

BEAUTY SLEEPING AND OTHER STORIES

by

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This thesis is a collection of eight original short stories. They were written during my participation in the Kidd Tutorial, a creative writing program at the University of Oregon. They were inspired, in part, by the ways in which fairy tales define female characters, and also the ways in which fairy tales continue to influence the lives of women.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Sarafina Learns to Fly.....	5
Blue Like Glass.....	12
Beauty Sleeping.....	21
Equating.....	33
The Gift of Sorrow.....	43
Heroine Dreams.....	53
Anne Marie's Red Cloak.....	63
Relativity.....	74
Afterword.....	80

Preface

What follows is a collection of eight short stories that I have been working on for the past year. I started some of these stories a full year ago, revising them over and over again. Others I wrote within the past month, and they've had very little revision, if any at all. For me, this is a project that will continue to grow and change long after my thesis is bound and shelved. My writing is still in the experimental stages. I have not been practicing this craft long enough to have developed a style that is uniquely my own, and most of these stories differ greatly from one to the next. I have explored different forms of narration. I have retold old stories. I have written stories that are magical, and stories that are realistic. For the time being I'm comfortable with this variation, as I am only at the beginning of what I hope will be a lifelong learning process. The purpose of this creative endeavor was to establish a foundation, and I can only build up from here.

I have had a love affair with the written word for as long as I can remember. Jon Carroll, a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has this to say about what it means to be a writer: "All writers start out as readers; all writers have read stories that spoke to them, that opened worlds, that dissected emotions, that explained relationships, that showed them other ways of being. Writers start out being drunk on somebody else's words; they spend their lives trying to create equally potent brews." I am no exception. As an English major, I have spent the past four years reading, writing and thinking about literature. This year, I participated in the Kidd Tutorial, a year-long creative writing program here at the University of Oregon. Through this program, I had the opportunity

to formulate my own line-of-inquiry, which focused my reading and writing around specific interests and concerns.

I must admit that I developed my line-of-inquiry in a rather backwards fashion. I had already written “Sarafina Learns to Fly” and “The Gift of Sorrow,” and I wanted to include these stories in my final project. I searched for themes that they had in common, and started from there. They both employ magical realism. They both involve characters who undergo some sort of physical transformation. They both explore the concept of female beauty. It wasn’t long before I realized that I had been hearing stories with these themes all of my life. The fairy tale, with its roots in oral folklore, is one of the oldest and most widely known forms of story telling. Some of the most prevalent fairy tale themes include love, beauty, magic, transformation. We can count on fairy tales to deliver formulaic characters and plot lines. We can almost always depend on the happy ending – good will triumph over evil, love will triumph over hate. Most fairy tales revolve around archetypal female characters, such as the wise woman, the beautiful virgin, and the wicked step-mother, to name only a few. In my writing, I decided to explore the ways in which women are still profoundly affected by the roles established for them in the fairy tale. What does it mean to be the dutiful daughter, or the evil witch, or the object of masculine desire? What does it mean to subvert these roles? In a broader interpretation of this theme, what happens when a character is tied too strongly to the “fairy tale” conception of love or beauty? These are a few of the questions I had in mind when I set out to write these stories.

By chance, I came across a collection of stories by Angela Carter called *The Bloody Chamber*, in which she rewrote such classic fairy tales as “Bluebeard” and “Little

Red Riding Hood.” I was fascinated by the way she manipulated these familiar stories in order to convey completely new themes. In “The Tiger’s Bride,” for example, a story based on “Beauty and the Beast,” a young woman sheds her human skin and turns into a tiger, rather than the beast turning into a man. This ending forces us to challenge our ideas about what constitutes “beauty” and what constitutes “beast.” I was inspired to try something similar in some of my stories, thus “Anne Marie’s Red Cloak” and “Beauty Sleeping” were born.

Not every story in this thesis conforms to these themes. I discovered early on that stories have a tendency to shape themselves. Anne Lamott, in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, states that “writing a first draft is much like watching a Polaroid develop. You can’t – and in fact you’re not supposed to – know exactly what the picture is going to look like until it has finished developing”(39). If a story didn’t want anything to do with fairy tales, I didn’t force it to fit the mold. Sometimes I made an effort to let the theme guide the story, but most of the time I simply wrote whatever occurred to me, and let the story guide the theme. I found that it was difficult to address my line-of-inquiry in every story, but nevertheless I have done my best to produce a coherent body of creative work.

Last summer, I had the good fortune to attend a reading by Pam Houston, the author of a collection of stories entitled *Cowboys are my Weakness*. In the title story of this collection, the narrator meditates on the role that story-telling plays in our lives. She writes, “...I thought about the way we invent ourselves through our stories, and, in a similar way, how the stories we tell put walls around our lives”(124). I think that this quote is very applicable to the characters and situations I have developed in this thesis.

With only a few exceptions, I have written about women who are caught in the painful gap between the way life is and the way life “should be.” To paraphrase Pam Houston, they are caught in the stories that they have built like walls around their lives. These “stories” can be about any number of things, including physical appearance, romantic relationships, and familial relationships. In the metaphorical sense, I have written about women who are on the verge of “waking up” to the possibility that not every story will end happily-ever-after, and that even if it does, it might not be the ending they were counting on.

Finally, I would like to thank my two lovely roommates, Teela Labrum and Danielle Chantiny, for being such enthusiastic and encouraging editors of my work. I could not have done this without their constant praise and support.

Sarafina Learns to Fly

IN GRADE SCHOOL the other children called Sarafina chicken legs. This was a slight annoyance in her growing up years, but it was better, she reasoned, to be chicken legs than to be fatty or four-eyes, and as the law of the playground decreed that no child must escape unbranded, Sarafina accepted her label more gracefully than most. She knew that a girl could never be too rich or too thin, because her mother, whose two passions in life were grapefruit diets and lottery tickets, always said so. And so Sarafina took a certain degree of pride in her bony knees.

She was twelve when the advertisement at the intersection of Candy Avenue and Gum Street first caught her attention. She was riding her bicycle to school, a different route than usual because of the construction detour on the bridge, when a red light changed her life. Sarafina looked up, waiting for the light to turn, and found the Super Slim Shake billboard model looming directly in her line of vision. A happy redhead in a bright green workout leotard smiled down on her, assuring her that all the secrets of life,

love and spiritual enlightenment could indeed be found in one can of Super Slim Shake. And just to further illustrate her point, a chiseled monument to manhood stood behind her, his muscular arms encircling her slender waist and his eyes full of hopeless adoration for her stunning figure. IF YOU WANT THE HUNK, LOSE THE CHUNK, her slogan read. And she offered out her can of Super Slim Shake (chocolate flavored) as if it were a holy relic, as if it could save, redeem, purify, deliver the oppressed from bondage and light the valleys of darkness. Sarafina sat through three stop lights contemplating these things. She, too, had red hair. She thought perhaps this was a sign.

The Super Slim Shake billboard model winked at Sarafina every morning as she rode past on her bicycle. Even after the construction on the bridge was complete, she never went back to her old route. It would be like betraying a best friend.

During career exploration week Sarafina stood in front of the class and announced that she wanted to be a Super Slim Shake billboard model when she grew up. She gave three reasons: 1) Models inspire women to be beautiful. Beauty (studies show) equals success, which equals happiness. It follows, then, that modeling is a service to humanity. 2) The company offers fabulous benefits, including free workout leotards, a fitness club membership, and a lifetime supply of Super Slim Shake. 3) A girl can never be too rich or too thin.

Her teacher thought these were fine ideas. She received an A+ on her report.

Sarafina was fourteen when she heard the Super Slim Shake billboard model speak for the first time, the same afternoon that she won her school's annual pie-eating contest. For three days she had restricted her diet to bread, water, and jellybeans in preparation for the event, and her sacrifice had paid off. She had devoured three apple pies, one chocolate cream, and half a lemon meringue in under ten minutes. Grand prize was a two hundred dollar shopping spree at the mall. The right clothes could make all the difference as far as high school boys were concerned.

On her way home Sarafina glanced up, out of habit, at the intersection of Candy and Gum. The Super Slim Shake billboard model did not give her usual wink.

“Do you think you’ll make it anywhere in life if you keep stuffing yourself like that?”

Sarafina was startled. She looked around to find the source of the voice. “What?” she asked.

“You heard me. Up here, Girl.” The Super Slim Shake billboard shook her diet drink to attract Sarafina’s attention, a disapproving frown souring her normally cheerful face.

“But it was for the clothes,” Sarafina protested.

“The clothes make no difference if you don’t have the body to put them on. You should know that by now, Girl. I must say, I thought for awhile that you really had potential.” She shook her head sadly.

“But I do have potential,” protested Sarafina.

The Super Slim Shake billboard model was not convinced. “Prove it,” she replied.

Sarafina got off her bicycle, stuck two fingers down her throat, and threw up three apple pies, one chocolate cream, and half a lemon meringue right there on the side of the road.

The billboard model nodded approvingly.

High school was a breeze for Sarafina. In her sophomore year, she became famous for flying so high on a cheer-leading stunt that the half-time show was almost over before the incredulous crowd spotted her floating calmly back down in a perfect straddle split. After that, she was crowned homecoming queen three years in a row.

Sarafina decided that college was not the right choice for her. After a brief consultation with the Super Slim Shake billboard model, she invested in a green workout leotard and went to the gym instead.

Sarafina was nineteen when her mother finally scratched a winning lottery ticket. Within the week she handed her daughter the keys to the house, wished her the best of luck, and, as she boarded a private jet bound for the Hawaiian Islands, reminded Sarafina one last time that a girl could never be too rich or too thin.

On her Super Slim Shake employment application Sarafina changed her name to Sarafin. A new name for a new life, she told herself. Besides, Sarafin had an exotic,

glamorous ring to it, a ring that suited a billboard model nicely. She was well on her way to becoming larger than life.

Her application was rejected. A pleasant form letter stated that over two thousand aspiring young models had applied for the position, and although she was among the top applicants, there were only so many billboards. Sarafin could read through the lines, though. She would simply have to become thinner.

Sarafin was pleased to discover that she no longer had to open her front gate. Once she managed to squeeze her head through, the rest of her body fit nicely between the iron bars.

One sunny spring morning Sarafin found love at the gym. She had always expected it to happen that way, and so when her very own chiseled monument to manhood inquired after her workout routine and then her phone number, she was only mildly surprised. The affair, unfortunately, was short lived. At first the relationship was fabulous, as they discovered that when she stood by his side, his arm around her slender waist, he could sling his trench coat over one shoulder so as to completely cover her head and body. This way, they only had to pay for one ticket at the movies. However, he could not help thinking that her delicate body would break in half during their love-making. She adamantly denied this possibility, but when he discovered the crack beginning to form in her lower spine, he felt obligated to call the whole thing off. He could not be responsible, he told her sadly, for destroying her chances with Super Slim Shake. Sarafin switched gyms to avoid the embarrassment of seeing him again.

The second time Sarafin applied for her dream job she changed her name again. Maybe, she thought, she would have a better chance at an all-American company with an all-American name like Sara. She practiced her new name in front of the full-length mirror in her living room, standing only inches away. She had become so thin that her reflection was difficult to see otherwise.

“Hi, I’m Sara, and I model for Super Slim Shake.” She was pleased with the alliteration as her name echoed back through the silent house.

This time, her application was accepted. She had one month before her first photo shoot, and they asked that she please try to lose five pounds.

Sara watched the news every morning before leaving her house. In particular, she watched the Weather Channel. She had to be certain that the wind factor wasn’t too high, as the week before she had been swept a good three feet into the air before she was able to make contact with the ground again.

“Such is the price of beauty, Girl,” the Super Slim Shake billboard model had told her with a wink and a smile.

Two pounds to go before she made her Super Slim Shake modeling weight.

One week before the big day, Sara stopped showering. She only took baths, and she was extremely careful to be completely out of the tub before she removed the plug

from the drain. Running water, a slippery surface, and an unplugged drain were risks that were not worth taking.

One pound to go.

Sara was too excited to watch the Weather Channel before she left the house for her photo shoot. Just that morning, the scale had announced that she had shed the final pound. It was the day her destiny would be fulfilled.

A high gust of wind caught Sara off guard at the intersection of Candy Avenue and Gum Street. She struggled to regain her hold on the ground, but the wind was stronger than she was. As she was lifted up, higher and higher, she made eye contact for the last time with the Super Slim Shake billboard model. The startled model waved as Sara drifted past, forgetting her grip on the can of Super Slim Shake in her shock. After a few speechless seconds she managed to wipe the spilled drink off her green workout leotard. When she finally composed herself she called out, “Hey, Girl! What’s your name?”

“Sa...,” the girl started to reply. But she was caught by an undercurrent and her name was lost in the wind. Soon she was far beyond the billboard model, beyond the clouds, even. She closed her eyes, spread her arms, and just before the air became too thin to breathe, Sarafina knew what it meant to be weightless.

Blue Like Glass

TAD COMES RUNNING through the door and announces that I taste like cold, blue bottle glass and white silk. It is eleven minutes past midnight, and she just got off her shift at Josie's Cafe. I am lying on the sofa bed that we keep permanently pulled out in our living room, pretending to read a trashy British mystery but really staring at the large world map that hangs on the opposite wall. I am thinking (between badly-written sex scenes) about all the places I will go as soon as I manage to get myself off this sofa bed that we keep permanently pulled out in our living room.

