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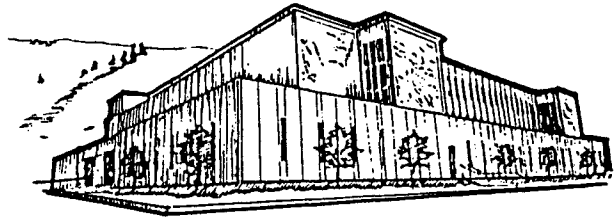
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**. CATCH AS CATCH CAN .**

**A Collection**

by

Donna L. Oetzel

B.A., Pomona College, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

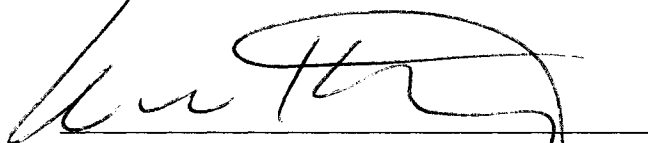
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing


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1994

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## SONGS OF FRANCE

When Bea was fifteen, she spent two weeks with a French family in the outskirts of Paris. The entire family spoke English, even the six-year-old boy, but not with Bea. She was supposed to be perfecting her French. When she hesitated over a word or phrase, Monsieur Munier clapped his hand against her back and shouted *Forte!*

Monsieur was deaf in his right ear. A minor wound, he said, a small sacrifice for France. He'd been with the cavalry, years ago, in the Moroccan desert. His uniform hung alongside winter coats in the hall closet, wrapped in plastic from the dry cleaner. He showed Bea his black riding boots, and draped the heavy cape around her shoulders. *Courage!* he said. *Courage!*

Madame Munier took Bea aside. She pointed to Monsieur and his boots, then tapped the side of her head with one finger. Bea stared. Madame tapped her head again, harder this time.

*Comprend?*

The Muniers had a daughter, Bea's age, whose name Bea could not pronounce. She smoked two packs of Marlboros a day. Her perfume was *Opium*. One evening she decided to try on Bea's clothes.

"*I am American*," she said, holding a pair of Bea's jeans up to her waist and smiling at the mirror. "*I am called Bea.*"

Next she reached for a skirt. From the corner of Bea's suitcase she unburied a cotton bra, new and white, with the tags still attached. "I am your sister," she said. "*Ta soeur Française.*" She smiled at Bea the way she had smiled at the mirror.

Monsieur scolded Bea at the dinner table for leaving the bathroom light on. Here in France, he told her, electricity wasn't cheap.

Monsieur's daughter nodded and lit another Marlboro. *Elle est très Américaine*, she said. *N'est-ce pas?*

Madame pretended not to stare at Bea's clumsy, American way of handling silverware.

Bea refused to eat rabbit or to taste *boudin*, a thick-skinned sausage that looked to her like a newly-formed scab.

She started riding the Métro alone into the city. When she found an empty seat, she sat sideways, facing the window, with her legs stretched out on the seat beside her. She listened to a cassette, *Songs of France*, on her Walkman.

*Oui, la vie, c'est l'amour*, sang Edith Piaf, *et l'amour, c'est la*



*vie.*

People stood behind Bea, waiting for her to turn around, to make room. Their reflections blurred in the window with billboards and tunnel walls, then disappeared.

She had a metro map and a pocket-sized Paris guidebook. From these she devised a list of destinations. In her journal she wrote down the gravestones of poets, the Café Flore and the Jardin de Luxembourg. She penciled in and crossed out the name of a restaurant that served only cheese. What would she remember in twenty years? What would she want to tell her children?

The morning she climbed the many steps of the Sacre-Coeur, she waited with other tourists while paramedics carried out an old man who had slipped and cracked his head in the entryway. The man was covered by a blanket. One of his arms slipped off the stretcher, and for a moment it hung there, beside a paramedic's uniformed leg, until someone noticed and put it back.

The tourists filed around the pool of the old man's blood and into the church.

In the courtyard below, Bea dropped coins in a juggler's hat. Bits of white and red fell from his painted face when he smiled. She sat with a group of children watching a puppet show, and drank an

orange soda. Later, she lied to the family and said she had been inside the Sacre-Coeur, and that she preferred it to Notre Dame.

It rained several days in a row, a warm, drizzling rain that coated her skin like sweat. She lingered for more than an hour in a bookstore one afternoon, finally buying six folders with elastic cords-- a kind she'd never seen in America-- and also a book for conjugating French verbs.

In the alley outside the store, a man grabbed her shoulder and pushed her up against a stone wall. Before she could scream he began shouting, or not shouting, but speaking rapid, forceful French and shaking her arm, which was hooked around the folders and the book of verbs.

Her glasses slipped down her nose, clattered onto the street, did not break.

Somewhere, out in front of the store, people were walking by, their shoes clicking on the pavement. Bea closed her eyes and jammed her fist into the man's neck.

When she opened her eyes again, he was bending down to retrieve her glasses. He held one hand in front of his face, protectively, and pointed to the folders under her arm. Finally she

understood: No, she said, not a thief, not a *voleuse*. She dug the receipt out of the pocket of her jeans, and he let her go.

That night at dinner Bea showed the family her purchases. The boy was delighted by the folders, and by the way she said "snap" when she demonstrated how the elastic worked. "Snap," he repeated, "snap, snap, snap." He began bouncing up and down in his chair. When he refused to stop, his mother ordered him upstairs to his room, where he continued to chant throughout the meal.

"It's okay," whispered the girl, the *soeur Francaise*.

Bea shook her head, no, and turned away.

Monsieur began to speak about the desert again, about the sand kicked up by horses and the dark *visages* of Moroccan soldiers.

"Shut up," said Madame, in English, and they finished eating in silence.

The Chatelet métro station, where she switched trains most days on her way home, was a city of its own, underground. She'd been warned about gypsies, knew to avoid groups of children and their small, cunning hands. Nearly every day she made a wrong turn in the maze of corridors and escalators and had to ask directions from

one of the vendors. They expected her to buy something in return -- a leather belt, earrings, or wire-thin bracelets she knew she would never wear. She bought them anyway, and she bought warm apricot tarts, two or three at a time, to eat on the train.

Two days before she was to leave France, while waiting by the Chatelet tracks, a man tapped her on the shoulder. His face was flushed, orange in the yellow station light: *Mademoiselle...excusez moi...votre jupe*. He pointed to her skirt, looked at her, then quickly away. She looked down, already embarrassed, and saw that her skirt had gotten caught up in the back, bunched up in ridiculous, flowered folds, exposing her.

She yanked the skirt back down, viciously, and heard it tear at the waistband. The right thing to do was laugh, she thought, be a good sport. She managed only to push a bit of air out of her lungs, the start of a giggle.

*Ca va, Ca va*, the man was saying, touching her gently on the arm. He leaned toward her, frowning, inspecting her, and she saw now that he was an old man. She closed her eyes, reached out as if to pull him closer, to reassure him. *It's O.K.*, he was saying now, in English, *It's O.K. It's nothing*.

He was blushing. She wanted to talk to him, to explain herself.

To tell him about the mispronunciations and the food she couldn't eat and the blood spilled outside the Sacre-Coeur. She wanted to tell him she'd been mostly alone for the first time in her life, and that though it was difficult to be alone, it was getting easier. If it had been possible to live that way for two weeks, then she knew it was possible for much longer, however long was necessary. She wanted to say that what frightened her was that loneliness could be managed, that it did not change the taste of apricot tarts.

But the train rushed in and shuddered to a stop, and the man was already moving away from her.

## THIEF

At the train station in Austin, Texas, Beth watched a man walk away with her suitcase. Beth had been in Austin for three days, visiting her daughter, Raye, who lived with three boys in a house near the university. One of these boys, whose name was either Luther or Kip, had driven Beth to the station. There had been a moment of confusion beside the ticket counter over the proper way to say goodbye. They settled finally on a cross between an embrace and a handshake, and the boy jogged off, pulling his baseball cap back on as he went. When Beth turned she saw her red suitcase moving across the lobby. It was balanced on the head of a man in a raincoat, heading for the door.

She expected to see another man, a man in a uniform or a three-piece suit, dash after him.

"Hey," she said, not loud enough, to a train official who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

Through the glass panels of the station, she saw the man in the raincoat board a waiting train. He looked ordinary, except that he was wearing a raincoat in Austin in the middle of August.

"Hey," she said again, louder this time. She ran out to the

platform and stepped up onto the train's metal stairs. She looked down at her feet and remembered that her tennis shoes were in the bottom of her suitcase, stuffed with dirty socks. The sandals she had on were handmade, an intricate criss-crossing of leather straps that she wore in spite of the painful welts they'd left the day before. It was hot, too hot for tennis shoes. Ninety-eight degrees and rising, the motel clerk had warned her. Too hot, Beth thought, to run the length of a train searching for a man in a raincoat. Even if she did find him, what would she do? He might be dangerous. He might have a gun. A gun stashed under a loose grey coat, she thought, and stepped down onto the platform.

A voice behind her said, "Excuse us."

Beth turned and leapt awkwardly to one side, making way for two identical, round-faced children, a large suitcase and a small, perspiring man.

"Grandma's," Beth said aloud, watching them mount the steps, and then, "Damn." The train had started to whine, hissing and rumbling as if in distress. It clanked and sighed and began sliding along the track. She looked at her watch: the train to Houston was scheduled to leave in just over an hour. She had credit cards, travelers checks, her driver's license -- she touched her handbag, for

reassurance. Walking back into the station, she made a mental checklist of the things she had packed, organizing and reorganizing them rapidly until she discovered two items she might regret.

One was a silk blouse, jade with pearl buttons, that she brought on this trip because Raye had said to bring something nice. The blouse was elegant. It turned Beth's grey eyes green. The other was a compact travel alarm. It wasn't valuable but it was round, silver, reliable, and she hadn't seen another like it.

In the lobby, a man sat slumped on one of the wooden benches, sleeping or maybe just not moving, his eyes closed. A small boy lay on his back on the floor, tapping his bare chest with one fist, humming in a lazy, broken monotone. It was the sort of day people moved through slowly. It made Beth think of swimming pools, the way concrete smelled when it was damp with chlorine. She was never athletic but when she was young she liked to play in the shallow ends of pools, somersaulting, holding tea parties, imagining a life underwater. Now she and Elsa Getz walked for twenty minutes four days a week, striding purposefully along sidewalks, their fists and elbows swinging in unison.

