

PARADISE:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by
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A THESIS

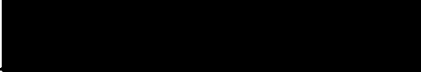
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This collection of short stories delves into the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. The three stories follow the relationship of a mother and daughter, Grace and Lily Easley, through selected periods of their lives. From their separation in Montana, to Lily's life as a student in New York City, to Grace's illness and Lily's subsequent return to Montana thirty years later, the stories reveal the contradicting deep-seated love and hatred between two women who struggle to find peace and acceptance in their relationship.

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A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing.
-Anne Sexton

Mothers and Daughters: Some Observations

My mother has had a distinct impact on my life that I have never been able to articulate. Her imprint on me continuously unfurls itself in all sorts of places, from my obsession with shoes to the odd, hollow cough we share; from my love of animals to my propensity to hurl objects when angry. We share all of these traits, as if she took me aside as a young child and specifically taught me how to act just like her.

Yet even larger than these minute similarities, I find my mother's presence in the most intimate parts of my life: my relationships with other members of my family, my friends, my significant other, and the world in general. Before I was able to venture out into the world and experience it myself, my mother subtly, and often quite overtly, deposited all her knowledge, feelings, and wisdom into some pocket of my brain. As I grow older, fragmented pieces of this knowledge float into my consciousness, leaving me wondering where I begin and my mother leaves off.

Because I am female, I feel that I have some special insight into the inner workings of women. Of course, not all women have the same feelings or experiences, but there are many similarities that can be drawn between us. One of these widespread experiences that women share is the relationship between mother and daughter. Both through conversation and writing, I have found this relationship to be one of the most complex and puzzling that women face. Because of my own situation as a daughter, I think that I'm particularly qualified to write about the complexities mothers and daughters experience. However, before I could really write about the subject, I wanted to explore why the relationship between mothers and daughters is so unique from any other.

In thinking about mothers and daughters, one of the first things I realized is that the mother-daughter relationship is special because the mother embodies a woman's first glimpse of herself and her understanding of what it is to be a woman in this world. Pushing the idea further, I wondered what might happen to the daughter when the model a mother presents or her information about womanhood is skewed or even false. Judith Arcana provided some insight:

We learn how to be women from our mothers. They teach us, consciously and unconsciously, what women are. . .but we say our mothers never seem to tell us what we really want to know. . .in some instances, the reason for their silence is their own ignorance, compounded by inexperience, shame and discomfort. Generally, however, they seem not to remember the painful, frustrating aspects of their living as women...in that forgetting our mothers lie to us. (35-37)

In many instances, mothers forget what it is like to be women. Some mothers push the struggles they faced throughout their lives to the furthest recesses of their minds because they can never measure up to what the rest of the world says they are supposed to be. For these mothers, the images and ideas of "woman" they pass onto their daughters are what society has enticed them into believing. These mothers buy into the false images of women they see in magazines and on television. They then encourage their daughters to follow this path simply because they have forgotten that there are others available. They teach their daughters this false picture, which their daughters teach their daughters, and so on.

Of course, not all mothers have fallen into this trap; many have made conscious efforts to avoid perpetuating in their daughters the type of stereotype that their mothers attempted to inculcate in them. However, for every mother who has made the decision to allow her daughter to become her own woman, there are at least two others who've encouraged their daughters to follow the traditional image of "woman." Even the women who rebel against the notion of the proper woman cannot escape the intense pressure from society to take away their agency. No matter whether a woman chooses

to conform or not, her womanhood, that entity that stems from her mother's example and teaching, is a huge part of her life. She cannot deny this fact and must face the many conflicts her sex brings up in her life.

Judith Arcana offers some insight into how this idea of the traditional woman enters and causes conflict in the mother-daughter relationship:

[B]y necessity, being a good daughter depends on how closely we hold to the current standards for women. That is, no matter how loving we are, or how supportive. . . we are not meeting the expectations our mothers hold for us if we aren't proper women in the now well-identified mode: passive, submissive, 'pretty,' not-too-obviously intelligent, and (at least potential) mothers and wives. (7)

It is important to note, first of all, that women should not be seen as being without agency in their lives; they can be powerful and aggressive while still being forced to live under the umbrella of society's prejudices. The fact remains that our society plays a large role in the way gender is perceived, regardless of whether we want to acknowledge that power or not. Therefore, even if a mother does not necessarily impart a certain idea of "woman" onto her daughter, society certainly compels her to expect one out of her daughter; or her daughter comes to feel that she needs to project one to make her mother happy. This cycle between mother and daughter is a vicious one, which often results in the gradual breakdown of the relationship. The daughter feels that she can never measure up, while the mother feels that she has failed because her daughter is not the kind of woman she is "supposed to be."

Because mothers impart the crucial information about being women to their daughters, their relationships are often filled with pain and confusion. Some mothers want their daughters to avoid the pitfalls they experienced, and others want their daughters to be exactly like them. The point where a mother lets go of her idea of what her daughter is supposed to be (that idea being influenced, of course, by society) and lets her daughter become her own woman is the most point where many relationships deteriorate. Even when a daughter is given the freedom to develop as a woman on her

own, she often returns to the undying image of her mother to learn more about herself. Her mother is “Eve” in her eyes, a figure that is ever present no matter how hard she might try and escape it.

The Stories

When I began thinking of this project over a year ago, I had no idea what I was getting into. I had originally planned to write a sequence of short stories, each dealing with a different topic. However, I felt that the stories would be more cohesive if I found a common “theme” to tie them together. Nevertheless, I had no idea what that common theme might be. Looking over the short stories I had written, I realized that all of them dealt with mothers and daughters struggling with each other for some reason or another. I decided that I had something to say about the relationship between a mother and daughter and set out to explore that topic.

What I did not fathom, or even now cannot comprehend, is that one topic can have so many facets and complexities. It has been a pleasant surprise to discover how rich one topic is with potential stories--I feel like I could write forever about mother-daughter relationships because the ideas are so numerous.

During the writing process, I encountered so many potential topics in the mother and daughter category that I had a hard time focusing on exactly what I wanted to say in each story. In many cases I started running down one avenue, then found myself switching to another in mid-stride, usually without even realizing my mistake. From the beginning, I viewed everything on a grand scale; it was only after many failures and much guidance that I was able to narrow each story and realize how one scene and idea can actually be the focus of an entire story.

After a couple of errant stories, I came upon the character of Lily, who basically leaves home in the middle of the night without saying a word to her mother about her

plans. Through the process of packing for her trip, the reasons for Lily's leaving unfold. In essence, she simply can't deal with her mother's oppression any longer; she wants very different things for her life than what her mother has planned for her. She can find no other way to express her desire and so she runs away.

Once I came upon the character of Lily and the strange but interesting relationship she has with her mother, it seemed a natural progression to follow her life and the culmination of this relationship in the other stories. Using the information I gleaned from thinking about the ways mothers and daughters relate, the character of Lily and her relationship with Grace blossomed into being and the plots just flowed. It was important to me that Lily be a powerful woman, yet perplexed by her conflicting feelings of love for but desire to submit to her mother's expectations.

The connection Lily has with her mother is something that she cannot understand. Grace loves Lily but cannot understand why her daughter is so different than her, or why she wants such incomprehensible things out of life. This failure to understand each other brings a veil of silence down around the two women; neither of them can verbalize the hurt they feel. Grace wants Lily to be a good daughter and accept her place in life on the ranch, and all Lily wants from her mother is acceptance, understanding, and love. These are the root conflicts in the stories.

Audience

When I started writing, I naively hoped that my audience would be "all people." Upon the reading of the first draft (albeit a primitive one) to a group of three men, I was brought down to reality. One comment was, "I certainly hope you're not planning to sell this to G.Q!"

I did not write these stories with a specific audience in mind, but simply wrote the truth about these characters as I see it. In hindsight, I can see that women will

probably be drawn to the stories since the subject is one that is close to their hearts. However, I hope that the stories are broad enough that men will also find them interesting; at the very least I hope that any reader will see that the writing is strong and meaningful, regardless of whether or not they like the subject matter. I feel that the stories hold insights into all familial relationships in general, but I am no longer so naive as to think that everyone will want to read them.

Artistic Influences

Before I began writing I listed several influences, particularly N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Terry Tempest Williams. Through the course of my writing, however, I abandoned any attempts to emulate the various styles of these writers. I discovered that the only way I could tell the stories the way I see them is to follow my own writing style, whatever that may be. While I feel that these writers are still very important in my view of writing in general, I don't think that my stories follow their styles as much as I thought they would before I actually started writing.

This said, I must admit that every author whose work I have read has influenced me in some way, whether it is Shel Silverstein, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Eudora Welty or Alice Munro. Throughout this year I have really come to understand the importance of reading other authors and thinking about their writing. By examining other literature, I've been able to learn a great deal about the craft of writing. Looking at a great writer I can see why certain things they do work and where my style doesn't.

I think that my greatest influence on these stories subject-wise is Refuge by Terry Tempest Williams. The struggle that the narrator (the author, in this case) goes through in coming to grips with her personal landscape gave me lots to think about in terms of Lily's struggle with becoming her own woman. In Refuge the narrator deals with the combination of her mother's influence and the power of the physical earth she

inhabits. She sorts through her feelings about both “mothers” and comes to terms with her relationship with the twin entities in the end, using both aspects of her life to see herself more clearly.

The connection Williams makes between the earth and her mother is a topic that I wanted to actively explore in my stories. While Williams’ relationship with the land in Refuge is one filled with love, I decided to take the opposite view in my story. Lily’s hatred for Whitefish drives her to the city, while Grace’s connection to land rules her life. In essence, the land represents the mother-daughter relationship for the two women; Lily sees in Montana everything she despises about her mother while Grace sees the city as holding all the fears she has about her daughter. Using Terry Tempest Williams’ example, I strove to construct a relationship in my stories between the women and the land.

The other author that had a large influence on my writing is Louise Erdrich. Although all her books have been helpful, Love Medicine in particular was the basis for which I developed the idea of writing several stories that would be connected through common characters. In the end, I completely strayed from the non-linear fashion of Love Medicine, but I believe that my stories still evoke the same type of connection between them that Erdrich’s do, even though it is a different style. I want the stories to be able to stand up on their own, as well being separate stories.

Erdrich’s writing also gave me the most useful example of voice and character to learn from and follow. The characters in Love Medicine are vivid and complex, yet described with a wonderful simplicity at the same time. Erdrich doesn’t spend a lot of time on useless description of her characters; rather, she lets the scenes unfold and the characters then demonstrate themselves through the action of that scene. Her characters are well developed, with specific voices to fit their personalities. I found Erdrich’s third person narratives of great help in illustrating how to tell a story through

the eyes of a third person narrator without letting too many authorial opinions distract the reader from the action and characters. Erdrich's effective dialogue also provided good examples for me to follow when I struggled with realistic patterns of speech.

Before beginning to write, I checked out several books on how to write short stories. While I did not believe there was some magical formula to writing a wonderful short story, I did think that these books might give me some helpful advice. For the most part, I found that these instructional guides were useless. I discovered that writing a short story is not like building a house, and I didn't realize this fact until I was knee-deep in the muck of my own writing.

Of course, there are certain components that are crucial for a short story like plot, characters, and setting, but there is no tested and fool proof theory for construction! At least I don't believe there is one. The fact is that I built my house, put the drywall up, then discovered I forgot the plumbing and had to tear down the drywall in order to install the pipes, then had to reconstruct the foundation, etc. I think every writer goes through the process differently, but I found trial and error to be the best method. When something didn't work, I merely tore it apart and went at it again.

Bird by Bird, a book of writing instruction by Anne Lamott, is one book I found to be helpful. The main advice of Lamott's that I followed is actually quite simple, but it is something I try to remember every time I sit down to write: "[G]ood writing is about telling the truth" (3). Many of the problems I encountered occurred when I strayed from the things I know to be true and attempted to write about things as I thought they should be instead of as I know them to be. My best writing came at the times I was trying to be the least literary and when I was the most honest.

Technique

The most important thing I have gleaned from writing these three stories is a better understanding of the craft of writing, or at least, my approach to writing.

All three of my stories are from the third person point of view, which I found comfortable and quite successful in showing the relationship between Lily and Grace in a very non-judgmental light. I wanted the reader to see the situation as it unfolded, and to see the actions of each character before evaluating their own view of what is happening. The only problems I encountered with this point of view was the occasional insertion of authorial opinion into the text and succumbing to the tendency of focusing on Lily too much. It is very hard for me to just sit back and write the scene as I see it, especially because I got to know these characters so well. At times I found it difficult to separate myself from the characters, but I did my best in trying to paint simple scenes to illustrate their characteristics and feelings. I also tried to give Grace's point of view as much attention as Lily's.

Another problem I encountered in my writing was the break away from this vision I have of what is "literary." I love the sound of words and the flow of poetic images, but I tend to combine too many metaphors and descriptions in one sentence or paragraph. The reader gets caught up in trying to follow the sentence or simply gets flooded with mass images and turns off in defense. Even in the final drafts I struggled with this tendency; it is a continuous battle for me. I want my images to be powerful, but not overwhelming. I've learned that there can be too much of a good thing.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I feel that this thesis has been a tremendous growing experience for me, both on a technical and personal level. I am pleased with the improvement in my writing skills over the course of the year, and am very satisfied with the quality of the

stories I've produced. I hope that others learn from reading the stories some of what I've learned in writing them.

