

PIECES

By

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Bachelor of Arts

Northwestern State University

Alva, Oklahoma

1988

**Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
July, 1994**

PIECES

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the members of my committee: Dr. Gordon Weaver (Chair), Dr. Richard Batteiger, and Dr. Jeffrey Walker. Until I entered graduate school, I had never written a scholarly paper. I still do not do it well. I am sure Dr. Walker was often astounded by my scholarship. Nevertheless, he rose to the occasions with constructive guidance, from which I learned and for which I am grateful.

Dr. Batteiger encouraged me when I was discouraged, understood my personality, and recognized it in my writing. He told me I was "coming along," and advised me to seek Dr. Weaver as chair of my committee. I have greatly utilized Dr. Weaver's knowledge and expertise. His suggestions, his reminders to stay in the persona's point of view, his proofreading, and his "don't worry" attitude have been invaluable. I am truly thankful to have these professors as my committee.

In addition, I wish to thank my family. My mother, bless her heart, thinks anything I write should be published. She spent many hours proofreading, running errands, and bringing meals. My husband deserves great praise. He shifted from the center of my life to a shady area; he understood when I stopped cooking, cleaning, and

listening. Finally, I wish to thank my children for their encouragement and support. But most of all, I thank God for His faithfulness in my life during these years of study.

PREFACE

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the World appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot.

from "The Lady of Shalott"

The short fiction in this manuscript came about as I commuted to classes at OSU. Driving the familiar road, I envisioned the characters, their dilemmas, actions, and dialogue. Pieces of stories floated through my thoughts while I searched for the right voice, viewpoint, degree of effacement - the most effective narrative persona for each story. Next, the relationship between the stories is based on the characters. I created people with a unique common trait, something akin to paradox; they seem ordinary, yet are not. Finally, the manuscript presents episodes, moments in the characters' lives that bring decisions to either move forward or remain stagnant. The entire manuscript, then, is based on the actions of the characters.

Since the reader's credulity relies on the extent to which he becomes immersed in the fiction, the voice, Booth's "implied author" is paramount to the character's

believability. Because the voice that carries the most authority is the most effective, I chose the voice that would best describe the actions, motives, feelings of the characters. For instance, the voice in "Seasons" is the persona of the woman, allowing access to her thoughts as she tells the action, and situational irony occurs as she unconsciously discloses her need for chaos as she goes about straightening her world. Without children to nurture, the woman focuses on her husband - his personal habits, his temperament - establishing disorder in a now quiet household. Ultimately, she suggests a divorce she never intends in order to perpetuate chaos.

In "Colored Glass" the voice is third person because the viewpoint character is incapable of expressing himself, and third person is, of course, necessary for showing the other characters. Since the success of "Colored Glass" depends on character rather than plot, my aim was to allow sympathy for Joe; for instance, the narrator relates Joe's past experiences with taunting and his parent's protection, which he now lacks. Also, I intended simplistic narration, short, precise sentences, to reflect Joe's simplistic nature. However, I believe the strength of the fiction is its ambiguity; the reader must decide for himself why Joe gives away his prized marbles and why he arranges them as he does when he offers them to the boys.

Even though voice was a primary concern, the characters developed first as I crafted the manuscript. I

knew who they were and what I wanted of them before I knew the voices that tell about them. Although their stories seem unconnected, they have a common characteristic; they are misfits. They are not blatantly out of step; their lives are functional. They are normal: neighbors, friends, relatives - ordinary people with flaws. However, they allow their flaws dominance, which is the unifying factor of the manuscript. Sherwood Anderson calls these kinds of people "grotesque," attributing their behavior to the "truths" they live by (25).

In his introduction to Winesburg Ohio, Malcolm Cowley defines grotesqueness as "moments" into which the person pours a lifetime (8), and in a study of grotesqueness in Winesburg Ohio, Robert Dunne interprets Anderson's "truths" as "ruts" (181). These critics agree that Winesburg's conflicts occur from the characters' attachment to the past. However, I did not intend for the manuscript I present here to be a revival of Anderson's Winesburg. In fact, I do not like the book much. While Anderson's novel is held together by a central character and a constant setting, my collection is diverse; the characters and settings are unrelated. However, the characters do possess attachments that keep their lives from going forward. Although Joe's flaw is primarily biological, he settles to it. In "Stateline," Jessie Sue's flaw is her inability to move forward. She clings to old friends, old dreams, unrealized goals. Roffy's flaw ("Alpo") is his

determination to act out his fantasies. Rather like idolizing comic book heroes, he wants to become the mercenary in the magazine he reads. These are not the tragic flaws of Macbeth or Hamlet, yet they cause disorder, as with the woman in "Seasons." Motivated by habit, she becomes disordered by her inability to accept change.

According to Dunne, a cure for grotesqueness exists (180). When the character makes a self-conscious decision to move beyond her frozen moment, she begins to resolve her disorder. As in real life, the characters in Pieces have a chance at the cure by making choices. Not all of them move forward, however. Roffy does not; he decides to pursue a criminal career. Meggie ("Prologue") does not, for in her move to throw out the past, she steps into someone else's past, which is the final irony of the story; she exchanges the naivete of childhood for adult values, and these decisions are a part of the manuscript's unity, too, for the characters are ordinary people making life-determining choices.

Unlike Anderson's Winesburg, in which one main character appears throughout the fiction, this collection presents various characters and settings. The manuscript also reveals the piece of each character's life that determined his grotesqueness. In addition, the characters represent ordinary people. I used the narrative voice that best told the story of the character's frozen moment and his degree of movement toward leaving the "Shadows of the

world" (Tennyson), and I intended ambiguity in order to provoke the reader's involvement in the fictions. I do not pretend to emulate Anderson; I do, however, like his treatment of the flawed personality and its ramification. I used his technique to produce pieces I hope touch the reader.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Colored Glass.....1

II. Alpo.....14

III. Prologue.....27

IV. Seasons.....46

V. The Stateline Incident.....57

Colored Glass

Joe woke up as the sun's first rays sifted through the bamboo shades on his east window. The shades had been there when Joe moved into the house. He did not have any others to hang in their place, and they served their purpose as well as the flat sheets, white with big pink flowers, purchased at the Red Caboose thrift shop, that covered the stuffing, spilling from tears in his couch and recliner.

Joe swung his stumpy legs over the side of the bed and searched the bare wood floor for his house slippers. His right big toe touched one of the slippers under the bed, and with his foot, he swept both slippers into the open and stepped into them. He took a quick look around the room, making sure everything was just as he left it. It was a precaution he took every morning. He did not have a reason; he just liked to know everything was the same as he left it the night before.

The room was small and did not have anything to clutter it, only a night stand which supported two bookends filled with children's books and a twin-sized bed. Joe liked to look at the pictures in the books before he fell asleep. He did not know how to read. He shuffled into the bathroom and began his daily routine.

Joe's life had always been like this. He could not imagine it any other way. His morning ritual began when he was fourteen. He rose early so he could be at work on

time. He was hired at the foundry because his daddy worked there all his life and developed a dependable reputation that followed Joe. Work started at 7 o'clock and stopped at 4 with an hour lunch break. If a worker were late, he must have a supervisor sign his time card before he could clock in. Joe was never late. Although Joe retired ten years ago, the routine changed little. He still rose early. He still ate lunch at 12 noon.

Joe pulled his denim overalls over a white undershirt and bent at the knees to roll the bottoms into wide cuffs. He stuck his small feet into a pair of high-top tennis shoes and fumbled with the laces. Joe was never taught to tie his shoes in the traditional way, but his method sufficed. He made two loops and tied them into knots instead of the complicated looping around and pulling through most people did.

He went out the back door to feed the dog. Barney was a stray found downtown one day and made Joe's backyard his home. For this reason, Joe never considered Barney his dog, but took care of him just the same. Barney was not any special breed. If anyone asked Joe what kind of dog Barney was, Joe replied, "Just a mutt."

Years of neglect had caused the dog's white coat to yellow. He had several scars on his face from fights, and his back legs were pigeon-toed, caused when his pelvic bone had been crushed by a careless driver. Barney would not eat packaged dog food, so Joe always fed him whatever was

left over from his own supper the night before. This morning it was a slice of pizza.

Joe went back into the shabby house to fix himself breakfast. He ate the same thing every morning that his mamma always gave him, corn flakes. He could not think of a reason to change his breakfast food. It could serve as supper; it didn't cost much, and he liked the way it tasted.

After breakfast, Joe set about sorting the aluminum cans he picked up the day before. He wandered around town in the evening with a plastic trash bag searching ditches and dumpsters for soda and beer cans. Joe found the best place to pick up cans was on a country road three miles west of town. This was the road where the high school kids met after dark to drink beer and play loud music. Joe could tell from the beer cans, tossed carelessly in the ditches or in the middle of the road, which day of the week it was; there were always more on Saturdays and Sundays. The ones in the middle of the road were the kind Joe liked best because they had already been crushed by cars' tires.

Joe began a pile on his right for the cans that had already been crushed, a pile on the left for the ones that needed to be crushed. Next, he crushed those on his left by carefully placing his foot on the top of an upright can and then bending to tap the middle of both sides of the can with his index fingers. The can would instantly crumple, as though it had been inflated with air and he had stuck a

pin through it. The man at the recycling center taught him this trick, and it always amazed Joe to see the can collapse so easily.

When he finished sorting cans, it was time for his morning walk to town for his daily Hershey's. The Hershey's bar was another tradition started by his mamma when he was a boy. They walked to the grocery market together and bought two Hershey's, one for her and one for him. They never ate them until they were home, and sometimes in the summer they had to put them in the icebox until they became hard again. Otherwise they would have to lick the chocolate off the shiny white paper.

