

ABSTRACT

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This collection of short stories is a study in varying degrees of isolation. I've drawn characters into moments of significant dynamism, when their relationships with the world around them are changing. These changes are often catalyzed by some external event, or chain of events, and my characters respond to these changes by constructing solitary hiding places enabling them to buffer themselves from the world. Bertha, of "Food and Shelter," hides beneath her dining room table. Gloria, of "Collections," hides inside too-tight suits. James, of "Climbing to the Roof," hides at a buffet, cultivating a relationship with food. I've attempted to unravel the particular sets of logic that drive my characters, and travel with them as they vacillate, attempting to weave their interior lives into relationships with other people.

TIME ALONE

By

Tamar Jacobs

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Sitting Still in the Thunderstorm

Every Sunday these days, Helen remembers the old Sundays, how they spent them. Mo always cooked, heaped the table in the breakfast nook with plates of bacon, blueberry pancakes, a bowl of peanut brittle. He brewed coffee for himself and put on a tea-kettle for Helen so she could steep herself a cup whenever she came down, not have to wait for the pot to come to a boil. When Donald was young he was part of the ritual too, woke up early to sit at the table and watch while Mo poured the batter in the shape of a big D for Donald. Helen loved walking in and seeing the two of them together, Donald elated to be with his dad at the beginning of the day when he was wide awake and in a good mood, not exhausted after long days of work that often ran long, bled into their evenings.

After Donald left home, he took to telephoning on Sunday mornings, because he knew they'd both be there, sitting in the nook, reading the paper for hours, nibbling bacon and peanut brittle, beginning to talk about what to make for dinner. It was a day to be together, sit without hustling anywhere, do nothing but eat and lie around relaxing before the week began. In springtime, Helen might spend an afternoon setting up her tomato and zucchini pots, Mo wandering out back now and then with a crossword puzzle in progress. In summer, when Donald was little, they'd take him to the pool at the Y. When it snowed, Mo shoveled the walk, sneaking cigars behind the garage.

But since Mo got sick, Sundays bring morose visits in the living room with Donald, his wife Kathleen, and their baby, Ava, everyone gathered in a stilted circle around Mo in the chair Helen settles him into in the morning, and lifts him from at night, rearranging him throughout the day so he won't sprout bed-sores.

Donald comes to visit by himself all the time, popping in at different hours, bringing candy for Helen and maybe an Osrowski's sausage for Mo, even though Mo's appetite has been drying up. This is the hardest part for Helen; this hammers home like nothing else the fact that something is wrong. Taking care of him, lifting him, this she can do, even the terrible work of changing his diapers and giving him shots, these too she can do, but watching him, her man who loves food, watching him try to eat, only to wince, tears seeping into the corners of his eyes, this is too much for Helen. Hearing him say, oh, Donald, you read my mind, when he sees the familiar yellow and green bag from Ostrowski's in Donald's hand as he comes through the door, this often forces Helen to turn and gather herself.

But nonetheless, the visits with Donald are wonderful. He always kisses Mo hello and goodbye, giving him a chuck on the shoulder afterwards, but without the velocity behind it, just a show to temper the tenderness of a kiss that would otherwise be embarrassing, Helen can see. He stays and makes Mo laugh, tells stories, sometimes brings the baby.

On Sundays, though, he brings Kathleen along. Kathleen is such a stiff bird; she can't bring herself to pretend like the rest of them do that Mo isn't sick. It's restorative for Helen and Mo to stick their heads in the sand once in a while, try to forget what's happening to them. Donald understands this. Kathleen's face, though,

even when she's just listening to something having nothing to do with cancer, looks mournful, terse, wide-eyed.

Helen would like sometimes to slap this look off of her face.

They come after church on Sundays. They used to stop home first, to change, but after they moved to the county last year this became more trouble than it was worth, so they come straight from services. They must be starving, Helen knows, but Kathleen always refuses food, says she's not hungry just yet, which is ludicrous! Helen thinks: you've been sitting in church all morning, haven't eaten a thing, now it's almost 1, and you aren't hungry yet? Donald follows Kathleen's lead, stares at the floor in front of him, busies himself playing with Ava.

After they leave, Mo always tells Helen to go easy, Kathleen's just trying not to impose, not to burden them with getting lunch together, and Helen says to him, yes, but if she were really paying attention, she'd know that we'd *love* to feed them. This isn't *church*, for crying out loud. And who'm I kidding, anyway, the woman needs a double shot of J&B, not food, loosen her up a little, that's what she needs.

Helen stops short of saying: just because someone here is sick, does not mean this has to feel like some kind of a sick-house. She does not say: I'm having such a hard time figuring out how to put one foot in front of the other here, pretend I'm not terrified, who does she think she is to come in here and not even bother putting on a good show?

For Helen, the things she stops short of saying are the loneliest part of Mo's illness. She's never watched a thing she's said to him, never had a lot of girlfriends,

just Mo. Now, she comes up on roadblocks, things she wants to protect him from, and in so doing, leaves herself out in the cold, no one to really let loose and bitch to about Kathleen, how afraid she is, or how tired. No one, she thinks grudgingly, to tell her she's being way too hard on Kathleen. But Helen can't help it. These days, it's a relief to have someone to blame for something.

She's come up with a compromise. Maybe Kathleen doesn't want lunch, but she can't refuse a plate of cookies, or the dumplings Helen can pop in the microwave from their freezer-bag and have on a plate steaming and smelling good in just a couple of minutes. These kinds of nibbly things, Helen has found, Kathleen will eat, just so long as it doesn't seem like a big deal, like a meal.

On this particular Sunday, it's been a rough week. All Helen can glean from the cabinets is a half-tube of stale Oreos and some (God only knows how long) frozen lemon bars. At the kitchen counter, Helen lays them carefully on two glass plates and carries them into the living room, leans over and slides them onto the coffee table. She lands a few kisses on Ava's sweet, fat cheeks on her way across the living room to adjust the back of Mo's Lazy Boy so he has a decent view of the room without straining his neck. Kathleen and Donald and the baby are always so stiff-looking straight from church like this: Kathleen in a pastel, flowery dress with dowdy lace at the collar, and Donald still in his jacket, blue checkered tie loosened, pulled away from his neck. Ava is a darling puffball in her little skirt and sweater.

Helen always feels ill at ease with Donald and Kathleen all dressed up in church clothes while she's in sweatpants, a housecoat, and slippers. It's not worth it

to her, though, to change clothes for the occasion, so she remains ill at ease. Helen and Mo were never churchy, never went on days besides Christmas and Easter, even when Donald was little. But Donald up and married Kathleen, who's quite the bible thumper.

Helen marvels at the way these things turn out, how children mutate from their parents. She's determined to keep a close eye on Ava, make sure she grows a healthy sense of humor, and fun, unlike her mother, who perpetually looks like she's being pinched all over with clothespins.

Mo looks like a pig-in-a-blanket once Helen's done setting him up, propped and tightly bundled, with his head poking from the top of the afghan she's tucked around him. Helen settles on the end of the couch, to Mo's right, slightly behind him. He doesn't need to have a clear view of her; he sees her every day. Donald, Kathleen, and Ava are the main event. Besides, Helen thinks, he knows she's back here, behind him.

“So how was church?” he asks conversationally.

Helen is continually astonished at the niceties Mo is able to perform these days.

“Oh, it was lovely, really lovely,” Kathleen answers, bouncing Ava on her knee like a Jack in the Box, even though Ava isn't even thinking of fussing, is in fact trying determinedly to get the Oreo she's clutching into her mouth, only to have it jolted sharply away every few seconds by her mother's antsy bouncing. Helen loves Ava so much, her only grandchild. Mo's face lights up when he sees her, and Helen is

grateful for this, as if Ava senses that pop pop needs cheering right now, and so is particularly charming during these visits with him.

“You know, we talked to our pastor about St. Vincent’s, and he’d love to come and visit if you wanted, just casual, you know, to get a handle on whether you might think about it. He says it’s a great place, and you guys are just the sort of people it’s designed for, really. No awful visiting hours, and wonderful people right there to help you around the clock...”

This is a statement, though maybe it was intended to be a question? Kathleen trails off, wiping some invisible crumb off of Ava’s cheek, so insistently that Ava (who never cries) begins to whimper, eyes widening, finally catching the drift that her mother’s lap is a troublesome place to be at the moment.

They all sit quietly and listen to Kathleen’s words reverberate around the room. They aren’t new words; they’re spoken every Sunday, but there is never a quick answer for them. Helen hates Kathleen all over again, hates the intrusion. Kathleen has been married to Donald for five years, and she thinks this gives her the right to take the lead in conversations like this?

Donald is quiet, turning one of Helen’s crystal coffee-table angels over in his hands, staring into it, bits of light ricocheting from the front window off the tiny wings and into his face, his forehead, W-shaped thinning hairline, cheeks, chin, lips. The backdrop for this slideshow of tiny, dancing rainbows, Donald’s face, surprises Helen once in a while, just how much it takes after Mo. She bolsters herself sometimes when she’s flagging by thinking that when Mo’s gone, she will visit Donald, and maybe seeing his face, still breathing and walking the earth, maybe this

will give her some bit of comfort. But she soon stops this line of thinking because it sends the edge of something up her throat, makes her need suddenly to scream.

When Helen snaps out of it, Kathleen is back on her soap-box, having turned her body toward Helen now, Ava pointed her way like a shield, a little cherub on the bow of the angular flowery ship that is Kathleen. The baby shoots Helen a beatific crinkly-eyed smile, all four teeth on display, and this softens Helen's view of her mother's tense face above.

“I mean, you guys, we know how tired you both must be, and that's what they *do* there, they know how to *help*. And it's actually such a pretty place. They have the most beautiful garden in back, fountains and so many flowers, oh, and a hummingbird feeder! Can you believe it? And they walk around in the afternoon passing out a menu card for you to choose what you'll have for dinner that night. It's like you're eating in a restaurant.”

Helen suppresses a wave of manic laughter. They've never heard the like-you're-eating-in-a-restaurant angle before. Mo squirms under his afghan. Helen notices, but their son doesn't, face pointed towards the floor, fiddling with the angel, and his wife doesn't either, peering into the back of Ava's diaper intently, having run out of invisible Oreo crumbs to wipe away, pushy things to say.

“Well dear, that's very thoughtful of you, but we've discussed this already, yeah?”

Helen is grateful to Mo for cutting in and answering Kathleen so she won't have to, navigating this conversation that they've had some tedious version of for the last five Sundays, maybe six, since that last CAT scan showed them a shattering

picture of brand new tumors blooming all over Morris: ghostly mushroomy looking swells wallpapering the insides of her husband.

“So long as Helen can stand me, Kathleen, I’m fixed to stay put. I don’t know how to make you stop worrying, though. Really, I promise you, I’m best right here.”

Mo smiles quietly; Helen knows he is, even though she can’t see his face. If you couldn’t see the tiny bundled-up body beneath his big-as-always head, fast smile and chatter, flirty eyes, you might not know to figure his state of things.

“Ok, but just promise us you’ll keep it in mind.” She pauses, clutches Ava firmly around the waist as she leans forward to take a sip of her coffee. After clattering the cup back into its saucer, her eyes scan the room, rather desperately, Helen thinks, for a change of topic.

“Donny, what were we talking about in the car? Oh! Dad, we read in the paper that whatsisname’s son is getting married. What *is* that man’s name, you know the funny one with all that red hair at your shop?”

Morris used to own a garage. The man with the red hair is Charles. At the moment, Helen can’t bring herself to care about him or his son or anyone getting married. She bows out of this line of polite small talk by averting her eyes, pointing her face deep into her coffee cup, rearranging it into the groove of its saucer. She catches a wavering reflection of the white waves of her own hair shimmering in her black coffee, the distorted crescent edge of her forehead below.

“Oh sheesh,” she declares abruptly and looks up just as her reflection stops trembling, “I’ve got to go check the roast.”

She leans her right hand against Donald's shoulder as she passes by him to steady herself on her way out of the room. He tilts his head slightly towards her hand at the gesture, and this blazes her eyes on fire with fast tears.

There's no roast cooking. Mo must know this. Helen doesn't care whether her son and his wife know this, and besides, she bets they don't. Helen has cooked countless roasts, hams, chickens, turkeys, legs of lamb in her life, and she's always been able to excuse herself by saying that she has to go and baste something, check a timer. That's just her m.o., popping up and checking things. She doesn't think twice about leaving Mo in there rolled up in blankets, to deal with Kathleen and their quiet son. He can handle himself. He may even be enjoying the visit. It's Helen who just can't ever understand Kathleen's pushiness about moving Mo into a hospice, away from her when there obviously isn't much time left anyway. Mo doesn't seem to mind the visits so much, just takes it as it comes and brushes off Kathleen's efforts. So long as he's here, Helen will let Mo deal with the conversations, the hardly-veiled negotiations. Once he's gone, it won't matter, she thinks acidly, who cares, I'll go anywhere they want me to.

She opens and shuts the oven door, fiddles around in the fridge, doing her best to sound as if she's really bustling around in here. She decides to pre-heat the oven for the hell of it; dumps the spent coffee grounds in the disposal; waits for the tap to run hot and then sloshes water around the pan she froze the lemon bars in. Her bad knee is beginning to throb under her. In the windowsill over the sink, she notices her neglected rope of garlic sprouting little green talons that are curling themselves

like a beaver's teeth without any wood to chew, wending their way out of their cloves, towards the sun. She plucks the whole business off the nail and tosses it in the disposal after the coffee grounds, rope and all, turns on the motor and is very satisfied with the sputtering, clunking racket of it as it's hacked to bits under the sink.

When Helen's composure has returned and she heads back into the living room, she walks right into a heave of awkward silence, thick as a wall. Even the baby has stopped teething her Oreo, looking into the faces around her a little apprehensively, uneasy in the quiet. Donald looks up at his mother.

"Well I guess we better head off. Don't want to get in the way of you all's supper."

"Oh no, honey, so soon?"

This comes out of Helen's mouth as naturally as did running off to the kitchen. Her hands are still chilly from washing the pan, and she stands in the doorway clasping them together and blowing into them, like someone who's just removed her gloves, come in from the cold. Donald hasn't put Helen's angel down this whole time she's been in the kitchen and now he does, settling it carefully between the two other ones. He lowers her (Helen thinks of them as girls, these two inch tall balls of glass Mo gave her for a wedding anniversary) into her place intently between his thumb and index finger, as if he were playing chess, leaves a finger on the top of the sideways tilted, stylized head, shifts her forward so that she forms a perfect triangle with her two crystal sisters. He brushes his hands over his thighs to demarcate the beginning of wrapping things up here, and then stands, stretches,

plucks Ava from Kathleen's lap. He gives his daughter's belly a long, loud raspberry before heading into the foyer for all of their hats and scarves and coats, catalyzing a cascade of hearty Ava-giggles which taper down as Donald carries her away. Helen watches the doorway Donald and Ava have just disappeared into, having a hard time pulling her eyes away from it, and back into the room with only Kathleen and Mo now.

Kathleen has nothing to fiddle with anymore with Ava out of the room, no excuse to go after the coats since Donald's already set to work on that task. She looks up, re-crosses her legs, touches the corner of her lace collar, smiles a little nervously at Helen, and then Mo. Helen settles herself on the couch where Donald was, just an inch or so within Mo's peripheral vision.

“So how are you feeling, now, Dad?”

Mo smiles at Kathleen.

“Oh sweetheart, I'm really feeling fine, I promise you, just a hair tired, you know, but I'm not hurting a bit. These pills are something else. And Helen's taking great care of me, as always.”

He tries for a big laugh to shoot this point home, but it comes into the air fraying at the edges, and Helen can tell that this visit is finally running a little long for him. She'd like to touch him, reach for his hand, but she's embarrassed to show her marriage to her daughter in law so nakedly. She'll wait till they're gone.

“Well we're praying for you all the time. The Lord has his plan, I really believe that.”

She isn't twitching or bouncing anymore, staring straight at Helen's husband as if she thinks she can read this plan of the Lord's right in his face, in this living room. This insistent, dour woman: Helen's been wondering for the last four years what drove Donald to find a woman so very different from herself. Helen is round, fun, says "shit" when she drops things, or when she hears some extra-out-there bit of gossip. Kathleen is a string bean whose never-removed gold cross necklace seems to overpower her face, suck the light of life right out of it, the color out of her ash blonde hair with gray wisps. But Donald loves this woman. Enough to marry her late, long after she and Mo gave up on the idea of grandbabies.

"Thank you dear, we appreciate the thought."

"And remember about Pastor Bill, he's a good friend, really, he'd love to come visit if you felt like it."

And now, mercifully, Donald and Ava are back in the room, Ava wrapped up like a gift in a bright pink scarf and lavender jacket with snowflakes, all ready to go. Donald sets her in his mother's lap and holds his wife's jacket in front of her, shakes it at her like she's a bull and he's a matador. She stands up and slides into it, one arm at a time, her cross glinting as she shimmies her narrow shoulders, and then it's a flurry of kisses and see-you-next-week-call-us-if-you-need-anything's, and the three of them are gone, Donald's and Kathleen's heads darting from side to side as they rush out to their van, away from Morris's slow dying, away from any oncoming street-people in neighborhood that has become more and more dangerous over the years. Kathleen is fastening Ava in the car seat, Donald in the driver's seat, peeling off. They don't look back to see Helen waving goodbye from the doorway.

“Well,” says Helen, her whole body shifting with relief, back leaned against the front door. She would like to take off her pants and relax.

“Well,” echoes Morris from his chair, trying to get her to smile. “That was a long one, hmm. How you holding up there, champ?”

“Oh I suppose I’m ok, what about you? Do you need me to shift you? Another pill?”

“In a little bit, in a little bit. Not now.”

If his hands weren’t bound by his afghan wrapping, if he had the energy to move them, he would be waving them impatiently. He would be beckoning her flirtatiously to come give him some sugar. But he says it all with words and winks instead, eyes glinting in his face.

Helen drags her bad knee across the room from the door and slides her rear-end down vertically on one of the arms of the Lazy Boy, so that it will fit and she won’t fall over, so she can trick herself into feeling as if she’s sitting in Morris’s lap the way she always used to in this chair before he went so brittle. Her knee is on fire, a combination of moving around too much today and the weather. It’s going to rain. There are clouds sliding over the sky outside, and the room is draping itself in long shadows. Helen doesn’t turn on the lamp. She rubs her knee with both hands.

They sit quietly together perched on and sitting in Mo’s Lazy Boy, staring into space. Helen’s belly grumbles inelegantly and breaks the silence. This makes them both laugh.

“You old turbine. When’s the last time you had a square meal?”

It feels good to laugh, and it feels good to be alone with Mo again, where she doesn’t have to think too hard about her words, to make anyone comfortable but him. It’s true, she hasn’t been cooking like she used to, not since Mo lost his appetite, but she hasn’t been thinking much about eating either. She orders a pizza once in a while, or nukes a potato. As a matter of fact, this is the first time in a while she’s given real food any thought.

“None of your business, you high maintenance so and so. I’m on a diet. Wait’ll you see me in a teeny-weeny polka dot bikini.”

She takes his face in her hands and gives his cheeks a squeeze and shake. I-love-you-I-love-you-I-love-you-so-much-please-please-don’t-leave-me-please-Morris-James-please-shit-please-please-please she thinks into his face with kisses. She lays her lips on his forehead, the tip of his nose, his forehead again. She touches Morris now the way she touches Ava: so gently, both of them as delicate, breakable as glass.

“Can’t wait, darling. Meet me on the beach. In the meantime, fix yourself some dinner, would you? We can’t have you starving just because I’m a pain in the ass. And besides, I’d like just to smell you cook around here. It’s been a long time.”

“Do you think you might feel like eating?”

“I’d have a bite of something.”

And so Helen finds herself back in the kitchen, this time frantic to put something on a burner that will send the smells Morris has requested into the living

room, and fast. She remembers the garlic she insinkered, curses herself and settles for a shriveled onion chopped and hurled in butter on high heat, half of it missing the pan and burning quickly in the flame, reducing quickly to singed little embers. She pulls an uneaten pizza wedge out of the fridge and mines it for the sausage bits. She throws out the rest of the pizza. That will do it, smell up this place like food, like life, she thinks. She takes the pan off the heat once it's really going, grabs the handle with both hands and carries it around the room to spread the smell, like a cluster of sage in a house with a spirit, her bad knee screaming beneath her.

She sits in the breakfast nook to be alone just a minute, leaving the sausage sizzling its food smell around the downstairs. Mo is dozing in the living room. She lifts her leg up onto the chair across from her, grunts, anchors her elbows on the linoleum, and stares out the hexagonal windows of the nook. The rain started while she was in an onion chopping, sausage hijacking frenzy, without so much as a precursor of drizzle, just the sky cracking apart and hurling down raindrops of iron with amazing velocity, complete with thunder and lightening. Mo has always loved thunderstorms. She's grateful to this one for lulling him to sleep.

It's not yet night, only 4ish, and people are still going about business as usual while Helen watches, adapting to the rain. The friendly mail-lady who hasn't been wearing her uniform lately is sitting in her mail-mobile with the engine idling, waiting for the downpour to let up. The man across the street, Dwayne, she thinks his name is, comes running home from the bus-stop, arms stretched up to tent a newspaper over his head, elbows flailing, though it's soaked, for crying out loud, he

may as well just slow down and toss the paper, Helen thinks, come to terms with the circumstances at hand.

One of the junkies who showed up in their neighborhood about ten years ago is huddled in the doorway of 2462, crouched low, head and legs tucked like a snail in his puffy olive coat. He is camouflaged by the strength and speed of the rain. The onslaught of water bevels the window and blurs the huddled man's edges. If Helen hadn't seen him out there the day before, she might think that he was a full Hefty Bag, an abandoned pile of trash.

A carload full of kids passes by in a little Japanese car with one of those speed bars jiggled up on the back side that Mo makes such fun of, and it booms its bass line down the street, loud enough to be heard even through sheets of rain and thunder, right up through the tiles of Helen's kitchen, up through her seat, boom boom boom boom, a few beats, and then boom boom boom boom again. And now it's gone and the room is still.

What if she never gets up, she wonders, could she freeze-frame their life, their home? If she were to sit here staring out at people moving along her street, could she keep Morris snoozing in the living room? My God, please, let me sit here forever, she thinks, just for a minute. Just let me sit here with him asleep in the other room, where I know he'll wake up and be with me, smell what I cooked and tease me when I carry him upstairs and put him in bed and tuck him in and then wake him in the morning for a bath and a pill.

And so Helen sits and sits, anchored to her chair, elbows rooted on the table. She watches the window like a television. She sits as long as she can, until the rain

lets up. The mail lady leaves her truck and walks around to the other end of it, bends into the back intently, only her legs visible, getting the mail in order. The junkie unfurls his legs one at a time. Helen waits for him to stand, but he does not.

She sits and sits. She sits until both of her own legs are fast asleep and she's got to get some feeling back into them.

Going Back and Forth

John liked his job, he did, or maybe it's just that he didn't mind it so much as other ones he'd suffered through. There was the fact of not being on his feet, doing all kinds of heavy lifting, getting ripped up, a dead man walking by the end of the day. There was the freedom to do his hours without anyone breathing down his neck. Yes, that was a plus. There was the fact of the little deli right down the street that made good, big, cheap sandwiches. By the time he'd brought lunch back to the shop, eaten, gone to the bathroom a handful of times, listlessly tapped around on the computer, well, by then the day was almost done. He'd been doing it sporadically since he was a teenager, working summers here at his dad's travel agency, so it felt natural. He fell right back into it.

Yes, he liked his job on most levels. But the reasons for its tolerability worked against him too. It didn't feel too hot for John to think about how little he actually *did*. To know he was employed by his father. The same father who'd put him through art school ten years ago now—ten years already!—and must be thinking I-told-you-so, even though, John was grateful, he'd never given any indication of this. Hell, John would think the same if his own son couldn't quite whip his life together after making a stink about needing to go to school for sculpture. Sculpture? John hadn't thought of clay in years. But he hadn't thought about much else either. He couldn't quite strum up a career, per se. He got married. This, he figured, was a halfway decent showing of progression into adulthood. His wife Jeannie was a schoolteacher. Everyone loved her. He did too. She was kind, and funny.

Always, though, there came an emasculating moment when it hit him that he was working for his dad, with his sister Ella, like a child, still. When phrases like *pull yourself up by the bootstraps* or *self made man* came up in conversation, or when, this was the very worst, someone asked him what he did for a living (and this happened all the time, especially at some awful social thing of Jeannie's), he would descend into a funk, feel dark and ashamed.

