To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Felicity M. Pearson entitled "Tell Me a Lie, But Tell It True." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Dunn, Major Professor

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

TELL ME A LIE, BUT TELL IT TRUE

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Felicity M. Pearson
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DEDICATION

for Galen,
who has consistently given me the
encouragement, support, insight
and love necessary for my success.

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ABSTRACT

Tell Me a Story, But Tell It True is a collection of short stories. There are stories that are primarily about isolation, stories about relationships, and then there are the Midway stories, which examine the interplay between individuals and community. If it seems that those divisions are tenuous at points, perhaps that is because those three concepts – isolation, relationship, and community – are very intertwined in the author's experience and imagination.

In "Portraits," a woman rediscovers her ability to take action after a long period of emotionless existence. "The Business Trip" is a very short story that looks at obsession and lost love. "Still Life in the Rain Forest" examines the letting go that its protagonist must do after she takes a new job and has to move away from family and friends. "The Soda Can Man" gives the reader a brief glimpse inside the mind and heart of a homeless man. While each of these stories is on many levels about isolation, each is also about a deep yearning for human contact.

In the same way, the stories in the next section represent a blend of disconnection and affinity. "Dear Jack ... You Are Here," while ostensibly a reflection of the relationship between the narrator and her husband, is also about the isolation that drove them apart. So too, we find "Pearlie" balancing between being a glimpse at the relationship between a man and his daughter as well as recounting the rift that exists

between them. "The Knife Thrower's Wife" is a depiction of tragedy in a loving marriage and "The Sacrificial Man" deals with a man's attempt to renew his relationship with his son, but both also are portraits of people who are fundamentally alone. The stories in each section are points along a continuum rather than members of rigidly defined sets.

The final four stories – "Safe In Moon Villa," "Five Rubber Chickens," "Beyond Quicksand," and "Offerings at the Boston Public Library" – explore pivotal moments in the lives of a group of people who frequent a small, obscure Boston coffee shop. In these stories solitude and connection are both factors in the characters' lives, just as both are present in our own lives at one time or another. The ebb and flow between those factors, and the strength of friendship, love, and the human spirit are what the Midway stories offer a reader.

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FOR A MORE TRUTHFUL LIE

When I was growing up, I went to school in an old building some eight or ten blocks from my parent's house. There is a picture of the building in a small paperback history of the area, which my mother sent me as a Christmas gift one year. The caption says that the building dates from 1878. I remember that the building was condemned; I remember that because I remember that my mother fought to have the school closed and lost. Badly. My sister, who could spell, pronounce, and define pterodactyl when she was in the third grade was denied placement in a special academic program and my brother failed kindergarten. Outrageous reasons were given for both acts – underdeveloped social skills seems to be a key issue in both – as if to make certain that my mother knew she was being punished through her children. Somehow I wasn't caught up in this. Perhaps my teacher took a stand and would not bring herself to that level; or maybe there just wasn't any convenient stick with which to hit me.

I think they simply didn't notice me. I am a middle child and middle children know about not being noticed. It is not as tragic as it's sometimes made out to be – when you have not done your homework, when you have stayed out beyond curfew, when you are slipping painful truths into a story you are telling; it is useful not to be noticed.

What I remember best about that school, though, actually had nothing to do with the school itself. There was a small print shop around the corner and after school, my sister and I would stop there and ask the printer if he had any scraps we could have. Nowadays, print shops take the trimmed paper, gum it, and sell the odd sized pads for anywhere from a quarter to a dollar. The printer must have set the best trims aside for us because he would always have something and we would go home with handfuls of paper just the right size to fold and staple into the child-sized books we made. We were serious about our books, my sister and I. We made up stories, drew the pictures, wrote the words. We would draw a proper cover, often including a price in the upper right corner, and we always had titles for our books. We signed them as well, proud of authorship.

Once upon a time there was a girl who liked mice. The mice liked her too. The girl played with the mice and had a good time. The mice liked her so much they asked her to be the Queen of the Mice. She said yes and everyone was happy. The end.

It did not seem odd to me that I should write stories about mice because I was mad for mice at the time. I kept them as pets and, while I never was invited to be their queen, the symbiosis between reality and story seemed perfectly natural to me. Life was littered with elements over which I had little control, but when I wrote stories, I was in complete

control. Had I thought at that age about fantasy, I think I would have described it as making stories.

When I was seventeen, I talked a cabdriver friend into taking me out to the house in the country where my used-to-be boyfriend was then living. I showed up at about three-thirty a.m. and while fortunately he was alone, he was not amused and we did not get back together. When I got back to the city on the Greyhound bus I caught later that morning, I had finished a not too hot short story about a woman who goes out to the country to confront an ex-boyfriend but doesn't, and instead leaves with her dignity. It wasn't a great story, but I hung onto it, because something in that original story, interwoven with the mistakes and poor choices of language, was right.

I've revised that story many times, and it grew in my imagination until it became the cornerstone in a collection of stories about a group of people who populate a fictional Boston coffee shop. These stories are my most autobiographical, I suppose. Those who know me can pick out the places where I am doing nothing as much as I am transcribing the details of some event that I have lived or witnessed. What is intriguing to me, though, is that these stories are also my most fictional. The characters have thrown off the masks of my real life friends and they go places and do things that are total invention.

It's an odd paradox. As writers, we want Truth in our writing, but literal truth is poisonous to my process. It isn't that I believe that I have more or uglier demons than any other writer, but I've learned that in order to wrestle with them, I must have distance. If I don't, what emerges is muddy and disingenuous, perhaps because I am as busy denying my knowledge of darkness as I am trying to describe what can be seen in the dark when the eyes adjust. I like using bits of my life for my stories. Sometimes the whole story will spring out of my own experiences, not unlike the not-great story I wrote at seventeen, but that is becoming more and more rare. Most often it is simply a small, amusing game – a friend's nickname, a view from a place I have lived, a character taking on my own habits or hobbies. I do this for a number of reasons but never because I want to write about my life. Or at least not in that way. What I try to do in my writing is tell an emotional truth. I invent characters and move them around in worlds as imaginary as the kingdom - queendom? - of the mice. I make their fictive lives miserable and then, with feelings of guilt and godliness, I try to walk them through the misery. Their function is to suffer so that someone reading them can see a Truth. How though, do I know these truths? I look at my life, and luck seems more evident than wisdom, but even at my most self-depreciating, I cannot deny that I know some things. These things feed my work and enrich it; in many ways they are the key to what makes it right, but they also frighten me,

and so I use the details of my life as camouflage. Many readers assume that they learn something about the author when they read his or her fiction, and I suppose that is inevitable. I know that the line between fiction and fact is a fine one, and sometimes I may be the only person who sees the line at all. But as long as I believe that line still exists, I am comfortable and can go on poking around for truth. The scraps of detail I scatter around my stories are markers, perhaps in that they help me delineate the boundaries.

What I consider my best writing is also the closest to the things that embarrass, frighten, amuse or in some other way move me. When I said that the things I know frighten me it is because I am becoming more honest in my work. When I write a woman who has sex in an alley with a poorly dressed bar pick-up, it doesn't really matter to me that I can claim with total truthfulness that I have never done such a thing. What matters is that I can imagine it, I can understand why she would do such a thing, and, as I grow more willing to risk exposure, I can put the scene into my story. The trick is in knowing that the stories don't take their value from their connection to "real life." When a story is true, it becomes its own reality.

As I delve into myself for the truths I think I know, I find that I must be careful not to simply bleed on the page. It would be so easy – pull out this thing that happened when I was eleven, that moment of

social humiliation, and always the losses and tragic deaths. Fortunately, that sort of writing offends me. That sort of writing leaves the reader with no ability to react or evaluate the writing itself. It tells the reader "This was what really happened to me" and waits for the sympathy. "Based on a true story!" the credits at the end of an insipid television movie tell us. Somehow that is supposed to elevate the truth of what was told, to make it a truer truth. Baloney. While some may privilege the "truth is stranger than fiction" approach, I would suggest that truth is not necessarily truer than fiction. In fact, I believe the opposite. Truth in fiction is not a recording of what really happened in a person's life or thoughts or even how the writer thinks things really happened. Truth is more sly than that.

What I try to do in my writing is use the things I know – the memories and the imaginings and the things I hate to admit could come out of my head – in such a way that they become something new, something that is its own, not beholden to my recollection or even my understanding. I think of those amazing structures that keep appearing in The National Geographic – a cathedral built over years in some Arizona garage by a strange little man who always had a pocket full of bottle caps and champagne corks and wheelless Matchbox cars. This is how I see the realities, the details of my life. They are no more consequential in the final product than are those bits of trash to the end result that is a

cathedral or shrine. Nonetheless, I like them. They catch my notice and I believe they will add to the picture I am trying to create. Just as the bottle cap is not supposed to be recognizable as a bottle cap in the final sculpture, the real details I stick in my writing are not supposed to look like pieces of Felicity Pearson's real life. They are there to serve that story, not my life story. They may be recognizable to someone who knows what they are, but they are still transformed.

Part of this, I suppose comes out of the fact that I grew up in an odd household. I know that a lot of people feel their family is strange, but I think I am justified in believing I have a stronger than usual case. One of those things that I know, but continue to be surprised by, is that everyone did not grow up like me. I think I thought there were pockets of us around the country, sort of like Jews in Arkansas, not a lot, but not unheard of either. I am not so sure anymore.

There was a time when I wished that we didn't have family stories like the one about the time the ocelot ate my grandmother's pajamas – while she was in them. The stoic cry my father claims she let out – "Rick, your cat's in my room" – defines her in my memory. I'm happier with our weirdness now. My family's stories are great for parties or bars, though, but not for the stories I write. I know that I can never get away with it. Some editor will tell me it was too unbelievable. Thurber could draw his cartoon about the seal barking but I know I can't write about how my

grandmother (how this woman suffered!) came home from work one day, went up to the bathroom, and sat on the john only to realize that she was being watched – by a full grown seal in the bathtub. And even if I could convince someone to publish a story built out of these events, I have to ask myself "what's the point?" What do I want to say that necessitates using these things?

I used to do a lot of acting. Nothing major; there is no Tony award tucked away in the attic, just high school productions and then later, community theatre. Even at that level I tried to take seriously what I was doing, and I think I was a pretty good actor. Acting is pretty far from the truth at first glance, but when it is right and good, it creates its own truth. You stand on a stage, facing someone you may have hated two hours earlier, and you kiss him. And mean it. And you weep when you hear he has died at sea, even though you know he is standing in the wings, and that when everyone goes out for a beer after the show, you will sit as far from him as possible. And all those things are true. The reality of the relationship between actors is true, and the reality between the characters on the stage is true, but those realities come out of artistic transformation.

I think something similar happens in the process of writing. The things we learn and experience live in our writing, but not without transformation. It would not be wise for me to write a story about a

woman who wants a role in a play that a friend could have given her but didn't. This happened; it's true. That story would not be worth the telling. I do know though that I could write about unexamined expectation and the perception of betrayal. I could write about destructive anger and self-absorption. I might even give my characters pieces of this episode from my own theatre days, but if I did that, it would be more for color or texture than to try to present reality as truth.

The truth of art – acting, writing, or whatever other artistic devise we might consider – is not contained in the duplication of reality. Art's truth comes out of the act of creation, not the act of reporting. I may use reality as the material I create with, but I think that to pretend I've discovered something merely by telling it is a mistake. Reality is a writer's clay. I may try to make my writing look real, or I may aim for the exaggeration of detail, but to tell a true story, I have found I have to be as willing to invent as I am to borrow. The link between creation and artistic truth is mysterious to me, but I do believe in it. The act of creation is as hard to define as is Truth itself. I don't know what happens when I invent a character, I don't know where the details of personality, or the quirks of behavior come from. Some of it, I know, is pure thievery, but even when being a thief of real details, I know that there is a shaping, a changing that I engage in. This shaping is an act of creation itself. It comes back to the idea of privileging "true" stories over invention, and perhaps my

project is an act of aggression against that privileging. In relegating the recognizable to decoration and focusing instead on manipulations of real events, perhaps I am trying to force my readers to acknowledge the value of invention. What I want to do is create things and I want those things to touch readers.

When I began assembling this collection, I imagined it in three segments. There would be stories that were primarily about isolation, stories about relationships, and the Midway stories, which would examine the interplay between individuals and community at a certain level. These distinctions still shape the collection, but the lines are no longer clear. Perhaps this is because those three concepts – isolation, relationship, and community – are so intertwined in my experience and in my imagination. "The Soda Can Man" is certainly a story about isolation, as is "Portraits," but yearning for relationships and, perhaps, forming unvoiced relationships is an important part of what both these stories are about. In the same way, "The Knife Thrower's Wife" is a depiction of tragedy in a loving marriage and "The Sacrificial Man" deals with a man's attempt to renew his relationship with his son, both also are portraits of people who are fundamentally alone. Looking at the eight stand-alone stories, I see points along a continuum rather than members of rigidly defined sets.

I haven't spoken of language, or style or aesthetics, and, as I close this essay, those omissions trouble me. The lyricism and play in language is an enormous part of what I love about the act of writing, but I am not sure where language and truth meet, though I know they do. Certainly, there is no art if love of language is not some part of the writer's drive, but I do not know where the music and play of language fit in the mosaic of truth that I find so important in what I am doing. Language and play are important and I believe that when a writer is successful, they are inseparable from the notion of truth that I have been discussing.

As I was writing this essay, I paused to listen to Richard Bausch discuss his new novel, *In the Night Season* in a radio interview. This novel is apparently violent and frightening, and details – graphically, the interview led me to believe – the torture of a widow and her eleven year old son. Bausch talked about a lot of things; it was an interview, after all, but two things stood out as I listened to him. The first was his answer to the question "why is this book so violent?" Bausch says he wanted to see if he could write a scary story.

"I wanted to see if I could do it."

I was able to hear Bausch read when he visited here at the University of Tennessee. One of the things that made the story he read that evening interesting was the manner in which his two characters so

completely shared the point of view. He wanted to see if he could do it, he told us. And I believe him. I know that feeling; it is a major factor in many of the decisions I've made regarding the Midway stories.

I also suspect, though, that he is not telling the complete truth. "I wanted to see if I could" implies, to me, a sense of play. It is what a juggler says when he tosses one more rubber chicken into the air. But a writer such as Richard Bausch, a writer who grapples with loss and love and truth in the ways he has, plays with the creation of truth. I believe he knows this, and that titling his scary story with a line from the book of Job is his way of reminding us that, for all the play, there is more at stake. It is his way of acknowledging that he is playing with the truths of human suffering and survival.

That's the second thing that stood out for me while listening to Mr. Bausch. We can write to entertain our readers; we can write to entertain ourselves; we can write for whatever reasons make sense to us. But there will always be something more at stake if we want to be true.

I don't compare myself to Bausch. I have a long way to go in my work, but it excites me to listen to a writer whose work I so respect and hear some of the issues I have realized I am struggling with. I make up stories, but they are as true as I know how to be.

1... ISOLATION

Ada wiped down the long counter, slipping in between the twirly seats and leaning as far over as she could so that she wouldn't have to wipe from the other side. On the other side – the side the customers never saw – were splatters of mayonnaise, dried rivulets of spilled cola, thick trails of something that used to be red, and an overlay of grill grease. When Ada brought an order to the counter, she held herself rigid, gut sucked in hard to keep from touching. If she didn't stop herself, she could imagine the roaches nibbling at the counter edges in the empty shop after Costas had closed for the night. Ada tried not to touch anything in the coffee shop and she never ate there. She finished wiping the counter and moved quietly to the next end-of-shift task, which was filling the salt and pepper shakers, the sugars, the napkin holders, and the ketchup jars. The dry tickle of pepper in her nose recalled hot summer afternoons in a dust filled attic, and she smiled, despite the low throb that pestered at her temples.

She finished and went into the kitchen. Costas was sitting on an upside-down milk crate by the open back door, reading a Greek newspaper. Ada stood near enough to make herself felt, and waited. He always took his time acknowledging her; some days he never did but those days were rare.

"I finished the sugar and all." Costas continued to read. The insides of her ears grew hot, confirmation of the headache. "So.... I'll go ahead and leave then?"

"You sweep the floor behind the counter?" His eyes never left the paper.

"It's already past the end of my shift." She'd never had to sweep before. This was one of his games. Ada's head was a drum now.

"Floor not swept, you not done."

"No."

He looked up from his paper at that. "No? Fine, you don't do your work, you don't have work. Or paycheck." His eyebrows arched like antennae.

"Costas, we had a rush at eight-thirty. I'm already almost half an hour over my shift, and I didn't know you wanted me to sweep." She clapped her mouth shut. The words sounded whiny and Ada didn't whine. There never was a paycheck anyway, just money silently taken out of the register on Fridays and handed sourly to her. Perhaps when she finally did quit, as they both knew she eventually would, she would not even bother with what pay she had due. Telling him to go to hell and walking away for good was tempting, but impractical.

"Now you know. Go sweep, then go away. Not before." He turned his attention back to the paper and after a long moment of standing

before him, Ada turned and found the broom. She swept the floor behind the counter, and carefully tipped the gatherings into the trash bin. There were two glasses in it. She had tossed them earlier in the day, one because it had come out of the dishwasher with the long whisper of a crack in it, and the other when a customer had pointed out the chip in the rim. In apology, she had only charged the customer for toast and coffee, not the full breakfast he had eaten. Ada pulled the two glasses from the trash and slipped them, in a paper sack, into her purse. She returned to the kitchen, swept that floor, put the broom away, then collected her sweater from the coat rack. Costas continued to stare at his paper. Though there was plenty of room, she brushed her calf slowly along his arm as she walked past him out the back door.

Costas does not look up from the paper, even when he knows she is out of sight. He thinks about the swish of the broom against the floor and imagines Ada's hips moving smoothly as she sweeps. When she moves past him into the night, he smells the lemon scent she gives off and remembers a grove he played in a lifetime ago. Had there been other children? Had there been girls playing in the scent of lemon? It has been too long and he cannot remember any more than he can remember much about his round hipped wife, who died giving birth to a stillborn baby boy. He sets the newspaper aside and locks the front door.

The kitchen door opened onto an alley and the back of a row of apartments. From the front, they were a listless ribbon of brick, perforated at regular intervals by grey windows, but in the alley rickety balconies, laundry lines, the occasional lawn chair or barbecue grill revealed the individuality of the people who lived in the apartments. In the summer, tricycles and soft pink bikes with banana seats would be tucked close to the heavy grey doors that led into dark hallways. Ada liked imagining families as she walked through the alley. She'd picture them sitting at a chrome trimmed kitchen table, the children – two, usually – drinking milk out of Flintstones jelly glasses, while Mother served an amazing casserole that cost a dollar and ten cents to prepare but tasted so good that Dad and the kids raved about it for the rest of the night.

Near the mouth of the alley, looking down on the back of a bar, was the mystery man's balcony. He wasn't a family: the laundry line hung with a week's worth of slacks, thin button-down shirts, tee-shirts, socks and boxers gave him away. Every Sunday the clothes appeared on the clothes line and day by day they disappeared like seedlings resolutely nibbled away by bunnies. Other things, though, made him curious to Ada. A woman had appeared on the balcony, sitting in a lawn chair in a bright flowered robe. At first, Ada thought the mystery man had married or at least found a woman to live with him, but when the woman sat for

three days in exactly the same spot, peering in his kitchen window, Ada finally realized that it was a mannequin. She'd laughed aloud in the alley, delighted by the silliness of her mistake. The man must have eventually tired of lifeless eyes watching his movements, because after work one evening Ada saw plaster feet sticking out of the dumpster behind the bar. She felt sorry for the mannequin and walked home confused. She wondered why it had been cast aside so unkindly. She thought briefly about looking to see if the mannequin was still wearing the bathrobe. She thought of putting the flowery robe on, creeping up the fire escape, and peering in the man's kitchen window herself. Ada wondered how he would react to eyes that weren't painted plaster, dark brown eyes that blinked back their curiosity and questions, but the idea had frightened her and she hurried home that night, sticky with obscure guilt.

For several weeks after the mannequin had been dispatched, the mystery man's balcony offered nothing more interesting than the disappearing laundry. Then he hung the cranes. Bright, vivid, origami cranes. Quite a few of them. Ada knew something about a thousand paper cranes being good luck, and suspected that if she counted there would be at least that many fluttering from the unseen threads. Weather and sun bleached the cranes and wind took many fluttering off and away, but several still danced on threads thumbtacked into the balcony

ceiling.

Ada was even with the bar before she remembered to check on her man. Looking up, she was surprised to see blue light puddling from the kitchen window. She walked back a few steps and squinted up. He had replaced the regular bulbs in his kitchen fixture with blue tinted ones that gave the kitchen the look of a gypsy's sitting room. Ada walked back to where she could see into the living room. Blue flowed from those windows as well. Ada looked up at the cobalt light for a bit and wondered what it felt like to live in a blue world. Would walking around the apartment feel like swimming? This was what she liked about the Mystery Man; he made her think about things. It didn't matter that she couldn't tell him what she was thinking, she still considered it a dialogue. She turned away and the dumpster reminded her about the glasses in her purse. She slipped one hand into the sack, and ran a fingertip along the smooth surface of one of them. Forty minutes over her shift he'd kept her this time, and holding that damned paper like the lord of the manor. Her hand curled around the glass, her finger stroked the rim and skipped like a caught breath over the chip. The alley was empty, but still she looked up and down several times before she yanked the glass from her purse and hurled it against the open dumpster lid. It broke like a rifle shot, and Ada bolted out the mouth of the alley. She stood, rubbing her thigh where she had bumped it against a car parked

by the side of the bar, as she blinked in the glare of halogen. People swirled around her on the avenue, car tires whispered to the pavement, and presently Ada started toward her apartment like a matron aunt tottering through a party to the bathroom. She held the sweater closed against the chilly air with hands crossed over her chest, hunching in on herself as if wounded. At her apartment, Ada collected her mail from the box – junk fliers and a women's magazine. "No time to cook? 15 sure-fire dinners in 30 minutes or less." She let herself into her apartment and set the remaining glass into a plastic milk crate by the door, which was already full with glasses and bottles and jars and light bulbs.

Ada stripped out of the pale pink uniform and stuffed it into the duffel bag she kept on the floor of her closet for dirty laundry. She unclipped and brushed her hair while the water in the shower ran, then stepped into the stall. In the shower, she washed until she could not smell anything but the clean, citrus tang of her soap. Once out and dry, Ada sat in the kitchen, wrapped in a bathrobe, and read her magazine. It was a family magazine, one for women with families, and Ada read every page. When she reached the end, she went back and deliberately re-read each recipe before deciding whether or not to cut it out. She taped the clippings into her "Family Favorites" cookbook with the happy blue goose on the cover and wrote out a grocery list from the most interesting sounding new meal. While she worked, she put a dish of last week's

chicken-broccoli casserole into the microwave to re-heat.

It started to rain as Ada was washing the dishes. She watched from the kitchen window for a long while, drawing one of the chairs over by the sink. The window mirrored the room and her face and the glow of her cigarette as she brought it to her lips. Looking into the window, Ada could see the table behind her, the cookbook on the table like some shrunken hope chest, holding her offerings. The magazine mothers moved smoothly in her mind, cleaning glass-topped stoves, sweeping hardwood floors, and playing with clever-eyed, elfin-faced children. She was no older than the magazine mothers, but they seemed to have found a secret path to a place she could only look in at from the pages of the magazines. She watched her pale face look back at herself as the rain trickled down the window, though the reflections. When she brought a hand to her face, she was startled to find her cheeks dry. She rose and turned away from the window and padded quietly through the living room to bed.

He is painting again, the walls of his living room. He is the voiceless Neanderthal in a cave in France, he is a prophet-artist and the visions that burn his eyes out from behind emerge on the cave wall, painted by blue moonlight in feces and blood.

