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FALSE STARTS

A Collection of First Chapters

By

Terri McFerrin Smith

B.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

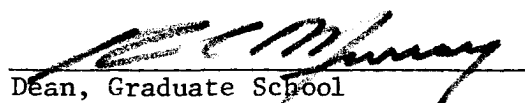
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2-1-84

For
IAN EVERETT

my parents,
Mother Alice
Meghan and
especially, Tim

It is at her first abortion that woman begins to "know."

Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word...

Luke 8:11

IAN'S MOTHER

Mara blinked, blinked again, then stared. Dim. White. Hundreds of off-white holes in the surface overhead. Holes forming rows forming ranks. Acoustical tile. Silent. White. Ceiling joining wall joining white wall. White cinderblock. Six blocks over, two blocks down. Window. Light along the lines of the Venetian blind. Shadow moving in the light.

As Mara swam up out of her sleep, objects took shape in the colorless room. A lamp, a stool motionless on its casters, a steel cabinet. Gleaming jars of cotton balls and tongue depressors. Mara closed her eyes, wondering where she might be. Unable to imagine a place so silent and simple, she dozed again.

Inhaling, she smelled a kindly, antiseptic odor. A cool hand lay across Mara's forehead, another stirred in her limp hand. This time, Mara's eyes opened wider following the wrist to the forearm to the shoulder. A white figure.

"Miss Johnson?"

Mara didn't answer, thinking this is the woman who wheeled the machine, the steamy jar of pulp away.

"How do you feel?"

Mara's tongue lay thick and dry in her mouth. Shrugging, she felt a clean white sheet rustle against the pale contours of her body.

"Why don't you sit up?" The woman helped raise Mara's inert body to a sitting position. A waxed, white floor spun into view.

"You just sit there a minute. I'll get your clothes."

Mara's feet dangled inches from the dizzying floor. She gripped the edge of the narrow chrome table where she sat. Her knuckles had turned

white, when the door to the room opened. Mara stared past the perfect white figure in the doorway, out into a hall. Dark. Putting one hand to her head, Mara asked, "What time is it?"

"Five."

Somehow Mara knew the white figure, a nurse, would go off shift soon, home to cook the evening meal for her family. She thanked the woman for her clothes, her familiar clothes. "I'll be just fine."

The nurse nodded and left the room. Mara lifted her white gown overhead. She shivered and stood. As Mara stood, she began to bleed and bleed.

ETHER

To this day, Mara does not know what purpose tonsils and adenoids serve. In 1956, tonsillectomies were a popular, money-making operation. Mara was two. Her mother worked for Hallmark Cards at the time; her father studied tax law. Usually, Mara stayed home, eating toast swimming in chicken broth each time she had a sore throat.

She doesn't remember much about the operation. Her mother took a day off work. She held Mara's hand as they rose up through the hospital on an elevator. Mara can remember the floor pushing at her feet, the void in her knees. And she remembers how high the bed was from the floor. And, slipping into slips of a nightgown and being rolled away to a room where the doctor was. She recognized his face, kindly and old. She tried to do what he asked her to do, count to ten.

Mara did not know her numbers that far. She said, "One. Two. Three..." and then, the smell was too sweet. The dark swallowed the number 4.

That's the first thing Mara remembers.

THE KITCHEN TABLE

Mara's mother eats because her father drinks. Her father drinks because her mother is fat. They eat and drink and blame each other at the very kitchen table they ordered to match the counter-top in 1961. That was the year they built their dream house, a split-level on a hilltop. The Johnson's were among the first families to move into the development and from the hilltop, they watched identical split-levels rise up out of holes all around them.

The formica on the kitchen table and the counter-top is white with scribbles of black. It has always looked as though each of the Johnson children had learned cursive writing on its surface and their pens had gone wild. The counter-top is stained now and etched with knife marks.

For years, Mara's mother stood at the kitchen sink cleaning fruits and vegetables. Then, she chopped them up. Mara could never understand how her mother had grown so fat; fruit and vegetables are not fattening. A psychiatrist once suggested her weight problem could be a nostalgia for days she'd been expecting, an attempt to refill her belly with food.

She loved sweet corn, fresh from the field. She taught Mara to recognize a good ear; pull back the husk and sink a fingernail into a kernel. If it squirts a milky liquid, that ear is good. And she'd make a meal of green beans flavored with smoked bacon. One summer, she ate so many tomatoes, she developed a rash around her wedding band. Rather than give up tomatoes, she parked the ring on the window sill above the sink until the first frost.

The family could look forward to homegrown tomatoes every 4th of July and sliced peaches for the ice cream Mr. Johnson cranked out in his ribbed-

knit undershirt. Their mother would take the Johnson children to the orchard and let them lug the finest, most dangerous peaches they could find back to her basket. The fuzz irritated their forearms. They said the fuzz felt like kissing daddy in the morning. Other times, they picked strawberries. On their hands and knees, Mara's brothers and sisters crawled the strawberry beds before the dew had dried in the morning. They ate so many as they picked, they longed to lie down in the dark wet earth between the rows and sleep their stomach aches off.

At the grocery store, Mrs. Johnson thumped and sniffed melons. In summer, when Mr. Johnson wouldn't be home for supper, Mara's mother would fix huge spreads of fresh vegetables. For dessert, they'd all eat slices of watermelon and spit the seeds at one another. They believed if they swallowed the seeds, their bellies would swell around the melons that grew inside.

Her cooking was Mrs. Johnson's way of loving. However, she hated to clean up the mess. And as soon as Mara and her sister were tall enough to stand on chairs at the kitchen sink, they began to wash the dishes. The Johnson sisters fought over who would wash and who would dry. They hated the silverware, the pots and pans. Their mother went to bed right after dinner and listened to her daughters fight.

When Mr. Johnson was home, the children fought at the dinner table as if they were somehow on display and anxious that he notice them. Many nights, he wasn't there. Mrs. Johnson set a place for him at the table and kept food warming. When the children woke to find the plate untouched the next morning, they carried a sick feeling around in their stomachs all

day. Sometimes, his late arrival would wake Mara. Sometimes, she could hear him eat. Sometimes, she heard the cupboard door open and the deep voice of a bottle.

The children never understood why their arguments at the dinner table became so vociferous. They couldn't understand why none of them, not even Mara's mother, could win an argument with Father. Most of the time, Mother wouldn't argue. She saw, Mara thinks now, that he drank out of pressure. He was under pressure because he was ambitious. No one knew why he was ambitious, but he had bills to pay, house payments to make. The Johnson's lived in the dream house on the hill. He provided for them. How could Mrs. Johnson take issue with that?

As the Johnson children grew, they learned the fine art of kitchen table debate. Rule #1: Never cry, as Mother did. Rule #2: Be able to back up an assertion with a reason. Mr. Johnson played the devil's advocate and asked why, why, why until Mara's reasons dissolved. Mara's mother learned to rise above the argument and begin clearing the table. She'd refuse to listen or pretend to refuse. Sometimes, she'd just laugh and her fat would shake. Sometimes, tears would collect in the corners of her eyes. Even when Mr. Johnson was home, it was her habit to go to bed early. The children would be stuck, a half hour or more, while Mr. Johnson finished his argument. And then, Mara and her sister had the dishes to do.

Mara thought about this peculiar logic of alcoholics as she swiped around her mother's garage sale treasures. Toothpick holders, salt and pepper shakers, spoon rests had begun to accumulate on the counter-top since Mara left home. She turned off the overhead light and turned on

the swag lamp over the kitchen table. The cupboards, the ruffled curtains, the rows of medicine bottles on the sill receded into darkness.

Once the children left, Mara's father had moved his accounting practice home. He puttered around the house all day, waiting for Mara's mother to come home. After a day at the office, she began to prepare potatoe soup. Mr. Johnson nibbled on soda crackers between drinks and thought aloud. Mrs. Johnson seemed to listen. By supper time, her husband was no longer hungry. Mara's mother had gone to bed.

In the cleaned kitchen, Mara lit a cigarette. She smoked and smoked and studied the configurations of smoke in the light for a message. Under that interrogatory light, the prodigal daughter supposed she should listen to her elders. She made a fresh pot of coffee and invited her father to join her for a cup. He laid his work aside. They talked about the state of the world, their own back yard, of Mara's ambition and sex. They shared their doubts. They discussed Mrs. Johnson's problem: her bargains, her housekeeping, her appetite. Mara began to feel the familiar acid edge of cigarettes and coffee in her belly. Her own thought, critical of her mother, pleased and preoccupied her. She did not hear her father go on to explain how he needed her, her mother.

"You know," Mara said, "I love this old table." She swept their stray ashes into her hand, then brushed her palms together over the ashtray. She felt her way up the dark stairs, to a bed in the guest room.

Mara heard a cupboard door open, ice rattle in a glass. And just in case his daughter was still awake, Mara's father muttered "gotta get some sleep, gotta get some sleep."

THE ACCOUNTANT'S DAUGHTER

"no. No. NO!" Mr. Johnson, to emphasize his point, stamped his foot three times. His trousers shook around his leg.

Mara was suddenly touched by his drunken incredulity. Inside the trousers she knew the leg was thin and pale and covered with long, dark hairs. On his feet, her father wore thin black socks and heavy wing-tips. These scotch-inspired arguments often proved to be his most lucid. Then, Mara thought, he said what he thought.

"Abortion simply eliminates unwanted children."

Mara shook her head and swallowed a bite of meat. "Un-huh. Abortion encourages irresponsible sex."

"Irresponsible sex!"

Mara nodded and added, "It's nothing more than a form of birth control."

"Just what is irresponsible sex?"

Mara thought for a moment. Her father was exacting about definitions. "It's hopping into bed with no thought about the consequences of your actions. Men," she muttered, "are particularly good at it."

Her father ignored this last remark. Mara seemed fond of sexual distinctions lately. "What consequences?"

"Children, of course."

"But Mara, human beings make love because it feels good. It's not strictly procreation." He winked at Mara's mother.

"You're right. It's recreational too. It's both. The problem is that men don't have to think about the consequences. Women do. Nowadays, most men assume women have taken birth control measures. They

don't even ask."

Mara's vehemence on the subject surprised her parents.

"But the pill, IUDs. Those are women's responsibilities."

"What about rubbers? Vasectomies?"

"That last is pretty extreme."

Again, Mara agreed. "They might at least have the civility to ask, remind the woman, at least attempt to share the responsibility."

There was a lull in the conversation. No one knew quite what to say. Mara's mother studied Mara's face.

"What do you want to do? Cut men off?"

"Well, I've found out the hard way. You shouldn't hop into bed with someone who isn't willing to commit himself."

"Cut us off."

"Not at all. I just stopped using birth control. I tell them that." Mara's father looked at his daughter's face. "It's amazing how often they change their minds. They put on their clothes and go home. Not using birth control is the best contraceptive."

The accountant didn't know what to think. His first-born had grown up to be a castrating bitch. And from the sounds of it, she'd had plenty of opportunity.

"But honey, it's fun."

"Might be more fun if I wasn't the one who had to worry about babies."

"You can't change that. Men can't help the fact they're men."

Mara went silent. She'd heard this last comment as "boys will be boys" too often. She'd mounted a one woman campaign against it. Her reasoning was convoluted, she knew. She could no longer explain it clearly to others.

"Obviously he is or he wouldn't want to make love."

"I wouldn't be so sure. If I suggest this, I'm punitive, heartless to the poor, red-blooded male. I'm told I don't understand his normal drives. What about mine? Is he punitive or cowardly?"

While Mara's father considered for a moment, she continued, "No, I'm simply asking my lovers to be as fearlessly human as they can be. Love to be all it can be."

HOW MARA CAME TO BE

Mara came west with a girlfriend, on a Greyhound. They spent New Year's Eve curled up with their pillows in the cramped seats, rereading their diaries for the year. There were melodramatic accounts of men they'd snuck into their dorm rooms. There wasn't a corkscrew. The bottle of fine German Liebframilch they'd stashed in a pack, traveled through the dark Wyoming landscape without a laugh. A neon sign woke Mara in Buffalo, but her girlfriend slept and Mara felt no desire to go running into a tavern an hour after midnight to have the bottle opened.

In Billings, a blind man tapped up to the pair and asked directions. He wore a fine old suit and blinked pinkly as the sun came up. He was looking for a men's room. Mara pointed out what she thought might be the right direction, then saw the wet spot, like a saddle, between his legs. The dark wind whipped and her concern for his thin, chapped thighs did not last long. She crossed the street to an all-night cafe. It was busy, orange and vinyl. Mara and her girlfriend ordered homemade cinnamon rolls. Over coffee, they made a sociological note: "How many pickups there are!"

Butte rolled up under the bus at noon. The cafes there were closed for the holiday. Without even a bowl of soup to reassure themselves, they wondered if they'd made a mistake. The pair sat on the bus, peering through their window at a sign that read, "Waiting Room." Through the plate-glass door beside the sign, they watched the thick, crossed ankles of old women, worrying that they might board the wrong bus. Mara had

come west with no knowledge of her destination. These close, heavy buildings, this grey sky, that smoke, like breath, frozen in it.

Though they felt better coming around the mountain, clinging to the curve, Mara's girlfriend had already decided to go home again. She didn't mention it. Together, they laughed at a billboard warning one Montanan contracted VD every hour.

Missoula was hungover. The Garden City had a crisp, peculiar stillness. No welcome. The depot was dingy as all the rest had been. Outside, the sky was clear. A car or two eased through the thin snow, leaving long black lines down Broadway.

Mara and her friend carried their luggage across the street. The Palace Hotel would rent them a room at \$4 a night. A motionless man in the lobby raised one grey eyebrow over his dark glasses as the girls boarded the elevator. Their shower, single beds and old chenille spreads seemed luxurious to them. Mara's friend went right to sleep. Mara curled up with the other's paperback copy of The Second Sex and lit her first cigarette.

Mara's smoke curled in the bedlamp's light. Thinking this was a scene jazz might improvise, she turned down the corner of page 550.

HANDS

He showed up one day while Mara was babysitting. In his boots and jeans and mackinaw and beard. He introduced himself as a friend of the child's mother. Mara let him in. He took off the jacket. The plaid, flannel shirt underneath made him look like any one of the outdoorsmen who cruised Missoula's streets in their Blazers and their jeeps. Like them, he had a beer belly. When he opened his mouth to offer Mara the fish, a visible breath emerged. He had no lips to speak of, his teeth bent back into his mouth. But his hands held Mara's attention.

Mara told him she didn't know how to clean the fish. His hands were ruddy and rough, the fingernails ragged as though he cut them with a pocket-knife. He was a big man to begin with, but his hands were disproportionately larger.

While Mara rummaged in a kitchen drawer for a filet knife, he lay the fish on a cutting board. The baby rode Mara's hip and blinked as the man showed how to make the incision behind the front gill. The knife's fine blade eased along the spine with a slight sawing motion. Mara studied the stainless shine of the knife, the slow movement of his blunt fingertips and his face as he worked. He may have pretended not to notice she studied his face. She knew nothing about catching, cleaning or cooking fish. This delicate operation seemed out of proportion with his hands.

He flipped one side of the fish back, exposing the ribs. His blunt fingers showed how Mara should make a second incision between the flesh

and the skin. He showed how with a gentle motion that lifted the flesh away, just at the edge of the knife's fine blade, she'd have a filet.

"There's nothing to it. You try."

Mara handed the baby to him and flipped the carcass over. The texture of the fish was slimy to her touch. The baby squirmed, looking for a soft curve on the hard planes of his body. Mara's progress along the spine was fair. She clipped a couple vertebrae. He was unconcerned, he said she'd be able to chew those few. The baby had tucked its legs up to either side of its belly and nestled against the man's pectoral muscle. Mara flipped the filet back at the tail, but severed it with her second incision. She saw the man's eyes roll, but he said nothing. This made separating the skin from the flesh nearly impossible. Mara tried, but the finished filet had quarter-sized spots of speckled, silver skin attached to it. He seemed to think she could eat the skin too.

"But how do you cook it?"

"With a little oil. Dip it in milk and egg, a little cornmeal and flour."

Handing the baby back to Mara, the man wrapped the fish remains in newspaper and dropped them in the trash. The filets, he put in a bowl and ran tap water over them. He left. Mara heard his pick-up pull out of the drive, while she changed the baby's diaper. She looked out the picture window after him, but all Mara saw was the grey slush of afternoon.

The next time he came to see her, Mara told him the fish had been good, the odor intolerable. He laughed that she knew no better than to

take the fish carcass outdoors in a day's time. She studied his hands. He asked for one of the weak, long cigarettes Mara was learning to smoke. They traded the stories of their lives. She was an accountant's daughter from a midwestern suburb. He was the third child of his father's third wife. He'd grown up in a little town on the Milk River.

WORKING MEN

From the moment Mara entered the Hideaway Club, she felt she'd been there before. She was sure she'd dreamt about this garage turned bar in the months before she'd come to the last wilderness on earth. She watched the waitress's wet rag leave swipe marks on the chrome table. The guys were on a first name basis with her. "Katie" must have been fifty or older. Her hair stuck together with hair spray. She wore costume jewelry and a conservative polyester slack suit. She took no guff from the working men she served.

Mara listened to the guys talk of Alaska, the pipeline, the inflated wages and prices. If they could find a way to beat the cost of living, they thought they could make their fortunes, enough to get ahead, in six months.

"Hey, Mara, you could strap a mattress to your back and come along." Lane, the taxidermist, and Rick, Mac's partner, laughed. Mara smiled, not getting the joke and looked to Mac for direction. Tipped back in his chair, Mac's eyes smiled, but he didn't grin.

Mara said, "Oh, you guys."

Mac ordered another round of beers. Mara had so many lined up in front of her, she asked Katie not to open any more. "Bring me a tomato juice." Diluting her beer with juice, Mara could keep up with the guys.

"Couldn't Skip put us up?"

Mac nodded tentatively. Mara stood and crossed the linoleum floor to a pinball machine that flashed curvaceous women. She plugged a quarter in and stood back at arm's length with her middle fingers on

the flipper controls. Her bottom wiggled with each thrust of the flippers. She was just learning to play pinball. It was a past-time she'd picked up with Mac. She didn't want to think about him leaving and she didn't feel right saying "don't go." She comforted herself with the thought that they only had a place to stay. Skip was a government bush pilot, no one with connections on the pipeline. They wouldn't go.

Mara lost her quarter to the machine and went back to the table for another coin. Rick's laugh filled the echoing emptiness of the bar. The laugh was so crazed and long, Mara wondered if he wasn't high on something besides alcohol. The laugh was so contagious, she smiled herself as she joined the circle again. She knew little about Rick. He'd had two wives, two children by the first. He was bogged down with child support payments, some \$2,000 behind. Last year, unable to make sense of all his work-related receipts, he decided not to file an income tax return. Now, a little man from the IRS appeared at his door. The little man confiscated a rifle here, a stereo there, in lieu of delinquent payments. The little man threatened to throw Rick in jail if he didn't pay.

The joke was about a credit card. Rick didn't quit laughing until he'd fallen off his chair. On all fours, he crawled under the table and bit Mara on the leg. She slapped him away and he sighed, as if to say, what do women want? As he stood, every contradiction about him stood out. This farmer's son from North Dakota styled his hair. His face, unlike Lane and Mac, was clean-shaven, yet he wore their same flannel shirts. Mara found him attractive and looked away.

Lane's laughter subsided first and he stared into his beer. "I wish I could go, but I'm months behind at the shop."

