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*The University of Montana*

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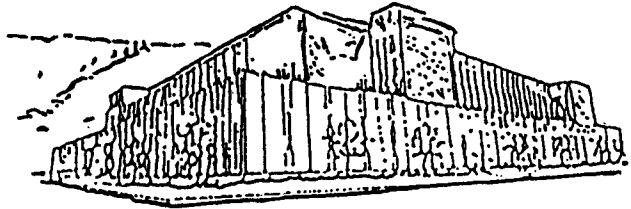
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UNDERWEAR AND OTHER PERSONAL EFFECTS

by

Margaret A. Tilton

B.S. Williams College, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

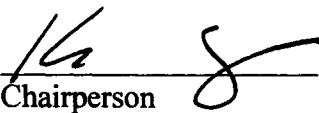
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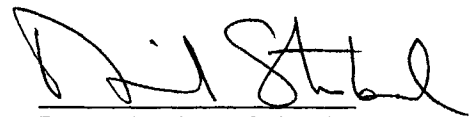
Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1999

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## Emergency Assistance

The wedding happens in a park – *Green Hollow*, the sign says, and the name seems fitting. The grass has not been mowed recently. A hem of lilacs and rhododendron grows around the park’s edges, and their smell is almost too sweet for Natalie.

After the ceremony, when the guests gather under the tent, she has trouble talking. “I’m so happy for Anne and Kamil,” she says, and then starts at her mistake. It’s Kazim, Kazim; Kamil was a boy in her junior high school. But the man she’s said this to, who is as white-skinned as Natalie, does not seem to notice. His eyes flicker past her. She’s trying too hard, she thinks. Why did she wear this suit? The jacket has a grease stain on the lapel, and even though she’s covered it with a gold pin, the stain seems to blight all her conversations.

Truly, she’s happy for Anne – an old sorority sister of hers – and for Kazim, a short, glowing man from the Middle East. She’s happy as far as that as possible, for other people’s luck isn’t her own. In the fifteen years since she and Anne got their diplomas, Natalie has attended many weddings, and at first they were fun. At Anne’s first wedding, for example, Natalie wore a bridesmaid’s dress of pink crepe, danced until her legs ached, and finally slept with one of the groomsmen, Anne’s new brother-in-law. But she’s different now, no longer so fresh and rabbit. This wedding is making her nervous. The summer smells, the touching couples, make Natalie wonder if she’s become too complacent: too adept at wearing pleats, at bargain shopping, at *not* looking for men. These are efficiencies that she normally relishes – yes, she does, she loves making lists and hiding stains – but now she feels embarrassed for herself.

At noon she changes into sweat pants and a clean T-shirt, and climbs into her car. A damp acrylic smell rises from the Chevy's floorboards, comforting her like the smell of her apartment on rainy days. She's lived in the same Manhattan studio for ten years and knows everything about the neighborhood: which Thai restaurant has the best iced coffee, which booths at the flea market sell the wooden cookie molds she collects. Soon enough she'll be back home, surrounded by her books and ferns, calling her friend Dahlia to see if she wants to go out for dinner. They will laugh about her mistake with Kazim.

The wind pushes through Natalie's hair, churning it around so that she has trouble seeing out of her left eye. The park and the wedding begin to seem far away. In the glove compartment she finds a tube of lipstick and puts it on, liking its greasy brown look. She presses her lips together.

She glances around, suddenly self-conscious, and sure enough a man in the next lane is smiling at her. He winks. His red hair is tied in a ponytail, and he's driving a blue van that says *Debuggers, Inc.: Getting Rid of the Pests in Your Life*.

"Gross," she says. "Get away."

She presses the gas pedal. The car is old, a 1982 model, but the engine catches and whines furiously. Within a few minutes the ponytailed man and his van recede into the distance. Natalie relaxes again, drumming her fingers against the dashboard, searching the radio for something spicy.

Along the Taconic she stops for lunch. It's a billboard restaurant, touted for its mouth-watering home cooking, but she gets orange chicken and a puddle of coleslaw. The cashier shortchanges her five dollars and grows sullen when Natalie points out her mistake. But it doesn't matter – in fact she relishes everything that is wrong with the



place, its dirtiness and inhospitality, because she knows she'll never see it again. She finishes her chicken and then she's back on the road, coasting. In an hour she'll be at her parents' house, where she'll ditch her car and catch a train into the city. She's happy at everything, at the candy wrappers and ticket stubs strewn across the dashboard, at the gray rabbit's paw that dangles from her keys. Then she notices the "check gauges" light.

It flickers first, and then, as she watches, it comes on solid. Car trouble. It seems so improbable, so at odds with her reverie, that it takes her a minute to realize it's actually happening. Her temperature gauge is clear over on hot.

Her throat tightens. It's not fair, she thinks. The lipstick jinxed her. Just for a second, she was feeling pretty again, so now someone has to remind her that she's not – that she's just a lonely woman whose friends are onto second marriages, a woman whose car breaks down on the trip back from other people's weddings. Natalie doesn't know why it has to be like this, and it makes her mad sometimes. It doesn't seem this way for other people.

Stop it, she tells herself. You'll be okay. She flips the hazard lights on, and after half a mile there is a gas station.

"No service," the man behind the counter tells her, not looking up. "Not on Sundays."

It's a minute before she trusts her voice not to warble. "It's just overheated. Can't I put water in it or something?"

"There's a white jug next to the soda machine and a spigot near the bathroom."

She can't bring herself to ask more questions, and she knows there are many. She abandons the jug and spigot and returns to her car. There is now a bright green puddle

collecting beneath the engine. It is dripping vigorously, like drops falling from a hidden stalactite. Battery fluid? she thinks. She searches the floorboards for quarters.

The Triple A representative tells her someone will be by in sixty to ninety minutes, but refuses to give a definite time. Natalie slams the phone down and walks back to her car. She opens the window to let out the heat – at least she has a place to sit, she thinks. She wishes she'd thought to bring a magazine or the stack of expense reports she is supposed to review. But Anne's wedding was supposed to have been a quick-and-dirty affair, a day trip, nothing that warranted reading materials. She thinks of the things she could be doing in the city: having coffee with Dahlia, painting, ordering bulbs from the new catalog that came in the mail. The plants in her roof garden need watering. But it's all gone. She feels like she had a big ice cream cone that she licked a little too vigorously, and suddenly she's watching it melt on the sidewalk.

“Car break down?” a voice asks.

Natalie turns toward a thin man with long red hair. It takes her a minute, and then she remembers; out of the corner of her eye, near the ice machine, she recognizes his blue exterminator van.

“Yeah.” She decides to be friendly. “I'm waiting for a tow. It started dripping that green stuff.”

“Antifreeze.”

“Oh.”

The man has already gotten down on the pavement and is peering underneath her car. His ponytail trails near the green puddle.

“Could either be the water pump or a leak in one of the hoses,” he calls. “Here, you can see it.”

Natalie bends over, making a halfhearted effort to reach the bumper. The man worms back to the edge of the car and gets to his feet.

“It’s hard to say,” he says. “Just the very bottom of the pipe is wet. I wouldn’t have expected that. Usually it leaks from further up.”

She gets a look at him and is shocked by his ugliness, his one drooping eye. Surely he could do something to make himself more attractive she thinks. But when she thinks about it, she doesn’t know what. He’s clean and his clothes are good, nicer than she would have expected for an exterminator. She’s surprised, really, that he’d get down on the pavement in those clothes. But no matter how good his clothes are, they can’t make up for his face. His face is just awful.

He’s talking about how someone has put straight antifreeze in her car, how it should have been cut with water. “It’s not *that* cold,” he says. “We’re not in Alaska.”

Natalie peers down the pipe. “I just get it serviced at a station. I don’t know why they did that.” She pauses. “I’m Natalie.”

“John,” he says. He doesn’t try to shake her hand. Instead, he runs his fingers underneath the engine again. “If it’s the water pump, we may be able to get one around here. They’re not very expensive, but they can be hard to get at. They’re behind a bunch of pulleys.” He looks in the engine again. “Wait. Hold on a second. See that?”

“What?”

“There, see?” His voice is rising, and she hopes he’s found the problem. “The water pump is out in front. Oh, this could be easy.” He taps his foot, then smiles at her.

“Where do you live?”

“New York.”

“Did you grow up there?”

“New Jersey.”

“Same thing,” he says. “I grew up right around here myself.” He grins, his one eye still drooping, and taps the side of the car. “I’ll try to put some water in this. That way we can see where the leak is.”

“You don’t have to.” Natalie is starting to feel a little guilty, and alarmed at his persistence. “I mean, I’m sure you have other things to do.”

He shrugs. “I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

“I want you to. I just don’t want to take up a lot of your time.”

“It’s my day off,” he says, as if this explains everything. He looks over at the cashier, who is sitting behind a Plexiglass window. “Rick!”

The cashier looks up, his brow furrowed. “What?”

“Bring us that jug full of water, will you?”

“I’m on duty. Get it yourself.”

John winks at Natalie. “High school buddy,” he says. “I stop here every time I make this trip, because he needs someone to hassle him.” He turns back to the cashier. “Come on!” he shouts. “There’s no one here.”

The cashier rolls his eyes. After a minute he comes over to the Chevy carrying a white jug. He’s so thin, so small outside his cashier bubble, that Natalie wonders how he ever had intimidated her.

“I really am supposed to be on duty,” he says.

“Whatever.” John hits him on the back. “How’s that sad story with you and the girlfriend?” John doesn’t wait for Rick to answer, but takes the jug and begins pouring water into Natalie’s engine. Then he goes to start the car, leaving Natalie and Rick alone.

“Was he telling you about that?” Rick says.

Natalie starts. “No, not at all.”

“It *is* a sad story with me and the girlfriend,” he says. “Listen to this. I go out with this girl for ten years and give her everything. Ten years. And then I find out she’s having an affair with a married guy. I put her through school, I paid rent, I paid for all her clothes. Everything. And then she goes and has an affair.” He shakes his head. Out of the corner of her eye Natalie sees John winking at her from behind the driver’s seat, and she realizes, dimly, that her engine is running and that water is leaking out the front.

“So then,” Rick says, “it turns out that she got pregnant by this guy. She wanted to get pregnant so that she could get him divorced, but that didn’t work. So now she has a two-year-old. She’s still sleeping with this guy, he’s still married. And you know what the worst part is?” Rick stares at Natalie. He has hollowy eyes, like a bloodhound.

“What?”

“I got her pregnant right before that, and she had an abortion. She didn’t want my baby.”

Rick’s shoulders droop beneath his green nylon jacket. His face is even-featured, handsome really, but Natalie can tell by his empty look that his handsomeness has never mattered and never will. Of course the girl didn’t want your babies, she thinks. She knows it’s cruel.

"I'm sorry," she says. "That's awful."

"It's a sad story, all right."

She touches his shoulder. "I know it never makes you feel any better when people say this, but you deserve someone better."

"Thanks."

"It's the truth."

"Maybe. But you think women want to date someone wearing an Exxon jacket?"

She falters, not expecting him to be so honest. "They don't," he says.

"I got someone for you," says John. He's gotten out of the car and is walking toward them. "My cousin. She's coming to visit next week. Cute, blond hair. You'd like her, Rick."

"Well," Rick says, "she wouldn't like me."

"Sure she would," John says. "Just take her out for a beer. She's up from Carolina and she'll be lonely hanging out at my place."

"I don't know."

"You should do it, Rick," Natalie urges. She wants him to go out with John's cousin. She wants, in fact, to tell him the things that other people are always telling her: give it a chance, don't be so worried, nothing ventured, etc. But she knows how annoying this can be, so she decides to be quiet. Rick looks nervous.

"She'd like you," says John.

"Is there anything —" Rick stops. "I mean, is she really cute and nice?"

"Yes," John says. "Come on."

“I just don’t know.”

“All right, think about it,” John says. “You don’t have to.”

“Okay,” says Rick, looking happier. “I should get back to work. I’ll let you know.” He begins walking back toward the store, calling to John to put the jug over by the soda machine. “Nice to meet you,” he says to Natalie.

