironing board cover. "I'm so happy. For four years I've thought I wasn't unpacked, and look at this: I'm selling everything. No more ironing. No more unpacked boxes in the garage. No more dusting around crates!"

Men, women, children, and others thronged the front yard, picking and poking and jabbing at lumps, shapes, and other unidentified stuff and things. The morning had been busy; now, by four p.m., we could sense that business was tapering off.

"How about a beer?" I called. "It must be five o'clock someplace." Two men and an acne-spattered teenager of indeterminate sex roared immediate assent. "Not you," I snarled. "How about it, Alice? A beer?"

"Does the sun rise?" called Alice, stooping to right an upturned comic book rack. "Does the moon set?"

A fat lady shrieked.

"That's JUST what I've been looking for!" she screamed at Alice. "How much?"

"Watch my stuff," I called, and fled into the house for the beers plus another little surprize for Alice.

I returned with the beers and my two stories.

"If I watch your stuff for awhile, will you read them?" I asked, handing them to her along with the Budweiser to sweeten the pot. "I really want to know what you think." An idea had been brewing in my mind. I looked anxiously at Alice. She likes to read the same kind of books I do; would she like to read the kind of crap that I had written?

"Hey, it's hot out here," she said, sinking gratefully into a lawn chair and popping her beer. "You mean, me sit here and read while you do all the work? Sounds too good to be true." And with that she forgot the garage sale and commenced to read.

I waited on customers and kept up a cheery sales patter (It's a genuine mink-tipped golf tee; no home should be without one.") while keeping a nervous eye on her progress. Finally, just as I was helping to load a broken high chair in the back of a station wagon, I saw her glance up.

"Whaddayathink-whaddayathink-whaddayathink?" I yelled anxiously. "It's important. Whaddayathink?"

Alice checked out the clouds in the sky. She checked out her fingernails. She checked out the progress of the garage sale.

"Let's close down," she called. "There's not much junk left. Then we can discuss this in peace and quiet."

Within the hour, we had stuffed the non-sellers back into our respective garages and were sitting at my dining room table with fresh Bud's.

"They're not bad," decreed Alice, sipping, "not bad at all. But of course there are a few things -- like, in the kid story, we weren't really drinking milk at two a.m. You know perfectly well we were drinking..."

"I couldn't write that, Alice," I argued, immediately defensive of my literary baby. "Jellins'd think we were alcoholics." She cleared her throat.

"Ahem. I suppose you're right. We must think of our reputations. But in the 'mother' story, what my mother really said to the bus driver was...."

"I know I know," I replied, but Jellins'd think we were racist pigs. It's a STORY, Alice; it's FICTION, remember?"

"Ahem. Yes, I can see that some of it is. Ahem." She settled herself back in the chair. Her empty glass needed refilling. I refilled quickly. After all, if a friend takes the time to read the drivel you've written, the least you can do is refill her glass.

"I'm not sure," she mused. "I think in some places I came off sounding like an idiot."

I grinned rakishly -- "Takes one to know one!" -- and raised my glass. She smiled. Thank God, she smiled.

"Ahem. Or like a busybody." I had the sense not to say, "If the shoe fits...." Silence fell. She took another sip from her glass. "So. What do you propose to do with these 'stories?'" she asked, her words clipped like ice cubes.

Sipping my beer nervously, it was now I who turned quiet and thoughtful. I had started college as a business major; it had seemed the sensible and most lucrative line of education to follow. I had done my time in junior college, sweating through hours of Financial Accounting, Marketing, and Public Relations. But numbers, I had learned, confuse me. Markets repel me. And the "real" world had taught me all the P.R. I wanted to know: how to eight-six a drunk and keep him coming back the next night for more; how to mix a mean martini while smiling at a dirty joke; how to skim a few extra bucks in tips from customer and management alike and still keep them trusting my innocent face.

Literature classes were the classes I really enjoyed. When I stuck my nose in a book, I could forget the reality of vicious landlords who demanded payments on time and lose myself for an hour or two in King Arthur's court as Sir

Gawain searched for the Green Knight, or walk Harlem streets at midnight from the safety of my own bed. I could analyze my Fear of Flying. I could cry when Gatsby died.

So. When I transferred to the university, I had made the two most impractical, rash decisions of my life. The first was to change my major to English (What can you do with an English degree? Teach? Let's face it: English teachers don't rake in the big bucks.); the second was to apply for admission to the Honors College.

"Look, Alice," I explained earnestly, laying my cards on the table, "you know I'm in the Honors College." She made a little meow with her face. "Okay, okay, so I'm masochistic. But here's the deal." I leaned forward earnestly.

"To get my B.A. from the good old H.C., I have to write a thesis. And a thesis means hours and hours of research...."

"Oh, I love research!" Alice broke in. "I could just bury myself in the library, it's so peaceful and quiet. I did this paper once on Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Indians. I gagged Edmund and left him in the children's section for story hour. The librarian wasn't happy, but she was getting paid. Did you know that the Oregon Trail ends right here in Oregon? At Seaside, I think. There's a marker right on the beach. Edmund and I went...."

"Can Chief Joseph, Alice," I interrupted sourly before

she could swing into full gear. "I hate research. If I read something, I want to read it straight through, not just bits and pieces to stick here and there in a research paper. And I hate bibliographies: they remind me of formulas, and you know how I hate math. And I hate footnotes. I always get confused when I see those little asterisks. I go looking around the page for the reference and forget what line I was on. If I hate to read them, I'd sure as hell hate to write them."

"Well," she agreed, "I'm not so hot on footnotes myself. They teach organization and discipline, I suppose. They must be good for something. But research...." She sighed a heavenly sigh and sipped her beer. I waited patiently until she had calmed herself.

"Now, look," I began again, "this is what I've been thinking. I can get around all this research garbage if I write a novel instead. They call it a 'creative' thesis. No research. No bibliographies. No footnotes. Just a plain, simple little couple hundred pages of fiction." I sighed. "What a scam. It'd be great, don't you think?"

Alice looked at me like I was nuts.

"You mean, write a book?" she squeaked. "A whole BOOK?"

I smiled smugly.

"Can you DO it?"

My smile slipped somewhat.

"And what on God's green earth are you going to WRITE about? My MOTHER?" she screeched practically. "You must be CRAZY!"

We sipped awhile in silence. With supreme effort, I roused myself from dour thoughts.

"Jellins said to write about what I know," I said, trying to sound logical but coming off more like one of Alice's squeaks. "I hate research. I really want to give this a shot, Alice."

She heaved a big sigh.

"I infer from your stories that I'm going to be involved in your 'creative' process, right? You're going to turn me into 'art,' right? You're going to poke me with pins and write about when I bleed. You're going to write about when I smack Edmund, right?"

"You don't smack Edmund."

"I should. This may be an incentive."

"I've got to do SOMETHING," I begged. "My word processing program can't handle footnotes. Those asterisks would kill me."

Alice heaved another big sigh, then slowly stood and raised her Bud high.

"So here's to kids and mothers," she replied valiantly, squaring her shoulders and throwing back her head. She looked like the Statue of Liberty, that brave and shining symbol for Freedom from Asterisks, standing

there beside my dining room table. "After all, you have to do all the work; I can just sit back and be immortalized. I..." drum roll "...will be 'art!' Just," she warned, clinking her glass to mine, "for God's sake..." drum roll "...don't write that I swear!"

...On Cats

Whenever Alice and I run short of cash, which is often, we hold a big neighborhood garage sale. The big neighborhood garage sale is nothing more than Alice and me hauling out all our garage sale junk, spreading it over our adjoining driveways, and tacking a few signs to highly visible telephone poles. But having a garage sale is a lucrative way to spend a weekend, and, if we each clear thirty or forty dollars, we are pleased. We've managed to stave the wolf from the door for yet another weekend, and probably even have enough left over to take the kids to McDonald's.

Our last garage sale was pretty good. Besides her usual junk, Alice sold some men's undershirts and work pants which she'd gotten from her mother, who had inherited them from a gentleman friend who'd recently died.

"Poor mother," said Alice with a sigh. "Since Stan bit the dust, she's really lonely."

I sold, besides my usual junk, two rickety folding

chairs which I had borrowed from Father Brennan three years ago and never returned. I wasn't, unfortunately, able to unload the broken stereo-hi-fi combo that my mother had contributed. I couldn't even give it away.

"My mother's lucky," I said. "She's got a clean attic. But now I've got her white elephants sitting around, collecting dust in my garage."

"Don't worry about it," said Alice, eyeing the dusty stereo. "Maybe it'll move in the next sale."

All things considered, though, we did well. By Sunday afternoon, we were feeling hot and tired, but flush.

"Let's close down," said Alice. "I'm buying the beer."

It is our custom, after a garage sale, to celebrate a little. Alice is trying to gain weight, so we have temporarily shifted from wine to beer, although we like wine better. If we've done poorly, we split a quart of Bohemia Club (seventy-four cents). If we've done well, we splurge on a six-pack of Budweiser. I knew it was a Bud afternoon.

Alice left to buy the beer, and I started hauling things into my garage. I could hear Mickey, Sean, and Edmund playing out back.

What a pleasant day! Fluffy clouds hung high in the blue sky, old Mr. Sun had helped my tan along, and I was jingling coins in my pockets. Nothing could go wrong on a

beautiful day like this.

"Ew, yuck!" I heard from around the corner of the house, then a chorus of "Ew, yucks!" Sean came tearing around the front lawn.

"Mom, you'd better come quick. It looks like Daddy Cat is hurt...REAL BAD!"

I dropped the carpet scraps I'd been hauling and hurried around the corner of the house, muttering under my breath as I went. It would be just like Daddy Cat to come dragging his butt to my house if he were injured.

Daddy Cat is not my cat. He's not anybody's cat, just a mangy, ornery stray who wandered into the neighborhood two years ago, Alice says, looking mean and hungry. He keeps the neighborhood mouse population in check, however, so occasionally I feed him table scraps, as do several of the other neighbors. I've learned to pet him a little, but not too much. If Daddy Cat gets happy, he bites.

Dad has developed some close neighborhood ties. He is the husband of Alice's cat, Momma Cat. Momma Cat used to be named Baby Paws until she met Daddy. We know that Dad has engaged in incestuous relationships, as he is also the father of two litters born to two of Momma Cat's daughters, Molly and Cali. Alice currently houses nine illegal cats/kittens in a two bedroom, "no pets allowed" apartment. I'm not sure what we feel for Daddy is exactly affection: it's more like the responsibility one feels for

down-and-out black sheep distant relations.

I rounded the corner of the house, and there he was...hurt REAL BAD.

"We were just playing and we saw him come limping...."

"There's blood coming out of his mouth...."

"He's going to die. Can we help him, mom, PLEASE?"

"PLEASE?"

"PLEASE?"

The boys interrupted one another in this dramatic moment in history. Gingerly, I squatted down to get a better perspective, and Dad weakly bit me.

He did appear to be in bad shape. A few drops of dried blood speckled the fur around his mouth, and he was filthy -- dirty, oily, greasy filthy.

"Oh, Daddy, what happened to you?" I crooned as I inched my way closer.

Dad said "me-e-e-OWWW" in a weak, scratchy voice, and attempted to stand and walk. Although he was very stiff, all his legs appeared to touch the ground.

"I don't know, guys," I said. "He looks pretty bad, but I think all his parts are working."

Alice pulled into her driveway.

"I got the beer," she called merrily. "Party time!"

I knew the next few moments were going to be traumatic. Alice is a tender-hearted person, especially towards animals. She is an active member of PETA (People

for Ethical Treatment of Animals). However, her feelings towards Daddy Cat are mixed. She also can't stand the sight of blood.

"Alice, Daddy Cat has been hurt," I called to her.

"Yah, he's been hurt REAL BAD," said Edmund, running to his mother.

"There's blood coming...."

"He's all...."

"He can't...."

"Mom, can we help him, PLEASE?"

Alice could not look.

"Do you think we should take him to the vet, Peggy?" she asked. "What do you think? Do you? Do you?"

"Probably. But who's going to pay the bill?"

And thus our nursing careers began.

Daddy had been run over by a bicycle, we learned -- maliciously, we suspected -- but he didn't die.

"What are we going to do with him?" I asked. "He can't stay at my house. I'm allergic to cats. And besides, he bites."

"I don't have any place to put him," said Alice. "I've got enough cats already."

We compromised. Alice cleaned out a corner of her garage, and we took turns feeding him, even going so far as to warm his milk. By the fourth day, he was demanding a little action from Momma Cat, and we knew he would survive.

He still walked stiffly and looked like hell, but it was time for him to face the cold, cruel world again.

That evening, while the boys played outside, Alice and I finally got around to our Budweiser.

"I know he's just a stray," said Alice, as we sat at my dining room table, "but we couldn't have done anything less. We had to help him."

"Of course," I agreed. "After all, he's Molly and Cali's babies' father."

"And Momma Cat's husband."

Our self-righteous Good Samaritanism instincts began to surface.

"It just makes me so mad, though," I huffed. "People dropping off strays like that...."

"I know," said Alice. "Why if it wouldn't have been for us, Daddy Cat could have...."

"I know," I said. "We had to help him. It was the humane thing to do. Thank God we were around to...."

From the back yard we heard a chorus of "Ew, YUCK!"s. Edmund and Sean came running to the door.

"Mom, we just saw Daddy Cat, and he's hurt REAL BAD!"

"There's blood coming...."

"He's all...."

"He can't...."

And this time, he was.

Poor Dad. Alice couldn't look.

"You look, Peggy," she said. "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

Dad looked like hammered dog do-do. A bloody hole gaped from the side of his neck, and he couldn't even raise his head and bite when I petted him.

"He looks like he's been in a terrible cat fight," I said, "and he came out the big loser."

And this time, a trip to the vet was imperative.

"How are we going to pay for it, hold a garage sale?" cracked Alice.

"Why not? We can ask for donations from the neighbors, too. I'll see if I can find a vet who will take Dad on credit."

After several non-productive phone calls, the receptionist at Dr. William F. Maloney's, D.V.M., Sutton Place Animal Hospital, finally agreed to let me bring Dad in.

"It's an emergency," I explained. "He's got this big hole in his neck and blood is coming...."

"How much are you willing to make as a down payment, Miss, ah...?"

I ignored her delicate probe for a responsible party.

"Three dollars and fifty cents," I replied. "That's all I have until payday. But I can ask the neighbors if...."

Click. She put me on hold, and I listened to a

stirring rendition of Dr. Dolittle's "Talk to the Animals."

Her manner was businesslike when she clicked me back on.

"We usually require one third of the total amount," she said.

"It's an emergency," I replied. "He's not even my cat, just a mangy neighborhood stray. But he looks like he's been in a terrible fight, and I know he needs...."

"Let me check with doctor."

Click.

More music. Hmm, mmm, de hmm....

Click.

"Doctor says if you'd get him neutered he wouldn't be so likely to get in fights, Miss, ah...?"

"I can't afford to get him neutered, I just want to get him sewed back together," I protested. "He's not my cat. He's just a stray."

Click.

Music. hmmm, de....

Click.

"Doctor says that's all the more reason he should be neutered," she explained patiently. "Strays impregnate more domestic pets than...."

I was becoming exasperated and, at this point, didn't want to be reminded of Dad's numerous contributions to the neighborhood.

"He only needs a few stitches," I wheedled in a whiny voice.

Click.

