

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: THE BOOK THIEF AND OTHER STORIES
Johnna Marie Schmidt, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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Department of English

The Book Thief and Other Stories is a collection of short works of fiction. Thematically, the stories share a concern with central characters who have difficulty negotiating social boundaries within forced communities (meaning a community of people who have not necessarily chosen each other but have nevertheless ended up together, such as groups of co-workers or neighbors). The central characters in this collection can loosely be grouped as those guilty of encroaching upon social boundaries which others might wish to keep intact, and those wishing to avoid encroachment. In all cases, the central character's relation to their surrounding community is at risk.

Stylistically most of the stories experiment with first person point-of-view modalities, including two stories told in epistolary form. In diction and syntax the narratives shift between passages written in heightened, poetic language and those written in a more simple prosaic style.

THE BOOK THIEF AND OTHER STORIES

by

Johnna Marie Schmidt

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair
Professor Carol Burbank
Professor Michael Collier
Professor Howard Norman

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Client Correspondence: Damascus, Rose

October 19

Dear Dr. Braun:

Regarding this proposed correspondence, I asked you how can I know that you won't turn it all over to the authorities and you said it wouldn't be professional of you, considering what you understand to be the severity of my crime. But this seems to me a terribly contingent answer - first, upon your understanding and second, upon your idea of yourself as professional. Do not such understandings and identities change through time? When I suggested that I don't know you, and for you to ask me to write all this down is too much to ask, you leaned over your desk and stared at me.

“My dear, we only have eight sessions. You have to trust me or there is no point.”

And the irony, that my company's health plan is covering these eight sessions, but only eight sessions; that somehow the owner of the company I work for, my nemesis, is paying for our sessions but will never know it through the miracles of modern bureaucracy; and finally the hilarity of trying to heal quickly from this self-inflicted wound - well, it all made me laugh. And I want you to know that I wasn't laughing at you. Because you seemed startled and you leaned back against your seat with a puzzled look on your face. In fact, you almost seemed hurt. Or affronted, I guess. I'm sorry. I hope we can have some kind of meaningful eight-session-long relationship.

Can you believe that even this moment as I type, alone in my tiny apartment banging away on my shoddy old computer, I can feel his eyes behind my shoulder? My boss. My employer. I will call him Optic. The Watcher. His dominion over all of us penetrating with his gaze. Watching our finger strokes on the silent and ergonomic keyboards, purchased not for our comfort but for our speed. He says as much, this and much more all the time. He is proud of what a good business man he is, at the obvious and ongoing expense of all his human relationships. Should I feel sorry for him?

"Rosey. Use the 10-key," he commanded me on my first day of work. He was standing above me, as he often does. I type about 50 words per minute, which is fast, but not very fast. My skills are more in understanding webs of relations, databases, spreadsheets, functions, reports, and how information can be used. I had hoped my prowess in those areas alone might make me a valuable employee, esteemed in the eyes of my new employer. But he was very clear with me, right from the start, that I should work on my speed as well. Economy equals value, at the Institute. There would be no fifteen minute employee breaks.

“Time lost is money lost. My money lost. Use the 10-key, it’s faster. You’re costing me money when you use the numbers at the top of your keyboard. I should fine you.” Here his lips spread back along his teeth as if to indicate a smile. He pointed a long stiff finger to within an inch of my face. I found myself going cross-eyed wondering if he was going to actually tap me on the nose.

“Learn 10-key. Don’t let me see you reaching up again. Never.”

What comes from our fingers and mouths is his capital and he watches and listens. Eavesdrops on our telephone conversations, creeping up silently, as he did to Cita yesterday:

“Cita, put them on hold,” he warned in a low voice. “Now.”

Cita looked up with big, startled eyes.

“Excuse me sir, can I put you on hold for just a moment?” She swiveled in her chair to face him.

“It’s beneficent, not benevolent,” he growled.

“What?”

“You just described the Institute as benevolent. We are not the goddamn Salvation Army and we are not fucking Old Saint Nick on Christmas Eve.” (He turned to me and winked, here, lascivious and especially foul as he continues to occasionally accost me with the memory of a humiliating mistake both of us made last Christmas Eve after the staff party which I hosted in my tiny apartment. I was so drunk and I didn’t know him well then. My skin crawls to think of it; it’s better I don’t remember. C’est la vie.) He continued: “We are, however, beneficent.” Again, the spread of lips along teeth.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said, “I’m sorry, my tongue must have gotten tied up. I knew that.”

“I know you know that.” Articulated like a threat.

“I’m sorry, but can I go back and close the sale? I’m afraid I’m going to lose him.”

He dismissed her with a wave of the hand, continued to stand over her with his hands on his hips, while she successfully, with a verbal smoothness both calculated and poetic, closed the sale, and made him another \$495 dollars. Cita is an amazing salesperson on the phone. She’s also quite stunning in person, a darling young Jewish woman with bright red hair, a full bosom and nicely rounded posterior, a tiny waist. She dresses well to accentuate her figure. She wears these amazing shoes that are like a cross between clogs and mules and make a clip clop sound on the nylon tile whenever she rises from her desk and picks her way through the cluttered office.

Optic. Watching the four of us but especially her. Do you need a description of the floor plan? I think you do. Five desks crammed into what should have been one office, including Optic’s desk, the largest and the original. As the Institute expanded, he just kept adding smaller desks. We all begged for dividers and finally got them when we convinced him we needed more bulletin board space because of our expanded sales. But there’s no real privacy, and he can stand in the middle of the room, and by taking just two steps in one direction or the other, go from watching Cita, to me, to Elmo, to Belinda. There. I’ve named us all. Because this is a fiction I am writing and because I do not trust you, how could I?

Dr. Braun, have you ever been watched six to eight hours a day, by someone in a

position of power over you? Do you wonder why I obsess on this seeming detail of my work environment? Have you read Foucault? Observation feels like punishment, acts as coercion. It breeds dis-ease. Disease of the mind and spirit. I come to you diseased still from the complication of acting out of this diseased state. I wish to excuse myself, of course. How could I not? But I know I'm at fault, a faulty human. Why was it me, of the four of us, who finally did something? I am tired and can't think how to write all this down.

October 26

Dear Dr. Braun:

Excuse me for writing it here, what I couldn't bear to suggest in the office, but your interest in my sex life seems almost voyeuristic. I don't agree with you at all that we need to spend more time on the drunken and hazily remembered roll in the hay, really, I can barely be held accountable for those actions. Isn't the present circumstance more important? My actions taken last month, while sober and with forethought? I've stopped drinking as a result of the little fiasco you are so fixated upon. I have, as they say, dealt with it, processed it, come to grips and accepted a certain level of self-loathing in regards to it. It's the newer mistakes I lie awake unable to stop thinking about. And the whole reality of our office life, at the Institute.

If you could just spend one day at my workplace. One hour. How he keeps us jumping. Perhaps you could visit during your lunch hour, posing as a registrant. You should see. It's not just the constant observation, it's also the claustrophobia, the enclosure, the lack of space and air, the noise. We can smell each other's breath.

“My God, I’m starving,” one of us finally exclaims during a miraculous pause, at 1:30 or 2:00, as if this utterance is a spontaneous interruption of the flow of work, not planned and mustered up to over the last two hours. The phones ring, two lines at the same time. Cita and I leap to our receivers as it is company policy to answer on the first ring. The printers whirr, producing reports, news releases, questionnaires. Belinda is doing payroll. The sales slip from the credit card machine rat-a-tat tats, spitting itself out like a tongue. Another phone line lights up, and another, and suddenly all four of us are yelling at the phones and banging on our keyboards with a ferocity which seems almost animal. We are yelling at potential students about the benefits of the Institute, what an investment it is in yourself, the small class size, the personalized attention. I catch myself repeatedly yelling the word “attentive” at some vulnerable, lonely man who works in a bank.

“Rosey, what are you doing for lunch?” Elmo might ask me, pulling nervously on his luscious and curly hair, twenty minutes later when he gets off the phone. I cover the mouthpiece of my phone.

“I’m going to have to order something in. I have too much to do.” The answer is always the same, no matter who asks who. I have no idea why we keep asking. It’s a ritual I suppose, the only way we know how to get from point A to point B, from not having food to having food.

Optic orders something spicy, making his breath even worse for the remainder of the day, or something deep fat fried, filling the office with a two day stench. Did I mention already the lack of ventilation? The rest of us juggle our sandwiches with our phones and coffee cups, hunched over our registration forms clutching #2 pencils. You

can often tell who processed a registration form by what bits of food are smudged onto it. We all drip our foods and beverages onto the papers we shuffle for pay, and Optic stands over us with his spicy black bean and garlic noodles, slurping, not infrequently dripping the sauce into our hair. If I lose a pencil, if under pressure I might reach for a pen, I find myself literally spat upon:

“Pencil. Pencil. Always use pencil on registrations! Always!”

One by one we excuse ourselves after lunch like good school children at summer camp, carrying our toothbrushes and toothpaste to the office bathroom. Except, of course, Optic, who moves in such a cloud of stench, body and breath, that you can locate him in the room by smell, without turning around to see where he is. I’m not trying to say that he deserves it, what I did, just because he smells bad. It’s the sick environment he’s created, and the fact that he is, in addition to his more serious personality flaws, an insensitive slob.

November 2

Dear Dr. Braun:

Your suggestions are very gentle, and I appreciate that. But you must understand that a year ago, when I moved to the city under some misguided and delusional pretense of becoming “a real writer,” I felt very lucky to find a job, any job. I started out at the Institute at ten dollars an hour, and I was basically running the place in a few weeks, not very well, but figuring it out. I realized the place was a disaster, and I did threaten to leave, but he gave me a raise and a benefits package to which I am now, unfortunately addicted. Could I make \$36,000 elsewhere? I don’t know. To tell you the truth, I don’t

think of leaving my job as much as I fantasize of leaving the city altogether. I have no friends here but Belinda, Cita, and Elmo. No activities that aren't somehow related to the Institute. I work late most nights. The environment of the Institute is the environment of my life, and this would be fine, except Optic, who ruins it, also rules it, rules me. The accumulation of grievances against him, the evolving distrust, I think you understand by now. How I watched him closely when he came in every day to see what kind of day I could expect to have. As if he's some sort of God.

And then Belinda came to work with us, last summer. And this was pivotal. She is middle management, above us, below him. The plan was that he would sit at home collecting checks and leave the day to day operations to her. I think I would have quit long ago if she hadn't given me hope. She glided in so quietly, so respectfully, so small and so blonde. We had special private meetings where she inquired about where I bought my shoes, and then put on her glasses and listened at great length to how I thought the office should run. And she laughed a little bit here and there, but only at the appropriate places. I pointed out health hazards and machinery storage liability, and the general disgruntledness of the staff. I pointed out vast filing system errors, the unnecessary, uneconomical and boring redundancy of documents and therefore work. I was speaking and working in good faith again. I was giddy with delight and anticipation of how it would all get better soon.

She was stronger than I. She had more clout. Even after he vetoed the new envelope system idea, she researched it and found it more cost-effective than our current system, then presented him the paperwork halfway filled out with a "Ha! I told you so!" She was tiny and admirable and had a sense of humor. She gave us all hope. All of our

spirits were high, except for Optic's.

He was getting harder and harder to work with. Whereas he used to make a big show of saying "Good morning!" to everyone and starting the day with a big bang of superficial positivity, now he made no bones about slouching in late and hissing orders before even saying Hello. A typical scene:

(Optic Enters)

Optic: Elmo get that hand truck out of the way! Cita, Did James Rowley the Third call?

Cita: *(rising from desk, hands fluttering in front of cleavage)* He called about 9:30.

Optic: Why didn't you call me at home?

Cita: He was just calling to say they hadn't made a decision and there's no need for you to call-

Optic: You should have called me at home. Elmo! Get this hand truck out of here!

Elmo: *(tufts of hair bouncing, stacking boxes perilously high)* Yeah, boss, I'm just making a place for it.

Optic: NOT THERE! You can't put them there! Those are the precious textbooks with soft fiber lining!

Elmo: Yeah, Yeah, Boss. OK. *(Bewildered, he looks, at walls, nooks, and crannies.)*

(Pause.)

Optic: I don't care where it goes, just move it!

Elmo: But - - where should it go?

Optic: Just - - *(kicking the hand truck and injuring his foot)* OUT OF HERE!

Elmo: OK. OK. *(blinks and turns with an air of resignation, clapping the back of his neck softly)*

(Cita, meanwhile, is placing the errant phone message which should have been a phone call on Optic's desk, throwing up her dainty hands and shaking them as if to rid herself of the responsibility, and clip-clopping back to her desk)

Optic: Cita! What did Rowley say?

Cita: He said they haven't come to a decision yet and -

Optic: I got that part, what else? I was distracted by the hand truck in front of my desk, you see.

Cita: Yes, I see, he also said there was no need for you to call him.

Optic: WHAT?

Cita: At least not every day.

Optic: Not every day? NOT EVERY DAY? I haven't been calling that jerkimo every day. Gimme that phone I'm calling him right now.

Cita: Sir, he didn't want you to call him.

Optic: Shut up.

Cita: *(softly)* He said he didn't want you to call him.

Optic: *(a slow, disappointed collapse into his chair, loosely hanging up the phone as he falls back. He emits a low groan)* Well. Here we go for another day. *(He rubs his fingers on his brow, thumb and forefinger slowly sliding out to relieve the undoubtable pressure within.)*

Is he not appealing in his vulnerability? I do like him a little more when he looks beaten. But I would follow this scene with scenes of less sympathetic badgering: Belinda reprimanded for a finger slip, myself asked in degrading tones exactly how I shut down the computer programs and was I sure that I wasn't doing it in the wrong order, and

did I know what to do supposing there were further complications due to my shut down order error and fields must be compressed on Jet and so on. In this particular case, it turns out there actually were obscure and complex chains of command I hadn't known about which I could give the computer and which would ease my hypothesized injurious shut down order error. He gave me the software manual to read at home. I gave him my usual huge shit eating grin and masqueraded as the loyal employee, lying right to his face: "You're right. Absolutely. I'll be sure to read the manual thoroughly, Chief." Perhaps it was this kind of on-going self-determined erosion of my integrity that brought me to taking action.

Or it might have been him losing his wife so unexpectedly. That might have put him over the edge, and in turn put me over the edge. She just up and left him last April, and no one in the office blamed her. None of us knew exactly why she had left or whether he even knew why. Although there was that time she called the office in May and asked to speak to "That lying, cheating sonofabitch." In any case he wasn't telling. I think we all tried to cut him some slack at first. But it was hard to feel compassionate towards him, for so many reasons.

Within days after his wife moved out, Optic started rubbing Cita's shoulders and tucking her hair behind her ears as she stared at her monitor. She wasted no time in feeling revolted.

"Eww, it's just gross," as the door clicked behind him, "why is he starting to touch us all of the sudden? Slimeball." She wriggled in splanchnic distaste. It gradually became clear to her through these conversations that she was the only one in the office currently getting a kinder, gentler, more bodily intimate version of Optic.

Office tensions were at a fever pitch at the annual Memorial Day outing, where everyone but me drank several margaritas on the boss' tab, swishing down as much as they could in order to punish him with a high bill. There are many parties throughout the year, and everyone habitually gets completely bombed. As if we could spend all his money and bring him down to our level. As if we could obliterate the ongoing indignity of our relations with him. I used to do it too, but not anymore. So now I'm always the sober one.

Cita was sitting in between Elmo and Optic and she excused herself to follow me into the bathroom where she cursed and cried and confided that Optic had put his hand on her leg and "fucking left it there" even after she had pulled away. I suggested that he experiences such a deficit of social skills that he's left with predatory behavior as his only social option. She continued to fall apart, so we decided to leave early and share a cab home. She leaned against me in the cab and I put my arms around her and I realized it was the first time since Christmas Eve that I had held or hugged someone. I kissed her fragrant hair. Her main fear seemed to be losing her job. I told her that although I didn't see it happening, she could always start documenting now, just as a safeguard, and encouraged her just to tell him to back off.

"I don't want to make a scene."

"You don't have to, if you just say one little thing he'll back right off."

"One little thing like what?"

"Like, I'd rather you didn't touch me." I was pleading with her like my life depended on it.

"I really don't think I dress like a slut."

“It has nothing to do with how you dress. He’s just completely out of touch with reality.”

And then she said something like:

“I just wish he’d go away. Take a trip around the world. Start another institute in another city. Have a stroke. Get food poisoning and die. I don’t care. Just get him away from me.”

She was distraught. My own problems with him had been bad enough. But it’s very hard to see someone as sweet and good as Cita being preyed upon like a baby mouse.

November 9

Dear Dr. Braun:

The way you kept inserting my supposed image of myself as a female avenger, is extremely inappropriate. And just wrong. I do not see myself as some sort of female avenger, although Optic’s actions, even more than you could know, could justify that. It wasn’t just Cita. It wasn’t even just women. Yes, I acted out of what seemed at the time like a collective desire. But that’s my role in that office; I am the one who knows *how to do things*, how to make things work. I find shortcuts. Not that what I did was a shortcut. I don’t mean that. I just mean, Cita wasn’t the only person in the office who seemed to be almost asking me to take action. And, I repeat, it’s not just about sex! There were more incidents than you can imagine. Since you seemed so delighted by my previous scene writing, I will favor you with one more, here, at the risk of further suggestions that I pursue screenwriting (Please spare me!).

The Faux-Firing of Elmo: A Scene

(Optic stands with fists on hips at Elmo's desk. Elmo looks up with beseeching eyes.)

Elmo: Boss, I don't know what to do. Our branch security guard wants more pay and is walking off the job.

Optic: Use one of our jumpers. Don't you have three jumpers?

Elmo: No Boss - that's just the problem. There's two now and they're maxed out at 40 hours a week each, because we lost Domino, remember?

Optic: Oh. Domino. Right. Well, offer them more work.

Elmo: But then they'd be in overtime.

Optic: We don't pay overtime.

Elmo: I know. Exactly. But you have to.

Optic: What? No, no! Not if they agree.

Elmo: N-no. It's state law.

Optic: Show me. Show me the law. Where is it if you did all this research?

Belinda: *(practically singing in an effort at light and cheer)* It's the law all right.

Optic: *(turning and pointing at Belinda)* Hey, you stay out of this, OK? *(turning back)*
Elmo, do you have the document?

Elmo: I don't have it, but I called and asked.

Optic: Call them back and tell them to send us the document.

Elmo: OK, OK, but anyway, I'm telling you it's definitely the law and if we keep these guys 60 hours a week instead of 40, you have to pay time and a half.

Optic: And what do they make?

Elmo: Seven an hour.

Optic: (*voice crescendos throughout this speech*) So that's seven, three and a half, that's ten and a half an hour! What happened to six? Aren't you starting them at six?

Elmo: N-no. Noel has been with us for six months which is a long time for that position, so I gave him a raise, and even though Neill - I just hired him - I started him at seven because he seems like a great candidate and we're giving him the driving right off the bat, which, uh, is also, well - -

Optic: (*glowering*) What?

Elmo: Well, his license was recently stolen, he's getting a new one in the mail any day.

Optic: (*yelling*) What?

Elmo: I trust him. I believe him. He's an honest guy.

Optic: (*screeching*) You don't know that! You DO know he hasn't got a license! Jesus Christ!

Elmo: Well. Anyway. The point is, we don't have a guard for tonight or tomorrow night.

Optic: Jesus Christ. Do this. Tell - - what's his name?

Elmo: Neill?

Optic: You tell Neill we'll pay him six an hour but offer him 16 hours overtime. So he actually makes more.

Elmo: What? Lower his pay? I just hired him at seven.

Optic: Just offer it to him. Always offer people work. It's not a worse deal. It's a different deal.

(Here, there is a painful silence as we all collectively ponder Optic's statement. The stillness is broken by Elmo standing up and rubbing his hands awkwardly on his pants.)

Elmo: *(very quietly)* I can't do it.

(Another extended period of motionlessness. And then Optic erupts, pushing Elmo hard up against the closet door, then reaching for Elmo's phone. Elmo's chair slides across the nylon floor mat and bangs into his file cabinet)

Optic: Give me the goddamn number. *(He starts flipping through Elmo's rolodex with shaking hands)* Where the fuck is Neill's number? *(He finds it, rips it out, and punches numbers onto the keypad of the phone, then points the card in Elmo's face)* You Are Fired. You Are Fired. If you can't work for me go work for someone else just don't call me for a reference you little fuck You Are Fired.

Elmo: *(his jaw drops and then floats noiselessly up and down, followed by incoherent soft noises)*

Optic: DON'T SAY ANYTHING! *(He turns his back)*

(Elmo quietly gets his things together and walks out. Cita runs out after him. Then Belinda. Finally Optic throws the rolodex card on the floor, slams down the phone, and strides out, leaving me alone with the phones. I answer the phones and politely tell people we are experiencing technical difficulties and they will have to call back tomorrow. I take about sixteen calls of this nature and almost begin to believe my lie. In fact, I shut down and reboot all the computers. The four of them come back looking very glum, about an hour after leaving. Optic, with forced cheeriness urges us all back to work, saying "These things happen.")

And Elmo stoops to the floor, picks up the rolodex card, and then picks up the phone and makes the call to Neill.)

The burden of misery on that small office was just too heavy to bear. To see Cita and Elmo and Belinda and myself, perpetually anxious and bitter, and the poison seeping outward to such uninvolved innocents as Noel and Neill. The idea that he could spread misery to people who would never even see him - - that he would use poor Elmo as his goon. It was too much. Sitting at my desk I came to the conclusion that he was simply a misery-maker. That's how he functioned in the world. Every morning the place ran fine, and then he came in and, as Cita put it, "Hell started." He regularly slouched in several hours after we did, and we lived our mornings in a sort of decadent, pleasurable dread. We basked in the glow of our loving office politic as long as the common enemy was at bay. With the click of a door everything switched. We took care of each other openly while he was not present, and fed each other morsels of subterfuge while he was.

Ah, but subterfuge was wearing thin. It's no way to live, I think we all know that.

But it was finally Belinda, even more than the others, who really got me thinking I could change everything. We were at the Institute's "Falling Together" Party, a huge affair which recurs yearly around Labor Day at a trendy bar in SoHo. She was supervising the whole thing and I was in charge of clean up, so we were both pretty much stuck there for the duration. And it was late and we sat at the almost empty bar, watching the bedraggled few who were left leaning there, drunken new couplings trying to decide whether to risk going home with each other or not. Optic had somehow managed to embarrass Belinda at the party and she was fuming, muttering phrases like "I can't wait until he leaves" and "God, I could run this thing so much better without him." Optic

kept pushing back the date when he would finally leave the office in Belinda's care. A date we all craved. Belinda looked me in the eye:

“You know, he just got in the cab with one of the students. Frances DuBlanc. She's taking the Development class.”

I had just indulged myself in a hit of pot and I wasn't sure I understood exactly what she was saying. There seemed to be undertones. I remained silent.

“So irresponsible and sleazy.” She lowered her voice to an angry whisper, “I saw him grab her ass as they got into the cab. Unbelievable. And how old is she? He better hope she's not a teenager.”

I nodded slightly and made a noise of assent. She launched into an accounting of what a greedy bastard he is, how much money he makes per year, how needing to use the staff economically and no raises this year was just a line of bullshit, and how “You'd think he'd be able to see his way clear to at least rent us some more office space.”

“I know.” I managed.

“And the killer is, he doesn't even do any of the goddamn work!”

And then we argued about the capitalist system, with my position being that basically our situation somehow typifies this state of late capitalism in America and hers being that other, more enlightened businessmen have found it more cost efficient in the long run to deal more progressively; productivity and sustainability and worker satisfaction, etc. “The American workplace is changing,” she railed, “people have child care at their workplaces now, and gyms, and we can't even get a damn water cooler!”

“So is that the first thing you'll change when he leaves you in charge?”

“Rosey, you wouldn't believe what I'm going to do with this place-”

“Because if we’re getting a water cooler, may I suggest the kind that has both cold and hot spigots so that we can make soothing herbal teas?”

My attempt at humor was almost completely lost as she laid out her plans: renting an additional room, support staff, plants and music, and “we’re all in our own offices, right?” Hour long lunch breaks, some mutually beneficial commission system, the employees as the most valuable company resource, and how the Institute would have to backpeddle pending our imminent burn out and inevitable quitting.

She was convincing. And I was feeling pretty inspired by this whole vision of the reformed, worker-friendly Institute, and I fell into the dream of my new, improved workplace. She kept talking but I lost track for a while. When I surfaced she had calmed down a bit and was saying very reasonably: “You know, he’s not even good for his own business in the long run. He’s destructive. Someone just needs to take him out of the action for a while, get him out of the way.”

It made sense to me. I realized I was crossing a line but the line itself became questionable and therefore dotted. I mused on the different planes of existence; how he could get away with enacting psychic violence on us every day of the week, and why wouldn’t I retaliate, and who cared if it was in the psychic or physical realm? The irony that the most easily punishable thing for us to do would be to steal from him the money that we made for him in the first place. How and what he stole from us. What a construct it was that gave him all these aggressively used rights, while giving us nothing, no rights but a paycheck, our ticket to survival. And I had this feeling that we were in the midst of something very unbalanced, very evil, and we had to fight it, tooth and nail, and use whatever means necessary.

November 16

Dear Dr. Braun:

Of course I was acting alone. Of course I am responsible. I know that. I was not trying to imply that Belinda or Cita or the faux firing of Elmo made me do it. I'm just trying to explain to you my state of mind, how my insanity in this regard evolved.

I went home the night of the "Falling Together" party on the subway. My mind settled into an obsessive round of thoughts about how messed up everything was and how I could fix it all. By the time I got to my apartment I felt quite driven. I walked into the kitchenette without putting my purse down and threw the cupboard door open. I had given myself an herbal abortion back in January and still had all these bags of herbs and essential oils. I had already used them on myself. I knew their effects. I hadn't been able to work for a whole week. It happened to be the last week in January, which was Spring Registration. Every day of that week I called in sick and listened to Optic's barely veiled insinuations that by not coming in I was proving to the world what a crappy person I really was:

Monday: "We really need you right now."

Tuesday: "This week is important. This week is what I hired you for, you know."

Wednesday: "What? You're taking another day off? What the hell is wrong with you?" I made something up about gastrointestinal colitis or something. Said I was spending all my time on the toilet.

Thursday: "Rosey, this is not acceptable. Take some goddamn Tums, OK? Have

you tried Extra Strength Mylanta? Should I start looking for a replacement? Not that it would fix this mess.”