“You too,” she says, but he’s already inside.

John shakes his head. “He won’t do it.”

“No,” she agrees. She watches John get down on the ground again and crawl underneath the Chevy’s engine. “You know, that’s quite a story about his girlfriend,” she says.

“Not really,” he says, his voice muffled beneath the car. “She’s a bitch. That’s the whole story. I know that sounds woman-hating or something, but you have to trust me. She’s bad news. Damn!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” John rolls out from under the car. His face is sweaty and a straw wrapper is tangled in his hair. He grins at Natalie. “I found it. There’s a little dial under your engine that can be open or closed to drain the coolant. Someone opened yours.”

Natalie laughs. “That’s it? You’re kidding.”

“Maybe someone opened it on purpose.”

“Well, it wasn’t me. I didn’t even know it existed.”

“If someone wanted to fry your motor, this would be the way to go,” he says. “Did you just break up with a guy?” She shakes her head.

“You sure?”

“No, no.” She’s laughing, but uneasy now.

“Tell the truth. Did you turn some guy down?”

“My last boyfriend and I broke up a year ago. Maybe the service station I go to did it, to make me come back?”

John shakes his head, unconvinced. “No guys?” he says. “Or maybe a woman? Women can be really vengeful. You have a competitor?”

She giggles and looks at him to see if he’s serious. He’s smiling, but it’s a careful kind of smile, like he’s watching out for her. She shrugs, baffled. “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” he says. “Look, maybe it did open by itself. I’ve never heard of that, but it’s possible. Or maybe it was the service station. At any rate, we’ll get you some antifreeze and you’ll be good to go. Rick!” he yells. “Bring some antifreeze.” Rick disappears behind a row of shelves and then comes out of the store, holding a white bottle.

Natalie walks over to the pay phone and calls Triple A. When she returns Rick is squinting in the sunlight, watching John pour antifreeze into a pipe.

“I’ll be happy to pay for that,” says Natalie, nodding toward the bottle.

“No charge,” Rick says.

“Thank you guys so much for doing this. It’s so . . . nice.”

“No problem,” Rick says. “We just want to be good Samaritans.”

“I just want your phone number,” John says. He gives her a sultry look. It’s campy, and a little ridiculous because of his eye. He seems to know it and laughs. Natalie laughs with him, pleased and excited.



“No, I’m kidding,” John says. “I’m just a nice guy. You don’t have to have sex with me or anything.” He hikes up his pants. “I mean – ” he grins at her “ – unless you want to.”

“Don’t pay attention to him,” Rick says. “He thinks he’s still in high school.”

“Just an offer,” says John, still smiling. He hikes up his pants again.

Natalie laughs at the absurdity of it. As if she would have sex with him. Even though by now she does like his smile, the thought of – of *being* with him is disgusting. It’s his face, his eye, the way it tapers out into a little worm at the end. When he was looking at the engine she’d seen a boil on his finger.

“I’m going to try out the car,” she says, serious now. She gets in the driver’s seat and turns the ignition. It starts quickly and loudly. The temperature gauge hovers near cold. Natalie grins at them, revving the engine a few extra times. She leans out the window. “You guys are the best!”

“I know,” John says.

She gets out of the car. Rick begins walking back toward the store, giving her a wave. Natalie begins to feel nervous. “Bye,” she calls to him. She turns to John. “You sure I can’t buy you some cigarettes?” She has already offered beer, but he doesn’t drink. He shakes his head no.

“You know, I was partly serious when I said I wanted your phone number.” He smiles and leans against the car.

“Oh . . .” her voice trails off. I should have known, she thinks. But then she realizes: she did know, she’d known all along, had been enjoying it. She’d wanted to see if she could get it this far, and now that she has she doesn’t know what she wants.

John looks at her hand and steps back. "You're not married?"

"No," she says. The ring is on her middle finger, diamonds interspersed with emeralds. His question reminds her of Anne and her dark-skinned husband, their beaming smiles at the reception.

He reaches for her hand. She feels his callused fingers warm around hers, pressing into her. He pretends to examine her ring, and she pretends to look at the ice machine. She acts like they're not standing there holding hands, touching, she and this exterminator, in the middle of a gas station. She doesn't even know him, she thinks. But then she knows him as well as she ever knew Anne's brother-in-law, the one she let press her up against a wall so many years ago. And his hand feels so hot and tight around hers.

"Pretty," he says. When he finally lets go, she remembers the boil.

"Well," she says. "Actually, I am kind of seeing someone." It's a lie, and she feels her face warming.

He nods, looking at her. "Well, then."

She's feeling bad and she doesn't want it to end, although she doesn't want to give him her number either. She lingers.

"So," he says. "What does this guy you're seeing have?"

"He works with me."

"I mean, what does he have that he has you?"

*That he has her.* She likes the way he says it. But then she feels his eyes, still intent on her.

"He's funny."

“Funny is good.”

Natalie knows she should leave but she’s still hanging out, stressed.

“Look,” he says. “Let me give you my number.”

She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t call you, and then I’d feel bad.”

“Don’t feel bad. Women never call anyway.”

“But I’d still feel bad.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you,” he says. “Well, maybe a little. But you really don’t have to call if you don’t want to. It’s just you seem like a nice lady, and you’re very pretty.”

“Stop it,” she says. “Please.”

“I’m sorry. I told myself I was going ask, but I knew you probably wouldn’t want to. Now I asked. I shouldn’t be pestering you.”

“It’s all right.” Where are her keys? There, in her pocket. Calm down, she thinks. She looks at John. “I’m sorry that you spent all that time helping me, if you wanted anything. I should’ve told you I was kind of seeing someone.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I am silly,” she says. “I can’t help it.”

She’s still standing next to the car, making no move to get inside it. John looks at her again. “So you’re sure?” he says.

It’s this question, finally, this assumption that she’s already made up her mind, that gets her to decide. She smiles. “Yes,” she tells him. “Bye.”

She tucks her legs into the car and he shuts the door. Then he begins walking toward the store, leisurely, like none of this mattered. She turns the ignition, forgetting

that the motor is running. The car screeches. She's so nervous. She releases the brake, putting the car into drive. It slips forward beautifully – against her will? she is trying to figure it out, still – and she pulls it around. She sees John, bouncing back to the Cigarettes-Snaks-Soda area, his red hair flapping. She beeps the horn and they wave at each other.

As he disappears inside she realizes that she's safe, mobile and protected once again. She will be back in New York by six, and she might even be able to meet Dahlia for dinner.

A hint of regret prods at her. She remembers John looking at her, waiting for her to decide. She feels his hand, warm and firm around hers. Maybe, she thinks, he wasn't as bad as she thought. Maybe it would have been possible after all. But she knows she's deceiving herself. An exterminator, a man who works with silverfish and cockroaches, a man who beyond all that is ugly – she simply could not have presented him to her friends. She couldn't imagine telling Dahlia that no, the wedding had been a load of rocks, but that she'd met someone nice in a gas station. It just wouldn't have worked.

The afternoon shadows have grown longer. The once-bright puddle of anti-freeze has been subdued by the dark, stretching outlines of the pumps. A motorcycle buzzes into the parking lot. Natalie looks at the station one final time, taking in the dirt-streaked windows and the men inside, memorizing the scene so she can mull it over later. Then, before she can think about it, she's on her way.

Several hours later she's sitting in an outdoor café. Dahlia leans across the table, her blond hair glowing from a nearby street lamp, and looks at Natalie excitedly. When

Natalie finishes her story, Dahlia sits back and takes a long sip of the milky iced coffee in front of her.

“Nat,” she says. “That was a close call.”

“You think I did the right thing?”

“Not giving him your number? Are you crazy?”

Natalie looks up, not sure what she means, and her friend’s eyes are bright.

Natalie feels a wave of anger. Dahlia never likes the men she meets, she thinks. She shouldn’t have said anything about John; she should’ve kept him for herself. “He was nice.”

Dahlia considers her. “Nice?”

“Yes.”

“Nat, think about it.” Dahlia twirls a strand of her hair. “When did you see him first? On the highway?”

“Yes – ”

“And then you stopped for lunch along the same highway? After that your car broke down, and he *happened* to stop and *happened* to know how to fix it?”

Natalie stares at her. “It wasn’t like that,” she says.

Dahlia stops twirling her hair and shrugs. At the table next to theirs, a couple is holding hands, both arms outstretched toward the other. In the corner, next to a potted tree, a man has his arm slung around a dark-skinned woman. Natalie glances at them, and then looks hard at Dahlia.

“He was nice,” she repeats. Dahlia says nothing.

“It could’ve happened my way,” she says. “You didn’t see him with his friend, or with me. You don’t know how it happened.”

“Nat – ”

“I mean it,” she says. She is angry now, feeling a prick of something like hate toward Dahlia. She remembers John – how he flopped down on the pavement, how tightly he held her hand. “You don’t know,” she repeats.

“Look, Nat,” Dahlia says. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings.” Her eyes are wide, so wide Natalie can see white all around the irises. “All I’m saying is that sometimes you pick the wrong people.”

Natalie looks at her friend. Then she sets her drink down on the table, carefully so it doesn’t rattle.

“Yes,” she says. “Sometimes I do.”

## Underwear

I have bad eyesight. I turn schoolgirls into homely, long-haired men; I make rats out of Dachshunds, and graveyards out of patches of clear-cut forest. People look through my glasses and say “Geez, Lucy.” I like this. Mostly because I work at the library, where a strong glasses prescription is like a war decoration. My lenses are thick, and so scratched that they numb and lighten the shapes that pass through them. When I go running with Honey, my golden retriever, she has a halo around her.

I have a smoker’s lungs, and Honey’s gotten arthritis in her old age, but today the snow hums and crunches under our feet. She comes out of the woods with something for me; a stick, I think, but then hair scratches against my fingers and my thumb finds something wet. A deer leg, that’s what it is. Honey pants at me. *Let’s go*, she says. *Throw it*. So I do. It’ll be a good story.

A good story for Jim, my boyfriend, who doesn’t deserve any stories today, who’s been sending e-mails he shouldn’t.

But I tell it to him anyway. That night, when he comes home, I pour two glasses of wine. Jim looks too neat for my kitchen – too ironed against the crooked linoleum – and it still sometimes surprises me to see him in my apartment, even though we’ve been dating a year and living together almost as long. He seems at home, though. His mouth is curved up in a way my friend Wendy calls a smirk, but it’s a look I love: you can tell something fun is going on inside his head.

I tell him about the deer leg, making it as grisly as possible. Tendons coming out, I say. Hair and dried blood. As I’m talking Jim makes kissy noises at Honey. I pause.

Should I tell him about how I threw the leg, even after I knew what it was? In the past he's laughed at stories in which I'm featured this way, blind, groping things, later sardonic and rolling my eyes at myself. But then I remember the e-mail.

Jokes he forwarded. Supposed to make me laugh.

*Why can't Helen Keller drive? Because she's a woman.*

Why didn't I just delete it? Why did I look at the recipient list? I get a pitty feeling in my stomach. I'm wimping out, I think.

I say, "About that e-mail you sent me –"

Jim looks at me. Honey looks at me. *Yes?*

"I have bad eyesight," I say. "I feel some solidarity with Helen Keller."

"Oh, right, Luce," he says, starting to laugh. "Don't pull this. You're hardly blind."

"No," I say. "I guess I'm not blind."

He smiles, thinking we're joking. He pushes his chair up on its back legs and balances. With the chair tilted, his feet don't touch the floor.

"Or at least, not *that* blind," he says. He holds up a hand. "How many fingers?"

"Stop it," I say.

Already I'm feeling better. I love that Jim doesn't act cautious about my bad eyesight. If I'm truly lost, if I can't find people at a party, he'll steer me around with his fingers on my elbow. But otherwise he just makes fun of me, like he is now. He picks up the wine bottle with his free hand.

"I didn't know they made wine in Chile," he says.



“Quite a lot.” I say. “Santiago,” I add. “That’s the capital. Like that old man in the Hemingway book, except the town isn’t on the sea.”

