Woman of the world

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1995
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THE NEXT FRAME

It's a black and white cartoon. In the first frame, Twerpo and Supertwerp use Aunt Jane's eyeliner to draw whiskers and a black triangle nose on Baby Charlie. Next they pick him up and swing him by his hands and feet as they chant, "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, now go, cat, go!" With a gleeful shout they fling the squawling baby through the window, then rest their hairy paws on the sill to watch him free-fall two stories down into the river, where he lands with a soundless splash. The black water sweeps Baby Charlie along; his tiny body spins like a pale starfish in the swift current. When he slams into a piling and slips underwater, the twerps squeal joyfully, their long dark snouts quivering with delight. Then they scamper down the hall to the parlor, where Itchy Rat and Biggy are entertaining the relatives.

Liz bent over the sketchbook on her lap and added bristles to Supertwerp's mustache. She ignored the smoke streaming from her cigarette into her eyes and the hard stone bench beneath her, but when a drop of
sweat splatted onto the heavy white paper, she closed the black sketchbook and squinted through the afternoon glare at Rufus, her aunt's black and tan coonhound. He was crashing around in the high dry weeds, lifting his leg on as many of the departed as he had piss for.

"You ready to go, Rufus?" The big dog cocked his head and wrinkled his brow, then ambled over to the next headstone. Liz tucked the sketchbook under her arm and hesitantly stepped among the graves, alert for the buzz of a rattlesnake. When Rufus reared up and put his paws on her shoulders, she pushed him down, then massaged the warm silky skin behind his ears as he pressed his bony head into her stomach, his body heavy and too warm against her sweat-damp jeans.

"The things I put up with from you," she said. "Come on." Liz raced Rufus up the dirt slope to her aunt's house, panting as she scrambled to the top of the rise. Rufus padded over to the strip of shade below the back porch and flopped down. He watched mournfully as she clipped on his chain. She knew he liked to keep her in sight. He snuffled and whined at the back door each night until she let him in to lie at her feet beneath the kitchen table. And he always leapt into the pickup truck to perch solemn and erect beside her when she drove into Billings to mail her comic strip to the syndicator in Chicago. He'd been like that since the day she got here, when he'd sniffed her hand, then poked his cold nose into her crotch, which embarrassed her although her Aunt Corrine said it was just his way of making friends.

When Liz had stepped off the train in Billings a month ago, the ground tilted under her feet and her vision splintered in the searing heat and vaulting space of Montana's big sky country. Swaying and blinking beside
the silver train, Liz barely responded when her Aunt Corrine, a big woman with coarse white hair, strode up, gave her an abrupt hug, grabbed the heaviest suitcase and led the way across the parking lot to an old blue Ford pickup.

As they roared and bounced north on Highway 3 the heat rushed through the cab's open windows. Beyond asking if Liz could drive a stick, her aunt didn't say much, which suited Liz fine. As she rested her temple on the rattling door and closed her eyes she heard Nick's voice in the hot gritty wind blowing across her face. Have I told you how much I love you he asked as they stood under the Santa Monica lifeguard tower and the rain darkened the sand.

When they reached Lavina, Liz opened her eyes, but there wasn't much to see. The gray highway narrowed into the main street, which ran for two blocks to the edge of town, where 3 teed into Highway 12. Beyond Lavina's low brick and clapboard buildings, the land stretched flat and cow-dotted to the dark circled line where the sky clamped down hard, like a huge blue bowl pressed tight to keep the cows from flying away.

Corrine pulled onto the dirt shoulder beside a squat building with a sagging wooden porch. "That's it," she said. "That's the Sunset View Cafe. I'm gonna pop in and ask Curty over for dinner. Won't be a minute."

After her aunt went inside, Liz hung out the window to look around. The cafe slumped between a barbershop and the Red Spur Saloon. Across the street was a boarded up victorian hotel and a feed store. At the gas station on the corner, a plywood sign with FOR SALE painted on it was propped against the glass-domed pumps. A lanky man wearing a feed cap low over his
forehead slouched out of gas station office and headed for the saloon. Liz
drew black music notes above his head for the whistled sound track of "The
Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," and fastened spurs to his high top tennis
shoes. Kachink. Kachink. He grinned and touched his cap as he walked
past, and Liz ducked back inside the cab, muttered, "We're not in Los
Angeles anymore, Toto."

That evening at dinner--potato salad, ham, and peas--Liz could barely
keep her eyes open while Aunt Corrine told Curtis how to run the cafe in her
absence. Curtis wasn't much more than a kid, thin and dark, and he didn't
say much, but Liz caught him looking at her with a mixture of scorn and
admiration that she didn't care for.

The next morning her aunt boarded a train to Seattle to visit friends,
leaving Liz alone in the faded green clapboard house overlooking the
graveyard on the edge of town. Beyond the graveyard a deep ravine straggled
north toward the low smudge of hills on the horizon. That first night at
dinner Curtis warned Liz not to go hiking in the ravine. A mountain lion
might take her for a starved albino deer. She'd scoffed at him, but the first
time she went alone to the graveyard, she spooked herself into seeing big
tawny shadows creeping toward her through the whispery dry grass, and
after that she always brought Rufus along for protection.

Today they'd stayed at the graveyard longer than usual. The shadows were
lengthening across the dirt yard, and when Liz touched her forehead it felt
sunburned. She filled Rufus' water bowl, then ignored his mournful gaze and
went inside. It was cooler in the kitchen, and quiet. After the constant wash
of city traffic, the penetrating television voices and the brisk clatter of
Carla's heels on the staircase, this silent house felt like a sanctuary. But sometimes the silence was an accusation, the insistent ticking of the hall clock a reminder that she was alone, like she'd been those last weeks in Los Angeles. Liz got a drink, as much to listen to the water gurgle from the tap as because she was thirsty, but it didn't help. She picked up her sketchbook and went into the hallway, where she was distracted by the tiny blue victorian couples strolling across the wallpaper, each couple circled by a dark green garland. It wasn't fair that the little victorian men all had Nick's profile. Liz grabbed a dusty black Stetson from the antler hat rack and crammed it low over her eyes. An imagined rose clenched between her teeth, she tangoed furiously down the hall, her boots clomping on the sagging floorboards, then shoved open the front door, letting it squeak slowly shut behind her as she leapt down the steps into the yard.

She hurried past the three hammocks that were tattered remnants of when Corrine's daughters lived at home, strung in a triangle under the thirsty pines that screened the house from the road. Sunlight quivered on the yellow pine needles under her feet as she crossed the yard, then slid down the embankment onto the gravel road and headed toward town. She'd gotten in the habit of dropping by the cafe most days for a beer and to talk to Curtis, who might get on her nerves but at least he wasn't one of Lavina's good 'ol boys. A crow strutting along a split-rail fence cawed and flapped heavily into the air as she passed, her boots crunching on the loose gravel. Its caws faded as it flew over the pines, west toward the rockies and beyond them the ocean.
A dirt path between Morton's Guns and Feed and the boarded up hotel led from the gravel road to main street. It was Sunday, and the cafe was the only place open. Heat shimmered off the faded asphalt as she crossed the street. When she pushed open the cafe's screen door, Curtis called to her from the kitchen.