Friday he yelled at me about how much damage I was causing, how the entire Spring term was “a write off” because of me, etc. I got out of bed and made an effort, but didn’t get very far, and had to crawl back to bed to call back again. It was not a pleasant conversation.

This is, of course, a whole other area to go into, the abortion and the trauma caused and the abuse I had to take from Optic. But it’s a tangent and we are pressed for time, aren’t we? I guess we have three sessions left. The point is, I thought I could relax Optic with a dose of Damiana, Pennyroyal, Blue Cohosh, and Poppy. I could calibrate up to compensate for his heavier body weight and get the same effect on him that they had on me. The Institute’s health plan is constantly touted as one of the best by Optic himself, so why should he not have the opportunity to take advantage of it? He would get drowsy. He would start to feel sick to his stomach. He would break out in a sweat and possibly faint for a short spell. Being the sissy he is, he’d probably go to the Emergency Room and take a few days off. Maybe he could get over his wife if he were forced just to sit still in bed and think for a while. It seemed a completely reasonable action - - even better, an oddly humorous one.

So. I measured the tinctures with an eye-dropper in my bathroom, and kept the bottle nestled among lipsticks and powders in my make-up bag at work. This seemed like the easiest way to make everything better.

And then I waited. I waited for him to ask me to get him a cup of coffee. By the time he finally asked me, I had been carrying this stuff around for a few weeks and I had

gotten inured to the idea of actually following through with it. Every little mean thing he did in that intervening time seemed more reason; justification, fodder. I had seen myself doing it in my mind's eye so many times. I was like an Olympic diver who visualizes the twists and turns of a certain dive for hours every day, and then when the actual event comes, it is done unthinkingly, quickly, like a reflex. I didn't realize I was mentally disciplining myself into action. It was more like I had this secret, mean fantasy that I kept replaying, and it kept getting more real. Yes, I should have sought out therapy at that point instead of at this point. I can see that very clearly now, but it was all happening for the first time.

November 23

The day of, you demand. A detailed account of what happened and how I felt.

It was very surreal. I remember it in slow motion: vivid, seedy, violent, and outrageous.

On a beautiful day last September he threw down a fistful of American Express statements as he saw me rise and grab my purse. I was actually planning on going to the bathroom and splashing my face, jumping around and doing some breathing exercises, which I sometimes do just to break the tension.

“Going out?”

My time had come.

“Yes.” I said it slowly, lightly, and with as little attention as possible.

“Could you get me a cup of coffee? Double Depth Charge, one sugar, three drops of milk.”

“Sure. Would you like a twist of lemon on the side?”

“What?”

“Oh - they’re really good that way. They’ll put a twist of lemon on if you just ask them to.”

“OK. I’ll try it.” He gave me the weird non-smile. He began to grope for his wallet.

“No, no. I’ll get it, you can pay me back.” I offered.

“Thanks.” He appreciated this sign of camaraderie.

I strode efficiently out of the office, model employee as ever. I was even wearing the Institutes t-shirt that day, with the motto “People Are Not Meant To Live In Isolation” emblazoned on the back. The lemon was easy enough to procure at the salad bar. The Double Depth Charge with one sugar was a pleasure to order. I felt full of mirth and power. Do you think I should be institutionalized? I asked to put the milk in myself, and with a hand steadier than pavement administered the three fascistic drops. It would be just right. I carried the cup in its bag carefully so it would look more appealing than usual, with no brown stains trailing down the side. I took the cup to the ladies room and wiped off the counter around the sink. I carefully set the cup down. This is my last chance to decide not to do this, I thought. But my nerves hardly quivered as I fantasized about the coming days in the office, almost as good as a vacation, with my friendly co-workers and stress free environment. Decisions made simply and supported. No time consuming, extraneous vanity projects dumped on my desk. No yelling, whining, or defensive explaining. No subterfuge. An honest place. A clear place. Nine hours a day would be a thrill. I took the lemon wedge out of its plastic container and pulled the pulp

away from the peel. I washed and thoroughly dried my hands. I slowly unscrewed the cap of the tear dropper and slid the dropper along the neck of the bottle. I thought I was being careful not to overdose.

I entered the office minutes later, lipsticked and powdered anew, and set the bag on his desk with my usual haphazard charm. The thing was done and would take care of itself from here on out.

I was in such a haze, so drunk on adrenaline, I found myself groping for ways to appear normal. I sat at my desk and pretended to review the exact order in which to shut down all the programs, I looked at the two hard drives, sitting next to each other on the floor, but they were inscrutable. I picked up some registrations and called up one of my new, fancy queries on the computer. The “Export to PKZIP for Mail List with Branch Relations Query.” Ah, the comfort of the database. I watched the rows and columns filling with data smoothly, with nary a hiccough. I had done such a good job. I physically patted myself on the back and fantasized about being appreciated.

I heard a sharp gasp behind me.

“This stuff tastes like shit!” He exclaimed.

I whirled around on my multi-tasker.

“You don’t like it?”

“Have you ever actually tried this - uhhgh - it’s awful.”

“Here, let me try it.” I glided over to him in my chair. I took the tiniest sip and pretended to really savor it, thinking.

“You know, it is a little weird, with the milk. I guess I’ve only had it with lemon, black. I guess lemon and milk don’t go very well.” I handed it back to him. “I’m sorry.

Do you want me to go get another one?"

"No - - no." He looked edgily at my desk. "What are you working on?"

"The updates from the pinks."

"Oh." He nodded.

I babbled about the new Enumeration of Charges table and how it was finally hooked into Batches and Forces, which should make reconciliation easier, and how the updates were the final step to getting everything in place.

"Yes, yes." He cut me off. "OK. Great." He turned back to his American Express statements.

I had a short pang of regret. I felt a little sorry for him. He was trying to be good. No one should ever have to try as hard as he was trying. I went back to work. Two hours passed and I began to think I had under-dosed him. There's always a hundred things to take your attention at the office so I didn't think too hard about it, but I was operating under the half-relieved and half-disappointed assumption that it was all a big, failed science experiment, when at 4:17 I perceived that Optic was feeling more uncomfortable than usual on the phone. He had finally managed to get James Rowley the Third to talk to him. There was a strange edge to his voice that seemed unbusinesslike and inappropriate for such an important conversation. I turned around slowly, trying to think of something I could do to look productive while facing him. I grabbed a pile of stamps and envelopes and started stamping the envelopes as if we were getting ready for some big mailing.

"Yes, Mr. Rowley, but our Institute is interested for purely beneficent reasons."

He was beet red, sweating, and almost completely doubled over in his chair. I

remembered that feeling. I remembered how my knees had knocked against each other uncontrollably for minutes at a time, in weakness and pain. The exhaustion that followed. Needing the toilet but unable to get my body off the bed. The shaking and the fever. “No. No. It’s not just free advertising, it’s a cultural contribution to our fair city.” His voice had a strangled sound and was higher in pitch than usual. “But Mr. Rowley, I’ve already sent you three separate packets with adjustments made to the last two such as you’re requesting again.” He began to shiver in his fetal position. “Ohh.” His voice trailed off. “No, this is time sensitive because... ohh. Call me Monday then. But you better call. Yeah. Right. Bye.” His hand crept back over the top of the desk, clutching the receiver, but he couldn’t reach the phone. I felt so sorry for him. I got up, unpeeled his fingers from the receiver, placed it in its cradle, and knelt down next to him.

“Are you OK? Is something wrong?”

“Ohh.”

Cita turned around from her desk.

“Oh my God, what’s going on?” she shrieked, her hands fluttering up to her mouth.

Elmo and Belinda rose simultaneously from their desks.

“What’s happening? Are you hurt?” said Elmo.

“Rosey, what happened?” asked Belinda, “Should we call 911?” Everyone stood there for a moment, waiting for judgment from me or from Optic. All of the sudden I felt immensely tired, drained of power and ability, like I didn’t have the stamina to make it through the rest of the scene. Like I should flee before it got any worse. I was on my knees next to him. I leaned against his filing cabinet. He emitted another soft “Ohh.”

“I don’t know - I just turned around and - I think we should call 911,” I faltered.

“Ohh.”

Belinda grabbed the phone and dialed. Cita sat utterly still at her desk with her hands at her mouth and her forehead molded in stricken waves of disbelief and fear.

“Ohh.” Optic was trying to move. He reached for me. I supported his forearm. His grip was surprisingly strong considering his condition. Elmo stepped forward.

“What can I do to help?”

Meanwhile Optic was pulling himself towards me, his tortured face closer and closer, the lids of his eyes fluttering and then opening wide again, staring at me like some kind of question. His breath smelled worse than ever. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to do but I held him up by the forearm until he raised himself just barely off his chair and then collapsed to the floor.

“Oh my God” Cita wailed.

“He’s just fallen down. Can you please hurry?” Belinda’s soft but urgent voice provided an ongoing soundtrack. “Yes. Suite 1720. 17th floor. Yes. 5910 Broadway. He looks real bad. No I don’t know if he has a heart condition.”

“What can I do to help?” Elmo asked again, looking upset and helpless.

“Get him a glass of water, then go downstairs and wait for the ambulance,” I directed him. Elmo flew into action. Belinda put down the phone.

“They’re on their way. Rosey, what do you think this is?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. He was roiling a little bit on the floor and I had my first real feeling of panic. Had I looked that bad? He seemed to be trying to get on all fours. His Ohh’s were getting louder. Suddenly there was a heaving motion from his butt up,

and a horrible squishing noise concurrent with a slew of vomit which he then fell face down into, an incredibly toxic smell. He had shit his pants, vomited, and passed out.

Cita screamed and Belinda cursed. I knew exactly what to do. I had taken a CPR class within the last year and felt like an expert.

“Help me get him on his side. ON-HIS-SIDE-ON-HIS-SIDE!” I barked as Belinda got down onto her knees to obey me. “Cita, get us some paper towels and water to clean his face off. OK. Support his back so he doesn’t fall over. We have to keep him from choking. We have to keep the air flow going here.” My fingers were in his mouth, removing all foreign matter just like we practiced in class. It was vile. “OK, now onto his back. Careful. Careful.” We carefully rolled him over. I felt for a heartbeat. He had a heartbeat. I watched to see if his chest moved, lowered my ear to his mouth. Nothing. I swabbed his mouth and nose area with my fingers. I tipped his head back, opened his mouth, pinched his nose, formed my mouth like a suction cup over his, and breathed as hard as I could into his body five times. His chest rose with my breaths. We had airflow. Cita came back in with the towels and water. I stopped to wipe him off quickly then pinched his nose again, readjusted his head and lowered my mouth to his again. I had chunks of his vomit in my hair. I can’t find words bad enough for the taste and smell of the thing. It didn’t matter. Tears were rolling down my face. I counted breaths and pulses, feeling to make sure I didn’t break his ribs. But also flashbacks to me lying alone on my bed, day after day. I remembered how I had thought for a time I might be dying. And it struck me that I had done this awful thing to this man, and he was the only person I’d had any contact with that whole week. How I had done this thing to him and now I was saving his life. How I had chosen him somehow, to have this life and death bond.

How he could never be unimportant to me now, which was all I had really wanted. That I had failed, deeply, as a human being.

Well, anyway.

I have to stop to breathe.

So, to finish up, the EMT guys came, very efficient and knowing exactly how to respond to the situation, and they carried him away, and that was a huge relief. It was so comforting to have a team of unemotional experts in the room, I felt I missed them when they left. We made sure we knew which hospital he was going to.

I was still crying after the ambulance pulled away. Belinda noticed and gave me a hug, which made me feel worse. Then we all took the elevator back up and got organized. We called his mother, left messages on the machines of business appointments for the following day, and found his estranged wife's parent's number in his rolodex, and called them, too. We crumbled into our chairs when we ran out of phone calls to make.

Everyone in the office kept bringing up how noble I was.

"Wow Rosey - you really took over," someone said at least three times.

"Yeah, we're lucky you were here," someone responded, and stuff like that.

I wished they would all shut up.

Once I looked over at Elmo and I believe he was praying, but I'm not sure.

December 7

Dear Dr. Braun:

Must I be reduced to a diagnosis? You asked today if my problem is that I feel guilty or that I don't know who I am. Couldn't it be both and so much more? What is it I lack? I lack space, I lack intimacy. Isn't this just how we are? Are you really so different than me? You asked me how I felt after I poisoned him, how I felt the next day. What do you want me to tell you? That I threw up on the way home in the subway? I'm not trying to get your sympathy. Who cares? No one cares.

I spent the night lying in bed, not sleeping, wondering if I could end up in jail because of this thing, figuring out how to dispose of the evidence. I lay there most of the night holding my head because it hurt, trying to think my way out of what I had done

I rose from my bed and showered the next morning. I wanted to go to work for the first time in ages. I needed to be with the others. I was afraid to be alone.

The tone of the office wasn't so pleasant and golden as I had imagined it would be when I planned the whole thing. But by then I had kind of forgotten how it was supposed to go.

Cita looked horrible. She hadn't put her makeup on and was wearing sweats. She hardly spoke a word all day. She put all the phones on call forward to the message service. She sat morosely at her desk, much of the time with her head in her hands. Finally after a few hours of this she turned to me and whispered: "Oh Rosey, it's so awful. I feel like I wished it to happen. And him without his wife. And we hated him so much, and all of us with good jobs at least and now what if he dies? I feel so bad."

Elmo was jamming a pencil through the center of a pad of yellow Post-It Notes, with such determination and so lost in his funk that he didn't even look up to see any of the rest of us.

Belinda spent most of her day ragged and gray at her desk calling the hospital and Optic's most pressing business associates, worrying over decisions she wasn't supposed to be making just yet. She looked up at me once and I thought it was a funny look, but how could she know?

There's no way any of them could know. I spent the day repeating that thought. I wanted to talk to them but was afraid I would give myself away in some small detail, so the event itself became a barrier between me and them.

The only place to go at six o'clock that day, when I got off, was the hospital. It pulled me like a magnet through dirty wet streets into its gleaming hallways. The bad smell of hospitals. The attempt of the magazines and the fake plant in the waiting room. The TV mounted in the corner, and a man waiting for word about his sick son watching it.

Finally a nurse led me to his room. His estranged wife wasn't there. His mother wasn't there. None of his business associates were there. I sat down next to his bed. I watched the I.V. trickle into his arm and his nostrils opening and closing with labored sniffy noises over the tubes they had stuck in his nose. I regretted the six drops. I guessed it should have been three drops instead of six. Four at the most, for the plan to have gone as it should have.

When a nurse came in to check his chart I was informed that he was in stable condition and could probably go home tomorrow. He just needed some rest. He was sleeping, not comatose, I was told when I asked. The nurse was friendly but seemed to me a bit slipshod about the whole thing. I hope these dopes don't screw him up even more than I did, I thought. She left me alone to watch him. I watched him closely. I

looked at his very pores. I counted the rhythm and steadiness of his breathing like it was gold.

Visiting hours ended at eight. I was getting ready to leave at 7:45 when he opened his eyes and looked right at me.

“Hey Chief...” I murmured and moved closer to take his hand. He looked a generation older than he had the day before.

“Rosey,” he whispered.

“Yes. You’re going to be all right.” I was fighting back tears and waves of desire to confess what I had done to him.

“Rosey, is Dante?” He took a breath. I wondered what kind of dreams he must be having.

“Yes?”

“Is Dante?” He took another breath. “I have a dog. Dante.”

I never knew he had a dog. I was dumbfounded.

“Keys in my stuff. Closet. Pocket. Please.”

“Yes.”

“Needs.”

“Yes. I’ll go to your house. I’ll feed and water and walk Dante. Don’t worry about Dante. I’ll take care of him until you go home.”

“Thank.”

“It’s OK. I’m happy to.” He closed his eyes and nodded a little bit. A tiny piece of surgical tape had come undone underneath his nose, the part holding the oxygen tube in place. I reached over and pressed the tape back down. He opened his eyes and blinked

a few times when I touched him, then seemed to go back to sleep.

Weird sobbing noises bubbled up from my throat while I opened the sliding closet door and went through his things. The soiled clothing was gone but his bag's side pocket contained his keys and wallet. I copied down his address from his driver's license onto the back of a dollar bill from my wallet and taking a few deep breaths, trying not to sob, sniffing instead, grabbed his keys and left his room, exiting through the long white corridors of the hospital until I reached the comforting darkness of the city's streets.

The apartment had a feminine feel to it. Floral monographs in the hallway. A pink bathroom. A kitchen which looked like you might actually cook in it, with a broad work table and beautifully enameled gas range. Two ovens. It didn't seem like Optic's apartment at all.

The chocolate colored labrador retriever seemed confused then happy about my entrance and calmly followed me from room to room. Everything was nicely cleaned and organized except his mammoth desk, which was covered with dusty piles of paper and surrounded by boxes filled with even more papers. I noticed there were not pictures of him and his wife around the desk and I wondered if there had never been or if he had taken them down. There was a single picture of an older woman, his mother, I presume, standing in front of a casino holding a bunch of dollar bills like a fan and grinning.

I peeked into his bedroom. His bed was unmade. It gave me the shivers. I sat down on the floor in the hallway as a sudden wave of nausea hit me.

It was time to go. What was I doing in this place?

It wasn't hard to find the dog food. I had more trouble with the leash and ended up going through several closets, two of them still filled with women's clothing.

Feminine corporate wear sheathed in dry-cleaning bags, some dresses and women's suits with price tags still on them. I felt saddened by these signs of wealth. I, at least, use everything I buy. But who am I to feel superior?

Walking Dante was the best part of the whole week for me. A real highlight. Possibly the best thing I've done since moving to the city. Dante loves the park. There is a fenced in dog area covered by cedar wood chips, way uptown on the west side. The place has a nice smell. I never would have known about it but Dante led me by the most direct route, running, panting, and grinning. He seemed to be genuinely interested in sharing the experience with me, running back and forth, muzzling up against my hand. Dante is by nature a joyful and generous creature.

Just before we arrived at the dog run he squatted next to a tree and took an enormous crap, and I felt very proud of myself that I had the forethought to bring along a plastic bag to clean it up. It felt good to know that I was doing the right thing, leaning over to handle the dogshit, warm and solid in my hand. I felt myself to be, for that moment, part of a greater community of responsible dog walkers, those-who-clean up, and I felt that my action mattered, perhaps even to Dante. I thought Dante could sense that he was being properly cared for. I tied the plastic bag off and swung it proudly at my side.

If you think people are not meant to live in isolation, you should take a look at dogs. Dante frolicked with any dog who would take him. And in fact it seemed there was no prejudice or selective process in dog world, they were all game to play with each other. Their rough dog-play inevitably led to rolling, scratching, half-biting, yelping, play fighting. They jumped away from each other, into each other, and away again with

varying degrees of intensity and consequence. I watched them, amazed. They made it all look like so much fun. There were sniffs and yelps and growls and occasional human interference. The dogs were all so beautiful and the humans seemed beautiful and somehow trustworthy, just by the fact that they had dogs, and brought them to this lovely place. I sat there the longest time.

You urge me to make amends. You say I can't move forward without honestly facing this. I'm still working for the guy, isn't that a type of amends? Like I don't deserve to leave him after what I've done.

Well, we have one more session. The pressure is on, isn't it, Doc! It's kind of now or never for the major breakthrough, right? I take my place on the spreadsheet. Column of my personality, row of this situation. Column of time, row of geography. Column of him, row of me.

February 15

Dear Dr. Braun:

I wanted you to know one thing came of all those sessions, I guess. Optic and I talk occasionally. He is still a total asshole, of course, but every once in a while we have a conversation which almost sounds like a real, actual conversation. And I stand, facing him, taking it slowly, and I try to determine what I'm really thinking, what can I say that I can live with for the rest of my life? We finally threw him a goodbye party last week and when he handed over the keys to Belinda he made a stupid sentimental toast to each one of us, and for mine he said:

“To Rosey Damascus, who you can always count on. Although there was that

one time in January when she didn't come in for a week right in the middle of Spring Registration. We still haven't forgiven her for that." And everyone laughed except me. I stood there clutching my non-alcoholic drink feeling both too cold and too hot. He came over to me later and made a sloppy and drunken attempt at an apology.

"I'm sorry I brought up your illness with my toast. I didn't mean it. You're great. I could tell from your face you didn't like it when I said that."

I didn't say anything and he paused to take another swallow of his drink. I guess he felt that this exchange wouldn't be complete until I actually said something. So he asked a question.

"What did you have that week? What was it, some kind of colitis?"

And I suppose if I hadn't had eight sessions with you I might have automatically continued the lie. But I had the presence to stand and to think, why am I protecting him?

I spoke very slowly. I said "Oh, I had a pretty bad miscarriage last January."

Which is, medically speaking accurate. Voluntary miscarriage.

I was standing very still and he was totally liquid, barely able to stand at all.

"Wha-?" He looked confused. I felt a little mean, unloading this on him while he was in such an incapacitated state. But it felt like the right thing to do.

"I didn't want to tell you back then. And maybe you don't even remember last Christmas, the party at my apartment. I guess now it doesn't really matter. I'm sorry I lied to you." I stopped. There was absolutely nothing more to say unless it would have been to launch into the explanation of how I had also poisoned him, in addition to lying to him.

He got it.

“Oh God. I’m sorry,” he said, “Oh, God, of course I remember, I’m so sorry.”

And he started kind of falling apart. “Damn it Rosey, God. I never... I never -”

I put a hand on his arm to steady him. He was about to fall over.

“It’s all right now. Believe me. I’m sorry, too.” And we looked at each other for a few seconds. Then I sort of patted him on the arm and turned away, heading for the door. And I felt that I had reached the edge of my capacity for violence, and for the first time I felt sure I would never go that far again. And it felt, to me, not like it was over, which is what I have wished for. But all of it somehow settling down inside my body and becoming another factual part of my life, my history. Not a crisis so much as mistakes and misfortunes I’d rather not tell.

Outside the city streets were wet with a cold and dirty rain, and an old lady in front of me hobbled along in a coat that used to be white, clutching the leash of a small mutt similarly discolored and feeble. She stopped at a corner deli and told the dog to wait for her, looped his leash over an iron window railing and stepped into the store. The dog peed on the building and then sat, slight and shivering, some kind of poodle mix I suppose. He tilted his face towards the door where his owner would appear. The dog sat there, resigned and hopeful, unafraid and unashamed of his dependence. It almost made me laugh. I offered my hand for the dog to sniff, but he wasn’t interested. The subway entrance was close by, and I could hear a train under us, a train I had already missed, no doubt. I felt in my pocket for the token I had bought on my way to the party. The token was there, warm, round, and dependable. The next train would take me home.

Trummers in Drought

Part 1. Meet the Trummers

Lindsay, their daughter. Lindsay with an “a.” Almost four years old. They had named her after **Lindsey** with an “e” **the Third**, her father, and now, almost four years hence, **Gunhilde** feels the weight of that mistake. Even good friends (but do they or did they ever have any *good* friends? Really good friends? What is the definition of a Good Friend? She wonders.) had responded politely instead of enthusiastically when they announced their daughter’s name. And, too, it was just too confusing in moments like these, when Gunny found herself screaming down into the backyard from the upper deck.

“Lindsey. Lin! The phone. It’s your mother. LINDSEY!” And her stubborn

husband didn't look up from trimming the hedge. And her tiny daughter stood, stricken for a moment before advancing from the all-wood construction play center, quizzically, trying to figure out what she had done wrong this time to make mommy's face so red and wrinkled. And she stood there, bewildered and stock still as her mother screeched from twelve feet up.

“NO! NO! It's your father, Lindsay. Not you, *Daddy*. Go Get Daddy, and tell him it's a long distance phone call.”

Then as the girl turned to start running: “NOOOOO! NOOOOO! Lindsay! Carefully. Daddy has the trimmer. Careful.” Gunny lifted the phone to her ear and turned back into the air-conditioned comfort of her bedroom.

“Mrs. Trummer, he's on his way in. Yes, I know it's long distance. He will be here soon. Would you prefer to hang up the phone and I will tell him to call you back?” Her mother-in-law's snotty rudeness was just another small, rankling matter on a pile of matters which made things difficult. “Yes, Mrs. Trummer, I do have one of those phones you can walk around with, but it's very hot, here. He's outside and I'd rather not go outside. And also, I am wearing my pajamas. Do you know we have a drought here in Maryland? Governor Glendenning has issued a state wide state of emergency. Yes. And how is the weather in Florida?”

Lindsey the Third finally made it to the phone and Gunny hung up. She sat down. Stood up. Looked outside. Little Lindsay was back on the slide, sitting at the bottom of it, looking at something small and brown that she held cupped in both hands. She seemed to be speaking to it. Probably a wood chip. Oh, Dear God, he wouldn't have bothered to put sunscreen on her or offered her water any time in the last two hours.

Sunday mornings are supposed to be Mommy's Alone Time.

Goddamn telephone Goddamn Lindsey Goddamn drought Goddamn air quality. Goddamn mosquitoes and hole in the ozone layer. Goddamn responsibility and motherhood and brain that won't stop Goddamn too stressful job in the psychward where she periodically has nightmares or are they daydreams about checking in, just to get away.

She looks down at the tattoo surrounding her belly button, an orange and red design which looks vaguely like an art-nouveau flower conceived of infinity symbols which interweave with each other, emanating, blooming. This is what she had loved about the design, its ambiguity. The impossible eternal bloom which she must have believed to be possible, back then, cradled in the reupholstered dentist's chair at Dagmar's two lifetimes and twelve years ago. The design had looked better without stretch marks. Her gaze wanders to the window, where she sees Carlos rounding the corner, pushing the lawn mower and smoking a cigarette. He is stocky and strong and has a gorgeous, wide smile which Gunny finds irresistible.

"Carlos?" Ferociously pulling the sliding door open, "Please, no smoking today, Carlos, please. It's a Code Orange Day and too hot and dry - at least please not around Lindsay."

Carlos nods and smiles and continues to smoke.

"And Carlos? I really don't think you should mow the lawn. There's a city ordinance in Takoma Park against running the lawn mower on Sundays, isn't there? Do you happen to know? Is it Saturday or Sunday when you're not to mow... Well, anyway, we've already used to the trimmer today and I think we've annoyed everyone enough for

today, so no mowing, please, today?”

Carlos nods and smiles.

“I know Mr. Trummer probably told you to, but -”

“No, no, it’s OK, Mrs. Trummer, I have other things to do.” He pushes the lawn mower towards the shed. She watches him. The man moves so gracefully it is hard not to watch. He emerges from the shed carrying a bucket and a few tools and approaches the house again, still smoking, he ducks under the deck where she stands in her pajamas with her arms crossed, looking down at him.

