

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **AT EASE WITH MR. WRONG AND OTHER STORIES**

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This collection of short stories explores the minutia of everyday existence while questioning what it is that makes up a life. In examining this overarching question, the stories often stray into the surreal while taking the reader into moments between couples navigating their relationships, to workplaces where characters explore the implications of their professional decisions, into the glut of physical objects that reflect, and personify one's interior life, and finally into characters' minds, where they privately question what most troubles them.

In scrutinizing, consciously or unconsciously, what their lives consist of, these stories present characters profoundly stuck in a flawed existences (as suggested by the collection and story title "At Ease with Mr. Wrong"), navigating a quotidian world of partial truths or imagined realities. Overall, the stories hold a common thread of characters attempting to formulate who they are in relation to the people and objects that surround them everyday.

AT EASE WITH MR. WRONG AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Overture

And on this particular morning, Jim has forgotten how to get out of bed. He can hear his alarm clock piercing his cold bedroom; the early morning light peeks intrusively around the slats of his pale blinds. His heavy flannel comforter is heavy. Too heavy to move. Jim's forgotten how to move. How to get up and out of bed.

Jim can't remember how to walk across the room into his bathroom, drink some cold water and look tired into a sleep-puffy and crumpled face. Alas, the man has even forgotten how to take his morning shit, peruse the latest *Newsweek* on the floor, and relax those few minutes on the bowl before the routine begins.

It must be said, Jim has altogether forgotten how to brush his teeth, take a hot shower, use soap and shampoo and shave steam-softened stubble from his sometimes handsome face.

Jim can no longer match the colors of a plain dark suit with a boring solid shirt and a slightly brighter patterned tie. All the hues of his clothes appear to clash with one another, making dressing impossible. Dresser drawers checked over and over yield no white cotton t-shirts. Jim can't find his underwear.

Where are the Raisin Bran and milk? A bowl and a spoon? Car keys are altogether elusive; his wallet purposefully hides.

Jim will be late to work. Work waits; as over-sized analog wall clocks tick pointedly, second after second, co-workers begin to notice his absence. They form themselves into small groups in the lunchroom where they whisper insistently, "Jim is

late. Jim is late.” His coffee mug, washed late last night by the custodial staff, sits by the coffee machine, unused, confused.

Jim, still under his immovable leaden comforter struggles with disobedient limbs. As if he is still in a dream but willing his waking body into motion, he only twitches a shoulder and a toe, as the comforter holds him down more tightly in response to these efforts. Jim’s arms and legs claim that bed is where they are at their best, shouldn’t they remain? In proving their point they ask Jim if he knows whether he should shower or dress first, pants or shoes go on in which order, does one store the cereal or milk in the refrigerator? Well? Which one? Jim cannot remember the answers to any of these questions. His boldest ties laugh out loud while the brown socks begin to whimper that it is time for them to be separated and slipped over feet, the left on the left, the right on the right, don’t get it wrong again Jim, we like to be on the correct feet and on time to work. Jim no longer recognizes his own bedroom as it chatters impudently. The phone threatens to call his work and tell them he is not even sick.

Meanwhile office clocks, mugs, and co-workers become more and more self-righteously certain that Jim will not be joining them showered, dressed, and in the right place at the right time. Goodness! There is a meeting soon -- should they wait?

Florescent lunchroom co-worker questions morph into chants, “Jim is late. Should we wait?” which grow into a bellowing operatic chorus, a great vibrato, as the accusations begin: “A minute past, Jim is certainly late. Is he hungover, sick? Languishing and lazy under heavy covers, how can he participate?”

Out of sight, his underwear whispers to his hidden wallet, “He won’t make it

out I tell you. What a pity. Not even a good start today. And honestly? He was never a closer. Who would know better than I?" The wallet cringes in embarrassment.

The striped boxers continue, "Furthermore, there is a woman named Jane on the fourth floor who repeatedly asks nothing of him but dinner, preferably Italian. Uptown, and very much to the West, but he does not comply. No, he simply cannot comply. Just dinner I tell you, he won't even make the date. I even peeked out and saw her -- not half bad. I don't know what's wrong with him. Perhaps we should have known."

Jim: All slanderously forgotten and pinned heavy under the comforter. The alarm clock screaming, the early sunlight blinding, traffic congestion, teeth demand brushing, Jim's beard growing, cereal wants eating, slightly brighter ties strain to be appreciated. Twitching limbs slow to stillness, Jim's sour morning breath weakens as his eyes scan faster and faster from corner to corner of his bedroom trying to fathom what might be able to help him, which book or spare blanket might be most sympathetic. Across town, pale-faced punctual wall clocks tick anyway. Coffee mugs are unused, confused. Shampoo, soap, keys. Knowing underwear. Disappointed wallet. Co-workers will accuse.

New Shoes

Her first mistake was asking that weird guy from the sixth floor out to dinner. After seeing him jogging in the park again and talking to him just briefly in their apartment lobby last week, she is having doubts. When she had asked, he had looked down, studying the carpet -- out of embarrassment for her? Politeness? But something hadn't been right about him. His hair or eyes? She cannot put her finger on it. After all, it was only boredom that had led her to be that bold. Or hope? She ponders.

She often ponders, sitting and pondering at her desk in the afternoon when her coffee has chilled to room temperature and her pantyhose pinch an irritated imprint around her waist. But really, it seems her first mistakes were college, the classes, her degree, then maybe her job. All of it so ordered and dry. Prescribed, inevitable, flawless. She hadn't really had a choice, had she? She wasn't given a choice.

Her co-worker rushes by her open office door. Afterwards, she smells the cologne moving in the re-circulated office air, an intrusive stab of pleasure in the stale environment. Maybe the guy from upstairs will be ok. They're supposed to go to an Italian place this weekend, if she doesn't cancel.

She spins her beige upholstered desk chair to look out the large single-paned window at the rooftops and huge antennas across the square. But maybe it has to go as far back as her parents, her hometown, and even her friends? Test-prep classes and Saturday soccer giving way to clumsy hickeys and keg parties in the frozen February

woods. Taking part in the collective. Those could possibly be her first mistakes. But because they were made, the others had to follow.

And if so, with asking the weird guy out, college, the classes, her degree, job, parents, hometown, and friends, then today she made, altogether, her ninth mistake in buying the navy blue shoes on sale in the window after work. Though handsome, she could sense the snug comfort afforded in trying them on and walking on the store's soft under-padded rug would be all but gone the first day she took the shoes out for a full day in the office.

“They look lovely on your slim feet.”

“Yes.”

“Very elegant.”

“Though I have a pair very similar to them at home.”

“But they are a classic. You can wear them forever.”

“Yes.”

And a tenth mistake? With the shoebox and her heavy briefcase awkwardly filling her arms as she enters her apartment, she goes straight to the phone. Even before kicking off her stiff pumps and unzipping her binding skirt. She does that one, most pathetic thing: She goes straight to the phone to check, some days over and over, if a boy called. It is as simple as that. Some boy. These days it is the one with the red wine in juice glasses and late-night gin and tonics in bed with jazz and open windows and her always on his lap even in the restaurant and the breathing slowed just by

walking into his house.

“I like this shape. . . and this one. . . .” tracing his points down her back with a single presenting finger, “. . . leading to your waist. . . . Easy on the eyes. Yes, easy on the eyes.”

To see if he could have called, to break her streak of mistakes? To become another? She is afraid she will lose count.

On the machine are only a cable television sales call and a hello from her mother. She erases both quickly and drops her skirt and shoes in a heap, leaving them in the hallway by the phone.

In her blouse and pantyhose, she sits on her couch and looks around her apartment. She does not want to watch TV or make dinner all over again. She notices the scissors on the table and rips out several pages of text from the latest magazine in the coffee table pile and begins folding. She cuts slowly, making shapes, her fingers remembering. The shapes of hair and feet are difficult and she slices her finger by accident. Blood flows and smears onto the shiny magazine-print faces, but she continues, intent, creating three full chains of tiny identical connected paper-dolls. Holding them wide between her outspread arms, resisting the urge to count and catalogue their disparate sizes and ill-fashioned limbs, the imperfections and mistakes hanging before her, she crumples the project in disgust and goes into the bathroom for a band-aid.

Collecting her new shoes from the hallway, she takes them into her bedroom and slides open the mirrored closet door. The floor of the closet is full. White tennis shoes, running shoes, multi-colored strapped summer sandals, open-toed black sling-

backs for evening, high boots for Winter, low boots for Fall, clogs for Spring, closed-toed heeled work shoes in black, brown, and navy. . . . With her foot, she impatiently pushes several pairs out of the way to make room for the newest arrival. Transfixed by the gaping mouths of all the empty shoes covering the bottom of her closet, she quickly slides the door shut and rests her forehead against its cold mirrored exterior.

Revisions

One beautiful sunny day, I am in the process of making changes. I am on one of my walks, whistling with my hands deep in my pockets, feeling the hot sun on the top of my head. After wandering by all the bright shop windows, contemplating everything for sale, I catch a rich warm scent on the wind and, heading out of town, I follow it for a long time, past many neighborhoods, the lawns growing longer and more sprawling, the green spaces more open as I walk farther and farther. As the scent grows stronger, I feel more and more certain there will be something worthwhile waiting for me when I reach its source.

I arrive at a vacant parking lot surrounded by a chain link fence. A dog trots up to me from out of nowhere and sniffs my feet. "Hey boy," I say, "beautiful day, huh?" and pat his golden head. He looks up at me contentedly and runs off.

Far across the lot, there are three parked bulldozers and two men standing between them talking. They are in front of a grand landscape of mountains and canyons of garbage. There are large gulls flying overhead towards the multicolored hills of broken furniture, fast food wrappers, stained newspapers, rotting food. I feel fresh and full of energy, sure of myself. It is time to rebuild.

I approach the men. "You guys looking for any extra help here?" The smaller man on the right just stares at me silently; he seems shy, but not unfriendly. The big man standing to the left smiles broadly and leans confidently against his bulldozer, though his head only comes up to the bottom of the rusty yellow door.

"Looking for work? You new around here?"

"No, I'm from town, but I've never been out this far before. Never knew the place existed. Really, I can start immediately and work any hours." I am hopeful they can tell how eager I am to start fresh and do a good job at something new. I think the big man is in charge, and I feel sure he understands. To make sure we are on the same page, I add, "When a person finally decides it is time to clean up his life, first there is a certain amount of idle time spent thinking, but then, when he's decided what in his life is worth keeping, and sometimes it isn't much at all, he starts the cutting back, often drastic cutting back, until all the bad stuff is gone and he's ready to add new things again. And on this beautiful day, I feel certain I am ready to add something new."

With a knowing smile between the big man and me, the whole thing is taken care of, and I am on my way to creating a different and better life for myself.

I work for weeks and months at this job. This is what I do: I use a bulldozer, like the two other guys, to move mounds of garbage, as large as I can possibly move at one time, towards a central canyon which we are supposed to fill. Yet, no matter how much trash I push over the edge, the canyon always appears to be about the same depth, maybe a hundred feet.

When I stand at the edge, I can make out individual things, as long as they aren't too small. There are lots of scrap metal parts, shiny chrome bumpers, flashy hood ornaments like the one the neighborhood kids ripped off my wife's new car last week, TVs, entertainment centers, car stereos with CD changers, or occasionally a warped and discarded shopping cart. There are also bits of house things, like puffed

leather recliners (always torn, stuffing outpouring), or porcelain dishes, though never our wedding pattern, the one she took a year to pick out, even metal bed frames without mattresses.

When I'm actually bulldozing the trash, I can make out much smaller things. There are pieces of clothing, torn gray pinstripe suits, silk blouses, cashmere scarves, personal computer parts. Then a lot of other things like baby car-seats, jewelry (though not good stuff, baubles), hairbrushes, or pastel-colored plastic cosmetic cases. Like those rectangular pink or baby blue ones that fill the medicine cabinet and remain spilled out around the sink when she is late to work.

Now that I think about it, I would say my wife uses cosmetic items too much. She is a pretty woman, but she has these small hard eyes sort of imbedded in her face. She's always drawing and painting around them with this stuff, trying to make them look bigger and softer, I guess. And then she has this shrill high voice that I always thought was so cute, until lately. *Drop off the dry cleaning. . . I asked you a week ago. . . how do you like the new carpets and curtains. . . ? I know you don't like my sister's new husband. . . how will we afford the new car. . . ?* On and on she can go. Though it began so softly, insidiously, after graduation and the secret mice-infested old motels where she would still bring the white nightgown, and then the cozy second floor walk-up homes with only loosely tied bathrobes and morning coffee under open summer windows, soft music still playing at every meal.

I'm not sure how she feels about this new job. When we were young she said you become what you do. I used to protest, but with this job there is no longer any reason. And since I started, it feels like I haven't seen her in ages. Everything is

fresh.

Sometimes on our lunch breaks we all sit up on top of the big guy's bulldozer and eat and talk. He parks it right at the edge of the canyon and we get a lovely view of the landscape. The golden-haired dog occasionally joins us and we feed him bits of our sandwiches.

You may think that it wouldn't be pleasant to eat at the center of a dump, but the view is truly stimulating. It gives one a lot to think about. I wonder about the trash, who may have once owned these things filling the canyon, what they do everyday at work, whether they get new curtains every year and watch cosmetic cases teeter on the edge of every bathroom surface with detached curiosity. Whether they still make love to their wives. I love this job and I do not get tired of it for a long time.

*

Then one day, the big guy starts to piss me off. He talks and talks, like he knows everything about everything: sports teams, cars, how to do *our* job. But soon he only talks about himself. I think it pisses off the little guy too, but I can't be sure; he won't really look at me.

The big guy starts spending our lunch hour every day bitching about his life. He becomes one big moving mouth. If you ask me, it sounds like he has it pretty good. He has this nice big house on the other side of town, he says, but his teenage kid is always backing the car into the garage door. He says the kid doesn't understand

the value of work and a buck and his comfortable bed. His wife insists on buying new clothes and makeup very goddamn week. Absurd, he says. Like she needs so many outfits anyway when all she does is work all day and then shop more. And he hasn't gotten a raise in years. He says he's moved more garbage than all the other people who've worked here combined.

With this comment, I shoot the little guy a look, but he is just staring out across the canyon, eating his roast beef and swiss in silence, thinking, or pretending he isn't there. I get paid peanuts here, but I love the job. It's given me a new start on life, it's a great place to be. What does this guy have to complain about?

The next day the little guy is even more distant. I try to say "hi" when I arrive at work, establish that we are pals and that the obnoxious big guy, already out in his bulldozer pushing around piles of junk, can go to hell, but he's not as friendly as he usually is. Personally, I'm still loving my job; I don't see why these guys aren't as happy as I am here.

I spend the morning moving huge mounds of garbage. I'm more efficient at it now. I can take in everything I see in front of me without really having to stop and think about it. I see so much and then I am able to dump it swiftly into the canyon. Hair curlers, briefcases, wallets, ancient VCR's like at the first apartment, with the old black-and-white TV you had to smack to get the volume to work, and her parents orange-flowered couch that we made love on every night after dinner. Pajamas and white silken nightgowns whiz before my eyes. I love watching it all fall, break, cover over a spot on the bottom, and then get buried by the next batch. I bury the old batch

of garbage as quickly as I can, and I'm so good at it now that I've cut back all the crap in my life, the old tiresome job, the daily lists and planning with her and the kids; I've broken the ties, emerged clean and new. I've never felt as strong as when the bulldozer shovel gives the final heave and all the old stuff, his stuff, her stuff, their stuff, *so much fucking stuff* goes flying off into oblivion and crashing below. I am happy, here and now.

But at lunch that day it's the same and I just can't take it. We sit on the bulldozer overlooking our work, but the big guy continues on and on. The wife, the kids, the job, the bills, the garage door, the commute, Caribbean cruises, college funds, retirement -- even the damn yellow dog needs vet shots.

I stand up on top of my bulldozer cab and look down into our canyon. I tell him to just say fuck it all! To liberate himself, to walk, to whistle, to see the sun, hear the birds, pat the dog, and yes, goddamnit, even to kiss the wife! I tear off my thick gold wedding band and huck it down into the pit. Yes, fuck it all, I say! I hear her whining voice like a skipping record, over and over, faster and faster. *We haven't spent time alone in months. . . .* I imagine shoving handfuls of garbage deep down her throat, choking her and her shrieking voice. I feel great, I am free! I take off my wire-rimmed glasses and my shiny leather shoes and hurl them one at a time into the open air.

The little guy watches me, blinking rapidly and peering around from the other side of the big guy; he is unsure. The big guy is mad and tells me I'm crazy. He threatens to fire me right there. We are all standing now and the little guy starts

panting in fear, his small eyes tightened and glassed. But he takes his nice deli-style sandwich she made him that morning and, with a determined face and a casual flick of his wrist, he tosses it over the edge. Brushing his empty hands together with satisfaction, I know he is with me now. Nothing will jeopardize my freedom, my new life. I cannot go back. It is clear to us both.

We each grab one of the big guy's arms before he has a chance to resist and throw him off the truck. He yells for a moment in the air, as if only for effect, and then bluntly lands spread-eagle on the trash far below. From where we stand above his body doesn't look mangled at all. He could be sleeping at the bottom of our garbage canyon. The dog has been watching from the ground. I jump off the bulldozer and lift him in my arms awkwardly by his soft-skinned underbelly and hurl him over the edge too. My wife is approaching us waving a brown paper bag and yelling something about leaving my sandwich in the fridge again. She is moving as quickly as she can over the uneven trash and gravel in pumps. The little man starts to cry silently. She gestures at me accusatorially with the crumpled bag in one manicured hand, the other clutching at her long knotted strand of pearls like some crazed modern-day flapper in a navy blue pants suit. I run over to her and wrap one arm around her head and mouth and the other around her navy tailored hips, dragging her as she squirms and twitches.

*

The little man and I sit for a long time, silent in our thoughts. As the daylight

begins to disappear, he gets up from where he has been sitting, holding his knees to his chest, since after lunch. He looks at me for a minute, with pity I think, nods without conviction, and walks across the parking lot away from me and down the street until I can no longer see him.

When the dark finally falls suddenly and heavily, I leave the dump and find my way back to my home. It is a long and unfamiliar way, as though I have been gone for years, though my feet move steadily through the black unlit streets.

I enter my large home where a lamp has been left on in the living room, but no one is there. Without thought, I begin to glide sweaty fingers over leather-bound books, the TV, stereo speakers, the back of the soft striped couch, crystal figurines atop the glass coffee table, posed pictures of all of us, Disneyworld, the Eiffel Tower, in ceramic hand-painted art-project frames. My moist hands pick up no dust.

I touch everything with sensual awe, as if it is all smooth marble sculptures, or just someone else's stuff.

I go into the immaculate kitchen, sit down at the breakfast table without turning on any lights, and absently begin to detangle the fringe of the woven placemat under my hands, stroking it over and over into perfectly straight patterns.

Girlfriends

Joan's best friend since childhood, Liz, is coming over to her apartment. It is late one night and Liz has told Joan over the phone that her boyfriend of seven years has just left her, that he has left out of the blue, leaving only a small note on the kitchen table saying he felt smothered, that he couldn't imagine a lifetime of that smothering. That he is sorry.

Hearing this over the phone, Joan is shocked and worried for Liz. Through all the years they have known each other, Liz has always been happy and optimistic, and, it had always seemed to Joan, with cause -- Liz is beautiful and magnetic, friends and jobs have always seemed to fall into her lap. Joan has never seen Liz struggle with loss or disappointment, it is not a language she has often had to speak. This makes Joan, never quite the natural optimist as Liz, even more concerned. She has never dated anyone for more than a year, and even then the breakup left her lost for months, with no appetite, anti-social, the emotional impact more than even she had anticipated.

But Joan knows that she and Liz have always been able to help one another. Through years of talking about boys and laughing, even while living for a time on opposite coasts, they have always connected so simply -- a bond forged in elementary school, a shared love of bad jokes and summers at the beach. So while waiting for her friend, Joan prepares to help her as best she can. She gets out a fresh pack of cigarettes, a bottle of red wine, and two glasses, leaving them expectantly on the coffee table.

A moment after knocking on the door, Liz breezes into Joan's living room as if she has just heard some great news. Her shiny dark hair bounces as she hugs Joan sharply and pats her back with her tiny hands. Joan lingers with her hands on Liz's shoulders, searching her face, waiting for a frown, anger, even tears, ready to hug and comfort, but Liz only smiles quickly and then turns away, taking her coat off and moving towards the couch.

The two women settle into the couch, smiling into each others' faces, the outside edges of their thighs warm and touching as they sit close to one another. Joan rests her hand on Liz's forearm sympathetically once again trying to tell her how sorry she is, how she is ready to listen, but when Liz turns to face her she clasps her hands together in her lap and smiles happily.

"Wine?" offers Joan.

"Sure," says Liz.

