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Short Story Collection: Final Project

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**SHORT STORY COLLECTION
FINAL PROJECT**

Aisha S. Abram, B.S.

**An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts**

2007

ABSTRACT

This collection of six short stories all center their plots on the actions and responses of a strong female character. I took this approach because I feel there are too few female characters in the world of fiction.

In the story "Angie" a young girl befriends a strange man living under the family's house. The story focuses on her mother's fear and ultimately her acceptance of this odd friend.

The story of "Chelsea" centers on the decision that Chelsea, a common waitress, must make to change her situation. In the story she meets a trucker who is like many of the other truckers that have tried to pick her up from the small coffee house in which she works. But, at this point in her life, Chelsea thinks about making a decision that would change her life.

"Christine" focuses on the supernatural as a young couple buys their first home. In the story, the events surrounding the home test the couple's relationship and their belief in the unknown. "Christine" ends with her knowledge and acceptance of a world that is unseen.

An everyday plane ride gets a supernatural twist in "Laura." Laura, who is traveling to her grandmother's funeral, befriends an old lady who sits next to her on the plane. The old lady teaches Laura about accepting death and about grief and hope.

In "Monica," the female lead must decide if she should change her life's path. Monica journeys with her city boyfriend to her family's orchard after the death of her grandfather. The experience of being back at the orchard pushes Monica into reexamining her life.

"Sherri" is based on the story of Rip Van Winkle. After a car accident and being stuck in a ravine by herself, she wakes to find the world around her changed. Much like Van Winkle, she is forced to face this new world, one in which she is old and gray.

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**A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
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Degree of Master of Fine Arts**

2007

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro, Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Beth Mead

For Dad

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The professor leered at me over the disheveled stacks of papers and essays on his dusty desk. His brow furrowed and he pointed a cigarette-yellow finger at me.

“What’s your major anyway?” he said.

“Journalism.”

“You really shouldn’t be a writer,” he said.

My heart sank. He stated it as a fact. Not something to be questioned or argued about. The professor proceeded to go into a tirade about how I didn’t know what a sentence was—that I should rethink my career choices and that I should do so—quickly.

This college professor was the first person who had ever questioned my ability to write. At the time I was a sophomore and features editor of “The Oracle,” the University of South Florida’s newspaper.

I knew that what he was saying wasn’t right. I burst into tears anyway.

How could all of my preparations be wrong? I had been the film editor of the newspaper the semester before—I had come in on scholarship after scholarship.

I turned and left the room.

Looking back on this event, I am disappointed that I didn't stick up for myself. I'm disappointed that I didn't question what he was saying. I should have rushed back into the room screaming, "I can write and I can prove it!"

Instead I didn't write for myself, I didn't write fiction again for nearly three years.

During those three years I kicked myself for not turning that encounter into some kind of fuel to do better—to try to use it to stretch my boundaries—to not always be safe in my writing. Instead I turned to the safe, formulaic journalistic style of writing.

I started learning the technical side of writing. I learned the ins and outs of sentence structure and dialogue. I learned to take those sentences and take them into paragraphs and finally into journalistic style articles.

I learned to be bold and to ease past my shyness to go a step further with the subjects I interviewed. I learned gradually to stick up for myself in little ways because I was forced to. I learned that being a good journalist was to push the issue with a politician, to look for the real story and to talk to the right people. I would go up and introduce myself to someone new at random, ask them what was important to them and what they would like to see me write about.

Boldness was an entirely new skill I had to learn. Sticking up for oneself was never something that I was taught. I almost wonder if someone can be taught to stick up for themselves. I grew up in the small town of

Alachua, Florida. It is a rural, predominantly farming community. My high school was known as an agricultural magnet school, not exactly a cultural and educational Mecca. Since I was always good at writing, I had to tutor a lot of students who didn't do quite as well in English or Literature or Writing.

While this was often a task, I did get to interact with people whose backgrounds were different than mine. This has helped tremendously in my use of dialogue as a writer and in creating characters that are reflections of small town life.

My use of dialogue was furthered when I pursued journalism as a career. While fiction is incredibly different from journalism, my background has helped me communicate my ideas more effectively. Creating a character from thin air, based on pieces of persons I knew was a lot harder than merely writing about issues and persons that existed.

Journalism has, of course, helped with grammar and syntax. But, journalism also helped me become a great study of people, how they react to things and how they interact with each other. A look to the side or a shrug of the shoulder can mean something decidedly different coming from a mayor than coming from a secretary.

Journalism connected me to one of my favorite authors—Ernest Hemingway. I have often favored his short clipped sentences. I think it comes with the territory of working as a newspaper reporter. It lends itself to getting to the point quickly and trying to allow the reader to fill in some of the blanks.

The background also lends itself to looking for the right words or groups of words without overdoing it. It's about saying exactly what you mean and nothing further.

I think this lends more to the imagination. The reader is forced to think of those items that are understated and unsaid.

In Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, he uses these clipped sentences interspersed with a longer one:

After they went out of sight a great roar came from the bullring. It kept on. Then finally the pop of the rocket that meant the bull had gotten through the people in the ring and into the corrals. I went bank in the room and got into bed. (164)

While I love short clipped sentences, at the same time I do enjoy the long, looping sentences of Ray Bradbury. Bradbury's use of flowery, descriptive, heavy-laden sentences makes Hemingway seem abrupt. Bradbury's style is one that uses these descriptions to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary. The long sentences give Bradbury's descriptions a musical quality, one of long looping lyrical descriptions. Bradbury tells the reader exactly what the image is, rather than having the reader give their own impression.

Bradbury's use of metaphor and description is also one of the reasons I'm drawn to his writing in Dandelion Wine.

The first thing he noticed the next morning was dozens of birds fluttering around in the air stirring up ripples like colored stones thrown into an incredibly clear stream, gonging the tin roof of the garage softly. (55)

Bradbury's description of the birds as stones is more lyrical than simply stating that the birds were just sitting on the roof of the garage.

Bradbury also interposes his long sentences with short, sometimes fragmented sentences. The impact this creates is apparent in Bradbury's

Dandelion Wine:

She heard her clumsy feet on the porch and listened and felt her hands scrabbling and rippling at the lock with the key. She heard her heart. She heard her inner voice screaming.

The key fit.

Unlock the door, quick, quick! (175)

Bradbury uses the simple phrase "The key fit" to slow things down, to create a dramatic pause (175). This is something that I strive for in most of my stories—a stopping point. A point of realization.

It also allows the audience to fill in for themselves those things in the middle. Much like Bradbury, I enjoy taking something normal and transforming it into something not quite as ordinary.

Bradbury does this in Dandelion Wine by changing lunch on a railroad track into a magical event:

They raced along the railroad tracks, opened their lunch in brown-paper sacks, and sniffed deeply of the wax-wrapped deviled-ham sandwiches and green-sea pickles and colored peppermints. They ran and ran again and Douglas bent to scorch his ear on the hot steel rails, hearing trains so far away they were unseen voyaging in other lands, sending Morse-code messages to him here under the killing sun (106).

I believe that I'm drawn to the darkness in many of Bradbury's works. It is most evident in his novel Something Wicked This Way Comes. But, the lean towards dark things even appears in Dandelion Wine,

The Ravine.

Here and now, down in that pit of jungled blackness were suddenly all the things he would never know or understand; all the things without names lived in the huddled tree shadow, in the odor of decay.