Carlos looks up at Gunhilde Trummer through the cracks of the deck. She is six feet tall in bare feet and has a squarish face and hair so blonde it is almost white, and she easily evokes visions of sinister plans for Aryan dominance with her nervous manner and German sounding name, but Carlos gives her the benefit of the doubt; she may yet turn out to be all right. He speaks sincerely:

“Here is a crack, Mrs. Trummer.”

“Oh.”

“You see it has broken the glass because of the crack in the foundation.”

She can’t actually see it from where she’s standing but is not surprised to hear of the faulty foundation. Of course their house *would* have a crack in the foundation. Ha! She turns with a sigh back to her bed. This is exactly the type of moment in which she has been urged to try alternate nostril breathing in her Stress Reduction Class, which the hospital provides free of charge even to part-time employees. Alternate nostril breathing. Forget it. *I’d rather drown*, she thinks.

Petunia, in the basement, is breathing deep, three-part breaths. Watching Carlos’

leg bend and straighten in front of her bedroom window. Her father emerges from the house and resumes his trimming. Petunia is another naming mistake from Lindsey the Third's previous marriage. She is thirty years old and living in her father's basement "just for the summer" while she gets some things together. Having just taken a long lukewarm shower and a hit from her bong, she is trying to find out how long she can hold the yoga position called "The Tree," and meditating on the question of what exactly it is she is supposed to be getting together. She begins to chant. "Boredom is the first step towards enlightenment. Boredom is the first step towards enlightenment. Boredom is the first step towards enlightenment." Deep breath. Carlos has knelt down in front of her window, blocking the view. The crack in the foundation has caused a secondary crack in her window. His brow is furrowed as he rubs a finger along the window crack. He hasn't seen her right on the other side of the glass. She breaks out of the pose and waves a bangled hand right in front of his face and he jumps then laughs, grinning at her. "Well at least someone is having fun around here," she murmurs, waving.

The ants who live in the crack of the foundation are experiencing a sort of holocaust. Total apocalypse as the plastic foundation-crack-gunk spews from Carlos' caulk gun. *Run! Run! Run for your lives!* goes the clarion call in ant-language, emitted as a gas from ant to ant, this sense of panic, of immediate discontinuance of life as we know it. *Drop the muffin crumb and run! Abandon the old and the weak! Juveniles with damaged limbs must be left to drown and grow turgid in the white plaster, immortalized for all time in their plastic graves!* Mommy, Daddy, and Baby ants run over and around each other in as humane a way as antly possible under the circumstances. Some of them make it out, some don't.

Part 2. The Problem

The problem is the lawn. Well, the problem, to be more exact, is that Gunny has a husband with a track record of pulling sociopathic episodes which alienate everyone around them and they've just moved less than a year ago to Takoma Park because hardly anyone in their neighborhood of townhouses in Georgetown dared to even say hello on the sidewalk anymore, not after that debacle at the Georgetown Historical Society Annual Ice Cream Social followed by the debacle at the City Council Meeting, which was recorded in the local newspaper to Gunny's horror and Lindsey's glee. She shouldn't be surprised that he's doing it again.

Gunny has been through several sets of friends since marrying Lindsey. She'd like to have just one set for a while. The Dodson's, new Takoma Park neighbors on their right, have made several attempts to be friendly and Gunny has fantasized of evenings and shared bottles of wine with the small brunette couple. The Dodsons, who seem to be perpetually dressed in tasteful natural fibers. The Dodsons, whose college-aged children are both attending good colleges. Morning coffee with Marie Dodson, Gunny thinks, laughing over what stupid things their husbands did over the weekend. But this is too stupid.

Everyone else in the entire neighborhood has allowed their lawns to go brown. The Trummer lawn is lush and luscious, green and wet and dark, the ground spongy when you walk on it. You can see it from the end of the block. It sticks out like a sore green thumb.

It has been the subject of dinnertime conversation all week long.

“Darling. Lindsey, honey, you know everyone else on the block has stopped watering their lawns. And I think we should, too.” He continues to stir the vegetarian mushroom gravy into his garlic smashed potatoes. He tilts his head and she decides to take this as a cue that he is listening. “I mean, the Dodsons are even beginning to lose their shrubs!” No, perhaps he’s not listening. Ah. He’s watching the TV over her shoulder. He’s watching one of those real video programs where they show people almost dying and being miraculously saved. The TV is on mute in order to preserve the sanctity of the dinner hour. A concession he made way back when.

“What a mess,” he says, “Lindsay, stop humming so loudly and get out of the high chair. You’re not a baby anymore.”

The following evening she bursts into the living room breathless and flushed:

“Lindsey, Carlos had the sprinklers on just now.”

“Which sprinklers was he using?”

“Lindsey, he shouldn’t be using any sprinklers.”

“Well, I hope he’s not wasting time with those damn swizzlers.”

“Lin, we’ve talked about this. There’s a drought. Glendenning has declared it a state of emergency.”

“Oh yes, the drought the drought, water. Wahhhhhhtehr. Governor, can you spare a glass of wahhhhhhter for my daughhhhhhter?” Little Lindsay started to giggle.

“We’re all so parched you see, the faucets haven’t worked in days.”

“Lindsey, it’s not funny.”

“Look, scientists agree it’s not really a drought and I won’t have my lawn dying just to slake some useless politicians power mad thirst to feel he’s doing something that has an impact on our lives and is somehow useful in society at large.”

“People are turning each other in! Lindsey! Neighbors are calling the authorities and informing on their neighbors for God’s sake.”

“Those pansy-assed hippies next door don’t like the authorities any better than I do.”

“The Dodson’s are not hippies and please don’t use that kind of language in front of Lindsay, she doesn’t know any better.”

“Oh. Well. Sorry. Sorry. I’ll just keep it shut then.” He turns to Lindsay and mimes zipping his mouth shut. Gives her a wink.

Gunny exhales audibly and shakes her head vigorously. “Anyway. It doesn’t matter. I’ve asked Carlos very clearly in very simple English to stop watering the lawn. Altogether. Not even holding the hose. We really can’t afford it. We can’t risk it.” Lindsey has now silently engaged Lindsay in a staring contest. Lindsay is trying not to giggle.

Part 3: Trummer at the Office

“Hello, Stacy?”

“Yes?”

“Stacy? Lindsey Trummer Three here.”

“Oh - - Mr. Trummer.”

“Yes, listen, Stace, I know you’re working and I hate to bother you but-”

“Yes, we’re very busy right now.”

“Yes, yes, well, if I could just ask you one quick question, I was wondering where you might have saved last year’s portfolio review, and the company brochure. See, I’m here looking through the hard drive and...or are they on disk?”

“Mr. Trummer, the disks are all numbered by the system Mr. Sandley had set up. They’re in the archives by now. On the hard drive, why don’t you look in...hmm...let me just think. Is it Documents? Or, hmm. Well. Financials for the portfolio, I think. And the brochure. Did you look under Advertising?”

“Advertising? There’s a separate folder for advertising? Whose idea was that?”

“Mr. Trummer, I really can’t talk right now.”

“I know, I know, just one more thing -”

“Mr. Trummer, I don’t work for Trummer and Associates anymore, you know. You laid me off.”

“I know, I know, it’s just I’m trying to -”

“I work *here*, now, and they want me to be, you know, doing work for *them*. I’ve been asked not to be on the phone for non-company purposes, the same as you used to ask me -”

“Yes, of course, I just-”

“And this is a non-company purpose and I really have to go.”

“Oh, well, all right, I guess, but, please, Stacy I’m in such a fix, and you’ve always been such a nice person, and you knew everything, and I could always count on you. I always liked you.”

“Really, Mr. Trummer, I’m so sorry, but you laid me off, you know.”

“Yes, I know, but-”

“And I’m on company time here.”

“Yes, well, could I, could I call you at home later?”

A long silence. He can hear her breathing. The squeak of an office chair. A phone ringing not too far away and being picked up.

Quietly: “I don’t owe you anything anymore.”

“I know, of course, look. I know that, but from the goodness of your heart-”

“I’m sorry Mr. Trummer, but I think it’s time for you to, you know, let go.”

“Let go? What? Did I - - ? I just need to ask a few -”

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Trummer, but I’m going to hang up now, and I’m asking you not to call me back.”

“What?”

“Ever.”

“Wait a minute”

A click.

The dial tone.

The urge to throw the phone through the window.

He stands and stretches his arms back. Rubs his bald head. Rubs his hairy arms. Picks up a stapler. Hurls it against a wall. A small discoloration, a small dent. Kicks the heating vent next to his desk which remains undented while his toe erupts in giant and radiant pain. Godammit. Howls. Good thing the place is empty. Trummer and Associates. What a scream. The gold lettering on the glass door should read “Trummer,

Alone.” He laughs and he hears his laugh and it sounds like either the world is a lousy place or he is a lousy person. He stands motionless. He sits down to his computer. Checks his e-mail. The bank. *Here is the information you requested regarding a Home Equity Line of Credit. Please download the application.*

Flips through his rolodex to “C.” Carlos. Cell phone.

“Hola.”

“Hello, Carlos, it’s Trummer, here, how is everything?”

“Everything A.O.K., here, Mr. Trummer. Mrs. Trummer at work, Petunia in the basement doing her exercises. But Mrs. Trummer says again when she leaves, about the sprinklers, very upset.”

“Yes, Carlos. I know. I know. But I won’t have my lawn parched. She’s just going to have to understand that.”

“OK, OK, but just she doesn’t want no sprinklers at all, Mr. Trummer.”

“I know, I know, es loco, you know? I’m sorry, my wife is a little loco that way, but you know, I’m the man of the house, right?”

“Of course, Mr. Trummer, yes. But it’s just no good for you, you know, to have so much problem at home, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Hey, give me some credit, I know what I’m doing, I know how to take care of my own business.”

“Of course, Mr. Trummer.”

“You let me worry about that. I know you feel caught in the middle.”

“Is OK, Mr. Trummer, you know, but, ah, this is drought.”

“I know, I know. OK, Carlos, listen, I’m calling because I think we’re going to

need to cut back on your hours. I hope you won't mind."

"Cut back? Look, I'm sorry about the drought and Mrs. Trummer, maybe I-

"No, no, it's not that. We just need to. You know. Cut back."

"Oh, I see."

"It's not that I'm in any way displeased or anything. You're terrific to have around, but it's going to have to be just one day a week."

"Oh. I see."

"So could you just come by on Sundays from now on?"

"Sundays? No, if just one day then better I come on Wednesdays."

"What? But Sundays-"

"But no, Mr. Trummer, if one day only it is Wednesdays. You understand, I am a business man, too."

"Well, of course."

"So Wednesdays only."

"Well, O.K. O.K."

"And I think cash payment, better than a check, OK?"

"O.K. Cash. Cash it will be." Trummer sighed. "So I'll see you at five when I get home, all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Trummer. See you then."

Everything from the bank has printed by now. "Help Protect Your Family's Lifestyle - At A Rate You Can Afford!" Aw, this trash. The checklist of what they need to give him the goddamn money:

- The last three years tax returns.

- Pay stubs of Borrower and Co-Borrower.
- Proof of Insurance.

“Never go into debt,” his father used to say, “credit is a sucker’s game, Lin. Your grandfather and I built this entire business without a single red penny of debt. Now how’s that for management!”

Trummer types in the web address of the bank his father always used and pulls up his inheritance account. Wonders briefly if Petunia has anything at all left in hers. He types in his password with the sick feeling that everything would be better if he had forgotten it, long ago. If only he’d had to do things the old fashioned way and physically go to the bank to make a transfer or a withdrawal.

The account, which read in seven glorious digits only ten years ago when Gunny and Trummer were married, now holds exactly \$9, 860.34. Ah. Four digits. Soon it will be three. How everything dwindles. Is there any better indication of failure than a rich kid’s poverty in fatherhood? His own father is dead and Trummer is grateful.

He looks more closely at the Home Equity Application. He is lucky they bought low. There are many questions on the form applying to both Borrower and Co-Borrower. He groans. He’ll have to tell her? Of course not. No. He can forge her signature. He knows all her numbers. She doesn’t need to know. He can bring the documents from home tomorrow. He can deal with all of this tomorrow.

Trummer pulls up the games menu on the computer and clicks on Solitaire.

Part 4. Gunny Coming Home

She can see them as she turns right off of Highway 410, the little circular sprinklers, the swizzlers, he calls them, all four of them, placed equidistantly throughout the generous lawn, each with three streams of water arcing and chasing each other like a dog and it's tail, water dancing in the sun, rising and falling with such lightness and tempo; joyous swizzlers in maddening dissimilitude. She shrieks and unconsciously presses her tense foot against the accelerator, causing the car to race at thirty-five miles per hour down their peaceful and shady domicile-lined street.

“Mommy what's the matter?” asks Lindsay from her booster seat. The brakes screeching as the car hits the driveway almost drown out Gunny's scream.

“Nooooooo! Carlos! Nooooooo Sprinklers!” She's opening the car door and getting caught in her automatic seat belt, trying to get out of the car too fast. Somehow her I.D. tag from the hospital gets implicated and she finds herself suddenly choking on the slender chain. Breaking the chain and disentangling herself, leaving the car door open, she strides ferociously towards smooth-faced Carlos who stands at the fence between her yard and the Dodson's, mulching the azaleas. Gunny's sudden awareness that Marie Dodson is standing on the other side of that fence, not even twenty feet away, does nothing but cause her voice to raise even higher in volume and pitch.

“I told you, yesterday, no, a million times, no sprinklers. No water. It's a drought, we must conserve - save - water -” she screeches.

“But Mr. Trummer-”

“Yes, yes, I know Mr. Trummer, but that was last week and this week it's an emergency. E-mer-hencia. Do you understand? We must turn them off.” Finally realizing that she could, actually, turn off the sprinklers herself, she turns and marches

back towards the side of the house.

“Mrs. Trummer, I shut it off. OK? I shut it off,” he runs to keep up with her.

“but Mr. Trummer told me this morning. And I do as he say.”

She freezes.

“When did he tell you?”

Finally the sprinklers are dying down, spitting, sputtering. Carlos looks up from his leaning position.

“He told me just before lunchtime.” There is a faint look of consternation on Carlos’ face and Gunny feels sorry for him, working under such conditions. As if the heat weren’t enough. What an awful family we are to work for, she thinks. She wonders for the first time just how much Lindsey pays Carlos. She hopes it is enough to make whatever home he goes to at the end of the day a pleasant one. She is in an absolute dazy haze of alarm, as if systems in her body are now one by one preparing to shut down completely.

“I just can’t handle this anymore,” she says softly.

“What?”

“Nothing. Nada.” He looks concerned. She has a fleeting vision of going home with Carlos, to his apartment or small house or wherever, and lying down on an old sofa and soft, warm, brown hands offering her Mexican hot chocolate and she drinks it and then sleeps for three days and then gets up and boards an airplane. But Lindsay, the little one, intrudes upon the fantasy like a hijacker. “Mom?” Gunny drops her head and walks back to the car. Shuts the door. Opens the back door and lets Lindsay out of her car seat.

“I’m sorry honey. I’m sorry I left you in here. I got a little carried away. I’m

freaking out a little. How about if you watch a movie tonight.”

“O.K. The Music Man?”

“O.K.”

She turns to the front door, staring at her white nurse’s shoes, wondering how it could ever have come to pass that someone like her could be working in the psych ward.

She goes inside to start the video, to start supper, to start the laundry, to start waiting for the sound of her husband’s car which does inevitably come, and the sound of his footsteps on the walk, pacing smartly up to the door. Then stopping. The door does not open. There is a long frozen moment while Gunny stands next to the window without looking out. Just listening. Finally, she pulls the curtain back.

Part 5. Water Fight, or,

The Immediate Discontinuance of Life As We Know It.

Petunia in the basement, is meditating, is smiling, is remembering again the ‘89 earthquake in San Francisco. How it rippled. Like waves. Land like liquid. She had been cocktail waitressing at a sleazy bar on the wharf and the concrete and tiled floors of the place had risen and fallen like waves for fifteen seconds - - then settled, cracked but still functional, back into their solid original concrete shapes. The miracle of it! That something so solid had such a secret - hid its own ability to be liquid and changeable. The mutability of everything. Every thing. How everything changes and nothing changes. It gave her hope. That the world might not be the shitty way she thought it was after all. She woke up tickled pink to be alive every day for two months after the ‘89

earthquake, a bit embarrassed to be enjoying herself so much until she heard on the radio a report about “earthquake euphoria” which apparently she was not alone in experiencing. She peeked out of her basement window to see Dad in his business clothes changing the hose from the little circular sprinklers in the front yard to the big, glorious rainbow sprinkler. And then the sound of Gunny thumping down the stairs, and the front door slamming above Petunia’s head and Gunny striding out, literally clutching her hair, eyes bulging, forehead creased, a mad beeline towards Dad, who calmly straightened, deadpan, to watch his panicked wife advance on him.

“What are you doing? WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Are you insane? Is this fun? Do you ever consider? My feelings? Do you give a shit about anything? The officials will call, you idiot! They’re going to arrest you. Is that what you want? Boy, we’re going to be everyone’s favorite neighbors now!”

The silent death of the drought. They loved each other once. How everything dwindles. The wreck of Trummer’s life. His uselessness. Trummer, spending his inheritance every day on the yard, the house, his castle, the only culmination in his lifetime of his father’s and grandfather’s tremendous wealth and it damn well better be worth it. She doesn’t know. She just doesn’t know. So many conversations with the financial planner that she doesn’t know about. Calls from the bank that she doesn’t know about. Shit, there have even been calls made to Lindsay’s Montessori School that she doesn’t know about. He’s protecting her. He’s protecting her, her with her penny ante job, the only nurse on her floor who still insists on wearing white, coming home three times a week like some kind of self-proclaimed angel, nagging and complaining, judging him when she doesn’t even know what there is to judge, telling him how things should be

done as if it were her house and her house alone, like she married him for the money so that she can put it out of her mind, and she doesn't *see* him anymore and maybe she never did *I won't have her running my life, I won't have her ruining my life.*

She leaps towards him and is trying to grab the hose from him, trying to tear it from his grip before he hooks it up to the large sprinkler. She's got the nozzle and she's holding it tight into her body as fast as she can. There's a three foot long piece of hose between them and he raises his right arm with the hose then slashes it to the ground shouting "Just get off me get off my back." And because her body is so tight she is easily pulled off balance by the whipping of the hose, and because she will not let go of the hose she cannot break her fall. Gunny is falling to the ground her face wide with shock. It has never occurred to her that it could come to this, falling to the muddy ground, that bastard, and even as she falls, in that still weight of time, she is aware of the Dodson's windows facing her and grateful no one is standing there to see her fall. The brick border which surrounds the azalea garden is so dainty that it's easy to ignore, easy to forget about, until you fall nose first to the brick then forehead to the mud, Azalea branch scratching your cheek along the way. Gunny hears the strange clicking sound of cartilage and bone giving way inside her face.

Landed and blinking, she notices the nursery's price tag, somehow never removed from the branch of the azalea. It dangles in front of her like a jury's verdict, an undeniable indicator of what kind of people they are, a family of a lesser category, proven once and for all.

If they could see into the future. What good care he would take of them all, the following month when Hurricane Floyd washed through. How efficiently and generously

he would deal with the power outage, teaching little Lindsay about candles and flashlights. Calmly moving Petunia out of the flooded basement. Making sure his wife had enough light to read by at night before she went to bed, her only comfort. If they could see Petunia landing of all things a government job and paying them rent, see little Lindsay singing “Solitude” at her eighth grade graduation, her voice pouring over the public school auditorium like water. See Gunny once more generous, and Trummer finally optimistic. If they could see this at that moment they might have some small shard of hope to pierce the heavy bubble of misery. But they are not looking into the future or the past. They are here, securely in the present, the great Now that Petunia strives for in meditation. Trummer sees the fence of the yard as it seems to constrict more tightly around him. And Gunny cannot remember any tiny kindnesses as she rolls over on the wet slick grass where a cricket hops barely missing the crushing weight of her body. The cricket, landing on the shaken earth, is startled and pauses; still in that completely still way insects can be. And then, hopping in an arc measuring over ten times his body length, a hop he performs over and over again as an assumed part of living, he resumes his day.

Good Fences

The last time I saw Ketut was on Pacifica State Beach, the day after the big waves. Pacifica must have the ugliest beach in all of northern California. It doesn't help that a Taco Bell sits right on the sand, breaking the vista from north to south, or that the surfers have taken to referring to the beach as "Taco Bell Beach." The beach itself never loses its fishy smell, and is always covered with litter and slimy ropes of decayed seaweed. Where other beaches might have rocks, there's a boundary of broken pieces of concrete that you have to climb over to get to the thin bar of sand, and the sand once you reach it seems oily.

There had been a big storm on the other side of the Pacific, and huge waves crashed in for several days, and then a surfer who had come down from San Francisco

drowned, which shocked the whole town. So I think many of us found ourselves visiting the beach the day after the waves subsided, curious and stunned that our little beach had the power to swallow someone up.

It was a hazy, windy day, and Ketut sat fully dressed with a sun hat, on a large blanket. She was wearing sunglasses and seemed to be gazing out at the horizon. I sat down next to her. We commiserated about the beach being even dirtier than usual after the storm, and agreed that we preferred the mountains which rise up behind the town. Both of us turned around on the blanket to gaze at the mountains which seemed to have eyes, watching us, gazing back. Ketut said they were like a bunch of old aunts and uncles, hunched protectively over the town and its inhabitants. I said no, they hem us all in here, our keepers. She sighed and turned back to the water. Stan stood ankle deep in the surf, with his pants rolled up. He twisted around towards us and made a “come on down” gesture with his arm. Ketut seemed not to see him, although she was looking in his direction.

“In Bali, there is a mountain called Gunung Agung, and-” she stopped.

“What about it?”

“Never mind.”

“No, Ketut, really, tell me-”

“No, no, it does not matter. Ah, Beatrix. I am tired.”

I took this to mean tired of talking and we lapsed into silence, consumed by the wash of the beach, the light, and salt and watery air.

Pacifica is a town that has it all, we say. Mountains and shoreline, small town

atmosphere, drivability to San Francisco, what more could you want? I am lucky to be here. Back when I was married we scraped together a down payment and bought the house - these little bungalows were going for \$90,000, if you can believe it. I could leave now, sell it and move almost anywhere, I guess, but where would I go? People in Pacifica tend not to leave. Even long vacations are rare.

Which may be why all of us at Pacifica Décor were shocked when Stan decided to cash in years of unused vacation time and take a month long leave to go to Bali. It seemed especially out of character, unusually bold of him. He's one of those people who's socially awkward to the point of being something of a misfit and it was hard to imagine him negotiating any kind of social encounter with people from another culture. Even with us, every interaction is carried out as if he's in a state of great discomfort. To complicate matters, he has white, almost transparent skin and blond hair, and blushes easily, so he ends up looking very pink and yellow, most of the time, which is not exactly attractive. Suffice it to say that although Stan was nearing forty and single, I never thought of him as a bachelor.

"Uhm, Miss Stolfusson," he said. He always called me that, even though everyone else in town calls me Beatrix. I whirled around to face him. He was leaning against the opening of my cubicle, as if weak with effort, "Uhm."

"Yes, Stan, what is it?" I tried to be patient and encouraging but I had a lot to do.

"Well, you know I'm leaving -" his lip quivered a bit in between phrases, "taking a month's leave starting next week-"

"Yes, of course, you're going to Bali, have a wonderful time."

"Uhm. Well. I thought I might forward my sales calls, my phone to your

extension while I'm gone. I mean. George said you could answer my phone while I'm gone but I thought if I forward my calls to your phone it would be easier. For you."

Stan had a hard time holding anyone's gaze and he had a tendency to look down at a diagonal. At this moment he seemed fixated with the power strip under my desk.

"Oh." I hadn't considered the fact that Stan's sales calls would be inherited by me, but it made sense. We shared work all the time and our cubicles were right across from each other. "Sure. That's fine. That's no big deal. No problem."

"Oh. Thank you, Miss Stolfusson. Thank you so much, I really appreciate it."

He clasped his hands in front of him and shook them a little, looking much more relieved than the situation called for. This was so typical of him.

"It's no problem, Stan." Sometimes I heard myself sounding almost annoyed while trying to reassure him. "Are there any accounts that need attention? Shall I take your files?"

"No, no. I've got everything fixed up and ready to go. Uhm. They all know I'm gone for a month. So they'll only call in case of an emergency."

It's hard to imagine what exactly an emergency in the decorative poster business might consist of, especially in the month of June, but I nodded and smiled anyway and he turned to leave. That's when I noticed the haircut. Stan had been getting the same, bowl shaped, blunt cut for as long as I had known him. For all I knew he cut it himself. But now, in addition to his bangs being shorter, which had passed without notice, the back of his head sported a fade and a shaping that were professionally styled and seemed very un-Stan, as I knew him. I found myself staring at the back of his head as he walked away, in a way I never would have allowed myself to stare at his face. I thought about that phrase

“eyes in the back of his head,” and was glad he didn’t have them. For some reason I felt his haircut to be an embarrassment, to both of us.

The first change I noticed when Stan got back after his leave, was his cubicle. I gasped. His cubicle had been steadfastly gray, tidy, stark. The company’s black and white wave shaped logo, “Pacifica Décor,” with “Bringing Nature’s Beauty Indoors” in smaller letters, had always been the sole decoration: tacked above his computer and seeming to bear the burden of irony.

Now his cubicle exploded with color. A garland of hyacinths framed the opening, reaching up to a curved peak which hung a few feet above your head, like a doorway of flowers. Once inside, a large ivy plant with fanning vines created a terrific burst of foliage through which you had to look to see the thirty or forty pictures and postcards Stan had tacked up. Balinese temples, children, markets, dancers, musicians, mountains, jungles, flowers, birds, monkeys, cocky roosters, mangled dogs, gated enclosures, beaches, sunsets, and women and men smiling broadly, wearing brightly colored sarongs and intricately folded cloth hats. I guess they are hats. In the largest picture (which Stan had obviously used the office’s color copier to enlarge to a full eight-and-a-half by eleven inches), pink-faced Stan stood next to a woman holding a huge, multi-tiered platter of fruit on her head, with both hands hanging at her sides. She was dressed in bright greens, and golds. She seemed to be laughing. But I thought I could discern a trace of fierceness, or maybe just pride, in her eyes. This is what I had stepped into his cubicle to look at more closely when Stan came back from his meeting with George.

