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# THINGS WE DON'T SAY & OTHER STORIES

Frances A. Stubbs  
*Longwood University*

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Frances Ashley Stubbs. THINGS WE DON'T SAY AND OTHER STORIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, July 2006.

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct an examination of what it means to survive, specifically in terms of overcoming the expectation to fail. I have discovered that the exploration of success and failure, especially relative to human survival, is most interesting for me in my own writing process. In the eight short stories that make up my thesis, two pieces of flash fiction and six longer stories, collectively entitled "Things We Don't Say and Other Stories," the focus of each narrative has proven to be a struggle for survival by means of reconciling public opinion, assumed or real, with an individual's perception of what it means to fail. This reconciliation emerges first from an understanding of identity based on the rejection or acceptance of larger, more class-driven ideas about failure, and is later deepened through relationships between characters. In effect, the character must put into practice their decision to either accept or reject their previous definition of failure. These relationships primarily, but not exclusively, concern varying interpretations of the family unit. In each of the stories, a moment exists when the character must choose between accepting expectations laid on them by others, or becoming something different than what is expected. Coming together,

making a family function and thrive despite divorce, poverty, or illness, is how my characters survive. Because people affected by poverty, divorce, or illness are typically expected to fail, or are already seen as having failed, my characters must challenge the idea of what it really means to be a failure. Survival means something different for every character, regardless of how similar their lives might seem. My characters struggle to survive, emotionally and physically, in a world with skewed value systems and unspoken rules. Because family is so central to survival, more attention has been paid to the creation of relationships. There is the delicate pattern of give and take in a blended family, the halting, stilted romance shared by husband and wife, and the battle for understanding between mothers and daughters. Each relationship survives or fails because of the survival or failure of the characters in that relationship. My fiction is about owning that moment when we truly understand why we've done the things we have, and knowing that there are some things we don't say, not because there aren't words, but because of the damage truth can bring when it comes down to survival.

THINGS WE DON'T SAY & OTHER STORIES

by

Frances A. Stubbs

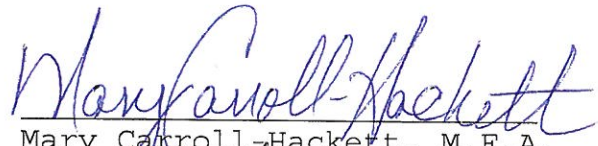
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requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

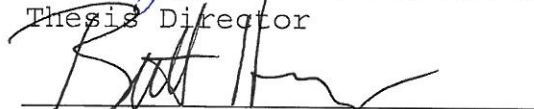
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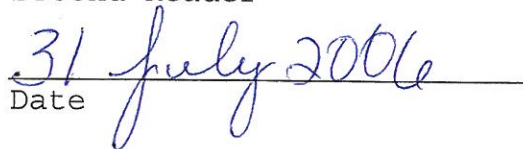
Mary Carroll Hackett, M.F.A.  
Thesis Director



Brett Hursey, Ph.D.  
First Reader



Craig A. Challender, Ph.D.  
Second Reader



Date

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DEDICATION

For my family, real and imagined, who have always known  
best.

But especially for Mama, who set me on this path.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to both acknowledge and express gratitude to the members of my committee, Dr. Brett Hursey and Dr. Craig Challender, for their guidance and patience. I would also like to thank Sallie Bedall and Nick Liberante, who unknowingly nurtured the seeds of this project years ago. Thanks to my fellow graduate students and friends -- you know who you are -- for the late nights, High Life, and coffee, but most of all, for your honesty. And finally, I have to express my appreciation and admiration to my director, Mary Carroll-Hackett, for the flair and confidence with which she brought me, sometimes kicking and screaming, to call myself a writer. If it weren't for her tenacity and deep compassion for her students, creative writing would not be what it is at Longwood University. Deepest thanks to you all.

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## OUTSIDE BUMPASS

About a mile outside Bumpass, just before you reach the county line, skid marks crawl all over the stretch of blacktop called Firehouse Road. The people Mama calls rednecks get high and do donuts out there, power-brake, grind a couple miles off their tires without going anywhere at all. I think everybody out here does, like that country song about a bunch of kids riding around in a pickup truck, shooting out lights, talking about driving too fast on a dead end road.

Mama calls it being restless.

She'll say, "Well baby girl, I believe I've caught the restlessness."

But I think maybe the feeling is more than restlessness. Last time I felt it, I flipped a go-kart over onto my leg trying to take my brother on the inside like Earnhardt used to do. Somehow the bruise it left made me feel braver. I showed off, wore a denim skirt every day until the purple faded to yellow and the soreness went away.

A lot of people asked me about it and I said, cool as anything, "Yeah, it didn't hurt that bad though."



Then I'd press my fingers into the bruise, liking the way pain swerved down the inside track of my spine, made me clench my teeth and grin at the same time.

Now, when the smell of tractor grease and newly downed alfalfa calls up a storm, and the baler is chucking hard as it can go, I feel stronger for having been marked that way.

I saw a truck for sale the other day -- an old Chevy, white with chrome trim. Somebody put a lift kit on it, added a custom bug shield that said 'High Cotton' in fancy cursive lettering. I've never seen a cotton plant -- plenty of soybeans, but no cotton. I told Mama I'd like to have that truck but she said it's too top heavy, I might flip it over. She only thinks that because a guy from my school -- one of the Conrad boys -- was out riding around with his brothers a few weeks ago, and they came around the turn on Old Ridge near the Redding place too fast, and flipped his truck over. It killed Ray, the oldest boy.

When the accident happened, I wasn't too far behind them. All of us were either coming home from school, driving to work after school, or going to get in trouble someplace. You hear a wreck before you see anything -- the tires raw against the pavement, screaming like the people inside. On the news, people always say, "It happened so fast." And it does. Next thing I knew, their truck was all

folded up, front axle broke all to hell, wheels still spinning.

Todd, the middle brother who goes to my school, had his arm hanging out the window like everybody does when the weather gets warm. When the truck flipped, it came down and crushed every bone from his elbow to his fingertips.

Later, at school, he gave me a somber, proud sort of smile when he told me he'd have to wear a cast for a year. The skin on his fingers was pink and shiny with scars -- a doughy, bubblegum fist with fingers like flattened possum tails. The way I figure, he's made it out here, earning as many scars on his fingers as skid marks on the blacktop outside Bumpass.

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## THE TRADITION OF FATHERS

Hoyt came into his sickness like a bitch comes into heat -- only regular if you kept track, if they had good breeding and some money came in. When Hoyt got in a bad way like that, he left little piles of debt all over town, spent money on things he didn't remember buying. His wife, Emma, told him sometimes that he hadn't come home for dinner when he said he would, or his boss yelled at him the next day for not coming back after lunch or even taking a whole day off.

He'd lost a lot of jobs that way. But he couldn't remember where he was, couldn't recall ever having left the jobsite at all. Emma begged him to see a doctor but he wasn't having any part of that. Besides, they didn't have insurance to cover that kind of thing.

He thought Emma tended to be a little touchy about him coming home on time, but that's the way women are. Emma was a sweet girl, she meant well. Even his own Mama hadn't loved him as much as Emma did.

Now, Hoyt stretched his back and looked over the fuse box he'd just installed. The company he worked for had gotten the bid on a new Home Depot, and they were behind schedule as usual. Hoyt popped the child safety catch off a new lighter and eased a cigarette out of the pack, trying

not to crumple it between his big fingers. He often wondered if maybe he was a little "off-kilter," like his mother used to say of his father, Willard Fletcher.

When Hoyt was thirteen, his mother explained how one night Willard waited until she and Hoyt were asleep, walked about a mile back into the woods behind the house and shot himself in the stomach with the shotgun Hoyt's granddaddy had left him in his will.

"Fletcher! It ain't break-time, buddy. Get back on that lighting." The foreman yelled from the trailer door, hard hat slanted down over his forehead with all the seriousness of a state trooper, black strap taut against the shallow end of his high and tight haircut.

"Be time for breaking something if you holler at me like that one more time," Hoyt grumbled under his breath as he hefted a coil of wire onto his shoulder. He'd worked for Dumfries Electric about two months now, and the foreman was a retired military captain or something. Hoyt couldn't remember, but the son of a bitch sure did get on his nerves. Seemed like everybody was always pushing Hoyt, trying to send him one direction or another.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Hoyt was thinking about Emma -- how good she smelled, the way her lips rolled up at the corners, like pulling up blinds to

let in the light. Maybe he'd buy her some flowers from the Moonies he'd seen on the corner of the block.

"Hey, Hoyt, wanna hit up Applebee's or something?" one of the guys asked, tossing a pair of bolt cutters into the shiny chrome toolbox on the back of his Dodge.

"I really need to get on home." Hoyt took off his hard hat and rubbed the place above his eyebrows where the spongy cushion stuck to his wrinkled forehead. "You know, Emma's expecting me." He laughed, rolling his eyes.

"I hear ya." The man wrenched open the truck's door.

"Maybe tomorrow," Hoyt said as he climbed into his own battered Ford.

Hoyt walked in the front door and called out, "Hey, baby!"

"Hey, darling," Emma answered.

Hoyt watched Emma through the doorway as she opened a can of Sloppy Joes at the kitchen counter.

"How's my boy?" he asked, winking at Alan as he emptied a handful of wire nuts onto the coffee table where his son was watching television.

The boy pounced on the bright red and yellow caps, sticking one onto each of his fingers and clacking them against each other like castanets.

Alan was six years old now, and Hoyt had been out of work for about half that time. Foremen these days were getting tougher, they all thought they had something to prove. Hoyt did good work, but he didn't put up with much shit on the job. He figured that was why he couldn't always get a good reference. As a result, Alan started school a month ago with patches on his jeans. His son's first day of school and they hadn't been able to afford anything other than what was on the teacher's list of school supplies. Mrs. Tyler had the nerve to write down all the brand names too: Crayola markers, Elmer's glue, Five-star notebook. Hoyt knew that ticked Emma off, but she bought the off-brand anyway, and Hoyt watched them on the living room floor as Emma wrote Alan's name in bold black letters on each item before handing it over to Alan to put in his backpack.

Alan climbed onto the sofa and jumped on Hoyt's back.

"Sloppy Joes okay for dinner?" Emma asked, walking into the living room.

"That's fine, baby," he said, leaning over once he pulled his boots off to kiss her on the forehead. When Alan wasn't looking, he reached around and grabbed a handful of her rear end.

"Hoyt!" She laughed and smacked at his free hand.

Hoyt glanced at the clock on the microwave and suddenly felt like he'd forgotten to do something. Had he made plans to meet up with the guys after work? No, Hoyt thought, he'd told Jimmy he had to get home.

"You okay?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, sure." Hoyt felt his thoughts buzzing and tapping against his skull like big green flies trapped inside a window. Maybe if he took a drive, he could remember.

"Listen, I got to run to the store for a minute, but I promise I'll be back by the time you get those Sloppy Joes on the table." He took a few chips from an open bag on the counter behind her and headed toward the door.

"Sure," Emma said.

Hoyt heard someone call his name and he turned around slowly, watching a woman stand a little boy on the back steps. She ran into the laundry room and came out with a fire extinguisher. Hoyt didn't know what to think when she pointed it toward where he stood. The tapping in his head was frantic, like a million pairs of wings humming, separating the thoughts in his head. He started to think maybe his head really was full of bottle green flies.

"Get out of the way!" she hollered, pulling the silver pin from the trigger and firing a blast of white powder onto the flames before he could move.

Hoyt watched her without hearing any sound at all except for the boy's crying in the doorway. Hoyt thought hard, but couldn't figure who this woman was and what she was doing in his house, wearing a flannel nightgown and spraying him with a fire extinguisher.

"Beverly?" He peered into her face as she set the fire extinguisher in a chair at the kitchen table.

"Hoyt, it's me -- Emma. Your wife." She dusted the white powder from his sleeve with a hand towel and switched off the stove. Then, she grabbed the broom from the corner of the room and jammed it into the smoke detector casing until the battery fell out.

"I married Beverly... Walker ... Bev Walker. She's running around on me again, isn't she? I knew it. She gone and left me and my boy to fend for ourselves. She send you? You from the state? I won't let you take him," Hoyt's gravelly voice trembled as his head twitched around on the thick stem of his neck. How all those flies got inside his head, Hoyt didn't know.

"Shh, now honey, it's all right -- ain't nobody gonna take Alan from you. He's your boy and he loves you," Emma



soothed as she took Alan by the hand and led him into the living room. "Bev was your first wife, but you and me got married in '97, remember? Are you hungry? I can make you some Sloppy Joes -- got some leftover from earlier tonight. Remember that, Hoyt? You were going to the store and we were gonna have dinner together, the three of us."

