

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

1999

### Watercolored monkey| Stories

Tom Lombardi

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

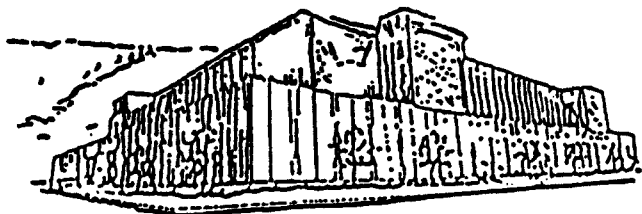
---

#### Recommended Citation

Lombardi, Tom, "Watercolored monkey| Stories" (1999). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 4055.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/4055>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).



Maureen and Mike  
MANSFIELD LIBRARY

The University of **MONTANA**

---

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety,  
provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in  
published works and reports.

**\*\* Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature \*\***

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature 

Date 5/17/99

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with  
the author's explicit consent.



THE WATERCOLORED MONKEY

stories

by

Tom Lombardi

B.A. Southern Connecticut State University, 1995

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1999

Approved by:

  
Chairperson

  
Dean, Graduate School

5-17-99  
Date

UMI Number: EP33878

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP33878

Copyright 2012 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

## Contents

Evening at the Rock Climber's House	03
Zate Boogies Through the Alleyway	20
BB in the Chest	45
A Bag of Bullets	67
A Day for Dead Nana	87
Phennel's At Once Pastoral and Gated Estate	106
The Watercolored Monkey	139

### **Evening at the Rock Climber's House**

Desperately longing for human contact, I backpedaled down the frozen food aisle, pretending to search for an appetizing TV dinner stacked inside the droning freezer, when I struck the body of a rock climber. I bounced off the sliding glass doors and landed hard -- elbow first -- to the linoleum.

"Sorry, man," he said, offering his hand, of which the fingertips looked charred. I grabbed my elbow and winced, expecting sympathy, hoping he'd chat, since he'd just, although entirely accidental, knocked me over.

"You all right?" Above his head a fluorescent light flickered, and his then his hair blinked from red to brown and back again.

"I think," I said. "Boy, it hurts, though." I clutched his hand, and his forearm swelled with green veins as he pulled me up. Then he let go of our grip and sidled to the end of the aisle, where he kicked a foot in the air (he wore khaki pants and tennis shoes), rested it on a shelf of laundry detergent (the liquid kind), and touched his chin to his knee (not knobby).

I said, "So, I'm new here. Actually, I'm looking for some cooking work. You know anything about the restaurant scene?"

"No. Listen, man, I'm hosting a party. With friends, who told me to invite anyone. And you're sure as hell looking like an anyone. What do you say?"

"Oh, God, "I said, "I'd love to."

"Beer's on me then." The rock climber grinned.

We moved to another aisle, where he caressed the various bottle necks of six packs in the cooler -- "Ah," he said -- until he reached the ones encased in the cardboard with basil leaves painted on its cover. I stood behind, trying to restrain myself from hugging him. What luck I'd been granted! "Thanks," I said.

"Thank you," he said.

Outside, surrounding the parking lot, the street lamps had recently turned on, one of which was dim: no moths fluttered in its rays. We left in his yellow Japanese compact car, foam padding showing through the vinyl seats, the engine clanking to a syncopated rhythm. Tangled in the back seat was a rope, a small gym bag, and a pouch with a thick zipper, out of which white powder had spilled. That's when I found out he was a rock climber. "You climb things, don't you?"

"Rocks," he said. "Walls, too. Depending on the weather. Sometimes ice is nice. My friends all do it. But you'll meet them soon, my friends, that is." Creases of skin formed around his eyes until he stopped smiling. Then he pulled his knee to his chest, at which point his sock-less ankle (bereft of hair) shot across my torso, landing on the cracked dash. With a hand clasped to the steering wheel, he lowered forehead to his thigh, watching the road while his face reddened.



I said, "Your legs hurt often?"

He placed his leg back in the driving position, and said, "Does it offend you? Me stretching?"

"No, no. By all means...it's just that, well, hey, I was wondering where I could find a quick job right off the bat, you know, in case a cooking gig takes a while to acquire." Could anyone be offended by stretching? I did not want to shatter any chances at forming a friendship.

"Climbing," he said, "A *thing* to do."

"For money? You mean, you teach it?"

"No, my friend, money's for the birds. And even *they* don't want it." He turned on the radio and nothing came on. "Jap junk," he said punching the black knob.

The engine knocked faster.

Houses, each surrounded by a raw-meat purple lining of dusk, zipped by one after another, some with their doors left open. Riding in this car was certainly a treat. Aside from a quick discourse regarding the thinness of pepperoni with the pizza delivery man, I hadn't spoken to anyone in three weeks. I was new to this Northwestern valley town. Back east, my wife of four years had been shot and then sawed in half by a street gang called the Latin Kings (or whom the police suspected, anyway). She'd been working in Bridgeport as a social worker. When she'd drive into the housing projects to pick up her clients, she'd bring her gun -- a thing of which I completely disapproved: concealing a weapon under the pretense that trouble himself

would wave her down with his large hands and yank her out of the car.

So it happened. And so I had to flee. Everything in that area reminded me of her. Certainty staying with relatives hadn't helped -- they comforted me too much, filling me with injections of concern: *You are in pain...here, take this, take that, take take take!* Lucky for me, my Aunt's apartment in Missoula was temporarily vacant.

I quit my suit job and showed up in the West with a credit card debt and ambitions to become a chef. I needed change. It was a good plan. On the first day even, after I'd moved in, I was pedaling home from the grocery store when I actually felt a trace of happiness pulsating inside me, like the exact moment when an alcohol buzz begins fizzling somewhere behind your eyes, and you think the dirty things locked inside you are going to gather themselves for departure. I gripped the handlebars as I waited for the stoplight to change, gazing up at the mountains over which clouds, like giant salmon fillets, fell. Really, I thought, couldn't things be worse, in some strange way? Then I noticed a man (he had a thin mustache, like an anchovy stuck over his lips) standing not too far from me in a yard, gripping a chain saw. .

He looked at me and pulled the starter cord. The thing whined. White smoke sputtered out. I smelled oil. His forearms rattled as he sliced into the tree stump, bits of wood arcing over the red wagon turned on its side. Her dead face flashed before my vision (although the gang had reportedly used

a hand saw), looking the way she did when I'd wake her up unexpectedly at dawn, at which point she'd stare at me all bug-eyed and silent, as if I were a stranger.

They slashed that beautiful body in half. A group of children found her legs lying akimbo across a playground slide. Apparently, one of the boys had picked up a leg and wielded it, chasing the others. Her upper body and head, on which they'd placed a Hartford Whaler's cap, was found tied to a mailbox in the suburbs not too far from Bridgeport, the gang's origin. Last I heard, the senior citizen, who first noticed her upper half on his way out to get the newspaper, was still going through shock therapy.

Thankfully, it was a closed casket. The last time I saw her, she was sitting on the toilet as I stripped. I said, "Do you have to smell it up it before my shower?" She held up her middle finger and continued chomping gum and reading a magazine. It's fascinating how someone, when appearing in a projection room of your memory, weeks later, can look so goddamn magnificent lounging on a toilet with a National Geographic Magazine folded over her hands. "I love you more than I love myself," I should have said.

So there I stood over my bike frame, parked under the buttered sunlight, afraid to go move. I watched the wood spray over the red wagon. When the man spun around and headed for another stump, I started weeping. I dropped the grocery bag on the guy's lawn and pedaled home, where I lay on my bed, feeling carved out. When, I asked myself, is this feeling, this longing, going to end? What the hell was I longing for anyway?

A personality I could no longer communicate with? To go back and treat her the way she deserved to be? Yes. That would suffice. To live out the dream of being a chef, while pretending our marriage had existed in some other life? Or was I just longing to be longing-less?

"Home's home," said the rock climber. He shut off the engine as we rolled silently into a driveway. In front of the house, a few hammocks had been strewn up between various trees. Two black dogs (neither of them barked or panted) ran past us, disappearing into the bushes. Another one (the color of olive oil) lay asleep under one of the hammocks. The yard, with the aide of a red porch light, held a few patches of grass here and there, the blades aflame with orange. We moved through the heaviest of patches, my ankles shuddering as if the ground were quivering. Nervousness: a trait I'd been trying to overcome. *It's going to be okay*, I told myself. My latest mantra. It hardly worked.

He skipped inside the front door. And I followed with a hunger in my chest.

A girl, with the same color hair as the chocolate lab we'd seen prancing (Frisbee in mouth) through the grocer aisles, sat at the kitchen table on which a Coleman lantern hissed. A moth whirled around it, gaining altitude as it flapped its way toward the ceiling. She was smoking a joint. It smelled like Christmas trees burning. She had thin lips, around which wrinkles, like pencil marks, were sketched. A few more were

written across her forehead -- each line some form of trouble, perhaps, she'd tried desperately to suppress.

"How are you?" I said, my voice louder than normal.

She held up her hand, as if to say, Wait a second, while her cheeks ballooned with smoke. Then the rock climber (I'd forgotten to ask his name), emerged from a door I didn't see him enter. Behind him, piled in the corner of the room -- the carpet was red -- was a large pile of purple fleece what looked like pullovers. He took the joint from the girl, put it to his lips (full like a woman's) and said, "You suggested I invite anyone, so I invited anyone. Oh, yeah, and I got that herbal beer you wanted." In unison, they both blew out funnels of smoke covering the moth, blowing it back into the darkness. "Allison," he said, extending his hand, "this is anyone. Anyone, this is Allison. My name's Derrick."

"Nice to meet you, anyone," she said. "Do you know someone in this town?"

I could handle this type of talk. I said, "No, I don't know someone. But I know no one."

"I know no one," she said, looking up at Derrick. "No one's not the friendliest person around."

"I hear you," I said, smiling. My face warmed. When the last time I'd smiled? Then Derrick handed me the joint. I took a hit and tried, as well, to attack the moth with smoke. But I missed, covering, instead, the Hackysack on the table.

"Easy there," Derrick said, and with a long finger he biffed the sack until it fell onto his other hand which lay open

just below the lip of the table top. He shoved the Hackysack inside his pants pocket.

I said, "Where're you from, Allison?"

"Alabama."

"And your accent?"

"Alabama." She blew out smoke and said, "Along with some other things."

The weed went around -- dishes were slanted in the sink over which the moth bounced -- and when the joint got small (its narrow end moist from our lips) my heart began to tick faster. I said, "I'll be right back," and without thinking I was stepping backward into the room we first came through, as if to reunite with my wife; maybe she'd be emerging from the bathroom, and, as she'd fumble to turn off the light switch, we'd share a secret glance: as if to assure the evening at this stranger's house would work out just fine.

I was spinning around -- a kayak on the couch, a glass water bong on the glass coffee table, a stain like a dirty rag on the wall -- when a ping of some sort tapped my upper skull. I put a hand to my forehead, a palm to my chest, which felt as if a dying fish were quivering beneath it. I took deep breaths.

That stain on the wall looked the way Mom had always described a soul: an internal thing I could never identify, yet (driven by her threats) I'd tried to nurture: an internal thing I'd pictured -- at least, as a kid -- as a dark blur constantly changing texture and shape inside you.

Relax, I thought, childhood's lone gone. I'm an adult -- an alone adult. I headed into the kitchen, where suddenly I

felt empowered, as if all the external forces out there owed me something, now that they had my wife. For God's sake, I thought, stop fearing. You're among perspective friends.

I held a finger over the lantern. No heat emerged. Derrick was gone again. "Allison," I said. My mouth had gone numb from the weed. I was smiling. That ping in my forehead had been replaced by a warmth.

"What do you want?"

"Allison," I said.

"What do you want?"

"You climb rocks?"

"Just walls."

"What kind of walls?"

"Ones with fake rocks embedded in them."

"Oh."

She clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back, and her breasts were smashing against her T-shirt, when she said, "Climbing. It's something you should try."

I said, "So, Derrick told me you guys were having a party."

"Oh...he did." She stood up (she wore corduroy shorts, her legs were hairy) and entered the room through which, I suspected, Derrick had recently entered.

My ankles shook so badly I had to sit down. I thought of fleeing...wasn't it better, though, to stand here among strangers than to be lying on my Aunt's bed? I wasn't going back that apartment. Christ, I never should have come out to this town. Then again, maybe these rock climbers would let me

sleep here tonight, if I impressed them in some way. I could cook them Beef Wellington. Yes: and a Caesar salad with garlic croutons. Some bread pudding. Red wine, coffee, cognac. They could hook me up with a starter job. Everyone knew someone with a job. By being invited here, goddamnit, I was granted a gift.

Then I heard whispering. I unched forward and put my ear up to the bedroom door. "What do you think?" I heard Derrick say.

"He's decent looking enough," Allison said. "Oh, Christ, I can't believe we're doing this."

"Hey," Derrick said. "Don't do anything stupid like send him home."

"I'm just not sure. The timing's off . . . yes, the timing's certainly off."

"Come on, Allison. No time for your indecisive crap. Just do as planned, all right. You know, as planned? Jesus, you're all tense."

"Don't tell me how I feel. I know how I feel, Derrick. See, you're always -- "

"All right, I won't tell you how you feel."

Who'd they think I was anyway, some naïve trick? I rapped on the door, infuriated. I said, "I can hear what you two are saying in there. What's this plan I'm hearing about?"

"Wonderful," said Derrick in a raised voice. "Just wonderful."

I jiggled the doorknob until the door opened. And there sat Derrick on the bed with legs crossed. A black terrier of



some sort slept beside him, its teeth showing. Suddenly I felt intrusive, having busted into their bedroom. But they'd been referring to me, conjuring up some scheme, I was sure. "Well?" I said.

"Let's talk," said Allison, and she sat down on the bed and crossed her legs as well. The hair on her shins looked gray from the light bulb burning under the lamp shade over which a red t-shirt hung.

My throat pulsed. "I demand to know the plan."

Derrick put his arm around Allison. He opened his mouth and she cut in: "We wanted to, well, you know, have some fun with a third party" -- she leaned back with hands held strangle-style to her throat -- "okay, fuck it, we wanted to have a threesome. But we didn't want to do it with anyone we knew, and then genius here goes and rounds up someone at a grocery store." She bit her fingernails. "Of all places."

"Beats a church," Derrick said.

"Heh," she said, sitting up.

I turned around and saw the lantern glowing on the kitchen table, beyond which swayed shadows from the living room and then, of course, the outside door: and the street, and a few miles away my Aunt's place. I saw myself running back to my Aunt's bed and crashing on it, wanting only to entomb myself in her flannel sheets that stank of cigarette smoke.

Above their heads, embedded within the synthetic paneling, was a dark face resembling a knot of wood. "Okay then," I said. "I'll do it."

Allison sat up and spit a fingernail across the room, it landed somewhere near the pile of fleeces. "Sit down," she said. "Yeah," Derrick said, "please do."

I sat, shivering. Allison burrowed her head into my neck. Her hair smelled of peanut butter and granola. I held her. And it seemed as if my bloodstream had hit a stop, my entire body freezing for a moment as the heat of her skin penetrated my arms. I pulled her closer. She hugged back, it was comforting to be hugged by a stranger, a strange woman at that -- more genuine, anyway, than any relative's hug. No obligation or guilt involved.

On the wall, just above the dog, hung a poster of a man flying upside down in the air with a snowboard attached to his feet. And then I couldn't help thinking of that day, last year, when my wife and I had gone camping in Maine. We were hiking a trail when a black bear crossed our path. We held each other, breasts to chest. The thing looked at us, its eyes dark and glossy. "It's beautiful," I whispered in her ear. "It is," she said. "We're going to die," I said. "Stop," she said. It didn't smell, not like it'd said in the books, anyway. No insects clung to its fur which glistened under the jagged sunlight. It grunted and gave what looked to be a shrug, then lumbered off down the slope, disappearing into the darkness that filled in gaps between the green leaves. And we remained in our grip, feeling blessed. "I love you," I said. "I know, I know," she said. The next day, on the drive back home, as we held hands -- because our coupledness had been adorned by fate itself -- we heard on the radio that a middle-aged, divorced man in a

bear suit had been arrested for inexplicably impersonating an animal deemed hungry and dangerous by the park rangers. They'd caught him around the same trail we'd hiked on.

Allison's hand touched my chest. My body jolted. She sighed beside me, her breath warm against my skin. I began rocking back and forth. I wanted to thank them for letting me into their little bedroom. I didn't want words to ruin the moment, though.

Then Derrick's penis (large, helmet-shaped and leaning off to the side a bit) jutted out the zipper in his pants as he knelt over her. Of course, she'd seen that thing so many times, and it seemed this act was being performed for my sake. I watched him slip it inside the hem of her shorts, I watched him move it back and forth. His pink tongue slipped out and licked slowly along her neck.

I kept rocking. But my new-found appreciation for the moment was already withering. And I was anticipating some massive impact, as if a body from a crashing airplane would at any moment blast through the roof, when Allison said, "Feels...oh," then put her arm around me.

I stared at Derrick's fingers (pink) tracing along her thighs until it reached my stomach. He inserted a fingertip inside my belly button. I flinched. I turned to Allison. Her eyes were brown and in them I could see a reflection of my face: gray and distorted. Her hips swayed. A slither of skin showed above her shorts where the t-shirt had slipped up. Ah, I thought, her torso looks so beautiful, so attached to her hips. "You're so lucky," I said and kissed her nose. I pulled her

closer, rolling the both of us toward the lamp side of the bed as Derrick's hand slipped off of me.

We fell back onto a pillow, and my neck was burning. Her cheek touched mine, it was bumpy but nonetheless there. I felt as if I were levitating.

Her nose, cold against my neck, moved up to my ear. My ankles were quivering again. I wasn't sure what to do next. But that's just it, I thought. I didn't want to do anything. "I like you," I said in Allison's ear. I kissed her lobe which felt detached from her head, like a garlic clove. "Thank you," she said, putting her leg over mine, clenching herself against my thigh. My groin tingled, and for the first time in a while, it seemed, for reasons I didn't have the energy to figure out, I thought of my mother (who'd died three years ago in a canoe accident), the way she'd stare up at the kitchen light, mouth wide-open, fingers clamping shut her nose, another hand on hip, until she sneezed.

Derrick's hand slithered over Allison's breasts, stopping at my chest, inching downward (one of the knuckles was wrinkled, looking as if it'd been burned years ago), pressing into my skin. It landed over the tip of my penis. My hips locked up, and I jerked my body away from it. "No," I said. He grabbed Allison's hand, and together they pinched my half-hard on. "Wait a second," I said.

"Maybe we should slow down," she said, retracting both their hands. I heard Derrick let out a breath of frustration.

How many times had I imagined my wife and a third party? "It'll be an adventure," I used to say. "A mutual adventure." And eventually she'd cried over my incessant eagerness to invite the other into our bedroom. I couldn't imagine how rejected she must have felt.

I could see the compartments of muscles bulging beneath the skin of Derrick's stomach. He leaned down and pulled off Allison's shorts. Her panties were yellow. She turned to me, her eyes closed again. My penis grew hard. And it bothered me that I couldn't tell what she thought of all this. Was she submitting? I kissed her nose and pulled her closer -- "I like you," I said again -- and I kept pulling her away until I fell off the bed and she followed, landing on me. "Ouch," she said.

We lay stuffed between the bed and the wall. Her body was stiff against mine. I could feel the corrugated bones of her ribs. "You okay?" I said.

"For hell's sake," Derrick said, "you're fucking this up." He knelt at the edge of the bed, gripping his penis. "Shit, man, it's supposed to be all of us."

She got off me and offered her hand. The lines on her face looked deeper. I didn't want to cause any trouble in their relationship. I wanted them to live out the days appreciating one another the way it's supposed to be done, the simplest of laws by which, no one (at least I knew) ever abided. She pulled me up. "Damn," Derrick said. Then I stood in the doorway saying, "How about I cook for everyone? We can have a good talk over a hearty meal, get to know things about each other. Hey,

you guys like Beef Wellington? It'll just take some minor ingredients."

"Wait," said Allison, looking small in her t-shirt. "Maybe a talk is good. You know" -- she turned to Derrick who was scratching his stomach -- "a talk."

"Whatever," Derrick said. "Just don't leave...not yet."

"I'm feeling lonely is all," I said. "Can we just lie here then?"

"All right, all right," Derrick said. "But no cooking business...besides, we're vegans."

"It's a deal," I said, removing my sneakers. I got on the bed and slipped my feet under the blanket. And we lay there (Derrick breathing heavily) with Allison in between, watching (at least, I was) the shadow in the shape of a box drift across the ceiling. A clock ticked somewhere in the kitchen. The shadow flinched.

"Where are you from?" she said, our hands interlocking.

"Connecticut."

"Hmm," she said. "What brings you out here?"

"A death."

"A death?"

Ah, finally a real conversation. I was about to explain -- it felt appropriate, even though I'd promised myself I wouldn't -- when a large dark oval intersected the shadow on the ceiling, and there, beside me, breathing through his nose, knelt Derrick, lowering himself over Allison's face, his thing like a shovel extending from his body.

"Christ almighty," I said. He ignored me, and his tongue began tapping against the front of Allison's panties. I got up and grabbed my sneakers. I scurried into the living room, the furniture turning various shapes in the shadows. "Hey," I heard Allison say. My mouth went dry.

I bolted out the front door. The sidewalk stung my feet. Rays of headlights washed over me. Where could I go? Oh, God. Anywhere. Anywhere but back in my Aunt's apartment with the cigarette sheets. No way. No way.

I stopped running. Crickets rattled in the bushes lining the road. I stepped onto someone's lawn. No lights were on in their house. And when I looked ahead I saw, off in the distance, the dark outline of the mountain top with a tower blinking its red light, and I stood there terrified to think what lay behind it.

I hurried back. Into the red light of the lawn, leaping over two sleeping dogs, past the hammocks, through the living room, the kitchen (the lantern had burned out), and then the bedroom, where Derrick and Allison sat at either side of the bed, with their feet resting on the same pillow. I dropped my sneakers. They both looked. "I'm ready," I said.

### Zate Boogies Through the Alleyway

Zate slips on the oven mitts -- "Can't scratch me now," he says -- reaches behind the stove, and grabs the neighbor's cat by the neck. He squeezes, his forearms burning. The feline gasps, its tongue jabbing out. Always a reminder! Even its goddamn fur is the same color of his ex-girlfriend's hair, like dried-up leaves. "You are not," he says, pounding the cat's head against the counter, "going to bother me -- pounce, pounce, pounce -- or my cat anymore! Got that?"

The thing lets out its final breath, its whiskers like wires against his arm. Zate also lets out a breath, tasting the horseradish from the bloody Mary's he's drunk. "Shit," he says, "now what?"

Zate rushes onto the porch. The sun pierces through a gap in the clouds, just over the mountain top covered in miniature pine trees. He looks up, sneezes, and yells, "Been gone long enough, don't you think!" The sun slips behind a cloud again.

He takes the cat down the stairs, drops it by the mailbox, and rushes to the front yard, where the cars race by because that's what they do, these people driving places and purchasing products Zate can't afford with his salary from the radio station, and oh, goddamnit...now he's getting sidetracked. Has



he been that unfocused lately to have just killed this thing?

Yes, he answers himself, in fact I have.

Wait a second, the cat! He drops the oven mitts and hurries into the backyard. He picks it up, its muscles rubbery in his hands.

Back to the front yard he sprints. Again, the cars: tires spinning along the wet pavement. He can't just throw the animal away, can he? From the cat's nose blood goops out, staining his finger. Its eyes are gray balls reflecting Zate's head and the branches above him, so that it looks as if his face is hovering in the tree.