As Joan removes the cork, Liz remains silent, and then, after the generous pour and a first sip, she suddenly begins to talk.

"You know, I sometimes just stop and take inventory of what's in my apartment. . . like on the long ride home from work? You know. . . ? Just for fun? I catalogue all my books and CD's and furniture and dishes and clothes. . . . I wonder what it's all worth and what some stranger going through it might think about me, like if that was all someone had to know about me? Would they know I am an only child? Would they be able to tell what I think about politics and art? Could they tell that I loved the beach and fruit sherbet? Do you ever think about that?"

Caught mid-sip, Joan just nods. Though she is lying in agreement (she has

never catalogued all her belongings, she knows she would find summing up the totality of her existence to a room full of crap to be too depressing) she wants Liz to keep talking, in hopes that she will move to what happened earlier that night.

“And then sometimes I think about if there was a fire. . . like what would I want to save first? What if I could only save three things, how would I choose? You know what I mean? I mean there’s obviously my laptop, the necklace my folks gave me for graduation, the letters we wrote as kids, but what about everything else? How can you decide what boils down to being the most important? What if only sentimental value mattered? Would you take your TV, or only the love letters and the stupid bear. . . ?” Liz laughs, a small hiccup. Joan notices Liz’s fingernails around her glass are trimmed perfectly flush with the ends of her fingers. She does not know how to respond. “I guess it doesn’t really matter as long as you made it out, right? Like you could always get more stuff. . . ? I don’t know. . . .”

Joan sips her wine and opens the pack of cigarettes as Liz is quiet, then, looking down, begins again:

“Are those new shoes?”

“Yeah, just got them. . . .”

“They’re cool. . . god, you have so many! Where do you put them all? You’re my artsy shoe fanatic friend -- I always know what makes you happy on a shopping trip!”

“Yeah, I suppose I shouldn’t waste the money.”

Liz closes her mouth and studies Joan’s new brown clogs for a minute. “I remember once back when he and I had just met, we were sitting in his dorm room on

his bed and he reached down and picked up one of my sneakers from the floor, stuck his nose in it, and said ‘I knew it! Your feet don’t even smell!’” Liz laughs again loudly as Joan silently sips her wine, looking down at their shoes. Although there is loose spring mud covering the ground outside, Liz’s black loafers shine from beneath the hem of her jeans.

Liz’s laughter dies down and they again sit in silence.

Joan asks, “So what have you been up to this past week?”

“Well, my old roommate and I go rollerblading every evening when I get home after work. . . . I go to the gym every morning, bike on the weekends. . . . You should come with us sometime, it’d get you out of the house.”

Joan opens the cigarettes and lights herself one, pulling another from the pack.

“I think I want to train for the marathon next year. . . he was training for one all spring, but I never got into running with him. I can’t believe I never tried it before, it makes you feel so great afterwards.”

“Cigarette?” offers Joan.

“Oh no! Yuck, I can’t. . . . I should start training.”

“But you’ve always smoked. . . . It calms you,” Joan protests.

“That was before,” says Liz.

“Oh,” says Joan, pushing the cigarette back into the pack and taking a long drag on her own.

Coffee

Roger Murray, the crusty old alcoholic in his early sixties, divorced long ago, estranged from two grown children, and an eternal fixture in the Insurance Department on the third floor, found love.

I learned this sometime after the day I took the stairs two flights up from Marketing to the third floor lunchroom, both for a stretch of the legs and for some fresh coffee. I was back at my desk looking over some papers before I actually tasted what I had poured into my cup. It wasn't the regular crappy office Maxwell House. It was deeper, richer, gentler. I'm no coffee connoisseur, but I'm telling you its comforting flavor practically reached out and stroked me from inside my residually stained company mug.

I finished my cup, and, glad for another excuse to leave my office and get the blood flowing back to my ass, headed down one flight to Accounting and questioned our source for inter-office gossip, Carol, to see if she noticed the new coffee.

It hadn't taken me long after I got here six years ago to learn that Carol knew everything there was to know about everyone and everything on all eight floors of Hartwell, Inc. I swear the woman could tell by the way you walked down the hall that you had been dumped last night. The other managers in my department and I joked that she took home the security tapes to find out who was on what bathroom and Twinkie break schedule. It also hadn't taken me long to realize that Carol was super-single, a divorced mom, and had the hots for me. All of this equaled strategically

avoiding her at corporate social functions, but on the other hand, it also meant that whatever information I wanted about my co-workers, however personal or trivial, was at my fingertips.

“Hey gorgeous. . . I’m on my way to a meeting, but I wondered if you knew who made the coffee this afternoon. It’s damn good -- they should get promoted.”

She had on one of those phone headsets and smiled big at me while presenting the “hold on one second” pointer finger, the nails ever fake and flawlessly manicured in flaming Fuck-Me Red.

When she finished her call, she just said, “The coffee? Upstairs right?” I nodded. “That would be Roger in Insurance. I think he’s the only one who makes the fresh pot after lunch. . .” she leaned in toward me and whispered, “probably to keep those hangovers at bay. . . . Though,” she concluded in her normal voice again, “he must get his work done somehow, ‘cause he’s been upstairs at that same desk since the Dark Ages. Who knows, maybe he’s been cleaning himself up. . . .”

After talking to Carol, I took the three flights back up to Insurance and took a tour of the floor before finding his cubicle to ask what brand the wonder-coffee was. I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I guess I still was; Roger’s bowed back appeared before me and I could tell right away he was an old school Insurance Drone. Someone who believed cleanliness and organization meant no personal items in your cubicle. No personal calls except in an emergency, no dawdling in the lunchroom by the soda machine, and certainly no prolonged summertime mid-afternoon “fresh air” (tanning) breaks.

He sat on a small hard brown leather office chair with wheels (didn’t these

guys get new stuff in the upgrade three years ago?). He was thin and wore a white short-sleeved dress shirt and blue striped tie with no jacket. He was bent over his neat desk, and moving closer, I noticed the hard-pack of Winston's peeking out of his shirt's breast pocket. His thick hair was almost all white, as was his closely cropped beard. His dry papery face was creased deeply and unevenly around the eyes and forehead like crumpled newsprint someone had later tried to re-smooth. Even from a considerate co-worker distance he smelled of stale coffee and cigarette breath and maybe something else too. As I had predicted upon first seeing him, he had no pictures hanging in his cubicle. There was only a company-logo calendar, barely marked up, and an old newspaper clipping about the Sox losing the series in the last game over a decade ago hung with colored plastic push-pins to his carpeted divider wall. I instantly recognized the yellowed picture of Buckner bent over and spreading 'em at first as the ball slipped through. What a disgrace. I remember how my college teammates and I had practically cried into our beers after the game.

“Excuse me, are you Roger Murray?”

He didn't look up from an immaculate chart he was filling in with a long, new pencil.

“Yes.”

“Well I'm Mark from downstairs in Marketing, and I heard a rumor that maybe you made the coffee this afternoon. . . ?”

“Yeah, that was me.” Again, he never even glanced up. He had a thick coastal accent, but I couldn't place the town.

“Well. . . would you mind telling me where you got it? I could get some for

the office too. . . .”

“Who knows,” he cut in, “it was a gift. But I think it came from some pastry place around Winthrop or Marblehead.” Then, below his breath, but not unkindly, “she would’ve gone there.” With his face buried in his chart, I got the sense he was almost talking to himself, and after that comment he remained silent even though I was still expectantly standing over him.

She. . . ? Who the hell was he talking about? His *wife*? Did this guy have a wife? I saw no wedding ring. Did he have a woman? Did he get *laid*? Uch, I couldn’t fathom. But it became clear he had no intention of telling me any more, so I thanked him stiffly and headed back down to my own windowed office. The office that came with my five-year review. The one my mother and sister had insisted on driving all the way downtown one Saturday to get a proud look at. The one that said to them that maybe I would someday be more successful than my father living alone in our big old house in Weston. The one she had let him keep in the settlement, despite his rampant whoring with that woman he had later tried to tell me in a letter was just a mid-life crisis.

In the sinking afternoon light, pushing pens and folders around in the skewed geometric patterns the five o’clock sun made across my desk, I felt legitimately sorry to have bothered him. I had disturbed a day-to-day existence he had probably established long ago as one he preferred free of unanticipated invasions. People deserve their privacy, right? And here I was spending the end of the day picturing the washed out face, the white undershirt visible through the thin, smoky-smelling dress shirt, a shaky grip on the immaculate No.2 pencil, and, despite myself, a shaky grip

on. . . his. . . parts of. . . . *She?*

Before I left that night, none of the guys, or Jen, called about meeting out for a drink, and I laughed to myself that after three weeks without a date I needed to get some short-sleeved button downs like Roger to be properly attired for my socially bleak future. Fuck suits. Think of the money I'll save.

Driving slowly home after dark, I didn't think to put on the radio for the traffic report. In my spacious and pretty bare apartment (I've been told I lack the "nesting instinct" -- give me a break), I gave in and called Jen. She already had plans. Hanging up the phone and leaning back in my big recliner, I watched a spider with spotted hairy legs scurry across my stark white ceiling.

After deciding not to bother calling anyone else, I considered a few beers to help me sleep, but instead had some cereal, read some proposals and the *Journal* in front of the tube, watched the eleven o'clock news, and finally got into bed and lay sleepless as usual until after three.

I asked Carol about him the next morning. She knew a little. Between fielding phone calls and munching out of the little heart-shaped bowl of Hershey's kisses on her desk, she imparted the bare essentials out of whatever files she kept on all of us in that hairsprayed head of hers. She knew he'd been with the company long before any of us. He had not been promoted in ten years. Maybe he drank too much, maybe he lacked a degree, maybe he didn't do a good enough job. . . who knew why our old boss (maybe the only one here longer than Roger) kept him around. Apparently, a few years ago Roger had liked to go to Sox games with one other young

guy in Insurance, and this guy had told her a few things about Roger before he left (was fired?). She was careful to add, again in an almost whisper, “I hear he was quite a drinker too, and that they made more than one scene at company parties with open bars.”

She had learned that Roger had a son and a daughter. The son was trying to act in New York, rarely mentioned, maybe gay. The daughter had an illegitimate child his ex-wife helped her raise. He had lived in the same house in Nahant, practically on the shoreline, his whole life. Probably inherited the place from his family. The secretaries said if you announced his ex-wife as his wife (she had kept his name after the divorce) over the intercom when she placed her seasonal call to check up on him, he snapped at you.

The afternoon coffee continued to be the same incredible blend I had first tasted days before, and it only served to keep my mind on Roger upstairs, his nose bent into his charts. I even mused that it couldn't be cheap stuff and decided to take one Saturday to see if I could find it. Yet despite a whole day touring the coast towns, I never found any pastry shop carrying coffee for sale.

On that day, all I found were lots of rocky beaches with frigid waves slopping themselves on the hard sand, dragging at stubborn half-buried candy wrappers and condoms. There were plenty of dumpy old snack bars along the shore-line roads. Giving in to my hunger around three, I stopped at one and sampled the rubbery fried clams with a generic fountain soda to wash them down. And there were plenty of rundown weather-beaten houses, one or two stories with peeling paint and glassed-in

front porches. Had I passed Roger's? Overtired on the way back into town after dark, a few joyriding Pontiacs almost killed me while laying rubber to merge onto Route 1 by the strip clubs.

*

Maybe I had just never noticed him before, but like a word you learn and then encounter many times in the next few days, though you can't remember seeing it anywhere before that, Roger is suddenly on the radar. I watch him slink out of the big windowless florescent lunchroom with an over-sweetened khaki-colored cup of coffee around three every afternoon. He has a tall slight build and moves quickly, without any particular grace, as if he *wants* to remain unnoticed when outside his own cubicle habitat. He does not look at me or smile, even though I perch myself near the coffee machine, waiting to see if he'll start a conversation. What's more, in the following weeks, I learn that he eats at noon everyday, and takes no more than exactly a half hour to finish everything. I watch him eat the same goddamned lunch every single day. A ham sandwich on rye, an orange, more coffee. He sits alone seemingly without care that people come and go and never acknowledge him. Doesn't he want a little friendly chat about sports or something to break up his day? Who does he talk to? I can't remember if his cubicle even has a phone.

Then one day I take a sip of my afternoon coffee and practically choke. It is suddenly the old crap it used to be. Instant freeze-dried whatever, and my feeling of

slow comfort and luxury that I had grown to enjoy so much about the last few hours of the day is gone in a gulp. So the next day I take lunch a little early to see if I can get anything more out of Roger about the coffee.

I am already seated an unthreatening kitty-corner from where he always parks himself to eat when he comes into the lunchroom. He unpacks his usual and refills his coffee before sitting down. He doesn't even seem to notice that I am sitting at the table with him, when he usually eats alone, other people preferring to eat later, or at the other end of the long white table.

“You're Roger, right?”

He looks up quickly and then back to his sandwich. “Yeah, that's me.”

“Remember I came up the other week to ask you about that coffee you've been making? I'm Mark. . . ?”

“Yeah. You liked that coffee, right?” he says without looking at me, busily stirring his freshly steaming cup.

“Yeah right, that was me. Well I noticed we're out of it and I wanted to know again if you could remember where it came from so I could get some more for the office. It's the best coffee we've ever had here.”

“Sorry kid, I told you before, it was a gift, so I don't have a clue.” Again I notice a thick Boston accent, but not one I'm familiar with.

“Maybe you could ask the person who gave it to you. . . ?”

“I don't know. I'll see. It's just coffee anyway. There's a Starbucks three blocks away,” he adds before beginning to eat his sandwich quickly as if to signal he doesn't have time to waste talking. I take the hint.

“Well, thanks anyway,” I pronounce loudly, and take the rest of my lunch up to my office.

One night later that week work has gotten way off schedule, and I’m frustrated with thinking about the hours I need to put in to catch up. I decide to try Jen again, even though she’s turned me down the last two weekends. On the phone her tone is sweet and we crack some jokes for a few minutes about how much we both have to do.

“So would you want to forget about work for a little while and just grab a bite with me tonight?” I ask.

“Oh. . . I’m sorry Mark, but these reports can’t wait. I would, but, not tonight. Another time. . . .”

It’s almost seven and I really need a break. I’m not sure if Jen wants me to give up or not, but I don’t have time to think about it now. Instead, I head up the stairs to Roger’s floor to check if he has any of the coffee stashed in his desk (of course not), or any receipts for it around, or buried in the trashcan. A thorough search (I’m careful about exact replacement of everything of course) reveals this guy has absolutely nothing but graphs and reports in his desk, and yes, there isn’t even a phone. I would have felt better had there been a book, some junk food, a frigging porno, *anything*. I sigh in frustration at Buckner, feeling ridiculous to be sneaking around like this. But then I check the flat middle desk drawer and find an open pack of his Winston’s. I go out on the freezing fire escape and light one with the matches stuffed in the front of the pack. I puff tentatively. I have never been a smoker, but

they aren't even half bad. The cold air and the smoke are refreshing. I feel more awake. I look around at the hundreds of high-rise windows surrounding our building. About half of them are lit up. I can see a few people hunched and still over their desks, and others on the phone gesturing energetically. I smoke Roger's Winston's on the fire escape a bunch more times over the next few weeks until one night the tiny dark cleaning lady finds me walking around the empty place, and though I casually say hi, she cowers by her huge supply cart and glares at me like I am going to jump her.

Sometimes on my silent drives home, I imagine Roger in his small Cape-style near the beach (not as well insulated from the elements as one would hope). He fries and eats a tough piece of Stop N' Shop steak and falls asleep on the stiff couch in front of a PBS history special, a depleted open bottle (Beam? Dewars? Daniels?), not recapped, resting on the floor near a limp overhanging hand. He remains on the couch, pulling a worn plaid blanket over him in the dark, or maybe he wakes suddenly and disoriented at the same time every night and guiltily wanders off to bed in a warmer back bedroom. The windows rattling from the harsh, old Atlantic air never disturb him, yet he awakens automatically, without fatigue, at a stale five AM each morning.

*

And then I work late one Friday night. Unlike during the week, I hate the

barren office after five on Fridays, but it is month-end and certain reports on our progress have to be finished before I can go. I am hoping I can get home in time to try to catch Jen again, or one of the guys, to go for a drink. Otherwise, I could probably get to sleep early, after this long week, or so I hope. The beers before bed *had* been helping.

Already in the elevator, pressing the button for the ground floor, I hear a bubbly woman's voice, "Hold the elevator please!" She trots on board, over the threshold, completely filling the cramped office-carpet-smelling-space with a thick flowery perfume. She beams her wrinkled face at me in thanks and I grin back in response. I am pretty sure she isn't one of ours. I step further back against the wall so I'm not touching any part of her. She positions her round body in the open door to hold it.

She is altogether bigger than me. She carries a canvas bag with the logo of our local library on the side and is dressed in a pants outfit of huge purple flowers. She wears a blue velvet hat with a fake felt rose pinned to the side. Under it, a pale smiling face, sagging, rouged and lipsticked, framed by long, thick gray hair. The nuttiest achievement of the outfit is the green wool hooded cape, adorned with a silver brooch of a cat. Stray hairs (long ones -- hers, short multi-colored ones -- not human) cling to the cape. The cape itself seems to be shedding and in need of a brushing. My lingering adolescent compulsiveness about my grooming resists the urge to pick off a hair or two. My mother would hate the hat. My sister would hate the Robin Hood cape, and even crazy Aunt Betty who would wear both with style, would hate the big floral print.

Still in the elevator doorway, she calls out, “Oh dear, now hurry so we can get the chocolates and some more coffee before the start of the program.” I hear slow footsteps, quickening. “You hate to miss the opening part where they show the crime happening. . . .”

Roger Murray enters the elevator. Though he glances quickly at me, his face doesn’t show any recognition. Thinking about what I had been doing in his desk a few weeks ago, I guess I am relieved. On the ride down, she grabs his hand and interlaces her chubby fingers with his bony paw. On her tip-toes, she pecks him on the earlobe, leaving a red smudge. She pats his hair, though it is already in place, and brushes the back of her hand down his white beard.

“I know where we can get the stuff near here, not so far away,” he says in his indistinct accent.

“Good,” she chirps, “after your show, maybe we can call and see how Michael is doing. Didn’t you say he was going to be nine next week? . . . I’d like to meet them you know. . . .”

“We can call. . . later.”

I watch him decorously present his thin arm for her to take as they step into the lobby. She grabs it heavily and wraps her thick forearm under his. As they stuff into one compartment of the revolving door together, she begins to sing operatically. I linger as they spin around and out before stepping inside myself. Amazed, I see him take a quick step out of the door onto the street a perfect split second ahead of her so as to lead her out of the glass triangle.

Outon the frigid street lined with darkened windows of downtown lunch

spots, they go quickly on ahead. I watch his thin frame next to her swaying buoyant one. Their distance from me increasing, I watch his linear hips shift rhythmically as he adjusts his stride smoothly in time to her rushed bouncy amble. My garage is in the other direction, but I follow. Though their intertwined arms hinder them slightly, they hurry together. I watch them trot across the street. Walking behind, I see them mount the concrete steps towards the neighboring office plaza's garage. I stand on the curb, the wake of rushing traffic and wind holding me at the edge of the crosswalk, and let them disappear into the blackness.

The Waitress

“Everybody has a story. It’s just that some people’s are more interesting than other’s.”

He tells the waitress this for the hundredth time, catching her eye as she delivers beers to his table of friends during their Thursday night poker game. She smiles politely, sliding full mugs in front of each large man at the table.

“So you’ve been here, what, six months? And you still won’t tell me your story. Everybody tells me their story. Isn’t that right guys?”

The table of heavy-set men emit several low grunts, ignoring their friend while squinting and pursing lips between fleshy jowls. They evaluate their hands with dissatisfaction, fanning and re-ordering the plastic-coated cards.

“I can tell by just looking at a person. . . and you, my dear, are definitely hiding an interesting story.”

The waitress looks up from the beers to his handsome face. She smiles silently, only to once again take stock of the situation: In his favor, a thick beard, peppered gray and white, the same color hair, his after-work dress shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, exposing slender forearms and wrists leading to delicate long-fingered hands, mischievous light eyes, and a big open smile whenever he sees her. A smile that makes her grin back in spite of herself and tell him lots of things, though never much about her own life.

And she possesses only straight brown hair wrapped in a bun, a thin gold band

on her finger, nicked and scratched over time, an apron. She wonders again if he sees something different to make him want to talk with her so much over the months she's been there.

“Come have a shooter with us. Bring another round with one for yourself. . . . Come sit down when you're finished. Don't you finish soon? I'm going to get that interesting story come hell or highwater.” He flashes his bright grin at her from behind his cards.

She smiles apologetically over her shoulder at him before returning to the waitress station.

The young bartender says, “You should go have a drink with them. It's almost the end of the week, you've earned it.” She is surprised. He is already pouring, as if making her mind up for her. “These are on the house. . . . I'll bring them over. You have the day off tomorrow anyway.” He smiles from behind the shiny lacquered taps and she returns the smile appreciatively.