There were three old women, two together and one alone, and a solitary grey-haired man who had just come in. Ada had served the

women already and was taking the man's order, when Costas came out of the kitchen. He lumbered deliberately to the counter and, when he was behind her, looked over her shoulder at the green pad as if to read the order. He edged his hips forward, pressing against Ada's bottom, and she felt his penis twitch against her. He leaned closer and his weight pushed her against the filthy counter edge. She'd brought her hand up reflexively and pushed back, wheeling away from the counter and from Costas. She tore the check off her pad and shoved it at Costas. He looked at the check, then at her, then shambled back to the kitchen. Ada scrubbed her hands at the sink, then set silverware and a glass of ice water in front of the customer. The man took a napkin from the holder and polished water spots off the cutlery. He watched her empty the dishwasher trays until Costas thumped the order down in the pick-up area. The man's light blue eyes followed as she brought his food to him, and then he cut his meat in tidy, small bites, pushing fat and gristle to the side into a small discard pile. When he had finished and left, Ada cleared away the dirty dishes and the tight little grey packets he had folded several napkins into. An image of him hovered in her mind while she worked. His clothes were neat, but nondescript. His fingernails were dirty, but he wasn't, making her think he was a mechanic perhaps. He watched her move back and forth the whole time he'd been in the coffee shop, but he didn't really seem to be seeing her. Instead it was as if his eyes had been

focused on something dancing on his side of those pale irises.

Near closing time, Costas came to the front and opened the register. It was Friday, payday and he counted bills out, twenties, and then looked Ada up and down. He took a five dollar bill from the register and added it to the bills in his hand. He held out the money and she looked at the five on the top of the sheaf of bills. Ada's mouth bent into a tight smile as she slipped the money into her pocket with her grocery list.

When her shift was finished, when she had finished picking groceries off the shelf at the market and checking them against her list, when she had finished lining items up on the kitchen table and carefully consulting the recipe in the Family Favorites cookbook, when she had finished cooking and portioning the meal into several microwave and dishwasher safe containers, Ada showered. She rested her forehead against the cool tile until the water turned cold and she began to shiver. She pushed the vinyl curtain open and grabbed a towel. In front of the mirror, Ada looked at herself. The cold water and the towel had left her pink. She held her arms up, fingers twining behind her head; it made her breasts look prettier, she thought, and she half closed her eyes to soften the woman in the mirror. She thought of hands reaching from behind and running up her ribs and then down to settle on her belly. She imagined someone behind her, kissing her neck, just behind the ear and she let her eyelids flutter. She imagined it was Costas behind her, but he

smelled of sweat and grease, so she stopped thinking of him. She switched off the bathroom light and went to bed. Light from headlights passing on the street outside pulsed in and out of the room. She leaned across her bed and set the alarm clock, then lay back again, her hands moving lightly on her belly. She fell asleep imagining pale blue eyes looking deep into her own eyes, sharing secret visions.

The city is sleeping still despite the lightening of the sky. She is standing in the railroad yard trembling, holding an empty paper sack. Broken glass pulses in a heap by the side of a brick building. She tears the bag into bits and lets the pieces flutter around her feet. She's crying but she does not know if she is sad or angry and it frightens her that she cannot tell. This can't go on, but she knows it will. She hears a noise behind her; it is only a dog, sniffing and pissing on weeds, but she hurries away from this place and goes home.

Most days Costas did nothing more than watch, but sometimes he would touch her again, always pressing from behind, always unexpected even after it had become routine. He only did this in the kitchen now though, and he whispered hoarsely into her ear the things he wanted her to do. Ada would stand still until he backed away, then she would turn, smooth her bunched uniform and go smoke a cigarette at an empty table. The thin, grey-haired man had become a quiet regular and Ada often felt him watching her. Sometimes she looked up into his pale eyes,

but she always felt embarrassed and always looked away first. Costas developed a fondness for the man, who sometimes left sketches of the shop or other customers. The pictures were always buried under the pile of paper the man's restless fingers had folded into tight little squares. He'd sketched Costas on the back of his check one day and the portrait now hung in a cheap fake brass frame in the kitchen.

"Hey, Picasso, what you want to eat today?" Costas would ask him now.

Ada looked through the scraps of paper after he had gone each day. She wondered who he saw when he was watching her, what he would draw if he ever bothered to. Would her hair look lush or greasy through those eyes, would he see her edging toward being a brittle husk, a cocoon around a dead caterpillar? She was afraid of what he would draw, but it still hurt that he drew nothing.

Ada no longer asked permission to leave; she moved placidly through the agreed upon chores and left without a word when it was time. Costas did not comment or retaliate except on paydays. Once, when he hadn't touched her all week, he had added only a single dollar to her pay, and she had laughed. He had almost slapped her for that, she'd seen his arm jerk back, but he hadn't, and she made a point not to laugh again.

Willy is drinking a beer and thinking about the drive home. His Mustang is parked in the alley and he thinks about the dark highway he will soar down soon. He likes the drive home better than being at home. His house is dark and he expects that the bedroom will be cold. Maybe he should get a cat, girls like cats and besides, it is hard to be the only living thing in a whole house. He remembers a girl he met in here a couple of months ago. He wonders why he didn't call like he'd said he would. He finishes the beer and buys another and sits, trying to remember the girl's name, but he can't. He gathers his change from bar and leaves.

When she looked up, her attention caught by the frenzy of cranes in a whirl of wind, Ada realized that she couldn't remember the last time she had checked on her Mystery Man. The windows were painted over in a dark mossy green, except for two holes in each window. The holes were ovals and the blue light from inside spilled out in tight, focused beams. She wondered when this had happened. He'd ended the dialogue and she had not even noticed when. She was ashamed of herself and sorrow pushed against her throat.

The bar music was loud that night. She stopped and looked at the front of the bar. A group laughed outside the door. Ada listened to the careless ring of their laughter, the banter and conviviality, then turned and walked deliberately home. Once inside, Ada stripped out of her uniform, but did not shower. She pulled on her jeans and found a black

turtleneck sweater she had not worn for some time. She brushed her hair and stuffed her feet into a pair of flat slipperlike shoes and dug a bright string of beads out of a dresser drawer. On the street, she stood forcing her breath to come in longer, regulated waves and when it did, she headed back to the avenue.

At first, the inside of the bar made Ada think she was in a darker version of the coffee shop. The dim light brought out the dinginess instead of masking it, and the music, tempting from the alley, was too loud inside. She bought herself a beer, a bottle of fancy beer instead of the cheaper draft she'd drunk in college, and found a vacant stool. She was near the end of the bar, too close to the speakers, and the band's overblown bass made her ribs quiver. It had been too long since she had sat in a bar, wanting to be approached and she felt both stupid and superior. She watched boys she had no interest in look her over and then dismiss, and she glanced at herself in the bar mirror. She was out of place. Her hair did not shine and bounce, her skin looked too pale, and her clothes looked old. She drank her beer quicker than she'd intended to and ordered another. A third arrived before she was half done and she looked up to see a man across the bar smiling in her direction. He appeared older than the college crowd, wearing jeans, but less naturally than some men would have, and his hair was cut for a traditional job, maybe a bank or insurance office. He bobbed his head, giving an

impression of charity in his purchase. She realized that she would do no better, and that she could not stand to go home alone, and she smiled back.

They left the bar after last call, having squinted in surprise when the lights were turned up to drive the barflies out. Willy stumbled and led her into the alley. When they reached his car, he pressed her against the hood and pasted wet kisses on her face and neck.

"I'm not going with you." she said flatly. The risk of getting into a car with this man was suddenly clear to her. She was tired and the sorrow she'd felt earlier swept back like a wave. She thought of her own bed, safe and warm.

"Ahh, baby, you aren't going to leave me like this, are you?" He kissed her again and pawed at her jeans. Catching her wrists, he set her hands at his own waistband. Willy pushed her jeans and cotton underpants past her knees and when she realized that this part did not matter to her, she undid his pants. He boosted her onto the hood and fumbled with the foil packet he had pulled out of his pocket. Ada shook one foot lose from her jeans as she wondered if they still sold condoms in men's bathrooms, if he had bought it during one of his many trips there that night. They must, since she now remembered a machine selling them in the ladies' room. How nice these things are equal now. Progress on the heels of plague.

Willy's breath was heavy with beer and Ada moved her hips forward and murmured back at him. She was tired and thought about her apartment. When he pushed into her, she whimpered, not being ready, not being interested, not being aroused, but the sound was smothered by his shoulder. She looked up the alley, oddly indifferent to the possibility of discovery. The paper cranes spun in a darkly shadowed wash and when Willy cried out in orgasm, the light shifted and the cranes twirled softly, fully spotlit again.

Willy kissed Ada on her mouth and her eyelids and plucked at her in drunken affection as she pulled her pants up. He told her she was great as he zipped himself and offered to drive her home, but she refused. She left him sitting in his car with the radio on, and she hoped he would sleep before he tried to drive away. Once home, Ada peeled out of her clothes, crawled into bed and fell asleep.

She woke before the alarm and spent the morning in her kitchen drinking coffee. Cars and people swam below her window as she watched, first the shift workers - nurses and factory workers, then the office bound, then finally students and retirees and other miscellaneous wanderers. Ada watched them all, wondering where they lived, who they were. She wondered if they had people they talked to on the telephone at night; she wondered if someone down on the sidewalk had passed the alley when she had been fucking on the hood of a stranger's car. Finally

she showered, dressed, and left for work.

Walking up the avenue, Ada had a horrible image of Willy waiting around in the alley. She didn't really think he would be, but she thought she ought to be sure that he was gone; the idea that he might come into the restaurant while she was working was jarring.

The car and Willy were gone, though he left the condom lying on the ground. She kicked it toward the dumpster, glaring around in case she'd been seen. The alley in daylight seemed wrong. Far down, a thin, blonde woman hung clothes on a line. The woman did not look like the mothers Ada had imagined; she did not look like the mothers in the family magazines. Ada was annoyed by the laundry woman and irritated by the alley's dinginess. She wondered if sunlight would ruin the Mystery Man, and she turned to look up at his balcony.

His latest work spun in a slow circle, hanging from a strong beam. Ada watched the grey hair move round; watched the inert, pale blue eyes meet hers, then move past to peer at the painted-over kitchen window. She went up the fire escape and sat on the edge of his porch. The mystery man hovered with his cranes, he soared above the alley, he danced over a solitary, newly folded crane beneath his feet. Ada reached out and took the pale green bird and went back down the fire escape stairs. She turned it gently in her fingers and thought about all the frozen meals in her kitchen. She thought about all those dinner orders

written on her pale green check pad and about hands on her belly. When Costas looked out the back door of the coffee shop an hour later, she was still sitting on the bottom step of the fire escape and the front of her uniform was wet with her tears. When he said she was late, she told him to go to hell and discovered that she could, in fact, walk away without bothering to collect her pay.

Martha thinks of him often, playing with his features in her mind as if he'd been formed from play-doh. How would he have aged? On days when she is less than kind, the lovely olive undertone she remembers becomes more of a jaundice. His hair thins badly and too many years of negligent eating make him as lumpy as an old mattress. After a spell of this sort of thinking, she feels contrite and has to reform him immediately. She tells herself this cruelty is because she loves him still, but there is a part of her mind that knows love does not really justify the kind of anger she still bears him. It has been four years and two months since he left, four years and a little more than seven months since they met. It has been three years and four months since her divorce, but she does not think of her husband, Randall, often; only of the man she says she left him for.

At her job, Martha maneuvers to be sent to a trade conference in his city, the city where he moved with his wife and child, the city where he built a life without her. At the public library there are microfiche copies of all the telephone directories in the country, including the directory for his city. She finds his wife's name in the listing. She calls the number that evening. The wife answers and Martha pretends to be selling credit cards and asks for him, hoping that he will still be at work.

He is, and the wife asks what the call is about. Martha launches into a sales pitch, drawing for inspiration on the calls she, herself, gets at night when she lurches to the phone still convinced that someday he will need to hear her voice. The wife is not good at brushing salespeople off, and the call goes on longer than Martha intended. She listens to the wife's soft voice and knows that this woman never vents anger over a phone call not being from the right person onto some poor slob just trying to sell credit cards.

Martha goes to his city a day early and picks up her rental car at the airport. She drives to the street that the telephone directory listed. She waits in the car until he comes home. He is driving a van and his children run over to him from where they were playing. One child is new, one is old. The wife appears in the large window that faces the front yard and waves. They could be filming a television commercial – for what? Mini-vans? Insurance? Martha pulls her car away from the curb, drives back into the city, and checks into her hotel. After a shower, she goes down to the restaurant and orders extravagant food she would never eat at home – filet mignon and wine and even dessert afterwards. She thinks about the man she saw getting out of the van, not jaundiced, but not alive with the old vitality, either. He did not look happy to her, but neither did he look lost or alone. She picks at the chocolate cake in front

of her. She is alone in this city where her lover lives and she wants to cry, but she doesn't.

Martha goes back up to her room and selects a dirty movie from the cable system. She falls asleep listening to strangers moaning. She dreams of being held, but not by him. It is his wife who holds her and the wife whispers "Of course he loved you. Stop fretting, little one. Stop fretting."

Sounds from the street rose on the heavy air and wandered cat-soft through the open window. The neighbor boys lounged on the porch across the street, laughing and occasionally calling out to cars that passed by. It had rained earlier in the day and tires swished against the street. There was a smell of charcoal fluid and meat in the air, as well as vague spiced scents which swirled and wound their way up on random breezes into her own linseedy room. It was early in the season but distinctly summer, and Claire was painting a rainforest in her studio.

The rainforest was actually a stop on the Green Line, where the trolley cars swooped overhead instead of underground or along the median of the street, as they did everywhere else in the city. The girders rose up from the street to the concrete base where commuters waited for overcrowded cars to arrive. From the street, the platform looked like a tree house, like something out of Peter Pan or the Swiss Family Robinson, except it was so unabashedly urban. Despite the grey of the platform, of the girders, of the glass attendant's booth, and of even the people waiting for trains, the station had a festive feel. Claire had returned later that week and shot a whole roll of film and now those photos were tacked all around the easel.

In her painting, the girders rose like giant hardwoods in the Amazon. At the base, the steel spread into roots that bulged up and cracked the asphalt and at the top it reached out with sturdy branches. The color shifted slowly from gunmetal grey roots to warm bronze limbs. The platform overhead also hinted at vegetation, with random leaves and other moments of greenery – someone's sock, a tree on an advertisement – implying the canopy. A spider monkey eating a breadfruit was tucked up into the steel beam that supported the platform from beneath. Tired Bostonians stood around, or sat on benches on the platform, though one elderly man in pin-stripes sported shell earrings and a royal blue tattoo across his forehead. In the booth, an Amazon tribesman sold the tokens that passengers need to pass through the turnstiles. A pretty red haired woman was breastfeeding a baby, while two older children pulled shells and flowers out of her briefcase. The red-head was wearing the navy blue skirt of a power suit and running shoes. Her children were naked, as was she from the waist up. A smiling anaconda lounged along the tracks, a small shower of sparks forming between its extended tongue and the live third rail that powered the trolleys.

Claire stepped back from the picture and combed her hair with painty fingers. Someone in another building was playing scratchy old records, summer songs. Claire got a beer from the kitchen and came back to the studio to take one last look at the finished painting. She liked

it. Such a simple thing to feel about one's own work; so hard to admit. Pride was for raising children who won scholarships, not for being the child who created the art that won the scholarship. Pride was for building a house, a wall, a deck. For painting the living room.

Claire smiled at the bright rainforest, then settled herself in the open window. One of the boys down on the sidewalk called a rude, flirty comment up to her and she laughed and shot back a lewd reply. They bantered for a few minutes, till a car pulled up and he and his friends tumbled into it and drove off. She stayed in the window and watched dusk roll toward her.

The apartment was on the top floor of an old three-decker. The building had high ceilings, unexpected little built-in cupboards, and window ledges big enough to sit on, but it also had electrical outlets that grew frighteningly hot when she plugged anything into them, radiators that gurgled and wheezed like battlefield actors dying in war movies, and plumbing and drafts and creaky floorboards that were quaint only to a person living somewhere else. The windows were huge, though – high and wide like a cathedral – and the agent had been smart, showing the apartment when afternoon sun spilled into the room like a golden waterfall. She'd signed the lease that day.

Paul had driven the Ryder truck filled with her things – her computer and stereo and television boxed like new in their original

cartons, second-hand furniture hauled home from Keene after graduation; canvases wrapped in old sheets and tied with clothesline; and her easel. Claire was squashed beside Paul, and Avery leaned against her at an angle, his feet out the window, hooked into the big, oversized side view mirror. Hestell was supposed to have come too, but hadn't been able to get off work that weekend. Claire had joked and evaded, wanting to avoid saying the words. Hestell started to cry, though, and Claire hugged her quickly, murmuring "good-bye... it'll be okay... it'll be fine" like a mantra till Paul finally said that they had to hit the road. Claire had stared out at the bland highway trees rushing by for the first hour, not talking. She'd wanted to be angry at Paul for rushing them, but the truth was she'd been grateful. A better person would feel worse about leaving her best friend.

It was a week and a half before she could get a phone line installed and she surprised herself by crying through the first three calls. Paul had soothed in his awkwardly tender way, which assured her that nothing would change for them. Hestell had started crying when Claire had, and as always, seemed so much more upset that Claire forgot her own problems consoling her friend. When she called home and cried about being lonely, her mother told her to come home then and stop all the art nonsense.

Claire set up the computer, phone, and answering machine in an alcove off the living room, and laughingly told Hestell it was her techno-shrine, where she could make offerings to the gods of communication. She sent absurd, chatty e-mails to Hestell several times a week and called Paul every night, often falling asleep holding the cordless phone like a teddy bear. In the mornings, the phone embarrassed her, as if it were a vibrator or smutty video, and she would quickly put it back in its base in the shrine. Every Monday morning, she stuffed the Sunday classified section of the *Globe* into a manila envelope for Paul. On the phone, he told her that he had sent out some resumes, but he didn't tell her about his promotion to floor supervisor. That Hestell had mentioned in an e-mail earlier in the week. He didn't have to tell Claire that he really did not want to move to Boston, but she still thought it was his responsibility to say it.

Claire's own job at the Museum School pleased her, particularly when she realized that she was a better teacher than she'd expected to be. And the city pleased Claire, with its shops and its subways and its bustle and grime and variety. She pleased herself, too, these days.

Paul and Hestell drove down to spend the Fourth of July in Boston. Both told Claire that Avery had to work, but both also told her privately that Avery and Hestell were fighting.

"He's being so awful, Claire. I don't know what to do. The worst of it is that he blames it all on me." Hestell bowed her head a little and her hair tumbled forward in a ruffle of doll- blonde ringlets. "He says I act like I want out, like I'm drifting away from him, which is so untrue, but he won't tell me why he thinks that." Claire wrapped her arms around Hestell, then after a few minutes, went to find some tissues. Hestell took out her contacts and washed her face, splashing cold water in her eyes until the red faded. Paul returned with the boxes of Chinese carry-out he had gone to pick up for their dinner. The apartment was hot, so they crawled out the kitchen window and ate on the fire escape. When they finished, it was dark and Claire dragged them up to the roof to watch the fireworks. They sat on a blanket Claire had up there; Paul with his arm around Claire's shoulder and Hestell a little in front of them, occasionally leaning against Paul's legs, then quickly sitting forward. If Avery had been there it would have been like the old picnics that had extended late into the night while they talked about movies or family or what was happening at their jobs. The roof smelled faintly of warm tar and the sky was clear enough that Claire wanted to stay and look at stars. Paul shrugged indifferently, and Hestell complained that she was being eaten alive by mosquitoes. Claire finally gave in and they went back into the apartment.

While Hestell and Paul watched television, Claire worked on "Evening." It was a painting of a woman, standing in understated offering like Botticelli's Venus, but in an apple orchard. The woman's face and arms were covered with tiny variegated leaves and golden hair billowed around her head, eventually becoming green branches. Her arms curved up around her head as if she were a ballerina and leaves extended down her chest just over her breasts and met with chamois tans and grey as leaf melded into bark. Her torso and legs formed the trunk. Below the knees, Claire had switched to darker shades, and the woman's feet were roots, sinuous and dank, with violets growing up between the elongated toes.

Claire glanced toward the living room, then painted an apple in the vee of the woman's groin; red, with flecks of golden yellow. She repainted one arm so that it curved down with the hand cradling the apple. When Claire was finished, there were long ringlets of golden hair twined through the upper branches, and the woman looked placidly from the canvas with bland azure eyes. Claire took the canvas off the easel when she was finished and set it facing the wall, careful not to smudge the still wet paint. In the living room, Paul and Hestell sat on the futon watching the cable comedy channel.

"They don't have this at home, Claire. It's so great. I can't believe you didn't want to watch." Hestell said as she scooted over.

Three days after Paul and Hestell had driven back to New Hampshire, Claire got an e-mail from Hestell saying that she and Avery had broken up for good. The e-mail was a day old when Claire read it and she felt guilty that she had not checked earlier. She practiced an apology for not calling sooner as she dialed Hestell's number, but there was no answer and Paul's machine picked up when she called him. It was an odd moment, as she sat on the edge of her bed, knowing that Hestell was somewhere with Paul and that she, Claire, was a bit out of the loop. She took the phone with her into the studio and sat in the window, looking out onto the street. After about an hour of dialing and hanging up at the machine's whirl, she left the window and began to gesso a large canvas while ideas for a new painting formed. When Paul finally called back, she did not think he sounded disappointed when she said she was busy. After she hung up, she looked at the phone in sad annoyance, then went to bed.

The new painting was set in the courtyard of the Boston Public Library. Claire intended a realistic look for the building and was painting the old bricks and nuances of architecture as precisely as possible. She thought of her high school art teacher as she worked, who'd told her she was a draftsman and not an artist. The remark been intended to hurt, but it hadn't. She was painting from photographs again and had decided that only two walls would be visible with their long banks of windows

above the portico. There were twelve windows and when the painting was finished one bank of windows would be perfect rectangles. On the other wall, the windows would be parallelograms because of the perspective. Each window was a tiny painting within the whole and the architectural details around each window would serve as a frame. Some of the miniatures would be copies of old masters, which would help establish the conceit, but most would be glimpses of ordinary life. After she had finished the walls, Claire borrowed a magnifying glass from the museum school, a huge, rarely-used contraption that screwed to the easel; and she painted the miniatures with extra-fine brushes with half the bristles carefully pulled out.

In one window, the view looked down from the top of bleachers, through a sea of heads seen from the back, to the floor, where a Celtics game was in progress. Another looked through a wide plate-glass window with the word "Coffee Shop" painted in a gilt arc. A thin waitress in pink poured coffee for a slumping grey-haired man sitting at the counter with his back to the viewer. The windows filled as icons and anonymous moments came together in compatible randomness.

Paul came down for the weekend when she was almost finished but she draped the painting with an old sheet while he was there and if he noticed, he did not ask her what she was working on. She took him out to the brew-pub favored by the museum crowd for dinner on Friday,

but late enough that her new friends would already be gone. She told herself that it was because she didn't want him to be bored with all their art talk. Hestell called late on Saturday, in tears.

"I was just so lonely." she said. "Avery was at the club tonight and it was like he didn't even know me."

Claire had been straddling Paul's lap, covering his face in kisses and tickling him when the phone rang, and she did not want to be talking, though she didn't want Hestell to know that. When she finally hung up, he'd gone to bed. She stood in the doorway and watched his chest rise and fall. It was a peaceful cadence, even if she didn't believe it was true sleep, and she climbed into the bed next to him to share it. The next morning, he said he needed to get an early start and Claire kissed him and waved good-bye from the porch as he drove down the street. She didn't know if he was watching her in the mirror or not, and so stayed on the porch till his little green Honda rounded the corner.

The next window she painted was a departure from the theme of Bostoniana. It was the last rectangle, the last window before the straight side of the building butted into the other wall. This window she painted as a window. Framed with wispy white curtains, it showed the bedroom of Paul's apartment. She painted him nude, discreetly so, sitting cross-legged on the end of his bed. His solid thigh masked his penis and only the slight curve of his bottom showed. His stomach as flatter than it

really was, a detail that made Claire proud of her generosity. A bowl of apples was in his lap and he was holding one, looking at it, his face turned almost three-quarters away. The door behind him was open and the shadow of an unseen figure could be seen on the wall outside. Claire painted herself in another window, the first of the skewed windows, and she was balanced on the wide sill. She had her back against one track and her feet against the other. She, too, was nude but she was less sparing with herself, even including the thick roll of skin that formed at her belly when she sat. She wanted to be beyond fair. Looking beyond her, the easel could be seen in the center of the room, the magnifying glass still clamped in place. The courtyard painting was on the easel, "Still Life" was hung on the wall, and "Evening" was propped below it, facing out, with a small, grey tabby cat sniffing at it. As she worked, Claire smiled, liking the idea of a cat.