Maybe he could mail the carcass to his ex-girlfriend who'd been so *god damn* opposed to killing it. Ever since they'd moved into this attic apartment last year, the sonofabitching neighbor's cat was just whipping the bowels out of his own cat - - last weekend his cat actually deposited a walnut-shaped piece of crap on the porch, after it just got its head wrung by its nemesis. The routine: Zate would let his cat out only to later hear deep-from-the-throat moans and then the neighbor's cat would strike and you'd hear that shriek. Zate would dart out the door and chase that quick fucker down the stairs. "Stop harassing me," he'd say. At first he started throwing spoons at its butt as it wobbled down the steps. That didn't accomplish much, though. So next time he threw a rock, and that kept the little bastard away for a whole what...three hours?

And there was its owner, the guy with the black goatee and black long hair. Could he look anymore like civilian Satan?

They only talked once. Zate was on his way back from spin class (his ex-girlfriend had purchased him a gym membership, to get rid of those bagels around your waste, she said) when he saw the owner out back with a stick in his hand. Zate walked up to him and asked, "What's with the stick, man?" The guy clasped the lower region of his goatee. "Oh, this...well, I was going to smack my cat with it. She's been fighting again."

"No shit," said Zate. "It won't leave my cat alone. Keeps accosting her. I mean, you'd think your cat was getting paid to bump mine off."

"You ain't alone, brother. Let me tell you, she goes after all the cats around here. Then comes in soaked in blood. Then wants to go back out for more." Civilian Satan smiled -- his teeth remarkably white within the beard -- and headed for the backyard with the stick dragging behind.

When he first suggested to his ex that he could murder that cat, she said, "Get out there and talk to its owner again. Be an adult for once, Zate. Tell him the score!" "The score," Zate said. "The score! Sorry, honey, things just don't work that way." In short, they both knew Zate didn't have the courage to kill an animal. For Christ's sake, he's twenty six years old and has never even been in a fist fight -- has never broken a bone, except for his tooth, when he was ten, when he fell down at the florist and chipped it against a shovel, and Dad wagged a finger and said, "Serves you right busying yourself into this nice woman's business. Now why don't you wipe off that blood and tell this lady that you're sorry for falling into

her shovel, and for God's sake stop whimpering." Now, if you got close enough, you'd see the discoloration on Zate's front tooth, on which a gray line runs diagonally across.

Can't think about Dad, Can't think about Dad...

A woman in a yellow sundress, pushing an empty baby stroller, moves toward him, the wheels crunching along the pebbles on the sidewalk. "Hello," he says. She says nothing. What's he doing, saying Hello to strange women on the street? Zate tucks the cat in his arm, leaping the curb.

It wasn't as if she (his dearest companion of six years, mind you!) wrote a note and took off. If only it were that simple. No way, she dropped the cruel bomb during the month of April, saying she'd move back to Connecticut at the end of summer, this way she could keep her job that provided health insurance, which enabled her to take the acne medicine, because only she, it seemed, would start breaking out at the age of twenty-five (Zate had always accused her of having bad luck). He couldn't resist making certain allusive comments. For instance: "Uh, honey, there's a white head on your nose." The reply: "Thanks for noticing, Zate. I mean, do you really think I didn't know a snow-capped zit was growing on my face, you prick?"

So his ex-girlfriend -- The Cunt Tessa! -- drove off last month, and even though thirty days have gone by, Zate feels as if he's still lying squashed beneath that bomb, wishing it'd just go off already

Could he blame her? So she wanted to go off on her own. Hadn't Zate been wanting out as well, hadn't he been wanting to grope every attractive woman he saw? (not to mention a few of the high school girls that strolled around his neighborhood during lunch break, some of whom lapped at ice-cream cones...oh, but that sort of lusting after youth was considered uncivilized, and Zate preferred not to grind against the grain of society). Sure, he'd told himself during the relationship, he wanted to date other women, but ultimately he was loyal. Or, (this he's recently wondered) was the desire to stay with her actually fear of being lonely? Well, nonetheless, he didn't believe in infidelity. Zate, with a certain strain of concentration, always tries to push toward prudence: he's never even got a traffic violation, except, of course, for the fact that he just killed an animal...oh, shit, the cat!

Oh, God, oh God.

Zate keeps running.

Cars swish by. A horn beeps. It beeps once more. To the right, behind a red house, lies a man face down on a hammock, with arms dangling off like wings from a big fat plane that crashed long ago. Is that guy happy?

Zate turns the corner, spinning around the U.S. mail box.

In April, after Cuntessa had just delivered the news, Zate, numb with shock, said, "You know what, I think we can do it. Yeah, who says we can't? Why can't two people broken up live under the same slanted roof?" So they'd spend a few months together, she'd leave at end of August. And Zate was thinking: Starting September he'd have one night stands with a series of

mornings in which silk panties would be strewn on his carpet. Maybe he'd end up naked with a thirty-nine-year-old divorcee who'd take him places guys his age weren't sexually certified to go.

So the decision for the break-up was made. Then the sun got hotter and stayed out longer and Zate and his long time companion began to make love on a daily basis, eating out at restaurants and chatting with forks held up, like two people who've recently met. Eventually, over the course of the summer, their bliss inflated itself with such intensity that it drifted higher and higher to one day pop -- at which point its remnants, like snapped-up photographs of good times, fluttered over them.

It was the day they went swimming at the nude section by the river, about a week before her departure date, when Zate was going to suggest they give it another try, because he'd never felt so *in* love in all their six years of glorious togetherness.

He wanted her to love him again. Before he got a chance to ask her to stay, though, she said she had a confession. Zate was standing naked in the water. She was applying lotion around her breasts. A confession? Yes, a confession: she'd sixty-nined with one of her co-social workers. Sixty nine! Couldn't they just hump like normal citizens, would that have been too much to ask? No, instead they had to go lock their bodies in a way Zate was sure the majority of the conservatives -- take his parents, for instance -- had never even thought of.

Apparently the guilt had been festering inside of her. "I've got something I need to tell you, Zate," she said, the

lotion making a fart noise as she squirted it onto her palm. The introduction of the confession hurt more than the actual facts. Oh, the anticipation! *I've got something I need to tell you...* "Well," he said. "Say it already!" She put her hand to her forehead to shield the sun. She told him. Zate said, "Really," and then attempted to drown himself. Beneath the water green rocks shimmered from the sunlight slicing in from above.

But she pulled him up by the hair. Then he dried off, opened a Pepsi can, and asked a few questions. (Because one queries when first hearing about such a fling, when one is at once jealous and dangerously curious.) He asked: "Who was on top?"

She said she was.

"Did you come?"

She said she did not. Not the first time, anyway.

"You did it twice? Oh, God...so, did he have a big dick?"

She said she would not answer that.

Zate's penis got hard. Luckily they were alone at the nude section of the river.

"Let's go home," she said.

Zate asked no more. He jumped back under the water and exhaled, the rocks turning red beneath him.

You'd think his honey, his jelly roll, could have spared him the news about her affair. You'd think she could've clenched that secret like a note in her hand as they hugged their last good-bye in the driveway.

For a while he attempted denying her existence altogether. How could he deny it when he had no current experiences from which to draw and replace the image of his sexy ex and that man he'd never met? Besides, he thought, there're just too many damn questions. *Did she swallow? Did she lick his balls? Did they lie there naked afterwards, chatting, laughing, gripping hands, holding in gas the way respectful, newcomers do?* Boy did he try, but he couldn't stop picturing the scenario. For instance: Did she crawl toward him on the bed, slowly turn around, lower herself onto his face, and when she felt that tongue flickering against her, did she whip her head up at the ceiling, on which, perhaps, a spider was scurrying along, and say, "Ooooooh, that's the spot, boyo. You've got it, you've got it." Or: perhaps the dude had wrestled her into it, and she gave in and, while slurping away at his tip, thought how foolish and hussyish of her to do such a thing when her soon-to-be ex was spinning records at the local radio station, because, after all, he was too confused and ill-motivated to major in anything worthwhile, except for Communications, and now that he finally got that on-air shift he'd been wanting...so what if it's three till five in the morning, so what if he's obligated to play Kenny G., which is what the listeners want. So what if he just blabs into the microphone sometimes for twenty minutes, and when he wakes up hours later, after his nap, feeling sluggish as if he'd swallowed a bucket of hot tar, he can't remember what he said in real time or dream time

Zate's galloping down the sidewalk. The cat's blood feels cold against his fingers. Odd, it only died a short while ago. Then Zate realizes, as he turns another corner, that he doesn't know where the hell he's going. He spins around and heads for his apartment.

To shock that visual out from his brain -- Cuntessa and Superman munching on each other -- Zate's been walking around imagining himself sixty-nining with every woman, fat or thin or short or tall, that comes his way. During spin class, for instance, he'll pump his legs on the bike wanting to lay the instructor -- or any other female spinner -- along the orange rubber mats and sniff her crotch like a lost dog searching for an owner to whom he could submit his utter loyalty.

On the other hand, perhaps she was getting back at him for all those times he'd spit out the criticisms. An allusion: "You know, maybe you should try and be less vocal all the time, like, maybe you talk a just bit too much." The reply: "See, this is what I've been talking about all along, Zate. You don't know how to communicate with me on a rational level." An action: one morning over the winter, he hung her plaid robe from the iced-over tree branch that stretched over the porch, because he got so goddamn sick of seeing it scrunched up on the bathroom floor.

A UPS truck zips past him, the driver's arm held out the window. Perhaps if Zate respected her more there'd be a chance he could move back east and they could reunite. But now she's seeing someone else! Her letter showed up last week. She's existing in another universe as far as he's concerned, living on



the east coast, and now the mere thought -- her actually dating someone, an Englishman of all people, a bloke! -- flaps around him like a bat he can't shoo away. Shoo shoo shoo! Still, it whips and dips and flaps. Perhaps, he figures, if he were dating someone, that pestering thought would go hang upside down in the closet and Zate could forget about it.

"Goddamnit," Zate says, his head sweating, gripping the dead cat against his chest. "I'm actually drunk." How long has he been drinking...since noon maybe? All because of that promiscuous sonofabitching woman he ended up with last night at the bar. Oh, but it wasn't her fault. If only he could go back to the night and start things over. She was ten years older than he, she was fat, but she had breasts the size of softballs, and his ex-girlfriend had little ones. Boy was he drunk last night. So that was it, huh? He was trying to extract the mere idea of his ex-girlfriend by fucking someone entirely different.

This morning Zate woke up feeling as if his brain had been soaking in warm cooking oil all night. His nosed was stuffed. And he was about to reach over to the bed stand where he kept tissues (because every time he'd leave the tissues in his bathroom, his cat would rip the whole lot of them into narrow strips) and just when he was about to snag a tissue he noticed a slope of egnog colored skin in the way -- with a tattoo of a palm tree etched on the stomach -- and then he saw the face out of which a small nose, like a knuckle, had grown, and those eyes embedded within the fat under the black eyebrows. And oh, *man!* was she looking exactly like his sister. His sister! What kind

of luck was that? Zate didn't like being reminded of his sister. Sister, thirty-three years old, was back home -- two thousand miles away -- still living with the parents. Sister had three kids, and her husband had left her because, he'd said, he couldn't take the fat anymore, and now the husband, the drunk, had slunk his way back in, so the entire family was living in that house, the three kids staying in Zate's old room. Zate couldn't visit anymore. The house was a mess. And now his mother had a cyst on her heart, and osteoporosis, because she was carrying the goddamn family on her back. Was that enough? Hell negative! Two days ago Dad called from Pennsylvania threatening to come visit for a while. "I can't take that house anymore, Zate. I can't. I'm on my way. I'm driving out there."

"Dad, don't. Go back, you should go back and help Mom. She's under enough pressure as it is. Dad, please, here me out!"

"I've already gone this far, Zate. It's a goddamn madhouse. I'll show you're mother. You know why, she wants to raise those kids, her and Jesus, the two of them. I'm telling you, Zate, I'm getting tired of hearing about Jesus, I'm tired of living with Mother Theresa."

"DAD, NO!..."

Can't think about Dad, can't think about Dad...

Zate throws the cat over his shoulder and picks up pace. He hops a puddle. He runs onward.

So this morning, anyway, he was lying with his hands clamped around his head, trying to shake the idea of his sister

out from his brain when he saw a door in the wall, and next to the door was a map of what looked to be...Europe? What the fuck? Oh God! he thought, I'm not home at all. I knew that door was out of place. I'm in *her* bed! The woman was still asleep with little wind noises coming out that nose of hers. "I'm sorry," he said, touching blanket that covered her leg. "I have to go," he said. But she didn't wake up. And it took some sneaky maneuvering -- he'd left a sock under the sheets -- to get to the outside (it wasn't too hot yet; it was early morning of which the sharp air stung his lungs) and Zate took off sprinting for his apartment, his forehead pounding as if about to give birth to a creature.

He stumbled inside the attic and fell onto his bed, his stomach doing somersaults. Ooooh, that fat woman -- she'd smelled like stale gin and peaches. Could he sleep? No! So he got up and concocted a bloody Mary from the mix his ex-girlfriend had bought for their Christmas eve party to which one person had shown, then he dumped in the vodka his grandfather (who had Alzheimer's) had sent in the mail.

And he was guzzling his third bloody Mary, thinking: what am I longing for? I need to make a change -- when out of the corner of his vision he saw the evil cat crouching beside the stove. "Hey!" he yelled. It must have climbed through the bathroom window he'd left open for his own cat. He leaned down to grab sit! It hissed, its teeth showing, then clawed his wrist.

And, oh geez! here he sweats later on with the dead cat in his hands. The Green Fabric Softener laundry mat is coming at him, getting closer. Zate makes a turn and hurries past its large windows, at which point he sees inside a girl holding up a bra to the fluorescents. The cat falls out of his arms, landing on the bench, its back curling slowly over the head until the whole thing *thumps* to the concrete.

Zate picks it up by the tail. He cradles it.

Then this on-looker, who's a looker (that's the way Dad refers to an attractive female) stares behind slits of eyes, still holding up the bra.

Zate moves to the doorway.

She puts down the bra, covers it with her hands. She has a wide mouth and thin lips (recently the program manager told Zate that a person, if interested, can tell the size of a woman's vagina by the width of her mouth, and since then Zate can't stop staring at female mouths, sizing them up. An awful practice, he knows, utter objectification! -- he doesn't even believe in this myth -- but he can't stop. Everywhere he goes he looks at their mouths.) This girl's got a silver hoop in her nose. It looks painful. She's just staring at him. "What!" he yells. "What what what what!"

"Nothing," she says. "Is your cat all right?"

Zate pets the cat. He puts the cat's head to his lips -- its fur is like sandpaper -- and kisses it. "It's fine."

"It doesn't look very fine."

"It's nothing," Zate says. With his foot, he itches his other ankle, wondering if this girl enjoys sixty-nining, if she's the type to initiate, to plant herself over the man (or maybe she's done it with a woman, oh, Lordy) or is she the type to sneer at that sort of thing in bed?...oh, he can't not get rid of that thought: his ex and that mystery man interwoven on where, he never asked. Had they done it on the floor, in the bath, on the bed? Was she now doing the same with the Englishman?

The girl is shaking her head. This poor attractive, young woman with little boy hips, Zate thinks. I don't deserve to be in the same room as her. Zate turns away. Across the street an older man, with arms crossed, sits on the front stoop. Help me, Zate wants to say to the man.

"Well," says the girl, "It looks sick to me. Do you mind if I just take a look at it?"

Zate turns back, says, "Of course not," and takes off running. He feels her gawking at him. He has to get rid of this cat -- the evidence!

Zate's feeling guilty for all the imaginary vaginas he's licked, attached to real women strutting the streets, combing the grocery aisles. He thinks: What have I become? A monster who can no longer look at a woman without imagining her planting a cunt to my face. Where's all this lust coming from? "Oh, God," he says, running, panting, "I should be locked up."

Zate boogies through the alleyway, which, in this Northwestern town surrounded by mountains, isn't an alley in the

conventional sense, it's just a narrow street, actually, that runs between the real streets. It does, however, have a dumpster along its side.

A dumpster with a pad lock. "Damn."

Sweat leaks into his eyes. The cat feels heavy again. He reaches the next alley way leading to his attic, sprints past The Green Fabric Softener -- that girl's nowhere to be seen -- and hurries through the backyard and up the porch. Once inside, he drops the cat on the kitchen floor which is covered in jagged shadows. His own cat walks up and begins to sniff the dead cat. "You won't have to worry anymore about your nemesis," Zate says.

His cat looks up with yellow bubble eyes, as if to say, *I don't speak your language, you fool. Stop explaining things to me.*

The phone rings.

Zate goes to the bedroom window, leans down, and splits the blinds to peer out at the neighbor's house. Great, Civilian Satan's home, at least, his front door is open. The guy usually leaves it open when he gets home, a little something Zate has noticed all those days he considered killing the cat.

Couldn't he could just talk to the man and admit to the murder? No no no! that would only make things worse. The phone rings. He could just plant the cat in the yard and not tell anyone about it, and Civilian Satan will discover the carcass and think that perhaps the birds had put the lynch on his feline. The phone rings. Oh, what about that girl from the laundry mat? She had to have known the cat was dead.

The phone rings. The answering machine beeps. The message: "Zate, it's Dad. Where the hell are you? I'm at a gas station in Wyoming. God, it's hotter than a sweatshop. It's got to be one hundred degrees. Zate, damnit, pick up!"

Can't think about Dad...can't think about Dad...

Zate turns the ringer off.

In the kitchen his cat is licking the line of blood off the dead cat's fur. "Stop that. Cut that out!" Zate picks up his own cat -- it squawks -- and throws it into the bedroom, shutting the door on his way out. Another message: "Zate! Damn it all, pick up! Where are you? I'm sweating, my air conditioner isn't working. You didn't answer the phone last night. You better not be in there pulling any stunts. I just drove a million miles and I need a place to stay tonight. These corporate motels charge right up the shitter...Zate!"

An idea: A duffel bag.

Why hadn't he thought of this before? Zate puts the dead cat into the bag. One of its paws sticks out. Zate's forehead pulsates, and from the back of his mouth he can still taste the Tobasco from the Bloody Mary. He gulps down the rest of the vodka. "Yeeeh," he says, looking down at the white tiles, one of which is smeared with dots of dried blood. Oh, such a mess!

He begins wiping it off with a paper towel, which has pink diamonds running across it, not unlike the paper towel the fat girl used to wipe off the cum last night, which means they didn't use a condom...ahhh! Zate pulls down his shorts to inspect.

At the base of his penis is a galaxy of red spots. Now, are those from chafing or are they initial signs of the herpes virus nestling within the skin of his member? Oh, dear. Avoid it, avoid it. He puts his dick back. Then shoves the paw in the bag and zips it shut.

Forget this. He's going to admit the truth. He's going to show the dead cat to the guy.

The sunlight touches his eyes, and it isn't until he skips to the bottom of the steps and lands on the walkway that he gains back full sight. And there stands Civilian Satan in a Hawaiian shirt, gripping that long stick and smiling, his teeth the color of the beaches on his shirt. "Hey, man. Have you seen my cat?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Zate's heart flops, and he thinks of bat wings. *Tell him! Tell him!* The weight of the bag is burning up through his forearm.

"Well," says the guy, "where was he? Was the little bastard sleeping under your car again?"

"Here you go," Zate says, handing over the bag.

"What's this?"

The zipper zips open, and the guy is peering down at his dead cat. "Whoa," he says dropping the bag to the concrete walkway.

"I'm really sorry, I wasn't thinking straight. It's just that, I killed your cat because it was slowly killing mine."



"You piss ant," Civilian Satan says, taking a few steps back until he stands up to his knees in the bushes. "What am I supposed to think about this, huh? You actually killed my cat."

Zate closes his eyes, remembering, over the summer, a conversation about -- he hears the bushes rustling, he hears pebbles being crushed from Civilian Satan's footsteps coming for him -- anyway a conversation about bar fights at a bar with an old guy wearing a large white foam hat that said, in blue letters, *Make Someone Happy. Mind Your Own Business.* The old guy was saying, "Soon as you anticipate the damn punch, just relax all your muscles...like you're lying naked on a massage table. This way the impact won't hurt as much, trust me."

Zate lets his shoulders fall. A punch, he thinks, will be the best thing for me right now. I need to pay for my mistakes. He clenches his teeth. He imagines himself nude, with soft finger tips clamping the skin around his neck. His spine tingles, goes cold. He hears Civilian Satan spit.

And Zate is backpedaling across the lawn. Suddenly his cheeks are warm.

Above him is a telephone wire on which a small black bird stands, and then Zate realizes he is lying on the ground, looking up at the bird. He must have fallen down. That's it! because his lower back throbs. He runs a finger over his face. He wasn't hit. Why'd he fall then?

The guy stands over him, his wavy hair blocking out the sunlight. He chews on his lower lip which looks purple. "Listen, I know the cat was a problem. All the neighbors,

including you, complained about. But, I mean, for fuck's sake, you could've discussed this with me. We could've worked out some deal."

There are red blotchy slits, like scars, running along side the guy's nose. Are those broken capillaries from crying? Zate's ex used to get those mornings after they'd argue all night. *You're so afraid of life*, Zate would always tell her.

Zate says, "I couldn't help myself. I'm Sorry."

"If you apologize once more I'll put out your face like a cigarette." The guy snorts. Then holds out a palm. His goatee is in the shape of a shovel, and Zate imagines his own face being kicked in. Then he'd walk around with a massive bruise on his cheek, a bandage across his eye, maybe he'd have to get dental work. His damaged face would make Dad nervous. What the hell you doing out here? Dad would say, then go back home where they need him. Even better, Zate can call his ex and say, *Honey, I've done something horrible, and I've learned from it.*

"You want up or what?"

"Yes, I do."

Zate feels a ping in his forehead when he gets pulled up. He tastes horseradish, trying to concentrate. His palms are stained red...from blood or bloody Mary mix?

"So what the hell were you thinking, man? It's just a cat."

"You want to have me arrested?"

"Look, the cops are the last crowd I feel like getting involved with today, all right?" He looks up at the sky, which

is the color of wet cement, the clouds lowering behind the mountain on which the sun, from the other side of town, the west perhaps? throws a few rays turning the miniature pine trees an electric green.

The guy's still looking. He has to do *something* about all this! He can't just stand there. Zate says, "You're welcome to hit me or something."

Still staring at the mountain, he says, "No no. My hitting days are over...just like this cat." He leans down and picks up the duffel bag -- a paw sticking out -- and steps into the middle of the lawn. Then starts spinning around like a discus thrower, the bag extending out into the air as he picks up momentum, round and round, his black hair fanning outward, until he lets go and the black bag sails across the backyard where it lands on the grass beside the wheel barrel. "I guess that's the end of him," says the man.

"Wait!" Zate hustles over to the bag, saying, "You can't just throw it away." He picks it up, slings it over his shoulder, and carries it back across the yard, holding out a hand as he talks: "I mean, you have to give it a proper burial or something."

The man, with fists at his side, marches toward Zate. "Proper burial?" he's saying, his black eyes ballooning larger as nears. "You killed it. And now you want to have a funeral for the thing?" His large hands reach out and grab Zate by the T-shirt, pinching his chest. His eyelashes are long. His breath smells of onions. Zate's legs quiver. Come on, he

thinks. Punch me. Knock me on my ass. Punish me, you sonofabitch!

"Man," says the guy, "I thought I was fucked up." And he lets go of his grip and walks back toward the house.

"Hey! It's not going to bury itself, you know...fine, I'll take care of it. It's my responsibility anyway, and --"

The guy punches Zate's mailbox. Which now leans to the side. "All right, you neurotic little shit, listen, once and for all. That cat's been driving me up the goddamn ass. You see" -- he pulls back on the mailbox until it stands straight -- "it's my ex-wife's. She left me with it. So I just fed the fucker, I don't know. I didn't even let it inside. It only caused problems around here anyway. All the *neighbors*" -- he holds up his hands, as if there's a audience of people listening -- "all the *neighbors* were complaining about! Maybe that lady upstairs was right. The cat was a demon."

