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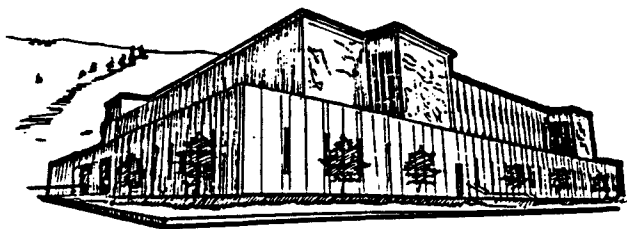
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University of
Montana

What Does Not Kill Us

By

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B.A., The Evergreen State College, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing

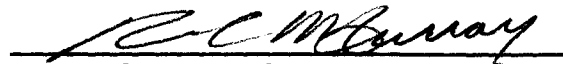
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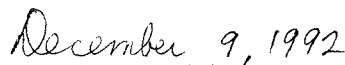
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What You Don't Know

Dressed in boxer shorts, Billy Chubb walked to the pier, still trying to cut loose the nightmare he'd pulled in. Their cabin was a square of silence behind him, braced by white pines. He stood on the small pier he'd built himself, feeling the water's gentle rocking like the soft breathing of Donna Mae in their bed. Billy slapped at a mosquito that whined in the patch of hair on his shoulder, and spat into the water.

It was the third time in as many nights that he'd been hauled up out of that nightmare.

A breeze fingered through the pines and streaked the lake's dark surface like schools of silver-backed fish breaking water. He breathed deep, his chest opening wide as he tried to remember the dream. He heard the screen door bounce softly on its hinges, looked over his shoulder and saw Donna Mae standing there in her cotton nightgown.

She turned away. She would put on the coffee now to fill the thermos, wrap a couple sweet rolls in wax paper. It was always this way up here on vacations, the routine practiced and familiar, nothing marring it, not even when the children had still been at home. She used to bundle them as efficiently, hushed their whinings with small pats and kisses and threatened them with Billy Chubb if it carried beyond that.

It should be easier now, Billy Chubb thought, and watched a mosquito tight-walk the gray, curling hair on his chest. He waited for Donna Mae to call out, warn him against catching his death of cold, but her attention was absent, as so much of her had been lately. The first shouts of birds cut the silence. He walked back to the cabin to get dressed.

They sat in the jon boat, Donna Mae in the forward seat, her back to him, the tackle box split open in the space between. Billy Chubb maneuvered to a point off the east end of Bear Paw Lake. He rowed carefully, as his father had taught him, the water swirling quietly around the paddles. Billy's father had been as large a man as Billy Chubb himself had come to be, six-foot-two, and his father rowed with the same delicate ease, his two hundred pounds muscled tight on the seat. He always wore a visored cap, finger-stained and sporting some corporation logo that he sold machine parts to on sales trips.

She nodded, her back still to him.

He set the anchor as she made her first cast. He admired the precise way she flicked the lure clean past the low-hanging branches, clear of the deadfall under water. He wanted to speak of his admiration, of how her back still looked tight and young, how the silver in her hair looked like the breeze-riffled water he'd watched earlier. But even as he lifted his own line free, he knew she was drifting clear of him, down into some private place.

Billy Chubb's father had been the same, falling into the same kind of quiet, locking Billy out. Billy Chubb would watch him from outside and try to read his father's face, see what prompted the smiles, the hands sagging open. Sometimes Billy would talk anyway, because he knew his father wasn't listening--nonsense, out-right lies. Or sometimes he told things nearest the truth as he saw it, like how some nights he woke out of dreams in a sweat, his bedroom black as he lay there sensing his life was ending, his body growing out of control and all the things he was certain of turned haphazard as his own face.

Then for no reason connected to Billy or the world he sat in, his father would come out of it, smile, as if surprised to find Billy there and Billy would turn silent, grateful for yet one more reprieve.

The last fishing trip with his dad, Billy had been thirteen years old.

"Don't horse him in!" his dad had shouted. "Work him. Work that son of a bitch."

Bily fought the fish and his own panic. He smelled sweat breaking sour on his skin.

His father peered into the water to see where the fish slapped side-to-side. "He'll try to take you into that snag. Back reel," he said, "but don't give him any slack. Keep that line tight."

The line swerved.

"It's the big one!" his father said, tugging the visor down. "Didn't I tell you?"

Billy looked up, saw excitement shining on his father's cheeks. But he could feel the fish on the line, small and a disappointment, and even in those days, before his life went haywire, Billy knew that was something he could no longer afford. He tightened his grip, yanked on the rod, pulling himself free of the fish.

"Jesus!" his dad cried out as the fish slapped free. "Aaah, hey, Billy." He turned, his eyes flat before softening. "Next time, right?" He reached over and shook Billy's arm as the lake wiped clean, as if the fish had never happened.

Billy Chubb thought about how he'd not had it in him to trust his dad's judgment, and maybe he had been wrong not to. Perhaps, his father had seen something, in the way the reel spun out, or the way the line sliced the water that told him the size of the fish truer than a child's fearful hold on the rod. But if Billy had been wrong in smaller matters like the weight and worth of a fish, he'd been proven right in the long run on the worth of the man.

Donna Mae reeled her line in. Her face was turned sideways to him. In profile, it looked smooth as a young girl's and relaxed.

"You feeling better, now?" he asked.

She turned to him puzzled. "I wasn't sick."

"No," he said, "just tired all the time."

She turned away. "We've been through this, Billy. I work what hours I need to."

"I seen what comes of it."

"My working late some nights isn't the end-all, Billy."

He opened his mouth to say he knew better. That he'd called her some of those late evenings just to hear her voice, to quiet the questions in his own head and there'd been no answer. He wanted an explanation, but even as he opened his mouth, he couldn't bring himself to ask her for one. "I seen it happen before," he said instead.

Donna Mae sighed. "If I leave, it won't be because of work, Billy."

"That supposed to make me feel better?"

"Billy--"

Billy Chubb felt the hit on his line. There. He set the hook, read the fish in the water. Donna Mae picked up the net, but he shook his head. It wasn't a keeper.

Slow fishing in the mid-day meant a trip to Ray's Crow Bar for Billy Chubb to get fresh bait for the evening, and sit quietly with Ray awhile. Ray's Crow Bar was an eleven-stool tavern with two formica-topped tables set against the wall and one pool table in the center of the floor, its felt surface

stained brown with rings like random bulls-eyes. The backbar was wood-paneled with one large mirror flanked on each side by deer mounts, glass eyes dusted like cataracts. Muskies, walleyes, and crappies lunged against driftwood mounts on the side walls. Billy sat at the bar, glanced up at the stuffed crow namesake and ordered a Point beer from Ray. The bait tank bubbled in the backroom.

"How's by you?" Ray asked. He mopped up the overflow as he set the glass down on the black enameled bartop.

"Went out early. Donna Mae got herself a couple nice smallmouths." Billy shrugged, drank foam. "When you gonna buy me a beer, Ray."

"It's a living," Ray laughed, smoothing his hair with the palms of his hands. He sat on the stool behind the bar. "Seen what's left of my mailbox?"

Billy Chubb nodded.

Ray shrugged. "Damn kids."

"Leastways we know it wasn't ours this time." Billy Chubb laughed, remembering the first and last time their two kids had spent a night in the slam. Donna Mae had stormed small but meaningful into the jail, hauling their boy Billy Junior down to her level by his hair.

"Your daddy and Mr. Ray may be paying for last night," she'd said. "But you boys will do the labor. Do you hear?" She drilled each word into their heads. She shook Billy junior hard by the hair and made him look her

straight in the eyes and say, "Yes, ma'am."

There were few better moments than that, he thought, watching Donna Mae chew those nitwit kids down to size. It came to him that that was what had changed--her being right up front, dealing with him eye-to-eye.

Ray poured himself a tapper, shook his head in disgust. He took a sip of beer, sucked foam from the edge of his mustache. From the overhead television they could hear a faint dinging as a game show contestant spun the wheel of fortune. They pondered the puzzle for a long moment.

"What's Darryll doing these days?" Billy asked.

Ray offered Billy the sports section. "See they're catching walleyes over on Winnebago." He scratched his chin, took a sip of beer. He busied himself wiping down the bartop then tossed down the beer rag. "Darryll's getting divorced again. Second time." Ray dumped the last of his beer down the sink. "Not like I don't understand his attention straying once in a while. You know?"

Billy Chubb nodded, although he didn't know. He had not had another woman since Donna Mae. At times he was both proud and embarrassed of that fact, but it was not a thing he could tell Ray. Or Donna Mae either for that matter.

"The first time I figured--so the kid made a mistake--like father like son." Ray grinned nervously. "But at least I learned with my second

marriage. It just ain't worth all that shit coming down." He crossed his arms over his chest gone soft like breasts. "Trouble is, these damn kids don't know when they got it good."

Billy Chubb stared up at the stuffed crow perched on a trapeze over the backbar. Over the years it had slowly tipped forward. Ray was a queer one on occasion, but he was smart about some things. The business of marriage was maintaining a status quo between people, keeping the shit from coming down. Billy Chubb's mouth was dry; he took a sip of beer. It was like treading water; you take it easy as you can, but you can't stop working it. That was what gave older couples such dignity--their stamina, being there for each other. Keeping the other in sight. He'd always believed when the flailing about with kids and jobs was over with, their days would become precise and comfortably predictable. There would be time to do all the things he'd put off. He'd get to know Donna again. He pitied the young people these days like Darryll. He looked up. The crow was going down for the count, Billy Chubb figured.

"You need another?" Ray asked.

Billy Chubb slid his change off the counter, shook his head and walked out the bar.

He crossed the gravel parking lot to his car. The hood pinged with the heat. He squinted against the glare off his windshield and for a moment

thought about the restful dark in the bar. Ray was right. People didn't know when they had it good.

Billy swung the car door open. He wiped a handkerchief over his neck and down the side of his nose. He opened the car windows and pulled out onto the county highway.

He had been a young teenager when his father's road trips started stretching out longer and longer. The few times his father was home, Billy's mom kept all her fear hidden, saved it to spend on Billy those nights the two of them were left alone.

"Tell the son of a bitch off," he'd yelled at her sitting at the kitchen table. The light bulb overhead cut ravines into her face. He'd hated how she sat there looking defeated before she'd even tried.

"Billy," she said, her hands sunk into her lap, her face fixed into its familiar look of hopelessness.

"Well, Jesus Christ, Ma. What do you want me to do? Go to his boss and say, listen, you gotta give my dad a desk job, 'cause he ain't worth shit to us on the road ten months out of twelve?" He banged out the back door shouting, "I'm late. The guys are waiting on me."

He'd stood out in the yard awhile. What did she think he could do--a kid--if she didn't have it in her to save them? He wanted his father there, and he wished for the arc of head lights swinging up over the curb and onto the

house, the car door swinging open, his dad's feet slumping out onto the pavement, his face grave with relief. But the street remained empty. Billy looked back at the house, the roof dark against the bright stars, the house black except for the single light in the kitchen. He imagined her crying and ran down the drive.

Billy Chubb dropped his fork on the dinner plate. Cross-hatched fish bones were stacked on the rim.

Donna Mae smiled.

"Ray says, hi. Stopped there for a beer this afternoon."

"More potatoes?" she asked.

Billy thought about the potatoes slivered and the color of straw in the cast iron skillet. He nodded. The metal spatula scraped the iron lightly.

"He's feeling badly."

"'bout what?" Donna Mae spooned them onto his plate.

He edged the fishbones further on the rim. "Daryll's getting divorced again. Second time." Billy Chubb tamped the potatoes down with his fork.

"Damn kids these days, don't know when they got it good."

"Sounds like Ray talking."

Billy Chubb speared a mouthful of potatoes. "You don't think so?"

"I think Ray sees what he wants to."

"When'd you come the expert?" Billy set his fork, down.

Donna Mae leveled her eyes on him. "I'm just saying Ray's seeing what he wants to see. He can't know what Daryll needs."

"I guess I know what Daryll *thinks* he needs. You defending that?"

Donna Mae folded her arms.

Billy leaned forward, "I'm not saying anything. I'm just saying Ray ought to know." Billy pushed the plate away.

Donna Mae shook her head. "I can't take much more of this," she said quietly. "You just don't let go, do you?" She sat down in front of Billy Chubb. "We got to talk, Billy."

Billy pushed his chair back and carried his dish to the sink. He looked up, saw the sun moving down. "Fishing'll be good. You coming?"

"I mean it, Billy, we got to talk."

He held his breath. More than anything he wanted her now without words. He wanted her to just be there with him, at his side like it used to be. They would drift out there in the boat, inches apart. Content to be as they've always been. "Come with me," he said, his voice breaking, and he turned toward her.

"God damn you, Billy," she whispered. "Don't make this bad."

"Bad, Donna Mae?" He threw his plate in the sink, heard it hit hard and break. "You don't know bad." He walked away from her, slammed out the

door, grabbed his gear from the side of the porch and shoved off in the boat. He saw her come out to the pier, heard her voice but not the words.

The early-evening catch, a dozen perch, gasped on a stringer off the side of the boat. With the coming of dark, he rowed in toward the marsh. It was the big bass he wanted, scarred and pitted as the rocks they slept under during the day. He smeared mosquito repellent over him and pulled on a jacket. He hung the Coleman lantern off the pole on the back of the boat, set the bait on his hook and turned the light off.