Tad, short for Matilda although it's a not-so-well-kept secret, is my roommate and best friend. Most of the time, I look forward to her frequent outbursts of random thought. Last week, for instance, she told me at breakfast that "fucking" was the only infix in the English language. You can put it in anyfuckingwhere you please, she said. Isn't that fanfuckingtastic? She can amuse herself like this long after I stop paying attention. Usually, though, her games involve my participation. If you had to be north, south, east,

or west, she'll ask me, which would you be and why? If you had to choose, would you rather be able to sing like a diva, or give out-of-this-world oral sex? There isn't always an easy answer.

By far, though, her favorite game is to make things up and talk about them as if they've already happened. We'll be in the kitchen, cooking dinner or washing the dishes, and she'll suddenly start a sentence with the phrase "remember that time..." This is my cue. We start remembering all kinds of times. That time our car broke down when we were driving across the country, and we ended up hitchhiking through Oklahoma. That time the landlady fined us one thousand dollars for writing in permanent black ink on the bathroom walls. That time we got caught trespassing after dark in public hot springs and seduced the police out of writing us citations. We can play this game for hours, and it never fails to make us happy.

Tonight, though, I am not in the mood for her games. "Blue glass and white silk? What are you talking about, Tad?"

"I'm talking about what you taste like, Maggie." Tad often fails to realize that the rest of us don't live inside her mind. I lick my arm to oblige her.

"Salt," I say. She rolls her eyes.

"Not what you *really* taste like, what you *metaphorically* taste like. You know, like your essence or your soul or something – it's *much* more profound than just the taste of your skin." She emphasizes her words as if I am a child, incapable of grasping this complex idea. I stare at her blankly. "Take my little sister, for example; she tastes like warm oatmeal cookies and honey graham crackers." Tad does not give up easily.

“But those things really have a flavor, Tad. Cold, blue bottle glass? What the hell kind of flavor is that?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “That’s just what you taste like, Mags. I can’t argue with it. Now it’s your turn – what do I taste like?”

I do not have the energy for her mental demands. “You don’t taste like anything, Tad. It’s a stupid game.” It’s not Tad’s fault that I haven’t moved from the sofa bed all day, but I take it out on her anyway.

She opens her mouth to say something and then changes her mind. She turns to leave the room, but pauses at the door of her bedroom and returns to where I am lying. She lies down beside me and squeezes my hand. “Our horoscope said to love another Gemini today.” She rolls onto her side and kisses my cheek. I continue staring at the map, refusing to acknowledge what the stars have decreed. “Did you get any letters today?” she asks. Her persistence is admirable.

I nod, reaching over to the desk to pick up a stack of loose notebook paper. I flip through them, reading off names. “One from my dad, one from Leo, and two from my grandmother.”

“Can I see them?” Tad asks. I hand the papers over for inspection. She needs only one glance at the handwriting to confirm that I wrote all of the letters to myself. Tad is the only person in the world who knows that I do this on a regular basis. I can’t say why I do it – why does anybody do anything? As far as I can tell, we’re all just trying to cope with our lives in the best ways we know how. Some people drink themselves into oblivion, some stare at the soaps all day long, I write letters to myself. There are worse things I could do to calm my inner demons.

I wrote the first letter when I was nine years old, one week after my grandmother died. I suppose I was not ready to let her go, and I must have needed to hear her voice again. To this day she's still my most regular correspondent. My grandmother's letters are always soothing and composed, offering me the advice I know I should take. Today she wrote that I would feel a lot better about myself if I got out of bed, took a shower, and went to class. Writing the letter is the first step. Perhaps tomorrow I will be able to translate the words into action.

When I first told Tad my secret she thought it was odd, to say the least, but over the three years of our friendship she has come to accept my idiosyncrasies. By now she's seen a wide range of letters, from family members, from ex-boyfriends, even from movie stars in my moments of weakness. I write whatever it is I need to hear. At least I don't pretend that the letters are real anymore like I did in the eighth grade, when I came to school every day for a month with a new love letter from a mysterious, older boyfriend who, conveniently, lived in a distant city. A psychiatrist could have a field day with me, I'm sure. But I think I've made a lot of progress on my own – these days the only person I attempt to deceive is myself.

“Why didn't you get a letter from your mom?” Tad asks. I shrug my shoulders. I don't want to talk about my mom right now. She wisely decides to change the subject. “Did we get any real mail?”

I point to the kitchen table. “I didn't go through it. Looks like bills and junk – nothing good and nothing for me.” Tad walks to the table and picks up the mail. She flips through glossy advertisements and pizza coupons, takes out a bill from the phone company and attaches it with a magnet to the refrigerator, and then opens a clothing

catalogue filled with smiling couples modeling the latest spring fashions. A white envelope falls from between the pages. She glances at it, and then tosses it to me.

“This one is addressed to you, Mags.” My name and address are typed. There is no return address. I have no idea who it could be from. I am dying of curiosity, and I can tell that Tad is too from the way she’s lingering in the living room, but I am in a selfish mood tonight and I don’t want to share my letter with anybody else. I set the envelope aside and pick up my book. Maybe Tad will take a hint and leave me alone.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Tad asks.

“Not now. I’ll open it later.” I can tell that Tad is disappointed, but she knows better than to force the subject.

“Okay. Goodnight then, Maggie. Don’t stay up too late, all right?” Tad is always worried that I don’t get enough sleep. I pretend to be annoyed, but really it’s nice to have somebody worry about me.

Tad brushes her teeth and gets into bed. I listen, and decide not to open my letter right away. It’s a rare treat to get something in the mail that I didn’t write to myself and that isn’t from my credit card company, so I feel obliged to savor the moment. Besides, I am thinking about the way people taste. It’s really not a stupid game. I don’t know why I had to be so mean about it. I close my eyes and I am eight years old again, sitting in my grandmother’s lap and reading out loud to her from the newspaper. She has a wholesome taste with a hint of sweetness, like hot baked potatoes and peppermint candy. And Leo, the most recent boy to break my heart, he has a deceiving taste. Kind of like vanilla extract – it seems like the best thing in the world, but makes you gag from bitterness as soon as it touches your tongue. My dad’s taste is simple – cigarette smoke, sun-warmed

earth, fresh cut-wood. It's a taste that comes from a lifetime of working outdoors. Tad is right; some people taste like things that don't have a flavor, and that's the way it has to be. My mother, for instance. She doesn't translate into any single flavor known to the human tongue.

If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can see her as she was when I was a little girl. Before the medication. Before the wheelchair. Before the drinking turned her into a zombie, lifeless, soulless, flavorless. For as long as I can remember my mother has been prone to drastic mood swings, but "bipolar disorder" was not a term we knew back then. This is how my world made sense: Mom was sad, and I would crawl into bed with her in the middle of the day while she cried and stroked my hair. Mom was happy, and we sang songs and built forts and never had to go to bed at all if we didn't want to. One week, in a flurry of energy, she started re-painting the living room. She became depressed again, though, before she completed the task, and the next time she had that much energy she had already moved on to another project she would never complete. For a full three years, one of our walls was half white and half blue. I think my father had a desperate hope that she would finish it someday, as if somehow that would make everything better. He finally hired a painter to finish the job.

When she was depressed, she had a taste like decaying rose petals.

When she was happy, she tasted like a rainstorm in the middle of July.

I don't think she has a flavor, anymore.

Her illness was diagnosed about the time that the drinking started getting bad, shortly after my grandmother died. I can picture her clearly at my grandmother's burial, kneeling in the cemetery, hung-over, and throwing up her anger and self-pity for having a

mother who she didn't learn to love until it was already too late. I think it's fair to say that from that moment on, the situation in my family spiraled downward. Back then, my dad didn't know how to deal with her. He would spend a lot of time alone in the backyard, chopping and stacking more wood than anybody could use in five winters, and imagining that somehow the steady swing of his ax could cancel out the unsteadiness that was progressively working its way through my mother's head. My dad would carry armfuls of wood into the house and keep the fire constantly tended, pretending that he was doing something she needed.

I was eleven the first time I came home from school and found my mother still in bed, and I believed her when she told me she wasn't feeling well. I even brought her some whiskey, to help her cough, she said. I wised up fast. Years later, during a particularly nasty period when I often wouldn't see her sober for weeks at a time, I came home one afternoon and found her on the floor of her bedroom saying that she couldn't move her legs. It didn't even occur to me to feel pity. How will you take twelve steps, mom, I asked, if you can't even take one? I know it wasn't nice of me, and what I did next was even worse. I brought a bottle of tequila into the room, and placed it on the dresser just out of her reach. Then I left her there for another hour until my dad got home from work. We discovered, after a trip to the hospital, that all those afternoons in bed had damaged the nerve endings in her legs. It's hardly surprising that Tad chose glass as my flavor, of all things. I learned to be sharp a long time ago, because if I didn't cut the only thing left was to crack.

Just four days ago my dad decided that her "issues" were too much for him. He had her committed to a treatment center. He's thinking about filing for divorce. To be

fair to him, I'll admit that it wasn't an easy choice to make. I'll also admit that she wasn't the easiest person to live with. He held on longer than I would have, that's for sure. We thought she would get better after the doctors made it clear that if she didn't stop drinking she would never walk again. To be fair, she did put up a decent fight. She didn't last five months, though, before the wheelchair came back out of the closet. For weeks on end she'd lie in bed and drink herself to oblivion, refusing to bathe, brush her teeth, or even comb her hair. My dad would wash her face and brush her teeth every night, just so she didn't rot in her own filth.

For now, my dad is refusing to tell me where she is. He claims that she needs her "space." Whatever that means. I think I remind him too much of her. Maybe he's afraid that if I'm allowed to talk to her I'll go off the deep end, too. Tad says that maybe it's the other way around. She thinks it's my mom who doesn't want me to know where she is, and maybe Tad is right. Maybe my mom is just ashamed that she can't take care of herself. Who knows. In any case, I'm sure I'd make her proud, lying here on the sofa bed all day. Like mother like daughter, as the saying goes.

My thoughts are becoming too depressing even for me. I decide it's time to open my letter. I slide two fingers under the flap of the envelope, taking care not to rip the paper. Inside is a hand-written note on half a sheet of lined paper. *Dear Maggie,* the letter reads, *I am going to be okay. Please don't worry about me. Smile once in awhile and be sure to get enough sleep. I love you.* The word "Mom" is scrawled in capital letters, and a happy face is drawn inside the "o." It is not my mother's shaky handwriting, but for once it isn't mine either. On the bottom of the note is a post script. It reads, *Remember that time when everything worked out?*

Suddenly I cannot stop crying. I think I am smiling, too.

Tad comes out to get a drink of water and sees that I have not moved from my position on the sofa bed. The letter is lying open beside me. I am trying to read, but my eyes are fighting sleep. Every few minutes I awake to realize that I have been dreaming. Tad returns to her room and brings out a blanket that she tucks in around me. She takes the book from my hands.

“Go to sleep, Mags. It’s two in the morning.” She leans down and kisses me on the cheek, and then turns to walk back to her room.

“Tad,” I call after her.

“What?” She pauses at her door.

“Wildflowers,” I reply. “That’s what you taste like. An entire field of wildflowers.”

She smiles. I go to sleep.

Beauty Sleeping

Part 1 - The Curse

IF YOUR LIFE were a movie, you would be smiling right now. You would be spinning in circles, your arms outstretched, laughing as the rain ran down your face. You would be madly in love with the man whose house you just left. You would be on your way to a fulfilling job (A kindergarten teacher? An advertising executive? A magazine editor?) where all of your co-workers would be funny and sympathetic. The previous scene would have been touching and romantic. Your life would be what pop-culture critics call "the perfect date movie."

Your life, unfortunately, doesn't even come close. You wait tables at a truck stop called *Pantyhose Junction*. You do love to walk in the rain, though. You walk with your trench coat open, your head uncovered. The water drips off your hair and down the back of your neck, off the top of your head and into your eyes. You love to feel drops of water collect on your eyelashes, savoring the moment before you blink and the raindrops roll down your cheeks like tears. It is even better when you are wearing your glasses, and the rain collects on the lenses until your entire world is streaked with water. Walking in the

rain makes you feel tragic, isolated. You're not sure why you like to feel this way, but you do. You suspect it's the next best thing to being in love.

You are twenty-three years old, and all you want is for your life to resemble a Hollywood-produced romantic comedy. You are stunningly beautiful. Your hair is thick and dark, your skin is flawless, your lips are full and naturally red. You look like a movie star, a princess, a woman who is destined to be swept off her feet and carried away into the happily-ever-after. You have never had a relationship that lasted longer than three weeks.

Recently, you've begun staring intently at your reflection in the mirror, searching for the place where your beauty ends and you begin. Your roommate is beginning to think you are conceited. You aren't. You are sure, though, that it is not for lack of good looks that all of your relationships fail.

You believe that you have been cursed.

