

OLD WOMEN TALKING

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Salt Lake City, Utah
1989

Master of Arts
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Logan, Utah
1991

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May, 1995

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PREFACE

Fiction writing begins with tension and ends with craft. The story is a thing seen but unseen, tugging at the mind and heart, wanting to be made. Words brim over, want to be poured out, and yet, like every other made thing that exists first in the mind's eye--a table to be built, masses of color wanting to be painted, a dress that is only a length of silk--they want crafting. The words call out, but their meaning is not clear until the writer finds a compelling voice that will reach the reader and make the story believable.

It *is* like building a table. The carpenter assembles his building materials, cuts them to the required length, fastens the legs and underpinnings together for strength, and finally nails on the seamless width of the top. We soon forget what went into the building. But in fiction writing, we cannot forget those underpinnings. Convention and device -the writer's particular choices through craft--are the design elements that make the story sound and create the reader's 'willing suspension of disbelief.' Once this edifice is built, the working surface--what the reader sees--can have any breadth or width the writer chooses. Setting, progression of events, characters, and meaning all depend on the writer's orientation, experience, and imagination, but the broad plain of the story, the working surface, depends on the establishment of that compelling voice.

Instead of looking at *Old Women Talking* and fiction writing in general in terms of plot, scene, character etc., superficial features painted on this broad canvas, I would rather focus on what makes the structure work-- the dialogic tension of word and voice as it is forged by craft and as it interacts within the culture.

To define dialogic, in every human being-- since we think in language and from the beginning of our lives depend on communication for nurturing--consciousness is embedded in language and always includes an audience. *Dialogue* begins there, but for the writer, it must become more than that. The writer, however consciously or unconsciously, must believe in the notion of *dialogic relationship*, a mutually redemptive space where the struggle takes place, where essence *reaches out* anticipating an answer, where there is both truth and seeking.

Mikhail Bakhtin's highly distinctive concept of language includes a sense of opposition and struggle which determines the way we experience language. According to Bakhtin, the dialogic relationship is built into language and provides it with dynamic life. He describes the dialogic arena of words:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates and structures itself in the answer's direction. . . the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue (280).

The word as it breaks through to its own meaning goes through a

dialogized process which shapes its style and tone(277). The voice of the storyteller is shaped to reach an audience. In folksongs and folksayings, the voices are made on front porches and around kitchen tables, and they often gibe at voices of authority and the formal voices of literature. In early novels and short stories, the voice was that of the author, an intrusive narrator who told the reader what to believe about his story. Henry James was the first to write about the need for a writer who did not hold the reader hostage, but allowed him, as tellers of anecdotes often do, to see the story unfold. In this kind of storytelling, since the writer is as complex as the language he uses, he must consciously efface himself and allow the reader to speculate--to say his "Amen" and "Yes, Lord"-- to create his own meaning from the fiction.

Wayne Booth, in *Rhetoric of Fiction* and other essays, writes about conventions and devices of fictional writing as they set up distances. Booth describes authorial effacement, in the silence he maintains, by the manner in which he leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us. (273) This idea of an effaced author gave rise to Booth's concept of the *implied author*, whom he characterizes as a "second self . . . usually a highly refined and selected version, wiser, more sensitive, more perceptive than any real man could be." (92).The implied author draws a curtain between author and reader to overcome any naive assumption on the part of the reader that the story comes to him unmediated.

Flannery O'Connor explains the difficulties and the value of undramatized narrators:

Modern fiction often looks simpler than the fiction that preceded it, but in reality it is more complex . . . The author has for the most part absented himself from direct participation in the work and has left the reader to make his own way amid experiences dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered (139).

If the author is effaced and the implied author is only a figurehead, who tells the story? This is where voice comes in. The author creates a *narrative persona* to tell the story (in first person) or reflect the action of the story (in third person). In first person, the narrator is, of course, the storyteller. When there is a third person (unacknowledged) narrator, James suggests that the narrative is filtered through a "center of consciousness." He sometimes called such narrators 'reflectors' (94). Percy Lubbock hailed the triumph of James's dramatic use of the 'central intelligence' saying '*the whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, is governed by the relation in which the narrator stands to the story . . .*' (87). (My italics. This statement is an important guideline for the working writer).

The third person narrator allows for degrees of effacement and fore-shadowing not available through an intrusive authorial narrator. It also allows the author to give even further latitude to the reader through the rhetoric of *showing not telling*, dramatizing events rather than explicating them.

The first four stories in this collection, including the novella, are told in first person, but in the final story, *On the Road to Mandalay*,

the reader understands the events and their significance in Iris Castleton's life through the ironic distance established by the third person narrative persona. This can be seen in a short passage from *On the Road to Mandalay*. In this passage Iris goes to her room in the hotel convinced that the reunion has been a thing of little importance.

The sparkling clean linens were pleasant to look at and felt good sliding in, but they were not home. If she was going to spend her time reading, Iris thought, she might as well be in her own bed.

The reader, however, knows that something of profound importance happened for Iris at the reunion.

Even in the first person distances of time and place can be developed through manipulation of voice. In the novella, *In the Middle of Rain and Rosebuds*, written in first person, Iris Castleton attempts, through the conscious control of her memories, to reconcile her life, using particularity and the vernacular to narrow the distance between persona and reader. This scene shows the tension between the teen-aged Iris and her mother:

I wanted to smart off but my eyelids were heavy, my throat sore from crying, so I just lay there and watched her. *That would make her madder anyway.*

'What are these for?' She picked up a pair of gaudy black earrings. 'You know young girls don't wear this kind of trash.' She dropped them in the waste basket.

In this story the narrative persona manipulates time and point of view through a device used by Faulkner in *The Rievers*. Rust Hills

describes this manipulation of point of view:

. . . he tells the story of a young boy as remembered by that boy as an old man. When he wants to move in close on the experience, he puts us into the mind of the boy directly and achieves immediacy, humor, and irony from the boy's misconceptions; when he wants to get some distance and accuracy or make some comment, he moves back into the perceptions of the older man remembering the action. (Hills 104)

The narrative persona, as story teller or reflector, is like the controller in an airport. It controls who does what, when, and how. This allows for a multi-level of voices, forms layers of dialogic space. Using Bakhtinian theory, this dialogic establishes the tension between layers of voices, each speaking out in search of an answer. This reaching out in search of an answering voice is redemptive in that it seeks to reconcile separation. In Bakhtin's thinking, the diversity of voices, organized into a "structured artistic system constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre" (300).

Another important fictional element is the *motif of meeting*, particularly as defined by Martin Buber's I-Thou perspective. This *motif* is sometimes combined with the *motif of epiphany* (Bakhtin 98), and establishes a redemptive quality in all fiction as art. As Flannery O'Connor says

There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored.

At a basic level the writer and the reader are in it together, to save

themselves and each other from intolerable loneliness. The tension between meeting and alienation is the real stuff from which stories are made.

This dialogic emphasis is the foundation for the relationship between the writer, the implied author, the narrative persona, the fiction and the reader. The author steps back to hide herself behind the facade of the implied author, who, after all, is only an invention, not a reality. The narrative persona, an entity who tells the story, or sometimes only reflects it, is a voice, without gender, emotion, or judgment, a mediator. The fiction is the meeting point where author, implied author, and narrative persona meet the reader in a text that finally stands alone, a word "waiting for its answer-word." The reader steps into that ground to embrace, dispute, acclaim, distort, or even ignore the author's intention. This is the toe-to-toe meeting, the tension out of which the living presence of the fiction is born.

Old Women Talking is a collection of four short stories and a novella in which old women talk about the way they feel, relate their past, try to make meaning of their lives. Their stories are a fiction of their own making, a stereopticon view of segments appearing on the screen of their memories, seemingly without volition, a reconciliation of their lives. The focal point of each story is a moment when the thing sought becomes the thing recovered.

These women do not need to rearrange the boundaries of linear time--their old age has done that for them. Iris says, "my memories pop up like post-vacation slide shows--*click-click, click-click*--come and go when I least expect them. As Eudora Welty says,

It is our inward journey that leads us through time--forward or

back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover, and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge. Our living experience at those meeting points is one of the charged dramatic fields of fiction (113).

The mediated voice is of particular importance when we speak of female writers because *womantalk* has been historically mediated. Female authors have often hidden behind a facade, covering up by using masculine pen names, writing anonymously, or writing with care to avoid being ridiculed by men. Adrienne Rich points this out:

In rereading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) for the first time in some years, I was astonished at the sense of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness, in the tone of that essay. And I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is *willing* herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity (37).

Female authors also personalize by situating themselves within the familiar. Eudora Welty tells about finding her voice in a familiar setting:

My first good story began . . . in a remark repeated to me by a traveling man . . . [who heard the phrase] while on a trip into North Mississippi: 'He's gone to borry some fire.'

As usual, I began writing from a distance, but

'Death of a Traveling Salesman' led me closer. It drew me toward what was at the center of it, to a cabin back in the red clay hills--perhaps just such a house as I used to see from far off on a rainy night, with the firelight or lamplight showing yellow from its open doorway.

Flannery O'Connor has regionalized her work in several different ways. In "Good Country People," she writes about women in the South, in the country, in a grotesque situation (a woman PhD has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman she tries to seduce). She explains these aspects of her writing

An identity is not to be found on the surface . . . It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from *the hidden and often the most extreme* . . . It is made . . . from those qualities that endure . . . because they are related to truth. . . . In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist.

The carnival, Bakhtin says, is one place where language is vitalized *by marginal people* in "street songs, folksayings, [and] anecdotes" (273). This process redeems language by providing the tension that gives it vitality.

I interpret O'Connor's "hidden and often the most extreme" to mean people of Bakhtin's carnival--marginalized people whose speech dialogizes the language and keeps it authentic. The funeral in my story, "Lighter Than Air," has some elements of the carnival, pushing through the formal rite of funereal language to dialogize speech.

I gave her some balloons to hang onto and began handing out

the rest of them, watching from the corner of my eye for the minister. Finally all but a few balloons were gone so I went back up the slope a little ways and turned around. Everyone was watching me. I cleared my throat. 'We're here today because of Emily. She came to visit Tanya for a while, but then she had to go. She needed flowers, and balloons, and a bright blue sky; she couldn't find them here.'

I began to sing in my old whiskey tenor, starting with 'Amazing Grace' to get people comfortable, pull down their eyebrows, close their mouths, and take their minds off those damn balloons.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing* Belenky *et al* researched ways of looking at women's voices

'Women's talk,' in both *style* (hesitant, qualified, question-posing) and *content* (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) is typically devalued by men and women alike . . .

. . . . in describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence . . . in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others . . . the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined (17-18).

I interpret the regional and societal settings in Jane Austen, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor as ways of staying in the everyday, the interpersonal, and the voices of women writers to be their way of breaking the silence.

The title itself, *Old Women Talking*, evokes an image of homeliness, perhaps even of ignorance or triviality. Except in the last story, the language is that of stories told over a kitchen table with a particularity that erases the traditional distance of old age. In "On the Road to Mandalay."

She could hardly remember sex. When she touched herself down there, instead of the warm languorous experience it once was, she felt violated, as if a stranger were pawing at her body. Nothing much happened anyway.

Old women create fiction when they talk: they talk about experience as they remember it, not as it was, and each new experience is filtered through the fiction of their remembered past. The rhythm of our speech reflects *the liquid sound of The Song of Hiawatha*, the nasal twang of the Joads, our geographical heritage--the Southern voices of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, the pre-war memoirs of Edith Wharton, the Nebraska plains of Willa Cather, the ever-changing landscape of Southern California in my case. It reflects the music of Glenn Miller and Harry James, the powerful voices of Marian Anderson, Pearl Bailey, Kate Smith--and the wartime years, the years of Rosie the Riveter, Vietnam protests (how can we ever forget walking in a long line of people whose faces are reflected in candlelight, singing "Blowing in the Wind" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone"?). Early radio with *Amos 'n Andy*, *The Green Hornet*, *Little Theater Off Times Square*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, the Three Stooges, George Burns and Gracie Allen.

The old women of my time were born in the twenties, grew up in the Depression, were teen agers during WWII, married in the

fifties, were not shaped by television. We were not watchers, we were listeners. Instead of images, we had voices, and our voices took on the flavor of all the voices we heard. When I read I heard voices of people I knew and heard them in Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner (although he was considered "not nice"), Mark Twain, Nancy Drew, Thomas Costain, Mary Roberts Rhinehardt. And we read to our children from *Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Raggedy Ann*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Princess and the Goblins*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Deerslayer*. As my children grew up, I read with them, and learned about *tesseracting*, *Strangers in a Strange Land*, *Dune Messiah*, *The Naranja Chronicles*, *Charlotte's Web*. And as we listened and read, our voices changed, became richer and more colorful. Woven into our voices was the language of the church, "Halleluiah! Praise the Lord! The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. , "We are not worthy so much as to pick up the crumbs from under they table, , *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa.*"

From all these heard voices, some old women's voices took sustenance, and as death came nearer they took on a new vitality. They discovered the urgency of death's deadline, short time, the "end-Time" days. Because we had spent a lifetime of waiting--for men to speak, for childbirth, for homecomings, for leave takings--we grew impatient with waiting, and finally discovered ourselves, our lives, and our deaths-to-come. When I began to speak I discovered my voice.

But for some the voices did not come easily, and for some they did not come at all. Baba Copper speaks with anger of the social

phenomenon, *ageism*

I will soon be sixty-seven. I am becoming invisible. I am seen as asexual, although that is not how I feel. I am condescended to and socially segregated, as if I had a condition that is catching. . . It is not physiological aging or psychological aging that is troubling me. I am experiencing social aging--ageism (52)

Ageism is a social disease, but many women buy into it years before they reach old age. The concept of selflessness, of servanthood--at least in part a legacy of patriarchal religious dogma--has left these women with little sense of themselves. If they are not involved in a relationship that honors their personhood, they seem to erase their own identity year by year during the course of their lives, with an infantilism so strong their identity depends on being daughters, wives, mothers and grandmothers. They become accomplished actresses accustomed to the familiar chalk marks of their stage, taking pride in the roles they play. Of grandmothers, Barbara Macdonald says:

She has no personhood, no desires or value of her own. She must not fight for her own issues--if she fights at all, it must be for 'future generations.' Her greatest joy is seen as giving all to her grandchildren. And to the extent that she no longer directly serves a man--can no longer produce his children, is no longer sexually desirable to men--she is erased more completely as grandmother than she was as mother.

Some of the women in my stories are perhaps more marginal than others in that they are recovering alcoholics. I see alcoholism as

a catastrophic disease which requires strong measures for recovery. The alcoholic woman must find new ways of relating to herself and to other people, or die. The good news is that these strong measures often teach women ways to relate that force them to become authentic. The idea of selflessness (self-erasing) must disappear along with the alcohol. Thus women like Ellie in *Lighter Than Air*, Jan in *Snow Fences*, and Iris Castleton in *In the Middle of Rain and Rosebuds*, and *On the Road to Mandalay*, since they are still compulsive-obsessives, seek epiphanies through self searching.

In *Lighter than Air* events bring about Ellie's epiphany of connection with herself.

The whole affair seemed like a chance crossing, a firefly lighting up the dark, but for a minute there it all came together and I was in one piece.

Iris Castleton begins her story with these words: "In the October of my life I want clarity, the bare bones of things; I want to fly again until it's over." In the novella, *In the Middle of Rain and Rosebuds*, she investigates her life and takes responsibility for it., and in the final story, she begins to experience, in the wake of an epiphany, possibilities for her life she has never before considered. As she sings in the shower the reader knows Iris still has a life to live, perhaps a better one than she has ever lived before.

The women in *Old Women Talking* are not defeated by ageism. They have come close at times, but they have not erased themselves. Instead they have used cataclysmic experiences, large and small, as turning points, and so they have found, in their old age, the independence of artist Ann Domitrovich, who says,

Society today says that women should be young to be acceptable. And when we are not young anymore, we should imitate youth as long as we can and then we should become invisible. I have never doubted that this is wrong for me. I will not lie about my age. . . I will not apologize for my age. . . I will feel my feelings and think my thoughts and express myself as the sum total of my experience and my years. I will be who I am.(133)

The particularities of these stories about old women bring them into a dialogue that struggles with alienation and perhaps fulfills Bakhtin's prescription for a "word which has not been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word." We speak in language and through language. Word and voice in dialogue are the stuff of both craft and communication, socialization. I hesitated to use the two connotations of voice--and with voice, language--but too often, women have hesitated to speak about what is of utmost importance to them, so in writing about these stories, I chose to ground myself in craft, but also to use the word, the voice and dialogue in all its connotations.

A sincere thank you to Dr. Gordon Weaver, my major adviser, mentor, and fellow sojourner, to my committee members, Dr. Gene Halleck, Professor Mark Cox, and Dr. Chung-Shin Park, to Dr. Carol Lynn Moder, to the staff of the English Department, especially Dale McLaughlin, and to my friends and professors at Utah State University, Roberta Stearman and Dr. Kenneth Brewer.

To my friends and guides in Alcoholics Anonymous--especially my friend and sponsor, Janice Edlund--my profound gratitude.

Finally, my thanks go to my family, my sister, Carol Sanders, my brothers, Tom and Gordon Archibald, and my beloved sons, Kit, Scott, Douglass, and Timothy Hain, who have loved me and let me be.

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LIGHTER THAN AIR

A few weeks ago I walked in the AA club for a noon meeting. Tanya was sprawled out on an overstuffed chair with her eyes closed and her large pale hands, the fingernails chewed to the quick, clasped across the huge mound of her stomach. A bright pink T-shirt labeled *Baby on Board* was stretched tightly over her belly and over the ties of her flowered wrap-around pants that didn't meet in the middle. Her protruding navel stuck out against the stretched pink. Her face was pale with green shadows and that puffy look of late pregnancy, her hair stuck behind her ears in a dull black mat.

I'd seen her in the club often but never spoke to her until one night after the meeting when we were all singing '40s songs around the table, trying to see who could remember the most. That night, Tanya was sitting on one of the old chairs at the back. She had that medicated stare and her mouth was slightly open. When we were ready to lock up, I offered her a ride home. After that she talked to me sometimes, mostly about the baby.

I stopped to say hello that day and she struggled to sit up, leaning forward as best she could, pulling my head down. She whispered in my ear, "Did you know?" Her breath and some moisture from her wet lips made me pull back, but her arm was tight around the back of my neck. "Did you know I'm going to have a baby?"

She relaxed her grip then so I could straighten up. "No," I said, teasing her. We'd had this conversation before, but I could sympathize. The last few weeks before any baby are always rather trying, but with the first one the unknown gets you. You're afraid,

excited, and impatient all at the same time. Even if you're normal, you feel gross and awkward, and you don't know how you feel from one minute to the next, or how you're supposed to feel. At least, that's how it was for me. It must have been a lot worse for Tanya. She was probably schizophrenic, although I'm no psychiatrist, but she was also only sixteen years old, and apparently alone in the world except for social workers, doctors, and a few sympathetic AA people.

I laughed and said, "When are you due? It must be soon, the way you look."

She looked around to see if anybody was listening, then whispered, "Maybe tomorrow. I hope tomorrow. I want to see my baby, hold her in my arms."

Her pale green eyes were large and round like a child's, the lashes stuck together as if she had just awakened from a nap. She usually had that blank medication stare, but when she talked about the baby, there was a tiny flicker in the back of her eyes. Its glow lit the heaviness of her face, and even her long black hair took on a shine. Her words came out in a rush. "It's a girl, you know. Her name is Emily and her favorite song is `You Are My Sunshine.` Whenever I sing it, she dances." She laid her hand reverently on the mound of her stomach, "You know, inside me." She looked up at me, wide-eyed with the wonder of it, "She's mine."

I touched my finger to her cheek. It was soft as a baby's. Most everyone else in the club was looking away, not knowing what to do or say, not wanting to get involved. This wasn't a meeting place for

crazies, some people complained. They hadn't forgotten the old club and Crazy John.

Crazy John was like Tanya; he didn't fit in because he wasn't an alcoholic. He started coming into the club one winter when it was cold outside and he had nowhere else to go. He always had his guitar with him and sometimes, after the meeting, he'd strum a few tunes, singing softly to himself. He seemed harmless.

A bunch of us used to play cards on Wednesday nights--chicken rummy--a wild game with lots of card snatching, screaming, and laughter. We were whooping it up one Wednesday night after a meeting when all of sudden Crazy John came to life.

He hit the strings of his guitar in a loud dissonant chord to get our attention, "Okay, you in the corner," he yelled, "I know who you are. I've got a radio here in the guitar and I'm in constant touch with the FBI. I know those people in the back room are Commie spies and I'm gonna burn 'em up. Nobody's gonna get out alive."

No one was in the kitchen but he charged out there and started to turn the burners on the stove up high. We seemed to be paralysed but fortunately Oley, one of the longshoremen who hung out at the club, came in just then to pick up his girlfriend Norma. He settled the whole thing fast, threw John on the floor and held him down while we called the police to take him away.

That's why I called it the old club. Right after that, we rented the place we're in now because it has a back door. The card games never did start back again, and everybody was a little less tolerant of people who didn't belong, even of Tanya with her child's face and swollen body.

That summer I impulsively married a fellow AA member. He'd been sober a long time so his intense and unexpected rages were something I hadn't counted on.

Before I married Joe, I read a lot of stuff, trying to find a Higher Power. I never found any *pie in the sky* but I did get some sense of being connected. When Joe's bewildering rages began to become a pattern, I lost some of that feeling, reverted to old behavior. I spent my time looking over my shoulder, nursing that peculiar combination of blinders alcoholics use--fear, self-pity, resentment--to keep them from looking at the facts. I kept hoping Joe and I could make it work somehow, so I stayed away from people who would tell me the truth, from meetings.

The phone rang one afternoon while Joe was at work and I was fixing dinner. It was Barbara, one of my AA friends. She asked if I'd heard about Tanya.

When I said no, she went on, "Ellie, she had her baby Tuesday. It was a girl, so she's Emily, just like Tanya said. I went up to the hospital to see them. She's a doll. She's got gobs of curly red hair, and she's not red like most babies, in fact her skin is so white you can almost see through it."

"Maybe I ought to go see her too," I answered.

"It's really sad. She's not gonna live more than a couple of days. Something's missing, her liver or something, I forget what." Barbara sighed. "I suppose it's all for the best but I hate it."

"Tanya's a sad case," I said, "but I wonder if we should encourage her to rely on AA people. You know how everybody feels about it down at the club."

I should have realized then I was deep in the people-pleasing mode, forgetting all I'd learned about connections. Barbara ignored me, bless her heart, and went on. "You won't believe this--they let Tanya take her home. There's a nurse and a social worker keeping an eye on things, of course, but I guess they decided she might as well have a little time with the baby before it dies."

That was a lot to take in, and just then the frying pan caught on fire so I had to hang up. I didn't get a chance to talk it over with Barbara--what she thought we should or could do for Tanya. As it turned out, there was no *we*; Barbara went out of town the next day.

Two days later Tanya called me from the pay phone outside her room. She was sniffing and I could just barely hear her. "Emily's gone; they took her away last night and this morning they called to tell me she died. She's going to have a real nice funeral though, with balloons, at Sunset Memorial Park tomorrow at three. Would you sing?"

The balloon part flabbergasted me but I thought it was the product of her vivid imagination, or whatever you want to call it. I started talking fast and phony, hoping she'd forget the singing part. "Oh, Tanya, I'm so sorry about Emily. What will you do now? Are you okay?" There was silence on the other end of the line. I knew she was trying to outwait me so I decided to be direct. "About the singing, I can't help you there. I used to sing a little when I was a kid, but booze and cigarettes took any voice I ever had."

She stuck right with her point. "Oh, come on. You know how she always liked 'You Are My Sunshine.' I know you sing that real good because I heard you that night, when everybody was singing.

Remember? That night you took me home?" Her voice got real teary. "At least come by my place before the funeral so we can talk about it."

I didn't have the heart to say no, just like that, so I said something sympathetic and hung up without committing myself, or so I thought.

That night Joe was out of town and, since I was avoiding meetings, I was home alone. I picked up one of my old books, thumbed through it, and rediscovered Imrah's Net. It's Zen. The concept is that the world is a net, with people connected by almost invisible threads, a light shining out from every knot, like a great ship floating through the universe, lit up like Christmas. I sat down and scribbled off a note to Tanya. At the bottom I made an ink sketch of a net, each knot giving off light except for one intersection where the lines were broken and dangling. Underneath I wrote *Without you, there's a hole in the universe.*

When I looked at it, I knew right away whose light had gone out. You never know where it'll come from--the glitch that suddenly connects you with yourself. I think I knew then it was all over with me and Joe, but I wasn't ready to face it.