He realized he and his mother were alone.

Her hand trembled (42).

The transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary occurs in several of my stories including, "Angie" and "Laura." I am unsure why I am fascinated with darkness and magic. I've been described by classmates as slightly morbid in the past. For this series of short stories I've tried to reach

past that, no one dies but they come to realizations. The realizations are just as significant as a death and the characters are forever changed.

In addition, most of the characters in the stories that I write are everyday people. One of the stories in this work, "Chelsea," typifies the small town life. Her transformation is one that takes her from a normal diner into a life that's more extraordinary.

Most of my subjects are not celebrities or rich people. They are small town reflections of things that I have seen, and then taken to the next level with a touch of magic. Most of the small town scenes are set from memory, from growing up in an agricultural town.

The story "Chelsea" epitomizes the idea of escaping from a small town, while the story "Monica" deals with a return to the rural. This struggle is something that I deal with—as a person who loves both the country and the city.

I tried to add a touch of magic also with the short story "Sheri." I experimented with the structure of the story to create a chopped sense of time throughout as if the reader goes in and out of consciousness along with the main character.

In this series of short stories, I also decided to write all of the short stories with all female main characters. I also decided to give that theme further weight by using the characters' names as titles. I feel that there are so few short stories with strong female roles. In "Chelsea" I made what happens

to her, her own decision. She isn't influenced by her surroundings; instead she makes a choice—a choice that ultimately creates her fate.

In the future, I plan to continue to create stories that have a twist at the end. It's because life is very much the same way. A person can expect an outcome and then find that they're taken in a very different direction. I plan to continue to stop asking the question, "Can I write?" and change it to "Can I write effectively?"

Angie

Angie's ball rolled under the deck.

"Be careful there might be spiders under the deck," Karen called from the kitchen window.

"I will mommy," Angie said.

The ball had rolled past Karen's flowers, past the deep colored mulch Angie helped stomp flat in the spring.

Angie flattened herself to fit under the beams and she crawled past several other toys: a ragged baby doll missing one eye, a jump rope frayed at one end, a baseball scarred on its face.

She saw a glimpse of the red ball. It was in the small crawlspace hole. As Angie reached for the ball, it rolled back towards her.

Startled, she grabbed it and rolled it back into the crawlspace.

The ball rolled back.

"Angie," Karen called. "Angie where are you?"

Her heeled footsteps clomped on the deck above her.

"I'm here mommy," Angie said. "I'm coming out."

Angie rolled the ball towards the crawlspace again then crawled from under the deck. Cobwebs in her hair, her play clothes completely covered with dirt.

“Look at you,” Karen said. “You’re filthy; let’s get you cleaned up for dinner.”

“Mommy there’s something under the deck,” Angie said.

“What’s under there?”

“My friend, I rolled the ball and he rolled it back to me.”

“Oh really, well what does your friend look like?” Karen said.

“I don’t know I really didn’t see him.”

Karen laughed.

Great, Angie has a hard enough time getting new friends, and now she has an imaginary one, Karen thought.

Karen picked aphids off the stem of a rose. She watched as Angie ran back and forth in the lawn sprinkler.

It never fails that things seem never be as beautiful as you hope they would be, Karen thought looking over her roses. She’d never thought of the amount of bugs involved in gardening. She reached a hand inside her work apron and felt the epi-pen in her pocket. Angie’s allergy had never been a major problem, but Karen didn’t take chances. Karen put the epi-pen on the deck rail and bent down to look more closely at her roses.

“Angie,” Karen said. “Come look at this.”

Angie scurried towards her, her pudgy legs revealing the pale white skin poking through the side over her swimsuit.

“Look at this, right there, watch the rose leaves,” Karen said.

Angie peered at the leaves, bright slick green. Then slowly, she began to see the slightest movement, one of the leaves moving slowly.

“What is it mommy?”

“It’s a praying mantis,” she said. “Do you see her little head here, and her body, it looks just like a leaf. She does that so she can surprise the other bugs and eat them. She blends in.”

They watched as the mantis moved towards a pair of aphids, then slowly ate one, then the other.

“Ewww,” Angie crinkled her nose and reached out towards the bug, catching her finger on a thorn.

“Wait here dear,” Karen said. “I’ll go get a band aid.”

Angie plopped down on the grass next to the deck, sucking on the tip of her pricked finger.

Her red ball rolled from under the deck to rest at her side.

“Hello,” she said. “Come out from under there. Don’t be afraid.”

Angie stuck out her hand as if to call a kitten or puppy.

“Come out. I won’t hurt you. Mommy’s inside now. It’ll be our secret.”

Angie made a sucking noise with her teeth.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she said. “Don’t be scared.”

A frail hand, encased in what looked like a mitten, extended from under the crawlspace.

Angie heard the sharp clap of Karen's shoes on the deck and the mitten withdrew.

"I have to go," Angie said. "But I'll be back, don't be afraid. You can be my friend. My very best friend."

Angie pushed her red ball towards the crawlspace.

"Here keep this, I'll bring you my teddy bear tomorrow," she said.

The mitten hand stretched out from the hole under the deck.

"Thank you," a small voice said in the darkness.

Karen's shoes tapped against the deck in agitation.

"Angie get over here right now young lady," she said.

Karen reached for the epi-pen but found it had rolled off the deck onto the yard below.

Angie crawled backward out of the crawlspace, covered with dirt and cobwebs. Karen looked at her. Angie picked up the epi-pen and handed it to Karen. Karen looked at her daughter. Another destroyed dress, she thought.

"Listen here young lady, you can't go gallivanting all over the neighborhood and not come when I call you," Karen said. "What did you do to your clothes?"

"I was playing with my friend under the deck," Angie said.

"Inside young lady," Karen said. "March."

Karen peeled off Angie's dress and checked the bathwater's temperature with the back of her hand.

"I can't believe you ruined another dress," she said. "That's it. No more playing under the deck. Who knows what's under there anyway? There could be a nail or a rat or spiders. You don't want to get stung by a bee do you?"

Angie shook her head no and rubbed her eyes.

"But my friend lives there," she said.

"Well maybe your friend can live somewhere else?" Karen said.

"Maybe the neighbor's pool or doghouse?"

"People don't live in pools or doghouses mom."

"Well they don't live under decks either. Besides no one could fit under there. I've just about had it with your imaginary friend. You should be making friends with some of the kids down the street. What about Steven?"

"I don't like him," Angie said. "He smells like sausage."

"Get in the tub," Karen said.

Karen sighed. It was hard enough being a single parent without all of Angie's delusions. It had been only a year since Angie's father asked for a divorce. The separation had been hard on both of them. The counselors all said it was natural for Angie to search for a male role model or create one of her own.

Angie struggled and frowned as Karen scrubbed at the dirt that had lodged itself in her elbows and knees.

“Well, maybe you should bring your friend home sometime,” Karen said. “A deck is really no place for a human being—I mean a person. You did say he was a person right?”

Angie frowned again.

“What else could he be?” she said.

Karen lit the charcoal grill. The summer had been nice this year. There were just a few thunderstorms and a breeze blowing through every now and then. Karen made Angie a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Angie insisted that she make one for her friend too.

“Can I take my friend his sandwich?” she said.

“Yes,” Karen said. “Your friend. Does he have a name?”

“I don’t know, I’ll have to ask him,” Angie said.