It was in the midst of one of these wallows when Dascha called him. He hadn't heard her voice in five years. When he realized who he was talking to, his gut pulled like it was whizzing up an elevator. She hadn't needed to do any sleuthing to find him; the shop's phone hadn't changed in twenty years. Dascha, on the other hand, dropped off the earth five years before. Even if he'd wanted to look for her in earnest, he'd have had no idea where to start. With her grandmother, probably, but who knows? He'd always told himself that if she ever called, he'd hang up. He wasn't sure why he kept talking, for one minute, then two. He was especially unsure of why he agreed to have lunch with her. He was just bored, he told himself. That's all.

Such an odd phone call it was too; they talked like strangers. There were long gaps in the short conversation, and they spent half of it talking about the weather. *Santa Fe to New Jersey, whew, better wear layers*, that sort of thing. John shuddered a little when he hung up. He hadn't even told her that he was married, that he was working for his dad again, that...anything, really.

He arrived early, parked at a meter right in front, but then pulled away after a moment of sitting, not wanting to plant himself in plain view of everyone walking in. They would notice him, wouldn't they? Wouldn't they think he looked misplaced, suspicious, sitting still there in his car? All these people were in such a hurry, carrying briefcases, clipboards, rushing in to eat, then rushing out, a non-stop parade of people holding the door for each other. Why had Dascha suggested such a chi-chi place? What was she trying to say? John forgot, quite often, that he actually looked quite presentable now. He even had his own briefcase, though he'd left it at the shop. He'd forgotten his cell phone. Otherwise, he would not have been above pretending at an involved phone call.

It was 15 degrees outside and he couldn't stomach an aimless stroll around the block. The Wind Chill would make him feel even more off-kilter. How funny, he thought, in the car he was a little excited to see her, and excited to feel excited. But now, he was sweating, flapping his elbows like wings so he wouldn't sprout sweat patches. This was all a mistake, he thought, but not enough that he would consider standing her up. Get in and get out, he told himself, his palms leaving slick prints on the wheel.

He sat in his truck down the street for five more minutes, too antsy to wait longer, even though he knew that if Dascha was still Dascha she'd never show up on time. Hands fisted into his coat pockets, body curled inward against the cold, he walked the four blocks to the restaurant, resigned now to the idea of sitting and waiting. Would they make him sit at the bar while he waited? He hoped not. He didn't want to be tempted. He'd stopped drinking four months before, because

Jeannie asked him to. But right then, he could have done for a drink, something to ratchet down his nerves. The sides of his mouth tingled, thinking of the way it would warm and calm him. Already! he thought, al-fucking-ready, she's got me disjointed. He thought anxiously, mournfully, of the deli. The 50-cent bag of Utz and good, crunchy pickle that came with every sandwich. The single piece of masking tape sealing the wax sandwich paper, the satisfying, brief, ripping noise of it opening, letting loose smells of cold cuts, vinegar, mustard.

He liked that deli so much that he'd told Jeannie about it after he'd been back at work for his dad for a month or so. She'd laughed, rubbed the back of his head, and started making him sandwiches to take to work, packed sweetly in brown paper bags with an apple and a Fig Newton. But she'd missed the point; it was the deli's sandwiches he liked so much, how walking to go buy them punctuated his days.

John left Jeannie's lunches in the fridge when she made them, until she got the hint and stopped.

Burgundy drapes staved off the sun inside, so the little green glass lamps everywhere were the only source of light. Weird lighting for lunchtime, John thought. The host did not seat him. He told John to come back and let him know when everyone in his party had arrived, to please, if you'd like, have a seat at the bar.

"I'll keep an eye out for your friend."

"Oh, but she'll be here any minute, and there's just two of us, so..."

"Yes, sir, I understand, but we can't seat you until the whole of your party has arrived. You just let us know and we'll be able to seat you right away."

Again with the “party” business. Two people? A party? Shmuck. The man stared at John. John stared in turn at the man’s hair, a spiky sea anemone looking -do gelled up towards the ceiling. He was too old for gel, thought John, pretty ludicrous looking, actually. John felt a little splash of pity for the man, even a quiet cockiness comparing that hair to his own straightforward, even manly buzz cut, if he did think so himself.

John thanked the man politely and wandered over to an adjacent waiting area, a cushy blue couch, end tables splayed with Architectural Digests, Vanity Fairs. Big red lamps instead of the small green ones. Maybe he would take Jeannie here for her birthday next month. She liked going fancy places, getting dressed up. She always wore the same black dress. A tightish dress that was sexy, yes, but she wore it every time, and the zipper that began at her hip was unraveling, puckering out from its seam.

He wondered if he had time to go to the men’s room and adjust himself, stop sweating, re-tuck his shirt. He pretended to read the framed review on the wall, hands in, then out, then in, then out, of his coat pockets.

And then there she was. She clamped her chilly hands over his eyes from behind like this was, what? A surprise party? He needed suddenly to take a piss. He managed to say, “Dascha?” and she peeled her hands from his eyes, the reward for saying her name. He turned around slowly, her warm fingerprints still affixed to his face like goggles. He wondered, again, what exactly he was doing here, really. She was wearing embellished copper earrings connected by a barely visible chain, which bisected her face like an uneven W, held up in the middle by a miniscule silver stud in

her right nostril. He tried to remember seeing one of these jobs on an actual woman, and, aside from Bollywood movies, he could only remember one, a performer in a belly-dancing troupe Jeannie had taken him to see once at a Moroccan restaurant.

A layer of Dascha's bone-straight hair was held an inch or two from her head by cold static, giving her a wild looking black halo. Her green eyes were done up in aquamarine shadow. She was much shorter than John, but he felt like the presence of her might knock him over. He realized now how much he looked like everyone else in this restaurant, nothing like five years ago. Dascha looked just like herself, but amplified. She was so skinny now that everything she wore seemed bigger. Even her eyes, sitting in pools of that shocking color, seemed to take up half her face.

"John, my God, *look* at you."

She clamped both hands on his forearms, holding him incapacitated at an arm's length, staring in wonder at his button down Oxford shirt, chinos with a little pleat, nice shoes.

"What's all *this* about?"

"Um, what's the *this*?"

He was testy at the gawking, even though everything Dascha ever said was proclaimed, accompanied by big gestures, arm motions, head tilts, a loud voice. This had not changed. He squirmed out of her hold on his arms, reached out and patted her shoulder conciliatorily, to cover his irritation. It was tiny, like a child's. She really had lost weight, and she'd always been lean. She cocked her head at John sideways, the sheet of hair on the left side of her face pulled nearly perpendicular to the floor by gravity. And then she snapped it back into place, finished appraising.

“Come on John, what’s with the fancy clothes? Did you get all dressed up just to come see me?”

John was grateful for her shift in tone, the way she’d sensed his mood and switched into a breezier flirtation.

“Not this time, Dasch. I’m working with Ella at my dad’s shop again. Gotta dress the part. I’m pretty used to it, though.”

She nodded gravely, and then suddenly looked around in all directions, the last strands of her static halo collapsing. She waved her hands at John impatiently, a quick command to him to hold-that-thought, all of the stones on her many rings sending loud trails of flickering color into the air.

“Lets get out of here, what do you think? I want to hear everything, and I’d love some drinks. I’m not nuts about the vibe in here.”

The host with the hair-do was staring over at them. They had not gone to see him yet, were still standing in the waiting area. John wondered what the man thought of him now, with Dasha next to him. Was he surprised? What had he thought the other half of John’s party might look like? John enjoyed a breath of self-satisfaction. Fooldja, he thought at the man, I’m not so dull as I look.

“Dasch, I have to get back to work at some point. I can’t start drinking with you now. And you’re the one who came up with this spot in the first place.”

He didn’t tell her that he wasn’t exactly supposed to be drinking right now.

She gripped him by the arm and turned him towards the door, nudging him around a klatch of businessmen extricating toothpicks from cellophane, adjusting their belts, gathering coats from the rack, movements slow and clumsy after eating.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. I’m sorry about this place. My grandmother said it was good; she comes every few weeks with a neighbor friend. But I’m not feeling it. And honestly, John, is it going to kill Ella to answer the phone if it rings?”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. She was right about his sister. All he did at his dad’s shop was sit and Google people he used to know (like Dascha, once in a while, never turning up anything), maybe answer a phone call here or there from retired people interested in cruises. These people never came in. Nobody his age ever called or came in. They used Orbitz or Blueline. His sister Ella did the very same thing at the desk next to his, both of their desks facing the glass storefront decorated with a blue fluorescent sailboat, topped with pink light bulbs spelling out “Vincent’s Vacations!” These low-rent, Vegas-y lights were the only things separating John and Ella from the gazes of people waiting for the #8 across the street. Every few years John’s father, Vincent, had to replace the glass when someone kicked it in overnight, or threw a rock. An old man, lead-footing the gas when he’d meant to hit the brake, once drove his car right through the window.

Dascha’s ability to sum John up so quickly after five years, to know the fact of his availability for the day better than his wife, both unnerved and made him feel known and understood, all in an unsettling jumble. He thought of Jeannie, longed for her actually. Dascha was making him feel exposed, like a turtle flopped on its back.

Dascha let up her grip once they were in the vestibule of the restaurant, and linked her arm in his more tenderly, companionably. Then they were in the street, the gelid air wrapping itself around the two of them as tight as shellac.

They wound up at a bar with no windows just around the corner from the restaurant, a block yet to be overtaken by renovators like the ones surrounding it. These were the sorts of places they used to come together, seedy dim places that felt edgy then, not sad. It took a long time for John's eyes to focus, to see the wood-paneled cigarette machine in a back corner, the twenty or so seat long bar, a mirror running the length of it, picking up glimmers from the glass ashtrays evenly spaced every four stools or so, waiting for smokers to come dirty them. Two pool cues leaned in a corner, but there was no pool table in sight. He kept blinking, trying for a better look.

John thought again about Jeannie. She'd be at her desk now, classes over, her day winding down. She would call him soon, or wonder why he wasn't calling her. The reason he'd suggested lunch instead of a drink was because it seemed less sketchy. It seemed like something he could maybe (just possibly understandably) overlook telling Jeannie about. But drinking in some bar he'd never been to in the middle of the day when he was supposed to be at the shop? She would know something was off. She would certainly be able to tell that he'd had a drink. Maybe though, maybe if he just had one?

This just was not a great idea from start to finish, he knew, queasy, but couldn't figure out how to make it stop. Reaching for his back pocket to turn his ringer to silent, he remembered he'd forgotten the phone, and was relieved. He made his way to the men's room, where he caught himself in the mirror over the sink. He thought he looked old. He smoothed his imaginary hair away from his face. He did this sometimes. He'd begun keeping his head shaved before he'd met Jeannie. When

he and Dascha lived together, John had long hair he kept in a ponytail. Jeannie had never even seen photos. She'd heard stories about Dascha, but never a photo, either of the woman, or of her now-husband with long hair.

And here was John, remembering his long-ago hair, the long-ago woman waiting at the bar outside the bathroom door.

By the time John left the bathroom, his eyes had adjusted to the light. He didn't pick up anything he hadn't registered the first time around, but things were in focus now, his edges and depth perceptions clearer. Dascha sat at the bar, and how wild, as he walked towards her, without daylight to hit all of her colors, rings, eye shadow, she was just a childlike, skinny figure on a stool in a dark, bleak bar. If he didn't know her he might wonder if maybe something was off with this elfin woman dressed like a crazy mix of teenager, medicine-woman, and lady of the evening. And he wanted her a little. Blood thumped through his body in a way it hadn't in a long time.

Dascha patted the stool next to her and John sat on it. She'd ordered him whatever she was drinking, something clear on the rocks with a lime. John squeezed his lime, clinked glasses with Dascha, and they sipped. She leaned the side of her body into him. It felt to John like a sort of matter of fact, well-here-we-are. There was no one else at the bar, not even a bartender. John didn't wonder who'd poured the drinks. He just sat quietly and felt the slightness of Dascha's body against his flank, took another sip, sank into the stool. He felt like he'd just landed at the bottom of a slide he'd been racing down ever since she called. He went out on a limb and put

his hand on the base of her back, gave her a half rub, half pat. She could take it however she wanted.

A heavy woman came from a back room with a plastic flat of clean bar glasses angled into her midriff for leverage. She hoofed them up onto the bar, looked over her shoulder at John and Dascha.

“You guys doing ok?”

“Oh, we’re *great*, thank you,” answered Dascha in the particularly musical voice she used for hellos, goodbyes, or brief exclamatory statements, her words too loud for the room. John was embarrassed. Had she always been quite this unabashedly loud? Conspicuous? No, not quite. John had always done most of the talking, calling shots, ordering drinks. He’d been the one to decide what they’d do if they had the day off together. She’d footed the bill for most things, though, while he spent months sculpting faces, dozens of eerily realistic faces that were his thesis project. After he graduated, she paid the rent while he launched his ill-fated hot sauce venture. Most of his money went towards bulk bottling, and the rent for a little stand at the Saturday farmers’ market. John would pay for their drinks today, he thought. Would that surprise her?

The weary looking bartender gave them a closed mouth smile and turned to stack the glasses on an upper shelf. Pint glasses in stacks of two, each pair flush up against the two behind. Her brown t-shirt was the same color as her skin, made her look naked to John when he glanced peripherally at her and forgot he’d already noticed.

The presence of the woman, even though her back was to them and she wasn't interested in them anyway, made John feel self-conscious about sitting so quietly. He made a move to fill the air.

“So tell me about Santa Fe.”

She lifted herself away from him, sat upright in her stool, moving swiftly from quiet leaning into upright, legs-crossed, attentive, talking mode. She nodded as if he'd asked something profound, looked into her lap theatrically for a beat before she answered him, threw a slippery layer of hair over her shoulder.

“It was just what I needed for a long time, but lately I'm thinking that I've gotten everything I can from it and maybe it's going stale. I mean, of course, it's beautiful, inspirational, absolutely, shit, John, you've never seen anyplace like this, it's so true what they say, but I think it's just the end of my time there. And my grandma isn't doing great. I'm thinking about coming back to stay with her for a minute until I figure out where to next.”

“You could always go back to the vineyard.”

John was teasing, just talking to be talking, but he'd forgotten how sensitive she was about the vineyard. Dascha'd had a job working open houses at a vineyard Saturday nights dressed as a bunch of grapes (purple tights, white ballerina slippers dyed purple in the washing machine, purple leotard with royal-blue balloons pinned to it, plastic purple hair band with two grape balloons humiliatingly bobbing slow-mo from the top like antennae). She handed out Dixie cups of wine and pamphlets of information to the visitors, had found the job on an online artists' message board. She was paid so well that she stuck with it once a week for lots of years. She was almost

always in tears afterwards. John remembered her now on the couch, out of her leotard but still in her tights, getting slowly drunk on the same wine she passed to visitors all night, reminding him of Good and Plenty candies: purple tights on the bottom and white on top where her leotard used to be.

John had liked the puffed up feeling it gave him to sit on the couch while she cried and he reassured, soothed, held her, gathering her hair gently into a ponytail with his fist, telling her that it was just for money, just to get by, the silly grape gig has nothing to do with your real work, don't let it get to you, you won't have to do this shit forever. Come on, Dasch, you're so *talented*, everyone knows that. Just think of all this as a big grapey joke. And he'd kiss her ear, her temple, feed her another sip of wine. He'd worked hard to strike just the right balance. Sympathy, compassion, care, but never so much she'd think he might be encouraging her to quit.

Her slippered feet curled beneath her in the same spot on the middle couch cushion every Saturday night created a purple stain that got darker by the month, as she replaced worn-out slippers with new pairs, freshly dyed and quick to rub off their color.

Dascha sat quietly for a minute on her stool, giving him a tired look. John remembered this look. A bit of her eye shadow had seeped into a miniscule fold of skin next to her eye. He would never have noticed this fold had it not been for the shadow filling it.

“You asshole. That job was lethal, John. How can you joke?”

“Oh, Dasch, I'm kidding, I'm kidding, please. I know.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, shook her a little, rubbed her back again. He felt like he'd just been with her yesterday, holding her and reassuring her just like this. Why couldn't they just sit and relax? Why couldn't this with them be a nice, dark, escape? He wished they could skip backwards to the beginning of their relationship (that he barely remembered), or forward, way, way, forward. Or to some completely different place. What would be so wrong with that? They hadn't even properly caught up yet, and they seemed to be playing out the end of their relationship, John speaking things aloud that weren't funny, weren't appropriate, Dascha looking tired. Except that she looked so much more tired, or just more *used* to being tired now than before. He wondered if she was even still painting.

He scooted her empty drink up to the top of the bar with his own so the bartender would pour them another round once she was done shelving glasses. After she did, all without a word, just a nod to Dascha, the kind men sometimes give one another on the street, Dascha turned to him again. Her hand was anchored around the base of her glass, her shoulder angled behind her, hand on her hip, pulled purposefully away from him now.

“So how's married life treating you?”

Which just sounded bizarre to John coming out of Dascha's mouth: this question that only friends of his father's asked him, distant cousins, sometimes old friends from school, but never anyone who actually knew him. He hadn't even been sure she knew. He hadn't mentioned it on the phone, and he wasn't wearing his ring.

“It's good.”

He answered her cautiously. He didn't want to give too much away. This shift in the conversation made him feel pretty crappy, the first attack of conscience that had nothing to do with fear, covering his tracks. And he was angry too, that he couldn't rub Dascha's face in his happy-enough marriage. If you're so happy, she might ask, why is your hand on my back? Why are you leaning your side into mine? And what would John be able to say then?

"Really? Good?"

He couldn't read her tone. She sounded so neutral. Maybe even amused.

"Yeah, really. Good. My wife is very cool."

"That's great, John, I'm so happy for you."

At this she patted his forearm, a physical emphasis on what she was saying, the happiness.

"What's her name?"

"Jeannie. Jeannie Maycomb. She didn't take my last name."

"Oh, I like her already. Is she feminist? Or just a professional something or another who doesn't want to part with her name and all that."

Dascha was sliding her glass off its square paperboard coaster while she looked at John, moving it back and forth across the bar, the condensation leaving behind what looked like the trail of a slug, a snail. She dragged her trailing pinky finger through this wake.

"No, nothing like that. She was planning to, but she never got around to it. Too much of a pain, lots of forms."

John felt a little defensive of Jeannie when he heard his own voice put this lackluster bit about her in the air. The moment of wanting Dascha, to kiss her, to take her back to his truck, dissipated the longer he had to string together thoughts about his wife and share them.

“You two would get on great. She’s very political.”

Dascha nodded approvingly, continued to nod even after John paused to take a sip of his new drink. So he kept talking, filling this silence that felt so expectant. Maybe all he had to do was keep talking and Dascha would keep nodding and listening. Maybe this afternoon could be something he might even tell Jeannie about one day. Maybe. He went on, reminding himself of his father, wondering aloud about the bar they sat in, how long it had been here, why he’d never been here before, how he’d been thinking about buying a bar a few years ago, and this would be just the sort, a quick fixer upper. Then he wound down, and they sat in silence again for a few sips until Dascha broke it.

“What does Jeannie do?”

John was jarred at this question, another one he never would have expected from Dascha. What do you do? He would have liked to ask Dascha. That question always made her testy. An artist, she would say. Oh really? And you make a living at it? Laughter. And she would self-deprecatingly refer to her grape-gig, *got to pay the rent, it pays the bills, it keeps the wine rack full!*, in a way that made John cringe. He didn’t know what her answer would be today, without the grape-gig to refer to anymore. But he answered her plainly, didn’t return fire

“She teaches high school math.”

Dascha threw back her head and laughed so loudly that the bartender looked up from her stool in the corner at the end of the bar, where she was gnawing the end of a blue pen, hunched over the Classifieds.

“Oh Jesus, John, that’s a hoot. How did *you* ever wind up with a nice math teacher named Jeannie? Of all people.”

She laughed again, this one even more for show. A laugh, John thought, that looked like a demonstration of a laugh missing the laughing impulse behind it. She brought both hands to her mouth, then palms down on the bar, then, finally, folded neatly in her lap, laughter distilled down to an infuriatingly pitying smile.

“I’m sorry, I guess it’s just that, it’s just that, I don’t know,”

She lifted her glass, pinched the tiny straw between her thumb and index finger, pointed her lips at it, and took a long sip. How was it that such dense lipstick could leave a straw completely clean?

“I mean John, what *happened* to you? I never would have guessed you’d wind up back at your dad’s place. Aren’t you miserable there? What happened to your hot sauces? I mean, honey, you look like,” She brushed her bony fingers against his jaw as if she were trying to see beyond his skin, into some memory of him, “I don’t know, you look like the guys who eat their lunches in that place back there, like your dad.”

John didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry, am I being too rough?” Dascha asked in a voice that had become petulantly flirty, head tilted down, absurdly blue eyelids batting their lashes at him.

“Not rough, just wrong.”

You bitch, he thought. Bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch.

“Hot Stuff never turned a profit, and I was running out of funds. But Dascha, I’m telling you, I’m enjoying my dad’s shop. It’s very Zen, actually. Ella and I are finally having a chance to hang out, and we just chill all day. No stress. I’m lucky to have the job.”

He felt her pitying fingers still rubbing the side of his face a moment ago with a shiver and was shot through with a sudden, uncharacteristic need to get at her, to jab her. He wanted to slap her, though he’d never hit anyone in his life, not once.

“Look Dascha, you know, it’s been a long time. I expected you to look, I don’t know, different somehow, but you don’t. You look the same. And that’s great, right? It’s a compliment. But the rest of the world changes. Don’t hold it against me. Whatever happened to me is ok by me.”

She put her hands in the air, palms facing his face, in surrender mode.

“Hey, whoa there, sorry, easy tiger.” She lifted her glass in the air tentatively as if she were trying to get him to drop a gun. Wide-eyed.

“A toast? To self-actualization. Really, I get it. I’m sorry.”

He clinked her without looking at her face and drank, began to itch all over with a need to be out of this bar and away from Dascha immediately, to slip back into the place in the world where he belonged.

When they got off of their stools, John held Dascha’s jacket for her to slide her arms into. He paid, slipped two twenties underneath of his empty glass on the bar even though it was way too much, because the bartender had disappeared into the

back room again and he didn't want to wait. Dascha thanked him politely, like a stranger. Outside, the daylight was more of a jolt than the cold, and while his vision was transitioning from dark to light, his foot landed in a pile of spilled blueberries mysteriously covering the sidewalk. He hopped sideways. Dascha squatted to the ground and gathered up a handful of them, commenced to catch up with him and pop them in her mouth one by one as if she'd plucked them off a bush on a mountaintop. He was disgusted.

Once she was properly hugged goodbye and shut into her car (her grandmother's borrowed Cadillac), John tried not to run. He couldn't walk fast enough to the truck. The drinks were enough to shield him from the cold, and he wanted to rip off his clothes immediately, be home and never leave. Two oncoming backpacked school kids split when they noticed him coming, to let him pass through their center. He could feel them pull magnetically back together once he'd passed.

He remembered his hot sauces. He still had two abandoned cases somewhere. He was suddenly aware of how voraciously hungry he was, thought he'd like to make himself some eggs when he got home, pull out a bottle of his favorite kind, the Apocalyptic (that he hadn't sold much of when he was in the business of selling it because it was too spicy for anyone but him) and maybe have a beer to go with. This idea was delicious enough to occupy him for the remaining two minutes of his walk to the truck.

But when he got there, he couldn't find his keys. He lunged through his pants, all four coat pockets (even the two zippered breast ones he never used), could not find them. He'd have to go back to the bar. He raked all ten fingers through his imaginary hair, the hair he used to have, his old gesture of frustration. He stood for a minute staring into his truck, holding his head, longing to be inside of it, turning the key in the ignition.

And then a fast moving bus whooshed a wall of freezing, sooty air straight up his nostrils, snapping him out of it and propelling him backwards.

Climbing to the Roof

James was eating lunch in his favorite booth in the corner when it happened: a waitress came over and started talking to him. Not even his waitress, but another one, one who had no reason whatsoever to come over to his table and start talking. To him! And even if it *had* been his waitress, a visit at this point would have been strange. That's what he liked about The Golden Corral. Aside from the beginning, when they got you settled with a drink, and the very end, when they brought the check, there wasn't a whole lot of being waited on, pleases and thank yous, having to wait for a refill, or another fork because yours dropped on the floor and you didn't want people to see you eating with it, or because you ordered something very different from what you got, anything like that. Here, you picked it all up yourself, whenever you wanted it, however much you wanted of it, at any one of four whole buffets. A soda machine and coffee station, even. Long gleaming rows of food and

drink, all set and ready to go, like a grocery store, except everything was already de-canned, heated up, and laid out to be chosen. And here was a waitress, stopping, yes, at James's table, looking down at him and smiling like they were friends.