I was eating lunch the next day, reading the paper, but kept looking at the clock. Suddenly, I put down my fork and went into the bedroom to change clothes. Before I knew it I was dressed and out the door. I stopped by Tanya's, but she looked out of it. Some other people were there helping her get ready, so I went on to the cemetery.

When I stopped at the office to find out where to go, they pointed across the drive and down the hill to a little hollow where a weeping willow drooped over the lawn. Some guy came out of an inner office and handed me what seemed like hundreds of balloons. The service would be in half an hour, he said.

There was nothing to do but take them. *What am I supposed to do with these, for God's sake?* I almost shouted at him. I felt ridiculous already and we hadn't even come to the singing part. He shrugged his shoulders and gestured a thumb toward the gravesite, "She ordered 'em."

There was nothing else to say. I went on out and stuffed the balloons in the back of my car, then drove over there and parked. I felt unreal--I mean, I knew where I was, it just didn't seem like I should be there. A car pulled up close behind me and it was too late to change my mind.

I got out and reached in back for the bobbing balloons, then started over toward the open grave, vaguely hoping there would be something there to tie them to. Instead the balloons seemed to tug me up the slope into the sunlight. I looked across at the hills and began to feel a sense of peace. The sky was that soft blue of coastal Oregon with just a hint of umber. Beyond the wooded slopes over toward the sea, the afternoon fog bank was moving in.

When I turned back toward the road, the small grave beneath the willow tree was like a stage set for a play entitled *The Funeral*, except the faces of the half dozen or so people standing there were stiff with embarrassment and pity. Tanya was off to one side, alone, staring, her eyes wild.

I walked over to her and she started in right away-- plucking at my sleeve in that irritating way she had, trying to pull me over to the grave. Everyone else moved back. "I can't wait any longer to say goodbye to Emily. I said goodbye to her last night; I don't want to do it anymore." She gulped and then went on, "I had her for one night, and now she's gone." Her voice ended in a wail.

I didn't know what to do. She seemed on the edge of some new state I didn't even want to think about. Her eyes were glassy and when she let go of my arm she looked down at her hands and started cracking her knuckles. I wondered if she had taken her medication. Newly sober alcoholics, except for a propensity to shake, vomit, and have seizures, are easy to deal with when you're used to them, but I try to stay away from anything more complex.

"What do you want me to do, Tanya?" I said, trying to sound calm and rational.

"I want you to pass the balloons around and sing. You're going to sing, aren't you?" she said, her voice rising.

I was still clutching the foolish bouquet of bright balloons. People were edging away, looking for a minister or somebody to take charge. They probably thought I was as crazy as she was. "Where's the minister? Isn't he coming?" I asked her.

"I don't know. Please start. Please?" Her voice was almost shrill and she looked as if she might start crying any minute. I could envision sobbing and screaming, maybe even a physical struggle. Nobody else seemed to want to get involved, and I didn't blame them.

I gave her some balloons to hang onto and began handing out the rest of them, watching from the corner of my eye for the minister. Finally all but a few balloons were gone so I went back up the slope a little ways and turned around. Everyone was watching me.

I cleared my throat. "We're here today because of Emily. She came to visit Tanya for a while, but then she had to go. She needed flowers, and balloons, and a bright blue sky, and she couldn't find them here."

I began to sing in my old whiskey tenor, starting with "Amazing Grace" to get people comfortable, pull down their eyebrows, close their mouths, and take their minds off those damn balloons.

When that was finished, I waited a minute, then took a deep breath and began, slightly off key, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray . . ." Suddenly everything was right and simple.

I let go of my balloons and the others let go of theirs. We stood and watched them rising, blowing in the wind. Finally they took on the slightly umber shade of the Oregon sky, drifted across to the mountains into the waiting fog bank. The quiet stretched out and caught us all.

A car door slammed. The minister in his black suit hurried up to Tanya and took her hands. Turning to the little crowd of mourners, he began. "We are gathered here . . ." He seemed like an intruder, although I suppose some people were relieved by the familiar ritual. We all waited politely until he stopped talking.

I walked to the car slowly. As I opened the door, I looked back at Tanya. Her social worker was with her now, as well as the

minister. I heard later she was taken to the state hospital in Salem the next day.

I never saw her again.

I forgot all about Emily in the midst of my troubles, until one day I found myself humming and then singing out loud, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine." Suddenly I was back in that moment, watching balloons drift across the sky.

Joe's rages got so bad I never knew when one would come. Finally, one Sunday morning, I found myself trying to figure out a dignified way to commit suicide, and realized I had to do something. So I was in the midst of packing, not knowing what would come next. The kitchen was a litter of newspaper and cartons, but I poured a cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

I thought back to the graveyard, that moment when everything was right and simple. The whole affair seemed like a chance crossing, a firefly lighting up the dark, but for a minute there it all came together and I was in one piece. Then I made the connection. I've been looking for somebody to be the *you* in my song, but now I can see the *you* isn't important. In all those songs--*You light up my life, You are the sunshine of my life, You are my sunshine*--the main thing is *light*. The wrinkles in my face smoothed out like magic, and I felt like one of those balloons, lighter than air.

I don't know about Zen and knots. I'm always suspicious of anything that smacks of sentimentality. It's like going backward, hanging onto the past. What I do know, what I can see, is that stars make the night sky friendly, and those old feelings of self-pity and

resentment are like clouds shutting out the light. Instead of looking for some other *you*, I need to remember how the light feels, save those times like beads on a rosary, and go looking for more.

OVER THE HILL AND GLAD OF IT

Luke's in the story, so is Dan, along with Joe's girl Mary Jean, and Joe, of course. He was in it way further than he wanted to be. As it turned out everybody was. I mostly watched and tried not to let anybody know what I was thinking. If there was a real hero, to me it was Joe. He got hurt the most, not counting Mary Jean, and stayed gentle through it all, as far as I know.

I was working at the mill, pulling on the green chain, when I met Dan. Saturday nights a bunch of us girls would go to Mary's Place out on the highway, drink beer, shoot some pool. They didn't have a dance floor, but once in a while someone would dance to the jukebox.

One night a bunch of the fallers was in, just back from a week in the woods. The first snow drifted onto the mountains that week, which meant the end of falling till spring. They were celebrating the end of work for another year, and hunting season. These guys were the young buckos; the married guys with family responsibilities were already out searching for jobs, ways to keep the family going until spring when their big checks would start coming in again.

Falling trees is the most dangerous job in the woods, and fallers are often the mavericks, the wild ones. Dan was one of those. He was a fine figure of a man in his steel-toed boots, stagged jeans, cut off above the ankles, and striped shirt, the red suspenders flashing. His blue eyes bright with excitement, his body never still. He had an edge. That night he was gulping his drinks, turning up the

juke box, dancing with all the girls, his long legs flashing like jackknives.

I was the quiet one in our bunch, so I watched it all. Later on he began to bow in front of each girl when he asked her to dance, nearly falling each time. I couldn't help but laugh.

Finally he got to me. Bending over beside the table, he leaned down and asked, "And what, fair lady, makes you laugh so much? Could it be me?" With that, his legs collapsed under him and he fell in a heap on the floor. I laughed even harder. At first he looked bewildered, then he gathered himself together and tried to get up. When that didn't work, he stretched out on the floor, cocked his head on one elbow, and looked up at me.

"Gosh, you're pretty," he said. "Maybe I should get to know you better. You might be a keeper." He turned his head toward the bar. "Innkeeper," he shouted, waving one arm, "Bring me coffee!"

In town they would have eighty-sixed him, but this was a logger's bar and everyone knew Dan, liked him, especially Mary. She waddled over laughing and put a pot of coffee by his elbow. "You're going to need all of this, and I don't know if that'll do the trick," she said, looking down at him fondly.

"Leave me alone with--what's your name? I'm courting." Mary just shook her head and went back to her usual seat behind the bar.

That's how it started. That winter Dan and I got married and I quit the green chain. We lived on his rocking chair money, unemployment, and had a grand honeymoon. Sure he got restless, and drank too much at times, but we laughed all winter long. One night he sneaked out and took Jenny, the neighbor's dappled gray

mare, and rode into town wearing nothing but a set of black longjohns. He rode that horse right in the front door of the Colony. Looking down, he saw where something in the woods had ripped his long johns and pulled on the string. When the pants started to separate at the knee, he flung his head back and roared, "Twenty miles from home and no black thread. Bring me whiskey, Mary, for I think I may freeze to death!"

About that time Jenny decided this was no place for a lady. She lifted her tail and dropped a steaming load, reared and dumped Dan in it, kicked the pool table over, high-tailed it out the door. When they brought Dan home he was sleeping peacefully, though he didn't smell too good. Folks still like to tell the story, down at the Colony bar.

When spring came and Dan went back to the woods, I had to do something. Dan was falling trees twelve hours a day out on BLM land, and I couldn't sit still for worrying. Dan's pa was a crippled old logger who ran the post office and the general store. He'd made a snug little apartment, a bachelor's hole, he called it, out in the old woodshed. I used to go over there when I finished my chores and listen to him yarn.

One day we put our heads together and figured out a scheme. When Dan came home, we told him about it, and he was tickled. He wanted to start drawing plans right away. He was that energetic. The three of us drank three pots of coffee sitting at the round oak table, drawing plans for an addition to the post office where Dan and I could live so's I could help Pa and keep my mind occupied.

First they built a little apartment up next to the general store on the other side from Pa's. Then they cut a hole through from the kitchen into the store. They built a platform about a foot off the floor and framed it in. From about four feet up the walls were mostly glass so I could see out and wait on customers. There was a window I could open and close. They put a counter along that side so I could sort mail and sell stamps, and above it, next to the window, were the post office boxes, with etched brass door frames and a gold number on the front of each box. I shined up every one of those boxes, polished the brass, washed the windows. When we finished it was something to see. I even baked pies and had free coffee the day we were ready for business. I was sitting pretty, right there in the middle of the general store, with Pa and the customers keeping me company days, and Dan holding me close at night.

Pa sold a little bit of everything in the general store, but mostly he liked to tell stories, tie flies, and sell bait. I sat up in the post office, nice and tidy, knitting or talking to customers, sorting mail and watching the general store while Pa traded stories and ran the bait business. I could step down two steps and be ready to cook dinner. When I did my canning or roasted a turkey and made plum pudding, I'd leave the door open. You could hear the wood snapping in the stove, the plum pudding bouncing off the sides of the pot, take in the smell of cinnamon and apples, and on holidays, a big Tom turkey roasting. Of course we had a big old wood stove in the middle of the store. It was a favorite place for woodsmen in the winter; Dan held court there.

By the time Luke came along, Pa was gone and Dan too, of course. Seemed like Pa started to shrivel up about the time Dan began drinking so heavy. Then one day there was nothing left.

But Dan, that's another matter . . . logging didn't kill him right off, no such luck. I think I would've handled that. I would've grieved my heart out and had it over. The way it happened I wished I could care, felt guilty cause I didn't.

I quit worrying when Dan quit falling, went to work on the loader. That was too soon. He was already in the hospital when they called me that day. The doctors tried to put his leg together, had it in traction for weeks, but they never could get it to work. At first he had to talk about it, make it real.

"God, what a beautiful day," he'd start, "You'd never expect any bad news on a day like that, the sun shining, reflecting off the guy wires buckled onto that ninety foot spar, sparkling across the logs layin' down across the field." He stopped often in the middle of his story, hearing the sounds, the yarder grinding away, holding the turn, bringing the logs to the landing, the whistle punk hooting, four sharp blasts, warning the pull was coming.

"I heard a crack, like the crack of doom," he said. "When I looked up that old spar had broke clean off at the guy buckle about halfway down. I only had a split second to decide because it was coming right at me. I had to get out of its way, and pick a place where the guy wires that were already starting to sag couldn't get me. I took a chance. It was an eighteen foot drop to the ground, but that was nothing compared to what would happen if I stayed where I was, where if the spar missed me one of those guy wires could

whistle right around my neck, cut my head off." He'd look away, remembering.

"I hit the ground running but it felt like I kept stepping in a hole. When I looked down I almost passed out from the shock of seein' my leg. My right leg was splayed out, floppin', and I was runnin' on the bone that stuck through the skin, spurtin' blood. I was runnin' on the bloody stump, crunching bone with every step."

He didn't lose heart right away. For months he hoped, prayed to get back in the woods. Finally he whittled it down to hoping he could walk again-- not lose his manhood, he called it. When he came home from the hospital and had to settle for a wheelchair, he turned against God. He sat in the living room most of the time, staring out at the woods with blank eyes, yelling at me to bring him food, gobbling it down like the logger he used to be. I tried to get him to call on Jesus but he was too far into his misery and hate to hear. He turned into a bitter old man before my eyes, thirty-seven years old and finished. The fatter he got, the meaner he got. Course he always had that little pint shoved in his bib overalls; that didn't help.

If he was hopeless, I was hopeless too. Most days I holed up in the post office, knitting, talking to folks, trying to stay cheerful with my insides churning, changing from a soft person into a hard one, from cinnamon and spice to horehound.

The last day started out bad. Dan was shaking hard, staring at the corner of the room, moaning, the tears running down his cheeks. "You don't care about me no more, Floss. Them rats is chawin' at the woodwork and you just sit there, won't even set a trap."

He screamed and ran the wheelchair into the table, chasing the rats. The coffee pot fell over and hot coffee streamed down his leg, but he didn't seem to feel it. He even ran at me when I got down to clean the floor. The rats were bigger than he was, I guess, and he must've thought I was one of them.

I finally went in the post office and locked the door shut so I wouldn't have to listen to his hollering. I opened my book and fell right into it. I was jolting through London on a foggy night, trying to figure out how Hercule Poirot would get through this one, when I suddenly noticed how quiet it was. I hated to put the book down. There'd be another mess for me to clean up, including Dan and his peed-in pants, if I was lucky, but my conscience got to me. When I opened the door to the kitchen things looked bad, broken dishes, broken glass--broken man, I thought. But then I realized Dan was gone, and saw blood on the floor next to the window. The front door was wide open, wind like ice blowing in. I followed the trail of blood out to the porch where it dripped down the weathered steps, then smeared across the weeds. I thought of getting somebody but I was afraid to take the time. I had a terrible feeling about Dan. A trail through the dusting of snow showed where he'd jerked the wheel chair, impatient, maybe trying to turn around, racing down the hill like a kid doing wheelies on his bike. Parallel ruts gouged a path down the hill and under the trees.

I found him face up in the creek. He must've been there a while; ice was starting to freeze around the edges of his hair, in his ears. His eyes were frozen open, staring up at the old black crow screeching from the top of a pine tree that slanted out over the pond.

The blood had quit running out of the jagged slash where he'd stuck his hand through the window. In the bitter cold, I began to shake, and the wind tore my mind into shrieks, the cold stones of my feet rooting me to the ground.

I don't remember much after that. Somebody must've heard me; people came right away. The guys took care of Dan while the women took me home, put me to bed with hot bricks on my feet. Stayed with me till I came back to my head.

You may think it's gruesome, talking like this, but I had to start talking, like Dan, getting over his accident. Every night I'd see his eyes staring at that old black crow waiting to peck 'em out. Day and night that's all I'd see. Feeling guilty I never heard him go. Feeling guilty I was glad he was gone.

Luke came dancing into the post office one day on a spring wind. The air was balmy and it seemed like he brought the smell of the mountains and summer with him. He took one look at me and decided to do something about my sad eyes, or so he said. "Hey Floss, there's a dance over at Emerson School tomorrow night. How long since you been dancing?"

I almost fell off the chair. It was ten years at least since I'd thought about dancing, what with Dan's legs and all. After he was gone, I never had the heart for it, thinking about those eyes. Besides I was over the hill. I might go across to the Grange Hall, take some pickles or something, but I never danced and nobody ever thought of asking. I was the widow woman that worked in the post office. It was nearly twenty years since Dan and I courted.

"How about fixin' a basket? I'll come by and get you about six o'clock." With that, he sashayed out the door.

Luke had been around there off and on for a couple of years. He worked the harvests, traveled from one place to another all summer long. I don't know where he went in winter. He wore faded jeans and high-heeled boots, and usually he had an old guitar slung over his shoulder. He could strum a pretty tune, that Luke, the bones in his wrists sticking out of his sleeves, his thumbs sprung out from them with a life of their own. Grizzled black hairs pushed out from the little pads of flesh between the joints of his fingers, though he didn't have much on his head. Sometimes his hands with their splayed thumbs reminded me of spiders crabbing their way up and down the strings. But he always had a smile on his face, a word for everyone, and his hips moved with the music. It seemed to come from the center of his soul--if he had one, God love him!

That day I was so flabbergasted I let him waltz right out the door without saying I wouldn't go. Guess I didn't want to say it, really. He acted the fool at times but he was the only one treated me like a woman since I couldn't remember when. So I stood at the door and watched him walk down the hill thinking about it, knowing I was the fool, but feeling the sap rise just the same. I guess that never really goes away. Stays with you like a sleeping bear in winter.

His brightness warmed me for a while as spring turned to summer. I used to watch him. Sometimes his shirt would hike up and the hair on his back seemed alive. Every time he came to town we'd do something. Sometimes we'd go down by the river and I'd pick wild daisies while he cast for speckled trout. I'd try out the petals to

see would I marry again. At night, most times, we'd just sit on the porch and listen to the quick splash of fish jumping in the creek, the wind moving in the willows, watch the fireflies come up in the weeds to meet the stars. No man ever treated me like Luke did, but he never asked to stay the night, never touched me more than holding my hand, taking my arm to see I didn't stumble. I thought he was being a gentleman, treating me respectful, and I sat back, letting wishes take me home.

I'm glad I had the dreaming; it didn't last long. He went off to look for work down by Sisters that winter and we didn't see him for a long while. I settled down in my rocking chair like an old spayed cat, played solitaire, and sometimes on Sunday the kids next door brought over a new jigsaw puzzle. I had the post office and then, when the Higdon's came to town, I hit it off with Joe and Betty, and their daughter, Mary Jean. Mary Jean was a pistol, always winning some prize or other. She was ten the year they moved to Clearwell, like a twig off her father's tree. Looked like him, walked like him, tried to talk like him. She'd come by the post office every week with something for me, an old fashioned posy tied with a piece of long grass, a rock touched by lightning, a lichen twig. It made the time pass.

When Luke came back to town, he didn't come around me except to pick up his mail and get groceries. He seemed different, more careful somehow. Kept his elbows tucked into his sides and his shoulders hunched--like he was holding his breath. His shoulders seemed more rounded and his head was pushed forward, with his nose always pushed into things, sniffing around like a blade looking

for rotten wood. His cheekbones were bright red knobs beneath the lashless eyes, the blue of them faded and blank-looking. The laugh lines next to his eyes that used to crinkle up so pretty were more like chicken-scratches in dry dirt. He blinked his eyes a lot, and his eyebrows were rucked up and twisted white--devil's eyebrows--his eyelids like tissue paper, trembling.

When Luke came in to get his mail he looked every which way but at me. I'd watch him go down the hill in front of the post office, down by where Dan's chair went in the creek,. His walk was curled in around the edges, cautious, like a man with secrets. When he talked, his voice was wispy, like he was casting out a line and didn't want to scare the fish. Later, of course, we wondered if he might've spent some time in jail, if that's why he stayed away so long.

He came in the post office the day of the grange dance and for a minute I thought he might be waiting to ask me something, even though I knew better. No fool like an old fool, that's me.

That night when I walked over to the Heberman's barn carrying my pickle jar, the barn doors stood open and chaff swirled down from the loft across the stage lights. You could hear the light voices of the women bringing in the baskets of food, laying it out on the table.

Luke was up on the bandstand doing tricks for the gaggle of awestruck kids that still hung around him. When he hunched down with his Stetson held in front of him and pulled a rabbit out of the hat, you could hear them gasp, but what I saw was the scalp shining white under the hair he combed across his bald spot. He looked oily somehow, the shine scummed over.

I wondered where he got the rabbit. The old Luke could've talked most any man, woman, or child out of anything, but not anymore. He handed the rabbit to Mellie, the Smith's youngest, saying, "Take it to your ma. She'll cook it for supper, tomorrow night, most likely." He whacked her gently on the bottom. "Now git."

Like I said, the kids were all crazy about Luke, maybe cause he didn't come around very often. Most of the grownups walked around him these days. Seemed like he'd lost the hang of just talking to folks, finding out what they were doing. But with the kids he was still the Pied Piper.

He turned back to them now. "Okay, kids, before I quit I'm gonna show you what to do when you forget your lunch."

He stuck his hand in his hat and put on a big struggle like he was trying to pull something out, then shook his head and said, "Sometimes they fight me." Finally he pulled his hand out of the hat and shook out his long wispy fingers. They were like fringe on an old buggy, brown and tarnished, still flying in the wind.

He plunged his hand back into the hat and every one of those kids was on tip-toe. He climbed up on the bandstand and walked in circles, his face screwed up like he was in pain, while he made the hat jump and buck in his hands. In a frenzy, he threw it on the platform, stomping the edges down, then stood back so they could see the hard-boiled egg standing up in the crown of his battered hat.

He scooped it up, jumped off the bandstand, and thrust the egg at Kenny. "Hold this for me, Kenny, while I dust off my hat."

Kenny's freckles stood out like spattered paint. "Yessir." He stood back from the other kids and held the egg out in front of him

with both hands. The next day, over at the post office, he said he appreciated the honor but was so scared he almost peed his pants. Maybe Kenny started to grow up right then. Of course all of us grew up that night, especially me. . . and Mary Jean.

Luke pulled his shirt sleeve across his forehead to wipe off the sweat, whomped the hat across his knees, then leaned against the bandstand and rolled a cigarette one-handed, showing off. He took a couple of deep pulls at the cigarette, ran his hand around the brim of his hat, fingered the deep groove in the middle, put the hat on and pulled it down so the brim shaded his face, then reached across to Kenny for the egg.

The kids were looking up into the lights, but from where I stood those lights carved shadows in Luke's face, hollows like tears running down his cheeks.

Kenny juggled the egg for a minute and almost dropped it, then it was in Luke's hand. "Thanks, kid," he said carelessly. He gestured to the boys on the bandstand. "Give me a drum roll, fellas." When it came he rolled the egg along the splintered edge of the bandstand till you could hear the shell crunch. Somehow it made goose bumps come up on my skin. He slipped the shell off quick and dropped it into Kenny's outstretched hand.

Before Kenny had time to close his hand, Luke flipped his wrist and tossed the egg up hard. It twisted, shining in the golden chaff, then disappeared in the shadow of the rafters. It seemed like magic the way it hung there then disappeared. When it came down it dropped like a shot into Luke's open mouth with a sucking gargle. Seemed like he would've choked on it or at least gagged. I did, just

hearing it. Reminded me of the keeper feeding whole rabbits to the snakes at the Portland zoo. Luke cleared his throat, shook his head, turned away. In seconds, he was on the bandstand tuning up his guitar like nothing happened. The kids looked away and shuffled their feet, the way kids do when they're ashamed. Some noisy teen-age boys romped in from outside where they'd been sampling white lightning.

When I turned I saw Mary Jean over by the big double doors, looking like a lost pup. She loved music, liked to sing, and Luke had been kind of a hero to her. It was a hard time for her anyway. She didn't belong with the little kids anymore, and yet she wasn't ready for big ones, the teen-agers trying on makeup, giggling when the boys came in smelling of whiskey, wanting something more. She was too young to sit with her mother listening to the women talk about canning blueberries, and she sure couldn't sit with her father. He was celebrating getting the hay in, probably trying out the white lightning outside, although he was never a rowdy man.

Mary Jean was staring at Luke, and I could see her mouth curl down like she tasted something bad, but now that I think back on it, her chin was trembling. At the next intermission, I saw him come up and take hold of her elbow where the bones are like a baby bird's, squeeze on it, and bend down to whisper something in her ear, that blade of a nose breathing on her neck. She whirled away from him and was out the door, quick as a wink.

She should have talked to her mother. I wasn't the one to talk to, still remembering summer, and the daisy petals that said never or forever, whichever I wanted to believe.

But I couldn't imagine them talking, not about that. Betty was a big woman, the everyday kind, a hard worker and no complainer. I could just see it--she'd be standing by the kitchen table folding the big white sheets just off the line, her mind on dinner, getting Billy in bed, planting a winter garden. Mary Jean would be standing there waiting, clearing her throat, trying to start talking, finally walking away.

Her best friend, Sally, was over by the bandstand now, standing first on one leg and then the other in front of the noisy boys, and I could see Betty Jo, Sally's little sister, careening around the dance floor with the little kids. They were screaming and falling down--asking for bedtime, really. They'd struggle a little, then bed down in the hay, whimpering, muttering like sleepy birds in a nest.