The shop, a taxidermy studio, was a hodge-podge of skins, racks and wild game forms. Entering it for the first time, Mara felt herself in the northwest. It distinguished Missoula from her midwestern home town. Taxidermy was Lane's compromise between art school and the real world, as he called it. Once, he put wheels on toilets and skis on bicycle frames, now his reputation for life-like, inexpensive mounts extended the length of the Bitterroot Valley.

Mara thought 'you'd be caught up if you wouldn't spend so much time trading tall tales with every hunter who came into the shop.'

After three beers, he asked "Wanna pose for me Mara?" She met his hazel eyes and managed a playful no. Lane was married to a second wife. The wife was a friend of Mara's, but Mara wouldn't have taken her clothes off for any photographer, even an amateur. This was Lane's way of flattering a woman.

She studied him as he looked into his beer with pretended dejection. He'd never have a beer belly. His own hips were slender and girlish. His hair was long, thick and dark as his wife's. The grime under his fingernails, contradicted his wrists. His face, at 30, was lined from working with a taxidermist's chemicals every day.

Conversation slowed as happy hour ended. Mara could tell each was seriously thinking of Alaska. Lane looked up with a beer froth caught in his sparse mustache. "No, Linda would never understand even a hunting trip to Alaska." Rick and Mac nodded their understanding. Mara said nothing. Drinking, though she was learning to do it, bored

her. She looked away from their sad faces. Katie flirted with an older man at the bar and laughed a seductive, throaty laugh. Cigarette smoke curled into the air beside the waitress station.

Mara took 50¢ from the change piled for Katie's tip in the center of the table and slipped it into the jukebox. She made seven selections. Linda Ronstadt's "Prisoner in Disguise" began to waft through the air, with the scrape of chairs. The boys were putting on their jackets to leave.

HUNTING

Early one autumn morning, the boys took Mara hunting. At the hour Mac shook her awake, it was so dark Mara doubted whether she could distinguish a deer from the side of a barn. Even the trees swam together in one darkness. But she'd talked about this so long, target practiced all summer, purchased all the credentials, that she didn't roll over and go back to sleep.

Mac stood over her in a red and black checked jacket as she slipped thermal underwear over her sleep warm body. He was impatient as she misbuttoned her flannel shirt. He laced up her boots as she braided her hair. And finally, he propped her up in the pick-up as he scraped windows, revved the motor and wound his quiet way downtown.

"You remember the rifle?"

Mac didn't answer, just parked out front of the Stockman Cafe and waved. Lane and Rick motioned from a table inside. Steam rose from their coffee cups into the bright overhead light of the cafe. Rick's florescent orange jacket seemed so bright to Mara, she wearily closed her eyes. When she opened them again, Lane scratched one skinny leg inside his wool trousers. The conversation began without her. A cheery waitress brought her coffee and stood waiting for their orders. Mara gathered a big, greasy breakfast must be a ritual of the big hunt, but she was not a breakfast eater and Mara waved the waitress away with a smoking cigarette.

Mac, Rick and Lane discussed places they might hunt. They wanted a place close to town, with mild terrain, since Mara was along. A place where they wouldn't have to contend with other amateurs, out-of-staters.

Sopping up the egg yolk on their plates with triangles of toast, they chose a spot up the Blackfoot River.

The place, 30 minutes outside of town, surprised Mara. Dimly, she recognized the rickety railroad bridge. Could there have been deer here that hot August afternoon Mac stood around her, pulling the rifle into her shoulder? She'd laid her cheek against the stock, finger on the trigger, anticipating the dust ghosts she'd raise.

A gate barred the old logging road. Lane and Mac, with ammo belts slung under their bellies, stepped deftly around it and began to climb the hill. Mara slipped the Smith and Wesson 22-250 from its case and ran her hand along the blond wood of its stock. She loved this gun. It was lightweight and according to Mac, it was versatile. You could use it on all sizes of game. Its recoil did not leave a hickey-like bruise on Mara's shoulder like some of his other guns did. And the wood grain was beautiful, enough to want to polish it with lemon oil. Mara filled her pockets with shells and set off beside Rick. She could no longer see Lane and Mac up ahead.

Mac had told her Rick was not much of a hunter. Judging from the stories it seemed, the only deer he'd ever brought down, he'd hit as it jumped out of the path of his car. True to what she'd heard, he hung back, wanting to talk in hushed tones.

Two figures appeared in the path up ahead, waving a red bandanna. Rick laughed and Mara turned to see what this meant. "Putting out a little wolf bait," he muttered. And Mara understood they'd squatted behind a tree and left their own human droppings.

At the crest of the hill, all four stood together, surveying the ridges and the valley, deciding on a plan of attack. Rick and Lane would circle to the left, Mac and Mara to the right. Then, at a spot Mara couldn't identify, they'd meet and flush back down the mountain.

Mara set out beside Mac. Within seconds, he whispered at her sharply, "Walk flat-footed, it will cut the sound you make." Mara grew so absorbed in stepping without breaking a twig that she was unaware how far ahead of her Mac was. She heard a sound and looked up, around the rifle barrel pivoting with her shoulder. Mac stood tapping a can of snoose and lifting a plug of tobacco to his mouth. He waited for her to catch up.

"This here is a bed, a good sign," he said, pointing to Mara's feet. She stepped back and saw a flat, circular spot about the size of a curled-up dog. A spot covered with pine needles. She squatted and touched it, unable to feel any warmth. "You'll wanna look for fresh droppings too since there isn't any snow. No tracks."

Mara nodded as if she understood. Mac set off again. The ridge they walked seemed to climb interminably. Mara fell behind though walking flat-footed came more naturally to her now. From time to time, she saw Mac pause up ahead and peer around the valley through a pair of binoculars. Apparently, he saw nothing. He kept walking, shouldering matter-of-factly through the trees. The butt of the Smith & Wesson grew heavy in Mara's palm.

Mara figured they'd been walking a couple of hours now. Her mind began to wander: November here was not much different than November there, cold and bleak. She wondered about the deer beds, the does and their fawns. Once a year, in rut, the bucks butted heads for the pri-

viledge of certain does. The rest of the year, as far as Mara knew, the does fended for themselves. Mara tried to imagine fending for herself in the woods. She thought about Mac's unwritten rule that she could only shoot a buck, when a shot rang out.

She stopped. Ahead, Mara saw Mac freeze too in a half-crouch. Slowly, like an animal, she saw him ease to a stand from this position and look around, alert as she imagined a deer itself would be. Mara followed the direction of his eyes and perhaps a quarter mile away, she saw a spot of flickering orange move from tree to tree. It stopped too, then Rick's high crazy laugh echoed through the little valley.

Mara and Mac met Lane, each having completed the half-circle of the ridge. Mara was surprised to learn it was only 11 o'clock. She was obviously tired. The second time Lane and Mac paused to wait for her, Lane handed Mara the sling from his rifle. Wordlessly, she accepted it; she'd watched the empty barrel of her rifle swing back and forth at her waist, recklessly. The three headed downhill, Mac and Lane at a brisk pace, as if they were trying to tell her something. Mara's legs faltered with the attempt to keep up. She was hungry.

Mara kept the men in sight. Without them, she would have had no bearings, beyond going downhill. Curiously, she noticed the conversation between them grew less hushed. They paid less attention to the sound they made passing through the brush. Then suddenly, they stepped out on the road. Mara hadn't realized the road was this close. The hunt must be over and she hadn't seen a thing. This, wandering around in the woods, is hunting?

Mara brushed wisps from her braids away from her face. She sniffled and heard the short, rhythmic shots of a .22. As they came in sight of the truck, Mara could see Rick on the tailgate, drinking a beer. He'd been far enough ahead to set some 20 cans up on the opposite side of the river. Between swigs, he took successful pot-shots at the cans. Mara heard their slight metallic sound tumble down the rocky bank into the river.

Mac and Lane said nothing as they slipped their guns back into their quilted cases.

To Mara, Rick said, "You wanna try?" She looked at the other two hunters. Unable to read their expressions, she shrugged and said, "Sure." Taking the .22 from Rick, she sighted according to the small metal piece jutting from the far end of the barrel. The gun felt like a toy. It barely kicked as it brought down a rusty can of Rainier on the first try.

The boys cheered and offered Mara a cold can of beer. She could feel the cold liquid trickle over her ribs, each sip she took, all the way back to town.

IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning, they slept. Together, in a tropical room, a greenhouse, a sunporch walled in with windows. Plants drooped over the rims of their clay pots and grew towards the floor. Vines climbed the oak grain of the dresser and clung to the mirror. Fronds of fern stirred the air. African violets bloomed. Someone had tied back the blades of the sansevieria and spilled potting soil on the floor.

An edge of light crossed their faces. The girl blinked. In the night, their breath condensed on the windows. A drop of moisture rolled toward the sill. A planter revolved overhead. A chill touched her shoulder. The girl turned toward the boy. Her fingers caught in his auburn hair. She liked the warm, damp smell of their sleep. She closed her eyes.

In the dream, the sky and the earth were the same color. White. There was no horizon, yet there was a town built of alphabet blocks. Smoke puffed out of chimneys. Trees without leaves surrounded the houses. The trees took on human postures. Fat robins hopped from limb to limb. People made motions in their sleep, within the houses. The men went to work. The women drank coffee and said, "I'm going to have a baby." The sun, a visitor, strolled the streets, filling the trees with a violent red.

He woke. The walls were green, the windows dirty. A bare lightbulb hung overhead. Dust mice skittered under the bed.

THE DISHES ARE THE LEAST MARA CAN DO

Each of them was the other woman in his life. There were exclamations "I've heard so much about you." And hugs, as though each really did welcome the other. Then, "I held her at arm's length." A cold sore on the girl's lip, an odor of cigarette smoke about her. She noticed how tightly the mother's hair was wound around her green curlers; it was a red more faded than the girl's own auburn-haired mother.

The son grinned and tickled the mother. The same grin--silly, apologetic and grim--spread across her plump face. Her wrinkles were filled with fat and the girl thought the mother looked younger than her 55 years. The mother slapped at her son's hands, the hands were the girl's favorite part of the man.

"You kids hungry? Want something to eat?"

The older woman peered into her refrigerator. The girl saw it was filled with forgotten leftovers. Jars with no pickles, mouldy cheeses, small packages of crumpled aluminum foil.

"I've got meatloaf." The girl shook her head, but the son bent over the mother. The mother's housedress lifted, exposing deep dimples in the back of either knee. The son reached out a gallon jug of milk and sat at the spot the girl cleared for him at the kitchen table.

It was cluttered with newspapers, folded to the crossword, bills and junk mail, a fat Bible in a zippered vinyl cover. He swigged directly from the bottle as the girl searched the clutter for an ashtray. He sucked the white liquid from his mustache and the mother sliced the grey, greasy meat.

In the months the girl and the son had lived together, the girl had never carried milk home from the grocery store. She didn't drink it herself. He'd never mentioned his own thirst for it. Neither did she know his favorite sandwich was meatloaf, drenched with ketchup.

Beads formed on the milk bottle at room temperature. His fingers drummed impatiently on the table. The girl gave up her search for an ashtray. She was very tired. Together, they'd driven slick roads all day, his truck full of her shifting belongings. It had grown dark and the nearer they came to their destination, the quieter they became. He'd searched the dial for a radio station they both liked. And she'd studied the dark prairie for darker forms that simply weren't there. They'd exchanged a look when the small collection of lights appeared on the horizon. His hometown.

She closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep. She heard the plate set down, a chair sigh with the mother's weight. A sandwich and a pickle. The girl, Mara, lit a cigarette. Now, the mother searched among the clutter for an ashtray. Unable to find it, she shuffled across the linoleum in her over-run slippers. She rummaged through a drawer of kitchen gadgets.

Mara's smoke curled towards the overhead light. She hated overhead lighting, particularly at this hour of the night. It threw everything into too sharp a relief. Even skin took on a dull grey color. Just as the ash was about to fall from her cigarette, the mother set the lid of a jar down before Mara and sat down again herself.

"You here to stay?"

The son nodded, his cheek full of meatloaf. The mother adjusted her bi-focals on her nose and seemed to search for a word in the crossword. She erased something with the stub of her pencil.

"Well, until you two find a place, Mara can sleep on nanna's old bed. There's a piece of plywood under the mattress, but it'll have to do."

Mara exhaled and lay the cigarette in the jar lid. She put a hand to the small of her back and rubbed as if to indicate a problem there. Tar collected in the lid and the mother continued.

"I made up the bed in your old room. You can sleep in there."

Mac finished the sandwich and wiped his mouth.

"It's full of your brother's schoolbooks and my plants, but it'll have to do."

The man nodded and rose, shouldering his way out the back door. Mara stubbed her cigarette out and listened to the clock tick. As if the mother had heard it too, she stood up and offered to show Mara the bathroom and her bed.

Mara sat on the edge of nanna's narrow bed, studying the furniture in the room. She could hear mother and son murmuring in the kitchen, the sleeping breath of Mac's teenage sisters in another bed across the room. Eventually, he brought her suitcase and gave Mara a quick peck on the cheek. Outloud, Mara wished she had a nightgown.

He laughed as he walked on into the next room. He left his door slightly open and Mara undressed by the block of light it let into her room. Huge, leafy shadows played on the walls. She could hear him move huge clay pots, pushing boxes across the floor, clearing a path

to his bed. She heard the change loosen in his pockets as he removed his jeans. She heard his boots fall to the floor. She heard the lamp click off. She heard him punch his pillow and his restlessness subside, long before the dark entered Mara's head.

Mara slept late and soundly as a child in nanna's old bed for several nights. One morning as Mac left for work, she pulled on his earlobe and whispered, "How will we make love?" The kitchen light flashed in his eye, but he shrugged his shoulders and turned to go. His back was covered with red and black checks.

Mara, barefoot and robed, sat down at the kitchen table, to her coffee and her cigarette and the Billings Gazette. She wondered how a paper from a town 200 miles away, arrived in time for breakfast. Beginning with the horoscopes, she read her way forward to the editorial page.

His mother bustled behind Mara, piling breakfast dishes in the sink.

"I'll do those, why don't you sit down?"

In this way, Mara had learned the history of her bed, the house, the town and the mother herself. The bed, like the rocker in the living room, had belonged to Grandma Winters. The grandmother had lived with them in the early day's of their marriage. Everett's mother.

She paused and Mara nodded. She did not know what to say. The picture the mother pointed out in the photograph album was of a cantankerous looking woman in a polka-dot dress. Her hair in the black

and white glossy was a steel grey of tight curls.

Mac's mother had removed her green curlers. She hadn't yet brushed the curls out and her head was covered with tunnels of hair. She ran her hand through the curls.

"Yeah, Everett's mother had back troubles. She sat in that rocker all day and complained." Mac's mother grew lost in her thought. The dog scratched at the door.

"She was full of advice too. She had the years on me, but I knew enough. Seemed like I couldn't do anything right, plant cabbage or wash dishes. Well, that first year, we had 50 head come up."

The woman continued as if talking to herself. "Once, after supper, Everett put on his coat before he dried the dishes. We used to do them together and go for a walk afterwards. I asked him where in the hell he thought he was going and he said, "Out." I slammed the dishes around, then she called from the living room, "How long did you think the honeymoon would last, honey?" I could feel her smile. She just rocked and rocked."

"She died 15 years ago, just after we bought the house. Never got around to taking the board out of the bed."

Mara rose to fill her coffee cup. She put the morning paper on a pile of old papers in the pantry. Later, the mother, would dig the crossword out of the pile on her way to work.

A tenant knocked on the door and shuffled into the room before the landlady could answer. Mara flew to her room to dress, going so fast past the rocker, it rocked once or twice. Over the sound of water running in the bathroom sink, Mara heard a high old voice say, "Alice,

you're gonna have to do something about that plumbing."

Mara could not hear the reply over the toothbrush in her mouth. She took a last pleased look at herself in the mirror and ventured back out to the kitchen.

Before an introduction could be made, the tenant said, "You must be Mara." The girl nodded at the fine wrinkled face of an old Indian woman.

"Well, you better not go flushing the toilet, my sink's backed up upstairs."

Mara did not know what to say. The woman slapped her thigh and looked out of her wrinkles with a keen animal eye. Her other hand bent around a mug of coffee, as if she lived at this kitchen table.

"Don't mind Louise, Mara," Mother Alice sighed. "The house is old. I'll call the plumber today."

"How old?"

"Well, I been here ever since they divided the upstairs into rooms. I came with the place," Louise cackled again.

Alice took her hand from under her chin and extended her arm. "This whole first floor used to be big enough to hold dances."

Mara could not imagine society of any sort in this dusty, cowboy town.

"There was a verandah clear around the front of the house. Big trees and lilac bushes in the yard." Mara could hear Alice imagine the luxury. "A maid lived in my room."

"Yeah and you ought to see the stained glass window in the stairwell up on the third floor."

"Three floors?"

Louise nodded, "Yep, four apartments upstairs and one in the basement." She was visibly proud of her small place in the huge house.

"Any vacancies?"

The mother-landlady shook her head, No. "Everett thought when he bought this place, it would be a moneymaker for us. He had big plans to renovate it, but the kids kept coming. There was never enough money. Gradually, he enclosed the porch for the kids."

Mara emptied the percolator and started a fresh pot of coffee. She preferred drip coffee.

"That room of Mac's?" Mara nodded. "It was so nice. Everett walled it up with window 'cause it faced the east. So sunny in the mornings. I never had to wake the boys."

It sounded nice to Mara too. She tried to imagine the light inching across Mac's face in the morning now. He slept in the boy's double bed all by himself.

Louise, tiring of history she'd heard too many times before, put a veined hand on the table and pushed to a stand. "You call that plumber right away, Alice, you hear?"

The floor mat balled up behind her as she closed the door.

Alice sighed and the coffee pot gurgled.

"Since Everett died ten years ago, the house hasn't been anything but trouble. You think I could get Mac to regrout the tile in the bathroom?"

Mara shrugged. In the week they'd been in his hometown, Mac had spent his hours at home, lying on the couch, watching television. Mara wrote letters in the easy chair. "I'm seeing a side of Mac," she wrote, "I've never seen before." "Eventually," Mara answered Alice.

"He installed the carpeting for me. Didn't he do a good job?"

Mara looked at the floor.

Standing, toast crumbs fell from Mara's lap. Mara began running water in the kitchen sink. This sinkful would take an hour. With the coming and going of Mac and the two teenage sisters, all cooking for themselves, the chore was never done. And Mara had never realized how particular she was about kitchens.

Over her shoulder, Mara asked Alice, "Know of any job openings in town?"

"Hospital. They're always looking for nurses' aides. Change bed-pans and such."

Mara said nothing. The suggestion, she realized, was a serious one. Alice worked nights as an LPN. It was there Alice did her crosswords and knitted afghans so each of her seven children had a new one, once a year. Medical gossip peppered these morning conversations. Already, Mara felt she knew this little town too well, from their insides out.

"Anything else?"

"Well, you might check with the Nelson's. Ivan. He's a big wheel around town. Just opened a new bar. He'll be looking for waitresses and bar maids."

"Hmm." Mara scrubbed at yolk stuck to a fork. She liked this idea better. In a town this size there couldn't be many choices no matter what skills a girl had. Mara had some experience--wiping tables, tilting a glass under a tap just right. She reasoned, as she washed, it'd be a good way to meet people.

"I'll check it out."

By the time she said it, Alice had gone to bed for the day.

THE ROCKER

Grandma's rocker was a slender mahogany chair. For its age, Mara thought it had surprisingly simple lines. It had no arms. If a big person should sit in it, the chair would groan and disappear.