In the time it took for his eyes to adjust he oriented by sounds--spring peepers to the right, in the weed beds, the flutter of bats overhead, the splash of a fish about fifty feet out. He saw the aisle of moonlight on the water. Something heavy-footed moved through the brush on shore. Then the reeds resolved in a silver-tipped tangle. Billy Chubb looked down into the dark of his lap, saw his hands pale around the rod. He eased into the quiet, letting his hook drift close to the reeds, moving his legs when they got stiff, looking into the lake to see the stars reflected below.

As the hours passed, he let himself think of the cabin, snug in the grouping of pines. He thought of walking up to the door, his catch swinging beside him. He would walk over to Donna Mae to see her breasts slumping and face dimpled with sleep. He would wake her so they could clean fish in

lamplight. He would stand behind her, press his face into her hair and then she would lay her head back on his chest as he ran his fingertips over the scales glittering on her arms, sloughing them off before they dried and pinched. And then he thought of the cabin closed and dark, the car gone. His breathing went shallow. Arm shaking, he cast out close to the reeds, heard the plop and watched the silver rings expand, blow outward, break into ripples.

Maybe Donna Mae had been right about some things. Sometimes Ray *was* full of shit. Like that father-like-son crap, Billy thought. As if we were cursed or blessed enough to move in such careless steps as our parents had, as their parents before them. As if all the living we did on our own, all the working together couldn't make a shift of difference. That was some pretty twisted thinking all right. And Billy Chubb breathed deeply; he was living proof to the otherwise. He wasn't like his father.

His father had come by the house on a hot July day with a strange woman. She sat on the front benchseat of the car, in the center near to the driver's side. Billy had stood on the curb trying to see out of the corner of his eye, into the car where she sat still as a store mannequin. Sweat beaded on her powdered chin and she wheezed softly as she breathed. "Aren't you a nice looking young man," she said, and rolled a handkerchief against her neck. Then the house door banged shut behind him and his father came out. Billy felt him approach.

"Billy," he said, stopped and put his hand on Billy's arm. "Doesn't have to be this way. You can come with." Billy's mother strode down the front steps, her body limp inside her starched cotton dress.

He felt strangely like his father at that moment, able to shut it all out, drifting off someplace, separate from his mother and father and the softly wheezing woman in the car. And then their words fell into place.

"You don't have to stay here. You can come with us."

"You leave us be," his mother said, her voice tight. "You go on."

Then his father moved to the driver's side, stepped into the car.

"Billy," he said across the woman's body and the length of the car seat.

Billy turned to the car, leaned into the open window, his hand fixing itself to the door handle. He heard his mother behind him.

"You got what you came for," she said. "You leave my boy."

"He's my boy, too, Emma." His father leaned over the woman. "Come with us, Billy."

Billy heard the sound of his mother's fists hitting on the car roof beside him. The car was pulling away, his hand still tight on the handle. He ran alongside the slowly rolling car. "You coming, Billy?" his father called.

There was heat on his back, and a little kid was shouting something, and he could hear his mother crying, left behind. He stumbled, lifted his hand free.

The air liquified in his chest; his heart banged. It was in just this way that he always woke from his nightmares--his heart banging, his hands clenched, the dream fleeing back into hiding faster than he could take hold of it. Billy Chubb reeled in. His mother had accused him with her eyes--even after he'd stayed with her, like she knew he had wanted to go with them, like she was waiting for the inevitable, watching him with the same easy resignation. He'd hated her then, her helplessness, her unquestioning acceptance of his father's lies and excuses, her refusal to see what must have been before her eyes all that time. He sat quietly on the seat, his body damp with the lake air. Mosquitos peppered his hands.

He lifted the rod, raised it over his shoulder, the bait dangling in the dark. He threw his arm forward, heard the line sing overhead, trailing out into the black. He leaned forward, held his breath.

There was no splash, no circle of expanding rings on the water, but something struck with light quick little tugs. Billy Chubb clicked the bail shut. He snapped his wrist, set the hook. He tried to feel the fish. But it was a strange, fluttering, floating action. Damn, he thought, how can a fish move that way? The line leaped, grew slack; he reeled in, hauled back. He felt the rod tip rising, saw it straighten, impossibly, skyward. "Son of a bitch!" he yelled out. What was that thing? It frightened him, and he ached for Donna Mae to be here. The distance of the lake between them seemed terrible and

black. He was afraid she had left the cabin, moving into the night without him. What if it was not another man after all, but as she had said, simply the distance she'd come to need over the years. What if she left, when he needed her more than ever, to make some sense of it all, to help him pull this thing out of the dark?

Billy Chubb tried to reach the lantern with one hand, but stopped. It would destroy what vision he had. He backreeled as he felt the line swerve close to the weed bed. He searched the black lake surface to see the bright 'v' that should be cutting behind the line.

He looked up, saw the moonlight on the line spin up into darkness overhead. He felt a snag, saw the tops of the reeds bending and heard a thick flutter in the weed bed. He caught sight of the small quake of light, and then he saw a black shape lift itself, sweep up into the dark.

His mouth was dry, he felt dizzy, his hands grafted to the rod. The line leaped higher, veered away. He swallowed the cry in his throat, clung to the rod. What he could not know or see rose and moved wide, circling in the black night around him.

He closed his eyes against the line that winged out over the water, hooked in the tender pink mouth of a bat. The dark spun out far around him. He squeezed his eyes shut, his face settling into a look of hopelessness. The boat rocked gently on the water. He was exposed, floating on a thin skin over

depths that spun down to stars cold and bright beneath. He was alone and suspended on that fragile skin, tied to some unknown thing pulling him onward. He could tip so easy.

Trash

John Root Pratt scraped his breakfast dish clean into the garbage pail tucked under the kitchen sink. He could hear his wife, Tillie, singing down in the root cellar. She was slightly off-pitch. He found it comforting.

"Tillie," he called down to her and waited.

She came to the bottom of the stairs, jars tucked under her arms and carrots suspended in a sling of newspaper between her hands. "Just coming up," she called, looking small and gray on the stairs.

He took the carrots, their tips withered black. "Want me to take these to the compost?" he asked.

Tillie shook her head. "You go on," and she lifted her face to him as she had every morning of their forty-three years together.

John brushed her with a kiss. "We're getting too old for this," he said and put on his John Deere cap and wool coat.

"We were too old yesterday," she said laughing as she opened the door for him. "Soup for lunch."

John walked his fields following the treeline bordering the south-most pasture from the highway, treading on fallen leaves that sweetened the air with decay. He was careful to keep his eyes averted from the subdivision rising like a blister on the far side of the road, focusing instead on his fields, the crop, the

leaves underfoot. He loved autumn--it was the green of summer well used and spent, a time to let the year's labor account for itself. He squinted into the thin sunlight and opened the top button of his jacket.

Raccoons had raided his cornfield, but still it would be a good crop. His father had liked to say, "The good years diminish the poor." John looked over the tall corn and although he was not a steady church-going man, he liked to believe he knew God's presence when he met it.

He routinely walked the field's edge along the highway. Up ahead, in the ditch, a pair of dogs worried an industrial-sized black plastic trash bag. The plastic stretched between their fighting.

"God damn," he said, rolling his hands into fists. "Can't keep their garbage home." He searched out a large stick and approached.

"Go on, get!" He raised the stick, figured them to be vacation dogs, shagged out of the back seat of a car at the end of summer. The smaller of the two, with sides shrunken and back arched, slunk off with its tail ratty between its legs. The other, a larger long-haired breed, stayed, trying to pull something free of the bag.

John picked up a rock and hit the big dog square in the side. The rock hit with a hollow sound. The dog scuttled into the leaves and ran off yelping while the gaunt dog remained sitting at a distance. The bag's white plastic tie, still looped, had slipped off and lay in the dirt. He glanced at what had slid

partially out of the bag.

It looked like the leg of a brown-Swiss calf. Why in God's name would someone waste good meat? He stepped closer and the leg angled oddly, and then he realized it was no cow's leg, but a man's, severed with its fuzz of soft blond hair still curling tightly against the white skin. He looked down at his own squat legs in surprise for a moment.

A fly crawled up onto the leg, opened its wings to the sun. John lifted the plastic, looked into a jumble of body parts, seeing what might be the crook of an elbow, a nipple. He shifted the bag so that the half-exposed leg slid back into the dark. The fly buzzed inside the bag.

John straightened, staring down the highway, his arms slack at his side. At his back, the corn clattered in the breeze, a blue jay screamed. The air smelled of meat gone bad. A car drove by and then another and then none. He reached down to the bag at his feet and twisted the plastic opening closed in a knot.

He paced off a short distance, returned to stand over the bag. Something must explain this, he thought. Maybe it would come clear if he gave it time. The sun pierced a patch of clouds while a rooster pheasant strolled down a row of corn. The skinny dog was panting as it lay in the dirt, tongue spread over one foot, still watching. He should call the police. The dog's ears lifted and it raised to its feet.

It was clear he couldn't leave the bag. He looked down the length of highway and then carefully hefted the bag. It hung at his side in odd bumps and sags--then he turned toward the house.

With each step the bag swung, throwing his gait off. The dog trailed at a distance. "Go on, get!" he yelled and took a threatening step. It backed up, trotted off to a safer distance. John put the bag down, looked around the fields as if for an answer, then hunching his shoulder swung the bag around and over. He flinched as it thudded against his back, but it rode easier, high on his shoulder. It had the weight of an over-sized bale of hay, or better yet, a yearling calf. He used to carry his boy this way.

It rolled almost comfortably back there. Looking out over the fences he knew personally, he hoped he might see Ben or his boy in the neighboring field. They could stop. Talk. He could show them a thing or two, he thought matter-of-factly. He turned to look for the dog, but it had disappeared into the rows of corn.

Back in his yard, John walked to the burn barrel, a rusted oil drum next to the garage. He swung the bag off his shoulder. It bumped against the metal, ringing softly. John eased the bag down into the barrel, settling it in the soot of old newspapers, cardboard and wax milk cartons. Ash drifted up.

In the kitchen, the radio played and Tillie was swaying in place at the cutting board. John took his jacket off, hung it on the peg behind the door.

He walked to the sink.

"Remember Carmen Miranda?" Tillie asked. She held an onion behind her ear.

He scraped bar soap up under his nails. Tillie walked up behind him.

"You're back early."

The water steamed out of the faucet and stung his knuckles. An old song he could almost remember played and out the window, across the yard, he could see the burn barrel.

"A penny for your thoughts," Tillie said softly into his ear.

He wiped his hands and turned to her. Her eyes were the same blue as when he'd left that morning. "It don't matter," he said.

"John?"

"I found something. I got to call the police."

"What?" Tillie's voice raised. "What's happened?"

"Found a bag full of a man's body parts. It's in the burn barrel." He hesitated. "You want to see?" And even as he asked, he wondered if it was right to show a woman a thing like that. Was it right to show her? And yet it seemed the years spent at her side gave him the right to ask it of her. "It's just out there." It became important that she see it too.

Tillie backed away. "No," she said then crossed to the stove and turned on the gas under the coffee pot.

John followed Tillie, put his hand on her elbow. "It's just out there," he repeated. He waited until moisture hissed from the coffee pot, then walked into the living room and called the police.

John sat across the kitchen table from their son, Karl. Dishes rattled in the sink as Tillie washed the coffee cups the police had used earlier. Under that, he could hear Karl's pregnant wife snoring on the living room couch.

"This county's always been a dumping ground for Chicago trash," Karl said, grinding out a cigarette.

A cup banged on the sideboard. The overhead light was yellow on Karl's face. He looked fleshy in the starched, white shirt. Like a banker. John looked down at his hands in embarrassment.

Karl's voice dropped. "Mobsters. Probably drug-related."

Tillie turned from the sink, wringing soap from her hands. "That's enough," she scolded.

"Dad should be on the eleven o'clock news." Karl walked into the living room.

The TV clicked on. John stood up from the table. "You going to come see?" he asked.

"I got to finish these dishes," Tillie said. And that was like her, John thought. He had always taken pride in her composure, her tidiness--a woman

who knew what belonged to each part of the day, and these dishes just another part of another day, as though the stack that mounted on the side board had not been the result of detectives breaking for coffee at the house. She moved with a purpose, cups clattering onto the drying rack. "I'll be right in," she added but remained standing with her back to him at the sink. In the living room, Karl sat on the floor in front of his wife, his head resting against her belly that slumped off the side of the couch. She smiled, the cushion damp beneath her mouth. John sat in the easy chair. They were the first item of news for the evening.

It all looked so neat as he watched the footage of his south field, then a quick shot of the barn--empty this past three years when it had gotten too much for him to manage the herd without Karl--and a close-up of the burn barrel. The reporter faced into the breeze.

"You're going to miss it, Ma," Karl called. "Hey, look at you, Dad."

John watched himself on camera. He looked thick. The weather-scrubbed barn behind him, which he'd always admired for being burnished down to the heart of the wood, looked shabby on the small screen. The sheriff came on briefly, while behind him two men hefted the black plastic bag onto a stretcher. John remembered that he'd meant to tell the men they wouldn't need it, that the weight sat easy enough on your shoulder if you leaned forward a bit. But he hadn't said that. There he was on TV, looking startled,

saying what he'd supposed they wanted to hear. "Yes. Quite a surprise."

John stood up, knowing now a person could not always believe what he saw. Tillie waited in the doorway, studying him. He walked past her, out the back door and into the yard.

