

THOSE WHO WILL HAVE US

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. SHORT STORIES.....	1
A Child in the Backseat.....	1
Femme Fatale.....	11
Twenty-four Minutes.....	28
Cameo Sue.....	35
Broken Buckles.....	48
Fainting.....	57
Role Playing.....	69
Laura.....	77
These Things I Must Do.....	93
These Things I Never Did When I Was Married.....	104
Fayetteville, 1968.....	110
II. THREE SECTIONS OF <u>FINGERPAINTING</u> , A NOVEL IN PROGRESS.....	122
Gardenias.....	122
Fingerpainting.....	128
Those Who Will Have Us.....	156

CHAPTER I

SHORT STORIES

A Child in the Back Seat

"God in heaven! Thirty-seven miles to the next reststop? Why we've driven at least fifty since the last one." Rhonda slid down in the car seat. The plastic seat-cover crackled under her weight. "I tell you, in Illinois there were reststops every twenty miles. Every twenty miles, I tell you."

A light rain fell on the windshield; the water drops slid into one another, trickling down the glass. Rhonda's husband Jack pulled out the wiper button. The wipers shuttered on. Slap groan, slap groan, slap, slap . . .

"And I know for fact that the reststops were every twenty miles because when I was a little girl I was my daddy's navigator. I sat right up here," Rhonda patted the spot of seat between herself and her husband. "I read all the road signs for my daddy. The reststops were every twenty miles. Read all the billboards too. That's why I'm such an avid reader to this day." Rhonda looked at the book in her lap. She fingered the outlines of the cover sketch--a woman in folds of silk, coiled in the muscular

arms of a mustached man twice her size. "A fast reader, too."

A boy sat up in the back of the car and stretched. He peered over the seat. "Mamma," he yawned.

"Not like this place, mind you. Why this state is in dire need of reststops--if for nothing else but to break up the goddamned monotony. Desert, desert, desert. Boring, boring, boring. Not even a decent bush to hide behind in case of an emergency. And what would happen if we had car trouble?" Rhonda opened her book, touching back cover to front cover, and pressed her hand along the inside edge of the newsprint paper. "We would roast to death."

"Mamma?"

The windshield wipers stuttered and whined over the glass, streaking the water drops behind them. Jack pushed in the wiper button and droplets soon covered the window. He drummed the steering wheel with his long, thin fingers.

Rhonda frowned at her husband's drumming. "I know you can't get the grease out of your cuticles, Jack, but you could at least pare it from beneath your fingernails. My father always had immaculate nails. Course, he wasn't no welder--no sir--he was a salesman."

"I provide well enough for you," Jack said. "You can stay home."

"A damn good salesman too." Rhonda said. "Took good care of his hands. Hands are important to salesmen. You shouldn't let your nails grow so long if you can't take care of them." Rhonda ran a strand of her long hair behind her ear and flipped it over her shoulder. Her hair needed a wash, all clumping and slick. "Salt Lake City--hundred twenty eight miles. Didn't say a thing about that reststop. How far have we gone since that last coffee stop?"

Jack popped out the wiper button. The wipers glided over the glass then immediately resumed their growling.

A yawn came from the backseat.

"Don't suppose we've gone too far," Rhonda said. "The scenery looks the same. Scrubby. Flat. This is probably the only rainstorm they get a year and it can't even rain-rain. Ah, the rainstorms we used to have--like being in a shower, it'd rain so hard and fast. And clouds--black and as tall as the Empire State Building."

"When did you ever see the Empire State Building?" asked Jack.

"Mamma." The boy propped his legs on either side of the floor axle hump and balanced himself on his knees. He put his hand on the car seat just behind his mother so that his hand lightly touched her shoulder. The tip of his

middle finger made a slight indentation in her naugahyde coat.

"Yes sir, I sat right next to my daddy, between him and Ma. He always said, 'What would I do without my little navigator?' I was Daddy's little navigator. I was. Not that little Gretta. No sir. She sat in the backseat. She still doesn't know her left from her right, that Gretta. And God knows she still doesn't know how to get around town, even though she's lived there all her life. Never read a book in her life, either. You tell me: What kind of banker would want that in a wife? You'd think he'd like someone well read like myself. God in heaven--haven't we gone that fifty seven miles yet?"

"Mamma, I'm hungry."

Rhonda rubbed her hands over her stomach. "Why, I feel like there's a cantaloupe in my belly, I do. And not a station--or even a tree--in sight. This is an outrage. Not at all like where I grew up."

The boy inched his hand further under Rhonda's shoulder, up close to the headrest. The indentation in her coat spread under three of his fingers.

"I wish it'd either rain or not rain," Jack said, grabbing for the wiper button. The button came off in his hand. "Goddamnit! You'd think the least Detroit could do is put one of those in-between settings in this car. 'Buy

American, buy American!' And they can't even put in the same features the Japs have." Jack twisted the button over the thin metal stem that stuck out of the dash. "Paid enough for the damn car, too. Just one of those settings between zero and one. What do they call it? One of those . . . half marks. What are they called?"

"Mamma?"

"What d'ya want? What're ya going on about?" Jack sneered, his head cocked the boy's direction. "Rhonda, I can't get this button back on." Jack dropped the wiper button into the seat space between himself and his wife. Rhonda rotated the knob over the stem, then pressed it back into place.

"Are we almost there?" the little boy asked.

"Read a comic book," Jack said.

"I run out."

"You got plenty to do. Keep yourself busy and outta my hair," Jack answered.

"But I'm hungry."

"That Gretta was no navigator," Rhonda resumed. "She'd get in the backseat and go to sleep--we'd never know she was there, she'd sleep so much. But not me. I was right up here reading all the signs. Why, I love to read. You tell me, Jack, what kind of banker's wife don't read?" She sighed as if waiting for an answer, then continued. "I

give them two years, maybe less, before they're divorced. You mark my words. Two years or less. I don't care how fancy their wedding was--never seen so much mushiness in my entire life. God, what a wedding. Sure wasn't worth this drive. Jack, you pass up a fillin' station, and I'll skin you alive; this cantaloupe's getting out of hand. I swear you're aiming for every bump in the road."

"Rhonda, there are no bumps on this highway."

"Mamma?"

"I don't even care if it's a station run by coloreds, you stop Jack, ya hear?"

"Half-way switches should be required by law," Jack said. "Compensation for those damned Nader-bumps."

"And didn't she look all dolled up and silly? Always was like that, always was wearin' dresses. So prissy, so sweet. Enough to make a normal person sick. Two years, I tell you, and it'll be over."

The boy's hand pulled a strand of his mother's hair.

"Ouch, Goddamned little varmit!" Rhonda reached behind her and grabbed the boy's hand. "Stop being a pest." She gave his hand a slap.

"But Mamma--"

Rhonda straightened herself forward, the seat plastic squeaking. "Now, if we were to've had a proper wedding, Jack, it wouldn't have been like that At All. I'd get

married in the country, in a little church. A white church with a steeple. I'd have a bridal bouquet of white roses, and pink baby's breath, and you'd be in a pastel green tux. Imagine." Rhonda yawned, but continued talking through her yawn. "With clean nails and a hair cut. My cream satin dress would sweep the floor four feet behind me. Four feet, now. We'd have a horse and buggy to drive us to a big garden reception. A black stallion with four white legs and a perfect star on his forehead." Rhonda's polyester slacks clung to her nylons, riding up into her lap, and puddling there in mischievous folds and pulling at her crotch. She tugged at her slacks, pushing the fabric over her knees, then wiggled in the seat, trying to get comfortable.

The rain fell heavily now, the wipers doing little good to keep the windshield clean.

"Those wipers sound like the flag in our front yard on a good windy day." Rhonda said. "Ours was the biggest flag in town. Gretta always got to take it down with Daddy--she in her pretty dresses. But I was his navigator. She never was." Rhonda laughed. "I suppose she and that banker will have to put up a flag pole to give her something to do."

"Mamma, can I have a piece of candy?"

"What's wrong with Gretta?" Jack said. "She don't mind working at least."

"And what for? A woman shouldn't have to work-- married to a banker who can take care of her. But no--says she'll keep her job as a retail clerk. Gets ten percent off, every time she buys clothes there. Big deal. I save more by shopping second hand. And we dress well. A wife shouldn't have to work. Ten percent discount--and she never did take me shopping. Took cousin Starla shopping. Not me. Gretta's so prissy." Rhonda wiped her sleeve over the door window. The fog streaked into swirling drops of water.

"Use a hanky, will ya?" Jack said. "I can't stand ya using your arm."

"I'm hungry, Mamma."

"The way they talked to one another." Rhonda said. "It made me want to vomit. Sweetie, dearie, honeypie--real people don't talk like that. But Gretta. People've always talked to her like that. There's something to be said about blond hair, although I always thought it made her look bloodless, washed out. No wonder she wears so much makeup. The fortune she must spend!" Rhonda played with the droplets on her window, drawing smaller ones into larger ones, fingering little heart shapes. "Oh Jack, a little town, hear, eight miles ahead. Traveler City, and not another one for twenty-five miles. You'd better stop

or I'll explode. If you go sixty, it'll only take eight minutes."

"Forty--five," Jack answered. "More'n forty-five's no good for the engine." Rhonda pressed her palms over her stomach and groaned.

They traveled the eight miles in silence. The boy was slumped against the backseat and door, slapping the ashtray in the door handle open and closed, open and closed. Rhonda counted the telephone poles they passed; and Jack fumbled with the wiper button as they passed out of the intensity of the rain storm.

"Here, Jack, here." Rhonda called, leaning towards the dash. "Tasty Freeze. They'll have a clean restroom. I tell you what though, no one keeps restrooms as clean as they did when I was a child.

"Daddy always knew the best places to stop," Rhonda added as Jack pulled into the Tasty Freeze lot. He cut off the car's engine and got out, then stretched, and scratched the back of his head. Rhonda followed the hand nailed to the white painted brick--one finger pointing to the back of the building, and RESTROOMS painted across the palm.

She was talking as she rounded the corner back towards the car. "God in heaven--but that was the worst kept bathroom I've ever been in." She carried her naugahyde

purse in the crook of her arm, and it slapped against her squeaking coat. "Now Texaco, they used to keep neat restrooms." She stopped and looked over the Tasty Freeze menu scotch-taped to the window. "Why don't we go ahead and eat, Jack? I'm hungry. I'll get a burger basket and a coke. No, I want a strawberry shake. One of those large ones."

"Why don't you get him up?" Jack said, pointing to the car.

"I don't wonder if he's coming down with something . . . so quiet and all. We'd better leave him alone--if he is sick, he won't want anything to eat."

"He was maoning at me earlier."

"Not feelin' well, I tell you. We should get the medicine stuff that'll knock him out. Stop at a drug store here in town. Lord, I do feel better, Jack."

Jack opened the door for his wife, and the brass bell hanging from the handle jangled. It jangled again and again as it bounced against Rhonda's rump.

"Pay attention, Jack! Won't ya? 'Bout knocked me flat on the floor."

Femme Fatale

Sweater tied over young woman's shoulders,
knotted sleeves dangling;
old woman's tits.

Coursing the cluster of tables where Sonya and her companion sit, the woman moves like mercury through fingers. Her heels tip-tap, her skirt flips out from her knees, and her blouse has slipped from one shoulder. A ribbon tendrils from beneath her too blond hair of too many curls. Before her, a man half-stands, waves; she claps her hands, swings his way.

Sonya's companion smiles, tips his head the woman's way.

"You find her attractive?" Sonya asks.

"Of course."

"So?"

"She's young."

"And?"

"Well, actually--though you'd never guess from looking at her--I've overheard her speaking, and she's really intelligent."

"From looking at her?"

"Well, how her whole demeanor is so--sexual. It's a shame, really."

"I see. But she's young. She'll come to know better."

Sonya's companion sips his coffee with an, Mmm, replaces the cup to its saucer. He rubs his finger around its rim.

The movement of Sonya's cup in its saucer, circling: the sound of porcelain on porcelain. "We were talking of haiku, renga," Sonya says. "Linking."

"Yes."

Her companion's cup clicks. He is staring at Sonya; he distracts her, and she thinks, "I have no sense of my sexuality." But this is a lie: Sonya ignores her sexuality. She won't own the soft roundness of her hips, the flatness of her tummy, the perky tip of her breasts, or her collar bones that roll like oars on a raft as she laughs. Or how men watch the way she moves. No. Sonya shakes her head.

She is a young woman, but she is not. Thirty-some. She'd like to stay at this age, settle in and become familiar with herself. The self she's moved through, the self she's become. When Sonya looks at her image, whether in a storefront window or dirt-flecked mirror, her eyes stay focused on themselves and she says, "This is my face." It is not beautiful. It is neither ugly nor plain: It is a woman's face, it is Sonya's face. She

cannot smile at it. She stares but does not notice a value, merely a function. It works.

Sonya has ignored her own half-smiles at her companion that say, "I want you to desire me. To yearn. To see something about me I do not believe." These things Sonya thinks she has no control of: desire, yearning, beauty perhaps. Things she has no control of don't exist. It's simple. Sonya sees little to her own existence. If her companion were to say, "I must have you, I want you," she might give him her body, but he would be left still wanting. If he were to say, "You are beautiful," she would not forgive him his lie, she would not forgive the bitter sound of his lie.

He stares. His eyes do not slip from her eyes. She challenges him, does not blink, he does not slip. Sonya's senses know this man, but her mind denies him, and she blushes.

The mercury-hipped woman was something to notice, so much to watch, her skirt swiveling about her knees as she walked, her puckering blouse. Dancing through the room, past women's angry looks--anger not from envy, but from disgust or fear or the apprehension of their own desire for her.

Sonya discovered the fluidity of her hips at thirteen while dancing to rock and roll with her friend Jeanette. Half Japanese, half Russian, Jeanette was beautiful--skin brown, blue-black hair, wide white teeth smiling through lips deep-flesh brown. The girls swung their mini-skirts round the world to Three Dog Night, Deep Purple, Edward Bear, while the housekeeper in the den watched soaps. Sonya and the working woman had a contract of mutual secrecy--soaps and rock and roll, and a given battle of decibel dials.

The woman is laughing, leaning back and stretching out her long Paris legs; she crosses her ankles.

Sonya draws her legs under her long, black skirt. Is she jealous? Well, Sonya doesn't have the runway legs, something to show with short, flipping skirts. Hers are peasant-woman legs, strong and earthy. Men have appreciated Sonya's legs. Women friends have said her legs were built to spite men. No hosiery, no heels hide their strength. Yes, Sonya is aware of her sensuality, her sexuality. What has age to do with it? It is there before a woman learns to recognize it in herself.

Sonya looks at her companion, past his patience of desire, and into his fear. She goes there secretly as he watches the mercury woman: Sonya thinks she knows this man's fear. A woman can give any man her dirt, but only

she will bring forth a crop. If he were to know that his fear was a woman's--a woman taught it to him--she could swallow him liquid and sweet from a spoon. And his taste need not give her satisfaction.

This companion is not a man Sonya will sleep with. She is not sleeping with any man. Perhaps she would sleep with the woman. Sonya smells the woman's perfume as she passes again. She has noticed this woman's fragrance before: Roses, always roses. Soap. Scent. Shampoo. Skin cream.

Soft; soft roses.

Sonya bathes every two days. By the second day, she smells herself through her clothes. Acrid, dusky. This does not displease her, and her companion has never made mention. Is he too polite, or is he pleased? When Sonya is in her second day of scent, her gestures and strides are still bold and well aimed. In a crowd, Sonya does not change course; others move from her. This, she enjoys. Sonya smiles as she walks forward.

She has a natural posture. She was an athletic girl.

She and her friend Jeanette rode horses along country roads to Sonya's boyfriend Tom's house. There, they let their animals graze and drank the iced teas Tom's mother prepared. Sixteen year olds, they used the bathroom

together, giggled in the mirror about Tom. Cute Tom. Sonya was lucky to be dating him. They rode along the country roads, their knees pumping, fannies airborne over the trotting horses' clopping gaits, hands stroking thick manes. Smiles and smiles, laughter and jokes. Hair in the mouth: then flicked over their shoulders.

On the girls' last summer venture, a car drove by, turned around in a gravel road ahead, drove by again. Again and again. Jeanette leaned over, looking through the windshield its last trip past, and screamed. She reined her horse into the ditch, jumped the reedy culvert, and galloped over the silver wheat stubble towards a green farm house. Sonya's horse caught up.

"What Jeanette? What is it?"

"The man"--breath--"he had"--breath--"no pants."
Breath and breath and breath. "The man was beating off."

"Do men have an awareness of sexuality?" Sonya wonders, peeking past her companion's conversation, past the boundary of their whispers. "Do men own their sexuality?"

She thinks of the men she watches in this cafe. She thinks of the way in which they walk. There exists a vacuum in the way they walk that women fill.

"The scented woman," Sonya decides, "she imagines too great a vacuum." Or, perhaps her hips roll in defiance of vulnerability, overdoing a boldness to distract a pain. Why else such an act? "Pain, I know," Sonya thinks.

She was sodomized at seven. Playing in the woods near her house, by the creek, under lilac bushes. Blooming. Hunting in the creek for tadpoles, talking to herself, calling for her pets to come closer. Rustling lilacs; young Sonya glanced up in smile.

He had a stain along his yellow zipper. And a bulge. He took the tadpoles swimming in her jar and pinched each lifeless--oyster smear between the whorls of his fingertips --then grabbed the wrist of the girl clawing up the creek bank, her nails filling with dirt.

Jeanette found Sonya massaging her tears into the red welts on her wrists. She helped Sonya up the scarred bank, took her home, wash-clothed her dress her skin her fear. Jeanette said, "I know a secret to take to my grave, and I will share mine with you. Secrets help their keepers." She opened the door to the bathroom they were hidden in, looked up and down the hall. "My father . . . my uncle . . ." Jeanette began.

Sonya's companion says, "Actually, watching her, I don't think she's particularly attractive."

And Sonya replies, "I think she is beautiful."

"Beautiful?" her companion questions, tipping his head, arching his eyebrows, "There are women in here more beautiful."

Sonya knows what he means, but does not play. She says, "No. There are no women more beautiful."

Sonya thinks, "What does he know of the sadness in beauty? A sadness in beauty being pinched lifeless by sexuality?" She watches the woman settle again at a table, across from the smiling young man. The woman bites her lips, places her open hand at her throat. The man tenses a moment as if to reach for a touch of her, but he pauses. The woman leans away from him, laughs. How she taunts him. How she kills him. How she kills them all--even the women who feel the death of her, even the women who refuse to look at her.

Yes.

A few houses down from Sonya's childhood home lived a beautiful woman, laughing, smiling, taunting. Sonya remembered nights of holiday parties when her parents argued, her mother complaining how she hated the flirt, how she hated all of the men responding to her, googling over her, how she hated the passivity of the woman's husband.

When the woman killed herself, slicing a line under her chin ear to ear, silence pumped itself thick over the

neighborhood, sticking to the smiles that did not wrinkle their tight cheeks, and pressing eyes shut.

The night Sonya learned of the death, the leaves in the trees shivered outside her bedroom window. Birch. Spotted white barked birch. Moved by the echo of an absence.

And now, Sonya cannot recall the cursive lines of her face. Her beautiful, beautiful face.

"Is there love in beauty?" Sonya asks. Her companion's smile wanes. He does not understand.

Renga. Haiku. Sonya's companion's dissertation: Should they return to their talk of it? She stretches, shoves her coffee cup away from herself. The oily liquid has gone cold, the drips on the cup's lip have dried. They are sticky. One has the imprint of Sonya's fingertip; the grooves of her finger are sticky with the brown residue. Yin. Yang. She puts her finger to her moistened lips: Bitter.

Her companion smiles. He has built a bridge to a bank that will not support it. Does he know that? Does he persist because he believes otherwise? They will never be intimate. Sonya knows better. She does know better.

"Did you read poetry when you were a boy?" she asks.

"Not much," he answers. "The usual stuff."

The usual stuff. Sonya wonders.

The children's book that her parents read most often was The Little Engine That Could: "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can" Sonya, however, had her own favorite: Are You My Mother? A blue bird dropped from its nest, searching and searching for a place to return home.

Neither were poetry, but much the usual stuff.

Sonya's nervous breakdown at sixteen, following the death of Jeanette, began with her laughter. She stretched her legs up the wall by her bed and chanted: "Are you my mother? Are you my mother?" A blue chick's search--she always appreciated the question over the answer.

Her breakdown was not poetry. Neither were her dreams. A family. Sonya dreamed of a family. She thought that she did not belong to the family who raised her, and her later woman-searching certainly took her from them.

Sonya's only sibling was an older sister who came into her womanhood alone in the bathroom; ten-year-old Sonya was too young to know her sister's modesty. She only recognized her own changed world: No more shared baths, no more dressing together over the heating vent in the den, no more past-bedtime secret knocks on bedroom walls.

Her sense of rejection went unnoticed--who would have thought?--her questions (Why? What have I done?) died by

silence. When the answer came for Sonya one private morning--one morning on a white porcelain toilet--she had no reason to remember her past sense of rejection. She had accepted its cold comfort.

Her later loss of Jeanette, her breakdown, made it complete: She had no sister, had nothing left of sisterhood.

Sonya looks at her companion. He waits in gentle smile. Patience, persistence are his. Sonya shakes a sad head at him. He seems to think this a kind gesture; his eyebrows move up, stretching the boundaries of his pleasant face. A kind face, morning-black eyes wide set, long thin mouth holding always on the soft-edge of a smile. He would like to be her lover, she knows--he doesn't care if she has others. (He has made assumptions.) But Sonya stays away from intimacy. She is in a cynical stage. Perhaps she is a cynic. But this she gives no credence to: either her cynicism is a stage of growth, or it is her resignation. Waking daily, she then eats, walks, talks; she urinates, defecates, and sleeps; she thinks, "No, I have not resigned."

Still, Sonya has hurt many friends. She has laughed at one's smile. Walked from another. Two friends gave hugs she stiffened against. A woman-friend squeezed

Sonya's cold, still hand from across the table where they sat, then pulled away; a male-friend bought her a beer, but Sonya bought the one that made herself drunk.

After drinking, Sonya has played solitaire at her kitchen table--white, white light of the kitchen. Her card deck was red with cardboard-gray edges. They did not snap shuffled, they sighed. Sonya's airline cards wore out months ago. She has missed them, the silver tube with no suspension in a blue-depth-blue. She was always on the plane. It flew anywhere she imagined. She remained buckled in for its entire flight.

But Sonya remains broke. She has told her companion she has wanted to live in Japan, Africa--Iceland? He smiled, saw her transparency; he saw: "I want to run. I want to hide."

He stands up. "Can I get you anything?" he asks. She glances into her cold coffee. She imagines his reflection in the black oil: Sludge. Her companion is black stains and cold sludge.

"No," she answers. "Coffee gives me headaches. It makes my hands shake."

He winks at her, takes her cup with him. "What does he care?" she thinks. "He can see nothing of me. What he thinks he sees is what he wants from me. If he saw how I know him--" No. He would still hold her if she relaxed

her shoulders, moved into his warm arms. She would not need to say, "A hug?"

But Sonya is a mole. She takes comfort in cool, dark dampness. Earth.

When she was very young, neighborhood children visited, wanting her to play. She hated the doorbell, told the housekeeper to say she wasn't home. She built card houses on an oriental carpet, drove matchbox cars--those with doors and trunks opening and closing with tight little snaps--around and around the fragile homes.

