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Migration Patterns

by

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B.A. Miami University, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

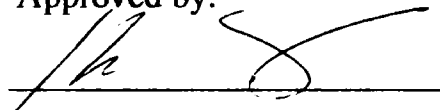
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Our Words

Some words have the power to stop me cold. I can not hear *button* said out loud in any context without seeing my mother sitting in the middle of an enormous floral couch, fingers flagellating like sea anemones to indicate that I should pass her the remote control. “Pass my buttons.” Always *my*.

Buttons, according to my mother, is any electronic gadget that she can’t see without her glasses. Impossibly large, red, reading glasses over which she peers with magnified eyes. Buttons are devices that will break, that she won’t be able to fix, and that she will eventually throw on the floor. The sound of her high heels punctuates the throwing as she stomps across the linoleum to get the phone book for the number of a repairman.

Repairman, another. In the years that I lived alone with my mother we depended on repairmen. Repairmen were saviors in overalls with tackle boxes full of nuts and bolts they kept organized in tidy, compartmentalized layers. Men who carried wet/dry vacs in the backs of their trucks, and wore wrenches and flashlights in their belt loops like holsters. Cowboys of efficiency who rode up in beaten-up trucks and knew how to fix things.

In a house full of second-hand appliances and a twenty-four year old furnace, everything required repairmen at one time or another. My mother would invite the repairmen to stay for supper. *Supper*. Even the sound of it is stiff and uncomfortable. I can't even think it without seeing my Mom leaning suggestively in a doorway in freshly applied lipstick.

I didn't know if it was normal repairman protocol or normal mother behavior to invite these men to stay for dinner, but lacking any other role model I decided to trust her. On the repairmen who couldn't stay (most didn't), she would try to force a snack, and if they resisted the snack, she would wrap sandwiches in cellophane and tuck them into a grocery bag folded down like a lunch pail.

Mick was the only repairman who stayed for dinner. My mother hired him to build a deck in our backyard after he produced, on a napkin, a pencil drawing that looked more like a playpen. My Mom held the drawing at arm's length, squinted, and turned it around a few times before digging in her purse for her checkbook.

The first day on the job he arrived several hours late in a rusty, light blue truck with a hole the size of a fist in the passenger door. I hit tennis balls against the garage and watched him drag long planks of wood into the backyard, stopping after each one to stretch his back. My Mom came home from work and after a few minutes of commotion in the kitchen---cabinet door slamming, dishes clanking---she appeared in the doorway in watermelon-colored lipstick that made her teeth look yellow, and comb lines still visible in her long blonde hair. "Will you be staying for supper."

He stayed well past supper that night and every night thereafter, making it a habit to show up for work an hour before she got home, which gave him just enough time to

build up enough sweat to warrant an invitation. It took Mick almost the whole summer to build that deck, and when he finished, it was fall and he had already fallen in love with my mother who moved him in, converting our basement family room into a bedroom because the light in my Mom's room woke him up in the morning and he liked to sleep until at least noon.

I rarely spoke to Mick though I thought he was handsome and sweet in that quiet way that people who are trying to stay out of your way have. He washed his own towels, carried his toothbrush in every day, and kept a photo of a daughter he never saw taped underneath the passenger seat sun visor in his truck. He showed it to me one snowy morning when my mother asked him to drive me to school. It was a tiny square school photo from the first grade or so of a girl with ribbons in her hair though Mick said she was much older now but he didn't know how old exactly. *Hop in, kiddo*, he said, pushing away beer cans and yellow hamburger wrappers so I could put my feet down on the floor. *Kiddo*. Kiddo is warm air blown from a car heater onto cold knees.

Mick had the type of blue eyes that reminded me of men in Clint Eastwood movies, which made watching my mother go off in the snow to look for him on the nights when he didn't come home almost palpable. She would pace in front of the picture window watching for his truck until she could no longer stand it, then would slip on her brown boots with the furry edges and her vinyl driving gloves and head off in the snow, her red silky nightgown visible under the edge of her winter coat. She would come into my room to tell me she was going for a drive. *Drive*. Drive is the act of trying to control every relationship that you can't control. Drive means taking charge, doing something. Drive means watching the back of a car as it skids up the road in the snow.

I would pace in front of the window for hours until I saw her headlights on our street. I eventually learned to categorize the countless variety of headlights: square, round, rectangle, in differing widths, each with a different type of beam hitting the street, beams that vary with weather conditions. With practice, I memorized my mother's. *Headlights*. Even today I can't look at headlights without memorizing them.

One morning my Mom came into my room with two Swiss cheese and mushroom omelets on a tray and got under the covers with me. We talked about wall papering my room, putting down a fresh rug, maybe even some flowers for the dresser. Mick's truck wasn't in the driveway. *Omelet* means change. Omelet means endless possibilities.

Piano. Piano means insecurity. Piano was one hour every Saturday morning and three nights a week with my Mom standing behind me saying, "That doesn't sound quite right to me." Piano means being deprived of hours of phone calls with my friends discussing the outfits we would be wearing the next day. *Outfits*. I could never have imagined then that a word that had dominated so much of my energy during my teenage years could ever become extinct in my adult vocabulary. Outfits forced a chasm between my mother and I, and earned me the nickname, Gloria Vanderbilt. Outfits introduced other words: *second job, debtor's prison, your asshole father*.

Somewhere down the hall a phone rings and my mother puts her hands on my shoulders, pinning me to the piano bench. "Don't even think about it," she says.

Piano meant failure, unfulfilled expectations, and endless teasing from my mother about marrying my teacher Mr. Jenny, which, she loved to point out, would make me Jenny Jenny. She thought this was hysterical and told everyone we knew that I was

marrying my piano teacher. At age twelve, I had no concept of marriage but after months of the teasing, I began to like the idea and envisioned that marriage meant having my own car, a checkbook, and cans of black olives outside of holidays. So despite Mr. Jenny's patchy perm and his pointy-featured face, severe as a hood ornament, and the impatient way he slapped his thighs and said, "NO, NO NO, You're not getting it!", I decided to love him. For my birthday he gave me the complete Barry Manilow song collection and wrote on the title page, *To Jenny. Love, Mr. Jenny*. That equation, our parallel names in red permanent marker made my head swim. Mr. Jenny and I just so happened to be wearing matching red, clingy turtlenecks that day and when I noticed that his breasts were bigger than mine I averted my eyes and worked hard on the keys.

I told my Mom I wanted more piano lessons and she thought that was just fine because by then she had married an accountant and money was no longer an issue. Her new husband, Paul, kept dried moths in Mason jars and had hundreds of miniature, sample cologne bottles, which he lined across his dresser in perfect rows according to size. He also took us to dinners, plays, and on vacations to places with historical significance.

One year later when Paul ran away with Mr. Jenny to Florida, it devastated us all for entirely different reasons. *Florida* is a complex emotion of betrayal and happiness. Not just the place you go to escape winter, boring jobs, and lives. Mr. Jenny would return a month later to his wife Patty who would forgive him and, like everyone else in our church community, deny that the affair ever happened. Everyone but Paul, who remained in Florida. I never spoke to Paul again though I thought I saw him in the back of the church, one year later, on my confirmation day.

My piano lessons ended, and my mother and I were inconsolable. She sent me up to their room with a garbage bag and told me to empty his drawers. I pulled out gold-toed socks and white handkerchiefs and knocked off all his bottles with one sweep of my arm, then threw the bloated bag into a corner of the garage.

I was sent to my grandmother's house for the summer and when I returned my Mom met me in the airport with a small dog tucked in her purse. The dog's head poked out as she told me about our new house. We named the dog Benji while we waited for my luggage to come down the conveyer belt.

Atheists. Addicts. Serial killers: these are the words my Mom uses, without irony, to describe men. When I left home for college, she told me not to take up with any serial killers. "Serial killers?" I asked. She nodded her head, and told me that they can seem like normal people at first.

In the language of families where our worlds take root, we all speak our own dialect. We form pidgins, hybrid makeshift languages, forms of communication that serve our common bonds of language. Sometimes we try to find words that bridge emotional gaps and awkward patches of family history. Mainly though, we use words to cover up what is missing.

The language of my family is female-centric in a long history of households dominated by women; families where men are pushed to the outer realms of our collective history like scarecrows. In this language, men are serial killers, jack asses, or in the case of my father, a horse's ass.

“Jackass does not do that man justice,” my mother told me the night before she was about to have a major surgery. She poured us each a glass of wine and told me that she still loves that horse’s ass, despite it all. Despite the fact that the college courses he took at night had turned him into an atheist, despite his affairs, despite the fact that he left her when he found out about her own affair. “He started all of that,” she said shaking her head. “Stupid, both of us. But he didn’t even try. What a worthless horse’s ass.”

Then quietly she told me about her first boyfriend, a man she had been planning to marry, who had fallen off a roof he was patching and died on her birthday. She said she made it all the way through the funeral without crying until the church organist walked over to tell her how unfair it was that good guys die young, which for whatever reasons made my Mom so furious and frustrated that she cried for four hours. “As if that old spinster knew even the first thing about love,” she said.

The older my mother gets, the more worthless men become. This worthlessness is measured in degrees based on how much they are willing to do around the house. Yard work is at the top of the list, followed closely by laundry and then general household cleaning. You did well for yourself, she tells me, because my husband not only cleans house, but also does the ironing, which she tells me is rare, rare. And he is handy. “I’ll bet he can even install a disposal,” she says. “I don’t think you could have done much better than that.”

“Look at *him*,” she says, and points across the street to the neighbor’s house where her third husband, Skip, stands talking to a boy in a red baseball cap with one foot on a scooter. Both Skip and the kid are wearing baggy painter pants, and I can see the

teeth of a red comb poking out one of Skip's side pockets. Soon Skip is out on the scooter doing figure eights in the street.

"Look at that jackass," my mother says. "The grass is higher than our heads and he's out playing with kids."

I look down at the grass, which is only slightly higher than the top of my Mom's powder blue slipper. She is standing next to a sign that says, *Welcome to Our Home*, which is surrounded by interlocking pink, wooden hearts. Next to it two green and red gnomes play croquet. One gnome has his mallet crooked back behind his head, about to swing, while the other stands with one tiny leg outstretched as if about to kick the ball.

"Skip will run errands," I say.

She nods her head. "Yeah," she says. "He's okay if you give him a list."

Accordion. Words, too, can give us form. When I think of accordion I see my mother, bent at the knees, with the fake pearl strap around her neck that holds her accordion against her chest. She closes her eyes as her fingers move from the buttons to the keys, creating perfect rhythm without ever looking at a piece of sheet music.

As a kid I was mortified when I had friends over and saw her reaching up into the closet to get down the big box, because there was nothing more uncool than a Mom who played an instrument in front of you, let alone an accordion. But when we were alone I would beg her to play. It was the only time that her nervous hands would stop shaking and become capable of producing something so full of life and energy that I could not help but imagine women dancing in pairs as shy men in knee socks stood on the edge of the room watching them. My aunt told me once that when my mom was a teenager she

would go out to clubs and play polkas with her uncles and was so good that she could pass around a hat, money she had planned to save to go to college. Money that ultimately went toward my father's education. My aunt said that men would line up in front of her waiting for her to put down the accordion to dance, which she wouldn't do. At this point, I couldn't imagine a time when my mother wasn't nervous, pacing in a bathrobe, crying into a phone, or talking about getting carted off to debtor's prison, the pale pink rims of her light green eyes getting rawer every year. The accordion kept my mother in place.

Velvet. On my sixteenth birthday my Mom told me to put on makeup and a dress and took me to a restaurant with red velvet tablecloths and patterned velvet wallpaper and ordered us a bottle of wine. After lunch, she said we would go shopping, maybe have our hair done. She had just joined a social group called Parents Without Partners, which encouraged family bonding.

Each table had a red phone in the center and even though it was a Friday afternoon, phones were ringing all around us as groups of men called tables of women. Every time a table's phone rang, a red light would spin above their heads like an ambulance.

After our lasagna, my Mom told me to tell the waiter it was my birthday so that he would sing and then maybe we would get a call or two. I refused and tried to sit sideways to make myself smaller in the chair. My Mom hissed at me and told me that being shy is okay as a girl, but that it is a very unattractive quality in a woman and she pointed a long red nail at me and told the waiter that I was too shy to say it was my birthday and that would he please gather some of the others and sing me a song. The waiter looked around

confused and eventually came out of the kitchen with a dish washer with tomato stains on his apron and the two of them choked their way through one round of Happy Birthday, while I willed us all to light on fire and quickly burn.