He stood in the cold and shoved his hands into his pant pockets. Moonlight congealed on the elderberry bushes and the remains of Karl's old play fort canted into the shadows. He started walking away, and when he heard the storm door bang shut behind him, he looked back to see Tillie come out onto the porch, pull a sweater over her shoulders and step down into the yard after him.

They went out through the orchard, his steps turning on fallen apples that had bruised and slumped into the ground. They passed the storage shed and empty cowbarn, through the rows of field corn with the leaves flagging in the breeze, until he came out on the far northern field and stood on a hill, his breath churning the chill air. Tillie stepped close and pressed a sweater over his shoulder.

He looked south. "You see," he said, "from over there." His finger followed a pinpoint headlight moving down the highway. "Can you imagine? All the way here to put such a thing on my land."

Tillie leaned into him, but he felt separate, as if the act of walking out into his fields this morning had left her too far behind. He looked into the

night.

She ducked her head and whispered, "Don't think about it," and snugged the sweater tight around him again.

John turned to her. "How do I walk my own fields again?"

Tillie hugged her arms around her.

He asked, "Why? What did I do?"

The next morning a hard frost scabbed the few remaining squash in the garden, but by ten o'clock the clouds had broken, the frost melted and John found himself walking to the south field, not first, as he normally did, but last, as a thing worked up to.

He had started finding his way there since breakfast where he sat longer than usual, drinking *two* cups of coffee and reading the newspaper slowly. He was on the front page. Inside were pictures of the police with shovels and teams of dogs searching his fields. He sat spread over the paper, breathing through his nose.

"Karl might have been right," he said. "Police think it had something to do with drugs and organized crime."

"Why do they think that?" Tillie asked, buttering a slice of toast.

John cleared his throat, then spoke each word as though he were counting change. "His head and hands are missing."

Tillie settled the butter knife onto her plate, glanced out the window.

"Does that make sense?"

"I didn't notice them missing," he said quietly.

Tillie sat back. "You looked?"

John glanced up.

"I supposed," she offered, "it would be the natural thing to do--"

"At first I thought it was just meat, something off the rendering truck, maybe, I don't know, but I saw it was human then. And I looked."

Tillie stared down at her hands. John sensed her backing away as she had yesterday. He waited for her to ask what he had seen. What he had felt when he looked into the bag. He waited for her to ask how he could sleep after seeing that. He was afraid she would ask and he would have to admit he had slept well-- after a while. Tillie remained silent. "I should go now," he said, spreading both hands on the table as he pushed his chair clear.

Tillie shook her head. "I saw my father with his arm in the thresher. I've seen body parts before." She paused. "I wasn't much help yesterday."

John rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You going to be all right?" he asked.

"You want me to come along?" she answered.

As Tillie lifted her face to him, he turned away, left the house and walked to the north field as it had been his job to do each day of his adult life.

The fields were his, given into his care. He had never taken that obligation lightly. As he walked, he told himself it was garbage--trash he'd found, like the styrofoam cartons from fast-food joints. Or a careless litter of kittens. He wondered what his father would have thought of it all. John walked down the crest of a small hill, looking over the fields to the rows of blank-faced houses in the near distance--subdivisions, curbs, gutters, driveways and roads. Waste. But then his father had not known about such things. That was before the highway and the trash it spawned.

John walked carefully over the plowed field. Maybe next year he'd rent the field out. Ben could use the extra hay. *I am* getting too old for this, he thought. He ran his fingers through his thin hair and looked across to the highway where he'd found the bag. A car was parked on the side of the road. He could see a young man standing on the gravel shoulder.

John hurried, his feet sinking into the fresh-turned soil. There were others in the car. John slowed as he approached the ditch. The man had a sweater tied in a bright yellow knot around his waist. His hair was red and burnished bright in the sunlight. There was laughter from inside the car and a door opened for the young man. Another car passed slowly. John could see an arm pointing to him, to his fields.

He stepped into the ditch. "You got some business here?" he shouted.

"Just looking," the man squinted down at John.

John stooped to pick up a wad of paper and a pop can. He pressed the paper into his jacket pocket. "This is my land," he said.

"Hey, Mister, we're not bothering anything. Listen, it's a nice day."

"It was." He held out the pop can.

"This is public road."

"That's the road," John pointed to where a car drove slowly by, "and that's public road," he pointed to the sloping gravel shoulder, "but this is *mine*." He pointed to the ditch.

The young man backed into the opened car door and laughed. "You crazy, old man?"

John fingered the battered can in his hand. He threw it as the car pulled away, gravel popping from the tires and the shouts of the young people trailing like exhaust.

John watched until the car winked out into a curve. He turned, facing the road that wound through the rolling countryside and eventually leveled out in the suburbs of Chicago, to be swallowed into the city itself.

"Go ahead," he said, wiping his hands on his pants and confronting the faultless blue of the sky. "You bring your garbage here."

Frankie Aldtenburg's "All Concertina Band" played every Friday night at the Elk's Club. Although Tillie had often asked John to go, this was the first

time he had suggested it to her. The idea had come to him as he'd pulled off his work boots, and then his white cotton socks--they were still clean after a full day. He looked down and saw his leg hairs curling dark and blue veins rooting beneath the pale skin. He pulled at the hair, watched the skin pimple up beneath it and snap back when released. It was at that moment, with his eyes tearing slightly and his breath squeezed in his throat, that he thought of dancing.

At the club, in the Bull Elk Room, Frankie Aldtenburg sat in a wooden folding chair, center stage, his metal walker standing companionably alongside. The drummer brushed a slow shuffle on the snare, while his foot kept the one beat on the bass, and the high-hat floated in the yellow stage light. The other concertina player sat to the right and slightly behind Frankie, squeezing rhythm in chords.

As John and Tillie walked by, fellow Elks and neighbors nodded their heads, said, "A little dancing, hey John?" and "How's by you?"

They sat at a table near the three-piece band. Frankie played polkas and waltzes and limping two-steps. Tillie ordered a Manhattan. John drank highballs.

Between songs, John leaned in toward his wife as though to speak, only to fall silent. He wanted to explain how he had found himself here, to draw a connection from his pale legs with their curling hairs to the bright dance floor

and old man Adltenburg wheezing out melodies on the concertina. He knew it had something to do with finding your legs under you.

During the break their neighbor Ben stopped by the table, his head politely inclined to Tillie. He rested a hand briefly on John's shoulder, his voice funeral-soft. "How's it been, John?"

John eased back in his chair, looked up at Ben through the rim of his raised highball. It made his face look water-streaked and ruined. John knew what Ben was feeling, relief that it wasn't found on his property--that thing like an accusation from God Himself. "Fair to middlin'," John replied and smiled. "Corn's looking real good. Bumper crop with all that early rain. Hear you had some bad luck with that new soybean."

Ben leaned back on his heels, looked up at the ceiling a moment, then back at John. "Had better years." He nodded to Tillie then to John before he strode back across the dance floor.

At the end of two hours and five highballs, John let it all drift. He raised his face to the shine of stage lights, and as Frankie trailed out of a waltz and into a schottische, John asked Tillie to dance. On the floor they stood next to each other, John's hand riding her hip. Of all the dances, the schottisch was his favorite, with its practiced shuffling step and determined movement forward.

His mother had taught him it as a child, out on the dirt of the chicken-

pecked back yard, humming the oom-pa-pa beat under her breath, the hens racketing out of their way. His father watched, shaking his head at such nonsense. His father would walk him through the fields instead, tell him, "You put yourself down and stay. Then you see what God provides." He would open his arms, gathering in all the crops and years in one gesture.

John felt himself stumble. Tillie kept dancing. He threw his head back far on his neck and shouted, "My father named me John Root."

Yes?" she asked.

He circled the dance floor with Tillie, planting each step recklessly, his body bearing down as if to pack the earth beneath them.

For a week, each morning John lingered over breakfast, ate each item slowly, then walked out to the fields with the same deliberation. Things seemed normal again, as though the sin in that bag had never been committed or his discovery of the bag had been only a glancing blow after all. If he tended to fall asleep a little later, or startle awake in the dead of the night, he told himself it was no worse than when he'd worried about musk in the corn, or when Karl had sickened with chicken pox as an infant. He saw how Tillie watched him from the corner of her eye.

On the eighth morning he came back from the barber with the back of his neck clean-shaven and the tips of his ears revealed white where his field tan

never reached. Tillie was packing squash into scalded jars, wringing the lids tight. She lifted each jar to the light before immersing it in the hot bath.

"They stop talking when they see me," he said.

"Why ever?"

"It's like I told them some secret they don't want to hear about."

"It could have been them," she said, turning down the heat under the canning kettle. "The highway runs along every one of these farms. They don't want to know it could have been them." She put her hand on his arm. "Listen to me. You got to listen. You're a good man. You've spent your life working to feed others--"

He shook his head, swaying lightly on his feet. "I truck my grain to the elevator, sell it cheap as dirt. If my father grew wheat that year, he saw the bread, knew the bakers and the families who ate it. Do I see the bread my grain makes? No, I take it on *faith*. I take it on faith, but I *know* some middle-man is stealing from that broker to sell to some company baker, who's stealing from the workers and the chain grocers are piling food in dumpsters because it's two days past shelf life in some *city* and people don't buy it because they're buying booze or drugs or lottery tickets. And then they come out here to take a crap on my land, like they knew who they were coming home to."

Tillie slapped her hand down on the table. Her body settled like dust

into the chair. "It was trash, coming down the highway--it stopped at the dark bend in the road. There was no knowing behind it, John. Just chance." And he willed himself to believe that as he knelt and she rocked him in her arms.

Later that evening, on their way to Edgar and Anna's for their regular card game, John drove the road as he thought a stranger might. He counted the dark stretches of unlit fields. The fields became random, the dark accidental. He breathed deeply and when he smiled to himself he felt his skin stretch.

The six men ringed the dining room table, each one alternately sitting out a hand. They played five card stud, high and low, and aces and jokers wild, while Ernest always added a bump and a wiggle. They drank beer from amber bottles that Anna carried to the table, waved their cigarettes and spat small bits of tobacco from the tips of their tongues.

After a few hands, John took a long pull at his beer, looked into the bottle and asked, "What do you get when you mix beer cans and mobsters?"

The others fell silent.

"A Chicago landfill," he answered.

The men laughed uneasily at first, then loosened up with Charlie's belly laugh.

"I don't know if we should be joking . . ." Anna said and faltered. Tillie looked over at John in surprise. He could feel her confusion just as he could

feel the approval of the others. Their relief.

"They should all do each other in," Ben said, and the group looked to John.

"Garbage," John said looking away from Tillie. He leaned over Ben's hand. "More garbage," he said, his laughter erupting like a bark.

"I didn't deal it," Ben scowled at Hank.

John sat out the next hand. Perhaps it didn't matter after all. And even if it was an accounting as his father had promised, and if God had given him this, then John had looked deep and he had not found *himself* wanting, only the world.

Ben excused himself from the table.

Charlie raised his voice over the general laughter. "Speaking of that. I heard from Clifton that his department thinks it might have been sexual. He got a report some guy's been missing since a week ago Saturday."

"Sexual?" Hank asked.

Charlie nodded. "As in *homosexual*."

John set his cards down.

"Said he was canvassing in the suburbs for AIDS or something."

"You calling?" Edgar asked John.

John folded. Edgar split the pot with Charlie, and Ernest dealt the next hand. John listened to the cards hit the table with a soft sound like slapped

flesh. Their voices hummed in his head and he sat with his cards flat on the table. He didn't understand what it was--how the word sexual had *changed* things, or why it had done so. He felt his breathing grow shallow. But it had. He remembered lifting the bag, how it hit his back, that fleshy contact he could not allow himself to believe at the time.

John stared at the cards face-down in front of him.

Edgar spoke up. "Well it don't matter. Still garbage, ain't John?"

John straightened his back, looked around the waiting circle of men to where Tillie sat with her eyes down on her hands. "Garbage," he agreed.

Ben entered the dining room from the kitchen, a black plastic trash bag in his hands. He dropped it on the table in front of John.

"Must be for you," he said.

John's face whitened as if slapped. He sat looking at the bag as Ben turned away, laughing.

"John." Tillie left her chair next to Anna, moving to his side.

He looked up and the group fell silent. He glanced at Tillie, then down at the bag. Tillie moved her hand toward it, but John stopped her.

"No," he whispered, wanting to spare her what he wouldn't have a week ago.

Ben stepped forward. "It's nothing," he said. He laughed awkwardly. "Just a joke." He ripped into the bag; sandwiches scattered out. "It didn't

mean nothing."

Later that evening, back home, John called Karl long distance. In the background he could hear Karl's wife questioning "Who is it? Who is it?"

"Sell the damn place," Karl said.

"It was supposed to be *yours*," John answered.

There was a long moment of breathing on the line, then "I don't want it, Dad. Look what it's gotten you."

John couldn't argue that. He sent his love and hung up. He tried to watch television, and later, in bed, he tried to rub himself alive, and failing that, to press himself limp into Tillie. She tried to help, her hands stroking him, but he remained limp, the moonlight illuminating a piece of himself, a piece of her and something of them--all their parts jumbled in the dark room.

