

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PARACHUTE: STORIES
Emily Chiles, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

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Parachute is a collection of short stories that looks closely at family relationships, particularly between mothers and daughters. Women's stories are a primary focus of the book, but another key theme is the lingering presence of fathers and husbands who have absented themselves either physically or emotionally, or both. *Parachute* also explores the connections between history and fiction, and seeks to tell stories that speak from both historical and fictional truth. While some of the history is autobiographically based, as with fictions springing from family lore, other stories in the collection are loosely based or influenced by real historical figures and/or actual events.

PARACHUTE: STORIES

by

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For Adam

And for my mother

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Comfort

Rebecca once loved a man who did not believe in God. He was sure that when you die, that's it. No St. Peter at the gates, no loved ones on the other side waiting to greet you. Rebecca didn't believe in St. Peter either, but she felt sure God and heaven existed, and she told him so, lying there with his arm under her head, in the moments before sleep.

As a little girl, she had imagined velvet cocoons. Red velvet. Whenever she saw red velvet she thought of heaven. She told her mother this once, and her mother laughed in a way that made her realize that Rebecca didn't understand things. She felt the same way this night, with the man she loved.

Heaven, she told him, was relief. Permanent comfort.

He smiled at her strangely and pulled his arm from beneath her, cradling his own head with it. It was clear that it changed things. This saddened her. But she felt disappointed too, in him. And frightened. This was the first man she had loved, and she felt how slippery love was, how quickly it could shift and change.

He drifted off to sleep. She watched him a little while, worrying. In the early morning, he had to work. He dressed in his deliberate way, his eyes fixed on the whitening sky, while she lay there quiet. It had begun to snow.

Big powdery flakes, she said, mean the snow won't last.

He sat on the edge of the bed and kissed her quickly, his hand on her neck. Then he grabbed his coat from the chair.

Rebecca went to her job at the stationery store as usual. From behind the counter, she watched the sky become gray and the snow wet and icy.

An old woman who stooped at the shoulders came in to the store for shelter. When she removed her winter hat, her hair was a white cloud of static. She stood at the door for a few minutes, shaking her umbrella, watching the dirty snow collect on the parked cars. Her cheeks became ruddy with the heat. Eventually, she became restless and began to wander the store. Rebecca saw her rounded figure move from aisle to aisle in the store's security mirrors. The woman touched some of the loose stationery as if to be sure of its weight.

Eventually she came up to the counter with a greeting card in her hand.

For my friend, she said, who just lost her husband.

Rebecca nodded as she punched the numbers on the register. The woman's eyes were light and watery, rimmed with pink like a rabbit's.

I can never find one without flowers, the old woman said.

Rebecca smiled. She put the card that had two somber irises in a paper bag and handed it to the woman, along with her change.

Thank you and have a nice day.

The woman took the bag and stood for a moment, turning the package in her hands. Then she laughed weakly, a dry sound in her throat, as she moved away from the counter.

Who the hell needs flowers? She said.

The old woman pushed the door open with great effort, and so slowly that the bell hardly jangled.

That night, he came to the front door with a rose.

Just because, he said.

While he took his snow and mud crusted boots off at the door, Rebecca put the rose in water, gently stripping some of the leaves from the stem. She noticed how one petal had started to droop away from the rest.

They talked some about their day. Rebecca did not mention the old woman.

After a while he pulled her towards the bed. She obliged him. He looked down at her as they made love, holding her face in both hands.

Something fleeting passed in his eyes that shook Rebecca deeply. It told how rootless he was. What she saw was something beyond comfort.

She closed her eyes against him, pulling him towards her. Her love was a part of something bigger, safer. It was. It fed into this greater love between God and man.

But his love for her existed only for itself, with nothing to tether itself to. His love had no root at all.

Sometime after midnight Rebecca got out of bed, where he snored softly through his nose, and went to the window. It had stopped snowing. There was no moon, but the sky seemed light. In the kitchen, in the dark, the single rose sat on the table in its slim glass vase.

She gently tore off the one drooping petal. Now the rose was completely closed.

Waiting

They have been there for over an hour, and in that time every patch of yellowish grass surrounding the Monument has been covered by blankets and coolers and people – some in bikinis, others in hats and sunglasses. Ruth is sitting in a folding chair, mostly under the shade of an umbrella. In her arms is her grandchild, asleep, his mouth moving as if he were still sucking on his bottle. Melanie is sprawled on the blanket beside them. Her eyes are closed, hands folded on her belly. She has tucked her t-shirt under her bra and pulled the frayed edges of her cutoffs up to expose more of herself to what little sun is left. Albert has gone off to find them something cold to drink.

Ruth is contemplating the best way to ask Melanie to take the baby. She glances at her purse, picturing the fresh pack of cigarettes, hidden. She hasn't had a cigarette all day and it is beginning to give her a headache. Besides, her grandson is getting heavy, and it is so hot that there is a layer of sweat between her arm and the baby, soaking through his orange overalls. She is trying to find the right, casual tone, rehearsing the words. She doesn't want to sound annoyed.

A man in a straw hat goes by carrying a cooler and almost trips over Ruth's feet, but she quickly pulls them under her folded chair.

"S'cuse me," he says.

"That's okay," Ruth says, and Melanie stirs, sits up.

A woman in a flowered sundress follows behind him, a child in a matching dress in tow.

“Don’t step on the nice people’s blanket, Katie, walk *around* the blanket,” she says to the girl, without looking at them.

The baby squirms a little and begins to cry, so Ruth bounces him a little. Melanie leans over Ruth’s arm and looks at her son, touches his cheek with the back of her hand. The baby grabs her fingers and tries to pull them to his mouth.

“Are you hot, honey?” Melanie says softly to the baby. “Why don’t you take his hat off?” She says to Ruth, and lies back down, an arm over her face.

“He’s fine,” Ruth says, taking another breath to ask her question lightly, off hand. She lets the breath out, annoyed at herself, goes ahead and pulls at the ties and removes the hat. The baby’s hair is damp. It is Melanie’s hair—blond, frizzy. Albert’s has always been dark, like his father’s.

Ruth decides she’ll wait for Albert to come back. It will be easier to ask him to take the baby.

Someone nearby turns a radio up – a deejay is rattling on about how hot this Fourth is. Then a Beach Boys song comes on.

Albert is weeding his way towards them with two plastic cups of beer in hand. He has taken his shirt off and slung it over his shoulder. Ruth notices with a little embarrassment that her son’s chest is pale, paler than his arms, and much narrower than his father’s was. Is. It annoys Albert the way she talks about his father in the past tense, as if he were dead. Mostly, now, they avoid talking about him at all.

The baby gurgles, fingers in his mouth, slobbering a little.

“I wish the sun would go down so we could see the fireworks,” says Melanie, without opening her eyes.

“You seem to be enjoying it,” Ruth says, “but it’s probably too late in the day for much of a tan.”

Melanie doesn’t respond.

Now Albert sidles up and sets a beer on Melanie’s stomach. She squeals and smacks him playfully.

“That was mean.” Melanie pouts and grabs the beer. He laughs, and leans forward to kiss her. Ruth looks at the baby.

“What took you so long?” Melanie says. “I was thirsty.”

“Too many people.” Albert pulls a soda can out of his pocket and hands it his mother. “Lot more than last year.”

“Yeah, I know.” Melanie is holding the sweating cup against her cheek.

Albert squints into the sun. He looks over at his son, and then leans over and tugs at his toes.

“Do you think he’s getting too hot, Mom?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Melanie says. “We took his hat off.”

She leans back on her elbows, her face aimed towards the Monument, beer in both hands on her chest.

“Would you take him?” Ruth asks Albert. “He’s getting heavy.”

“Sure,” he says, sipping his beer, “in a minute?”

Someone shrieks to the left them. They all look to see the source of the noise, then give up after a moment or two. The sun goes behind a low cloud.

“God, when is it gonna start?” Melanie says, and flops over onto her stomach.

Ruth looks at her watch. "It's half-past six," she says, and shifts the baby's hot little body to her other arm. He doesn't like that, so she holds him up so that he is standing on her lap, looking out at the crowd, shifting his chubby feet on her thighs.

Now it's Jan and Dean on the radio.

"Ugh," Melanie mumbles.

Two tan young women go by in bathing suits and flip flops. One of them stares at Albert, who glances back, tapping out the song on his knee. He finishes the last of his beer and leans over and takes the baby from his mother, lying back on the blanket with his son on his chest. A breeze hits Ruth's body where the baby was, cools it.

Ruth had picked a nice light yellow for the dining room, and had managed most of the first wall by herself before Albert appeared that day, a year ago, and stood in the dining room doorway running a hand back and forth over his nearly bald head.

"What did you do to your hair?" The last time she had seen him, a week or so before, his hair was dark and curly, down to his shoulders.

"Shaved it. It was too hot. It feels weird though. Feel," he said, and leaned his head towards her.

She touched his head with her fingers.

"No, like this—" he said, and grabbed her hand and rubbed her palm on his head. It was bristly and very warm.

She laughed, and so did he.

"Weird, huh."

"I guess I'll get used to it," she said.

It had been a few days since she'd seen him. She never knew when he would show up, and when he did she didn't know how long he would stay. She had stopped asking where he was, even though she still wondered, and was hurt that he never called. On some level she realized this was unreasonable. Albert was 22, a man now. He could do what he pleased, and didn't need to consult his mother.

"What are you doing in here?" He asked.

"Just a little fixing up," Ruth said. "You can help if you want."

Albert took off his jean jacket, laid another sheet of plastic down and applied some tape along the edges where the floor met the wall. Then he picked up a roller and began to paint. An hour went by, the two of them working side by side. At one point he went over and changed the radio station from her oldies station to classic rock. Albert had always had dreams of being a guitarist in some band, and he worshipped the rock stars from his parents' generation. When a Led Zeppelin song came on, he turned it up.

"I haven't heard you play much lately," she said over the music.

"What?" He said.

"Do you still play ever?"

"Nah, too busy."

He dipped the roller, not looking at her.

"With work?" She asked. He was a cashier at a downtown video store, and had been there almost two years. It had started as a part-time thing while he went to the local community college. Now, he was there full-time, and the semester off he talked about had turned into more than a year.

"Yeah, work."

“Good. Good,” Ruth said, and left it at that.

She didn’t want to push. She was too glad to see him, glad she wasn’t painting the dining room by herself. Somehow, it seemed to her like a pathetic thing to do alone, the kind of thing aging divorcees do when they have nothing else in their lives to occupy themselves.

Since Joe had left almost two years ago she tried to keep herself busy, to remind herself that she had her own things to do. She had started with little projects, like doing something with all the fabric she had collected over the years (curtains for Albert’s room, a tablecloth, dinner napkins). Now she found herself trying to change, little by little, the way the house had looked when Joe lived there. He had never liked change, had never let her alter anything in the house. The day Joe left, the rooms still looked much as they did when they bought the house twenty three years before.

First she rearranged some of the furniture. Joe’s office – which had remained empty and untouched ever since the day he came with the moving van to pack up his computer and books – became her study/sewing room, though she had to admit to herself that it still didn’t feel like it was really *her* room. Then she painted the upstairs bathroom violet, which came out too dark. Then the living room (pale blue), and now the dining room. She already had paint swatches taped to the wall in her bedroom, and she was thinking of wallpaper for the kitchen, and of course the cabinets needed redoing, had needed it for years.

When she finished with all that, she didn’t know what she would do. Maybe get a dog.

Now, Ruth took a break from painting the corners to step back and watch the room slowly brighten as Albert finished one wall and then moved on to another, working fast, his nearly bald head shiny, a triangle of sweat darkening his t-shirt between his shoulders.

She wanted to ask Albert if he had seen Joe. It was still important for her to know how he was. Hearing that Joe was doing well, or not, still hit her with a force that was difficult to bear. Joe had not died, he had just stopped loving her; he lived another life now that did not include her. And yet she continued to ask, trying to space the questions out because she knew it was a conversation that Albert never wanted to have. She had asked Albert only two weeks ago (“I don’t know, Mom, I guess he’s okay,” he had said, annoyed), so she had to let it go a little while longer. Another week or so, and she could ask him again.

It was after eight when they finished. The color was perfect.

“It looks good, honey. Thank you.” Ruth wanted to hug him but resisted.

“Yeah, looks nice,” Albert said. “Good color.”

He switched off the radio and went into the blue living room and sat down on the sofa, absently rubbing his head. Ruth followed.

Albert turned the TV on and then off again, still staring at the blank screen.

She stretched her lower back, and then sat next to Albert and patted his knee. He glanced at her hand and she pulled it away. Sometimes he still looked so much like the little boy he used to be.

“Whew, I was starting to feel dizzy,” Ruth said. “I hate the way paint smells.”

Albert was quiet. He fidgeted a little, playing with a tear in his jeans.

“What’s going on, Al? Everything okay?”

He looked at her quickly and then looked back at the blank TV screen.

“Nothing, just—well, not for supper, Mom, but this girl I know is coming to just, you know, to say hi. To meet you.”

“Okay,” Ruth said carefully. “When is this blessed event?”

“Well, tonight. Soon, actually.”

“Tonight?” Ruth said, standing. “Al, I’ve been painting all day and the house is a wreck.” She smoothed her hair down, looking around her at the paint-splattered plastic sheets, the empty cans and dirty brushes. “Tonight? Really?”

“Look, you’re tired, Mom. You must be exhausted.”

Albert stood too. He looked at his watch.

“Why don’t you just take it easy tonight and I’ll bring Melanie over another time.” He shrugged, rubbed his head. “I’ll just – I’ll tell her it’s not a good idea tonight.”

He looked at his watch again and frowned.

The knock at the door startled them both. Albert stood there frozen, his eyes apologetic.

“Well, she’s here,” he said, and went to the door, avoiding his mother’s eyes.

Ruth went quickly to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Her t-shirt was splattered with paint – there were even flecks of yellow in her hair. She patted some water on her face, decided she was a mess and there was nothing she could do about it now.

When Ruth came out of the bathroom, Melanie was there in the foyer: round, solid Melanie, yellow hair in a straggly ponytail, pale, pale skin, eyes somehow too close. Tank top, no bra, skirt to the floor.

“Hi,” the girl said, with a wide smile that made her dry lips white. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Ruth took her hand and shook it. It was very warm.

The girl put her other hand to her heart.

“You’ve got a great son.”

She could be no more than seventeen, eighteen.

“Yes,” Ruth said, nodding dumbly. She began to say ‘how are you,’ and heard: “How old are you?” come out of her mouth instead.

“Mom, Jesus!” Albert said.

He laughed nervously, then leaned over and kissed Melanie quickly and said to her, “My mom doesn’t get much company,” a remark that stung Ruth.

He pulled Melanie towards the living room.

“That’s ok,” Melanie said, settling in next to him on the couch.

Ruth took the other chair.

“I know I *look* young, but actually I’m eighteen,” the girl said. “I’ll be nineteen in November.”

“Oh,” Ruth said. She realized that Melanie was nervous, and felt ashamed at her question.

“I’m sorry. I’ve – we’ve been painting today.” She gestured to the dining room.

“You know, the fumes. They make me a little out of it.”

“Yeah, it kinda smells,” Melanie said, wrinkling her nose.

“Sorry,” Ruth said. “We can sit outside if you want.”

“Okay,” Melanie looked at Albert.

They went out and settled on the porch – Albert and Melanie in the porch swing, and Ruth in the nearest chair. The sun had almost completely set, and burned an orange stripe across their laps.

“Well, Mom,” Albert began, “wow – this is hard.”

Ruth looked at him sharply.

“What? What is hard?” Her voice sounded faint.

He bit his upper lip. Melanie swatted at a fly.

“What’s going on?” Ruth said.

Albert took a deep breath.

“We have some news,” he began. Melanie squeezed his hand. “Something to tell you.”