Sonya's companion now walks towards their table. He is a thinnish man, wears his Levis with room. She likes thin men in roomy Levis, long thin legs, sharp waists. But she and her companion will never be intimate. "Perhaps," she thinks, "we'll know each other for years and years." Of course she does not keep in touch with friends. Jeanette died before there were stolen cigarettes, strange beds and alcohol, before there were secrets exposed. Sonya has no practice keeping in touch. Adult friends who try grow old of their burden. They lose her addresses.

She moves a lot.

This companion holds their cups and saucers steadily, his elbows right angles. A neat man, thorough. She

imagines him to be a fine lover, considerate and mature. He might even be capable of loving her. This is not her interest. Wanting she can accommodate; loving is a warm touch come after the skin has turned blue and cold, after the collapse of one's capacity to believe. Sonya's imagines her capacity for love as a bud caught in a frost. Beautiful, pink flesh, crystallized edges folded over a hard center. She thinks if she opens her left hand she can hold love just so.

If she were to open her right hand, she would hold the image of Jeanette--too white and stiff and still to be believed. Who could have known anyone so dead?

What was it?--Jeanette fell down the stairs and broke her neck? The friend strong enough to reach down an embankment and pull up a ruined girl did not survive the stairs? One flight? Sonya thinks, "There is no love."

Yet she has had lovers. She has been faithful; and she has not. She has never let a lover stay a full night. Nights are for commitments to love. Sonya commits her love to no one; she is poor, and glad that she is poor.

Those who have money don't treat commitments like the poor, she thinks. The price of a commitment is too high for the poor: sharing cups of coffee, pitchers of beer, the two-fifty Monday night movies in the sticky-floor theatres, and occasional trips out of town to hike the

countryside, the wilderness. Or, to the coast; to the dunes that go on. Go on to the soft-hip slopes, to the grass, wind-curved into shafts resembling golden delta hair. Unfold a blanket.

Sonya's beach blanket is quilted. She buries her nose in it periodically. Catnip from an abandon farm's herb garden, penniroyal growing along the river beaches, salt of the coast, salt of the forest bed, salt of two women loving, of a man and a woman, of two men and a woman . . . Sonya's pleased that she's poor.

Her companion paid for the coffee he brought. He stirs his own. He likes cream. Sonya puts cream in her coffee only when she has a clear glass. She doesn't like the taste of cream in her coffee, but she does likes the swirl. Cocoa, caramel, old book binding's beige: She will let the liquid cool, leave the cup full, set aside the wasteful entertainment. This mug is not clear, yet Sonya will leave it full--she told her companion she would drink no more. Why does he not listen?

Sonya says to her companion: "I should be outside in the sunshine. White skin isn't at all fashionable." Will he catch her sarcasm? She is thinking of the woman, how her finished tan brings such a sheen to her blond curls. No bra strap, no hose.

"Are you so interested in making a fashion statement?" he answers with a half-smile.

He is not funny, but Sonya laughs. "I know this man," she thinks. "I know exactly all that he knows of me, and it is not enough. It is never enough." Truth is enough: yet even Sonya cannot own that. She has known too many lies to remember what knowing the truth is like.

Sonya and her companion will not be lovers.

She crumples up a napkin, drops it into her lightly steaming coffee. The paper soaks itself up a mute brown, but does not sink. An edge is pasted to the cup rim. She stands.

"I will walk with you," he says. She nods. Today she waits, lets him finish his cup of coffee; but he does not trust her stillness, and gulps two hard strokes, grimaces.

Sonya thinks, "When I gulp coffee, I get heartburn. I'm worth heartburn."

They cross the room; they pass the rose-woman's table. She is laughing deeply, penetrating into the man's instincts, past his consciousness and obedient subconscious. His fingers knead a twist of tablecloth like a kitten nursing on its mother's tit. If this man were to begin mewling, or purring, maybe even howling, would anyone

brave noticing? The woman: Would she clap her hands in
delight like a child? or draw him in, mother-gesture?

Sonya and her companion say nothing to each other as
they pass outside.

She resists the urge to touch his hand.

Twenty-Four Minutes

The rim of Carol's watch caught a flash of light as she checked her time. Twenty minutes on a twenty-four minute meter. She knocked on the frame of the open door.

Inside the room, her father stood by an opened window. The leather soles of his shoes squeaked and squeaked as he rocked back on his heels; and his shadow swelled behind him, billowing and black.

Carol held herself still, afraid that her father would hear her heavy breathing--she had climbed eight flights to her father's room. She told herself, "There is still time to leave." To return tomorrow, during her sister's visit.

She knocked again.

"I heard you the first time. The door's open for you."

"I'm sorry I'm late," Carol replied. "Traffic."

"Come in."

She stepped into the room, holding her purse in front of her like a shield; she could not relax her arm. The air was too stiff for her to relax. Even with the cross draft between the open window and door, the room smelled of alcohol and cigarettes--and a floral-scented air freshener. Carol couldn't remember her father having smoked in five years, and thinks it is unlike him that he should spray the air.

"What has he done with the things Mother said she sent over?" she thought. The clothes from his wardrobe, the family antiques, plaques and trophies, books, and the collection of beer steins from his trips to Germany? The suite's front room is furnished with a hotel couch and coffee table, a tv, desk and chair, and a buffet. The buffet was used as a bar; two dirty glasses were set among the liquor. One of the glasses had a lipstick stain. Carol looked away.

The door next to the desk was open a crack; the room behind it dark and draftless. Carol listened for sounds from the room, but it was silent. A humming silence. "What has he done with the things Mother said she sent over?"

Her father said, "Have a seat." He motioned to the couch. Its cushions sank too deeply beneath Carol where she sat--the front edge rubbing the back of her knees; but she could see her father better. He was facing the window, his hands behind his back, watching the street the eight floors below. There was something different about him, she noticed: he had a new hair cut. He no longer combed the long temple hairs over his balding crown. "It looks better this way, as if he is less than middle-aged." Carol thought. "He is more handsome," she decided. Not so end-of-a-long-day looking. As crumpled, worn clothes get.

"If you want a drink--" he said, then corrected his offer. "No. I shouldn't offer you a drink. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"I know, Carol. I know." He paused, cleared his throat. "Your mother said your grades are in."

"I brought the card with me."

"Set it on the desk."

Her father's briefcase sat open on the desk, a letter from her mother nestled among the notes written to himself. It was wrinkled and pressed flat like used aluminum foil. Carol touched its curling corner. The letters she has received at school from her mother were written on the same violet cotton rag. But her letters were scented: this one was not.

Next to the briefcase was a blotter Carol had made for her father in eighth grade, three years ago. In calligraphy across the top of the pad, she had quoted Kahlil Gibran:

If your heart is a volcano how shall you
expect flowers to bloom in your hand?

Carol ran her hand along the edge of the blotter worn from her father's cuffs. She had made the pad to fit his roll-top desk. When she was home, the desk had been moved

to the den--her mother's things stuffed into its multiple slots. The blue felt of the blotter was now faded to grey.

The silver filigree frame Carol gave her father last Christmas--gave it to him with a photo of herself, her mother and sister--sat on the desk. Empty.

Carol licked the taste of salt from the corner of her mouth. Tears. She swallowed, tries not to sniff. He'd hear a sniff. She felt her father looking at her, glanced up, and he turned away.

Something was wrong with his cheek--Carol thought she caught it in her glimpse of him. Two long red streaks down the side of his face, forming a V. "Victory?" she thinks. "Vagabond? Victim?"

"Who is this man, my father?" Carol asked herself.

He rubbed his glasses lens with his handkerchief.

"Straight A's?" he asked.

"One B," Carol said.

"In?"

"Art." Carol knew that he was frowning. She doesn't get B's in Art. She said she still wanted to study art history in college. He talked to her of gallery work, traveling. She said, "Fine. Yes, fine."

"You park at a meter?" he asked.

"I could only find one for twenty-four minutes." It had been fifteen minutes. She hoped that she remembered to

lock the car; she has never locked it at school. The town there was so small, so safe.

"You alone?"

"I dropped Sue Ian off a Bullock's; we're meeting there at one thirty."

"Eaten lunch?"

"We've got plans."

Carol returned to the couch, placing her purse in front of her, on the coffee table.

Her father replaced his glasses, said, "You didn't bring Sue home for a long time--how is she?"

"Better. Her mother's remarried, expecting a baby in August."

"What was it that killed Sue's father? Cancer was it?"

"Drinking," Carol said. Sue Ian's drunk father ran through a sliding glass door; he bled to death at the edge of the pool.

Carol has told her friend about her parent's arguing, of her father's traveling, her mother's affairs with men driving pickups, old cars, re-painted vans, of her sister's trip to a drug rehabilitation center last summer.

Carol's father held no drink in his hand while Carol visited--did that mean anything? No: the soiled glasses. Nothing changed. Everything changed.

Three minutes. Carol stood up, scooting the couch back. It bumped into the wall, tilting the framed print behind it.

"Time for you to go?" Carol's father asked. "Say hello to Sue for me. And straight A's next semester, young lady. If you expect me to send you to a good school, you'll have to earn the privilege."

Carol thought, "I know." She felt herself withdrawing, like the antennae of a snail. Still, there had been no excuse for her B. Daydreaming--daydreaming was worthless.

And her nightmares! Carol has dreamed of aliens in her world, making small, nearly imperceptible changes. If the aliens had come into this room, they would have changed the filigree frame from silver to gold. Hardly noticeable, but still startling; bringing her to question the accuracy of the perceptions she has of her world. Perhaps, she'd wonder, that frame has always been gold?

"Good-bye--Daddy." She picked her purse up from the coffee table. The varnish beneath where it lay had been lifted in two overlapping white rings.

"I bought a condominium along the river," her father said. "I'll let you know the address when I'm settled, and notify the school of the change. Your reports will be sent directly to me."

"Thank you."

"Will you be coming with your sister tomorrow?"

"Mom's bringing her straight from the airport. She did well in college this semester, she expects A's. And she's bringing home a guy she met."

Carol's father nodded; his flinching shadow caught Carol's eye--a raven's wing in flight, a snapping black cape, the life of a shadow. She started when he said, "Visit again before you leave. Bring Sue if you like. I'll take you both to lunch. On your next break I'll be in London. I'm sorry."

"That's okay." Carol did not have plans to return home during her next break. Maybe she and Sue would be taking a trip somewhere. It was time to take a trip. She checked her watch: Twenty-four minutes. She snapped the clasp on her purse, and asked: "Close the door?"

"I'll take you and your sister to dinner when I'm back in town. I have someone for you to meet."

Carol nodded, although her father was not looking at her.

She pulled the door shut behind her, thinking, "Nothing on earth could feel as light." Nor as heavy: she was out of breath. She waited in the empty hall outside the door a moment, listening to the draperies drawing shut from within the room, then began to run.

Cameo Sue

"Auntie Sue," Suzanna's father said, holding his scotch and water not-so-still in the plastic plane cup, "taught me how to really drink.

"She could still drink me under the table any day," he added with a nod.

Suzanna and her parents were flying from Seattle to El Paso for Auntie Sue's eighty-fourth birthday, and Suzanna's father was killing time by telling her all the old stories of drinking with Auntie Sue and his brother Leo in Mexico. Of slapping and pinching Mexican rumps for a few guffaws.

"Miss Sue Peak was a great gal," he said with a toast of his scotch and soda.

"She's an old drunk," Suzanna's mother said without turning from the small plane window and her view of the overcast sky. "A thing to be pitied, not admired, fawned over. Certainly not someone to mimic."

Her words, Suzanna knew, were aimed at her father, his third drink in hand. Suzanna had no plans to mimic her aunt's drinking; she thought of other things about Auntie Sue besides her drinking. To dwell on her drinking was as useful as dwelling of the old woman's dress size, or of the endless number of silvery wigs she owned to cover her balding head. Instead, Suzanna thought of the life her

aunt had led. Of the sadnesses her drinking denied.
Numbed.

Auntie Sue had once been engaged to a handsome and wealthy man. Daring and darling. It seemed the whole family knew the story; but no one talked to Auntie Sue of him. Suzanna didn't know what was fact, what was fiction of the woman's past; and she brought up the subject to her mother each year the old woman spent holidays in Seattle.

"It was Christmas Eve," Suzanna's mother once explained, "when he was traveling to see her--Christmas Eve has always been more important to your father's family than to ours. He died in an auto wreck. Don't ask me for the details. I don't know them."

"How long ago?" Suzanna asked.

"In the twenties sometime. I don't know."

"What kind of car was he driving?"

Her mother frowned. "What did I just get through telling you?"

"I'll go ask her then," Suzanna said.

"No you won't. Not in my house."

"I don't know what the big deal is."

"We must treat another's loss with respect, Suzanna. We don't need to bother her with our curiosity. Look what it's done to her, how it's affected her."

* * *

Mac's brother Leo was at the airport to pick them up. He walked straight up to Suzanna. "You made it after all Suzanna--good."

"I only took time off from work," Suzanna told her uncle, "Dad bought me the ticket." Mac smiled.

"We haven't told Auntie Sue y'all are coming," Leo explained as he led them down the terminal. "Haven't said a word about a party even. Just invited her over to dinner. The usual. She'll be so surprised."

"Isn't she too old for surprises?" Suzanna's mother said--more like a suggestion than a question.

"She's not as old as she ought to be," said Leo. He took care of the old woman. Saw to her affairs. Went to jail once, for beating up a man selling her thousands of dollars of cancer insurance policies. "Damn Yankee," he had told the family. Not that he had to defend himself to them. Not even to Suzanna.

"She's permanently pickled," Suzanna's mother whispered to Suzanna as the group stood outside the baggage carousels. "Doesn't age."

Suzanna complemented her uncle on his snake-skin boots. He rocked back on his heels. "Traded a few of my own spots for these boys'," he grinned.

* * *

"Oh! Land sakes!" Auntie Sue screamed in her high heron's voice as she walked into the den. "Land sakes!" The families stood, lined up for hugs and kisses. Auntie Sue was wet-cheeked by the time she reached Suzanna. "Oh my word, y'all even brought my little Suzanna!" She gave her niece a hug, left her smelling of camomile lotion and lipstick. "Did y'all have a nice flight, darlin'?" she asked Suzanna. "That Mac, he loves to fly!" she said winking, tipping her thumb to her lips. "The benefits of altitude."

Suzanna's mother nodded. Her mouth was a trim, straight line.

Leo and Mac soon had the bar-b-que hissing and spitting out on the patio. Leo's young girls were in the pool, hadn't come in for the receiving line. When Auntie Sue came out on the patio, they swam to the pool's edge, asked her what she brought for them. Suzanna smiled at the question. An automatic one, and of ageless response: the old woman let her pocket book slip down her forearm and into her hand. She opened it up and pulled out three floral silk scarves.

"Take a chair, Auntie Sue," Leo called, pointing out the sturdiest with his spatula. She nodded her head and sat in a springy green lawn chair.

"Don't know if you can trust that one," Leo said.

Auntie Sue waved a hand at him. Her charm bracelet jingled. Suzanna remembered the hours she'd spent as a child going over and over the stories of her aunt's charms. A heart with a ruby had come with the bracelet Valentine had given her--for that Christmas Eve. Suzanna never played with it, never mentioned it; a mystery. How had she known to keep it so? How soon had she learned never to pry into the woman's past?

"Mac!" Auntie Sue called out, setting her pocket book at her feet. "Fix me a drink, darlin'." She patted Suzanna's knee. "Best part of having a birthday in the spring is gettin' to spend it out-of-doors. Course, for y'all living up North, a summer birthday's just fine."

"You'll have to come visit this year Auntie Sue," Suzanna suggested. "How 'bout Christmas?"

"Traveling's awfully hard on her anymore," Suzanna's mother said. She set a tray of condiments on the picnic table, glanced past Auntie Sue to Mac. "But she is welcome to come, isn't she Mac?"

"Sure," Mac answered. "Gotta get me some boots while we're here," he said to his brother.

"We are planning on staying in Seattle this year," Suzanna's mother added with a look to her daughter. "No travel plans."

Suzanna smiled at her aunt.

"Where's that drink, Mac?" the old woman called.

Mac handed her a gin and tonic rattling with ice cubes. The glass was tall and frosted.

Auntie Sue took a sip. "What is this ba-looey?" she yelled, shoving the drink back at Mac. "I'm old; yes sir. I do know that I am old. But I am not dead, Macon Jeffries. You take this drink back and put something in it!"

Mac held the glass and looked at Leo. Leo bit his lip and shrugged his shoulders. "We tried," Leo said with a wink.

"Tried?" Auntie Sue said. "Tried? And I'm not deaf either. When I've had enough drink I'll decide. I thank the both of you not to conspire over my decisions."

Suzanna's mother took the glass from her husband's hand and slipped back through the sliding glass door. "Fix me and Leo something too, hon," Mac called.

"You've had enough, Mac."

Mac grinned at his brother then trotted into the house. "A man's gotta drink," he yelled over his shoulder, "what a man can drink. Guardian angel or no."

"To hell with heaven!" Leo shouted.

"Can't trust the pack of them," Auntie Sue whispered to Suzanna. "Conspiring scoundrals."

Suzanna looked at the old aunt lightly springing the old green chair. She was heavy--high-breasted. The rest of her weight fell away down to her narrow, pointed feet--but she wasn't strikingly heavy. She still had a beauty that hinted backwards, saying, "Yes, I was a beautiful woman in my youth, and I have aged well." Eighty-four. It was hard to tell.

Suzanna's mother returned with Auntie Sue's fresh drink, handed it to the woman. She was another kind of beauty, a tired beauty. One that spoke of holding back, straining on an edge, waiting for time to drop into folds of soft skin. Her mouth was pinched into its familiar tight line. A network of scaffolding wrinkles held it firm.

Suzanna touched her hand to her own cheek. She was often told how fortunate it was that she look so much like her mother. What would Auntie Sue and Valentine's children have looked like? she wondered.

At one time, Leo had told Suzanna that Auntie Sue had had a red petticoat--in the twenties, when such things weren't mentioned in polite company. Suzanna then wanted to buy the old woman a red slip during the old woman's last Christmas in Seattle; but her mother insisted on flannel sheets. She was, after all, getting old, Suzanna's mother

explained. "Old people are always cold. Red slips, anyway. Where'd you get such an idea?"

Suzanna wondered if the petticoat came before or after Valentine; perhaps it came during the forty-five years she worked as the secretary to an oil millionaire. She was rumored in the family to have been his mistress. Her retirement pension from the job had kept her in comforts many years: an apartment with a large veranda, a view, elegant woodwork, arched doorways, and a Mexican housekeeper.

Suzanna loved visiting Auntie Sue's apartment. Behind her tv console she had taped up pictures of all her nieces and nephews, their children and grandchildren--stripes of each family member from birth to present, invitations to graduations and weddings, a few clips of hair from the two babies that were lost, and child-made cards. Besides the pictures of herself, Suzanna loved those of a family she did not know. She imagined they were related to Valentine.

* * *

The spring peepers started up from behind Leo's back wall, where a canal ran, and his sprinklers cut on. The meal was finished. Everyone had moved back to the chairs from the picnic table.

Suzanna's mother slapped her arm. "The mosquitoes are starting to eat me alive," she said. "I'm going inside."

Everyone returned to the house but Suzanna and her aunt. They sat on, Suzanna listening to the summer sounds of the sprinklers and peepers, and the ice tinkling and charms jingling as her aunt lifted her drink to her lips.

"How things going for you, Suzanna?" the old woman asked.

"Like . . . "

"Well, now, got any young man's heart on a string? Beauty like you?" She smoothed her fingers along Suzanna's cheek. They were soft, cool, and damp from holding the drink. "You've got your mother's delicate skin. Take care of it. Hmmm? Any young men?"

Suzanna blushed. "Oh, not now. I'm busy. Work, you know." She waved a mosquito from her arm.

The old woman sipped from her drink. "They don't like the taste of your blood either?" she asked Suzanna.

Suzanna stood up and helped her aunt to her feet. "No. Especially when they have a choice, I guess."

"Not even when they have a choice," the old woman said.

"Worse I've gotten into them," Suzanna told her aunt, "was staying at the cabin in Montana. Fishing for trout. I felt like I had the chicken pox all over again." Suzanna laughed. "But I thought the trout would be worth it. I had just hooked a big one, was reeling it in nice and slow,

not letting the tension get too great, when Dad saw the bend in the pole and got nervous. 'Hand it to me, Hand it to me,' he yelled. He lost it, of course! Pole and all!"

They laughed, then started for the door.

Auntie Sue leaned on Suzanna's arm. She was light, but her grip was strong, as she tugged at Suzanna to stop in front of the yellow-lit patio door. The laughter of adults rolled out the open glass door with the thin billowing curtain. "Suzanna," the old woman whispered. "Suzanna. I have never needed them, you know."

* * *

Nearly two years after the birthday visit the old woman died. Suzanna's mother telephoned her to tell her of the old woman's death. "Leo called," she said. "Your Auntie Sue passed away this morning."

"How'd it happen? Had she been sick?"

"Liver complications, I'm sure," her mother said under her breath.

"She was eighty-six, Mom. I was just wondering if she died in her sleep, or if--you know."

Her mother sighed. "I didn't ask."

"You didn't ask?"

"She wasn't the most pleasant person to be around. Anyway, your father will want to go to the funeral; I'll get him to fly you down too,"

"Thank you."

After their conversation, Suzanna thought about the pleasantness of her aunt. Maybe her drinking hadn't been all pleasant, but at least it had been honest. Her mother resented the old woman, because she resented her own husband's drinking. That was it. But hadn't there been times when Suzanna had smelled alcohol on her mother's breath? Behind heavy fumes of peppermint, some scotch? Who had the problem?

She decided to call her Uncle Leo.

* * *

"My girls and I were there when she died, you know," Suzanna's uncle explained. "She was in bed, sleeping. And just before she died--her eyes were closed--she played with something in her hand. Small and hinged--but it was only in her imagination. Her hand was really empty. She opened up whatever it was, and patted her face. The girls said, 'Oh, a compact--she's powdering her face.' Sure enough. She held it at arm's length and then applied lipstick. Just as if she were getting ready for church or something."

"She was unconscious the whole time?"

"Didn't say a word. We didn't try to talk to her. Just let her be. And you see, after she got her make-up on she sighed and just stopped breathing." Leo himself sighed. "Then, you see--" he paused to sniffle, blow his nose, "--my youngest said that she had been making herself all pretty for Valentine. I do believe she was right."

* * *

The phone rang immediately after Suzanna closed her conversation with Leo.

"I've been trying to call," her mother said. "Your line was busy."

"I called Leo."

"Oh."

"She died in her sleep."

"I see. Well, your father's agreed. I've reserved your plane tickets."

"Mom? You remember when we were at Leo's for her birthday?"

"Umm."

"She told me she never needed them."

"Leo and the girls?"

"Men."

"What's that supposed to mean? She doesn't need men. So what? Why are you telling me this? Suzanna?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just thinking about what loving Auntie Sue means."

"Oh? This is an odd conversation, Suzanna. Knowing what loving means. I don't think I follow. I called to tell you about plane reservations."

"I wouldn't think you'd follow. No. She wasn't just an old drunk, you know."

"Tell me, Suzanna. I was wrong. Was I wrong, Suzanna? Was I wrong? Tell me. I don't understand what love is, do I? Hmm?"