Within a moment Angie had darted down the deck steps and disappeared under the deck with both sandwiches.

Karen strained to hear what Angie and her friend were saying but couldn’t hear her.

Angie pushed past the old toys again towards the crawlspace.

“My mommy makes the best sandwiches,” she said.

The small hand reached from the crawlspace and grabbed the

sandwich.

“You can be my friend,” Angie said. “You can be my friend and I will keep you here, o.k.”

A muffled peanut butter and jelly voice replied.

“O.k.”

“What’s your name?” Angie said.

“Jeffrey.”

“I’m Angie.”

“Thank you Angie.”

“My mommy said you should come inside the house and she wants to see you,” Angie said.

There was a long pause.

“Are you done with your sandwich?” Angie said, taking bites of hers.

“You told your mom about me?” Jeffrey said.

“Yes,” Angie said. “She said that a deck is ‘no place for a human bean’ to live.”

Jeffrey poked his head out of the crawlspace. Angie could see his large sad eyes and his pale pasty skin. He looked like no more than a child worried about being scolded. He looked longingly at the rest of Angie’s sandwich. She held it out to him and he snapped it up and stuffed it into his mouth. Angie laughed.

“I told you that my mom makes the best sandwiches,” she said. “My

mom called you 'maginary? What's that?"

"It means she doesn't believe in me." he said. "She doesn't think I'm real. She thinks you're dreaming me up."

"Oh," Angie said. "You are real aren't you?"

"Yep."

"Why do you live here?"

"I like it."

"Why?" Angie said. "Mom said there are nails and bugs and spiders and it's no place for a human being to live."

"When I'm under here no one makes fun of me," he said.

"Why would people make fun of you?" she said.

Jeffrey extended one of his hands even further from under the crawlspace. Angie could see that he had only two fingers on each hand, resembling claws. It reminded Angie of the green grabbers on the large praying mantis Karen had plucked from her roses.

"What happened?" Angie said.

"I don't know," Jeffrey said. "Ever since I was little I had these instead of regular hands. I guess I was born like this."

Angie looked at the hands and touched them without fear.

"I'm different too," Angie said. "My mommy said that if I get stung by a bee and don't use my pen then I can die. Some other people can get stung by a bee and be o.k. though."

Jeffrey licked the peanut butter from his hands.

“Don’t you have a mommy or a daddy?” Angie said. “I just have a mommy now.”

“I guess I used to have a mom and dad,” he said. “I ran away from home a long time ago. I barely remember who they were or where they lived.”

Karen’s voice boomed interrupting their conversation.

“Why don’t you bring your friend up here,” she said. “I’d sure like to see him.”

Angie looked up through the slats of the deck. She could see her mother’s white sneaker tapping dust through. Angie looked back towards the crawlspace. Jeffrey had already gone back in. Angie crawled from under the deck, up the steps to Karen.

“He doesn’t want to come out,” Angie said.

“Oh he doesn’t?” Karen said.

Angie sat cross legged on the deck floor.

“He doesn’t want to come out,” she said. “He said he’s real and you don’t believe in him. Mommy, he’s a real man and he lives under our deck and he has claws instead of hands and people make fun of him so he hides under there.”

Karen smiled to herself.

“O.k. baby,” she said. “I’m sorry. But I really would like to meet this friend of yours. Would you invite him to dinner?”

Angie leapt up and under the deck. She poked her head back up a minute later.

“O.k.,” she said. “He said he’d come but he didn’t want you to be scared or make fun of him because of his hands. He’s my friend and I want you to be nice.”

“I will honey,” Karen said. “I’ll be nice.”

Karen set the table.

It couldn’t hurt to entertain her little fantasy, Karen thought. A little pretend might be nice, nice and normal, she thought.

Angie said her friend would be in for dinner at about 7 p.m.

It was 6:45 p.m.

“Angie, honey, go tell your friend it’s time for dinner,” she said.

Angie darted out the door and down the step and under the deck.

Karen looked up from the table. She wondered if she should set a plate for Angie’s friend with real food or imaginary food. Maybe real food, better make it look good for her little fantasy.

Karen went into the kitchen to finish making sloppy joes. She heard the door bang shut again.

“Ok mommy,” Angie said. “We’re ready for dinner.”

“Ok honey, I’ll be right there,” she said. “Go ahead and have a seat. Napkins in your lap, I mean laps.”

Karen gathered up the plates. It was Angie's favorite meal, sloppy joes and fries.

Karen stopped in the doorway. Angie was seated in her usual spot, eager and happy for dinner. Across from her was a strange looking man, if she could call him that.

It was no more of a man than a skeleton. It was then that a realization hit her. The plates with sloppy joes and fries hit the floor with a loud clink as the plates shattered.

"Oh my God Angie come here!" Karen said.

"Mommy what's wrong?"

"Come over here right now," Karen said. "And you what are you? You stay away from my daughter do you hear me. Stay away."

Karen gripped the sides of Angie's face.

"Did he hurt you baby?" Karen said. "Did he touch you?"

"No mommy," Angie said. "He's my friend. He doesn't have a family. We can be his family now."

"No baby listen to me carefully," Karen said. "Did he hurt you at all? You can tell me anything you know that."

Jeffrey sat at the table, he hadn't moved at all during Karen's outburst.

"It's ok Angie," he said. "I'm going to go now. I'm sorry."

Jeffrey got up to leave.

Karen pushed Angie behind her.

“That’s right get out of here,” Karen said. “I don’t want to see you around here or near our house or under our house or wherever the hell you’ve been.”

“But mommy--” Angie said.

Jeffrey opened the door and walked out into the night.

“Go to your room,” Karen said.

“But mommy--”

“Now.”

“He’s my friend and you were mean to him,” Angie said. “You promised you’d be nice to him. If you were nicer daddy would still be here.”

Angie marched to her room.

Karen sat down in the floor, exhausted and looked at the mix of sloppy joes, glass and fries.

Karen secured the crawlspace under the house the next day. She didn’t say anything to Angie about it but watched her more closely each time they went outside. She thought that Angie snuck down once to see if Jeffrey was under the front porch.

The divorce was finalized. Life was starting over again. Karen kept a watchful eye out for Angie and a fearful eye out for Jeffrey. Angie enjoyed playing outside and was even making friends--real friends and normal ones too. She even befriended Steven, the kid down the street. He really does smell

like sausage, Karen thought.

The children were playing tag, running back and forth across the lawn. Karen went back inside to fold some laundry. She sat the Epi-pen on the edge of the deck, just in case. Through the back window she could catch glimpses of the children, running back and forth. Their soft yells floated through on the wind.

Karen folded one washcloth, then a towel. Then she noticed silence. No shouts, no voices. Then one high pitched scream.

“Come here come here,” Steven screamed. “It’s was a bee. It was a bee.”

Karen rushed through the door. She could see Angie lying in the backyard, gasping for air. She reached for the Epi-pen at the deck’s edge. It wasn’t there. Karen searched the ground but there was no sign of it. She started down the steps.

She saw Jeffrey kneeling next to Angie. He was already plunging the Epi-pen into her leg with his claw-like hands. Karen reached Angie and grabbed her as she regained consciousness. Jeffrey backed away from her, sitting flat on the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I wasn’t supposed to be under the deck. The pen rolled off the edge of the deck and under it. I found it and I didn’t think you’d be able to. I’m sorry.”