Hmmm...!

Click.

"Doctor says bring him in," sighed the receptionist, as though she held the weight of the animals of the world on her shoulders. "He'll see what he can do, and we'll work out a payment schedule then, Miss, ah...?"

Payment schedule: the magic words.

"Thank you so much," I gushed, ending the conversation. "I'll bring him right in."

Alice and I ran into a few minor transportation problems getting Dad to Dr. Maloney's, but nothing two grown women couldn't handle.

"I'll drive if you'll hold him," bartered Alice, glancing fleetingly at the bloody furry heap at her feet.

"I can't hold him," I replied reasonably. "I'm allergic. He bites. Somebody has to stay with the kids. And besides, I can't stand blood, either."

So we called our mothers. My mom brought the cat cage, and Alice's mom did the dirty work.

"Oh, you girls," said Alice's mother. "Come here, Daddy Cat, you little sweetheart. Whatever happened to you, you poor baby? Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm...."

How anyone could call Daddy Cat a little sweetheart was beyond me, but I escorted them to Alice's car and stayed home with the kids. I bit my fingernails while waiting for their return. How much would the bill be? Dollar signs danced in my head. I worried a bit about Daddy Cat, too.

"You dirty rat," said Alice when she got home. "You didn't leave your name. They wouldn't let me out of there 'til I gave them mine." She smirked. "But I gave them your address and phone number." We were both worried about the same things.

Alice had to work the next day and I had classes, so we decided to wait until we both got home to get a progress report on Dad. Alice made the call, then over she came.

"You aren't going to believe this," she said. "The hell with the beer, where's your wine?"

Daddy Cat, Dr. Maloney had informed Alice, had not been in a cat fight. He had been shot by a pellet gun. Dad had successfully undergone major surgery, and a shunt had been inserted in his neck. Medication had to be administered, both orally and through the shunt, for the next ten days.

Dad's bill was one hundred, sixty-eight dollars. We sat for a moment in stunned silent awe of the three-digit figure.

"And then," said Alice, "and then he had the nerve to

tell me he'd neutered Daddy Cat. Did you tell him to neuter Dad? Did you?"

Personally, I didn't much care about Dad's sexual standing, as long as we didn't have to pay for it. But considering the fact that Alice was housing many of Daddy's incestuous offspring, I thought she might appreciate this bit of news.

"We have to pay for it," she said dryly.

"OF COURSE I didn't tell him to do it!" I exploded. "Dad isn't even our cat! Does the man think Good Samaritans are made of money?"

"And now poor Dad won't have the spunk left to defend his territory," she moaned, gulping her wine. "He'll get in more fights, and lose, and stop chasing mice, and become soft and dependent." The future was not bright for someone after we'd sprung Dad from the vet's.

"Dr. Maloney says he can come home this afternoon," continued Alice, "but he has to stay in the house for ten days until the shunt comes out."

"Who's house?"

We drank some more.

"Maybe mother can take care of him," mused Alice. "Just until he gets off the medication, of course. I know she's got all of Stan's junk stored in her garage, but...."

"Dad bites," I said. "He has fleas."

"And mother has a new couch."

"It's almost five o'clock," I said. "What are we going to do?"

"Stall."

So I called Dr. Maloney.

"We don't have any place to store Daddy Cat yet," I told the receptionist. "How much does it cost if he spends another night?"

"Seven dollars." Her voice sounded nervous. After all, the color green had not yet crossed their palms. "You know, this is highly irregular, Miss, ah...?"

"I'll have somebody there to pick him up tomorrow, I promise." I hung up the phone.

"Now what?" I asked, turning to Alice. She contemplated her wine for a moment. Then inspiration lit her face.

"I know," she replied. "I'll ask my mother to pick him up. They won't make an old lady pay all that money. We'll figure out what to do with him once we get him home."

I waited anxiously to learn further developments until Alice returned from work the next day. When she pulled in her driveway, I hurried over.

"You aren't going to believe this," she said. "Break out the bottle."

They had refused to release Daddy Cat to Alice's mother.

"Who are you?" the receptionist had asked her.

"I'm Alice's mother. You remember, dear? The cute little girl who brought...."

"Are you the responsible party for billing?"

"Oh, my, no, I'm just here to pick up...."

"What is your name, please?"

"Why, dear, I'm Marion Doe, of course, Alice's mother. Remember her? The cute little girl...."

"Who?"

"Mrs. John Doe. At least I was until John died. Poor John! That was back in '67. He had gall bladder problems, you know. Back then, they didn't know much to do for gall bladders. He had surgery, but the doctor told me the end was inevitable. Just like Stan. Poor Stan died of a...."

They had refused to release Daddy Cat to her.

Dad's bill was now a hundred and eighty-two dollars.

The next day when Alice got home from work, I borrowed the cat cage again and we loaded the kids in the car and went to Dr. Maloney's office to face the music together.

The small waiting room was crowded and noisy. Colorful circus animals danced around the wallpaper. A lady hugged a Siamese cat. Another lady hugged a Great Dane while her three small children fought over an old copy of "National Velvet." A young girl sat by herself in the corner, holding a large bird cage in her lap. The cage was empty, and the girl had tears in her eyes. Two men, knees touching, nuzzled twin apricot poodles.

"We're here to see about Daddy Cat," Alice said pleasantly to the receptionist, anticipating a long wait. She smiled an innocent, we-don't-have-anything-to-hide smile.

The receptionist looked up from her appointment book, eyebrows arched.

"Follow me," she ordered.

The denizens of the waiting room glared as we were ushered past them.

Dr. Maloney and his bookkeeper were waiting in ambush for us in Examination Room Two. The receptionist ushered us in and followed, leaving the door open behind her.

Stacked wire cages lined the rear wall of the room. Several of the cages were occupied by cats. Each occupied cage bore a customized bronze nameplate. "Chopper," read one. "Owner: Buffy Phillips. 3742 Park Dr." In the cage next to Chopper was Daddy Cat. His cardboard nameplate said only, "Daddy Cat. Owner: ??? "

"Daddy Cat!" the boys squealed. "Hello, hello! Oh, how are you?" And they rushed over to his cage.

"And hello to you," said Dr. Maloney, looking from Alice to me. "How are you?" He leaned nonchalantly on a filing cabinet, his arms folded across his chest.

We all took deep breaths. The bookkeeper, a girl in her early twenties who wore glasses, began the inquisition.

"Good afternoon," she began sweetly. "I'm Martha. We

usually request payment in full," here she frowned at the receptionist, "but in this case, I understand that Joyce has agreed to accept the patient on credit. Therefore, we require one third of the total amount due...."

"What?" Alice squawked in what I thought was a reasonable tone of voice under the circumstances. "That's, uh, sixty dollars!"

"I know you told me you only have three dollars and fifty cents, Alice," said Joyce, "but with the unexpected escalation of costs due to surgery...."

"I told you I only have three dollars and fifty cents," I interrupted. "I don't know how much money Alice...."

"Who are you?" asked Joyce.

"I'm Margaret Durbin, the one who called," I replied, finally acknowledging responsibility. "And we don't have sixty...."

"Actually, one third of the total amount is sixty-four dollars," said Martha, double-checking her figures. "The total bill comes to one hundred and ninety-two dollars."

"What?" squawked Alice. "Two days ago, it was a hundred and sixty-eight, plus seven for...."

"...plus seven for EACH extra day of boarding," continued Martha heatedly. "Two extra days, that's fourteen dollars...."

"...plus two extra days of administering medication,"

injected Dr. Maloney. "I treated Daddy Cat myself."

"...bringing the total to one hundred and ninety-two dollars," finished Martha smugly.

"And how much of that is the neutering fee?" I shot back, becoming a little heated myself. "I distinctly remember telling you 'no neutering.'"

"You told ME," said Joyce, looking uncomfortable. "I don't count in billing." Martha gave her another dirty look.

"Neutering is standard procedure for all strays," explained Dr. Maloney. "It's...."

"And is it standard procedure to nick Good Samaritans who are only trying to help a poor suffering animal?" yelled Alice. "We're not paying for any...."

"All right, all right, I'll pay for the neutering!" Joyce was becoming hot, too. "Call me soft, but I'll...."

"And what about this 'major surgery' business?" I pressed. "I thought he only needed stitches."

"I thought YOU told me that," yelled Joyce, whirling on Alice.

"Not me," Alice yelled. "YOU told my mother that...."

"Who's your mother?" yelled Joyce.

"I told her we wouldn't release Daddy Cat," yelled Martha. "The old lady who came in yesterday, remember? Said her name was 'Mrs. Smith.' Ha!"

"Mrs. Doe," yelled Alice.

"Oh," squeaked Martha, glasses sliding down her nose.
"It wasn't fictitious?"

Daddy Cat sat forgotten in his corner cage. The boys listened avidly to every word, their little heads bouncing back and forth like the audience at a ping pong match.

"Surgery was necessary!" broke in Dr. Maloney, wafting an arm in the air. But it was hard for him to get a word in edgewise. The four ferocious females forged on.

"All right, all right!" yelled Martha. "So forget the neutering fee. That brings the bill down to...."

"And that reminds me, what about that seven dollars for the extra day of boarding?" I was getting into the spirit of things now, too. Sean's mouth dropped open in amazement. I don't often yell. "Alice's mother came in YESTERDAY to...."

"And that reminds ME," Alice yelled. "Now Dad won't have the spunk left to defend his territory. What are you going to do about THAT?"

"Yah," I screamed, all semblance of sanity finally gone, "glue his balls back on?"

"You'll have to be more protective of him!" bellowed Joyce.

"He isn't our cat!" I screeched.

"Not even our cat!" echoed Alice.

Dr. Maloney finally threw his hands in the air.

"You win! You win!" he shouted. "Forget the neutering fee! Forget medication administration! Forget the extra seven dollars!"

"Okay, okay!" yelled Martha.

"Thank you!" Alice and I both shouted.

Dr. Maloney was kind enough to load Daddy Cat in the cage for us -- neither Alice nor I wanted to touch him with that shunt sticking out his neck -- and we left Examination Room Two and followed Joyce back to the waiting room.

You could have heard a pin drop.

"I assume you're going to..." yelled Joyce. Then she looked at the other patients and moderated her voice. "...make a payment of three dollars and fifty cents," she finished sweetly.

"No," replied Alice haughtily. "I have three dollars and fifty cents, too."

Many pairs of eyes followed our dignified exit.

As far as the boys were concerned, the experience had been a Major Event in Their Lives.

"Way to go, mom!" cheered Edmund. "I never knew you...."

"Man," breathed Mick, "I've never seen my mother so...."

"I've never been so embarrassed in my LIFE!" said Sean. "Mom, you are such a...."

"And that part about 'balls,'" broke in Edmund

gleefully.

"Oh, yah, the balls!" crowed Mickey. Sean shook his head in disgust.

My neck felt very hot. I rested my head on the steering wheel.

"Stifle!" yelled Alice. "Stifle! You're scaring Daddy Cat!"

The boys went running off to find playmates to whom they could relate their afternoon's adventures, and Alice and I took Dad in the house. I set the cage down by the table and we collapsed into two chairs. My head fell face forward onto the table, and I left it there.

"Well," said Alice. "Well."

Presently, she cleared her throat.

"I guess I'll call my mother."

Neither of us moved.

"Meow," said Dad from his cage.

The clock ticked.

"Meow."

Alice's mother came and got Dad.

"Oh, you girls," she said. "How do you get yourselves into such predicaments? Hello, Daddy Cat. Do you want to go home with Grandma?"

Daddy Cat's mousing days are over. He now lives in happy retirement at Alice's mother's house, the treasured object of her affections. He eats Kal Kan and drinks milk, and his fur has become thick and glossy. We visit him sometimes, and he receives us in state from his throne on the new couch. For old time's sake, he often bestows a happy bite.

And Alice and me? The neighbors contributed seven dollars towards Dad's bill, and a donation can at our next garage sale netted another \$2.76. Alice and I take turns paying off the balance at five dollars a month. The bill comes to my house, but I am always eager to share it with her. We carry on with our lives, trying to ignore the nagging fear, buried somewhere deep in our psyches, that history repeats itself. My sons have learned to stifle, and visions of old people's homes dance in Alice's head.

Like mothers, like daughters?

Fishing

"You wrote about the CAIS?" squawked Alice, turning over the last page. "The CAIS? Do you know how much trouble I'd be in if the landlord found out about the cats?"

I sighed. I had expected opposition, but the thesis had to be written.

"It's what I know about. Professor Jellins said to write what I know about."

"But CAIS? I didn't mind when you took a crack at the vet-- he deserved it -- and I didn't object when you said I squawked. You even defamed my mother. But the CAIS!! I could get evicted." We both shuddered.

"The landlord will never read it, I promise," I promised. "As soon as I hand the damn thing in, it'll get buried in some dusty archive in the Honors College. No one will ever read it but you and me and whoever ends up on my thesis committee. It'll be history. Dead and buried, like the Dead Sea."

Alice shook her head.

"At LEAST you changed the name of the vet." She arched her eyebrows at me. "Have you ever heard of libel?" I shuddered again.

"Sounds like research to find out. Besides, I'm not going to think about that right now."

We sat in silence for a minute. Upstairs, I could hear Mickey brushing his teeth.

"Sean," I called up the stairway, "are you almost ready to go?"

"I'm shining my shoes," he yelled down. "Some dumb bunny got a scuff mark on them!"

"Five minutes!" I yelled. "Then we're leaving!"

I turned back to Alice.

"Cats and libel aside," I asked, "what is your critical opinion? That's what I need to know."

Alice ahemed.

"Well," she said, "if the characters were someone else besides us," she made a little tent with her fingers, "I'd say it's not bad. It's pretty long...."

"I know, I know. But I didn't know where to cut it. What could I cut out?" I leaned over her shoulder and ruffled the pages. "Here, you know," I said, pointing, "this whole first part: I thought about scrapping this whole first part, maybe, and not even writing about the garage sale, but then when...."

"Do you want to know my opinion or not?" she asked. I nodded. "Then kindly sit down and stop interrupting." I sat.

"Ahem. Well, then. In my opinion, it's really so

ordinary and -- common, you know? Cats. Mothers. This is a thesis, after all. Put something Freudian in it; give them something to think about, you know?" I nodded thoughtfully. "Show them this is the culmination of all your hard-earned accumulated knowledge. Make them think that you're deep, you know?"

"I'm not deep, Alice. I'm shallow."

She threw me a disgusted look.

"Pretend."

"Okay, okay, I'll pretend."

"Outside of that, it's really not all that bad." She smiled. "I liked the part about the 'balls.'"

"Oh, did you, Alice? Did you really?" Relief flooded my being. "You know, maybe I could...."

Sean and Mickey came bounding down the stairs.

"I'm starving. Let's go!" beamed Mick.

"Dumb bunny," grumbled Sean. "Can't even stay off of somebody else's shoes."

With a sigh, Alice hauled herself up from the chair.

"I'm starving, too," she said. "Business meeting over. Let's go eat."

We collected Edmund from the front sidewalk, where he had been busily disturbing an ant trail, and walked down Second Street towards Q. The lowering sun beat down upon us from the cloudless sky. A warm breeze fluttered tree leaves. Business meeting over.

"Oh, God, I'm glad it's summer!" I sang joyfully as we sauntered down the edge of the street. "I don't think the kids enjoy summer more than I do. No more car pools. No more classes. No more teachers, no more books," I sang, "no more teacher's dirty looks!" I hopped a little two-step in the gutter.