Since I was still standing in the door, not in and not out, I saw everything. I watched Mary Jean stand outside in the shadows till she grabbed off her shoes and zig-zagged across the dry crumbling dirt of the parking lot, a trail of white dust behind her in the moonlight. They'd pulled a blade across the field next to the barn so people could park for the party. The bare dirt was like a desert next to the soft plowed field sprouting grain. I watched her crawl into the back seat of her folk's car parked at the back of the lot.

Car doors slammed, and the boys were showing off again; I could hear the girls screaming softly. The band took a break so people could put their kids to bed or start for home. Luke shambled across the parking lot, tipping a bottle. He made me think of a cockroach waving its antenna. I hated seeing him that way, and God forgive me, I turned and walked away.

Around eleven o'clock, Mary Jean's mother started gathering up the kids and discovered Mary Jean was gone. Joe left them all standing, jumped in the car and headed out like a prairie fire. He told me about it the next day. About halfway to the farm he saw Mary Jean limping down the road in her T-shirt, nothing else, her legs dragging, tears dripping off her chin onto her torn T-shirt. When he stopped the car, she just kept walking. It was then he saw the clot of blood and mucus that trailed down the white grain of her thigh. He ran to her, tried to pull her up into his arms, but she fought him, sobbing, flailing, punching, pushing him away.

They were standing like that in the headlights when a neighbor, John Littleton, pulled up. Betty jumped out of the car almost before it could stop and ran over to Mary Jean. "Oh, my baby, what have they done to you?" Sobbing, she turned Mary Jean around and held her close to that big soft bosom.

"Take me home, Mama, take me home." She was still crying, snot running down her face, standing there in nothing but her T-shirt, shaking fit to die.

Joe was down at the post office first thing next morning. When I saw his face I had an awful feeling, and I locked up the door and made him a fresh cup of coffee. That's when he told me the whole story, the awful hate in Betty's eyes, the fear in Mary Jean's. He was Betty's husband, Mary Jean's father--a good man, but still a man. I suppose I should have told him right then about seeing Luke in the parking lot, but the habit of secrets is strong and, to tell the truth, I still didn't want to think of Luke that way. That night, instead of Dan's

dead eyes, I saw those spider hands on Mary Jean, the splayed thumbs working.

I didn't hardly see Betty or Mary Jean the rest of summer. Folks said she'd been fooled with, torn raw till she bled. They had the doctor out, I heard, but nobody else saw them. Joe stopped by for the mail but he got quieter and quieter as the summer wore along. Wouldn't talk to nobody.

Folks said Betty and Mary Jean had taken to sharing a bed, shut the door on Joe. I reckon when Betty saw Mary Jean fighting her dad out there in the moonlight, she decided her baby needed her most. Mary Jean never did tell what happened.

I heard some pretty nasty things about Joe, sitting up there in the Post Office. "Where there's smoke there's fire," people said, and "Nobody gonna tell me a daddy's girl like Mary Jean would fight off her old man." They were new folks, of course, nobody that knew Joe. But it was hard on him just the same. They shook their heads, looking pompous and self-satisfied, like folks do when there's trouble and it isn't theirs.

Joe came into the post office early one morning a few weeks later wearing his best Stetson and dressed in a new pair of jeans with a bright bandanna around his neck. He said he reckoned he'd stop by before he left town. "Gotta head on out, Floss, what I'm doing just ain't gettin' it," he said, standing by the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in his hand. "They don't need me at home. The hay's in and Mary Jean's healing up fine with just her mom. Hard for a mother to think of anything else when her baby's hurting."

All summer I'd kept thinking someone would tell him and I wouldn't have to, but that didn't happen, I guess. "Joe," I started off easy, my throat was so dry, "The moon was shining real bright that night. I saw Mary Jean heading off to the car looking like a whipped puppy. Luke tried to talk to her, stuck his face down right next to her neck, whispered in her ear. She ran away from him, went out to the car, and crawled in the back seat. Next thing I saw was Luke heading out that way, staggering drunk. I couldn't believe he'd hurt her." I started to cry.

He looked at me real gentle, a pitying look. "I know, Floss. That's where I'm going--to find Luke."

It didn't sink in right away that he'd known all along. I kept apologizing. "I know I should've told you about Luke a long time ago . . ."

Joe's eyes, colder than I'd ever seen them, stopped me. "I always knew there was something wrong with that son-of-a-bitch. Didn't want to say so because of you, now I see I should've. All he ever wanted you for was bait. When Mary Jean got . . ." he choked back the word, then went on, "I knew right away it was him."

Something shifted inside me, like ice breaking loose. Sure it hurt having Joe look at me that way, but he already knew it was Luke. I didn't hurt anything by not telling. Something inside me curled up, knowing what folks thought of me--poor old widow woman, waiting on Luke, and him nothing to wait on.

When Joe turned around and walked out the door I think we both had tears in our eyes. I know I did. He turned when he got to the car, shrugged his shoulders and made a little face, half smiling at me.

I was a lot more humble than I had been before he walked in the door. I showed Joe what a fool I was and he forgave me without a word. I don't know which was the hardest, letting him see me, or letting him forgive me. To my mind Joe's the hero of this story. I don't know what other folks call a hero, but to me, anymore, it's a person who keeps on keeping on.

John Littleton's wife died a couple of months ago and I decided to take him one of my strawberry rhubarb pies to start the summer with. I drove past Joe Higdon's, gawking, thinking I might see a For Sale sign. Instead Mary Jean was sitting in the old tire swing just like she used to. She wasn't swinging hard or laughing, but her face was bright and her hair was shining like she'd just brushed it. As I went past, she ran over to Joe and swung on his arm, asking for something. He put down his saw, reached down and took her hand like it was something precious. They walked across the yard, him looking down at her, her looking up. They never even saw me.

John Littleton was kind enough to ask me in, and he liked my pie. "I sure was glad to see Mary Jean looking like her old self when I came by," I said between bites.

John never did talk much. He just cleared his throat and said "I reckon what comes around goes around. Heard old Luke got hisself gored by a bull over by Lightner about a month ago. Took him a while to die." He looked straight at me, and when our eyes met I knew I didn't have to say any more about Luke.

I sat there and watched John eat my pie, his Adam's apple going up and down, knots coming and going in his jaw. He was a

good man, John Middleton, a thrifty farmer with 160 acres, some in wheat and some in trees waiting to be harvested. He had his own mill, and you could tell he was handy by the way he kept his farm-- the barn painted, the house tidy, and the fences straight. Thinking about the fences made up my mind. I'd had enough of fences. I thought about reading in bed, ordering lingerie out of the catalog, leaving all the lights on when I felt like it. Besides that, John didn't talk and what else is there, besides guessing games?

I like being over the hill. I've climbed one too many, tagging along behind some man. I gave up daisies and wishes, but I'm still baking pies. First it was strawberry and rhubarb for John, now it's whatever / feel like. In a few months I'll start baking pumpkin and mince for the holidays. I'll serve pie and coffee on Christmas Eve, but I'll do it at the general store, where I'm the only one that takes inventory.

SNOW FENCES

I criss-crossed the West this summer from Oklahoma City to the Oregon coast, from San Francisco to Ketchikan, saying hello, saying goodbye, and started thinking about the past on my way home. The fog moving through the interstices of the Golden Gate bridge, the snow fences bracketing the highways of Wyoming, the tiny vibrating Indian woman dancing at a pow-wow in Idaho, her black hair rolling off her shoulders--all reminded me of Ishi. I still miss her.

Ishi came into my life about ten years ago, the year I was fifty and alone for the first time in my life. Without sons or lovers, I floated like a dandelion seed, tumbling, blown by the wind, no one needing me, no place to be. Reality was so tenuous I'd leave for work looking over my shoulder, hanging on to the apartment I'd put together, hoping I'd make it back that day, hoping they wouldn't take me away, hoping for one more day, and then another. When I left the apartment I was like a starfish pried from a rock.

One Saturday night I went into town to speak at an AA meeting. After the secretary introduced me, I got up and started to say, *I'm Janet, and I'm an alcoholic*, but I like to add a couple of things some people don't approve of. I like to give my last name so people can find me in the phone book, and I have to mention my addiction so I'll remember it when some doctor tempts me with an easy way out. So I said, "I'm Janet Michaelson, and I'm an alcoholic- addict."

That must have rung a bell with Ishi; she came up to me afterwards, put her arms around me, and whispered in my ear. "I

understood everything you said and why you said it. I can tell you're rebellious, like me." Then she leaned back and grinned, still holding on. "Can I have your telephone number?"

According to AA, the way I understand it, you never say no, but I wanted to--bad. I had twenty-five miles to drive through the mountains that night. For years I had suffered from what they call agorophobia--fear of the marketplace--which, translated, meant I had panic attacks whenever I left home. That wall of fear stood between me and everybody. I gave her my phone number and got out of there as quick as I could.

When Ishi called the next day I was so low I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to talk to me; I certainly wasn't a shining example of serenity. I said it was okay to come by. An hour or so later I heard the air brakes of a semi pulling up the street next to my house. I thought it was some trucker coming in for a couple hours rest until I saw Ishi climb down from the cab. As it turned out she was a long-haul driver on her way out of town, just wanting to touch base with me before she left. I'd been pole vaulting over mouse turds as usual--another AA expression. AA meetings and AA people were my lifeline in those days. If I went without meetings I had no substance, nothing to hold me to the earth. I felt as if I might float to the ceiling, burst through and disappear like a cloud breaking up in the wind.

After that I never knew when Ishi would stop by. I'd hear the squeal of the air brakes, look out the window, put on the coffee pot, and then sit down to listen. In a couple of months my house was her home base.

When my own kids left home ten years before, it was like the diaspora. They went in every direction and the further they got from me the better they liked it. Now there was Ishi, like an oasis in the middle of a desert, needing me. She had been sober six months and wanted someone to lean on. We were both Californians; I had four years of sobriety, and she thought that was forever. It seemed too good to be true.

When I came to Myrtle Point from Santa Barbara, it was culture shock in spades. The only job I could get was bartending. The first time I saw grown men drunk, rolling in the sawdust, calling each other names, I stood there with my mouth open. It didn't scare me; they were too much like little boys fighting over marbles, drawing a line, daring someone to step over it. Besides I'd never been scared of anything real.

I did my drinking, at least the first phase of it, at Tommy's Golden Cock, in the San Marcos area of Santa Barbara. Tommy's had a band and an intimate dance floor. The clientele were mostly businessmen; at least they wore suits and shaved. In Oregon the men wore striped shirts and red suspenders. Their ragged jeans were cut off above the ankles for safety in the woods, *staggged*, they called it, and their boots had steel toes. When I came to work in high-heeled boots with my trousers tucked inside, they broke up laughing, "Dutch," they'd say, "you think the shit's that deep in here?"

When I wore my black fedora and the plaid wool cape I love, they laughed even more and said, "Dutch rode in on her broom so she could sweep up the shit instead of wearing her pants rolled up."

Then some high roller would walk in and yell "Timber!", which meant *set up the bar*, and they'd forget about me as long as I kept the beer coming.

With her crooked grin and flying feet, plus a natural sweetness, Ishi was a favorite in AA. I was not. With her beside me, I was slotted in the mother role, so I was okay. God knows I loved her too; I loved the excitement, the flying joy, the child in her that showed me how to have fun. One time we drove to the beach fifty miles away to do our laundry and didn't come back for a week. When I got tired and scared of getting old, she massaged my feet and bought me books about the joy of aging. She was my daughter, my sister, my friend, my mother. She may have saved me from going crazy that winter, yet sometimes it was a little much. At night when I woke up, she'd be rubbing against me, crying, and when I pushed her away she sulked. I began to wonder what had happened to her apartment in town.

Ishi was in her late twenties, her hair black and curly, her skin olive. She had laughing blue-gray eyes, a dimple that came and went at the corner of her mouth. In town she wore gauzy shirts tied at the waist so the half-moon of her belly showed just below her perky breasts. When she came home after a long haul, she would jump down out of the truck and take the stairs two at a time, whirling into the kitchen to lift me off the floor, turning in circles.

Most of the time she reminded me of a little girl with a secret, but when she was up in the cab of that silver truck, wearing her dark blue hat with *Road Hog* across the front in curly gold letters, a cigarette dangling unlit from the side of her mouth, the little girl disappeared; she was a bona fide truck driver.

At that time, I was trying to be an artist. I rented the upstairs of an old house with gables and painted floors, remodeled it, made one room into a studio, carpeted the entry and the stairs for a gallery. The walls were white, the woodwork and the gracefully curving bannisters deep gold, the carpeting a mixture of gold and red. I painted a mural on the stair wall. The light switch was Aladdin's lamp; smoke drifted up the stair wall into a genie's face at the landing. Ishi thought it was cool.

When I wasn't remodeling or refinishing furniture and collectibles from the local dump, I was painting or wood carving. Before Ishi came I told myself being broke and lonely was what depressed me. With Ishi in my life, I didn't feel so alone, but she could be pretty wearing. One winter afternoon, she began to tell me her story, the way we do in AA. It was a doozy. She ran drugs from Canada to Mexico. When I asked about money, she told me she usually carried from sixty to a hundred thousand by the end of her run. Money wasn't important; she had a hate and a habit. She lived for them and on them.

She sketched out her background, beginning with her teens when she was a bareback rider in the circus. She had an accident, got hooked on Demerol in the hospital. She hated her life, felt she like she'd been cheated. After she got out of the hospital, she stepped up her habit, got hooked on heroin, went to work as a carrier for a syndicate. The China white heroin she carried from border to border was the only thing that took the hate away. For two years she raced through the nights in her custom van, meeting underground people who crept out of cracks in the pavement or opened garage

doors in suburbs marked with careful lawns and graceful trees. During the day she holed up in anonymous motels. When she began to fill me in on the details, she tensed up, her feet pushing against the rungs of the bar stool as if she might jump and run any minute. Her hair hung over her face like a shield.

The last night started out like any other night, she said. She was coming into San Francisco about 3 a.m. to make a routine drop. Suddenly there were two vans blocking off the three-way downhill corner at Van Ness and Market. When she stopped, two guys ran out from behind the vans waving guns at her. Before she could move, a bullet ricocheted off the rearview mirror. Ishi grabbed the .38 from the seat beside her and snapped off two shots, then gunned the motor. A face rose up before her and she heard a scream. Then she was screeching around the corner, racing for the freeway. Her windshield fell away in an arc of crashing glass, the tiny shards bouncing against her face.

When she got to the bridge she started to breathe again but driving across the Golden Gate without a windshield was unreal. Fog swirled in and out of the van.

"I couldn't afford to think, all I could do was drive. *Get out* screamed in my head and sucked my guts out. It was like I left my old self on the street in that scattered glass and turned into a survival machine."

Ishi was so dramatic I didn't know what to believe. This was high drama. She went on, speaking so low I could hardly hear her, her head still in her hands. I could see the tracks of her tears circling her wrists, catching in the fine hair of her arms, disappearing in the soft fabric of her jeans.

She hit Ukiah about five that morning and stopped by the side of the road to wash away the blood from the flying glass. She knelt down and stuck her head in the little creek, then stood up, shook her hair back, dried her face on her sleeve, and looked around to see if anyone was watching. All night she had been making plans.

Finally she drove the van down into a wooded area, put a change of clothes and sixty thousand cash in her leather back pack. She left the dope and the gun in the van, she said it was registered to a Jane Logan in New Hampshire. She didn't know any Jane Logan, had never been to New Hampshire.

She decided to sleep and change clothes, then find a cheap car and head for the ranch in Montana, her family's place. Since it was the middle of December, the ranch would be moth-balled until spring, so if she could get through the snow drifts, she could camp out in the bunkhouse.

She raised her head and looked at me, pushed back her hair. "There was nothing to do then but hole up and heal up." She shrugged her shoulders. "If the cops are looking for you, that's one thing. You might even be able to get by if a dealer's looking for you. But when they're coming at you from both sides? Might as well say goodbye. One way or another you're gone. "The idea of kicking was

so scary I didn't really want to think about it. I told myself *just do it*, climbed back up to the highway and stuck out my thumb."

I knew the country--San Francisco, Ukiah, Reno, Lolo Pass--I drove it all, back in the days before I got scared, but that was as close as I could come to empathy. We sat there at the coffee bar in the kitchen, each of us lost in the past, and stared out the window at the bleak November afternoon. Finally I got up, made a pot of tea, and let down the bright yellow blinds to blot out the rain that trailed across the glass. I turned on the lamps in the living room and kitchen, then sat down with her again. When I reached across and took her hand, Ishi pulled her hand away, squared her shoulders, then put her boots down on the floor with a thump and pushed herself away from the bar. I'll say this for her, she wasn't looking for sympathy, or at least not the mothering kind. When she walked away down the hall I thought I'd lost her--maybe in a way hoped I had.

Ishi came back to the kitchen in a few minutes, poured a fresh cup of tea, and started to talk again. This time her head was up, though she didn't look at me.

"I picked up a car in Ukiah--an old Buick in good enough shape to make it over the mountains, then headed up through Reno to Highway 84. I bought groceries and gas in Reno, picked up a couple pair of jeans, and scored a quarter of Mary Jane from some guys on the street." She looked at me then. "My grandma was half-Indian and she used marijuana to make tea, bring on the quiet. She's one

tough old lady. I didn't want the dope so much, just wanted to buy into her power, lean on it. Anyway, I couldn't kick everything at one time. China white was enough."

I was both intrigued and appalled by the bizarre details of Ishi's story, but couldn't help worrying about the stubborn look on her face when she told me about the marijuana. As the weeks went on and she kept coming back, I began to relax. She had almost total recall of conversations, feelings, geography, everything, and she knew how to milk her story for every bit of drama. I knew telling it must be a big relief. The way she described things, it was almost like a movie. When I closed my eyes I was right in the middle of it. At first I was fascinated but as time went on, it wore on me. I wanted to protect her, put my arm out in front of her like I did when the kids were little and I had to make a quick stop. I wanted the story to be over and Ishi well again. I couldn't push her though, I knew that from my own recovery. I had to listen until she was through talking.

When she left town the next time, I painted my worries out in brilliant colors and strange shapes. But when she came back she started right up again. She must have been re-living it all the time she was gone.

"I stayed in the bunkhouse kicking for three weeks," she started out, "shivering and screaming, hallucinating, walking the floors, crawling on my hands and knees, begging. I had locked the door and hidden the key. When it was finally over and I unlocked the door and walked outside I felt transparent. My eyes were sunk back in my

head and my face was all bones. My legs felt like spaghetti, not even *al dente*."

I was glad to see her sense of humor was intact, but a minute later her eyes turned sad and far away again. "There was an empty spot where the craving used to be. A hole in my belly like a boxcar."

A couple of months before all this happened Ishi's dentist in San Diego had suggested major surgery on her jaw for an overbite. Now she decided to take him up on it in the hope that her face would change enough to be a disguise. If that dentist couldn't do it, she vowed she'd find another, even if it took the whole sixty thou.

She called the dentist, then called her grandmother in Cheyenne. If she went straight there after the oral surgery, her grandmother wouldn't be shocked by the way she looked, and she could stay there for the worst of the winter months.

It took a couple of days to clean up the bunkhouse. While she scrubbed, she stuffed herself with vitamins and carbohydrates to finish the healing process. Finally the day came when she could lock up the bunkhouse from the outside. The wind off the Rockies was piling up tumbleweeds against the door when she looked back.

It only took an hour to get rid of the old Buick in Missoula; at one o'clock that afternoon she was on a plane. She took a taxi from the airport and by five she was in a hospital bed, smoothing the cool sheets down over her body, watching the California news again.

January first she clambered down from the plane in Cheyenne with her jaw wired in place. The snow whirled around the airport, and with the bandages around her face, Ishi felt like a ghost blown in on the storm. The worst was over. She'd made it through the blinding

cramps although her knees still ached from kneeling on the rough floor of the bunkhouse, and through the agony of having her jaw broken and set in a new mold. Now all she had to do was wait. In a month she would fly back to San Diego, have the stitches out, come back to Cheyenne and get used to her new face.

Ishi took a long drag off her cigarette. "If I'd known what it was like to kick, have my face changed, I might have gone out in a blaze of glory. Sometimes I look back at those months in Wyoming and wonder why I bothered. It took everything I had, but there was something in me that screamed out *Fuck you--you're not going to get me--not this time--not ever!* She grinned and shrugged her shoulders, "Don't ask me who the *you* is--maybe it's me."

She propped her head on one elbow, "Why is it always the same? By the time you know how hard it's going to be, it's too late to change your mind. When I do change, it seems like it comes out of something bad--like the worst part of me forces me into a corner, so I have to find something better. I think good and bad are connected, like a tree growing out of a rock, one can't survive without the other. Sometimes I'm even not sure which is which." She stared out the window. The sky was blue that afternoon, and now the first star flickered in the smoky twilight. Ishi crushed out her cigarette and took a long gulp of coffee, the muscles working down the long column of her throat. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, and I suddenly realized all this happened less than a year ago. Poor kid, no wonder she needed to talk.

Her voice was husky as she began to tell me about Cheyenne. The grandmother she remembered from when she was a kid was

gone. A very old lady had taken her place. She slept most of the time. An Indian housekeeper who had been with the grandmother for many years took care of her. They spoke to each other mostly in their native language. Ishi wandered around the house, knocking over knick-knacks, scattering newspapers, leaving unread books open on the floor or scattered across the tops of tables.

One day she wrapped a scarf around her head and backed her grandmother's old Pontiac out of the driveway. She was used to traveling long distances alone, and before she knew it she flashed past a sign that marked the Continental Divide. There was no one else on the highway. She pulled off to stretch her legs.

It was a rush. No color anywhere, the clouds building gray on gray, sagebrush--gray-green, oily, smelling of desert and, at the same time, of home and roasting chicken--crunched beneath her feet, surrounded her, the silvered snow fences plowing across that gray sea. The wind lifted her hair, strand by strand, seemed to scour her face clean. Hands thrust into her pockets, hair flying, she shoved her body against the wind and stretched her legs, feeling like somebody, striding across the top of the world.

When Ishi stopped to catch her breath, I got up and walked around, getting my bearings again. This was an epic, too much to take in all at once, poetry made and handed over like a gift--or a burden. Ishi looked down at her plate, fingering crumbs from the pumpkin pie I served her earlier. She stared at me for a minute, mumbled something about going to the bathroom, slid off the bar stool and walked into the other room.

I heated up the coffee and poured us some, watching the cream swirl in my cup. When Ishi came back, she sat down with her back to me, but started talking again right away. This time her voice was dreamy. "Snow fences, they marched across the curve of the hills like the bones of mastodons that died without quitting, you know what I mean?" She gestured with her hands. Without them, she told me, the bleak sagebrush-covered hills would have swallowed her up. Instead the fences snagged her in and held her safe inside the wide horizons.

One day she passed a rest stop museum, stopped and listened to the docent's spiel. She seemed to remember every word. "Most places a blizzard is the main event," she told me, "but in Wyoming, it's only the beginning. The blizzard sweeps across the hills, deposits snow and moves on. But that's only the first act. The wind moves across the high desert and picks up the snow, builds it into what they call a ground blizzard. When that happens, it swirls along the ground, sometimes as high as twenty feet, blinding anyone in its path--usually travelers or cowboys working the range, looking for cattle. Snow fences hold the snow to the ground, keep it from blowing up into a ground blizzard."

The idea of blizzards coming from the sky or rising up from the ground seemed to trigger deep feelings in Ishi.

The habit and the hate were fading, she told me, and with the surgery, even the fear of doing time in the joint for the killing in San Francisco, or worse yet, the possibility of being held to account by people in the syndicate, began to disappear. But that didn't seem to relieve the pain.

"A cold wind was still whistling through the hole in my gut, and the waiting, not knowing what was going to happen next, brought back that feeling of emptiness I used to blank out with heroin. If I was gonna stay clean, I had to find something to fill the hole."

The snow fences, like spines of arks, washed up on the top of the world, haunted her. They fit some way in her life but she couldn't figure out where. Finally it occurred to her she could build snow fences in her mind, control the ground blizzard of feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. The idea made her laugh and comforted her at the same time.

As she talked, Ishi got up and paced in front of me; I emptied ashtrays and poured coffee. I felt as if I had walked the Wyoming hills with her, pondered the snow fences, felt the restlessness. She made a grab for me as I started to sit down next to her, held me tight and buried her face in my hair. She pulled away and took my face in her hands, kissed me on the mouth. With a teasing smile she said, "You're my little mama, aren't you? I can feel you right there with me roaming the hills. When I get cold I can hold onto you. But I don't think you really understand what those snow fences did--my snow fences, the ones in my head. I needed them then, but now I want to get rid of them, throw my feelings out to the wind, let you catch them." She giggled, "You know, like frisbees."