"That you, Liz?"

"No. It's Nancy Reagan come to help you redecorate." She clambered onto a counter stool, hooked her heels on its rungs and dangled head-first behind the varnished wooden counter to fish a Millers from the ice chest. As she twisted off the bottle cap she looked around, reassured once again by the red vinyl booths and the moth-eaten deer heads on the pineboard walls. Liz in these surroundings was no one she knew. She lit a cigarette, tilted back the Millers and took a long gulp. The ceiling fan shredded her cigarette smoke and spun it across the room. Looking into a deer's glassy eyes she made it wink and say, It takes two to tango.

"Mind your own business," Liz told it. "If you're so smart, how come you're dead?" Liz tightened her grip on the bottle as she felt Nick's hands on her, the black hairs at his wrists, the smooth folds of his knuckles, his dense white fingernails. She sighed, opened her sketchbook and uncapped a ballpoint pen chosen for its heavy, even flow. Swiftly she inked in three jail cells, one to a page.

"What did we do wrong?" Biggy asked. He rubbed his long black snout with a hairy paw and sniffled.
"Whatever it was, we're not to blame. If you don't know you did something, you can't be held responsible." Itchy Rat's badly chewed tail twitched as he glared at Biggy.

"Yeah, that's right!" Biggy's dark eyes popped open. "If you did something without thinking, then it's just like you didn't do it at all."

"Shut up, stupid," Itchy snarled. "They'll fry you for that kind of talk."

"Maybe all we did was something little," Biggy whined. "Like when we stole Cousin Joey's plastic hook-hand and scared those lovers parked by the river, remember?"

"Don't start in on that," Itchy hissed. "Don't admit to anything."

Curtis maneuvered through the swinging door with a rack of dripping coffee cups, steam trailing off them. The muscles corded on his forearms as he slammed the rack down beside the coffee machine and nudged it into place with a skinny hip. He tossed his head to get his bangs out of his eyes and looked pointedly at the beer bottle Liz was tilting skyward.

"Can I get you something, Liz? A beer maybe?"

She laughed. "I thought this was a self-serve joint." When he kept looking at her she blushed and spun on her stool to make him stop.

"Sun's bleached your hair almost white," he said. "How come you always braid it into that little rat tail?"

"Keeps it out of my eyes. You should try it."

"You're just trying to grow a tail, so you'll look like your rat friends." He leaned his elbows on the counter so his face was close to hers. "I wish you liked me as much as you do them." His thin face was pocked with acne scars. Up close he smelled of bacon grease, eggs, and dishwater.
Liz leaned away from him. "Chill, Romeo. You're wasting your time."

Curtis stood up straight, tucked his stained t-shirt into his jeans. "My time's my own. But what's the problem? I thought you liked me. You got something against half-breeds?"

"Jesus, Curtis, give me a break."

"Then what is it?"

Liz sighed, drained her beer. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Liz glanced up at the deer head. She wished it would say something to protect her from this forward boy, but instead she drew a balloon coming from its mouth with the words, who, me? I'm not one of your cartoons.

"You're too young," she said finally.

"Four years, big deal. I'm twenty-two and you're twenty-six, but you treat me like a kid. You know how that makes me feel?"

"Nope. But somehow I feel confident you're gonna tell me."

"It makes me feel like shit."

"My heart bleeds. Can I have another beer?"

Curtis didn't look at her as he pulled a Millers from the ice chest and slid it across the counter. "I'm not the one who screwed you over, Liz."

"Who said anybody did?"

The ceiling fan ruffled his hair as he turned away to measure coffee into a row of white filters and stack them for morning. "It'll just fester if you keep it inside," he muttered.

"Yeah, I've noticed how open and sharing you are, Curtis."
He rubbed his mouth to hide a reluctant grin. "So what did those cartoon delinquents do today?"

"The twerps drowned a doll, I mean a baby, in the river, and Biggy and Itchy got arrested for it. They don't know why they're in jail, and they're chewing on their scaly-ass tails, they're so scared."

"Was it a doll or a baby?"

"A baby." Liz took a gulp of beer, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Curtis gazed piously up at the ceiling. "I can't believe people actually want to read such violent filth."

"It appeals to the urban hip," Liz said loftily. "Besides, the twerps are alter egos. What they do is only real to their victims." She dipped one fingertip into a water puddle on the varnished wood counter, then touched her forehead to make a cool liquid dot on her sunburned skin. What she liked best about Lavina was how real everything was, the blinding heat, the spade-headed menace of rattlesnakes, the beads of moisture condensing on the beer bottle's slick brown sides.

"Liz, did you chain Rufus before you came over?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Looks like he's busted loose."

Liz leaned forward to peer across the cafe through the dusty plate glass window. In the fading light she saw the big dog prancing along the dirt shoulder across the street, his head high, a length of chain clinking merrily behind him. She slid off her stool and clomped toward the door. Curtis legged over the counter and followed her. When Liz pushed open the screen
door, it squeaked, and Rufus swung his head toward her, his floppy ears cocked forward. He crouched on his front paws, haunches in the air, long tail wagging. Then he bounded across the street toward the cafe.

The truck's foghorn blare rattled the windows, then the high black cab barrelled into sight. Liz shot out the door and ran toward the street, shouting at Rufus and waving her arms at the tiny white face high up in the cab. Rufus skidded on stiff forelegs, then veered low, back toward the road's shoulder, belly grazing the ground, the chain scraping the asphalt, his legs meeting beneath him as he tried to escape the giant tires but he wasn't fast enough and even though the semi had slowed for town it couldn't stop or swerve without fishtailing into the storefront windows. Rufus's shriek, the squeal of the brakes and Liz's scream rose together, followed by the whump whump whump of the dog's body under the truck. Curtis grabbed Liz's shoulders but she wriggled loose and ran into the middle of the road, where she stood and screamed at the driver's sorrowful pale face in his rearview mirror. "You son of a bitch! You goddamned shit licking pig!" She ran after the bigrig as it rumbled out of town and dwindled into a shimmering black speck in the flat distance.

Rufus whined, and Liz turned and hurried across the road. Curtis grabbed her arm but she shrugged him off and kept walking, feeling dizzy with the heat and sick with the smell of blood as she got closer. The dog was badly mangled, his hindquarters twisted, red glistening through his torn skin, but his head was intact. He lifted his muzzle, blood oozing from his ears, and tried to lick Liz's hand when she knelt beside him. Then his brown eyes
dimmed out, and his jaws went slack. Liz stood up, swallowed hard. A tear ran down her nose and she wiped it away impatiently.

"Goddamned asshole truck driver," she muttered. She felt Curtis looking at her. "It's my fault, isn't it?" she whispered. "I shouldn't have left him chained up all alone."