Honey looks at me, panting, then looks away. *Whatever*, she seems to be saying. *Don’t embarrass me*. Jim just stares, his blue eyes blinking.

“*Iago* means James in Spanish,” he says.

How did I not know that? Elena would’ve known. Then I have a thought that is even worse: he knows *because* of Elena. Elena – she’s fluent. She’s a girl who’s known Spanish since the time she was born, a girl who won’t stay away from the boys she’s discarded.

The next day I get another e-mail, and once again E\_Garcia is among the recipients. I see her again, her balloon hips, the wings of black hair. I suddenly look all wrong: too pale, too smoker-skinny, with arms that are as thin and hard as monkey bars.

I call my friend Wendy, who comes over with her two-year-old. She stands in my doorway, blowing thick brown bangs out of her face, holding her son Charlie across her stomach like a load of firewood. He’s kicking to get at the dog. Wendy looks sturdy, as if she can take care of all of us, and for a second I think it’ll be okay. She shakes off her ski jacket.

“Did I tell you what Dean did?” she asks. Dean is Charlie’s father. “You know he owes me like three thousand dollars?” She looks at me, nodding. “So I call him and find out from his answering machine he’s living with some woman. So I start leaving a message, telling him I need some of the money, and he picks up in the middle and, get this, he starts yelling at *me*. Calling me a bitch for getting after him.”

It takes me a minute to understand that she's talking about herself, since I'd expected us to talk about me. But then I'm right there with her. Dean hasn't paid alimony in a year.

But still, I know better than to say the things I want to say – *what about court? what about selling the ring?* No one wants to hear questions like that. So we sit on the couch smoking, and Charlie chases Honey, who gives me a bleak look. *If I weren't a golden retriever, she says, I'd do something about this.*

A while later Charlie starts to smell, and Wendy asks if she can use the kitchen table. It's old, brown plastic made to look like wood, with strange green shapes that are somewhere between stars and Celtic crosses. Wendy hoists Charlie onto it and opens a blue quilted bag. Charlie wears cloth diapers, with polka-dotted undies that go over them – environmental, Wendy says, but she has to scrape the used ones into the toilet and I don't see how she does it. Charlie's face twitches. His tiny pink penis points straight in the air.

Suddenly the dog swoops down, going for the chair Charlie's clothes are on, and she grabs the polka-dotted underwear and heads out the kitchen door. For a second we just stare after her. Then I'm moving, yelling.

“Honey!” I say. “Drop it. *Honey!*”

She picks up the pace. She's spry for a dog of thirteen. Soon we're on our way upstairs, her blond butt bobbing in front of me. She heads for the bedroom, and her jaws are working like crazy. We run around the bed, then she gets up *on* the bed and scrambles across it.

*“Bad Honey!”* I say. *“Bad Honey!”*

But she makes it, swings out the door. Her instincts are wrong this time – she heads for the bathroom – but just as I’ve got her cornered, she plunges through my arms and into the hall. Finally I grab her collar, but the underwear’s nowhere in sight. I look around the bed and the bathroom, but it’s gone. As I yank her downstairs, she retches.

Charlie’s running around the kitchen, excited to be so suddenly naked. His pants have been moved to the table.

Wendy blinks. “Where is it?”

“I, uh.” I pause. “She ate it.”

Wendy stares, then begins to laugh. “Shit, Lucy,” she says, like she has no idea what she’s going to say next. “I’m sorry,” is what comes out. I start laughing.

“You’re sorry? My dog eats your kid’s underwear and you’re sorry?”

“I shouldn’t have left it on the chair,” she insists, more sure of herself now, of her duty to apologize. There’s a crease between her eyebrows, as thin and straight and delicate as a plumb line.

I call the vet, who says not to worry but that I should take Honey in just to be sure.

“She’ll be fine,” I say after I hang up the phone. I don’t want Wendy to leave. I need to talk more about Elena, to find out how seriously I should be taking this. “Look,” I say, “the dog’s not the one we need to be concerned about.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Wendy sighs, but she seems distracted. She thumbs a loose thread on the blue bag. After a minute she says, “A woman! On his answering machine. Can you believe it?”

The vet is a young man, mid-twenties, maybe even younger than I am. When I get close I can see his eyes are beautiful, clear and pretty like a girl's. He does not seem surprised at Honey, but then this is Boulder, and people probably bring in golden retrievers that are strung out on acid. He writes up a ticket with Honey's stats: her color is buff, her sex is female, her patient ID number is 3455. Under "reason for visit" he writes, "Underware Consumption." He is a kind man, if a bad speller: under "prognosis" he writes, "All will be well with Honey."

Which is more than I could say for him, or for me. Where was his composition teacher in college? And me: here's the reason that I'm stuck. How can I face being single again, having to check out men who can't spell?

The vet takes Honey's temperature, and she gets a funny look when he sticks the thermometer in her butt. She tries to scoot forward on the examination table.

He strokes her back. "Cats sometimes purr. Strange, isn't it?"

"Masochism," I say. "It happens to the best of us."

He gives me a bland smile that tells me he hasn't the slightest idea what I'm talking about, and he doesn't care. Honey's temperature is fine, so he gives her some Kaopectate. After some gulping and some panicky looks (*what is going on?*) she coughs up a slimy polka-dotted rag.

"You want it?" he says.

Is he crazy? "Um, no, I guess not," I say, and he puts it in a clear plastic bag, ties the mouth, and leaves it on the examination table. It looks like used toilet paper. I have

trouble not looking at it, and trouble not gagging when I do. Honey is unperturbed; she smiles and pants.

When the vet hands me the ticket, I see he's wearing a ring.

So now I've got a story for Jim, I think, a great story, *the dog ate the kid's underwear*. The question is, do I whore myself by telling it to him, by trying to be funny (if I can just be funny *enough*, I think) in spite of E\_Garcia?

I do. He laughs, and then he comes around behind me. He puts his hands on the crease between my hips and thighs, palms flat and angled down. That decides it: how can I say anything? He kisses my neck, trolling around the nape with his lips, his tongue edging toward my hair, soft and wet. Soon we move to the bed, where he holds my arms down and moves toward me as if from a great height, only his lips touching mine, everything else high up, teasing, holding back, until I'm almost crazy and then finally he comes to me, presses down into me and jams his tongue in my mouth.

Afterwards we lie under the sheets and he traces words on my back. *Hi beautiful. Hi baby.* Honey wanders in. Her orange head bobs down near our feet. She looks at us, her eyes unsettled.

"Maybe we should get our underwear," I say.

Honey begins to chase her tail. She twitches, first this way, then that. Snap. Snap. She spins in circles and bonks into the mattress.

"Honey!" Jim says. "That is such a cliché."

She pauses, out of breath, and pants at him.

“You think you still have those undies?” I say. “You doing a wash cycle?”

“I just can’t believe she ate *underwear*,” Jim says. “I’m going to syndicate that and send it over e-mail.”

The word jars me. For a minute I debate. Then I put my underwear and jeans back on, while Honey looks at me owlishly.

“Why is Elena on your e-mail list?” I say. My voice is surprisingly normal, the voice I use for helping people at the library.

Jim gives a little jolt, and his eyes go gray. He sits up.

“What?” he says.

“Elena,” I say. It’s strange to say the name aloud.

His feet kick. “We’re just friends,” he says.

I look at him. “Friends?”

“Yes,” he says, stubborn now. “She’s a good friend of mine.”

I laugh, not very nicely, and move to the edge of the bed. “I thought she was the one who devastated you,” I said. “I seem to remember your using that word.”

He frowns.

“I was upset,” he says finally. “I think she could’ve handled it better, I know, but so could I.”

“Right,” I say. I laugh again. “The *Mr. Rogers* school of break-ups.”

He shakes his head. His face has that stubborn set, and he looks at me with something close to hate. I should be outraged, I know, but instead I just feel sick. It’s okay, I say to him silently. I don’t like myself either.

“Well,” I say. “What about what happened before?”

“I knew you were going to bring that up,” he says, his voice flat. “Why is it so hard for you to let me be friends with an ex-girlfriend?”

“Because,” I say. “You kissed her after you were with me.”

*Kissed*. It hangs in the air, a lie, an easier word, not the word I should’ve said.

“Once,” he says. His toes are making little white tents out of the sheet. “Once. And I never said I wasn’t going to be friends with her.”

“But why do you *need* to be friends with her?”

“I don’t,” he says.

“Then stop,” I blurt out. “Don’t see her anymore. Don’t. I don’t care how smart she is, I’m smarter. Okay? I’m better for you – I’m – I’m – ”

What the hell am I doing? Screwing myself, it seems, but I can’t stop.

“She’s not that great,” I say. “When I first met her? I remember her from that, and at that point I was objective, because I didn’t like you yet. And she had bad breath, coffee-breath. You know what else? She mixed up a few of her words. You can say that’s because she’s bilingual or whatever you’re going to say, but she *mixed them up*. Okay? Look at Nabokov. He was like quadrilingual and he never mixed anything up – ”

Jim has his hand on my arm. The only reason I’m still talking is because I know I’ve gone way too far.

“Stop, Lucy,” he says. “Stop.” His chest presses into my shoulder.

I could be acting better, I think, rising above the suspicion and jealousy, preparing to move on. But I’m not. Some part of me *wants* to stay right here, wants to be desperate and miserable and angry.

He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“A lot of people are friends with their exes,” he says. “And what happened between us happened a while ago.” He pauses. “Why are you so bitter?”

“Why was Helen Keller bitter?” I say.

A few days later I try this out on Wendy. “It would just be so much easier,” I say, “to be a man. I saw this nature special, on crocodiles? Their sex is determined by temperature. If the eggs are lying around in hot weather, like above ninety, they’re all male, but if it’s below eighty-eight then they’re all female. Wouldn’t it be great? Just get put in an incubator when you’re born, and double your chances in life.”

She laughs. Wendy usually laughs at what I say, and it heartens me, like I may actually be funny after all, that it’s just Jim who doesn’t see it sometimes.

“What I like least,” I tell her, “are the little unexpected jolts. You know? Every time I meet someone named Elena or Ellen. Every time someone mentions the Dead, since that makes me think of Jerry Garcia, which makes me think of her.”

“Maybe you should think of Joyce,” Wendy says. “You know, *The Dead*.”

“No,” I say. “All chains go back to her. If I think of Joyce, then I think of Irish people, and I think of people discriminating against the Irish in the old days, and then I think about current discrimination and Hispanics and then her.”

“I know,” Wendy says, suddenly gloomy. “The short-circuit route. I get it every time Charlie smiles. Babies look like their fathers the first few years, it’s a biological fact.” She gets the little line in her forehead. “It’s an evolutionary thing, to make the dads know their kids are theirs and stick around. Lot that worked, huh, Charlie?”



She scoops him onto her legs, so that his stomach is bared in a basketball of white skin, and she starts tickling him. When she puts him down his mouth is shiny with drool. He pitches after Honey, who scrambles over to me. I try to keep Charlie away from her. I think she's feeling sick, because she didn't eat her dinner last night.

Wendy puffs on her cigarette. She says, "I used to think that males had it easier, until I had Charlie. But it's not all one-way." She pauses. "For instance, baby boys are more likely to be abused. Their breathing systems aren't developed when they're born, so they cry more, and then their parents hit them."

I frown, looking at Charlie's egg-shaped head. He drools at me. I try to look away but can't.

"No one's talking about babies," I say.

"Dean's been a jerk," she says. "I'm not trying to pretend he hasn't. But Lucy, look at what he gave me."

Charlie blinks at us, his eyelashes wet and beautiful. But his damp, murky eyes remind me of someone else, and I see Jim back when we were just friends. The afternoon he'd stumbled though the story of Elena breaking up with him, how he'd had to blink away tears. And I'd been there, hadn't I? I'd been there, and three weeks later we were together.

But how can't it be real? What about all those moments? Standing outside that bar in the rain, laughing, kicked out for setting our sambucas on fire. The night Honey swallowed the condom. The evening we went for a walk in the wet snow, so that by time we took our socks off our feet were as hard and white as peeled apples. After that we were so cold we got into bed to warm up, and I lay on top of him for a long time.