“They’re offerings. For the gods,” he said.

I almost jumped. “Stan! I’m sorry. I just walked right into your cubicle. I couldn’t resist. How does she balance that?”

He laughed in response. “Oh, that’s Ketut. I don’t know how she does it.”

“God, she’s beautiful,” I looked up at Stan, and seeing him, felt myself blush. “So how was your trip?”

“Amazing. Just amazing. That’s Ketut. She’s my, hmm, friend. My pen pal.”

“Pen pal!”

“Yes, I’ve already written her. And she promised she’d write back.” Stan was tan and seemed more relaxed than I’d ever seen him. He seemed almost confident.

“Wow. It looks like you had a really great time.”

“It was amazing. You should go, Miss Stolfusson.”

“Oh, no. If I need to go to a tropical island, I’ll just go to Hawaii. I’m no good with languages and I could never face getting all those shots you had to get, you know. It’s too hard.”

“But it’s worth it.”

“Well, maybe. For some. Anyway. Welcome back!” I gave him a few notes and messages and then settled down into my own work.

Now, maybe I am a little close-minded, because to tell the truth I’ve lived here in Pacifica all my life and I had never felt the need to go anywhere else. When I need to get away I take a long walk in the mountains that rise up behind the town. But it did seem very odd to me that after one month of visiting a place, Stan just glommed on to the whole culture, the whole kit and caboodle of it. The contrast between his behavior before his trip, and his behavior after, was startling. He had always been so quiet and

withdrawn. Now he started playing Balinese music in his cubicle, very clanging and percussive, and sort of out of tune, to my ear. Under Stan's enthusiastic tutelage I could soon identify gamelan orchestra from bale gangar music. He continued to rearrange and add stuff to his cubicle, including masks and shadow puppets.

"My, you're really doing a job with your cubicle," Shirley remarked, tapping her pencil on her clipboard like it was a tin drum, "I sure hope there's nothing in there that's a fire hazard." Ever since she married George, who owns this place, she acts like some sort of de facto Facilities Manager. She enjoys pulling rank on people who used to be her equals. But Stan missed her insinuation completely.

"Oh, if you think this is something, you should see my house!" he crowed.

And the letters. He would bring letters from Ketut into work and re-read them over and over, carefully folding and unfolding them. And he seemed unconcerned that any of the rest of us might wander by his cubicle and see him mulling over these letters. One time I saw him raise the light blue paper to his face and breathe in, like he was smelling it. Twice he got a new photo of Ketut and he showed it to absolutely everyone in the office. We all commented on how stunning she was.

"Now that's what we call drop dead gorgeous," said Phil from Accounting, adjusting his Tweety-Bird suspenders and then clapping Stan on the back. Although a mere puppy (he can't be more than twenty-eight years old) Phil's comments to Stan always have an instructional tone. "She's a perfect ten, Stan-O, you better lasso that philly in!"

Stan would blush and sigh, and say things like: "Oh, you should see her in person. She's even more beautiful," and "Well, maybe you'll meet her someday." It's

when I heard him say that to George that my inklings about Stan and Ketut crystallized. Not that I hadn't thought it before. But saying something like that to George made it almost official. I started thinking of Ketut as Stan's Balinese Wife. I wondered if they might have gotten hooked up through one of those internet matchmaking services. I had ideas about what kind of woman Ketut was.

So there was a year of letters and then Stan traveling back for two weeks to seal the deal, then Stan's ongoing saga about how difficult everything was with the K-1 fiancée visa, and finally, the big bash Stan threw at his house to welcome Ketut to her new life in the United States of America. It was the first time I had stepped foot onto any part of Stan's property, even though our backyards adjoin. I walked around the block to get there. The front porch had six sets of chimes tingling in the wind, and the face of what looked like a monster hung from Stan's front door. I could hear the clanging of the now familiar Indonesian music from inside, even as I knocked. The door swung open to reveal Stan standing with his arm around Ketut, who appeared, as Stan had suggested, even lovelier in real life than she had in photos.

"Miss Stolfusson!" Stan exclaimed, "Ketut, this is Beatrix Stolfusson," he looked to me, "and this is Ketut." Ketut extended a slender hand to me. Her eyes twinkled. Her grip was soft. Her hand felt fragile in mine. She smelled like oranges.

"Beeatrix." She drawled, stretching out the "Bee" part of my name like a rubber band, which in my native accent would annoy me, but then she softened the "ah" sound and lightly trilled the "r." My name sounded charming and fun, a little frenchified, maybe. I felt a smile take my lips and I turned my eyes to her with an open

gratefulness.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you,” I said.

“Yes. Thank you.” Her voice had a bit of the gamelan in it, a jangly quality, and she spoke louder than I was expecting her to.

“Take off your shoes!” Stan cried exultantly as he turned back to his other guests.

“What?” I was a bit stunned.

Ketut laughed. I looked down to notice a long row of shoes lining the porch.

“He say, ‘take off your shoes,’” she smiled at me warmly. Well. I was grateful that I had worn slip-ons, but wondered if it was really OK to be barefoot. Ketut was wearing straw flip-flops.

She took my hand and led me into the living room, toured me around the room, past masks and shadow puppets hanging on walls covered with Indonesian cloths - batiks, I suppose. Incense burned. Sculptures stood in each corner. Garlands of flowers hung in each doorway and little straw baskets with a few flowers and some woven leaves were placed all over the room. My colleagues from work and a few other townfolk sat on the floor around a long, low, narrow table. It struck me that a man of George’s immense size would usually not appear comfortable seated on the floor. But even he looked relaxed. In fact everyone seemed more comfortable than usual, in high spirits, and curious to see what might come next. Phil from Accounting reclined in the corner, he had loosened his American Flag tie, and although smiling, he for once was keeping his mouth shut. Shirley wore flowers in her hair and leaned against George. The ease in the room was palpable. It was magical, really. Ketut led me to an empty spot at the table.

“Sit down, sit down,” Stan yelled at me over the music, “we’re about to start

eating.”

The food was a bit too spicy for me, but I got to sit directly across from Ketut and watch her. She had a small dark scar, about an inch long, at the base of her neck to the left side. I wondered what that might be from. There was a quick grace to all of her movements, and her eyes never stopped laughing. It was as if she was sharing some private joke with herself, about all of us, I thought. She seemed to me somehow superior in quality. There was a cohesiveness about her, like she all fit together, like she knew exactly who she was. Why isn't she nervous? I kept asking myself. But she wasn't. She was utterly composed. After we had eaten she kicked off her sandals and gave herself a foot massage, right in front of everyone. I felt a bit shocked by this until I caught a glance of Shirley, sitting next to George and looking flabbergasted, like, the outrage! As if we were witnessing something deviant and sexual. I realized I didn't want to be shocked by such things as foot massage.

I left that evening thinking of how in love with her Stan must be. How could he not love her? All day, the next day at work, I listened to people who had never initiated a single social conversation with Stan drop by his cubicle.

“Stan, you're one lucky dog,” said Phil from Accounting.

“You certainly did well for yourself with her,” said Shirley.

“That's a terrific lady you got there,” said George, turning sideways to fit through the corner between our cubicles and next ones.

Stan smiled and nodded, strangely elevated in status by virtue of his Balinese wife. Finally, I decided to weigh in on the matter.

“Thanks for having everyone over, Stan, what a wonderful dinner, and Ketut is

great.”

“Thanks, Miss Stolzfulsson.”

“What’s she going to be doing, here?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, what’s she got to keep her busy?” I had some half-formed thought that maybe Ketut needed a friend.

“Oh - well, she’s got an ESL class up in San Francisco, and she thinks she’d like to get a degree and go into business. She had a business in Bali. She’s smarter than you think.”

“Oh, I think she’s smart.”

“No, but really, she’s smarter than you think.”

“But why are you saying that, why wouldn’t I think she was smart?”

“I’m just saying, she’s really, really smart.”

This exchange ended as many of mine with Stan did, with me drifting back to my computer not because the conversation had come to a close, but because I had run out of responses.

In fact, Ketut had no problems keeping busy. I came home one day for lunch to see her in the backyard, wearing pants, turning first one way and then the other, eyes falling slowly over the periphery of the property, lifting her arm in a straight line towards the sun and judging the angle, then crouching and pulling up a handful of grass and looking at the roots, the soil. The wind whipped her long hair out of the loose bun she had pinned it into, and tendrils of it slashed across her face. Her hair was wild but her face was calm. I

was in my kitchen and the way the sun was shining I felt sure I wasn't visible to her, so I just watched. She moved carefully around the yard while I ate my soup and cheese.

Then I stepped out onto my back steps.

"Planning a garden, Ketut?" I called, smiling as wide as I could and hoping she understood enough English.

She looked up at me, slowly, from the other side of the chain-link fence.

"Beatrix," she smiled and then her face settled back into its former seriousness, "this fence yours?" The question startled me. And I realized I didn't actually know whose fence it was. I walked towards her so we wouldn't have to yell.

"I'm not sure if this fence is mine or yours. I doubt it matters." There was an awkward silence.

"Do you like?"

"Like it?" I had to really think about it. "I don't know."

"I put up better fence, OK?" she asked.

"Sure, sure. Yeah. If you want to put up a different fence that's fine with me."

There was another long silence while we just stood there. It was quite windy and we both stood facing East, with our backs to the wind.

"I don't understand why no flower."

"No flower?"

"Stan love flower so much but not here. In Bali, I think "house of Stan" and I think, flower, flower, flower. And now I come now and no flower outside, but only inside. You understand?"

I just looked at her and smiled nervously, and nodded. After a while she shook

her head and started moving slowly around the yard again, and I went back inside.

With that day, the procession began. Ketut carrying bamboo, Ketut carrying bricks, Ketut with a wheelbarrow full of manure. Ketut going out early on recycling days and gathering old coffee cans from other people's driveways and planting one small bamboo plant in each coffee can. Then digging a shallow trench at our property line and burying each coffee can so you can't see it, just the bamboo.

"Why the cans, Ketut?" I asked.

"To stop spreading," she chuckled, "you believe me, Beatrix, this will grow up in whole back yard and yours, also, if I don't container. I am doing you big favor!" We laughed. Through the bamboo barrier I could still see much of what was going on in their yard. Even as it grew, the bamboo never became completely impenetrable. Ketut carried in spring mulch, then fall mulch. Humus, sand, oyster shells. Small plants that grew quickly. Brick pathways. Rock garden. Christmas lights lining pathways at night. Ketut single-handedly carried an entire alternate back yard through the front gate and around the side of the house. Hoes, shovels, special aerating shoes. Stan offered to give me his lawn mower the next fall, and I took it.

"I don't have a lawn anymore," he said. But he seemed a happy man.

Ketut and Stan threw this huge Christmas party. They had just gone back to Bali for a week and they gave everyone amazing gifts: gorgeous batik tablecloth and napkin sets, intricate wood carvings, masks, shadow puppets, drums and gongs. Everyone was a little overwhelmed, but Stan kept reassuring us.

"Really, you wouldn't believe how cheap this stuff is, over there. The rupiah is

now, what is it Ketut, 8,000 to the dollar? So this tablecloth set was, like, nine or ten dollars. It's no big deal."

When George opened his present, it was a huge mask, the kind that goes over your whole head, with a monster face much like the one hanging on Ketut and Stan's front door. It was quite impressive.

"Ketut, what is that?" I asked.

"It's a goat," Shirley screamed, a little drunk. There is a suspicion we all share, that Shirley married George for his money. George is devoted to her, and I think we all wonder why. But he is such a large and paternal man, and so kind to everyone that in fact it doesn't seem out of character for him to have taken her under his wing. And whatever else may be happening in their marriage, the two of them obviously relish the privilege and performance of public marital bickering.

"It's not a goat, it's a dragon, Shirley, anyone can see that," George shouted back.

"It's either a cow or a goat, George, the cows are sacred, you know, over there."

Shirley dipped her sate into some spicy red sauce.

"Shirley, it's a dragon -"

"George, dragons are Chinese for god sakes," she yelled with her mouth full. I turned to Ketut.

"What is it?" I asked again.

"He is a Barong, a god," she said, but I don't think anyone else heard her. It was very loud and we were all in a festive mood and George tried putting the mask on. Ketut kept reaching over and trying to help him get it on correctly. She kept saying: "no, no, not that way. Here. Here." But then you couldn't tell what she was doing differently.

George was drunk and confused and finally passed the mask to Stan. “All right Stan, you’re the expert, you show me how to get this thing on.” Stan turned red then grabbed the mask, his big fingers poking through the eyes of it. “You just, uhm, put it on over your head, George,” Stan said, and there was a big laugh while George slapped his forehead in mock dismay and Stan turned the mask in his hands awkwardly then lifted it over his own head. There was a round of oohs and ahs as the mask settled over his shoulders, and a smattering of applause. Stan shrugged his shoulders and made a half-hearted attempt to dance, I guess like they do in Bali. But of course, being Stan, it looked utterly ridiculous and clumsy. Ketut had been standing next to Stan as he put the mask on, saying quietly “no, Stan, no, Stan.” But now her face darkened and she turned abruptly and left the room. I made an excuse to follow her to the kitchen, but it took me a while to get there. She was kneeling on a mat in front of a small shrine with her hands pressed together in front of her face. As I began to back out of the kitchen, thinking I would go to the bathroom instead, Ketut turned suddenly, and quickly rose to her feet.

“Ah, Beatrix, come in, come in.”

“No, Ketut, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No interrupting. I am done. Come in. What a nice kitchen, yes?” She spread her arms and smiled. I stepped into the kitchen and complimented her on her new toaster oven. “Yes, I love that,” she said, “you don’t know what is to cook without electricity, Beatrix. You should see how I cook at home. In Bali. I have big stove with fire in it and woodpile to get wood every day, and we walk for water. You can’t imagine.”

“How far would you walk for water?”

She waved her hands and sighed, “Ah, do not ask.”

“It sounds hard.”

“Cooking is easy in America.”

“Yes, I guess it is, if you at least know how to cook.”

“And laundry.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“With cooking and laundry that is it, your day is gone, in Bali.”

“But Stan said you had a business in Bali - I thought -” I didn’t know how to finish. Ketut laughed.

“Is that what he said? A business?”

“Yes - he said maybe you would go into business here -”

“Anyway, maybe, but I had a warung in Bali, no big business.”

“Warung?”

“A little - shed I guess, like your garden shed but not as new, to sell water and small things to tourists -”

“And that’s how you met Stan?”

“What?”

“And that’s how you met Stan?”

She was silent and looked at me closely.

“Beatrix, it is silly, I think, but Stan does not want me to tell how we met.”

“Oh.” There was an awkward pause. “Are you OK?” I’m not sure even now what I meant by that question.

“What?”

“I guess I followed you because I thought something was, wrong. Out there.”

“Hmm. Ah, Beatrix, I think I tell Stan ten times not to put his fingers through the eyes on that mask.”

“Fingers through the eyes?”

“Yes, how would you like to have fingers through your eyes?”

“Oh -”

“It is holy mask. Like a god. In Bali we sell these to tourists all the time but to see with my eyes where it goes...”

“Oh, Ketut. I’m sorry.”

“And I tell him ten times and now he show George how to do it wrong and I think what have I done. I tell you, tourists buy these all the time and it no big deal, but to tell someone ten times and they don’t - and now I send this Barong to a new house to be disrespected.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. I kept looking at her and nodding.

“It is harder than I thought.”

“Oh.”

She sighed. “And this is life, yes? Marriage harder, cooking and laundry easier, ha-ha, the joke is on me.” And she laughed a real sounding laugh and I started laughing, too, and she put her arm around my shoulder, and I felt honored, and almost weak with happiness.

I took Ketut shopping in San Francisco on Tax-Free week. I thought I would show her the ropes but it turns out she already knew them. As if it takes so much know-how to know how to shop. As if shopping is not a worldwide occupation. It was obvious to me,

even as I pulled up to the curb to pick her up, that I was still underestimating Ketut in some way. She sat on the porch wearing a pair of tailored pants looking decidedly cosmopolitan. Suddenly my corduroys felt hopeless.

We were going through the Men's Slacks at Marshall's and I was talking about how Stan was such a changed man, for the better, since she'd come along. How happy all of us were that she was with him. I don't know what I was saying. It was dumb I suppose. Who was I speaking for? "All of us," meaning whom? All of Stan's friends? Stan didn't even have friends before Ketut came into his life. Those of us who visited now, visited only because of her. Imagining Stan without her was impossible because before Ketut, Stan had no social aspect, at all. He must have spent a lot of time reading, or watching television, or something. Anyway, Ketut was snapping her way through rack after rack of men's pants, figuring discounts in her head, mumbling numbers, reading labels, looking for a good washable pair of dress slacks for Stan. And I guess she'd had enough of me gushing about how wonderful it was that Stan and she were together and how romantic I thought it was because she suddenly looked up and glared at me.

"I don't think it will last, Beatrix."

"What?"

"Stan and me not good for each other." She shook her head. "Not a good match."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Beatrix. You know, I did not know how stupid he is. He is stupid like a child. It drive me crazy every day. I did not know, my English, not so good. You know? I thought when he do things wrong in Bali that because he was in Bali. But he wrong with people here, too. He handle everything wrong. People. Things. Everything."

It was horrifying to hear her speak what we had all maintained silence about, regarding Stan, who he was, how he was.

“And he not strong, either. Stupid can be OK with a strong, good man. But he not like that. He just weak and stupid. Better for me alone than with him. He drive me crazy every day. I afraid that I will hit him someday if I stay.”

I was stumped.

“And worse of all to think him a father - no, no, never. Not me. Never.”

“But Ketut. You’re married.”

She cocked her head at me and raised her eyebrows.

“You’re married.”

“Well, only by judge and in my country the wedding is more. He took me to a judge! And he said that is how we do here, you know? And I should not care? Stupid.”

“But Ketut, it’s still legal. What are you going to do? Divorce him?” I wondered if she even knew the word “divorce.” But she obviously did.

“Why so bad to divorce? Stan said you divorce. Are you divorce?”

“Well, yes, but-”

“Why you divorce?”

“My husband. Well, it was complicated. My husband never understood me.”

Ketut laughed. She threw back her head and laughed so hard that tears formed in her eyes. I looked around nervously but everyone nearby was immersed in their shopping.

“Beatrix. You so funny. You think? You know Stan better than me. You work with him every day for many years. You think he understand me? You think?”

I felt myself get hot. I felt embarrassed and defensive and all wrong. I wanted this conversation to be over. I turned back to the slacks. I heard my voice harden.

“OK Ketut. OK. But you know, life isn’t easy without a man in America.” I looked up at her.

Ketut was staring at me and did not blink or turn away. We held each others gaze for what felt like a full minute before she said very quietly, very emphatically, word by word:

“Listen, I know about life.”

When I went home that day, I pulled my shades down in the kitchen. It was darker when I sat down to eat breakfast and lunch, and the view of the backyard would be missed, but somehow I felt protected.

The day after the big waves subsided, Ketut and I sat there quietly after we spoke of the mountains and she told me how tired she was. The blanket was spread over a litter of cigarette butts, candy wrappers, broken up pieces of old styrofoam, twigs, feathers, and bits of wood. Everything seemed a fragment that day, the sand itself worn down with age. As it grew cloudy, Ketut took off her hat and her sunglasses, and for the first time I saw clearly the wrinkles around her eyes, so dry they seemed powdery. The look in her eyes was weary and flat, her mouth set, and she looked ten years older than she had seemed to me previously. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her, and she slowly turned her head to look back at me.

Stan called out to her from the edge of the ocean, again motioning her over. She shook her head. And then turning her head to the south where the hills meet the water

she said “Here comes trouble” in a wry voice. I followed her gaze to see George and Shirley far at the end of the beach, starting towards us. Ketut smiled at me, her eyes dancing again, and we laughed, and as the laughter subsided, Ketut reached out and took my hand in hers, and then she laid down on her back. I laid down, too, and we lay there quietly together for many minutes, side by side, looking up at the sky and holding hands.

I don’t know why I rolled over and kissed her. I was telling myself that from twenty feet away it may have looked like I was telling her a secret. I was telling myself that if she had taken my hand and laid down in the sand then she must have feelings for me as inexplicable as mine were for her. I had never kissed a woman before and I was surprised at the smallness of her face and how soft her lips were, for the second that our lips touched. I kissed her, and this was a terrible mistake. She pushed me away with a look of alarm, sat up and busied herself with her hat and sunglasses, covering herself with her back turned to me.

Finally Stan came over, looking slightly sunburnt. He greeted me abruptly and then turned to her: “Ketut, I don’t know why you won’t walk with me.”

“Too cold.”

“It’s just your feet.”

“It’s not for me.”

“It feels good.”

“It’s dirty.”

“What’s dirty?”

“The sea. In my religion, Stan, the sea is dirty and we don’t touch.”

“What, are you serious?”

“And bad. The sea is evil.”

“Oh, come on, the sea’s not evil.”

“You say this and a boy just died.”

“It’s not dirty either.”

“You leave me alone, Stan.”

“Ketut, come on.”

“No.”

“We never walk anymore, Ketut, come on.”

“Stan, stop it.”

I stood and excused myself to go to Taco Bell, breaking a years-long vow never to enter the place. Taco Bell was warm and sheltering, and I was surprised to hear classical music playing over the sound system. It was all so new and clean, and the views were simply spectacular - the dingy beach looking majestic from a short distance. I stepped out onto the deck with my huge soda, intending to watch the surf, the kids, the dogs and surfers, the sky. George and Shirley had joined Ketut and Stan at their blanket. Ketut remained sitting as she had before, and the three of them stood in a triangle, over her. It was still windy and a globby mass of sea foam tumbleweeded past them. George, Shirley, and Stan seemed to be getting more animated in their gestures, while Ketut sat perfectly still. Something about the scene made me want to hide. I sat down at a table so that only the top half of my head might be clearly visible from the beach. After a few minutes the three set off to the north, leaving Ketut alone and unmoved. Stan broke away from George and Shirley, taking a few steps back towards Ketut and gesturing wildly. Then he stopped and stood there for a few seconds before turning back to George and

Shirley, and setting off again.

I stood and walked back home via Linda Mar Boulevard, feeling a bit shaky. When I reached my house I got right into my car and took Skyline Drive out of town, heading south to Big Basin State Park. I spent the better part of that day lying down on a park bench, gazing up at those towering trees, trying not to think.

I suppose it was disingenuous of me, the way I pretended to be shocked when Stan told me Ketut had moved away. I was sitting at work, looking through competitors' catalogs. I was preparing a list entitled "What They're Doing That We're Not." My plan was to convince George that we need to spend a lot more money for a better catalog. I was putting little yellow sticky notes on the pages I had chosen to show him as examples, and practicing my phrasing under my breath, trying to sound smart and professional. My main points were: fewer posters per page, more emphasis on what's new, better paper quality and more professional, updated graphic design. "We're being left behind, George," I would say.

I heard a noise coming from Stan's cubicle. I stopped what I was doing and just listened. It sounded like a rhythmic nose-blowing, with intermittent gasps, not exactly like a person crying, but I knew that's what it was. I folded my hands in my lap. And then there was the creak of his chair and I looked up to see him leaning against the opening of my cubicle, wiping his face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Stolfus-" he gasped, "I know you can hear me, and it's very awkward."

"It's OK, Stan. I mean, what's wrong?"

“It’s Ketut -” he put his hand over his eyes and bent his head down, composing himself.

“Is she all right?”

“She’s gone. She’s fine. She left.” His shoulders shook for a moment and then stopped. “She moved up to San Francisco. She’s working in some kind of Thai restaurant there. A friend she met at her ESL class gave her the job.” He choked.

“God, Stan, Oh God. I’m so sorry.” I turned all the way around to face him. “Hey, come on in. Why don’t you take a seat. Sit down.” Stan moved haltingly into my cubicle and pulled out the folding chair and we sat there with our knees almost touching, for about an hour. It was strange. I handed him tissues. Every once in a while someone would walk by and glance in and then quickly walk away.

The worst was when he said “I just wish she would tell me why,” and “I’d be willing to change anything if she’d just tell me.” I just nodded solemnly, as if I had no knowledge in that area.

Then suddenly everyone was talking about Ketut.

“She just married him for the visa!” Shirley hissed at me while Stan was away from his desk. And then sighed: “Oh, Poor Stan!” This energetic pendulum between vituperation for Ketut and almost parental concern for Stan overtook the entire office. The whisperings at the water cooler. The self-righteous anger while waiting for the microwave in the company lunch room. The phrase “gold digger” haunting all the gossip about Ketut like a bad smell. And was it up to me to say “But really, would you stay with Stan? Can you blame her, really?” I was in the strange position of having to speak ill of

him to speak well of her, when she had left my life while he remained. Mostly I tried to keep my mouth shut but I occasionally got into trouble.

“I had a feeling you couldn’t trust her,” said Phil as he squeezed the cream cheese from its foil packet directly onto his bagel.

“Well, I can’t say that,” said George, “She seemed very nice to me, a bit headstrong maybe, but she didn’t seem like the type.”

“I mean, she was nice to look at but I always sensed something -” Phil groped for the word as he took a bite “something - cunning - about her.” A little spot of cream cheese appeared on his moustache and on his Homer Simpson tie.

“Oh come on, Phil,” I said.

“Yes, really. I mean it. Manipulative.”

“Come on, don’t be that way,” I said.

“What way?” he asked with eyebrows arched in innocence and surprise, “What are you talking about?” I suddenly felt very vulnerable.

“I don’t want to get into it.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’m just being honest.”

“Well then who needs honesty, Phil, why don’t you try lying.”

“Wow, Beatrix, what crawled up your butt?”

“OK, OK, coffee clutch is over you two. Forget about it. Get back to your cubicles.” George made a whip-cracking movement with his hand and we all drifted away. I find myself feeling just completely insufficient at moments like these, dirty and gutless.

Stan continues to walk around in a daze and claims that we shouldn’t blame her.

When he walks into a room you can feel everyone's attention shift to him. The invisible man made visible by marrying a beautiful woman now doubly visible in his pain.

He's taken down the photos of Ketut in his cubicle, but he leaves all the rest of the Balinese stuff up. I wonder what he must feel like when he goes home to his rooms, surrounded by souvenirs of a place not his, symbols of a hope for a life he had no real claim to. I wonder if there's any logic in what he's deciding to keep and what he's deciding to throw away.