At the concession stand, Beth bought a newspaper and a soda. She drank two long swallows standing there at the counter. A man offered her a handful of peanuts from a plastic tube.



"I'm thirsty already," Beth said. She walked away and the man followed.

"Salt prevents heat stroke," he said.

Beth turned to look at him. "It raises your blood pressure." He was a tall man who stooped.

"I'm in excellent health," he said, patting his chest as if the gesture were some kind of proof.

Beth sat down on a bench and unfolded her newspaper.

"Are you coming or going?" he asked. He was standing close to Beth's bent head. She knew he was stooping even lower now. One of his shoe laces was untied.

"Going."

"You don't look like you're going far," he said. Beth could feel him waiting for her to look up. "No luggage?"

"My suitcase was stolen," Beth said, folding her newspaper again. It seemed the man was not going to go away.

"Stolen?" He tossed the last few peanuts into his mouth and sat down, rubbing his hands together to shake off the salt.

"Yes. A man walked away with my suitcase."

"Here? You saw him?"

"Just a few minutes ago. He left on a train."

The man sat back and looked at Beth.

"You don't believe me," Beth said. She had caught him off guard.

"What did he look like? Did you report it?"

Beth shook her head. Her feet were swollen and sweating. She wanted to take off her sandals and close her eyes. "I haven't time. I'm leaving for Houston." She looked at the large, brass clock above the ticket counter. "My train leaves in less than an hour."

"How long can it take to report a theft?"

The man was looking at her closely. He wasn't crazy, Beth decided. He wasn't a man who hung around stations bothering women.

"There will be questions, forms to fill out. They'll want me to stay. I need to get back to Houston."

"You won't have to stay, necessarily. They could stop that train right now. Stop it and search it and find your suitcase. Don't you want your things back?" The man leaned forward again, still looking at her. He seemed upset, as if it had been him, not her, that had been the victim of a crime.

"It was a small suitcase. Just a few clothes. Nothing valuable." Beth moved away from him a little. "It's really none of your

business."

The man smiled. He had a large space between his front teeth but otherwise it was a nice smile.

"Taylor Steinhart," he said, extending his hand. "Concerned citizen."

"Beth," she said, and shook his hand. She considered giving him her married name, to discourage him, but of course he wouldn't know the difference. Raye was always warning Beth about giving her name out, even over the phone.

"Just make up a name," Raye said, and when Beth said she wouldn't, Raye said, "Then don't give a name. You're a woman living alone. There are precautions." According to Raye, Beth was the only woman in America who left her car unlocked in the shopping mall parking lot.

"I'm not coming or going," Taylor Steinhart said, letting go of Beth's hand. "I'm waiting."

"You live in Austin?" Beth asked.

"My son is starting at the university this fall. At least I hope so." Taylor ran a hand across his head, leaving two clumps of hair standing straight up. "He was supposed to arrive on the two o'clock from Houston. He spends summers with his mother. You don't know any Steinharts, do you?"

Beth shook her head. She imagined a young Taylor Steinhart: skinny, stooped, wearing braces. He would be a basketball player, maybe, but not a star. What Vance used to call a team player. Long ago, Vance had plans to be a sportscaster, someone whose voice was recognized all over the country. A man like Howard Cosell made Vance moody and critical. Beth had teased him, told him he was too smart, told him he was going to have to learn how to talk dumb. Now she wondered if it wasn't part of the equation, all those little things that added up to the end of a marriage.

"My son is the type who misses trains. All his life, people will be waiting in stations and airports for Trent Steinhart. He takes after his mother." Taylor leaned back against the seat and looked over his shoulder, toward the trains.

He was not handsome, not by any stretch of the imagination. Not with that nose. But there was something in his profile, in his mouth and the clean-shaven line of his chin, that made Beth think that sometime, maybe just for a few years, he'd been successful with women. Vance had been the same way, with a reputation for charm. He had proposed to her on one knee, bending into the windstorm that lifted their red-checked picnic blanket, scattered sandwiches, and turned a bottle of red wine into her lap.

"My daughter is studying chemistry," Beth said, and shook her head at this, still surprised. "She lives with three boys whose names I can't keep straight. Raye calls it a platonic arrangement. She says living with girls can be difficult. She claims to be allergic to hairspray."

Raye had spent the summer working in a flour mill, a sprawling complex where they made and tested bread scientifically. Raye had explained yeast and enzymes to Beth. The air at the mill was filled with fine particles of flour, and Raye had worked in an airtight room, a room sealed off from dust. Each month, Vance sent checks from California, and Raye put these into a savings account. "You're the one he should be paying off," Raye said. "You're the one he walked out on."

Taylor had fallen silent beside Beth, twisting the empty peanut tube between his hands. The boy who had been humming on the floor was up now, spinning in slow circles across the lobby, arms stretched out to each side. Sweat was collecting on the bench beneath Beth's thighs and on the small of her back, soaking her cotton dress. Somewhere, in the compartment of a train, the man in the raincoat might be opening her suitcase, reaching in to sift through her folded clothes.

"He was wearing a raincoat," Beth said. "A suitcase thief. I wonder if this was his first, or if he does this all the time? Maybe he has some kind of psychosis. A luggage fetish?"

"He could be a professional, you know." Taylor sat up again. "Roaming from station to station, preying on innocent travelers -- where was that train going? He could have a stash somewhere, a warehouse full of lingerie and toiletries, travel guides..." Taylor gestured wildly at the thought of stockpiled, stolen goods. He stood up suddenly, and gave Beth a stern look. "We've got to report this. It's our duty."

Beth looked up at the clock. "My train --"

"You can take the next train. Make some phone calls. You can leave tomorrow, if that's what it takes. Have dinner with my son and I. You like Mexican food?"

"Yes," Beth said, standing now, her hands folded loosely at her waist. "But this isn't necessary. It's not worth putting anyone to trouble." She glanced back, over her shoulder. "Do you really think they would stop the train?"

"A crime has been committed. If that train goes over state lines, it'll be a federal crime. They'll call in the FBI."

"They will not," Beth said, starting to laugh. "The FBI?" She wondered if the man had discovered the clock yet, between the folds

of her linen skirt. If he had lifted it to his ear, to hear its gentle ticking, the sound that had lulled her to sleep in strange motel rooms.

"I'll tell you what," Taylor said. He had his hands on his hips and was standing tall, now, not stooping, his chin thrust forward. "There's a pay phone, right over there" -- he gestured toward the back wall of the lobby -- "and you can call whoever you need to call. I'll see about the rest. What color is your suitcase? We'll get it back."

"Red." Beth let her arms fall to her sides. "It's a small, red suitcase."

"Right," Taylor said, and he was off, striding toward the information desk.

Beth stood and watched him as he slapped both hands down on the counter. She backed away slowly, clutching her handbag. He turned and smiled at her, a confident smile, and waved her toward the telephones. She waved back, nodding yes, turning toward the back wall.

The train to Houston was on track two, humming while passengers struggled up the steps, luggage in tow. Beth stood by the double glass doors, breathing the smell of trains. The whistle blew with the shrill, desperate sound of a promise. She turned once more

to look at Taylor Steinhart, at his determined stance, his shoulders rising and falling with the the hopeful motions of his hands. She hurried out to board her train.



## INDIA

Kevin stopped in at the Second Street Deli two or three times a day. He'd gotten to know the owner, a woman named Maya. He liked her. He wanted to ask Maya to dinner. He'd been thinking about driving all three of them-- himself and Maya and Raj, Maya's six-year-old son-- to San Francisco for some crab legs and a walk along Pier 39.

Monday morning, when he pulled into the parking lot at 6:15, the Second Street Deli was closed. No sign of Maya. The neon *espresso* sign, the beer advertisements, all the lights were off. Kevin had figured she'd be there already, preparing to open at 6:30. He'd planned on tapping on the front window, convincing her to unlock the door. He thought they'd have time to talk. She would pour him a cup of coffee in one of the blue ceramic mugs she kept for regular customers, and Kevin would offer her an invitation, a drive to the city, a view of the sunset on the bay.

Now Kevin had no choice but to sit in his car and wait. This disappointment, as slight as it was, caught him off guard. He turned on his radio, searched for the morning news. On the low end of the dial, a reporter was talking about the oil spill up north. Volunteers were trying to save the seals. They were bathing ducks and seagulls,

cleaning their feathers with Q-tip swabs. The reporter's voice faded in and out of static. Kevin glanced through his open window at the broken antenna. He'd been meaning to get that antenna fixed.

At 6:25 he got out of the car and walked to the stucco building across the street. The signs on these storefronts stated their purpose, nothing more. *Dry Cleaning, Donuts, Shoe Repair, Liquor.* Kevin had never seen customers walk in or out of their doors. The owners leaned against the stained white walls in the afternoon, smoking imported cigarettes, staring at the street. They were Morroccans, according to Maya. They missed home.

Kevin found someone in the donut shop, a teenaged kid, who shrugged when Kevin pointed out the dark windows across the street. The kid didn't know who Maya was.

At 6:56, the Deli's *Open* sign flickered on. At 6:58, Kevin pushed through the swinging glass door. Inside, it smelled like just-brewed coffee, stale smoke, and something else, spice or perfume, that Kevin had never been able to identify. It took him a moment to locate Maya in the dark interior. She was sitting down at the end of the counter, counting change. Beside her was the ledger, filled with rows of numbers, the profits and losses she used to measure each day.

“Well, good morning,” she said, lifting her head. The sweater tied over her shoulders came loose and started to slide down her back. She caught it easily, with a swift jab of her left hand. “You’re an early bird today.”

The boy, Raj, was cleaning the pastry display case , using both hands to work a spray bottle. He watched Kevin walk over to the coffee maker. Kevin stared back at him. He stuck out his tongue, trying for a smile. The boy’s eyes widened for an instant, then turned resolutely back to the case. Beneath the Windex streaks were blueberry muffins, croissants and scones, twists full of cinnamon and sugar.

