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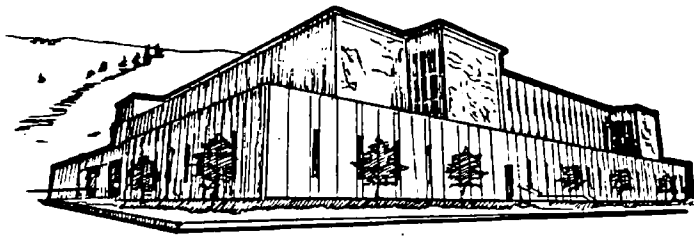
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University of
Montana

GESTURES AND SCARS

By

Constance B. Wieneke

B.A., University of Washington, 1974

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

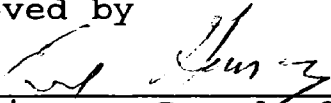
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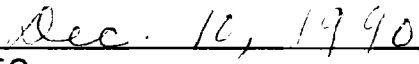
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Preface

My thesis, Gestures And Scars, represents a cross section of the creative writing I have done over the last four years. Because of my interest in that muddy area where fiction and nonfiction merge, this collection includes autobiography, imaginative pieces, and poetry, all of which freely incorporate elements of each. However, I think it foolish on my part as the writer to point out where this mingling of so-called fact and fiction occurs, and foolhardy on the reader's part to try to discern where these streams converge and separate. Perhaps the differences are only a matter of semantics, of intent on both of our parts--mine in the writing, yours in the reading. Ultimately, what appears on the page as a story or an essay or a poem comes out better when you and I have stretched out our legs and arms, leaned our heads back into the water, and floated with what happens in the course of things.

The title, Gestures And Scars, also concerns itself with that place where people, again myself as writer and you as reader, and characters come together to think about and perhaps even solve the emotional problems in their

lives. To reach that place, they try different gestures, employ different strategies, consider different possibilities--as I have in selecting these three media in which to write. Those gestures can be as complicated as tears or laughter, as simple as washing our faces or locking the only door we can find. Through these stories--for me, "story" lies at the core of each piece--they and we realize that some solutions for healing wounds can only leave scars as damaging as the original blows. But other pieces, through their mere telling, signal the characters' and, I hope, my desire to dive beneath the surface of scars, to discover the weapons which created the wounds and with which, for all too long, we continued our self-flagellation, and to break them, but not ourselves or our spirits in the process. At that point, the story both ends and begins.

Finally, I thank my thesis committee--Professors Earl Ganz, Julia Watson and Lois Welch--as well as Bill Kittredge, other University of Montana faculty, and fellow students in the MFA program for their help and support during the last two years. I also dedicate this collection to my husband, Rich Greenwood, who has always encouraged and prodded me as needed.

First, This Memory: A Kidnapping

The same summer of 1958 that a bee flew up my shorts in Havre, Montana, and did not sting me, my sister, Lyn, was kidnapped.

For me, this story begins, like so many others, with my father coming home: this time, from pumping gas at the Texaco station, the red-and-white star, a misplaced sun, stitched to one pocket of the dark green space of his shirt, over the place we assume his heart lies. When he asks the whereabouts of Lyn, he seems to be testing us. But, for once, my mother, brother and I know the answer to this one: she is outside, still playing in the front yard of the Veterans' Housing. Where else would she, the smallest of three-year-olds, have been?

However, my father knows Lyn is no longer there. Hasn't he looked? Yelling at us all, he again bears witness to my mother's inability to come up to snuff; he even hints at some infidelity, at something missing from her make-up. All of this before my father tells us how, as he was nearing home, he had seen a little girl waving to him from a passing black car and how--Strange, he thought at the time--that little girl had looked so much like Lyn. They could have been twins, he says.

When my father says he will search for our sister, my

mother's daughter, and the Black Car, he suddenly becomes a Hero in our eyes. Somehow, by this declaration, by this decision to act, he will redeem us and himself. When he goes, taking the stairs two at a time, my father leaves behind a tension that boils and eddies around us. Rather than swim against that, my brother and I float as best we can. My mother sits-stands-worries, sits-stands-worries, moving from bedroom window to living room window and back again. She stares through ammonia-clean panes of glass-- Hadn't they better be?--first, at crumpled weeds in the field behind the apartments, as if Lyn might be hiding there; then, at the paved lot out front, as if she might have crawled in one of the cars parked there. But no transformation takes place before my mother's hopeful eyes.

All this, while my father in his red-and-white Plymouth station wagon cruises up one street and down the next. Seemingly hours without end, he looks for the Black Car in a Havre that has become the largest city in the world. And, more miraculous than any saintly act we will ever hear of at catechism, he finds the car parked in front of a house that, for me, is always painted the palest green. My father knocks on the door, and when a woman opens it, he sees Lyn playing on the floor with a man.

"That's my daughter there," he tells them, walking in and picking her up amidst a litany of "Daddy"'s and

"Lyn"'s, one he seldom participates in, one he has, until now, left all but unfostered.

After my father brings my sister home, we ask him so many questions. But the one foremost in our minds revolves around the why of it. Why would this strange man and woman kidnap Lyn? Why her? Of course, he put that question to them.

"They said she was sitting on the curb--trying to tie her shoelaces. They thought she must've been lost," he says to us, the now-tight circle of his family.

Staring at Lyn resting in my father's arms, we recognize the lie: my sister can neither tie her laces nor button her red plaid jacket. Nevertheless, we store those strangers' lie, only later sorting through all its possible meanings, for my sister as well as for each of us. For me now, it is as if that man and woman were saying that my sister longed to be kidnapped, taken in by them; but for what did she think? Was her consciousness, her "make-up" trying to escape from what it foresaw, from what seemed ordained? Or was she only then fulfilling the prophecy? At that time though, none of us had the nerve to dive beneath the surface of such an ocean of words.

My parents do not report the kidnapping to the Havre police. You tell people that these days and they are incredulous, especially when milk cartons come printed with

the faces of so many missing children, half-tone images which cannot gloss over some underlying pathos, some untold story. However, my parents' lack of familial or civic duty does not strike me as odd, except in retrospect, because back then, the sense that my father has taken care of things settles over us--once again. An unspoken commandment calms us: my sister's taking and return shall not be made any bigger of. What purpose can that serve? After all, here she is, back with us. Safe and sound. Any mention of the kidnapping to the authorities may have brought unwanted attention, a new manifestation of the Evil Eye. Doesn't my mother throw salt over her shoulder and refuse to buy knives for herself, for us? In those days, none in my family will tempt fate with such bravado, such derring-do. We will cherish our invisibility, our thoughts.

All except my sister, it seems, who has exposed herself, let herself in for "it" by being kidnapped.

* * *

To my mind, even at that time, Lyn's kidnapping and the bee flying up my shorts acquired a kind of magic: one promising me protection for a lifetime; one requiring that we, her family, protect my sister forever, if need be. Wouldn't I always be the one to walk the streets of Seattle enveloped in a mirror-like bubble, the proverbial voyeur,

unseen but all-seeing? Wouldn't my sister always be all-too-visible, the proverbial victim, the Leda to Zeus's swan, that woman of whom men would say that she got "it," because she is "asking for it?" Through childhood, adolescence, even seven years of a first marriage, I believed I would be the "good" daughter/wife/mother and she, the "bad" whatever. Eternally, I would carry that talisman, and she, that brand. Hadn't I read The Scarlet Letter and Pride And Prejudice by then, seeing myself and her in those pages? I knew where each of us stood on the stairway to the stars, the "rocky road" of Life, or was that, Love. There I was, crouched on the upper rungs, "nearer to Thee," and thee; there, my sister, swinging on the gates to Hell.

All of that sounds now too much like bullshit to me. The patriarchal, elitist, holier-than-thou, polarizing kind of bullshit we were/are handed from Day One. The kind of rhetoric that has kept and keeps sisters and mothers and daughters and women, and yes, lest we forget, brothers and fathers and sons and men, "apart from" each other. Instead of "a part of" each other. Dismembered, instead of remembered; disconnected, instead of connected. By buying into such either/or-ism, by repeating the assumptions implicit in the very words of the mythos, the way the story has been told, I pulled-the-plug, blew-the-fuse, flipped-

the-switch on myself and my sister, reiterating the choices given us, which are not choices at all, but merely reenactment of the same script.

What chauvinism on my part, I think now.

Yet, at that time, hadn't I wanted to trade places with my sister, to be "it," the one blessed with blondness and blue eyes, that round McHale nose and what my mother called a "cupid's bow" for a mouth? After all, nobody ever pinched me, or pointed at my plain brown hair, or looked into my eyes, eyes that would not settle into one color, blue this day and green-gray the next. But, would I have ever allowed "it"?

To be honest now, secretly I craved such attention. But, so positive then that I would never get it--especially as that overweight, pimply-faced teenager, who took easily to self-pity and to reading maudlin poetry in her upstairs bedroom--I put on a surly face through adolescence. Even today when someone stares at me too long, or longingly, I frown or smirk or bury my nose in another book. My own form of diverting the Evil Eye, I suppose. How clever I thought myself, above boy-girl games, all that insipid--Or was it really incipient?--Sex. Again, I was dealing myself one more hand of Better-Than-Thou; solitaire would have been more honest, out-and-out masturbation more satisfying.

Meanwhile, my sister at fourteen was smiling and flirt-

flirt-flirting, sneaking out at night, until my mother took her to her own gynecologist and got Lyn on the pill. I was twenty and at the University before I purchased my own little packet of Ortho Novum 150 at Hall Health. And I felt oh-so-safe, taken in by the hermitage of language and culture and self-motivation, a place my sister could not share with me because I would not let her in. How could I have shown her Rimbaud or Anais Nin, Dylan Thomas or William Carlos Williams, when she had never opened up to Jane Austen or Shakespeare, never found solace in H. Rider Haggard or Emily Bronte?

Instead, I would leave my sister without kinship, with only her roundness, seemingly so endearing, inviting of smiles, and the oh-so-gentle pinches from strangers and friends alike. Could any of that have bruised her?

I would leave my sister for college, for the chance to travel on fellowship to study Arabic in Tunisia. Couldn't I give myself another pat on the back for that accomplishment? My sister would finish, barely, high school and, as the need arose, dress in a tuxedo and top hat to sell Kellogg's corn flakes in a Safeway off of Military Road. Could this have prepared her to help run her husband's business in Tacoma?

I keep leaving my sister: to work in a second-hand bookstore, where my boss calls me "Miss Versatility." Can

this be just one more way of "using" me? I leave her and Seattle for small town newspapers, to interview loggers and environmentalists, politicians and pigeon-raisers, and finally, dozens of Junior Miss candidates. Were these scenarios, these girls any different from the Romantic plots, the assumptions, the roles I thought had been laid out for and accepted by my sister and me from that day she was kidnapped?

Another Truth: I wanted to be the one taken in grace by strangers, that child kidnapped. Could I have ever used that word, Grace, meaning thankfulness for our just desserts, for keeping ourselves out of harm's way? One would have thought I was making of my sister a Saint Anne or a Mother Mary being visited by the Angel of the Lord, who taps her with his long stick and says, "God blesses you. You're it." "Muchas gracias." But didn't my sister's innocence, all of our states of unrecognized grace, deserve something better than what we were being dished up?

And now, the final Truth must be told: for thirty some years I was haunted by the possibility that my sister might have never been found by my father. I envied her that opportunity to disappear, to take up a new life, a new abode. And all that time, at the bottom of my envy--a softer word for jealousy--was my imagining that I was the

one kidnapped and lost, never to be rediscovered.

With that strange man and woman in the background, I drafted alternative scripts of happiness for my sister and by extension, for myself as her understudy, casting us as princesses and them as fairy godparents, complete with forever after's, handsome princes. The whole shebang. After all, when it came down to it, weren't we all orphans, deserted at birth and waiting to be rescued by our real parents, who had been tricked into thinking we were dead?

How different, I thought, would Lyn's life have been if my father had not seen her wave across that space between the window of his red-and-white Plymouth and the window of the strangers' Black Car. I wrote and re-wrote my sister's life, becoming those fairy godparents I had always wanted. In this comedy, she was never arrested for shoplifting a paisley-printed scarf at the Wigwam Store on Pacific Highway; she never smoked dope, drank cold Rainier from long-necked bottles, nor had to prove her sexuality in the back seat of some boy's borrowed car. There, in that best of all worlds, where anything became possible, she avoided monthly beatings from her lover and stopped throwing up after every meal in an attempt to stay thin for him, for so many others. With the touch of my wand on her brow, she would have known from birth that she could never be thin enough, never good enough, never quiet enough, and would

have stopped wending her way through the labyrinth of self-deception to that invisibility she had lost as a child.

In those last desires for my sister, I recognize corollaries for myself. However, rather than diving headlong into them, for now it seems safer for me to begin to wade through her life as it has become, noting where I, as fairy godmother, would have to leave well enough alone. I would still give her these: her house in Tacoma, with Arucuna chickens that lay eggs the color of an overcast day ("They have the lowest cholesterol," she tells me) and dogs and two children; the nerve to interrupt her testimony before a federal grand jury, the further nerve to tell the judge she has to nurse her baby son ("Right Now, Your Honor," she says, looking him in the eye), and yes, her marriage to a quiet man with black hair and mustache, both of which have started to grey, a man who shows his guitars to me and my husband in such a way that I toss my wand in the nearest stream.

My acceptance of the gift of her stories evokes more magic now than the stories I have allowed to tow and buoy her and me for so long. Over these thirty years, I had not noticed when the so-called differences and similarities converged and separated, like double helixes, until all that mattered was not how we compared, but who each of us had become. Until I began to work out the mythos on paper,

I had not realized how Lyn and I had changed, moving beyond the need for blessings from above, from our parents, from someone other than our selves, from so many "thee's." Once these stories were articulated, I saw that we have all the grace we need, and do not have to change the past to nourish it. I do not need to look in her for me or for what is not me.