Barney always walked to town with Joe. He never ran ahead of him or lagged too far behind. Instead, he walked behind Joe, just far enough to keep from getting struck on the head by Joe's foot. The picture they made was familiar to the townspeople. Most called him Little Joe because he was so short. Joe had a pretty quick pace for a man his size and age. In fact, Barney had to do a half-trot to keep up with him, and one small girl referred to him as "little old man who walks fast."

The route Joe took to town every morning never changed. He walked straight down the sidewalk in front of his house to the corner where a red-bricked church sat. Joe liked this church more than any of the others in town because of the colored glass windows. He especially liked the one with the lady and her baby. The reds and blues and

yellow sparkled with a brilliance Joe had never seen anywhere else, except for the marbles his daddy used to bring home from the five and dime on his birthday. He kept the marbles in a cigar box, stowed on the top shelf of his closet so no one could get them. From time to time, he pulled the box from the shelf and rattled it. Sometimes, he poured them out so he could look at them or roll them across the floor, and on his birthdays, he added two more he bought at the five and dime.

At the corner Joe made a sharp, ninety-degree right turn and continued to walk in a straight line down the sidewalk. His route took him past the town's grain elevator, where Mr. Fox sat in the front window every morning at 9 o'clock to watch Joe walk by. As soon as Mr. Fox spotted Joe, he looked at his watch and said, "Yep, Joe's right on time." Then Mr. Fox watched Joe until he reached the railroad tracks and made another sharp, ninety-degree right turn. As Joe walked down the tracks, he stooped to pick up rocks or pennies or other things that caught his eye, and stuff them into his pocket. Mr. Fox always wondered what Joe could possibly find on the tracks worth keeping. He had walked the rails himself, going to and from the post office, and never found anything of interest.

Once Joe was at the grocery market, Barney sat outside the doors while Joe went to the candy rack, picked up a Hershey's, and paid. Then Joe and Barney started their

journey home; their route did not change much from the trip to the store. Mr. Fox sat, waiting for Joe's return. "Sure 'nough, Joe's on his way back."

Joe made his ninety-degree turns and Barney followed behind at just the right distance. As soon as Joe made it back to his house, he filled Barney's bowl with water and poured himself a tall glass of milk. They sat on the front porch, Barney drinking his water, Joe sipping his milk and eating his Hershey's. Joe ate the bar as though it would be the last one he would ever taste, taking pains to break the Hershey's at each section and lay it on the wrapper. Next, he broke each section in half and laid the pieces on the paper so they were in the original shape of the candy bar. Carefully picking up each piece, Joe ate them one at a time, just as he had since he was a boy.

A mid-morning nap always followed for both Barney and Joe. Of course, Joe had not always taken a nap in the middle of the morning, but since he retired he found he could not make it through the day without lying down for a nap, and since he could not think of anything better to do at mid-morning, the nap became a habit.

Joe spent his afternoons sweeping his rooms or looking at the pictures in his books until time for his afternoon trip to the grocery market, which was just like the morning trip, except he bought milk and bread or whatever he needed instead of the Hershey's bar. Mr. Fox was not sitting in the office window of the grain elevator, waiting

for Joe to walk by; Mr. Fox did not work in the afternoon, because another man took his place, and this man did not pay much attention to Joe. He had usually dozed off by the time Joe walked by.

During harvest, the elevator owners hired extra help. Teenage boys were given jobs on the elevator floor, and the little girl who called Joe "little old man who walks fast" became old enough to operate the scales used to weigh the trucks as they came in loaded with wheat. Since the elevator was not busy in the mornings, the girl watched for Joe along with Mr. Fox, and she began noticing him in the afternoons, too.

"Mr. Fox," she would say, "here comes the little old man."

Mr. Fox would look at his watch and say, "Yep, right on time."

Before long, the girl and Mr. Fox shared stories about Joe. "I saw him dragging his sack full of cans down the street yesterday," she told Mr. Fox. "He makes those sharp, precise little turns, even when he's carrying that sack full of cans."

"He never misses a step, not even for a puddle when it rains."

And then they would laugh. They watched for Joe each day, knowing he would walk past at nine o'clock on the dot, betting one another he would not when it rained, wishing he

would stay home and keep dry. But rain or shine, Joe came rushing along, wearing his overalls rolled up at the bottom, his dilapidated felt hat pulled well down over his ears.

One day the boys who guided the wheat into the pits when the farmers dumped their loads from the backs of their trucks propped their scoop shovels by the building and watched Joe as he walked along the railroad track. A boy in a faded red shirt and cut-off jeans reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change. He quickly separated the larger coins from the pennies and put the nickels and dimes back in his jeans pocket. "Hey, fellas, watch this."

He threw the pennies at Joe. "Looky there, I don't think he can talk. Some of 'em hit him right on the head, and he never said nothing. Just kept on walking."

"Prob'ly retarded," answered a boy in a blue, sleeveless shirt, and they all snickered.

At first, Joe did not know what to do when the pennies came flying at him. He was not sure where they came from, and when he heard the boys laughing and calling out "Dummy, hey! Hey, dummy!" he kept walking because his mamma told him to ignore bad boys; she did not want any trouble. He had been called names before, when he was a little boy. Boys would stand in the street in front of his house and yell at him if he were outside. Sometimes, they threw rocks at him. His father yelled back, telling the boys to

"beat it or he would tan their hides." No one called Joe names or threw things at him after he began working. He had nearly forgotten how bad the teasing made him feel.

The dog yelped when one of the pennies struck him, and he turned and barked at the boys, who were still yelling and laughing, but he soon gave up the barking to follow Joe. At the grocery store, Joe bought his Hershey's and started home. But he took a different way. He sat on the porch and ate the chocolate pieces, one by one, and decided not to go for his afternoon groceries.

The next day was Joe's birthday. He took the cigar box full of marbles from its shelf and poured the contents on the bed. He picked up each one and rolled it in his hand, feeling the cool, round, smoothness. He liked marbles. He could hold several at a time. He could rattle them against each other or roll them, one at a time, across the floor, or he could roll them across the top of his kitchen table, making a game of seeing how hard to shove them without causing them to fall off the opposite edge, and sometimes he put them in his mouth, feeling the smoothness with his tongue. He held the marbles to the sunlight coming through the bamboo shades of his little room and tried to look through them. He loved the colors, the reds and blues and yellows and greens.

The "shooters," his father called them, were larger than the others, and he kept those in little white sacks with drawstrings that had held his father's tobacco, and

one of the sacks held a special marble, all frosty except for the image of a dog. His father found it, he could not remember where, and told him it was valuable. Some of the marbles were swirls of colors, like ribbons, twisting and blowing in the wind. Others were just one color, all purple or all green or red, and he had some that had been all one color, but now they were broken to bits, like ice crystals on the inside, yet smooth on the outside. His mamma cracked them for him. Each time he looked at the cracked marbles, he remembered sitting on a chair in the kitchen, watching Mama boil the marbles and then put them in the freezer. He had been amazed at the change in the marbles when they came from the freezer and had not understood. They were his favorite because his mama made them.

Joe liked the cat's-eyes least. They were too real, too liquid, with the slit of color floating in them, and he did not even want to hold them in his hand. But when he did, they felt just like all his other marbles. Still, he did not really like them, even after his father said cats could see better than other animals.

Once, Joe put them over his own eyes, pretending he could see better, see in the dark, see everything. He pretended he could read the words that went with the pictures in his books. After that, he liked the cat's-eyes better, but he always took the cracked ones from the box first. He held each one, fondled it, looked through it,

and placed it carefully until he had a little hoard of cracked marbles separate from the rest. Then he did the same with the colored ones and the swirled ones, the ones completely clear except for a bubble in the middle, until none were left in the box but the cat's-eyes. When they were all organized into piles by color and kind, he gazed at them. He loved marbles, the colors, the feel, the usefulness of them. He had never played the game.

Finally, Joe counted the marbles and carefully put them back in the cigar box. Then he tucked the box under his arm. He had never taken his marbles out of the house. He kept them, every one, in the cigar box on the shelf in his closet, since the day his daddy first started giving them to him. But the day of his birthday, the day after the boys at the elevator called him names, Joe took the box with him to town. He took the same route he had always taken. As usual, Barney trotted behind. When Joe got to the elevator, he saw the cluster of boys, leaning on shovels, waiting for the trucks to come with their loads of wheat. Mr. Fox and the girl watched Joe come. "Right on time," Mr. Fox said.

Joe made his sharp, ninety-degree turn and started down the railroad track toward the grocery store. Beside the group of boys, he made another sharp turn and walked to where they stood, laughing, watching him come. As Joe neared, the jeering stopped. Some of the boys stepped back, behind the others, "What's he want? What's he gonna

do?"

The boy in the red shirt said, "I'm not scared a' him."

Mr. Fox and the girl watched from the sliding window where the girl worked, logging bushels for the farmers who sold their wheat to the elevator. They told each other how strange it was, Joe's break in routine, and Mr. Fox moved to the door to be ready in case he was needed, for he had seen, and frowned, when the boy threw pennies at Joe.

Joe squatted in front of the group of boys. He took the cigar box from under his arm and slowly lifted the lid. Inside, the marbles glittered and shone when struck by the sun. Joe lifted the marbles, one at a time, and set them in precise, straight rows in front of the boys. As he placed them, he studied the colors of each one. He opened the tobacco sacks and laid the shooters down. He came to the special one, the frosty one, and held it a minute longer than he held the rest, then placed it in front of all the rows. Then he closed the box, tucked it under his arm, and walked quickly away, leaving the marbles, like soldiers, in front of the boys. He did not look back.