“No bear claws today?” Kevin asked. He could feel himself slipping into the normal routine. Losing momentum.

“Why don’t you try a muffin,” Maya said. She’d come around the counter, behind the cash register. Her eyes were identical to her son’s, black and wide. The ash-colored circles beneath them gave her face a somber look. When she smiled, the look dropped away, and Kevin found himself at a loss for words. He’d been caught off guard again.

He handed Maya his money. She handed him his muffin, wrapped in wax paper, and Kevin headed out the door, off to another work day.

Six months ago, Kevin was living in Portland, Oregon, tending bar at a tavern called the Brig. He had no plans to move. He had few plans of any kind. He was making a decent amount of money, by Portland standards, painting houses on the weekends with his friend Tom. One rainy Saturday night he came home and found his ex-girlfriend waiting for him in his apartment. She still had her key. Her name was Monica Hansen, and she'd been living in California for the past year, housesitting for an ex-diplomat in Mill Valley. She wanted to know what Kevin thought about California. How would he like to take a drive, check it out? Monica's voice was the same as ever, deep like a man's, full of confidence.

She told him not to worry about work. She said something would come along, sooner or later, and it would pay more than he'd been making in Portland. So he stayed in the ex-diplomat's house for a month, making phone calls and writing cover letters. He kept the place spotlessly clean and spent hours just driving along Highway 101, to Tiburon and Sausalito, or north to Sebastopol, all the way to Geyserville. Monica was commuting into San Francisco every day. She worked at the French Consulate, checking passport photos, stamping visas. She came home after ten-hour days to find Kevin

whistling in the kitchen, making dinner.

Kevin was taking a tuna casserole out of the oven when Monica said, "I'm sorry." She put one hand on his back and used the other to slam the oven door shut. "You're starting to get on my nerves."

Monica became his ex-girlfriend for the second time. The diplomat phoned from Senagal to say he was coming home. Kevin's life in California evaporated.

He considered moving back to Portland. Packing his car again, shipping the same things in the same boxes, trying to get his job back. But where was the point in that? He'd abandoned everything he'd built for himself in Portland on the spur of the moment, for a woman he'd known to be as predictable as a flash flood.

He moved again, this time to the east bay, to Oakland, where rent was cheaper. He signed up with a temporary agency. After sending him on series of short, miserable jobs -- including a week on the night shift at a warehouse, unpacking boxes of women's jeans -- the agency hired him for a permanent position in their Fremont office.

At 8:08, Kevin stepped out of the elevator on the third floor of the

Kepler building. Before he sat down at his desk he took his jacket off, knowing he would put it on again when the air conditioning kicked in. He spent his days taking off and putting on his jacket in response to the vent above his desk. When it clicked and hummed he sat back, waiting for the chill to filter down. Particles of cold, like dust or light, slipped under his collar and down his spine.

From the window beside him, he watched cars pull into the parking lot and people hurry toward the building, glancing at their watches. Sunlight glared from rows of windshields. By the time he left the building for lunch, it would be close to a hundred degrees out there. He imagined Maya, in her sleeveless t-shirt and Levis, turning on the fan above the lunch counter. An old-fashioned fan, with adjustable speeds, that hummed along in the background.

Kevin tried to get the air-conditioning in his office fixed. His supervisor told him to talk to Maintenance. Maintenance was in the mail room: two men in green overalls, sitting on a counter, laughing, speaking Spanish.

"I'm new here," he told them.

They nodded, still laughing.

"I work next to Lydia Walker." He gestured behind him, to where he thought his cubicle was, beyond the wall and the copy

room. "There's a problem with the air conditioning."

"Problem," one of them repeated, and nodded, waiting.

"There's a vent above my desk." Kevin looked up at the ceiling. They looked at it too, then at each other, and at him. "I get cold," Kevin said.

They stared at him, still waiting. Kevin had the feeling they were only pretending not to understand. He was not going to resort to hand gestures.

"The air conditioning," he said again, slower this time. "It makes me cold."

"Yes," said the same one who had spoken before. His name, according to the tag on his overalls, was Manny.

"Is there a way to turn it down the temperature?" Kevin asked Manny. "Is it possible to warm up this place a bit? Have you noticed that it's summer outside and winter in this office building? It's a little crazy, don't you think?"

"Yes," Manny said.

"Will you? Turn down the temperature, I mean? I'd like you to turn it down, please."

The two men conferred in Spanish. Manny pointed at the ceiling, then turned to him and said, slowly, "What seems to be the

problem?" He sounded, Kevin thought, like a repairman on a television commercial.

"Never mind," Kevin said. "I just -- never mind. Don't worry."

He backed toward the door, waving his hands before his face, erasing the whole encounter.

Most of his time on the job was spent interviewing perspective employees over the phone. He asked them questions and filled in their answers on a form, then put the forms into three piles: Yes, Maybe, and No. When he had enough filled-in forms, he created a file on the computer for each one, and entered the information into the computer. He gave the Yeses and Maybes to Lydia Walker. He stored the Nos in a file marked "To Be Scheduled."

Lydia talked to him through the wall separating their cubicles. She typed faster than he did, and she could talk while she typed. On her way to the soda machine or the restroom, she stopped in and peered over his shoulder at his computer screen to tell him what he was forgetting to do. "If I'm bugging you, just tell me to go away," she said.

When she asked Kevin for advice about her wedding, which was scheduled for August, Kevin said, "I don't think I'm the right person



to ask."

Today Lydia bought jelly donuts on her way to work, one for her and one for him. Kevin thanked her and waited for her to walk away. He wrapped the napkin carefully around the donut and put it in the garbage.

Lydia called to him from her cubicle, "How was your donut, Kevin?"

"It was good," he said.

"Do you want to go to lunch today?" Lydia asked. "Dim Sum? There's a group of us going."

"I've got plans," Kevin said.

"You've always got plans," Lydia said.

Kevin mentioned the air conditioning to his supervisor again. "Maybe I could move to a different cubicle," he said. His supervisor told him he'd have to talk to Human Resources.

Their office, on the second floor, looked like someone's living room. There were curtains on the windows, instead of blinds. Pat Cornell, Human Resources Manager, shook his hand. Her skin was soft and cool. She invited him into her inner office.

"What seems to be the problem, Kevin?" She smiled, and looked into his eyes.

"I want to move to a different cubicle."

"Oh?" She smiled again.

"There's a broken air conditioning vent above my desk. "

"Have you talked to Maintenance?"

"Yes. I tried. I don't think they--" Kevin shifted in his chair. He didn't want to get into it. He felt a little foolish, now, the way this thing had turned into a production. "I think it would just be easier if I moved."

Pat looked down at her hands, which were lying, one on top of the other, over the blotter on her desk. "I see. There's no other problem, nothing else that bothers you?"

"No, I don't think so. I've been wearing a wool sweater under my jacket. It's not very professional."

"Who are your neighbors, Kevin? Do you you get along?"

He stared at her. "My neighbors? You mean my cubicle neighbors? Lydia? Lydia and I get along fine. She talks a lot, but that's not--" He stopped. Pat Cornell seemed to want him to say something different. Something better than this. "I don't think you understand. It's summer. Drastic temperature change is bad for the heart." His laugh came out like a nervous cough.

"You look a little young to be worrying about heart attacks,

Kevin." She smiled and looked into his eyes again. She didn't believe him.

Believe me, he thought, looking back at her.

She reached her hand toward him across the desk and tapped twice, gently, with her fingers. "I'd like you to attend our next Employee Relations Seminar." She flipped through her calendar. "They're really a lot of fun. Let's see, there's one at the beginning of next month. How would you feel about that, Kevin?"

"O.K.," he said, rising from his chair. "Fine, thank you. That would be fine."

At noon, Kevin transferred his phone to the receptionist and left the building. Lydia and some of his other co-workers were gathered on the strip of grass by the front doors, organizing for Chinese food.

He started up his car, ready to head for the Deli. He turned right, and then, on impulse, took another right, toward the man-made lake and the golf course. He had time. He needed to think. Maya would still be there, thirty minutes from now. She'd been making sandwiches, letting Raj help her spread the mayo when no one was looking.

Down by the man-made lake, picnickers were spreading their blankets on the grassy shore. Kevin made another impulse turn. He passed the lake and curved back around the base of the hills, through a condominium complex. At the end of the complex, there was a highway sign, and the road veered suddenly to the right. Kevin slowed, reached across to open the passenger side window, and sped back up again.

The two-lane highway wound up between steep, treeless slopes. Kevin could see nothing but dry grass, blue sky, and the road before him. About ten minutes up the hill, a pick-up truck pulled in behind him, blaring heavy metal music out its open windows. The three boys in the front were high school-aged, smoking cigarettes, probably cutting school for the day. They had a six-pack or two with them, Kevin thought, and a joint, and somewhere up here there was an old tree or a hill with a view. In Eugene, where Kevin grew up, they used to hang out in a park on the outskirts of town, where the cops never bothered to check.

He pulled over into a gravel turn-out to let them pass, and got the full effect of the music a moment later. All three of them waved. The driver shouted "Fuck you!" as the truck disappeared around the bend. Kevin turned off his engine, listening to the echo of the beat die out. He stuck his head out the window. Now the only sound was

the chirp of a lone insect on the slope beside him. An abandoned car sat on the other side of the road, rusting from the inside out. What kind of people, he wondered, abandon their cars? Did they just walk away and leave them there? He turned his head sideways and watched a hawk glide across the sky. On the other hand, what kind of people kept their cars and abandoned their lives? All over the world, every day, people packed their belongings into boxes. They quit their jobs, filed for divorce. They moved on.

Kevin felt dizzy, suddenly, and thirsty. He glanced at his watch.  
12:34.

Kevin's eyes took awhile to adjust to the light, once he was inside the store. What he saw first was the boy, Raj, stretched out on his stomach in a rectangle of sunlight. He looked up at Kevin for a moment, staring, his small mouth hanging open, and then turned back to his coloring book. He selected a color from the crayons lined up on the linoleum beside him, gripped it in his fist, and bit his lip. His movements -- the way he pressed down on the paper, bouncing the toe of his shoe on the floor -- seemed familiar. Kevin thought that he might have colored just that way, on his stomach in summer, when he was young. He moved toward the back of the store, thinking of

India.