"Shoot, Liz. Your aunt did all the time."

"The way Rufus looked at me this afternoon I should have known but I was too busy feeling sorry for myself." She stared down at the ground, Rufus's front paws at the edge of her vision as she watched poisonous black ink seep from her boots in lethal puddles that Rufus lapped up. "Everything I love gets wrecked."

"You didn't kill him, Liz, and I'm not all that sure you loved him."

She glared at Curtis, her face white beneath her faint sunburn. "I was supposed to take care of him. I let him down."

An emotion she couldn't read flickered in Curtis' dark eyes before he looked at his feet and said, "I'm sorry Rufus is dead, but I think you're making a bigger deal out of this than you need to."

Liz looked away. The sky was glowing pale yellow in the west, the same color as the sunlight that had filtered through the maple tree when she and Carla had pricked their fingers with a straight pin, smeared the bright red drops together in a childish vow to become blood sisters. When she felt Curtis' arm around her shoulders, his thumb rubbing her bare arm, she stiffened, then drooped against him, surprised at how comforting it felt. Then his arm withdrew. "Why don't you wait for me in the cafe?" he said.
"I'm gonna drag him around to the storage shed. Tomorrow I'll take him to the dump."

"Can't we bury him?"

"A coyote would just dig him up, Liz." He touched her elbow. "Now go on inside, okay?"

Shadows had seeped into the cafe and turned the vinyl booths at the back into caves. Liz switched on the overhead light, then crossed the room and slumped onto a stool. She didn't care what Curtis said, everything she touched died on her, and now Rufus, and Curtis thought she was hysterical, morbid. That's why he'd moved his arm away when she'd leaned on him. She reached for her beer but let her hand close on empty air and dropped her head onto her arm, her tears hot and wet on her skin. Even if she didn't love Rufus you can't live with someone for a month and then watch them die like that.

Curtis came in through the back door, blinked in the glaring light.

Liz lifted her head, wiped off her damp arm. "You okay, Curty?"

"Don't call me that." He walked over to the counter, picked up her unfinished beer and downed it.

"Are you mad at me?" she whispered.

"I just don't like being called Curty. It's what all the old white folks around here call me. Like I don't count for anything."

She yanked a paper napkin out of the tarnished silver dispenser and blew her nose. "I thought you might be mad. At what I said, or, or because of Rufus."
"I'm not mad at you." There was an edge to his voice. He closed his eyes, shrugged, like he was forcing himself to calm down. "Come on," he said. "I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to."

"I want to." He slid onto the stool next to her, pulled out another napkin and leaned over and wiped off her hands, then pressed her palms together. "Don't treat me like the rest. Like I don't count."

While he locked up, Liz leaned on the porch rail and watched the accident happen. Then they crossed the street; avoiding the spot where Rufus had been. The sun had burned down the sky to a dull red bar across the horizon. It was still warm, but a breeze had come up, and it seemed to scour the air until the faint red of the brick buildings glowed in the twilight. They cut between Morton's and the hotel and headed down the gravel road toward Aunt Corrine's house. As they passed a barn a horse stamped in its stall, and the breeze lifted the scent of fresh hay. When Liz started crying again, Curtis stopped and took her in his arms, murmured, "there, there," and patted her back until she calmed down.

As they walked along the road, Liz a little ahead of Curtis, he cleared his throat. "You want to tell me what you're hiding from, Liz?"

She kicked up a spray of white-speckled gravel, watched it shoot into the dusk.

"You'd better spit it out before it chokes you," Curtis said.

Liz jammed her hands into her back pockets, the sketchbook clamped under one arm. "I had some trouble. With a man. And a friend."

"What kind of trouble?"
"The man and I were in love, and the friend stole him from me." Liz hesitated. "Well, she didn't steal him from me exactly, but she led him on until it was too late, then when she told me about it she acted like it was all his fault." Liz paused, added bitterly, "Like I needed her to tell me. Like I didn't watch the whole thing."

"Sounds like maybe he wasn't as in love with you as you thought."

"That's not the point, Curtis. Carla was my best friend. We lived together for christsake. She was the one person I thought I could always count on." Liz hunched her shoulder. "She shouldn't have done it. Not with Nick. Not to me."

"What did she do exactly?"

"Oh, nothing. Just flirted, charmed the socks off him." Liz shrugged. "She'd sit on the arm of his chair in her short skirts so he could stare at her legs while she whispered secrets in his ear. She could do that so a guy thought she was telling him things she'd never told anyone before, like he was special." Liz's voice shook. "Just her usual tricks. I've always known how she had to see herself that way, in men's eyes. But this time it was at my expense, and she didn't care how much it hurt me until it was too late."

Liz snuck a glance at Curtis. "So I did something pretty awful."

"What?"

"I don't think I can tell you," Liz whispered.

"Try."

"Carla had this antique china doll that used to be her mom's." Liz paused, cleared her throat. "When we were kids sometimes on rainy days her mom let us play with it, and I swear, Curtis, we thought that doll was
magic, an enchanted princess or something it was so beautiful. Its dress was real silk, blue with lace trim, and it had yellow curls and pink cheeks and little white teeth, and eyelids that opened and shut over shining blue glass eyes.

She kicked up another spurt of gravel. "Carla would hold it in her lap and say she knew when she grew up her mom would give the doll to her, not to any of her sisters. As if by saying it she could make it come true, like a wish. And it did. It did come true. When she turned twenty-one her mom gave her the doll. Carla was so happy she carried it around all evening, crooning to it like it was a baby."

"And?"

"After she told me about Nick, I was so frantic I didn't know what to do. I stayed in my room until she left for work, then in the afternoon I wandered into her bedroom and picked up the doll from her dresser, thinking it was beautiful, and hollow, just like Carla could be. I wished that it was Carla so I could shake her, slap her pretty face." Liz was glad it was getting too dark for Curtis to see her expression. "Well, that's what I did. I shook it and shook it, and then I swung it by its heels and smashed it against the wall." Liz's voice sunk lower. "And that's not everything. I stomped on it until it was nothing but broken white shards and I ripped its dress and flung the hair around the room." She glanced nervously at Curtis. "I flushed the eyes down the toilet."

Curtis gave a low whistle. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"It's not funny."

"I'm not laughing. What did Carla do when she came home?"
"I was sitting on the floor by my bed. I heard her humming as she came upstairs, and then she screamed and ran down the hall to my room." Liz's voice dropped to a whisper. "I'd locked myself in but I was scared when the doorknob rattled and she pounded on the door and shrieked at me. After awhile she went back to her room, I heard her sobbing on the phone for hours, telling everyone we knew what I'd done, telling it over and over."

Liz closed her eyes and would have stumbled but Curtis grabbed her arm. "I woke up in the night to voices, and furniture being dragged across the floor, and that went on until morning. Then everything got quiet. When I finally worked up the courage to open my door, her room was empty except for the smashed doll. She'd moved out in the night, and I haven't seen her or Nick since."