Alice kept it in one corner of the living room, the "ballroom" of Everett's boarding house. Alice's clutter did not affect the dignity of the chair. The rumpled afghans on the overstuffed furniture, the newspapers, the dry dirty plates on tv trays kept a respectful distance. Mara noticed none of the family ever sat in the rocker or seemed to notice it was there, though flying in or out of the house, a current of air occasionally set it in motion.

Mara liked the way the chair looked, the way it would one day match her own antique chiffonier.

Several years later, Alice sold the boarding house. She moved into a spacious double-wide trailer. Mara went to visit. The trailer was considerably smaller than the house had been and the family, laughing, told how many trips to the dump it had taken to fit Alice into her new home. And still, there was clutter.

The trailer came with its own furnishings and the worn overstuffed chenille sofa and chairs from the old house had been replaced by pieces upholstered in floral velveteen. When the sateen drapes at the windows were pulled, sheers fluttered into the diminished room. A black kitten stalked in and among the houseplants. The rocker moved with a breeze off the prairie.

Mara acquired her rocker at an estate sale. It had none of Grandma Winter's rocker's lines, but it had a dark finish that went well with Mara's antique chiffonier. There were no other bids on it. Mara thought she had a bargain at \$50. She took the rocker home to her apartment and never bothered to sit in it. At night, on her blind way to the bathroom, she often stubbed her toe on one of its rockers.

The rocker sat in one corner of Mara's bedroom. It collected her clothes at night. Until the baby arrived, she didn't discover how indispensable rockers could be. She learned all of its creaks and the creaks comforted Mara and the colicky baby. In the fifth hour of the first long crying spell, after she'd murmured "we're seperate now, we're seperate now," Mara finally began to cry herself.

In time, the rocker, set to see the sun go down and the moon rise over the mountain, with its familiar creak and motion, came to be the most peaceful place in the world. Mara's nipple poised in the baby's mouth.

After six month's of rocking, a crack across the seat began to widen and expose the fibrous wood under its dark stain. Mara found the crack just minutes after the estate sale had ended. Daily, she had polished the chair with dark oil, but its comforting creak turned to a moan. One day, the seat split clear across.

Still, Mara and the baby rocked in the anonymous rocker. Though it moaned and the crack pinched Mara's bottom, they nursed. And nursed. It was in such a reverie that the dowels connecting the chair's legs gave way. The seat yawned wide enough to deposit mother and child

rudely on the floor.

Mara put the chair in the Dipsty Dumpster. It could not be glued back together again.

A LANDSCAPE

Mara waited at an empty intersection. The light was red. Blue music circled the interior of the car. A black man, standing at a bus stop, suddenly smiled. The smile split the night into bubbles of unfocused color.

The light changed. Mara pressed the accelerator. Where had she felt this before. Somewhere south of the Milk River? The infinite stare of a coyote pup caught in the headlights? Or daylight? Dull, dun-colored prairie as far as her eye could see. An antelope moved. It seemed to have sensed her sight with its nose and fled into the horizon, white tail flapping over its rump. The prairie had broken into a thousand, subtle colors. Mara had had to learn to see all over again.

Mara switched on the windshield wipers. No, more than that. South of the Milk River, but winter. The dog had scared up a jackrabbit. Its quick footprints. The flat landscape, fattened, filled with rabbits. Rabbits whitened and brought to an abrupt red halt. Their warm stain whetting the snow. The hound whimpering in its dog dreams. Its legs twitching after the dream.

Dreaming, even as the highway pulled them 70 m.p.h, east through a Sunday morning. Stubble stuck through the snow, the sun high in a big sky, a fence raced the engine. Each snowflake had reflected the sun. How could she have captured the colors, the contours? Outside the Art Institute, a statue stood. An ebony nude. A woman, several months pregnant, dripping in the rain.

On the radio that morning? Jazz. The music had held them in place, the place crammed with the past, that moment and the destination, drawn out over the future. All Mara had been able to do was breathe it in, breathe it out, see the breath congeal and watch its warmth dissolve on the window. To dog.

The dog lay between them, brooding, its skin loose along the floor. Mara's hand itched to scratch the dog to life again. She shifted. The dog had always been in a hurry, with no clear destination, just in a hurry. Unconscious as Mara was conscious of the muscles, shifting, beneath the skin, it ran. Beauty in that aimless speed, beauty acquired through speed. It was as though the dog had existed for the sheer purpose of beauty alone, to chase birds through the sky on all fours and make people laugh.

Once, in August, one August, she'd seen his ear flap along the ripe heads of wheat. It had been a frantic attempt to keep pace with a cloud of dust he knew must be Mac's pickup. The ears gave the illusion of crippled wings, unable to rise. The ears gave the illusion of a bird. A seagull rising from water, the wheat had seemed like water. Nothing had seemed like what it was that August Mara decided. A saxophone squealed. Mara's apartment building pulled into view.

ICE FISHING

Mac drove 17 miles east into the sunrise. The light was warm coming through the window, but it was cold out, 30 below. Mara could see their breath inside Mac's van though the heater ran full tilt. They searched the radio for a station that played music instead of preaching. They settled for jazz from some town in British Columbia they'd never heard of before. Mara loved the music, went real well somehow with that landscape out there. Deceptively simple. High, wide blue sky. Prairie covered with snow. It was glacial land, rounded and contoured, with huge rocks where no man would have left one. Snow softened the contours. Behind the barbed wire fence, the expanse of white was untrampled as far as the eye could see. Here and there, grass stuck through a foot of snow. Sunlight refracted off snow flakes and gleamed. The light bent in every direction. Mara sucked in her breath.

The van turned off on a little gravel road. A snowy owl on a pole swiveled its head toward the vehicle. The van drove along the shoreline of Nelson Reservoir, looking for a gentle incline. It turned again and Mara gasped as it drove out onto the lake.

The first time Mara didn't know that a lake this size, frozen over only three inches, could support a locomotive. That's what old timers said. She gripped the door handle and Mac's friends in the back of the van laughed at her concern. The ice was ten inches thick. The van picked up speed. Mara could hear the wind howl around it. No road guided the van. Mac braked and the van spun in a perfect circle. Every-

one laughed but Mara. The van picked up speed again, winding all over the lake. Later, Mara would understand there were faults in the ice. It was possible to go in, if a person couldn't recognize the crack. If you went fast and didn't look, the next thing you'd know there'd be bubbles and fish floating before your eyes and cold dark liquid seeping in round your feet. You'd be in a panic with the door handle, letting yourself out into the liquid.

As the van slowed, Mara could hear the ice creak and complain beneath its wheels. It stopped. The entire group piled out and shivered, making a plan. The men extended their arms and pointed out spots to drill holes. The wind unwound Mara's scarf. She fought with it, while the men drilled a semi-circle of holes 25 yards apart with a gas-powered auger. Mara unwound the tip-ups, 50 pound test fishing line attached to small crosses of wood. The brave ones among the fishermen dipped a hand into the minnow bucket. It was impossible to hold on to the squirming minnows with mittens on. It was terribly cold to take the mittens off. The wind froze the skim of moisture from the bucket on their hands. Mac showed Mara how to put a hook through the minnow, twice for good measure. Still wiggling, they'd lower the minnows into the water. They lay the wooden crosses down across the holes.

Giant pike, walleye and northern, cruised in the dark waters beneath the ice, beneath their feet. The pike ate any fish smaller than themselves, the wiggling minnows. If they'd go for the minnows, if the hook caught them, the small cross "tipped-up." Mac would lay his cribbage hand down on the dashboard and run to check the line.

Sometimes, the fish got away with the minnow or part of a minnow. Mac would pull the line out and rebait it, the hooks catching on his cold hands. Other times, there'd be a fish wiggling on the end. He'd shout and throw a fist into the air. He'd dig the hooks out of their mouths with a pair of pliers. Pike, especially northern, have wicked teeth. They can bite the end of a finger off. Mac would leave his catch on the ice, flopping their fins and trying to breathe air with their gills. Little by little, the fish froze solid as a rock. In the evening, Mac and Mara gathered them up and took them home.

Pike are better eating than trout. The flesh is flaky and the bones are fine enough to chew. There's nothing better than twitching pike in the frying pan, not even brook trout over a camp fire.

Mara was fascinated by Mac's huge hand around a filet knife, slicing this delicate flesh from the bone. She'd had him teach her how to clean. The frozen fish would go clunk against the sink. Mara would get out the cutting board and set to work. Sometimes, there were so many to clean, the fish began to thaw before Mara could finish. Then, they'd begin to flop, some so vigorously Mara thought they'd flop out on the floor. Sometimes, their tails would slap the cutting board. She'd have run her knife all down one side of the spine, flipping the filet back to run the knife between the flesh and the skin and its mouth would move. Mara screamed and Mac came to her rescue, smiling as he gave each slimy fish a good whack on its head with his pliers.

Mara dipped the filets in eggs and milk, corn meal and flour. A good batter.

Next morning, they got up early and checked the lines they'd left out overnight. They had to do this early, before any other fishermen checked the lines for them. First, Mac checked the traps in the creek for more minnows, then followed the creek back towards the lake. Out of 25 lines, 15 might have tipped up overnight. Overnight, the water froze around the line half an inch thick. Mara broke this skim out with the toe of her boot. You couldn't just yank the fish out, you might lose him. Mac scooped the chunks of ice out with his bare hand. Mara couldn't stand to stick her hand in the water. For some reason, pulling it out of the water, back out into that dry, cold air made her nauseous. Everytime, he'd do it, Mara studied the crosshatch on his skin. The texture of the skin magnified. She admired Mac for his ability to put his hand into a wet, icy hole. She couldn't understand why he didn't seem to feel the cold.

It never seemed quite fair, getting all those fish overnight for nothing, no work. After they'd checked and rebaited their lines, Mac and Mara spent the morning driving around seeing what kind of luck other fishermen were having. The fishermen would pass a flask back and forth between themselves, wipe their mouths, smack their lips and lie to one another. Gradually, Mara began to feel comfortable with the dark holes and vehicles parked all over the thin ice. She developed a reverence for those spots where men in vehicles had gone into the lake.

One day, Mac and Mara stayed out all day, playing cards and drinking. Mara was having a good day of cards and Mac persisted, wanting to beat her. They drank brandy in their coffee and laughed. The sun set before they knew it.

Mac decided they better check the lines one last time before heading home. He pulled the lines and Mara baited them. She looked like a sack of potatoes dressed in his all-weather coveralls. A drip of mucus collected at the end of her nose. Before she could wipe it away, the wind strung the mucus out. It whipped around and hit her in the face. She couldn't get hold of it to wipe it away. Couldn't even see it, the wind bent her eyelashes and made her eyes water. Mara laughed, huddled over a tip-up by van's headlights. To her, it was so funny, she was useless. Mac worked. Mara complained of the cold. He had warned her in country like this with temperatures below zero and a wind coming up, you'd get wind chills 30, maybe 40, below. Human beings couldn't last half an hour in weather like that. He told her to get in the van, start the motor.

While Mac worked, Mara listened to the radio. Country-western. He must have been out in the cold twenty minutes before he climbed in. Mac put the van in gear, circled. He ran the headlights all around them, looking for the spot they'd driven onto the lake. The horizon to Mara's eyes had disappeared. Mac drove in one direction, then changed his mind. He tried another. In a third direction, they saw the dark outline of a cabin and headed towards it. The bank there was too steep; they couldn't make the run from ice to land though they tried several times. Mara didn't worry, she trusted Mac. She laughed at their predicament.

Mac asked Mara to get out, put sand under the wheels. That didn't work. They tried boards. That didn't work. They wore a path in the ice with all their attempts to drive off the lake. Mac even had Mara push, to rock the van out of its rut. There was no traction. Mara's feet kept slipping out from under her. Nose to ice, Nose to ice.

With a combination of these efforts, they eased the van out of position enough to take one last concentrated run for shore. The back wheels spun on the ice. Mara heard small cracklings. Wearily, she got out to push again. She felt the van take a bump and pull up over the bank.

Mara rode back to town with her hand on Mac's knee, by the light of the radio dial. There was a big white hole in the sky and the sound of fish flopping in the rear.

PLAYING HOUSE

Gradually, Mac moved into one of his mother's basement apartments. He did so under pressure from Mara to make love. Mara stocked the old ice-box with beer and snacks and made up a bed in the back room. A friend had given the couple a set of designer sheets for Christmas. Mara spread these across the mattress without a wrinkle, then a Hudson Bay blanket, a worn chenille spread and an elk robe. On the dressing table, Mara placed a candle and lit it in mid-afternoon, liking its reflection off the mirror and the low, dark ceilings. Overhead, she could hear the creaking weight of his mother's body.

Then, because Mac said they could not make love without music, Mara set up Mac's stereo. When he lost his job, she hooked up the television. He lay all afternoon on the old hide-a-bed and watched soap operas. He did set up his rifle rack; Mara built bookshelves of bricks and boards. She bought more groceries and began to prepare meals of the elk and geese and fish he brought home, on a little gas oven without a thermostat. Before Alice knew it, the couple was comfortably settled in the apartment Mr. and Mrs. Wild Man had vacated. The first month, instead of paying rent, they invited Alice to dinner. The meal would have been tasteless, if it had not been burnt. Alice disapproved of their arrangement, but did not know what to do. She offered Mara the use of any kitchen utensil she might need.

So, Mara helped herself to the candy thermometer permanently, washed their clothes, working around the clutter in Alice's laundry room. Mac stored his hunting equipment in the second basement apartment:

his bows and arrows, reloading equipment and a trunk of ammunition Mara could not lift. The couple passed evening playing cards, tying flies and tip-ups, sewing leather patches on their jeans.

Mara became bored with the soap operas and the bad back that developed as a result of so much lying around. She changed the channel, brought beers, read voraciously and took a job at the little tavern where Mac played foosball on Friday nights. Tips in chips from drunken millionaire ranchers in the backroom made the job worthwhile. The coins collected first in Mara's cleavage, then in a big restaurant-sized pickle jar Mara kept under the kitchen sink. From time to time, Mara loaned Mac poker money from this jar.

They passed one winter in this way.

HOW TO FRY AN EGG

In Hoagland, Montana, the view goes on for miles. In the summer, its golden. Combines circle the fields, dying dogs circle the one intersection in town, flies buzz over the pile of beer cans behind the bar. That's where Jack parked Mara's kitchen. Inside her mobile home, Mara cooked for Jack and Mac and a crew of high school boys.

She opened the door and set a jar of clear water and tea bags on the step. A smell of vinegar wafted up her nose. Nine o'clock and already it was hot. With the back of her wrist, Mara brushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. She'd just finished the breakfast dishes--eggy plates, juice glasses with pulp clinging to the sides, coffee cups full of rings. The sink in the trailer was 12" by 18" and doing dishes was a chore.

It was her habit to spend the next two hours reading or writing letters. But this morning, she couldn't concentrate. She stared out the window at storm clouds gathering on the Canadian border. She heard the rat-tat-tat of power wrenches at the construction site. The crew was building a granary, rings of corrugated steel they jacked up and jacked up until the granary towered nearly fifty feet in the air. Mara listened to a fly circle the inside of her cubicle. She had no appetite for her usual cup of coffee or cigarette.

Mara knew. She worried. She could not go to the doctor in Malta. It was a small town and she'd listened to enough of Alice's nurses' gossip to know her secret could not keep. This knot in Mara's belly could be Alice's first grandchild.

Thursday, Jack had to go to Havre for supplies, a carpenter's belt or bolts. Mara had him drop her off at a shaded clinic on Main Street, while she ran in to make an appointment. Mara told the nurse she would take any doctor she could get that afternoon. The nurse ran the silver clicker of her ballpoint up and down the page of her appointment book. The phone rang and the receptionist went to answer. Mara drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter top, orange formica. The receptionist returned and in a blue scrawl wrote out "Dr. Mayer, 4:30."

It was noon and the pick-up idled impatiently out front. Neither Jack nor Mac seemed upset that the late hour of Mara's appointment would cost them an afternoon's work. They backed Jack's dusty pick-up into noon hour traffic and ogled the secretaries as they made their way through town to the hardware store.

Their errand took less time than making Mara's appointment had. They'd driven 70 miles for minutes' worth of supplies. All three decided to while away the afternoon in a tavern, the one they'd seen with a red vinyl-upholstered door. Each ordered a beer.

The clientele was mostly Indian and the three of them sat at one end of the bar. They put 50¢ pieces in the jukebox and that was as brave as they got. Mara couldn't add much to the conversation. Her morning sickness extended into the afternoon. Their banter dwindled and Mac said he thought he'd go get a pair of shoelaces. Mara sat up straight on her stool once he was gone. She struggled out of her pre-occupation to ask Jack questions about his wife's pregnancy, how it was for her. Melanie was due any day, but Jack couldn't answer for her. He hadn't been home longer than to repack his suitcase in months.

"I've been cut off," he said, laughing his big Swede's lippy laugh. When Mara didn't laugh, he said, "You're worried, aren't you?" She nodded, shrugged her shoulders and looked at the clock. Twelve minutes to four. Mara lit one last cigarette and tapped her foot as Jack stacked change on the counter. The bar maid came and collected their empties. She asked, "Another?"

Jack nodded and Mara shook her head. Mac wasn't back. No parting kiss as Mara climbed off the stool and stepped across the threshold into daylight. She blinked, looked up and down the street. No bearded figure, no man with a small sack of shoestrings making his way up either side of the street. Not even a place where you could buy shoestrings. Mara walked to the corner and crossed with the light.

With a great effort to walk a straight line, Mara walked the block and a half to the clinic. Cool, color-coordinated interior. Magazines. The receptionist looked up without recognition. Her hair-do had come undone. "Dr. Mayer? Oh, yes, Miss Johnson. He'll be right with you."

Mara leafed as far as the People section of Time magazine, when a nurse carrying a file, called Mara's name and said, "Follow me."

Mara sat clothed, waiting in Dr. Mayer's huge office. The chair she sat in was a practical, straightbacked wooden one like Mara remembered from grade school. She studied the clutter on his desk, the prescription pad and insurance forms, topped with a stethoscope. She had her head tilted to read the title of a medical book, when the door opened and an old man stepped into the room. "Now, what seems to be the problem?"

Dr. Mayer's white coat came to his knees. By the grey halo of hair and the tired four o'clock eyes behind his wire-rimmed glasses, Mara estimated his age as a month or two short of retirement. He sat in the squeaky desk chair and revolved around to face Mara. She licked her lips, wiped her nose on the back of her hand. The doctor handed the patient a kleenex.

"I wonder if I'm pregnant."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I haven't bled. I'm two weeks overdue. My breasts ache." Mara squirmed in her tight t-shirt. "I'm nauseous in the morning. Could you take a urine sample?"

"Could, but it's too soon to tell that way."

Mara sniffed again, not needing to.

"Is there some way to find out?"

The doctor drew out a long yes and asked Mara if she was married.

"No."

"What will you do?"

"Get rid of it."

"How?"

"Abortion."

"What makes you think that's a solution?"

"The father doesn't want it and I don't want it. We're children ourselves. Neither of us wants the responsibility."

Dr. Mayer cleared his throat. "Do you use birth control?"

Mara shook her head, not bothering to explain her problems with pills and IUDs.

"Abortion, young lady, is not a form of birth control."

The man rose from his desk, asking Mara to undress. He'd be back.

Mara skinned off her tight jeans and t-shirt. Her breasts felt like ripe fruit. A thick mucus stained the crotch of her panties.

