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NAMELESS HEROINES

By

KATE ELIZABETH MURPHY RISTOW

BFA, Writing, Literature and Publishing, Emerson College, Boston, MA, 2004

Thesis

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Approved by:

Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education
Graduate School

Deirdre McNamer
English

Kevin Canty
English

Hiltrud Arens
MCLL

Ristow, Kate, M.F.A., Spring 2009

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Nobody's Food

It was if somebody had died, but nobody was dead.

“Actually,” said Mrs. Finley, “I feel more alive than I have in years.” She held her belly and bit her lips. “Whoopee!” she hollered and slammed her bedroom door in the faces of three of her four daughters.

A pregnant woman, left by her husband! The people of the town knew they had to react, and when they reacted they did it by bringing food. What pregnant woman feels like cooking? What pregnant woman doesn't want to eat? “A pregnant woman in need,” they said to each other. They shook their heads and stirred their stews.

But soon there was too much food to eat and the three Finley daughters threw it over the cliff and into the ocean. The seagulls ate some of it; the fish ate some of it. Nobody had to know, because nobody used that beach except for the Finleys. The daughters, like all island children, understood riptides and undertows and were a little frightened of the ocean. Usually, they just stood on the cliff and hoped the wind would carry the salt water to them.

But Mrs. Finley was a swimmer. She liked the salt and the cold. When she was not locked in her room she walked down the path to the beach, took off her dress or nightgown and swam naked. Before this the children had never seen their mother's body. They found it both beautiful and embarrassing to watch. Even so, they did watch because they loved their mother very much, especially since their father was, as Linda said,

“Total history.” Linda was the eldest and most despairing of the daughters. After all, she was sixteen.

“Finito,” Carine agreed, hurling a plate of banana-nut mini-muffins, Frisbee style out to sea.

“Carine! Not the plates,” said Linda. “You don’t throw the plates, you idiot.” The glass broke into pieces when it hit the rocks and Carine thought it very pretty, like flower petals, and was pleased with herself.

“You’re the idiot,” she said and threw a croissant at Linda’s face. It left a spot of grease shining above her eyebrow before tumbling like a loose wheel to the beach below.

Susie was the littlest. She thought this was sort of fun. She laughed and plucked orange poppies from the cliff’s edge.

The girls found a certain amount of satisfaction in wasting all of this food, and were not guilty because they didn’t think anybody would want to eat it. Especially the mother. By then, they understood she was starving herself. Or something like that.

The Finleys were known around town as The Removers. It was the father’s business and he employed his children to pull up dead roots from gardens and yards. Most people knew the Finleys, since at some point they had all needed something removed. On that particular island, it was the trees that died most often. It was as if their roots got through the ground to the sea and were poisoned by salt, or perhaps algae. There were frequent red tides. Nobody knew why.

The Finley girls were known as being quiet, toothy and dirty-haired. They talked to each other in low tones, and had the feeling of the religious, though they did not attend any of the town churches, and were in fact, not religious at all.

In the eyes of the town, the family's godlessness made the situation worse. This island was a holy place.

"For the Finleys," the priest said to his congregation.

"Lord hear our prayer," they answered. They closed their eyes and bent their knees.

But after a while, the people of town really didn't know what else to do. It began to feel more like a burden and less like a cause.

"She's got to *get it together*," they hissed to each other in grocery stores and at town meetings. There was always time to talk. There were weekly gatherings on this island. It was a community-oriented place. People liked to be informed.

But eventually they decided, as people will, that they could only do so much. So they did what they could and that meant: pink bakery boxes, frozen lasagna, pies made with sugar, pies made with salt.

But there was a problem with all of this food. The house was small and was already so full of food that there was no place to leave it but on top of things. They left it on top of the piano and the television. There was food on every surface of the house and in some places that were not even really places, like the top of a floor lamp and the thick corner where two windowsills met. They tried, when leaving their various dishes, to get a good look. This was their town. Remember, they were *involved*.

The mother, on the other hand, was uninvolved. She laid in bed and read books by unknown authors. She wore her bathrobe over jeans and slept that way. At night the daughters heard her creep into their rooms. But she didn't stay. She trusted they could take care of themselves and she was right. After all, it was summer vacation and there was plenty to eat.

Broccoli soup warms the belly.

Wrote John Perkins, the bus driver. He left two pots which grew cold and congealed on the porch.

"Who makes soup in the summer," Linda asked Creature, the little white cat who had appeared out of nowhere as soon as the food began to arrive. Creature watched John Perkins leave his wife's nice pots on the porch and licked her lips. She was having a great time, living off tuna sandwiches and slices of bologna. She was growing fat.

"We must look starved," thought the daughters as the food piled up before them. And apparently they did. The people who brought the food, the ones who were lucky enough to get a good look, had remarked that the children looked thin. But hadn't they *always* looked thin? The people asked each other. Hadn't their bones *always* looked just a little too close to the surface, the skin so fragile, so translucent?

They had watched the Finley children work in their yards from their picture windows. They had watched as the girls dug and dragged, their sleeves rolled up, their

sharp arms white and determined, little pilgrims, they thought, little pioneers. The father worked too, but was sort of sluggish.

“What that man could use,” they said, “is a *son*.”

“These girls,” they said. “Must be *starving*,” they brought out trays of cookies and slices of apples.

And when the father left, the people said it again. This time they were right. The girls *were* hungry. They were *astonished* by their hunger and yet they did not eat. Not really. There was too much food for them to contemplate eating. There was so much food, that it no longer looked like food, but like some sort of decorating technique, based on food.

This was nobody’s food: shiny cheese cubes stuck on toothpicks, meats in mottled shades of red and white, curling around the edges, sticking to each other like grafts of skin. Food made for strangers and delivered in plastic. This is what was brought.

The father had left after the mother got pregnant. He said he had too many daughters, and he had a point. He knew a man with a job on a fishing boat that happened to be a long way off. The money was good, he said. He’d send some. *Sure*, he’d send some.

The people of town did not approve, and said so when they dropped off cinnamon buns and jars of honey from their very own hives.

“A fishing boat?” They said. “In *Canada*? Who does he think he’s kidding?” They congregated on the Finely lawn. They crossed their arms. They went home and poured disapproval into their spiciest sauces.

The other eldest daughter, Linda’s twin, had left with the man who delivered ice cream and frozen dinners to the grocery store because she said she had too many sisters. She too, had a point. She sent a postcard from California. She said they were staying cool, traveling the country in the Schwann’s freezer-van. The mother put the postcard on the refrigerator then went back to her room. She had not left the house in days. But really, who was counting?

“She’s going to hurt the baby,” Said Carine who had gotten her hands on too many books.

“Please don’t say that,” said Linda and picked up an egg salad sandwich square.

“You know, mayonnaise is poisonous if you leave it out for too long,” Carine said. Linda took a pretend handful of mayonnaise. She was into suicide jokes.

They were not surprised when the mother began to have issues with the pregnancy. There was a miscarriage early on. There was blood in the toilet, there was blood on the sheets. Carine called the doctor and he came to the house with a briefcase (is this a Charles Dickens novel, said Linda under her breath). The doctor said there was nothing he could do.

Susie held out a plate of Butterscotch cookies. They would have liked for him to sit down and stay, but he did not. In fact, once the mother was attended to, he seemed to hurry out the door with particular speed.

The girls hadn't eaten all week, or at least that's how it felt. For days they had been collecting dishes, piling them on the table, watching them form a mountain of cellophane. Deviled eggs with stiff middles and paprika spots, sandwiches in triangles, sandwiches in squares. Susie was afraid that the food would block the door and they would be stuck inside the house. She made a pathway, lined with picture books and building blocks that led to the doorway.

They snacked, sometimes, eating with their hands, using toothpicks and tiny napkins. But the food stuck on the tops of their mouths and covered their teeth thickly and they did not want to eat any longer.

It was a strange sensation. They were unaccustomed to not wanting to eat. After all, they were children, and children love to eat! But their real hunger was a different kind of hunger that had nothing to do with food. What they wanted, but did not say, was for everybody to *leave them alone*, so that *life could go on*.

"There has been no silence for four days," said Carine.

"What is that smell," said Linda.

"I feel like an animal in a zoo," said Susie and snorted animalishly. Then, there was a knock on the door.

"Hello?" called Nurse Buckley. "I have some cold chicken."

The plates, if they were left on the front porch, had notes Scotch taped to the cellophane.

The notes were short. After all, what do you say?

Dear Susie:

I made these cookies. I hope your daddy comes home soon.

Hugs to you,

Marcy

p.s.

Does he really know how to train elephants?

"What did you tell her?" said Linda when she read the note.

"That he joined the circus." Susie held a cookie on the palm of her hand as if she were feeding a horse.

Often there were prayer cards with pictures of Jesus and his burning heart sticking out from underneath the cellophane, and that reminded the girls that they were in trouble and that there were people in town who were talking in the church hall over coffee and donuts, while the children sorted through their food, indifferent and starving, but not for this; not for sticky ham slices and melon balls. The food had begun to look animate, like something that might begin to dance or speak. Just looking at it made them tired.

Young Susie collected the Jesus cards as if they had pictures of baseball players on the fronts. Notes and napkins were used to help the girls light fires in the fireplace. It

was a chilly summer and the house was cold, which was helpful, since it kept the food from rotting too quickly. But it was uncomfortable at night, and the children slept in the room with the fire burning all the way down to ember and then ash. That room was next to their mother's room. They slept there to be warm, but also because they hoped to hear the sound of her breathing.

"And how is your mother?" this was the church secretary who had made Rice Krispy Treats.

"Fine," said Carine. "Out for a swim."

"Well maybe I'll just go down and..." said the secretary. She had a name, obviously, but nobody could ever remember it.

"No," said Linda. "She doesn't like to be interrupted."

"She's naked," said Susie.

The church secretary breathed out, fogging the cellophane. *Those* treats went straight into the trash.

The mother had locked herself in her room, but she was alive. Of *course* she was alive. They had a key to her door, which they kept on a nail, hidden in the corner of a cupboard. They checked for the key periodically, but rarely took it down.

For obvious reasons, the people were baffled about this strange family and although they were curious, preferred to keep their distance. They pursed their lips as they drove away, thinking they should have just used one of those disposable trays from the grocery store since they would probably never see their nice, colorful, microwaveable dishes again. The mother hadn't even sent a thank you note. She hadn't even called.

“Do they even have a phone?” said the seamstress.

“Disconnected,” said the operator.

They blew powdered sugar from their donuts into Styrofoam cups and rolled their eyes.

Even so, the food kept coming: Cookies in the shapes of flowers, cookies in the shapes of eggs. Easter had been two days before or five or a week. Every daughter wondered how anyone could be so indiscreet as to give them leftovers from a holiday.

“Pretty tacky,” said Carine and plucked out an Easter Bunny’s candy eyeball with her fingernail.

An aunt had arrived, or was it a cousin or a friend. They didn’t know, or care particularly.

“These women,” said Carine. “They all look the same.”

The women had gray hair or white or blonde. They were thin skinned. They stood in corners and at countertops.

Women came and women went.

Please enjoy these muffins, which were made with love.

“By who?” said Linda.

“Duchess Marketplace,” said Susie. She peeled a price tag from the bottom of the plastic container and stuck it on the cupboard door.

"There is a social worker," said the guidance counselor when she arrived with a macaroni casserole in her bitten little fingers. "Who will be visiting your home."

For this the mother appeared, or the women appeared, or someone appeared and cleaned the house, took care of a few things. The girls helped. They liked helping. There was a rainstorm. They threw food into it, over the cliff. The tide was high and the beach was gone and the seagulls came down in fat white swarms.

Take care of each other in this difficult time.

Said a note taped to a plate of crullers from Winnie Watson, the lady who worked at the bank.

The daughters did their best. They brought the mother tea and sometimes a plate of toast, which they made by scraping the tuna salad from sandwiches and warming in the oven. They left these things on a tray outside of her door. But she kept the door shut, as if repulsed by the smell of food outside. One week passed and then another. There had been no word from the father.

"Not to mention money," said Linda and poured of jar of pennies onto the floor.