A car went by and Ruth watched it. Now everything would change. She tried to prepare herself somehow for whatever was coming, to steel herself against it, but could only sit there and watch that car go out of sight. In that moment, following the car with her eyes, she was angrier at Joe than she had ever been – the rage boiled up in her and settled on her son’s face, on Melanie’s face. She would have to bear this too, alone.

The sky behind the Monument has turned lavender, but the low sun is warm on Ruth’s back. Albert and Melanie have gone off together for more beer, and Ruth is on the blanket next to the baby, who is on his stomach, playing with a touch and feel book. The last page has a mirror and he is looking at it, patting it with the flat of his hand.

“Who’s that?” Ruth says. “That’s you.” The baby looks at her and then back at the mirror.

A young couple passes with cigarettes in their hands. Ruth breathes it in. Years ago, when Albert was in middle school, she and Joe had made a pact and quit together. It was the year that they talked about smoking in Albert's school, and he had come home with all this information about what smoking can do to you.

But last month she broke down and bought a pack, feeling disappointed in herself but wanting them too much to care. Albert didn't know she was smoking again, and she felt guilty, obliged to the 13 year old boy he was, coming home with the lung cancer pamphlets for his parents. She touches her purse, feeling the pack through the canvas, assured. It's the same brand she and Joe used to smoke (Marlboro ultra lights). It occurs to her now that he may have begun again too, that that pact they had made was, of course, meaningless now, null and void.

She looks out at the crowd for her son, looking for someone very tall. He towers over most people the way his father did. She remembers looking for Joe this way in crowds, or at parties. It was what she first noticed about him when she met him. She thinks of his bare back in the sun as a young man, how she used to enjoy simply watching him move. Ruth wonders if Melanie does this with Albert, and tries to think if she's ever seen it. She doesn't think she has.

They are making their way over to her now, Albert walking ahead of Melanie, eyes down. He has put his shirt back on.

"Can you take the baby, please?" Ruth says to them when they reach the blanket. She thinks she sees Melanie waver a bit and wonders if she's drunk.

Albert leans down and picks the child up.

Ruth stands, reaching for her purse.

“It’s almost time,” Melanie says.

“I know.” Albert looks at her for a long time.

Ruth realizes they’ve had—or are having—a fight.

The baby starts to cry. Albert shifts him to his shoulder.

Melanie says to Albert, “do you want *me* to?”

“No, it’s fine,” Albert says quietly.

With the child in one arm, fussing, he fishes in the cooler with the other, and brings out the baby formula. He sits down in Ruth’s chair with his son sucking at the bottle.

Ruth watches Albert’s face for a moment.

“You know,” she says to him, “you look just like your dad feeding you.”

He smiles.

“Yeah,” Albert says, “except he is much cuter than I was; he looks just like his mama.”

Melanie leans over and kisses him on the arm.

“People thought you were the cutest baby they’d ever seen,” Ruth says from the edge of the blanket, “they said it all the time.”

Albert gazes at his son, then at Melanie.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Melanie mouths, “me too.”

Ruth shifts her purse to the other shoulder.

“I want a beer,” she announces.

“Why didn’t you say? I would’ve gotten you one,” Albert says.

Ruth waves this away.

As she heads off, she hears Melanie say, “I’ve never seen your mom drink a beer.”

Ruth hates beer. Albert will know this. But she’s desperate for a cigarette. And she’s tired of both of them.

She weeds her way through the clusters of people and feels her throat tighten.

She remembers saying to Joe that she felt the loneliest ever while alone in a crowd. And when she said it, she had him. It was years, a decade or more, before he left.

Ruth finds the beer line and stands at the end of it, lighting up and taking a long, deep drag. She looks around a little sheepishly, as if it is obvious that she isn’t just standing there wanting a beer like everyone else.

She smokes her cigarette quickly and lights up again immediately. She waits.

Ruth put her dining room furniture in storage and they converted the dining room into the baby’s room, because Albert’s room down the hall was too small for three. Melanie was thrilled with the new yellow paint, since it was neutral, not blue for a boy nor pink for a girl.

It was temporary (they kept telling her this) just until they could afford a place of their own. But Ruth watched them settle in, Melanie’s stomach growing bigger and bigger. They both worked at the downtown video store and were gone most of the time, and when they were home she was glad for the noise of people in the house again. She got used to watching all their TV shows.

The paint swatches stayed on the bedroom wall for a few months before she finally took them down, put them in a drawer for later. She wouldn't have time to paint with the baby coming.

Ruth hoped to be able to give Melanie advice or ease any fears she had about childbirth, or being a mother, but the girl did not seem at all nervous. If she had questions or worries she never voiced them to Ruth, and Ruth never felt relaxed enough with Melanie to bring it up herself. The first time the baby kicked, Ruth, delighted, laid her hand on Melanie's stomach, and saw immediately that the gesture made Melanie uncomfortable. She didn't know how to get to know this strange girl, and after awhile, she simply gave up trying.

Melanie's mother, Evelyn, came all the way from Denver when the baby was born. She was younger than Ruth, blond like Melanie. She stayed in a hotel near the hospital, and rented a mini-van for the visit. The day before Melanie and the baby came home from the hospital, Evelyn showed up at Ruth's house and unloaded from the mini-van a fancy crib and changing table, even though Ruth had brought Albert's old set up from the basement and stripped and re-stained it.

Evelyn asked for Ruth's help setting up the crib, and Ruth found it difficult to protest.

"Kids these days," Evelyn said, as she and Ruth shoved Albert's old set into the living room, "they want all new things, you know?"

While they put the crib together, Evelyn talked a little about Melanie's father, who had left when Melanie was only four. Neither of them had seen him since.

"So it's just been the two of us, you know, for awhile. A long time."

“Melanie’s a sweet girl,” Ruth said, aware of how false her words sounded.

After a moment, she added, “she makes my son very happy.”

“I can see that,” Evelyn said.

They were quiet while they made up the little mattress with the new blue and yellow crib sheets Evelyn had bought.

“I hope they will be happy,” Evelyn said thoughtfully, smoothing down the striped cotton and giving it a final pat.

Before she left, Evelyn offered to take Ruth by the hospital.

“You know, you don’t have to worry about running into your ex,” she said gently, laying a hand on Ruth’s arm. “He was already there today.”

“Oh,” Ruth said. She didn’t know what else to say.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being nosy, I just thought, you know—Albert said—”

“No, it’s fine.” Ruth wondered what her son had told this woman. “Well, I’m glad. I’m glad he got to see the baby,” she said, nodding dumbly at Evelyn. She wasn’t brave enough to ask if Joe had been alone or if he had brought someone.

“Yes, well,” Evelyn agreed solemnly, nodding too. “He is the baby’s grandpa.”

Grandpa, Ruth thought. Joe is a grandpa. And I am a grandma.

“I’m tired. I think I’ll stay,” she told Evelyn, “but tell Albert and Melanie I’ll see them tomorrow.”

Ruth sat on the floor in the dining room after Evelyn had gone, staring at the new furniture, wanting a cigarette badly. She felt so close to laughing and crying at the same time that it seemed an entirely new emotion.

Now Ruth inches forward in the beer line and sees the sky get darker, lights a third cigarette. She will probably miss the fireworks now. Maybe she should go back, she thinks, tell them that the line was too long. But she would feel ridiculous now, returning empty-handed. She's been in line fifteen minutes. Better to come back with a beer and show that that was her intention all along, to just have a beer like an adult.

Behind her, a young mother is reasoning with her little boy.

"We'll go after this, I promise, sweetie. We won't miss the fireworks."

"But, Mooom."

"No. No whining."

"Mom, I want to go now."

The child starts to whimper.

Ruth finds herself unreasonably irritated and turns to look at the woman: she is on her knees, holding her child by the arms.

She wonders suddenly how long Albert and Melanie and the baby are going to live in her house, how long before she gets her quiet back.

The little boy is crying louder now, the mother bargaining, "Honey, just a few more minutes. Remember, you promised me you wouldn't do this."

"Noooo," the child wails.

Ruth leans down to the kneeling woman and says, "You know, you're the parent, you're the one in control." It comes out loud, far less kind than she intended. People turn around.

The woman looks at her and frowns, recoils almost. Even the child stops crying momentarily to stare at her, before starting up again.

Embarrassed, Ruth steps out of the line, moves toward her family. She pushes her way through the crowd, thinking of what she will say to them when she gets back to the blanket. It can't wait. She is tired of being their nanny, sick of Melanie and her coldness, her childishness, she's sick of both of them. Sick, mostly, of their youth. Sick of the baby.

Ruth spots them through the sea of faces and beach chairs and coolers, and stops. People push past her, trying to get back to their blankets before the fireworks start, but she just stands there, looking at her family. Her son is leaning back in the chair with the baby awake on his lap. Albert's face is turned up, waiting. Boyish. He looks just like Joe. Melanie has her head on his knee, her long frizzy hair partially concealing her eyes. They are waiting.

Everyone is watching the sky. Suddenly the first one streaks through the air and cracks. Ruth sees it explode into a million sparks. People around her shout and clap.

Albert has covered the baby's ears, and is laughing. Melanie points at the sky.

Another one shoots up and splits open, stars falling.

Ruth puts her hand over her mouth stop herself from crying, but a sob comes anyway, quickly, and then vanishes before her eyes are even wet.

"God," she says, but she can't hear the word over the noise.

The fireworks streak two and three at a time now. Everyone is looking up.

Ruth takes a few deep breaths and goes over to them, sits on the blanket beside Melanie.

"Mom, you missed the best one so far," Albert shouts across to her.

She gives her son a quick close-mouthed smile and looks up at the sky, which is bursting with purple and red.

“Wow, pretty,” Melanie says, “I like the purple.”

Albert leans over and kisses her as if she’s just said something incredibly profound.

After the finale with “God Bless America,” they pack up the cooler, fold up the blanket, get the baby settled into his stroller and head for the car down by the river basin. They are moving slowly along with the crowd. It is almost ten.

Ruth is very tired.

Someone coos at the baby while going by, “look how handsome you are.” Melanie smiles big and says thank you. Ruth cringes at this, and then marvels at her own criticalness. Melanie is the baby’s mother, she tells herself, she has every right to be proud.

On the ride home Ruth sleeps in the backseat next to the baby, her face turned towards the window, sweater pulled tight against the air conditioning. She dreams of seeing Joe in an airport, getting off a plane. In the dream they are still married – she has gone to the airport to meet him, wearing the yellow dress he had liked from years ago. Now, it doesn’t fit her right, but she hopes he won’t notice. She hopes he won’t notice she’s older. Joe walks out of the tunnel, suitcase in hand, taller than everyone. When she calls out to him, *Joe*, he turns and looks at her and it is someone else entirely. The man keeps walking past her through the gates. Everyone gets off the plane, and not one of them is Joe.

She wakes with a start when Albert pulls into the driveway. Melanie and the baby have both been sleeping too.

They go into the house and Ruth heads straight upstairs to her room, too tired to even say goodnight. The dream has disturbed her. Sometimes, it still occurs to her: Joe left her. He left her. Sometimes she has to deal with it all over again.

She takes the paint swatches out of the drawer and tapes them to the bedroom wall again. The room is still the same beige it was then, for all those years, when it was their room and not just hers. Why hadn't she changed it sooner? She'll pick a bright color, something happy and bold.

A few minutes later she hears Albert on the stairs and knows he's coming to talk to her. She is already curled up on her side in bed, makeup still on, teeth not brushed. She thinks, it's my house, I'm allowed to tell him to go away; I'll just tell him to go away.

He taps at her door.

"Mom?"

"What?" Ruth says, turning on the light.

Albert sits on the bed.

"Melanie is worried that you might be sad about this, but we feel like it's time we got our own place."

Ruth almost laughs at first, before it cuts through her.

"Okay," she says after a few seconds.

"It's just that –"

"I said okay."

“All right. Glad it’s okay.” He looks at her and then away.

“It is.”

She feels like she should put his mind at ease about it, but something in her won’t allow that.

He sees the paint swatches on the wall. “You going to paint in here too?”

She nods, closes her eyes. Albert sits there a moment, tracing the pattern on the quilt with his finger.

“All right. Well goodnight,” he says finally, and stands.

“Albert?”

He sits again. Ruth sits up and reaches her hand out to him; he takes it.

“How is your dad?” She asks, turning his hand over in hers. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, Mom. He’s fine,” he says gently. He pulls his hand away and gives her a half-smile and stands, goes out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Ruth turns out the light. She lies awake for a long while, her eyes open in the dark room. Downstairs, the baby is crying. Soon there won’t be other people in the house. Already, it feels empty to Ruth, bare. She sees the exploding sparks in the sky, red and purple, when she finally shuts her eyes, closes them tight against the quiet that will come.

Paterfamilias (A Triptych)

I. 1918

In the morning, Sunday, you wake up at dawn as usual. You decide while dressing it is a good enough day for a walk, tell your wife you will take a turn before breakfast. You circuit around Lincoln Park, sticking to the sidewalk. The century is ahead of you. The war behind you. But of course you don't think of that. You only think of the business of the day: the accounts to go over, a loose door knob, the paper to read. Near the statue a stray dog noses a piece of rubbish. You cross the street, head for your open gate. Breakfast is waiting.

During mass, you grip your Bible (a gift from your wife). You silence your two sons with a glance. You are irritable, tired. Perhaps the walk was a bad idea. Or maybe the standing and sitting and standing wearies you. Your lungs find it difficult to hold enough breath to sing the Agnus Dei, though you make an effort for the children. They learn from example. They will be good men.

You line up, take the communion. The bread turns acidic in your mouth.

After the service you look at your watch three times while waiting for your row to empty. You shake Father Murphy's hand at the door. His hand feels hot. You watch your wife corral your children out into the sun, which is terrible and bright. You shiver though it is June and the breeze is mild.

At home, you climb under the covers. You are only a little tired – it will pass. Your wife tells you this and you agree. You sleep. She brings more blankets from the cupboard. She keeps the children quiet. In the morning you will wake, refreshed. You will kiss your wife goodbye, you will go to work. You are young, you are healthy. Your life is ahead of you. You have faith. It will pass. It will pass.

Your feet never touch the floor again.

By nightfall it has run its course and left the husk of you, shrunken. Your blazing skin has finally gone cold under the stained bedsheet. The silent house still throbs with your prayers, your bargaining.

Outside in the yard your summer suit, your starched white shirt and collar, your tie and straw hat are piled. Ready for the fire your wife is stoking now, her mouth fixed in a thin line. Your good Sunday clothes.

II. 1944

Our father had been home from the war only months when we became we. Curled around each other in her womb, forming limbs indiscernible as his or mine. What was his was mine and what was mine was also his, even then, in the dark, waiting.

One night our father began screaming. We jumped. There was commotion, running. Then calm.

We heard our mother say, 'come out from under there, honey.'

It was the same voice she used when she talked to us, before she knew we were an us, a she and a he, and not a she *or* a he. She called us 'little one.' She would say, in the mornings, when she finished her coffee: 'well, little one, let's get ourselves going.' Or, when we shifted in unison: 'you are restless today, little one.'

Our mother said to our father that night, 'you are in your own kitchen. That is your own table you're under.'

Our father had never spoken to us. But we knew his voice.

He said, 'they're coming. They'll be here soon. Any second. Can't you hear their footsteps?'

We listened hard with our developing ears but we did not hear footsteps. He pulled her, and us, under there with him.

'Stay quiet,' he said, 'quiet as you can.'

She began again, 'this is—' and he closed his hand over her face; we heard her voice catch in her throat.

'Shh,' he said.

Her heart sounded like boot heels falling on the soft earth. We did not move. We were afraid.

The four of us were rooted there together until he stopped trembling and his breathing slowed. His hand must have fallen away from her mouth, he must have folded himself up. Our mother lay down next to our father, her body bending into his the way our bodies made us we.

She put his hand on us. She slept too.

III. 2005

I saw this on the news.

From a distance, the climbers spotted a parachute flapping in the wind, red against snow. When they got closer they saw the parachute was attached to the shoulders of a man frozen into the side of the mountain like a deep rooted tree.