Angie opened her eyes and looked at Karen and then at Jeffrey. She

reached out her hand to hold Jeffrey's hand. Tears formed at the edges of Jeffrey's eyes.

"She's my friend," he said. "I would do anything for her."

Karen reached out her hand and took Jeffrey's. She could feel his warmth as his hand squeezed hers.

Chelsea

Chelsea, the night waitress, looked up as the doorbell clanged.

A burly trucker shook rain from his jacket as behind him lightning sparked.

“Looks like we’re in for some storm,” he said.

The droplets of water dotted the linoleum.

He made his way to the long, empty row of bar stools and motioned for coffee.

Chelsea glanced past him. He was right. In the blackness she could barely make out the silhouette of the town’s gray water tower. It was the town’s only feature, except for the diner, and had stood sentinel for more than three decades

Now the gray looked black. The clouds had begun to gather; the darkness of another mid-west storm was spreading.

She filled his cup. Not a bad crowd for a Wednesday night, she thought. She glanced down the bar at her few customers, the trucker and the group of teens in the big corner booth.

“Best ya’ll get away from that window kids,” she said.

The teens giggled at her strong country drawl. In response, a bolt of lightning scratched through the black. The teens opted for another table—this one closer to the glow of fluorescent bulbs.

“Never seen the sky turn that color and I been here goin’ on three years,” she remarked, putting out the cream and the sugar. In this town she was the queen of small talk.

“Another day, another dollar huh gorgeous?” the trucker winked at her.

“Gorgeous?” Chelsea chuckled and wiped her hands on her gingham apron. “Ya’ must’ve been on the road too long.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” he sighed. “Name’s Hal.”

“Chelsea.”

“Well Chelsea, what’s a good lookin’ southern girl like you doing in a po’ dunk town like this?”

Chelsea shrugged a response.

Hal began nursing his coffee.

Outside the rain continued.

Inside Chelsea knew she was safe. She’d seen a hundred storms like this one blow through town. Here one day, gone the next.

The 19-inch black and white television in the corner flickered and snowed, offering brief flashes of a weatherman in a black suit talking as if there was something to be excited about.

Chelsea wiped the counters, polishing and pushing around crumbs with a rag as old as the diner itself. She washed her own reflection in the diner’s windows.

Chelsea was pretty, in a down-home way that all women are pretty. She used to be beautiful. At 40, time had already taken its toll with more frown lines than laugh lines and less-than-perky breasts. She could see a transformation had begun. She was morphing into her mother—an aging-went-nowhere-did-nothing-ex-prom queen.

Outside the rain pounded on the roof and shook the parking lot's straggly saplings. The water tower groaned under the burden of the howling winds.

The storm's intensity seemed to bother her almost as much as Hal's question.

Who was he to bring all of her failings to light? After all he was just a trucker. He probably never accomplished anything in his entire life either.

"More coffee doll?"

Hal's voice snapped her back to reality. The teens made a mad dash to their cars, braving the rain and darkness—back to a life of suburban sprawl and endless opportunity. Only a 25-cent tip.

She topped off Hal's cup.

Hal swiveled on the school like a child. He was no spring chicken but he was handsome. He sported the one-red-arm-suntan of a veteran trucker. His brown eyes were etched with age and his once trim physique had given way to a beer gut and double chin. Still—he had large hands and the stellar smile of a high school quarterback.

He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

“What do you say about getting out of here?” Hal said.

“Excuse me,” she said. “You’re crazy. I don’t even know you.”

“What’s there to know,” he said. “I’m Hal. You’re Chelsea. What else can you really know about a person?”

Chelsea shook her head.

“Sure you know me,” he continued. “I’m every guy you never dated. Every adventure you never took.”

He stopped swiveling, intently staring at her.

“What’s keeping you here?” he said. “There’s a world out there and I’m going to find it. Every inch of it, roll it right up and put it right here—” he patted his shirt pocket. “—keep it right here like a cigarette.”

She stared at his hopeful expression. And she could feel the hope growing inside her as well.

“If I left with every guy that fed me a line of —”

“Of what? The truth?”

Chelsea looked past Hal at the storm outside. She turned away knocking over Hal’s coffee. Chelsea looked at the hot brown liquid coating the countertop. She picked up an old rag and reached for the mess.

Hal grabbed her hand at the wrist. His warmth spread through her whole body.

“Come with me.”

He eased off the stool. Hal walked towards the door. Chelsea followed. She hesitated, looked back at the diner, the rows of booths and bar stools, the coffee pot, still warming.

But she stepped through. The water tower leaned in time with the wind. It was searching for its own escape.

Chelsea was cocooned by the wind. She could still see Hal’s figure ahead of her and she pushed forward through the rain, letting it soak her shirt.

She had never felt rain so exquisite. Each droplet sizzled on her skin. Electrified with excitement, the rain raced down her hair, into her eyes.

She stepped up to the truck cab door; Hal opened it and lifted her in as carefully as a prince lifts his beloved.

She could see the diner—a warm, dry interior. The diner was a prison, one where she would’ve scrubbed the counters each day, talk to a million Hal’s and never see anything but the confines of this town. From here she was no longer safe.

She slammed the door of the cab. Hal climbed in next to her.

“Drive,” she said. “Just drive.”

The next day, a full 1000 miles outside of town Chelsea saw a newspaper. A gust of wind had snapped the small town’s water tower like a twig.

Christine

The box made a crashing sound as it hit the ground. Christine knew in an instant it was grandmother's rose patterned tea pot.

A loud clap of thunder boomed in response.

"Great, now what did you do?" Ron said.

Christine looked down from the moving van.

"Sorry, the box was marked bed sheets," Christine said.

"Well be more careful will you," Ron said.

"Ok. Ok," she said. "It was your idea to move in the middle of a rain storm anyway."

"Yeah right Christine, like I can predict the rain."

"Let's not fight, let's just get this done before we catch pneumonia," she said. "The truck's due back at four."

Christine watched as Ron carried another box towards their house.

"Their house," that phrase was music to her ears. It seemed as though they would never take the next step but now they have and everything would be fine—just as soon as they finished unpacking this damn truck, she thought.

"Hi, how are you?"

Christine turned as a perky blonde poked her head into the truck. A large pink umbrella hovered over her head like a halo.

"I'm Cecilia. I live across the street. I brought over some towels. I thought you might need some out here in the rain. It's one helluva day to move huh."

Christine took a bright yellow towel from the top. It smelled of lilacs.

"Thanks, I'm Christine."

"We were really glad to see a couple move in," Cecilia said. "Ms. Henderson lived there for years. It's nice to have some young people back in that old house. I do believe you two are the youngest we've had around here in a long time."

Christine looked back at the old Tudor style house.

"Thanks for the towels," Christine said. "My husband Ron should be coming out here soon. We hope to have everyone from the neighborhood over after we get settled in."

Cecilia winked slyly.

"Oh of course, a young couple like you should get settled," she said. "One of the perks of being newlyweds. I'll leave you two to it. If you need anything let me know."

Ron came from the house.

"Cecilia, this is my husband Ron," Christine said.

"Hi."

"Cecilia was just telling me we're about the youngest couple on the block," Christine said.

Cecilia handed a towel to Ron.

“That’s right,” Cecilia said. “We thought the old woman would never die. People don’t sell their houses in this neighborhood. Once you’re a Pike Street-er, you’re always a Pike Street-er.”