Dr. Mayer returned with his nurse. Firmly, he told Mara to lie back and draw up her legs. He stood between her bent knees thumping Mara's belly with two fingers. He sighed and sat down, pulling a small spotlight into position over his head. His old gleaming head shook, but Mara could not tell if it was from age or attitude.

The doctor spread a lubricant on Mara's genitals and roughly inserted two fingers. Mara felt them move every which way and she hated her reliance on this man. As the doctor withdrew his hand, an unidentified mucus dribbled out of Mara's body onto the textured paper toweling of his examining table.

The doctor spat into Mara's glistening crotch.

He asked his nurse for a kleenex. Dutifully, she handed him one. Roughly, he wiped the dribble away. He turned his broad, bent back on Mara. He wrote in the file.

The nurse followed Dr. Mayer from the room and Mara dressed, still not knowing. She sat again in the school chair by his desk, a kleenex balled up in her hand. Mara watched the clock tick slowly towards 4:47. A rough turn of the doorknob broke her fascination with the second hand.

Dr. Mayer shuffled across the room and collapsed into his chair. Tilting back, he stared hard into Mara's face. He nodded his head.

Mara asked that the results be sent to Missoula as she made out her check. Turning away from the counter, Mara looked at the sunlight the other side of the entrance to this dim waiting room. Her vision blurred. Trees swam into cars swam into traffic into buildings. Mara made her way back to the bar without a false step.

It was happy hour when Mara arrived. The number of customers had multiplied. One let out a whoop as Mara's eyes adjusted to the darkness of the place. The customer caught himself when Mara joined Jack at the bar. Mac was in the men's room. They'd switched from beer to scotch. Mara ordered herself two and threw a twenty at the bar maid.

"Well, what's the verdict?"

Mara turned slowly on her stool to stare at the figure settling in beside her. Jack hurried away to the men's room. Mara stared at Mac and refused to answer until she'd finished one scotch and eaten the last ice cube in the glass.

She slurred, "What do you think?"

Mac didn't answer. Mara finished her second drink.

"What will you do?" Mara ordered two more.

"Well," Mara said, studying the melt of ice cubes in her scotch. "I suggest you have a vasectomy. You've talked about it long enough. Now you know the damn thing works."

Mara looked Mac steadily in the eye. He said, "I knew that already."

Jack re-emerged out of the dark and juke box music, saying he was hungry. He and Mac discussed places to eat as Mara took time with her drinks. Satisfied after four that she couldn't walk, that everything was finally funny, Mara let the men lift her out onto the sidewalk.

She slumped between them like a marionette.

The three cruised Main, looking for a place to eat. Finally, the guys let Mara decide among the fast food joints lining the highway out of town. Nothing but the A & W looked good. When her onion rings arrived, the smell of hot grease overwhelmed Mara.

"HELP"

For diversion, Mac and Mara drove the fifty miles between Malta and the Little Rockies to visit Jack, Melanie and their baby daughter. They found the Lindsay family snowed into their three-room cabin. It was cozy with a wood fire. Melanie wore a pink angora sweater; it added soft curves to the angles of her body. Since the baby had been born, she'd lived on diet drinks. She was drinking the day's fifth can of Fresca when Mac and Mara arrived. She and Jack lay their cribbage hands down on the kitchen table, relieved to have company. Jack carried his beer out into the snow to greet them.

Mac and Mara stomped into the cabin, shaking snow from their boots. With the pop of a beer can, Mac immediately sat down to finish Melanie's cribbage hand. The men played several more hands. Jack began to eat from a jar of hot, pickled eggs and belched without excusing himself.

Melanie rolled her eyes at her husband and patted out a shortcake for supper. She'd given Mara a glass of wine. Mara followed the dinner preparation, feeling useless. She was no better at mother's shop talk, diapers this and colic that. Eventually, she wandered into the living room, selecting a record from the Lindsay's meager collection. The sound of country rock mingled with the smell of dinner cooking. Mara grabbed the magazine left open on the couch and began to leaf through it, the first issue of Hustler she'd ever seen.

Mara said nothing about the magazine throughout the meal or the dishwashing. When the women joined the men in the living room, they were laughing over a cartoon. "Scratch and sniff." Jack laughed be-

tween belches; the eggs were causing indigestion. Mara wanted to play cards, but her plan was over-ruled. The sweet summertime smell of burning weeds filled the room. In the corner, Jack doubled up in a 200 pound ball, laughing and holding a butane lighter to his behind. Farting, he flicked the lighter and flame licked his backside to his knees. Mara roused from her stupor on the couch. The men laughed and Melanie giggled timidly. Then Mac tried it with less fiery results. Jack grabbed the lighter and pulled down his pants. "Let me show you how it's done."

The stunt reminded Mara of things she heard fraternity boys did. She focused on the big Swede's flabby, pale buttocks. As he rolled up in a ball, she saw the tiny purple pouch of his testicles, his flacid cock. Mac and Melanie laughed. Shaken by their laughter, Mara stopped staring and warned, "Don't burn yourself." Again, the others laughed. "You'll singe your hair." An even bigger tongue of flame licked Jack's backside in the dark room. From the bedroom, Jack's tiny daughter began to cry in her sleep.

While Melanie quieted the baby, Jack and Mac listened to one more record and drank one more beer by the tiny red light on the stereo. Mara slumped on the couch. When Mara opened her eyes again, Melanie was spreading thick quilts and sheets on the floor. "You two can sleep here."

Deliberately, Mara began to unbutton her flannel shirt. She fought with her tight jeans and loosened her braids. Already, Mac lay stretched out on his belly. His body seemed startlingly dark in light off the kitchen. Mara ran her hand along the backside of his thighs, feeling

the prickly hairs. Suddenly, his still form turned to her. She objected, hearing sounds either Jack or Melanie made in the bathroom. He snorted, intrigued by her protests. "They'll hear." Roughly, he smashed Mara's right breast and rubbed his beard against her cheek. She liked the whiskers, he knew that. And he liked Mara best when she was drunk or drugged. She was so stiff sometimes. His hand followed her full, familiar contours under the flannel shirt, through the dark. His hand parted her legs and began a circling motion Mara's drowsy body followed.

The toilet flushed and as the sound subsided, Mara arched her back towards him, towards him, towards him. She saw Mac smile to himself. She heard the slosh of the water bed in the next room and someone's sleepy sigh. She bit her lip and made no sound. Mac saw this and penetrated her. Again and again, he penetrated Mara. And seeing he would not get the satisfaction of a sigh, he did not hold back.

Mara lay awake afterwards, blinking at the strange ceiling. The red light on the stereo blared through the dark. She supposed Mac was asleep now. She heard the baby whimper and saw a man's shirt flutter through the dark over her head. Melanie stepped through their bed to the kitchen. Returning with a warm bottle for the baby, Mara saw the dark yawn between Melanie's long, pale legs. A deep voice beside Mara spoke: "Hey, where you going?" Melanie giggled. The voice continued, "Why don't you join us?"

Shocked, Mara crawled out of bed. She thought a dry run to the bathroom would alter Mac's invitation, discourage Melanie. Passing

through the bedroom, she heard Jack's drunken snore. Returning, she heard Melanie's sigh. For several paralyzed moments, Mara stood in the strange bedroom between the sleeping father and his child, imagining she heard Melanie's breasts drip on Mac's chest. When Melanie's moans did not subside, Mara climbed into the waterbed beside Jack. He grunted in his sleep and snuggled close to the body in his bed. He filled a hand with one of Mara's breasts.

Mara stared at this new dark, listening to the lovemaking in the next room. Once their sounds subsided, she listened to them listen for her. All three held their breath and each other in this stasis, until Jack farted loudly in his sleep. Aloud, but to no one in particular, Mara said, "Help?"

The pair on the living room floor laughed with relief.

THREE DREAMS

Mara dreamed she waited for a girlfriend in a motel room, when an actual knock came to her apartment door. The knock was so insistent, Mara woke and sleepily stumbled to the door. It was 3 a.m. No sooner did she turn the knob than the weight of a drunk forced the door in on her. The drunk wore a fishing cap and had a huge nose. He kept asking for Marcia. Mara kept telling him, "You have the wrong door." Her robe gaped open. "Marcia, Marcia," the drunk said, reaching for Mara's breasts. They swung just out of his reach as Mara heaved the parts of his body over the threshold enough to close the door again.

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Mac was fishing. Mara saw him disappear through a fault in the ice. His voice made a falling sound she mistook for "Help." She ran across the ice and peered down into the hole. The dark icy waters Mara expected to see had crystallized and formed a huge, brilliant room under the lake surface. There, Mara saw Mac and his mother in a remote domestic scene. She called to him and he answered. "I'm okay. Don't worry." She watched his mother putter around. Alice apparently couldn't hear her. "It's okay," Mac said again, "I don't need you."

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Mara dreamed she'd have the baby at home, with girlfriends attending. When the dream came, none of them knew what to do. None of them knew how to hold its slick body. It slipped from their arms onto the bed, fluid as a cat. It slithered over the edge of the bed. They were horrified to hear it hit the floor. They scrambled to retrieve it, to reassure

it, but it snaked away. No sooner would one of them close a fist around its long, slender body, than it would slide away. Another hand closed around it just behind the head. Again, it slid away. While Mara's girlfriends stared at their empty fists, Mara herself seemed to get a firmer hold. But the snake, this child of Mara's, turned to a fish and flipped out of her hands onto the floor again. A mucus formed on its scales. They tried to get hold of the baby. They tried to get hold of themselves. It was Susie, a friend Mara would yet meet, who accidentally stepped on the fish. Mara screamed, hearing the tiny crush of its bones. Susie lifted her foot, revealing the distorted shape of an ant.

The girls stared at the spot, speechless. The floor creaked and splintered as a tree sprouted through the hardwood. Visibly, it grew, lifting the ceiling with its boughs. It towered above them. Its limbs filled the room.

ASKING FOR A HAND

He first called during a dinner party Mara gave for several friends. They were having after-dinner drinks when the phone rang. She made it clear to him that it was neither the time or the place to discuss such a thing. She unplugged her phone.

Then, he began to call her at work. After several Saturdays of his interruptions, she told him he could come to Kansas City, discuss it on her territory, if he was serious. Mara returned to her paperwork, expecting never to hear from him again.

One Tuesday he called asking Mara to meet him, 2:15 a.m. at the airport. Mara looked out the window at the snow, dubiously. She had no way there except the last airport express bus at 10:30, no way to be sure his plane could land after all her waiting.

She took a magazine with her and during the bus ride chatted with a man who told her he was a night club singer. The man was on his way to Denver, but he took Mara's false name and phone number anyway. Then, for four hours Mara sat at the proper gate, reading in a chrome and vinyl sling of a chair. Red caps wandering by lazily glanced at Mara out of the corners of their blood-shot eyes. She smiled, enjoying the anonymity.

Mac's plane landed in a flurry of snowflakes. He was one of the last passengers to shuffle into the terminal. While Mara noted he'd been careful to tuck his flannel shirt into his jeans, his eyes uncomfortably studied the height of the terminal ceiling, before they fell on Mara.

It had been nearly two years. Mac thought Mara had put on some weight and poked her in the side, playfully. She smiled wanly. She'd worked all day, would have to work tomorrow. "I'm tired."

Together they stood at the luggage carousel, searching for things to say. Mara was first to spot his bag, though Mac grabbed it. He followed her out to the taxi-cab lane, watching the arm she flung out in the snow-filled air. They shared the expensive cab with a ragged looking salesman who set his sample case on their feet. The cabbie slid his cab all over the highway and asked for a twenty when he pulled up at Mara's apartment building.

Mara's roommate was asleep on the couch when she and her guest arrived. Mac would have to share her bed.

When he woke, Mac said he thought he was in the 15th century or something. He hadn't known where he was or who this woman was, riding his cock. Gradually, the sloshing of the waterbed brought him around. It had been like climbing into a boat. And the flying head of hair was Mara, as far as he could make out by the dim light along her Venetian blinds.

She'd left him no directions, so Mara was surprised when Mac appeared punctually at her office for their lunch date. She took a good daylight look at him and decided they'd eat hamburgers and drink cold beers in a workingman's bar across the street. As she told him they'd been invited to her parent's for supper that evening, Mac pulled a clear, plastic bubble from his pocket. Wordlessly, he handed the

bubble to Mara. She grinned and slipped the 25¢ engagement ring on the third finger of her right hand.

Mara's father picked them up at 38th & Main, a corner famous for streetwalkers, on his way home from work. He strained to keep the conversation going the 18 miles down Main, Troost, the Paseo, towards the suburbs. They were miles Mara thought she could drive blindfolded. Finally, Mr. Johnson tuned in a middle-of-the-road FM station. The three rode in silence. Mara wondered whether the one man's reticence had attracted her to the other. The engagement ring flashed in the car's dark interior.

It was a relief to pull up before the house on the hill in Skyline Heights. It looked like many other houses in the neighborhood, but the familiar swing of her father's Buick off the hill into the driveway made it Home. The house was alive with lights and music. As they climbed the steps, Mara could hear her mother's laughter and smell her lasagna.

Mara had not known there were other guests coming for supper. Immediately coming into the house, she heard Sam Miller's laugh. He and his wife, Marion, were neighbors. She understood why her mother had invited them, to keep the conversation rolling. Though Sam worked for the Post Office, he'd killed a few birds in his time. Hunting would keep the dinner conversation light.

Mr. Johnson took Mac's down jacket with a rustle. Mac stood in the entryway awkwardly until Mara's mother offered him a drink.

"Scotch."

Mara twisted the stone of her bauble around to the inside of her hand and went to help the women in the kitchen. She sipped wine from a tumbler.

By the time they all sat down to eat, Mara was giddy. She felt closed off from her parents and the Millers, in a private joke with Mac. Mac, on the other hand, tried valiantly to include himself in the conversation. The Bob Marshall wilderness? He knew it like the back of his hand, he boasted. The ring twisted round and round on Mara's finger, to the candlelit clatter of silverware.

At last, when their plates were smears of tomato sauce, the Miller's rose to go. "Another day, another dollar," Sam always said. After lingering good-byes at the door, Mara's father retreated downstairs in the direction of his study. She heard the ice in Mac's fourth scotch clink, heard him follow her father down the stairs.

Mara helped her mother clear the table.

"Did you notice the ring?"

"Yes." Mara laughed.

"He bought it out of a bubblegum machine." Mara laughed again.

"But you're wearing it on the right hand. None of us knew what to think."

Mara blushed. She hadn't realized the mistake.

"Have you reached a decision?"

"We haven't even talked about it yet. Just this ring." Mara continued to wipe the plates dry. "Says his uncle needs him to manage the family ranch."

Mara studied the few suds that floated on the grey dishwater. She could see neither of her mother's hands as she scrubbed at the silverware. "Is that what you want?"

Mara shrugged. Staring at her mother's raw red hands, Mara pondered the question. Do you want to be a farm wife? Kill chickens and throw bales and let your breasts droop to your waist? Do you want to give up your good job and lovely apartment and all your friends?

Likening the lines of Montana prairie to the museum spareness of her apartment, Mara couldn't answer. Her father came up the stairs. Two ice cubes rattled at the bottom of his glass.

"You ready to head back into town?"

"Guess so." Mara folded her towel, as Mac emerged from the bowels of the Johnson's split-level house. It was a moment of recognition. Mac was a stranger, a character out of her past. Two year's past. She studied him by the harsh overhead light of her mother's kitchen.

They lay in Mara's bed, listening to her roommate turn the pages of a book. Once the waves subsided, Mac said, "I talked to your father?"

"About what?"

"Us."

"What about us?"

"I asked him if I could marry you."

Mara stifled a laugh. "I'm touched. but what an old-fashioned thing to do." She rolled over to face him, setting the mattress in motion again. She touched his shoulder. Once the waves subsided and she could no longer hear the pages turn down the hallway and she thought Mac was asleep, she said, "What did he say?"

A voice in the dark answered, saying "It's up to you."

Each day of his stay, Mara worked. Mac lay on her sofa and read novels Mara suggested. Little by little, the trailer they would live in on the ranch became a little log cabin in the woods, with blue skies and a few pre-arranged, fluffy clouds. Mac would trap and Mara would read and they would live off the land.

They talked about the cabin over sloppy beers at the workingman's bar and as the sun set between the cramped apartment buildings in her neighborhood, the leafless trees seemed to claw at Mara's window, wanting in. Though Mara never said yes, she'd never said No.

Mac caught the airport express at a luxury hotel on the Plaza. The bus idled as executives piled on in all-weather coats and briefcases. The man in his flannel shirt bent to kiss Mara's lips. For a moment he watched the snow fall around her face and melt on the heated sidewalk. A black man, with shiny brass buttons across his chest, appeared, clapping his gloved hands mutely. Mac stepped up onto the idling bus. Its doors folded, closed, behind him.

Once the bus pulled away, Mara bought a New York Times. She ordered a croissant in the hotel coffee shop. She left the ring in the ashtray.

DAN'S WRIST

Mara's roommate was a secretary named Dan. Their arrangement, sharing an old luxury apartment in what had become a bad part of town, had worked well. A long hallway connected three bedrooms; Dan said it reminded him of railroad car apartments in New York. The high ceilings and spacious dimensions dwarfed their few pieces of furniture. The apartment reminded Mara of eastern Montana, while Dan referred to it as "minimalist." Splitting the rent, the apartment was more than either of them could have afforded alone. They kept separate bedrooms, telephones and schedules. When Mara listened to helicopters patrol her street at night, she liked the idea of having a man around the house.

Dan packed Mara's books into cardboard boxes for her move North. He mumbled something about a woman's touch. Mara, dismantling the bricks and boards, said "What's that?" The words echoed in the emptying room, the middle bedroom they called the library.

"Let's celebrate tonight."

Matter-of-factly, Mara agreed.

Dan made reservations at a small family restaurant that didn't take reservations. An Italian place in the Italian part of town. They overdressed. Mara wore a white linen suit--a slim skirt, a sheer mauve blouse and blazer she knew she would have no more occasion to wear. He wore baby blue and light grey. They sweat, elegantly anyway, in traffic as they searched for Tony's.

Inside, Tony's looked much like Montana truck stops. The unfinished edges of paneling particularly brought truck stops to mind. The chrome chairs and vinyl upholstery reminded Dan of the diners he'd been so fond of in Manhattan. One table was set for a party of 20 and couples kept drifting in dressed in jeans, baseball jerseys and caps. They ordered beers and made toasts and sang raucous songs as Dan and Mara's scotch and waters went watery. Both Dan and Mara shivered in the air-conditioned air.

Dan looked up. A candle, flickering in a red glass, net-covered jar illuminated his face. His Scandinavian features said, "They're famous for their fried chicken." So that's what Mara ordered, without realizing all a chicken dinner entailed. Waiting, they drew shapes on the checked tablecloth and discovered wads of dried gum under the table top as they crossed their legs. The waitress brought a relish tray and watery salads and a basket of rolls and a hot plate of crisp golden chicken with mashed potatoes and a hearty gravy. And a side of spaghetti. Dan and Mara's mouths moved and moved. Bones littered their plates. The waitress took the plates away, then brought half a spiked watermelon and two long straws. To the other table, she carried a chocolate cake with sparklers.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you." Mara listened to them sing. The plump women in tight jeans began to fall over the men and paper noisemakers unrolled and rolled and unrolled. The watermelon loosened Mara's tongue. She said nonsense things and Dan sang all the old romantic songs that made Mara move in with him in the first place. "Blue skies, shining at me, nothing but blue skies do I see."