After they walked away, the red light above our heads turned on and my Mom answered the phone in a voice that made the velvet seem cheap and tacky. The smile on her face collapsed and I looked around the room to see a pair of elderly women in polyester pantsuits waving at me with their handkerchiefs from a corner table. *Happy Birthday, Dear*, one yelled across the room.

My Mom told me to raise my glass in the air because she wanted to make a toast. She knocked my glass and said, "To happiness, baby girl. May it never get away from you." My mother and I finished the bottle of wine in the now empty room, lifting our feet so the busboy could sweep under our table.

How to Survive Night Class

You tell yourself you are not really going to join. You will just attend the first class and leave at the break, so you can say you did it. But when the instructor trips on her shoe and says “impotent” when she means to say “imminent” you stay past the first break till the end of class. You nod your head when she says, *Let’s write about emotions. Everybody feels something, right?*

Tonight the emotion is humiliation so you write about grapes, a Tupperware container, and standing at the edge of a road in a pink nylon nightgown. When it is your turn to read, you imagine a book balancing on your head. Back straight, feet flat on the floor. You pretend you are singing into your hairbrush like you are thirteen and singing “Muskrat Love” in the mirror.

You start at the beginning. Describe the container of grapes as you found them on the cement stoop next to the door. The same grapes you had washed and put into your husband’s briefcase that morning. Tell how you held the grapes, and called to him in a voice that you didn’t recognize, quaky with anger, your words caught by the wind like a lone parachuter. When he turned, surprised to see you, and said, “What?” you said, “You forgot these?”

“No, I left them on purpose,” he said.

“Why?”

“They were awkward. I didn’t want to carry them.” He turned away, and you watched him, the perfect way his body fit into his gray, pinstripe suit as he walked down the driveway toward the car.

“But *you* weren’t carrying them. Your briefcase was,” you said, and he stopped and turned around.

When he sighed loudly and gave you that same look he does when you stand in front of the mirror trying and retrying on jeans while he waits for you in the hallway, you made a joke. You laughed at yourself, at your being angry over such a stupid, miniscule, small, petty thing. You looked at the grapes in your hand and said, “Geez, who knew these were the Grapes of Wrath. Get it? *Wrath.*”

You smiled and tossed the container in the air, and pretended to juggle. He always did like your sense of humor, and called you his little clown. Little Clown, the one person in the world who can always make him laugh, the only person who can shake those bad moods that hover over him like finicky rain clouds.

He looked down at his watch, smiled at you, and walked over to kiss you on the top of the head. Then he got into his car, and backed out of the driveway, smiling.

You tried not to make a big deal out of this. About the trip to the grocery store last night at eleven p.m. after he said how much he liked grapes, how good grapes were in the summer. You tried to ignore his smile; that carefully measured, always the same, thin-lipped smile. A stingy smile.

You read this next section slowly. You tell how you nearly tripped on your nightgown, as you ran down the driveway after his car, yelling words you never knew until you met him. Twisted words from the gut of your marriage, words that ricocheted like skimmed rocks on water: Fucker-in-law-of-a-bitch, God-damned-shit of-a-piece-of-a-holy-shit. Words he didn't hear from inside the car as he drove toward the stop sign at the end of the street.

You read about how you hurled the container of grapes down the street at his car and stood watching on the side of the road with the nylon nightgown laminated against your legs. How you watched the container skid up the street and hit the tire of a passing Buick and then felt so sure he would turn around and drive back to get the container that you just stared at it in the middle of the road until a man with red hair like your brother honked his horn and motioned at you to cross the road, or get out of the way. How you remembered your grandmother then, telling you to always proud, *proud as a prom queen*, so when you walked in front of the car and bent down to pick up your Tupperware, you lifted your nightgown up around your knees and curtsayed. Tell how odd it seemed when you bent down and saw your ankles, pale as blanched noodles, despite the fact that it was the middle of summer.

After you read, you sit down in your chair and tap the end of your eraser against the desk, listen to the metallic click of the electric clock above the door, and think, *is this writing?*

“We’ve all done things like that,” the instructor says.

A man in brown knit slacks turns around in his seat and says, “I never have.”

“Remember when you threw the bowling ball in the wrong alley?” A woman with the same nose sitting next to him says, “That was exactly like this.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The important thing is writing about our feelings. Good job,” the instructor says. You draw a circle in eraser dust around the grease stain on your thigh, while a blonde woman with pink, sticky skin reads about the overgrown weeds in her yard. After class, you go home and cook your husband a pork chop.

The next week you tell yourself you are too busy for class. There is a laundry basket full of socks and a spider plant that needs repotting and plus at night those stop signs are nearly impossible to see.

But then you think how good this class might be for you, how it was your idea, too, really, since you didn’t entirely disagree with your husband when he said that writing might make you feel better, might make you happier, which in turn, would make both of you feel happier. And there was that article in *Reader’s Digest* about how nobody exists in a vacuum, how everybody is out in the world suffering, too, and that your suffering is probably just like your neighbor’s. You picture your neighbor, Ginny, on her hands and knees in the garden, white straw hat bobbing, arm muscles taut and determined, plucking out carrots and tomatoes for a dinners that she later served you because her husband is out of town on business and she hates cooking for one. You remember how your husband sat confidently at the head of Ginny’s table, telling jokes in French, then translating them for you. How Ginny laughed, nearly snapping open a chest button on her too-tight dress, while she complimented his accent. You have never seen your husband

look so confident and happy. You try not to remember how long it's been since you seen him happy. Instead watch Ginny's handpicked orchids, floating in a crystal bowl in the center of the table, bob like ships every time you cut into the wing of your Cornish Hen.

You reached for the bottle of wine and poured the glass to the rim. Take a deep drink and feel the wine moving through your body like mercury rising in a thermometer, numbing you, until the contours of your husband's face are less severe, and you feel drunk with happiness. You think, I can do this. See how easy.

And, you think that deep down your husband is right when he says that writing about your emotions will do both of you good. Deep down you are confident that if you could just write a life for your marriage, make it a flesh-and-blood character, you could also learn how to take care of it. You picture your marriage as a 200-pound survivor hanging by its fingertips from a window ledge ninety feet in the air and you know exactly what to do. Sweet talk it, offer it a plate of gingersnaps. Shout slogans -*Choose Life!*--- until finally, your endorphins kick in and you lean over the ledge and grab it by the shoulder blades and pull it into the building with the strength of a boxer. Brush it off and rock it in your lap, and whisper in its ear. Point at the sunset, lopsided and orange, passing over the hulking back of a mountain range in the distance. Say, *That wasn't so bad, was it.*

After dinner, you convince yourself to drive to the store and before you know it, you are in the parking lot of the community college. One more class won't hurt you.

Tonight the emotion is surprise and this time, when it is your turn to read, you stay in your chair and read loud. You think you are shouting, but it only sounds that way to you.

You start by reading about how surprised you were to find the egg yolk, bright yellow and stiff as enamel, stuck to the living room wall. After all, you'd been standing in the kitchen when you threw it. You had aimed at his face when he'd rolled his eyes at you.

Earlier he had lectured you on importance of conserving words, and laughed at the way you muddled language, often using three or four, sometimes five words, to describe one thing. He is a word conservationist. People compliment him for this. He is thoughtful, contemplative, which is why he is a good lawyer. "Every word costs a dollar," he once said, "and the trick is to spend your money wisely."

When he lifted his head above the table and said, "Congratulations. That was a five hundred dollar sentence," you looked for something heavy to throw. You describe a futile search through the living room before running outside to the front lawn to throw yourself. You are new at throwing things and always surprised to see where they land. Eventually you will learn to aim but now you seldom hit your targets. You describe how cold the grass was on your cheek, and how you looked up and saw Ginny's face in her window, and the horrified look she gave you when she tried not to see you. You know then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she feels sorry for your husband for living with such a hand full. How there is nothing at all to feel but sympathy for him, maybe for you both. After all, unraveling lives are embarrassments, something to be treated with gestures: silent prayers, apologies, banana bread.

When you finish reading, you smile at the class with a twitching bottom lip. Your classmates become transfixed by their shoes. The man in brown slacks hacks away at a chunk of gum on his chair with the tip of his pen.

You smooth your blouse and notice that a button is undone and the lacy edge of your skin-colored bra shows through the gap. The instructor grabs her bottom lip and squeezes it into a triangle and then looks at her watch. "Very vivid," she says, and dismisses the class thirty minutes early.

On the drive home, you take a new way. You circle a subdivision just like the one you live in, and watch the blue light from television sets cast shadows on the drapes in windows just like yours, in living rooms just like yours. You try to get lost to give yourself a mission; a reason to pull out the map your husband keeps folded in the glove compartment. You give up after you pass for the third time the house where the sprinkler spits slow streams of water on a bed of robust geraniums. You turn back onto the road toward home and give yourself a pep talk. You feel grateful to live in a house your parent's could never afford. You remind yourself about children diving into dumpsters in search of food still wrapped in cellophane. You're proud of how far you've come, of your four-poster bed, your fat down comforter. After all, you are the woman from the dentist office, whose would-be husband filled out insurance forms on a clipboard every six months when he came in for his cleaning. Until the day he stopped by without an appointment to get the umbrella he said he had lost and leaned on the reception desk with one arm to ask your name. You said, "Catherine" even though your name is "Ellie" and with a shaky right hand, you held out a fishbowl full of Dum Dums. He smiled at you,

and in his eyes you saw desire, a longing as cool and polished as the counter you sat behind. At that point the overhead lights seemed brighter, and you forgot about your ham sandwich and the can of diet Coke waiting for you in the break room refrigerator and you wondered, truly wondered, how on earth you could have possibly felt satisfied with your life when you woke up that morning. When he took the umbrella and did a Gene Kelly spin around your desk post and bowed to you, sticking out an imaginary hat, you felt sorry for Mrs. Miller sitting in the waiting room with a magazine on her knees, and for everybody else in the world who wasn't you.

“What’s wrong?” you ask your husband when you get home. He sits at the dining room table, with a pile of open catalogs underneath his elbow, and you can see the bleached wood slats of an Adirondack chair.

“Nothing,” he says.

“Nothing,” you say.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

“Not one thing.”

He walks past you into his woodshop and locks the door. He is the only man you know who runs a fully operational woodshop---complete with saw horses and hydraulic hammers --that produces nothing. Despite the hours he spends in there on nights and weekends, there is never any sawdust on the floor or wood scraps piled in the corner. He has promised you a birdhouse with a cedar-shingled roof for your birthday.

You lean your cheek against the door and under the moan of a circular saw, you hear him crying, chest-sized cries.

“It’s just a birdhouse,” you say, both palms pressed flat against the door. “Forget the shingles.”

This week in class you are told to close your eyes and imagine a white room. “Let the emotions find you,” the instructor says. You picture your bedroom, even though it is beige, not white: beige walls, beige curtains, beige carpet. The only sounds in this room are your breathing chests rising then lowering. Side by side your elbows overlap and you feel your arm raise up in the air when he breathes. You touch his ankle with your toe and in his sleep he jerks it away like he’s been burned.

Behind your closed eyes you search the corners of this room for things to write about. A precious cat sleeping in your slipper, a favorite reading chair, a husband who wakes you up in the middle of the night to point out the window at the ladle of the Big Dipper.

You ignore this room, and instead decide to write a humor piece. When the teacher calls on you, you read about the noise you heard in your basement last week, how the two of you sat up in bed, wide-eyed like owls, how you crept side by side into the kitchen like children, and handed him a rolling pin---*a rolling pin!* ---And sent him to the basement to investigate while you called 911. The class roars with laughter as you read about the police circling the house with flashlights and finding the pair of dusty paw prints on the porch. You didn’t know that raccoons had human-like hands. You tell you both stood dumbfounded watching the policeman demonstrate opening and closing the

door raccoon-style. You speak in a deep voice when you read dialogue. “Didn’t you know that raccoons could open doors, Bill? You give your husband an Italian accent when he says, “I didn’t even know raccoons lived here.” You laugh with the class as you read the last line, where your husband looked down to see the snap-fly in his flannel pajamas had come undone, which made the policeman blush.