Your mother's favorite story to tell is of your baptism. It was a small affair, as they were new to town and didn't have many friends or family members in the area. They wanted to have a dinner party afterwards, but like most new couples they were poor, and had only one set of dishes and utensils between them. Service for six. Your mother and father chose their four guests carefully. Carol Rose, your mom's best friend from college. Your grandma Hazel. Your father's cousin Jimmy, and his fiancée Suzanne. That was all. They thought about inviting your mom's uncle Harry, but he lived over an hour away (on an estate worth at least a million, if not more, your mother never fails to mention) and then Jimmy wouldn't be able to bring Suzanne. Besides, Harry had developed an ulcer in

recent months and wasn't such pleasant company anymore. It seemed easier to leave him out of it.

You hate to admit that you're a superstitious person, but you wish they had just fired up the barbecue and used paper plates.

The party, at first, was a great success. Jimmy and Suzanne brought the red wine. Your mom and Carol Rose blended raspberry daiquiris to serve with dessert. Even Grandma Hazel had a drink or two. You were a special occasion, after all. Everybody was a little drunk by the time your father came up with his bright idea. Let's go around the table, he said, and each say a blessing for the future of our precious little daughter.

Jimmy said he could drink to that. Jimmy, you've heard, could drink to just about anything in those days. To her beauty, said Jimmy. To her good fortune, said Suzanne. To her talent, said your mother. To her charm, said Carol Rose. To her intellect, said your father.

You've heard this story so many times that you know it by heart. It gets told more often than the one about your tutu falling off in the middle of the ballet recital when you were five years old. According to your mother, you stepped right out of that tutu and threw it into the audience without missing a beat. A natural born Lolita, she liked to say, with a little too much pride in her voice. You can barely remember taking ballet lessons.

But back to the baptism. The good part is coming up.

As grandma Hazel was preparing to speak, a shrill ring cut through the laughter and clanking glasses. Your mother, a little unsteady on her feet, got up to answer the phone.

Who else but the scorned Uncle Harry to make the party complete? When, he asked your mother, are you going to baptize that beautiful baby girl? I've learned to knit, he said. I'm making her a pink and yellow striped hat. The kind with the fuzzy ball on top. To hear your mother tell it, his pride was practically oozing through the telephone.

Of course she had to tell him the truth. What else could she do? As far as you're concerned, she could have just said thanks for the hat, but we've decided not to baptize the baby after all. Your mother, though, despite high performance marks for skills such as flattery and manipulation, has never been a good liar, and alcohol has a tendency to tip the scales toward honesty anyway. To make a long story short, Uncle Harry became raging mad about being left out of the celebration. He hadn't been invited to your cousin Patrick's first communion party the year before, and even though Aunt Sharon swore on a stack of Bibles that his invitation had been in the mail with the rest, he never really forgave her. Missing your baptism was more than the embittered, ulcer-ridden old man could take. After a heated round of apologizes and excuses on your mother's part, accompanied by threats to rewrite the will on Harry's part, your mother made a last ditch effort to secure her share of the estate.

Uncle, she said, as lovingly as she could, even though you aren't with us tonight, we would be honored if you would offer a blessing for the future of our baby girl.

Silence.

Suspense.

What would it be? Love, perhaps? Happiness? These things, unfortunately, were not quite what he had in mind.

I hope, he sputtered in rage, I hope she's plagued by gut-wrenching, mind-consuming, incurable ulcers until the day she dies!

And the line went dead.

Your mother returned to the table with a solemn face and reported that she had more than likely been cut from Uncle Harry's will. Grandma Hazel, after hearing the whole story, poured herself another glass of wine and completed the interrupted blessings.

So here comes that love and happiness, right? Not so fast. *To a healthy and ulcer-free future* was Grandma Hazel's long-awaited, slightly slurred toast. The whole party clinked their glasses and drank to that. According to your mother, you woke up at that very moment and started to cry. It was probably, you think viciously, a stomach ache.

The story, though, is not over yet. This is your mother's favorite part. Uncle Harry suffered a fatal heart attack the very next week, before his lawyer had the chance to legally execute the changes to his will. Your mother inherited her share of the estate, which wasn't as much as she had hoped for, but she certainly wasn't crying at the funeral. You got a hand-knit pink and yellow striped hat along with a lifetime of useless blessings.

Okay, so maybe that's a harsh criticism. You are beautiful. You owe one to Jimmy. And Grandma Hazel did her best, but it's no simple matter to reverse a curse. That ulcer was waiting to happen, and you're just thankful that it wasn't incurable after all. To give your well-meaning grandmother her fair praise, the worst health problem you've ever dealt with (excepting the ulcer, of course) was a mild case of mono during your senior year of high school. It wasn't really that bad, and it gave you a good excuse to catch up on the soaps. Not to mention that because you had mono you weren't on the

choir bus that crashed on its way to Disneyland. Nobody died, but Tiffany Simpson, the shining star of all things theatrical and musical, had to wear a neck brace for three weeks. Even though you were just getting over mono, you won the lead in *Anything Goes* that year. Three cheers for Mom and Suzanne. Charm and intellect, you suppose, are up for debate. You're a truck-stop waitress, after all, but nobody ever said that intellect walked hand in hand with motivation or success. And the truckers who come through Pantyhose Junction find you charming enough.

Yesterday you had a conversation with Tom (affectionately called Thirteen by his fellow truckers, for the number of women's names he has tattooed on his body). Tom is a short-distance trucker and one of your favorite regulars, so you admitted to him during your cigarette break that you wanted your life to be a Hollywood-produced romantic comedy. A little light-hearted conflict, but true love in the end. Tom said you were hopeless. He said that angst-ridden, independent films were trendy right now. You smiled, but were not comforted.

This morning you are walking home from Tom's apartment in the rain. Your work uniform – short black skirt, tight white blouse – is rumpled and reeks of cigarette smoke. In your haste to get dressed and get home you didn't bother searching for your underwear. You pat your coat pockets. You forgot your cigarettes, too. You love smoking cigarettes. It makes you feel tragic and isolated. Besides, you're addicted. You could really use some nicotine to jump-start your morning. You are not crying, but the rain is running down your cheeks. It feels like tears.

You don't know why you have these meaningless flings. Tom had sauntered back in at the end of your shift and whispered to you that all thirteen of those women had

begged for their names to be tattooed onto his body. You looked him up and down and decided that you had better see for yourself what all the fuss was about. Your girlfriend Sky, a short-order cook who works part-time at Pantyhose Junction, saw you and Tom leaving together and wondered, out loud, if your vibrator was broken. You ignored her. You had already decided that going home with Tom was better than lying awake and staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on your ceiling.

The insomnia crept up on you gradually. At first, you just woke up in the middle of the night and had trouble falling asleep again. Then, it started taking longer and longer to make your eyes stay closed in the first place. You listened to *Relaxing Sounds of the Ocean*, you counted sheep, you concentrated on your breathing, you stared at the clock. Recently, it's been four or five in the morning before you can shut your eyes, which doesn't do you much good as you have to be up again between seven and eight. Today is your day off, and you are finally going to see your doctor.

The doctor inquires after your ulcer. You tell her there's been no sign of it since your last check-up. To your great relief, she writes you a prescription for sleeping pills almost immediately.

Part 2 - The Awakening

The pills work like a charm. You feel better once you start sleeping again. More importantly, you're no longer so tempted to go home with the likes of Tom. (Not that it was half bad, but who's ever heard of a romantic comedy where the heroine falls for a short-distance trucker?) Tom, you are sure, would never be written into a movie script. Waitresses, on the other hand, have it made as far as Hollywood is concerned. Waitresses

exude sex appeal. Waitresses have sassy attitudes and hearts of gold. Waitresses are one hundred percent desirable. Waitresses take a lot of shit, but always get the right man in the end.

Despite the many joys of your profession, you sometimes feel guilty that you haven't chosen a more challenging career path. If your life were a movie, and you were in charge of the script, you'd probably opt for more prestige (A marine biologist? A computer programmer? A delegate to the United Nations?) and a bigger paycheck. You dropped out of college your sophomore year, though, because you developed a gut-wrenching, mind-consuming ulcer. What a surprise. Your doctor suggested that you take the rest of the semester off, as it was best to recover in a stress-free environment. You liked being out of school so much, though, that you never managed to go back. Your parents have made it very clear that they're still willing to pay your tuition, but they don't mention it every time you call home anymore. They've changed tactics, and now they drop not-so-subtle hints about getting another job. You don't really mind waiting tables – the tips are good and it's easy to decide what to wear in the morning – but you do think it would be nice to find employment where fishnet stockings aren't a mandatory part of the uniform.

You and Sky have been going job-hunting on your days off. You both agree that it's time for a change of scenery. You can't speak for Sky, but you've already experienced everything that the truck stop has to offer, including all thirteen of Tom's tattoos. It's time to move on.

You like Sky. She's got a quick wit and a sharp sense of humor. She's working her way through a school for the culinary arts. You feel privileged to be on her good side,

because if you weren't she wouldn't hesitate to let you know about it. Today is your birthday, and you and Sky have plans to go bar-hopping after an afternoon of applying for restaurant positions all over town. You get dressed up for the occasion. Knee-high leather boots. Silver sequined tank top. The same black mini-skirt that you wear to work. You glance at yourself in the mirror before you leave the house, and smile at your reflection with approval. Your roommate tells you to quit being so conceited. It's obvious that she's just jealous.

Sky meets you at a bar downtown. You don't drink very often because alcohol and ulcers don't mix well, but tonight you don't care. You look spectacular, and it's your birthday, and the evening rushes by in a blur.

You wake up with a hangover in Sky's bed. Your clothes are on the floor, and you are wearing a T-shirt that doesn't belong to you. You have a hazy memory of kissing somebody in a bar, and you're glad that Sky had enough sense not to let you go home with whoever it was. It was nice of her, you think, to let you crash at her place. She lives within walking distance of the bars, and it must have been easier to get you to her house than to put you in a taxi. You wonder where Sky slept, since you had the bed.

Something smells delicious, so you get up and wander into the kitchen to see what Sky is making for breakfast. She turns around and greets you with a smile and, to your surprise, a kiss on the cheek. Last night was great, she says.

You're not sure what part of last night she means. You can't remember much of anything after bar number three.

I didn't know you liked women, she says.

You suddenly realize that you're not wearing any underwear.

Sky is still talking. After I saw you leaving with Tom that evening, she says, I didn't think I had a chance.

It takes a few moments for you to fully comprehend the situation. You mumble something about how you didn't know that she liked women, either. The words are already out of your mouth before you realize that this was the wrong thing to say. You decide that the best course of action is to go home and clear everything up after you've slept off your hangover. Sky keeps smiling, and says that you woke up just in time for breakfast. She flips an omelet, done to perfection, onto a warmed plate and hands it to you. She's wearing plaid flannel pajama bottoms, an old San Francisco Giants T-shirt that says HUM BABY across the chest, and tiger slippers. You never noticed before that she has dimples when she smiles, and freckles across her nose. You decide that it couldn't hurt to stay for breakfast.

The panic hits as you are walking home. If your life were a movie, this would not be happening. The beautiful waitress never ends up with the lesbian short-order cook. Your head is pounding. You swear you feel your ulcer flaring up. You desperately need to sleep. You arrive home to an empty apartment, and find a note from your roommate saying that she'll be out of town for few days. Thank God for small blessings. You drink two large glasses of water. You take a shower. You lie on your bed and stare at the ceiling. It's light outside, so you can't even look at your glow-in-the-dark stars. After half an hour, you decide to take a sleeping pill. Your mind is still racing. You toss and turn and stare at the clock. You take another sleeping pill. You pick up the bottle of pills and study it closely. DO NOT EXCEED RECOMENDED DOSAGE, the warning label

reads. The doctor told you no more than two pills in twenty four hours, but you are still awake. Every time you close your eyes you see Sky's smiling face, dimples, freckles, hum baby. You shake two more pills into your palm and chase them down with a glass of water. You decide that it probably won't kill you.

If your life were a movie, you would have poured the whole bottle into your mouth and swallowed it down in one brave gulp. This is the last thought that crosses your mind before your eyelids become heavy with sleep.

You awake to the sound of the telephone ringing. You look at the clock. Four in the afternoon. You haven't been asleep for very long. Your head is still throbbing, and you're unbelievable thirsty. You answer the phone. Sky is on the other end. Is that you? she asks. She sounds relieved to hear your voice. I've been worried sick, she says. I've been calling constantly. Don't worry, she says, I covered for you at work. I told them you had to leave town for a family emergency.

You don't know what she's talking about. In your head, you go over the events of the past twenty four hours. Yesterday was your birthday. You went out with Sky and drank too much. You slept in her bed. You did not have to be at work today.

Sky's voice is persistent. So where have you been? she asks.

Your gaze falls on the open bottle of sleeping pills. You ask Sky what day it is. Your brain is still shaking off the effects of medication, and it takes you a while to do the math. You calculate that you've been out cold for a little over two full days.

You laugh. Your throat is so dry that laughter hurts. You feel terrible, but you're happy to be awake. You're happy to be talking to Sky. You try to remember the last

time you felt this happy, and in your mind you see a little girl, stepping out of an itchy pink ballet tutu and tossing it into the audience.

You tell Sky that you've been sleeping.