Joe left Barney outside the grocery store. He came out with two Hershey's. He put the cigar box on the sidewalk while he opened one and laid it in front of Barney. He watched Barney lick the bar, scoop it into his mouth, gulp it down without chewing. He opened the other,

stuffed the cigar box between the front of his overalls and his white undershirt, and began eating the little chocolate squares, one at a time, as he walked. He continued through town to the five and dime. Once inside, Joe quickly walked to the toy section and decided on two marbles, one solid blue and one green cat's-eye. After paying, he put the marbles in his cigar box and started home. He could hear the marbles, rolling in the nearly empty box all the way home.

Joe sat on his porch and rolled the two marbles back and forth in his hands. He put them on the gray boards of the porch and flicked them with his third finger, watching them roll. He decided he still liked the solid ones better; they reminded him of the lady in the colored glass of the church. Later, he put the marbles back in the cigar box and placed it on the closet shelf.

After his usual afternoon nap, he and Barney made their second trip to the grocery store. Mr. Fox and the girl watched him make his sharp, right turns.

Alpo

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Almslinger and their only child were planning a two-week vacation at their mountain cabin. The boy was frail, too frail to attend a regular school, so was schooled at home by a highly paid tutor. The tutor, however, was more inclined in affection toward Mrs. Almslinger than to Jonathan, a fact recently come to Mr. Almslinger's attention. The tutor had been fired after being found naked in Mrs. Almslinger's bed, along with Mrs. Almslinger. Mrs. Almslinger was placed on probation, a search for a new tutor under way. Mr. Almslinger had placed an ad.

The depth of Mr. Almslinger's wrath was felt by means of a letter delivered to the tutor through Mr. Almslinger's attorney, which categorically stated that Mr. Almslinger would personally see that the tutor should never again find work in the private sector. Furthermore, Mr. Almslinger did not intend to go to the mountains with his wife and child. He made plans instead to have a company crisis at the last moment that would prevent his attendance at the cabin.

In the meantime, Mr. Almslinger went to work as usual, stopping first at a coffee shop near the building which housed his glass enclosed office. The place was not a bonafide restaurant, nor was it a fast food service, just a convenience serving black bean soup, red chili, and oyster crackers to a lunch crowd on a tight schedule. More

importantly, a gin and tonic could be had at ten o'clock coffee break. Almslinger took a booth at the back and waited for Li Har Yang to bring his coffee.

Li Har expected very little from life, having arrived in the U.S. homeless and orphaned with a rag sack and hardship experience. She served black coffee to Almslinger, Monday through Friday, at eight-fifteen. Almslinger sipped the coffee, no refill, until it was nasty cold. Legs crossed, he stirred the remains and read the latest issue of Intrepid Encounters. Except for his initial order the day Li Har began the job, they exchanged no more than a nod. She was quite surprised when Mr. Almslinger said, "Miss," and detained her as she poured his ritual coffee.

She would have been more surprised had she known how little Almslinger cared for the boy he asked her to take care of for a few days. He explained the boy was without a tutor and needed companionship until a suitable replacement could be found. He did not consider her a perfect stranger, since she had been serving him coffee every Monday through Friday for two years, and his intuition led him to believe she possessed characteristics of responsibility suitable to that required of someone entrusted with his son's well-being. It would not be practical to employ a tutor just when his wife was going on vacation, so, if she would meet the boy in the lobby of the building where he worked and take him around to the zoo or

the park or wherever he wanted to go, and bring him back again, she would receive generous compensation for a few days' work.

Li Har wanted to know how much, and Mr. Almslinger confessed he did not know the going wage for nannies. Li Har knew, however, and they struck a bargain straight away. She agreed to meet the boy at ten o'clock the following day and return him at four. It was her day off, anyway. She arranged to trade shifts with another waitress after that and congratulated herself on her good luck.

At the Almslinger home, things moved as scheduled. Mr. Almslinger advised his wife of the hiring of a nanny. He told her an important client would need his attention, preventing him from joining her at the cabin. Nevertheless, the vacation would proceed as scheduled, three days in the future. While they were gone, he would do his utmost to secure a new tutor. He magnanimously offered to obliterate all events pertaining to the old tutor from his mind and henceforth would never give the unfortunate man another thought. Mrs. Almslinger was quite relieved. The tutor, without income, was staying at the Almslinger cabin.

Several miles south of the city in which Almslinger made plans, Roffy Jones thumbed a copy of Intrepid Encounters. He was two years out of high school and without a job. He had always been a fanciful boy and did

not want a customary nine to five job. He wanted something daring, something that would make him famous and rich. Mostly rich. He was thinking about becoming a bank robber. He had put a bandanna over his face and waved a fake gun at one of the two tellers in the bank where his mother kept a checking account. He had done it to see if he had the nerve, really. The teller, a woman he had known all his life, recognized him. She gave him the money because of the gun. It wasn't much, just enough to put a tank of gas in his car and rent a motel room in which to hide, but Roffy gained some valuable information from his hands-on experience. More, he thought, than he had learned in school; he had the nerve to do it, but he must plan more.

He had not thought about what to do afterward. He had gone home. From the time the teller gave him the money until he heard sirens, he wondered what he should do with the money. He would ask his mother, he thought, when she came home after work. But sirens sounded close to his home. He ran. He should have gassed up beforehand. That was another thing he had learned. He had to stop, not five miles from home, to buy gas. He pulled in at a self-serve and filled the tank. The station attendant had a scanner, and Roffy's name and description squawked over the air as he paid.

He did not know the roads to anywhere. He had to stay on the highway. Luckily, he was close to a town when he

ran out of gas, so he hitched and rented a room. He'd been in the motel two days, eating at the attached cafe. He was bound to be recognized soon, but he did not know what to do next. He was nearly out of money. If he was going to be a serious bank robber, he thought, he would have to find ones with more money.

The magazine Roffy purchased from a rack in the motel lobby carried ads. Most read: **Commando for Hire**. One ad, however, said **Commando Wanted** and gave a telephone number, so he called. The man on the other end wanted a boy kidnapped, and he was paying top-dollar. Roffy said he was more into bank robbing, but would take the job. It was close to the town where he was hiding. He would hitch to the city, but he didn't know how long it would take; he hadn't done much hitching. The man told Roffy to call when he arrived and ask for Alpo.

Roffy caught a ride right away and was in the city an hour later. He found a telephone booth and called his contact. Alpo gave Roffy an address; it was an empty apartment, and Roffy could use it as his headquarters. The boy he wanted kidnapped was the son of his business partner, who was divorced and had custody of the child. The boy would meet his mother in the lobby of an office building so they could start their vacation. He gave Roffy directions and told him to grab the boy just before his mother arrived, hide him in the apartment, and call to let him know when it was done.

Roffy took a taxi to the address Alpo had given him, a near-to-condemned brownstone. The apartment was two rooms in the basement and smelled of smoke and the food from everyone else's cooking. One room was furnished with a sagging, green sofa, a card table with two chairs, and a bed. The kitchen had a refrigerator that clanked when the compressor came on, and a hot plate. Roffy was excited. He had a job - a daring job - that would make him rich. He didn't know how rich, though, so he decided to call Alpo and ask how much "top-dollar" was. He remembered seeing a pay phone on the corner. When Alpo answered, Roffy asked about the money.

"A hundred thousand," Alpo said.

And Roffy could keep it all; it wasn't the money Alpo wanted. The business was going badly because the partner spent too little time working. He would not sell to Alpo, which was the fair thing to do, since he didn't want to work, but he would have to in order to raise the money to ransom his son. Roffy hung-up and started for the apartment. It was incredible, all that money. He would be famous, in the papers.

Back in the apartment, Roffy remembered he did not have a car, and he would need one for the kidnapping. He went to the pay phone and dialed Alpo. Alpo would provide the car, a yellow Chevy disguised as a taxi. It would be parked at the curb, keys in the ignition, in front of the building where the kidnapping would take place, and at the right moment, Roffy could grab the boy and hustle him into

the car. The police would never be notified; it would be bad publicity for the company. Roffy was disappointed. The police would not know, which meant the newspapers and television reporters would not know, so he wouldn't be famous after all. But he would be rich, and that would be almost as good. He went to the apartment satisfied.

Li Har was punctual, but Jonathan and Almslinger were waiting when she arrived at the appointed time. The boy was small, skinny, Li Har thought. Skinny like the boys who came with her as refugees, and he had the same watchful expression, as if he were expecting something dreadful to happen any moment. Yet, he wasn't shy. As soon as Almslinger left he began to chatter.

"So you're Li Har," he said. "My names's Jonathan. I guess you know that already." He skipped a few steps as they walked and ran ahead of Li Har so she had to pick up her pace and catch him by the hand in order to keep him from outdistancing her.

They bought a hot dog from a street vendor, and Li Har asked, "What would you like to do now?"

"My father said I could do anything I wanted."

"That's right."

"I want to spend the whole day watching movies. Can we do that? The whole day, I mean. Just one movie after another. As many as we can see."

At the end of the day, with plots and characters so

jumbled in her mind she couldn't remember any of the movies clearly, Li Har returned the boy to his father. The next day Li Har sat on the bench by the third teller until she saw Jonathan approach. His father was not with him, and she hurried toward him. He saw Li Har and did a little skip and jump as he presented himself in front of her.

"My father was busy with a customer," he said, "so he told me to come by myself. Can we do movies again?"

"Oh, Jonathan. Don't you want to go to the zoo? Or the park and go on the rides?"

"Not really," Jonathan said as they started toward the revolving glass door. "I hardly ever get to go to the movies."

Li Har resigned herself to another day of dark movie houses, popcorn, and dill pickles. They stepped into a path of sunlight that streamed through the glass door and formed itself into a pool on the tile floor, and pushed through the revolving door.