“How long did Mrs. Henderson live here?” Ron said.

“I don’t know, she was here before my husband and I moved in, and that was about 15 years ago,” Cecilia said. “She had trained a husband in that house, gave birth to two children in that house and watched them as they all left her. Kinda sad really. She lived the last four years by herself after her husband died. Just her and that damned cat. I hope that family put it out of its misery. That damned thing would sit around all day and just stare at you.”

“What happened to the cat?” Christine said.

“Who knows?” Cecilia said. “Damned thing would get in our garage, and then in our trash. I think some relative probably got it, or took it to the pound or had it put down. Good riddance. Damned demon cat.”

Cecilia looked off into the distance.

“Well I’ve taken up enough of your time,” she said. “I’ll get the towels back from you later.”

Ron and Christine watched as Cecilia crossed the street.

“That woman was nice,” Ron said.

“Are you kidding, that’s the oldest trick in the book—coming over to check out the new neighbors,” she said.

"Come on Christine," Ron said. "Maybe she's just nice. Don't be so cynical."

"How long did she say that old woman lived here?" Christine said.

"Cecilia said at least 15 years," Ron said. "The realtor said she was the original owner of the house. That puts it at about 45 years."

Christine climbed down from the back of the truck and grabbed Ron around the waist, squeezing him and pressing her cheek into his chest.

"Do you think we'll be here that long?" she said.

"Of course," Ron said, kissing her. "Of course."

"Christine you better come down here," Ron called from the basement.

"I'm busy," Christine said. "You need to come back here and take some of these boxes down to the basement," Ron said.

Christine began unpacking boxes into the cabinets.

"Now Christine you've got to see this," Ron poked his head from the basement step. "There's cat poop everywhere down here."

"Why would I want to see that?"

"Well it wasn't here when we walked through with the realtor," Ron said. "The cat must've gotten in here somehow. I wonder if it's that old lady's cat. I bet it's still roaming around the neighborhood."

"But Cecilia said she hadn't seen the cat for a while," Christine said.

“You know how cats are. They’re only seen when they want to be. Probably been getting in through a crawl space or crack in the foundation somewhere.”

“That’s all we need, a crack in the foundation.”

“You have to get it,” he said. “Go get a bag and a mop.”

Christine looked at Ron, then at the poop.

“You’re the man of the house,” she said. “You get it.”

“No, you get it,” Ron said.

Ron smiled mischievously.

“You get it or I’ll make you touch it,” Ron said.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Ron grabbed Christine around the waist and she let out a high pitched squeal and started laughing. Ron put her down, laughing at her hysterics.

“Fine,” he said. “But if we find any more it’s yours.”

Christine grabbed a roll of paper towels and slapped it playfully into his chest.

“Have fun,” she said. “I’m going to finish unpacking the boxes in the study.”

Christine began organizing the study, gently unpacking the big globe and the stacks of papers in boxes. She took a cloth and wiped it over the surface of the big mahogany desk. The light was shining from outside, it was

already a full moon. It seemed that it had gotten dark rather quickly, Christine thought.

She looked out at the backyard, lit completely in moonlight. The shed behind the house reflected the moon, the big bright disk and she tried to look for the "Man in the Moon" face that she so loved as a child. She thought maybe one day, her own children would do the same.

Christine saw a shape dart across the yard.

"Ron," Christine said. "There's something out in the yard."

Ron flipped on the porch light, moths immediately batted around the naked light bulb on the back porch.

"Where was it?" Ron said.

"Over there, by the shed," she said.

The couple inched closer toward the shed.

"It's probably that cat. But you know it could be anything, a rat, a raccoon," Ron said. "I really don't feel like getting rabies shots tonight."

Ron kicked over some cans leaning against the shed. Then he swung the door to the shed open. There was nothing but rusty garden tools and boxes.

"Nothing," he said. "It was nothing, let's go back in. I need to get ready for work tomorrow."

Christine looked over the backyard. I must be imagining things, she thought as she went back up the porch step. She took one last look and switched off the porch light.

When Ron stepped outside onto the first step of the porch he was surprised by a crunch under his feet. He stepped in a huge pile of cat food, stacked neatly on the bare concrete step.

“Christine,” he said. “Did you put food out here for the cat? You should know better, any kind of animal would be attracted to this. Raccoons especially.”

Christine came outside to look.

“Did you put the food out there for the cat?” he said.

“No, of course not. I’ve barely had time to unpack the boxes, let alone do anything else.” she said.

“Well there’s food out there.”

“Well I didn’t do it,” he said.

“Maybe it’s some of the neighbor kids,” Christine said.

“That’s all we need is some stray nosing around out there, screeching under our windows at night,” Ron said.

“I didn’t do it,” Christine said. “Just go to work. I’ll clean up the cat food.”

Ron opened the garage door. A big black cat leapt out from under the car and across the street to Cecilia's house. The cat skulked in the shadows of the Cecilia's garage.

Christine carefully scooped out the remains of grandmother's teapot from the bottom of the crushed box. Each shard seemed sharper than the next.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of black leaping from the countertop behind her. As she turned, the sharp edge of porcelain caught her index finger.

"Damn it," she said.

She grabbed a towel as the blood began oozing from the wound. The big black shape was a cat. It hissed from its perch on top of the refrigerator.

"Shoo, Shoo," Christine said. "Get out of here."

She struggled to hold the towel over her finger and open the back door at the same time. She waved the end of the towel at the cat. It jumped from the fridge and ran out the door.

Across the street she saw Cecilia drop the hose she was using to water her flowers and run inside. Even at a distance she could hear Celia's deadbolt click.

“How many stitches?” Ron said.

“Five.”

Ron looked at the bandaged finger.

“It must be getting in here somehow,” he said. “We have to look for holes, places where a cat can get through. I bet it’s that old woman’s cat. I’ll call the humane society to see if they can’t come out and look for it too.”

Christine shrugged.

“What’s that shrug for?” Ron said.

“Well,” she said. “You weren’t here to deal with it now were you? This didn’t happen to you--now did it?”

“Hey look, I have to work,” he said. “Someone has to pay the bills around here.”

Ron put up his hand.

“Honey, look, I don’t want to fight,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Christine rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Ron said. “I’ll go outside with the flashlight and shine it at the foundation. You go into the basement and look for holes, places where the light is shining through and just mark it with an X. We’ll stop the guy before he gets in here again. In the meantime, keep the basement door closed.”

Ron began rubbing Christine’s shoulders.

“Don’t worry; everything will turn out just as we imagined it and we’ll live happily ever after.”

Christine looked up at him.

“Do you promise?” she said.

“Of course,” he said, kissing her softly on the forehead. “Of course.”

Christine cringed as she struggle to put up plywood outside the house with her one good hand. The bandage slipped chaffing the stitches.

Christine brushed the sweat and hair from her eyes and looked around. Cecilia was in her garage pushing things around.

Christine went to the front of the garage.

“Hi Cecilia,” she said.

Cecilia jumped and turned.

“Oh, it’s just you,” she said. “You scared me.”

Cecilia’s gaze shifted to Christine’s hand.

“What happened?”

“Oh,” Christine said. “I thought you saw the other day. There was this huge cat in the house. I’m trying to fix it so it can’t get in again.”

Cecilia glanced past Christine, she scanned the yard.