A few weeks ago I came home and he was ripping the bamboo up out of the earth and I ran to him, shouting without thinking.

"No! No! I love that bamboo! Please, Stan, can't we leave it?"

He stopped, glistening and purple with effort, and panted at me for a few moments before throwing the pieces of bamboo he held in his hands down to the ground in a clatter and turning for his house.

"Wait, I'm sorry," I yelled. "I'm sorry, I'm way out of line - - if you want to take it out, of course you should." Without thinking I had stepped through the opening of bamboo and stood now in his yard, in Ketut's garden. He turned around and put his hands on his hips. He was still wearing his office clothes, and his pants were getting muddy.

"I tell you what. It's yours now, OK? Do whatever you want."

I looked down and saw among the fallen bamboo a Bird of Paradise that had been knocked over in full bloom, vivid and pointy. I began to stutter:

"Look - no - look, if it will make you sad - let me, let me help -"

"Miss Stolz - - No. I can't do this with you. I need to be alone."

“I’m so - I’m so sorry, Stan, about, about everything.”

And he looked so exasperated with me, and I thought about how many times I must have given him a similar look, for far less reason.

“Don’t be sorry. It has nothing to do with you. Just - just -” And he stopped and looked at the sky, and then waved his hand at me as if giving up, and turned to walk towards his back door.

I turned around in the clutter of the half-demolished garden and stared at the fallen Bird of Paradise at my feet. It seemed such a shame to leave such a beautiful flower, and my desire to bend and pick it up was so strong that I did bend over, but then caught myself, since it would be stealing in a way, and I couldn’t bear to ask Stan for permission. I stroked the stiff and pointy foliage; such bright yellow and orange. How do such things germinate? I wish I knew. The leaves had a purplish hue, and where the stem was broken a clear, viscous substance oozed out. I touched the oozing and sniffed my fingers, and slowly rose to return to my house. Those flowers are so tough. I am amazed that I can still see it, even weeks afterwards, from my back window, a flash of color in the untouched garden, abandoned but not forgotten.

Falling Away

April 7

David,

Just so you know, my mother said it's a problem that I'm not talking much. Isn't that a hoot? She and Dad come over after church every Sunday to check in on us and give me the update; who announced what during the service and always a description of the music. I listen quietly and then serve them the chicken, rice and broccoli casserole they bring, week after week. Dad drinks up our coffee; the Graffeo blend you ordered from California is almost gone. And today Mom said: Marie, I think it's a problem that you're not talking much. I said Well if that's not the pot calling the kettle black. Mom said I'm not going through what you're going through and I'm not you, you've always been a talker. I said What I'm thinking is unmentionable. How can that be, she said, and

I didn't answer. And then she handed me this thing and said: Write about it, at least. I was touched that she went to the trouble of buying something so obviously expensive, the paper so thick I feel even now that I should be writing something that really counts, here. I said as much when she handed it to me: I can't write anything worthy of such thick paper.

Oh no, she said, it's good to have thick paper because even with passing sentiments you can bear down hard.

April 8

David:

What drives me nuts is this: being the daughter of a Mennonite minister and having lived my entire 35 years of life in Wichita, Kansas, and having gone to church every single Sunday and I didn't know that I don't really believe in God until your leaving us a month ago. What a mess. I had intimations of my lack of faith earlier on, but I chose to ignore them. I had to, loving my people as I do.

My first summer back from college at the family 4th of July outing I remember being so relieved and grateful to back among my own. I gobbled up the very tone, volume and accent of my aunt's voices, the slow meter in which they speak. It was hot that day, and Sarah, Charlene and Peggy joined me on the bank of Peggy's muddy service pond, and Charlene started making jokes about going in.

Where we supposed to wade, Peg, she said.

And I remember looking at the cleanliness and matching of their outfits, the careful coif of their respective hairstyles, and even, in Charlene's case, the meticulously

self-manicured light pink fingernails. It seemed unlikely to me that they might even stick a toe in, but there they were, taking off their shoes.

Sarah and Charlene were holding hands and they began to step, bracing each other, slow but not timid into the water. Peggy skittered around me, arranging their shoes next to the cottonwood tree, chattering in low german about the senility of her sisters, about dirty water and fancy clothes, as Sarah and Charlene continued, steadily paced, towards the center of the pond. Holding hands higher as they went. A few more steps and my two oldest aunts, both over sixty, were up to their nipples in dirty water. They were not laughing but facing each other and smiling, and there was a long silence. I have seen these two fight so often that I almost began to cry.

Nyoh! said Peggy. Charlene commanded us: Kommen sie hier, meine fraulein, meine liebechen. Sarah turned to me and said, Marie, we need you; Peggy, bring her out. Nyoh! said Peggy, but she grabbed my hand with one arm and stretched the other out to her sisters, and in I went, sneakers and all, and the four of us stood with wet blouses in a circle, quietly. And then they opened their mouths at each other as if on cue, and they began to sing:

Gott ist die liebe, lasst mich erlosen

Gott is die liebe, er liebt auch mich,

Drum sag ich noch einmal,

Gott ist die liebe,

Gott ist die liebe,

Er liebt auch mich.

The sun was high, the cottonwood shaded us, the meadowlark provided

accompaniment, and we sang through song after song. But it's that first one that echoes over time with the last line haunting my loss of faith, betrayal of all that is mine: loves even me. Loves even me. How could one doubt it when immersed in song and water?

April 9

Would things be any different if we had skipped our winter vacation this year? Or gone a day later? Was it all inevitable? Why the mad rush into the car? What crisis did we believe ourselves to be responding to when we hurried Paul through dinner, shouting at each other from room to room while zipping our bags. Ruth was ignored and fussing like crazy and you finally folding yourself into the back seat of the Cressida with a heaving sigh of relief, checking your watch as if it really mattered, and giving Ruth a bottle as we headed out on 81. You needed to sleep, so I had to drive. You had put Paul in the front seat and I said But isn't it illegal. And you said This car is so old it doesn't have airbags. And Paul was so excited to be in the front seat he stayed awake long after you fell asleep. Did you hear us? We talked about how boring school can be. How difficult it is to listen to things you're not interested in.

Anyway, I was the only one awake within an hour or so, and I had that thermos of coffee and the radio and was feeling very happy to be heading for the mountains. I was thinking about how we would arrange childcare so that I could get some good skiing done. And then somewhere around Hays or maybe a bit after, you made these strange sounds that were like snorting or gargling. And I thought Oh, good, he's really sleeping. I looked back at you and you had your head leaning way back on top of the head rest. But, you know, you're a big guy and even though it looked a little uncomfortable, how

comfortable can a big guy get in the back of a Toyota, anyway? I stopped the car at the pancake diner in Limon there you were, absolutely still. And that's when I got the strange sensation, my spine arching and really panicky, shouting your name, and I got out of the car as fast as I could, no coat or nothing, and ran around to your side. Your lips were no color at all. Your skin was a bluish grey. I touched you and you were cool to my touch. Worst of all was your stillness.

It's really something how these kinds of situations go. How you have a whole new personality for a limited time while you're in crisis. Paul had been getting his shoes and coat on, and I grabbed him and ran into the diner. And I just threw myself on everyone who was sitting there. I just made this huge announcement to the whole restaurant that my husband needed CPR in the parking lot and could anyone please come right now, and this woman with bleach blond hair and a lavender sweater with lace on it rose from across the room and said: I'm a nurse. I wish you could have seen her, she looked very competent and was comfortingly non-fashionable. She came walk-running across to me, and out we went, and she took one look at you, put a finger to your neck for about half a minute, then turned to me and looked at me for a second with steady eyes and said: I'm sorry, he's expired. That's the word she used. Maybe because Paul was right there. And her daughter, who had run out behind her and stood there shivering said: What's expired?

And she didn't answer her daughter. She just looked at me, and she didn't move away.

How these complete strangers were suddenly right there and not going anywhere. Her family became our new supplemental family for the next twenty-four hours: Chantal

Glade, her daughter, Hope, and her husband Nev, who happens to be a Baptist minister and worked me through the whole “what to do with the body” question step by step.

Darling, your body was cared for by strangers in Limon. I’m so sorry, but we couldn’t figure out how to get it back to Wichita any other way.

And then they drove us home, even though they live in Salina and it was a considerable distance out of their way. They were the ones who were there, offering me glasses of water, holding Ruth or making sure that Paul got breakfast, while I sat at the Limon, Colorado Funeral Home saying over and over again I hope he’s in heaven. I hope he’s in heaven. And then I’d start crying again which I guess looked like maybe I thought your were a bad person or something. That I doubted your ability to gain entry. Although that wasn’t where the doubt lay.

It was March 2, and your young body, only 39 years old when your heart stopped beating, was to be embalmed, and driven home to Wichita in a hearse. I am trying to believe that you didn’t have a choice, and that those noises in the backseat weren’t meant to communicate with me that you needed my help. That there was no other way for this to go.

April 10

How I hate your mother. No I don’t hate her. I hate her presence. She dropped by today. After chiding me for wearing “that horrible burgundy sweatsuit” (which happens to be very comfortable for sleeping and for daytime wear) Clara went on and on about you, which drives me nuts because its like she’s talking about a completely different person than the David I know and love. Traitor! Did you spend your whole life

camouflaged from your own mother? Were you really so weak? Is life so unimportant, that we can all just lie our way through it, even to our intimates?

Today Clara talked about how you were always so careful and tidy (!), and would help anyone who needed help even if it wasn't convenient. She brought up the I-35 story again, how you stopped to help this black family that was having car trouble on a Sunday morning when you drove Clara and Pete out to their old church. And of course it seems to count for extra points in her mind that the family was black, like you were Jesus himself for doing it, and that's bad enough to listen to. (I am absolutely positive that Clara is repeating this story about you to everyone at church, anyone who will listen.) And I can't stop thinking about how you probably just wanted a break from listening to your folks bicker about this year's wheat crop or whether or not to listen to the radio. You would probably do anything to stop the car and get out. You hated driving them places! You never took the time to stop and help people at the side of the road! That's probably the only time you did it in 39 years. And now this is some definitive allegory about who you were and what you meant. But weren't you good enough just the way you were, which was too busy to help others so much but good in other ways?

Anyhow, we were able to maintain civility until she came upon Paul in the den, watching Teletubbies. You may remember this has been an issue between your mother and I in the past. I think if Paul had never proclaimed to Clara his belief in the Baby Sun God who rises and sets at the beginning and end of each show, everything would be O.K. But I simply will not take Teletubbies away from him; they're incredibly comforting, I've come to realize. Even to me! Sometimes, when I feel anxious before sleeping, and my mind is casting around for something to rest upon, I simply imagine Teletubby-land, the

bunnies and flowers, the softly rolling hills, the four happy tubbies who each have exactly one toy to carry around. The nice real-kid videos. Paul and I agree on the goodness of Teletubbies.

So the Baby-Sun-God controversy rages on. She really let me have it, today. She said it was poisoning his mind in the worst way, and might even cause him to fall away from the “true God,” right now when he needs it most. Anyway, she made such a big deal of it that Paul was upset, too, and asking a lot of questions that I had a hard time answering, you can imagine.

Geez, it’s just a metaphor, right, all these versions of God. But a metaphor for what? What is the real thing? What is God without human projection? And I couldn’t come up with an exact answer - I just thought, OK, love. And that seemed alright. God is love, I told Clara and Paul, just like it says in the Bible. And I kind of stopped the conversation and that was that. Clara left unsatisfied. She sat down in her car and put it into gear and then called out the window: Marie, I think it’s a real deficiency in your parenting. I’m afraid the truth about me is much worse than she fears.

She had brought me a damn spice cake, and I thought Just take your damn spice cake and leave us alone! I had visions of hurling it at the car, and after she left I threw it away. I apologized to starving children everywhere and threw it as hard as I could into the trash can. The trash can rocked but did not fall over. I know I should feel compassion for Clara, that it must be so hard for her, but I married the best part of your family and am now stuck with the worst part, is how it feels. Traitor, deserter, turncoat. I love you.

Paul kicks the soccer ball into the chain link fence as hard as he can a few times

while I am throwing away the spice cake and then stops to ask: Is Daddy with God now?

Yes.

And God is love?

Yes. Daddy is with love. Daddy is completely surrounded by love. He's in a big warm, soft, cloud of love.

And that's heaven?

That's heaven.

And we'll see him there someday?

Yes.

These are the beliefs that I pass on, which I don't really believe myself, because they are the only beliefs that are acceptable as far as levels of pain go. Meanwhile, I sit around and nurse Ruth and while I'm nursing I refine my ideas about God, and more and more, God doesn't seem to exist, in any of the old, useful ways. I've almost stopped using the word "God" altogether.

Even that first day, in Limon and driving home with the Glades, I was trying to think about heaven, thinking about interlaced spirit clouds of you and me, and I thought about meeting God, in that form, and I couldn't make it make sense to me. I just laid back in the car seat and gazed at the passing fields, so frozen and vast and still. Chantal offered me her sunglasses even though she was driving, because I left mine at the funeral home. And I watched the fields and there was a dark and empty spot in the center of my vision.

Super-high-pie-in-the-sky tree, Paul called out, and pointed at one of those trees you can see growing out of the top of neglected old grain silos. It was a big one, its

golden branches reaching out against the electric blue sky in extreme and vivid contrast. It would be breathtaking in the spring and fall, you could tell.

I closed my eyes and I imagined floating around with you, both of us happy, visiting dead grandparents and old friends from high school who fell asleep at the wheel or dove into shallow water. And that's kind of how I got through the day, but every time I got to the "meeting God" part I would sort of mentally stumble and go blank. What would it mean to meet God? God as a presence you could locate, exactly. God as a center of knowledge, a seeing God. I just can't get there anymore. And what does that leave me with?

I try out various realities: You are the banana peel thrown out onto the compost pile. Breaking up and mixing with all the other stuff. Some tiny, dissolved, and separated parts of you coming up next spring as strawberries and tomatoes. Oh, David, I have no idea.

I sit in the rocking chair you painted for me, nursing Ruth. Ruth the un-knowing, who oogles up at me, who grabs my hair and strokes my nose, the only one in my presence who didn't stop laughing and smiling for the last month and I think, well, what's so great about knowledge, anyway? Of what use to this little girl is the knowledge that she'll never know her father? Given the way the world is, I'd rather have an unknowing spirit than a knowing God.

April 11

David:

I return again to your memorial service, to the things that people said but even

more to the music. We are fortunate that the choir had sung the Fauré Requiem just last November, so they sounded pretty good, singing it again. Of course, they would have sounded better with you and me. It always felt to me, last November, like our whole family got caught in the web of sound at those rehearsals. Paul always brought drawing to do, but I'd often catch him lying down with his eyes open and fixed, sucking his thumb and appearing almost autistic. Ruth always slept. And you and I seemed transported from our very lives into another dimension consisting only of sound, breath and rhythm. And then it was as if the atmosphere of the Requiem had a fading life of its own: it went home with us. The quiet rides in the car, the solemn snack and slow bath time, the peace of bedtime stories. Everything around that Requiem floats.

I read the words in English today and many of them don't resonate for me: *And with Lazarus, once a beggar, may you have eternal rest. Or: Let not Tartarus swallow them, Oh Lord.* The repetitive requests for light, rest, and mercy make more sense. But it's really all about the music, isn't it. The sound succeed where the words fail.

The truth is, my life has somehow quieted down and opened up, since you died. We had such a schedule to maintain, such habits and ideas of where we needed to go and what we needed to do, and I've let it all drop. I don't cook near as well as I used to. The best meals we eat are the ones people from church drop by every few days. And the leftovers usually carry us at least an extra meal. Left to my own devices, I mostly just open a can of soup, and that really seems OK to me, and to Paul. Don't worry, we won't starve. I've skipped the meetings at Paul's school and haven't been to church since the funeral. I imagine the church at large perceives me to be ungrateful considering all this good food that keeps arriving at our doorstep.

I know everyone's assuming my absence is temporary. They say I'm depressed and in shock. They have concerned conversations about me, I have no doubt. But the longer I stay away the surer I become that I don't really belong there anymore. I imagine myself doing the antiphonal readings, singing the hymns, not believing in their truth, while still affected by their beauty. The congregation, singing in haunting unison the first lines of "I Sought the Lord," and then breaking into four part harmony, sad and dense, and me with a lump in my throat, unable to sing, moved and confused.

It doesn't feel like the honest thing, to go. Me, sitting in the wooden pew with the familiar smell trying to do all kinds of metaphoric manipulations in my head to make it all work for me. When the truth is, simply, these are my people, the people I come from, and I have no idea of what I am separately from them. But we are a people bound by faith, and I have none, and no intention of continuing to foster the belief that I'm getting some later on down the road. My place in the world evaporated with my tenuous faith, I'm down to zero now. And I prefer not to argue about it. I just want to slowly rediscover the world, from zero, without God. I feel OK about all of this, except when the church people come to visit. Then, I feel like I have a dirty secret I'm keeping from them. I'm not thinking what they think I'm thinking. But who has the energy for the ensuing discussion? I mean if I were to tell them what's really on my mind.

April 12

David:

So, I don't believe in God anymore. And I don't know what I believe about you. I know I believe in The Glades. I think I'll start capitalizing the family name like that,

from now on. Maybe if I get the guts up, I'll stop capitalizing god. Ha! Anyway, The Glades. They were, coincidentally, returning from their family vacation. Chantal, Hope, and Nev. I love their very names. When I told Paul that Daddy had died and we were going to drive back home, and these nice people were going to drive us home because they wanted to help us out, Paul said: We're not going to the mountains?

No, I said.

We're not going skiing?

No.

Where's Daddy?

Daddy is with God, I said, and something inside me winced.

In retrospect, it might have been better if I had stopped everything and just admitted that I don't really know where Daddy is, or if he is. That no one really knows.

Chantal, Hope, and Nev just stood there and watched us and waited and did what was necessary. Such people. The whole family so solid and steady. They even, all three, have that squarish shape. And quiet voices, although maybe that's just because of the situation. Nev drove our car, sometimes with Hope riding along in the backseat, sitting in the same seat you had been sitting in, the night before. Paul and Ruth and I piled into their station wagon, with Chantal driving.

After a few hours we stopped at a rest stop, and I stood outside facing the fields in the cold, sharp air, with the wind burning my face, and tried to take a few deep breaths, but the air was just too cold. The wind howled, moaned, shrieked, whistled, and was strangely comforting. After a few minutes Chantal walked up next to me, holding Paul's hand. And Paul yelled: We're not going to the mountains? And I yelled back no, no,

we're going home, because Daddy died, and we need to go home and think about it. And Paul yelled: Well then, can we go to the Bison Refuge? And I yelled back: No, honey, the Bison Refuge is out of the way and we don't have time. Our hair was whipping around and we were all changing color and Chantal yelled: Let's get back in the car. We leaned into the wind and walked through the empty tunnel of sound, pulled our car doors shut, and recovered.

And then Chantal said, as if it was the most reasonable thing: Well, it's really six of one and a half dozen of the other, mileage-wise. Why don't we just hop on over to the Bison Refuge, then take 15 back to 81, back to Wichita. I said it's a longer drive. She said the weather is good for driving. Paul said Daddy loved the Bison Refuge. So that pretty much did it. We went to the Bison Refuge.

It's not really six of one and a half-dozen of the other. And it was already a long drive. That western part of Kansas is really something. There are no diversions, nothing to break or cloud your vision from the utter uniformity of town after town, grain elevator, occasional cattle, occasional Pizza Hut. The milo fields blanketed in snow with small brown stalks poking through like fingers reaching up from the frozen earth. Only flatness, distant lines of hedges, and the horizon. Such openness and monotony. This was the landscape I gazed upon while I envisioned you and me together again, as vapourous spirit clouds, in some version of heaven. The presence of these good strangers who rearranged their return home so that I wouldn't have to drive. My own faith strongest just in this: that even strangers can treat each other kindly, and that people do survive.

April 13

The crocuses are coming up. Even the daffodil shoots. I'm amazed after all our neglect of the flowers that this stuff keeps coming back.

I look out at the trees in the backyard, still bare but just beginning to have those tiny tips of light green, and the grass which is yellow, and the fences which surround the yard, fences of neighbors yards, and I think of this space without god. I think: No god. No god. I speak to the trees: What does it mean, Elm tree, if there is no god in you? I realize that I've always held onto a kind of animism, always thought God lived in the trees and grass and animals, in all of us.

On long drives you used to call it God petting: the prairie grasses shimmering like the wind is petting the hair of the earth, and the earth is responding. But did you really believe in God? Or were you a good pretender like me? No god, I say to myself, and it's as if the air becomes empty of this electrical charge I had always perceived it to have, like the world is suddenly only material. It would be lonely and disheartening if I didn't know about spring. I want to watch the astounding regeneration of spring as only a physical process, and see where that takes me.

Erin Walters dropped by today, she brought some split pea soup, home made bread, and an absolutely mouth-watering lemon tart. As the church community goes, Erin is one of the most easy for me to bear these days. She doesn't have a lot to say about church or much of an agenda regarding what needs to be said about death and my circumstances. More like, she just likes to come over once a week to take a break from her own household. It's very quiet here. She usually puts the food down and then collapses into your old easy chair and pretends to faint. Then Paul and she have a whole

revival thing they go through, which always ends in her feigning exasperation and saying: I have five kids, Paul, I deserve to faint, OK? And then she faints again, and Paul says Mom, I think we'd better call 911, and then I pretend to call. It keeps getting more and more elaborate. Today I said, really Erin, I should be bringing you food. This is ridiculous. You have five children. Why are you still bringing me food?

Oh, I just got into the habit, she said. It's as good an excuse as any to get out of the house on a Saturday morning.

I know I must be still on the Nurture Committee's list. I'm probably still on the Prayer Request list, too. I wonder if there's any chance Erin and I will still be friends if I never go back to church, and though I like her I doubt it. She simply won't have time for me.

The sopranos sound awful without you, she said. I mean, no pressure and all, but it's very screechy and whiny sounding these days.

I had to laugh even while I felt that piercing of guilt. But what am I supposed to do? Turn them away at the door? Call the church secretary and explain?

Hey Paul, we're going to the zoo tomorrow after church, wanna come? she said, and Paul started doing the monkey hop around the room. How are you doing for money she asked me softly.

Get out of here, I said, you must be out of your mind.

She started getting into her wallet.

Stop it, stop it, please, I said, I'm OK, I'm OK. Are you sure, she said, with a distrustful look in her eyes. These are the kinds of exchanges that just about do me in.

April 15

When I took Paul to school this morning he told me about your little illicit and secret-from-Mommy stops at the donut shop every Friday on the way to school! You know, there's been talk about your heart and clogged arteries and such, and Paul wanted to know if the donuts you got that Friday morning maybe killed you. He even remembers what you ordered. He said you usually got a cinnamon role and a chocolate covered donut, but that Friday you got two apple fritters. Apple fritters! You can see the grease on those things. Two! You Bastard! I felt like I was going to throw up just listening to this, and I hit the steering wheel and said Bastard and Paul started crying. My dear little boy. I pulled over in front of his school and we sat there holding hands.

I think we should get a new car, Paul said. And I could see his point.

Then Paul said he didn't want to miss the opening songs at school, so he better go. And he reminded me so much of you then that I sat there longer after he dashed off. I kept hearing your voice saying: Well, that's what you get for marrying a fat guy, just like you always said. How long will I be mad at you for being too busy and not taking care of yourself? I really think you killed yourself, you know. I really think that. You didn't know how to live so now you don't get to live and you've left me here and Paul, and Ruth, and do you even know that? Do you miss it? Can you see us? Did you have even a moment where you knew you were leaving, even a second of regret or sorrow about this?

Did you see us at the Bison Refuge, that day? I stayed in the car nursing Ruth, who googled and smiled, and grabbed and stroked my hair for a while, and then mercifully fell asleep. I carefully put her down and then opened the car door. Do you remember the smell of the chalky road and how it rises to meet you like an old friend, the

crunchy sound of the limestone gravel road?

Let me tell you, the wind had shifted that day while The Glades drove us, and it came lightly from the south, caressing the tall prairie grasses; the big bluestem, the switchgrass, indian grass and little bluestem. It was as beautiful a day as I've seen out there.

Hell, David, I don't know why it was such a favorite of yours to go to this place, half the time you don't even see the Bison, they're somewhere tucked away. In fact, the first few times I came here as I kid, I didn't see any Bison, and I didn't believe that Bison were a real, living animal. I classed them with Dinosaurs, ancient and big and gone.

And then Paul gesticulated, silent but wildly, from the top of the observation tower, and I knew the bison must be visible to the group of huddling people up there, Nev holding Hope in his arms, Chantal with her hand resting lightly on Paul's shoulder.

The only sound was the pong of my footfalls on the metal steps to the top of the tower, and then there they were, closer than ever, under a small copse of willows, the group of huddling animals, about seven of them, the deep brown of their coats the only thing on them that moved, the wind ruffling their mane-like collars over their eyes. So real and so old seeming. They stood in an uneven circle, facing each other, as if conferring. One of them stomped a few times.

I leaned down next to Paul. It's so cold, I said, are you all right? Do you want my scarf?

I'm not cold, he whispered. His breath coming out in white puffs and fogging my glasses.

I said to The Glades: If you want to get back in the cars, believe me, I'll

understand.

That's okay, said Nev, we're tough. The air is good, even if it's cold. Not every day you get to see bison.

We stood there for a while, and the sun was just getting ready to set, the light had that golden late afternoon quality, and we had a long drive, yet, back to Wichita. There was no talk of getting a motel. The sky reached up unimpeded by clouds or buildings, a great dome above us of every imaginable shade of blue. I turned a slow three-hundred and sixty degrees, taking in the view. The curvature of the earth so pronounced from the observation tower; the world stretching in all directions as round and as gently textured as the face of the coin and I thought: Yes, it would be possible, you could fall off that edge. This view is where I am, I thought, wherever I am is the money I have and always have, and it's all I have. A truck passed in the distance along the limestone gravel road and the dust it kicked up behind it made a vaporous tail, settling slowly behind it.

The Glade's began their descent, ponging down the steps, holding hands once they reached the bottom. Their shadows were long and marked the white earth like a jagged "W" and I decided to read that as standing for "with."

And I stood there and wondered why, exactly, you loved the Bison Refuge so much. What was it about the Bison that were so special to you? I had this immense need to talk to you about it. I willed the thought out into the universe: David, why do you love Bison? And I waited for an answer. And I stood there, looking at the Bison, trying to discern some meaning. And you didn't answer me, and the grief was bigger than my body, and I felt small standing next to it. Time passed and Paul leaned against me.