Archaeologists came to pick at the ice and free him. When the man emerged from the ice it was clear to the archaeologists he was an airman from the second war. They put him on a plane to Hawaii in a flag-draped coffin. Took him to a lab where forensic scientists poured cold water over him for many days.

The scientists supposed he was fair-haired, though it could be that decades of sun functioned as bleach. Examining his teeth told of an even smile – they used the word ‘beautiful’ on the news.

In the airman’s pockets the scientists found a handful of dimes and a small black address book.

They told the camera they intend to scan what’s left of the pages with a special light machine to find the faded words. The scientists hope the words will reveal the frozen man’s identity. They have narrowed him down to four missing men that were lost on the mountain.

I thought: my father is missing. We haven’t seen him in years.

He disappeared one night on top of a mountain with a telephone in his hand. It was a different mountain, another time, yes. But isn’t it possible? There was snow on his mountain too. The sun was nearly gone.

You should see this view, he said into the phone to my mother. Beautiful.

I picture him in a uniform, a parachute fluttering behind him. The exposed hand holding the phone to his ear is red with cold. My mother is telling him some thing their daughter uttered in her sleep. Really, he says.

He is peering over the gentle cliff edge, noticing a path he could take into the snow. The other hand is jangling the change in his pocket. Perhaps he touches the leather cover of the small black book that also rests there.

With the phone in his hand he swings one leg over the fence, then the other. Goes sideways to accommodate the slope, parachute trailing behind him.

She has changed the subject: Christmas. Yes, he says, I'm listening.

He looks back. The fence is out of view now.

Her voice blinks in and out, rises slightly – she is asking a question. Then static. The signal is lost. He looks at the phone and then encloses it in his hand, pulls his sleeve over hand and phone.

The sun slips behind a low ridge. It is getting colder. He must move fast.

He chooses a place near a stream where the ground is softest. Digs at the soil until his fingers are stiff and numb. He stops, rubs them, begins again.

Places the phone in the earth and packs snow and mud over it with his open palm. Rests a palm there. Perhaps he says our names.

He brushes his hands on his uniform and examines his dirty fingernails.

Walks on, towards a flat expanse of undisturbed snow.

Now it is done he can rest.

He arranges the parachute like a pillow and lays down, ankles crossed. Looks up at the moon in its habit of rising. A bird flying over.

Past Lives

William first started acting strange the day before our Memorial Day barbecue, when he slipped on the kitchen floor I had just mopped. Our daughter Tina was bringing her new boyfriend, Doug, and Doug's mother to the barbecue. I wanted the place to look nice and tidy as can be, since Doug's mother, who we hadn't met yet, runs a cleaning service. William was on his way to the TV chair with his dinner when his feet just went out from under him. His head hit the floor with a smack and I came running over to see what happened. He was lying there on the kitchen floor cursing at me, his dinner spilt everywhere. The plate didn't even break.

I helped him sit up and he held the back of his head and howled like a dog sitting on a nail and wouldn't get up for awhile, as if his legs were hurt and not his head. Then I gave him an icepack for the lump and a fresh plate of dinner, and he sat eating quietly in front of the TV most of the evening, feeling sorry for himself I suppose. I cleaned up the mashed potatoes and gravy I had made for him, feeling sorry for myself too for the rotten things he'd said. Even in the beginning, when we were still young people getting used to each other, he never called me names.

We went to bed that night without speaking, no quick kiss goodnight as usual. How do you break a 27 year old habit, just like that, over a bump on the head?

The next day, the day of the barbecue, he worked the gas grill and I handled the side dishes, so we didn't talk much, and that was fine with me. As far as I could see it he still owed me an apology. But the only thing he had seen fit to say to me all morning is, "Did you remember to thaw the meat?"

My cousin Mary arrived first, all the way from Fredericksburg. And George, who lives next door, came soon after and shook hands with everybody, looking a little too long at Mary's bosom for someone who just lost his wife last winter. William's younger brother Charles also came with his new girlfriend, a blond woman who appeared young until you got up close. Charles had put some sort of dye in his beard that was too dark. It was hard to look him in the face.

Then Tina and Doug arrived with Doug's mother, Faye. I thought Faye seemed older than me, though I found out later from Tina she is only fifty-two. She had short bristly gray hair and she wore a tee shirt with an American flag, and earrings to match. Faye put a cake on the dessert table and when she removed the cover I saw that the cake had a flag too.

Tina waved to her father and he came over to shake hands with Tina's guests. He hugged Tina quickly and then said to me, "Patty, it's almost time for the hot dogs," and excused himself while he went back to the grill to check the meat. As he walked away I noticed that he hadn't even combed the back of his hair that morning and I wondered if he was trying to make some point about the bump on his head and if that was supposed to make me feel guilty for mopping the kitchen floor.

Tina shrugged at Doug and his mother, who stood there smiling, looking a little confused.

"Well, have a seat in the shade," I said. "Let me pour you something cold to drink – iced tea? Beer?"

"Beer," Doug said, looking at his mother, as if to challenge her.

"I'll have iced tea, Patty," said Doug's mother.

Tina followed me into the kitchen.

“What’s going on, Mom? Are you and Dad fighting?”

I held out the hot dogs to Tina.

“Here,” I said. “You deal with him.”

“I guess that’s a yes,” she said, grimacing at the hot dogs (the vegetarian thing still hadn’t passed).

“Look,” I said, “I was only trying to make the place nice for the Memorial Day company, especially Doug’s mother. And he slipped and hit his head. And he called me all kinds of names. Now he’s mad at me. As if it’s my fault! As if I’m the one who should apologize.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Tina said. She looked out the window at him and shook her head. She sounded like a parent about to reluctantly scold her child.

“Tina, do you know what he called me?” I said.

She looked at me, waiting.

“Forget it,” I said. “And I can handle him myself. I handled him for two years before you were born.”

“Fine.” Tina shrugged. “Whatever.”

She went outside, to her father, who was standing by the grill with Charles and George, all with beers in their hands. Poor young Doug stood near them, listening politely, his hands in his pockets. None of them made an effort to include him, and when Tina noticed she grabbed Doug by the hand and said something to her father that made the men laugh. She’s always had that way about her.

I went to the picnic table to join Mary and Faye and Charles' blond girlfriend, who were sitting there talking about when (not if) Charles was going to propose marriage. I took a bite of Mary's store-bought potato salad, watching my daughter with her boyfriend, who was listening to George with his head tilted to the side, as if trying to catch every word. He was not at all like William.

I heard the blond woman say something quiet to Mary about Charles' beard dye. Mary started giggling, and when I leaned in closer to hear what was said, there was a crash behind us and Tina made a gasping sound like she was scared. We all turned and saw William marching off towards the woods behind our house. The grill was on its side and Tina and the men stood around it, stunned.

Doug rubbed his head and mumbled, "What did I say?"

Tina told us later that all he said was that he wanted cheese on his burger too.

William was gone for nearly three hours. Charles and George and Doug went searching for him while the women sat silent in the front room. Tina tearfully insisted on going, too, but the men told her to stay in case I needed her. She sat on the sofa with Faye's arm around her and I felt a pang of jealousy that surprised me.

Mary made coffee – she said it seemed like the kind of thing people do in "these kinds of situations." She tried to start up a game of Scrabble but no one was interested. Finally she turned on the TV and we all stared at an episode of a sluttier, modern day version of the Dating Game. Faye chuckled every now and then, patting Tina on the arm. The blond woman sat with her hands folded politely and took little sips of her diet soda. She seemed so uncomfortable I actually felt sorry for her.

I sat by the phone, wondering if I should call the police. It started to get dark. I kept thinking of suicide but it didn't sink in as a real possibility. It seemed like it was straight out of one of William's cop shows. There was, of course, the lake, about a half mile away by foot, through the woods. If it got dark I would call the police. They would want to drag the lake. *Drag the lake*, I repeated to myself again and again. What a terrible group of words.

Mary saw them first, coming up the path in the backyard.

"Look!" She pointed.

We all went to the window: the men were clapping William on the back and laughing, as if it was all some joke.

"Oh, thank God," Tina said, and tears started to roll over her cheeks.

William was nodding and smiling, but his face seemed blank. He had just the same look on his face that day years ago when he fractured his arm in a car accident on Highway 29, when we were coming home from Tina's dance recital. The paramedic told us then it was shock.

When they came up to the house, the women scattered and tried to appear busy, as if we hadn't been sitting there worrying the whole time. Someone turned the TV off.

George opened the door and yelled, "We found him!" It echoed through the quiet room.

Tina went running up to her father and hugged him tight. He hugged back, laughing a little. She kept asking him why, why he would scare her like that. Faye and Mary and the blond woman all stood, smiling uncomfortably. The blond woman finally sat down again and took another sip of her soda.

“Sorry, honey,” William said to Tina softly, while she cried.

I stood there at the dessert table cutting the flag cake into perfectly even squares.

Mary ushered everyone out, saying William needed his rest; he did look tired as he settled down into his TV chair.

“Take some cake,” I said, but everyone was in a hurry to leave.

Tina decided to stay. She sat in the other chair (my chair) and put on his favorite cop show. I stood in the kitchen looking at both of them, the identical slopes of their noses.

“William?” I said.

“Let him alone, Mom. Please?” Tina said. So I did.

“Well we’ll talk about this later,” I said.

William glanced at me, past me.

“Could you get me a glass of water? With ice?” He said, and looked back at the TV.

I got the water for him. He took the glass from me with a quick nod of his head and said, “Thanks love.” I had heard him say this millions of times in all the years we had been married, but none of them had ever hit me in the gut so hard as it did just then.

I went upstairs alone to bed. Those two words echoed in my ears. They were words he would normally say, so maybe things would be normal again. I hoped.

A few days later, William and I were eating breakfast and I asked him if Charles had proposed yet to that blond woman he brought to our party, and William closed the newspaper with a snap and stalked out of the house. He was still in his bathrobe.

This time, he was gone four hours.

When he finally came shuffling back up the yard in his slippers, Tina and Doug were here, and I had the police on the phone. Doug had searched for about two hours before he gave up and came back, looking defeated.

William came through the door as if he'd just gone for the paper. His slippers were filthy and wet, and a twig was caught in the collar of his robe. I hung up on the police and stalked past him, upstairs to the guest room, shutting the door loudly so he would hear. Then I changed my mind and opened it. I curled up on the bed and listened to Tina crying angrily and William saying that he was sorry.

Finally Tina sniffled, "I have to go back to *work* now."

"Glad you're safe, sir," Doug offered before he and Tina got in Doug's car and drove off, leaving me alone in the house with William. I heard him turn the TV on, and after a little while I heard him snoring.

I went downstairs and shut the TV off. He woke up and immediately righted his glasses, which had slipped down his nose. I noticed the newspaper on the side table next to his chair.

"What is this? What the hell is going on?" I said.

William pulled his bathrobe tighter. He still had that blank look on his face, the same look the paramedic had called shock.

"Patty, you woke me up."

For some reason this remark made me angrier than anything he had ever said. "I what?" I yelled. He flinched. I picked up the newspaper and threw it at him.

William placed it back on the side table, with his lips pursed – a look he got when he was putting up with me, with something irrational I said or did.

“Don’t give me that face,” I said. The rage came out in a whisper.

I stood there waiting. Surely if I waited he would tell me. You don’t stay married this long and not know how to tell each other things. But he sat there looking past me.

Finally, William said, “Can you just let me alone right now? Please.”

So I did. I let him alone.

That was when I began sleeping in the guest room. I still cooked his dinner, and we still ate in front of the TV together, silently (all his shows, of course). By damn, I would wait for him to speak to me. It wouldn’t be long before he missed me. I would wait.

Tina kept calling, but William wouldn’t come to the phone. When she’d ask me what was going on with him, I would tell her I sure as hell didn’t know. Occasionally she would stop by and she’d sit with her dad and watch TV with him, as if that would cure anything. She’d give me that worried look and I’d shrug.

After a week or so of this Tina called the family doctor. When she told him about William hitting his head and then acting so strangely, the doctor agreed a CT scan wouldn’t hurt. She told him it wasn’t like William to just up and leave in the middle of a party or in the middle of breakfast.

She brought it up gently during a commercial one night.

“Dad, I called the doctor. You have an appointment for tomorrow. Just to check things out.”

He sighed. Then his show came back on.

During the next commercial break Tina got to crying about how worried she was about him.

“Fine, I’ll go,” he said.

“I want to go with you.”

“I can handle it on my own, Tina. I’m not some feeble old man.” At this he laughed a short sharp laugh.

Tina looked at me significantly.

William came home from the doctor looking tired, and stood in the kitchen for a while looking out the window above the sink. It scared me.

“Everything okay?” I said.

He nodded. “Yup.”

Then he went upstairs and slept the rest of the afternoon.

Ever since he retired last year, he had prided himself on getting up early every day, going through the same routine he had each morning while he still worked. But around the time of the doctor visit, that changed. He no longer trimmed his moustache neatly – instead, he let it curl in an unruly manner over his upper lip, blending into the beginnings of a beard. Now there was always dirt under his fingernails. Before he hit his head, I used to tease him about his feminine habits, such as filing his nails instead of clipping them as most men did, and taking baths instead of showers. (I swear sometimes

he would use my loofah.) But all signs of those habits were gone by the beginning of summer. Now he did nothing but sleep, stretched out alone in our bed.

All the tests came back normal and Tina and I worried more than ever. For once, she and I were on the same page about something. There were several whispered phone conversations over what to do. If there was nothing wrong with his head, then what *was* wrong with William?

One afternoon I called upstairs to William that I was going clothes shopping. Instead, I met up with Charles at the local Starbucks that had just been built on Highway 29, next to IHOP. I figured if anyone would know what was going on with William, it would be his own brother.

When I arrived, Charles was already seated with something frothy. He got me a cup of decaf and then we sat for a minute or two, listening to the clatter and whine of the espresso machines. I noticed that Charles' beard dye had faded to a much less disturbing hue.

“How is the girlfriend?” I asked.

Charles laughed and shook his head. He told me the girlfriend – whose name he repeated, and I instantly forgot again – wanted to move in with him, and had started bringing her things over bit by bit, even though Charles hadn't yet given a yea or nay on the subject. He shrugged, as if she couldn't be stopped.

Then he asked about William. I took a few sips of the decaf, which was bitter even with sugar.

“I'm just so confused,” I told him. “Things were okay until he hit his head. And now, twice, he's run away from home.”

“He sounds like a dog,” Charles said, and chuckled.

“This is no time for jokes,” I said.

He nodded soberly.

“I don’t know what to do,” I told Charles. “There is nothing physically wrong with William. The medical tests have proven that. But something’s just not right. Maybe he’s depressed or having a nervous breakdown or something.” I sighed. “I wish he’d just buy himself a sports-car and get it over with.”

Charles glanced at his red Miata in the parking lot and grimaced.

“Oops, sorry,” I said.

Charles smiled, waving it away.

I rubbed my temples. My eyes were filling with tears and I could seem to help it.

Charles became very serious then. He can be very sensitive; he even cried at our wedding.

“What about some kind of therapy?” He suggested.

“You mean like a psychiatrist?” I asked. “Do I have to remind you why that’s a bad idea?”

Charles’ first, brief marriage was to a psychiatrist, and the constant analysis the entire family suffered at her hands had embittered them towards the whole concept.

Charles smiled. “Hmm, yeah. I guess you’re right.”

He rubbed his beard thoughtfully.

“Maybe,” Charles said, holding up his index finger, “maybe we could try hypnotism. It helped me quit smoking once.”

“William would never go for that either,” I told him.

Charles thought for a minute.

“Who knows, he might. With hypnotism, you work out your problems in your subconscious mind while you’re in a state of deep relaxation. My girlfriend’s into it. She says it’s very scientific.”

“Do you think he’d go for it?” I asked.

“If Tina pushes it he will. He’ll do it just to humor her,” Charles said.