How can there be confusion after moments like those? Elena seems suddenly impossible: a nuisance, a pest. I feel sure of this, because I don't understand yet how old moments can get in the way of the new. And what were our times otherwise, the sambucas, the swirling snow, my jokes that I worked so hard on? I am the one. I am it.

But I'm being eaten by jealousy. I empty the trash can in secret, because all those Kleenex seem like a bad sign. Honey finishes only half her dinner, which I take as a gesture of loyalty.

Four days after my talk with Jim, it happens. I come home from the library to find Honey trotting around, excited, doing a goose step. On the kitchen floor is something that looks purplish and wet and shiny, like the mashed-up skin of an eggplant.

It's underwear. I know before even look at it.

I pick it up. Skimpy, with string sides, which is probably why Honey could get it down. The washing instructions are in Spanish.

When did this happen? How could he *here*?

Honey wanders over, to see what the noises I'm making are about. I hold her. She yawns at me, her tongue spiraling like the tail of a sea horse. But she's patient. My girl, I think.

I wait two days, until the night of Jim's office party, and then I put on filmy pants and silk blouse that's a lurid blue I love. Jim has on a suit, and he's carrying himself in the way that short, good-looking men often do, with his chest puffed.

Get ready, I think. You get ready.

The restaurant turns out to be perfect. Amber lighting, bottles of oil with leaves floating in them. The dining room is packed. It's hard to eat without jostling elbows. Jim's friends talk in low voices about the partners at their firm, about a man who was fired and had to be escorted out by security.

During the main course, I lean over and cup my hand around Jim's ear.

"I'm wearing edible underwear," I say. "Wanna see?"

He smiles, his cheek full, but he looks suddenly nauseous. "Here?" he asks. I pull down the waist of my pants, enough to reveal a snatch of purple. He stares at them, then at me. His eyes are like pebbles.

"Those aren't edible," he says.

"No."

He looks at me, so stupidly that I laugh.

"No," I say again. "But Honey ate them."

He blinks. "You're wearing underwear that – that was in a dog's stomach?"

"I'm wearing *her* underwear," I say quietly. A busboy edges by with a round tray.

Jim gives a hollow laugh. "You're pretty amazing," he says. "I hope you washed them."

*Amazing.* I know he doesn't mean it as a compliment, but my skin begins to tingle.

"You dick," I say. "You total dick."

"I'm sorry," he says. "She didn't say she'd lost them."

He looks at his water glass.

“You were too nice,” he says.

I stare at him. What? I think. What about how I yelled at him after last time?

“I don’t know that I was so nice,” I say, my voice tight.

“Okay, you weren’t,” he says. “But you didn’t leave.”

So I should’ve left, I think. He wanted me to leave. He *wanted* to fuck it up, to finish it, and he never told me. My scalp begins to itch.

“Come here,” I say.

He turns his head further toward me, not understanding – and that’s it, I’m winding up, and my hand hits his face, *crack*. It’s a solid hit, one I can be proud of for years to come, one that rattles through the restaurant.

His hand goes to his face and he gapes.

It’s quiet. The clink of wineglasses and silverware stops, the conversation falters, and people turn to stare.

And then Jim is up, pushing back his chair and yanking me toward the door. I see people as we pass, all strangely in focus, and their faces seem like a sea of starving children. Then Jim gives my wrist a pull and we’re out the door. My heels skate on ice. He pulls me around to the back of the building, where the light is orange and there’s a sour smell coming from a dumpster. He paces up and down.

“What did you just do?” he says. “What the hell did you just do, Lucy?”

“You deserved it,” I say, feeling angry but a little less certain. “You did. After everything we went through over her.”

He strides up and down, his mouth moving but no words coming out.

“What is this,” I say, “the multi-cultural dating plan? Try a Hispanic, try a blind person?”

His mouth is gaping, his eyes are wide and blinking fast. The part of me that still cares hurts to see it, hurts to see his face so naked.

“Are you crazy?” he says finally.

“Yes,” I say, “I am.” I push back my shoulders – it’s a marvel, I’ve kept my head – and start walking away.

He moves his things out of the apartment, but later I find reminders. His German-English dictionary, an empty box of condoms in the drawer of the bedside table. An extra condom free, the box advertises: 13 vs. 12. So when was the extra time? I wonder. When he wrote *hi beautiful* on my back? My wastebasket brims with tissues, my curtains are drawn, and Honey goes unwalked. She whines, stares at me, pants in my face: *Come on, let’s go!* But I’m holed up, just me and my righteousness.

I try to map the recovery time-line: is it a sine wave, an exponential function? But it can’t be plotted. When I think I’ve reached a minimum it turns out I’m still falling. Finally I just pretend to feel better, pretend like things matter again. I notice beautiful men in an abstract way that depresses me more than anything else.

Three months go by. I start dating another man, but it ends quickly. With him I’m determined not to be too nice, and as it turns out I’m not nice at all. I’m heartless, really, and it’s easy. But it doesn’t surprise me: I’m past the point where anything about love can surprise me.

Or so I think, until one afternoon when Wendy comes over crying. Dean has gotten engaged to the woman on his answering machine.

Wendy is devastated. Her tears are loud and messy, her eyes so swollen that the contours of her face have changed. It's fascinating, grotesque: she looks like a fiend, a slab-faced Buddha. She sits at my kitchen table, letting the tissues fall to the floor like leaves. Charlie runs around the room so that the toaster shakes.

"I still thought he was coming back," Wendy says. Her nose is raw from Kleenex burn. "After all that, I really did. I'm such an idiot."

I squeeze her shoulder. "You're not an idiot."

"Did he go to the same store?" she says, shouting now. "Maybe he bought the same ring. Maybe he got a package deal!"

"You're a million times better than her," I say, "whoever she is." But Wendy just grimaces.

Charlie stops running and eats a cigarette butt, which we both pretend not to see. Wendy puts her head on the fake-wood table and sobs. She cries with total abandon, long, siren-like wails that wrack her body. I just know, looking at her shaking back, that I'm seeing one of those moments when somebody's life is changing forever.

Charlie runs into her knee. She barely moves.

"You've got Charlie," I say.

Her voice goes tight. "Yes," she says, looking up at him. She lets out a shaky breath that makes her bangs flutter. "Oh God, yes. What would I do without Charlie."

After they leave, I think about what I would've felt if it'd been Jim. If he were getting married, would I be upset? Would it matter if it were to Elena or some other girl? But I don't think I'd care: Jim seems dead, like he can't touch me now. He's become an event, not a person. I don't imagine that he'd feel sad about me, either, because our story seems like it was finished long ago.

It's not until later that I understand that you can still feel bad, sorry, long after you thought yourself capable of it. It happens when I move out of my apartment. I have to leave – even though it seems years since Jim lived there, the crooked linoleum and the empty bookshelves feel haunted with what happened between us, hollow, and I've grown to hate the place. So I find another apartment, one that allows smokers but not pets. I give Honey to my parents until I can find a better place, one where we'll both do well, and I tell myself that we'll be together again soon.

But Honey's old, her kidneys aren't good, and she won't make it. The last I see of her is at the airport, her face looking out of the cage as she moves down the conveyor belt. *What's going on?* she says. *Where on earth am I going?* Her brown eyes look haggard, and I almost tell them to stop the belt right then and there. "It's month-to-month," I call after her. "Give me four weeks." Her cage grows blurry, then moves behind the rubber strip curtains.

My new apartment is quiet. I like certain things about being alone: Saturdays I can sleep in, and I can leave the trash out even with chicken bones on top. But soon it's too quiet, and I miss Honey's squeaky yawns. And then, after just two weeks, my dad calls. She isn't doing well, he says. The next day he calls again. His voice is hesitant, then the words spill out quickly. He had to put her to sleep.

That call is short.

Later, when I'm feeling better, we make a few jokes: they still take her for walks, they just put the little pewter urn in their pockets. And there is, absurdly, airline mileage to be gotten out of the deal, since Honey won't be using her return leg to come back to me. My dad laughs, says I'll have to go to Jamaica. But our jokes are half-hearted. I look at the tag he sends back to me, nicked and dull from her years of licking it. *My name is Honey*, it says. And then there is the line beneath it, the *I belong to* line, which I can't read right now. It's too blurry through my glasses.

This is it: I can be nice to my next dog, and I am. But I'll never get the chance back to be nice to her. She thinks I left her, and I did.

I'll be different, I think. With new dog, with the next boyfriend.

I look at Charlie, who likes to play Nerf football with my new dog. And I think: maybe I'll get another chance, another Honey. The new dog and I are trying.

But I keep calling her Honey by accident – I forget that she's not the same one, and I think I'm going to screw it up again. The old moments will get in the way of the new. Because in my mind I'm still seeing her, the first one. I can't help it. I see her as she used to be on our runs, when she was depressed and lagging behind, how when I turned around and said *let's go* she'd perk up and then charge off in the other direction, bouncy, as if this time she was really going to keep up.



## **Tell Me Something Happy**

Over eastern Colorado, Tonia had put on two coats of lipstick – sienna siesta, the tube said – but as the “fasten seat belts” sign came on, she decided it looked cheap and rubbed it off. Inside the airport her mother was waiting, throwing a hand in the air to catch her attention. Her mother was short, but heels on one end and frizzy hair on the other stretched her out. “You’re beautiful,” she said, admiring the boots that Tonia had chosen for the flight. “Stunning!” The trace of an accent sharpened her mother’s words.

Tonia had wanted this. But now she slung her bag over her shoulder and didn’t answer. Beeping carts moved by them, a sausage stand showed pink hot dogs glistening on skewers. Her mother beamed. Tonia couldn’t meet her eyes, her mother was beaming so much. They began walking out of the terminal, and their reflection in a restaurant window was startling: the boots made Tonia look so sure-footed she could almost understand her mother’s reaction.

Her brother was to arrive next, then her aunt. She and her mother settled into a row of black chairs to wait. She wanted to talk about college, to ask advice about a certain boy from Georgia. But her mother was distracted, putting her glasses in her pocket and then patting the seat next to her, trying to find them. She giggled when Tonia pointed at her shirt.

“Danny!” her mother called minutes later, and Tonia saw her brother come toward them. His hair was clipped in a gleaming crewcut. Her mother grew flirtatious. Danny hugged them both and hit Tonia in the shoulder.

“When’s the dragon lady coming?” he asked.

“Dragon lady!” her mother said. A man reading a newspaper frowned at her.

“Oh, right, I forgot,” Danny said. “We all like Aunt Liesl.”

It was true that Tonia’s aunt was a bit of a dragon. When Tonia was young, she’d liked her – Aunt Liesl had brought treats from Switzerland, nougat and marzipan, or tinfoiled chocolates shaped like ladybugs. But now she seemed to disapprove of Tonia and Danny, and was always saying they should be helping more with housework. Still, Danny had never called her this before. Tonia felt keyed-up and a little reckless. “Yeah,” she said, looking at her mother. “We’re so glad she comes every Christmas.”

She was excited and wondered if she’d gone too far, but her mother only smiled.

While her mother looked for a luggage cart, Danny began talking about medical school. Last week he had to open up a two-month-old kid, with the smallest ribs he’d ever seen. When the kid woke up he bawled and grabbed Danny’s pinkie. “Five doctors around the table,” Danny said, “and he grabbed *my* finger.” He shook his head, as if he didn’t understand it, but he looked happy as he kicked a shoe at the floor. Tonia tried to picture it, a baby clutching his finger. A baby with tiny feathered ribs who’d just been opened up and sewn back together. She wanted to know more, but Danny was already talking about something else.

“Hey,” he said. “Guess what I got Aunt Liesl for Christmas.”

He leaned back on his heels, happy.

“A breast pocket calendar,” he told her. “With photos of real breasts. One for each month.”

She blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m not even sure the joke works in German. The point’s to see her freak out, since she’s such a Puritan.” He paused, as Tonia’s mother came up. “But don’t tell mom.”