THE SODA-CAN MAN

It was time for a break; he couldn't really walk for much more than twenty minutes at a time, even slow. His chest didn't work as well as it used to; he got winded so easy lately, and his left foot had that sore on it now that often pained him. He sat down on the bench, the bag of soda cans settling at his feet like a dog. The bench was one of several that ringed the playground. It was a place for the mothers and nannies to sit while children climbed and swung and laughed and fought and cried. The benches were a moat between the children and the city. On weekends, he saw fathers taking their places here, sometimes making shy conversation with the mothers and nannies and sometimes arriving with their own women, new loves who might become wives and mothers and eventually bring new children to the playground.

She was small but didn't seem to know it, and her hair was dark brown, long and wild and messy. She was wearing thick green tights and a short little pink skirt and a puffy red snow jacket that was zipped up to her chin. He watched her for almost an hour, even when his hips and knees grew sore from the cold. He pretended he was her daddy, and that when she fell and scraped her knee, she would run to him and cling like a monkey with her arms and legs, while he whispered into that black cloud of hair that it was okay. He knew her hair would smell sweet, like

hot sugar. Thinking about how she would smell made him notice himself and the sick-sweet, not good-sweet, smell from the bag of cans. He stood up and tipped back the top of the trash can next to his bench. Two Cokes, a Diet Pepsi and a Mountain Dew. He put them his bag and started to walk away. She was hanging upside-down on the monkey bars. Another girl ran over and poked her bottom, ran a little ways away, and then came back and poked again. The two girls shattered the cold air with their high, clear laughter and he smiled as he left the park with his sore hips and ringing ears.

He'd found the bag several weeks ago in the machine shop dumpster. It was thicker than the green bags he'd been using to hold his soda cans, almost like a tarp and clear, which was good because he could see when it got dirty and needed to be washed out. After he took the cans to the redemption center and the boy there had given him $6.35 for them, he folded the good strong plastic bag and headed for the shelter. There was a market on the corner and he went in and picked up two tins of sardines, a small box of saltines, and a quart of Miller High Life. He walked up and down each aisle, and near the diapers and toilet paper he saw a small bottle of baby shampoo. He paid the sleepy-eyed woman at the counter and went around to the alley by the shelter where he could eat before he went to stand in line for a bed for the night. He would eat the dinner they served at the shelter, but he liked having

something strong tasting first. He could barely taste the overcooked shelter food. He joked to his buddies that it was probably a good thing, but he knew the food was filling and he didn't like to knock a kindness when it was offered, anyhow. He ate the sardines casually, laying each fillet on a saltine, then washing the whole thing down with a mouthful of cold beer. He patted his pocket where the shampoo rested and thought about how he would shower at the shelter tonight. He would wash his hair with this shampoo and his skin and his stinky feet, too, and he would fall asleep smelling like hot sugar.

2... Relationships

I am holding an umbrella over an opossum that is dying in the back of my truck and all I can think is "when did I turn into someone who'd even own a pick-up truck?" I know better than to touch the animal, yet, despite my repulsion, perhaps because of it, the impulse is there. The impulse, though, is not enough. The animal is dying and my need for self-preservation – even the relatively minor preservation of fingertips from feral teeth – is greater than any desire to offer comfort. Would human touch even be a comfort to a wild animal, though? Perhaps it would be one more affront and I am more decent in my restraint. Perhaps that is a rationalization. I don't know how to measure my own decency; I am too harsh a judge and at the same time too likely to let myself off the more difficult hooks.

The opossum is looking in my direction, though I don't flatter myself that it is looking at me. When cars pass, its eyes go green like glo sticks on the Forth of July. Its eyes look wet, and I wonder if the opossum can feel anything beyond the pain of dying from the sort of internal damage a moving car inflicts. I wonder if the opossum is sad to be dying and I get angry at myself for wondering that. Its mouth is open and as I shift on the balls of my feet and try to roll out the burning pain in my shoulder, the umbrella moves and rain puddles under the

opossum's tongue. I try harder not to shift. I'm staring at the filthy thing and wishing it dead. I see fleas leaping off it and I hope that my arm is too high for them. I start to go abstract and dissect the opossum mentally into pointy parts and round parts – pointy tail, pointy mouth, pointy tongue, round body, very round eyes, round ears and round head. Pointy fingers and toes. The opossum dies with its mouth open and I have to set the umbrella aside to pull the piece of cardboard it's on out of the back of my pickup. I root around in the silver toolbox and find my shovel. I am afraid of driving alone in snow storms so I carry water, blankets, candles, snacky bars, and a shovel in the toolbox. Even in the summer. Even in Tennessee. But I am not in Tennessee; I am in Ohio, just outside of Cincinnati and there is a dead opossum in my truck that I must now bury. I find the shovel and start digging by the side of the road. It's the first time I have ever used the shovel and I learn that it's hard to dig with a shovel that is two feet long and hinged. I don't lock the hinge properly; I don't know to until the shovel buckles shut and raises a blood blister the size of an opossum's eye on my palm. The dirt is as hard as bricks, but the rain softens it as I dig. When I have what looks to be enough of a hole, I tip the opossum into it. The rainwater in the hole surges up on all sides and blankets the opossum. The tail sticks out. I nudge it into the hole with the tip of the shovel, then cover the animal with soupy mud. I throw the shovel into the back of the pick-up, hard,

then get in and finish driving to the motel, which is where I was heading when I saw the opossum on the yellow center lines.

That is not exactly true. What I *am* doing is sitting at my computer, after all these things happened. I *am* writing in a style that I haven't affected in over thirty years. I *am* writing in the style I invented for Jack after he kept wheedling for me to write letters and tell him what I was doing while he was in New York.

"I am at the grocery store with my mother. She is shopping for Easter dinner and I have decided that I must stop her. I grab a canned ham, stun her with a quick blow to the temple and stuff her in the freezer with Sara Lee. A lone sandal lies on the floor, and I wedge it into the handles to block the door before she revives. As I sprint down the aisle to safety, I hear her love beads rattling against the glass as she shouts 'Esmé ... Esmé ...this is *so* not groovy, baby.' I will be the hero at Easter dinner when the family learns they aren't having grape leaves stuffed with cracked wheat. I throw some wadded bills at the checkout girl and escape with the ham from the A&P into the dark cover of night."

The "you are here" letters. I wanted to make him laugh, and I wanted to appear more clever than the artists and musicians and writers I imagined him surrounded by. I didn't believe him when he said that he was lonely in New York. What would I have done if I had? That was how I wrote to Jack, though, and this is how I am now trying to write about

Ohio. I don't know what I will do when I finish this, because I know that it cannot be a "you are here" letter. Not now.

The opossum got clipped by three cars in slow motion succession while I watched, but it wasn't killed. I found the cardboard box in the ditch near where I had pulled over when I first noticed the opossum trying to cross the road, and slid it under the opossum as a makeshift stretcher. As soon as I looked at the animal, I knew it would not live, though I didn't expect it to take over an hour to die. There are a lot of things I didn't expect. I didn't expect to be the sort of woman who would drive a pick-up truck. I didn't expect to miss snow. We do get a little snow in Tennessee, but not enough to keep me from missing it. I didn't expect to be alone at the age of forty-seven. And I didn't expect Jack to leave a path back to me, particularly not a path with nowhere at each end.

In the motel, I can't help but remember Jack. As teenagers in Boston, we were the motel king and queen because both our mothers were at home often enough to guarantee carnal ignorance. Kitty, Jack's mother, was old school Boston-Catholic and had decided that Jack, her youngest son, was going to be a priest. She tried to be polite to me, but a divorcee's daughter was not part of the pre-priest regime. My mother, on the other hand considered herself a liberal, though in those days a person was a hippie, not a liberal. She was significantly more open about

my sexuality than I would ever be, and had given me long, earnest talks about my body being a temple of the goddess. I don't know which goddess, but apparently the goddess approved of orgasms. Once, my mother offered to bring a speculum home from the clinic so I could look at my cervix. I declined and for once, she did not press the issue. The problem was that she viewed sexuality in lush, abstract terms and Jack's presence involved more realism than she'd prepared herself for. Or maybe it was me. Maybe I decided, and am misremembering now, that I simply would not allow her to insinuate herself into that part of my life.

Every other Friday night – payday at the grocery where he worked – Jack and I drove up Route 1 to the strip of cheap motels. Jack would pick a motel and sign us in as Mortimer and Earlene Livermore, or Stanley and Earlene Butz, or Felix or Percival, for which he would affect a lisp. He always had a new name for himself, but I was Earlene. I would try not to giggle, but sometimes he got me. Wilber was his favorite; it reminded me of the talking horse on TV, and I'd bite the inside of my cheek, because I thought if I laughed, the motel manager might refuse us a room. It never occurred to me that the fact that the managers did not question the sophomoric pseudonyms was proof enough that they only cared about our hourly rental fee. Even in those days, Jack was controlled by arbitrary rules, and for sex the rule was that it had to be in a bed. He could accept that the bed had been previously used by the

most tawdry and cynical of prostitutes, but for him it was still less demeaning to me to have sex there than in the back of his car.

I take a shower in my motel outside Cincinnati, Ohio, and lie on top of the comforter. I sleep for a while like that, naked on top of the bed with all the lights on, but cold wakes me and I turn out the lights and crawl under the covers. I fall asleep telling myself that I have to ask the morgue guy if I have to call Jack's mother.

In the morning, I call the morgue guy and ask him to write a list of all the things I am supposed to do. He asks me where I intend to bury Jack and I tell him that I have to talk to Jack's mother. The morgue guy goes silent, as if he hadn't considered Jack having a mother. I tell him to do the list; I will call her and then call him back. I am suddenly protective. The morgue guy could hurt Kitty so carelessly. Once I would have relished her squirming, but I understand her a little better now. I understand the bitterness of disappointments that have no door to lay them at.

At the beginning of our senior year, Jack ran away to New York City. His car, paid for with his own earnings, was registered in his father's name and therefore could have been considered stolen had he taken it, so instead he stood at the Watertown entrance to the Mass. Turnpike and hitchhiked to New York. Kitty blamed me and made no effort to hide it, but the truth was that I had been as shocked as she had

been, and as hurt and confused. Jack called a week or so after he left and told me how easy it had been to find a job in New York City, but he hedged when I asked him what kind of job he had. He wanted me to join him, but he wouldn't ask and I held out for the invitation that I knew he wouldn't extend. I broke the stalemate when I said I had to graduate, which was not untrue, but what was truer was that I didn't believe in him. He called a few more times, then switched to letters, which softened the doubt in both our voices. He came back almost two years later, with hepatitis and a tattoo, though the two were acquired independent of one another. The tattoo was the traditional bulbous sailor's heart with a banner for a sweetheart's name. He'd had them put Earlene in the banner, but by the time he came home, it didn't make me laugh.

The phone rings tinny in my ear, as if it is being routed through time. Kitty answers groggily even though it is after ten in the morning.

"Kitty?" I ask, though who else would it be?

"Yes.... Esmé ? Is that you?" I am touched that she recognizes my voice. It makes it harder, though, and I find I am battling a tightening throat, and tears. "Something's happened to Jack." she says and I confirm her worst fear and begin to cry. She does not. Even in this, she will wait until I am off the telephone and gone. I tell her the details, that Jack was struck by a car while he was walking on the side of the road, apparently picking up soda cans for redemption, that he'd apparently

been homeless, that it was only luck that they had found me. I do not tell her that he had written my telephone number on his arm with a marker. And I lie and tell her he had been wearing a St. Christopher's medal and so they had given him last rites. I almost feel noble.

"Where do you want him buried, Kitty?" I ask.

"There's a plot for him here." she tells me. "By his father ... and me, when my time comes."

"Mount Auburn?" I ask, and she tells me yes.

"Do you want me to call them, or do you want to?" The question sounds all wrong and I think for a moment that I should have let the morgue guy do this. I am no kinder a bearer of bad news than he would have been. I tell her that I have maintained a small insurance policy from when we were married that will cover expenses.

"I'll take care of arrangements here, if you'll handle things down there." she says. "Will you be with him?"

"I don't know. Should I be?"

"No need."

I tell her I'll call her again once I have everything seen to and we end the conversation.

When they called me in Tennessee to tell me about Jack's death, they asked for Earlene. It wasn't until I got to Ohio that I learned about

my telephone number on his arm. He was carrying a wallet and had an expired drivers license for identification. Aside from six dollars and some change, he had nothing else with him. They cannot tell me where he was living or where he might have slept at night. If he had any effects, they are lost.

I drive to the mortuary instead of calling again. The morgue guy is annoyed by this, I can tell, although he obviously has been trained not to exhibit annoyance. He has not made a list for me and I am livid. He suggests that cremation will make transporting Jack to Boston easier and much less expensive. I tell him no, that Jack was Catholic and his mother would come to Cincinnati and tear out our hearts if we sent her son home as ashes. The morgue guy starts to tell me that the Pope has made allowances for cremation and I shock him and myself by opening my mouth and screaming. It is only then that I realize that I must finish this quickly or go crazy. A small man, balding and wearing a shiny navy blue suit scurries into the room. I close my mouth, but I feel the scream still quivering in my eyes. The man in the suit confers with the morgue guy and the morgue guy leaves.

"I'm sorry about that, Ma'am." the man in the suit says. "Mr. Megley is new. We did not mean to offend you in any way. I'll assist you personally with whatever arrangements are necessary." His formality is like a lighthouse and I find my bearings and tell him about Kitty and that

I was Jack's wife. He nods and I know that he won't talk about cremation anymore.

"I asked that man to make me a list. I don't know what has to be done and I don't think I can remember unless we make a list." I sound pathetic but I know it is allowed and I want to wallow in it while I can. He finds a brochure with a pre-printed list and he guides me through each item. Some do not apply to Jack, and some, because I am shipping the body, are not on the list. He writes those in the wide spaces between the printed obligations. He draws arrows next to what I will have to do, and puts parentheses around the things he says he will take care of. Most of the items are cocooned in his parentheses and I am excessive in my gratitude. "This is what you're paying for" he tells me simply. I wonder, silently, if I ask him to stay with me in the motel and hold me while I sleep, if he would do that also. I wonder, silently, what the fee would be for that.

After he had been home for three weeks, Jack proposed. He said he'd bought the rings in New York and I knew, instantly and without doubt, that he was lying. I knew he'd bought them in Boston and taken them with him to New York, believing that I would come to him and we'd get married there. Did I marry him out of guilt over letting him down two years earlier? Something else I don't know. My memory is erratic. Sometimes all I can recall are the emotions of a time, and other times

there is nothing but a lifeless chronicle of one event after another. I married Jack and we lived in an apartment in Somerville and made love in a bed several times a day. We were happy, or at least we appear happy in my memories. I got pregnant and we acted like a couple of goofballs and loved every minute of it until I had a miscarriage. In his grief, Jack invented new rules for himself. He could not shower if I was in the house. He could not eat the same sort of meat two times in a row. He could not sit in the living room before dark. I became pregnant again and miscarried again and Jack began whipping himself with a home made flogger and I, in my greatest betrayal yet, filed for divorce.

The man in the suit finishes the list and I look it over. One of my few responsibilities is to provide clothes for Jack to be buried in. The man tells me that I don't need shoes and I realize that Jack's shoe size is the only thing that would be the same. I tell him this and he looks contrite, as if he should have know that. He excuses himself and I hear him whispering in the hallway. He comes back and tells me that Mr. Megley will give me Jack's measurements. In a few minutes, the morgue guy comes in and hands me a slip of paper and I thank him, though we do not meet each other's eyes. The man in the suit photocopies the list and hands me the original. I don't like the brochure, it offends me in

some way that I can't articulate, so I fold along the side of the list, tear it off, and hand the rest back to him. He shakes my hand and I leave.

In my truck, I feel the motel pulling at me like sideways gravity. I know that if I go there, I will sleep and the stores will all close before I can buy Jack's suit, but I feel like I am driving in my sleep, so I find a lunch shop and go in for coffee. I drink two cups and pick at the french fries I ordered and I get directions to a mall from the waitress. She is put out that I stop her so that I can write the directions down. I tell her that I am buying a suit for my ex-husband's burial and she blanches and cannot do enough for me. I feel like a ghoul and promise myself that I will not do that again, but when the clerk at J.C. Penney's is rude about my ignorance of sizes, I do it again and it works just as well. I wonder how far I can go with this; I imagine driving my truck at ninety miles an hour down the highway and telling the trooper about dead Jack, or pushing a loaded grocery cart through the express line at Safeway. I have no morals, no shame I tell myself, but I know that is a lie and I know that I am only telling myself that because I am enjoying feeling like a shit. It's not the first time.

I drive back to the mortuary and give the black suit I have purchased to the man in the shiny navy blue suit. It occurs to me that Jack will look much better than him and I am briefly dazed by my inability to make sense of that thought. I ask to see Jack's body and I

realize that I have caught the man off-guard again. I feel badly, he is the one person I have dealt with who I don't want to unnerve. He tells me that he had expected me to want to wait until the body was laid out. I say that I want to see him now, like he is, and while it is clear that the man does not understand this request, he does not refuse me. He asks me to wait, and he disappears from his office, carrying the suit bag.

He returns after a long, silent fifteen minutes and leads me into what I assume is the actual morgue, though I am not sure. I don't think it appropriate to ask. Jack's body is on a table that has been draped with sheets down to the floor. Jack himself is mostly covered with sheets. His face is badly damaged, but clean and I wonder if they just now washed it. There are two pieces of gauze taped on his face – one on his left cheekbone and one covering his right eye. I will dream about what is beneath the second piece of gauze and the dreams will be terrible. I stand over Jack, looking down and I am torn by the desire to touch him and the fear of doing so. I push the sheet back so that I can see his arm, the arm with the tattoo. It is clear that the man in the suit did not expect me to do this, because Jack's arm is crusted with blood. I rub the tattoo and my own faded telephone number with the edge of the sheet. When I have flaked off most of the blood, I stroke the tattoo with my fingertip, just like I did when he was alive and sane and mine, then I kiss his forehead and touch his hair.

Ed's gone out to buy beer, which is fine, since we were planning to watch the game, but I do worry about him and his urges. "Vegetables" he will say and when I look at him, wondering how that man can expect a person to understand all the implications he might have behind a simple word like vegetables, he goes on and says "A house isn't a home without some vegetables in the cupboard, now is it?" Then he's stacking canned beets in the cupboard, though neither of us would eat a beet unless the Russians had bombed this nation senseless and beets were all that were left. Of course, that could be his thinking, that if he buys beets, they'll stay put.

It's an odd urge, there isn't much doubt about that, but it isn't as bad as when Pearlie took to knitting, even though she didn't know how to do a purl stitch. Ed's mother had been the one to teach Pearlie to knit and what with Vera being right handed and Pearlie a southpaw and both of them stubborn as sin, Pearlie hadn't been able to understand how to do the purling part and Vera certainly wasn't ever able to make it clear. I used to think it was so funny. I'd tease, saying "Pearlie, can't you purl yet?" But I didn't tease when she was knitting over her poor dead baby, so Ed can't fault me there. She just sat in the living room knitting and knitting on that cheap blue baby yarn, just row after row of stitches that

didn't look like anything. Ed didn't say much neither, but every night he pulled the knitting apart and rolled that yarn up into a ball for Pearlie to start in on again in the morning. The yarn turned grey with so many passes through both their hands, but neither of them seemed to care.

Ed says that if Pearlie should come home again, we ought to eat nice dinners again. He asks me when the last time we had a real Sunday dinner was and when I ask him what put that in his mind, he says "nothing" and gets another beer out of the icebox. We stopped having Sunday dinners when Pearlie was sixteen and ran off pregnant with James. Ed knows that as well as I do because it was watching him choke on good food at a lonely table that made me stop cooking in the first place. Of course, a father won't often tell what he's thinking about his little girl, but you would think that after she left again, he would do something besides buying beer and beets.

She sat at a small table, the center of which was flipped up to reveal a make-up mirror. Her hair, as dark as it had ever been, but less glossy, was tied back with a scarf to keep it off the canvas of skin and she was drawing greasepaint down her cheeks with a triangular white sponge. It actually wasn't greasepaint, she reminded herself, hadn't been greasepaint for years. The new make-up was kinder to her skin; it didn't sink into her pores leaving her stained like the greasepaint had. When this had all been new, she hadn't known the color would sink into her skin as if the circus were claiming her, marking her as its own. There had been one time in those early days, after a show, when she and Rudy had gone to eat in the town they had been working. She'd changed into street clothes, of course, but when they had walked into the Gasthaus, the drunks at the bar had dragged their watery eyes over her breasts and hips. Passing the bar on the way to the ladies room, she had heard someone mutter "Hure" and the others bark with vicious laughter.

Whore. She had looked at herself in the mirror after she had stumbled, blushing and feeling struck, into the bathroom. Whore. The bright daubs of rouge, the carmine lip paint, and the green shadow at her eyes were gone, she had scrubbed with cold cream until her face had stung. But remnants of stage paint mixed with fatigue and left her looking as if she had simply worn off her make-up through exertions in a cheap, dark room. When she returned to their table, Rudy had asked why she was so quiet. She'd lied to him; a forgivable lie, she had hoped, and said she was just tired. In those days, Rudy still felt obligated to

incorporate her every sorrow into himself. He was why she was living in Germany and if her life was difficult, he felt responsible. She'd taught herself to bury things deep inside so that Rudy could not gobble her griefs up like an opium eater and poison himself.

The new make-up was gentler. Joan smoothed it over her face and watched it fill the many small lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth as she painted the Lovely Isabella into existence. With distance and the amber lights inside the tent, the illusion held. She colored her cheeks, then painted an extravagant wide line of green across her eyelids, followed by a thinner black line, a stroke of calligraphy, along the lashes. With distance and the amber lights and a flesh colored unitard to cover softer, wearier skin; with distance and the sequins of her costume flashing under the amber lights and the sparkle of white teeth shining against carmine lips as the leather straps were fastened, the illusion held. The audience would sit breathless as the Lovely Isabella was bound to the wooden wheel. Rudy would watch from the other side of the ring and she would smile and nod to him when she was ready. He would return the nod with his own, tie the black satin blindfold across his eyes, fling his arm out with the arrogance and surety of a surgeon and let Dieter lay the shining knives into his hand. The audience would sit breathless and silent as Rudy would fling the knives POK POK POK POK embedding them in the wood above and below her wrists. POK POK POK POK and her arms would be surrounded by the flashing silver knives. POK POK POK POK. Knives on either side of her knees, her thighs, and still the audience would not dare breathe. POK POK POK. Rudy would rip the blindfold from his eyes and with a dazzling smile to the audience,

gesture to the still quivering knives bristling around his wife's head and then the audience would breathe and applaud and whistle for more. Rudy would cross to the wheel and retrieve his knives. His eyes would meet hers so steady, and the tips of her mouth would curve up slightly and they would hold each other this way for a small moment, then release and he would wrench the knives free. The routine would finish as it always did, with Rudy blindfolded again, with Dieter grasping the lumbering wheel and setting it spinning, with the tent silent except for the tick tick tick of the wheel and then the thud of knives landing to perfectly outline The Lovely Isabella. The audience would explode then, whistling, clapping, thudding boots against the wood of the bleachers so hard she'd expect the stands to crumble down in a heap. And the illusion would hold.

Isabella was complete now, painted in place, but Joan saw in the mirror another version of herself, some thirty years younger. She was putting on her face for luncheon with the Officers' Wives Club. The hair was shorter and subdued with lacquer, a well-behaved little sable cap that curled under itself and framed her face and its unexpressive grey eyes. A pair of white gloves would have been sitting on the dressing table, the final piece of that costume. The make-up then was Cover Girl, and the shades were pinks and pastels, colors for a wife. Joan pulled off the scarf that had been holding her hair back, combed her fingers through the fat, lazy curls, pulled the more obvious greys, then lowered the mirror, shutting both masks away. She wrapped a sweater around her shoulders and left the trailer, going to wait by the performers' entrance to the tent. There was an enclosure to protect against weather and Joan

stood inside and watched Marlene put her dogs through their final routine. Marlene pampered her dogs. She slept in a nest of canines and fed them better cuts of beef than most of the circus women bought for their husbands, but the dogs repaid her affections with crisp response and a blatant, swaggering enjoyment of performance. Joan was glad Marlene had finally been given the slot prior to theirs. The audience was well primed now, happy and easier to hold. The tent flap rustled behind her but she did not turn her head. When Rudy came up behind her and stood close, with his hand light on her hip, she leaned into him and his chin grazed the top of her head. She suspected he knew a smile was dancing at her lips.