Her sudden changes of mood were as hard to keep up with as her story. Maybe she did it to throw me off balance. She didn't need to; I was already off balance. I moved back, lit a cigarette, tried to

slide up on the barstool gracefully, moving away. I put my hand on her knee, keeping my distance. "Maybe you should keep some of your fences, Ishi. Don't throw all your feelings at me; I have my own to deal with." That might just have encouraged her; I don't know. She seemed to settle down, went on with her story.

"I was too far beyond the old world to go back, but I couldn't find a new one. I felt like I was caught between two worlds, sliding sideways, trying to keep from spinning down between them, like in the pictures you see of earthquakes, where the ground opens up and people fall in. I had to get practical; it doesn't take long to get rid of sixty thousand dollars when you get tangled up with doctors and hospitals, elective surgery, they call it." She leaned back and grinned, putting out her cigarette, "I was still a loner, still a runner. I had a lot of experience driving but what would I do for references? Then I got the bright idea I could enroll in truck driving school with the last of my money."

My mind took its own turn. I understood where she was coming from--that back-to-the-wall feeling was no stranger to me. At the end of my drinking I had no job, no money except forty dollars a week unemployment, and had to have a place to live, food on the table. I was different from Ishi though. For one thing, I was twenty years older. I couldn't drive and I couldn't walk. Undefined spaces terrified me. I was so crazy I was even phobic about my phobias. No amount of Valium helped those feelings, and no amount of booze. Drugs could put me out, but they couldn't keep me loose and moving

in my skin anymore. One morning I woke up with two black eyes and knew there had to be something better. I started telling Ishi my story, got up and made a fresh pot of coffee. We began to laugh about the job references we could give if people were just a little more broad-minded. I took some ice cream out of the refrigerator, pulled a couple of bananas out of the fruit bowl, began putting together banana splits. We washed up the dishes together and crawled into bed.

Ishi only had to go to Denver on her next trip; she'd be back in a week or so, counting turn-around time. I hoped she was almost through with her story, secretly wished she'd start putting some of those fences back. I wanted her to be free, but she was crowding me.

When she came back, I could see it would take more than secret wishes. She was more restless than ever. She didn't want to talk about it, but she couldn't stop talking. You talk about *between two worlds*--that was us, me with my painting, her with her truck-driving, and in between us, feelings everywhere, like flags on the ground.

After a good night's sleep Ishi started in again. "At first," she said, "I felt really out of place with the truckers, thought I'd made a mistake. I was beyond being a kid, but in a way I'd led a sheltered life. I was totally involved in the circus from the time I was fourteen, with horses before that; most of my childhood was spent at the ranch. The accident, if you want to call it that, happened when I was seventeen. We set up the big top that morning in San Bernardino, and the show started at seven. I was watching Mai-Lee's face,

striking a pose, standing upright on the horse's back with one arm stretched out gracefully behind me, the other hand gesturing, pointing out the high wire where the artistes were trading places. The music was blaring. Then came the drum roll. Ginger, my horse, gave a little shake and began to go nuts. I had a hard time holding her, and at first I thought it was just the drum roll that set her off. Then she reared up and began to scream--there's no other word for it--sunfishing, trying to get me off her back. I was trying just as hard to stay on, get her under control. The last thing I remember is flying through the air. I landed so hard on one of those little steel fence posts that mark off the ring it displaced my kneecap, went right through my leg. I was in the hospital a long time with corrective surgery and skin grafts. When I came out I was an addict; it was that simple. Of course I didn't admit it for a long time, or maybe I did and just said fuck it. Of course the circus was gone. I always thought Jens put a burr under Ginger's saddle but there was no way to prove it. Out on the street it didn't take long to realize how scary a habit was, but at least I had the insurance money. It went fast until someone told me I could invest the money in heroin and start dealing instead of just sticking it in my arm."

I'd heard some of this, though not in as much detail. "How about a break? All this listening is making me hungry." Without waiting for an answer, I went around to the other side of the breakfast bar and began to get out stuff for an omelet. "How about a chili and cheese omelet?"

"Sounds good to me." Ishi answered. She looked worried. "Do you want me to quit, Jan? Maybe talking it out isn't such a good idea. I don't want you to hate me."

What could I say. I made the omelets and put one in front of her. After the dishes were done, I suggested a ride. We stopped at a restaurant for coffee and pie, and gossiped about AA people--who was sober, who was drunk, who had somebody new or dumped the old one--the usual stuff.

The next day Ishi left, still looking worried. She was going on a long haul this time, clear to Brookings, Massachusetts. I'd have some time to recuperate. I knew if she still wanted to talk I'd listen. I filled in the time she was gone, started a huge canvas--a portrait of Ishi. I had a picture of her climbing down from the truck, and I could bring it to life when Ishi was there to sit--after confession time was over, which would hopefully be soon.

She drove in at midnight about two weeks later, gave me a quick hug, put her clothes in the washer, and jumped in the shower. When she came out she was wearing a white nightshirt that came just past her crotch. It had a deep ruffled neckline--a poet's shirt, I think they call them now. When I suggested it was a little chilly, she got up and wrapped herself in a robe, said she just liked to be feminine when she got off the road. I made coffee and we settled in at the bar, our usual place.

"I've got to finish this, Jan," she said abruptly. "I'm just now coming to the AA part. Before I went to the truck driving school, I had pretty much given up hope on fitting in anywhere, but I knew I could

do better with truckers than Sunday School teachers or secretaries." She got up and took a Coke out of the refrigerator, turning her back on me. "It's not that I don't like your coffee. I've got to wet my mouth with something cold.

"One way to fit in was going out with the boys after class. But that didn't last. I drank the guys under the table the first week. Then it got weird. I couldn't drink and I couldn't not drink--two beers and I was falling-down drunk."

Finally she was into something I knew about. "I remember what happened when I crossed over the line," I told her. "I was just starting to have fun. One night I looked around the bar and all the guys were standing around me, laughing, buying me drinks, asking me to dance. I wondered why I'd missed all this when I was a teenager. It seemed like only a couple of weeks later I got thirsty and it took three drinks to do what one used to do. That's when everyone disappeared for me except the bartender.

I'll never forget my forty-sixth birthday. The band played *Could I Have This Dance for the Rest of My Life*. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the bartender buy a drink for a guy down the bar, and suddenly I knew he was asking the guy to dance with me. A month later I married another drunk I met in that bar, but this time my luck ran out. My new husband turned out to be strong, healthy, and mean."

My story didn't fit Ishi and she was a little bored, but it was the only one I had. She was only-twenty eight and now that she was off heroin she wanted to party. I couldn't blame her, and I suddenly realized not being able to drink was worse for her than murder. No

wonder she wasn't comfortable talking to me about it. She was dry, not sober. Six months, and she still looked sullen and defiant. I couldn't help but wonder if she was really ready. The thought was depressing.

At the school one of the owners finally took her aside. "Ishi, why don't you face it--you can't drink. I know you want to fit in, but if you keep fighting the booze, you'll be out on your tail. Bruce, over there," he pointed a finger, "goes to AA. Why don't you talk to him?"

"I was really pissed," she told me. "I wanted to punch his lights out, but he was the owner, and I also wanted to stay in school. I went back to my old loner role. Maybe my biggest mistake was trying to be one of the boys. It didn't work. Even at home alcohol wouldn't leave me alone. I was drowning my problems instead of getting through them. At work, everyone was on my case. Finally I agreed to talk to Bruce, but I was sorry right away."

"You think you might have a problem with alcohol?" He boomed it out where everyone could hear. She wanted to sink through the floor.

"Bruce," she pleaded in a frantic whisper, "this is private."

That was her introduction to AA. From the beginning she hated everything about it. That's why she didn't want to talk to me about the AA part. I was one of Them. She took a deep breath and tried to explain.

It was one thing to give up heroin, she said, she could isolate and do that. But when she had to give up booze, people crowded her. AA people crowded her the most. They were so healthy she

wanted puke. "If you drink a lot of beer," they'd say, "you drink a lot," then they'd laugh; it made her mad just thinking about it. They laughed at everything sad, then cried when they gave her a 30-day chip. She wanted to throw it back in their faces and scream, *I'm not one of you!*

The worst of it was they had her pegged. They knew she hated them. One old geezer had the nerve to tell her she looked like a trapped coyote. Yet they took her to meetings, sat with her nights when she couldn't sleep, told her their stories. Their stories made her want to cry, but they made her feel superior too. She was young, with her whole life in front of her. They were over the hill.

Ishi put out another cigarette, ground it into the ashtray, got up and took off her robe, sat down next to me showing off her cleavage. Finally she looked at me, her eyes shining with tears. "Now for the hard part. The big reason I'm still here is I'm in love with you. As much as it scared me, I had to tell you the whole story to see if you'd love me the way I really am."

Without giving me a chance to say anything, she went on to tell me her experiences with sex. Her first sexual relationship was with Mai-Lee, the Chinese woman who taught her trick riding, then seduced her. Jens, the one she blamed for her accident, was her boyfriend before Mai-Lee got to her. She thought it was none of his business. Mai-Lee was her teacher, her creator. Being her lover was part of that, the natural course of events. Now she wanted me to create her again.

I took a deep breath. Everything became too clear. She hadn't been taking an AA inventory, admitting her faults and taking

responsibility for her share in them. She'd been courting me. I felt stupid, angry, betrayed, but she was only trying to please me, after all. What could I say? Ishi was a beautiful girl with a figure to take your breath away. That is, if you respond to women that way. But I don't, not then and not now. Even if I did, I hope I wouldn't respond to someone who was so sick. If there's one thing I learned from Ishi, it's that motivation is everything. You can do the wrong thing for the right reason and nine times out of ten it'll work. But try doing the right thing for the wrong reasons and you're screwed every time.

I blame myself. I should have sorted things out sooner; the signs were all there. My motivation wasn't so hot either. I needed her--so I let it go on.

Even after that Ishi hoped, and so did I. She hoped I would give in, and I hoped she could love me as a friend and try to get well. We were both disappointed. We finally came to blows. It was pretty ridiculous actually, I'd never struck any one in anger, but when she pushed me too far, I pushed back. She could have wiped up the floor with me. The fight was over some stupid thing, with something not so stupid underneath it, our different ways of loving. I suppose it got physical because we ran out of words, had to finish it the only way we could.

Eventually we spoke to each other again, but never about anything that mattered.

Since then I've been married and divorced, finished school, finally learned I could make it on my own. This summer I've been on the road, visiting my kids in Alaska, Seattle, Salt Lake City, visiting

friends in all those places and more. I left Salt Lake City at three o'clock this morning, heading for home with the last of my scattered possessions piled in the back of my pickup truck.

The Wasatch Mountains were like walls holding in the early morning dark. My little truck labored up the mountains like the boats I watched from the Coast Guard station a few days ago, bucking their way through the waves at the mouth of Coos River.

I had to slow to fifty miles an hour. I felt completely alone in the darkness, rocked in the wake of roaring diesels, overwhelmed by my own insignificance, drowned in memories. Somewhere around Rock Springs, fingers of light began to reach across the sky. I came around the bend craning my neck to see them, hit a patch of gravel on the shoulder, and for a minute I thought I was a goner.

I stopped soon after at Little America--*The World's Biggest Truck Stop*, according to the sign. Before I sat down to breakfast, I stopped in the gift shop and bought two pairs of earrings, bright red, just to get centered. At breakfast I toyed with the idea of calling someone from the phone on the table, but of course there was no one to call. I thought of Ishi, wondered if she was still blasting her way across country in that silver truck of hers. For a minute I thought about what it might have been like if I hadn't been alone when the sun came up, but then I thought of the bright red earrings I didn't have to explain to anybody.

I finished my scrambled eggs, piled all the jam on a half slice of toast, and left a two-dollar tip for the sleepy waitress with the rumped hair.

IN THE MIDDLE OF RAIN AND ROSEBUDS

. . . the closer I move
To death . . .
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ram-shackling sea exults.
Dylan Thomas

October is a new beginning. The air's crisp and leaves layer the trees with color, like the winter clothes I love--turtlenecks, flannel shirts, wool trousers, corduroys. When the wind gets cold I ache a little these days, but red leaves still fly in the wind; their smoke still burns away the hope of spring and the summer doldrums. They say hope is a whore, and I believe 'em. It lets you look at the stars and fall in the gutter, if you don't watch your feet.

In the little Southern California town where I grew up, the north wind came in October, twisted the leaves against an impossibly blue sky, got me high--on the wind, nothing else in those days. I walked in the wind with my hair blowing across my face, basking in the clarity of light. Bare-branched trees whisper in the morning, separated beneath the first evening star, their clawed black shapes stark against the deep blue of twilight.

The year I was seventeen, after the spring and summer of Ricky and Andrea, I had a hard time beginning again when October came. That summer scoured me empty. I filled the emptiness with fantasy and lies, built my life on that foundation. I'm getting too old for lies and complications, hopes and fears. In the October of my life I want clarity, the bare bones of things; I want to fly again until it's over.

An unfinished past is like a blackberry seed under your lower plate. You can't get at it. You feel around with your tongue and suck in your cheeks, watching people to see if they're watching you. God forbid you should take out your plate--which reminds me of my dad.

It was the habit in our family to sit around the table after dinner and talk. We all loved Mom's blackberry pie, but sometimes it brought the after-dinner conversation to a screeching halt. Daddy would stop in the middle of a sentence, push back his chair, and rush to the bathroom to take out his teeth. Afterward he went right to the radio and turned on the war news, grumpy, embarrassed I suppose, not saying a word. That meant we were supposed to start clearing the table, no more talk.

So, the truth about the past is embarrassing and painful, hard for me to find. My memories pop up like post-vacation slide shows--*click-click, click-click*--come and go when I least expect them. Sometimes they make me laugh, but more often they leave me feeling sad and lonely, sorry for myself or guilty.

I want to take control, exorcise the ghosts, take out my teeth and scrub them clean, not caring who sees. I suppose I'm thinking of blackberries right now because it's blackberry time in Oregon. I'm sitting in the kitchen, as usual, my partial plate on the table in front of me, next to an empty plate smeared with juice from a big piece of blackberry pie. Sometimes my mind likes to fly like a kite, swooping and diving, crashing when old memories pop up, but my body is grounded in food, I'm afraid.

We were in Hunter's Ice Cream Parlor and Ricky was wearing what my father called "that sappy look." My dad didn't think much of Rich, as he called him, because he drove a racy Model A Ford, and rumor had it that the whole basketball team went up to Lytle Creek in his car on spring vacation and got drunk. In a small town like ours, nothing was secret. Daddy heard about it, and put the kibosh on my seeing Ricky. But we were going steady and Ricky wouldn't be around much longer so Daddy gave in. He didn't know it but Ricky was my salvation. By myself I was just a brain, a nerd they call them now. With Ricky Weston, captain of the basketball team, class president, I was somebody. And I needed that desperately.

Ricky reached across the table to hold my hand while the jukebox played Tommy Dorsey's latest, "Sentimental Journey." His eyes were soft and dreamy and a little smile played across his lips. It was one of those moments I still treasure, foolish though it may be. While I looked into his eyes, I pictured myself in Ricky's mind--lips a bit thin but turned up on the ends, nose a little too long, wispy brown hair drifting in the breeze from the fan on the ceiling. My eyes were what saved me. The eyebrows weren't much; they were light brown and kind of skimpy, but my eyelashes were long and curly and my eyes were royal blue. Royal blue was big that second year of the war--we were patriotic, and Anglophiles to the core. I had a royal blue dress that just matched my eyes, with a skirt that swirled around my legs when I danced. I also had a twenty-four inch waist then, which I definitely don't want to think about now.

Once I tried mascara to heighten the effect of my eyes, but Mother caught me. I'd stayed overnight at Eileen's--she was my best

friend--and while we were giggling in the bedroom that night after everyone went to sleep, I tried it out. The mascara looked so great I left it on when I went to sleep that night. The next morning when I walked in the house my dad said, "You've got paint on your eyes."

Mother just pointed to the bathroom and said, "Wash your face."

That day at Hunter's I watched Ricky's every move, hoping he was thinking about the time he kissed me beside the bonfire at Laguna Beach or remembering the basketball games with me leading the cheerleaders, chanting "Weston, Weston, Weston." He might be thinking about last Saturday's dance at the Aud. Tommy Dorsey was there in person and we danced to that song. Ricky held me so tight I could feel him get hard; I knew what that meant, but I didn't want to think about it. Anyhow Ricky was leaving; I didn't have to.

At seventeen, I suffered instead of searching. My kind of reading didn't encourage searching; it was romance, escape--la-la land, I call it now. Unfortunately I didn't always find la-la land in a book, sometimes I found it by falling in love. I think I'd recognize it now, but the question hasn't come up lately, so who knows?

I knew, in my rational mind, if I had one then, that he was really thinking about going off to war with Bruce and the rest of the gang. But in my fantasy I hoped he was dreaming about coming home to me. As it turned out I wasn't anywhere near the top of Ricky's list, although he may have had me on his mind in one way--hoping to score so he could brag about it. That may be a bit too cynical--he was just a boy, after all, in the same way I was just a girl.

He grinned at me and let go of my hand when the waitress brought our milkshakes, then took off the end of the paper on his straw and blew it at me. It hit me right on the nose. Just then Bruce walked up. "Bull's eye! Right on the old schnozzola! Too bad you didn't make a shot like that Friday night, Ricky."

That was the end of The Moment. I saw Ricky's eyelids flicker and his eyes get red. He hated it when someone pointed out he wasn't perfect, and I hated it when he got mad. I'd seen it a couple of times, and after that I always tried to distract him if I saw it coming. I threw my hand against my forehead and screamed, "I'm blinded for life," playing the clown, laughing up at him out of my royal blue eyes.

His face cleared and he leered at me, "The better to lead you astray, my dear," twirling an imaginary mustache. I remember the feeling of relief when the rage left his eyes.

Rich was only the first to inspire that feeling. The last, I hope, was Lou, who unfortunately didn't think I was funny when he was in his cups, as they say. At least not funny enough. I stood in our kitchen one night, stunned, blood pouring down my face, and said, "Honey, how come you hit me so hard?" From Lou I learned that feeling of relief inside out--and the alternative.

A crowd gathered around the table, drinking root beer floats or milkshakes, licking mile high cones, rough-housing, joking about tomorrow. Tomorrow we would all go to the bus station at five in the morning, to see the boys off on a bus to the Selective Service office in Los Angeles. They wouldn't admit they were scared, but Ricky as good as told me so one night when we were alone and he was

getting mushy. I imagine they were both proud and scared. In one giant step they would turn from boys into men.

After the war started, guys were men if they were in, and something else if they weren't. All they had to do was put on a uniform. The boys in our crowd all knew they were in. We were raised on Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, and Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions.

I can still hear the voice of that radio announcer in my head, and my brother's sobs when Daddy made him turn it off and come to the dinner table.

As if Wheaties was all it took. When I got to be a woman there were no flags, no uniforms, it was just messy.

The afternoon before they left was my last time with Ricky, although I didn't know it then. The gang was going on a bike ride over to MacDonald's in San Bernardino, a little drive-in known for the best burgers around.

Come to think of it, McDonald's has changed as much as I have in the last fifty years, at least on the outside. I wonder how many secrets they've had to clean up.

Gas was rationed then, of course. It had been ever since the war began, and Ricky was always short of gas stamps, so I figured we'd leave his car at my house while we went on the bike-ride. That way we could look forward to later.

In my fantasy we'd ride home in the dusk through the familiar avenue of palm trees silhouetted against a sky turning deep blue, and the crowd would break off into small groups and couples. From then on it would just be Ricky and me. The family would be sitting out

on the lawn when we got back, waiting for the house to cool off. They might be eating one of the watermelons my dad always brought home from the field. I could taste the grainy sweetness of the melon against my tongue, feel the sticky juice run down my chin.

When Mom and Dad went into the house with my little sister, I would reach my hand out to Ricky and we'd walk together to the car. He would bend down and lick the sweet juice from my face. The breeze would blow gently against my skin when he pulled down the straps of my sundress to touch my breasts and lick them too. All around us the tang of eucalyptus would mingle with the faint smell of orange blossoms from the orchard. For a minute there, even that smell was part of my dream.

Then Ricky stood up, grabbed my hand, and pulled me out of the booth. "Come on, Irie, stop dreaming," he growled. "I gotta mow the lawn for Mom before we go." I must have turned ten shades of red. I still remember how embarrassed I was, stumbling after him, looking down, glad I was still wearing school clothes instead of watermelon juice and nothing. He was right; I read too much.

That was only the first time I heard that from a man. When the last one said, "I don't know if I want a wife that reads," I told him, "You don't have to have one." A narrow escape.

Actually Ricky would think licking my face was stupid, probably tell me to go in the house and wash it. When we got in the car, he'd grab me, stick his tongue in my mouth, and reach inside my underpants, as usual.

Looking back, the best part of my life for a long time was those dreams. I wish I could do it still. I try, once in a while, but I can't seem to bring up the rose-colored mist on my screen anymore. Sometimes I fantasize, when I'm--well, you know. But I never get that feeling--like it could all come true. Of course I had my fill of romances a long time ago. Now I read detective stories.

When we got out to the sidewalk the gang was gone. Ricky got in his side of the car and left me to struggle with the door, then swore impatiently when I dropped my books. That boy sure knew how to bring me out of a fantasy.

As a matter of fact, the bike ride was about as far from fantasy as you could get. My best shorts were crumpled in the hamper, I didn't have time to iron a blouse, and I couldn't do anything with my hair. I felt out-of-it from the start. Ricky didn't want to park the car at my house so I had to ride my bike down to the streetcar tracks by myself, and my father got mad because he thought a boy should pick up his date at her house. By the time I left the house I had an awful headache and, of course, I blamed it all on my dad.

No such luck. About a mile out of town my stomach started cramping and I felt a trickle of blood running down my leg. Ricky was way ahead of me, thank goodness, horsing around with the boys, so no one noticed when I headed back home. They must have had their own party planned--probably had beer stashed in somebody's garage. Anyway Ricky never called to find out what happened to me.

Mother fixed a hot water bottle and fussed some, but even after I took a bath and put on my p.j.s, carefully washing everything in cold

water so the blood wouldn't set, I felt awful. My stomach was like a balloon, and I wondered if this was how it felt to be pregnant, then got mad all over again about being a girl. In the movies June Allyson looked up and smiled at Van Johnson, seeing him off to war, but I wasn't June Allyson, and Ricky definitely wasn't Van Johnson, at least not the movie version.

I dozed off, cramped around the hot water bottle, sweating in the stuffy heat of my room, and dreamed Ricky was back from the war. At first it was wonderful; he looked just like pictures of my dad when he came home from the first World War on crutches, handsome, debonair in his uniform, smiling enigmatically, a little pale from months in the hospital. I rushed up to put my arms around him but when he reached out to me, he dropped his crutches and fell, then lay on the ground with his face smashed in. Suddenly the face was Ricky's; he was trying to grab me, snarling and cursing. I woke up shaking.

The next morning before it was light my alarm went off. I stumbled out of bed, got dressed, crept out of the house. I felt grouchy and my stomach was still bloated. The sun wasn't up yet; it was strange being out on the street alone in the dark. The sidewalk was closed in beneath the pepper trees, and little seeds slid under my feet. There were no street lights and all the windows were blacked out because of Japanese submarines seen near Santa Barbara in the first days of the war. The idea of sneaky little yellow men creeping into town, the sound of bombers overhead coming into March Air Base scared me a little bit, I guess, but I have to admit they were more like an exciting background for my daydreams. What

I was really scared of was another kind of blackout--life without Ricky.

He didn't live up to my expectations, that was for sure, but I knew I could show him how. Sure, and pigs have wings.

A few girls were waiting outside the bus station, kissing the boys goodbye, watching them pile into the Greyhound bus. Ricky and the rest were already inside rough-housing, scuffling for seats. He waved at me once, I think, but never came out to kiss me goodbye. After last night's dream, I felt a little stand-offish toward him, but I was humiliated just the same when he ignored me. I could just see them coming back from boot camp in uniform, still together, like a basketball team, only more so. I stood there alone with my stomach pooched out and hurting.

I still hear my mother saying, "Pull your stomach in, Irie." After fifty years.

Finally the bus pulled away and the buildings turned black and cold against the lightening sky. Some of the girls were going to Hunter's for a Coke, but I had the cramps. Besides I hadn't forgotten how things turned out the day before. Looking at the reality of that glorious send-off it's hard to understand how I kept any romantic illusions about Rich, but I suppose he was all I had.