He makes the guy next to him move over so she can sit beside him at their crowded table.

“Should we deal you in?”

She shakes her head.

He leans close; she can smell beer and almost feel his beard against her face.

“So what cards should I keep?”

She points to the jack and queen. He places the others face down in a pile and asks for three more.

The bartender comes over with a tray of shooters and beer. After two drinks, she can feel her face become warmer and her feet begin to tingle. The dim hanging lamps and dark wood walls appear duller, gentler.

“So no story, eh?” he probes, “How am I going to learn more about you than what that pretty face says?”

She drops her head and then looks away at the other men, wondering if they are listening.

“C’mon, all this time, you hide, but you can’t hide forever. Jeez, I’ve told you *everything*, and all I’ve gotten back is a boring snippet here and there. . . .” He raises his hands in exasperation at the group. “Fellas, tell me, after all this time, what do I have to do to get more than some superficial chatter out of the lady?”

More uninterested grunts, reshuffling of cards.

She meets his questioning eyes, smiles, and helps herself to a four and an eight in his hand, placing them face down in a pile.

The bartender brings more beers and reminds her to finish her side work before going home. Her warm feet are expanding like liquid in her shoes, but thinking about getting up again, she begins to feel her back tighten and ache.

He looks at her, concerned. “How about I do those damn ashtrays and ketchups for you? Will that buy me a story?” She has been waiting for him to begin this exchange, their nightly game before she must return home to everything that’s always still there.

“How about no,” she replies quietly, with the smallest of smiles.

“How about I buy you another drink and deal you in?”

“How about I need to finish up and get home.”

“How about some more shooters!” he bellows at the bartender. At this she knows she must get back to her work before he presses her further to relax with another drink.

“How about you all have a nice rest of your evening.” She is speaking to the table, avoiding seeing him staring at her face.

The shooters arrive quickly. The men pinch the glasses with two or three fat fingers and toss them back.

She has risen from the table. He swallows his shooter too quickly, reaching out a hand and coughing at her, “How about I take all these chumps’ money in the next five minutes while you finish up, and then we sit until closing and I get your story?”

“How about not tonight.”

“How about tomorrow night?”

“How about I don’t work tomorrow.”

“How about just the first ten years now, and you can save the next installment for Saturday.”

She rolls her eyes with a weak smile, feeling her face, hands, and feet all going numb. “How about you worry about your own story and I go home.”

He grabs her wrist tightly and she turns back to him; it is the first time he has done this. His face has slackened. She wonders if he is more drunk tonight, or just tired. “How about that first night you were here, all smiley and hurrying around, and that beer I sent down to your station you wouldn’t even drink. . . .”

“How about you drink some water and I’ll buy you one to make up for it next time,” she replies gently.

“How about you let me drive you home and I get the teenage years on the way.” He grins.

She rolls her eyes at him again and turns to go. “How about goodnight. I’ll see you next time, ok?”

“How about it. Yeah, how about it, huh?” he mumbles looking down at his cards, then at the other men studying their cards, then at her, then back to his own cards. Tonight she cannot read his expression. He mumbles again into the cards, “How ‘bout it, huh?” but then, looking up, he gives her another big grin, pronouncing each word deliberately, “How ‘bout did I tell you that I’m secretly *in love* with you?”

There is a moment of silence as if no heard him in which she stares directly at him, her face flushed, smiling.

Suddenly the table erupts into laughter. The doughy faces open, the big bodies shake, stout fingers adorned with gigantic school rings cover round open mouths.

Still smiling, she searches his face questioningly. Amidst everyone, he is laughing himself in surprise. His glassy eyes linger on hers, but they are neither warm nor cold; they give away nothing. As her smile fades, she too begins to laugh loud and hard. She watches his mouth wide open with laughter.

She returns to her station to finish for the night. She is still laughing to herself while she wipes the dark wood tables with a damp rag and empties the ashtrays. She chokes over small sharp chuckles while refilling the salt and pepper shakers. She

giggles continually while counting her tips and depositing her cash in the safe. She grins, her face frozen open in this expression, through one last cold beer, alone in the basement office, her feet up on the cluttered desk.

She chuckles audibly through closed lips on her chilly walk home. She listens to the snow crunch pleasingly under her heavy feet. Looking around her, dark store windows appear calmed, lighted houses cozy, but she does not even notice that passers-by hearing her unceasing cold laughter turn back to look at her, wondering if she is crazy.

At home in her dark bedroom, she smiles, her mouth open, as she takes off her smoky clothes and thick-soled shoes. She giggles automatically as she removes the pins from her long hair, brushes her teeth, pressing a bit too hard, and splashes cold water on her face. She slides her chilled bare body under the sheets and blankets. With a stiff series of residual chuckles, she spreads herself fully across the empty bed and falls asleep.

Eyes closed, her sleeping face is still frozen in its earlier grin when her husband comes home and shuffles into the bedroom. He drops his clothes into a pile of shoes, socks, and shirt, topping it off with a heavy thud as his pants and big belt buckle hit the wood floor.

The sound awakens the waitress, who, remembering his beard near her cheek and his laughing expressionless eyes, begins to laugh all over again. She is laughing silently and very hard from deep in her stomach when her husband slides into the bed next to her, and especially when he reaches one cold hand over to her and rests it, too

casually, on her hip. He can't hear her laugh, though he can feel a slight shaking in her hip, which he figures is her shivering, so he pulls her rigid body closer and draws the covers tightly up to her chin.

Work

It's nearing the end of the day. I've passed the water cooler candy bar break at three and I'm into the home stretch, my eyes and back hurt from sitting at my computer all day. I've long since slipped off my navy pumps under my desk to air out my swollen feet. Again I stare into my computer screen, past the numbers I don't want to face, and I can see reflected the silhouette of my head, round, opaque, and featureless. My blank head blocks the bright reflection of the long ceiling light over me and the big round wall clock behind me that hangs over my shoulder ticking unceasingly day in and day out. I peer into my coffee cup which is now empty and I'd like a fresh cup, but I know I should get started on the quarterly report due at the end of the day before I get up.

So I force myself to open a spreadsheet on the computer and start plugging in the receivables. As I had already guessed, they're not optimistic. The totals are lower than what my boss projected. I haven't been able to keep the department on target this season. I haven't been collecting what we are due. I mean, they're not disastrous either, I'll be able to explain them, pass them off, but they're below the line, just getting by. Just barely adequate. I won't be able to disguise this fact with a happy face when I present them.

In am in the middle of considering the impending bad meeting with my boss, and starting to worry over the time ticking away, when out of the blue I realize that my husband doesn't love me anymore. I have no specific reason to think this, no new

evidence has suddenly presented itself, and yet I feel certain that recently there's been a change.

I try to ignore my dry mouth and silhouette head on the computer, to look again at the numbers. My husband is not very good at math. I have to pay all the bills at home because he is afraid of screwing up the simple addition or subtraction involved. Actually, I think he just doesn't want to take the time to do it carefully, so he has me do it, saying that he doesn't want to screw it up. I suddenly realize he does a lot of little things like this. Like he's afraid of ruining a blouse I love in the wash, so I always do all the laundry, even when it's only his stuff that needs washing. And when we go out, I drive because the traffic gets him too angry. So it seems better for both of us in the end if I just drive everywhere. But then I never get to sleep or look at the scenery. If he really loved me, wouldn't he make an exception to let me look at the scenery? Over all these years, what pretty views have I missed because he can't control his temper? What green mountains, or fields, what birds or grazing cows have I passed up, never to be gotten back again? Wouldn't he want to make that effort to control his temper, even though he has explained many times that he *just can't*? What does *just can't* mean anyway? I mean, I hate visiting his drunken witch of a sister every year at Thanksgiving, but I *have to*, for us. Doesn't *for us* outweigh *just can't*? And recently, I remember that he no longer makes me coffee for my car ride to work in the morning. For this he didn't even offer any explanation. It just stopped happening and I didn't ask. I glare at the Dunkin Donuts cup in the trash can from this morning's drive. This is clearly the beginning of the end. My stomach begins to turn and my face feels hot.

My reflected head in the computer screen still stares at me, immobile and inscrutable. Maybe I'm not being fair. He *does* still hold my hand at the movies the way I like, and he still leaves me notes telling me "have a good day" in my briefcase. But is *that* really love? I mean, he probably still loves me on some level, but it's not the really strong, crazy kind of love like it used to be. It just makes the cut. Adequate, but no more. Certainly not the "I'd jump in front of a bus for you" kind of love. Like back in high school when you'd sit across the red-checkered vinyl table cloth at Papa Gino's with your boyfriend and he'd just sit there staring at you over a pepperoni slice as if he couldn't believe you were there, as if he was about to spontaneously combust because his sneaker brushed yours five minutes ago. Or what about in college when he would climb the outside of your dorm, risking life and limb, so that he could desperately hold your little breasts, just for a minute before you made him sit across the room and pretend to talk about your biology homework. And after you finally *did* get married? He would call three times a day to say he missed you, run home from the subway panting, never forgetting the groceries you asked for. I can't remember the last time he picked up any groceries.

But all this spontaneous combusting aside, the clock ticks and groans the half-hour behind my head reminding me that I should get started already. Yet I can't shake the knowledge that my husband just wouldn't jump in front of a bus for me. I think about last night: He asked me to pass the salad at dinner with this tired coldness in his voice. He said, "Could you pass the salad?" Not, "Honey, please pass me the salad," but only "Could you pass the salad?" I'm sure something is different. And he doesn't even have the courage to tell me about how he feels, to discuss our problems.

I can't live like this. I don't want a marriage of salad passing without total disclosure, a clear conscience. I decide that the next time he asks for the salad, I will refuse to pass it to him. I will say, "For the record, I cannot pass you this salad with a clear conscience, because I know that you no longer love me."

By now I have a stomach ache, a headache, my eyes are burning, and my throat stings. I am disgusted by the unfinished report still sitting before me. I look into the gray screen, my empty coffee mug; I hear the unceasing staccato clock. How can I do work when my husband's conviction that our love is worth dying for is gone?

My head is in my hands. I think I could be near tears when there is a knock at my office door and my boss sticks her head in.

"How are those numbers coming?"

Trapped, I sigh pitifully. I want to blurt out, "My husband doesn't love me anymore!" but my dark silhouette face stares in warning to keep quiet.

"I think I just need a little more time. . . ."

My boss studies my face for a slow moment, her expression concerned. "Ok." She thinks for a minute and then I can't believe it when she tells me gently, "If you want, you could go home early tonight and then just finish up in the morning? There's no sense in ruining your evening staying late when we can do it tomorrow. Go home and have a nice dinner with your husband, that always relaxes me after a long day. We'll start again bright and early tomorrow, okay?"

My silhouette nods in agreement and the busy clock ticks its approval. I look at them mistrustfully.

"I'll see. . . . Maybe I'll just stay and finish up tonight."

Lucky's

I had been complaining over and over, all my life really, about my round hips and thighs. My fiancé, Jack, and the others before, always insisted that I was beautiful, truly feminine, but I always imagined myself as one of those walking Fruit of the Loom characters when I looked in the mirror. Yes, the pear. Of course, a giant pear! I couldn't just smile at my own round face in the mirror and pose gracefully when getting dressed. No, I always had to stick my arms out from my sides and toddle from one leg to the other as if I was wearing a huge round fruit suit. I would cross my eyes and stick out my tongue. The expression went with my pear-ness.

Once Jack even caught me doing this act in the mirror and told me I was being ridiculous, a child, that I was a very beautiful woman and not some chubby "weeble-wobble" (another one of my favorite imaginings -- if I fall down, I roll right back up again). But secretly I knew I wasn't *being* ridiculous, I *was* ridiculous. And if I was doomed to Fruit of the Loom status forever, deep down I really wanted to be a banana. Even a soft, over-ripe banana would have sufficed.

So the other night, my ever-patient and loving Jack turned to me on his pillow before going to sleep and said, "Diane? Honey, I am worried about you becoming more and more preoccupied with these silly ideas you have about being fat. You have always been too worried about it, but recently I see it growing into a bigger problem. I can see you looking at your reflection whenever we pass store windows on the street, and I know about your little daily "human fruit" routine in the mirror. And what

about *us*? You haven't wanted to go camping yet this season like we always do. And every time I bring up setting a date, you cringe and tell me you aren't ready yet. What has changed so much that you don't have the enthusiasm about us that you did a few months ago? My mother has even started calling me at work from back East asking me if you've changed your mind. I'm running out of things to tell her since you said you wanted to save the money to take some more classes first, but you haven't *taken* any classes honey. . . ." He stopped and sighed. Jack is always careful not to be too accusatory. To compensate for his frustrations, he reached over and stroked my curly hair.

I just looked back at him and shrugged like a kid who had been bad.

"It worries me sweetie. It really does. I want my happy Diane back. And I've been thinking. Maybe you just need to conquer your demons. Maybe if you joined a gym it would make you feel better about yourself, more confident. You could get over these ridiculous ideas and see just how pretty you really are."

I thought about his suggestion. I wondered if I could at least be a streamlined and toned pear, the firmest one in the fruitbowl. So I agreed, and hugged Jack under the covers with a warmth I hadn't felt in ages.

I did some research when I was bored with the phones and filing at work and found that the least expensive gym in town was called Lucky's. I went over after work to check it out. It turned out to be a warehouse gym owned by this guy named Lucky. It was across from the discount mall on Route 209. There were no frills, no sauna, no hot tub, just two open rooms with concrete floors, lots of bikes, treadmills,

mats, and rusty old freeweights. Lucky himself told me he is always there.

Lucky was a sweetheart, about fifty, with fluffy white hair styled in a mullet, a t-shirt cut at the shoulders showing tattooed muscles, and red nylon shorts with tennis shoes. He was always smiling, huge white teeth that were probably dentures, but gleaming and inspiring nonetheless. So I joined on the spot and had Lucky show me how to use the equipment. He encouraged me saying, “Come as often as you want, but I always think new folks gotta plan for at least three days a week to get the flavor of feeling healthier and stronger. Little lady, I guarantee this place will make you feel great in no time,” and he punctuated his certainty with the biggest, most blinding grin I’d seen yet.

So I attacked working out like there was nothing else to do in the world. For three months I worked out five days a week after work and sometimes on the weekends too. In my baby blue sweatsuit and new sneakers that Jack bought for me, I rode the exercise bikes, trotted on the treadmills, and struggled against all shapes and sizes of rusty dumbbells.

However, to my dismay, the walls in front of the freeweights were covered by huge mirrors in which the other patrons admired themselves pumping iron. They heaved the dumbbells standing, sitting, on their backs, on all fours, all the time watching each defined bulge and flex. They watched themselves, and they watched each other. The guys checked out who was lifting more weight than whom, the women who had bigger hair than whom, and both sexes watched each other. It reminded me of a junior high dance.

The other patrons: Large men who looked a lot like Lucky and spent a lot of time talking to him at the front desk between sets. Tiny women in leopard spandex leggings and bodysuits threaded through their butts that wore makeup and had their nails done before showing up. After only a few days, I recognized the same group always there when I arrived and still lifting or chatting when I left. They were like their own little club of superheros in mullets and tights. I wondered if anyone else there besides me had a full-time job.

Me: More than a bit clumsy on all the equipment, it was obvious I was a newcomer to this sweat-smelling worn mats and clanking iron world. And seeing myself working out in all those mirrors didn't exactly dissipate the ideas I had always held. Now, I was a stiff pear about to drop freeweights on my toe, struggling with shaking arms and an uncooperative five pound dumbbell (the smallest in the freeweight lineup -- I think I was the only one who used them). Now a giant green orb bouncing side to side- rhythmically, occasionally stumbling in order to keep up with the treadmill. Watching myself day after day became a trial in itself. I would go home tired and sore, my brain saturated with pictures of round me huffing and puffing, never looking fit, or even comfortable. My beginner status so obvious, after the first few days, the regulars (thankfully) stopped watching me, though I wish I could have done the same. Despite Jack's hopeful encouragement when I got home at night, and what Lucky had promised the first day, I never felt great.

For those three months, I worked out hard. And every week I weighed myself in the locker room and found there was either no change, or I was heavier. I was

putting on muscle, but there was apparently nothing my body was willing to give up in exchange. I was a pear and I would stay a pear. I cut way back on food (and sometimes even water) to see what changes I could produce. Looking in the mirror at home before bed, I became a wan, hollow-cheeked pear. My stomach may have been flatter, and I was in a constant crabby mood, but my proportions remained those of a giant pear. I was simply a stronger, more solid pear.

“Honey, you know you need to eat *more*, not less, if you’re working out so much. It’s not healthy to starve yourself,” Jack would plead with me regularly at dinner. “You’re looking fantastic, but you are pale and distant, sweetheart. *Please* eat some more.” I was sick of hearing him, sick of feeling like a space cadet, and sick of being so tired at work all the time.

So I gave up. Just like that, after three months I’d had it and didn’t feel bad about thinking that Lucky’s and all the over-built men and skinny women there could go fuck themselves. But I was too embarrassed to tell Jack that I had given up so quickly and completely. He kept coming home from time to time with new shorts or sweatsuits he wanted to see me in. I would put them on before bed and listen to him tell me, “You’re looking great honey, I can see some new muscle in your arms. . . .” as I would roll my eyes to myself and think, “Chapter Five: The Pear Gets a New Outfit.” But I would only smile at Jack. How could I ever fault my sweet Jack? He tried so hard with me. So I continued to go to the gym, half-heartedly. Until I discovered what Lucky called his “side” business.

The thing is, on the back wall of the weight room was a door. Through there, I

discovered, was a dark room full of bright blinking arcade games and pre-teen boys banging their slender loins against the consoles while pounding the launching and firing buttons with their sweaty fists. Their complete absorption in the games was mesmerizing. They barely acknowledged each other, but instead stared straight ahead into the large screens that erupted in sounds and colors that reflected on their small faces. When they lost, they kicked the front of the machines and cursed words that seemed newly invented coming from their mouths (“cocksucker,” “dickhead,” and “motherfucker” seemed to be particularly popular), only to slip in more quarters for another game. When they won, they raised their arms above their heads in triumph and high-fived whoever was next to them. They took time carefully spelling their names for the winners’ list on the screen before digging in their jeans for more change. It was too loud to talk much in there, and yet it was strangely soothing to listen to the cacophony of electronic sounds. There was a lingering smell of gym mats and then the added aroma of cheap, adolescent-boy cologne. One disappeared into the chaos. No one noticed me watching that day, hovering in the darkness seeing how the game controls worked. I began to slip in to watch more and more each day after.

I even started ending my workouts early in order to play a few games myself. In the buzzing, beeping, exploding, dim arcade, I lost myself like the boys, my eyes sucked into the screens, my hands controlling the video extensions of my body -- cocky streetfighters or spaceship gunners -- their huge cartoon limbs did what I wanted, their aim was dead-on. When I won, I left my initials on the winner’s list, hoping to beat my own score the next day. And I soon found that the claw game (the big glass case filled with stuffed toys where you have to work a metal claw to pick

them up and drop them into a chute in a certain amount of time) tucked in the back corner was my thing.

When I first ventured over to the older glass machine in the corner, I wondered why no one ever played it. After all, it offered prizes. After a few rounds I realized that the claw was designed to make it nearly impossible to grasp and carry the toys over to the chute, but I could soon tell what the right angle was, how to really hook the soft bears and gorillas; I had a feel for it. And winning was addictive. Those little toys dropped out into my hands and, unlike with the video-games, I could actually hold the fruit of my victory. I mean this game was *my thing* like nothing's ever been in my life.

When we met, Jack and I loved to camp and hike and explore, but we're no athletes. I always toddled behind him, having to stop to catch my breath on a patch of grass when my pear-bottom was weighing me down. We would take pictures of pretty things out there, but we're no artists. More often than not, we never got every exposure of our film back from the drug store because they were so blurry or dark that they couldn't be developed. And while Jack always loves looking at the pictures we get back, to remember the time alone out in the woods, the fun we had hiking and toasting marshmallows, I always see where I could have focused or framed my picture better.

I work for a law firm, but I can't decide if I want to study to actually take those classes I've been making Jack save our wedding money for and try to move up, or stay as support staff my whole life. And Jack has his buildings, he runs the guys on

the job, he's level-headed and they need him, but we'll never have enough for much more than what we have now. The list of things that we don't do well, or more than adequately, separately or together, goes on and on -- tennis, cards, trivia-- and it can really wear me down. We're just not graceful people. We handle ourselves best together in our little apartment. And this always seems to work for Jack. But I could slip two quarters into the claw machine, and more times than not, I was a winner. Even the kids who were always there, whom I began to recognize and nod to when I walked in during the week, couldn't beat my record. I was a natural.