Whitefish, Montana

Spread out on the bed was an official-looking cream parchment. The paper was important, but worn; its thick ink was smeared and rubbed away in spots from fingertips tracing the delicate sentences too many times.

Lily Easley lay on the bed next to the paper, carefully cradling it in the space on the quilt between her curve of her right arm and her body. She protected the letter like a baby, as it protected her. Looking up at the ceiling, she thought about what it said.

She knew the words by heart. She had read them at least three times a day since first receiving the letter four months before. “We invite you to Columbia University as a member of the class of 1953. . .Because of your outstanding academic achievement, we offer you a full tuition package.” The words always left Lily cold.

It wasn’t that they didn’t mean anything to her. In fact, for Lily, that letter held the world. But it was the force behind those words, a large, illusive, slippery mass, that sent a fierce chill to the nape of Lily’s neck. This force spelled out an escape, a chance for something other than what she was destined for within the world as she knew it in Montana.

But for the words to mean anything, Lily would have to put them to work. She would have to leave.

Glancing around the room, Lily felt the past dripping down the walls. No matter how much she paced the room, nor where she diverted her eyes, she could not escape that stifling mist that surrounded her. For eighteen years she had tried. But there was something about this place, the land, the people, that grabbed her body and held onto all it could. Lily’s mind and body were not her own. She felt drained of her

spirit, rendered dry and useless by a force which invited her yet pushed her away at the same time.

Tonight was the night she could leave it all behind. The corners of her mouth tipped upward slightly at the thought, then dipped quickly down again. She closed her dry, bloodshot eyes. The ever-present dust hung thickly in the air of her room. The particles dragged Lily down as they floated together on the streams of sunlight filtering through the open windows.

Lily wanted to be forever rid of that grime, of the land that stuck and dripped off her body and everything that surrounded her. She felt herself falling, the dust pulling her under once again. She was being absorbed through her bed, the floorboards, and the foundation of the house into the soil below. There the dust turned into thick silt that filled her mouth, ears, and nose. She choked and her eyes bulged. She clawed her way back up to the surface and spit the dirt out of her mouth. She felt the lurch of her stomach, the gagging in the back of her throat. Opening her eyes, she found herself back on her bed, staring up at the cobwebs on the ceiling.

Lily got up and went to the window, brushing the sweat off her brow. Outside the dusk turned the edges of the skyline purple, a kind of lingering summer twilight that seems to bring the true vibrancy of the world up to the surface. Bright greens, yellows, browns, and blues filled the valley, the usually predominant blacks, greys and whites relegated to the background. The evening coolness enticed everything out of hiding. The horses neighed softly, nuzzling each other in rowdy play. The jagged mountain peaks softened in the easy light, and the white caps were no longer remindful of the coming autumn.

In the midst of this activity there was a minute, almost undetectable, stillness. Perhaps it was the dark night coming soon to blanket the valley. Maybe it was the

nocturnal animals waiting in the wings for their chance to feed on the sleep of others. Whatever it was, the stillness was an underlying tension, a feeling that announced that life was not often this tranquil and beautiful. It was the never-ending, inescapable memory of darkness that filled Lily's mind.

She used to be mesmerized by the land, filled with wonder at a place so alternately kind and harsh. As a small child, Lily was never afraid of what the dark might bring. Seen through her eyes, every inch of the valley held something new and infinitely intriguing. As a young girl she followed her mother everywhere--riding around on the back of her horse, her arms tightly embracing her mother's waist as they rode through the valley watching the cattle. She helped her mother repair fences and feed the horses, often having to run behind Grace just to keep up with her large steps. The small window of sky carved out between the surrounding mountain peaks was enough to keep her happy as she watched the clouds drift by. She did not question where those clouds were going.

The valley, her valley, held all the things she needed: her mother and father, the cattle that provided food and money, the horses that provided her transportation, her dog and the kids across the creek who kept her company, and the small schoolhouse in the Fletcher's barn where she learned to read and write. There was nothing Lily needed to know beyond the skyline.

But things changed. Even though Lily grew taller and stronger, her mother's steps became increasingly harder to follow. And Lily didn't try as hard to keep up. She got distracted and forgot to do her chores. Her dog Freddy and the new school in town weren't enough to keep her occupied. Lily and her friend Janice spent their time walking every road they could find as far as they could before having to turn back

home to do chores. Even in adventure the world had boundaries. For Lily, her life became intensely suffocating, no longer novel.

Then, at thirteen, Lily got a glimpse of the world outside when her father took her with him on a train trip to Spokane, Washington, for supplies. The electricity and life of even a small city that was enough to lighten Lily's heavy spirit.

Lily felt the way things were different in the city from the moment the train pulled into the Spokane depot. As soon as the train stopped, she noticed her father's voice change from being small and stern to a warm, continuous, boyish current of excitement. "Hurry Lily!" he urged her as she gathered her bag to get off the train.

Walking along the sidewalks, Lily saw the smells, the heat, and the energy of so many bodies moving together. There was a gentle, thriving connection between the people in the city, and she felt a part of it immediately. This feeling passed from person to person through conversations, looks, brushes of hands. People she did not know smiled and said hello to her. A part of this hidden chain, Lily felt embraced and somehow needed.

She knew her father felt the same way. She could see it in his being, in the way his steps floated along the sidewalk, his chin jutting up towards the sky, his eyes fluttering around at the mass of things to see. Making their way downtown to Uncle Albert's apartment, the excitement grew. The buildings were closer together and taller, the number of people larger and more densely packed. Alton grabbed Lily's hand to keep from losing her, but also in the happiness of sharing something so exciting with his daughter.

As Lily slept in Uncle Albert's small and cluttered third floor apartment that first night in the city, she listened to her father and uncle laughing together. There was an easy boisterousness and joy that filled their voices, something she had never heard

before, in Montana. Their joy made her laugh with giddiness, putting her head into her pillow to stifle the noise. When Alton finally heard her laughter, he peeked into the one separate room in the apartment where she was supposed to be sleeping. With the door open, her loud giggles could not be hidden. Watching how Lily looked up at him with her mouth open in laughter, Alton felt his eyes fill up with tears. To keep from crying, he went up to the bed and tickled her.

“Stop it Papa!” she screamed while laughing. “Help me, Uncle Albert!”

Alton stopped and hugged Lily tightly, their smiles shining through the darkness. “I want to stay here,” Lily said suddenly.

Alton pulled away and brushed her hair away from her eyes, those eyes so like his. “I know you do,” he said. “But our home is Whitefish.”

When they left Spokane on the evening train, Alton and Lily were quiet. There was something between them now, a knowledge they knew and understood, but still could not share. Lily could not help but turn back to the city, glowing, beckoning her to return, to stay and share that feeling with her father once again. It was only when the city was finally swallowed up in the dark hills that Lily could turn away. Yet even then her eyes searched for the halo of light. Her father had turned his eyes forward from the very beginning, for he knew the futility of hoping for something he could not have and the despair that comes with dwelling on it. But Lily was too young to know this, and so she kept looking back.

Lily tried to forget about her trip to Spokane. But every time she looked into her father’s eyes she remembered. Hearing his voice made her think of the boyish tinge she’d heard. Seeing him outside doing his chores made her think of his absent laugh. She thought of her own absent laugh.

Leaving home wasn't a conscious decision. It was like a dream the way the piece of paper ended up sitting on Lily's bed, the way the train ticket to New York found its way into the palm of her hand. Yes, Lily was the one who wrote away to colleges for applications and scholarship forms, the one who caught the mail every day, the one who forged her parents' names on the forms; but it seemed like someone else doing these things.

Lily didn't think twice about sneaking into her mother's office to get financial information. She felt strangely calm and calculated, never thinking about the possibility of getting caught.

The sun was bright that winter day, but the curtains in the office were closed. When Lily opened the door to the office she was momentarily blinded by the shift from light to darkness. The room was nothing but a black hole until her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Even then the room was filled with shapeless and eerie shadows.

Knowing exactly where the information was, Lily did not waste any time as she fished the papers out from the bundles of paper and manila file folders. She paused, checking the dates to make sure the information was correct. Then she heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. The noise filled her head and temporarily froze her body in fear.

"Lily!" Her father's voice echoed down the hall and through the crack in the office door. "Lily are you in here?" his voice called again. She figured he was somewhere near her bedroom. As the footsteps came closer to the office, Lily shoved the forms back into a manila folder and scrambled for the space underneath the large desk in the center of the room.

Underneath the desk, Lily molded herself into a ball, hiding her head in her knees. Closing her eyes tightly, holding her breath and waiting for inevitable discovery,

her mind raced through possible explanations for her bizarre behavior. She prayed for some way of escape. Her father would know what she was doing, and her face flushed red in hot shame at the thought. The sudden, crashing immensity of what she was doing darkened her face even more.

The door creaked open and a gush of air swirled through the stale and dark office. The smell of her father's musty aftershave rode in on the wave of cold air and Lily's muscles tightened. His rubber boots squeaked on the floor. "Lily?" Her father's voice trailed off. As he moved closer to her, Lily grabbed her knees harder, wanting to become as small as possible. She tried not to breathe too loud.

Noticing the open file cabinet, Alton stopped. As he bent down to close it he heard short, tense breaths. Crooking his neck, he saw the paleness of Lily's bare arms and feet shining through the darkness. She was crumpled underneath Grace's desk, trying to hide. He squinted his eyes, looked again at the open file cabinet.

His eyes rested again on his daughter's thick hair, falling forward to cover the rest of her body from view. His body slumped down in a release of tension and despair. The knowledge of what Lily was doing and the ramifications of that action weighed heavy on him.

Alton stood silently for a moment, thinking of his daughter, looking at her and listening to her breath so small and scared. He forced himself into motion. Flipping through the open file, he came across the numbers he knew she was looking for. He glanced at Lily one last time, her bare feet now tapping the floor nervously, wondering if her father had seen her. Alton walked out of the room as quietly as he could, closing the door behind him.

Even after she heard the door close Lily could not move. She could not feel her nails gouging into the flesh of her knees, even through the thick material of her pants.

When she finally raised her head, white blips flashed before her eyes. She crawled over to the file cabinet, ready to close it and forget forever about what was inside, ready to toss in the fire the papers hidden underneath her mattress that she was to fill out and send back to Columbia University.

Then she saw the papers laid out on top of the open file drawer. Her head cleared and she felt the pressure that had built up inside her, a feeling that she had never acknowledged. It washed over her like the water of a cold shower gliding down her back and whirling down the drain. She clutched the papers to her chest and held her hands to her eyes.

Lily shook her head, struggling to put the memories out of her mind. She had to pack the trunk. She had to pack the trunk, carry it downstairs, put it in the wagon, and go to the train station in town. Then she had to give her ticket to the train conductor and board the eastbound train. She had to do these things.

She stood up from the bed, the coolness of the night suddenly hitting her. Hugging herself and rubbing her bare arms vigorously, she approached the open window. Outside she could see her mother pulling weeds in the garden. From the barn she could hear the rhythmic pounding of her father's hammer as he worked diligently on a rocking chair for Grace's birthday. It was in looking for the trunk that Lily had discovered the rocking chair, hidden behind old tack and saddles and boxes of papers and magazines in a secluded corner of the barn. Lily hoped that her father hadn't discovered that she had taken the trunk.

The windows squeaked loudly as she closed them. It was the dust that made them squeak, a fine powder that gathered so thickly in the window grooves Lily could not remove it no matter how hard she tried.

Grace looked up at the window as she heard it close. She waved to Lily, motioning her to come down. Lily looked at the empty trunk in the corner of her closet, then looked outside. She shut the closet door and went downstairs.

Outside the evening did not seem quite so cool. One of Grace's cheeks, her forehead, and both of her arms were smudged with dirt. In one hand she held a small hoe, in the other the glass of water Lily handed to her.

"Thanks, this hits the spot," Grace said, downing the water and handing the glass back to Lily. She knelt back down to look at the tomatoes. Brushing thick vines away, she exposed the hidden fruit for Lily to see. "Look at those beauties!" she said proudly. "We'll cut some of those up for lunch tomorrow and have a feast."

Lily nodded as her mother picked several large tomatoes and handed them to her. "Mom, I only have one hand here," she said. "I can't carry so many." Lily held out the glass she was holding to show her mother.

"Oh," Grace said and stopped picking tomatoes. "I guess that's enough for today." She brushed the dirt off her knees. The two women walked into the house through the porch, silently kicking their shoes off at the door, making their way to the kitchen. "We'll just put these on the counter for now," Grace said as she set her tomatoes down on the counter, grabbing the glass and the tomatoes from Lily's arms.

Looking at her mother, Lily felt a tug of possession and kinship she had not known since her childhood. She observed the curve of her mother's hands, then looked at her own. They had the same slim fingers and tiny palms. Lily saw that she and Grace had the same nose, and the same smile. But her mother's hair was different, and so was the way she walked with the authoritative air that Lily could never quite master. Brushing her hair away from her face, Lily touched the corner of her eye. Grace's eyes were a piercing blue, while hers were a mellow green. Lily had her father's eyes.

“Mom, I have to tell you something,” Lily blurted out suddenly, surprised at the strength of her voice and the steadiness of her gaze. Grace’s hands stopped for a moment. She did not raise her eyes to look at her daughter. Her hands began to move again, faster than before, fluttering over the tomatoes like a butterfly. Looking intently out the kitchen window, Grace picked up a plump tomato and ran it under the water pump.

She held it in her palm, weighing it, judging it carefully. Then she took a large bite out of it, eating the tomato like an apple.