Alan followed Emma -- the pads of his footed pajamas crunching across the dusting of powder as he stared up at Hoyt.

Hoyt gestured back toward the stove and a plate of grilled cheese sandwiches with the cheese still in its plastic wrapping. "I was making us some sandwiches! I don't need no help from the state! Stop trying to work me over, woman. I won't have none of it," Hoyt said, standing in the archway between the living room and kitchen, watching Emma put in a video tape for Alan.

"I understand." Emma tried to slip past Hoyt, but he stuck his arm across the doorframe to keep her in the living room.

"I don't think you do." He pushed her into the living room.

Emma fell back onto the coffee table and cracked her head on the corner. She looked stunned as she lifted a hand to the back of her head.

"I hope you're gone when I wake up," Hoyt said quietly before he turned, walked down the hall to their bedroom, and slammed the door.

Hoyt got up, surprised to find that he was still wearing the clothes he'd worn to work the day before. Sometimes he took a nap before dinner and he thought Emma probably just let him sleep. Working in the heat all day made him tired. That must have been what happened.

He found Emma asleep on the couch, one arm slung across her face and the TV still on. He smiled, picked up the remote and pressed the power button.

The clock on the microwave read 6:48, and Hoyt knew Alan needed to be ready for school by seven o'clock, so he strode down the hallway to Alan's bedroom and pushed open the door. The boy wasn't in his bed and Hoyt looked all over the room before going back to the kitchen where he found Alan under the table, rolled up in his blanket like a little pig. He took a deep breath and sat down at the table -- the kitchen smelled like hot plastic or something chemical. The smell brought him back to his childhood, when his father sent him out back with a bag full of garbage to put in the burn barrel and Hoyt watched the black plastic bag shrink around tin cans, empty yogurt

containers, meat trays, and old newspapers. He got up and looked in the trashcan, saw a molten bag of ruined bread and white powder sprinkled over top inedible grilled cheese sandwiches. Hoyt looked at Emma, then back at Alan on the floor.

He tugged on a corner of the boy's blanket, sliding Alan toward him until he could pick him up and carry the boy back to his room.

"Hey buckaroo, it's time to get up," Hoyt coaxed, laying him down on the bed.

"Uh-un," Alan said, jerking into a fetal position when Hoyt pulled away the covers.

"Go on and get dressed now," he said, giving Alan one last nudge to wake him up.

Hoyt decided to make breakfast for them -- waffles, eggs, and bacon. He put on some coffee first, knowing how much Emma loved her coffee in the morning. Somewhere between putting the frozen waffles in the oven and frying the bacon, she woke up.

"Good morning, baby," he said as she stumbled into the kitchen.

"Morning." She pulled a coffee mug down out of the cabinet. "Where's Alan?" she asked, looking under the table before she poured her coffee.

"Getting ready," he said, handing her a plate of fried eggs and bacon.

"Thanks," she said, sitting down at the table. She clicked her thumbnail back and forth over the raised design on the outer edge of the plate.

"Aren't you hungry?" Hoyt asked, sitting down across from her.

"Do you remember what happened last night?" she said, biting into a piece of bacon.

He looked at her for a moment, trying to remember. "Yeah honey, I'm sorry about that. I guess I was just tired is all." He sliced his eggs with the side of his fork.

"Tired? Hoyt, you shoved me into the coffee table -- in front of our son. You called me *Beverly*," she hissed, keeping her voice low so Alan wouldn't hear.

"What are you talking about?" Hoyt asked. His whole body paused. Hoyt felt his throat pulling in as his jaw clamped down. His heart beat faster, and Hoyt was nervous without knowing why. He never doubted Emma, never thought she might be lying. The doubt he felt in himself, the way his chest closed up to where he almost quit breathing, proved he had something to feel responsible for.

Hoyt felt Emma's cool fingers slide around his fist as she lifted it and guided his hand through her thick blonde hair, searching ahead with her own slim index finger. Gently, she guided his hand over a swollen knot at the back of her head.

Hoyt closed his eyes, trying to remember. He couldn't think what he'd done since walking in the door and seeing Emma with the can opener the afternoon before. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just don't know." Not knowing scared Hoyt. He worried Emma might think he was lying, maybe she would think he wasn't being faithful to her. When she came to him like this -- her voice soft, gently explaining something horrible that Hoyt had done, but couldn't own up to -- he got frustrated. Even if he put his palm to his lips, cast his eyes toward some spot on the table and scrunched his brow like a person trying to remember something, Hoyt knew he would look like a fake. He couldn't bring back an event that didn't exist in his mind, had tried too many times and knew there wasn't any point in it.

Tears fell down Emma's face as Hoyt pulled his hand away. "What am I gonna do with you?" she said, standing up from the table and wiping at her eyes.

"I don't know," Hoyt said, staring down at the half-eaten waffle on his plate as she walked out of the kitchen.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Just take Alan to school -- we'll figure it out," she said, closing their bedroom door behind her.

While Hoyt drove, Alan looked at the pictures in a home decorating magazine Emma left on the dashboard of her station wagon. Hoyt studied his son during a red light at the intersection -- they had the same wide mouth, the same narrow face. He wished Alan looked more like Emma, even if she wasn't his real mother.

When Hoyt got to the front desk of Alan's school, the secretary gave him a friendly smile. She mouthed "Hang on," putting her hand around the phone receiver and rolling her eyes.

Hoyt sat in one of the plush leather chairs and Alan plopped down on the floor in front of the fish tank. Alan quietly flipped through the magazine, pausing to study the things he didn't understand, like electric can openers and postage stamp dispensers shaped like snail shells.

"Sorry about that," the secretary said. "I'll send an aide to take Alan to his classroom." She smiled at Alan. "And Mr. Fletcher -- Mrs. Tyler wants to talk with you."

Hoyt stood up and brushed the wrinkles from his dirty jeans. "I'm just dropping him off."

"Mrs. Tyler wanted a word with you," the secretary repeated.

Hoyt sat back down, suddenly uneasy at the thought of dealing with Mrs. Tyler.

The aide took Alan by the hand and led him out of the office. Alan left without telling Hoyt goodbye and he watched the boy walk away, still clutching the magazine.

"Bye, Alan!" Hoyt shouted down the hall.

Alan stopped long enough to smile and wave at his father, "Bye, Dad!" he yelled back.

Hoyt was suddenly aware of someone standing beside him.

"Mr. Fletcher, nice to see you again." Mrs. Tyler extended her hand for Hoyt to shake.

"Hey, how's it going?" Hoyt asked, standing up from the chair and taking her hand.

"All right, I guess," she replied, leading Hoyt into the small conference room adjacent to the receptionist's desk.

Hoyt took a seat directly across from the teacher. This was worse than going to the doctor.

"We've been having some problems with Alan and I feel you need to be made aware of these issues." Mrs. Tyler clasped her hands over a pad of paper she'd brought with her. "Alan is particularly combative when reprimanded. He doesn't follow directions, and he lashes out at the other children as well as me." She paused, "Does he act this way at home?"

"Not that I've noticed, no," Hoyt lied, crossing his legs and leaning back. Alan was bad at home -- he hit Emma sometimes when she asked him to do something, and he fought with Hoyt sometimes too. But this woman didn't need to know all that -- this was something they could handle at home, he thought.

"Really?" Mrs. Tyler raised an eyebrow.

"Really," Hoyt said, folding his arms against his chest.

She uncapped an ink pen and held it poised above the paper. "And how often are you at home, Mr. Fletcher?" she asked.

"I'm home as much as any father," he said. "I work, you know."

Mrs. Tyler scribbled a few lines on the paper. "From what I understand, you work *sometimes*, Mr. Fletcher."



Hoyt shifted his position forward so that his elbows rested on the table. "What are you getting at?" he asked, stroking his lips with the fingers of his right hand.

"Mr. Fletcher, is there a history of mental illness in your family?" she asked with a blank face.

Hoyt snorted. "I know you must be crazy to ask me a question like that." He stood up and looked down at Mrs. Tyler. She might be an all right looking woman, if it wasn't for her snotty attitude -- nose all jacked up in the air.

"I'm afraid if he continues this way, I'll have to suggest he is placed in a special class," Mrs. Tyler said, pulling the sleeves of her silk dress shirt down and buttoning them around her braceleted wrists.

"I'll be sure and tell Emma -- I'll let you know what we decide to do," Hoyt said, moving toward the door. "Is that all?" he asked.

Hoyt sat down at the kitchen table across from Emma and explained what Mrs. Tyler had said.

"A special class?" Emma said, kneading her knuckles against her palm as she looked at Hoyt with glazed eyes.

"Why?" she asked.

"That Tyler woman said he was being bad in school, said he had some 'issues' or something." Hoyt dismissed the teacher's warning with a wave of his hand.

Emma stood up from the kitchen table and walked to the sink. "What else did she say?"

"She asked me if there was a history of mental disease in my family. She asked me how often I was home." Hoyt propped his legs up on the table and lit a cigarette. "Can you believe that bullshit?" he said, tossing his lighter onto the braided placemat at his elbow.

Emma ran her fingers through her hair. "Yeah, I believe it," she said, clenching the handle of her coffee cup. "You've finally given it to Alan -- your sickness, your bad blood."

Hoyt took his feet off the table. "Bad blood? Come on, Emma. That's crazy," Hoyt said, his voice cracking just a little. His chest hardened, and his lungs became bags of sand inside his body. Hoyt trembled inside his skin. I'll lose her, he thought.

"I think you've been lying to me, Hoyt."

"What are you talking about? Lying about what?" Hoyt asked. He tried to take her hand, but she pulled it away.

"What if I did like you've done, how would that be?" she asked, slamming the cup down on the table. "You just

zone out and act like everything's fine when you come back around -- you can see the house is tore up, you felt the knot this morning! I didn't make it up, Hoyt." Emma turned away from him. "And by the way," she said slowly, "why aren't you at work yet? Or, did you forget that too?" Emma's voice sounded nasty, like she'd just been waiting to toss that question at Hoyt all morning.

Hoyt blinked at her, felt the buzzing in his head again. He hadn't thought about work at all, didn't realize it wasn't Saturday yet. "What exactly have I done?" he asked, using a napkin to wipe up the coffee that spilled when she put her cup down. He looked back at Emma, stopped, and dabbed at a spot on the counter. One hand hung down at his side, and the other moved in timid circles over the stain he'd already cleaned. In his heart, Hoyt knew the question wasn't what he had done, but what he hadn't. He felt caught between defending himself and giving over whatever was necessary to keep Emma from being mad. To keep her from leaving.

Emma just sat at the table, holding her head in her hands and crying. "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It's in his blood -- in your blood. And there's nothing I can do."

Hoyt threw the napkin away and stood behind Emma, putting his hand on the curve of her neck and rubbing his fingers up and down. "I'm sorry, whatever it is. Do you want to go out to eat tonight? We can hit up Smokey's. We've both had a lot on us lately, maybe I can take you shopping, too," Hoyt soothed. Maybe he could make her forget whatever had happened. "Come on, girl. Remember that necklace you saw at Friedman's? I just got paid last week." He wouldn't say he needed her, but hoped she would know without hearing the words. He wondered if she felt how afraid he was when he put his hands on her. He had to make her understand, somehow.

Emma lifted her head, and Hoyt knew she hadn't even been listening. "Talk to Alan -- just consider that you might have passed on to him what Big Willard passed on to you," she said, getting up from the table.

Hoyt's frustration billowed into anger as he let out the breath that had been clamped in his chest. Emma went out the front door, and Hoyt heard a car door slam shut. How could she not see that he loved her, that he wanted to make it right? Hoyt thought about a song his mother used to sing when Hoyt was still little. *There was an old lady who swallowed a fly*, Hoyt hummed. *I don't know why she swallowed the fly*. Hoyt hadn't thought about that song in

years. How did the end go? Hoyt felt the flies again, so many tiny bodies crowding out his thoughts. *Perhaps she'll die*, Hoyt remembered before the flies covered him over.

Hoyt pulled into the driveway and tapped the horn twice. Alan's face appeared in the living room window, then disappeared.

Emma met him at the door.

"I'm going to work. Karen called and asked me to take her shift," she said, her brown eyes offset by the deep purple makeup she'd applied on her eyelids.

"You look good, baby," Hoyt said, leaning in for a kiss.

She ducked away from him and stepped into the yard. "Be back early in the morning."

He watched her walk to the car, saw her look back once. He thought he saw her wiping at her eyes as she turned out of the driveway.

Alan watched cartoons on the couch, drumming his heels on the coffee table.

"Hey Daddy," he said, peering over the back of the couch at Hoyt.

"Hey buckaroo," Hoyt answered, pulling off his socks.

"How's school going?"

"Good," Alan said, jumping over the back of the couch and running down the hall to his room.