Equating

MARGARET AND HOLLY wandered the streets of Quito, licking rapidly melting ice cream bars and talking about the baby as if it were already a certainty.

“Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?” Holly asked Margaret.

“Oh, a girl probably,” Margaret replied, her hand gently rubbing her flat stomach.

“What will you name her?” asked Holly.

Margaret didn't answer. She was going home the next day, and this was the last time she would walk through the south of Quito, where the breathtaking cathedrals and elaborate buildings still exhibited the architecture of the Spanish conquest. The girls had just passed through the central plaza, where women with thick, dark hair and babies tied to their backs sold bright, hand-knit wool sweaters, and children as young as four years old offered up their boxes of gum and lollipops with big eyes and shy smiles. Almost five hundred years ago, right here in the central plaza, the indigenous people had been converted to Christianity by the thousands. They were told to repeat words that they didn't understand, and out of fear they did as they were told. Margaret reached up and

pulled at her short blond hair, a nervous habit she had acquired in the past month. She wondered if she had changed the course of her life without any understanding of what she had done.

Holly decided to break the silence. "I don't really think the test will be positive," she said. "Do you?"

Margaret shrugged her shoulders and remained silent, her attention focused on eating the last of the ice cream off the stick without sacrificing a single drop to the hot pavement. She was remembering the day she had sat in the beauty parlor down the street from her apartment and watched her hair fall in shining curls at her feet. It was just one short month ago. Four weeks. Thirty days. Already it felt like a lifetime. She couldn't help but think about how her father would react when she stepped off the plane in less than forty eight hours. She could already see the disappointment in his eyes, and in order to block out the image she thought of Ramón, who had seen her passport photo one evening and commented that short hair made her look much more sophisticated.

When she looked up again her eyes went to the far south, where high on a hill the city's patron saint stood watch over her people. Ramón had taken her there the day after they met. It was dangerous, he said, in that part of the city, but the view was worth the risk. They had climbed the steps of the statue together and looked out over Quito, still silent and shy about what had started between them the night before. Ramón pointed out the neighborhood where he grew up. Margaret cast her gaze over the entire valley, trying to memorize its shapes and colors in order to make it her own.

The statue herself was beautifully carved, a winged creature, with a serpent coiled at her feet. She had one arm raised as if asking for a blessing from above, and although Margaret had never found much comfort in the idea of a higher power, this gesture of supplication was strangely reassuring.

Holly's voice brought her out of her contemplation. "Has it been half an hour yet?" she asked.

"Twenty five minutes," Margaret replied, checking her watch. The action brought her thoughts back to the present, and she suddenly realized that she had no idea where they were. Quito was a large city, and to her weary eyes all of the streets looked the same, blending into a labyrinth of currency exchange centers and indigenous street vendors that she could never find her way out of alone. She no longer knew her orientation to the central plaza, let alone the main trolley line. Margaret often relied on other people to lead her where she needed to go.

"Do you remember where that pharmacy was?" she asked Holly, a hint of panic in her voice.

"Oh, it's around here somewhere. Don't worry, we'll find it again."

Margaret just nodded, and the girls continued walking in silence.

Margaret had known Ramón for only one month. She met him in a dance club in downtown Quito the very day that she cut off all of her hair. When she allowed herself to be completely honest she would admit that the new haircut was responsible for the whole affair. It could have been anybody; all Ramón had done was ask her to dance. He had

asked for her name, too, while leading a rather complicated salsa step, and she had surprised herself by both following the step perfectly and simultaneously pronouncing her name for him in Spanish, *Margarita*. It always made her feel silly to say her name this way, as if she should be ordering drinks rather than introducing herself. Ramón only nodded solemnly and said that it was a pretty name, like the flower. Margaret had never heard of her floral namesake, but Ramón had a beautiful smile, an irresistible combination of shy and sweet and charming, and she decided to take his word for it.

Margaret and Ramón left the club together that night, weaving in and out of people on the crowded sidewalks. They bought hot dogs heaped with relish and onions and crushed potato chips from a street vendor, even though she had been warned countless times about unclean preparation and dangerous bacteria. They walked past upscale bars playing traditional salsa music, where most of the patrons were well-dressed Ecuadorians. In the very next block they passed the local dives, where techno music blared from inside and the people going in and out stumbled, rather than walked, through the doors. Quito at night, Margaret reflected, had a very different feel than Quito during the day, and she never could decide which she preferred. She liked the carefree crowds that flooded the bars and dance clubs after dark, but she missed the blue and red and pink buses that made crossing every street an adventure during the day. She was glad that light and dark were divided into two equal parts. Back home, it was almost time to set the clocks one hour ahead. It seemed a ridiculous concept here on the equator, saving daylight. In Ecuador it was simple: twelve hours of night, twelve hours of day. It was

exhilarating, the feeling this country gave her of being completely free and yet perfectly balanced for the first time in her life.

She didn't try to explain any of this to Ramón. They did talk a little bit, becoming acquainted with each other in her halting Spanish, but for the most part they just walked slowly through the nighttime city.

Usually, Margaret behaved so cautiously around Latin men that her American girlfriends made fun of her propriety. That night, though, she felt that Ramón was different. Or maybe she was the one who was different, because she had just cut off all of her hair and suddenly the capital city of a warm country on the equator was hers for the taking.

When she traveled to Ecuador on a cultural exchange she heard all of the horror stories about what happens to careless women in dangerous Latin American cities. Latin men, her father warned, are predators. American girls are their prey. Margaret took his warnings to heart, and vowed to take all of the necessary precautions. Her father stroked her hair as he hugged her goodbye, and told her to be good. She said that she always was, and for the most part it was true.

This is why Margaret was surprised to discover that she led Ramón, that first night, in the direction of her apartment. When they reached her building she wasn't sure how the evening would end. She turned away from him, fumbling in her purse for the key to the iron security gate. She felt his hand touch the back of her neck, where her hair had just been cut so short it was practically shaved.

“Margarita,” he whispered, “puedo besarte?” She answered by turning slowly toward him and offering him her mouth. No other man, in her recollection, had ever asked her permission for a kiss. He whispered her name again, very softly, and she led him through the gate.

Before Margaret traveled to South America, strangers would stop her on the street to comment on the beauty of her hair. When she stood in the sun, the light striking her head at just the right angle, shining streaks of red appeared amidst the thick blond tresses. Her last boyfriend, Seth, had begged her to loosen the pins that kept it pulled away from her face so he could run his fingers through her thick curls. When she was a child, her father had called her Rapunzel.

Margaret herself was rather indifferent to her remarkable hair. It was a nuisance to wash, and it took hours to dry. A favorite game of hers was to casually mention that she was thinking about cutting it all off. This always sparked a horrified reaction, from friends and strangers alike. Once, she had mentioned it to her boyfriend just to see how he would react. He had actually buried his face in her hair and cried. Margaret let him enact his goodbye ritual before telling him that she wasn't really serious. She had been attracted to Seth because he wasn't afraid to talk about his feelings, and this, she believed, was a desirable quality in a boyfriend. His sensitivity, though, had started to wear on her. He was always so emotional, and it bothered Margaret more than she cared to admit. He was the one who cried at sad movies; he was the one who wrote passionate poetry about the curve of her ankles and the freckles on her arms; he was the one who declared his love at least twice a day. It was exhausting, Margaret thought, just to stay on his level. But all

of her friends adored him and envied her good fortune, so she hated to admit that she found him tiring. She meant to end their relationship a few days before she left the country, and she even pulled her hair back in tight braid for the occasion, but she couldn't find the nerve to break his heart. She did it the cowardly way instead, in an e-mail from the other side of the world.

Thinking about Seth was not improving Margaret's state of mind. The woman at the pharmacy had said come back in half an hour for the results, but thirty minutes had turned to forty five minutes had turned to an hour and the girls still hadn't found the pharmacy again. Margaret almost hoped that it would stay lost. The whole experience had been humiliating. She hadn't even known the words for *pregnancy test* in Spanish, but she had squeezed Holly's hand, taken a deep breath, and asked the woman behind the counter for the test-you-take-to-see-if-you-might-be-pregnant. She had envisioned something simple and discreet, blue for negative, pink for positive, something that she could take in the privacy of her own apartment. Not like this. Not with a stranger ushering her into a semi-clean bathroom, handing her a plastic cup for a urine sample and saying, use that bucket of water to flush the toilet when you're done. Saying, come back in half an hour for your results. Saying, without words, *slut, whore, American.*

Holly was getting tired of Margaret's long periods of silence. She stopped walking and turned to her friend. "Do you want to ask somebody for directions?"

Margaret shook her head. "I think we're close. I remember that shoe store."

Holly was doubtful. "I don't think that's the same one we passed. Let's ask somebody."

“There’s a pharmacy on every other block, Holly. How will they know which one we’re talking about?”

Holly tried to disguise the frustration in her voice. “Do you want to get those test results or not? I’m only trying to help.”

Margaret nodded slowly, although she wasn’t sure that she was agreeing to anything Holly had said. Finally she spoke. “I haven’t told Ramón anything yet.”

“Are you going to?”

Margaret shrugged. “Probably not. I don’t want to ruin our last night together.”

“But what will you do if…” Holly let her words trail off, suddenly unwilling to speak her thoughts out loud.

“What will I do if the test is positive?” Margaret finished the sentence for her. “I’ll have a baby, I guess.”

For once, Holly didn’t have anything to say. Margaret was silent as well, thinking about how she would tell her father if it came to that. She was the first to speak again.

“Do you know the story of Rapunzel?” she asked Holly.

“Yeah, sure. Beautiful girl locked in a tower. Rescuing hero comes along, says Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair. Everyone knows that story.”

“But do you know how she got locked in that tower in the first place?” Margaret asked.

Holly shook her head.

“Her mother, when she was pregnant, couldn’t live without these vegetables, called *rapunzels*, that grew in the witch’s garden. She had to have them. She risked everything to feed her desire.”

“So what happened?”

“She got caught. The witch let her have the rapunzels, but took her baby as punishment. And that’s the end of the mother’s story.”

“It never says what happens to her?”

Margaret shook her head. “The rest of the story belongs to her daughter. She’s the one who gets to live happily-ever-after.”

“How depressing,” said Holly. “That poor woman.”

“I guess so. But we’ll never know the mother’s side of things. Maybe those rapunzels tasted so good that it was worth the consequences. Maybe she had no regrets.” Without thinking, Margaret reached up and tugged on her short blonde hair. She glanced at her watch. “We’ve been walking for almost two hours. Let’s just get a taxi and go home.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep looking?”

“I’m sure,” Margaret replied. “I need to pack, and say goodbye to Ramón.” She waved down the first taxi she saw and the girls climbed in, without even bothering to bargain for a price.

The taxi driver dropped Holly off first. Margaret gave her friend a hug, and said she would see her tomorrow at the airport. All the way to her apartment, she watched the city go by outside her window. It was nearing six o’clock, and the mountains that bordered the city were growing dark as dusk fell over the valley. She watched a woman laden with shopping bags and children make a frantic dash across the busy street. She watched a blue bus stop just long enough for a man holding a chicken under each arm to jump off at the corner. She watched a pig slowly roasting on a spit at a sidewalk food

stand. In the morning, on the way to the airport, she would watch the sun come up over the Andes for the last time, and wave goodbye to the patron saint who looked down over the city. Tonight she had bags to fill with bright wool sweaters and silver jewelry and hand-painted clay pottery. She had a lover to say goodbye to. Even if she had his dark-eyed child, she would never tell him. Ramón would fade out of her life just as surely as the pink and blue buses, and the salsa bars, and the gentle language that she hadn't quite made her own. She rubbed one hand over her stomach, not ready to know one way or the other. Back home, her father would look at her reproachfully and talk about how pretty her hair used to be. She would set the clock ahead to capture an extra hour of sunlight, and try to feel the perfect balance between night and day.

The Gift of Sorrow

MARÍA ISABELA de los Angeles had never intended to harm the child. But Greta became sick with fevers and vomiting, and when after weeks the doctors still remained baffled, the old woman did not hesitate to hand the child's mother a letter of resignation before slipping away into the night. She did not even allow herself a goodbye kiss from the little girl she had grown accustomed to calling "mi'ija," in two syllables instead of three, as if the word for "daughter" could not separate itself from the possessiveness of her love.

Nobody in the Johnson household had known where María Isabela came from, and she did not tell them. Perhaps if someone had asked, she would have spoken of a small village high in the Andes mountains of Perú, a village that had existed long before the Spanish conquest, and continued existing, to the best of María Isabela's knowledge, in its slow and ancient rhythm. She might have described the early-morning taste of mountain fog on the tip of her tongue, or the dizzying sensation of looking down on the clouds. Maybe she would have mentioned an ancient language, a childhood language spoken only

in her sleep, when, in the vast flatness of California's central valley, she dreamt of flight. Or perhaps she would have smiled and said nothing at all, continuing to peel potatoes in one long, unbroken curl and letting her gaze become impenetrable. At times, her silences could last for hours. When this happened, Greta would get out her crayons and color patiently at the kitchen counter, waiting for another story to begin.