Zate rubs his fingertips over his eyes, and there are swirls of yellow things, like animals of all sorts, diving in and out of his vision. He opens his eyes and ascends the steps to his apartment. His legs are rubbery, and he's trying to find a reason as to why he should go back inside -- where there are probably more messages from Dad, where his ex' silver dress, the one she forgot, hangs in the closet -- when he remembers that he's still carrying the bag on his shoulder.

"Hey," says the guy, "it's hotter than snatch out here. Why don't you come in for a beer."

"That wouldn't be right," Zate says, switching the bag to his other shoulder.

"Forget the cat already. Come in for a beer. Maybe we can work out a deal. You took my cat. I take something of yours." The guy tugs on his goatee, then stares down at a squirrel, who's stopped in mid-scurry on the concrete walkway, as if to go unnoticed, and now they're both looking at the squirrel, Zate assuming Civilian Satan has gone through a miserable break-up with his ex-wife, and perhaps some nights he longs for her to sit beside him and talk to him; perhaps he feels as if part of his spirit, like a lung, has been removed.

"All right," Zate says, "a beer. But I still think it's not right."

"Something tells me you don't know much about what's right."

When did he ever know, when was the last time he even felt satisfied with anything? Zate places the bag under the steps -- he will deal with it later -- and follows the man into his apartment. They walk through the empty room with the yellow carpet and into another room in which a piano stands in the corner, with its white keys ripped off, revealing the finger-tip stained raw wood, the color of Zate's Grandpa's skin. And on top of the piano bench is an empty frozen dinner plate on which Zate notices, as he gets closer, a lady bug passing through one of its plastic sections laden with bits of meat...pork, maybe? "In here," says the guy, and Zate steps over an empty box to get to the kitchen which smells like burnt toast.

"Thanks for invitation," Zate says.

"Thanks for knocking off my cat," says the guy, laughing with his head in the refrigerator. The outside light glitters off the silverware piled in the tub of water in the sink. Then it's gone: the ray of sun shooting out of the room. Damn clouds again. Zate's forehead pulsates. The hangover's beginning.

And the guy is no longer laughing. He leans against the counter, puts a finger in his mouth and bites on it, squinting.

"I'm really sorry," Zate says.

"Enough already."

Maybe he can become friends with this guy. Together they can discuss their breakups. Zate says, "So, tell me about your divorce. Was it bad?"

The guy pulls out a chair, rests his hairy knee on it and says, "Man, you're out of your mind. I didn't invite you in here to talk about my divorce. I'm just trying to get on with things. I certainly didn't invite you over for a beer talk about *that*." He grins. "So, have you got a CD player?"

"Sure...take whatever you want."

"We'll see, we'll see." He reaches down, itches his ankle, then takes off his sneaker, of which the Adidas stripe has been ripped off. Zate's ex wore the same kind, except hers were red, and Zate's thinking of that afternoon -- it was at her picnic work party -- watching her lying on the grass by the dandelions, thinking how sexy her ankles would have looked if only they'd been shrunken down somehow. Would he ever learn to actually appreciate things? To appreciate one, Zate thinks, is a difficult task.

Well, for one, he can't think about her for a while. And if he does, of course, he certainly can't refer to her as Cuntessa. It's just not right. Zate stretches his neck as the ceiling spins over him. Beer bottles are clanking.

"How about just a toaster? My toaster's been blowing fuses left and right." He hands Zate a beer.

"You can have anything. I want to help you out." He has to return to his attic and start to figure some things out. He takes a sip, the carbonation stinging his throat. "Thanks for the beer, but I have to move on." Zate stands up.

"I'll stop by later on with a shopping bag."

"Remember, if you get angry or something, talk to me. You can still hit me, you know." The guy grins, and then Zate's leaping over the empty box, trotting past the piano, rushing to the outside where it's sprinkling, the rain cooling his head. He picks up the bag, the weight of it familiar in his hand.

He sprints to the darkness of the shed -- a spider web covers his face -- and grabs a shovel. He's going to bury this cat, somewhere anyway. He has to finish it before Dad calls again. For the first time in six years he'll have to sort through these problems without out her help. For instance, he'll have to deal with his family. How long can he deny their existence?

I am alone, he thinks, dropping the shovel and tasting the web in his mouth. Zate sits on the picnic table and holds the cat whose fur is moist from the rain. And he closes his eyes and sees her, standing before the mirror, her plaid robe bundled up at her feet, drying her red hair with the brown roots. "I'm

sorry," he says in thing's ear. He hugs it. It doesn't smell dead or rotten just yet. He'll hold it here for a while. It seems the thing to do.



### **BB in the Chest**

My older brother Wayne used to shoot me with the BB gun. It was never loaded. After a while I got used to it. I stopped flinching. I no longer put my hands in front of my face and crouched behind the bed yelling, Don't do it, don't do it! Getting shot by the spits of air became customary in our bedroom, and after a few months enduring this subtle torture, I figured I had earned not only Wayne's respect but my own: the ability to face the barrel without fear.

Then he actually shot me. I was thirteen. It was a summer night. Our parents had gone to the prayer meeting, our mother to chat with Jesus, our father to eat the post-prayer refreshments.

Wayne and I had been lying across from each other on our separate beds. He was going to let me tag along with him to the carnival that night. Now that was a treat. And I didn't want to blurt out anything meaningless or unfunny, anything that would have him saying, *That's it, you lose. You can't go.* So I was listening to him crack his knuckles, feeling a great sense of sibling camaraderie when he sat up and said, No, now I'm sure of it. Luke's gay.

It was the second time that week Wayne had mentioned our older brother's sexuality. Once again I had to feign ignorance. Over the spring Luke had told me and shown me that he was gay. Well, the showing part was accidental, since I caught him making out with his best friend in our basement one night when I went downstairs to watch TV. And *Oh my God!* there they sat entangled on the couch. Fingers were scurrying over their necks and shoulders, little nostrils poking out for air. I held a bag of chips. I felt lightheaded. I said, *What?* Luke shut his eyes. All three of us were freaky nervous under the basement light bulbs, waiting for someone to say something -- *someone* had to talk! Finally Luke said, *Oh.* I looked at the wires webbing down from the ceiling Dad was supposed to repair. Luke's friend stood up and backpedaled into Dad's workshop. I was about to exit myself when Luke pointed and said, *No way, no how you're telling anyone about this. Got that?*

Tell anyone? I didn't want to tell myself.

The next morning Luke dropped me off at school. We were parked behind a school bus backing toward us, its reverse horns beeping as Luke explained that he was a gay guy and probably always would be. Thanks a lot, I said and got out, slamming the door before I could hear a reaction. I faced the school lobby feeling like I'd just been handed a secret the size of a bowling ball. Luke drove off, back to college. I tried not to lay too much emphasis on what he'd just told me. Actually, it took a few months to cram that knowledge into my subconscious -- the

sucker was heavy. Still, I'd been doing a damn good job keeping it all down and leave it to Wayne bring it back up.

I'm telling you he's a fag, he said.

You're talking out of your ass.

I'll talk out of any hole I want. There's too much evidence not to.

Evidence?

That's right! He splayed out his hand, bent each finger as he went through the list: Think about it, he doesn't play sports, I mean, we have hockey skates, he has figure skates. He goes camping with that *best friend* all the time, just the two of them in a tent with a bottle of wine. Hasn't had a girlfriend in God knows how long.

And he's a cheerleader, I said, wishing I'd just kept my mouth shut. The fact was Luke *had* joined the cheerleading squad at college, one of those fit chumps who holds the babe in the air by her crotch and cheers for the team.

There you go, Wayne said. How many dudes you know are cheerleaders?

You thinking about asking him?

Not yet, he said. He walked over to the closet and grabbed the BB gun. Then sat down and shook it, like always, listening for a rattle in case a BB had got lodged inside the barrel. Nothing. He pumped the wooden handle a few times, studying me with those algae eyes of his, as if contemplating *my* sexuality, then peered at me through the scope. And as part of the ritual I tried to assume the deer-in-the-headlights pose.

Ten... nine... eight... better not flinch! he said. Flinch? I was too busy fidgeting my hands and trying to figure out how to join another family without Mom getting all pissy and worried.

This gay talk was like a toxic stench drifting in from a far-away place. Especially a month from high school where I planned to try out for freshman football, and after practice, based on what Wayne had said, the players showered in a large room bereft of curtains or dividers, lined with water spouts that sprayed the naked bodies. According to Wayne, there was a kid who'd got hard in the shower in front of his teammates -- did he just stare at it like it wasn't part of him, did he scurry off for a towel? -- and apparently a few days later the whole school knew about it. Seven... six... five...No question I'd have to flee Connecticut if my penis decided to flex itself before a group of a naked football players.

A few weeks after I'd caught Luke and his friend kissing, the skinny nun teacher stood before our class declaring homosexuality not only a sickness and a curse, but also hereditary. *Hereditary!* she said. Who was the sister kidding? I wanted her to elaborate, like maybe it only affected families from New Jersey.

But I knew that in our town lived a family in which the two brothers were homosexuals, both of whose names had been typed at the top of St. Jude's prayer list. Which meant Mom and company were praying fiercely on a daily schedule that soon the two sons would venture out from the dark gay forest and finally get their hands on some certified Catholic pussy.

Still, I was curious. I raised my hand and said, So, if one person in the family is gay, does that make everyone else in the house gay?

Listen, Keith, she said. God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Bruce. It's that simple!

I sat at my desk chewing my pencil. Don't think! don't think it! *I just might be one of the...gay...chosen.* Why Luke? Why our family? That fucker!

One, Wayne said.

And there came the spit of the barrel. There came the pain in my chest. It felt like I'd been punched. Popped by something more fierce than Wayne's fist. I couldn't breathe right. I put my hand to my chest. I saw the stripes on Wayne's tube socks and fell to my knees.

No, no, no! Wayne yelled. You're doing it all wrong. More wiggling. People *wiggle* when they get shot!

I'm not kidding, I said, lying face down on the hard-wood floor. I looked up and there was the black O of the barrel a few inches from my nose. I said, Stop it, dick.

Hey, Wayne said, I'll drop a BB in for real if you don't start taking this seriously.

My chest burned as I crawled up on the bed. Then we were both staring at the BB-size hole in the number 1 of my Roger Staubach jersey. Ass!

Don't get cranky, Keith. Maybe it bounced out.

How could it have bounced out?

Take it off then.

I removed my shirt. There was a red spot between my nipples, looking as if someone had secretly flecked it on with a paint brush. My head went heavy, and it seemed all the nervous butterflies were drowning in the acid of my stomach. I might puke, I said. I might puke on you.

Wayne put a hand on my shoulder, his lips and jagged teeth closer to me than usual. He said, Answer this, right now: think you need to go the hospital?

No way I'm going to a *hospital*, I said. I wanted to go to the carnival and stare at men and teenage boys, make sure once and for all I didn't have a speck of attraction or fondness for them!

Wayne clicked on the reading lamp which showed the sweat on his forehead. On, off. On, off. Bitch, he said and left the room.

Okay, I told myself. This can't be dangerous. It's just a BB. Aside from the pain my body seemed to function on normal mode. At least, my heart had slowed down. And I figured if an organ had been punctured or damaged I'd be unconscious, or dead, or even floating up to God the way people did in the stories Mom had told, how they whizzed through dark tunnels heading toward blinding mega lights. As always no one ever knew if they went temporarily blind or downshifted through the gates of heaven because those same unchosen who fell back into their bodies had only made it a block or two down the tunnel, with nothing to tell: no sight of God, his sandals-wearing Son or the Holy Spirit. Christianity is all Mom ever talked about. Which was

probably the main reason Luke had been terrified to make the leap out of the closet. Who could blame him? He knew damn well if Mom found out he'd been reborn into the alternate lifestyle, she'd just plain shit, as Wayne used to say, a *holy brick*. Then shower his head with holy water and guilt until he sixty-nined a girl in front of her just to prove his straightness.

Speaking of which, I hadn't had any proof of my own. Indeed, I liked girls. I liked their painted toe nails. The smell of their perfume. The thought of nipples guarded by silky bras. And ah, the look of an ankle coated in panty hose! Thing was, I'd yet to slide my hand down a girl's pants or even grope a pair of breasts. Did that mean all my under-the-blankets fantasies of older woman strutting topless down hotel hallways wearing only nylons, desperately knocking on doors in search of me, were mere products of over-compensation: that I really wanted a stiff one between my legs? Oh boy!

It looked as if a purple blanket had been draped outside the window, and I had to make sure I could still walk to the carnival -- BB or not -- to carry out my plan. I sat up, convinced my chest was feeling better.

Wayne walked in banging an ice pack against his knee. Still alive. How's it feeling?

Like a bee's in there. But I'm still going to this thing. Didn't pierce a lung or anything?

Why'd you have to shoot me?

He placed the pack over my chest, and little prickles of ice were crawling over me when he said, Think about it, there're

Vietnam Vets walking around with bullets and shrapnel stuck in them. You don't hear them complaining. Remember that movie we watched with Dad? Anyway, just stay away from places with metal detectors.

Metal detectors?

He sat on his bed. Forget it. Listen, you know I've been scanning the market for a girlfriend, right? Well, I've got this chick on mind and I just called her and she's going to meet us tonight. And get this, she might bring her friend. But don't be thinking you'll score some ass. She's my age.

Figures.

Typical Keith, he said. Knocking yourself down before getting into the ring.

Let's just go already!

We emerged from the shadows of the last lawn, the moon hanging like a giant eyeball over the neon action of the carnival. This place is packed, I said. You sure these girls will find us?

Across the street a cop waved us on. And we were heading for him when Wayne said, Yeah, and do me a favor, don't say the wrong thing in front of them.

What do you mean?

Just be yourself.

Myself? When am I not myself?

A man without a shirt was straddling a Harley, its engine rattling the street as he waited for us to cross. Steel-wool hair covered his stomach which was a sac of fat about to



explode. I sure as hell wasn't attracted to that guy. So far so good.

Like right now, Wayne said. You're nervous.

I'll act normal, now quit worrying. Our dad had always accused Mom of being *No earthly good*, and too nervous, and too chatty, and he'd say the same thing about Luke: *Just like his mother, never shuts up*. So the lady and the gay guy of the house were hyper-talkative, and now Wayne was labeling me the same. How was I supposed to know when it was cool to keep silent?

We marched into the crowd.

Rubber mats lay like paved roads here and there across the field to cover the network of thick wiring that snaked from the rides to the food tents. We headed for the ticket booth, our feet shuffling through the worn grass scattered with empty popcorn boxes and blades of shadows. People came at us in tube socks white and tube socks striped.

Wayne stopped. I stopped. Kids clasping onto steering wheels zipped past us, their mothers and fathers forming a circle around the ride. Wayne hopped up and down a few times, trying to gaze over the people, and said, Let's go.

We hurried past the food tent which smelled like clam chowder. And we were moving through the stream of walking bodies, passing the game booths when suddenly I realized the carnival activities didn't excite me anymore. I needed something to fulfill me on a mental level. I wanted a sexuality detection booth, like those love machines in which you deposit a

quarter and then slide a finger into a slot, wait for the meter to reveal exactly how loving or horny or masochistic your mood. I could insert my hand, or better yet, my penis, into a plastic hole and the words GAY or STRAIGHT would flash in neon letters. And once and for all the on-lookers and I would know the verdict! Except for Jesus, of course, who'd already had the scoop, since, like Mom had implied over the years, he had my thoughts tapped.

Wayne grabbed my arm. He pointed to the corner of the field where two gigantic spice jars -- one black, one white -- spun around upside down, whipping along a larger circumference. Salt and Pepper, he said and grinned.

He bought tickets, gave me half. I put them in my palm, began clenching my fist which activated the sting in my chest. Behind him the Ferris wheel blurred into a neon disc. All right, he said. You're not riding anything unless you're feeling one-hundred percent with that thing inside you. What do you think?

No problem, I said, pumping my hand until my eyes teared, trying desperately to be the cool and quiet type.

You're right, fuck the BB for now.

Along the rubber mats we strolled, and then Wayne told me to hold a place in line while he scoped out the crowd for the chicks, said he'd be right back.

High school kids loitered at the fringe of the woods just outside the orange fence, some of them looking around without smiles as if searching for a boy to use as a dummy bag. Eventually they smoked their way to the back of the line and

without turning I could smell beer. I was supposed to be saving a spot, warning these older fellows -- who'd been drinking -- that a party of three would be joining this portion of the line, and would they kindly step back when they showed up?

Instead I pressed my hand over my chest, wondering if I could yank out the BB, the way you'd pull out a splinter, when somebody hit me from behind.

Hey, I said. I bumped into the kid in front of me. I had to grab onto his arms to keep from falling - it felt like socket wrenches were embedded beneath his skin. Line's going nowhere, he said.

I stood wedged between two bodies, a vice of torsos squishing my chest. Cut it out! I said. The line contracted. We lurched forward, then backward, forward again -- for a moment we stood upright, my chest throbbing -- and then the worn-out grass was coming up at me. I held onto the socket wrenches and closed my eyes as we crashed.

Something that didn't smell like anything was rubbing against my nose, and when I pulled back and opened my eyes I saw a head of blond hair. My hips were pressing against his butt which had a rubbery yet firm feel to it. Strange, I thought, this boy must be a runner or something, or maybe one of those gymnasts who flips around in tights.

Get the fuck off! he yelled. I rolled over and hit the grass, facing him. His eyebrows were like strands of wheat and my lips were close to his lips which I thought about kissing. I thought about kissing him...kissing...him He looked at me with squinting eyes. What's with you? he said standing up.

A boy's lips. Odd, they didn't seem that much different than a girl's really, even had the same pinkness to them...uh oh. Stop stop stop thinking that! Wait, had I just found the kid in front of me attractive?

Okay, I thought, standing up. I'll just sprint home and hide in the chimney and emerge when I figure out some answers. And I was about to run off when I saw Wayne strutting with a girl on either side of him, like he'd just stepped out of a magazine ad. One blonde, one brunette. The blonde wore a tank top and fire-engine green shorts. The brunette was smiling with her braces glittering under the lights -- this girl had on pink jeans cut off at the middle of her thick soccer thighs. Save us a spot? Wayne said.

Almost.

Wayne made that face with his lips turned inward, as if holding back an insult. No cutting, someone said. Wayne raised his chin toward that voice, then said, Fine, we'll just have to get in back no thanks to Keith here. Unless, Lorie can get in with you? He winked.

That'd be fine, I said.

Wayne got close with what smelled like chocolate breath. Jesus, Keith, you're sweating like a mother. That thing bothering you or what?

Stop worrying already, I said, my eyes fixed on Lorie, the brunette. Here was the sixteen-year-old public school girl bending over and using her red fingernails to scratch her ankle, her other hand gripping a cone of cotton candy, and oh will you

look at that! -- the fringe of white bra just visible under her T-shirt.

No punks from the back objected when she stepped in line. I couldn't look at the tanned boy with the rubbery butt, so I turned to her. Brown hair stood above her forehead as if supported by small twigs. She wore red lipstick, her face white as flesh hiding beneath the fabric of a bikini. Ever been on this ride? she said.

Not yet.

Me neither. She took a bite off the cotton candy. Her pink tongue dappled with moisture slipped out. She said, You'd think these idiots would learn how to make this stuff. I mean, it's the freaking *carnival!*

I wanted to kiss her. But the timing was wrong. Instead, I tried to think of something charming, to say. You going to be junior next year?

Hey, Wayne told me you got shot. Does it hurt or what?

Not really, it's just a BB.

Can I see it?

No...I mean, not in front all these people.

How about on the ride? She held the cotton candy to my mouth and I took a bite off the tip, wincing as if to agree that it did taste like crap, the whole time hoping the surrounding teens would think Lorie was my girlfriend, that we were a serious romantic unit whom other couples should model their behavior after. Lorie tossed the cotton candy into the garbage can.

The salt shaker slowed to a stop with red light bulbs blinking on its roof. It rocked for a moment before the mustached guy working the gig let go of the yellow lever and opened the door. Then the tanned kid and his friend stepped out with white teeth and grins. I closed my eyes as they passed, thinking I'd see that slick chump at the high school, thinking he'd haunt me for years, make cameo appearances in my dreams, pink lips and muscles and that rubber butt. Damn him!

The man pulled the bar over our waists and the door clicked. I shivered with nervousness.

The thing jerked, then lurched upward where it stopped and we sat there swaying while the pepper people exited beneath us. From behind my caged window I could see across the street and down the driveway, where a spotlight shone onto the statue of St. Jude who held his hand in the air as if to say, *Oooh, I know, I know*, to some question asked many years ago.

Okay, Lorie said. Let's see it.

She smelled like bubble gum and for the first time that night I was glad I'd got shot. Then suddenly I lost the optimistic grip on things. Here I was with an older chick and I didn't know how to act. I'd kissed a girl from my school during a spin-the-bottle session, but she'd looked like a younger version of my mother and I wasn't into it. Then I thought about that slick kid's face, those wheat-colored eyebrows, those tool arms, and I wanted to punch him out of my mind...oh, geez, here I was with Lorie: all sixteen years of her!

I lifted up my shirt.

Wow, you really did get shot.

With her fingertip she traced a circle around the hole which had turned purple. My upper body tingled. As did my lap: a surge of warmth spilling down my feet. She held her hand there and smiled. I smiled back, noticing the little blonde hairs growing out her thighs; I'd never thought of girls letting hair grow on their legs but it looked sexy and even made sense so I touched that muscled thigh, my fingers at the rim of her shorts and she didn't say anything, just gazed at my hand and then we were both staring at it like it belonged to someone else, as if it'd inexplicably groped its way into our shaker, so we watched it slither inside her shorts and I was feeling the silk hem of her panties -- oh boy, this was it! -- the fringe of prickly hairs, the heat of her body, about to slip it inside when she drove her fist into my chest.

Perv! she said.

I hugged myself, coughing.

Think I'm some sort of slut, huh?

No way. Honest, I don't. I'm sorry.

Sorry! Are you sure about that, are you?

Positive, I said. My chest pulsated as if driven by more than one heartbeat. Something was wrong in there. I needed a medic, needed to be lying on a table with needles stuck in my veins, people in white lab coats slicing me open.

The ride rocked and with a complete force, like it'd been kicked by a massive foot, thrust downward and I was clasping the bar and looking at my sneakers which were curling over me. It

picked up speed. Lorie screamed. I couldn't breathe straight. My head feet arms shoulders -- all whipping around as if the molecules that held them together were breaking apart from some distorted gravitational force. Round and round and round we spun until the momentum slowed and the shaker creaked and we were upright again, lowering to the grass. A head with a mustache appeared outside Lorie's window and said, Time's up, kids.

With my fingers to the wound, I ran after her, waving my other hand as if I could convince her to lie low about the incident which took place inside the salt shaker. She marched up to Wayne and her friend and said, Your brother's a sicko!

I stood back from the line saying, I told you I was sorry.

Lorie jabbed a finger at me. That boy just felt me up! And I'm going to tell someone. Let me tell you, I'm no slut. I have my rights, you know. She walked off, Wayne's prospect following and yelling, Lorie, wait!

Wayne pulled me over to the orange fence, his fingers digging into my biceps. The lights cast a white spot in the shape of an egg atop his head. She telling the truth?

I think I need the EMS or something, Wayne. She really hit me.

EMS, he said. You're out there, man. She's going to tell someone. And for all we know she's talking to a cop right now - - you don't put your paws on girls unless they're asking for it, idiot! Now we've got to run out of here like two criminals. He



looked around like there were a group of cops wielding billy clubs and running for us.