Hoyt fixed dinner, boiling enough hotdogs for him and Alan, setting ketchup and mustard on the table. He even put some steak fries on a baking sheet and cooked them in the oven. But, when he and Alan sat down to eat, Hoyt wasn't hungry at all. A dull hum grew in Hoyt's head, but he tried to ignore it. Don't come back, he thought. Sometimes there were so many flies, Hoyt wished he could bash his head on a rock to set them free. He focused on Alan, watched a smear of ketchup bob up and down on Alan's face while the boy chewed. Alan ate everything he could reach -- three hotdogs, two helpings of fries and a whole glass of soda.

"They feed you at school?" Hoyt asked, watching his son.

"Yup," Alan said.

"Yes sir," Hoyt corrected.

Alan grinned and showed him a mouthful of chewed-up hotdog. The hum got louder, Hoyt pictured a black cloud of flies storming inside his head. What had Alan just said? Something about Big Willard, Hoyt thought. When Hoyt's big

palm connected with Alan's face, hotdog flew out the side of the boy's mouth onto the kitchen floor. Alan started to cry but Hoyt slammed his fist on the table and frightened the boy into silence.

"What is the matter with you?" Hoyt demanded.

"Mama says you're the matter with me," Alan stuttered, touching a hand to his cheek.

"Is that a fact?" Hoyt got up from the table and dropped his plate into the sink so it clattered loudly in the empty house. Alan stared at him.

"What do you think?" Hoyt asked, sitting back down at the table.

"Dunno," Alan said in a small voice, looking down at his hands. "We both get mad a lot."

Hoyt stood up from the table again and walked into the living room. Bad blood. Emma said he gave Alan bad blood and Big Willard was "out of whack," Emma kept talking about a curse. Hoyt looked at his arm, turned it over to stare at the veins beneath the thinner skin of his forearm. The big green flies snapped their wings, their papery bodies made popping sounds inside his head. He loved her so much. Hoyt hoped she really would come back in the morning. In the meantime, though, he wanted to find a way to make it up to her, wanted to set things right.

"When do I get mad?" he asked Alan, who stood in the archway between the kitchen and the living room. Hoyt thought he might cry, but his eyes only burned. He didn't want Alan to see him cry.

"You got mad last night -- you missed Sloppy Joes. You called Mama the wrong name and you pushed her and she hit her head. I heard her crying but she didn't want me to. You burned the bread bag; Mama had to use the red thing to put out the fire. You said the state was gonna take me."

Alan curled up on the couch and Hoyt sat down beside his son while he cried, burrowing his wet face into the crook of his father's arm. "Don't let them take me," Alan sobbed, choking back tears and snot.

"I won't," Hoyt said. They sat together for a few minutes and Hoyt stroked Alan's arm until he stopped crying. When Hoyt looked down, he saw the boy had fallen asleep, his breath throbbing heavily on Hoyt's sleeve.

The popping in his head made Hoyt start to twitch. He lifted Alan's arm and traced the blue veins through the translucent skin of the boy's forearm. He pressed his nose into the sparse white-blond hairs on Alan's arm, trying to catch the scent of his father's blood. He got up and walked into the kitchen, pulled open the junk drawer and found a small rectangular package of razor blades.



The tiny box was awkward in his large hands. Hands, Emma always said, that were stripped of sensitivity by exposure to the elements and hard work. He thought about the safety of her body in the bed next to him, and the back of his throat closed. His stomach cramped, Hoyt thought he might throw up. He opened the package and tapped on the end. I love you, girl, he thought. Several blades slid into his hand like pennies. He let all but one fall out of his hand onto the countertop before walking back into the living room and sitting beside Alan. Hoyt watched Alan jerk in his sleep. He'd embarrassed his son, frightened him, set a bad example. What kind of man hits his wife in front of their kid, Hoyt thought. Even if he didn't remember doing it, Hoyt still felt ashamed. The boy curled up with his face in the back of the sofa, moving his arms so his hands were balled up under his chin. The noise in his head was so loud, Hoyt almost couldn't see. How did they get inside his head? Maybe one night while he'd been sleeping, one or two had climbed inside his mouth or up his nose. Shit flies, Big Willard called them.

"Oh, Daddy," Hoyt whimpered. Shit flies, with their crunchy blue-green bodies and black-veined wings, were drumming inside his head.

Hoyt wanted to take the blade to his own arm, but there wasn't any use. Still, maybe it wasn't too late for Alan. Maybe he could cut Alan, separate the bad blood from the good in his son. But how would he know? Hoyt held the blade so tightly that the bed of his fingernails whitened, eclipsing the dirt beneath his nails. Tap, tap, tap. These were the kind of flies that ate dead things. He couldn't know if Alan was like him -- "out of whack." But maybe there was one way Hoyt could show Emma how much he loved her. One way he could make sure Alan wouldn't have to be embarrassed at school. Flies so big, you thought they were wasps, or bees. Hoyt remembered being drawn to the sound of a fat green fly beating against a window, its hundreds of eyes seeing the outside, but not the window itself. What had he done, Hoyt thought, seeing that fly trapped? He'd killed it, of course. Mama never liked flies in the house. Emma could help Alan, could take him to a doctor or something, but Hoyt was too ashamed to go himself. Too much damage had already been done. Mama would take care of her baby, and Hoyt could set the fly free, let it go singing out the window. He pressed the blade to his own arm, and a thin line of blood welled to the surface. A stinging red line like a mile on a map -- that same kind of mile Big Willard walked. A line that

barely broke through his thick skin and went no deeper than  
his hand willed it to go.

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## THINGS WE DON'T SAY

The day Marla Sayers caught her husband, Daniel, cheating on her with his secretary, Marla packed up her house and moved into a hotel room. A few weeks later, she went out and bought a gun without really knowing why.

What made it so bad was that Daniel's secretary was Marla's best friend from high school. The situation was like something Marla had read in a romance novel or heard in a Tammy Wynette song. All those years Marla and Daniel had been married, Tracie came to cookouts and picnics, Tinnie's dance recitals and on shopping trips with Marla. And Tracie was the first one Marla talked to about the abuse, about how Daniel slapped her when she got home late from work sometimes and told her she was too fat, that she made him sick to look at.

Marla saw the two of them together, Daniel fastened to Tracie's naked body on the conference table in his office building. Kissing Tracie in a way he never kissed Marla. The best thing, Marla knew, was for her to say nothing. So, she went back outside and got in her car, feeling like someone who's had too much to drink. The absence of anger confused her, but Marla started the car and drove past Daniel's Suburban and Tracie's Neon without even crying.

Even their cars were parked snugly next to one another, she thought.

She drove home feeling like the space between her temples, the place her anger came from, was hollow. When she parked the car in her driveway, Marla ground the keys in her palm, testing to see if she could still feel pain. Dendrites, she remembered, was what the tips of nerves were called. The word made her think of teeth, of bleached white bone being worn down to nothing. She couldn't explain to Tinnie what she'd seen, or why they had to leave.

She knew that it would have been right to cry, to break holes in the walls or think about burning the whole goddamn house down. But Marla just moved around the house stealing things from their places in cabinets and dressers. She and Tinnie packed the car with everything it would hold -- bags of clothes, books, a microwave, television, toaster, boxes of plates and glasses, things Marla thought they might need to start over.

She left her collection of thimbles. When she went to take it off the wall, Marla realized all the thimbles Daniel said he got for her while on business trips were from places he'd been with Tracie. She left their photo

albums too. Marla couldn't imagine having to see his face mirrored in the blade of the scissors as she cut him out.

After Marla hired a lawyer and filed for divorce, Marla and Tinnie moved from the hotel into a small two-bedroom house on the other side of town. This way, Tinnie wouldn't have to change schools, and if she decided she wanted to see her father, they would still be close.

But Daniel changed once Marla left. He started watching them at night, and it was Tinnie who saw him the first time he came up to their house in the middle of the night. Marla had been on the couch with her feet propped up on the coffee table, painting her toenails. Tinnie was coming back from the kitchen with two glasses of sweet tea in her hands. Tinnie looked past the television to the window, and her eyes widened.

Then, Marla saw Daniel walk to the middle of their front yard. She couldn't see his face clearly, but Marla knew he was grinning -- smiling like he did when he got home and laid one of those thimbles on the table in front of her dinner plate. She didn't want to admit it, but part of Marla was flattered that Daniel had come after her.

Tinnie called the police while Marla turned out the lights, closed the windows and locked the front and back doors. Tinnie and Marla watched from a darkened window as

Daniel got back in his Suburban and eased out into the street before flicking on his lights. A cruiser showed up a few minutes later.

"Ya'll ought to put up some of those 'no trespassing' signs," the cop told Marla.

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Marla woke up in the night to the sound of Tinnie's breathing. Light from a passing car filtered through her bedroom blinds and Marla saw the shape of a body moving past her window. Marla looked back over at her daughter on the bed. Tinnie had her own room, but Marla hardly ever woke up without finding Tinnie next to her. Tinnie's dark hair pooled around her sleeping face like a bloodstain, and Marla put her hand on Tinnie's arm to make sure she was still warm, that she wasn't as dead as she looked. Marla swung her legs to the edge of the mattress and lifted a .357 off the nightstand. The alarm clock on her dresser said the time was 2:46 a.m.

Tinnie stirred and rolled over. "Mama -- is that you?" she said so softly that Marla saw her mouth shape the words before their sound came out.

"Yes, baby," she whispered. Marla moved from the bed to the window like a shifting cloud. She sat on the toughened balls of her feet and looked between the blinds.

"Is he out there?" Tinnie asked.

"Yeah." Marla rested the gun on the bed, her finger wrapped around the outside of the trigger guard.

"What are we gonna do?" Tinnie asked, pulling her legs out of the sheets.

Marla sighed and leaned her head against the wall. "I don't know but I'm getting tired of this shit."

"Me too. I'm tired of this shit, too."

Marla crouched lower under the window and put her other hand under the butt of the gun, supporting it with her clammy palm. A dog barked outside. Marla and Tinnie both looked back to the window. When it barked the second time, the sound was closer to the house, almost under the window. Tinnie slid off the bed and Marla knew she was reaching for a length of steel pipe beside her nightstand.

"Stay down," Marla whispered as Tinnie crawled toward the door.

"I am," Tinnie said, clutching the pipe against her chest.

Marla scuttled over to Tinnie with her head tucked low enough that it couldn't be seen from outside the window even though the shades in the room were pulled down and the lights were off. They sat on the floor, facing each other, Tinnie holding the pipe and Marla palming the gun.



"Well?" Marla said.

"This sucks," Tinnie said, loosening her grip on the pipe.

"I don't know what to do." Marla thought about the thimbles, about Daniel's body sliding on top of Tracie's. She wondered what she might be teaching Tinnie by running away and hiding all the time.

"Go out there. You're the one with a gun."

"I'm thinking about it," Marla said, studying the pistol in her hand.

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Marla bought the gun four weeks ago from a firearms dealer in Chesterfield. He sold them out of his garage, which he'd turned into a sort of store. Just inside the door stood a huge glass tank holding an albino python. The bottom of the cage was lined with bright blue Astroturf, and something about that struck Marla as funny.

In the back, the man showed her a room filled with big guns -- ones Marla was pretty sure weren't legal. The door to the room had a round handle on it like a vault, but the floor was covered in the same Astroturf as the snake's cage.

Finally, she picked out the gun she wanted and they stood together at the counter, the man on the other side with a cigarette hanging from his lip.

"I want the three-five-seven," she said, smiling.

"I'll go five on the piece." A cigarette dangled from the man's lips, and he didn't look at Marla when he quoted the price.

"No deal. Three-fifty is as high as I go." Marla was prepared to bargain for the gun, but she had no idea how much a gun was really supposed to cost.

"Three hundred and fifty dollars?" he asked.

"If I don't get it from you for that price, I got a guy in Newport News that'll let me have it for that much." The lie was easy for Marla, but she was surprised at herself. She didn't know anyone in Newport News, much less someone who sold guns.

The man looked at her for a long time and Marla tossed her head back and gathered her hair up in a ponytail while she waited for the man to say something.

"Okay," he finally said.

Marla let out the breath she'd been holding.

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Marla unlocked the catch on the sliding glass door.

"You ready?" she asked Tinnie.

Tinnie nodded her head. "Yeah, I'm ready."

They stood at the back door, Tinnie holding the metal pipe, wearing an over-sized t-shirt with a picture of a cat on it. Marla was in a sleeveless cotton nightgown that came to her knees, pistol in hand.

"What are you gonna do if you see him?"

"I ... I don't know," she paused. "Shoot him? I just want to scare him, not kill him." Marla put her hand on the door. For a second, she imagined herself pulling the trigger and remembered what her father had said to her once. If you pull a gun on someone, you'd better be willing to use it.