“Do you think that’s old Mrs. Henderson’s cat?”

Cecilia looked out over the yard again.

"Come in," she said. "I've got something to show you."

Cecilia's house looked like most on the block. It was old, subject to peeling wallpaper and creaky stairs but she had made the most of it. The old wood floors looked nice next to her floral print sofa and knik knacs.

"Sit down," she said.

"Cecilia, what is it, you're scaring me?"

"Scared?" she said. "I don't think you're scared enough."

Cecilia's hands were shaking.

"That cat," she said. "That cat and Mrs. Henderson were inseparable."

"So," Christine said. "Most people that age love cats. What's the big deal?"

"I'll show you," Cecilia said.

She reached under the sofa and pulled out a large book. The spine showed "reference use only."

She flipped it open to a page with a black cat.

"It's a familiar," Cecilia said. "That old lady and the cat are one in the same. She was a witch."

Christine put the book on the table and laughed.

"That's nice," she said. "Who put you up to this? Is this some joke you play on all the new neighbors?"

Christine looked at Cecilia again. Christine felt her face flush.

“Or what?” Christine said. “You didn’t want us to move in to that house? It is the biggest house on the block. Did you have another family picked out? Is that it?”

Christine got up to leave. In the corner of the kitchen a bag caught her eye.

“What’s that?” Christine said.

She rushed into the kitchen as Cecilia tried to stop her. She pulled on the bag, and cat food spilled onto the floor.

“Explain that,” Christine said. “You don’t even have a cat.”

Cecilia looked at her open mouthed.

“That’s what I thought,” Christine said. “I don’t want to see you leaving cat food on our porch, or you will be sorry.”

Ron saw the cat in the morning. It brushed up against his legs and he kicked it away.

“Damned thing won’t get out of here,” he said.

He yelled for Christine.

“Did you call the humane society?”

Christine came out still brushing her teeth. The cat ran towards their shed.

"I'm doing the best that I can," she said. "It's already been done. You need to get a grip on yourself. I've already talked to Cecilia about it. All we need to do is wait until it leaves."

Ron skulked towards his car.

"Damned cat or woman or whatever the hell it is," he said.

He waved his briefcase around.

"Do you hear that cat? Mrs. Henderson? Get lost. This isn't your house anymore. Can't you take a hint?"

Ron got into the car and turned onto Pike Street.

"Stupid cat," Ron said.

The cat jumped across the street in front of the car. Ron swerved to the left, narrowly missing a tuft of black fur and plowed into a utility pole. Silver smoke hissed from the front of the car.

Ron reached his hand up to his forehead. Blood oozed from a gash above his left eye.

"Damn cat," he said, and passed out.

When Christine returned from the hospital the cat was sitting on the front porch.

"Why did you do that?" she asked it.

The cat blinked a response.

Christine sat on the stoop next to the cat. It purred and rubbed against her shoulder.

“You know he’s going to be fine,” she said. “It was just a couple of broken ribs and a broken nose.”

Christine picked the cat up and put it on her lap. The cat looked up at her. She looked at the cat’s eyes, green with a dark slit. As she looked the cat’s eyes changed and the pupil became rounded.

Christine jumped up and the cat sat on the porch and looked at her.

“So what is it?” she asked it. “What is it that you want?”

The cat went towards the front door and scraped its paw on the screen door. It looked at Christine again.

“Oh,” she said. “Is that all?”

Across the street, Cecilia was watering the lawn. As Christine opened the door she could just make out Cecilia making the sign of the cross.

Christine opened the door and let Mrs. Henderson in.

Laura

Laura gripped the sides of the airline seat.

“First time flying?”

She glanced up at the wrinkled face next to her.

“Uh, huh” she managed.

The old woman smiled.

“You know they say that flying is the safest way to travel,” she said.

“Even more so than driving on the highway. People drive like maniacs nowadays.”

Laura looked at the tarmac slowly leaving them, the plane lurched upward.

I bet someone has said that on every flight, including the ones that crash, she thought.

The plane was in the cloud layer now. A light beep over the intercom reminded passengers to keep their seat belts securely fastened. Laura checked hers, and inched the buckle tighter around her waist.

The old woman next to her leaned towards her peering past her out the window.

“My, my, my,” she said. “Just look at all those houses down there; they’re little more than a blip now.”

Laura tilted her head slightly. Peering outward with her eyes half shut toward the open window.

It was true, even the land seemed so far away, she couldn't make out houses any more, just the greens and browns of the landscape.

"Well honey, that wasn't so bad was it," said the old woman. "Where you headed?"

"Home," Laura said.

"Me too. By the way, my name's Maggie," she said.

The old woman looked like a "Maggie." She had more laugh lines than wrinkles around her eyes.

"Business or pleasure?" Maggie said.

"Neither," Laura said. "My grandmother died."

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry," she said. "Was she very old?"

"About your age," Laura said.

Instantly realizing her mistake, she continued.

"Look I'm sorry I didn't mean..."

"Oh, don't worry about it honey, I'm not as young as I used to be," she said. "Don't think another word about it. Most of my friends have already passed on. I've already buried two husbands."

Laura glanced at the woman's hands. She wore no wedding ring.

"Lookin' for husband number three," she said.

Laura smiled. It was the first time she had smiled all week.

“What about you?” Laura said. “Where are you headed?”

“Homebound too, honey,” Maggie said. “I was visitin’ the grandkids in Oklahoma. Heading back home.”

Laura looked out the window. The ground wasn’t even visible. Laura’s eyes began to water.

“Whatcha’ thinkin’ dear,” Maggie said.

“Just thinkin of what waits for me at home,” she said.

Laura looked out the window again, her fear of flying overcome by her grief.

“It’ll be terrible,” Maggie said.

Laura looked at her sharply.

“What honey, I’m not going to sugar coat it,” she said. “Those things always are—funerals and families and everyone thinking they know what’s best for everyone else. It’s always that way. But then things gradually get better, you forget about the hard parts and can focus on the easy times.”

Laura softened her gaze.

“You know you look just like my own granddaughter,” Maggie said. “She’s been away at college for the past few years. Should be done by now if there was ever a time to graduate. She does look a lot like you. I bet you two have a lot in common.”

Maggie took out a handkerchief and handed it to Laura.

“Go on, take it,” Maggie said.

Laura hesitated when she saw the lightly embroidered cloth.

"I insist," Maggie said. "What was your grandmother's name?"

"Molly," Laura said, taking the tissue and dotting her eyes. "Her name was Molly Anderson. Everyone always called her by her initials M.A.—Ma for short.

"My, my, my, that's a good old-fashioned name, she said. "That makes for a strong woman."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what honey," Maggie said.

"Deal with it all," Laura said. "With death I mean. Two husbands?"

"Well honey," she said. "It doesn't get any easier, but you just have to remember that there are always angels watching over you."

"Angels, huh," she said. "Everywhere?"

Laura motioned to the guy across the aisle. He was snoring loudly, his head thrown back and his mouth open.

"How about that guy?"

"Now don't you get sassy with me, honey," Maggie said. "It's true. No matter what you think. It's something I was always taught. They pop up when you least expect it and when you need them most. They're always there in your time of need."

Laura raised her eyebrows, and then shrugged.

"Maybe," she said. "Sometimes I wonder where mine is."

Maggie giggled, and then leaned forward to look out at the darkened sky. The sun had set, casting twilight on the clouds below.