After class the teacher compliments you for having a sense of humor. With her pink nails on your wrist, she tells you that she doesn’t say this to everyone, really truly, but she just has never seen anyone with such a wild imagination.

“Usually I have to teach imagination, but not to you,” she says. “It’s as if your imagination is like an animal trying to get in through a closed window, bashing and bashing its head against the glass.” She punches her fist against her palm and makes a slapping noise. “By the way, I love that sweater.”

She turns and walks toward her car, swinging the wooden handles of her macramé purse. You watch her until she gets in her car and pulls away and you are the last one in the parking lot. In the sky there is a dim crescent moon no bigger than a clipped thumbnail.

When you get home, you see your husband’s dark form at the end of the dimly lit hallway. His pajama bottoms are low on his waist and he is wearing only one sock like a boy.

“Hi,” he says, shyly flipping the hair out of his eyes.

You stare at his one bare feet, at the toes you have counted over and over when he

put his feet in your lap. He told you he would always put his feet in your lap, for forever, or as long as you could stand having them there.

He walks toward you and you send him a mental challenge, a telepathic plea. Look at him and think, "Say it. Say the right thing. Whatever it is."

"You're home," he says. The shadows on his face bring out his cheekbones and make his face too thin like a person starving.

You think, *Home is where the heart is. Home sweet home. Home, home on the range.*

You watch him walk and try not to visualize the tiles on the floor between you as land mines. With every step, hold your breath and think, *Not there.*

Weather Depending

Grace imagined Peter circling in the plane overhead. She shoved a silk nightgown into her purse, and stared out the window at the tiny red lights in the sky, red and full of urgency, flickering through the dense fog that covered the moon like a cataract. The phone rang and she hurried into the kitchen to pick it up before her husband Bill got it.

“It’s me,” Peter said. She felt the blood moving into her limbs. She could almost smell him, the efficient smell of his after shave dabbed on each cheek.

“Have you landed?” she whispered.

“What?”

“Have you landed?” She could hear the anonymous hum of conversation punctuated by intermittent high-pitched female laughter, and a buzzing that might have come from her own ears.

“No, I’m still in the air. It’s all this fog. They’re talking about re-routing us.”

“Are you still coming?”

“Look, I’ll call you as soon as I know anything” he said. She held the phone to her ear for a few seconds until she heard the dial tone.

Down the hall Bill's feet slowly pounded the treadmill. He refused to run outside because he was afraid of dog attacks. Recently she and Bill had bought a condo downtown with a view of the Ohio River with neighbors who threw meat-free parties and drank in moderation. This was the first place they had ever owned and Grace liked walking barefoot on the white, plush carpet. They had great views from every room. From the bedroom, they watched barges push coal up the river, and listened to the long pull of solitary ship horns. In the living room, they could see car lights pour through the street like lava.

Their last apartment had been in a big, dusty building with fire escapes and bars on the windows. This place with its mortgage payments and taxes made her feel like an adult.

"Who was that on the phone?" Bill walked into the kitchen and turned on the lights. He leaned over the counter and stretched his calves.

"What?"

"Who was that on the phone?"

"When?"

"Just now."

"Nobody," she said. "Penny."

He looked at her while he leaned over the counter and stretched his calves. At thirty-five, he still looked like he was in a fraternity in a Greek lettered sweatshirt and perfectly baggy pants.

"Should we go out for dinner?"

"You're sweaty," she said.

"I know." He reached above the sink and took down a shot glass from his collection of hundreds that ran the length of the cabinet. He grabbed a bottle of vodka and poured it up to the navel on the pink hula dancer decal. He eyed it and then poured more, covering the coconut the woman held above her head in an outstretched palm. He liked to say that true health had to be balanced by vice and sometimes to prove his point, he drank straight from the bottle.

"I'm going out with Penny tonight."

He looked at her and then walked over to the refrigerator and ran his index finger across the weeks on the magnetic calendar stuck to the center of the door.

"Penny...Penny.....Funny, I don't see it written here," he said. "Just what would Larry say about that?"

"Reason 403 that we should not be together," she said, deepening her voice, and stroking the end of her chin like Larry, their marriage counselor, used to do. They had gone to see him on a friend's recommendation after Grace threw a stapler at Bill, missing his ear by less than an inch. They had gone three times until they noticed that Larry wore clear nail polish over what Bill had called freakishly long nails. *A cross dresser, Gracie,* he had said, *Come on, I don't think we can stand that kind of confusion.* Instead he took her out for dinner at an expensive restaurant downtown, splurging for an extra bottle of wine, while they took turns mocking Larry's earnestness and his homework assignments, and his therapy speak: spaces, boundaries, being in a good place. Once he told them to punch the heartache out of love while he shadowboxed his desk.

Bill laughed, and cinched the sweat pants around his bare stomach, flat as it had been on their wedding day, unlike her own body that on average added two pounds per

year. Just fewer than twenty at this point, despite the gym pass Bill bought here every year for her birthday.

“I guess I’ll shower for my boy’s night home alone,” he said. “Maybe I’ll even do my hair.”

“Don’t use my conditioner, please” she said.

“You mean my conditioner,” he said.

“Your conditioner. Your house. Your shower.”

He sighed, and sat down next to her at the kitchen table. He stared at her Hello Kitty clock on the wall and looked away. He hated that clock, but had bought it for her on the day they put her cat to sleep. The black and white tuxedo cat she had since college, whose death depressed her so much she spent the weekend in her bathrobe, washing and re-washing the ratty yellow towel the cat died on.

“I’ll skip the conditioner,” he said.

“Yep.”

“I didn’t mean anything.” He put his hand on her knee and rubbed the bone in tired circles.

“No worries,” she said. He squeezed her knee and stood up. Her arms and legs felt full of sand and she saw the faint red of a bruise forming where his thumb had been on her leg. She knew he was trying to help her. He brought home brochures for nursing and massage therapy schools, giving her pep talks sprinkled with sea terminology: rising tides, steady gusts, sinking anchors, mate.

In the months since she’s lost her job, Grace walked through the apartment draped in white linen smocks, like some former ghost of herself, making appointments with

Deans at various colleges and canceling them when she couldn't think of any questions to ask.

She looked out the window at the flashing light and when she squinted, saw it was only the light from the radio tower on a nearby building.

She had met Peter at a revolving restaurant on the top of the Hilton two months ago when he came to Cincinnati on business, the same place she used to go with her co-worker Penny after work. The bar rotated slowly so that you might be seated with a view of the Covington skyline in Kentucky and an hour later be staring at the lights from Montgomery without knowing you'd moved.

There had been a luau that night and hotel guests stood in groups balancing festive plates filled with shiny chicken pieces and slabs of Jell-O with small marshmallows suspended in the center. Grace noticed a man walk in wearing Bermuda shorts and a red and orange floral shirt.

Don Juan has arrived, she said to Penny, though after she said it, realized she meant Don Ho.

Her first thought of Peter was that despite the thinning patch of gray hair, he was absurdly attractive with the face of a teenage boy, air brushed on like a poster of a pop star. His khaki shorts were too high, showed too much sock, as if in his fussy rush to be attractive, he had bypassed his own natural waist. He looked over at them, and walked the other way, gathering with others around a conference table with fake orchids glued to the sides.

Guys like that are the reason we all have eating disorders, she said, sucking down the last sip of her Mai Tai. When Penny frowned at her, she said, *Not really. Just kidding.* HA, and grabbed a clump of cheese off a nacho.

Later when he walked up to her and asked her name, she looked down at her chunky boots, and choked it out in two syllables. He was beautiful up close, like an exotic breed of fish. Something imported with precise feeding schedules and temperature requirements that Grace was sure she would screw up and kill within a week.

He said he was an environmental lawyer. She pictured him in a yellow slicker, hair tousled in a salty wind as he crusaded across an ocean in a rainbow-flagged ship. She had always wanted to do more with her life.

“I recycle,” she had said.

“What?” He wrinkled his forehead and spoke loudly in the same way people do when they talk to the elderly.

“Save the whales.” She raised a fist in the air.

“Not that kind of lawyer. I work for the other side. The oil companies.”

“Oh.”

“It’s complicated,” he said, looking disappointed.

“Yes, yes, yes, it is. Life is complicated,” she said, and grabbed the paper umbrella out of his drink and stuck it behind her ear.

He joined them at their table and spent the rest of the evening talking to Grace about mergers and then about their mothers until she went to the bathroom with Penny who told her that she needed this---*God, did she need it---*and left in a waft of cigarette smoke. Grace returned alone to the table, which led to several more drinks and finally, to

his rubbing her thigh under the fake wood veneer table. Later, when he moaned slightly and called her baby, she found it terribly sexy, the way Las Vegas is sexy if you have never been there, all those neon marquees.

They walked through a series of sweaty skywalks and when they got to his room, he slammed her up against his door, and kissed her hard on the mouth while fumbling in his pocket for the key.

They undressed and he led her over to bed. They rolled back together on the acrylic bedspread. He kissed her neck and she started giggling and couldn't stop until finally he rolled onto his back away from her and said, *Tell me a story. Anything!*

She told him that she had been a fat teenager, and that as a girl she had spent one year dressed as Snow White, waving around a ratty plastic pinwheel, and freezing her father in spells until he threatened to send her to a special school. One semester she had taken a philosophy course in college and could not understand anything she read. The fear of having her stupidity exposed in the final led to her swallowing half a bottle of aspirin and puking all over her dorm carpet while her RA held her hair away from her face. She didn't know why she had told him that and said it had just slipped out and not even her husband knew. He rubbed her back while she talked and she told him that she felt she could really talk to him, that he opened up some part of her she feared was dead. Peter admitted that he regularly cheated on his wife, that he didn't love her anymore, and though he feared he would lose his children, he didn't know how to make himself leave her.

She was different from the other women he met, he said, more intense. She visualized a tornado, tearing across a cornfield, lifting cars and ripping barns from their foundations.

“Great,” she said.

“And your hair is so straight and shiny,” he said. “I love women with long hair.”

He kissed her then and slowly he took off her shirt and they had sex with his socks on. He put his arm around her neck and they slept open mouthed until they were startled awake by the phone ringing. Grace wrapped herself in a sheet, and walked across cold tiles in the bathroom and flicked on the fluorescent light. It was seeing herself in the mirror, mascara smeared in spidery clumps under purple lids, that made her realize what she had done. She had no idea what time it was or what she had told Bill she had done that night.

She would lie. She felt herself dividing into two selves, one who deserved things, and the other more recognizable self who knew what it meant to go through hard times, the Mid-westerner self, who trusted perseverance, the power of sticking to something and seeing it through no matter how bad it was. Just like ballet lessons and the recitals for the eager parents who sat in the front row and snapped Polaroid’s of them prancing ungracefully onstage. She had always craved the idea of being a woman with secrets, the exotic big-city cousin, the more stylish one, who dressed in head to toe black ensembles and drank martinis. Women on the verge of themselves, who understood that life was messy business.

She said, *Oh my God, Oh my God*, and despite herself, noticed how beautiful her hair looked, brushed like that over one shoulder.

When she came out of the bathroom, he was bent over the phone. He looked up and rolled his eyes and made a beak with his hand like it was talking, more like nagging. When Grace smiled, he moved it up and down like it was screaming. He looked down at his hand as if he was scared of it, and slid it into his pants pocket. He whispered something she couldn't hear, and put the phone back in the cradle.

Grace got down on all fours on the emerald-green hotel grade carpet and pulled her clothes out of the tangle of blankets. She sat beside him on the droopy mattress, her bra and underwear in her lap, and said, *You know, This doesn't necessarily have to be a one-time fling.*

He wrote his number on the back of a dinner receipt. They made a tentative plan to meet two months later when he would be here again.

It wasn't until she got to the parking lot that she realized she had left her stockings. She pictured him finding them and holding them at arm's length, mortified by the hole around the big toe, and the smell of her feet.

Grace heard a banging in the living room. Bill was standing next to the mantle with a tennis racket. He ran across the room and bashed the racket against the sofa.