María Isabela was sixty-five years old, although most people found it difficult to estimate her age. Her black hair, always kept neatly in a thick braid that fell to her waist, was streaked with gray, and her ankles were swollen from years of service in people's homes. Her eyes, however, were ageless. Her black irises completely engulfed her pupils, creating the illusion that her eyes were two black holes, absorbing all light and all color while allowing nothing to escape. Most of the time she appeared to be looking inward rather than outward, as if, rather than standing outside of an image and watching it unfold, she pulled the image into herself. Her eyes were not frightening, but a strange, almost mesmerizing mixture of thoughtful and sad. Only she knew of the dangerous depth of sorrow that she carried in her eyes.

Two days after her sudden departure she received a letter in the mail from the child's mother. *Dear María Isabela, the letter read, You'll be happy to know that Greta is feeling better – the doctors are saying that it must have been a flu virus. Although I do not fully understand your reasons for leaving our household, I am convinced that my daughter's sickness had nothing to do with you. In any case, now that Greta is well again she is refusing to bathe until you return. I can do nothing with that stubborn child.*

She must have gotten it from her father. Please reconsider your hasty decision. I'll be waiting to hear from you.

Sincerely,

Ramona T. Johnson

P.S. Do you think you could still take Greta to her kindergarten's open house on Monday night? You know how full mine and David's schedules are these days.

María Isabela read slowly. English, as a written language, was still difficult. She had never liked the child's mother, and could tell from the way the letter was addressed that the woman was trying hard to make a good impression. Mrs. Johnson had never called María Isabela by her Spanish name during the entire year of her employment in the Johnson household. She always called her Mary, as if one version of a name were the same as any other. There were many things, María Isabela reflected, that Ramona T. Johnson would never understand.

María Isabela folded the letter carefully and weighed the consequences of visiting the child one last time. Greta's sensitive nature would make her extremely susceptible to a relapse, but so few people remained in María Isabela's life whom she really loved. She could not bring herself to sever another tie. María Isabela knew the dangers of her own selfishness, but her decision was already made. Glancing at her watch, she decided not to delay her visit. It was almost six – Greta had already eaten her dinner and would be

coloring alone in her room, Mrs. Johnson would be gossiping with a girlfriend on the phone, her husband would be working late at the office. There was no need to call first.

The afternoon was cool, so she wrapped a black shawl around her shoulders before setting out to walk the twenty-three blocks to the Johnson's house. A year of following the same route had allowed her feet to memorize the half-hour walk through immigrant neighborhoods, where she did her best to ignore the laughter of children playing games on the sidewalks and the shrill voices of mothers calling their sons and daughters into dinner. She was relieved to enter the quiet, upper-class neighborhoods, where the carefully tended gardens and freshly painted houses distracted her from her heartache.

Ramona Johnson was talking breathlessly on the cordless phone when María Isabela arrived at the front door. The young mother, styled and made up in a manner that suggested a practiced dedication to her appearance, cradled the receiver between her ear and her shoulder and motioned the older woman inside the house. She continued to make conversational noises for the benefit of whoever spoke on the other end of the line, although her attention was focused on the shiny, purple appointment book she held in her left hand, and the large, red pen she grasped with her right. As she talked, Mrs. Johnson alternated between marking dates in the book and drawing bubbly hearts and flowers in the margins. Not wishing to interrupt, María Isabela pointed silently down the hall toward Greta's room. Mrs. Johnson, not seeming the least bit surprised by the sudden appearance of her daughter's nanny, nodded her approval.

As María Isabela made her way to the end of the hall, she could not help but overhear Mrs. Johnson's conversation. The younger woman's voice, despite her attempts to speak softly, carried well through the house.

"You remember Mary, don't you, Sweets? Greta's latest warden? The one who walked out on me Wednesday night? Well, thank God she just walked back in.

"I know, I know. I couldn't believe her nerve either. My nails would have just been destroyed for that interview, and Lord knows I'd never have gotten another appointment with Eliza before next Tuesday. I could have tried to convince David to swing by the school for the graham crackers and crayon drawings, but you know how he is with Monday Night Football. What a relief that she's finally come to her senses.

"No, it wasn't the money. I offered her a raise and she wouldn't accept it. She gave some hocus pocus Indian excuse about...Hold on a minute, Sweets, would you? I've got a call on the other line. Don't you go anywhere now, I'll be right back."

María Isabela did not need to hear more. She knew that her actions lacked reason in the eyes of the other woman, but she did not blame Greta's mother for being who she was. Eventually she would have to tell Mrs. Johnson that she had only returned to say goodbye, and would not be resuming her responsibilities as Greta's nanny, but that could wait. She paused at the door of the child's room and removed the black shawl from around her shoulders. Carefully, she tied it around her head so the fringe hung down over her face, hiding her eyes from view. She pushed open the door and entered the room.

Greta, absorbed in her coloring, did not immediately notice that María Isabela stood in her doorway. The old woman spoke first.

“How do you always say a story must begin, mi’ija? Once upon a time?”

“ISA!” The little girl cried out, using the nickname she had given to her nanny when the ‘r’ in María had proved too much of a challenge, “I knew you’d come back!” She abandoned her crayons and propelled herself across the room, only to stop short at the unfamiliar sight of the black shawl draped across María Isabela’s face.

“Are you wearing a costume?” asked the child, the joy in her face quickly changing to perplexity. María Isabela thought for a moment before replying.

“Yes,” she said finally. “Yes, it is a costume. This is your goodbye story, Greta, and so I want it to be special.”

“You’re going away again? Right when you just got back?” The little girl began to cry. María Isabela reached out to stroke her tangled, unwashed blonde curls. “Hush now, mi’ija. I will need your help with the story.” The old woman settled herself on the carpet. Greta sat down in her lap, sniffing through her subsiding tears. María Isabela cleared her throat and began.

“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, a young girl lived a peaceful life.”

“Was she a princess?” Greta interrupted, her tears almost forgotten in the excitement of the story, “was her name Penelope?”

“Yes. Yes she was a princess named Penelope,” replied María Isabela, having learned that a story, when told to Greta, must be flexible in order to survive. “Penelope had black hair and green eyes. She was *una mujer hermosa*. Beautiful, as you say. But you must understand this beauty, mi’ija. It was a curse, her beauty was, for when she

came of an age to be married, every man in the kingdom wanted this honor.” The old woman paused and smiled sadly. “Her green eyes made them *locos*, *niña*; made them crazy for a desire they believed to be love. You will learn soon enough, I suppose, about the way love works in the world.” She stopped, the train of her story lost among these thoughts.

“What about the princess?” the child asked. Her question brought María Isabela back to the task at hand.

“Oh yes, Penelope. Penelope had eyes for one man only. He was a poor man, named...” She paused, unable to come up with a suitable name.

“Roger!” suggested Greta.

“Very well, he was a poor man named Roger, and he made his living selling stories.”

“You mean he worked in a bookstore?” asked Greta.

“Oh, no. Listen more closely, *mi’ija*. I did not say he sold books; I said he sold stories. A story, *niña*, does not have to be written down, and so it has freedom. It has life and breath. It changes with the weather. Once a story has been written down, it is trapped forever. Roger never put his stories into books.”

“Where did he put them, then?”

“Roger put his stories into the hearts and minds of those who listened, and Penelope the Princess listened more than anybody else. Every day she would sneak away from the watchful eyes of her father and sit by Roger’s side for hours, listening to the most beautiful stories she had ever heard.”

“Did all of Roger’s stories have happy endings?” Greta asked. María Isabela sighed, and reached out again to stroke the child’s hair. “Someday you will learn, niña, that even the stories that don’t end happily are beautiful in their own way. But where was I?”

“Penelope and Roger,” prompted Greta.

“Oh, yes. When Penelope’s father, the king, discovered his daughter’s love for Roger, he was not happy. A story teller, and a poor story teller at that, was not an ideal match for a princess. But when Penelope admitted that she was already carrying Roger’s baby, the king could do nothing but grant his blessing on their marriage. Better, he thought, for his daughter to marry a story teller, than to raise her child alone.”

“And so they got married and lived happily ever after, right, Isa?” Greta jumped up and returned to her crayons, convinced that the story had come to an end.

“You are too eager for the happy ending, niña. Be patient and I will tell you how it turns out,” said the old woman, watching, through the fringes of her veil, as Greta colored peacefully. For the child’s sake, she felt bad about the way her story had to end. “Penelope and Roger never got married, you see, because the night before their wedding, Roger was killed by *un hombre celoso*. Jealous, I think, is the word you use. He had been made crazy by her beauty, mi’ija, and could not live with the knowledge that her green eyes would belong to another.” Greta stopped coloring and positioned herself once again in María Isabela’s lap.

“Was the princess sad?” asked the child.

“Penelope’s heart was broken, mi’ija. It was a sadness I hope you never have to know,” answered the old woman, her voice shaking. “But then something very strange happened. Her sorrow, as black as night and as thick as tar, filled her from the bottom up until even her green eyes were colored black with grief. She had her baby alone, *su hija*, and for a short time, her daughter filled her heart with joy. What Penelope did not know, however, was that the grief still lingering inside of her was dangerous. It escaped through her eyes, and slowly crushed the innocent spirit of the baby girl, until one day the child could no longer breathe under the weight of her mother’s grief.

“And that is how the story ends. Penelope the Princess fled from her kingdom, and from that moment on she wore a black veil, to protect the young and the weak from her sorrow-filled eyes.” Greta was silent, turning it all over in her five-year-old mind. Finally she asked, “What was the name of Penelope’s baby?”

María Isabela smiled. “Esperanza,” she replied. “It means *hope*, niña. Don’t you think Esperanza is a good name?” A tear rolled down the old woman’s face, and as she moved to brush it away, she accidentally lifted her make-shift veil and caught the direct gaze of the child. María Isabela held Greta’s bright green eyes with her own, seeing her own dark and veiled reflection in the clear eyes of the little girl and forgetting herself in the distance of once upon a time.

She was startled back into the present by the feverish flush she saw spreading over Greta’s forehead. María Isabela quickly replaced the shawl, returning herself to the safety of obscurity. It was past time for her to leave.

“You are getting sick again, mi’ija. You must rest for awhile.” She carried Greta to her bed, tucked the covers in tightly, and kissed the child goodbye.

Greta reached for her hand as she turned to walk away. “Will you come back again, Isa? To tell a story with a happy ending?”

The old woman could not answer.

Greta lay awake for a long time after María Isabela had left. Then, she got out of bed and crept quietly down the hall to the bathroom, careful not to disturb her mother, who had fallen asleep in front of the television. She pulled out the stool that she stood on to brush her teeth and used it to reach the light switch. As the fluorescent light flickered on overhead, she turned to face the mirror, studying her reflection. She was pale, except for a spot of high color on either cheek where María Isabela had kissed her goodbye. She brushed her fingers across her forehead, and her skin was dry and hot to the touch. Then she noticed her eyes. Her clear green irises were outlined with a dark, black rim that hadn’t been there before. She closed her eyes tightly, and thought about the princess, and the story teller, and the dead baby girl. When she opened her eyes they were clear again, and two tears, black as night and thick as tar, rolled slowly down her cheeks. And Greta knew that she had been given sorrow.

Heroine Dreams

I AWOKE IN the semi-darkness to the sound of Zach's voice, singing a Cat Stevens' tune softly to himself outside of the tent. *Now that I've lost everything to you, you say you want to start something new, and it's breaking my heart you're leaving. Baby, I'm grieving.* I nestled deeper into my sleeping bag to fend off the cold night air but stayed awake, listening to his voice. He had brought his guitar on the trip but hadn't touched it all week. It had been a long time since I'd heard him sing, and I took it as a good sign. *But if you want to leave, take good care. Hope you make a lot of nice friends out there, but just remember there's a lot of bad, and beware, beware.* We were camping in the Nevada desert outside of Las Vegas. In the morning, it would be day five of one of the longest weeks I had ever lived through. *Oh, baby, baby it's a wild world. It's hard to get by just upon a smile. Oh, baby, baby it's a wild world, and I'll always remember you like a child.*

I wondered how long he'd been up. The night was still bright with moonlight, and I couldn't have been asleep for more than a couple hours. I sat up and began searching

for a flashlight so I could check my watch. Zach must have heard my movements, because he stopped singing and popped his head back inside the tent.

“Ellie? Are you awake?”

“It’s impossible to get comfortable on this ground,” I replied. “I’ve been awake forever.”

“No, you haven’t. You were snoring just a while ago.”

“Oh. Well, I’ve been listening to you sing.”

“Yeah. Can’t sleep tonight.” He looked eerie in the moonlit glow of the tent. I hadn’t noticed before how thin and hollowed out his face had become.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked.

“I think the worst is over,” he replied. “Insomnia must be stage two.” I finally found a flashlight and directed the beam at my watch. 2 am. He had a long night ahead of him. I lay back down in my sleeping bag.

“El? Are you going back to sleep?”

I yawned. “It’s two in the morning, Zach. What do you think?”

“There’s a motel just down the road from the campground. Maybe it would help if I could take a hot bath, or watch TV. You wouldn’t have to sleep on the ground.” His voice was almost pleading.

“I’m fine right here. You go if you want to.” There was a time when I would have been excited about the prospect of a motel room with Zach, but he hadn’t touched me in at least two months and I wasn’t expecting any miracles tonight.