Her mother looked at him, pleased. She put her hands on her hips. “What!” she said, almost shouting. “Don’t tell mom what?”

“Nothing,” Danny said.

They waited at Aunt Liesl’s gate. Outside, the wind had gotten fierce; flags whipped around metal poles and tumbleweed skirted across runways. When Aunt Liesl came off the plane, she too showed signs of being buffeted around. Her clothes were ruffled and untucked, her hair falling out of its gray braid, and her cheek jagged with the imprint of a pillow.

On the drive to Boulder the wind was so strong it rocked the car, and Tonia’s mother had to hold the steering wheel at an angle, as if she were piloting a lame shopping cart. Aunt Liesl spoke Swiss German and only switched to English once, to remark that a car in front of them had given a cyclist too wide a berth – in Switzerland, she said, more people rode bicycles and so motorists knew precisely how much space to give them. Then she turned back to Tonia’s mother and they started up again in their yodeling dialect.

Later, when Tonia was upstairs in her room, Danny showed her the breast pocket calendar. The outside was navy vinyl, but the inside was scandalous: a perky breast for January, a sagging one for February, a fat brown-nippled one for March. “That one’s her,” Tonia said. She pointed to the March picture. “Are you really going to give this to her?”

He sighed. "Probably not."

"She *would* freak," Tonia said.

Danny slipped the calendar in his jeans pocket. Then he stared out the window, at the snow that had stayed balanced on the garlanded telephone wires.

"What was that baby's name?" she said.

He glanced at her. "Joey, Jakey," he said. "I'm not sure."

"You can't remember? After he liked you like that?"

"You can't remember every patient's name," her brother said. After a minute he added, "He was a cute kid, though. Looked like a monkey. A UFF." Danny paused and looked at her, to make sure she'd heard what he'd said. "That's doctor-talk for 'unusual facial features.' It used to be FLK for 'funny-looking kid,' but that was un-PC so they changed it."

*I would've remembered the kid's name, Tonia thought. She tried to imagine it: a baby's fingers wrapped around hers, a small wailing mouth. Maybe she'd be a doctor too. It was fun to think about. It made her problems seem far away.*

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That night, after dinner, Tonia helped her mother with the dishes. Goopy cheese laced the long-tined fondue forks; greasy bits of salad clung to her hands, while a sour smell fumed up from the disposal. They were alone. Aunt Liesl had gone to bed, and Danny was in the basement, where an announcer's voice was bawling on TV. Tonia

liked the reflection she and her mother made in the window, mother and daughter working together.

At school dinner had become awful. Many days she'd be alone as she hurried over to the slab-faced cafeteria. And there he'd be, every time, sitting at a table with his soccer friends. Hunched over his tray, with his glasses of milk and water and Coke standing around like a small army, his eyes would flicker up and see her, and then he'd glance away as she moved behind the salad bar. Each time it happened it seemed that a chance between them had been destroyed. Now, in the kitchen, Tonia looked at her mother. This was it. Her mother had begun chewing on a sugar cube, so that a watery crunch moved around her mouth. "You know," Tonia said, "there's this guy –" she began, but then she was stopped by a knocking on the wall.

It was Aunt Liesl. She blinked at them and said, "Is this a private talk?"

"It's okay," Tonia's mother said and then looked guilty.

"Weren't you going to sleep?" Tonia said.

Aunt Liesl sat down at the kitchen table. "Insomnia," she said. "It's so awful when you're exhausted."

She began to pick her teeth with a magazine subscription card. She pulled it out of her mouth, examined the corner, then dug back in. She said, "Tonia, I know this looks strange, but it's good for your teeth. Gum stimulation." She smiled; her gums were indeed as fat and pink as earthworms. She said, "I heard of a woman in Africa who still has all her teeth, because every day she chews on a twig. The only one over thirty in the whole village who has her teeth."

“Really?” Tonia’s mother said. She put down the serving spoon she was washing. She turned toward Aunt Liesl. “Really? How old was the woman?”

“I believe eighty,” Aunt Liesl said, with a wave of her hand that made Tonia suspect she was making this up. Aunt Liesl then began to talk of an oil-painting course she was taking. “Not to toot my own horn,” she said, “but my instructor thinks I’ve got talent. A gift for portraits. My next project’s going to be very interesting, I think. It’s a series of African tribesmen – ”

But at this point Tonia interrupted her.

“Aunt Liesl,” she said, “I was going to ask my mother something right before you came in. Would you – that is,” she said, beginning to get nervous, for her mother was looking startled, “Would you mind if we had a few minutes alone?”

Aunt Liesl’s elbow fell onto the table, and she began playing with the magazine card. “No,” she said. “No, I’ll leave.”

“It won’t take long,” Tonia said, for she was already feeling guilty and rude.

Aunt Liesl nodded. Her back was round and Tonia could see a roll of fat around her neck, white and smooth.

“I’m sorry,” Tonia said. “It’s not that big a deal. In fact, I don’t even know why I said anything – ”

“No problem,” Aunt Liesl said. “I’ll go. Can I say just one more thing before I leave?”

“Of course,” Tonia said, feeling miserable.

But then Aunt Liesl went on talking as if Tonia hadn’t asked her to leave at all. She started telling Tonia’s mother about the African painting. The preliminary sketches

were complete; she planned to use a paint solvent made from orange peels, and something else, which she said in Swiss German so that Tonia didn't understand until her mother turned to her and said "linseed oil" with a despairing look on her face. Her mother finished wiping dry the last of the dishes, stood on her tiptoes, and slid the fondue pot onto a high shelf. *Sorry*, she mouthed at Tonia. Say something, Tonia thought, but her mother didn't. Tonia's fury grew and became focused on the magazine card, which lay on table now, the corner damp and bent with bits of sprouts on it.

Finally Tonia left. Aunt Liesl called out, "Sorry, dear! I'll go," and then she laughed about taking over the conversation. Tonia didn't answer.

Twenty minutes later, there was a knock on her bedroom door.

"I'm sorry," her mother said, coming in. A striped apron stretched across her legs as she sat down on the bed. "I know she cut you off, sweetie."

"What's with her?" Tonia said.

"She just forgot. Now, what did you want to talk about?"

Tonia waited to see if her mother would remember that she'd mentioned a guy. Bringing it up again seemed humiliating, not only because it meant her mother hadn't been listening, but because she was sure the Georgia boy wasn't struggling over how to mention *her*.

"She drives me crazy," Tonia muttered.

Her mother nodded. "You sure you don't want to talk?"

The room seemed to wait. The dancing ballerinas on the wallpaper paused mid-leap. Tonia had the sense that she was being watched, that someone out there was laughing at her.

Ask me again, she commanded her mother silently. Insist I tell you.

But she'd been quiet for too long. Her mother smoothed her apron, so that the coarse material scratched under her fingers. Then she said, "Try to be nice to her, okay? I know she can be oblivious. But it's different for me. After our mother died she raised me, you know."

Tonia did know. She studied the ceiling. But her mother kept talking, her words coming quickly now. In Switzerland, her mother said, Aunt Liesl had built a fire for the family's baths every Friday. Aunt Liesl had even fixed their hair using an old curling iron that had to be warmed in the fireplace. Tonia kept her eyes on the ceiling. All her mother's stories were the same. Right now she didn't want stories; she wanted advice. But her mother never gave any of that, except on things like how to avoid botulism or ingrown toenails.

At last her mother left, and Tonia went to Danny's room. He was on his bed, reading an article on memory and intelligence. Glossy science magazines lay on the carpet, like tiles on an unfinished floor. The covers showed shadowy geometric shapes, and reminded Tonia of the men professors who scurried around her college without ever speaking. But she moved a pile of the magazines from Danny's desk chair and sat down. She told him about Aunt Liesl interrupting – "To brag about her painting," she said, "as if anyone cares." He didn't answer, and the meanness of her words hung in the room until finally he looked up. His hair was bright under the reading lamp, and his face sharp, as if he might ask what she'd been about to tell.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I mean look at her. Sixty years old, and probably still a virgin."



He smiled and began to sing *Edelweiss*, very softly, so that no one would hear. Her mother's room was right next door. "C'mon," he said, when Tonia was quiet. "You're much cooler than she is."

It was true, Tonia thought. Her mother was blind for not seeing it.

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Two days later, on Christmas morning, Danny said he wasn't going to give the breast pocket calendar to Aunt Liesl. He and Tonia were in the dining room eating shiny braided bread with lots of butter. Aunt Liesl and Tonia's mother had spent the previous day baking, making both the bread and special Swiss cookies from molds. These cookies looked beautiful but tasted awful – so bad that Tonia's father, who'd been divorced from her mother for ten years, still remembered and complained – but the fuss that had gone on in the kitchen yesterday had been long and noisy. Now once again Tonia and Danny had been left alone. It was late, the sun was pouring in through the window, and Tonia was too hot in her wool sweater. She said, "You're being a wimp."

"Don't you think Mom might get upset?" he said.

"No," she said. "She'll think it's funny. Here, give it to me."

Danny looked unsure, but he reached in his pocket and handed over the calendar, now wrapped in polka-dotted paper. She took it quickly, before he could change his mind.

Soon her mother came in the front door, followed by Aunt Liesl, who held a brown paper bag. Chestnuts from the grocery down the street, Aunt Liesl said. They

looked pale; they wouldn't taste as good as the ones she made in Switzerland. But Tonia noticed that she put the chestnuts in the oven right away.

Afterwards they took down the stockings. Aunt Liesl's looked long and twisted, like a snake with its belly distended, a snake that had just eaten a strange, right-angled meal. Tonia's heart began to drum. Everyone was quiet, undoing the miniature, perfect packages that were better than the cheap things inside. Tonia got bath salts, gold-foiled chocolate coins, a marzipan pig, and a cassette of Japanese music with a lewdly grinning man on the front. The coffee table became heaped with ribbons, wrapping paper, tags, bows, and earring boxes, all mixed together like a colorful salad. Tonia could feel the calendar approaching. Finally her aunt pulled it out and ripped off the paper.

"A calendar," she said, turning it around. "Thank you, Danny."

Then she opened it. She jolted. She stared at a picture, then began flipping through. She looked at the front cover, the back cover, and then the inside again.

At last she glanced up. But she didn't look at Danny. She turned to Tonia's mother. Her mother's forehead was covered with lines. Aunt Liesl said something in Swiss German.

Tonia's mother said, "No, no –"

"This is very nice," Aunt Liesl said, turning to Danny. "You like to make fun of people?"

His eyes widened. "It's a gag gift," he said. "We didn't mean –"

"You think it's nice?" she said again.

"It was a joke," he said. He glanced at Tonia's mother, then back at Aunt Liesl.

"This is a mistake. We didn't mean to upset you." He frowned at Tonia.

Aunt Liesl shook her head, so that her braid snapped behind her back.

“Hey – ” he began, and he glanced around, more nervously, and then he saw Tonia’s mother looking at him. His fingers began to yank on the cuffs of his shirt. “This is so crazy,” he said. “It was a joke, Mom. We didn’t mean it. You know that’s true – I mean – ”

He stopped. He turned to Aunt Liesl. “Look,” he said, but nothing more came out.

Tonia had to do get this moment over with.

“Can’t you understand?” she said. “He told you, it was a joke.”

Aunt Liesl turned. Tonia could see a black hair sprouting out of a mole on her aunt’s chin, like an eyelash that had wandered across her face.

“This was your idea, Tonia?” she said.

“No,” Danny said.

“Yes,” Tonia told her. “It was. But we thought it was funny.”

Her mother gave her a bleak, discouraged look and put her head in her hands. It was terrible, as bad as seeing her brother flounder.

Aunt Liesl got up and banged out the front door, so that a gust of cold air spat into the living room. Out of the corner of her eye Tonia could see her mother’s face starting to stretch and pinch. Her mother said something that sounded like “ow,” but long and wailing, and then she ran after Aunt Liesl. The door slammed again.

Danny looked up.

“*That* was a good idea,” he said.