It hurts, I said. I know I'm supposed to --

He put his finger to my lips. Not now, Keith.

The policeman motioned us across, and we headed for St. Jude's to see our mother because Wayne refused to take me to the ambulance, since, he said, he didn't feel like explaining to some medic why exactly he'd pumped up the BB gun and shot his little brother from three feet away.

You realize, Wayne was saying, that you just ruined my chances with that girl. And realize, when school starts, those two will spot your ass in the halls and tell all their friends that Keith's a nasty pervert. Even chicks in your grade will hear about it. You might as well wear a big letter on your chest, like that lady in *The Scarlet Letter*.

If you didn't shoot me none of this would've happened.

Hey, did I tell you to grab some older girl's tits?

Wasn't tits.

He threw his hands in the air. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Do you like living with your head up your ass, huh? Is it comfortable up there? God, what's wrong with you?

Nothing's wrong with me! Why do think something's wrong with me? Why're you saying that?

See, you're being nervous again.

Guys, Wait up!

We spun around to see Lorie pumping along in her soccer thighs with that blond girl trailing behind.

Next to us the spotlight shone up at St. Jude who had his mouth open. I wanted to be a statue, to stand there and watch without having just shoved my hand up a girl's shorts. Don't say shit, Wayne said.

Lorie caught up, and was clasping her knees and letting out quick breaths, saying, We were thinking, you know, that maybe I overreacted. Well, I just want to make sure your brother's okay.

He's fine, Wayne said. Keith, why don't you go in and see Mom. Tell her I'll be home later.

How about we all go? Lorie said, and her friend said, I think that's a good idea.

The three of them headed for the yellow glow of the lobby and I stayed behind, feeling confused and shameful: my first type of sexual experience and there was a punch involved, and yelling, and my chest was pounding.

The fluorescent lights of the gym popped when Wayne hit the switch, some of them flickering for a while until they all hummed within their cages. There were refreshments laid out on the table by the kitchen, meaning the prayer warriors were still holding a board meeting with Jesus, about to storm in any minute stoned on the big Word.

Wayne bolted down the court and entered the door to the locker rooms. Now, what was I supposed to do? Talk about awkward. The girls and I stood in silence. I held myself. Orange extension cords dangled off the stage.

Finally Wayne emerged from the door dribbling a basketball. The blonde girl walked toward him and he threw the ball at her.

Lorie's eyes were Popsicle blue. She looked down at my sneakers, opened her mouth as if to speak -- that pink tongue of hers -- then closed it. She buried her hands in her hair, her underarms dotted with stubble, and said, Think you might need surgery?

I just want this thing out of me. You know?

I wonder if they'll let you keep it after they remove it. Like, maybe you could put it in a little jar or something?

Maybe I could make it into a necklace.

She gave me one of those smiles with the stainless-steel braces. She let go of her hair and said, You have nice eyelashes. I couldn't help smiling myself, and then my face was tingling.

The basketball bounced closer.

I grabbed Lorie's hand and said, Follow me. And we were gliding across the half-court line when Wayne dribbled into our path, putting the ball between his legs, back and forth, his sneakers squeaking as he switched up feet. Sweat bubbled on his forehead, and he stared me down as if I were supposed to offer up Lorie as an act of sibling honor and respect.

He held the ball over his head. Where're you going?

I gripped her hand and said, Don't worry about it. Wayne's lips closed up, giving me one of his *I'm-disappointed-in-you* looks. For God's sake, I wanted to tell him, I was about

to take Lorie into the storage room and walk out like a straight guy who'd just kissed his woman!

We skirted around him and were strolling together again when the ball bounced off my back. I accepted the pain. I kept moving. I took her into the darkness of the storage room. I shut the double doors.

What's in here? Lorie said. Keith, answer me. I can't see. Ouch!

Careful, it's just a bunch of stuff for the church.

I fumbled for her other hand and led her to the center of the room, moving through the space between the folded-up chairs. We stood so close I could smell the alcohol in her hair-sprayed head. Outside the room the basketball bounced for a while, then faded off. Who knew what Wayne would do to me after this? And why was he was pissed off? The important thing was, though, I had control here in the darkness. It was as if all paranoid thoughts had finally flitted out of me, and were hovering like a swarm of bees outside the door, waiting with Wayne, who was probably jealous right now... jealous of me. What a surprise!

I kissed her face I couldn't see. I felt for her lips which were wet. She moaned. Her tongue reached inside my mouth -- whoa! that was nice -- and I ran my fingers over her little breasts but then her lips weren't there anymore. Of course they weren't. She was talking now. Hold on, she was saying. Hold on right this minute, you.

I kept pumping the liquidy mounds of flesh. I squeezed harder, my chest inflamed as if we were connected through the pain. I pressed myself against her.

You're being pushy, she said.

But it feels so good.

I'll kick your ass, you know. I'll hit you again.

She tried to pull away but I held on. I slid my hands up her shirt, her nipples like pencil erasers, and I said, Please, stay with me.

She squirmed in my grip. Not this way I won't! Help!

Please, I said. My penis leaped with excitement, so I pushed it against her crotch, and we were falling onto the giant building block that made up the alter when Lorie's face was right in front of me -- there was a pimple at the center of her forehead...weird, I didn't remember seeing that before. Shit, the lights were on! I took my hands out from her shirt.

My mother was standing in the doorway. Her cheeks were pink. Oh, you stinker, she said. Then a woman with red hair entered and said, For heaven's sake!

Lorie worked her way through the chairs and slipped between that lady and my mom. Of course, they ignored her and with palms held out came at me. *In the name of Jesus*, Mom said, *I rebuke that spirit of lust...*

No, I said. Leave me alone!

Fingertips clamped my head -- Mom's cold as usual -- and I could smell coffee on their breaths. Through the doorway I saw Wayne dribble by with his hair flopping. I started shivering like I was consumed by the spirit of lust, whatever that was. But the more I fought them off, the more they'd consider me the

demon-ridden freak, so I lifted up my shirt to show Mom I'd been shot, hoping for some of that Jesus compassion.

What the hell is that?

There's a BB inside me, I said. She put on her reading glasses which were strung around her neck. She pinched her fingers around the purple hole, squeezing it.

Fuck, that hurts!

Be quiet you, she said. How'd this happen?

Give it up, Mom. It's not coming out.

I can feel it, she said. I can actually feel it. Praise the Lord!

Let a doctor do it, I said.

It's right here, I've got it. Trust me, sweetie, I can handle it.

No, you can't, Mom. Leave me alone! My chest flashed with heat, nerves rattling up to my neck in pain I'd never experienced. I scrambled free from their hands. I darted out of the room. Get back here! my mother yelled. I wanted to be away from adults, from boys, from girls. I needed time to think. I ran past Lorie who was talking to Wayne and hugging herself, past the small crowd of Christ addicts gripping their coffee cups and watching me, Dad holding a brownie to his mouth. I didn't know where to go. I sprinted across court, my chest burning as I made my way toward the white brick wall at the other side of the gym. Don't look at me, I wanted to say, feeling possessed by a thing I could not identify.

### **A Bag of Bullets**

Laureen wobbles into the kitchen with a sting in her hip.

"Teakettle!" yells Sal, her husband, from the couch in the living room. His blood pressure's been peaking. And his sugar level has jumped, he's been eating too much candy again, as if he could care less about his diabetes. "If that whistles any damn longer I'll toss it out in the yard...Laureen!"

Little fingers tug at her blouse. "Grandma, grandma, look what I found."

"Not now," Laureen says.

"Oooh, why was I born?" says her husband from the living room.

"Stop whining," Laureen says, trying to pierce the wall with her voice. She pours the cup of tea, puts a hand on her hip -- it's been acting up lately, and the doctor suggested she quit the nursing job. How can she quit when they've got a mortgage to pay, and Amy, her daughter, still living here with her three kids and that husband of hers, Terry, who spends his hard-earned money at the bar every night. Those two haven't chipped in for the mortgage in months.

Terry drinks, her daughter eats. What's the difference?

A goddamn madhouse, said her son on the phone last night from three thousand miles away. That's why I won't be there for Christmas, or any other Christmas. You're carrying the whole house on your shoulders, Mom. Those two need to establish a life for themselves and their kids. You and Dad should just move out. Fuck em' You're enabling them. Goddamnit, I can't take it! All that anger coming from that kid's mouth. "Don't take the Lord's name in vain," she told him. The Lord can jerk me off! What an awful thing to say, he's so immature, that kid. Enabling: his favorite word. Since when is caring for her three precious granddaughters enabling?

"Grandma, grandma, look."

"To care would you get in the way. The tea is hot."

Laureen pats the little girl's head, grabs the pills, and moves into the living room. Sal's sneaker sticks out from the blanket on the couch, his head covered with a pillow. "Ohh," he says from beneath it.

"Shoes off the couch," Laureen says, "and off your ass. Here, take your medicine."

He sits up, his eyes surrounded with tiny purple bubbles of skin. "Grandma." It's her other granddaughter, the six year old. She lifts up Sal's sweatshirt and plucks a hair off his gut. "Ouch," he says.

"Papa's a bear," she says.

"Damn it, cut that out," he says, his lips forming a smirk, a flash of his yellow teeth.

"Grandma, look what we found," says the six year old.



"What? What is it?" Laureen says, "for God's sake, can't you see I'm doing something here?"

Laureen hands the tea to Sal. He swallows the green pill, winces, takes a sip, hands back the mug. He grabs the girl's head and bangs it against his own, biting his tongue, growling, his way of showing affection and love. She giggles, saying, "Stop it, stop it." The younger girl's hopping up and down, her hair flopping as she yells, "Bullets, bullets."

"Yep," says the other one, "we found a bag of bullets." She raises her hand and sure enough the kid's right: dangling from her thumb and finger is a plastic baggy full of golden bullets, with red pointy tips.

"Give me that!" Sal yells, yanking it from her. "Where'd you find this?"

"Dear Lord," Laureen says, scurrying back to the kitchen as if the living room just caught fire. Sal's going to burst. He loves to tell off Terry, to scream, to curse! to hold his fist in the air, especially when Terry's not home. He'll yell at Laureen, as if it's her who's six feet tall with a beard, who leaves the house at six every morning, works at the docks all day, returning late at night covered in dirt and grime, reeking of beer, only to get up at six again, breathing deeply through his nose (you think he'd get tired of being hungover!) and back to work he goes.

Here it comes: a nasal whine whipping in from the living room: "Bullets! Goddamnit...I told that sonofabitch. Laureen, get in here! I knew he'd pull something sooner or later. I told him no guns or he's out!"

She hears his little feet (Sal is only five foot three) pacing. "You can't leave these around the house, what if they blow up? Set the whole house on fire. If I don't stick with my promise, they'll never leave. He'll think of me as a damn joke." He stands in the kitchen, the light reflecting a white crescent on his bald head. His pink tongue hangs out, and then he bites on it, pounds a fist into his cupped hand, stomping his foot to the floor, the teakettle shuddering on the stove. One two three. It's what he does when he gets mad. Who has ever seen such a thing? His face reddens around his sunken eyes. "I can't take this crap anymore," he says. "You and your Christian bullshit. I told you, Laureen. You should never have let him back in, that drunken bastard. Trying to save the world with Jesus up your ass!"

"Ah, to hell with you," Laureen says. "Go back and lie down."

"I'm out," he says leaving the room.

The girl, gripping her younger sister by the ankles, walks backwards around the floor in front of the fireplace, the little one's face, being dragged upside down, turning pink, her eyes widening. "Stop that," Laureen says.

"Boy, I tell you." Sal's back, wearing his orange ski vest, which looks like a life jacket. He's never skied, in fact, he's never done any sort of activity involving physical risk. He won't even take out the garbage anymore. "You know, I never asked for any of this. Why I was born into this life I don't know...if I grew up a Rockefeller none of this crap would

be happening. I'll tell you, Laureen, when I get to heaven I'm going to tell God to go fuck himself!"

He's just trying to get under her skin. And she's got enough people under her skin, a crowd of fingers scurrying around her organs, clutching at her lungs, suffocating her heart. "Talk to Terry," Laureen says.

"Like where? Oh, a talk. Everyone and their mother's got to have a talk. Well, I'm too old for these talks. It's your responsibility, you invited them to live here. You tell him he's got to go. I won't tolerate a gun in the house." He zips up his vest. "I'm out!"

"Take me with you," the littlest girl says to Sal, her arms flailing behind her head as she gets pulled toward the couch.

"Get your coats on," Sal says. He slides open the glass door and slips outside, the kids following without their coats, the littlest one without shoes.

"Hey," Laureen says. "To care would you get sick without your shoes."

They're gone.

Over the mantle piece the clock ticks, a hand-me-down from Sal's ninety-four year old mother. Sal's sister will drop off the old lady for the weekend, as if they haven't enough people in the house. When she shows up, Sal will ignore her, refusing to help out.

Laureen sits down on the couch. Her upper back tingles. Last week she found out she has osteoporosis, didn't consume enough calcium when she was a kid, the Doctor said. All that

cows' milk just wasn't healthy enough. Her back is already hunched over. *Will you walk straight, put your shoulders back,* her second son used to tell her before he too stopped coming home.

Outside, through the sliding glass door, she sees a leaf flutter across the deck where it lands on another tree. Jesus, she says to herself. Lord, wrap your almighty hands around this house and hold it. Please Lord. Don't let go. Laureen falls back on the couch, her hip throbbing. The kids' toys are laid out all over the brown carpet, a doll hanging by its hair from the top of the mantle piece, its eyes missing, looking like pencil marks in the plastic cream face.

A few months ago, Terry moved out, and Amy said they were going to get a divorce. Then, a week later, Terry showed up with Porterhouse steaks and jumbo shrimp and cooked the entire family a dinner with a white cream sauce (as if Amy and the rest of them aren't fat enough!) glistening over the shrimp. Afterwards, Terry, with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, went out to the deck with Sal to talk about anything but the matter at hand. From the kitchen window, Laureen actually heard them discussing mail trucks, of all things. "They're just not the same," Sal said. Terry said, "I hear you, everything's made of crap these days. It's all crap." Meanwhile, Amy sat at her favorite spot at the kitchen table, doodling on scrap paper. "I still love him," she said gazing at the paper. "You believe that, I still love him."

*It's all part of the cycle, her son said on the phone from three thousand miles away. The fucker knows exactly how to play you guys. The moment you threaten to make them move out, he acts up, gets the boot, then comes back with a silver platter, and all is well...*

Sal wants to move to North Carolina, to a town he passed through driving to Georgia to visit their second son. Sal loves to drive long trips, he's terrified to fly. "You'll never leave these kids," Sal said when he got back from Atlanta. "I tell you, this is our purgatory, Laureen, raising someone else's kids."

Laureen does want to leave Terry and her daughter. She wants to have her own life, for once, but go where? What if Amy shows up with the kids? When Amy and Terry lived in an apartment, before they got evicted, Amy called twice a day, helpless, fearful of Terry, claiming he hit her and so on, yet she never had bruises. Amy's always exaggerated, though. Just last week, she came barreling down stairs shouting, "Lyn fell off the bed and she can't move her legs. She can't move her legs!" By the time Laureen had made it up to the room, Lyn was jumping up and down on top of the bed.

What would Amy do without her mother? Call her constantly, that's what. It's been so long since she and Sal have lived alone, what...thirty three years? Goodness gracious! She should go back to Ireland by herself -- to hell with them all! She should go back to County Mayo, move in with her brother. Oh, but he's another alcoholic, he and his wife.

Amy, mother of three, wife of drunk, appears outside the sliding glass door. She walks in gripping a wrapped-up sandwich that says SUBWAY all over it, her belly hanging out over her black stretch pants, looking like she's pregnant. "Hey," Amy says, disappearing into the kitchen. Laureen says, "Terry left a bag of bullets in the chair. The little one found them. Doesn't he think about these things? They could go off, you know. They could blow the whole blessed house up."

"Good," Amy says from the kitchen. "Maybe we'll all explode."

"You know what your father thinks about guns. With his blood pressure and all, he can't be worrying about a gun in the house. He had an agreement with Terry. Now Terry has to go."

"Dad's bullshitting. He's not going to kick anyone out."

"Terry hardly comes home on time anyway," Laureen says.

"Do you blame him? All you do is bitch at him." Amy stands in the family room, holding the sandwich out in front of her like a knife, little strings of white lettuce curling off it. "Let me guess, Dad's pissed off, and now I'm going to get yelled at, like I left bullets around the house. Well, tough shit, Mom. Not going to work this time."

*A goddamn madhouse*, her son had said. *You're just enabling them*. "Fine," Laureen says -- another leaf spinning slowly to the deck -- "when are you moving out?"

She looks up at the ceiling and says, "When I start singing." Then she moves into the kitchen and sits at the

table, where she smiles. "You know, Mom, it's a joke, when the fat lady sings. You could lighten up, Mom."

Laureen gets up -- her back tingling numb -- puts a hand to her bad hip, and says, "Well, your father and I are just enabling you two. You all need to get out on your own for once. I don't know how much I can take of this."

In the kitchen, Amy's scraping away at her cuticles. Her fingernails are down to slits, she's constantly picking at something. Her cheeks are full, as if filled with whipping cream. She chews some more, then stands up. "Enough with the guilt trips, Mom. God, you're so predictable." Her head is covered in the afternoon light coming in from the window until she takes the sandwich out of the room. She's like a child, that girl.

Laureen feels a warmth above her eyes. She looks at the picture of Jesus stuck to the refrigerator by magnets. Yesterday Sal drew a pair of sunglasses on Him, a cigarette coming out His mouth, and a few puffy clouds drifting over the halo. She puts a finger to His nose and whispers, "What do I do?"

She turns around and walks outside, imagining her spine, perforated like a sponge, slowly arcing, and eventually it'll be difficult to see anything but the floor: dust, shoes, socks, sneakers, her granddaughters' toes -- Put your shoes on! she'll have to tell them. She stands before the sliding glass door. The yard is filled with twice-rained-on yellow and red leaves Terry promised to rake last weekend. Her shoulders shiver.

Laureen goes to the living room and opens the drawers in Sal's desk. He hides everything in here. Where is it? The bottom drawer -- ah, there it is. She picks it up -- the bag heavy in her palm -- and gets her coat. "Where're you going?" Amy says, working her cuticles from the couch.

"Never mind." And the fall air burns Laureen's throat as she walks outside, where she has to push the red upside-down wagon out of her way so she can move across the deck.

Laureen merges onto the highway. She never hears anything of her youngest son's life -- he's going to law school all the way out in Washington. Does he have friends, does he date? -- he only talks of her problems. *You know, I'm getting tired of you saying next spring. Moving out next spring. You said that last spring, and one before that. Why can't you just admit it, Mom? Amy's lethargic fat lazy ass and that husband of hers aren't moving out. They're waiting for you and Dad to die. In fact, Amy herself is waiting to die, isn't she? She's the kind of person who'd rather wake up dead. I mean, look at her. Christ, Amy and Terry. I swear, their names sound like a horror movie to me...admit it. I want to hear you say it. Stop bullshitting me here. Say they're never moving out! Go ahead, say it!*

That son doesn't believe in God anymore, he thinks Jesus was just a man with long hair and sandals and some peaceful words to say. He hasn't come home in two years. Wouldn't it be a treat to have him over for tea once and a while? And her other sons, too. Her three boys and her, maybe sitting around



at a table, someplace where the sunlight coats their heads, reflects off the silverware, the boys laughing with their teeth showing.

In Ireland, Laureen lived with her aunt until she was five, then moved in with an old friend of her mother's until thirteen, then attended a boarding school for girls. And she always promised herself she'd raise a normal household. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! now it's the same blessed situation: three of her sons living in different parts of this giant country, with a world of rivers and highways and buildings and a million other families between. Her oldest son, the gay one, rarely comes home anymore. Someday the Lord will heal him...precious blood of Jesus be upon him. Sal just recently started speaking to him. Now, when he actually visits from the city, he stays for two hours, if that, usually bringing flowers and smiling a lot, glancing around the house as if he's a stranger showing up to buy the place -- saying things like, *The yard looks good, I guess* -- and then off to the city he flees. He was the son who'd promised her he'd become a priest, back when he was ten or so.

So what does she say to Terry? I love you like a son. But I want you out of my life. Lord, give me the strength.

She's driven here before, when Terry got the DWI and needed a ride for a month. She turns off I-95, drives past the series of brick buildings surrounding the concrete playground. Behind the metal gate stands a little black boy on top of the car, bouncing up and down with his arms in the air. Father in

Jesus' name, bless that boy, protect him with Your almighty shield.

With a long stick of steel clamped to its end, the crane swivels over the black water of Long Island Sound. Laureen watches it lower the piece of steel onto the dock as she parks between two pickup trucks, three spaces away from Terry and Amy's mini van. She rolls down the window and the breeze skims her cheek, saltwater mixed with sulfur.

She wobbles past the security booth in which sits a bearded man biting his nails. She holds her hip and moves onward. She walks up the wooden steps. The air smells like burning tires. Jesus, give me the right words to say to Terry.

A man is sucking on a cigarette outside the office. Laureen says, "Excuse me, dear." She smiles at him, puts her hand on his wrist which feels chapped and cold. He's wearing a full body suit the color of a camel. "Do you know Terry MacDonald?" she says.

"He's somewhere. Somewhere I don't know." The man trots up the wooden ramp, which leads to the massive black boat.

Laureen fumbles in her purse for holy water, splashes a bit on her fingers and flicks it onto the office door -- quick, quick -- leaving a spray of dots across the wood.

The guy hustles back with a cigarette bouncing from his lips. "Terry's at lunch. He'll come back soon."

"Thank you," she says, and heads back into the car. She puts the bag of bullets on the seat beside her. Oh, she doesn't want to think about anything right now. She should go home and forget all this nonsense. It's really not that bad. Terry

makes mistakes like the lot of them. He's got a big heart. He just needs to join AA, really. It's so hard to tell with God's plan, when something is really going to change. What if God's plan doesn't exist? What if what if...no no, that's just unfaithful to think. See, here she is doubting her faith all because of that Amy and Terry.

The crane swivels away from the boat, gripping another piece of steel in its claw. It stops, moves again -- the steel teetering in the air as if about to fall. Laureen puts her thumb in front of her eye to block out the neck of the crane. How strange it looks: a stick of steel floating above the black water, a red barge inching behind it, heading toward another port perhaps.

The window shakes beside her head.

Her heart pumps faster. Terry grins from within his beard. "Scare you?" he says.

Laureen rolls down the window. "Yes, I'm scared," she says, feeling nauseous all of a sudden. "And I'm getting out." She opens the door, but he doesn't move. It hits him in the stomach. "Watch out there," he says. "You might hurt me."

He steps back and lights a cigarette, shakes the lighter the way he always does, places it back in his pocket. He's wearing the full body suit like the rest of them, its legs and arms streaked in black, just like his hands. There's a collar of dirt lining his neck.

He says, "What a surprise. Did I forget to take my vitamins this morning?" He smiles, revealing teeth as white as a priest's robe against the dark hair of his beard...of course,

last week he went to the dentist to have a cap put in. Laureen was too afraid to ask how much. The idea of a man with three kids and a wife and no house purchasing a capped tooth! *No priorities*, her youngest son said about the teeth incident. *The bastard has no sense of what's real and what's not. No sense for the future.*

"This." She shows him the bag of bullets. "You left it in the family room. What's wrong with you? It's all that beer, I'll bet. Clouding your head, Terry. You can't go on like this. None of us can. I can't take much more. For God's sake."

"Oh, Christ."

"Christ what?"

He turns and starts walking away. "Let me guess," he's saying. "Sal thought they were going to blow off or something, right? Like these things are going to set the whole house on fire."

She follows him, moving toward the white hut that's an office. "Do you keeep guns in the house?"

He's still walking, hands hidden inside his suit pockets, the cigarette smoke curling like wings around his hair.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," he says.