Sometimes those boys would even crowd around when I put my money in the slot. It was like the claw came to life and I was the only one who could master it. "Bet she'll never be able to get that turtle on the bottom," they would taunt, "Naw, the dog in the corner is much harder, look at the angle you idiot. . . . Fifty cents says she gets both in three games and you two owe me for last time anyway." When they won a bet on me, it drove them wild with excitement to cheer and rub the loser's face in it.

I finally asked Lucky if I needed the gym membership to use the game room. Looking concerned and hiding the stellar teeth, he said, "I . . . guess not, darlin'."

So I didn't tell Jack, but I began using the money for the gym dues to play the claw machine instead. We have a joint checking account and each month I would write a check out to Lucky's. I began making the check out to "cash" and writing "Lucky's" on the description line. When Jack noticed this, it was easy enough to tell him that Lucky had asked for cash, so he didn't have to report it, I assumed. Jack

seemed to accept this. So my gym dues became lots of dollars, fed to the change machine, to become piles of quarters, fed to the claw machine, to become all kinds of small stuffed beanbag toys. Any type you could imagine. I even developed calluses on my hand from operating the claw lever, and I was careful not to open or damage them in the shower.

By now I couldn't get through the day without my claw fix. I don't know what I did with all my time before it. So Jack wouldn't be too suspicious, I gave most of the toys away to the junior high guys (for their little sisters, of course). Some of them even asked me for rides home, or to be picked up from school to get to Lucky's before they had to be at dinner. They would pile in the back of the pickup after I got off work, or on the weekends. I felt like a little league mom taking the team out. They loved riding in the back of the truck, just sitting and laughing with each other, the wind blowing their sloppy stringy hair around. We never spoke much, they smiled shyly at me, but usually uttered no more than a few, "thank you ma'ams," or "good game today, see you tomorrow."

Finally, I was even avoiding a camping trip with Jack because I was afraid if I left the claw for too long, I would lose my skills.

I was spending so much time at Lucky's that I guess I didn't notice Jack's growing concern. Because all of a sudden one night he rolled over on his pillow before going to sleep and looked at me pointedly. I could tell there was something serious on his mind by the way his forehead scrunched up. I wondered if he was thinking about the gym dues checks again. "Honey, you are away so much in the

evening now, over at the gym. . . . And I know I'm a fool, and this is a terrible thing to say. . . but I have to ask -- are you having an *affair* with Lucky?"

"Oh honey, *no*. I've just been working out a lot." This was the first thing that came out of my mouth. I don't know why I didn't just tell Jack then that I was a video game junkie, but I didn't, I was embarrassed; so I stuck to my story. "It makes me feel good. Haven't you noticed how happy I've been lately? That's all, I like the routine of it. I would never. . . ."

"I know. I'm sorry I asked. Really, Diane, I'm just being silly." But this made me feel even worse. I would tell him soon, I had to.

A few nights later, I was at the claw lever working my magic with a few of the boys watching silently, when I felt a tap at my shoulder. I turned around to see Jack standing behind me, an odd look on his face. The boys quickly dispersed.

"Are you *spying* on me?"

"No. No, I just. . . wanted to talk to you. You've been so distant. . . and I know there's nothing going on with Lucky, but. . . well, he told me you haven't been paying your dues."

"So you *are* checking up on me."

"But Diane? What's going on? Is there something I should know about?"

Jack's brow was so wrinkled I thought he was going to cry. I put my hand on his shoulder and burst into relieved laughter. "Honey, I play *arcade games* all the time over here. With these junior high kids. Nothing more than that. Well -- I don't work out anymore. It's ridiculous I know. I play stupid games all the time." I was

nearly hysterical with laughter now, thinking about how this sounded coming out of my mouth, about how I had felt that I had to keep this from Jack. “I’m no cheater, just a video game addict, honey. And I love it. I love losing myself in this game. *I love winning* -- I’m one of the best players in here!” With my outburst some of the boys looked over from their games, curiosity on their thin faces.

While I laughed until my stomach hurt, I didn’t notice that Jack wasn’t laughing with me.

“Come home with me Diane. Follow me home, this is enough already. This has gotten out of hand.” Jack turned and left. I followed him, silent as a scolded child.

Jack rarely gets upset, but I knew he was really unhappy with me. I wasn’t sure if it was the wasted dues, or the lying, or what, but I knew the best thing to do was stay out of his way until he was ready to talk.

Back home, I got ready for bed without a word and slipped under the covers without looking at him. Then Jack got out of bed, and I heard him rummaging in the livingroom. He came back with an envelope in his hand. He gave it to me and said, “Jesus Christ, Diane. *This is us* winning.”

Inside were a small pile of photos from our last few vacations, I remembered them, some of Jack’s favorites. The pictures were of green mountains. And Jack and I. Me hugging his side next to our tent, him laughing. Him piggy-backing me the last few yards of the trail to the road, the most happy and relaxed look on his face I had ever seen. Then some more of green trees, flowers, and a huge dark green frog that had crossed our path.

But despite what Jack thought about those pictures, what I saw there is what I always see: The pictures of us, taken by passing strangers, are clear and joyful. They are centered in the frame and in sharp focus. But the pictures we take, of each other, of the landscape and whatever flowers and animals catch us -- they are just plain old bad pictures, sometimes out of focus, sometimes a hint of a pink thumb in the corner, off-kilter and off-center. Looking at those pictures then, I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. I thought, "Both of us, we can't even handle *this*."

And that last picture, the blurry close-up of the big frog sitting in our path, more real than if he was in a movie and not afraid that we'd almost stepped on him? That picture, you can't tell how beautiful that frog is, for Christ's sake. How can you tell how amazing he is if you can't even get a good look in his eyes?

Nostalgia

“When the idea of being on my high-school girlfriend’s back porch at the end of summer with a warm keg of Bud, some weed and Zeppelin no longer gives me a hard-on, it’s time to shoot me.” I smile the same old smile at Bill when he brings this stuff up. “Or start bringing home some of your guy friends from the salon, cause I’ll be on my way to homo-ville.” I’ve heard this all before and yet I still feel something between jealous of his easy love of these simple pleasures and jealous of the old girlfriend that was part of his simpler, younger life of simple pleasures. It’s a dull twinge in my temples and behind my eyes that sometimes even makes my stomach upset, as if jealousy were a purely physical ailment.

And yet I feel all this less than before. We have been together so long now, it seems, that I can tell exactly how many beers he’s had by the way he inflects these same old declarations.

“Yeah, Chris-tinawas a looker alright-- don’t get me wrong, she wasn’t the brightest bulb -- but she was *blond* and *round* as the day is long.”

Today is Sunday, and he’s had four and a half beers. No I haven’t been counting. I can feel it. How much I do still feel concerns me. I am too conscious. Like I wish I could learn to ignore those little aches and stabs in my head that, after a few beers, like to spread, often making my bloated insides knot up pretty hard. Sometimes after Bill passes out at night they leave me wide awake and doubled over on the couch.

I *do* still listen to him though. I always listen when he reminisces about high school. Sometimes his glassy eyes light up just enough to start to excite me too, and I remember what was so bright and infectious about Bill five years ago, how his huge smile made me breathe faster.

But now I've learned to listen while having a separate conversation in my own mind: *I really want some weed too.* But we decided, for some reason, a year ago, to give it up. Probably because it was too expensive to do all the time. Or because I was determined to get back into dancing and leave the hair and makeovers to someone who cares.

“When the light would fade at about eight, god, we'd sit and watch the trees, Bad Company's *Feel Like Makin' Love* playing low and the mellow from the joints just creeping in. . . .”

Over and over Bill talks about Christina and classic rock, his football team, and all-night basement keggers like bad grades at school, fights with parents, having to cashier at McDonald's, and pimples didn't exist. Like at eighteen we were the best-looking, happiest, most fully-formed people we were going to be. I picture Christina as a cross between a porcelain doll and a platinum porn star. Bill as young and full of power, even muscles instead of beer fat. In his quarterback's uniform, I probably would have found him irresistible, or unapproachable. But I won't buy that those were our best years. Hell, I know more now and I can take better care of things. Every feeling isn't a crisis anymore, every fight, every bad mood not the end of the world. We are more even, more able to deal. Yet the more Bill goes on, the more my head aches and the more I want to drown that ache in a good buzz. Too bad we don't

even keep a little weed around, just for emergencies.

I get up to get us two more beers. The game is over on the TV and now we are faced with the empty space of the rest of the day ahead. We could keep sitting and watch what's next and next, but we vowed to stop doing that. I could stretch or read, but somehow Bill's irritated nostalgia has caught me again. I can still hear him with my head inside the refrigerator, grateful for the rest of the case of cans still there, gleaming up at me with shiny identical faces.

“With a fresh keg and a bunch of us around it singing, man what a time that was.” Now that he's begun, I know he won't be stopping soon. Fuck, I don't want high school parties and kisses that lasted all night cause you weren't supposed to go all the way. I want this older perspective. I know what to expect day in and day out, I know the right thing to say and do at work, to Bill's parents, in all the situations thrown at me. I don't have to hide at the back of the class, waiting for things to happen. We're smarter now. We live in apartments and write out monthly budgets and buy groceries and pay electric bills. We have jobs that pay those bills, even if they weren't what we imagined they'd be when we were ten. We have real relationships, people that are there for us, no matter what. And my love for Bill is so dry that I am no longer afraid of being hurt. He can't hurt me. We've melted together into one mass like candles that can't stand separately. That's a good thing. Bill loves me as the person he tells his stories to. I love him as the person next to me on Sundays, keeping the time passing, at one time keeping the aches and knots away. I begin to feel nauseated leaning into the white glaring fridge.

I crack the new beers, hand one to Bill, and go to the stereo. I catch his eye

with a smile, put on *Stairway* and start to laugh. He lights up, and his mouth opens as he decides which new story to begin. Though suddenly, with a choke of cold beer foam, I've lost the mood. I wipe my mouth and chin, but Bill doesn't notice. I feel dread settling in my belly in preparation for knowing what I will hear. In preparation, I try to forget again about the test buried under my socks in the drawer for two weeks now. I don't even care to take it. I won't let our time before this become part of his "it was so good then" repertoire, nor could I bear to see him silent or sullen in the face of dealing with the present, or future. In preparation for his next story, I imagine we have a joint and some people over. On the couch, our tall thin neighbor has his thigh next to mine and Bill is on the other side of the room grooving to the record with his eyes closed.

An Amicable Divorce

The wife is very drunk again, standing late in the night in the dark kitchen of their apartment. She is fumbling with dishes, then slipping a curled end-piece of bread into the toaster with one hand, gripping an almost empty wine glass in the other. She has been watching TV shows all night, sipping pink wine, relieved that tomorrow is her day off.

Earlier, she had come home from work, tired from being on her feet all day, kicked off her thick-soled shoes, went into their bedroom down the hall, silently changed into her pajamas, and finally dropped onto their threadbare couch. Through this, her current husband has been in their bed sleeping soundly since before her arrival home, preparing for another workday to come.

Hearing the clinking porcelain and glass in the kitchen, the husband turns over in bed, an irritated roll that scatters any lingering dreams. She pops open the small cassette player on the kitchen counter, plastic tapes slapping against one another as she chooses the best one for her mood. A slow Motown ballad in a sweet falsetto floats across the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bedroom, “Ooh, ooh, oooooooh, ba-by, baaaaa-byyyyy. . . .”

The husband sighs and sits up on the edge of the bed. The wood floor is cold under his bare feet. Resigned, he puts on his robe over his boxers and t-shirt and goes to the kitchen.

She holds her wineglass with the stem in her fist, a half-eaten piece of toast

clutched in her other hand. She is swaying lazily to the music and singing to herself, her eyes half open.

“Hey,” he says, “how are you doing?”

“Hey, I’m ok. I’ve been watching TV and got hungry. Guess we’re almost out of wine too baby. . . . Look how cute you are in that robe. . . ooh, ooh oooooooh. . . .” She croons along to the song, letting her head fall side to side with her heavy dance steps.

He comes to her and pries the empty wine glass from her absent grip. He places the toast on the bare kitchen table, and takes both of her arms, gently placing them around his neck. He sways with her a-rhythmic steps, his arms around her waist, bunching the extra fabric of her baggy flannel pajamas behind her back.

“You’ve always been a good dancer,” she coos. “So good. It probably helped me fall in love with you, you know. You know that?”

“You’ve told me that, yes.”

“But we never get to dance to this.”

He nods in response.

“You know why?”

He nods again and sighs. He kisses her gently on the corner of her mouth, sticky with pink wine and toast crumbs.

“These songs were. . . he and I. Seems like a long time ago now, though really I guess not. I mean. . . it’s only a few years. But another life, another life aaalllllll - together,” she sing-songs. Her eyes are focused far over his plush shoulder into the dark towards the dim window above the kitchen table. She can make out the

neighbor's kitchen window across the alley, dark and framed with bony winter trees.

The song ends and they continue to sway through the silence until another slow tune begins, "Ba-by to-night, be-longs to us. . . ." From time to time, she steps on his feet as they dance, but he holds her tightly so she doesn't lose her balance.

"It's sad how these things didn't work out. How they don't. . . ."

"I know."

"I mean he was a wonderful man, but we just didn't work. I still can't figure it out."

The husband is silent.

"You think. . . you think about it sometimes. . . was it my fault? Whose fault these things happen?" She drops her head heavily into his shoulder. Their dancing has become a more robotic shift from side to side. "Anyway, I am happy things are how they are. You know, I was lucky, it was an amicable divorce, we got along. . . it was so easy. It was *ridiculously* easy."

The husband's eyes are closed. When he opens them, the digital microwave clock reminds him he has to get up for work in a few hours.

"I mean," she continues, her words drowning to a whisper, "I am grateful for you. . . ." She tightens her hold around his neck. "I don't know. . . but really I need to get things together too. . . you know?" She places her bare feet completely on top of his and they sway in one place very close together.

Lifting her head to look at him, her speech sharpens. "I need to think about changing jobs soon, really. I need to clean. . . and put my papers in order."

He stiffens his hold around her waist and rests his chin down on her shoulder,

shutting his eyes again.

She continues, more quickly, “I need to get my resumé together. . . to change jobs. I need to keep things in order, better, maybe save more money this year. . . ? I should finally wash your winter coat.”

They stop moving and are standing holding each other. The song drones, “And if you want it, you’ve got it, for-ever. . . .”

She touches his cheek and looks at him with glassed eyes. “I need to think about next year. . . a job. I have you though, baby. . . I have you.” She trails off, resting her face against his shoulder again, leaning unsteadily against him. He puts his cheek against her hair, bending his back forward and closing his eyes.

But she begins again, “Still, I need to move on, keep going. I need to wash out that refrigerator. I need to wash the coat, call some people. . . .”

Still bent against her hair, he sighs and the words seems to fall heavily out of him, “All you have is needs.”

He steps back and searches her face, afraid she might become upset, but the wife is just silently looking at him, her brow slightly furrowed in confusion before her eyes begin to droop closed, her features becoming more slack and expressionless, several crumbs still clinging to her bottom lip.

He helps her to bed. He lies staring at the dark ceiling for a long time as she sleeps heavily next to him, snoring gently and evenly. Moments later, he wakes to the alarm feeling both light-headed and heavy, dreading the long day. He hopes that when he gets home, he can take a nap and that she does not remember or want to talk about the night before.

Through the morning, the wife sleeps fitfully and wakes late with a slow feeling of empty sadness, wondering if she has had bad dreams all night. Turning to ask her husband what time it is, she is startled by his empty and neatly made side of the bed, before realizing that he has already left for work and it is actually very late morning.

Angelica's Monster

"I've decided it *must* be Alzheimer's, dear, oh it *must*. So much forgetting, I wouldn't know where my own head was if it wasn't attached," Angelica heard her mother moan that day as she walked through the door returning from her usual classes as an Italian major at nearby Boston University. She was not surprised. Since her father had left when she was a toddler, Mrs. Glass had maintained the attitude of woeful victim-hood and martyrdom to a "T," and since she had retired from teaching her French classes at Boston Latin last year, this condition had only intensified. She needed Angelica's help, company, support, a free finger to keep the bow from slipping day in and day out.

Through the years, when not at school, her mother had always preferred to remain at home, with only Angelica to keep her company. And Angelica had been raised to dutifully fulfill her role. Angelica was silent, patient, and obliging. She was forever used to this. This: "You look a little pale today dear, why not put on some lipstick or rouge. . . . Your figure is so lovely, do you really want another piece of cake?. . . Do you really have to go to the movies with that boy tonight? My arthritis was just starting to act up and I thought we could relax with some tea together. . . ." Angelica was her mother's most perfect roommate and companion, a job she had performed for decades, easily, without thought. Dates regularly got cancelled, nights out with friends were rare, besides her coursework, she believed her first priority was to be her mother's daughter, as trying as it could be at times.

Sitting at the kitchen table beginning a new pint of Rocky Road, her mother continued, “Uch, I can’t even remember where I put my checkbook. . . have you seen it dear? Did you move it? You know my mother may have had Alzheimer’s when she passed, they weren’t sure it was only dementia. . . .” Angelica spotted the checkbook on the table beneath her mother’s elbow and rolled her eyes. “You know I’m getting too old to take care of so much of the housework dear. . . how about vacuuming for me today? I don’t think we’ve cleaned behind that old crimson divan in the living room since the day you were born.” She said it as if it were an indictment. As if Angelica’s birth had somehow prohibited her from ever cleaning thoroughly, from keeping a respectably neat house again (though Angelica couldn’t remember the last time her mother had lifted a finger to help with the housework).

Yet their spacious old Victorian in a historic Boston neighborhood *was* spotless. Perhaps the wood floors, furniture, and bathroom fixtures were showing their age, a little chipping paint, scratched wood, and dulling brass, but Mrs. Glass’ periodic prodding kept Angelica on top of the chores.

So without a word, Angelica procured the old Electrolux from the musty hall closet and began a quick vacuuming of the downstairs before beginning her homework. Her mother sat in the kitchen munching her ice cream as Angelica dragged the awkward machine over the old Persian living room carpet. Angelica was beautiful, even doing housework in a quiet huff, with her long dark hair, light eyes, and thin demure pink mouth. Hearing her daughter busily fulfilling her wishes, Mrs. Glass smiled over her heaping frigid spoonful, self-congratulatory in having brought up such a wonderful, proper young woman.

But in the other room, Angelica stood before her favorite old divan and hesitated at pulling its crimson wood-trimmed body from its eternal resting place against the front living room wall. She couldn't remember the last time she had cleaned behind it. She knew that it, and whatever had collected behind it over the years, encapsulated many private moments for Angelica, the sparse few she had kept separate from her mother.

As a child, Angelica would sit on the divan looking at picture books for hours. Left to amuse herself for long afternoons while her mother worked in her upstairs office, translating and correcting student's work, the divan became a house, a boat, an airplane, a horse-driven sleigh. She looked at pictures and imagined her huge divan the perfect environment for each adventure, her princess' castle from which she needed to be rescued, her carriage to the ball, the dark forest to be wandered in search of the hidden treasure, or the friend lost in the shadows.

Quickly, she learned that her mother did not hear much of what she did while she played downstairs. She could slip a few cookies from the kitchen jar, wolf them down, and brush any crumbs or other evidence behind the back of the sofa.

Over the years, many bits of sweets forbidden until after dinner were hastily tossed away in the same manner as Mrs. Glass entered the room unexpectedly. If Angelica was asked to sweep or dust the room, the collected piles of dirt, hair strands, bits of food or paper might disappear suddenly underneath the low wood-carved front of the sofa when her mother was turned away, in an effort to finish more quickly to get back to her favorite story.

As she got older, and was left alone more often and for longer periods of time, Angelica might clean out her itchy nose and daintily deposit the contents behind the divan. If surprised by a date showing up too early and being led into the living room by her mother, Angelica might crumple the tissue with which she had just blotted her pink lipstick and makeup (“a proper girl always wears her lipstick out”) and stuff it with precision down between the wall and her favorite piece of furniture.

Dare it be reported that one time or another, Angelica would be alone in the house with only her thoughts of some boy from school in whose presence she would blush? And in the heat of the summer she might remove her shorts and tank top to cool herself while reclining on the divan. There she might imagine scenarios with the boy, them alone, his fragile adolescent hands smoothing over her. Upon reopening her eyes, Angelica might even become alarmingly self-conscious and retire to her room, these moments never to be recalled, admitted to. . . .

“Honey? What’s taking so long in there? Are you having *trouble* with something?” Her mother’s voice ringing from the other room, Angelica stopped herself from her reveries and hurriedly pulled the divan away from the front wall, ready to clean whatever she might encounter.

Dragging the divan from the wall, what suddenly appeared from behind it was an apparition, a seemingly transparent, three-dimensional projection, finally free and vengeful, a nasty scowl on her face.

“Ahhhhh!” Angelica screamed. “Ahhhhhh!” the Monster screamed too as she burst free from her cramped home and stepped clumsily, one leg at a time (as if testing

to see if they really worked after all these years) from behind the sofa into the glorious open space around her.