"What are you doing?" she said. There was a flutter of feathers in the air as a bird flew around the room. It landed on the bookshelf and squawked, flicking its wings and knocking over the wood African fertility doll. Bill chased it, wildly swatting the air. It flew above their heads and landed on Bill's sculpture, a myriad of knives, forks, and spoons nailed to the wall in symmetrical patterns, which he once had explained to her was the story of their lives. *Think of us as pioneers forging our own paths in the world,*

Grace, he told her once at a garage sale while he sifted through a box of somebody's dead Grandmother's discarded silverware. She stared at the assemblage of cutlery on the wall, looking for a pattern, something that represented their eight years together, a family tree, even a bush, but saw only tarnished silverware with nails through their torsos, hundreds of culinary crucifixions.

The bird flew down and landed on the end table. He cornered it on a lampshade and swung the racket back, and Grace closed her eyes.

"Stop it."

She heard a whack and glass breaking followed by a wild fluttering as the bird flew across the room and rammed its body against the top pane. It fell to the sill, then toppled back out the open half of the window.

"I think I got it," he said, and held up his palm in the air for her to slap high five like a teammate.

"Did you kill it?" She shook her head in disbelief. She tried to remember if a bird in the house is bad luck or good luck.

"Did you want shit on the floor? I just did you a favor."

"Some favor," she said. "Are you going to kill the cat next?"

"Ha, we don't have a cat!"

"HA!"

He set the racket down on the floor and walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. His eyelids were pink, and swollen and made his pale green eyes watery. He was a perfect replica of his father, Bud. Both had the same full head of blonde hair, pushed over to one side like a track star, and both dismissed impertinent information with

the same wrist flip. Both had stood beside his mother's bed when she died, each holding one of her hands while they watched dry-eyed as the life went out of her.

Grace was the only woman Bill had dated that Bud had liked. At their wedding, Bud had pulled her into a cluster of uncles, and said, *Here's a riddle for you. You got a priest, the pope, and a monk. Three clergy in a lifeboat that's sinking and you get to save one. Who do you save?*

Me, she had said. I save myself.

Bud laughed and slapped her on the back and hooted with the rest of the uncles. She can see them now, huddled in dark suits, surrounding her like a pack of crows.

"What do you want, Grace?" he said.

"Nothing," she said.

She left him standing in the hallway with his hands on his hips and walked into the bedroom. Bill had left a shotglass on top of her jewelry box. She found these glasses everywhere. Sometimes under the couch, once under his pillow like a tooth. He seemed genuinely surprised to see them collected together in the sink, when she gathered them every few days and left them for him to wash. He had warned her when they had got married that he would need a lot of space, and that for the most part, he would remain unchanged. *Fine, she had thought. We can orbit one another like moons.*

Grace secretly went to see Larry, first crying in frustration over her ignorance of pop art, and later confessing how much she had enjoyed the one night with Peter, how those few hours with him had somehow been more meaningful than the last three years of her life, though she didn't know why.

“I think I know where my life went wrong,” she said. Lately they had begun to talk about her life in past tense, eulogizing it like survivors.

“It’s easy to think we know the answers,” Larry said.

Then he told her that affairs were forms of panic attack without the nervous ticks and respiratory trauma, but ultimately driven by the same impulse—a fear of death—and that sometimes, under such circumstances of duress, it is quite natural for the child in us to throw a temper tantrum and lock the adult out or in Grace’s case, have an affair.

The phone rang and she grabbed the phone on the dresser. She held the phone away from her ear and could hear voices in the living room where Bill must have been watching television.

“Grace?”

“How are you?” She closed her eyes and felt her body rising to the surface of something, arms and legs propelling like fins.

“It’s not looking good. I might have to cancel my meetings,” he said.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” she said.

“I can’t talk,” he said. “Everything is socked in up here.”

“Maybe I should leave for the airport.”

“Grace, did you hear what I said?”

“Of course I did,” she said. “I’m standing right here.”

“I’ll call you soon,” he said and hung up.

She went into her closet and grabbed a silk shirt off the hanger. She let her bathrobe fall on the floor, and put the shirt on. The silk felt good on her body, cool and

she.

soft like walking in cold rain on a humid day. She put on a pair of high heels and a short skirt, now too tight in the waist that she used to wear when she and Bill went out for drinks and dinner dates. She sucked her stomach in and zipped up the skirt.

She walked into the hall closet and rattled a coat off the hook. Bill was sitting back in recliner in the living room. He looked up from the television screen and she felt his eyes on her as she tried on a rabbit's fur coat and replaced it with a short denim jacket she borrowed from Penny.

"I'm going," she said.

"Wait, Grace. Look. This is for you." He smiled, and clicked off the television.

She laughed. One of Larry's homework assignments had been to do one nice thing for each other per day and report back with results. Bill had spent that week opening doors for her, sweeping back his arm in mock bravado while she pretended to roll out an imaginary red carpet. She had cooked macaroni and cheese for him all week and served it in plastic bowls. They made a show of shaking hands and clapping each other on the back when Larry became exasperated, and said, *No, No, that's not what I mean. Give each back rubs! Get to know one another again!*

"Wait there, " Grace said. She ran into the kitchen and grabbed the bottle of vodka and one of his shotglasses. She stood in front of him and filled it to the rim.

"Bottoms up," she said, and dumped it back, ignoring the slow burn as it lodged itself in the center of her throat.

"For me?" he said, smiling like he had just won a beauty contest. He clapped his hands and held out his arms to her. She felt the vodka in her head as she walked to him and sat down in his lap.

He put his arms around her and they laughed so hard they nearly tipped each other of out of the recliner. She put her head on his chest and she felt the warm breath of his laughter like sun on her hair. He must feel this, too, she thought. The two of them, balanced in a gravitational pull, laughing at each other while they rescued orphaned silverware from garage sales. Giving each other space to explore crevices and knowing exactly the right time to pull the other one back in.

“I’ve got to go,” She stood up and walked across the bare tiles, toward the door. “I don’t want to keep Penny waiting.”

“Are you warm enough in that coat?” he said.

“I’m fine.” She pinched the sleeve to show him.

“Are you sure?”

“What do you want me to say, Bill? That I feel cold when I don’t feel cold? Should I make things up to please you?”

“It’s your body, “ he said, and shrugged.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t fill up on sweets. Save room for dinner.”

“Bye Bill,” she said. He turned back to watch the dramatized court series on the television.

“Don’t talk to strangers,” he said. “Watch out for buses. Remember to look both ways before crossing the street.”

She took the elevator down and stood on the sidewalk, looking up at their living room window. She could see a blurry outline of Bill’s head, silhouetted by a reading lamp. She half expected to see his face in the window, watching down to see if she made

it safely to the corner but saw only the flickering of blue television light on the white walls.

She stood underneath the window, and held her wrist up toward the streetlight and waited till the second hand hit twelve. She made a deal with herself: if he came to the window, she would go home, back to him. She felt something cold hit her neck and roll down her back under her coat. She looked up to see if was raining, but realized she was standing underneath an awning that was dripping from yesterday's rain.

She watched the empty window while the minute hand passed twelve. She wasn't even sure how to get to the airport or if she had enough money for a cab but would find a way.

Turn of the Century

They were playing jazz in the living room, which meant it would be a late night that ended in tears. Probably it would be Sherri Lee, who sang love songs in a cigarette voice with her eyes closed. I've seen it before, Sherri crying into my Mother's shoulder while Joe sat over on the couch, polishing his saxophone with a purple velvet cloth, pretending everything was perfectly normal and that his girlfriend was not over there crying over him, which according to my mother, is always what set her off. There was something really creepy about it all; Sherri crying like a baby and Joe staring around the room with his big toad eyes that never blinked.

My mother sat beside Sherri Lee on the piano bench. They always played like that, while Joe stood with his horn in a corner next to my mother's favorite red beaded lampshade my father use to call her prostitute lamp. My father also hated my Mom's low-cut glittery shirts that she now wore all the time.

My Mom bit the corner of her lip when she played the piano like she was a famous person under a spotlight even though she had never played outside of our living room, and refused to even substitute at Church when they asked her to fill in on the organ. She said music was ruined if more than three people were in the room at once and

so she must have sensed me standing in the doorway because she turned her head and looked at me.

“Go read one of your books, Liz,” she said, looking over the rims of her red glasses that had slid down her nose. Her eyes seemed wobbly like they were floating around in her head unattached.

“I’m too tired,” I said.

“Well find something else to do,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Call Connie,” she said.

“Connie goes to camp in the summer.” I wanted to remind her that normally she hated Connie and said that every time I spent the night at her house, I came home thinking I was Gloria Vanderbilt.

“Go look for birds then,” she said. “Take your father’s binoculars.”

“Do I look crippled to you?” Shelton, the kid in a wheelchair next door, had binoculars. Scotty, his mother, parked him underneath the oak tree in his front yard every morning and left him there for hours to stare at the squirrels. Plus it was night so I couldn’t even see squirrels if I wanted to.

“Honestly, Liz,” she said. “You’re old enough to entertain yourself.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed loudly and I was afraid that she would tell my grandmother who might make me hand back the five dollars a week she gave me to wash the dishes and not argue with my mother. Plus there was the issue of my report card and my failing Geometry, which she took in stride yesterday and even promised not to tell my

father. I didn't want her to remember that now and I certainly didn't want it brought up in front of Sherri Lee and Joe.

"Where are the binoculars?"

"In the garage. With the rest of your father's stuff," She leaned against Sherri's shoulder and they swayed together like two birds. When I walked out of the room, Sherri started singing again. Something about a church in the woods. She played everything by heart and didn't read a note of music, a real musician my mother said, something she had missed out on by going to Julliard.

The grass was cold as I walked across the back yard to the garage. Our old house had been modern with an attached garage and automatic door opener. This garage was all brick with small, thick-paned windows and a heavy door I had to get under to lift with a shoulder. We lived in a neighborhood my mother called turn of the century, but really it was just a boring neighborhood full of ex-convicts, cripples and old people. My Dad moved us here after he lost his job at the bank and before he left for New York City to find a new one. Before this, we had lived in Connie's neighborhood in a two-story house that had a swimming pool and ceilings with a normal height and rooms that were not always cold, even in the summer. I hated this new house with and the red velvet rose wallpaper and the rust stains on the toilet. This was once the wealthiest section of town, according to my mother, who liked to point these things out to me like I should be grateful.

I turned on the light and stared at the neat rows of shoeboxes lining the wall of shelves on all sides of the garage. Boxes within boxes within boxes. My father had liked everything to have a place. He had also devised an elaborate series of pulley systems that

ran the length of the wall on both sides with a purpose only my father knew. My mother said my Dad could invent something perfectly useless but couldn't do one practical thing like install a garage door opener. I had no idea where to start looking so I walked over to a shelf and stared at the boxes. Every one had a letter written in neat black ink with a list of items underneath. There was dust over everything, which my father would hate. I found the binoculars hanging next to the badminton rackets on a hook underneath the window.

I shut the garage door and walked back through the yard. I could hear splashing from the ex-con's yard next door and I was happy now for the binoculars so I could spy on the neighbors. I walked in through the back door into the kitchen and could hear them singing in the front of the house. I accidentally slammed the door behind me and I waited for my Mother to yell at me for making noise but nothing. I could hear only the piano and Joe's lone saxophone. From here, it sounded like people whispering secrets.

Our house was divided neatly into four rooms that fit together like a cube. I went into my mother's room and opened the window and propped my elbows up on the sill. From here I could see over Junior's privacy fence and had a perfect view of his kidney shaped pool. My mother said Junior sold drugs with his girlfriend and that I was under no circumstances allowed to talk to them and if I so much as put one toe in their yard, she said she would break it off.

Junior and his girlfriend were sitting next to the pool surrounded by tiki torches. A pair of legs suddenly stuck out of the water and wiggled in a V, so that meant that Junior's daughter had flown in from Texas, which she did every summer on a court order. The legs disappeared under the water and then with a splash, a girl popped through the

water in a yellow bathing suit. With my binoculars, I could see her face, tan and freckly, maybe my age, or older. Loud rock music blared through an open window and the girl in the pool sang into her fist like it was a microphone, which made Junior and the woman laugh.

I saw a flashlight moving across my backyard and the top of a platinum head as it walked across the lawn. It was Scotty, the rich widow who lived on the other side of us, who drank too much wine but who otherwise, was a good person, my mother said.

Scotty walked over to Junior's fence and pulled off a blue towel they had hung over the side to dry. She wadded up the towel and tossed it in a ball over Junior's fence. Then she grabbed another one and did it again.