He turns. "Go talk to your daughter." His voice is booming. "I'm the bad one, right? I'm Satan. Well, look at what I've got to go home to. Tell her to stop eating, and maybe I'll go home early."

"What about those poor kids? That's who I'm worried about. I'll tell you something Terry" -- she jabs her finger at the air -- "I'll tell you that I don't care what happens to you and Amy anymore. You know that? I don't care if God strikes you dead. It's those kids, and to hear a grown man say he has nothing to go home to...Lord help me, you don't deserve them!"

Her arms are burning, and it feels as if her biceps are growing.

He paces in a circle, stops, looks at her as if to confess -- *You know, you're right, Laureen, I've been living in the dark, and it's time for me to come back, to offer my soul up to Jesus* -- but he says nothing. He continues to step round and round. He stops, rolls the cigarette between his fingers until the orange head of ash falls between his boots. (Terry suffocates cigarettes, she finds the filters without any ash lying around the garage.)

"I can't believe what I'm hearing, you don't care if we die, is that what you're saying. Jesus, some Christian you are." He walks off again.

"You know the agreement you had with Sal!" she screams.

He keeps going, probably anxious to return to work, so later on he can go drink and avoid things.

Laureen's forehead warms up, feels as if it's swelling. She runs toward him with her hip bouncing awkwardly, rattling the nerve endings, numbing her lower body. She feel ridiculous, her knees about to shoot out their sockets. A grandma jogging after this man that somehow crawled into her life, unexpectedly,

and has doomed it ever since, not to mention her daughter's. Charity starts at the home, it says in the Bible. *Goddamn madhouse.* She trots onward. "You can't run from me," she says, her purse strap jumping on her shoulders.

He waves a hand in the air, still facing forward. She reaches into the baggy and pulls out a bullet. She throws it. It hits him in the back. It falls to the ground where it rolls and stops beside a pebble.

He looks at her with his eyes like slits in a face coated in dirt. She takes out another one. "I won't have it anymore," she says, throwing it at his chin.

He blinks when it hits him. "Goddamnit," he says.

She throws another, this one bouncing off his neck, and dropping to his boot and then rolling onto a pile of pebbles. Three bullets lay on the gravel, a few inches from one another, the sunlight catching their necks, and for a moment they look like they're turning.

"So that's that. I have to move out, huh? That's going to look great in front of the kids. Daddy has to leave. You know what, Laureen, just kill me." He holds out his arms, grinning. "I won't mind, it'll just make things easier on me. Go ahead." He's holding out his hands, of which the palms are black. Behind him, a group of cranes leans over the water, as if to get a better view of the fight.

"You stinker!" And she throws the last one. Which smacks him in the forehead, and he catches it before it lands.

Laureen runs into him with fists out. "Murderer," she says, even though he's never murdered anyone, at least, not to her knowledge, but it just makes sense to say. She'll have to ask the Lord to forgive her for such an outburst but for now it actually feels comfortable to hug him back. She's crying. Jesus, help me. Terry rubs the nape of her neck with sandpaper fingertips. "It's okay," he says. "It's okay." His body towers over her. His hands press into her, and she wonders if this is what it'd feel like to be standing in the arms of the Lord, as they say: strong hands pulling you in, able to carry you over oceans and volcanoes and mountains if they so choose. She burrows her face into his shoulder, sniffing cigarette smoke and what smells like Crisco. "Try to relax," he tells her. And she does, for the first time that day. She lets her muscles go.

A bang occurs from the other side of the docks. A man yells out something. The crane lowers to the boat. Laureen closes her eyes.

"Why don't you go home and get some rest," Terry says.

Home! Her home is his home, and his home is something he sleeps in and eats in, like a selfish dog. "You have to be out," she says into his work suit, tasting the dirt. "I can't do it anymore."

"The kids," he says, his breath warm against her ear.

"Out," Laureen says. And suddenly the bones in her lower back are aching, and she's seeing her spine curling over. She pulls away from him. She steps back. There's a spot of dirt on the bridge of his nose.

"What am I some bum? You can't just kick me out. I have a family to take care of." His blue eyes are looking to the left and right. His hand, dirty, clenched into a fist, rises up in front of his face where he scratches his eye with a knuckle. "Soon, we'll all move out, I swear."

His boots are covering one of the bullets, its red tip sticking out. Laureen swallows. Her throat tingles. She wants to hug him. Instead, she says, "I'm sorry. I'm changing the locks today, Terry. If you don't come home at a decent time, tough luck." He rolls his eyes.

She hurries to her car. "Wait up," he's saying. But Laureen will not wait. "Hear me out," he's saying.

"I'm tired of your promises!" she yells before slipping inside the car. She's got to go back, where she'll have to tell her oldest granddaughter, the thirteen year old who's due home from school soon, to do her homework because Lord knows Amy won't demand anything.

In the rearview mirror she sees Terry swatting at the air. She's told him how she really feels. Her son will be proud. *Good job, Mom, he'll say. That's the first step.*

Laureen drives away from the cranes. Her heart knocks fast beneath her chest. She can race home and tell Amy what she told Terry, that it's just those kids she's concerned about. She'll tell Sal to stop being such a baby, that he can take his own pills. Stop blaming me for everything, she'll say.



*A goddamn madhouse!* Maybe so, but she needs to return to keep it from crumbling, as if the entire house rests on her spongy spine.

Under the highway bridge sits a maroon compact car with no hood, its door smeared with yellow spray paint. As she slowly drives past it, she sees inside a black teenage boy hunched over in the back seat, searching for something. Jesus, she thinks, may your precious blood be upon him. Laureen stops, a few feet from the bridge over which traffic screams. She rolls down the window. The boy looks up, squinting. There's a red slit over his eye. "Do you need a ride?" Laureen says, "I can bring you somewhere."

The boy turns toward the bridge, then back to her. "No," he says. "Jesus loves you," she says. He opens the car door, looks both ways -- there's a white circle on his yellow t-shirt -- and says, "Fuck Jesus." Then darts off under the bridge.

A seagull dips by the window. Oh, Lord, if she changes the locks today, Terry will just sleep in his van if he has to. He's done it before when he hadn't the courage to come inside at all hours of the night, running the engine because he's got no concern for money, since he pays no rent.

Oh, these talks! At least she told him the truth. Yes, it was a start. For the first time in a while, it seems, she feels relaxed, her back not hurting as much. That's right, it's those precious grandchildren that are keeping her from pushing Terry and Amy out in the streets where they belong.

Then again, they're people, too, just stuck in a bit of trouble, really.

Laureen waits to merge onto the stream of cars and semi's whistling by. A school bus with little heads in the windows zips past, its wind rattling her car. Words, she thinks, are not enough anymore. She's going to have to think of some other way, to keep struggling against the demons of that house, to keep hoping and praying for the best.

Beside the billboards stand smoke stacks out of which black air ascends into the clouds breaking apart, revealing slivers of blue sky. Laureen pulls onto the road and steps on the gas to keep up with the speeding cars. She knows Terry won't leave. They have the strength to kick him out. Still, no matter, she needs to get back home, to the madhouse. She's going to help this family if it kills her.

### **A Day for Dead Nana**

Nana's dead. She's lying in a coffin underground, where the maggots and worms are probably trying to work out some sort of treaty as to who'll get the leftover remains. And here we are - Mom, Dad and I -- standing around the kitchen table about to sing happy birthday to her.

Abby, *please*, Mom says, cooperate! I grab her hand --her skin so sticky-wet I'd rather not ask what from -- and stare at the table where a vanilla cake's lying there with HAPPY B-DAY NANA written across it in green-frosted lettering, the cake shaped like a pear. A pear! That was Nana's favorite fruit until she lost all her teeth.

Mom's hair is tied back in graying strands, some split, some not, curling off her head. Come *on*, Bill, she says. But he just lets out a breath, then looks down at his shoes or gut, whichever he sees first. I want to end this corn-ball ceremony myself, so I fumble for his palm and he ends up holding my pinkie, barely. And somewhere on his skin I feel a blister or callous and wonder what from since he refuses to take part in any manual labor around the house. He worked in an office most of his life, until a few years ago anyway, when GE laid him off. Then he started temping around and doing all kinds of clerical

assignments at offices until he got fired from the temp. agency, and rightly so -- he kept leaving the jobs during lunch break and not returning. He hasn't worked since.

Mom clears her throat. Here she goes. Looking up at the ceiling she takes in a quick breath -- like she just sucked in a bong hit -- and starts the song: *Happy... birthday... to... you....*

See, now you think my mom's a little on the freaky side. Nana died over a year ago on the fourth of July. She was out on the patio, sitting on a lounge chair with her big black windshield sunglasses on. We thought she was relaxing, no big deal, until my little hairy Italian cousin lit a firecracker near her chair and when it went off she didn't move. It popped and she just sat still, nothing but a weak breeze curling through her hair. And when he went to light another one -- placed it right between her toes -- Mom ran over with arms in the air screaming, Oh no, Oh God. Mom! Please. Not today.

Nana never taught me how to bake some American pie or Lasagna or anything that normal or even TV grandmothers do. Trust me, during the last few years of her life she was as mobile and exciting as the rat-shit sized mole that grew out of her neck. Even before her still-life years, our time together wasn't too meaningful. And for some reason it always seemed to go like this: I'd run off the school bus and into the house. On the couch in the family room there'd be Nana lying under her afghan no matter how hot it was. I'd sprawl out on the recliner. You didn't want to get too close to her -- she always

smelled worn, like a rack of clothes at the Goodwill. Her skin was spotted brown and cracked in wavy shapes, loose and wrinkled into a sweat suit of flesh. In a pinched voice she'd ask about my day at school. I'd say, It's all great, Nana. Then she'd say something quick like *Oh* and return to her laid-out position, which made me nervous. I wasn't sure if she wouldn't talk to me because I was boring or if her voice hurt her too much. My mom would say, *Oh, Abby, stop worrying, she's just not good with kids.*

Since I'm about to go off on certain people I might as well say some crap about myself. I'm twenty, caught between high school and college and that's not because this month is June. I never applied. I'm a career waitress. I'm also twenty six pounds over weight -- I can squeeze my inner thigh and grab handfuls of fat until tears roll out my eyes. My last boyfriend of two whole months recently dumped me, said I was too negative to be around. Too negative? Go screw *Mary Poppins* if you want positive energy!

He was just a humper anyway. You don't have much of a selection when you're fat-assed and shopping the big marketplace. All you can do is browse the aisles all hungry and desperate, and end up picking out a humper who takes you back to his place and makes you feel like plastic. That's all those guys wanted, a little chat -- *What is it you do again, waitress? Hmm... interesting* -- and then *bing bang boom*. I mean, did they really need me to be there?

Anyway most mornings I don't want to get up and face the music, or I want to leap out of bed and kick each member of the band in the shins. So I've got this theory: inside my brain there're rows and rows of tables and empty chairs just waiting for knowledge, all kinds of little information creatures that'll stroll in at staggered hours, sit down, smoke a few cigarettes, sip on drinks and teach me something. They will mold me into someone with a real purpose, someone who enjoys waking up and maybe even playing a few tunes with the band. So far the little business in my head has been a slow one, soon to shut 'down. Not many customers. Not even faces peeking through the windows. Like any new business though it takes time. Eventually things will pick up, and soon I'll have a diamond sharp outlook on my decisions. If you admit you're a dumb-ass it'll only make you smarter than the average person, right?

At least my issues aren't as on-the-surface as my mom's. Her obsession with her dead mother has grown worse and has wrapped itself into a knot that's impossible to untie but I keep trying anyway. So it all can be helped, right? That's what some might suggest -- counseling or some crap. It's just impossible to get the words into her. Trust me, I've stabbed her with them myself:

*Mom, Nana's dead. She left the earth. You have to live your own life now. Mom, are you listening?*

Never works. Because she's one of those born again freaks, a prayer warrior! Whoever heard such crap? She's whacked out on the stuff, I mean, we're talking every little

thing getting related to God. If you're having a tough time with something, don't worry, just offer it up to Jesus and he'll reshape your problem into something pleasant, which is like hiring a gardener to turn a patch of your crab grass into a flower garden. That simple!

An hour before Mom goes to the prayer meetings she gets all psyched up, as if she's about to attend an award ceremony where the messiah himself will hand her the most-consecutive-prayers-in-a-day trophy. She'll hum gospel tunes while frying something in the pan, usually eggplant or chicken, food that coats your tongue with grease so that after a few bites the stuff's just sliding in and dripping down to your stomach and spreading out to your thighs.

In high school I'd do more or less the same thing before a night out: pace the hallway upstairs trying to figure out what to wear so I could go out and drink with my boyfriend and smoke a few bowls in the woods, laugh real loud at him and his friends' stupid jokes. Then later on he and I would go hump somewhere dark, usually on his basement couch. Next morning I'd wake up with a headache and flakes of dried cum stuck to my stomach and of course I'd be irritable -- it wouldn't be night anymore. That's how Mom acts. Dresses up in a eggplant-colored outfits. Splashes on Mary Kay perfume. And goes off to her prayer meetings, only to come home around midnight all baked on the Holy Spirit. Oh, Abby, you should've been there, she'll say. This missionary gave his prophecy on his time in Africa and how he taught this tribe that Jesus doesn't believe in incest.

Next morning she's all cranky like she was the one smoking pot and drinking wine coolers. How do you get through to these people? These Christians. *Hey, you're addicted to Christ.* They'll just lay a hand on your head, stare at you, and say, Abby, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus.

Then there's my dad. He's not a Jesus addict -- lucky for him he got out of that years ago -- no, he just watches TV. Last month he spent a hundred dollars on request movies, and Mom had to pay the bill with her nursing money because he's too superior to keep a job past lunch break. Weird thing is that he got strange after Nana died too, not that he was close to her. Before she died he used to toy with her moldy brain. He used to tell her she's made it to heaven. He'd say, How does it feel to have finally made it, Nana? And she'd actually believe him. She'd flash a smile with those pink gums. He'd say, Oh, Nana, your wings, so lovely and white, much better than anyone else's. Nana, careful not to scrape them against the doorway there. And old Nana would lift her thin arms as high as she could, and I know I should've stopped the cruelty but I didn't because half the time I'd be laid out on the floor laughing.

Then Nana died. And Mom started going more and more to prayer meetings and weekend retreats, buying all kinds of God videos from Reverend Dangling-from-God's-Ass Benny Hinn, ordering holy water from Israel, and Dad was like, I need a way out. But he had trouble finding one. He hates to drink, hates to smoke. He even tried hanging with me but I wouldn't hear of it -- I was still in high school, still cool. So he went out a



few times, sat around at sports bars drinking ginger ale, sometimes not returning until eleven o'clock. It's like he actually *tried* to find a vice -- something that'd keep him away from reality, like he wanted to be a kite tangled up on the power lines. And he's never boozed much in his life, never done anything harmful to himself. When someone gives him a beer at a family picnic he just sips at it and then you might see him an hour later pouring out the rest over the deck. Once in a while when he's trying side step out of his depression, he'll reassure himself with rebel stories of his past. And if you're in the same room you'll force yourself to listen because you can't help feeling sorry for him. Twice he told me this one story about him smoking cigarettes in the Navy. Smoked at least twelve a day, he said. Went to a strip bar by himself, and when the dame leaned over to grab his dollar he blew smoke rings into her cleavage. And both times after he finished telling me this I held my thumb in the air and said, Dad, you were on the edge.

When we finish the song Mom starts to clap, which becomes the only noise in the house. Dad and I put our hands in our pockets fast as if we're afraid someone might steal them away. After four or five slaps of her palms she stops. There'll be no cutting this cake. She'll let it sit outside under the sun. She believes Nana will free fall from heaven with her friends, maybe Grandpa and Jimi Hendrix, to show them how special our family is.

I'm going upstairs, my dad says.

Mom and I know that he'll be down in a while to watch TV. He knows it too. Nothing up there that'll hold his interest for more than a few minutes, except his bed maybe.

She rolls her eyes. I say, What can you do? He's depressed. Nothing excites him anymore. I open the cabinet where the coffee filters are stashed.

She cups her hands over her mouth and yells up at the ceiling: Bill, What about the card? You have to be there for God's sake! Your name's on it! She shakes her head at me as if I totally agree. Yeah, signing a birthday card for a dead person is a sane act.

Wait a second, I say. Be where?

Oh, you'll see. I planned something new this year. I just wish your father would join us. She goes over to the sink.

Maybe you should spend more time with him, I say. Like, just you two without Nana around.

Stop that talk, Abby, she says, squirting dish soap into her palm. Your father isn't necessarily a saint, you know. As she washes her hands she stares off at something on the floor. From the window there's a stream of sunlight glittering through the top of her peppered hair and it makes me wonder: maybe there is a God and he's watching her. Then her eyes close, and she's looking like she's about to cry, her cheeks turning pink, the creases on her face stretching.

I don't know why I always take Dad's side. She's right, he can be a real hemorrhoid about things. I say, Mom, wait.

But she mumbles something I can't exactly hear and takes out the cake to the picnic table.

Now this is where it all gets tangled. Dad's all zoned out feeling rejected because Mom's married to Jesus, and she's frustrated with him for not working, for lying around the furniture like an old dog waiting to die. But if Mom expects him to come around she's got to understand his laziness. I guess they're both equally tired and too distracted to pull themselves out of this mess. Since Nana died, they've been drifting further away from reality and I figure if I could just get them to grab onto each other -- well, they're both a bit on the weighty side -- they could sink happily to the ground and start something fresh.

The screen door smacks shut and Mom marches by me into the dining room. By the time it takes me to load the coffee filter she's back. In one hand she's got Nana's card, in the other a curled ribbon with a heart-shaped helium balloon attached to it -- those expensive kind that're thin like tinfoil. On the balloon in white script it says, *Happy Birthday, Grandma. We Love You.* Around those words are pictures of other rainbow-colored balloons and their curled strings. Real freaking creative.

Mom, what the hell're you doing with that balloon?

Her lips are folded in as she stares at the card.

Sometimes she gets caught in a daze and I have to raise my voice to get her out. *Mom!*

I'm sorry, what?

The balloon, I say. What's it for? I mean, I'm not that positive but I think Nana's dead. You know, like... gone?

Abby, stop that right now in the name of Jesus. She goes over to the counter and pulls open the junk drawer, and after fiddling her hand in there she lifts out the Scotch tape.

Sometimes I let my words fly out faster than I want but how else do you let someone go on like this? Acting crazy over a dead person.

The balloon scrapes along the ceiling as she tapes its ribbon to the card. Now, she says. It's time.

I follow her promising myself I won't snap at her anymore, at least until Nana's birthday is over. In the foyer she yells up again: Bill, honey, come on... a few minutes of your life.

We hear a moan, then a creak of the mattress. Then he says, All right, all right, and with a hand sliding along the banister he walks down the stairs. He's changed into his favorite outfit: a T-shirt and cut-off sweat pants. This is the last time for this junk, he says. It's plain idiocy.

Plain insanity, I say.

He stops on the last step, holds a finger in the air and says, With a capital I.

Enough, Mom says, and when she opens the front door I squint from the outside light which outlines her shoulders and turns the strands of her hair into wheat-colored highlights. We, she says, are going to do this right. A little strange, I know, but --

Oh no, it's totally normal. Shit, there goes my mouth again.

Abby, don't start. A breeze enters the house, making the balloon sway and she goes on pointing a finger and looking at us like we've got 666 stamped on our foreheads. I had a dream last night, she's saying, that Nana was walking on a dark dirt road without any street lights. You see, the Lord was telling me that apparently Nana's not exactly *inside* the gates. And until we keep our prayers going strong she'll be hanging around the outskirts. With the sinners!

My dad sits down on the blue carpet of the last step. Using his fingernail he starts cleaning the dirt from under his toenail. When he finishes he rubs the shit onto his thigh and starts on the next toe, real slow as if he's forgotten we're here. Of course, of course, he says in that scratchy-tired voice of his. A message from God. That's natural. But why doesn't he give you any *useful* info? He looks up. How about this, Patty? Maybe next time you'll get the winning lotto numbers and we can all get the hell out of debt.

It's called faith, Bill. Something you wouldn't know anything about. Evidently, I have enough to see the truth. *How about this*, she says trying to imitate his voice. Next time you're whining about the mortgage or rotting away in front of the TV, why don't you talk to Him. Seek some guidance for once.

But he's got his head down again, working away at a toe. So Mom turns and looks outside, and stays that way for a while

as if she's praying that when she turns around we'll be gone, and it'll just be her, Jesus, and Nana's spirit living here.

Piled in the corner of the foyer are my Birkenstocks, running shoes I never jog in, and waitress sneakers. I bend down and arrange them side by side because I yelled at Mom the other day about the house being a mess. My life here would flow like gravy if I just shut the fuck up once and a while

Mom walks outside and stops in the shade of the oak tree. Our senior citizen neighbor has parked her old-ass bicycle in front of the curb. When my mom opens the card the old lady yells out something.

So, my dad says. She's going to send the balloon up to heaven. Is that it? He looks at me with purple slugs of skin under his eyes.

What a plan, I say.

Heaven and hell are right here on earth, he says. You know that? That bullshit about the golden interstates and mansions is only for fanatics like your mother. Don't forget that, Abby. As far as I'm concerned, your mother and I're living in hell right now. In fact, most people I know are. He flings a piece of toenail into the living room.

It's possible, I say. I don't believe in heaven and hell anymore -- I figure when you die your body seeps into the earth and grows back elsewhere into a flower or a weed or even a chain restaurant, depending on how good, bad or greedy a person you were. As for the living, my parents are miserable and like my dad's sort of saying, how much worse could it get? I rub my

hand around his back and say, Well, Dad, doing nothing all day isn't necessarily going to get you into the heaven on earth.

Goddamnit, he says, then stands up and puts his face so close to mine I can smell the onions on his breath. Going around analyzing everyone isn't helping you either. You know, no one around here says much about you and your *illustrious* career.

Hey.

He waves me off and when he walks outside our senior citizen neighbor yells *Hello* to him, then pedals away.

Abby, my mom says. Get out here and join us.

We stood in the middle of the yard where Mom raised her hand with the balloon -- her eyes shut -- and started a prayer, her lips moving in spasms and I wondered if the words were getting caught in her mouth because it sounded all mumble-jumble like she was whispering in another language. The only thing I could make out was, *Jesus, sweet sweet Jesus*. When my dad knelt down on the lawn she stopped praying, as if she'd sensed his movement with her eyes closed. Or maybe the Holy Spirit had informed her.

Stand up, she said.

He picked at the grass and remained silent.

All I ask is that you join us, she said. It's bad enough you don't have the faith to pray for your mother-in-law -- God knows you don't like to pray -- but the least you could do is

stand. She looked around the yard like there was an audience of people and whispered, You're acting like a baby.

Dad, do it, I said. Let's finish the torture.

Abby, don't encourage him. You know what this means to me.

Fine, he said and brushed his hand against my knee. I grabbed onto it and pulled him up and he stumbled forward. Then gained his balance, lifted his arms toward the sky and yelled, Hey, God! just let her in already. She's not that bad. She might fart once in a while or --

Mom slapped his arm. Shut up.

Please, can we get this over with?

She ignored me and with the card raised up in her hand whispered something quick and released the balloon.

Amen, my dad said.

And like it was in slow motion -- must've been a breeze or the weight of the card -- it floated up at an angle and kept drifting toward the tree. Shit, Mom said, and we all watched the yellow card lead the balloon right into the green thickness of the branches.

See what you did, Bill? You and your anti-Christ spirit. It's been nothing but a curse to us all!

You're out of your mind, he said walking toward the house. Out of your mind.

Hey, get back here! Now she was in full bitch position with her hands on her hips. The least you can do is help me get it down. I paid ten dollars for that balloon. I wrote a



beautiful message to Nana on that card. And *don't* even ask me to write it again because I can't remember those words... they just came to me!