They really seem to be from a different time, I said out loud.

Do they have a barn? Paul asked.

No, no, I don't think they need a barn. They've never needed a barn, I answered, and they've been alive for a long, long time.

Do you think they are sad to be out in the cold? Paul asked.

No, I said. I think it's just how things are for them, and they don't imagine it any way different. Maybe they like the cold.

One of them sat down on its haunches, lowering itself carefully, folding up leg by leg. And that seemed to set off a kind of slow chain reaction, because a minute later another one came down. And a few minutes later, a few more.

I guess they're going to sleep now, Paul said, I guess it's time to go.

Goodnight Buffalo, I said.

Sweet dreams, said Paul. And we started down the staircase.

April 16

David, dear and lost,

Dad delivered his yearly trailer full of manure today, and we pitched it onto the strawberry and tomato beds, as usual. He mentioned that next month would be another christening, and it would be a good time to include Ruth, and there was a long pause while we panted, Dad with a pitchfork and me with a shovel.

Oh, Dad. I don't know. Not yet. I said.

And I started in again with the shit, and so did he, and it occurred to me that in addition to all the other things I appreciate about cow manure, there is a very particular rhythm and weight to the pitching and shoveling of it. The substance itself demands a

sort of choreography from my father and I where we move around each other, and how we've learned how to do this over the years, and we're very good at it now. I felt proud of both of us.

Then he started in on how the music would be especially good at this christening: a string quartet playing Vivaldi, Mozart and some spirituals, and then how community support is important and how he feared I might be isolating myself.

Oh come on, Dad, I'm getting out. I said.

Really, now, how's that?

Well, I applied for a job yesterday, bet you didn't know that.

No. Do tell.

I told him how I drove down to the big Macy's and went to the Women's Clothing section and found the clearance rack, and tried on slacks and blouses until something looked and felt as I imagined I should for a job interview. Then I bought them and walked right back into the changing room and changed, and then went straight up to Human Resources on the eighth floor.

And Dad and I laughed about it and he said he was glad I was getting out. Then he asked me directly when I thought we might be coming back to church.

Again we stopped pitching and shoveling and leaned against our tools, and the shit was pungent and it gave off a faint steam around our boots. Dad was sweating hard and wiping his eyes out, and his entire face was red.

I'm not feeling right about church, I said, I might not be coming back. I said it just like that.

Dad was quiet.

I'm not sure I believe in God, Dad. The way we say we do in church. It feels wrong to say those things. I don't believe in God.

Oh, you believe in God.

No, I don't.

Sure you do.

Oh, Dad.

You're getting caught in semantics, Marie.

Mom came quietly across the yard to us from the back porch and I could tell from her eyes that she'd been listening.

I'm sorry, I said, I've never wanted to cause you pain. And then I told them how on the morning of my baptism, at the age of fifteen, I had woken up, and how I had laid in bed. How I'd been looking forward to that day. It was even more special because I was to be baptized in the river, with my father baptizing me. I always found the baptisms in the river to be inspirational. Anyway, I was lying there in bed, and I realized for the first time that I wasn't really sure that I believed in God. Part of the baptism service was to get up in front of everyone and give a statement of your faith, something you had written, and then there were several direct questions to answer, such as "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God?" And I was about to get up in front of the whole group and just lie my way through the whole ceremony. I gave thought to the idea that this was simply a test of my faith. But it still seemed wrong to lie about it. After all, in the Mennonite church, fully considered and conscious adult baptism is one of the main points. Then I thought about backing out of getting baptized, putting it off for another year. But my name was in the program, and I'd have a lot of explaining to do, and I

didn't want to go through that. And would my father be ashamed of me? I consoled myself with the idea that if I went through with it, if I performed it, I would feel different once I got on the other side of it. If I performed it as an act of faith, that faith would be restored. So that's what I did. I performed my baptism. I read my statement of faith with passion and conviction. I pronounced "I do," at the appropriate times, with a firm and confident voice. And then my father dipped me in the river, I laid back in his arms in the warm muddy water, and it was just that, a dip in the water. Un-holy. Sacrilege.

You're such good parents to me, I said, and this is so hard for me to tell you, I've kept it in for twenty years. But I've never really believed in God. And I can't pretend any longer.

You know Mom has always been a quiet one, "the quiet in the land," a real old-fashioned Mennonite woman. Really, she is one of the last, after so many generations of women who really knew how to maintain silence, and stuck with it.

Dad said, I think this is a very hard time you're going through. You may not feel the same way in a few months. Mom said, Maybe she will and maybe she won't. Then she turned to me and said very gently, it's all right, Marie, if you don't go to church. You do what you feel is right. You're a good person. And there was a bit of a silence, and I tossed my shovel down and sat down on the railroad tie that borders the strawberries.

She slowly lowered herself next to me and settled in, then said: Frankly, I sure never thought you were going to stick around this long.

And she gave a small sort of snort-laugh and reached out and grabbed my shoulder and she squeezed it hard, and didn't let go.

And I dropped my hot head into my dirty hands, and I wept.

The Book Thief

1.

When we argue late at night, Daniel cleans the kitchen, except he doesn't really clean. He complains about the lowly state of our family household: how meals are improvised, the place a mess and bedtimes are anytime; how he is trapped in his ludicrous job installing signs; how I can never be counted on to do what I say, such as saying things like "I'm going to bed now," and then I don't actually go to bed; how I'm chronically late getting home from my office job; how I'm not doing what I should to further my non-existent career as a playwright ("When is the last time you sent something out?"); and furthermore I'm not doing anything at all to advance our real estate prospects because god knows if we wait much longer we won't be able to afford anything the way housing is going in this neighborhood and we'll be stuck in this tiny cottage until we rot in it. As

he complains about these things he reverts to what must be a bachelor habit of wiping instead of washing the dishes.

He wipes them with a dirty rag that used to be a washcloth and is as thin in places now as the kind of mesh used to bandage a wound. He is so methodical that he even seems to be polishing at times, repetitive and precise with the knives, careful with the glass ramekins. He wipes down the refrigerator and scrubs the stovetop with the same rag. I have even seen him take the stepstool from its corner and loosen the screws of the lighting fixture and wipe out the glass globe that surrounds the lightbulb, with this same rag, and then replace the fixture screw by screw above our heads, as he reminds me that soon I'll be even more sluggish than I am now as I will only be getting more pregnant, and just look at the chaos our household has descended into: the laundry and dirty dishes an all-too-obvious metaphor for the mess of our very lives, aw, for fuck's sake, it's all a spinning and bottomless vortex, he says, and nothing is enjoyable anymore, not a single social exchange remains pleasant, even watching a William Steig video with our charming five-year-old son seems like work, not leisure, and what quantities of shit he swallows at his inane workplace day after day, where the signs are sometimes made with incorrect punctuation and amazingly no one seems to notice or care and they just get angry with him for bringing it up, or the sign will say something like: "Holy Church of the Redeemer: Creating Dynamic Disciples Through Discipline and Discipleship," and he is somehow complicit in this mediocrity, how he has the sense that he as a human being is made redundant in proxy by merely installing the damn thing, how embarrassed he is to even be standing there in the bucket truck in plain view of the public, the obvious perpetrator of this idiotic sign, and how sick he is of hearing his employer reprimand him

for one petty mishap or another that wasn't even his fault, at least not most of the time.

I have usually sat and listened, taking mental notes about which dishes and knives need to be taken out of the cupboard and re-washed at some point when he is not around, but on the Friday night of my 20th week of pregnancy I started to cry and to interject hostile admonishments such as “So why don't you do something about it” or “Will you stop it with this negative crap?” and then finally I said to him “Are you even using soap?” And he flung the dirty rag into the sink and told me to “Criticize someone else!” and he marched down to his workshop in the basement at which point I began the re-washing process, furtively, still crying and occasionally hiccoughing as I did so, and then he came back upstairs and I didn't even look at him, and then I retreated to the bathroom where I could cry and hiccough more freely while sitting on the toilet, constipated as usual, and then, while I was brushing my teeth, which I notice I've become quite compulsive about, he came in looking very old and depressed, his face sagging and his eyes tormented, and I said “Are we going to be all right?” and he said “I don't know.” And that's pretty much where we left it.

2.

In the years when I was a thief I wore more dresses than I do now. My hair was often bleached blond and I especially liked to tramp around in mini-skirts and a pair of combat boots that were one size too big for me, given by a friend. I imagined myself a sort of fierce pixie, and an up-and-coming performance artist.

My name, Penelope Weaver, was shortened to “Lo-Weave” by Sidney Eisenstein, my dear friend and fellow performer-cum-housemate. As the moniker caught on, I found

I didn't mind, and even began listing myself as such on the programs and flyers which littered the city of San Francisco. In a flash of marijuana-induced epiphany I changed the spelling to "Low Eve" and I presented myself as a point of subterranean feminist genesis. When I wasn't performing, or working at Manuscript New and Used Books, I could be found at the Beano Café or Muddy Waters, expounding upon subverted femininity, or how to be a subversive girl.

"Damn Girl, that looks uncomfortable, are you sure?" Sidney had grown up in the deep south and had a sing-song drawl.

"Tighter." Sid and I were backstage at HeadSpace, and he was helping me shrink-wrap myself, mummy style, affixing several pairs of 3- to 4-inch high heeled shoes to various parts of my otherwise naked body: a shoe over my crotch, with the heel protruding like a penis, a shoe cupping each breast with the heels acting as violently long and pointed nipples, a white patent leather shoe heel rising like a unicorn's horn from my forehead. Shoes for hands and finally, the tallest and most uncomfortable pair of shoes on my feet. The costume was harder to get on than I had anticipated and I was getting nervous about making my entrance. Sid's hands were finicky and gentle, too fussy, too careful.

"Finish up, I'm next, I'm next," I whispered as the Butoh dancers slank past us to scattered applause. Luneige was out there introducing me. "Oh Christ! Finish it, Sid!"

"Take it easy doll, you've got that minute of sound at the start."

"I need that time to breathe."

"Yeah, no shit. Maybe you should start breathing now."

"Fuck you, Sid." I swatted him on the ass.

“Ooo, spank me again. Is this thing secure?”

“It’s fine, thanks. Now get away from me.”

“Knock ‘em dead, Low.”

“Yep.”

I reached out and squeezed his hand in thanks as we parted, he nodded and then saluted me as the room fell to complete darkness and my soundtrack faded up: the clicking of heels, the sharpening and chopping of knives, the whistle of a kettle boiling. I took three slow deep breaths. Grounded myself and visualized the performance space as a safe space in which I would not get injured. I trilled my tongue, shook my whole body, then brought my hands over my heart, incanted quietly: “Give up the body. Give up the body. Give up the body.” I backed up ten paces and fell headlong into performance, hitting the stage running and dancing as hard and as violently as I could. The honky-tonk piano came in, layered with the knives and heels and whistles, and I punched and kicked the air, fell down, slid and bruised my knee in the process, took a deep breath and started to belt out the opening notes of “Happy to Keep His Dinner Warm,” a song I had revived from an old college song and dance revue.

Looking back, it seems to me to have been a very elaborate way to go about getting laid. There was never a shortage of attention from men or from the city’s alternative weekly papers. Press clippings the following Tuesday would describe me as “a public embarrassment” or “an electric creature whose singing and dancing are spectacular,” depending upon which weekly you preferred.

Sidney didn’t have such great luck as a performer. In truth, even I found his performances, though endearing on a personal level, to be something of an

embarrassment on an aesthetic level. Like me, he ranted, but his rants were less entertaining. He never wore anything resembling a costume, just his regular clothes, and although he sometimes danced, he never used any soundtrack or music, and he wasn't much to watch as a dancer. His torso was slightly pear shaped, and when moving quickly, jumping or leaping, his body seemed clunky and his legs too heavy, never quite reaching full extension. His slower, graceful movements lacked intensity. He also had the annoying habit of continually brushing his long wispy hair back from his eyes, even while performing. Worst of all, he was one of those improvisatory artists who never rehearses. This lent his performances a shapeless quality – you never knew if you were watching the beginning, middle, or end, and there were times when I sensed Sid onstage trying desperately to finish something he wished he hadn't started. His overall lack of preparedness seemed to me to be a betrayal of the audience's trust, but it made sense, because Sidney's relationship with the audience always bore a hint of the adversarial:

“That'll show 'em,” he panted, coming off stage. The show was over and the audience was filing out past us on the other side of a very thin curtain. “White-collar scum. Low, did you see that couple in the second row, where they hell did they come from?”

“Apparently they don't know how to dress to go slumming. Maybe it's their maiden voyage.”

“Scared the crap out of her. Did you watch it?” He knelt to re-tie his shoes.

“Yeah, it went great.”

“Not too long, right?” It had been entirely too long.

“Hell no, make 'em listen for once.”

“Exactly.”

Luneige popped her head in, “Y’all goin’ out for burritos?”

“If Sid ever finishes with his shoes.” I was ready to go.

“I’m giving you ten minutes to get out of here, Sid.” Luneige was Sid’s old college friend who used to be a man. She was also a cø worker of ours, and she lived at HeadSpace, although I was never entirely sure where she slept. Nothing resembling a bed was visible.

Sid habitually wore hiking boots, for which he bought the extra long laces and tied them in double knots. His shoe-tying was not limited to times when the laces came undone. And in fact, I’m not sure they ever actually came undone. Instead, the concern seemed to be a desire to make the laces tighter, firmer, more secure. He had now untied the existing knots of one shoe, loosened the laces through their eyeholes, then pulled them tight and retied them. He unfolded his body and stretched.

“Ah, nothing like a good rant to make a man feel pure of heart again.”

“Luneige is waiting and I’m hungry, let’s go.”

“The impatience of youth.”

“Shut up.”

“OK, sweetheart, no one’s running out of burritos out there.” Sid knelt to the other shoe. “This is the United States of America, you’re white and college-educated, you won’t starve.”

I dropped my bag and sank to the folding chair behind me.

“Luneige, do you have a damn banana out there?” I yelled.

“Yeah, she’s wasting away, she might not make it to El Farolito if I tie my left

shoelace.”

“Sid, I have low blood sugar and I’m really hungry.”

“The medical industry has her convinced she’s hypoglycemic. Consume!
Consume! Wait! You might need a special pill for that. Got any special pills out there,
Luneige?”

“Oh, forget it.”

“Darlin, I’ve got some lentil soup, but it’s cold. Come on.” Luneige extended a
hand to me and dragged me to the kitchen.

“Him and his fucking shoes, you know?”

“Oh yes, I know. Here. Sit on my lap.”

Luneige was still wearing her make-up and radical fairy outfit, and her tu-tu was
scratchy against my lower back. I curled up on her lap. She handed me a small recycled
yogurt container and a spoon. The soup was good and earthy.

“What is this, kombu?”

“I don’t know, honey, Tash made it. Your knee OK?”

“It’s fine.”

“Ice?”

“I iced it during Sid’s thing.”

“Arnica?”

“You’re an angel.”

“No, baby, I’m a fairy.” She picked me up and carried me to the bathroom.

“I wish you liked girls.”

“Sweetheart, I like girls just fine, but I can’t live without cock.”

“I know what you mean.”

Sid reappeared and we finished gelling my knee and the three of us skipped out into the night which was crisp and young at ten o'clock. Anything could happen. Before the year was out, Luneige would go back to using heroin and disappear from our lives, taking our T.V. with her. But what did that matter? The T.V. had been an unwanted gift from Sid's parents. And T.V. was evil, anyway.

3.

The first time I saw Lynne she was gardening in her front yard, across the street from me. She was wearing some kind of sports bra and a big billowy pair of nylon shorts, and old cruddy sneakers without socks. She was on her knees, vigorously attacking the root system of a shrub I didn't recognize. Her mass of curly red hair was tied back in a messy ponytail and she was sweating and turning red. I immediately liked her and was glad she had moved in. I live now in the suburbs of Washington D.C. and anyone who moves into the neighborhood that isn't involved with the military or the government is a definite plus. Something about this woman said “Not A Fed” loud and clear. Still, she immediately apologized for her appearance when I walked across the street to introduce myself.

“I'm Penny Brody. I live in the yellow bungalow there.” I said.

“Lynne Schumacher. Pardon my appearance.” She rose to Amazonian height and removed her gloves.

I felt a slow, wide smile spread across my face as we looked at each other. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to tell her I liked her looks just fine. I said it anyway.

“You look great to me.”

We stood there making small talk for a few minutes and then she asked if I could let her dog out when she left for the day on Friday. She wasn't coming home from work, would be returning late after a Nina Simone concert and didn't want him to get desperate. She stuffed her gloves into the waistband of her shorts and got me a set of keys.

“While you're at it, would you mind checking in on my new kittens? I have two.”

A story followed about how the kittens had come to be in her hands.

“Sure.”

“I have four cats altogether, but the big ones can fend for themselves. I'll leave a second dose of food for the little ones, up in their room. You'd just have to tear open the packet.”

I didn't ask if she shared the house with any human occupants, it seemed a rude question. I figured such information would be self-evident, in any case. Over the next few days I saw only Lynne come and go, usually on bicycle, away early in the mornings and home rather late at night. Her bike was an old 3-speed Raleigh, women's frame, and she usually wore a skirt and jacket, and some kind of fashionable scarf. Her briefcase was a leather shoulder bag. She looked very sophisticated and energetic, pedalling away every morning with her hair in combustion behind her.

“Who's the redhead?” Daniel asked me, catching sight of her one day on his way back from putting Charlie on the school bus.

“Across the street. Lynne. Remember? I told you. The kittens, this Friday.”

“Wow,” he hefted his toolbox onto the back of the bucket truck in an easy swinging motion, all efficiency and grace.

“Do you want anything from the store?”

“Beer.” He slid into the cab, slammed the door and tapped a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard, struck the match upon the matchbox using only one hand with a deftness akin to magic. Leaned over and rolled down the window. “And cigarettes.”

4.

First there is the fact that I adored Sidney, and that for some time we were the type of friends who were always seen together. Anyone who didn't know us well would have assumed us to be a couple, and even now I'm unsure why we never landed in bed together. I suspect it may have been his hair; long and wispy and altogether the wrong hairstyle for his bold features. Perhaps I was young enough to be swayed by appearances.

Second, there is the fact that I owe Sid a lot. He provided me with housing and employment when I desperately needed both. Although we had become friends years before at the Theater Artaud 24-hour Performance Marathon, we always met in cafes, performance venues, or at my house, never at his. I was on the point of eviction when he showed me his third story apartment at 20th and Guerrero. It was clear upon entrance why he didn't entertain. There was simply no space save the small bedroom I was being offered. His collection of books far superceded his bookshelf space and stacks of books dotted the floor of the living room, his bedroom, and the hallway. Each stack was ten or fifteen books high. Pathways led through the stacks, from doorway to doorway, and of course, to the bookshelves. A pathway to his bed, a pathway to the single living room easy chair.

Finally we came to the kitchen. Even the kitchen table had several stacks of

books on it, and he hurriedly carried them to his room and laid them carefully on his bed, clearing a place for me to sit down and have a cup of coffee.

“God, Sid, this is incredible, I had no idea you had such a collection.”

“I know, it’s out of control. I’ll clear it up before you move in.” He reached up and pulled a heavy cord from the hallway ceiling and a ladder creaked down, revealing an unfinished space above us. “According to the landlord, we’re not supposed to go up there, but I’m planning a library in the attic.”

At this point in my life I had two sacred boxes of books which I had carried with me from college and then from one temporary domicile to the next. This apartment seemed like a new world opening up to me, Shangri-la.

“I don’t mind the books, as long as I can read them.” I was understating the case. My heart was beating furiously and I was consciously trying to breathe steadily so as not to scare him away with my enthusiasm.

“Well, I don’t mind you reading them, as long as you don’t get food on them and don’t crack their spines.”

“Where on earth did you get them all?” It was a hypothetical question.

“Manuscript New and Used Books.”

“Oh?”

“As day jobs go it has it’s points.” He had been there as long as I’d known him and was practically management.

“I’ve always dreamed of working at a bookstore like that.”

“Really? You should come on down. They’re always hiring.”

I was in, and he would wait until I got my first paycheck to cover the rent.

5.

Friday arrived and I found myself on Lynne's back porch, fitting the key she had given me to the lock. A note on the back door informed me that the kittens were on the third floor, in the first room on the right, and would I please "rig" the door again upon leaving, as she didn't want them all over the house.

I don't know why I felt so nervous walking through the house. I hadn't stolen anything in years, that was all way behind me, but there was some sense of *déjà vu*, as if I was on the verge of finally being caught. The stairway was steep and polished, and creaky. A doorway on the second floor landing opened to a disheveled looking bathroom; the bath mat folded in upon itself next to an upside down slipper. I heard a soft mewling as I came to the third floor. The door was indeed rigged. An eight foot long piece of string stretched between the doorknob to an old fashioned iron, which sat five steps down on the stairs. I picked up the iron. It felt too much like a weapon.

A tiny gray kitten greeted me within the door of the bedroom, which was light filled and contained a pale green foldaway bed and two matching dressers. The wood floor was covered with a fashionable cotton rug and there were several toss pillows and cat toys littering it. The water and food were next to the radiator. I knelt down and tore open the foil packet of kitten food and squeezed the reddish brown mush into the plate. I wondered where the second kitten might be, as the first dived enthusiastically into the food. And then I heard a soft thudding noise, emanating from the large dresser. I stood and walked over to it. Yes, there was a soft mew. The kitten was inside.

The dresser was lime green and of a new design, or perhaps newly retro. It had

three rows of three drawers, like a tic-tac-toe board, each about a foot square. The thudding stopped. I wondered which drawer to open first and my nervousness mounted at the prospect of opening so many drawers. I finally opened the top middle one, thinking it a good candidate for having a kitten inside it, for no reason I can name. But the drawer was filled with scarves, mostly blue, gold, and green. A black and white scarf stood out, unblending with the color scale, and I noticed its design of human skeletons with the names of bones scrawled around the sides as a border. The words: clavicle, sacrum, radius.

Next I pulled out the middle drawer one row down, directly below the first I had opened. This was an odd assortment of things, small wheels such as belong on the legs of some furniture, coasters, old keys, foreign coins. Also some postcards, the one on top showing a Remedios Varo painting, the one of the floating city, all golds and reds. I knelt, then, and pulled open the bottom drawer in the middle. And here I stopped.

There he was, on the top of a pile of framed photographs: Sidney Eisenstein. The frame was an old, cheap metal one, and the photo itself pre-dated my years with Sid. It seemed a high-school graduation photo. His eyes earnest and open, his mouth innocent, skin not yet the skin of a fully matured male. His shoulders were slight, and his hair was shorter than it was in the time I knew him, all of one length at chin level, but for all this he was immediately recognizable.

I picked up the frame and lost I don't know how many minutes just staring at the photo. Not knowing what to think. What did Sidney Eisenstein have to do with Lynne Schumacher? And what did this mean for my life?

I imagined scenarios where Sidney was staying at the house across the street for a

short period of time and I managed to hide for the duration of his visit. That wouldn't be so hard. There were always hats and sunglasses. The name Penny Brody, if it came up in conversation, would not be linked to Low Eve. I attempted a mental catalog of possible connections: They're fucking, or used to fuck and he never got his photo back. But am I jumping to conclusions? Eisenstein and Schumacher. Relatives? Does anyone keep framed photos of cousins? Brother and sister? Very close friends? No, this is ridiculous. They're fucking and it's serious.

The mewling recommenced. I pulled open the bottom drawer to my right, and a second gray kitten popped out. I hardly gave it a look. I went through the rest of the stack of photos in that drawer but found no more of Sidney. Putting them back, I closed the drawer and sat there thinking, OK, how am I going to figure this out? I re-rigged the kitten proof door as I left the room, and then commenced to drift through the house, not knowing what I was looking for. Letters? Phone bills? More photos? Photo albums? Where do people's relationships show themselves in their homes? My search was complicated by the fact that Lynne's house wasn't quite fully set up. There were unopened boxes. I opened file drawers in her office, and found files alphabetized "Eisenstein" and "Sidney" not among them.

I didn't have the nerve to turn on her computer, although I pined to see her e-mails. Finally I found myself in the kitchen, looking at the peg board next to the wall-mounted phone. And there it was: Sid at Work: and a 212 phone number. Yes. After he lost his job at Manuscript, Sid had kind of fallen apart and then moved to New York. Only five hours away. I felt my breathing quicken and I sank to a chair, calmed myself down from panic to dread. A yellow cat streaked by on it's way somewhere else.

Sidney, I thought, with something like longing, if I could fall to my knees and hug your legs. Admit my transgression, explain my stupidity, beg your forgiveness. If we could be friends again, here in these suburbs with yards and trees. I should be happy, I thought. I should be glad to see him again.

6.

It was Sid who taught me how to steal. Or maybe I already knew. It was my first day on the job at Manuscript and I was discovering the extent of my addiction. How I couldn't bear to shelve a single book without at least cracking it open and reading one page. How intensely aware I was of their smells - moldy or new. How the turning of a page seemed not just action but ritual.

The feel of a book in your hands. It's solidity and weight. The way the cover of a new paperback sometimes has a dusty texture which you can feel on the palms of your hands long after putting the book down, or is immodestly slick and takes the fingerprints of every holder. Open it: the inky smell of print, chemical intoxicant, vehicle of thought, mixing with the smell of recently pulped trees; the book itself retaining heat and wetness, a thing both dead and alive, mysterious and available.

I stood at the top of the stairs, immobilized, with a new hardcover copy of Eileen MacDonald's *Shoot the Women First* held in my hands, unable to quit reading and put it where it belonged. The store was in one of those strange lulls, almost empty of human presence. The manager who was training me was taking a long lunch, and I hadn't been disturbed for what seemed like half an hour when Sid came bounding up the stairs. He stopped at the top next to me, and I raised my eyes guiltily, caught in a flagrant display

employee time-theft.

“I’m researching female terrorists for my next performance piece,” I excused myself, “this is just too fascinating to put down.”

“Why don’t you take it home.”

“It’s twenty dollars.”

“Give it to me.” I handed it over reluctantly. He strode to the nearest cash register, slammed the book down on top of the de-magnetizer then handed it back to me. “Go to the bathroom and put it in your bag.”

“But won’t inventory-”

He shrugged. “Inventory never matches up around here, it’s just something we do for tax purposes. It’s all a big write off for him. The only inventory he really cares about is the Rare Books cabinet in front.”