The girls, who had relished their freedom at first, had grown restless and tired of one another. And so they began to build a baby with food. They called him Paulie and gave him olives for eyeballs and thick, wavy hair made from lasagna. They kept Paulie in the shed where nobody could see him and the raccoons couldn't get him. When in the

night, smaller critters came and stole from his skin and hair and teeth, they rebuilt him. He was a good-looking baby, they thought. He was colorful and textured in a way that was pleasing to the eye. Though he required a good deal of maintenance there was plenty of food to fix him with. The girls grew more creative. They had gone below the cornhusk jumper and the bread crust skin and given the baby a pomegranate heart and real bones gathered from cold chicken legs. As they built him, they identified the source of the food.

“Tabitha Mullis, “ they noted. “Lasagna.” And indeed, the lasagna had the heavy, oppressive quality of its maker. The baby’s head seemed weighed down by it, stuck a little closely to the floor of the shed.

The girls slept on that floor with Paulie. They pulled quilts from their beds. They had flashlights. And so, when the baby began to cry, they were there to hear him. They were less surprised than they should have been. By that point he had become so real to them, so accurate. The sound that came from his lips was more like a howl than anything. But it was sweet-scented, delivered from a mouth made from the candy-store owner’s marzipan.

That baby, understandably, was at first confused. He had come from many places. Nurse Buckley’s chicken bones wagged a finger at the girls. Meanwhile, the little corn kernel teeth began to snap and clack. They were strong and flashy teeth. After all, the corn was the donation of the dentist’s wife.

For five days, Paulie talked and for five days the girls listened to the secrets he’d uncovered over the years.

“Mr. Crockett and Georgette *Smith!*” Linda gasped. “*For how long?*”

“I’m afraid it’s been a very long time,” said Paulie.

And nobody argued with him. After all, the bread crust of his skin had come from Georgette's own oven.

"Not the *priest*," Carine said. "Isn't that, like, *illegal*?"

"Tell us more," said the girls, and settled on the floor.

But there is a problem with a baby made from food. Paulie had a shelf life. He began to fall a part. To rot, unfortunately.

"Oh, Paulie," Carine said when the baby's little baby-carrot nose began to go.

"Oh dear."

But Paulie was wise. His heart, after all, was an ancient jeweled fruit, delivered in a basket by the town shrink.

"Don't worry," he told his creators. His eyes were shiny and black. They twinkled.

"They twinkle," Susie said.

"Yeah, yeah," Linda said.

"Like stars," said Carine.

The olives had come in a can from ninety-seven year old Dolores Carlisle, the oldest woman on the island. Of course they twinkled.

"I have seen too much," said Paulie, and with onion skin lids, he closed his eyes.

The girls wrapped him in their quilts and went to the ocean. Where else could they go? They figured their mother would be in the water. She always swam on afternoons like that, when the tide was low and the waves pulled themselves out easily.

They made a raft of driftwood and covered the splintery bits with seaweed. A seagull or something more terrible, loitered above and to the right. But when they pushed Paulie out to sea, they directed him to their mother who spit and waved white foam from her fingertips. And as Paulie floated towards her, they threw fistfuls of poppies and with six opened palms waved back.

The girls wrapped him in their quilts and went to the ocean. Where else could they go? They figured their mother would be there. She always swam on afternoons like that, when the tide was low and the waves pulled themselves out easily. They made a raft of driftwood and covered the splintery bits with kelp. A seagull or something more terrible, loitered above and to the right. But when they arranged this new father on the raft and pushed him out to sea, they pointed him to their mother who spit and waited and waved white foam from her fingertips. And as the raft floated towards her, they threw fistfuls of poppies and with six opened palms waved back.

Baby-Holders

It has to do with social-bonding, the development of it. Babies have to be picked up, they have to be touched. Here at the center, I'm what's called a Baby-Holder. I started a month ago. There was a background check, a TB test and an interview. This job isn't as easy as you might think. But you get better with practice, learn how to hold the head with your palm. Your hands get steadier, more confident. What you don't want to do is be nervous. Don't think about dropping a baby, don't think about tripping over the rug while you've got one in your arms and you won't.

After you get the job there are a bunch of pamphlets and booklets to read to help you learn how to hold babies right. For your first week you shadow a more experienced holder, the way you do when you get a new waitressing job. You follow this woman around and watch the way she does it, watch the way she holds the baby, the way she manages to keep it from crying. Then you go home and read the pamphlets. If you care, that's what you do, because you know this is important. The babies need to be *cuddled*, they say. The babies need to be *caressed* and *stroked*. I read the pamphlets like I was studying for a test, sitting up late at my kitchen table. I underlined the important bits, took notes.

"How hard is holding a baby? Anyone can hold a baby," Sandra said from the doorway. She cradled her arms and swung them from side to side.

"It's doing it right," I said. "It's about doing it right."

Sandra is my sister. I waited eighteen years to get away from my family, only to end up living with half of it. We live together because it's the only way to not live at home and we are not about to live at home now that we're both out of high school. I moved out here last year and Sandra moved in a year after that. This was supposed to be temporary. We made an extra room from what the owner of the apartment called a breakfast nook. Sandra sleeps there. We hung an old sheet over the opening of the nook for privacy.

I have the real bedroom in the back. I keep a tank of fish there, and Sandra says it's *insane* that the fish have a bedroom and she has a nook. It isn't a perfect situation. But we're glad we aren't at home these days. Our mother has a new boyfriend. His name is Gordy and he's five years younger than her. She says it makes her feel like a million bucks.

"And makes her dress like twenty-five cents," Sandra said to me. It's true. Our mother has been dressing more than five years younger than her age. We drive over there for dinner once a week. Our mother says family dinners are the glue that will hold us together.

"We didn't need glue before," is what I said about the new arrangement.

"And look what happened," she gestured vaguely, like whatever happened was sitting on the couch in the next room.

She says: Put your napkin in your lap, hon, when I pick up my fork leaving the flower-printed paper towel on the table. This man Gordy has his napkin draped over his thighs as full as a skirt. Apparently, he has manners and apparently that's something she's

into these days. They both sit very upright at the table, but when my mother passes Gordy the salt, I see his fingers touch her hand.

When you're a baby-holder, you pick up a whole language that has to do with touch.

"You are giving this baby a special gift, an essential Vitamin, Vitamin T, for Touch," Mrs. Z, the volunteer boss says. She gets this stuff straight out of the pamphlets.

"God gave us hands to heal and feel," she says. She talks about God almost as much as she talks about Vitamin T, and I'm beginning to have a hard time telling the difference between the two.

There's is a reason we Baby-Holders are here, and a reason the babies are here and if you ask me, it has nothing to do with God. These babies have mothers who are addicted to crack, and that's the real reason they're here. If we aren't with them they'll just lay on their backs and gurgle and cry and stare. Most of them are too weak to roll themselves around. Crack Baby is a nasty sort of name, but it's what people call them, even some of the doctors. Crack Babies, Meth Babies, Ice Babies. It all means the same thing.

There are four of us Holders who come regularly. Susan wears skirts and high-necked sweaters and looks at the floor like it has something written on it. Mrs. Z tells me Susan can't have babies, that her body won't allow it.

"It happens to some women," she says and I can feel her eyes digging into my stomach. "Sometimes the window of opportunity passes. Or there just isn't a window in the first place." A babyless woman is obviously the worst thing she can think of.

But Susan's told me that did get pregnant once.

"I know I can do it," she said, looking unsure. "They say I can't, but I know I can."

She never mentioned it again and I don't ask. Something about people with tragedies makes you stop short. But I would like to call Susan my friend. I would like her to be the person I could call up on a Sunday and say, "Let's take a walk. Let's go down to the river park and stretch our legs." Susan's story would come out of her on her own time, and I'd listen quietly, without asking questions. But Susan doesn't seem interested. She hurries out of the Center and takes the stairs to avoid waiting for the elevator. Once I asked her if she wanted to have coffee across the street when we were done holding, and she said: "I have to be somewhere," which seemed like an obvious lie coming from someone who didn't care much about telling the truth.

Sandra is that kind of liar. She came home last month wearing a man's shirt over her jeans. There was a scratch on her face, right under her eye, that smooth, dipped place where football players put their sunscreen.

"What happened to you," I said.

"Brandon has a cat." She turned her face away and walked into the nook. When the sheet came loose, she didn't even notice.

At the Center, besides Susan and me, there's The Girls, a couple of skinny high-school juniors who have their college applications in mind when they come to hold babies. They're too clean and soft looking to be picking up trash along the highway or

standing for hours at the Catholic Church's soup kitchen doling out bowls of potato leek. Before I started holding, I did that a few times. At the JC there's a Community Service board set up that nobody ever looks at. I guess I felt sort of bad for it, because I read all the postings, read about delivering meals to the elderly, walking dogs, collecting clothes and cans of food. This just made me feel worse, so I signed up for a shift at the soup kitchen. While I was there some man asked me if I'd like to come home with him and then touched my hair and said it was a strange shade, but interesting, and I said "well, where do you live," which was a stupid question to ask a homeless man, but I was just trying to make conversation. Also there was something about his hands holding the soup. I wanted just for a moment to take them by the wrists, put them up my shirt and press them to my stomach.

I tell Sandra about Vitamin T and we laugh and it feels good, like we're kids in our bedroom instead of roommates in a dumpy apartment one town over from where we grew up. Sometimes I look at Sandra and think, "how did we get here." Sometimes I almost say it out loud, but if I said it out loud, Sandra would just say "where?" and that would be a pretty good question that I wouldn't be able to answer. Sandra isn't going to the JC. She's working at the Safeway.

"Stroke the baby!" she squealed when I showed her the pamphlet. "This thing, it sounds like a sex manual."

"Maybe you'll pick up some new tips," I said.

I'm a baby-holder because of this: I read somewhere that you have to be touched eleven times a day in order to survive. This article, it was just trash. I said: "eleven

times!” out loud. I was sitting in the dentist’s office waiting to get a filling. I tried to think about the last time I’d been touched in any significant way and came up blank. But, wait, the article said, there’s a trick. It might just be the brush of an arm. It might be unintentional, the way the cashier touches your palm when they hand you your change. So I have to admit, that lying in the dentist’s chair I was a little bit relieved when he cupped my chin with his hand, when I felt his skin coming warm through the glove.

Mrs. Z, on the other hand, is somebody who is no stranger to touch. She has five kids and says if she could she’d be pregnant all the time.

“I don’t care about getting fat,” Mrs. Z says. “I don’t care about the stretch marks, the morning sickness, nothing. Young girls now, what a bunch of whiners, yapping about a couple of extra inches around their middles right in the faces of their beautiful babies.” Mrs. Z is fat. And I like the stretch of her body, the way her hips sway when she walks. She’s been director here for longer than anyone knows. She can hold two babies at a time and walk and hum so that one falls asleep and then the other catches on and falls asleep too. She wears sweatshirts made of cotton. Designs them herself, sews pictures on the front, little animals and flowers in baskets. Sometimes the pictures are of her grandkids.

“I like to keep these ones close to my heart,” Mr. Z says and taps the happy little faces, which have become deformed and wrinkled, pressed up against the long sag of her chest.

Two weeks ago, Sandra came home from work and told me she’d found out that the guy who worked the meat counter has a baby at the center.

"It's named Maya," she told me. "Do you know a baby named Maya? Apparently the mom's a total fuck-up. They weren't ever really together. But Jared's trying. He's a little stupid, but he's clean and kind of cute."

"Jared?" I asked.

"The meat guy." Sandra said.

"Clean?" I said.

"Like of drugs." She looked annoyed.

"I know Maya," I told her. Maya has been at the center longer than most of the other babies. She is growing, but slowly. I told Sandra this, and for a moment, she seemed pleased and I wondered if she'd tell Jared the meat guy, if it would offer him some sort of encouragement, if he'd work a double in honor of his growing baby.

She said, "I guess that's what happens, huh," because she didn't want to seem like she cared.

I said, "Most of the time," because the fact is some of those babies don't seem to be growing at all.