Most of what he knew he'd heard from Tom, back in Portland. Tom had traveled there two or three years ago. He said it was the only place he'd ever been that he would never go back to. He spent three weeks on a filthy train, jerking through one crowded town after the next, two and a half of them so sick he could barely make it to the bathroom.

Kevin pictured the train, an aerial view: a black line winding through the gold desert, the glint of the sun, a village in the distance where commotion kicks up, sand in a dust storm, as the train arrives. As a passenger, looking out the train window, Kevin stares into a sea of faces, bodies draped with white cloth. Hands reach up, extending toward him. He catches a glimpse of Maya's face moving through the crowd. She steps into the sunlight, looks up at him, nods, and disappears. She keeps appearing and disappearing, sunlight to shade, sunlight to shade, until the train pulls out of the station.

## JUNK MAIL

When Michael moved into the studio next to Kate's, he dragged his couch from the elevator to his front door. Kate leaned her head out her doorway to complain about the noise.

"There's no way you're going to get that in there by yourself," she said.

They turned it sideways and maneuvered it through the door. She dropped her end in the entrance way and it sprang open, pinning them both against opposite walls.

"It folds out into a bed," Michael said, trying to breathe.

Kate wrenched her left thigh from behind the couch and gave him what she hoped was a long, hard look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Huh?" He was turned halfway around, bending from the waist, straining to get a hip-level look at the wall, where the couch's leg had drawn a jagged, six-inch "Z" in the fresh paint.

Kate decided he looked more like a nerd than a pervert. "You'll get charged for that," she said. "Griggs is a creep."

"Who?"

"The landlord."

"What kind of creep?" They were shoving the couch back together, sliding it along the linoleum.

"You know, a creep. Mentally unstable."

"He seemed pretty normal." Michael was on his knees now, pushing from behind.

"Oh, sure. He's got to, until you sign the lease. Then he turns weird." She gave the couch a final tug out of the hallway and it collapsed upside down onto the carpet, snapping shut with a low whine.

"God, do you realize you're going to have to get this thing *out* of here someday?"

Michael raised his face from the floor to look at her.

"Well, it's a fact, right? Unless you plan on living here forever. Now *there's* a depressing thought."

"Why do you live here, if it's so awful?"

"I didn't say it was awful." Kate watched Michael gather himself up and lean cross-legged against the wall. "It's cheap, as far as L.A. goes. Are you from here?"

"Pasadena."

"Born and raised?"

"Born and raised."



"And you're still here? You're lungs must be dying. Did you go away for college or something?"

"I've never been out of Southern California."

"Never lived, you mean."

"I mean never been."

"No way."

"O.K., once. To San Francisco."

"That's it?"

"I was four."

"No way."

"Yes way."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Kate paused to examine him in light of this news. His plaid shirt was buttoned up to his chin.

"When I was your age, all I wanted to do was travel. Don't you want to go across the border, at least? It's not far, you know. A whole country.

"How old are you now, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Twenty-six."

"You've settled down then, I guess?" He was still on the floor, looking up at her.

"Don't be sarcastic. You're the sarcastic type, aren't you? I should have guessed. Actually, I'm saving up for South America. Or Africa. I haven't decided yet."

"What do you do? To make money, I mean?"

"I'm a waitress." She bent down to fix him with a level stare. "Vic's 24-hour restaurant, midnight-to-six shift. Mostly I serve burgers and eggs." She lowered her voice dramatically. "Incognito."

It took Kate two weeks to convince Michael to come into Vic's. She was taking an order when he walked in. She pretended not to see him. He was carrying a newspaper under his arm, looking anxious.

"Be right with you, Monsieur," Lauren called out from behind the cash register. Lauren was the other waitress on Kate's shift. She had been trying out a French accent lately. If people thought she was from France, she said, they tipped better.

Kate stopped by the register on her way to the kitchen. "Put that guy in my section. He's cute."

Lauren gave her a blank look.

"The guy who just came in. My section, O.K.?"

Lauren turned to look at Michael and shrugged. "Whatever

you say." She grabbed a menu and motioned to Michael. "This way," she said, dropping the accent. She led him to a booth in the back.

"Enjoy your meal."

Kate brought ice water to his table a moment later.

"I'm not supposed to do this," she said, setting it down. "You're supposed to ask. The drought, you know. But I figured you'd ask."

"Listen, Kate, I -- "

"Shh," Kate hissed furiously. She pointed to the name tag pinned to the front of her baby blue polyester mid-thigh length uniform. *Gail* was printed in block baby blue letters.

Michael was staring at her. "This is too much."

"Just pretend like you don't know me."

"I don't."

"Yes you do."

"I met you two weeks ago. You dropped my couch, remember?"

"I was *helping* you *carry* your couch. I'm your *neighbor*, remember?"

"Look, just bring me a cheeseburger, O.K.? And ketchup?"

"Okay. "

Kate turned and walked toward the kitchen. Lauren was

hanging out at the salad station, flirting with the prep cook, when Kate put her order up.

"It's not so hard," Manny was saying modestly, his knife poised over a tomato. "You learn little tricks, you know?"

"Hey Lauren," Kate said, motioning her over to the order wheel.

"What?"

Manny was delicately slicing into the skin of the tomato. "The mistake most people make, see, is that they press down."

"Can I talk to you for a minute, please?"

Lauren placed her hand gently on Manny's arm and smiled.

"I'll be right back."

"Do me a favor? It'll just take a second." Kate pressed a fistful of quarters into Lauren's palm. "Play number 147 on the juke box as many times as you can."

"Are you going to tell me why?"

"Someday."

Lauren sighed and pushed through the kitchen's swinging doors.

Number 147 was Patsy Cline's "Crazy." By the time Michael finished his cheeseburger, it had played fourteen times.

Michael's other neighbor was a small, asthmatic man who worked for the phone company. He wheezed all through the night. Michael began to have recurring dreams that he was in Mexico, choking on a chicken wing.

"I'm no architect, but I don't see why they can't build all the floors the same. The Peterson's toilet is right above my kitchen. Every time I stand in my kitchen -- that's all there's room to do in there, is stand -- I keep wondering when they're going to flush."

Kate and Michael were on speaking terms again.

"That's apartment life, I guess," Michael said, pouring Coke into two, plastic cups. "Do you want ice?"

"If I designed a building, I'd put the studios on top of studios, the one-bedrooms on top of one-bedrooms...just stack them up, you know, like building blocks."

"Not very imaginative."

"I'm talking logic, here. Not imaginative -- livable." Kate was scanning the titles in Michael's tape collection. "I don't need to know that Mr. Peterson is taking a pee while I'm cooking my dinner."

"Or Mrs. Peterson, for that matter, right?"

"I see you have some Patsy Cline here."

"That's not funny."

"What's this?" Kate held up cassette labeled in purple ink.

"Love from Kristy," she read, and gave him an amused look. "The plot thickens. Who's Kristy?"

Michael took the tape from her and put it back in the case.

"My girlfriend."

"You never mentioned a girlfriend before."

"It's not like I've known you for years, you know."

"I'm not asking you for details about your sex life."

"She's in Michigan. In graduate school. I hope you like ice."

Kate took the cup from him and sipped thoughtfully. "So how come you aren't with her?"

"I've got to work. Make a career for myself, climb my way to the top, that kind of thing."

"You're a file clerk."

"You've got to start somewhere."

"So, be a file clerk in Michigan."

"I've got connections here."

"How many connections does it take to be a file clerk?"

"I've never been to Michigan."

"You've never been anywhere."

"I'm comfortable here. I know my way around."

"You could visit her, at least."

"I'm no good at travel. I wouldn't know what to pack."

"That's ridiculous."

"I know." Michael poked at an icecube in his cup and watched it bob back up in a stream of fizz.

"That's O.K. I cancelled my wedding because I couldn't make it up the aisle. Six rehearsal walks and I tripped every time."

"No way."

"Well, it might have been psychological. I wasn't even wearing the dress."

"What happened to the groom?"

"He got married. To somebody else."

"Oh."

"He was kind of a creep."

"Mentally unstable?"

"No, just your basic creep. Your normal, everyday, garden variety creep."

There were days, walking home from the store or the movies, when Kate tried to develop x-ray vision. She kept her eyes on the sidewalk and thought, "When I reach the corner, I'm going to look up

and see right through the walls of my building." The tenants, believing it was a day like any other day, would be walking from room to room, eating sandwiches, talking on the telephone. Someone would get up to look out the window and she, with her x-ray vision, would have to laugh.

"I think someone's been stealing my mail."

"Griggs," Kate said matter-of-factly. She was pulling her hair back, getting ready for work. "What did I tell you?"

"Our landlord is a mail thief?"

"Hand me that, will you?"

Michael picked up a wadded up hairnet and handed it over.

"Ugh. You have to wear that thing?"

"You're not missing letters or bank statements or anything, are you?"

"No. Just...I don't know. Junk mail, I guess."

"Our landlord's a second-class mail thief."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Who else has a master key to the mailboxes?"

"What do you think he does with it all?"

"I don't know." Kate dabbed on some lipstick and wiped most of



it onto a Kleenex. "I'll bet he has enough free samples to last him years."

Michael's parents kept calling him to see how he was getting along in the real world. He told them he lived next to a nice man from the phone company and a waitress named Gail.

"Do you think he could cut us a deal on our local long distance?" his father wanted to know.

"Your grandmother's going to Mexico," his mother said. "Can you believe it? She's going to end up with diarrhea. And at her age."

Mr. and Mrs. Peterson had an argument one night while Kate was still home. She couldn't understand most of it, but a few words came through Kate's ceiling clearly. Later, at work, she repeated the words to herself: *garbage! cake! point!* She wondered if Michael had heard them, too.

It was Michael's idea to have dim sum in Chinatown on the Fourth of July. "This is better than being on the beach, isn't it? I've never been a fan of watermelon."

"I guess that's what most people do, huh?" Kate swallowed the

last of a potsticker. "Picnics?"

"Didn't you, when you were a kid.?"

"Sure. That was in Oregon, though. The beaches were usually fogged in."

"Better fog than smog."

"What are your parents doing?"