"Gosh I'm tired," she said, reaching behind herself, unknitting the apron at the small of her back and refastening it tighter, bending her head forward and to the side in the process, enough for her glossy black ponytail to slip slowly at first, then fast as a spill over her shoulder. She straightened her head to look at James and smile when she was done, all re-tied. A gap between her two front teeth made her look a little devilish. James swallowed his bite of roast beef and was bewildered. He laid his fork against his plate, not letting go, but not spearing another bite either. He sucked in his stomach so that it wouldn't push against the table, sat up straighter. What was he missing? Why was she here? She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at his plate, leaned her left hip against the edge of his booth, settling against it.

"That's some good stuff, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

James's plate was just about empty, so he didn't know what she was talking about.

"The roast beef, silly. We just put that on the hot table last week. I've been eating it breakfast lunch and dinner."

James put down his fork, and rested both forearms on the table, interlaced his fingers politely.

“It’s wonderful,” said James, nodding and looking down at the lone triangle of roast beef left on his plate. The waitress swept a loose, long bit of hair behind her ear, uncovering a row of tiny silver studs climbing up her right earlobe.

“Ahhm, do I know you?”

He just wasn’t sure what else to say. She laughed, a shocking succession of delicate snorts, clapped her hands together.

“Oh no,” she said, seeming reluctant to shake off the laughter, “It’s just it gets boring in here, I’m just trying to pass some time.”

She gestured out into the room with the arm not leaning against the side of James’s booth. A row of heads poking from the tops of their own booths stretched in front of James, way to the other end of the room, the length of four buffet tables. James realized for the first time in the month or so that he’d been coming here on his lunch break that there wasn’t any music. The room was hushed. The floor, wall-to-wall maroon carpet, matched the booths. A cluster of servers leaned in the doorway of the kitchen, three women and one man, a cloud of blue denim shirts. They didn’t seem to be talking. One woman noticed James and his new waitress friend looking her way. She smiled, waved, and broke away from the others.

Upon arrival she theatrically swept a forearm over her forehead, collapsed into the seat across, propped up on one elbow.

“Ellie, do you know it’s only 12:37? I think I might die.”

“You better get up outta that booth before Neal sees you.”

James was not sure where to put his hands, who to look at.

“Oh Neal can go fuck himself,” the woman said, but she grunted and got up anyway, standing across from the waitress whose name James was happy to learn, turning it over in his head a few times: Ellie, Ellie, short for Ellen, Eleanor? He could have figured it out earlier by checking her nametag, but he hadn’t wanted to get caught looking at her chest.

“Who’s your friend?” the new waitress asked Ellie after glancing at James as if she’d just noticed him sitting there. She had a meticulously done hairdo, lots of hard blond curls falling over the crown of her head, each an individually perfect hiding place for a pencil. This hair reminded James of the beauty pageants for little girls his mother watched all the time when he was small. She always sighed her wish for a daughter at commercial breaks, tangling her fingers in James’s hair if he were on the couch too.

James thought this waitress looked old for this sort of hairdo. And there was that her brown skin didn’t match her platinum hair, though he got used to this after a minute.

“I don’t know,” said Ellie, turning to James and blowing a blue gum bubble, “who are you?”

“I’m James,” said James, trying to figure out a suave way to arrange his face. He was still shell shocked from the arrival of first Ellie and now this new woman. James was used to moving around quietly, not talking to many people. His only friend, Otis, had moved away after they’d graduated from high school together two years ago.

The woman reached her hand across the table.

“I’m Celeste.” James shook it, blushing a little when he felt a dribble of something wet, probably thousand island from his salad, pass from his palm to hers, flatten greasily in the middle of their handshake. She pulled back and laid both palms on the table, maybe to subtly wipe off the dressing splotch. Though it was also possible that she hadn’t noticed at all, James tried to reassure himself.

“Let me guess,” Ellie put a finger to her lips, squinting as if she were guessing, “Job Corps!”

“Yup,” James patted the little white emblem on the left breast pocket of his navy t-shirt. He patted a little too hard, sending his chest jiggling. He’d gained weight since the end of high school. It’s just that he was so *bored* now without Otis to tag along with. Eating had become his hobby.

“My nephew Phillip is doing Job Corps,” said Celeste excitedly, “Do you know Phillip?”

“Uuum, I don’t think so, I just started a month ago, I don’t know a whole lot of people yet. And I don’t really know anyone outside my class.”

Celeste looked deflated, like a wilted flower crowned with all that hard platinum hair.

“Well his name is Phillip, Phillip Wiggins, I’m sure you’ll be running into him soon. He’s a real sweetheart, trying to get his life back together, ran with the wrong people for years, but he’s trying to shape up now. He’s been down at Job Corps for, oh let me think…”

“*Celeste!*” Ellie interrupted, hitting the last half of Celeste’s name hard, like a mother. Celeste did sound, James thought, pretty capable of building up lots of

steam, talking for an awfully long time before anything ever stopped her. He wondered if Ellie interrupted Celeste a lot. He wondered if they talked to other customers like they did him, and he felt a wave of jealousy rush up his throat for these imaginary people.

“Not everyone in Job Corps is a delinquent like your Phillip,” Ellie hissed, gesturing with her eyes down at James. As she looked from Celeste standing across from her, to Phillip sitting below her in front of his nearly empty plate, and back and forth and back again, her hair was always moving, like the big black belts inside a carwash, swinging around and interrupting Phillip while he was in the middle of trying to count her earrings.

“It’s a real school, not some kind of a halfway house.”

“Well who in the hell said it was any kind of a halfway house? And who’re you calling a juvenile delinquent? You’ve got some nerve.”

Celeste’s hands were on her hips, talking loudly now, putting on an all-in-good-fun display to hide her hurt feelings. James recognized this quickly because he’d done it before, though not since he’d lived with his mom. Aside from the womanly hands on hips gesture, the mood was the same. A man in the booth behind scratched his shoulder and glanced over. James was, again, not sure what to do. Celeste looked down at him, her shellacked curls not moving, aside from a floating halo of single hairs the hairspray must have missed. They caught the sun once in a while, little gold threads floating in the air free of their curls.

“Please forgive our friend here, she gets a little uppity sometimes.”

Celeste straightened her back, brushed off her apron, making to leave.

“Oh for crying out loud, Celeste, come one,” said Ellie, her voice softer than her words. She blew another blue bubble. A conciliatory blue bubble meant in a way to ratchet down the tension that’d built up so suddenly, to act out nonchalance, chill-out-ness.

“Hey, it’s ok,” said James, to diffuse the tension. He’d had a lot of practice doing this with his mother too, throwing out something, anything, to distract her from whatever she was getting frenzied about, “I guess we *are* kind of a bunch of juvenile delinquents over there anyway.”

This succeeded in distracting both women. They swiveled simultaneously to look at him as if the same puppeteer were under the floor pulling their strings at the same time.

“Oh please-Louise. James, honey, what are you talking about?”

This was not a question. Celeste’s face took on a new look, unmistakable and unbearable to James: pity. “I know juvenile delinquents and you’re not one. Look at you, you’re a straight arrow.”

Ellie looked revolted at Celeste’s loose lips all over again. She and James were about the same age, Celeste older. To be a straight arrow was no compliment. Not to a nineteen year old enrolled in Job Corps. Maybe if he were at a fancy college like Otis, this could be something to laugh off. Because Otis would become something powerful! Respected. He would have a COLLEGE DEGREE, and James would be a plumber, maybe, if he was lucky.

“You don’t know what James is, why he’s there, none of that,” Ellie said, before pursing her lips and spitting her gum into a crumpled silver wrapper she’d pulled from her apron pocket. Celeste turned to James. Paused.

“Well why *are* you there?”

“I’m getting my certification for plumbing.”

Celeste snorted.

“Ha! He’s getting certified to fix the pipes! You’ll be just fine, every woman loves a man with a trade, whooo!, a man who works with his hands. I love it.”

Celeste nodded lecherously at her own words. Ellie looked mock-horrified, mouth wide open in a big O. But then she laughed. A man James figured to be a manager headed rapidly over, saving James from either of the women seeing that his entire neck and cheeks were consumed by sudden, fiery splotches.

Celeste began to clear James’s table, with purpose. Ellie turned fast and fled the table.

“Hello Neal,” Celeste said, sing-songy, and gathered up all of James’s silverware and slid it in his empty glass. While she was bent over gathering, she shot James a surreptitious co-conspirator kind of wink. A wink! Had James ever been winked at in his life? No, he didn’t think so. And then she was gone, back into the huddle of blue shirts leaning into the kitchen doors.

“Those two bugging you sir?” the man asked. But it was a joke, accompanied by a chuckle, an inside joke for James. A joke implying that Ellie and Celeste were his friends, wanted to be at his table, were in fact harassing him with their friendship,

wanting to talk to him. And James laughed too, feeling, for a moment, very big, strong, manly.

After James paid his bill he took a striped peppermint from the glass bowl by the register. He'd never been tempted to do that before, but he was hungry still. He'd only eaten one helping of lunch, because Ellie had come over just as he was starting to think about a second. Normally, he'd get at least three, taking care never to pile his plates up to their edges, so he wouldn't look greedy in case anyone was noticing. And no one *was* noticing, which was why he liked the Golden Corral so much. Here it was quiet, quiet, quiet. James didn't have to talk, or figure out how to talk, to people, this arduous process of puzzle piecing himself into some group.

Some of his classmates at Job Corps brought lunches: sandwiches in foil, rectangular packets of orange peanut butter crackers, super-sized Snickers bars. Some guys walked to McDonalds in a great pack so big there wasn't room for all of them on the sidewalk. They walked en masse two blocks down from Job Corps, spilling off the sidewalk into the street, playing chicken with oncoming cars, trucks and buses like a great, defiant, school of fish, breaking apart only when it was time to squeeze themselves into the door under the red arches, then funnel into single file to buy lunch, pulling crumpled dollars and loose nickels and dimes from their regulation navy Dickies pants pockets.

From noon to one, most everyone ate sitting on the pavement in front of the school, right on Pratt Street, the big front entrance flanked by grates with hot, wet steam piping from them. But James didn't like sitting near the grates. The steam

stunk. And he'd gone to McDonalds with the other guys for the first few mornings, but he didn't like trailing behind them, edging the periphery, trying to figure out how to wedge himself into floating conversations. And when they got back, he didn't like figuring out which square of pavement to sit on. It was just like high school, despite what Otis said the last time they'd talked on the phone, maybe three months before. Otis who knew everything. It hurt to know that Otis-the-expert-in-all-things-tell-it-like-it-is-dude was reassuring him, telling him something both boys knew wasn't likely.

“It'll be different, J, I mean, you know, these are *men* you're going into Corps with, not stupid kid idiots like at Douglass.”

This had turned out to be maybe *sort* of true. All of the guys at the Corps were here to get certified for something, some real job-job. But lots of them were here because they had to be, straight from Juvenile Hall, and some of the older ones even, out on parole. James felt young and soft in this crowd.

James and Otis stuck together through high school even though they were different in all things but their inability to blend in, navigate the world of school. Otis talked constantly, making up for James's relative silence. Otis's favorite topic was his bugs. He'd brought his entire labeled collection of boarded, pinned ants, roaches, and moths into his admissions interviews, and this was a big hit. He carried his pet frog, Andre, around with him in a hand-held Plexiglas cage. He set Andre under his desk during class and fed the frog bugs that didn't cut the mustard for his boarded collection.

Otis really did know everything. The problem, though, was that he told everyone in the world everything he knew, even if they hadn't asked about it (and really, they didn't ever ask about it). He loved telling people about Andre, Andre's favorite kinds of bugs, how they compared to bugs that were better for Otis's collection because they had more chitin and would therefore ossify, stay tacked to the cardboard forever and not slip off like softer ones. Beetles were great for the board, crickets too. Not flies so much, and this was great because Andre loved flies, could digest them better than hard-shelled insects. Once in a while though, Otis would inform his repulsed audiences, he'd slip Andre a nice beetle as a treat.

The constant feed of this sort of information repelled everyone around Otis. It even gave teachers the willies. Otis's voluble expertise grossed James out too, though he became accustomed to it. His long lectures, his frog, were just a part of him, like his astonishing skinniness, like the fluorescent yellow, green, pink hoodies he wore, convinced the shocking colors helped him to lure bugs. Once in a while one of Otis's gleeful ramblings would gross James out all over again, some gory reality of the lives and deaths of insects and frogs. James marveled at Otis's ability to go on at length to anyone around. James liked feeling himself safe under the umbrella of his role as Otis's sidekick. When people thought of Otis, they thought of James too: the husky, quiet one who tagged along with the weird bug-boy.

James had always been quiet. When he lived alone with his mother, often when he talked, she'd swat him on the back of the head and say "just like a boy, just like your goddamn dad. Oh, maybe one day I'll have a girl." And then she would lock him against her chest in the crook of her elbow and noogie the top of his head,

hard, so it hurt, like she was trying to bury her knuckles into his brain. James never knew a woman who ever did this besides his mother: this thing men did so they could be violent with each other but pretend they were playing.

James's mom got taken away at the beginning of his senior year at Douglass. She rolled off the couch one night, knocking over her fold out dinner tray and a nearly entirely full can of Heineken, which shot its insides across the room in a fast, foamy stream. James knew his mother was epileptic, but he'd never seen her seize before, thought maybe this was another thing she made up on a manic whim, for attention. He left the door open and called 911 from the payphone out in the courtyard. He stayed in the shadows of a vestibule down the hall until the ambulance people had come and gone, taking his mother with them on a stretcher.

She never came back, and he didn't go looking for her. And so he lived alone for that last months of high school, buying groceries at Shop-n-Save with the packet of WIC vouchers that came once a month. Otis came over and gathered flying roaches from the cabinets. Yellow, blue, and then green eviction warnings came, but he got out before it happened, before the city came.

He knew people felt sorry for him. The neighbors saw the slips on the door. Nobody joked him at school for wearing the same dirty clothes all the time. Otis brought odd bits of food he swiped from his grandmother's fridge. But what James actually felt was relief to be on his own those few months. There was so much new room to breathe. He didn't have to watch his mother from the corner of his eye anymore, watching for signs that her mood was about to change, that she would force him to sit on the couch with her for hours while she cried and yelled at the television,

the walls, him. James never knew how to take care of his mother, and now that she was gone, he felt free. Guilty, but free.

James signed up for Job Corps because he'd heard that you lived there while you were enrolled, even got paid. He left the apartment behind. He packed some clothes, a toothbrush, a few packets of Twinkies, and he left.

James went back to the Golden Corral the next day. He scanned the room for Ellie, but didn't see her. Celeste yelled from the kitchen doorway.

“James!”

She covered her mouth with both hands after yelling his name so loud, came hurrying across the room to say hello, a fast walk/skip that made her look like she had to go to the bathroom. People sitting in booths, people standing at the buffet, looked at Celeste, glanced over at James, then back to their plates, getting quickly back down to the business of figuring out what to pile onto their next plates.

“I'll seat him, I'll seat him,” she said to the host who'd been about to take James to a booth. The man handed her a napkin-rolled bundle of silver, and she turned, swiped her hand through the air in a gesture for James to follow her. When they got to the booth, Celeste slid in across from James as if they'd come together. James found himself once again in the predicament of not being sure what to say, or do, or look at. He smoothed his shirt over his chest, his fingers bumping reassuringly over the raised Corps emblem on his left breast pocket. Celeste leaned against the booth with all of her back. With one arm, she swished her blonde corkscrews to fall

over the crown of her head, so she could lean the full weight of it against the back of the booth.

“Do you like my friend?”

She looked at him coyly, pulled a pen from behind her ear and began to roll it on the table under her index finger, back and forth, back and forth.

“Who, Ellie?”

James’s mouth went dry. He was blushing; he knew it. Celeste laughed.

“Come on now, who else? Don’t be shy, I’m just asking. Don’t worry, just between you and me.”

“Well I just met her yesterday.”

“Yeah, and?”

James was getting worried. His lunch break was two hours long. He had about 45 minutes to eat, and he needed the rest of the time to catch the #3 to the Corps and back. He’d never been late for a class, even though other guys were late all the time, and the instructors never made an issue of it.

“I like her fine, but I’m sure she has a boyfriend.”

Celeste sighed and leaned forward, talking quieter now.

“Yeah, she’s got a boyfriend. That’s the problem. I’m thinking if she had some attention from a nice young man like you, she’d maybe think about cutting him loose.”

James worked on tamping down his blush by staring hard out the window beyond Celeste’s head at two billboards over the intersection: a sad looking girl with red pigtails in front of a backdrop reading: 1-800-DONATE-CARS, the other a

smiling bride and groom, MARRIAGE WORKS lettered in black over their chests, like bars. Someone had spray-painted a pink moustache and penis on the bride and the little girl. James fleetingly wondered how the people doing the graffitiing had climbed that high facing the traffic of Lombard. Had anyone seen them? Had they gotten away with it? The groom looked back at James, untouched, between the bride and little girl. This moment spent considering something besides Celeste finally quelled James's blush, and he was able to speak again.

“Listen, Celeste, I can't...I don't think I can help you. Ellie's great, but I just met her, you know?”

Celeste began to scoot herself sideways out of the booth.

“That's ok, honey, I'm sorry to be pushy, but you're such a sweetheart, and I saw the way she came right on over and said hi to you. I think she likes you well enough, and I care about her.”

James didn't know what to say, so he smiled weakly up at Celeste, who was now standing.

“What time do you all finish up at Job Corps for the day? Is it 5 or something like that?”

It was five. James nodded.

“Will you meet us here Friday? We'll do something sociable. And don't worry, just friends, I know, but we can all use more of those, isn't that right?”

James was horrified.

“Thanks for inviting me, but sometimes I get out later on Friday, and I'm not sure I'll be able to make it in time.”

“Well then we’ll wait. Don’t worry.”

Celeste patted the table with her hand, satisfied, like it was a done deal, and walked away.

James was panic-stricken. Had he just agreed to show up here on a Friday night with the vague arrangement that he and Ellie and Celeste would do something together? Something sociable? What was something sociable? And would Celeste tell Ellie that James *liked* her? Because he didn’t. Yes, she was beautiful and funny and had been nice to James for no reason at all the day before, but James didn’t think he’d ever be with a woman that way. He didn’t think it was plausible that one would choose to be with him, to look at him with anything more than a little pity. It was better not to hope. The idea of Ellie thinking he had the balls to hope made James want to jump off the top of a tall building.

As he caught himself thinking this—the tall building bit—he cringed. His mother threatened to jump off of tall buildings all the time before she was taken away. Even in his own head, without speaking out loud, he sounded like his mother. It was so much easier to keep his mouth shut, and keep far away from people, so they wouldn’t see through him, see that he didn’t belong in the world like they did, so they never saw that he was his mother’s son.

The row of maroon booths in front of him went double, and James fought viciously to kill his tears, blinking down so hard his entire face scrunched up with the effort. He missed Otis, wondered what he was doing, thought of Andre the frog, felt more alone than he had in a long time, maybe ever.

After a waitress came to his table with a glass for him to go fill himself at the soda station, and after he'd eaten (only one plate, because he felt a little queasy, and because Celeste had eaten up enough of his time that he had to rush for his bus), James took a deep breath and walked to the bus stop. For the five minutes he was there, he found himself tucking in his shirt, sucking in his belly. When he got on, he looked at the people around him. The old woman with the wheeled grocery cart in the seat behind the driver, did she live alone? The man sitting half in one seat half in the other, muttering, and rocking back and forth, had he ever not muttered to himself? Did it get better and worse? Did he think he was talking to someone specific? Was he on medication? And the driver, with an armful of gold bracelets, some links, some herringbone, did he buy himself a new bracelet every so often, slowly adding to his collection, or were they gifts from a girlfriend, a wife? All this in a six-minute bus ride that James usually spent staring out the window, remembering whatever he'd just eaten for lunch, daydreaming about what he'd eat the following day.

His stomach growled, a loud, plaintive, wandering growl, and he looked down at it in surprise.

That afternoon at the Corps, the focus for James's class was industrial pipes, the kinds used in apartment buildings, not single family homes. Because the Corps was waiting on a new shipment of snakes for class, and new technopetrol and colypylene tubing, the instructor divided everyone up into pairs to share the dwindling supply of old pipes and snakes hanging around waiting to be replaced.

James was partnered up with Roger, a white guy with stringy, greasy, mud colored hair hanging in his eyes, and a sloppy navy yin-yang tattooed on his left bicep.

They sat next to each other on high stools pulled up to their worktable, waiting for the instructor to drop off their pipes and work kit. James was gradually calming down after his talk with Celeste. It helped him to be assigned a partner, to be assigned a task, to know that after the task was through, he would go back to his dorm room for exactly half an hour and then down to the cafeteria for dinner. It helped him to know exactly what that meal would be: Salisbury steak and baked potatoes. On Tuesdays it always was. Wednesdays were fish sticks and broccoli, Thursdays chicken hash, and so on.

“Hey man,” said Roger, looking at James with the side of his eye through a few lank strands of hair, “you ever work with this stuff before?”

“Nope.”

“No?”

Roger, who James had never officially met, looked over at James with his full face now, surprised. “Really? I been working a while now. I just came in this place to get my cert, get job placement when the program’s over.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, look, this is simple shit here. Real easy. I’ll show you.”

Mr. Robeson, the instructor, dropped the kit on the table, clattered the snake next to it.

Roger pulled a rubber band out of his pocket and gathered his slick looking hair up into it. James wondered why he bothered, since nearly all of it popped right out, too short to stay gathered.

“They make it all sound so fucking complicated, but it’s not, I’m telling you. Watch this.”

Roger unhinged the two clasps of the kit, pulled out the pipes and started screwing the elbow joints together.

“See that? Bada-boom. They spend like three pages in the freaking manual explaining how to do that. Here, you try.”

Roger unscrewed the pipes, handed them to James. James smiled. He liked Roger. He fitted the small hitch end, and then screwed the two pipes together. He could tell, in his hands, the moment they couldn’t be screwed any further, when there was no more give to them.

“How’s that?” James asked, putting the pipe on the table and sliding it over to Roger.

“Ha!”

Roger clapped his hands, triumphant. One more piece of his hair slipped out of the rubber band and landed in his right eye. He opened the manual, flipping pages fast and showy with his thumbs, like cards in a deck.

“What’d I say, huh? This manual stuff, the school, they just got to put us through our paces. Can’t be handing out certs like candy.”

He chucked the manual behind his shoulder, where it landed loudly on the floor. No one noticed. The other twenty sets of partners, separated by five feet or so

between tables in the cavernous basement classroom, were talking loud, clanging their own pipes, joking around. Roger didn't make a move to pick up the manual. He lifted the pipes James screwed together and steadied them between his knees.

“Now, see, this is the rest of the chapter, right here, watch this. Pass me that snake.”

James passed Roger the snake. Roger poised it above the pipe and paused to look at James.

“Real tough stuff, huh? Step B: Stick the damn snake in the pipe.”

James laughed. Roger bit at his bottom lip, and snaked the snake into the pipe, paused when he hit the joint, and then rearranged it between his knees and twisted the snake a little. Its ridges glinted under the long fluorescent tube on the ceiling above them.

“Just got to be careful when you're turning this part here, cause if not, and the pipes are the real ancient ones you sometimes find, you'll damage them right at the joint. Be alright long as no one finds out, but still.”

Roger looked back down at the pipe between his knees and slowly pulled the snake back out. When he reached the top of the opening, he made an obscene in and out kind of gesture with the snake and the very opening of the pipe, and cackled, held up his hand for James to high five. James met his palm with a smack, and laughed. He felt giddy, the way he had leaving The Golden Corral not yet an hour before, when he'd met Ellie and Celeste.

“Hey,” said James, before he had time to consider what he was doing, “you ever go to The Golden Corral?”

“You mean the one on Lombard, right on the #3 line?”

“Yeah, that one.”

Roger looked at James gravely, like they were discussing a matter of great importance. He nodded, and this movement of his head was the last straw; the rubber band fell down his back and rolled to the floor between their two stools. Roger crouched to pick it up, grabbed the manual while he was down there. James waited until he was back on his stool to continue.

“Been a minute since I have, but yeah. What about it, man?”

“I’ve got some friends there, is all. We’re getting together Friday night, hanging out.”

As James talked, he felt lightheaded, grandiose. He sucked in his stomach and winced a little as the layer of flesh pressing up against his belt rearranged itself, fell into the fold below his belly button.

Roger reached behind his head to pull his hair into another attempt at a ponytail, his elbows sandwiching his face

“That’s cool. What’re you all doing?”

“I’m not sure, I’m just meeting them at 5 on Friday and we’re figuring it out from there, I think. Hey, you doing anything? You should come.”

The fluorescent tube of light directly above James and Roger’s table crackled, fizzed, flickered, then popped. Their table became shaded. Roger’s hair didn’t shine anymore. James let out his belly again.

“Your friends know any ladies?”

James laughed.

“They *are* ladies.”