He got up, dressed and left the house. In the yard, he found himself walking to his tractor, an old Allis he'd bought almost new in fifty-four. His hand ran along the dent on the right wheel cover, from back in sixty-seven. He swung himself onto the cast-iron seat that knew his spine better than he did. The engine stuttered as he choked it back to life. The night fled, closed down to two converging circles of light from the tractor's high beams. He backed over to where the disker rested, the rows of hard metal plates buried in wilted ragweed. He hitched it to the tractor, belly-down in the damp weeds, a stone

for a mallet to hammer in the cotter pin, then looped two lengths of chain over the hook on the back of the tractor. He hiked the disk lever and the round plates lifted up to the trailer wheels. Standing in the dark, he admired the gleam of frosted metal--blades he still honed himself, just as his father had, in the off-season. The damp on his shirt was like a second skin, already stiffening in the cold. The porch light went on as he pulled onto the dirt road leading from the yards to his fields.

The moon was low on the horizon, a small sickle shape his grandfather had used as a portent for harvest in a time when soil was clean. He could have driven the road with the lights off, though the moonlight was feeble. But he kept them on to skitter over the road with each bump, leap up onto the trees like someone whose line of sight is jerked this way then that by the rush of objects thrown at him. He shifted down for the rise leading into the south field, the engine warming him, the exhaust cap popping with small contained explosions, metal ringing each time it slapped back down. The wheels churned gravel and then he was over the hill and idling, the corn marching in straight rows out of the tractor's lights. He could see eyes lit red and and sparking through the corn rows like embers blown on a wind.

He slipped into gear, rolled forward and the corn rustled through the headlights, snapped like teeth clamping down beneath him. Over his shoulder he could see the ten-foot-wide swathe behind him, mowed flat against the wall

of corn on his left. He steadied his hands on the wheel, feeling his heart banging in his chest like the pheasants that shotgunned out of the corn scattering into the dark. There was an excitement he had not anticipated, an intense joy rising up from his stomach and he shouted into the drone of engine and snapping corn, nearly rising from his seat to lean over the wheel, the night cut with lights, the dark revealed.

Halfway back across the field, he saw Tillie crossing the ruined path. Her hair was loose down her back and she hugged herself as she stumbled over the flattened corn. In the light, she looked startled. He shifted to neutral and pulled the brake.

"I can't see very well," she said as she neared the tractor.

He offered a hand to her, and she climbed up onto the wheel fender next to him. "John, you could wait until morning . . ."

But he shook his head, engaged the gears. "I know this field," he shouted, thinking how well he knew it--better than his own body, maybe as well as he knew Tillie's. She nodded for him to go on then, her arm tight to his waist, her other hand gripping the wheel cover she sat on.

They mowed the next row, and then the next, nearly a quarter of the field scraped flat, the remainder bristling at the edges of the light. Tillie was slumped against John. He could feel her weariness and the joy turned in him like winter storage, flat tasting, then soft and bad. He turned the tractor at

row's end, driving on.

This was what it came to, he believed. The final leveling. His father's body leading a three-car cortege. John's son, Karl, an accountant. John's own life work just so much trash. His stomach cramped and he put in the clutch, shut off the engine. He stepped down from the tractor, crouched next to the fender, taking deep breaths through his mouth. Tillie was at his side, stroking his forehead and trying to shrug her sweater over his shoulders.

He turned to look over the broken field and stopped. A pair of eyes winked in the near distance at ground level. John started to laugh, pointed them out to Tillie. "Goddamn raccoons," he said. And then the eyes raised up a foot, burning, floating effortlessly higher and held at a height even with John's own. His back arched then sagged softly. And then he made out the shape of haunches and shoulders, a narrow head with a rack and flagging ears. The deer moved across the broken corn, feeding in the silence. The smell of corn was like a bruise in the air and he put his shaking hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry," Tillie said, "for what happened at Edgar and Anna's. It was . . . an ugly thing for Ben to do."

John sighed, his breath gelling in the cool air. The earth sounded hollow beneath his feet. He judged the depth of frost at six inches.

She tried again. "I didn't mean to hurt you--"

"No," he said, "you didn't." He turned off the tractor lights, hefted the

disks back to trailer height. They walked clear of the tractor, crossed the standing rows of corn until they came to the creek skinned with ice. He could hear water rustling beneath.

"All these years," she said. "Shouldn't I know how to help you?"

He turned, following the creek away from the road. Tillie's fingers were tight on his arm. He said, "When I first saw it--when I first saw it I thought, for just a moment, that it was my own legs someone had cut out from under me and I just didn't know it yet." John stopped and peered down into Tillie's eyes. "Isn't that strange?"

Tillie's eyes were bright in the dark. "No," Tillie said. "We've been hurt."

John sighed and straightened up. He looked over his shoulder toward the highway. "Know what I did? Stood in that road and told God, Go ahead bring me Your garbage." He looked at Tillie. "Dared Him." John released a shaky laugh. "Back at Edgar's house--when Ben brought out the bag, I thought He'd answered, sent me the damned head and hands."

Tillie squeezed his arm.

He thought about what had come to him in the field just now, what he had thought of when he saw those eyes alive and rising, how he had again felt the soft hit and roll of the bag on his shoulder--"I called it--no,*him*--garbage, Tillie. As if I hadn't *seen*."

John Root leaned into Tillie and lay his head on her shoulder. He listened to her breath, cavernous in her body. He wrapped his arms around her, lending his own small weight to hers. The creek wandered in a lazy tangle, washing the soil, moving into neighboring fields past the homes of friends, beyond to where houses squatted in packs and dogs barked and ran the length of their chains. He stared into the distance to see inside the houses, to where people shed soiled clothes, lifted tired legs into beds and drowned the noise of the dogs, the highway, and their own slow dying in the muffle of quilts and the soft slap of flesh.

Four O'Clocks

In the tightly fenced neighborhood on the south side of town, two yards leaned against a picket fence. Its narrow slats were wedged between the tangle of the old man's gardens and the crisp lawns on the old woman's side.

Idabob Herring, sat quiet in the shade of her backyard sour-cherry tree, its fruit dimpled and green. In the twilight, she faced her stiff-backed house set dead center in the yard. She sat deep in thought as she had the entire day, with her chin resting on her breast bone, long gray hair wrapped in a knot on top of her head.

Sam Leaper worked quietly in his gardens next door, his big-knuckled hands stained with the day's crush of flowers and soil. He wore a translucent visor that tinted his face green as blade and leaf. His small cottage squatted on the far end of the lot. Narrow, mullioned windows looked out over his flower gardens that sprawled color the width and breadth of the city lot. Sam looked over at the old woman. He wondered about her and her silence. Then he scolded--wasn't no call to concern himself. Idabob Herring had never done him any favors, keeping strict to her side of the fence these twenty-some years. Never an uncivil word, nor a kind one either, though time and again, he'd seen her offer muffins warm out of the oven, wrapped in towels, or cakes swaying in tiers on a plate to other neighbors. He closed one nostril

with his thumb and blew, then covered the moisture with a wad of dirt.

He lifted the foliage on the four-o'clocks. He always worked on them early dusk, when they spent their colors in a wasteful rush before the dark. Didn't know why he was so fond of them, holding their buds tight-fisted most of the Lord's good day. He spooned compost in around the base. With a hand pressed into his back, he rested on his heels. Her soft cries picked their way through his garden from the other side of the fence. He looked over at Idabob, saw her shoulders shaking. He crossed over to the gate laced shut with morning glory vines, pulled them free and pushed it open to enter her yard.

"Miss Idabob. You okay, Miss Idabob?" he asked.

Idabob braced her shoulders against the tree. She didn't want to have that old man seeing her like this. "I'm fine," she whispered.

"Well, mind me now, I don't mean to snoop--"

"Then don't," she snapped back. Her hands closed in her lap.

Sam looked at the old woman humped up against the tree bark like a gall. "Didn't mean no intrusion, Miss Idabob, just being neighborly. No harm meant." Sam looked over his shoulder to where his delphiniums bristled in the dim light. "You need anything, you call." He stepped across the lawn and through the gate.

Idabob watched him latch the gate, saw him stop on the other side and

then move on, shaking his head. She looked up at her house. She should go inside, turn the lights on, before that old busybody, Sam Leaper, decided to come by again. She could still hear him: Just being neighborly. As if coming into her yard, snooping into her hurt were all it took.

He had no right, and she had a mind to tell him so. She stood up, her legs stiff from sitting. By the first spill of full moon over the elm tree street-side, she crossed the lawn.

She followed where the old man had gone, to the gate she had long ago forgotten connected the two yards. She stood looking at the tangle of color snuffed by the evening to gray and black and floating whites. There wasn't a square foot of lawn in Sam Leaper's yard, just the wild masses of flowers and a shabby cobbled footpath wandering like a half-thought-out apology.

Idabob stopped, her breasts heavy and pendant over her crossed arms. "Mr. Leaper," she called. She opened the gate and stood suddenly anxious of leaving the clean-edged lawns, the neat grass that pressed dark with her footprints. She stepped across.

She walked unsteadily down the path, stumbling on stones that had been unseated, frost-raised like the dead from their graves in the heart of last winter. "Sam?" she called out. "Sam Leaper, where are you?"

She passed the stands of fragrant and blowsy lilies, knowing them by the scent that burgled her slit window early summer evenings. She walked past

the hush of bee balm. She paused, sighted on the reflection of the full moon on cottage windows. "Mr. Leaper!" she called louder. "Mr. Leaper!"

A dark shape broke from the shadows and moved forward. "Miss Idabob, is that you?" His voice moved ahead of him, steadied her.

"Yes. Yes, it's me, Idabob. I've come."

He reached her side and his smile was moon-washed, scrubbed fresh as a young man's. Idabob hesitated and gathered her anger about her again. "I just came to tell you, you had no call to come over."

Moonlight limned Idabob, her skin glazed, her hair a froth. Sam leaned forward to better read her words.

"Yes," Miss Idabob," he said. "I know we ain't been but like passing acquaintances, but seemed to me you might be needing help, sitting so quiet all day, like I never seen before. And then I heard you crying."

"I wasn't."

Sam stepped back. "Well then, might of been them mourning doves."

She nodded.

"Is that all, Miss Idabob?"

"Yes," she said, turned and stood waiting, looking across the yards.

Sam took a step back, and still she stood quietly. "Miss Idabob. Maybe you'd like to come sit awhile?" Sam wasn't quite sure why he'd offered. But something in the way she hung there, staring off at her house swollen big in

the darkness, had made him offer.

She turned back to him.

"This way," he said. He turned once to make sure she followed and then led her in the dark with a gentle patter.

"Now this here's Canterbury bells. They're biennials, bloom the second year, seed themselves and die. I've staggered them, so's I got some blooming every year. But they're growing wild and raggedy now, so I'll pull 'em back a bit. These here asters will be late color--along with the mums and dahlias."

Idabob followed. There was no easy path through this place. Rose bushes swelled thorny and florid on either side. At last he stepped into the arbor, its lattice work leaning on the crutch of thick-wooded rose bushes. She walked beneath the arch, heavy-headed blooms drooped dark and warm as snared birds.

Moonlight sifted through the lattice in small drops of light. He took a seat and pointed to the bench opposite. She sat carefully, their knees nearly touching.

"Was a fine day for sitting. Good idea, taking your ease that way, Miss Idabob."

They sat a while.

"This here's one of my favorite places," Sam continued. "Keep minding

myself to fix this old arbor, but seems every time I mean to work on it, I get to sitting instead." Sam flicked at a moth that battered his ear. "Too hot for baking today, Miss Idabob?"

Idabob picked her head up sharply. "I'm not baking anymore. Ever again."

Sam leaned back, surprised. He couldn't remember a time when the smell of her baking hadn't come warring across his yards with the scent of his flowers. "Miss Idabob, that seems a harsh thing to say--"

"It's the truth," Idabob hissed. "The truth's a harsh thing."

"Still, Miss Idabob, time and again, I've heard folks say how fine you bake."

Idabob leaned forward into the dappled light. "Yes." She nodded quickly. "But will they remember it, Mr. Leaper?" She paused. "Will they carve it in stone, Mr. Leaper?" She sat back. The bench creaked with the soft chorus of crickets.

"I don't understand, Miss Idabob."

"Didn't expect you would."

"Why would you *want* it in stone?"

Idabob snorted. She leaned against the rose vines, wondering why she should speak to this old man, who she had never found a word for before.

And in the end, she supposed that was what made it so easy, an old man,

foolish in his own ways--his voice brawling over the yards to the neighbors, "Come, smell these lilacs, Miss Bedebecker."

She looked in the shadows where Sam sat waiting for an answer. She decided she'd give it to him.

"It came to me yesterday, Mr. Leaper, that I am old." She paused, waiting for some reply. She looked down at the moonlight dotting her hands like bright liver spots. "I am *old*," she repeated and laughed softly. "And that, Mr. Leaper, is not an easy thing to discover one morning."

Sam nodded his head. "No, Miss Idabob. I come across that morning myself a while back."

Idabob drew in her breath, held it a moment. "And what did you see, Mr. Leaper? Looking back, what did you see?"

"Well, Miss Idabob. I don't know but that's none of your business."

Idabob bent forward. "No. None of my business." She waited.

They sat in uneasy silence, then Sam sighed and said, "Saw my shortcomings, Miss Idabob. Made me small."

He could hear her breaths coming in short huffs. "Yes," she said. "Yes. How is it Mr. Leaper, that all the years, moving through them one step after the other, each placed so carefully, could in the end come to so little distance? Do you know I was *born* in that house?"