"All right, all right," sighed Alice. "I get the point."

"At least, not until September. Just think, Alice, one more year and I'll have my diploma. The world will be my oyster. Money, fame! No more teachers, no more books," I gurgled. "No more...."

"Can it," said Alice glumly. "Summer is the same as winter to me, only worse. I still have to work, plus I have to pay for a babysitter for Edmund. Summer sucks eggs."

I sobered. Alice was right: summer is not all fun and games. Summer meant scrambling for house cleaning jobs on my days off from the lounge so I could scrape together enough money for tuition in the fall. At least Alice and I could split the cost of the sitter.

"By the way," said Alice, sauntering along, "I haven't seen any strange cars around for awhile. Have you become a monk, or what?"

"You know how it goes," I sighed, "feast or famine. All the neat guys disappear after finals. Besides," I

accused, "I haven't seen any strange cars parked in front of your house for awhile, either. What happened to old what's his name, the one who liked Demolition Derby?"

"Are you kidding? I'd rather read a book!" she squawked. "He drove too fast. He played the radio too loud. He chewed with his mouth open. He -- he watched ballgames all the time. Besides," she added lamely, "Edmund asked him if he was going to be his new daddy."

We strolled on in commiserating silence. Q Street neared.

"I can see it!" yelled Edmund. "Come on, let's go!" The boys scampered ahead to the new Safeway's Grand Opening.

"Be careful in the parking lot!" Alice yelled after them. "There are a million cars!"

And, indeed, there were. People -- on foot, in cars, in pickups, in motorhomes -- thronged the parking lot, and more kept rolling in. Dust rose in billowing clouds. Colorful banners snapped smartly in the breeze. Music blared from outdoor speakers. Ponies circled endlessly in one corner of the lot, enticing children with free rides.

Mickey came hot-footing-it back to us.

"Mom, mom, can we ride?" he asked excitedly. "Can we ride?"

I eyed the long, hot, dusty line.

"After we eat, honey," I promised. "Maybe the line

will be shorter then."

"Oh, mom," he wheedled. "Sean and Edmund are already in line."

"Get them out," Alice directed firmly.

"Yes," I seconded, "tell them we have to eat first. Then rides."

"Oh, mom," he grumbled. But he turned around and sped off in the direction of the ponies.

Alice and I were overjoyed that Safeway had decided to relocate in the new shopping center only three blocks from I Street. A beautiful new grocery store, and within walking distance! It meant that when we ran out of milk or bread, we could send one of the kids instead of having to load everyone in the car and driving to the nearest Seven-11. It meant, when the kids had nothing to do, being able to say, "Well, then, walk down to Safeway and watch the lobsters in the seafood case." It meant, if either of us had a few extra bucks, being able to select ready-made potato salad from the deli.

And, more immediately, the Safeway Grand Opening meant free dinner.

We collected the boys from the pony line amidst protest and herded them into the sparkling store for our share of all the free munchies.

"Boy, this is really great," mumbled Alice through a mouthful of Swiss cheese. "Much better than the food

kitchen. I like these crackers. Boy, what a crowd. Where do they all come from?"

"Ew, yuk." Sean made a sour face. "What is this junk?"

"It's limburger," I mumbled through a mouthful of Brie-on-melba. "Don't eat it if you don't like it. Why don't you guys go try the pizza?" They shouldered their ways through the crowd.

"You should have told them about the bakery," said Alice, fighting her way to the salami squares. A red-faced man in Kansas City baseball cap and sweat-stained tee shirt diverted her outstretched fingers. She came up with a sardine-on-toast-point.

"They'll find it soon enough," I replied, munching. A lady jostled the little boy in front of me. The ice cream from his cone dripped onto my sandal. The little -- I thought, eyeing my sticky foot. He started to cry.

"Well," huffed his mother. She gave me a dirty look. "Some people!"

"Not my fault!" I lisped, spewing cracker crumbs in her face.

"Well!" she huffed to the crying child. "Come, Teddy. Momma will get you another one."

"Free or not, I can't take much more of this, Alice," I spewed at her over the shoulder of somebody's cowboy hat. "I hate crowds. I'm getting claustrophobia."

"I can't breathe," spewed Alice. "Let's get out of here." She grabbed one more sardine and we plowed our way laborously upstreamed towards the exit.

"Whew," she said when we had finally made it to fresh air again. We sat down on the curb to wait for the boys' reappearance. "Here. I grabbed an éclair when we passed the bakery."

We sat amidst the thronging crowd and munched.

"You know," she said presently, eyeing the milling people who surrounded us, "this really makes me sick."

"I think it's delicious," I munched. "I love chocolate."

"No," she replied, "I mean all these people. Where do they all come from? Springfield and Eugene together don't hold this many people. And all looking for a free handout. Cripes, look at that Winnebago over there: it must have cost forty thousand dollars. They should be ashamed. I wish I could just drop out of the rat race for awhile and find some piece and quiet, you know? Hear birds sing. Hear bees hum."

"I know what you mean. I hate crowds, too."

"You know," she mused, "get back to nature."

"Nature's not all that great, Alice. Birds drop whitewash. Bees sting. There're no Safeways."

"I don't care," she insisted. "Next weekend, let's do something different. Let's break out of the rat race and

have some fun. I know, let's take the boys hiking! We can pack a picnic. We can take them to the forest. We can...."

...On Fishing

"How is your Man of the Month Club doing?" asked Alice. She leaned on the countertop as I washed breakfast dishes.

"You know how it goes," I replied with a sigh. "It's either feast or famine. Since the university let out for summer vacation, pickings have been slim. The club is experiencing a temporary slump."

"Too bad," said Alice. "What about the baseball player?"

"Don't mention him." I angrily sloshed soapy water at her. "He threw my rabbit jacket in his Jacuzzi."

"Oh, yah," said Alice. "I remember. You walked home in your bikini and Berkenstocks."

"I worked nights," I said. "I cleaned toilet bowls for three months to buy that jacket." The memory still rankled.

"Whatever happened to the sailor?" asked Alice, changing tack.

"He's still around," I admitted, "but I cracked his mast, remember? We aren't exactly on speaking terms right now."

"How about the wildlife biologist?" she persisted.
"The one who loved kids?"

"Off counting brown spotted owls, I guess. I haven't seen him since Mt. St. Helen erupted. Why all this sudden interest in my love life?"

"Just wondering," she replied innocently. "I haven't seen any strange cars parked around here for awhile."

"I'm getting a little tired of the club," I admitted.
"All these rugged individuals. Where do you find a man who just enjoys going out to dinner?"

"Don't ask me," said Alice. "I got out of club-jumping years ago."

Sean and Mickey burst through the front door. Close on their heels was Edmund.

"Alice's taking Edmund fishing!" bubbled Mickey. "He invited us to go, too. Can we go, Mom? Huh? Please? Can we go? Can we go?"

I looked at Alice suspiciously.

"Edmund has been bugging me to take him fishing," she explained, all innocence. "There's never a man around when you need one. Do you know how to fish?"

"Of course I do," I replied, smelling a rat.
"Everybody knows how to fish. Ignore him. I don't want to get involved in this."

"I promised," said Alice. "Think how much fun we'd have, getting out of the city and back to nature. We can

drive up the McKenzie to the woods, find a deserted spot. The boys can fish and we can read books. You'll love it."

"We don't live in the city, we live in Springfield. Nature can be found in our own back yard."

"But there aren't any fish," trilled Alice.

I stood at the sink, remembering fondly my childhood days on an Iowa farm. I had lived near City Park Road and my brother and I had fished nearly every summer day in the park's muddy little man-made lake. We had risked frequent chastisement from our father for breaking good fishing pole-sized limbs from his apple trees, winding kite string to their ends, and adding red and white bobbers and simple wire hooks where appropriate. We must have caught every bullhead in the lake, then thrown it mercifully back. Our mother always insisted that bullheads were not good eating fish.

But that was then and this is now.

"No, thanks," I demurred. "I'm busy."

"With what?" scoffed Alice. "The club's in a slump. Besides, fishing is a required boyhood experience. One day of fishing won't kill us."

"Please, momma, please?" begged Mickey, grasping my hand and looking at me with moist brown eyes.

"Oh, shingles," I cursed, mellowing.

"Told you he could talk her into anything," said Sean smugly to Edmund as they helped themselves to cookies.

"It's his sweet little baby face. That and his dumb goo-goo eyes."

Plans progressed. After scouring the neighborhood for apple trees and coming up empty, Alice and I loaded the kids in the car and headed for Fred Meyer's Variety.

"I don't have money for a fishing pole," I grumbled as I pulled into the parking lot.

"We'll give up wine for a week. It'll be good for us."

We located the poles in the rear of Sporting Goods, a department neither of us had previously frequented.

"Forty-two dollars," I breathed, turning over a price tag. "That's a lot of Strawberry Hill."

"I like THIS one!" said Sean, grabbing a red and silver pole from the bin. "Bet I could catch a shark with this one. And it's only sixty seven dollars and ninety-five cents. I have the ninety-five cents, mom."

"Ha, ha."

"Here're the cheap ones," said Alice, busily digging beneath the counter. "Down here, under the tackle boxes. We're in luck -- they're on sale."

A rugged-looking individual in flannel shirt and worn blue jeans disengaged himself from another customer and strode his macho way over.

"Those aren't bad poles...for kids," he said. "Do you ladies enjoy fishing?"

"Not at all," replied Alice. "It's just our duty as mothers."

"What kind of fish are you going after?" he asked. "Trout? Salmon? It makes a difference in the gear."

"Bullheads," I said. "Then we can throw them back."

His blue eyes twinkled, and he looked amused.

"I know a nice spot on the McKenzie," he said, holding out a bobber to Mickey and smiling kindly down upon us. "About a mile up from the cutoff to Twin Forks. The water's shallow, and there's a nice little sandy beach. Perfect for sunbathing. It's only a mile or so from my spread. I'd be happy to show you after I get off work."

"No, thanks," I demurred, backing into a stack of wicker creels and sending them crashing to the floor. "We'd rather do this ourselves."

We left Sporting Goods weighted down with poles, lines, bobbers, sinkers, hooks, and artificial red bait packed in its own little plastic container.

"Oh, my aching Master Card," I groaned. "Whatever happened to night crawlers?"

"At least he gave us a break on the tackle boxes," comforted Alice. "You made quite an impression with those creels. What's the matter, don't you want to add a fisherman to the club roster?"

"Please, God," I breathed, looking heavenward. "No more jocks."

We packed a picnic hamper and our library books and the fishing gear and two blankets and the mosquito repellent and stuffed the boys in the back seat and headed up County Road 188B.

"Willamette National Forest, seven miles" read a sign, and I turned off the artery onto a narrow gravel road.

"How much farther?" asked Edmund. "I have to go."

"I told you to go before we left," said Alice. "Hold it. We're almost there."

The afternoon was warm and sunny, a perfect day for lounging on a blanket and reading. In spite of myself, I began to look forward to the afternoon. I could picture the boys, happily occupied with their poles, and Alice and me with our books digging into the goodies in the picnic hamper.

The road narrowed and angled sharply upwards. The woods became dense.

"We're lost," bragged Sean. "My mom gets lost all the time."

"She always finds the way home, though," defended Mickey.

"How much farther?" asked Edmund. "I really have to go."

Miles and miles of deserted forest sped by my open window. Massive evergreens enclosed the narrow lane, dimming the early afternoon sunlight. It was then that I

noticed the gas gauge.

"Just how much farther is the cutoff?" I whispered nervously to Alice.

"Only another three or four miles," she replied, confident. "We're almost there now."

The trees thinned out, and ahead I could see a fork in the road. To the left, dense forest closed in again. To the right we caught a glimpse of water between the trees.

"Right," directed Alice. "That beach must not be far now."

The evergreens closed in again. The road knifed switchback next to the shoreline at a steeply climbing angle. My palms grew moist on the steering wheel. A mile or so farther on, just as I was negotiating an impressively hair-pin curve, Alice caught a glimpse of sand.

"Stop!" she screamed.

I jammed the brake to the floorboard.

"Don't EVER scream again!" I screamed at her. "I could have killed us all."

"Sorry," she replied meekly. "I was just so happy to see...."

"Told you we were lost," said Sean.

Edmund was in agony.

"Go behind a tree," said Alice.

"What?" said Edmund. "You told me never to...."

"That's different. This is nature."

"Yah, but not with mothers around."

"Okay, smartie. Suit yourself."

Edmund excused himself and headed for the evergreens, and the rest of us started unloading the car. The sandy beach was much farther than it looked from the road, perhaps a quarter of a mile through underbrush, fallen logs, and old growth timber.

"You brought TWO blankets?" grumbled Sean. "And the lounge chair? I thought this was nature."

"Yah, and Edmund's sure taking a long time," grumbled Mickey. "He always weasles out of helping."

"March," I ordered. "We'll get even with him later."

"Hmph," snooted Alice. "He really had to go."

I didn't say a word.

Base camp was established in silence. Thirty minutes later, I threw myself down on a blanket, exhausted.

"Okay, guys, this is what we came for," I sighed. "Go fish. Mommy's going to take a nap."

Sean and Mickey and Edmund looked at the pile of fishing gear.

"How do you put it together?" asked Mickey.

"I don't know. Ask Alice."

"Tell you mother I don't know how," sniffed Alice.

"She's the one who said she knew how to fish."

"Tell her I know how to fish with a REAL pole," I said. "With apple branches and kite string."

"Tell your mother you call that a REAL pole?" snooted Alice. "After we just spent thirty-seven dollars at Fred Meyer?"

"Plus interest," I snooted back. "Remember? We charged it."

"That's okay," said Edmund. "I don't really want to fish anyhow."

"Me, neither," said Sean, eyeing the picnic hamper. "I'm hungry."

A stiff breeze, unnoticed, had sprung up. High above us the evergreens swayed. Whitecaps appeared on the creek.

"Tell your mother I'll fix lunch," said Alice. "Ask her if she would like peanut butter or jelly?"

Food soothes the savage beast, and so it was with Alice and me. Besides, she had concealed a little surprise in the hamper.

"Look what I brought," she giggled. "Boone's Farm Blackerry."

"Oh, Alice, you sweetheart. The perfect thing for fishing."

"No wonder the hamper was so heavy," grumbled Sean.

By the time lunch was over and the boys had walked downstream to catch crawdads, Alice and I were civil again.

"Maybe we can return all this gear," she reasoned, lying back on her blanket with a sigh and closing her eyes. "After all, we never used any of it."

"Maybe you'd better return it," I said, thinking of the scattered creels. "The salesman might remember me."

A large raindrop splashed my nose.

"Oh, no," I said.

"What's the matter?" asked Alice. A raindrop splashed her chin. "Oh, no. Save the fishing gear."

What had taken thirty minutes to set up and carefully arrange was stuffed back into the car in eight and a half minutes flat.

"It's just a little rain," grumbled Edmund. "It won't kill us."

"Shut up," said Alice. "If I hear another word out of your mouth today, you're grounded."

"For how long?"

"For LIFE! Shut up!"

I backed the car carefully around on the narrow road and headed downhill. It sputtered.

"Oh, no," I said.

"What's the matter now?" asked Alice.

It died.

"How far can we coast on empty?" I asked in a very tiny voice. "Do you remember any farm houses?"