Roger’s eyes opened wide and his head jolted up. He raised up his left hand for another high five, which James dutifully delivered.

“Count me in, man. Any of them yours?”

James felt a blush coming on. He talked loudly and confidently to fool the blush away. It hadn’t occurred to him to try this before.

“Oh, no, I just met them. And one of them is older,” said James, thinking of Celeste and feeling funny talking about her this way, like she and Ellie were things to think about having.

“Old ladies need love too, my man.”

Since the mention of Ellie and Celeste, Roger was talking with a kind of slyness, a glinty cockiness. It looked pretty goofy on him, James thought, and he was able to see Roger the way he’d seen Otis in the moments he looked absurd, talking nonstop about bugs and making kind of an idiot out of himself. James had the novel epiphany that maybe Ellie and Celeste would think he was cooler than Roger. Even if they didn’t, it would take the edge off to arrive with Roger, not show up alone.

Roger loaded the pipes back into the kit and latched the box, slid it to the edge of the table and laid the snake next to it. They sat for the rest of the class under their busted light, waiting for the bell to ring.

James didn’t go to The Golden Corral the next day, Thursday. If he had, he wouldn’t have known whether he should talk about hanging out Friday. He didn’t

know if Ellie knew that Celeste had invited him, and come to think of it, he didn't know if there'd be people there besides Ellie and Celeste.

He bought a jumbo Snickers from the vending machine in the lobby and went out front to sit on the grates with everyone else. The individual squares of the grid dug into his rear-end, but the other guys looked comfortable, so he sucked it up and settled back. After a few minutes, he didn't notice the steam so much anymore. The guy to his left was sitting by himself too, eating a McDonalds burger intently, taking one bite and then rotating it, studying it to decide where to sink his teeth into his next bite. Then he'd grab it with his teeth, and keep his eyes closed for a few beats, while he chewed. James ate his Snickers and relaxed, felt pretty ok. He felt like he and the guy eating his burger were at peace, and didn't need to say a word. He felt like he belonged. He found himself thinking about Ellie, the gap in her front teeth and her long ponytail.

He wondered where his mother was right then.

James went out to the grates to wait for Roger at 4:27pm. He knew this was early, but he was too antsy to sit in his room. He waited and waited and waited. Finally, at 4:55, Roger emerged at the end of the long hallway, stopping to talk to someone waiting for the phone booth. James quelled the impulse to scream at him, to run down the hall with his arms flailing, drag him to the bus stop. He'd started to sweat over the last ten minutes, thinking about Ellie and Celeste waiting, wondering if he was even coming. He tried to shrink back from his shirt to halt the progress of the stains under his arms. He was so close to tears; his nose was tingling with them.

Roger finally broke away from his conversation, and James could hear his laugh echo down the hallway. He saw Roger as he walked, slowly, with a strut, taking his time. He waved. His hair was pomaded straight back from his face. The tracks of a wide-toothed comb left shiny trails through it that James could see glinting from tens of feet away. Without hair falling in his face, Roger's age showed. He could be almost as old as Celeste, James thought, maybe close to forty. And he was so skinny that his shirt hung from his collarbones, never grazing his chest or stomach on the way down.

James felt glaringly fat. He sucked in his belly, but he knew this would make him sweat even more, and so let it out again. He dug deeply in his right pocket as if he were looking for something, even though he wasn't.

“Hey, sorry to keep you waiting there, bro.”

“No problem,” said James, his nose dripping now as a result of the rush of suppressed tears. He swiped at it with his arm.

They headed wordlessly out of the gates and onto Lombard, but when they got to the bus stop, Roger kept walking.

“Aahhm,” said James, slowing. It wasn't cold outside, but a girl within the Plexiglas bus-stop rectangle busied herself zippering a sort of plastic wrap around her baby in a stroller. Roger turned his head.

“Dude, it'll be faster if we walk it. Who knows when the bus'll come around again, you know?”

James nodded, even though he knew the #3 was dependable. It came every fifteen minutes, and stopped right across the street from The Golden Corral. He fell

into step next to Roger, trying not to pant. He had to do a discreet kind of run-step every few strides to keep up. He gave up on trying to keep his shirt away from his now-very-sweaty body. At least, James was grateful, the work of walking jettisoned his need to cry. This was good. When James and Roger intersected oncoming people on the sidewalk, James was the one to sidestep them, hugging the perimeter of the sidewalk, while Roger barreled through, seeming not to notice anyone in particular except girls, who he sometimes sucked his teeth at, turned his head to scope out from behind without slowing or breaking his stride. James was mortified by this, but also astonished when two or three of them actually looked up, and smiled at Roger.

Finally, after about ten minutes, they reached the crest of Lombard and saw the Golden Corral, the canary yellow sign with fluorescent red lettering and lasso blinking, on off, on off. It was dusk, and against the violet and pink sky, James thought the blinking sign was beautiful.

He looked at his watch and was discombobulated to discover that only seven minutes had passed since they'd set out from Job Corps. Out of habit, his mouth watered as they got closer, but he realized eating anything wasn't likely anytime soon. Ellie and Celeste wouldn't want to, were probably itching to get away from the place they'd worked all day. This shot James through with a new wave of nerves as he thought about the night they were walking towards.

“So what's the deal, did you find out what we're doing?” Roger asked, slowing as they crossed the street and landed on the block of The Golden Corral.

James shook his head.

“Hm Mm, no.”

“How well you know these ladies, man?”

Roger looked into James’s face, a little concerned. He ran both hands over his hair, as if to pat into place, even though it hadn’t budged, looked hard as rock.

“Not too well, but don’t worry. They’re cool.”

Roger nodded, as if this explanation were plenty. James felt a surge of something like confidence, power, to be in the lead, calling shots.

His heart fell though, when they reached the big double doors and all the lights were off inside. Roger rattled the handle halfheartedly, even though it was obviously locked.

James cupped his hands on the dark window to cut the glare of cars whizzing past, peered through the space between his hands. He smushed the tip of his nose against the glass. It was chilly, refreshing. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness on the other side, he made out the cash register, and the little green light flickering on the credit card machine behind the peppermint bowl. Beyond that, he could see the outline of the salad buffet, just a hulking shape in the dark. The side of the clock on the wall across from the kitchen picked up a reflection from the street, a crescent curve of light disappearing into its underside. James squinted hard, looking in the direction of the kitchen. Everything receded into thick darkness beyond the clock, no light at all. James remembered the blinds in the big windows. He’d seen servers dusting them. He might even have seen Ellie or Celeste dusting them before he knew who they were, he realized now.

James heard Roger move behind him, the rustling of clothes, and his shoes making some noise on the sidewalk.

“Hey man, forget it. Lets just go down the street to Pickles, get a drink. All them legal secretaries go there for happy hour.”

James had never been to a bar. He’d snuck sips of his mother’s beers, and they tasted like spoiled water every time. He was attuned to the smell of alcohol coming out in strangers’ exhales, and the particular smell of it working its way through pores and oil and pomade and perfume, seeping from under peoples’ skins, getting into the air. Every time he smelled it these days, he did a double take, whipped his head around, because this was his mother’s smell. For a moment, he’d hold his breath, certain she was around somewhere.

His recent habit of eating too much helped him relax. The sheer mechanics of chewing eased the guilt attendant to the knowledge that he hadn’t gone looking for her, searching maybe at hospitals or something. And he’d abandoned the apartment. He knew he couldn’t have figured out how to get the rent paid, but still. Would she come back? Find it empty? If she did, James knew, she’d get drunk, and lose her mind.

So James did not want to go to any bar. Did not, did not, did not. He looked into the space between his hands with a new intensity, desperately seeking out any sign of Celeste or Ellie, feeling Roger behind him, restless. James had gotten them out here in the first place, and he wouldn’t be able to say no to any alternate idea of Roger’s. What could he say? Nope, I’d rather walk back to the Corps and hit the cafeteria? He’d be immediately unveiled as a loser. More than he already had, bringing Roger here, promising him a night hanging out with the ladies of the Golden

Corral, and then showing up at a shuttered restaurant. Why were they closed on a Friday evening anyway?

The small, circular window in the swinging kitchen door lit up. Ellie's face came into the center of this globe-view. James made an involuntary noise, a kind of a yelp.

It was unsettling to be ushered into the restaurant he'd only known during the day, when the blinds were wide open and the lights on, smells from the hot table piping through the place. Following closely behind Ellie, James and Roger cut a path through the dark room. It smelled like cleaning solution, not food. The place was entirely silent, no echoes of anything, not even the traffic right outside. Their feet made no noise, falling on carpet.

As they passed through the swinging kitchen door, James felt a funny wave of déjà vu. Of course, he'd never been here before, but looking at the room around him, he realized that he had particular ideas about it. He'd built them during a months worth of lunch hours spent gazing absently through the circle window in the door. He'd pictured a row of three or four cushiony, grandmotherly Aunt Jemima looking women doing the cooking, nothing like this man named Donnie who Ellie introduced them to. He had a great, gleaming, bald head and gold hoops in each ear. His chef pants were filthy: long smears and drips of crusted food plastering his upper thighs. He smiled and lifted his hand to wave when Ellie said, "James, this is Donnie. Donnie, James. And who're you?" to Roger, who answered "Roger," and shot the same sort of wave right back at Donnie.

Celeste blindsided James, came from the side and hugged him. Today her curls were a deep, dark maroon, like blood. This was a jolt. James tried to reconcile the foreign hair color with the familiar woman.

Celeste pulled back and looked behind James at Roger, very formally offered him her hand to shake.

“Hello there, I’m Celeste.”

Roger answered, “pleasure to meet you, Celeste,” and gave a half-bow at the waist. Whatever he’d used to slick back his hair was beginning to melt, creating a shiny perimeter creeping below his hairline.

“What’re you all doing closed on a Friday night?” asked Roger, leaning back against a stack of milk crates, burrowing his fists so deep into his pockets that it looked like he was trying to pull down his pants.

“We close for a week every April and October. Our owner’s been doing it since he bought the franchise. He goes on vacation, doesn’t mind if we hang around,” Ellie answered, as she slid a piece of gum from its packet and began to unwrap it.

“Sweet deal,” said Roger, nodding, looking at the walls around him as if this bit of information warranted another impression.

“Yeah, it may be sweet, but it’s not fun and games for everyone around here.”

Donnie’s disembodied voice came from where he’d crouched behind the line, hidden from view, clattering things around. His voice took on an eerie, tinny, sound, like he was speaking into a cast-iron pipe. He grunted audibly and stood up, hoofing a stack of sheet pans the size of the centerfolds some of the guys tacked to their dorm walls at the Corps. James watched Donnie slide the empty pans far enough across the

counter that they wouldn't fall, noticed the intricate navy tattoos coating both of his arms, difficult to make out against his dark skin. He thought he saw some letters, but he didn't want to get caught staring. Donnie looked up at James and Roger where they stood, still hovering close to the door.

"These two hang around all week and watch me put the place in order, get rid of old stuff and figure out what we need new." Donnie said, gesturing with his thumb at Celeste and Ellie. Ellie cracked a tiny blue gum bubble between her teeth. She rolled her eyes.

"Don't go getting all sour on us, Donnie. You know I brought you something," Celeste said, pulling a small plastic baggie out of her purse and shaking it in the air like a flag.

"Alriiiiight," said Roger, doing his appreciative nodding again. His gel had reached the crest of his forehead now, and his hair was beginning to slip from its hold, bobbing at the root with the movement of his head.

"Now you're talking," said Donnie, clapping his hands together, pushing the sheet pans a bit further in before turning his back to them, taking off his black and white striped chef coat and hanging it on a post next to the grill, the white of his undershirt dazzling James's eyes with its brightness.

Ellie led the way out to the back of the restaurant. Celeste propped open the door with a brick. The five of them made their way past two trapezoidal, overflowing dumpsters, to a tiny empty lot with room only for three parking spaces. It was night now, and as they made their way to the other side, headlights moved across their

bodies until they rounded the corner into the private, empty, lot. Donnie stamped his feet and clapped to scare off the rats. Just as James was beginning to wonder what the hell was going on? Where were they going? Donnie reached up with his thick arm to rattle down the fire escape ladder. While James tried not to look terrified, Donnie went inside again and came back with five plastic milk crates tucked beneath his chin. He set them down at the base of the ladder.

It was only three stories to the roof, James knew, but his heart was racing. There was no way out of this, not without looking like a wus. He was overcome with an inexplicable flash of rage. At who, he didn't know, but he wanted to scream something into the sky. All he'd been going for today was whatever it felt like to be normal, just for once, even if he had to fake his way through it every step of the way, and what had it gotten him? Stuck in front of a fucking wall he didn't want to climb, that's what. He felt like a bug, doomed in one of Otis's catching cups, soon to be pinned to a board.

He remembered his limited view into the kitchen of The Golden Corral the moment the door, in swinging open, stayed still for just the most fleeting moment before it pulled closed again, giving up a view that was there, then gone, in a moment, like a dream forgotten in the morning. He wanted badly to be in his regular booth, eating however many plates he wanted, in peace. Really, he would have liked this very much, he thought bitterly, because he was ravenous, hadn't eaten since breakfast.

Celeste took one milk crate from the stack and lodged it against her hip, the way she might hold a small child. With the other hand, she held the rail of the ladder, and started climbing the rungs. Ellie followed.

“Y’all are nuts,” Roger muttered before taking his crate and following Ellie and Celeste.

James picked up his crate, sucked in his stomach, and climbed. Donnie came up behind him.

But on the roof, everything changed. There was nothing between James and the sky. It was as if the ground had been raised, like suddenly he’d grown a couple hundred feet. He walked to the front edge and peered over. People walked on the sidewalk; cars stopped for a long red light; a man paced at the bus stop across the street; no one looked up! James stared at the man down there, certain he would eventually feel eyes on him, readying himself to look away, and back away from the ledge, but the man never looked up. The graffiti’d twin billboards of the married couple and little girl with the tow truck weren’t legible. From this perspective, they were reduced to a narrow sliver.

The world felt different, safe, and James was exhilarated.

“James come on over here, have some,” Ellie called from twenty feet away, waving a lit joint the way Celeste had waved the baggie in the air of the kitchen half an hour before.

He backed away from the edge, running his hand over his left breast pocket, like he’d been taking to doing lately when he was nervous, but he wasn’t wearing his

Job Corps shirt tonight, and so didn't feel the reassuring emblem under his fingers. He walked the twenty or so feet over to the milk-crates. Celeste, Donnie, Roger, and Ellie were sitting on in a tight circle.

"Pull up a seat," said Roger, patting the empty milk crate between him and Ellie.

James sat down. Ellie took a long inhale, and passed the joint to James. He took it between his fingers and inhaled as Ellie began to exhale, a long, dim funnel of smoke into the night in front of her.

James had never smoked weed, but always liked the smell. Otis's uncle smoked, and a cloud of it settled around the upper hallway when he did, despite the towel he pushed up under his door. James had liked Otis's uncle. When he was stoned he was quiet, smiled a lot, quite the reverse of the effect drinking had on James's mom, whose fits of screaming got worse the more six packs she put down. James would have tried it long before tonight, had it ever been offered to him. He took one more pull, then passed it along to Roger, who inhaled it greedily, like it was food and he was starved.

The feeling that flooded his body after a few minutes was euphoric. He realized after a moment had gone by that this was sort of what eating felt like these days, but more effective. His constant backbeat of anxiety was gone. His body felt empty. He had no urge to suck in his stomach, even though there were four people sitting facing him who, if they chose to look, could surely see it sloppily hanging over his belt, pulling at his shirt.

In fact, he decided giddily, hell with it. He leaned backwards so he could reach the buckle, and unclipped his canvas belt, slid it out of its loops and dropped it onto the roof next to him. The ground up here *is* the roof, he thought to himself, amazed at the depth of this perception.

“Whoa there, buddy, it’s not that kind of party,” said Eddie, looking warily at James’s belt doubling over onto itself at the ground.

James didn’t recognize Eddie’s uneasiness, he was so taken with his epiphany about the roof.

“Eddie, do you realize that up here, the ground is the roof and the roof is the ground? You know, like, my belt, it’s on the ground, but it’s on the roof too!”

A beat of silence passed. A horn honked in the street, and this was followed by the sound of a car stepping on the gas, squealing off, the noise of it reverberating in the air.

Celeste let out a bark of laughter, and everyone else chimed in like they’d just been waiting for her to get them rolling.

“Right on, man, right on,” said Eddie through his laughter, a big hearty laugh that reminded James of Santa Claus.

“Well he’s right,” said Ellie, “think about it, the ceiling is the floor.”

“We’re flying high, people!” Celeste said, plucking the joint carelessly from Roger. It had burned down low, and the coal-red end of it hit her finger. She flung it to the ground, and leapt up from her crate, clutching at her hand and yowling. Roger scrambled around the gravel-strewn roof trying to rescue what was left of the joint. Celeste hopped around him, in a little circle, still yelping in pain.

Her violently bouncing curls flew off her head. James was so stunned, he forgot to breathe. He didn't understand why everyone else was laughing harder than they'd been a moment ago. The pile of maroon curls lay, limp and defeated, on the ground that was the roof. In the dark they could be mistaken for road kill, a pile of dog shit. Or maybe, James thought, was he imagining this? Was this what being high was like? It was normal to hallucinate, right?

"Girl, you had better pick up that weave before I steal it," said Eddie, making a move to grab the pile of hair.

"You're going to have to fight me for it," said Ellie, lunging for the weave and clutching it, her own ponytail whipping the air behind her, remaining affixed to her own head.

Her hand disappeared in the now homeless curls. She walked over to James. She placed the hair carefully on top of his head, stood back to appraise the angle, leaned over him again to adjust it. He had a clear view down her shirt, which fell away from her body as she leaned. She smelled like shampoo, the gum she was chewing, and weed smoke. James wanted to crawl into her shirt, felt nearly confident enough to try, but she straightened up and walked back to her milk crate before he had a chance.

Celeste, standing still now, looking, James thought, naked and incomplete without her hair, laughed the loudest. She had a tiny nub of hair gathered on top of her head, like the tied tip of a birthday balloon.

James sat on his crate and felt the weight and warmth of Celeste's hair on his head, and took the fresh joint Roger passed him, that he'd been rolling since giving

up on the one Celeste threw down, brought more smoke into his lungs. He inhaled long and hard now, wanting to keep his high going, and closed his eyes while Celeste, Ellie, Roger, and Eddie talked and laughed around him.

He felt the slightest breeze on his face. How liberated his stomach felt now without a belt strangling it! He thought of the view down Ellie's shirt, her pale skin glowing in the night. He thought of his mother, as he often did, but without guilt or anxiety. He sat completely still and thought he could hear her voice, hear the popping tab of a beer can, after hours of making herself sick with sobbing, her nose completely stuffed and her voice croaking, exhausted from screaming. He felt Roger pluck the joint from his fingers. He didn't open his eyes.

James felt alright. He did; he felt alright. He kept his eyes closed for a few minutes, making an effort to bottle up a memory of this feeling so that he could find it again when he needed to. When he opened his eyes, he smiled, and took Celeste's hair off of his head. He walked over to Celeste as Ellie had walked over to him, and tenderly anointed her with her own hair. She smiled up at him, and he went back to his crate.

No one laughed. The five of them sat quietly for a long time, breathing in the silence together, nothing at all standing between them and the sky, the stars, the night air.

Packing

Cherie was shampooing her mother in law's hair in the kitchen sink. She'd been doing this quite a lot since Pearl moved in, wanting to make sure she felt loved and fussed over enough to distract from Reno's complete lack of welcoming-ness. Ok, so maybe Cherie did this to distract herself more than Pearl, who these days wasn't able to notice much she could recall with any clarity later. She'd begun to forget who Reno even was. She'd smile at him politely. Sometimes she batted her eyelashes and called him Bill, the name of her long gone husband, Reno's dad. This

was certainly creepy. And she'd taken to calling Cherie Martha. "Do you know who Martha might have been?" Cherie asked Reno in bed the night it happened the first time. "Nope," he'd said, without turning from his book. But Pearl's inability to remember didn't make Reno's attitude any less infuriating. To prevent herself from crying, shrieking, throwing things, what Cherie usually did in response to Reno's long, petulant sulks about one thing or another, she fell into taking care of Pearl.

For crying out loud, his own mother! Really, it burned Cherie up from the inside out. The kitchen shampoos became an escape. Pearl's inch or two of baby-fine white hair certainly didn't need much shampooing, but that didn't matter. Pearl loved to be touched. And touching Pearl, caring for her, made Cherie feel the way she imagined having a baby would. Having a baby: this was all she wanted to do! All in the world! If she harped on it too much though, she'd have to cry. So she slammed the brakes on the floodgates by throwing herself into treating Reno's mother with deliberate tenderness.

She pushed a chair flush up against the sink, and topped it with the Yellow Pages so Pearl's head could reach. She put a couch cushion on top of that. She plunked Pearl into this chair gently, and draped a towel across her shoulders. She twisted both faucets on and wiggled her fingers under the water until the temperature was just right. She centered one hand between Pearl's chopstick-tiny shoulder blades and held the back of her head with the other, guiding her. It couldn't feel natural to bend backwards like this, Cherie knew, so she'd murmur encouragingly as she maneuvered Pearl's head into the sink: "That's it, just about, just another inch, ok? Can you scooch down a little? There we go." Then, as she cupped Pearl's head-

which was tiny but had such heft!- Cherie filled a water glass and emptied it over one side of Pearl's head, then the other, taking great care to start the pour right at Pearl's hairline, so the water wouldn't crest her forehead and dribble into her eyes. Then she lathered and rinsed, lathered and rinsed, smoothing Pearl's hair from the root all the way to the base of her neck in one soft, long, sweep of her hand. Pearl, whose moods were so unpredictable lately, loved this ritual. Once she was settled back in Cherie's hands, she relaxed like a wet egg-noodle. Sometimes she fell asleep.

Drying Pearl off, hoisting her forward and twisting a towel around her head, not too tight, but not so loose it would flop and unwind, Cherie felt anger get back under her skin. Her wet hands caught a chill in the air, not involved anymore under the warm stream of water. If only she could just have a baby, so that she could always be swept up in something like shampooing, washing, cooking, caring for, some little person who would need these things from her. The way Pearl did now, but it would be so different! Pearl was getting further and further away, but a child would get closer and closer. The older it became, the more history it would have with Cherie, the more time Cherie would be on this earth, new and improved, as someone's mother.

She was someone's wife, but Reno didn't need her. She was someone's daughter in law, but Pearl called her Martha, for God's sake. She'd not talked to her own parents in ten years. She spent her childhood fantasizing about babies, sweet little smiling cherub-y babies she would raise with such love and warmth. The way she wished she'd been. Music boxes and diapers and lullabies and silver spoons and nurseries and.... She consoled herself for the better part of her 33 years dreaming

dreams with pink and blue walls and babies floating through them. Whenever she had a happy moment she withdrew from it for a minute, thinking how much better it would be when she was a mother.

At the point with Reno when Cherie realized things might lead to marriage, she was elated. Surely marriage would lead to children, though they never discussed this directly at the time. She never stopped to look hard at Reno. If she had, she would have seen that he just didn't seem to enjoy things. Well, except for the bottles he hid all over: behind the couch, in the cab of his truck, in his toolbox, in the laundry bag. She stopped herself from wondering why he kept them hidden. Why not just keep a bottle in the cabinet and make no apologies for it? Maybe this would have, if Cherie'd cared to notice, given her a sense of his past.

He was not a spring chicken. Reno was 48. That expression: the old dog and the new tricks. This would have perhaps challenged her fixed idea that once they had a baby, everything would change. She might have laughed at the idea of him changing an infant's diaper, or patiently answering the questions of a two year old. He was raised in Australia, and his accent blindsided her. Beneath his sexy hard y's and flat a's, what was there? But she wanted a child out of the deal. She felt entitled, after four years of weathering life with him. Maybe a baby could be the one thing that would fix it all.

With Pearl tucked in, a fresh towel snug over her pillow, Cherie stayed downstairs another hour, puttering around, rearranging the fridge and sweeping up. Then she sat at the table and stared at the window over the sink. She didn't see anything beyond it; it was dark. The only view to be had was the neighbors' kitchen

window a few feet away, plastic shades pulled against the night. No, Cherie's gaze glanced off and then landed against the window itself. She let her focus go, the reflections against the windowpanes from the overhead light going all fuzzy. She sat until she felt ready to go upstairs and lie down.

The next day, Cherie got Pearl all bundled up for the drive to her house. They had to start sorting things, get a handle on what to do with all of Pearl's things. The house was going on the market in a week, and the realtor needed things cleared out and prettied up.