"Wait. What if ... what if he's in a tree?" Tinnie asked.

Tinnie was stalling, Marla knew that Tinnie was afraid. But Marla was tired of being afraid, of saying and doing nothing.

"Then I'll shoot a coon in a tree," Marla laughed and took a deep breath. "Here I go."

Marla slid the door open and slipped out onto the back porch. The moon hung like a deep cut in the sky. When Marla looked back, Tinnie stood in the open doorway, holding the pipe in her sweaty hands.

Beneath her nightgown, Marla's knees trembled. Tighten up, now, she told herself. Behind her, Marla heard a sound. Before she could turn around, Dingus, their cat, rubbed against her legs.

Goddamn stupid-ass cat, Marla thought.

The thick grass cushioned Marla's footsteps as she snuck through the yard. Daniel stole their lawnmower about four weeks ago when Tinnie was in school and Marla was working at the veterinary clinic, so Marla hadn't been able to cut the grass since then. The garage door was broken, so Daniel just walked in and took the damn thing in broad daylight. They called the police then too, but the deputy said there was nothing they could do since it was technically half his property anyway. He'd chained the lawnmower to the lamppost in his front yard just to let Marla know that he could get in anytime he wanted.

Marla remembered touching a grenade at the gun shop. She thought about the coolness of the ring when she'd hooked her index finger through the pin and felt the hard ridges on the body of the thing. The pin was secured with a plastic zip tie so she couldn't have pulled it out even if she wanted to. The blood had thrummed hard in her ears just the same, and her palms grew so sweaty she had to rub them

dry on her jeans. She thought she'd like to have one of those now, not to use, but just to have in her hand.

The dew lay heavy on the overgrown grass, soaking Marla's feet to the ankles before she even got around to the side of the house. When she turned the corner, Marla saw a shadow glance across the edge of the yard into the woods. Under the window, she found a pile of thimbles. The porcelain shells glistened like teeth in the murky green glow of the dawn-to-dusk light.

Thimbles. Marla knew why Daniel had chosen thimbles for her. He thought she was something to be used up, a receptacle for all his hate. She was sick with the hate he'd handed over like something she should be happy to have.

"Coward," she said out loud. Her voice came out in a whisper so she said it again, louder. "Coward."

Suddenly, Marla realized she'd been winning all along. She could lie about something or leave it out altogether, so long as she didn't have to tell the truth. Look where telling the truth had gotten her -- Tracie was the only person Marla told about how Daniel really was, and Tracie had betrayed her. Lying was how Marla could survive breaking away from Daniel. Marla hadn't told Tinnie about Daniel and Tracie, but she'd understood almost through

instinct what had happened. Marla never had to tell Tinnie, never had to go through revealing to her daughter the truth about Daniel's faults. At the gun shop, Marla flat out lied to the man about being able to get a deal elsewhere. She didn't know the first thing about buying a gun. The idea of having secrets for herself was powerful, thrilling. Maybe this was what Marla's mother had meant when she said it was important for women to be mysterious.

She looked back at the thimbles and out again at the corner of the yard where she'd seen the shadow earlier. This was the best Daniel could do -- hide in the dark and creep around their house. He probably still loved her, but Marla wasn't looking for that kind of love anymore. Was that the truth? Marla thought maybe it wasn't yet, but she'd make it true soon enough. Marla pulled a rock from a nearby flowerbed and kneeled beside the thimbles under her window. She closed her eyes and smashed the rock against the thimbles, crushing the painted porcelain and listening to the chalky, grinding sound that made her mouth water. When she finished, Marla stood and brushed the dirt from her knees. She turned her back on the broken mess and strode toward the house.

"Well?" Tinnie asked as Marla climbed up the steps.

Marla looked at Tinnie's pale face, her freckles washed out in moonlight from the window. She would teach Tinnie how to be strong, how to set her chin and fold her skinny arms against people like Daniel and Tracie. How to mend truths like weak places in armor. "He won't be coming back here anymore," Marla said, taking the pipe from Tinnie's hands. She laid it on the table, next to her pistol.

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## NO GATES ON GOSHEN

The opening credits for *My Little Pony* fluttered onto the television screen and Shannon, Lewis's step-daughter, squealed at the pastel butterflies and pony tails dancing in time with the music. Shannon would be four this year, and she looked more like Arlette every day. Bobbie, the oldest girl, didn't look like her mother except for her cool blue eyes. Bobbie was angry, fighting against everything that challenged her. Maybe that was the way with fifteen-year-olds. Lewis didn't know. But she wasn't calm like her mother and sister. Arlette and Shannon could look at you and slow your heart -- but all three of them had what Lewis called ghost eyes. Colorless like the sky on a hot day. Shannon yawned and stretched out on the sofa.

"I'm going to the kitchen, okay?" Lewis said, hooking a finger around Shannon's big toe. He knew she'd fall asleep by the end of the show.

"Kay!" Shannon said.

Lewis stood up and walked toward the kitchen. He had a slow way of moving around, like someone looking for an address and uncertain of the way. When he got to the door, Lewis saw Bobbie tugging the edges of a trash bag up out of the can. Suction down in the bottom of the trash can made



it more difficult to get the bag out, so she pulled harder. The bag was halfway out when the edges tore under the strain and trash spilled all over the floor. He wanted to help but wasn't sure if Bobbie would feel like he was trying to do it for her, trying to say she was incapable in some way.

"Shit!" she said, drawing back when a Styrofoam meat tray fell out and landed on her bare foot. Flakes of dried blood sprinkled onto the tile floor.

"You ought not to talk like that when your little sister can hear it," Lewis said as he leaned against the doorframe.

"Well the goddamn trash bag busted and Mama said I could drive to the dump if I got all the trash up and put it on the back of the truck," she said, careful not to apologize for her swearing.

"That ain't no excuse, baby girl," he said, bending down to pick up an empty can of tomato soup that had rolled across the floor to rest against the toe of his boot. Lewis thought Bobbie resented his place at the head of the table where she used to sit before Lewis and Arlette got married a year ago. He figured Bobbie thought she was too big for a daddy, but he knew better. He still wasn't sure how to handle Bobbie, if he was supposed to be more stern

or step back and let her mama deal with her. Arlette worried about that girl. In three years, Bobbie would be eighteen. Lewis remembered what that wait was like, thinking the minute you were old enough, you'd run. Eighteen was a magic number that meant you didn't have to care about what was holding you back. Except family wasn't supposed to be like that. Lewis knew that now. He just hoped he could find a way to tell Bobbie what he'd learned.

Lewis stood at the kitchen window for a minute, looking out at Arlette. She stretched behind a pink bath towel, arms bent above her head, fingers pinching a clothespin. With one hand he reached into the pocket of his t-shirt and pulled out a pack of Cherokees while his other hand dug down into his jeans pocket to retrieve his lighter.

"I wish ya'll would quit smoking, it's bad for you," Bobbie said, turning the trashcan upside down and emptying it into a new bag.

"You reckon?" he said, tapping the pack softly against his palm.

"I saw a picture in health class of a smoker's lung and a healthy one. The smoker's lung was all black and nasty," she said.

"I can't imagine anybody's guts being appealing," he said, turning to watch as she tied a knot in the bag. Lewis didn't know if he should feel good that Bobbie was concerned about his health, or if she was just trying to be hateful.

"It's supposed to be pink," she said, hauling the bag out the door.

The way Bobbie said the word 'pink' made Lewis think about when he'd been married to his first wife, back while she was still pregnant. That was ten, eleven years ago now. She'd gone to stay with her mother for a few days, and while she was gone, Lewis painted the nursery as a surprise. He'd picked out a bright, creamy pink for the walls and a wallpaper border with yellow cats.

"Pink?" she snapped when she came home and Lewis led her into the nursery.

"Yeah, I thought because it's a girl -- " Lewis said.

"You didn't even ask me! Don't you care what I think?" She pressed a hand to her back and sighed.

"You don't like it?" Lewis asked.

"I hate it. Pink? You know I hate pink. Remember when you brought me that corsage for prom? Pink carnations?"

I told you then that I hated pink. God, Lewis, do you even think?"

"Baby, that was two years ago! How was I supposed to remember that?" Lewis slapped the wet brush down onto the paint tray.

"You never remember anything!" She yelled. "Where are you going?"

Lewis left the room, grabbed his keys off the counter in the kitchen, and slammed the front door behind him. His fingers left a pink smudge on the doorknob where the paint on his hand was still wet.

Lewis got married right out of high school. She was the only girlfriend he'd ever had, and Lewis's parents didn't like her because she didn't come from "good stock," like Lewis's daddy said. They stayed married for seven years -- their divorce became final while he was still at Merrill County.

Arlette had worked as a secretary for the construction company that hired Lewis after he got out, but he knew her from high school. It took Lewis a year to ask her out, but on their first date Arlette said she had designs on him back when they were in school. Bobbie and Shannon's father died in a motorcycle crash while Arlette was still pregnant with Shannon. When he and Arlette first got together and

he found out she had kids, Lewis thought maybe Arlette just wanted a man around for the girls' sake. The chance to be a husband and father again scared him at first, but he knew it was time even if he wasn't sure what it meant to be a father. Lewis was an inmate at the Merrill County Correctional Facility when his own father died of emphysema. He imagined his father coughing up bits of lung while Lewis picked up cardboard Whopper boxes and empty bottles of Olde English on James Anderson Highway. Lewis got out in the spring, four months after his mother had stood sobbing over the casket before they laid it in the ground. They say spring is a good time to get out; people are more likely to give you a job because it's warm enough to work. A lot of big jobs break ground in the spring, after the thaw.

Hearing the sound of Bobbie's raised voice, Lewis turned his attention back to the window.

Bobbie and Arlette stood near the clothesline he'd built. He had to throw it together in a hurry a few days after they moved in because Arlette refused to run up the electric bill by using the dryer. Even in the winter Arlette would line-dry their clothes so long as the temperature was above freezing. He'd taken two enormous

metal pipes off a job he'd had in Warsaw specifically for the clothesline. Arlette had given him a DeWalt cordless drill for Christmas, and he used it to drill holes in the pipes for the line. He let Bobbie try to run the drill, but when she couldn't hold it steady, he told her she could run the wire through because her fingers were smaller than his and she could do a better job anyway. Even then, Lewis was uncertain about whether it was right to have a girl fooling around with drills and things. He worried about turning her into a tomboy, but couldn't think of anything to do with her that might be better for a girl to learn.

Now, Bobbie stood with the bag of trash at her feet and her hands on her hips. Arlette held the clothes basket against the jut of her hip, shaking her head. Bobbie was still trying to argue about something, but Arlette just stared at her with those ghost eyes. Those two looked like ying and yang, Arlette's blonde hair kicking up in the wind and Bobbie's dark pony tail lashing against her face. Finally, Bobbie slung the trash bag over her shoulder and ran around the side of the house. The wind whipped the clothes hanging on the line. Arlette looked over her shoulder at the clothes and shook her head again before she started up the back porch steps.

"Pa!" Arlette said as she came in the back door, "A storm is a'comin'!" She set the clothes basket on the table and kissed Lewis on the cheek.

"Girl, you ain't got good sense," Lewis said, leaning his head to look out the window. His arm draped across the wooden back of a chair at the kitchen table, his legs crossed so his ankle rested high on his other thigh.

Shannon shuffled into the room, her curls matted against her face on one side and a red crease running from her forehead to her cheek.

"Ellie Mae! We got to get the horses up!" Arlette said, hoisting the toddler up onto her hip.

Shannon wasn't quite awake yet and started to cry. Arlette put her down on Lewis's lap and he hurried to put his cigarette out in the heavy crystal ashtray on the table while he wrapped one arm around Shannon. Bobbie slammed the screen door as she came in from taking out the trash.

"It'll blow over," Lewis said to Arlette as Shannon slid down from his lap.

The phone rang, and Arlette lifted the receiver from the wall. "Hello?" she said.

"Do you really think it will blow over? How do you know anyway?" Bobbie asked Lewis.

"Wind's coming in too hard, it's blowing the clouds away," he said with an unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

Arlette tugged on the cord, moving around the doorframe into the living room.

"Will you take me driving?" Bobbie asked, laying her hands out in front of her on the table. Shannon sat on the floor at Lewis's feet playing with the dirty laces of his boots.

Lewis thought for a minute, drawing in on the cigarette and letting the smoke roll out of his nose. "I thought your mama was gonna take you." Lewis didn't know if he wanted to take her or not. He was surprised Bobbie had asked him. If they wrecked or something bad happened, Arlette would never forgive him. He'd never been anywhere alone with Bobbie.

"I think it would be better if you did," Bobbie said, picking at the dirt beneath her fingernails. "You're more laid back than her, and she keeps putting it off."