Sam shook his head.

"Born there, raised there, stayed after Mother and Father passed on. Seemed the right thing, you know, one day after the other--"

"Don't know that it wasn't, Miss Idabob," Sam rushed in.

"I told myself that, Sam." Idabob's voice raised louder. She clenched both hands down on the bench. "I said that very thing. Made it all those years on my own. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"Well, Miss Idabob, my Florrie used to say you were a strong woman. 'Not a pretty woman,' she'd say. Begging your pardon, Miss Idabob. Florrie'd say, 'No, not a pretty woman, but handsome in a strong kind of way.' She always wondered why you never married."

Idabob slid further into the light. "Of my own choosing, I'll have you know, Mr. Leaper. Of my own choosing. It didn't matter to me, that I wasn't much to look at." And at that moment it was true, because she had long ago misplaced the memories of all that hurt. After the first rush of youth, people had come to appreciate something other than beauty in her--a solidness that had drawn men, but in turn had made *them* seem unnecessary in her life.

"I've been content on my own. Does that sound odd, Mr. Leaper? Just happy to be my own company and to bake. If I wanted company, I'd take a pie to Stella's, or bring biscuits to the Pokorny's with all their children."

Sam nodded his head. "I seen that."

Idabob carried on, unaware of his small hurt. "It all came so natural,

like I've always known the feel of a good bread or cake dough. The days passed."

Sam nodded his head.

"But I wake up this morning, and there they are, all those years--"

"Then is it the looking back, Miss Idabob," Sam asked, "or the looking forward that bothers you?"

"Forward?" Idabob's voice softened. "Forward? What do you take me for, Sam Leaper? I watched my father seize up in the kitchen and fall dead to the floor without a moment to straighten his soul." She shook her fingers in the dark at Sam, amazed at that man's insolence--to think her so ignorant in the face of all she'd seen. "I'm no green girl. I know what's ahead, and I've seen it close enough to know I'm not about to hide from it."

Sam knew what she meant. Watching a loved one die brings a person to an accounting--the more years pass, the more you get to numbering up the sides. "Didn't mean no offense, Miss Idabob," Sam said. "But still, I know people who've seen death all their lives, never believed it'd be there for them."

"They're fools." Idabob stood up, stepped out of the arbor.

"You know," Sam said, "I watched my Florrie pass on after twenty-six years of marriage." He clucked his tongue and shook his head. He remembered a bare three years later, when he'd sat at the death bed of Helen,

his wife of only 17 short months. He felt the familiar squeeze in his chest, the ache that had seeded itself there, bloomed with each loss. How differently each woman had worn their years, and yet how beautifully.

"Why don't you tidy up this place?" Idabob asked, looking around the snarl of flowerbeds.

"Pardon?" Sam sat lost.

She swept an arm before her. "Not a straight-forward step to be found. It's untidy."

Sam joined her, looked around in the dark, each flower bed familiar and in the place it needed to be. "Why, it all just come to be, like you was saying earlier, one day on another."

"And just as senseless." She turned on him. "Looking *back*, Sam Leaper. That's what scares me. One day like another, baking cakes, breads. Just to give it all away. Handed it out. Gone." She took a deep breath and peered into Sam's face, trying to see his eyes in the dark.

"Don't seem so senseless to me," Sam muttered. "Why them roses's is where they need to be. Sunlight. They want all the light the Lord'll give 'em. So's I planted them there. Makes perfect sense."

Idabob drew back. "You're not listening."

"I heard right!" Sam snapped. "Untidy, you said, like you plant a flower bed the way you'd sweep a floor."

"I should have known better than to spend my breath on you." Idabob stepped away.

"And the good Lord knows, them breaths of yours been too precious to spend on me before now," Sam threw at her back. "Keeping to your own side of the fence, never spending a hello, or a good day. Don't take much, you know, just maybe a lean on that fence and a word, like, nice flowers there, Sam."

"A flower garden, Mr. Leaper, is a border, or a nice tight bed, with lawns, real lawns a person can walk across--can see their footprints, know where they've been, and how to get back." Idabob stepped away, her feet testing the path.

"For crying out loud, Idabob Herring. You make it sound like a body could get lost or something. And how you think that could be, with that old house of yours rearing its ugly bones smack in front of God and everyone, is beyond me." Sam Leaper walked close behind her. "Here, let me on ahead."

He stepped in front of her, stopped, held her arm and turned to bore into her face. "Looking back, you say, looking to see footprints of where you been? As if that's to tell you if it all been worth it. Go ahead. You cross back into that yard of yours with them footprints clear and close up to your face, what then? You going to walk backwards? Wipe 'em out, maybe?"

She pulled free of him, stumbled off the path, stepping into damp soil.

She felt a satisfying snap of stem under the thick-heeled shoe. She walked further in.

"Here, now. Miss Idabob. Here." Sam reached for her, tried to steer her back to the path. She pulled away. Her lips crossed to a tight, black line. She moved away from the small man, further into the beds, cutting a straight line for the immense old house next door.

Sam thought to follow her, but seeing the wake of flowers pressed flat behind her, he raced down the cobblestones, trying to cut her off.

Idabob knocked at the flower heads that bobbed senseless against her fists. The plants rippled under as she waded through, huffing. She saw Sam winding his way toward her, keeping to his paths.

She became a heavy-footed woman, her hands like great blunt sickles swinging back and forth, lopping the heads of pale-budded lupins, black-bearded iris, clumps of phlox. Idabob looked back over her shoulder to see the swathe she had cut in the moonlight. It lay straight behind her; she continued toward her yard and the house.

Sam paced her from the path, smelling the sweet green destruction, anger rising in him. "You got no right!" he yelled across the beds. "I don't give you *none* of them."

Idabob stepped smartly, each step placed carefully before the other. Straight as always. He would thank her some day.

He caught her just short of the gate, his boots muddy from the last bed he'd trampled to reach her. She smelled a bruised green. She smelled a small piece of sour from marigolds. She smelled dusky with bee balm and sharp with lemon verbena.

He leaned into her face. "It don't change what we been," he said.

Idabob's smile loosened and slipped. She felt the day's despair edging back. She had thought herself shut of it in her anger at the old man who'd squandered his own life on a yard full of flowers and a sad succession of dying old women. But here it was again, close on her skin, making her gasp for breath.

Sam backed off, but his hand stayed cupped under her elbow, catching her cries in tremors against his palms.

They stood that way together, under the eye of the moon and the whole large luminous body of night. And he bent forward, weighed under the press of that speculation, holding onto the old woman's elbow. He felt her hurt seeping through his palm, filling him to aching, as he had been filled so many times before in his life--all those losses coming like a stream of seasons, one hard on the other, but always somehow he had found himself still upright and breathing, until it was time to uncover the flowerbeds once again.

He patted her elbow gently and spoke his words carefully, each one dropped separately into her ears, to keep them from winking out into the

dark. "I'm sorry, Miss Idabob."

Idabob looked up through her tears, the moon a nimbus of light around Sam Leaper's bowed back. "I'm frightened, Sam," she whispered. "What if I've come all this way, only to find myself an old, foolish woman?"

Sam breathed deeply, inhaling the crush of flowers. All the light of stars cold and untouchable hunched bright and huge over him. He felt himself rooted firm to the soil, a small growing thing under the vast dome of night.

The Company of Strangers

From where she sat on the porch, Martha could hear music spilling out of the corner bars, down past the street lights and the couples leaning like sighs against brick-red buildings. She spread her palms on her thighs and felt the pulse rising up through her feet from the porch boards. Pigsville squatted in a small corner of the Menomonee River Valley floor, heart of old industrial Milwaukee where factories with brick chimney stacks had long since grown over the pig yards and slaughter houses. Down there, the dropforge hammered metal plates, its staggered two-beat rising up through the streets and the floorboards of houses. Sometimes she thought the whole neighborhood breathed to it. Sometimes she thought it put her own heart off balance.

She sat alone, sweat rimming the legs of her shorts, arms loose at her side. Next door, fat Bettany yelled at her husband, Francis, as their three sons broke out of the house and ran into the dark.

Up and down the street, two-story houses sat in tight order, dining room windows opening on bedroom windows or the blank facade of particle siding battered down to tarpaper. Porches the width of each house and roofed by second-floor balconies ranked like sentinels. Martha leaned against the porch rail. Her son's baseball glove rested on the lower step and her daughter's tricycle winked under the street lamp.

Next door, a screen slammed and Bettany, a large black woman wearing only a white dress slip, huffed across the patch of dirt between houses. She lowered herself onto a step, her skin rolling into dark folds and drifts, making Martha's skin more startling in its whiteness.

"Sometimes the night's too long," she said nodding toward her house where Martha suspected Bettany's husband had slipped back into sleep in front of the television set.

Martha was surprised as always to see the line of dark hairs bristling over Bettany's lips. Bettany leaned forward; fried sausage, onion and sweat released into the air. "You seen my boys?"

Martha looked up from the tangle of railroad sidings and factories, to the other end of the street where the near-northside sprawled. Above the rooftops the viaduct tunneled into the night sky. Martha nodded and her finger wandered into three directions as though to point them out--the teens' separate trails winding down and into the streets to merge in congregations of young kids in back alleyways.

"You got it coming to you, yet." Bettany rested back on her elbows, her breasts slumping.

"You divining my troubles again?" Martha half-closed her eyes. "Not busy enough with your own?"

"That's right," Bettany grinned, her forehead shining with sweat. "I

haven't got half enough troubles between unbudgeable Francis, and three young sons running the streets." She eased her chin down on her hand. "Can you tell me what sins those boys can think up to commit out there?"

"Alphabetically?" Martha asked.

Bettany lifted her slip, fanned air up her thighs. "In the order of importance--abandoning their mother being the uppermost," she replied.

A siren swirled down a side street. Under half-closed lids, Martha watched Bettany tense, all the energy and humor sweating out of her, and Martha wondered how it would be, sitting on the porch in the heat of a summer night listening to sirens if it were her own children out there fleeing her safe regard, preferring, instead, the company of strangers.

Bettany sighed. "You got a brew?"

Martha nodded, stood up.

"You got a man?" Bettany threw at her.

"Only your old man on his better days," Martha joked.

Bettany snorted and leaned back on the steps. "I've seen his better days." She shook her head. "They weren't so hot."

Martha smiled, eased open the screen door and let it bump shut against her buttocks. She threaded her way through the dark house, past the rattling tick of the glass-domed clock keeping summer time, and barefoot onto the cool linoleum floor of the hallway where she paused to listen to her son grinding his

teeth in sleep.

Across the hall was the bedroom where only her things were strewn. Bettany saw living alone as a time between men. Some nights Martha understood that. When the laughter of men standing on the corner came through the screens like the whine of insects, she'd find herself lying still, holding her breath. Sometimes she would touch herself, first her breasts, each one, and then between her legs, as though to make sure she was still intact, a woman in that way too, and then she would make her way to the front porch to rest against the rail and watch.

In the kitchen, Martha squinted into the light of the refrigerator, lifted two of the last three chilled beers from the nearly empty shelves. She'd come to know men were not the answer but had to admit there had been times enough she wanted to believe they were and had tried to make it so.

She bumped the screen door open. Another neighbor, Opal, stood at the foot of the steps flanked by two men, her lover Chad on one side and a stranger on the other. Even in the shadow of the streetlight, Martha could see the stranger's skin was fair, but his hair was nappy and tight on his forehead. He was a good-looking man, and Martha let herself stare a moment before she handed Bettany one beer and offered Opal the other.

Opal seated herself on the bottom step. "Why thank you." She slid the dark bottle against her neck, her black hair curling on the glass. "Bet you

thought I was going to drink that," she said then bent toward Chad standing before her. "Chad, baby." She extended a carmel-colored arm to him. "You want this beer, hon?"

Martha perched on the step below Bettany. Looking at Opal, slim and brave at twenty, Martha felt her own thirty-four years sifting down and imagined her buttocks flattening out with the approaching years of sitting late into the night, alone on porches. Chad lifted the beer from Opal's hand, his nails pale like spring bulbs against his black fingers. He rolled the chilled beer bottle against the bottom of Opal's bared left foot.

"You two don't stop that, I'll have to wake Francis," Bettany said.

Opal laughed. "You wake Francis for anything other than snoring, you'll stop his heart."

"You go ahead, talk smart--all you young girls. But Francis is regular. Got a job, and I turn over at night, he's there."

"Sounds like a good woman's dream," the stranger said.

"On a bad night," Opal growled and prodded Martha's knee.

Martha glanced up, trying to sneak a good look at the man. He nodded to her.

Bettany lowered her head. "A woman could do worse." She tipped her head toward Martha.

Martha braced herself, but the stranger spoke again. "Like that woman

down the block?"

"Jesus," Opal whispered. "This is no place to talk about that." She looked over at the house two doors down, its windows vacant. "Gives you the chill don't it? In her own home."

Chad spoke to his friend. "All the women are spooked." He waved down the street, whispered through his teeth, "Found four of her fingers in his pockets."

Bettany shook her head and scolded, "We got to talk about that?" She ran her hands over her hair.

"Too close for you?" the stranger asked.

"Damn *right!*" Opal spat out. "Damn right it's too close--fifty feet down the street. That shit can just *keep* itself in some other neighborhood."

"Where you don't have to see it?" The stranger settled himself next to Martha. His legs stretched down the steps as he rested back on an elbow. Martha looked away, her heart bumping.