Joan sat with Rudy's black costume across her knees, mending the apparently endless spots where threads had snapped, spilling gold sequins and leaving gaps in the pattern. A three day break. Everyone would be making repairs, patching thin spots, covering age with glitter. Rudy lay on the bed, a cassette player on the shelf over his head playing opera at a whisper. Joan had not cared for Wagner when they first married but Rudy disliked the press of headphones against his ears. He took to playing his music at the lowest volume. By now, Joan knew the operas as well as he did and she took quiet pleasure from the muted voices tickling her ears, though she doubted if she would even recognize *Tannhäuser* at regular volume. Joan's needle slipped smoothly along the fabric, adding sequins where bare patches had appeared like worn sections on an old rug. The light outside the small windows changed from afternoon grey to a mottled darkness. Shadows stretched across the trailer and Joan dozed in her chair.

"Mein Ausweis! Wo ist mein Ausweis?" In the disorientation of sudden wakefulness, Joan could not identify the shapes flying up from the dresser nor the shape that was yanking the drawers half off their tracks and howling like a frightened, furious gibbon. "Jemand hat meinen Ausweis gestohlen."

"Rudy?" Who else could it be, she thought, but what was all this? "Rudy, what's wrong?" The darkness spit him out looming above her and he shook her by the shoulders, thudding her against the back of her chair. "Gib es mir!"

"What? Give you what?" She was choking on tears. "Rudy!" She screamed it into his face and his eyes flitted back from some place where she had not been. He stared at her, blank and bovine for a moment and then released her shoulders and crashed out of the trailer. She sat in the dark for a moment and then crossed to switch on a light. Every drawer was emptied onto the floor, every cluttered surface swept bare. She looked toward the door and then began putting things back in place.

Her first husband had shouted often. Perhaps that was why she hadn't cared for opera, she had walked away from loud, impassioned voices. Thomas, an American Army captain, had believed in hierarchies - this one is higher than that one, that one is higher than them all. Thomas had been known to leave his soldiers doing push-ups in the cold German mud for hours if they gave him a sense that his standing in the hierarchy had not been duly respected. He'd brought the creed of hierarchy to their marriage and tried to teach Joan that she was not higher than anyone. She did not fight him, but he knew she did not give

him rank either and that knowledge chafed him. Sometimes Thomas held her chin between his thumb and middle finger, only hurting if she tried to pull away. With his mouth inches from her face, he smothered her in his anger, shouting about contrived grievances as the spittle flew from his lips and tongue. When he finally tired and pushed her away, she rose and went to the bathroom to scrub her face pink with a washcloth.

Rudy returned and stood silent in the doorway. Joan set her sewing aside and moved quickly to him. She put her palms to either side of his face and drew him in the door, into their trailer.

"I did not know where I was."

"Oh."

"I thought I had lost my papers. I was afraid."

"Yes. I see." Joan did not know what to say. Rudy was sitting on the edge of the bed with his strong hands clamped together between his knees. "Maybe you were dreaming. It could have been that. A dream and you woke badly." She could barely talk. They were not talkers by nature, either of them, but this was not the quiet of graceful communion. This was a death of words.

"Are you hungry?" She moved to his side and stroked his hair. "You must be hungry, we haven't had anything but cheese-brot this morning. Did you eat while you were out?"

Rudy shook his head. She stooped to kiss his temple and then crossed to the kitchenette where she began to scrape potatoes. She moved efficiently in the small space and tried not to think about the fact that he had been shouting in German. Rudy didn't speak German in

their home, in their life. She had given up her fatherland, he had told her, he would give up his mother tongue. But tonight he had been shouting in German.

The show was nearing intermission and Joan asked Dieter if he needed her at the concession stand. There were others to work it, part of their duties because their acts were closer to glorified party stunts than professional routines, but today Americans from the air base had filled the tent. Dieter thought about it a moment then said "Ja, gut. Danke." and stalked off to check the animal enclosures, where, for a separate fee of five marks apiece, people could peer into dark cages at the tigers and camels and elephants. Americans always liked this and the extra money would release Dieter from having to pass cigar boxes like a beggar at the end of the performance. Joan slipped through the side door of the concession trailer. She helped the Italian girl ready things for the mob they hoped they'd have. When intermission came, Joan worked smoothly, switching easily between German and English, opening bottles of beer, warning Americans that the popcorn was sweetened, not salty, explaining what was available. She watched the Americans as they milled outside the stuffy tent. They stood in groups of two and three and chattered gaily, sounding like birds playing in a puddle after a rain.

The circus posters had appeared around the kasern as sudden and wonderful as mushrooms. They tempted her with their red backgrounds and yellow lettering. Tigers leapt through hoops in some, clowns stretched their faces into impossible grins in others, and Joan drove, that

first day the posters had appeared, to the where the circus was setting up. Parking at an overlook over the field, she had stood outside her car and watched the circus people. Like toy figurines, they watered animals, tumbled in practice sessions, juggled and shouted and laughed. The toy people even made a routine chore like hanging laundry on a line look magical. When she drove away, she determined to see the circus.

She watched Thomas for almost a week, waiting anxiously for the blandness of mood that, for once, she could use to her advantage.

"There's a circus in town." she said during dinner. "Posters all over Heidelberg."

"So?"

"I've never been to one. I thought it would be a hoot to go." Thomas could be lulled into believing that she was a good little television wife when she spoke like one.

"I don't have time."

"No. No, I didn't expect you would ... such a silly thing. No, I was thinking maybe one of the girls in the wives' club." She watched his face, looking for reaction. Thomas expected her to be active in the Officers' Wives' club. Hierarchy. Submit to him by evening and Mrs. Colonel So-and-So by day. He made a small, dismissive noise and turned back to the potatoes on his plate. Barring a last minute mood swing, he would not interfere with her plan.

She went to the circus alone, as she had planned all along, and once there, she splurged on a seat in the first tier. She sat in the front row, where the seats were comfortable chairs instead of bleachers.

Families moved in on either side of her seat and the high, foreign shrieks of German children fluttered around her head like shrill confetti.

Rudy performed midway through the second half of the show. By then Joan had given herself over to the fragile spell and was sitting forward in her seat, enthralled by every detail. The ringmaster had spoken, she'd understood nothing and then from the shadows, Rudy strode like a gypsy prince to the center of the ring. His knives flew across the ring and burst balloons fastened to a board one by one as fast as popcorn; they flew and formed patterns on a big wooden board, they flew and cut the stems of roses he then presented with exaggerated gallantry to the older women in the audience. The gesture revived the lingering coquette and the women laughed, pulled him closer, kissed his cheek. The roustabouts set up a large panel, the outline of a person painted in the center. The ringmaster was talking again and though Joan did not understand the words, the intent was clear. The knife thrower scanned the first few rows of seats and when his gaze met hers, he crossed deliberately to her.

"I can't ... I don't speak German. I'm sorry" Joan said.

"You don't have to speak at all, and I can speak English. I promise, not a scratch." One of the clowns had come around to the aisle and Joan did not know how to refuse without embarrassing herself further, so she meekly followed the clown to the panel, where the knife thrower waited for her.

"Okay, now I fasten these on your hand, ja?" He gestured to the leather straps at the outline's wrists. "Is so you don't get scared and move your arm. I fasten them, and you are very safe."

Joan nodded and he buckled the straps at her wrists and ankles. He walked across the ring and collected his knives and when he turned back to face her, he raised an eyebrow in query. The gesture amused her and she smiled and nodded. After he hurled the first knife and it landed neatly almost a foot away from her side, Joan realized that she was not afraid. Her muscles relaxed and something must have shown in her expression, because his face changed and the moment became something like dancing on a precipice, knowing he would not let her fall. The knives thumped around her and Joan memorized the moment, planning to keep it for the rest of her life like a talisman.

Joan watched Dieter enter the tent, and a few minutes later the taped calliope music summoned the audience back for the second half of the show. There was almost half an hour till she and Rudy performed. Joan found Rudy in in their trailer in his street clothes, frowning at the newspaper he held. He looked up at her, took in the costume and she saw fear flutter mothlike in his eyes.

"Why aren't you ready?" She tried hard to keep her voice neutral.

"Thursday. No show till Thursday." He sounded defensive, almost timid.

"Rudy..." Her mouth had become a desert. "Rudy, it *is* Thursday. We've just had intermission."

His face looked slapped. "I never practiced. I'm not ready. How much time?"

Joan looked at him and then away, out the window toward the tent. They had worked for two hours that morning. She did not know

which would frighten him more – telling him that now or allowing him to perform with no memory of the morning's rehearsal. "I'll see if Josef can fill some extra time after Marlene. I'll be right back." She turned to the door and then stopped, not looking back. "Do you want to not perform today?"

They had never missed a show. Twenty-seven years together with one circus or another, thirty-nine years for Rudy all told. Not once missed a show.

"Are you afraid?"

Was she afraid? "Not of you. No." She left to find Josef, the lead clown, and worked over a plausible lie, an episode of spilt coffee and a costume torn on the counter edge while bending to clean up the mess. The clown nodded and said he could stretch his routine to fill the gap.

When she returned to the trailer, Rudy was in costume. He looked less ragged, less lost.

"Josef will fill the time. I told him you ripped your costume, had to change."

"We did work this morning, ja?" he asked.

"Yes."

"We should talk. After, okay?" Joan nodded and on an impulse moved to him, slipped her arms under his and held tight to him. He kissed the top of her head, pausing as he did, leaving his lips pressed to her hair.

From the same overlook where Joan had parked before, they had watched the caravan of trailers snake out to the road. The knife thrower

had asked Joan to have a beer with him after the circus and she'd agreed. They'd met at a cafe the next day and then again the day after that. By the time the circus broke camp a week later, Rudy had decided to stay in Heidelberg. She'd left him at the room he had taken and had driven back to the post. She'd packed her clothes and some few dishes and carried them to her car, then waited at the kitchen table for Thomas to come home. When she told him she was leaving, he slapped her across the face. Her cheek bloomed heat, more in shame than from the slap. What medal had she thought she was going to be awarded for her stoicism? When she started toward the door, Thomas grabbed her arm. She wheeled around, her free hand curled like a tiger paw and she raked her nails across his face at the same moment she sank her teeth into the hand gripping her forearm. The violence had swarmed in her like enraged hornets; she bit to draw blood. Thomas, who'd had no reason to expect resistance, wavered, and she ran and was in her car before he caught up to her. He beat on the window by her head so hard she'd thought it would shatter, and she leaned on the horn, making it bleat into the night. People appeared in doorways and at windows and Thomas backed away, shuddering with the fury of denial. She had the key in the ignition and was starting to drive away when a rock smashed through the passenger window, spraying her with glass and letting Thomas's bellows in at her.

"Whore! You fucking, fucking whore! You god-damned, fucking slut bitch, whore...." She had driven away with him standing in the road screaming after her. At the room, Rudy washed the scratches the sharp

pebbles of window glass had caused then held her till she fell asleep in his arms.

The show went well. Under the lights, Rudy seemed confident. He knew his knives, and Joan knew that whatever was wrong, it did not intrude here. Yet. Afterwards they sat in the trailer and Joan watched Rudy strain to find the slow, anguished words.

"I was in the market, a few weeks ago. You had asked me to buy for you stockings and I thought, I should buy myself some...." He paused, hands picking at the air. "I could not think of the word. You wanted stockings, I wanted ... things for my feet. No word. Still none. Like someone stole it out from me."

"Socks." she whispered. He looked at her blankly. "Die Socken. What you put on your feet." She knelt in front of him and touched the sock at his ankle. "Socks."

"It's like this word never has been in my mouth." he said, his hand on her shoulder, his eyes averted. Joan could not think of the response to this and instead rested her head against his leg. They sat this way, silently, for several minutes.

They decided that they would finish the performances there in Spangdahlem, and then make an appointment for Rudy to see a doctor in Kaiserslautern, where the circus was next booked. The decision made, they tried to achieve normalcy for the evening. Joan felt as if they were suddenly on stage, cast in an unknown play. Their words and actions, even the objects she had lived with for the last twenty-seven years were caked with a luster of unfamiliarity.

In Kaiserslautern, the doctor listened as Rudy described events Joan had known nothing about and then Rudy was sent off with a nurse to schedule tests at the university. The doctor held Joan back, discretely.

"I think your husband is developing Alzheimer's Dementia." Joan could not breathe, could not gag, could not release the-howl-at-the-moon scream that was vibrating in her head.

"How can you know that? There isn't any test. You can't know that." Anger masked her disgust at having suspected this answer. She covered her eyes and waved a limp hand to tell him she wanted no reply, that she knew she was being less than rational. When she thought her voice would not warble, she asked what she must do.

"Wait. See what happens. This sounds like I don't take seriously what is happening, but that isn't the case. There isn't much else I can tell you. The tests I ordered are to rule out other things. I expect, though, to find nothing. This is the trouble. We know when the disease is present only through knowing what else isn't."

Kaiserslautern was quiet; quiet in the trailer and quiet as they performed. The new quiet was one that sucked the color from the upholstery, streaked her eyes with a grey film, stripped grace from their life. There was no growth in Rudy's brain, no virus, no crack in the skull, no bleeding or ballooning veins. No reasons except the unbearable reason. Neither Joan nor Rudy could look at the pamphlets and booklets the doctor had given them, at least not with the other in the trailer. Sometimes, when she found herself alone, Joan would take one from the drawer in the night stand. The language tried to be compassionate, but the blandness of the words horrified her.

From Kaiserslautern, they moved on to Heidelberg, where there were two weeks of performance and then the season was finished. The circus people traveled off to winter down each in their own manner. Dieter would take the animals to Albania, keeping them over the off-season was cheaper there than in Germany. Marlene surprised everyone when she started leaving her canine nest in favor of Josef's bed. When the trailers filed out of the field after the last show, Marlene's was hitched behind Josef's and they sat together as he drove them south to Munich. Rudy and Joan stayed in Heidelberg. They had bought a house several years ago, and during winters and springs they lived like ordinary people. Rudy worked as a carpenter for a friend from their first days in Heidelberg and Joan waited tables at a Gasthaus near the Army post, where her English was a benefit. The coming home had been one more of the simple pleasures of Joan's life, but this time she was frightened when they left the security of circus.

The fall began well, but December brought another episode of Rudy searching for his papers. Joan ran to the kitchen, found his wallet and pressed the identity card into his hand. He squinted at it like a child trying to will the black marks on a page into being the words his mother reads, unable to comprehend and growing angry at the frustration.

"Das ist gar nicht meiner. Der gehört zu Ihrem Mann!" He threw it back at Joan and her hands fluttered to catch it as it struck her chest. "It belongs to your husband," he had said, but he couldn't see and she could not make him see that he was her husband. "Ich bin Soldat, ich muss meinen Ausweis immer bei mir haben." he kept shouting.

Joan grabbed his shirt sleeve and dragged him to the mirror in the hall. "Schau! Look, Rudy, look." she shouted. "You're not a soldier, you're an old man. Du bist kein Soldat. Du bist mein Mann." She jammed the card by his cheek and pushed his head closer to the glass. "This is you. You are my husband and this is you." She began to cry. "This is you, Rudy." She left him staring at the man in the glass. When the front door opened and slammed shut, she was glad and hated herself for being glad.

The rest of the winter was no better. More words were lost, some German, more English. Rudy slept erratically and sometimes left the house and walked for hours and miles in the cold, often in his pajamas and robe. The doctor prescribed pills to help him sleep, but he rarely took them and finally Joan moved the bottle off the washstand. Joan lay waiting during his night walks. She listened to the house sounds, the ticking clock in the living room, the atonal hum from the refrigerator. In February, Joan got a telephone call from Werner, the carpenter Rudy worked for, asking why he had not come to work. When Rudy finally came home, several hours after the call, he went past her into the sitting room and put his music to play on the stereo. Joan, trying not to show that she didn't think she could stand one more loss, asked what had happened. She told him that Werner had called, had been worried, that she had been worried, but Rudy would not reply to anything she said and finally he turned the volume higher and returned to his chair to sit with his eyes closed. Joan stood in the doorway, amazed and hot-cheeked, and then she turned and left him there, realizing that there was nothing he could have said anyhow. The next day, Joan was in the

bedroom folding laundry when heard him telephone Werner and quit his job.

Spring finally arrived and Joan coordinated with Dieter, took down the circus itinerary, and made arrangements to close the house for the season. She felt Rudy watching her. Sometimes she looked up and flinched when she saw his obvious humiliation. Other times, not often but more than once, he seemed a sullen child, angry at her and the world and nothing like the man she knew. The circus would regroup in Heidelberg. For four weeks old acts would be rehearsed and modified, new ones auditioned and then the circus would begin the weeks of driving from town to town. Rehearsal month was a time Joan had always loved, a time when the illusion did not have to be shared with the public. She loved watching ideas that had been cultivated and nurtured over the cold winter months now become realities.

It had been like that years earlier when she and Rudy had added their finale. He'd dreamt the spinning wheel in a nightmare and woken shaking and frightened, but over the winter they had kept coming back to the idea. Rudy and Werner had built the wheel, carefully spacing the pegs on the back of the wheel that were the key to it all. It had been such a simple idea, the back of the wheel like a roulette wheel, pegs ticking against a hard plastic flap, ten ticks per quarter turn. Rudy had tacked the bright red carpet runner to stretch from the wheel to where he would stand. He attached a small block at his end of the runner so he would be perfectly aligned when he set his feet carefully against each side. Every detail, every potential error thought of and countered. Joan and Rudy

had come to the circus that spring almost quivering, eager to see if it could be done. Joan's one responsibility was to signal when she was upright. The wheel had to have slowed enough for him to begin to count the ticks, to see the target in his mind, but he had to know her position to begin. That first time, her voice was a dry whisper though she was not even on the wheel, but instead standing near Rudy and watching. The spinning slowed and when the painted outline was upright she croaked a small "Jetzt!" Rudy had begun to laugh, pulling the blindfold off and dropping his knives back onto their tray. He caught her in his arms and kissed her ear and whispered that she wasn't going to be skewered if he could help it. She'd laughed also, happy in his arms and when they began again, her voice was strong and the knives flew while Rudy mouthed his count. By the time the circus had left Heidelberg, the routine was perfect.

The night before they were to leave for the fairgrounds. Rudy woke from a sound sleep in a panic, convinced that he was supposed to have met Werner for a job hours earlier. When Joan was finally able to calm him, he lay in her arms in the dark, more himself than he had been all winter. They talked in the darkness, just barely seeing the outline of the other, and he let himself voice his fear and guilt.

"This isn't what I wanted for you, Liebchen" he whispered. "This isn't what I meant for you."

"I know." She stroked his arm, and realizing that she wanted him to make love to her, she curled herself along him and let her fingertips move to his chest, then lower. As he began to respond, she kissed his

neck and throat and let herself fall into the familiar patterns of need and love and attention. Later, when he was sleeping again, she lay still and let her tears run down either side of her face to the pillow.

They unpacked the equipment, the props, the costumes, the knives, and the wheel and inspected everything carefully. With her expression masked and guarded, Joan watched Rudy throw, no relief showing though it became obvious that his skill was deeper in his brain than the disease had yet eaten. The first week he practiced the wheel without her on it, as was their habit. They worked with Wagner playing loud on the circus sound system. Rudy did not question her when she slid the tape into the machine, but instead let the music enfold him.

Joan left their trailer and walked to the edge of the field. It was early, just five o'clock in the morning and after Rudy woke and they ate, they would practice with her on the wheel. Joan was not afraid of the practice session, she had watched Rudy like a judge all the last week and she knew that he would not fail her. She sat in the grass at the edge of the field, alone with herself, till voices began to break the quiet, and then she slipped back to their trailer.

They headed to the tent, both outwardly calm and reflective. Rudy had slept well, woken well and Joan could see the none of the changes that were stealing him away from her. She put the music on and sat in the stands as he worked his solo routines. She watched Rudy and listened as *Götterdämmerung* soared inexorably toward disaster. When it was time, she stepped to the wheel and Rudy fastened the leather cuffs at her ankles and wrists. He grasped the wheel and heaved it into motion and then quickly crossed back into position and tied the blindfold over

his eyes. Joan had shut her eyes, the first moments of spinning often made her dizzy if she didn't. As the wheel began to slow, she opened them. Upright. Sideways. She thought of the pills she had put in Rudy's breakfast. She thought of the large, heavy breakfast she had fixed to make sure she would have enough time for the pills to begin to dissolve. Upright again. Sideways. Inverted. The spinning made her tears forget gravity. She thought of the moment years earlier when the first knife had landed at her side, the moment that she had planned to carry with her for the rest of her life, the moment of perfect trust. Upright. She paused. The wheel ticked. Sideways.

"Jetzt!" she cried. And the knife flew and the illusion was shattered.

The green dash lights and the orange tip of Ellis's cigarette were compass points, defining space on the dark bus. Robert gazed out the window with casual disinterest, but the dry, open landscape hid in the black night. All Robert could see was his own tired face slightly tinged by green and orange. They could have been driving to Mars, green and orange stars in the quiet sky, it was all the same. Actually, Mars would be good, a new audience. There were things Robert knew now that he hadn't at thirty-seven. He could acknowledge the futility of the whole sad situation in a way he'd been incapable of when he'd first done the show in New York. The bus was headed for Omaha, though, and in Omaha they were expecting an Abraham who was as tender as old tree roots. That was the Abraham he'd created eighteen years ago, the Abraham who destroyed Rachel without visible regret, and that was the Abraham the good people of Omaha were plopping thirty bucks per ticket down to see. Someday, someone might mount a revival in New York and a new actor would have a chance to do it differently. For the touring company, though, different would be just be indulging his own regrets.

Susan slept soundly, leaning against his chest so prettily that Robert wondered if she had invented a means of practicing even her sleeping poses. It wasn't a kind thought, but Susan would soon go on to

another show, soon have another actor to sleep prettily against. In the right setting, he could make the observation aloud, and she would laugh. Now though, she would find no humor in the suggestion that she was more deliberate off stage than on. Robert looked down the length of the bus at the dark shapes of the cast and crew. Four days of *The Sacrificial Man* in Omaha, then back on the bus and off to Kansas City. Points on a map, places he'd been but never visited, never seen. You don't visit during a tour; what does it matter where you sleep when the curtain comes down? Who would he visit anyway? His friends were in New York or California; those friends who hadn't faded like old photos. Robert looked down again at Susan. He placed a soft fingertip at the corner of her mouth and gently smudged the lipstick.

The hotel lobby was empty when they arrived and the night clerk groggily petulant at having to check in seventeen people. Robert filled in the registration card and pushed it with his index finger to her side of the counter. She looked at it and frowned. He'd left a small, greasy red blot in the corner of the card and he thought she might try to make him redo it. He looked away and watched Susan dab a tissue at her lips and reapply lipstick. She saw him watching and her eyes narrowed for a flicker of a second. Robert smiled at her and she broke the eye contact with a pouty kiss to the mirror. He laughed at their blatant posturing and she flashed a smile too quick to be phony. Some actors did cross

word puzzles to pass the time, but he was glad Susan amused herself differently.

"You've got messages already." the clerk said, shoving two pink slips of paper at him. One at nine thirty-seven from Kitty – no personal message; just the little "please call back" box checked – and one from Martin in New York at nine thirty-five. "I owe you, I know. She said it was important." No check marks for Martin; he'd left his apology to let them both out of an unnecessary call. Robert stuffed the messages into his coat pocket and carried his suitcases down the corridor to his room.

Unpacking was a ritual. He slipped his tweedy sport coats onto his own wooden hangers and hung them from the shower rod, so that the steam from the shower would help ease the packing wrinkles out. His slacks and shirts were packed on hangers and went in the small nook that hotels call a closet, two pairs of comfortable old shoes aligned carefully below them with a space for the ones he was wearing. Comb, brush, razor, aftershave and hair gel went to the right of the sink and the liter bottle of Jim Beam and two of his own highball glasses to the left, on the little plastic tray with the ice bucket. He put his toothpaste and toothbrush in one of the plastic glasses the hotel provided, then threw the other three in the trash. When he was finished, Robert took the ice bucket down the hall, filled it, and bought two cans of Coke from the vending machine. Back in his room, he fixed a bourbon and Coke. He sat

on the edge of the bed, took off his shoes and socks, and pushed tired feet into leather slippers. Finally, he picked up the telephone. It was almost two thirty in the morning, later in Rhode Island where Kitty lived now. She was sure to be asleep. He pulled the message slip from his jacket pocket and dialed the number. He was disappointed when she picked up after two rings.