What I didn't tell Sandra is that Maya is the only baby I haven't held, because Maya hates to be touched. Mrs. Z tells us she'll get better in time, that she'll grow accustomed to the feel of our skin. But for now, most of the volunteers avoid Maya. If you try to pick her up, she arches her back and throws out her arms. She cries silently, like she hates the world so much she won't even give it noise. But Mrs. Z holds her anyway, singing little songs about other little babies, giving us the usual speech about touching and stroking and cradling.

"Each baby," she says and rolls her eyes heavenward. "Each baby is a gift."

We nod our heads and hold our babies close. But the truth is I'm starting to hate Mrs. Z a little bit. At least once a week she asks me if I have a boyfriend. The answer is no, no and no again. I tell her I'm waiting for Prince Charming and she shakes her big head and laughs her big laugh and says, "Then you'll be waiting for a long time." But I don't mind waiting. I have what you might call faith.

And the truth is, I wouldn't know what to do with a boyfriend if one fell right in my lap. What I do know is what I'm not looking for. The man for me won't be one of the losers with rough, nicotine-stained fingers that drive around in junky old trucks with their elbows poking out the window, even when it's raining. That's who Sandra goes out with. That's who sends Sandra home in the early-morning hours with smeared eyeliner and a crooked skirt.

I'm smarter than that.

The man for me will have clean hands, a capable mouth that is good with words and direction. I know one man like that. Dr. Paulson, the main doctor at the Centerr has hands that are so smooth and translucent they almost reflect light. He comes through twice a week. He spends time. He holds babies against his shirt. It is something I like to watch.

Once I told Sandra that Dr. Paulson had been a trip to Africa to help care for babies with AIDS. I said, "He spent six months there, living in a mud village, helping these babies."

She looked at me, looked right into my face, and said: "You. Have. A. Crush. Oh my *God*. Miss Immaculate has a *crush* on a *doctor*!"

Then she did something strange. She came across the room and kissed my cheek, and then she was gone, out the door, singing "A crush, a crush, a crush," the way she did when we were eleven and twelve years old, and I got caught staring at Ryan Tilton on the school bus.

So you can understand why I didn't tell Sandra when I went down to Safeway last week on a day I knew she wouldn't be working. She'd gone to the gutted out amusement park on the coast with the Coke guy.

"Romantic," I said

"Go feed your fish." She sucked her cheeks in and pushed her eyes out, fish-like.

And you can understand why I didn't tell Sandra that I walked straight up to the meat counter, that I stood there for a good couple of seconds and watched the back of a man who may or may not have been Maya's dad moving a child-size ham through a slicer. The thing is, once I knew about Jared, I couldn't stop wondering if maybe he would want to know about Maya, would want to know how she was doing. I was thinking I should tell him his baby's okay, but not great. That maybe the center isn't the best place for her, that she recognizes nobody not Mrs. Z, not Dr. Paulson, not me, that when you stand over her crib, when you touch her belly, she does nothing to respond.

"It's not your business," Sandra told me.

"He could come see her," I said. "Babies recognize their parents by scent."

"Is that true?" Sandra looked at me.

"Well," I said, "You know what I mean."

She cocked her head to one side so her hair hit the top of her shoulder. She has picked up away of moving her body that is new. She moves jerkily, drawing attention to body parts that might otherwise remain hidden.

Sandra says I'm wasting a perfectly good bedroom. Like, if all you are going to do is sleep, you don't deserve a door.

"You're forgetting the fish," I tell her. "They live there, too."

"Doesn't count," she says, "Unless those things are getting into bed with you, and if they are, I don't want to know about it."

The fish don't sleep in bed with me, they sleep in a big tank with a bubbler and treasure chest that opens and closes. The tank stays lit up and at night and I count bubbles and watch the fish move their lips against the water. In the morning I clean their tank and drop food above them. It's a god-like feeling, like giving something stars. But aside from this, their world has nothing to do with mine. I like it this way. They are separate.

But I care for them. I've been thinking about stopping by the pet store on my way home from work to pick out a couple of new additions for the tank: a miniature scuba diver or maybe an octopus for them to rest near. Though what I know is that they always sleep in the same place, a tall cluster of plastic weeds that explodes through the middle of the tank like fireworks.

When I sleep I take up a small corner of my bed. I sleep with my legs bent in a weird position, half fetal, half jumping. I am the most aware of this when I hear Sandra lead a man into her room, when I hear the way they laugh at the sheet as they push it

aside, when their shoes hit the carpet in four definite thuds like the final beats at the end of a song.

It is in those moments that I want to be here the least. I was a good student. I might be at real college in a real city. But I came here instead. I got a part-time job at the law office downtown. I'm planning on doing some traveling. At first, I was saving money for a trip to Sweden where I've heard it is clean and the sun stays out all night during some days of the summer. But now I'm thinking about asking Dr. Paulson to tell me more about Africa. I'll tell him about my savings, about Sweden, I'll say, "I'm thinking about changing my mind, Dr. Paulson. Because who needs clean, who needs light? Who needs these things when there's all those babies out there?" Dr. Paulson will admire me, will see that I care, will put out his hand and touch my skin.

Unlike Sweden, this town isn't clean. It's because of the mills. They make the place smell like rotten meat. You have to go to the coast to get away from it and even then, the air is foggy and brown and half of the seagulls look like they would choose death if Seagull Suicide was an option. At the center the air smells like powder and sweat, it's a little sour, but it's a soft kind of smell, and if you put your nose over a baby's head you get this nice, dizzy feeling like right before you fall asleep.

"A boyfriend?" Mrs. Z says, over and over. "Do you have a boyfriend yet?"

"Not at the moment," I say. In my arms is a baby named Jamie who isn't growing hair.

"A long, long time," she says. "You could be waiting forever!"

"I'm very patient," I tell her back, because that's what you say.

The man for me will have fingers that could play the piano or separate the meat from the bones of a fish without struggle.

At Safeway, I approached the meat counter slowly like I was trying not to startle someone. I didn't know if the man behind the counter was Jared until he turned around and asked me what I needed. It wasn't the nametag that gave him away. Under his baseball cap, Jared's eyes were like a less-vacant version of Maya's.

"Hi," I said and he looked confused, like I'd just asked him directions for a faraway place where neither of us would ever go.

"Hi?" he said.

I asked for the first thing I saw: a pound of ground turkey. When he handed it over I was pleased, and a little relieved, by the slenderness of his fingers underneath the gloves.

Since then I've been making it a point to try with Maya. I lay my hand over her chest and hold her feet in my hands. I think it's possible that she is growing used to me.

"Just by stroking her you are performing a life-giving act," Mrs. Z says while walking among us, like some sort of religious leader in a sweatshirt full of petunias.

The Center is short on volunteers, so I've been going four days a week now instead of three. It's hard to think about school when you know all these babies are lying

around with nobody to pick them up. Last week I held Maya for five minutes before she grew stiff and hot and opened her mouth into a perfectly round and silent howl.

“It’s like watching something bloom,” Mrs. Z says, when Maya finally sighs and gives up to exhaustion. The shudder of breath that comes from this baby feels a little bit to me like a last one, but maybe I’ll just let Mrs. Z be right.

There is one thing I know for sure about babies. When you’re around them, you can’t help but start to imagine their futures. And sometimes the futures I imagine for these ones aren’t all that bright. In the pamphlet it says, “In your arms you might be cradling a rocket scientist, a pianist, an Olympic athlete.” At least one famous baby has come out of this place. This town is on the map for one reason. It is the hometown of a rock star who has been dead for five years. But when I look down at the baby in my arms I’m likely to picture it big and dirty and holding a can of beer between its knees while it drives up and down the strip. Your imagination can’t always be cheerful.

But Maya, I think she’ll do OK. When I’m bending over her crib, not touching, just getting her used to focusing on another person, it’s almost like I don’t want to breathe out, like I’m afraid my breath will burn right into her. She’s that delicate, something you should be able to slip under your shirt, and I won’t say that sometimes I don’t think about doing that, or that I don’t pretend she’s mine.

From behind the meat counter, Jared spoke abruptly.

“You look familiar,” he told me before handing over my meat. I nodded at him and said, “I know,” and then I just stood there.

“You need something else?”

“Sandra,” I said and looked towards the check-out. “I’m Sandra’s sister.”

Jared nodded and said, “Nice to meet you,” and put out his hand. It was a good hand shake. I held onto it for a little too long before letting go.

My hands have gotten to be red and cracked, and sometimes it hurts even to hold a pencil. At the center we wash our hands three times in hot water and antibacterial soap before we can pick up a baby. It’s a rule. There are other rules too, like that you can never, ever, take a baby out of the room, not even down the hall or to the waiting room to look out the window. And I don’t, obviously. But like I said, I won’t pretend that sometimes I don’t think about it, that sometimes I don’t think about walking Maya down to the Safeway, stiff and howling, and kicking her feet.

My schoolwork is slipping. I’m distracted most of the time. I wake up from dreams where I’m holding a baby and then the baby turns into a fish and it slithers out of my arms and falls to the ground and when I look down its head cracks open and a bunch of babies crawl out, all of them crying, the whole floor covered with babies.

If Sandra hears me in the night, I tell her the dreams are falling dreams, the kind everyone wakes up from screaming.

“Everyone does not wake up screaming,” she says, and I say “Whatever,” and give her a raised-eyebrow, because we both know she’s done plenty of screaming in the night.

I can't think about the dreams, or about Sandra when I'm at the center. You have to put all that stuff aside or the baby will sense it and start crying and once one of these babies starts crying, they might all start crying, and then there's not telling how long it will take them to stop. Sometimes you get a headache and want to just leave the babies in their cribs and shut the door.

When Mrs. Z sees one of the volunteers get that look she says, "Think about these helpless little creatures, think about what they've endured, in their short lives."

Susan does not get that look. The problem with Susan is sometimes she won't put a baby down when it's time to go.

"Okay, now," Mrs. Z has to say. "Let's tuck Devin in, lets just let little Julie have some rest." Susan's face gets pink, then white and eventually she lets Mrs. Z take the baby from her arms. But before putting them back down at her sides she holds them right where they were for a minute. The sleeves on her sweaters are always too short and her wrists look dry and bone-white like all the color was burned out of them with bleach.

"What are you doing this weekend?" I asked Susan once, and she looked a little confused like I'd asked her to solve a math problem or list all the presidents in alphabetical order.

A week or so ago I found a boot print in my bathtub. Now, I'm thinking I might need to lay down some ground rules for this apartment. One of my rules will be no shoes in the bathtub. It's not so much to ask. It's finding the right time to ask that's the problem. For one night I wish Sandra would come home from work a little earlier than usual. We'd eat spaghetti at the kitchen table and while we were washing the dishes I'd

say, "About this Coke guy. What's his name? And what's the deal with him anyway? You said he has a cat? Tell me, does this cat have a name?"

"You are giving this baby a special gift," Mrs. Z. tells us again and again. I watch Susan curve her dry wrists around a baby that does not belong to her or maybe to anybody, and am fed up with all this talk of giving and stroking and saving because in that moment none of it seems to be getting anyone anywhere.

Sandra says the Coke guy is looking for a roommate, that the rent is cheap, that they've talked about her moving in since they're spending all these nights together anyway. She says it's about time she got out of this apartment, and into someplace that has a real door, for Chrissakes. But I can tell she doesn't mean it. Not yet. Sandra is smarter than that. Smarter than she looks with the makeup and the red Safeway apron that hangs onto her like an unfinished dress. I think, sometimes, that if she were to just relax her body, get it out of that stupid show-off position, that the apron wouldn't look half bad on her.

The most important thing you learn to do while you are holding a baby is to relax the muscles in your arms and just let it sort of sink through your skin and into your bones, and I think it must be sort of like that with all touch, even the bad kind, the way you press into someone, the way you close the space.

What is eleven times a day? Who knows. I'm still trying to figure out what counts. At the center I slide my fingers under a baby and let its weight sink down into my palms like it might grow roots there.

But there are other ways too. Outside, when it rains, don't put your hood up and hope that counts. If you don't think about the wet it feels like a hundred cold little fingers massaging your scalp. On the elevator, don't move out of the way so quickly. That shoulder next to yours, that elbow that finds your side. That might be your chance.