"Where I don't have to *live* with it," Opal said. She lay her hand on Martha's wrist. "It's harder for women."

Martha wondered if that were true, and she was tempted to ask Chad or the man next to her if that were so. Could men sleep any easier knowing what had happened? While she had slept, kicking off blankets in the heat, Margarita had been murdered. She wondered, could men really walk past the house

without wondering what Margarita felt in those last minutes? "Who are you?" she asked instead.

"Him?" Opal flicked a moth from her arm. "Some no-account friend of Chad's." And she smiled back at him, something living in her eyes a moment before extinguishing. Martha glanced at Chad, saw him frown and pull Opal's bare foot into his lap.

Bettany finished her beer, belched and excused herself.

"Some nights down at the Bulls Eye," Chad said quietly, "Margarita wasn't so shy."

Opal pulled her foot away. Chad reached over, smiling and wrapped his hand around her ankle, pulled it with quiet force back into his lap.

Opal leaned forward, her breath hissing and Martha felt the heat of them flash and then evaporate as quickly with the short explosive laughs of the man next to her.

Bettany crossed her arms over her chest. "Ain't no woman asked for that kind of thing."

"Now," Chad said, "I'm just saying living alone down here and all, maybe she just wasn't as smart about it as she should have been. Say like Martha."

Martha wrapped her fingers around a porch spindle. "Do you really think it has to do with being smart?" It sounded like an accusation, but all she

wanted, more than anything, was an answer that would make the violence predictable--avoidable. The man next to her tapped his foot.

"Did she know him?" Bettany asked Opal. "He didn't belong here, did he?"

"How'm I supposed to know that?"

The stranger spoke up. "Just tell her no, that's what she wants to hear. She wants to believe you mamas don't raise that kind of child here." He looked at Martha. "Isn't that right?"

Martha's face heated. "Mister," she asked, "what kind of child did your mama raise?" And then she thought of her own son asleep, grinding his teeth. She had the urge to go wake him.

"Sic 'em, Martha," Opal hooted, then turned on Bettany. "Like you think the cream settled down here? And anyway, can you tell me what difference it makes? Like none of us have taken chances?"

Bettany shook her head. "If she took up with a stranger--"

"Hon, they're all strangers at some point. Even Francis," Opal said quietly.

And that was the problem, Martha thought. How did a woman know? She thought about her ex-husband Evan. "And sometimes," she said, "just when you think you know them, you get married."

Opal nodded. "And then they think they got a ninety-nine year lease to

do their worst with a twenty-five dollar marriage license."

"I still say you got to know who you pick up," Bettany said.

"Who said Margarita picked him up?" Martha asked. "Maybe he broke in."

"News didn't say nothing about a break-in," Chad said.

Martha sat in the dark, uncomfortable with the judgment in Chad's voice, as though, somehow, Margarita had given permission.

She could hear the forge more clearly in their silence. The foundry was down on the valley floor, a steel and glass building shaped like a church with high-arched peaks. On summer nights, the thirty-foot doors stayed open on the side of the building and the men lounged in sooty groups, smoking in the dark while the drophammer slammed behind them into red-hot metal plates and the air in the building looked stricken with heat lightning. Some nights Martha walked down there and stood concealed in the dark while the pounding of the hammer rose up through the ground and up her legs, racketing in her chest like a second heart. She wondered what it did to a man to spend every night in there. On some rare evenings, she walked past them, just to feel their eyes, and then she'd stride off, their calls falling off her back. Once home, she'd lock the door behind her, feeling giddy and frightened and ashamed. She'd sit at her children's bedside, trying to make up for it.

Bettany spoke up first. "It don't feel right to talk bad about the dead."

Chad lifted Opal's foot to his lips, kissed the underside of a small toe.

"And what *you* want, baby?" he asked.

Opal seemed to uncoil, leaned back on her elbow. "We're going dancing," she addressed the street lamp overhead, then she inclined her head toward Martha. "You interested?"

"Might be." She'd wear pumps, she thought, her blue cotton shift with straps that slipped when her shoulders got sweaty. He'd like that. She stopped herself. "The kids," she said.

Opal whispered into Martha's ear. "They're asleep." She tapped her finger on the porch step. "Listen to that music, girl." The sound of a saxophone came through the open door of the Bulls Eye Club, and overhead, pigeons cooed, their calls softly garbled.

"Chad, honey." Opal slipped her bare feet out of his hands and stepped off the porch. "We *could* dance here."

Bettany sat up, resting her elbow on her knee. She looked down at the man sitting next to Martha. "You're a good-looking man. You got a job?"

He leaned up to her. "Didn't I just hear you saying what a good man you got in Francis?" He smiled sweetly. "You're going to shake my faith in good women."

Bettany reached down, slapped his arm.

Martha watched Opal and Chad on the sidewalk, dancing to the faint

music while a dog barked and muted shouts came from down the street. As they danced clenched to each other, sweat dappled their clothes where their hands rested. Overhead, on the far north end of the street, mercury lights lit the night sky thick with the haze of factories and car exhaust. The skyline fumed with reflected light. Martha closed her eyes. Perhaps Richard had had the best hands, she thought. At night, she used to ease lotion into the cracks that creased them as he sat on the edge of their bed. She spread lotion over his hands, his arms, rubbed his neck. She shifted, glanced at the stranger. He was watching Opal, under the street light dancing in slow circles around Chad, her hands raised to her hair, lifting and wrapping it on her head like a great, dusky turban. From a porch across the street came a shout, followed by a sharp clap of hands. Martha caught her breath, tried to see across the avenue of light to the other porches where she knew other people gathered.

Bettany cleared her throat. "So, did Opal ever tell us what your name is?"

The man leaned back toward her, lifting his broad face to hers. "No," he said and turned back to Martha.

"Didn't answer if you got a job either."

"That's right."

Bettany picked her slip clear of her thighs. "Maybe you ain't so good looking after all."

Martha laughed. "Bettany you're shameless."

"Me?" Bettany pointed to Chad and Opal stalled under the light. They were kissing, his hands buried in her hair. Bettany took a deep breath, glanced over at the windows of her home. She whispered loudly into Martha's ear.

"This is your porch. You got a right to know his name. You ask him."

"Jesus," Martha said softly. She turned to the man. "It *is* my porch."

He nodded. "Who's arguing?"

"She could order your sorry ass out of here," Bettany spoke up. "Go ahead," she prodded Martha's shoulder. "Order him the hell out of here, or tell his name. A woman got to know."

He laughed, his face breaking into shadows.

"You think this is just a game," Bettany scolded. "But Martha knows." She patted Martha on the shoulder. "A woman's got to take care of herself, her children."

Martha sat bunched over, Bettany's hands drumming through her. On the sidewalk Opal danced. A shout cracked in the dark. The drop hammer fell, one, two. And Bettany was right, Martha thought.

"Who are you," she asked.

"Julian," he answered.

"You got any children, Ju-li-an?" Bettany asked.

"None I'd admit to."

"You are a sorry ass," Bettany said, standing up. "Won't admit to," she grumbled. "And that's what it all comes down to. No matter how piss-poor a place, women got to be there. We got no choice. The children keep coming home." She balanced her way down the narrow space between the two. "My boys will come home. Always do." She stepped down onto the sidewalk and turned back to Martha, looked straight at her. "But I worry, you know."

Martha nodded.

"A mother's got to worry, else who's going to?" She walked past Chad and Opal, her slip glowing in the dark. "Things happen," she called back.

"Hey, where you going, Bettany?" Opal called over Chad's shoulder.

"Just up the street a ways," she answered.

"Dressed like that?"

Bettany looked down at herself and shrugged. "It's not so different from what you young girls are all wearing, is it?"

Chad laughed. "But *you're* so much more."

Bettany strolled back up the street toward him. "I know your mama. She didn't teach you to talk that way."

"Now, Bettany, I didn't mean nothing. But what you going to do? Follow them around, lock them up?"

Bettany stood under the street light, her back softly arched, her eyes contemplating the pavement beneath her bare feet. Chad hadn't said anything

Bettany wouldn't have already grieved over. Martha felt her throat tighten. When children are little you believe you have some control over what might harm them because to believe otherwise is unthinkable. It was that easy. And you proceed on that belief. Every day the children remain safe seems proof you made it so. And now Bettany was supposed to let go, just like that.

"Chad, honey," Opal said softly.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Shut up."

"I'm just telling it, baby--"

"Shut up."

Julian clapped his hands slowly then threw his head back and laughed.

Bettany turned toward the porch. She stood at the foot of the steps.

"You take what you got coming, girl," she said to Martha, then she looked at Julian. "But you don't necessarily got to take what they offer. You see my boys, send them home." She crossed to her front door and closed it behind her.

A white low-rider toured down the street, the top half of the headlamps tinted blue. The side of the car had "Jesus Rules" in black letters. The car was full of young men and women. A bared ass was flattened against the back passenger window.

"Some folks sure know how to have fun," Opal said, disgusted.

"Oh, come on, baby, you going to tell me you never did it?" Chad followed Opal back to the bottom of the porch steps.

"That's the problem." Opal sighed and sat down. "All the men in this town lack class."

Chad slumped down next to Opal. "And all the women--respect."

"See?" She pointed to Chad. "I don't blame you, honey," she patted Martha's wrist, "for staying the hell clear of this kind."

Chad's fist knotted on the steps.

Julian turned to Martha. "And what did your men lack?"

Martha looked away, down the street past three women strolling with arms around each other's waists, to the corner where the pawn shop squatted with metal gates bolted over its doors and windows.

"Stamina," she said thinking of Richard, who'd pretty much cleaned her out just before leaving. Leaving her with a part-time job in a fast-food chain and a place in line for food stamps. "And a scapegoat." She thought of her husband. And finally, she thought of Gene, who would wake nights and slip out of their bed. She'd find him sweating and naked in her children's room. And though he would not touch them, or wake them, he stood there, over their beds, watching them with an intensity that had frightened her.

A young boy came running up the other side of the street, paused in the dark under a tree where he coughed and spat. Dark head bent down and face

lowered into a smudged handkerchief, he crossed over to their side. It was Bettany's youngest son, Maury. He hurried up the steps.

Chad loped over to him, pulled the handkerchief away. "Boy you are going to have one crooked nose."

"It ain't so bad, is it?" the young boy asked.

"I'm talking about when your mama gets done with you." Chad laughed and slapped the boy's back.

Next door, the porch light blinked on and Bettany rushed out. "Jesus! Child, what's happened? Where's your brothers--" She hurried him back into the house. The porch light winked out.

Chad looped his arm around Opal, drew her onto the sidewalk. "I got class, baby." Then he whispered into her ear.

Opal laughed and Martha watched them wander down the street, Opal teetering into Chad's side, his arm tucked around her waist.

"You live alone?" Julian's voice startled Martha.

"I have my children," she said.

"A-lone," he repeated.

She waited for him to join Opal and Chad, but he kept to the step next to her. "You'd better hurry," she said, "or you'll lose them." Chad and Opal turned into the Bulls Eye.

"They'll keep," he answered.

There was a soft popping noise down the street. Martha's stomach tightened.

"Bad side of town," he said softly. "You must get tired sitting guard out here all night. That's what you're doing, don't you know?"

"What do you know about it?" she asked.

"This is no place for someone like you."

"Because I'm white?"

He shrugged. "You aren't the only white woman down here. Doesn't *seem* to make much difference anyway."

And she had to admit it hadn't. It used to be Germans lived here, then Italians. Then the races became color and the colors confused.

"But a woman alone . . ." he added.

And there it was, she thought. Her finger pointed down the street, to one house, then three in a row, skip one, linger on the next two. "We are all women." She leaned away from Julian. "Men move, change places. Who knows?"

"Except for old Francis?" Julian asked. There was the ring of glass on the step as he rolled an empty bottle under his hand. "Got another beer?"

"No. Shouldn't you get going?"

"You want me to?"

"Mister, I don't give a damn what you do. I don't know you."

"Julian," he repeated.

She rested her shoulder against the rail and, knowing he was watching, turned her back to him, looking instead at the elm trees buckled over the streets. A door banged; someone yelled, and salsa music thumped from a boom box. Three blocks down, a fight rocked out of a bar while a police car turned down an adjacent street, its windows sealed and chilled on the inside. The downtown avenue glowed at the end of the street.

Julian stood and walked up onto the porch. Martha looked over her shoulder, watched his tall body lean over the railing as he looked down the row of porches.

"Did you know her?" he asked.

"Margarita?" Martha looked down to where the house waited, unused. "We sorted through the bruised fruit together once," she answered, and then thought with a keen regret, that wasn't enough to know of her. What else? That like herself, Margarita was not a large woman, but that she had long hair pinned back off her face. She had a birth-mark over her upper lip. Her nails were bright pink against the bruises. "She kept to herself." Martha paused. "Mostly, we all do."

"Must get lonely."

They sat quietly awhile.

"You get lonely, Martha? Sitting out here all night, keeping the boogey

man away from your porch?"

Martha stood and quietly walked up the steps, crossed the porch. His hand closed over hers on the screen door handle. She froze. His fingers tightened.

"Let me go," she said, holding her voice steady.

"Come dancing." His hand relaxed.

She looked up over her shoulder, saw the unbroken line of his chin and beyond that lights strung in a bead across the viaduct.