Roffy saw the boy and the woman leave the building. He jumped from the yellow Chevy and grabbed the boy, who did not resist. But the woman screamed and hung on to the boy, and Roffy pulled on his arm until he became afraid he would hurt him. He looked around to see if they were being noticed. A few people stared, but no one intervened. Roffy went behind the woman and shoved, and the boy, almost voluntarily, entered the car, leading the woman, still attached to him. Roffy sped to the apartment, afraid

someone could hear the screams. He wished he had the toy gun he had used for the robbery. If he waved it at her, she would shut up.

Jonathan rescued him. "Be quiet, Li Har. He probably has a gun. He'll probably shoot us if we don't let him kidnap us."

After that, getting them in the apartment was easy. Roffy showed the way, and they stood quietly while he unlocked the door. Inside, they stared at the dirty, worn-out furniture. "I've got to pee," Jonathan said.

Roffy showed Jonathan the bathroom and told Li Har he had to make a phone call. He ran to the corner. When Alpo answered, Roffy told him he had the boy, but he'd had to take the mother, too. Alpo cussed, then said it would be all right because she could help them. Alpo himself would make the ransom note and deliver it. Jonathan's father would be told to put the money in a briefcase, leave it in a locker at the Central Street Station, and go directly to Earl's Diner on 72nd. At the diner, he would go to the third booth, order coffee, and lay the key on the table when he left. Jonathan's mother could get the key. That way Roffy would not be seen at the diner. She could go after the money at Central Street Station, too.

"Tell her you'll let them both go as soon as you get the money."

Events unfolded as planned until the three arrived at Central Street Station. The third booth at Ed's Diner

could be viewed from the street, although the sooty window prevented much detail, and a man was already sipping coffee when Roffy arrived. The man wore a no-color topcoat and a felt hat, placed toward the front of his head, and as soon as he walked away, Roffy sent Li Har to get the key.

Jonathan watched Li Har go into the diner. During the time he had known her, he had wished she were his mother, and when Roffy assumed she was, Jonathan did not tell him differently. While Roffy was gone, using the phone, Jonathan warned Li Har, telling her to fall in with the deception because Roffy was less likely to hurt her if he thought he could get money for her, too.

When they arrived at Central Street Station, Jonathan began to cry. He wanted to go inside with Li Har. "You aren't going," Roffy informed him, "you're my insurance she'll come back." Jonathan continued to whimper. "Shut up, or I'll strangle you." Roffy was getting tougher.

"You won't," Jonathan said through his sobs. "You'd have to strangle Li...my mother, too, and we'd fight you, wouldn't we, Mother?" Li Har nodded.

Roffy made a quick decision. "Okay, we'll all go."

Inside the station, the three looked for the locker number inscribed on the key. Spotting the right one, Roffy steered the other two toward it, watching for anyone who might be watching him. Li Har took the key from her pocket, where she'd placed it after leaving the diner. She tried it, but had trouble with the lock. She turned the

key upside down, but before she could try it again, she dropped it on the floor. Roffy stooped to pick it up. Jonathan was faster; he scooped the key from the floor and ran headlong down the hall. Roffy started after him, dragging Li Har. She could not keep up, and Jonathan had the advantage of being able to dart through the crowd unimpeded. Roffy would have let Li Har go, but thought it better to retain at least one hostage. Surely the boy would trade the key for his mother.

Giving up the chase, Roffy leaned on a wall, catching his breath. He waited for Jonathan to come back, and when he did not, he took Li Har back to the car. He locked her in the apartment and went to the corner phone to tell Alpo what had happened.

"Just let her go," Alpo said. "She's not his mother, anyway. She was hired to look after the boy."

Roffy went back to the apartment. He put Li Har in the Chevy and asked her where she wanted to go. She told him to take her back to the street where he'd found her. He stopped the car in front of the revolving door and watched her walk away down the sidewalk. It was sad, he thought, like a movie ending, when the girl leaves the boy, except he hadn't been in love with her, didn't even know her name. He found a pay phone and called Alpo. He didn't know what to do next. Alpo didn't answer, so he called his mother, who told him to come home. Roffy headed away from the city. At least he still had a car, even if it did look

like a taxi. If he didn't go home, he thought, he'd try another bank. They were easier.

A week later, Almslinger sat in his usual place, waiting for Li Har to bring his black coffee. As she poured, he said, "I want the money, Li Har."

"I don't know where it is," she said. "I told you already. I've told you every day since it happened. I thought he was your son. All along, I thought he was your son; you said he was."

"And I told you he was a street kid I hired. He was supposed to bring me the key. You know where he is or where the key is, and I want it."

But Li Har did not know, she insisted, and if he continued to question her, bother her, she would go to the police. "Would you like for the police to know you stole your company's money?"

Almslinger stormed out of the coffee shop. By bits and degrees, he forced himself to abandon his plans to divorce his wife and hide his money from her. Instead, he sent his son to public school, worked harder to make up what he lost, and devised a plan to frame the tutor, still living in the mountain cabin, for the theft of his money.

A year later, a messenger delivered a brown envelope with Li Har's name scrawled in red ink to the coffee shop. She had not been expecting anything. She thrust the envelope into her locker until after her shift. At the end

of the day, she carried the envelope to her apartment, tore it open, and shook out the contents. She gasped as fifty one-thousand dollar bills spilled onto her bed. Among the scattered bills lay a yellow piece of paper. As Li Har read the uneven red-inked print, her eyes grew large and she placed her fingertips over her mouth.

Reaching the end of the message, she chuckled, rubbed two of the thousand dollar bills together, and began pulling the others into a pile in front of her. The chuckle shifted to a full, but tinkling laugh. The yellow paper fluttered to the floor. I used the key, it said. My real name is Eddie. I wish you were my mother.

Prologue

Martha pushed open the faded and water stained flaps of white muslin serving as curtains for the only window in the kitchen of the two-room house and watched her children, unencumbered with worries, play tag on the sunny hillside. She wished again for the small produce market they owned before the 1907 panic. Her sister, Mary Francis, living in close-by Philadelphia then, had been luckier. Her husband, a mine owner, lost everything in the panic also, but he had eyed the west, the fertile Oklahoma plains. And while farmers wore themselves and their wives out, Wes used his knowledge of the underground, locating black pools of oil underneath the rich topsoil. Martha envied her childless sister as she watched her own at play, and tightened her fist around a crumpled letter in her apron pocket.

She helped George load the cart in the early morning hours, picking the dew-covered vegetables, handing them to one or the other of their four children to be laid carefully in the home-made, oversized wheelbarrow he used to market their goods. She gave him his lunch, a butter and cucumber sandwich, and told him to eat from the cart also, knowing he would not for fear he would consume something a customer wanted. For the rest of the day she went about her routine chores: washing, hoeing, mending, tending children, but her thoughts out-distanced her husband. They traveled, backtracked, hovered at his side, studied the past and the future.

Two hours after George left their tiny plot outside Milltowne, she reckoned he was on his accustomed corner in Philadelphia, showing his vegetables. She imagined the customers, the old, grey-haired women, stingy, smelling and pressing each tomato, cabbage, carrot, finding fault, offering less money; housekeepers, shoving bags to be filled at him while they filled their own, paying for all with employers' money; young housewives, carefully, timidly selecting, reckoning cost against budget as they chose.

She described to herself the wealthy women who came, bringing maids to tote their selections, and the curly-haired little girl, sent by her mama to buy turnips. Occasionally, she let her hand stray to the apron pocket and the letter from Mary Francis, three months old, crumpled and thrust out of sight until two days ago. Her mouth formed a thin, grim line. She had not intended to answer. But now, the barrow returning only half-empty for more than a month, she was having second thoughts.

She had not shown George the letter. Once three boys knocked him down and robbed both him and the cart. He would have given them the vegetables, had they asked. He knew tough times. He knew about families and aching stomachs, and he could understand filching vegetables, but to take the money that fed his children was unforgivable, so he made a complaint to the police. But the theft had been swift, the boys coming from nowhere, leaving George muddled and frantic; he couldn't describe the boys, and the

needed relief from tedious, boring days, neglect from a reckless, flamboyant husband, pain of constant illnesses. She would send money again, but in return, she wanted a child.

An hour before sunset, Martha watched her husband plod up the dirt path, pushing the barrow, his slow, strained steps telling her it was half-full again. He stopped the barrow close to the house, shoved a rock behind a rear wheel, called to the children to unload the produce. Some of it would be their supper and some would be sealed in jars against the winter. They had more than enough now. Martha hoped the vegetables she put up could be traded for flour and sugar and shoes. In the house, soap and towels were ready by the kitchen sink, and she pumped water over George's hands.

Gathering the vegetables from her children's arms, she laid them in the sink to catch the last of the water from the spout. The boys, in a hurry to make the most of what daylight was left, returned to the yard, but the girl, Meggie, nuzzled her father until he sat and took her on his knee. She threw both arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. He brushed the dark, shiny hair away from his face in order to speak.

"How's my girl," he asked, "Did you help your mother today?"

"I'm fine, Papa, and I helped Mama hoe, and I hung the boys' shirts on the fence after she washed 'em. Why don't

they hang their own shirts to dry is what I want to know?"

"Well now," he answered, "that's a fine question. What do you say, Mother?"

"I say get on outdoors while there's still light, Meggie, but listen for me to call when I'm ready for you to set the table for supper." Reluctantly, the child climbed from his lap. At the door, she looked back at her father and flashed him a smile.

"Ain't you awful hard on her?" he asked when she was gone.