"We are in a national forest," she replied in a dignified tone. "You dummy."

The rain beat on the roof of the car. Inside, the occupants were silent.

"My mom hasn't run out of gas since we lived in Des Moines," said Mickey.

"Oh, yah? My mom runs out of gas all the time."

"Don't put your foot in the sandwiches."

"Stay on your own side. Mom, he's hoggin'!"

"I don't have a side. I'm squashed in the middle between you two window hogs."

"I'll walk," I said.

Alice cleared her throat.

"And leave me stuck alone in this car with three kids? Are you kidding? We'll ALL walk."

And that is how he found us on his way home from work, that wonderful fishing tackle salesman from Fred Meyer: two bedraggled women and three innocent little boys, hitchhiking their ways home after a long, long afternoon of communing with nature. He asked no embarrassing questions, just loaded us into his Bronco and drove us home. He helped unload the car, then walked Sean and Mickey and me to the door under the protection of his big black umbrella. And then he walked Edmund and Alice home, and asked her out for dinner on Friday.

"So you're starting a Man of the Month Club," I chortled to Alice the next day.

"I'm not starting any clubs," she replied happily. "We aren't going to a baseball game, or sailing, or

spotting brown spotted owls. He's taking me out to dinner."

"Dinner's just a ruse. He's still a jock," I teased.

"So? Edmund has been bugging me to take him camping. And besides," she wiggled her eyebrows at me, "I'VE got nothing against jocks."

Priorities

"It was a...."

The house was quiet. The boys were down at the court shooting hoops, and I was making a valiant stab at creative writing.

"...dark and stormy night," I typed into the keyboard. Damn. That was how Snoopy always began his novel. I pressed the INST DEL key.

The beautiful summer days were slipping by much too quickly. My thesis wasn't due until next spring, but I needed to get the bulk of the work done this summer: during the school year, I don't have much time to piddle around on the computer. That meant producing pages and pages of creative drivel right now, and my creativity was coming up empty.

"Once upon a time," I typed. Too cliché. INST DEL again. Research and bibliographies and footnotes were starting to sound easy. Why did I ever come up with this hairbrained scheme to write a novel? I stared at the blank monitor. The cursor blinked back at me, waiting patiently.

Outside the closed draperies, children laughed and gamboled along the edges of the ditch, poking water bugs with sticks. I could hear birdies singing. Bright

sunshine beamed down on my empty tanning blanket. I wanted a tan. I wanted to lie in the sun and just tan and tan.

And here I was, the third week in July, tied to the computer by my thesis umbilical cord and still pale as a ghost.

"It was a dark and stormy night," I typed. "The tall, dark, handsome stranger grabbed Gloria by her golden tresses and threw her down on the bed. 'You're mine now,' he leered down at her quivering body. 'All mine!'"

Alice knocked at the door.

"Hi," she called. "How's it going?" She peered over my shoulder. "Ew, write more, write more."

"Terrif, Alice," I said in disgust, hitting INST DEL once more. "Just terrif. I've put in a really productive two hours."

"I think they call it 'writer's block,'" said Alice. "And no wonder: you've been sitting at this computer for days. Why don't you take a break? You know, lay out in the sun for awhile and get a tan." She opened the drapes.

"Right," I rejoined sarcastically, "a break. I've got to get some work done on this damn thesis; you know that. Work before pleasure, right? Grind, grind, grind. Close the drapes; you can see the dust."

She looked around the living room. Crinkled pages of computer paper littered the floor. Empty soda cans and McDonald's wrappers vied for position on the coffee table.

The boys had made a fort in front of the t.v. with sofa cushions and a blanket. G.I Joe guys and wrestling dolls fought each other across the length of the room.

"What dust?" asked Alice. "I can't see any dust."

"You are a true friend, Alice." I switched off the power pack, then slid the disk out of the drive and sailed it across the living room.

"Who can see dust? Who can see a little thing like dust?" She bustled around the living room, picking up smelly sweat socks and a wet towel. "This reminds me of Edmund's room. The carpet in his room still looks brand new. That's because it's been buried under two feet of dirty clothes for a year." She plucked a half-eaten Big Mac from the top of the television. "He just walks on top of them. He says the landlord will love him for it."

"Relax, Alice, relax."

"I don't have to live with it," she said, shuffling G.I. Joes into a pile with her foot. "He has to clean his own room. When he needs a shirt, he's the one who has to find it. I just close the door." She scooped up a pillow and tossed it at the sofa. "I don't have to look at it. I don't even go in there anymore. If he wants a good-night kiss, he gets it in the hallway. Of course, sometimes I worry about furry little critters moving in. Do mice like filth?" She grabbed a corner of the blanket and tugged; the fort collapsed.

"I'll clean, Alice. I'll clean!"

"You're obsessive." She bustled for the kitchen. "You know, that's the trouble with you: once you start something you won't stop 'til it's finished. Give it a rest; you need to blow out some of the cobwebs." Did she mean from the corners or from my brain? "Take a walk in the sunshine! See people. Do things. And you probably need a decent meal, too. 'One cannot live on McDonald's alone,' my mother always used to say. Of course, she always ordered pizza a lot. What have you got in here?" she asked, opening the refrigerator door and peering in. "Ew, yuck. What is this green stuff?"

"I'M obsessive? Listen, Alice, I'll clean, I'll clean. It's on my list. Just, please, sit down," I begged, lowering myself into a dining room chair. "You make me nervous."

"On your list -- ha!" she muttered scornfully, dumping the dirty clothes on the counter top. She returned from the kitchen with an apple and a bread heel. "You need a little fun in your life too, you know? A little relaxation. And food. You need a little food, too. Now, eat!"

"Ew, yuck," I whined. "What is this green stuff?"

"Geez, there is green stuff," she said, poking the bread with a scrawny finger. "Okay, okay, so I'll find something else."

Okay, okay, I thought. So the house was a pit. Sean and Mickey loved playing in the dirt; how convenient to have it right here in the living room, in the comfort of their own home. My stomach rumbled. And what the heck, I needed to lose a few pounds anyway. And 'see people?' I didn't need to see people. I had plenty of companionship; just look at all those little men fighting around the floor. Maybe I could write a battle scene, I thought. G.I. Joe versus Hulk Hogan. Battle of the Century. Maybe I could write....

"Where are the boys?" asked Alice.

"Who?"

"You know, your sons. Who's-his-face and What's-his-name?"

Alice was right: I am obsessive. At least I had named the characters in my stories names that I could remember. Old Who's-his-face and What's-his-name.

"Oh, Alice," I sighed, eyeing the apple distainfully, "I think I'm losing it. I know the boys are important, and a clean house is important, and maybe even putting gas in the car is important, but I HAVE to get this thesis done. And right now I can't write diddly. Maybe I'll never be able to write anything again."

Alice bustled around in the kitchen.

"The writer's nightmare," she sighed, rinsing out my omelet pan. "What you need is inspiration. It's easy to

get caught up in things and forget where you want to go. What you really want to accomplish. Look at me. I really hate getting up at five o'clock every morning. It's always dragging Edmund to the sitter and driving clear to the other end of Beltline and racing through the parking lot so I won't clock in late." She broke two eggs into a bowl, added a little milk, then whipped them with a fork. "Then it's soldering wires 'til I can't see straight and listening to the girls on the line gossip. That's the worst part: all the gossip. Honestly," she said, heating the pan, "I know more about their marriages and affairs than their husbands do. I know more about their kids. I know more about their peek-a-boo lingerie. Once I asked if anybody had read a good book lately. You know what they said?" She dropped in a dollop of butter. "'The Enquirer.' Then they all laughed." She dumped the egg mixture in the pan as she hovered over the stove. "Then it's fight the traffic all the way home. Then Edmund wants me to take him swimming or my mother wants me to take her to the grocery store." She slid the omelet onto a plate and, grabbing a fork, carried it to the table. It smelled good. I took a tiny bite.

"Such is life," sighed Alice grandly, settling herself into the chair across from me. "What I'd really like to be doing is something worthwhile. Something for the benefit of mankind. Or the environment. Or animals. But you have

to get your priorities on straight. First of all, you do what you have to do to pay the bills. Then you take your kid swimming and your mother to the grocery store. Then, if you have any energy or time or money left, you can afford to slip in a little something for the benefit of the universe."

The omelet was delicious; I wolfed the last bite, then settled comfortably back in my chair with a discreet belch. That's what's good about Alice: she gets on her soapbox and makes me slow down and think about things for awhile.

"That's what's wrong with this country." she ranted, "nobody has their priorities on straight anymore. Tell me, just how important is peek-a-boo lingerie in the overall scheme of things? Any idiot would know that the environment comes first. Or animals. Or something. Otherwise, life won't be worth living. We have to think about the future. Kids know what's important; look at Edmund. He's out playing ball and his room is a pit. Does he care? No. Playing ball is important. Adults forget what is important. They get caught up in paying bills or writing books or cleaning the house. Things were different when I was young. Then, I knew what was important. I got arrested once. Why, I remember...."

Alice droned on; I smiled and nodded. Her words washed over me like waves of warm, soothing sunshine.

...On Priorities

"I got arrested once."

The house was quiet. The boys were down at the court shooting hoops, and Alice and I were sharing confidences over a beer.

"They were moving nuclear waste by rail through California. A bunch of us laid on the tracks." She swatted her bangs back and took another sip of her Bohemia Club.

I was not surprized by Alice's statement. Alice used to be a weekend hippy in Haight Ashbury during the early seventies, and she has a warehouse full of activist stories. Once in awhile, over a beer, she unpacks an interesting one for re-evaluation in light of liberated 'eighties thinking. I am always intrigued by her stories, but remain apathetic to involvement in causes. I grew up in Iowa. All we thought important was the weather, and there's not much you can do about the weather.

"Didn't do a bit of good, did it?" I scoffed. "You're one little person. You didn't stop them from moving the waste or anything. And now you've got a record. You can never run for president."

"I know," sighed Alice. "But it's important to stand up for your convictions." She considered. "Or, lie down for them. And who knows? Maybe some Congressman in

Washington heard about our demonstration, and it made him realign his priorities on transportation of nuclear waste. That's what's important."

Alice thinks politics are important. Yasir Arafat, Moshe Dayan, and the Pope (the Pope!) are on her "Ten Most Wanted" list, and she doesn't want to invite them to dinner. She thinks that it is important to be vocal about political convictions. She thinks sit-ins are a good means of vocalization.

Robert Redford and Richard Dreyfus head my "Ten Most Wanted" list. I am not political. I think politics are like the weather: there's not much you can do about them. Sit-ins can be detrimental to your record, as Alice well knows. They can be dangerous, what with billy clubs and hoses and things. They are time-consuming, and nobody reimburses expenses. If you really want your voice to be heard, it's probably more effective to write a letter to your Congressman.

I popped another beer. Alice leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"Don't tell anybody," she confided seriously. "Saturday I'm going to the Mill Race to a Memorial for All Those Furry Little Critters Who Have Given Their Lives for the Cause of Experimentation. It's for PETIA."

I know Alice holds strong convictions about ethical treatment of animals, but a sit-in is a sit-in.

"Alice, are you nuts? You could get arrested again. Why don't we have a nice garage sale instead? I'll do your ironing. What would Edmund say?"

"He'd be proud." (But then, Edmund also thinks Richard Nixon is God.) "And I buried my ironing board five years ago, but thanks."

Perhaps it sounds like I am overreacting about Alice and her sit-ins. Well, Alice is my friend. I rely on her experiences to broaden my scope of worldly knowledge. She relies on me for stability. I would rather that Alice just sit and knit and not get mixed up in causes. If she has to be involved, I wish she would write a letter to her Congressman. But that is not Alice. She is raising Edmund as a born-again hippy. She thinks I am "vanilla."

Nevertheless, I know that Alice could get in trouble on this one. She works for Opti-Magma, a company which produces laser scanners. Opti relies on government grants for research, and does not appreciate vocal political employees.

"You could get fired," I warned. "You have to think about what's more important: your job or a few scraggly animals. Where are your priorities, Alice?"

"Barbara Gordon Lickey sews kittens' eyes shut!" she yowled. "She rotates their little eyeballs! She cuts off dogs' heads and keep them going on machines!"

"She does it for research," I reasoned. "What if

Edmund needed open heart surgery some day? They'd insert pig valves. I guess that means the pigs'd have to go. How would you feel about animals dying for research then?"

She shook her head stubbornly.

"It's not the same thing. It's important that we let our Congressmen know how we feel on issues. Besides, they'll never fire me. I'll wear a mask. They won't even know who I am. We could take a picnic. The boys would have a great time."

I stalled. Sean and Mickey like picnics, and I knew I had to keep an eye on Alice. Luckily, towards the end of the week, the weather worsened. Alice has aged since Haight Ashbury: she doesn't do sit-ins in the rain anymore.

I know I am vanilla about taking a stand on controversial issues. I just don't see much use in getting involved in matters like politics or cruelty to animals, or abortion, or aid to the Contras. I vote. I pay a little taxes. That is my contribution to controversial issues. I know it is more important to mind your own business and go to work and pay the bills.

Besides, I am not apathetic about everything. Sometimes I do get involved. For instance, take the matter of solar energy. I know how important solar energy is. I'm willing to stand up -- or lie down -- for something

like solar energy.

"Are you skipping your session with the computer again tomorrow?" asked Alice. We were sitting on a blanket in the back yard, just tanning away.

"If old Mr. Sun decides to show his happy face again," I replied, readjusting the straps on my swimming suit. "Gosh, I love the sun. Think I'll move to California."

"I liked living there. Always something going on. Wish I had solar panels, though. Think how cheap utilities would be, even here in Oregon with all the overcast days. And then we could all have skylights. Just think how the plants would grow in a solarium! Solariums would really jazz up these apartments. But, of course, the landlord would never go for the initial outlay. He couldn't think far enough ahead to realize how a solarium would increase property value. Maybe we should circulate a petition. If everybody signed, he couldn't kick us all out, could he?" She peered at me over the top of her sunglasses. "Ah, just how far are you behind in your thesis schedule now?"

I stretched lazily.

"'bout three and a half weeks. But, Alice, think what's important: today one must tan, for tomorrow it may rain."

"Solid Oregon philosophy. If the government would stop throwing so much money down the tubes at Trojan and

Hanover and start spending some on solar research instead, we wouldn't have to worry about nuclear waste disposal. And thermal heat is free. We'd have an unlimited supply of hot water. No more three minute hot showers, then rinsing your hair in cold. Ew, " she shivered. "Did you know that eighty percent of the potential thermal energy in the United States is right here in Oregon, under our very feet? We are walking around on top of one of nature's great magma chambers every day. All that clean, pure energy, and it'd be free." She peered over her sunglasses again. "Ah, are you ever going to write anything again?"

"Don't worry about it." I yawned, thoroughly enjoying the warm sunshine. "I know what's important. I have my priorities on straight."

"Aren't you worried the least tiny bit about your deadline?" she prodded. "Remember, the days are getting shorter. When school starts again, you won't have time to do much writing. You'd better get it done now. Work before pleasure, remember? Grind, grind, grind. You'll never graduate. You want to graduate, don't you?"

I looked at Alice. Here she was, worrying about my thesis -- towards which, at the moment, I felt fairly apathetic. And here I was, finally shedding my vanilla and lying down for an important issue like solar energy. And she didn't even notice my activist stance. The bright sunshine dimmed behind a puffy cloud; a warm breeze

caressed me with a troubled sigh.