“Yeah?” was all Grace said. It was more of a statement than a question. Lily looked at her mother again. She grabbed a washcloth from the counter and tossed it to Grace.

“You’ve got tomato juice all over your face,” Lily said before she went back upstairs to her room. Grace wiped her face with the washcloth, opened the kitchen window, and chucked the tomato out.

In Lily’s closet hung rows of long-sleeved, solid colored work shirts in muted tones--grays, blue-grays, creams, mint greens. There were flannel shirts, many with worn, patched elbows and frayed collars and cuffs. Thick denim coveralls were folded on a lower shelf, and beside these sat thermal underwear. On the floor were the three pairs of shoes Lily owned: brown steel-toed work boots, green rubber irrigation boots, and black leather Sunday Mary Janes. In the far corner of the closet hung Lily’s special occasion clothes: a light blue print dress for summer, a black and red plaid skirt and matching blouse and sweater for winter, and a green skirt and white blouse for all the time in between. There weren’t many occasions that required nice dress, so Lily’s closet was filled instead with the things she needed for everyday.

Lily ran her fingers over the mass of soft flannel and cotton until she came to the itchy wool and polyester. Nice clothes were uncomfortable clothes, and Lily longed to be uncomfortable.

The first thing that she put in the trunk was her underwear, folding them one by one and lining the bottom of the trunk. She blushed at her shabby, off-white panties and bras. And the lace on the hem of her slip was ripped. Her only pair of stockings had a hole in the left foot. Most of her socks had mud and grass stains on the toes and heels.

Lily had planned for months what she would pack, checking off in her mind the items over and over again. But seeing the beginning of the transfer of her clothes from the closet to the trunk knocked the breath from her lungs. She sat down next to the trunk, feeling her back against its sturdy wood. All her life was going to be packed into this trunk, and she was taken aback at its bareness.

When she had gathered some strength, Lily rose and continued to pack. She removed her nice clothes gently from their hangers, folding them on their creases just as her mother had taught her, and placed them on top of her underwear.

While folding her blue summer dress Lily thought of the shoes that matched the dress, her mother's brown pumps. Grace had refused to buy a new pair of high heels to match the dress when she ordered it for Lily from the Montgomery Ward catalog. She told Lily that she had a pair of shoes that would work just fine.

When the dress arrived, Grace motioned Lily into her room to show her the brown pumps. They weren't too worn or second-hand looking, and Lily fell in love with them. They were her first pair of high heels. When she tried them on she found that they fit perfectly, even accounting for the fact that one of her feet was a half size bigger than the other.

Seeing Lily's surprise at the perfect fit, Grace smiled. "My feet are the same way, the left is bigger than the right," she said, tousling Lily's hair. Lily looked up at her mother and smiled back, standing up and modeling the dress and the shoes together for her mother.

Lily sat on the bed with Grace and slipped the shoes off her feet. "We should go to Spokane and find you a new pair to replace them," Lily told her mother as she gathered up the dress and the shoes. "You could buy some new clothes for yourself too," she added. "It would be fun to go to the city together, just you and me." Her mother was silent. "Wouldn't it Momma?"

Grace stood up from the bed and brushed pieces of hay off her shirt, stooping to pick the pieces off the floor. She did not speak, but kept herself busy collecting grass twigs off her clothes and the floor. "We could order some shoes from the store in Whitefish, couldn't we?" she said finally, her voice quiet.

"Well, yeah," Lily said, relieved the silence was broken. "But it would be more fun to go shopping for them in Spokane than getting them out of the catalog in boring Whitefish." The words shot out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying.

Grace looked up at her daughter suddenly, her eyes wide with surprise and pain. The smile on Lily's face melted into a frown. Both of them stood next to each other, looking down at the floor in uncomfortable silence. Grace took the shoes out of Lily's hands and put them back into her closet before she turned and walked out of the room, never speaking of the pumps again.

Without the shoes, Lily had never been able to wear the summer dress. She never asked for the shoes, nor did her mother offer them. She rubbed the soft material of the dress in her hands and thought of how the pumps might fit. She set the dress aside and went again to her closet.

She looked at the rest of her clothes. Lily knew that she needed more than one change of winter clothes and her Mary Janes to survive winter. She kicked her scuffed work boots in resignation, then picked them up and wrapped them along with her good shoes in a spare blanket. One decent flannel and long sleeve work shirt followed, as well as her thermal underwear and thick winter socks, a pair of denim jeans and her parka. Lily figured that she would work in New York and make money for the proper clothes--dresses and skirts and shoes--she would need.

From her desk Lily took her pencil case, dictionary, thesaurus, and stationery. She packed several blankets, sheets, a couple of towels, and her pillow. With those bare necessities, Lily closed the lid and sat upon it to fasten the latch with an old lock she'd also found in the barn.

Lily sat on the trunk for a moment, looking out the window and into the darkness that had covered the valley. She got up and picked the blue dress up off the bed. Kicking off her cut-off denim shorts and tossing them into the closet, she slipped the dress up over her hips. Her tank top ruffled her hair as she took it off over her head, and she stopped to lick her hand and wet down the static hairs that stood on end.

It was difficult to button the dress up in the back, but Lily managed it. Her bare feet were cold on the wood floor and goose bumps filled her bare arms and legs. She found her duffel bag and put her toiletries and changes of underwear in it for the train trip. Standing in front of her closed door, she listened for noises downstairs and heard none.

Taking her duffel bag, Lily walked down the stairs. She felt like an intruder, the way that she so stealthily crept through the house, making sure not to make a sound. She wasn't stealing anything, but she didn't need to. She was guilty enough.

Outside Lily had hidden her old red Radio Flyer wagon in the bushes by the creek. It was somewhat difficult to find in the darkness, but she finally fished it out and wheeled it up next to the front door. She was strong enough to carry the trunk for a short distance, but she knew that she couldn't carry it all the way to town. She set her duffel bag in the wagon, then crept back up to her room to get the trunk.

Balancing the trunk on her shoulder was difficult. Lily almost tipped several times, and dropped the trunk in the dirt outside the front door as she was trying to keep the screen door from slamming shut. The trunk made a sickening thud in the dirt, a noise that twisted Lily's insides into tight balls of yarn. She looked up at the house with dread, waiting to see the lights come on and her parents rush outside to see her packing a trunk in a wagon and traipsing off to New York City. But no lights came on, no parents came out to question what she was doing. No parents came out to ask her not to go. She picked the trunk up off the ground and set it gingerly in the wagon, noticing with a sigh the coat of dust covering her bare feet.

There was paper and pencil in a drawer in the kitchen and Lily pulled them out with the intention of writing a note. She started several times, then furiously erased what she had written. She could find no way to explain what she was doing. Her mind filled with explanations and excuses, pleadings and confessions. In the end, she took the acceptance letter out of her travel bag and propped it up in front of a bowl of the garden tomatoes. She set the blank paper and pencil beside it.

The pumps that matched her dress were inside her mother's closet, inside her parents' room. Lily knew that she wanted them. They were her mother's shoes. They were her shoes.

Approaching the bedroom door, Lily did not stop to listen for their deep, sleepy breaths. The door creaked when she opened it, but she did not look towards the bed.

She heard the rustling of sheets, but her eyes were focusing through the darkness to find the brown pumps. Shoes fell over and thumped onto the floor. It was so dark that she could not tell one shoe from another. She had to trust her touch, not her vision, to pick the right shoes.

The rustling had stopped by the time Lily found the shoes. As she got up and walked to the floor, she wanted to turn around to see her parents one more time. But she could not. She remembered that when she was a child she would come down into her parents' room. She would watch them sleep, to make sure that they were still alive and breathing. It was Lily's way of easing her mind of that childhood fear of parental abandonment. When she checked their breaths, they looked so cozy and peaceful in their bed she would climb in between them and fall asleep. In the morning they would wake up, the three of them, arms and legs tangled all together. Grace always gave Lily a disapproving look, but she could never hide the smile that crept onto her face.

If she looked back, Lily thought that she might just crawl into that bed, tangle her arms and legs into her parents' and never, ever leave.

Standing on the platform, Lily stared silently at the train. Her arms hung at her sides, one hand behind her clinging to the handle of the bright red Radio Flyer wagon. The trunk and duffel bag sat in the wagon, the weight splaying the tiny wheels a bit wide.

It was late night, the midnight train, and the only people on the platform were those who were just passing through, taking advantage of the short stop-over by walking through the station and stretching their legs.

A whistle blew, piercing the dark haze and sleepiness that surrounded the station. The train grumbled and shook, yet Lily remained cemented in her spot on the platform.

“Lily Easley!” Kelvin, the station manager, exclaimed and took his hat off in greeting. “What are you doing here? Where are you all packed up to go?” Lily looked at him but did not reply. Kelvin scratched his head and went to the wagon. He lifted the trunk with a grunt and placed it in the luggage compartment of the train, then grabbed the duffel bag and set the handle in Lily’s open hand.

Lily still held onto the wagon handle tightly, her fingernails gouging into the tender palm of her hand. “You want me to load that too?” Kelvin smiled and pointed at the wagon. Again Lily did not speak. The train conductor yelled out to Kelvin, “Hey buddy! She gettin’ on or what?” Kelvin looked at Lily, then back at the conductor.

“Lily.” Kelvin put his hand on the wagon handle. “Honey, if you’re going to go you gotta go. The train’s leaving now.”

Lily heard the words and let go of the wagon handle, but it did not drop to the ground. Kelvin caught it and pushed the wagon back against the building. “I’ll return it to your house,” he said reassuringly.

With her shoulders hunched over Lily looked much younger than eighteen. A comfortable heat fell over the valley, but the train’s breath blew Lily’s dress against her ankles and her auburn hair into her face. She looked very cold. A heaviness hung on her shoulders, draped over her eyelids and the corners of her droopy mouth.

Lily looked down at her feet, willing them to move, to pull themselves away from what had always held her in this place. She lifted her head, lifted her chin up to Kelvin’s face. “No,” she said simply. “Don’t give the wagon back to my parents. They don’t know I’m leaving home.”

The words, released for the first time, gave Lily's body permission, the freedom to move. Stepping to the train, she mounted the steep steps, her pumps clicking along the ground as she moved.

As the train pulled out of the station, Lily allowed herself that one last look back. Against the stark brown brick of the station building stood her wagon, its red color as bright as when it was new. Its white wheels returned her stare, looking back at her like wide, knowing eyes through the darkness. Lily stared at those eyes until she could see them no more, until the movement of the train forced her to focus forward once again, to the lights she knew were on even at this hour above that faraway city, waiting for her.

Paradise

Cool jazz was floating through the open window. Lily Easley sat at the sill watching young people hurry along the sidewalk, hearing them talk in alternating high and low tones. The clump, clump, clump of thick soled shoes along the pavement was interwoven with the lilting sound of a French horn. It was the sound of heaven coming from the club just down the street, piercing through the tall buildings and tenements, either serenading residents to sleep or drawing them out into the night hungry for more. The music originated in a dark and smoky enclave, the place those people below were all traveling towards, a place Lily could only imagine. She'd heard the name of the club many times, and even though it was just a block away from her apartment, she had never had the courage to even walk by.

But the picture in her mind, the picture she'd constructed using the ever-present music as her guide, was strong enough to keep her satisfied. Sitting in her room at night while her roommate was studying at the library, Lily would hear the music and be drawn, scratching and pleading for reprieve, to the window. It never failed; she would sit at her desk every night after dinner, a book open in front of her, pens, pencil and paper laid carefully out beside her, and try her hardest to ignore the sounds outside. She stuffed her ears with cotton balls and hummed to herself, but nothing could block out the melody drifting through the window. Her roommate, Lynette, tried to get her to go to the library with her, but Lily always refused. She'd had enough quiet to last her a lifetime in Montana; in New York City, all she wanted to hear was the noise of living.

So, instead of reading and studying for her next day's classes, Lily would inevitably end up at the windowsill, looking down at the people walking by on the sidewalk below. There were the women wearing black slacks and mock turtlenecks, smoking cigarettes slowly and carrying stacks of books casually under their arms. They

were women who carried themselves with power and confidence, wearing their hair straight and free, walking with large, unrehearsed steps. Lily admired these women. There were also women who looked more traditional, although there weren't as many of those as there were of the first kind. They wore long Lurex skirts with elegant dinner gloves, high heels and hats of all different kinds perched on their well-coifed locks. Latched onto a beau's arm comfortably, they tossed their heads up when they giggled, exposing deep red lips and bright teeth. They were more fragile, more dependent; they were the ones who always had men with them.

Lured by the music, these men and women, intellectuals or soft heads, glamorous or homely, left everything behind for the company, the solace of the notes and the players and each other. In other places they were separate and did not mingle, but in the club things were different. It was a few hours a week where they could forget the people they were supposed to be, the roles their costumes announced they were playing, and just let themselves become who they really were or wanted to be.

Tonight the air hung warm and thick, stagnant in the fourth floor room. Lily did not wipe away the beads of sweat that clung to her brow and dripped between her breasts. She was a passive observer, absorbing it all, feeling the sights and sounds wrench through her body, leaving her exhausted and strung out with desire, wanting to follow but never quite getting up enough courage to do so.

Sweat stung her eyes and Lily rubbed them roughly. It was the beginning of fall, yet the weather was still warm. The heat brought everyone out into the streets at night, trying to cool down, yet appreciating the short period of warmth before the cold forced them inside for the long winter months.