I know Sandra won't be moving any time soon, but you can't blame her for being a little fed up. That sheet that covers her nook doesn't do its job. It falls down. I see her naked and stretched across her bed while some booted man pulls on his jeans in the early morning hours. The space between the doorframe and the sheet is thin, and in this part of the apartment there is very little light. Still, I've seen her clearly enough. I've seen the line of small, finger-shaped bruises trickled like liquid down her spine.

This is when it doesn't make sense. There are babies like Maya that never really relax in your arms, that keep on fighting, that grow up this way, that cannot be convinced by touching or stroking or anything else.

But this is when it does: You learn to cradle a baby with just one arm. You take the other and hold your hand against that baby's chest until she finds your fingers and grabs one of them as if it were as thick and sturdy as a tree and just holds on.

The Oldest Animal

Yesterday I told my students about the oldest animal. The oldest animal is a clam. I read about it the Sunday Times. By counting the rings on its shell, the scientists have estimated it to be 405 years old.

“A clam is a mollusk,” I said. “Who can tell me what a mollusk is?”

“Mollusks are gross,” said Jamie and scowled. Jamie is a bully. His anger grows inside him like a strange desert plant, dry and prickled at the surface but wet and fleshy at its middle part.

Our school is on an island and so we study the sea. We walk down to the docks when the weather allows, and with nets pull up sloppy messes of jellyfish and seaweed. We watch the anemones close their sulky lips in the disturbed waves and we stare at the detached eyes of shrimps and crabs as they pass sideways through the water. My students can identify the cone-shaped hats of Limpets and the wagging white stems of Feather Dusters. They know which creatures are edible and which are not. They’ve written poems and fables about the animals that live in the darkest parts of the sea, the animals that they’ve never seen, that only come to the surface at night, stirring the water into a fluorescent glow.

A few of my students wanted to know where the oldest animal lives.

“The clam was found in Iceland,” I said. I pulled down our bright, waxy world map and pointed out Iceland to them.

“Remember what I told you about Iceland?”

"Iceland is not really made of ice," said Christine from the back of the room. Christine only talks during Geography. She loves the world as if she created it herself. I want to believe she will always feel this way.

"What else," I said.

"Greenland," said Christine. "Greenland is ice and Iceland is Green."

My students are as eager as priests to tell the world what they know.

"Let's go see the oldest animal!" said Teresa, and the class chimed in together, as if a conductor had lifted his hands, signaling them to begin.

"For our field trip," said Tommy. "We'll go see the oldest animal for our field trip!"

I could have lied, but I didn't. Instead, I said, "the oldest animal is dead now."

"It died," said Christine. "How did it die?"

"You see," I said and stopped. I leaned my pointer against the chalkboard. "It was discovered, taken up from the bottom of the sea with the other clams."

"How could someone kill the oldest animal?" asked Susan who is sensitive and always tearful, not just in her eyes, but everywhere, in her movements, expressions and even the way she inhabits her clothes, as if they are a burden, something painful to be carried through life. Susan is not the kind of girl you want to watch discover the world. She is the kind of girl who will be broken down.

"How long is four hundred years?" someone asked.

"A long time," I said. "A very long time." The students nodded, because they believed I had just offered them all I knew.

"How did they know how old it was?" said Miranda, who is inquisitive, who challenges everything, who will always be right and who I imagine will pay for it with her happiness.

Yesterday was a sunny day, the first real day of spring, and I took my lunch out to the playground. There was something in the air that had been let loose. The playing fields are just dry enough for running. The children have a way of moving their bodies that seems to challenge the directions of the universe. It is as if they are crazy. Their bright sweaters and hats stain the air in a temporary blur. On the monkey bars they are brilliant. Once, when the playground was empty, I tried to swing my way across the bars the way they do. I was clumsy and heavy, weighed down by my grown bones and the solid persistence of my flesh. From the rub of the metal three small blisters bloomed on each palm. The girls in my class have calluses which they compare like battle wounds, feeling each others hands intently, looking for something there. Like little fortune tellers they have a firm belief in the future.

During recess, I noticed a few of my students walking in pairs or threesomes. They were not running. They had their heads bent down in thought, like tiny professors of philosophy. They stared at their shoes as they walked and sometimes they looked up towards the sky. A small group of students gathered beneath the sickly oak tree at the far end of the playground. With a pencil, they drew something on its rough, dry surface. I was glad when the bell rang and it was time for them to stop what they were doing and come inside.

After recess, is art. Art is one of the calmest hours in the day. My students are happy to talk quietly, intent on their projects. During art period I walk around the room and listen to my students talk to each other as they create colorful, simple worlds whose features make more sense than our own. In these worlds there are precise streams, apple trees and open fields. There are flowers and animals who smile at each other. But yesterday everybody was still talking about the oldest animal and when I looked at my students' pictures I saw that none of them were beautiful. Many of the students were painting large round shapes, and it took me a long moment to realize that they were drawing clams. My students had chosen bland colors, greys and tans and mauves, colors that I didn't even know we had in the classroom. Then I saw they were mixing their own paints, mixing browns with yellows and whites with greens, blues, reds and oranges. The colors were ugly and grim, the color of things that sink or loom; of swamps and quarry walls. The classroom was eerily quiet and the children didn't talk except to request another piece of paper or to ask a clam-related question.

"Do clams have tongues?" they asked nobody in particular.

"Do they have stomachs and hearts?"

"What about teeth? Everyone needs teeth to eat." They drew long, sharp teeth on their clams.

I turned on music. I turned it on loudly to fill the hole in the air, the hole that the silence had been hollowing out for fifteen minutes. But nobody giggled or sang with the chorus. Becky said, "Mrs. Laurence, would you mind turning that down?" She looked at me the way my husband, used to look at me when he was sick from chemicals and even the sound of something beautiful, something subtle like a hummingbird's wings in the

garden stirred his nausea. I turned down the music. The paintbrushes swept in dry clam-shaped strokes against the thick, rough art paper. Bobby Duncan wrote 405 in black crayon beneath his clam, Leslie Lucas drew her clam with X eyes and a slack tongue, the face of the Mr. Yuck stickers that I plaster on the rubber cement and hand soap, the simple way children imagine the dead. As the students finished their pictures they carried them over to the drying table with solemn authority. Soon there were fifteen clams in a desolate crowd.

Even as they spread out the finished paintings, the children continued firing off questions like a group of political reporters.

“Will any of us live to be 405 years old?”

“No,” I said without stopping to think.

“How do you know?” they said.

“We humans,” I said, “we humans have different life spans than clams.”

“What is a life span?” they said.

“I want a different life span,” they said.

“I would like to outlive the oldest animal and be in the Guinness Book of World records!” they said.

It took The Story to calm my class down. The Story is what they call the book about a lost boy in Paris and a red balloon. They love The Story. They can say the last lines out loud as I finish reading and still they request to hear it again and again.

But when it was over we still had ten minutes left before the bell rang. Once again the questions began, this time with a new urgency.

“What will they do with the oldest animal’s body?”

“Will they eat the oldest animal? Will they put it in chowder at Ivar’s? Will we eat the oldest animal?”

“Does the oldest animal have a name?”

For this last question I had an answer. His name is Ming, I told them, and the classroom hummed with the muttering of this foreign name, Ming, as if it were a chant. Ming, said my students over and over. *Ming*. Miiiiiiing.

“Ming?” asked Christine, her eyes on the map as if she might see him there, floating about in the wrinkled ocean.

Then the bell rang, and the children filed out to the busses, though their voices stayed behind them, drying on the walls above their dripping clams.

I walked around the desks, as I always do, picking up the strange artifacts that the children leave behind, a dolphin barrette, a soda can top, rubber bands, and pencil pieces corroded with chewing. Once, when I was picking things up I found a tooth on the ground. Its smallness amazed me. The place where it had detached itself was still covered in a shadow of dried pink blood. Nobody claimed the tooth but I couldn’t bring myself to throw away something that had grown from one of their bodies. I keep it in a paper clip box in my desk. I don’t pick up the things the children leave because I have to. I pick them up to try and understand them, the way an archeologist does, by the small things that accompany them in their daily lives. I imagine that I know nothing about them, that they are gone, a vanished culture, and that I must piece them back together to better understand myself.

I went home with a heavy heart. I picked up a stack of spelling homework and then set it down. The words that marched and slanted about the page seemed cruelly contained

by the thin blue lines. I didn't feel like correcting my students' errors, or telling them they were wrong. Instead, I went out onto my porch to throw bread at the Canada geese. I don't like these birds. I think they are mean and awkward looking like soldiers from an early war. But every evening they appear on my front lawn and every evening I encourage them to come back. I throw fist-fulls of bread onto the wet lawn which is scarred and ruined by their flat feet and droppings. At the store I buy the geese their own bread. I buy the good kind, wheat bread, fortified with vitamins instead of the 99 cent loaves of white. I am comforted by their distant dependence on me. I stayed on the porch until stars began to come out and then I went inside to bed.

This morning it is raining. Even so, I leave my house and go out to walk on the beach. It is still halfway dark and the tide is moving farther and farther from the shore, revealing what it has kept hidden overnight. On my walks I collect things in bucket; shells and sea glass, and sometimes an agate or a grey wishing stone, circled by a perfect line of white. As I walk I think about Ming the dead clam and about my class. I know that I do not have any right to tell these children that they cannot, that they will not live to be the oldest animal. And this is not what I want to say. What I want to tell them, what I feel I should, as their teacher tell them, is that they do not want to live to be 405. And so as I walk, I decide to tell my students the truth.

"Class," I will say, "boys and girls, you know I believe in you because I am your teacher. You know I believe that you can be anything you want to be, anything at all. I will remind them of the book we read during World Worker Day. There are a million things to do in the world! A million places to go and see! It is wonderful the choices we

have! And it is up to you, not me. But listen when I say this: you do not want to be the oldest animal. The oldest animal will be alone, and it will be lonely. If you become the oldest animal your body will fall to pieces with the weight of all you have seen. There will be too much inside of you and you will not be able to let it out. It will simmer and shake. It will turn into poisonous lumps and bumps and scars.

“Tell me, class,” I will say. “What do you want?”

I know how they will answer. They will say, “teacher, we want a longer recess and more time for stories.” They will say, “cookies! We want cookies!”

They do not know they will not always love the things they love now.

“Next year, “ I will tell them, “when you are in a different classroom with a different teacher, you will want more. You will forget about the story we read together. It will seem childish to you. And then another year, in another classroom, you will be introduced to love, and you will want that, though you will not be certain what it is. Next will come beauty. You will hate your own face. You will pile things upon your skin and hair, you will pinch that lovely flesh that protects your bones from the cold and you will order reeking diet-pills advertised in the back of a magazine. You will begin to disappear. Gin and Vodka and cigarettes will kill the part of your tongue that longs for something simple and sweet. Soon, you will realize money and it will be all you can think about. You will go after it as if it is your last breath.

“But in wanting all these things you will forget how to breathe, and laugh and you will grow sick. When the doctors come, which they eventually will, they will be holding tubes that are stronger than you are. And if you are to be older than the oldest animal, you will have more than three hundred years to eat from these tubes. Eventually, they too will

break, because boys and girls, and listen to me when I say this, because everything should and everything does.

“Look around you, look around at your friends and neighbors. If you are the oldest animal you will watch all of these people die. You will bury your father, and then your mother. Your friends and brother and sisters, and then your babies. You will say funeral prayers until your throats are raw, and still you will not die. The fields you run in will be covered by roads. The stream where you build your dams will shiver and stop.

“You see,” I will tell my class, lowering my voice, leaning against the chalkboard to cover my back in white dust. “It is not that I mean to scare you. I only want to tell you the truth, and the truth is that we humans are not fit to be the oldest animals.”

I will say these things and I will leave them, because unlike my students, I am selfish. I will walk down the halls past the tiny bathrooms, and the gym, with its low hoops and climbing ropes, and then past the art corridor which is covered in paintings of green hills and warped rainbows and spaceships with flames of apple-red. These are the colors that I want to remember my students by. When I look back, it will only be to watch something vanish, the way a sailor watches the figure of a person wave from the thin, tattered shore.