Liz swallowed. "I'm a pretty awful person, aren't I? To do something like that to my best friend. I mean, it wasn't all her fault. And she'll never forgive me. I know Carla, and she doesn't forgive people. She just shuts them out of her life."

"Well have you forgiven her?"

"I don't know. It still hurts."

When they reached Aunt Corrine's house they followed the tire ruts up the dirt driveway. Liz must have left a lamp burning in the parlor all last night and today because light was shining through the front window onto the porch and across the three hammocks under the trees. She listened for the soft clink of Rufus's chain slithering across the dirt out back, but the only sound was the breeze hushing through the pines. They climbed the porch steps, and Liz leaned on the railing, reluctant to go inside, half afraid
Rufus' ghost was waiting for her under the kitchen table. The tree shadows flickered in the light slanting across the hammocks. Curtis stood beside her, looking in through the lit window.

"I've done some pretty bad things myself," he said.

"As bad as what I did?"

"Oh, worse."

"What?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"That's not fair. I told you."

Curtis peeled off a curl of white paint from the porch rail and rubbed it to dust between his thumb and forefinger. "I lit out on my mom and little brothers when they needed me. When my mom was sick. And I never went back. They don't know where I am. And I don't even know if my mom's still alive." He turned and stared down at the hammocks. "She drank, see."

His dark eyes were glassy with memory, and his face looked naked, revealed in the dim light. Liz reached up and ran her fingertips along his clenched jaw, across the tight set of his mouth, tracing the mute pain.

"Thank you," she whispered. She leaned over and kissed him. His mouth formed a startled oh beneath hers, then softened, like the taut line of the horizon melting at dusk. He pressed closer, then drew back. "I think maybe I'd better go." He cleared his throat. "It's not that I--"

"I know," Liz said.

"You gonna be all right?" Curtis asked after a moment.

"Yeah. I'll be fine, except, no, I'll be fine."
He frowned, then smiled and touched her hair. "If Rufus is around he
doesn't want you to be sad, or scared. Dogs hate it when we're unhappy."

Liz nodded slowly. "See you tomorrow, Curtis."

"See you then." He kissed her so lightly she barely felt it, then clomped
down the porch steps. She watched him walk down the driveway, a solid
black shape in the shadows. When the crunch of his boots on the gravel died
away, she wandered down the steps and into the triangle between the
hammocks, where she sank crosslegged onto the slick pine needles and
opened her sketchbook. For an hour by the dim light from the window she
tried to soften Itchy's sly weasel face. She'd always sketched him sharp and
mean. With each failure she ripped out the spoiled page, balled it up and
dropped it on the ground. The hammock ropes creaked in the breeze, which
tumbled the paper balls around the yard until the darkness was lit by small
crumpled white globes. At last, by fluffing Itchy's spiky mustache, widening
his eyes and rounding the lines of his narrow snout, she succeeded. She
sketched in the jail cell behind Itchy and drew Biggy crouching next to the
iron bars.

"Who locked us in here, anyway?" Biggy whined.

"God did," Itchy growled.

"Well, maybe if we're very, very good, he'll let us out."

"And maybe he won't." Itchy snapped his fingers under Biggy's drooping
nose. "Think of something else, smarty."

"I can't think!" Biggy wailed. His tail whumped softly against the bars.
"I know." Itchy put his paw on Biggy's shoulder. "I know you can't think. That's okay. But there's got to be a way out, and I'll find it. You'll see. I'll get us out."

"Promise?" Biggy whimpered.

"Trust me," said Itchy. "What else can you do?"
Mary Adams wasn't one to give up easily, so after she finished lunch and the crossword puzzle, she went out through the laundry room into the garage. The door clicked shut behind her as she stepped into the warm gloom lit by a naked bulb. Her husband was bent over the table saw, like a pool player lining up a shot, as he fed a plank of soft pine into the whirling blur of the jagged-toothed circular blade. The saw shrieked as it tore through the plank, hazing the air with yellow sawdust and the scorched fragrance of new cut wood.

"Have you thought anymore about Friday?" Mary asked as the saw's harsh screech died away. Keith straightened up and rubbed his lower back, his movements stirring the air so the flock of birdhouses suspended from the rafters twisted gently on their chains. He took off his plexiglass goggles and brushed at the sawdust that yellowed his fluffy white hair.

"If you want to go, then go. Nobody's stopping you." He turned away to light a cigarette.
"I want you to come with me," Mary persisted. "For Brian's sake."

"Christ, Mary. He's a grown man. He doesn't need us pestering him, and he was just down here for New Year's." Keith glared at her. "Anyway, my hip's acting up. Kept me awake last night."

"More likely it was the bourbon," Mary snapped, then wished she hadn't. "He's our son," she added firmly. "Families should stick together."

"Who says they shouldn't? All I'm saying is he doesn't need you hanging around pissing and moaning, reminding him of what he has to feel bad about."

"I don't do that."

"Like hell you don't. Moping around, shaking your woolly head like you cared more about Gail than you do Brian."

Mary looked down at the workbench, picked up an intricately scrolled curl of wood, painted black. Probably for the wrought iron balcony on the French Quarter birdhouse Keith was making. She carefully set down the delicate woodwork before Keith could order her to do so. "Brian needs our support right now," she said. "And it will seem more normal if you come, too. Just a regular family get-together."

"It will be more normal if we leave him the hell alone."

Mary smiled. "Do you have to swear all the goddamned time?"

"After thirty years, woman, I'd think you'd be used to it. Goddamnit." He grinned, balanced his cigarette on a platform next to an unvarnished Victorian birdhouse with gingerbread trim, then lifted the two halves of pine from the saw. Cigarette smoke rippled in through the birdhouse's opening
and spiraled out through an upstairs window. In the sawdust haze it looked for a moment like the mansion was on fire.

"Look, Mary, I don't want to go anywhere this weekend, okay? Hell, we just got back from San Diego. A whole damned weekend of Pat's everlasting drivel. Bored me out of my gourd." Keith picked up his goggles and pushed a button on the tape deck bracketed to the wall behind him. Pete Fountain's trumpet drowned out anything else Mary might have wanted to say.

As she walked back into the air-conditioned coolness of the condominium, her sandals clicking on the hallway's terra cotta tiles, Mary tried not to be hurt by Keith's last remark. But it rankled. She knew he'd enjoyed staying with the McDaniels. He always had a good time whenever she managed to pry him out of his workshop, but that was getting harder and harder to do. He used to be so adventurous, sweeping her off on spur-of-the-moment camping trips down to Baja or up the coast to Big Sur. Now all he wanted to do was build birdhouses. And drink.

Mary was in the guest bathroom, reddening her thin lips with careful smooth strokes, when Keith appeared at the door.

"Where you off to now?"

Her hand wavered and the red line shot above her lip. "Drat! Now I have to start over. I told you not to creep up on me like that."