"Yes," Suzanna replied. "You were wrong." She held the phone, the smooth plastic--real under her fingers. She thought of her aunt holding her imaginary compact, applying makeup to her soft, fleshy skin--the smell of camomile and lipstick, gin and lime. She waited for her mother's response, and she knew exactly what to expect.

Broken Buckles

The weather was turning from cardigans buttoned over cotton blouses to blouses with their sleeves rolled up. Mom wouldn't let me out of the house without shoes yet--or socks. My winter play shoes were worn through and the soles of my new sandals were still smooth. And even though school wasn't quite over, there weren't many days left. Boarding that bus was getting harder and harder to do each morning.

But this day was Saturday. Me and Kelly, my friend, were playing out-of-doors games on her front lawn. Her sister kept their yard neater than my three brothers kept ours. Neither of us had fathers at the time. Vietnam had taken them from us for a year. Nothing special about that--lots of families on the base were in the same situation, or had been, or were gonna be. That year's tour of duty was for every military kid's daddy. And for others.

I had gone through five teachers in third grade so far--two got transferred, one's husband was killed, and the third never came back to class after she was told that her husband was MIA. Not that we learned the details. No one wanted to go over details like that. But it looked like we'd be hanging on to the last teacher 'till the summer vacation.

Me and Kelly played blind man's bluff and hide-n-go-seek, Mother may I?, and other games we knew. We drew hopscotch on the sidewalk with Kelly's special colored chalk that her dad bought for her before he left. She was almost out. We jumped and leapt until we'd challenged ourselves right out of the fun of the game.

We used up most of the morning like that. Then Kelly's mom called us in for Lipton's Chicken Noodle Soup-- a favorite me and Kelly shared. We shared many good tastes. Like clothes. Both of us, not in the same home-room but the same grade, were the smallest girls in our classes. We liked lots of dresses, and being friends we had twice as many to wear.

We went inside Kelly's house. And there was the one thing I did not like about Kelly: her house. Ever since her daddy left, her mother stayed inside with the draperies pulled. It was dark and smelled like a girl scout camp tent. Her mother heated up the soup in her bathrobe, slippers and hair curlers. She stayed in bed until noon.

Kelly was an "oops" baby, and she had older sisters. One even lived on her own and went out with GI's. (I could not imagine.) Her sisters took care of what needed taken care of at Kelly's house. One of them still at home liked to mow the lawn and weed the flowerbeds so they looked

nice. The other liked to shop, and she was always trying to open the draperies.

By comparison, my house was much better, although Kelly had her reservations about being there.

Before my daddy left for Vietnam my parents took us on a trip to the city Sears where they bought a new washer and dryer, and looked over a lot of heavy iron grates. I got a new Barbie doll--one with bending knees and a twisting waist. A Sears van arrived at our house a week after our trip and delivered the washer and dryer. A week after that, another van arrived and stayed for the entire day. The Sears men screwed in those iron grates over my bedroom windows, my parents' and brothers' bedroom windows, and most all the other doors and windows in the house, all except the bay window in the front room. I was happy they left the bay open because after I chipped my tooth on my bars trying to get a peek at the baby-sitter kissing some guy one night while mom was at PTA, I liked to sit there and read or watch birds or wait for Kelly coming to play.

Kelly said the bars made her feel like she was in prison. Of course--but at least we had sunshine inside the house and Mom fixed breakfast at six as usual. And my mom didn't start fixing us food out of cans and boxes like Kelly's mom. We had hot cereals, sandwiches with our soup,

and casseroles or meat loaf for dinner. Time-taking stuff. Mom was the same mom after Daddy left.

When me and Kelly finished our soup, we ran outside to the front lawn and looked for four leaf clovers. No luck. My mom said she found one once when she was a little girl. Her grandpa helped her find it. He was a veteran, she told me. Of the Spanish-American War. A long, long time ago.

Kelly got out her jump ropes and we got ready set go for breaking the world's jump rope record which was listed in her sister's Almanac. We tried for the record every other Saturday since it was tiresome business. We counted out loud to keep pace--our goal was to top the Almanac record and set another one while we were at it. Up somewhere in the fifties, though, my rope snagged.

I tripped forward and landed on my knees, the heels of my hands and my chin. You can bet Kelly's mother came running out when she heard me screaming. She took me inside the house, band-aided me all up and asked if I wanted her to call my mom to come get me. By that time, Kelly had come into the bathroom and was looking so sad. She didn't like spending afternoons alone when her sisters weren't at home. I told her mother, "No thanks, I'm okay."

Which I was not. I knew my scrapes would pester me for days. First I thought of how they would stiffen and stick to the band-aids and how Mom would want to put on

fresh ones which meant ripping off the old ones with a few tender hairs. I thought of how I wouldn't be able to sleep on my tummy at night--which was my favorite position (and Kelly's too)--and how funny I would look my last few days of school with a plastic strip on my chin. Already it was hard to smile.

I was so worried about my scrapes that I didn't even notice the flapping my shoe was doing until I got outside and Kelly said, "Your shoe's busted."

Sure enough. The rope must have caught on the buckle, and ripped up the elastic strip looped through the buckle and stitched to the leather. "These are my favorite school shoes," I told Kelly. She nodded. She had made her sister buy her the same kind. "Now what am I going to do? No more jump rope."

Kelly shrugged her shoulders. "Hoola-hoop? Don't have to move you feet much."

"My mom's gonna kill me. I got these for Easter."

"Let's hoola-hoop." Kelly ran off. I could hear her rummaging in the garage for the hoops. They were the last of the summer games to be pulled out from winter keep.

I kept staring at my shoe, thinking of a way to stitch the elastic back on but--when I looked closer--the strip was torn. I thought of maybe borrowing Kelly's shoes until school was out--but she wore hers every day too. And I

thought of somehow drawing attention away from my feet long enough for Mom to forget I ever had such pretty buckle-over shoes--but she was a spy-eye. If I so much as walked in the house pretending nothing at all happened, she'd say, "What've you been up to?" She was an expert mom.

My head was full with thinking of my shoes. I wasn't even listening to the babble Kelly was throwing at me. When the blue Ford sedan pulled up in front of Kelly's house, I hardly noticed. It stopped, and both doors opened.

Two military police stood on the sidewalk and adjusted their shiny caps. Their insignia snatched flecks of sunlight when they nodded at each other. They came towards me, their feet clicking over the concrete. A pair as alike as Kelly and I would never be. I was stuck solid to the walk. They stopped in front of me. One touched the brim of his cap. "Is your mom at home?" he asked as politely as my mom had been trying to get me to be for years.

And I wasn't thinking. I was full of my heartbeats. I could feel my pulse in the tiniest of my toes, and I could hardly breathe.

"Is your mom at home?" he asked again, and I realized, yes, yes she was at home; and I nodded. I was lifting my arm to point in the direction where exactly my mom was

home, two blocks away, when from behind me and booming out of the garage came Kelly's, "Mom! Mom! Come quick!"

The men clipped past me then, and I heard the small sucking noise an opening door makes, where it pulls in the storm door and makes it pop. I was running. I was out of the yard. I was down the street.

I ran the entire two blocks, never stopping. I ran past my brothers--playing in the drain pipe that everyone knew was where the devil lived--without listening to their calls and teases that usually terrified me and made me cry or stop and do whatever they wanted me to do until I wet my pants.

I ran past Mr. Shostack who threw lumps of manure or chunks of rotten fruit and vegetables at children whenever they went by his house, and who Mom told me I should pray for nightly because he wasn't "right."

I ran past the house with the Pepto-Bismol Mustang.

I ran past Sergeant Miller, whose wife worked, parked in his wheelchair on the driveway so he could talk with the neighbors, and nap in the sun, and read books he liked, and books children would sit in a horseshoe at his feet to hear.

I ran.

And I got home.

My heartbeat was nothing next to the noise my lungs were then making. I could hear nothing but their huh-huh-huh. My mom rushed out of the kitchen--her fingers stuck together with Tollhouse cookie dough, her apron brushed with flour. My brothers pulled up behind me, and I was surrounded by everyone's "What? What? What?"

I held up my hand with its fresh band-aid--that I'd forgotten all about--and watched all the eyes off each other bouncing like marbles. Mom was gumming up her apron with cookie dough and the boys got in a shoulder-tussle trying to be the closest to me. One offered to get me a drink and ran away, yelling, "Don't start without me . . ."

I didn't. He could have walked the roundtrip from foyer to bathroom back to foyer, and I wouldn't have had time to catch my breath.

I drank my glass of water in thick mouthfuls.

"Slow down, now, you're gonna make yourself sick," Mom said, touching her near-clean hand to my arm.

I wiped a loose sleeve--that had come unrolled in my run--over my mouth. I let out deep, deep, deeper breaths, then looked up into my family's startled, fearing, excited, and waiting faces. "At Kelly's," I started, when the crying began tugging heavily at my bottom lip, turning it out, as if I was the coldest I'd ever been. "At . . . at . . . at . . ."

Yes, yes, yes, all of their eyes said, pushing me along.

I couldn't look at their faces, and hung my head. "I . . . I . . . I," and there was my shoe, its strap dangling open like the lid of a trunk. Its strap was broken. Its strap was broken! And I thought, "Oh, no, Mom will know for sure," and I yelled out: "I broke my shoe! I broke my favorite shoe at Kelly's! I hate her! I hate Kelly!"

With them all staring at me, their faces turning from interest to disgust, I cried and I cried and I cried until everyone except Mom walked away.

Fainting

"So you did come," Mrs. Freeley said, pointing to the chair by the curtained window.

Karen held herself still. Her mother had asked her not to visit, hadn't even wanted her to know she was in the hospital. When she appeared in the doorway, Mrs. Freeley smiled in surprise, and apologized for her looks. Her face, framed by the white plastic-coated pillow, was rounder, and her eyes were trapped dark and small within narrow laps of skin.

Mrs. Freeley rolled her eyes towards the chair. "Your car make it okay?" she asked.

"I just had it tuned," Karen said.

"Cost a lot?"

"On my budget? Always."

"I hate it when your father asks me to take the cars in--mechanics take advantage of me, I know they do."

Karen smiled. "The trick is to know the names of the parts. All that most men know. Then you have a way to say something to one another."

Mrs. Freeley frowned, tried to straighten up in bed. She pulled her chin from the folds of her neck: A simple movement, but already she looked better.

Her face was swollen from the operation, Karen thought.

She stepped into the room, letting the door swing shut. The room darkened without the hallway light streaming in from behind her. She asked, "Do you want me to open your curtains?"

"No," Mrs. Freeley said. "The glare gives me a headache."

"There's not much color to these rooms."

It was of plastic wood-grained veneer and metal. A thin gold crucifix hung over Mrs. Freeley's bed, and opposite, a silent tv bolted to the wall faced her with a gray glare. The bathroom, a black cubical by the sink and mirror, was brightened only by Mrs. Freeley's red housecoat. Karen started at the piece of something familiar in such a strange room, where even her mother was not herself.

The last time she had visited a hospital, her father had a broken leg; was in traction; was in pain. She sat next to the window, and even though it could not open, felt closer to the outside air, better. Her father complained about his restriction: either sit still and feel the pain throb, or move and experience a sharpening of it. "Some damn choice," he muttered, working his hands under his hips, arching his back, wriggling his body. His

torso shuddered and his face pinched up; he cried out, "Ah!" then stilled.

Karen went black, fell to the floor. She woke to the sound of her father's laughter. Karen faints, her father thinks that's funny. The laughter was worth the pain. When his nurse came in, she was happy to hear him. "Laughter's the best medicine," she said. Karen's father stopped; he asked for a shot of morphine.

Karen recounted this story to her mother. Mrs. Freeley smiled with a look that might have said, "If I felt better, I'd laugh." Or, maybe Karen imagined her mother would laugh at one of her stories. She's never laughed often.

"You inherited your fainting from your father," Mrs. Freeley said.

"Really? To hear him laugh, I wouldn't have guessed." Karen thought, "He's a fainter, I'm a fainter, ha-ha-ha. We could have laughed together if I had known."

"When did you get here?" asked Karen.

"Just after noon, yesterday."

"And when were you in surgery?"

"Yesterday as well."

Karen stood at Mrs. Freeley's bedstand. She shuffled through the pile of magazines and books. "I brought you a

book to read," she said. She noticed there were no flowers on the stand, or in the room.

"But it looks like you've got plenty," she added.

"I've been sleeping more than reading. But thank you."

Karen couldn't afford flowers. Her father could. "Thought about stopping on the highway to pick daffodils for you," she added, her look fixed on the flowerless stand. She wondered if her mother brought her father a bouquet when he had had his vasectomy. Karen was a child when this happened, an adult when she found out about it; she never did know if he had even stayed in the hospital.

"They're not open yet," Mrs. Freeley said.

"Yes, but they're all along the highway. They'll be blooming by Friday." It was Tuesday. "I wish I'd brought you flowers."

"Do you need money?"

Yes, no. But No. Karen hated that, what she'll say leading to money. It was something Mrs. Freeley picked up from her husband. Some confused line between the definition of need, and support.

The room's wide, heavy door with its burnished handle was pushed open and a nurse walked in. "How's your bladder?" the nurse trumpeted with a Scottish accent.

Mrs. Freeley fluttered an, "Oh!" She ran her hand over her hair, then sighed. "My whole belly feels like a pile of hot bricks are stuffed in it," she said. "I can't tell one thing from another."

"The bladder's on top of your uterus," the nurse explained. "To get to your uterus, they shoved around the bladder. It's in shock from the anesthesia."

Mrs. Freeley blushed. Bladders and uteri were never appropriate things to be discussed in front of her children. Karen was twenty-seven. The only reason Karen knew her mother was in the hospital was because her father let "the secret" out. Mrs. Freeley got very angry at him. "I didn't want to alarm you," she had explained to Karen over the phone. "You don't have to come up. I'll only be in the hospital for four days."

The nurse pulled some papers out of her pocket and scribbled over them. "Have you been out of bed?" She asked without looking up.

When Karen had been sick as a child, was bedridden, her mother held her, touched her, read to her. When her mother looked in Karen's eyes, Karen's tears remained hot, but the presence of her mother was somehow cooling. This nurse had none of that; this nurse irritated Karen. She thought: Perhaps she's not a mother. She glanced at Mrs. Freeley, and Mrs. Freeley closed her eyes.

"Have you been to the bathroom?" the nurse asked.

"This morning. You helped me."

The nurse shoved her papers back in her pocket.

"Yes," she said. "That's so." She checked the fluid's bag and automatic morphine feed.

When Karen's mother was in pain all she had to do was push a button. The machine gave her a computed amount of morphine. It beeped when she pushed her button, like the arrival of an elevator. Karen wondered how it knew if she'd had too much.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" the nurse asked.

"Let's go for a walk."

Mrs. Freeley reached under the sheet and pulled a pillow off of her stomach. The nurse drew back her blankets, and Karen retrieved the housecoat hanging inside the bathroom door. Red and velvety. "I used to have a housecoat like that," the nurse said.

Mrs. Freeley slid her legs slowly over the side of the bed and tried to push herself up into the sitting position. She moaned and grimaced. The nurse grabbed at her elbow, and waved at Karen to help. But suddenly, Karen's head felt like it was filling with helium, spiraling away from her, no string to grab ahold of.

"No, no, no, dear. Don't do it that way--" the nurse scolded.

"I don't know how else to get up," said Mrs. Freeley, her words punctured with heavy breaths. "Wait, let me rest a minute."

Karen turned from her mother. The chair by the window rocked at her like a lap. She tossed the red housecoat towards the nurse, gripped the baseboard of the bed, and headed for the chair. But as she stepped, it rolled away, farther and farther away.

"Don't do it yourself, let me help you!" The nurse's bullhorn voice fell muted and distant.

The carpet beneath Karen now puddled into water as she walked, and she didn't know how deep her steps would sink until she tried to put her foot down. Slowly. She thought that if she missed a step, she would fall. She didn't want to fall.

"Next time, wait for me to help you sit up," the nurse said from the far side of the bed. "You should roll on your side, then grab on to my elbow, you see?"

"No," Mrs. Freeley moaned.

Karen reached the chair and dropped into it. She couldn't feel it beneath her, but heard the muffled sound of her own collapse into the stiff naugahyde.

Mrs. Freeley sat on the side of the bed slumped over. She held her hands on her stomach as if it were a bowl

filled with hot liquid. The nurse turned from her. "Are you alright dear?" she asked Karen.

"Just put your head between your legs," Mrs. Freeley said. Her voice, though wrapped in cotton, was the mother voice Karen had always heard.

"I'm okay," Karen said, her own voice strange and badly connected.

"She's a fainter," Mrs. Freeley explained.

"Is she going to be okay?" The nurse held out a hand to pull Mrs. Freeley to her feet.

"Faints all the time."

Karen felt it was too early to stand, but she still pushed to her watery feet: She was going to go on the walk, to be with her mother. She felt like a child getting attention for being a fainter. Her mother had been through surgery, after all. She pulled herself up alongside the wall. It was solid and cool.

"Why don't you stay here?" the nurse suggested, nodding towards the chair.

Karen shook her head, no.

"The change of air will do her good," Mrs. Freeley said. She slid to the floor, took her first step with a frowned, Umm. Her eyes broke through their slits.

The nurse stepped up beside Mrs. Freeley, pushing her fluids and morphine rack, and Mrs. Freeley held on to the

nurse. Karen worked her way along the wall towards the pair. She wanted to hold her mother. She wanted her mother to lean on her arm.

Breathing in deeply, she pushed off the wall. If the pair hadn't been walking so slowly--Mrs. Freeley stepping one tentative foot in front of the other, holding her hands over her belly--Karen could not have kept up. But the three passed out of the room.

The hallway was bright. The air felt better, freer, and Karen felt breathing was easier. No deliberate in, out, in, out. She concentrated on even steps: left right, left right.

"How are you doing?" the nurse asked over her shoulder.

"Fine," Karen said. She walked next to her mother; she wanted to touch her hand, but Mrs. Freeley leaned on the nurse. Karen dropped behind them then caught up with the nurse. Her head was light and dizzy. "Can I push the rack?" she asked.

"I've got it," the nurse said. "You take care of yourself."

They arrived at the nurse's station, fifteen feet from Mrs. Freeley's room. The walk had Karen exhausted. She looked for a chair. If one had been near, she'd have collapsed in it, put her head between her legs, and waited

for the spell to pass. Patience took longer than fainting, defiance even longer.

After a few moments nurse and patient turned. Mrs. Freeley's hand had drained milk white from gripping the nurse's arm.

The nurse glanced at Mrs. Freeley and nodded. "Let's go back," she said. The rack jingled as she pushed it forward.

Karen took in a deep breath, imagined the oxygen pushing out the blackness in her mind, filling it with clear air. Clean, clear air pulsing throughout her body, fighting the blackness all over, forcing it out. She thought: I can make it. If my mother can make it, so can I.

"My daughter," Mrs. Freeley said, pausing for a moment to rest, "rode horses before she left for college."

"English-style?" the nurse asked. Karen was reminded of the woman's accent. She wondered if the nurse rode.

"She had a jumper," Mrs. Freeley added. She walked again, faster now, and got ahead of where Karen had stopped to lean a moment against the wall. Cool skin against cool wall. Karen pictured herself taking to one of the pair of chairs outside of Mrs. Freeley's room. She let go of the wall. No fainting. "Jumped the big fences," Mrs. Freeley went on. Karen didn't want to fall. "Five feet. Solid,"

"My watch broke yesterday," Mrs. Freeley said. "What time is it?"

"It's five thirty."

"Your father will be here soon."

Karen slowly looked up, her head breaking through its gray shadow like a swimmer emerging from water. The dizziness washed coolly from her face. She saw through the room's darkness more clearly: Her mother's head was squeezed into the pillow, but it was smoother, not so puffy. Her tummy was fat from the pillow she had returned there. Mrs. Freeley's eyes closed. She slept.

Role Playing

The little boy's hands pressed white against the glass of the restaurant door. His reach was just short of the handle, so he was probably near three. His father stood above him, smiling, waiting. The boy pressed himself against the door, and the bell tied to the handle began ringing. Encouraged, the boy pressed harder. His eyes squinted tight as he pushed, and the door gave. "Good job," the boy's father said as he slipped into the cafe.

The cafe area was small--seven tables, and a walk-up counter. The father bought his son a cocoa and himself a coffee, and they sat across from one another at a table. The man's face was interesting enough to make it handsome-- a jaw line running sharply from his thin ear lobes to his small chin, deep set eyes of gray or dark blue, and a short bobbed nose. The son's face was too round and fleshy to tell if it had the same jaw-line, but he shared his father's straight thin-seamed lips, and his teeth when he smiled were tight and even, as if they had been carved of a single piece of ivory.

"You're getting good at checkers," the father said.

"I like checkers."

"I like them too."

The boy knelt on his chair, leaned his chest against the edge of the table. He held his white cup in both hands. A brown line of cocoa covered his upper lip. His back was to the door, and each time the bell rang he looked towards it with a quick smile.

The father checked his watch. "How's the cocoa?" he asked.

The boy smiled and winked.

"Not too sweet?"

The boy shook his head.

"Would you like a muffin to go with it?"

"What kind of muffin?"

"Blueberry, I saw. Want one?"

"No." The boy freshened his cocoa line. "Could we play checkers?" he asked.

"We don't have the game with us," the father explained. "It's at home."

The bell rang again and the boy jumped from his seat. "Mamma!" he called at a woman standing just inside the door. She knelt and the two embraced. "I won two games!"

Mother and son had the same textured hair: straight, and thick--a full-bodied mahogany. and the boy had her eyes, round, and soft at the outer edges. They were deep-set eyes, but almost black, reflecting the fluorescent lights in flashes. The mother smiled at the boy, rubbed

her hand over his hair. "Two games of what?" the mother asked. Her son held his head up at her like a cat, and she brushed his chin with a finger stroke.

"Checkers," the father said.

"Checkers," the boy repeated.

"I didn't know you knew how to play checkers. Well, good. We can play a game when we get home."

The boy turned a puzzled look to his father. "You can beat the both of us," the father said.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee." The woman nodded towards the counter.

"Right," the man answered.

When the woman returned from the counter, she looked down on the pair. The man read a paper that lay on the table, and the boy watched him. The woman paused a moment, then sat at another table.

"Mamma!" the boy called, frowning. "I want you to sit here." He patted his own chair.

The mother smiled; the father looked up. He nodded. She carried her chair with her and set it between the father and son, then sat at her boy's place.

"How's Clara?" the woman asked the man. She bit at the edge of her finger.

"She's had the flu, but she's over it."

The woman glanced at the boy.

"She stayed the weekend at her apartment. She was worried about being contagious."

The woman nodded and smiled. She brushed her boy's hair. "How's work?" she asked the man.

"I've been putting in fifty-hour weeks."

"As always--"

"But temporarily. It won't last long."

"As always." She turned to the boy. "We're going to the dentist today."

The boy whined.

"But you like the dentist. You like all the books and magazines she has."

"No," he whined. "I don't like the dentist."

"And the assistants like you, they're all so nice."

"Tell me how it turns out," the father interjected.

"He's got my teeth--he'll be fine."

"I'd like to know."

"Do you think I tell you nothing? I tell you everything." She lifted her eyebrows.

The man raised his hand as if to make a point, and the boy interrupted: "I'm hungry. I want a muffin."