Mrs. Glass, to her stout-bodied credit, charged into the living room to save her daughter from whatever attacked her. And there she, it, the Monster was. By the slimy greenish trail that had burst forth with her from behind the divan, Mrs. Glass could see where the monster came from. Angelica had released it, this disgusting creature.

Frozen in shock and gazing upon it, Mrs. Glass and her daughter realized at the same moment -- this *thing* looked a bit like Angelica, except the hair was green and oozing, the features composed of rotting crumbs, bits of food and cakey adolescent makeup. Its pretty see-through greenish body was barely covered, clothed in what appeared to be old rags.

Intently focused on Angelica, the Monster scowled and jeered, it shook its hips in mocking sexy haughtiness. Angelica was seized with nausea and doubled over as if to heave. Her mother could only gasp in frightful disbelief as the Monster snarled at her in warning to stay away. "Help me!" shrieked Mrs. Glass as she backed out of the room, tucked her body behind the doorway wall, and peered around the corner. She held one frail hand to the baby blue curlers scattered in her gray hair and kept the other over her agape mouth.

But the Monster had no interest in the old woman. She squared off in front of Angelica, folded her gooey arms across her voluptuous chest and laughed as if in challenge. Angelica, strong and resourceful, attacked without hesitation. She aimed the growling Electrolux at the Monster's feet and attempted to suck the vision into the

machine. After all, this thing was made of dirt, crumbs, rags, household grease, and dust. Surely it could not withstand the mighty beast that could devour quarters and bathmats in the blink of an eye. However the Monster proved more substantial than she looked. She could not be sucked into the vacuum, and she only laughed with tickled delight as the machine butted against her bare little toes. Still Angelica rammed the vacuum at the Monster's feet over and over with increasing ferocity.

Seeing it was useless, eventually Angelica shut off the vacuum and on the verge of a flood of tears, demanded, "Who are you and what do you want with us?!"

Mrs. Glass could not believe her only child's boldness. "That's right dear! Tell it we'll call the police! Tell it your uncle is on the force! He owns a gun! How dare it terrorize us!" But the dripping moldy apparition would not respond. She only snickered and gestured rudely with her fingers (*where did she ever learn that?* Angelica wondered) and made juicy snorting noises that wouldn't be tolerated by any decent New England household.

The Monster leapt to Angelica's cringing side. She looked expectant, she looked cruel, and she wanted something. As she reached to put a menacing arm around Angelica's shoulder in ownership, Angelica ran out of the room. It followed. She locked herself in the bathroom and there it came, through or underneath the door, to be at her side and imitate Angelica's frightened indignant outrage, her face contorted into mocking expressions of horror, or to gesture wildly about things she wanted, the makeup in the medicine cabinet, bottles of various medicines or painkillers seemed to intrigue her. Angelica just sat upon the cold toilet cover and wept with her dark hair fallen over her face, her head in her hands.

When she felt strong enough to rise, Angelica returned to the kitchen, where her mother was burying her sorrow in the waning pint of Rocky Road. The Monster followed Angelica's every move. It was maddening. "Mother, what shall I *do?*," she cried in the most childish tone she had heard come out of her mouth in decades.

"How am I supposed to know, dear? In all my years, I've never seen anything like this. . . even your crazy dying grandmother, lost on the way to her bed from her bathroom in her room at Mount Auburn, never experienced a monster. . . . I don't know what you could have done to have brought this on yourself," she pronounced, "but *have* the last spoonful, if you must, to try to feel better my sweetheart."

Angelica about-faced and stormed out of the kitchen. The Monster stuck waggling fingers in her greasy ears and gave a resounding raspberry to Mrs. Glass as she trailed Angelica into the living room.

Angelica plopped herself on the divan and hugged her beloved cushions. *How could you have given birth to this?* she asked the worn crimson velvet of her favorite piece of furniture in the whole house. The Monster sighed and wept loudly in histrionic strains, hugging and kissing and licking the other cushions. When Angelica watched her, she was disgusted. She slid further away from the Monster, but it just moved closer. Angelica sprung to the other side of the room, but it was faster than her and was at her side the instant she planted her feet again. Angelica sprinted from room to room and it zipped along behind her. She went out the side door, but it remained in the doorway.

Her mother yelled from the kitchen, "Stop that running around, you can't get

rid of her, anyone can see that.”

“But look mother, she stays in the house and watches me from the doorway. . . at least I can go out and be free of her.” But just as the words were coming out of her mouth, Angelica knew she could not leave her mother alone in the house after all these years in order to be free of the Monster.

And, as if she was reading her mind, her mother pronounced, “I won’t have any ridiculous monster scaring my own daughter out of her own house! Surely this is a temporary thing, a few days at the most. I have the utmost confidence that whatever brought her here is no match for your goodness, my dear. You simply don’t *deserve* this. I’m sure it will work out soon enough.”

The Monster waved seductively as Angelica re-entered the house. *She has such a filthy way about her* Angelica thought. It truly was unsettling. What should they *do*?

At dinner that night, the Monster imitated Angelica eating with the crassest of table manners -- gripping utensils in childish fists, opening her mouth and waving her green tongue about, or holding her nose in disgust at the food Angelica served. Mrs. Glass only gazed at the creature in exasperated impotence. She offered little comfort, and as Angelica buried her head under her pillow that night in a vain attempt to forget and sleep (and ignore the Monster tossing and turning next to her), she reflected on what her mother had said. Would it only be a few days? A small problem that would take care of itself? She could only hope; in all her years within this house, it had never given her such a cross to bear.

Since she was finally released several days ago from her cramped existence behind the divan, Angelica's Monster never left her side. Angelica spent her time at home in denial that she would never, ever be alone again with only herself to answer to, with only her thoughts to accompany her when she locked her bedroom door at night. "If only she didn't have to look so much like me! And then act so shamefully... gross!" Angelica cried to her mother as the days passed and nothing changed.

Meanwhile, the sexy transparent doppelganger had had her high drama entrance into proper human society and now demanded every bit of the life she had missed all those years, every bit of fun and mischief. In the very least of mutual understanding, Angelica had figured out this much during the last few days. Her Monster gestured wildly in excitement at the table around second helpings of desserts, and commercials for various types of liquor on television. She made unfathomable thrusting motions with her hips when handsome men appeared on the screen, or the cute mailman dropped the day's mail through the brass front door slot. Angelica could only cover her eyes in embarrassment. What was worse was that Mrs. Glass, from time to time, even began to blame her daughter for not being able to control the Monster's behavior.

"Darling," she would insist, "you spend all your time with her... haven't you figured out yet how to make this thing go away? Haven't you studied it? Doesn't it have a weakness? I think you just need to try harder, something is bound to happen. . . ." But Angelica found studying the Monster impossible. It seemed constantly in motion, constantly studying *her*, perfecting its impressions of all Angelica's moods, discovering new ways to distract and confound Angelica in her

attempts to execute her daily routines of showering, eating, cleaning, and studying. And looking at the Monster at all just made her feel all the more desperate.

Angelica began to stay home days and nights, skipping her classes, moping around the creaky old house in a constant effort to simply ignore the Monster's existence. This took all her energy. She tried to avoid eye contact and stifle its behavior by not paying attention to it. This meant that Angelica read or watched television or slept as much as she could to avoid any activity that would inspire her monster's evil mimicry. She bathed and ate little, but still maintained the house and cooked for her mother so as not to compound her problems by arousing her mother's scolding. If she could just become slow and sedentary, intensely vacant and uninteresting, she felt somehow that the Monster would be forced to do the same. Further, Angelica came to believe that this was a curse brought on her for a reason. As her mother also began to intimate, she had to be deserving in some, however small or unknowable, way. "She's clearly some reflection of you dear. . . . How could this have happened? You are such a sweet, perfect little thing, always by my side. This is clearly some figment of evil sent to test us. She is our nemesis and with our good manners and breeding to combat her, we will, eventually, rid ourselves of this curse!"

Angelica's university sent her letters telling her to withdraw or be dismissed for never attending classes. Her few friends stopped calling, frustrated by Angelica's refusal to join them for any activities. When Angelica considered the possibility of simply leaving her home and her mother to escape the Monster, she would think of her life, and her mother's, without one another and she just could not bring herself to

imagine a world different than the one they had always had in that house. So Angelica believed (with her mother's wise encouragement -- "we will face this together, not ignore it, you'll see, we can win") that she should remain in her home, maintain her normal life as best as she could, and defeat this thing, not simply escape it, but contend with it and accept that there had to be a *cure* for it. Besides, as Mrs. Glass told her, "what better place to face your demons than in the safety and familiarity of your home and supportive family?"

In her constant sedentary pondering on how to rid herself of this grotesque haunting once and for all, Angelica still curled under a thick blanket on her divan (she had forgiven *its* role in this tragedy), aimlessly watching television and often silently weeping on Saturday nights after her mother had gone to sleep. She occupied herself by thinking about possible exorcisms, brutal tortures, and gruesome deaths to her evil double. The Monster just sat near her and cried too (though all her tears were of course alligator tears).

Finally, one afternoon, Angelica left the house to execute the first of the only two plans she could conceive of, and of which her mother approved ("We can't tell just anyone about this and embarrass the family, dear, just go see the professionals we can trust to be discreet").

Father Veritas had known Angelica since she was a baby. Through her mother, she had maintained contact with him and the church over the years and she trusted him and his desire to heal and soothe a troubled parishioner. She found him alone in his office and told him all -- excepting the really dirty details about the

Monster's inappropriate desires and gestures, of course. To Angelica's surprise, Father Veritas quietly admitted that he had heard similar stories several times before.

"Really?!" asked Angelica.

"Well, only *similar* to this one, and only second hand, but, yes, always about good young women and some type of double shadowing them, tormenting them. I guess I had dismissed the stories as folk tales."

Yet as to what to suggest to help Angelica, Father Veritas was at a loss. After consulting several spiritual guides he kept on his desk, he sighed from the depths of his clean untroubled soul.

"My sweet child, I know you and your mother to be good, proper people. I cannot fathom what evils have brought this affliction to your side. You must look deep into yourself and cleanse yourself even more thoroughly of ill or improper feelings. Read and reread the Word for comfort and guidance. Reach out to your mother with love and accept her love and help as well. I feel these are the only things I can suggest that might ease your troubled heart and the similarly troubled Monster out of existence." Angelica thanked him (secretly disappointed that he had no ideas different than ones she had already conceived of), and agreed to do even more soul searching and good deeds.

The next day, she headed to Doctor Golden's office. He gave her a very thorough exam. There wasn't a thing in the world wrong with her youthful heart and body, he proclaimed, and he had never heard of this phenomenon before, so he was sure it was only some simple trick of her senses.

“You are just perfect, honey, as always, healthy as a horse. Your problem sounds like maybe you are perceiving light and air and. . . floating dust to look like a creature. We all do it at some point in our lives, you know. Young creative minds see all sorts of human forms everywhere they are not. You know, that shadow at night that was a monster, the grain in the wood of your headboard that resembles an evil face? Fanciful imaginings, that’s all. You’ve probably been reading too many scary books or watching those new bloodbath movies that are out these days. However, most of us *do* grow out of our overactive imaginations at a fairly young age as the world quickly becomes smaller and more predictable. Might I suggest some simple breathing and meditation techniques? Relax that pretty little head of yours and come back for another thorough exam in one month.”

That evening after cleaning up from their dinner, Angelica excused herself to her room to practice the techniques Dr. Golden had suggested. She sat Indian-style and moved her arms slowly up and down with her deep breaths. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was really alone again, free in her own life without her “curse” by her side. When she opened her eyes, she only saw that the Monster was having a grand time imitating Angelica doing the exercises. Her face in a constipated look of great concentration, she flailed her arms and waggled her tongue in mock concentration. Did she really look that stupid? Angelica wondered.

While Angelica grew slow, pale and thin, wasting away in her misery, wallowing in questions, anger, self-pity and guilt, the whole world seemed one big joke to her Monster. How was she to kill something that seemed to believe only in its own existence and in its sole purpose of tormenting her? How could this Monster,

clearly an echo of her own *good* existence (but was it? she was so unsure now), not have any grasp of faith or science, not adhere to any rules of society, in short, unlike herself, have been so *poorly brought up* behind that beloved couch?

That night, after her mother was asleep, in a desperate moment in her bedroom, Angelica beckoned her Monster to come even closer than normal. She reached into her bedside table and drew out an old lighter she kept for when she randomly used to acquire bent cigarettes from friends and smoke them out her window on boring summer nights. She held the flame right at the heart of the transparent green bosom before her for as long as she could, But it seemed her particular Monster wasn't flammable. It only laughed and joyfully watched the flame dance before Angelica's dark sunken eyes.

Afterwards, Angelica found an old cigarette in her dresser and calmed herself with it, smoking slowly and cautiously, before contemplating what else might be good to burn in this old house, before feeling more ashamed for considering being destructive, before dropping off to sleep, exhausted after another day consumed by this "floating dust" -- her own fault, her own misconstrued perceptions.

Several weeks later, very late one Saturday night, after her mother had retired with her usual "I know you'll figure this out dear. Don't forget we need groceries for tomorrow, and please try to get her to keep down the late-night grunting and moaning so I can sleep," Angelica had the TV in the living room on as she curled in her regular spot on the divan. Evening programming was over and a televangelist-healer-fortune-teller-infomercialist appeared on the screen promising answers. Angelica called the

number on the screen. Her mother would be mad about the charges, but this was life or death, was it not? In fact, the woman on the other end of the phone claimed she did not work in monsters herself, but that Angelica's story was so intriguing and tragic that she had a "friend" she would recommend who might be able to help.

With Mrs. Glass' hesitant permission, the following week Angelica was in a psychiatric office on the "friend's" couch, slowly concentrating and trying to "tell the story from the beginning," as she'd been gently instructed by the good doctor Mayfield who'd told Angelica that he had seen this before in so many pretty young ladies, "always the best brought up ones too. . . . Don't worry, we'll get to the bottom of this" (his notes read: Angelica Glass. Twenty year old Caucasian female. Lives alone with mother, student. Complains of homebound omni-present monster). He was sure he could help in only sixteen one-hour sessions. "Think of them as weekly installments towards a happier you," he insisted.

"I don't even know what *is* the beginning of all this," she protested, "I mean how am I supposed to know where she came from or why she lives to horrify and mock me?!"

"Ok, calm down," the doctor cooed, "Well, we know she came from behind the sofa. Let's start there. . . tell me everything you can possibly remember about that particular crimson divan. Perhaps we will discover some clues." Angelica thought, as best she could and the mist of her sorrow cleared to show her that early image of being left to play on the divan as her mother worked. The cookie crumbs, the beginning. All that was not good and proper, through the years, crammed in that very

spot. Of course she had been aware of that fact, but how had it created her Monster, and what was to be done now?

During many fruitful sessions, Dr. Mayfield encouraged and wrote fitfully in his notebook all the juicy details a wan and troubled Angelica could disgorge. About her father leaving, living alone with her mother for so long, her studies, and eventually Dr. Mayfield even probed for an embarrassed Angelica to discuss anything she'd ever done with a boy on any of her few dates. And yet, after all the difficulty of telling these pieces of her life, at home, little had changed.

After the time and money spent, after the crimson divan and other stories, Angelica's Monster was as present and merciless as ever. On her drive home from her last session (she, at her mother's suggestion, had refused to extend the duration of analysis), Angelica barely saw the rows of beautiful old houses, the tree-lined neighborhoods, the people walking passed outside her tightly closed car windows.

As her monster met her with a sneaky wink at the heavy wooden front door of her home (*it's as if she knows what I told Dr. Mayfield*), Angelica suddenly felt she would rather not live than live another day with *her* for company. Angelica found Mrs. Glass in the kitchen beginning a new pint of Butter Crunch, contentedly munching.

"Mother," Angelica declared, "I have lived with this thing for so long now, I have tried and tried as hard as I can, I have listened to you, I have remained here in order to do right and remove it from our house, but I can't do it anymore. I am going to leave for good. With me gone, we can both live our lives in peace. Please do not try to stop me, it will only make this harder."

For the first time Angelica could remember, her mother lost interest in her frozen snack and stared in full attention with her eyes wide at her daughter. “You cannot leave me! You would be lost without your mother! What would *I* do? You simply cannot leave. No, no, you cannot. If you are too weak to take care of this, then I will have to!” Her mother stood in thought for a moment, one tiny hand on the hip of her rectangular house-dress, one covering her eyes. She then burst into the cabinet under the sink and removed the most potent cleaner she could find.

The Monster, sensing what was afoot, slinked off towards the living room, to slip behind the divan for temporary cover. But Mrs. Glass was quick in her worn pink slippers and she caught the Monster before she reached the divan. “Oh, no you don’t!” she shouted. “We’ve had enough of you!” And with that, the mother sprayed the Monster with her burning acidic cleaner until her green film began to bubble and drip. Angelica watched silently from the doorway. As the Monster’s skin faded and dropped in chunky pieces of green dirt on the floor, she looked at Angelica questioningly. Though it was too late, Angelica looked back at her amid the scene of her mother’s curlers and spray-bottle fury, unable to say anything.

They never spoke of her again. Angelica remained living at home, a silent companion to Mrs. Glass. She went back to her classes and graduated and began to teach Italian part-time at a local high school. She and her mother ate what Angelica cooked for dinner. They shared a pint of Rocky Road or Butter Crunch for desert. They read or watched television in silence. Now that Angelica was eating and sleeping again, she was restored to her former health and beauty. In short, Angelica

was restored to her former life.

Then one Spring Saturday, Mrs. Glass asked Angelica to help her move her old king-sized bed from the heavy mahogany headboard in order to fully clean the carpet beneath. With their collective heave, an obese greenish apparition slowly floated out from behind the bed. *Yes*, a grotesque Mrs. Glass, made of rotting foods and beauty cream, clothed in tabloid pages and dirty rags, shrieking at her counterpart, causing the old woman to faint dead away. Angelica rushed to her mother's side and bent down to attempt to revive her. While calling to her mother and fanning her face with her hand, Angelica looked up at the Monster and smiled sweetly.

Friendly's

Since he left their home, her father's new apartment complex is a labyrinth of overgrown concrete, single-paned windows, and rusted balconies no one uses. She and her brother accompany him on Sundays to the Lil' Peach for just enough groceries to feed them lunch that afternoon -- ham, hard sub rolls, potato chips, and Mountain Dew. Their mother says potato chips and soda are bad for them and doesn't buy them at home during the rest of the week. On these excursions, she watches the sidewalk, studded with old gum turned black and slick from shoe bottoms, cracks and squares, cracks and squares. Her father towers above her, sometimes he holds her hand.

Sunday night dinners are at Friendly's. There is a tunnel nearby that leads them from the complex near the Lil' Peach farther away to a small row of run-down stores. Walking there at night, they pass the church made of blond brick he takes them to each weekend ("I saw you mouthing the words of the sacrament," her brother accuses, "you know Mom says we're not supposed to. . ."), down the ramp and through the tunnel that smells so strong and pungent she tucks her nose into her shirt collar when her father looks away. She didn't know why it smelled so different until one day they caught a ragged man in stained clothing facing the wall with his hands hidden in front of him. As they passed, he had turned and glared menacingly at her over his shoulder so that she had hidden her face behind the hanging fabric of her father's scratchy wool coat.

Each Sunday is like all the others until she begins to notice that this place has slowly become filled with small girls who travel around, sometimes with fathers, sometimes in huddled un-chaperoned groups. She sees them everywhere they walk in the neighborhood wearing brown corduroy pants, pink cotton turtlenecks, and identical ponytails of baby-fine hair pulled tightly back from their faces (“ouch, don’t brush so hard, it hurts”), with heads and protruding eyes seemingly too large for their tiny bodies.

The girls are afraid to go into Friendly’s restaurants. Heading to dinner, they see one another and nod in recognition, wide-eyed and clasping at the large hand dangling by their shoulders or to each other for comfort. They are deathly afraid of short old men, dressed like priests, high-ranking ones, in black robes, with white hair and dark skull caps. She has learned that these men circulate the city looking for the girls. The priests wait in the take-out line in Friendly’s restaurants. When the girls come in with their fathers (and usually their brothers too), the fathers sit at the counter on flat rotating vinyl stools, demanding service. The little girls stand or move around, too energized by the crowd waiting in line picking out their ice cream to sit down.

The priests hide among the crowds anticipating their peppermint swirl and pistachio nut. Inevitably, the hunted girls always notice the odd short men, alone in somber robes hanging over stout indistinct bodies. They try to avoid looking at him, but this Sunday night he succeeds in catching her eye, and he looks at her long and hard. Silently and smoothly from beneath his robe, he pulls out a small black handgun and aims it at the little girl. She freezes.

She looks at his face to see what it means. He cracks a huge wicked and

amused smile for her. Knowing her reaction could mean life or death, she smiles back as happily and sweetly as possible (she's practiced so many times) to let him know all is perfectly well with what is happening. Really, she loves what he is doing. She does not want to upset him further in any way. She is agreeable to this. He should have no reason whatsoever to be upset with her.