"Sorry. Where you going?"

"You know Tuesday's my bridge club."

Keith shrugged. "I can't keep up with your social life. You coming home for dinner?"
"We'll probably go to DuPars after. But I fixed you a plate. It's in the fridge. Just microwave it for three minutes."

Keith shrugged again and headed for the kitchen and the afternoon's first bourbon. Mary leaned in close to the mirror to reapply her lipstick, resolutely ignoring the wrinkles around her mouth and eyes, the slack folds beneath her jaw. A pale, spare woman with splotchy freckles and mouse brown hair now mostly gray, Mary knew she'd never been pretty, but she did her best with what she had. She shook the hairspray can vigorously, squinted as she spritzed the air around her head and let the chemicals float down in a misty net to keep her short poodle curls in place. Woolly head, indeed. At least she didn't grunge around in a stained t-shirt and pants so baggy and worn they slid off her behind, the way Keith did. It was all she could do these days to get him into a decent shirt when they went out. Tomorrow was dinner with the Gardeners, and at least Keith wouldn't complain about being bored since he and Frank G., former law partners, would resurrect all their favorite cases for the millionth time. Mary didn't care much for Sally G., always name dropping the private schools she went to half a century ago and asking nosy questions about Brian. Mary believed in keeping family matters in the family, but Keith would tell all after his third drink.

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On Friday afternoon, just before she left on the two hour drive from Palm Springs to Brian's house in Julian, up in the coastal hills, Mary went out to
the garage to try one last time to get Keith to come with her. He scowled at her, looking bug-eyed in his goggles. When she repeated her request he said gruffly that she'd better get a move on if she wanted to reach Julian before dark. She gave it up and went inside for her bags.

She backed her white Lincoln Continental down the driveway, then sped down Sinatra Way to Desert Drive, where the traffic slowed to a crawl. Through the palm trees lining the sidewalks, she could see the tourists swarming in and out of the tacky gift shops and exclusive boutiques, the glitzy restaurants and sidewalk cafes. She stopped at a red light and glanced at the crowded pavement. A tall slender woman with long black hair came striding out of Antoinette's Bakery, and Mary frantically beeped her horn, then let her hand drop, the dull red creeping up her cheeks. This happened all the time. A glimpse of straight black hair through a shop window, or a slender graceful figure striding up the sidewalk, and Mary's heart would leap. Before she knew it, she'd drop her shopping bags or library books in a panic that Gail would get away, only to realize that of course it wasn't Gail at all. Mary would kneel stiffly and collect her scattered belongings, try to smile at concerned bystanders. Who would have thought that grief could be so embarrassing?

The driver behind Mary blasted his horn, and she glanced up and saw that the light had turned green. With an apologetic little wave, she moved forward, picking up speed as the road curved out of town and wound past dry gullies and sandstone ridges. A wan smudge of moon gleamed like a white thumbprint in the pale blue sky above San Gorgonio's snowy peaks. When she swung onto the interstate she pushed the car to seventy and held it
there, as if to make amends for putting off this trip for so long. She'd meant
to go right after New Year's, and here it was, already February. It was now or
never for pruning roses, and that's what she had to do if she wanted to save
Gail's garden.

When Mary nosed the Lincoln up Brian's steep driveway, the overgrown
pyracantha hedge scraped the car's sides and a litter of fallen twigs and
leaves crackled under the tires. She parked in front of the low stucco house,
and while the engine ticked cool, she peered through the windshield at the
morning glories Gail had trained up a white trellis by the front door. They
were dead, their drooping brown blossoms hanging limp among the stiff,
brITTLE leaves. Mary sighed. Brian must have forgotten to water them.

He wasn't home from the office yet, so she carried her overnight case and
canvas gardening bag to the front porch. A row of junipers cast spindly
shadows across the yard, and bees hovered above the dandelions that had
sprung up in the untended lawn. Thinking she might as well survey the
damage before Brian arrived, she left her things on the porch and went
around to the back gate, stifling a faint gasp when her tennis shoe squished
into a rotten orange hidden in the weeds. Mary shivered as she wiped her
foot in the grass, thought about going back for a sweater, then shrugged and
pushed open the back gate.

It was worse than she'd expected. At the top of the steps leading down to
the sunken red brick patio, Mary paused, her lips thinning as she scanned
the terraced flowerbeds rising from the oval patio. The irises were dead, their
sword shaped leaves stretched across the dirt like gray knives, and the
petunias had dwindled to naked, flaccid vines, milky green and tipped with a
few ruffled leaves and tattered pink flowers. In the shady lower terraces, the twigged skeletons of the azaleas rose from a graveyard of papery brown petals. But worst of all were the roses flanking the porch steps. Roses were Mary's passion, and she'd studied the catalogs with Gail, helping her decide on yellow Old Faithfuls and velvet red Olympiads, Rio Sambas with petals that blushed yellow, orange and red, like a deepening sunset. All were aphid-bitten, festooned with overblown blossoms and withered black buds.

When the rising growl of Brian's Mustang broke the afternoon stillness, Mary hurried out of the backyard, her reflection speeding along beside her in the back windows, a thin, spry woman, gray curls bobbing up and down. By the time the Mustang shot up the driveway into the space she'd left for it, she was on the front porch, smiling and waving like she'd just arrived.

He got out of the car, reached into the back for his briefcase, and walked toward her with the erect, slightly springing step he'd adopted as a teenage surfer and never lost. His thin blond hair shone in the fading sunlight, and when he smiled his teeth flashed white in his tan face. Mary was amazed all over again that such a big handsome man had come from her puny body. He had her eyes, small and gray, but otherwise he was the image of Keith. She used to ask Keith why he'd fallen for a plain scrawny bird like her, but he'd just tweaked her curls and said he had a weakness for freckles. She'd finally decided that he'd glimpsed something he thought he wanted behind her shy reserve, but she'd never figured out what that something was, or if he'd ever found it. She smiled up at Brian, placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry I'm late," Brian said. "We were backed up in court again." He stooped to let her dry lips brush his cheek. She didn't leave a lipstick mark,
must have rubbed it off when she stopped for coffee. She gave herself a mental shake, odd how her mind veered toward unimportant details in moments of stress.

"I just got here myself," she said. She watched as he unlocked the door and picked up her bags. Then she followed him inside.

"Oh, oh no." Mary pressed a hand to her mouth. The living room was bare except for a makeshift coffeetable, just a door resting on cinderblocks, and the armchair Mary had given Brian when she redecorated the den five years ago. The television sat right on the brown carpet, the VCR beside it. Through the archway she could see dust filming the hardwood floor where the maple dining-room set should have been.

"I thought I told you she cleaned me out," Brian said as he set down her bags. "About a month after she left I came home from work and found it like this. At first I thought we'd been robbed."

Mary took Brian's arm to steady herself, swallowed hard, then stepped away from him. "She shouldn't have done that. It wasn't all hers to take."