The whole mess began when Pearl didn't show up one Saturday for her regular visit, and didn't answer the phone. Cherie drove to her house, went inside when the doorbell went unanswered, and found Pearl conked out on the couch in front of the blaring Home Shopping Network, a tub of room temperature Neapolitan ice cream leaking steadily from its soggy bottom, off the edge of the coffee table, brown white and pink gone to the color of mud. When Cherie turned off the TV and woke her, Pearl looked up with big eyes, confused and disoriented. Cherie called Reno, whispering insistently into the phone so his mother wouldn't hear.

He didn't get it. Exactly what was the problem with a woman taking a nap in her own home? She'd been doing it for *years*. You'd rather she be swimming laps? Taking a jog? Eating rice cakes instead of ice cream? She could see him rolling his eyes through the phone, raking his fingers through his hair as he worked himself into a tizzy. After he hung up he'd be digging through his dirty laundry for a slug from one of his hidden bottles.

Pearl's lapses got worse over the following months. She'd call on the phone and asked for Bill. Cherie paused and then said slowly, loudly as if Pearl were deaf, instead of losing her head, "I'M CHERIE PEARL, BILL WAS YOUR HUSBAND, REMEMBER?" The woman next door came home one day to find Pearl standing on her porch, fingering the hanging wind chimes. She said it looked like Pearl was trying to figure out what they were. The only viable foodstuff in Pearl's kitchen, Cherie discovered one evening, was a half-gallon of ice cream. At least she'd remembered to put it back in the freezer.

But ice cream? Cherie thought if she lost her bearings, had nothing to do but sit around and eat, liberated from her life and thoughts, she might like a huge bag of salt& vinegar potato chips. Yes, she'd like very much to spend a day just crunch, crunch, crunching until the inside of her mouth was raw and blistered.

Lila, the neighbor who found Pearl examining her wind chimes, had been collecting the newspapers. But they weren't inside. They were all stacked neatly, like logs, in the firewood bin on Pearl's front porch.

"Does this make sense to you, Pearl?"

Cherie pointed at the bin with her free hand, sounding as short-fused as Reno. She was holding Pearl at the crook of her elbow, frail as a wishbone even under layers of wool and cotton, as they made their way up the porch stairs. Pearl looked up at Cherie warily, without saying anything.

"Do you think Lila's trying to be funny? Well, very funny, but couldn't she at least have taken them inside? This is like sending an invitation to burglars."

As they clunked up the stairs, a family of squirrels shot out from under the porch, fast as bullets. At the top, under the shade of the overhanging roof, both women peered down at fifteen or so soggy newspapers, droplets of water on plastic catching bits of sun, drenched maple leaves slurped tight around a few papers like starfish. It rained the night before. A gusty, sideways, all over kind of rain that makes it under awnings, porches: the kind of rain that doesn't cause leaks because the drops don't pound down insistently in any one direction. But if you're outside with no way in, you'll get soaked, with nowhere to hide.

"Hmmm," said Pearl, staring intently at the wet papers as she pushed off the hood of her anorak and patted her hair in place. An old gesture from when she actually had a hairdo. Cherie was noticing Pearl quietly faking her way through the world. If she didn't understand what was happening, what Cherie was talking about, she'd nod and make a noise like "hmmm" to indicate that she was in the throes of considering something.

"I never know which of these keys is yours, Pearl. We really ought to declutter this ring a little. This is ridiculous," said Cherie, knowing perfectly well which key was which.

Pearl looked at the welcome mat under her feet, abashed. Cherie felt sick at how harsh, angry she sounded. She didn't want to think about it. Living these days was tough enough, getting from one minute to the other, thinking about the things she wanted. She'd love for someone else to make dinner. She'd like Reno to thank her for making dinner. She wanted Pearl to be herself again, before this veil of forgetting her life started falling over her. She wanted her friend back. Aside from Pearl, she

was down to the bitter end of her friend pool because she couldn't bring herself to admit her marriage was drowning. All her old friends from the bank were having baby after baby, their carols at work plastered with more and more pictures of little bundles of baby all swaddled in adorable outfits. Cherie couldn't help the agitation she felt at the proliferation of babies, though God knows she'd tried and tried. She sat through lunches with friends and babies, breaking her face open with the requisite cooing and purring that was expected of her. These lunch dates gave her migraines that lingered for days. Migraines and bad dreams.

Right after Cherie and Reno were married, Cherie took a deep breath and called Pearl to invite her to dinner. She'd just moved in with Reno and was excited to start playing house. She had an idea: this is what you *did* when you got married. You pasted yourself, sutured yourself into that family. She called Reno at work and asked if his mother was more of a meat person or a fish person. He said, shit, Cher, I'm working right now. I don't know if my mother is more of a fish person or meat person. She eats food; she's just a person person. Leave me alone with this, would you? Then he stopped answering her calls for the day, though she knew the phone was right in its holster on his tool belt. Sometimes it rang once, sometimes four times, sometimes stopping in the middle of a ring. She could *feel* his thumb pushing the ignore button on his mobile phone.

Cherie only met Pearl twice in the year she'd known Reno. Once they got married, Cherie'd figured, it would all change. It would be natural as biology. They would be family.

That first dinner was awful. Cherie waited until Pearl left before she confronted Reno, asked him loudly what the hell did he think he was doing? Leaving the table after wolfing his food to go watch TV? What kind of a thing was that to pull during FAMILY time. Reno'd looked into her red, tired face and slowly carved his mouth into a sneer. His teeth were showing.

“Did they do it different in *your* family?”

This was not the fantasy of domestic life she'd been cultivating like a precious thing since childhood. In fact, it felt like home, like the memories of her childhood she'd willfully worked to fuzz over, blunt the edges of.

Pearl called Cherie the next evening. Reno was still at work.

“My Cherie amour, thank you *so* much for that lovely dinner.”

Cherie was tickled to hear a reference to her name from an old lady like Pearl. People didn't usually get her name. She was named after the Stevie Wonder song. Reno chuckled when he learned this, somewhere around their first or second date, but never mentioned it again.

Cherie laughed.

“Oh gosh,” she said, wondering if she'd ever said oh gosh before. She wanted badly to sound earnest and sweet and kind, “thank you so much for coming!”

She felt a panicky happiness creep up her throat. She understood how it might feel to be an addict, a drunk. To have some moment of one thing feel so warm and good that you panic at the thought of its loss; Pearl would hang up and this soft banter

would be gone, with it Cherie's attendant moment of connection, her newly webbed, defined, familified status.

Cherie rushed to come up with something to say to keep it flowing, to keep Pearl on the phone. Pearl beat her to the punch.

"Don't be silly. It was such a pleasure. I'm delighted Reno's found someone like you, dear. What a blessing for all."

Cherie thought she might burst into sloppy, grateful, tears. She reined them in by pressing the receiver to her ear so hard it began to stick.

"Well let's do it again!" she said, too loud.

There was a hesitation. Cherie filled it by imagining Pearl on an old, romantic, jet-black, rotary telephone.

"I'd love that, but do you think," there was a soft series of coughs from Pearl's end. "*Excuse* me. Whew. Don't you think perhaps we should leave Reno out of it next time? He's a bit of a downer isn't he?"

Of course he was. For a moment Cherie felt less alone than usual. Of *course* he was. If his own mother said he was a downer, he was a downer. It wasn't Cherie's fault, her failing.

Cherie resolved to befriend Pearl, hoping this relationship would grant her some understanding of Reno. Maybe Pearl was the key. Maybe working together, they could figure him out: a wife and mother tag team of inescapable, unavoidable, love.

"I guess he might be, he's been tired lately, I'm so sorry about..." started Cherie, embarking on an apology for Reno. As if she were his mother. As if he were

a child. “Don’t be silly. Reno’s a character. Promise me you won’t go taking his moods personally.”

“I, well, he...”

Cherie tried to synchronize her brain and her tongue. A sparrow body-slammed itself against the kitchen window and dangled woozily in the air for a moment like a Roadrunner cartoon. Cherie noticed, on a branch immediately beyond the window, a nest she’d never spotted before. Did sparrows nest? Wasn’t it too cold for nesting? Had it been there since summer?

“Cherie. Dear. Stop stammering. Don’t make apologies for my son. If anyone should apologize it’s me; I brought him up. All you did was catch him. Now please, I don’t want his attitude getting in our way. Kapish? When can we get together again? You’ve never been to my home, have you? Can I have you to lunch next week sometime?”

For the next three years, Pearl and Cherie took turns hosting. Sometimes Cherie asked Reno if he felt like coming with her to Pearl’s, but he never did. Cherie perpetually hoped her marriage was on the cusp of something different, on the brink of a breakthrough. Her dusty old fantasies of babies sometimes served her.

“He’s not drinking again, is he?” Pearl asked periodically.

“A little bit,” Cherie would answer, her words riding a low sigh that could have gone on forever.

After gathering the waterlogged papers against her chest and dropping them like hot potatoes on the rug in the foyer of Pearl's house, Cherie was overwhelmed all over again by the impossible amount of work to do here. She froze, standing in a pool of sun coming through the transom window above their heads. The house smelled like long-ago cups of tea, a little waft of something like cloves or cinnamon. An apple pie? Could the scent of something baked linger for weeks in an empty house? Maybe it was just those little plug-in air fresheners Pearl used back when she went grocery shopping for things besides ice cream.

As Cherie stood, Pearl walked into the den and turned on the TV. Watching Pearl cut such a decisive path made Cherie doubt her actions, her forcing the issue of Pearl moving in with them, selling her house. Maybe Reno was right. Maybe it would be best for her here in her own home, at least a little while longer, while something in her blood still knew this was her house, knew which room the TV was in. At Pearl and Reno's over these past few weeks, she'd been walking around gingerly, not touching things, like their house was a museum. She jumped a little whenever Cherie came into a room, and sat up very straight.

Cherie followed Pearl. The old TV, after clearing its throat with a preliminary crackle of static, was still tuned to the Home Shopping Network. Two lacquered, dyed, and face-lifted ladies selling, could it be? Cherie blinked. Yes. They were selling a machine for pumping breast milk attached with a Pilates arm exerciser extension. What did these two ladies know about nursing, all over the hill and looking chock full of chemicals to boot? Cherie felt a cold chill. This was the stuff Pearl watched on TV all day when she was alone?

“Pearl!”

Cherie heard her voice snapping, felt herself walking towards the couch like she'd caught Pearl doing something wrong. Why was it so easy to snap at Pearl now, when she wouldn't snap back? Cherie was turning into Reno, but she couldn't stop herself. She was still trying to slow the process, but it felt inexorably close, menacing, the latent Reno-ness in her own character, popping out in startling, upsetting outbursts. Pearl turned her head. She gave Cherie one of her characteristic new looks: the what'd-I-do-wrong look, her eyes wide, lips a tiny bit parted.

“I'd like us to really focus while we're here, ok? We can watch TV when we get home.”

“But what are we doing?”

Pearl looked up at Cherie with the open face of a child.

“Packing up some things, remember?”

Pearl chose to ignore this, turning back to the women in the TV with their funny contraption.

The sliding glass doors beyond the television gave a bird's eye view of the backside of the adjacent strip of row homes, brick painted black, with bits of red peeking through the weathering paint. In one yard, a skinny brown dog paced the perimeter of the chain link fence containing it, over and over again, dragging its chain, snuffling up clumps of wet leaves like it was searching for something specific. In the second story window of another, a big woman with a hot pink do-rag and half buttoned housecoat leaned out and looked to her right, paused, then looked to her left,

blew her nose by putting her finger on one nostril, paused again, then hoofed her upper body back inside, sliding down the screen behind her.

Pearl turned off the TV with the flicker. She looked expectantly up at Cherie again, who stood in the doorway of the den, still in her coat, not surrendering yet to being inside.

“Why don’t you take off your coat and stay a while?” Pearl chirped, an uncharacteristic recognizable snippet of the old Pearl. This snapped Cherie out of her window gazing, and now she was the speechless one.

“Well come on, what’re you waiting for?”

Cherie slid out of her coat and threw it on the rocking chair in a damp heap. She fluffed her hair, trying to shake the cold and rain from it. She didn’t want to do anything to call attention to Pearl’s outburst, for fear of chasing it back to whatever evasive compartment of her brain it had come from.

“You know, I nursed my son in that chair,” Pearl said, leaning to the floor to work on unlacing her sneakers. These things she remembered, her couch, her flicker, how to tie and untie her shoes, her son? Was she really remembering Reno? Or was it just the husk of some old thing, an echo of a real memory, prompted by the absurd women on the screen?

“I didn’t know that,” Cherie answered. She eased herself down on the other end of the couch. If she’d been alone she would have really nestled in, landed harder. But she didn’t want to jolt Pearl while she was sounding like herself, even if it only lasted a minute. She sat primly on the edge of the cushion.

“Yep, sure did.”

“So that chair moved with you from Queensland?”

Pearl didn't answer her, but the moment didn't feel lost yet. Pearl paused and looked out into the sun pouring in from the sliding doors, two trapezoidal, 3-D chunks of light, illuminating thousands of dust flecks as they made their way through the air, impossibly slowly. Pearl slid off her now unlaced shoes, one then the other, and turned to smile at Cherie. This smile was not the new, confused smile. It was calm.

“Yes, I think so.”

“We'll have to take it with us today. I'll bet it'll fit if I tilt it sideways in the backseat.”

Pearl smiled.

They sat together in the light of the afternoon for a few minutes, and then Cherie got up and went to the bookshelf behind the couch, sat Indian style in front of it. Her jeans were stretched from the dampness outside, and weeks of stress, worry about what was happening with Pearl. Two years ago she would have been excited at a development like loose jeans. She might have stood in front of the mirror to assess how much weight was gone.

She studied the books on the shelf. These must all be kept. A set of Charles Dickens, brittle crackled red spines Cherie was afraid to touch. An old copy of Robinson Crusoe. Had Cherie ever read Robinson Crusoe? She didn't think so. A gigantic book of photographs of Australia, a kangaroo hopping directly towards the camera. Cherie gave this book to Pearl for her birthday two years ago, hoping it would open her up, get her to tell stories about the years they lived in Queensland. Pearl had never been forthcoming about that time. Neither had Reno. They moved

back to the states as a family when Reno was sixteen. Cherie knew this and not much more.

“Pearl, would you like to read something?”

“That’d be nice. Sure.”

Cherie pulled out the Australia book, brought it to the couch.

“Do you know where you got this?”

Pearl looked carefully at the cover, squinting her eyes and then pulling her head back, as if trying to make out hidden small print that might tell her where it was from, how it’d made its way into Cherie’s lap.

“Hmmm,” she said, looking up into Cherie’s face for an answer.

“Reno and I gave you that, Pearl, remember? For your birthday last year.”

Cherie stroked the top of the book like she was smoothing a bed sheet, or stroking a dog. “I made you a carrot cake, remember? Wasn’t that good? Remember what you told me about the carrots you grew by accident? The ones you pulled out of the ground because you thought they were weeds?”

Pearl burst into a peal of old spunky laughter and smacked her knee with her hand.

“Well how about that! Where did that happen?”

“Right in your yard here, you said.”

“Here?”

“Here.”

“Can we go outside?”

Pearl and Cherie got bundled up again, in their jackets that were almost dry. They walked out the sliding doors, onto the deck. The brown dog stopped pacing and looked up at them, tilting its head to the side. Cherie smiled at it, and the dog went back to its snuffling. A wind had picked up, had begun to dry some of the wet leaves from yesterday's rain, which blew animatedly around the back porch, seeming to travel in closely whirling groups of three or four, all in their own wind mini-funnels of wind, like ghosts, or families.

"Down here, do you remember Pearl? Your garden was right here. Do you remember the carrots?" They walked carefully down the rickety wood stairs, sideways, Cherie first, so if Pearl fell she could catch her.

"I've been meaning to start planting in our backyard. I'm embarrassed that I haven't gotten around to it yet."

The wind blew Cherie's hair off her shoulders, and she felt temporarily lightweight, floaty.

"So small," said Pearl, very quietly, "this is just so small, this yard. Isn't it?"

The wind had pushed the hood off of Pearl's head, and now she pulled it back on, and kept gripping the sides close to her face so it wouldn't fall down again.

"It's small, but all the stuff you planted back here! I wish you'd given Reno your green thumb Pearl. Maybe you can help me next month? I think we..."

Cherie stifled a shriek.

She'd spotted a rat squeezing itself between the two tin garbage cans in the corner of the yard, close enough that Cherie could see individual clumps of its matted hair spike around a grotesquely long, scaly tail.

“...Maybe green beans, lettuce, oh and definitely tomatoes...” Cherie nattered on weakly, wanting to keep Pearl from spotting the rat, which had now turned its back on them, was exploring some corner behind the garbage can, its body mostly covered now, aside from the tail, flicking irregularly, inflexibly, swatting the air behind it. Cherie thought she might throw up. She began to pull Pearl up the stairs by her elbow. Pearl followed, docile.

“Are you afraid of rats, dear? Don’t be, they keep to themselves. Can’t get rid of them anyway, you know. I’ve just learned to live with them.”

Cherie marveled at Pearl’s cool.

They didn’t go back into the house, but stood on the porch, where at least the rat was below them, at bay. They had yet to do any packing. Cherie was certain that being with Pearl right now was some intangible sort of packing, though she couldn’t put her finger on how. She felt less agitated, like there was no rush anymore to do anything in particular. Pack, run inside, run outside, run anywhere. She could maybe figure out how to live with this new Pearl. She would have to figure out Reno too, but who knew? She was pretty tired of trying to figure out Reno. The old, predictable knee jerk panic slid itself over her, the walls of her nursery, her imaginary family, falling away as she felt a brand new indifference settle in.

Cherie and Pearl stood out there on the back porch with the snuffling dog across the street, and the rat behind the garbage can. They stood there until the wind brought a spattering of icy drops of rain. Then they went back inside.

Time Alone

Rose is trying to make a bowl. No, really what she is trying to do is make a lump of clay stay in the middle of a wheel, stay centered, which is the point of the whole exercise, a metaphor for life, she knows, she's no idiot. But she feels like one; she is enrolled in a program at the Yoga Quest Retreat Center in Montana called *Re-Awakening Your Chi, Opening the Pathways to the Soul*, and Rose is not a yoga retreat sort of person. The bowl throwing, she's sure, is on the schedule as an icebreaker, something to get everyone loosened up, in the mood.

Rose is many miles from her home in New Jersey, from her new baby and from her husband. She has thrown bowls before, once on a field trip that her office went on in an effort to build team morale. Those wheels, Rose remembers, were mechanized, had switches that hummed on like so many planes taking off. But these particular wheels whirl to the rhythm set by the person pushing the pedal, and it's hard for Rose to pedal regularly as she concentrates on keeping the clay corralled in the center, so that when her foot comes down too late, out of sync with the pressure she's putting on the clay, the lump splays out on the wheel unevenly, propelled from the opening in her hands, even though she's going at this precisely the way Leaf demonstrated, right elbow anchored against her thigh for balance, left hand guiding the other side. But it's hopeless. She can't get the damned thing back in the middle.

Leaf, the tour guide, she guesses that's what he is, she guesses too that his name comes from the things that come off of trees, though she doesn't ask, and she supposes that he minted himself with this name, this man with the hippy dippy long frizzy pony tail topped with an unabashed bald spot, he comes over to look at her now stilled, de-centered, trapezoidal lump of clay.

"That's ok, Rose, just give it another whirl."

He spins an index finger in a whirly move in the air, the gesture that indicates a crazy person, except that he's whirling towards the floor, not around his ear. Rose does not want to give it another whirl. As soon as she stopped pedaling she realized how hard she'd been working at the lump. She is sweating hard enough for it to show through her t-shirt, the chunk of cotton that's been lodged in the fold of flesh at her belly button as she was hunched over the wheel.

As she sits up, this stripe of sweat cools and sends a chill over her, and she doesn't want it close to her body again. But the only way to get Leaf and his twirling finger and encouraging smile away from her is to go at it again, smile back, fall in line with the other people who paid to come here for some reason, twelve women, two men, fourteen pitiful people in all, Rose thinks, simpering people who are too sorry-assed just put on happy faces and live their lives. But she has not known how to do this herself, has not known how to begin, and so, defeated, she hunches back over her wheel, one part of a fourteen piece orchestra of lost-ness, a kind of sweatshop here, she thinks, Leaf as taskmaster, conductor.

So technically this is called post-partum depression, what Rose has come down with, funny, because she feels like the problem is not something she has, is afflicted with, but rather something she does not have anymore. It's as if the moment Annabel was excised from her in a neat, pre-scheduled c-section, the birth gutted her like a caught fish, and the doctor forgot to put all her parts back inside in the right order. Her smile muscles are completely MIA. Her husband Richard holds the baby and makes funny faces and calls her Anna-banana-bell, sing-songy, plays lots of peek-a-boo to compensate for the curtain of gloom Rose pulls around their home. Richard glances at Rose peripherally to see if he is maybe making her smile too, and though she can feel his eyes, she can't force it, even for him. This makes her feel worse. She can't even cry. She feels like the empty bowl she is failing to make under Leaf's care. When she came home from the hospital, this chunk of her life neatly planned and cordoned off, six months maternity leave spread, splat, before her, she couldn't fill it. She spent most of her time sleeping to hide from this wholly

unexpected failure. Rose's doctor assured her that a relatively low dose of Paxil, just 10mm a day, would pose minimal risk to Annabel, still breastfeeding, but some latent part of Rose protested loudly, refusing to funnel pills to her brand new, heart-breakingly delicate little baby when she nurses her. It's the only thing she can drag herself out of bed for, really, to feed Annabel, her little baby with a big name.

Richard was reading the Sunday Times in the kitchen one morning when Annabel was five months old, chirping delightedly to herself from the quilt on the floor at his feet and flapping her arms towards the cat. Rose was asleep upstairs. He flipped to the ads in the back of the travel section for bike tours through Holland, wine-tasting extravaganzas in Tuscany, archaeological digs on Mt. Ararat. Back when they were dating, before they lived together, they would meet at a café on Sunday mornings and take turns reading them aloud to each other, poking fun at the people who would go on such field-trippy vacations, but their reading voices came into the air sounding a little wistful. And actually, it's been years since they read the paper like that together. Once they moved in with each other, they had the paper delivered, and gradually began to read it separately.

Richard scooped Annabel up in the crook of his left arm and carried her and the newspaper upstairs to Rose, where he smoothed her hair back and kissed her forehead to wake her. She was wearing the same t-shirt she'd worn the whole day before, and her hair was a little tacky to the touch. When she opened her eyes, Richard told her to pick a trip, any trip, sky's the limit, maybe it would help her to have some alone time. Rose, groggy, almost laughed, thinking that all of this time in

bed, fitfully sleeping all day and night, was as horribly alone as any person could possibly dream to be.

But she went, because she was sinking deeper and deeper into bed, barely able to get up to nurse, eat. She chose the Yoga Quest Center because it was the cheapest, and because it was in the country. She wasn't sure if her passport had expired the year before. She remembered an interview on NPR with an animal behaviorist who said the best thing to do for depressed dogs was take them on a different daily walking route. Spice it up. And this sounded like as good an idea as any. Maybe it would work, a different walk around the block, a week stuck in a different place. She pumped a week of milk into bottles for Annabel, packed a carry-on, and left for Montana.

“Where’s a girl find a place to piss around here?”

This from the woman at the wheel next to Rose’s, who Rose had not noticed before, to no one really in particular.

“I mean for crying out loud, I’ve finished my bowl, and a girl’s gotta go when a girl’s gotta go. Leaf, Leaf, sugar, where are you?”

Rose can see from the very edge of her line of sight, the very closest she’ll dare look at this loony-tune sounding woman without turning her head, that yes, the woman has made her bowl, and it’s perfect, not spinning anymore, nothing left to be done. It is shallow and wide, with a perfectly concentric rim extending slightly outwards into a lip thin as paper. Expert, really. More curious now, Rose turns her head a little more and can see that the woman looks uncannily like Willie Nelson,

wiry and muscled, long salt and pepper hair tightly plaited and thrown over one shoulder in a skinny rubber banded plait, head craning around the room looking for Leaf, or the bathroom.

She gives up, and turns to Rose.

“I give up. I do. That Leaf is a shifty one, never there when you need to know something.”

She sends a wink at Rose, the quick, expert one of someone who winks often, and Rose finds herself feeling honored to be on the receiving end of it. She points the woman in the direction they came in, unintentionally single filing themselves like kindergarteners, these 14 retreating adults on a quest for their lost selves. This is a rickety old mansion, the center of operations for all Yoga Quest Retreats, and an unfinished renovation on the ground floor some decades ago knocked down nearly all of the walls and tucked toilets away in hard to find closets. Each Quester has their own rooms upstairs, though, comfortable ones. But the walls are thin as paper. Rose can hear quiet coughs, paper rustling on the other side of every room she’s been in here.