I looked down at the book in my hands in a new way. “Are you sure?”

“Just leave Rare Books alone. He looks at that every morning.”

“Well, I’d never take something for the monetary value, anyway.”

“Exactly.”

It all seemed very easily justifiable. Manuscript’s owner, appropriately named “Rich,” had a policy that employees were not allowed to buy books within the first two weeks of the book’s arrival to the store. I believe the policy had something to do with a fear that his considerable workforce of fifteen or so employees might strip the store of all its most attractive, new and exciting books, carrying them home at the twenty percent employee discount. I suppose it was just part of a cagey business plan, but it seemed unfair. We were an intelligent workforce, and Rich seemed so coarse, merely interested

in the books for their cash value. He was a kind of villain to Sidney and me. He was so extraordinarily wealthy, and we were all so shabby and poor.

Rich owned a vineyard up North and was known to pollute the creek that ran through his property. One afternoon I arrived to the store to find eco-warriors surrounding and picketing the store. I crossed the picket line, cognizant of my hypocrisy but seeing no other choice. I couldn't lose my job, I was regularly stealing about six books a week and already couldn't imagine myself without this material and intellectual enrichment. In fact, his polluting of the natural environment became another reason to scheme against Rich. He seemed deserving of additional punishment.

I pretended to be doing a search for a phone customer and carried a copy of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to the front of the store. I plucked a hardcover copy of *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, by Peter Matthiessen right off the New Arrivals display at the front of the store, and as Rich watched from the register, I tagged the books with the imaginary customer's name, "Mercy," and placed them on the Hold bookshelf at Rich's side, excusing myself as I reached past his body, brushing the back of my arm against his belt loops. "So there!" I thought, "In honor of the picketers." I wasn't sure why I wanted the Matthiessen. It didn't exactly fit into my burgeoning collection of subversive women thinkers.

Next I carefully checked each hoard of books I had stuffed away in nooks and crannies throughout the store. I systematically prioritized which books could wait, and which should be removed tonight, a Monday, the only night every week when Sidney was left alone in a managerial role, to close the store. For me, Mondays were like an additional payday at Manuscript.

That night Sidney, Luneige, Andreas and I closed the store down. We realized upon locking the door that we would all be taking the same bus. One of the homey touches of the store was the plain brown, grocery-style handle bags that were used to bag any book order of more than three books. All of us now stood around the bus awning with matching and heavy brown-bagged loads. It slowly dawned upon me that not one of us was leaving the store with less than four stolen books. This was followed by the revelation that if it was obvious to me, it was obvious to the others as well. Luneige, characteristically hyperbolic, carried two bags.

The night was cool and clean, the air carrying salty ocean and eucalyptus, fragrant and heady enough to drink and get drunk upon. I dared not look at anyone. I was wearing a pair of wrestling shoes; light, tight, and with good traction. I put down my books, inhaled and exhaled deeply and jumped onto a nearby safety railing, crouching first to get my balance, and then slowly standing up.

Luneige said flatly: "You are a lunatic." She had begun to let herself go, and seemed depressed.

Andreas and Sid pretended to ignore me, both of them standing with their hands in their pockets, Sid rocking back and forth on his heels while Andreas stood completely still. And then Andreas slowly raised his face and we gazed at each other.

"You climbed a lot of trees in your girlhood, eh Low?"

I was confident now of my balance and lifted one foot in a loose arabesque. "You climb trees even now, don't you, Andreas?"

"No, no. Now I am too big."

"Never."

Silence fell and a pretense of deep thought permeated the air. We were all careful not to look at each other's bags. Finally the bus came and I hopped down. We lined up to get on, each with an unwieldy load of books clutched in the left arm, so that we could proffer bus fare with the right. I was last in line and I felt like a member of a secret gang, or some kind of undercover operative. The complicity was adrenalizing and I began to laugh.

By the time we sat down halfway back on the empty bus we were all laughing, half-embarrassed, giddy, nervous and proud. But as the laughter died down we again found ourselves unable to speak and the uneasy silence continued.

In the florescent light of the bus the orange seats glowed and our skins took on a yellow-green tint. Sidney groaned and looked out the window. Luneige rubbed her moustache and feigned interest in the on-bus advertising. Andreas and I grinned at each other. We hadn't started fucking yet, but we would and we knew it. The bus ride was quiet, long and peaceful, and when Sidney and I got off, we laughed all the way home.

Settled at the kitchen table, Sidney and I compared our new acquisitions. I had the new RE/Search Manual on *Angry Women*, Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, a book from Lit Crit about Aphra Behn, *Cruelty* by Ai, a Journal of New Performance which featured Diamanda Galas on the cover, and the two books from the Hold shelf, which I already half-regretted.

"How I love my job," I said. It was my biggest take yet.

Sidney had recently been assigned ordering for the Philosophy/Cultural Studies section, and he unpacked *Orientalism* by Edward Said, *Illuminations* by Walter Benjamin, and Frederik Jameson's huge tome *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of*

Late Capitalism. Finally he held in his hands *When the Moon Waxes Red* by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

“I’ve been waiting for this one,” he carefully opened the cover, gazed at the photos on the frontispiece. He looked at my stack. “Hmm. Diamanda. Camille. Good choices. You know, if you’re collecting transgressive women you really should have this one, too.” He placed the book in front of me. I immediately became absorbed. Although I knew nothing of Minh’s work, Sid’s recommendation was enough to make me urgently desire the book.

Sid got up to open one of the bottles of merlot Rich had given each employee as an early Christmas bonus. He poured two glasses, set mine down on the table and clinked it.

“To the company of thieves, and honor among them.”

“Hmm.” I didn’t look up from the book.

“You know, in some cultures it’s considered rude if you don’t maintain eye contact when toasting.”

“Hmm.”

He sipped his wine.

“Damn girl, I’ll order you one, okay? Give that back to me. Read your own damn books.”

Later in my room I read a few pages of each book and then spent just as much time figuring out which stack they rightfully belonged in. I imagined the books patiently waiting there, in their stacks, for a day when I no longer stole books, but somehow had more time to read them. My room already matched the rest of the house, with a pathway

through stacks of books from doorway to bed, and talk of moving the books to the attic had been abandoned. They were too fine a thing to have tucked away, out of sight. We wanted them near and visible.

7.

My husband dug a pond in our back yard last spring and as the winter approaches Charlie begins to wonder how the little feeder goldfish we stocked it with will survive. We started with eighteen and he is counting six now.

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I don’t know what will happen to the fish in winter.”

“But they’ll *freeze!*”

“Well, they must do something. You know, fish survive in much colder places than this. They can’t just all die.”

“They can’t?”

“No.”

“But mommy, the water will *freeze!*”

“Yes.”

“It will freeze *solid!*”

“Hmm.”

The black stray sits beside the pond, calmly swishing his tail, occasionally dipping his paw in, although I’ve never seen him actually catch a fish. I have seen him with a frog, impaled and squirming on his fangs, as he trotted back into the bushy no man’s land which borders our property on the west side.

“And the black panther will *eat* them.”

“Well he’s a cat. He has to eat something to survive.”

Charlie flails his arms in frustration. “Then why did we even *get* them? If we’re just going to let them die? Why did you even *get* them!”

I have no satisfactory answer for this question so I remain silent.

“Mommy! You’re not even *listening* to me!”

“Yes, I am, honey, I just have to think about it. Let’s go inside and get some lunch, OK?”

“You’re just trying to *distract* me!”

“Sweetheart.”

“Why would you *get* the fish just to *kill* them? How could you *do* that to them? I thought you *loved* them!”

“I just don’t know, and I’m hungry, OK? Aren’t you hungry?” I’m not hungry, and maybe I do know. Maybe we got them because they look so beautiful. Because they make me feel peaceful and wealthy, even though they cost a dollar a dozen. They’ve grown to four or five inches now, and practically look like Koi.

Charlie is starting to cry now. “How will they *survive*?”

“Honey, honey. Come here.” He shows no signs of coming. “They’ll survive. They’ll make it through. At least some will, I bet.”

“And some will *die*?”

“Oh baby, I don’t know, really. Look, I’m sorry, OK? Let’s go in for lunch.” I don’t know what I’m apologizing for or what’s for lunch.

“I’m not a *baby*!”

“I’m sorry sweetheart.”

“Why are you so *stupid*?”

“Shh, shh, no, honey, mommy’s not stupid. I’m very smart. I’m just tired right now, OK?” I am stupid and a liar.

“But--” he stammers and flails his arms twice more, then stomps up the hill, clutching his head in exasperation. I do a sort of controlled fall to the makeshift bench; it’s getting harder to sit down these days. The water reflects the autumn light, the leaves are falling into the pond. The fish are still darting around in seeming oblivion to the presence of the cat and the approach of winter.

8.

Andreas Papadopoulos was a poet, and he bears the perhaps dubious distinction of being the largest man I have ever fucked. There were times when I feared I might be smothered in his exuberance. He was disposed to bursts of ecstasy even outside of the realms of sexual intercourse, and there was something charming and new, for me, in seeing such a large body dancing around the intersection of 18th and Mission because of the immense amount of produce we’d been able to buy at the produce stand, or giving a poetry reading at Adobe books and breaking a sweat, hands shaking with joy and revelation, unembarrassed before the small crowd. I was absolutely crazy about him for about three months.

He had a fiancée, elsewhere, far away in Seattle. But I never imagined myself an other woman somehow. I was so obviously the center of his life from the time we spent a night together until the time we drifted apart. The first night we spent on his futon was followed by a day of both of us calling in sick to Manuscript in order to continue the first

throes of the liaison, followed by a second day of calling in sick, totalling 48 hours straight of the two of us falling upon each other in fits of copulation, stopping occasionally only to feed ourselves.

I was complaining about how we had to go back to work, and Rich's being such a rich fuck when Andreas removed my nipple from his mouth in order to interrupt me.

"Oh come on, he's small fry. If you really want to make your Marxist critique fly, you're going to have to start ripping off the big boys."

"Believe me, I'd love to, if only I had the guts or the chance.

"Doesn't take guts. You make the chance."

"What are you talking about?"

He was talking about the airlines, the banks, the big corporations. Picking on an independent book seller was simply not as justified as choosing your adversary more carefully.

"You only hate him because you work for him. The damage he causes society is comparatively small. If you want to steal from the real assholes you should at least consider Crown Books or one of those shitholes."

"But they don't have the good books."

"True. It's true." He sighed. "That's why we have to steal from poor Rich. The man is a victim of his own good taste. But really, Low, if you're going to do the whole noble thief thing, you have to pick a better target. Just admit you're stealing the books because you like them, OK? I'll understand, I'm a Greek poet, for godsakes."

The bookshelf next to his bed, a solid square of sixteen milk crates, included a sort of Manuscript poetry section in miniature, featuring the best in poetry the store had

to offer. Thom Gunn's new book, *The Man With Night Sweats* lay open on the floor, untouched for the last day and a half, but still retaining a potent sense of intellectual optimism and potential. It wasn't just the content of the book, but its very availability, its casual openness, its material presentation: the pages and cover remarkable in their aesthetic cohesion. The constant presence in my life of these beautiful, expensive and stolen books seemed better than an insurance policy, they assured me that my life would not be wasted. They made up for the workday humiliations in the most deliberate and relevant way. Rich's new insistence that we log the exact number of how many used paperbacks we shelved per hour was immediately vindicated by my taking home a gently used, paperback copy of something by Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, or Joan Didion. The self-abasement required in cleaning up after a customer's dog who had urinated in the food section made up for by the *Green's Cookbook*. Whoever had to deal with the insufferable Belle was legitimately entitled to as many books as they had strength left to carry, as far as I could tell. I was generally successful in avoiding her, but on her last visit to Manuscript she snuck up on me in the New Arrivals section while I was in a manual labor stupor, stickering a new shipment of 20% off books. She gave a fake cough to get my attention.

I ignored her.

"Excuse me, it's awfully dusty in here, you know," she accused.

I looked at her and nodded. I knew her tricks. I wasn't getting sucked in.

I looked back at the stack of books I was working on.

"Excuse me, but don't you have that book that everyone's talking about? It's a best seller."

“Title?”

“You know the one I mean. It has a white cover with lots of little stuff,” here she squiggled her fingers as if to give me a visual clue.

“Author?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. Big black letters. Block lettering. Little stuff.” Again with the squiggly fingers.

“Umm. *The Way Things Work?*”

“No, not that!” she snapped. I couldn’t believe I’d let her suck me in.

“Fiction or non-fiction?”

“Give me a break, you know which one I mean.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. What’s it about?”

She gave an exasperated sigh and wheeled away from me, her large white shoulder bag knocking down a display book on the remainder table, “If this place weren’t so damn disorganized, I’m sure you could find it.” Her voice was rising.

“Ma’am-”

She held up hand and shook it, not bothering to turn and address me, screeching as she approached the staircase: “Don’t you Ma’am me, I’ll find it myself. You obviously don’t know your ass from the overpass.”

She proceeded upstairs to reference and then to social studies, emptying each room of other customers as she went, muttering obscenities and accosting the staff, until she finally settled in an alcove of the history room, where even the staff abandoned her as rumors circulated among us that she was “off her meds.” An hour later she was stomping back down the stairs, cursing under her breath and approaching the register.

“Excuse me, I have a question.” She whined from four deep in line.

“I have three customers in front of you, Belle, you’ll have to wait your turn.” Sid didn’t even look up from the books he was handling while he responded to her.

“I have a question about a book! Is this a bookstore? Aren’t you people supposed to answer questions about your merchandise?”

I was still at the remainder table, and I knelt to the floor to hide behind it, just in case Sid would think of referring her to me.

“Sorry, Belle, you’ll have to wait your turn like everyone else.”

“Oh, screw you all.” She was stepping out of line and heading for the door. “This place is so overrated. Run by a bunch of slackers! Incompetent, lazy-” She got this far before setting off the alarm as she passed it, and Sid immediately stepped out from behind the register to block her exit from the store. Rich looked up from the Rare Books lock up cabinet, where he had been taking his daily inventory.

“You think you might have a book in there you forgot to put back?” Sid asked quietly, looking at Belle, level and serious.

“What?”

“You mind if we take a look in your bag?”

“Yes I mind, I mind a lot! Who do you people think you are?”

“Well, the alarm went off, and it’s standard procedure to ask to take a look in people’s bags when the alarm goes off. Why do you think the alarm went off?”

“I don’t know why your dumb alarm went off! It probably malfunctioned.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Let me out of here!”

She pushed on Sidney then, just a little push. A few employees had drifted up from the back of the store, and there was an eruption of speech upon her touch:

“Whoa.”

“Hold on, there.”

“Let’s not get physical.”

Rich moved to his desk behind the register, and laid his hand on the phone, ready to call the police.

Belle started to breathe heavily.

“Now you let me out of here! You can’t just hold me here! You don’t have a right. I need to get home.”

“Belle, Belle, calm down, we just want to see the inside of your bag and then we’ll let you go.”

And then she slapped him. It came out of nowhere, her right hand lifting and swinging around like a whip. Another employee stepped in and grabbed her arm, and the screaming began. One side of Sid’s face was red and his eyes were watering.

“You O.K, Sid?” I called from the other side of the remainder table.

Sid didn’t respond. He turned back to Belle, who was still screaming but not struggling very hard, more giving a show of struggling.

“I’m going to take a look in your bag, now,” Sid said as he unzipped it. A new copy of *Don’t Know Much About History: Everything You Need to Know about American History but Never Learned* practically popped out. It was such a stupid book to steal.

“You didn’t buy this, Belle,” he said, “Do you want to buy it now?”

Her screaming increased in pitch and obscenity. Words like “fucker” and “dumb-

ass” began to be heard in the stream of vilification.

“Belle, we don’t want you to come back in the store.” Sid was being so grown up and reasonable. I was proud of him.

“Let me talk to the owner!” she screamed, the first sensible thing she’d said since she’d stepped in the door.

Sidney stepped back as Rich stepped forward.

Belle, apparently stunned by the sudden appeasement of her demand, shut up.

“Ma’am, my employees are acting on my behalf, and he’s right. It’s store policy. We’ll hold onto the book, we won’t press charges, but we won’t be allowing you back into the store. And if we have any more problems, we will call the police.”

At home, Sidney unpacked new copies of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, and asked me why Rich thought it his place to say that no charges would be pressed.

“It’s my face she hit, not his. I might want to press assault charges. But he doesn’t see it that way, because the way he’s looking at it is, I’m his. I’m his while I’m there so my opinion about getting pushed around and hit in the face by some fat yuppie witch on company time, my opinion doesn’t count. Hell, they’re on the same team, anyway.”

“I don’t think this is a class war issue, Sidney. He just wasn’t thinking.”

Sidney erupted:

“He never thinks and it is a class war. It’s always a class war. They’re just always winning, that’s all. And since they control the media, and they don’t want us to know, we’re educated into believing it’s not perpetually what it is: the rich using the

poor, taking what little we have and then passing it right on down to the next generation. What would Rich have if he hadn't inherited it? What would you have if you *had* an inheritance? Who would you be?"

"Stop yelling at me, Sid, I like who I am, anyway, I don't want to be them."

He sighed and muttered an apology, reached into his bag and brought up a used hardcover copy of *Gray's Anatomy*.

"Anatomy?"

"Yeah, hell, everyone needs one of these hanging around, right?" He sat down and opened it, began flipping through the index, then looked up at me. "You performing at the U.T.A. Benefit next week?"

"Girl and Gun. If I can find a replacement B-B gun. I guess I really broke it last time."

"Well, at least you know what you're doing. And if you're having problems finding a gun in the U.S. of A. you must be blind or a moron anyway."

"As usual it is a matter of cost, my friend."

"I hear that. I'm rolling a joint, you want some?"

"But of course."

"Good." He looked down at the *Gray's* while groping the inside pocket of his jacket. "We can look at a cross section of lung tissue while smoking together."

9.

My husband has offered Lynne the use of the bucket truck, as if it's his to loan, as if he hasn't complained bitterly and at length about his employer's annoying request that he

drive it home on weekends because the lot at work is “too exposed,” as if he doesn’t have a long list of things to do with his own family on the weekends. He has, in fact, dropped everything else: the raking of the leaves, the scraping of the window trim, the laundry and cleaning we agreed upon this morning. Everything forestalled because the redhead walked across the street and said “Would it be possible?”

I hate it that I care.

She’s up in the bucket, reaching down with a long handled trowel to clean out her gutters, hooting and hollering, while Daniel and Charlie run the commands from below.

“Bring’er up,” she cries, waving the tool above her head, then, as the bucket begins to move laterally, “No! Up! Up, the other up!” and then seeming to lose her balance and screaming, faking an emergency. Daniel and Charlie are laughing their heads off and, I suspect, moving the thing in the wrong direction on purpose. They are all having the time of their lives.

When she finally comes down to the ground again she sits on the curb and fans herself in a show of exhaustion. Daniel is laughing so hard he’s wiping his eyes. I haven’t seen him enjoy himself this much in years.

“Charlie, go in there and get your father and me a coupla beers from the refrigerator, OK?” she rasps. “I thought I was done for up there.”

“But it’s my turn to go up!” he wails.

“Oh, right. Right.” She gets up. “You’re sure it’s not too dangerous?”

“Dad said as long as you hold on to me.”

“You’re going to trust me?”

Charlie turns to Daniel with unsure eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, you can trust her, Charlie, you can always trust a redhead. She’ll take good care of you.”

Lynne blushes, and I, on my front porch, feel compelled to look the other way. I’m afraid that I, too, may be turning color.

10.

U.T.A. was the smallest and grimeiest of San Francisco’s venues, thirty seats at the most. The acronym stood for Universal Theater Access, which was something of a joke because the place was literally underground, in a cave-like basement into which someone had dragged a bunch of old theater seats and a few lighting instruments. In order to enter the space the audience had to be able to navigate a rickety staircase which required them to duck and turn a corner at the same time, in half light. All of this made it shocking that the San Francisco Chronicle sent someone to see their benefit.

My Girl and Gun piece involved me, in skimpy lingerie, hanging upside down from the low ceiling and singing “Much More” from The Fantasticks while aiming and shooting a B-B gun towards papier-mache duck decoys, rabbits, pastel outlines of houses, and the occasional male face, all of which lined the back wall. When I ran out of song and ammunition, I threw the gun as hard as I could towards the wall and Andreas, who was backstage holding me up via pulley, lowered me down to the ground in slow motion at which point I rolled over, revealing to the audience the front of my body, upon which I had inscribed the words “SEXY,” “SMART,” and “PISSSED OFF” in black greasepaint.

Sid pulled the Chronicle reporter back into the dressing room after the show. I was sitting there smoking, waiting for the audience to leave before I made my exit.

“There’s the one you should interview,” Sid said, pointing at me.

It appeared the man was doing a feature on performance artists in the city. He started fumbling with his camera. I called Andreas over and Sid stepped back to allow Andreas to enter the small room. Andreas sat down and I posed on his lap. The photo which appeared in the paper the following week shows the two of us smiling widely, the word “SEXY” clearly visible on my left arm, and the article includes a description of my piece (“intrepid...liminal...queasy”) and quotes from the poem Andreas read that night. In the photo Sid is a smudged reflection in the mirror behind us. He’s not mentioned in the text of the feature, at all.

11.

Daniel and I are at it again, this time on the day after Thanksgiving, as if we’d saved up a season’s worth of contempt for the four day weekend. It’s the same old stuff with me on the attack this time. It all started at breakfast, with Daniel’s insistence upon Charlie having good table manners when he himself doesn’t even set the table properly. I leverage this into a greater accusation about his parenting at large and ultimately question his character: “Why can’t you just let the kid eat? Why do you have to boss him around all the time? Why do you need so much control?” Next I accuse him of having too many dark moods upon which he plaintively begs me not to make a three day fight of our remaining long weekend upon which I retort: “It’s no better to have you slamming around the kitchen cursing at the pots with Charlie and I tiptoeing around you, where’s the peace in that?” Finally I confront him on his neglect of his duties as the husband of a pregnant wife. “Look at me!” I say, and I go on about how I’m the one dragging

anemically through day after day carrying 30 extra pounds, unable to sleep or to bend over and tie my shoelaces, with squashed and painful innards and acne-ridden facial features, yet he can't be bothered to take twenty minutes to massage my aching feet at the end of a day, all of which causes me to spiral into an anxiety ridden rant about how I just don't know how we're going to manage to have a half-way functional marriage with a second child coming on, and who do we think we are, if we can't get our parenting and marital shit together with one child, who do we think we are having a second one? And how I'm just so uncomfortable and tired and gassy all the time, it's really becoming too much to bear.

Daniel retorts with short sharp thrusts like "So I'm a bad person, is that it?" and "Hey, the gas isn't easy on me, either." And finally, "Yeah, Penny? Fuck you, too!" At which point Charlie shouts at us from the next room: "I can hear your bad words, you know!" and then, as we ignore him: "You guys, stop it!"

As I am complaining my gaze is fixed on the window across from me, which faces Lynne's front yard. She is coming around the side of her house, dressed in overalls, carrying a rake, turning to speak to someone as her English Shepherd bounds around her. A medium-sized man with gray hair follows, gesturing with his hands as if confused, also very rustically dressed in jeans and a faded flannel plaid shirt. As Lynne begins to rake, the man, still speaking, kneels upon the walk to her front door, and begins to unlace a hiking boot, pulling the laces tighter, relacing, retying. I stop speaking mid-sentence. I sit down in the chair behind me.

"What?" says my husband, who has been waiting patiently for me to run out of steam.

“Oh God, I suck. I suck. I’m weak. I just suck.”

“Oh stop it, I’m not listening if you’re going to start that bullshit.” Daniel hisses.

I retain silence.

Daniel leaves the room, gets himself a glass of water, and returns, leans against the piano, then sits on the bench. I get up and get myself a glass of water, returning to sit again in the chair facing the window. Our house is very quiet.

Across the street Sid is retying his other shoe.

“Maybe we should go somewhere. Take a walk in the woods.” I try.

“What? Everything is fine now?”

“I think everything would be better if we got out of the house.”

“God, Penny, I’m not taking you anywhere.”

“I’m sorry - I’m just way too pregnant.”

“And will be for two more months. Great.”

“And then the real fun begins.”

“Oh, yes, please, bring on the real fun.”

Daniel takes a sip of water and I gulp mine down like an athlete. Charlie appears at the door and glares at both of us.

“I’m going out to sit by the pond.” I inform them both. “I need to breathe.”

“Fine. Take a rake while you’re at it.”

“I’m not raking.”

“Fine.”

“Charlie, you want to come out with me and rake some leaves out by the pond?”

“I’m not raking either.”

“Fine.” Daniel and I say in hostile unison.

12.

The truth was that a customer did ask to look at something in the Rare Books cabinet, that night. He was a short man wearing a leather jacket, and he was beginning to bald. He was clean shaven. He sat there for about half an hour. It was the Monday before Christmas and Sid, Andreas, Luneige and I were running the store at a sweat - two additional staff people had called in sick, sales volume was tripling, and Luneige had worked a double that day and hadn't eaten since breakfast. She looked gray and despondent, and Sid sent her off on a long dinner break even though that meant hell for the rest of us. When the man asked Sid to open the case, Sid and I were at the front registers, and Sid opened the cabinet, raised an eyebrow at me to let me know to help him keep an eye on it, and returned to his register. The line of customers was ten deep for each of us when a fur-hatted woman stepped up to Sid's register and asked him in an accent I couldn't place where she might find the books of Joseph Campbell.

“Those are in Religion and Myth - right next to Anthropology, upstairs.”

“But I looked there - there was nothing by Campbell.”

“That's impossible. There are at least twenty books up there by Joseph Campbell.”

“No, no. Nothing. By the staircase, right?”

“The staircase? Not really - go upstairs and make a U-turn to your right, pass the computer terminal and then turn left.”

The woman simply stared at him and didn't move. There was a collective groan

from Sid's line of customers as he finally gave in:

“OK, I'll show you.” He practically ran to the stairs, with her following.

The short, balding, leather-jacketed man rose from his stool next to Rare Books. I excused myself from behind the register to a second audible groan. I sidestepped over to the cabinet. As I closed the glass door, tripping the lock, I noticed that the bald guy had taken out *Howl* by Allen Ginsburg, and set it on top of the cabinet. Having already closed and locked the door, it seemed at this point the most economical thing to do to simply palm the volume and take it back with me to the register. It was slender, wrapped in mylar, a deep blue cloth cover with gold lettering. It felt precious in my hands.

13.