The girl in the pool covered her mouth and pointed at the fence, which made Junior turn his head, and the girlfriend stand up. Her shimmery silver cover up just barely covered her thighs as she walked over to the fence to stare through a crack.

"Scotty, is that you?" she said. Junior leaned back in his chair and laughed silently in an exaggerated way, holding his stomach and making a big production.

Scotty turned around and put her back flat against the fence like she was trying to hide from a spotlight.

"Scotty," she said. "I know it's you." Junior pretended to fall out his chair, which made his daughter laugh. The girlfriend leaned down and picked up the towels and hung them back up on the fence and stood back and watched. Scotty turned around and grabbed down both towels at once and threw them back over the fence.

"Scotty, go home," Junior said. "And don't forget your bottle." Everybody laughed except Scotty who faced the fence with her hands clenched into fists.

“Go back where you belong,” Scotty said. “You’re nothing but a janitor’s daughter.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said. “Go home, Scotty. You’re nothing but a drunk.”

Scotty banged her fists against the fence once and then stormed back across the yard. I could hear her knock on our back door. Then I could hear it again louder and then music stopped and my mother’s heels clicked across wood as she walked into the kitchen. She opened the door and their voices rumbled together and then two pairs of shoes walked back toward the living room. A few minutes later the front door shut and I could hear Joe and Sherri Lee talking to somebody on the front lawn. I stuck my head out of the window and saw that they were talking to Junior, who was acting out Scotty, stomping his feet. Then the three of them walked across our yard and disappeared into Junior’s house.

I closed the window and sat on the top step and listened to Scotty crying to my mother and then my mother say, “Get it all out, Scotty. Let it go.”

I grabbed the binoculars and went into my room, and opened a window and stared at Scotty’s house. My mother once said that Scotty was lonely and that you had to make special allowances for lonely people, even if they showed up crying at your doorstep, which Scotty did at least twice a month. All of Scotty’s windows were covered with thick, velvety drapes and I couldn’t see anything. I wondered which bedroom Shelton slept in and what he would do if he woke up and had to go to the bathroom but couldn’t because his wheelchair was on the other side of some big drafty room and his mother was downstairs on our couch blubbering away like a baby.

The next day I woke up late and went downstairs. My mother left me a note on the counter asking me to fold the laundry. At the bottom of the note she had written a P.S.: *Get some fresh air and don't just eat garbage.*

I took the binoculars outside and stood in the middle of the street. I was half hoping that Shelton would be out there in his yard but it was empty. There were no sounds other than a sprinkler and a dog barking in the distance. I stood in the street and watched for a car, or a jogger, or anything. I saw a flash of something and focused my eyes until I could make out a hood ornament getting closer, which I knew was Scotty driving her dead husband's Jaguar. I took off the binoculars and sat down on the grass between yards. Scotty drove slowly down the street and stopped and rolled down her window when she saw me.

"Where's your shirt, sweetie?" she said.

"What do you mean?" I lifted up the strap on the shoulder of the shirt, an old tank my mother had brought home in a garbage bag from a lady at work, whose teenage daughter was also supposedly growing like a weed.

"Does your mother know what you are wearing?"

"She's at work."

Shelton was strapped into the front seat and was looking down at his shoes. I walked over to his window. His legs were bent outward in an unnatural angle like there were no bones underneath. His thighs were pink and rubbery looking under his shorts. He lifted his head and there was something purple dried in the corners as if he had been eating a Popsicle without a napkin.

“Hi Shelton,” I said, which made him look down at his feet. Nobody ever talked about what was wrong with him or how many things were wrong with him and it was impolite to ask, but I figured there must have been a coma.

Scotty looked at me and then looked away and I wanted to lean down and wipe the shit out of the corners of his mouth.

“Tell your Mother I’ll be over later,” she said.

“She won’t be home.”

“Where will she be?” She pushed her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose and I could see her eyes darting back and forth behind them like two animals trapped in a cage.

“I don’t know,” I said, though I knew she would be going to some bar to hear Joe and Sherri Lee play because it was Monday. She went out all the time now that she worked at an insurance company downtown in an office full of divorcees. Now she put on lipstick, weighed out her dinner on a scale, and even wore shoulder pads.

“What does she do with you when she goes out?” I could see her eyes move like they were pacing.

“I go to Connie’s house,” I said, which was a lie. My Mom and I fought about this all the time because she wouldn’t let me go and acted like staying at home by myself was some sort of honor. “You’re eleven,” she liked to remind me. “And very mature for your age.”

Scotty seemed to be staring at the geraniums in her front yard but I couldn’t tell where her eyes were looking. She stared off like this for several seconds and then looked down to shift the car into gear.

“I’ll see you later then,” she said, and smiled numbly as if she was saw something in the road that wasn’t there.

“You’re not going out tonight, are you?” I followed my mother from her bedroom into the bathroom. She leaned over the sink and watched herself shove a tiny gold leaf earring through her earlobe. She stepped back and stared at herself and her eyes caught mine in the reflection.

“Don’t you care that you are leaving me home alone in a sick city full of addicts?” I said. This is something that Connie’s mother said to us whenever she dropped us off at the movies.

My mother laughed, as if all the stories in the newspapers and on the news were something I made up for my enjoyment.

“What are they addicted to?” she said.

“I don’t know. Pills, cigarettes. Crime!”

“Don’t you dare think about smoking,” she said, giving me that same look she gets whenever she gets stuck for too long in traffic. “If I ever catch you smoking I’ll puncture both of your lungs.”

I followed her out of the bathroom into her bedroom. She walked over to the closet and pulled a red silk shirt off a hanger. She had clothes everywhere. On the bed, over the back of her chair, in a heap on the floor. This is something my father would never allow; one of the things that he said made her a Bohemian.

She took off her bathrobe and stood there in her bra and underwear because she knew it would make me uncomfortable, which it did. I walked out and slammed the door.

I went into my bedroom and started pulling clothes out of my closet and slamming my books on the floor.

“Look at me, I am going crazy,” I yelled. “Spending this much time alone is bad for my development.”

I ripped sweaters down from the top of my closet and yelled like a tortured animal. I waited for her to come bang on my door and tell me to quiet down, but she didn't come. Eventually I heard a car horn outside, which was Joe and Sherri coming to pick her up.

I heard the front door slam and I ran downstairs to catch her, to tell her how much I hated her and that I would be moving to my father's. Whenever I said this to her, she laughed and told me good luck. See if I could stand living with him. The door was closed, and the only sound was the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

I picked up the phone and called my father. My forehead was sweating and it took me three times to dial it because my hand was shaking. My Dad answered on the sixth ring, groggy, and I realized then that I had forgotten about the three-hour time difference. I was afraid to say anything because he hated being woken up, and I should have known better than to call.

“Liz, is that you?” He said, his voice tired, sounding far away.

“Kind of,” I said.

“What is it?” He sounded mad, and I felt stupid for calling.

“Nothing,” I said.

“It’s the middle of the night, Liz. Tell me,” he said. His voice softened and it gave me courage. When he had left he said that I should call him anytime I needed, or when it made sense to. Maybe this was one of those acceptable times “

“It’s Mom,” I said, and then immediately felt guilty for saying anything bad about her. She didn’t need any grief from me. She worked hard and never missed a day of work. My grand mother would kill me if she knew I was making things hard on my mother. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I could have moved with him when he left and I blew my chance. I was stuck with my Mom because I couldn’t leave her because if I did she would have a breakdown, which is what she threatened would happen every day.

“You’re still coming out next month, right?”

“Yep,” I could feel the tears stuck up in my eyes, simmering in my sockets like volcanoes. He said to pack a bathing suit and that he would send my plane ticket because we both knew my mother couldn’t be trusted to get it on her own. Then we laughed like it was an inside joke, and I prayed to god that my mother didn’t have a tape recorder in her phone.

After I hung up, I felt hungry and somehow better about things and grateful that I would be going somewhere this summer that I could talk about when I went back to school in the fall. I went into the kitchen and stared into the refrigerator but there was nothing to eat that didn’t have to be cooked.

Through the window, I could see into Scotty’s kitchen, which was usually covered by blinds. I could see straight into her kitchen, all chrome and shiny and empty

except for a table. Scotty could hold dances in her kitchen. Our kitchen was all clutter with counters stuffed full of appliances covered by quilted tops painted to look like ducks. When you opened a cabinet, Tupperware spilled out of the cupboards.

I was thinking about the party I could throw in her kitchen when Scotty walked past the window naked. I ducked. I was embarrassed by how skinny she was, with too pink, thin skin that hung over her bones. It reminded me of a baby chick before it grows feathers. I had no business staring into someone's kitchen. When I lifted my head she was gone.

I went up into my room and grabbed the binoculars. The light in her backyard came on and she came out of the back door and sat there naked staring up at the sky. She put both of her hands on the top of her head as if she had just remembered something or had realized she was standing in public with no clothes. She slowly walked across the lawn into her garage. A light snapped on and then off and she came out again, and walked back across the lawn to the tire swing that probably hadn't been used since Shelton's accident. She twisted around on the swing. I watched her with my binoculars and something about her swinging naked like that made me feel better about everything, about all adults. I could a huge smile on her face and at least tonight there would be nobody crying on our sofa. She spun around until the rope tensed and started to rotate in the opposite direction. Her hair flew up in the air as she spun back like she was under water and I remembered how good it felt to swing like that, to turn in the air. The tire stopped and I started to put down the binoculars and something shimmered and caught my eye. I didn't recognize it was a gun until she lifted it into her mouth. No, I said. Or

maybe I didn't say it. There was a loud bang. Scotty's body slumped down to the ground like it was a fake body falling in slow motion.

I set the binoculars down on my nightstand and went to the phone book. I wanted to call Shelton first, then my mother, but I didn't know his last name and didn't know how to find my mother. I went into her room because I thought that maybe she come home when I wasn't paying attention. I wouldn't have heard the door if she had opened it at the time of the shot. And she wouldn't have heard the shot, if she had been opening the door.

From the hallway, I knew she wasn't home because the light was off but I walked in and turned it on anyway and said, *Hi Mom*, in case she was getting ready for bed and I startled her. Her covers were pulled down and the sheet was flung back carelessly because she whips it off her body in the morning like that when she is running late. There was a red silk shirt in a ball on the corner of her bed, which was the last one she tried on. One of the arms was almost reaching over the side like it was diving into a pool or reaching out to shake somebody's hand. I reached down and picked it up so I could put it back on a hanger in the closet. I wanted to clean up all the shirts and dresses and shoes and dirty clothes off the floor before my Mother got home and saw this mess.

An Aerial View

Rolland and Ginny were driving in a convertible to Port St. Joe, Florida for a long honeymoon weekend. Rolland borrowed the convertible from his best friend Ray so he could drive Ginny through the crowd of rice throwers in style. He put the top up before they left Indiana because Ginny hated her hair blowing in her face, though they liked the way the air whistled between the plastic seams while they drove along the hot freeway.

The sun was starting to creep over the hills, turning the treeless tops purple. Rolland rubbed his eyes with a fist and wished the sun would hurry. It made him exhausted watching it lumber up through the clouds so slowly, like a tired, old man trying to get out of bed.

Ginny sucked coke through the flexi-straw in her disposable cup and talked about her childhood. About growing up on a farm, about being the only girl, about how glad she felt last night when they waved goodbye to her mother who had stood at the end of the driveway to take their Polaroid. Ginny hadn't slept once in the sixteen hours since leaving home.

“It wasn't easy growing up,” she said.

He nodded and fiddled with the digital buttons on the dashboard. He reset the electronic mile tracker every hundred miles so he could watch the numbers start again.

“And with dark hair?” she said. “Not a day went by that somebody didn’t ask if I was adopted.”

“I thought you were a European,” Rolland said. He had thought it the first time he saw her standing in her front yard with the blonde boys. He had been driving down her street looking for the house with carpenter ants that he had been called to terminate. The boys were thin-shouldered, short and pale, and ran around like chickens. She was dark, nearly as tall as the pear tree in the side yard, and wearing a red sundress with white tennis shoes and no socks. She looked exotic. A vibrant center holding together the white petals of a daisy.

When she turned around, he noticed that her face was the shape of a heart. A *sweet heart*, he had thought, and realized that words sometimes made perfect sense.

“We weren’t even farmers.” Ginny rubbed her eyes. “I have no idea why we had all that land.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“It was like living on a plantation or something,” she said.