Keeping Bees

I

Shrouded by nets and cloth,
my mother keeps her bees.
Along her shoulder they crawl,
following that curved avenue
to the breast of hive.
I rush to one side, knowing
they will taste murder
in my sweat,
in my pores find
the cells of bodies crushed
with newspaper and magazine,
on my fingers discover
flakes of once-pounding wings.
If they stop for one second, I think,
they will devour my skin like fear.
My mother, to me, Oh, so brave,
intercepts their incoming flights,
knowing drunk on apple and fireweed,
they will not sting.

II

On the ground
bare before me
my four-year-old legs
encompassed the north northwest
the north northeast.
What fragrance
what strange geography compelled
him to mistake my wind-
filled shorts for hive, new
world of flower.
Patience warmed my breath
my blood until
the bee stumbled out.
My fingers explored the path
he'd taken across my flesh,
but could find no meaning
to the feel of this new braille.

III

With a glass
and sheet of ruled paper
my mother would catch strange bees.
Their tiny buzzings she scooped
up from tables, countertops--
off vibrating panes of window.
My mother, that house-bound
opera singer, carried her
prisoners to the door,
arms stretched to release her
newly captive audience.
My mother's cupped hand alone stilled
their infinite frenzies
better than she could her own.

Assume You Know What You Want

You play the game solitaire
at a kitchen table mapped
by coffee rings and flat
beer not so easily brushed
away as the upholstery of
last night's dried semen.
You lay the red queen
on the king of spades.
The jack of diamonds coming
up where it should
not, cannot mate
the heart. Dealing
the cards, three at a time,
you let the jack cut in,
pushing the heart nearer
the edge.

Summer Squall

Swallows scoop up sky: flashing
rust, then cobalt blue slices
of filtered air.

Sun warming her belly.
she watches
the birds arpeggio-like.
He sleeps, back
against the bedroom window.

From nests patched of mud and spit
and shadowed eaves, the birds'
tight heads, eyes ringed in gold,
swivel left, right, fling her
deep-throated voices against the pane
of glass, bouquets
from an endless parade of brides.

Awakened, the man grabs
his stiff broom to flail
the air's feathered dancers.

The nests crumble to dusty pellets,
shattering to purple
dappled eggs: her still-
life on green grass.

To The New Calligraphy

I

Let the calligraphy of the uterus begin:

cell divide, cell divide,

etch code like ink

until one lunar egg feathers

through pigment of bile and blood

and tears, to disguise shells for this:

stained lithography of osprey,

ruby-throated hummingbird,

and great blue heron.

Let grass and leaf be tatted

for these: Raggedy-Ann nests patched

with chunks of coke bottle, duff

of gum wrappers and dried sphagnum moss.

May these orchids survive on

lost molecules of gulped air.

II

This, today, on the news:
a man grabs a "fussy" child,
bashes his head,
seven times dead,
graffiti on the wall.

III

From strands of D-N-A we hang,
sucking from our mothers' breasts
milk
tainted
by long-winded chemistry.
We
are foundlings, short-changed
by the luck of the draw,
side-tracked whorls of flesh:
a head too large, one heart
too many. Bones,
we are transcribed from
broken shells of peregrine.

IV

Penguins, they say, fight
over egg and rock
as if each were their very own.
With no plastic bracelet,
no numbered incubator
to distinguish
this one from the next,
they face their arctic landscape--
brush strokes bending the wind.

Jackson To Dubois--1984

Behind us, the sun sets
on the shadow-ribbed road,
the buttes cutting out
beneath the solstice moon, pale
icon riding an eastern saddle,
tooled edges softening under
a wash of peach and blue.

Toward us, the night drifts,
blossoms from an apple tree,
snow beyond a steam-streaked window.
No wind shatters the dreamy flood
of hands on thighs, lips on breasts.
Between shadows, our skin seeks
the tongue's blessing.

Roadside Crosses

It had been my sister Gena's idea to put Arnold in the apple tree. Arnold was our first and only dog. A cross between a black Lab and a German shepherd, he was about grown, mainly black, and with a patch on his chest the shape of Australia, where he liked me to rub. Gena usually never bothered with Arnold at all.

Now Gena's dead. You have to remember when she was little, she liked doing most things herself. Even when Mom volunteered to be a Blue Birds leader, she wouldn't join. I'm sure she tried to haul Arnold up into the tree herself first, but he must have weighed 40 pounds by then. For once, she had to come looking for me.

* * *

"I just want you to hold him," Gena said, tugging at the legs of her cutoffs. "And when I give the word you lift him. After you get him in the air, I'll pull on the rope. You understand?"

"We'll hurt him," I said, looking up at the way she'd hung the rope over a large limb. I didn't like the role she'd given me, like she was older than me.

For a second she stared at me, and then said Arnold would be just fine. "Come on, Linda, he's just a dog."

When she leaned over Arnold, perfect blond curls of

hair fell forward. I couldn't see her face. I watched as she patted him between his eyes; he never moved. At the very least, he should have bitten her or barked.

I didn't say a word until Arnold was wedged into the crotch of the tree. He looked like he was in pain. I said so, only Gena ignored me. So, I stared up into the tree. The blossoms had fallen the week before in the wind, millions of tiny flakes lying on the grass. I remembered being afraid they would break apart if I tried to pick them up.

Then, Gena convinced me to sneak into our mother's bedroom, open the dresser, and find the box with the camera in it--all because she wanted a picture, a record of that silly dog in the tree. It would be tough because my mother usually sat at one corner of the couch, working at a crossword puzzle, drinking her lukewarm coffee, and smoking cigarette after cigarette, the ashes growing so long they'd fall on the arm of the couch.

"You got it?" Gena said.

"Yes. She's at the door. Talking away to Mr. Miller." He was the Darigold man. "She'll be out here any minute. We're going to be in double . . ."

"OK. Take a picture of us."

* * *

Lucky for everyone there was film in that camera, or

else we wouldn't be sitting here looking at those photographs. There are six of them, all of Gena and Arnold. When I look at the pictures in the album, I try to remember why we did that to Arnold. Sometimes I've wished it'd been my idea, and that bothers me. And then, I have to remind myself again that Gena's dead. It happened in a different place. Long after I'd seen Arnold get hit at the four-way by Kim's Grocery, all because he had to follow me to the store. Even after I'd yelled at him and kicked him hard in the side, he wouldn't go home. After that my mother married Greg. They'd met when he'd come to Seattle for a realtors' convention, where my mother had been a hostess.

Then, we moved to Jackson Hole. Jackson, Wyoming. I didn't fit in too well, but my sister seemed to like the scene. She'd changed, gotten over doing things by herself and made friends. It was like she'd wanted to start over. Make up something else for herself. But looking at the pictures of her and Arnold, I notice Gena didn't smile much back then. She doesn't look like a cheerleader, but she got into all that at high school: pep club, homecoming princess.

I didn't; why would I have wanted to? When I graduated two years ago, I couldn't wait to go to college in Seattle. I came home last summer and at Christmas. And now for Gena's funeral. I finished up my last final and

flew out in the drizzle Thursday evening. Mom asked me if I couldn't come sooner. Not if I wanted to pass, I said. Greg said he understood. He's always being the go-between. A smoother-outer of everything.

Still, I could have come sooner, but for what? And then I start thinking about the accident. The newspapers had Keith Joiner saying another car forced him off the road and into a power pole. He walked away, Gena didn't; he was lucky, she wasn't.

My parents believe Keith wasn't drunk, simply because he's the son of friends. It's much easier to blame some mysterious "drunk driver." Better that than the son of the man who runs the Aspen Restaurant and who belongs, with Greg, to Kiwanis and puts an American flag out on holidays. They don't even stop believing when there's talk about how drunk Keith really was. How he'd been racing some other kid. They don't want to believe that Gena had been drinking either, but she was. At Christmas and last summer, she'd come home drunk a couple times. I heard her throwing up one night, because we shared the same bathroom.

* * *

Greg can say the stupidest things. He'll even repeat them. Like after the funeral, when we were headed up the steep driveway to the house.

"That didn't go too bad."

Run together--"That-didn't-go-too-bad"--didn't come anywhere close to what I felt, watching six men lower Gena's coffin. I didn't recognize one of them. They must have been friends of Gena's or Greg's. Rather than watching them, I stared at the balsamroot jerking about in the wind, expecting their big yellow faces to start singing. If they had, I wouldn't have been surprised; but they'd have been the only chorus my sister would have got. I thought of how the grasses on that hillside would dry out by late August and crunch under my feet, and then, this winter how four feet of snow would muffle even that. Then I wouldn't be able to find her grave. Besides, someone told me they lock the gate after the first snow.

Above all of that, the pastor's words droned on and on. Until he stumbled: "The ways of the Lord are . . . myst . . . mysterious." Didn't he believe what he was saying? Or had he just forgotten why he was there? Why any of us were there? I tried to wrap the pastor's words around me, only they felt like a sleeping bag, the kind you pull tight under your chin, but doesn't do much good because the stuffing's all matted up in spots.

As Greg shifted into first gear for the last switchback, I started thinking we'd forgotten to do something important, and my mother said, "The wildflowers are out early." She rolled down her window, reached out to

adjust the passenger sideview mirror so she could look at her face. She rubbed at her upper lip. Now, I wonder what she was looking for.

* * *

We've made it past dinner and calls from long distance friends. My mother says, "That dog just loved Gena." She's tapping the picture album with the tips of her fingers. I'm thinking, What a joke.

My mother's still in the navy dress trimmed with tiny amethyst buttons. The dress was bought special for the funeral. She sits next to Greg on the couch, her feet and legs hidden beneath the skirt's dark cloth. Greg's changed to a sports shirt and slacks, both the color of sagebrush this time of year. I think he does it on purpose, so he's color coordinated when he shows a piece of land. It's part of his job, so I kind of forgive him.

And here I am, in the recliner kitty-corner to them. Beyond them I can see the Gros Ventres, the ridgeline and snowfields of the Sleeping Indian dusted the softest pink. The photo album, like a resting moth, lies open on the couch between them.

"Arnold was my dog," I say.

"Gena always took him for walks," my mother says.

"They'd be gone for hours."

"He's kind of funny looking," my stepdad says.

"No, he wasn't," I say, thinking it wrong to be looking at the pictures. For a second, I wonder what's happened to all those baby photos of Gena and me, her smiling grimly with her hands in her lap and me with my arm around her small shoulders. "It was me that took him for the walks."

"I remember when the girls put Arnold up in that tree," my mother says. "It was hilarious."

"You were furious when you found out."

"No, I wasn't. I took the pictures."

"No, you didn't," I say, remembering Arnold's trust captured on so many pages in this album. "You were too busy flirting with the milkman. You would have killed us."

Mom looks at me, as if to say she's never had to flirt with any man in her life, but I'm just too young to understand that. As if to say, I'll never understand because no man flirts with me. She thinks being thirty-nine gives her some kind of advantage over me because I'm only nineteen. She can't know everything.

"Why don't you come sit with us?" she says. When she pats the couch, I shake my head. The movement reminds me of one time last summer when I tried to cross a stream up in the Tetons. Even through my running shoes, I felt my toes and feet reaching out to curl around slippery rocks. I was sure I was going to fall.

And then, like we've been talking about something else

and not about Arnold, Greg says, "We used to swing cats by their tails. We'd let them fly."

He keeps talking, all the time focusing on some point to the side of my head. I glance over at my mother, but she's staring at Greg, and I can't tell what she's feeling. It doesn't matter though. I want to shoot him. In the face. What a way to ruin his beard. It's that scruffy kind, with funny bits of gray all over. My mother tries to tell me it makes him distinguished looking.

"We'd even swing them off the bridge over the Milk River. They'd hit the water, and that was it." He laughs.

"I don't think that's very funny," I say, barely able to form my mouth around the words.

"Nobody said it was," he says, stubbing out a cigarette in an ashtray he holds in the palm of his hand. "It was just something we did."

There are times when I like Greg just fine. I wonder about that. I wonder if I'd like my real father any better. But he only ever sends cards at Christmas and for our birthdays. With checks for P.S.'s. He didn't make the funeral, but that was my mother's fault. She waited until last night to call him. And then only because Greg made her.

While I'd listened to my mother on the phone, I thought I would have to talk to my father. I wasn't sure what I'd

say to him. More than that I'd been afraid he wouldn't know what to say to me. What could we offer each other? What could I do with all that quietness coming down the line from Vancouver, or from wherever he was living?

I'm certain Gena would have known what to say. Even back when my parents were getting divorced she'd known. One day my father had showed up at the house, asked her and me whom we wanted to live with. How do you answer that one? All I could say was "You, Daddy." But Gena only said: "It's already been decided." She was twelve years old. I've always wished I could have said that. Instead of crying as my father walked out the door.

* * *

My mother has come back from putting the album away. She thinks that will stop anyone from talking about Gena or other things she doesn't want to hear about. Or think about.

"They should tie a rock around Keith's neck," I say, thinking about those cats of Greg's.

"Boys will be boys," my stepdad says.

For a few seconds, I'm not sure we're talking about the same thing. I watch Greg set his drink on the glass-topped table. The movement so precise that I'm suddenly irritated. It's as if his doing it with such care is an attempt to make us forget why we're here. As if we could.

There's something meditative about his action, his words; but I feel it could all turn at any moment.

"That's no excuse," I say. "He should be . . ."

"Let's not get started again," my mother says.

"He's only nineteen," Greg says.

"I'm nineteen. Remember?" I say. "I went to school with that . . . jerk."

Greg shakes his head. "Those things happen. He'll carry that with him the rest of his life." His voice drops. "Do you think he'll ever forget?"

I refuse to answer that question. Again and again, I drive a car over Keith's prone body, breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces. I'm amazed at the ease of such mutilation, wondering the whole time if watching him become nothing more than blood and bone and fat will be punishment enough. It will not. This has little to do with bodies or flesh. Nothing at all to do with molecules.

"Right," I say. "And what about Gena? She's only seventeen."

"Drop it," my mother says, her voice the sound it takes on when she wants everybody to smile and be nice.

"Girls will be girls, right?" I say, looking only at my stepdad.

"Don't be smart," Mom says, her voice a bit louder than before.

"When I was a teenager things used to happen," Greg says, bringing his gin and tonic up to his mouth. He pushes the tip of his tongue against the ice cubes. I listen, but can't make out any sound from his glass. "We raised a lot of hell. Makes these kids here seem pretty damn' tame," he says, "if you ask me."