Outside, Tonia’s mother began to shout. She stumbled past the front window, a maroon blur. On Christmas morning, Tonia thought. Inside her turtleneck she began to go

hot with shame. Her mother ran to the neighbors' yard then stopped: she looked confused, lost among their herd of tawny plastic reindeer. Then she moved off down the street, shouting out in Swiss German. Seeing her like that hardened Tonia. Yes, it was her fault, but just once her mother should keep herself together, and not howl out everything to the world.

Her mother's voice grew fainter. Over in the corner their tree stood gloomily, its candles unlit, its plastic bucket of water standing next to it like a dwarfish attendant. Tonia could see the colored lights of their neighbors' trees, and she wondered how many people were watching her mother.

"Hey," she said to Danny. "Tell me something happy. Tell me about that kid grabbing your finger again."

He closed his eyes. "It's not like that," he said. "That kid isn't going to make it."

Not going to make it? she thought. "The operation didn't work," she said.

"No," he replied. "The operation went fine. But his chances are still shitty. That's why I didn't want to know his name."

Danny leaned back against the couch. After a minute he said, "We had to tell the parents afterward. I'd rather have been anywhere else on earth, I mean *anywhere*. Me sitting there with –" he shook his head "– with two other fucking students while this doctor tells the parents their kid's dying. The doctor didn't tell us how bad it was, either. We walked into the room thinking the surgery had gone well, we had good news, right? And then the doctor starts saying how the operation probably won't make a damn bit of difference. It was – it was unreal."

“What’d the parents do?” Tonia said.

Danny stopped stretching. He looked at her and laughed.

“Not much,” he said. “They weren’t very happy.”

Outside snow fell from a tree in a huge fanning arc that left the air particled and dazed. Sun came down on Tonia’s sweater, beating into her, and she could feel sweat trickling into her turtleneck.

“Why’d you tell me that?” she shouted. He was quiet. “How was I supposed to know that kid was going to die?” she said. “Or that Aunt Liesl would freak out like this? How should I know anything?”

“Jesus Christ, Tonia,” he said. “Calm down.”

“Tell me something else! Something different.”

“But that’s what happened.”

“C’mon,” she said. “I mean it. A happy story.”

So he did. He told a story about a Mexican girl they brought into the emergency room, five years old, who’d jammed a marble in her ear. They had to hold her down while they got it out, and she’d been screaming and flailing around, and Danny’s job was to hold her head so she didn’t move. He was the only one she could see, and the whole time she was shrieking at him in Spanish, cursing him up and down, but then the marble had popped out and she’d stopped crying, bam, just like that, and started laughing. Then she’d said she hadn’t been scared at all, and she’d given Danny a hug.

Just as Danny finished the story, the front door squeaked. Tonia’s mother came in alone, sniffing, holding a tattered pack of pocket Kleenex. She held it out like a gift. She came over to the couch, sat down, and said, “She’s still out there.”

“I’m sorry,” Danny said. “We didn’t realize she’d react like that. I mean, not like we were being totally *nice*, but still.”

Tonia’s mother nodded. “It looked like you were taunting her,” she said. She paused. “She’s a lesbian.”

“What?” Tonia said. “What are you talking about?”

“Since when?” Danny said.

But Tonia’s mother didn’t have time to answer. Suddenly there was a terrific bang, *POP*, loud and blowing like a gunshot, and then another *POP POP*. Tonia’s hand jumped on the armrest, and she saw it jumping, saw it in a slow way that made her feel like it belonged to someone else. *POP POP*. Danny stared. Tonia’s mother covered her mouth with her hand, and she ran into the kitchen. They let her go. Tonia couldn’t move. Aunt Liesl was in there, with a gun. Ready to shoot, ready for revenge. And her mother was in there now too, she thought, as another *POP* blew, but then her mother was moving toward them.

“The chestnuts,” she said. “They’re exploding. Liesl forgot to slice them.” A battery of *pops* rang through the kitchen.

Tonia’s heart slowed to a loud drum. Her mother climbed back on the sofa and tucked her legs under her. Her eyes swept down the street, searching for Aunt Liesl. “She’s acting ridiculous,” she said, talking loud above the noise. “I can see why she’s hurt, it looks awful, but she won’t listen.”

The chestnuts exploded for a long time – it went on and on, the shells banging against the oven, smacking into the glass window, and the shrapnel pinging against the metal racks. Tonia sat on the couch with her mother and Danny and looked out at the

snow. They grew quiet, not talking, listening to Aunt Liesl's fury ringing throughout the house.

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Later, after it was silent, they stayed in the living room, waiting for Aunt Liesl to return. Tonia's mother was saying that Aunt Liesl had realized she was a lesbian this past year, but Tonia was hardly listening. A disaster had happened. It didn't matter now what kind of boots she'd worn in the airport, or what her mother said about the Georgia boy. He no longer seemed real anyway – just five minutes of lips and leaves and night wind, a kiss that had happened over a month ago. The only help her mother could give now was with a more general question: how to keep a beautiful five minutes from turning into a month of averted eyes and bright dining hall lights. Granted, it might help Tonia to know this, for the next boy. But she didn't want the next boy, she wanted him. She wanted to turn back time, to do it over, to do it right. Which was what she wanted in general.

Her mother kept glancing out the window. Her hand was pressed into her forehead, and her nails were dry and ridged, yellow at the tips. Packages still lay wrapped beneath their tree, the bows and ribbons frozen with cheer.

“Why didn't anyone tell us this?” Tonia said. “Do you think we would've given her that calendar if we'd known?”

Her mother blinked. “She didn't want me to tell you. Maybe she thought you'd use it against her.”

“Ow,” Tonia said.

“Well,” her mother said. “Well.”

Tonia pictured Aunt Liesl, and the chocolate ladybugs she used to bring over from Switzerland, with their little paper antennas in front.

“I’m sorry,” she told her mother.

“All right,” her mother said.

She meant it, Tonia knew. Her mother still loved her; she just didn’t think quite as highly of her as she had an hour ago. Tonia’s face felt hot.

She thought about the little Mexican girl, the one with the marble in her ear. She pictured the girl afterward, hugging Danny, showing the nurses her pink plastic coin purse. The marble would be lying on a countertop, long forgotten. How easy, when you were a kid, to say in the face of your undried tears that you weren’t scared – to rewrite the story so that you believed it. How easy then but how impossible now, Tonia thought. Her mother’s face, lit by the sun coming in through the window, looked suddenly – unmistakably – old.



## Saturdays

On Saturdays Fran's apartment is shadowy and gray. A music stand waits in the bedroom, with one of its tripod legs bent and propped up by a thesaurus. Everything is silent: the heater, the coffee percolator, the street outside. The only sound is the soft wet slap of raindrops on the window. Clouds roll over the sky – Fran knows it's raining not just in her neighborhood, but at the strip malls near the edge of town, and at dairies and farms all across the damp Pennsylvania countryside.

She likes Saturday. She likes it because it's her day, a whole day to practice her flute, a day she doesn't have to teach music appreciation to unappreciators. But now she lies still under her quilt, listening. The Catholic church across the street has recently started playing music outside, Christmas carols and breezy instrumentals. Fran has become obsessed by it, and she knows she's being crazy, but she can't help it. Now she strains her ears for any offending note. She almost *wants* to hear it, and she knows why. But today no sound is coming from the flowering mouth of the church's megaphone. It's quiet, except for the raindrops.

Fran isn't the only one who notices this silence. In a downstairs apartment, her neighbor, a man named Bob, also feels the still of the morning. He listens not for Christmas carols, but for Fran's flute. He chews his fried egg, sliding the rubbery white pieces around his plate, and watches the streams of rain that run down his window. Fran's at home, he's seen her Tercel out back, and he's going to visit her as soon as he hears the first scale. He thinks of the way she looks at him, with her knowing brown eyes, the smile that shows slightly crooked teeth. Does she like him too, or is she just torturing him?

Women do torture him, even nice girls, he knows from experience. But he wants to see Fran so badly that even the torture seems a pleasure. He wills her to pick up her flute. Play, he thinks. Start your scales, so I can climb up the stairs to see you (how the second floor seems magic now, the steps themselves exciting!).

In Fran's apartment, the smell of eggs frying leaks up from downstairs. She realizes she's hungry. She slathers a bagel with butter, takes a bite that leaves teeth marks. A spider web makes a plane in the air above the refrigerator, but she doesn't move to clean it. Back in her room she picks up her flute. She plays quietly at first, the tap-tap-tap of the keypads as loud as the music itself, but then she is cresting and trilling, the mouthpiece warm against her lips, the pipe end dribbling when the flute is held vertically.

A rap sounds on her door. Bob, she thinks. She could pretend she didn't hear him. But the knock comes again, loud and sharp as a hammer. When she opens the door he stands blinking in the hall, his hair tangled. His absurd cowlick leaps forward to meet her like a grace note.

"Hi, Bob," she says. "You're up early."

He moves into the living room, past her floating comment. "Sounding good," he says and taps the flute. Further on, near the television, he stops to inspect her peace lily, whose leaves part easily to let his hand through. Fran turns to watch. When he looks at the white bulb, his long fingers circle the stem with the grace of a yogi making a mudra, and then he tells her it needs water. "Thirsty," he says, but in the kitchen, where he goes to find a watering can, he's caught by another sight: the spider web above the refrigerator, with a plump fly now trussed in its threads. Wide-eyed, his cowlick quivering, Bob opens the window sash, searches for a broom, then moves the whole mess outside.

“Thanks,” she says. “But you need to go. I have to play.”

“Not even five minutes?” He picks the spider web out of the broom.

“Maybe another time.”

“You get those trash bags I left by your door?”

“I did,” she says. “Thank you.”

“At the A & P I thought, Fran needs trash bags. She said she forgot to buy them.”

He puts the broom down and jams his hands in his pockets. Arms as thin as a boy's he holds straight against his sides, so his shoulders ride up. The hair on these arms is black, the skin underneath a dull white. A computer programmer's complexion, Fran thinks. He does in fact program computers. This is one of the things she knows about him – he's twenty-four, so almost ten years younger than she is, and he programs computers, and he's lonely. He hasn't said he's lonely, but desperation beams off the skin that is as pale and dull as codfish.

Near her doorway she plucks two dollars out of her wallet. “It was a gift,” he protests, but she stuffs the bills in his hand. His shoulders slump, so that the material of his shirt rustles and scratches. He looks worried, unhappy.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “I just don't want to hang out. I mean, I *do*, but I can't.”

Her voice echoes in the hall, the reverberations stern, but on the landing Bob's face clears. His lashes blink in the shadows. “Maybe this afternoon,” he says. “Coffee might be nice.”

She stares at the carpet (a beetle stomps across the floor – is her house infested?) and she wonders at the way he misinterprets the things that he's already forced her to put too bluntly. He makes her act old, cranky, uptight, mean – and then it's not enough. She's

told him many times that she doesn't want to watch *Seinfeld* in his apartment, and she doesn't want to catch a jazz concert at the coffee bar he likes. She doesn't want to do these things or any others with Bob. Is that so terrible? But it makes her feel terrible.

“Another day,” she says. “I need to practice.”

She begins to shut the door, but in the shadows she sees the skinny shoulders droop. She says, in a softer tone, “Goodbye. I'll see you soon, Bob,” and wonders when he'll be back.

On the other side of town, across the river, Father David Gaverson is eating breakfast. Toast and black coffee, which he takes in the breakfast nook. The room overlooks a small, muddied tributary of the river, and the surface of the water ripples with raindrops. Father Gaverson's worried, he can't help it, worried and excited. More people have been coming to his mass than ever before. Today will see a big turnout, for during the week a tragedy has occurred, a local doctor hit by a truck, and after a tragedy people often see their way to church. It's terrible, but this only makes his job more important. He'll turn on the megaphone today, to remind people going by about the church's presence, to put the idea in their heads. There have been difficulties recently – complaints from people who live in the neighborhood, and that woman Francesca – but he won't think of her. The tragedy makes his path clear. He sips his coffee and looks at a legal pad in front of him. His sermon has to be outstanding. Right now it's good – of this he's confident. But he's not sure it's outstanding. If he's not sure, it probably isn't.