Satisfied, or disinterested, he always puts the gun back beneath his robes and returns to face the front of the jammed take-out line. Recoiling, the little girls slither in front of their father's stool (could a bullet reach her through him?), beneath the greasy chrome counter and his protruding belly.

“What the *hell* are you doing?”

“Nothing. . . hiding.”

Sometimes the tears come silent and full. If he notices some sort of discomfort, her contorted face, or the soundless tears, he blames the lack of service out loud, sweeps his cutlery onto the floor behind the counter with one big hand, and storms out, her and her brother in tow as the silverware clanks on the tile floor and the waitresses and patrons all stop to stare.

Outside the restaurant, the stooped old priest is moving away from her, unaware that she is still warily watching his movements. The legions of little girls see the black skull cap from behind. He walks in a hurry, curiously, his step light like a young man's. It makes their stomachs hurt to watch. He is always within spying distance of the restaurants. He crouches nearby in constant waiting for them.

In the parking lot, her father demands to know why she is upset. Her confused recounting of the robe, the gun, how he wants to kill them all enrages him. She must

be making things up to tell him how much she hates his new neighborhood. Defying her tales, he makes them eat right next door at the Burger King and return to Friendly's next week where she cannot eat half her meal, he yells at her for wasting it, and she prefers to sit slumped almost completely beneath the table for protection.

Later, when the girls see one another on the surrounding streets, they acknowledge and offer comfort with huge round eyes in small heads. The cold wind stings their wet eyes dry while their tight-mouthed gazes strain and pull towards each other, away from the hand that holds them out to the unceasing soiled gray squares that pass underneath.

Good Neighbors

August 3, 1995

It's a large, graceful two-story brownstone with a broad front stoop and (so unique for this crowded area) a large overgrown backyard. The livingroom has a small side window that is beautiful stained glass. It's on a gardened, brightly painted, (several colors per house), Volvo-driving residential street walking distance to Harvard Square. Despite the fact that the place looked like a crack house when the realtor first showed us the other day, you can't help but see the place's potential. The realtor told us that all the other three units are inhabited by people who have been here over fifteen years. As of last year, the area was rent controlled. From the outside, the place looked too good to be true, the rent the landlord is asking is actually affordable for the two of us.

Megan put her journal back in her bedside table drawer. Sarah was knocking on her bedroom door to get her to go over to the new place and start the cleanup effort.

From the outside it *had* been too good to be true. Their first floor unit was vacant because the woman who had been living there forever was finally evicted for not paying her rent. The realtor described her as a “total loony... clinically psychotic. Really, the landlord had to go to court to show she hadn't paid rent in a year and was completely out of her mind.”

“Where is she now?” Megan had asked.

“In a shelter somewhere. Apparently there were no family or friends to take her and she had no income. So. . .” he said as he jiggled open the old mahogany front door with his key, “the place is cheap and I’m only showing it to you girls because. . . it needs some work. The landlord figures he will give you this deal on the rent if you fix it up. So take a good look around and think about it.”

And what they really saw that first day, it was as if the woman had just picked up and left five minutes ago. Megan wouldn’t have been surprised if a light or the record player were left on. The rooms were *filled* with furniture, junk, boxes, and layers and layers of dirt. And there were these globs of colored crap encrusted all over the walls and furniture.

“What’s this hard colored stuff all over?” Sarah, always the skeptic, had asked.

“That’s actually wax. What she did for a living before. . . I guess, was make candles for a local craft shop. But it should be easy to scrape off. I know it looks bad, but the place is huge, the building is well cared for otherwise, and I don’t have to tell you girls you won’t get a better location at this price.” So despite a possible month of scraping and painting and scrubbing and fixing and moving the crazy lady’s old stuff out, they figured it was worth it.

August 29, 1995

The progress we’ve made. If only someone else saw the place before. The crazy lady who lived here left all her furniture and so much other junk. It seemed like she didn’t clean the place once during the time she lived here. How does a person live

like that? But it's probably never been cleaner now. The kitchen walls alone were washed three times before we tried to paint. Since the landlord said it was ok, Sarah and I kept some of her old furniture too. I got a great big mirror for over my dresser that must be worth a bit. It could be an antique. And apparently she had a cat. A white cat. But the poor thing has these strange discolored blue and red patches on it's back. I asked the upstairs neighbor about it and she told me that Sunny Rose (that's actually her name!) used to anoint the poor thing with colored oils in some strange ceremony. A real nutcase. But anyway, this multicolored old cat with cloudy eyes has been coming to our back window and meowing so pitifully in the middle of the night. I would have even let it in, but Sarah is allergic and forbid me. We figured if we ignore it, it'll get the idea and hopefully go somewhere else.

When cleaning the place out, they had to cart tons of big stuff out to the curb for the garbage men. Bookshelves, bureaus, tables, and boxes of broken wax shapes. Though she and Sarah did help themselves to a few things, it didn't feel right, at least to Megan. They were stealing. And they were made responsible for throwing away everything. But then Sarah, the voice of reason, would say, "Well what kind of life was this for a person anyway. . . ? Look around you Meg. . . she was living in squalor, she had no income, she was clearly *out of her mind*. Maybe now she can get some help. . . . We don't know the whole story."

On one of her many trips through the dank front hall with a load of garbage, Megan met one of the upstairs neighbors, Trina, a middle aged elementary school music teacher who apparently wore nothing but tie-dyed skirts and Birkenstocks. She

was loaded down with groceries in canvas bags.

After introducing themselves, she asked, “So what was the deal with this Sunny Rose woman? All her stuff is here and the place is so dirty. How did she live like that? Did you know her at all?”

“Oh yeah. Sunny was actually fairly friendly, when she wasn’t on some paranoid trip. I remember she got so paranoid that at one point she even boarded up the bottom of all her windows so no one could see or get in. I couldn’t believe she lived like that an entire summer on that first floor, even during the heat wave. But she never really bothered any of us, so we left her alone.

“Then when they turned her phone off, she used to come knock on my door to use the phone. Actually, she was by the other day, I’m not sure why, and asked to use my phone. I felt bad, with her being in that shelter now, so I let her, but told her only a few minutes. . . . That’s the last I’ve seen of her.”

“So she’s been here? *Recently?*”

“Yeah, maybe collecting her mail or something. . . . I hope someone is feeding that poor cat. I’ve seen her, but I can’t take her in because mine hates other cats. Mine’s a real queen, you know? Could you girls feed her?”

“I would, but my roommate’s allergic.”

“You girls in college?”

“No, we’ve been out of school a couple of years, and we both work. We have to, to afford the rent.” At this Trina scrunched up her deeply lined brown face.

“I know it’s getting worse and worse. I suppose it’s just a matter of time,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “Well, I should get these put away,” she said, frowning,

heading up to her apartment.

Reading in bed that night, Megan kept thinking about what Trina had said. *Had she looked in the windows and seen us redoing her place? Could she see that I had restrained the border to her mirror and that Sarah had repainted her bedside table? Would she be mad at us?*

She didn't tell Sarah about her talk with Trina. She also didn't tell her that in one of the boxes she was carrying out to the curb, she found some empty medicine bottles. From the pharmacy around the corner, prescribed to Sunny Rose (*that really was her name*), some med she had never heard of. Maybe it kept her sane. What if she couldn't get it anymore at the shelter?

That night, Megan was awakened to a piecing meow next to her ear. Her eyes flicked open and there was the face of the white cat a foot away from her, pressed against the screen. "Get out of here," she said and smacked at the screen. "Go somewhere else!" It turned on its haunches and leapt down from the window sill. Scowling at herself, she closed and locked her two bedroom windows even though the weather was cool and breezy.

When they were done working on the place in early September, it was white-walled and bright and clean and looked even more spacious than before. Meticulous Sarah had even spent hours staining the wood trim in the living room a deep brown when Megan had had enough; but she had to admit, it made all the difference.

Now Megan loved reading in the open living room. She and Sarah drank wine

in the overgrown backyard on warm nights on the rusty wire furniture someone had clearly left out for several seasons. There was something so old and solid about the place, she felt at rest there. Like gravity was stronger in the apartment; her feet felt heavily and soothingly connected to the soft pine floors under them. There was no need to move quickly.

*

October 25, 1995

I don't know how I'll tell my folks and Sarah, but I got laid off today. I had thought I was going to move up and stay at the radio station for a while. It was working out so well. But they had to cut the budget, and I was the youngest one there. Now I'll have to start again. At least I have some savings. . . .

Megan spent the following weeks leaving the apartment in her crisp black interview suit, but she was only beginning to realize how tight the job market was. She wanted to move into television and do journalism that would reach a much wider audience. But after several fruitless informational interviews, she learned that TV was hot and the economy too slow. A month went by and though she had had several second-round interviews, none of them ended up panning out. She began to grow tired of looking for a job, tired of interviewing, asking, trying. She made calls and sent out resumés less and less; she began to lose heart, sleeping later, and leaving the house less frequently.

Although she laughed at herself, at being a cliché, Megan went from sleeping in most days to moping around the house all day in her bathrobe, reading or watching soap operas, even drinking wine during the afternoons. She stopped looking for jobs altogether for the time being and spent a few days writing self-deprecating letters to old friends from high school or old boyfriends from college that she never sent.

Dear Mike,

Remember me? You're old girlfriend from freshman year? You'll never guess what I'm doing now! I have no job! I read bad novels and watch TV while guzzling cheap wine all afternoon while my roommate works an honest day. What a joke they sold us in school, eh. . . ?

Then she would laugh herself to tears, thinking of what Mike, or any of the others, would actually think if they really got one of these letters. They would think she had lost her marbles, or just that she was pathetic and had lost her drive. All of them, she had heard through the grapevine, were getting another degree or doing really well for themselves already. But it was oddly pleasing to think of them holding the letters, smiling curiously -- she wondered if the letters would make them feel better about themselves, and this was funny too. Actually, she was pretty sure they'd ignore them, she hadn't spoken to any of them in so long.

As days passed and the pulp plots got too predictable, she began to wander

around the apartment, go into her roommate's room when she was at work. Deep in the back of Sarah's huge closet, she found a box of books on Impressionism mixed with chunks of colored wax. They had missed it. She looked at the books and felt the smooth wax lumps collected at the bottom of the box. They smelled nice. Not just simply that nice birthday candle wax smell, but mustier and richer.

She walked the periphery of the yard. Sat on the broad stoop and sipped beer or wine. Went up and down the hall stairs of the old building until another neighbor she had never met from the apartment directly across the hall from theirs, a tall thin old Indian man, came out of his apartment and gave her a silent funny look.

"Hi, I'm the new tenant across from you." He looked at her. She wondered how much her breath smelled like liquor.

"I am Chinny."

"It's nice to finally meet you."

"Please, just be quiet out here, thank you ma'am. My niece lives with me and she is a university student. She must study."

"Oh, sorry. No problem."

She moved her wanderings back into her apartment and went out the door in the back of the pantry and down into the basement.

Descending into its musty blackness, it gave a child of the suburbs and refinished game-room basements a chilling feeling of a colonial torture chamber. Witches shackled to the uneven stone walls. Stone and mortar foundation pillars evenly spaced, dividing the huge room, as big as both apartments it supported above,

but unbroken by walls. And dark. In the day, the tiny cracked windows at the top of the walls barely let in enough daylight to see by.

Megan didn't re-surface up to her apartment for four hours. She inspected the old furnace, the ancient fuse box (one circuit per apartment, no wonder Sarah's hair dryer blew the whole place), some old porcelain bathtubs, four total, with lion's feet at the bottom that must have been removed and stored here years ago. The tubs were lined up parallel to each other along an outside wall. She stood in one, the edge came up to her thigh, what a luxury it must have been to bathe in them, she thought.

And there was lots of people's stuff. She assumed it was storage for the other apartments, some old bikes with baskets and rusty bells she would ring and then laugh out loud in her boozy haze, boxes of coats or clothes, trunks labeled with names and apartment numbers. Each apartment seemed to have claimed their own area of the basement so their stuff was not confused with anyone else's. She ran her dusty fingers all over and around the items, picking out names, reading a stray paper here or there. Amazing what people just abandoned down there, old utility bills, newspapers going back several years, and personal letters, mostly yellowed and illegible, but the neat script beautiful to look at anyway. Digging through the boxes in the dim light, dirty, taking in the musty smell and feeling all the papers in her hands, Megan felt like she was discovering what the world was like years ago (though the stuff wasn't really that old). She was an archaeologist, a tipsy and sedentary one in her pajamas and slippers, but that afternoon she was contented for the first time in weeks.

She descended there again the next day and the next, and soon abandoned her joking letters to begin recording in her journal again.

November 20, 1995

Today, I found a whole big pile of her stuff downstairs. The wax dripped and hardened over books and papers, envelopes addressed to “Miss Sunny Rose.” It was the first time I thought about her as being able to read and write. What was I supposed to think? She dropped oils on a cat, she stopped working or paying rent for over a year, she had no phone, she took medications for who knows what, her world was dipped in swirling colored wax and dirt. . . .

Fingering the envelopes and letters, smelling their burnt papery smell, and carefully taking out the decorative sheets of stationery, reading them, and putting them back, Megan spent weeks with glimpses of Sunny’s life in her dusty hands. Some in small and intimate friend envelopes, little notecards, some in larger business envelopes, most handwritten, some illegible, but worth the extra struggle.

May 18, 1983

Dearest Sunny,

I am truly glad to hear you are doing better, that the shop in the Square took your work and wants a continuing relationship, that your doctor has agreed on a trial of the medication. . . . I am sorry to hear the last few weeks have left you with various attacks of your illness, but be strong and I know you will be alright. Meditate and listen to music when you cannot work or read. And I am here. Call me soon and we will have lunch again.

Love,

Mary

February 3, 1992

Dear Sunny,

I received your letter regarding your troubles with your landlord. He is clearly taking advantage of you and others in your building. You should not have to go without heat or water because he is slow to repair things. It is against the law. . . . However, I feel this is a battle you need to wage yourself. I cannot step in for you whenever things are tough and I will not, and never have, accepted any “mental disorder” as an excuse for you not to use your great god given intelligence to get along in this world. . . if you can work some agreement with your landlord, that he will fix things you need fixed, that he will treat you fairly, that he will make your apartment inhabitable by the Cambridge housing laws, I will consider lending you the money you need. . . . I understand you have fallen behind due to past disputes and are now finding yourself in a hole, but I repeat that I will only help, if you can reason with this man yourself to make your life better.

Best of luck.

Your Brother,

Jim

She read and reread the voices. She wondered what Sunny looked like now, what she used to look like, where she was now and what she *did* have with her.

December 2, 1995

I haven't told Sarah about the stuff. I guess I'm jealous and want to keep it to myself. Besides, she has been going out more and more after work, so I barely see her anymore. If she isn't out, then she's sleeping. Since I'm not doing much in the days, what do we have to talk about anyway? And I don't want her riffling through this stuff, invading it.

At first this was curiosity, but now, every morning after Sarah leaves for the office, I dress in some already dirty clothes and head into the basement with my flashlight for close reading. I come up for lunch and go back down after with a few beers. Then I re-emerge before she gets home for dinner and shower. I tell her I am researching jobs on the internet or in the paper or going to meet people during the days. I suppose Sarah is raising eyebrows behind my back since I am no longer leaving the house in my interview suit with her in the morning, and I'm sure she can smell that I've had a few in the day, but she can't complain as long as I have the rent. And I will for just a bit longer. So fuck journalism. I could do this for a while: Spend my days dirty in our basement, spying into someone else's life.

Sunny must have placed all this stuff here for safety to come back for someday. Years of letters, collections of old and foreign books, small paintings, records, lots of candle art. Since we threw out, took, or destroyed everything upstairs, this is all that is left of her.

On any given Winter day that year, Megan mentally catalogued all the objects,

books, and papers that Sunny Rose had left in the basement. She picked up and touched most of the wax “sculptures.” Some of them were of people, and quite delicate. She held and appraised small paintings in frames or on sketch pads, some of them clearly Sunny’s, some not. Her art always seemed to focus on the human face or form. It was rarely abstract, always in vivid striking color combinations. She had many books on art and sculpture, on portraiture, on female artists through the ages, on Van Gogh, Degas, Erte.

There were boxes of books, sets of books, published in the 1920’s, falling apart in the damp down there. She had three different full sets of *Faust* and critical works on *Faust*, but they were in German and Megan could only look at their beautiful gold-lettered covers and tiny-printed pages. She had Hugo in French (Megan’s French from high school was rusty, but she did spend one afternoon deciphering some paragraphs, losing herself in damp passageways in Paris hundreds of years ago), Dicken’s complete works, books about medicine in Roman times, *Art of the Renaissance*, *The Post-Impressionists*, more Goethe, in German.

The records showed Sunny to be a Jazz fan focusing on various artists from the sixties. Since they had no record player, Megan spent several weeks in the library listening to them. She didn’t like them necessarily, too chaotic, disorganized, the brasses too shrill, but the jackets were beautiful and smelled wonderful. A variety of smoky accents and the basement combined.

In attempting to read many of the books on painting, something she had never studied in college and wished she had, she would get sleepy and mark her place with a tiny gentle dogear to go take a nap upstairs. Or, depending on how involved she got,

or how much she had drank that afternoon, sometimes she would lay the book down on the floor and curl up right there on the cold dusty cement next to it. The hard surface never seemed to bother her, the dirt of the floor smelled calm. Other days, she might sit deep in one of the lion-footed tubs and read there. She could sink completely below the edge when leaned back against the side, and they also provided a cozy place to nap when she grew sleepy.

*

One evening there was a knock at her door. She got up from where she was reading on the couch and opened it. He stood there, the silent Indian man who lived across the hall. He wore a moth-eaten blue wool sweater over what looked to her like a white sheet wrapped around his legs down to his bare ankles. She wondered immediately if something was wrong because she had seem workmen coming and going from his apartment the last few days and gotten a note from the landlord that there were inspections and “structural repairs” scheduled for that month. Did he need to use the phone?

“Please ma’am (with his thick Indian accent it sounded like “Mum”). . . . Do you have. . . just one beer?” He gestured the number one with an upraised pointer finger.

She looked at him, trying to hide her complete surprise before inviting him in to stand in the hallway while she disappeared into the kitchen to get him one of the stale Bud Lites they always had around for months at a time.

“Thank you so much, Mum.” A look of sadness crossed his dry papery face.
“My house, it is falling down around me.”

“Yes, I saw the workers coming and going this week. I overheard that they found some bad problems with your place. But hopefully they’ll be finished soon.”

“No, a long time they say. My niece cannot study with the noise. She will have to go to another place until it is done.”

“I’m sorry. But once they finish, you won’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“Yes.” he said, turning and going out the front door of the building. She wondered where he was going in his white sheet-skirt and flip-flops, beer in hand. It was pretty cold out.

*

At first, Megan had a single dream. Sunny appeared to her as she was holding her letters and reading by flashlight on a dark Winter afternoon. She was quite beautiful, with long black hair, pale skin, and lucid flaming blue eyes. She wore a tie-dyed skirt, sandals, and a peasant blouse. Sunny approached her and sat on the floor facing her. She took a few books from her boxes and flipped through them, silently pointing out several green impressionistic landscapes to Megan. Then she leaned forward and her hair fell all around Megan’s head and she felt her face close to Sunny’s; it smelled of beautiful old delicate pages and dust.

But later she dreamt of Sunny many more times. In these dreams Sunny was mad at her. She appeared ragged or diseased, reaching for her and threatening her.

She had stolen her house and now her things. She would attempt to grab Megan and tell her that she would make her crazy and take her to the shelter too. Megan would awaken and take a few days off from the basement out of guilt, but that never lasted long.

And soon she became afraid for Sunny's things. If they were to ever be thrown away. And more than that, she wanted to keep them for herself. She wanted them the way a person wants their own marked up copy of their most favorite book. And besides, no one seemed to know all of this was here. Just her. And Sunny. She wanted to bring it all to her. No, she really wanted to keep it. She knew it was bad to want to keep it, but she still did.

So one day, before returning to daylight upstairs for her shower, she reached into a box and took out a tiny volume of *Faust*. She thought it was one of the most beautiful books down there, the pages so fragile. Sonny wouldn't miss it; it was so small. She would just keep it for a little while. Keep it safe, appreciate it. All it was doing down there was collecting dust and mold. She tucked it in her bedside table with her journal.

*

One evening Megan came home from a walk and the old Indian neighbor was sitting on the stoop.

“May I sit with you?”

“Ok.”

She got herself a beer from the fridge and brought out a couple extra. They sat on the steps, in the dark, silent. The night air smelled good, she felt clear-headed.

“Where did you go to school, Mum?”

She told him.

“Oh, so you like studies?”

“I used to. What do you do?”

“I am retired. A math professor here.”