"I'll get you a muffin," the woman offered.

"I asked you earlier if you wanted a muffin," the father said. "You said, 'No.'"

The boy picked at the vinyl piping of the chair his mother brought for him.

"He can change his mind," the woman said, shaking her head.

"Here, then," said the man, pulling out his wallet.

"I'll pay. I've got money."

"You're moving . . . I thought things were tight . . ."

The woman sighed. "Not because I can't afford to stay where I'm at, but because I want to save some money."

"If you can't save where you're at," the man said, "then you can't afford it."

The boy whined. "A blueberry muffin. I want a blueberry muffin."

"Of course," the woman said. The man held out a dollar and she took it. "Thank you."

She handed the boy his muffin when she returned, and took her seat. He stood next to her holding the small cake, mumbling.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice strained, her forehead pulled into a frown.

The boy mumbled again and she held her ear near his mouth. "What about the chair?" she asked. He whined now. "What is wrong with your chair?" She patted the empty seat. "You sit here." The boy shook his head. "What's

wrong with this seat?" She looked at the chair and then the father--he had picked up the paper again.

"I don't want to sit there." The boy was nearly crying.

The father looked up, set his paper down. "It's ten thirty. I'm meeting with Clara," he said. He stood, turned to the boy. "Hey, guy," he said, "Thanks for the games." He ran his hand through the boy's hair, smiled awkwardly. "Did you remember the matinee?" he asked the woman. "I'm taking the boy."

She looked at her son, startled. "Oh, yes, the matinee," she said.

The man frowned. "I don't want you to forget. I'll be by at three-thirty."

The woman nodded. She looked tired, distant. "No, no, I won't forget."

"You'll remind her, won't you, Chris?"

The boy looked at his mother; he nodded.

The father gave the boy's head another pat. "Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye," the woman said, holding the coffee cup to her lips, her voice trapped inside the porcelain cup. "Say hello to Clara for me."

"Sure. Good-bye Chris."

The boy didn't look at his father.

"Chris," the woman said, "your father is saying good-bye."

The boy didn't move. He cupped his muffin in his hands, and rocked against the table.

"Say good-bye, Christopher," the woman demanded.

The boy stared without blinking. Only the corners of his soft mouth hinted a twitch.

The father shrugged his shoulders. He waved at the woman and she nodded at him. The bell rang as he left.

"Hurry up with your muffin," the woman said, her voice more lively, "and let's stop by a store to buy a checker board. You can teach me how to play while we're at the dentist. I think I've forgotten. Do you think you could teach me how to play, Chris?"

The boy shook his head. "Don't want the muffin," he said.

"Checkers, Chris. I was talking about checkers," the mother said, stroking her boy's hair.

He shook his head free of her hand, climbed into his father's seat and set the cake in the middle of the table. He spun the muffin, rolling it around and around with his hands.

"Stop playing with your food, Chris," his mother said. He did not stop and she put her hand down on his. "Stop. Eat your muffin and we'll go."

Chris looked up at his mother, watched her, as he raised his fist over the muffin.

Laura

"I like your new chair, Anne," Kristine said. A blue chintz, floral pattern, at one time expensive; she settled into it. Anne was shuffling around the kitchen getting their tea. Already she'd set a tray of pastries on the coffee table, told Kristine to help herself.

"Oh--and a new table and lamp. Nice. How long have you had them?"

"Just a few days," Anne called. "Only a few days. They were Laura's things."

Kristine rubbed her palms over the smooth carved arm rests. "Laura? did you say?"

Anne poked her head through the arched doorway between the living room and kitchen. "That's why--" The teapot began whistling. "Ah," she pulled her head back into the kitchen, "gotta get that. Be right out."

"What's going on? Laura move? She find a place to stay?"

"Let me get the tea, and I'll be right out."

This invitation to Anne's apartment: Kristine had hesitated before accepting it. Anne was a gossip, knew and told everybody's business. She could spend hours on the phone. To invite someone over, Kristine suspected, meant that something was in the air. Yet when Kristine saw the new chair then table and lamp, she felt a relief. Anne

only invited her to show off, she reasoned. Unlike her, but not impossible. Nothing was impossible, not with Anne. Kristine had known her for years--they'd co-oped a large house through college. But now, Kristine doubted her first relief.

"You still take cream in your tea?" Anne asked. She now stood over Kristine.

"No. No, thanks." She took her mug from Anne. "What's going on with Laura? You haven't told me a thing."

Anne flagged the steam rising from her cup as she blew on her tea. The steam still fogged up her glasses--she took them off and polished the lenses. "Booze and pills," she said. "Sugar?"

"Booze and pills? Sugar? I don't understand what that's supposed to mean. Anne?"

"Sugar for your tea, Kristine?"

"Anne! Booze and pills?" Kristine set her mug down on the new table. Mahogany. An antique. "What's going on? Has something happened to Laura?"

"She killed herself, Kris--you didn't know?"

Kristine slid down in blue chintz chair. "I don't--"

"Well, of course. The two of you weren't friends, right, Kris? Yes. Laura's dead. She killed herself--an overdose of pills and booze. How long's it been, now?"

Anne looked up, set her glasses back on her face. "Three, four days?--already?"

"Jesus."

Anne let out a quick, sharp laugh. "You should've smelled her place!"

"What! Really, Anne, please!"

"Oh, that's not what I meant. No." She sucked in her tea between her teeth. "Nothing like that," Anne said. "She was found the afternoon . . . of . . . the morning. She wasn't--you know. It's just that when I got there, her place smelled like alcohol and flowers. Disinfectant, I guess. Her landlady was odd, you know."

"You didn't find her? But you were there. How did you find out?"

"The landlady. I was really the only person she knew in town."

"Who? The landlady? Laura?"

"The landlady, Laura. Both, I guess. Except Laura's ex-husband--but the landlady didn't know how to get a hold of him. I did that. She wanted Laura's stuff out--she was spooked."

"I guess."

"I took her furniture, her books. Her journals and jewelry went to her Ex, her clothes I told him to give away." Anne looked over Kristine. "She was tiny. Even

you couldn't have fit in her clothes. She wasn't well, you know."

"I gather."

"You didn't like her."

"I didn't know her, Anne."

"But you turned her down."

"She frightened me."

"She needed friends. Is that so frightening?"

"More than that, Anne. As we can tell."

"I keep thinking, you know, if she'd just gotten out more."

"Look, Anne--" Kristine sighed. There was something terribly wrong with this conversation; although she could feel it, she had no sense of how to change it. Anne was bitter. She seemed to want to be bitter. "I'm sorry, Anne. I'm really very, very sorry."

"She was real sweet, you know?" Anne pulled her napkin from her lap and pressed it to the corners of her eyes. Her glasses rode on her knuckles. "So kind. So, so kind."

Kristine had met Laura only once. But she'd heard Anne talk of her troubles often. Laura and Anne had grown up a few houses from each other. Anne only shook her head at the memories of those days. She talked of Laura's new

troubles: a marriage betrayed, a divorce. Turned from a home in a beautiful neighborhood, expensive car, clothes accounts, restaurant dining, travel. A brilliant education, mind, and contacts, yet a creeping fear of inadequacy. "That was her husband's influence. He belittled her. She took it; she was so used to taking everything but praise."

Kristine heard everything: Laura bleached her hair; Laura dyed her hair red; Laura gave herself a permanent and had to have her beautiful hair cut, butched; Laura lost weight; Laura was too thin; Laura was much too thin; Laura was biting her nails; Laura was drinking again; Laura was isolating herself; Laura wasn't returning Anne's calls; and Laura had her phone disconnected.

Anne told Kristine that Laura was dependent upon her stopping by. Anne took Laura everywhere, from day-trips out of town to grocery shopping.

Then one morning, Anne called Kristine. "Thought you could use a roommate." she said happily. "I'm bringing Laura by to meet you. Give us forty-five minutes or so." The phone line was dead before Kristine had even said "Good-bye." She put down the phone, and glanced over her house. "God," she groaned, "company."

She ran around picking up shoes, dirty and clean clothes. She made her bed, straightened her bureau, her

desk. She stacked her dishes into the washer, wiped down the countertops, the appliances, then ran on into her bathroom, washed out the toilet bowl and sink, and wiped her sleeve over the dirty mirror. Her hair fell in strings around her face.

She was rebraiding her hair when Anne let herself into the house. "Go take a look," she said. "I need to talk to Kris a minute, then I'll let you two alone."

Kristine stepped out of the bathroom, and Anne pulled her to her side, hugged her. "Thanks, Kris. She needs to be around people. Nasty--I mean nasty--divorce, you know? And a little cash each month isn't a bad trade-off for you, is it?" She loped off after Laura. "Laura, hon?" she called, "I'll pick you up in half an hour, 'kay?" She passed Kristine and headed for the front door. "Sorry I didn't introduce you, Kristine--you'll have to do it yourself. I'm off." The front door slammed shut.

Kristine wrapped the rubberband around the end of her braid. She flung the rope over her shoulder.

"Hello," a small voice came from behind her.

Kristine turned around. She was thin. Much too thin. "Oh, Hi. I'm Kristine."

"I know." Her clothes were pressed, laundered, and meticulously matching in color, style, statement.

No one to share clothes with, Kristine thought. She tightened the drawstring on her cotton sweatpants--nothing she would wear in public, nothing she would wear for company, if she'd had warning.

"Well, it's nice to meet you. Anne sings your praises." Laura was silent, still; and Kristine sighed with the strange feeling that it was she who needed to make the proper impression, not this narrow, anxious woman peeping through rheumy eyes. She shrugged her shoulders, "I was working out when Anne called, you see."

Laura said nothing.

"Ah, would you like to sit down?" Kristine motioned to her couch. "Can I get you anything to drink? Eat?" Then she thought, "Why'd I mention food?"

Laura shook her head. "Nothing. Thank you. And I'd rather stand."

"You don't mind if I sit, do you?"

"No." She stood with her arms crossed, one toe pointed in the direction of the front door as if she were ready to leap for the sound of Anne's return.

"I'm not really sure I want a roommate," Kristine said. "This was all Anne's idea. I haven't given it any thought," Kristine said.

"She thinks I need to get out--that a move, meeting someone, would be good for me. I have a small studio in a house, but it's out of town, isolated."

"Have you considered an apartment?"

"I need to start thinking of saving money. Not that I don't have money--I just want to be careful with it." She nibbled on the edge of her thumb. "Are you quiet?"

"Very much so." But, Kristine wondered, would this woman think so? She stopped herself from adding, "I think."

"So am I. That is good. I listen to music on a small radio--but only at night and I keep the volume low. My landlady has never complained. You enjoy music?"

"I have a nice stereo." Kristine pointed to her components. She had a large collection of classic rock and roll records and tapes. She liked dancing to the music in the evenings, or to invite friends over to chat about nothing while the old songs played on. She liked the feel of times past.

"I don't like music in the mornings or the afternoons," Laura said. "Only in the evening, and in the privacy of one's room. Is there space for your stereo in your bedroom?"

Kristine thought of her bedroom filling with the odds from the spare room, and then having to pile in the stereo and speakers.

Laura continued: "I don't have much use for other people's things. I'm very private. I'll keep to my room-- was it the one next to the bathroom you'll be renting out?"

Kristine nodded. Or was it? Which room was next to the bathroom? She forgot for some reason, couldn't picture the layout of the house.

"That won't bother you, will it?" Laura began tapping her toe, glancing towards the front door.

Kristine scooted back in the couch. "I'm out most of the mornings and afternoons. I visit with friends in the evenings, but rarely bring anyone home."

Laura nodded. "I like to stay in my room. If, say, I'm in there three, maybe four days, I wouldn't want you to be curious enough to knock on my door. I demand absolute privacy. I've gone through some troubles. I need the time alone."

Kristine pulled her legs up underneath herself. Three, four days. She pictured herself walking past a closed door. A closed door in her house. She saw herself putting an ear to the door, listening for music. Or, she'd look for signs of her roommate if she didn't actually see or hear her. There were ways, she told herself, to know

someone was around. A crumb-littered countertop, dirty dishes. An opened magazine. A wet tooth brush, face towel. Not much though. Would this drive her crazy? What was a roommate for, but passing through her closets to pull out interesting clothes to borrow, or sitting on her bed late at night to talk about houseplants, men, or the behavior of friends? The mean-streak in Anne? How dominating she was?

Living with Laura, Kristine was thinking, would be more like living with a mouse. Silent droppings; a nibble here and there. How long would Laura's need for privacy last? Would they become friends? Anne and Laura were friends. But then, Anne could force her friendship on anyone. Could Kristine?

"When can I move in?"

Kristine started. "Well." she said. She cleared her throat. Three, four days of silence. How long would she last? "Anne made this proposition only this morning. And we've just met."

"I see."

"Could you call me? Give me a few days to think it over?" Kristine tried to smile, but her lips felt pressed in a grimace. Only her cheeks responded to her intent. She succeeded in squinting at her visitor. What would her

face mean to this woman, she wondered. "Do you like the house?"

"It's a nice neighborhood. Convenient."

"Yes. And the house is very comfortable."

"I live with a nosey old lady. And we live out of town. I need a change. To meet people."

"So I understand."

"I noticed you're not very tidy. I'd need a roommate to be more tidy."

"I've been busy. I clean on Sunday--tomorrow."

"I clean daily."

Kristine nodded.

"Anne mentioned you needed to meet people too?"

She did need to meet people, Kristine guessed. Maybe this roommate suggestion was a good one--why hadn't she thought of it before? Her mind wandered over the images of certain friends, associates, acquaintances. Why not a male roommate? She could see herself fussing over raised toilet seats, flicks of facial hair pasted to the sink basin. Or perhaps someone with a happy dog. A cat? She looked at this thin, anxious woman. Yes, she decided, she was too isolated, too lonely. She didn't want to end up . . .

"That must be Anne," Laura said, looking towards the front door. "Well, I will call you. Wednesday?"

"Make it Friday." Kristine stood. She held out a hand that Laura seemed to pretend not to notice. "I'll be home Friday evening."

"You won't be going out?"

"I do get out more than I entertain, but this Friday I'll be home. Alone." She was expecting several friends, but for a quiet evening of wine, talks.

"Yes. So you mentioned. Good. That's good." Laura's face seemed to relax. The lines of her lips softened, and Kristine felt a relief that something she'd said pleased this woman.

"I like privacy. Quiet."

"I understand. I'm most quiet. Very quiet." Kristine thought of the long evenings with her friends. Music, food, alcohol. Laughter. Face it, she thought. You're noisy. You're noisy and messy, and you're a busybody. And you have plenty of friends. What have you been telling this woman?

"I'll just meet her outside," Laura said. "No reason for her to come in." And she was gone.

She called on Wednesday after all, and Kristine said in a timid voice not her own, "I've decided not to have a roommate. I'm sorry."

Laura hung up without responding.

Kristine set the empty phone in its cradle. She felt all wrong and all right. She almost began to cry, but that wasn't what she felt the need for. She went into the kitchen, looked through her cabinets, opened up her refrigerator, and was leaning into the refrigerator's cool light before she realized she wasn't hungry. She flipped through her records, then knew she didn't want to listen to music. Only silence.

"Maybe," she thought, "I should pick up the place. It's a mess." But she couldn't decide where to begin. If she picked up her clothes she would feel better cleaning out her closets. If she made up her bed, she'd want to change the sheets. If she started in the bathroom, she'd need to mop the floor and then mop the kitchen too, to use up the soapy water.

Then she wanted to do none of these things, and found herself in her hall closet looking for a good pair of walking shoes. When she sat down to tie up the laces, she leaned back and fell asleep.

Anne said, "She'd tried before. Once when we were girls still living at home. Another time more recently--after her divorce."

"You knew she was suicidal when you brought her over to my place?"

"She needed to be around people."

"Anne, she needed treatment."

Anne dropped her mug. The tea sloshed over her hand. She wiped herself on her trousers. "She just needed companionship. I couldn't be around her all the time. So I was hoping you'd be able to help me."

"You didn't tell me anything."

"You knew she had troubles."

"Not suicide, Anne."

"I would have filled you in once I had the chance."

"But why not before--" Kristine fell back into the chair. "Oh, what difference does it make?"

"Difference? What difference? She would probably--"

"Not that. I mean--Jesus, Anne, she probably would have killed herself at my house. What would have been the difference?"

"You could have kept an eye on her."

"No. She didn't want a nurse. She wanted 'privacy'."

Anne took off her glasses, rubbed her eyes. "Well, of course, you're right. She might have killed herself in your house. I hadn't thought of it. I'm sorry. That would have been awful."

Kristine shuddered. Three, four days. And if she hadn't been nosey? If she hadn't looked for mouse signs? Would she have smelled?--it wouldn't have been a smell of

alcohol and flowers. And she would have had to open the door--much as she'd been warned not to intrude--and . . . see. "Did her landlady find her?"

"Actually, no. Her ex-husband. He was stopping over with a support check. His final one. Her apartment door was open, he helped himself in."

"She was expecting him."

Anne shrugged her shoulders.

"Jesus. Maybe, if--No. She was intent enough. It was only a matter of time. She probably would have killed herself at my house. I would have found her."

"Awful. The smell. So sweet. A floral spray, perhaps. And alcohol, though I didn't see any bottles. The place was so clean. She was very neat, and she didn't have much, but it looked picked over. The landlady was nervous."

"Her husband wouldn't have stopped over if she'd lived with me, maybe."

"I don't know. He didn't like to meet her friends, that's for sure."

Friends. Kristine asked herself, "Would we have become friends? Could we have laughed together?"

"I feel terrible, Anne," Kristine said.

"Yes? I'm sure, though you shouldn't. It wasn't your fault. But Laura was so smart. And when she wasn't as

thin, she really was beautiful. Her hair, if she'd let it grow out, was very thick, very dark and thick."

"I'm so sorry, Anne, that I didn't let her move in. We probably would have gotten along, somehow. I'm sorry I didn't help her out."

Anne shook her head. She filled their mugs with tea.

Kristine held the fresh cup to her lips and let the warmth loosen the feelings in her fingers--they had grown steadily cold in Anne's apartment. She blew on the rising steam, let it roll over the mug and curl back to dampen her face.

"It's so sad," Anne whispered, shaking her head, "if it could have been helped." She reached forward and touched Kristine. Lightly. A light touch. "But don't think of blaming yourself, Kris."

These Things I Must Do

When you were in a downtown department store, and the loudspeaker crackled on and an edgy voice said, "Will the mother of the toddler with long brown hair and striped coveralls please come to the information area," I was that toddler.

When you strolled through a tree-lined street and saw a preschool girl with quick black eyes flying down the sidewalk giggling, "You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man," while looking over her shoulder to a woman, her long legs making purposefully short strides, that was me.

The time you glanced across the playground during recess and saw briefly the young girl with legs growing faster than the rest of her body; when you blinked and she was gone, she wasn't really gone, she snapped her fingers and disappeared so that even if you looked for her you couldn't find her; you were looking past me.

When you turned to the back of a milk carton and saw a picture of a sad-eyed, drawn-mouthed teen who ran away from home at fourteen, or if you followed the news report of the gal reunited with her parents after she ran from home, think of me.

But now I'm forty-eight, doubled in age from my last adventure, and you can find me working in the clock shop I inherited, or alone in my studio apartment (adjacent to my

mother's apartment) reading, or at my mother's talking about her past while playing cards.

I also follow her around in the grocers while she chats to herself. Chancing to see my long graying hair, she'll turn her chatter my way: "You're so meddlesome," she'll say. "Worst of the bunch. Go away. Leave me alone." But I cannot; Mother might not be able to find her way home from the store. Sometimes she cannot remember her name; and, if she doesn't have her i.d. with her, she could panic. Be afraid, know that she's lost. Know that she can't remember her name.

Beatrice. My mother's name is Beatrice.

*

She says, "He cheated on me."

I look up from my pad of paper into my mother's clouding blue eyes. We sit at her breakfast table drinking coffee and munching toast. Burnt toast--guess who left it too long in the toasteroven? I am taking notes; this is what is required of me most times I'm with her--if we're not playing cards. My mother is writing her memoirs.

"Impossible," I say.

"What do you know?" She flings a nip of crust at me, misses.

I know. My father was a clocksmith, and we lived over his shop. When Poppy wasn't bent at his worktable, he was

home. He had no time to cheat. Also, he was impotent-- something to do with the war. How many times did I beg for brothers and sisters, Mother telling me to count my blessings that I was here to breathe. She said she'd never wanted children--had had her fill growing up.

"Your father cheated on me." Mother taps out each word with her finger on the table. "Yes he did," she insists as I shake my head no. My mother didn't meet my father until after I was born: Poppy was not my biological father. He adopted me when I was two--after returning from the Pacific. My real father is someone whom I've never met--I don't think--and whom my mother has not specifically included in her memoirs. I figure she got knocked up by some war-boy before he took off. Maybe he was killed.

When I ran from home at fourteen, my father was who I was after. I thought I'd wander until I met a man with similar features, or perhaps with younger children growing through stages the way I had.

I returned home to confront my mother about my real father, but when I asked her who he was, she answered, "Just what are you implying, you tart?"

"Your father cheated on me before you were born," she says, her eyes tight in a defiant squint.

"Tell me about it," I sigh, nodding to the paper. May as well write it down; what could it hurt? I figure that someday I'll want to return to these scribbled lines, to these odd times; really, though, I'd like to know about my natural father, but there's no way for me to get at that information. I'd like to think that the man who she's talking about is my biological father, yet I can't separate this woman's memories from her imagination. She's not a reliable source.

I know what it's like, though, having a memory you'd just rather be left alone. I was once married. It was a short affair I'd gotten myself into when I was in my late thirties.

I was a virgin when I married Ted. If I told my mother I was a virgin until I married, she'd probably laugh, say, "Sure, sure you were. I know all about virginity."

Sure, sure she does. When she tells me Poppy cheated on her, rather than get worked up wondering if she means my real father, I automatically think, "You must've cheated on him, lady." That's probably closer to the truth. I figure that with anyone's memories, responsibility is the first thing to go.

Take, for instance, when Ted divorced me--divorced me-- I afterwards heard from several friends that he would

confide in women about how I broke his heart when we split. Some heart. Maybe he was trying to mix me up--who divorced whom, now? I don't like someone trying to deliberately mix me up.

My poor mother's mixed up. Her mind is dying--in fits though, like a finished jigsaw puzzle that someone's dismantling, piece by random piece. It doesn't make sense, the way her mind's going. There are things she can remember. Like numbers, cards, how much money's in her checking and saving's accounts. And there's lots--she's a penny pincher.

My mother tells me, "If you don't write it down how I tell you, I'll write it down myself." Not that: 1) the old woman can see anymore, or 2) she can read or write.

I don't remind her of this.

Once, when I was in third or fourth grade, I came home upset over losing a spelling bee--first kid out, don't ask me what word I couldn't spell, probably still can't spell it (trauma sticks to me like wet leaves to sidewalks). Mom told me all about what a terrific speller she was when she was a kid. From an immigrant family in West Virginia. A mining town. During the depression. Right.

Even as a kid, I knew better.

"How'd you find out about Poppy's affair, Mom?" I say.

"Caught 'em in bed together. She wore dentures from that day forth." She laughs.

"And Poppy?" I ask. "Are you talking about Poppy here, Mom?" I think, "We'll see how that goes over."