“Like *Scarlett O’Hara*,” Rolland said, though he wasn’t sure that was right because he had never seen the movie.

“How can you say that to me after I just told you how awful it was living with all those boys.” She put the back of her hand over her eyes and slumped in the seat.

It was light enough that he could see that Ginny’s eyelids were pink and the skin swollen underneath. He realized this is the first time he had ever seen her in the morning.

He thought she looked beautiful, like a warm sleepy cat. He reached over and put his hand on her knee, the bone jutting through her thin cotton dress. When he dreamed about being a married man, this is what he had pictured. Driving on a highway with his hand on a beautiful knee.

She grabbed his hand and held it in front of her. She put her hand up against it and stared at their two hands together. Her fingertips came to the first joint of his fingers, and were half the width. He wished he had been able to scrub out the dirt out from under his nails before Ginny had slid the ring on to his finger. She didn't seem to notice and neither did the pastor, who had stared at Ginny. She looked like a magazine ad in her tightly fitted white satin dress. He knew the pastor admired her. He had watched him watching her at the reception, holding his glass of red wine with his pinky finger extended, stomach flat under the waist of his pleated pants. All the woman flirted with the pastor. He had pink and freshly shaved cheeks and a wife who wore belted dresses that hit above the knees. He thought he saw the pastor make a disgusted face at them when they danced by him.

. Ginny guided his hand and dropped it on the gearshift. Was she mad at him? He looked at her for some sign, but she was staring forward. Her face seemed sharper now, less puffy. He was amazed at how easily she shifted moods. Her face was like a tide, each one moving and then settling under her skin into a new expression.

Rolland patted his chest pocket and felt the reservations bulging in a square. The wedding had cost him much nearly a quarter year's salary, and he almost had to tell Ginny that there wouldn't be a honeymoon, but then he got a call from a telemarketer who promised them a free weekend in a resort full of potential landowners. All they had

to do was attend one presentation and a dinner. He planned to do it alone, and send Ginny to the pool. He would think of some excuse for why they had to go to the dinner, and was sure that after a day relaxing in the sun, she wouldn't mind.

"What was your childhood like?" She turned toward him and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know, silly." she said. "You have to know. You were there."

"It was dark," he said. He squinted and tried to figure out where the puddles in the road were coming from. It was mid summer and hadn't rained in weeks. When he got closer he realized that there were no puddles, the road was dry, and the puddles were an illusion, a trick of the sun.

"Dark like sad?"

He nodded, though he didn't know if that's what he meant. He hadn't thought about his childhood in years. The last time he had been home to Pittsburgh had been to clear out his mother's stuff after she died, which was two months after his father. He had spent a weekend boxing up recipe books and reams of lace.

It been so long since he thought about his childhood, or his parents, or Pittsburgh. He remembered the sky as gray, smeared by the soot chugged out by the chimneys from the steel mills that ran along the Allegheny, dark like the crescents of coal under his father's fingernails that his mother scrubbed raw with the pink plastic brush that she used to scrub pots. He had been an only child riddled with allergies and spent the bulk of his childhood on blacktops in a solitary, pollen-free imaginary universe.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m hungry. Can we stop for pie?”

Her voice soothed him. Made him feel like he had a purpose in the world at last. This marriage. Her voice sounded light and sweet. He didn’t know how to tell her that they would have to live in his apartment. He thought that after she spent a luxury weekend in the sun, that he would tell her. He was afraid that she might not be happy with his cramped apartment.

“We live like a couple of kings,” he said to her, pinching a soft fold of skin on her thigh that was sticking out from underneath her pin striped seersucker shorts. When he moved his fingers away, she noticed that her skin quickly welted into the perfect shape of his thumb.

“There’s the hotel,” she said, pointing a squared nail at an orange sign announcing the Port St. Joe Howard Johnson’s where big green letters against a stark white sign welcomed guests for a class reunion. Below in small blue letters in the corner the sign read, “Builder’s United, where we build your dreams.”

Rolland pulled the car up to the front office and came back swinging an orange triangle key ring in his right hand. He drove the car through the parking lot and pulled directly behind a white Cadillac. He checked the number on the key in his hand against the number on the door in front of which the Cadillac was parked, and said that the car had parked in front of their room. Your room, he said to her.

“Just park in the space next to it, it’s only an extra five feet. Don’t be silly,” she told him, “I can walk.”

Rolland looked forward and slammed the palm of his hand against the horn, first in a succession of beeps, which eventually bled together into one long incessant sound which to Ginny’s ears sounded like a trumpet. The pale faces of hotel guests poked out behind polyester drapes and some even opened their hotel doors to get a closer look.

Rolland stepped out of the car and tried to push the Cadillac with his hands, his face red and puffy, the seams in his suit pulled tight against his back like the netting on a frozen turkey. When this didn’t work, he pounded with small, clenched fists against the hood of the car until a thin man in white underwear eventually emerged from the room in front of the car and punched Rolland in the eye. The punch forced Rolland down on his back in the parking lot and where he wrapped his arm around his head, stunned and surprised. Ginny watched all of this from the passenger seat in the idling car, frozen still, until she watched him eventually pick himself up and head toward their hotel room, sand and bits of gravel engraved into the back of his suit, his pants lifted too high in the waist so that the threadbare heels in his socks showed. Then she sank behind the wheel and slid the car over into the slot next to the Cadillac, curled her legs up under her and concentrated on erasing this image of Rolland and his fists until her eyes were clenched so tightly shut that she saw only purple dots jumping on what she thought might be the backs of her eyelids. Eventually she opened her eyes and realized that the sun was still shining and she was still hot and she didn’t know how much time had actually passed. Nothing thus far in their year of life together prepared her for this type of behavior from Rolland, and her tongue felt swollen and her head heavy. She thought about what trips

they might take next year, thinking that it would be nice to go somewhere cold, where she would be surprised to see the sun.

She opened her eyes when she heard a knock on the door. Rolland was tapping the window with the tip of his key. Under his eye there was a purple knot the size of a ring. She opened the door and he nudged her over to the passenger side then backed the car out of the lot. They drove three blocks to the dinner sponsored by Builder's United, where they would have dinner and see the slide show.

"What do you say to roast beef?" he asked, rubbing the end of her knee. "I'll bet we get a whopping plate full of beef and maybe those tiny carrots you like so much. That would be good, huh?"

She nodded and made herself smile. She knew it would be chicken. It was always poultry.

The weather was turning and Rolland watched clumps of gray spongy clouds inch their way across the sky toward the remaining sliver of blue sky, like a lid being closed on a pot.

Women were just like winds, he decided. He was amazed at how easily she shifted moods. Her face was like a tide, each one settling and finding a piece of her face that moved everything under her skin into a new expression.

Within a few minutes they arrived at a squat gray building in the middle of a cluster of palm trees and walked into the building to find their nameplates on a table next to a slide projector. A man in a white coat handed them plates full of blond piles of food, which smelled like turpentine. The plates were cleared just as a short man in brown knit slacks dimmed the lights and stepped behind a slide projector, explaining to them that

what they were about to see were aerial shots of the land taken from 2000 feet in the air. Prices would be available at the end of the demonstration. Then the room was blackened expect a slide picture at the far end of the room, illuminated against what seemed to Ginny to be a screen the size of a napkin.

At first Ginny thought the image was out of focus until all the colors settled and she realized that what she was looking at was a piece of first class swamp land. It could have been anywhere; the land heaving under the weight of spongy soil and rain, puffy and bloated, and sinking into the sea. Anything built on it would sink; even a fool could see that, Ginny thought. She was happy not to own this land, and happy to know that she and Rolland were here this night simply for a free meal and a free place to sleep and a free means with which to see the world. She would revel in this relief for several minutes as the man showed the room more and more pictures of this swamp land, her life with Rolland feeling restored and back to normal. Then she knew she could turn to Rolland and he would wink at her and they would both know, as they always did before, the real reason they were here. But this time when she turned to Rolland she found his eyes fixed on the screen, his mouth forming a perfect oval.

“One day, Ginny,” he said to her, “if it’s the last thing I do, one day that will all be ours.”

What We See

Linny and her mother Flora were on their way to the top of a mountain to have their picture taken with a one-dimensional wooden man. Flora leaned back against the gondola door and crossed her feet at the ankles. Linny saw a post in note stuck to the bottom of Flora's tennis shoe that said *eggs, foil, diapers*.

Flora fidgeted through her straw purse and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and a green plastic lighter. She lit it and inhaled deeply ignoring the "no smoking" sign over her head.

"Going to the mountains is better in the summer than the winter," her mother said. "Don't you think?"

"I don't know," Linny said. She had never been in the winter even though they lived less than two hours away.

Flora tossed her cigarette out the window. Her face was red and blotchy, puffy around her mouth, the wrinkles pulling like seams. Linny watched the orange tip as it fell through the air toward the smear of pink lift tickets and candy bar wrappers strewn across the burnt brown grass that in a few months would be covered in snow again.

She breathed in and folded her hands on her stomach. She was wearing an Izod sweater, the alligator hand-sewn crookedly on the ridge of her collarbone. Her mother

had made all their clothes growing up, and tried to follow styles. Her mother had sewn them and wrapped them in a bag that she had bought last years Christmas decorations or on sale sheets.

Each year she came to the top of a mountain in Colorado where she came each year to get her picture taken next to the one dimensional wooden man---part skier/part mountain man---who gets wheeled out each summer so tourists can take their picture with him. Her mother has three pages of photo album of herself with this man, discernable only by styles of the decade and an eventual graying of hair. In the first picture she is a platinum blonde in red jelly sandals, a newly wed with a diamond chip on the hand that she waves, and by page three she is a chubby gray-haired woman in a sweat suit. He is the only man ever with her in these pictures, and always looks the same in his painted red and black checkered shirt and the yellow boots laced just under his knees, which somehow are glued to a pair of skis.

Linny moved closer to the door to get away the ridge of her mother's shoulder pad, which kept poking her in the arm.

"Life sometimes serves you a cold one," Flora said.

Linny suddenly pictured her mother sitting around the table with girl friends, smoking, ordering Bloody Marys that her mother called, 'Bloodies.' This was wrong, Linny thought. She was sure that their relationship did not have the strength to carry this conversation. They had never really been friends. More like roommates, pre-teen and sulky, who split things in halves and drew boundary line with strings. Families had always seemed like a luxury to Linny, something decadent and unnecessary, like aromatherapy. She and her mother didn't talk as much as they watched TV: Linny in her

room with her own television, her mother watching on her own set down the hall with her door closed, the two sounds joining together in an echoey stereo in the hallway.

Linny's mother dug into her purse and pulled out a tissue and rubbed her nose, the skin on the bridge of her nose crinkling into a deep crease.

"Why do you dress like that. You look like a cat," her mother said. She ran her eyes up and down her black slacks and turtleneck sweater.

"You always said you wanted a pet," she said. She looked over at her mother. Underneath the ridge of white, curly hair she could see her mother's scalp, soft and pink like the inside of a shell.

"Honestly, Linny, " she said, "why do you try so hard to get on my band aid."

"Your band aid?" Linny asked.

"Bad side, Linny. I said, bad side."

Linny leaned over the railing and it made her head feel unbalanced, heavy and full of water. The clouds were piled together in a sluggish clump and moved across the sky slowly, like a lid being closed on a pot.

The gondola stopped suddenly and the car swayed in the air. Both Linny and her mother lurched forward with their arms outstretched like ice skaters. Linny grabbed for the railing.

"What's happening," Linny said. "We are way too high." She could see just barely see a man on the ground hiking, his bald spot making a small pink target. She felt panicky, her bladder felt full.

“Don’t be so scared,” her mother said. “You were always such a chicken,” her Mom said. “Remember the deer? The other kids held out apples for it, but not you. You took one look at it and koopey, off for the hills.”

Her mother raised both arms over her head, and slapped them down on her thighs.

“That’s because you told me that a deer had sliced a kid in half,” she said. She remembered that day, her Mom leaning over the fence to tell her this while the two sides of Linny’s unzipped coat flipped open in the wind. She had thought she heard her mother say, “deer”, though it might have been, “bear.” They both spoke softly and inarticulately, and often they could not understand each other unless they were standing across a lawn yelling.

“Nonsense,” her mother said, waving her hand quick in front of her face. “I’m sure I didn’t say that.”

The gondola made a metal sound and began moving.