"You'll have to clear that by her," Lewis said, idly scratching his chest. He would leave it to Arlette. Making the decision hers would take it out of his hands.

Arlette made Lewis swear he wouldn't let Bobbie drive over forty-five miles per hour. Lewis liked the way her



hands sat high on her hips, her head cocked to one side while she finished her speech. He stood there listening with his shoulders slumped back, knowing this was something she felt obligated to say. Bobbie ran past them carrying a pair of blue flip-flops in one hand and her learner's permit in the other. She threw the flip-flops on the ground and wriggled them onto her feet as she slid the permit into the back pocket of her shorts.

"All right chickadee, you be careful," Mama called to Bobbie as Lewis came down the steps and walked across the driveway.

"Yeah," Bobbie said, using both her hands to wrench open the door to climb in.

Lewis pulled open the passenger door and slung a pack of Cherokees onto the dashboard.

"You got the keys?" he asked Bobbie.

"Of course," she said, reaching out to slam the door closed.

"Go ahead and start it," he said as he rolled the window down.

"I've driven before, you don't have to tell me how to do everything," she said, turning the key in the ignition.

"What are those?" Bobbie pointed to some wires hanging down near the ignition.

Lewis lit another cigarette. "Hot wire switch. I used to lose my keys a lot."

Bobbie steered the big truck down the driveway and out onto the road. "Hey, Mama told me you were in an accident once. In this truck," Bobbie said. "What happened?"

Lewis closed his eyes for a second. "It wasn't really an accident," he said.

"Did you get hurt?" Bobbie asked.

"Huh." Lewis took a drag off his cigarette. He thought about telling her how his ex-wife had come to his work and told the foreman Lewis had molested their daughter. The accusation still made him sick. Maybe he should tell Bobbie, he thought. Tell her how he got in this truck because he couldn't go back to the job. He'd sat there, probably for a long time, watching them put power to the gate and feeling as though it was closing on him, shutting him out.

Bobbie sighed. "Does that mean yes?"

"Yeah, I reckon you could say I got hurt," Lewis said.

"Oh."

"We'll take the long way, go out here and make a left. You won't run down no children or old folks over on Goshen," Lewis said, flicking ashes out the window.

Goshen Road was a lonely stretch of gravel and pine trees, the ditches ran deep on either side. People said it was one of the oldest roads in the county. Bobbie braked her way through the turn, but Lewis didn't say anything. Suddenly, Bobbie punched down on the gas, bumping the needle to fifty. The tires chunked gravel into the wheel well and Lewis told her to be easy.

"It's an old truck," he said.

"I know what I'm doing," Bobbie said, her face concentrated on the road ahead.

"All right, Miss Know-it-all," he said, stretching his arm across the back of the seat. He didn't want to correct her too much but knew he should say something.

Bobbie pursed her lips and focused her cool eyes on him. "What did you go to jail for?"

When he looked at her, she put her eyes back on the road.

"Your mama didn't tell you?" he asked. How could Arlette not have told them? But that was her way -- Arlette must have wanted them to hear it from him, so they would know his side of things. Lewis wouldn't tell her too much because he didn't know how she might feel, if she would believe him or not.

"She said your ex-wife took all your money and wouldn't let you see your daughter anymore. But she won't say nothing about what you did."

"Well," he said.

"You do something real bad?" Bobbie asked. "Kill somebody?"

Lewis laughed and tried to think of what to say. "I had already given her everything -- the house and all -- "

"Who?"

"My ex-wife." Lewis pulled another cigarette from the pack in his hand. "She told the people I worked with something that won't true. I guess I got mad about that."

"What did she tell them?" Bobbie asked.

"That I did something bad to my daughter," Lewis said.

"I'd be mad too," Bobbie said.

"I was right stupid about it -- drove this truck through a big gate my company was putting in. I don't even remember starting the engine, but when I came through the other side, the windshield was broken and the gate was all tore up. Turned out to be a right expensive gate -- that's what made it a felony charge." Lewis wondered what she would think now.

"Well, that ain't so bad," Bobbie said.

The speedometer was pushing sixty now, but Lewis wouldn't tell Bobbie to slow down. Learning how to handle different kinds of terrain was something she'd have to come to on her own. But when the truck rolled toward the ditch, he spooked a little.

"Watch it!" Lewis shouted.

Bobbie jerked the wheel in the opposite direction of the ditch and mashed the brake. The truck spun around in the road, and Lewis's cigarettes slid across the dashboard toward the window. Dust clouded the cab, and his seatbelt pulled hard across his neck. He reached out for Bobbie, but his fingers only grazed her arm on the wheel. The front of the truck hit a tree and jammed into the red clay bank of the ditch. Please let her be all right, Lewis thought as the cab shifted around him in slow motion. Lewis didn't know what he would do if he lost another daughter.

When the truck stopped Bobbie looked at Lewis, her eyes wide and her mouth open.

"Are you okay?" Lewis asked as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

"I ... I can't. I ... what happened?" she stammered.

"You can't drive as fast on gravel, tires don't grip as good. Next time, don't jerk the wheel so hard. Now,

put it in reverse and back it up just a little bit," he said.

Bobbie's hands shook as she wrapped her hand around the shifter and put the truck in reverse.

"All right, that's good. Now, pull it forward a little more."

Once the truck cleared the ditch, Bobbie put it in park and shut off the engine. Tears streamed down her face as she opened the door and got out to look at the damage. The passenger side headlight was cracked and caked in red clay. On the other side of the hood, the long scratches from Lewis's wreck ran into a half moon where Bobbie had hit the tree.

"I'm so sorry!" she cried, looking up at Lewis as he brushed some of the dirt off the headlight.

He looked at her and smiled, clapping his arm around her shoulders. She clung to his side and he felt the wet heat of her face through his shirt as she cried. Maybe this is what it means to be a father, Lewis thought. He couldn't stop smiling even though she was still crying, her arms clamped around him tight. If Bobbie could give him a second chance like this, he wouldn't hesitate anymore. Somehow, her tears on his shirt made him understand now what he should do.

"It's all right, baby girl. I've come through worse."  
Lewis lifted her face and looked at her puffy eyes, the  
spit around her mouth, and her snotty nose. "Sometimes you  
gotta crash so you can learn how to land," he said. "It's  
all right, now."

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## WHEN HE LOOKS TWICE

I imagined the man thinking about me when I met his eyes. As I stalked across the street, I dropped my head and looked down at the pointy leather toes of my shoes.

I made him think of me as pretty -- he was an older man, a professor maybe, with an appreciation for beautiful things. The purse on my shoulder shifted slightly as I hopped the curb. He was still looking -- I felt it.

My high heels snapped out a hard rhythm on the sidewalk as my hips led each deliberate step. He got into a beat-up Volvo, definitely a professor's car. I thought he must like the sleekness of my young body, my sharp profile cutting across the parking lot in a red wool coat and patterned stockings.

He wore thick Coke-bottle glasses, and his face was wrinkled and foreign. He looked as though he was trying to remember who I was, so I pretended that once I had helped him use the copy machine in the university library. I made up that he had told me a joke and said something in Spanish that sounded dirty, and that was why he remembered me -- the blush he had caused in my cheeks.



A car passed between us and I turned down Franklin Street headed toward the Food Lion. I smiled, wondering if my pretend-professor was still thinking about me, and what part he appreciated most.

"Trish, you are losing it," I thought, pulling a smoothly folded sheet of loose-leaf paper from the pocket of my coat and reading over the list of things I needed to pick up.

I'd forgotten broccoli, key ingredient for the casserole I was going to make for dinner. Mac is a big fan of my chicken broccoli casserole and I had something very special planned for dessert -- me. Whipped cream was already on the list, low fat of course.

I hoped he wouldn't have to work late again. I always told him, women like me shouldn't be kept waiting. Another pearl of wisdom from my mother, whom Mac despised. I pushed the cuff of my coat up my wrist and checked the time. Almost four-thirty. Kathleen let me go early because it had been such a slow day at the bank. Tuesdays usually are.

I kept walking, examining the ragged state of my cuticles and considering whether I would have time to get my hair done. A low whistle broke my concentration. I

looked up, half expecting to see the professor-ish man again. But whistling hardly seemed his style.

"Hey sugar -- you looking right pretty today," a man called from rusty scaffolding around an old brick building.

When he spoke, several men nearby turned to gape at me from similarly precarious positions on the scaffolding and from inside the glassless windows of the building.

"Oh," I whispered hoarsely, "Thanks." Two more blocks and I would be at the Food Lion. I tightened my grip on the handles of my purse and walked faster.

"Ow! Hey baby!" another man hollered, leaning out of the window. Gritty sheetrock dust clung to the shadow of his beard.

This time I kept my eyes fixed on the sidewalk ahead of me. My shoes clapped crazily on the sidewalk, and I concentrated on making my hips disappear into the folds of my coat.

The smell of joint compound, cigarette smoke and the sudden heat of another body caused me to lift my eyes from the pavement ahead of me.

I'd been focusing so hard on walking faster that I didn't see him until I was close enough to reach out and touch his sleeve. He wore a thick flannel jacket over a dirty sweatshirt, and his jeans sported a gaping hole in

the upper thigh. The bunched hem of his boxer shorts peeked through the torn denim. He had the kind of face that let me know he was ugly on the inside -- his lips drew back too far from his teeth when he spoke, and branches of tiny broken blood vessels spread across the yellowed bulbs of his eyes.

"Hey pretty thing, what's your name?" The man leaned up against the outside of the chain link fence that surrounded the building site.

"Pardon?" I asked in a French accent. I figured a foreign woman might put him off his game, but a smile drifted across his face like smoke, causing something inside me to clench up like an unearthed clam.

"Oh my little kitty," he said in a Pépé Le Peu voice as he rolled off the fence, crushed his cigarette and turned to stand in the middle of the sidewalk, watching me hurry away.

The automatic doors at Food Lion swooshed apart, folding me in stale heat so hard and dry that I couldn't shimmy out of my coat fast enough. I'd brought along a canvas bag instead of using plastic bags from the store for my groceries -- something I counted as "doing my part" for the environment. Mac is very concerned about the

environment, which is why we don't have two cars. Walking keeps me in good shape, so I don't mind all that much. I like to think the fresh air keeps me looking youthful.

Food Lion had a deal on chicken so I got two more packs than I needed. Mac liked getting a good deal more than most people. When we first started dating, Mac and I used to go to a golf place near his house that had a driving range where we could get a bucket of balls for five dollars. I liked seeing how far I could send the ball and Mac always tried to hit something during his turn. After the bucket was empty, we sat on a bench, his arms locked around me and my chin against his shoulder. Back then, the cheaper our date the more fun we had. Saving money was something we liked doing together and I tried to surprise him by coming up with things we could do differently. After we got married I used to cut up the tough stems of broccoli, the part most people throw away, and cook them in butter until they got soft -- that way we could eat the whole vegetable and not have to waste anything.

Thinking of broccoli reminded me that I still needed a bag of frozen florets for dinner. I passed back through the store toward produce, my heels ticking on the slick tile floor.

On my way back from Food Lion, the building site was empty of life except for a discarded plastic soda bottle half full of brown tobacco juice, rolling around outside the port-a-potty.

Staring up at the gutted windows, I wondered what it would look like once the renovation was finished. The hairs on the nape of my neck bristled as I passed the place where Holey Jeans had been, reducing my toughness to something like boiled cabbage with just the curve of his lip.

"Okay Trish, pull it together," I said aloud.

Traffic grew heavier as I hurried on, the shopping bag's canvas straps twisting until my fingertips became white and bloodless. A few minutes passed before a man in a gold minivan finally paused at the crosswalk to let me slip across the street. I rewarded his kind gesture with a smile and wink in my mid-crossing pose -- a little Marilyn Monroe meets Abbey Road. I've always felt there was something terribly sexy about wearing high heels on pavement.

I walked the remaining three blocks to our house trying to think of a clever way to explain to Mac the day's events. He used to think I was so funny. I thought about the first time we drank together, both of us laid out in

the backyard of some frat house trying to make sense of where we were, so drunk it didn't matter that the ground was wet and our clothes were ruined.

I didn't see his car in the drive when I neared the house, and the street lamps flickered on as I pushed the side door open with my hip. I laid the groceries out on the tiled countertop before taking off my coat and hanging it on the fancy coat rack in the hall. Mac and I had bought it at an auction two years ago. It had a little seat in the middle, and a high back with a mirror framed with intricate carving. Several ornate hooks hung on either side for coats and purses. Sometimes I sat on it as though it was a throne, carefully flexing my calves so the fat part didn't show when I crossed my legs.