But she only demands more coffee, rattling her cup in its saucer. When I got here this morning I fixed her first cup the way she always likes it: two thirds coffee, one third half-and-half, two lumps sugar and one ice cube. Don't ask me . . . Anyway, I set the cup in front her and she poked her nose in it. "What's this? What you trying to do to me?"

"What?"

"You know how I like my coffee. Why are you so mean? The worst of the bunch."

First, I'll let you know, I'm an only child--she's the one who came from a large family. Second, she's had her coffee like that ever since I can remember. I said, "So, how do you like your coffee, Mom?"

"Black. With a shot of whiskey."

I shake my head. Some mind she's got. I didn't even know if there was whiskey in the house. "Where do you keep the whiskey?"

"Tart."

To her coffee I added a shot of scotch that I'd hunted down over at my place. She tasted the mix, shoved it back

at me. "So how long have you been trying to get me to cut back?"

"On what?"

"I'm no alcoholic."

No joke; I know this. I've never seen my mother take a drink in my life.

Poppy, though, drank to black out nightmares ruining his peace, and to kill the arthritis in his back and hands. He was killed by his poisoned liver--but I don't want to think about that. He didn't have a pleasant trip. He moaned and cried out a lot as he got worse. Thankfully for him, but not for us, he was deaf.

He went deaf not long after I returned home from my youthful travels. Mom wanted him to get a hearing aid. He said, "For the first time in my life I can't hear clocks and you want me to get a hearing aid." From then on he just talked loud and taught me how to repair clocks and watches. I stayed home to fix clocks. Poppy had, after all, raised me. I knew he loved my mother, but he got me with her.

Mother can't see, but she can hear. If I raise my voice, or she wants to think I've raised my voice--when she's mad at me, say--she screws up her face and says with a satisfied nod, "Just like your father, wouldn't you know. You inherited your obnoxious voice from your

father." And she means Poppy, you understand. Other times, she'll be sarcastic and say, "How's your hearing? Your hearing okay? Maybe you should see a doctor."

I poured more booze into her coffee. She took a sip and smiled. She didn't shudder at the scotch either, and I thought, "Good God, what's this going to come to?"

Sometimes, the way my mother's losing her mind worries me. I wonder how my real father's aging--if he got the chance to age.

Mom's new style of coffee fits in with the latest grocers incident. Our last trip out, she pulled up in front of the soups and grabbed several tins of tomato. "Mom," I said, "you hate canned soup." She was hurt. Her face fell open, wounded as a child's who'd been called nasty names.

"I raised you on canned tomato soup."

Poppy, now, he loved tomato soup; but he always had to get it in restaurants if he had a craving. Mom could put her foot down, if you can imagine.

"You're allergic to tomatoes, though."

Her face flushed with anger. "How do I get to be sixty-seven and have my daughter tell me something I don't know about my body? Allergies. I have allergies?"

That was what she always told me. She said that when her mother fed her tomatoes her lips and tongue and throat

swelled. I threw out the soup when we got home, just in case. Meddlesome me.

"Enough," she says when she's finished her second cup of coffee. I unplug the percolator, sit down to take more notes. She sees my hand poised; I imagine I look like a typical old-time secretary seated before her boss, legs crossed. Mother grunts. "Enough already, can't you hear?"

"No more notes? I thought you meant coffee."

"These things I have to explain. When are you ever going to grow up?"

I've been married; I've been divorced. I went to business college nights. I run a clock shop. I believe I'm adequately grown up. I sigh loudly.

"Imp," Mother says.

I set down the pad of paper. "What next?" I ask.

"Go away. Leave me alone." She sounds like a parrot; her hands flutter like beating wings.

"You want me to leave, I'll leave."

I clear off the table, wash the dishes. "I'll be here tomorrow at three," I tell her.

"What do I need you for?" She looks at me like I'm some rude sales clerk. "Sales clerks these days," she's told me, "think they're better'n you are." I had one come up to me once and say, "You look like you could use some

help." I knew what my mother meant. Still in divorce-mourning, I also knew what the sales clerk meant.

I walk past the television, turn it on. It'll keep her company for the rest of the day. I've got to open the shop. A commercial comes on and a soft woman's voice say, "Beatrice." Mother looks up. "Huh?" she says. I'm about to tell her it's the tv when she says to me, "That's my mother's name. Why you calling me by my mother's name?" Gran's name was Ella Rose. I always loved the sound of it; when I was little I asked my mom why she didn't name me Ella Rose. She said because her mother was retarded. My mother was the eldest of sixteen kids and the only girl. When she hears on the radio or tv about how some woman had quintuplets, or how some Mormon or catholic family up the street's had their sixth, seventh or eighth kid, she'll say, "Retards." For the longest time, though, I thought she really meant her mother was retarded. As in low IQ.

"We'll play gin tomorrow," I tell my mother, kissing her cheek. She wipes the spot where my lips pressed against her flesh. She's never been affectionate. She's funny, and she likes to play games, and I loved her when I was growing up, but Mother never liked to be touched. She and my father were perfect for each other. "I'll be here at three," I say again. "Have the cards ready."

"Gin, huh. You'll teach me how?"

Mother may not remember certain things much, or remember them correctly, but she can still play gin. Numbers: A card's never played that she doesn't remember. I used to listen to my mom and dad playing gin after I'd gone to bed when I was growing up. Lots of triumphant "ha's" from Mom, or her occasional, "You cheat, you cheat! You devil of a cheater! God how I hate them." When my parents came down the hall, way into the night, with the dark following the clicks of the light switches, my father would say, "Beatrice? Beatrice." Their footfalls would stop outside my bedroom door, and my father would whisper, "I love you." I would think with a grin, "Yeah," and fall asleep. Before my father got too sick with dying, I told him about overhearing him tell her he loved her, and how I couldn't wait, when I was a kid, until I was old enough to play gin with my mother. He shook his head. "Hate to play gin with your mother. Never met anyone cheats like her."

Yes, I've learned to hate playing gin with my mom because I never win. Yet these things I know I must do. I care for my mother.

These Things I Never Did When I Was Married:

Leave the bed unmade, piling the blankets and the clothes heaped on them in a bundle at the foot of the futon.

Brush my teeth while sitting on the toilet watching myself (who cared then?)

the faucet drip (no drips then)

ants crawl over the white basin (of course: no ants).

Flush the toilet only after a sizable many #1 uses (still flush immediately after a #2) to conserve water (never mind the damn faucet drip).

Hang toilet paper so the new sheet drapes over the roll.

Leave the laundry in the hamper for weeks.

Drink iced tea at breakfast.

Go out for coffee, become addicted to

espresso

reading newspapers left by early-morning patrons

poppy seed muffins

espresso mixed with a cup of coffee

conversations with strangers

flirting.

Eat vegetarian meals; cook one potato at a time in the oven.

Buy organic food from a natural foods store, get on familiar terms with several friendly clerks and customers.

Have my horoscope read.
Sleep with my astrologer.
Let my hair grow out, cut my own bangs.
Quit shaving my legs and underarms (even though my mother
says--)
Throw away packages of razors sent by my mother.
Shop for my clothes at Goodwill, St. Vincent de Pauls, and
vintage clothing stores.
Stop wearing underwear.
Stop ironing.
Give away new outfits my mother sends.
Let the lawn go; sprinkle wildflowers seeds in the spring.
Paint the house pink.
Paint the walls and ceilings each a different pastel.
Giggle over the obscenity.
Tape, tack, nail up pictures I like: gallery-bought, cut
from magazines or old books, my own originals painted on
rainy Sundays with matchbox-car enamels.
Replace draperies with rice-paper blinds.
Stencil young green ivy leaves crawling over my living room
windows.
Adopt a kitten.
Name him after a my ex-.
Have him fixed.
Grin.

Change the kitten's name to that of a revolutionary.
Play with him at least an hour a day; he is a happy cat.
Let the cat sleep on the table covered with papers, The Nation, letters, books, bills, an Atlas and Dictionary, plants and sticky drink rings.
Buy more books than bookshelf space.
Don't put books in
 alphabetical order
 rows according to size
 sections for hardbound and softbound
Titles may even be shelved upsidedown.
Enroll in graduate school in an arts program (how impractical!).
Write feminist papers.
Never mention having been married--forget how long it's been since . . . since . . . ah, well, there it is.
Have an affair with a professor.
Send her roses and a card apologizing for deceiving her (This is not me.).
Avoid a certain department, certain classes.
Fall in love.
Deny love.
Ignore love; shelve it with the unshelvable books, what libraries call oversized books like:

The Oregon CoastlineAndrew Wyeth: The Helga PicturesThe Whole Earth Catalogue

Have affairs with men more like my ex- than I'd care to admit (until my mother says--).

Join group therapy (ah!); take years before feeling its effects (how long have I been numb?).

Cry (I'm not crying . . .).

Don't cry (Well, okay . . .).

God--I'm crying (that's better).

Be celibate for a year (reclaiming my virginity !?! My mother says--).

Laugh.

What? Laugh!

Laugh and laugh and laugh.

Listen: there's only one person in my house, and she laughs!

Meet a radical environmentalist and become an activist (I have skills . . .I'm useful . . .)

Become, become, become (my mother's becoming mute, my father's becoming a parent and he now writes, telephones).

Stand up for myself to my father.

Finish my master's thesis.

Shrug my shoulders at those who say I'm PhD material.

Take a vacation to Canada--alone.

Enjoy my aloneness.

Enjoy my aloneness!

It's the date of my wedding anniversary; enjoy my aloneness.

Count my savings, save my savings, be budget-conscious, live off of four-hundred-fifty dollars a month.

Have passport photos taken.

Count my four thousand dollars in the bank.

Grin.

(Who was it who called me a spendthrift?)

Study maps of Europe (oops, I did that when I was married).

Study maps of Asia.

Study my new passport photos--study my old passport (I've lost weight, I've improved with age, HA!).

Smile, go stand in front of a mirror and touch myself.

Make love to myself.

Enjoy myself.

Fill the bath with HOT water, mix in Government Dried Milk, soak until my skin is

ivory crepe de chine

white chocolate mousse

down.

Try to figure out to what uses I can put my Government Processed Cheese--perhaps a boarder for the flower beds/yard?

Figure it will kill the plants.

Let the tub drain, shower off.

Use two towels instead of one to dry myself.

Draw peace signs, smiley faces, horses heads, lips, over
the mist-covered mirror.

Don't blow-dry my hair.

Walk through the house butt-naked.

Dance to women's music until I'm exhausted and my hair is
dry.

Fall asleep, diagonally, taking up the whole double bed.

Remember that the reason I don't have a couch to my name is
so that I'll never sleep on one again in my own home.

Fall asleep without crying.

Fayetteville, 1968

[Fayetteville, North Carolina, is the home of two military bases, the Army's Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base. Fort Bragg is the "Home of the Green Berets". During the height the the Vietnam war, there were so many war dead that the base contracted with Fayetteville taxi companies to deliver their telegrams. Oftentimes, the taxi drivers would simply deposit their telegrams in mailboxes.]

Wednesday, not unlike Monday and Friday, is bridge day for the four military wives, Patti, Roxi Lee, Samantha and Helen. They are seated around a fold-up card table that Patti stores in the hall closet and sets up in the living room the three bridge days a week. Patti's children are giggling through a game of blindman's bluff in her front yard. She has seated herself at the table so that she can glance out the living room bay window to make sure they stay within the limits of the yard. Her youngest has long been potty-trained, but Patti's kept most of the baby things; who knows? perhaps when her husband returns from his tour of duty in Vietnam they'll begin talking about a fourth child. Patti loves children. She loves carrying and caring for them.

Roxi Lee has an infant asleep in Patti's old playpen set up alongside of the cardtable. Her baby girl--her first child--was born after her husband's orders took him to Southeast Asia. He is a pilot, and has written that although he's based in Bangkok, he flies routinely into

Saigon. Roxi Lee has taken to biting the soft skin around her fingernails and does so as she watches her daughter stir and sigh, roll over from her stomach to her back.

"Honey, get your fingers out of your mouth; you'll spread disease," Samantha says. She is the oldest of the four women, and Patti's neighbor. Her two sons--eighteen and twenty--are college students at Duke. She has a Duke sticker right up next to her old base sticker on the bumper of her car. Her husband was career military, stayed in for twenty years. She has lived in Asia, Europe and the Middle East and all parts of the states, including Hawaii. Women, whose husbands have recently received their transfers, call Samantha for her advice on what life will be like in Dayton, Ohio, or Phoenix, Arizona, Waco, Texas, or Tacoma, Washington. If Samantha hasn't lived there, she has talked with those who have.

Samantha, though, has lived now in Fayetteville for six years. Six years is the longest she's ever lived in one town since her marriage. Her husband retired here; but he did not stay here. After his retirement, he told Samantha she was too tired and run down for himself. She no longer had skills to find work, and he found the day-to-day with her dull. He drank. He played golf daily. He came home late. One day four years ago, he left Samantha a note; he had met a woman at the golf course. Although the

same age as Samantha, she seemed much younger; she was still beautiful, and was interested in all that he had done while in the service and all that he wanted to do now that he was out; and she was interesting herself--not only college educated but self-supporting. She owned her own boutique in town.

Sometimes, when it is late at night and Samantha cannot find sleep even on the couch--when she feels as empty and abandoned as the house and rooms that shelter her--she wishes that her husband had stayed in the service long enough to have been sent to Vietnam. Maybe . . . he would have

Samantha will cry herself to sleep, or telephone her oldest son, never mind the hour. "Come home," she'll tell her son.

"Mom, it's impossible," he pleads. "You know that. You should get out more. Try dating . . . something."

"What? Here? In Fayetteville--a military man, you mean."

"Mom--Mom." He'll sigh. "Look, I'm sorry, Mom, but I've got a test tomorrow. I gotta go. Okay, Mom?"

And she'll think--and keep herself from saying into the click of his deadened line--"Every day's a test, you'll see. Don't ever think you've ever passed anything."

"Honestly," Samantha says to Roxi Lee, "not with the baby, don't put your hands in your mouth." She waves at Roxi Lee's habit like it were a gnat. Samantha was a registered nurse when she met her husband. Before finding any nursing work now that he's gone, she'd have to return to school; but she prefers to live off her husband's support checks. She's forty-two and figures she's earned her retirement as well as he. This he would argue, of course.

Helen looks up from her hand and says, "Roxi's only nervous, Samantha. Stop teasing her, you'll make her more nervous."

Roxi Lee laughs. "It's her strategy, don't you see, Helen? Distracting us from our game."

Helen smiles, nods. The three women seated around her envy Helen. She has a smooth, long figure, and a face and personality riding anywhere from twenty-five to forty; no one often guesses her age. She likes it like that. She opens herself up so often during her working months teaching elementary school that when she's off work or on summer vacation--like now--she reveals little about her self and her life.

Helen is a widow. These women who invite her into their game appreciate that she is quiet about her circumstances. None of the three really knows when, where

or how her husband died. If she lost her husband in 'Nam, neither Patti nor Roxi Lee would dare to ask. Helen is also childless. Seven years ago, she found her four-month-old son death-blue in his crib. This much she has mentioned to Samantha; but she is especially careful not to mention her loss around Roxi Lee.

Reliable sources have rumored to Samantha that Helen's husband hanged himself after his son died and Helen suffered a nervous breakdown. She never even hunted down a definite confirmation or denial of the rumor, but she does take the rumor seriously. It is the only rumor that Samantha has never let pass through her lips. She considers herself Helen's special friend, and makes herself available to her at anytime. Samantha also feels akin to Helen because they have lived in Fayetteville the longest and will continue to live here long past the years Patti and Roxi Lee will be stationed elsewhere.

Roxi Lee's baby is crying, and putting out an odor. With a sigh, Roxi Lee puts her card-hand face down on the table. "I guess it's that time," she says, laughing. "The daily dirty dozen."

The women join her laughing.

Patti too sets down her cards, and turns her attention to her children. Outside, her little boys run in circles around her oldest, her daughter. How strange their waving

arms look to her; she thinks only the arms of her children have grown this year. Maybe their growth spurts come and go, year in and year out, according to body parts. Last year, it seemed she noticed for the first time that the girl and the oldest boy were destined for braces. Where they will find the money for braces, Patti does not know. Her daughter is not far from puberty either; Patti feels changes in the girl's temper.

"You're fortunate never to have had a girl," Patti says to Samantha.

"How so?"

Beside Samantha, Helen stands up, stretches. "Here," she offers Roxi Lee, "I'll help you with the baby. She's getting so big so fast--are those dimples?"

"Oh," Patti says to Samantha, "I'm thinking of puberty."

"Are you kidding?" Samantha retorts. "Wait until you have to explain menstruation to your boys."

"I never thought about that."

"Who has dimples in your family?" Helen asks Roxi Lee. "Oh! You know, I'd never really noticed, Roxi. Smile again. Lucky you. Lucky her."

"There's so much you never think about," Samantha tells Patti. "Then sometimes, there are things you think about. Only it's too late. The children are grown, gone

even, and you've suddenly remembered that they needed some certain little bit of information, help or support at, say, six. You forgot to give them something essential.

"There's no end to the ways you can remind yourself of how you've failed as a parent."

"Listen to you, Samantha!" Patti says. "Two wonderful boys you've practically raised on your own! Duke and all that future before them. Why, they're such responsible young men, too. You have every right to be proud."

Patti turns her attention to Helen and Roxi Lee and the baby. She's off down the hall getting something for Roxi Lee.

Samantha watches Patti's two boys and girl. They're very lively children, and often--when she'll watch them discreetly through her kitchen window--their happy squeals and laughter make her cry. She'll want her boys back. She'll want to hear the way they talked to each other before their voices changed. Before they spent less and less time together.

Her oldest tells her that he hardly ever sees his brother on campus. The youngest pledged a fraternity and the oldest found that decision offensive.

Her boys did not come home last Thanksgiving. Even though Samantha spent the day at Patti's, it was still awful. Worse than the first year she and the boys had

Thanksgiving alone, not because their father was out on assignment or TDY, but, because he was with a woman Samantha's age who had never sacrificed her career to follow a man's as it criss-crossed the country and the seas, who had never sacrificed her figure birthing two boys, or who had never sacrificed her face staying awake all night long because this worry was that her husband might never return home, that worry was because the oldest had whooping cough and a temperature of one hundred four degrees.

A fine neighbor, though, Patti. And fine children. "Soon," Samantha tells herself, "there will be grandchildren for me."

From her seat at the card table, Samantha can see out past the yard, into and beyond her own, down to the end of the street, two blocks long, where it intersects the road leading from the bases to town. Another two blocks past the busy intersection, their street deadends. A narrow strip of pines cap the dead end like the slash at the top of a "t". And from there, the army base begins. A dirt road, or, rather, a red clay road follows the line of pines. Before the boys left home, Samantha used to have to walk the five blocks in a marching stride to the clay road. If it rolled up red clouds, she could find her sons straddling their bikes, watching with their friends the

heavy armory being hauled between the base and the war games fields. Samantha detested the red clay road; she "grounded" her sons when she found them playing near it.

Long before her husband left her, Samantha determined that she would not allow her boys to join the military. Not even to put themselves through college. She had to persuade her youngest not to join the Reserve Officer Training Corps when he left for college. Samantha would sooner take her boys to Canada than let them be drafted.

The military already robbed her of one man she loved. She would give it no other.

Flashes of color mark the busy intersection. As Samantha is looking on, one of those flashes makes a turn onto their street. It is yellow. Samantha straightens up. A shark, she says to herself. She glances at Patti's children, and in the moment of her glance the children still, quiet down, face the approaching car. A boy mowing the lawn across the street has stopped his mower, and is pushing it towards the garage. Yes, Samantha thinks, yes. Another one.

The yellow car, a taxi cab, creeps up the street, pausing at each mailbox to scan numbers.

"Shark," Samantha says loudly.

"Oh, God," Helen says. "But it's only ten o'clock."

Roxi Lee presses her baby too tightly to herself, and the baby squirms and grunts in objection. Roxi Lee doesn't seem to notice. Her fingers knead her baby's shoulders.

Patti's at the the front door calling in her children. They are silent and slow falling in. As they pass under her arm holding open the screen door, Patti says to them, "Why don't you all go on into your rooms and play for a while. I think it's going to start raining."

"Raining?" her daughter questions. "There's not a cloud in the sky, Mom."

"Hush. Summer clouds come on fast. We heard a weather report. Besides, I can smell it in the air."

The children shuffle down the hall to their rooms. "It's the taxi," the girl remarks, her voice distinctly pouty. "You know it's the taxi."

"But why?" one of the boys asks before a bedroom door slams.

Patti holds open the screen door, but she is watching Samantha. Samantha: still and poker-faced. Samantha holding her hand fanned over her unmoving breast.

"Galloway," Roxi Lee nearly shouts. Helen pulls the baby from Roxi Lee's grip a moment before she begins to wail. "Is it up to Galloway?" Roxi Lee lives on Galloway, just off of Patti's and Samantha's street near the intersection. "Did it turn up Galloway?" She brushes

against Samantha, meaning to pass her, put her face against the cool glass of the bay window, but stops, drawn instead to the warmth of Samantha's soft shoulder. Roxi Lee leans against her.

Samantha's shaking her head.

"No? No what?" Near-sighted Roxi Lee cannot see what Samantha sees.

"It's past Galloway," Samantha says.

Helen bounces Roxi Lee's baby in her arms; she brings out the infant's smiles. She coos and the baby laughs.

"Dimples," she whispers. "Baby-baby has dimples."

Samantha says, "It's . . . it's . . ."

And Patti cries, "Oh, dear God." Her arm falls to her side, the screen door claps shut. "Oh, dear God. Oh, dear God." She falls back, against the closet door--her hands covering her face. "It did not stop. Tell me it did not stop. Samantha? It did not stop, Samantha! Samantha! Oh God, oh God, I heard a car door. I heard it. Where is he going? Tell me he's crossing the street, Samantha! Samantha?" She's pressing her fingers bloodless and white over her face.

"Helen," Samantha whispers, "why don't you take Patti's children to a movie?" She takes the baby from Helen, grabs Helen's shoulders, pushes her off in the direction of the children's rooms. "Roxi Lee, honey," she

says, handing the young woman her infant girl, "it's best that you leave by the side of the house." Roxi Lee holds her baby in front of her like a shield. "Go on, now," Samantha tells her. "Go on."

Patti has slid down the closet door, her legs folded beneath her. Samantha passes out of the house into the strangely silent moment. The neighborhood is now empty of children and mowers. Sprinklers have been shut off, and the women in sun hats and gardening gloves with their rubber palms, have retreated into their houses. The windows of those neighboring houses: watchful eyes.

"Missing in action," Samantha chants softly to herself, "missing, missing, missing." She thinks, "If he's missing in action . . . then . . . what?" Then what?

Up the sidewalk she meets the cab driver, his cap pulled over his head so his entire face is in shadow. The telegram shakes in his hand. For a moment, for the moment she sees the shadowed, aged face of the taxi driver, Samantha has to talk herself out of spitting in his face. When she takes the telegram from his hand--his smooth hand--she looks up to say something, but she cannot: he can't be more than eighteen.

CHAPTER II

THREE SECTIONS OF FINGERPAINTING, A NOVEL
IN PROGRESSGardenias

Moments before the grieving family was led through the chapel doors, a garland of gardenias was set around her head by gentle and practiced hands. These blossoms, white, waxen, easily bruised to brown, and most sweet past bloom, held their seductive perfume over the girl's motionless lips, and waited, like damp-winged butterflies for a wind to lift them into flight.