The last straw came when I turned and started for home. Somehow I managed to trip over a crack in the sidewalk and skinned my knee so bad it bled. In my personal war there was already lots of blood, but none of it was the kind you brag about.

I got a postcard from the Army post office with Ricky's APO number and I wrote to him every day, but he only sent one postcard the first week, and it didn't say anything.

They were supposed to be out of boot camp in August but Ricky never wrote and the phone didn't ring. Some of the boys came by the school one day; he wasn't with them. Their new uniforms were ugly, stiff olive-drab wool, not broken in yet. They were awkward too, in-between, not part of the school but not part of the Army either. Their voices were loud and they stayed together, strutting a little, like boys do when they don't know what else to do. They seemed older somehow, even though you knew they were the same boys.

I kept listening for the phone and finally one day when Mother was busy in the kitchen I called him. She never would have let me if she'd known. She said girls should have more pride than to call boys, but I didn't. The phone rang and rang but no one answered. I worked up my courage and called Bruce.

"Uh-Irie? Did-didn't Rich call you?" he stammered. "His father had a heart attack just before we finished boot camp. I guess he died. His mother was falling apart so the doctor called and asked the Selective Service office to give Rich a hardship deferment. He left without even saying goodbye. We only found out what happened through the grapevine. Sounds like little Ricky ain't going to war--at least not with us."

Some friend. When I put down the phone I wanted to get in bed and pull the blankets over my head, to stay there for the rest of my

life, or the duration, which ever came first. I knew Bruce would tell everyone Ricky hadn't called me.

Mother came in just then with a pile of napkins over her arm to start setting the table. "Don't you have anything better to do than sit there staring at the phone? Rich'll call when he's ready. Maybe his mother had things for him to do. You know his father isn't well. I told you--" She stopped. "What's wrong now?"

I didn't want to cry in front of her but I couldn't help it; I put my head down on the phone and bawled. When I quit crying I started thinking; that was worse. Ricky was probably mad because he had to come home. He'd never admit he was mad at his father for dying, or his mom for falling apart. So who could he get mad at? Remembering that red flare in his eyes, I shivered. He'd missed the big one and he'd have to take it out on someone. There'd be no kidding him out of this one. And if I didn't go along with him we'd be through, I knew that.

Somehow I didn't realize the way Rich treated me meant there was something wrong with him, not something wrong with *me*. I thought it was my fault, that I wasn't good enough. That there was something wrong with me. There was something wrong with me all right; I was still there.

I'm kinda surprised I still feel sympathetic toward Irie (they never call me that anymore). After all, she's the one who got me into all this. The really sad thing is that she was ashamed. Of course that feeling of shame stayed with me. Years later I looked in the bathroom mirror at the bruises on my throat after Lou left and felt the same way.

My memories are starting to overlap, more like patterns on a grid than scenes. I want to quit remembering, let go of the whole damn thing. Why look at the past? One boyfriend I had used to tell me, "Don't complain and don't explain." That might have worked for him; he had watertight compartments, but mine leaked. *And that's why you started all this, Iris Castleton, because of the leaks, I remind myself, and why you're going to finish it.*

Ricky finally called late the next day. "I hear you called Bruce, so you know what happened," he said. "The memorial service's tomorrow at ten."

"Can I do anything? Can't I just be with you, Ricky?" In those days I didn't recognize whining.

"I guess you could come to the service tomorrow if you want, but I'll be with my mom." He cleared his throat. "I'll probably go to work for the railroad now that Dad's gone, and Mom needs me around, so I guess I won't be seeing you. Oh, and if I do see you, would you mind calling me Rich?" With that he hung up the phone.

Mother came in then and started to clear the table. It was my job but I guess she was trying to help. When I told her about Ricky's call she made clucking sympathetic noises, then started talking in a bright cheerful tone, trying to make me feel better. "It's too bad, honey, but we'll bake a cake, and you can run it over there in the morning. Everything will be all right. Let's see, should it be coconut with a cream filling? That's always nice," she hesitated, "but then again, in this heat the cream filling might spoil. I could make chocolate--"

She broke off when I screamed "Mother!"

As I ran out of the room I could hear her say to herself in a satisfied tone of voice, "I know, I'll make an applesauce cake; it always keeps."

I wanted to scream at her again, tell her to shut up, for God's sake, but of course I didn't have the nerve to do that. Instead I threw myself across the bed and pounded the pillow, then cried till I couldn't cry any more. I wouldn't be part of anything, not without Ricky, and when the boys came home after the war everybody would be getting married but me. No more parties or bike rides. I cried even harder when I remembered how the bike ride turned out. Finally I went to sleep. When I woke up it was dark and the sky outside my window glittered with stars. I remember staring up at them, feeling too lonely to cry. No one would hear me. No one would care.

They have a saying in AA, "Poor me, poor me, pour me a drink." But I didn't know about that yet.

That was it; the end of Ricky, I mean, Rich Weston. Oh, I tried to drag it out a bit during the summer, but that was really the end.

I sit back at the kitchen table, take off my glasses and rub my eyes. To my surprise, my cheeks are wet. Staring out the window through the rain, I try to remember those lonely stars, but it's like looking through binoculars the wrong way--everything's small. Including me. I thought I was in love, but I can see now I used Rich, plain and simple; he had to dump me to survive. We used each other, I suppose, but when his father died . . . I can't do it over, but I

feel ashamed, especially remembering how naked and alone I felt when my father died. And I wasn't seventeen, missing out on everything, with a mother to support.

This is like cleaning closets. I can throw away the hair shirt, it was never real, along with the big moment I've held onto so long. The shame I feel for the my insensitivity when Rich's father died is a lot cleaner than the old shame for being myself. Something's working--remembering the days when I was "nobody without somebody," as the song goes, makes me grateful for today.

When I put on my glasses I can see new buds breaking open on the rose bushes down in the garden, but tears run down my cheeks; everything goes blurred. I get up to find a Kleenex, wash my face in cold water. Maybe if I go down to the garden, I can get philosophical again--about the way spring falls in love every year without bargaining, the old leaves blossom with color and fly in the wind.

I go to the back porch for my raincoat then remember my glasses, rush back to get them, and hurry out the door.

I woke up thinking of Lou, my heart pounding, my mouth dry. Dreams have always been my nemesis but anymore the dreams and memories run together. Sometimes I can't remember what's real; memories seem like nightmares, nightmares like memories.

In the night the rain had settled down to a gentle mist. I dressed quickly in sweatshirt and jeans, climbed into my pickup, and

headed for the wharf. Just being out where people are moving helps sometimes. My mind was a jumble, but the tall trees along the narrow road that led into Blossom Gulch steadied me. Places stay with me, shore me up most of the time. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I'm not sure which, they come back to me some times in vivid color. Like the dream--or was it a memory--that visited me in the night, of iron railings, mahogany red tiles on the stairs in that pseudo-Spanish apartment. Lou was trying to grab me and I knew if he did he would send me down those stairs ass over teakettle. I ran down the hall screaming. He kept grabbing, those long skinny arms ropy with muscle and sinew clawing at me. First the vest went, then the sweater. Finally I was running down the hall in my bra with one strap coming loose, trying to keep my breasts from bouncing. All I could think of was staying away from the stairs. I could picture my body turning in the air like a rag doll, thumping wetly on the cold tiled stairs, breaking, bleeding. The shocked faces popping out from the doors of other apartments were were only a blur. In my panic nothing was anything except those clutching arms and the stairs.

A sense of peace began to come back. Coming out of the Gulch, I felt safe in the folds of the tree-covered mountains, and as I turned onto the highway, the red and green reflections of the stoplights on the wet pavement were like Christmas tree lights, with the mist softening it all. My little pickup hummed; the Sunday morning symphony surrounded me.

When I got to the wharf, I stood beside the truck breathing in the curling cries of seagulls, the tar-encrusted timbers of the dock,

the smell of salt water, the singing of lines hitting masts in the wind. In spite of all the bad memories, there is still nothing for me like the magic of salt water and boats.

The bad times started that year right after Thanksgiving. I trying to recuperate from a failed love affair of fairly long standing. After five-years sober I started to have panic attacks again, and while marriages might hold during panic attacks, love affairs do not--at least this one didn't. I was on my own, and even the Valium I'd relied on for years wasn't keeping the terror at bay. I was broke and job-hunting, which probably didn't help. I called my long-time friend and therapist Chris.

Although she must have been weary of hearing about my fears, she had a suggestion. "I'm working at Larry's, up the hill from the marina, Iris. You know the place. I'm just hostessing for a friend so I don't have much to do. Why don't you come up there tonight where you can be around people? It'll be good for you to start getting out, listen to some music, get mellow."

"You don't know what it's like. I can't go out to a bar by myself," I protested.

"You're right. I don't know what it's like. I've never had an anxiety attack," she said calmly, "but I'll be there and it might be better than going crazy by yourself. You've tried therapists and psychiatrists; they didn't help. Maybe it's up to you to get well."

I knew better than to go to a bar, but I went anyway, kept going, found another bar after Chris quit her job. At first I tried my old trick, drinking until my nose got numb, and it worked for a while.

Around Christmas, something happened. It took a dozen drinks to do what three used to do, and my nose didn't get numb anymore. Of course I couldn't admit what the drinks were doing to me, denial, I think they call it, and the combination of Valium and booze didn't help.

I met Lou in that bar. He came in the bar on a Saturday night with Charlie, another deck hand from the *Miss Veronica*. They were still in their working gear, boots and all. Lou had a quiet voice, a Hoosier drawl, and a droll sense of humor. We danced a few dances and then he looked at me with those soft brown eyes and said, "You're so fine." I fell in love again. Of course, I had been so lonely during Christmas, my first in two years without Jack, without my daughter Sally, if he'd been green and croaked, I would have thought he was a prince in disguise. I didn't see the sadness in his eyes when he told me, " It's always the same, falling in love. You think it'll never haapen I again, and then it does." Or maybe I did see it, and that was part of the appeal.

He invited me to come down to the boat the next day and I started going there every afternoon after work. I got used to having them come back after a week out on the ocean, to scrambling from the dock over the railing of the boat, drinking coffee with the boys in the cabin--they called it a house, feeling superior when tourists came down on the dock, like I was part of something. I suppose the salt air and the screams of seagulls diving for fish scum reminded me of the fishing trips we took when I was a kid. Come to think of it, Lou was a little like my dad.

He was ten years older than me and his face was rugged, lined, brown--like a fisherman's should be. He had a gentle wit that could be biting at times, and when he put me in my place, which didn't happen often, he did it with quiet sarcasm, like my father. Lou could do anything--fix pipes, paint, cook--a result of being a hotel owner, or so he told me. I didn't stop to wonder how he came down from hotel owner to deck hand. I was naive, but every man I met had a story. I used to laugh about how I always met them after their money was gone, never thinking there was a connection --I met them all in bars.

I got so I would go down to the docks when the *Miss Veronica* was out, watching the horizon for the familiar shape of their boat, my excitement rising as they raised the flopper stoppers, the extra set of masts that hung out from the boat to keep it stable when they were at sea. I bought a good pocket knife and Lou showed me how to carve. I was writing some poetry too, and all of a sudden I had a life. I found a job in a real estate office and the panic attacks faded into the background.

We were married the first of February on the boat, wearing jeans and sweatshirts. A friend from the office supplied two cases of champagne. My mother came up from Southern California, and I can still remember how cute she looked as we helped her over the railing in her pink London Fog raincoat. Afterwards we all went to the bar where Lou and I met. The organist played background music while I read a poem I'd written called "Wedding Song." Lou danced the first dance with Mother; to her it was glamorous and exciting.

One night in April, the boat got in late and Lou found me at the bar. He and Charlie, the other deck hand, brought buckets of shrimp, and Tony, the bar owner, took them in the back room to boil. He set up bowls of the huge spotted prawns all along the bar and we peeled and ate them with our fingers. Lou was feeling pretty proud of himself, everyone buying him drinks. Charlie took me aside. "You need to watch out for him when he's drunk like this. He can turn on you as quick as a rat, and he's mean."

I suppose I was none too sober myself, but I'd never seen Lou anything but gentle, so I laughed and said, "Don't worry about me, Charlie, I can handle Lou."

When the bar closed we headed for home, but as soon as we got in the house and the door closed, Lou turned on me. "You fucking cunt. You rotten cocksucker. I saw you rubbing up against Charlie, that rotten hair-lipped motherfucker. He going to be your next boyfriend?"

For a minute, I was too shocked to move, and when I did move it was to put my arms around him. "It's me, Lou. Don't you remember?" He'd told me about his wife who walked away with another man, and I figured he was drunk, confusing me with her.

He shoved me away, his face twisted, feral, his eyes cold and distant. I'd never seen anyone look like that. When he grabbed my arms and pulled them up behind my back, tears came to my eyes. "Lou, you're hurting me!"

"I meant to. Now you know what'll happen if I ever catch you even close to Charlie." He pulled me into the bedroom and shoved

me down on the bed. When he let go, I scurried over the other side, got into my nightclothes. Lou lay down and passed out, thank God.

I wandered around till it was almost light and finally took a quilt from the other bed and went to sleep on the couch. When I woke up, Lou was fixing breakfast. He brought it to me in bed, his old gentle teasing self. The scene from the night before seemed unreal, like a nightmare. Maybe I had been flirting with Charlie, or it looked like I was. Neither of us mentioned it again.

Somehow it was Thanksgiving. I got used to Lou's sudden rages, and he never hurt me again. We found a little apartment a half a block from the beach. Rents were cheap then. The apartment building was Spanish style, with red tiled floors, wrought iron banisters, colorful tiles set into the walls. Our apartment was a studio--a bed-sitting room with a tiny kitchen. There were French doors between the main room and the kitchen, and the windows looked out on a courtyard. In summer it was a riot of purple fuschias, blue hydrangeas, bright orange bougainvillea, clusters of blooming jacaranda trees covered with soft blue-purple flowers, and palm trees swaying gently in the sea breeze. I tried to make the inside match the outside.

When I wanted some flowered curtains Lou said "Why don't you paint some?" So I got muslin and sewed it up into curtains, then painted on sprays of bougainvillea. He was so proud. I had a better job by this time, and between my job, writing poetry, painting, fixing up the apartment, and hanging out at the harbor, life was mostly good, even though a sense of dread began to be mixed with the excitement of Lou's homecomings.

That feeling came on so gradually, and most of the time he was so gentle with me, it was hard to sort out. Of course, I was still drinking, so that helped to keep things fuzzy.

The day before Thanksgiving, the boys were in port and I took off a little early from work to go down to the boat where they were mending nets. As I walked up to the boat, one of the Coastguardsmen handed me a bottle of blackberry brandy and I took a few swigs. When it started to get dark we went to the captain's house for a few more drinks. His wife asked me if I was afraid to go home with Lou when he was so drunk. I was less naive than when Charlie warned me, but I thought once we got home and had dinner, Lou would sleep for a while. That wasn't exciting, but it didn't scare me.

I made biscuits and creamed chicken, fixed up a nice plate, and brought it to Lou on a tray. When he was finished, I carried the dishes out to the kitchen. Lou followed me. In the tiny kitchen I was a bit nervous having him behind me. He laid his arm across my shoulder. "Time for a little drinky-poo. Hurry up with the dishes."

Something about his voice frightened me but I answered him matter-of-factly, "Not for me, Lou. Why don't you go on without me?"

His voice changed. "So you're too good to go out drinking with your husband, huh? You want everybody to think I'm pussy-whipped?" His hand tightened on my shoulder. "We'll just see about that." When he flipped me around all I could see was a mask of rage and his fist coming at me.

Blood spurted everywhere. He shoved me back against the sink, his fist twisting the front of my blouse. "You're a mess. Now I

suppose I have to clean you up." He grabbed a towel and threw it in the sink, then turned on the water. He dragged the cold dripping towel across my shoulder to scrub my face and shirt. "You can dry yourself," he sneered, pulling me out of the kitchen by my shirt front, pushing me into a chair. He threw me a towel.

I lit a cigarette with shaking hands. "I didn't say you couldn't go, I just said I'd had enough."

"That ain't going to work. You're coming with me." He paced the floor in front of me, caging me in, then spun around and grabbed me by the hair, jerked me up out of the chair and shoved me toward the closet. "Put on some dry clothes."

I broke for the door but he was ahead of me, holding the door knob. He looked down at me smiling. In his old tender, slightly amused voice he said, "You know if you open the door, or even scream, I'll kill you."

His smile and tone of voice chilled me completely. My shoulders slumped and tears began to slide down my cheeks. It was only a little place, our studio apartment, with no place to hide. I threw myself on the bed, on the muslim comforter I had painted to match the curtains, and curled up with my knees against my chest. This only seemed to make him madder. He kicked at me, pushing my head down into the mattress. I still had my cigarette in my hand and it set the bedding on fire. I began to cough and choke, gasping for breath. When Lou saw the smoke, he jerked me up, snarling. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You could yell fire, and everybody'd come." He jerked me up off the bed and turned me around so my back was up against him. One long arm snaked around my throat, pulled my

chin up and my head back. He tightened his arm across my neck, thrust a knee in my back, and stretched me like a bow.

This guy was strong--a deck hand used to hauling anchors, pulling in nets, six feet two, a foot taller than me. He was an old guy and a drunk, but every ounce was muscle, and he had insanity going for him. I waited for the sound of my back snapping.

Suddenly he threw me on the floor. "You ain't worth it!" He strode into the kitchen, filled the bowl I had mixed biscuits in with water, dumped it on the smoldering sheets. Barely turning, he tossed the bowl toward the window. With a graceful spin, it smashed through the window. I heard the flat sound of it shattering in the courtyard below.

Lou pulled me up off the floor, opened the door, and dragged me down the stairs. The bar was just around the corner and down a block, and all the way there I was thinking desperately, hoping I could get someone to help me, get the bartender to call the police. I tried to use the pay phone in the back, tried to talk to the bartender while Lou was in the restroom, but they all turned away. When I think about it I wonder what I looked like, nose swollen across my face, eyes turning black, red from crying, my neck girdled with bruises, my blouse bloody and wet, and it still seems strange to me that no one had any compassion. I was desperate to get away from Lou, to stay away from the apartment, the flowered curtains ripped from the window by the flying bowl, the sodden bedcovers, the blood-spattered kitchen.

About midnight, Lou's face began to relax and his words began to slur. He leaned on my shoulder, staggering, as we slowly walked back to the apartment.

I wonder why I didn't let him fall and run away. It's a funny how you can't remember fear. You remember having it, but once those shackles fall away, it loses its power. That's why hindsight is a hundred percent, I guess. You remember the facts, but not the feelings.

When I woke up the next morning Lou was gone. I staggered into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. Both eyes were black, and dead gray bruises ringed my throat. I was ashamed, and I knew hopelessly I would never get away.

Watching the rain make patterns on the windows, I'm still more ashamed of myself than angry with Lou. He was a drunk; I had no excuse. In those days there were no safe houses, and police didn't protect wives. Wives belonged to their husbands, but more than that, I think, the police had the same disgust as I did for any woman who would get herself in that position. My mother would say it was "cheap." The old Virgin Mary judgement call, that a woman should be pure, unsullied. That travels side by side with the idea that a female drunk is more disgusting than a man--she only gets what she asks for.

Of course at that point in my thinking, I have to get back to the basics. I was a drunk too. Even now, after twenty years of saying,

"I'm Iris and I'm an alcoholic," I have trouble remembering, have to go through the process of taking responsibility for my part of the problem, forgive myself all over again.

Words like *bravery* and *cowardice* are ingrained in my value system. My dad was a Legionnaire in the days when we had parades and waved flags. I was brought up on Kipling's "It's not the fact that you're dead that counts, but only how did you die?"

Right then I made a major life decision. I decided to get real. *Fuck Rudyard Kipling and parades!* I thought. *What is he but a dead white male? I'm a woman with the courage to stay alive, no matter what it takes! Today I can watch the rain, smell the salt air, taste the coffee, watch my cigarette smoke curling into the air; that's the bottom line.*

"Would you like some coffee? How about some breakfast?"

The waitress smiled at me and bent over to fill my cup.

I could see some of her teeth were missing, and wondered if she too had been used as a punching bag, was a sister under the skin. If I could forgive myself, how could I look down on her? And yet I always had. Not her, of course, I'd never seen her before, but women like her.

Pride's a another character defect, one that kept me drinking and using a long time, even now makes me forget I'm just another drunk. I smile up at her, look at the name on her badge. "Sure, Thelma. Thanks a lot. I'll have bacon and eggs, and maybe a couple of pancakes on the side."

That wasn't the end of it, not by a long shot. When I came in to work after Thanksgiving vacation, the black eyes were better but I lied to my boss, told him I'd had an accident, been thrown into the windshield. At the company Christmas party Lou showed up drunk, and my job was really over then. I have to admit my own drinking was beginning to interfere with work. I was always behind, and I began to miss work Mondays or Fridays, occasionally both.

The incident when Lou chased me down the hall happened the weekend after the Christmas party. I left him then. I bought a car and was feeling quite independent when I decided to move into an apartment a little way out of town. Three weeks later Lou helped me move, and, of course, we talked. He told me he had gone back to AA and for some unknown reason I let myself be convinced the new sober Lou was sincere, that AA would do it all. Then the long-expected day came when the boss called me in and said he was letting me go. I settled down to put together a home. I was fairly comfortable with that--I had done it so many times. Three months later I ran as fast and as far as I could when the old Lou surfaced, sans booze, but filled with rage again--or still.

Bill, the apartment manager, called me the night after I left. I had given him a telephone number, sworn him to secrecy. He told me Lou went on a binge after I left. Apparently he took the souvenir *samurai* sword hanging on the wall and slashed everything to pieces--pictures, tapestries, couches, chairs, clothing. What he didn't destroy he threw off the fire escape. He was raving, threatening to kill me when the police came. He told them some wild story, I never

did get it straight, about how I was with another man, so all they did was take the distributor out of his car for the night. When they called me to make sure I was out of harm's way, their contempt was obvious; they said I could charge him with criminal mischief if I wanted to. By then I only wanted to stay out of his way, stay alive.

I found a place in the suburbs with Marge, a recovering alcoholic friend who needed someone to share the rent. I changed my name and quit drinking. I was still hanging on to my Valium, of course.

After a few weeks, I went to the Retreat House up on the hill. At the monastery, as we called it, I was surrounded by treasures-- paintings, china, carvings, carpet. One beautiful bright blue afternoon as I was wandering on the grounds, I began to cry. A young monk, I think it was Sid, led me into the sunroom. He held my hand and sat with me until I was finished. When the storm of tears had passed, I had reached a sort of quietus: I didn't have to own things to have them, I only had to let them fill me up; then they were mine. So I let go of one more thing.

I had been there for about a month when Pat Ownbey showed up. He was middle aged, round, a little worn down at the edges. He sat outside with me on the terrace and let me talk while we watched hummingbirds dip into the bright red flowers beside the low stone wall out front. We walked together along the graveled walks and looked across the city to the sea. Mt. Calvary is on a hill, almost a mountain, and you can see forty miles of coastline on a clear day. Some mornings, early, there was nothing but blue sky overhead and

long shadows from the monastery lay across a fog so thick it was like whipped cream, only lighter.

Pat was not romancing me, he was listening. He lanced my wounds and let them drain. Finally he asked me about my own drinking. I was never embarrassed about it. I only did what everybody did, I told him, and I was usually more sober than whoever I was with. I never hurt anybody, got a ticket, or went to jail.

Pat interrupted me. "You hurt somebody I know pretty badly, and weren't you in a jail really? The bad thing about it is that you put yourself there." His eyes were sad, or maybe filled with compassion. I didn't know the difference; I thought it was sympathy.

I spoke right out in answer to that. "He did it to me. I've never done the things most alcoholics do. And it wasn't my fault he beat me up." He looked away and shook his head, allowed it must be time for his nap.

Gradually Pat helped me to see past the romantic haze I'd lived in all my life. He showed me I was like a little girl, depending on everyone but myself, blaming everybody. He told me Valium was like booze in pill form--it kept away reality. Finally he straight out told me I was immature, phony, dependent, and furthermore, refused to take responsibility for my own life.

That was my first experience with ruthless honesty, quite a pill to swallow, especially when I was feeling so sorry for myself. At first I was mad, but after Pat left, I kept hearing his words. I stayed a couple more weeks, thinking, writing, trying to figure out what to do. Finally I left, but instead of looking for a job, I went straight to a home for alcoholic women. The new life came slowly because I wasn't

done with the old one. A long time after that I heard the AA saying, "When one door closes, another one opens, but we're always getting our hand caught in the door." That was me.