Of course, Charles was right. But it rankled me that everyone knew Tina had her father wrapped around her little finger.

“Well, I’ll try anything,” I said.

He finished the rest of his drink.

“Does that kind of thing really work?” I asked.

“Worked for me,” Charles said, licking the froth from his moustache, “at least for about six months. Anyway, it’s worth a try.”

We left the Starbucks and Charles hugged me goodbye.

“Take care of yourself, okay?”

I pulled away. “Do I look that bad?”

“No! No,” he said, before getting into his little red car and driving away, back to the blond woman in his apartment.

I didn’t want to go home yet. Didn’t want to face William and this awful new silence between us. I sat in the car for a while, baking in the June sun, and then I got out and wandered into the IHOP and ordered pancakes and bacon and more decaf, sat there watching the cars roll by on Highway 29 as I ate. William and I had been to this IHOP when it first opened, five or six years ago. It was after a movie. The service was not

very good and neither was the food, but we had fun ordering pancakes at night. We didn't go out very often. I remember he said to me that night, "What if I go first? What will you do?" I told him I would sell the house and move to the beach. I always liked the beach, and we never went. I think he had expected a different answer. William nodded, sipping his coffee silently. "Why?" I had said. "What about you? If I go first?" He thought for a minute. Then he said something like he didn't think he'd live very long. I laughed. "Yes," I said, "who would feed you?" But I remember worrying that I had hurt his feelings.

Tina pushed for the hypnotist. She pushed and pushed. She wheedled and whined. And eventually, William gave in.

"If it'll shut you up, I'll do it," he said.

But when he said that kind of thing to her his voice was lighter.

Charles helped us pick out someone good. The blond girlfriend had given him suggestions on a couple of hypnotists we might contact. She said people who made house calls were best because it helped for the hypnotee to be in a comfortable environment. I was irritated at Charles for sharing our family troubles with the girlfriend but I guess he had the right; after all, it was his brother we were dealing with.

Tina, of course, was there, and Charles came too, as "moral support" for me. I think he was really just curious, but then so was I. William seemed to find it all very silly.

"Where's your crystal ball?" He asked when he opened the door that evening, but the hypnotist only smiled a serene smile.

She had frizzy blondish hair and she was dressed head to toe in velvet. Under one arm was a little pink cassette player, and she held a quilted bag with two candles poking out.

“My name is Debbie. Which one of you is the afflicted?” She asked brightly, looking from face to face.

We all stared.

Finally, Debbie focused on William’s unkempt hair and the circles under his eyes and she said, “You must be he...let’s find a quiet place.”

William nodded, shooting Tina a look, and led Debbie into the living room. Tina and Charles and I all stood in the hall, not knowing what to do.

Tina shrugged and said, “Let’s just go in.”

“Do you think we should?” I asked.

But Tina and Charles had already started after them. We stood gathered in the kitchen, looking in at William lying on his back on the living room carpet, his stockinged feet crossing and uncrossing. Debbie was lighting her candles on the coffee table. She pushed a button on the little cassette player. Then she kneeled at William’s side, her back straight, and she began to take long, deep breaths, exhaling loudly from her mouth. She urged William to do the same.

“I feel absurd,” William said.

But he did as he was told, his clasped hands lifting slowly up and down on his chest. Several minutes went by like this, both of them breathing deeply. Charles leaned his shoulder against the doorway and crossed his arms. Tina looked at her watch a few

times. I started to wonder if maybe Debbie was in some sort of trance, sitting there upright on the floor next to her patient, breathing loudly.

“William?” Debbie said.

We all jumped, all except William.

“Are you relaxed?”

“Yes,” William said simply.

“William,” Debbie said, her voice soothing and gentle, “I’m going to slowly count backward from ten, and when I get to five you will enter a state of deep relaxation. When I get to one, you will go back to the place where you began to feel as if you weren’t yourself, where you began to feel out of touch with your being. Okay, William?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Ten,” Debbie began slowly, blowing her breath out.

Nine, eight.

We all counted softly with her.

Seven, six.

When she got to five, she said, “William, you are now in a state of deep relaxation.”

William’s breathing had slowed so much I looked at Charles and mouthed, “Is he asleep?”

He whispered back, “Maybe he’s really under.”

Debbie glared at us.

Four, three, we counted silently.

When Debbie got to one, she said, “William, you are now in the place where you began to lose touch with yourself, your sense of being. Tell me William, what do you see? Open your eyes and look around you.”

William’s eyes remained closed. It was quiet for a long time. I counted two minutes on the mantel clock.

“I’m in my Chevelle,” he said.

He hadn’t driven the Chevelle in 23 years.

“I’m eating my lunch,” he said. “I have to go back to work soon.”

“What do you see out of the windshield?” Debbie asked.

There was a long pause again, perhaps longer this time.

“Uh, there’s the lake. Burke Lake. It’s winter so part of it’s frozen.” He shivered. “Brr, it’s cold. I’m going to turn the heat up.”

Debbie said, “Are you alone in the car?”

William laughed lightly.

“No, Janice is with me.”

I saw Tina look at me out of the corner of my eye. I did not look at her. Janice. Janice. Who was Janice?

“What is making you laugh?” Debbie asked.

“She said she would jump in the lake if I didn’t—you know, if I don’t do it.”

Debbie paused. I put my hands to my lips and they were shaky and cold.

“Don’t do what?” Debbie asked.

William laughed again. “She’s getting out of the car. Don’t jump. I’ll do it.”

“What will you do, William?”

Quiet again.

Charles motioned for me to sit in one of the kitchen chairs and I shook my head, unable to look away from William's feet.

"Are you talking to her?" Debbie asked.

"Yes," William said.

Charles sat in the chair himself and leaned forward, his forearms resting on his thighs.

"Tell me what you're saying."

"I'm telling her it won't be easy," William said. His voice had an edge to it now.

Tina looked at me again.

"What won't be easy?" Debbie asked.

More quiet.

"This," William said.

"She's beautiful." This he whispered. "Her eyes."

Tina put both hands up to her forehead, as if shielding her vision. Charles touched my shoulder but I stiffened and he pulled his hand away. I didn't look at either of them.

"What is Janice saying?" Debbie asked.

I didn't want to hear more. I just walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the guest room. No one followed.

I lay there on the bed in the dark with my eyes shut. I thought of the Chevelle, the sales job William worked back then, Tina as a baby. Me at home with her every day.

The little apartment we lived in on the other side of Burke, the matching brown yard sale furniture. It seemed like it was always winter then.

I remember him coming home late, exhausted, too tired really to do much talking. He would go in and look at Tina sleeping. And then he would come to bed in pajamas. That was when he first started wearing pajamas. I remember thinking then, my husband has become old before my very eyes. But that wasn't it. That wasn't it at all. I knew what it really was, but I just didn't let myself see it. William was missing then too, just as he was now.

Sometime later I heard the front door open and close. A car started and drove away. I wondered who paid Debbie.

There was a low murmuring downstairs and after a little while I heard Tina coming up. Then she was in the open doorway of the guest room, blinking, her eyes adjusting to the dark.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

She stood there for a few moments looking as if she didn't know whether to come sit by me or flee the house. I hoped she would flee.

"Really, Tina. I am fine. Okay?"

Tina said, "Okay."

Her voice was unsure. She shifted her feet.

"You didn't miss much," Tina offered. "Debbie tried to figure out why Dad kept running off. He talked about unraveling a pile of paper clips. The more he tried, the

more tangled they got. She thought that meant something. I think we should get another session. It might solve things.”

I didn't answer.

“Anyway then she tried to get Dad to go to his past life and it didn't work. He wouldn't go there. He doesn't remember anything he said. It's weird. But Debbie taped it so he could listen to it later.”

She stood there a little while longer before she sighed and moved away from the doorway.

“Can you close the door, Tina?” I called out. My voice wavered a bit, out of my control. She appeared again and shut it quietly.

I slept poorly, dreaming in scraps, like when you channel-surf the TV. Sometime before dawn, I awoke still in my clothes and, without turning on the light, changed into my nightgown. I got under the covers and slept some more. When I awoke again it was close to noon. I lay there for a good hour, not wanting to see William. I did not know what I would say to him.

When I finally went downstairs, William was not in the kitchen, nor in the living room. I checked upstairs.

He was gone. Again.

I raced to the phone to call Tina and then thought better of it. This time I would deal with it myself.

My hands clenched at my sides, I walked straight out the back door into the stifling summer air, into the woods. Towards Burke Lake. I hadn't stepped beyond the

back fence that marked our property in at least twenty years. The trail was overgrown with weeds that scratched at my bare ankles.

Maybe they still met there, after all these years.

I started running. I ran and ran, my hair in my eyes and mouth. I hadn't run that much since high school gym class. The trail seemed to go on forever; it was much longer than I remembered, and it meandered all over the woods, leaving me unsure of which direction our house was now.

Maybe I would catch them together. I imagined seeing the Chevelle, parked in the tiny grass lot, windows steamed over.

I came to a sharp turn in the path and stopped, gasping and coughing, my heart beating out of control. My armpits were sweaty and I felt sick. I had to stop and lean against a tree to catch my breath.

I remembered this part of the trail. The trees got thicker here. We had taken this trail quite a bit when we were younger, when we first bought the house. We picked the house because it was close to the lake. "The right side of Burke," William had said. Tina was a year old. He would carry her in one of those papooses that became so popular in the seventies. We used to bring a blanket and sit by the lake for hours. Tina would crawl around, taking a step or two. William would watch her. He was utterly fascinated by everything she did.

What did Janice know of this? What did she know of those days?

My heart squeezed and I held onto the tree, my eyes closed.

I started to walk, following the sharp turn, and guessing where to leave the trail and cut through the trees to the water. Branches scraped at my arms and legs.

By the time I reached the lake, I was gasping and dizzy and had to kneel in the sand to recover myself.

It was going to rain. The wind was stirring up the water in choppy white peaks. The little strip of beach was littered now with cans and cigarette butts. The grass lot had been paved, and it was empty but for one car. A lone fisherman on the other side of the lake was packing up his gear. It wasn't William. I didn't see William anywhere.

I sat there for a while, as the rain began to pelt the sand, my eyes filling up with tears and spilling over. I made little piles with the wet sand while I cried. It seemed to make sense to do that, like something I had done as a child.

There were voices on the trail, coming towards the water. Wiping at my face frantically, I looked down at myself, huddled in the sand in my old blue nightgown, sweating, my breasts sagging low under the nylon. My makeup probably running from the night before. In my hurry to get to the lake I had lost a slipper. My one bare foot was covered with mud and scratches; I was bleeding.

No wonder he didn't love me.

I removed the other slipper and hurled it into the water. It landed with a little splash. A young couple approached the water. They smiled politely at me, looked up at the sky, and turned back.

When I got back to the house, William was sitting at the table, his hands folded. He had bathed and combed his hair and he was clean-shaven for the first time in weeks. He looked at me, a little startled by my appearance. I went straight past him and stomped childishly up the stairs to the guest bedroom and slammed the door, sat on the bed. I

folded my hands and waited for a minute, feeling more and more nervous that he might not follow.

Then I heard him coming up the stairs. I hid my dirty feet under the quilt and smoothed down my hair. He tapped on the door before opening it.

“I only went to get razors,” he said.

I looked down at my hands, ashamed. I hadn’t even thought to check the driveway.

“Were you out looking for me, Patty?”

“William, we’ve *all* been looking for you,” I said. My lips trembled. “Where have you been?”

There I was, crying again. I took a deep breath and swallowed, trying to get a hold of myself.

William came and sat next to me gingerly.

“I listened to the tape.”

He waited for me to respond.

“Patty, I didn’t—I honestly didn’t think I could be hypnotized if I didn’t believe in it,” he began, still apparently astonished. “It must have been terrible for you to—” He didn’t finish.

“I still don’t know how Debbie did it.” He shook his head. “One minute I’m lying there feeling silly, and the next—”

He shrugged, a bewildered look on his face.

I looked out the window at the woods beyond our house. The afternoon sun was on the trees.

“I’m sorry, Patty,” he said helplessly.

“I didn’t – it didn’t mean anything.” He held an open hand in the air. “It was just some – some stupid flirtation. You know? Nothing ever really happened.”

We sat that way for a few minutes, and then he stood, as if there had been some agreement between us. He opened his mouth to speak, but then changed his mind, scratched his head.

“It was a long time ago,” he said at last. His eyes were sad.

“All right,” I said.

William smiled cautiously. He sat down next to me.

“I won’t run off again. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did it.”

He reached out his hand. I held it, briefly. It was warm and familiar. When I let it go I saw that it hurt him.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I went to the lake today,” I said. “I thought—for some reason, I thought you might be there.”

William nodded.

“Silly,” I said and shook my head.

“Well,” he said. “I haven’t been there in years.”

I looked at William and my chest hurt. He was the same man I had always loved.

“Yes,” I said, and sighed. “It seems like another life, doesn’t it.”

Alice, In the Beginning:
The Early Life of Alice Guy Blaché

I.

The first voyage, I saw nothing, I only felt the surging of the ship as it tried to be forgiving with the water. I was not yet born. In the blackness I was afraid. There were no soothing words from my mother, no hands to comfort, in the seven weeks between Valparaiso and Paris. She lay very still. Moved only to drink some water and eat a bit of something, or to retch into a metal pail. It was 1873. We were going to France. We were going on the theory that I did not belong to my father.

II.

Perhaps she looked at me, at my bloody face, and thought, even before she named me, of how she could now return to Chile, to my father, to the hacienda. She could breathe. The burden of worry was now being washed by her own mother, who rinsed the rag in a porcelain basin of water that was now pink with blood. Seven weeks on the sea. The burden had her husband's mouth. The burden was called Alice.

III.

My mother took me from her breast one dark early morning and put me in my cradle. She patted my full belly and kissed me wordlessly. Later that morning she boarded a ship bound for Chile. I was still sleeping in my cradle.

IV.

My mother might never have existed. There was cherry soup, there was the disorderly garden, there was my grandmother's song *Beau ciel de Pau quand donc que reverrai-je*.

V.

I was three years old when my mother returned to bring me home to Valparaiso. She arrived one morning at my grandmother's door, a tanned face I did not know. She carefully took her gloves off, looking at me. Then she passed a hand over my hair, pulled me close into her perfumed neck. My grandmother had just shown me, that week, the Spanish alphabet.

VI.

What I remember from the ship has little to do with my mother. For seven weeks she lay still on her deck chair, a plaid blanket pulled tightly up under her chin. Sometimes I stayed close to her and watched the sea, an expanse of moving earth that was sometimes gray, or green, or, when rains came, black. I remember fish leaping into the air, their silver backs catching light from the fading sun. I imagined they were saying hello. *Bonjour*, I said to them, leaning over the railing. Two passing women, their skin like my grandmother's milky tea, smiled at me. They drew me gently by the shoulders away from the railing and said their own greeting to the jumping fish, their mouths forming words I did not understand.

VII.

At night I sang. *Beau ciel de Pau quand donc que reverrai-je.* “Alice,” my mother said, eyes closed, fingertips pressed to her temples. I repeated the Spanish alphabet. She didn’t mind this.

VIII.

One sunny afternoon, the ship slipped between two great walls of ice, like a slippery dolphin, and we entered a hull of still air. The ship was very careful. The ship concentrated. It was if the ship and the glacier were in silent conversation. I stood very still, my hands braced on the back of my mother’s empty deck chair. I watched the ice glide by, listening. A ray of late sun reverberated through the glacier. Prisms of light became faeries, their skin blue as frost as they flickered on the glacier. A few of them dove into the water. On a distant ice cliff, a great polar bear watched us pass as the moon rose behind him. I felt certain he looked right at me. I saw him in my dreams that night. In the morning I woke to find another flat stretch of green sea. While my mother sipped her weak tea she told me there were no faeries, there was no polar bear on the ice cliff.

IX.