“Oh.” He could discern the interest in her face.

“You *do* like studies. You are an academic.”

“I don’t think so. What does that *really* mean anyway?” He grinned at her slightly, his mouth closed. He took a sip of his beer and looked into the bottle.

“It means you like to read books. It means you are lonely.”

About to protest, she only looked at him grinning into his beer. She caught his eye and smiled back at him.

Later, after he went back inside, she was a little tipsy. Sarah was asleep, as usual, and the big apartment suddenly felt lonely. On a whim she called her ex-boyfriend from her last job; she knew he still liked her.

He came right over, even though it was a Tuesday night and he had to work early the next morning.

“How is work now?”

“The same, boring. You’re not missing much.”

“You and your brother still doing your band on the weekends?”

“Yeah, it’s been going really well. We’re playing the Middle East next week. You should come if you want. . . .”

They talked quietly like this in the livingroom. She sat at the other end of the couch from him. Out of things to say, she asked, “Will you sing for me?”

“You want me to sing? Now?”

“Yeah, quietly. I always liked your voice.”

He sang for her, several slow songs, while she looked around the room, out the window at the neighbors’ cars and houses.

Later, in her bed, with the early orange light creeping in, after much wakeful silence, he decided he should leave. She had been strangely distant, even while he kissed her. They were lying side by side in their underwear, but she didn’t seem to want to do anything more.

He got dressed and left, looking at her happily resettling in the bed in his absence out of the corner of his eye and muttering awkwardly, “I’ll call you, take care.”

After he left, she thought about the way Chinny had risen from the stoop to wish her goodnight. His tall fragile lines, the slight bow of his graying head, and that knowing glint of amusement in his eye.

She slept long and late. Not wanting to be awake to think about the night, to feel what it hadn’t quite relieved, what she had been hoping it would relieve, some vague longing, not really for Tom, or any man.

Long after she faintly heard Sarah shower and leave for work, after going back to sleep again, she roamed the apartment, looking out of the windows at the piercing daylight before returning down to the stuff.

Pawing through her favorite boxes, she decided to allow herself one more small thing -- her favorite yellow wax figurine of a kneeling naked woman smelling a rose. She would take it and put it in her drawer with the book. No one would ever know. In a way, she figured she was saving Sunny and her stuff. Wouldn't this all be thrown away someday anyway? And if she ever came back for it, Megan would have it. Maybe she would leave a note on one of the boxes. Obviously it was Sunny's for the asking. If she ever came back. So for now she was just saving it.

And the next few days, a small painting and a few letters came upstairs with her and slipped into her closet. But, seeing that the boxes looked emptier without these items, she soon stopped.

*

Megan began spending some of her days in the library. She read and listened to records. She was re-learning French. Maybe she would go back to school.

*

One wet day, coming home from the library, there it was, all of it, on the curb. All her boxes, neatly piled up for the trashmen tomorrow. She recognized every box,

every shape and size, globs of wax sticking to the outsides, dropped on top of one another, on their sides, right on the soggy curbside grass. She frantically dropped her backpack in the muddy street and carried each box back into the basement, one at a time, wiping off any water or mud until she was satisfied that they were not damaged and they were where they had rested for the last six months.

The following week, she found them out on the curb again, with a note from the landlord taped atop one box: “These belong to someone who no longer lives here. They are taking up valuable storage in the basement and need to be discarded. Thank you, The Landlord.”

This time, she carried each box, one at a time into her bedroom. She left a path to her bed, but otherwise, they practically filled the open floor space. Then she sat on her bed, distraught, and fell asleep.

For several days she kept the door to her room closed so Sarah would not see. At first, with Sarah home and awake so rarely now, she didn’t notice. Then she surprised Megan by knocking on her door one evening.

“Megan? Can I talk to you?”

Megan cracked the door and stuck her head out. “What is it?”

“Can I come in? I have something to show you, a job ad I saw today.” She peeked as best she could behind Megan. “Why won’t you open the door?”

“I’m working on a project, it’s private.”

“Give me a break, you freak,” Sarah huffed, pushing the door open. “What the . . . ? Megan what *is* all this stuff?”

“It’s some old family stuff I offered to keep, I just need to catalogue it and I

thought I would store it downstairs. . . ok with *you*?”

“Whatever. But I know you need a job. It’s been months and I’m getting worried about you. I saw this today and I think it’s right up your alley. So would you please at least contact them? *Please.*” She handed Megan the piece of paper.

*

Megan spent the next two days repackaging Sunny’s stuff, all she could bear not to have in her closet at her fingertips, into sturdy new boxes and plastic bags to try to keep out the mold. She sealed everything away from prying eyes and labeled every box clearly “Property of Megan Johnson. Apartment 1. Do not discard.”

March 15, 1996

Dear Ms. Rose,

You don’t really know me, but I am one of the women who moved into your apartment after you were evicted. I am very sorry about your eviction. I know you must have loved your home here. That you must miss you home, your things, your life before you had to leave this apartment. I hope you do not blame us, but we were forced to throw away much of your furniture. I kept your big antique mirror and my roommate kept your night table. Of course, if you ever want these things, you need only tell me and they will be returned to you.

Also, I want you to know that I found your things in the basement. I assume you were trying to save them for when you had another place for them. If that is the

case, you should know that the landlord had put them out to the curb to be thrown away and I brought them in and re-packaged everything in boxes labeled "Property of Megan Johnson." All I ask is that if you ever come to take them, that you let me know so I do not worry that they were stolen or discarded.

And I must confess to you that I have also removed several items that I found interesting or beautiful: A book of Faust, the painting of the ocean, the figurine of the woman smelling the rose, among a few others. These items are safe in a box in my apartment where I enjoy looking at them. I hope this does not make you mad. Please understand, I think very highly of you and your work. . . .

She put her pen down, folded the letter in thirds, put it in an envelope with her name on it and the date, and put it in the shoebox with all the others from when she had first gotten laid off.

She lay on her bed with her face against the wall. She noticed, as she had so many other times since they had moved in here and fixed this place up, the small glob of bright pink wax protruding from the fresh white paint they had applied back in August. She reached out and scraped it off with her thumbnail. She put it in the small drawer of her bedside table with the others.

She got out of bed and went into the hallway. Across the hall, she knocked on Chinny's door. He answered.

"Can I show you something?" He followed her back into her apartment and into her bedroom. "Look at these things," she gestured into the box on the floor.

“Look at all she read and made. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“These belonged to the woman here before you, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“But I am *not* lonely.”

“But Mum, these are not your things, here.”

He furrowed his brow at her, not saying anything. She reached into the box and pulled out the wax figurine of the nude woman smelling the rose. She reached for one of his dark papery hands, the back and palm overcast in dried dead ash-white skin. It felt like a warm ancient animal in her hands. She placed the figurine in his palm and closed it around her.

A Method

Today I am a philosopher. So the first thing I do is begin. I get out of bed and go into the bathroom. Collecting data, there I stare at my face, staring for a very long time at my features. They are alternately concrete and elusive, though they are unchanging. My eyes, nose, and mouth arrange themselves appropriately to make a face, or at least what appears to be a face. Someone's face that closely resembles my own. I can move forward based on how closely it resembles mine -- it's close enough. Therefore, I decide to comb my hair. It's a choice, an action. Hair combed, I continue to stare. I wish I was hungry or had to go to the bathroom. The assumption is that these are necessities.

I wonder if the mail has come yet, so I put on slippers and walk out to check my mailbox. It's a choice, an actual action. Nothing has been delivered yet. No extraneous variables enter my apartment with me when I come back inside. No new data to process.

Back in my room, I sit down on my bed and begin to try to think, while trying not to think at the same time. I hope this in-between will be productive. It's analysis of what there is to analyze. But since this doesn't always work, I comb my hair again. It's still an actual action. However, I avoid the paralyzing urge to re-start the staring. If I were the person in the mirror, I would think I was so rude.

I think, at least I should read. This would be acquiring new knowledge, new eyes with which to view these circumstances. But books are so accusatory. With

tables of contents, covers and everything. Organization and assertions, so many choices already made and actions already taken, sustained, and completed.

I assume I cannot choose what to do so I don't choose to go back to bed. I just get under the covers and lie there. Hours pass and my body grows stiff while I get a stronger and stronger headache. Maybe I think something like, am I subconsciously learning something? Will analysis somehow explain the person under the covers with features close enough, a headache and a stiff back?

The phone rings. Ah, a new variable. A forced action; I must move, in a short amount of time from under the covers in order to lift the receiver before it may decide to stop ringing and I will have acquired no new data with which to occupy myself. Someone speaking on the other end of the phone line asks me to go out to dinner. A proposition, and possibly a fruitful one -- leaving this environment, entering a new one, greeting new features and another heap of combed hair. I will be confronted with another, separate, moving mass of choices and actions. I think, an expansive new set of variables! It is only two hours away. I will have to lie here for that time because I have already wondered whose features I wear and combed my hair and not thinking about thinking about ideas has made me just tired enough to need a brief nap before dinner.

A Bar, a Man, and a Talking Cat

The man passed out at the table in the bar. His head resting on his folded arms, he lost consciousness in the middle of all the voices and music. Disgusted, she left him there and took a cab home.

When he awoke and lifted his heavy head, his metal-linked watch band had left a deep pattern of parallel grooves across his cheek. He looked around and, blinking slowly to clear his dry eyes, realized the bar was closed and everyone had gone home. He could make out little except for the outlines of the tables and chairs illuminated by the orange glow of the neon beer signs in the window.

There was a scratching sound at the front door. He watched the door slowly push open just enough for her silver cat to slide in. The old long-haired thing sauntered over to his table and stopped at his feet. He resisted the urge to push it away with the outside of his shoe as he had done so many times behind her back or under the dinner table.

“How many drinks have you had?” the cat inquired.

“I don’t know,” replied the man, “less than it seems.”

“I somehow doubt that.”

When the cat spoke, its mouth opened and closed so that you could see its front fangs, yellowed and rimmed with brown plaque. “Really, had I known it was you in here, I never would have come. I learned a long time ago that when you are drinking it is pointless to talk to you. All those times you called from a payphone

after drinking until you were lost somewhere downtown and crying about how sorry you were, about how much you loved her, about how things would change, because she had locked the door on you again. I never wanted to answer the phone those nights, but I lacked the courage to be so cruel. But over time, over all this time, somehow courage and kindness are no longer the issues. You have made it a necessity to take cabs home and lock the door with the chain from the inside.”

“Look now,” began the man, “I give you medicine when you are sick and cannot eat. I put fresh water out for you when she is away and let you lie on clothes and blankets even though your silver hair can never totally be washed or brushed off, and it makes me sneeze, but I take my allergy pills because I never wanted to live with you, but I wanted to be with her that much. . . .”

“Yes, you are a mean, self-centered, person. You care for me to disguise your jealousy and lack of understanding. I was there before you when she was so much happier with only me and her work to worry about. I will be there after you. And I will be the one to try to make her into who she was before you left all those pieces of glass on the kitchen floor that we cut our feet on because you refused to clean them up until you were sober and no longer angry. That horrible night when you were the worst we had ever seen you, when your usual irrational rantings turned into chips in the kitchen linoleum and a whole box of bandaids to fix us. I provide comfort for her. I am always there. We are there for each other.”

The frail cat sat gracefully upright, pushing out its long-haired chest as regally as it could, speaking to the man from only a foot away. She accused with cloudy cataract-covered gray eyes. With one hard kick he could kill her once and for all.

Then they wouldn't have to wait for her to die as the woman had dreaded for so many years now. They wouldn't have to watch the cat hobble around the apartment, hear her throw up on the thick carpet in the night, impossible to clean, see her breathe hard and labored, watch her grow more wretched and skeletal; he wouldn't have to watch her watch the cat, sick and helpless.

"I can tell you she does not want you to come home. Do not call either. Not for a long time anyway."

"How do you know this? Did she tell you tonight?"

"We are tired of your behavior. You hurt us over and over again. Didn't you know that someday she would grow out of this? That there was only so much that she, that anyone, would take?"

"I guess I thought. . . . I thought that things would change." The man rested his head on his forearms again. His mouth tasted like stale bourbon, a dry and acrid thirst.

"Listen. I can tell you that your mother is slowly going crazy. She will become a greater and greater burden on you in years to come. You must stop ignoring the symptoms and covering up for her. It is obvious to all your siblings except you." The cat was smiling oddly now, a triumphant grin across its ancient white face, but the man did not look up. She paused, and began again. "You are not as hateful as you think you are. Remember the time you were sick for four days and I lay on your chest for eight hours a day purring as you slept?"

"Yes. You never did that before."

"Nevertheless, you *will* need to leave us soon. I want her back to myself -- the

way she was.” Once again, the man pondered the swift kick, breaking her brittle ribs, but the thought only made him feel sicker. He would have to see her suffer so brutally, probably needing him to end her suffering. Then, worst of all, he would need to explain the cat’s absence to her, and he could not bear that thought.

Undisturbed, the cat continued, “Also, besides your mother, they will cancel the bus route that takes you to work. I have no advice about this, except to buy a car or move or change jobs. It was bound to happen. Keep your stocks even through the dips in the market. Buy me the grossest and sweetest soft food you can until I die. I know my breath is unbearable, but it makes me happy to eat well. After all I’ve done for her, and you, I deserve at least that. It won’t be for much longer.”

The man had closed his eyes again, his head pressed down on the table. He did not respond.

The cat stood slowly, turned, rubbing its bony side one time against the man’s ankles, and ambled to the door with the poise of an aging Hollywood leading lady. she coughed pitifully several times before placing her front paws up on the door and pushing it open to make her exit.

Hearing the door bang shut, the man lifted his head and looked at the newly deserted bar. He considered pouring himself a beer off the abandoned taps. Instead, he stumbled, bent and worn out onto the empty street. Emerging from the bar, he was accosted by the overhead streetlamp bathing him in a shaft of light. He squinted his eyes up at it and, for a long time, could see nothing but pure blinding whiteness.

Sleeping In

When I get up some mornings, it is already strong daylight, and I have slept in weighted oblivion through half of the rest of the world's day.

My older brother increasingly likes to call early in the morning to "ask how I am doing" -- i.e. to see if I am home, awake, and leading a productive adult life as the perpetual student. Am I dutifully perched over a keyboard? Tearing out my hair over pages of erudite fountainpen-scribbled notes?

I have stopped answering his calls. Consequently, he knows that I am not at home in the morning because the previous evening I left some dark and dirty pool hall with a half-stooped creature, unshaven, his white beard and thick hair smelling of smoke and bourbon, a sweat-stained t-shirt barely covering the faded and wrinkled tattoos of exotic naked beauties encountered on his tour of duty during his last lifetime, an earring shining in his fleshy misshapen ear beneath the long wiry hairs creeping like ivy vines around the inner folds.

We would have been playing pool all night, and I'd have won just enough for the ruffian to grab me around my tiny waist, swing me to face him (my long dark hair shining, my eyes flashing) and growl, "you dang sexy thing, you." I'd giggle girlishly in response, defenseless against his seasoned and practiced masculine charms.

My brother sees all the other men in the bar watch wolfishly as I trot out alongside this decrepit troll, his head only coming up to my nose. I ride a bumpy shotgun in his rusty pickup over uneven roads, farther away from town than I have

ever been.

My brother is afraid for me -- or just profoundly disappointed. He smells the old man's stale sheets of unwashed celibacy (why do *I* have to be the one to give in to him after all this time?). He witnesses the moldy bathroom to which I retreat in order to check my bouncy hair and tasteful makeup. Somewhere between imagining my flowered Laura Ashley dress being torn off me, the buttons flying and seams rending, he can stand it no longer.

After getting my answering machine twice (I calmly listen to him sigh and hang up), my brother knows I am a grotesque slut who has once again spent the night at some strange old man's rundown house along a trash-blown highway. And *still* I have not returned home yet. He knows he never should have lent me my rent last month.

Distraught, he picks up the phone and calls my father to report (without all the gruesome details) on my rampant, frequent, and indiscriminant whoring. "Where did we go wrong? All that education. . . and she has learned *nothing*?!"

Soon the magazine articles will arrive in the mail detailing the importance of safe sex -- without any comments or letters attached, and no one will quite look me solidly in the eye as they pass the mashed potatoes during holiday dinners.

*

Other mornings, after ignoring my brother's ringing and willing myself back to sleep, I wake up alone and underwhelmed. I know I should eat a healthy breakfast

and take a shower. I watch the daylight move across my wall and the clock change digits. I eye my keyboard skeptically and turn away from the view of my desk, the piles of generic-covered library books and spiral pages awaiting my attention. Between the piles of paper sit broken pencils and single crumpled sheets of notebook paper. Usually, I sit on the edge of my bed, or in the bed, awake and thinking. Often there is a book involved -- but not the right kind.

The nights I do go out at all, Will is there. He holds a master's degree in physics ("actually, I'm A.B.D., with five years of teaching") but for now works construction for a living ("screwed over by my advisor, the *pusillanimous bitch*"). He arrives tired and dirty. Angry. Relieved. I am truly happy to see him. We sit side by side humming increasingly louder along with the jukebox. Will aspires to be an American socialist in a karmic way. Following his lead, we talk about politics and how we can self-righteously observe all the sick transgressions against human freedom in the world, and how it is *so* sad.

"Christmas presents should be outlawed. We should be forced to put all that wasted money into underdeveloped countries, or the domestic poor instead."

"These free Fritos make me sick."

"This country is a shameful bully."

"My cousin's in jail again for possession, they're not going to let him graduate, poor kid."

"If I could take back these wasted years, I would have moved out of here long ago, gone into the Peace Corps, *done* something, not all the paper-pushing crap. . .

only leading to what? This shitty job I have now?”

“But you’ve taught, *that’s* something. Isn’t educating, learning *something*?”

“It’s just feeding it back into the same bigoted system, helping those that can help themselves, not the others, stuck outside. . . .”

We buy each other drinks (unspokenly one for one, who do we know who isn’t broke?) in easy exchange. And later, pupils full, smiles wide, inevitably we talk about what we’re not doing wrong. Given all we’ve learned, sitting at desks, standing before students, sitting before advisors, standing in gowns, all the tests, formality, pomp and circumstance, this uncombed, perspiring, gesticulating, swaying, humming, liquid, rhythmic intercourse *must* be wrong. We say, “I should really go home to bed so I won’t get up so late tomorrow.”

His Story

“My Dearest,

It has come to this. I am writing you in a last desperate attempt to reach you lost far within the walls of our house, hoping that maybe you will see reason through my words.

It’s this house that you made us buy, that we could not, and still cannot afford. You loved it from the moment you saw it. Looming, brown clapboard, square and round shapes protruding. You insisted on having the turret-room for your office. Even when Stephen begged you to let him have it for a bedroom instead. It still pains me to think of him pleading with you on that first day here, and your cold response, “Stephen this will be *my* room and that is my final decision.” You were so determined; but I didn’t foresee that this singleminded selfishness was only the beginning.

In the first months in the house, it was only small things. Unexpectedly I would come home from work to find dainty new dishware, and even heavy velvet curtains for our bedroom. When I would ask you if we really needed the new items, especially when we agreed to try to save money to put into the mortgage, your responses were consistent and vehement: “If we are going to live in this lovely house, then we will keep it well furnished. What is the point of having it and not making the interior live up to the beautiful exterior?” And while I could understand your logic, and we did agree that we should enjoy what we have, perhaps I blame myself for

allowing this to get out of hand.

Because six months after we moved in, I will never forget finding you on your knees in front of the French doors between the livingroom and diningroom. Your hands clung to the glass doorknob above your head. Your body hung limply, and I could not tell from behind if you were crying. When I asked you what was wrong, you simply pointed in helpless distress. In one of the middle panes of glass was an oil-smearred child's handprint.

Do you even remember what I told you then? As gently as I could, I told you that this is a house in which a family lives. It is not a museum or a flowerbed. It is to be lived in by all of us. Your response was to go into your beloved office and lock the door.

And darling, I know you had the lock to your turret-office re-keyed so that I can no longer use the extra key. What is so private in there, between you and your room, that you cannot trust even your own family? Now, I did not say anything to you about it, I didn't want to seem to be denying you your own special space, but aren't you being a bit paranoid and over-protective?

Then the boys wanted a dog. I listened to them implore you for weeks, promise to get the shortest-haired, cleanest dog, but you would not give in. You showed no vulnerability to their feelings, even when we argued late for many nights about how we both had loved our dogs so much when we were children and how I thought our boys should have the same experience. By that time, I'm not even sure you were really hearing me anymore.

After all the fighting last year, the boys have resigned themselves to never

having a pet. I have resigned myself to both of us working long hours to support this house. But I cannot resign myself to your latest charades. I saw on the statements you tried to keep from me that you spent some money from our account to buy that huge crystal vase. When I asked you why we needed a new vase when we already have many, you replied that it was the house's anniversary -- two years since we had moved in. I let it pass, but since then you have bought a new velvet settee, a massive oil painting, and a new set of silver. The accountant told me that if you keep this up we won't be able to afford summer camp this year.