"They're at Venice. Watching the muscle builders, I guess. I said I'd take a raincheck."

"Two of those," Kate said as the cart came by, pointing to something wrapped in seaweed.

"It's too bad you have to work tonight. You should get holidays off."

"Somebody's got to feed the starving firework watchers."

"I've been meaning to ask you," Michael said, waving steam away from his face. "Why do you work such weird hours? Won't they let you change shifts?"

"I haven't asked."

"You must be a night person."

"Gail's a night person."

"And a Patsy Cline fanatic?"

"Yes. Gail is the sort of person who will never get tired of working in a twenty-four restaurant. She is patient with teenagers

and drunks. She jokes around with truck drivers. She sympathizes with parents on family vacations. She listens to the stories that lonely people tell her. When it rains, she gets wistful, and she plays "Crazy" on the juke box."

"And she keeps everyone's coffee cup full."

"Yes."

"What will Gail do when Kate goes to South America?"

"She's not worried. Gail will always get by, somehow. That's her job."

On the fifth of July, Michael found an envelope in his mailbox marked "First Class Mail." It was a list of dates and plane fares from Los Angeles to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

"This definitely counts as meddling in other people's affairs, wouldn't you say?"

"Meddling is under-rated. You want to see her, don't you?"

"That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The point is that I break into a cold sweat after driving ten miles on the freeway. And that I have to deal with it."

"You don't have to drive anywhere. All you have to do is sit in

a cozy blue chair for a few hours and drink gingerale."

"Well I can't do that."

"Yes you can."

"Why didn't you get married?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not."

"It's complicated. I was afraid, I guess. I didn't want to get stuck. With him. Or myself. I don't know."

"Are you glad? That you didn't, I mean?"

"I don't know."

Michael smoothed out a tuft of shag in the rug with his toe.

"I really don't." She glanced at her watch. "And I have to go."

"Where?"

Kate grabbed her uniform from the back of a chair and stuffed it into her backpack. "Lauren and Manny are going to a French film tonight. Their first date. Lauren switched shifts with Maggie, and Maggie asked me to sub. Which means I'm working a double shift, *sans* prep cook. And I'm late."

When Kate walked into the building at six-thirty the next morning, a small group of tenants was standing around the lobby.

Most of them were wearing robes and slippers and talking in low voices. A policeman was talking to the phone company man. Mrs. Peterson spotted Kate and hurried over, holding her pink, quilted robe closed at the neck.

"Something terrible has happened," she said as soon as she was close enough to whisper and be heard. "They took Mr. Grigg's away in an ambulance."

"Mr. Griggs?"

"The landlord, dear. They think he was mugged. Right outside the lobby door. He has head injuries."

Mr. Peterson had come over to join his wife. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Come on, now, it's nothing that serious. A minor concussion. Some scrapes and bruises."

He smiled at Kate. "Your neighbor was the one that found him," he said. "That new boy, what's his name?"

"Michael?" She knocked again, waited, and knocked again.

"Michael?"

He was holding a cup of coffee when he opened the door. "Do you want some? I made a whole pot."

"No thanks."

"I called the police," he said.

"I know."

"They got here very fast." He walked over to the folded out couch and sat on its edge. It was the first time Kate had seen it like this. She stood still in the middle of the room and looked at the white sheets tucked neatly into the metal frame. "He should be O.K.," Michael said after a moment.

"The thief got mugged. Pretty weird, huh?"

"Don't say that. He could be dying, you know."

"I thought you said he would be O.K.?"

"I said *should*. Anything could happen."

"But it probably won't. He will probably, very probably, be O.K."

"Maybe."

Kate nodded. "Maybe-probably we could go for a walk."

"That's a good idea. Get some air." He stayed on the bed, looking out the window.

"Are you coming?"

"I think I'll stay here."

"Come on. Let's walk around the block or something. I'll buy you a bagel at the deli."

"No."

She could hear him breathing, and water dripping in the sink.

"O.K," she said. She walked over to the opposite side of the bed and sat on its edge. They stopped talking and stayed that way, back to back, looking out the window.

## BACKSTROKE

By my tenth year, my mother had decided: I was going to swim in the Olympics. The careers of my past -- concert pianist, tap dancer, poet -- were dismissed as false starts. I was tall, square-jawed, long-limbed, built for underwater ease.

I had talent. So did my sister, Joan. This was my mother's conviction, and for years we had been enrolled in lessons of one kind or the other, searching for our true calling. One warm, spring afternoon my mother watched me glide past David Hicks and Elise Eichholz to an easy victory at the public pool.

"I don't know why I never thought of it," my mother said in the car on the way home. "Your father was a swimmer, you know."

I didn't know. My father had a beard. He sang on the low end of the St. Mark's choir.

"He never took it seriously. He had medical school, of course. That took all his serious time."

I watched her face. She was making plans.

"At your age, you can devote yourself to something. Cultivate your ability."

"There's a swim team," I offered. "At the high school."



She looked over at me. "Is that something you'd like to do?"

I turned to look out the window. The plum trees were in bloom, patterning sidewalks and lawns with petals.

"I beat David and Elise," I said.

Four things happened in June. Joan got the part of Titania in a children's theater production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. My grandmother bought a car. My mother slipped on the back porch steps and broke her ankle. I joined the swim team.

No one was surprised about my mother. It was the sort of thing that happened to her. She bumped into things, tripped easily; dropped things and picked them up in the same motion, all as if it were necessary and expected. Joan and I dedicated some time with Magic Markers to her cast, each of us filling a side, until Joan's New York skyline collided with my coral reef. After a few days on the couch, her leg propped up on velour pillows, my mother was up and about again, moving through the house on crutches as if she'd been using them all her life.

My grandmother took up the task of shuttling Joan and I to our summer activities. She had a house of her own, three houses down from ours, that she bought when my grandfather died and she

decided to move from Virginia to California. She slept in that house. The rest of her time belonged to us.

The car was a 1966 Ford Mustang convertible, advertised in the classifieds. My grandmother let it sit for two days in the driveway with the windows down. She hung rosary beads from the rearview mirror. Joan and I helped her wipe down the black upholstery and wax the exterior. It had been painted a peculiar, dull shade that my grandmother called gold. Joan said it was silver and gold at the same time. It was the color of a shell I had found on the beach one summer and kept in a drawer full of small, useless things.

She liked to drive slowly with the top down, both hands on the steering wheel. When she parked she took up two spaces, so she could swing the doors wide open. Before sliding out of the low-slung seat she would dangle her legs over the pavement, adjusting her slip and the pins in her white hair. She wore different colors of the same cotton dress and a knit cardigan, even on the hottest days. She smelled like church -- of candles, dust, and cedar pews. Her favorite time for a drive was evening, while it was still light and warm and the crickets were starting up. One evenings, she took me to the creek that ran through the golf course and behind the high school into a wide ditch filled with cat tails called the swamp. I filled a mason jar with brown water, scum, and fourteen tadpoles.

"Watch them closely," my grandmother said. "Blink, and you'll have fourteen frogs."

I didn't believe her, until the morning I woke up and realized six of my tadpoles had legs and shrunken tails. Then I began to spend evenings monitoring the tank. I wanted to catch the moment when the signs of growth appeared; when the toes, impossibly small, reached out and pulled through the water for the first time. One tadpole sunk down to the silt at the bottom and stayed there until I had given him up for dead. He was one of the few that survived. I called him Lazarus.

Joan had just turned fourteen. She could break into tears at any moment for no reason at all. She would go through periods of ignoring me, then come back around, usually apologetic, sometimes outright mean. She started pacing the hall between our rooms at night, practicing her lines, occasionally poking her head in my door to announce fairy rituals and moonlight revels. I was forced to ward off thorny hedgehogs, newts and blind-worms, and to gather musk-roses from the forest floor. On one occasion she convinced my father to take the part of Oberon, and for days after we'd be waiting at the door when he came home from the hospital, to announce the arrival of the King of Fairies and his Train.

Five days a week, I dove into the clear blue lane of an Olympic-sized pool and raced the clock. Breast stroke was like breathing. Butterfly did not come as naturally, but it didn't come naturally to anyone. I managed its strange rhythm well enough. I could take girls two or three years older in the face-down crawl, and most of the boys my age. It was backstroke that gave me trouble. I could have competed in medleys if it weren't for those two laps. On my back, I had no sense of time. Three quarters of the way across the pool I would start reaching back, feeling for the wall. I knew if I were doing it right, I should have one arm extended at all times, and that this would prevent a head-on collision. Still, I couldn't help dipping my head back into the water, looking behind me. I'd end up with a nose full of chlorine and come up sputtering, treading water.

If I glanced up I could see my grandmother, sitting high up in the bleachers. Unlike my mother, she did not drop me off and pick me up later. She stayed there, without books or magazines, until I came up to stretch out beside her and drip dry. Once I asked her what she'd been doing all that time, two hours, sitting in the sun.

"Waiting," she said. She twisted my wet towel tight in her hands and snapped it above my stomach.

"Boys do that," I said, squinting at her.

"Boys will," she said, squinting back.

"You could put someone's eye out."

"That would be a shame," she admitted. "Have you ever seen an eye put out?"

"Have you?" I sat up.

"Dozens." She shook her head. "I stepped on a put-out eye once, if you must know. It rolled right under the tip of my shoe."

"How did it sound?"

"How do you think?"

"Splat?"

"Of course." She lifted her foot and brought it down, hard.

"Splat."

We stopped at Baskin Robbins for ice cream cones and took them on the road. The children's theater was across town, which meant we had to take the freeway to pick up Joan. We passed neon signs, strange in the daylight, and grey warehouses. They were places I never saw, except from the freeway. It was like passing by a different city. The bay wasn't visible but I knew it was there, a finger of water reaching down the Peninsula from San Francisco and the open Pacific. I sat in the back, gripping the cone with my knees, and held my hands high in the wind.

"You'll fly out," my grandmother yelled back at me.

"No I won't."

"You will."

"What if I do?" I leaned forward and propped my elbows on the back of her seat. Strands of my hair whipped both of our faces.

"We'll have to peel you off someone's windshield."

Joan was waiting for us on the lawn, draped in polyester.