On the beach I look down at the tide pools, the strange colonies of life left by the waves. The sea creatures have no choice about the place they end up, but still they make a home. In that way, I think, they are not so different from us. They live where they are left, until a new tide lifts them to another place. The rain picks up, and the pools overflow. This kind of rain is the kind that threatens to pull the island into the sea. I am

soaked and shivering. I turn back towards my home, my bucket heavy and bright, warming my palm with its rub.

When I get to school it is early and I am glad when the children come into the classroom, soaked and glossy in their rubber coats. Without them this place is unfamiliar, like a barn without animals.

“Good morning class,” I say.

“Good morning,” they answer. They huddle in the coat closet, stacking their umbrellas and hanging their clothing on the low, tiny hooks before going to their desks. The desks the students sit at seem to get smaller every day. The chairs attach themselves like strange growths. In the hollow middle parts of the desks the students keep their secret things—strawberry scented erasers, Lemon Heads, spit balls and notes folded and re-folded into stiff triangles. Each morning, before the bell rings, they take inventory of the things they left the night before, thrilled by their collections as if discovering them for the first time.

I read the school’s morning announcements. I tell them grilled cheese and green beans for hot lunch. I tell them there is a principal’s assembly at 1:00. The children have their journals on their desks. They are prepared for the first part of the day, the part of the day where we do our reporting. We check the weather, the temperature, the date, the number of days left in the school year and record it in our journals as if we are explorers, studying a new land. I am comforted by their understanding of these things.

But today I don’t choose a messenger to go read the thermometer. Instead I say, “Do you remember what we talked about yesterday? About the oldest animal?”

“The oldest animal is dead,” says Bobby as if he’d forgotten until this moment.

"Right," I say.

"They killed it," says Christine.

"True," I say.

"But why?"

"It was time," I say. "And they killed him so we could know about his life."

"He lived for hundreds of years," reasons Susan.

"Exactly," I smile. "And that was long enough."

"My dad says the oldest animal is in heaven," says Britta Mullis, says Britta Mullis who is already religious.

"Do clams go to heaven," says Ellen Johnson who fears God.

"Why not?" I say. "The oldest animal made room for something new. Made room for someone else."

"Another clam?" they ask.

"Sure," I say. "Or something else."

"Us?" they ask, and I say, "Yes. Yes, you."

I ask them to come closer, to make a circle around my desk. Their skin gives off the smell of wet earth, and their closeness goes through my skin, opening my pores, reminding me that there is a reason I am alive. I put a box on my desk and open it. Inside is a hermit crab in a pile of seaweed, his shell still wet and candy-bright. The children cheer and clap their hands.

"Is he ours?" they say.

"For a while," I say.

"What is his name," they say.

"That's up to you," I say.

As my students watch the hermit crab explore his temporary new home, they shake the rain from their hair and try out new names.

"Stripey!" they cry, because his shell is striped.

"Crabbie!" they shout, because they know what he is.

"Ming Two!" they eventually call out.

"The new oldest animal!"

"The oldest, oldest animal!"

I stay there with them. I do not leave or walk away. In the tide pools I have found my students something new which they can touch and hold. There will be time for all the rest. My students and I stand around my desk and touch Ming Two's shell with alert fingers. Like a warm wrist or throat, his small body is proof.

What Grows Back

I went to the dentist last month and found out that my wisdom teeth had grown back. Not all of them, just two.

“No way,” said the hygienist and called the dentist in. They stood above me and squinted. I stared into the light and made a noise with my throat. The dentist removed his mask, smiled and said, “no worries,” because he is a young dentist, and that is the kind of thing he says. He has kind, dry eyes like he does a lot of winking.

The first time I got my wisdom teeth out I was eighteen. That was four years ago. I didn't get dry sockets, I just lay on my mother's couch and ate yogurt and Percocet feeling as happy and boneless as a clam.

The truth is, I'm a little bit pleased about my teeth. The resilience of life in my mouth seems like a sign to me. Those stubborn little molars fighting the odds, coming back for more. While the dentist studied my chart I tongued the rough points that had pushed through my gums like new weeds.

After I left I drove to my mother's house to tell her my news. I knew she'd be there because she'd just been dumped. The house was messy, magazines and cups of weird liquid were all over the place. The house she lives in now is not the house I grew

up in. It's not even the house after the house I grew up in. We moved out of the first house when I was sixteen after my dad left for Alaska. He said he was going to find some meaning. He said something about wilderness. My mother said something about another woman. She threw things and said we needed a change. Floods ruined the second house in 1998. Everything was lost or destroyed. Now, everything is new. Not *new* new, but new to me.

My mother was taking a Personal Day from the bank. It's what she always does when she breaks up with a boyfriend. She sits at home with the TV on and pours whiskey in her Coke.

"It's nothing to worry about," she told me when I picked up a glass and held it under my nose.

"Nothing at all. Nothing to go to Al-Anon over."

"Who said anything about Al-Anon," I asked. I went to the kitchen and stared at the cupboards. I took out the coffee can and measured some spoonfuls into the maker. My mother is a drinker, but she is not a drunk. There is a difference. I know, because my father was a drunk. She was just doing what she always does which is to stay home and mope for a day or two, then hop in the shower, clean up the house, buy a new dress and find another man.

"Guess what?" I said.

"She turned the volume down, and shifted her position to give me her almost full attention. She has high hopes for me. She believes one of these days I'll come over with news of a good job, a good boyfriend.

“My wisdom teeth grew back. It’s a miracle. Better clear off the couch, better buy the yogurt.” I know I’m too old for this, but she’s too old to be moping like a teenager because Doug the car mechanic dumped her.

“Does insurance cover miracles?” she asked.

“Guess what else?” I opened the cupboard to look for a clean mug.

“You have an extra eyeball?”

“I’m cutting off my hair.”

“Your beautiful hair,” she said and began to sniff. Her own hair is gray at the roots and coarse as the head of a broom. She says it’s one of the reasons nobody will marry her, one of the reasons she’ll always be alone. She thinks I moved back here because I’m worried about her and that’s part of it, but I’d never admit it. I threw her a box of tissues and slumped in the recliner. In the kitchen, the coffee maker hissed like a cat.

I am not cutting off my hair as a statement. It is not because I’m bored, or because the stylist at the salon where I work as a receptionist says I’ll look like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*. My hair is my main attraction. My roommate tells me cutting it off is like beauty suicide. But I’m going to do it anyway.

After I left my mother’s I didn’t feel like going home, so I walked down through town to the marina. This place is the jump-point to vacationland. To the north are hundreds of islands. The mayor calls our town a gateway. Technically we live on an island too, but it’s the fake, drive-to kind that you can reach by bridge. What it really is is a line of fast-food restaurants, gas stations and gift shops that sell t-shirts featuring

pictures of Orca whales. From the marina you can see the beginning of the archipelago, scattered down the sound like a trail of crumbs.

I walked on the docks and checked out the yachts which are immense and shining and have puns for names. The year I was seventeen my mother dated a man whose boat was called Sin or Swim. He had red hair and owned two houses, one in Arizona and one in the islands. He took my mother and me there a couple of times and served buttery mussels and warm Chardonnay. After one month she said he was the answer to all of our problems. She said "In Arizona it never rains." She said, "It's time to get out of this town." Three months later, he said he had to be leaving and sold his yacht. She put vodka in her orange juice, and I got into college and moved to Seattle.

On my way back to the car I went to the hardware store to buy some paint. I had been thinking about changing the color of my bedroom. But when I was there I forgot about the paint and bought a little garden kit that came with seeds, a flowerpot, even dirt.

"You bought dirt?" my roommate Mel said when I got home.

"The finest," I said. "Look how dark it is." I mixed the dirt with water in a big bowl like I was making a cake. I poured the mixture into the pot and opened up the packets of seeds. The directions said to separate them by kind, but I mixed them up. I liked the idea of the flowers mingling their roots below the surface is some sort of forbidden flirtation.

"For variety," I told Mel, who was watching from the doorway.

"Variety *is* healthy," Mel said. She thinks this is something she knows a lot about because she goes on up to three dates a week. She's been trying to get me to double with her which sounds like just about the worst thing I've ever heard of.

"Please," I said. I know what she's talking about. It's not the flowers. "My mother dates enough for the both of us. You should see her right now. At this *very moment* she's acting about fifteen years old. That's where variety got her."

"The woman lost her house," Mel said. "And she got *left*."

"Seven years ago," I said and poked a few more seeds deep into the dirt. Mel and my mother have met a few times. They talked about men like college girls in the bar bathroom.

"And every five minutes since then," Mel pointed out.

"She digs her own grave," I said and smoothed the soil with my index finger.

In college I went on dates because that's what you do. But what I wanted was to stay at home, eat a sandwich from the cafeteria and read magazine advice columns about people whose lives are so screwed up they make you feel like your future is the brightest one around. I hid the magazines under my pillow, embarrassed. "What He's Thinking When You're Naked," the covers bossed above pictures of models with thin, arched bodies. "A Slimmer You in Twenty-Four Hours!"

I'm not pretending to have it all figured out, but I know a few things about myself. I am constantly dissatisfied and disappointed in people. It's something I'm not working on.

Mel says it's an avoidance technique.

"You're afraid of getting close to people," she said while I sprinkled water onto my seeds.

"Are you a therapist?" I asked.

"It's better to have loved and lost..." she began from the doorway and I left the room to find my pot of dirt a nice sunny corner to call home. That was a challenge. It was November. The clouds were heavy as sheep in the rain.

Mel's not a therapist, she's a waitress at the Compass Café down by the ferry terminal. She finished high school, but just barely. What she wants is to find a nice man and settle down.

"In the country," she says. We both know that will never happen. Mel is what my mother calls a Go-Go-Get-'Em Girl.

I am what my mother calls a Scaredy-Cat.

She says, "You're afraid."

I say, "I'm smart."

She says, "That you are," and then I feel bad like I said she wasn't.

There was a tiny bit of gladness that nestled in my chest when the flood ruined the house. It's still stuck inside me like a piece of glass, a clean kind of pain. I liked that my mother was forced to do something other than wait like some aged Rapunzel forgotten in the castle. I liked the way she looked, moving around the new house with a sort of

dignified purpose. She became useful, unpacking boxes full of donated food, rearranging furniture like she cared.

I said, "This is starting over."

She said, "This is the beginning of the end."

Three years ago, while I was in Seattle getting a degree, Mel was down the street from my college getting an abortion. We didn't know each other well then, but it still depresses me to think of her lying there with her legs open while I took careful notes about the depiction of marriage in Jane Austen. She says it wasn't that big of a deal, but what I know is that she still celebrates the baby's due date every year by drinking too much wine and falling asleep with all the lights on.

I finished college on schedule, but you wouldn't know it by looking at me. The lease on the apartment I'd been renting ran out and I moved back home and then, when my mother and I lost patience with each other, in with Mel who was a friend of a friend and was looking for a roommate. It was supposed to be temporary, just until I could save up enough money to move somewhere better. But it's been six months. My job at the salon isn't the kind of job you go to college for, but it's good enough for now. I like the shampoo smell of the place and the way people try to catch their reflections in the window on their way out the door.

Every now and then someone I used to know comes in and says,

"I thought you were never coming back."

I nod and shrug and say "Oops." Then I tell them their stylist will be right with them and flip the pages of my appointment book.

My mother says, "You are the first college graduate in our family and you work at a salon."

I say, "Be patient. I'm just figuring things out." But that sounds weak, even to me.

The owner of the salon has this thing about community. Her motto is: We take hair care to another level. Right now she is hosting an event for Manes of Mercy. I've signed on. I'm cutting off my hair to make a wig for a kid who has a disease and has gone bald. There are a few places you can send your hair. I chose one in California, because that's the closest and I want to keep it nearby. The pamphlet was what got me. There's this picture of a little girl with her hair donor. The donor has a pixie cut and the girl has auburn curls that fall past her shoulders. They are both looking happy. I tried to detect signs of loss in them, to see the effect of the process. But they're just smiling, standing very close together with their hands on their hips. It has occurred to me that they might just be models.