"Hello?" Her voice was soft and breathy and always made him think of Marilyn Monroe. There had been a time when he was kind enough to extend the image to her wide eyes and unnaturally blonde hair.

"You're awake."

"I got up early. Figured you'd get there late. Omaha ... can't say I can really picture you in Omaha."

"I try to avoid doing so. What's up?" Robert felt like he was drowning in the breathiness, drifting on a sugary cloud to gluey sleep. He took a deep sip of his drink, wincing as the ice clicked against his teeth.

"Already? Jesus, don't you even bother to unpack anymore?"

"I unpacked first. Didn't want to disappoint you. What's up, Kitty?"

"William is getting married. He was going to call Martin to get a number for you, but I told him not to bother, I'd do it."

Robert wanted to hit her. It wasn't an uncommon thought, he always wanted to hit her before the conversation was through, the only

question was when. It was only after the divorce that she'd found the power to goad him into violence, even if it was only imaginary violence. He put a tic on the score pad he kept in his mind. Her side was overflowing, but he was not without points. Less than two minutes, though. He gave her another point for dexterity.

"Have you met the intended?"

"No. I haven't been to Michigan in over a year and he never tells me shit about who he's dating. Must have learned that from you."

"Did he say when?" Robert ignored the jab. It was cheap and much too easy; no points.

"Sometime in December. He needs to know what your schedule is. I told him I'd find out and tell him when he calls me tomorrow. The fact that I'll have this to handle on top of Christmas doesn't seem to matter." It occurred to Robert that she was angry because she couldn't control the wedding plans. She'd always wanted a real family. Real families had children, not child. Real families moved out of New York City, to White Plains or New Jersey even. Real husbands had their affairs with secretaries, not stage actresses. Real mothers got to plan weddings.

"I'll talk to him. He's still at the same number?"

"Just give me your dates for December, he's calling me about setting up the rehearsal dinner, anyway."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow. Tell him that. Goodnight." Robert hung up and finished his drink, then fixed another, more bourbon than Coke this time. He opened the drapes and looked out at the headlights slicing along the highway. He thought about renting a car, plunging into the inky night, and driving to Michigan. He would rest at quaint truck stops, buy coffee, and in the early morning he would pull into Lansing. He'd find William's apartment, ring the doorbell and William would appear, leaden with sleep like a little boy and they would break into slow, wide smiles. William would talk about his girl while Robert made breakfast. Robert finished his drink and changed into pajamas, leaving the drapes open to let the morning light wake him. He lay on the bed and thought about driving through the night until his thoughts slowed and grew gauzy and became dreams. In his dream, the drive was like a movie montage, blurred streetlights and billboards whipping past in the peripheral vision. When he arrived at the apartment, Kitty answered the door, dressed like Betty Crocker and holding a sleeping William on her hip. Robert kept asking when the wedding was, but Kitty told him to go back to Omaha and she would call to tell him how it all went.

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Omaha in the morning made Robert tense. There was an openness, a size of sky and street that was too unlike the comfortable claustrophobia of New York. Robert inspected the street with its chain

restaurants and anonymous stores. In New York, he could walk from his apartment to any of several coffee shops where the hash browns were cooked fresh on a flat, grease blackened grill then pushed into a crispy heap at the side. He knew places that sold rice pudding baked in individual Pyrex cups in an oven, served with tin pitchers of cream instead of pre-measured plastic thimbles of non-dairy whitener. Creamers. The pitchers used to be called creamers. He told himself that such things didn't matter, but he wanted them to matter. He went back inside to the hotel restaurant and pecked Susan's cheek as he slid stiffly into the empty chair next to her.

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Robert watched from the back of the auditorium as the crew assembled Abraham's penthouse on the stage. He'd spent more years within those canvas walls than he had in his own apartment. He had more memories associated with the heavy, cut glass ashtray Susan threw at him night after night than with any thing he actually owned. There had been things before. He could remember items, possessions, *things* that had history – the goose necked lamp Kitty gave him one year for his birthday so he could study lines in bed with her; an old split ash picnic hamper he bought at a flea market, the godawful macaroni Tony award she and William had made for him after he'd missed out on the real one. Later, she'd cooked it, gold spray paint and all, and served it to him for

dinner. Both acts – making it and destroying it – were unexpectedly creative, he thought now.

The show was playing the Civic Center, which should have pleased Robert; which did please Robert because it meant that they would have a good house, but he missed New York theatres with names like Bellasco and Winter Garden. He wanted dressing rooms musty with the muted scent of other actors. He'd played the Guthrie in Minneapolis once, early in his career. It had been a small part and Kitty had been furious that he'd be away for three months for so little money, but Laurette Taylor and Lee J. Cobb had been playing the leads and he'd had three scenes with them. Was that the beginning, he wondered? Had he even known it then for what it was? He thought of Susan's calculated flirtations and his stomach felt cold and tight. He slipped into the lobby, found a pay phone, took William's business card from his wallet and dialed.

"Buchanan."

"So, am I going to have to lift a new suit from wardrobe, or will my thread-bare tuxedo suffice?"

William laughed. "The tux is great, Dad. You've always looked good in period costumes, right? Shit, you can show up as Hamlet's ditch digger and I'll be happy."

"Sounds good .... except he's a grave digger, not a ditch digger."

There was a small pause. "It was a joke, Dad. I know Hamlet, at least."

Robert cursed himself silently. "When are you planning the wedding, then?" he finally asked.

The wedding was set for the second Sunday in December. The tour finished in Detroit at the end of November and didn't pick up again until spring, so there was no conflict. William joked about being an innocent bystander, docilely obedient to his fiancée and his mother in their separate planning frenzies.

When he finished the call, the set was almost complete. Susan was on the stage, reviewing lines and blocking with Ellis. Robert watched, struck by her simple grace. If this had been a New York revival of the show, she would attract notice. She was what? Thirty-one, he thought, and poised for the moment when she would be plucked out of the gaggle and marked as one of the special ones, one of the anointed. He called down and asked if she wanted him to run their scenes himself. She was so smooth that Robert wondered why she'd felt the need to rehearse. He remembered the show at the Guthrie again. It wasn't need; it was a desire to steal more time on stage. Hunger.

The Omaha run was good and Susan fared particularly well in the local review, which Ellis read aloud at breakfast before their Sunday matinee. "Robert Buchanan was, of course, born to play Abraham, and

after almost twenty years with the role, he *is* Abraham." When *The Sacrificial Man* had first opened, before they all knew they'd hit, before Robert had been subsumed into this one, final role, he would have given his year's salary for a critic to write such a comment. Now he wondered what happened after you played the role of your life. He watched Susan, but after Ellis had finished the section about her, she'd turned to mauling her grapefruit and did not meet Robert's eye. He finished his coffee and went to his room to pack again. When they finally were on the road, Robert watched Omaha fade into the background. Kansas City lay before them in the nearing dusk. Everything was blending together, this year's tour and last year's and all of the time on bland highways melding into one long drive.

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Susan sat in Robert's room knocking back shots of bourbon and rehashing the Kansas opening night. He watched, sensing what was coming and yet still surprised when she finally set their glasses on the night table and kissed him for the first time off stage. Her lips felt like chamois. When she lay against him later, half dozing, he daubed at her smudged lipstick with the corner of the bedsheet. Later, when she rose and dressed and let herself quietly from the room, he lay with his eyes shut, maintaining the deep, even breaths till she was gone.

From Kansas they moved to Tuscon, playing to almost full houses each night. They loaded directly onto the bus after their last show to make a tightly scheduled booking in California. Robert had changed quickly. His skin felt sunburned from the stage lights and was tender, but he scrubbed his face and neck thoroughly, nonetheless. There would be a handful of people waiting outside the stage door, and from past experience he knew they would be startled by the make-up if he did not wash it all away. There was nothing he could do to prevent their noticing how much older he was than they had expected. He pictured them out there, shifting back and forth on cold feet while they crafted the one comment they would have time to make before he moved on to the next. On good nights, his autographs were the grandiloquent ramblings of older, better times. More often though, he fought not to be maudlin, not to admit that he wished the kind, broad-faced school teacher had seen him before he'd become a hack.

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Robert called William from Sacramento. A woman answered and Robert almost hung up the telephone in a spasm of panic.

"Is William there? William Buchanan?"

"Yes, but can you hold a moment? He's making meatloaf and his hands are gruesome." She laughed as she spoke and Robert realized she had to be the fiancée.

"This is his father. You're... ?" Robert groped for the name. Beth? Bev?

"Beth. Well ..." She sounded as flustered as he felt. Robert suddenly wondered how William spoke of him, what had been said. "It's going to be wonderful to meet you, Sir. He's told me so much about you." Her speech was formal, stilted almost. Robert could not remember if William had told him how old Beth was. He couldn't remember anything about her suddenly, and he felt stupid. He answered her apprehensive questions and asked his own. It struck him that they were auditioning for one another, though as an image, it was flawed. Neither of them had a choice. He was William's father, she would be William's wife; these were givens. Robert heard her speaking away from the telephone, to William. The lilt of their joint laughter swept through him. After a pause, William came on the line.

"You'll be relived to know you passed."

"That's a first. She sounds like a nice girl, William. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you. I just want you to know that."

"It's worth a lot. Thanks, Dad."

Robert heard Beth saying something, her surprisingly husky voice already touching to him. He pictured a delicate hand, pale with elegantly manicured nails handing William a plate with the last slice of cheesecake. A firm thigh nonchalantly exposed as she tucked her feet up

while watching television with his son. William looking over a softly bent shoulder as she wrote a letter to a friend from her college days. William was talking again, back with Robert.

"Dad... Beth would...." A pause. "She'd like to know if you'd sing at the wedding?" Another. "Maybe something from that Sondheim show you did when I was in high school? It's up to you, of course. We both know you're busy."

Robert could barely reply but did, embarrassing himself and William with a torrent of sentimentality that he stemmed as quickly as he could. "Hey, I've kept you on the phone long enough, kid. She'll never marry you if you start sticking her with all the cooking, right?"

When he hung up the phone, he immediately missed the pulse of their voices. Pulling the telephone directory out of the drawer in the night stand, he called a florist to send flowers to Beth. He had to have them delivered to William's apartment and he worried that she might be offended by the implication that he thought she was living there, but he sent them anyway. It was only as he was showering that he remembered William had not just been in high school when Robert was in that show. He'd been a senior. William had graduated that year and because the lead, somebody Guilfoyle, had been hung-over and Robert was the understudy, Robert had missed the graduation. He'd called Kitty – they were separated by then – to ask how bad it would be if he wasn't there.

Had he really been weighing it? Was it at all conceivable that he'd have called Guilfoyle back and said no? He had no idea, looking back at it. She'd said William had never expected him to make it anyhow; it wasn't a big deal. For the first time he considered that she might have lied.

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They played Salt Lake City, Denver and Bolder, Austin, Little Rock, and Nashville, then would move on to Ohio – Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati – then Detroit and the much needed break. There would be a winter hiatus and though Robert had not signed a new contract, the option was there. It was always there, easy as a lobotomy. While there were always voice-overs and television cameos, eventually Martin would mention in an odd non-committal sort of query that the touring company was interested in taking *The Sacrificial Man* on the road again. Robert always made some wry joke, laughed about not being so rich that he could turn down easy money, and signed the contract. It had been a lark the first time, a chance to relive old glories. Now he counted on it, like a subsidy, a royalty check for the brilliant first novel that was forever an only child.

The message from Martin was waiting when they arrived in Nashville. "There's a script on the way down to you. Read fast and call me." The script arrived via Fed-Ex the next morning, and Robert read it in the back of the theatre. He sat and looked out at the set when he had

finished, but the dusty colors stung his eyes. The walls were going up. Ellis was swearing at the locally hired stagehands, but there were suddenly miles between the back of the house and the stage. Robert left the auditorium, feeling dizzy and bewildered.

Robert blinked in the daylight and began to walk. The script was fine in the oldest, loveliest sense of the word. The role was even more fine. The role whispered that he wasn't a has-been actor reliving old glories in dusty theatres. It was too good. It was as if *Death of a Salesman* had suddenly shown up new and undiscovered in a white and purple Fed-Ex envelope and he wasn't sure there was enough left in him to play the role. Why was he so shattered to have been given what he wanted? Robert looked around, having walked well past the few landmarks he'd picked up during his one day in Nashville. A purple fronted honky-tonk surprised him by being a local landmark and not the anonymous dive he'd assumed it was. Landmark status meant that the bar had some top quality single malts and Robert nursed a shot of Lagavullin while he read and re-read the note Martin had sent with the script.

The show was going into rehearsal in January, slated to fill an unexpected opening at the Shubert and open on Broadway the first weekend in March. The producers were scrambling to put the show together, confident that it would hit, but under financial strains that left no room for flexibility. The director wanted Robert and, while the

producers had wanted someone with more box office draw, they hadn't vetoed him. He read Martin's closing again. "It's yours, Bobby, all you have to do is say the word – but they need to know now."

¤

Robert made Susan cry that night on stage. He was awake after a long, restless sleep, and every movement, every word was as new as it was instinctive. He caught everyone off-guard, but Susan had recovered, had matched his intensity and they dragged the rest of the cast with them. They didn't talk at all during the intermission, but Susan sat with him in his dressing room, leaning slightly toward him, as if he were a bonfire.

The cast descended on the hotel bar in wickedly high spirits. They rehashed the performance scene by scene, until, long past the normal closing time, they were finally chased off by the tired bartender. Robert and Susan kissed outside her room, but she didn't invite him in and he was glad. They'd been as intimate as they would ever be; he didn't want to ruin that with her ambition or his loneliness.

¤

Robert watched out the window as the bus rumbled along the highway and laughed at himself because he was almost bouncing on the seat like a kid. Two performances in Detroit, then home to New York. After signing the contract for the new play, he'd have about a week to

relax, then he would fly back to Michigan for the wedding. He started a list of things to do. Get the tux cleaned, buy a wedding present, maybe buy some plants for the apartment, now that he would be living there for more than a few months. Maybe he would ask Kitty about the picnic basket. If she still had it, perhaps she'd be willing to let him have it now. He laughed again. He was jinxing the whole thing, he tried to think, but he was too happy to believe it.

Thinking about the wedding present made Robert miss William and Beth. When the troupe got to their hotel in Detroit, he called. He'd realized that he could fly in several days before the wedding, but wanted to feel William out before suggesting it.

"You sound pretty relaxed for a man with less than two weeks of freedom." Robert hugged the receiver against his ear with his shoulder as he pulled at his shoelaces. One week for him and there would be no more feet made sore and swollen from hours of sitting on rumbling buses. He lay back against the headboard.

"Actually, I got a reprieve. There was some screw-up with the reception hall. They lost the reservation and Beth was about crazy, but Mom convinced her to push the wedding forward. Said it would be better for everyone to do it after Christmas."

Shit. He wouldn't be able to take several days out of rehearsal. "Well, it's certainly better for her. When did you move it to, then?"

"First Saturday in March. That was what Mom suggested, and she's been feeling really left out anyhow, so I figured I could give her that much." William paused. "That weekend is all right with you, isn't it? I know I should have waited till I talked to you, but Mom said it wouldn't matter once you were done with the run, so Beth called the printers with the new dates."

Robert felt sick. "There's someone at the door. I'll call you back." He hung up before William answered and sat on the edge of the bed, his hand still holding the receiver against the phone, as if he were afraid it would float up and he would have to speak. She hadn't even been trying.

He walked too calmly into the bathroom and poured bourbon into the highball glass. No Coke. No ice. He sat back on the edge of the bed and drank. When he finished, he reached for the telephone and dialed Martin's number. It was too late for Martin to be in his office, but a message was better. Call the producers, tell them he can't do the show. Cancel everything, he told the machine in Martin's office, then he hung up before he began to cry.

3... The Midway Stories

SAFE IN MOON VILLA

Devilish Mary found the Midway when she was being walked home one night by Bob, who was something of a boyfriend. The escorted walk home was a new frustration for Mary, who enjoyed walking alone. She felt safe in Boston; whether she was or wasn't was immaterial. Her apartment was so near to where she had grown up that when she had moved out, she'd carried her things to the apartment without boxes – though at her mother's insistence, she *had* stuffed her underwear into a discrete shopping bag from Filene's.

Bob came to Boston from a Kansas suburb and his complaints about the city are constant. Often he reads articles from the newspaper about shootings and rapes and muggings aloud to her. When he finishes reading, Bob looks at Mary with his limpid eyes radiating worry like x-rays. Mary forces herself not to think about how much he looks like an extra on the Andy Griffith Show.

Mary often wonders how she started dating Bob, but she cannot remember. The details of courtship are lost under a mountain of cloying encroachments, the latest being this decision that real men walk their ladies home at night. Mary thinks that the idea of being someone's lady is about as unnerving as a feather down the throat, but has not yet figured out how to detach herself from Bob and his walks. If he were

cruel or careless, she could manufacture an escape, but Mary doesn't know how to break up with a nice guy.

On the night that Mary discovered the Midway, they were halfway between his apartment and hers when it began to rain. Hard. Biblically. Within minutes, the rain soaked Mary to the skin. A river of rain coursed down her neck and spine into the crack of her ass. Because it was a cold rain, this was neither carefree nor erotic; it was just cold and annoying and Mary was already annoyed. At exactly the same moment that she was about to lambaste Bob – she had decided that the drenching she'd received was directly related to his "his lady" business – she saw the Midway.

The Midway is located on a side street off Mass. Ave., and if one isn't looking for it, one can walk past a hundred times without seeing it. Of course, if one is soaked silly and the yellowy light spilling from the plate glass window beckons like an Alpine hostel in a blizzard, one would have to be blind to miss it. Mary was soaked and was beckoned and flung herself in the door of the coffee shop with Bob trailing behind.

We could, if we were inclined to be kind, hold this moment for a long, compound sentence, for a paragraph or a page. We could stop time here the way we try to stop time in our own lives, when we want to freeze a particular moment until it is burnt into memory. It never is, of course. We bury our face in our lover's hair and swear that we will never forget

the musk of sweat and love, but we do and we re-invent the details each time we remember.

The Midway is a coffee shop, we did this part already? Devilish Mary – with Bob, his hand heavy on her shoulder, just behind her – faces the counter. At the left end of the counter is a large old-fashioned cash register, a pale industrial green that suggests fifties era medical equipment. There are nine stools at the counter, backless with those metal footrests in which children get their feet stuck, screaming until their mothers squat down and untangle them. The counter itself is Formica, patterned like marble with flecks of mica. To the right of the counter is a swinging door and behind that door, Mary assumes there is a kitchen, perhaps storage as well. Behind the counter is a two-tiered coffee maker, two glass pots on the upper tier, one with hot water, the other orange handled and half filled with decaf coffee. There are three spaces on the lower tier, the one burner below the brewing basket and one on each side of that. There is a full pot of coffee beneath the basket. Next to the coffee machine are trays of clean mugs, heavy and white. Next to the mugs are stacks of saucers and plates. Along the left wall of the shop, there are five square tables and they are covered with heavy oilcloth like the sails of a fishing boat. Salt and pepper on one side and sugar on the other bookend the tin napkin dispenser. Each table has a white bud vase with a few plastic roses stuck into it. The roses are

slightly fuzzy with dust. Along the right wall are booths with high wooden backs and the booths form an L as they round the corner and continue down along the plate glass window from which spills the inviting yellow light. The booths by the window are not as intimate as those along the wall; the backs are lower and those booths are open to whomever might look in from the street.

Bob and Mary dry themselves with the big white aprons they were given by the blonde bear who had been slouching at the counter with his wide back curved like a boulder. He'd looked up from the book that lay flat between his hairy blonde forearms, straightened, and disappeared into the kitchen without a word. He reappeared with the two aprons, saying that he didn't have any clean towels and would they like some coffee?

Devilish Mary returns the next day, dry, and the day after that, and again and again. Fast Eddie – she learns his name from Steve, the long-haired cabby who spends more time hanging out at the Midway than he does driving his cab – keeps her coffee cup full and makes her welcome in his quiet way. The Radiant Anna, who spends a lot of time flashing Eddie her lovely smile, sometimes sits with Mary and their friendship grows like a volunteer sunflower. Usually, Mary sits at one of the five booths that run along the short wall and she writes poetry. She knows that her poems are not very good, but sometimes they are not

terribly bad either. When writing bad poems about bad relationships is too ridiculous, she writes in her journal instead. One day, when the shop is full of lunch customers, Mary slips behind the counter with Fast Eddie, and pitches in till the rush is past. This, too, becomes habit and Eddie stops charging Mary for coffee.

It is to the Midway that Devilish Mary goes the night Bob calls and tells her in a defensive tone that he is seeing someone else. Bob says it is serious and he owes it to his lady to make an exclusive commitment. Mary wonders when she stopped being his lady, since he walked her home two nights ago. She thumps down the stairs of her apartment and to the Midway, where she lets her coffee grow cold and tries not to cry. She feels stupid that it is such an effort. She stares out the large, plate glass window and wonders why she doesn't live in Greenwich Village. She is sick of Boston and she is sick of never being the person to initiate a break-up even when she's miserable with the person she's dating. She fantasizes about moving to Paris and working at a cafe, where she can bring thick, dark coffee to smoldering older men in their thirties or maybe even their forties, who commit to no-one and therefore will never pull threadbare rugs out from under her. Mary conjures images of herself wedged between Ginsburg and Burroughs in the back seat of a wide rattling Rambler being driven by Jack Kerouac. Mary imagines making them wild with jealousy because she is writing with so much intensity,

vision, and abandon without having to locate a single vein. Since she is prone to masochism even in fantasies, she reminds herself that this might just be a waste of time, what with the fact that she doesn't fantasize herself male. She sighs and takes her coffee cup up to the counter to dump it and get a fresh cup. It is then that she notices that Eddie is training a new waiter. Eddie makes introductions and she goes back to her booth with fresh coffee and a sappy smile and a profound gratitude that Burroughs, Ginsburg, and especially the Radiant Anna are nowhere around.

The new waiter works from eleven in the morning until seven at night. His name is Ray and he shares an apartment with Steve and has amazingly beautiful almond shaped eyes with glinting bronze irises. He is the only person Mary has ever met who doesn't look bad when his hair is greasy; or who wants to study heating, ventilation, and air conditioning installation; or who does not own a single book. Mary starts coming into the Midway later in the day because she does not want him to think she is stalking him, which she is. She also does not want him to think the poems she writes are about him, which they are. When she's in the Midway and he's working, she cannot keep her eyes off him. He moves as if he is dreamily naked, flowing through space with the languid ripple of a snake. Ray sits with Mary during his breaks. Sometimes when his shift is over, he takes off his apron and they talk for hours. Mary

knows she was smitten weeks earlier, but she tries so hard to not give herself away.

Finally, Steve provides the impetus Mary and Ray are in such awful need of. Cold Brew – Steve's band – is playing at the Din of Iniquity and several days before the fact, Ray casually mentions it to Devilish Mary. Mary says that she will probably go to hear them. Ray suggests that, since the band won't be playing until nine, perhaps they could grab some dinner first and Mary agrees that this is a fine idea. The next day, before she wanders to the Midway, Mary casually refills her prescription for birth control pills and prays to the gods of sex that something more happen this night than that Steve remember all the lyrics for once, though that, too, would be nice.

The gods smile on Devilish Mary. As she is drifting to sleep in Ray's comfortably crowded twin bed, he tells her that he loves her. She spends the rest of the night wide awake, staring at his profoundly ugly ceiling. Within a few weeks, Devilish Mary has calmed down and no longer walks into magazine racks or parking meters, which is a good thing because she bruises easily. She's given a lot of thought to what Ray said and decided that she can, and in fact should, say it back. Definitely in bed, Mary tells herself. He told her that he loved her in bed, so it would be somehow unbalanced if she said she loves him while eating French fries or even Chinese food.

Unfortunately, by the time Mary decides that she should tell Ray she loves him, he has quit his job at the Midway and is now driving cab. At first, the problem seems to simply be that their schedules are wildly out of synch. While Mary still finds herself in bed with Ray fairly often, it is usually at dawn and she is too tired to tell him anything. It soon becomes apparent to Mary that she may have missed the moment, because time spent together has taken on a tense, mechanical feel and she now thinks that some things ought to be left unsaid.