They took me to meetings, and Lou was there, sober again. He began to court me, and when I left the home I went back to our old apartment with him. I had thrown away the Valium, so the panic attacks came back in spades. I usually ended up vomiting and crying. One day I decided I might have to vomit but I didn't have to feel sorry for myself while I was doing it. So I stopped crying. Sometimes I couldn't even sleep under the covers, I was so restless. I would lie there and imagine Lou throwing me out the window or off the fire escape, where he had thrown everything else. Everything I had was gone--a lifetime of accumulations. I went to a lot of meetings and set up a studio, began to paint.

It was a year before the numbness wore off. During that year, my mother came to visit. I always kept her separate from the tawdry affairs of my life, and this was no exception. I told her nothing of what had happened. She invited me to go to Oregon with her, where she lived with my sister, and for some reason or other this time I was able to gather up my courage and make the trip. Soon after that, she sent me some money, cautioning me to keep it in a separate account. Maybe she knew a lot more than I thought.

I don't know if Thanksgiving triggered it or what, but one night I had a doozy of a panic attack. I called my sponsor and she found a place for me to stay. I felt guilty, leaving Lou--he hadn't done anything to hurt me recently, I thought. She told me it was okay to

be comfortable, I didn't have to blame anybody or give anyone else the credit for who I was--a strange thought.

I called Marge and she and I spent some time together. She was feeling pretty lost too. We shared our misery and even had a few laughs. We went shopping with my mother's money. I bought a little blue truck and put a thousand dollars in traveler's checks. She went to the apartment with me and I filled a grocery cart with things I had to have. Lou was there, but in front of Marge he was a pussycat. He was unshaven, sitting in the den with all the drapes closed, watching television and drinking Nyquil--25% alcohol. Said he had a bad cold.

At the last minute Marge decided to go with me, and it took a week for her to pack her things. We held each other up all the way to Oregon, making plans that almost came true.

My coffee is cold and when I look around I can see breakfast time is over, the lunch crowd coming in. I leave Thelma a three dollar tip. When I get home the sky is starting to clear over the mountains, the tall trees behind the house souging gently in the wind, but I'm not into outdoors. I want cozy. I build a fire in the fireplace and carry my comforter and pillows out to the couch. I stare into the flames, remembering when a martini before dinner, wine with, and Galliano after were my idea of gracious living. Make believe ballroom time, la-la land. I smile when I think of how gracious that living turned out to be. And I can smile, because it's over.

I'm still not ready for reality all the time, and today I've had enough. I curl up on the couch and pick up an Agatha Christie, one

I've read a dozen times. It may not be exciting, but at least I know how it comes out.

It's been a week since I sat in that cafe. All week I've been flattened--not drowned in memories, emptied by them. Somebody told me years back I'm like one of those life-size inflated dolls with the weight in the bottom--when something pushes me, I go all the way over, then bounce back. I'm beginning to see what she meant.

This morning I can feel myself plumping up a little bit. I get out of bed and put together the coffee, stand by the window looking out at the rain, then go back to the bathroom for my morning routine. Shit, shave, shower, clean my glasses, put on pads for my leaking bladder, shoot insulin. It gets more complicated and less rewarding every year. Even when I've done the best I can, some old lady looks back at me out of the mirror.

But today I'm not doing the best I can, just what I have to. When the coffee's done I pour myself a big cup, dump in cream and two spoonfuls of sugar. Yes, real cream and real sugar. Dammit, I deserve it.

I take a clean ash tray out of the dishwasher and sit down at the big old table with my daily notebook. Usually I make a list in the morning while I'm getting ready for the day. Errands, things I want to accomplish. I've got more damn lists--lists for the day, for the week, for the month, for the season--lists for the garden, for sewing, for birthdays, for Christmas, for my soul. I suppose I'll never get over

wanting to fix things. The only consolation is that these days it's me I want to fix, not everyone else. Maybe that's only because there's nobody left.

But today isn't a list day, I'm not that plumped up. After forty-five minutes of staring, first at the blank sheet of paper, then at the rain, I look at the clock. When I realize I'm digging myself a deeper hole sitting here thinking, I put on some old shoes and my raincoat, go outside to pick the artichokes. I never grew artichokes before and can't believe how wonderful they are homegrown. While I'm at it I pick some tomatoes, a cucumber to fix with sour cream. I go back to the kitchen for a basket, dig up an onion, rub some mint between my fingers and smell it, then set the basket on the porch while I go around front to check the roses.

Yep, the buds are coming on, getting ready for their second blooming, a few even starting to show color. Funny how the little things make me want to go on living. Sometimes it's fixing a sandwich late at night, the house empty, no one to account to, the electric blanket warming my bones, the sound of rain on the windows.

Sometimes it's deciding what to wear, putting the colors together, like squeezing the colors on a palette. Today it's artichokes, mint, and the roses coming on.

In the kitchen I wash all the veggies and put away the artichokes and tomatoes. The cucumber looks fat, juicy. I like the feel of the skin without that grocery store wax preservative. I take a fork out of the drawer and score the sides, decide to slice it into one of my mother's fat pottery bowls. I take the bowl off the shelf

carefully, let my fingers linger on its curves. Turning on the kitchen light, I see the golden color of the bowl, the delicacy of pale green translucent slices of cucumber, their scalloped edges like flower petals. Dollops of sour cream, the pungent smell of dill seeds out of my own garden, the sharp tang of vinegar. I sprinkle on some salt, not much, then take down the heavy wooden grinder and grind fat flakes of pepper, remembering when life was quick and fast, and I thought sensuality and sexuality were the same thing. Putting the bowl into the refrigerator, I spot the last plump cinnamon roll from yesterday's bakery run, take it out and slather it with butter, stick it in the microwave.

Washed clean by the outdoors, I enjoy my coffee, the sweet roll crunchy with sugar, fat with raisins, dripping with butter. Of course all this is not without a twinge of guilt, remembering the insulin. So, I'm in denial about the diabetes. There are worse things. I get a napkin, wash my hands before I light a cigarette.

The smell of mint makes me think of my mother, remember her out back of the barn hoeing the garden in her faded housedress. She never had the time or money for pepper mills, sour cream, being alone. And when dinner came to the table, as often as not one of us kids would say, "Do I have to eat that?"

She'd get uptight, her voice snappy, "Don't eat it if you don't like it, but don't talk about it!" Scenes from the summer after Ricky begin to flash through my head.

The day of the memorial service Mom came in and woke me up. It was hot already and I'd been awake off and on for hours. I had no reason to get out of bed--every reason not to.

"I decided to bake a fresh peach pie, Irie. The peaches are ripe," she said, throwing open the windows, automatically straightening up my dressing table.

I wanted to smart off but my eyelids were heavy, my throat sore from crying, so I just lay there and watched her. That would make her madder anyway.

"What are these for?" She picked up a pair of gaudy black earrings. "You know young girls don't wear this kind of trash." She dropped them in the waste basket.

I thought she looked like a character out of *Grapes of Wrath*, the frizzy hair she'd permed herself parted down the middle, stuck behind her ears, the starched house dress ballooning around her knees, her faded cotton stockings clumsily mended so the seam bunched and wormed its way down to disappear inside her run-down oxfords. A clump of mud from her shoes crumbled on the polished floor.

Now, of course, I realize she'd been up for hours, hoed weeds, picked vegetables from the garden for dinner. It was a Monday, so she'd probably put all the sheets and towels through the old wringer washer in the garage, rinsed and blued them, hung them on the line. But then I had the sensitivity of a goat, that is, the merciless self-centeredness of a seventeen-year old girl crossed in love.

With a long audible sigh, I turned my head into the pillow, "Don't call me *Irie*, Mom." I spoke to her with a studied contempt, calculated to make her mad. "Nobody calls me that."

To my surprise, she just shrugged her shoulders and walked out of the bedroom, her voice trailing behind her, "Where you came from, I don't know, but I can tell you where you're going. You're going to that memorial service in exactly one hour, so get a move on. I'm not walking in late with everybody watching, and I'd hope you have too much pride."

Her voice softened a little. "Breakfast is on the table, your favorite--fresh sliced peaches with brown sugar and cream. I just now poured the cream off the top of the milk."

I turned on my back and stared at the cracks in the ceiling, then pulled the covers back and got out of bed.

After the service we went to Ricky's house, but I didn't know most of the people, which only made me realize how little I knew Ricky. I felt wrapped in plastic, separated. Ricky didn't help a bit. He stared at me from across the room then turned and started talking to some old guy. The Boys (I never of them as separate people) had all gone back to camp, so there was no one there from the old gang. After a few minutes I went over where Mom was talking to Ricky's mother.

Mrs. Weston tried to be friendly, "It was nice of you to come, Irie."

"Oh, I had to come," I gushed. "Ricky and I are best friends. Whatever happens to him happens to me. That's how it is with best friends, isn't it?"

She took my hand. "Of course it is, dear." She was staring over my shoulder and gently turning me toward the door. "Don't you worry, Irie, Ricky and I are gonna be okay. I'm just glad you kids had so much fun before . . ." She choked up, her eyes filled with tears.

I did have the sense to know when I was licked. I thanked her politely and said I was sorry. I was sorry--sorry she had Ricky and I didn't. We left then but as I went through the door I had to look back. Lot's wife. Ricky had his arm around his mom, and he was looking down at her the way he used to look at me. There was nothing for Mom and I to talk about on the way home. I hated it that she had been a witness to my humiliation.

That summer I slept till noon whenever Mom let me get away with it and when I was up, I moped around the house. The hot nights were the hardest. One day I read in the paper about summer theater; they needed volunteers. That sounded better than staying home, sitting out on the lawn with the family waiting for it to get cool enough to sleep, then not sleeping. I went down and applied, stayed to watch rehearsals.

After that I hung around every night till they finally put me to work. I did everything, mended costumes, painted flats, prompted. Andrea, the director of the show, seemed to like me, and even asked me to be her assistant. I said okay. That way if I was still around next summer I could at least have a part as a can-can dancer in the oleos, if not in the melodrama itself.

I almost started to have fun, or would have if I'd let myself. As it was, after rehearsals were over, I dragged myself home through the heavy air of the late summer dusk. Sometimes I'd go past Ricky's

house on my way. He was always sitting out in front, slumped down in a chair, his mom sitting across the porch from him. He wore motorcycle boots, heavy jeans, and dark T-shirts with cigarettes bulging from the pocket. The glow from his cigarette limned the flat planes of his face, but his eyes never reflected the light.

Nobody at home wanted me around, that was for sure. Oh, maybe to do the dishes or dust, something like that. The distance between me and my mom grew from the day of the memorial service. She was right--I did have my pride. The rest of the family were background faces moving across my dark summer. They were getting ready to go on the big annual fishing trip and I didn't want to go.

We always had a big dinner at noon. It was too hot to eat then and I hated the bloody juice from the pot roast pooled in the platter, the fat hardening in it, cream separating into little clumps of butter on the fresh string beans. I hated everything that summer.

After a series of sullen arguments, Daddy looked across the dinner table one day and said, "All right, stay home! I'll be damned if I'm going to let you ruin fresh salmon and blackberry cobbler. You can stay home but you'll have to find somebody to stay with. That's my final word. Either stay or go, but stop trying to make everybody else as miserable as you are."

I got on my high horse. "It's time for the theater to open and at least Andrea wants me around."

"I'm glad somebody can stand your sulking, or maybe you save that for us?" was my father's answer.

I knew I'd gotten his goat because usually he never said anything. I could stay at April's, sleep on the daybed in the studio, but I had an inkling that might be complicated. The way she looked at me scared me a little bit. In the end I made my decision by default. I couldn't call any of the old gang, so Andrea was it.

My sister Corky was two years younger than me, tall and lanky with blond curly hair. With my luck she'd be the belle of the ball someday; now she merely had Daddy's attention. The day Daddy dragged out an old barrel and set it up under the acacia trees, she came running with the hose. When Dad went into the house and came out carrying the Evinrude, she was ecstatic. They clamped it to the side of the barrel and Daddy wound the rope, then pulled it to get it started. As usual, it sputtered at first, then died. Corky was hanging on to Daddy's arm, begging to pull the rope. When the motor started to rev up she pushed Daddy out of the way and grabbed hold of the handle, like she was running it. Daddy looked down at her and smiled. It made me sick.

They finally turned off the motor off. Daddy took it out of the barrel, laid it on a piece of tarp, and went inside. Corky ran to get an old towel. She polished every part of that motor, covered herself with grease in the process. I walked over and looked down at her. "Irie!" she shouted up at me, her eyes shining. "Daddy's gonna let me run the motor when we go out fishing--not just down at the dock, or going downriver--fishing! He said so."

I stared at her, "I hope you know how filthy and disgusting you look." I watched her face turn red, saw the quick tears in her eyes, and enjoyed every minute of it. A few days later, I watched them

pack the trailer. It was homemade of course, like all my school clothes, like everything we had.

I didn't always feel that way about it. When Daddy started building the trailer I was excited. It all started because Daddy wanted to go fishing every summer and he couldn't go to the Sierras anymore; the altitude was too high for his heart, and besides, us kids were getting too big to leave with a baby sitter. In the summer of 1934 he made some extra money raising watermelons, and he and Mom took a trip up North. They discovered salmon fishing. I was seven that year.

Daddy spent the winter figuring out plans and talking to people. That spring he would take me with him sometimes to the sheet metal shop where he had the frame made. I'd wait in the yard watching the sun shift through the tall eucalyptus, watching Daddy squat down in the yard with the welder and draw out plans in the leached white dirt.

When the bulky frame on wheels was finished, they welded a hitch on the back of our new '34 Ford sedan to pull it home.

The frame looked like a huge oversize beetle, waiting there in the sand in front of the barn. Then the carpenter came and started building the frame, and they moved it over under the pepper tree. Even in the midst of my hate, I could remember how excited us kids were, watching the plywood walls go up over 2 x 2's.

Daddy had to puzzle out the roof. He worried at it over the dining room table, eating and talking. Finally he worked out a plan to use curved braces from a Model T Ford, then dampen plywood to curve over them, with layers of cheese cloth and white lead over that for water-proofing. They scoured the junkyards for those Model T

Ford parts. When the roof was on, we painted the trailer a soft green with black trim around the windows, and the silver top shone brightly in the sun. The neighbors all came out to watch in August when we pulled out of the drive and started off for Northern California.

That was then, this is now, I told myself. The trailer was clumsy, homemade. Daddy had special ration stamps because of his heart trouble--the doctor said he couldn't stand the heat in Southern California. Nobody else was taking vacations that year. I suppose I should have been grateful, but I'd hated those vacations for years. Wrinkled clothes, gritty floors, and no privacy. On the road us kids sweated and fought in the back of the dinky old 1934 Ford. It took us three or four days to get to the Klamath River--it was almost in Oregon--because the wartime speed limit was forty miles an hour. At mealtimes Mom set up the Coleman stove on a rickety folding stand and cooked while people went by on the highway staring. I really hated it when the convoys passed us and the soldiers laughed and pointed.

I watched them pack the outboard motor under the bed, then shove the trunk filled with clothes in front of it. I thought they looked like Okies.

When the packing was done, the car lubed and filled with gas, they were ready to go. Mom backed out of the kitchen with a wet mop in her hand, propped it up against the back door and said, "Well, that's that."

Completely ignoring me, she walked toward the car and peered in the back window of the car. "If you're all settled, Corky, Dad'll back the trailer out." I saw her turn toward me as if to say something, but I

wouldn't give her the satisfaction. I pretended I was opening the screen door to go inside. After she walked away I came back out on the porch to watch while Daddy backed the trailer out of the driveway and set the brakes. He stepped out of the car, then shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at me. Finally he walked around the car and got in so Mom could take over the driver's seat.

It was like a movie in slow motion. I couldn't move, not even to wave goodbye. Daddy raised one hand as they pulled away. I knew they were worried, and the car looked empty with only Corky in the back seat. My brother Sam, a year older than me, had already joined the Navy, was stationed at St. Mary's College outside of San Francisco; they'd stop and see him on the way up north. For a minute I almost wanted to be part of the family, but they pulled up the hill and were gone. They would go out through Cajon Pass, then turn north to head up over the mountains. Probably spend the night pulled off the road by a cotton field near Bakersfield. The air would be clear, smelling of new mown hay, packed with heat, crickets filling the silence. I shuddered at the thought.

The house felt empty without them and I began to realize what it meant to have them go off and leave me. In a way it was like the day I came in the kitchen to make a sandwich. It was hot that day and Mom was bending over the ironing board.

"Your feet are muddy," she said, "and I've just mopped the floor."

"So?" I answered, dragging it out, "Since when is this kitchen floor ever clean?"

She put the iron down. "I ought to slap your face!"

I knew better but as I turned away I said, "You wouldn't dare."

Mom was quick, and I didn't really expect it. She turned me around and belted me a good one across the mouth. It didn't hurt, not really, but my eyes filled with tears. I didn't go back in the kitchen till after dinner. It was my turn to wash the dishes. The incident was never mentioned again but I found out then I could only push Mom so far.

I was free, but it didn't feel as good as I thought it would. Why did they have to be so corny? Without them to fight against I had no direction. Finally I called April and told her to come get me.

Life isn't fair. After fifty you should never have to see yourself in the bathtub, warts and all. Or remember what you were like as a teenager. I don't really want to know what I cost myself and everyone around me. When I remember what I put my mother through I know I deserve to have the rottenest daughter in town; instead I have Sally, my darling Sally.

Through all the years I was racketing around, I hardly ever stayed in touch with Mom, yet when I came back, when I started putting my life together, she didn't ask me what happened or why. Maybe that's where I learned it--not facing reality. She never believed I was an alcoholic. She didn't raise me to be one.

She loved roses. Even on the hottest days, she'd be out there hoeing the weeds from around the roses. She planted them in prim little rows on a bare piece of ground, irrigated them as if they were vegetables. The cupboards were full of vases--the parrot vase Sam gave her the year he was seven, the yellow vase like an open tulip

she found at a rummage sale during the war when everyone was moving. There was one vase like a smoky swirl of green glass, and of course, there were the crystal and silver vases we bought for their twenty-fifth anniversary the year before Daddy died. When they were blooming, a bouquet of roses always stood in the center of the big oak table in the dining room, set carefully on a crocheted antimacassar. The last note she sent me--I have it framed on my desk--had a picture, a watercolor of a rose garden--maybe the one she dreamed of--roses banked against a broad lawn, going on forever.

I think about roses--Peace, with its huge golden blossoms rosy on the edges, Fiesta, the scarlet explosion, Herbert Hoover, the old-fashioned yellow rose Mother always liked best--and feel myself expanding, smell their fragrance, feel the cool smooth petals in my hands, like Sally's baby skin.

Sally's independent, smart as a whip. When I left California, we stopped to see her, Marge and I. She didn't offer to help, she knew better than that. She'd read everything she could get her hands on about recovering alcoholics. But there was so much compassion in her eyes, so much love.

Somehow we came out friends, Sally and I, more so than I ever was with my mother. Sally watched me try so hard to get well, fail again and again. I never protected her from any of it. I didn't have the stiff upper lip my mother learned from hers--my grandmother, who dug the sewer to the street and roofed her house when she was seventy, who had a line to the bookie and played a mean game of

poker, who supported the family when Grampa couldn't, who never learned to say I love you.

My mother finally did learn that, and we were more than friends at the end--we were mother and daughter. I hope, wherever she is, Mom's surrounded by roses, expanding beyond any horizons she ever thought of.

Thank God life isn't fair. We never get what we want in this world, greedy as we are, but we never get what we deserve either. I didn't deserve my mother's forgiveness, or Sally's either; much less their love. In a family, grownup women love one another, in spite of all they know about each other--it's a wonderful thing.

I'm not coming out of this a hero, whatever that is. I begin to wonder if my life is just a series of scenes, remembering them like re-living the childhood diseases-- measles, mumps, chickenpox. Then I think of Lou--he wasn't a childhood disease. Or maybe he was. Something I never got immunized for--Daddy's girl.

The trouble is I wasn't even that. My sister was. I was just a wannabe--spent a lifetime trying to get in, courting my father. I remember the old sick feeling when I watched Corky playing with Dad, having fun, feeling secure. I never had that, don't have it now. But that's what this is all about. Facing reality, giving up wishes, dealing with wants, taking inventory. I can feel that August with Andrea begin to roll through my mind.

She pulled into the driveway, got out of the car, and walked up to the front door. "Everybody gone?" she asked, throwing my duffle bag up on her shoulder.

It was heavy. I could barely lift it, but she was strong and tall, like Corky, sure of herself. I felt like a shadow coming along behind her, carrying my backpack. I went back in the house, a last check. It felt like I was stepping off an edge into nowhere.

Andrea peeled out in her usual fashion. Her hands on the wheel strong, tanned, capable. I giggled nervously, thinking *You're in good hands with Allstate--or with Andrea*. She just ignored me.

At the apartment Andrea dumped my duffle on the living room floor. "You can sleep anywhere." She gestured vaguely around the room. There was only one bedroom so I took it that meant the couch. "You forgot to bring your racket." she said.

I didn't answer.

She looked annoyed but put out her hand. "Give me the keys to the house." As she went out she was muttering "Kids. Deliver me from kids."

I didn't really like the idea of Andrea walking through our empty house, going to the bedroom where I kept my racket. She was like a Viking invader--more like an Amazon, or a combination of the two, with her broad shoulders, the helmet of yellow hair, her intense blue eyes.

She was back in fifteen minutes with the tennis racket and a can of balls. She went right to the kitchen and, in a few minutes, brought out lunch, a plate of tuna sandwiches dripping with tomato, the green edges of lettuce curling out from large slices of heavy

brown bread. I didn't like drippy sandwiches and I hated brown bread, but I sat down at the table and meekly asked for a glass of milk. I was used to seeing Andrea in charge at the theater, chalking marks on the stage, making sure people used them, striding up and down the aisles, shouting instructions, criticizing, praising, running the show. At home, or at least in this setting, she was a bit daunting. And I was here for the whole month of August, with no one to run home to.

During the week we were out on the courts by nine o'clock. We came back to one of Andrea's hearty lunches, napped in the afternoon for an hour or so. Later we snacked on avocado and crackers, a slice of pie with cheese, whatever was handy, then left the house early for the theater. Andrea was meticulous. Every night she made sure the chalk marks were bright, props laid out, dressing rooms neat. She put me to work mending costumes or re-touching the flats. At home it was the same. By the end of two weeks I was exhausted. All summer I'd gotten up around ten or eleven, moped around, reluctantly dusted and done dishes, then dragged myself down to the theater to sit out front and prompt. This was not adequate training for Andrea's schedule. Especially since I had to act cheerful. She didn't specifically address the question, but somehow I knew she'd have no patience with loafing or the sulks. I was "on" every minute of the day, and when we got home after each performance, Andrea wanted to rehash the show.

One Sunday afternoon she decided we would go to the park. But first we had to pack a big lunch--half a watermelon and some Cokes surrounded by ice, fried chicken, bread and butter

sandwiches, carrot sticks and celery tucked in around edges. When we were finished, that cooler weighed a ton. Of course I didn't have to carry it.

We were going to Fairmont Park, over in Riverside. By the time we got there I was already tired. We parked and put our things on a table under a shelter. I walked over to a glider swing, sprawled out, and laid my head back. Andrea followed me. The sun was hot. Some kids were playing tag near us and one of them, a boy about seven years old, skidded to a stop beside our swing and fell in a heap giggling. I opened my eyes. A little girl in a pink dress-- she must have been about four--staggered over with her arms wide and fell on top of him. When they stopped giggling and got up, they came over and stared at us. I laid my head back and closed my eyes until they went away. I could hear them shouting a ways off and an airplane droned overhead, but everything else was quiet. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the swing started to vibrate. I felt it in my feet first, moving just a little bit. There was a gentle sway and it began to move faster. I knew Andrea was doing it and wished she'd quit. The slats began to creak and I jerked upright to see Andrea standing up, pumping from her knees, sending us flying. She yelled "Geronimo" as she jumped off and somersaulted across the lawn. I just looked at her. The swing slowly came to a halt. She stretched out a hand, coaxing me, "What's wrong, Irie? Why don't you want to play?"

I gave in then. First we rented a little motorboat, one of a dozen or so putt-putting on the lake. I turned my face up to the sun, smelling the must of the leather seats, the boggy rankness of the

land-locked lake, the faint scent of roses on the breeze. After a half hour of cruising, Andrea pulled into the dock. When I stepped out of the boat, the lawn beneath my feet swayed, just a little.