You can't blame her for getting pissy and you can't expect him to behave totally normal throughout this funky letting-go-of-the-balloon ritual. Really, their relationship is one of those cycles that just spins around and keeps coming back to the chaotic middle, and frustrating when you're trying to fix it, like attempting to solve one of those mathematical word problems -- no matter how you approach it, no matter how many ways you try figuring out the big equation, it only makes you frustrated and want to shove the pencil up the person's ass who wrote it.

I went over to the tree and saw part of the yellow card stuck near the top. I see it, I said. Pretty high up, though.

Bill, you've got to help me with this, she said.

Mom, relax, I can get it. I figured if it stayed up there she'd never forgive him, then start hanging out with Jesus full time, which would give Dad yet another excuse to sit around melting like a giant scoop of vanilla ice cream on the couch.

Abby, he said yawning from the doorway. You're just going to hurt yourself. For Christ's sake, you don't even have insurance.

Okay, I've got a plan. But my parents don't say anything and I'm shocked, there're actually listening to me, so I keep talking: If Dad can lift me up to that first branch I can climb to the top. They're still staring at me so I say, Like a cat.

Looking up my dad says, I don't know, Abby. My back's been pretty tricky lately. Why don't we borrow a ladder from the neighbor?

Shut your trap, Mom says, then plops her hand against my forehead like I've got a temperature. Lord, give Abby the knowledge and courage to climb that tree for Nana. With her lips smeared into a grin she wipes the sweat off my forehead and says, Thanks, honey. Then she kisses my cheek which makes me smile, makes me feel like I'm ten all over again when I thought of her as a big grown up chock-full of strength and all sorts of answers.

Come on, Bill, she says. Make your hands like this. Do it!

Yeah, yeah.

So with both their hands held out in holy-communion style, I bring one foot up to Dad's hands and with my palm against the bark I pull up myself. And after kicking my other foot around I finally land it in Mom's hands. I look down to see sweat leaking out his forehead, and her making grunting noises like she's sitting on the pot.

All right, raise me up.

Aiming for the first branch I feel myself elevating, but my right foot -- the one Mom's got -- is sinking, and my left one's rising too fast so I start falling over and just before I lose it I hug the tree trunk. With my face and boobs pressing against the scratchy bark I say, Mom, what the hell're you doing?

She grabs my foot and grunts. Almost there, Abby.

Please, are you that weak?

I'm doing my best, Bill, doing my best.

Excuse me, I say, my hands trembling from my own weight.

Can we discuss this later? I'm slipping. Then the foot controlled by my dad starts to shoo up again so I say, Wait, Dad! Can't you do it evenly?

When I hear my mom say, *Oh*, she's just too heavy, my right foot drops *again* and my dad says, I've got you. Then I'm moving up with my eyes closed and my hands out hoping to grab onto something and when I look up I'm swinging from the first branch and my mom is clapping.

Praise the Lord, she says.

To get the momentum I start swinging my legs and when it feels right I hoist myself up onto the branch. Then real careful, with my ankles wrapped around the bark, I inch forward and use the tree trunk to pull myself up. You okay? Mom says but I ignore her and step onto the next branch, lifting myself up onto another limb, and repeat this throughout the web of branches until I'm standing with sweat dripping down my face, and my eye's locked on that card that's keeping the balloon from flying off. Amazing. When I was younger I was terrified of heights. Looking down at my parents' squinting faces, it feels like the right place to be. The sunlight's filtering in tubes through the leaves. And I can smell fresh cut grass. I can see over our house and onto the next street where two boys are flinging a Frisbee back and forth.

Can you spot the balloon, sweetie?

Again, I don't feel like answering her. Why can't I do this more often? Climb the tree and sit up here, listen to the birds, think about the bare strip of land that is my future. Instead I spend my time pacing the house, talking circles around my parents, trying to patch up everything.

Abby, Dad yells. What's wrong? You stuck?

No! I start the climb again. It's a cinch: step on a branch, grab a higher one with your hands and before you know it your legs are following. Now, with sweaty hair in my eyes I move toward the balloon. Then clasping a different branch, because in this tree all you've got to do is reach out and there's something, I lean across for the card with my fingers clamping like tweezers.

Abby! she yells. I can barely see you. Have you got a hold of it or what?

Yes, I say to shut her up. Resting against a limb I rip off the card from the ribbon and let it drop to the ground. A few more branches and I'm at the top but it's not necessary since without the weight of the dumb card, the balloon can make it.

Damnit Abby! he says. Get down before you fall and we get stuck paying your hospital bill.

I say nothing and why should I? I don't even want to come down, it's too relaxing up here -- just me and my thoughts which I can spin as fast I want. For instance, can a person really be too negative toward things? Through the branches I see into my

bedroom: there's the bedpost sticking up with its round brass ball. The same freaking room I've had all my life! Same wallpaper covered with the red and yellow tulips that look like snakes in the dark. Below my parents are bickering about my lack of insurance.

For Mom's sake I open my hand and watch the ribbon twirl along my palm and the balloon bounce its way through the leaves and into the open sky. Goddamnit, come down already! Dad yells. I won't. I'm waiting for them to go back inside. I'm standing on a branch. It's the best thing I've done in years.

### **Phennel's At Once Pastoral And Gated Estate**

The corporate lords had ordered one of their dutiful mechanisms to clamp its massive robotic arms around Loafs (the local grocery store once owned by Phennel's soon-to-be ex-wife's family) and raise it just above the telephone wires. The drivers-by swished onward, buzzed with indifference. The mechanism proceeded to rattle the store until all its components dropped and shattered and splattered across the foundation for the ma/pa establishment in which Phennel had once ejaculated onto a box of frozen fish sticks. The mechanism then tossed the store into a nearby pond -- chicken breasts and mops clinging to its arms -- and began plucking out trees to widen the lot. Two months later, the supermarket was built.

Or so Phennel liked to imagine the corporate takeover. Here he was walking in its massive parking lot. He dreaded patronizing this mega store. But he had to quickly gather celery stalks for a pot roast simmering on his stove. He was hosting a dinner that evening for Jerilyn, the state trooper's wife. Ah, that freckled suburban queen! Jerilyn lived in the new housing development recently built near Phennel's house. She was teetering on the cusp of divorce, and for the last few

weeks, it seemed, Phennel had been lounging beneath that cusp, patiently awaiting her fall.

A cloud, like a giant stainless steel countertop, hovered over the parking lot, blocking out the afternoon sun and causing a streetlight to flicker over Phennel. A woman in a long dress came at him, pushing a shopping cart while fumbling her hand inside one of the paper bags so that he had to step aside to let her pass. "Hello," she said. Phennel nodded, hurrying onward.

Oh, why couldn't he just enjoy interacting with strangers? Because, he thought, I'm incapable of living with people without hurting them. No no no...tonight will be the start of something fresh. A date with the suburban queen!

Then came a boy (that woman's, maybe?) using his foot to nudge along a head of cheese. "Hello, son," said Phennel, and the boy kept his head down.

When did these people ever stop rushing around? Phennel had originally moved to this Connecticut town twenty years ago - - there were actually five farms in it -- so he wouldn't have to view herds of people when buying, for instance, a few celery stalks. He and his wife had bought a house with a pond, they'd built a gazebo, all surrounded by twenty acres of New England woods. His wife had managed Loaf's, her father's store, only ten minutes away. And Phennel, on his morning commute to the train station, would glide past high-grassed fields and slip under tunnels of oak trees aflame with foliage in the fall, breathing with greenness in the summer, and so on. In the evening he'd flee the city and head back to his pastoral estate to embrace his glorious wife and their little son.

Things changed over twenty years, though. Their son, for instance, grew long arms and legs, facial hair, and no longer ran around the house in a diaper shouting, "Daddy, Daddy, where are you?" Things changed indeed. Two years ago Phennel was forced into early retirement, when the company he worked for had been bought out by a national cigarette-making corporation. And the boy, being victim to certain physical on-goings performed by Daddy himself, eventually sided with his mother on the divorce proceedings. *Here I am, son, here I am...alone.*

As if he didn't have enough trouble trying to win back his son's love, his wife had been threatening to take the estate. Of course, Phennel objected. He told his lawyer if he loses his house and yard and pond and gazebo, he will probably kill himself. "I understand," said the lawyer, "but we can't use that."

For the past two months or so Phennel had been living alone, trying to enjoy, perhaps, his remaining moments in his suburban utopia. Which was difficult, ever since the corporate lords had sent mechanisms to chain saw through the woods surrounding his property -- as well as the town's farms and fields -- to drive their mechanical members into the landscape, and, as a result, the allotted barren plots simultaneously sprouted life-size doll houses and driveways equipped with basketball hoops and Jeep Cherokees.

Enough with the town for God's sake! There were more important things to think about. For certain that brown liquid was evaporating around the pot roast. He quickened his stride.



Focus, he ordered himself. Get in that store and collect the goods! Rush to the deli counter and eat as many of those sample turkey cubes as your weary stomach can stand, and out you go, old fellow, without a single nod or gesture to the townspeople.

He paused outside the electronic doors, taking a deep breath. He wanted to enjoy seeing all the people. After all, living alone wasn't what he'd always imagined. It hadn't involved divorcees lounging around his house gripping cocktails. Living alone was boring. Not to mention lonely. And he was tired of having endless conversations with himself.

The mechanical doors swung open. He entered and thought: I am a pleasant person who will tolerate all these people.

Like a stench, the noise of store rushed over him. A series of bleeps from the laser scanners. The drone from every refrigerator and machine it took to keep this fat mother organism pumping. Bleep bleep. The smell of fried chicken. Bleep...Bleep...Bleep. A pile of watermelons by the photo shop. Phennel covered his ears. Big Ben's, it was called, the store, which, more or less, was a warehouse laden with racks of food, disgruntled teenage workers and their grinning managers, and of course the PA system playing Muzak from its speakers when some worker wasn't blabbing muddled grocer code into its microphone. Bleep bleep.

He bent down slowly (he'd injured his hip a few months back in a physical struggle with his wife, something to do with an espresso maker and a few insults). He was picking up the plastic basket when he heard glass shatter. Or was it an explosion? Some nerve-whacked Super Mom must've knocked over a

pyramid of mayonnaise jars. But what would explain that clicking sound? Yet another...mystery.

Phennel turned. A deer without antlers was charging at him. He clutched the basket. His chest went numb.

"Yo!" someone yelled. "Move!"

He could not. At least, a portion of his brain seemed to register the occurrence: *There's a wild animal on its way to trample you.* He should dive. Dive to the left. The deer's head dipped to the linoleum.

"Watch out!" someone said. *I'm watching!* he wanted to say but instead he muttered, "Heh." The deer's legs buckled, at which point it glided past a few cash registers -- the on-lookers' faces following -- only to gain back its balance like a glorious figure skater and continue trotting on all four hooves, glass shards glistening in the fur over its nose. Click-clock...click-clock...click...click click click...

Now! A chance to slink the hell out this store and race home. But his arms and legs were locked stiff. People were shouting things again. "Get out of there...Deer!"

He could not move. His chest pulsed. He shut his eyes -- Oh! -- clutching his grip on the basket, the clicking getting louder. God, please, help me...

Phennel was floating among the rafters. Beneath him shoppers yanked various items off the shelves. All in unison, each in a separate isle, the people moved, stopped, grabbed products, tossed them into carts...they just never give up, these consumers. But look, down there, standing in the middle

of the aisle, gazing up with his full head of dark hair, was Phennel's son. *Hello*, said Phennel but no sound came out his mouth. Phennel tried to wave. But he had no hand. Christ, he and the boy hadn't talked in a year, not since Phennel had forearmed him in the nose -- at the boy's wedding, of all places. *You don't know how to love, Dad*, said the son sliding backward on the frozen pond in their yard. *You don't know how to love*. What did he mean? Who really knew how to love? *I'm so sorry*, Phennel attempted to say as he ascended into the air, watching the boy's head shrink beneath him.

"He's awake, he's awake." His cheeks were being squeezed by cold fingertips.

Suddenly he wasn't floating anymore. He saw a pair of wide lips roofed under a faint blonde mustache. The mouth opened, flashed gray and jagged teeth, a woman's lips. Suspended next to her head was an upside-down plastic basket, and attached to the handle of the blue basket was Phennel's hand on which white knuckles pressed against the skin.

"What happened?" he said, his stomach churning. "Where's the animal?" The on-lookers had gathered around, clasping their knees and whispering things to each other. "Tell me!" he said.

"It's okay," the lips above him announced. She wore a visor on her head. "I'm a nurse."

"No," Phennel said. "We need to hide...from the deer."

"You are safe," said the nurse.

"I am not safe." When he opened his hand to drop the basket his tendons locked up -- it felt as if his goddamn fingernails had been ripped off.

"His name's Phennel," announced a young man wearing an orange apron, or was he a teenager? He had a pink face, like salmon flesh, and blonde hair, and he was holding the frayed eel skin wallet. "My wallet," Phennel said.

There it went again -- oh, God! -- that clicking noise. Phennel's chest grew hot. He watched the deer trotting toward the buy-a-raffle-for-the Toyota parked by the barbecue grills. Its hind legs kicked up at the air. Phennel said, "Off me for God's sake. Before it attacks again." The nurse held him down by the shoulders. "Let me be," he said. Her nails dug into him. "Off!" he shouted, squirming. "Be still," she whispered. Another orange-aproned man -- this one wielding a mop -- darted after the deer. "Corner him," someone said. "That's it...You missed him!" Down the aisle galloped the deer. It leaped over a shopping cart. Behind it came the mop flopping in the air, the man spinning around the cart.

What had he come in for? Oh, yes, the pot roast, it must be burning by now. Soon Jerilyn would be over, a chance at an actual functioning relationship, and there was no way in hell he was going to screw it up. He turned to the crowd and said, "I'll be on my way." He got on his knees to stand up.

"Oh, no," said the nurse, who wore a black mini skirt and sneakers. A tennis-playing nurse? There was a web of varicose veins etched just above her knee...varicose veins...*Mommy's got*

*blue blood*. Didn't he say that to his mother once when he was a child? Yes, that afternoon she lay there in a towel on the couch with rosary beads in her hand. It was just after his father had once again left them -- *I'm out!* -- carrying a pillow case full his clothes. *Blue blood, what a thing to say*, his mother had said. Or did he imagine it all? Christ, it'd been months since he'd even thought of her, God rest her soul.

"His eyes are shut again. He's slipping. Where's that ambulance?"

The nurse held her hands on his shoulders, her breath smelling of coffee. "Listen," Phennel said, opening his eyes and falling into the soft-smirking voice that would make his wife stomp her feet and say, *I'd rather have you scream at me than use that tone, you prick!* He cleared his throat. Be compassionate! Be gentle! He said, "I must go. There's a pot roast burning." He crawled through the patrons' legs and stood up, a few hands groping his back, then hurried for the mechanical doors.

"He's delusional," said the nurse behind him. "Don't let him go."

Phennel grunted and marched onward, holding out his hand as if this one gesture would say it all. What a power that'd be: a single wave of a body part that could sustain the constant movement of the townspeople and allow him to rush out the store without an interaction which, of course, always held the potential of turning into a confrontation.

Right in front of the electronic doors stood the young man with the salmon face, holding out his pink palms. It said N. on his name tag. "Sorry," N. said. "It's just store policy. We can't let anyone who's been hurt leave the premises. Trust me, we're here to help you." He itched his eyebrow over his hairless face.

"Let me out," said Phennel.

"I understand your impatience. But trust me, you'll have to stay."

"Goddamnit, I must go!"

"No, you can't leave."

Phennel punched him in the chest, N.'s teeth showing as he stumbled onto the coupon rack. "For God's sake," Phennel said, and the boy slid to the floor, his head resting against the white wall, just beneath an orange sticker that read, *Just Baked*.

Phennel's knuckles were aching. The nurse scurried over to them. Another man wearing an orange apron followed. Get out, he thought. Get out. He stomped on the rubber mat -- Come on, move! The electronic doors opened, and he darted outside. Glass shards glistened under lamp post just outside the window the deer had entered. He paused, scanned over the few remaining oak trees surrounding the parking lot, making sure no deer were heading his way, then hurried across the rain-speckled pavement, his entire hand throbbing, one of his thighs numbing up. Don't look back, keep running! His heart pumped madly and heavily, as if about to slow and malfunction and then eventually stop.

He reached his car, he fumbled for his keys. Oh God, he thought, what the hell have I done? Why'd that boy have to stand his ground so hard? Sweat leaked into Phennel's eyes. His stomach was burning with pain. He put the car in reverse.

---

It wasn't until he reached the back roads leading to his estate that Phennel noticed his ring finger was swollen. His lower torso felt as if it'd been hit by a cannonball, not that he'd ever been struck by a cannonball...so why then the sudden paralysis when the deer was charging? Perhaps some interior force had stretched out its tentacles to put the strangle on him, some thing with the desire for death or pain. *Observe here, people. Notice before you the fifty year old man willing to die not too far from the fifteen-items-or-less stand.* But Phennel didn't want to end his life. Sure he'd considered it, especially after being laid off from the same godforsaken company -- twenty-five years! of devotion -- and the sluts ended up selling out to a tobacco company of all things. And so what, if in the past two months on his own, when he wasn't napping, or calling his wife begging her to come back -- *I'm lonely too, Phennel, she'd say. Just don't be afraid of the pain* -- he sat on the couch lubricating his penis to the exercise shows on cable.

Whatever the case, he was still alive. First priority after the incident: score that freckled dame. Develop a healthy relationship for once in your life! He depressed the gas pedal. Yellow leaves brushed past the window like a crowd of hands.

Once inside, Phennel turned down the flames on his stove, added a bit of water to the roast, a dash of cumin for good luck, and went for the couch. He pulled up his shirt to see his stomach covered in a round welt the shape of...a pear? When would the piano come swinging down from a crane and smash through his bay window? Goddamn mega store! You pay taxes all these years to keep your privacy, and the town ends up whoring its trees and soil to lustful corporations. How random to have been struck by a deer in a supermarket!

On the other hand, his pain could've been worse. He'd been knocked over by humans caught in animalistic rages before -- his father used to tackle him out in the yard, forcing Phennel to grip the football and stand still while the old bastard came charging at him -- so what made this any different? Except, of course, for the fact that he'd actually hit that poor salmon-faced boy.

Phennel made a fist, gazed at the hair curling like gray wires over his knuckles. He hadn't hit the guy that hard. Had he? Oh, Christ, it'd been a while since he'd hit a person. And here he was: the violent citizen returned. Just recently Phennel had begun walking around the new neighborhood, a test to see how much resentment he still had for the greedy land buyers. It was quite a treat actually, to stroll with soft hands, with forearms that no longer struck, as he'd glance at the large windows behind which families and couples lived. He even met Jerilyn on such a walk. She was jogging in a sports bra...a sports bra, ah, what a wonderful invention! For certain, he'd



figured, after he'd asked her over for lunch that day and she said, "Why not?", that things could very easily, once again, slide his way.

Phennel clutched his fist until his finger went numb. For shit's sake, now it was as if he hadn't made any progress! He should saw off his arms at the elbows.

What were those rules? Phennel, under recommendation from his wife, had seen a counselor about his physical urges to strike people, particularly his wife, although he'd only hit her twice during the marriage. The first time he'd blacked out, and woke up sprinting across the yard, heading toward the pond, only to see his wife crying inside the car at the top of the driveway, pounding the windows. Why'd she have to taunt him all the time? Why'd he have to destroy the marriage? So the rules...okay, number seven: *Don't allow the guilt to eat at you. Forgive yourself for your behavior, Phennel.*

I forgive myself, he thought.

Perhaps he'd punched the young man out of self-defense -- yes! -- and he could simply phone the store and take him out to lunch to apologize.

"Stop thinking about it," he said.

For Christ's sake, a healthy and frustrated and not to mention *considerably* attractive woman was on her way over, he shouldn't focus on the negative.

It took a certain amount of effort to stand up. Soon Phennel was wrapping a tawny ace-bandage around his stomach,

setting the table at the same time, when the doorbell rang. She made it! He buttoned up his shirt and made a move for the door.

And there, standing in a gray sun dress on which red steam boats puffed, was Jerilyn. "Banana bread," she said. She held out the dish, grinning with all those freckles.

"How thoughtful of you." Phennel almost dropped the dish because of the strain it put on his finger. She grabbed it back from him and said, "Hey, I can handle it. Remember, I'm a big middle-aged girl now."

"Certainly." He looked over her shoulder as if to see binoculars peering out from the pine trees, her husband hidden somewhere in a camouflage outfit. Of all the woman out there, Phennel was pursuing the one married to a state trooper, a man trained to shoot terrified targets from at least a hundred feet away. Relax, he told himself. You're just suffering from post-deer-attack distress disorder.

The pine trees bowed over the pond which reflected the silver clouds through occasional splatters of rain drops. He said, "Why don't we get inside before it rains."

"You all right?" she said. "You look flushed."

"Flushed?"

"Yeah, as in toilet...you know it's funny, your gate was left open. In fact, my husband and I talked about that just the other day, how neither of us have ever seen that thing open. Are you making bombs out here or what?"

"Bombs? I'm merely being cautious." She was right. It was the first time he'd returned back to his estate without clamping shut the pad lock. There was something else he'd

forgotten tonight, but what was it? How careless of him!

"Quick," he said. "Inside before we get struck by lightning."

"Yeah, lightning. The stuff can kill."

They sat at the dining room table not saying anything.

The roast lay dead in a bed of potatoes and carrots that looked like eyeballs watching from different angles. *Stop watching*, he wanted to say. A line of steam curled between them. Phennel reminded himself that this was by no means a date. He was currently serving as a cork board on which Jerilyn could tack up bits of neurosis involving her doomed marriage. Of course, he enjoyed listening to Jerilyn, he enjoyed handing back advice. But how long could he last without his own cork board? He hadn't been feeling too strong these days, he hadn't slept much lately. Last night, he lay in bed studying the shadows in the room, feeling as if any moment a demonic creature were about to step out from the darkness and lay a hand on him.

Phennel swallowed the rest of his wine, trying to relax. Outside the window, the grass surrounding the gazebo had turned an electric green spotted with a gang of leaves, the gray sky churning over the pine trees. He poured himself another glass and suppressed a belch. He thought: Please, don't let her leave without a kiss, without something positive to think about in the morning.

"I knew this was going to happen," said Jerilyn, still chewing. "Nothing has changed. I'm just as crazily confused as last week. Crazily confused. The story of my life, Phennel. I'm telling you, I've forgotten what it's like to make a

decision. You know, it took me an hour today just to figure out if I should make banana bread or fucking *cornbread!*"

She needed his counseling. Phennel said, "Has he hit you recently?"

She laughed, and a sliver of meat shot out her mouth. It stuck to her wine glass. She wiped it off with her napkin and said, "Why'd you just say that?"

"My wife used to hit me," Phennel said. "First with her fists, then with small appliances. Just when things get harray, someone's got to start swinging." He stood up. "Relationships. A tough institution to be a part of."

He shook his head in disgust as he walked into the kitchen. What the hell, he thought, am I saying. Why am I lying all of sudden? He hadn't planned to discuss his past. His ex-wife *did* hit him several times, so technically, perhaps (he hoped) it wasn't a lie. She once, for instance, drove the espresso maker into his hip after he'd told her to shut up. Of course, he'd initiated the violence in the marriage, but wasn't it equal distribution toward the end? Didn't he flinch like an abused dog each time she'd load the espresso machine after that fight? Equal distribution. Goddamnit! Here he was justifying all over again. Number four: *Avoid verbal or mental justification of an event.* Perhaps he could remove his clothes and show Jerilyn the scar from the espresso incident...oooh, the thought of a suburban queen lying naked in his bed. He'd never once cheated on his wife, which meant -- Christ almighty! -- it'd been over twenty years since he'd experienced new flesh

breathing against him. Number three: *When you feel the need to control, take a deep breath. Consider your options. You always have options, Phennel. What are your options?* He took a deep breath. A piece of meat was stuck between his teeth.