Lily closed her eyes and the music seemed louder, the laughter more rambunctious, the darkness of the night less fierce. She felt her heart beating and it seemed like it was everywhere in her body, a deep throbbing in her stomach, an

insistent twitch in her thigh, a tender thumping in her neck, light taps of pressure all over her body. She opened her eyes. A refreshing breeze blew in through the open window and rustled the papers set out upon her desk. She watched the sheets float around the room, fluttering noisily as they slowly fell to the floor. She jumped, then started to get up from her chair to pick them off the floor.

A shrill note, trumpet perhaps, penetrated through the night and drew her attention back to the window. Lily saw a woman and a man walking down the sidewalk, holding each other, the man whispering something into his girl's ear. Their laughter filtered up through the window and Lily watched them kiss each other, long and hard. Her heart tweaked.

Lily decided: Tonight was the night. Leaving the window and curtains open she walked to the closet, removing her clothing slowly along the way and tossing it carelessly onto her bed. There was a building opposite hers; in the apartment directly across the way lived a young couple whom she had often seen as she sat at the sill. If they happened to look now, they would see her naked through her open window, her body out in the open for anyone. The possibilities sent surges of electricity through her. She shivered involuntarily, but did not move to cover herself. The warm air felt good wrapped around her naked body.

Lily stood in front of Lynette's full length mirror, wondering what someone else --a man-- would think of her. She had met several nice boys in her time at Columbia, and she'd even gone out on a couple of dates, with one boy in particular. But the boys in her class were just that--boys. They were still gangly and clumsy, and didn't know or care a whole lot about anything but themselves. A real man would be different, romantic, clever, intelligent and. . .well. . .sexy. Lily blushed at the thought.

Out of her bureau she selected a pair of underwear that were in the best shape, the only pair she had that had no holes. Lynette had underwear and bras that matched,

pinks, whites, cremes, even black. But being on scholarship and having parents who wouldn't even take her letters, Lily was lucky she had a bra that was still in one piece. It was a dingy white, darker under her armpits from her sweat, and had to be clasped at the back by a safety pin. She'd often stuck herself trying to clasp that safety pin, but tonight she was careful.

A slip had inched out of her drawer. It clung by the lace hem to a splinter in the wood. Lily picked it up, held it in her hand for a moment as if she was weighing it, then tossed it behind her head, across the room.

In the closet hung her only dress suitable for evening wear, a thin blue Rayon print--the only thing her mother had ever bought her, out of the Montgomery Ward catalog. Lily removed the dress from its hanger, then slipped it over her shoulders. She struggled with the buttons in the back, but managed to reach them all.

She walked to the mirror and stood in front of it, noticing how the dress hung funny at her waist and was a little too tight at the bust. It made her breasts seem larger than they were, larger than she had ever thought they were. She arched her back, sliding her hands over the profile, looking at the pictures of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo that Lynette had taped up to the wall. She shrugged her shoulders, resuming her normal posture with a sigh.

Still, Lily continued to watch herself in the mirror, rolling her stockings on slowly, observing the way her body looked, how she moved without self-consciousness. She was like a dancer, graceful even in the minutiae of dressing herself. There was some transformation that was taking place. Right in front of the mirror stood a girl desperately trying to become a woman, fighting to carve out a place for herself in the world the only way she knew how.

Scanning the room, Lily's eyes finally rested on her mother's dark brown, square-heeled, out of style pumps. They were underneath her bed, one awkwardly

leaning against the other. The last time Lily had worn those pumps was on the train from Whitefish to New York City.

The blue print dress was the only decent summery outfit Lily had, so it was never really a question what she would wear on the train. She wanted to look her best for her arrival in New York. Her mother's brown pumps were the only shoes that matched the dress, so she had taken them too. What Lily hadn't thought of was the fact that the train trip was four days long.

She had not planned changes of clothing, so by the time she arrived in Grand Central Station she was wrinkled, frumpy, and blistered. She was also extremely annoyed. She limped, heels bruised and swollen, through the train station, dragging her trunk behind her. The attendants, janitors, and information booth people smiled and shook their heads at the sight of her, another country kid come to tackle the city and make good. She had a lot to learn.

Just as Lily was about to give up she saw the Columbia representative holding up a small sign with her name on it. She sped up, feeling the delicate skin on her feet tearing with the increased stress from the tight shoes. But she didn't care. Close up, she saw that the sign had originally been made for someone else--a Nancy Houseman; a thin piece of paper had been placed over the previous name, and her name sketched in place. And it was spelled wrong. Lilly Esley. All Lily could do was drop her trunk, plop down on top of it, put her head in her hands and cry.

The Columbia representative, a thin, stuffy girl with immaculate clothes, didn't know what to do with Lily. She tried to console her by stiffly patting her on the shoulder, but Lily wouldn't be comforted. "What am I doing here?" she whispered to herself, waiting for an answer. The girl squinted her eyes in discomfort, looking around the bustling station for help or sympathy. There was none to be found.

“C’mon girl!” she finally said, a rough New York accent breaking through her previously stoic voice. “You’re in New York now, you can’t be a cry-baby here.” Lily sniffed loudly and looked up at her, noticing how comparatively shabbily she was dressed. Her eyes teared up again, but she choked them back and stood up, holding her hand out to the girl. The girl’s tone softened. “My name’s Joan. Here, let me help you with the trunk.”

When Joan delivered Lily to her new room, an apartment that the university had set up for her with a roommate, she gave her a number. “It’s my phone number. If you need anything you can give me a call.”

Lily looked down at her dress and said, “I need some clothes.” The girls laughed together, but the discomfort was obvious. There was a disparity between them, a difference in backgrounds that was apparent to both of them. It wasn’t something that could be bridged by a trip to a clothing store. Lily didn’t have any money anyway.

Lily fished the pumps out from under the bed, banging them together in disgust. Nothing much had changed in the month since. She still didn’t have any money, and she was still part of an inferior group, the scholarship group. She tried not to care, but sometimes, watching the well-dressed, sophisticated young men and women smoking in the student union, she was overcome with jealousy. Joan was one of them, and she would smile at Lily, but she would never come over to her table and feign friendship like she did on that first day.

Lily looked again in the mirror, frowning at her clothes and features, the ordinary that would just never measure up. But she wasn’t sure it would matter tonight, where she was going. Color filled her cheeks and her eyes brightened. Yes, where she was going it wouldn’t matter.

She opened the door stealthily and looked down the hall, her head whipping from side to side, a little kid making sure a car wasn’t barreling towards her before

crossing the street. Then she stopped and cocked her ear towards the stairwell. There was no one coming.

Closing the door behind her, Lily leapt to Lynette's beauty table, confiscating her make-up like a hungry animal. Back on her own side of the room, Lily sorted through her bounty, deciding on the powder puff first. As she patted her nose with the puff she breathed deeply, inadvertently sucking the powder through her nostrils. She bent over, gagging and coughing, eyes watering, tracks of tears running through the powder on her face. When she came back to her senses, she wiped the tracks off her face, then reapplied the powder, making sure not to breathe in this time.

Next she took the tube of lipstick. The line she spread on her lips was crooked, and as she took the tip of her finger to straighten it she ruined it even more. Her lips looked blotchy, uneven, and blood red, but she did not bother to blot them on a tissue. It looked striking, like a movie star or a model.

After the lipstick, Lily took the eye pencil and lined her upper lid. This too was crooked, and she smudged the line further trying to straighten it. She shrugged her shoulders in and then popped the mascara brush out of the tube, brushing thick black coats onto her eyelashes. This final application was successful. Even in her over made-up state, Lily was pretty. Obviously inexperienced, but pretty nonetheless.

Lily replaced Lynette's make-up on her beauty stand, keeping the lipstick and powder for later touch-ups. She looked at herself in her roommate's mirror, fluffing her hair with the tips of her unpolished fingernails. Sitting at Lynette's chair, she teased her auburn hair at the crown, rattling it with Lynette's brush to give it extra height. She then smoothed the sides, licking her fingers and flattening strays so that her hair was smooth. Using her teeth, Lily pried bobby pins apart and wedged them underneath the curls to hold them in place. She was careful to hide the pins strategically so that they could not be seen.

She was drawn back to the mirror one more time before stepping out the door. She resisted the urge, but couldn't help admiring herself. Looking into the mirror she was greeted with her mother's face, her mother's eyes looking back into her eyes. It was a face nothing like her own, yet it was her own. The vision startled her, and as she stood up abruptly she stumbled backwards a few steps. The heels of the pumps caught in the rug, but there was nothing she could do to right herself. She fell backwards, landing on the floor with a thump, knocking her head on railing of her bed. The ringing of metal filled the room.

Lily sat on the floor, more stunned than anything else. The sound of footsteps and the key rattling the doorknob shook her to attention. She scrambled for leverage, trying to right herself before Lynette walked in the door.

"What are you doing Lily?" Lynette asked as she walked into the room, holding her gaze on Lily a bit longer than usual before dropping her books on the table. She busied herself with straightening the few other papers and books that were on the table, rearranging them again and again.

Lily, finally summoning the strength to move, pulled her legs underneath her and rose shakily to her feet. She gripped an iron post of the bed with white knuckles and rubbed the back of her head.

The sound of Lily's feet scraping on the floor lured Lynette's attention away from the table. Raising her head quickly at the loud noise, she watched Lily wobble for a few moments before saying anything. "What's going on?" she finally asked, her cold and stern voice contradicting the soft look on her face.

Lily sank down on her bed, still rubbing the back of her throbbing head. Strands of now static hair stood up straight in the air; several locks obscured her downtrodden eyes. Her careful preparation was undone.

“I’m going down to the club,” was all she managed to get out. She took a deep breath. She had forgotten her proper posture, yet beauty remained in the gentle curve formed by her body, neck and head. She waited patiently, but not passively, for Lynette’s response.

A long and uncomfortable silence filled the space between them, a stiffness that Lily could not ignore. Lynette stood at the table, looking down at her fingers fluttering over the pages of the books. “What do you think?” Lily asked. The words invited an opinion, but the tone of Lily’s voice dared Lynette to defy her wishes. The sudden anger in Lily singed Lynette as well.

“Lily, I don’t care if you go to that club. You can do whatever you want to. . .” Lynette’s voice trailed off. She shook off her hardness and started fishing through her purse on the table. Pulling a cigarette out of her case, she stuck it in her mouth. Just the feel of the cigarette was calming, and she inadvertantly let her guard down.

“I don’t know why you’re here Lily,” she blurted out suddenly, the cigarette bobbing up and down like a diving board on the cusp of her lips. The protective levy that had always held her judgment back was obliterated now, and all of the venomous indignation spilled forth.

“You never study, you don’t go to class, you just spend all of your time in this room, sitting in that chair, looking out that window and dreaming of some exciting life out there.” She pointed to window. “But there’s nothing out there Lily, it’s all in here, it’s all in your mind.”

Lynette paused, cupping her hand around the match she held to the end of her cigarette. As the tip glowed in life, she sucked in quickly. Her face turned pasty white. One hurried cigarette after the other, and smoke filled the small apartment. Lynette’s furious silence caused a small but wicked ball of fury to begin churning in Lily’s stomach. She screwed up her face and waved her hand dramatically through the air.

Lynette stormed to the window, took another deep puff, then flicked her cigarette out into the street. She blew the smoke outside with exaggeration. Turning to Lily, her eyes narrowed. "Of course, there won't be any smoke in a club," she said, the sarcasm dripping off her lips. Her stupidity made so obvious, Lily looked away in shame. "You're so naive! You're just a little Montana brat, a little girl," Lynette spat out contemptuously. "You have no clue what it's like to be a grown woman."

The stinging barb of those words, the acknowledgment of their partial truth, the anger at Lynette who had made it all so obvious--everything filtered into Lily's lungs and stayed there, burning, until it shot back out. She jumped up off her bed and stalked to the table where Lynette's cigarette case lay. She fumbled with the clasp for several seconds before the case flew open and cigarettes flew everywhere. Lily did not stop to pick them up. Catching one as it flew through the air, she slapped one hand over the matches lying on the table. With the other hand she stuck the cigarette between her lips, then lit the end.

The cigarette came to life, the tobacco and paper crackling. Taking one puff, a triumphant smile spread over Lily's face. She did not cough. She looked at Lynette and nodded her head slowly through the haze of smoke.

Lynette couldn't help herself; she was shocked at Lily's insolence. Her mouth dropped open as she watched Lily take puff after puff. Lynette's reaction fed Lily even more, and the puffs became smaller and more frequent until the cigarette was down to a useless stub.

Before she even had the chance to rub the cigarette out in an ashtray, Lily's eyes registered the nausea that a first-time smoker, especially an over-zealous one, often feels. Her face turned a tender pea green, her bloodshot eyes bulged, and her lips grew faintly purple. As Lily began to cough, first controllably, and then in great fits that racked her body so hard she was brought down to her knees, Lynette's face softened.

The cigarette dropped to the floor and began to burn a hole through the rag rug. Strands of spit hung off Lily's open mouth, but she was too concerned about getting oxygen to notice or care. Taking a deep, scratchy breath, she finally stopped coughing, only to smell the burning. She looked down. A small hole had burned through the rug and was now making its way to the wood floor.

Lily picked up the burning butt, ran to the window and tossed it out. She stood silently at the window, bent over in exhaustion and nausea, licking her burnt palm. In the background she could hear Lynette whispering, "The landlord's going to kill us, the landlord's going to kill us. . ." as she dabbed the floor. Lily didn't notice the rest; her mind was filled again with the music that had started up down the street.