"Last one in's a chicken," Andrea shouted as she leaped out of the boat and raced for the car. When I got there, she had towels draped over the windows and was squirming into her bathing suit. When she was finished I got in and changed. She waited for me outside the car and when I opened the door she put out her hand. We ran to the swimming pool holding hands and jumped in. We slid down the slide, played at water fights, pulled ourselves out on the edge and lay panting in the sun. Finally it was enough, even for Andrea. She grabbed the towels and laid one across my shoulders, then dried off, twisting the towel around her waist, and held out her hand to pull me up.

As wet as we were, it was too cool under the roof to sit still so we moved our picnic things over on the lawn. Too many people under the roof anyway. That morning I thought it was totally unnecessary to fix such a big lunch, but I had to admit the fried chicken and cold Cokes were worth it. When Andrea handed me a cold juicy slice of watermelon I got to my knees and bent over the lawn to eat it, but the sticky sweet juice ran down my chin and trailed down between my breasts. Andrea watched me.

The apartment was hot and stuffy when we got in. I started for the bathroom to shower and Andrea went to the kitchen with our picnic basket. As I walked past the kitchen door, Andrea reached out and stopped me. She stood beside me in the doorway to the bedroom and cupped her hands around my face, laughing when they

stuck to the watermelon juice. When I looked up at her, her eyes were soft, Her lips full and trembling. She looked into my eyes for a long minute, then bent her head to lick the sticky juice from my neck. As her head moved down she took one finger and pulled the halter top away so she could lick the trail of juice all the way down. She pulled the halter straps away and undid the hook in the back, lightly touching my nipples with her fingertips, then with her lips. She moved her hands behind me and spread them up beneath my shorts. She pulled my hips forward, close to her, and ran a finger inside my underpants, moving it in and out, backward and forward, until my pants were wet and my knees shaking. She pushed my hips just far enough away to unzip my shorts and pull them down. Her lips never left my skin as she knelt down. When she laid her cheek on my belly, I heard her whisper, "Dear God!"

Finally she laid me on the bed and kissed the slow tears from my face. It felt good, of course, like the feelings I had with Ricky and more, because Andrea knew what she was doing, but it was dream-like, reflections in a mirror.

That night I woke up filled with terror, dreaming. I was the cashier at the turnstile going into the horse races. People were crowding in, each one paying me two dollars. I could hear them shouting, hear the race results being announced, then they were on me, piling up at the exit gate, shouting for their money. Everybody won seventy dollars and I only had the two dollars they'd paid to get in. I got out of bed crying, sobbing, went into Andrea's bedroom and woke her. I had to have the money; they were after me. I went to the bathroom and stood at the lavatory retching, trying to cough up the

money. The basin was too small. I knelt by the tub. Andrea was holding my head, saying "It's gonna be all right, baby. You're just dreaming." I shook her off. Finally she got a pan from the kitchen and poured cold water over my head.

That brought me out of it. I collapsed in a heap on the bathroom floor, sobbing and shaking. Andrea knew what to do about that: she pulled me up off the wet floor, dried me off, dressed me in a clean nightgown, took me in her bed. She was the mommy I needed.

I didn't know it then, but that dream was the forerunner of my panic attacks. For years and years even the thought of that dream overwhelmed me. Now I can hardly remember how it went. That fear was like a tumor encapsulated in my brain--the fear of never having enough, never being enough, I don't know which. When I started over, after Lou, after the pills and the drinking ended, all the cliches from AA were what saved me--*take it easy, live life on life's terms, don't push the river, one day at a time.*

The summer days flowed past for me like a river of dark molasses. Andrea started making drinks when we got home from the theater and that helped. After a few drinks I began to tease her, become seductive. In the morning, I was filled with disgust, but at night I loved the power I had over her.

She insisted on my being active, playing tennis, swimming. We even danced sometimes, jitterbugging, rough-housing, then, when the drink took over, dancing close. Her activity therapy was working. I could feel the apathy dying, energy beginning to rush through my

veins. Unfortunately this only brought on a restlessness tinged with dread.

One night in the middle of the re-hash, I walked out. I walked halfway into town, ran the rest of the way. When I got there the town seemed empty. I had that sense of separation I'd experienced at the memorial service, like everybody was part of something except me. A few people were out walking, mostly couples, the men in uniform. I'd forgotten all about the war, forgotten everything in my secret life with Andrea. I walked back home, frightened of shadows, hurrying, but not wanting to get there.

It was hot as usual when we came home that last night, muggy, with a haze of smoke from the brush fire over the mountain turning the dusky twilight orange. After dinner I stood in the kitchen perched on one leg, idly scratching mosquito bites with my other foot while I leaned against the sink, nibbling on crackers and cheese, slowly putting the dishes in the cupboard. When Andrea came charging out of the living room and grabbed my arm, I fell against the kitchen table, then came up swinging. We scuffled for a minute; Andrea ended up on the floor. I stood over her screaming "Can't you ever keep your filthy hands to yourself? Leave me alone. I hate you!"

She sat there for a minute with her knees up, her head resting on them. When she looked up, her face was drawn. She ran her fingers through her hair, took a deep breath, and said, "I'm going to say this slowly, Iris, so you can get it. That grass fire is coming down the hill toward our house." She jumped to her feet and grabbed my shoulders, shaking me and screaming. "We have to get out of here!"

Now!" Then I was the one on the floor. She paused in the doorway and looked down at me. "Look out the window, for God's sake, and try to get out of your own little world for once. You have five minutes to get your things together."

That got my attention. Through the open window I could see the dull red glare from the brush fires flaring, eating a path down the side of the mountain. I could hear the fire roaring and snapping, smell the creosoted pungency of mesquite burning.

I ran to the living room, grabbed my duffle bag, and threw a few things in it. Andrea was pulling me out the door as I slipped a back pack over my shoulder. We ran to the car.

A few blocks away Andrea pulled up to the curb and we watched the smoke swirl around the little studio apartment, burst into flame when the roof caught fire. Without a word, Andrea put the car in gear and drove to Denny's, only a couple of blocks away. We walked in the cool air-conditioned restaurant, took a booth near the window, and ordered large cokes. As I stared out the window the fire made a zig-zag and disappeared over the crest of the mountain. It was a huge black hulk without the familiar lights from houses built halfway up the side of it.

We sat there staring out the window. When I closed my eyes the tears welled up, making a trail through the soot and dust on my hot cheeks, dripping off my chin.

"For heaven's sake, blow your nose, you've got snot running into your mouth!" Andrea said, jerking a napkin out the holder, thrusting it at me across the table. I blew my nose and she handed me another napkin. When I began to dry my tears Andrea pointed at

me and doubled over laughing. Tears ran down her cheeks and she grabbed a napkin for herself. Then I could see what she was laughing at. Her face was covered with soot, smeared with tears. We looked like a blackface comedy act, after the show was over. We both began to whoop hysterically, our laughter mixed with tears. People were staring by the time we got up and headed for the restroom. Inside we jockeyed for space in front of the lavatory, looking in the mirror, laughing again, bumping hips, scuffling playfully. Andrea stepped back and gave me the space in front of the lavatory. That's the way women do it, I guess, laughing and crying. For a minute we were closer than we'd ever been, but saying goodbye. We both knew it.

I scrubbed at my face with a paper towel, then moved over to give Andrea room. We went back to the table, ordered hamburgers and french fries, fresh cokes, and sat there munching away our troubles. The fire was too pat, too much a metaphor for what happened between us; we could either laugh or cry, and we chose to laugh.

But the mood was broken, I could see that when I looked across the table at Andrea, her face buried in her hands, her bright hair, lank and greasy with smoke, covering them. I thought she was crying, but when she looked up she threw her head back in the old defiant gesture. Her mouth twisted, "So now what am I supposed to do?"

She didn't expect an answer. I was going home, we both knew that, and she didn't belong there. She stood up and fished in her pocket for the car keys. "I'll take you home--where I should have left

you in the first place." When I stood up she stopped and laid a hand on my shoulder, "I'm sorry, Iris, it's not your fault."

She pulled into the driveway and I fished around in the back seat for my duffle bag. The sound of the car door slamming was a curtain coming down, leaving Andrea back stage. I stood on the porch and watched a cloud of white dust swirl up in the moonlight, enveloping Andrea's car as she gunned it back out onto the street, the tires squealing. She took off down the hill toward the center of town. Then my eyes were drawn in the other direction, up the hill where the dusty green homemade trailer lumbered out of sight only a few weeks ago, taking the family toward the cool green river, flashing salmon, the smell of musty tents, Coleman lanterns, and salt water.

Stale air and dust filled the stifling darkness. I felt my way into the dining room and began to turn on lights. Moving through the house, I stopped at the record player and put on Benny Goodman, then began a slow dance while I opened doors and windows. It was almost like another dream sequence, one that let in the fresh air. The air smelled of fruit, eucalyptus, and the roses. I plopped down in Daddy's chair. Peggy Lee was belting out "Why dontcha do right, like some other men do?" I was shocked when I found myself sobbing, heard the harsh sounds coming from my throat, had to wipe away the tears and the gobs of stuff coming out of my nose.

My clothes and even my hair reeked with smoke. Suddenly I felt tired almost to death. I went to the kitchen sink, washed my face and dried it on one of Mom's kitchen towels. I found the half pint of whiskey Daddy kept in the cupboard for his heart but there was only a couple of inches left. I slugged it down, drank a tall glass of water,

then went into the dining room to look up the number for Shorty's Camp. I wanted my mother.

It took a while for Shorty to get Mom, and as I waited I thought about the river again. Maybe I didn't want to go there, but it was nice to think about it--the mist rising through the old apple trees at the end of the campground. Inside the crudely planked windbreak attached to the trailer, a fire would be crackling in the homemade oil drum stove. The family would be sitting around the fire on their fold-up camp chairs polishing spinners, or re-winding the thread on their homemade bamboo fish poles, a Coleman lantern hissing and gasping from the tent pole overhead. Or they might already have taken the lantern inside the trailer. In that case they would all be in bed with Mom reading aloud, Zane Grey probably. I looked at the clock. It was only nine but they'd probably be in bed.

When Mom answered she was gasping for breath and her voice was shrill with fear. "Iris? Is that you? It's the middle of the night!"

"Mom, it's only nine o'clock. Of course it's me, who else would it be? How's the fishing?" I said nonchalantly, baiting her, wishing I could stop doing that.

"Iris, you scared me to death. I can't believe I got up out of a warm bed and ran all the way down here to have you ask me how the fishing is." I held the phone away from my ear and shook my head, listening to the familiar scolding voice I suddenly knew was partly my fault.

I stopped her. "I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't call to tease you; it just popped out. Andrea's house burned down. The fire turned and came

down the mountain. It burned up Andrea's place, then turned around again and went back over the mountain. Just like it was meant to be, like we were the target." I started to cry; being an adult was too hard. "We barely got out. It was awful!" I could feel my throat closing up.

"What about Andrea, is she there with you?" Mom's voice was full of concern.

That got me. "Why do you care about her? I'm your daughter!"

"I know you're my daughter, but Andrea's house burned down. Have you forgotten your manners? You should have had her stay with you--at least for a couple of days."

The enormity of the gap between us hit me like a ton of bricks. I started to laugh. I needed to talk to my mother all right, but what did we have to talk about?

As I remember, they came home in about a week, but things were never the same. I had my secrets, their life went on as if nothing had happened.

I sit up in bed and reach around to plump up the pillows. The memories of sex with either Rich or Andrea are faded, unimportant. Even though I see the self-centeredness clearly, I can see too that Irie was a little girl looking for love--confused, alone, and so needy.

I'm tired, deathly tired, but my mind's still squirrel-caging. Just turning off the light won't turn off my head. I remember the liverwurst and rye in the refrigerator, can almost taste the mustard, feel the lettuce crunching. I turn the light back on, sit up and feel for my

slippers. Soon I'm back in bed with a sandwich and a tall glass of milk, reaching for a book. I turn up the electric blanket.

Gather ye rosebuds as ye may, what a crock of shit. Didn't that man know about thorns? You gather rosebuds, they wilt. You gather roses, they got thorns. My coming-of-age bouquet, these scenes, are rank, like ragged robins, the old rootstock beneath the graft. Roses are made that way; the rootstock stays the same, the graft above it spliced into the rootstock to change the color, size, and shape. Each new splice--in my case, Rich, Andrea, Mom and Dad, even Corky and Sam, and of course, Lou--changed the color and size, the texture of my life. If you let roses get too dry, ragged robins, straggly little blossoms, start to bloom below the graft. I was dry, needy, reaching out to fantasy to nourish myself. Now I'm pruning back, trying to find new ways to nourish myself, bring back my true colors. I know they're still there.

I include as a part of my coming of age my marriage to Lou. In my life, he was a part of my growing up, the sick part of the love for my father that never matured. I never saw the connection--they were so different, my father and Lou. Certainly my father wouldn't have been capable of the violence, the crude vicious language, or even the anger that brought them on. But I can see why the marina, the fishing boats, and the fishermen fascinated me. Breathing in the moist salt air, absorbing the harsh cries of seagulls, watching the men, their bare torsos brown and muscular, cutting bait, tying lines,

rigging the nets--all these triggered memories of the hours I spent with Daddy fishing, trying to please him.

Lou and I were married in sweatshirts and jeans on the deck of the *Miss Veronica*, one bright sharp day in February, late in the afternoon, the sun going down, the masts of the fishing boats turning black against the sunset. Our wedding song was the wind in the rigging of a hundred boats. Daddy would have gotten a kick out of that, but he wouldn't have liked what came after--the cases of champagne, the raucous celebration, and especially Lou's drunken cynicism before I went to bed alone that night. In that marriage the nightmares of my childhood came alive, but maybe the fishing life kept me in the fantasy.

During the Depression, in the thirties, nobody I knew thought of women working. Men were roaming the highways looking for work. They often slept out in our orange grove, came to the back door asking for work and food. As for educating women, that was a joke. In the physics class the teacher jeered at my mistakes; in calculus, I was ignored. War made it more obvious. Women were expected to wave goodbye, keep the home fires burning, have dinner ready and their legs spread when the men came home, then have babies. I bought into that, and when Ricky didn't go to war, I didn't know what to do.

My father wanted me to be a doctor, or a lawyer, but, now that I think of it, he may have seen his own failed ambitions in me. He had no idea how to help me get there except to issue a challenge. His favorite was "You can be anything you want to, but you won't." He'd been an entrepreneur, buying and trading properties, but I was born

when he was forty, and soon after that he developed a heart condition that drained him of the strength to carry out his ambitions. And another factor entered in to his inability to love, I think--his mother's death.

On a Saturday morning in June of 1904, Phemie Castleton was in her kitchen preparing for a picnic on the lawn. Wearing a long cotton house dress of a drab color, a little faded, she worked in the kitchen, taking chicken out of the black iron spider, putting water on to boil for tea, taking the potato salad out of the icebox, cutting wedges of apricot pie. She moved slowly, without her usual energy. Her mind must have been squirrel-caging, as mine often does. The children helped her carry the food out and set it on a tablecloth spread on the lawn, her sixteen year old, Bessie, carrying the youngest, Sue Ellen, on one hip. Phemie's mind echoed with what Mervyn said to her in the bedroom that morning; she heard it over and over.

His back was turned as he pulled up his braces, his BVD underwear white against the curling gray mat that met the coarse silver-streaked hair curling on his neck. His voice, heavy with contempt, shivered across the silver morning air. "You're no kinda wife, Phemie. When you should be doin' your work, you're playin' at water fights with the kids, drawing pictures, readin' books. The Lord says *we should not be yoked with unbelievers.*" His voice took on the sonorous tones he used when he interrupted the preacher in church with Biblical quotations to show how much he knew, or justify his behavior.

"I ain't gonna be yoked with you no more. You're an unbeliever, Phemie, a growed up woman acting like a child, with no respect for your betters." He let down the braces and started honing his razor against the thick leather strop. He dipped his hand in the china bowl of water that sat on the bureau, reached for the soap brush, and began to lather his face. He pulled his mouth to one side and described a sharp line with the razor at each side of the full silver and black mustache he was so proud of. He was looking in the mirror and Phemie could tell he wasn't as sure of himself as he acted because he let his eyes stray to her reflection in the mirror when she sat up in bed and smoothed her hair. Once he swore when he cut himself looking at her in the mirror.

"I've found me another woman, Phemie, one that knows which side her bread is buttered on, treats me with respect--a clean woman who will bring up these children to live in the Lord's house and be meek before their father. Like the Lord sayeth, the man is the head of the household."

Even though she was scared, or maybe because she was, Phemie couldn't stop the giggle that popped out. When he got tangled up in *sayeths* he always got himself and God mixed up--didn't know the difference most likely.

"You're laughing, Euphemia!" he roared, outraged. "You'll laugh out the other side of your mouth before I'm through. I'm kicking you out, Phemie, gettin' a divorce. Me and Philomena Johnson are getting married. Then I'll have some kids that look up to me in a clean house that's run the way I want it. You can go back to your mother, do whatever you have to do." He bent over the bowl,

snorting and blowing, then wiped his face with the linen towel that lay next to it, put on his khaki shirt, and pulled up his braces. He bent over the mirror a last time, brushing his curly hair flat on the sides with two swipes of the ivory-handled brushes, straightened his back, and opened the bedroom door.

He glanced back at Phemie, her face suddenly pale and drawn. "I see you stopped laughing. I'll get with Lawyer Meese tomorrow. The girls can help you pack. Get out of bed and hurry up about it, I want my breakfast."

Phemie hoped she'd have her monthly show this morning, but no such luck. She was heavy with discouragement over the appalling fact that she was, at thirty seven, pregnant with her seventh child. That was bad enough without Mervyn's talk of divorce. It wasn't just talk, she feared. Mervyn was a loud-talking man, especially when he started talking Bible, but he always meant what he said.

She thought about Frank, her middle child and only boy. He was fourteen now, tall and awkward and gaunt. Even though he shook with fever and cried out from the pain in his arms and legs, Mervyn sent Frank out to the fields to work every day, whipped him when he complained about being tired. She couldn't protect the child, couldn't even protect herself, the way it looked now.

As she walked out the door with the pies on her arm, she glanced over at Mervyn, reading the paper in his big chair. "Dinner's on the lawn today, Pa. It's so hot I thought we'd eat under the shade of the sycamore trees."

"You don't hear nothing I say, do you, Phemie? Always playing. A man can't even put his feet under the table and serve his kids dinner in this house."

Phemie went on out the door and laid the pies down carefully at one end of the checkered table cloth.

The door slammed behind Mervyn. He walked up to where they were sitting, reached out one hand, and picked up a drumstick.

"Phaw!" He spit out the meat. "No salt. And there's blood runnin' in the middle. You can't do nothing right!"

Phemie didn't say anything, just kept her hands clenched in her lap, the knuckles white. She looked around, the only life in her face those big grey eyes that seemed to take in everything--the family, the orange groves in the background, the golden acacia trees. Frank's face was white and miserable, his jaw clenched, the baby was whimpering, trying to squirm loose from Bessie, who was arguing in a loud whisper with Jenny, the second oldest. Phemie got up and walked in the house.

The table cloth was skewed and wrinkled, the plates of chicken almost gone, the pie tins emptied except for one piece flattened and soggy with juice congealing in the pan. Sue Ellen was screaming, mouth open, face red, protesting against Jenny's ministrations. Jenny was trying to wipe the grease and sticky apricot juice from her mouth with an edge of the tablecloth.

Frank sat in lordly isolation on his canvas porch chair, scraping the last potato salad and pie from his plate. He threw his napkin on the floor in disgust, set the plate down, took out his silver toothpick.

"Go get your ma, Jenny. What's she doin' in the house all this time? You kids need lookin' after."

Jennie came back out quickly, her face pale and frightened, her hands shaking. She grabbed at Mervyn's arm. "Pa, you better get the doctor. Ma's doubled up on the bathroom floor and I can't get her up."

"Always something' to ruin a man's dinner. She'll get up or I'll know the reason why!" He got to his feet and went in the house, slamming the screen door.

That's the way I pieced the story together from what I've heard them say. Phemie screamed for three days before she died, the carbolic acid eating out her stomach lining.

Her son, Frank, was my father. He never did get over the rheumatic fever. Oh, the fever went away all right, but it left his heart weakened and enlarged. He dropped out of school that year, went back two years later to play baseball. He was called by the minor leagues in Arizona, but when the heat came in summer, he couldn't keep up, couldn't breathe.

That wasn't his only heart failure. They say I look like Phemie. When we were kids, I was the only extrovert in the family, the artist, the reader, the musical one, although that's changed some since we grew up. Sam writes for the newspapers now, and Corky's a photographer. Daddy saw I had lessons in everything, but he couldn't show love. I remember crawling up on his lap when I was little, trying to hug his neck and tell him I loved him. He'd pull my arms from around his neck and set me on the floor without a word.

My parents never hugged or kissed in front of us and I always wondered if he allowed himself any tender emotions. A few months before she died my mom and I got talking about Dad one night late. We both started to cry, and she finally told me the family secret, the story of Phemie's suicide. It was considered a disgrace; she was a quitter. Mom said my father loved me very much, just couldn't show it.

I courted my father, but with that I was courting rejection. Or maybe I should say, in him I found rejection and learned to court it. There must have been plenty of good stuff, but all I found was rejection. I was the social one--I liked bright lights, makeup, hairstyling, party dresses, people--not vegetable gardens, homemade trailers, and fishing.

I didn't fit in anywhere--not at home or at school. I wanted to be one of the gang, but I wasn't a ball player, a winner at jump rope or volleyball. I was too scared for that. Instead I was a brain and didn't know how to hide it. My only victories were A's, and those turned to ashes in my mouth when the kids circled me on the schoolground, jeering.

I begin to see that Lou was the culmination of every negative factor in my life. With him I got the fishing *and* the bright lights, that's true, but I also got the rejection, a way to act out my father's final pronouncement --*but you won't*.

I hate the whining sound of my story, even while I search for the ruthless honesty Pat Ownbey tried to teach me. I'm restless--wondering if there's any hope for me, if this is going to help--it seems so negative. I find myself wandering through the house, picking up a

book and putting it down, letting the dust gather, the vegetables go unpicked.

The meetings go sour. The men are frightening, crude or too slick. They patronize me. No one cares that I spent twenty years counseling. My sponsor tells me I can't be a counselor until I get *weller*. *Carpenters go back to work*, I say rebelliously. I find sick people to listen to my psychological bullshit, but they don't stay long. They either find someone whose been sober a while, or get drunk.

Maybe I need to go back further--back to Nancy Drew, my first real love. From my earliest memory I went to the library every week with my mom. She took out six books and so did I. My life was lived in those books; everything else was too hard. My dad was proud of me because I was so smart. In those days no one knew about obsessive behavior so they let me read all I wanted to, protesting occasionally when it interfered with my chores. Even now, in between these memories, I have to have a book to shut off my head--not a gourmet experience, enjoying good literature, savoring the turn of a phrase, or a neat bit of symbolism-- more like junk food for the mind. When I go to ground like a fox seeking its hole, I always have a book in my hand. I was ripe for the love affair with Ricky and its outcome, I can see that now. I had no experience of real people; I only knew rejection, exclusion, paper romance, and a desperate longing to be part of something. I suppose the person I needed to be was myself, but I hadn't found her yet. I was just a kid, too rebellious to let anyone show me how to grow up.

Looking back, I can see my whole life has been an escape. If, instead of escaping into books, I had let the ball hit the end of my

finger more than once, fallen down and gotten up again, I might have developed some guts, avoided becoming a target. I can't change that, but I can take an honest look at it, instead of blaming everyone else. Actually, I've come to believe everybody does the best they can, or, as my Japanese friend once said when I was crying over my feelings of guilt as a teenager during the evacuation of the Japanese, "Each in his own time, each in his own way." That kind of acceptance is easier to apply to other people, I find.

After Rich, I came to the relationship with Andrea, *looking for love in all the wrong places*, as the song says. We used each other too, I suppose. She had no business seducing an innocent young girl, but she was my getaway, I used her to get back at Ricky and maybe even my mother, God love her. I used her to satisfy a lust I didn't know I had, and worst of all, to prove I had power over somebody. I say *worst* because I see sex for power as the lowest form of betrayal, both of our instincts, and of our partners in the crime.

Of course, in my defense, I never heard of homosexuality growing up. People are fighting for gay rights now, and at least young girls like I was know it exists; that makes the choices clearer. Maybe I'm so aware of my using behavior with Andrea because she was the first and only erotic experience with a woman. It had long-range effects. Ever since then I'm been frightened when I'm attracted to someone, man or woman, never trusting my emotions toward either sex, or theirs for me. Worse than that, the affair opened a larger gap between me and my mom, one that took years to bridge, or learn to ignore.