It was a dark and storm night, I thought. It was a dark and stormy night. Oh, Alice.

Babysitters

The umbilical cord returned. By day I cleaned toilet bowls; by night, eighty-sixed drunks. In between, the keyboard sizzled.

Armpits and legs grew spiky. The girl at McDonald's learned our first names. Old What's-his-name grew radishes in the carpet. Who's-his-face studied wrestling holds and double-superplexed his brother across the floor.

"Fey!" taunted What's-his-face.

"Maaa!" screamed Who's-his-name.

Reality blurred into fiction. My fingers flew. Somewhere in there, the boys left on their annual two week junket to New York to visit their father, and the house became quiet.

I hate it when they leave: the house is quiet.

But at least their departure afforded me more time to work on the thesis. Existence became a merry-go-round of keyboard, toilet bowls, keyboard, lounge, and keyboard. I quit opening the drapes. The plants wilted. My fingers flew.

Then, one Friday night, reality crashed back with a vengeance.

Being a cocktail waitress isn't terrific, but the job

has a few benefits. A shift is only six hours long -- usually six-to-midnight or nine-to-three -- so you only have to put in thirty hours a week. The pay is lousy but, theoretically at least, tips make up the difference. If you're in a good house, you get to hear a good band five nights a week (and if you're in a bad house, you can always wear earplugs). Working nights isn't bad if you've got a reliable babysitter -- which I do -- for the kids: I can go to school, "moonlight" a day job, and/or carpool Sean and Mickey to my heart's content. And, as Ray Kimber, my boss, says, the rotten Oregon economy will never break us; in fact, says Ray, if the economy is bad, people drink even more.

Ray's right and Ray's wrong: people do drink more; they just tip less. That upsets my economy.

I had gone into work a couple of minutes early: I was working the nine-to-three, and I figured if I got a little of the prep work -- slicing the oranges and lemons, fanning the napkins, stocking the backup beer case for Saturday -- done ahead of time, I might be able to sneak out by quarter past two. Then I could be home and on the computer again by three.

Ray was in his office. He's a pretty good guy: never makes passes, which is unusual in the bar business. I've worked dives where I had to fend off customers AND the bar manager, which doesn't make for enjoyable working

conditions. It's always smart to act businesslike, however, talk like a lady and never get too friendly, just so the Big Guy doesn't get any ideas.

"There's one born every minute!" I called in cheerful cocktail patter as I passed his door. "G'evening, Ray!"

My mind was on the oranges; had Thea ordered a new crate, or was I going to have to wait around for a delivery?

"Peggy," called Ray, "come in here a minute. I need to talk to you."

If she hadn't ordered the oranges, the delivery wouldn't be in until ten. Then I'd have to shoot the bull with Carl, the delivery man, for a couple of minutes, maybe buy him a drink because he always threw in a couple extras for Sean and Mickey. The boys were gone; who'd eat them? Carl liked Mimosas; the orange juice makes them healthier, he says. Couldn't have anything to do with the fact that Carl sells oranges.

"Sit down, hon," said Ray. I sat, snugging my short skirt down as discreetly as possible and keeping both my feet flat on the floor like a typist. No crossed legs in front of the boss; no sense in asking for trouble. The ledger book was open in front of him; I could see a lot of red marks. He leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms behind his neck.

"Peg, I'm afraid I have bad news."

Mimosa, I thought. Orange juice and champagne. Wonder if there's a bottle open; too bad if I have to crack a split for a delivery man.

"Business in the restaurant has been falling off."

"Yah, but the lounge is sure jumping. Great, huh?" I grinned. The restaurant didn't concern me: I don't do food, unless some regular gets the munchies and begs for a late night snack. Then, I'll throw together a ham sandwich and chips if he's in the habit of tipping. My mind was on the oranges and cocktailing: I ticked off the OJ drinks in pre-shift exercise. Orange Blossom: OJ, gin. Tequilla Sunrise: OJ, tequilla, shot of cherry juice. The Sunrises needed fruit and a little umbrella; I'd have to make sure the umbrellas were stocked before I picked up my tray.

"The restaurant business affects us," said Ray.

Harvey Wallbanger: OJ, vodka, float of Galliano.

"Peg, stop grinning like an idiot and listen to me."

Ray leaned forward in his chair; it emitted a rusty squeak.

"Okay, okay!" I wiped the smile off my face. "You're the boss." I leaned forward, too, and looked serious and businesslike. Screwdriver, I thought, OJ, vodka.

"Peg, the restaurant is cutting back on help. They're laying off a few people...Thelma, you know her, and Irene, maybe even Jackie. Thelma used to cocktail in Missouri. She's got more seniority than you, Peg...."

"WHAT?" I gasped (Screwdriver!), "WHAT are you trying

to say, Ray?"

"I'm sorry, Peg; it's the economy."

"You mean Thelma...THELMA, with the gray hair and the lumpy tush...?"

"You can break her in during your shift tonight, but then...."

"You're laying me off, Ray?" Me? The best cocktailer on the strip? He was laying ME off? "Is that what you're trying to say, Ray? You're laying me OFF?" I screeched. "What was all that CRAP you spiel about the economy never hurting US?" I hissed. I hurtled to my feet, short skirt bobbing around pantyhose-clad thighs. Ray's mouth dropped open. "The damn restaurant is falling off because of ME, I suppose! It couldn't be because Thelma can't remember a prime rib from her a...!" I paced back and forth in front of the desk, enraged. "Who do you think draws the customers in here, anyway? All the regulars love me, and I've got the black and blue marks to prove it. You think they're going to enjoy Thelma's supp-hose?" I snarled, baring fangs. "This hole will fall apart without me, just you wait and see. Work in this dump one more night? Why? So you'll give me a good recommendation, Ray? From this dump? Break Thelma in yourself. Screwdriver you, Ray," I hissed. "I QUIT!"

And that was reality, crashing back with a vengeance.

"I understand," said Alice, after I had banged on her

door and pulled her from a warm bed and a hot romance novel. "It just makes you want to blow the whole scene, doesn't it? For crying out loud. Here, let me open your beer, your hands are shaking. Get the hell out of Oregon, I mean. Move. California? The economy is booming there. Have some chips." She shoved the bag and a bowl of her famous homemade guacamole closer. "I loved it when I lived in California. And California has sunshine; not like Oregon, where it rains every day for six months. Or seven. And California has the ocean. I went to the beach almost every day. Of course, Oregon has beaches, too. Just because we never get over there is no excuse. And there's lots of money in California, and movie stars, and...and...good-looking guys and...it just makes you want to move, doesn't it? Far away, I mean? To California. From Oregon?" She looked at me inquiringly.

I glared back.

"I mean," she said, "life's not fair, is it? In Oregon, I mean. It's got to be better someplace else. Except, of course, Sean and Mickey are pretty settled here in school. They have friends and everything. And your family is here; that's always nice. And your mother."

I glared back.

"Well," she said, "and you have school, too. Of course, there are schools in California. But you're a senior; you're almost done. If you transferred, you'd

probably have to take some extra classes. That's how it always works; no institution of higher education ever trusts any other institution of higher education. Especially one that's out of state. If you can just hang in here for a little longer...."

I looked at Alice.

"And," she continued breathlessly, "who needs a stupid job as a cocktail waitress? It's probably like me: after I get through paying the babysitter, I don't have enough money left to buy toothpaste. It'd be better if I were on welfare; at least then I wouldn't have to pay taxes. Or babysitters. Or get up in the morning. But you're a morning person anyway, aren't you? You'd probably get up anyway. Not me; I'd sleep until noon. Then I'd read. Then I'd watch soaps."

"So why work?"

She glared at me, then sighed.

"I know! What we need to do is go out and celebrate. Yes, celebrate. It was a crummy job; you can live without it. You can start sleeping at night like a normal human being. That will lift your spirits. And now that you're not working every night, we can go out. We'll hit all the hot spots. I just heard of a great new place: Jiggles. A guy at work told me they really have good entertainment. We'll go out and drink and dance and carouse. Wouldn't you like to play customer for a change, instead of always

waiting on people? Of course, we'll leave big tips; I know how hard cocktail waitresses work. But it'll be cheap," she added hastily, noticing my frown, "someone will buy drinks for us, for sure. You can wear your pink miniskirt. Besides, we don't have to drink much; we can dance a lot. It's just the point. You like to dance, don't you? Well, don't you?"

I looked at Alice, then arched my eyebrows and nodded ruefully.

"And, besides," she swigged her beer triumphantly, "if you moved, you'd never have to finish your thesis. I want to find out how everything turns out. I WANT to be 'art.' I've kind of grown fond of the idea of being immortalized."

So I calmed down and thought about things. Sean and Mickey were happy. It was nice to have my family near. Cocktailing was a crummy job; certainly -- even in Oregon -- I could find something better. I was about to graduate.

And I didn't admit it, but...California doesn't have Alice.

*

Sean and Mick returned from New York. Alice and Edmund drove out with me to the airport to pick them up.

"Dad has a new UCR," reported Who's-his-face. He was brown from his summer at Martha's Vineyard; new freckles spattered his ruddy cheeks. God, it was good to see him.

"That's nice, honey. Did you have a good vacation?"

"Dad has a new Video-Cam," said What's-his-name. "He took lots of pictures of us. We made up movies. I pretended I was the Godfather."

"Gosh, that sounds like fun!" I enthused. God, it was good to see him.

"Dad had a birthday party for me. Grandma and Grandpa and Uncle Ed and Aunt Marlene came. I got a laser gun and the starship Enterprize and a new ten speed. And a lot of dumb new clothes."

"Ew, is that a new shirt?" asked Alice, smiling at him from the passenger seat. "Nice." She turned around again.

"It has to be ironed," she muttered out the side of her mouth. "Sadistic, isn't he?"

"And I got a new video game and an autographed baseball mitt and we went to see the Mets play."

"Wow, that's terrific!" I thought ruefully of the measley package of baseball cards I had sent him.

"Did you get my card?" asked Alice sweetly.

"Yah, thanks. And dad has a new girlfriend, mom. She's really nice. She likes cats. Her name is Shirley."

"Wash that kid's mouth out with soap," muttered Alice.

And so, day by day, crept September nearer. My fingers flew. Sean and Mickey started back to school the third week in August, and I resolved to be a better mother. I harvested the radishes. I started cooking decent meals again. I baked a cake for the bake sale. I joined the (1)

PTA. And Alice and I resumed cocktail hour.

"Boy, isn't it great the kids are back in school?" she asked one afternoon over a beer. Sean, a mature eleven-year old now, worked on his pre-algebra homework in the living room, and Mickey and Edmund kicked the soccer ball at each other in the back yard.

"The babysitter almost broke me this summer," she confided. "Things have been slow at work, and I only get a few hours' overtime every week. The bills are piling up."

"I know about bills," I said, gulping my beer and shaking my head. "Don't talk to me about bills."

"All right, then. How's the book coming?"

...On Babysitters

Breath comes in short rasps. Eyes bulge wide, disclosing dilated pupils. Terror pierces little hearts, and small hands flutter futilely to chests.

"No," they whisper, "no."

Slowly, eyes riveted, the children back from the doorbell's ring, unconsciously overturning chairs and plants, until the walls enclose them, until they can back no further, until there is no place left to hide.

Slowly, the door creaks open. A huge black shadow falls across the dining room floor.

"I see the children are playing games again," purrs the hulking creature in the doorway. "I LIKE to play

games."

"No, mom, please, no, no!" a hundred small voices wail from the shadows of the living room. "You don't have to go to the PIA meeting! Brother Dan won't expel us! We were only joking, honest!"

The babysitter has arrived.

Alice and I are fortunate enough to share that true, rare gem: an excellent, reliable, responsible, available babysitter. Misako came to us in the dead of night, a refugee from a broken home. Her parents were in the process of breaking it.

"Mind if I stay here for awhile?" she had asked, clogging Alice's doorway. "They're at it again."

Across the street, dozens of little Japanese people scurried from Misako's house to the safety of their Toyotas. Misako's father, Ronald, a three hundred-eighty pound Polish ex-Marine from Guam, had just pitched her Japanese mother's Buddah statue through the gahonzon (prayer shrine).

"No more prayer meetings!" yowled Ron. "No more chanting! The ohms are driving me wacko!"

Loud crashes emanated from the living room. Shrill Japanese curses rent the air. Ron's mammoth figure cowered in the doorway before the advancing dynamo that was his wrathful, tiny, Japanese wife. In her hand Suwa brandished a cast iron frying pan.

"Mitchi yooka pahri ana!" she screamed. "Sumi dana itchi oto!"

"I'll take off my shoes!" groveled Ron. "I'll eat with chopsticks! Just no more prayer meetings! I can't take no more ohms!"

The frying pan took flight and so did Ron. With an angry backward shake of his fist, he jumped into his pickup and roared away down Second Street. Little Japanese people emerged from shadows and slowly reentered the house, chanting.

"It's Friday night," Misako had explained, helping herself to potato chips and soda in Alice's kitchen. "Mom's night for chanting."

Luckily, Suwa's nights for chanting are Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays -- the rest of the week, Sue chants elsewhere -- so Alice and I always have an available babysitter.

Misako has inherited her mother's beautiful Asian features and her father's over-abundant size. She has grown from an almond-eyed, headstrong, chunky pre-teen into an almond-eyed, hot-tempered sumo wrestler before our very eyes. She tolerates Edmund, Sean, and Mick. She protects them from bullies. She plays G.I. Joe and soccer with them. She knows every dirty little trick and evil twist of mind that has ever occurred to any of them. Somewhere, deep in her half-Polish, half-Japanese heart of hearts, she

loves them as one would love pesky little brothers. And, as any self-respecting big sister would, she also strikes terror into their breasts.

"Yaka mooshy!" growls Misako. They shut up.

Misako can be bribed. For five dollars, she will clean a boy's bedroom, knowing intrinsically which is trash and which, precious memento. For three dollars, she will deliver a paper route (four if it is raining). For two, she will patch a bicycle tube and replace the tire. She will take the boys swimming for the price of her admission, plus popcorn and cotton candy. She will accept, in lieu of cash, a partially used three-month bus pass.

And Misako is a romantic.

"I'd just love to have my big, strong, handsome Prince Charming come riding up on a white charger and sweep me off my feet," breathes Misako ecstatically, chubby hands clasped, eyes upturned towards heaven.

Alice is pragmatic.

"It'd have to be a Clydesdale, and Prince Charming had better be in shape," she mutters out the side of her mouth.

Misako has taken the babysitting course offered by Sacred Heart Hospital. She passed with the highest grades ever recorded, and earned the coveted Best Babysitter of the Difficult Child Award. When Alice and I close the door behind us, we are confident that our sons are in caring, responsible hands.

"I need time to myself without you brats around," growls Misako at the boys. "I want to read 'A Glorious Passion.' There's this handsome duke, see, and he..."

"Let us stay up," beg the boys. "Wrestle Mania comes on at nine. They're having this contest. You get to vote for your favorite wrestler. We'll be good, promise!"

"That wrestling junk is all fake," says Misako. "That kind of trash is not good for innocent minds. Now, get to bed! March," she orders, thrusting out her bulk and pointing up the stairs. They march. They have all been victims of Misako's vicious four-letter-Japanese-word tongue lashings. They have also been bounced off walls.