Mary enrolls in a poetry workshop. She is told she must use her dreams for inspiration, and therefore must write about them in her journal. Because she does not have to actually show the dream journal to anyone, she writes long, elaborate fictions in it instead of her real dreams, which usually involve riding the subway naked at rush hour while reading romance novels. She isn't sure which part she finds more embarrassing, but she'll be damned if she'll confess to either aberration on paper.

Revels in the midnight heat
And perhaps
You meant it.

Replying to
A question I'd never ask
You convinced me easily.

Romantic misconceptions
"Ah, love..." can we be true when
Your words wither so quickly?

The poem is forced and Devilish Mary knows that the first step to fixing it is dropping the sophomoric gimmick, which she resists. The second step is scrapping the whole poem as well as the relationship that inspired the poem, but she can't quite make herself do that either. Ray has stopped calling her, though she has not quit calling him, and he hasn't suggested that she should, yet. He has also quit driving taxi-cabs, and has enrolled at a school for heating, ventilation and air conditioning repair. He is moving from the apartment he shares with Steve to a new place that is closer to school.

The day before he is supposed to move, Devilish Mary decides to drop by to help him pack. When she gets to the apartment, Ray introduces her to Kym, who he went to school with. Kym, aside from making sure that Mary knows the unique and clever variation on the spelling of her name, keeps rubbing the side of her neck and trying to catch Ray's eye. It is Mary though who notices the perky smear of lipstick under his ear. Mary wonders as she stalks up Commonwealth Avenue toward Mass. Ave. if that particular color would be pynk and if she is justified in thinking that Ray is a real pyg.

Over the next several weeks, Devilish Mary writes no poems. Instead she writes stories. She writes about a lonely, alcoholic man who eats cat food and whispers "I love you" to his smelly pillow. Another is about a lonely alcoholic heating, ventilation, and air conditioning repair

man who electrocutes himself by crying onto live wires. Occasionally she writes about women who use cute spellings of their names and get hit by streetcars or buses or both. The tragic accidents are always witnessed by sad old men with bronze eyes ruined by years of drinking Everclear. Even more occasionally she writes from imagination, ideas sparked by a glimpse of someone through an apartment window or at a bus stop. Magda the Amazon notices the stories one day while she is waiting at the Midway for her husband Alan to pick her up. Mary lets Magda take a few of the stories with her, and when Magda brings them back, she tells Mary that she has let her boss at the Magazine read them. He has written comments on the stories and enclosed a brief note telling Mary that he thinks she has potential to be a real fictioneer. The word delights Mary. On the last day of her poetry class, during the readings, Mary realizes that she is an impostor. She is not meant for head to toe black and fishnet stockings; she has no eye for line breaks, and no ear for rhythm. She is meant to be a fictioneer and might even buy an eye-patch. Mary concentrates on her stories and polishes and crafts and fusses with each word until she is satisfied. She stuffs them into long manila envelopes and sends them off to various magazines. Most come right back to her with form letters, but not all. Devilish Mary is happy.

It is now over a year since she went to help Ray pack. Mary tells the Radiant Anna – who moved out of her apartment during a rent

dispute and has been spending the night on Mary's sofa for the last two weeks – that she is cured and over him. Anna blushes and admits that she forgot to write it down, but Ray called earlier that week. He'd mentioned that he was going to go hear Steve's new band that Friday and that he hoped Mary might be there. Since it is Friday night when Anna divulges this information, Mary is too rushed to consider how odd it is that Anna, legendary for her memory, forgot such a singularly important message. Mary flies through showering and dressing and painting eyelids and is sitting calmly at the bar, sipping a beer when Ray walks in. They go to the Midway after the Din closes and Mary is so comfortable and content being with him that she feels like she has rediscovered a favorite sweater. The Radiant Anna takes over the apartment when Mary moves in with Ray; and then, five months later, she lets Mary spend the night on the sofa for several weeks when Ray decides to move upstate.

We should move forward now quickly, perhaps doing a literary version of the pages being blown from a calendar that was so favored in old movies, stopping only when Mary is in her early thirties and has re-united and broken with Ray a total of nineteen times. It wouldn't hurt, though, to notice as we skim ahead that Mary's writing gets better and her stories begin to be published.

We might also pay attention to her friends, smiling perhaps when Fast Eddie finally asks the Radiant Anna to marry him, which to his

immense relief she accepts. Despite the speed with which we are pushing forward, we'd notice the patterns Steve's days follow, we'd realize they were becoming habits of avoidance and denial and seeing that will help us understand his coming despair. We could let ourselves wonder where Edgar the tarot reader goes when Fast Eddie locks the Midway door in the early hours of each morning.

Then again, why should we? Perhaps it's time to stop being metaphysical or metafictional and just admit that Mary gets older in a very short amount of reading time and she apparently is obsessed with someone who has proven perfectly at ease in a relationship that allows him to wander in and out of the plot like a friendly retriever.

One evening at the Midway, while Anna and Eddie are making themselves extremely nervous by pouring over real estate catalogues full of hideously expensive houses and Edgar is trying to make psychic readings from the minuscule photographs for them, Devilish Mary writes Ray a long letter. She itemizes each break-up and reconciliation, unable to ignore the fact that she wants him to be touched by her memory of the details of their relationship but not admitting it, either. She has not seen him in over a year, but ends the letter with a vehement request that he forget everything about her, of which, of course, she has just finished carefully reminding him.

Being easily as predicable as she is, Ray phones her as soon as he receives the letter and they make a date for dinner and end up back at her apartment afterwards. Mary digs out old albums full of songs she associates with Ray. They sit on the sofa and continue talking and touching each other lightly, tentatively, more lingeringly and finally Ray pulls Mary close and kisses her lips and eyes and nose and ears. They nibble at one another for a long time, both knowing that they will end up in bed and therefore not rushing now. When they do finally move to her bedroom, their love making is sweet and cautious and as Mary feels Ray slipping into sleep, she tells him that she loves him. He does not reply, but a shift in his breathing tells her that he heard her.

When Mary wakes the next morning, she is alone in her bed. She realizes that she is not surprised and when she finds his note propped against the coffee pot, she reads it calmly. In the note Ray tells her about the house he has rented in the country. He does not tell her exactly where it is, but he borders on eloquence as he describes the pond in the back field where he can see the moon mirrored in the flat black surface of the water. Devilish Mary sets the note aside and makes a pot of coffee.

Mary is at a party being hosted by the small publishing house which has just released a collection of her stories. The book is called *Safe in Moon Villa* – the title of the only decent story about an alcoholic

heating, ventilation, and air conditioning repair man she wrote – and is dedicated "To Ray, who isn't..." which was a mistake because she keeps having to explain that it means isn't safe. There have been a few reviews, and while they're not in the *New York Times*, they are kind and everyone is feeling pretty damned good, particularly since there is an awful lot of booze at the party. Mary smiles a lot, until the scotch she is drinking starts to catch up with her, and then the smile feels phony and she sneaks out of the party without saying good-bye to anyone. By the time she gets to the Midway, Mary has realized that she is really very drunk and she decides no-one that drunk should not do something really stupid. Steve is there, having a cup of coffee before he turns the cab in for the night, and Mary is surprised at how easily she wheedles Ray's address out of him, though she had had no doubt that he'd have it.

Soon a chicken farmer named Eric pulls over to the side of Route 2, where Mary is hitch-hiking and offers her a lift. He doesn't say much as she rambles on about where she is going and why and how much she adores this man she is planning to visit unannounced at 3:45 on a Sunday morning. Devilish Mary has several copies of her book in her purse, and she gives one to Eric as a thank you when he drops her off at the driveway of a small farmhouse.

She does not look back as she strides up the dark driveway, but that might be because she is afraid she might trip and present herself to

her beloved all covered in mud. When she gets to the house, she is less drunk, less certain of her motives, and is feeling foolish. She sits for a while on the wooden glider on the porch. She likes this place Ray has found, though she has trouble really imagining him here. Would he really sit on this weather beaten furniture and just be himself? She realizes that she has no idea who he is anymore. She walks quietly around to the back of the house, hoping to see the pond he told her about. There is a large willow by bank of the pond and she stands under its canopy, leaning against the sturdy trunk. Ray was right – the moon is reflected perfectly in the deep black water. She finds pebbles and lobs them into the pond, watching the moon dissolve into a school of silvery ripples then reform like a ball of mercury. Day breaks in the slow, liquid gift of light she usually sleeps through and a mist rises from the pond. When she heads back down the driveway, the walk is less frightening but infinitely sad in its finality. She is surprised to see the chicken farmer's battered blue pick-up truck still pulled off on the opposite side of the road. Eric has the dome light on and he is reading the book she gave him. He looks up as if he heard something and seeing her, smiles. He leans across the seat, rolls down the passenger window, and asks Mary if she needs a lift back to Boston. She nods her head.

Later that morning, Ray steps out onto his porch for the Sunday paper. He doesn't notice the small book on the glider. When he does

come upon it several days later, he brings it into the house and sets it on top of the television Within a few weeks, the book is covered by a couple of television guides from the paper, and later still Ray accidentally throws it out when he is cleaning the house before a date he has with the girl from the Blockbuster who told him that his eyes are totally cool. It is almost a year later when something reminds Ray of the book and of Mary. He is sitting on the deck looking at the moon's reflection in the pond and it startles him when he cannot recall the sound of Mary's voice.

It is probably not exactly at that moment that Eric pours two cups of coffee and carries them out to the big room of his farmhouse. Eric probably does not look out the window that frames the big, silvery moon that is hanging over the pasture. That would be too coincidental, even for fiction. He does smile at nothing in particular as he sets his own coffee on the table and then he does carry the second cup to the far end of the room, where his wife taps rapidly at her computer.

FIVE RUBBER CHICKENS

Steve met Hank driving cab, Fast Eddie tells the Radiant Anna as they walk home from the Midway. This is not quite true, though to haggle the point would be unnecessarily disagreeable. Hank was not actually driving his cab when Steve met him; he was sitting cross-legged on its hood at the cab stand in Kenmore Square, juggling four rubber chickens. Rubber chickens are trickier than beanbags or balls; they demand response from the hands, acknowledgment and then release all in a split second. Four are trickier than three, and juggling while sitting is trickiest of all. Think back to those dazzling jugglers on the Ed Sullivan Show – on their feet and adjusting placidly to the slight deviance of descent. Perhaps Steve had a subconscious recognition of the accumulation of difficulty he was witnessing or maybe he just reacted to the carnival air Hank's chickens lent Kenmore Square that evening as they soared and plunged amid the buzz of neon signs and halogen street lights, the lilt of strolling pedestrians, the metallic meep of car horns and the prickle of food scents in the air. It does not matter. Enchanted, Steve pulled his own cab into the queue and ambled down to watch the flying fake fowl. It was a warm evening for so early in the summer, and Hank was dressed in loose khaki shorts and a black tank top, and the muscles in his shoulders knotted, rolled, and smoothed in a seemingly perpetual circuit.

His head was tipped back slightly and black hair lay between the two bunching shoulders, occasionally ruffled by their movement or by the light breezes that eddied through the square. When Steve told Eddie about it, he was smiling again, because he cannot think about that perfect, prolonged moment without falling backward into it, even much later when Hank has left Boston and him.

Steve asks if he ever does ducks and Hank answers "only when they're in season" and the two start laughing and Hank drops the chickens, but it is all right. He introduces himself and offers three of the chickens to Steve, but they fall as if shot when Steve tries his hand at juggling. Hank says that the one thing about juggling is that people always want one more than you can do. Four is hard, he says, but there is always someone who asks him to try five. "As soon as I can do five, that same person will want a sixth." he says. "That kind of person needs to show where I fall short."

They talk, Hank leaning comfortably against the windshield and Steve against the front bumper, until a fare appears and Hank clambers into his cab and drives off with his chickens. Steve spends the rest of his shift basking in the good mood that his chance meeting created and his cheerfulness bubbles through the cab partition and his tips are noticeably higher all night.

By the time he puts up his cab for the night though, the buoyancy has been replaced with a restless melancholy and Steve walks to his apartment feeling uncharacteristically alone. He thinks about his life while he watches an old Sherlock Holmes movie on television. He is thirty-six years old, unmarried, unattached, and unreproduced. His current band is as unlikely to earn fame or fortune as any of the previous ones had been, but Steve does not care; the band gives him a chance to play and that was all he'd ever really wanted. He looks around at his unframed concert posters and the random piles of clothing – clean and unclean – and at the mismatched furniture bought used through want ads in the Real Paper and he realizes that he is living like a kid and he isn't a kid any more. He thinks about Fast Eddie and the Radiant Anna. It had been Steve who drove them to the Boston Women and Children's Hospital the night Anna gave birth to Grendel and now the boy is almost four. He thinks about Mary and Eric and remembers with a wry smile his own small part in their meeting. It has been longer than he can remember since he has brought a woman back to this apartment and he realizes that he hasn't missed the ritualized groping, culmination, and token complements. Steve realizes as he watches Dr. Watson listen adoringly to Holmes's theorizing that he has a hunger for something more individual than the friendships he has at the Midway. Because all

this thinking and realizing is extremely uncomfortable, Steve drinks too much beer and eventually falls asleep on his mismatched, used sofa.

The next evening, he drives out of the garage free from the gloom that had seized him the night before. All day he has looked forward to getting to work, to getting out on the streets again, and to maybe running into Hank again. He has thought about that first glimpse of Hank so much that Hank has taken on the flawless patina of a young Siddhartha, sitting serenely beneath a halo of floating chickens. Steve drives directly from the garage to Kenmore Square, but Hank is not there. A fare to the Back Bay is. From the Back Bay, Steve gets a radio call that takes him to the North End, and from there he drives to the financial district, where he is hailed by a lawyer who has a plane to catch at Logan. Steve gets his lawyer to the airport in time to make the flight, though the man will be wheezing from the jog to the departure gate, and decides to take a break by pulling into the very full taxi pool at the airport. He queues his cab and is heading to the small coffee shack when he catches sight of airborne chickens. He is so happy that the strength of feeling stops him in mid-stride, but Hank sees him and calls out and Steve continues over to his new friend's cab, where they laugh and banter like they had known each other since birth. Within an hour, three flights come in, and Hank and Steve drive off in separate directions.

They continue to run into each other routinely and when Steve mentions that he is going to paint his apartment, Hank immediately offers to help. Steve has already taken down the concert posters and bought several gallons of white wall paint. Having never thought about his apartment in any terms beyond it being a roof over his head, he was overwhelmed at the paint store by the array of tint cards and wallpaper boarders and thick, glossy brochures full of pictures of glossy rooms decorated with glossy furniture. Steve feels discouraged about the painting. His apartment might look less adolescent after he's done, but then what will he do about the furniture? He remembers what Hank had said about the fifth chicken, and he realizes that there doesn't have to be another person to point out that he is falling short.

The day that they've set to paint, Hank arrives two hours later than he'd said he would, and it takes Steve three beers to shake off the feeling of having been stood up that had built up in those two hours, but he does and at the end of the day, they are sprawled on the sheet covered sofa in the middle of the living room, admiring their handiwork. Hank asks what Steve is going to put on the walls and Steve admits that he has no idea. Hank offers to photograph Steve in his cab at various points around the city and he convinces Steve that these pictures, printed in eight by ten and in plain black frames, will look great. Hank begins

carrying a camera with him when he drives and within a month, several photos are taken, framed and hung. They do, in fact, look great.

It is November now and, as usual, the heating in the Midway is not working as well as it ought to be. Fast Eddie is wearing a sweater the Radiant Anna knit during a blessedly brief attempt at craftiness. The sweater is warm and since the Midway is not busy because of the heating problems, Eddie is able to ignore the disparity between sleeve lengths and the loose, sagging stitches. Steve comes in with a stainless steel thermos for a coffee refill, but, as has become his habit, he does not linger because he hopes to run into Hank, about whom he is forever talking and who he occasionally brings to the Midway.

Hank thinks that film is far superior to literature, not that books aren't worthwhile, just that film is so much more ... visual. Hank thinks that within the next ten years everyone will own a computer and newspapers and magazines will have become obsolete. Hank thinks Gen X has really been underestimated because they are not as self-absorbed as the yuppies were nor as disorganized as were the hippies. Hank has satellite TV rather than cable, DVD, a highly tweaked state-of-the-art computer, an equally tweaked stereo, and a titanium alloy mountain bike that weighs less than the dungeon's worth of chains he locks it with. But Hank knows that if he had to, he could survive with just the coat on his back and his aging black Jeep. Hank thinks that Eddie and Anna would

really enjoy this new band he's been listening to, so he recorded a tape for them. Fast Eddie thinks that if he hears one more thing that Hank thinks, he will run raving onto Mass. Ave., whacking car hoods with a stainless steel serving spoon until some enraged driver shoots him and ends his suffering. Eddie knows that he should be happy that Steve has found a wonderful new friend, except that he is not convinced that Hank is as wonderful as Steve insists. Eddie suspects that Hank told Steve what a wonderful new friendship they have. It would make sense, since for the last several months every opinion to leave Steve's lips originated in Hank's head. Eddie decides that he is being a poop and he wipes the side of Steve's thermos and hands it back to him with a smile and tells him the refill is on the house. Steve leaves, oblivious to Eddie's scuffle with poopiness, as cheerful as he had been when he arrived.

Back in his cab, Steve wends his way through traffic while listening to a tape of a band he and Hank recently saw in concert. He has developed a new way of driving that involves yielding to an almost imperceptible rhythm that the city streets beat out. He has not even told Hank about this, because it feels silly to even try to articulate it in his thoughts. What he feels is different than being in a rut, instead it is an anti-rut, a willingness to park at stands he used to pass by, an openness to and an awareness of choices. Each night is new and each fare, even the regulars, has the potential to take him someplace he has never been,

despite the number of years he has been driving. Steve feels almost trance-like as he guides his cab through the night. He would like to talk about this discovery with Hank, but Hank already thinks that he is too pliable. When they finally do run into each other, it is very late and Steve is ready to put up the cab and go home. Hank is in a sullen mood, something to do with another friend who he deigns not to name, and they part without making any specific plans for the coming weekend. Steve flips on his television when he gets home, but he is asleep before Nigel and Basil conclude their latest adventure.

Steve finds an invitation to Devilish Mary's annual Christmas party in his mailbox. "Spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, lovers, soul mates, partners, and/or significant others welcome!" the invitation reads. Steve looks at it and feels more single than he can remember ever feeling. He wants to bring Hank, but which of Mary's categories is appropriate for their relationship? They have never touched intentionally, but Steve has imagined himself running his fingers through Hank's hair and also kissing Hank. He has tried to imagine more, but he is incredibly naive about these things. He doesn't know who would do what to whom and the whole thing is too uncomfortable to pursue at this stage. He does not think he should consider himself homosexual because the only people he has ever gone to bed with have been women, though he does admit under this self-scrutiny that his pursuit of carnal delights in that area

have been less enthusiastic than what appears to be the norm. On the other hand, since he has not pursued any other options, perhaps he is simply monosexual and should not worry about it. He sticks the invitation into the book he's been reading and plods off to the garage. Later, Hank sees the invitation and asks about it and Steve asks him to come to the party with him. He does not offer the invitation to Hank to read because he is not sure how his own invitation will seem if Hank sees the line about boyfriends and lovers and such.

Hank turns out to be a great charades player, which is a social asset with the Midway crew, and Magda swoops him into a mutually delighted hug when he figures out her very abstract rendition of "The Purloined Letter." Mary does not swoop people into hugs as a general rule, but she is pleasantly surprised when she discovers that Hank has loaded all the dinner dishes into the washer and cleaned up the kitchen. Steve is quieter than usual at the party as he watches Hank socialize. He is proud of Hank, but it is a confused pride and when they drive back to the city later that night, he does not say very much, even when Hank tells him that he will be flying to San Francisco to spend the holidays with his family and that he is considering staying there to go back to school.

After the first of the year, Hank calls Steve and tells him that he has decided to go to school in California. Steve agrees to ship the things

in Hank's apartment for him and he suggests that perhaps Magda could drive the Jeep until Hank can figure out if he wants to sell it or come back for it. When he packs Hank's belongings before the movers come, he discovers a print of one of the cab-stand photos of himself pinned to the cork board over Hank's desk. He does not put it into the box with all the other papers and pictures.

Spring come to Boston in a swell of sunshine and the dark, cold winter trickles away in rivulets of melting snow banks. Steve is working with a new band and the old cab company. The new band is awful, but they work more and smoke less dope than the old band, which was also awful. With Hank gone, he feels somehow freed to explore some of the questions he had been avoiding, and so he begins to date men. Steve does not know how to talk about what he is doing, either with gay men or with his old friends at the Midway, who mildly annoy him by not being at all surprised or non-plussed about his behavior. He does not feel as if he is truly coming out, because he doesn't really feel as if he had been *in.* He wonders if there is a separate term for realizing what everyone else apparently knew and accepted about him.

Unfortunately, while Steve does learn that he is significantly more enthusiastic with men, he is still put off by ritualized groping and token complements. He takes his cab out each night and is grateful almost to the point of tears that peaceful yielding he discovered in the late summer

is still available to him. He earns his living and he goes to the Midway for coffee and conversation, and once in a very great while he imagines brushing his lips across strong, fluid shoulders. He often falls asleep on his sofa, lulled by the black, grey, and white flicker of the television. Hank does not write, but he had said he probably wouldn't since he never has before, and so Steve feels unfair in his disappointment.

Summer comes and goes, autumn blazes through in a too-brief dazzle of bright, crisp days and too soon it is November and grey. Steve is cruising from the financial district toward North Station, when the dispatcher calls him. There is a fare at Logan Airport, asked for him specifically, and when Steve arrives at the terminal, he spots a slight figure at the far end of the sidewalk sitting on a pile of suitcases. Five rubber chickens soar in a soft arc and Steve soars with them as he pulls the cab over.

A pall has fallen over the crowd at the Midway and even the Radiant Anna is hesitant with her lovely smile – you never know how things will be taken these days. Magda the Amazon is losing her mind. She has lost everything she cares about and so, in some unconscious fashion, she seems to have decided to lose her mind and make a clean sweep of things.

It begins, though, not at the Midway, but at the Magazine. Sidney, editor of the Magazine, announces that he is retiring. Magda has been Sidney's assistant for thirteen years and while she knows that her credentials are weak – a bachelor's from a nondescript school – she applies for the position when it is posted in-house. She is not given the job; instead the university hires Jason. Jason is very impressive. He has been with several magazines and most recently was the features editor for the Other Magazine at the Other University. It is as much a coup for the Magazine as it is for Jason, and Magda realizes just how absurd it was for her to have thought she had a chance at the job. Jason calls a staff meeting and assures everyone that he wants nothing as much as a smooth transition. If Sidney had hired him, Magda would orchestrate Jason's entry into the office routine. She would convince him that he was getting plum assignments while simultaneously making the others think

Sidney was giving him new-guy cast-offs. But Sidney is not there and there is no reason for Magda to initiate Jason into the ways things are done because he makes it clear that things will be done his way. After the meeting, Magda drifts from office to office, soothing her coworkers' nerves as best she can. Several times, she passes Jason in the hall and he gives her a look each time that she interprets as meaning it would have been better if she'd been at her own desk a little more often. Magda goes home with a headache so fierce that her eardrums feel like the dikes of a dam.

"He says Sidney should have retired ten years ago" Magda tells Alan, as she washes lettuce for a salad. Alan is slicing tomatoes into wedges, a pile of little red smiles at his fingertips. "He's planning to have the Magazine on-line before the fall semester. Oh ... oh, get this, too. He says we won't be doing paste-up by hand anymore. He's got some program we're going to have to use instead. Scan the graphics in, import the text, do the whole thing on computer. I wish he could have been around when we first got e-mail in that place; he wouldn't be so quick to re-invent the wheel maybe." Alan makes a sound in his throat that could be taken for agreement and begins to peel a cucumber. During dinner Alan is quiet, so Magda rattles on about Queeg, as she christens Jason, hoping to jolly Alan out of the mood he seems to be in. After dinner, Alan switches on the television. She calls her daughter, Winnie, but Roger

says she is at church. Magda is jealous of Winnie for being able to sustain faith and she is jealous of the church for nurturing her daughter. It's hard for her to contemplate loving Jesus when he seems to have replaced her in her daughter's heart. It's even harder when the flavor of religion that Winnie is embracing is so conservative and creepy, as if besides believing in Christ Jesus and the Bible, these people also believe that Ike, too, will return. But Magda admits to herself that goddess worship would not be any better if she were not Winnie's main goddess. She goes back to the living room and watches television with Alan. Finally, she goes up to bed and is sleeping deeply whenever Alan finally comes up.