"Took you long enough," she said, settling into the front seat. Her hairline was tinted green. Traces of blue shimmered on her neck and the backs of her hands. She inspected herself in the rearview, hooking one finger around its metal base.

"What happened?" She asked.

"What do you mean?" I caught her eye in the reflection.

"The beads," she said, turning the mirror back toward my grandmother. "Did you take them down?"

I got down on my knees between the seats, feeling around underneath. I found six pennies and a quarter, used Kleenex, a unopened pack of spearmint gum, and a Swiss army knife.

"Didn't you notice?" Joan said, rolling her eyes at me. "Are you blind?"

"The world," my mother said, is a petty place." She was tossing

salad, tearing lettuce leaves with her fingers. "People take things because they can be taken."

Across the table, my grandmother cleared her throat. She believed the theft had been a blasphemous act. A minor, misguided, blasphemous act.

"Joan's sweater was in the car," I said. "They didn't take that."

My mother took a swallow of wine and passed the salad to Joan. "Do they stop to think about who they're stealing from?" She shook her head. "No. It doesn't even cross their minds."

"It was kids," Joan said. She was slumped backed in her chair, tracing her fork through a mound of mashed potatoes. "High school kids. Fooling around."

"That's it, exactly. 'Fooling around.' It's doing careless, foolish things. Not thinking."

Joan nudged my foot with hers and wrinkled her nose. We'd heard this before.

My father looked at us both and raised his eyebrows. His head was turned slightly to the side. He ate that way, sliding forkfuls into the side of his mouth so they wouldn't catch on his beard.

"How can you be sure it wasn't a deliberate act?" My grandmother asked.

"We're talking about a cheap strand of beads, Mama."

"They're more than that."

"To us," my mother said. She put down her fork. "Are you going to pass the salad, Joan? Or just let it sit there by your elbow?"

Joan sat up and handed me the salad with an exaggerated sigh. "Can we drop this, now? Nobody died. Can we just have a normal conversation?"

"Absolutely not," said my father. "In this house?" He stabbed a piece of ham and shook it in Joan's direction. "No normal, everyday conversation. Not if I have any say in the matter."

"What do you think happened?" I asked him. Joan kicked me under the table.

My father took his time chewing. "Chicken sinners," he said. "If you're going to sin" -- he made a sweeping gesture with his fork -- "Sin big."

This was my father's idea of humor. He was a scientist and a believer, a well-respected doctor who, he liked to say, should have known better. He was fascinated by the evolution of technology, and spent fall weekends bow-hunting deer. In the den, surrounded by Latin texts, sheet music, and an over-sized prototype for a personal computer, he spent one spring building a harpsichord by hand.

My father and I had our first talk about religion when I was



eight years old. I asked him why we were Catholic.

He stared at me for a minute, and took off his glasses. He told me I'd better sit down.

"I knew a woman once. A Jewish woman. Her son was healthy, intelligent but without goals. He didn't know what to do with his life. He was aimless. The mother went to her rabbi for counsel. She wanted to know how she could help her the boy. The rabbi told her to put three things out on a table." My father leaned back in his chair, stroking his beard. "A Bible, a bottle of whiskey, and a ten dollar bill."

He was smiling. I didn't see what a rabbi could have to do with being Catholic.

"'If he goes for the money, he'll be a businessman', the rabbi told her. 'If he goes for the whiskey, he'll be a politician. If he goes for the Bible, he'll be a rabbi.' So the woman did this, she put the things on the table. Her son came home and looked around. He put the Bible in his coat, the money in his wallet, and took a good slug of whiskey. His mother burst into tears. 'Good Lord,' she said. 'He's going to be a Catholic priest!'"

He actually laughed out loud after the punchline. He must have been holding onto that joke for a while. Who else would he tell

it to? Not my mother.

It took me a moment to realize I was supposed to laugh. I didn't think it was all that funny, but I laughed anyway. He put an arm around me. "Faith is your best defense," he said. "A good joke is second best."

Less than a week into July, one day after the fourth, Joan lost her part in the play.

"She can't remember her lines on stage," the director told my grandmother. "She freezes."

We were in the Green Room, at the back of the theater. Joan was changing in the dressing room, waiting for us.

"I'm very sorry," the director said. "We tried everything. She didn't want to let the rest of the cast down." She paused, waiting for my grandmother to say something. "We talked about her working backstage. She's very good with make-up." She looked down at her clipboard. "I hope you understand."

"I'm supposed to understand," my grandmother said to me, as soon as the director left. "All those weeks. She never said a word."

For once, I took the front seat on the ride home. Joan sat in back, her legs stretched out across the seat. She kept her face

turned toward the freeway behind us.

"Keep driving," she yelled, just before our exit. My grandmother looked over her shoulder at Joan and then back at the road. She drove us out to the Baylands, on the half-paved road that wound away from town, past the dump.

"Is this O.K.?" My grandmother asked, and Joan nodded. The three of us sat quiet for awhile, watching seagulls dive down toward the murky water and glide back up again. A small flock circled above us and then veered suddenly over the hill and out of view, heading toward the dump. We were parked in a hang-out spot, a dirt lot littered with beer cans and cigarette butts.

"Joan," my grandmother said. I looked over at her, waiting to see what she would say. I thought she had been thinking all this time, working out the right thing.

She didn't say anything. She ran her hands along the steering wheel. She pulled a Kleenex from the pocket of her cardigan and blew her nose.

"Let's go for ice cream," Joan said.

"We should head home," my grandmother said.

"Not right now."

"Why put it off? You're going to have to tell your mother sometime." She reached behind her seat and tapped the toe of Joan's

shoe.

"Not today." Joan pulled her feet up and hugged her knees to her chest.

A gull swooped low over the car. Something, a scrap of food, was hanging from its mouth. I leaned my head back on the seat, tracing the arc of its flight with one finger.

"Tomorrow," my grandmother said.

That night, fixing dinner, my mother was full of news about plans for the renovation of St. Mark's. The year before, a wealthy member of the congregation had died, leaving a generous sum to the church. The money had finally been freed up, after months of litigation over the estate. "We'll be putting up scaffolding along on the south side," she told us. She was on the renovation committee.

"When?" I asked her. I was peeling carrots over the sink, letting an orange mound develop over the drain, half-listening. Joan and my grandmother were at the kitchen table. Joan had been holding a paperback book in her hand, folded back to the same page, for over an hour. My grandmother was setting the table.

"Next week. It's about time. I don't understand all these legal hold-ups. It's not as if someone were contesting." She looked over at

my grandmother. "I'm a lawyer's daughter, and I still have to say, I don't understand the system."

"Neither did your father," said my grandmother. "No one does. He used to say we weren't supposed to. He said that all the time."

"He never said it to me. He had nothing but good things to say about the lawyer's life. Don't you remember? All those courtroom stories. He had to be the best lawyer in Roanoke." My mother laughed. "He drove us crazy sometimes, didn't he?"

"It made winning arguments tough," my grandmother said. She pulled a stack of clean napkins from the china cabinet.

"But he was fair," said my mother, her voice soft with nostalgia. "He was good at being fair. The best."

"He did his best. It wasn't always about fairness. It was his job."

"He had principles," my mother said. "Hand me those, Clare, will you?" She leaned over on her crutches, pointing at the peeled carrots I had lined up on the counter. "I wish he could see you girls now. He'd be proud." She turned to her mother. "Wouldn't he?"

My grandmother shook out a napkin and folded it, creasing the sides between two fingers. I set down my last carrot and glanced over at Joan. She looked up at me. She was biting down on one corner of her lip. I shrugged.

"Yes," my grandmother said. She touched Joan's shoulder, lightly. Joan slid her book aside and my grandmother set her place.

I was in in the middle of my floor, stretching out before bed, when Joan came into my room.

"Sore?" she asked. She was wearing an old nighshirt of my father's, its sleeves rolled up past her elbows.

"Butterfly," I said. "Twenty fifties on the minute. My shoulders ache."

"How's Lazarus?" She walked over and peered into the tank.

"He's getting bigger. The others are scared of him."

"Why don't they crawl out?"

"They can't hold on to the glass. They can't jump high enough. Not yet."

"You could wake up some night with a frog on your face." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "I don't know why you keep those things."

I stood up and leaned against the bed post, one leg stretched behind me, flexing my calf.

Joan lay back on my stack of pillows. "I memorized all my lines," she said.

"I know."

"I know what to do with my hands. I know Titania's walk. You don't walk on stage like you do in real life."

I concentrated on my calf, leaning in further. My muscles cramped, resisting the stretch, and then slowly gave way.

"When I close my eyes, I feel like Titania. I can imagine myself onstage, under the lights. I can see myself. I could stand here right now and do it." She turned away from me. "I could do it perfectly."

I let go of the bedpost, walked around to the other side and lay down so we were facing the same way, a foot apart, curled on our sides. I closed my eyes. Sometimes I lay like that in bed at night, imagining how to be faster. I pictured the black lane lines, sun spots on the bottom of the pool, my arms digging harder through the water.

"I think I know a kick-turn push-off that will get me halfway across the pool," I said. "I can't do it. But I know how."

Joan half-turned to look at me. "That doesn't make sense."

I rolled over onto my back. I heard the crickets suddenly, just outside my open window, as if they hadn't been there a moment ago. "What are you going to do?"

"Make-up. Costumes. I can do that. I'll still go to practice and everything. Anyway, I'm the understudy now. Maybe Linda Stotts

will get the flu. Or get hit." She looked over at me. "By a truck."

I didn't know what to say to that. We were quiet again, both of us on our backs now, staring at the ceiling.

"I meant what are you going to do about tomorrow," I said finally. "How are you going to tell her?"

"Opening night's in three weeks." She stared at me, a look like a kick under the table. She shook her head. Then she sat up. "I'm going to bed."

Tomorrow came and went. We dropped off Joan at the theater as usual. I went to practice. On the way home we talked about my upcoming swim meet. Joan chattered on about a girl my grandmother and I had never met, whose father was in jail for embezzling. I was nervous, expecting a scene at dinner. When I had scraped the last bit of peach cobbler from my plate, and my father was pushing back his chair, getting ready to excuse us, I realized. Joan wasn't going to tell them.