"How's it going?" Alice called across the lawn as she got out of her car. She was just getting home from work, and I was on my way out to check the dreaded contents of the mailbox. I don't know how many times I've asked the mailman not to leave bills.

"So-so. I made it through classes anyway. I only slept through the last two. Have you recovered yet?" Alice and I had done a little partying the night before at the Bavarian Club. The partying had been my idea; the Bavarian Club had been hers.

"I'm fine, I guess," said Alice. "The usual. Edmund is fighting me about helping out around the house, but that's normal."

"I know. Sean and Mickey act like they have an allergy to dirty dishes. Look, Alice, about last night," I began as she scooped her mail out of her box and gave it a cursory shuffle. "I know I said I wanted to hear something a little different, but I'm not sure the Bavarian Club is exactly right for me."

"We had a great time, didn't we?" said Alice defensively. "The cloggers were terrific, weren't they? And the beer was cheap."

"That's true...I mean, the beer WAS cheap, but..."

"And the music was thumping. 'Omph-pa, omph-pa-pa.'"

"Oh, my, yes."

"And the square-dance caller asked you out for dinner."

"Oh, my, yes."

"And remember Jiggles?"

"You didn't tell me about the boobs," I accused.

"So what's to complain?"

So what's to complain? My taste in music just happens to run in a somewhat different vein than Alice's. I scanned my mail.

"Bills, bills, bills," I complained some more. "Holy cow. My telephone bill is thirty-four dollars!"

"Mine's always twice that," bragged Alice. "I call my brother in San Francisco nearly every week."

"Yes, but I don't have a brother in San Francisco."

Holy cow! There are nine long distance calls to Portland. The only person I know in Portland is my sister, and she and I take turns calling every other month. There's got to be a mistake."

"Call Ma Bell," advised Alice. "Complain."

"I will, don't you worry. I can't believe an outfit as big as the telephone company can't keep its records straight. And what say we try something a little different from the Bavarian next weekend? I'll set it up with Misako."

The days passed quickly. By Saturday, Alice had put in six hours of overtime and I had worked two cleaning jobs, so we had our mad money for the weekend. We were headed for Rainbow's End, the swingiest country spot in town. At seven-thirty, Alice popped over.

"Peggy, I don't have anything to wear," she whimpered. "My clogs will look funny."

"Wear anything," I reassured her. "Boots, fringe...you know. The last time I went swinging, there was this guy with a derringer earring, and the derringer was real. In a crowd like that, how can you go wrong?" I lathered my bangs with mousse.

"I don't own boots," whined Alice. "I don't own fringe."

"Better decide quick -- Misako will be here in half an

hour."

The doorbell rang. It was Misako.

"Hi," she rumbled. "Where are the boys?"

Alice and I looked at each other in amazement. Rule number one of the Babysitter's Handbook was being violated: Be On Time, But Don't Be Early (you'll get suckered into helping with the dishes).

"They're in the living room," I answered, eyebrows arched, "but we don't start paying until we walk out the front door."

"That's okay." She shrugged her ponderous shoulders, sauntered into the living room, and plopped down on the floor beside Edmund, who had begged to spend the night.

"Pre-wrestling warm-up? You guys watching that Junk again?"

"Yah," gushed Mickey. "Isn't it great? Andre the Giant and Hulk Hogan are gonna fight for the belt tonight."

"Who's the one with the yellow hair? The one who's ripping his shirt off with his teeth?"

"That's The Hulk. He's nearly seven feet tall. And Andre is almost eight feet. He really is a giant."

"What a body," breathed Misako, looking closer. "What biceps."

"Isn't that sweet?" Alice whispered. "Misako's talking wrestling with them. It must be part of 'Show Interest in the Children's Activities.'"

Alice finally got dressed and we went out and ended up closing the Rainbow. She was a big hit: everybody adored her clogs and dirdnyl. A biker and a cowboy almost got into fisticuffs over her, until she threatened to dance with neither of them ever again. By the end of the evening, she had mastered the Cowboy Shuffle and the Texas Two-Step.

Thank God the boys slept in Sunday morning; I am not as young as I used to be.

The doorbell rang.

"Ahhhhhh," I groaned. "'Morning, Alice."

She sauntered in.

"Do you have coffee?" she asked casually.

"We had a great time, didn't we?" I was immediately defensive. "That guitar player really burned those strings. I know the drinks weren't cheap, but your friends kept buying them for us, right?"

"That's true...I mean, THOSE PEOPLE kept buying..."

"And that guitar player was really twangin' those strings."

"Oh, my, yes."

"And..."

"Actually," said Alice, "what I was thinking about is some sort of compromise."

It is not easy to find music in Eugene or Springfield which is compatible to both a schottische lover and a

country music freak, but I was willing to try. We tossed it around for awhile.

"Let's check out the Valley River Inn," Alice suggested. "They usually have rhythm and blues. Maybe I could handle that."

"I'm flexible," I replied quickly. I was familiar with the current group at the Inn: upon request, they would play swing. "The only problem with the Inn is there usually aren't many unattached males around. That means we have to buy our own."

"I can handle it for one night."

"I don't know if I can," I sighed. "Remember my telephone bill? No mistake. The operator verified the calls had originated from this house."

"To who?"

"I don't know, the number is disconnected now. I told her the only person I know in Portland is my sister, and that's not my sister's number. I told her I cannot believe a company as big as Ma Bell cannot get its act together. I told her I would take this to corporate headquarters."

"Have you asked Sean and Mickey about this? They know how to put their little fingers in the dial, too, you know."

"I asked them if they had made any long distance calls. Many long distance calls. They both deny."

"Fight it, then," said Alice. "And don't worry about

the money. I got in a little overtime again. I'll stake you to a glass of wine."

Saturday night came, and Misako arrived.

"How long are you going to be out?" she asked as she edged through the doorway.

"Yah, how long?" asked Edmund, who had been eager to spend the night again. Sean and Mickey stood nonchalantly in the hallway, waiting to give us good-bye kisses.

"My, how sweet it is," I said. "Good-bye kisses. I've had to beg for these for years."

"We'll probably close the joint," Alice answered suspiciously. "Why all this sudden interest?"

"I need to know in case of emergency," replied Misako. "It says so in the Handbook."

"'In case of emergency,'" Alice snorted as we pulled out of the driveway. "If anybody ever tried to break in, Misako'd rip him limb from limb. I wonder if she's found a guy who likes giant-sized girlfriends?"

The Valley River Inn was not entirely a success. The music was acceptable and the atmosphere lovely, but the unattached males were all stodgy types who looked like they were hiding wedding rings in their suit pockets. We let them buy us drinks, then waved good-bye at the doorway.

"It was okay," said Alice as she got in the car. "It is nice to see linen tablecloths and candlelight once in

awhile. But the Rhythmettes just had no zing. How can you polka to a waltz?"

"You're right," I sighed, "but let's keep trying. The Springfield Centennial Celebration is next weekend. There's going to be street dancing and different kinds of bands on every corner."

"We can walk from block to block and both be happy," she chortled. "Don't worry: be happy. To next weekend!"

The boys slept in again on Sunday. Alice and I were surprized.

"Misako never lets them stay up late," said Alice. "She likes to read her Gothic novels in peace and quiet. I wonder what is going on?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I am never going to mix red and white wine again," I swore, brushing my aching temple with my fingers.

By Monday afternoon, I had recovered. I met Alice at the mailboxes.

"You aren't going to believe this," I said. "Remember my telephone bill? Well, the operator called back. She said there are eighteen more calls on my bill to the same number."

"Wow," said Alice, impressed. "I thought it had been disconnected."

"She said it was reconnected on Saturday. Now it's disconnected again."

"Are you sure this isn't just some guy you've picked up in a bar?" asked Alice. I gave her a scorching look.

"She said the number was listed to a 'Russell Manilla.' I don't know anybody named Manilla. I don't even know anybody named Russell. I'm going to fight it," I vowed. "I told her I would take out a newspaper ad and warn the public about the incompetency of Ma Bell. I told her I would sue. I told her I live in a duplex, and maybe they have my line crossed with somebody else's."

"Wait a minute. I live in the other half of the duplex. They don't have any lines crossed." We glared at each other.

"Wait a minute," said Alice again. "Wait a minute. Russell Manilla...Wrestle Mania. I think it is time to call a conference."

Sean and Mickey and Edmund showed up under motherly diress, and Misako came grudgingly (we had refused to pay her for her time).

"It's not my fault," defended Misako. "They wanted to stay up and watch wrestling. I was just being nice."

"Misako's in love," explained Sean. "She thinks Andre the Giant is a hunk."

"All those muscles," breathed Misako.

"I like Randy Macho Man Savage," spoke up Mickey.

"I like Jake the Snake," put in Edmund.

"They were having a contest," explained Misako. "We

voted. You just call this number, and...I didn't know it was long distance. Maybe you can take my share out of babysitting fees."

"At least we have a free babysitter for the Centennial Celebration," said Alice later, when we were alone.

"You mean I have a free babysitter, unless you want to pitch in on the telephone bill."

"Okay, okay," she corrected. "Well, at least we both have free dishwashers. Isn't it nice how things work out?"

Alice is my friend, and I did not hit her.

Tuna Surprise

September blew in on brisk morning winds, clothed in her traditional kalideoscope of yellows, browns, and scarlets. Nighttime temperatures dipped to the mid-thirties, a harbinger of winter to come. But the days remained warm and sunny, and I made use of them. The manuscript thickened.

"Hi," called Alice across the driveway one sunny Tuesday morning. I had just pulled in from delivering the boys to school and had an active day at the computer planned. "Got time for coffee? My boss gave everybody on my line the morning off -- we nearly doubled production this quarter. Boy, I'll say this for Opti-Magma: they pay slave wages, but they sure give us a lot of days off."

"Hey, great! Gosh, it's good to see you. Sure, let's party." We trooped into the house. It seemed like a year since I'd seen Alice: I'd been so intense with the computer. I fired up the coffee pot as Alice nestled into her favorite chair, talking, as usual, all the while.

"Boy, isn't the weather great? I just love cool weather," she rambled. "I seem to have so much more energy.

"My mother's garden is doing great. She's been

loading me down with cucumbers and zucchini. You need any zucchini? I've about run out of recipes. Zucchini bread, zucchini pudding, zucchini salad, raw zucchini. Why do people always plant so much zucchini? Zucchini cookies. Edmund's complexion is turning green. Next year, I'm going to tell her to plant squash. At least you can dry squash and use it for a center piece. And you should see her tomatoes!" I filled two cups with steaming brew and joined Alice at the table.

"Sugar. You always forget sugar," she said, popping up. She dug through the silverware drawer and came up with a spoon, then helped herself from the canister. I like my coffee black: why dilute all that super-charging caffeine?

"Edmund's got a great teacher this year," she said, settling herself again. "I love new school years: he's able to start fresh again, with no preconceived notions on the teacher's part."

"Right," I agreed. "Fresh starts are good for everybody. Mickey signed up for touch football instead of soccer this year. He says he wants to get in training, so he'll be strong enough to beat up Sean when he teases. And Sean's taking the new computer class. He wants to learn graphic design. Actually," I wiggled my eyebrows, "I think he wants to learn how to draw dirty pictures."

Alice laughed.

"Edmund just uses pencil and paper. I find them

stuffed under his mattress." She sipped. "They're at that age, I guess. But, so far, things are going great. Here it is, the third week in September, and I've only had to go and talk to his teacher twice. Fresh starts are great. If he keeps up the good behavior, I promised I'd buy him a bike for..."

"Wait a minute," I broke in on her rambling. "This is the second week in September."

"Where have you been?" she scoffed. "Tied to the computer, I know, I know. Dig your head out from the sand, lady. This is September twenty-first."

"Oh, NO!" I wailed. I made a dash for the kitchen. The calendar still read August.

"Oh, NO!" I wailed, flipping August. "See, right here, it's only..."

"It's September twenty-first. Remember, last Wednesday was Open House. We met the teachers. Except, I'd already met Edmund's teacher before, of course. And Edmund spilled punch on Brother Dan's shoes. I know it was an accident."

"Oh, NO!" I wailed. "I have to register Thursday. I thought I had another week."

"Tough cookies," she said. "You're a senior now. You get a fresh start, too. Fresh starts are good for everybody, remember? Read it and weep."

I wept.

As much as I hated to see it, Registration Day had dawned.

Bright and early Thursday morning I put on a little makeup and trudged for Mac Court. Only eight-thousand other eager beavers had had the same idea. But I elbowed my way past disgruntled freshmen, sophomores, and Juniors (after all, I was a senior) and signed on the dotted line for sixteen credits. My printout (minus parentheses) read: Math 101 (ugh); American Literature before 1900 4796; Chaucer 428M; Major American Writers 401; and Advanced Composition 411 (maybe I could work some of the thesis stories into comp assignments and kill two birds with one stone). By rights, I should have taken the math class earlier in my college career, but who would ever have dreamed I wouldn't give up and drop out long before? Certainly not me. And who wants to go through the pain of math unless it's absolutely necessary?

I sauntered through first day classes the following Monday. Chaucer promised a foreign language: Middle English. The lit classes promised challenge. Math was expectedly ugly. But comp -- my passion! -- proved to hold an interesting bonus: the professor was cute, and he didn't wear a wedding ring.

...On Tuna Surprise

"Salsa?" squeaked Alice, eyeing the bushel of

tomatoes, green chilies, and fresh garlic bulbs incredulously. "YOUR boyfriend wants ME to make salsa?"

"He's not my boyfriend. He's a friend. We're friends," I insisted. "I like him. I LIKE him. But we're friends. Just friends. And besides, he thinks I'm making the salsa. I don't know how it happened. Oh, Alice, what am I going to do?"

Of course Alice knew what I meant.

I am a wonderful person. I work, I go to school, I am an immaculate housekeeper (except during mid-terms and finals, when housework gets a bit out of hand), and I am one terrific mother (almost always). I do, however, have one minor shortcoming: I hate to cook. Kitchens confuse me. All that chopping and kneeding and baking and braising and stuffing and zapping, and what do you get? Lumps of different colored things that get gobbled in ten minutes and then they're gone forever, and Sean and Mickey squabble over whose night it is for the dishes. When the boys ask what's for dinner, I say Tuna Surprise. They know this means I don't know what's for dinner yet, but they can be almost assured that it won't contain tuna. I believe that leftovers have a second purpose in life: they keep the garbage disposal clean. Fast food is what heaven is all about. When Sean and Mickey go to visit their daddy in the summer, I pride myself on not cooking. I drink a lot of milk and orange juice, and accept every lunch and dinner

invitation which comes my way.

Alice, however, loves to chop and saute and braize and zap. She stuffs baked potatoes with melted cheese and chopped onions and gaucamole. She freezes the potato peelings to flavor lentil soup, lines the cat litter tray with the onion skins, and plants the avocado pit. She makes savory pot roast with carrots and onions, and creates meat pie from the leftovers. She even saves coffee grounds. She dries them and sprinkles them on her kitchen floor before she sweeps. She says they keep the dust balls from puffing around.

So of course Alice knew what I meant.

"You told him you'd make salsa?" she asked. "You implied that you c-o-o-k?"

I sighed. Samuel Rosenthal is an English professor at the university. He orchestrates low pressure upper-division classes conducive to creative writing, and I like his style a lot. I shared some of my thesis stories with Sam, and he uttered semi-enthusiastic mumblings.