But, it was a clear dark night. They stood on their apartment building's tiny lawn and admired a ring around a full moon. Dan's shadow beside Mara's was tall as a skyscraper. Skyscrapers and newspapers blowing along empty city streets and the 1940's. "I've got a headache." Mara went in for an aspirin. She kicked off her heels and padded down the hall in her stockinged feet to Dan's room.

His mattress lay centered on his bedroom floor. His room was surrounded by windows. The shadows of trees behind the shades, shifting in the thick air was Bergmanesque, they decided. They could hear the ivy climb the walls, the clock tick.

Mara kneeled on the slick hardwood floor beside the bed. She'd been in this bed. Together she and Dan rolled around like brother and sister, naked and laughing. Dan folded his trousers along the crease, hung them particularly on a hanger. He straightened his twisted sheets with one big billow and climbed in. He punched the pillow into shape. Drowsily, he began to mumble all the things people are supposed to say when they part.

Mara held one hand, but felt Dan's wrist go limp and letting go the hand, she watched it hang from the edge of the bed. All Mara wanted to tell him was that she'd seen the rough immigrant angle of his wrist as he washed vegetables at their kitchen sink. Mara was about to say 'you don't fool me' and her lips were parted, when Dan began to snore.

THE PRODIGAL'S FATHER

Mac, packing boxes of books down two flights of stairs, complained they weighed nearly as much as his guns. Mara laughed, insincerely it seemed to Mac, and took a swig from her beer. The air was thick with insects and humidity. Sweat soaked into the ribs of Mac's undershirt as he worked to load his van with Mara's belongings.

He drank a beer as they drove toward the suburbs. City traffic irritated him. Up north, he'd have covered 60 miles rather than 15 by the time they pulled into the Johnson's driveway.

Mrs. Johnson greeted Mac with another beer on the front step. She fed the two of them charcoaled hamburgers. She did not try to make conversation. It was obvious to her that they were tired. Instead, she made up the bed in the guest room, Mara's old room, then slipped off to sleep herself.

Mac went upstairs to shower. For a few minutes, Mara sat on the patio with her father. They watched fireflies and sucked their cigarettes. Mara was listening to the locusts when her father stood, unexpectedly, and said good-night.

"Good night?" Mara's voice trailed off into a question. This was so unlike him. She sat on the chaise lounge thinking about this until the sky grew dark as the houses around her. Then, she felt her own way upstairs to bed. Mac was already asleep.

The bed was very likely the one Mara had been conceived in. Over 25 years, the old mattress had developed quite a depression in the middle. Mara and Mac kept rolling together and pulling apart. The air

was too sticky to touch.

Mara lay in the dark, blinking. It really wasn't very dark. A yard light across the street shone in the bedroom window. It had ever since Mara was a little girl. It illuminated things like a full moon. In fact, she often mistook it for a full moon. She felt safe and singled-out because this "moon" deigned to shine in her room.

The next thing Mara knew, it was morning. By the time she woke, her mother had left for work. Her father lingered over his newspaper and coffee longer than usual. They exchanged pleasantries, but Mac was anxious to be on the road.

Mara remembers her father walking out to the van, rather, he followed her out. He was barefoot and it was still chilly. The grass was long, each blade distinct for Mara. It covered her father's feet. He had on his inevitable trousers and a ribbed undershirt. His hands were in his pockets, his elbows close to his sides, keeping him warm.

The birds were oblivious, sweet and dumb in the Johnson's two elm trees. Mara remembers getting in and slamming the van door. She remembers some joke about her belongings. She looked out through the windshield and then turned to look at her father through the passenger's window. Their eyes traveled all over each other's faces. A long, silent searching look. Mac cleared his throat. Mara slowly rolled her window down.

She expected her father to say "Don't go." But he was at a loss for words. Mac broke their hypnosis, easing the van away from the curb. Mara didn't look back. Her eyes watered a little, winding through town

towards the highway. She and Mac talked: the exhaust from industrial smokestacks along the river, blurred the view. The sky in Missouri is a lighter shade of blue. Fifty miles outside of Kansas City, Mac already knew it was a mistake.

WALL DRUG

Mara studied the map. If they went across Nebraska, then up through South Dakota, she reasoned the drive would be more interesting and they wouldn't have to deal with Denver after all of Kansas. She drew a dark line from the dreary little Nebraska town where they sat in a cafe eating salads leftover from lunch to Wall, South Dakota, through Blackjack and past Custer's battlefield in the southeastern tip of Montana.

Mac paid for their meal and went to gas up the van, while Mara disappeared into the ladies' room. As Mara dried her hands, she read the graffiti on the walls. "But I just assumed you had a vasectomy." and "Toxic shock syndrome has finally given women something intelligent to scribble about on restroom walls." She smiled and described the lines to Mac as they drove several miles down the wrong highway. He noticed it first. The road signs were wrong. The sun was going down and the weather, worsening. Suddenly, Mac turned off onto a country road, driving due North.

Mara trusted his sense of direction though there were fewer signs along this road than the last. As they came over a small rise, the asphalt suddenly turned to dirt. Mara got out the map and studied it again.

"Reservation. Must be." Mac said.

Mara put her finger on Rosebud, South Dakota. "Probably."

The rain they'd left in Nebraska turned to a fine, freezing mist. As they jostled over unkempt roads, Mara heard her grandmother's antique dresser crash into her guitar. The mist thickened to snowfall.

It was late April, but this was blizzard nevertheless. The road began to wind and the sky darken and though Mac drove with his headlights on bright, there were no signs to be seen. "Lock your door."

Mara did as she was told, but looked at Mac questioningly. Off to the left, she saw a man stumbling along the ditch. "Let's give him a lift. Maybe he can give us directions."

Mac cast a look at the back of the van. It was packed to capacity with Mara's belongings. "He's drunk. Indian."

Mara rode in silence, in some danger she didn't understand. Twenty miles later, the van passed through a community of tumble down houses. Mara saw no one on the streets, though there were lights in the windows. Again, Mara suggested they stop for directions.

Mac drove on without a word, his jaw set firmly, but obscurely in his beard. Forty-five minutes later they came to a junction and stopped. Snowflakes flew hypnotically into their headlights. Mac allowed Mara to get out and peer at the number on the sign. Once he'd located the spot on the map, he got out and peed.

They stayed at the first motel that would take Mara's credit card. And they laughed the next morning over nickel coffee and cafeteria hot cakes at how many Wall Drug signs they must have missed short-cutting through the reservation. Mara had counted 80 along the highway before they'd stopped for breakfast. The place was an obvious tourist trap, though quiet this morning after a blizzard. Mac was anxious to move on. He'd seen two semis slip off the slick highway into the median. He was having trouble making out any sort of horizon. Mara could only finger

the postcards and gaudy turquoise as they passed through the gift shop after their meal.

She wondered aloud if Wall Drug ever filled a prescription. Mac didn't laugh. She tried to describe a decor of tourist kitsch to him, but he still didn't smile as the van pulled out on the highway behind a sand truck.

In picture postcards Mara mailed home, she described how at Mount Rushmore George Washington's nose ran that day, as Mac photographed the bellies of birds circling overhead. From Deadwood, South Dakota, she wrote: Here, Wild Bill Hickock was shot in the back of the head, playing poker. He held a hand of ace's and eight's. A deadman's hand.

Mac took a long sip of beer and tucked the can between his legs. He'd been narrating the trip with stories he'd read in western American history. Mara claimed she would be able to feel the moment they crossed the state line into Montana, whether it was marked or not. The sun shone for the first time in a thousand miles. The prairie was the same ahead and behind the van. Mara became lost in all this landscape recalled to mind. She took one of their two remaining beers and lapsed into excited silence. Her blood felt carbonated.

She felt the van slow and turn off onto a gravel drive. "Where are we?" In the distance, Mara saw run-down ranches with bee hives and sway backed horses.

"Custer's Last Stand."

Curiously, Mara sat up. The grass shivered in the breeze as far as her eye could see. Mac drove slower and slower, as if not to disturb the gravel. They mounted a low rise and stopped. Mara pointed out a tiny white wildflower that dotted the hillside. Mac pointed out several granite stones jutting at odd angles from the ground. Mara climbed out for a closer look, slowly realizing each stone marked a grave. The stones multiplied and surrounded her. Mara ran, counting like a child, until she lost track at 139.

Mac talked about the battle halfway across Montana. Mara watched the prairie begin to gather itself up into mountains. She welcomed the scent of pine after long hours of prairie wind moaning at the van's contours. They sped obscenely through the landscape, history and many individual stories. Mara slumped with fatigue.

They began to see mileage signs: Missoula 200 miles, 89 miles. Then, "VD attacks one Montanan every hour." They rounded a mountain, took the first exit and merged into late afternoon traffic. Several drivers waved a greeting to Mac, including a tanned girl in a low sports car. Mac stopped a block from Lane's shop and bought another cold six-pack.

Mac lived with Lane in an apartment off his taxidermy shop. The boys were all there, waiting for Mac. Mara nodded a greeting to Lane and Rick and excused herself, her bladder was about to burst. Mac helped Rick load pistols into Rick's car, then waited for Mara. "Get in."

Though Mara was tired of riding, she did. The three of them cruised the access road along I-90 until sunset, drinking more beer and shooting birds off power lines. Mara watched for gophers.

Rick handed Mara a .22 pistol. "You try."

Mara hadn't held a gun in two years. She propped the pistol out the car door and peered down the barrel, waiting for a gopher to peer out of its hole. Within seconds, one appeared, looking curiously from side to side as if it smelled her. Mara shot. A direct hit. The gopher's tiny leg shivered with its last nervous reaction. Its head was gone.

Both men looked at Mara, admiringly, before they idled on down the road.

THE LITERAL SMELL OF DEATH

A little bell over the door rang as Mara entered Valley Taxidermy. The entryway served as a trophy room. Heads of deer, elk, antelope, moose, sheep and goat stuck rigidly out from the walls. A duck spread the wings of its stuffed body over a counter that separated the trophy room from the taxidermist's shop.

Lane peered over the counter from his workbench. An old smile spread across his face at the new arrival. "Mara!" Mac stepped into the shop behind her.

Mara gave Lane a wooden hug, looking over his shoulder at the display in the shop. Not much had changed. Tanned hides lay everywhere. Hides in various stages of skinning draped over several old dinette chairs. Tagged rack of deer, antelope and elk hung from the rafters along with a pair of stretched bear skins. Forms for elk mounts jutted at odd angles from the floor. The walls were papered with Playboy centerfolds. The false eyes Lane fitted into his mounts stared up from the clutter of tools on his workbench.

Mara vaguely remembered what the boys used to say about Lane. He was an 'artist.' He had a way of making your trophy look life-like, the way he painted in around the eyes.

Lane and Mara stepped back from their hug, holding each other at arm's length. Deep lines fanned out into Lane's freckled, weathered skin from either sallow green eye.

"What's that smell?"

"Huh? Oh, I've been sawing this rack in half. Easier to handle.

Bone."

Mac entered the shop again through the apartment door, a beer in hand. He and Mara had been on the road all day. Mara wandered off to the apartment. A bathroom connected the shop with the garage Lane and Mac were in the process of remodeling into living quarters.

The kitchen and living area surrounded a wood stove. And though there were shoes and hats and hunting gear strewn everywhere, the room had a woman's touch. An afghan over the back of a dilapidated couch and a plant tied up to a stake. Off this big room, two hollow doors set in plaster board walls led into the bedrooms. The first room Mara peered into she decided must be Mac's. She recognized the dresser under all the shot gun shells and .22 cartridges. One drawer would not close, it was so full of socks.

She carried her bags in herself. Mara cleared a spot on the floor to open her suitcase at a right angle to the wall. She dug several paperbacks out of the toilet items in her flight bag. Mara piled the books to one side of Mac's unmade bed and washed her face. Until they could find a place of their own, Valley Taxidermy would do just fine.

The woman's touch belonged to a big, friendly gal named Susie. She'd made an arrangement similar to Mara's in Lane's bedroom. She'd lost thirty pounds over the summer at his urging. In the mornings when Mara went looking for something to eat, the cupboards were bare.

Mac was out of town during the week, doing construction work somewhere in Idaho. Susie rushed off to the office each morning at 8 and Lane busied himself next door in the shop. When Mara rolled out of bed at ten, she didn't have much of an appetite. She'd drink a cup

of coffee and read the paper, scanning the classifieds. Everyday, she'd make a few calls, write a letter, mail off an application. Mara liked this lazy, rent-free arrangement. She took her time in the bathroom, read novels and napped until Susie came home from work. By five o'clock, Lane had usually disappeared. Mara and Susie would sit over a bowl of peanuts and wonder where their men were.

In time, Mara began to think of Susie's friendliness as naivete. Mara was engaged to Mac; Susie merely lived with Lane. Susie gushed on about Lane this, Lane that. Mara did not tell her the "good old boy" stories she heard as customers came and went during the day. If Mara could believe what she heard through the bathroom door, the sound Susie supposed were mice in the attic had been Lane stuffing some woman named Debbie. Mara wanted to tell her friend the truth and didn't because they were friends. Most women, Mara thought, wised up in their own time.

Mac's job in Idaho dragged on through May and June, into July. Women stopped by the shop asking for Mara's fiance. Mara became disenchanted with sharing her bathroom with Lane's customers, the interruptions to her reading. The unidentified smell in the apartment on hot afternoons drove her out; she took walks along the train tracks. On Friday afternoons, Mara made pitchers of fresh fruit dacquiris, so good that even the boys made a point to be home. They'd lean up against their vehicles in Valley Taxidermy's parking lot, sipping their drinks, swatting flies and rating runners as they passed.

Mara began to help Susie pick up after the boys. The place was clean, but flies proliferated in the apartment and the unidentified smell hung in the air. Mara learned to co-exist with them. She learned to read without flinching at their touch. She learned to like their quick, tiny touch as they wandered among the hairs on her arm.

Mara did not begin to scan the classifieds for rentals until one afternoon after Lane had shuffled through the apartment to its back door. The unidentified smell poured into the room. Mara left her book open over the back of the couch and went to see what Lane was after. There on a small patio, maggots swarmed in and out the orifices of 25 assorted animal skulls. Mara closed her eyes against the skulls that seemed to crawl in a thousand different directions. She swallowed the vomit that rose in her throat.

SECOND THOUGHTS

One day, Mac thought, he'd inherit his uncle's ranch. For ten days each year, he harvested wheat on the family homestead. He left Mara with his mother. The women would go ahead with wedding plans, while Mac's combine circled the fields. He'd promised Mara he'd think things over.

Mara thought things over sitting at the kitchen table, her elbows propped on Alice's crosswords. His mother had worked all night; she slept now. She'd sold the old boarding house and moved into a trailer on the edge of town. The wind howled around it. The sound made Mara shiver. She couldn't believe Alice could sleep through that sound, even after a hospital graveyard shift.

Wind chimes tinkled. Gauze curtains billowed. Cats slinked in and out and about Mara's ankles, Alice's houseplants. One cried, clinging to the screen door and Mara let it out. The prairie unfurled endlessly from Alice's doorstep. A sense of timelessness paralyzed Mara; Grandma Winter's rocker moved within it, with it.

"You're a dull bride-to-be." Alice's voice surprised Mara around noon. Mara sat at the kitchen table where Alice had left her four hours before. Mara shrugged. She'd redone Alice's crosswords and begun to read. One Hundred Years of Solitude. Her breasts ached.

After lunch, Mara and Alice drove south to the Little Rockies. The little white church where Mara meant to be married sat on a hill overlooking a ghost town. It came into sight before the dust settled around Alice's stopped car.

The bartender said reserving the church would be no problem. They didn't hold regular Sunday meetings anymore. "Might have to do some serious cleaning."

The bartender's words echoed as Mara rubbed a spot clear on the window. She peered in. Dust. Everywhere. Mara pictured the church filled with wildflowers. She would stand at the altar in an ivory dress with a lace jacket. Her hair would be braided, her feet brown and bare. Alice smiled at Mara as if she'd seen the very same thing.

Alice said she would ask Reverend Jones to officiate after her Bible Study that night. Mara was in bed when Alice came home and reading Marquez when Alice woke the next day.

Wind screamed through the screen windows. The cats did figure-eights around Mara's ankles.

"Well, what'd he say?"

Alice launched into a diatribe on Christians Mara couldn't follow. "He must have said No."

Alice nodded, "Said he couldn't do it, said you and Mac had violated the sacraments of marriage. That you two had openly lived together. He said he wouldn't be made a fool of."

Mara sighed, picturing the reverend, his handlebar mustache and cowboy boots. She pictured him stamping his foot, pointing his finger like a pistol.

It seemed to perplex Alice that Mara wasn't disturbed by her news. Reassuringly, she went on, "Well, there are others, ministers. You can always get the justice of the peace."

Mara smiled, the justice of the peace was a plump, middle-aged divorcee. Encouraged by the smile, Alice suggested they register at the Mercantile after lunch.

The clerk led mother and future daughter-in-law past racks of shovels and rakes, galvanized tubs and plastic tubing, towards "Domestics."

The plates were thin, flowered patterns, not the thick solid stoneware Mara had always imagined she'd use for entertaining. The clerk followed Mara, steno pad in hand, making a list of items Mara hadn't acquired living on her own or with Mac. The clerk tapped her pencil impatiently. None of the modern appliances, whipped cream pressurizers, appealed to Mara. The sales clerk thought she'd never seen a more listless bride.

Alice fingered yard goods in the Penney's store, wondering aloud about dresses for the bridesmaids. "Hunh?" Mara answered, then pretended to feel several sheer floral materials. She sleep-walked behind Alice, trying to conjure up a bridesmaid, as Mac's mother finished her errands.

At the bank, the plumber's, the drugstore and the grocery, Alice introduced the reticent Mara only as her "daughter-in-law." Alice beamed, buying steak and wine. Mara purchased a Bride's magazine.

The wine, Mara knew, was a concession for company. Alice poured a pink chablis into empty shrimp cocktail glasses, while Mara licked a finger to turn another page of her magazine.

"Any ideas?" Alice asked. Mara shook her head and sipped her wine. Alice began tearing lettuce for salads. Mara turned page after page,

pausing only to sip more wine. Her sense of chronology became comfortably confused. The two of them sat before empty, greasy plates before Mara remembered Alice even setting the meal on the table. "That was good."

Alice tipped her glass, waiting for the last slow drop of wine to roll into her mouth, then set the jar down announcing she had a headache. "I'm going to bed. Maybe you ought to go visit Alan."

Mara washed dishes. She heard Alice get out of bed and make her disoriented way down the hall. Mara turned to see Mac's mother wrapped in a sheet. "Maybe you ought to go visit Alan."

Mara wanted to read Marquez. Instead, she took Alice's keys, backing out the driveway into a blinding sunset.

Alan invited her into his trailer. He filled her in on the plot of a television show they continued to watch and offered Mara a beer. Alan curled at one end of the davenport in his work clothes. Mara sat at the other end, on the edge of one cushion. During a commercial, she commented on how clean his trailer was. Alan nodded.

"My cousin came to visit. Left the place in better shape than when she arrived."

Mara nodded, unable to think of a reply. Together, she and Alan sat on the davenport, not speaking, until the program ended, as if their careful boredom kept the place clean.

Mara began to make leaving motions. Alan stood and followed her out. He showed her the cantaloup in his garden. Dark had fallen around the screen throbbing in his living room.

Alice, in a white uniform, let the cat out as Mara pulled in the drive. 10:30, time Alice left for the hospital. She flipped off Johnny Carson. Mara handed Alice her keys. In a moment of understanding, she said, "Think I'll take the bus back to the big city tomorrow." Here, neither of us can live as if we were alone.