“Never mind,” he said. “It was a dumb idea. Just talk to me for awhile, okay? Tell me a story or something.”

I was tired and couldn't think of any stories, but this was the first time in five days that he had wanted to exchange more than a few words. I welcomed the attention.

"Yeah, sure. I can do that. What kind of a story?"

"Anything. You decide, babe." Despite everything, I still loved it when Zach called me babe. I had been in college long enough to know that I ought to feel offended, or oppressed, or objectified, or some other "o" word, but all the same it made me melt inside.

He kicked off his shoes and crawled across the tent to lie down next to me. I thought for a few minutes, and then told him a story I had read once in a *Reader's Digest* while waiting for a doctor's appointment. It was about an elderly man and woman, both alone in the world, who met in a senior citizen's exercise class. They began to date, only to discover that as children, they had been imprisoned in the same Jewish concentration camp. It was a sad story with a happy ending, a story about two people who had the same scars and knew how to heal each other's wounds.

"Typical *Reader's Digest* story, isn't it?" commented Zach when I had finished.

"Sorry. I couldn't think of anything better."

"No, it was fine. I'm glad you stayed up with me for awhile." He found my hand in the darkness, and locked my fingers between his. "I haven't felt this alive in months, Ellie." I rolled onto my side so I was facing him, and reached my free hand up to caress his face.

"You know," I said, "I might stay up a while longer if..."

"If what?"

“Well, maybe since you’re feeling better, we could...” I stopped again. I wanted this to be Zach’s idea.

“I don’t think I’m up for it tonight, El.” I moved away from him, arranging myself once again in my sleeping bag. It was the answer I had expected, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear.

“Never mind,” I said. “It was a dumb idea.”

“Just give me a few more days. Maybe when we get home...” I cut him off.

“When we get home you’re leaving, Zach.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.” I wanted him to sound sorry, but we both knew that he was thrilled to be starting over. I closed my eyes.

“I’m going to get some sleep, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied. “I think I’ll walk around for awhile. I don’t want to keep you up any longer.” He moved to the door of the tent and put his shoes on.

“Good night,” he said, as he zipped the tent flap shut behind him. “And thank you.”

“Thank you for what?” I asked.

“For the story. For everything. You’ve saved my life this week.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Zach.”

“Well, I want to anyway. Sweet dreams, babe. See you in the morning.” I lay awake and listened to him walk away.

Zach told me the night we met that he wouldn’t be in town much longer. Mexico, he said, seemed like a better place to be, and I had to agree that the sun was hotter and the

tequila smoother. But as the party was winding down I handed him my phone number anyway, on the back of a Victoria's Secret receipt for velvet thong underwear, and expressed an interest in seeing him again before he left the country. I had never done anything so bold in my life, and I've never been able to decide if it was Zach, or the alcohol, or the sexy underwear that made me so courageous. Maybe all three.

He called in less than a week. We went out for Chinese food, and he never once mentioned Mexico. Conversation came easy with Zach. He talked about the independent music scene, and the beat poets, and his family's immigration from the Czech Republic. By the time the waitress brought our fortune cookies, I adored him completely.

He loved his cat. He sang in a band. He climbed mountains in Europe.

He said, I like you Ellie, so I'm going to be honest. He rolled up his sleeves and showed me his scars, marching up and down his forearms like a battalion of soldiers. Heroin, he said. Junk. Black. Horse. Angel Dust. Dope. H. Smack.

He said, I'm trying to wake up from this nightmare. He said, I've been clean for almost eleven weeks now. I nodded, encouraging him to talk. Does it bother you? he asked. It's fine, I said. I'm glad you're getting well. It doesn't bother me at all.

He drove me home, and we walked around the block to smoke a cigarette before going inside. He said, I'd really like to hold your hand.

I was hooked.

Things were good for about four months. Then Zach started falling asleep all the time, in the middle of movies, conversations, cigarettes, sometimes even kisses. He smoked incessantly. He disappeared into the bathroom for long periods of time. Once, in

a restaurant, he was gone for so long that two women at another table leaned over and asked me if my friend was coming back. I tried to smile. I said I hoped so. What I really hoped was that at night, when I slept in his bed, he would at least give me a kiss before turning away and falling into a heavy slumber. I was too afraid of the answer to ask what was wrong. Junk. H. Dope. Smack. But I was even more afraid that somehow, I was the problem.

When I was sixteen, I met Danny Stillwell after school in the park every day for three months. We made out in the grass behind the play structure and talked about how much we hated high school. Sometimes we went to the movies if we could find a ride. Sometimes I helped him do his math homework. Algebra always made a lot of sense to me. Balance the equation and solve for the unknown. Find an answer every time.

Then, one afternoon, Danny didn't show up at the park. I waited for two hours. I called his house that evening to see what the problem was. Ellie, he said, this just isn't working for me anymore. It's not you, he said. It's me. Of course my sixteen-year-old heart was crushed, especially when three days later he was holding hands with Cynthia Cranston without a care in the world, and I knew that he had lied. It had to be me.

I don't know what kind of terrible, selfish person this makes me, but when Zach finally admitted that he was using heroin again, deep down inside I was relieved. At least I knew that it wasn't me.

The camping trip was a nightmare from the start. I drove most of the way, alternately watching the road and watching Zach to make sure he didn't fall asleep with a lit cigarette in his hand. I had stayed up late the night before, helping him sew patches onto all of the clothes he had burned holes into in the past two months.

I had high hopes for our vacation, which was my first mistake. It was the last time we would be together before he moved away, and in my mind, we would make the most of every minute. Zach had quit using heroin the week before. I knew he had quit, because that's what he told me and I still hadn't learned not to believe him. As far as I knew the withdrawal sickness was over. Then, we crossed the border into Nevada and he admitted that he had relapsed two days earlier. As the bright lights of Las Vegas rose on the horizon, he finally confessed that he hadn't really quit at all.

I wasn't strong enough, he said. I couldn't do it while a fix was just a phone call away.

By then I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry, and I wasn't sure that it mattered either way. It was going to be a long week.

For the first three days I left him alone while he moaned in the tent and begged to die. Sometimes he ate when I offered him food, but usually he stayed curled up on his sleeping bag, too cold or too hot and too miserable to feel human. Our tent began to reek with the smell of his sickness, and I tried hard to keep my compassion from turning to disgust.

On the evening of day three, Zach decided that he felt well enough to drive into the city. When we got there, though, he didn't want to get out of the car. I had never been to

Las Vegas, so I left him asleep in the back seat while I wandered alone down glittering streets and through gaudy casinos. When I returned to the parking garage Zach was wide awake, sitting in the driver's seat and playing the stereo. It was late, and I was tired, so I got in on the other side. That was my second mistake.

We didn't talk much on the way back to the campground. I must have dozed off, because all of a sudden I was jolted awake by the sound of a horn and the glare of oncoming headlights. Zach had fallen asleep at the wheel, and we had drifted into the wrong lane. I grabbed the wheel and jerked the car back to the right side of the road. The other car swerved onto the shoulder, barely avoiding a head-on collision. My heart was pounding. Zach, awake now and in control of the car again, started apologizing immediately. It's fine, I said. Nobody's hurt. It's fine. It's fine.

I finally fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep, and when I awoke again it was to the hazy glow of early morning light. Zach was lying on his sleeping bag next to me, staring at the changing colors of the sky through the sun flap that he had unzipped on the ceiling of our tent. I hadn't heard him come in. I stretched, and he turned to look at me.

"Good morning," he said.

"You too," I replied. "Did you sleep at all?"

"No. Didn't really expect to."

"So what did you do all night?"

"I wandered around. Walked down the road to that motel I told you about, maybe five or six miles. Nice night for a walk. I didn't have any money on me, though, so I hitched a ride back."

“You were just going to check into a motel and let me wonder where you had gone?”

“I would have come back this morning. Besides, if I had been serious about it I would have taken some money with me. I was just out for a walk.”

We were both silent for a few minutes. I didn't want to start a fight, but I couldn't help but feel hurt that he needed a hot bath and a television more than he needed me. I thought about the near-accident the night before, and the cigarette burns in his clothes and his bed sheets, and our very first date when he rolled up his sleeves to show me his scars. I had brushed my fingers over his forearms, captivated by the fantasy that my touch could heal. My touch, though, had never been enough. I wondered why I was here, and which of us was more in need of healing in the dry Nevada desert. I was the first to speak again.

“Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“What's it like?”

“What is what like?”

“Heroin,” I said. “Tell me what it's like.” He took a deep breath.

“I don't know if I can describe it, El. It's a way to survive. It's a way to get through the day.” I nodded, although I knew that I would never understand. Zach had given me his copy of *Junky* by William Burroughs a few weeks earlier, and I had searched the pages for insight into the fierce pull of the opiate addiction. The *junk equation*, Burroughs called it, only it didn't seem like any equation that I knew how to solve.

“It's a nightmare, Ellie,” Zach said. “You don't want to know what it's like.”

“I guess you’re right,” I replied, letting the subject drop. I did want to know, though. All those months and I had never asked Zach what he saw when his eyelids dropped and his head began to nod. I never asked where the drug took his mind, or why he needed to go there so badly. I had my own illusions to create, and while he drifted off beside me I held his hand and closed my eyes. In my dreams, he came to me with a need so urgent it haunted his nights and consumed his waking hours. In my dreams I was liquid passion, spreading like fire through his veins. I didn’t leave him scarred.

I never considered the balance of my equation. I never thought about what would happen next, when he was high and I was hollowed out, like an empty syringe.

The tent was getting warm as the morning advanced. Beside me, Zach’s breathing had become deep and steady. I was glad that he would finally get some sleep. Through the open sun flap I could see that the early morning haze had lifted, leaving behind a bright blue sky. I watched a single cloud drift across my line of vision and out of sight. I got dressed as quietly as I could. I looked at Zach, his face serene in sleep, and wondered if he was dreaming. I went outside to get through the day.

Anne Marie's Red Cloak

The hunting is always slow for the pack in the winter. This is wilderness country, and most of the townspeople avoid the woods when the ground frosts over and darkness begins to creep in early. When Kip was alive, he always saw that my ice box was stocked with more meat than I could consume in one season. I think, in his shy way, it was how he courted me all those years. He would have been welcome in my home with or without a gift, but he didn't like to come empty-handed. It was Kip who first introduced me to the wolf I have always called Henry – Hal for short – after the hero of the Shakespearean history I happened to be reading on the afternoon we met. He found him as a cub, injured but alive in one of his traps, and although he was no friend to the wolves his compassionate nature would not allow a cub to suffer. Kip, knowing my love for animals, brought him to me, a frightened bundle of soft gray fur. I nursed his wounds before returning him to the wild, and Hal became my connection to the pack.

I would see him watching me from a distance as I planted vegetables or pulled weeds in my garden. When he reached maturity he allowed me to follow him deep into

the woods, where he proudly showed off cubs of his own. It was a gradual process, but through Hal the other wolves came to accept my presence. In the winter, when their eyes became wild with starvation and their ribs showed through their dull coats, I could not help but feel sorry for the animals. Once or twice a week I would leave an offering of fresh meat for the pack, from the excess of what Kip provided me. It is against their nature to accept charity – they prefer to eat only what they kill – but even wolves, if they are hungry enough, will swallow their pride. I had no idea of the events I was setting in motion.

Kip did not abandon me, even after the accident, but he was the only one. Witch: that's what everybody else called me then, and perhaps there is a kernel of truth to this name that has somehow become synonymous with my own. It is becoming more and more difficult to separate myself from the stories they tell about me, as the layers of my memory grow hazier with each passing day. Like the unused remnants of the red fabric that hasn't been touched for forty years, the colors of the past are dull, the patterns faded. The face of Lily's father, for example, is blurred around the edges, as are the two years the three of us shared when I still thought we could be a family. Sometimes, just as I reach deep inside to pull a memory to the surface, it disintegrates into nothingness at my touch. Only scattered moments remain of our time together: a glass milk jug, shattered on the kitchen floor. A deep cut across the palm of my hand, the baby screaming in the other room. I can't remember how the milk jug shattered, how I cut my hand, how I got Lily to sleep without her milk. I do remember that the wound healed badly. It was the first time my life marked me permanently, and perhaps I wouldn't recall the incident at all but for

the faint scar that still stretches across my palm. Then, of course, there are the memories that haunt me, the images that remain as clear as my own terrible reflection.

Looking back, I can still place my finger on the exact moment of my transformation – that moment when I ceased to be Dahlia Gray, mother, botanist, amateur musician – and became a sorceress, a pagan, the mistress of the wolves. I can hear their voices become hushed; I can see their heads lower in urgent conspiracy. *She doesn't pray in our church. She doesn't worship our God. The wolves that kill our sheep and our chickens lie down at her feet.* I can see them pause, their hands tracing the sign of the cross from head to chest, shoulder to shoulder. *She tames wild animals with the spells of her craft.* Their voices are a mere whisper now. The words come out slowly, victoriously. *They say it is the scar of Satan she carries on her face.*

Everybody in these parts, young and old, has some version of the story to tell, but there is not one remaining who knows it as it really happened. Kip Hunter, my friend and lover to the end, has been in the earth for almost fourteen years. My granddaughter, Anne Marie, moved with her family to the city back in 1957. She was never meant to be a child of the woods. She is grown now, with children of her own. To the best of my knowledge my great grandchildren have never heard my name. I am in my ninety seventh year. Soon I will take out that old red fabric and make the cloak that will cover me in death. First I will set the record straight.