Sam is intelligent, he has a droll sense of humor and a bit of distinguishing grey in his beard, and is an excellent cook. Unfortunately, I can't aesthetically picture us as a couple: Sam is five feet six and weighs a hundred and twenty pounds. I feel like a giant slobbering Oregon buffalo butt every time I see him. But an idea was brewing in my mind. Alice is tiny. Alice is intelligent.

Alice is droll. Alice has a grey hair. Alice cooks. Samuel and Alice would make the perfect couple.

And besides, it might be nice to have an English professor hanging around the neighborhood. I could ask him for free advice should writer's block again threaten.

"Sam's great," I said. "You'll love him."

She eyed me suspiciously.

"There's more," I admitted. "I called to tell him how my thesis was going. He asked what I was cooking for dinner. I told him Tuna Surprise. He says he loves Tuna Surprise. I invited him to dinner. Oh, Alice, what am I going to do?"

So Alice sighed and hefted the bushel of tomatoes and took it home and combed her hair and put on a clean sweat shirt and came back with noodles and sour cream and crushed potato chips and chopped chilies (I had a can of tuna, thank God), and she told me how to make Tuna Surprise.

"A few more chilies," she directed, tasting.

"He doesn't like spicy."

"A few more chilies," she insisted, "won't kill anybody."

"Okay, okay, but when you make the salsa, just go easy on the chilies."

Sam arrived.

"So this is Alice, the famous ex-hippy from Haight Ashbury," said Sam. "Or should I say infamous? I've read

so much about you."

Alice glanced darkly at me.

"Hi," she said. "I was just leaving. I had to borrow a cup of sugar."

"So he's cute," she whispered as I ushered her out the door. "So I'll make the damn salsa. But tell him you need canning jars."

Sam and I talked about famous authors and the merits of jogging and the semester system versus terms and the thesis, and I enjoyed his company very much. Sam is the nicest, kindest man I have met in a long time.

"Ah, Tuna Surprise," breathed Sam, sniffing the appetizing aroma of good home cooking. "A favorite." He smiled sweetly at me. Unexpectedly, my heart did a little flip-flop. "I love a woman who can cook," he said, patting my hand. And, for some reason, my heart sank a little.

*

Weekdays are busy, and I didn't see Alice until the following Friday. We settled into our accustomed chairs and prepared for the ritual weekend cocktail hour. Alice had furnished some of her famous guacamole, and I popped the beers.

"What a week," sighed Alice, settling back and putting her stockinged feet on the empty chair. "Edmund got in a food fight at school and got suspended for three days. The fly wheel is going in my car. The cats have had diarrhea,

and my boss had the audacity to accuse me of having a bad attitude. So how did dinner go?" she asked. "Did Sam like Tuna Surprise?"

"I think you overdid the chilies on purpose," I accused, looking at her over lowered eyebrows. "Dinner was spicy. But Sam was a gentleman. He ate two helpings. And he drank lots of water."

"Ah, well," said Alice. "Such is life. I have a confession to make. I didn't have time to get around to the tomatoes. They rotted. How are you going to explain that one to him?"

"I have a confession to make, too," I retorted smugly. "I gave the leftover Tuna Surprise to your cats."

Alice glowered again.

"A week of stinking cat litter," she muttered.

"I have another confession to make," I said. "Sam gave me another bushel of tomatoes. And four dozen canning jars."

"He's cute," said Alice, "but he's no Dustin Hoffman. Are you sure he's worth all this?"

I gritted my teeth. I like Sam. I REALLY like Sam. But I knew that he and Alice would make the perfect couple. Then I looked at the bushel of hated tomatoes.

"He's worth it," I sighed. "He's worth it. Hang in there. I'll blanch the tomatoes. Just tell me how to blanch."

*

On Saturday I blanched. Then I took the tomatoes to Alice's and set them on the front porch and rang her doorbell and ran. Sunday morning, Alice brought me six jars of salsa.

"That's ALL?" I wailed. "He's given me two bushels of tomatoes."

"They really cooked down," said Alice. "And I kept four jars for effort expended. I hate tomatoes. I hate chilies. I hate salsa. And I hate Sam. You explain it."

*

"That's ALL?" exclaimed Sam. "I gave you two bushels of tomatoes, and all I get is two jars?"

"They really cooked down," I explained. "And it's really spicy and you'll probably hate it, but my kids really liked it and they ate a bunch and...I...kept a few jars for my effort...and...and...I have a confession to make, Sam. I...hate...to...."

Afterwards, Sam shook his head and looked at the two jars.

"Why did I buy hybrids?" he muttered under his breath. "Why did I hoe them and water them all summer? Why did I cut up garbage for mulch?"

"They really did cook down," I said defensively.

"And a schiksa who doesn't cook," muttered Sam. "What is the meaning of life?"

*

"So," said Alice a few weeks later. Life had been spinning right along, and the salsa was long gone, but not forgotten. "So. How are things?"

"He's great," I replied happily. "He's intelligent and fun to be with and interesting and I really enjoy his company. And he is kind, and very understanding. He didn't eat his salsa fast enough and it got moldy, and he had to throw it away."

"So," said Alice. "I take it he's still speaking to you."

"Thank God," I smiled. "I think he's about ten feet tall."

"Such is life," mused Alice, sipping. "Tuna Surprise. Such is life."

Honors College

"SYLLOGISM:

English majors become teachers.

I am an English major.

Therefore, I will become..."

I shuddered. Somehow, the syllogism had broken down again.

"Alice, help," I begged. "I'm having trouble with my syllogisms."

"Ha HA," said Alice. "You've got your syllogisms down pat. You've just got trouble facing reality."

I gave her a sour look.

"You promised you'd help," I accused, ignoring her implication. "I've got about six hours of homework to do this afternoon, and then I've got to make dinner for the kids. Sam's coming at seven. I won't even have time for a shower."

"That's what you get for trying to have a social life when you're in the Honors College," responded Alice maliciously. "How about,

'Plasma donors make money.

I am and English major.

Therefore, I will become a plasma donor.'

"It may be true," I sighed, "but it doesn't work as a syllogism. Keep trying."

...On The Honors College

Alice says the Honors College is sadistic, and that Honors College students are masochistic: The HC and its students deserve each other. I don't really think I am masochistic, but I am the first to admit that membership in the old HC may have drawbacks.

The Honors College produces successful, well-rounded students. HC requirements are stringent: a computer science major cannot wriggle out of taking a foreign language; a Poli-Sci major must take Ancient Lit; an English major must (shudder) struggle through math. Classes are intense. In high school, prospective HC students were accustomed to getting straight A's. But once in the HC, EVERYBODY struggles for the A, and there are only so many A's to go around. Someone will end up with a B. Someone will end up (shudder again) with a C.

The pressure doesn't let up after HC requirements are fulfilled. Then, the HC student must sally forth into the

cold, cruel world of the university to complete his major's requirements. University professors use HC students for target practise. "So they think they're smart," say university professors. "I'll teach them what smart is." The poor overachieving HC student is marked. I have friends who only admit to being in the Honors College behind the privacy of closed doors.

"You're dating Sam," reasoned Alice. "Sam is an English professor. Why don't you ask Sam to help you?"

"Wow, that's a perfect syllogism!" I marveled. "Let me make a note of that." I scribbled a bit. Then I thought better of it. "No, I can't use his name. It would be unethical. It would be like taking advantage of our friendship."

"You take advantage of me all the time."

"That's different. You beg for it." I checked the clock. Time was getting short. "Oh, hell," I said. "I'll never have time to get all this done. I'm going to call Sam and ask if he'll bring a pizza for the boys so I won't have to make dinner."

"This is taking advantage," trilled Alice.

"This is different. This is friendship."

There may be drawbacks to being in the Honors College, but there are also compensations. Classes are small, and each student is an individual and not a social security number. We have our own library, computer lounge, and kitchen. We have our own xerox machine. We have our own lockers, so we can stow notebooks and umbrellas and not have to lug excess baggage all over campus. We each have our own advisor, who keeps close tabs on us and is always available with wise advice and sound counsel.

There are university students who are smarter. There are university students who are prettier, richer, and more athletic. But collectively, there are no students anywhere who are such dedicated, frenetic, frantic overachievers as the students of the HC. That is how I got to meet Sam. Few under-graduate normal achievers would ever have tried to get into his Advanced Comp class. I count Sam as an Honors College compensation, although he is associated with the university.

Hours passed. Alice went home, and I struggled through math. Syllogisms I can figure out; x's and y's elude me. Formulas danced through my head and became

entertwined. $M=y_2-y_1$ over m_2-m_1 . Or is it $y-y_1=m(x-x_1)$? Is there a difference? What is the difference? When do you use the first, and when do you use the second? Who knows? Who cares?

Sam brought pizza and I uncrossed my eyes and kissed the boys good-bye, and Sam and I went out and experienced a social life.

"Today was really rough," said Sam over dinner. "I've introduced some new concepts, and all week students have been coming to talk during office hours. My review is coming up, and I have to get all this documentation together. I've had to put my research on hold." He peered closely at me through the candlelight. "You're quiet, Peg. You look a little pale. Is something wrong?"

I sighed. "It's not you." I sighed again. "I'm sorry about the students. I'm sorry about the review. I'm sorry about the research. It's algebra," I said. "I think people who put numbers and letters together ought to be shot."

"How is the old plasma donor?" asked Alice the next afternoon. "Did Sam help you get your syllogisms on straight?"

"Ye old plasma donor is just fine, thank you," I responded with a smile. "I didn't ask Sam to help me with syllogisms. That's his job. It would be like taking

advantage of our friendship. But listen:

'English professors teach English.

I am an English major.

Therefore, Sam is tutoring me in math.'"

"It works for me," said Alice. "Does Sam understand?"

"He did mutter, 'What is the meaning of life?' again."

So goes life in the Honors College.

Overnights

I wish this story were a little more juicy. I wish that some bright morning, either Alice or I would wake up and look out our respective bedroom windows and espy a white Charger (1990 model, of course, with power steering, power brakes, climate control, rear window defrost, and a tank full of gas) sitting in the other's driveway. Curious, then either Alice or I would quickly pull on our respective jeans and head to the other's house for coffee. Either Alice or I would presently open the door with tousled hair and a contented Cheshire cat smile on her face. Gone would be the flannel night shirts. Gone would be the Long Johns. A silvery peek-a-boo negligee would scarcely conceal the charms of either Alice or me.

"Sorry, I cannot coffee right now," would say either Alice or I, and the other would spot articles of male apparel flung in careless abandon the length of the staircase. A happy sigh would escape the lips of either Alice or me. "I have... a guest."

Wishes are like dreams: ashes and dust. This is not a juicy story.

...On Overnights

When a mother is single, she must accept full responsibility for molding her child into a caring, responsible future adult. Single mothers with daughters have it easy: they can instill responsibility in the comfort of their own homes, what with housework and dirty dishes and sewing. Single mothers with sons sometimes find the job a little more difficult. Let's face it: aversion to dust balls under beds and urine streaks on bathroom walls is just not inherent in the male gene. The caring part comes easily for sons. The rest has got to be worked at.

Mickey came tumbling across the school yard and flung the car door open with all the eager energy a nine-year old can muster. His cheeks were rosy from the nippy December air and his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"GREAT news, mom!" he exploded. "A.J.'s birthday is Friday after school his mom is picking us up A.J. says bring a sleeping bag I know just what he wants for a present he says he collects old coins we have those old coins in that box out in the garage it lasts 'til noon on Saturday his mom cooks French toast on a real griddle she'll bring us home when it's over!"

"GREAT news," I smiled fondly at him. It was the week before midterms -- Midterm Dead Week -- and I was dead. Visions of a quiet evening of quality time spent with Sean.

a little studying in my room, and then early-to-bed-for-me danced in my head.

Sean came streaking across the school yard and flung the car door open with all the eager energy an eleven-year old can muster. His cheeks were rosy from the nippy December air and his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"GUESS what Friday is!" he exploded. "Our class is going on Retreat with Brother Dan we get to ski at Springriver Edmund is bringing his rubber snake we're supposed to bring ten dollars for food more if we want to buy anything like rosaries or stuff we're going to visit the lava beds we'll be home around five o'clock on Saturday parents have to pick us up at school I just found out!"

"GREAT news," I smiled fondly at him. I was worn out from all that studying. My brain was over-loaded with academia. Now, visions of a mad night of alcoholic beverages, wild dancing, partying, and general decadent carousing danced in my head. So? I'm flexible. I could sleep late and study on Saturday.

Friday came and the boys went and I gussied myself up and caroused. The campus taverns close at two a.m., but they don't start kicking people out 'til 2:30. A bunch of us went for breakfast at Hoot's, and then somebody said I have a new cassette. I think I glimpsed the clock just before I oozed into my own little bed. I think it said 5:10.

At first I thought little elves with big hammers were playing the Alleluiah Chorus inside my head. Then I almost realized it was the telephone. Disembodied, my hand reached out and knocked it to the floor. I grappled blindly.

"Ahhhhhhh," I said.

"...mom!" said someone, "...cold...skiing..." There was a lot of static on somebody's line.

"Ahhhhhhh," I said.

"...fine," said somebody. "Don't worry...snake..." said somebody. "...hair..."

"Ahhhhhhh?" I said.

"...remembered," said somebody, "...responsibility...route."

"?" I said.

"...route. Paper route."

It came through loud and clear. Paper route. The paper route.

"Ahhhhhhh-sh..." I managed. "Ahhhhhhh-kay. Ahhhhhh-kay. Have gud time, hun. 'Bye."

I staggered to my feet and pulled on my jeans. Such a short time ago, they had been dancing so merrily.

I fumbled for the route book. I stumbled out the front door. An icy blast plowed me in the face. An icy, wet blast. An icy, wet, dark, dreary. Oregon winter blast. My car was not in the driveway. Someone must have driven

me home. The papers. The papers. How am I going to pick up the papers?

I knocked on Alice's door. I knocked again, quietly. I knocked again, louder. Louder and longer and louder and longer. Those elves.

"Morning," said Alice. "I suppose you realize already that it's five thirty a.m. What's up?"

"Ahhhhhhh."

"I'll make coffee."

"Ahhhhhhh."

"Wait a minute. I'll get my coat."

"The house was so quiet last night with Edmund gone," said Alice, driving. "I read a book and listened to Christmas carols and ate fudge. Does 368 S still get a paper?"

"Ahhhhhhh."

"I washed my hair and did my toenails," said Alice, driving. "What about 295 R?"

"Ahhhhhhh."

"Gosh, I wish it was a little lighter. I almost missed the cul-de-sac. How about 372 Q?"

"Ahhhhhhh."

"Want to stop at Safeway and get donuts?" asked Alice.

"Ahhhhhhh," I replied, flinging open the car door.

"Oh, cripes. Lean out farther. Here, hand me the route book."

On Sunday afternoon, Alice popped over.

"Gosh, I really want to thank you." I carefully shook my pounding head; occasional spasms still gripped my tummy. "You are true blue and a Girl Scout. You went way above and beyond the call of duty this time, Alice. I'm glad somebody in this neighborhood shows a little responsibility."

"Think nothing of it," she replied modestly. "It was nothing. Don't mention it. You would have done the same for me. Got time for a beer?"

"Ahhhhhhh."