I'm surprised my mother showed up so often in these scenes. She was a practical woman, seemingly never troubled by doubts and fears--but then, there were the roses. After Daddy died, she sold the old house and built herself a small two-bedroom house, draped and carpeted it in turquoise blue, the lamps gilt and amber. She filled it with *objets d'art* from France, Holland, Germany, Venice--all the places she traveled. She bought a sporty car, visited Las Vegas at least once a year. She liked to crow over her winnings.

There were no more fishing trips. We became friends, but we never discussed world issues. She would cut out a articles from the Wall Street and save them for me, but it couldn't go any farther than that; she was too old to change--didn't want to actually--and I was still a rebel. She died last year--rather gallantly, I thought. Desperately ill, knowing she was dying, she climbed on a plane by herself and flew back to Southern California where Daddy was buried.

AA says our secrets keep us sick, and I agree with that in the case of Phemie, but I never told my mom about Andrea and I'm glad. I've come to realize there's a lot that doesn't need to be said, and you can't trust impulses--look at Phemie, how much havoc she created, and didn't stay to see.

With all the doubts and fears, the shame and guilt, I'm not sorry I started this inventory. I begin to see myself emerging, wanting love, needing it, only learning as I go along that you get love by giving it. Those who can't give love--and I might be one of them--are sometimes lucky enough to find people who know how, and learn from them. I suspect, however, it's always a double process--trying to

learn how to love, but mostly settling for who you are, taking love where you find it, without apologies.

ON THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

Iris Castleton was getting old. She could tell by the way nothing good happened to her body anymore except food. And food didn't taste the same. Since she quit smoking, no matter what she ate, she wasn't satisfied. What she wanted was a cigarette. Sometimes the idea of sitting down with a cigarette was like the craving for sex. Having a cigarette would be like falling in love again, she knew it. Everything would take on new color; she would feel alive. She also knew that was the drug talking, trying to get her back; sometimes it talked loud.

She used to say a hot bath was almost as good as sex and a lot more reliable, but these days hot water hurt her skin and cold water chilled her. She could hardly remember sex. When she touched herself down there, instead of the warm languorous experience it once was, she felt violated, as if a stranger were pawing at her body. Nothing much happened anyway. She once read that sex was the best aphrodisiac and she thought that must be true; doing without certainly didn't create a voracious appetite, just made her feel like one of Agatha Christie's old tabbies, or was it Dorothy Sayers's?

This morning she woke up to a small but insistent clawing itch under her breasts and around her neck. When she scratched, she was unbearably reminded of the warts that had taken over her body. They tore delicately, bloodlessly, like crumbling yeast.

But by the time she got out of the shower and reached for the soft thick towel hanging next to the sink, her perspective had shifted.

She had miraculously survived her morning meditation, an invariably negative version of the *on and ons* that ran through her head, seemingly outside her volition, every morning. She woke up with a dread of what she might do or not do and guilt about what she had already done/not done. At her age, she had a backlog of guilt. It could crowd into her thoughts and ruin a whole morning, a day, even weeks, for that matter.

This week, ever since she got the letter, the class reunion lay in the back of her mind like a coiled snake, reminding her that her high school graduation was fifty years ago.

Showered and shaved--she'd sprouted whiskers too, these last ten years--she threw on a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt, automatically sat down at the dressing table, and put on her makeup. Because she still went through the motions every morning she knew she didn't have the fashionable clinical depression so many women took pills for. She always got out of bed and put on makeup, searched out earrings to match, even when she was only wearing jeans.

She stood up to get some now, put them on, then posed in front of the mirror. Her belly didn't look too bad when she covered it up with a long shirt; she could almost feel good about the way she looked, but she still hated the way her stomach spread across her lap when she sat down, and envied young girls who wore jeans with a buttoned waistline instead of elastic. She turned away from the mirror, sighing, and went to get the morning paper.

Outside fog blotted out the sun, but in Oregon that usually meant it would be bright and sunny after ten. She poured a cup of

coffee, added cream and sugar generously, and sat down with the paper. As usual, the news mirrored her morning mood, nothing positive worth reporting. And in this election year, with small countries engaged in civil wars and children starving in much of the world, including the United States, the prospects for any kind of a cheerful message were increasingly sparse. She turned quickly to the crossword.

Here she had two chances; if she couldn't solve the crossword, there was hope for the Cryptoquote. She hardly ever failed both. She hoped the Cryptoquote had a *that* in it. With *t*'s at either end, *that* was an easy clue, sometimes opening the way to solving the puzzle. An author's name, like George Bernard Shaw, with its two *es* and two *gs*, could help too.

This is what's it's come to, she thought, an old lady nattering over the puzzles in the daily paper, not wanting to read about anybody's problems, not wanting to do anything about her own. She hoped she was still withdrawing from smoking, and wondered for the thousandth time why she'd ever started again. She had the best *forgettory* in town, she guessed. Over the past fifteen years, she'd quit at least ten times. She couldn't seem to remember the hacking cough and chest pains that repeatedly forced her to quit smoking, or how bad the first six months were.

The phone rang. It was Ethel. "What's new, Iris? Are you doing anything this morning--besides the crosswords?"

"That's mean. Mainly I'm trying to ignore the facts of life. I have a bad case of the fat and uglies this morning and the invitation to my

high school reunion didn't help. Fifty years. Can you believe that? Don't answer."

"Oh, Iris, we're survivors. Doesn't that make you feel good?"

"I hate remembering, and this high school reunion triggers a lot of old feelings. Fifty years ago, and I still remember every nasty word, the way they laughed at me, and stuck their noses in the air when they walked past. It makes my skin crawl just talking about it."

"Well then, let's not talk about it. Nobody said you have to go to that old reunion. How about going for a run in the park this morning? The daffodils are just starting to bloom. Afterwards we can stop at the Heron for a sinful *cappuccino* or something."

"Ethel, you're like an old shoe--you're even comfortable when I'm bent out of shape. You're the very best person I know of to talk to when I'm down."

"Thank for those kind words. You'll get yours back the next time I'm bummed out. Pick you up in ten minutes."

"Sure," Iris said as she hung up the phone. No more thinking negative, she told herself. I'll put on my tennies and work on changing my attitude. As she walked by the mirror this time, she blew herself a kiss and said, "You're beautiful," adding out of the side of her mouth, "and so's your uncle."

The sky was blue with the usual haze and Ethel was right, the daffodils were coming out. They walked across the bridge onto the footpath. Under the bridge, the creek was littered with plastics of various kinds, torn cartons, cups filled with muddy water and bent straws. The water wasn't moving.

When Iris started to run her legs felt awkward and everything jiggled. Her state of mind fit right into the picture. It was a mish-mash of anger, guilt, and fear. She was getting old; it scared her and, at the same time, made her mad. No, outraged. Old age is like an accident, she thought, it's supposed to happen to other people, not to me. She felt a little guilty too. Like she should have been better prepared for this.

Further on, a wide grassy swale curved down to the bank of the stream and the trees closed in overhead. Here, they were further from the bank and the leftover picnic trash. The sluggish stream reflected blue sky and overhanging trees. Iris began to feel at peace. This part of the world was cozy, companionable, small enough to fix. She could feel the lines in her face smoothing out.

At the bench beside the second bridge she stopped and leaned on the rail, puffing a bit, wishing for a cigarette. She knew it was ridiculous healthwise, but when she ran she liked to take a break with a cigarette in her hand. Of course passers-by sniffed disdainfully, looking away, even speeding up when they passed her to avoid the smoke. Once a woman stopped and began to tell her stories about how the lungs looked in the operating room, went on to talk about varicose veins and oxygen tanks. Nasty stuff. The woman justified her intrusion by explaining she was a nurse. It was all Iris could do not to remind the woman she could read and was capable of understanding the horror stories about smoking in every magazine and newspaper.

Here I go again, she thought, negative thinking. Hanging on to the past. Letting a stranger ruin my serenity, a stranger I talked to a year ago. I don't even smoke any more.

Ethel dropped heavily onto the bench next to her. "I think they've changed the path since we were here last," she grinned. "Seems more uphill." She bent over her legs, examining them. "I've got at least one more varicose vein tattoo and a twenty percent increase in cellulite since the last time I wore shorts. Where will it all end?" She put the back of her hand against her forehead and rolled her eyes dramatically.

When Iris refused to laugh, she smacked her lightly on the nearest leg with the back of her hand. "Fluff up, Iris. From the day you were born you've been dying. You can laugh or you can cry, either way you're going."

Iris stared at the plastic cup half full of muddy water trapped in the reeds across the creek. "I know, but I don't want to do it. I don't want to die; I don't want to laugh; I don't want to cry. I seem to be stuck somewhere in the middle and I can't move."

Ethel stood up. "You know what my shrink told me *Can't* lives on *won't* street.' Meanwhile, back at the ranch, this run isn't going to do us any good if we don't get on with it. I'm off."

Iris got to her feet again. She seemed to weigh more than she had when she sat down. Her legs felt rusty, like they could use a shot of oil in the bearings. As she headed for the last bridge, her eyes were tearing, as usual, from the wind. Suddenly she realized it was more than that. She took off her glasses and dumped out the

accumulated tears, then polished them with her shirttail and put them back on.

Ethel was sitting on the rail waiting for her at the last bridge. She grabbed Iris as she tried to walk by, stuck a Kleenex in her hand, and laid an arm across her shoulders. "Guess it's serious, huh?"

"No, it's not serious." Iris snapped. "That's what's so disgusting. I have absolutely nothing to complain about. When the kids were small and there was so much to do, when they all had measles at once, when we had to think up ways to have fun without any money, that's when it was hard. I thought. But you know, in those days I had to move over and make room for somebody else. Now when I move over, there's nothing there. Just emptiness. Sometimes I feel like I could fall off the edge."

Ethel was staring off toward the creek, jiggling her feet, her eyes glazed over. Self-pity, Iris could hear it herself. It oozed over and muddied everything she said, fogged every reflection, bored everyone, even her. If she kept this up, she'd have no friends left, and rightly so. Forcing a laugh, she said, "You were right, Ethel." Putting her hand up to her forehead, rolling her eyes, she said, "If I don't give this up, my gravestone will read *Not with a bang but a whimper*, and nobody will come to the funeral."

From the disgusted look on Ethel's face, she could see her attempt at humor had not come off except as an echo of the self-pity that seemed to cover her like the warts she hated. She could scrape off the top layer, but the ugly growth was still there. Silently, the two friends turned and started back down the trail.

That night, after dinner, she poured herself a cup of coffee and refused the temptation of a detective novel. God, how she wanted a cigarette! Tonight I'll think seriously about the reunion, she told herself. She took out a sheet of paper and began to list the pro's and con's. She would get to see everybody, but they would all be old. She remembered too well the insults back then, but they were all grown up now and the reunion could be healing if she had the right attitude. She'd like to see the old town, but she would hate the changes, she knew. Summer in Southern California might dry her out after a soggy winter in Oregon, but she wasn't used to the heat. Impatiently, she threw the pen down. This was getting nowhere.

Would Bernie be there with wife number three? She had heard his new wife was the same age as their eldest son. Who did she really want to see?

Maybe the decision wasn't really so much whether she wanted to go to the reunion as whether she wanted to do anything. The reunion would at least provide a change of pace, but she suspected that outside things, like trips, even reunions, were not going to change the inside problem.

The slow leak of tears began again. This time she just took off her glasses and let them run down her cheeks. She would definitely have to do something before she got dehydrated. That thought almost made her smile.

Maybe she was having an identity crisis. That was fashionable at least, if boring. She began to take stock: She liked her name. She loved iris, the tall smooth flowers, their subtle color, their openness, the smooth crisp separation of their fleshy petals. She liked them

best when they were unexpected, standing cool and pale in a field of weeds, like the patch in the vacant lot next to the Alano Club in Salt Lake City. Or the bronze ones by the parking lot of that cold cement community college in Oregon the first year she started back to school, when she was so scared. Then there was the lovely planned bed of daisies, iris, gentians, with a border of lobelia by the building where the folklore conference was held, that summer in Logan when she almost fell in love.

If she could only live up to her name, she sighed. Instead of tall, she was round, instead of dignified, she was coming into old age a blithering idiot.

If she knew anything at all, the answer was in action. Maybe some people could stand still and let the hurt wash over them, then write about it, or talk about it, but she had tried that in therapy, on her friends, with a diary at her kitchen table where the darkness waited for her just outside the lamp light. It never worked. She just wallowed in *if onlys* and *what ifs*. She could remember sitting at the piano playing "Yesterdays" after her first divorce, snot and tears everywhere. God, she was a mess. It would be funny now if it hadn't taken almost forty years to get a sense of perspective. Going over things just didn't work for her; it was that simple.

Maybe she could get into gardening. In books, old ladies always seemed to find themselves in gardening. She couldn't help wondering how their knees survived. When she tried to garden seriously at all, she always ended up with aching knees and soggy jeans. Afterwards she walked bent over for days. And much as she loved them, she always forgot to plant iris in the fall.

She tried painting, but when she put the pictures in her mind on canvas, the clouds were like tufts of cotton pasted on an impossibly blue sky. Maybe some people could stand to paint like that and let everybody see; she couldn't. She had too much ego and not enough talent to be another Grandma Moses.

Her mind was wandering. Speaking of knees, hers were starting to ache. She had made a decision to do something. Surely that was enough for one day. Morning was soon enough to figure out what. Now it was time for a bubble bath, a hot cup of cocoa, and some of those delicious macaroons. She would prop herself up in bed against the nice soft pillows with cocoa and macaroons standing by while she read a romance novel.

Next morning her mind was clicking. When she started thinking about what to wear, she realized she was going to the reunion. She got out her duffle bag and began to hum a little tune.

Packing was a little depressing. Since she always peed her pants, she would have to take two of everything from the waist down, plus a large pack of sanitary pads. She wondered if anybody else had the same qualms about the reunion. She could almost cry if she let herself think about how she used to pack a pair of skinny jeans, high heeled slingbacks, and a V-neck T-shirt or two. When she pictured herself at the hotel, she was sitting at the bar drinking a martini, smoking a cigarette. She had given up the booze years ago, but cigarettes were only a few months in the past. Getting through the weekend without any props was a little scary. She briefly wished her fifty-year reunion had been twenty years ago, when she was a size ten in a leather skirt and boots, with no warts in her cleavage.

When Iris drove into Preston Thursday night, she was hot and tired. All she wanted was a long shower and bed. Well, maybe a Wendy's burger and a Frosty. But no phone calls, no visiting. That would come soon enough. Her skepticism about the whole idea of reunions was still hanging on.

Next morning she shaved her legs one more time, put Oil of Olay on her face and Elizabeth Arden's Sun and Sea, (*Tan Without Sun!*) on her legs. She put on shorts, a big shirt, and sandals, and was ready to explore. She would call Emily, her bitter enemy in high school, now the friendly reunion chairperson, and find out what the plans were. Maybe she'd wait till after breakfast. She sighed and picked up the phone.

"Iris, you finally got here!" The shrill voice pierced her ears and she quickly jerked the receiver away. "We didn't know whether you'd show up. Where are you?"

"I'm at the Applewood on Mill Street," Iris answered tentatively. "I thought I'd have some breakfast and drive by my old house, maybe even the high school. Is anything scheduled today?"

"Nothing, really, this morning. Of course, people will be straggling in all day," Emily answered. "Everyone's at the Hilton. Why don't I meet you there for lunch and find you a room?"

Already Iris felt like the outsider, as if forty years had never happened. She felt hemmed in, unsure of herself, like a sixteen-year-old with no Saturday night date. "There's someone at the door-- the maid, I think. Why don't I call you back?"

Emily sounded disappointed, like a salesman who had missed a live one. Her goodbye was cool.

Eventually, Iris knew, she would have to mingle and tell them all how glad she was to see them, how young they looked. They would all lie to each other for a day and a half, secretly appalled at how old they looked, and try to sound more successful than they were. Even she was shocked at that bit of cynicism and, in penance, decided she could at least move over to the Hilton as a gesture of good will.

When she stepped out the door of her motel room, all her defenses melted, literally. Her hair stood on end, her lipstick felt oily, her skin dry and scaling. She had forgotten how hot it was in Preston in August. The car would be stifling too; she didn't need air conditioning in Oregon.

She wondered if she would be able to find her way through the maze of freeways that surrounded and separated the town. *Dithering, that's I'm doing*, she told herself, as if she had to put a name to it.

When she walked into the lobby of the Hilton, she thought at first there was some kind of old people's convention going on. Then she saw the sign, *Class Reunion 1944*. That jerked her back to reality. *We have met the enemy and they are us*. She shook her head, then glanced around wildly to see if anyone was watching. She didn't recognize anybody, but no one seemed to know her either. She probably wouldn't recognize herself if she hadn't been watching the slow results of time and gravity in the mirror all these years. It was hard to reconcile the outside with the inside. Like someone else

had been writing checks on her account, using up time when she wasn't looking.

This was ridiculous. She took a deep breath and approached the registration desk. There were nametags--she was sure they'd all need them--laid out on the desk, and a large note that said, *Come on out by the pool*. Iris grabbed up a tag and wrote her maiden name in large letters, then headed for the French doors in the back. She wasn't about to put on a bathing suit and expose her warts and her belly, but she needed food and had to start somewhere.

People were sprawled on lounge chairs, splashing in the pool, standing around talking. Emily was there wearing a large button that said *Chair* pinned to her bikini bra. She was blond and sylph-like, poised and confident; Iris hated her. She almost turned and walked away, but then someone squinted at her nametag, and everyone started making a big deal out of her being there. She was in. Still feeling like out.

That night she drove to the fairgrounds, got out of her car, and locked it, then stood there for a minute to let the rasping north wind touch her hair, waiting for it to pump her up into the high she always loved, the north wind high. She remembered it best in October when the leaves were changing, the band practicing for a Friday afternoon football game.

When she walked into main building where they were having the banquet, the sound and light was overwhelming. There were acres of white tablecloths and above them, pale skin and white hair, or the reflection of light off shining heads. *Rissy, Rissy, Rissy*, everybody seemed to be whispering. She couldn't tell whether they

were calling her to join them or talking about her. Maybe neither, maybe she was just imagining things.

Warren, one of her brief high school flames, was lurking in the background, wearing a loud plaid jacket over a T-shirt and jeans. That was the story of her life in high school. On a scale of one to ten, she always got the threes, and the maddening thing was they always dumped her before she could work up the courage to dump them! Warren spotted her and was weaving in her direction. Before she could sit down, he folded her in a big hug and tried to kiss her, his breath reeking. He stepped back and patted her on the fanny, as if they were still connected in some way. She looked around wildly, then saw her brother and his wife at the table in front of them.

Warren stood there with his beefy hand on her back. "Hey, there's Spike and his beautiful wife."

Spike looked embarrassed but got up to shake hands, which gave her a chance to pull away. As always, he missed what was going on. "You guys going to dance?" he said.

"What a great idea! Issy always did cut a mean rug." He pulled her out on the dance floor. *Cut a mean rug* echoed in her head. This guy was still back in the forties!

Warren looked down at her, grinning. He was sawing the air with her hand just like he used to do in high school, sweating and beginning to puff, his belly rubbing unpleasantly against her. She stopped right there and stepped away.

"Sorry, Charlie, you're too drunk for me." She couldn't believe it was her voice, but it went on. "It's not the forties anymore. I'll see you around."

Warren was still standing on the dance floor when she found a seat next to Spike and sat down. From then on, she was okay. They were just the old gang. She danced with some of them, and, of course, they caught up on old times. No one drank much. Most of them had stopped smoking.

About ten o'clock she said goodbye and went upstairs to the familiar impersonal comfort of the Hilton. She turned on the lights by the bed, picked up the chocolate on the pillow and laid it next to her book. The sparkling clean linens were pleasant to look at and felt good sliding in, but they were not home. If she was going to spend her time reading, Iris thought, she might as well be in her own bed.

She picked up her book, then laid it down again and let her mind drift, wondering why she had made the reunion into such a big deal. This wasn't the old days, when she was a part of the group, yet left out. They had no power to hurt her. Nor any desire. They had all gone on with their separate lives, just as she had. The reunion had no sinister overtones, it was just an interlude, a chance to catch up. Everyone was here to have fun, gossip some, show off.

The weekend she had tried to avoid, waited for, dreaded was over. She'd found no real connection with her past, no lost loves, unless you counted Warren, who was a desperation move in the beginning and only lasted until she discovered she wasn't that desperate. She wouldn't have recognized him if she met him on the street, but was glad in a way she'd run into him. All those years she'd danced with people, stayed with them feeling uncomfortable, like a little mouse. It was so easy; all she had to do was walk away. She shook her head, smiling, picked up the chocolate in one hand, her

book in the other, plumped up the pillows behind her head, and snuggled into the bed covers.

On the way out of town she got lost looking for a freeway entrance. The only building she still recognized was the old Carnegie library, but when she stopped and went in, the ceilings didn't look as high, nor the stacks as big. Little old Mrs. Spragins was gone, of course, and the library was computerized.

It was sunset when Iris came around the curve into San Francisco. Traffic was heavy, even for a Sunday, so she got in the middle lane and tried to stay at sixty-five. She fumbled among her tapes until she found *The Swan of Tuonela*, smiling as she remembered her grandfather who introduced her to Sibelius, taught her to read Finnish using the *Kalevala*. Her favorite story, once she heard the music, was the one about the warrior who was challenged to kill the great white swan of Tuonela using only one arrow. He died in the struggle and the swan continued to float eternally on the dark surface of the river surrounding the abode of Death.

The sky flamed in a half dozen shades of coral and cerise, a swoop of mauve marking the edge of reflected light. The color seemed to swallow her like a great red throat. Pulsing with the sound of beating wings, violins and cellos in crescendo, she sat behind the wheel, staring, her mouth open, caught up in sensation, a particle of light sucked into the vortex bridging San Francisco and the Bay.

The trip south through the hot dry valleys of inland California and the weekend out of time primed her for this onslaught of color reaching out through the dusk to make her a part of everything--

sound, color, light, the beating wings of the swan, the dying warrior, her grandfather. It was like an acid trip--a good one this time--and she knew it wasn't just a chemical trip. It would last.

By the time she left the city lights behind, the sunset was gone and she was hungry and tired, watching anxiously for a Vacancy sign. She hated coming down. Blurred vision and a knot in her stomach let her know she had once again driven too far. She never seemed to learn. She planned to stop in Monterey, but instead drove twelve hours straight, was somewhere near Ukiah. It was the obsessiveness; she could never get away from it entirely.

The next afternoon about one, she pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition. It almost too cool in the shade of the tall pines casting their shadows down the hill behind the house. She got out of the car slowly, her bones stiff. When the roaring in her ears stopped she could hear the wind soughing in the trees. A bee droned next to the lilac tree.

She turned to the car and dragged her bags out, then humped them up the steps and into the house. Before she sat down at the kitchen table she went to the refrigerator and made herself a Dagwood, wondering idly if they still called them that, filled a glass with ice and poured a soda. She took a few bites, gulped down half of her drink. Driving was thirsty work. The silence filled her kitchen. She jumped up and put a tape in the stereo, wanting some kind of noise.

The tape was Easy Listening from the 40's but she didn't let her mind go back. Instead she smiled at the roses blooming just outside the kitchen window. Her little garden had no terrace, no banks of

flowers, no hedges, but the roses made up for everything. She had Peace, and Silver Jubilee, and a yellow rose she loved whose name she could never remember.

Most of all she loved the Cecile Bruner that grew over the garage. She could remember her grandmother's house, where the pink buds of the Cecile Bruner bloomed as high as the roof. The tiny sweetheart roses only lasted a day. Once the flower opened, it fell apart so that the ground all around it was thick with browning petals. The Cecile Bruner didn't last long, but the others lasted for a week or so, and she liked them in the house.

She would spray them tomorrow and cut off the old blossoms, saving the petals for *potpourri*, using the hips for tea. She could do that early in the morning, while the dew was still on the roses. After that, she'd go to the library, find out where she could get a copy of the *Kalevala*, think about a trip to Finland. Or maybe she'd sign up for the Spanish class offered this fall at the community college, consider a trip to Mexico, or even Spain.

Iris moved through the living room, drank in the bright clear red of the bullfight poster she'd hung over the weathered oak chest, ran her fingers over the satiny finish she'd put on it, picked up the red glass ashtray her mother brought from Mexico so many years ago and held it to the light to look at the iridescent bubbles rising through the glass. She carried her suitcases into the bedroom, unpacking, sorting things out, thinking about clothes for the fall.

She stripped and walked naked into the laundry to drop her clothes into the washing machine. As she turned on the shower full blast she was humming. From behind the shower curtain her voice

rose in a cracked crescendo, "and the sun came up like thunder out of . . . da-dum . . . cross the bay."

VITA²

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