Sharp bursts of laughter broke through her reverie. Looking toward Lynette, she found her roommate rolling on the floor, laughing so hard her legs kicked the air. "You were *green!*" she choked out between spasms of laughter. Lily rubbed her forehead in confusion. She had never seen Lynette laugh.

Lynette struggled to her feet and stumbled over to Lily. She put her hand on Lily's shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said, her solemnity sandwiched between half-stifled laughs. "Really, I am."

Lily shook her away. "Leave me alone," she said roughly. Walking over to Lynette's mirror, she brushed the strands of loose hair back into place. Lynette walked up behind her and watched her reflection in the mirror. She put her hands firmly on Lily's shoulders and turned her around. Picking a brush off the table, she applied blush to Lily's cheeks.

"Lily, I know you think your inexperience is something bad, but it's really not. I don't mean it that way." She turned Lily back around to face the mirror, then knelt down next to her so that both their faces were reflected back to them. "I think it's kind of nice, myself."

"Thanks," Lily said quietly and moved away from the mirror. Lynette got up heavily and walked to where her cigarettes were scattered across the floor. She bent down, examining a slightly bent one before putting it in her mouth and lighting it.

After taking a long drag she paused, looking Lily square in the face. "I'm not trying to keep you from doing what you want--I'm not your mother for god's sake." She took another drag and let it out slow. "I just don't want you to get hurt, okay?"

The hot defiance in Lily's stomach was squelched. Tears sprang to her eyes and she fought to hold them back. Here she was, trying to act like a woman and crying like a little girl.

But there was still something in her, a stubbornness that would not let her give in. Swallowing the tears down, a lump caught in her throat as she sat up and tried to speak. "Lynette, will you come with me to the club?" The question came out not much louder than a squeak.

Lynette looked at her incredulously. "You never give up, do you?"

"Nope." Lily sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Muttering, Lynette walked to her closet and rustled through some dresses.

"God, I can't believe I'm going to do this."

"What?" Lily asked.

"Shut up and don't push your luck."

"Yay!" Lily squealed, jumping off the bed and leaping at Lynette all in one motion.

"Hey, watch my cigarettes!" Lynette screamed, spreading her arms out over the floor like an umpire signaling safe. Upon landing, Lily lifted up each of her pumps, scraping a smashed cigarette off the bottom of one.

She looked at Lynette with a crooked smile. "Ooops."

Lily and Lynette walked along the street, away from the university, into unfamiliar territory. They tried not to look scared. Lynette sported her tough New York attitude and Lily held her chin high, strutting like a peacock with its feathers spread, but when Lily's hand brushed against Lynette's, both girls had to fight the urge to clutch each other. They feared what they would find inside the club, but they also feared themselves if they turned back. Either way, they were trapped. Their eyes were cagey, fluttering.

Not really sure where the club was, they had resorted to following the sound of the music and the small but obvious stream of people they somehow knew were headed to the same place. It was an unusual group they followed. No one looked alike and yet it was apparent they all had a common destination. These people knew each other well, talking, laughing and joking with each other, nodding their heads silently to that same beat they all followed.

Lily and Lynette were out of place, even though no one seemed to notice but them. They forgot how long they had been walking, forgot what direction they were heading in or whether they had turned. The music had stopped; the line of people was the only thing that had kept them in the right direction, and now even the people were sparse. They began to think that they were lost; Lily started to wonder what in the world she thought she was doing.

Then they saw where the people were going to, where they disappeared and the street regained ownership of the neighborhood. Their hearts began to pump a little faster and beads of sweat popped out on well-powdered foreheads. They stopped, smoothed their hair and made sure that their lipstick was on straight. Lily breathed in deeply before she turned, ready to absorb the immensity of the place she'd concocted in her mind.

They walked up to the door they'd seen the last man go into, then stepped back. "Are you sure this is the place?" Lynette asked as Lily reached out for the doorknob. "It's just a door!" Lily stood quietly, looking around carefully to make sure they hadn't been led astray, cringing at the flood of disappointment in Lynette's voice.

"Did we miss it?" Lily asked, knowing they hadn't.

The door was cracked open slightly. From within they could hear glasses clinking, the pleasant murmur of conversation, and repeated punches of loud laughter. Lily strained her eyes and crooked her neck, trying to see through the darkness and the tiny opening what kind of atmosphere was behind the shabby doorway.

Behind her came the sound of someone clearing their throat, then came an insistent tap on her shoulder. Lily turned around to find a pair of dark brown eyes looking back at her. "How're you doing there, girls?" the man said, lifting his cap off his head in a gentlemanly motion. "You lost?" Lily shook her head. "Well, can I get by you?" he asked, his gaze still fixed intently on Lily. She stepped aside silently, giving him a wide girth.

The vision of the man's eyes was burned into her mind so permanently that Lily didn't even bother trying to look around him and catch a peek at the inside of the club as he opened the door wide. The door closed with her looking after him, not really seeing him, only remembering the depth of his eyes.

"Did you see anything?" Lynette asked. "What'd you see?"

"Nothing. Everything."

"What the hell. . . You saw something? Or you didn't see anything?" Lynette's eyes screwed up tightly in confusion and annoyance, her face framed in wrinkles. Lily was quiet and Lynette punched her lightly on the shoulder. "What are we going to do now?"

“Let’s go inside.” Lily said absent-mindedly, softly, but with a conviction so thick even Lynette could feel it. The prospect knocked them both a bit off balance. Lynette recovered first.

“What?”

“Let’s go inside,” Lily said firmly. Without hesitation she put her hand on the doorknob and opened the door.

Walking in the door, up a flight of stairs, and through a narrow hallway, Lily finally found what she had been looking for. It was the club, the place she had heard about, dreamt of, longed for. There were swarms of people, more people than she thought could fit into the tiny room, all of them crammed around the thin disks that served as tables. Their eyes were trained on each other, taking in the movement, feeding off it. Lily breathed in the thick, fragrant smoke, looking at Lynette in amazement.

The only places left to sit were at the bar. Lily motioned towards the area and Lynette shrugged her shoulders in response. As the two inched up to the high barstools, Lynette leaned over to Lily. “I don’t like this place. There’s an awful lot of people here, a lot of smoke too.”

Lily waved her hand. “A little smoke never hurt anyone.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t regular smoke,” Lynette said suspiciously.

“What do you mean, regular smoke?”

“I mean, regular smoke,” Lynette said. Seeing Lily’s blank face, she leaned in closer. “This isn’t cigarette smoke Lily.” Lily nodded, then looked around.

“But they’re all smoking cigarettes. Look!” Lily said, waving her hand over the room. Lynette grabbed her arm quickly. She set it on the bar, nodded and returned

Lily's smile. Once Lily turned away, Lynette rolled her eyes and motioned the bartender, who put down a whiskey straight after accepting her money.

"What can I get you honey?" the bartender asked Lily.

"What do you have?" she asked. The bartender tilted his head in wonder.

"Excuse me?" he asked, leaning in closer to Lily as if he didn't hear her question.

"She's fine," Lynette cut in and waved the bartender off. He looked alternately between the two women, then walked away shaking his head.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lily asked indignantly, shrugging Lynette's hand off her arm.

"I'm saving you from yourself." Lynette took a sip of her drink.

"I don't need you to take care of me," Lily hissed. She jumped off the barstool, landing crooked on her heels and almost twisting an ankle. Righting herself, she brushed her hands over her dress.

"Where are you going?" Lynette asked, her humor suddenly gone. "I'm sorry Lily, I won't do it again."

"That's right. You won't because I'm not standing here anymore. I'm going over there." She pointed to an empty spot along the wall.

"Fine," Lynette said matter-of-factly. But Lily's eyes sparkled with the challenge. She turned on the tips of her toes and walked over to the wall, swinging her hips with exaggeration the whole way. Lynette gulped down the rest of her drink, then motioned the bartender for another. It didn't matter, she still could watch Lily from the bar.

Bending one of her legs and putting the sole of her foot against the brick wall, Lily blew her bangs off her forehead with a deep breath. Scanning the club, she discovered that she and Lynette were the only girls out alone. They weren't the only women in the club, they were just the only ones without men next to them.

This place, what seemed to be the real world to Lily, was filled with couples. Some of them exchanged serious looks as they sat snuggled close together at the table, others gazed in opposite directions and kept a large distance between them. The women leaned heavily upon their men, often standing up quickly before falling back down. Their clothes, even their skin, was wrinkled, surely not as crisp as when the night began. Lily watched these people with a feeling of detachment at first, then longing. The night was cooling off. She could feel the fresh air coming up the stairs from the now propped open door, throwing a glittery sheen that covered everything around.

Standing at the wall, without having to worry about Lynette's judging eyes, Lily was able to get a good look around the club. Sitting at the bar, in the barstools surrounding Lynette in fact, were several men with their hats pushed back on their heads. They held clear glasses filled with bronze liquid, and leaned against the bar casually. One of them was talking to Lynette, his hands moving speedily as he told a story, his face animated. Quick bullets of laughter peppered the end of the story, and Lily saw him signal to the bartender for another drink, pushing it toward Lynette. She pushed it away, looking over toward Lily. Lily stared back at her, watching how long it would take for the man to convince her to accept the drink. It didn't take long. They'd been in the club for less than an hour and Lynette already had some man buying her drinks.

Lily was mesmerized by the motion of the men at the bar, the way they suddenly turned, almost in unison, towards the nondescript stage. They knew when the music was coming, and their eyes were focused intently on the stage, forgetting whatever had come before.

The music started, controlled yet furious. On the small platform fixed at the corner of the room were three men crammed together, playing the cornet, piano, and

bass. They were concentrating on their creations, and the audience respected this fact. The flood of music in the club drowned out the current of conversation that had filled the room previously; none of the patrons wanted to talk anymore anyway. The faces of the people sitting at the tiny round tables strained to absorb all that the musicians tossed their way. The room was wet with the effort of everyone together, sloppy, sweet and lovely all at the same time.

As Lily was taking in the music, she was oblivious to what was happening around her. She didn't see the brown-eyed man walk over to her, didn't feel him take her hand and clasp her fingers around a drink, didn't notice the heat of his body radiating out towards her as he leaned against the wall next to her. Or maybe it was that she was so enthralled by his actions that she couldn't respond. Either way, she was apathetic, which intrigued him even more, made him move closer to her and smile widely as he put his hand on the delicate back of her neck.

Not knowing what else to do, Lily drained the glass he had handed her without looking to see its contents. Her throat cried out in anguish, but she stifled the coughs that surfaced. The whiskey drifted lazily throughout her body, tickling her toes and fingers, and bringing a flush of life to her face. She wanted to look at him, but couldn't force herself to do so. The music was fuzzier now, the sharp notes and tones now blended, no longer distinct, the difference between day and night. It was harder to focus on the music now, with this man next to her.

But the quality was no less. Yes, Lily thought, the music is better now. She looked at the musicians again and saw that they were not as stoic as she first thought. Their energy came from somewhere within, but it was fueled by the people sitting in the audience. It was a collaboration, a mutual feeling of pain and love and sorrow that produced this feeling that was powerful enough to silence the room. It was paradise,

that electric place in between those musicians and this man next to her. Lily leaned her head back against the cold brick wall and closed her eyes.

When she looked down at the empty glass in her hand she found that it was full again. She did not question this occurrence, and merely downed the liquid. She was drunk now, felt herself losing control, flying out of herself and floating somewhere above the room, looking down at herself. She noticed the bareness of the walls. There were no knickknacks, no posters or pictures hanging to give the customers something to focus on. Even the light fixtures were plain, most of the light coming from candles randomly placed on the center of a few tables. The chairs and tables were dark too, but Lily couldn't tell what color they were. There was nothing here to distract a person, no masks or Band-Aids to hide scars and frailties. But this did not seem to bother people. It was strangely comforting to Lily, standing out in the open, nothing to hide behind, everything laid out on the table.

And so as the world became blurrier, things became much clearer. Lily noticed that one of the men sitting at a table was missing an arm. She saw a woman with ripped stockings and shoes that did not match her dress. There was a man with bad acne, another man with several teeth missing, a woman with a crooked nose. A man sat up near the platform crying silently, tear after tear rolling slowly down his fat cheeks. Some of the tables were tilted, some of the glasses dirty. Chairs creaked as people shifted, and the paint on the walls was stained and chipped in places. The musicians strained and faltered at points, were too anxious and then too ambitious in others. But these things made Lily like paradise even more.

A long time passed, a couple more drinks, before the music stopped again. The musicians walked out a door left of the stage to have a smoke and maybe a bite to eat before they went back to work. Lily looked down at her glass, unable to believe that she had drained it so many times. She glanced sideways, towards the bar, hoping to find

Lynette, a familiar face she knew, but every face she looked at was nothing but a blurry mass.

There was a man standing next to her; Lily had almost forgotten him. As she looked towards the bar, he leaned over to her, putting his face up close to hers. When she turned around, Lily found herself looking up into his eyes, those spheres so warm and beautifully brown, his hair dark and curly. He brought one hand up to her face and caressed her, circling his other hand around her waist. He pinched her cheek and laughed, a chuckle so deep and full. Lily looked again to the bar for Lynette, but the only thing her eyes would focus on was this man standing so close to her, his full lips parted so slightly. She didn't know what was happening, didn't know whether this churn of emotion in her body was the alcohol or her feelings for this man. She wanted to touch those lips, to kiss them, but instead she forced herself to turn her head away. She knew that she should push herself out of the circle of his arms, but she wasn't sure she wanted to.