There are nights that Mel and I sit in the living room and turn the lights low and count the people passing by. The most we've gotten is seven in one night. Every now and then someone we know will walk past and we'll consider this new angle, the top of heads and shoulders, and make up new names and lives for them. We drink cheap wine from the jug and eat crackers, and sometimes Mel says, "Let's go out," so we dress up in jeans and shiny tops and go to the bar across the street which is new and not someplace frequented by locals. The bar is called The Net and has themed nights, but it never really

changes. Ladies Night means cheap well drinks, Salsa Night means stale tortilla chips and an empty piñata. We order Gin and Tonics and walk out on the dance floor with our shoulders back and our eyes straight-ahead. It seems like we're the only ones that dance at this bar. I like to think we do the floor a favor, resuscitating it with our shoe bottoms. A few men usually watch from the sidelines like parents at a soccer match, and I sort of like it, knowing they aren't a part of our game. Every now and then Mel grabs one and pulls him out on the dance floor, and weaves in circles around him. Once I let a man put his hand up my shirt, just to be that kind of girl. But I am not that kind of girl. At the end of the night, I leave alone.

At the dentist's office I sat in the half-reclined chair and tried to look composed even though I felt like a freak. He explained that he couldn't explain why the teeth he pulled out grew back. I asked him if I might be a dental miracle and he said no, though he looked fascinated and a little bit unsure. Then he winked at me and called me shark-girl because sharks have two layers of teeth. I looked this up when I got home and found out that was true, that sharks can lose tens of thousands of teeth in a few years, but that they always grow back. I pictured the dentist studying the teeth of animals by lamplight, and wondered if he slept alone. The dentist is not from this town. On the wall of his office is a certificate from the UCLA school of dentistry.

"You must miss the sunshine," I said to him when I saw the certificate. He nodded, smiled out the window at the rain and I wanted to reach over his desk and touch the hair that covered his forehead.

Mel is most like my mother in the moments before she goes out on a date. Whatever they have lost they have decided to fix with lipstick and perfume and a certain kind of smile that distracts attention from the look in their eyes. They pull and prod at themselves in front of the mirror and say, "Okay?" I nod and say, perfect." But they can't be convinced. Mel is worried about the size of her nose, since she read that it never stops growing. My mother is worried about the flat and heavy sag of her breasts, the flesh around her middle, the blue veins that are fighting against the surface of her skin like worms in the dirt.

Once I cut off my hair, there is no telling how long it will take to grow back. The pamphlet assures me I won't even notice how fast it is coming in. How thick, how glossy, how like a child's it has become. *And perhaps, one day, you will donate again*, it tells me. They have a star system for repeat donors. It goes from bronze to gold, like in the Olympics.

Mel said, "You should at least let me set you up with Ray before you cut it off." Ray is the one she wants me to go out with. He's new in town and works in the kitchen at the Compass Café.

"But seriously," she said. "He's super smart."

"So why don't you go out with him?" I said.

"He's not my type. Anyway, my hands are full at the moment. But he has a pet turtle. Isn't that cool?"

I said, "No way," but I'm starting to consider it, just to shut her up.

I stared at my pot of dirt for one week before two sprouts pushed to the surface. Now there are five. I check them morning and night. I can tell they are getting bigger by the day, their little stalks pumped up with liquid. One of these days I'll need to transfer them to a bigger pot. Maybe even a garden. There is no garden at my apartment. There is no garden at my mother's house. There is only a parking strip like someone spilled their lawn while they were driving it to their better house.

I like to get up before light, when the leaves outside are black. It has been raining for four solid weeks. Everyone is worried about flooding. But my garden grows in the lamplight. On the day I had an appointment with the stylist who was going to make me look like Mia Farrow, I did up a braid and reached for the scissors myself. Tiny pieces of hair fell around my toes, tickled the tops of my shoulders. The braid was heavier than I expected and coiled in my hand it looked as gray and strange as a dead pet.

Before I went to the dentist to have my teeth pulled, I put lipstick on. He stood over me with a scalpel and said, "I guess nothing's impossible." He smiled at me like an experiment and I thought about my sprouts, pushing their way out of the dirt towards my open face. The dentist has good, careful hands. He lifted my chin with the tip of his finger and I shut my eyes and tried to look serene.

While he put the metal up against my gums and said, "Hold tight," I pictured him studying books about cavities and plaque removal under palm trees.

I like to think about California. I picture a beach house with room for a garden. I imagine that I'm sitting on the sand and I look up and there is my donated braid, back from the dead, running after a ball or doing cartwheels in the sand. I'd know my hair anywhere. My mother is right. It is beautiful hair.

The truth is, there is a part of me that thinks she's got it right a lot. She's always crying over movies and things in a way that makes me feel like I've missed the point. I admire people who cry a lot because it is a sign they are alive. My problem is I don't know what is in me unless it is yanked out with pliers.

"You cut your hair," the dentist said after he had my head exactly where he wanted it. He kept his hand on my chin for a moment. I nodded and was glad for the lipstick.

"You look different," he said.

"I donated it."

"If only you could do that with these guys." He tapped my jaw. Underneath the light the dentist's eyes flickered like they might go out.

He didn't put me under while he pulled out my teeth.

"You won't even feel it," he said, though of course I did. But the teeth were hardly there. Just babies, their roots were thin as string. It was only a tug, like the way someone takes your hand.

"That's it!" he said, like he'd just finished a song and dance routine. He held the teeth in his palm, and when he took the cotton from my mouth there was just a small spot of blood. I took off my bib and left the office, my new teeth in the trashcan like leftover food. I found my car on the street where I left it, but sitting in the driver's seat I forgot which way was home.

By the time I started the engine, the bleeding had stopped entirely and there was no pain in my mouth, only the tinny taste of raw skin. The dentist had said there was no need to put myself out. No need for yogurt or painkillers, or lying around on the couch like I'd just had a liver removed. But I went to my mother's house anyway.

When I walked in the door it smelled good, like laundry. The living room was mostly clean. She had a dress on and her hair was up. From where I stood it looked mostly brown, hardly gray at all. She was standing at the kitchen sink, just standing there, not doing anything.

"What's his name," I asked.

"Clark," she said. "As in Gable. Your hair!"

"It's a nice name. I told you I was cutting it."

"I guess you did." She looked startled but said it suited me. "It reminds me of something," she said.

"Rosemary's Baby?"

She put her hands on her hips and came towards me. Over and over she said, "What is it. You remind me of something, of someone," like she'd forgotten I was her own.

I stayed at my mother's for a while and told her about Manes of Mercy.

"You're a good girl," she said. But she kept checking the time and twisting her dress around, so I decided to go home. It was Friday, Mel was off work at five, and I figured maybe we'd go across the street. On Fridays The Net hosts Funktown, which means a sign on the door that says: "Welcome to Funktown" and not much else.

I'd decided to tell Mel I'd go out with this Ray person. If I said it once, I wouldn't be able to take it back. I've never seen this guy, but I've imagined him a few times, feeding his pet turtle pieces of lettuce and checking the temperature of its cage. It's sort of a nice thing to think about when there isn't anything else.

The other day I read that shrimp keep their hearts in their brains. I told my mother that and it made her laugh and laugh.

"So they think with their hearts?" she asked

"Or love with their brains," I answered.

For their first date Clark took my mother to a restaurant at the top of a little mountain where you can see almost all the way across the sound to Canada.

"It was perfect," she said, and more than anything I wanted to believe her.

My hair has already grown about one quarter of an inch. But my neck still feels exposed, like a broken bone, jutting through skin. I don't always recognize myself in shop windows. Meanwhile, some kid just lost another sweep of hair in her mother's brush. When I see the flash of my neck reflected in glass I think of that new bald spot, fresh as anything. I think of my mother's beat-up heart growing a light pink shell, slick a

pill, and the layer of flesh that covers Mel's hollowed out stomach. You don't know what you have until you've lost it. I guess that's the point of all those sayings.

It's true what the pamphlet said. My new hair is soft as a child's. When it's long enough I might cut it off again, and go for the silver star. What I now know is that it will always grow back. But this time, I think I'll drive my braid down to California myself. I'll have moved my flowers to a larger pot by then. I'll strap them in the passenger seat like a kid, and when I get to California I'll stay there and go barefoot until I no longer need shoes to protect my feet. I'll get a tan, sitting there on the beach and beside me the air will be as real and warm as a body. Leaving here will be easy. Everybody will have been expecting my departure for a long time. But I won't say I told you so and when I drive over the bridge to the mainland I will keep my eyes straight ahead.

After the flooding had stopped, but before the evacuation crew dragged her away from her ruined house, my mother got the photo albums and her mother's dishes, a few of her dresses and a trunk full of letters. Everything else grew bloated with rain and soft from rot. She said the flood was like divorce since it distorted the shape of everything. Made it seem more valuable or more worthless than it probably was.

I said, "Things are just things."

She said, "You are so young," and held my face the way a person holds a book when the light is almost too low to read.

Parts

Like children, the genes had been given names, scientific sounding mixtures of numbers and letters: BRCA1 and BRCA2. Mary called them the Breast Catcher genes.

“Catcher,” she told her friend Lonnie on their weekly speed walk around the lake, “sounds much more appealing. Think how many people would love to catch a breast! People would be buying my genes on the Black Market so they could become professional Breast Catchers.”

“True,” Lonnie said, dodging a rollerblader, little white hands fluttering in front of her. “But remember, you don’t even know if you have the gene.”

“Genes,” said Mary. “There are two genes. Twins. Double trouble.”

“Well,” said Lonnie, “you still don’t know.”

But Mary did know. She had taken the test for the breast cancer gene, and it had come back positive, the cells in her body had matched up like a game of tick-tack-toe. In a way, Mary had been relieved, as if she had won a prize for answering the right question on a radio show. “I told you so,” she wanted to say to somebody. “I knew it all along.”

Mary’s mother had worn scarves rather than wigs, intricately patterned flags of mercy that wrapped the startling baldness in slick, oily color. Mary had only seen her without the scarf once, through the bathroom door, her hairless body egg-white and fragile, the only color the scars slashing her chest like whip marks. Horrified, Mary had stared wondering how this woman could be her mother, how a body that had attacked itself so fiercely could have produced another human being.

“It’s our family tree,” Mary had once told her doctor. “It’s poisoned.”

"Family trees aren't a medical term," said the doctor. "They're just a figure of speech."

"Well," said Mary, "Not everything is medical. So maybe our family figure of speech is poisoned. I know my risk. I took a quiz online."

"Well I took a quiz online that told me I was going to win a million bucks. Does that mean I'm going to win a million bucks?"

"Why are we fighting?" Mary said.

"We're not fighting," said the doctor argumentatively. "I'm your doctor."

"So you say," she said and crossed her arms over her chest.

She didn't like being dramatic, but it was true. Mary's mother and her mother's sister had both had double tumors and mastectomies. Mary's mother had died a slow, delirious death, shrinking into the disease, her body deteriorating piece-by-piece. And just last year, Mary's cousin Laura had been diagnosed with Ovarian Cancer. She had been trying to get pregnant. Instead she got cancer. Mary knew her risks.

"The internet," Mary's doctor had told her, when she had made her third appointment in two months because of a vague discoloration on the left side of her breast, "is a dangerous place for a hypochondriac." Instead of offering Mary a diagnosis, the doctor had handed her a pamphlet for High Risk Women and a prescription for antidepressants.

Still, Mary decided to take the test, and when the results came back positive there was triumph mixed with her despair.

"See," she had said to her doctor. "I'm not just depressed. I'm cancerous."

“Not yet,” said the doctor. “It doesn’t confirm anything.” But the exasperation had been replaced by something gentler, something like sympathy only more sterile.

“Our sap is full of cancer-y cells,” Mary said while the doctor moved towards the door.

The lake where Mary and Lonnie took their walks was dirty and full of sticky looking children and people on wheels. Everybody on the cement path that circled the water was out of control, and Mary didn’t like it very much, but she liked the ritual of taking a walk with a girlfriend. Mary was new to Seattle and Lonnie was her new friend. They worked together at a small, unimportant newspaper, called What’s the Word? which was distributed for free at grocery stores and shopping malls. Mary wrote the book review section and Lonnie wrote a column called “Seattle Scene and Heard.” It was a sad sort of column that Lonnie had zero creative freedom with. Gerry, the editor told her what to write about and she did.