"Whatever you want," he said. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

She listened carefully to what he was saying. Her breath came easier. It would be nice to dress for a man again. She looked up at the door. "My children--"

"They're asleep," he said. "They'll never know."

He was probably right, she thought. Nothing would happen. Just this one time. She turned the screen door handle.

"You are beautiful." He breathed into her hair, his body close, smelling sweet and bitter at the same time. His hand closed on her hip.

A small sound escaped her, easy as breathing. She stood still, his hand feeling its way down her hip, down her thigh. She leaned back into his chest. There was always this, she thought, long after all the ways of escaping were canceled out, this was what was left--your body, the night, the feel of a man.

And if that wasn't enough for always, maybe it was enough for right now. She could feel the beat of the drophammer and she couldn't tell if it was in his body, or hers. She welcomed that gentle confusion, wanting for once, for things to be unclear, roles blurred so that she could walk away too--her own part in the creation of those children a glancing blow, a negligible impulse. And if she was to admit she could not bear that, who was to say that she couldn't make her escape in just this way, one night at a time? His hands cradled her hips, shifting her center of gravity, ever so slightly.

"Ask me in," he whispered.

Martha lowered her head, watched her feet as though afraid the porch might disappear beneath them. She hung onto the handle, and after a few moments the sound of his breathing fell away, and she heard the ticking of the glass-domed clock in the living room, the hum of the refrigerator. "Go away, boogeyman," she said.

He let go of her hand, laughed softly. "Maybe next time?"

Martha opened the door, stepped through and shut it firmly behind her. She threw the deadbolt home. With her cheek pressed against the door, she could hear him waiting out there, in the dark. He was softly humming, sounding like the whole restless city guarding the door against her.

What Does Not Kill Us

Maybe it has to do with me being near-sighted--all that definition up close and the distance undefined, just *working* out there, out of control. And maybe that's why six years ago, I was sitting at the breakfast table over limp toast and cold eggs unable to understand what Harold was saying.

"I'm in love with someone else," he said.

This after two years of courtship and seven *years* of marriage.

"I'm in love with someone else," he repeated.

"Is it because we don't have children?" I asked. It didn't matter that it had been his decision. At that moment, I felt competent to take the blame.

Harold shook his head, his face flushed. It was one of the things I loved best about him. His modesty.

"We could adopt," I offered.

He slumped, looking stricken at the breakfast table. "It's not that," he said taking a deep breath, "it's not anything you might guess."

I thought that was unfair. I'd always thought of myself as an imaginative person. And then I wondered how bad the damage was. Dear God, I thought, don't let it be someone I know. Though the chances of it not being an acquaintance were slight in a town like Missoula where the mountains rimmed the valley on five sides, tying us up into a community more midwestern in

gossip than western, I'd always thought.

"Who is she?"

"This isn't easy," he said.

I had always seen it my place to make things easy for Harold, and I found myself filling in the blanks. "Mandy? (My sometimes best friend.) "Britta?" (His secretary at the small publishing house, and good looking enough to carry off a name like that.)

"His name is Robert," he said.

I rolled my eyes at him.

"No, honest." He leaned forward with an intensity he rarely showed. "I'm gay."

"Your tie is in your eggs," I said.

Looking back, I know I should have said something more worthy of the moment. My whole life was at stake, our marriage, a man's painful honesty with himself, but all I could see was his tie, lapping into the plate of cold scrambled eggs. And quite truthfully, I don't think, at that moment, I really believed him. I thought it was something we could talk over. Or better yet, forget he had mentioned.

I took a bite of toast, so that I could avoid seeing the humiliation I knew must be on his face. He excused himself from the table, and I spat out the piece of bread.

When something like this happens, a person believes she had some part in it. I took to looking at myself more closely in the mirror. I'd always been what they call a large-boned woman, my jaw square, my forehead blunt. Truth be known, I look more like my brother than anyone else. I shy away from short hair cuts. My mama called me a tomboy right up until I turned fifteen and my breasts became cumbersome. The "why me?" seemed obvious. But over the next several days, Harold and I kept a fairly easy truce. I paid stricter attention to my make-up, dressed up for dinner.

I took to studying him as well, picking out all his idiosyncracies-- how he never liked me to ball his socks in pairs because it stretched the elastic, or how he hated it when I used his underarm deodorant. I wondered if it all might be symptomatic of homosexuality. At nights we kept to our usual sides of the bed, but the dark room took on new meaning. It occurred to me that we had never once in seven years made love with a light on. And the few times we did it in daylight, he had kept his eyes shut, me believing it was the sweet thrill of it all.

I have always been a naive person. When I was seven my mama warned me about catalpa trees with their long, cigar-shaped seed pods. She was ironing bed sheets in the kitchen. She always wore a mother hubbard and permed her hair so that it frizzed in the heat. "Don't look up when you walk under one of those trees," she said, sprinkling liquid starch out of an old coke

bottle. "Those big bean pods come falling down, they could pierce right through your eye, clear into your skull."

I believed Mama and thereafter steered clear of catalpa trees with their missile bean pods as well as boys with B.B. guns who would shoot my eye out. I became aware of all manner of things that might enter my eyes.

In the following week, Harold and I talked about all sorts of things--all but one. I began to believe we could actually forget what he had said, or that it had been only a temporary aberration, a small storm in his brain. So I suppose it was understandable that at the end of that week I was taken back when Harold announced he was going out.

"Hon," I said, "I'd rather stay home." I was sitting on the front porch, a small reading lamp lit next to me. I put down my magazine, looked up into the sky where city lights dimmed the stars, but the beacon light atop Mount Sentinel turned its steady beam.

"No. *I'm* going out." He stressed the I. "With Robert."

He was dressed in soft chino jeans and a worn denim shirt. My first thoughts were of how beautiful he was and then the automatic question: how could I have been so fortunate to have someone like him love me? And then what he'd said struck home. I gathered up all the arguments I'd thought of earlier in the week.

"What about AIDS? You know, in all history, you probably picked the

single worst time to become homosexual."

"I didn't choose this."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that."

He took a step off the porch.

"No, really." I could see he had misread what I'd said. I followed him, holding him back. "I just want to understand how this happened."

We sat on the stairs. His voice was tender, like a father to a daughter.

"I've always been attracted to men. Even as a boy to other boys." He turned to me, trying to make me understand by just telling me how it was, looking into my eyes the whole time, never flinching.

I respected him for that.

"But I didn't want to be," he said.

"And now you do?" I asked.

I don't think I was crying yet, but I must have sighed, or maybe I turned my eyes away from him at that point, because he said, "If I could love any woman it would be you. I knew that from the moment we met."

I believe the heart shuts down at these times, holding off the ache until it is reasonable. He stood up and left me sitting on the porch. It didn't hurt; it didn't feel believable. As he drove off, the muffler back-fired. I thought to make a note for a tune-up later that week, but instead of going back into the house, I stepped out of the yard and went for a walk.

Greenough Park was just three blocks from our home. The park is an anomaly in its time; people still walk it at night. The creek that runs down the center, the Rattlesnake, starts in the summits of the Rattlesnake Wilderness five miles up the valley, and ends as a tributary of the Clark Fork River next to the Red Lion Inn, downtown. I stayed on the broader, better lit path, although even here large areas dipped into complete darkness. Harold had said if he could have loved any woman, it would have been me. He'd wanted me to be cheered by that. But the double-edge was it also implied I had something to do with it all. I was his last chance and I had failed him. Did that mean I had been too much woman, or not woman enough? And if I walked the proper balance could I still undo it? I was young. I believed such things possible.

I walked close to the creek side of the path away from Reservoir Hill, with its rubble and brush cliff faces. The city had set up small wooden stations with facts about the riparian habitat. Harold said Missoula itself was a kind of riparian habitat, where people live in a thin stream in the heart of the wilderness. There is this mixing of extremes here, people hiking up into the piney peaks while cougars rest in the shade trees at the base of Mount Sentinel, in the back yards of the University's family housing. Each maintains an uneasy, delicate balance. I always suspected that is what drew Harold to this area; it made more sense now.

I stopped to lean on the sign detailing the ouzel, a small bird also known as

a dipper. The plaque suggested the reader walk down to the river, turn over a rock to see what the ouzel feeds on. I didn't do that, as I have always been cowardly when it comes to the feeding habits of others.

My first boy friend gorged on Taco Bells and Big Boy's. He kept Hostess Sno-balls under the front seat of his car and peeled the marshmallow skin off, eating it separately. He was proof we are what we eat. He was why I fell so quickly for Harold.

Harold is not a man of appetites, although he does love Hemingway. I forgave him that. We were friends. The first time we made love it was his first time. I would know--after all, it takes one to know one. I always took his reticence for modesty; he was not demanding, sexually. Leaning on that placard and listening to the rush of water below, I wondered if that wasn't what I found so comfortable about Harold. What did that say about me?

I did start to cry then. Everything bunching up from my chest and into my head. I get headaches when I cry, and I get angry. I grabbed a rock and lobbed it into the creek. "You son of a bitch," I yelled. "You faggot." I imagined him there. I imagined I'd hit him, saw him staggering in the cold water, blood black on his face. I picked up another rock.

Something moved in the bushes. I thought I heard laughing. I am not a brave person. I don't think I was then either, just angry enough to be foolish, and foolish enough to believe it might be Harold, whom, at that time, I wanted

more than anything to confront with a rock in my hand.

I aimed the rock at the bush. "Come on out," I ordered and stepped forward.

The brush moved. The thing was large and dark. It snorted hard in surprise then rumbled. There was a big chest behind that sound, and it was just about eye level.

"Harold," I said, though I knew it wasn't him, "is that you?"

I backed away from the bush. I could smell the animal now, musk and urine. It had to be one of the black bears that occasionally find their way down to the creek. I backed down the path, and it moved off, into the darkness, where the creek ran cold and noisy.

Harold came home about midnight. He found me sitting on the bed, wrapped in an afghan my aunt Rita had given us for our wedding.

"I could have died," I said. "Eaten by a bear."

"Did you see the bear?" he asked.

"I was close enough to smell him. I heard him growl. No dog growls like that."

"But did you see it?"

"No."

Harold walked over to the bed, put a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't touch me, you son of a bitch." I picked it off.

"We didn't do anything," he said, "if that's what you're worried about. We just talked."

I sat still. As soon as he said it, I knew that was what really frightened me, and it added insult to injury that he should know me so much better than I knew him. I pulled the afghan tighter. "I'm tired."

"I'll sleep in the studio," he offered.

"Fine. Turn off the light."

Harold paused at the door. I stared at the light switch and he flicked the lights off. At that moment, I hated him as I had hated no one in my life. I asked, "Did you tell him you loved him?" but he'd already left the room.

The next week I stopped dressing up for dinner. I also lost some weight, along with the inclination to make myself pretty. My makeup went to hell.

Harold didn't seem much changed, if anything he was more attentive. We walked the park, took in a show at the Crystal, even took a hike up to the big concrete M on Mount Sentinel, overlooking the university, to watch the sun set. By mid-week my stomach began to untense.

I asked him, "Is this so bad a life, the way it is?"

"No," he answered. "No, it isn't. This is a good safe life."

I could be that. If there was anything I knew well, it was safety. Cook solid meals, change the linens, keep your eyes down under catalpa trees. I would be his safe harbor, his rock, his life preserver. I would be whatever I

damned well needed to be. I still loved him and somehow, the moment of hate had passed, only serving to up the ante.

I needed to know what made homosexuals tick. I called up an old friend, Jim, a man twice divorced and three times married in a span of seven years. I'd known him since highschool, an out-sized man even then at 6'9" and 290 pounds. He was my homecoming date junior year, more a process of elimination than choice. We'd stayed in touch, usually meeting to talk during what he called his "pre-lapsarian stage" divorce inevitably following. This time I called. Jim said it was purely sexual. He whispered it in my ear at lunch one afternoon--what they did to each other in the dark. He told me over a bowl of lentil soup that had the color of meat gone bad. "Butt fucking and cock sucking," he said. He argued that women were spiritual, and if it was spirituality they really wanted they'd find themselves a good hymn-singing woman. "If," he said, "there's more to it than pure sex, it is the weight of history. The universality of it. Have you never thought of another woman?" He waved his hand in my face, "Now don't go taking offense. Be honest. Haven't you ever wondered if you were who you were really meant to be?" He had me there, and he knew it. "It's a human enough condition. Choice. And, yes, sex" he smacked his lips, "is the appetizer, the delicacy--squid, lark's tongue, oysters on the half shell, beef heart in aspic." He leaned forward. "Can you do better?" If not, he said, I was a fool to live with it. He asked how

much I was willing to do to keep Harold. I didn't have the answer yet. I hadn't yet worked up the courage.

But two nights later, I thought I had. I did not know then, what I do now. There are some parts of yourself you do not cross. That every betrayal is done first and worst to yourself. But that would take me years and several lovers to know.

I took him to bed. Dimmed the lights and urged him onto his back, so that I could rub sweet-smelling oil onto his chest. I crouched next to him, kissing my way down his breast bone, to where his belly curved, still trim and firm, the dark hairs leading from his navel like soft fur on my chin. His skin was cool and salty. I kneaded him with my hands, took him, still small, in my mouth. I felt foolish, bobbing there in the half-dark. My breath whistled through my nose. My mouth felt cavernous. Every other part of his body was stiff. I could feel both our humiliation. I rose up yelling, "What? What do you want?" He had his arm over his eyes; he lay still as a corpse and just as lively. "Look at me, God damn you. What do you want? You want me to butch my hair? Bind my breasts? What? I could get good at this." I swallowed. "I could get good at *anything* you wanted."