"Excuse me," she said. Lily felt her words slurring together and clenched her fists. Concentrating, she pieced the sentence together again, louder this time. "Excuse me sir." She tapped his hand that lay lightly on her shoulder, trying to get his attention without having to look into his eyes.

"Yessmiss?" His words were slurred too and Lily tilted her head into his in an attempt to decipher his word or words, she wasn't sure which.

"Huh?" she asked, still avoiding his eyes.

"What, baby?" he replied, leaning his face even closer to hers, the smell of alcohol thick on his warm breath.

She could feel his piercing eyes, but couldn't save herself. Looking to him again, her tenuous sobriety slipped away. "Um. . ." She forgot what she had meant to do.

“You got a taste for the stuff, eh?” He chuckled again and Lily looked at him blankly. He paused before continuing. “I mean, a real drinker knocks ‘em back like you do. Most women don’t drink the stuff.” Lily nodded. She wasn’t sure she was understanding his words, but she wanted him to continue, liking the sound of his voice and his words floating through her mind.

“You wondering who was filling your glass?” Lily made no response. “My name’s Webster.” He waited for Lily to introduce herself, then lifted the glass in his left hand up to his lips to quench the silence.

“You’re a sweet little thing,” he said reassuringly. “But you don’t talk much do you?” Lily smiled, a sudden dizziness overcoming her. “Well, that’s okay. Some of the best company is silent,” he said, chucking her under the chin and laughing.

Off in the corner, far enough away that she had to squint to see, Lily could see a couple sitting up against the wall. It took a moment to distinguish two separate people, their bodies being smashed together almost into one. Webster followed Lily’s look, and the two of them stood silently, watching the couple kissing and loving, feeling that they were the only ones in the room.

Then the tension was too much and Lily had to turn quickly away. She turned so fast that her head bumped hard into Webster’s. Knowing that he had seen the couple too, that he had watched her watching the couple, Lily was embarrassed.

“I gotta go home now,” she muttered, rubbing her head and stumbling in a crooked line for the stairs and the door. As she moved, the alcohol rocketed to her head. Webster saw her eyes roll and rushed to grab her.

“Whoa there!” he said. “You have take it easy. . .you can’t jump up so fast.” Lily mumbled Lynette’s name, incoherently. “Let’s get you outside for some fresh air,” Webster said as he clasped Lily’s arms around his neck. She kept tripping over her feet

so he had to half drag, half carry her towards the stairs. He moved slowly so as not to bump into anybody and make her sick.

Seeing him leave, several of the men around the bar turned around to watch him. "Alright Webster!" one man finally hooted. "You finally got yourself something, huh?" another one piped up. The crowd laughed, and Webster flashed a toothy grin in their direction. But he could not hide the defensive response of his flesh turning pink. Lily was concentrating on her churning stomach; still she could not help but hear the words. They angered her, yet she felt some sense instant loyalty to Webster.

Leaning up against the wall outside, Lily breathed in deeply, allowing the cold, calm air to travel through her body. It collected in her head, in a pain like an ice cream headache, dispersing the clutter that the alcohol had left there. Things seemed clearer. She turned to Webster.

He stood next to her, sucking deeply on his cigarette, blowing out smoke rings in quick succession. Lily gathered her strength and pushed off the wall. "Thanks for helping me in there," she said. The words came out roughly although she tried to make them sound neutral.

"Oh. . ." Webster said, flicking his cigarette away quickly and standing up. "Don't feel quite so dizzy now, eh? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Lily returned, putting her hand over her stomach where a wave of nausea had just crested. She started to wobble down the sidewalk hunched over, walking slowly, leaving space enough so that he could follow, but not walking slow enough to make it seem like she wanted him to follow. She heard no footsteps behind her.

She stopped and turned around. Webster was leaning against the wall again, smoking another cigarette, staring across the street at a run-down apartment building. Lily's skin quivered, a feeling she knew was not the alcohol. "Webster?" She walked

back to the club, her feet moving faster than she thought they could given her drunken state. "Webster!" Her voice was filled with urgency, a tone she was surprised but not embarrassed to hear. "Aren't you going to walk me home?" she asked, her words direct but tinged with a strange shyness.

"I thought you said you were fine." Webster looked away from Lily. "You seem fine to me. You can make it home okay. I won't bother you."

"I don't think so," Lily said, falling slightly to the side for effect. "I still feel kind of sick." Webster flicked his cigarette away and smiled at her.

"Okay, if you want me to take you home. You want me to take you home?" Lily said nothing. "You don't want me to take you home?" he said.

Lily looked down at the ground. The music had started back up inside the club. "Yes," she said. "I want you to take me home."

They walked down the street, now quiet with sleepiness. Webster took off his jacket and put it around Lily's shoulders, holding her steady on her wobbly legs. No words were exchanged--what could either of them say in a situation like this? Lily's head throbbed and her stomach reeled with each step, but she kept her chin lifted, her eyes looking forward to the next building, the next streetlight, the next block. The feeling of Webster's arm around her shoulder was the thing that kept her going.

"This is it." They were standing in front of Lily's building, as she fumbled down the front of her dress for the key that she'd carefully stuck in her bra. Webster looked down at her, the pale light of the streetlight showing the youth in her face. She was nervous and clumsy. His eyes clouded over with shame.

"I can't do this," he said simply, his hands falling down to the sides of his thighs with a slap.

“Do what?” Lily asked, turning around to face him, her cheeks burning.

Webster shook his head and pulled hers down so that he wouldn’t have to look in her eyes. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, burying his nose in her sweet-smelling hair before pulling away.

Lily clung to him, tried to plead with him to stay, but her strength was gone. Through the mask of her tears she watched him walk away, cursing his name until he disappeared from her sight.

Then Lynette was before her, holding her heels in one hand and her purse in the other, trying to pick her up off the sidewalk. “Oh my god Lily, what did he do to you?” she kept saying over and over again, sobbing, trying to explain how she had gone to the bathroom and returned to find Lily no where in sight. “What did that son of a bitch do to you?” she demanded through her sniffles.

Lily’s eyes were now dry, and her whole body was hard and stiff with cold. She brushed Lynette’s arms away and stumbled to her feet. Her lips blue and pursed, she looked at the woman standing in front of her. “He didn’t do anything, okay? He didn’t do a damn thing.”

Finding Peace

Lily Easley was sitting in a gliding rocker on the enclosed porch of her childhood home. Outside, the day was bright and warm, but Lily could see that the tops of the Rockies were still covered in snow. The sun changed nothing up there. The ice and snow was so thick, so permanent in the sharp crags and deep valleys that even the hottest summer days in Whitefish barely made a dent in its accumulation. Lily was like those mountains, full of peaks and razor sharp edges. The picture was breathtakingly beautiful: the mountain and the woman, each surrounded by an impenetrable layer of frost that even a barbed pick could not catch hold of. The warm light floating through the window could not shake the cold flowing through her veins.

Lily shivered and looked across the room at her mother. Grace Easley's fingers were bent and twisted like pieces of dried-up vine. She looked as if she would snap at a touch. She sat on a mint green couch across from Lily, the hunch of her back standing almost taller than her tiny gray bun of hair. Her hands were folded in her lap, her knuckles kneading her palms in concentration. The rest of her body shook with the effort of living, but her eyes were bright and clear and steady, the iris surrounded by enormous white saucers. Her vision was hazy, but the sharpness of her eyes announced a presence behind the cloudy screen of infirmities.

It was thirty years ago that Lily had packed her bags and left Montana in the middle of the night, when she first got a glimpse of the world beyond those mountains that had always surrounded her. In the time between she'd discovered that people could be different from those few she'd known as a child, that lives didn't have to be like glass jars, trapping and suffocating those inside. She'd seen that not all families functioned like gutted out cars up on blocks in the front yard.

But being gone so long and having lived for thirty years in the city that never sleeps didn't mean that Lily had returned to Montana an enlightened woman. She

smoked her filterless cigarettes one after the other, using the first to light the second; she put salt on her food before checking to see if it actually needed salt for taste; she was ten pounds underweight and didn't mind rubbing it into anyone's face; and she still slept with guys on the first date.

When she left Montana, she understood that the world outside, the city she ran to, was the thing that would save her. It blotted out the knife-like mountains, the ranch, the stifling obligations. But most of all, it brushed away the silence that had filled her life since she had been old enough to stop and notice it. It was typified by the way that she and her mother had always worked in silence, Grace quiet as she absorbed the beauty of the land around them that, for Lily, only felt like a constant reminder of her inability to speak.

Now Lily found herself back in the place where she had started. But she did not return to Montana to find out how to be happy, to mend the broken fences that would clear her conscience, to finally stop and take stock of her life, or to find the place where she had taken a wrong turn. Lily did not believe in those things. She had come to Whitefish only because her Uncle Albert had asked her to.

She hated the thought of her life coming full circle. The idea implied some ending but for Lily, nothing ever ended. Things were always beginning, always moving, something always running through her mind. She never worried about what was next or where the end might lie. She didn't stop to ponder philosophy of life. It wasn't always this way, but in the process of growing up and growing wise, Lily had become the kind of woman who simply went with her intuition and never second-guessed herself. Some called her a bitch, some saw her as cold-hearted. But for Lily, it was just the way she lived her life.

Lily shifted in her seat. The sound of ice cubes crackling in her glass of iced tea annoyed her--it sounded too cheery--and so she flicked the ice cubes pointedly with

her middle finger. Droplets of the liquid took flight and landed in the corner of her eye. Setting the glass disgustedly on the coffee table, no coaster, she dragged a hand across her eyelid, smearing her eye make-up. She shook her lowered head slowly from side to side as her lips moved quickly, silently issuing forth cuss words.

She had run fast and far to escape the cold grayness of the Montana landscape, yet here she was, iced tea in her eye, sitting in front of her senile mother. The muttered cuss words reminded her of her weakness in returning to this place that she'd vowed to forget forever. Nevertheless, she was here and she was determined that her stay was only temporary: she had returned to set her mother's affairs in order, find a buyer for the ranch, and then use the money to finance Grace's placement in a suitable nursing home. She had calculated that the whole process would take two weeks, three weeks maximum.

She had accomplished some things: checking out some nursing facilities in Missoula, placing an ad for the ranch in the Spokane and Missoula papers, and sorting through Grace's financial information. But she hadn't actually answered the various inquiries about the ranch, nor filled out the applications for the nursing homes.

Lily cursed again, realizing that she had now been here for three weeks and could still be found sitting in the gliding rocker on the patio, looking at her mother and wondering how she could do what she had originally come here to do. She felt herself drowning and knew that she had to do something quick to save herself.

For weeks before she boarded the plane to Missoula, Lily had planned how she was going to tell her mother that she was selling the ranch. She thought that it would be easy, maybe even bring some sort of deep-seated satisfaction at having complete control over her mother for the first time in her life. But as yet she had been unable to speak a word. So she sat on the porch day after day, languishing in her silence, feeling the same misery she felt as a teenager, the memories pulling her deeper and deeper into

herself, into a pit of weakness. She could hardly believe that she was indeed a grown woman.

There was an actual reason that Lily had not been able to tell her mother that she was selling the ranch. For all the things she didn't know or understand or even like about her mother, there was one clear truth she could never forget: the ranch was Grace's home and it was the love of her life. Selling the ranch would be like stealing every ounce of peace she had ever known, the only thing that had ever made her happy. In New York, Lily could have done it with the wave of a hand, for there she was in her element, away from the strange potion of motherly influence and earthen spirit that overwhelmed her here. In Montana, sitting in front of her mother, looking out the window at those imposing mountains, she wasn't so sure.

Grace's humming filled the room again and Lily shook her head. The only thing that seemed to shut the woman up was glasses of cold iced tea with splashes of brandy thrown in for good measure. Lily never would have thought of giving an old woman so much alcohol, but she had found the bottle on the kitchen counter, cap off, after the nurse had left. She hadn't resorted to the brandy until Grace's incessant humming drove her to bite her nails down to throbbing, bleeding nubs. After gulping a great deal of alcohol herself, Lily thought a little of it might put her mother to sleep for awhile. It never managed to put Grace to sleep, but it did keep her quiet. Then, when silence finally filled the air, Lily would be left with her own thoughts, unwelcome, hated guests. So she began making twin drinks, one for herself, one for her mother. She laughed at the thought of mother and daughter bonding in such a way, but the dysfunction fit them well. They could be together when they were both numb.

Grace's humming was getting louder. Lily rose from her chair, picked her glass up off the coffee table and went into the kitchen to make a fresh batch of comfort.

Lily stood at the sink with the cool water running over her hands, looking out the kitchen window to the mountains. As soon as she arrived in Whitefish, she felt the spell of the land come over her. She remembered the way it had felt as a child, the wonder with which she had regarded this place. There was nothing more powerful, nothing more frightening. She had forgotten the lethargic, entrancing flow that drew her in, lulled her to sleep while her mind remained frighteningly alert. There was nothing here to distract her; no noise, no people to jumble the thoughts in her mind. Nothing but constant waves of silence crashed through her mind.

This place was the only thing that could possibly force Lily to think about the things she buried long ago. Sitting on the porch every day, she mulled over memory after memory, sifting them back and forth in her mind like flour until they slipped away once again. But even as they leave she knows they will return. They always do. Even the brandy can't erase her pain.

Removing her aching hand from the faucet, she put an empty glass underneath the pounding stream of water. She gulped the cool water, then chased it with a gulp of brandy. As the warmth spread through her stomach she sat down at the table, put her head in her hands and sighed.