When we neared land my mother folded the plaid blanket into a small, neat square. The water was changing. It became lighter, bluer. In the distance, there was a strip of bright squares, like the powdered candy my grandmother bought me when I fell in the garden and scraped my knee. The ship pulled closer and I saw the colorful shapes were not candy but houses. As the ship approached I saw dark children swimming towards it.

Passengers tossed coins to them. The children dove into the water to fetch the coins, which glittered on the ocean floor. Their bodies glided as if they were born in the water, like the leaping silver fish I had seen. Great water beasts with sharp noses darted towards the children, their fins cutting the surface. I was afraid for the children but saw the two tea-colored women clapping.

X.

We reached Valparaiso and my mother let go of my hand to walk towards a tall gentleman with a dark moustache. The tall man held her tightly and kissed her. Then, with his hands still on her elbows, he looked past her at me. “She resembles you,” he said to my mother. I stood watching them watch me, clutching the small blue suitcase my grandmother had packed carefully with picture books, a baby doll she had given me, and a tiny patchwork quilt she had made for the doll. Inside one of the picture books was a photograph of my grandmother and me in her disorderly garden. Now, my legs were wobbly on solid land. I looked past my mother and the tall man for the horizon, in order to steady myself. I had grown so used to the firm, ceaseless line of the sky and the sea, but it was shielded now by houses and people, the streets busy with color. “Come here, Alice,” the tall man said. I went to him and set the suitcase down. He put long arms around me. He was my father.

XI.

He took us back to the hacienda. Conchita greeted us there, waiting on the porch with a cold drink for my mother. Conchita’s black hair shone under the unforgiving sun, and I

was afraid. My father carried my mother, who was weak from the voyage, onto the porch. He and Conchita settled her into her chair, each adjusting pillows and murmuring soothing words I did not understand. My father said something to Conchita, and she turned her gaze on me, smiling, her mouth uttering a stream of sounds that reminded me of the tea-colored women on the ship. She leaned down to pick me up. I screamed, holding my fists tightly together. Conchita's eyes, blacker than her hair, held me for a moment before she turned from me and went into the house. The long dark braid swished back and forth as she strode away. My father rubbed his moustache with thumb and forefinger, squinted into the sun. I looked at my mother. She said, "Alice, that woman is called Conchita – she will take care of you until I'm better." She took a sip of her cold drink and closed her eyes, let her head sink into the soft red pillow. My father sat down next to her, laid his hand on hers. She opened her eyes only long enough to smile at him. My mother rested on the porch all that afternoon, and many long days after. That night, Conchita unpacked my small blue suitcase, laying the baby doll and the doll's quilt in the willow basket that served as my cradle. It was Conchita who sang me to sleep in my willow basket. She sang Indian lullabies, and reluctantly I grew to love them as I loved my grandmother's song.

XII.

The hacienda was a place where shadow did not exist. Sun flooded every corner of every room, and after a long winter with my grandmother, the two of us huddled in front of a warm stove, each with a bowl of cherry soup, I was happy to lay my picture books out in these bright rooms and let my back grow warm, and then roll over, stretching like a cat.

Often, I fell asleep this way. One morning, while stretched out on the carpet listening to Conchita sing in the laundry room, the floor rumbled as if a great lion was underneath the house, desperate to escape. The sofa lunged towards me and a few books fell off the shelf. Then, quiet. I ran to Conchita crying, and she held me to her. Her apron smelled of flour and sweat, and through the cloth I could feel her heart pounding. She said to me in Spanish, which I was learning quickly, that it was an earthquake, *terremoto*. The word sounded beautiful and terrifying.

XIII.

After that first *terremoto*, I stayed close to Conchita in the laundry room. She and the other servants talked or sang while they did their work, and often they forgot I was there listening, hiding among wet linens drying in the steady stream of sun. Because of the heat they drank wine all day, dipping a metal cup into a demijohn that kept the wine cold. Once, when their talk had turned to laughter, and as their hands rested in the cloth they were kneading in soapy water, I slipped behind them to the demijohn and dipped the cup into the dark red liquid. I drank. It was sweet and cold. I emptied the metal cup and filled it again. A soft throbbing filled my head, but it was not unpleasant. I rested my forehead against the hanging wet linens and the coolness was lovely. When I closed my eyes, the world shifted, like the *terremoto*. But I was not afraid. Conchita called me to her. She asked me, “What is the matter?” I only smiled. She took me to my mother on the porch. My mother pulled me onto her lap. I leaned into her, sleepy and pleased with her worry, and the sour-sweetness of my wine breath reached her nostrils. She held my shoulders and looked hard at me, and then at Conchita. “*Terremoto, mama,*” I said. She

pushed me away. I stumbled towards Conchita, who caught me, and then caught a string of scoldings. When my mother was angry, I learned, she only knew French. Conchita did not know French. Since Conchita spoke only Spanish to me, I was quickly forgetting it. Soon only my grandmother's song would remain of the French I knew. *Beau ciel de Pau quand donc que reverrai-je*. Conchita and I listened until my mother settled back into her pillows, and when we went back into the house Conchita put me in my little bed (I had quickly outgrown the willow basket). I asked her to sing to me. She uttered something sharp, like fragments of stone, in her Indian tongue. Then she left the room, shutting the door behind her.

XIV.

On Sundays Conchita and I went to Mass with the other Indian women of the village. They sat still as icebergs on their tiny mats, their tongues at rest in their mouths. I loved this silence. But I loved it more when the time to worship ended and the women gathered up their baskets, their tongues flowing freely now, and climbed the cliffs down to the bay, where they pounded corn into meal on stones heated by the sun. Their voices, raised in laughter, echoed off the cliffs. When their conversation grew quiet they sang, and it was as if their voices braided together into one strong voice like the thick ropes of their black hair. Often, they dipped their bodies in the blue water to cool themselves, and their brightly colored clothes, darkened by wetness, were soon brilliant again from the high sun. I watched all this from my own rock on a grassy part of the cliff. I did not dare go in the water with them, though I longed to. I felt, without understanding the feeling, that I would disturb them, awaken them to something they were happy to forget. At dusk, the

women would collect their baskets, and Conchita and I would head back to the hacienda. If she had a free hand she would hold mine, and I was happy.

XV.

If there were shadows in the hacienda, they were my parents. Conchita and I moved in the sun. She allowed me to follow her like I was a planet in orbit, as if she were my sun. We went from room to room as she worked, and when she stopped to rest I rested too. My father was busy with his bookstore, and my mother had her charitable events to attend to, so it was Conchita and I in the big, empty hacienda. Some nights, one or the other or both of my parents appeared in my dark doorway, leaning in to whisper goodnight. Often, their voices carried through walls during the night, pulled tight like a whipcord.

XVI.

When there were *terremotos*, for there often were, my father would return home from the bookstore to check on the house. I got used to the *terremotos* – they were only a sign that my father would appear soon after. He would come rushing through the front door, pick me up and squeeze me tightly. It was really the only time he ever did this. Once, there was a *terremoto* when my mother was dressing. She sat down on the bed with the force of it, as if someone pushed her, but continued to zip up her emerald green dress. When the room stopped quivering she put her head in her hands. A quick sob shook her body, but she soon remembered me, sitting on the floor in a patch of sun, and she smoothed her hands over her lap and smiled.

XVII.

Very early one morning, Conchita woke me. “Quick, quick,” she said, “we must get you ready.” Her mouth was a thin line, pulled downward at the ends, and her eyes were red. I tried to put my arms around her but she pulled away. “We must hurry,” she said, the lines around her mouth pulling deeper. She tugged a sweater over my head, though it was summer. I did not object, afraid of this new Conchita. Out on the porch, my little blue suitcase was stacked with two steamer trunks and my father’s beaten brown leather suitcase. My mother was waiting there, a brightly colored shawl draped over her. She drew me into the shawl and held me tightly. She did not say anything when she let me go. Soon Father and I were at the port of Valparaiso, boarding a ship. The sun was rising over the water. And there was the horizon again, after two years, that long taut line stretching out ahead of me.

XVIII.

The ship passed between the two walls of ice, in reverse. It was a cloudy day, one of many cloudy days where my father and I sat quietly in adjacent deck chairs watching the sea change. I looked for the faeries and for the polar bear, but they did not appear. The ice walls were opaque, like huge gray blocks of concrete.

XIX.

When we arrived in Bordeaux on a cold winter night, my father was very tired. It was a beautiful city, like a place I had seen in a snow globe my mother kept on her dressing table, but I tried to contain my excitement because I did not want to annoy my father. We

went to a tired hotel on a back street near the river, and when we were settled by the fire in the hotel parlor, my father ordered a large drink of amber-colored liquid. I sat near him, watching him as I always did. He took his hat off and ran his long delicate fingers through his hair. He held the glass near his nose and breathed in, closed his eyes. Tears rolled down his face, melting in his moustache the way flakes of snow had out in the street. He rubbed his moustache with thumb and forefinger, a habit I had grown used to seeing since that first day on the sunny porch of the hacienda. He had forgotten I was there. I wanted to bury my face in his coat but I did not have the courage. I thought of the Indian women on their straw mats during Mass, and willed myself to be as still as them. The snow blew sideways outside, and I decided to watch it instead of him. We sat this way until the hotel clerk began putting chairs on tables, and my father had drained the last of the liquid.

XX.

We took a train to Viry through the snow. At the station, my father lifted my small blue suitcase and the smaller of the steamer trunks. Two nuns came forward. I stared at them, mesmerized by their strict outfits, by the little squares of their faces visible in all that cloth. My father spoke to them briefly, and signaled for a porter. The porter lifted the steamer trunk with the help of one of the sisters. The other sister took the blue suitcase from my father, and she grabbed my hand. I looked at my father. I didn't understand. He patted my cheek and kissed the top of my head. The nun pulled on my hand, "Come now," she said. I was taken to the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

XXI.

The Convent was winter. I had left summer behind me forever in Valparaiso. After two years of light, of Conchita and her singing, I was in a silent, cold world, with vaulted stone stairways and halls that echoed only the sound of orderly footsteps. The voices of the nuns were like the hard stone of the Convent's long corridors, where we sometimes kneeled for hours, shivering – our punishment for taking a second piece of bread or smirking across the chapel aisle, or speaking Spanish instead of French. The Convent was like the place between the walls of ice when there was no sun filtering through. Gray. Often, when I closed my eyes in prayer, I was willing the light to enter to iceberg, to refract and splinter into rays of color. I was willing the faeries to appear.

XXII.

One morning very soon after I arrived, I woke with a fever and swollen tonsils. Sister Margarete sent for the doctor, who worried that I might infect the other girls. They sent my grandmother a telegram to come fetch me. She appeared at my bedside and bundled me up in quilts she had brought, and took me home with her on the train. I remember the world passing by very quickly, and in my feverish state, I was sure I was going back to Valparaiso, to Conchita. I would be back on the boat soon, I thought and then it would be summer again. When we reached my grandmother's little house, I could not help the tears. My grandmother patted my hand, and said kind words to me in French, but I did not understand her.

XXIII.

Winter was fading, and a recent snow was melting in my grandmother's garden. That first afternoon, she made cherry soup. She sang her song to me, *Beau ciel de Pau quand donc que reverrai-je*, while I slipped in and out of sleep, warm in front of her fire. She spoke to me in streams of French that always ended with the word "Alice." The words washed over me like one of her damp rags on my forehead. I was not allowed to speak because of my tonsils, but I listened. For five days, I listened. It was as if a key was unlocking a secret door in my brain. By the time I returned to the Convent nearly two weeks later, I understood the sisters completely. They could no longer whisper about the dark Spanish girl.

XXIV.

In my six years at Sacred Heart, I received twelve long letters from my parents – one on each birthday, and at Christmas. Chile seemed like a distant planet. I remembered my mother's emerald green dress, my father's moustache. But their faces were blurry, while the sisters, the squares of their strict, pale faces, were clear. In Valparaiso, one Christmas letter said, it was getting worse. The rains had come, and many homes were ruined. In the mayhem my father's bookstore had been robbed. They had nothing. And then the *terremotos* came, deep, bottomless. The hacienda was still standing, but half of the sunny porch was destroyed, and the barn had collapsed on the horses. That summer (my birthday letter said) my father returned to France alone. My mother remained in Valparaiso. Why this was they did not say. The birthday letter was short.

XXV.

Late that summer my trunk and small blue suitcase were retrieved, dusted off, and filled with my possessions, which amounted to some letters and picture postcards, a blanket, and some warm clothing my grandmother had sent that I was quickly outgrowing. I was taken to a cheaper convent in Ferney, in an old chateau that once belonged to Voltaire. The sisters were kinder there. They did not make me kneel. Still, it took time to grow used to their faces. The sisters at Sacred Heart had become so familiar. While I tried to fall asleep in the cold, drafty rooms, I imagined Voltaire's ghost wandering the halls. At first, it frightened me, but I grew so lonely that sometimes, when I was sure the other girls were asleep, I would whisper to Voltaire. I was fourteen, and prone to romantic thoughts. On some rainy, blustery nights I was sure I heard him answer, just under a gust of wind. I convinced myself he must disguise his voice so others wouldn't hear him. "Alice," he would say. I'd wait for more. There was never more.

XXVI.

Voltaire was the only one I told that my father had died in Paris. He was fifty-one. My mother was with him. I was sent for – she needed taking care of. I whispered these things to Voltaire the night before I left the Convent. I cried because I was uncertain. I did not know how to cry for my father. Voltaire did not answer, but I felt sure he was sorry I was going.

XXVII.

In Paris, my mother and I lived in a cramped apartment on the rue Cardinale. Since the days of her emerald dress she had grown older, plumper. Her hair had thinned, and the

bright red lipstick she always wore now feathered in the little fault lines of her lips. We were, in many ways, strangers. At night I undressed quickly in the dark, while she put on her own nightdress in the lavatory down the hall, which we shared with an elderly couple who lived on the same floor. When we woke in the mornings in our adjacent beds, we said good morning politely, and I went into the kitchen and made a fire. We drank our coffee sitting at the small table in the makeshift kitchen. We often did not speak. I had grown used to the quiet of the Convent, but this quiet was different.

XXVIII.

Many mornings, she began the day by crying about my father. When she cried the words tumbled out in a tangled mix of French and Spanish. I did not know how to comfort her. I took the coffee cup from her hands and just listened, watched her wring her hands and rock back and forth in her chair until it passed, until she drew shaky hands over her hair. Then she smiled that same smile I had seen on the day she wore the emerald dress.

XXIX.

We found work, both of us, in a charity hospital's maternity ward. A friend of my father's arranged it, and we were grateful – with winter coming on, and no prospects that would keep us off the streets, we would have taken anything. We filled our lunch pails with bread and cheese in the mornings, and there was no time for tears over my father, or for us to sit in uneasy silence. The hospital was very dirty. It smelled of slick, of soot. Of the alcohol they used to clean. The smell would not come out of my clothes, though I

vainly scrubbed them every night with boiling water, remembering Conchita's laundry room, the wet linens hanging, the demijohn of wine.

XXX.

There was always blood, and there were always babies being born, and young mothers in tears. Sometimes the babies did not live – the mothers wandered out empty-handed, frail. Sometimes it was the mothers who died, and a social worker in a smart uniform came with papers to sign and took the baby away. My mother and I watched all this and found some strange peace in it, as if it somehow told our story, told of the fracture we had endured. In the evenings, we undressed while talking of the events of the day. My mother, sitting on the bed opposite, often stopped in mid-peel of her stocking to listen, to shake her head in sadness, or, sometimes, to laugh.

Where We Go From Here

It's 2:36 in the morning and Jim is in the corner of the bedroom, naked, spraying a line of ants marching towards the hallway, where light spills onto the tile. Everything is tile in Arizona, like one big bathroom.

"Jesus," he says, "they're everywhere. Annie, you gotta see this. They're like little fucking soldiers."

I am in the bed, an arm over my face. I can't look at Jim right now without wondering how I'm going to love him in forty years, when we're old. With my eyes closed Jim sounds just like my father.