And then he turned over onto his stomach. I lifted the pillow from my side of the bed. "I'll sleep in the studio tonight."

"No," he said. "Please." He looked up at me over his shoulder, his eyes

bright. "Stay with me." And I fell asleep crooked in his lap, believing we'd made some progress after all. He slept the night with his hand under my breast.

The weekend came and went, and Harold stayed home. If it only meant an occasional night out with the *boys*, how was that so different from an occasional night out with the boys watching football, or bowling?

But the next Wednesday, Harold had a date. Robert was going to call for him at nine. He thought we should meet.

At seven Harold started getting ready.

First he took a long soak in the bathtub. He laced the water with birch oil until the bathroom smelled like a wooded grove. He carefully sponged each arm, pumiced his nails. I sat on the toilet next to the tub listening while he talked about a new book they were finishing work on and his old home team, the St. Louis Cardinals. He asked how my day had been. He sat in the tub, as always, with the shower curtain half drawn only his head, arms and chest in view. I thought about pulling the curtain aside and really looking at him, as it was my right to. But I'd always been delicate about Harold's sensitivities. Old habits do die hard.

I went to fix him a cup of tea. When I brought it to him, he was in a towel, standing at the sink and shaving.

Until that moment I had forgotten that, as a treat, my mother used to shave

my father. It was quite a production. She led him into the kitchen where she claimed all her best work was done. She plopped him in a chair in the center of that square room, lay a crisp white towel around his neck and a steaming wash rag over his cheeks.

Daddy leaned back, his feet flopping sideways with pleasure. Then his hand snuck out and flattened on the side of her thigh. Just riding there. Comfortable.

After steaming his face, Mama lathered him. She'd lather my little brother John's face too, so he could lean up into the kitchen mirror and pretend to shave with the broad side of a pencil.

I watched her take the razor to my daddy's neck. And him leaning farther back, groaning with the sweetness of it all, so that I wished I could be a man too and feel her pull that cool blade up my neck while I slumped back in perfect confidence.

Harold swished the razor in the wash bowl and clacked it against the porcelain. He pointed his chin, turned his head from side to side, inspected his nose.

I thought to tell him about those times, in the kitchen as a child, but I couldn't find the words. No. I couldn't find the charity in me to give him that story.

I sat on the bed as he pulled shirts from the closet. "What do you think

about this?" he asked holding out a print silk shirt I'd bought him.

"Depends on where you're going. Maybe the pin-stripe?" I pointed to a shirt he'd discarded. "That's a safe choice."

He hugged me quickly. "You're right," he said, "I don't know how I could get through this without you." I managed a tight smile.

We settled on a pair of loose khaki baggies, the cotton shirt--sleeves rolled to mid-arm--his suede Rockports and a camel-hair cardigan.

Robert was punctual. He drove up in a black sixty-five T-bird. He was good looking, but I'd seen better. We shook hands. It was when he spoke that I began to understand Harold's attraction. Robert's voice was low and sweet, each word placed carefully.

"How are you doing?" he asked, and I believed he cared. His eyes held mine until I was pressing forward, and then I caught myself and stepped back.

We perched in the wicker chairs on the porch, neutral ground, while Harold served us chilled bottles of beer. Mine heated up in my lap, untasted.

Harold sat across from me, on the porch step next to Robert's chair. Robert said he'd worked in counseling for awhile, but had to leave it because he couldn't live with all their pain. He was in real estate now, finding homes for happy families. I shut him out, trying to keep a distance I could afford, listening instead to the sound of katydids and then a train winding down the railroad overpass on Van Buren, continuing on to East Missoula where the mill

fumed into the nights.

Robert wore a cashmere cardigan and khaki baggies. I was secretly pleased they would look like the Bobbsie twins on a date. He showed interest in my part-time secretarial work.

"Lots of time for home and Harold. Do you bake?" As he said this, his hand touched briefly on Harold's shoulder.

"I've told Robert how much you two have in common," Harold said.

"Robert's a wonderful baker too."

"I should have made us something for tonight," Robert said tipping his chair forward. "Eclairs?"

They laughed while I rocked in my chair, trying to ignore the familiarity of the exchange, focusing instead on the faint nimbus of moonlight on the crest of the mountain. I knew that a block west, the moon would be already tipping over the hill, and on the other side of Greenough Park the moon would be high over the ponderosa pines lining the crest, already shining on the scree littering the north face. Hypothetically, a person could watch the moon rise any number of times walking east, right up to the base of the mountain. It would be a full moon tonight and as I felt my eyes filling, I stood up. "Well, you kids have fun," I said and walked past them into the house.

I washed the dishes, blew dead beetles and powdered moths out of the glass lamp shades. After an hour of this, I took a shower and let the water run ice

cold down my back until the cold began to burn and the muscles in my back knotted. But I didn't cry. I dressed and took a walk downtown.

I found the T-bird parked outside Paul's on Main Street. The passenger side door was unlocked. I sat on the leather seat, where Harold must have ridden. Robert's sweater was neatly folded in the back seat next to a Saran-Wrapped plate of pastries. I lifted them into the front seat with me. Eclairs. I balanced them on my hand and locked the door behind me.

On the outside, Paul's Bar looked like a Ma and Pa kind of place. It was a small one-story brick building, snuggled in among the other brick buildings on Main Street, though there's nothing really main about the street anymore. It's tucked in between an antique dealer and L.A. Design Custom Framing Shop, named by someone with the mistaken impression that Montanans admire the designs of Californians.

Paul's had a cowboy theme. I don't mean real cowboy, weather-bitten and teetering in their best-dress cowboy boots downtown Malta on a Saturday night. This was mythic cowboy. There was a life-size Hop-a-long Cassidy poster on the wall opposite the bar. His high-domed Stetson floating in a black and white matte finish like a marshmallow popped on his head. The bar top was tooled leather and silver ingots. A six-foot cardboard cutout of a young John Wayne in "Hondo" stood at the entrance. Bob Wills warbled on the juke

box.

I kept to the wall, walked back along the length of bar, the plate of eclairs firmly in hand, and found a table where the room opened into a dance floor. Harold and Robert were at a center table, beneath the wagon wheel chandelier. I could watch them, unobserved.

It is not the first time I have been an unwitting witness to an ending-- unwitting, because although at the time I thought I knew what I was doing, I did not. No more than I did as a child, keeping quiet beneath the dining room table as my mother and father talked, believing me asleep in bed as was my brother John.

My father's feet were sprawled apart, his sock garters undone.

"I didn't mean for this," he said. His elbows hit the table, a blow over my head. "It was one hour--one God-damned hour out of a lifetime. Can't we move *past* it?"

I was afraid to move, wishing more than anything not to be there.

Mama's feet held still, her ankles crossed the way I crossed my fingers to make a wish. "I don't know," she said. "We'll see."

I felt the deep breath my father released. They stood, walked over to each other but kept their distance. "We'll talk tomorrow?" he asked.

They must have talked because life went on. I don't think John ever noticed a change, but he was a child given to notice only those things

concerning himself--his toys I'd hid, or a too late lunch. But I did notice. I think I did. They spoke to each other less. And Mama never put a razor to my daddy's neck again.

As I watched Harold and Robert, a young woman wearing a crew hair cut and a red-checked flannel shirt sat next to me. "I'm Scotty," she said. I nodded politely and offered her an éclair before turning back to watch Harold and Robert.

A man in a gingham cowboy shirt and jeans came to the table. "Anything from the bar, ladies?"

I gave him two éclairs, ordered a rum and coke. Scotty ordered a whiskey ditch, sniffed the éclair and took a bite.

"These are good. You make them?" She pulled her chair close. I could see men in twos and threes seated at the bar, at various tables, a few women in their own corners.

"I'm a wonderful baker," I said, smiling.

Scotty pressed against me, offered to share the bitten éclair.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm allergic to custard."

And then, across the room, I heard Harold laugh. I looked over to see him resting against Robert's arm, his dark head inclined toward Robert's, their faces a soft blur.

I reached into my purse, pulled out my driving glasses and turned to look

again. Someone's hand closed over mine; I could hear Scotty saying something, but I was caught, in the startling clarity of Harold's face as it lifted into the light. He looked full at Robert, the corners of his eyes raising, his mouth parted as if breathless. How is it in everyday living we can see so much detail--know that he trims his nails left hand first, that he loves to mulch the garden and February is his worst month--and in the end, have it amount to so little? I saw in his face what I'd never seen before, what I hadn't known I'd been cheated of all those years: that look of genuine trust, of willingness. And then I was afraid, for myself and for him, this man whom I'd loved but had never really known. I put some money on the table to cover the price of the drink that had not arrived, fumbled apologies to Scotty and left the bar.

One of my mama's favorite sayings was, "What does not kill us makes us stronger." Am I a survivor because I'm more fortunate than others, or merely because I'm a better creature of habit? We go on, taking each step as if it had a purpose--until it does.

Harold came home pleased that once again, nothing had happened, they had only talked. I knew better. I ended it cleanly, which is not to say it was pleasant. In the following days I said things to Harold that I am resigned to live with for the rest of my life. Harold left Missoula. I kept track of him for awhile through Christmas cards from his parents, who never truly knew the

whole story behind our split. I suspect they blamed me, a convenience of parental love.

I was celibate for awhile, which was not altogether a bad thing. But sometimes you just don't know what you need until the need is there--present in your body, waking you at nights, rising up with the steam in a hot shower stall, niggling at your legs while wheeling a grocery cart. I became less celibate. I had a few one night stands. Some few left me feeling satisfied, most didn't. They all left me scared. I did not learn passion all at once, but in small pieces over several years with a man who, on first seeing, I would have believed impossible of inspiring such. He was short with a sparse rim of hair around his head like a lopsided halo, due to an unfortunate hair cut. His lips were thin, his chin soft as his voice. He taught a course in criticism at the university. His name was Michael. I'd just gotten a part-time job as one of the grounds crew when I ran over his sandwich with a mower. I offered to buy him lunch and some time later he offered me marriage. We both accepted.

But that makes it all sound so easy, and the real truth of it was persistence. I believed trust was a time come and gone. I'd seen too much of its failure. I wasn't about to step into that one again.

My mama was taken by surprise when I told her about Michael's proposal. She was pleased. She patted my hand frequently, like I was an invalid. She'd given over the mother hubbard's but still wore house dresses. The years and

perms had taken their effect. I could see more pink scalp than white hair.

Daddy had passed on years before, but his picture was dusted and prominent on the wall.

"How'd you do it?" I asked her. "Keep on with him after what he did."

"You're thinking of Harold aren't you. You had a bad time of it."

"So did you. Daddy had other women, didn't he." She looked shocked. It hadn't occurred to her that either of her children would know.

She sat still for a long moment. "One."

"But you got him past her."

"And that's a different thing--getting a man past another woman is different from getting him past himself. Don't mix the two. You did your best, now let it go."

I asked her if she had let it go, and she admitted that it had changed them. She asked how she was to judge if it would have been better otherwise? "I loved him," she finished. "You do what you can and then you do what you must."

I had long since lost track of Harold when early one December afternoon he came to our home. He stood on the doorstep, snow dusting the back of his overcoat.

He had changed, just as I must have. His hair had gone salt and pepper. It

looked good on him. He was thinner than I'd remembered, but he looked well. After some confusion we settled in the living room. He told me he'd lived in San Francisco awhile and then on the East Coast. He was moving to Washington State.

"I'm celibate now, you know," he said. "It's so bad. You couldn't imagine."

And that's when I really got mad. Him standing there, after all these years, as if it had all been *handed* to me, as if I had never known any of the doubt, run any of the risks, as if all the years between had only mattered for him. And now he wanted my sympathy. I've never been a vengeful person, but I can be moved to it. I wanted to hurt him. I took him into the bedroom where my children were napping. Two girls. He studied each carefully, leaning over the youngest to see how her fingers pulled at her own hair, then to my three year old. Harold held his fingers, knuckle down near her mouth to feel her breath. He led the way back out to the living room and the front door.

It was dim in the room, dusk coming early this time of year, even earlier here with the mountains. He stood in the light from the doorway. "This could have been ours," he said.

"No," I said, surprised by how good that felt.

He nodded. "Of course you're right." He stood there, off guard, looking out of place in a home, in a life, I found I still believed could have been his. He

was vulnerable. I felt shabby.

"You could stay for dinner," I offered. "Michael will be home from work soon, you could meet him, and the children when they're awake.

"No," he said. "I have no part in this." He looked over my shoulder at the room behind me. "Are you *happy*? Has it turned out all right? I've worried, you know."

And that was the truth of it. I could see it in his eyes. This was what he had come for. My forgiveness. But given the moment, I wasn't certain of what to forgive. I had survived. I had a husband now, whom I did not love the same way I had loved Harold--with a foolhardy faith in the impossible. No, I loved Michael as I loved myself now, in a more profound sense of the word. With a love that bided in actual time, grounded in the details of our lives. I looked up at Harold, holding his gaze, wanting him to believe and understand what I was about to say. "Yes," I said. "Thank you."

And with the last moment of sunlight trembling on his face he turned from me, his hands still at his side. He looked young again, as he had on a night so long ago in a small bar. His face lit with that look I choose to remember as love.