Upon arriving in Whitefish, Lily noticed that the population had definitely grown. There were now a few rich and famous people who lived and vacationed in Whitefish, and lots of new people who made their livings off the land in ways other than ranching. There were nice boutiques, homespun art galleries, and fancy homes that had changed the look of the town, but the new buildings couldn't replace Lily's memories of old. No matter how much she admired the resourcefulness of those trying to give the town a make-over, nothing could ever change Whitefish in her eyes. Lily still saw the old feed store and saloon, not a fancy restaurant and antique store. The

town would always be the way it was when she had left, regardless of the fact that most of the buildings had been knocked down and the names changed.

Her mother's house was still far out of the township, close to the mountains, nestled in its own little valley. Even though the nearest house was now just a half mile away rather than five miles, it still felt like the middle of nowhere. Lily missed the hubbub around her apartment in Manhattan, the loud traffic on the street below, the people constantly going at every hour of the day and night. The activity kept Lily alive and warm. From the moment of her arrival in Whitefish she felt brittle and old.

When Lily first approached the house, a nurse greeted her at the door dressed in a purple and teal cotton print shirt and teal leggings with stirrup bottoms. The fabric was clingy, making every roll of the nurse's fat painfully obvious. But the nurse didn't seem to care.

The nurse was carrying her bag with her and passed by Lily with some difficulty in the narrow doorway. Mumbling, she clutched her bag tightly in her pudgy hand as waddled out to her car. Halfway there she stopped and turned to Lily. "You got some mother there," she said brusquely. "Quite a handful."

"Don't I know it," Lily said and shrugged her shoulders. She fished through her purse for a tip, and then waved the money toward the nurse. The woman's cheeks relaxed as she walked back to Lily and accepted the wad of bills.

"I'm sorry. It's just that your mother is a very trying patient," the nurse said. She paused, waiting for Lily to inquire further, but there was only silence. "Good luck," she said finally, grabbing Lily's hand and patting it consolingly. The nurse's car roared to life, then peeled out of the driveway, burping plumes of dust and gravel in its wake.

Lily walked into the house, trying to guess what room her mother would be in. The wonder was unnecessary--the pull of intuition led her immediately to her mother's side. In the covered patio, she was sitting on the couch with a colorful afghan wrapped

around her tiny shoulders. It was the place she had always sat, the throne of her castle. She was looking out the window, her vacant eyes focused on the mountains--or maybe something else that Lily couldn't see. Still, Lily breathed a sigh of relief. Her mother was upright and in one piece. She seemed all right for the most part--a little shaky, hunched over, and wrinkly maybe, but seemingly harmless enough.

"Momma?" Lily asked, raising her voice in case her mother happened to be hard of hearing. There was no response, no twitch of movement to acknowledge the presence of another person in the room. "Mother!" she said again, snapping her fingers quickly for emphasis. Grace still did not lift her head or make any movement. Lily squinted her eyes, looking closely at her mother for any sign of life. She seemed to be in her own world, oblivious to this one. Lily decided to take a look around.

Setting her bags down in the patio by her mother, Lily slowly worked her way through the house, remembering every knick-knack, book, picture, and piece of furniture. She ran her fingers through the dust on the mantle and blew the specks off the pictures. It was all exactly where it had been when she lived there. The couch, the chairs, the pictures--none of it had changed. The only thing Lily could see that had changed was the afghans draped over the furniture. In the winters her mother always sat in the patio and knitted. Summer work was usually shucking corn or snapping beans, but winter work was knitting. Lily could see by the number of afghans that Grace had kept very busy.

Walking up the stairs, Lily found her feet choosing the familiar non-creaky path, which was still mostly creak-free. Her mind flashed back to the memory of sneaking downstairs at night when she couldn't sleep, making huge roast beef, turkey or ham sandwiches, whatever was left over from dinner. She would eat outside on the front steps, sitting in the crisp summer wind with only her nightgown on. Those were lonely nights, nothing but her food and the crickets to keep her company.

Lily paused at the top of the stairs, overcome with the memory. The house was an exact reproduction of the picture in her mind that she had always tried to forget. She turned and looked down the stairs, thinking that she could not continue walking the path through her memories. But something in her wouldn't let her go back downstairs. Some insistent push in the small of her back forced her forward.

Lily could see that the door to her old bedroom was wide open. Like the little girl returning from her forbidden snack, she crept down the hall on the tips of her toes. She did not pause at the door; instead, she closed her eyes and slipped soundlessly through the doorway, imagining that, like the rest of the house, it would look exactly as she remembered it.

She was surprised by how wrong she was. A new queen-size, four poster bed with a beautiful deep blue and white checked bedspread had been added. Her old pictures had been removed, and the walls were no longer the white-changed-to-dusty-cream they'd been when the room had been hers; now they were covered by a lovely blue flowered wallpaper. Her bookshelves were gone, replaced by an antique bureau with a white pitcher and bowl on top in one corner, and a small cabinet in the other. Her room was now a guest room. She pushed down the bubbling of indignation in her stomach at the irony.

As she approached the closet and slid open the door, Lily expected to see another person's clothes. Or maybe no clothes at all. But stacked on the floor were cardboard boxes, carefully labeled with big block letters written in a black marker. The boxes contained her things, all the things she had left behind, carefully packed away with mothballs. In the corner of the closet were her pictures, carefully piled one on top of the other with sheets of paper in between. Her books were neatly stacked on the top shelf, alphabetically, just the way she had always kept them. Lily's hands flew up to her mouth, and her eyes widened in disbelief.

With her eyes wide open, her field of vision expanded just enough for her to see something hanging in the furthest corner of the closet. She dropped her hands and blinked once, then ducked and squirmed around the boxes to get a closer look.

Standing up as straight as she could in the cramped space, Lily found herself staring at a row of tiny dresses. At first she thought they were dresses from her old dolls, but the outfits were too elaborate, too perfect to be the clothes her tattered dolls wore. She fingered the fine materials with bright colors and lace. The most beautiful of the group was a beige christening dress with seed pearls, but Lily's favorite was a crisp yellow gingham summer dress, the only simple dress in the group. She thought that it fit her the best.

Lily buried her nose in the cloth. The dresses still smelled of home, that mixed bag of smells that could only make her think of her mother. In her mind she could see Grace carefully washing and hanging these dresses in the closet, remembering the days when she had taken so much joy in dressing her little girl in them. Those were the times when things were perfect, when a mother could fashion her child to be what she had never been able to be. Lily closed the closet door. That time had ended forever when she had outgrown those dresses.

Lily and Grace had never talked about what had happened between them, the way Lily had left so abruptly. When Lily wrote letters home, she would get them back a few weeks later, the words "Return To Sender" tattooed across the top of the envelope in her mother's distinctive scrawl. When she had the money, Lily would call home, but as soon as her mother would hear her voice on the other line she would hang up. It didn't matter if Lily had a friend call either. If Grace heard a voice she didn't recognize on the other end of the phone she would also hang up. Eventually Lily gave up calling and writing.

Alton, Lily's father, knew what was happening. In the beginning he would hear the phone ring once and feel the tension in the strained silence. He would see Grace pull something out of the mailbox yet return to the house with nothing. Sometimes he could get to the phone first, rush a few tender words before Grace came into the kitchen with the pained look in her eyes that compelled him to hang up.

"What are you doing Grace?" he finally asked his wife one night when she returned from answering the phone. "She's your daughter. Can't you just hear her explanation, her apology for how it happened?"

"Oh, so you know so much, do you?" Grace spat, her hands clicking with the knitting needles as she worked furiously. Alton sat back in his chair. A long silence filled the room, then the truth settled down on the house: "You knew she was leaving didn't you? And you didn't stop her," Grace said breathlessly. Her hands stopped suddenly and she looked up at Alton, her eyes filled with both poison and pain. The mixture was almost too much for Alton to bear, the knowledge of his betrayal. He looked away from his wife without answering. The needles started clicking again.

Alton loved Lily and he understood why she had to leave. He knew the way she felt about the ranch. He wanted to explain this to his wife, to go to Lily and tell her it was okay, but he could not do much more than get in hurried conversations when his wife was outside, or slip letters through the mail when he went into town. He was paralyzed, torn between his heart and his mind, his wife and his daughter.

It wasn't that Grace would have physically restrained him from seeing Lily; there was just something about Grace that thwarted his attempts to leave her. It was this power that had kept Alton in Whitefish for over fifty years. Sometimes he was burned, but he loved his wife with such intensity that he could forget his unhappiness.

Lily was not as willing. She had coped with Grace for eighteen years, always maintaining that certain distance that allowed her to stay just out of her mother's reach.

Grace's range of influence frightened Lily. As soon as she had the chance, she fled that oppressive power that hung over her young life.

Alton found himself lost somewhere in the middle, looking at his daughter on one side and his wife on another, forced to choose between them. He did not believe he could make the right choice.

In his wife's arms each night, Alton cried silent tears. He was numb inside, but uselessly under Grace's spell, unable, unwilling to escape. It had always been this way, and he knew it always would be. He could only wonder if his daughter would understand the choice he was making, a choice he couldn't understand or believe himself.

Alton complied with his wife's wishes, despite the fact that it tore him up inside, but he could turn his back on his daughter for no longer than a year. He informed Grace that he would not allow her to treat their daughter as an outsider in her own family. He called Lily immediately. "You can call home and write whenever you want to honey," he told her. "I won't allow you to go without a family any longer. I'm sorry I let it go this long."

"What about Mom?" Lily asked hopefully.

"Um. . ." Alton couldn't find the words. "I'll work on her Lily."

Lily was silent for a few moments. "Yeah, I'm sure that will help," she replied sarcastically. "I don't want to talk about her anymore."

Alton's love for Grace had not waned, but her power over him had. In response, she moved out of their bedroom, setting up her bed on the couch in the patio. She was silent about this turn of events. She felt the sting deeply, but kept anger to herself. She had already lost one part of her family in Lily, and she didn't think she could bear losing Alton. But her stubbornness shut them both out.

Lily's love for her father was strong enough that it did finally bring her back to the West--not to Montana, but to Spokane, Washington. When Alton found out that he had stomach cancer, he had to go to Spokane for treatment. Grace would not accompany him to Spokane, refusing to understand that his condition was any more serious than a common cold. "You go there and come home as soon as you get better," she told Alton. She waved her hands in annoyance when he tried to explain that he was dying, that he probably would never be able to come home. "Don't let those doctors fill you with such crap Alton!" she exclaimed. When he left on the train she held him so tightly that Alton's brother had to pry her away from him. But she never cried.

As Grace got word that Alton was growing more and more sick she barricaded herself up in her house, denying reality, spinning deeper and deeper into herself, away from the rest of the world. She opened the fences to let the animals loose and pulled the phone out of the wall. She refused knocks at door. She even let her garden be overcome by weeds. Grabbing a bottle of brandy, she sat on her couch in the patio day after day, taking deep swigs straight out of the bottle.

Uncle Albert called Lily and told her the news. "Honey, your father is very sick," he said gently, not mincing words. Without a split second of silence Lily answered.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

She was by her father's side for the weeks until his death. "Don't have any regrets Lily," he told her one day out of the blue. "Regrets are the only things you see when you're about to die."

"You're not going to die," Lily told him roughly. "Don't say that."

"You have to solve all the problems and mend the broken fences before you go," Alton continued. "You gotta be able to die in peace."

“Okay Dad. I hear you,” Lily said softly. “Let’s talk about something happy now.”

When he was in a lot of pain, Alton would ask for his wife. “Where’s Gracie?” he repeated over and over again. “Please Grace! Don’t leave me, don’t ever leave me!” he pleaded. His pain was so raw it brought Lily to her knees in sobs.

“Goddammit Albert!” she yelled at her uncle. “What am I supposed to do? How can I tell him that his wife isn’t here. . .that she abandoned him just like she did me?” Albert shook his head and held Lily. “I can’t take this anymore,” she mumbled.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said quietly, his lips pursed in anger as he wiped Lily’s tear soaked cheek.

When her father called for Grace again, Lily touched his hand. Alton stopped his restless movement and looked into his daughter’s calm eyes. “She’s at home,” she told her father gently.

“Where?” he asked, his face filled with confusion.

“In Whitefish,” she answered. “She’s there in the house, sitting in the rocking chair you built for her. She’s got an afghan wrapped around her legs, and she’s looking out the window towards the mountains. The sky’s so blue that you can hardly imagine God created a color so beautiful.” She brushed her father’s hot forehead with a wet rag and put her cheek to his. “Go there now Dad,” she whispered in his ear. “Be with her there.”

Alton’s eyes closed and his head tilted to the side in deep sleep. He breathed easier and the muscles of his face loosened. Lily set his hand down beside his body and sat next to him, dreaming of Whitefish as it was through his eyes.

“You can be at peace now Papa,” she told him.

Lily entered the patio and handed her mother the glass of fresh iced tea she'd just finished making. It was the same beverage she used to make her mother every summer when she was a little girl, except now she added the brandy.

For the first week she was there, Grace did not acknowledge Lily. At the second week, she began to watch Lily closely, clutching her afghan like a little kid, watching Lily's every move. Lily thought that maybe her mother recognized her, but Grace did not ask her who she was. She refused to leave the patio; Lily didn't try to remove her, she just never moved except to shuffle to the bathroom.

It was the end of the third week and there was still no change. As Lily handed her mother the glass of tea, Grace looked up at her with unwavering eyes. Lily wasn't exactly sure what was going on behind her mother's eyes, but she felt that old sense of power lingering somewhere behind them, the way it always used to be.