Instead of answering, Martha clamped her teeth together and turned her attention to the vegetables in the sink. She wiped a tear with the back of her hand and began peeling turnips, placing them in a fire-blackened pot of boiling water. She rinsed the greens and placed them in a bowl. Finally, she reached in her apron pocket. She smoothed the letter and laid it on the worn table, taking up the coins he'd laid there.

"Letter from Mary Francis," she said. "Wants payment for the loans. Be here tomorrow for it."

"How're we going to pay her back? She knows we ain't got no money."

"Money ain't what she wants. Read it. Oh, she don't say she wants payment, but that's what it is, all right. Payment for the money she's given us and for what we'll be wanting, 'ease from worries,' she calls it, but it's payment just the same. Wants us to let her have Meggie."

"Why sure, Meggie can go. Be a nice visit. Nice of 'em to ask. She'll have the time of her life in that big house of theirs. But she ought to ask 'em all. That's only fair. Ought to take 'em all for a visit. House is plenty big enough, all those bedrooms she says she has, no children of her own - -"

"It's no visit she's talking about. She wants Meggie for good, to be her child."

"Why, you don't mean it. She don't mean it. She didn't say so, did she?"

She shoved the letter closer to his face. "Read it."

He raised the letter, moved it closer, then farther, until he found his reading distance and read, haltingly, the words she knew almost by heart. While he read, she watched her children through the window and listened to George murmur the words. The boys threw a knife into a circle scratched in the ground. Meggie sat under a tree, talking to a pretty wooden doll. Its blue sleepy-eyes fascinated Meggie, and she tipped the doll, watching them open and close. She manipulated the eyes with her index finger, pushing and pulling on the long, stiff, black eyelashes. The doll had come in the afternoon mail. Martha opened and shut her hands, making, releasing fists while he read. She concentrated on the garden soil in the wrinkles of her knuckles and worried that it never washed out no matter how much laundry, dish washing, cleaning she did.

Meggie was her favorite, if she had one. Perhaps because she was the youngest or because she was the only girl, perhaps because she was an anchor in a house full of men. Martha looked forward to the day Meggie would know the tiresome woman-life, sharing the secrets and intrusions, the necessary but unsolvable complaints. She was partial to Meggie's green eyes, like those of her own mother, and Meggie's dark, slightly curling hair, full of shine, as her own had been. When she looked at Meggie, she thought of the girl in the Snow White story, and she'd always believed, since the day Meggie had been born, that some woman somewhere had borne a Prince Charming for Meggie. George finished the letter and looked up. "She says she wants Meggie to come live with them a while. Just live with them, that's all. That don't mean for good, like you said. What could it hurt?"

"Huh!" She faced George. "See where it says when she's sixteen, they'll introduce her into society like they do in New York? How long a visit you think this'll be? And look what it says about school, how they'll get her the best, and how they'll take her to England and France, and all that. How long you think that'll take?"

"Well, a while, I guess, but that's still not for good. They ain't having Meggie for good. She can come back any time; says so in the letter, right here," he pointed to the words. "We'd bring Meggie to see you."

"Yes, to see us."

He moved to the window and placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Look at her out there, playing with that doll Francis sent. We can't give her up for good. If you think that's what they want, then she can't go. You decide."

"We both know. If we let her go, she'll have a chance. Not just shoes and dresses, she'll meet people. She could become something. I don't know what, something." Martha took a deep breath. "She'll find a man out there, a fine, educated man with manners. And money," she rushed on, "and she won't have to grub to stay alive."

She saw the cancer thicken, as she knew it would, and hung her head. She checked the boiling kettle. "I've thought it out. Ever since the letter came, I studied on it. The boys'd have a chance, too."

"How's that?"

"We'd have more to spare for them. They could stay in school instead of going to the factories."

Meggie ran in the house, carrying the doll by one arm. "She's so pretty, Papa."

"Yes," he said, taking the doll from her. "What do you call her?"

She smiled. "I haven't picked yet."

Martha interrupted. "I said I'd call, Meggie. I'm not ready yet."

"Doesn't matter, she can sit with me until you are ready." He pulled Meggie to his lap, and she showed him the eyes, urging him to tilt the doll so it slept. Martha

turned her back on the glue and sawdust body with the beautiful, see-nothing, blue eyes.

Days later Meggie clutched a stained rag doll under her arm and watched the dust that meant a car was coming up the road. She knew why Aunt Francis was coming; her mother told her, explained it was her chance. Martha stood nearby, shading her eyes with one hand, watching also. The boys had been told to pull weeds from the truck garden. The car barely came to a stop before the door opened and a large, noisy man jumped out.

"There's our girl!"

He swung Meggie off the ground and over his head, depositing her on the fender of the car; the metal was hot. She jumped down and watched the man pump Mama's hand and then wrap his arms around her and pull her against him in an enormous hug, all the while booming how good it was to see her, how well she looked, how well the farm looked, how nice the vegetables looked, until Meggie covered her ears.

She stood next to her mother and watched in silence as he called to the boys and gave them each a dollar bill. He swung Meggie off the ground again, this time holding her while he told her mother how "swell" it was of her to let Meggie be their little girl. Aunt Francis leaned on the open car door, pushing stray hair under her hat. Her face seemed too white behind the red lipstick she wore.

"Come on in," her mother said, "George's waiting."

Uncle Wes strode toward the door, and Aunt Francis clutched her purse and followed. The three boys seized the opportunity to inspect the car close up, peering inside, running their hands over the smooth metal, pushing one another in an effort to be first behind the wheel.

Inside, Uncle Wes pumped Papa's hand and squeezed her mother's arm. "We'll take good care of her. You don't have to worry. She won't ever want for a thing. We'll love her like she was our own, won't we Francis."

"Lord, yes."

"Well, I didn't pack her a suitcase; you said in the letter not to."

"Oh, no, no. She doesn't need to take a thing with her; we'll outfit her, top to toe.

"But I can take Jenny, can't I?" Meggie pulled the rag doll tighter.

"Sure you can," Uncle Wes said. "Didn't Aunt Francis send you a new one?" Meggie shrugged. She didn't want to say she didn't like it anymore.

"Never mind, we'll get a nice new one made out of rubber. You'll like it better." Meggie clutched her doll closer.

"I have some papers for you to sign, George. Don't amount to much, just says that since we're going to look after Meg she'll use our last name."

Meggie's father was surprised. "I don't see the reason in that."

Uncle Wes put Meggie on the floor and drew a leather folder from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. Aunt Francis smiled while he spread the papers on the table. "Just a formality. Just a formality. Say, what if we had to have a doctor? This'll just make things easier."

"I don't like it. Don't like it one bit. What about it, Martha?"

"The letter never said anything like that."

Uncle Wes put a hand in his trouser pocket and stroked the lapel of his blue suit with the other. "Well now, I thought everything was settled." He turned toward Aunt Francis. "It was supposed to be settled."

Meggie watched the adult faces. She wasn't sure what was happening. She didn't really want to go on the visit to Aunt Francis's house. Maybe she wouldn't have to. Aunt Francis began crying. "I don't know," she whined. "I've been sick. You know I've been sick, Wes. I'm sick sometimes, Martha. I forgot. Please let her go."

"I said she could go. I just don't know about signing things."

Uncle Wes rocked back and forth on his heels and frowned. "Well," he said. "Well, well, well. We can't hand over money without some kind of agreement on paper. Not good business."

He moved closer to Mary Francis and squeezed her hand. "Stop crying. How about this, Martha, six months. We'll make the paper good for six months. Will you sign if its

just for six months?"

Martha turned to her husband, questioning. He shrugged. "I guess," he said.

"Six months, then." Uncle Wes offered his hand to Meggie's father. They shook on the agreement, and Uncle Wes shoved the paper forward.

Martha watched as George signed, then Uncle Wes shifted the paper to her. When the signing was done, she turned to Meggie. "It's settled. You're going, Meggie."

"I can't go now. I want to be here when the puppies are born."

"Six months isn't long. They'll be here when you come back." She reached for a sack, placed on the table earlier. "Your top's in here and the horse Papa carved, and your whistle. I put some sandwiches in, too." She pushed Meggie toward the door.

"I don't want to go." Meggie's mouth puckered.

"Hush. I told you. It'll be better."

"Don't make me leave you, Papa."

"Hush, I say. Papa wants you to go, too. You'll be just fine. Stop your bawling." She pushed open the door and motioned for the boys. "Say goodbye to your sister."

Will came to the house. "Bye, Meg." He moved closer to Meggie and took her hand, stared up at his mother, searched her face. Briefly, she touched Meggie's cheek, stroked a lock of her hair, then shoved her toward the car. Her father stayed at the table, staring at the place

where the papers had lain.

Uncle Wes hustled Meggie to the car and into the back seat. The older boys stared, poked each other, said it wasn't fair as she climbed in. Meggie began sobbing again. "I don't want to go. I don't want to leave, Mama. I want Papa. Where's Papa?"

"You do what I say, Meg. Say your prayers. Keep clean. Do everything you're told."

Left behind, the brothers jammed their hands in their pockets and kicked the dirt as Uncle Wes backed the car around and headed it toward the road. On her knees, looking out the back, Meggie watched her mother wave and smile until out of sight. Will waved too, and when the cloud of dust behind the car faded away, she turned and wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

Uncle Wes patted Meggie's bare knee. "You're going to love your new home. You'll have your own room, a big one. And a pony to ride. We'll go places, too. Anywhere you want to go. We'll go to England and see the Queen if you want to. We'll go to New York and buy out the stores. Just name it. We'll do it."

"Are you really rich?" Meg asked, "Can we go to Philadelphia and buy all Papa's vegetables?"

"Why sure, but not today. First thing is to get you into new clothes. What do you say, Francis, think we better go shopping?"