“Much obliged,” says the woman like a cowboy gentleman in response to Rose’s gesture towards the bathroom, and gives Rose another wink, smacks her hands on her jeans to dislodge some clay, swings one long, narrow leg over the low stool to meet the other with a flourish.

She struts off in the direction Rose pointed her in. Rose quite admires her strut, the way it sets her long braid to swinging like a pendulum on a grandfather clock against the back of her Harley Davidson sweatshirt. Rose wonders what her

own walk looks like from the back, and absently grabs at the long edges of her own long black hair that she hasn't thought much about in nearly half a year. When she and Richard were first married, he would get into the shower with her sometimes and shampoo her hair, twice, sometimes even three times. She relished those shampoos. All that washing rendered her hair a frazzled, brittle wreck for days afterwards, but she never told him that.

Rose glances to the wheel on her other side, manned by a woman with no eyebrow or lashes on the eye facing Rose. Does she pull them out one at a time? Well if this is the story, thinks Rose, at least she leaves the hair on her head alone, though it's sad and non-descript, too many times permed. It falls into her eyes as she works laboriously, shaping a bowl with her own two hands, having given up on the wheel endeavor entirely. She must have dental flossed her clay off the surface when Rose was pointing Willie Nelson to the bathroom. The woman bats her hair back with a forearm because her hands are all gooped up with clay, flashing the room a quick view of the sweat-ovals blooming under the arms of her green batiked tunic.

Rose feels sorry for her. What a wimp. Rose may not be doing a bang-up job of bowl throwing, but it never would have occurred to her to give it up in order to make a pinch pot like a child. Not with all these people watching. Rose thinks of Annabel, wonders when she'll make her first crafty thing. Clay, watercolors, play-dough, crayons. Summer camp, maybe? When will she and Richard begin to hang messy Annabel art on the fridge? Rose twirls the now clay-caked shoot of her hair around a finger, and thinks about those sweet paintings by the second grade class at

Jefferson Elementary, hanging above the counter at the post office on the corner at home.

Rose is newly motivated by the sad pinch pot happening in the hands of the face-hairless woman on one side of her and the drying masterpiece on the other, and goes at her clay again. But it's still fighting her, and she's sweatier than she was the first time around when Willie Nelson saunters back from her trip to the bathroom.

It's been at least fifteen minutes since she left, braid swinging, much longer than the time it takes to have a quick pee. Rose can smell the haze of a just-smoked cigarette Willie Nelson has brought into the room with her, a smell that Rose typically loathes, but, hmmm, interesting, not today. Today she finds herself deliciously amused by the image in her head of the bowl-maestro woman calmly covering the lawns of Yoga Retreats with a blanket of smoke. She imagines Leaf and an army of other earthy crunchy staff members in a frenzy, alarmed that someone would think to bring cigarettes here, seeking out the offender, noses twitching like mice, beaded dreadlocks and crumbs of tempeh trailing in their wake. But Leaf's bald spot twinkles at Rose from across the room. He's clearing space for finished bowls on a high shelf, oblivious to Willie Nelson's new smell.

“Hon, you are butchering that there clay. What in the Sam Hill is happening on your wheel?”

Rose's first reaction is to look over at the woman with no eyebrows. Surely if there's someone whose clay needs defending it's her. But no. Willie Nelson is looking right at Rose's wheel, chuckling, arms crossed, shaking her head bemusedly.

“Excuse me?”

Rose was going for a carefree, return volley of good humor, but she realizes that her voice sounds edgy and defensive as soon as she hears it in the air. She lifts her hands from the wheel, not sure where to put them now, all gloopy with clay. She holds them a little like Jesus in those churchy pictures, hands outstretched like she's giving a benediction. She is Rose, patron saint of clay, awaiting a response from the woman in front of her.

“Well, darling, you ever rode a horse?”

“Sure,” Rose answers, “I've ridden. It's been a while, but yeah, I have.”

The woman laughs again, shaking her head sharply now, like she can hardly believe how funny Rose is, her braid hitting the air behind her like a whip, left, right, left again. Rose is not certain whether she is really this funny, or if she's being made fun of. Or both. The woman sits back down on the low stool, legs wide, elbows on her knees, hands hanging towards the floor.

“Coulda fooled me, sweetheart, if you rode any self-respecting horse the way you're riding that clay, I'm shocked the poor thing didn't go running for the hills. Loosen up, there, tiger.”

And Rose realizes that, whoa, Willie Nelson is absolutely right. Her biceps are squeezed tight. Even her butt muscles are clenched sitting there. All of the looking at people sideways to avoid talking to them has given her the beginnings of a headache. She's got no choice but to laugh.

Willie Nelson's name is Denise, and she's here because she's always wanted to get into yoga, not because she's any kind of a lost soul. Retired from her job as a

dispatcher for Sysco Trucks two years early and has been roaming around since then doing the things that retirees do: elder hostels and workshops. No children. No husbands. Not a dyke, either, she says, answering Rose's unasked question, just doesn't like being tied down. Always a swinging bachelorette, she says, winking her swift wink.

"So Rose," she asks the next morning over the group breakfast of huckleberry yogurt and green tea, the rest of the Questers eating intently, barely speaking to each other, "do people ever call you Rosie?"

Richard sometimes calls her Rosie. He always rhymes everything, adds an -ie to the ends of names of people he likes. He is a sound engineer, and always points out things that emit noise that Rose would otherwise not spend much time noticing. Which direction the horn of a distant train is actually coming from, the way it resonates, making it sound like it's coming from the west when it's actually coming from the east. Taking the scenic route to her mother's summer cabin in the Adirondacks, Richard pulls over when they reach the deepest stretches of woods so they can get out and close their eyes and listen to birds. He loves to identify birdcalls. But they have not had any fun together for a long time, she realizes. He saves the nicknames for Annabel now, happy to have someone to direct them towards who will respond to him, smile.

She tells Denise that, no, people don't call her Rosie very much.

"Well you look like one," Denise answers, cocking her head to the side and picking a huckleberry skin from her teeth with an incense stick leftover from meditation circle the night before.

“Rose is a name for someone’s granny, but Rosie is, you know, cute, and spunky. No offense, but you look like you could stand a little spunk in your life, a little pep in your step. Always walking around like someone stole your puppy.”

“Well, excuse me,” Rose responds dumbly, just like she did during bowl throwing yesterday, and it comes out every bit as shrill as it did then, even though this time in particular she’s going for funny, flip...spunky.

Denise laughs and looks down to give all of her attention to swirling an index finger around the inside of her yogurt bowl, licks it, does it a few more times, until the bowl is completely clean.

“You have no idea,” Rose tells Richard on the phone from her room that night, “honey, she’s a Willie Nelson double. Same hair-do, same attitude, very fire-crackery.”

“Firecrackery?” Richard echoes back, receiver against his shoulder as he extricates the baby from the long phone cord.

“Willie Nelson isn’t fire-crackery, is he? I mean isn’t he stoned all the time?”

“No, no, not like that.”

Rose is frustrated. Richard is a scientific person. For all of the romance of his bird watching, his job putting together sounds all day, his tenderness, he is very tethered to explicit language. Not big on figures of speech. It’s been a while since they talked about something frivolous, and they are doing it now because she’s away from home. Otherwise she would avoid it. She’s forgotten how frustrating it can sometimes be to talk to him.

“No, Richard, it’s like, it’s this energy she has. She’s totally irreverent. We have all of these big group activities, and people are so hushed if they talk at all, but she’ll just blurt something out loud and not give a shit.”

A second passes and Rose hears a waterfall of chirpy Annabel trills in the background, right next to Richard’s receiver, and she has a pang, misses her so much. How funny, her body responds immediately, and she feels herself making milk, despite the astonishing volume she pumped just two days ago, right before she left.

“Well don’t let the loud, irreverent woman distract you too much. Anyway, you sound really good, how are you feeling?”

Rose knows very well that Richard loves her. She loves him too, very much. But suddenly a fear grips her that is outside of the slow, tired darkness that settled over her after she gave birth. She feels like she’s talking to a stranger. She needs some newness in her life. She’s going to have to build herself all over again, and she isn’t sure how to explain this to Richard in words he’ll get the gist of, beyond the language of Paxil, nursing, finding day-care. She doesn’t want to scare him.

“I’m feeling much better, thank you. I’ll call you tomorrow, ok? I’ve got to run down to the evening meditation circle, I’m running late.”

“Have fun, Rosie, we miss you.”

Rose chokes up at the sound of his long-ago name for her, says good night and hangs up the phone. She skips the meditation circle, gets under the covers, and falls into dreams of a huge flock of birds flying overhead, all of them blackbirds, but each calling out a different song, an discordant, overwhelming, cacophony of noise. The birds drop bowls full of huckleberry yogurt from the sky. The yogurt comes down in

her dream like rain, like fat splats of bird poop, peppering her with huckleberries. It feels good, like a massage, a head rub, the shampoos Richard gave her when they were newlyweds.

At breakfast the next morning all of the Questers are still quiet, hushed, like they are in a library. They hit the buffet table for their yogurt (blueberry today), granola, tea, pomegranate juice, and take their seats at the long, communal table. But Denise breaks the stillness by lighting into Rose as soon as she sees her.

“Well, check out this one here,” Denise says, pointing at Rose with her entire arm before she’s even made it down the whole flight of stairs into the dining room.

The Questers shift their gazes to Rose, tea mugs poised mid-air.

“Damned if we’re barely into our second day and Rosie here’s playing hooky already!”

Leaf clears his throat from the end of the table, says in a measured, cheerful voice,

“Now, that’s quite alright, of course it takes some time to adjust. Rose, if you find it helps you to center yourself by getting to sleep a bit early, by all means, get to sleep early. We did miss you in the circle last night, though. Do please try to come tonight. The more of us are present, the stronger our energy en masse.”

Rose looks at Leaf and thanks him, assures him that she’ll be participating in the circle tonight. A few of the Questers smile sheepishly over in Rose’s direction, as if it were they who’d just been chided like children in a roomful of near-strangers. None of them quite meet her eyes before the room slips back into its hum of quiet

clinking spoons in granola bowls, discreet slurps of hot tea. Rose finds herself amused, rather than furious to be called to the attention of the room so inelegantly. This is not a typical reaction for her, this she knows, and she takes a moment to marvel at the different feeling of it.

“Whew, Rosie, I sure wasn’t trying to get you in trouble. I was really just going for a laugh, I promise. Kind of a stiff crowd here isn’t it.”

Rose smiles at Denise, who has slid into the chair next to her to apologize.

“Oh it’s fine. Next time pick on someone else, though, ok? Now I’ve got to come to the damned circle tonight.”

Denise grazes a manly, you-big-joker sort of punch off Rose’s shoulder and chortles.

After that the days fall into a kind of rhythm. Breakfast. A nature-hike in the morning. Lunch. Very easy yoga that Rose thinks can’t be real yoga. It’s too easy. Just simple stretches, really. Something crafty in the afternoon, like guided water coloring, more ceramics. Dinner. Call Richard and Annabel. Guided meditation in the evenings. The Questers are all very nice, but are here to keep to themselves, for the alone time that Richard wanted Rose to have. That she would indeed doubtless be having, just like the others, were she not having such fun hanging out with Denise. Evening meditation circles are half an hour long. All fourteen Questers sit out on the covered porch on pillows, lotus style, eyes closed. One night Denise farts loudly into her pillow, and shoots a wink over at Rose, whose eyes have flown open at the noise everyone else ignores, squeezing their eyes willfully closed. Rose spends the

remaining, interminable ten minutes or so staving off the onset of manic giggles by biting her tongue until she thinks she tastes blood. On a break during one of their morning nature hikes, while everyone is resting, drinking from water bottles and eating trail mix, Denise sits behind Rose and french braids her hair. Rose feels like a girl. She begins to go to bed looking forward to the next day.

Rose is also really getting into taking baths in the evenings. All of the Yoga Quest literature encourages participants to indulge in long, healing baths in their rooms following the evening meditation circle. There are complicated recipes for these baths: a dash of sandalwood oil from a little medicinal looking bottle, two scoops of salt mined from the shores of the Black Sea. And Rose started following the recipes out of boredom in the evenings, but now she's really enjoying them, fudging the recipes, pouring in half a carton of salt every time, leaving out the putrid smelling sandalwood entirely. She lights the candles around the tub, plays the Ravi Shankar that was loaded in the bedside cd player when she checked in loud enough to hear it in the bathroom. She actually bothers to light the incense that came with the room too. It makes her smile, reminded of head shops, college. She thinks of Annabel.

She calls Richard one night, a little late, usually she calls after dinner, and talks to him while she's running a bath. She asks about Annabel and he tells her about her amazing new rolling over technique; she's figured out how to use the floor to give herself an extra bit of oomph, velocity. He asks about Willie Nelson, but Rose glosses over Denise, other than to tell him that she's still irreverent. She tells

him that she loves him, can't wait to see him in a couple days. Then she hangs up and lowers herself into the hot water.

Rose has finally settled, relaxed into the heat, when she's startled by a loud, rap, rap, rap, right behind her head, on the other side of the soap dish. She freezes, and waits. It starts up again, this time accompanied by Denise's voice from the other side of the wall, yelling and knocking.

"Hey Rosie, you in there?"

Rose knows it's Denise but her heart is slamming in her throat, her hands gripping the edge of the tub as if she were afraid the knocking would pull her out of it. So this is what electro-shock therapy might feel like, this kind of jolt, Rose thinks as she leaps up to her feet, causing a great tsunami of bath water to slosh over the edge, fast clouds of steam to rise from her body.

"Yeah, I'm in here. Where are you?"

Rose finds herself back at square one with Denise, sounding shrill all over again.

There's Denise's faint cackle from the other side of the drywall, the unmistakable sound of a splash that mirrors Rose's own moments ago, Denise getting out of a tub on the other side of the wall, and Rose barely has a towel around her body before the same rap rap rap is happening at her door. Denise stands in front of her in a Yoga Quest issued bathrobe, doubled over at the waist, cracking up, bright red from laughter, and also from the heat of the tub she herself was just in on the other side of the wall. Her braid looks much darker all wet, and it drips from the end like a faucet.

"I got upgraded!"

Denise stops her laughing long enough to speak. “My roof sprung a leak and they moved me over to your wing. I couldn’t resist surprising you. It’s wild the way they’ve rigged the plumbing, back to back to back like this.”

She looks into Rose’s face and has the good grace to look concerned as she wrings out her braid with both hands and a ribbon of water shoots from the end of it, creating a muffled splat, and a dark spot on the carpet between their two pairs of bare feet.

“I didn’t scare you too bad, did I hon?”

Rose thinks she should be getting into the flow by now, of Denise throwing her for loops, farting, yelling, shocking the hell out of her in the tub. But she isn’t, quite. Every time it happens it jolts her, gets her thinking about the way she wants to react to it, wondering what the other Questers are making of Denise’s wild-woman antics as they do their best to ignore her. But now it’s just the two of them, standing at Rose’s door, so fresh from the tub that their individual clouds of steam have merged. They look a little spectral there in the hall, a bubble of pink skin and billowing steam.

“Yes, you scared me that bad. But get in here and stop dripping all over the carpet.”

She steps aside, gestures Denise in, clutching her towel with the other hand. Right before she turns to follow Denise back into her room, she stands in the hall for a moment and listens to the quiet, beginning to catch a chill. Her towel is officially soaked through. Are the other 12 Questers in their own rooms, safe, tucked away in their tubs? She heads in after Denise, fending off the shivers.

Denise is in her bathroom, draining the water from her tub, wiping a towel over the floor with her foot to soak up the water Rose splashed across the floor when she jolted her from the other side of the wall.

“Oh my God, what are you doing?”

Rose makes a feeble little gesture at the floor, but Denise is too busy mopping to notice.

“Please don’t worry about that, I’ll get it, really.”

“Come on now, least I could do, freaking you out like that. I’m sorry, I hope I didn’t spook you too much. Come here, dear you’re all wet.”

And Rose has barely begun to formulate a second round of protesting, to tell Denise that no, she really didn’t spook her that badly, and really, please, don’t clean up my bathroom, she doesn’t even have the time to say the words as they come up behind her lips when Denise pulls a clean towel from the cabinet below the sink, sits down on the closed toilet, and unceremoniously pulls Rose’s clammy towel away from her body without even asking, tosses the dry one in Rose’s hands like they are two football players in a locker room.

And when’s the last time Rose’s been naked in front of another person? Well, aside from all of the doctors, and she was never naked then, always a scrap of a blue paper gown to hold on to. And being naked with Richard, really naked, upon closer examination she realizes she can’t remember. Conceiving Annabel took a lot of trying, and didn’t involve much lollygagging over the parts of their two bodies that wouldn’t make a baby. Rose has not thought about that chunk of time at all, really before now, before finding herself bare and steamy in front of Denise, naked like it’s

the most natural thing in the world. Because she and Richard were on the same page, trying to get pregnant. But by the time they finally conceived Annabel, Rose felt like a too-many-times-used Petri dish. She hasn't lingered over her body with any joy for a long time. She used it as a tool for such a long time, she thinks. And what a funny thing, really, how much they've changed. It's been maybe two years since Richard gave her a shampoo.

Denise is sitting on the toilet, eyes politely averted, unbraiding her hair and ringing it out, braiding it again, nattering on about the odd renovation they did here, plumbing that doesn't make any sense, her cousin the master plumber who could have done a much better job, hell, *she* could have done a better job. And Rose takes her time drying off, feeling mischievous and interestingly cared for with Denise. She doesn't have to come up with the right thing to say, the right reaction. Denise will just keep on talking, and Rose appreciates the company. She makes a note to herself to make sure to get Denise's phone number, address, before tomorrow, the last day before she goes home.

She dries herself slowly, goes gently over her tulip colored c-section ripple that runs parallel to her pelvis, pronounced now, florid from the heat. Richard and Rose have never worn their rings religiously, sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. Rose didn't wear hers here. She traveled alone across the country, nothing marking her aside from blue jeans and a non-descript sweatshirt, nothing easily legible about her. But here, naked, with her Annabel scar exposed, there is an indelible mark of who she is, like a tattoo. Rose looks down at herself, and thinks she'd love nothing more than to never have to put on clothes again.

Food and Shelter

Bertha and her husband Sidney bought their house forty-three years ago. They raised their children, Abigail and Jonathan in it. When Abigail told them she was pregnant with their first grandchild, they gutted the sun porch, gave the ancient pair of brown leather reading chairs to the Salvation Army, moved the ceramic water jug they'd shipped from Bertha's Oaxacan sabbatical into an empty corner in their bedroom upstairs. They gave the glass table with tiny metal legs to Bertha's friend, Elaine. They filled the room with the most wonderful old-fashioned toys: nesting Petrushka dolls, Tinker Toys, felted hand puppets, brilliantly colored wooden blocks. They emptied the shelves of all their heavy, somber, source books and stocked them with children's books, ones that the baby wouldn't be able to dig into for years yet.

It was time for a change like this. Things were great, sure, but an insidious restlessness had settled over both of them. They'd been so cocky about retiring together, confident that that predictable thing people said: be careful, you're both

such active people, what're you going to *do* all day? was just silliness, the rote thing to say to any and all retiring people. When it fell over their house in a haze, they never acknowledged it to themselves or anyone else. Sometimes they bumped into each other in the halls of their home, and would smile politely, continue on their separate wandering paths en route to nothing particularly exciting.

Daydreaming about the baby was a welcome new development. Bertha and Sidney spent one rainy Tuesday in the newly overhauled sun porch eating Mint Milanos and reading books to each other: *Blueberries for Sal*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *Where the Wild Things Are*. The rain beveled the glass that afternoon like a watercolor in progress. It felt to Bertha like things were changing. The funny little limbo period in their lives was over, now onward, and into the next chapter: grandparenthood.

But then Sidney got sick, and was ill long enough for Bertha to become secretly unmoored. He was parked in a hospital bed in the living room for almost a year. The glinting metal frame of it caught the sun and hurt Bertha's eyes. He was always desperate to talk, even when there was nothing to say. Bertha, come lay down with me, come hold me for a minute, Bertha, will you call Abs and have her bring the baby? Bertha, come talk to me.

After the end of the Shiva, after Jonathan and Abigail stopped taking turns calling to invite her to dinner, after Rabbi Gerschwin from the synagogue Bertha and Sidney only attended on the High Holy Days, stopped coming over (without ever calling first), Bertha found herself alone in her house. She'd signed on to teach Anthropology 101 at Kingsborough Community College, at Abigail's urging, but the

term didn't begin for another month. She'd called Jonathan's wife to thank her for dinner the night before. Elaine was at her studio in the city for the weekend. Bertha was really alone, for the first time since before Sidney got sick.

She walked barefoot down the stairs and listened to *The Splendid Table* on NPR while bringing a kettle to boil. She poured it into a mug over a black tea bag. She sliced a wedge of lemon and squeezed it in. She drank it down leaning against the counter, suddenly shy and confused at the prospect of sitting at the table without Sidney. When she was finished, she left the cup on the counter, the saggy spent tea bag plunked beside it on the cutting board. She didn't clean it up, testing his absence a little. Sidney had been an insufferable neatnik.

Bertha wandered into the dining room, Lynn Rosetto's friendly voice fading behind her, as she opened the phones to talk about the new convection ovens that cooked a chicken in 20 minutes, a cake in 10.

The front of the house faced east, so this early in the morning the dining room was awash in reflections of the sun shifting through the leaves of the dogwood tree Sidney planted when they'd moved in. A pool of blood red, violet, and green light shifted hazily on the table, refracted through the stained glass panel Jonathan made at sleep away camp 25 years before. Sun from the side window hit the glass doors of her mother's china cabinet head on, and the Wedgwood inside was impossible to see for the reflection. Bertha'd been meaning to hang a few plates on the wall, prettily, free them from their decades long stint in the cabinet, maybe paint one accent wall a similar shade of blue to really show them off, but she hadn't gotten around to it yet.

It was so quiet. She stood leaning against the table, her fingers brushing its surface, watching wandering paths of the sun slicing through the air around her. Had it always been so quiet? She thought she could hear dust move through the air.

Considering this, as she stood in the quiet sun, Bertha longed for Sidney's comforting banging and clattering. He was such a soft-spoken man, but he created a circumference of noise around him. He was always stubbing toes, banging his pruning ladder into walls, filling his long arms with too many things and dropping them. Bertha loved this contradiction: the intrinsic clumsiness in her fastidiously organized husband. But she'd taken the attendant racket it created for granted. Now, in its absence, she panicked. What else would come up missing, now that people weren't watching her so closely anymore, had brought their kugels and lasagnas and casseroles and cried and told stories and left? She was afraid now, looking suspiciously at the walls around her, realizing this wasn't the same house as before, and she didn't know how to live in it now, in such a glaring absence of voices, noise, footsteps that weren't her own.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, she thought over and over in her head, like a mantra, though she was Jewish, and a scientist, not religious at all. Jesus Christ. She leaned with the full weight of her palms against the dining room table and bowed her head, waiting for the pulse of pain in the base of her belly to throb up inside her ribcage, into her throat, flame up her nostrils. She cried standing completely still in the silence, her tears falling on the table, drop after drop, the sun catching them as they splatted on the surface. She wanted badly to get out of her home, immediately. But she knew there wasn't anyplace outside of it to go, where she might be eased.

When the worst of this wave of panic had ebbed, Bertha lowered herself onto one knee, then the other, her hands still clutching the end of the table. The carpet was soft, thick, through her bathrobe. Without rising, she pulled one of the Shaker chairs away from the table to make way for her to slide through. She crawled underneath the table, swiveled on her knees, and pulled the chair back into place. She laid on her side, arranged her head neatly in the crook of her elbow, pulled her thighs into her stomach, until she was a tight, tiny little ball of woman. She centered herself in a patch of sun broken by bars of shade cast by chair legs. As she drifted off, she waited for the sound of Sidney's keys in the door, the muffled shuffling of him shaking himself out of his coat, walking in through the kitchen and saying her name, trying to locate her in the house.

When the sound of keys in the door did wake her, there was a moment when Bertha thought she'd made Sidney come true. But it was Abigail calling out for her from the kitchen hallway, her voice getting closer.

"Mom! Mom, are you here?"

"In here," Bertha murmured into the carpet, not wanting to be heard or found. How pathetic she was! She felt a dramatic, satisfying wave of self-pity as she braced herself for her daughter. She considered rushing out from under the table so Abigail wouldn't find her here, but felt too rooted to the floor to move so quickly.

Abigail's red clogs appeared in the doorway.

“Hi honey,” said Bertha cheerfully, trying to introduce a little humor to the room, poke some ironic fun at herself by talking as if under the table was a perfectly appropriate place to be.