But Jim's not my father, I remind myself, he's my husband. So I take my arm off my face and look at him: he's on all fours, his face close to the ground, ant killer poised in one hand. The light from the hall isn't flattering.

"Jim, I will call the landlord tomorrow," I say. "Now please put the ant spray away and come to bed. I've got to work in the morning, you know."

Even though Jim's feeling fragile these days, I don't try to hide the irritation in my voice. And maybe that last part isn't fair. Jim was laid off from his teaching job at the University seven months ago, and has been looking for work ever since. Lately, that means surfing the Internet every morning, and spending the afternoons watching golf and home improvement shows. He says he's waiting for the right opportunity.

"In a second," he says now, "would you just let me..."

He sprays some more.

I've been ready to pack it in and go back east since the last time he went on an interview and didn't get a call back. It took Jim weeks to apply for anything else. Last month my parents had to help us pay our rent, but I didn't tell him that – he couldn't handle it right now.

On top of all the money worries, I can't get pregnant. We've been trying for almost a year. I thought we should stop trying when Jim lost his job, but I didn't want to make him feel any worse. He wants a baby more than anything. We're both starting to worry that there's something wrong with one of us, though we just keep saying encouraging things to each other like, "oh honey, we've been under a lot of stress," or "maybe next month," or, my favorite, "that just gives you more time to get healthy." I have a slight eating problem that seems to rear its head when I'm sad or stressed out. I don't make myself throw up or anything, I just tend to eat more than I should. And I'm not fat, but I guess I've put on some weight since we moved out here four years ago. I can't seem to help it.

When we were home in Virginia for Christmas, my younger sister Kim noticed there was more of me this year than last, and wondered if I "had any news" for them. That hurt, but not as much as my aunt Penny saying, "good lord, are those your *knees*?" when I got out some pictures of the camping trip Jim and I took to the Grand Canyon in the summer, before he was laid off. Before things got strange.

The swamp cooler kicks on and the smell of ant spray hits me in the face.

"Jim," I say, "for Christ's *sake*. That stuff stinks. I don't want to be breathing it."

I bury my nose in the pillow. "And you're supposed to wear a face mask anyway."

“Yes, dear,” he says. That’s his little joke.

Jim gets up and goes into the kitchen – I hear him opening drawers. He comes back with paper towels and a zip-lock bag. I can’t watch him clean up the dead ants – his tidiness has always irritated me – so I throw the covers off and go into the bathroom and lock the door. I sit on the can with the lid down, the fan on.

I can feel my period coming again – there’s a rumbling pain down low, a pressure there. It’ll come tomorrow, or even tonight.

Maybe that’s why I’m so annoyed at Jim. Not just the PMS or the fact that there’s no baby, that we can’t breed even though there are ants being born every millisecond in the walls of our house, but also this nagging feeling: maybe I am relieved to feel that rumble. Maybe, even though I’m 35, I’m not sure I’m ready. Or I’m not sure I’m *sure*.

Jim knocks on the door.

“You okay in there?”

“I’m fine,” I say over the fan, “just waiting for the fog of ant spray over the bed to dissipate.”

“Ha, ha,” he says. “I opened a window. Come to bed.”

I want to tell him my period’s coming but I’m not sure I can face his disappointment. I’m afraid of it. It just seems to get deeper and deeper. Each time it takes him longer to be the old Jim again.

I look in the mirror, trace the lines around my mouth, across my forehead. It seems like I’ve aged so quickly out here. Soon I’ll look like one of those pruny old ladies you see here in Tucson, their skin cured like beef jerky. Soon he’ll probably suggest we go to a doctor. But I just want to go home to Virginia. We were happy there, when we

were first married. Sometimes I would even forget to eat.

When I come out of the bathroom, Jim's back in bed. I get in next to him and he curls around me.

"You okay, hon?" he says.

"Yeah. Fine."

He kisses my shoulder. "Well I got 'em."

"Got what?"

"The ants."

I sigh. "Oh honey, they'll be back tomorrow."

"I know," Jim says.

He rolls over, facing the wall.

"Jim, my period's coming," I say. I want to get it over with.

He is quiet.

"Jim."

"Well we'll try again," he says, sounding defeated.

At some point near dawn, I roll over and he isn't there. I see him over by the window, staring out. The look on his face worries me, but I don't say anything. I just go back to sleep.

In the morning, while looking for my sunglasses, I notice the ants have seized a Hershey bar I had left on the kitchen counter. I was saving it to have with my lunch today. If you put your eyes out of focus, it looks like the chocolate bar is moving, like it might get up and crawl away all on its own.

I grab my car keys and call to the bedroom, "Jim, can you get the ants that are

eating my chocolate bar please? I've got to go."

I tell myself he'll be glad to feel useful.

"It's on the counter next to the phone," I add.

No response.

"Jim?"

"I'll take care of it," he calls back. "Have a good day."

"I will. You too."

When I get to work I have to run to the bathroom because my period arrives, right on schedule, like the phone bill. Our phone bill is huge lately because of all my calls home to my mother. I think she's getting tired of me calling when I've got nothing really to say. I've even taken to calling her from work now, so that Jim won't hear.

At my desk I pick up the phone and dial home.

"What," my father says. They have Caller ID.

"Don't you say hello anymore?"

"Annie, you just called last night."

"Can you put Mom on?"

I hear muted voices, static.

"Hi, hon," my mother says. "Listen, I can't really talk. I'm heading out the door. I have yoga in twenty minutes."

My mother has been taking a yoga class at the community center in town. Sometimes while we're on the phone she'll start in with the whooshing yoga breaths, and when I ask her what she's doing, I hear, "warrior pose, honey," or a muffled, "child's pose." I imagine her on all fours with her hands flat on the living room floor and her

nose pressed to the beige carpet, the phone tucked in the crook of her neck – something her yoga master (a guy named Dave) probably wouldn't approve of. Earlier this week, with Dave's help, she mastered the downward dog, but she admitted she can't do it while she's on the phone.

“Can I call you back later?” She says now. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. I just – you know, just wanted to hear your voice. I'll let you go.”

“Did your period come?”

I don't answer. Suddenly I don't feel like I can talk about it rationally.

“Sweetheart, remember what I told you,” my mother is saying. “It took me four years to get pregnant with you. And when I finally stopped worrying about it and decided to just have fun, if you know what I mean....”

“Okay,” I say. It comes out in a pathetic whimper.

“Now I know you're feeling sad right now, but remember part of that is your hormones.”

“Okay.”

“Stop saying okay.”

“Okay.”

She laughs; it makes me feel better, safe.

“I'm sorry, Mom. I don't mean to keep bugging you.”

“I know, Annie.”

“It's just, you know—” I want to tell her how confused I am, but I feel like I might come unhinged again.

“Yes, I know. Just hang in there, okay? Look, I'm sorry but I really have to go.

It ruins Dave's concentration when we're late."

"Okay."

"Wait, how is your ant problem?"

For some reason, I hear *aunt* and picture my aunt Penny, cigarette in hand, looking at my knees.

"My what?"

"The ants. Are they gone?"

"Oh. No, Jim kept me up half the night spraying. And the little bastards ate my chocolate bar this morning."

Sometime before lunch I start to feel guilty for how I treated Jim last night. I should have waited for a better moment to tell him about my period. I try to call him but I get voicemail. I am guessing he is still on the Internet, probably looking up old buddies again. He has had this weird obsession lately with locating friends he had in college and even high school to see what they're up to. A few months ago he found Andy, the guy that was his roommate sophomore year, before I knew him. I'm glad they connected since Jim doesn't have many friends these days, and they used to be pretty close. Andy is now working in some bar in Colorado and living with a girl he might marry.

In college Andy was the one who started calling Jim "Lord Jim." It wasn't a very creative nickname, since "Lord" is Jim's last name (and mine now too). Jim had a reputation for being the poetic type. For a while, he walked around with a pipe in his mouth and even carried a book with his poetry in it, mostly about nature and girls, but occasionally about the evils of war. Some of it was pretty good actually.

Jim worked at a diner near the campus, and I did a lot of studying there. I always ordered hot chocolate with extra whipped cream, which I would scoop off a bit at a time with the end of my straw while I read, sucking on the straw until all the whipped cream was gone. Jim thought I was flirting with him by doing this, but the truth was I hadn't even noticed him. He came over to my table one day and asked me what I was studying. (When we tell the story he always adds here that it took him a month to work up the nerve to talk to me.)

And that was that. I mean, it was six years before we got married, but we were pretty much together after that for good.

One night when we were home last Christmas, I couldn't sleep. I went down for a snack and sat at the kitchen table eating pumpkin pie and looking at our wedding pictures. Our album is in a box somewhere, but my parents have theirs right there on the shelf in the living room.

There are a few with Jim standing behind me with his arms around my waist (which was much slimmer then). I'm looking off to the side, my eyes sort of downcast. I remember the photographer telling me not to smile.

"Think of all the people who you wish could be at your wedding," the photographer was saying as he clicked away.

I thought of my sister Kim, who I was closer to then. She was nine months pregnant with her son and living hours away in Philadelphia. She had called me the night before: "Annie, you should see the size of my ankles – they're huge. They look like tree trunks!" The thought of that brought on a grimace that didn't please the photographer either.

“No,” he was saying, “you’re not mad, you’re not sad, you’re *pensive*. You’re serene.” He got a nice shot then, but there is also one at the back of my parents’ album with a slight frown.

The serene one is on my desk now at work – I’m looking at it while I dial Jim a ninth time. He had more hair then, and it was brighter somehow.

Jim still hasn’t picked up after lunch, and I’m getting worried. My boss is in court all day so maybe she won’t notice if I go home to check on things. I leave a note on her desk just in case (*Sheila – family emergency, back v. soon, cell phone on, sorry. A.*) and head out the door. Sheila will expect a family emergency now. If Jim is okay I will have to make one up to justify my absence. Probably what happened is he forgot to disconnect from the Internet before he settled in on the couch for the day. I hear myself informing him of the needless worry he put me through, the potential trouble I could get in with my boss because of his carelessness. I begin to rehearse exactly what I will say when I get home.

I turn the radio on in my car, listen to half of a Gladys Knight song, and then turn it off again. I can’t stand Gladys Knight.

Since morning, the clouds have come out and the palm trees are blowing in a chilly wind – it’s going to rain for the first time in months. I drive by the No-Tell Motel, the Los Betos, the Veteran’s Home, low buildings all gray without the sun on them. Tucson is an ugly place to live on those rare days without sunshine. But then even when there *is* sunshine, and everyone says this place is beautiful, it still seems alien to me. The first time I saw southern Arizona, from a plane, it looked like the surface of the moon. Every day I look at the palm trees, and the prickly pears that grow in our patch of

grassless yard, and I feel lonely and homesick.

When I pull into the driveway, Jim's old Honda is gone. I let my head fall back against the headrest and exhale. I admit to myself uneasily that some morbid part of me expected to find him dead. I don't know why, maybe just because he's been so down lately. I think of him standing at the window early this morning, staring out. But clearly he is out on some errand. Maybe he went to see about a job?

I head towards the house, and inside. Now that there is no emergency I'll have to make something up to tell Sheila.

On the kitchen counter, there is an envelope with *Annie* scrawled on the front and underlined once. I am frozen for a moment, staring at it. Then I go over to the hall closet and hang up my jacket. In the bathroom, I take off all my clothes and leave them in a pile on the floor and take a long hot shower. I don't know what else to do.

I half expect him to come in any moment and startle me. Maybe he'll appear in the bathroom doorway cracking a beer. Yes, that's exactly what he'll do. I keep thinking I hear the key in the door and I shut off the water periodically to listen. I stand there dripping with my hand on the knob. There is nothing but silence.

I put on my bathrobe and look at my blurry shape in the foggy mirror. Maybe the note is an apology. It could be anything. He probably just went to the store.

But why the envelope?

The house is too quiet so I turn on the TV. On the afternoon news, another shooting on the south side. I make myself a cup of tea and sit with it perched on my lap, watch the newsman switch gears to ask a leading question about the weather, which he claims he will answer after the break. On another channel, they are fixing up a house.

It's getting dark with the storm coming. A hard rain starts to hit the tin roof, and the smell of wet desert comes in through the open window. I stand up and close it, shut off the TV, and stand there listening to the rattle of rain on tin. I look at the envelope resting on the counter – my name and the one line under it – and start having heart palpitations. I take a deep breath. And another. My mother told me that turtles live longer than any other animal because they breathe the slowest. Dave must have told her that. I focus on breathing like a turtle and my heart stops flopping around so much.

I open the envelope. Jim has scrawled a note (in all caps as usual) on the back of a Safeway receipt. I sit on the floor, my back against the kitchen cabinets, and smooth the thin strip of paper against my thigh with sweaty palms.

*PLEASE DON'T BE ANGRY. I LOVE YOU.
BUT I CAN'T DO THIS RIGHT NOW. I AM ON
MY WAY TO CO. TO STAY WITH ANDY – HE
SAYS THERE MAY BE A JOB FOR ME. I NEED TO
THINK. I'LL CALL YOU IN A FEW DAYS. LOVE, J.*

I read the letter maybe six times. Then I curl up on my side on the kitchen floor, one hand on the receipt flattened on the tile in front of me. I expect to cry. Instead I get unreasonably angry that at 37 he still can't manage cursive. An ant crawls over to inspect my hand, the note. I sit up and read it again, as if it might reveal something different. I study the *J.* – like any other *J.* he might scrawl. Nothing unusual about it. I look at the printed receipt on the other side – that day, last week, we bought milk and candy corn and a couple of Lean Cuisines. We saved \$2.67.

The rain has finally stopped, but the sun has given up trying to come back out. I can hear the wind still going in the palms. I crumple the receipt and throw it at the wall – it lands with a disappointing little thud. In the cupboard, I find the half-eaten bag of

candy corn. I finish the whole thing, sitting there on the kitchen floor.

I go outside, stand in the yard shivering, watching the light change on the Catalina Mountains. The dirt is cold and wet under my bare feet. There is mariachi music coming from next door, and the police helicopter is going over again, looking for suspects.

The next night, I am boarding a plane home to Virginia. I was glad to be able to call Sheila and offer a real emergency. She told me she has been through this before with two husbands, so she gave me the week off.

"They're all a bunch of *scoundrels* in my book. Who needs them? Nothing but scoundrels," Sheila yelled into the speakerphone.

"Yes," I agreed. I didn't know what else to say.

"You go home and let your mom and dad take care of you, sweetie," she said. She had never called me sweetie before but I was not going to object. So I called my mother and she bought me a ticket home.

As the plane climbs towards cruising altitude, I find myself hoping Jim will call while I'm gone and wonder where I am. I want him to worry about why I'm not picking up the phone, whether I'm dead on the floor, ants marching single file over my remains.

My mother is waiting for me when I land. With that look on her face, she must be thinking I'll never have children now. Or maybe I've gained more weight than I thought since Christmas.

In the car on the way home, she tells me that my sister Kim and my nephew and even my aunt Penny are in town for my dad's 65th birthday.

"Mom, *why*? I don't want to see anyone."

"I told you they were coming to visit last week. I'm sorry, I couldn't un-invite

them, Annie. It would be rude."

She takes the exit off the highway. The trees rush past, impossibly green even in October.

"It's just, I kind of wanted to keep this quiet, you know?" I am unable to keep myself from whining.

She is looking at the road, her hands at ten and two the way they teach you in driver's ed.

"I mean, I don't know what's going to happen yet," I say.

"Look, it's your dad's birthday. This has been planned for weeks. Try and think of someone other than yourself, okay?"

We drive in silence for a while. I don't look at her, but I know her mouth is set in a thin line.

My mother says, "Have you decided what you're going to do now?"

"Nope," I say quietly.

"You can stop sulking anytime now," she says.

I heard that a lot when I was younger.

When we get to the house, my mother calls out in a falsely cheerful voice, "Look who's here, everybody."