A Day at the Zoo

Friday night. Alice and me and the beer.

"I can't believe this week," said Alice, slouching back in her chair. "The ice and the snow. Brother Dan called me Tuesday at work. Edmund had slipped on the ice in front of school. He split the root of his incisor and was in the orthodontist's chair for an hour and a half. I've been late to work twice; my car slips and slides all over the road. You'd think a town as big as Springfield could afford a snow plow. The boss put me on Official Warning. One more day of being late and I owe them Unpaid Vacation. The pipes froze in my garage. I haven't been able to wash since Tuesday. The landlord came to fix the pipes instead of a plumber. He said all the plumbers were taking appointments for next week. I had to hide all the cats in the car. I had to hide their litter pan under my bed. They almost froze," said Alice. "My bedroom stinks. I thought he'd never get those pipes fixed."

I slumped in my chair.

"You're lucky," I said. "My pipes didn't freeze. I ran my washer. The hoses had frozen instead. The washer backed up in the garage. What a mess," I said. "The garbage men didn't come. They said, 'Just put out double

next week.' Easy to say, if you've got fifty garbage cans. The kids were playing ball. My windshield got broken, but Nobody did it. And you know that nobody ever knows who Nobody is." Alice understood. "And," I wailed, "my thesis advisor hinted she'd like to see a 'little something' by next Monday."

"Or else," sighed Alice. "I know. The gods'll have mercy the day it snows four feet on the mall, hell freezes over, the Ayatolla speaks at Mac Court, and the Ducks go to the Rose Bowl." A light gleamed in her eye. "Give her a shot of tomorrow," she chortled evilly. "It'd serve her right for demanding creativity on a timetable. Whatever happens, give her a shot of tomorrow."

...On A Day at the Zoo

Saturday morning. Up early, doing homework in bed. If I'm quiet, maybe Sean and Mickey will sleep late. Seven a.m., phone rings. It starts.

"The terrorists are trapped in their high chairs throwing scrambled eggs at each other, so I thought I'd give you a ring. How's life?" chirped Kate. My sister was calling from Portland to catch up on things. The terrorists are my nieces, Babies Leah and Julie, and they are adorable and perfect.

"Hey, great to hear from you," I said happily. Kate

is my only sister, but even if she weren't, she'd still be my favorite. "I got up early, but I'm still lounging in bed. Alice is giving me a ride to the body shop to pick up my car in about fifteen minutes," I said, checking the alarm clock. "Life is usual. The house is a pit. The washer's been on the fritz since Monday and I've got dirty clothes up to the armpits. The repairman's coming this morning, thank God. Mickey's football game is at ten. Can you believe it? In this weather? And," I inhaled impressively, "Sam is throwing a little get-together tonight for a visiting lecturer, and he invited me. Me," my voice swelled with pride, "a lowly undergraduate."

"My, aren't we coming up in the world?" Kate was suitably impressed. "Tell me, is he going to serve spiked punch at this little affair?"

In the heyday of our B.M. days (Before Marriage), Kate and I had gotten into a few escapades involving alcohol. Like one New Year's Eve, our dates taught us to do Tequilla Shooters (rub a little lime on the wrist, sprinkle with salt, lick, then toss down a shot of tequilla). At evening's end, the dates had unloaded us on our front doorstep and roared off in disgust down the road.

Kate and I had still wanted to party. We turned up the stereo and sang "Hack it to death with a kitchen knife, do-dah, do-dah," as we cut down the Christmas tree with steak knives and burned it, piece by piece, in the

fireplace. The next day, Kate and I had sworn lifelong abstinence from Shooters, and added a cautionary sub-clause concerning the consumption of hard alcohol in public.

"I'll be good, I promise," I promised. "I wouldn't want to embarrass myself in front of the faculty. Or Sam."

"This is shaping up to be a rum and coke weekend, if you ask me," said Kate. "Julie is teething, and she cries all the time. She's got a rash on her chin, and bites everything she can get her hands on. Namedly, her sister," said Kate. "And Leah leaks in her training pants. There are puddles all over. We've been cooped up in the house all week because Paul needed the car, and I'm going stir crazy. I have begun to doubt if I'm really cut out to be a mother. And now Paul has to work this weekend." She paused for breath. "I was thinking of packing the terrorists in the car and driving down to see everybody."

"Hey, come on down!" I chortled in my best Johnny Olson imitation. "It'd be great to see you."

A skyscraper of dirty laundry clogged the living room in anticipation of the washer's resurrection. Underneath it, potato chip crumbs undoubtedly grew moldy. I'll have to clean, I thought, dragging the vacuum in from the garage. The cupboards are bare. I'll have to get groceries.

Alice knocked at the door.

"Morning," she sighed. "Are you ready to go?"

Brother Dan just called. He wants to see me, so I've got to get a move on."

"I'll be dressed in a flash," I said, abandoning the vacuum. "Sorry, I'm running late. Kate's coming down. Why's he want to see you?"

"I don't know. But whatever it is, no call from the principal's office can be good."

The doorbell rang.

"Are Sean and Mickey here?" Three neighborhood ragamuffins stood on the front porch, eyeing me sheepishly. They looked like some of the group who had been playing ball when my windshield got broken.

"Sorry, fellas, they're still asleep," I told them, not sorry at all. "And we're having company."

"Do you think she knows?" whispered the shortest one as they turned to go.

"Hey, we're awake!" Mickey yelled from the top of the stairs. "The phone woke us up. Hi, Mike! Come on up!"

The phone rang again. It was my father, calling from Arizona. The ragamuffins trooped up the stairs.

"I hear Kate's coming down to visit," he said cheerily from the ninth-hole tee of some sunny golf course. "I just talked to Greg. He's on his way over with the kids. Devin wants to see Mickey's football game." Greg is my brother. He lives in Eugene. It was probably faster for Greg to have dad relay the message that he was coming over with the

kids than to trying calling me himself.

"It's my father," I mouthed silently to Alice. "He's calling long distance. I'll only be a a minute." Alice nodded and waved as she left to warm up her car.

A strange man walked into the living room.

"The other lady let me in," he explained. "Washer repairman. I'm early."

"Holy cow!" I gasped. "I can't believe it."

"No cracks, lady," he snarled. "It's been a tough week. You want me to look at your washer or not?"

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean, I'm still in my pajamas." He looked discreetly at the floor.

"That's okay, honey," said Dad. "I don't mind. I've talked to you when you were in your pajamas before."

"No, it's the washer repairman," I explained, trying to conceal myself behind the laundry. "He's early, but I'm so glad to see him because all the underwear is dirty. I'd really like to chat, dad, but I have to go to the body shop now."

"You go get dressed right now, young lady," dad ordered. "Do you hear me?"

"It's in the garage," I said, pointing, as I slunk past the repairman and up the stairs to my bedroom.

I could hear a basketball bouncing off the boys' closed bedroom door.

"No basketball in the house!" I yelled as I pulled on

my jeans. "Stop that right now!" I pulled on a sweatshirt and some socks, then opened the drapes in time to see my brother pull into the driveway.

"Morning," called Greg, stretching in the freezing air. "The roads are lousy." My nephew and two nieces scrambled from the car and bounced through the front door.

"Aunt Peg!" Devin squealed as he hugged and kissed me. "Where are Sean and Mickey?" He threw open the closed bedroom door.

"Surprize!" he called. "We're here!"

A basketball hit him in the face. Blood spurted from his nose. Greg raced up the stairs.

"His nose may be broken," he ventured, examining my sobbing nephew. "I'm going to take him to the Emergency Room." Sean and Mickey and the rags looked scared.

"It was an accident," Sean said anxiously.

"Yah, a accident," sniffled the shortest ragamuffin. "Somebody only did it one more time." Kelsie, Greg's youngest, started to cry. Devin had dripped blood on her mittens.

"Are you ready?" called Alice from the front doorway. "My car's overheating. Good grief! Who is that screaming?"

So Greg took Devin to the hospital and Alice took me and the boys and the sobbing nieces to the body shop to pick up my car. Then the kids and I headed for Safeway to

stock up on provisions.

"I want my daddy," sobbed Kelsie.

"I'll get popsicles," I promised. "Just stop crying."

"I want my daddy," sobbed Kelsie. "I want blueberry."

"I want rainbow," sobbed Danielle. "I hate football."

"Hurry, mom," Mickey urged in Aisle 17-18 ("Wines, domestic, Champagne, Beer"). "I have to be at the field by nine forty-five." I flew down the aisles.

We pulled into the driveway at nine-thirty. Mickey hot-footed-it in search of his cleats, and Sean and the girls and I formed a bucket brigade of grocery sacks to the kitchen. I concentrated on putting away the perishables first.

"I can't find my uniform," Mickey howled from upstairs. "Where is my uniform?"

I thought of the pile of dirty laundry. Mickey was not happy, but there was little time to argue. The washer repairman was gone, thank God.

The nieces and I spent the football game on the playground, me pushing frozen swings and they, freezing their rears off, riding them.

We made it home by eleven-thirty. Greg and Devin waited patiently on the doorstep. Dev sported a black eyepatch.

"It's just cosmetic," confided Greg. "The doctor thought it would make Devin feel better."

"Hi," said Devin proudly to the boys. "Sorry I missed the game. I had to get an eyepatch."

"Hey, neat," said Mickey admiringly to his cousin. "Want to see how my cleats stick in the snow?" Six kids left the house in a flurry of mittens and scarves.

"How about a beer?" said Greg, emotionally drained. He dug through the half-filled grocery sacks on the countertop and came up with a warm six-pack of Bud and the potato chips and dip.

"I'll be right with you," I promised, "as soon as I throw in a load of wash."

Alice knocked just as I was returning from the garage. She was pale. Greg grabbed another beer and shoved it at her.

"I just saw Brother Dan." She exhaled slowly. "Edmund is on Permanent Detention."

"He wired a buzzer to Mrs. Bekkedahl's chair." Alice looked like Momma Cat had looked the day after Alice had gotten Momma fixed.

"He was late for English class every day this week," she continued. "English class is second period. How could anybody be late for second period? He threw litmus paper wads in Science Lab. The list goes on." Alice clasped her beer. "And for this I pay tuition?"

"I take it Edmund is not doing well at school."

reasoned Greg, lifting his beer for emphasis.

The phone rang. It was the repairman.

"Sorry, lady," he said. "Looks like I'll have to order a part." Ominous swishing sounds could be heard from the garage.

The kids trooped back in and deposited wet mittens and coats on the floor. Greg fed them peanut butter sandwiches while Alice mopped the garage and I wrang out wet clothes. I was just putting the vacuum away when Kate stumbled in, carrying a kid and a diaper bag in each arm.

"The roads are lousy," she gasped. "Two hours of fighting ice. Leah threw up. Julie is teething. Watch out: she bites. What, beer?" she asked, eyeing the remnants on the table. "There's a bottle of rum in my left diaper bag."

We cracked the bottle and called mom to invite her to the festivities.

"Nobody even bothered to call and tell me Kate was coming down," she complained. "Nobody ever tells me anything." But she was on her way.

It had started to snow again. Sean and Mickey and Edmund and Greg's kids found dry mittens and coats and went back outside to throw snowballs, leaving all the wet mittens and scarves and coats in scattered piles on the floor. Greg turned on the football game, took off his shoes, and laid down on the couch. Kate and I bottled the

babies and rocked them to sleep, gabbing quietly all the while. She had just placed the slumbering Julie behind a pillow on the living room floor when the doorbell rang six times in quick succession and the front door burst open.

"I stopped in Aisle 17-18," sang out mom in rare form and brandishing a champagne bottle. "Let the party begin!"

"Granny!" screamed Dani and Kelsie joyfully, running up the driveway behind her.

"Grannygrannygrannygrannygranny!" They hugged her knees. The boys ran up behind them.

"Grannygrannygrannygrannygranny!"

The babies awoke, screaming.

"An eyepatch," Greg shook his head. "Fifty-eight dollars for an eyepatch. But his nose is fine." The table was littered with mittens, peanut butter sandwich remains, and empty cans. The babies bickered over blocks on the floor beneath us.

"He looks so cute," said mom. "Who could have done such an awful thing to such a sweet little boy?"

"Nobody," I said. "Nobody did it."

"And for this I pay tuition?" muttered Alice. On the table in front of her sat a half-consumed warm beer, a rum and coke, and an empty champagne glass.

"What do you mean?" asked mom. "What do you pay for?"

"I wish I had an eyepatch for Julie's mouth,"

murmured Kate. She swizzled her rum and coke.

"What is she muttering about?" asked mom. "Maybe she's teething?"

The doorbell rang.

"Registered mail," said the postman. "Sign on line twenty-two."

"What is it?" mom asked as I returned with the envelope.

"A letter from Brother Dan." I tossed it on the table. Alice eyed it suspiciously.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" prodded mom.

"No."

She looked at me, exasperated.

"You kids never tell me anything."

"And for this we pay tuition?" Alice muttered.

The phone rang. It was Sam.

Alice read what I had written.

"Why is it called, 'A Day at the Zoo?'" she asked.

"We didn't go to the zoo."

"It's metaphoric."

"I see," she said. "Well, it's all right as far as it goes. But you never said anything about..."

"I couldn't. The insurance company would be at my

throat."

"You're right," she agreed, "and I guess you couldn't mention..."

"No, because then what happened to the carpeting would be in print. The landlord..."

"Or where I really stored the cats while he fixed my pipes. But what about...?"

"No way. My father would never..."

"Or what Sam said when you..."

"...and he told me I snored," I said, mortified. "Right there on the floor, in front of everybody."

"And it doesn't have an ending," complained Alice. "All stories have to have endings."

"If there were an ending, I wouldn't have had time to write it anyhow. But it's unending, isn't it, Alice?" I questioned pleadingly. "Please, tell me there's an ending."

She shook her head sadly.

"Besides," she said, "it's Monday. You had to give your advisor something."

Epilogue

When Sean and Mickey and I moved to I Street, I knew we were only marking time: some day I would graduate, and we would move on to bigger and better things. A prestigious Ivy League graduate school, then a high-powered career, then fame, wealth -- who knows? My dreams were big, and they did not include continuous residency in a ratty little apartment on I Street.

Things never work out like you plan them. Sean and Mick have grown webs between their toes and roots in the Oregon soil. Sean wants to go to middle school with all his friends, and Mickey faithfully signs up for soccer and football every season with his same little teams. The boys don't seem to mind our apartment: all they care about is if there are snacks in the refrigerator and someone to play ball with after school.

And, of course, I have Alice.

Webster's says a friend is someone you know, like, and trust. I can go further. A friend is someone who helps you change a flat tire in the rain. A friend takes wet laundry out of her own dryer because yours is broken, and you are desperate to dry a skirt to wear on a date that night. A friend gets off work early to pick up your kids

after school because you have a dentist appointment. A friend helps you clean your house when company is coming.

I cannot imagine life now without Alice next door. She borrows sugar for her coffee every morning at five; she shares experimental casseroles; she calls to ask, one more time, how to tell a boy kitten from a girl kitten.

And so, gradually, my plans have changed. The kids could go to Marist: lots of their friends will be going there. I could apply for graduate school at UO. And Springfield really isn't that bad, I keep telling myself. At least I Street has Alice.

Things never work out like you plan them. Last week, the landlord found out about Alice's cats; she and Edmund have to move by the end of the month.

Ashes and dust: stuff of dreams.