The whole time he's talking, I'm thinking: Why should I care about what it was like back then? For you? "Nobody asked," I say, quiet so everybody has to listen closer. I squinch down into the recliner, wondering what will happen next.

"Kids were killed in my day," Greg says, clasping the sweaty glass in his left hand. As I watch, his fingers freeze, turning white then black before falling off. "Seems pretty stupid now, but at the time . . . Up there on the Highline. Drive that road in any direction, out toward Shelby or back toward Harlem. You'll see lots of white crosses. Guy Matheson was killed up there. He wasn't valedictorian or anything close. He tied a good one on though the night we graduated."

I don't know about this Highline or Shelby that Greg's talking about. "Maybe we should put up a cross out there on the highway."

"I've had it with the two of you," my mother says. "Can't you drop it? Like right now."

"Makes people think," Greg says. He stares at me. "Can't help but learn from these things. Guy was by himself. I almost left with him, but Mary Goodfellow--this Indian girl I went with for a while--she wasn't ready for me to leave. So, I stayed. Later, the state had that cross put up."

"Maybe we should put up a memorial," I say, at the same time feeling I want to remember and to forget. "Or plant some flowers."

"She's buried," my mother says. "Let her be. Don't you understand?"

As she uncurls her legs and feet from under her body, I'm thinking it's her that doesn't understand. There's something obscene about the way her feet and then her legs materialize, as if they will keep on appearing, again and again until everything unravels into nothing. And then, I see me looking into my mother's grave. She stands up. "Do you want anything from the kitchen? Another one, Greg?"

"Sure."

Mom turns in the doorway and smiles back at him, and I feel like they're part of a conspiracy. For a second, I think maybe I am too, only I just don't see it.

* * *

Before my mother is up, Greg knocks on my bedroom door. He wants to go for a morning ride in Grand Teton,

see if the road up Signal Mountain has been cleared of snow. We've done this before, but usually Mom goes along. I don't ask questions. We take the Suburban, charge a tank of gas in Wilson, and head out to the curve where Gena was killed and from which Keith walked away. When he says it's on the way, I don't mention there being two other ways to get to the park, or tell him that I'd been wanting to go there. Only I couldn't do it by myself.

Greg slows and pulls off on the shoulder. There isn't anything very dramatic to see: cars and pickups zip by at 55 miles per hour. According to the newspapers, that long curve, like a pair of welcoming arms, was designed for 75. It all but says, Come on, come on, you can do it, you can make it, come on, baby. Nothing should have happened here.

Not ever.

Except maybe in the winter, in a whiteout, the southwest wind driving snow across the road like it can. But maybe that night a deer had come up from the river, following the willows along the irrigation ditch, before jumping the barbwire fence, before running out in front of Keith and Gena. Nobody has ever suggested that.

I think about Greg's friend up on the Highline, the white cross erected where he died so long ago. Can it still be there? I doubt it. I want to ask him more, but I don't. He lights a cigarette. I think about Mary Good-

fellow, and when it was that Greg must have started selling real estate. I've never thought to ask him about his life before Jackson. He doesn't talk about it much, and so I try to imagine what it could have been like. After awhile I almost block out the traffic, funneling in and then out as it does in each direction.

When I look at the borrow ditch, it seems too shallow for anything. But here Gena was thrown from the car, landing sixty-five feet beyond a power pole. That was in both newspapers. That, and her not wearing a seatbelt. They described it like it was some amazing gymnastic feat, like she was some circus trapeze flyer. That's not how it happened at all. She didn't do anything special. She never had the chance.

Gena had called me on New Year's Day. I couldn't understand her phoning like that. I'd just seen her the day before. She'd started telling me how Greg was switching from station to station on the satellite, watching football game after football game, and how Mom was running back and forth like she does to the kitchen getting drinks and coming up with some sort of sushi dish that Greg liked. Only it didn't taste that good, not really Japanese because she'd added Worcestershire sauce. We'd both laughed. You know what I mean? Gena had said. Like you wouldn't want to feed it to your worst enemy. It'd

been pretty funny listening to her. She didn't mention Keith once. She wasn't going with him. I don't think she was ever going with him. Only she got in the wrong car. That's what I keep thinking.

At first, I'd wanted to get off the phone, but Gena kept talking. She'd told me how she was going to Laramie in the fall. She wanted to become a teacher. I was surprised, but didn't say anything. There I was listening and waiting for whatever she wanted to say. Maybe that was all there was. Then, she had to go because Greg was expecting a client to call--On New Year's? You're kidding!--and she'd said she would call again or I should call collect. I'd said, Oh, sure, Mom would like that. She'd laughed. It never happened. I sent a card for graduation. Now that doesn't seem like enough.

Maybe I should get out of the car, look around, see if I can tell anything. But I don't move. Greg crushes his cigarette in the ashtray and opens his window a couple inches. It's the first week in June and there's still a hint of snow settling like it does out of the wind off the mountains. And then I imagine the highway patrol guy, his dull brown shirt stretched tight across his back and bulging out above the belt, his knees jutting out as he bends and closing as he straightens up. I've seen him along the road before, just after an accident. He holds a

measuring tape and walks between the car and Gena, between the car and the pavement, and back again. You can tell that he's done this before, his cap pinned to the back of his head. He's trampling flowers, kicking at stones. What's he looking for? Watch out! She's right over there, only I can't remember where exactly. And which pole? North? South? What about there, near the fence? There's no way I can tell where she died.

"It's not fair," I say, more to myself than to Greg, and not sure what I really mean.

"Nobody said it was," he says.

I can feel him looking at me. I stare straight ahead, only I can't focus beyond the windshield; the sky fades to something invisible, something no more than a thought. I look down at my hands. They don't even look like they belong to me.

Greg turns away and says, "I wish I could get your mother to come out here."

That sinks in, and I say, "I wanted us to be friends."

"I thought you girls were."

I wonder at that, at Greg's sureness.

"Can't we go?" I say.

"You're the boss," he says, a laugh just under the surface. We drive on to the Village, buy cokes and Pepperidge Farm cookies--cappuccino for Greg, orange milano for me.

At the intersection we head north into Grand Teton, my body already tensed for the washboard and river rocks. When we reach the aspens, their leaves fluttering in the light and wind, I start watching for wildlife, expecting a moose at any moment to run out in front of the car. Again and again I go over how Greg will react to the moose's awful clumsiness, how I would react if I were driving. Maybe if Gena were here, now, with me, she could keep a lookout though. Just for a second, I think that.

That's when I realize I must have been crying the whole time. I turn away to watch the shoulder. I don't think I could stand it if Greg saw me this way. Only I don't have my sunglasses.

A Place To Visit

O.J. settled his body further into the tub's hot water. A bottle of whiskey sitting on the edge, yes, right there, would have made it all perfect. But that was hard to come by, wasn't it? With half a mind, he listened to the voices coming from the other side of the door, to feet scuffling, the scrape of a walker on the linoleum.

"Mr. Jacobs, are you in there?"

If he didn't answer right away, he was sure Naomi would just keep at him. "Yes, where else would I be?" he said. He scooted his butt around until his hip felt better.

"Mr. Jacobs," Naomi said, knocking two times. "You've locked the door again. You've got to unlock it."

"Why?"

"That's the rule, Mr. Jacobs. What if something happened to you in there? Then what would we do?"

O.J. forced Naomi's voice into the farthest corner of the bathroom, trapped it behind the drainpipe under the sink. Now, he could concentrate on the long curve of faucet above his feet, watch each drop of water as it shivered before falling.

"Mr. Jacobs? Did you hear me?"

"Why don't you find somebody else to nag at? There's plenty of candidates in this loony bin."

"Mr. Jacobs, it's for your own good. We care about you. We all do. Something could happen."

"Like what, Ms. Naomi?" He smiled, drawing the words out. Won't she hate that "Ms?" he thought. Her with that teenage son who comes around asking her for money all the time. And she gives it. I wouldn't, not without some questions. Craig, isn't that his name? Craig Jr., only there isn't any Craig Sr. around. Though that doesn't seem to bother that Naomi. Like an afterthought, he said, "I'm all by myself."

"Mr. Jacobs. Please, don't be difficult."

There was no window in the bathroom, just a circle of fluorescent light in the middle of the ceiling. O.J thought of how pleasant it would have been with a window. Then he could have just lain there. Watched the magpies dipping and gliding like crazy pinwheels in the sky. He'd never had time for that before. Not back then, back in Montana. He was pretty sure if he'd paid some sort of attention then, just watched for a minute, he'd have learned something. What, he wasn't sure of. Maybe this place is rubbing off on me. If you aren't careful, you're going to turn into Donohue, he thought. Donohue only stayed in his room and fingered the edge of his blanket. God, what an idea.

He shifted his knees so that the water lapped softly up his chest and into his Adam's apple. The drops that splashed

onto his chin turned cold.

"Mr. Jacobs, are you all right?"

"Damn it, Naomi. Just go away. I'll be finished in a few." He thought about adding some hot water, but then he'd have to sit up. That'd get him cold. Or even worse, he might not be able to lower himself again. Where would he be then?

"You're being selfish," Naomi said. "Someone else may want to use . . . the room."

"Who's waiting?" O.J. hunched and wiggled his shoulders, trying to get the lower part of his neck into the water. He thought about someone standing outside. Maybe Pearl. Legs crossed, her fake red hair all a twitter, like some dingy bird. He laughed at the picture. But what if it's Edith? That would be something different. You'd get out then, now wouldn't you. No question about that.

"Nobody. . . Well, yes. That's not the point. Mr. Jacobs, really, you're spoiling it for everyone else."

"Christ, can't you leave a man alone for ten minutes." Under his breath, he added a Jesus H. "A man could drown with so much damn' attention."

Using his arms, he struggled to pull his body out of the water. Only, his arms started shaking. Damn it. I don't have the palsy, he thought. Always this damn' leg. But O.J. would never complain to anyone about the ache in the leg, an

ache that stretched clear up into his hip. He could hear someone, Naomi or Kai, fidgeting with the door handle. It sounded like they had a screwdriver.

"Hey, hold on. Give a man a break. I'm just about finished," he said to the door. "Can't you wait?"

"Are you out of the tub, Mr. Jacobs?" said Naomi.

"Yes, siree, ma'am, I am."

Starting at his feet and working up his legs to his butt, O.J. rubbed and patted his body with the thin towel. He frowned down at the words "Greenbriar Residential Center," words that had faded to an uneven gray at both ends. He wasn't able to reach the middle of his back, but the cold, wet spot where his shirt stuck to the skin reminded him that he'd done it all himself. Didn't have anybody peeking in at the door every five minutes to see how he was doing. When he was through dressing, he sat on the toilet for a few minutes. Just a few, he told himself.

* * *

Later that afternoon, O.J. watched Kai, the Greenbriar maintenance man, remove the locks from the bathroom doors. Men's and ladies'. "So much for getting a little privacy," he said to Edith.

"Oh, Oswald. Do you mind going for a walk?" was all she said.

Edith had one of those wheelchairs with a motor, so O.J.

didn't have to push her. As they headed down the hallway toward the dining room, he stayed off to one side, one hand on the head piece as if he were helping her along, his other hand clasping his cane. Edith wanted to show him her photo album. He'd seen it before, but O.J. didn't see the harm in looking.

"They make me feel like a baby," he told Edith. "They'd like to tie all of our hands." He thought about those children that you see on the street with the string in their hands. All in a line. They'd get taken out for a walk like that, like they were dogs. That wouldn't satisfy the people in this place though. Outloud to Edith, he said, "They'd like us in diapers, too."

"Oh, that's only their way, see," she said. "Their way of feeling needed."

"Well, I don't have to like it."

* * *

From the very beginning of his stay at Greenbriar, O.J. had found ways to cut through what he called "the damn' rigamarole." From day one, he had let everybody know his opinion about the place ("Stinks to high heaven"), about the people who ran it ("Wouldn't have cut it on any crew I know of"), about his son, the attorney, dropping him off for just "a look-see." Yes, his son, who had said they'd find "something else," if O.J. didn't like Greenbriar. "Well, I

think you already found 'something else'," he'd told his son. He wouldn't bring up Dotty to his son, Dotty who was already buried in Montana. He was just glad she wasn't around, couldn't see what their son had done to him. All on account of his bad hip. Too many years working sheetmetal in cold buildings. North Dakota. Montana. Washington. Back and forth between two many of them places.

When he had got to Greenbriar, O.J. refused to unpack his clothes and place them in the drawers or hang them in the closet in his private room. "I can live out of a suitcase just as easily," he'd said. Naomi and somebody else had removed his two suitcases and arranged the clothing in the metal dresser and the corner closet. He had pulled his belongings out of the drawers, stacking them on the bed or chair or dresser top. Anywhere but in the drawers. They'd even got his son to call up and tell him to "cool it." He'd show them. But then he'd kept knocking his socks and undershirts on to the floor. And then he had got tired of getting down to his knees and crawling under the bed, and decided to let the clothes stay where they were put.

"I'm just visiting," O.J. would tell Naomi as she shaved his face on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. "Just visiting."

"Just visiting," Naomi would say. "Looks to me like you've already moved in. Anyway, you old fool, who else is

going give you a great shave like me?"

O.J. had started turning his face away from Naomi's razor on Wednesdays. "It's no difference to me," was her response. "One less of your ugly faces I gotta look at."

Oh, he'd grab for the razor. Sometimes he'd get it; sometimes that Naomi was too quick for him. But that was just on Wednesdays. Then, that first winter after O.J. had come to Greenbriar, he got the Type A influenza, and afterwards, he couldn't hold the razor without trembling. He didn't want anybody to see that, but sometimes he'd still make a show of taking the razor from Naomi. Only they both knew it was a game. And sometimes, after that bout of the flu, O.J. had to use a cane. Not every day, just on his bad ones. He swore the flu had gone into his hip and made it even worse.