Mara curled up on the sofa with Marquez. She heard what she thought was rain. She mistook the orphans crying on the doorstep for the cat's meow. She told herself the cats anking at eye level through Alice's unmown lawn were tigers.

Without sleep, Alice drove Mara 80 miles to the bus stop the next day. She hugged Mara and her eyes followed her to a seat. Each thought the other looked sad behind the tinted windows of the bus. Mara disappeared from Alice's sight long enough to dig a paperback volume of sociology out of her bag. Mara had finished the Marquez.

Alice thought the girl read too much. Once the children were born, Everett had never allowed Alice to read. But the trip would be a long one with connections to make. Better to read than dwell on Rev. Jones.

Mara slept clear into Great Falls. The sun was too warm, the landscape monotonous. She spent twenty minutes drinking coffee in the bus depot, listening to the pleas of a long-haired stranger. "Couldn't we go somewhere? Smoke a joint? Get a room? Mara shook her head and heard herself begin to talk about abortions and babies and.

Toward the pass, the air cooled and the late afternoon sun threw trees and rocks into long shadowy relief. As the landscape disappeared into the dark, Mara saw that having a child might not be the last thing in the world.

ANNIVERSARY

To her co-workers, the new girl seemed too serious to have been a friend of Susie's, the bookkeeper. Mara was pale, both overdressed and underdressed for an air-conditioned office in basic black. She shivered at her desk, shuffling papers. The calendar on her desk, blank but for one appointment read August 2. White corners, venetian blinds. Egg yolks. Air-conditioned John Deere combines. Three years to the date, the same glaring blue August day. Mara excused herself, joking that she'd be in the back office. The co-workers looked at one another; her trips to the ladies room were so frequent.

There, Mara dabbed at her red-rimmed eyes as she stood before the mirror. Even she thought she looked like death warmed over. She shivered. The will of this little creature seemed immense and beyond Mara's control. It seemed to surround her like air; it was dangerous to breathe. It seemed to surround her like light; it was dangerous to look. Glumly, Mara regarded herself in the mirror. The blue, goose-bumped pallor of her skin turned a greyish pink there in the restroom's florescent light. Mara took a deep breath and flushed the toilet, should anyone see her come out of the back office. As it's dull roar faded behind her, Mara returned to her desk.

She watched the clock. At ten minutes to four, she straightened her desk and announced she'd be leaving for the day. "I have a doctor's appointment."

Mara sat, waiting for Mac, on a concrete bench between the office building and the parking lot. The heat in the bench warmed her as she

scanned the drive for Mac's van. The sun was so bright, she squinted. She lost track of time. When her co-workers began to filter out of the building, Mara looked at her wrist. She didn't wear a watch. Susie called out, "Where's Mac?" Dazed, Mara shrugged her shoulders.

"Get in." Susie helped her friend into her car. Mara should have been there half an hour ago. Susie wove through rush-hour traffic toward the clinic. Breathlessly, the two women entered the doctor's office.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Smith?"

Calmly, the receptionist asked the nature of Mara's visit, then informed Mara that Dr. Smith no longer performed that particular operation. The red-rim around Mara's eyes widened, "But I made an appointment."

"How far along are you?"

Mara guessed about 12 weeks.

Without another word, the nurse retreated into the doctors' examining rooms. Another woman within days of delivery stepped out of an examining room. Her smock no longer covered the elastic panel in her slacks. She wore dirty tennis shoes and Mara watched one arch flatten, before the nurse bustled back. "Dr. Frazier will see you."

Susie sighed. She and Mara took seats in the waiting room, ignoring the magazines. A fern nodded near a vent. Susie took Mara's hand, removed the ball of kleenex from it. She listened as Mara quietly tried to vent her anger at the father of this, this child. "You'd think he wanted me to have it," Mara hissed. Susie nodded, but Mara could tell from her eyes that Susie thought she sounded irrational.

"Miss Johnson?" The nurse smiled.

Susie and Mara exchanged a look. Susie squeezed Mara's hand. The expectant mothers in the waiting room wondered as Mara's sniffing subsided behind the door what this flat-bellied woman's problem could be.

The nurse, a tall, middle-aged brunette, took nervous looks at Mara. She read to herself from Mara's file, then said. "The doctor will be with you soon."

Mara studied the room, its dull green, the wood-grained formica cabinets, the next kleenex coming out of the box, the charts of female anatomy with the logo of drug companies in one corner. The door opened and a brisk, handsome man filled the room with currents of air. His dark curls were parted in an unsuccessful attempt to make them lie down. He wheeled a chair up to a small counter hung from the wall and began to ask questions, updating Mara's file.

Mara handed him the folded memo on Planned Parenthood paper, confirming her pregnancy and began to cry. Abruptly, Dr. Frazier's scribbling pen stopped. A blob of blue ink collected on the tip.

"I'd like to talk about this first."

From the look that came over his face, Mara knew he wasn't prepared to counsel her. "I made this appointment without a second thought. I'm engaged, the wedding's not until September, and we agreed we didn't want to start off this way. I didn't think. I didn't think the first time either, and months later, the bad dreams came."

The doctor tried to nod as though he knew which dreams Mara meant.

"You know what I realized just this afternoon? It is three years to the day this happened last." Mara shook, physically trying to shake the thought. "I asked myself, if this was the purpose of my body? of love-making? To abort each pregnancy? To take a pill each day?"

Frazier said nothing.

"What else can I do?"

The doctor mentioned adoption, then realized it wouldn't do. How could a young couple give up a child, even if it was born six short months after a wedding. And then, Mara realized Mac had no intention of marrying her. In spite of all his talk after the first operation about the red-haired, barefoot tot in overalls they would someday have. He'd harvested, combined, through the first terminated pregnancy. This time, he couldn't even drive her to the clinic. Mara blew her nose.

The doctor began a little story about a child born with a birth defect. The parents had known before she was born that she would likely have a handicap. They'd allowed the pregnancy to go full term. The girl, confined to a wheelchair, grew up to be a fine violinist. One day the mother asked "Aren't you glad we had you?" And the girl flatly said, "NO."

In Mara's state of mind, she could not apply the doctor's story to her situation in any way. Was she supposed to see that children are not always grateful to be in the world. Mara tried to look the doctor in the eye, but her vision blurred. The doctor fidgeted with his pen. Mara fidgeted with her ragged kleenex and caught her breath in near hiccoughs between sobs. She had not more to say or words for what she wanted to say.

Frazier ended the 15-minute session scribbling, "I will not perform this operation in the patient's present emotional state." He lay a tan well-manicured hand on Mara's shoulder. "Get yourself some counseling."

The nurse wrote the number of a counselor at a women's abortion clinic on a slip of paper. "Didn't you see Dr. Campbell about birth control once?" Mara remembered the scene in the waiting room: tearing off her clothes, calling for her mother 1500 miles away. The doctor had removed the IUD just minutes after he'd inserted it, saying "you shouldn't be reacting this way."

"How is Dr. Campbell?"

"He died," the nurse said. "This office has all his old records."

It bothered Mara what the nurse must have read about her insides.

THE WOMEN'S CLINIC

At the Mountain Women's Clinic, abortions were performed once a week, en masse. There, the operation was cheap, but professional. It was legal. There, a woman had the support of other women. Mara pictured 20 to 30 women, reclining on army cots, under stiff white sheets. In the space between the cots, each held the other's hand, forming a human chain round a large, institutional room.

So the lunch hour Mara went to be counseled there, she was surprised that the waiting room was so small. Maybe it was just full of old magazines. Maybe because the clinic office was lost in the catacombs of this old building, with one frosted window on the real world, the dim light just made it seem small.

The door eased closed behind her. To Mara's left was a counter and a window into a small office. Three or four women in street clothes looked up, hushed in mid-conversation by Mara's arrival.

"I'm Mara." She felt hot and sticky in her office clothes, nylons, skirt, heels and jacket. She dressed these days better than she felt. The suit was appropriate to the over air-conditioned office she worked in; the chill turned her skin blue.

"I'm Martha," a woman in purple, head to toe, replied. She broke away from the group of idle volunteers, inviting Mara into another small room off the office. All of them expected her.

Mara was surprised how friendly the brown eyes behind Martha's thick glasses were. As she followed Martha into the room, Mara noticed Martha's hair shone and flowed down her back. Mara had expected to be

looked up and down.

Taking a seat in a vinyl tufted chair, Mara kicked off her heels and propped her feet on a hassock. She tried to estimate the thickness of the door between this room and the office, to determine if the other volunteer counselors, pressing an ear up against the door, would hear. Mara didn't know Martha. She'd called the clinic and simply asked for a counselor. She'd let Martha listen, but Mara's story wasn't for everyone. Besides that, Mara expected a fight. Afterall, this was an abortion clinic. Mara called them precisely because she knew she needed to be talked into it.

Martha sat diagonally across the cramped room from Mara, in a canvas directors chair. Mara's own chair was the closest thing to the chaise lounge she'd seen in psychiatrist cartoons she'd ever sat in. Martha handed Mara a kleenex. Mara removed her glasses. Minutes passed in which neither woman said a word. Mara commented how comfortable she felt. Martha nodded.

The silence embarrassed Mara. Though the only clock in the room was strapped to Martha's wrist, Mara had the sense of time ticking by. She was not accustomed to speaking without being questioned. She took a deep breath and described her visit to Dr. Frazier.

Fat tears rolled down Mara's face and she wiped them away. "He said he wouldn't do it, unless I was counselled first. Here I am."

Martha made no reply.

"I don't know what happened that day. Mac missed his connection with me. He was supposed to drive me to the clinic. Susie took me." Mara realized Martha couldn't know who these names referred to, but

she continued, "Susie and I, we've both been through this before. I knew what to expect: a night's aching around a laminaria. I don't know why I fell apart."

Mara waited for the counsellor to tell her. Martha made no reply. Mara sniffed.

"I told Mac what happened. I laid into him for being late. That was unusual. He's never seen me so mad about such a little thing. A ride. We never argue because he won't argue back. He just clams up, like I'm always right, like I'm attacking him, like there is no argument. Like he is an asshole. That's how he responded at first and then, I turned my anger into pleading. I said, "Let's have this child?" He didn't say anything. We were drinking tumblers of scotch and ice. I remember that. It was late afternoon and the sun deflected off our drinks, colored everything more yellow. I felt warm. I felt there could be a solution to this. I swallowed my anger, the ice melted. He listened to me. I thought we were working things out, little by little. But he still couldn't see a way to keep it. Thought it was all my fault, the pregnancy, that I tried to trap him. That I hadn't used birth control. We've been engaged all summer. I didn't see any need to trap him. I was as surprised as he was that I was pregnant. He's been gone so much all summer, we haven't made that much love. No way, he said, we couldn't keep it. The more I talked, the more he grinned sweetly, letting me talk. The ice jangled in his glass. He said he knew he'd slighted me this summer, being away so much. My problem is that I like solitude. I made up to him when he was home, so he'd keep leaving me alone. He cajoled me, said he'd make the time up to me, if I'd get an abortion. He threatened

me, he wouldn't marry me if I kept it. I smiled; I didn't think he'd ever planned to marry me. The main reason we couldn't keep it, he said, was because he'd just changed jobs. We weren't well enough established. I've been looking for a job myself all summer."

Mara paused. She was gathering force. She was surprised at the sound of her own voice. She was not accustomed to being listened to.

"I tried to reason with him. I said it didn't matter how much money a person had, money had nothing to do with kids. You just find a way. I didn't know for certain if that was true. I just thought of it as I talked to him. It'd be a big chance to take, but he wasn't convinced. Thin ice."

"I said, remember the first time. Everytime a woman on a soap opera had a baby, I'd cry. You'd hug me and say, 'someday we'll have one too.' I believed you. We've known each other five years. Isn't that long enough to know whether we're ready to take a risk? He didn't say anything. We talked for a long time. We had a barbeque to go to. I made a salad, cubes of cantaloup and watermelon and honeydew. Dangerous wielding that knife. Kept sniffing, trying to suck the tears back in. I was a composed drunk, after an hour or so. We went to the party. Neither of us said much to anyone that night. Mac didn't talk to me. The others told dirty jokes until it just got too chilly on the patio to go on."

"I've had one abortion. He didn't see me through that one. He was harvesting, he does every year for his uncle. Sometime between the end of July, the beginning of August. He had an excuse that time. It wasn't the way I wanted it. I wanted him to hold my hand. I went to

to see him on my way to Missoula, drove right up to his combine in the field. He stopped his circling, the machine for a couple minutes. Hugged me, said it was gonna be okay. He met my bus at Havre on the return trip. I remember he bought me supper. I remember the drive on into Malta, I cuddled up to him just like I tried to do that afternoon of the barbeque. I kept telling him it was gonna be okay. He didn't say much. The gun rack rattled behind us in the pickup. He held me tight that night. I felt like a kid. I was a kid."

Mara blew her nose, Martha didn't move.

"Bothers me now, he didn't go through it with me that first time. I said I'd do it this time, but he was gonna have to help me through it. I put it off until after harvest so he could. Must be the 13th, 14th week now. Late. Then he couldn't even give me a ride to the doctor's for a laminaria insert. That's not even an abortion. All he had to do was sit in the waiting room, 15 minutes. That was his mistake. I could have gone through with it, but he was late."

"He doesn't know what it's like. This time I wanted him right there in the cubicle with me. I wanted him to hold my hand. I wanted him to watch them suck the blood out of me. I wanted him to see the little knot gag the machine. He won't even make love to me; he's afraid he'll knock up against that little knot. His very own knot. He likes the way my breasts are though."

"I called my mother the night after I talked to him. I told her I was pregnant. I told her about the first abortion. I told her about the summer's worth of problems with him. I'd glossed the problems over in my letters home. They were full of descriptions, scenery and

weather. She heard me out, but she thinks I ought to talk to a counselor too. My idea that it's ethically, if not psychologically unsound, to have more than one abortion sounded crazy to her, who never had a choice. She thinks I'm off my rocker to think I can recreate the first foetus by letting this one grow. That alarms her. She just wants the best for me. She wanted me to come right home."

"I haven't worked all summer. I have no money. I couldn't afford to go home. I said, who's gonna hire a pregnant woman if I pack up and leave this job I just got, if I come home again. She didn't answer. She said, talk to a counselor. Do what I thought best."

"I'm not thinking very straight these days. All my girlfriends are aborting their pregnancies. They have better things to do. They think I'm crazy. The doctor thinks I'm crazy. It seems crazy. But it isn't the purpose of my body to make love and then abort everytime I get pregnant, is it?"

"The first time, I was just like my girlfriends. No way, I thought, I could support a child. We were living hand to mouth, but having fun. When I left him after the first abortion, I was tired of drinking and taking drugs and sleeping with all his buddies. We weren't getting anywhere, just older. We're all so selfish nowadays."

Martha cleared her throat. The second hand on her watch dial read a quarter to one.

"I know I'm not making much sense. You've listened to me for an hour. When will you tell me what to do?"

"Well, you can have repeated abortions without physiological damage.

We're set up here to..."

"But, do you think I'd get pregnant twice like this if I really wanted an abortion? And one, exactly three years after the date to the first?"

"That often happens to women who've had previous abortions."

"Well, what do you make of that. It seems to me like this kid wants to be born, like its will is greater than mine."

Martha shrugged.

"Do you have children of your own?"

Martha shook her head. "I've had an abortion. My ex-husband was a student then. You know one thing we women tend to forget? Even the men who will hold your hand through the operation, can't know what it's like. We have to understand that and be careful how we react. Don't destroy a relationship you value just because the foetus didn't come out of his body."

"I don't seem to have much of a relationship."

"Some people will say you're selfish to keep the child, that you're only thinking of yourself and not the baby's future, when you have a child and no husband. Think of the problems. Try to imagine what it's like to sit home Friday and Saturday because you don't have the money for a babysitter or you can't find one. Try to picture yourself carrying a diaper bag with you everywhere you go. Try to imagine listening to stories of what your single friends do, the fun they have. Add up the costs of childcare and formula and clothing and medical expenses. Of course, there are social programs to help single mothers out."

Mara didn't hear Martha. Martha's watch read 12:55. Mara began collecting herself to go, without looking at the counselor. She said, "That baby won't know how poor I am. That was Mac's problem. He thinks he has to give a child the best money can buy. It's an excuse. We're all making excuses. We think we know what's best. It's nothing but a thick cover for our fear." Mara stood.

Martha sighed and looked her client in the eye. "You don't know how you'll deal with the practicalities of your decision, but you want this child."

DANCE WITH THE MOON

Mara had thought riviera blinds would be better than curtains in their new apartment, but two uncertain months had passed and nothing but the drapery rods hung at the windows. In the meantime, Mara had decided she liked the windows just the way they were and since it was a second floor apartment, she left them uncovered. Looking out, she could see the boughs of a tall, dancing pine, the glare of street lights, powerlines and sometimes stars. Looking in, a voyeur would see a double bed centered in a sterile white room, an antique dresser pushed up against one sand-blasted, plaster board wall.

Yes, Mara liked the neat corners of the window and likened the view to a painting. Tonight, as she tried to sleep, moonlight fell across the crumpled sheets like a sheer blanket she could not disturb. She seemed able to feel the light and opened her eyes, restlessly. She saw back through all the years to similar restless nights as a child. Then she'd tossed and turned in her parents old double bed, beside her sleeping sister.

Tonight, she lay still until her eyes adjusted to the shapes in the room. She filled clothing hung in the closet with figures. She stared at the floorboards until the dark room was illuminated. She studied the angle the bedroom door made with the wall and the dark beyond the angle. The tiniest sound magnified itself, she looked so intently at that door. She expected a familiar form, even more solid than the dark, to appear there. The burglar with a key. She expected Mac.

When the form failed to appear and the sheet of light began to slip from the bed, Mara sunk a fist into the pillow beside her own. A dull, muffled sound. Taking the fist back to herself, Mara noticed the graceful arc of an arm. She punched the pillow again and the arm reappeared. Alarmed, she sat up in bed, as did the shadow the arms were a part of. Experimentally, Mara hugged herself and the arms disappeared.

She took a deep breath and watched her breasts swell in shadow. The breasts of both women swelled. Mara threw herself on the shadow, panting, and it disappeared. But as the sound of her breath and her heartbeat grew loud in her ears, Mara pushed away from the mattress. The torso of the other woman played on the wall with Mara's same swollen breasts, taut belly and long legs. Mara reached for her and the shadow's arm lifted out of reach. Indignant, Mara put one fist on her hip and the other woman mimicked her with an unintended flounce of hair. Seeing that this other woman was playful, Mara arched her back provocatively and fell back on the bed. The figure rushed into Mara's arms.

The pair played this way until the soft night jerked like a muscle around them. Exhausted, they fell asleep. When Mara woke, her lover was gone. She felt no grief, instead she understood her distaste for curtains. She no longer had anything to hide.

CHEERIOS

"I've decided to have the baby."

Mac looked up from behind his cereal box. Milk dripped from his spoon. "Do you have any idea what you're saying."

Mara nodded.

"Do you have any idea what an immense responsibility you're taking on?"

Mara nodded again.

"You're crazy." Then, as Mac drank the milk from his bowl, Mara heard his ride pull up outside. Silently, Mac gathered his jacket, hat and gloves. Mara padded around after him, barefoot, trying to give him the usual parting kiss. So far as she was concerned nothing had changed, having a child was a passive act. Mac ignored her. He slammed the door on the dim grey morning more firmly than usual, saying "I'll see you, later."