I cut the chicken into cubes and mixed it in with the broccoli and cream of mushroom soup before slamming it into the oven. I expected Mac between six and six thirty, and I was a mess. I ran down the hall to the bedroom. Tendrils of hair crept down all over the place, and not even in a sexy "windblown" sort of way. I tucked them back into the captivity of a bun and stood before the oblong mirror in our bedroom. Crossing my arms at the reflection, I decided the bun was too severe.

Mac honked the horn as I pulled out a dozen hairpins and tousled my hair. I smiled at myself and reapplied some lipstick. Mac opened the door just as I rounded the corner of the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway. I undid two more buttons on my blouse so the lacy edge of my new red brassiere peeked out.

"Hello darling!" I said, batting my eyes and slinking into the kitchen.

"Hey," he said, setting his briefcase on the kitchen table as he loosened his tie. I loved the things that defined Mac -- his briefcase, the forty-three ties that hung on the revolving tie rack I bought him for Christmas, dress socks with silly designs, the crease in his trousers, the shiny leather of his belt, the hollow sound of his Bostonians on the hardwood floor in the hallway.

"How was your day?" I asked, sliding down the counter and placing myself in front of him as he reached into the cabinet for a glass. He frowned.

"It was okay," he said, turning away to fill the glass at the sink.

"Just okay?" I asked, opening the oven to check the casserole.

"Pretty much. What's for dinner?"

I watched as he lifted the glass of water and drained it. The muscles in his throat flexed as he swallowed, and I flicked my tongue over my lips, sidling up close to him again at the counter.

"Guess," I said, tracing the sleeve of his undershirt through the starched cotton of his white dress shirt.

He leaned back over the sink and refilled the glass. "Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, Garner is sending me to Dayton for two days next week so we can't go to Steve and Ellen's dinner party," he said, patting me on the arm.

I wondered if he noticed my undone blouse. I put one hand on the counter behind him and pressed my chest against his. He would have to notice now.

"I see what's going on here," he said, smiling down into my cleavage. I sighed and rolled my eyes.

"Finally," I laughed, standing on tiptoe to kiss his neck.

He put one heavy arm around me and drank from the glass in his free hand.

I breathed in his smell -- something like aftershave and Scotch tape. I could easily kill another woman for coming close enough to enjoy that smell the way I did. Easily.



"So what's for dinner?" he asked again, cracking open the oven door to check for himself. "Chicken broccoli casserole, great!"

"I knew you'd like that," I said, reaching into the cabinet for two plates.

The oven timer went off as I finished fluffing the reheated rice with a fork. I set the ceramic bowl on the table and tugged oven mitts on my hands. Mac filled another glass with tea and plunked in a few ice cubes.

I lifted the bubbling dish from the oven. "Would you grab some silverware, honey?"

"Already on the table," he said, brushing a hand against my shoulder as he danced out of the way of the steaming hot casserole. He placed a trivet on the table and stayed back so I could set the dish down.

We sat across from each other and I kicked off my high heels to rub a stockinged foot against the inside of his leg.

"Stop that," he said, digging into the casserole with a serving spoon. He served my plate first, heaping a larger amount on his own plate.

I dropped my foot and crossed my ankles. "I got hollered at today by some construction workers," I blew on a forkful of broccoli and chicken and cut my eyes at him.

"Oh yeah?" he said, heaping some rice onto his plate without looking at me.

"Yes. Several of them. One of them actually came up to me," I said, watching his face for a reaction.

"Hm," he grunted.

I sighed, letting my shoulders sag a little.

"Well, you're a fox, baby -- it's gonna happen," he added, grabbing the remote and switching on the TV.

I took another bite, crushing slightly undercooked broccoli between my teeth. "What do you think of the casserole?" I asked.

"It's good," he said, changing the channel.

"Just good?"

"Baby, it's good. What do you want me to say?" he replied.

I sat there watching him eat and contemplated pulling my blouse up over my head. He was handsome, despite his thinning blonde hair and five o'clock shadow. I thought it made him look rugged, mature.

"I met a Spanish professor from Macon at the grocery store. He told me that I reminded him of a famous Spanish movie star. Rosa something," I lied. My foot crept back to his leg. A full minute passed before he answered, and I considered just getting up from the table and walking away.

"Did he get your digits?" Mac grinned around a mouthful of chicken.

Mac's smile did it for me. Buried beneath a mile of intestine and blood, something shook loose; the clam shuddered open. I was nineteen again, perched on the bathroom counter, swinging my legs and watching Mac make slow swipes with his razor through a layer of shaving cream.

I smiled back across the table. "Almost -- he almost got the digits." I winked, relaxing my grip on the fork and finishing the last bite of rice on my plate.

Mac cleared the table while I scraped the leftovers into a plastic container for him to take in his lunch the following day.

He bent over the dishwasher, loading the dirty plates and silverware. As I opened the refrigerator, I caught sight of the can of whipped cream on the shelf.

I hesitated for a moment, then shoved the container in front of the can, pushing it toward the back.

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## GIVEN NAMES

From the front steps of their porch, Linda watched Desiree walk down the driveway. The fireplace poker felt like a knob of ice in Linda's sweaty hand. She knew he would come today -- the dog that chased after them every time Linda or Desiree stepped outside their little house. Desiree almost made it to the end of the driveway before the dog appeared at the edge of the woods and casually crossed the street toward Desiree, its toenails scratching loudly on the pavement. Baring its teeth, the dog inched closer to Desiree. Desiree turned on her heel and ran as hard as she could, her backpack shifting back and forth awkwardly as she gained momentum.

"Git! Git on outta here dog!" Linda yelled, attempting to deepen her voice to make it more convincing. She ran down the steps waving the poker in hopes of scaring him off.

A few weeks after they moved into the house in Montpelier, Linda saw the dog nosing around the yard at night. It snapped at her outstretched hand as she stood on the back porch attempting to pet its head. In the mornings, the dog lurked in the woods across the street, snarling at Desiree as she waited for the school bus.

Linda found out from another neighbor that the dog belonged to a woman named Mrs. Mallory who lived across the street. Together, Desiree and Linda crossed the street and walked through the woods the same way the dog had come. The Mallory's house was covered in two slightly different shades of plastic siding and rain from recent storms flung red mud up against the foundation, coloring the concrete orange.

They stood on the woman's porch amongst old tires, broken plastic outdoor furniture, and empty wire spools. Linda took a deep breath and looked at Desiree as she raised her hand to knock. The woman came to the door right away, pushing open the battered screen door with her bare foot and stepping into the doorframe.

"Can I help you?" she asked, crossing her arms and cocking one eyebrow up toward her bouffant hairdo.

"I just moved into the Tinsley house across the way," Linda said, pointing in the direction of their house, "and I wanted to come by and introduce myself and my daughter. I'm Linda Hollins, and this is Desiree." Linda stuck out her hand and smiled.

"Oh! Well, I was wondering when I was gonna get the chance to meet you, honey," the woman said. "I'm Mrs.

Delores Mallory, nice to meet ya'll." Her pudgy fingers squeezed around Linda's outstretched hand.

"How do you like Montpelier?" Mrs. Mallory asked, shifting her weight. The doorframe barely contained her large body and it looked like she might pop out onto the porch at any minute.

"Oh, we like it all right," Linda said.

"I've lived here all my life -- couldn't imagine being anywhere else," Mrs. Mallory said. She turned to look at Desiree, "Where are you all from?"

"Louisa," Desiree said.

"Mrs. Mallory, do you happen to own the big black dog we've seen in the neighborhood?" Linda asked.

"Oh, you must mean Toby! Yes he's mine," Mrs. Mallory said. "What's he gone and done this time?" Mrs. Mallory's lips pulled back into a tight frown as she looked from Linda to Desiree.

A silence cut between the three women and Linda thought Mrs. Mallory was staring at her empty ring finger. Linda never married Desiree's Daddy and, somehow, everybody seemed to know right away. That's why Linda moved here in the first place -- because everybody back home knew all her business. She couldn't walk into a store without feeling like everyone was calling her a bad name under their

breath. Maybe that wasn't true, but Linda felt like it was. She'd convinced herself that something in the way she walked or spoke always gave her away.

"Actually, he's been bothering my daughter when she goes out to catch the school bus in the mornings," Linda said, crossing her arms and burying her left hand in the crook of her elbow, "and I was wondering if there is any way you could tie him up until after she leaves."

"Tie him up?" Mrs. Mallory laughed again. "How are you gonna tell me what to do with my dog?"

"There are leash laws in this part of the county, Mrs. Mallory," Linda said.

"Go ahead and call the law," Mrs. Mallory said, "but don't you come on my property anymore, you goddamned hussy." She slammed the door, unsettling several empty Budweiser cans that rolled across the porch.

The names had started again, Linda thought.

"You know," Linda said as they walked back through the woods, "I was thinking about just getting a shirt made that says 'hussy' right across the front."

"I'll get a matching one that says 'bastard'." Desiree laughed. "Now wouldn't that make shopping fun?"

"Maybe everybody should wear a shirt that says what they are," Linda said.

"What other people think you are, anyway," Desiree said.

"Now this is the third time you've missed the damn bus because of that dog," Linda said as Desiree's bus shuttled past the house.

The dog stood a few feet from the bottom of the porch, its loose gray jowls drawn back to reveal blotchy purple gums and sharp white teeth. Linda crept toward it, concealing the poker behind her back.

"Git on home! Go on! Git!" Linda stood over the dog and shooed him away with the back of her hand. The dog stood almost at Linda's waist. She realized then how useless the poker was going to be if the dog knocked her down.

The dog growled at her and snapped its jaws at her leg. Linda jumped out of reach just in time, and she swung the poker out from behind her back and connected hard with the dog's solid shoulder. The dog took a few steps backward but continued snarling. Linda was afraid Desiree might have to see something awful happen. She remembered a dramatic reenactment of a dog attack on *Rescue 911* and how much blood there'd been -- the jagged, puckered scars zigzagging under the survivor's lifted t-shirt and the face



of a helpless witness. No, Linda thought, Desiree wouldn't be a helpless witness. Not this time.

"Go on home!" Linda yelled again. The dog snapped at her once more, its teeth closing around her hand for a moment, then letting go as she pulled her free arm and landed the poker against its head.

She walked backwards to the house. Desiree opened the door and the poker clattered to the floor as Linda dropped it.

"Let me see your hand," Desiree said, gingerly taking her mother's hand and examining the bite marks.

Several puncture marks perforated the outside of her hand, and blood seeped to the surface.

"It'll be okay, Mama," Desiree said, "You got him good with that poker once or twice. Let me get you some gauze and we'll clean it up so you don't get rabies or something."

The dog was on the porch, sniffing at the door until it settled down to lick its shoulder. Linda watched him while Desiree went to get the first aid kit. She set her jaw and smiled.

"I reckon I could call the law now," Linda said as Desiree headed back down the hall, "I got proof that dog is a menace."

"I think you should," Desiree said, holding a towel underneath Linda's hand as she poured hydrogen peroxide over the wound.

"That ignorant woman should tie up her damn dog." Linda winced as Desiree pulled the gauze taut. "Thanks," Linda said, walking into the kitchen and picking up the phone.

The dog was long gone by the time a county patrol car pulled up in the yard and Linda stood at the door watching the deputy adjust his utility belt as he walked up the porch.

"Good morning, ma'am." He smiled and peered into the house through the screen.

"Good morning," Linda said. "Come on in."

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked. He filled the room with his height and the busyness of his radio perched on his shoulder like a parrot.

"We've been having a problem with Mrs. Mallory's dog," Linda began. "It's been snapping at my daughter when she goes out in the mornings to wait for the school bus."

"That dog holds the record for killing chickens in this county," he grinned. "I've heard more complaints about Toby than I can count. But there's nothing I can do

about it, ma'am." He propped his arm against the mantle over top of the fireplace.

The way the deputy smiled and called her ma'am gave him away. Linda knew what he was thinking well enough, and it didn't have anything to do with the dog. Linda wished she had saved something from Desiree's father to give the impression that there might be a man in the house. An old coat, a pair of boots -- something.

"What do you mean you can't do anything about it?" Desiree asked, "Aren't there leash laws?"

"Yes ma'am, there are. But they only apply in areas that have been zoned as strictly residential -- and most of the land around here is still used for agriculture. I reckon whoever made up that law figured outlying areas like Montpelier are right good places to hunt, and people run dogs out here during deer season. You just can't keep hunting dogs on a leash," he explained.

"Well, he bit me this morning," Linda said, lifting her bandaged hand. "And I can tell you, if he comes around here again, I'm gonna put a bullet in him."

After nightfall, Linda had Desiree put dinner scraps and all the leftovers from the refrigerator in a big bowl on the back porch. *Wheel of Fortune* reflected in the

window as the dog sauntered onto the porch and helped himself to the bowl of leftover lima beans, old chili, bits of cube steak, and gravy. Linda watched him inhale the food, his rib cage expanding and contracting between gulps as he glared at her through the glass.