The days became months, and what O.J. concerned himself with had changed. In the beginning, he wouldn't have been caught doing what he was doing now, listening to some old woman's talk about her grandchildren. Not to Edith. Not him. I've got better things to do with my time, now don't I, he thought. Like maybe playing cards with Sven and Harvey. Maybe I should. Only they'll want to talk about Ballard, and fishing and boats. He didn't know anything about fishing and boats. At least not the kind they did up there in the north. He was used to the Columbia. The steelhead when they

came up that wide river couldn't be beat. He'd start to tell them about that, and Sven and Harvey would nod their heads together over their cards, and he'd give up. Them Swedes.

* * *

"I gave her my mother's baby ring," Edith was saying. "She was the first granddaughter, don't you see?"

O.J. leaned over the album. A girl squinted up at him from the color photograph, curls of blonde hair tucked behind her ears. She looked fat. He'd thought that before, but didn't tell Edith. He'd wanted to, but hadn't. Lately, he'd found himself not always saying what he wanted to about things, not to her.

"She's 24 now. My son's oldest daughter. She's engaged to a dentist from Wenatchee. But I've told you all about her," Edith said. "Of course, I have, haven't I, Oswald?"

"Yes, yes, but that was last week, Edith. I like hearing about your family," he said, thinking he could hardly remember anything of what Edith had said then. It didn't matter though; she would tell him again.

"I've got other grandchildren, four more, but she's the oldest. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I do. Certainly."

"Suzanne Edith. That's her name," she fidgeted with the edge of the album. "After me."

O.J. thought about his own children: the two girls--Ann

and Mary--now in their 30s, one in California, the other back in Montana, both unmarried but living with men he and Dotty had liked when they'd come on vacation. And just across the river in Portland was his son, the attorney, with his only grandchild, Melissa. Only now she wanted to be called Mel. She was a junior in high school and would come to Greenbriar unannounced, outside the regular visiting hours. That way she'd upset everybody's routine. That was just fine with him: this place needed some upsetting. She'd bring "treats," even chocolate cake. "It's Granma's recipe, you know. The kind with mayonnaise in it?" Sure, he remembered. And she'd come for stories about Montana, about his growing up, about his uncle's ranch in the Bear Paws, about Indians. Even stories about her dad. He could remember some good things about her dad, about times back then. Only he didn't think it was enough. Not near enough.

He listened to Edith, nodding at her when he felt he was supposed to, frowning when it seemed that was what she wanted. The photo album spread itself like wings across her knees. To get his attention, she would grab at his arm or touch the back of his hand with her small fingers. She wanted to make sure he could see the pictures from where he sat in his chair. O.J. followed her hands. He was surprised there weren't any brown spots. They were so white and so . . . dainty. Yes, that was the word, he thought. Dainty, like

hummingbirds at their feeder, going about their business so quick and particular. Not like Dotty's hands. Not at all like Dotty, who had complained about being chunky almost every day they'd been married. He wasn't sure what chunky had meant. Hadn't Dotty always seemed just right to his mind?

Listening to Edith meant O.J. didn't have to talk much about himself, or his family. Not like he would have if he'd been sitting with Pearl. He knew Pearl. She'd start in hounding him about only having one grandchild, when she had six or seven. There'll be more, he'd tell her.

He looked around the dining room. None of Pearl's red hair in sight. Maybe he'd be lucky today. Probably though, he didn't have a pig's chance in a slaughterhouse. Sven and Harvey were at the cribbage board by the window. He could tell who was winning by the way Harvey crouched over the table, staring at Sven's pegging. Sven had this way of pushing the plastic peg into each hole and pulling it out that announced to the world at large that he was the top dog. He'd call out the score in a loud voice, like he was singing in a big room, like everybody was just waiting to know he was winning: ". . . fifteen-six and a double run. That makes fourteen." Jesus, couldn't I show them how it's played in Montana, O.J. thought. The right way.

"'O.J.' is a . . . child's name, don't you think,

Oswald?" Edith said, turning the page. She didn't look over at him, just kept her face to the pictures.

"Naw," he said, and stopped. Pearl was at the doorway, talking and laughing with the new nurse. Mrs. Granger, wasn't that her name? "O.J.'s what I've always been called."

He bent further over the album, as if he couldn't see very well. That was one thing though, he didn't have to wear glasses. Pearl walked straight off to where Sven and Harvey were playing. Laughing as she picked up a chair, plopping it to one side of the card table. Thank God for the little things, he thought. Maybe she'll stick to them.

Today, Pearl had on fuzzy yellow slippers. Jesus H., O.J. thought, she must have a whole collection of those things. He was sure he hadn't seen these ones before. Yesterday, they were the pink ones with little rabbits' heads on the toes and no backs. Something only a child should be wearing, he'd thought. Something he may have given to his daughters. She'd kept losing them, but that didn't seem to bother her.

Edith grabbed his wrist. O.J. jerked his hand away and knocked the cane to the floor. He'd forgotten Edith was there, but she didn't seem to notice.

"See this one here, Oswald? That's me, when I was 17. Now, look at this one. My granddaughter at the same age. We could be sisters, don't you see? That's why I put them side-

by-side. So people could see."

O.J. examined the two photographs. The one on the left was in color, but seemed a little out of focus, perhaps because the girl was looking away from the camera. He liked the other picture better. It was larger, a black-and-white of a young girl who faced the camera straight on. Edith's hair then had been braided like it was a crown.

"Look at the way the eyes are set, Oswald. It's the same in both. Our hair was even the same color. See the nose."

Somewhere in that black-and-white photograph was Edith; in the other was her first granddaughter, the one with the baby ring on her little finger. The one she probably couldn't get off any more. O.J. thought about the way lives stretched between those two pictures. He was sure he didn't see what Edith was seeing.

"Now, what are you two old love birds up to?" said Pearl, bending over between him and Edith.

O.J. was sure Pearl was going to put her arms around them, but she didn't. Not yet. He could smell her perfume, or maybe it was her skin. Or something in her clothes. Though she seemed to change those all the time. All the smells seemed mixed up. He could see where the pinkish powder on her cheeks ended an inch or so from her hair. Dotty would never have let herself run to that. Such a godawful red that hair was. He'd told Melissa all about it.

"How can an old woman do that to herself?" he'd asked. Melissa had come back with, "Well, why don't you ask her, Gramps?" Then she'd pinched his arm. That granddaughter of his wouldn't let him get away with much. He liked that. "Don't call me 'Gramps'. Sounds like an Okie name. I was born in Canada." And Melissa would laugh. "So, you're a Canuck? A regular cheese-eater."

Pearl was pointing at the photographs. "Who's that?"

"Me and my granddaughter," said Edith. She reached out to turn the page.

"Wait a second," said Pearl, sticking her hand flat against the plastic-covered page. "Let me look. So, which is which?" She laughed and looked first at O.J., then at Edith. The glasses she wore made her eyes look like they were always waiting for something. What? O.J. wondered. But maybe she just couldn't see very well. And why did she have to tease Edith like that?

"We've already seen these," Edith said. O.J. noticed how she squinched her body further into the wheelchair's hard back. The wheelchair had been a present from her children the Christmas before. That way they didn't have to push her around when they came to visit. Edith never would have said that, and she hadn't liked it when he'd said that was the reason for the rich gift. So, he hadn't brought it up again.

"That's OK," said Pearl. "I love looking at pictures."

Don't you, O.J.?"

"Sometimes. When I'm not interrupted by you." He looked at Edith's hands. They seemed whiter, as if they were trying to turn invisible.

"Well, I've got some pictures," Pearl said. "Maybe you'd like to see them."

"No, don't trouble yourself," he said.

"Oh, it wouldn't. I'll go get 'em. I don't have a nice album like this one of yours, Edith. Just an old shoebox. But it's good enough. Isn't it?"

"I'm sure it's very nice, Pearl," Edith said. "I'm kind of tired now."

"That's all right. It'll just take a sec. I'll be right back."

O.J. turned to watch Pearl. Before she even got to the door, she was talking at Mrs. Granger again. He knew that before long the new nurse would figure out how to get away from Pearl.

"I am really tired," said Edith. "I should rest before dinner. You see that?"

"Yes. I'll walk you to your room."

"No, I can make it."

The stiff metal arms of Edith's wheelchair reminded O.J. of a cage. Or maybe a crib. Which, he wasn't sure. Her hands were crumpled in her lap, her shoulders twisted against

the back pad. Her head, the hair a deep sort of white, seemed lost above her body, somehow disconnected. How easily it could have been knocked off, he thought.

"Edith, I wish you'd call me 'O.J.' I've asked you before. 'Oswald' seems so formal seeing that were friends."

"Oh, I don't know. 'Oswald' seems more . . . appropriate. I should really call you 'Mr. Jacobs.' It isn't as if I've known you all my life. Though I must admit I feel like I have. You understand so much."

She looked small and uncomfortable, like someone who'd been caught doing something bad, like someone who needed forgiving. Except he knew she had nothing to feel guilty about. She would never steal packets of sugar off the dining room tables. Or turn the cushions around on the sofas and chairs so that the zippers faced the room. Or wear her slippers to bed. Not like some of the other residents, not like O.J. himself, who would watch innocently as the attendants righted all the cushions in the activity room, frustrated that they couldn't catch him or anyone in the act. But he was too smart for that. He'd even got away with stealing all the bed pans one night and lining them up in the hallway like they were soldiers on parade. Everybody laughed like hell about that, but he was sure none of them got the point.

If pressed, he would have admitted these were small

victories and didn't mean much. He was still here. He also knew Edith was completely unaware of any wrongdoings. O.J.'s guilt made him smile, even at the thought of Pearl, who was an old pro at these games. Wasn't she the one who'd wrapped pink and yellow t.p. around the scraggly bushes out back? And it'd rained so much that it'd taken Kai days to clean it all up. Where she'd got the paper was a secret she'd never given over as far as O.J. knew.

"Pearl will be back with her pictures. You know, she'll be hurt if you left."

"Well, maybe I won't be here. Or maybe she'll forget," O.J. said. Except he wasn't so sure. When he looked toward the door, Pearl was gone. Besides, she'd find him.

"Oh, Oswald, it won't hurt you to look. She means well," Edith said. She switched on the wheelchair motor and rolled away.

That's just hunky-dory for you, O.J. wanted to tell Edith. You can just walk away, now can't you? You don't have to worry about Pearl wanting to give you one of her hugs. Pushing her body around, like she's a teenager or something. Smelling like she does. Wearing those silly slippers. She doesn't even pick her feet up when she walks. He wasn't interested in any of that, in keeping track of the way women moved. Not now. Well, maybe sometimes he thought about it. About the different ways women had. About how

Dotty used to be before she got the cancer. How she'd felt. How she'd got angry about stuff he didn't understand, stuff he couldn't see his way to help her with.

No, he didn't want to get any closer to any of the women here though. None of that. But maybe he was missing something. Sometimes he felt like he was searching for something familiar, and yet something he couldn't name. Maybe it was sex, but he thought it might be more than that. He thought about Dotty, the way her body had fit so comfortably into his--even the first time, on their wedding night, him holding her tightly to his chest, one hand cupped around her breast, the other curving over her thigh, his face buried in her hair. It was the way they had always slept until she got herself sick: her back to his front. During the night he'd always pulled his arm out because it would have gone to sleep.

* * *

"At your age, O.J., I'd think you'd have scads of grandchildren," Pearl was saying.

"I didn't marry until I was almost 40," he said, thinking what a broken record she could be.

"Oh, I see," she said.

"Glad to hear that," he said.

"So, why'd you wait so long, Handsome?"

"That's none of your business."

"I was just being polite. You know, making conversation."

"No need for that. Where's these pictures you wanted me to see so bad?"

"Oh, they're right here," she said, pulling the box out from under her sweater. "You a widow?"

"Don't act stupid. You don't see a wife, do you?" O.J. said, waving his arms to the room. "Do you think I'd be here if my wife was still alive?" He wondered where he would be. Would it have made any difference. "Come on let's look at your pictures?"

"Don't you have any pictures? Of your wife? We can look at mine any ol' time," she said, and then waited, but not long enough for him to respond. "Maybe you ought to marry Edith. Then you wouldn't be lonely. Though she's kind of quiet to my taste."

"People shouldn't get married at our age. Don't talk about Edith like that."

"Says who? Whose age?"

"Says me. Besides, who said I was lonely? I'm not." He noticed the way Pearl cradled her precious shoebox against her chest. Not much there, he thought. "You're the one who's always gallivanting around, looking for someone. Where'd you get that sweater? What do you call those

things?" He pointed at the fringe that hung down from the collar.

"Oh, I don't know. I never did learn any of those woman's things. Knittin' or crocheting. And maybe you're right about my gallivantin', but so what? I like people. It's better than being an old grump like some we know." She picked at the front the sweater, at something O.J. couldn't see. "So, you like this sweater? It was in a pile for the fall jumble."

"It's all right." He paused. When Pearl didn't say anything, he said, "Maybe you noticed my granddaughter. She comes to visit. Once every couple weeks."

"Yes. She certainly is one cutie," Pearl said. "That one is."

"You're not telling me something I don't already know, now are you," he said, grinning at Pearl for a second or two.

"But it's not like she's real woman. You know what I mean?" Pearl guffawed when she said that. O.J. thought about her crassness and how it must have come natural. Dotty had never talked like that. Not one bit. She'd never offered an unkind word for him or anyone else. Except at the end, but that was the cancer getting her.

"Where's these pictures you've got to show me?"

"We'll get to them. Don't you worry about that. Did you love your wife a lot?"

"None of your business." That's nobody's business, he thought, sorting through the meanings of all those words. Love and wife and lot. What did it mean now? Here?

"You're such a shy boy, aren't you? It's OK to talk about this kind of stuff now. It wouldn't hurt you."

"You probably don't have anything in there," he said, pointing at Pearl's box, putting on his best frown.

"Where's your pictures?" she said. "There's none in your room."

"You stay out of my room. I don't need you poking your head in there." O.J. stretched his right leg. Lately, he'd noticed how the hip hurt when the circulation got cut off. "You don't see me coming to your room."

"Well, you can," she said, straightening up in her chair, patting the sides of her hair. "Anytime you want. Except I'm not hardly there."