Fran's flute sits abandoned and cold on the lip of the music stand, its open-holed keys staring at her. She starts her scales again, then plays Gariboldi. Finally she does Mozart Symphony No. 313, the sheets of music dense with sixteenth and thirty-second notes, even a sextuplet of forty-eighths, squeezed together like miracle babies. The other marks – the tuttis and solos and trills with waving tails – they make her fingers fly over the keypads, so the music jumps and taps like the feet of Irish dancers. She doesn't sound quite like James Galway or Samuel Coles – who does? – but she sounds good, graced, like a Mozart player. He makes everyone triumphant, she thinks, makes a dancer out of the most clumsy, dull-footed child. "A man with an immature sense of humor," a magazine article once smirked, and Fran immediately looked at the byline – a German last name, scratchy with too many consonants. Jealous, she decided, someone disappointed in his own life.

Now she keeps playing, her flute dripping, so that she has to stop and clean it: a large wooden needle laced with a rag goes up the pipe, twists, and comes back out. She plays again, her fingers stumbling ... and when she stops to start over she hears a strain of music, a saxophone crooning through the rain like a lost and dejected cat. She opens her window and pokes her head into the driving rain. Cold air hits her face. Yes, it's the church, the megaphone that blossoms into the neighborhood. Just ignore it, she thinks, and begins to play again, but she can't concentrate. Strains of saxophone seep into the room, and she finds herself seeing the unmentionable priest at the Catholic church ... she'd rather not think of him, but she can't help it. He floats up from under her keyholes, dressed in gold-and-white pomp, looking puffed and condescending. His neck tendons pull like drum snares.

She tries to ignore this image and keep playing. But notes fall out of the flute punctually, their occasional outburst now as predictable as a leap year or a lost daylight savings hour. The glory of the sonata is gone. When she sets her flute down she drops it heavily, so that the music stand rocks back and forth on top of the thesaurus. In the living room her raincoat dangles from a brass hook near the door, looking like a thin, untrustworthy man standing in the darkness, and she moves toward it warily. Outside she ducks her head into the rain and hurries to the church.

Downstairs, Bob is watching her as she leaves the apartment building. She runs along the wet sidewalk in her raincoat, then disappears inside the church. What is she doing? She went to the church that same way last Saturday, but why? She isn't Catholic, he's fairly sure, and anyway it's hours until Mass. It makes no sense.

He stares outside. Behind the church, in the distance, the hills are swallowed in fog. A McDonald's sign reaches for the sky, a speck of yellow in the drear. He can't take much more of this rain. It's making him crazy. Maybe he should go to California, to Silicon Valley or L.A. The trip would be exciting – he'd love to pack up his belongings and leave this misty, gloomy jungle. But eventually he'd arrive, and then what? He doesn't belong in California. He glances across the street at the church doors – still closed – and he goes to his closet. His parka, the color of grape juice, lies balled-up next to his camping gear. He puts it on, wading through folds of plastic, and then he heads outside.

Fran stands in the echoey, womb-like quiet of the church's antechamber. She's right beneath the bell tower and the megaphone, she knows, but the thickness of the church walls keeps the sound out. She stays still for a minute. Her coat drips. She pushes

through the caramelized double-doors and into the main room, down a side aisle.

Mahogany pews and sculptures of the Virgin Mary loom in the shadows.

She finds the priest sitting at his desk, dressed in a black cassock. The room is familiar to her now: the ebony-carved cross, the needlepoint behind cheap glass, the rose-colored candle that stands scornfully beside the short, blooming one that is in the process of swallowing its own curling offshoots. Now, lit by the flame of its neighbor, the smaller candle casts a lacy shadow on the cover of a Bible. The priest's eyes flicker to Fran and then toward the window.

"Lost souls," he mutters, "Lost souls. Remember Eli's sons, who treated the Lord's offerings with disrespect. 'I will honor those who honor me' – have you read the Bible, Miss Samuels? – 'and I will treat with contempt those who despise me.' Please shut that door," he continues, in the same murmuring voice. He glances up at her, not at her face but at her breasts. She closes the door. She feels her skin go hot under her turtleneck, and his neck tenses too. She can see the cords pulled taut. "The music," she says.

He glances back at the window. "It's a special occasion, Miss Samuels."

"Isn't it always?"

His wet brown eyes dart to hers, and then away, leaving her with a flash impression of his self-consciousness, his thin-veined desire.

"Pardon me, Miss Samuels?"

"You know what I mean."

"I do not."

He raises an eyebrow as he says this. Outside the sky has grown still darker, as if the lid of a stainless steel pot has descended on the valley.

“It’s always a saint’s day or something,” she says, almost shouting. “An obscure holiday that no one’s ever heard of.”

He holds a finger to his lips. Near his feet, a spider travels across carpet, then crawls behind the leg of the desk.

“This week our community has had a tragedy,” he says, in a low voice. “We’re playing the music as a gesture of respect for the dead.”

She lifts her eyes and stares at him.

“My God,” she says. “You’re not talking about the doctor.”

“He was born into our church, Miss Samuels.”

Her fingers are shaking against his desk. “This is bullshit,” she says after a minute. She can feel her anger – a fear that he’ll get away with this, that she won’t be able to set things right. This time she’s really mad. He doesn’t even see that what he’s doing with the doctor is wrong.

“You should be ashamed,” she says. “Using this as a promotional thing – ”

His neck cords go tighter.

“ – as a *gimmick* – ”

“That’s quite enough!” he says. “Keep your voice down.” His own voice is raised. His eyes narrow at her, like two wet raisins in a pad of dough, and he looks uglier than she’s ever seen him. She feels a twinge of excitement. He pushes back his chair and his low-thread cotton gown scratches as it moves toward her. His eyes blink, watery and



resentful, roaming lines of her mackintosh. He clears his throat: “Miss Samuels, why do you come?”

She begins, diffidently, “The music – ”

“Pah! ‘The music,’” he mimics. “The *music*.”

He is pressing against her. She waits, her excitement now tuned on the candle in front of her. Its dull red curls seem to be mocking her. She likes it. Suddenly she feels an insistence, small but stern, rubbing and pushing. His hand darts through her coat, squeezes her nipple, and then he pushes her face-down on the desk. Her eyes fasten on the loops of the candle. When her gasps begin to choke over the whine of the saxophone, he covers her mouth. This time he doesn’t even turn off the music: another humiliation, that he won’t stop it *now*. It plays on even during this, even as he pushes into her, so that it burns in her ears.

The music, she says. She’s lying, of course. Perhaps what he does is wrong, but he does not lie to himself, he knows that many would think him despicable and a hypocrite. Yet he feels God understands – are not man and woman made to be together? – and she comes on her own, as a woman. She stands in his doorway, outlined under the metallic olive of her raincoat, so that he can see the curve of waiting hips. At least he does not lie to himself like she does.

His sermon hasn’t turned out properly. All morning there has been rubbing and scratching and scrawling on the yellow legal pad, until the paper has become dull and coated with eraser stubble. Yet the words have become meaningless, only words, and the chance he felt this morning has been lost. He doesn’t know why: hasn’t he toiled, as the

Bible advises? *A hard worker gets what he wants. Take care of a fig tree and you shall have figs to eat.* But he hasn't been rewarded: he has to preach only two hours from now, and his sermon is empty, weaker than it seemed this morning. His body's tense, his shoulders tight with tension. His failure feels connected with the woman in lying on his desk. Just an hour ago he told himself that he wouldn't do this anymore, that it's too dangerous, that any child with a periscope could peek through the window and see what's going on. But now he grows desperate, no longer caring about consequences, pounding into the woman with the force of frustration.

Bob sits in a pew, his head shielded by the hood of his parka. He's the only one in the main chamber. Although the noises are soft, he hears enough to understand. But "understand" is the wrong word. How can she? It's beyond comprehension. He's seen the priest, a pompous old bag, and the thought of him with a girl is disgusting. And for her to do this after he, Bob, has done everything he could: invited her to movies, coffee, jazz shows ... bought her trash bags ... offered to water her plants while she's away .... His hands clench at the thought of everything he's done, and his face goes hot with foolishness and anger.

He thought she didn't realize he liked her. Or that it was a game she was playing, smiling at him like that and then hesitating at his invitations.

He rises and walks back into the rain.

Afterwards, the priest turns gloomy and says hardly a word to her. He straightens his cassock, sets the long candle which has tipped over back on its base, and snaps the

music off. He's looking out the window, as if Fran weren't there, but he's no longer doing it to irritate or arouse her, she can tell. He looks defeated, not ugly or vicious, just old, and it makes her gloomy too, and she leaves. On the way back to her building her insides shuffle.

In her apartment she returns her mackintosh to its stand and looks slit-eyed at the shape it makes. She squeezes out her hair. Drops splat on the hardwood floor, showing dust. It is finally quiet.

Downstairs, Bob hears her footsteps at his ceiling. How could she? he thinks again. But he's less sure of himself now. Maybe she's just lonely and confused, and maybe, in spite of everything, she doesn't understand that he likes her. He's never come out and said anything. Should he be more obvious? It would be awful if they both wanted each other but never acknowledged it, if she were driven to this because she thought she was alone. But still, for her to do *that* ... he doesn't understand ....

Fran is taking off her turtleneck, which is damp around the collar. So she's done it again. The sixth time? Seventh? She's lost track. At least she can play now, at least he's turned off the music. She wasn't sure, when he left it on at first. Her hair snakes cold against her neck, and she pins it up with a mother-of-pearl clip as she giggles at the thought of him not turning off the music after *that*. So outrageous, that would be. But then she remembers the doctor, whose family has been in the newspaper the past few days, those grainy prints of heads bowed at a funeral. She feels heavy. She's been just as bad as the priest, just as selfish, like those who try to tie themselves to the tragedy in order to increase their own importance.

A knock comes at the door. She jumps (he has never, ever come to see her! what can he want?) but when she swings the door open it's only Bob, his black hair damp and standing up like the tuft on a titmouse. Her face goes warm with guilt. When he pushes into the apartment she smells a stink, the staleness that sometimes comes off him when he's heated.

"How are you?" he says. His voice sounds edgy and suggestive to her. "Done practicing?"

"I was just going to get back to it."

His lips purse into a line. He walks to the kitchen, and she hears water running and the clang of metal. He stomps back with her watering can with the chipped spout. Does he know about the priest? she wonders. He seems wound up about something. She watches as he pushes the lily's leaves apart and begins to pour. Water comes out of the spout in erratic bursts, splashing onto the lily's iron stand. Bob jerks the can upright with such force that more water seeps out the top. He says, "Shit! Shit!"

"Bob." Her voice is testy. "What do you want?"

He straightens. The can dangles from his index finger.

"Are you okay?" she says.

Shoulder blades move under his shirt, and the smell comes again, fainter. His edginess is gone.

"You weren't ever going to water it," he says. "It was dying of thirst."

"Thanks then," she says, "for doing it for me."

She's pleased with herself for being nice. But now he's got to leave, because she can't hold out much longer. His neediness is so bald that every patience takes an effort.

He doesn't move. He says, "You need to take care of it more, you know," and he glances at her, his posture saying that she's wronged both him and the lily, and that does it, his thrust-out neck and quivering cowlick.

"You have to go," she says.

She pushes him toward the door. His legs go rigid.

"You're making a mistake," he says fiercely.

"Bob – "

"Don't you know I love you?"

She stares at her hand, planted on his back. Stiff cloth slides under her fingers as he turns around.

"What?" she says. "You can't."

"I do," he says. He frowns. "What do you mean, I can't?"

"You just – you don't even know me."

"I know that I love you."

She shakes her head, but suddenly she understands – he's read it in a novel, or seen it on T.V. – she should've known it was coming, based on the visits and favors, such as that new package of garbage bags. She thinks of the priest, though he lives in a part of her brain unconnected to tenderness.

"Look," she says, "you only *think* you're in love, isn't that right?"

She can see the idea rippling over his face, then passing smoothly into the next wave – preposterous, one has a right to one's own feelings – but by now she's got him in the hall.