Wreathed and vase-arranged roses already saturated the sealed, air-conditioned room; their fragrance seeped into the lungs and minds of the family as they made their way past row and row of empty pews to the casket's platform beneath a lighted cross; their fragrance rolled from the the family's direction like water waking from a swimmer; their fragrance lapped against the chapel walls then washed into the eddies of air beneath the cathedral ceiling. The room, the ritual, seemed to belong to the dominance of roses.

A woman, a mother, stops before the rose-crested platform staging the silver casket, one half of its lid

propped open. Her arms sag over the shoulders of a young girl in cotton gloves, and a mild-faced boy. Behind her stand two young men, one too bulky for his tired navy suit, the other too tall in gray.

The boy sniffs garishly, moans; the square young man whispers, "Hush"; the girl weeps into her gloves; and the tall young man shuffles his feet. The mother squares her jaw, sucks in her cheeks.

Only one in the room is silent, she who belongs to these who suffer the images of her open smiles and quick eyes and strong voice and bold gestures--sweeping arms and pounding strides. Still. Images they fear will scatter like pearls slipped from their string when the casket is closed. Still. The silver-metal casket, one half of the divided lid propped open--an open eye--surrounded by roses, all buds, all red and red and red. Still.

Well, the mother whispers, nudging the children she holds. Well and well and well, she thinks.

There is a movement behind the casket. A man, dark and clean-dressed, smiles, nods at the woman, the mother. She motions him to her.

I know flowers, she whispers. I grow flowers, but not roses.

Yes, m'am, he answers, his hands clasped, pressing lightly together at his beltline.

Where are these roses from, she asks.

Those two on the left, he points, were sent here; you'll find their cards. A Colonel and Mrs. Moore, I believe. The other, I'm sorry, I can't remember.

And the rest?

Ah, those came are with the entire arrangement. From the chapel.

I had roses at my wedding. I had roses at my bedside for the birth of the first four of my children.

The square young man steps between the woman and the chapel attendant. Mamma, he says. He touches her shoulder.

She goes on. I had roses at my bedside for the birth of this child.

Yes, m'am, the attendant says.

I had roses for every Mother's Day.

M'am?

Mamma?

We have a funeral here, a child is dead.

M'am.

Mamma.

Now roses? For a child's death? She shakes her head. No: no roses.

Would you like me to take them away, m'am?

Yes.

And the graveside ceremony, m'am? Do you want any of the roses there?

No, not there either. Do you understand? Where is the garland I requested?

I placed them on her head.

That is all.

Mamma. The gifts. Mamma?

She stands motionless as the clean-dressed men carry off the roses, exposing the silver casket, leaving it barren, alone on the platform. When they are done, she moves to it. She touches the garland, moves her fingers from its waxy stiffness to the sixteen-year old girl's cold rigid face. Her fingers tremble, touching that hard, hard cold, and the mother lets close her eyes. She withdraws her hand.

Her movements send the first swell of air through the girl's casket. The sweetness of gardenia is lifted into a maiden voyage up and down the coffin's pink satin lining; it bathes the child's diaphanous cheeks in scent, washes the white still hands crossed over ribs--the cuffs of the white meant-for-prom dress stitched to the quiet bodice--rinses over the silk slippered foot absent its companion less than a week.

The sweetness of gardenia is lifted quietly up and out into the rose-scented air, tendrilling silent and sightless

towards the mother's breath, through her lungs folding and unfolding, into her blood pulsed, and settles among the crevices of her mind and imagination. The fragrance hovers, then wafts in and through and out of the living, bridging what the child was over what she is to what she will be: living, dead, now remembered. The roses, they had their own ceremonies, their own memories; now the gardenia's claim theirs.

The mother straightens, full of gardenia, full of memory. She moves on. She is satisfied: The fragrance has worked its interjacence between the dead and the living. Between the past and present.

Following her, each of her living children passes, pauses at, and moves past the casket, past the girl trapped motionless and silent. Solid and cold. The young girl strips her hand free of their gloves and touches the face of her sister. Her gray-suited brother holds her at her waist. She squirms and he put her down; but her hand stays in the coffin, feeling over the hard ridges of her sister's face. They finger the velvet petal of gardenia. A flower loosens from the garland at her touch, falls into the cradle of her palm. She looks up; no one has seen what she has done. She closes her fingers over the flower and draws it up and out and nests it in the pocket of her dress.

The ritual over--the mourners, entered after the family had made their peace with the dead, have hushed their crying--the gentle and practiced hands reach to remove the garland of gardenias and are stopped by the girl's mother. "They stay with the girl," she says. "The flowers stay." The young girl watches her mother. Her fingers smooth over the petals in her hands. The casket lid is shut, the chapel doors open.

Fingerpainting

Stones rose and fell with the hill, their rolling mimicry miniaturizing the curves of the hills themselves. The day's noon heat and sky reflected off their flat faces; under trees, stone whiteness was smudged with shadows elongated and vague like sleepy eyes. Paper leaves hanging motionless offered no relief, only mute interruption. The air simmered like held anger.

A small procession of mourners gathered behind four neatly dressed attendants; a silver casket balanced on the attendants' shoulders. They left a small line of cars parked behind a black hearse and began walking up the hill, their footsteps crackling through the summer brown grass, echoing the pulse of noon. Hot, fevered August noon. As they passed under a stand of oaks, their dark clothing darkened in the shade. The light flickered through the leaves, but the heat was stagnant.

Few talked few words. What they spoke fell from their mouths like iron into the still air--too heavy to pick up, too cold to forge, too grey to radiate an image.

A mother and her four children trailed the procession. The children traveled behind their mother in pairs: a tall young man in a gray suit coaxing a mild-faced, slow-witted boy, and a thick, square young man holding the hand of a young girl. The mother glanced

nervously back at them, then anxiously forward. She stopped periodically to hurry them along with a curt wave of her hand, and a harsh whisper.

Peyton Lafleur let go of her brother's hand, grabbing at her black wool dress, pulling it from sticky-wet skin. A line of sweat trickled down the groove of her spine, another ran down the inside of her bare leg. Sweat drops were as persistent and frustrating as houseflies tickling her skin and too quick to catch. She licked those salty beads forming on her upper lip and glanced behind her to the curve of cars snaking along the cemetery's avenue.

Their black Ford sat behind the hearse, the first in the short line of open eyes. On the drive from the chapel ceremony to the cemetery, Peyton had watched the starch-still curtains drawn taut over the hearse's back window for movement. Any movement, any. Cindii Lafleur pulling aside the curtains, smiling, laughing, waving. A joke. A Cindii joke, brash and rude and bold. Peyton waited, wedged for the ride in the following Ford between her oldest brother Bobby and her mother, and she waited. But the hearse had stopped. Its driver and passenger pulling open the long arching door with its window and taut, still curtain, and withdrew the silver casket. Four men. Peyton's mother Mona had refused to let her brother carry Cindii. The hearse, long and black; the casket, long and silver; the

ambulance of a week ago that had taken Cindii to the hospital from where she never returned, long and white. Queer, the similarities; queer the differences.

Peyton had not gone with the ambulance the Sunday morning it fled screaming and flashing, white and red and windowless. She did not visit her sister in the hospital. She knew little of Cindii's illness. Happened to have heard of the leg amputated, cut from her body as cleanly as her life a week following.

Bobby tugged Peyton, and nodded toward the line ahead of them. I'm hot, Peyton said, her voice sounding nearly as young as she was. Do you want me to carry you, he asked; No, Peyton snapped, I'm too big for that. Eight was not too big to be carried, but eight was too old to be carried. She began to walk.

The young attendants leading the way had disappeared over a hill. It was the first time in the day that they were out of Peyton's sight. She had watched them constantly, from the time they opened the chapel doors and seated the family in a vestibule looking east over Cindii, while everyone else faced south to the time they motioned to the trail through the cemetery saying, "If you'll follow us, please. She's just over the hill, under a lovely oak." Their smiles and low soft voices and glass eyes, their passive movements closing the casket, lifting it to

their shoulders: So many manners so will fitted like the suits they wore. Was it nothing to them, this something so big? Peyton had wondered. How could anything ever come to nothing?

Their mother put Peyton under Bobby's charge, and Fool-Stu the calm-faced boy under tall Sandy's. Stu was a walker, and usually a talker, though even he was slowed and hushed by the heavy heat and meaning of the day. These two boys were half way up the final slope when Sandy stopped at a stone and pointed. Their mother Mona caught up and pushed them on, but Sandy's glance stayed with the grainy stone as she urged him forward. He called back to Bobby: See it?

Bobby answered, Go on, Sandy. I see it; go on.

Peyton gave her mother a look of question, but was ignored.

Come on, Mona called, her voice slow and dry. This heat--she protested.

By the time Bobby and Peyton caught up with Mona, sweat had crept into the corners of Peyton's eyes, blurring and stinging them. When she rubbed, they felt worse. She could barely make out the letters of the gravestone Sandy had pointed to, but they spelled out a name she knew--Tov Beecham, a boy dead last summer. Dead at sixteen, like Cindii. She faintly remembered Tov, knew he had been an

interest of Cindii's, a friend of Sandy's, and accepted by her mother. Not like Kurt. Not at all like Kurt.

Where was Kurt? Why wasn't he here? Wasn't Kurt the young man who had loved Cindii?

Bobby squeezed Peyton's hand, and she skipped to catch up, but the heat made her head light and her legs numb. She pitied her mamma wearing stockings.

Mona's legs glistened from sweat clinging to the nylon pores. Her legs were swelling about the ankles, the skin rising like bread, pressing against the seams of her dusty black pumps. Old woman legs. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. Her makeup clotted the shadowed lines around her eyes and mouth. She sucked on the insides of her cheeks, hollowing the skin between cheekbone and jaw. Heat and sweat, pain and anger.

The Lafleurs--Mona and her children--and the party of mourners--mostly church acquaintances--reached the shade of the oak; Cindii lay in full sun, girdered over a grave sliced straight through the dry soil into the earth deep and moist. They formed a crescent within the shade; the pastor took his place in the sun.

Less than an hour ago, Peyton had kissed her sister, had smelled a sweetness she had never experienced before and had to have. A piece of sweetness that was only

Cindii's; a piece of sweetness that was Cindii. She reached into the coffin and plucked up a flower from a stiff white garland, and dropped it in her dress pocket. Now, she could almost smell the moist fragrance smoking up from her pocket. But she did not; the air was so dry and still even the roses of the wreaths the funeral-men brought to the grave site had wilted the petals over any remaining scent.

Peyton fingered the cool flower in her pocket. Cool and waxy as her sister's cheek.

Standing among the wilted wreaths, the preacher talked his words more aching than those of his Sunday services. Long, slow, lifeless words with no images for relief-- heaven and earth, sin and its wages, children and the Lord Jesus. Dutiful words from a dutiful mind, dry as the day. He pressed his palms together. Amen, he said.

Amen, answered the gathering, their heads bowed. They were faces Peyton had never noticed, would not remember, but were somehow familiar to her. They were faces shadowed by black hats, hidden behind black netting, dappled with the movements of wettened handkerchiefs. They were women and men much older than Peyton, older even than her mother. They were the same faces she felt turning to watch her and her family walk down the church aisle, and their voices were the ones she had heard in whispers following

their backs. They were the people Peyton asked her mother about, and was told, "They are Christians. We are all Christians." They were the people who attended funerals without feeling the salt of tears clinging to their cheeks. Peyton did not know why they had come.

The preacher's voice had scattered weightless as dust. Amen, amen, amen. A wetness from Peyton's eyes dimpled the dust at her feet, pocked her dusty shoes. Dust to dust: Amen, she whispered.

The church faces gathered, each nodding to the Lafleurs as they turned from the grave. The preacher looked up from his sleep gaze and held out his arms. He shook Mona's hand and squeezed her shoulder, then turned after his flock. The funeral attendants followed.

Mona motioned her children to her. Cindii lay before them, closed and sealed like a secret. Together they stood in silence, until the shuffle of feet behind them, and the chattering voices, freed from their whispers by the preacher's Amen, no longer could be heard. The noise of the heat began to Shsssh, like a wave rolling, rolling to smooth her beach.

Two men in dungarees moved from behind an oak and took up the ropes cradling Cindii's casket. A man for each side of the casket, a rope for each hand. They lowered her unevenly and ungently into the grave until the casket hit

bottom. Peyton had not considered there being a bottom, the casket making a thud. In her mind, the hole Cindii had covered was black and endless. She pictured someone--some one of them, not men in denim--severing the ropes and letting Cindii in the silver-metal casket fall and fall and fall to eternity. Free.

Fool-Stu cried out at the thud: Cindii! Cindii! He rocked side to side, wringing his large, damp hands, and bellowed repeatedly his stertorous Cindii's.

The hand Mona placed on Peyton's shoulder tightened until Peyton felt pain, but Mona's face remained hollow and fixed--light twitches at the edges of her mouth revealed a determination to remain quiet and calm. She only nodded at Sandy, and he lead Stu away.

She's in heaven, Stu, Sandy massaged.

Why? Why? Stu moaned, rubbing his hands over his face messing himself with his sobs.

She's in heaven--God loves her.

But I love her, Stu moaned. His cries beat through the air, lessened; and, with distance, the air then waked over itself to reclaim its stillness.

As the silence resettled, Mona loosened her hold on Peyton's shoulder. She picked a rose from a wreath rolled it in the palm of her hand and tossed the limp red flower in after the coffin. Bobby pressed a dark soil clump into

Peyton's small hand. It was still cool and moist. He squatted down behind her and whispered, pointing: Throw this in after the rose. Bobby's encouraging push stopped at the grave's edge; he held Peyton tightly at arm's reach. Go on, now, he whispered, Go on. She threw the dirt into the hole, and it pelted across the smooth metal casket like cat prints over a car's hood.

She looked up as Bobby reeled her in, and saw the couple for the first time. A man, and a woman near Cindii's age, watching. He wore a navy blue jacket with a double breast of brass buttons, a white sailing cap, white sailcloth trousers and white leather moccasins. Beside him, belonging only to him, clinging to his stiff-cocked arm, she stood shaky on thin legs towering up from high-heeled pink shoes that matched her pink pink mini. A flamingo. Peyton felt an instinctive jump in her stomach not of fear but violation, intrusion. The audacity of their presence and dress glared like an unfair gesture--incomprehensible, hurtful--yet somehow fateful enough to belong.

Mona did not act as if she had seen the couple. She held a fistful of soil over her daughter's grave and opened her bloodless white hand. The ball of dirt rested on her

fingertips. It did not move, so pressed was it with the indentions of her skin and bones, anger and astonishment.

Hush, Bobby said before Peyton had even raised her finger to point at the couple. Hush. His words were not scolding, not impatience, but an embarrassment. Peyton blushed at her own naivete'. She searched Bobby's and Mona's faces for chance words to fall from their expressions, but her mother's face remained immobile as the couple stepped from the oak's shadow into the sun glare. Only Bobby's eyes moved, flicking over the white on white and pink pink couple like feet twitching over hot pavement.

Peyton recoiled in fear, pressing her face into Bobby's leg, wishing she'd never come--not even for Cindii. Not even for the pride of having overheard Mona's insistence that she and Stu come to the funeral, Bobby arguing that they remain at Mrs. Mosley's. And Mona saying, "No, Bobby, they are coming with us."

Mrs. Mosley was their neighbor, a mother-smelling woman past child-rearing age, yet still between youth and a stock of white hair. She pulled from her cabinets slick white paper and pots of colored paints for Peyton to dip her fingers into. Cool and wet and smooth before sticky. Where Peyton pressed the paper, the paint moved aside in streaks; she could slide the image into shape or leave it as formless as smoke. She could choose her colors with

appropriate care to the picture she was after; and if she mis-captured the image, she could rub the slick paper clean to begin again.

The clump of dirt in Mona's hand fell like a heart beat on her daughter's casket. She turned from the grave, from the couple opposite her and snatched up Peyton's hand, pulling her to her side. Her grip was as tight as the ball of soil that had rolled from her fingers without loosening a grain. Peyton felt her hand wrenched from her--it belonged to her mother; the belonging traveled up her arm, to her shoulder, her heart, and mind. She looked at the mother who possessed her: There was nothing and everything between them. What Mona felt Peyton felt: fear shut inside them both, bouncing, pounding, ricocheting, beating and beating. As it filled her up, inflating her nerves like air forced into a balloon, Mona marched. Her steps were long and strong, one leg of two-fold grief, the other of two-fold anger, and Peyton was jerked from the ground.

Mona's pace was too fast in the heat. The air Peyton gulped, in fear and hurry, burned in her mouth and throat, and the blood that reached her temples bubbled there, aching. Her mother's fury threw the couple into her imagination: their colors were not clothes, but feathers, wings; and they took to the hot white winds throwing shadows over the mother and child running. It was Peyton's

smallness--her incapable steps too short--which held them back, kept them in the bareness of the stretch from hillock to hillock to car. The stones about them flattened, the long shade of trees flickered over their path. Peyton's heart pounded out danger and fear and passion.

They'd made it half-way to the car, were climbing the last slope that would bring Sandy and Stu into view, when Peyton stumbled, fell hard against the pull of her mother's arm. She screamed, Mamma! Mamma! -- panicked that she'd be left behind, sacrificed to talons as the birds swooped to carry her off.

*

Sandy had had enough of fool-Stu's slobbering and moaning and Cindii-mumbling by the time they reached Tov's headstone. He stopped his brother and pulled the round, wet-swelled face to his. The boy's reddened blue eyes widened. Puffy and slanted out and down. They were an old man's eyes.

Fool-Stu knew Sandy wanted him to stop crying, but he couldn't stop, much as he knew he was supposed to. He'd say to himself: Tears stop, Sandy say so. Or he would try to hold in his breath; but when his lungs swelled, his blubbering was that much louder, and Sandy sent him hard

glances. All this much worry, and Fool-Stu felt closer to wetting himself. And he knew better than to wet his good clothes. Sunday clothes, stiff and Sunday-smelling. He liked to wear them; he like the trips to church.

They had fooled him this morning, setting out his Sunday wear. Cindii had not come in to dress him. Sandy had helped, and that got Fool-Stu crying. He had not wanted to come. Fine with me, Sandy said. Then he wanted to come. Where was Cindii?

Oh, then he remembered: the empty church where they sat where singers sit, but they did not sing--and that long box that Cindii--

Sandy tightened his hold on the shoulders of Fool-Stu's suit.

Enough, Stu, he growled. I'm hot, I'm tired, and I don't want to listen to you.

Fool-Stu rolled his head from side to side, trying to loosen the words I'm sorry from his sobbing and whining. But let one go and the other exploded with it. His jaw slackened, and as he took in a breath that whistled deep in his throat, Sandy anticipated him. He shook Stu, shouting, Enough! Enough!

Stu's mouth snapped shut.

Sandy pushed Stu away from himself and stepped back. Enough, he sighed. Sandy circled around the headstone.

You remember Tov, you old fool, Stu? Tov? Tov Beecham? Tov, he whispered to the headstone.

Fool-Stu knew the sound "Tov," but not how or why. It sounded like the name of a song or a story Sandy on friendlier terms would ask if he wanted to hear; like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Stu would know the words Sandy used, but could not hum a tune without his prompting. Once Sandy began humming, then of course he knew. Yes, he knew that song. The relief from his anxiety would be half of what he enjoyed about hearing it. Tov, Sandy had said. Tov.

The boy's mouth opened wide and spilled out a long high wail. Sandy leapt on him, grabbing his shoulder with one hand, and raising the other to slap the hollow, resonating cheek.

Fool-Stu squawked, twisted and gasped like a noosed bird then quieted down as if the slap hooded his senses. He held his hand over the reddening spot of cheek. Ah, Stu, Sandy moaned, wrapping his arm around the fool, squeezing him. It's okay, Stu. Okay, Sandy soothed. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd remember Tov.

Sandy knew if he had to slap Stu around he'd better mean it. Two years before, when he'd been fifteen, and Stu was thirteen, Sandy slapped his brother for no reason. No real reason. Only the prompting of a neighborhood boy.

Only that. A dare, a kid telling Sandy he was like a girl to his brother. He struck Stu, and it was days before Stu stopped crying when he saw Sandy, days before he forgot the red sting on his face. What Sandy hadn't meant, the fool knew. The blow had not carried only anger and duty, it had carried fear, and fear lasted, fear lingered.

We were right here last summer, Sandy said, pointing to the grave. Me and Bobby and Cin--he cleared his throat. Strange thing was--he continued, knowing that Stu couldn't completely understand him, the words, maybe, but not the feelings--The strange thing was, it rained. In August, it rained. Sandy looked around him, past his quiet brother, as if the white heat of the day was the fog of the past August.

A circle of people, young friends and adults, stood under black umbrellas. The rain was thick, hitting the black canvasses with heavy plops. Water trickled past them, rolling over the hard summer ground, around their muddy shoes; the wet dead grass was oil-slick--it had been a hard climb to the gravesite. Below the steady noise of the rain, Sandy heard the kind words of the preacher, of Tov's friends, the cries of his sisters and parents, and the moaning of Tov's grandmother. And Cindii cried, Cindii cried. Bobby looked tired, older and worn out. Sandy had thought then, This should not have happened, this dying

young. How can we have faith? How are we to trust the truth?

Sandy looked up at the dry, heat-shimmering sky. Belief, Tov, he whispered, is the water and truth is the boy who can't swim.

I remember it, Stu ventured, peeking at Sandy, trying to get past his queer look into one that meant a story, or a song, or something familiar. But he did not remember, and felt an embarrassment--like he'd get caught and Sandy would be mad. Or that Sandy would even laugh at him, hurt his feelings because he was trying to do more than he knew how. Sandy knew the truth and would laugh.

But in kindness--or maybe it was something else--Sandy ignored Stu's interjection. Raining in August, said Sandy. And Tov had drown.

This day was sweating Sandy up. His clothes were wet. It was the hottest damn day; yesterday broke records. And he thought, There's the connection. But no, that wasn't right. People die of burns on rainy days--and to their folks, perhaps in that there had been irony. What if Cindii had died on a beautiful spring day, a cold fall day, or winter--Snow? How could there not be irony in a death when snow was falling?

Death's ironic, it came to Sandy, three hundred sixty-five ways ironic.

There was Sam Herring's dad a few years ago. Sam's mom moaning about how Mr. Herring had only three to ten months to live; and the night he was told of the cancer, he got drunk, slipped on the stairs and broke his neck. Sure. Death's not ironic: death plays fair: she takes all who belong to her, come time. We all belong to death. It's a matter of return. Each day you wake up to complete a day is like getting on with finishing what work needs doing before you can go home. But the control, the consciousness, this belongs only to death; we cannot take that from her, we cannot protest.

There were other strange, ironic connections between these two deaths. Cindii and Tov used to date. They'd both died when they were sixteen, one of water one of fire. And Cindii was the first to dare swim that pond again where Tov died. Rumors spread about the pond a week after the funeral. One was that it was stocked with an alligator. Or, if you shook your head in disbelief at that, there was the other that an old man with a rifle hid out in the wild blueberry bushes on the north side. He slept in the abandoned mill there.

Whether or not anyone believed any rumors, there was a tension in the neighborhood, and the kids respected it. They respected the pond as a haunt of death--and while she took Tov in a most simple way, no one expected her to

strike again so simply. Death's mystery deserved an elaborate plan, the neighborhood figured, like armed old men and alligators.