Pearl shuffled around with her shoebox and pulled the lid off. Inside it was stuffed with pictures--some with scalloped edges, some with pieces of yellowed tape at the corners, like they'd been on a wall or in a book before. On top he could see a house with a family standing in front. They were all dressed up. It must have been Easter. There was a flowering tree of some kind beside the house.

"That's my daddy there with his second wife. May was her name."

Listening to Pearl, he wasn't sure he wanted to go through with this, spend his afternoon with her photographs. He was used to her razzing him and taking his guff, but this was different. She was still talking away. She'd want him to say something.

"She'd been widowed like him and he felt sorry for her. So he goes and marries her. She was some kind of hell cat, always beating me and my sister 'cause we weren't hers." She shoved the picture to the bottom of the box.

O.J. was thinking the whole time of how to put off hearing all about family troubles. He'd never show that picture. Not to anyone.

"But I got back at her," Pearl said, smiling. "The day I graduated I told my daddy what she'd been doing. I even called her a whore to her face. That was the worst word I knew back then. I'd come up with something better now. Bet you know a few, O.J. Then I ran off to Denver. Got myself a job in a laundry. I didn't go back until she died with the flu." She paused and started to thumb through other photographs.

He thought of all sorts of things, until some of it came together, a story that had always bothered him.

"I knew a fellow once," he said. "Up there in Havre, where we were living at the time. He lost his job and went off to California. Things were rough all around. I got on

with the Great Northern briefly, so we didn't have to go on relief." He looked at Pearl. Was she listening? She nodded her head. "You know about relief?" He expected she'd been on relief somewhere along the line.

"Doesn't everybody? It's funny how they call it 'welfare' now. What does that mean?" she said, poking him in the arm with her index and middle fingers. "Welfare."

"I don't know," O.J. said, rubbing his arm where her fingers had been. "Anyway, when he never came back, his wife and kids had to go on relief. I don't know if he ever did come back."

Pearl laughed. "That happened all the time back then. It still does. You'd be silly to think it didn't."

"But do you think he ever thinks about them? Wonders what might've happened?"

"Why wouldn't he? It didn't mean he didn't love her."

Sitting like this and talking with Pearl, O.J. remembered again how Dotty's body had changed after the birth of each of their children. Always too damn' busy to notice, he thought. To ask questions.

"Maybe we'll look at these some other time," Pearl said. "When we're real bored, huh?"

"Who said I was bored?"

"Oh, I can tell. I'm sure I've got some crocheting to do," she said, reaching down to pull her slippers back on.

"You said you couldn't crochet," he chuckled. He had an urge to touch the slippers, to see what they felt like. That seemed silly though. "You gotta keep your stories straight."

"Don't tell anybody," she said, with a loud laugh. "I've gotta have some excuse for hiding out in my room now and again. Hey, Lover, see you at dinner."

"I ain't your lover." In her smiling O.J. noticed that the tooth just off the front two was gold. As he watched Pearl walk off, her slippers rasping like sandpaper against the floor, he said, "Okey-dokey."

"Maybe we can sit together, huh?" she said, flinging another wild laugh at him. "A real date for us old folks."

"You betcha," he said, not sure if either of them was meaning to joke. The sight of her moving off mixed again with the feel of Dotty's skin beneath his fingers. There was a sense of surprise in that memory, of how hard her skin had become in strange places and soft where he hadn't expected it to be. He was ashamed of not noticing any of that before. As he traced the lines on her thighs and belly, lines that had been there all along, lines that meant children and operations, he knew he hadn't thought until now about where any of that would end up. Why'd you have to die like that, he wondered. It had never been in him to go off, leaving her behind. Though now he had to admit he'd thought about it; he'd just never put it into words.

Damn' that Pearl, but he would sit with her later. Maybe. And Edith couldn't say a word about it. No, siree, he thought as he clenched the cane.

It was Friday, and he didn't even have to wonder what was for dinner. Tuna salad and macaroni cheese. But Dotty had taught him that a little tomato catsup would always help that out.

The Kiss

Steve was Mikki's mother's boyfriend. He was picking them up at the movies because Mikki's mother was working the swing shift at the Hilton down on Pacific Highway. She'd been afraid Mikki and Janelle might hitchhike, and so insisted they get a ride home. "Or you're not going," she'd said. "Understand? Finis. That's Latin," she'd said, "something you'll never learn at that school."

Although Steve had been coming around for almost four years, Mikki didn't want to ask him for the lift from the Lewis & Clark Theatre. She'd rather have walked. Even if it was raining.

And it wasn't that Steve wasn't a nice guy. From the beginning she'd liked him. Or at least as much as she could any guy that drove a white Impala and hung out with her mother. He was always taking them places--Lake Meridian or Surprise Lake in the summer for swimming and a picnic, the Denny's on Pacific Highway for dinner--and giving her and her brother presents. And not just at Christmas. Once, he'd given her a pin shaped like a flower. To Mikki, it looked like a cross between a rose and a carnation. It was made in Italy and Steve said it had belonged to his grandmother. She didn't like the pin all that much, but wore it because her mother got mad

whenever she saw it. "He shouldn't have given that kind of thing to you," she'd said. "It's worth something. You don't even know it's cloisonne."

So, she'd put off asking Steve for the ride until the night before. Maybe because him being at the theater with his car would put Steve in the role of her father, something which she wasn't ready to accept. Not that her father did anything special for her, or that she saw him all that much. He used to take her and her brother bowling Sunday mornings. That, instead of church. And then, Thanksgivings they'd go to a restaurant--sometimes in Kent, other times in Renton. Mikki saw that the waitresses always smiled at her father, though he didn't seem to notice them. At least, not when the "kids" were around. She wondered if he went back and asked them for dates.

But maybe, she thought, Steve wasn't ready to start being anything different from her mother's boyfriend. He'd never stayed for dinner at their house. Her mother would ask and he'd refuse, saying there was this meeting at the "hotel" as he called it or that he'd promised to drive one of his boys--he had four--somewhere. All true, perhaps, but Mikki thought it was weird: her mother always acting like some dip and asking, him saying no. As if when he'd say yes, it would mean he was staying forever or some-

thing. Most of the time she sure didn't think anybody wanted that.

And when she'd asked for the ride, Steve said, "Hey, why not?" Like he'd nothing better to do than sit in a car in the rain, not like Janelle's father who had his AA meeting, or so he'd told the girls.

* * *

"Cats and dogs out there, aint it?" Steve said, when he finally pushed the passenger door out for Mikki. "What do you think?" he said as they slid across the clear vinyl covers, Mikki in the front seat, Janelle in back. "Hot off the showroom floor. 1969." Steve talked like that, all the time his mustache never seeming to move with his mouth. She assumed it came with his job. That way of talking. For seven or eight years, he'd been manager of the Airporter Inn. That was where her mother had met him.

"Nice," Janelle said, without looking around.

Mikki smirked at Janelle's words, wondering what she saw in a friend that couldn't think of anything better to say than "Nice." She'd already decided this was the last time she'd go to the movies with Janelle. Four times Janelle had leaned over to ask what was going on with Michael Caine, and once to say she didn't like his glasses. Mikki thought Michael Caine's glasses made him too sexy for words.

Besides, she thought, a new white Impala deserves something more than "nice." As boring and as tacky as the car was, it was ten times better than the dinged-up maroon Mustang that her mother drove. She had got it with the divorce, along with the trailer they were still living in. The passenger side door had been crushed in two years earlier by a hit-and-run and had never been fixed. Whenever Mikki went anywhere with her mother, she had to crawl in on the driver's side, her stockings snagging--on torn upholstery, the edge of the seat. She couldn't afford a new pair until Sunday afternoons, when she would have earned enough in tips at the Triple-X Drive-In. By then, the cinnamon-colored panty hose would be dabbed with pale pink fingernail polish. To Mikki, it seemed like a waste of good polish. Her idea of rich included being able to throw panty hose away at the first run, never again having to feel dried globs of polish sticking or scratching against her skin. Never again worrying about someone looking at her legs and seeing nothing except white skin through the runs, runs that looked to her like ladders climbing up her legs.

"Looks just like the last one," Mikki said. Turning to Janelle, she said, "Steve gets a new white Impala every year. He says it saves on the maintenance costs." She rolled her eyes, but didn't think Janelle even noticed.

To herself, she thought it was stupid because he would spend days and weeks thinking about getting a different car. He'd even pick up brochures from other dealers and show them to her mother. That seemed kind of phoney to her, because then he would always settle for one more Impala.

At least once a week, Mikki would ask her mother, "Why don't you get married?", pausing to let that sink in and then, "Then you can get a new car." Her mother would come back with a look that said, "Mind-your-own-business-young-lady."

Steve barely stopped talking about extras as he pulled over to let Janelle out at her house north of Sea-Tac Airport.

"We'll have to do this again," he said. "Your parents home?" There weren't any lights on in Janelle's house.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "Everybody's in the rec room watching T.V. It's in back. My father just bought a new color T.V. A G.E. Twenty-one inches. You should see it. Mikki's seen it."

God, she can talk when she wants, Mikki thought. Maybe I should get out here and let her ride back to my house with Steve. Then, they can talk about cars and televisions. To Janelle, she only said, "See you tomorrow."

* * *

Steve babied the Impala over a half-dozen of Trailer Town's speed bumps ("Gotta keep the shocks in fighting trim. Don't want to ruin her for the trade-in"). Mikki tried to keep track of what he was saying as the car passed slowly from the adult section into the one reserved for families. He pulled under the carport beside the trailer. Mikki could tell David was home: all the lights were on.

"Thanks for the ride," she said.

"Looks like your brother's home," Steve said, switching off the engine and leaning over her in one movement. "Your mom says he's keeping out of trouble these days. I sure hope that's true."

"He's doing O.K.," Mikki said. She could smell the stuff Steve put on his hair or maybe it was his aftershave. It reminded her of when she must have been seven or eight, and she'd spilled lavender water all over her grandmother's dressing table. Thinking Steve wanted her to say more, she said, "He's here most nights."

"That's good. A young lady like you needs an older brother," Steve said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "It's too bad he hasn't gotten into sports like my boys."

Something in Steve's voice and the way he moved his hand along her arm to her elbow made Mikki's heart jump abruptly and then to stop, as if it was waiting for permission to cross some busy street.

"You need someone watching over you. How about a kiss for your old Steve?"

Mikki looked at him. He wasn't smiling at all. She looked away into the dark space between the hood of the Impala and the end of the carport, trying not to blink, hoping he'd kiss her quickly, on the cheek, and that her brother would open the trailer door. Then that would be that.

Instead, Steve pulled her face around toward him and kissed her on the mouth. Mikki felt his mustache, and then his tongue pressing against her lips and then her gums. Even her teeth. Jesus. She tried to ignore the feeling moving along her arms, into her stomach and on down her legs. Jesus. Jesus. I'm going to be sick. She wanted to say that to him. Stop or I'm going to throw up. She pushed away from Steve with one hand, fumbling with the other for the door. I'm going to throw up, she kept thinking, but nothing came out.

* * *

In the bathroom, Mikki let the hot water run over the soap in her cupped hands. Willing herself not to cry, she stared at the white bar. First, she noticed an embedded pubic hair and then, the letters IVORY that had been rubbed almost to an invisible smoothness. Before lathering the soap into foam, she dug out the hair with her fingernail.

She scrubbed at the blush and eye shadow, at the black streaks of mascara that had dribbled down her cheeks and chin. She smiled grimly at her face in the mirror. Jesus, tears aren't supposed to affect Maybelline, she thought, and started to laugh.

And over and over it played out in her head: Steve's closed eyes, his tongue. His hands. When she'd glanced at Steve's face, she'd seen how his eyes were closed. She'd squinted at him just to make sure. Shadows seemed to fill the pores in his skin. They had grown huge, like he'd had acne when he was younger. She'd never noticed that before. He probably still had pimples or something worse. All over. Suddenly, she wondered if her mother saw him that way, too. Maybe that's why she wouldn't marry him and get them out of this trailer. But then how could she let him kiss her? Ever?

Looking at herself in the mirror, Mikki knew for sure that Steve hadn't been drunk. Not that she could smell. But that cigar would have covered up anything. Maybe he drank all the time. Maybe that's why he smoked those things. Wouldn't that surprise her mother. It wouldn't have made any difference if he did though. None at all, she thought, starting to dry her face with the towel.

David was banging on the bathroom door. "Hey, Mik, come on. I gotta take a piss."

To David, "Yes. O.K." To the mirror, she smiled, wrinkling up her nose and then scowling at her red eyes. "God, can you look bad."

"What're you being so weepy about?" David said as Mikki stepped past him and into the narrow hallway. The words drummed softly against the trailer's walls, echoing some question she hadn't quite put together for herself.

"I thought you had to take a pee so bad."

"Oh. Right." David didn't close the bathroom door. The sound of him pissing followed Mikki to the living room. She thought about calling Janelle, telling her what had happened, but didn't want to hear her say, "Gee, that's not nice."

As he turned up the volume on "I Spy," David said, "You need to mellow out. How 'bout a joint?"

"Have you really been watching this . . . shit?," she said, reaching over and turning the television off. "You'd better open a window. Mom'll smell that stuff."

"Hey. Just because you're having a bad day . . . doesn't mean . . ." Bill Cosby and Robert Culp were back, tennis rackets in hand, discussing their latest escapade. David continued to stand in front of the television, looking down, turned sideways to Mikki. Suddenly, she thought about how his face matched those on the screen.

* * *

"Do either of you want to help count?" her mother said, pointing at the tips she'd dumped from her purse onto the coffee table.

Mikki shook her head, but David pulled his chair closer and started arranging the change and bills. He's thinking he'll snitch some, she thought. How ever much, it'll never be enough though.

"Not interested?" her mother said.

Mikki shook her head again.

"What a night," her mother said, slipping her white shoes off. "These jerks came in drunk from the lounge. And it was only seven o'clock. They were expecting more than just coffee."

Mikki listened for a few minutes. It was the same old story; sometimes they wanted more than apple pie. "Aren't you going to ask about the movie?"

"Sure, Hon. Was it any good?"

"Michael Caine was in it."

"Well, now, he is kind of cute," her mother said, pulling out the stack of coin wrappers and handing one for quarters to David. "Did you have to wait long for Steve?"