"My head aches," she answered. "All this dust isn't

good for me." She reached inside her purse for her pills. "Stop crying, Meg. It'll make your head ache."

Meggie gulped back her tears and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Uncle Wes patted her leg again and asked her if she'd like to climb in his lap and drive the car.

"No. Thank you," she added. "Will would like to, I bet. I wish Will could come."

"Some other time. When you're settled, maybe. And call me Daddy Wes."

That autumn Meggie turned eleven, and Daddy Wes hired a circus to celebrate her birthday. It was a glorious day, gold and red and orange leaves on the trees; water splashing from a fountain; tables of cake, ice cream, and soda pop; a red and white striped tent for the jugglers and fire eaters and clowns. Parents shook Wes's hand, thanked him a "million." He kept Meggie by his side, holding her hand while he talked to his friends. Aunt Francis was in bed, pills on the night-stand beside her.

Meggie wished she were home, having a birthday supper with Mama and Papa and her brothers, crowded around the worn, wooden table. She missed them, but her six months was almost up. She kept a calendar and marked the days, but whenever she talked about going, Uncle Wes became angry and Aunt Francis cried.

She watched the other children run and shove and eat cake. A group of boys raced by. Uncle Wes laughed his loud, roaring approval and held tight to Meggie's hand. None of the boys and girls were Meggie's friends. Instead of going to school, she stayed home with a nanny and a tutor, and Aunt Francis never felt well enough to visit other ladies who might have children Meggie could play with.

She wanted to talk to the girls at her party and run over the lawn with them, but Uncle Wes held onto her hand when she tried to pull away. He sat next to her in the tent, laughing and pointing at the circus people, asking her every few minutes if she liked it. He wanted her birthday to be great, he said, the best ever, and she did like it, but after a while she was tired and wished everyone would go home. But Uncle Wes told everyone to stay, and the circus people performed again, and finally, close to dark, the parents took the children home.

At the end of the six months, Meggie asked about going home. She wanted to see the puppies her mother wrote about, and she missed Will. She waited until Daddy Wes came to tuck her in. As usual, he helped her out of her clothes and pulled a cotton nightgown over her head. "Aunt Francis isn't feeling well, again."

"I'm sorry," Meggie answered.

"Do you love me, Meggie?"

"I guess so."

"More than your Papa?"

"I don't know."

He fastened the last button of the gown, fingered the hem. "I'll tell Nanny to buy a silk one tomorrow. Would you like that?"

"I guess." She shivered.

"Cold?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"Would you like a new doll?"

"I have so many."

"A new dress, then. Anything you want, just tell me."

"I want to go home. The six months is up. Can I go home, now?"

"Not yet. Wait six more months. We'll talk about it then."

She remembered her mother's words, do every thing you're told, and she waited. Six months later, Meggie jumped from bed and marked the day off the calendar. She threw on her clothes, emptied drawers onto the bed, and folded things into suitcase-size bundles. She pulled clothes from the closet, laid them on the floor, and skipped down the hall to Aunt Francis's room. Aunt Francis was still in bed, but Meggie went in anyway. Aunt Francis always had breakfast brought to her on a tray. She pushed food around the plate, complaining that nothing tasted right. Uncle Wes went to his office an hour before.

"Can I take everything with me, Aunt Francis? It's all

laid out. I can hardly wait to see the puppies. They'll be so big by now."

"Why Meggie, what are you talking about?"

"The puppies. The ones that weren't born yet when I came to visit you."

"What about them?"

"They're big now. But I can still play with them, don't you think?"

"You can't have them here. You have a dog already."

"At home, I mean. It's the end of the six months."

"I really don't know what you're talking about, Meggie. I don't feel well today. Run along now."

"Today's the end of the six months. The second six months. It's over now. I can go home."

"You are not going home, Meg. Not today, not ever. Now run along. I'm tired." Aunt Francis reached for her pills and tinkled the little bell on the tray that summoned the maid.

Meggie still stood at the door. "But Aunt Francis, I stayed the six months the paper said, and six more like Uncle Wes wanted. Now I can go home."

"The paper did not say six months, Meg, now go to your room." Meggie didn't move. The room was silent until the maid, coming for the breakfast tray entered, and Aunt Francis began crying. "I'm ill. Meg has made me ill. Call my husband. Call my husband and take her to her room."

Meggie waited in her room for Uncle Wes. She knew when he entered the house. She heard the murmuring between him and the maid, and she heard him go into Aunt Francis's room. She heard him leave again, and she waited. Nanny called her to lunch, but she waited. She waited all day. Nanny sent a dinner tray, and Meggie waited and listened. Finally, she heard him coming to her room. She sat on the bed, piles of folded clothes still surrounding her. Uncle Wes opened the door, shut it behind him, and sat beside her.

"The paper says you'r mine, Meggie. We didn't write out about the six months in the paper. We talked about it, but we didn't write it out. Aunt Francis is right. You aren't going home."

"Does my mother know?"

"Yes."

"What about Papa, does he know? Does Papa say I have to stay?"

"Yes. Your papa knows. It's legal. Because of the paper, it's legal. You have to stay."

Meggie chose a pile of clothes, took them to a drawer, went back for another pile. "Then I want something."

"Anything you want. Just name it."

"Will. I want you to give me Will. Bring him here like you did me. Give me Will, and I won't talk about home again."

"All right. It's a deal."

"It's not a deal until its on paper. Put it on paper and sign. You and me. We'll sign. Then it's a deal." She turned her back and put another pile of clothes in the drawer, handed him a tablet and a pencil from the top of the clothes chest. "Put it on paper. You'll bring Will here."

Uncle Wes took the tablet and wrote. Finished, he signed his name and handed her the tablet. Meggie read, signed, and folded the paper. She put it in the drawer and added another pile of clothes. She lifted a dress from the floor and hung it back in the closet.

"When?"

"Soon," he answered. He pressed her head against his chest, put his arms around her. "Daddy loves you. Do you know that? Say it. Say DADDY, not Daddy Wes. Say, DADDY loves me."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, then. Say it."

"Daddy loves me." Do everything you're told, mother said, but she didn't say believe.

Seasons

It was two days after Thanksgiving, and I didn't want to be married anymore. The sun hit me between the eyes, and I rolled in the bed. I didn't want to get up, but it was no use, the relentless beams badgered me. I stretched each limb, my back, my ankles and toes, feeling the luscious unraveling of the tension I brought to bed and hoarded even in sleep. I squinted at the window; Paul opened the blinds hours ago, in the dark for god's sake, when he left for work. I didn't need to ask why. I knew from years of asking, but I would anyway, so he would know it bothered me.

I wouldn't say "Please don't open the blinds when you leave because the sun wakes me." I would say, "Do you need the blinds open when it's still dark out?"

And he would say, "I need to know what the weather's doing, why?"

Then I would say, "Wouldn't it be better to walk out on the porch and get first-hand information?"

"Can't go out naked," he'd say, "the neighbors would complain."

"Wear your pajamas." That was another sore point. "What if the house caught on fire?"

"Didn't used to worry you."

"That was before kids. Turn on the TV. They do have weather reports with the morning news."

"How would you know?"

Two days after Thanksgiving. I set my feet on the blue bedroom carpet and hobbled to the bathroom. I broke my leg skiing a few years ago, and it gets stiff in cold weather. I smeared Clinique's Seven Day Scrubbing Cream on my face and wiped away any I might have missed when I cleaned my face the night before. According to the saleslady, one night of failing to remove make-up equals seven days aging. I used a white wash cloth. I used to use a tissue, but studies show they're too hard on the skin. I started the cleansing routine a few years ago. Another thing I didn't worry about before kids. I lifted Paul's underwear from the floor in front of the hamper.

"The lid opens just as easily for you as it does for me."

"Just leave it there, I'll take care of it."

Yeah, right. Downstairs, I surveyed the morning mess in the kitchen. To be fair, it wasn't all from Paul's breakfast. Some were left from last night, after supper, after the dishes; his bedtime snack. I rinsed the dishes, put them in the dishwasher, shook the cereal box. Empty. Trashed it. Ditto the empty milk carton. Butter tub.

"When you leave the butter out, it melts."

"So? It'll set up again."

"But it separates. The watery part goes to the bottom."

"I never leave it out."

I decided to leave it this time. It would be there at

dinner, melted and separated. I put a cup of water in the microwave and two pieces of low calorie bread in the toaster. While I waited, I checked the downstairs bathroom, the kid's bathroom when they lived at home. Now Paul used it in the mornings to keep from waking me so early. Great, huh? Especially after leaving the bedroom blinds open. I didn't always follow his thinking, but it was a great gesture. Now I had two bathrooms to clean. I rinsed the whiskers and soap scum from the sink and mopped the puddles from the marble counter with the frilly guest towel he pulled from the ring. My fault. I hadn't put regular towels back in the rings after Thanksgiving company. A new roll of toilet paper on the lid of the tank caught my eye.

"How can a man so brilliant not know how to change the toilet paper?"

"It's not in my contract." He belongs to the union.

I pressed the tension on the roller, took out the empty cardboard, and replaced it with the new roll. I jiggled the fat new roll to make sure it caught. I hate it when the roller comes loose; the paper falls and the spring jumps twenty feet away. There you are, panty-hose around your ankles, chasing paper across the floor.

The toast was cold. I shoved the handle down again and put instant coffee in the cup. It was my favorite, the one with Loony Tune characters on it. It had been missing for a long time; I found it in the garage just before

Thanksgiving while I was looking for Christmas decorations. Paul must have used it on some project; a stiff paint brush was embedded in thick, sticky, black gunk in the bottom of the cup. Some of the black gunk had run down the sides. Tricia, my daughter, brought it to me from some trip she took. Reverse. We used to bring stuff to the kids. Now, when we took a trip, I avoided souvenir shops. The attic was full of junk I didn't want to dust anymore.