“See, you can relax now,” her mother said. She weaved her hands together behind her head, and blew loudly through her nose, which made her zipper in her pants come down and Linny could see a patch of silky, skin-colored underwear.

At the top of the mountain, the car swayed to a stop and they stood. Linny’ mother went first and leaned forward to grab the railings on each side of the car, and froze, with her chin thrust forward and the peaks of her knuckles turning white. The attendant helping them looked at them impatiently.

“Come on, Ma’am,” he said. He waved his hands at her like he was backing in a car. When Linny’s mother still didn’t move, he grabbed one of hands and pulled it.

“Come on, easy does it,” he said. She stepped forward on one shaky leg and took one of his hands. She plunged one plump leg over the edge and then the other. She turned around slowly, still holding the railing, like she was walking down the ladder to get into a cold pool. Linny saw a nest of black cat hair ground into the cuff of her mother’s sweatshirt and looked away. When she finally let go of the railing and turned around, her fly was completely unzipped the patch of underwear a full triangle.

“Are you okay, Mom,” she asked. She grabbed her mother’s hand, which was clammy and cold.

“I’m fine,” her Mom said, pulling her hand away. “Let’s go find the man.”

There was a group of high school girls leaning with their shoulders on the man, giggling in shrill voices and snapping photos. *Howdy Partner*, one of them said, and acted like she was pinching his butt.

“This is no fun,” Linny’s mom said, “Let’s come back when nobody’s around.”

Linny went to get them hot chocolate and sent her Mother to find a table. When she walked over to the table with two wobbly Styrofoam cups of watery chocolate, her mother had applied fresh lipstick and seemed more chipper.

There were a dozen or so empty tables, but her mother had picked the one behind three men in brightly colored rugby shirts. A pair of yellow-haired twin girls sat on the other side of one of the men. The girls were dressed identically in pink dresses and knee high white vinyl boots. The girl on the end pulled her dress down around her knees and crossed her legs like a majorette. She waved to Linny. Linny waved back to her. Her mother turned around to see who Linny was waving at, and then waved, too.

“Hello little darling,” her Mom said in a singsong voice which Linny recognized from childhood. “Helloooo.”

Her Mom waved too fast, erratically, like an out of control car in a zoned intersection. The girl stopped waving and reached for her father’s hand.

“Aren’t they precious,” her mom said, pointing at them with a long red nail. Then she turned her body all the way around and stared at the table for several seconds.

“And the men aren’t bad either.” She leaned toward Linny and reached over and poked her in the shoulder. She made a laughing sound, low in her throat, full-throttle, which made Linny think of a tractor stuck in mud grinding gears.

“Come on, Linny,” her mother said, “let’s have some fun.”

Linny cleared her throat and swished the hot chocolate around in her cup, making a whirlpool.

“We can talk about boys, like two girlfriends,” she said. “Mary Burley and I did that all the time when we were young. We would put on ice skates and off we went, talking talking.” Her mother closed her eyes, leaned back on the bench and kicked out her legs like she was doing a figure eight.

“How about we talk about Mary Burley,” she said.

“Oh poeey, Linny,” she said. “Lighten up. Why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“Because I have a divorce,” she said, “And I find that more comforting than a boyfriend.”

“Oh Linny,” she said. “It’s really not so scary. Men are like us. They take their pants off one leg at a time.”

“That’s brilliant, Mom,” she said.

“Really?” she said, smiling. “Don’t be so stingy with yourself, Linny. Learn to give a little.”

“I don’t think I’m stingy enough, Mom,” she said. “Or maybe you don’t remember my marriage, the one where my husband lived with another woman. On the same block.”

“I wouldn’t say *live*,” she said.

“Right,” Linny said, “Not all the time, just nights, like summer camp.”

“Summer was camp during the day.”

“Then summer camp for adults,” Linny said.

Linny’s mother shook her head and took a long sip of hot chocolate and wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

“Where on earth do people get these ideas?” her mother said, shaking her head.

Earth is exactly where people get these ideas, Linny thought. Earth, and in her house. A type of de-evolving earth, more like an ecosystem in a petri dish, where organisms attacked each other’s cells, wore down immunities, and mutated into diseases, or bleu cheese.

“It’s not your fault,” her mother said, and patted her on the leg. “We just marry wrong. All the woman in our family do.”

The air was cold and breezy on the top of the mountain and the wind caught the back of Linny’s windbreaker and made a screaming sound. For a minute, she thought it is her mother but when she spun around to find her, she saw her mother shoving quarters into a machine full of nuts for squirrels.

Her mother walked over to a cluster of squirrels and held her palm, full of nuts, out to them but they run away. She watched as her mother threw the nuts on the ground. She turned to walk back toward her and the wind blew her hair forward into a pair of pigtails.

"Let's go see the man," her mother said, brushing her hands together to dislodge a nut stuck between her fingers.

A cluster of patchy clouds collected in a pocket between the mountain peaks, bridging the two streams of blue sky.

"Not enough sun for a good picture," her mother said, wrestling the camera strap off her shoulder.

"Let's try anyway," Linny said.

She walked over to the wooden man. Close up she could see that his sides were rotting in blackened green spots and he was warped with water. Someone had planted a waxy lipstick mark on his cheek, preserved in a dusty film.

"Come on, get beside him, Mom," she said. Her mother walked over and stood next to him. The man almost looked like he might reach over and put an arm around her mother's shoulder. Almost as if he could scoop her up in his big muscled, woody arms and sing her to sleep or whisper something sweet into her ear. Instead, his arm was painted into the pocket of his jeans.

There were no pictures of her parents together. Her Dad had been sour, cheeks puffy and maroon as boxing gloves. A man who would lean back in his recliner and pretend he was sleeping, snores stuck in the back of his throat like raw vegetables ground in a disposal, and who would jump up suddenly and scare her and her mother who might

be walking past him at the moment or knitting on the couch. They would both scream and he would laugh until he became angry. "God damned timid women just like a pair of mice."

Linny put the camera up to her eye. "Say something cheesy," she said.

"Something cheesy." Her mother smiled shyly with her upper teeth grabbing her lip and her face turned slightly to the side, like a girl about to go on her first date. She focused the lens on her mother's face, the burst capillaries on her nose and cheeks, shooting stars fading out underneath her skin.

"Your fly is open," Linny said, and snapped the picture just as her Mother looked down, capturing the dark roots in her hair, and a face full of surprise.

Once when Linny went to a Happy Hour after work with the account executives, women who looked like mannequins in a Nordstrom window, complete with the right scarves and other accessories. The woman complemented each other on their outfits and her friend looked at Linny awkwardly and looked her up and down and with a thinly disguised trace of disgust told her that her lack of style was in itself a style. The somethingness in the nothingness, a garbled world of blurred lines.

Ways to Kill Babies

One

Ian said he would boil the baby in a stainless steel pot. He pictured it, limp as a peanut, bobbing up to the center through a rush of bubbles.

“A delicacy best served in a marinade,” he said. He described everything like he was trying to sell it, a must-have trait, he thought, of a good copywriter.

“How revolting,” Liz said.

“Rare and delicious,” he said. It was late, and he feared he might be slipping backward into what he called “the trough of unused vowels,” a phenomena he compared to men in overalls on farms, shoveling and shoveling.

“Cooking scares Liz,” Warren said. “She wouldn’t know a kitchen if it creeped up through the sink and bit her.”

“Maybe I would cook if my husband wasn’t so critical,” Liz said. She had thin eyebrows and a long nose, which made her face seem pointy when she laughed. Ian still thought that she was by far the best looking woman in the office, maybe the best he had ever met in person.

She and Warren sat on opposite ends of Ian’s leather couch. Warren crossed his ankle over his knee and picked an embroidered diamond on the cuff of his sock. They

looked alike, dark hair, dark eyes, and complemented each other like the bride and groom on a wedding cake, pale and dressed in glossy blacks.

“How about some baby’s eyes?” Ian said. He lifted a blue ceramic tray of stuffed mushrooms off the coffee table and held it out to Liz.

“I suppose.” She wrinkled her nose and grabbed a mushroom with the tips of her fingers.

He was afraid he had gone too far trying to steer the game back on track, but it was still his turn and he wanted a chance to win. This game was her idea; the object to be as graphic as possible when describing how they would each kill a baby. It was only midnight so there was still time. Plus he was hot tonight, Earlier this evening he had won his first ad award. Warren and Liz practically ran the agency and when Warren had handed him the framed poster of his campaign for a local vodka, a poster of a woman in a dress sitting on a bed with the words, “Don’t get caught empty handed” in red lipstick on the mirror behind her head. Warren had called it fresh and edgy and bought him a latte. ,

Warren leaned over and spread Brie on a cracker. He inspected the cheese knife that Ian bought last week at Pier 1. He had bought a set of them, three Italian chefs in matching red-striped aprons and stiff white hats, and it now looked stupid in Warren’s hand, and he felt like a sissy.

“To success,” Warren said, raising his cracker in the air. ‘

Two

Jeanette had brought him a pint-sized aloe plant wrapped in pink cellophane when he moved in. It had taken her three transfers to get there, and he pictured her on the bus

holding the plant on a knee, guarding it with her free hand to protect it from strangers squashing it.

“Holy Moley,” she had said when he opened the door. “Look at you Mr. Bigshot.” She smiled at him with a big wide smile and ooh and aaahed when she sat down on his leather sofas.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” he said, uncomfortably.

“Of course it does. It’s the shit,” she said. Jeanette had worked as a vet tech since high school and talked about eye boogers and cat piss loudly in a way that embarrassed him.

“Can we stop talking about it yet?”

“Fine, Mr. Sensitive.”

She tugged the frayed waistband on her sweater, a cheap looking acrylic pink sweater that he recognized as being a gift his mother had given her one Christmas. He had been her high school girlfriend and he had broken up with her during his freshman year. She had not been surprised when he told her, and said that she always felt like they would outgrow each other. He still called her every few months, usually when he was drunk and depressed, and she sent him birthday cards every year.

Three

The squat vanilla candle on the end table leaked wax onto his end table and tasted like the salt-water taffy that his mother put on top the register for customers. She let him have as many as he wanted on the afternoons when he helped her wrap tissue paper around desert sandscapes stuck in jelly jars and other novelty items she sold. The candle,

along with a terra cot pot shaped like a dog, had been the two things he had taken from his mother's apartment when she had died. She stored rubber bands in the pot but he emptied it and put it on a shelf in his closet.

His mother had died his senior year of brain cancer, but had scrupulously paid for his college so he wouldn't have any loans. He wonder what she would think of all this, the leather couches. She reupolstered one couch all his life with resilient fabrics. She spoke of resiliency like it was something that ran in her family, like diabetes or myopia.

He still felt bad for her when he remembered the night he had brought home his freshman roommate, Michael, at her request. He cleaned up the white turds the untrained dog left and scrubbed the rust stains from the back of the toilet. He grimaced when his mother talked about cat pee, though Michael was gracious, ignoring the card table that shook everytime they cut into a chicken wing or forked the tiny cubed carrots.

Four

They laughed, and Ian felt stupid and wished he had said the first thing he had thought of about wanting to cut off its limbs with a hunting knife. That was a better one, he thought. Ian suddenly felt too sober for this, for being in his living room late night with them, and reached for his vodka tonic and threw it back and the plastic sword hit him in the nose. He threw it on the glass coffee table and the lime fell off in a pulpy green pile. When had he started putting swords in his drinks? He felt the vodka rush to his head like a storm stuck between mountains. He reminded himself that this is his boss, his *boss* for Christ's sake, and his bosses' wife.

His friend Rob at work had pulled aside and told him to watch out for Warren. He put his hands on his hips and shook his ass. When Ian looked back puzzled, he told him Warren fucks around on Liz. Why would you fuck around when you have some body like Liz, he asked, incredulous Not with girls, dumb ass. He's a fucking dandy. Come on!

“Oh, I know,” he said.

Five

Ian could hear a clinking, an object being pushed or dragged, and he imagined the man with the shopping cart who wore a battered Persian rug safety pinned around his shoulders and who sat on the front steps of his apartment and greeted the tenants like a doorman. He gave this guy money everyday. Warren and Liz had stepped over him on the way in without comment.