He grimaced. "You get used to it. At least she left my bedroom set."

Mary stared at the empty room. She wanted to put her arms around her son, but she'd never been good at physical affection, raised as she was, her mother dead and her father and brothers pretty much ignoring her. And anyway Brian took after her that way. Even as a toddler if he cut his knee or bumped his head he squirmed away from her attempts to kiss it better. It wasn't until Gail joined the family that Mary was deluged with impulsive hugs and kisses, the younger woman's smooth cheek rubbing against her wrinkled one, the warmth of Gail's hand on hers. And now Mary craved that
touch, yearned for it like a heartbroken lover. She glanced at Brian. He'd set down her bags and was watching her with narrowed eyes.

"I'll tell you what," she said briskly. "You do whatever you need to, check the mail, whatever. Then I'll take you out to dinner. I saw a cute little Mexican place in town that looked fun."

"I'd like to take a shower."

"You go ahead and wash up, then we'll get something to eat."

After he walked down the hall with his lilting step, Mary sank into the armchair. She wished Keith had come with her. He might be harsh-tongued and crabby, but he could dispose of runaway wives with a few choice words and make the most awkward situation seem normal. She thought he might have made the effort this one time. After all, he was Brian's father and would know what to say.

She hadn't known how to comfort her son when Gail left, because she and Brian had never been close, despite memories of the pink squirming baby she'd held in her arms, his toothless gums tugging at her nipples, or the little boy sprawled asleep in his flannel pajamas, or flushed and tousled on Christmas morning, ripping open presents and jealously comparing his gifts to his cousin Timmy's presents. Mary sighed and leaned back in the armchair. Christmas morning had always ended in a squabble, Brian grabbing and shouting while pudgy faced Timmy, reduced to hot noisy tears, clutched a toy car or plastic revolver to his chest.

The hot-tempered child had soon disappeared into the glum silence of adolescence, broken only when she tried to make him clean up after himself or when Keith lost his temper, and their shouts, and once the sound of
blows, drove Mary out of the house and into the relative peace of her garden. But after Brian went away to college and then passed the bar, he seemed to settle down, and she'd thought his marriage to Gail four years ago would be the making of him. Mary sometimes thought she'd loved Gail from the moment the young woman had walked into the Palm Springs condo on Brian's arm and exclaimed, "It's exactly how you described it, Brian, even the vase of peacock feathers." And Gail had leaned down to kiss Mary's cheek so naturally, as if they'd been good friends all their lives. Even Keith had taken to her, though he'd never admit it now.

"Mom, are you awake?"

"Why did she leave us?" Mary's voice was thick and her eyelids were sticky with sleep. She must have dozed off because it was dark and Brian was crouched on his heels beside the armchair. She peered at him through the gloom, wondering if Gail had taken all the lightbulbs, too.

"I think I was too hard on her," Brian muttered as he stood up. Mary had to strain to catch his words. "I didn't mean to be, but I don't think I ever had much practice loving people."

"But we loved you, Brian. Your dad and I loved you."

Brian's mirthless smile unnerved her. "Relax, Mom. I never said you didn't."

"The trouble with young women these days is they expect marriage to be a bed of roses, when everyone knows you have your ups and downs." Mary got up stiffly. "Do you think it's cold out? I'd better bring my sweater, just in case."
That night, Mary lay on her side in Brian's bed, a hand under her cheek, and tried to ignore the uneasiness she'd felt ever since Brian broke the news that Gail had left him. It had been six months now, and Mary accepted that Gail wasn't coming back, had accepted it on the chill December morning when she cleared the wedding pictures from the fireplace mantel and left it bare in the silvery morning light. Then she'd replaced Gail's photo on her nightstand with one of Brian at his graduation. What was harder to accept was the way Gail had vanished without a farewell phone call or letter, because Gail had seemed so eager to win Mary's affection. It had been easy enough to do, since they'd shared a love of beauty, of planting gardens, choosing furnishings for harmonious, graceful rooms, setting the dinner table with candles and linen napkins. And now the daughter Mary'd always wanted was gone as utterly as if she were dead. It might even be easier if Gail had died. Then Mary wouldn't feel so betrayed.

She'd felt the same way when Keith had his affair, those dark, ugly thoughts of wishing him dead instead of unfaithful, her pride dreading what her friends would say when they found out, their avid sympathy and inevitable comments. "You must be devastated. I feel so sorry for you. Is she younger? They always are. When did you first suspect something?"

The humiliating truth was she hadn't suspected a thing. When he'd told her about it, she was sitting in the breakfast nook sipping her morning coffee and gazing out the window, wondering whether to take out the ornamental peach and plant something hardier, a christmas cactus maybe.
"Mary, goddamnit, would you listen to me?" She'd glanced up and realized it was the second time he'd said her name. He was standing at the kitchen counter, leaning heavily on it with both arms, and at first she'd thought he was sick.

"I can't keep lying to you," he'd said. "I've been seeing someone."

She'd stood up so fast she spilled her coffee, and for once she didn't rush to clean up the mess, even when the coffee flowed across the glassstop table and dribbled onto the clean white tile floor.

"I don't believe it," she'd gasped.

"I'm sorry, Mary. It just--"

"I don't deserve this." Her voice shook. "How could you?"

"If you showed me half the affection she does, maybe I wouldn't have." His blue eyes turned to agate. "When was the last time you really listened to anything I said, Mary? Huh? When was the last time you asked me how I really feel?"

"When was the last time you asked me!"

"I've asked you plenty. You just say, 'I'm fine, dear,' and go back to wondering if the frost is gonna kill your goddamned chrysanthemums."

"You're seeing Sally Gardener, aren't you?" Mary thought she would drop dead with pain if he said yes, but he shook his head.

"I do care about you," she said. "I just can't gush about it, like, like some other woman might. I'm just not that way." She glared at him. "You knew how I was when you married me."

"I didn't know you were an iceberg, all the way down."
At that, Mary started crying, horrible, choking sobs that stung her eyes and hurt her chest. When he came around the counter and tried to hug her, she pushed him away and ran down the hall to lock herself in the bathroom.

They'd survived it, but not before more fights, the worst one when she smashed a whole shelf full of crystal goblets and told him she wanted a divorce. They got as far as putting the condo up for sale. The chubby young real estate agent had rubbed his plump-knuckled hands together as he paraded through their lovely home, his squeaky voice rising and breaking as he predicted a quick sale and a large profit. Mary and Keith had eyed him with loathing, as if he were the one wrecking their lives. Keith had practically pushed the young man out the front door, then he'd turned to Mary and said, "Don't make us do this."

She was gazing out the window into her garden to hide her tears, and she kept her back to Keith when she said, "I can live without you, but I'd rather not." When she turned to face him, he took her in his arms and held her close. They stayed that way for a long time, reassured by their steady heart beats, the solidity of their bodies pressed together. Then pride stiffened her back and she pulled away. "What about her?" she asked, and held her breath.