"No, he was right there in that white thing."

"It's an Impala," her mother said, lighting a cigarette with a kitchen match.

"I know that. I'm not that stupid, you know."

* * *

The fingernail polish was where Mikki had left it, on top of the built-in dresser in her bedroom. It was Cover Girl. Bright red. The latest color. Something she would never use on nylons. She took a white cotton ball out of the blue box, poured the clear remover on to it, and began rubbing at each nail in turn on her left hand, the circular motions releasing snatches of chemical smell.

If she told her mother about Steve, what would she do about it? Probably nothing at all, she thought. She would say I'd made it up. She'd say, "You've-got-an-active-
imagination-young-lady."

She picked out another cotton ball, and started on her right hand. But what if I told her and she believed me? What then? Once the nails and cuticles on both hands felt dry under her lips, Mikki began filing each nail to a rounded point with the emory board.

Then, she knew, no matter how her mother might have responded, she would never tell her. Not in a million years. Let her think he was a great guy. Didn't she used to think he was OK? Let her mother believe he'd been a hero in some stupid war. Let her go on thinking of him those same old ways. As far as she was concerned, he'd never gone to any of those places he'd talked about. She didn't think he could ever go anywhere at all.

Oh, yes, that's keen-o, she thought, turning the cap on the bottle of polish. When it came loose, the cap made a pleasant pop. Mikki couldn't keep from smiling. She watched the tiny brush lay down the most perfect of red lines, ones that the other girls couldn't help but envy when she would show them her hands.

Snakebit

When I was six years old a rattlesnake bit me.

My mother will tell you this didn't happen at all. But then, for years, she has tried to convince me that when I was younger and we were still living in Bakersfield, I passionately loved a neighbor's Irish setter. She even drags out the photo album and points to a half-dozen scalloped-edged, black-and-white pictures of me and the dog in the backyard; there I am, streaked with mud and being licked by this dog I do not remember. The rattler, though, in a cemetery outside of Havre, materializes painfully as two red marks on the skin above my ankle bone. All these years, proof positive that a rattlesnake bit me.

It was 1959 and my father had just rented a 15-acre farm in a low spot a little south of the Milk River. The property belonged to Bill Kimiele, a guy my father had gone to high school with.

"Your father's old drinking buddy," my mother says long distance from Seattle when I call to ask for some facts about the time we lived in northern Montana. "Why do you want to know?" she asks, the suspicion in her voice.

"I'm just writing this story. Nothing earth-shaking. No skeletons will be revealed," I assure her, and laugh.

She's delighted to accommodate me. "We were paying \$50

a month rent," she says. "Part of the deal was we had to take care of Mr. Kimiele's horses."

"Yes," I say. "The horses were called Molly, Polly and Ginger."

"I don't remember that," she says. "Maybe you'd better let me hear what you've written."

"This isn't a history," I remind her, and start reading.

My parents' makeshift farm was bordered by fields of winter wheat, a south-running dirt road, and the new Catholic cemetery to the north, between us and Highway 2.

"You do remember Mr. Connelly's cows and corn?" my mother says. "He was on the other side. Mr. Connelly's cows were forever getting out and getting into the cemetery. I tried to shoo them off. One time I got a stick and I got about thirty feet up to this one cow. Oh, boy. When I saw how big it was, I went back and called Mr. Connelly."

"I thought his name was McCoy," I say.

"That was a TV show," my mother says. "The Real McCoys."

"Oh, yes, I remember."

When she starts laughing like a hoarse Walter Brennan, I continue reading to her over the phone.

Somehow my parents got a hold of a two-bedroom, silver-and-blue Nashua trailer. Vintage 1955.

"Your father had to borrow the money from his brother," my mother says.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "That's not essential to the story."

My mother goes on: "He didn't really want to do it. You know, your dad was in a lot of trouble as a teenager and your uncle could do no wrong."

"I like Uncle Johnny," I say.

"That's nice," my mother says. "I'm just telling you what it was like."

"OK," I say, hoping that will stop her.

"We paid \$2,800 for that trailer," she says. "I still have the papers."

"That figures," I say, remembering my last trip home. I'd made the mistake of trying to find a box of my college textbooks stored in the attic. To get to the books, I first had to move hundreds of plastic orange juice jugs, the kind with orange caps; a box of advertising supplements from the Seattle Times; at least five boxes of half-gallon wine bottles, all green and with their caps screwed on tight; clean milk cartons which my mother told me later would eventually be used for freezing fish my stepdad would eventually catch, and one trash bag filled with foam packing material shaped like squashed figure-eights.

"You just never know," she says. "Like right now. I

can prove what I say."

"That doesn't matter," I repeat.

In the attic, there was even a suitcase containing clothing my stepdad had taken on a trip to Sweden twenty-three years earlier and a wooden crate he used for storing 75 LPs that my mother told me were worth a mint. "If I could only convince your stepdad to take 'em to the pawnshop." I finally pulled my box out of the attic, all the time cursing hers and my stepdad's "chintziness," and then my use of "chintzy," because that's the kind of word my mother uses.

When my mother stops for more than two seconds, I go on reading the story.

My parents set the trailer up on the farm, next to a well, three run-down outbuildings and a box car with the Great Northern insignia on both sides little more than ghostly mountain goats. Late afternoons, the cover of that well was the perfect spot for us to watch sheet lightning. In that lightning, I saw sheep and cows rushing across the horizon, followed by horses. And always Indians. Everything galloping toward the west. Everything in such a hurry. The lightning was so far away to the north we never heard any thunder.

"That's not right," my mother says. "It'd roll up on us and you kids would go screaming into the trailer."

"I liked it," I say. "I can still feel those first drops on my face. Big and so cool."

"Big's right, but they weren't always cold and they were usually full of dirt," my mother says.

"Well, I don't remember it that way," I say, and then ask her why she, a St. Louis city girl, and my father, who'd only done sheetmetal and tended bar, had decided to become farmers on the Highline outside of Havre. Of all places.

"We were on 'relief' at the time," she says. "You know, welfare? We got commodities. You do remember the powdered eggs and peanut butter, don't you? We'd get flour wrapped in brown paper and the oleo came in clear plastic. You kids used to fight over who was going to squeeze the yellow into the oleo."

"I hated that margarine," I say.

"Well, it got us through," she says. "It was doodly-squat there for awhile, but that was the happiest time of my life. Your father wouldn't let me take my medicine. He said the epilepsy was all in my head. During that year and a half we lived out there, I never had any seizures. Not one. I think it was just being on that farm. I wasn't a farm girl at all."

She pauses. I ask her what my father was doing all this time.

"Your dad was working for Great Northern as a switchman,

but he was on-call. Which meant he wasn't working much. It was a hell of a time."

To make money, my parents decided to raise chickens in the box car and sell the eggs. They went for sixty cents a dozen which was high.

"They were brown," my mother says.

"Yes," I say.

My parents started out with two hundred chicks, but lost one hundred and fifty in one night. My mother forgot to turn on the heat lamps.

"Your father was fit to be tied about that," she reminds me. "He went to the Elks Club in Havre. Didn't come back till the next morning."

"Where'd he stay?"

"I don't know. It didn't matter."

The surviving White Rocks became "her" chickens after that, and my mother was very proprietary about them. I remember her feeding scratch to the chickens in the pen which they shared with the horses, Molly, Polly and Ginger, and shooting at hawks but never hitting one, chopping off heads when we needed something to eat: Chicken-and-dumplings. Fried chicken with "smashed" potatoes as we children liked to call them. And chicken noodle soup.

"You make it sound like all we did was eat chicken," my

mother says. "Your father went hunting. We had elk. One time even bear."

"Yes, but I'm telling this story, Mother. I can still see those chickens running around, blood squirting all over the place."

"It wasn't that bad," she says.

The chickens didn't really have anything to do with the rattlesnake, but they were the reason my parents were living in the middle of nowhere. Our closest neighbor was a couple miles down the road.

"It was only a mile, but you kids never wanted to walk that far," my mother says.

And I'm thinking if she keeps interrupting, I'll never finish this story and my phone bill's going to be horrendous.

"Mom, I'd like to talk about the cemetery, and the snake."

"Well, I thought you wanted to know."

"I do, but I only have so much time and the piece is only supposed to be a thousand words."

"That should be about right," she says and hurries on before I can speak. "I couldn't drive down to the Simpsons--they were the ones just down the road, remember?--because of the epilepsy. The only time I could go down there was when your father was at work. You know how he thought I should

just stay at home. It'd take us at least an hour because the whole time you kids would be getting into the ditch and walking in the middle of the road. One time you got ahead of your brother and sister and me. When we caught up, you'd found a dead skunk and were sticking your fingers into it."

"That's revolting," I say. "You're making that up."

"No, I wouldn't do that," she says. "Lucky for me there wasn't much traffic. And then . . ."

"Wait a second, Mother. Let me finish this first. I've heard all about the Simpsons. The outside of their house was covered with tarpaper."

"It was more of a shack," she says.

"OK. I also know it took me seven or eight tries before I learned to ride the Simpsons' bicycle on their gravel road."

"That wasn't there," my mother says. "You're thinking of the Keller family. Red and Ruby. They were out on the highway and had pigs which . . ."

"Not now, Mother," I say.

"You didn't like it when they butchered those pigs. They were . . ."

"Mother, I've never seen a pig killed. OK? Can I go on with this?"

"Oh, yes, do," she says, all too perky.

Because we didn't have any close neighbors, my brother,

sister and I had to entertain ourselves. When we got really bored, we'd go to the cemetery. It was a new one, meaning nobody was buried in there yet, but three statues had been erected and we loved to play on them. We had to avoid the "caretakers" who were working at the cemetery. They'd chase us out of there, especially when they started laying the sod.

My mother interrupts. "No, it was still covered with sagebrush. Mr. Connelly's cows liked to eat it. That's where they were always . . ."

"I don't remember the cows," I say. "Cemeteries have grass."

"Well, this one didn't," my mother says.

I work to control my voice when I continue my reading.

It was the hottest part of that summer and we'd gone over to the cemetery again. We were playing on this statue of Christ with children all around him. I think he was supposed to be telling a story because the children were looking up at him, like he was saying something important.

"A parable, darling." My mother again. "He was telling a parable. You remember what a parable is?"

"Yes."

"You should come to church with me sometime. You'd like Father Joe and . . ."

"Sure. I'll think about it," I say, knowing I'll never step foot in St. Thomas's.

There were several other Jesus statues. All of them were white marble with red marble bases. I don't know if I'd decided to go home or what, but I stepped down into the weeds behind the statue and heard this sound. You don't have to hear that sound more than the first time to know what it is.

"What was it?" my mother says, like she's talking to a toddler. "A rattlesnake?"

"Mother."

"Just teasing, Darling."

After touching the snake with the toe of my shoe, I jumped straight up and ran. When I got to the ditch separating our property from the cemetery, I stopped to look where the snake had bit me.

"Oh, Hon. You shouldn't tell people that rattler bit you. They might believe you."

"Well, it did."

"You'd be dead, if it had."

"Well, I'm not. Can I continue?"

"By all means. I'm enjoying this."

I was sure I was going to die and ran home, yelling "Mamma, Mamma, a snake bit me!" She asked me where and I pointed to my bleeding ankle, which I could see swelling.

But my mother wanted to know where the snake was. I pointed toward the cemetery. She grabbed a baseball bat. Once my mother tried throwing a bat at a chicken hawk.

"No, I didn't," my mother says. "You don't tell people that! I used the .22."

"But it's true." I can hear her taking a drag off her cigarette. "Well, you never hit a thing."

Unaware that I had been bitten, my brother and sister were still playing on the statue. I guess I was too scared and didn't say anything to them about the snake. By the time my mother and I got back, the snake had crawled out of the weeds.

"No, that's not how it happened," my mother says. "It was still in there. I poked at it with the bat. And then I sent your brother to get help."

"Please," I say. "This is my dime."

By the time the caretakers arrived, the snake had crawled out of the weeds and was maneuvering the open ground of clods and stones. We were all running around. It was like a Laurel and Hardy movie on Saturday afternoon. There was a feeling that nobody knew what they were doing or why. Finally, one of the men used a long-handled hoe to chop the snake into three pieces.

"How can you remember that?" my mother asks. "Three pieces?"

"I just do."

I was standing over one of the pieces, it moved and I jumped.

"Yes, that's right," she says. "I remember that. We all laughed."

"I don't remember it being all that funny," I say.

I showed everybody the two holes from the snakebite. "Look at the blood," I said, pointing to my ankle. "I've been bitten."

"They were just scratches from the sagebrush," my mother says. "You were always cutting yourself."

I could have died, but my mother wouldn't take me to the hospital.

"You were fine. You're making me sound like I wasn't a very good mother."

I thought it was a miracle that I didn't die. It made me feel special after that. When I started first grade, I told my teacher--Miss Jilson was her name--and the class how I spent my summer vacation. Nobody could come up with anything better. Not even Jimmy Wong who went to San Francisco to visit his grandfather. He got to ride a trolley, but that wasn't half as good as getting bit by a rattler.

"You were fine. Are you listening to me? Nobody'll believe that snake bit you."

"Look, why don't you write the story yourself."

"Maybe I should," she says.

My worst nightmare is that she will and it'll get published. "Well, nobody'll print it," I say.

"No, darling, I wouldn't even try," she says. "I'll just send it to you. Keep going."

On my computer screen, I scroll to the last paragraph.

According to my mother, everything was "compatible" between Mr. Kimiele and my father for another year, until even the monthly \$50 was hard to come up with.

"We must have been a hundred bucks behind," my mother says. "We had to move. B.B.'d had a litter in one of the sheds out back. The kittens were wild and we couldn't . . ."

"That's another story, Mamma," I interrupt, not wanting to remember, but her words prompt me, force me to think of those kittens left behind that time, and of the trio of kittens my parents brought home for us the summer of the rattlesnake. One barely-weaned kitten for each of us. Somehow my kitten, whose name I can't recall but who was white all over except for a black splotch on her right side, climbed into the warm engine compartment of a truck and was chewed up when the visiting neighbor decided to leave. I can still hear that sound: the cat's strident mewling above the motor's rumbling. My brother's pet had fallen asleep

atop the tire in the wheelwell of our car and didn't move fast enough. Nobody'd realized what had happened until we came back from grocery shopping in town. We all cried and my mother decided the third cat, who had been christened "B.B.," would become hers to prevent my sister from mourning "her" pet's death. B.B was a wild black and we left her on that farm when we moved down the road.