“Don’t you worry dear,” Maggie said. “Tomorrow is another day. Things always turn out alright, you’ll see.”

Laura dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief. She leaned her head towards the twilight, resting it on the plane’s shell and listened to it rumble softly against her brain.

Laura woke to the bright light of sunrise. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. The fasten seatbelt sign came back on. The captain made the announcement for the final descent.

Laura looked next to her. Maggie was gone. She rang the stewardess button.

“Miss,” Laura told her. “The woman who was here, she might be in the bathroom. I was worried about her. We’re about to land.”

“I’ll check,” she said.

The stewardess went towards the back and returned just a moment later.

“There’s no one back there,” she said. “What woman were you talking about?”

“The old woman, the one who was here just a moment ago,” she said. “The one I was talking to last night.”

“I’m sorry, maybe she just took another seat,” the stewardess said. “I have to go get ready for landing.”

Laura watched the stewardess move toward the front and strap herself in for the landing. She glanced around the plane. She didn’t see any sign of Maggie. She barely gripped the seats as the plane slid down onto the landing strip and pulled towards the gate. Laura grabbed her things and slipped towards the front to be the first to get off.

Laura got off the plane, turned and waited. Maggie never got off; the stewardess slipped through the door and began closing it.

“Wait,” Laura said. “The old woman, she didn’t get off the plane.”

“I’m sorry Miss everyone’s off, I checked myself.

Laura moved backward, sticking a hand in her pocket. She fumbled and pulled out a small embroidered handkerchief. She glanced at it and the initials in its corner—M.A.

Monica

Monica loved the thick tangle of the tangerine trees. David quickly plucked a tangerine off and handed it to her. She could smell the sweetness beneath the bitter pith and it reminded her of grandpa.

Grandpa had planted most of these trees by hand, before tractors had made the task more about technology than brute force. It was the brute strength that allowed him to scoop Monica up as if she were no bigger than a barn cat and place her in the branches of the trees.

He'd act like he was going to leave her there, to live among the branches-- a wild child among green and orange. Then just when it seemed she would lose her balance, he would lift high and she would fly among the rows of the orchard like a bee in his arms.

David was nothing like grandpa.

David had the physique of a pencil pusher, gaunt and lanky. An accountant, he preferred the hot sweetness of a latte to the cool rush of water from a hose. He swatted at bees and fumbled with the tangerine peels around his thin fingers. Frustrated, he ripped the tangerine in half.

Grandpa would've hated David.

"Can we get out of this place now?" David said. "I need to go to the bathroom."

Monica glanced up from the tangerine.

“We are outside you know,” she said. “Go behind a tree.”

David turned pale.

Monica delicately removed the colored skin, allowing the zest to creep into the corners of her nails. She admired the fragrance and began separating the sections.

“Hurry up already,” David said. “I’m not kidding. I have to go now.”

David began walking quickly back to the main house. Monica caught up to him, and then stopped.

“I don’t want to go back to the main house yet,” she said. “It’s too sad in there.”

David turned and rushed back to her side.

“Look, this is going to be hard on everyone,” he said. “We just have to stay for the reading of the will and then we’ll get out of here. There are too many bugs here anyway.”

David hugged Monica.

“Once we’re back in the city things will be normal again,” he said. “We’ll start fixing up the apartment and we’ll get back to work. You know that I love you, right?”

Monica looked up at him and nodded. David pushed her back and began swatting at a gang of mosquitoes.

In the city things seemed easier. Monica used to think country life was simpler, but now she realized she was wrong. In the city the daily routine

prevented people from thinking, from realizing their own faults and looking at their life. For Monica the daily grind was simple: wake up with David in their loft, go to work, come home to David, go to sleep. The routine was simple with sex and dinner out sometimes creeping into the mix.

The country allowed too much time to think. Maybe that's why she left in the first place.

David and Monica approached the main house; the brick facade loomed in front of them.

"Amazing that all this came from oranges," David said.

"Tangerines," Monica said. "There is a difference."

"Whatever."

"By the way, you need to be nicer to my brother," she said. "Corey's had a hard year too you know."

"But you know I can't stand the guy," David said. "He acts like he's making a joke but a lot of times I think he's making fun of me."

"Stop being sensitive."

Corey boomed out of the front door.

"Hey strangers," he said. "You two been gallivanting through the orchid without me."

He winked at David.

"Or you two been doing something else—" Corey said.

David rolled his eyes.

“Let’s just get this over with,” David said.

Corey grabbed David around the shoulders and led him towards the den.

“Sure thing buddy,” Corey said. “The lawyer’s just in here.”

David blushed and rushed towards the bathroom.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Corey looked over his shoulder at Monica.

The room had always been grandpa’s favorite, full of family photos and travel mementos.

“Hey sis, do you remember this?” Corey said.

The photo was of Corey and Monica in elementary school in an old sled. Both dressed in winter garb, tongues outstretched trying to catch snowflakes.

Monica remembered how she would tilt her head towards the sky, reaching out her tongue for that snowflake. Back then, snowflakes always landed delicately, and then melted, a unique blend of cold and imagined vanilla.

“Remember when grandpa used to tell you that when you ate a snowflake you were really eating an angel,” Corey said.

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” David said, emerging from the bath room.

“No, no with each angel you ate, you were capturing a little bit of heaven, right there in your tummy,” Corey said.

Corey pushed a finger into David’s gut.

“You could stand eating something a little lighter yourself,” Corey said.

“Easy boys,” Monica said. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Tomlinson, grandpa’s attorney, motioned to them from further in Grandpa’s study. Monica and Corey had grown used to Tomlinson’s gruff ways. He reminded Monica of the worms that sometimes poked through a tangerine, then wiggled around only to turn and disappear back into the tangerine.

“Yes, let us get this over with,” Tomlinson said. “It was the last wish of your grandfather, Monica, that you receive the house and orchid. As for his cash holdings and stocks, Corey is to receive those.”

It didn’t seem real, Monica thought, until that moment that Grandpa was really gone. She knew his one real love had been the orchard. She knew she loved it just as much.

“What are we going to do with a stupid orchard,” David said.

“Excuse me?”

It was Corey’s voice that interrupted. Monica could only look on with mouth open.

"This orchard was the only thing worth keeping," he said. "Money, well, money can be spent and then it's gone. My grandfather worked hard to build this orchard, but I wouldn't expect some yuppie punk like you to see that."

Corey pushed David down with one swift movement and then looked at Monica.

"You're too good for him. I'm going outside to get some air," Corey said.

Monica reached grasped his shoulder but he shrugged it off and stormed out the door. She turned towards David.

"Why would you say something like that?" she said.

"Well what do you think we can do with this place? Move here?" David said.

Tomlinson gathered his briefcase, approached Monica and dropped a set of keys in her hand.

"Well that does it," Tomlinson said. "Your grandfather always insisted you have the orchard. He said you would know what to do with it."

As Tomlinson left the room, David sat on the edge of the desk.

"Really what are you going to do?" he said.

Monica looked out the window, at the rows and rows of trees.

"Come on it wouldn't be that bad, living out here," she said. "The

orchid was always a success. Sure there were some bad years, but he always made a profit. Anyway, it would be a great place to raise kids.”

“Kids?” David said. “What, and give up on the city and our life together? And you said profit? It’s nothing compared to what we can make living in the city. Besides, the city doesn’t have this many bugs.”