Dad is in the living room watching a football game, but when a commercial comes on, he comes over and hugs me firmly and pats me on the back once. His breath smells like decay. "Good you could be here, Annie," he says. Then he goes back to his chair. My sister nudges me and mouths, "birthday," and jerks her head towards our

father.

"Happy birthday, Dad," I say. "I haven't gotten you a present yet, but..."

He nods his head without looking away from the screen. His hair is completely white now and looks like it hasn't been combed in days.

Aunt Penny pats me on the cheek and looks at me closely.

"You poor thing, I know just how you feel. When your uncle Roger passed away, I was completely devastated."

"Well Jim didn't die, Aunt Penny. He went to work in some bar in Colorado." I try to laugh. Everyone but Dad stares at me.

"Don't pay any attention to the mouth on that girl, Pen," my mother says, shooting me a look.

Kim says to her son, who must be at least six by now, "Daniel, show Annie what you drew for her in the car."

He comes up to me with a crayon drawing, presumably of me since the figure has yellow hair. The sky is a strip of blue at the top, and standing next to me under a big orange sun is a cactus. The cactus has big arms and a stupid grin. I wonder if it's supposed to be Jim.

"Nice cactus, Daniel."

He hides behind his mother.

"Daniel, don't be shy. Daniel's become a little artist," she announces.

I nod and thank him for the picture. I fold it to put it in my pocket and then realize from the way Kim looks at me that that is the wrong thing to do.

My sister and I have not shared a bedroom since we were small. My mother has made up the twin beds in the same matching pink quilts we had back then. I think my mom didn't put one of us on the couch because she thought it would be good if I wasn't alone. Maybe she was worried about midnight trips to the fridge. Or maybe it was Kim's idea. I feel uncomfortable undressing in front of my sister, so I go into the bathroom to change into my nightgown. Kim works out all the time and still looks like she did before she got pregnant with Daniel.

She is reading a fitness magazine when I crawl into my twin bed, facing the wall.

"So Daniel gets his own room, but we have to sleep together?"

"You never minded when we were kids," she says.

"Yes I did. So did you."

She is flipping the pages. I can tell she wants to say something to me, but I hope she won't. I hear her put the magazine down, and she is quiet for a bit, the light still on.

"What," I say at last.

"I didn't say anything," she says.

"Yes but you're going to." I sit up and look at her.

"I'm just worried for you, Annie, that's all."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Kim," I mutter and throw myself back down on the pillow.

My sister is quiet again. I probably hurt her feelings, and this just angers me more.

Please don't be angry comes back to me from the letter. It occurs to me I might be terrible to live with.

Kim turns the light out. My eyes fill with tears. I suspect they're from self pity more than anything else but I go ahead and let them spill over. When my sister hears me

sniffle, she comes over and puts her hand on my arm and I let her.

"Kim," I say, "Maybe I was horrible to him."

"No you weren't, Annie," she says, but I can tell she doesn't really believe it.

The next day we throw a little birthday party for my dad. He sits at the dining room table staring at the coconut cake my mother has made while everyone sings. I notice his fingernails are long and dirty, like those homeless veterans you see sleeping in the parks in Tucson. He blows out the candles: a six and a five made out of wax. Everyone claps.

Earlier, my aunt Penny had suggested I give her some money for the bottle of Irish whiskey she'd gotten him. She let me put "& Annie" after "*Love, Penny*" on the card. It's the only nice thing I can ever remember her doing for me. She's my mother's sister, but they don't seem anything alike. Then again, neither are Kim and I.

My sister has gotten my dad a puzzle with a picture of a castle in Scotland.

"Oh hey," he says when he opens it, "how about that."

"Remember, we used to do puzzles together when I was a kid?" Kim says. "I thought you and Daniel could have a go."

"Yeah," he says vaguely, nodding.

Kim is always trying to please him. I gave up a long time ago.

My father opens the whiskey and we all have a taste. He gives Daniel a tiny sip, even though Kim and my mother tell him not to. Daniel makes a face and we all laugh. Penny calls him a brave young man.

We all have some birthday cake. I don't dare go for a second piece in front of my

mother, so I am glad when she puts it away.

After the plates have been cleared by my mother and Penny, Kim opens up the puzzle and spreads the pieces on the table.

"Dad, wanna have a go?"

"Sure," he says.

My father picks at the puzzle for a minute or two, and then wanders off to his chair in the living room with another glass of the whiskey. If my sister is hurt, she does not show it. She and I sit next to each other piecing together the bottom edge, Daniel almost asleep on her lap. We have not gotten to the castle – just the hedges. Some FBI show is filtering through the living room wall. From where Kim and I sit, we can see Penny and my mother standing in the kitchen, chatting in low voices long after the dishes are done. Penny is chain smoking. Now and then, snippets of conversation drift in: "He meant it." "*you're kidding.*" "We weren't going to."

I hear the name "Dave." My mother, in mid-conversation, plants her feet solidly on the kitchen floor and stretches her arms out. She is showing Penny the warrior pose. Her face and the rigid ends of her fingers point toward the room where my father sits, probably dozing. Penny, cigarette in hand, lifts her arms in imitation. She looks over her shoulder at my mother and says, "like this?" "No," my mother says and drops the pose. She puts her hands on Penny's neck, turns it slightly. For a moment, they both look down the length of Penny's arm, away from us.

It's the middle of the night and I'm lying there starving, while Kim sleeps peacefully, the pink quilt pulled up under her chin. I've been trying so hard to be good while I'm home but it's hard, especially when I know there's coconut cake in the fridge.

I try not to think about it, but I know I won't be able to sleep until I eat something. So I creep downstairs and there is my aunt Penny sitting in her nightie at the dining room table, smoking. She's working on the upper frame of the puzzle.

She looks up and sees me in the doorway and jumps.

"Jesus, Annie. You scared me half to death."

"Sorry," I say.

"Can't you sleep?"

"Nope."

She finds a fit with three pieces near the top left corner and grins.

"Does Kim snore?" She says.

"No. She's too perfect."

Penny laughs and I laugh too.

"For instance I don't think she'd ever get up in the middle of the night for a piece of cake," I say, feeling somewhat ashamed, but wanting the coconut icing too much to care.

"Get me one too, will you?" Penny says, peering over her glasses at a piece that looks like sky.

"A glass of milk, too?" I ask, relieved.

"Okay. Sure." She stubs the cigarette out.

I bring the cake and the carton of milk to the table and go back for two plates and glasses. I slice two large pieces and lick my fingers.

While we eat in silence, I gaze at the puzzle: the rectangular edge is almost completed. When I look at Penny, I can see her scalp through her hair, which is a bit

fried and a strange buttery color. Her skin isn't as bad as I thought it would be without makeup.

The cake is gone too quickly. I fight the urge for another piece, hoping my aunt will go to bed soon.

"OK, I'm going to stop messing with this damn puzzle," Penny says.

Then she holds up a finger and winks at me.

"Finish your milk," she says, holding out her hand. I obey, emptying the glass in one gulp. Penny takes our milk glasses over to the cabinet and pours each of us a generous whiskey from the bottle we bought my father. I try to smile; she won't be going up anytime soon. We clink glasses and I take a big swallow.

Penny looks at me strangely for a moment, her head cocked to one side.

"You know, I think I know what happened."

"With what."

"With you and your husband."

I stare into my whiskey and wait for her to continue, too curious really to be upset.

She says, "I think you maybe scared him a little."

I start to laugh.

"You think I scared him away."

"Yes I do." She taps the table twice for emphasis. "Absolutely."

"Um, thanks, Aunt Penny. Now I really feel like shit."

I get up, my feelings hurt, and start to clear away the plates.

"Wait, wait, wait," she says.

She starts to cut another slice of the birthday cake. After a pause I set my plate back down and she puts the cake on it.

"Your father doesn't need all this sugar," she is saying while she lays the last piece on her own plate, "we should just finish it off."

I sit back down and take a bite, washing the thick coconut icing down with a swig of whiskey.

Penny points her fork at me. "Annie, did you know that when I first met your father he was singing in a folk band? He wanted to be Bob Dylan. He hasn't always sold cars."

I think I've heard this before, but it is strange coming from her.

"Go on," I say.

She chews thoughtfully for a moment.

"He was good. Really good. Played guitar and sang. The songs he wrote weren't so hot, though. All about peace and love. But he could really play. He even taught me how to strum a couple of things."

I nod, kind of nervous about where this is going.

"We had our thing, you know. I think I liked him more than he realized. But when your father met her, that was that. And of course she always wanted whatever I had because I was older."

I just look at her, stunned. Another cigarette is lit, the smoke blown upwards.

"If you ever wondered why I wasn't in the wedding, that's why. They didn't ask me." Her voice quavers a little. I wonder how much she's had to drink before she poured the whiskey for us.

"But we've worked through all that," Penny says, waving the smoke away. "It helped when you were born."

She looks at me for a long time.

"I always thought your dad could do more, be something. And maybe that scared him. I don't know. I guess he wanted something safe."

My fingers feel numb. I take another sip of the whiskey, unable to look at her. I feel like I should defend my mother but I don't know how.

"But when I saw your Jim standing there waiting for you to come up the aisle, I thought oh Jesus." She shakes her head. "He's not up to that girl. He just ain't up for the job."

Penny smiles as if she's just paid me some compliment.

"You've barely even talked to Jim," I say. "You don't even know him." My voice seems louder than I intended.

"Honey, I don't need to."

I finish my whiskey and get up from the table without looking at her. My legs are wobbly.

"Now, don't—" she says.

I shake my head and turn. I leave the plates, leave her sitting there.

Lying in my twin bed, shaking, furious, I imagine going back down there, what I would say. Who does she think she is? I come up with twelve different long-winded responses that would reduce Penny to ashes. It's a long time before I hear her coming up the stairs.

The third night there, Jim calls. We're all at the dinner table. I can tell it's him by the look on my mother's face when she answers the phone. Not knowing what to say she simply holds the phone out to me. I go out onto the front porch and sit there for a moment or two before I put the phone to my ear. The air has turned cold and someone in the neighborhood has lit a fire in their fireplace. The smell is as familiar as the smell of my own pillow.

"Hello," I say, trying to sound breezy, off-hand.

"Annie. It's me."

He is trying not to cry. It embarrasses me. I wait for him try to get a hold of himself.

"Are you okay, Jim?" I say.

"I'm okay. I miss you. I'm just – I'm so sorry." He loses it. "I just – I felt so useless, you know? It was stupid."

He tells me that he's in a motel somewhere in Utah, on his way back to Tucson. He only spent one night with Andy in Colorado before he turned around and headed home.

"It was just so stupid, Annie – I don't know what I was thinking. Jesus. I'm so sorry I hurt you."

A part of me sees that he's even managed to fail at leaving me. I tell him I'll be home in a couple days, and he says he loves me. I say it back. I tell him to get some sleep. And he says he will.

When I go back in, my mother and sister want to know what was said.

"Well, he said he loves me," I offer.

“Oh,” they say encouragingly.

Aunt Penny does not look up from her plate, where she is cutting the fat off a piece of pork.

The morning I leave, my father takes me to the airport. Daniel comes along and sits in the backseat with a dinosaur coloring book beside him, concentrating for a long time on an open box of crayons. My mother has dragged Penny and Kim to her yoga class. When we said our goodbyes this morning, my mother held me by the arms, as if scolding me, and said, “you see? I knew it would work out all right.” Then she hugged me while Kim and Penny looked on in their borrowed yoga clothes, waiting for their turns. Kim said, “call me if you need to talk.” I said I would, though neither of us believed it. Penny only said, “bye now, safe travels.” She had lipstick on her teeth, and for some reason the sight of it made me feel guilty. I wanted to say something to make it okay with her. “Thanks, you too,” was all I could manage.

My father and Daniel and I ride in silence most of the way to the airport. I want to talk to Dad about what Penny told me, but I can’t seem to bring it up. I half believe it never happened, it’s so hard to imagine it. He switches on the radio, the oldies station. Occasionally, he whistles along with a refrain. I glance back at Daniel and he is furiously coloring the dinosaur’s back with a green crayon.

Somewhere on the toll road I say, “Dad, can you still play the guitar?”

He glances over at me.

“I was never much good at it to begin with. Didn’t see the point of going on with it.”

“Oh.”

He taps a beat on the steering wheel.

“What time’s your flight again?”

“10:04,” I say.

He begins to whistle again, to a Temptations song.

When he drops me off at the departure gate, he kisses me on the cheek and his face is rough. He squeezes me and lets go. I lean in the backseat and say, “give your auntie a goodbye hug.” Daniel carefully puts the crayon and coloring book down to allow me to hug him. He pats my shoulders with his small hands. I want to say something wise to him, something he won’t forget. But I can’t think of anything, so I just close the door and wave.

On the plane I think of Jim at home in Tucson, and it’s hard to know how to feel. I wish I had some kind of answer prepared on where we go from here so that when I see him, I won’t have to think about any of it too much.

I remember as if it were a very long time ago, or some other couple, some people on TV, that Jim and I were trying for a baby. I don’t know what to say to him about all that. I don’t know what to say to him about anything.

Cruising over Texas, I order a whiskey, even though it’s only 11 in the morning Mountain Time. I’m hoping it will settle my nerves. It just makes me sleepy.

When I pull the shutter closed and drift off, I dream of Penny and my father. And Jim is in there too, only it’s the Jim in the photo on my desk.

Finally the initial descent, and the Catalinas come into view. I start to scan the Tucson valley for our house, like we always do. We’ve only been able to find it that one

time, last Christmas, in the brown grid south of the stadium. I wonder if the ants have completely taken over since we've been gone.

I don't know if Jim will be waiting at the gate when I get off the plane. I find myself hoping he isn't. I'm not ready to face him yet. I'm afraid to face him.

We land 15 minutes early, and when I get off the plane I don't see Jim at first. Relieved, I start to head for the ladies room, and then I see him sitting at the El Charro bar near the gate having a beer, gazing down at his glass. He looks nervous. He doesn't expect me yet.

I slip into the bathroom and wash my face with cold water. Three other women talking in rapid Spanish come and go while I stand there at the sink. I do not look at them, and I don't look at myself in the mirror. I take two deep breaths. I think of the turtle. I close my eyes and breathe, letting the air out in a whoosh. I stretch my arms out the way my mother showed Penny, aligning my chin with my shoulder. I breathe.

Then I let my arms fall slack. I splash my face again and go back out.

Jim is no longer at the bar. For a moment, I think he's decided something, that he's gone. But then I see him standing at the gate. He is peering down the long hallway, waiting for me. Almost everyone has gotten off the plane now. He must be wondering where I am. I could leave him there, keep walking towards the exit. I'd have a half hour to pack a few things. I could leave a note on the kitchen counter. There would be just enough time to tell him exactly what needs to be said.

Before he turns around and sees me, I am composing the letter in my head. It starts with: *Go to Colorado. Meet a girl. You could be happy.*

The Before and the After

Your mother is sitting on the bed with her hands folded when you arrive with your husband. The bed is neatly made, hospital corners tucked the way she'd taught you. The nurse must have done this.

Your mother smiles at Frank, and then at you.

"Why hello," she says, the way she would greet a fellow church patron. Frank goes to her and gently lifts her elbow.

"Are you ready?" Frank says.

"Yes, dear. Of course."

She nods, standing, lets herself be led down the hall, down the stairs. You follow behind her, looking down on your mother's pink scalp, the thin white hair parted with a wetted comb.

Into the waiting car.

"Are we going to see Dad?" Your mother says as you buckle her in. She is looking at her hands, open on her lap.

"Maybe next time," you tell her, picturing the small yellow room where your father died, miles away in a home outside Lincoln, where he had made a lopsided basket that you keep in your bathroom, full of soaps. You recall the cloying smell of the flowers that you took home with you after his funeral, not wanting them to go to waste. That smell lingered in the car for months.

"I'll be back soon, Mom," you say. "Just need to tend to a few things here."

You kiss her wilted cheek, close her door.

To Frank you say over the roof of the car, “Call me if you have any trouble. I won’t be long.”