"Dear, are you still there?"

"Yes," I say. "I was just thinking." Finally, I ask, "What happened to the snake?"

"What do you mean?" she says.

"The pieces? Of the snake?" I say.

"I don't know. We probably just left them there."

"No," I say and start keying in a new sentence.

I crawled under the trailer with the snake . . .

"How did you carry it?"

. . . in my pockets.

"It was a big snake," she says.

"It fit in my pockets, Mother."

If I'd had a shoebox, I would have used that for the snake's coffin, but I had to be satisfied with laying it out without such a formality. I said a "Hail Mary" and "The Lord's Prayer" like I'd learned for the rosary and crossed myself with a solemn "Amen."

"That's blasphemy," she says. "I hope Father Joe never reads this."

"Mother, it's just a story. Have a sense of humor."

With the palms of my hands, I patted the soil and then covered the grave with stones from the driveway.

My mother can't stop interrupting. "The dog would have dug it up that same night," she says. "Look, you were too squeamish to pick up the snake. The magpies got it or we . . ."

"Mamma, I've got to go. This is costing me money." And time, I think. Here, we've been talking for more than twenty minutes. I realize I haven't talked to my mother like this in a long time. I'm glad when she says she has a parish meeting to attend.

"This has been nice," she says. "Next time don't wait so long to call. I love you."

"Me, too," I say, and hang up.

I read what I've written about the rattlesnake and one thing my mother said comes back. When I asked her about where they got the box car, instead of telling me, she said: "I used to go out to the chicken coop with B.B. You remember her? She'd never bother the chickens. I'd sit there with her in my lap and look out the window. I'd talk to the cat and cry. I couldn't talk to anybody else. You know how your father was."

That has nothing at all to do with my rattlesnake, I decide. *Nada. Rien.*

I vow never again to go over a story with my mother, knowing all along that I will mail this one to her, knowing she will write me immediately, informing me that it wasn't an Irish setter at all, but a chow, and that we had never lived in Bakersfield.

"You know what kind of people live in Bakersfield," she'll say.

"No, I don't," I'll say, "but I can imagine."

The Care Of Birds

Among the scattered seeds and droppings, a finch had settled to the floor of the cage. On the wire above it, the other finches were perched, fourteen voices and bodies strung like so many socks on a windless day.

"What's happening with you fellows? You're awfully quiet, if you ask me. You're not even covered up."

Marty moved around the kitchen without her glasses, aware something was off-kilter. As she looked for her pack of Winstons, she hoped the coffeemaker's automatic timer was still working. Seeing the finch, claws pulled tight against his shrunken body, she prayed he hadn't died of something contagious. If he had, well . . . Hadn't she had lots of practice?

Burying her dead had come easy for Marty. All of them there in the backyard between the patchy cactus and beneath the sometimes shadow of the lone Joshua tree. All of them wrapped in layers of plastic bread bags, the colors mixed together like the smattering of wildflowers in late winter. She remembered each bird, their names and the mystery or tragedy surrounding their deaths. Conners was there, along with a whole slew of macaws, cockatiels and cockatoos--Mr. Hurley, Gondola, Castor Oil. The finches were a different story. "Too many of you to bother naming your frivolous

souls," she would tell them, refusing to kneel over any of their graves.

The finch lay on his side on a piece of newspaper beside Marty's ashtray and cup of coffee. "I thought you were going to stop smoking," she said, waving the cigarette to the air before her. "Well, not this morning."

From the living room, she heard Rose Ellen getting up from the sofa. It was strange her granddaughter being there. She listened to the unfamiliar sounds of someone else dressing. It'd probably be the same shirt and jeans. Now she must be stuffing her sleeping bag. She said she'd be leaving today. All too soon, old lady . . .

"You were talking to yourself," Rose Ellen said, standing in the doorway.

"It was the birds," Marty said, thinking the girl was accusing her of something beyond being crazy. "One of them's died."

"Oh." She walked over to the table and looked down at the bird.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Marty said, thinking her voice came out too apologetic.

"Sa'll right," Rose Ellen said. "I need to get going."

"You've barely got here." She was remembering the last four days.

"I told you I could only stay so long," she said, and

reached down as if to poke the bird. But she didn't.

"Mom'll be worried."

"You could borrow a phone and call her. At least let her know you're here." As she watched her granddaughter tuck her thumbs in the back pockets of her jeans, she wanted to say something about the girl not seeming that concerned before. She mentally crossed her fingers.

But Rose Ellen turned toward the bathroom. "She knows where I'm at. I'd better take a shower."

"Use a clean towel," Marty said, wondering when the girl had called Glennie. "There're plenty."

The shower sputtered along with bangs and gurgles. She hadn't noticed before how much noise it created. With the back of her hand, Marty pushed the finch over, thinking it was watching her, knowing all the time it wouldn't be looking at some old lady. She stared at the ashes that had fallen from her cigarette onto the bird's matted feathers.

* * *

The plain white envelope had come three months before; it had included Rose Ellen's high school graduation announcement and a color photograph. Marty had rubbed her fingers across the raised letters, stared into the photograph's small eyes. She had even called up Greyhound from Mrs. Gutierrez's, thinking she ought to go to Seattle. Surprise them all. Her daughter Glennie especially. But

she hadn't got beyond that one phone call. Now, she felt guilty. She could have written. Or sent a present of some kind.

When Rose Ellen had showed up at the door late Friday afternoon, Marty hadn't known who she was. She couldn't be expected to though. Hadn't it been fourteen years and some months since she'd seen her last? And then she'd been little more than a baby, walking like it was some sort of adventure. Even with that graduation photograph still in mind, she couldn't have known. This girl's hair wasn't blond enough, and it was straight and spiky on top. In the picture, it had seemed longer. She hadn't put it together until the girl had spoken and said how she'd got there. How she'd hitchhiked on I-5, got rides with two long-distance truckers. The girl had laughed. Those guys couldn't believe she was out there alone. A girl who could have been one of their daughters, they'd said.

Marty had started to lecture her about that. "What would your. . . ?" She'd wanted to tell her about taking chances like that, but kept her mouth shut when she saw how the girl's eyes were puffy and dark like she'd been crying for hours. This girl who said she was her granddaughter. But maybe she could see a bit of Glennie in her. She'd been tempted to ask if her mother knew she was here, but decided that could wait. "You must be beat," she'd said finally,

feeling she was being tested.

"Not really," the girl had said.

And Rose Ellen didn't ask why she hadn't come to the graduation. That still bothered Marty more than if she had put that question to her. But then she didn't ask her why she'd come to the desert, or even how she'd found the house.

Instead, she'd opened the screen door and said, "You must be thirsty. How about some lemonade? It's the frozen kind, but it's not bad."

She'd watched as Rose Ellen grabbed a sleeping bag and small day pack she'd stashed beside the porch. Now, Marty realized the girl hadn't thought she was going to be welcomed.

* * *

When her grandmother had turned in the doorway that first afternoon, Rose Ellen had noticed how her body was ringed in light, glowing like some alien in a horror movie. The flowered print of the thin dress her grandmother wore only added to the effect, making her seem to float inches above the floor. And when her grandmother looked toward her, Rose Ellen felt uncomfortable because she couldn't tell if her grandmother was smiling or frowning. But then scratchy sounds, guttural like the ones her German teacher, old Mrs. Mashed Potato, had tried to get her to make, came pouring out of the kitchen. She remembered the birds. Do

they spit when they sing? she wondered.

The woman at the market off of Highway 14 had talked about the birds when Rose Ellen had stopped to ask directions. "She's got hordes of the damndest birds. I'm surprised that Mrs. Crawford hasn't gotten some disease off of them by now. Why you going up there?" When Rose Ellen didn't say anything, she continued, "I've never seen it myself, but I heard . . ."

With barely a thank-you, Rose Ellen had taken the piece of paper that the woman had scribbled a map on. She'd almost told the woman a dollar for the Diet Pepsi was a rip, but that seemed too rude. Besides she'd been real thirsty.

"OK. OK. Mother's here. I'll feed you later. Hush. Hush now, or I'll have to cover you fellows up."

Already Rose Ellen was wondering why she'd lied and told her grandmother she'd hitchhiked from Seattle. That was childish, something her mother would have done to save her from what she called the Truth. Whatever that was, it had seemed to change on a daily basis. The truth was she'd gotten a ride with a classmate whose family was moving to California, and then had taken the bus north out of L.A. From Lancaster, she'd had to hitch. But she'd been careful, taking a ride from a soldier and his family who were returning to Edwards Air Force Base. She'd got to sit in

the back seat next to the little girl who'd been as cute as a bug's ear.

"Don't be shy about the birds," her grandmother was saying as she bent over first one drawer, then another. She was so skinny that her dress barely seemed to touch her back. It fell from shoulders as narrow as a clotheshanger. "It's got to be here."

Maybe it was just that the truckers sounded more romantic, or at least more dangerous, she thought. But they'd have been nice guys. But maybe she'd wanted her grandmother's disapproval along with everybody else's. Sometimes she would ask herself why.

"I could just drink water," she said.

"Not the kind we have here. Ha, I knew I'd find it," her grandmother said, holding up a can opener. To Rose Ellen, it looked like the kind that never worked for her.

Watching her grandmother clear the table, she found it hard to think of her as anything other than some strange old woman, one of those bag ladies pushing a shopping cart, or someone caught scrounging in the Safeway dumpster. Someone you'd never meet in the eye because they might ask you for something. Watching her grandmother move about was like seeing a speeded-up film: newspapers tossed in a box by the door, a used coffee cup and a small plate disappearing into the sink, cigarette butts dumped, ashtray whisked out with a

rag and set back on the now washed table. Then, she was done and pointing at her, at Rose Ellen, to "Sit" in the chair. She couldn't tell if it was an order or a request.

A glass pitcher of lemonade stuffed with ice cubes appeared on the table, along with two glasses and a pink Melmac plate of soda crackers.

"I don't have any cheese or peanut butter," her grandmother said, standing with the refrigerator door open.

Rose Ellen was surprised at how clean everything was. Somehow she'd expected her to be the slob her mother had made out, the one she'd held up to her as a model of what not to be. She stared at the drops of water that had condensed on the pitcher; they could have been dew on the bright yellow and orange flowers. Like the marigolds in her mother's garden in late summer.

* * *

Once Marty settled herself in her chair and lit a cigarette, she felt ready to talk to the girl. Though she didn't want to look at her for long; when she did, she noticed the smudges around her eyes weren't from crying, but had to have been made by thick, black liner pencil. It made her look old and very young at the same time.

"I'm kind of a kitchen person," she said finally, as if that would explain anything. The girl looked at her. Marty turned away and then pointed at the largest cage. "It's

bright and warm for the birds."

"You've got lots," said Rose Ellen.

"Too many. But they give me company. Though none of these fellows talk back," she said with a laugh. "I used to have a mynah, but he didn't say much either. Just squawked along to beat the band." All the while, she was thinking, You're talking too much again, and This kitchen was the last place I ever saw you, my first and only granddaughter.

"Don't you remember being here? Ever?"

"No," Rose Ellen said. "Mom doesn't talk much about . . . when we lived in California." She took a long sip of lemonade.

Like hell, Marty thought. She stubbed out her cigarette and said, "Glennie couldn't have changed that much. She wasn't the kind that could, or would, keep her opinions to herself."

"Boy, you're right on that," Rose Ellen said. She grinned, but clamped down on it almost as quickly, like she was willing herself not to smile or be agreeable.

To herself, Marty was thinking about that last time her daughter had brought Rose Ellen to the house, only to tell her she couldn't or wouldn't come again: it was the same thing. They were moving. Glennie had even snuck out here without her husband's "permission." Probably the only gutsy thing she ever did. No man would have ever . . .

To her granddaughter, she only said, "Yeah, she used to say I was a 'bad influence.' And your dad called me a 'hellion.' That was like the pot calling the pan black."

You shouldn't be bringing that up so soon, old lady. But people change, she thought. Don't grandmothers have rights? Didn't she yell that at her daughter? But maybe she couldn't remember some of it right. Yeah, I used to get on the gin a bit and whatever else I could find. But her memory seemed to have gone the way of so much else. You'll be chasing this girl off before too long, she thought.

When Rose Ellen didn't say anything, she added, "Well, that's neither here nor there. You're here now."

The girl sat quietly, swirling the ice cubes in her glass. They sounded like bells dinging a long ways off.

"You don't mind, do you?"

Marty didn't hear any question or apology in those words. It was as if the girl--it was hard to think of her as her granddaughter--was daring her to mind. Why should she? I'm not the one showing up at someone else's door.

"No. But we'll have to get some food. If you're planning to stay long."

"Three, four days max. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," Marty said, angry that this girl seemed to be wanting her to say both yes and no to her unspoken request. "Like I said, you're here. All I've got is the

sofa out there. Take it or leave it."

* * *

Rose Ellen wasn't able to sleep, but that wasn't the couch's fault. Her mind wouldn't settle down. It kept going over things all on its own.

When she'd left Seattle three days before, her mother was still bugging her to go to the community college in the fall. She'd acted as if her life, not Rose Ellen's, depended on it. It had seemed so contradictory because her mother had always made her feel stupid and inept about anything she'd tried to do. And now her mother was thinking she'd do better at Highline than working at a restaurant or going to data processing school for six months. I just don't get it, she kept on thinking.

They'd argued about it since the beginning of her senior year. Especially after Rose Ellen had brought home a bunch of brochures from the counselor and made some joke about them. Her mother had slapped her for not being more serious about her "future." "If you're not smart, you'll end up married with three kids," she'd said.

"What would be so bad about that?" Rose Ellen had yelled.

The idea of getting married was a laugh on her mother. She'd gone out with boys from school. To movies mainly. Even dances after a couple basketball games. Her mother

accused her of sleeping around, because sometimes Rose Ellen would stay all night at a girlfriend's house. She wouldn't tell her mother which girl and so her mother never believed her.