Jerilyn stood in the kitchen, gripping the door frame, the ceiling light reddening her hair. There was a bruise, shaped like a claw, on her biceps. She leaned forward so that her breasts smashed against the cotton of her dress, no doubt a body sculpted at the town's new mega gym. "She hit you?" she asked, squinting. She was skeptical, who wouldn't be?

"Yes, she was quite fond of throwing objects."

"And you never hit back?"

"We're supposed to be helping you. Not me, remember?"

"I don't know if I believe you."

"I don't blame you. You barely know me." He wanted to lick her eyelids -- that brooding face of hers -- lead her to his bedroom where they could wiggle naked in the darkness, chat about random subjects until morning dew collected on the grass blades outside. She'd be his messiah, she'd take him for walks across the pond...no, bring it back, keep focused.

She let go of the doorframe and walked toward him, her slender fingers sliding along the counter top. Suddenly Phennel was confused as to what was manipulation and what wasn't. Was he muddling his options? What were they even talking about?

"Well, *should* I believe you?" Jerilyn said.

"Hmm...You ever strike him?"

"Strike him?" -- she rubbed her cheeks -- "Actually, I bit him once. I mean, I was pretty damn angry at him that night. But we've never boxed with each other to answer your question. Thing is, I enjoyed biting him. Got him right on the ankle. I even tasted blood."

He watched her look out the kitchen window -- nets of algae crept toward the center of the pond which bubbled with rain drops -- and with those suburban-princess unpainted fingernails she began scratching the side of her neck which was smeared with red blotches.

Phennel held his hand a few inches from her lower back. His chest grew warm. She turned to him, then backpedaled against the cabinets, clutching the doorframe again. "Maybe I should just move out. You hear me talking, Phennel? Flee the goddamn scene. I'm telling you, I feel that way. Didn't you, like just running away from her, the kids, the dog, the *fish* even?"

"And the washer and dryer. Sure, honey, the whole trade. Just keep running. Shit, I feel that way now and I've got nothing to run from."

He smiled. Her eyebrows went up. Finally he began to relax. He grabbed her hand, feeling the confused and virile warmth of this suburban mother of two. She took it back. "Shall we finish eating?" he said, gliding backward to the dining room.

She followed and sat down. Through the window, the outside light illuminated one side of her face -- there were

purple creases around her eyes -- and she was looking like a waxed version of herself. He said, "Stay with me while you decide on the divorce. You and the kids."

"See, you're forever Mr. Irrational. First off, we both know my husband would shoot off your ears, and second, like I already said, I don't know you that well."

Phennel sipped his wine. "Do you really know that husband of yours? Didn't you say last time you don't respect the man? I mean, when was the last time you two had a serious talk? I see a beautiful woman too buried in a nest of denial to realize how badly she needs out. You're suffocating, dear lady. Trust me."

She finished her wine, poured herself another -- her blue eyes masked behind long and pointy eyelashes -- and said, "If I wanted to be treated like a piss-ant, I'd spend the day with my husband. *Don't* manipulate me."

But it's what I do best, he wanted to say. "I'm Catholic."

"What? What the hell're you saying?"

Focus! Think before you speak, goddamnit. He clapped his hand, his finger stinging, and said, "Actually, I'm not Catholic. But forget that. Let's forget the divorce subject too. Why don't we dance?"

He put on some Billie Holiday and they sat on the couch. Jerilyn picked a few pieces of lint off her dress, then rested her hand on her thigh. Phennel tapped his fingernails against the wine glass, hoping she wouldn't notice his penis extending

itself beneath his pants. "What is this thing...called love?" asked Billie Holiday from the speakers.

Then Jerilyn removed her sneakers -- this dame actually wore a dress and tennis shoes! -- revealing feet coated in the gray nylons. What a sight! He should offer to massage her feet: a gesture of kindness which everyone knows is masked with utter lasciviousness, but how can she refuse a hand with all its multiple muscles working over her foot, the sole source that connects her to the ground, skinny toes and the rest? Speaking of which, her arches were cold. "Oh," said Jerilyn when he touched her heel. Her arm slid off the cushion, her biceps spotted with the red blotches. "I needed that," she was saying. The light from the lamp highlighted the baby hairs on her chin, reminding Phennel of his wife, a sweet reminder actually. "I'm really glad you came over," he said. "So am I." She smiled, her teeth pink from the wine. He put her foot to his forehead...ah, like silk...and began rubbing her toes over his eye lids when she recoiled and said, "I thought we were going to dance. We should be dancing."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at her.

She snapped back. "The wine, I think it's getting to us."

"Right." Phennel bit his lip to keep himself from saying Ouch! when he attempted to rise off the couch. His stomach tightened like a fist, the pain shooting down to his groin. Don't think about it! For shit's sake, Jerilyn needed his emotional support and he had to act courageous, not to mention casual and indifferent. Sure, if they slept together, even



kissed, Phennel would feel a glorious sense of happiness mutating his miserable cells...but he couldn't show his eagerness. Number 4: *When you feel the need to be aggressive, take a step back and recollect. Do you really need the control, Phennel? What is accomplished by control?*

He slowly pulled himself up off the couch.

"You okay?" she asked.

The knuckle on his ring finger had rounded into a ball. He put the hand in his pocket and said, "Just aging."

Phennel was gripping her, dangling a glass of wine, his other hand pressing just above her buttocks (ever since watching those exercise shows, he'd become a devout fan for the lower inward crevice of the female back). She let her arms hang on his shoulders. Her hair smelled like peaches. His heart jumped. He felt like a young man once again. Finally, he thought, things are going my way. *There is hope!*

They spun around -- Phennel's cheeks heating up from his extended smile -- slow at first: one two three...one two three...one two three...then faster. "*You took my heart,*" sang Billie Holiday, "*and threw it away...*" They were cooking with gas now, spinning and whipping around the room. There went the stone fireplace; there went the wooden wall with the dark knots that occasionally showed grotesque faces depending upon your mood; there went bay window from the dining room, oh look, a van in the driveway; round and round and there went the fireplace again. Of all things, here was a woman dancing in his living room, a suburban freckled queen temporarily bereft of shoes! He

felt a sudden air of confidence. He had progressed. He had achieved something in these last two months on his own.

He had seen a white van! He let go of Jerilyn, stepped back. "What's wrong?" she said. He moved across the hall into the dining room.. Parked beside the pond was the van -- it said NEWS 30 on its side -- with a miniature satellite dish perched on its roof. Phennel spun around. "I can't believe this!" From the dining room he couldn't see Jerilyn.

"What is it?" she said, stepping into the foyer. Hair covered her eyes. Phennel marched over, brushed the hair so he could see her entire face -- her lips were purple and full -- grabbed her hand, and led her back to window, his heart flopping. "My wallet," he said.

"Your wallet?"

"Yes, I forgot about the wallet." Phennel drew the curtains, he locked the doors, he ran around instinctively searching for a weapon of some sort. He'd had the gate and lock installed recently so his wife wouldn't enter like a thief in the night and take certain valuables. He felt more secure this way, especially with all those construction workers building houses in the woods and wandering the streets on their lunch breaks -- and the one day he forgets to lock it, goddamnit, a news van of all things drives its way in.

He was running through the house. Into the bedroom. A narrow shadow lay across his bed. Out of the bedroom. Down the hall, the empty silver picture frames flashing by. He was panting. There had to be a weapon, there had to be something!

"What're you doing, Phen, what's going on? Phennel, don't shut me out!" Into the kitchen. Shut out, he thought. Shut left. Shut right. Shut down. When he stopped to catch his breath, he found himself standing in the middle of the hallway gripping the fire poker.

Jerilyn hustled over with drops of wine sputtering out her glass, splattering the wall beneath the picture frame that once held a photograph of Phennel and his wife grinning at a banquet table for the ceremony where he received a clock, an award for putting in twenty five years. He was laid off six weeks later. "Okay," she was saying. "It's *high* time you calmed yourself, Mr." She dug her finger into his chest. Indeed, she was a physical woman. "Stop acting like such an idiot. And tell me why exactly there's a news van out there? Talk to me, Phennel. Have you done something? Something horrible?"

"No." He explained what had happened at Big Ben's. He showed her his torso wrapped in the bandage, the finger which had turned purple. "Wow," she said. After withholding information about his past as a casual wife-and-son beater (well, one time he'd dropped a glowing piece of coal on the dog after it'd had eaten the porterhouses off the grill), it was a relief to be honest.

"Okay then, we'll figure something out," she said, rolling the wine glass along her cheek as she looked down at the floor. "A deer, huh? That's very odd."

Phennel said, "There's nothing to figure. We're hiding out, honey."

"Well, suit yourself. I'm talking to them."

He scurried into the dining room and peered through the split in the curtains. The van was moving up the driveway. "You've got to understand, Jerilyn, I don't want those people invading my life. I've worked too hard to achieve this place. I can't have my son seeing me on the news, it's just more reason to keep hating me. Trust me, we just lay low and they go away."

"I still don't understand the big deal here!" she yelled from the hallway. "You got hit by a deer. You're the innocent victim, right?"

He could only see half her body standing there in front of the fireplace. He walked in, grabbed her hand, and led her to the couch. Jerilyn sat down and crossed her legs, revealing a nyloned calve...ah, a mother with muscles -- no no, don't lose concentration.

She put a knuckle in her mouth, biting down. "Boy oh boy."

"What's wrong?"

"What if you're not telling me everything? My husband's been skeptical of you ever since we moved in that house. I mean, a deer in a grocery store. *Christ*, come off it already." She laughed. She stood up. She began to pace.

"Forget about the state trooper for now. Listen," -- he patted the couch. Then she stared at his hand, as if it were someone else's, attached to a body with dirty intentions. Stupid, he thought, retracting it. "Hear me out," he said.

She sat two cushions away from him and cleared her throat.

"I'm listening."

"I punched one of the Big Ben workers."

"Punched?"

"He was in my way...well, there's no excuse, I shouldn't have done it, but you see, I was disoriented."

"Oh."

"I've been violent with people in the past, but I've changed, honestly. In the store, though, it just happened" -- Phennel hugged himself -- "so suddenly."

"What do you mean, violent?"

There was a knock at the door.

Phennel clicked off the lamp. A line of gray light shot across the hard-wood floor, stopping at the leg of the coffee table. The doorbell rang. He said, "Jerilyn, please. Stay with me until they leave, a few minutes. Then you can go back to Mr. Husband."

In the darkness, her eyes looked like mounds of clay. "I don't want to hear about that guy."

Another knock at the door. "Hello?" said a female voice. "Phennel, are you in there? We'd like to have a word with you. Are you okay?"

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Jerilyn said.

He leaned over and fumbled for her hand, which felt overly dry. He hoped that news woman would leave soon, so he could continue on with his prospective date. Maybe even, he could wake up smiling, happy to be alone, at which point he could brew coffee and sip it along the path that led to the large boulder

by the stream in the woods, the way he used to years ago on weekends. But it was no time for getting sidetracked. Phennel said, "Husband, what do you mean, you don't want to hear about your husband? News flash, honey -- you live with him."

"Can't I get a break from him and the kids, just once?"

"Absolutely."

She took back her hand. "Wait a second, now it's Phennel time. Time to start focusing on *your* problems for once, because" -- she stood up and pointed at her forehead -- *I'm* not the one with a news reporter knocking outside the door." She spun around gripping the sides of her hair, then leaned toward him, her freckles barely visible in the grayness.

"I...don't...know."

"All right," he said. "I resented my wife so much I hit her, twice actually, and my son too, a few times. Now you know. Then she started hitting *me* back, which I deserved, of course. I started fearing her. Anyway, it's much better to end it when the time is right. Don't let it rot. Don't let the resentment take over."

"You hit your wife! Great, I'm sitting here taking marriage advice from a wife beater -- not to mention a son beater. With freaking Action News in the driveway." Her forehead looked like a freckled slab of sheet rock. "I'm leaving."

"No, please." Damn, he shouldn't have been so honest. He was losing her. "It's all over now. I'm no longer that person, Jerilyn. Trust me." Rule number 1: *Don't over-intellectualize*

a situation. Allow your thoughts to emerge through feeling...I am not a violent person, he said to himself. I am a gentle, soft, and quite caring.

The doorbell rang.

Bruised layers of light lounged over the furniture. Only Jerilyn's nose, like a candle flame, was more visible than the rest of her face, until it flickered back into the shadows. Phennel heard the bones of her feet clicking around the corner. Please, he thought, stay with me. The doorbell rang again, its chime echoing just above his head, and he wanted to smash that box to stop the ringing. "We really need to talk to you," said that woman in her deep journalistic voice.

He sat alone. He bit his fingernails. Come back, he thought. The creaking-feet noise returned, getting closer. She flitted like an apparition into the room, her face gaining light as she neared him, two dark patches for eyes. Ah, she was back! And now it was Phennel's responsibility to give her sight once again. She said, "Okay tough guy, what do you do? There's now an ambulance and a police car out there. I think they're all business and they're meaning it."

"Tell me, do you fear me?"

"Not really...I don't think so."

"You shouldn't."

She laughed. "Well, I'm the same height as you. I probably have healthier muscles than you. I can definitely run faster than you." She grabbed his arm and squeezed, her perfume smelling like alcohol. Do it to me, he thought. Give me the

pain I deserve! She said, "See that." Nerve endings wriggled up to his neck. "I can hurt you pretty goddamn easily, Phennel. I'm not some excuse for a woman you can slap around. How's it feel, huh? Bet it hurts, doesn't it? I'll bet you it hurts."

"Okay, okay," he gasped. He tried rubbing the pain out of his arm. "But let me say that I never hit her for the fun of it. It was a result of a lot of repressed anger, most of which I've worked through with my counselor. And, like I said, after a while my wife and I used to hurt each other. It wasn't all me." It felt as if a heart were beating under his arm where she'd squeezed. "Equal distribution."

"Equal, my ass, you don't think my husband and I hurt each other? All couples do, Phennel. We just don't *hit* each other."

"Which is why you should flee before it's too late, Jerilyn."

She let out a sigh and sat close to him. He had to make some sort of move before she left, or else he'd go to sleep regretting his own passivity. He patted her thigh, the dress cool under his palm and he inched closer and then kissed her nose. "Oh, not this," she said. She stood up and began to pace. "I need to go, I need to get on with my life, to make some changes, right? To change my entire fucking existence because that's what I'll have to do, turn my life and my kid's life and my husband's life upside down so that I can be happier and feel freedom. Freedom. My personal joy! So that I can be lonely, oh how lovely a thought. I'll spend the next few years fighting over the kids. Is it really worth it?"



She sat down, touched his knee with her finger, and he looked at it, then back to those brooding lips, and his penis got hard. "I didn't mean to hurt you before," she said, massaging his arm. "Honestly, I do believe that people can change."

Outside, voices picked up. And Phennel didn't want to think about it anymore, that goddamn supermarket! He moved closer to her face. Her breath smelled of wine. Now their foreheads were touching, hers bigger than his, but softer. Suddenly no voices could be heard. Phennel kissed her. Her lips were dry. "It'll only get better if you end it," he said, sliding his hand across her knee. "Easier said than done," she said, clasping his hand. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"We should." His waist filled with a liquidy warmth he hadn't felt in years. He placed his hand under her chin and leaned in to kiss her. She let out a soft moan, the end of her tongue tapping against his upper lip. Oh, this woman! Phennel's groin went numb. He was sliding his hands over thighs, muscles contracting and expanding under his palms, burying his head in her breasts and growling when she said, "Stop that!"

"I'm sorry."

"Jerilyn, I know you're in there!" It was the state trooper, that sonofabitch.

"Jerilynnnnn! You're getting yourself involved with this freak? I knew you were lying to me. Spending the day at the bookstore. Even *I* can think of better excuses. At least you

could've hidden the car in his garage or something, honey. And as for you, Phennel. Better prepare yourself."

"That your guns talking?" Phennel yelled, wiping his mouth dry.

"Please," said Jerilyn, "don't provoke him. I have to go."

"Guns talking, hah! Jerilyn, get out here!" Fists pounded the door. Phennel looked up -- the ceiling looked black, and it seemed any moment it would lower over him, filling his pours with tiny specs of emptiness. Perhaps he could walk down the hallway and fall asleep on his bed, and the people and voices would leave him lying there in the darkness.

He sat alone on the couch, and Jerilyn's face floated above him, and now her mouth was moving: "What just happened didn't just happen, you understand me?" She wiped her lips and said, "This is it, I guess. This is fucking it. What the hell was I thinking?"

Perhaps I will fall asleep, he thought, his arms and legs filling up with a great sense of lethargy. He flicked on the lamp. Jerilyn hopped on one foot as she slipped on her sneaker. When was the last time he'd bought a pair of sneakers? Probably when he went to the mall last Christmas, just after he'd got laid off, all those people rushing in and out of the stores. Was it in the evening or in the day? It was the second time he hit her, they'd been arguing over his inability to park. *You are, she'd said, so stupid. Pull in here! For God's sake, you'll always be such an insignificant ass!*

"Don't you go hitting him, Phennel. He's still my husband, I'll have you know."

"What are you saying?" he said, and when he looked down he noticed he held the poker in his hand, and he was standing. Odd, he didn't remember getting up even.

Something bounced off the living room window. He turned to see a gray face pressed against it. It was the state trooper. It banged again. "I see you!" the trooper yelled and punched the window once more, the empty picture frame wobbling on the stereo before it dropped to the floor.

"Don't tempt me," Phennel said, inching toward the window, and he held the poker in his hands like a rifle, staring at the trooper's nose which smudged the glass. Number one: *Think before you strike. Think before you strike.* He closed an eye, as if looking through a scope, and thought: I want to ram this poker down his mouth. This wasn't right. This wasn't right. *Think before you strike.* "Boom," Phennel said. The trooper smiled, saying something behind the glass he couldn't quite understand.

And a thing beside Phennel's ear. Oh, that clock! It sat there encased in a glass bubble, its gears showing, his name inscribed in the gold plating on its base. Twenty-five years sitting at the same desk -- Phennel dropped the poker and moved toward the front door -- and all, it seemed, he had to offer now was a pension which matched his monthly mortgage and a mechanism that reminded him of his time left on earth. For some reason,

though, he hadn't been able to part with the clock. "You're going out there?" said Jerilyn. He'd already turned the knob.

Beside the leaf pile Phennel had been too tired lately to pick up, the police man stood in his blue uniform. And next him -- dear Lord! -- slouched N., the boy from the store. Before Phennel had a chance to apologize to the young man, the news woman, covered in a yellow poncho, with a microphone held out in front of her, and her big teeth showing, rushed up the steps, saying, "You've been struck by a deer. What was it like?" Behind her, the man held the camera.

"Off!" Phennel said, swatting the microphone with the clock. "Leave my yard at once, all of you!" He hurried by the small crowd, his hips burning with pain. But he kept running. He ran past the paramedic smoking a cigarette and leaning against the ambulance, which, Phennel noticed, as he broke into a slow jog, had made mud tracks in his precious lawn. When he got to the gazebo, he tossed the clock into the pond where it splashed, his lower torso contracting as he let go of the thing. He heard people talking behind, getting closer. But he felt no sense of closure seeing the thing go under. Here he was yet again acting out foolishly. Oh, when was it going to stop? Up at the house, he saw the trooper running from around the backyard, marching up to Jerilyn who was talking to the news woman. "I can't believe this," said the trooper with his hands in the air, then ran off to his car. "Wait!" Jerilyn yelled.

Phennel's first attempt at a date, and a news van had shown up. Perhaps, he figured, I need some time on my own. There was a patch of blue sky hovering within the clouds over

his house. Jerilyn stood outside his front door, biting her nails. They could have made a team, for a brief time, maybe, but nonetheless... She brushed the hair from her eyes as the police man and the salmon-faced boy made their way down the slope.

And he imagined running up to N. and laying his fist into his pink face, knocking him to the grass, then standing over him and driving his shoe into the boy's ribs.

But what would that accomplish? Phennel got down on a knee. He felt tired. His forehead pulsed. The two men got closer. Then he lay down on the wet grass, watching the rain occasionally dot the black surface, at which point he buried his fists in the water, a chill shooting up to his shoulders as the water rippled outward. Stay in it, stay in it. "What's he doing?" he heard the boy say in that nasal voice. Phennel hoped the camera was getting this, maybe somewhere his son would be watching, seeing old Dad, for once, resisting violence. "Time to get up," said the police man, and Phennel saw his own blurred reflection in the cop's black shoes, his nose looking elongated. There was no distinction between his skin color and hair, it all looked gray. The water was cold. "Sir," said the police man, "the man here wants to press charges for assault and battery."

"Get closer up," he heard the news woman say.

A fish brushed his hand. And Phennel bit his lip to fight off the numbness in arms, knowing this was the last time he'd ever set his hands in this pond, soon it'd all belong to his wife, who after all, deserved it. He could no longer feel his arms, he could no longer feel his fists. He was going to lay here for

a while. "Sorry," Phennel said into the shoe, watching his distorted mouth open and close. "But I'm not ready to get up yet. I'm just not ready."

## The Watercolored Monkey

### 1

Sarah steps her way toward the cooldown on the stairmaster her husband bought for her. Five more minutes. Come on already! Actually, it's that painting that's bothering her -- recently she signed up for a watercolor class at the YWCA, and now, wouldn't you know it, she's thinking of quitting. Geez, she thinks, lately there's always some *thing* that annoys the piss out of me! A few days ago it was the teakettle. Tom, her husband, would let the thing whistle (she was sure of this) longer and longer each evening, the steam shooting out while he sat on the couch with legs crossed, like a woman's, watching TV for his stocks. "Oh," he said last night after she'd accused him of intentionally letting it whistle just to annoy her, "I didn't realize the noise affected you so badly. I promise" -- he got off the couch and hugged her, caressing her lower back -- "for now on I'll put a stethoscope to the thing and listen for the water to make its first bubble."

Such a typical response from him -- he's rarely sincere about anything. Sarah clamps hands to her hips. Her thighs burn, the machine whining beneath her. Okay, big decision. Should she finish the painting soon, tonight maybe, or set it

up, easel and all, outside for the garbage men to collect? She wipes the sweat off her forehead with the strap of her sports bra.

"Whoa, tits," Tom says, standing in the doorway with a cage under his arm.

Sarah's chest flutters. "Don't scare me like that," she says.

He must be waiting for her to ask what's in the cage but she refuses to acknowledge it. He stands still under the chandelier, his forehead shining with sweat. That's the Georgia humidity for you. As usual he has worked another ten-hour day, has arrived home after sunset. As usual his hair looks molded in brown waves, as if his head's been dipped in wax, as if Sarah can lift this husband made of wax and lug it upstairs and tuck it under the sheets and then hurry downstairs to finish her painting.

He tosses the suit jacket on the banister. "I bought you a rodent."

"A what?" Sarah says. She's climbing imaginary stairs. Her calves tingle. Yes, she should finish the painting, for God's sake, like an artist! Someone more than just a nurse's aid who wipes elderly ass and gets bitched at by RN's.

"Honey, over here." Tom's waving. "I said I bought a hamster."

"I know, Tom, I know."

"It's a pet...I mean, we need one, don't we? A little something to spice up the joint." He raises the cage over his



head, its handle nudging the chandelier and sending tongue-shaped reflections of light around the walls.

"Hey, you want to see the little sucker or what?" With a hand held out, he moves into the living room. "Remember when we talked about getting a dog? Well, I said to myself, Everyone in the goddamn neighborhood's already got one. Why should we conform, you know? So I stopped at the mall on the way home and now we own a rodent." He's smiling.