Unfortunately for everybody at the newspaper, Gerry was religious. He had a bookcase-full of porcelain Jesus’ from around the world in his office, and he muttered prayers before starting meetings. He also was lecherous and had an inappropriate crush on Lonnie, who was pretty and petite with a rare color of shiny hair, surprising in its brightness, as if it might appear underneath the wing of an otherwise dull bird.

Gerry was working on boosting the newspaper’s morale, instigating office contests and celebrations. The employees rarely attended these events which wasn’t a surprise because everybody who worked at What’s the Word? hated their jobs. That year at the spring company picnic there had been an Easter theme. They held it in the waterfront park where the bums hung out and they ran around like idiots, plucking

chocolate eggs and baggies of jellybeans from the dirty grass. Nora, one of the junior features editors walked out in the middle of the egg toss, tossing her egg in Gerry's direction and yelling, "I quit!" The employees gathered in a group and admired the way she looked as she walked off, her pink plastic basket swinging defiantly from her elbow.

"Bless her soul," said Gerry, picking bits of eggshell from his shoulder.

Every morning Gerry read the news from online newspapers and announced it as if he was the first to know about the world's biggest announcements. And so it was Gerry who had revealed the news of the breast cancer gene to the employees, though by then, almost everyone had heard of it months ago.

"We've got news, and we've got a reason to thank the lord," he'd said coming out of his office, shirt ruffled, legal pad marked up with red pen under his arm.

"They've discovered a gene. A gene to prevent breast cancer." He'd emphasized his delivery by sweeping the newsroom, piggy eyes at breast level as if this news gave him an excuse to look through the fabric of the women's clothing and bras and skin to the soft, vulnerable places where cancer made its nest.

"The gene is not preventative. You'd have to take drastic action," said Jonah Smith, who wrote the sports column for the paper. "I read about it in The Times." Jonah was depressed. He drank coffee and smoked cigarettes on the sidelines of minor league football games. He made references to Shakespearean tragedies in his baseball stories. He wrote tiny poems on Post-It notes and kept them in his pockets and shoes.

Sometimes after work, Lonnie, Mary and Jonah ate hamburgers at the restaurant next to the squat grey headquarters of What's the Word?. They complained and chewed and drank flat pale beer, until the fact that they had to begin again in the morning seemed

more tolerable. But on the night of the gene announcement, Mary had a meeting of the High Risk Women, which was a relief because she didn't feel like hamburgers or beer, or the sight of unbalanced looking families staring over plates of soggy jalapeño poppers.

"Go ahead without me," Mary said when Lonnie and Jonah came by her cube, coats and hats on, faces pale, porous and moony in the fluorescent lights.

"I have to finish something up."

Mary suspected Jonah and Lonnie of having crushes on each other. It bothered her. It made her feel and sometimes act like a child left out of a game that only allows two players. But tonight, she was glad to let them disappear into the stairwell without her. She felt as if she were doing them a sort of favor. She felt that someday, like every martyr, she would be repaid. She hadn't told them about her support group. She liked keeping it to herself, a secret society of doomed women. It seemed exciting in a morbid sort of way, to have a secret like this, to be a part of something.

"I have to *go* somewhere," she would say, gathering her things together and putting on her sunglasses before she reached the elevator doors. "I'm *late*."

On the way from work to the hospital, where the High Risk Women met, Mary sometimes stopped at the Catholic church to light candles. She liked the musty, medieval smell of it, the dim light, and the purposeful order of the Stations of the Cross. She tried to sit under a different image each time. Tonight she sat under number ten: "Jesus is Stripped of His Garments," and marveled at the emaciated man being helped out of his clothes like a child before his bath.

Unlike most urban churches, Saint Agatha's looked the way a church ought to look. It was whitewashed and simple with a steeple sharpened like a pencil, and a Jesus

who bled from the appropriate puncture wounds. It was a small church, but full of priests and Jesuits, red-faced and white collared and holy, milling about like last minute Christmas shoppers at the mall. Sometimes, but not always, she paid the suggested donation of a quarter. She always went with the intention of lighting the candles for her mutant genes, but the many other things there were to want usually sidetracked her. She started lighting them for everything she could think of, things like joy, a nice man, world peace, thinner thighs. It made her feel holy. The church was covered in Easter Lilies with big trumpeting mouths and thick throats. Their scent overpowered the church, making Mary think of a perfume used to cover something grown terrible with decay.

Sometimes, after work, even when she didn't have her group, Mary had started to go to the hospital. She liked to be there, just in case a tumor appeared, like an early dinner guest, without her knowing. Sometimes she went inside and walked the halls, feeling her breast lightly when nobody was looking. "Remember, said the group leader, a double mastectomy survivor herself, "early detection is key." The hospital was, in fact, the only place she felt safe these days. Since she found out about the genes, she could think of nothing else. It seemed she was growing pale, losing hair, she felt the cancer inside of her, mixing up her cells and preparing a tumor in a little cancer oven like roast lamb. At work she spent most of her time researching preventative surgery and going to the bathroom where she would lock the door, pull up her shirt and stare at her breasts in the mirror. She carried a self-breast-check pamphlet in her purse like a prayer card. Her work suffered. She had stopped reading the books for her reviews. "It's a pretty good ending," she wrote about the latest bestseller. "But don't take my word for it." She was

losing her mind, staying up nights reading articles online, her heart quickening as the results flooded the screen in a parade of blue lettering. The words on the screen were scientific and alien sounding--rude words like mutant, abnormal, tumor suppressor, risk factor. Mary had grown afraid of making sudden movements, worried that she might shake up the genes and aggravate them into forming their cancerous union. At night she sat very still at her kitchen table, drinking organic tea, unable to sleep or even lie in bed. It felt too much like dying to spread out like that in her cool, blue sheets.

It had been on one of these delirious, exhaustive nights that Mary began forming her decision to have a preventative mastectomy. The thought of removing her breasts from her body was a relief, enough relief that she finished a novel and then fell asleep in her bed. But soon she grew anxious again, impatient about the surgery, sure that the cancer would come first, spreading like vinegar-scented dye into hardboiled eggs, poisoning her body, leaving her both breastless and cancerous.

Often, the High Risk Women talked about their relationships. How do you maintain your femaleness if your *breasts* are your *disease*? How do you show your partner your scars?

Mary didn't have a partner, and in a way that was a relief. Whenever her last boyfriend had touched her breasts, she had grown tense, reminded of what they held inside them, afraid his rough, needy hands would somehow coax the tumor to the surface. Eventually he broke up with her, claiming she was flighty and distracted.

"Flighty?" Mary had asked. "And what do you mean by distracted?"

"All this cancer talk. I think you might be depressed."

"You sound like my doctor," Mary said.

"Maybe you should listen to her."

"Him," she said. My doctor is a *him*."

The High Risk Women dealt with their risks in different ways. Some were angry, others hopeful, others seemed resigned to a fate of chemotherapy and baldness.

"It's just not fair," a young woman named Susan who was a Kindergarten teacher had shouted one week.

"I mean, for genes to determine something like this." She cracked her knuckles and stamped the heels of her boots on the linoleum. "Some people get blonde hair and other people get fucking cancer?" Mary shifted in her plastic seat. She was terrified thinking of Susan with a flock of five year olds.

"I'm getting them cut off," Mary told her group. "I have an appointment. Snip, scoop, snap." She tried to make a joke, but it didn't work out for her or anybody else. The women eyed Mary's breasts through her sweater sadly, as if saying goodbye. The High Risk Women were the only people that Mary had told about the surgery. She planned to keep it a secret, afraid that someone would talk her out of it.

"Are you sure?" said the group leader. "The preventive mastectomy is a very drastic action."

Mary glared at her. "I'm sure," she said, though of course, she was not.

"This is very brave." The leader touched Mary's sleeve. Mary did not feel brave, she felt like crying. She moved her arm away from the woman's hand.

After her group, Mary went to the diner downstairs for a cup of coffee with two other High Risk Women, Susan the schoolteacher and Leslie, a masseuse, who was so

thin Mary wondered how cancer could even think about growing inside of her. The diner was warm with grease and stoves, and the perfumed rush of waitresses' bodies. They sat at the counter facing a row of dizzying mirrors. Mary wore a turtleneck sweater and abalone earrings the shape of tears. In the reflection she looked odd, serious, messy-haired and bland. She wished she were wearing lipstick; something bright and unnecessary.

The countertop was decorated with straw baskets full of pink, green and yellow plastic eggs. Mary held one of the eggs in her hand. There was something inside of it, something heavy and loose. She shook it and it made a hissing sound. She put the egg back in the basket with its companions and wondered if it had plans to hatch.

Leslie tapped her pink nails on the counter as if they were warming up for a parade. "When is it?" she asked. "When is the surgery?"

"The day after Easter," Mary said. She picked up the egg again, but put it down quickly. She poured Splenda into her coffee "Cancer sugar," one of the doctors passing through the Oncology lounge had called it. "Tumor nectar." "Then maybe you shouldn't serve it in the *Cancer* ward," Mary said loudly enough to make people turn and stare. The doctor put a sterile hand on her shoulder. "It's hard," he said. "I know it's hard." Mary stepped away from the hand, poured the powder into her cup and stirred, taking pleasure in the fact that he couldn't make her stop. "I'm not one of them," she wanted to say. "I don't have it. Not yet." But when he turned away, she went to the bathroom and flushed the coffee down the toilet.

"Are you going to get new ones?" Susan asked. "New boobs?"

“You have to be careful with those,” said Leslie. “One of my clients did it. Reconstructive is different than cosmetic. The nipples got all messed up. They looked like fried eggs, all stretched out and sloppy. Then she asked me to massage her face and neck. Honestly, it was hard to work on her with those things staring at me the whole time.”

“Better than nothing,” said Susan. “Anyway, these days they’re better. My aunt’s are made out of her hip. They just took part of her hip off and stuck in on her chest like she was a Mrs. Potato head.”

Mary had been saving up her vacation days, and she told everyone at What’s the Word? that she was going away on a trip.

“I’ll give you a ride to the airport,” Lonnie had said when Mary had told her plans.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mary said. “You’d have to leave work, and you know how upset Gerry gets when you leave.” Mary’s meant to sound teasing, instead she sounded bitter.

On the day of the procedure she brought an extra large suitcase to work for effect, and left the office at two.

“Are you sure, I can’t...” said Lonnie as Mary gathered her things.

“NO,” said Mary. “I mean, *thank you*. It’s just I already called a cab and everything.” She smiled at Lonnie who looked bewildered and a little bit injured.

“Adios! Ciao! Hasta Luego!” Mary called as she waited for the elevator.

“Send us a postcard,” said Jonah’s voice from behind a wall.

Mary looked back at the hunched shoulders of her coworkers, straining against their cardigans and button down shirts as if trying to escape and felt for a moment as if she were going someplace nice, someplace warm that smelled like the sea, instead of an air-conditioned high rise full of piss and death.

Outside, the air felt mean. It was cold and bright, with rays of sun that came through the rain clouds in a way that made it obnoxiously impossible, whatever your beliefs, to not consider the existence of a heaven. The streets were full of the ordinary gloom of everyday life, people with ugly, wrinkled rain jackets and bright umbrellas and clusters of strangers ignoring each other as they waited to cross the street. When the hospital became visible Mary sped up, almost running, as if she were catching an airplane or bus.

But at the revolving doors, she slowed and controlled her steps and breathing. She had realized on a previous visit, tripping over an oxygen tank that led to a young, bald patient, that among the fragile, you had to be careful where you put your feet.

Inside, the walls were still covered in Easter: pink-nosed bunnies and buttery chickies and eggs and jelly beans the color of baby clothes. There was something horrifying about these pictures against this setting. They made her think of a nursery school where everyone was dying.

On the door to the first floor maternity ward, there was a picture of a hill with a cross stuck in it. The cross was tilted haphazardly like a thermometer in a piece of meat and a few rectangular beams of light shot out from its sides like they were advertising a car show. A few times, while hanging around the hospital, Mary had sat in the waiting area, watching newly deflated but glowing mothers and proud, puffy fathers clutching

their little red infants. It depressed her, seeing these new lives surrounded by such happiness. It seemed unfair to give their squishy, undeveloped brains false hope for the world.