I made the cloak and cap for the celebration of Anne Marie's thirteenth birthday. I chose the fabric with care. Red: the color of womanhood, the color of blood. I was proud of the woman she was becoming, and I wanted her to be proud, too. I have made many mistakes in my life, but Anne Marie's red cloak still haunts my dreams.

Looking back, I realize that I tried too hard to shape the girl in my own image. The admission does not come easily. Her mother, Lily, had always disappointed me. She chose marriage over college, the church choir over a professional singing career, and in the end, the city over the woods. Although my love for her did not diminish, I could not help but feel contempt for the way she chose to live her life. Lily saw the scorn in my eyes even if my words disguised it. She loved me less for it, and I cannot blame her. I did not recognize then that my only daughter, who had lived in four states by the time she was twelve, who had never known the love of a father, who had always walked at least three miles to the nearest town, only wanted a life of security. It was a modest wish, and she got what she wanted. I should have been happy for her, but I wanted something too. I wanted a daughter who understood the freedom of the wild, the cycles of the moon, the healing powers of the natural world. I wanted Lily's child to be the daughter I never had.

I always worried about Anne Marie. She was pretty enough, with dark blue eyes made even more striking by her white-blond hair. She wasn't a stupid girl, either – perhaps more calculating than I ever gave her credit for. She was a timid child, though, in many ways. Quiet and withdrawn. Afraid of the dark. Afraid of the woods. Red was not her color.

I could tell, when she opened the box, that it was not what she had hoped for. She brushed the material with her fingers as if trying to convince herself that she thought it beautiful. She did not take the cloak out of the box. Lily, however, had schooled her well, and so she politely kissed my cheek and offered a semi-sincere thank you for the gift. I was not hurt by Anne Marie's dismissal of my present; in fact, I was used to it. The books I lent went unread; the flute I had offered to teach her how to play had been

donated to the local elementary school; the telescope I had given her on her tenth birthday collected dust in the attic. I should have learned, over the years, not to give her such expensive gifts, but I continued to present her with things that I knew she would cast aside. I might have tried harder to understand her nature, to buy gifts for her instead of for myself.

I spent more time learning the habits of the wolves that roamed our woods than I did learning the character of my own granddaughter. I am not proud of this admission, but what can I do to change it now? This is what the wisdom of my years has taught me: No matter how faded the past becomes, it will never disappear completely. The stitches of my life cannot be pulled and re-sewn, anymore than the red cloak, abandoned forty years ago when Anne Marie ran forever from my house, can suddenly transform itself into the yellow flowered dress that she wanted for her birthday. I envy those who claim to live without regret, yet at the same time I cannot help but think that their minds are weak or their hearts are cold if there is truly nothing they would change about the past.

Before I continue I must make this clear: Forty years ago, wolves were still the enemy. We have always lived in fear of wolves – so much fear that through the years our traps and poisons have killed at least two million, most likely more. The wolf was a threat of mythical proportions, a reality that we seldom encountered but created vividly in our imaginations nonetheless. *Stay on the path*, her mother always said. *Wolves, my dear, are cunning creatures. They watch for little girls on their way to Grandmother's house.* Then, as Anne Marie was leaving the gated cottage with her basket of homemade sweet rolls, baked chicken, fresh goat's cheese, her mother would come running after her. *Remember to carry your Bible, dear.* As if the Bible means anything to a famished wolf.

A knife, perhaps, would have been useful. The winter is long and hard in these parts, and the wolves suffer the most in the cold months.

The truth be told, neither Lily nor Anne Marie had ever seen a wolf with her own eyes. They lost a chicken or two every winter, maybe a sheep as well, but this was to be expected. To the best of my knowledge, no child had ever been preyed upon on her way to Grandmother's house. Fear, though, is an infectious disease, and like the tuberculosis that raged through town that winter, it has a tendency to spread. Even Kip hated the wolves. He made his living as a big game hunter, and the wolves were his fiercest competition. It didn't matter what Kip was after – grizzly, moose, deer, caribou – wolves are natural predators and they would often get there first. He never could understand what drew me to the pack, and I never could explain it myself. This much I know: I did not fear them, and they did not fear me.

My granddaughter did everything she could to avoid me, even if the wolves did not. Even though Anne Marie used to come, at her mother's bidding, every Sunday afternoon, she hated those visits, and pleaded illness as often as she could to escape her chore. But she was an obedient child at heart, and so more often than not she wrapped herself warmly and walked the three miles through the woods, even on the coldest days of December. Sometimes she brought a basket of food, but usually she came only with her Bible. She started making those Sunday visits when I stopped attending church. I went to town once a week for food and supplies, but the market was closed on Sundays. Even then my age and gender exempted me from making two trips a week. Of course I was fully capable of the three mile walk, but I had no love for the preaching of sin's wages and hell's fire so I gratefully accepted the excuse they provided me. Lily, ever attentive to my

salvation, believed that my immortal soul was sure to burn if left in my own hands.

Unwilling to come herself, she sent Anne Marie every week to read to me from her Holy Book.

I looked forward to the child's visits, even if she did not. I usually convinced her that a passage or two of God's Word was more than enough for one day, and I would try to engage her interest elsewhere. *Look, I said, a combination of these herbs cures stomach aches and love sickness. Just steep the leaves in hot water and drink it down – better than any medicine you'll find at the druggist. And these plants make a cream that rubs the wrinkles right out of your skin. Here, take some home to your mother.* Anne Marie showed little interest in my knowledge. *There's no such thing as love sickness, Grandmother,* she replied, as she politely stifled a yawn. The child had a disconcerting way of turning me into the ignorant one.

On the terrible Sunday that transformed my life forever, Anne Marie was carrying a basket of food along with her Bible. I had been ill, and hadn't made it to the market that week. *Wear your red cloak, darling,* her mother had said. *It will please your grandmother to see you putting it to use.* She started late, and dusk was already descending. She could not hear the howling from town.

Perhaps, when I started feeding the wolves, I unknowingly entered into a dangerous bargain. Nobody save Kip, Anne Marie and myself ever had any reason to walk through the woods in the dead of winter. Kip was rarely without his gun, and I was blinded by my love for the animals. I had observed them at play, watched them care for their young, stood within three feet of their leader's den. I had also seen them kill. More

than anything, I had seen them kill. I should have warned her not to come that week. I had been sick. I had not upheld my end of the bargain.

I heard her high-pitched screams before I heard their low growls. I jumped from my bed and ran outside, taking a large piece of meat from the refrigerator as I went. They must have smelled the food she was carrying, as three of them had crept out of the darkening woods and surrounded her on the path. Anne Marie stood transfixed, her eyes wide with fear. I saw the contrast of the red cloak against her pale face, and it was like her blood had already been spilled. The wolves advanced, and my heart caught in my throat when I recognized Hal, approaching her from the front. In my mind I can see it all in slow motion, the events that took no more than thirty seconds in real time.

I threw the meat, and it distracted the two wolves who were approaching the girl from behind. The quickest of the two clenched the meat in his salivating jaw, and the other, howling with jealousy, chased him back into the woods. Only Hal remained between Anne Marie and myself, and I knew enough of wolves' behavior to realize that he was preparing to attack. *The food, Anne Marie. Throw him the food!* I screamed the words, but she remained frozen in the path. In the split second before he lunged, I threw my body between the wolf and the girl. I have never been afraid of any wolf, and this was no exception. I still believe that he wouldn't have attacked if he could have stopped himself, but it happened so fast that his course of action was irreversible.

I saw him lunge, felt a claw tear through my face. I felt no pain at first, only a strange darkness on one half of my face. Then I heard Anne Marie's hysterical screams. *Grandmother! Your eye, Grandmother! Oh my God oh my God your eye...* She began to sob uncontrollably, shaking with horror and fear.

I do not know how long it took me to understand what had happened. Everything was fast. Very fast. My immediate concern was the wolf, half-starved and still hungry for blood. With one hand pressed over my left eye-socket, I stretched the other hand toward the crazed animal. Hal recognized my scent, and whimpered as he lay down at my feet. I held his gaze with my good eye, and knew he would not attack again.

Kip, by chance or by grace, was on his way to see me that evening, and he came running when he heard Anne Marie's screams. He observed the scene in an instant, and calmly raised his shot gun. As a hunter, he had seen too much blood in his lifetime for a single eye to affect his nerves. *Don't shoot Kip. Please don't shoot. Just get the food. Throw him the food.* I had saved that wolf as a cub, and I would not watch him die now. He was wild, a creature of instinct, and I do not blame him for trying to survive. I don't know why Kip obeyed me. If Kip had anything he had a mind of his own, and I never had been successful at swaying his decisions or altering his opinions. This time, though, he lowered the gun. Hal ran into the woods, after the homemade sweet rolls, baked chicken, and fresh goat's cheese.

I packed snow into my gaping wound to dull the pain, while Kip tore page after page out of Anne Marie's Bible, pressing them to my face to stop the blood. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, soaked in red. Matthew, Mark, Luke, as if my life depended on those flimsy pages. At some point, Anne Marie stopped sobbing. At some point, she took off her red cloak and wrapped it around my bare shoulders. I had been in my nightdress. I had not realized that it was freezing. Then she ran, and it was the last time I ever saw her.

Lily came to see me once in the hospital. The child, she said, had been traumatized. They were thinking it would be healthier for her to live in the city. Away

from the wolves. Away from the woods. *Away from you*, she said with her eyes. Away from me.

I burnt Anne Marie's red cloak in my fireplace as soon as I was well enough to return home. I fed the fire log after log, and watched the life I had always known rise up in smoke.

Time, they say, heals all wounds. I believe that time can dull the pain, but it cannot erase the scars. Nobody whispers anymore when I show my face in town, or makes the sign of the cross when I walk by on the street. Nobody asks prying questions about the patch I wear over my eye. Nobody invites me to dinner, either, or inquires after my health. I am an eccentric old woman, the local wolf lady, no more, no less. In the bits and pieces of news that I get when I venture into town, I have heard that wildlife biologists and animal rights activists are flying in gray wolves from all over the world to repopulate the wilderness areas of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho. Some of these projects fail, some succeed. Slowly the wolves are returning home. The wolves in these woods, of course, have never left.

I keep no mirrors in my house, as I have no need to remind myself of what I can never forget. I only have to run my fingers over the jagged scar that stretches from the bottom of my chin to my missing left eye to know why Dahlia Gray, Mistress of the Wolves, has not been asked for forty years to play the piano at a local wedding, or take a group of school children on a nature walk. Sometimes, I believe that my scarred face repulsed them so much that they invented the stories as an excuse to shun my presence. Sometimes, their whispers still echo through my head. *They say she was swallowed whole. Hunter ripped open the animal's stomach and pulled her out alive. He's a simple*

man – he can't help but love the woman who opens her legs for him. Even if she does look like...like that. In the dark hours of the night, when I cannot close out the past with sleep, their voices still torment me. Now she's part wolf. I've heard it said that she runs with the pack. I will say only this: My family has abandoned me, my community has shunned me, my lover has passed to the sweet hereafter. If only the wolves will take me, where else am I to go?

Relativity

EVERY TIME I see a star fall, which isn't often anymore, I remember the night we drank cheap malt liquor and took off our clothes to swim beneath the vast Montana sky. Our heads spun, our bodies spun, the Milky Way came in and out of focus as the world spun around us. I lifted my hand, and told you that there were more stars behind my palm than grains of sand on the earth. I asked whether you believed that it was true, and you said that anything was true if you believed in it completely. The world was spinning so fast that this answer was good enough for me. A star streaked across the sky and I pointed upwards, reminding you to make a wish. It was then, staring into that overwhelming expanse of space, that I understood why they call it Big Sky Country. Nothing had ever made me feel so small, and yet that night we were the center of everything: the water, the sky, the crisp mountain air.

The next night, driving back to the ranch after my day off, I caught a deer in my headlights and could not swerve in time. I came to you and cried, remember? The road was dark and narrow. A car was approaching in the opposite lane. I have to record these

excuses, for whatever they're worth. I saw no antlers so I knew she was a doe. She was making a bold dash across the road, and I caught her hind legs with my front bumper just as she was inches away from her destination. I heard the sickening thump, saw the dark blood splatter my windshield, but did not stop to see how much damage had been done. Tears blurred my vision, but I kept driving.

The next morning, while I was folding white sheets hot out of the industrial strength dryer, Luke walked by the laundry room and casually mentioned that you had left without explanation. Without giving notice, without packing all of your things, without saying goodbye to me. I fought the wave of nausea that hit my stomach. Tears choked my throat, but I kept folding. I counted how many sheets I folded that morning because it was the only thing I could think to do. Thirty two twins, twenty eight queens, seventeen kings. Seventy seven sheets folded corner to corner, perfectly smoothed, stacked symmetrically on the shelves. When I had no more sheets to count there was nothing left to do but give in to the tears that were burning behind my eyes. I ran past the children playing water games on the front lawn, past the tennis courts, past the corral where the wranglers were saddling horses for the afternoon ride. I didn't stop until I reached the creek, and then I collapsed on the rocks and gasped for breath, washing away hot tears with cold water.