She didn't tell them the next day, or the next. My grandmother said nothing. The days were the same as they had been, with a new, invisible pattern. I worked harder than ever at the pool, preparing for the meet. I knocked seconds off my 400 meter



times for breast stroke and the crawl, and spent extra time struggling with the backstroke, hoping to at least place in the medley . I grew tense on the way home, tenser during dinner. Joan, my grandmother and I were there with my parents, talking and eating, but we were also waiting. After the meal, alone in my room, stretching on my floor, I let myself relax. The tension was back again the next morning, like an itch. I kept busy. I thought of Lot's wife, one of my the Bible stories my father liked to repeat. A pillar of salt after one glance back. I plunged ahead with the strange notion that momentum would let us plow right through the inevitable, or, better yet, to skip over it.

Early in the morning, on the day before my swim meet, my mother got her cast removed. That afternoon, while she testing out her healed ankle, the play director at the children's theater called my mother to ask if she could help out backstage on opening night.

"Imagine this," my mother said, when were all sitting down to dinner. "Imagine me, on the phone with this woman, telling her how excited I was, how we had all helped Joan with her lines. The whole family, I told her."

My mother had been repeating these lines, the story of the phone call, all afternoon. The original offense, Joan's failure as an

actress, was all but forgotten. She saw our days of collective silence as a sign of conspiracy.

My grandmother got most of the blame. She made few efforts to defend herself.

"I didn't want to interfere," she said.

"Interfere!" My mother laughed. "What can you possibly mean by interfere? Joan's your granddaughter. I'm your daughter. You can't interfere if you're already involved."

My father held up his hand, palm forward, like a crossing guard. "Wait a minute," he said. "I sense some faulty logic here."

"It was between you and Joan," my grandmother said quietly.

"That's ridiculous." My mother's voice kept rising and falling, from outrage to disbelief. "Joan is fourteen years old."

"That's old enough to make her own decisions."

"You lied to me."

"No." My grandmother looked steadily at my mother, her face calm.

"What then?" My mother's voice dropped. She looked around the table, at me, at Joan and my father.

"Joan lied to you," said my grandmother.

"You let her."

"Yes, I let her."

My mother stared at her, shaking her head. "I'm amazed. Just amazed. I understand you less right now than I have in fifty years."

Trying to fall asleep that night, I tried to imagine what would have happened if Joan had told my grandmother had interfered. If she'd insisted that Joan tell my parents, or if she'd gone ahead and told them herself. Or if I'd ratted on Joan. I thought about what that meant, interfering. On one hand, we'd stayed out of it. On the other, if we hadn't stayed out of it, we wouldn't have been a part of it. It would have been about Joan's failure, my mother's disappointment. It was bigger than that now, more complicated.

At 8:30 the next morning, I was on the starting block, waiting for the warning shot. It was my first race -- the medley. My whole family was sitting in the bleachers, high up, where my grandmother had been sitting five days a week since June. My father, wearing a paper cut-out medal for the patron saint of medley relays. My mother, one leg slender and vulnerable, the other firm and tan. Joan, one bench down from them, arms crossed. My grandmother, off to the side, carrying a new strand of rosary beads for the car. I

looked up at them and waved. They waved back.

The warning gun fired. I bent over, hands at my toes, listening for the second shot. I was alone on the block, staring out across the blue water, waiting.

## THE UPPER HAND

After Carl left, Edith slipped back into some of her old habits. One of these was sleeping on the couch in the living room, beneath a frayed wool blanket. She'd never liked the master bedroom. In fact, she avoided the entire second floor of the house, because it was cold, and because a few summers ago Carl had stripped the wallpaper from all the rooms and painted them blue. *Out with the old, in with the new*, he said. But Edith liked the old parts of the house, the Victorian lampshades, lilacs in the dining room, inkstains on the carpet. She felt comfortable on the sagging, second-hand couch, where she could see her walnut tree and her rosebushes through the picture window. She listened to the radio until she feel asleep.

Just a few blocks east of the house, at the bottom of the hill, cars sped along the Aurora Freeway. In her dreams Edith became a busy efficient, person. She had things to do. Busses passed by and she raced after them, shaking her leather briefcase like a fist.

One September night Edith woke to the sound of a walnut cracking against the side of her house. It was two in the morning. Edith sat up so fast she managed to fall off the couch, and, in the process of getting up, knocked the magazine rack. A year's worth

of National Geographics toppled and slid to the floor. Edith thought the noise she'd heard-- a thud followed by a small explosion-- had been a firecracker. For a long, confused moment, Edith believed it was the fourth of July.

She got up from the floor and walked over to the picture window. She pressed her hand against the glass and peered out.

A woman was standing beneath the walnut tree in Edith's yard. She wore a yellow dress that caught the moonlight, and a pair of tennis shoes. Shadows moved across her body. She was facing the house, facing Edith. Could she see Edith in the window? There was something odd about her posture-- she looked like she was trying very hard not to fall down. Her hair was pulled into a loose knot, secured with a pencil.

Now she was bending down, picking up a handful of nuts from the ground. She turned them over in her palm, inspecting them. She slipped all but one into her left pocket, which Edith saw was bulging, pulling the dress down with its weight.

The woman took a step back and pitched the nut toward the house. It cracked against the living room wall, to the right of the window.

"She's drunk," Edith said out loud.

There was no one in the house to hear her. Another of Edith's old habits: talking to herself, mulling things over. She liked the sound of her own voice.

"She's a harmless drunk," Edith said. The sound of the word *harmless* relaxed her. She took a step back from the window. The rain had stopped. A wet rose leaf, torn and ragged-looking, hung onto the glass as if someone had pasted it there. Tomorrow, she'd have to weed through the Silvertips, throw out the damaged flowers. They didn't hold up in a storm.

Edith did not usually sympathize with people who drank-- she thought drinking was a sign of recklessness or weakness or both. But lately she'd been rethinking certain of her ideas. She was willing to concede that drinking, as far as vices went, was pretty far down on the list.

Could a walnut break a window? Edith wondered. The glass of the picture window looked sturdy. It looked like it could withstand a baseball. Anyway, she did not believe this woman intended to break anything. The way she was wandering across the yard, her head bent to search the ground, Edith believed her mind must be unfocused, without real purpose, as loose and lopsided as her dress.

Edith did not drink because she didn't like the taste of

alcohol, even when it was mixed with something sweet. Carl used to drink, occasionally, a beer or a vodka tonic after dinner. He'd never been drunk, though. Not in her house. It was something Edith had admired about him from the start. He wasn't like most of the men she'd met in bars. By the time she turned thirty, she'd given up on taverns and nightclubs, the places where people went to meet each other, to "get lucky." There was no luck involved in what came of that sort of meeting, not as far as Edith could tell. More likely humiliation or regret.

Meeting Carl had been a relief. They'd shared a table at a restaurant during a busy lunch hour: both of them alone, checking their watches, politely engrossed in paperback books. It was Edith who had started the conversation, commenting on the crowded restaurant, wondering whether her food would come before it was time to go back to work. Carl had responded, of course. But reluctantly. At least he had appeared reluctant at the time.

She believed then that she'd gotten lucky, after all-- lucky to meet a man like Carl. There were so many people she knew, all kinds of people, who'd for some reason or another ended up alone. They showed up at places like Del's, the tavern up the



street. At closing time, they drifted out into the neighborhood. They woke Edith with their shouts and their laughter. They left empty bottles on her lawn, cigarette butts, candy wrappers. Edith guessed the woman in her yard was one of them.

Another walnut cracked against the house. This one was much closer to the window. Whether or not the woman wanted to damage Edith's home, it seemed dangerous to allow her to go on like this. If she managed to break the window, what would Edith tell the police? That she sat and watched it happen? Carl used to tell Edith she needed to stick up for herself. She let people take advantage of her: repairmen, for example, and the salespeople in department stores. Even the owner of the flower shop where Edith worked, a grandmother, was capable of bullying Edith.

Edith pressed her face close to the window again. "Go away," she whispered to the woman. "Go home."

But the woman did not seem ready to leave. She was reaching up into the walnut tree, standing awkwardly on one foot. Her other leg was bent, swinging back and forth. Edith realized that she was trying to gain momentum, trying to pull herself up into the tree. The branches were rough, covered with sharp curls of bark-- it must be painful, thought Edith, to hang all your weight

on a branch like that. It might cut into your palms. It would leave a pattern of indentations, purple spots beneath the skin. "Let go," Edith said.

Edith remembered falling from a tree, an almond tree, when she was a child. She'd been climbing up the trunk, hanging onto the bark. Her arms were wrapped around the tree. One of her feet slipped, and suddenly she was sliding back down the trunk, her t-shirt up around her chest, her bare stomach scraping against the bark. They'd given her pills and gauze at the hospital.

The memory made Edith nervous. She was afraid something like that would happen to this woman, that she would fall and Edith would have to drive a stranger, a drunk, to the hospital in her car. They would ask questions that Edith would not be able to answer: name, age, next of kin. Allergic to drugs? Taking drugs? Edith would be obliged to spend long hours in a waiting room, drinking bad coffee.

Fortunately, the woman was still on the ground. She was jumping up and down, slapping the branch with both hands. It didn't look likely she would manage to get a grip, much less pull herself up. Edith walked over to the door and switched on the porch light. She wasn't sure what she was going to do, but she would not be able to sleep until the woman was gone.

Edith lived on the backside of Queen Anne hill. The house had belonged to Edith's grandfather. When he moved into a nursing home, he told Edith he didn't want to think about strangers taking the house over.

Edith visited her grandfather on Wednesdays. She brought him flowers from the shop. She asked him to tell her stories about parties and holidays, times when the house had been full of people. Her grandfather tried to remember, but he got confused, these days, and tired. His mind wandered.

Edith took her grandfather's stories and added to them, inventing her own stories about the way it had been. Before Carl painted them, the bedrooms had been patterned with flowers. *Nosegays*, Edith called them, though she wasn't sure if that was their name. She guessed that her grandmother had picked this design, years ago, because it was cheerful. Edith had never met her grandmother-- she died when she was a young woman, before Edith was born. Her appendix burst. No one was home to help her or to call a doctor. It must have been unbearable for her grandfather, at least for awhile, to be surrounded by miniature bouquets of yellow flowers.