It didn't go over. Abigail didn't answer, and her clogs didn't move. Bertha began to right herself, leaned up and pushed out a chair to make her way into the room again. Abigail didn't move to help her, just stood there. All Bertha could see were her daughter's feet, but she knew Abigail, and therefore knew that her hands would be clasped over her mouth, her eyes bugging out, trying to stifle a gasp.

Abigail had always been on edge, quick to shock. Sidney and Bertha spent her harrowing infancy in shifts, literally, two hour shifts through the night, passing shrieking, swaddled, Abigail back and forth like an apoplectic, pink, potato, so that one or the other could sleep. After one single, fateful, trip to the Bronx Zoo, she had years of night terrors about alligators. She had to be assured over and over again that Sidney and Bertha would protect her from monsters in closets. A well-worn joke: Bertha would proclaim amazement at the astonishing bravery she and Sidney exhibited, getting pregnant again after the trauma of hell-baby-Abigail. They didn't divulge the “hell-baby” nickname to anyone but each other. In company, or if Abigail was listening, they ratchet it down, protecting fragile Abigail even though she was grown.

Bertha wrestled with the chair, which was more difficult to push than pull. It kept stuttering through the thick carpet, her bathrobe getting tangled under her knees, and the roughly hewn underside of the table caught and yanked individual strands of her hair along the way. She saw the wallpaper and remembered the day Abigail

chose it. Bertha'd watched from the doorway of Sidney's attic-study as he lifted five-year-old Abigail into a chair, rolled out three samples, and told her she was the boss, the choice hers alone to make. He'd meant this to be fun, but for some time after Abigail chose the wallpaper, at bedtime she agonized over the un-chosen two, worried she'd made the wrong choice in the paper that happened to be Bertha's favorite of the three: delicate clusters of garnet colored flowers on emerald vines woven over and under each other on a backdrop the shade of cream. Was the one with the purple prettier? she would ask, face puckered with the kind of stress she was too young for, all tucked in after being read to.

It had broken Bertha's heart to think of her little girl unable to concentrate on *Goodnight Moon* because of this worrywart, insecure, second-guessing. Sidney held Bertha in bed that night, swept the hair from her temples, and held her face in his hands to give her an Eskimo kiss. He promised her these were just signs of their daughter blossoming into a careful thinker, a deliberate considerer, a think-before-she-speaks sort of person.

By the time Bertha managed to get the chair pushed out and her bathrobe neatly retied, she was angry at careful, deliberate, think-before-she-speaks Abigail, who came into full view frozen in the door-frame as Bertha crawled out from under the table,

"Oh, mom," she said finally, her hands dropping from her mouth, those long elegant fingers of her father's floating to her sides slow motion, landing on her hips. An infuriating combination of things were legible to Bertha on her daughter's face: pity, some fear, scorn? Was that scorn?

“Abigail, don’t oh mom me right now,” said Bertha, smoothing her hair with both hands, trying to smooth herself calm so she wouldn’t yell, or sob, or who knows what.

Abigail shifted a bit, seeming aware that this tack she was taking wasn’t appropriate. She walked over to Bertha and wrapped her long arms tightly around her. These arms were Sidney’s too. Standing there in Abigail’s Sidney arms, Bertha was struck, as she often was, by the wildcard of genetics. Jonathan was undoubtedly hers, but strangers never guessed Abigail belonged to Bertha, engendering a lifetime of jokes about the mailman. Bertha herself was barely five feet tall, so petite that when she needed something like a winter coat, she shopped in the children’s section. Even her hair was compact, tight black curls, delicately threaded with strokes of gray taking up a minimum of space around her face. But Abigail was tall as a tree, tall as Sidney, with shiny straight reddish brown hair hanging a bit below her shoulders.

She pulled back from Bertha, keeping a hold on her shoulders and stooping a little to stare into her eyes, like she was looking for something in particular. Bertha didn’t recognize this gesture in her daughter. It was a new one, uncharacteristically bold.

“Looking for something, honey?”

Bertha had taken to joking around since Sidney got sick, trying to diffuse all of the new tension lurking everywhere, but sometimes, like now, it just made her sound mean.

Abigail flinched, and let go of Bertha’s shoulders.

“What were you doing under there, mom?”

“Oh, checking out the scenery from a different perspective?”

This just slipped out. Bertha couldn't help it. Now Abigail looked genuinely wounded, her eyes filling. Her hair slipped over her shoulder and covered one side of her face. Bertha felt terrible.

“Honey, please don't pay attention to me. I'm sorry, really. It's just I'm kind of a mess. It's hard for me here without dad.”

Abigail quickly looked up again.

“Why don't you come stay with us for a while?”

Bertha hadn't exactly meant it was hard for her *here*, in the house, though certainly that was part of it. She supposed what she meant was that morning it became hard for her to figure how to carry herself into the next minute, and the one after that, and then one after that. But no need to burden Abigail, who had, after all, lost Sidney too. Bertha had to keep reminding herself of this. She felt like a selfish imbecile for not leaping out from under the table the moment she heard the key in the lock, for not protecting Abigail from the worrying and stress that came so naturally to her.

“You're so kind, Abs, I'm really fine. I'm just having a hard patch.”

“Will you come for dinner? Dahlia would love to see you.”

“Can I take a rain check? I'm just pretty tired. I'm going to nap for a while.”

“Well let me walk you up to bed. Can I make you a cup of tea? Are you hungry?”

“No, no, I'm fine, I promise, really. I just had a cup.”

That cup was hours ago, in the kitchen, before she slid under the table. Bertha knew Abigail knew this, but she was trying to reassure her, let her know she still had the presence of mind to tell polite lies. She wanted badly to be alone again.

She followed Abigail up the stairs, in the trail of her familiar, floral perfume. Bertha let her hand on the banister guide her, and closed her eyes, thought of her perennials, the hydrangea hedges, the compost bin out by the shed that would need cleaning so she could start filling it for spring. Bertha and Sidney always worked in the yard together. She hadn't so much as thought about the garden since he got sick. She bit the inside of her cheek with her molar to rein herself in, and by the time they reached the top of the stairs and rounded the corner to her bedroom, she'd succeeded, but now her cheek was throbbing. Bertha turned to Abigail in the doorway.

“Ok, sweetie. I can take it from here.”

Abigail crunched up her face in another infuriating way, a kind of patronizing pity, though Bertha knew, she *knew*, this wasn't what Abigail meant to convey, or even how she felt. Like her own acerbic cracks these days. She and Abigail were getting lost in translation. Just another minute and she'll be gone, Bertha said to herself. Just one more minute.

“Mom, can I ask you something? Promise not to be mad.”

Bertha didn't answer.

“Have you thought maybe about seeing someone?”

“Seeing someone like who?”

But Bertha knew who. She struggled to tamp down an urge to scream at her daughter.

“A therapist, a professional.”

“Abigail, honey, please.”

Abigail’s answer to everything was therapy, attendant medications. She’d been notorious for her therapy spiel for years. Bertha felt Sidney’s absence. It hurt, twisted her belly into a sick knot. He’d known how to handle these lectures diplomatically, hearing Abigail out, then firmly change the subject.

“Please consider it, mom. I know this must be terrible for you. It might help.”

“Thank you Abs, honey, really. Listen, I love you so much, but what I need right now is to be alone. I appreciate the suggestion, but I can’t handle talking about this right now, ok? I love you, I love you, I love you, but please can I just be alone right now?”

Abigail looked at the floor below her again, to cover up tears, Bertha knew. But she recovered quickly.

“Of course. I love you too. I’ll call you tonight, ok?”

Another hug, this one shorter, and then Abigail turned and headed down the stairs. Bertha didn’t follow. She waited for the sound of the car door closing, Abigail’s engine turning over and driving off. She heard herself taking short, shallow breaths. The air was oppressive. The unbearable smell of Sidney’s illness hadn’t died with him. It dissipated, yes, but never disappeared. It lurked around corners, in closets, emanated from the armchair Bertha’d moved into their bathroom to make bathing him easier. But she couldn’t bring herself to move it. The remnants of his healthy smells were almost worse. Shampoo was lodged deep in their bed pillows. Infinitesimal bits of dirt he’d tracked in from the garden many springs ago were

lodged in the carpet of their bedroom, giving the room a wonderfully loamy smell on humid days. Bertha could see the tiny black speckles if she stared hard enough. She could see them now.

She thought she might throw up. She hurried down the stairs and burrowed under the table, pulled the chair in place behind her. She felt sheltered, her waves of nausea fading.

She looked out into the dining room, down the hallway leading to the kitchen, saw the house without having to admit to herself that she was inhabiting a world without Sidney. She didn't have to *do* anything under here, because what is one to do under a table? She propped herself on one elbow and plucked at the carpet, pulling tiny fibers from it one by one and then smoothing them back in the direction of the grain, over and over, a kind of meditation. She sat staring into the carpet until the sunlight began to wane, but she didn't want to get out to turn on a lamp. She laid down in the crook of her elbow again and fell into a kind of half sleep, half wake doze.

The phone woke her. She wasn't sure if it was dawn or dusk. With a vicious crick in her neck, Bertha rolled to her other side, as if turning her back would halt the ringing. When the ringing stopped, she checked the face of the cordless for the time, found that it was dusk. Only about two hours had passed since Abigail'd gone.

How funny, Bertha could see the room around her clearly without any lights on, as it gave over its sun-lit colors to shades of gray, shadow and moonlight. She could read a newspaper under here if she wanted. And to think, she and Sidney always tended to leave the lights on, even in the middle of the day. And also funny:

going on four days without a shower, she didn't feel particularly dirty. On day two she felt a little grimy, but then the next morning that layer of dirtiness she'd been imagining gave way to a supple, delicious kind of moisture in her skin and hair. The kind of moisture, she thought to herself, that she took estrogen supplements for! Who knew? She wanted to tell Sidney. She wanted to tease him, tell him that he wouldn't have needed all that lotion she'd slathered on him after baths, before getting him dressed, if only she'd thought to camp him out under the table with her where they could get nice and grimy together.

But there hadn't been the kind of levity this would have required when Sidney got sick. Time changed shape as his sickness built itself inside of him. Days became urgent units of measure, ticking away, quickly stacking on top of each other to become the 6 to 8 months Dr. Felice gave him. Bertha flipped into a sort of survival mode, handling one thing at a time, deftly, quickly, as it faced her. Giving Sidney his pills, emptying his reeking bedpans, trying to force food into him, trying to remember to feed herself, having guests over for stilted, morose visits...one thing after the other filled up those days, precluding any space for lightheartedness.

She thought often of her dissertation, some forty years before, what a machine she'd become, compiling research, slides, chapters, all of her checklists. Bertha was good at getting things done. But with Sidney, she couldn't bring herself to stop and remember that the reason she was in this flurry of things was the end of their life together. When he pleaded with her to stop whatever it was she was busy with, and come, please, just sit with him, Bertha's skin crawled. She tried to hide it, but she knew that of course he saw. She could self-indulgently grieve with him, give

herself over to something she couldn't see the bottom of, or buzz around handling things. She could not do both. One of them had to live in the world, the real, permanent one.

When he died, it was the same. Bertha swept herself along with the tide of things that appeared. She couldn't pause long enough to consider Sidney's absence. She buzzed around the Shiva refilling people's coffee, passing plates of cookies, even as everyone tried to force her to sit down, like Sidney had. Only Bertha's son Jonathan sat quietly and took a brownie from the tray she passed, then refilled, then passed again. Abigail walked around trailing Bertha, her lips pursed.

Under the table, Bertha dreamed of climbing into each one of her water jugs, vessels, urns, the ones she'd made a career of studying, climbing into each one until she found one that fit her body perfectly, like Goldilocks's bed. And then, in this quasi-conscious dream, she nestled herself into this vessel and set off to sea in it, with oars that appeared in her hands, on a clear, crisp day full of promise and possibilities, sun glittering on the waves.

The cordless she'd brought underneath with her, along with a glass of water and a pillow, jarred her from this soothing dream and into darkness. She didn't move a muscle, and didn't answer it, pressed her eyes willfully closed, like a child. She laughed at herself. Was she regressing here under the table? Maybe she'd slipped into a psychic time machine. All of these childlike responses and reactions she was tapping into down here were quite funny, she thought, laughing aloud. She thought of Abigail's reaction were she able to see her now, laughing aloud to herself in the dark, curled underneath the dining room table in an infantile ball.

The phone rang again, stopped, and then thirty seconds later, started up again. Bertha was overwhelmed with irritation. Whoever this person was, Abigail, probably, was interrupting the peace Bertha'd only just discovered for herself. She answered it.

“Hello?”

“Bertha, shit, you've had me worried sick. Abigail told me what's happening over there. You're under your dining room table? Is this true?”

Bertha felt a deep-seated agitation from deep in her gut radiating through her body. She did not want to share her space just now, just yet, even with Elaine, who was the person she trusted most in the world, aside from Sidney.

“Elaine, I'm fine, I'm fine, hi. Listen, I'm a little busy.”

“Busy doing what? Worrying the people who love you? Level with me Bertie. Please.”

Bertha was speechless, agitated. She sat up abruptly, bashing the side of her head against the center support beam of the table.

“Bertha? What's happening over there? What are you doing?”

“I do happen to be under the table still, Elaine, as if it's any of your business. I hit my head on a table leg.”

“I'm coming over.”

“No you are not coming over.”

“*I am.* My goodness, Bertha please, it's ok, it's alright. Don't move a muscle. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to say anything. I'm just coming to sit with you for a bit, ok?”

There was a pause, while Bertha clasped her head with both hands, arranging the cordless against her shoulder.

“Bertie, I think you’re wonderful, and I support your right to go a little haywire. For heavens sake, you probably need exactly this, the right to be a shut in for a while. I’m always hearing about shut-ins, is this what they do? Hide out under their dining room tables?”

“I think they just watch television and eat pound cake all day and get fat. I, on the other hand, am peacefully reflecting.”

“Under the table?”

Elaine’s tone had changed. She wasn’t joking anymore.

“Lainey, please. I promise I’m fine. Are you in the city still?”

Bertha knew changing the subject wouldn’t work, but she was desperate.

“No, I’m turning onto Clairdale as we speak.”

“If you don’t mind, Elaine, I don’t think I feel like a visit.”

“Well then I’ll camp out on the porch. I’ll spread this picnic I brought out on your porch and I’ll ring your bell incessantly.”

Elaine hung up.

Clairdale was five minutes from Bertha’s house. Bertha smoothed her hair again. It was hopelessly un-presentable. She couldn’t feel the reassuring weight of her curls because they’d degenerated into a gray frizzy mass. All this napping on the floor was no beauty rest. The odd high of being paused, sitting still, was rapidly dissipating. She wondered objectively about the state of her own sanity. She saw herself as if she were a stranger, this bathrobe, this hair, this dark house. It was

evening now. If Sidney were here he would reassure her, hold her, kiss her, read her some passage of something he'd come across to ease her and get her mind to stop racing in circles. They would talk and laugh.

Bertha began to cry. She crawled up into the room again. She wouldn't ignore Elaine, who she loved, who she'd known almost as long as Sidney, the three of them teaching in the same department for decades. She'd left the chair out of its place this time, so she wouldn't have to wrestle with it again. She stood in the dark room, leaning against the table. The room sat in pools of shadows and light cast by streetlights. How slowly this day was moving, Bertha thought. She was standing there, still, staring at some empty space in front of her, when Elaine pulled up the driveway.

She banged on the door so hard, Bertha thought she must be hitting it with the side of her fist. She walked to the door as Elaine began to ring the doorbell over and over.

Bertha unchained the deadbolt, flipped the top lock, and opened the door. Elaine was bent over rearranging the handles of her duffel bag, in the dungarees and sweatshirt she wore for painting. She was covered in vibrant splotches of fuschia.

"What a wonderful color," Bertha said.

"You think?" Elaine asked, as she hugged Bertha, both women leaning forward over the bags between them. "I don't know, I've been obsessed with it. I'm using it for the big installation you saw last month, but now I can't see the forest for the trees. It just looks like pink. I don't know anymore."

Elaine paused in the doorway.

“Oh Bertha, look at you. Why didn’t you call me?”

Bertha’s tears started again, and she made no effort to stop them or wipe them away. Elaine reached for her again, right there in the doorway over their bags, and this swaddled, all-encompassing, embrace was wonderful.

A few minutes passed, and Bertha pulled away, bent to lift the grocery bags. Elaine lifted the duffel. Elaine walked into the house first. She had a long drip running from the crown of her shiny-bald, brown, head, all the way to the base of her neck. It was so beautiful on her that it looked almost deliberate. Bertha had long envied Elaine’s boldness, the sheer sexiness of her painting hobby, her impromptu decision to shave her head, just for the hell of it. Elaine, her husband Fred, Bertha, and Sidney, had a decades-long friendship together, all four of them. Fred was crushed by Sidney’s death, Elaine told Bertha during the Shiva, before Bertha began to withdraw from everyone.

Bertha followed Elaine down the hall towards the kitchen. Elaine extended her arms, touching each side of the hall to orient herself in the darkness, even though she’d walked down it several thousand times before. Bertha imitated Elaine, brushing her fingers along the cool wall, feeling for the beginning and end of each panel of wallpaper. Elaine turned into the kitchen, flipped the switch and dropped her bag, reached for Bertha’s bags. Then she turned to Bertha, held her by the shoulders, and looked her in the eyes exactly the way Abigail had. Bertha felt guilty about her earlier irritation. Apparently this gesture was not specific to Abigail, but was some kind of a universal sign for hello-I-love-you-and-am-worried-about-you. Still, though, it was annoying, this feeling like Elaine was trying to pin her down and drill

through her with her pupils, particularly after the unquestioning and open embrace from the porch a moment before.

“Bertha, dear-heart, what can I do? How can I help?”

Bertha responded by reaching for Elaine’s hands on her own shoulders. She clutched them, and moved them away from her, planted them at Elaine’s sides. She hoped this came across as a playful, appreciative, thank-you-for-being-here gesture, not a please-stop-touching-me-like-I’m-a-wounded-animal one.

“You’re doing it. It’s wonderful just to see you. I’m sorry. I’m just a mess. I didn’t see it coming.”

“I see that,” Elaine said, smiling tenderly, reaching out and patting the top of Bertha’s huge hair.

“Will you shave my head like yours?” Bertha asked, kidding.

“Absolutely.” Elaine said, serious.

“I’m joking, Lainey. I’m afraid what my head looks like under this hair. I think I’m too bumpy.”

“I am too, see look.”

Elaine turned and pushed at a small lump on the back of her head with her index finger. It moved back and forth under her skin, back and forth under the fuschia stripe. Bertha never would have noticed it. It made her feel sick again.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Do. I’m sure you’d look beautiful. And it may be cathartic. You probably could use a realigning of energy around here.”

Elaine crossed her arms. She looked over the walls of the kitchen, the ceiling, the breakfast nook, the recycling bin in the doorway, as if the energy she referred to could be found, lifted, realigned right there and then. Then she looked back to Bertha, her friend in an old bathrobe, hair wild, eyes spookily empty looking, red-rimmed.

“Have you eaten today?”

Bertha shook her head.

“Sit down and let’s eat some food, ok?”

Bertha sat down, feeling the wicker caning of the kitchen chair give a little under her weight. Usually she sat on the edge of these chairs with her elbows against the table, feet on terra firma. Now, she eased back so far they dangled, her toes just brushing the chilly blue tiles under her.

Elaine dragged the paper bags to the counter and started unloading tubs and containers.

“What’d you bring?” Bertha offered politely. She was having a difficult time putting together sentences. She was beginning to feel a variety of exhaustion sweep through her body that was entirely new. It felt like she’d been hooked up to an IV when she wasn’t paying attention, like she was being anesthetized. She couldn’t bring herself to speak. Elaine didn’t notice, busy chopping up a cantaloupe on the board.

“What’d I bring? What *didn’t* I bring. Lets see, I brought herring in cream, I brought pastrami and rye, I brought chicken noodle, I brought some whitefish...”

Elaine kept listing. She'd brought a whole deli. Bertha was disappointed to learn that Elaine hadn't brought anything she'd made herself. Elaine was a wonderful cook. Bertha thought she'd have to figure some way to wrangle a dinner invitation out of Elaine one day soon. She relished this unexpected direction her thoughts took, unable to remember the last time she'd looked forward to something more than simply to be left alone.

"Lainey, thank you so much for being here."

Elaine turned her head and smiled, her hands still busy on the cutting board.

"Don't thank me, my dear. I love you. You'd do the same."

"I know, but all the same."

Elaine blew a kiss, went back to chopping big blocks of cantaloupe.

Bertha leaned back and closed her eyes. The tall chair supported the back of her head, and the heating chicken soup on the stove smelled comfortable and warm. She thought of Abigail, was touched that she'd called Elaine. She thought of her garden, thought of Sidney knee deep in it, his pants falling down. She thought of her bedroom, her bed, closed her eyes and imagined the feel of cool sheets sliding over her skin. She thought, again, of Sidney, and thought she could smile. She began to sink into another of her half-awake, half-asleep dreams. Elaine did not wake her when the food was ready, but sat at the table eating a bowl of soup and keeping watch, making sure Bertha didn't fall off her chair, slip under the table.

Collections

When Gloria heard the voice in the answering machine telling her she'd gotten the transcribing job, she dropped her groceries and slid against the wall to the floor. She hit the green re-play button again and again with one hand clasping at her collarbone, listening at least five times before she stopped. She reached for the telephone to call her mother at work, excitement bubbling up her throat, heating her face. The moment her hand made contact with the receiver though, she remembered that her mother was gone.

Gloria replayed the message once more before peeling herself from the wall she'd landed against, strands of her hair sticking to the nubbly plaster, her legs shot through with pins and needles, having somehow gone to sleep in the few minutes she'd been on the floor. She thought of the message, the job, and laughed aloud into

the empty air. Then she picked up the groceries, carried them down the short hall, and put them away.

She microwaved a potato for supper. She didn't bother to leaf through one of her *Glamour* magazines like she did every other evening, preferring to stare into space, smiling as she chewed, delighted by the prospect of quitting her job at Wal-Mart. She twirled a slippery hunk of hair between her fingers.

This would be her first professional job. It had taken Gloria six years of days spent jammed behind the register at Wal-Mart, hemmed in by a wall of candy, and a never-ending line of grouchy people, to ratchet up the nerve to register at the community college downtown. Her fear that it would be anything like high school was unfounded. She had only to come to class, and then leave. There was no excruciating lunch period, sitting alone and quiet, with only food to busy her eyes and mouth with, in a cafeteria reverberating with talk and laughter. There was nothing like gym class, exposed and elephantine in too-short shorts, running circles around the room in squeaky K-Mart sneakers, in a room full of silent, swooshing, Nikes and Reeboks.

Gloria discovered a worn, olive-colored corduroy sofa on the third floor of the community college, facing a floor to ceiling panel of windows overlooking the busy street below. She liked sitting on that sofa before class, watching things happen outside. She watched flocks of St. Vincent's school-kids gush from the 3:25 #13 bus like a maroon-uniformed leak. She watched one of the secretaries from the front desk come out to smoke, and flirt with the Tuesday/ Thursday security guard. Gloria honed a secret collection of information, gleaned from her time on the couch. She

was proud of her skills of perception, this talent she thought she'd figure out how to put to use one day: the names of people she'd never speak to, the programs they were enrolled in, the people who were picked up in cars at the end of their classes, and the people who waited for the bus, like her.

Still, this close observation was no consolation from an ever-present feeling of separateness, something she tripped on when she tried to be friendly with people. Her mother was her only friend. They gossiped together about people they didn't know, laughing like girlfriends, freer alone with each other in the evenings than in their lives during the day. "You'll be fine, mija," her mother soothed when Gloria complained that she was lonely at school, "you're so young and pretty."

This always made Gloria feel a little desperate, because she knew she was not pretty. Her nose was lumpy, and her lips were thin, her skin consistently pimply.

When Gloria earned her Associate's Degree in Administrative Transcription, her mother took her out for lunch at the Cheesecake Factory to celebrate. They'd eaten outside, watching the people go by. The waitress brought a piece of double chocolate cherry cheesecake with a candle in it, and she and Gloria's mother sang happy birthday. The people at the surrounding tables looked over and smiled, clapped as Gloria blew out the tiny purple candle in the gigantic slab of cake. When the waitress left, Gloria's mother leaned forward and whispered, "sweetheart, isn't this is so much better than a birthday? I'm so proud of you."

They ate the cake together, and Gloria felt the sun on her face, a breeze lifting her hair, rearranging it over her shoulders.

Her mother died that summer. There wasn't a funeral. She and Gloria didn't have any family, really. There were some cousins in Mexico, but Gloria didn't know their names, didn't know if they were even Arroyos. Gloria didn't tell anyone at Wal-Mart that she'd lost her mother. She stayed on in the apartment, her Associate's Degree framed and leaning against the kitchen counter, standing among her mother's collection of dozens of pairs of empty salt and peppershakers. Gloria applied for the job at the Courthouse in March, and got the phone call from the administrator in April.