While the dog ate, Linda crept out the front door and moved down the steps. She hid herself behind the large bush on the corner of the house and cocked the hammer on her Ruger .38 Special. Her hands shook, and the memory of her father's face when he had to put down his favorite beagle came to mind. The beagle, Sammy, was riddled with cancer, and she remembered watching her father from the house as he carried Sammy in his arms, rifle tucked under his arm. And what about Toby? Linda thought Mrs. Mallory named him when he was still a puppy -- Toby was a cute name for a puppy, and Linda imagined the dog was small and playful at one time. But he'd grown into something mean and now the name didn't fit. For a minute, Linda felt bad for Toby. Like a child with no parents, no one to keep him from getting into trouble. But she had tried to reason with Mrs. Mallory, and now she had to protect her own child as best she could. Linda didn't want Desiree to be afraid to go outside, to always be running from something. If Linda scared him bad enough, shot close to him so that he

would know not to come back, she wouldn't have to kill the dog. Maybe the dog would understand, somehow, that he'd have to respect the space Linda was claiming.

Three sharp raps from Desiree on the window above her head signaled that the dog had come down off the back porch and was headed around the corner of the house. Linda waited until the dog had passed by her hiding spot to step out from behind the bush. The dog turned around to face her, licking its chops clean of food.

Linda locked eyes with the dog, and her injured hand supported the butt of the revolver as her finger curled around the trigger.

Suddenly, the dog stumbled and fell on its side, working its legs in the air and salivating. Linda looked at Desiree, who had pushed open the door and stood on the porch. The dog lay writhing on the ground, eyes lolling back in its head.

"What in the world?" Linda stepped back from the dog.

Desiree ran down the steps toward the dog. "Rat poison," she said, crouching beside him.

Linda jerked Desiree up by the collar. "Why did you do that?"

"Well, he hurt you -- and I thought this would be easier than shooting him," she said. The dog's legs pawed

wildly in the air, and he worked his jaw open and closed, lathering saliva into putrid foam around his mouth.

Desiree told Linda how she'd emptied a whole box of Decon into the food before she set it out on the porch, but thought maybe it wasn't enough to kill him. So she added some rubbing alcohol and toilet cleaner too, thinking maybe poison would be an easier death.

"It looks like he's hurting so bad," Desiree said, tears springing into her eyes.

Linda took Desiree by the shoulders and turned her away from the dog. "Go on in the house," she said. Linda would kill him now to save Desiree from feeling responsible, to clear her daughter's conscience.

The dog's body was caught up in a spasm, his legs drawing up and his head shuddering. Linda stepped back a few more feet and pulled the trigger. The dog quivered for a few seconds after the shot. She pulled the pickup truck around to where the dog lay and struggled to lift his body. Desiree came back outside and climbed up on the tailgate, wrapping a hand around one of the dog's wide paws and pulling as Linda stood on the ground and pushed. Bits of grass and dirt clung to the wet surface of the dog's tongue as it hung out of its mouth.

Desiree gagged when she saw that the foam had mixed with blood and left a bubbly pink smear on her hand.

"Ain't no sense in getting sick, Desiree. We've done it now, it's over," Linda said as she gave the limp body one last shove and closed the tailgate. "I'm gonna take him on up the road and leave him someplace -- you wanna ride with me?"

"Yeah," Desiree said, jumping out of the truck's bed and opening the passenger door.

They drove in silence, the revolver between them on the seat. When they were several miles outside of Montpelier, Linda pulled off onto a dirt road that led back to a few acres that were being subdivided. Linda grabbed a shovel from behind the backseat and started to dig.

Desiree lowered the tailgate and sat on the edge, looking over at the dog's stiffened body. Linda watched as Desiree reached out her hand and stroked its head for a moment, then jumped off the tailgate and took the shovel from Linda. When Desiree finished, they pulled the dog off the truck together and chunked him into the hole.

Linda thought about Mrs. Mallory, pictured her standing on the cluttered porch calling out for Toby. "Well, I guess I've done murder ..." she said, half-heartedly

mimicking Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind* as she stared down into the hole at the dead dog.

"But I won't think about that today, I'll think about it tomorrow," Desiree finished, shoveling dirt over the grave.

"Hey, I wonder what Scarlett's t-shirt would have said." Linda smiled.

Desiree was quiet for a minute and Linda wondered if she was thinking about a name for Scarlett's t-shirt or mourning the dog. "Fiddle-de-dee," Desiree finally said.

"That's right," Linda said. "To hell with Rhett Butler and everybody else."

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## TEACHER OF THE YEAR

In homeroom I took my seat in the back by the window and pulled out the battered secondhand copy of *Watership Down* Mama bought for me. I couldn't figure out why a so-called classic book would be about a bunch of rabbits, but they did seem like pretty smart rabbits at least. Everyone else read R.L. Stine books about killer hamsters and teachers who were really aliens.

A plaque commemorating Miss Turner's "Sallie Mae Teacher of the Year Award" hung at the front of the room, above the chalkboard. The bell rang as Lindsey slid into her seat. She looked at me and grinned as Miss Turner walked into the room.

"What's up?" I asked, closing my book and dropping it into my backpack.

"Oh, you'll see," she answered.

Miss Turner took attendance and I doodled on a sheet of paper. The school secretary came on over the loudspeaker and asked that Miss Turner report to the front office. Startled, Miss Turner said in her nasal voice, "Okay children, get into your writing groups and I will be back in a few minutes. Mrs. Redding across the hall is going to keep an ear out, so you better behave." She hurried out into the hall, looking annoyed.

The room broke out into a hushed chaos of whispers, giggles, and prissy girls saying "shhhh!"

Lindsey turned to me and said, "I saw your Mama in the office when I was coming in. Where did she get that ugly dress?"

I sighed and let my head fall into my arms. "Great," I mumbled with my forehead pressed against the desk.

"Ooooh -- I bet that's why Miss Turner got called to the office. Oh man, your Mama is in trouble -- nobody messes with Miss Turner." Lindsey paused, then poked me in the ribs with each word. "She is Teacher of the Year."

I wanted to die. My stomach churned as I stepped across the hall to ask Mrs. Redding for a pass. Running to the bathroom, I locked myself in the last stall and threw up before I could pull the hair back from my face.

As I headed back to the classroom, I considered walking past the office to see if Mama was still there. Maybe if I told her I was sick, she would take me home.

I heard Mama before I saw her. She stood in the hallway outside the office, talking to Miss Turner and I hid behind one of the big trophy cases to listen.

"Oh Mrs. Turner, it's so nice to finally meet you. Faith talks about you all the time." She was telling the truth; I talked about how hateful she was.

"It's Miss Turner. And I am delighted to meet you as well." I saw Miss Turner's whole body stiffen at the mistake.

"Oh honey, I am so sorry. Still not married? That's a shame. Don't worry though, you'll find Mr. Right one day," Mama gushed. "But I guess that's how you managed to pull off winning that Mary Kay award for being such a great teacher -- not having a husband or any children, I'm sure you have beaucoup time to focus on your career." Mama laughed and put her hand on Miss Turner's arm like they were enjoying some juicy bit of beauty parlor gossip.

I wondered about Miss Turner's life -- she had a career, had won awards. Mama had babies, but she was smart too. I thought maybe she was smarter than Miss Turner, but in a different way.

Miss Turner smiled. "It's the Sallie Mae Award for Excellence in Teaching."

"Of course it is! That's what I said, honey. Now listen, I came up here because I'm concerned about how you've been singling Faith out and sending her to the guidance counselor."

"I don't think you realize how your divorce has impacted your daughter, Mrs. Cottrell," Miss Turner said.

"Well Miss Turner, I don't think you realize how greatly your interferences upset my daughter. I am capable of counseling my own child in a way that does not cause her to be set apart from her peers. And, as a distinguished teacher yourself, you can certainly understand how vital it is for her to be in class instead of in the guidance counselor's office." Mama always used big words when she was trying to intimidate someone. She did it with me when I was little, but now that I knew what the words meant it didn't bother me.

"I was only trying to help Faith, Mrs. Cottrell. She seemed troubled in class and so I felt it would be beneficial for her to speak with a counselor."

"And you suggested to Mrs. Byers that Faith's anxiety was related to the divorce, when it is possible that Faith's difficulties in class are a reflection of your skills as a teacher," Mama said, still smiling and maintaining a warm tone. "But, anyway, I am sure that it won't happen again; I know how much you care about all your students. I am just so glad we had the chance to talk. You are such a dear sweet woman -- and I do appreciate your consideration in this delicate matter." Mama laughed and put her hand on Miss Turner's arm again.

"Well Mrs. Cottrell, I ... uh ... I apologize if I caused Faith any distress," Miss Turner stuttered.

"Aw honey! Don't worry about it! I spoke with your boss, Mr. Riggs, earlier this morning. He said he would make sure Faith wasn't inconvenienced again. But I'd say she's the one you ought to be apologizing to. I understand though if you don't feel comfortable saying you're sorry to a thirteen-year-old. I will certainly convey your apology to her this evening. Congratulations again on that Fanny Mae Award!" Mama said.

I turned and scurried back to the classroom, sitting down with my writing group seconds before Miss Turner walked back in, red-faced and sullen.

The day before, I sat in my classroom listening to Miss Turner talk about symbols in great literature when Lindsey came in late and flopped down into her assigned seat behind me.

"Hi," I said, still facing the front of the classroom.

"Are you going out for cheerleading this time?"

Lindsey asked, nudging me between the shoulder blades with her English book.

"Nope," I said. "I was thinking about color guard, actually."

Lindsey leaned forward, her breath hot in my ear. "Only geeks go out for color guard. They never cut anyone. Come on -- me and the other girls really wanna see you try out."

"Absolutely not. Those girls are mean," I said.

"It's called 'competition', dork. Cheerleading is a serious sport, okay?" she replied, slumping back in her chair.

"Faith, maybe you would like to start paying attention?" Miss Turner called from the front of the room.

My face turned about six shades of red, and I bent my head over my book. "Sorry, ma'am," I mumbled.

"I would like you to stay after, Faith," Miss Turner said. The room emptied of sound -- all eyes focused on me.

I mentally jabbed a finger toward Lindsey. She was talking too. Stupid idiot. Stupid assigned seats. Stupid alphabetical order. Stupid everything.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

Miss Turner put her hand on my shoulder after everyone else had gone to their next class. Lindsey didn't even hang around outside the door to wait for me. Miss Turner started talking about self discipline -- about how it was important for me to control my emotions.

"Lindsey started it," I said. "She was talking to me about cheerleading." Served her right for getting me in trouble. I didn't care if I was a snitch.

"Now Faith, you cannot simply lay the blame on someone else. I saw you talking in class. How can you expect to learn if you aren't paying attention?" Miss Turner lifted her hand off my shoulder and placed it on her hip.

"I was paying attention. Move me away from her if you want, I don't care. Then you'll see who's doing all the talking!"

"Okay, okay. Take it easy, Faith. Where is all this aggression coming from?" She walked toward her desk and I kept looking at the toes of my shoes, at the scrubby, bare carpet, at anything but her face.

"Aggression?"

"Faith, you've been acting out lately, and that's something I haven't seen from you before. What's going on?"

"How am I acting out? I didn't do anything!"

"Faith, I am trying to solve a problem here and you're acting as though there isn't one. I think you know that there is something we need to deal with -- I can't run an efficient classroom when my students are carrying such heavy burdens." She moved close again and put her hand

back on my shoulder. Her breath smelled like day-old fish sticks.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Now, you don't see Lindsey or the other girls acting this way, do you? They aren't the ones being kept after class." Her manicured nails left half-moons on my shoulder from where she'd kept her hand there so long.

When I got home that afternoon, Mama was dancing in the kitchen, arms poised above her head, fingers snapping, wearing that puckish sort of smile she gets when she feels like being someone else for a while. I had to laugh and she took my hand as I set my lunchbox on the green speckled countertop. We spun around in crazy little circles until the farm animals covering the wallpaper in the kitchen twirled past my head like a merry-go-round. Her heavy voice sang along to an old Randy Travis tune about a love deeper than a holler. And, in a moment of seriousness, she stopped dancing to stir the spaghetti sauce cooking on the stove.

Still dizzy, I perched on a stool at the end of the counter and cradled a bruised orange in my hands.

She turned and smiled, wiping her hand on the towel draped over her shoulder. "How was school, darling?"



"It was all right, I guess. I had to talk to the guidance counselor today." I let my book bag slide off my shoulders and land on the floor.

"Oh really? What about?" She slid a butter knife under the flap on a blue box of noodles and popped it open, emptying the contents into a pan of boiling water.