Jason arranges to have all the computers upgraded, which sounds wonderful until the day the new machines arrive, loaded with software that is compatible with everything except the staff. The new machines are Macs and Magda learns what all the fuss about Mac versus PC has been about. Frank puts a tally sheet for files lost up in the break room and Magda wins handily three days in a row. There is no joy in victory, particularly since every lost file has been something she was working on for Queeg. She tries to run interference between him and her increasingly crabby shipmates, but she is not the best person for this task. He is icily polite when she raps on the door to his office – Sidney's door was always open to her – but he does not invite her to jointly devise solutions.

Instead, he listens, looking up from his computer as she explains the latest difficulty, replies with some useless comment like "well, that *is* a problem, isn't it?", then returns to what he was doing with no further comment. He sends an e-mail to the person in question, reiterating the directive to come to him about transition issues. Soon only Sarah and Frank are complaining to Magda about Jason, which frightens her since both are lazy, dull workers. Magda feels like the rebel commander and it is a strange feeling since she does not see herself as a rebel. Magda is more than willing to be a party member, but it's Jason's party and she knows there will be no invitation.

Barbara, the woman who does paste-up, is sent to a week-long class to learn PageMaker and gives notice the day she returns. Magda starts a list that she keeps in the back of her desk drawer, hidden under a small box of tampons. It is a list of reasons that Jason is not Satan and it is painfully short. Thus far it has three items on it – Satan cannot be killed, Satan has a sense of humor, and Satan makes an effort to be likable. She stuffs the list back into her desk when Jason calls her into his office, where he asks her what the procedure is for initiating a new hire. Magda offers to do this; it is the sort of thing Sidney would have delegated to her, but Jason cuts her off and says that he will handle it if she will simply tell him the process. She goes back to her desk and adds "Satan is capable of delegating authority" to her list.

The ad runs the next Sunday and Magda is not surprised that Barbara's job description provided the requirements for one position. What does surprise her is a second position that suspiciously resembles her own. When she shows Alan the ad, he tells her not to overreact, then goes back to reading the Lifestyle section of the paper. She carefully clips the ad from the paper and the next day asks Jason if she has reason to be worried. For the first time since his arrival, Jason appears embarrassed, as if he'd been caught making faces behind her back, but it is quickly replaced with a level-eyed invitation to push the conversation further. He ruffles through some stacks on his desk and pulls out a folder, which Magda can see is her own personnel folder with Sidney's spidery handwriting on the worn tab. When he opens it, she is looking at her job description, upside-down and covered with light yellow sticky notes. These are new and they are in Jason's bland, round-handed script. He looks up at her. "You really were hired as a secretary, weren't you?"

This is true, of course. The University uses a step system for raises within each position, and Sidney, who said he hated paperwork more than sin or strife, had promoted her to higher steps rather than go through the considerable nuisance of changing her title. Sidney had pointed out that the salary cap for administrative assistant was higher than the cap for editorial assistant. and she'd never cared; she had never

thought it mattered. Magda goes back to her own office, where she spends most of the day staring down at tiny cars on Memorial Drive. The cap for editorial assistant was there because people moved up and on from that position. Magda relives the last thirteen years. It is like reliving a relationship gone sour; she feels stupid, publicly stupid, basking in her delusions while everyone sniggered in the break room. Sidney had called her his second in command, but only inside his office and now she sees that it was untrue, and worse, that it had never been true. Sidney had built the Magazine into his kingdom and all she had ever been was his guard dog. She wondered if he'd seen her as pit bull or retriever.

By Friday, Jason has hired Darcy and Rick. Both are young and bright and friendly, interested in the work and eager to show their stuff. Magda hates them thoroughly and hates herself even more. At the Monday staff meeting, Jason announces that he is reassigning workspaces. With no warning or decorum, he tells the assembled staff that Magda will be moving out of her office, that Darcy and Rick will share that office, and that Magda will now be in a cubicle, closer to the reception desk, which will be much more convenient because she will also now be spelling Sarah on lunch breaks and vacations. After she finishes throwing up in the ladies room, Magda prints out the resignation she wrote a week earlier. She marches to Jason's office and, after standing for a long moment in front of his door, opens it without

knocking and lays the letter on his desk. Jason makes no effort to mask the small upturn at the corners of his mouth. He tells her that he understands and that she needn't go through the awkwardness of putting in her final two weeks. By the eleven, she has packed her things into booze boxes mooched from the liquor store around the corner and, as she rides home in a taxi, Magda wonders what Alan will say. The idea that he won't care presents itself; he hasn't cared about what was happening with her job in some time, but she does not linger on that thought because it is quite possibly the only thing more depressing than thinking about the fact that she has quit a job that she should not have loved as much as she did.

She is surprised to see Alan's car at the curb when she gets home. It is not even noon and he is not usually home until after three. She wonders if he has quit his job, too. The cab driver helps her take the booze boxes up to the porch, where she leaves them for the moment. She goes into the house, where she discovers Alan coming down the stairs with a suitcase. They are both startled, as if he had been a burglar, but instead of a gun, Alan has a letter he has written, which he says he was going to leave on the kitchen table for her. He hands her the letter and sits on the bottom stair, looking at his feet while Magda reads. He is leaving, he has written in the letter, and he does not know when he will be back. He has taken a leave of absence at work – so he didn't quit or

get fired, she sees – his life is flat, meaningless, and he needs to find himself. Magda finishes the letter and looks at him in disbelief. Words swell in her throat and she can hear herself screaming, calling him a chicken-shit bastard, a son of a bitch, a fucker. She realizes that she hasn't said a single word aloud. Alan is looking at her, she can see in his eyes that he is fighting an impulse to show concern. She thinks she may be shaking; a glance at the letter in her hands confirms this. Magda takes a deep breath and informs Alan that people stopped trying to find themselves years ago and that, besides being passé, he is courting trouble. He might succeed, and disappointment is hard to take alone. Alan calls her a bitch and leaves.

Magda waits a moment. She imagines the other side of the front door. Alan sees the boxes on the porch and realizes what happened to her earlier. He drops his suitcase in shock. He thinks he is the most self-centered man on earth and, after taking a moment to wipe away the tears of shame that spring unbidden to his eyes, he comes back into the house to apologize. When she hears his car start and leave, Magda begins to cry. She opens the door and discovers that Alan did, in fact, see her boxes and he has kicked one of them down the stairs. File folders that had held clippings of work she'd helped other people at the magazine put together are being tossed around the yard by the breeze. She runs back and forth, weeping and grabbing what the wind hasn't

carried away and when she has rescued what she can, she drags her boxes and herself into the quiet house.

Magda stalks through the house. She wants to scream and does. It feels stupid, so she stops. She wants to break things, but knows that if she does, she will just have to clean them up afterwards. She finds a beer in the fridge and, after pouring the beer into a glass, she puts the empty bottle in a paper grocery bag and whacks it with the rolling pin. Doing so is not nearly as satisfying as she hoped it would be, so she throws the bag in the trash and drinks the beer. Finally, Magda decides to call Winnie. She doesn't want to really; she is embarrassed and unexpectedly shy and worried that her daughter will blame her for Alan's departure. Still, she feels an obligation to tell Winnie and besides, she doesn't want Alan to be first. Magda listens as Winnie's very genuine sympathy turns into an equally genuine plug for salvation. Winnie thinks that Magda should come to church with her that night and promises that the other women there will be delighted to include her in their prayer circle. When Magda declines the invitation, Winnie promises that if Alan calls, she'll have him talk to her own husband. Roger has helped other couples get through rough times. "When Daddy accepts leadership in your marriage, you'll both be so much happier." Magda hangs up the phone tries to picture Alan reading the Bible and discussing parables with her. She decides that Alan with his nose in the Bible instead of the

lifestyle section of the Sunday paper isn't much of an improvement.

Magda buys books on resume writing and job hunting strategies. Her parachute is invisible, she thinks as she stands in front of the rack of self-help employment books two weeks after her black Monday. No, that is not right, invisible is not a color. She sees herself in an airplane with Jason and Alan. Alan is on her left and Jason on her right and each has a hand in her armpit and they are hustling her to the open airplane door. She pulls the ripcord as she tumbles head over heels in the clouds and her parachute is grey like old, worn-out underwear and it has holes in it. Magda knows her parachute needs a makeover. She takes her books to the Midway and tells the story of her resignation to Fast Eddie and the Radiant Anna, to Steve, to Edgar and Hank, and to Devilish Mary. By the time she tells it to Mary, the story sounds pretty smooth and Magda thinks to herself that she is going to be all right. Mary asks what Alan said about all this, which annoys Magda. Alan isn't in the story and she says "not much" as she stuffs her books into the satchel she has been carrying and storms out of the Midway. She doesn't care that she has confused and flustered Mary. At home, she picks the mail off the floor and piles it with the rest on the hall table. The stack topples and she gets angry, so she pulls the grate off the hot air register and kicks the envelopes down it. She goes into the kitchen and fixes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which she eats in the living room, staring at

the television set, which is not on because she threw a hammer through the tube while watching "A Star Is Born" earlier in the week.

Magda arrives at the Midway every day with her satchel full of job hunting materials. Sometimes she is standing at the door when Fast Eddie arrives and she settles brightly into the end booth as if it is an office. Each Sunday, at home, she carefully clips ads from the classified section of the paper and puts them into a white envelope as if they are grocery coupons. She has a book with a lovely etching of cut-away nautilus on the cover and creamy unlined blank pages, the sort of blank book people use for diaries or journals. At the Midway, she re-evaluates each ad. Sometimes this takes a day or so, and she makes her friends read the ad and give their opinions. If the ad makes her cut, she pastes it carefully in the book with a glue stick. Each ad gets its own page and those she believes are truly promising get two facing pages. She writes dates on the pages – the date the ad runs is written in blue, the date she sends a résumé is in green. Replies to her letter are orange and she cuts the name and business information from the letter she receives and pastes that onto the page, drawing elaborate borders around it in orange and yellow. Interview dates are important, so she transcribes them in ornate lettering in red. Sometimes, when it is a position that she really would like, Magda draws detailed maps which place the ad at the point on the map where the company is located. If she succeeds in getting an

interview, she pastes in the business cards of the interviewers. There are not a lot of business cards in the book, and those that are there are in the early pages.

She offers the book to her friends each time she sees them. Hank makes the mistake of declining a look at her progress one evening, and she flies into a rage. He should have just told her that he wasn't her friend, god damn it, she says. If he wants those jobs, he can damn well work on his own job hunt and besides that he'd better stop staring at her tits or her husband will kill him. She sweeps her things into the satchel and slams the door hard behind her as she leaves. Fast Eddie tells Hank that it wasn't his fault, but Hank drives out to Magda's house to apologize. When she answers the door, she is calm and smiling as if nothing had happened and she invites him in. Hank spends several hours with her, helping her clean up the kitchen and living room. Magda tells him about Alan's departure. "The worst is trying to sleep," she says to Hank. "I'm not sleeping well." Hank leaves a little before midnight, having made Magda promise that she will let him take her to the grocery store the next day when he discovered that she has had no food in the house for the last three days.

Magda's friends at the Midway try to be true and good, but it is difficult. The Radiant Anna gets the worst of it because she comes in every day after dropping Grendel at his play group. When Anna arrives,

Magda expects her to sit with her, and Anna feels like a hostage, particularly when Steve or Devilish Mary show up later and get to sit at a different table. Anna confesses to Mary one night after a movie that she feels like the teenager who is stuck keeping peace at the kiddy table on Thanksgiving. Everyone broaches the subject of professional help, each thinking that he or she has been the only one brave enough to bring up such a touchy issue, and Magda tells each that he or she is right, that she should talk to someone, but she needs to find a job before she can do anything else. It is when Magda is so reasonable and open to suggestion that her friends feel most confused. They talk among themselves and grow increasingly resentful, not of Magda herself, but more generally that the whole thing will not resolve itself. They realize – is it Fast Eddie who pointed it out? – that they have learned to expect all crises to resolve themselves within hours. Hell, even the Titanic had finished sinking within three hours.

Then Magda goes away. "What if she's done herself harm?" Devilish Mary asks Eddie over a peaceful cup of coffee. Later in the day, Hank suggests that someone should drive out to her house and check on her. "We could just call her, maybe invite her over for dinner to see how she is doing," Eddie says to Anna as he is washing dishes, though he drops the subject immediately when he sees the unradiant pallor that his suggestion has caused.

Mary and Eric are at the Midway, playing Scrabble with Anna, Steve, and Edgar at one of the tables. Fast Eddie has just come out of the kitchen with a tray full of silverware hot out of the dishwasher. The bell over the door tinkles and when he looks up, Eddie drops the tray with a dramatic crash. Magda is standing in the open doorway, back-lit by the late summer sun. Her auburn hair is loose and wind-whipped, her copper eyes gleam like the bottoms of saucepans and her almost six foot frame is swathed in pink. The room is silent.

Magda's hatred of pink is legendary. It is the color of capitulation she has said. Capitulation, submission, and worst of all, cuteness. Magda has been known to deliberately ding Mary Kay Cadillacs in parking lots, but today she is a nightmare in pink. She wearing a hot pink turtleneck, cotton candy pink stretch pants a size too small, knee socks that are splattered with pink polka dots the color of Pepto Bismol and high-top sneakers that used to be white, but which seem to have been carefully colored with a pink highlighter pen. All of the items appear –the degree of wrinkliness and grubbiness is the clue– to have come directly out of Goodwill donation boxes without benefit of laundering.

"I've had my colors done." Magda tells the room.

After a hurried and hushed conversation in the kitchen, during which the nervously Radiant Anna listens to Magda's theories of color therapy, the rest of the group decides it is time to figure out what is best

for Magda until she returns to her senses. No-one voices the fear they all share that Magda may not return to her senses. They file out of the kitchen like a jury returning to the courtroom and Fast Eddie explains to Magda that they are really worried about her. He explains that none of them know what the best thing to do is and that they think she needs more help than they can offer. Devilish Mary takes the Yellow Pages and a fistful of quarters to the pay phone and within half an hour has secured an appointment for a psychiatric evaluation for Magda. The appointment is in three days time – the best she could do – with a psychologist whose name Mary was given by the emergency room people at Mass General. Magda listens while her friends plan the next three days. Anna and Eddie will take her that evening. Hank will pick her up in the morning and bring her to Steve's apartment in the afternoon, and from there, Devilish Mary and Eric will pick her up the next morning and see that she gets to her appointment. The planning stops there and Magda wonders if they realize that they are assuming that the shrink will make all their problems disappear. Or her. She thinks she might end up like Dorothy, sadly realizing that the wizard has nothing in his bag for her, but she doesn't say any of this. It is obvious that her friends need her to follow their plans and so she resolves to try to do just that.

When they finally get home with Magda, Anna and Eddie move Grendel's crib into their room. The sofa bed is still in nursery, a holdover

from when Grendel newborn and Anna was terrified to be apart from him. They always move the crib when they have overnight guests, but this time it seems to imply a lack of trust and both make small murmurs of regret as they set it in the corner of the room. When they comes downstairs with a load of linens to wash for the sofa bed, they discover Magda sitting on the floor in front of the refrigerator with her head resting on the lowest shelf. "It's restful, really." she tells them. Magda has found God in Anna and Eddie's refrigerator and spends the rest of the night searching for references to chilled food in a Gideon Bible she has in her bag. She tells them that while, obviously, there wasn't refrigeration in those days, there still should be some implication of the sanctity of chilling. Eddie and Anna convince Magda that she cannot sleep with her head in the fridge and everyone goes to bed.

Hank arrives the next morning and takes Magda for breakfast at the House of Pancakes. He brings her to Steve's an hour early and leaves quickly, saying that he forgot he has things he really has to take care of before work. Steve thinks Hank is a weasel, but what can he do? Magda decides that Jason fired her and Alan left her because she is unclean. She asks Steve to take her home so she can shower and change her clothes. Since he has been trying to ignore the slightly sour smell she emanates, he quickly agrees and drives her to her house. He is relieved to discover that her color therapy has been limited to the kitchen, where

she has painted two walls pink, though without bothering to move any furniture or decorations. The chairs are splattered and four baskets and a braid of garlic are completely pink. Magda smiles tranquilly as she looks around her kitchen, then strips and marches up the same stairs she found Alan waiting on those few weeks earlier. Steve is fairly numbed by Magda's behavior at this point and simply gathers up the clothing and dumps it into the washing machine with a generous scoop of detergent. He is watching a game show on television when Magda comes back down and for almost an hour they watch television together. A commercial for foot powders prompts Magda to bring her own foot up to her nose and howl that she stinks. She races to the bathroom where she starts water running to fill the bath. Steve does nothing to stop her as baths are known to be calming and more than anything else, Steve dearly wishes Magda to be calm. The tub is soon full and Magda exits to take her bath. After three minutes, she reappears in the living room, wet but fully dressed. Steve realizes that there are things that a hot bath can't cure. By the next morning, Magda has bathed twenty-two times, showered eight times, and even convinced Steve to scrub her feet in the dish basin. He is near tears as he makes coffee and listens for the sound of running water. Instead, he hears the front door open. He is a little dazed from lack of sleep and rushes to the front hall expecting to see Devilish Mary and Eric, but when he rounds the corner, he comes face to face with

Alan. The two men stand looking at one another for a long moment.

"I stopped by the Midway this morning. Fast Eddie told me what's been going on." Alan says.

Steve is uncertain what he should do, Alan is her husband and it seems reasonable that he take over, but somehow Steve cannot shake the idea that Alan's reappearance is an obstacle to this quest that the Midway gang have embarked upon. Magda appears at the head of the stairs and looks down on them both. She is wearing a tatty nightshirt designed to look like a football jersey and her hair is a tangle of rust and red, but to Steve she looks like a Celtic goddess. She smiles and comes down the stairs and strokes Steve's cheek, telling him he can go, she'll be fine. Alan echoes this without the smile and Steve leaves, feeling both confused by the sense of failure and ashamed by the relief.

Alone with his wife, Alan launches his apologia. He tells her he was a stupid, stupid man. That he is sorry. That he missed her so very much. That he didn't mean to hurt her. Magda paces the house while Alan is talking and he trails after her, unburdening himself as fast as the words can tumble from his lips. Magda finally wheels on him and he almost trips over her.

"The Druids worshipped trees, didn't they?" she asks, though her inflection is not that of a question.

This comment confuses Alan. It has nothing to do with his

departure or his return and he makes a stammering half reply. She seems not to hear him.

"Didn't even have electricity, never mind cold storage, but they were able to worship." she says. She looks at him for a long moment, then curls herself on a chair in the living room and stares out the window at the street.

Alan asks Magda if she heard what he had told her, if she understood, but she will not look at him and does not speak further. She is punishing him, he decides and he figures he deserves it. He takes his bags upstairs from the hall and begins to unpack. Alan is thinking about Magda's irrational behavior and these thoughts make him move slowly, savoring the last bit of alone time he will have for a while. It is his fault she has gone off the deep end, he knows this. He will care for her and accept her blame and then they will forgive each other for their separate transgressions. Alan hears the water running in the downstairs bathroom but thinks nothing of it. When he comes down, he sees the front door hanging open and a trail of wet footprints leading out the door. The water is still running in the shower. He dashes in and shuts it off. He dashes out onto the porch and follows the trail down to the grass. There are no footprints on the sidewalk, but he still looks back and forth in each direction, his head swiveling like a toy. As he turns back to the house, a movement catches his eye and he looks up into the oak tree in

their front yard. Magda has climbed high into the tree and does not reply when he asks her to please come down and come in with him. A car's brakes squeal as the driver spots the naked red-head in the tree. In the tone he reserves for his fifth graders, Alan orders Magda to come down. She ignores him. Someone on the street whistles a lewd catcall. Alan wheels around and tells the grinning boy responsible to shut his mouth and get the fuck out of there. The boy crosses the street, but doesn't leave and doesn't stop grinning. Alan goes to the tree and grips the wide trunk with both hands. He tries to shake it, but the tree does not move. He hears laughter and sees that some other teenagers have joined the whistling boy. He shouts at Magda and he shouts at the teens and he is ignored on all counts. Finally he decides that he will have to drag her down and he starts to climb the tree. This breaks through Magda's composure, and she begins shrieking and screaming so loudly that Alan almost loses his grip on the tree. He has never been so close to such anger and it terrifies him, but he continues to climb. Magda climbs also, higher into the tree. She is bleeding from scratches on her back and breasts, her face is red and sweaty, and her lips are stretched so tight over her teeth that Alan fears they might split. With nauseating clarity, Alan realizes that his earlier apology stank like shit. Now he is sorry. Now he is humbled and shamed and queasy with guilt. She yanks acorns and leaves loose and pelts him with them, but he climbs resolutely,

wanting nothing but to catch her and hold her in his arms. The are both sobbing when Magda finally reaches the last branch capable of supporting her weight. Alan pauses and takes a deep breath and holds his hand out to her. Magda looks at him, suddenly silent and they stand there on their separate branches, the whole of their lives almost corporeal between them. A slow smile comes over her face and she reaches out with one hand, the other steadying herself against the trunk. Their fingers brush for the briefest moment before she jerks her hand back and pushes against the trunk and crashes down through the branches onto the ground. Alan hears a scream but he does not know if it comes from Magda or himself or possibly the small cluster of people watching the drama from the sidewalk.

Later at the hospital, after a long surgery to repair one terrible break in her arm, after both Magda's legs are set in casts, the doctors explain options to Alan. He nods and says little and the doctors give him forms to sign. Alan leaves the hospital without looking in on Magda. He goes home thinking about the things he thought he wanted when he left. He remembers telling Magda that he wanted to find himself and he remembers her reply and he realizes she was right. He is disappointed in what he has found and disappointment is hard to take alone. He hopes Magda will have better results when she finds herself. He hopes that she will find room for him again, but he stops. This is not a good time for wild

hopes, they make his mouth sour. Alan goes to bed and listens to the sound of the wind in the oak leaves and near dawn he falls asleep.

At the hospital, Magda dreams deep, syrupy codeine dreams. It is winter and snow is falling. She is walking away from her house and she is nude. The snowflakes brush over her skin but do not melt, because she is colder than they are and she walks on the top of the deep snow without leaving footprints. Behind her, a small figure in a tree is calling to her, shouting even, but she cannot hear him because his words turn into icicles and fall like stars into the snow. She can see this figure in the tree, see his mouth moving, but it is odd that she can, because she never looks back. Ahead of her is a pink glow and she knows that when she reaches the source of that glow, it will be safe to be warm again.

Devilish Mary is in the middle of a writer's block and it is pissing her off. She has published three novels, two collections of stories in the last seventeen years, and plenty of stories in various magazines, but since becoming entrenched in her block, she has begun to wonder if there is an expiration date on the right to claim to be a writer. Mary does not know if the block is a symptom of the pervasive sense of disconnection she feels of late or if the block actually caused it, but she feels as if she is developing some rare form of adult-onset autism. Though aware that there is a problem, Eric, does not realize that by Mary's reckoning the block has lasted eight months, one week, three days, six hours, and fifty-seven minutes the last time Mary checked, which was fairly recently. They sit together in the evenings in the big room of their farmhouse and watch television or rented movies. Mary curls against him on the sofa with her head in his lap, but often he realizes she is somewhere without him. He considers various reactions to her retreat, considers trying to talk about it, but he is afraid that if her mind is elsewhere, conversation might be a bit one-sided. Eric knows he should react, but he is not particularly good at propping up one-sided conversations, so he says nothing and finally decides that waiting is a reaction and one he can handle, at that. Mary knows that her moodiness is hard on Eric but knowledge is rarely a cure for moods.

Some days she does wake without the aloof, ghostlike feeling she has become all to used to, and when she does, she is happy and awed to be loved by her handsome, clever, quiet chicken farmer, delighted with

her home and her life and even somehow pleased with the occasional grey hairs and the depth her face is achieving as it ages. On these days, the house gleams for her as if it had just been repainted and washed. She works in her garden, pulling invasive grass and weeds, tidying the plot so that the larkspur and dianthus and cone flower and yarrow can grow unimpeded. She nibbles at the wisteria with handsnips and is genuinely content and happy when she steps back and sees it ramble along the supports at the top of the porch roof. She drinks coffee in the backyard and watches Sadie's horses in the next field. Mary has many moments that make her consciously glad to suck air into her lungs and appreciate every tiny, lovely thing that life parades before her.