At the edges of her elation that night, as she ate her potato, Gloria remembered that she hadn't actually typed since school, over a year ago. Once she'd scraped all of the insides from her potato, she pushed away the plate holding its withered brown husk. Normally she'd sit and read her magazine a little longer, but tonight she tucked her hair behind both ears, sat up very straight in her chair, closed her eyes, and laid her fingers on the splintery wood of the kitchen table as if it were a typewriter.

She tried to remember her old typing exercises, the finger upper downer: aq1qaza :p0p; sw4hyyn!6, the zig-zagger: =][poiuytrewqasdfgkl;'/, the hopper: qzzq1zzp//po//o wxxw2xx2. It was, of course, tough to do this on an imaginary keyboard, where it was impossible to look down and double check herself, spend extra time on missed keys, mistakes. She thought she'd go to the public library tomorrow, practice on one of their computers.

Gloria sat and watched the twilight go dark, looking out the window over the sink, amazed that the dogwood on the apartment complex's front lawn was blooming, the woman across the street, using tongs to gather litter in a bag, wearing only a tank top. Gloria'd been oblivious to the passing of winter, and now spring, struggling to get her bearings now that she was completely alone in the world. She sat still long after the sun went down, a funnel of light cast by the lamp down the hall the only thing cutting the dark. She sat gripping the edge of the table, trying to hold herself still in time. When she finally got up and let go, her fingers were so sore, they felt as if they'd been typing for days.

That night, Gloria had a nightmare that her mother was standing under the flowering dogwood, shouting something, both hands cupping her mouth like a loud-speaker, the veins running from collarbone to jaw straining with the effort. Gloria stood paralyzed at the kitchen window, unable to hear or speak. Then, in the next frame of her dream, she was walking to the courthouse for her orientation. She climbed the steps of the building, almost skipping, running, she was so eager to be inside and begin her new life, her new career. But once she'd reached the top of the marble stairs, the tall door would not open. She pulled the handle with one hand, then two. She bowed her head toward her feet, between her straining arms, and discovered that she was still wearing her royal blue Wal-Mart smock.

Gloria woke up with her heart thumping in her throat. She got out of bed and walked into the kitchen, looked out the window, made sure her mother wasn't

standing underneath the flowering dogwood, trying to tell her something. She washed her dinner plate and went back to bed.

The next day, Gloria blew off practicing her typing at the library and went instead to the mall. It was hot, and her clothes bunched and stuck to her. When she rose to get off the bus, her jeans adhered to the backs of her thighs. But inside the mall, the chill pulled her shirt from her body, and her skin rose up in liberated goose bumps that didn't fall back into her skin for quite a long time.

She walked into one of the big department stores. A saleswoman, an old, lavender-haired lady, latched onto her, deposited her into a big dressing room with a little stool upholstered in ivory silk, where Gloria sat fiddling with her hair and unzipping, zipping, then unzipping her pants again, not sure whether she was supposed to be stripping off her clothes while the woman gathered clothes. She tried on lots of things: things she knew weren't for her the moment she saw them, pulling them onto her body in building waves of defeat.

She wanted to leave, but didn't know how. Wouldn't it have been impossibly rude to take up so much of the woman's time without buying anything? Maybe she could buy something and return it next week? But that would require another day off, another long bus-ride, and besides, this didn't solve the problem of what to wear to her orientation.

Gloria was beginning to blink back panicky tears when the woman slung a blue suit over the dressing room door. Gloria had an immediate, almost chemical response, an urge to make some kind of noise.

It was a robin's-egg blue, a color Gloria associated with full page Tiffany ads, worlds populated by little dogs, big pearls, amazing skin. Reaching to pull it from the door, she wasn't sure where the air stopped and the suit began, the material giving way to her palms almost imperceptibly. Like butter, she thought to herself, and laughed. She stripped down to her underwear and unclipped the skirt, a calf-length blue tube of material with a short slit up the back. Gloria'd never owned a skirt with a slit up the back. She'd also never owned any item of clothing with a lining like this, a satiny cool lining, in a color one shade lighter than the suit itself. As it slid up her thighs, Gloria's goose-bumps returned in waves, radiating up and up and up to the very top of her head and back down again, aftershocks of them sliding over her body until the silk lining settled to her temperature. She ran her hands over her hips, reverently took the jacket off its hanger, slipped it on, and buttoned the top button. She nudged her feet into the high-heels under the stool. They were too small, but Gloria perched on tiptoe inside them, struggling not to squash their backs.

In the mirror, Gloria looked, she thought, like someone different. She fell into the mirror for so long that the saleswoman, who'd begun to leave her alone, knocked on the door to see how she was. When Gloria opened up and showed off the suit, the woman made approving clucking noises, but said, after a minute of running her hands over Gloria's waist, hips, thighs, squatting and tugging at the hem, razor-thin glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, "It's gorgeous, honey, but let's try you one size up. I'm worried that when you sit, the lining'll split its seam."

"No," Gloria said, "No, I think this will be fine. Do you have any other colors?"

She'd never disagreed with someone so boldly before. The woman vanished, returned a moment later with more colors.

When Gloria finally peeled out of the last suit, the satin wasn't cool and goose-bumpy anymore, but clammy. Gloria didn't see this as a sign that the fit was indeed too snug, only thought to herself that all she needed to do was let it cool, start fresh, maybe lose just two pounds, stick to her potato-for-dinner diet, and give up ice-cream for a little while.

Gloria bought four suits, spending so much money that the saleswoman spoke the amount aloud in a hushed voice, so much money that the sight of it in digital green numbers on the screen of the register made Gloria blink. It was worth it, though. She thought of these suits as the invaluable birth of a collection. They would buy her a ticket into the world at large.

She made her way from the mall looking at people thinking: see? I'm like you. And you. And you. I have places to go, things to buy. Don't you wonder where, and what, and who I am? She imagined herself a part of someone else's wonderings for once, and she looked at the people she passed on her way to the bus stop sideways, flirtatiously, batting her lashes. She looked above her head into the windows of the tall buildings she passed, imagining people watching her pass below, her arms full of sleek silver bags full of suits.

By the time she'd been at her orientation for half an hour, Gloria's suit was squeezing the breath out of her. She hadn't counted on the way her body shifted

when she sat down, her hips straining at the side-seams, and she hadn't counted on tucking a shirt into the skirt, on top of a layer of pantyhose. It was the pantyhose, she told herself, she just had to get used to them. Gloria spent the month-long orientation squeezed into a wooden carol, behind a typewriter, bunching her shoulders together, sitting rigidly upright, clenching her knees to avert the triangle of shadow created when her thighs spanned just an inch under these astonishingly taut skirts. She was always sweaty, even in the frigidly kept air of the Courthouse. Undressed in the evenings, in front of dinner and a magazine, the itchy pink lines etched over Gloria's legs, a blueprint of seams and waist-bands, didn't entirely fade for hours.

A week after orientation ended, Gloria was assigned her first proceeding. She sat to the front left, and her nerves, in front of the room full of thirty, forty people, attorneys, jury, judge, made her so fluttery that her fingers shook, their aim at the keyboard imprecise. It occurred to Gloria that her too-tight suits served a purpose: concentrating on the positioning of her legs distracted her from the wall of eyes flickering her way, and very quickly, she came to look forward to these eyes. When she was transcribing, she pictured herself as they might: a competent typist in a nice suit, doing her job, part of a team.

She developed fledgling friendships with other transcriptionists, but they were all too tenuous to survive the constantly switching room-assignments. Women she'd see every day for a month, suddenly disappeared to assignments on other floors. Gloria took comfort in these not-quite-developed friendships. In the echoing halls of the Courthouse, she felt companionship in the growing collection of people she knew

well enough to exchange smiles and hellos with. These moments, accompanied by the sound of heels clicking on marble, sustained her through years at the courthouse.

Gloria retired when she was sixty-five. She'd by then accumulated a closet full of suits that she arranged by color, from light to dark. She had a handful of friendships that grew into something more than the rest. A transcriptionist named Lucy, who Gloria ate her lunch with for several years, until Lucy quit to go back to college. A gay lawyer named Clarence, who flirted with Gloria until she fell, silently, painfully, in love with him.

The week after her last day of work, Gloria packed away all of her suits. She layered them in three cardboard boxes, with a sheet of tissue paper and a lavender sachet in between each skirt and jacket, so they would not wrinkle. She slid and stacked these into the padlocked storage unit in the basement of her apartment complex. She stayed on through three different landlords, her apartment never changing very much. A coat of paint all throughout the apartment ten years before she retired, but that was all. She kept her mother's collection of salt and peppershakers, dusting them often. She unearthed a duffel bag of her mother's housecoats, and took to wearing them during the day, watching soap operas. She became her mother, some thirty-five years after her mother's death, except with no one like a daughter to keep her company.

Gloria took to sitting at the kitchen window after she'd eaten her lunch, before her soaps came on. She watched the world go by, taking note of the particulars of

people, all of them unaware of a face pressed against the glass on the second floor, obscured by the growing branches of the dogwood tree.

Belts in the Glove Box

With her arms crossed over her chest, Sue Ellen is eyeing the shrimp Lo Mein I'm eating while I try not to laugh, waiting to see how long it'll take her to say something. I don't know what it'll be, but it'll be something, for sure. She's got that look on her

face. She uncrosses her arms and props them up behind her like kickstands, takes on the Lo Mein from another angle. Sitting like that, her mastectomy scar peeks from her armpit, shiny and purplish now because it's hot out here under the sun. I'm losing my appetite.

"Hannah, have you ever heard," she finally starts in, leaning forward mid-sentence, speaking in her just-between-you-me-and-the-wall voice, "that the Orientals are not so hygienic?"

She's thought long and hard about a tactful way to broach this topic while I eat, I can see, so I think for a minute in turn, slurping a presumably un-hygienic Oriental noodle in the silence while we both sweat under the sun. We're sitting on the common front porch of our apartment building. As usual, I came outside to eat quietly, to watch the people go by, but she heard my footsteps or smelled my food and came out to keep me company. Sue Ellen has lived in the Horizon House for decades in a ground floor unit, rent controlled. I pay more for my tiny little studio upstairs. I can afford it, but it's still a lot for me to handle right now.

"Really?" I answer her, deciding to go the route of least resistance, hear her out about the Orientals. My great aunt Cleo used to call people the worst names, old time ones you don't hear often these days: kike, wop, spic, and with a very few exceptions she was the last person I'd heard with this sort of a mouth on her until I came across Sue Ellen. Who knows, maybe these sorts of mouths are alive and well all over the place, but where I'm from, people watch what they say. I don't know. I'm new here, still feeling it out.

“Well, you know, that’s what they say, they’ve got water shortages over there, so they go easy with showers and dishes, don’t wash as much as we do.”

I won’t offer her anything to this just yet. I take a sip from my now tepid Dr. Pepper. She looks at my eyes. Looks at my Lo Mein. Has the good sense to look uncomfortable for just a minute, but then she’s off to the races again, out to fill the silence and bolster her case. Sue Ellen was born in the fifties in Dundalk. The locals tell me that this explains everything. A very simple white folks kind of place, where men tie confederate flags to the antennae of their trucks.

“I had a pedicure up at that Chic Nails on Pratt once, you know that place is owned by them, and I got the most terrible infection, a kind of a fungus, the doctor said.” She gives a jiggly little shaking off the heevie jeevies sort of shudder at the memory, and it’s amazing how her new breasts don’t budge, how funny that she has this wonderful, high end, set of boobs on her now like some of the girls I dance with at The Goddess. They would look a little misplaced on an older lady like her if she weren’t so proud of them, pointing and shaking them everywhere.

I’ve finished my food, and I’m tired of listening to her, seeing her.

“Maybe the chemo is messing with your skin, making it overly sensitive, Sue Ellen, because I get my nails done there all the time, and I’m just fine, no fungus.”

I go on, telling her that Mae used to dance at the Goddess too, before she moved to Vegas when some showgirl something or another had an opening for an Asian girl. Mae is the owner couple’s daughter at Chic Nails. I swear up and down that she’s one clean Oriental. I’ve never used the word Oriental in a sentence before, but certain occasions call for speaking to Sue Ellen in her own language. This can

help me get points across to her that would be otherwise lost. I go overboard, tell her that Mae always hogged the shower after her sets to the point that there was hardly any hot water left for anyone else.

I've met Mae, she dances too, but it's not true that we've ever danced at the same place. I just need to put Sue Ellen in her place with a solid piece of evidence. Sue Ellen is all about evidence, hard facts. She's sensed that I'm over this line of talk, and is happy I've said something that can put a good, firm lid on it. She likes me. She doesn't like it when I lose my cool with her, and I've done it before. She watches my Dr. Pepper bottle, poised mid-air. I won't take a sip until she answers me.

“Well that's good to hear, maybe I'll work up the nerve to try them again one of these days.”

She doesn't always back down like this, but today she's trying to get on my good side. She probably wants a ride to the hospital. I can't say why I humor her. I'm bored, yes, I'm lonely, yes, but that's not all of it. I like the way she wants to be near me all the time. As soon as she was able to suss out my job, the dancing, she latched on and wouldn't let go, always wanting to hear stories, much more exciting ones than I have to tell. The way she looks at me is, I suppose, something like the way my men at The Goddess look at me when I'm leaning into them, working them. I like seeing this look in her face. It's strange, I know. I can't figure myself out. I came here to get away from everyone I knew, everything old, and now I'm drawing this strange, ill, racist, old woman close to me, like a magnet. My mother would say: watch who a person holds close and it'll tell you all you need to know about them,

louder than anything they say. I don't like to think about my mother, about home. I am here to forget about my mother. My mother wouldn't be able to stand Sue Ellen.

I can hear her now, shrill, over the vacuum cleaner racket coming from the lobby. She's talking to Darrell, the mailman she has a crush on, who's as gay as the day is long. A woman from Maid Pro comes to vacuum every two weeks, an older black lady named Ruth, who isn't any older than Sue Ellen, but Sue Ellen lifts her nose in the air when she walks through, after saying "excuse me please," even though she could easily have walked on the side of the room without carpet, where Ruth doesn't vacuum. I've seen Sue Ellen do this three times. If I'd just seen it once I wouldn't think much of it, but I've seen her do it three separate times, make Ruthie move her vacuum cleaner off the carpet and then say "excuse me please" standoffish and haughty as if she didn't recognize Ruth from vacuuming that same damned carpet every other Tuesday for the last twenty however-many years her old, tired, self has lived in this building. And Ruthie always moves the vacuum, doesn't even look up at Sue Ellen, but pushes the vacuum with her foot, pulls it back when Sue Ellen has gone off to wherever she was making to go off to.

If I were Ruthie, I'd look her straight in the eyes and say: excuse me please, what? What do you want? Then again, I make a habit of not looking people who irritate me in the eyes. I don't know what I'd do if I were Ruthie. I hardly know what I'm doing as myself.

One afternoon a few weeks after she had her mastectomy, she caught me coming into the building late from work. “Hey sweetheart, have a good night?”

She knows my hours; she’d been waiting for me. I told her yes, more or less. She was just sitting on the couch in the lobby without a magazine or anything at midnight, somehow making it look natural even though we live right on the meat rack and the boys had been out for hours by then pacing in front of our building. I’m friendly with some of them, and Sue Ellen surprises me sometimes, striking up friendships with people I’d have pegged her as calling some kind of a faggot, but nope, no friendships with the corner boys. They make her nervous. She pretends not to notice as they vogue and sashay chante up our street, twirling around the bus-stop pole with a hand on a hip when cars drive by cruising for them. I’ve given this some thought, and I think they make Sue Ellen uncomfortable because they’re too much like her. It’s the kind of woman-thing they both do. Same act. Hips all over the place when they walk, noses in the air. Backs always arched, delivering their asses to the world. Even my regulars sometimes don’t even recognize me if they see me outside the bar, because I relax, sink back into my body. But Sue Ellen and the corner boys never sink. Some of the men who pick them up never even find out they’re boys. Dante told me this, Dante with the blue eyeliner and unbelievable pear shape, though I would have guessed it anyway. He’d make a killing at The Goddess so long as he didn’t go getting too close to anyone.

So she asked if I’d made a lot of money and I told her I had. This time I’m telling the truth. Baseball season means money; we’re right around from the stadium.

But that night she didn't ask for any stories right away. "Hannah, honey, I was just wondering, are you busy Thursday morning?"

It was late, and I couldn't think up an excuse on command just then, so I said no. "Would you give me a ride to Mercy? I've got to get a round of this shit and they won't let me take the bus home by my lonesome afterwards."

I softened up and said yes, of course, we'd make a day out of it. How do you say no to a sick woman? That's the thing about Sue Ellen that's new to me. It's the combination of her illness, and her overall disagreeable-ness, that I'm not sure how to deal with. She asked for stories, wanted to know what happened, anything new? Nothing's ever new, I'd like to tell her, it's all the goddamn same, even though I moved all the way across the country to find something different, to start over. Everyone is the same; it's just the scenery that might change a little.

I made up a story for Sue Ellen about a woman around her age who came in all alone, no escort, bought all of us a round and then got Big Mike to help her up onto the platform to dance a little, didn't take anything off, but she threatened to. We all hooted and hollered, the audience for once, watching, until Big Mike carried her off the stage. Sue Ellen cackled when I finished talking.

"Oh, girl, you are too much! I'm going to come in and see you one of these nights."

She gasps for air, she is laughing so hard. I wonder if she knows that I make up stories for her. Maybe she does. I don't know. I don't pretend to know Sue Ellen. She's a strange bird, like me.

So that next Thursday morning we drive to Mercy in my ancient gray Chevy Celebrity that never gets driven. We drive right past The Goddess. In daylight it looks droopy, different. I don't point it out to Sue Ellen, who looks dead already in the passenger seat, her wispy white blonde old hair blowing out of her head, all over the car, eyes closed, resting. I'll remember her like this, so still, when I see her in the hospice place at Mercy, making the most horrendous gargling sound for every breath, her chest heaving up and down under a baby-boy-blue crocheted blanket left by a volunteer.

Sue Ellen worked for the government for a long time, as someone's secretary from what I gather. She'd rather make it sound like she did something very top secret, very CIA, and doesn't get specific. She'll say, "Back when I worked for the government..." and then tell a story in her whispery kitten voice that has nothing to do with the government, or her job at all. But unlike mine, her stories are all real. She just doesn't tell the parts she doesn't want to. I know this because she's got documentation. She pulls out jaundiced albums crammed full of photos of a woman I wouldn't recognize in a million years were it not spoon fed to me by none other than herself that this is Sue Ellen Hughes circa 1970 something. And eyes that I do recognize upon closer inspection. Vaguely cat shaped eyes that would make her look a bit on the Oriental side herself if it weren't for a blonde fall of hair like a Pantene commercial. She was indeed a hot mama, just like she says. Tiny little waist with a different man's hand hanging around it in nearly every picture. I wonder if she thinks I'm like her. If she thinks my job making money off men means that I'm like her.

She doesn't understand that probably it makes us very different. I don't care about men. Sue Ellen, I can see, looking into her delighted, flushed face in these pictures, did. I take what I need from them and keep moving, but I'll bet she was used, promised things that weren't ever made good on.

When she starts to give me all of her things because the Mercy people tell her this time she's dying for real, one thing will be a brittle plastic bag full of old belts: clangy silver links, colored rhinestones, a gold stretch fabric lame one, all of them Barbie-doll small. Her waist is twice that size now, blown up by treatments. So are her new boobs, so they ought to balance out. But you can't help but smell her illness. It's not a too-many-bon-bons kind of body. It's one of those stills for some sort of Catholic something or another, a starved African child with a hugely distended belly. Those bellies that look to me as hard and immovable as Sue Ellen's new breasts.

I'll keep the belts in the Chevy's glove box until I sell the car, my mother's old car. I'll leave the doors open so that passers-by can rifle through it to go through what little is there without breaking the windows. They won't ever take Sue Ellen's belts, and this will always surprise me a little. They are gaudy and cheap, but don't they sparkle? Don't they make you think, just for a second, that they might be able to pass for something good, something real?

Before she took a nap that day in the car on the way to Mercy, Sue Ellen asked me, “Hannah, have you ever been afraid of anything, really just scared shitless?”

This threw me because I’d never heard her do anything but overflow bravado, talk about how the doctors these days, all their research, never run out of shit to try. Some root from a rainforest somewhere that shrinks tumors. Super lasers that shoot darts full of tumor kryptonite, deflate them instantly like party balloons. Someone’s cousin who swears that drinking a teaspoon of holy water every Sunday sends tumors straight back to hell where they came from. Sue Ellen slides CAT scans of since-killed tumors under magnets on the fridge the way pregnant women do ultrasounds. Shows me the big one every time I pass through her kitchen for anything. Says, “See that sucker? Gone! That mother fucker is G-O-N-E, gone!” Sue Ellen is not a scared shitless woman, and this is why I stick around, because her balls are contagious, despite how she grates on my nerves the rest of the time. So she threw me that day in the car, talking about fear.

“Yeah, I have.” I told her. “You remember in September when that guy followed me home from work and stuck me up?”

She remembered. She sat me down in the lobby and called the cops, sat with me until they came, and for a while after they’d left.

“I thought he was going to really beat me up, hurt me. I thought I might pass out, I was so scared.”

It took her a minute to answer. I was quite glad to be driving through this conversation with a wheel in my hands, a road to keep my eyes on, green and orange and red lights to keep track of.

“Lord, I would have been scared too. Hannah, I don’t know how you went to work the next night.”

“It wasn’t so bad, actually. The worst of it was really that night, while it was happening. Big Mike has been walking me halfway home since then, past that sketchy patch of streets until you get into Mt Vernon.”

We sat for a minute chewing on the silence. We were getting closer to Mercy, stuck in lunchtime traffic. Watched the light at St. Paul and Biddle turn red, green, orange, red again without moving. I shifted into park. The man with a cardboard sign at the intersection glanced at the Chevy and then rolled his wheelchair on to the cars behind us without even bothering to give us his spiel.

“Well I’ll tell you what, I’m scared now. I’ve never been as scared before as I am now. This is a frightening thing, Hannah, I can’t tell you how it feels to know I’m being ate up from the inside all the way out. I can’t tell you.”

She was stroking the worn navy velour of the seat between us like it was a cat. My mother got the Chevy when I was a little girl, and it felt like the inside of a fairy tale to me then, that velour, like the lining of a queen’s throne in any one of one thousand stories of the princess and the pea, Snow White, Rose Red. I have to remind myself what an asshole she is, this woman, Sue Ellen. It’s the best word: asshole. Someone like her has no right to be so vulnerable, pitiable. I’ve known men like her,

and I ran to this city to get away from them, to get away from my mother judging me for them. Not even any one in particular, but a legion of them.

I turned to look at Sue Ellen, because the light had turned red again and we still weren't moving.

"Sue Ellen, I really can't imagine," I said, stalling for time, trying to figure out what else to say to her, sitting in my passenger seat, being eaten from the inside all the way out. I knew how scared she must have been to speak it out loud. I'd heard her talk about a lot of things, but never fear.

"Hey, do you want to swing through St. Andrews on the way to Mercy and try to get our hands on some holy water for you to make a little cocktail out of?"

She chortled, sounding grateful to have a reason to laugh, and that's when she leaned her head back in her seat for a nap. It took us another half an hour to get through the traffic even though we were only a handful of blocks away from the hospital.

When Sue Ellen dies I will go to her funeral in Dundalk, where I've never been before, and I'll get all turned around trying to get there. I won't happen to spot any trucks with confederate flags tied to antennae. It won't feel like more than factories, desolate stretches of weedy, seedy land, so I'll keep turning around before it's time, driving the Celebrity up and down the same stretch of road. There will be a bagpipe player in the door of the church, who I'll know Sue Ellen left cash specified for in her will. All of her leftover disability will go towards this bagpiper who will make eyes at me as he blows his pipes, stares at the back of my head. Sue Ellen will

have signed each funeral pamphlet like an actress signs a playbill. “I love you all, xo xo xo Sue Ellen,” and she’ll put her own words in quotation marks.

I will sit through the service by myself towards the back, but a woman will see me and come over to hold my hand at that point in the service when the pastor tells everyone to join hands with their neighbor. The woman will walk towards me, hand outstretched. I won’t know church protocol, and I won’t look in the mood to fake it. But she’ll head towards me anyway, because that’s what these Christian people do, you know. My mother was like this. Her too-long rayon skirt covered with k-mart purple flowers will swish the floor and she’ll smile a forlorn, welcoming smile. And while I’m holding her hand, I will begin to weep like the mourner that I’ll be, grieving hard, despite myself, bagpipe player watching me, playing his pipes, long, hard notes, in this church, on this empty stretch of road.