Bobby and Sandy still fished the pond: they were older boys, seventeen and sixteen, who knew the rumors for what they were, excuses to supplant a fear of drowning. They fished in their swimming trunks, but didn't wade out past where the water lapped up warm and clear over the river rocks picked clean of skipping stones. There was someone in the blueberries--only a kid yelling dares at Bobby and Sandy. Ain't ya gonna swim? Huh? Ain't afraid, are ya? Bobby shook his head, No. A slow wizened, decided No. Wouldn't look up. The dare turned on Sandy, and Bobby's shaking spread over him; a No for the dare and a No to Sandy's creeping hotness.

The kid's voice waved over the pond, steady and forward; and even when it ceased, even when the boy caught his breath, the dare rolled through Sandy's mind like an ocean rhythm captured in a shell held to his ear. Washing and washing.

Bobby broke the spell, while Sandy stood in anxious pain between ought and should, would and want. Bobby yelled: We respect our mother's concern! He spoke as if he were innocent of the security a mother's desire gave them. But the boy's taunting stopped; he did not question the

words' truth, any fear they might have masked, or the excuse they conveniently and obviously afforded the brothers.

But a girl's laughter pounded out from behind them: and she knew. This strapping laughter clubbed through the words and made them so ineffective Bobby and Sandy; but it also worked its way over the water and warned the teasing boy he should be getting on--before something happened he might be held accounted to if a witness. We respect our mother's concern, she mimicked, breaking again into laughter, slapping her thigh at the frayed edges of her cut-offs. Our mother's concern!

Aw, come on Cindii, Bobby said, the kid was scaring the fish. God, but she did know the truth.

Scare the fish? Cindii yelled, I'll scare the fish! I'll scare the fish! Up she ran in her shorts and worn t-shirt to the water--past where it was warmest, past where the boys had waded--and dove in. Her body stretched out long and lean. The water, shocked into a violent reaction, leapt around her like a thousand cold bubbling arms, and pulled her down.

Cold water slapped and slapped over the lazy warm, and licked across dried rocks out of the calm waves' reach. Wettened, disturbed, then still.

Sandy wiped from his face Cindii's spray of water. No: sweat. Only sweat. He looked over at his brother--not Bobby here, now, but Fool-Stu--and he was wet too, overheated and panting, pale like a rabbit from the sun and strain.

Stu bobbed towards the car in his funny half-run, half-skip. He wore a nice old suit of Bobby's badly. He was already as big as Bobby, bigger than thin Sandy, though two years younger. The suit twisted and puckered and bulged in unreasonable, uncooperative spots. A fool to look at, even from a distance--how he ran, how his adopted clothes hung on him--as if his foolishness was the first thing he wore and then skin, and then clothes.

Opposite of the man he was named for, their father gone just over eight years.

Sandy remembered his father some, more from the time he returned than from the time he belonged. His clothes fit like a part of him, down to the t-shirt that framed the red triangle on his chest. His movements unfolded with strength and grace. Even the floorboards under his steps respected him with silence as he walked through the old house. As he talked, his hands told stories of their own, of tenderness and action, work and play. Stewart Lafleur was a man to respect and admire, a man to awe and emulate. A man to grow into, Sandy told himself.

But perhaps he too was a fool, in a mirrored sort of way. Not from being born, but for leaving his wife, his children--all that which makes a man worthy, happy. And he must have considered it so, once: he'd returned--years ago--long enough to get Mamma pregnant with Peyton. Ah, then he was twice the fool to Stu's once--a figure standing askew, reflected in the mirror's beveled edge.

Yet Stu's foolishness was the big one: a born, irrevocable foolishness. Sandy watched the man-sized three-year-old lumber toward the car, holding out his hands like a kid on Christmas morning beholding a gift-fat tree. Fool-Stu loved the car, the machine, the box to climb in, to sit and listen and feel. It moved. For Stu, Sandy figured, climb into the car, climb into a movie theater, every ride.

The fool-boy reached for the car's door handle then screamed and recoiled. His hand went in his big, wet mouth and he turned with a pained and puzzled glance to Sandy.

As Sandy soothed his brother's cries, looked over his burned hand, he thought, No, he's not without senses. There's not a lot connecting smarts with senses. Stu's got them: something's hot, don't touch it; something's bitter, spit it out; a scary sight disappears when hands are placed over your eyes; hands over your ears and thunderstorms peacen. All's well once the bad's removed. Easily done

for a fool, it's the thinking that will burn longer than any wound.

How long were they to wait for their mother and the others in this heat, this shadeless heat? Sandy pulled Stu to the curb and they sat in the shade of the only car besides their own, a Cadillac parked in a direction counter to their Ford. It was a white convertible, red leather interior, Florida plates. Now Stu, Sandy pointed, this is a car. He whistled, and Stu mimicked. A regular myna bird.

They walked around the car, and Stu felt of the leather seats, pushed the lifeless buttons. It seemed a strange car to be in a cemetery. Their black one was more appropriate.

Out of the silence of the heat a scream that seemed only to be from young Peyton came rolling over the hill behind them. The boys looked up from the car. Mona was trotting Stu-like towards them, half-dragging their little sister.

Mamma! What is it? Sandy called.

Get away from that car, Mona yelled. Go on! Get in the Ford!

Too hot, Stu whined, frightened.

Get in the Ford, she panted. Peyton drooped from the end of Mona's arm crying. She had her free hand clinched deep inside her pocket.

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Mona had fled at the sight of the couple; but Bobby was left with nothing to do but stare at them. Who wears flame pink minis to funerals? he asked himself over and over again, each question rolling over his mind faster and faster until he was changing, mini-funeral, mini-funeral, as he stared at the woman at the man's side.

The girl's wide, flickering eyes were smeared black. Rubbed black. She had been crying. Bobby pictured her running the back of her hand across her nose, pressing the small bulb tip to one side, wiping the tears, the runniness. Licking from her upper lip what her hand had left. And that hand was smeared with residue from black liner, black mascara. When had the crying begun? When she saw the cemetery? The stones with their flowers wilted and dried, some fresh? Cindii's fresh, most fresh? The crying didn't look entirely gone. Reserved, but not out; a coal to fan into flame. He put her up to it, Bobby thought. She won't even catch my stare for fear of embarrassment.

Bobby'd never seen this woman before; he'd only seen this man with one woman, Mona. The others he'd only heard of, had only heard of this man's lust and craving, of his chasing after women--out of town, out of state, out of his family's reach.

Bobby's licked his lip, his tongue moist and warm. The day, yes, had been hot--too much so for his suit and tie, the walk over hills, and caskets over drying holes. Yet the near-crying he had been checking and checking all day had kept his mouth moist, kept the tears not running forward, but backed up, washed down with frequent swallows. Forced swallows, intent and conscious. Salt to taste, and a bellyfull of tears. He spit. Clusters of white foamy spittle shattered against the heat of the afternoon.

His action was reflexive, neither necessary nor relevant. And he regretted it:

The man immediately smiled and stepped forward. Son, he said. He pointed at the uncovered grave, past the two workers with spades in their hands. He shrugged his shoulders. Humility? Embarrassment? Or apology? My sister--he continued through his plastic smile--Uh, your Aunt Susie . . . told us, me . . .

Aunt Susie. Bobby didn't know whether or not his mother tried to contact their father. She had to have.

But, no, she wouldn't have. She couldn't have called his sister. His mother couldn't have called his aunt. She had no family, and his had never been hers. Not hers, and therefore not theirs.

. . . the last minute, the man in starch white and navy blue said. He shrugged. Just, uh, happened to call her, he added. There was an obituary. He drew his hand to his pocket, hung it there, the thumb tucked in.

This man was twice his son's age, but young--younger than the bitterness of his son, standing with his back towards the hill down to his family. His family. Not this man's.

Bobby glanced at the woman. Woman, no. She was younger than he. She blushed. She crossed her arms and leaned away from Stewart. This companion, younger than Bobby added to the freshness of Stewart's look, his dress, and demeanor. She was probably only Cindii's age. Cindii's.

But why her? Bobby thought. Was it so, last-minute he had to bring her? So last-minute he couldn't leave her at some hotel--or could he not trust her at a hotel? He could have left her at least in the car, waiting.

Bobby thought angrily of Cindii's boyfriend Kurt, how he'd treated her. No more a man than Bobby, and just as much the same kind of man as this father standing here with

this girl. To know this man, to see this girl--Bobby's anger grew.

Stewart pulled his hand out of his pocket. He held a slip of paper there, flashing color to white like an aspen leaf in the mountain's fall. He held it out to Bobby. Bobby glanced at the girl. She smiled embarrassed, then shifted her balance, one birdy leg to another.

The paper fluttered, but Bobby heard no leaves above now them. What stirred it color-to-white, color-to-white? He stared at the paper, traveled the line from its edge to the thumbnail pressed bloodless, maggot white. His eyes cut away the blue blazer and cream french-cuffed shirt to the muscular, tanned forearm, biceps and shoulder. He slipped back down the line of man's quivering and twitching arm. A man of maggot lines. Withering, squirming--no, not an arm, but an arm's mass of shuddering, squirming maggots. The man's muscles coiled, bubbled from larvae sucking on marrow --drowning, fizzing.

Bobby shook his head. He breathed through his open mouth--panted--swallowed salt phlegm, licked the taste of tears from his lips. The white seething maggots, he saw them traveling from father to son, jumping from arm to arm . . . No. They were already there. Growing out of the marrow, his marrow, passed from father to son, surfacing, breaking through skin, a cycle . . . And Bobby stopped

himself from retching, stroked his hand against his throat. Caressing the images down, caressing his mind.

Take it, his father said. He shook the paper.

And that was it, this nausea: the offer. It made Bobby sick, this held paper twitching at the tip of the man's bloodless fingers. He shook his head. No.

Take it, Stewart repeated.

Bobby stood motionless. Take it, his father insisted, stepping towards him. Take it, take it, take it! Stewart shoved Bobby in the chest, and he stumbled back a step not looking up.

God damn it! It's for her, Stewart shouted, fanning the paper towards Cindii's grave. For my little girl, he whispered.

The woman paled, shuttered. When had she begun weeping?

Bobby held himself still for fear that moving would mean too many wrong things. He was three: he would pee his pants; he was ten: he might vomit; he was eighteen: Yes! eighteen. He had found himself, and he might . . . he might . . . He felt his hand, and the muscles traveling from hand to chest knotted. Knotted and gripped on to anger and fear, fear and anger, disgust.

Bobby spit again, moving from where he'd stumbled.

Stewart straightened with a moment of recognition. The boy's look startled him, but he knew. It was not all there. The boy was only half-full of anger; his reaction was half shock, half disgust.

All in a moment, Stewart cat-stepped to the boy's swaying side, ducked Bobby's fist, and slipped the paper into the boy's frayed-coat pocket. Slipped it in, using as stealthy a motion as a polished pickpocket used. Then he swung the punch that dropped the boy and brought a scream to his girl's throat.

Those Who Will Have Us

Mrs. Moore lived fifteen years waiting for her boys' four o'clock bus, waiting for their afternoon hunger for food and conversation, until they shed their boyish lives and needs, and entered college, leaving Mrs. Moore longing for summer vacations and holidays. Her husband was career military, a uniformed figure tall, imposing, and too often absent; and his latest transfer immediately followed Mrs. Moore's farewell to her youngest son. His transfers had been frequent--taking the family from the Southwest to Germany, California to Thailand, then from Greece to the Northeast--but never severing Mrs. Moore from sons. Yet after this move, after her separation from her boys, she came to resent the dress and code that first took her man from her and then took her from her men. Her four o'clocks became a loneliness of absence the four strokes of Colonel Moore's enormous cuckoo clock swathed through, and echoed silence. And silence. Silence and silence. Mrs. Moore replaced its taunt with a tea for her new neighbor ladies.

Her most frequent guests were the widowed-sisters who lived on the far side of Mona Lafleur. She instinctively preferred the company of Mrs. Lafleur--a mother like herself--and she invited her as often as the sisters. But Mona let her declination stand as open as Mrs. Moore's invitation. Mrs. Moore understood of course; Mona had a

young one constantly streaking about, and her slow Stu was not to be trusted alone. Stu would always be a child, always; perhaps it was a blessing for Mona to have his guaranteed company, although there was nothing like having boys one could be proud of.

Mrs. Moore had never noticed any visitors at the Lafleurs, no family or friends. Mona tended her children and yard: They had no lawn to mow, and what of their yard wasn't graphed into rectangles of vegetables, was left wild with flowers. A quilt of green stitches embroidering yellows, reds, pinks and blues to purples. So many more, soft and mute, warm or hot, shuffled by wind, rainstorm, playing children, cats stalking butterflies and birds, or running from the dog chasing a ball child-thrown. A quilt dream-tossed by the day, rippling and rolling. Spring to fall, Mona watched over children and flowers. Mrs. Moore pictured Mona: she stood framed by the sun-sparked arch of a sprinkler behind her, in cotton slacks, her arms crossed, a spade dangling from her hand. She stared off towards the road--often staring off towards the road. Mrs. Moore knew the longing for a certain time, a certain company.

Mona was a quiet neighbor--except when she took after her oldest daughter Cindii. Her anger towards the girl took her out of her quiet garden character, threw her

screaming at Cindii: "Get in this house, girl! You are grounded, hear. Grounded!"

It didn't work; sixteen was a difficult age, and Cindii was so spirited. How often had Mrs. Moore seen the girl sneaking through the backyard, crossing through the creek, the adjacent lot, and to the waiting boy and motorcycle? The very boy and bike that roused Mona's anger. A determined girl, independent and proud. Mrs. Moore could close her eyes and see Cindii so clearly: the way the girl walked, so strong; the way she tossed her head so that her hair flipped over her shoulder and settled in a wave; the way her lively hands and her wide happy mouth molded a laughly tale. Her admirers--siblings, neighbors, the Beecham boy before his death--held to the moments she carved from movement and language. Her siblings fell behind her when she let them, the fool silenced, the youngest mimicked, the boys loved and loved and loved. A charm Mrs. Moore had envied. A charm, however, that led the girl to her death.

A shame, Mrs. Moore thought. Such a shame.

Mona's oldest son Bobby was strong and industrious, freely and frequently helping Mrs. Moore with her yard. So kind a boy in manners and face. Her son Sandy was poetically shy, even in the way he moved, a dancer with private music Mrs. Moore could read if she watched him long

enough; Stu was slow-witted, awkward--a bleating lamb--tearful and sucking on lips, fingers, folds of his or his siblings' clothes; and Peyton was haunting--big observing eyes patiently filling with knowledge and passion, and firm white teeth she'd grow into beautifully. Children beautiful, as if this woman in the garden had engineered their seeds to perfection, planted the strongest, most beautiful and varied, deep into warmth and moisture and nutrients, drew them up and unfolded them with cultivating hands soiled by time and trial.

There was a day in early June that Mona did come to Mrs. Moore's tea. She came out of her usual slacks and in a dress free of an apron. She smiled--almost apologetically--not, it seemed, for declining so often but more for indeed arriving. Mrs. Moore intended to make her feel comfortable. She was very curious about Mona. The woman with so many children and not a single man except for the one she was near-finished raising. Mrs. Moore had her instincts, but not enough facts to tell if this neighbor was a woman Mrs. Moore should resent or appreciate, accept or reject.

The widowed sisters did not make tea the day Mona arrived, and Mrs. Moore expected the tea to suffer from the lack of their talk. The sisters squabbled as if they had

never spent a lifetime as adults and were still rival children, competing for Mrs. Moore's attention. But they would have consumed the tea, hidden quiet Mona, and given Mrs. Moore something useful to do, like try to break their hold on the conversation, noise, and time. They were overwhelming, really. Mrs. Moore imagined herself growing silently angry at the sisters' monopoly on the conversation, allowing her anger to seep through in polite sarcasm the sisters would ignore. There's nothing worse than honest, clever sarcasm going unresponded to. Mona would sit too embarrassed to react to the sister's rudeness and Mrs. Moore's sarcasm. But at least all this, while hardly enjoyable, was dynamic. Something was going on. Mrs. Moore expected less than something the day Mona came to tea.

She sat Mona down in her living room and placed the tea tray on the table at Mona's knees. They were thick knees set on thin, awkward adolescent legs. Children could destroy the loveliness of a woman's legs, the youth and strength of beauty, Mrs. Moore thought. She considered her own legs shapely and not overworked.

She told Mona how pleased she was to have her company. Mona asked after the sisters.

Not coming.

No?

I'm afraid not; tomorrow, perhaps. You're welcome to join us.

A smile. A clean, cool smile.

Silence.

Mona folded and refolded the napkin in her white stalklike fingers--with the garden dirt etched into the nail beds and fingertip whorls--while Mrs. Moore listened to the click-clunk of the German clock Colonel Moore brought back from the War. The vile thing, intrusive from the first day he released its pendulum. She had never grown used to its disrespect of the quiet passing of time; she did not care how valuable an heirloom it had been for the family her husband had helped cross the Russian occupation line. If it was so wonderful to them, she thought, send it back. But Colonel Moore had settled the matter between them years ago when he forbade her to mention the clock again. She since believed that its loudest and most demonic hour was the fifth, the hour when her husband returned from work. Mrs. Moore planned on ending this tea before the bird busted from its hold. This silence between and Mona and herself was too deep, too heavy to withstand the shocking waves of the bird's five o'clock appearance. Mrs. Moore envisioned cups flying.

Mona asked for more sugar. She took a spoonful from the bowl Mrs. Moore handed her and poured off a spoonful of

the grains in a thin, slow and delicate trickle of sweetness. Like the passing of time. Like the passing of youth.

Mrs. Moore studied her guest. Time was thrown askew over Mona's face. Her peppered white hair fell across her features, her eyes dulled to a white-blue, set deep in folds of skin scratched by worry and pain. Yet there was something contradictory in her conveying, a gesture not belonging to someone of Mrs. Moore's age.

Mona held her spoon like an anxious child at an older sister's debut. She glanced out the bay window nervously, watching for movement across her own yard, tilted her head for sounds--in particular Kurt Mott's motorcycle, Mrs. Moore guessed. Mother of five, anxious, uncomfortable at tea, her hands now folded church-polite on her lap, now fingering the pleats of her dress as Mrs. Moore spoke, then periodically interrupting their busyness to touch the bunned hair in an attempt to forestall its late-afternoon tumble into disarray. Her eyes twitched to narrow slits when she talked, remained teared as if anything she heard was hurtful, or what she saw, sad. Her glances towards Mrs. Moore were quick and pointed, an observant mother's way of glancing; but her casual cast-anywhere look was deeply involved with another time, another setting.

What was it in this woman of obvious maturity and experience that hinted at an innocence--innocence? A single mother of five. Mrs. Moore asked in her politest: How old is your Bobby, Mrs. Lafleur?

Eighteen, last April, Mona replied.

A spring baby, Mrs. Moore nodded. She had one as well--hers in his third year of college.

A spring baby, Mrs. Moore repeated to herself, nodding and smiling.

A smile then flickered over Mona's eyes and lips like a spark from a flint. He was so perfect, so perfect, she said. Born of a loving, a longing, an understanding. That's beauty, she sighed, that's beauty. That's love.

He's a good boy, Mrs. Moore said to hide her moment of embarrassment. Mona's voice had, for a moment, revealed a child's vulnerability. Mrs. Moore thought back just four short years to when her youngest sat across the kitchen table telling her of his day at school. And she had felt on her face the beauty of love and pride. This child of hers: what a lovely creature. What she felt contrasted with what she saw on Mona's face--there, not the beauty of love and pride, but one of love and possession, if that were a beauty.

Mona's eyes had flickered and stayed lit, the spark of a match's first blue flame stretching to amber heat. She

looked fevered with memory, the molten collapse of time. Mrs. Moore saw the mystery on her neighbor's lips and softly asked, When were you and Mr. Lafleur married, Mrs. Lafleur? The flame capped out. The clock gave off its two-stroke fifteen minute chime and Mona flinched. Her eyes followed the clock pendulum, and she answered slowly, We came together in nineteen forty-six.

When he returned from the war, then, Mrs. Moore surmised.

No, Mona replied flat and simple. Her voice softened, opening itself up like smooth petals of a rose giving up its tight cloister to the sun and air. He missed the war, she said. He was too young. Men don't like that, you know, missing the war. But women prefer it. He was eighteen when we had Bobby. Just eighteen.

Mrs. Moore wanted Mona to go on. She sighed with a false swell of romanticism. High school sweethearts like me and Colonel Moore . . . how sweet, she said. Colonel Moore and I met in Devil's Lake, North Dakota.

Mona replied by instinct: No. I was fourteen. He was joined up, but was too late, too late. I met him here, in town, at a grange-hall dance. He was stationed at the Fort here.

Mrs. Moore stopped listening to Mona's reminiscing. Her fingers were twitching with the numbers on their tips.

Sixty-five, the present, minus forty-six, the marriage: nineteen. Fourteen added to nineteen equaled thirty-three. Mona Lafleur was thirty-three!

She studied her guest, her flickering fingers, twitching glance and tilting head, her shyness of decorum; and where before Mona had seemed mature, now she did not seem even her thirty-three years. The Mona before Mrs. Moore now seemed a fourteen year old, innocent of womanhood. And this was the something Mrs. Moore noticed: the fourteen year-old inside the single mother of five. The innocence for all the suffering and pain and . . .

I had only my Mamma, Mona said, interrupting Mrs. Moore's thoughts, And she did not approve. She'd saved marrying and family until she was twenty-five. Then she was dead of a woman's cancer before she was forty. She lay her head in my lap swelled with Bobby, my perfect boy.

He is a fine young man, Mrs. Moore consoled, tempted to pull the woman-girl into her lap and stroke her.

Mona's face stilled--a child checking pain until another's comfort draws out its fear and shock and cry. Mrs. Moore reached a hand toward her guest, and Mona spoke without notice of it.

My Mamma's lips moved over my perfect baby, she said, her own lips moving soft and pink and moist, subtly trembling. While my baby and I were still hidden in hope

and mystery, still safe from the pain of birth, Mamma was filled with the pain of death. It was eating her up even as she pressed her head against the beat of that new heart. I imagined her listening, comparing, finding peace. I relaxed and smiled that I could give my mother such a gift. I was so proud of my belly. My baby. My mother's ear pressed to my creation--but her brittle lips opened and said: 'You have thrown your dreams to vanity, child. You have broken my heart.' New heart, broken heart.

Mrs. Moore's hand dropped on the space of couch between herself and her guest, as Mona asked, How could a new heart break an old one? How could a broken heart break mine?

Mona picked up her cup of cold tea, not even holding one hand to still the other, and the cup rattled in its saucer. She swallowed loudly then returned the cup to the table. Mamma was a fool to deny a daughter happiness, Mona concluded. A broken heart--what had she done to mine? To deny her daughter beauty, you see? Mona looked directly at Mrs. Moore. She shook her head: Our life had been hard; why should I have been denied beauty if I could make it? If I had the capability to make it so easily?

Honor? Mrs. Moore asked. She did not hear her own words, only felt Mona's beating heart as if it were her

own. Her instincts moved her lungs, moved her lips. She was startled that the words she did not really make were heard.