I stayed by the creek for a long time that afternoon, trying to decide if you were just another story I had wanted to believe in. I thought about the poem you taped to the wall above your bed, the one you said was about me. That poem, at least, was not a figment of my desperate imagination.

Did I ever tell you why I decided to take the job at the ranch? Of course I didn't. Most of the time I listened to you talk, as if somewhere in the tapestry of your words I would find a thread that I could weave into my own life. Now it is your turn to listen. I did not drive two thousand miles, I assure you, because I have any love for making beds and folding sheets. I come from the heart of an agricultural valley, where it is easy to believe that the world is flat. Tomato, rice, corn, wheat. The fields stretch as far as the eye can see into an endlessness that becomes unendurable. I used to have a recurring dream that I had wandered into a corn field, and I could neither see over the ripened stalks nor find my way back out. I came to Montana because I wanted to have a different dream. I wanted to wake up every morning to the sight of mountains rising outside my window, because I needed to believe that some things do have a beginning and an end. I hadn't counted on that overwhelming sky.

After you left, Luke was kind enough to give me the shirt you left in the closet, the book of poetry you left on the shelf, and a place in his bed when the walk to my own was too far, the night too cold. Luke and I used to raid the kitchen in the middle of night, stealing the gourmet food that was prepared for the guests and enough wine to make ourselves forget that the only things we had in common were boredom and lust. When he talked to me he talked about food – how to grill a steak to perfection, why red wine complements red sauce, how to turn a stuffed mushroom or a shrimp salad into a work of art. When I talked to him he didn't listen.

One week, the ranch had live lobsters shipped in from Alaska. Luke and I took them out of the walk-in freezer and watched them move in their lethargic, sedated state on the kitchen floor. I almost cried watching those beautiful, dazed animals stumble over

their own claws, so far away from salt water and rocky beaches. Luke only laughed, and said that he didn't envy the chef who had to snap their necks in the morning.

Luke forced me to see myself through his eyes: a silly girl wearing your abandoned shirt, not worth his time unless it was time spent in his bed. You're a wonderful girl, he said to me once, but you talk too much. Even then his hand was searching out bare skin. I have no right to be angry with him, because even then I stayed in his bed. At the time, I felt like I had to touch something real or be swallowed by the open space.

This is what it did to me, a place like that. The ranch was so isolated, so self-contained, it was all too easy to forget that an entire world existed beyond that thirty mile stretch of I-89. The gas station to the north, the grocery store to the south. Newspapers came a week late, if they came at all, and even then we didn't care. I was at the mercy of the Montana sky, and not even the endless fields of tomatoes and corn had made me feel so small.

Do you ever think about the night that we drank cheap malt liquor and took off our clothes to swim? We had to remind ourselves that the world still spun, because it was all too easy to believe that time had stopped in its tracks. Afterwards, dressed again but our skin still damp and our hair dripping wet, we sat back to back on the cold ground and watched for shooting stars. You told me about Einstein's theory of relativity, about how time, like space, is another dimension, about a girl in South Carolina who wrote to you almost every day. The cold reached in and wrapped itself around my spine. Do you remember when I pointed to the sky and asked if you had seen the shooting star? I lied. That star never streaked across the sky, and if it did I didn't see it either. I wanted you to

make a wish that wouldn't come true. I wanted to make you feel sad about missing something you could never have again.

I hated myself in the morning. I hated you, too, because it was easier than admitting that I cared. It was my day off, and I drove to town alone and wandered aimlessly along Main Street. Have you ever noticed how small towns are so alike? That afternoon, southern Montana reminded me so much of home that my body ached for the smell of harvested tomatoes. It started to rain, so I got in my car and tried to see how far I could drive before I lost my nerve and turned back toward I-89. I did not have the courage to go very far.

That night, driving back to the ranch on the dark and narrow road, I wanted more than anything to kill a helpless animal. I wanted to have a different excuse for the tears that blurred my vision. To be honest, I don't even know if all of those tears were for you. Maybe I was crying for myself, too, for coming two thousand miles only to discover that loneliness has everything to do with time and nothing to do with space.

The doe appeared around the next bend as if she knew I was coming. My headlights caught her by surprise, but she stood calmly on the side of the road as I drove past. Perhaps she had already dashed across the two lane freeway; perhaps she was just preparing to run. In any case, she knew that she was safe from where she stood.

I went straight to your cabin and told you I had hit a deer. I cried, and when you put your arms around me I cried harder. You told me that everything would be all right, and you read me a poem that I didn't understand about uncut grass and sleeping late. In the morning you were gone.

Do you understand why I had to change the story? I could tell myself that I cried for the broken animal, but didn't shed a tear for you. I couldn't admit to anyone, not even to myself, how the lonely hours stretched to lonely months among those spotless white sheets and those brilliant white stars. I thought that if I believed in the deer completely, then maybe I could make it true.

I need you to know this, at least: I didn't really want to kill that doe, anymore than I wanted you to leave, or anymore than I wanted you to stay.

Afterword

I have decided to include a brief statement about each story in this collection, reflecting on what my original goals were for the story, how I feel about the way it turned out, and ideas for future revisions. In some cases I have included written commentary from the thoughtful people who have taken the time to read these stories and offer their opinions.

Sarafina Learns to Fly

This story has been around since last year, and probably more people have read it than anything else I've written. My intention was to write a story about a serious topic that made it's point in a unique way. If I hadn't removed this piece from reality, it would have been yet another sad story about a young girl who starves herself to death. As it is, I think the use of satire saves it from being too depressing. I also wanted the absurdity of the story to reflect the inherent absurdity of self-starvation. Most people like this story. One criticism that I've received from a couple different readers is that it doesn't strike the right balance between the real and the fantastic. This, for example, is one of the comments I received after my prospectus defense: "...what I think is happening is that the careful balance between reality and absurdity it takes to pull off a successful, convincing, and transporting surrealistic story is a little lacking...your style seems to wave between the real and the fantastic rather than creating a combination of the two." The events do become more and more fantastic as the story progresses, but I don't agree that this is a

problem. If a billboard model is talking on the second page, then anything goes, as far as I'm concerned.

Blue Like Glass

I started this story last year as well, but it has undergone some major revisions in recent months. Right now, I'm at a point where I'm happy with the main characters – Maggie and Tad are just quirky enough to be believable. My concern for this story lies in its structure. It's divided into two parts, the first half dealing with the relationship between the roommates and the second half with Maggie's alcoholic mother. The only way these parts come together is through the letter that Tad writes to Maggie at the end, and I worry that this device ties everything up too neatly. This story hasn't been read by very many people, so I'm not sure what the general opinion is about the way it ends.

Beauty Sleeping

This story began as a free-writing exercise to experiment with second person narration, and it wasn't until later that it became a parody of "Sleeping Beauty." I liked the correlation between the princess and the waitress – two stations in life that are overly romanticized, one in the fairy tale and the other in Hollywood. With this story, I was simply trying to do something different – different narration, a different spin on an old story, different characters than those I usually write about. The use of "you" took most readers by surprise, and some people weren't sure how to interpret it. For example, this is one of the comments I got in my workshop: "I also want to know who the narrator is. This person obviously knows the main character – is it a parent? A friend? A movie

director setting up a scene for an actress?” I had more of an omniscient narrator in mind, somebody who isn’t directly connected to the character at all. I used “you” because I wanted to convey a sense of universality – nobody’s life is ever going to resemble a Hollywood-produced romantic comedy, so in some sense it’s a story that everyone can identify with. However, I think that in a revision I would attempt to structure my sentences more carefully, so I didn’t actually use the word “you” so often.

Equating

I’ve rewritten this story multiple times, and I think it’s finally close to where I want it. I am trying to convey the idea that Margaret is in a state of monumental transition. She is in a state of being “between” a lot of things, most importantly her father’s child or her own woman. With her character, I am trying to show that she is both calm and rational about the possible pregnancy, but also lost and afraid. I considered resolving the question of whether or not she’s pregnant at the end of the story, but I think I like it better unresolved. I would like to develop Ramón’s character a little more, as a sharper contrast between Margaret’s relationship with Ramón and her relationship with Seth might emphasize the transition that she’s going through.

The Gift of Sorrow

This story was inspired by Latin American folklore about the evil eye. I wanted to come up with my own explanation for this phenomenon, and I liked the idea of deep grief having a lasting effect. One reader in my workshop brought up an excellent point about

this story, and one that hadn't ever occurred to me. She writes: "Why did you decide to make the nanny from Perú? What purpose does this serve? Does it merely provide you with an exotic other so you can make her grief and her storytelling more intriguing?...I suggest this only because sometimes we rely heavily on the idea of a latent grief/exoticness in those who are not white, or mainstream, etc." I have thought about this comment quite a bit, and I'm not sure that I have an answer to it. It would be different if I told the story from Greta's point of view, or the mother's, but I tell the story from the perspective of a character whose culture I will never fully understand. It is certainly not my intention to insult anybody's cultural beliefs by exploring a phenomenon I know very little about. I think, though, that the story would lose something if I made María Isabela a white woman from North America.

Another aspect of this story I might work on is the character of Ramona.

Although she plays a very minor role, I fear that I've relied too heavily on stereotypes in developing her character. On one hand, this is a fairy tale, and fairy tales are allowed to rely on stereotypes. On the other hand, I want to give every story I write as much depth as possible.

Heroine Dreams

This is my most recent story, and as such it hasn't been through any major revisions. However, I did attempt to write it at least three times over the course of the year before I struck the narrative tone and structure that the story needed. I love this story, which makes it rather unique. Most of the time, I'm a pretty harsh judge of my own

work. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to workshop this story with a woman who has completed her MFA and is finishing a novel, and she gave me a lot of things to think about. Her primary concern is that Ellie's character needs to be developed further. What is it in her that allows her to delude herself? Has she changed at the end of the story? Is she going to stay in the same state of confusion in relationship to Zach? She writes, "One point where you can really show how desperate she is is to have her consider taking heroin herself. She seems wracked by the idea that he would chose heroin over her. Would she take it to understand him? To see what it is about heroin that is so attractive? This is only an example of how you might push the present story a bit further as a way of propelling the entire story...crises points for characters are often important because they inform us of the character and often show a sliver of the underlying themes of the entire story."

I agree that there are ways I can make this story even stronger, but right now I don't know what they are. I don't want Ellie to take heroin, but perhaps I could come up with another way to push her character and explore her need to understand Zach's addiction. Because this story is so new, though, and I still like it so much, I think I'll wait before I attempt a revision.

Anne Marie's Red Cloak

With this story, I was trying to give "Little Red Riding Hood" a new twist. The wolf and the girl always get all the attention, and I thought it would be interesting to explore the character of the grandmother. Who is this woman who lives out in the woods, other than a catalyst for the meeting between wolf and girl? I envisioned the archetypal wise woman/witch, too eccentric to find acceptance in her small, conservative mountain

town. I also wanted to explore the ways in which a story can be turned into myth. I went to the library and did some reading on wolves, but I still don't know how accurate all of my information is. If I continue to work on this story, I would like to do more research about wolves and their habits. If the grandmother knows these animals so well, I think she should talk about them more and discuss what she observes about their daily lives.

Another problem I had with this story was placing it in time. In the first draft, it retained the timeless quality of the fairy tale until the very end, when the grandmother mentions the recent movement to bring the gray wolves back to the Montana and Wyoming wilderness areas. This really threw people off, as it was the first hint of time and location. In my revision I left the location vague, but decided to establish from the beginning that it was twentieth century North America. I want this to read as a believable story, which is why I took such care to establish the relationships between the three generations of women. At the same time, though, the fact that I'm working with a fairy tale makes believability difficult to achieve.

Relativity

Many people, when they read this story for the first time, get a little lost in the time warp. In revising, I have tried to make the sequence of events as clear as possible. I understand that this is not the easiest story to follow, but I'm quite attracted to the idea of an unreliable narrator who changes the story to meet her own needs. One point that has come up many times in my workshop is the question of character motivation. Readers want to know why this narrator is so attracted to the "you" of the story in the first place, and why, when he leaves, she turns to Luke. In a journal entry I made while I was

working on this story, I wrote: "In this story, the landscape is so tied up with the narrator's own insecurities that it becomes threatening. By bringing in the narrator's background, I want to convey the idea that she brings all of her insecurities with her to the ranch, and the 'vast Montana Sky' is no different than the open fields of her home. In other words, the environment doesn't really influence her, she just uses the 'open space' as a metaphor for her central conflict, whatever that is. I think that's the part of the story that I haven't quite worked out yet." That was about five months ago, and I'm still not sure that I know what her central conflict is. I have tried to establish the fact that she's simply very afraid of being alone, but maybe this answer isn't enough.

To be honest, I've spent so much time thinking about characters and plots and metaphors and themes that I've lost all perspective on these stories. Sometimes I'm extremely pleased with this entire project. Other times I'm convinced that my time would have been better spent learning how to program computers. The important thing, I suppose, is that I've gone through the creative process, and learned something from it.

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