There'd even been a party on graduation night and she'd drunk rum and coke, but not so much that she hadn't known what she was doing. She'd ended up sitting on the couch in the downstairs rec room with Chris Dieter. She couldn't remember how they'd got there, but his hand was between her panties and her skin, fumbling its way downward, grabbing at her skin, her hair. Neither hurting nor caressing. It could have been funny, but there was something hurried and impersonal about the whole thing. It'd always been that way with boys. She'd finally gotten tired of Chris feeling around like that, not really touching her, like he was afraid to, and pulled away. She didn't want to help him out.

Rather than waiting for her friends to give her a lift home, Rose Ellen had left, walking the three miles along Military Road in the dark. One car had slowed down to look at her, but she kept her head down, willing herself to be invisible, and the car sped off. After it had disappeared, she'd started running.

That's why she had to laugh at her mother taking her to the gynecologist two years before ("I don't want any

accidents from you") and thinking she'd be married by the time she was nineteen. Just proves she doesn't know shit about me. And never will.

It seemed pointless lying there, rolling from one side to her stomach to her back and on to her side again, staring first at the ceiling and then out into the dark room or at the back of the couch. Maybe she wanted to go to college, but not at her mother's insistence. Can't she just leave me alone? Finally, she grew tired of picking at the knobby material in the couch and walked to the kitchen, thinking her grandmother might have left her cigarettes. She would never notice one missing.

Although the kitchen was dark, Rose Ellen could make out the covered cages. "Anybody home," she whispered, and then giggled. She flipped on the light. The pack of Winstons was next to the ashtray by the sink. They weren't her favorite, but beggars can't be choosers.

* * *

Marty hugged her knees, her bare arms stretched tight beneath her chin as if she was cold, but she was sweating with the temperature already eating into the nineties. Too goddamn' hot to be moving around. From where she sat, barely in the shadows on the porch's top step, she could follow Rose Ellen as she walked around the yard. There couldn't be much for the girl to see.

But hadn't they made it fine through a night and a morning? They'd even started up the car and drove into Mojave for groceries, Marty driving faster than needed.

Even though she'd had all those school pictures-- Couldn't Glennie have written something about how they were doing over the years?--this girl didn't look right. But she might get used to her. When she tried to focus beyond her granddaughter, Marty's vision wavered in the miles of heat coming off the Mojave, rippling like it was old window glass.

"What do you do out here?" Rose Ellen said.

"Sometimes I go for walks. In the spring, the real spring, it's nice. It's always quiet."

"No, I mean for work. What do you do for work?"

"I haven't worked for about a year," Marty said, holding her hand up. "I had to have a cyst taken out."

"Was it bad?"

"You mean cancer?" Marty said, uncomfortable with Rose Ellen's concern. "No. But it's never got its strength back. I proved it was my job that caused it," she said, bending her wrist like she was carrying a tray. "So I get some money from the state. That and most of my social security."

"Mom said you used to sew a lot."

"That was a few years back. By the time I moved out

here, I was tired of seamstressing. Besides, nobody out here could afford my prices and I didn't want to just 'fix' things that somebody else had started."

"Mom said you did it for movie stars."

"Oh, yeah, there'd been a few. You wouldn't know their names. Even Glennie thought I was an old fuddy for getting worked up about 'em."

"It must've been interesting. Did you go to their houses? In Hollywood?"

Marty felt a sigh coming up. "Yes, that or the studio. That's the way you did it then." Why did people always find this so almighty interesting? It amounted to nothing more than making underwear for the rich, and they weren't any different from the rest of us, were they?

"I even sewed you some dresses. A regular wardrobe. There was a jacket with a dark brown velvet collar and a tam to match. A real beaut. 'Cept your mother wouldn't let you wear them around here. Do you remember any of that?"

"Not really."

Yes, and you saying, "I made that dress" and "Let her alone." Yes, and Glenda wanting to know where you got the money for the material. "Which husband is it now? Or just some man you met at a bar? Where's my Daddy? You can't even tell me that, can you?" And didn't the arguing go downhill from there, Marty?

"I don't remember," said Rose Ellen. "My parents got divorced when I was eight."

Was that supposed to explain her not remembering? After a moment, she said, "Probably just as well."

"Mom never has remarried, you know?" Rose Ellen said.

Marty felt all the years, the anger, the part each of them had played coming through in the girl's words. She stood up, but not too fast, thinking she might faint. "How could I know any of that?" she said.

* * *

Her mother's voice sounded extra worried. That made Rose Ellen smile at the circle of reflections in the phone booth glass.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" her mother said, when she told her she was "at grandma's." "You know, I called the police. Now I'll have to call them back. Jesus. You can be a royal pain."

"I can take care of myself."

"Right, you and who else? Who's calling collect? Your dear 'Grandma' won't even pay for this. She was always cheap."

Inside, Rose Ellen wanted to say, "Please, don't be sarcastic. Just this once." But all that came out was: "She's smaller than you told me." But her mother misunderstood and thought she was saying her grandmother was

better looking or nicer or something. That wasn't it at all. She thought about the flat gray of her grandmother's hair, about that house out in the desert, a mile from the nearest highway. She tried again. "She's real old and kind of skinny."

There was a long pause, and then her mother's voice again: "Well, give me the phone number. Just in case."

When she said there wasn't one, her mother said she was a liar. Rose Ellen only said, "I'll call in a week."

After she hung up the receiver, Rose Ellen wondered if her mother would have called if there had been a phone at her grandmother's. Would she have recognized her voice? And what could they have to say to one another after all these years?

* * *

How Rose Ellen had convinced her to get out the old Singer Marty wasn't sure. She'd made the mistake of telling her granddaughter she still had a couple boxes of material stored in the bedroom closet. Rose Ellen had begged her until she couldn't resist opening those boxes up herself, peeling back the plastic and lifting out the material piece by piece, and still smelling of sizing. And then when they'd gone to some teen movie in Palmdale, Rose Ellen had made her stop at the Mini Mart to pick up Vogue and Cosmopolitan.

"Maybe we'll get some ideas," she'd said.

Marty hadn't been so sure that there would be anything she'd want to try patterning off of. Besides, she'd told her that her wrist would never hold up. But her granddaughter wanted these pair of pants ("They'd only get you a job in the circus") and Marty realized the striped silk once meant for a sheath would fall perfectly to elastic cuffs. And her wrist had yet to start aching.

Listening to the soft hum of the motor and the steady sound of the needle piercing the cloth made her confident again. Even the material beneath her fingers felt good, as if that's where it and they were supposed to be. Still, there was something hypnotic about the sound of the machine and the way the presser foot and feed dog worked together to move the cloth; she almost had nothing to do to keep the seam even.

Seven had been the magic number with Jed, she was thinking. Seven years. There I am again, standing in the backyard. That godawful Joshua tree threatening to fall even back then. There I am holding those pieces of paper, thinking D-I-V-O-R-C-E. Seemed like something worth celebrating. Didn't I think about burning those pieces of paper out back? But it didn't seem to deserve much attention, now did it, Marty girl? Yes, it had all happened without much gumption on my part. Just a lot of waiting,

right? That's always been my strong suit. . .

"He was gone for seven years," she said to Rose Ellen who was sitting opposite her at the table. She was still thumbing through the magazines, turning the corners under when she found something she liked. The girl must think all I want to do is piece together some new clothes for her.

"Huh?"

"Jed. Your grandfather. I guess he was really your step grandfather. He's gone seven of the eight years we were married. But he's the reason I started getting the birds. He bought me one for my birthday. A macaw that I named Conners. He's the one that painted this house yellow. I've kept it that color since."

"Mom said you'd been married a dozen times."

Marty laughed. "Not quite that many. Only six times and twice to the same fellow, your real grandfather. Glennie's father."

"What was his name?"

"Frank Dorsey. Didn't your mother tell you anything about family?"

"Hardly," said Rose Ellen.

"Well, I'm not sure why I married him the second time. Maybe because he was Irish. He wasn't any better the second time. Though your mother was the result. Peas," Marty said when the needle broke running over a straight pin. She

began rummaging around for the small wooden canister of machine needles. "Was that worst thing she said about me?"

Rose Ellen didn't say anything. That made Marty kind of mad. It meant Glenda had told her much worse.

"Not really," said Rose Ellen. "But that was when she was feeling down. About herself really. Or maybe just ticked off at me."

"I can't imagine her feeling down on herself. She always was hard toward me. Your mother was. I suppose she had her reasons."

Rose Ellen turned another page, but Marty didn't think she was paying attention to what was in front of her.

"Jed went off to get ice cream in Mojave. I'd wanted him to get some flypaper, too. He never came back. Left everything, except for his carpenter's belt. Took that with him."

"That's kind of funny," said Rose Ellen. "Weren't you worried though, that he'd been in an accident? Maybe he'd been mugged, or murdered?"

"People didn't get mugged in those days. I did report it to the sheriff. It didn't matter." What a liar, she thought. "Jed took what was important to him." She remembered going through his clothing, keeping some work shirts. Hadn't they been about the same size? Earlier, she'd remembered going dancing with him at the resort up at

Lake Elizabeth. "After seven years, I filed for the divorce."

Everything can be made to sound so simple when you put it into words like that, Marty thought. She pressed the sewing machine's pedal harder with her knee, hoping to drown out anything else.

* * *

Marty was thinking again how fast the four days had gone by, when Caruso screeched from the top of his cage. His stocky green and yellow body shook with some complaint only he was aware of. She saw the way Rose Ellen clenched her towel. God, she must be hating the noisy fellows. But maybe Caruso was ugly and a little frightening. Especially now, the way he was cocking his head first one way and then the other and starting to chew with an unholy vengeance on the bars.

"Hey, You, I can put you back in the cage damn' quick. Come on now, You, keep it down," she said. She didn't have it in her to try soothing Caruso. Anything she'd do wouldn't make a lick of difference to him. Hadn't she learned early on what Caruso's beak could do to a hand? He didn't even like to be petted on the back of his head. What a useless bird, she thought. "We have a guest, now don't we?"

Rose Ellen went back to towel-drying her hair. The

first morning hadn't she'd said it was weird not to have a blower? Weird? Where'd she come up with a word like that? Marty had thought, before telling her granddaughter, "I've got no big hurry." But maybe she'd buy her one.

"The birds never quiet down, do they?" Rose Ellen said.

"Well, mornings happen to be their time," Marty said, listening to the squawking chirping coughing singing beeping that had comforted her over the years. Could her granddaughter ever get used to them being around? She had her doubts.

Rose Ellen picked at her toast and then brushed a crumb or something else off her new pants. She was glad to see the girl wearing them. The cloth had just the right rough softness to make a nice swishy sound when she'd walked out of the bathroom after her shower.

Marty was needing to sit down. As she turned to the cage behind her, she felt the morning stiffness that had settled into her lower back: she'd given up on chiropractors ages ago. She pulled out Trudy, not because she was the closest, but because she loved the cockatiel best of all. Her feathers so soft and gray, the hint of yellow and red on her face, like perfect makeup. Like you used to bother with, old girl. Well, I had my day.

"I haven't introduced you to Trudy. My little friend."

The way that Trudy's topnotch trembled as she bent

forward to peck at her wrist, always made Marty's heart ache strangely, like she was performing some important ritual, something that could end as easily as so many others--with death. No matter how faithfully she did things. That's what made the hurt, she realized now.

"She's got the same name as a friend of mine from high school," she said, smiling at Rose Ellen. "We're still friends. It's been 46 years. I write her at Christmas. She writes back by Easter. It's a good system. Not much happens in a year. Trudy likes most any kind of music, don't you, Dear?"

"She's pretty cute," Rose Ellen said, and then took a sip from her coffee.

It must be cold by now, Marty thought. "You need that heated up?"

"No. I don't like it hot. I always burn my mouth."

"I used to have a chow that loved his coffee hot and with gobs of cream in it." Now, why'd you tell her that? She doesn't care about all your stupid animals.

When Rose Ellen spoke again, she said, "I'm thinking about getting a job in Lancaster or maybe Palmdale."

Marty couldn't look up at Rose Ellen. She wasn't sure what kind of face she'd see on the girl or what kind of face she'd give her. "How would you manage that?" She kept rubbing Trudy between the eyes. "How'd you get there?"

"Well, maybe I could use your car . . . Grandma."

Marty recognized the awkwardness in the word and looked across at Rose Ellen. Would "Grandmother" or something else have sounded any better, she wondered? She felt a little angry at the tentative tone in her granddaughter's voice. Then again, she wasn't sure she wanted the girl staying with her here. But then again, it might be nice. Oh, make up your mind. You must be getting senile.

"Yes. Well, you might ask."

Rose Ellen draped the towel on the other chair, like that was where it would always belong. "I was thinking we could try making clothes and selling them at boutiques? There must be beaucoup in Palmdale and Lancaster."

"What an idea." Still, Marty turned it over in her mind. She thought she might start liking it. But she had to laugh at her granddaughter, not sure she wanted to get used to her being under foot. "Can you see me going in any of those places?"

"I'd do it," Rose Ellen said. "Well, maybe it is crazy."

No "Grandma" this time, huh? "You can call me 'Marty,'" she said. "I'm more used to that." But maybe there would come a time for the other. Or was she being an old fool again?

She unlatched the cockatiels' cage, coaxing Trudy off

her finger and onto the wooden dowel. "There, you go, Trudy darlin'." Then, she tapped bird seed into the plastic container, the whole time Trudy swaying and whistling before her miniature mirror. "Yes, you are a beauty." She filled the reservoir with fresh water. "You, hush now."

Rose Ellen went back to eating her toast. That must be cold by now, too, Marty thought. But she knows by now where the bread is, and the toaster. What can she be thinking about? About herself, about me, the birds, my old house in the desert. About where they were going. Can you see yourself making clothes again, old girl?

As she walked from cage to cage, adding fresh water and seeds and nuts, attaching Mrs. Budgy's new millet ball, reminding herself that Caruso's paper would need changing the next day, Marty found herself wondering briefly who was taking care of whom, and how her granddaughter was going to fit in with all of them.