He looked back and forth at Warren and Liz, but they are not looking at him. Jane tilted her head to the side, and stared at Warren with squinted eyes, giving him that same look that Ian had noticed married couples often used in public, full of codes and secrets. Not that he had much experience hanging out with married people. Or even people in happy relationships, for that matter. Most of his friends were still breaking up in public places, disgracing each other by throwing ash trays or calling each other “mother fuckers.” But not that he would really know about this either, since he has never had a girlfriend, really, unless he could count Barbara, the receptionist at work, who occasionally met him after work for dinner at the sports bar where they ate hamburgers under the pulsing light of television screens.

Ian stared at her eyes, which are two different colors. One was gold, and the other gold with a large dot of green in the center like some exotic cat.

But, this too, sounded stupid and made him feel insecure, like a man hosting a cocktail party for the first time, which of course, he was. He had always wanted to be able to throw a cocktail party, though he isn't exactly sure what one was considering most of his friends still drink beer out of a can by puncturing it in the bottom with a can opener and cracking open the top. None of his friends had cocktail parties, let alone cocktail parties for his boss and his wife. Certainly not his ex girlfriend, Robin, who he had recently broken up with and who had found sleeping outside his door in a ratty gold sleeping bag last night, who upon hearing that Ian planned to have his boss and his wife over for cocktails had said, *What are you trying to gain from this relationship?* Ian could hear noise in the background, cheering or music. Rob had asked him the same question on graduation day when he told him he was moving out, taking a job in advertising and moving to the city. He hadn't been able to explain his high expectations for himself, let alone his deep-rooted fear that if he didn't do something he would sink into some pit, those dark places that pulled people under, the same pits that people like Warren were impervious to. His Dad would have hated this about him, probably even hated him, he was sure, had he known his Dad. He worked on oilrigs, is what his Mom told him. He pictured a rugged guy in overalls with grease stains covering the elbows and knees and calluses on his hands, something Ian lacked.

Warren stood up, and knocked the table with his knees. The candles flickered for a second until Warren grabbed the table to steady it. He stood straight and adjusted the pleats in his wool slacks, too tight in the thighs, and one of those details that reminded

Ian that Warren was his father's age, if he had one, and not entirely in style, which somehow made him even cooler. Everything about Warren impressed him and not just because he was a God in the advertising agency where they both worked or that every campaign Warren touched won some type of award. Warren also had the childhood that Ian had always envied, full of pipe smoke and stories about uncles who traded in Cadillac's every year under the judgmental guise of the patriarch, his grandfather, a tyrant with poor posture who ruled the family with fear and who gave Warren nickels for every golf ball he found on several acres of his estate. Warren had told him about stories about dinners served by women in white uniforms and the way his grandfather who only spoke to his wife through the children: a left over grudge from some argument that they had had that nobody remembered. Ian marveled over these stories, so different from his own childhood, growing up in tenement apartment with a single mom, a bank teller, who had no interest in men except an occasional visit from a married real estate agent who would stop by from time to time with flowers. His mother would open the door and let him in and then promptly ignore him, barely looking up from her game of solitaire, so that he felt obliged to sit and listen to the man talk about the sailboat he one day hoped to sail off the Florida coast. His mother had died of bone cancer his senior year in high school, but not before scrupulously setting aside a college fund for him, which had always made him feel guilty.

Six

He smelled something burning and remembered that he had stuffed mushrooms cooking in the oven and excused himself.

In the kitchen, he pulled out the pan of mushrooms, and spatulated them off before they cooled and stuck. He heard Liz's shoes clicking in the hall and hurried to get the mushrooms straightened into neat rows on the silver serving tray. Liz walked up behind him and grabbed one of the mushrooms, which Ian noticed, left a greasy imprint on the tray. She put it in her mouth and chewed the hollow space between her cheekbones becoming even more pronounced. Her face was all caverns, underneath skin. Close up to her, he could see the fine wrinkles on the surface of her skin, crumpled like a paper bag.

"These are really fabulous, Ian." She has one hand on her hip, and Ian can see the tight muscles in her neck, sinewy and tan. Liz had rich hair. Hair raised on fruit and vegetables and long summer vacations at the beach in whitewashed houses with full libraries, genetically passed through generations of well-rested women. Ian tried not to stare at her chest, at the r blouse that was too low cut, too plungy, exposing the plate of skin and the soft curves where her breasts began..

"Really?" He grabbed one and stuffed it in his mouth. He tried to chew it slowly, but he immediately swallowed it and felt it go down his throat in a greasy lump.

"They melt right in your mouth," she said

. She walked toward him, and instinctively he backed away from her until he felt the heat from the oven on the backs of his thighs. She stood close to him until her body was almost touching his and she reached around him to grab a mushroom. He could smell her skin, something like roses.

"It's easy," he said. His words sounded scratchy, stuck in the back of his throat.

"I'll bet," she said.

Seven

Liz turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving him standing there wearing an oven mitt. He could not help feeling that he had failed in some fundamental way, though he didn't know how or why.

Ian walked back into the living room, carrying the tray of mushrooms and a towel. The mushrooms slid and left greasy trails as he leaned over to put them down on the table. Liz has taken his seat on the couch next to Warren so he sat on the corner of the ottoman, and crossed one leg over the other.

Liz tilted her head back to drink the last bit of her martini. She polished off the drink and inched up on the couch until her legs were touching the floor. She leaned forward and tried to set the empty glass on the table, but instead knocked it against an ashtray on the table and the glass wobbled until she found the flat surface. He watched her fumble around with the glass and it dawned on him that she might be drunk. Warren grabbed the glass and shook it in the air, and Liz nodded. Ian tried to catch Warren's eye to tell him that maybe she's had enough. He looked over at his well-stocked liqueur cabinet full of bottles that he kept lined up in tight rows and dusted, but rarely touched himself. Bottles he had on hand, in all honesty, because he liked the way a full bar looked. He watched as Warren walked over to the bar and took the lid off the martini shaker, also purchased at Pier 1, which he had never used. Warren poured liquids into it without measuring. The levels in the bottles barely went down and Ian knew there must be enough alcohol there for at least fifty more drinks. He looked at his watch, but it was only eleven, too early to call it a night.

“I would take the baby by its pink little feet,” she said. “I would take those fucking tiny little feet in my hands and I would and swing it over her head like lasso until the blood rushed to its head.”

She grabbed the dishtowel off of the coffee table and stood up. She wound the towel over her head several times, building momentum with every swing, until she lost her balance and fell back and hit her head on the corner of the table.

“I didn’t see that one coming,” Warren said. He stood up slowly and bent down on the floor next to Jane. His cheeks were too red, clownish, and Ian thought his lips were too unnaturally pink. He was moving too slowly, taking too long to get down to Jane on the floor. Finally he was at Jane’s side, rubbing the back of her head with his palm.

“Are you okay,” Ian said, kneeling over toward her so that he could see her face. A clump of mascara was stuck in the corner of her eyelash like a squashed bug. She sat up and rubbed the back of her head, over Warren’s knuckles.

“I would swing it by its feet until all of the blood rushed to its head and ...”

“Shushhhhh,” Warren said. He leaned his mouth of her head so that his breath blew the hair forward on her scalp. “That’s enough tonight.”

“Smack,” she said, and clapped her hands. “Just like a water balloon.”

Ian couldn’t stand to hear her say one more word. He wanted to run into his room, come back wearing a pair of flannel pajamas and curl up under her mink coat and go to sleep. But, of course, that was what he would want to do, that was the type of thing he would always wanted to do, and now he felt like it wasn’t good enough, that he needed to do more.

Ian's stood up and walked over to the bar, leaving them together on the floor. He opened a bottle and poured himself a drink because he didn't know what else to do with his hands.

Funnier Than You

The man and woman stand across from each other on pale marble stairs in front of the courthouse. The woman shifts the child on her hip, and says, “Why do men have holes in the ends of their penises?”

The man watches a thick bead of drool fall from the child’s mouth onto the woman’s dress. The dress, the one the man recognizes from weddings and other special events, is broken in the middle by a white vinyl belt, which makes it shorter in the back.

“Look Marion, I wish you wouldn’t take this so personally. It’s not you...”

“Why do men have holes in the ends of their penises?” The woman says louder.

The man puts his hands up in the air as trying to stop a train. To his right, he sees his lawyer, who is huddled next to a man dressed identically in a navy blue suit. The lawyer whispers something to the man, and they both laugh and the lawyer looks up at him, and then quickly looks down at his shoes.

“Why, Marion,” he says, his voice tight and pinched.

“So they can keep an open mind,” the woman says. When she laughs, the man notices the tip of her nose turns white as if she has hypothermia.

“Marion,” the man says, “We should really...”

“What do you call a woman who knows exactly where her husband is every night?”

He can barely hear the end of her sentence. On the street a garbage truck stops and backs into the alley next to the courthouse. A silver Jaguar pulls into the alley behind it and the driver starts to honk in a quick succession which eventually bleeds into a long, sharp trumpet sound. The man stares at it until the sunlight reflecting off the back burns his eyes.

“A widow,” the woman says, but neither of them hear.

“Look, Marion, before you do anything...” the man says.

“I’ve got another,” she says. She licks her tongue across the deep ridges of her thick, callously lips.

“The CIA has an opening for an assassin,” she says. “They bring in a bunch of guys, do background checks, tests, and interviews. Finally they narrow it down to three finalists---two men and a woman. They take the first man to a large metal door and hand him a gun.”

“I get the point, Marion,” he says. He notices her lipstick is smeared a second tooth.

“So they hand the guy a gun and tell him to walk into the room and kill his wife, who will be sitting in the corner reading a book,” she says. “But when they tell him this the guy says, *You can't be serious. I could never shoot my wife*, so they say, *Well then, you're hardly the right man for the job.*”

The woman sucks her lips into her mouth and makes a serious face, the skin white around the indented lines on her forehead.

“So, they grab the second man and tell him to do the same thing. The gun, kill the wife, the whole bit,” she says. “But when this second guy comes out, he is crying and he tells them that he tried to kill her but just couldn’t. So they say, *Sorry, go get your wife and go home. You lose*”

The man kicks the toe of his loafer against the marble step.

“So then it’s the woman’s turn. And they tell her the same thing,” she says. “They give her the gun and send her into the room. A couple seconds later, they hear two shots and then a loud crush and a scream.”

The woman grabs for a hair in her mouth with a clawed hand. She catches it and stares at it. The wind blows it out of her hand.

“So the next thing they know,” she says. “The woman comes out of the room, wipes the sweat off her forehead and says: *You guys didn't tell me those were blanks. I had to beat him to death with the chair.*

The woman smiles, which makes her nose pointy and long, like she is pointing at him and laughing. She bends over to put the child down on the stairs. Bent over like that, the man notices that her tight, blonde curls look like cauliflower.

“You like that one,” he says. Sweat runs down his back, his shirt sticking to his skin. He reaches behind him and pulls a handful of shirt into a peak.

“Here’s one for you,” he says. “A farmer stands out in his field and tries to fly a kite, but it keeps plunging to the ground.”

The child squeals and claps its hands. The man and the woman smile and the woman bends down to touch its head, her fingers pinching salt over its head. The child crawls over to her sandeled foot and tries to wedge a pacifier between her toes..

“So, anyway,” he says. “Then the wife comes out onto the front porch, watches him for a second and yells across the field, *You need more tail*. Then the farmer slams the kite on the ground and says, *Damn it, woman, make up your mind! Last night when I tried to make love to you, you told me to go fly a kite!*”

The man laughs, a loud cackle from his chest, and the child’s face puckers up, and it begins to cry. The woman bends down and scoops up the child who is pink, slippery, with spit bubbling in its mouth like a bath toy. The man tries to stop laughing and snorts through his nose, catching it in his throat.

“Here’s one,” she says. “A woman gets up in the middle of the night and notices that her husband isn’t in bed with her. She listens hard and thinks she hears a muffled sound coming from downstairs so she gets up and looks around. She still can’t find him, but when she stops and listens again, she can a moaning. So she goes down to the basement where the moaning is coming from and finds her husband, crouched on his hands and knees in a corner, crying. *What on earth is wrong*, the wife asks. The husband looks up at her with tears in his eyes. He says, *Remember when your father caught us having sex when you were sixteen? And remember when he said I had two choices: I could either marry you, or spend the next twenty years in prison*. Baffled, the wife nods, *Yes, I remember, so what?* The husband cries harder now and says, *I would have gotten out today. Clean.*”