Recently, we have fought even more about this. They have been truly bizarre exchanges in which your eyes focus long past my face, transfixed out our bedroom window. You tell me this house has been your dream your whole life. Even the trees outside the windows are exactly right. I remind you that you missed Matt's last baseball game because you were out "shopping for the house." Confused, you want to make it up to us by having a formal dinner in the diningroom with the new dishes. You say you found a dress to match their color pattern -- it will be perfect, you always promise.

And finally? I want you to know that last month I found the necklace, a tiny replica of the hall light fixtures -- and the note. My dear, who wrote that note?

Thank you my darling for the beautiful vase and still life. They compliment my dark paneling so tastefully. . . . You are a most gracious and exquisitely lovely woman. . . . Please accept this small token as a symbol of my enormous affection. . . .

I have to draw the line somewhere. I will not be made a fool of, darling.

Have you even noticed that the house has become so cluttered with heavy furniture and paintings and sculptures that the boys and I have begun to go next door for dinner with the neighbors? Do you miss us at dinner? Do you notice our absence? We play happily with their dog and admire their hedges and even sit together on their front steps with ice cream in the evening. Their striped cat has taken a liking to me. It perches on my lap and purrs while I pet it as I sit in the dark on their porch night after night and watch you through the window after you have fallen asleep at your desk again with the lamp on. Now that it is warm enough, the boys and I took our sleeping bags over here and camp out on the lawn. We hope that soon you'll wake up and come to look for us, as we miss you tremendously.

In Loving Anticipation of Your Return”

He folds the letter in thirds on his lap and stuffs it into the envelope the neighbors gave him. He walks next door and, as he has for so long now, approaches his own front walkway as if he is an uninvited guest. He pulls open the brass flap of the front door mail slot and, crouching down, peers cautiously inside.

There, he can see off to the side into the livingroom, is his wife, naked, lying spread on her stomach across the velvet settee. Her eyes are closed, one hand gently stroking the fabric on which her head rests. She appears to be whispering.

He rises and slips the letter through the brass mail slot, hearing it slap on the wood floor below. He quickly withdraws his hand from the mail slot, letting the metal

flap bang shut as hard as he possibly can. He smiles with vague satisfaction and returns to sit on the neighbors' porch to wait.

At Ease with Mr. Wrong

She lives in a basement room surrounded by skyscrapers of files and papers and envelopes. She works in this room, with the piles, packets, paper clips, and stamps. The stacks loom and monitor her, the manila scrutiny always demanding attention. With this work, she has grown increasingly nearsighted. There is an unimposing rotary telephone next to the bed.

To escape the unending scrutiny, some nights she puts on her new glasses and drives light-headed and absent-minded to a bar, just barely avoiding broad siding parked cars on the way. There she drinks light beer presented to her like diamond rings from passed-middle-age men with yellowed palms hard and peeling from work done over years. Men who pay for each beer, one at a time, with crumpled one dollar bills and different sized coins they have to squint at regretfully before placing them on the bar, until the bartender grows impatient and tells them to forget it, sliding the cold beer across at them. Or until, if she likes their company, she feels sad enough to offer to buy them the beers. They are surprised, but not too surprised, and accept thankfully, more compliments spilling out as they move closer to study her even more closely than before, their eyesight not as clear as it once was. They say, “You sure are a pretty one. Why don’t you smile some more. . . ?”

The men talk mostly about Vietnam and then the current state of foreign policy problems. Sometimes about food they like, disparaging the pretzels or porkrinds in the bowl before them. Often about what they experienced in school, or in the Service

thirty years ago, ex-wives, or children in another state, now in school, getting so old. And about her. They want to know who she is, and they want to lean in close to figure it out.

They are men with thick white hair and silkscreened t-shirts stretched tightly over protruding bellies. Their outgrown t-shirts are modestly draped with unbuttoned plaid hanging atop dark jeans bagging at the back and held up by large buckles. Men with no telephones who don't know their own addresses, (and though she has already grown tired of their leaning questioning and wonders if they can tell by her face, an expressionless, slightly sorry face) still, they are men who will spend ten minutes drawing shaky not-to-scale maps on square napkins while intricately describing how to get to their houses, saying to yell up to them to let her in when she arrives (since they do not have telephones), maybe even knowing she will not come, but telling her to come anyway, and to bring someone else too so she will feel safe.

Some nights when she has forgotten to turn on the ceiling lights in her room for days and is struggling to cook a can of soup on her burner by the light of the gas flame, she forgets to wear her glasses and ends up after the bar closes in strange dirty dorm-like apartments with several strange and very young men. She watches TV with them (mostly sports), listens to them talk about their classes, parties, and girls, eats their food and drinks their liquor. The boys, not yet programmed to lean in or ask questions, sometimes it is a comfortable arrangement for everyone.

One night she has run out of stamps and misplaced the most pertinent file. The

precarious paper towers decry her incompetence. Constantly observed and defeated, the rotary phone ever metallic and silent, she comes out late. She decides she does not need her glasses anymore, it was a misdiagnosis. She sits down at the bar just before closing next to a young man with a brown paper bag at his feet. Without looking at her, the man quietly asks, “Where have you been tonight?”

Once she has looked around and determined that he is talking to her, she says, “I have just come out.”

She orders a drink. She turns to watch him. He is very thin-lipped with slitted dark green eyes and brown hair that hangs in curls at the ends like on a boyish Greek statue. His speech is quite slow and slurred and his narrow eyes are bloodshot.

He says: “This past Winter, I tried to kill myself with heroin.”

“Oh,” she says. “Why?”

“There was no real reason, I guess. I even talked to a therapist but it didn’t help. But I’m in a better place now. . . they said I probably just have a chemical imbalance.” She asks him if he is very drunk and he says that he has only, in reality, had three beers, but he has also taken some relaxants earlier in the evening.

It is last call, so she leaves with him and his roommate and his roommate’s girlfriend and goes to their house to watch a soccer game he wants to see. It is summer and they do not have air conditioning. He takes off his shirt and walks around the small dingy apartment in his shorts without shoes. He says he loves soccer and that he played for ten years. He gives her a beer. Sipping it and watching him, she decides he has a soccer player’s body. There is muscle and no fat at all. She can make out his pelvic bones. Aside from being only as tall as her, he is well built and

nice to look at. His browned chest and belly and nipples are all very pretty and would be soft to the touch.

When he talks to his roommate, he mutters out of the side of his thin mouth. He seems constantly about to pass out, but he does not pass out. Instead, he does bong hits with his bald-headed roommate and the platinum blond girlfriend. Those two are mostly silent and do not talk to her. After the bong hits, he can barely walk or focus his eyes, but when others talk his eyes shift slowly towards them and he responds with short sentences, mostly about the soccer game, astute comments about how good or bad each player is.

She beckons him with a curling pointer finger to come sit beside her on the stained couch. He has no facial expression, but he immediately sits by her and she puts her legs over his lap. He absently rubs her bare legs up and down as he stares at the TV screen. She takes off her sneakers and socks and presents him with her feet. She tells him to rub her feet.

“You want me to rub your feet?” he asks.

She nods without hesitation. So she sits there across him, breathing the smoky air and a little drunk and he does a very good job of rubbing her feet. He does not even do it that hard, but hard enough and smooth enough. The motions of his hands are very smooth and fluid. He does not look at her or her feet. She is not sure he is really watching the TV anymore either. His face is blank.

In this time, she replays the day and evening to herself: She had worked with her files and envelopes for hours so that some things were accomplished, but others, the harder and hardest and most important things, not even having to do with the

staples and letters on the pages, day in and day out, never accomplished. Then she began to think of the one that had seemed to like her so much last year. The man from the post-office who had just helped her with the folders at first, but then began to come over and cook for her and sometimes even stay to sleep close to her, a thin arm wrapped over her hips. Her feet across the boy's lap, she thinks about all the ways she wishes that one was still thinking about her, and then about all the various ways he must really not like her or her personality or her looks, and perhaps both, because he has not made the rotary phone speak its metallic ring for a long time now.

At length, she returns to the warmth of the smooth hands on her hot swollen feet. As if he's heard her return from her thoughts, and without turning his head from the TV, he asks, "Do you want to go to sleep?"

"Yes," she says.

They go into his room and there is nothing but a thin futon mattress on the floor and a computer on a folding table. On the table next to the computer, there is small tank holding a two-foot long iguana. He takes it out and seems to enjoy placing it on her shoulder. It feels strange, with long legs and very alive and holds to her neck and shirt with its long toes. She giggles, childishly afraid that it might bite her, and pleased that the feeling of something against her skin, an animal, or a situation, could cause her true surprise. It sits very still on her shoulder and she tries to breath calmly and not startle it. She strokes its dry smooth back, feeling its ribs beneath the paper thin skin, worried about how vulnerable it would be to a wound with such thin skin, how she could so easily squeeze it and hurt it.

She tells the boy, "He seems calm."

He says, “Yeah, he seems to like you.”

She goes into the bathroom to look at the iguana in the mirror. It has its lime green face pressed into her neck. She can see that it has its eyes closed.

After a long moment, he picks it up with one hand to put it back in its cage, but it is latched onto her shirt with its long toenails. She helps by unlatching each long toe, one at a time, very gently. She likes touching its feet.

When it is back in its cage, the man spreads a single flat sheet over his bare futon for her to lie on. He excuses himself and she hears him brushing his teeth and rinsing his face and hands. When he comes back, still without shirt and shoes, but in a different pair of shorts, he says, “I can turn the light off, but it will be very dark when I do.”

She is not ready to sleep, so she asks him to leave the light on. She watches him pull a prescription bottle from the clothes hamper in the closet, offering, “Would you like something to sleep?” She declines and they get into the bed together. She tells him to talk to her about himself.

Lying on his back, he stares up at the overhead light and talks. His speech is so slurred now that it takes her a minute to decipher what he says. He talks about his work at some medical research facility. “I program for them -- boring data mapping -- I have a few classes left I’ve been trying to do at night, but it’s been. . . hard.”

He has a piece of paper showing what appears to be the inside of a human head shaded in grays hanging on the back of his bedroom door with masking tape. He tells her it is a brain scan of an alcoholic whose brain is severely atrophied in the frontal lobes. He points this out to her, “See here and here, the lighter areas?”

“So you worry about it?” she asks.

He looks at her. “You shouldn’t,” he says. “This is twenty drinks a day.”

Then he adds, “And this is just a weekend warrior at that,” as if it’s funny. “Your hair smells good.”

He smells her hair for a little while, just inhaling slowly. He touches the top of her head too, perhaps he is gently kissing the top and back of her head, though she is facing away from him, so she is not sure.

He says, “My older brother, who is 27, is getting a divorce.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s not that I liked his wife that much, but it’s sad for their kids. John is five, he was born on January 5th, and Sarah is two, well, will be two in a few weeks, the end of August.”

He begins to kiss her ear. Then he runs his hand up and over her breasts and she takes his hand and holds it in hers, then places it down flat on the mattress.

“You don’t want me to touch you, do you?” he says.

“No. I’m sorry. . . .” She feels that she is obligated to add more, but in a moment he is breathing heavily and evenly, his eyes closed.

It is already daylight, so she gets up and sneaks out in the fresh summer morning carrying shoes and socks. Walking barefoot on the sidewalk to the parking lot, the pavement is warm and bits of broken glass catch the sunlight.

The Dream

Suppose a man awakens from a very disturbing dream early one morning. He is wet with perspiration and wheezing fast shallow breaths. So as not to wake his wife, heavily asleep next to him, he gets out of bed and goes downstairs into the still dark living room.

There, he looks around as if he no longer knows who lives in his big house. He does not recognize any of the things he and his wife have spent years acquiring. The bookshelves full of antique leather-bound sets from Shakespeare to the Romantics. Who studied them in school and wanted them so badly years ago? The crystal figurines bought in Italy (was it one for each girl?), a unicorn and a cat, moved from the highest bookshelf to the coffee table now that they had grown and moved away, diminishing the threat of breakage from a rambunctious Saturday morning wrestling match before he and his wife were awake. The posed pictures of a family, Disneyland, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, over the TV in misshapen frames made in grade school art class. He can no longer remember which child was the artist, which the athlete. A folk record collection from college, the rich-smelling cardboard jackets wearing away at the spines, making the album titles illegible. Who had learned their favorites on the old guitar in the attic? Her pile of throw pillows covering the sofa, always in his way, ending up on the floor during Sunday night movies. All of it so strange, all of the stuff surrounding him overwhelming with forgotten histories. All

the colors and smells not theirs, just someone's. Has he sleep-walked to the neighbors'?

He sits down on the overstuffed striped couch and tries to slow his thoughts. Still lightly panting, he recalls his vivid dream and can barely admit to himself that in his dream he hated his wife and the life he lives. In his dream, he wished himself a new life, alone, a life without financial and familial burdens. In his dream he led a life of simple daily tasks, held a job of physical labor, moving garbage at a dump, with other men, unattached, like himself, to keep him company. In his dream, when his wife finally found him, at work in his new life, at his new job, with his new co-workers, attempting to fully detach himself from his past, to bury it whole, she tried to get him to return to their old life.

So in his dream, he killed his wife. And now, sitting in his living room on his overstuffed striped couch, the man knows he must leave his house.

His wife has always known the expressions he wears on his face. Since they were first together, she always seemed to know where his thoughts were, and what emotions he was experiencing simply by glimpsing the position of his mouth and intensity of his eyes. When he got home every evening, he didn't need to tell her what his day had been like, as she could always instantly tell, he only needed to relay the specifics. While at first he had loved her for this and had felt that they were deeply connected as she seemed to understand him implicitly, he has slowly grown to hate his lack of privacy from her. Over the years it has become tiring and complex for him as she becomes a part of every small blissful moment she sees him having, and every second of dissatisfaction she must address with him, wondering if it relates to her or

how she can offer help.

And now, she will surely know that he hates her. She will be able to see that he wishes himself a new life, alone, a life without financial and familial burdens. She will read on his face that he only desires a life of simple daily tasks, a job of physical labor, with other men, unattached, like himself, to keep him company. She will scrutinize his small eyes, hidden far behind his wire-rimmed glasses, and know definitively and with horror that if she tries to get him to return to their old life, he is capable of killing her.

So the man rises from the soft overstuffed couch and takes his beige raincoat from the hall coat closet. He puts it on over his red flannel pajamas, and also puts on his low-brimmed matching rain hat. He puts on an old pair of tennis shoes from the back of the closet, sliding them right over his bare feet so he will not have to go back upstairs and risk waking her and having her see his face.

Maybe the man walks out the front door and is gone forever. Maybe that first moment he steps onto his walkway and latches the heavy wooden door behind him, he is able to breath a deep slow breath as if it is his first and freshest. As if he had been living for years in the house but it was actually underwater, and only now has he resurfaced.

She may look for him, but he knows he never wants to be found, and as if to make up for all the years he lived for her or them, he is able to remain free, unfound, and completely safe in the conviction of his dream.

But suppose that the moment the man steps onto his walkway and latches the

heavy wooden door behind him, he imagines his wife waking up several hours later, alone. He imagines her surprise that he is not still asleep beside her as he has always been since they were married. He imagines that upon realizing he is nowhere in the house, at work, at a friend's home, or any hospital or police station, she becomes tremendously sad and confused. She is even desperately worried, tortured. He can see her matted morning hair falling limply over her face, perhaps several strands sticking to her damp cheek; a vision he has seen many times over the years, it always causing him physical pain. He realizes that she would have no reason to understand why he left without a word; she never saw his face, or fathomed their underwater life.

Suppose he looks at the sky brightening over his neighbor's house in front of him and his thoughts slow to clarity. The bedroom window atop their roof catches the orange light and he can see their sheer white curtains. Like the ones in her first-floor apartment in college that she was so afraid someone could see through, to see him there, so she had made them go to old mice-infested motels instead.

In the growing orange-gray light he is exposed and ridiculous in torn tennis shoes, bare ankles, a formal beige raincoat and unshaven face under the big hat. So he turns back to face his own house, seeing the sunny forsythias beginning to bud and suddenly able to remember the year they planted them with the girls. He takes in the pristine white clapboard house before him, the mortgage just paid off last year, they had had a party for their friends where a lamp had been broken and even she had only laughed. He re-enters his house.

He goes into the immaculate kitchen, sits down at the breakfast table without turning on any lights, and absently begins to detangle the fringe of the woven

placemat under his hands, stroking it over and over into perfectly straight patterns.

After a while, he folds his forearms on the table in front of him and rests his head on them. He figures that with just a little more sleep, to chase the dream off his face, he will be ready to see her when she wakes up, surprised that he is not still asleep beside her as he has always been since they were married, and comes looking for him.

Hairs

This morning, after you leave for work and the kids leave for school, I take my cup of tea to the study and sit down only to find one of your long, dark pubic hairs lying on my desk.

Last night we fell asleep after arguing. This time it was the impending private school tuition for Matt (he passed the entrance exams with flying colors though you didn't know enough to expect it). The alarm woke us to my swollen eyes and your puffed morning face still twisted with anger. During your shower, I brushed my teeth and we began again, but more quietly. You reiterated that my income freelancing does not provide the stability we need. I told you that foregoing some meals out and the new car was all it would take.

The hair is coarse and wiry, the root faded to a white follicle at the end. It lies there, unapologetically three-dimensional and incongruent with the shiny mahogany desktop. I can think of no reason for it to be there. You and I have never had sex in the study. We moved into this house only three years ago, long past the "christen every room" phase and late into the "maybe we shouldn't let the kids see us naked anymore" phase.

So how did it get all the way in here? I slowly sip my steaming tea.

Perhaps when I am out on the weekends and the kids are at practices, you wander the house naked. Asserting a primal ownership of some sort. Even rubbing yourself on the more expensive items like some pervert, the leather couches, the computer, my desk? You have never been an exhibitionist. Are you just *that* bored

with us? Does it give you a guilty pleasure to hope that some neighbor's wife will be passing by the window and catch you strutting to and fro in all your fleshy hairy dangling glory? I shudder to think. Next time we join them for cocktails, I will search their faces for traces of knowing smirks.

Though just lately you sleep in pajama bottoms, maybe late in the night you disrobe and roam. Does it help you think? Or do you sneak down here to look over the bills to check my math to make sure the deposits are right. Maybe you sit here naked in the dark and read my drafts. Do you type your own thoughts and responses in hope that I will search the computer for them, find out what you are *really* feeling this year? I do not even check my computer files because I know that this much effort to reach me is beyond you these days.

For a moment I do think, what if there *is* a lover? It gives her pleasure to make love where I do my work. Would that callous a joke be beyond you? But more realistically, you masturbate in here on lonely Sundays when I take the kids for pizza. Maybe you do it out of a vicarious deviant pleasure, knowing that I love this turret room, this round space, apart from the rest of the house. It is my space, separate from you and the kids, and you do not have that, in the house. It is where I am most apart from you, even if you are home, and, despite your past denials, do you really resent it?

I blow gently on the hair, but it only wavers at its ends and remains at rest by my keyboard.

I remember well the last time we made love. The kids were away and we again felt so free. You were behind me and you held my hand as we came. Then you

lay on top of me and breathed heavy into the back of my neck. Eyes closed, my head swam warm and liquid. I turned my head on the pillow and watched your shoulder move with your breaths. I watched the long dark hairs that are becoming thicker and spreading over your shoulders in the past years. How goofy and middle-aged. But thinking of this moment, of your body pressed fully over mine makes me catch my breath. You are still quite beautiful.

Maybe the pubic hair wafted in here on an air current, through the halls and double doorways of this dark and drafty house. A part of the actual atmosphere of the house, our skin, our hairs, floating around, littering spaces, marking it as ours.

I pick up the hair and place it in the palm of my hand. I inspect it closely. It's exposed, and not at all attractive, twisting and bending with unruly chaos.

I place it securely under my teacup. I get up from my desk and take off my jeans and sweatshirt. I place my socks and underwear in a pile with them in my chair. I have goose bumps; my nipples are hard, my feet freezing.

I go upstairs and brush my teeth again with your toothbrush. I rub your shaving cream over my jaw and then rinse it gone. I put on your Speed Stick and walk into your closet. I put on your thickest flannel boxers and whitest tennis socks. I choose a blue shirt and a gray suit. The shoulders and sleeves hang on me. The pant cuffs drag on the beige carpet. I look in the full-length mirror on the back of our bedroom door. In your clothes I am oddly attractive, breasts and hips adding poking shapes inside the heavy material, though my eyes are sagged and raw from last night. I am tired. I smell you all over me and it smells so good, and yet I am tired. The hairs

sprouting from your shoulders, your cheek against my back.

Tired and smelling you, I take off your suit and crawl into your side of the bed to sleep with my head on your musky pillow, curled in a small ball, for just a little while before going back to my office to begin again.