"Well, I wasn't in trouble or anything, but it was about Da -- I mean Robert," I stopped myself from calling him Dad. Since the last visitation, I had resolved not to honor such an unworthy man with the title of 'Dad.' He had bailed on Mama and us for some woman he met at the car lot. Robert sold cars for my Uncle Terence. Mama said that woman didn't know what she was getting into, that nobody got a good deal that day. At thirteen, calling him by his first name was the most disrespectful thing I could think of.

"They pulled you out of class for that?" She stopped cooking and turned to face me. The smile that was on her face when I came home was gone, and I felt bad about being the one who made it disappear.

I looked down at my hands and selected the least chewed-on fingernail to pick at as I considered my response. "Yeah. He wasn't there or anything, but the counselor pissed me off. She wanted to know why I wouldn't call him Dad once we started talking," I spat out the

word "Dad" along with a small piece of fingernail. "And then she tried to convince me that I should think about the importance of having him in my life." My fingernail bled a little and I watched the blood gather into a shallow pool around my cuticle.

"What else did you talk about?" she asked as she walked over to the back door and stuck her head outside. "Dinner! Come on, girls!"

"Well, she pretty much said the same things over and over, and she kept looking at me like I was a bad kid or something," I took the opportunity her anger provided to try and work in a cussword. "It was a bunch of bullshit." I glanced up as she brought the pan of spaghetti sauce over to the table to gauge her reaction.

"What did you say?" She leaned close to my face and gave me her patented 'don't even think about it' look. Our faces were similar, and I used that mean look on a boy who was picking on a retarded kid a few weeks ago with about the same effect Mama was having right now.

"Sorry Mama, but it just made me mad. Then, after she got me all upset over that, I had to go back to class and Lindsey wanted to know what I had to go talk to the counselor for. Then, I had to stay after the bell to catch up on what I had missed and Miss Turner asked how I was

doing--like I was suffering, and then I was late to lunch -  
-"

My sisters slammed open the screen door and burst into the kitchen: a tumbleweed of ratty ponytails, dirty pink corduroy, and peals of laughter.

"We'll talk about it more in a little bit. Go get your brother out of the playpen and put him in his highchair." She lifted Georgia up into a chair and pushed her close to the table.

"Mama, I don't want dis," Georgia frowned as she wiggled in her chair.

"Ewww noodles look like worrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrms!" Delilah squealed.

Mama sighed and caught my eye as I fastened Jesse into his seat. "Too bad. It's all I got and breakfast is a long ways off."

That night as I lay in my bed, I listened to Mama sing the girls to sleep on the bottom bunk. She sang the same song to me when I was little.

*"Hear that lonesome whippoorwill / he sounds too blue to fly / The midnight train is whining low / and I'm so lonesome I could cry."*

I realized as she sang how sad the song had always been. When I was a little kid, she always made it sound so pretty that I never thought about the loneliness of the whippoorwill, or the poor robin weeping as the leaves began to die at the end of the song.

Mama's voice cracked a little on the last verse. *"The silence of a falling star lights up a purple sky / and as I wonder where you are / I'm so lonesome I could cry."*

I leaned over the edge to look down at her. "You all right?" I whispered, seeing that Georgia and Del were sleeping.

"Mm-hmm," she answered. "You wanna come out on the porch with me and talk about that guidance counselor?"

"Yeah," I said, already kicking back the covers and sliding down to the floor.

Mama brought out a couple of wine coolers and a quilt, and we settled on the porch swing.

"Sky sure is pretty tonight," Mama said, opening the bottle with the hem of her nightshirt.

"Yeah it is. Hey, today I learned the dark parts of the man in the moon's face are really ancient oceans, but I forget what they're called," I said, looking up between the limbs of the oak tree at the moon and wondering what it would take for Mama to give me one of those wine coolers.

When we had a little extra money, Mama bought us all candy bars and she got four little wine coolers.

"All right, now what happened?" she asked.

I didn't want to talk about it. Mama had better things to worry about, like how many times this week she was gonna have to feed us hotdogs and Ramen noodles.

"They were asking me all these questions about how I was dealing with the divorce and emotions and stuff," I said. "I wanted to tell Mrs. Byers that I was feeling an emotion that made me want to punch her in the face, but that would have made me seem even crazier." Suddenly, I felt ready to cry. Four weeks ago when me and my sisters were at some court-ordered psychological evaluation, I just started crying. It shook Mama up so bad that I vowed not to shed another tear in front of her.

"Those people don't know how to leave well enough alone." She slid an arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer. "I reckon I'm gonna have to go down there tomorrow and have a talk with that snotty teacher and your guidance counselor." She took a sip of her drink.

"Oh Mama you don't need to do that -- I didn't mean for you to have to take off from work and all."

"Faith, you come from good stock and we don't take no crap off some yuppie teacher and her cheerleading guidance

counselor." Her voice rose slightly as she spoke. Mama was always ready to suspect the worst in people. But she was usually right.

"Well Mama, I'm not 'scarred for life' or anything, I promise. It's just hard sometimes because they gang up on you, you know?" I said, snuggling closer to her and curling a finger around my big toe under the blanket.

"Oh honey, don't I know -- your daddy's ... I mean Robert's, parents came by yesterday evening when you were over at your Nannaw's. His Mama had the nerve to accuse me of running around on him."

"Mama, don't cry," I whispered, reaching for her hand and squeezing it tight.

"I just don't know how it got to be like this, honey. I'm so sorry." She wiped away her tears and looked down at me.

"Hey Mama, can I have one of those?" I pointed to her wine cooler, still captivated by the metallic label.

"Don't tell Nannaw, and promise you won't turn into a drunk on me." She handed me the other bottle.

I wiped the condensation off on the quilt and tried to unscrew the top with the hem of my shirt like Mama. She showed me how to use the thickest part of the hem to grab into the edges of the cap. I spilled a little on the

blanket as the top came off. Mama watched as I closed my eyes and took a big gulp.

"This is like grown-up Kool Aid." Somehow I had been expecting something magical -- even dangerous.

"Yeah, Bartles and Jaymes ain't hittin' on much." She pretended to stretch and tickled me under the arm.

The next morning my head hurt a little as I got ready for school. I stuffed some books into my backpack and pulled on the same pair of jeans I had worn the day before, a pink sweatshirt with a picture of a horse on it, and my Family Dollar tennis shoes. I hated those shoes -- everyone else had Reeboks, but I didn't tell Mama because I knew she didn't have fifty dollars for something that dumb.

When I walked downstairs, Mama stood in front of the microwave, tapping her high heel as she waited for the oatmeal to cook. She wore a yellow dress I'd picked out at Goodwill and her curly black hair was pulled up in a banana clip. When Mama tried it on in the store the dress didn't make her, she made it. That yellow would have been the same color by itself on the rack, but the way Mama carried the fabric on her body, the way it swirled around her hips when she was dancing, how it fell across her legs when she

walked away -- that dress would have been nothing by itself.

"Georgia, get down off the table! Del, go put your clothes on -- and if I have to tell you one more goddurn time, I'm gonna wear you out."

"Good morning, Mama." I yawned at her and opened the refrigerator door.

"Mornin' honey. I'm gonna be late tonight so come up with something good for dinner. Have a good day at school and make sure to call your Nannaw when you get off the bus," Mama said, dashing out the door with Jesse in one arm and her travel mug and purse in the other.

She stopped at the steps and walked back like she forgot something. I opened the screen door and she planted a lipstick kiss on my forehead, Jesse's sideways grin and sleepy face peeking over her shoulder.

The same day Mama came to school and talked to Miss Turner, I had gym class. As we dressed out in the locker room, Lindsey asked me where I got my tennis shoes. I paused before answering, "Family Dollar."

"They actually sell shoes there?" she asked, laughing. A few of the more popular girls whose lockers were near ours leaned in to hear, smiles spread across their faces.



These girls had boyfriends, learner's permits. They all were cheerleaders.

I looked down at Lindsey's Lisa Frank book bag, her hot pink Reeboks, then up at her freckly, leering face. Her mouth was cracked open in a smile so wide that I saw the rubber bands on her braces. She was half-dressed, her bony hips still encased in jeans that I knew for a fact cost more than my whole outfit -- more than my whole wardrobe. Her name was even written in perfect bubble letters on the school's blue gym shirt.

Maybe Lindsey really was better than me, maybe she had money and people liked her more. When I thought about it, I wanted the things she had, wanted a real career like Miss Turner and a big plaque with my name on it.

My mouth opened and Lindsey cocked her head, crossed her arms against her chest and waited.

Getting those things would be harder -- I would have to prove myself over and over just like Mama, who had to get up everyday on put on her Goodwill outfit with her Dollar Store shoes. But we had food to eat, and how much did those other things matter anyway? I thought about Mama's yellow dress, about Miss Turner's plaque and Lindsey's jeans -- Lindsey and Miss Turner didn't own those things, hadn't really earned them. I wondered how you

could own something you hadn't earned and suddenly understood how Mama earned that yellow dress while she stood in the hallway with Miss Turner.

"Of course, girl," I said. "Haven't you been there? And they've got the cutest little underpants -- as a matter of fact, I saw your mother in there the other day."

Lindsey's face reddened and the other girls laughed a little.

"Lillian and I only talked for just a minute, but she did mention how hard it is to find a training bra small enough for her little Lindsey. You're just so petite, you know?" I smiled and tilted my head to the side. "Well honey, don't you worry -- when you become a woman, I'm sure you'll thicken right up."

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## OTHERING

I've gone away, just for three or four days, on business.

I drive, playing music from the world I am leaving -- all drums and pop, pitch-corrected, popular songs. I think Billie Jean really was his lover. I wish Mister Jones was a passenger in my car. I remember partying when it actually was nineteen-ninety-nine.

I wonder if my husband has started missing me yet. Lately, our bodies don't touch when we sleep. I never wake up feeling rested.

Back home, I have a nice house, a golden retriever, a cushy green lawn with a sprinkler system, and my kitchen is sunflower-themed.

I know people at this business conference -- their houses are on the same street as mine, and our kids go to the same school. They want to know how my drive was and did I get lost. I joke and say, "I was lost before I even got in the car," but nobody laughs. Someone hands me a plastic nametag with a pin on the back. It takes me a minute to realize I'm looking at my own name. They want to know if I'm okay, suggest I go lie down. They think I look tired from the drive.

The hotel where I'm staying is historic -- some kind of landmark in town. My secretary booked the room at a discount rate, something I remember as I trace a finger against the wood paneling in the elevator and discover it's really just contact paper made to look like mahogany. I change my mind about lying down, decide to go for a walk first.

Outside, the air is so cold it lays open my skin and licks at the joints between my bones. The wind reddens my cheeks and suddenly, men notice when I walk by. Two or three men with snapped necks and dropped jaws slow their pace to look back at me. I laugh out loud, thinking I must have died to feel this beautiful, to attract so much attention. I go back to the hotel. And, in the bathroom mirror, I wipe off the shower's steam and check for wings under my towel.

At the conference speeches are made, decisions are reached. I forget why I was invited to attend and wonder if anyone at home has noticed my car is not there -- that a space has opened up in a convenient location. During the breaks, everyone makes phone calls, sends postcards. I call my husband to tell him that I miss him, but he doesn't answer. I hang up on my own voice when the answering machine picks up.

A few people from the conference ask me to dinner but I tell them I'm not feeling well. Instead, I walk into a bar by myself. A man at a booth comes to sit with me and when he laughs, the corners of his mouth look like ripples on water. The brandy I drink mixes with his smile, shading my cheeks the color of roses. I decide that I like the cling of his t-shirt on his wiry arms, the tattoo peeking from beneath his sleeve, and I order another drink.

This man is different from my husband because he sees me when I stand in front of him, kisses the flat curve of my neck as my head gets heavier with a fifth drink, and keeps his hand on the inside of my thigh when we're watching TV in my hotel room. I concentrate on his thumb as he rubs it back and forth, the web of skin between his thumb and index finger stretching and disappearing, stretching and disappearing.

He takes me to an overlook and I start hoping he'll abduct me -- that he's a trucker who can't find a companion and plans to take me with him. When I tell him what I hope he'll do, he pulls me into his arms and says, "Don't tempt me, girl." The lights below us flicker as snow begins to fall. I think I must be in a soap opera or sappy movie, but the snow landing on my open hand melts.

We go back to my hotel and I have a message from my husband that our baby girl is sick. The message said he didn't know what to do -- she won't stop crying. I imagine what his voice must have sounded like to the woman at the desk, if he felt my absence before our daughter began to cry. And, maybe, he trembled a little when he spoke my name to a stranger on the end of the line.

I say that I have to go, have things to finish, a husband, children, more business. I promise to make phone calls, send postcards. Neither of us tells the other a single true thing when we make our goodbyes, and I know this is what it means to be divided -- to have been cut down the middle by your own heart.

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