“Okay,” he says. His grayed hair shifts a little in the wind and he reaches up to smooth it. You go around the car and hug him quickly. He leans in and kisses you on the lips.

You stand in your mother’s driveway and watch the car disappear.

It has begun to snow.

You start in the bedroom, divide her belongings up into Things to Sell, Things to Keep, Things to Throw Away, Things to Give Away. Things You Don’t Know What to Do With.

In this last pile go all of her old satin hangers (kept in the back of the closet, bare). A pair of your dead father’s shoes, still in their box. A stack of Life magazines, a few of which you remember seeing your mother read when you were a child.

In a drawer you find a doll who is missing her arm from the elbow down. One of the doll’s eyes has lazily closed shut – you push it open again. You are sure you should remember this doll. The doll’s scalp is exposed much like your mother’s. You wish you had thought to put a hat on your mother’s head, with the snow starting. Then you sit holding the doll, looking at the piles you’ve created. You just sit there on your mother’s carpet, thinking, the doll on your lap, while the sky gets darker, and wonder if your mother is all right at your house, if Frank has made something nice for her to eat and let her nap in front of the TV. Wonder if she thinks she is staying with you for the weekend. You expect to feel sad but you don’t. Then you put the doll in the Things to Keep pile.

You move some clothes off the closet shelf and notice the pink hatbox in the corner. You have seen this box only once, when you were twelve and curious about who your mother was. For some reason, at that age, you had stopped knowing. She had become a mystery to you. This was partly because she had started having what your father called Her Quiet Spells, where she would sit in the chair by the window in her room, a blanket in her lap, eyes closed, fingers pressed to her temples. You knew this because you watched her from the doorway.

“Leave her alone,” your father whispered when he found you. “She’s having one of her quiet spells. Just let her be for a little while.”

One day when she and your father were out, you looked through her drawers, touched all her stockings, her silk slippers and her bras. You put on a couple of long, beaded necklaces she had hanging on the mirror, looked at yourself, and then immediately put them back in their place. Then you opened her closet door, pushed some old sweaters aside. And there it was. The hatbox, carefully taped shut. Confirmation that she had secrets.

At twelve, you did not have the nerve to take the box down and open it. And somehow finding the box itself had been enough, had verified something in you that was convinced your mother was a stranger, that there were things about her that you knew nothing about. This fact had been thrilling but it had also disturbed you, because you still wanted her to just be your mother.

Now you reach up. The box hits the chain to the closet light on the way down, and the chain swings. You set the box on the bed and kneel in front of it. Your hands begin to tremble so you rub them on your knees.

You begin to peel away the tape (which is probably older than you are). You hesitate, and then begin again. The tape snaps with the pressure of your fingernail.

You lift the lid.

In the box there are some misshapen hats, none you ever remember seeing. You take them out one at a time and place them on the bed in the order you found them. One is red, bright red, but the others are black and brown. You lift a yellowed handkerchief with her initials, *V.L.F.*, embroidered in elegant lettering. Then a pair of gloves, once white, that she must have worn to church.

You wonder whether that is all there ever was in the box, all this time.

But you pull on the edge of a paisley scarf and find it is wrapped around something bulky. A brown leather journal bound with a piece of red yarn. The back cover is bowed by the handful of photographs and other bits of paper she has slipped in there. They fall out on the bed when you untie the yarn.

You fan them out with your hand.

You recognize your mother as the young girl with the wide, serious face, the skin brown and smooth. You recognize her but the other people, the other places, you do not know.

You move the hatbox, the hats, the handkerchiefs, the scarf, the gloves into a new pile on the carpet. The photographs you form into rows. You think, perhaps she would have arranged them differently, and you move a few of them around. Then you place the other items she has saved – a torn out page from the Bible, some ration stamps, little postcards – in their own row, unfolding them gently if they are creased.

You open the journal, careful not to break its delicate spine. It says *Virginia Louise Farmer, Champaign Ill.*, on the inside cover. The year is *1944*. Five years before her marriage, six before you were born.

You turn the page, begin to trace her spidery handwriting: *12 Mar.* The pictures are in a grid in front of you, a map to her words. And meanwhile she sleeps in the chair in front of reruns of Jeopardy, and Frank, warm from the tea he's made them, dozes too.

12 Mar. Five stamps left in Mother's book, to get her and me through the week. Last night I had a dream about sugar in my coffee. Mother's still in bed with one of her turns. It's the second day now. Hattie came over and we did my mother's hair. That helped.



Hattie told me about J.'s new job as a chauffeur. He says it's for the mayor mostly.

Last night J. took Hattie riding around in one of the fancy cars. She said he had the speedometer up to 80 on the main highway. As long as he keeps the gas tank full he can sneak the car away and no one cares. He told Hattie he can do this kind of thing forever, that driving is easy. He doesn't have to think.

J. also told Hattie that when Don gets back he'll set him up with a job, and then when we get married I'll be set too. Then Hattie said she wished Don would come back soon so the four of us could go around together like the old days. I said, yes I wished that too but we don't ever know what will happen.

18 Mar. Hattie came by and wanted to know if I wanted to head into Urbana with her



and J. He was waiting in a big fancy black car in the driveway, the engine running so quiet you could hardly hear it. I told Hattie I couldn't go on account of Mother. She's still not better. Well, Hattie said, come out and

look at the car anyway. It was beautiful, so shiny I could see myself in it. J. leaned out the window and said, what do you think? I told him I thought it was pretty nice. He said, Ginny when it gets warmer I'll take you and Hattie over to the park in Monticello one sunny day and we'll have a picnic. I said I would like that.



Hattie got in the car and said they would swing by on the way home but they never did.

22 Mar. J. called today. He said he was looking for Hattie. When I said I hadn't seen her, he said, oh well. He asked what I been doing all day, and I said nothing much. Then he starts telling me about the chauffeur job: he likes it all right, likes driving such nice cars, but he hates that the people he drives around think things of him because he didn't go to fight. Last week, he said it was a rich couple getting married and the groom looked at him as if trying to figure out what they had in common.

J. said, maybe one time I could ride with him, just me and him. I said yes I could. He said he'd like that.

He asked if I had any letters from Don. I told him I hadn't had any in a while now.

Don does not write good letters. His handwriting is bad. The last letter had a big greasy fingerprint. He talks about things that bore me, maneuvers (manuevres?) etc etc. I wish I felt prouder of him.

30 Mar. *It snowed two days ago, and now it is sunny and it's getting warm. I went to Hattie's today. We got dolled up and went over to the army base to see J. and the new plane his buddy's been working on. It's called the Celestial Princess. I've never seen a*



plane up close. It was so big – the propellers alone were as tall as Mother's house. I wanted to climb into the cockpit but J. said we weren't allowed. J. pestered Hattie to pose for a picture but she was in a mood. She didn't want to stand next to the painted girl on the side of the plane who barely had any clothes on. I took the picture of J. anyhow. He was grinning at me big. He knew I'd pose if he could've asked me.

4 Apr. ? *Not sure what today is. J. came over while Mama was out. He drove me around in one of the fancy cars like he said he would. We left the windows open and the air was very fresh. I wore the dress with the little thumbprint strawberries. J. took me to the lake. He had even brought towels, but it was too cold to swim. Later he lay one on the backseat so we wouldn't ruin the upholstery.*

I didn't think much about Hattie and I feel a little guilty about that now. It started to rain some and J. let me borrow his shirt. We sat and smoked a couple of his cigarettes and he talked about the good old days before Don went. (Why does he always talk to me about Don?)



Then it was time to go and J. asked for his shirt back. He said he'd feel funny driving around in his undershirt.

We drove in silence. J. dropped me off at the end of my street. He said, Okay then.

I got out. He turned the car around, headed back towards town.

I walked up the street and Mother was reading on the porch. She didn't ask me where I had been. She just marked the page with her thumb and looked at me. I said, Hi Mother, and went on past, into the house.

I know I won't hear from J. for a while, now that we've done that. We shouldn't have done that. But I don't wish we hadn't.

5 April. *I wonder if Hattie has done that with him too? Would she tell me if she had?*

17 April. *Letter from Don today. He's won a medal. Isn't coming home yet, though. I have a hard time picturing his face. I don't want to look at the photos. He already seems dead in them. Maybe it's the uniform? Why don't I have any without the uniform? He seemed to pose for a million pictures, standing outside his mother's house in the hat and all. His mother was so proud. I suppose I felt proud too. I still think of the day he left, in*

the back of his mother's shed. Before, all he had ever done was kiss me. I suppose maybe he thought it was his last chance. Maybe it was. I don't know. Mother never asks about him.

20 April. *Saw Hattie. She says she is pretty sure J. is going to propose. I asked her why she thinks so. She*



said he told her he wants to be with her "biblically" (Hattie's word). Said that he wants to wait until they're married. Haven't seen J. If I do I don't know what I will say.

25 April. *Yesterday I was at the market and there was Don's mother. She looked so much older, I couldn't help noticing. She hadn't even bothered to put on lipstick. She asked me if I'd had any word from Don. I said it had been awhile, and she was quiet for a second and then she nodded and began to fiddle with an apple in her basket. Then she asked me if I had been hearing from him regularly before, and if it was unusual for me to not have a letter. I said, we didn't write much, I'm not much of a letter writer.*



Later I took out the pictures again, the ones taken in Don's mother's yard, to see if she was in them, if she really had changed that much in a few short months. I wondered, what do I look like to her now? Have I changed? But in the photos Don was in the center and his mother and I were figures in the background.

29 April. *J. hasn't even asked her yet and Hattie's already gone to the minister. We went over to the new church on Broadview today and I sat in a pew waiting while she talked to him (the*



minister) about dates and such. I hadn't stepped foot in a church since Daddy's funeral. That was three years before the war started. It seems like that was some other life then. I was glad when they finally tore the old church down. It only seemed right. But the new church is much too dark. I had imagined more light for my wedding day, when I imagined it at all. But Hattie doesn't seem to mind.

I pulled a New Testament from the rack and opened it. I hadn't picked up a Bible since Daddy was alive. He used to want us to pray more than we did, but he never got around to it much either. I read a little bit while I waited.

*Whom we call friends seem to sweeten life's cup and to fill it with the nectar of the gods.
We lift this cup to our lips but it slips from our grasp, to fall in fragments before our eyes.*

When I heard Hattie saying her goodbyes to the minister I tried to slip the book back into its slot without her noticing but it fell to the floor with a loud slap that echoed through the church. Hattie and the minister looked at me while I fumbled to put the book in its right place.

Then we went up Montgomery Street so Hattie could look at wedding dresses. She does not want a fancy wedding – she says it's just not done with the war on. So at the bridal shop on Montgomery we looked at some of the serious looking suits, white with big soft collars and high shoulders. Hattie liked the ivory one with the lace trim, even though she couldn't afford it. There were open-toed shoes to match.

Hattie tried the dress on, and the lady in the shop let her try on the hat and veil and the shoes too, and even gave Hattie a fake bouquet to hold while she looked in the mirror. Hattie took one look and said, Wait, this isn't right, and she went back into the dressing room and came out without her old tan stockings on. Her legs were as white as

the dress. She smiled into the mirror and the shoplady told her she looked pretty as a picture.

The belief of sin, which has grown terrible in strength and influence, is an unconscious, an embryonic thought without motive..... Passion, depraved appetites, dishonesty, envy, hatred, revenge ripen into action only to pass from shame and woe to their final punishment.

Hattie held the bouquet and turned this way and that in the mirror and I thought of J., standing beside the Celestial Princess, the near-naked girl painted on the plane. J. standing there smiling at me. I thought of J. and then I hugged Hattie and said she looked beautiful.

11 May. *J. took Hattie and me to Monticello yesterday, and his friend Ned. It was the first time I'd seen J. since that day. He and Hattie and Ned pulled up and J. honked the horn. When I came out J. was trying to get Hattie to take her shoes off (she will never do it when her toenails aren't painted). I got into the backseat with Ned.*

Today it was a different car. I was glad.

Hattie sat up front real close to J. I kept wishing I had stayed home. We had all the windows open and Ned kept looking at me, even though he didn't try to make conversation. He had so much oil in his hair it hardly moved in the wind. I looked out the window at the corn going by. At one point Ned tried to hold my hand. (What did J. tell him about me?) I let him, for a bit, but I kept looking out the window. Eventually Ned tried to move closer, but the picnic basket Hattie had packed was sort of in the way. I kept looking out at the corn and letting him hold my hand. J. had his arm around Hattie the whole time, even while he smoked.



I hadn't been to the park in M. since I was little and Daddy was still alive. I remember we passed by a statue and Daddy was embarrassed that the statue was naked and that I saw it. I must have been about eight or nine. I had seen Daddy naked once, and was puzzled why the statue was hairless, though I didn't say so. My father had so much black hair. Mother explained to Daddy that it was art and there was nothing for any of us to be ashamed of.

When we pulled into Allerton Park, J. and Hattie were having an argument. I didn't catch what about. The four of us walked silently to a spot in the shade. Hattie and I lay some blankets on the grass.

Ned set down the basket and began rooting for a beer. J. just sat and smoked, but then he started teasing Hattie about her hair, which had come undone in



the wind, and it was okay with them again. Pretty soon they were petting on the blanket. Ned made some moves but I didn't feel like it. He got kind of sore at me, but then he found a sandwich and he seemed happy.

I went wandering off but no one noticed. I tried to look for the statue I had seen with Mother and Daddy when I was small. I took off my shoes and the grass was a little damp. The sun was hot. I kept my eye out for rattlesnakes because of the rumor that Robert Allerton let them loose in his park. (I don't know if it's true or not.)



I saw the House off in the distance and I wandered through the woods towards it. I don't remember seeing it with Mother and Daddy. I had read in a book somewhere about a girl visiting a house like that and imagining herself as the mistress of it, and then one day it happens to her. I sat down in the grass looking at the house for a long time and wondered what it looked like inside. When I stood up, my legs had fallen asleep, and I wondered if I'd be able to find my way back to J. and Hattie and pathetic Ned. I don't need to be the mistress of some huge house. I would rather be prim little Hattie with her shoes on tight.

28 June. *No letters from Don. Almost three months now. But I haven't written either. He must be wondering where I am too. I wish sometimes I could close up that chapter the way I did with Daddy – just put it away like when they tore down the church. An old life, no longer me.*

It wasn't me in that shed with Don. Trying to do a nice thing. That was not me. That was before.

3 July. *Ned keeps calling. Yesterday I made a date with him. J. has got him a job at the base.*

18 July. *J. and Hattie are getting married next week. Hattie showed up today and told me. My mother hugged her. Hattie asked me to be her bridesmaid. She says I can have*

the same suit she picked out only pink. Since Don isn't here Ned is going to be J.'s best man. It's all been planned.



Your mother is still awake when you return home, long after dark. From the porch, where you tap the snow off your boots, you see her form in the living room window, the light on. Perhaps she can't sleep.

You go into the house, glad for its immediate warmth. Frank has got your mother into her nightgown, has set her up with a blanket and pillow. She smiles at you and then looks back at the TV (a gazelle is giving birth) while she pulls at threads on the blanket.

“Is Frank asleep?” You ask.

She shakes her head, smiles apologetically. “I have trouble with names, dear.”

“Never mind, Mom,” you say. “It's okay.”

You have tied the red yarn around the journal, then wrapped it in the scarf. Some pictures you left out. You placed the bundle in the bottom of the pink hatbox, then the

gloves, the handkerchief, the hats (red one last). You have sealed the box, carefully closing it shut with fresh tape, and returned it to her closet shelf, for now.

“Can you turn it off?” Your mother says. She looks at you with eyes that, for a moment, seem clear.

“The lamp or the TV?” You ask.

“The lamp,” she says.

You get up, flip the switch. The glow of the TV flashes on her face (gazelles running through tall yellow grass). You sit next to your mother, you hold her hand – which is easy to do, like holding a child’s hand – and you wait for her to get tired enough that you can both call it a day.

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