Unfortunately, even on the good days, she still cannot put three words worth reading onto a piece of paper. She sits at her computer and tells it to open a "new" file, and the whiteness of the screen sits before her and begs her to put something there so that the next time it won't have to be a "new" file she opens and it is that moment that Mary realizes that she has nothing to say and shuts it all down. She goes out to the back yard to drink more coffee and wonder what to do next. Mary decides that she ought to try going back to writing longhand. She buys beautiful blank books with thick, creamy pages between the artful covers, but the pages remain blank except for the one where Mary made an intricate pattern of coffee rings which at the time she thought were an amusing blend of Celtic intricacy and post-modern irony. She looks at the page now and sees nothing but self-indulgence and a glaring lack of writing.

Mary turns to advise books with their clever ideas intended to rekindle the ability to manipulate words like jigsaw puzzle pieces, but the exercises bore her. Instead, she buys a real jigsaw puzzle and avoids thinking about writing for several days as she creates Renoir's *Dance at Bougival* on her own dining-room table. Eric helps, and after he hands her the last piece and she completes the puzzle, he pulls her from her chair and whirls her dancing through the house. As she disassembles the puzzle later that day, Mary wonders if the woman in the painting was suffering from writer's block or if there is another reason for the faint look of preoccupied unhappiness.

Mary tries writing copy for greeting cards. "Sometimes the right thing to say / or the right way to say it / Eludes us .... But eventually we find the right words. / I know you will, too" convinces her that if Hallmark ever releases a line of condolence cards for blocked writers she'll have the market cornered. She rereads her condolence cards and "Feeling stuck? / It'll get better .... I guess." tells her that she isn't even doing that well. She writes a postcard to Hank, who is in Vermont for the summer working on a film, and decides that she might need to learn how to drive a bus because "wish I was there" is not her idea of a good postcard.

Mary feels as if she is taking writers block to new heights and for several days becomes in her mind the Carmille of blocked writers and pictures herself wasting away, consumed from within by the words which would not flow from her. She sighs routinely and is comfortable in her tragedy until one day she comes at herself from a slightly different angle

and, loathing the self-indulgence, shuts the daydream down with a bang. She still sighs a lot, but without a French inflection.

Mary decides that if she cannot write, she can at least read and the day she reaches that decision, 288 days into the block, Mary sets off to Boston to visit the library. The soft, sage glow of budding trees and the occasional gift of lilac on the air make the drive into Boston a joy and when Mary reaches Copley Square, she has been transported to a rare optimism.

The public library in Boston is a little amazing, even to Mary who grew up taking the place as a given. There are two buildings, two distinct interpretations of a temple for books. The older McKim building, Mary's favorite and the one she remembers being brought to by her grandmother, is entered by scaling a sea of low stone stairs, the sort that are low and deep and make the act of walking up them something that requires active thought. The dark Gothic doors are flanked by two mammoth stone women on stone thrones. The women are not looking at the tide and trickle of people in Copley plaza. Perhaps they are lost in thought.

Mary has a vision. She sees a stream of people coming single-file to the stone women. They come with offerings of *People* magazines, Sony Walkmen, television sets and video tape players, computer diskettes and chirping games with two inch screens. The people lay these things at the massive stone feet and enter the library. They trudge in dazed automation through the stacks, fingers bouncing off book spines till sudden mystical communion occurs. Light comes to their eyes and a sunbeam enfolds the person and the book is pulled from the shelf and

the person, no longer dazed, peers at the dust jacket through the crackly library plastic. Mary smiles as she sees the moment of connection. Perhaps it is the need to believe her own work might touch some stranger's heart that makes this vision so touching,. Perhaps it's vanity.

Mary is still standing outside the library at the base of the steps. She feels the wisps of her dream stick like spider webs and rather than shake herself free, she gently tucks the fancy away. She goes into the library and loses herself in the stacks, sometimes sitting on the floor for many minutes reading some snippet that caught an interest. Eventually, the craving for a cigarette changes from timid hints to the evil pitch of a tantruming child and Mary heads to the library's courtyard where, like her grandmother all those years earlier, she can have a cigarette.

She stands in the doorway of the courtyard and, like a poacher, she considers who might feed her desire to people-watch while she smokes. Two college students – a guess on her part, though a safe one in this city – sit on one bench, hot in conversation but Mary rejects them for their youth, which will likely depress her. An older woman with a cigarette dangling from tulip-red lips sits several benches away from the students, reading a low-grade romance, and Mary eliminates her as well. Mary knows it is snobbery but the cigarette bobs in time as the woman mouths each word, and the romance isn't even a good one. She looks to the far end of the courtyard and immediately is delighted with the last choice. He grey and bearded and seems tall, though she can't be sure since he is sitting with his feet tucked under himself yoga style. He is writing, not reading at all, and a tattered canvas rucksack sits on the

bench beside him. He is Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg and a touch of Burroughs and Mary batters the urge to skip as she moves to a better vantage point. She casually selects a bench that offers a better line of sight and yet does not make obvious that she has deliberately chosen to sit near him. She rummages in her bag and finds her cigarettes. After smoking two, Mary decides that if her hippie marvel can write, she also can, and she digs out her notebook and soon finds herself immersed in the wretched but workable first draft of the first new story she has written in 288 days. When she looks up and finds the other bench empty, she is startled, but the thrill of being out of her slump is so glorious that she doesn't care. Much.

The new story is polished at home, but Mary's thoughts flutter back to the library courtyard often as she weaves an outfit of identity for her hippie. She assigns occupations and discards them, furnishes and then redecorates then redecorates again a home for him and eventually Mary realizes that he has taken up permanent residence in her thoughts. She finds herself spending more and more time at the library, but the dusty stacks, the world class architecture, and the special collections are not even given cursory attention. When she goes to the library, she buzzes straight to the courtyard. Some days he is there and some days not. Some days she arrives first and some days not. She is writing consistently, at the library, at home, and at the Midway, where she usually goes after spending the morning at the library. She is deeply glad that the drought is over, but she worries that there is more than an small potential for trouble to be found in spending so much thought on a total stranger. She sits in the big room of the farm house one evening and

looks at Eric, and wonders why she can't put him into suspended animation while she works out what she is feeling toward her hippie. The thought so alarms her with its inherent risk and selfishness that she startles Eric, herself, and Libby the cat by leaping up in the middle of the television program to clean the catbox as an act of contrition. She manages to stay away from the library for four days.

There is no-one in the courtyard when Mary arrives and she notes uneasily the wave of disappointment that tugs at the flagstones beneath her feet and threatens to unbalance her. She sits hard on the bench that she has come to think of as hers and rises as if nipped when a well-worn copy of "Safe in Moon Villa" pokes her in the bottom. Mary has only published the one collection of poems and as she looks at her face on the back of the jacket, she remembers herself then – someone for whom nothing seemed good except the writing. A thought pesters that now everything is good except the writing, but Mary is not certain she really believes that anyway and flicks the thought away. A note is held to the front of the book with a rubber band and Mary sits and with shaking fingers pulls the note out and reads it, knowing that it will be from her hippie. It is and he is saying in simple, delightful words that she is the greatest poet since Shakespeare and lovely as well and would she please, please inscribe his book and finally with the signature she learns that he is named Del. She calls herself a fool and sniffs the note, hoping for a scent of him. She tells herself she ought to be ashamed and strokes the pages of her book, her book full of poems about falling in love, written when she was younger and free to fall in love as often as she pleased. She rereads the note and feels guilty that she had managed on the first

reading to not notice the reference to the tiny detail that Del, her hippie Ferlinghetti-Ginsberg-Burroughs marvel, has a wife. She tells herself that he adores his wife as much as she adores Eric.

Mary spends two hours working over the most perfect thing that can be said and finally settles, not totally satisfied, on "For Del ...thanks for asking ...Mary." Del's full name is written in the upper corner of the fly leaf. When she is done and he has still not appeared in the courtyard, Mary takes the book to the information counter and explains that a gentleman, Mr. Del So-and-So, has left this book in the courtyard and will likely be calling for it. The fine hairs on her neck prickle for no reason. She looks up and sees him standing at the railing of the upper level a good twenty feet above, looking down, watching her. She smiles and crosses to the door affecting one of the better exits of her lifetime. Unlike Lot's wife, she does not look back, but her knees might as well be made of salt when she finally has the doors behind her and the trembling sets in.

She drives as quickly as Boston traffic will allow to the Midway and sits quietly drinking coffee and thinking that coffee is not likely to be the finest cure for a pounding heart. She questions the pounding, wondering what is driving the excitement she feels but the questions is asking herself requires answers she does not really want to think about. Fast Eddie pours each cup as needed and watches her from his stool by the cash register and though she has not said anything to him short of mumbled socialisms, he supposes she probably isn't interested in talking philosophy at the moment. Fast Eddie may drive the Midway patrons

nuts with Kierkegaard and Sartre on occasion, but he still knows a thing or two about timing.

Finally, Mary takes leave of Fast Eddie and Magda and Anna, who arrived one limping, one radiant and both sweaty after their dance class. Mary drives home and cooks dinner for Eric and herself.

She wakes early the next morning and sits in the backyard, watching Sadie's horses slip in and out of the morning mist as if it were a time portal in a fantasy movie. Eric wakes an hour later than she and joins her, his conversation full of innocent trust and practicality and the solidness that she has tapped for sixteen years. She is appalled that she can sit and talk with him so easily when her mind has been touching Del's hair, watching Del's long, thin hands as he writes, feeling Del's smile float to her like bird down. Later, after Eric leaves with his egg deliveries, Mary decides that she cannot make herself any more miserable than she is doing at home and so she drives into the city. As she approaches the library, she looks at the stone women and wonders what sacrifice they will ask of her. She knows there is an offering to be made, though she does not know what it must be and she goes into the library prepared to set the next phase of her private melodrama into motion.

She reaches the courtyard and Del is sitting on her bench, watching the doorway and Del sees her and is smiling and Del's smile is sunlight and it bursts through her panic and makes her feel twenty-one and exalted. She is across the courtyard without running, without laughing aloud, without throwing her arms around his shoulders and pulling his silly face to hers and covering it in kisses and she decides

that maybe she can do this after all. They talk and Mary does not swoon at his voice which is twenty years younger than his face and so low and soft that it seems to run a silk scarf through her ears and into her mind and Mary decides that not swooning is also a good sign. He has done this and that, lived in New York and San Francisco and Macon, Georgia and Nepal – for a month. He has two children who have grown and gone on to their own lives. Del lives with his wife in a house he rents from the owner of the apple orchard that surrounds the house and where he indulges in his true passion which turns out to be beekeeping, which Mary would never have guessed. Del comes to the library to research the articles he writes on the art and practice of beekeeping. He shyly pulls reprints of his articles from the rucksack and Mary sees that they have been published in real journals, not *Bob's Bee Mag.* She notes the scholarly research, the references at the ends of the articles and she realizes that he is quite the expert on beekeeping. It seems to her a small thing to be an expert on, but there is something rather impressive about being a person who knows that much about something and Mary adds this to the list of things that are making her very glad to be getting to know him. They talk long into the afternoon, moving eventually from the library to a coffee shop. She brushes off the twinge of guilt that she feels when the thought flashes through her mind that they cannot go to the Midway. They are both well behaved and Mary reads nothing into the fact that Del's leg presses lightly against hers as they sit drinking coffee but she does not move her leg, even when it begins to fall asleep because she's kept it at an odd, uncomfortable angle for over twenty minutes.

That evening Mary is in fine spirits. While cooking, she moves through the kitchen like Sonje Henje on ice and smiles as serenely as Grace of Monaco. Mary, in fact, is feeling very competent and capable and in control of herself. Mary considers baking a cake so that she can have it and eat it too, and notices neither that she is deliberately missing the point of the adage nor that she is acting a lot more cocky than a woman who has fallen in love with a man who isn't her husband ought to act.

Mary and Del talk about poems and stories and bees and politics and religion and after several weeks of talking about anything else, they talk openly about attraction to one another. They discuss it reasonably and even get a shade overblown in their escalating declarations of devotion to respective spouses. That this particular conversation takes place sitting on a blanket in the Public Gardens while they tease each other's ankles with unfettered toes gives the declarations a layer of tarnish. That Del ends their visit with a long kiss that is accompanied by caresses from hands rougher and more sure than Mary anticipated along the outer curve of her breast makes the declarations positively laughable except that Mary is not laughing as she sits late that night in the darkened big room of the farmhouse.

Mary no longer feels like she is becoming invisible, now she feels like she is in the process of splitting in two and it is no better a feeling. When she is with Del, being with Del defines her, she is as clever and pretty and amazing as he tells her she is. When she is at home, Eric and writing, friendships, gardens and horses in the mist all are irreplaceable. She wonders why she is suddenly risking them all. She thinks about

Del's lips, about the taste of another man after sixteen years, about the feel of alien fingers touching her and she knows she wants this. She is flooded with shame and disappointment in herself but she knows that despite the shame and disappointment, she will meet Del for coffee again the next day and the day after and the day after that. She knows that she has not crossed an unforgivable line yet, but she also knows that when the time comes, she will. She is not sure when this decision was made, and wishes she had been paying closer attention.

Mary goes to her desk and tries to fit words to the swirl in her head and slowly the words are put onto the paper and she feels the beginnings of a center to her descent and clings to that center later as she falls asleep next to Eric, ashamed to reach out to him but doing so anyway.

Restraint now weakened, Mary and Del rollick in the physical. They neck in each other's cars, they rub thighs while talking over coffee, they touch like starving people devouring each other with their fingertips and palms, but both manage to hold the unspoken line. Though neither raises the issue, consummation lurks in their thoughts and they dance carefully around it, instead choosing to come to each other as teenagers — needy and fearful and reckless and overdosing in an almost histrionic longing for one another.

Del tells her that his wife is going to be away for a few days and that he would like to show Mary his bees. Mary suppresses the thought that this is the silliest come-on she has ever heard and she tells him that yes, she will come to see the bees. The fine points are resolved, where to go, how to get there, what day, what time. Mary and Del are not good with this. Mary becomes suddenly efficient and Del suddenly seems not

to care if she comes out or not as he punctuates every detail with disclaimers. Mary is likely to be bored with the bees. Mary probably was planning to work on her writing. Mary would doubtless rather go to the Midway and talk philosophy with Fast Eddie. Mary and Del part poorly that afternoon with considerably less touching than there had been in the days proceeding Del's invitation.

Bee day arrives and Mary, in keeping with her lingering sensation of having turned fourteen the day Del first kissed her, becomes an idiot. She and Eric collect and wash and sort eggs, tucking them neatly into the cardboard crates Eric will then load into the truck and deliver to his various customers. Mary is normally very fast and deft, her slim fingers apparently pre-designed for egg tucking. This morning she drops seven eggs and Eric laughs and asks where her mind is and Mary thinks that she will be sick right there in the stifling chicken coop. They load the eggs and Eric swoops Mary into his arms and kisses her good bye and Mary decides that she might as well have already slept with Del considering how shitty she feels at this moment. As she watches the battered red truck trundle away, she wonders how she is going to feel this evening when they sit together in the big room watching television. Will she be able to rest her head in his lap when the television show is boring? Will she suddenly consider Eric's lap in comparison to the new lap she is going to know? When the truck is out of sight, she returns to the house and begins to get ready, even though it will not be bee time till noon. She showers and stares into her dresser drawer trying to pick out underwear, which turns out to be harder than she expected and she finally decides that she is better off not wearing any, the thought of

which pushes a half a dozen arousal buttons. With the underwear problem solved, she next must decide what to wear over her underwear if she were wearing any, which could reasonably be construed as a difficult choice if the options were more elaborate than jeans and a shirt. Mary owns three pairs of jeans and they are all the same brand and style. She lays the three pairs of identical jeans on the bed and scrutinizes them for differences. She settles on a pair, pulls them on and in her fastest decision of the morning, yanks a white cotton shirt from the closet and buttons it up, noting the rasp of fabric across bare nipples and trying not to think about the unbuttoning to come. She stands in front of the bathroom mirror and brushes her hair till it shines like mink and is so puffy from overbrushing that she has to wet her hands and pat it into submission. She daubs perfume at her throat and then remembers that she is going to be standing in the middle of several thousand bees and scrubs her neck till it feels raw. Mary hopes that she has not set the stage for Del to have to hide her sting-bloated corpse in the orchard to keep himself from getting caught. She leaves the bathroom and sits outside smoking cigarettes until it is time to go.

Mary realizes as she starts her car that she doesn't have to do this. She could go back into the house and wait for Eric to come home and surprise him with her lack of underclothes. She realizes as she rolls down the driveway that she could go to the Midway and spend the day writing or even just talking to Eddie. She realizes as she approaches the apple orchard that she wants to make love with Del more than she has wanted anything in a very long time and she isn't likely to talk herself out of doing it now.

Del is waiting to meet her on the porch and he takes her in his arms and kisses her and rests his lips on her forehead. He holds her and she can feel both chests rising and falling and she hears him whisper that he cannot do this. She pulls back in his arms and looks up into his eyes and sees that although he knows full well that he is about to hurt her, he is resolute in his decision. He strokes her hair and tries to explain but he is not good with words today and Mary is not hearing well, either. She knows that this is a good thing, the best thing that could have happened. She knows she should be glad that one of them found morals at the last minute, but all she can think is that as well as forgetting how heady and wondrous being in love was, she had also forgotten how numbing it was to lose love. She knows that it isn't just sex that Del is saying he cannot offer. It is love and the gift of himself, which he had long ago given to someone else just as the gift of herself had been given to Eric. The difference, though, is that Mary has stolen back a piece of that self to offer to Del and apparently he had not done the same for her. She pulls out of his hold as he talks and she sits on the porch steps. Del runs out of words eventually, for which Mary is very thankful. He stands behind her, and she senses that he is no longer able to stroke her hair or touch her at all anymore. They stay that way for several minutes and then Mary stands and asks to see the apiary. Del is as startled as if she had suddenly asked him to make her a peanut butter sandwich but he takes her around the house and into the orchard where the hives are kept. He gives her a bee veil and gloves. Del speaks stiffly of breeding programs and queens and tracheal mites and varroa mites and Mary walks with him, the veil blurring the tears that are

running down her cheeks. Finally Mary turns and walks out of the orchard back toward the house and, setting the gloves and veil on the porch, she gets into her car and drives home. Del watches from a short distance and when she is gone, goes into his house and sits in his study, wondering when his light, lovely adventure turned so wrong.

Devilish Mary is in her garden when Eric pulls up in the truck. She is stuffing weeds into a big five-gallon pail that used to hold chicken feed, and her face is striped with mud where she has backhanded random tear tracks away, and her hands are scratched and filthy with dirt. She calls to Eric that she will be in in a moment, that she's almost done for the day anyhow. Eric parks the truck and comes around to the porch and stands watching her work. He sees everything as Mary plunges her hand into the center of the sprawling Black Eyed Susan to lever out a sneaky dandelion that is hiding amidst the foliage. From his angle, Eric sees the bee on the dandelion head, he sees his wife's hand close over it and he sees her scream and jerk her hand back even as he is running to her. Eric leads Mary into the kitchen and scrapes the stinger out of the skin on the inside of her ring finger with the edge of a paring knife. Mary's finger is already swollen and the nail bed is cold and blue. Eric puts ice into a plastic grocery sack and smashes the cubes with the rolling pin and stuffs Mary's hand into it. He leads her to her car and drives into town to the nearest jeweler and with his arm around Mary's shoulders, Eric tells the neat, thin clerk what happened and asks to have the ring cut off. Mary slumps in his arms and begins to sob, covering her face with her free hand while she holds her left hand steady for the clerk to work on. The clerk pushes a bit of plastic between

the ring and Mary's skin and then slides a ring cutter between plastic and ring. Mary's sobs shake her whole frame except for her left arm as she watches the tiny flakes of gold fly off the small saw wheel. The clerk breaks through the band and spreads it with two pliers and Mary withdraws her hand and looks at the gold shavings on her palm. The clerk tells her to be careful, that the shavings can cut her and he brushes them away with a cloth. Mary thinks that she would have liked at least a sliver of her ring to have wedged itself into her flesh and stay with her but she doesn't say this. The clerk is telling Eric that the ring can be easily repaired within a few days and Eric looks at the twisted bit of gold on the counter. It is a very simple band, the kind a man might buy when he was thirty-seven and did have much money for a wedding ring but knew that his dark-eyed writer would not see the ring for anything but the love he wants to offer her. He glances at his own hand, which has been ringless since he took the ring off to repair the chicken coop over a year ago and never saw it again. Considering that he suspected that one of the chickens ate it, he had really never wanted to see it again. Eric tells the clerk to fix the ring and takes Mary home and is not very surprised when she tells him that she is exhausted and wants to go to bed.

Eric moves through the house quietly that evening. He washes the few dishes in the kitchen and clears clutter from the living room and sweeps the wood floor in the hallway. Eric does as many chores as he can think of and realizes that he is afraid. He thinks about Mary's moods and, remembering jigsaw puzzles and manic cheerfulness, he realizes that she has been a Cheshire cat moving in slow motion toward

disappearance. Eric wonders if he would have finally talked to her when she was packing and leaving and he has a vision of Mary as a large, striped cat sitting on a tree limb and melting away till nothing remains but her mouth telling him that they are over and she is sorry. Eric finally goes to bed and lies like a plank for much of the night, still thinking.

The next morning Mary and Eric collect and pack eggs in silence. Mary moves zombie-like in her guilt and Eric watches her as if at a greater distance than the cramped space actually offers. He does not swoop her into his arms when he leaves and she does not question this because she knows that she does not deserve his kisses.

After Eric leaves, Mary goes to her desk and gathers the packet of stories written since she first saw Del at the library. She looks at them and wishes she were strong enough of character to throw them into the wood stove, but they are good writing and good writing is too hard to burn for a gesture. Instead she takes them outside to continue working them into their final forms. Mary is hunched over the table, writing, several hours later when Eric returns and comes out to sit with her. He places a small box in front of her and when she opens it, she is looking at two new rings and she bites her bottom lip and feels tears again in her eyes. She looks up at Eric and he smiles a small, careful smile and wipes the escapist tears from her cheek and shushes her. He takes her hand and looks at the swollen finger and presses her hand to his lips and kisses it. He takes her other hand and puts the new ring on her finger and asks her if she will be his wife. Mary's yes is so light that it is almost only a breath. She takes the other ring and puts it on Eric's

finger and asks him if he will be her husband and when he whispers his yes, she buries her head on his shoulder and begins to cry.

VITA

Felicity Pearson was born on April 7th, 1958 in Boston Massachusetts. On the day her parents brought Felicity home, the rosebushes – one red and one pink, both climbers – were in full bloom. They had never bloomed so early before, and even now, Felicity's father says they have never bloomed in April since that time. It does not hurt to begin life with omens and everyone said that this was a lovely omen, even if no-one was quite certain what it meant. The oracle at Delphi was usually misunderstood, also, so why should rosebushes be any more clear?

Had it only been the rosebushes, Felicity would not have thought she had a particularly portentous start to life, but there is another story her parents tell. While she was such a small infant, they kept her in a wicker laundry basket rather than a crib, and they often left the basket on the dining room table, where the infant girl would fall asleep as the trains lumbered past the backyard, shaking the house as they went. Perhaps it was a surly vandal, perhaps just a bit of gravel caught in some freak manner by a train's steel wheel; no one knows for certain. What they do know is that when Felicity's parent's came downstairs that particular morning, they discovered the dining room window smashed. The table was covered in broken glass, but as the frightened parents

rushed to their baby, they discovered that there was not a single sliver of glass to be found in wicker basket.

The rest of Felicity's life has been less dramatic. She attended public schools in Boston and after graduating from high school, she worked at a wide variety of jobs. Finally, restless and heartsore from her latest crummy relationship, Felicity enlisted in the Air Force and was sent to Lackland Air Force Base for basic training. From Lackland, she was sent to Brooks Air Force Base for further training and it was there that she met her future husband.

After fulfilling her four year enlistment, Felicity left the military and began working toward her Bachelor's degree, which she received from the University of Maryland in the summer of 1993. In 1996 she was accepted into the Master's program by the English Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In the summer of 1998, she graduated and set out to fulfill some of the portent of her earliest days by becoming a writer of stories and a teller of tales.