I saved the toast just before it burned, and sipped the coffee. The mug still had a fleck or two of black gunk on it, and I scraped it with my fingernail as I ate the dry toast. I was lucky. The black gunk in my best Tupperware bowl never had come out. I took the coffee to my desk and turned on the computer.

I'm networked to the office. I sell real estate. It's a good job. Marilyn opens the office and makes my appointments. It's such a small town I know most of the houses. Sold some of them several times. I pretty much know which house will fit which people, and which house a person's been dying to get, so I can do most business by phone. Women can't talk until the kids are off to school, so I usually don't have to be at work early. They look while their husbands are at work. They look, do their homework, plan their attack - let him think it was his idea.

I work pretty late sometimes, coaxing offers and

counter offers, drawing up contracts. It's okay; I'm not a morning person anyway, and Paul knows that. Or should.

I checked the day's schedule. Alberta Johnston wanted to list, so I was viewing her house at nine. I'd tell her what the market would stand, she'd tell me what they had to have, and we'd agree on a starting figure. Then I'd write the ad, take it to the paper, put up the sign. It would take all morning. I had a closing at three, and two showings after five. I needed a meeting with the sales associates; I had a hot lead on a commercial lot to pass on. The day was covered. The last entry was: TREE.

Two days after Thanksgiving we always buy the tree. I wasn't in the mood for Christmas. We were out of little kids to open presents. Nobody had them anymore, not even my brothers and sisters. Most of the decorations were shot, and I didn't have a theme unless early memento counted. Tricia and Cody wouldn't be home until Christmas day. I wanted a little tree this year. Or no tree. I didn't want to be married, either; it was too tiring. After years of nagging me to turn off the lights, Paul decided it was costly. Flipping the switch led to burned-out light bulbs. He read it somewhere. Once on, always on. I had to be retrained. It wasn't worth it.

Apparently, it doesn't hold true for televisions. Paul walks through the room, switching channels as he goes. Even if someone - me - is watching. We can't watch

together. He plays roulette with the remote. Round and round it goes, where it stops....

So it was time to tree shop. We hadn't done it alone together in years; we took the kids. Then the kids and I went. Finally just Tricia and I. Now she'd dropped out, too. Their excuse was they didn't live here anymore. But they still wanted a big one, all the way to the ceiling, happily waiting on them to pop in for a few hours Christmas Day. Then it had to be stripped, bagged, and wrestled out the door, and I sure wasn't going to put bread for the birdies on it anymore. I'd be picking needles out of the carpet for six months. For that same six months, I'd be forced to nag Paul to haul it to the dump.

"I'm not paying twenty-five dollars to dump that tree. I'll take it when I've got a load," would be his excuse.

"Your mother's coming to visit. Could you haul that tree off?"

"Not now, there's a squirrel hibernating in it."

"I think I'll put a new rose bush where that tree is. Could you move it?"

"The birds are nesting in it. I will when the eggs hatch."

"If that tree hasn't taken root yet, we ought to get rid of it."

"You're probably right."

"My mother's coming for a visit. We better change the sheets in the spare room."

"She lives next door!"

"I thought you'd forgotten; you keep forgetting that tree."

"I didn't forget. I'm saving it until I have a load."

Spring. "Don't keep knocking yourself out worrying about that tree. It was brown and crumbly enough for the trash truck to handle. I hope you didn't need it to make a load."

"It's okay. I can wait six months for the next one."

Well, I'd made up my mind. There wasn't going to be another one. I wasn't having a tree. I wasn't going after one all by myself. Not with Paul, either. We'd tried that last year. We went to WalMart. It was bitter cold and windy. The trees were tied up in nets, and we couldn't see what they looked like. Paul grabbed one and held it upright.

"If they want to sell the damn things, they should cut them loose."

"Maybe they aren't on sale yet; there's no salesperson out here."

"Don't be stupid. Everything they've got is for sale. Which one do you want?"

"How do I know? I'm stupid. I can't tell what they look like without the net. Could you cut one loose?"

"You're not going to be able to tell until it's had a few days for the branches to fall. Just pick one with a straight trunk so it'll fit in the stand right."

"Well, what if it has a hole in the middle. Look at the dead branches in that one."

"Okay, I'll cut one open." I pulled my coat tighter while he fished for his pocketknife and cut one loose. I couldn't tell, so I told him to cut another loose. "I can cut every damn one of 'em loose," and I stood there shivering while he moved down the row, liberating trees.

"I can't tell," I said. "Just get one." People were watching.

Paul went up and down the row looking at trunks. "None of them are straight."

If you don't like these, we could go to the grocery next door."

"I want one with a straight trunk."

We walked a hundred feet to the grocery store. The trees were lined up against the red brick wall, still in their nets. "Well, hell." He went to the far end and started cutting. Twenty minutes later, they were freed and ready to take their places in society. Not our society. The trunks were not straight enough.

"Well, Mr. Lincoln," I said, "you want to take your emancipation to another front?"

"I damn sure don't want one I can't get in the stand." We drove to the Homeland, other side of town. Same story.

"Let's narrow this down. Inspect the trunks first, and we'll go from there."

"Why didn't you think of that in the first place?"

"Just stupid, I guess."

My approach worked better, no straight trunks, no cutting. All trees left in shackles. "I was tired of doing their work for them, anyway," Paul said. "Now what?"

"We can go to the next town, or we can go back to WalMart. Maybe we overlooked a good one. It's your choice."

We went to WalMart and looked at the trees again. Now that they were loose, we had to push our way through the crowd. He pulled a tree the right height away from the sidewalk and held it steady while I looked. "Seems okay. What about the trunk?"

I held it while he looked. "Okay, I guess."

We bought the tree and went home. About an hour later, Paul brought it in, stand and all. He stood it in the corner of the room. Halfway up, the trunk twisted, and Paul had to put boards under one foot of the stand to keep the tree from falling forward. We couldn't turn it the other way because of the holes. "That's the worst damn tree we ever had," he said.

I wasn't going through it again. I was getting a divorce, an apartment, and a poinsettia I could throw in the trash the day after Christmas. The tradition was over. No kids, no husband, no tree two days after Thanksgiving. I put on my clothes and went to work.

The next day was Saturday. Paul was off. No raised blinds. We both slept late. At breakfast, he said, "Did

you get a tree?" I just looked at him. I'm not a morning person. He should know that by now, so I don't talk to him before noon, just to make my point. "I thought we'd go get one when you're ready."

"I'm not having a tree this year."

"Sure you are. A big one, just like always. I need to add to my load."

"Huh," I snorted.

"We could cut one down, like we used to."

"That was pre-kids."

"Are you sure? When did we stop?"

"The year Cody was born. I was too big and clumsy to go. You were embarrassed to be seen with me, even by cows in a pasture."

"I was not."

"Yes, you were. I had to ask Dad to take me to the grocery store. My waddle didn't embarrass him."

"I thought it was cute."

"No, you didn't. My brother Chester wasn't married yet, and the two of you went to cut down a tree. Didn't come back until four in the morning, dead drunk."

"We had a tree, though."

"Yeah."

"And the three of us decorated it. That was the first year we had those lights that bubble. And the year Tricia was born you used the angel instead of the star. Where'd we get the tree that year?"

"I don't know. Safeway."

"I thought I'd rig the Santa up on the roof this year."

"Whatever. I don't care."

"Christmas is your favorite."

"I don't believe in Santa anymore. I'm getting a divorce."

"Before you do, we better go after a tree."

"Okay," I said, "but just a little one."

The Stateline Incident

The fame of the Stateline Ice House is the Orange Crush sign nailed to its gray board front. Except for the sign, nothing distinguishes the establishment. A few older model cars, rusting, losing chrome, occupy the once-graveled parking lot. One would think, driving past, the building was unoccupied, vacant many years. But the locals know otherwise and meet at the Orange Crush sign, or give directions, so many blocks or houses or streets, from the Orange Crush. During the day, old men sit, counting the spots on dominoes or slapping cards on the scarred tables. The room is dark, the sun's rays restricted by the streaks and grime on the unwashed windows. In the summer, the front door is open, and the sagging screen door bangs out the coming and going of customers. The ceiling fan, if not antique, at least collectible, circulates the beer-and-ashes odor.

At night, the canopied lights over the pool table are switched on, and the juke box whines country and western. The cards and dominoes are stored on a shelf under the bar, and the old men go home to their suppers and their old-lady wives. The regulars straggle into the bar, and until midnight, order beer from Jessie Sue Mecha, who has worked at the Stateline since she graduated from high school.

Jessie Sue became Jessie Sue her third day of school. Until then, she was known as Jessica Suzanne. Marty Jo Phillips, assigned to the seat behind Jessica Suzanne,

shortened the name that third day, when they became best friends on the playground. Marty was really Martha Joann. Soon, all the kids called Jessica Suzanne Jessie or Jessie Sue, and the first grade teacher, Mrs. Highcoat, picked it up. It caught on. Jessie's mother and father converted. The phone would ring and someone would ask for Jessie; Jessie would be called to the phone or the door when someone came looking for Jessie to play.

The next year, Jessica Suzanne enrolled as Jessie Sue in school, and it was official. After, the only time she had been called Jessica Suzanne was at graduation. Then, she'd gone to work in the Stateline Ice House and Marty Jo went to college. Now, Marty Jo was Martha Joann of Guchinni's in Dallas. Jessie Sue was Jessie Sue of the Orange Crush sign at the Stateline Ice House.