Honor. Mona repeated the word as if it were new to her. Honor. Pride, Mrs. Moore? she then asked. Do you mean pride? I do take pride in my children. They are what makes me proud. They honor me. You know them, they're beautiful. They're real. She sighed. Even Stu, Mrs. Moore. Even my little fool is beautiful. He's so innocent, and nothing can touch him. Isn't that beautiful?

But your husband--Mrs. Moore interjected.

What pride can I take in a man? Mona demanded. A man? He's nothing but seed. Mona's face flushed. Her hands fisted, then lightened their tension. I cannot create the man to produce the children. Her flush deepened. Please--she pressed emphatically--don't mistake me. I'm not calloused. A man is his seed, a woman is her womb. Of course there is more, and that is the heart, that is the beauty, the beating heart. We are all this. All of us.

The clock stroked its half-hour, enveloping the rhythm of Mona's words. The mother-woman and child-mother waited in silence as the clock's swing returned to the background. Then Mona explained softly, slowly: It will help if I finish what I was saying.

What Mamma believed was true and wise, Mona continued. She didn't believe in beauty, that the future belonged to beauty. What of beauty had she ever had? My father traveled--sales, you see--but he was not successful. He died young. But that's not here. Mamma. Mamma believed that beauty would not ensure love, and the future belonged to love. But I love my children; they are beautiful. I told her, 'Beauty cures.' I pressed her head to that one small heart of beauty. 'Listen!' I said. 'Listen!' And those lips, I could feel them against the tightness of my belly's skin, could feel them inside of me: 'False dreams, Mona,' she said, 'no cure, created this sweet child whom you depend upon. May Jesus love the children you bear, protect them. They are the hounds of a whore!'

Mona sat up, gulping--she had spent all her air on words and words and words. She pressed her hand to her bosom, and waited. The clock filled in the emptiness of her mouth. Chink-chunk, chink-chunk. Oh, she then moaned, I would have--and her hands jerked violently forward--I would have PUSHED my own Mamma off of my lap for her cursing, if she had not at that moment died. Mona jumped up and turned on Mrs. Moore. She died, Mrs. Moore! Right here! On my womb with a curse on her lips not for me but for my children!

Mrs. Moore was frightened to tears. She wanted to shout, Sit down! Sit Down!--feared but endeared the moment, the glimpse inside the woman held captive to a curse. But, she stammered, at first not knowing any words to follow, but, she repeated until the words did come: Mr. Lafleur, you had him, you had him and your boy, and then the others. Your beautiful children, Mrs. Lafleur. You have your beautiful children, and they love you.

Mona slunk back into the couch. Silence came over her again; a keeping silence.

Mrs. Moore made a trip to the kitchen for a glass of ice water for her guest. She felt exhausted. She felt afraid of returning to the strange woman in her living room. Afraid, but drawn--she had to return, because there was what she had to know still missing. Who was Mona?

The chime of the clock, three quarters of its way through the four o'clock hour, jarred Mrs. Moore from her questions and returned her to her guest. Still, the threat of the hideous clock's fifth stroke moved her; soon, her husband would return home.

Mona sat with her hands pressed and her head bowed as if in prayer. She shook her head as Mrs. Moore tried to hand her the ice water.

When are we to see things as they are? Mona whispered. Her hands unfolded like wings ready for flight,

lifted quiet words to Mrs. Moore's anxious ears. A man can create children, she said, but his children cannot create the man. I understand only the body, Mrs. Moore, not the soul--no one is the parent of their children's souls. We can only produce their nests. No, she said. No.

Beauty cannot mask an unkind soul. I tried to ignore this: every time I saw his face, I forgave him his soul. But beauty is only skin deep; and it is not love. It cannot to be shared--only denied, craved for, or possessed. I took what I could of my husband--his beauty--to create something beautiful for my own. To give something beautiful of my own. But one cannot believe in beauty. It is not honest, Mrs. Moore. There is nothing to forgive.

Mona's voice hung dry and still as a desert noon: A mother has nothing. Her role is finished from the start. She builds and protects her nest, then she can only watch for the moment to let go.

What of the father? Mrs. Moore asked herself. But then, what would Mona know of that? How could she really have escaped a man?

From the hall seeped the slow mechanical wind up of the clock's gears as they prepared for the hour's end, and still Mrs. Moore did not know: resent or appreciate, accept or reject?

A car passed through the front window's view and Mrs. Moore started; but it was only the sisters' car. They were returning from an apparent errand that had kept them from her tea.

*

The widowed-sisters, Cass Allen and Dory Lansing had lived together for some months more than ten years. Their first few months together had been fun, as they were re-acquainted, and as they adjusted to one another's habits. Then they settled into a life nearly as intimate as a married couple's. Words were reduced to gestures and routines; any secrets were already shared, so there was nothing new to reveal. Both looked forward to any time spent out of the house, especially Mrs. Moore's tea. Tea was something to dress for daily, a time to talk and come alive.

Today was different. They were not at Mrs. Moore's for a relaxing tea (there was nothing relaxing about silence), they were there to help her prepare a dinner for the Lafleurs. They had not gone to the Cindii-girl's funeral--though they watched her grow up--because the day was too, too hot for their health. Mrs. Moore told them she planned a meal for the grieving family and was not

going, please join her. And Mrs. Moore's house was air-conditioned--it helped.

The week's events had been hard on Dory, from the time Cindii fell sick until the girl's death. She had buried her only child many years before, and took Mona's grief on as her own, slowed her movements to a shuffle and complained of age and heartbreak.

Cass suggested she return home if not feeling well, and take a nap. She would want to share dinner with the Lafleurs, Cass reasoned, rounding out her words with the motions of her hands. Dory would want to be feeling well, she said. But the thought of suffering Mona's grief at table with her ached in Dory's bones and she sighed bitterly at her sister's shallow solution. A nap would only slow her down more, lay her down to think until she slept--alone, slept alone. She would think of grief and loneliness and memories that were too old to breathe for. What did Cass know about suffering, that a nap would be a cure?

Cass approached Dory's suspicion with an outstretched hand. You'll feel better, she whispered, taking Dory's elbow and gentling her towards Mrs. Moore's kitchen door. I'll walk you home.

No, Dory answered. I will walk home alone. She glanced at her sister, glanced with the quick and dangerous

and lying thought: You don't understand--before she could stop herself. She felt Cass's elbow-touch become dust and fall away taking with it even the feeling that she had been touched. Dory longed to swallow back time as she was swallowing the thick and salty masses in her throat. Her sister turned from her. This was a day of grief--it existed everywhere, even in mutual silences. Dory watched her sister walk away, thinking that the apologies were never as loud as the hurts, and helped herself home to her private silence.

Cass returned to the folds of Mrs. Moore's conversation without a word. Her limp hands held her helplessness and despair, and the hurt she could not admit to a stranger without explaining all that warped and colored her relationship with Dory--things she could not explain, would not explain, did not know how to explain, or could explain too, too simply for them to be the truth. She retreated into movement--chopping meat and vegetables, fluting meatpie shells, snapping beans in the white enamel sink, checking and repositioning the casserole in the oven--while Mrs. Moore talked the talk that demanded no more attention than the occasional Uh-huh.

Do not think, Cass told the carrots she sliced too thin, that I am not a woman--I have seen the diffidence in Dory's eye because she doubts it; but do not think that her

doubt is my own. She flicked a rolling carrot-top into the sink along with the other scraps, and started on a new root. Maybe she is less of a woman for not holding me in her heart any more than she held that baby to her breast dead before its own birth. No, I have not felt two hearts beating inside me, but I am no less of a woman than my sister or Mona Lafleur.

Cass scooped the coins of carrots into her palms and carried them to the simmering soup pot. Perhaps, she thought, rolling her palms over the rounds allowing them to drop with a minimum of splash into the soup, perhaps I am more so because I promised no future to anyone. I have belonged only to myself, only to my past.

Mrs. Allen and her husband accepted their childless fate and set about being as content with one another as they could be. They were unreserved in their shared love, gentle and kind to each other; and they worked hard to build a comfortable, unpretentious life--a modest white house with flower boxes, a trim yard Mr. Allen push-cut at alternating angles every other week, a garden plentiful enough to see them through winters softly plump, and a new black Ford in the garage every ten years. Mrs. Allen loved his wife enough to die in her arms; he was not old, but he was through.

It was in their modest home that she continued to live as usual, only taking up Mr. Allen's chores, and to which she invited her sister to live. Dory retired from her position as school-librarian, a position she loved for its shelves of books hiding her face, her humiliation, and the past she both loved to private away and suffer over.

Cass did not mind her sister's suffering. She knew it began before Dory had had any real pain, knew that Dory was familiar with pain before she felt it, before it existed. Dory was not a victim of circumstance, but an activator of circumstance--one earns the experience of one's life, Cass reasoned, and Dory earned her pain by her expectations.

Cass's knife sliced through the potatoes and thunked into the chopping board, echoing the passive chunking of the Colonel Moore's German clock. Big, ornate and precise. Cass noticed the semblance of rhythm and paused. She did not want to run out of work. She did not want to have to sit still with Mrs. Moore and converse. What had they to say to one another outside of tea talk?

She decided to start a cake. A cake would be nice for the children, Mona's beautiful, beautiful children.

Things were so uneven. Mrs. Moore had her children and husband; she seemed content, perhaps happy. Cass and Mr. Allen had had their happy life, but they were childless. Mona had her beautiful children but not their

father, and Dory had neither husband nor child. The loss of the child was God's will, but the husband? Cass tried to remember her sister's husband beyond the face framed and placed over the organ in Dory's bedroom. She could not. Her memory remained still and lifeless, fixed to one moment before the war. The camera caught his animated face with a small reluctant smile and squinting eyes, his hair tossed up by a beach breeze, held in a flicker revealing a hair line arching up like steep eyebrows. His uniform was untidy--he was always in a rush, always behind, always running, she recalled.

Cass determined long ago that their baby's death was a release God sent Dory which she chose not to accept as it was. She could have gone on, Dory, found a respectable man to father living children. She could have gone on with her womanhood as she chose it until it slid into rolls and bulges that hid tit from tummy. She could have gone on to hold grandchildren over her fat lap, wiping their white steamy burp-spills from her aprons. But she preferred to mourn something dead so fast that it had been scarcely in the earth before it was the earth--there was no funeral for the child. Dory was even denied seeing it.

The only dead child Dory saw was the one who returned from the First World War so bruised from a life of an

offense that his freedom was in retreat, escape: Dory's husband.

Cass stood over the soup, stirring. The carrot slices rolled up bright orange. She thought, We have always been like two sides of a coin, Dory and me--blonde and brunette, short and thin, tall and muscled, flirty and shy--it would seem to follow that I had the husband, she the child, and now we only have one another. She replaced the lid; the steam sealed its edges. Fury and peace, she thought.

Fury and peace.

Cass suggested the cake to Mrs. Moore, offered to retrieve her own eggs, sugar, but Mrs. Moore would not have it. She was quite prepared to fix this dinner for Mrs. Lafleur and her dear, dear children--cake included--if Mrs. Allen wished to go to the trouble of making it.

Oh, yes, she did.

Cass gathered and sifted the dry ingredients into a large bowl, then hollowed out a nest for the eggs and liquids. She worked methodically, from memory, in silence.

Mrs. Moore sat over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table resting from the pace Cass had set. She first sat without words, then began baiting Cass's silence. We have an interesting neighbor in Mrs. Lafleur, hmmm, Mrs. Allen? she said. She does have a barge to tow, doesn't she?

Filled with live weight--hard to navigate steadily with no assistance.

Cass separated her two eggs, dropping the yokes into the batter bowl chipped around its edges. She beat them into the liquids with a fork, folding in the nest of flour. Dory would have taken Mrs. Lansing back and his baby too, she thought. As if their departures were not God-willed.

Dory's Mr. Lansing: Mona's Mr. Lafleur? How did these men differ? One had been at least touched by the war, and not merely the effects of his looks--perhaps. Mona's husband had had no war, no excuse; but he had looks he could not control, had no power to maneuver. Women appeared at his elbow for escort through loving and laughs and pink cotton-candy summer nights, yet he did not seem to know how they got there, why they stayed. He trusted little, Cass imagined--or feared much--his own elbow's magnetism, and resorted to a lifetime of elbow flexing, so fearful was he each morning that the magic would be gone.

Self-seduced, and no peace.

Of course, said Mrs. Moore, stirring her coffee, not preventing the spoon from clinking against the porcelain cup. Of course, soon the boys will be old enough to help--to help or leave, two fewer mouths to feed, at least--but not Stu. Ah, she said, leaning over the light steam

swirling from her strokes, that Stu . . . and how old is Peyton? Seven, isn't she?

Eight, now--Cass jerked out her correction so quickly it was as if Mrs. Moore had taken a rubber mallet to her voicebox. She glanced nervously around the flour-snowed floor. Eight years from the time he was here last. Dory had been lucky--no matter how she sighed at the sight of Stewart Lafleur--that her own Lev was gone to be gone.

Eight, Mrs. Moore said, tapping spoon against cup, the drops of coffee sprinkling the liquid. I see. So Mrs. Lafleur has been on her own for--what?--no more than eight years? Less? Mrs. Moore's pause opened up Cass's ears to her own heart beat. She blushed at the strength of its sound.

Surely--did you know--but of course you must--but, did you know that Mrs. Lafleur is only thirty-two? Mrs. Moore asked.

Thirty three, sprang Cass's reply. The caramel batter bubbled under her forceful strokes. She let it rest, watched it slide down the sides of the bowl and wooden spoon.

What?

Cass gathered herself. She would not worry, would not be feeling so, so odd. Mona's thirty-three, she calmly

answered, ignoring her own so noticeable breath and adding, dear.

Mrs. Moore seemed relieved. Of course! What was I thinking? She smiled, lips and voice. I've never met Mona's Mr. Lafleur, you know. Have you met him?

Cass thought back and back to a picture of Stewart Lafleur. There were many years to roll and pull away from a clear image like dough from warm fingers--how one covered the other! It was years past the time her own husband had died. She paused at the memory, the morning he woke to complain of heartburn, when he broke into a sweat, laid his head on Cass's breast. As she stroked him like a child, his heart stopped, stopped gently.

Stewart had left before that morning, but when?

Eight years, Mrs. Moore repeated. It's an awfully long time to raise children on your own, but then, any amount of years--

Fifteen, Cass sighed. She had come to the picture. The baby Stu in Mona's arms, the toddler boys, the newly-walking Cindii.

What? Mrs. Moore's voice quivered in the air like a drop of water. But Peyton! she cried. What of Peyton?

Yes, yes, Peyton. Cass returned to her batter. She felt with surprise the cold, dry touch of Mrs. Moore's hesitant fingers on her arm, holding still Cass's strokes.

Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Moore insisted, whispered, What of Peyton--you don't mean to . . . to say, to imply . . . to mean . . . ?

He returned--Cass had watched him from her window. How fine he was dressed, from his smart hat to his wing-tipped shoes. And the car he drove--no Ford, but a Cadillac, long and black. Stewart had returned to his family; and Mona had not lost a moment from the time he left. Looked up from her flowers to the man standing without excuse, apology-- intention to stay--but when did Mona believe the truth? Not with her glances down the street--her babies weedy around her--not her held glances to the worthless hopes for a worthless man's worthless return. Then he did come! Everything had been worth everything.

Eight years collapsed into her sigh, her breath. She wiped her garden-soiled hands on her apron, called her children to her. There would not have been those eight years to Mona's look, but the children had obviously grown. Mona did not seem to notice. Stu, the baby in her arms when she held his father last, was now eight. She did not seem to notice the difference between two and eight. Cass had wanted to run to Mona, shake her by the shoulders-- For God's sake! For God's sake!

Dory, who had only heard of Stewart through Cass, stood behind her sister, watching. She retreated, her hand fisted up in her mouth, stuffing up her sobs. There was so much of what she saw of herself in Mona. She would have been Mona if she could, Cass thought. She did not see her foolishness, only envied her sorrows.

Stewart did not stay. A few months, perhaps, while the weather was nice. It was spring, or summer, Cass couldn't remember. But he was gone before Mona began to swell with Peyton. Eight years of an absence and Mona never mourned the waiting, never seemed to regret the new baby she carried, the hope that swelled with it. Cass hated that hope persisting in the woman's eyes; if they stood talking on the lawn, Mona again, still, looked through Cass or past her shoulder toward the road. The future always contained Stewart's return. The length of her vision was all he needed to travel. In her hope was the belief that the waiting past and the waiting future was worth everything. What would it take? Cass hated poor Mona's dependency on waiting, and she hated her sister's eyes of pity and remorse and false empathy.

Perhaps Dory and Mona's men had been different, but the women were not, and they disgusted Cass. Woman of the Wait, turning themselves into bitter, quick eyes, and suffering silences. This was not patience. Dory and Mona

were not the women to hold their men to themselves while their bodies became less and less of a sight to see or touch or crave. They were not the women to shake the fallen hairs from their men's combs, rinse fresh the doctor-made teeth and breathe hot breaths over glasses lens to squeegee them clean. They were not the women to love the men who trusted love. Theirs were the men who flexed their machismo because they felt none, who fled their manhood because they wanted none, who desired content women no more than Dory and Mona could be content women.

Stewart returned. Not Dory's Mr. Lansing. Stewart returned and strutted himself before this woman-of-the-wait; he rooted her deeper to her dependence upon the wait by seeding her, then fled back to his fear and the life it offered him, while Mona stayed in her garden, stayed with the children he left. One more added to their numbers. Back down the road: A man, a figure, a spot, a memory, an expectation.

Mrs. Moore shook Cass's shoulder, shook her as if to wake her. Cass almost laughed. But she did not; she only sighed. He came back, she said. For a little while, a few months--I don't remember--and then Mona was pregnant again. With Peyton.

Mrs. Moore uttered a moan of shock; this was too, too much. The facts, slowly filing their way inside of her, covered the pity she had had for the woman.

Cass returned to her cake, greased and floured the pans Mrs. Moore had set out. She rolled a spoonful of flour to the glistening, fingerstreaked metal then shook, then tilted, then patted the tin until the shine was dusted. Hope was like that, she thought, dusting truth but not taking it away, covering it finely, layer over layer, so one knew truth was still there, buried, suffocating.

Mrs. Moore was clearly shocked into silence.

Ironic, the story coming out the day of Cindii's funeral--Cass felt it was Cindii who had been the most likely to become her mother's daughter. The girl was tragic even before she died. Her beauty came early, thick and dark. Her hair hung to her waist heavy and black, her eyes were set deep into fair, fair skin, her flushed red lips spread wide over white, white teeth.

She was as bold as her features, but sad, aloof, distant. Her brothers did everything she wished, just to have her attention. The Beecham boy was the same: Tov drowned trying to swim the pond's length for Cindii. To show her his strength. But there was Kurt--a quiet, alley-strong boy in black and leather, always on his bike. Such an explosion of noise! Kurt didn't chase Cindii; she

chased him. Against Mona's objections. Her yelling and screaming. Her threats.

There's something there, Mrs. Allen, Cindii told Cass on a visit while Dory lay in bed with a cold or flu or headache (what was ever the truth with her?). Cass gave the girl an iced cola, cookies Dory made. She sat down with the girl on the couch, held the girl's long hands in her own. She brushed hair from the girl's face.

Cindii visited with Cass, from the time she learned to walk. Cass braided the girl's black hair as her Swedish mother had braided her own, and the girl loved her. Every year at Christmas they hid a packages for one another under the sister's tree. Dory never seemed to notice, or did not care. It was Mona's boys who attracted her, not her girls.

Cindii shared secrets. Told her about sweet Tov, cried when he died, told Cass he was the last of his kind. Told her about haunting Kurt. He's like a part of me unspoken. I know him, I do, she said. Others don't trust him, or like him, but I know. Something's deep and held, secreted away in him. I see it--No. I feel it and I'm drawn. I don't know what it is, but I forgive him of it. I'm drawn--I sound crazy. She hid herself in the hair that fell over her face.

Cass began a french braid across the girl's temple. No, honey, you're not crazy, she said. Possessed, she

thought. She'd seen it, lived with it, had nothing to say to it. But she listened:

I know there's a danger encasing his secret, a trap, but I want to prove to him that I care, that I'm no threat. I do. She was crying. They were both crying, but Cindii cried with tears.

Am I pulling too hard, honey? Cass asked.

No, the girl said. She patted the stroking hand. Thank you, thank you.

Go on, Cass said. I'm listening.

I feel, Cindii said. I feel; but I'll never get there. That caring, it won't make a difference.

Cass picked up the girl's hand, drew it to the finished braid. Hold that. The girl held. Cass began braiding the opposite temple. She did not tell the girl what she knew, about her mother, her father, about the boy. Cass was not Cindii's mother. She would give her no advice, only listening. And Cindii did not appear to want advice, had nothing she wanted to be told.

Where did this come from?

Cindii was possessed by a strange boy: Kurt Mott--himself a fatherless child. The son of Clare Mott, but that hadn't seemed to matter. He'd never known his father. Clare Mott had sent him away before the son was

born--she was not chained to any waiting, any hoping. Then there are those, Cass thought.

Whether the father was present, or merely a presence, a son was his. Didn't the life of the mother have any influence? Any? How was Clare, having raised to manhood that which she'd chased from herself? Was she changed? Mona was not one to change; not even when faced with a daughter the same as she. There had to be a difference. Why was it that Mona raised a daughter like herself and no sons like their father? What was Peyton's future?

It is a strange and wonderful and equally dangerous thing, thought Cass, when a woman recognizes herself in another woman. She could be jealous, envious, loving, pitying, or angry--anything, even threatened. And a daughter? Didn't the daughter throw into the mother's face everything she sought to deny? There was the difference between Kurt's mother and Mona. Clare denied nothing. Even her son, and Mona denied everything, but the hope Stewart had nothing to do with.

Mona could not have taken her daughter and given her the very wisdom she shunned. She could not have said, Here, let me tell you about the Wait, and the men she uses to seduce you. She could only scream. Mona's scream was as strong as a tree. Swing on up into the tree of deceit

and fill yourself with its fruit. Gorge yourself, grow into womanhood on its nutrients.

But God took pity on the girl, Cass thought. He threw her from the tree. Threw her so hard she plunged six feet through the earth to there rest.

Amen, Cass whispered to herself, and opened the oven door to place the cake on its rack.

*

Dory lay in bed. Quiet. Her chest moved a sleep's rhythm, her eyes remained closed, but her mind filled her with words and images too loud and vibrant to sleep on. She was awake, painfully awake. She thought of the day in June, a month past, when she baked her ritual cake. She baked it every year on the same day, and Cass never seemed to take notice. It was the day her son buried his own life within her. Dead before he was born. Her fist tightened at the thought. He gave me no chance to be the mother I had every right to be, she thought, and Lev Lansing gave me no chance to be the wife I was.

Dory had nothing but a band of gold and veins of belly scars to say she was ever wife or mother; her empty nights were demons taunting even those truths. The gold she

sold. The scars she never uncovered--she would not have sold them if--

She was sixteen when she returned childless and husbandless to nurse her father. He lay consumptive, his lungs raw with disease and brittle rasping. He closed his eyes and his hands lay warm and limp for three days before he rested still. Three days: not dead yet, not dead yet, not dead yet, then Dead.

I have lived fifty-seven years of not dead yet, Dory told herself. I closed my eyes and stilled my hands fifty-seven years ago. Each morning I wake. Each year I bake a cake. Fifty-seven cakes I have baked.