He grabbed and held Monica.

“It isn’t about just making a living,” she said. “I grew up here and it was like growing up in a fairy tale.”

He pushed away from her.

“I knew we shouldn’t have come here,” he said. “Just because you enjoy being here, doesn’t mean that I’ll enjoy it too.”

“What’s not to enjoy?” she said. “All the wide open spaces, the fresh air. Where else can you just think for yourself without others thinking for you?”

Monica picked up one of the photos from Grandpa’s desk. It was a picnic, one of many he had at the orchid. She had a yellow sun dress on and was standing on the front steps of the main house. Grandpa was sitting on the steps next to her.

She looked up at David and then back at the photo.

She always wanted to be just like grandpa, strong and uncompromising.

“I think you should go,” she said. “I think we’re over.”

David turned and stormed from the room without a word. He brushed by Corey who was seated on the steps of the main house.

“Hey man, watch what you’re doing,” Corey said.

David turned and jumped into his car and began the trek back to the city.

Monica emerged from the house and sat by Corey on the big steps. The concrete felt warm against her legs.

“We just didn’t want the same things,” she said.

Corey put his arm around her.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” he said.

They watched David’s car continue along the highway, silent, until it was out of sight.

“If there’s one thing about this place, it’s that you can see clearer here, more than any other place in the world,” he said.

Corey looked out at the sunset.

“You just know that Grandpa’s still here,” he said.

Monica put her head on Corey’s shoulder.

“I know.”

They looked out over the trees—emerald and orange in the afternoon sun.

Sheri

Sheri could see the tire spinning.

That's odd, she thought. How can I see the tire when I'm in the car?

It came back in a rush.

*I was listening to the radio, reached for a CD, dropped it on the floor,
and then?*

The rushed sounds of metal on metal. The grinding crunch
of the car on bone.

Whose bone? Mine? David's?

A bad Celine Dion was belting out a song somewhere in the distance.

*Where was it coming from? Is the radio still intact? Is my CD
collection? Is David o.k.?*

Sheri could see a tire. It was spinning. She imagined it was a ceiling
fan, giving cool air to her hot, tired face.

*I can see something, at least that's a good thing. I should sleep,
ambulance should be here any moment...*

.....

Sheri woke to a bright light.

I must be in the hospital. I must be o.k.

Sheri opened her eyes, blinding light. She put up her hand. She let her eyes adjust. To her right she saw the tire, it was still, no longer spinning, only staring. The bright light was a streetlight blinking at her from above.

I'm still here. Where am I?

Sheri struggled but felt metal on bone, her bones. Her legs were pinned under something, though she couldn't see what.

Blurrily, the car gradually came into focus.

"Hello?" she said.

Sheri was startled by her own voice. It was raspy and quiet.

How long have I been here?

"Hello?" she said. "Anybody out there? Help!"

Crickets answered her.

Sheri remembered David. He had been riding next to her. They had just gone to the movies, *Spiderman*. He was the only boy she'd ever liked. It was their first date. At sixteen it was her first date with anyone. She glanced around but didn't see him.

"David, are you there?"

Sheri grew more frantic. She struggled a little more but stopped as the needle intensity grew.

I have to get out of here. I have to find David.

Sheri looked up. The streetlight seemed to glow neon, the brightest thing in the entire area. She was in the underbrush, trees and fields and crickets.

She was in a ravine.

Surely they must be looking for her. Someone will see the skid marks on the road. Maybe David went for help already. Any moment they would be there, paramedics, an ambulance, police, firefighters, all crushing the car away from her body. Everything would be fine.

I should sleep, ambulance should be here any moment...

Sheri woke to a bright light.

At last, a flashlight.

"Miss, miss," a man's voice said. "Are you o.k.?"

Sheri blinked at the man. He had strange clothes on. A jumpsuit, not the typical paramedic blues.

"I'm Josh," he said. "We're going to get you out of here"

Sheri stared at Josh. There was something odd about the boy, his features were flawless. His nose, his eyes, even his hair looked perfect.

"Must have been down here for quite a while," he called to someone on the road above the ravine. "Hold still miss, this should only hurt for a moment."

Josh reached down and tore away the metal from her legs, and sprayed something goopy on the gashes that opened up.

Josh lifted her, as lightly as when someone lifts a feather, almost more than human.

Well maybe I lost some weight from being down here. How long have I been down here?

“Where’s David,” she said. “I have to find David?”

Josh looked puzzled.

“David who?” he said. “You’re the only one here.”

“David, David Anderson, we were on a date, I wrecked the car,” she said.

Josh ignored her request for an answer and began loading her onto some kind of gurney. It seemed to hover in front of her. *Wow, I must've really hit my head. I should sleep, the ambulance is here...*

Sheri woke to a bright light.

She let her eyes adjust.

A hospital at last. She could hear the constant beeps, the whirr of some other machine by her head. Otherwise she felt great.

She could see Josh moving around. He was checking her vital signs.

Another Josh was in the hallway...

Wait, another Josh? How can that be? I must have brain damage.

How is that possible? I feel fine.

Sheri wiggled her toes.

I can wiggle my toes! I'm going to be fine, going to be fine, going to be fine.

"Well there you are," a voice said from ahead. A doctor, who looked a lot like Josh, came quickly and flashed a penlight in her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel great," she said. "Josh, do you have a lot of brothers here in the hospital?"

"Brothers?" he said. "What do you mean?"

Another Josh look-alike walked by.

Josh picked up her chart, stared at it, and put it back down.

"It looks like you've been in a coma for quite some time," he said. "A lot has changed."

"How long have I been out?" Sheri said. "I feel like I can get up out of the bed right now."

Sheri made a move to get up.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Josh said. "Wait right there. We don't want to get you all excited. You still need some rest."

“How can that be?” Sheri said. “That I feel fine. Can I see a mirror?”

Josh frowned.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

Sheri was alarmed.

“A mirror,” she demanded. “Now.”

Josh handed her a looking glass from the nightstand. She hesitated before looking into the glass. The face of an old woman looked back at her.

“How long was I down there?” she said. “How is it possible that I stayed in the ravine this long?”

“Well there have been a lot of medical advances since you’ve been in a hospital,” he said. “My brothers? If that’s what you call them—they are my clones.”

Sheri stared at her reflection in disbelief.

“When I wrecked the car I was with someone,” Sheri said. “David, David Anderson.”

“David Anderson?” the doctor said. “Well he’s here. Right here in the hospital. He was tossed out on the road the night of the accident. He said he couldn’t find you or the car. Do you remember anything else about that night? Anything weird or alarming?”

“What do you mean?” Sheri said. “Can I see David? Is he out there? David? David!”

Sheri heard a commotion out in the lobby.

"Let me see her damnit," said a voice she recognized as David.

"She's not ready!" Josh said. "Keep him out of here. She's not ready for the shock of it!"

"Not ready for what?" Sheri said. "Let me see him, let me see him now!"

Sheri sprang from the bed, ripping out the tubes and wires from her arms, reached the door and flung it open.

David was on the other side. The same blue eyes, the same tussled wind-swept hair she had fallen in love with the summer of their junior year.

It took her a moment to look at his wrinkles, the wheelchair he sat in and that his once brown hair had turned silver. David was old.

I feel like passing out. I should sleep, than maybe everything will be back to normal...

Works Cited

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