"I won't see her anymore." Keith closed his eyes with the pain of saying that, but Mary knew he meant it, and she couldn't have stayed if he'd answered differently.

For awhile, things were better. Mary tried not to go rigid when Keith reached for her in the night, and she made an effort to really listen when he spoke, even though she'd heard his rambling monologues on Constitutional
law a thousand times. Whenever Keith asked her what she needed in return, she said, "Nothing. I just want you to be happy." It sounded false, even to her, but she couldn't think of anything else to say, so she supposed it must be true. Eventually he stopped asking, and if he sometimes stayed out until dawn at all night poker games or took fishing trips with buddies whose names she never heard, who never came to the house, well, best let sleeping dogs lie.

The mattress springs squeaked as Mary rolled onto her back. She hadn't really thought about that awful time in years, but Brian's trouble made it all come rushing back. She stared up through the shadows at the black cracks in the ceiling above the bed. Water damage. She'd mention it to Brian tomorrow.

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In the morning, Mary was up before Brian. She tiptoed around the sleeping bag that he'd squirmed into an S on the living room floor and went into the kitchen to make coffee. When it was ready she carried a steaming cup out to the back porch and sat on the steps to feel the thin morning sunshine in her upturned face. A scrub jay squawked at her from the pine tree in the corner of the yard and a squirrel swarmed up the redwood fence. She glanced down into the patio. Even in the morning light, the flowerbeds looked stark and barren. Her job would be mostly ripping out dead plants, weeding, deadheading the roses. A tear slid down her cheek. Gail should be here, Mary thought. She should be here, sitting in the morning peace, her
shoulder against mine, looking at a blooming garden and asking how to quell the aphids. The thought came unbidden, I wish Gail had taken me with her, wherever she went.

Mary was kneeling on her gardening cushion in the highest flowerbed, yanking out the dead petunias, when Brian came out holding his coffee cup in one hand and the coffeepot in the other. "Want a refill, Mom?"

"I'd better keep working while it's cool," she said without looking up.

"Come on, take a break. What doesn't get done, doesn't get done." He sat down on the steps and filled the cup she'd left there, then set the pot down on the porch behind him.

"It may not matter to you, but it does to me." She pinched a pink blossom off a dying petunia vine, wondering if the plant could be saved.

Brian was quiet for a moment. "Thanks for doing this."

Mary looked up from her work. "It's not much, but I couldn't think of what else I could do."

"It's a lot. I mean, it means a lot." He crossed the red brick patio and handed her coffee cup up to her. She sipped it before setting it down in the dirt beside her. After a few minutes, she said, "I can't save the petunias. It looks like you haven't watered in months."

"Yeah, well, we've been pretty busy at work. A lot of overtime on the Brosky case." He smiled faintly as he sat back down. "Besides, I didn't inherit your green thumb."

"No, you didn't inherit much from me. Just my eyes."

"And your stubborn streak." He grinned, a mischievous kid again, then shaded his eyes from the sun filtering through the pine tree.
"I'm not stubborn," Mary protested.

"Could have fooled me."

"It's your dad who's stubborn."

"Who won the battle between Palm Springs and the beach?"

"We discussed it," Mary said stiffly. "We discussed it and agreed on Palm Springs. The weather's better for his arthritis."

"Uh huh. Just like Gall and I discussed moving here when she wanted to stay in San Diego."

"I did not bully your father into moving to Palm Springs." Mary rose, moved her gardening cushion over a few feet, and resumed yanking out the petunias. "Besides, comparing us to you and Gall is like apples and oranges." She forced a smile. "Let's talk about something more pleasant. Your dad and I went down to San Diego last weekend to see the McDaniels. Do you remember them?"

"Sure. I remember Mrs. McDaniel always telling me to call her Pat when I was a kid. It drove me nuts. Grown-ups were mister and missus, and there she was telling me to call her Pat. I couldn't do it, and when I didn't, she made a big deal about it and everyone stared at me. I hated that."

"Well, that's one thing you inherited from me," Mary said thoughtfully. "You were always shy. You used to cry when I tried to leave you at birthday parties."

"I don't remember that."

"I was glad when you finally got over that stage." Mary squinted across the patio at Brian. "Shyness is such a handicap," she said with a little smile. "People think you're unfriendly, or cold, when you're not, really."
"Do you think I'm still shy, Mom?"

Mary looked at him consideringly. "Well, I don't really know. What did Gail say?"

Brian tilted his cup to his mouth and swallowed, then grimaced as if the coffee was bitter. He tossed the dregs into the flowerbed. "Who cares what she said? She's a liar. And a thief."

"She shouldn't have taken all the furniture, but she isn't a liar. She always told the truth." Mary's voice shook.

"Sure, like when she said she loved me two days before she walked out. You know she didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face she was leaving? Left a goddamn note stuck to the refrigerator door with a tomato magnet. Jesus, a tomato magnet." He shook his head, his small gray eyes bright with pain.

She glanced down at the petunia vine in her lap. White sap leaked from the crescent gouges her nails had dug in the fibrous stalk. "Well, if you were so hard on her, maybe she was afraid to tell you."

"Oh. Right. It's all my fault. Is that what you think?"

Mary straightened her tired shoulders and pushed a curling tendril of gray hair off her forehead. "I don't know what to think. I just know I loved Gail, and now she's gone, and her flowers are dying."

Brian hunched a shoulder, and Mary felt a small pang of contrition, like when he was little and she'd yelled at him for breaking a vase or tracking mud on the carpet. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just disappointed, that's all."

He reached into the flowerbed beside him, picked up a dry black rosebud and rolled it between his palms. "But then I've always disappointed you,
haven't I? I'm not affectionate, like Gail." His smile was so cold that for an awful moment, Mary was afraid he'd say Gail hadn't loved her, that the caresses and soft black eyes had been a hoax. Her fists clenched around the vine. She wanted to plead, Gail loved me didn't she? She loved me and she loved you, she married you, but sometimes things don't work out, and it doesn't mean we're not worth loving, you and I, we're stubborn and thorny but we need love. She opened her mouth, but to say the words was to risk hearing that Gail hadn't loved either of them, no one had ever loved them. She pressed her lips together, tugged feebly at another vine.

Brian flipped the rosebud back into the flowerbed and stood up. "Thanks for the sympathy, Mom. I knew I could count on you."

As the back door clicked shut, Mary reared up on her knees to call him back, but the words died in her throat as she pictured the terrible scene to come, her clutching at him as he pushed her away and shouted the things she dreaded hearing. She sank down on her cushion and reached for a limp vine but instead her hands found the dirt and she dug her fingers into the dry crumbling soil, head bowed between her arms. When she finally looked up, the sun seemed to scorch her face and blur her vision. She rose stiffly, wincing at the stabs of pain in her knees from kneeling so long, then bent to gather her gardening tools, the glinting metal that must be her clippers, the flash of red that was her trowel, the soft lump of cushion at her feet.