Grace's eyes rested now on this woman who handed her a cool, wet glass, then sat before her and began to rock gently in an old glider. The woman pulled a ragged, but still colorful afghan off the back of the chair and wrapped it around her legs.

"Maggie?" Grace whispered. "Maggie, is that you?"

Lily looked at her mother quickly. These were the first words she'd heard her speak in so many years that she had forgotten what her voice sounded like. It was small and fragile, no longer tinged with the power it had always commanded. It brought butterflies to her stomach and made her heart leap. Her voice caught in her throat before she could stammer tentatively, "Momma, it's me. . . Lily."

"Lily?" Grace questioned, her voice louder now, sounding more like Lily remembered it.

"Yes Momma. It's me, it's Lily." Lily leaned forward in her chair, hoping to give Grace a better view of her face.

“Why are you calling me Momma?” Grace said brusquely, her voice tinged with anger. “Maggie! Why are you calling me Momma? Is this some game?” Lily had not expected her mother to be fully functional--Uncle Albert had told her of the deterioration--but neither had she expected to be confused with her mother’s sister, dead since Grace was fifteen years old.

Lily set her feet firmly on the floor and slipped off the glider. She turned around and placed the folded afghan on the back on the chair. Beneath her warm auburn bangs her brow was furrowed.

She sat down next to the old woman and gripped the brittle but warm hand, alternately patting and rubbing it. She was taken aback by the flowing life in Grace’s hand. She felt so alive that for a moment Lily thought maybe her mother’s warmth could drive away the deep-set cold in her veins--that chill that always set in when she didn’t keep herself moving and busy. But there was a barrier, something between them that sucked the heat out. It was that fractured feeling that she had felt for as long as she could remember. Lily drew her hand away sharply and averted her eyes away from Grace’s piercing blue spheres that were watching her so intently, but so blindly.

“My name is Lily,” she said with her faced turned away. She observed the sunshine reflecting off the ripe red tomatoes growing rampantly in the garden outside and took a deep breath. “Remember? I’m your daughter.”

Grace clutched Lily’s hands suddenly. “Maggie, where have you been? I’m so warm. . .could you open a window and let a nice breeze inside?” Lily didn’t know what else to do except to get up and open the window. The color of the sky matched her mother’s eyes, and Lily was momentarily blinded by its strange intensity. She could see that the day was warm, but she could not feel it. The gust of wind that greeted her through the open window drove her back to the glider and the thick afghan. She shook it out roughly and tucked it around her whole body. Beneath it she shivered violently.

On the couch, Grace searched around and after a few moments finally grasped a pair of glasses. She put them on and slid them down to the tip of her nose.

“Maggie?” she questioned Lily, her chin stuck high in the air so that she could peer through the glasses perched on her nose. Lily did not respond. “Maggie!” she said again, this time with more force. Again Lily did not respond; instead, she looked again over her shoulder to the overgrown garden. Her mother lifted her hand shakily and said one more time, “Maggie?” Her voice was filled with fear as she groped blindly through the air for some trace of human presence. Lily’s brow softened and she turned to her mother.

“Yes, Grace?” she questioned, not knowing what else to say.

“Oh Maggie! Did you leave me again? I thought that you had left me again.” Grace pushed her glasses further up her nose to examine Lily more closely. “My Maggie, aren’t you beautiful!”

Lily looked at her mother in bewilderment and scratched her head nervously. She could not think of how to respond.

“Your hair is such a pretty blond color,” she gushed.

Lily ran her hand through her deep red hair. Grace removed her glasses and dropped them on the couch beside her. She relaxed and sat back, although the curling of her crippled bones required her muscles to remain taut, as if she might hop up and pounce on Lily at any time. Lily was debating whether she should argue with her mother or simply agree. “Thank you, Grace,” she finally answered, frowning at the absurdity of it all.

“Remember when Momma used to brush our hair at night before she put us to bed? One hundred strokes--not one more nor one less. Our hair would shine brighter than the manes of the horses at the state fair. You remember that Maggie?” Grace’s

eyes were focused on Lily, but she couldn't see the girl shake her head. Lily withered under her gaze.

"Yes, of course you remember. That was when we lived up in town. It was so cold there. We had to bundle up just to go to bed. We wore our nightgowns with long johns underneath and big wool socks. We'd snuggle in our bed to stay warm and fall asleep in each other's arms." Grace shook her head and smiled, her slightly gray teeth matching the color of her hair. "When she came to wake us for breakfast Momma had to pry us apart--every single morning was like that, except for summer. And even then, it was pretty cold at night." Grace was still looking at Lily, and Lily squirmed under the pressure. She rubbed her freezing hands together and got up to shut the window.

"Hey!" Grace barked suddenly. "It isn't winter yet is it?" Lily turned away from the window and looked at her mother. "Well, is it?" she questioned again.

"No. . .No, it isn't," Lily stammered.

"Then open the damn window!" Grace roared. Lily's legs felt weak underneath her. That tone was back, that hint of power that could control Lily even with senility behind it. Lily slowly opened the window, this time pushing both sections out wide until they hit the side of the house. The wind was now unbearable to her, and she thought she could not sit in the glider, next to the window. She wrapped the afghan tighter around herself, but forced herself to sit in the chair. The only other seat in the room was the couch--and she would not sit beside her mother.

Grace looked at Lily with those still blue eyes, but Lily did not look back at her. The old woman's mind was fluttering, and her thoughts floated like the bees on the daisies outside. In the mess that was left, nothing made sense. No thought was linear, nor connected to the next.

Lily's mind was moving just as quickly, wondering if, since Grace was finally talking and somewhat alert, she should bring up the nursing home and the plan to sell the ranch. She looked again at her mother, sitting so crisply on the couch, humming loudly. Instantly Lily was filled with anger, a blackness that boiled up from her stomach and stuck in her throat. She hated Grace for not being the mother she wanted her to be, the mother she was supposed to be. She hated her for never accepting the way she did things, for her silent judgment, for forcing her back to this place that she despised, for getting her way all these years. Lily hated herself even more for always letting her. But most of all, she hated her mother for making her what she was.

Lily shivered and looked at the wide open window. She suddenly flung the afghan off herself and jumped up out of the glider. She was going to close that window.

Grace sat silently on the couch and eyed Lily intently. She watched her lean out and reach for the window handles. "Maggie!" she growled. Lily turned abruptly and saw her mother's expression, looking like a cat watching her prey, her tail swishing back and forth in anticipation of the kill. Lily couldn't help herself. Before she knew it, she was slithering back to her afghan and chair, shaking her head in disbelief the entire time. When she saw her seated, Grace smiled pleasantly and reached once again for her glasses.

"Maggie, remember the creek we used to wade in? Yes. . .it's right back there." She pointed out the open window with her crooked finger. "We always got so dirty there. It was the mud pies we made. . .decorating them with the big black-eyed Susans and serving them up on plates made of leaves. Momma would scold us when we dirtied our dresses, but then she would laugh at the mud pie we'd bring her packed with a rock-crumb crust. That was when Momma let us play, before we had to do

chores.” Grace stopped for a moment and looked out the window longingly. “The old creek’s still there, isn’t it?” she asked quietly.

Lily rose up from her chair, noticing her mother’s eyes that were at once wide and vulnerable. “Momma?” The afghan slid into a pile on the floor. “Momma, are you there?” But as soon as the opening had appeared it vanished. Lily sat back down in the glider with a thud. She looked again at her mother sitting on the couch, looking out the window and humming, her face so blank, so innocent. But Lily would not melt. Something in Grace’s comfort touched a nerve in Lily. It was the manipulation, once again, by this woman who was supposed to love her, not crumple her up and toss her away without a second thought.

Lily wanted her mother to hurt as she was hurting, to be as confused and ruffled as she was. She was jealous of her mother. She wanted to forget as Grace had, to live in a world where she did not have to deal with the memories, with the way things were between them. Lily could go to the farthest point on the globe, into some chemical haze, but her mother was always right there behind her, reminding her of how she had disappointed her, of what a failure she was as a daughter, a carrier of the genes. She had tried to run, but she could never escape. But her mother had found a way to escape, and the thought burned through Lily.

There was silence all around her, and Lily stopped to listen. Even Grace had stopped humming, her head tilted and one ear cocked as if she was waiting to see what might break the silence too.

Somehow Lily felt that she had been brought to this point, that the events of her life had somehow collected into this one precise moment. She needed to be able to sit down and talk to her mother without any games, to explain truthfully what she was going to do with the ranch. Grace had to see that there was no malice in her actions, that it was just what had to be done. She wanted her mother to remember her, to yell at

her and tell her how much she hurt her by leaving, to tell her what a lovely woman she'd become.

It wasn't so much that her mother had forgotten her, it was the fact that she was slipping away without facing her. For Grace to slip away so easily, so unscathed--it was something Lily could not bear. She may have despised her mother, cursed their similarities, left her alone, but Lily would not let her mother get away with any more silence. It was the silence of all these years that had destroyed them, that silence passed from grandmother to mother, mother to daughter. The loss of Grace's memory meant that the sins were merely forgotten, not forgiven. There would be no atonement, no resolution, no relief. The cycle was continuing.

Hot, angry tears streamed down Lily's cheeks. She sucked her breath in loudly. Hearing her mother humming once again made her cry even harder. Shivering, she stood up, stumbled over to the couch, but managed to stand tall in front of her mother. Grace looked up at the person standing in front of her, but she was not really looking at her. Her vision was focused outside, where she could see the cerulean sky changing colors as the sun began to fade behind the mountains. The edge of the sky was the color of the autumn trees that covered the hills and valley.

Lily grabbed her mother's shoulders and shook her vigorously. "I know you're in there dammit! Momma! MOMMA!" Grace closed her eyes in the face of this unexpected wrath, her body stiff with resistance. Her lips pursed together tightly, faintly purple around the edges. "Come on Momma, you talk to me. Talk to me now!" Lily stopped shaking her mother and set her back on the couch, her eyes pleading, wild. "Goddamn you!" she screamed to the ceiling. She looked at Grace again, so silent and angelic. Red fury blinded Lily, and she grabbed her mother again, putting one hand on Grace's forehead, using the other to try and pry one of the old woman's closed eyes

open. But Grace's eyes flipped open and she fought back hard, slapping Lily's arms away with surprising strength. Both women put their hands over their faces in defense.

Lily parted her fingers and peeked through her hands, her face shiny and wet with a mixture of sweat and tears. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and knelt in front of her mother in exhaustion, bowing her head. Feeling the shadow move out of her way, Grace removed her hands from her face and slowly opened her eyes. Upon seeing Lily still in front of her, Grace gasped and brought her balled up hand roughly across Lily's cheek. Lily toppled over onto the wooden floor in a heap.

Almost as soon as she hit the floor Lily jumped back to her feet. Another of Grace's right swings was slow enough that Lily caught it before it could connect with her cheekbone. In that moment, the instant of holding each other's hands clenched above their heads, their eyes, open and searching, met. Lily lowered her eyes and her head in the shame of having treated her mother so poorly, but Grace did not falter. She held Lily's hand tightly and kept her gaze steady. "My daughter. Lily."

A lingering silence filled the room again and Lily could hear the wind kick up outside, blowing through the window and tousling her hair. Grace was rigid, sitting slightly tilted from the ruckus, so Lily sat her upright again.

The icy blue eyes were open, but vacant again. Lily reached for her mother's hand, but Grace jerked away. "Mom, I have to sell the ranch," Lily whispered quietly, her words so light they almost floated away on the wind. "I'm going to make sure that someone who will take good care of it buys it. What do you think?" Lily paused, waiting for an answer, realizing she would never get one.

"And I'm going to take you to a nice place in Missoula." Lily searched her mother's eyes again, her own filling with plump tears. "I can't do this anymore. I just can't." Lily broke down now, her head bowed low with the weight of her tears and her sorrow.

With difficulty but with an accompanying lightness that befitted her name, Grace rose off the couch and shuffled across the room. Struggling with the weight of the panes, she managed to close and latch the window. On the floor next to the glider lay the afghan, crumpled and damp with the sweat and tears of their struggle. Grace bent down and slowly grasped the material between her crippled fingers. She was winded from closing the window, and could not lift up the blanket, but she still managed to drag it across the floor to the couch. She then stopped, her breath ragged and raspy above Lily's quiet, rhythmic sobs.

Grace focused her deep blue eyes firmly, looking gently down at the woman on the couch. She reached down and touched her face. It was cold but her finger tingled at the touch, like the way a frostbitten toe tingles painfully as blood works through the contracted veins. Lily felt the tingling warmth too, deep within her, but she shook it away, brushing her mother's touch away. She would not be comforted. Grace nodded her head slowly.

She tugged the afghan on top of Lily and unfolded it, gently tucking the edges around her shoulders, arms, thighs, and legs, even making sure to tuck the material under her feet. Lily let her do this, moving different parts of her body to make the task easier. Then Grace sat back on the couch, next to her daughter, and looked out the window again.

From her seat she could see the creek in the beauty of the setting sun, and she imagined its babbling. She saw her husband Alton, and herself too, sitting on a picnic blanket next to the creek. There was a tiny girl with deep copper hair and a yellow-checked gingham dress running around, and Grace felt the muscles in her arms tighten suddenly as she grabbed her. Sitting underneath the shadow of the great mountains that surrounded them, holding her daughter tight in her arms, Grace's body was filled with a sense of peace.

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