“I could be your mother,” she says, although it isn’t true. “I’m sorry.” The door swings into the frame with a kissing sound. Then it’s quiet; the two of them stand divided, a fraction that refuses to be further reduced. She does not feel bad. Where has her compassion gone? Her body tenses, waiting for Bob to move, and she remembers an incident from years ago – a college dorm room, chased from one corner to the next by a drunk friend, a boy whom she didn’t want to hurt. She recalls clumsiness, pleading and nervous laughter. Compassion, back then.

Now she hears Bob’s feet on the stairs, the thump-thump-thump of his soles on the carpet, and when he gets to the bottom she clicks the bolt. She hears her voice again, “you only think you’re in love,” and now she feels bad. Did she lead him on? Was she too harsh? She meant it kindly – if he doesn’t really love her, then it’s not the same rejection – but maybe it sounded dismissive. Perhaps her impatience made her voice too sharp. She wishes she could do it over, say the words more gently. But it’s better to leave things as they are than to give an apology, she knows, which he might easily misinterpret.

In the downstairs apartment misery is being focused on a puddle just outside the kitchen window. Spongy grass and brown shivering water are whispering to Bob that he has never had a girlfriend and he never will, while a muddied-up paper napkin, floating at the pool’s edge, implies that there is something different about him from the men that women need and cherish. “You only think you’re in love,” he hears her voice saying, and it flickers in front of him – true? not true? – but true is only more hopeless. Why didn’t he buy cigarettes? He needs one feverishly. Whatever he might decide away from her, in her presence she has power over him: in the scratch on her neck, in the way her bra moves under her sweater, he sees a tender magic.

But Fran – how could she know this? Only an egotist, a megalomaniac! For she remembers that her bra was carried home in a gray plastic Sears bag, sitting muscularly between an ointment for foot calluses and a package of dishcloths. The effect that its itchy lace has had on her neighbor is hard to believe. And how could she know that the tiny perforated scratch on her collarbone (achieved unromantically: a nail scissors left forgotten in bed) has made him want to run his fingers over her neck? But downstairs Bob is thinking of these things, and others that he has taken as signs of affection – an answering machine message, a thank-you note scrawled on the top of a magazine subscription card. He finds an unremembered box of cigarettes, lingering in the pocket of a summer jacket. He puffs, stares at the puddle outside, and runs his fingers over a small Italian ring he has pocketed from Fran’s sideboard. “Look here – ” he thinks severely, reasoning with a God he knows is unreasonable, “Why do *I* always wait? Why everyone else and not me?” and he jumps up from the table, thinking of the priest, and paces around the kitchen.

Upstairs Fran’s flute waits for her, the steely latticework of the music stand gleaming in the gray light. She looks at the flute’s mouthpiece. The discomfort of her shifting insides (which obediently still shift) will help her play – it’s helped in the past, at least. She picks up the flute, then realizes she’s thirsty, and heads into the kitchen for a glass of water. Later, when a fresh knock sounds on the door, she realizes she hasn’t been playing at all. Her water glass is now in the sink, but she’s stayed in the kitchen, prying open pistachios with cuticle clippers. She’s been here ten minutes, at least.

The knocking startles her. Bob again, it has to be. He's caught her not practicing – it's his fault – if he'd only leave her alone for an hour. She's impatient again. She sneaks up to the door and throws it open.

He's not at all scared, as she'd hoped. He walks into her living room.

“Wait a minute,” she tells him, because the only way she can deal with this is to have music, some non-Bob presence in the room. Dvorak, Mendelsohn: she flips past them and chooses Schubert. When a Hungarian violin tune begins, she has a second of grace before Bob's voice interrupts and she's back to the hammering rain, the dust-coated floors.

“I know what you do over at that church,” he says.

She turns. He looks different – pleased, with a meanness in his eyes.

“What?” she says.

“You and the priest. I heard you. You should be more careful.”

She's startled at first, then furious. “You've been spying.”

His lips press together. His mouth has always irritated her: sensitive, lifted up in the center in a hurt way that makes her want to hurt him more. This is awful, she knows – he has a way of bringing out cruelty in her. That he could imagine them together baffles her.

“Did you really think that I wasn't going to find out?” he says.

For a second she's unable to speak.

“My God!” she says at last. “How can you think, how can you *possibly* think, that this is any of your business?”



He tips his chin up.

“I just can’t stand by and watch you do this. If you could only see how you’re acting. It’s – it’s a disgrace, Fran. It’s so wrong.”

A giggle comes out of her mouth. She’s almost shaking. How crazy that she, Fran (a priest-screwed, admittedly, but nonetheless the older and wiser and more polite one, the not-annoying one) that she’s being accused, in her own apartment, by the man she’s been forcing herself to be nice to for months.

“What?” Bob shouts. His white face looms in front of her. “Why are you laughing?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry. I just don’t think I asked for your opinion.”

“Well, somebody needs to tell you.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

I’m losing my mind, Fran thinks. This is what it feels like. Schubert is full swing now, music bouncing out of the stereo. Violins dance, cellos plod.

“Why should someone tell me?” she says.

“So – so you can stop, of course.” Bob’s lips quiver, then stop in a righteous set.

“So you can stop.”

“Ah.”

He stares.

“What if I want this?” she says.

“You want this?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Why?” she says, “Who knows why?”

“You have to have a good reason.”

“I don’t have to have any damn reason at all.”

She looks at him, waiting. If he so much as opens his mouth she is going to shove a fist down his throat, she thinks.

“You want to mess your life up,” he says, like it’s a fact.

She doesn’t move. She says, enunciating carefully, “Exactly.”

“Well,” he says. He shakes his head. His voice changes, becomes rich with false pity. “I just don’t know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t, then.”

“All I’m saying – ”

“Shut *up*,” she screams. “Are you listening? Shut up.”

He steps back. Then she sees something in the slits of his eyes. She sees gloating.

“You know it’s wrong,” he says. “That’s why you’re so mad at me, you know.”

“Will you go?” she says, begging now. “Will you please, please go?”

But he doesn’t move. She pushes on his shoulder, shoves him toward the door.

Suddenly she’s tired, and she feels the bones on her heels aching against her clogs. She remembers her excitement this morning, when she heard the church music come on, but it

seems like a long time ago. But even in her weariness he won't leave, and his voice cuts through the rain and the minuetting violins.

“When's the last time you had a real relationship?” he says.

She doesn't answer.

“Well? Tell me.”

“I don't know. How about you, Bob? When's the last time *you* had a real relationship?”

He's quiet. She knows she's been mean again, and she feels a needling – but it's more defiance than guilt, more satisfaction than regret. The words have been said, no taking them back now.

He opens his mouth and then shuts it again.

“Well?” she says.

“I guess I've never had what you could call a real girlfriend.”

He stops and blinks at the floor. The top button of his shirt is undone, the second one a white half-moon peeking out. Near his collar she can see that smooth, pale, hairless skin. It seems like baby's skin, and hurting him is suddenly like hurting a baby. She's still angry about the spying, but now she feels bad for him too. He knows what he is, she thinks.

“I'm sorry,” she says.

He shrugs.

“You ... you've talked about women before.”

“They were never serious. Dates.”

“Oh.”

“It’s always been like this.”

He shakes his head, so the cowlick and curls bounce. (They *bob*, she thinks, and immediately despises herself.) “It’s like I have something wrong with me,” he says, almost whispering. His back makes an upside-down *j*, skinny and wilted at the top. “Something different. I look around, look at other people, couples, they’re happy and they go out for years. Some of the guys aren’t good-looking, either, they’re ugly, or I know them personally and they’re just jerks, they don’t deserve girlfriends, but they have them and I don’t.”

He looks at her and his eyes are bright, so unlike the dull, wet eyes of the priest.

“You’ll have a girlfriend, Bob. I know the waiting’s hard.”

“I won’t. It’s something with *me*.”

“It’s not. Do you know how many lonely people there are?”

“Not that many!” he says. “And if they’re lonely, it’s because – well, because they’re in a wheelchair or they hate people or something. Or if they’re women, it’s because they’re fat or getting old. Tell me I’m wrong.” He pauses. “See, you can’t. There’s nothing wrong with me, nothing –” his voice cracks, and goes down to a throttled whisper – “nothing except that I’m me.”

“Bob, that’s not true.”

“You don’t understand. If I were in a wheelchair, I could say at least say, ‘it’s because I’m in a wheelchair.’ But I can’t.”

She stands looking at him. The Schubert CD is nearing the end of the first movement, she realizes, and the prospect of silence fills her with dread. She wants to say

that she's lonely too, but she knows it's different – it's by choice, at least partly so, and she doesn't want Bob to start up with his proposals again. She feels more tender toward him than she ever has – the neediness that bugged her so earlier, now that it's been confessed to, is almost unbearably sad. But she can't say she's lonely. He won't understand, and he'll start his old campaign. Two losers getting together: it makes perfect sense. No thanks, she thinks.

“You don't want to be in a wheelchair,” she says at last.

He waves his hand, as if to clear smoke from the room.

“What's wrong with me?” he says, but he says it like he doesn't expect an answer. His shirt rustles. She picks up the sour smell, stronger than she's ever gotten it before.

“Even the priest!” he says. “Even the priest who *should* be lonely, he's not. I know, sex isn't the same, but you understand. Well, I won't bore you. I've said this before. I should leave.”

“Bob – ” she begins, and stops. She doesn't know what she's going to say next.

“Yes?”

“Take care of yourself. You're – you're a good person. A lot of people have to wait. Not only you.”

For a second he looks about to laugh, but then he grabs her shoulder.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he says. “You don't have to be with me, you know. I just don't want to see you get hurt.”

She jumps at his touch. Get your hand off me, she thinks.

“I’m okay,” she says. He pulls his hand back, as if he knows what she’s thinking, and she feels sad for him again. “Thanks for worrying about me,” she says. “But I really am okay.”

Her tongue wants to say more – it’s body memory, like her fingers playing scales – after *I’m okay*, she desperately wants to add, *you deserve somebody better*. But she doesn’t say it, because she knows how very much it doesn’t help.

At last he goes. He moves into the hall, leaving a trail of sweaty desperation, his shirt turning dark in the dimness of the landing. The half-circle of his button glimmers. Then the door shuts with a snap, just as violins finish their *finale*.

Father Gaverson preaches. Afterwards, several people praise the sermon as they clasp his hand. Old Mrs. Dougherty, wearing a cardigan the color of strawberry ice cream, has tears in her eyes. Her beautiful white hair shines as others pass through the open door. Father Gaverson remembers that she’s had a stroke, and recalls hearing that stroke victims can be overly emotional, but he takes her shining eyes for what they’re worth. He grips the bony, veined hand in both of his.

Bob, in his downstairs apartment, is feeling better, feeling a sense of lightness. The muddied napkin floating in the puddle outside his window can no longer depress him: he stares at it, willing it to try, but it’s only a soggy bit of gray and torn paper. He’ll get through this day, at least.

Upstairs, Fran picks up her flute. She pushes her fingers down on the keyholes, so that pink circles rise on her fingertips. They are instant blisters, as if she’s been practicing all day, but when she blows into the pipe she knows she can’t play anymore. Tomorrow,

she thinks, and sets the flute down on the stand. She wonders if the church will blare music again. She's not a slut, not really, but though she's tired now – her legs ache behind her knees and at the underside of her heels – tomorrow she'll feel as she did this morning, and if not tomorrow then next Saturday. Bob and his tortured loneliness will fade away, and he'll just be unbearable again; she'll snap at him, probably. The moment between them this afternoon will pass. They're not alike, not really. She thinks of the priest, and the other ways, not yet employed, even worse and just as exciting – the big embarrassed boy she gives piano lessons to, the short boy in Music Appreciation who makes arrogant complaints but then gives her sweet smiles, or the cellist in her orchestra who looks at her in that dark, mocking way – what of them, these boys, these men, everywhere, all waiting to make her crazy? She'll be all right. She'll be a little messed up, but nothing like Bob. She'll be fine.