Mac did not come home for supper. He wasn't at Lane's shop or at happy hour. Mara called Susie and said, "I feel like dancing." She dressed, proud of the flat-bellied effect and the spark in her eye. She ran no risk of running into Mac at the Baghdad. Her only partners there would be black men and gays. When Mara pulled up out front, Susie stood in a crowd on the sidewalk, waiting to have her i.d. checked. Mara laughed; both women were far beyond 18. In her heels, Mara stood nearly as tall as her friend. Cars honked at them. Men standing in line with them, winked harmlessly.

They could hear the beat of Donna Summer's "Last Dance" waft out past the bouncer, through the door. The heat of dancers already crammed on the dance floor gave Mara the impression of entering a heart where flashing lights and throbbing music and writhing bodies were indistinguishable from one another. She and Susie fought the crowd for a table, but before the waitress could bring drinks, a mouthful of teeth requested this dance.

Mara could feel the knot in her belly rock from side to side and she held her belly in both palms proudly. She explained to her partners, during lulls in the music's fast pace, taking whiffs of the scent sweat made with their clothes, that she was going to be a momma soon. As word got around, shadows disconnected from where they leaned against the walls and asked to dance. Mara forgot her drink.

At 2, her long hair stuck to her face in damp, thick lines and Mara declined breakfast, hoping Mac would be home waiting. She drove across town, likening the traffic lights to the disco, a simple matter of letting one's focus go. Stopped at a red light, she felt a surge of moisture in her tight jeans.

Blood. Mara saw it by the harsh bathroom light. It looked like smoke dripping into the cool water. "Damn."

She cursed the familiar snore coming from the bedroom. She undressed, wearing only a fresh pair of panties to bed. It proved to be a restless night, as the bleeding gathered force. Mara propped herself up in bed beside the baby's father, hoping the angle of her body would stop the flow. She changed pair after pair of panties and sat on a towel.

She did everything she could to keep from staining Mac's side of the bed.

Mara was on the telephone when Mac woke. He heard her ask, "What can I do about the bleeding?"

She sat around all day with her feet propped up, reading Birth Without Fear. In the afternoon, she napped. Mac lifted the book from the arm of her chair. He read, "During pregnancy, women can maintain their usual level of activity."

AUGUST

Mac cooked her bacon and eggs, brewed fresh ground coffee, just as he had in their first sweet and sleepy days. And the next day, Mara listened to soft piano jazz on his stereo. On the third day, they shared a joint.

On Monday, Mara laughed once at work. Tuesday, Mac fell asleep in front of the television. At 4:30 a.m. Wednesday morning, Mara urged him out of the flickering blue light to bed. Thursday, he carried in sacks of groceries and Friday, Mara ate dinner with a friend. The friend had two little boys. Brian, the youngest, insisted that Mara kiss him. Without her kiss, he explained, he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Saturday, Mac left for the weekend. Sunday, Mara did the crossword. Monday, the incessant barking of a dog woke them. And the next day, it rained.

On Wednesday, Mara and Susie looked at an apartment in a swinging singles complex. Thursday, Susie decided to give Lane a second chance. That weekend, Mara went to Spokane and watched her hostess's cat move in the sunlight. The hostess was a single mother. Sunday, Mara returned to find blood oozing from stitches over Mac's left eye. He'd been in a bar room brawl the night before.

Monday, Susie found an incriminating letter to Lane in the trash. Mara changed the dressings over Mac's eye. Tuesday, Mara came back to bed after she'd dressed for work. She floated to the rhythm of Mac's sleeping breath: he knows no more about being a man than I know about being a woman, neither of us quite knows how to be human. Wednesday, Mara convinced Susie to rent the apartment, giving her a stern feminist

lecture. They put down a deposit. Thursday, Mac brought a friend home for supper. While Mara washed dishes, the men planned their weekend. Friday, Mac bought the Harley in Great Falls.

Saturday, Mara began to read an experimental novel. Sunday, she packed her books, her rocker and most of the kitchen utensils. Susie carried the boxes down the steps to a borrowed truck and back up the steps to their new apartment. She explained, "You're pregnant and should do no lifting."

Mac blinked his black eye in surprise when he returned to find Mara gone. She'd left him a pepper shaker and a dirty ashtray. He lay in bed, staring at the glitter in the ceiling. All the time he lay there, he thought how equitable and ordinary the past month had been. Mara curled up with the experimental novel.

Monday, Mara thought about giving the baby up for adoption and Susie in a moment of paralysis, called Mac to ask if leaving Lane had been the right thing. Tuesday, at the office, Mara felt a flicker of sexual interest in her boss. Wednesday, she kept her first prenatal appointment with Dr. Frazier. Thursday, she decided she liked the motel-like sterility of the swinging singles apartment.

Friday, Mac's landlord called Mara. In excited Greek, he explained he'd gone to collect the rent, disturbing some sort of stag party. Apparently, Rick, Lane and Jack sat all around the edge of the double bed where Mac lay, shooting a pistol into the ceiling. Mara assured Mr. Stergios the rifles lined up at the door were nothing more than Mac's efforts to move. Nothing to call the police about. The landlord's excited accent subsided into English. Mara hung up and smiled.

DETOURS by Michael Brodsky

Mara's shoes were lined up heel to heel in her closet. Her bed, the one Susie grew up in, was made without a wrinkle. Susie was out. That was the message Mara gave callers, as she sat at the kitchen table reading.

Their new kitchen was a bright peach color, a strained coordination with the living room carpet. They were short of cupboard space and Susie's Tupperware sat out, like other women displayed antique dishes and friendship cups. She'd spread a crocheted tablecloth across their formica dinette set. Mara's mug left a brown ring on the cloth. She was careful to set the mug in the same brown ring, sip after sip.

"I was glad she was masturbating," Mara read. "That way I would not have to spend hours making her barrel weep, locating the miniscule escarpment inside her that required incessant stimulation. But would her motions be an invitation or a warding me off with her own self-sufficiency?"

Mara closed the novel, 'or a warding me off with her own self-sufficiency?' Self-sufficiency? Mara closed her eyes. She opened them, then rose from her chair. She slipped into a heavy sweater and out the door, walking east on South Avenue past the grocery, the car lot. It was midnight, Sunday, and neon lights cast a dramatic glow on the street. Patrol cars cruised slowly past her. There was little traffic.

Crazy. She couldn't be sure he'd be home or alone. "Self-sufficiency." But it was imperative to admit her vulnerability, her need.

Half-way across town, Mara stood at an empty intersection waiting for the light to change. The same patrol cars passed her, more curious this time, amazed by the distance she'd covered on foot. They seemed to ask, "Don't you recognize the danger?" Then, as if reading her thoughts, they passed on. "I'm a big girl, bent on a mission, if I walk briskly and unafraid, no one will touch me."

After 18 blocks, the concrete and neon signs began to give way to landscaped lawns. Trees materialized out of the darkness at regular intervals, as though some thought had been put into their locations. With this change of scene, Mara herself was amazed her resolve didn't waver. Her legs tired, but her feet skipped up the steps to Mac's apartment.

The door was unlocked. Inside, moonlight shone through curtainless windows. There was a curious light to the close, heavy air. The place smelled of sleep.

Mara let herself in, familiarly. She stood in the doorway of the bedroom for a moment, studying the configurations of the sheets. A figure filled one half of the bed. It stirred as Mara's weight depressed the mattress.

"Hi."

"Hello."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have something to say." But suddenly, Mara felt a need to pee. The need ruined the cinematic way she'd envisioned the scene as she'd crossed town. Both listened to the loud sound of her urine into the toilet, listened to it ruin the momentum of what she'd had to say.

"I need you."

The figure made no reply.

"I wish we could let down our defenses. Quit pretending we're self-sufficient."

Still, there was no reply.

"Couldn't we just admit...we need each other?" Mara leaned over and put her arms around him. She lay her head on his shoulder.

He spoke. She could feel his throat vibrate, "You're having second thoughts aren't you?"

"Not at all."

Mara sat up, incredulous that he'd misunderstand when she'd spoken so plainly. "I'm a strong woman. I want this baby. I can fix my own breakfast and you can fix yours, but we need each other."

Mara heard his clock tick. "That's all I have to say."

She blew her nose. It was another unlikely sound. She bent to hug Mac again, smelling the sour odor of his sleep. He wanted only to sleep. Then, sniffing, she left the room.

"You're welcome to say," Mac hollered after her. Mara shook her head. "I'll give you a lift on my way to work, around 5 or so."

Mara shook her head and closed Mac's door securely behind her.

Stepping with her right foot, Mara doubted she'd trembled enough in his arms. Stepping with her left, she wondered why he hadn't been more alarmed by her strange presence in the apartment. She'd meant to enter like an intruder. He did not follow her. Patrol cars did. All the way. Home.

THE LOG AND THE LEG

The first time Mac hurt his knee, he'd been a kid. Just out of high school. Just after his dad died. he spent his inheritance on a Corvette. He ditched it after a month, a mile south of town.

The knee bothered him some, but then all flooring contractors complained about their knees. When he and Mara had started over, he'd decided to change careers. He switched to sawing trees. In fact, the day she skipped her appointment for the abortion, she'd ridden up to Nine Mile with him and watched the trees fall. She'd worn a hard hat and served a picnic lunch on a stump. She said nothing about the whine of chain saws, less about the thunderous sound a ponderosa made. She liked the smell of pine and sawdust.

He remembered all that when he came out of anesthesia a month later. The sharp antiseptic smell of his room on the orthopedic ward reminded him of his mother, the nurse. A thick white cast immobilized his right leg. He could vaguely remember Lane, Rick, the guys gathered around his bed the night before. They'd left a 6-pack, a can of snooze and a magazine though he hadn't able to focus their faces through his drugged eyes. He remembered nothing of his hours in the operating room, little of the time spent x-raying the knee.

When the log came rolling down off the hill, he'd been leaning against a Cat. It was coffee break and he'd been telling the operator what a fine woman she was, but not for him. Neither of them saw it coming. The runaway log pinned his leg up against the machine. By the time the guys could move it, the log had crushed the knee joint.

They loaded him in a pick-up and wound down out of the hills. With each bump, he knew how useless that leg would be. And once the truck pulled out on the highway, tears oozed out from under his eyelids.

"How do you feel?"

Mac studied the sky outside his 3rd floor window, through the venetian blinds. He looked at the clock beside his bed, 9:30, before he turned to the voice.

"Feeling no pain." Mac grinned through his disheveled hair. Mara saw the old flash in his eyes. "How about you?"

A thick-waisted nurse bustled into the room. She took the patient's vitals and closed his magazine, Playboy. Mara stood at the end of the bed, shyly holding the big toe that stuck out the end of the cast. "The doctor will be in to see you soon."

"This is the first you'll have talked to him since the operation?" Mac nodded to Mara's question as the doctor strode into the room. Mara sat down in the corner, uncertain whether to remove her coat. This would be the first time he'd seen her blossoming body. She decided one crisis was enough. In her lap, she held a book. She didn't know who the doctor took her for.

"Well, you banged you knee up pretty good, though you'll regain partial use of it with some therapy. Probably won't ever run again."

Mac's face betrayed nothing. Mac took the news mutely. It occurred to him that he'd never be able to lay another kitchen floor or limb a tree. Workmen's compensation. Occupational therapy.

Mara misread his silence. She thought of the added injury, of having no income at the same time all kinds of medical bills piled up.

She half-gloated thinking months of immobility might change his mind about fatherhood. The idea was so lovely to her, she even entertained notions of offering to come back, nurse him back to health, help him with the expense. Her blouse shifted over her belly and her reverie broke in time to hear the doctor say, "I've prescribed a pain killer for you. Ring the nurse's station when you need it."

An awkward silence filled the room once the doctor left. Neither Mara nor Mac knew what to offer the other. They heard the clock tick. Both stared out the window. The clouds drifted to the sound of traffic below. Looking down across Broadway, Mara could see the ob/gyn clinic across the street. She turned away and said, "I brought you a book."

When they'd lived together, she'd encouraged him to read. A man, unlike her father, who did not think and reflect, was a mystery to Mara. Mac seemed to like regional history best, the journals of Lewis and Clark, biographies of trappers and mountain men.

Handing him the book, Mara explained, "Novellas, three long short stories in one volume. Macho romances. One's about the son of a rancher who takes revenge..."

Mac's thick fingers thumbed the pages of Legends of the Fall. He thanked her, though he knew he wouldn't read them. Mara toyed with the buttons on her coat still wondering if she should stay or go. Her down jacket was too warm. "Is there anything I can get you?" She hoped he'd ask her back.

"That can of snooze."

Disappointed, she crossed the room carrying the Skoal. When he had a plug in his mouth, his kisses had always been matter-of-fact. And

if they were going to connect, the moment would have to be now. And Mara knew she would have to initiate. Coyly, she held the can behind her back and tentatively, leaned over.

Caught off guard, Mac failed to turn his head. Mara's kiss landed on one unshaven cheek. She stepped back, perhaps too soon. He caught her cheek in his rough hand and held her face for a moment. It was a gesture he'd never made before.

Mara heard Mac tap the lid of the snooze box once and turned at the door to say her practiced line, "Well, the baby's legs are strong." She patted her belly and disappeared.

The long walls of the orthopedic ward leaned in on her as she made her way to the elevator. Pushing the button for street level, she descended, pitying the poor man for his paralysis.

A LETTER TO MOTHER

Momma,

How long has it been since I've called you by that name? In the 7th grade once, I called you momma and the kids laughed. To keep the kids from laughing, I shortened Momma to "Mom" though the word felt strange in my mouth. Now in grad school, I run across this line in Piaget: "the mere cry of 'mama' has in it a soothing element; insofar as it is the continuation of the act of sucking, it produces a kind of hallucinatory satisfaction." Momma, you're with me, sure as I pat the place beside me on the step.

Tomorrow, you'll call me, dutifully saying my name, tentatively as I call my own daughter, "Allison." I remember you used to call home everyday after school, from the office, to assign kitchen chores and wonder what came in the mail. When there was a letter among Dad's professional literature and the bills, you'd have me open it and read. Grandma's letters would go on and on about the weather, how her garden grew. How patient you seemed as I stumbled over her handwriting and how impatient I was to come to the end of her aches and pains. The two of you wrote each other in sentences that dropped the "I". Always wondered why.

I keep a list beside the telephone of things I can tell you, things that will give you an impression of well-being, keep you from worrying. Raspberries. A friend has a patch of them in his back yard. Though times are bad, the raspberries thrive. They are so ripe, they fall off

in my hand. Like jewels, there is always one more red and plump than the last. I fill my pail in no time. The branches prick my arms and the leaves flutter into Allison's fascinated face.

My mouth waters for your homegrown tomatoes and I'd like to have a garden myself. My neighbors grow tomatoes in tubs. I tried that, but mine turned yellow and wilted when the volcano erupted. A natural disaster. There's a move among the family housing tenants to organize a community garden. The university is considering a plot next to the golf course. So, if all goes well, I should have tomatoes of my own late next August. A full five weeks after yours ripen. I'll have zucchini to give away. My friends have been generous with their garden surplus, but its not the same as getting my own hands dirty.

Do you realize Allison will be 6 months old this Sunday? It does not seem possible. Yet, she's twice what she weighed at birth. Grows like a weed. After all my long hours of rocking the colic away, Dr. Carter has supplemented breast milk with soybean formula. I'm convinced cow's milk is too rich for the human system. The switch came none too soon. That rocker I bought at that estate sale we went to? The seat was cracked when I bought it, but a week ago it split clear across. Pinched my bottom! Before I could have it repaired, we had another fit of colic. Just as Allison calmed down, stroking my breast while I sang "Rockabye My Baby," the cross supports loosened and the chair dumped us both on the floor. I threw the pieces away.

Momma, when I was born could you still remember being a little girl? I can. I remember your moments of anger, when you threatened, "Just wait

until you have children of your own." I can imagine the way you must have felt about your first-born, choicelessly accepting the responsibility. It was not quite love, was it? Ambivalence? And you had three more! I can remember holding a grudge that you couldn't love me absolutely and exclusively. Now, with my own ambivalence, I understand how you did love.

As a daughter of a daughter of a daughter, I've taken to sitting on my porch in the evenings. Comfortably invisible, I listen to lawn mowers and watch hang-gliders push off the mountain. Allison dozes in her mechanical swing. (We've nicknamed the swing, 'grandma'!) A girlfriend called, wanted me to march in a Pro-Choice rally tonight. Can't go, I have a week's worth of dishes to do.

Love,

Mara

BABY'S BREATH

The humidifier hisses and the television speaks and through the door, I cannot hear her breathe. Sometimes, I'm even able to forget the tiny body curled up under its quilt, behind the bars of its bed. I'm able to read or write a letter or putter around the kitchen. Or talk on the telephone.

But every so often, she'll whimper and wrestling with the quilt, turn over. Sometimes, she'll roll up against the bars of the crib and the furniture speaks. I'm so afraid the sound will wake her, I hold my breath too. I listen for the whimper to develop into a cry. I'm there if it does, to pace the small area between her bed and mine or to plug the cry with a breast. I'm there, but I'm always hoping she doesn't wake. I need time too.

But sometimes, minutes will go by after a whimper and the silence grows. There are voices on the television or a character speaking in a book. Or the sound of my pencil traveling across the page as I carry on a dialogue with a friend thousands of miles away. And the silence grows. If too many minutes pass without a whimper, that makes me nervous too. I turn the knob slowly and tiptoe to her bedside. I'll stand there very still and listen. Again, I hold my breath. Sometimes, there isn't any sound. Sometimes, she breathes too shallowly to hear.

I'll bend over the railing and place a hand on the small of her back. Sometimes, I can detect no rise or fall. I hold my breath and when five

seconds pass without motion, I'll give her a shove and she'll give me a histrionic sigh. She takes a weary breath of the dark, moist air.

Sometimes, I think I do detect a rising and falling, but I always have to double check; my heartbeat makes my hand tremble slightly, as the ribs around her lungs move under the skin.

Sometimes, she'll roll over, wide-eyed, and after a long look, blink, taking the looming face of her mother into her head.

Some nights, it's so bad I'll check her every 15 minutes, after every cigarette. And get nothing done. I'll go to bed myself and stare out the window and keep listening. Her breathing is irregular. I count the seconds between breaths or lie on my side, watching the rise and fall of her ribs. Some nights, I even throw back the covers and jostle her until I can hear her. I feel so responsible for her breath, I can't sleep myself. The only tragedy I can imagine now is her silent turning to blue as I sleep in the dark. I sleep only when I can stay awake no longer.

AMMUNITION

Mara bought the gun three years ago, thinking it might bring them together again. They could sight it in and target practice. They could spend long afternoons driving cross country, following herds of antelope. Or they could stand on the horizon together as she'd seen Mac and his dog do so many evenings at sunset.

She'd piled into the pick-up with the boys one evening at sunset and driven some 40 miles north of the Milk River, through wasteland that reminded her of a moonscape. There was a rifle ranch, a famous gun wholesaler, out there somewhere. She purchased a Ruger 7 x 57 on Mac's recommendation; it would be lightweight and versatile. Jack gave her a 4 power Bushnell scope. Both promised it would someday be a good investment. Mara spent most of her last \$300 on it.

In the field, she'd shot it only once, propping the barrel up against the window frame of an open pickup door. She took aim at a herd of antelope some 300 to 400 yards away. Mac peered through a pair of binoculars, when the gun recoiled against Mara's shoulder and knocked her glasses askew.