And it bothered Jessie. She swished a rag over the bartop and thought Jessie Sue pretty much summed her up. It was her fit, her total, her life: ol' Jessie, down at the Stateline. Why didn't I go to college? she thought. I could have. The folks wanted me to. But I wanted some spending money first. I could now. But all those young kids. Forty-two. That's too old to start over.

The phone rang and Jessie reached under the bar for the receiver. "Yeah, he's here. Sure, I'll ask him. Gabe," she yelled, "can you stop by the store on your way home tonight?" Gabe nodded. "Yeah, what do want him to get, Sarah?"

Jessie scribbled a list on a pad and hung up the phone. The old men hadn't looked up, settled, playing out their hands. A truck driver lifted a Michelob at the end of the bar. It would be a slow afternoon, same as always. She turned the TV to her favorite soap, low, not to disturb the old men. The blue and red beer sign behind the bar glowed steadily. Jessie watched Monica and Rock, their nudity wrapped in satin sheets, as she opened another Michelob for the trucker.

"First time I've been here," he said. "Always so quiet?"

"Most times. Picks up a little at night."

"Huh." He motioned toward her with the bottle. "You live around here, I guess."

Jessie nodded and moved away toward the TV. Conversation wasn't her nature, bar conversation, anyway. Talking to customers, ones she didn't know, well, men customers, ones she didn't know, that wasn't proper, really. Might get the wrong idea. Like a pick-up. She might be ol' Jessie Sue but she wasn't that slut Jessie Sue, and she didn't plan on giving anyone the idea. She changed the channel on the TV. The trucker finished his beer and moved toward the door. When she heard the screen bang, she grabbed her rag and swished it down the bar, removed the empty bottle, and mopped the wet left by the sweat from the ice-cold bottle.

Jessie noticed the time. Ordinarily, she wasn't a

clock watcher, but she was expecting a letter, an answer from Marty, Martha Joann. They really didn't exchange letters, just Christmas cards and occasional phone calls. But they were still best friends and saw each other whenever Marty could. Jessie had written, though, to ask Marty, to get her thoughts about going to college. After all these years, neither of them had married. Marty had chances, plenty of them; she had a different guy every time Jessie heard from her.

Jessie had chances, too. Not so many as Marty; there weren't that many to choose from at the Stateline, but she'd had chances. There'd been Walter, from high school, and Andy. She'd known him in school, too, but he was a few years older. Neither worked out. And there had been Charlie.

Charlie was her boss, the owner of the Stateline Ice House. When Jessie first went to work at the Ice House, Charlie had already been old. Old and married. Jessie worked the night shift with Charlie. Bessie, his wife, opened at eleven for the old men, and Jessie and Charlie came later. There'd been others from time to time who helped Bessie, and some helped at night. Back then the bar had been busier. Bessie was an enormous woman, always wiping perspiration from her face, and she was slow behind the bar. Charlie made jokes - Jessie thought they were jokes when she was eighteen - about how he loved every inch of Bessie.

When Jessie was thirty, she knew Charlie really did

love every inch of Bessie; Bessie died, and Charlie shut the doors on the Ice House. He swore he'd never open the bar again, too many memories. He and Bessie started the Ice House together, ordered the beer, the pretzels, the Orange Crush sign, together. Jessie thought she might try to go to college then, but Charlie woke up broke one morning, so he reopened the Stateline. He kept the battered Orange Crush sign in memory of Bessie.

Jessie went back to the Ice House. A couple weeks later Charlie proposed. He thought they should get married because he was so lonesome for Bessie, and it didn't look like Jessie would ever get "hitched." Jessie'd thanked him for thinking of her and said no. Sometimes, when she wiped the bar, she wondered if she should have said yes. Charlie didn't look so old, now.

Jessie checked the time again. Charlie would come in, relieve her, like she had done for him, earlier. They spelled each other. There weren't any others, now, to work the bar. She would come back in the evening, and they would work together until midnight. When Charlie came in, she'd go home, check the mail for Marty's letter. It would be on Guchinni stationery, addressed to Jessie Sue Mecha. The return would be Martha Joann Phillips. It would be signed M. J. or Martha, but not Marty, even though Jessie still called her that.

The screen door swung open, letting pure, unadulterated sunshine into the bar, just for a moment. The intrusion

did nothing to stir the old men; everyone who could play was already there. The truck driver placed himself in front of Jessie and ordered a beer. Jessie pulled a bottle from the beer box. The box was old; Charlie had ice delivered to cool the beer, and tied an opener to it with a string. Jessie twisted the cap and reflected that even bottle caps had changed while she'd been at the Stateline. She wiped ice from the bottle and set it on a cork square in front of the trucker. When he picked it up, the cork stuck to the bottom.

"Haven't had a beer this cold in a long while."

"Most places don't ice it down," she said.

"I'm stuck here for a while. Waiting on a guy to pick up part of my load."

She didn't want to seem rude. "There's a place to eat a couple blocks down."

"Yeah, I checked it out already. Not great."

Jessie smiled. She knew the food at the Little Rio Cafe. "No, it's not great. You want some pretzels?"

His lips already on the bottle opening, the man nodded. Jessie dipped a paper bowl in a giant bag of pretzels and set it in front of him. "House specialty," she said, smiling, and moved away. She busied herself, wiping and flicking dust, counting coasters. She scooted a broom around the floor behind the bar, then toward the tables. She'd swept earlier, but she didn't want to be too available for talk. She studied the bar from this side.

Except for the neon beer sign, it seemed monochrome, like a black and white picture with the sign colored in. It wouldn't be long until Charlie came and she could go home, check her mail.

Sure, Marty would say it was a good idea. So what? Anybody would say the same; it was the American goal, go to college, be somebody. Except Charlie, maybe. He'd want her to stay here. But Marty would be all for it. She'd move right away, get a little apartment, get settled. Then what? She didn't know.

She'd have to find out how to enroll, what classes to take, who to talk to, how to find her way around in a new town, on a college campus. And where would she go, anyhow? How did she know which college? Marty had gone to K. State. She figured she might as well, too, but didn't it depend on what she wanted to study? What did she want to study? She didn't know. She should've gone right after high school. Or when Bessie died. She should have married Charlie. The creak of the barstool turning stopped Jessie's thoughts. The man was watching her sweep.

"Need another beer? " she asked.

"Nope, don't want to get skunked. Got to drive, you know. I was just wondering, how long you worked here?"

"A while."

Jessie carried the broom to the corner, she stored it, and located the dust pan, walked back to the little pile of debris she'd gathered, little pieces of gravel, sand

really, dirt, a few blades of grass, the cellophane from a cigarette pack, the sum total of the day's excitement. She brushed the pile onto the lip of the plastic dust pan, paused. Suddenly, slightly curious, she wanted to know about the man.

"How long have you been driving a truck?"

"Oh, I don't know for sure. A while." He grinned. "Seems like I just woke up one morning doing it."

Jessie stood the broom in the corner and dumped the dirt in a can behind the bar. "Did you have other jobs? Before?"

"Sure," he said, "lots of 'em. Worked in the oil fields, carpentered some, even sold vacuum cleaners once."

"How'd you get into truck driving?"

"Answered a ad in a newspaper."

"Oh. You get tired of it? Ever want to change?"

"Yeah, I get tired. But I don't want to change. It's what I do. Some are plumbers. I'm a truck driver. It's sort of natural, see. That's what I mean when I say I woke up one morning doing it. It feels right, you know."

"I was thinking of making a change."

"Some people do. Some are stayers, some are movers. I never could stay. That was my trouble. I'd work a while, and then I'd just want something else. That's why driving suits me, I guess. Takes both kinds, stayers and movers. No stayers, no place for movers to go. Gotta Coke?"

"Sure."

Jessie filled the bowl with pretzels again and dug a Coke can from the bottom of the beer box, wiped it, set it on the coaster, took the beer bottle and fitted it into an empty square in the case under the bar. The driver waved away the glass Jessie offered and pulled the ring on the can. Except for the old men's murmuring, the bar was quiet; the tin clink seemed loud when he tossed the metal ring on the counter. The coveys of old men broke up. They raked change from the table; each had his own small hoard, money he hid, rat-holed, saved for the games. They stuffed the money in their pockets and shuffled toward the door, slapping backs, shaking hands, teasing.

"You're down four, Henry, wife ain't gonna let you come back."

"She'll give him ten to keep him gone."

Charlie was late. Jessie gathered cards and stuffed them in their boxes. She'd always refused to dump the brown spit from the gallon cans Charlie provided for chewers, so she left them now. The truck driver drank his Coke, and Jessie's mind talked to her as she stacked the dominoes and straightened the chairs.

She wasn't going to college. Or anywhere. She guessed she just didn't want to bad enough; if she was going to do it, she would have by now. And if she did want to go to college, or Dallas, or wherever, she didn't need Marty's okay. She wouldn't marry Charlie, either, now or ever, but she would insist on some changes.

They'd get someone else to work, give her a straight shift instead of coming and going all the time. And a coat of paint on the building and asphalt on the parking lot; if they were going to stay, they had to attract the highway trade. She'd let him keep the Orange Crush sign. The beer box too, if he'd get a new one to go with it.

"See ya tomorrow, Jess."

The last of the old men straggled through the door, nodded to a new stranger waiting for a clear entry. Once inside, his eyes searched the emptiness. When he adjusted to the dimness, he joined the trucker at the bar. "That rig outside yours?"

"You the guy I'm waiting on to transfer my load?"

"If you're Lee Harper, I am."

"That's me. Let's get at it." He slid off the stool and nodded at Jessie. "See you next trip. Jess, is it?"

"We'll be here," she promised, "and it's Jessica. Jessica Suzanne."

VITA

Ginger Hunter

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MASTER OF ARTS

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