The sky is gray, the water clear, and the plant life has died away so that the fish are more visible than ever. There is no place for them to hide. They school in the middle of the pond, four facing one direction and two facing the other. They float there, suspended in water, and the tiniest flick of a tail fin might change their direction entirely at any moment. One rises to the surface, his dark eye unblinking and mouth glubbing open and shut. He is a brilliant, fiery orange, not gold at all but almost red in this brown and gray world.

In the reflection of the water I can see the surrounding trees, bare of leaves, and nests that have been hidden all year are now exposed. There is a sudden twittering and a multitude of blackbirds rise, darken the sky, hover and question direction, and then flap away. The water ripples and the reflection of the trees shimmies.

I look up at the trees themselves. There is just a hair of wind. Ten mourning

doves perch on the highest branches of the highest tree, an ancient oak which dwarfs our cottage, towering over four times its height. The doves have all their tail feathers pointing the same direction, calm and quiet, or perhaps exhausted.

Lynne rounds the corner behind me, she and Sidney are apparently taking a back alley tour of our little berg. I can hear their voices in excited discussion, Sid's punctuated drawl as familiar as if we had never fallen from each other's lives. Keep your mouth shut, I tell myself, maybe he doesn't even know. I hear the back porch door slam and out of the corner of my eye I can see Daniel making his way down the hill towards us.

14.

"It's too much," said Andreas. The wrapping lay on the kitchen table in between us. He turned the book over in his hands. "Low. What did you do?" He opened the cover.

"Low. This is signed. This is from Rare Books. Are you crazy?"

"Come on, Andreas. Who deserves that book more than you?"

"Oh, it's beautiful."

"Yes."

He sighed. "Thank you, my little dove," he reached over and pulled me into him, kissing me deeply and stroking the back of my neck. Then stopped and pulled away.

"Does Sid know?"

"What?"

"Taking this on his watch can't be good for him, you know."

"I'll tell him tomorrow. He's too pissed off right now."

Andreas sighed again and pulled me back. "Okay, dovelette. Anyway, Merry

Christmas.”

But the next morning on the bus Sid accosted me with my thoughtlessness.

“Lookit. Last Christmas Luneige’s folks had me over and a bunch of people I don’t even know got me something – some little thing – just to be kind. To include me. To avoid being rude. Damn, Girl. You live with me. Andreas practically lives with me, too, and by the way, he takes up a lot of space, Low.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re sorry I’m confronting you on it, that’s all. You didn’t even think of me, think it might put me in an awkward position for you two to have your own little one-on-one Christmas gift giving ceremony right in my own damn kitchen – you could at least take it to your own room.”

“For Chrissakes, Sid, it wasn’t that big of a deal, all he got me was a measly box of See’s Chocolates anyways!” It didn’t seem like the best time for me to tell Sid what I’d given Andreas. I would tell him later. After I’d ameliorated him with a gift, I thought. Maybe a magazine subscription, or a really terrific pair of socks. Something he’d appreciate but never think of buying.

The bus passed the Geary Street Theater and I gazed at the marquee. It was playing *Truth or Dare*, the new Madonna movie. “Hey, are we going to see that piece of trash or what?” I tugged lightly on his sleeve.

Sid shook his head and looked away. He wasn’t letting me off the hook. By the time we got off the bus I was too uncomfortable to accompany him on our habitual stop at The Daily Grind.

“See you in hell,” I said as we parted, and he jerked his head in a nod.

The sun hadn't burned the fog off the city yet, and the street seemed possessed by grayness, everything in half tones, wet and chilly. My miniskirt felt shabby and insufficient against my bare legs. I entered the store shivering. Rich was standing at the Rare Books cabinet with his hands on his hips. Wake up, I told myself. I no longer felt cold.

He motioned me over. I approached him with my usual swing, and even reached nonchalantly into my bag to pull out a pack of gum, offering him a piece.

"No thanks. Someone in here last night?"

I let my gaze fall from his eyes to the cabinet. I furrowed my brow.

"No - I don't think so - no. It was really busy, you know, we were short-staffed, but I don't think anyone asked - No, I was on the register almost all night and I would have noticed." I still don't know why I lied. I hadn't thought the whole thing out. I was improvising, badly.

"You pretty sure about that?"

"Yeah. There were a lot of folks in Photography - there might have been some spill over, you know, people next to the cabinet, but no one got into it."

He took his pencil out from behind his ear and tapped it on the case and then took a long hard look at me.

"Luneige here last night?"

"Oh yeah, but she spent the whole evening in the back." This much was true. "Is there a problem?" I asked.

"No, no problem." His voice sounded casual but his face was still drawn and tense. "I'd like to keep this conversation between you and me, Penelope."

“Yeah.”

The store was just about to open and the front door seemed to be on the verge of bursting due to the pressure of Christmas shoppers who leaned on the door from outside. Sid was snaking his way through the customers to the front door, holding his cup of coffee high over his head, and I stepped over to open the door for him. He came in with a low whistle and a shake of the head: “The natives are getting very restless,” he intoned as he headed to the back of the store. I was still standing at the door and I checked my watch.

“Hey Rich, I missed my coffee this morning - be back in five - I’ll run, I promise.” I said as I let myself out, not waiting for a response. I headed next door to the diner, ordered a coffee to go and stepped into the phone booth they had in the back next to the restrooms. I called Andreas and told him what the story was.

“Hmm.” Andreas’ voice was low and sleepy. There was a pause. “Now what.”

“I gotta get back there, Andreas - just tell him nobody touched the cabinet last night, OK?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s probably nothing, Low. Just keep it cool.”

“OK. I gotta get back. See you in a few.”

“Or should I return it? Slip it into Photography or something?”

“No, no - I already told him no one - I don’t think so.”

“All right then. Keep your head down. I’m in at noon.”

Neither of us even mentioned Sid. It wasn’t that I hadn’t thought of it, I just hadn’t worked out when, exactly, I’d be able to talk to him.

When I got back to the store Rich and Sid were standing at the Rare Books

cabinet. Rich's arms were crossed and Sid was indicating the stool where the small, bald guy had sat.

"Yeah," I heard Sid say, "I think he was interested in the Beats."

15.

The first thing to be endured is the requisite conversation expressing wonder and amazement that the two of us have ended up in this corner of the world, with explanations to partner and spouse, consisting of the phrases "old friends," "lived together for a while," and even "partners in crime," although that is passed off as a joke, and no reference to Manuscript is made. He's looking at me awfully closely.

Charlie comes barreling down the hill, and I am grateful for the distraction. He grabs a stick and starts attacking the high, marshy grasses.

"That yours?" Sid asks. I can't get over his gray hair. But his face is mostly the same.

"That's ours. He's five."

"He's got quite an arm on him."

"Yep."

"Good looking kid."

"Best looking in the universe."

"Why don't you two come over for dinner tonite," says my husband, displaying social skills I had given up on him ever possessing. He must sense my unease, and be punishing me in some passive-aggressive way.

Sid declines, citing another engagement, and the dinner date is mercifully

relegated to “some other time.” We stand around in our loamy back yard, and I commit myself anew to a policy of the less-spoken-the-better, awkward pauses or no. I am ridiculous, I think. I am hiding a twelve-year-old secret that he might already know. But I have no way of knowing what he knows.

I excuse myself from the pond, saying I have to pee, the constant prerogative of the pregnant. I sit on the toilet for a long time, fighting back the fear that my secrets are being told, hoping they’ll have some reason to leave before I return.

16.

By the time Sid got back from lunch that day, Rich had already spoken to Luneige, who had been on her supper break during the short bald guy’s tenure. She would have no reason not to uphold my lie that no one got into Rare Books the night before. Rich had also interviewed Andreas at some length behind closed doors in the upstairs office. I was on the register and as I turned to get something off the hold shelf I was confronted with the sight of Sid outside on the sidewalk, holding his Chinese food with such a grip that the container was giving way and seeping sauce onto the sidewalk. He was purple with rage and I was beginning to hear the swear words through the glass. A few feet away stood Belle in her gray overcoat, still carrying the same white shoulder bag, her eyes unreadable behind dark glasses, her hands balled into fists and shaking at Sid, yelling back.

“Hey, hey, hey,” I yelled, and I knocked on the glass, “what’s going on out there?”

Rich got up from his desk and ran outside and put a hand on Sid’s arm. Sid

yanked away from Rich and turning towards him yelled loudly enough for me to hear:

“Don’t tell *me* to fucking calm down, she fucking spit on me, tell that psychotic *bitch* to calm down.”

Rich said something quietly to Sid and Sid seemed to freeze in place. Rich approached Belle, speaking. The three of them stood there for a few minutes, then Belle waved her arms around a few times, still looking mean, then clutched her bag to her chest and turned to be lost from sight on the busy sidewalk.

There was a short, quiet exchange between Sid and Rich. Sid put his container of Chinese food down on the table of bargain books that we always kept outside. He got a napkin out from a pocket and wiped his face and his hands.

I turned to help the next customer. When I turned back, Sid was retreating down the sidewalk, and Rich was re-entering the store. Sid had been fired on the spot.

Thinking of why Rich might have done such a thing, I felt myself go numb.

In the following weeks I would be surprised by how deeply effected Sid was by being let go from Manuscript. Days passed into weeks and he still seemed too shaky for me to come clean. He would occasionally appear in the kitchen, make furtive movements around the refrigerator and stove, and then take his food back to his room to eat it. He answered questions in one or two syllables and didn’t hold my gaze if I tried to engage him in conversation. After I had tried a few times, I stopped trying. I told myself he was just always stoned now that he didn’t have to work. We didn’t have another decent conversation before he left.

But then, I was distracted by my own small drama. Andreas had decided to return

to his girlfriend in Seattle. They were getting engaged. A June wedding. I concealed my shock and pretended that, as he put it, we'd "had a lot of fun," and that was all. On the day after he left town the copy of *Howl* mysteriously reappeared in the Rare Books cabinet. It was Valentine's Day, and Rich stood there with the book in his hand, absentmindedly tapping it on his thigh, perplexed and silent.

By March Sid, too, had fled San Francisco for New York, where an uncle promised employment and temporary housing.

Luneige had also vanished by this time, and I suddenly felt very alone in the city. My new roommate was curious about all of my books and I didn't want to tell her how they had come to be in my hands. I began to apply for secretarial positions, and gave notice at Manuscript by April.

17.

At the pond, Sid is standing next to Charlie, who is sitting on the bench, and my husband and Lynne are over next to what's left of the sunflowers; tired stalks which lean against the back fence, with only a few shriveled flowers.

Charlie's excitement at Sid's discourse is apparent from fifty feet away. He is looking up at Sid, rapt and quiet. Not even his feet, which hang down from the bench without touching the ground, are moving.

As I get closer I can hear the southern twang, the easy rise and fall of that familiar drawl, and my pace quickens as I begin to be able to make out the words.

"They've got this special anti-freeze in their blood. Just like your car in the winter can keep going. You don't have to worry about them."

“But how do they go anywhere in the ice.”

“They don’t go anywhere. They just lie there. Like bears, hibernating. They just lie there and wait for spring to come back.”

“But what about food?”

“They don’t need much. Fish in winter hardly eat. They don’t grow. They barely breathe. Actually, in colder climates some of ’em die from lack of oxygen, but I don’t think you have to worry about that, here. Those guys will just lie down at the bottom in their inch of unfrozen mud, and they’ll just wait it out, buddy, and you’ll see them swimming around again in the springtime.”

Charlie is digesting this information, and seems half-relieved and half disturbed.

“It doesn’t sound like much fun,” he finally says.

“I’m sure it’s very boring,” says Sid.

“Maybe you can come down here and tell them some stories to help them through it,” I say.

Charlie still looks doubtful. “How do you know all this?” he asks Sid.

“Oh, my ex-wife had a place in upstate New York with a fish pond, and it came up.”

Ex-wife. I think. Over a decade between us then and us now. It hasn’t seemed so long.

Daniel is smiling and waving expansively at old Mrs. Suarez who lives across the alley, then he turns back to Lynne and they both kneel down on the cold, spongy ground and begin to touch the soil around the sunflower stalks. Their rapport is obvious, and Sid and I are both eavesdropping on their conversation. We look at each other while we

listen to them.

“I’m incredulous,” he finally says. It could mean so many things.

I nod.

“So much water under the bridge, huh, Low?”

I nod again. The fish shimmy, the trees shake and the water ripples. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

“What does *that* mean?” Charlie asks.

We both look at him. I wish I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Sid and I were good friends during a really interesting time of our lives.”

“And is *now* an interesting time?” Charlie demands.

“It’s different.”

“You can say that again.” Sid agrees.

“It’s different.” I say again. I want to know now how I will tell him, when I will tell him, and what it will mean.

“It’s different, you can say that again, it’s different.” Charlie repeats while ecstatically renewing his attack upon the marshes. Lynne and Daniel are rising from the soil, laughing and brushing off their jeans. I want to know, I want to know.

The pond my husband dug has a narrow path of pebbles around it, and he’s recently put down a new load of them. They crunch and settle under my feet as I shift my weight on the muddy earth. I can only guess whether Sid is ignorant of my betrayal, or if in the intervening years he has grown in grace.

Charlie lifts his face to the sky and yells: “Come on then, Winter! Come on, Snow!” For a fleeting moment, the sun breaks through the cloud cover and the world is

suddenly drenched in color – golds and greens, reds and browns. Just as suddenly the world is returned to the grays this day belongs to.

I must stop asking questions. I lower my heavy body to the bench to accept this respite, this saturation, this temporary peace and fullness. We have, at this moment, reached the limit of what those such as myself may claim, or request.

Broken

At the time of the attacks, Russell is asleep, his morning nap. He usually sleeps for about an hour. Meg eyes him nervously. He lies facing the TV with his eyes closed, mouth open, drooling. Meg moves herself in between Russell and the TV so that if he should wake he will see her backside instead of the screen, her large square shape for once an asset. She turns the volume lower. Although it hurts her bad knee to stand still for such a long time, she stands there listening, every once in a while choking, gasping, and shaking, trying to be quiet about it, until her husband wakes up. When she hears him stir, a faint groan behind her, she switches the TV off and turns to greet him.

“Well, Lazybones, I think we should get you out for a walk today.” She can feel that her face looks funny. A tightness in her forehead and around her eyes. But he might not notice that kind of thing, anymore. Who knows?

She gets him up in a sitting position and empties his bag, takes it to the bathroom.

“Turn the TV on!” She can hear him from the next room, but she pretends not to hear.

She comes back into the room and hooks him back up, she’s all motion, she ignores another request for the TV. She feeds him a little snack of Ritz crackers and applesauce and yogurt. She gets him into the wheelchair, which is not easy on her knee or her back either, then she wraps him up good with the red plaid wool blanket because it’s suddenly a little chilly. And by that time it’s coming onto noon.

“Where we going?” he asks.

“We’re just taking a little walk. The air is good.”

It’s always tense getting him down the narrow hallway, through the front door and then through the screen porch door and down the ramp and around the turn through the gate. But then it’s mostly easy, pushing, walking, watching.

The yard is a mess. It’s just a goddamn mess. Forty-six years in this house and it’s never looked so bad. The archery target is swollen with water, misshapen, hanging off of its stand like a drunk scarecrow. She should have taken it in ages ago. The lawn is scraggly and wild. Forget mowing and a limb fell off of that old oak almost a week ago, taking a section of the fence with it and Meg doesn’t really feel like asking anyone to come over and help her clean it up. And now the leaves are beginning to fall. And of course last weekend it was Ruthie who came over and you can guess the chances of that girl doing anything useful. “Hey, Ma, why don’t you take a break and go out, shoot some arrows,” she had said. As if Meg does that anymore. As if the sodden target isn’t a

declaration to the whole goddamn neighborhood of the state of things in this household. Friends, neighbors, and relatives: Meg has called in every favor there is to call by now. How much longer can people keep helping? How long before they start saying things like “You know, I just cannot do that right now. I’m sorry Meg. You know, I’m just so busy this week.” The yard is a mess. She’ll call someone tomorrow. She keeps pushing.

Ever since the stroke Russell cries so easily. He cries when he tells Mary about the dinner they ate the other night at Family Buffet. He cries when he tells Sam that it’s OK to throw away those old muffler parts in the corner of the garage, or that he can do whatever he wants to with the three broken lawnmower engines he had kept around to use for parts.

“Take it all away.”

“No more tinkering with other people’s garbage, Pops. You are now, officially, retired from your pack rat ways.”

“That’s right.”

He cries at least three times a day about their dog Lucille, a good-natured and arthritic poodle who died at the age of 14, a few months after Russell’s stroke. Today, he cries when he tells the young neighbor lady about the fun they used to have in the old VW Camper Van. The neighbor leans against her cyclone fence, watching her small son play in the yard while Russell cries about how nice it was to lie down in the back of the Camper Van and feel that dog cuddle up on his feet, back in the day.

“That little dog was a good little heater!” He says, shaking and dissolving into tears again, the second time in one short conversation. The toddler emits strange sounds

from the sandbox, contented with his Tonka toy. Meg gropes for the young neighbor lady's name, with no success.

The neighbor lady has a haunted look today, and speaks mechanically: "Lucille was a good dog. I'm sorry. She was a good friend to you. I'm sorry she died."

"That's some sandbox!" Russell yells to the little boy, who happily responds: "Backhoe!" and continues to make loud machine noises. The neighbor looks at her son as if disconcerted by his happiness. Then she looks at Meg with big and questioning eyes, as if begging to speak. Meg notices her neighbor's color is off, and the girl is shaky. The neighbor opens her mouth but nothing comes out for a second. Then: "I'm sorry. Are you folks doing OK? I mean, with everything that's going on -"

Meg, from behind Russell, gives the neighbor a quick wave then shoves the wheelchair into abrupt motion, "Oh, we're all right," she tosses over her shoulder.

"We're still here," says Russell, his habitual response.

Meg can feel the eyes of the neighbor on her backside, and she knows that this is the kind of time when neighbors usually talk to each other more instead of less. She remembers when she had Mary, Sam and Ruthie at home, all under the age of five, and she thought she might perish for want of adult conversation.

"I can't do it, today," she mutters.

"What?"

"Nothing. Talking to myself, dear. It's nothing."

He's lost most of his vision on the left side, so he doesn't notice the yard until they

return. “The yard is a mess,” he says, “It’s a goddamn mess.”

“Don’t you worry about that, honey.”

“It’s a mess.”

“We have other things to worry about.”

“Overgrown.”

“I know, honey. Don’t worry about that.”

“Front hedge!”

“I know, sweetheart.”

“The fence!”

“I know.”

“Tell Sam.”

“It’s Mary’s weekend this weekend.”

“Tell Sam.”

“Sam’s not coming this weekend. It’s *Mary’s* weekend.”

“Ooohh.”

“Let’s eat lunch.” They are in the porch by now. “Let’s have it out here.” She parks him at the table. “I’ll bring it out to you. You just sit here and listen to the birdsong and don’t worry about the yard.”

“A branch down!”

“You just sit here now.”

“Hmmm.”

She listens to the radio in the kitchen. She knows she should not leave him out

there alone on the porch so long. But she can't stop listening. She stops preparing lunch and stands there, leaning against the counter. She goes out to the living room. She turns on the TV, then mutes it, still listening to the radio. People are gray, covered with ashes and dust. The streets are gray, everything is gray. Covered. It's hard to tell exactly what you're looking at sometimes, it's all one color. She thinks at first something is wrong with the color on her TV. Then the bright face of the news lady with red lipstick on. Then the brilliant blue sky and tall white buildings and unimaginable airplane cutting, cutting through like what? *What have I ever seen like this?* She asks herself. *Like nothing I've ever seen.* Orange blossoms of fire against the blue sky and black smoke lifting and then the second unimaginable airplane all over again.

There is something falling from the sides of the buildings, it looks like oddly shaped debris, or birds or dolls. Human beings falling from the sides of the building. There is unmistakably the shape of a man's shoe. She can see his tie fluttering above him like an extra, uselessly weak wing. His arms are outstretched and they look like strong, capable arms. There are two others, holding hands. A man and a woman. The woman is wearing an A-line dress. They are holding hands. They fall for a long time. They fall for a very long time. *But those are real people.* How can that fall be so long? *But those people want to live.*

The building sliding straight down upon itself. No. How many inside? One building, then the other. No no no no. And then the gray world of running and people who look not like people, exactly, everything gray, you can't tell who's white and who's black, all the different colors of people are gray and terrified. And huge things blowing around them and into them, blowing too fast, not blowing but propelled. The

unsteadiness of the camera. A frozen frame of video, badly framed, awkward and still.
The newscaster with the lipstick.

“Meg?” His voice from the porch.

She turns the TV off. She goes back into the kitchen. She has cut up little squares of bologna and bread. Some hamburger soup in the microwave. She turns off the radio. She takes out his mid-day pills from his day-by day pill organizer. Then she takes out her own pills. A glass of water. Just get through it, she thinks, step by step. Whatever is right in front of me, she thinks. That’s what I’ll deal with. The phone rings. It’s Mary.

“I can’t talk now Mary. Yes. We’re all right. Yes. Please call Ruthie and Sam for us, OK? Can’t talk now, I have to go. Daddy’s waiting on me.” She hangs up.

“Meg?” She shouldn’t leave him there for so long.

Step: she brings the plate of food and pills to the porch. Step: she sets it down in front of him. Step: she sits down across from him. Silence.

“What are you eating?” he asks.

She gets up and curls his hand around the spoon, forces his hand down to the bowl of soup. He is able to bring the spoon from the bowl to his mouth, once it has food on it. She spears a tiny square of bologna on the tip of a fork and gently lays it on his tongue.

“Now chew. That’s meat.” She remembers that meat is flesh and almost begins to cry.

He chews. He swallows. He looks at her.

“What are you eating?”

She doesn't answer.

When they moved him into the living room with his rent-to-own hospital bed, they did it because he'd be easier to take care of, next to the bathroom and kitchen, and because he'd *at least be able to watch TV*. So Meg has her hands full keeping him away from it all day long. But she manages. Evening is when it gets impossible. The routine demands that he spend the evening in bed, watching TV. How can she keep him from his nightly news?

"It's broken." She has, in truth, unplugged it.

"What?"

"See?" She presses the power button on the remote several times, inches in front of his nose. "It's broken."

"Batteries?"

"It's not the batteries. Look." She goes to the TV and presses the power button there. She turns and shrugs her shoulders. "I'm sorry dearie, it's going to be just like the olden days I guess." The phone rings. She scrambles for it, grateful for the interruption. It's Mary. "I can't talk right now, Mary. I know. No, no, I think we'll stay here as usual this weekend. We have no plans of going anywhere. No, we'd really rather stay here at home. I really can't talk right now, Mary! Daddy's waiting on me, goodbye."

He sits silently, his brow low and furrowed.

"Well, dear, we can listen to music," she says. She squeezes by the table to reach the console, which has been used for nothing but counter space for years and years. She slowly lowers herself, careful of her knee, and opens the cabinet door. Hundreds of

records stand waiting like soldiers in the fight. Their covers are peeling layers of paper, like little bits of confetti. The smell of dust. She coughs. The Andrews Sisters? Benny Goodman? The Mormon Tabernacle Choir?

“Sam fix it?”

“I don’t know if Sam can fix TVs, honey. I’ll ask. Anyway, Mary is here this weekend, not Sam.”

“When Sam coming?”

“Next weekend.”

“What day?”

“What day? Well, you know they always come on Fridays.”

“Nooo!” His voice is loud and wavering, she can hear that he is starting to cry. She looks over her shoulder to see his face spread into that great mask of agony, mouth pressed back and open on both sides, eyes squinting and watering. “What day today?”

“Sweetheart it’s Tuesday,” her own voice breaks, “September 11,” the date sounds strange, “and Mary is coming this weekend and Sam’s not here till next weekend,” her voice rising, “so you’re just going to have to wait for the TV! It won’t kill you to listen to some music!”

Choking sounds emanate from Russell, he is trying to stop crying.

“Here.” Meg reaches up and slaps an album on the table then rises unsteady and slow from her kneeling position, pulling herself up using a chair for support. “We’ll enjoy this, Russell. Let’s just calm down and listen to some Glenn Miller.” Her hands shake as she takes the record out of its dusty jacket, out of the yellowed paper sleeve.

Russell still looks distraught and confused but is following the careful steps he

retraces so many times daily: how to stop crying. She can see the mental resolve in his eyes as his muscles relax, one by one, and his face slowly assumes its habitual position, a still and quiet stare that seems somehow vacant but focused, as if he is immersed in something no one else can see.

Meg turns her face to look out the living room window, this view which has been hers for forty-six years. The sky is not so dark, and she can see the outline of the trees which have seemed sheltering and now seem to harbor some unexpected danger. She can see the birdbath, suddenly vulnerable.

Meg chews on her lip and turns her head back to the room, to what is in front of her. She finds herself gazing at the Archery Trophy she won just a year ago for the over 65 division at the fairgrounds. How she thought vision, precision, balance, and steady breath would take her through the rest of her life, and what are they worth now. She looks around the room. The stacks of clutter on every available surface; toilet paper rolls and books and dusty silk flowers with discolored ribbons and medical supplies and the occasional dirty dish. A box of personalized pens they had ordered last year, cards and envelopes that will never be sent, old newspapers, small cheery ceramic figurines that they occasionally receive as gifts and it doesn't seem right to throw away. All the usual stuff. None of it adequate. Everything covered with dust.

Russell is watching. She lowers her head.

"It's just you and me here, now, isn't it, Daddy?" she says softly.

"Aw, Meggie."

She sits down in a chair, still holding the album carefully with her fingertips.

"I've never been much of a homemaker, I know that would come in handy now."

“Aw, Meggie.”

“Some women would make a cheery nest of this place and look at it.”

“Meg-”

“I’m sorry, Daddy, this is all we’ve got and I’m not much good at it.”

“Long as you’re here.”

She feels tears forming and stands. She turns and raises the lid of the record player, praying that it still works. She sets the record carefully down, the hole of the record finding its way to the knob of the machine and the record softly thumping onto the turntable. A small cloud of dust rises and Meg coughs again. She bends over to pick up the needle, hands still shaking, but what could it possibly matter, now, if she scratched the record? The needle scratches and settles into a groove. The muted horns jumping and sliding. The whop of the trap. The sting of the cymbal. That bouncy sound. The music is impossibly happy. She almost laughs to think of it, how she could play one record after the next, hands shaking, scratching to ruin every one as she played it, and how long would they last? So many records. Till the end of the world.