"No, no, not a doe! The buck, the buck."

Mara, shaken, never said as much, but privately she thought her heartbeat caused the errant shot.

Allison wailed when Mara called to see if Mac would like to buy the rifle from her. Christmas was coming, she explained; she needed the money for gifts. Sure, he said, and hung up before they could

agree on a price.

Friday afternoon, just before Mara went to pick Allison up at the sitter's, Mac appeared on her doorstep and grinned. They hadn't seen each other in months. "I'm here for the gun."

"Oh. Sure," Mara answered, "But I was just on my way out. Can you wait five minutes? I'll have to dig it out of the closet."

"Sure," he said again. And Mara disappeared.

But by the time she returned, both Allison's father and the gun were gone. The closet was a jumble of receiving blankets and shoes. On Mara's kitchen table lay a \$100 bill and a note, "This is all I can afford this month."

She waited another 30 days and called him at the shop, "Can you make another installment on the gun today?"

"You bet."

"Good. Wait there. I'll be by around 4."

Mara walked from the bus stop, a good half mile, carrying a case of formula in her hands. She'd left her mittens on the bus. Her skin shrank a bright callous pink against her knuckles, translucent in the November air. She had no watch. She guessed by the color of the sky, it must be 4:30 or so. A bell tinkled behind her as she entered Lane's shop.

She took a deep breath of warm air and asked for Mac.

"Not here," Lane replied too helpfully.

"Did he leave anything for me?"

Lane played dumb.

Mara asked to use the phone. She explained to the sitter just where she was, that she was on foot and more than likely, she'd be late. "Re-assure Allison, I'm coming." In the background there, Mara heard a number of indistinguishable cries.

She rubbed her hands together and hoisted the unwieldy box of formula to her hip. "Tell him I stopped by."

As she turned to go, Lane lifted a brand new \$100 bill from his wallet and waved at her.

Mara set the box down and held out her hand.

For two months then, she thought about the gun as an investment. She figured it must be worth more three years after she bought it. Just before Allison's birthday, Mara decided to collect the third installment. She worried about it for a week, then one Saturday afternoon she bundled Allison up.

It took Mara an hour to cross town on foot. And with each frozen breath, she reviewed the past year. She could remember those first tenuous weeks of Allison's life. All the nights she'd guarded her daughter's breath. The sound of Mara's heartbeat amplified and interfered. Time after time, she jumped from her bed to put her palm against the baby's belly. The only tragedy Mara had been able to imagine was a crib death.

They'd made it, nearly to that age Mara could cease to worry about such things. They'd made it, Allison strapped to Mara's back. She was going to see her daddy for the first time.

Mara hadn't called to see if he'd be home. She walked briskly as if that didn't matter, as if this was just a walk. Exercise. Her heart began to pound again. She pictured him in an easy chair, his leg propped up in a cast, bluing her rifle. She pictured him holding it up to the light and pleased with his work, slipping a cartridge into the chamber, forgetting for the first time in his life to set the safety. Her knock at the door would surprise him. Her face would cause the rifle to discharge.

Allison dozed with one rosy cheek against Mara's shoulder.

He was home. He invited Mara in. He offered her a beer. Mara shook her head, explained her purpose, inquired about his knee. She could see for herself, the injured knee filled one leg of his jeans like a log. He hobbled off on crutches to his room. Mara watched him, thinking, he couldn't be much of a hunter now. She saw him empty his wallet, hobble back across the room. Matter-of-factly, he counted out \$65. "There," he said, "we're even."

ONE FLESH

Some nights she couldn't sleep. A gnawing in her belly woke her. She'd cry out. She'd keep crying, as if no one heard her. She'd beat the air with her fist. In her dreams, another figure would turn and sigh and rise. The figure would lift her tiny body into the big bed.

The cry continued. The mouth gaped a breathless o-o-oooh, like a fish would out of water. It gasped and its lungs heaved. The mouth searched for something to fill it. A smooth, moonwhite orb rose into view. The cry faltered, taking the orb into its mouth. The orb swung away. And now the hands, the tiny fingers spread, reached out.

The hands pulled the orb into its mouth, gnawing now at any surface loose enough to pull into itself. A huge hand gently pulled the surface away from the hard pink edges of the mouth. The mouth sucked on its lip, the tip of one huge finger, then the firm pink point full of juice. The crying stopped.

The figure, reassured by the steady tug, sighed and slept again. The tiny body, filling with juice, opened its eyes and studied the dark. The eyes shone. The dark was smooth and round; it rose and fell with regularity. When one orb emptied there was another, a space between the two. In that space, the tiny hand felt a distant thud.

The hand touched its own tiny fingers and spread them like a star. The smooth surface of the space felt much like the fingers. Skin. The hand traced the skin up through the long lines of hair, closing around. A bone. It went beyond the bone, following the dull, distant thud.

The hand traced the skin along the jaw, the familiar texture of the cheek. Over and over, it traced the cheek. The tiny body sighed.

This curious touch is more certain than a lover's. It finds a nose and sinks entire fingers into nostrils. It traces the line along the lip and forces them apart. What it finds is so soft and wet, the tiny body sleeps. It spread its fingers, pressed its palm, against the tongue.

THE CAVE

Trucks ran over Mara several times during childhood dreams. She woke, sitting straight-up in bed, screaming. Across the room, her sister continued to sleep. No sound curdled from Mara's lips. Again and again, she opened her mouth, the tendons in the neck strained, her limp hair shook, her stiff fingers knotted into fists. But her voice carried no sound. She could not make herself heard.

At the beginning of fifth grade, the music teacher made each student sing a scale: do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do. Silently, Mara practiced as she waited her turn. "Do." "Re." Each note sounded with great effort, like old plumbing. Her voice faltered at "mi" into a moan. All year, she mouthed the words, "Are you sleeping, are you sleeping, Brother John," letting the class sing for her.

When she told jokes, no one laughed. Even after she became a cheerleader with an electronic megaphone and a member of the student council, she felt mute. At a council meeting, she stood to speak. She pointed out the obvious solution to the problem at hand. She sat again, slowly, incredulously, as discussion wafted on. It was as though she hadn't stood, as though she was invisible.

At home, dreams continued to wake her. Opening her eyes in the dark, she saw the floor and ceiling revolve around her as if the room spun on one corner. To stop the spinning, she'd crawl out of bed, attempt to put her feet on the floor, touch one wall. She'd holler help as she fell, but it was the sound of her body, crumpling to the floor,

that brought mother to her side. "Mara?" Mara opened her eyes, relieved to see the room stopped.

Laryngitis.

Mara's sister, mother and grandmother all seemed to think this loss of equilibrium had something to do with menstruation.

The dentist talked about his relatives as he worked on Mara's mouth. Biting into an apple, an old filling and part of a molar had chipped off. The doctor isolated the tooth, constructed a rubber dam around it. He cradled Mara's head as he worked and chatted. Mara grunted in response and gagged on her own saliva.

So, she was fascinated by the bookseller's mouth. Smoke unfurled from his nose like a dragon, she thought at first and then, like a furnace. The odor of his breath attracted her. Dry, stale, but so bad, something must be dead inside.

Beneath the nose, two full lips parted and Mara saw a burnt brown circle on one large, front tooth. How many cigarettes he must smoke! Then another whiff of the breath. Something like a dead animal in a cave. She whiffed again as he pushed her book across the counter. "Thank you. Come see us again."

Mara did go see the bookseller again. Beyond the stain, she peered at the soft tongue flexing against the teeth. She wanted to examine the tongue as she'd poked dead animals as a child. She wanted to put her fingers in his mouth, count the teeth. She wanted to hold the tongue in her hand. No, she wanted to see it swell against the roof of the mouth, lie against the roof of the mouth.

That day she bought a copy of Plato's Dialogues hoping he'd guess; his mouth was the cave, shadows played on his mucous membranes. Easily, he thanked her and hoped she'd come again.

She did come again and again. She came to peer into the man's mouth. She came to love the deathly reassuring odor of his breath. She wanted to hold it. She bought Passage to India, Beauty and the Beast, hoping one day he'd hear her. One day she would crawl into his mouth. One day she'd live there, in the cave with the dead animal, awaiting word.

THE FLYING SAUCER

Allison wheels around the apartment in a walker, a contraption she and her mother call the "flying saucer." Anything at knee level is at risk, toilet paper, Mara's books. Tonight, as Mara watches the evening news, Allison maneuvers into the bedroom, checking to see that Mom is still there. She had Cioran's Temptation to Exist in hand. She chews one corner and Mara laughs at Allison's food for thought. She thinks with her mouth. She tears pages from the book with her teeth. There's no longer any doubt. Allison exists.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

"Burd," Allison said, pointing at the sky. The aptness of Allison's name for the moon shocked her mother, as "botel" would later dismay Mara. Laying claim to a ragged breast, Allison repeated "bottel." And then one day, she said, "Read to me a book."

The child commanded her mother and crawled up into her lap. Mara cleared her throat and began, "Once upon a time,

A poor merchant, returning home from a business trip, stopped to pick a rose for his youngest daughter, Beauty. Just then a hideous Beast, armed with a deadly weapon, appeared and demanded to know why the poor man had picked the rose. The merchant explained it was for his daughter, Beauty, and the Beast agreed to let him go in return for one of the man's three daughters.

Mara paused while Allison studied an illustration of the Beast.

At home again, the merchant gave Beauty the rose and told of his trouble with the Beast. Beauty's brothers wanted to go in their sister's stead, but Beauty insisted she must go, since she had caused her father's misfortune. Beauty's envious sister's rejoiced.

The Beast met Beauty at his palace door and asked if she came willingly. "Willingly," Beauty answered. The Beast, pleased, led her away to the room he had prepared. Lying on her dressing table was Beauty's portrait with these words, "Beauty is queen here; all things will obey her."

At the palace, Beauty was served splendid meals to the sound of music. In time, she overcame her fear of the Beast. When he asked, "Am I ugly?" Beauty replied, "Yes, but you are so kind I don't mind." Then, the Beast asked, "Will you marry me?" Beauty, looked away, saying, "Please don't ask." And she went off to her room.

Allison turned the page.

As time went on, Beauty did indeed become Queen of the palace. She liked the Beast more and more, but each time he asked her to marry him, she shook her head.

Though Beauty had everything she could wish for, she missed her father, brothers and sisters. One evening, she begged the Beast to let her go home for a short time. The Beast consented and gave her a ring, telling her to place it on her dressing table whenever she decided to go or to return. The Beast was very sad, but Beauty promised to return soon.

That night she placed the ring on her dressing table and the next morning she woke in her father's house. (Allison turned the page before Mara could finish the sentence. She repeated and continued.) She rushed to give him a hug. They had much to tell each other. Beauty told of her life at the palace and the father told of his change of fortune since meeting the Beast.

Beauty stayed with her family for several weeks, though her sisters still looked upon her as a rival. Her father and brothers urged her to stay. But one night, Beauty dreamed the Beast lay dead in the palace garden. The dream woke her and Beauty placed the ring on her dressing table. The next morning she woke in the Palace and ran to look for the Beast in the garden.

Sure enough, the poor Beast lay senseless on his back. Beauty wept and reproached herself for causing his death. Feeling her tears, the Beast opened his eyes and spoke, "Now that I see you once more, I die contentedly."

"No!" Beauty cried. "Live to be my husband and I shall be your faithful wife." Mara read with inflection and Allison clapped her hands.

No sooner had Beauty uttered these words than a dazzling light shone everywhere. A handsome prince stood before her. Beauty's words broke the spell of a magician. The magician had doomed the prince to wear the form of a beast until a beautiful girl should love him in spite of his ugliness. The Prince claimed Beauty as his wife. Beauty's father was informed of his daughter's good fortune; the Prince married Beauty the following day.

The End, Mara read. Beside her, Allison fingered her navel. Mara stared into space: even a story requires a teller and a listener. Allison looked at Mara's blank, unblinking eyes. The child patted her mother's hand. She said, "Don't cry, Mama. Don't cry."

AN OLD WIVES' TALE

A full moon and a street light shine on the old snow. It is silver outside the room and my head. A how-to book rests spine up on the table beside my bed. The digits on the clock are blue at 1:15 a.m. I wrestle with the pillow and the covers and settle into a half-curl on my right side. I am just beginning to dream, when I wet the bed.

I soak my nightgown, a long wallpaper print flannel. In the bottom drawer of my dresser, a pair of blue surgeon's pajamas. Wearily, rising to change, I continue to pour out of myself. I watch the edges of the puddle on the floor creep away from my feet. Stupified, I bend to look between my legs.

Across the hall, my roommate settles into a drunken sleep. I knock on her door, impatiently, a third time. "Susie?" I say, "it's coming. The time is come. We better go. Susie?" Her bed creaks, jeans rise from the floor, sweater descends over a head. Susie.

Susie warms the car as I change pair after pair of soaking underwear. At last in dark slacks and an old flannel shirt, I pick my way across an icy parking lot. The car idles in a cloud of exhaust. The wind chafes my legs.

Susie asks where my suitcase is.

"On the top shelf of my closet."

Susie, impatient, "Did you remember your toothbrush?"

I shake my head. Susie sees my hands also shake and my teeth chatter. She makes me buckle my seat belt and backs the car out without further questioning.

I remember her confident hands, turning the steering wheel toward "Emergency." "Emergency" is locked. A sleepy janitor answers my insistent knock this time. A white woman hurries up behind him, asking "what is it?"

"The full moon," I say.

The white woman hands me a square of cloth, covered with a print like my father's old shirts. Another white woman in quiet shoes pushes a chair on wheels into the backside of my knees and I sit. Swiftly, I ride down over the dull gleam of florescent lights on highly waxed tiles.

Pull a string on the square of cloth and 2 armholes unfold. The woman in quiet shoes and Susie help me into this gown and another bed. This bed is higher and narrower than the one at home, the sheets more crisp. Out of Susie's purse comes the Edward Weston postcard, the postcard of a conch shell turning in and in. Thoughtfully, she hangs it on the wall at the foot of the bed.

I study the room by light from the hallway. An overstuffed chair. A clock at 2. A sink hangs from the wall. Curtains hang from the ceiling. There are no windows in the room.

Quiet Shoes returns, wheeling an electronic device. She attaches a belt with an electrode to my waist and the device. Tiny nervous digits appear in red on its screen. Paper, the width of toilet tissue, churns out of the machine. Quiet Shoes leaves the room. I rise on my elbows and look at the device. Underneath the digits, the screen is labeled "heartbeat."

I am fascinated. The numbers change quickly as butterflies beat their wings. A third white woman comes into the room, snapping a rubber glove efficiently over her hand. She covers two fingers with a substance out of a thick tube. Politely, she asks me to part my legs. She runs two fingers up inside of me and claims to feel nothing.

Yet another white woman comes, snapping a rubber glove over her hand and covers her fingers with more jelly. She runs her fingers up inside of me. I can feel her fist. Locking down between my knees, I can see an arm from the elbow up. She is satisfied. She thinks she feels a face.

Every hour on the hour, a white woman comes snapping her rubber glove and feeling around inside of me. I do not mind much. I'm hypnotized by the pulse rate flashed on the screen, the print-out curling up on the floor. Susie tries to sleep in the uncomfortable overstuffed chair. My belly rises like a mountain and falls like a wave. The clock ticks towards 7 a.m.

The number flashing on the screen divides in half. The needle on the dial swings crazily to the right, in response to my scream. I feel no pain, but there are less heartbeats than before. A rubber glove comes running and explains the problem is an electrical short in the machine. She pats my hand. Could she get me something to drink? She says I can have anything I want. I order milk.

The sun does not come up.

At 8 a.m., a white woman I've never seen before comes flashing her diamond ring in the dark room. The ring is beautiful. She asks my name

and adjusts the uncomfortable electrode in the belt. Susie snores. Diamond ring sends another white woman into the room to tell all about her ski trip. Ski Trip wears dark socks and sandals. She has her hair done up in braids. I like her. She has clean, capable hands. She is not white, but green. I tell her how long it has been since I have shaved my legs. I ask Ski Trip if she wants to have a baby someday. "Once I meet the right man." In the distance, a woman moans. I smile, doubtfully and drift in and out of sleep. A dull ache at the base of my spine wakes me. A somnolent voice asks, "Sedative?"

I shake my head and shift in the bed. Even Susie is green now, she has blue puffs over her shoes. She speaks through a mask. I moan. Susie puts a cool cloth to my forehead.

I dream of going to the bathroom. Greens disconnect the belt. I sit on the chilly fixture in the closet of my room. There are silver rails to either side. Nothing comes. I climb back into bed, daddy's print falling away from my backside. On my back, my hairy legs fall apart. A reassuring man pats my crotch. He suggests an internal monitor.

I moan-No. A green woman crosses the room with a flimsy white stick, a sharp spring on one end. Green says the stick is for safety's sake; "would you like a sedative?" I shake my head. It distresses me I cannot relieve myself of this pressure, even in a bathroom. I look around for someone to blame. Men pace the hallway, cigars in their pockets. I roll over on my side, the monitor sticks out of my behind like a tail.

The words "I want to push" push out my mouth. Greens bustle at the foot of the bed. I could shit in their faces. Susie advises me to pant. I do and the pressure goes away.

And returns as greens wheel my bed through the double doors across the hall.

This new room is mostly dark and shiny. Everything in it gleams. An intense overhead lamp bears down on a table, long as a body. Someone drags a cloth over the table and positions a chair at one end.

Ski Trip asks me to lie on the table. I try though the wheeled bed I'm on seems to want to push away. I might fall between the two platforms onto the floor. The pressure returns and passes without panting. A voice suggests I put my feet in the stirrups. I do, noticing the dirty socks I'd worn ever since I closed my how-to book and first tried to sleep. I notice the long dark hairs on my pale legs. I notice the cross wires in the door's window and a strange man's face staring through it. I notice the angle of the lamp, glamorous and hot on my huge labia. A voice, with her back to me, arranges a blanket in a glass box. A man with glasses, nose pressed flat by a mask, washes his hands in one corner of the room. Susie's admonitions to pant grow distant, as I gather up my insides and turn, inside out.

The cervix eases over the skull.

Susie says, "It's," she says, "a girl."

A tiny body lays in a puddle of blood on the table. It blinks at the chrome, the bright lights. It gasps and captures a breath. The air shrinks in the room.

Someone hands it to me, lays the tiny body in my armpit. A rope of flesh trails between us across my belly. Body and I blink at one another. How old she looks. How slick she is. How mis-shapen the skull.

According to the book, she is supposed to suck from me now. This is the 35th week of gestation, that point in its development, medical science believes, when a foetus develops its sucking instinct. She takes one look at the size of my breast and turns away. It is twice the size of her tiny head.

Ski Trip wheels her away in the glass box, bound in a blanket.

The man in glasses threads a needle and chats and sews me up.

I tell the man I'd like to fart in his face.

Susie passes out.

The muscles in my legs twitch uncontrollably. My uterus contracts.

I have jello with whipped cream for lunch.

I fly up and down the maternity ward for hours, unable to sleep.

I take Sitz baths.

I do not urinate or move my bowels for a week.

I pump my breasts.

I ask the man in glasses about the old wives' tale. He nods his head. "Atmospheric pressure," that's what he calls the moon and the waves. Indeed, the majority of births in any given month occur on a full moon. There is statistical proof.

In fact, I sit in my rocker and do not sleep for a year. I stare out the window and listen for her breath. My breath clings to the glass. Beyond the glass, light preys on the mountainside as two hands. The moon rises out of a form darker than the dark.