Edith's grandmother had survived on rituals. This was according to Edith's mother. That expression, count your blessings-- Edith's grandmother had actually done it. She'd ticked them off on her fingers as if she were counting the number of apples in a crate, or guests at a party. She used to say that as the numbers rose, her fingers went numb. She began to feel dizzy. It was like taking a glass elevator to the top of a tall building and glancing at the street below.

Now, as she stepped out into the yellow light on her porch, Edith had a rush of this same sensation, this vertigo. The yard, beyond the light and the steps, was pitch black. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the yellow dress, the tennis shoes, and finally, a face. The woman was still beneath the tree branch, staring at Edith. Her hair had fallen out of its knot and she was holding it back from her face with both hands. Edith had hoped that she would hide or runaway when the porch light came on. What to do? The woman appeared to be waiting.

"This is my house," Edith said. Her voice, which had been loud enough inside, didn't carry cross the yard.

"You're going to have to leave now," Edith said, louder this time. "It's the middle of the night."

The woman smiled. She closed her eyes for a moment. She took a few steps toward Edith and yawned.

"This is private property," Edith said.. You're not allowed here."

"Who are you?" the woman said. She dropped her hands to her side, letting her hair fall over her face.

"I live here," Edith said. She pointed to the woman's dress. "Those are my walnuts you've got there."

At this, the woman started to laugh. She reached into her pocket and tossed a walnut in Edith's direction. "Sorry, she said. She began to empty her pocket, bending down to the ground. Then she stood up and pointed at the pile of nuts by her feet. "I'm sorry for stealing your walnuts."

"That's alright," Edith said. She had no idea what time it was by now. "I need to sleep, that's all. Aren't you tired? Don't you want to go home?" She took a step forward and looked into the woman's face. "What's your name?"

"Emily," the woman said. " She started to laugh again. "No, wait. Catherine. Or Jane. Louise. Betty."

"Please," said Edith. "Just tell me your name."

The woman shrugged. "Cleo," she said, "My name is Cleo."

"Okay," said Edith. What did it matter? If this woman

wanted to be called Cleo, then Edith would call her Cleo. "We've got to figure out a way to get you home, Cleo. Do you have a phone number? Someone who can come and get you?"

"Aren't you go to tell me who you are?" The woman-- Cleo, if that was her name-- walked over to the base of the steps. "I think you should tell me *your* name now."

Edith sighed and leaned back against the doorframe. She thought about sitting down. If she wanted to, she knew she could push the situation along, speed it up, make it disappear. All she had to do was call the police. Carl would have called the police right away. As a matter of principle, he did not believe in compromise. Not that he was unreasonable, but he said that it was simpler ninety-nine percent of the time if someone took the upper hand. Naturally, most people thought it was better to be the one with the hand than the one without it. But it was surprising, Carl said, how many people were glad to give it away. They were glad to put someone else in the driver's seat.

When Carl lost his temper, it usually had something to do with this willingness, on Edith's part, to give in. He'd felt that Edith was too indifferent when it came to decisions about their lives. He was forced to take on all the responsibility. Couldn't she

understand how difficult that was?

Just before Carl left, he and Edith had an argument. Carl had suggested that Edith quit her job at the flower shop, so that she could spend more time at home. The way he saw it, Edith was not bringing in much money there, anyway, and his salary was enough for both of them. There were many other ways she could contribute to the household, plenty of projects that she would be free to take on if she stopped working at the shop.

"What kind of projects?" Edith asked him. "What do you mean? Do you mean-- " she gestured toward the kitchen, to the pile of dirty dishes by the sink.

No, Carl said, he didn't mean that, of course not, not at all. But he didn't seem clear on exactly what he meant. He was trying to do her a favor, trying to free her up.

"Fine," said Edith. She shrugged. "I'll quit tomorrow, if that's what you want."

That was when Carl had raised his fist. He didn't hit her. He just held his fist up in the air, shaking it slowly, like someone in an old movie. Then he moved it close to her face. He touched her cheek with it. He never stopped looking her in the eye.

He brushed her cheek with his fist. That was all.

"I'll tell you my name," said Edith. "But not until you give me a number. Give a number to call, a friend, whoever. Then I'll tell you my name."

Cleo shifted from one foot to the other. She pushed the toe of her shoe into the grass. "I don't live here," she said. "I live over there." She half-raised her arm and pointed with her left elbow.

"Where?" said Edith.

"Way over there," Cleo.

"In the Puget Sound?"

Cleo grinned. "No," she said. "West Seattle."

"Now we're getting somewhere." Edith pushed herself away from the house and walked down the steps, so she was standing next to Cleo. She was no longer tired. Past tired, she guessed. "If you can give me directions, I'll drive you home. Can you do that?"

Cleo was still digging at the grass with her toe, but she was looking at Edith now, nodding her head. "Yes," she said. She took a deep breath and clasped her hands behind her back. "I can do that. I can do anything."

"Lucky for you," Edith said.

It took some manoeuvring to get Cleo out of the yard and into



the car. When Edith put the key in the ignition, she remembered she had left the door of the house unlocked. She had to go back. Cleo followed her. Then Edith had to start over again, coaxing Cleo to the car.

But once they got on the road, everything became easier. Cleo seemed content to lie back in her seat, eyes closed. They dipped down onto the backside of Queen Anne, past rows of dark houses, and curved around and up onto the Aurora freeway. It had been a long time since Edith had been out this late. She liked the city when it was lit-up and deserted. The buildings and streets looked temporary, somehow, and less practical. There seemed potential for the entire city to rearrange itself at sunrise. Or to pack up like an amusement park and move elsewhere.

When they merged onto the West Seattle freeway, Cleo told Edith to stop the car.

"Here?" Edith said. "I can't stop here."

"You'll be sorry if you don't," Cleo said. "I'm going to be sick."

Edith pulled over. She turned on the emergency flashers and waited. Below the freeway, the wharf was cluttered with machinery. Giant metal hooks dangled over the water.

Somewhere in this area was the Gibson Company, where

Carl worked. Gibson was a bread manufacturer; they shipped different kinds of bread all over the Northwest. Carl managed the lab at the corporate headquarters. He worked with enzymes, scientifically testing ingredients and cooking techniques.

A few weeks after they met, Carl took Edith on a tour of the flour mill. She had to wear a hardhat. They walked up a maze of steep, yellow staircases, past computer-operated machines for crushing and sorting the grain. Everywhere they went, the air was filled with flour. It was like a slow-motion dust storm. The men who worked there wore hardhats and visors and paper masks over their mouths. They worked one to a room-- the computers did most of the work.

"What an eerie place," Edith said when they left.

"I know," Carl said. "I would go crazy, working one of those shifts. I'm grateful for the lab, grateful to be in my position."

But when they visited the lab, Edith wasn't sure whether it was an improvement over the mill. It was sealed tight. There were rows of finger-sized test tubes on every counter. The air was cold and free of impurities. At least the mill had the smell of grain.

That same day, Carl mentioned marriage for the first time. He said they could live together, and then, when they were ready

-- when they knew for sure they were compatible-- they could make it official. While he talked, Edith tried to picture him in the lab. She had an image of him unbuttoning his white jacket at the end of the day. Folding the jacket, tossing it into a hamper full of identical, white jackets.

It was an image that Edith still carried around with her-- at one time, it had helped her to understand Carl. Lately, it had the opposite affect. When she tried to see him unbutton his jacket, the scene switched into reverse. His fingers were moving backwards, buttoning up again. He was snug in his clean white jacket, smiling.

Cleo climbed back into the car head-first.

"Are you alright?" Edith asked. She pointed to the glovebox. "There's some Kleenex in there."

"You're being too nice to me," Cleo said. She unlatched the glovebox and a pile of maps slid out into her lap. In July, Edith had driven to Florida and back, using those maps. The Automobile Association had recommended certain routes and highlighted them with an orange marker. But Edith had decided to stay away from major freeways, so the highlights hadn't been much help.

"I was trying to break your window a little while ago, remember? With the walnuts. I scared you out of bed in the

middle of the night."

Edith leaned back in her seat and looked at Cleo. "Why did you do that? What were you thinking?"

"I guess I wanted to break something."

"I was watching you from the house," Edith said. "I thought you were the product of a broken marriage."

"Nope," Cleo said. "Not married." She put her feet up on the dash and unfolded a map of California. "I used to live in Redlands, California. Ever been to Redlands?"

Edith shook her head. Foghad settled into West Seattle, along the beachfront. She needed to ask Cleo directions. But when she glanced over she saw that Cleo had dropped off, suddenly, into a half-sleep. She'd found the Mexican blanket Edith kept folded behind the driver's seat. It was draped over Cleo's legs, bunched into ripples of red and gold and brown. Cleo's eyes were closed but her feet were moving, up on the dash. They were tapping along, keeping the beat to some remembered song.

Edith had driven to Florida to get away from Carl. That was the truth. Her old fears-- the lonely people with their vodka tonics-- had given way to new ones. Images of black eyes, split lips. She'd been waking up in the blue bedroom at night, staring at

Carl's sleeping face for hours in the hope of reading the future. She'd begun reinventing a history for the house. In this history her grandmother hesitated at the base of the stairs, looking up toward the drafty bedroom. She was a woman like Edith in this scene. She was considering the possibilities. She was standing at the stairs as if at the window of a tall building, feeling her fingers go numb.

"Redlands is nowhere," Cleo said. She had picked up where she left off. Edith could not remember seeing her wake up. They were driving by the water, curving around a finger of land. Condominiums loomed, casting boxy shadows over the road. Beside them the old beach houses looked like bits of driftwood.

"There was a diner there, a place called The Jug. They served huge plates of food, just huge. I used to order a four-egg omelette, some mornings. It was my home away from home."

Cleo looked out the window, as if she expected to see the diner appear, any moment, just ahead. "There's no place in Seattle like the Jug. It's a huge town, Seattle. But all the restaurants serve tiny portions. I can't figure it out."

Edith glanced at Cleo's hands. They were shaking, slightly,

rustling the maps. She had no reason to believe Cleo knew where they were going. Maybe Cleo didn't live here, in West Seattle. Maybe she did.