She got onto the elevator with a picture of a rabbit sitting smugly on a nest of colored eggs. Before pushing the button for the Oncology Unit of the sixth floor, she ripped the picture of the wall, folded it neatly and put it in her purse. When she exited, it was in the way she always did—her chin-up, eyes straight ahead, avoiding the mute, unofficial despair vigil of the waiting room. At the nurses' station, Mary pretended she was checking into a hotel.

"Linden," she told the lady, "Mary Linden. I'll be staying over."

Her mother had spent weeks at the hospital. She'd stayed so long that she'd unpacked her things and decorated her room. She had a crystal wind chime hanging in the still air beside the window and pictures of Mary and her brother taped on the IV. Because of this, Mary felt an inevitable belonging at hospitals, as if here, with the sick, dying and grieving she was among her true people. She took pride in her knowledge of the procedures, the allergy questions and blood drawing and paper signing. She had been through these measures before and approved of the predictable, matter-of-fact routine—the things that had answers that could be confirmed by a few quick tests. The nurse had taken Mary to a small room in the back of the station and was testing her vital signs with pert efficiency. The nurse was pudgy, and her breath whistled through a round little nose. She didn't talk as she worked. There were only the sounds of dripping liquid and dried out gasping and the exaggerated drama of lovers' quarrels on the afternoon Soaps.

“So do you think I can keep them?” she asked.

“What’s that?” Said the nurse. “What do you want to keep?”

Mary pointed with her chin to her chest. “You know, like teeth.” I could keep them in a jar or something. Just to show they existed.”

The nurse took the stethoscope away from Mary’s heart and said, “Are you sure you’re ready for this? I’ve seen people back out, you know, just take a little more time.” Her face was impatient and loaded with muddy, cheap looking makeup.

“Oh no.” Mary stuck out her arms to allow the nurse to draw blood. “I have the genes, you know. I’m ready for this. I’m practically *born* for this.” But as she said it, she felt the weight pulling on her chest, she imagined the scars and fried-egg nipples and the hands of future lovers shying away from her monstrous body in terror and disgust.

“I had to do it,” she pictured herself saying as they jumped from bed, pulling on articles of clothing, forgetting their shoes as they ran from her home. “I was getting *Cancer*.” But the imaginary lovers were already gone, walking the streets barefoot, their eyes searching hungrily for the comfort of the intact breasts of passing women.

The nurse took Mary to her room and gave her a hospital gown. “Put this on,” she said and padded away in her clean white shoes.

“Hello,” said a voice.

Mary turned around to face the voice. The flowered curtain that split the room in half opened theatrically. Behind it was a talking woman wearing a pair of flannel pajamas with playing kittens on them.

“Welcome to Chateau Unwell,” she said. “How long will you be staying?”

"Who are you?" Mary asked stupidly.

"Hmm. What do I look like? I'm a patient, of course," said the woman. "I'm also a gimp." She threw back the white sheets to reveal the bandaged remains of a leg, gone from the knee down.

"A car accident," lied the woman, "I'm Linda. Did you have a nice Easter?" She took a chocolate egg from her bedside table, stuck it in her mouth and extended a sticky hand. Mary crossed the room, still holding her suitcase to shake the hand. Growing closer, she realized the outstretched hand was the only hand, because Linda was missing her left arm.

Mary hadn't considered the possibility of having a roommate. It seemed strange, like a summer camp where parents sent their children to have things cut off. Land of the Missing Parts, Mary thought to herself. Partless Paradise. Camp Cut it Out or Cut it Off.

Linda's handshake felt dried out. "What brings you here today?" she asked. Mary looked around the room. Linda had put up pictures of an ugly orange cat sitting on a porch. Its eyes looked mean, like a Jack O' Lantern's. There were dead daisies on the bedside table and a glass of milk that was congealed and yellowing.

"Let me guess," Linda sat up in the bed and peered at Mary. Her expression was concentrated and disturbing. When she moved her head from the pillow, Mary saw that a small nest of her brown hair did not go with it.

"Lumpectomy? Hopefully benign?"

"No," said Mary. She didn't want to play this game. She set down her suitcase and began taking things out. Linda watched and waited.

"You don't look like a smoker. It's not the lungs, I hope?"

"No," Mary sighed and looked at Linda. Her skin was sallow, her eyes dark, bright and button-round.

"I'm having a mastectomy," Mary said. "A double mastectomy."

"Ah ha," said Linda. "The whole enchilada, all or nothing, no child left behind. I hope the cancer hasn't spread?"

"I don't have cancer. Not yet. It's preventative," said Mary. Linda's questions were making her feel like an imposter, a joker. She was feeling watched—paranoid and jumpy.

"I have the genes. You know, the cancer genes."

"Ah, the genes. I knew you looked healthier than the rest of us."

Mary hadn't considered the current state of her health. Since she had taken the test, since it had come back positive, she had left the healthy and lived like the sick, going through the stages dutifully like a well-behaved child.

"So you're going to get rid of them?" Linda continued when Mary didn't respond. "I guess I can understand that. You have a nice pair, though. It'll be a shame to see them go."

Mary looked down at her chest and sighed. They *were* a nice pair. For the past six months she had seen them only as the enemy, the carrier, the well-padded tumor case. She felt as if she should thank them before she killed them off.

"Well, it runs in the family."

"Good tits?"

"Cancer."

The unfriendly nurse had returned. Mary was still in her sweater and skirt.

“You need to change,” she said, unpleasantly. “The anesthesiologist is almost ready for you. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

Mary wished for the first time that she should have brought someone with her. The hospital people weren’t being very nice and with her lack of disease it seemed she had been placed on the bottom of some list, making room for all the people whose parts were already killing them.

“Do you like stories?” Linda asked. “Because I have a story for you. It’s an Easter story. And it’s true.”

“No thanks,” Mary moved towards the bathroom with her gown in her hand.

“It’s about this woman. She was in love with a man.” Mary looked at her watch and leaned against the bed’s metal side.

Linda, looking pleased, rearranged her limbs and half-limbs and cleared her throat.

“Anyway, the man and woman were at an Easter party and there was an egg-hunt. I think it had an adult theme—you know, instead of filling those plastic eggs with chocolate and jelly beans, they filled them with condoms and edible underwear...things like that. We’ll say it was in a mansion. Everything is so much better when it’s in a mansion, don’t you think?”

Mary didn’t answer. She was thinking about the plastic eggs at the diner, the ones that hissed when you turned them around in your hand.

“So. The woman and man were looking for these naughty eggs in this big mansion. And they got separated from each other. The woman was very competitive and she was getting angry, because she had only found one egg. And there was a prize for the

person who found the most eggs. I think they got a romantic weekend in Las Vegas.

Something pretty tacky, because that's the kind of party it was."

Mary stared past Linda through the window. It was raining a thick rain, gauzy with mist.

"So the woman looked, and looked, and pretty soon she realized it was very quiet."

Mary was exhausted. She gave up and lay down on her back. She imagined the man and woman, and the eggs spread out like a bright, candy colored picnic.

"So she gave up, went downstairs, and tried to find the man so she could complain. It had been his idea to go to this party in the first place. But on her way down the hall, she saw one little room that she hadn't checked for eggs. It was one of those secret rooms, that all mansions have, covered by a tapestry or something, and she was just sure there would be a whole nest of them in there. But instead, when she opened the door she saw the man, the one she was on love with, fucking some woman with Easter Bunny ears. The bed was full of plastic egg shells, bouncing up and down like Mexican Jumping Beans. The moral is, be careful what you look for. After all, curiosity did kill the cat." She pointed one of the kittens chasing a ball of yarn up her shoulder.

"What a stupid, terrible story," Mary said.

"But like I said," Linda pointed out. "A true one."

"I don't believe you. I have to put my gown on," said Mary.

"Ah, yes. A princess getting ready for the ball. Don't be late, or you'll miss your prince and his silvery scalpels."

Mary slammed the bathroom door behind her and took off her skirt. She resolved to make the nurse give her a new roommate. Linda was demented. Linda could pester someone else with her twisted stories. She took off her sweater and tried not to look in the mirror. She was wearing a plain white bra, the practical, decidedly un-sexy sort mothers buy their daughters. She unhooked it and threw it towards the trash bin. The bra didn't make it. It ended up in the toilet, floating like a double lily pad in a marsh.

"I wasn't actually in a car crash," Linda called from her bed.

Mary sighed and opened the door a crack. "I figured," she said, kindly choosing not to point out the obvious fact that they were in the Oncology unit.

"I'd take the cancer back if I could have my parts. I'd like to leave this world the same way I came in. But that's me. You do what you have to do." She turned away from Mary's side of the room and curled into a disfigured ball.

"Why do you care," Mary said, tying the gown at the back, "What I do with my breasts? I mean what does it mean to you?"

Linda raised the remainder of her left arm like a punctuation mark.

The nurse was in the doorway with a wheelchair. Mary saw no other choice, and no other place to go. She sat down in it complacently, holding the gown about her body in the places where it wouldn't stay closed. They rolled down the hall towards the elevator.

"I was wondering," Mary began, "about my room."

"Oh," the nurse said, pushing her with a jarring bump into the elevator. "Don't *tell* me you're going to *complain* about your room. You know, some women don't even stay over after their procedures. Sometimes they can't afford it because the insurance

won't cough it up. Don't you watch Lifetime TV? They're doing a whole campaign about it."

"It's just my *roommate*," Mary said. They sped down the hall and the dry medicinal air lifted up the gown and covered Mary's thighs in goose bumps.

"Here she is," said the nurse to the anesthesiologist when they arrived in the operating room. He winked at the nurse and looked Mary over like a meal he wasn't sure he wanted to eat.

"Hi there," he said. He turned his back and put on his gloves. Mary felt like a she might throw up all over everything. She had pictured this whole thing differently. She had pictured it being about her.

"The world doesn't stop for cancer," the At Risk Women group leader had said. "They cut you up and keep on keepin' on. That's something you need to be aware of. Cancer isn't some secret password for special treatment."

"So what do you do, Ms. Linden?" the anesthesiologist said boredly.

"I'm a dancer," Mary lied. "I dance in a troupe. You know, a dance troupe." She couldn't bear to think about the newspaper, or her sad, unread book reviews.

"You'll feel a poke," he said, and the IV needle settled into her vein.

When she opened her eyes, the surgeon was there, thick skinned and strange in his mask. He wore a bonnet decorated with pictures of brightly colored Band-Aids. His pupils looked dilated like pools of oil in the sea. She had met him before, the previous week to go over the procedure. He had been kind then, but now he looked different,

threatening and dangerous in his thin blue uniform and wiry body hair. Something glinted on his chest, something that Mary couldn't make out. It hurt her eyes when she tried.

"She's not quite ready," the surgeon said. "She's fighting it."

The air was cold on her breasts, and instinctually Mary tried to reach a hand up to cover them but something pushed her arm down onto the bed.

"Wait," Mary said, or thought she said. But her words were morphing into something else as they made their way from her brain to her throat.

"The eggs. The woman never found the eggs."

"We've got a talker," said a female voice. "Remember the gal the other day? The one that was talking about caterpillars who played baseball?"

"My parts," said Mary.

"Take it easy," said the female voice.

"Don't take my parts."

"Nobody's taking your part. You just relax," said one voice.

"She's a dancer," said another.

The room became small and warm. Mary's arms no longer worked or had feeling. They lay at her sides, lifeless, and bleached as driftwood. The world was fuzzy, drunken wobbling about as if it were learning to fly. Mary felt herself lifting away from the bed, the room, the hospital, and towards something that was not unlike life. Things were growing heavy and dark as if the whole building were sinking towards the bottom of a lake. There was peace, though it was the chemical sort that you had to pay for later. She listened to the hospital sounds, comforted by the way the dripping and beeping, and soft

nurse shoes in the hall came together like a chorus of birds, awake at the wrong hour of morning, with nobody to hear them or make them stop.