"Maybe you can take it for walks on weekends."

"Oh, will you stop with that. Just look at the little bad-ass and see how you feel."

In the cage sits a red plastic house with a matching ladder for stairs, the plastic thick enough so the hamster can't be seen. Sarah stops stepping, and then her body is descending slowly to the floor, the engine dying down. She says, "I don't see it."

Tom rattles the handle until the plastic house is tipping over.

"Go easy," she says, sitting down on her stool.

"See, you scared it away."

"Is it a he or a she?"

He looks up, as if the gender has been painted on the ceiling, then peers down at her. "I forgot to inquire about that. Ain't that something?" A patch of stubble is growing out the lower part of his neck where he'd apparently missed with the razor. He's been so busy with work it's a wonder he has the energy to comb his hair or take showers in the morning. She

feels the sharp bone of his chin press against her head. Wouldn't it be nice if they could spend a weekend together, some place with a pool...no, a lake, yes, a lake, but then again, the ocean would be a treat...without either of them working, they wouldn't have to argue so much; she could even wear the yellow French-cut bikini she secretly ordered from J. Crew on Tom's credit card. because hers was maxed-out. because she has a slight addiction to buying things, but --

"Wow," Tom says, putting his finger to the painting, "Mr. Caveman's really coming along."

"It's a *monkey*, Tom. I've told you that."

"Yeah, and you listen to everything I say."

"Now we're even."

Tom puts the cage on the floor, then gets down on his knees and slaps the carpet. "Come out of that house, boy," he says.

A few weeks ago -- they were sharing a shower -- they had a talk about the importance of togetherness, and they both agreed to work a bit harder at achieving a higher level of communication. "Because communication," Tom said, lathering his penis with soap, "is the first step to adequate function." Since that conversation, though, Sarah's been confused as to what to say and what not to say. Does she tell him she can't stand the way he shits with the door open in the morning? Or, more importantly, just yesterday afternoon, in fact -- it was raining -- she stood in the kitchen with the lights off, staring down at the shards of glass from the popcorn bowl she'd dropped,

feeling as if she were hovering above the floor, when she was attacked by this thought: *I am only here because I'm too afraid to live on my own...I've already died and this marriage is my purgatory.* Nasty thought! Go! And away it flitted at which point she was free to think whatever she wanted. Or, maybe those type of unsettling thoughts breed and pop and fizz in everyone's head. Maybe's she's over-intellectualizing the situation.

Sarah turns around to see Tom standing the wrong way on the Stairmaster with his arms held out for balance, his red tie dangling off his neck. "Wait," he says, pumping his legs on the little platforms, "why're you looking so troubled on such a momentous evening? For shit's sake, baby, we've scored our first pet!"

"Us," she says. "We're not having good communication, are we?"

He steps off the machine. "Yep, we need to work at it. Keep *scratching* away until we find the answers. Well, I'm not in the mood to work right now. I did that all day." He pats the top of her head and takes the cage into the hallway.

Hamster. Sarah's never considered them pets or much of anything, and now all of a sudden there's going to be a little stranger in the house? Tom is no longer a stranger -- maybe that's the problem, that it all seems too familiar, seven years of togetherness, dating since their they were eighteen for God's sake, married for the last two. Maybe she's afraid of strangers (like Tom says, she possesses a general distrust for people)

that they'll get to know something about her she's yet to figure out. But what? Maybe maybe maybe she can say *maybe* so many times the word won't make sense anymore, and, as a result, she'll stop using it.

"What should we name the thing?" he yells from the kitchen.

"Maybe there's some dinner in the microwave!" Damn painting! She drowns her penciled monkey in brown paint, the liquid smearing like a thumb print around its frail body. So it's going to be fat monkey, so what, not what she intended but it'll have to suffice. There's no way she's starting this thing over. It took forever to draw, and it's a great idea! She's sure of it. Even her instructor, the art graduate student, says so, although he's always praising her in-class work and Sarah suspects he might be hitting on her. Nonetheless, her sketches so far, or from what he's told her anyway, have been *at once raw and complex*. Complex? It's a monkey robbing bananas off a banana tree that's toppled over somehow. There's also a shopping cart in it, half-filled with coconuts, but she might paint over that.

Tom sells computer service and makes four times as much as she. He isn't so keen on the idea of Sarah taking an art class. He thinks she should spend her free time taking courses at Georgia State to get her business degree, which she ceased going after a few years back. So she was bored with business theory, so what?

She wipes the brush onto Tom's T-shirt, the one she keeps over the top of the easel. Time for a break.

In the kitchen sits the cage on the counter, the little hamster sniffing wood chips outside its house as if it smells the scent of an intruder. The animal is the color of wheat with a white patch on its belly, and Sarah decides, without bothering to check, that it's a girl. Still, no matter the gender, a hamster doesn't belong on the counter. She takes the cage by the plastic handle and sets it down on the linoleum.

Tom is nowhere to be seen. He must be in the garage. Forget him for now anyway. Is she obligated to talk to him all the time? No, she thinks. I am an independent woman.

She returns to her painting, feeling a layer of sweat drying over her skin which has gone numb from the air-conditioner.

The garage door rumbles open and the floor beneath her vibrates, stops for a bit -- she can't concentrate when the house is shaking -- then starts up again, the walls shuddering until she hears the massive door meet the concrete of the garage. All right, this painting looks ridiculous. The monkey is just staring at her, as if to say, *Hey, fuck off, it's not my fault I look like an enlarged potato.*

Then, out from the corner of her eye, Sarah sees something yellow rolling through the foyer. The florescent-yellow bubble trundles back across the floor. It looks hollow.

Tom walks into the living room with his hands wrapped around the ball. His tie is gone. "I can't believe I forgot

this in the car. Holy shit, you've got to see this. Look, the little sucker just runs in place and the ball moves. Amazing or what? It's like it works on two entirely different levels, you know -- for him it's exercise and exploration, for us it's hours of entertainment." He places the ball down on the rug. The little hamster stays still in the ball. "What do you think?"

"I didn't know," she says, "people still made these things. I mean, what do the animal rights activists think about this? You know, first a cage, then a hamster. What's next, Tom? A snake? You going to bring home a snake? Maybe implement it into our sex life, like that blind-fold you bought?"

"Christ, someone's in an *off* mood."

"Stop analyzing me."

"You don't like this thing, do you? Come on, say it. You're never satisfied with anything I buy you. Like this stupid Stairmaster. You know, tonight was the first time you've used it in a while. You don't appreciate anything. Admit it. Better yet, repeat after me: I -- hate -- the -- hamster."

"God, you're so insecure."

"See, you're analyzing me."

"I never said I didn't *like* it." She puts her palm to his stomach, which feels taut beneath the shirt. "Listen, let's not argue over it. It's cute, it is. But *really*, Tom, what the hell are we going to do with a hamster?"

"We don't have to *do* anything with it." With his foot in the air he taps the ball and the hamster moves out of the room,

the plastic sounding like a bowling ball along the hard-wood floor. "You know what I'm saying, Sarah. I mean, it's just a pet."

## 2

Sarah steps out of the shower and starts to dry her hair, the first step in today's preparation for the barbecue. Ivan and Nancy are coming over. Nancy is a certified housewife who lives off Ivan's money. They are friends from the neighborhood, and even though they live two streets over, their garage and part of their driveway can be seen from Tom and Sarah's living room. It's the way neighborhoods are designed down here: the suburbs of Atlanta, where the homes are brand new and set abnormally close, as if they've all been planted at once from a gigantic bag marked HOUSE SEED.

Tom is mowing the lawn, but the steam from the shower has fogged the bathroom window. From up here he looks like a gigantic bug flying in a square pattern around the grass, passing in and out of the tree-branched shadows.

In her bathrobe she go downstairs to start on the burger patties. For God's sake it's her weekend off from work, she should enjoy it. In her bathrobe she go downstairs to start on the burger patties.

It's hot out. Humid. Sunny. Sarah and Tom are normal. They are going to further normalize the day by hosting a picnic with beer and burgers.

The air conditioner clicks on: a breeze tickling the moisture at the nape of her neck. She dumps the hamburger meat into the bowl. She adds the powdered soup mix, presses her hands into the red slop, cold and wet, onion dust rising into her nose. Over and over she squeezes. She likes making burgers, she likes pounding the balls of meat with her fists.

There's Tom holding the door open for the hamster. The poor thing can't make it over the lip in the doorway, so he gives it a nudge with his toe. Once inside the hamster actually inches forward. Pauses for some reason. Then rolls onto the carpet in the family room, over the patch of sunlight, and heads right for the TV cabinet. Smack. It bounces off it.

Sarah starts kneading the meat again. "I bought some good beer this time," Tom says.

"That's good," she says. "I think it'll be fun."

"Yeah, so do I."

Then he's coming right at her with a mess of grass blades stuck to his chest. He stops. Her heart is beating faster than usual. Kiss him or something. *Do something.* After all, he is your husband. His stomach's all moist from sweat and she goes to touch it, but before she has a chance to pull out her hands from the meat, he peck-kisses her on the forehead and moves on to the garage. They don't kiss like a young couple anymore. Used to be all tongue.

Sarah figures she can work an hour or so on her monkey before Ivan and Nancy arrive. It relaxes her mind, closes off specific currents in her brain -- like the fact that she's



forgotten what it feels like to glide along the hallways of happiness -- before they explode into tiny flowers of clarity in her head.

She stands by the coffee table for a different perspective. From here the monkey looks like a blanket hovering over the sand. Tom walks by wearing only socks, holding his gray shorts. "Sarah," he says, gripping the banister. "Think there's enough burger meat for all of us?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Burgers. As if he's got nothing else on his mind!

He walks into the living room with his penis bobbing. He stands beside her and dips a finger into the glob of brown paint -- "I like this color," he says -- slipping his hand inside her robe and tracing a circle around her nipple. The paint feels cold. Her nipple stiffens and goes numb. Pressing hard he slides his finger down to her belly button leaving a brown trail. "You're distracting me," she says.

"You're going to have fun with our friends today, right? You're not going to ignore them or pretend that you're tired, like last time?"

She says, "God forbid we spend a weekend alone together."

"We're going to grow old together, honey. We'll have weekends. Trust me." His damp chest is rubbing against her back when the hamster scurries inside its ball to the middle of the living room. That's where it stops and twitches its whiskers up at Sarah -- what does it want? -- and after twirling around it moves to the space between the couch and the end

table. Now the tiny feet are scratching at the plastic as it runs in place. You'd think it'd learn how to steer that ball already!

"Little sucker's really getting the hang of that thing," Tom says, his fingers circling her breasts. A shiver goes through her stomach. There's a tingling between her legs. Tom grabs her shoulders and pulls her down to the floor. "Tom," she says.

"What is it?" He undoes her robe. He lies over her, kissing her neck, his breath smelling of Listerine he gurgles throughout the day.

She kisses his shoulder.

They start humping.

"Think we should make a baby soon?" he says, placing the back of her knees on his shoulders.

"No baby talk. Not now." She covers her ears with her calves.

"Who said we had to talk?"

Talk! Lately he's been accusing her of not talking enough. What is she supposed to say all the time? She grabs him by the back of the neck. "Good, yeah," he says. And with her other hand she reaches behind her head and clasps the wooden easel leg, and now she's looking up at the painting. God, it looks boring. "Oh, boy," Tom's saying. It could use something else...like a chain saw -- yes! the monkey could be using one to saw down the banana trees. An industrial monkey. After all, he's got a shopping cart, who's to say he can't have a chain saw? She should change the painting somehow.

Sarah throws him off. She climbs over him, inserts his penis inside her, it fills her, reaching into her. Then it falls out. She puts it back in again. Tom's teeth, jagged, are showing. "That's the stuff," he's saying.

There goes the hamster rolling behind Tom's head. It spins around and rolls behind the Stairmaster. Sarah doesn't want to look at the ball anymore. Get out, she thinks. She's jumping now. She grabs his shoulders for support. She hops, she slides around back and forth -- Tom's mouth widening, his orgasm face forming: eyes squinting, cheeks ballooning and turning red -- and Sarah stops at the sound of the bell. A doorbell? Uh oh...

"Shit," Tom says crawling out from under her. He grabs his shorts and bolts up the stairs.

Sarah jumps up and reaches for her robe as the ball bangs between the wall and the Stairmaster, Stairmaster and wall. "Goddamn hamster!" She's bent down when off the glass of the fireplace she sees a reflection of socks and sandals: Ivan staring at her ass. She slips into the robe and turns around.

Ivan takes a stroll down the hallway. "Oh, Sarah," he says, craning his balding head back into the living room. "I didn't see you there."

"Actually, Ivan, I was here the whole time." He walks up to her, places his hands on her shoulders, and kisses her cheek, his breath smelling of peanuts. "How are you?"

"Fine, where's Nancy?"

"Outside bringing in the food. Hey, great painting. A monkey?"

"That's right."

"A monkey in the desert...interesting. So how's everything?" He glances at her toes. Sarah tightens the belt on the robe. She has trouble chatting to this guy, a difficulty which bothers Tom, who thinks Sarah's just needs to open herself up a bit more. Open herself up, what the hell does that mean anyway? Is she supposed to blurt out unnecessary things like Nancy, the spunk queen? Okay, she thinks, concentrate. She inhales deeply. Let yourself open up...but this guy just saw her naked, and he's still grinning. What did he say again? Sarah folds her arms and says, "Yep, a monkey."

"Oh," he says. Then Nancy walks in hugging two bins of Tupperware. She takes off her sunglasses, and in her Georgian accent says, "Hey there, Sarah. Sorry we're early, didn't mean to catch you in your morning wear."

"Oh, *this* thing," Sarah says and laughs with her head down. Her blue toenails (Clinique nail polish, ordered on Tom's credit card, oh shit) look plastic against the white carpet. I am open to conversation, she thinks.

### 3

The sky is dripping with purple blobs of clouds and as usual the case of Heineken is dwindling. The air is humid. They've all just smoked one of Ivan's power joints.

Sarah's T-shirt sticks to her skin. She's sitting on the picnic table, dangling her bare feet the way someone might sit on a dock in the middle of a lake. Would she be content if she

were sitting in the middle of a lake? No, she thinks, I'd be just as anxious, probably wanting to be some place else. Her blood is starting to warm up. Maybe she should stop drinking.

"Too many chicken bones," Nancy says, gathering scraps on the table. This is the part of the evening where the ladies are supposed to form a bond, but again, Sarah has run out of things to say to her, except, of course, for grabbing her by the hair, shaking her and saying, *Get a divorce. Get a job. Get something!*

And there's Tom, armed with a spatula, working the smoldering grill. "Throw it," he says to Ivan who's at the other side of the lawn. Ivan tosses the football and then stumbles in his drunkenness.

"Such a beautiful night," Nancy says. "Isn't it, hon? I just love this time of year. These neighborhoods with all the pretty yards and all."

Sarah looks out at the houses sitting along the road, some with kitchen lights on. She turns back to Nancy, who's got a crumb of some sort stuck in her dark bangs. "Pretty yards?" Sarah says. "They're all the same. In fact, everything in this neighborhood's the same. Which is why I think we should paint our yard blue. We can paint the bushes yellow. Wouldn't that be something, Nancy? A blue lawn with yellow bushes?"

"What's got into you, girl?"

"Nothing, I'm just talking here. Everyone says I don't talk enough" -- she holds out her hands -- "just talking here!"

Tom smiles at her from his grill duty. "Oh, what's wrong, sweetie? You want a hot dog? How about a hamburger bun?"

Sarah shakes her head and mouths, No. Then Tom sticks out his tongue and for a second looks like an adorable little boy, especially with his hair such a mess. Mr. Husband, provider of food and sex, financial security. He pulls down his pants to reveal his pink ass to her and the neighbors who can easily see them from their windows. No one laughs, and Tom pulls up his shorts and opens another beer. "Grills going out," he says.

Sarah slips her hands under her thighs moist from sweat, and suddenly it seems at any moment a large object, maybe an old junky satellite -- or would it burn up within the atmosphere? -- will drop down from space and land on their little back yard, crushing them all.

Till death do them part...now why couldn't that priest at their wedding have given them a receipt or warranty, in case one of them broke down and needed to be returned all of a sudden? On the morning of the wedding Sarah's mother said that young marriages were doomed from the start. *Look at me and your father.* Typical Mom saying. Maybe maybe maybe she was right, though. Tom and Sarah have only gotten worse (did they stay together out of fear or was it love?) and now it's as if they're waiting for someone to repossess their bodies in the middle of the night and drop a new happy couple on their water bed.

"An idea!" Tom yells with his finger in the air. "Let's play soccer. Sarah here played in high school, she's a ringer."

"I didn't know that," Nancy says.

"That's right, isn't it, honey?" Tom says. "And if I'm not mistaken, I think she was the captain of her team."

"Sure," Sarah says with a ping in her forehead.

Tom runs up the stairs of the porch and inside, past Ivan who's pissing against the house with a beer bottle hanging from his mouth. "It's only our house," Sarah says. "Do you want to piss on the cars next?"

Ivan zips up his shorts, and with his lips wrapped around the bottle says, "Someone's feeling spunky tonight." Then he walks over to the grill, picks up a burnt bun and tosses it at Nancy. It lands on her foot. "Christ, honey," Nancy says. Ivan laughs in silence, hugging his chest.

It gets real quiet, except for the crickets who're chanting their lives away around the yard.

When do the crickets stop? All these bugs with the same routine, night after night, a simple job, really, they don't have to change anything about their future, they just keep doing...oh, this headache. Sarah's about to jump off the table and head for the house -- where she can take a long nap -- when Tom appears on the deck holding the ball with the hamster inside. Under the porch light his forehead glistens with bubbles of sweat. From his pocket he grabs a spool of duck tape and wraps several strips around the plastic in a cross pattern. Yesterday he bought a hamster; tonight he's going to kill the thing!

"My God," Nancy laughs.

"That's one sorry hamster," Ivan says. "Toss him over."

Tom steps onto the grass spinning the thing like a basketball on the tip of his finger. The ball falls off, but he catches it in time. Sweat burns Sarah's eyes. He's just being drunk, she tells herself, wiping her face dry. Tomorrow is Sunday: things will be normal again. Or perhaps tomorrow they will avoid each other for half the day, then accuse each other on the sly, usually in the form of a question, like the last Sunday after the barbecue, when Tom, standing hungover next to the Mr. Coffee, said, *Sarah, why don't you try and be more social? You know, you can't be all quiet and Ms. One Answer when going for a real job someday.*

The reply: *Tom, speaking of work, do people like you there? I mean, ever think anyone there thinks you're an arrogant...I don't know, prick, and dreads the moment when they have to talk to you? Ever think that?*

*Projecting, Sarah?*

From the grill Tom takes the prongs and pokes a hole in the tape. "All right now, Sarah and I versus you two."

"You're kidding," Sarah says, her voice louder than normal.

"Yeah, you're right," Tom says. "Nancy and I take you guys." He drops the ball, and the hamster rolls for the steps, moving slowly in the thick grass. Tom starts to dribble it. He kicks it, stops, spins around it, goes at it again -- "Whoa," he says -- tapping the ball back and forth. He starts moving forward when Ivan darts out ahead of him with a Heineken in his hand shouting, "I'm open, I'm open!"



The two of them just going at it like that! Tom trying to steal the ball back, Ivan pushing Tom away, and Sarah the spectator: standing there in the wet heat, her ears stinging, her throat dry all of a sudden -- Nancy, of course, not saying anything. Tom steals it back and the ball gets closer to Sarah.

"Enough, Tom."

He dances behind the ball, his short hair flopping over his forehead.

"You want me to play?" she says.

"That's right, baby, show me what you got."

"Keep it coming then."

"He fakes," he's saying. "He goes right, he goes left, which way's he going?" Through the spaces between the tape Sarah sees the hamster rolling and flopping along the plastic. She charges at him. She slides into the ball as Tom's body -- head, chest, stomach exposed, shorts, hairy ankles bereft of socks -- flies over her.

"Hello!" Ivan is flailing his arms from his position by the fence. "I'm still open out here!"

Sarah grabs the ball and heads toward the wooden fence. She's going to save the little thing. Yes! she should save things more often. "Hey, that's handball," says Tom, panting behind her. "She's not allowed to hold it like that." His hand scratches the cloth of her shirt but she keeps sprinting. She keeps pushing. "Cheater!" he yells.

She remember the last time she's run this hard and before she can escape he claws her back again. "Leave me alone," she says and throws her hands forward, her body following and

sliding into the grass. From her seat on the ground she watches the yellow ball with the hamster inside wobble lopsided over the neighbor's fence. There's a splash.

Tom slides beside her, starts to laugh. He reaches for Sarah's arm but she retracts it and stands up. "What's wrong now?" he says. With the blue wrinkles around his eyes and the film of sweat on his face, he looks like an older version of the guy she used to date: Mr. Husband in the backyard of his four-bedroom house, Mr. Provider of food and sex. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," she says. "I mean, did you really imagine fd get like this?"

"Like what? For fuck's sake, Sarah, tell me how it's supposed to be."

"That's just it, I don't know how it's supposed to be. And, if you don't mind, I've got to save that little thing you bought from drowning."

"Goddamnit."

Sarah runs to the neighbor's yard, swings open the wooden gate, and stands there on the concrete patio. Along the walls of the pool are spotlights like baby moons shooting rays into the blackness of the center, where the ball floats like a buoy in its own wake.

She dives in. Underwater her hands fan out in the cloud-blue light, leaving arched trails of bubbles along her fingers. The water stings her eyes when she rises to the surface and grabs the ball. The hamster scratches at the plastic with a little puddle around its feet. "You're still alive," Sarah says, feeling less tired, as if the chlorine has washed off the

high. She dips back her head, her scalp tingling, and stands up again.

Funny, it's the first time she's been in this pool. The neighbors have never invited them over. Perhaps they're watching her right now. For this reason she stands there a bit longer. *Honey, come here*, one of them could be saying. *What's that woman doing in our pool? Is that our neighbor in our pool? She's out of her mind!* Oh, well, it'll give them something to talk about tonight, something to discuss in a serious manner -- adult communication! -- before they lie under the blankets and avoid touching each other's feet and wait in silence for sleep.

Then again, maybe they enjoy each other. Sarah and the hamster return to the yard. Already the humidity has wrapped itself around her and once again she's sweating, feeling as if her bones are water-logged. It's getting darker, but she can still make out an outline of Tom: arms and legs spread on the ground like a wounded man. As she nears him he rolls his head toward her. She holds the hamster high in the air and marches past. Tomorrow he'll wake up with a nasty hangover and toxic farts and think the picnic went as planned, that everyone played along and laughed at his antics.

"You okay, honey?" Nancy says by the picnic table, leaning against Ivan whose white shorts glow in the darkness.

"Absolutely," Sarah says.

Water drips from her shorts to her legs and onto the rug as she enters the living room. The outside light is down to

nothing, the last of its purple-black rays pulling away from the windows of this house, which hums with central air.

Using her nails she starts to peel off the tape but it's too damn wet and keeps breaking off. She grabs the poker off its rack on the fireplace, sets the ball against the leg of the easel. "Watch out in there." And with the poker held up, she comes down hard on the plastic which cracks into a web of florescent shards. Again she swings down. This time the poker spears the ball. Great, now she's stabbed the goddamn thing! In a hurry she yanks out the poker, begins pulling apart the fragments that are stuck to the tape. The hamster twitches its head. Sarah says, "You don't want to die, do you?"

She fits her hand through the jagged hole. The fur is soft, the body like a little muscle, beating and shivering. She sets down the hamster on the rug, where it tickles its whiskers along her toe for a while. Then it runs a circle around the easel -- depositing a few pellets in its track -- only to scurry back to her other foot, where it rests its head on her toe.