As soon as she stepped inside, Mary knew the house was empty. The air was too silent to hold any breathing thing. She checked the kitchen counter, the makeshift coffeetable, even the nightstand in the bedroom, but she couldn't find a note saying he'd run down to the store or gone for a stroll.
The kitchen clock ticked loudly as she went back to the living room and parted the dusty drapes. His car was gone. She hadn't heard him go. Mary stood in the empty house and realized she'd never heard any of them go, hadn't known until this moment that she was alone. Her knees threatened to buckle but she fought them and remained erect beside the window, staring out at the bright terrible day.
Frank remembers the past the same way he remembers certain movies. After he's forgotten the popcorn drenched gloom, forgotten the ending of The Treasure of the Sierra Madre and why he watched Bladerunner a dozen times one summer, the vivid, disconnected scenes still float inside him. They slowly rearrange themselves into enigmatic messages, like his dreams, like the memories he shapes into stories at night when his wife and son are asleep and he stands in the dark garden, trying to convince himself he has earned, and therefore may keep, his present good fortune.

As he breathes in the garden's damp earth and cool air, Frank remembers the scene he wouldn't let himself think about tonight at the dining room table or in the brightly lit kitchen, where Lara might see it in his eyes. It happened a month ago. He came home from the natural history museum early, a meeting canceled, and walked into the kitchen to find Lara sitting at the white tile counter, drinking coffee and talking on the phone to her sister. She was watching their son Anthony through the sliding glass windows, her
back to Frank. Beyond her he could see Anthony playing in the dirt by the maple tree, creating a prehistoric world for his plastic dinosaurs.

Frank had been about to announce himself when he realized Lara was discussing their sex life, in detail. She was describing what he looked like naked, the way his dark hair whorled below his navel, what he sounded like, what they did together that she liked best. Every so often she gave a low, melodic laugh as her voice subsided to a murmur, then rose and became clear again. Frank isn't sure how long he listened before he silently backed out of the room. He stood in the middle of the living room and coughed. When he entered the kitchen Lara was just getting off the phone.

Since then Frank hasn't made love with Lara. He can't help feeling like there's a hidden camera inside her, recording everything. Yesterday she mentioned it for the first time. Half-kidding, she asked if he was having an affair or what? She was putting on her stockings, one foot on a chair, her head bent as she smoothed the nylon up her slender calf and smiled at him through the veil of her soft brown hair hanging to her waist. He was sitting on the bed, and as he smiled back he wondered if he'd see this moment later in his sister-in-law's bright eyes. He bent down to tie his shoes but his fingers clenched on the laces and wouldn't budge. Blood rushed into his face as he sat hunched over, his teeth clenched, waiting for her to finish getting dressed and leave the room.

Standing barefoot on the damp lawn, Frank looks up at the stars struggling through the pink haze above Los Angeles. Lara is asleep, but he still hears the low melodic laughter he loves so much and is afraid he'll grow to hate. He knows he should go inside and wake her, say they have to talk,
but when he tries to work his mind around what to say, his thoughts veer off down long corridors of memory to evoke the timbre of lost voices, the warmth of long ago sunlight on his skin.

Frank lets his memories shape the summer twenty years ago when he lived in the canyon with his father. Like tonight, what he’d wanted most that summer was to empty his mind, fill it up again with redtail hawks plummeting from the sky, coyotes trotting along the hilltops at dusk.

When they’d moved to the canyon on the edge of Los Angeles that December, Frank had just turned fourteen, and he believed his dad’s assurances that they could start over. But the first time Frank stepped onto the schoolbus with its damp dusty smell and black rubber floor mats, a cheerleader with yellow curls and wide blue eyes looked him up and down, then whispered behind her hand to the homely boy in the letterman’s jacket sitting beside her. They smirked, and as Frank walked down the aisle a ripple of smothered laughter followed him. Frank realizes now it was just the way kids can treat a newcomer, but back then he was sure it was something more. He dropped into an empty seat, leaned against the window and watched the trees blur past until the trees stopped and there were students milling around in front of the high school. He didn’t get off until the bus was empty, and for the rest of the semester he pretty much kept to himself.

When summer came, he spent his days hiking in the canyon or exploring the caves hidden in the shadows below the high ridge. One scorching July day, too hot for serious hiking, he followed the path along the ravine to the waterfall. This time of year the waterfall was just a wet streak oozing down the rockface into a green pool, but there were ledges, massive stone slabs he
could stretch out on and feel their rough warmth against his skin as he watched the sunlight ripple across the treetops when a breeze moved through the canyon.

The path was covered with dead leaves that crunched underfoot. He tried to creep silently like an Indian, but his cautious steps only made the crackle of each leaf more distinct, so he gave it up. At the top of the ravine he catfooted across a fallen log, then deserted the path to scramble up through the boulders to the wide rock ledges beside the waterfall. As Frank hoisted himself onto the lowest ledge, the smell of cigarette smoke reached him, and he stiffened. He crouched, listening for the sound of masculine voices that would signal his retreat, then glanced up and saw a sunburned leg dangling from the jutting slab above him. Frank can still see that dirty, bare foot, the toes bright with chipped red nail polish, flexing and pointing before the leg withdrew out of sight. He hesitated, then pushed his black bangs off his sweaty forehead and clambered up onto the next ledge to see who was polluting his canyon.

It was the woman he’d seen a few times on his hikes, a small, solitary figure climbing the dusty path from the road below. She sat crosslegged in cutoffs and a tee-shirt beside a green linen napkin crowded with plates of picnic food. Beside the napkin was a wine bottle and a cut-glass tumbler that sparkled in the sunlight. The woman smiled through tangled auburn hair that fell across her face as she bent to stub out her cigarette. Her nose and cheekbones were sunburned, and her wide mouth bore traces of red lipstick.

Frank cleared his throat. “Excuse me, but you shouldn’t be smoking.”
Her gray eyes narrowed. "They're my lungs."

"I don't care about your lungs," Frank explained. "I just don't want you to set fire to the canyon."

"What are you, a junior forest ranger?"

"No I'm not a junior forest ranger." He loaded his voice with sarcasm. "I suppose you haven't noticed those big yellow signs on the road that say no smoking area?"

"I thought those only meant while you were driving."

"What?" Frank's voice cracked.

"You know, those dickheads who fling burning butts out their car windows? I don't do that." Her voice was deep and raspy, not like his mother's honeyed tones. Frank couldn't help grinning as he tried to picture his mom saying dickhead.

"Want to share my picnic?" the woman asked, just as if he hadn't been rude to her.

"Nah. I mean no thanks."

"Come on, there's enough for two." She lifted a plate of deviled eggs, and Frank capitulated. He'd just had lunch, but that summer he was always hungry, his body a furnace burning up everything he ate in a tormented growth spurt of awkward limbs, wrists dangling from his sleeves, oily pink pimples rising on his forehead while he slept. He sat down and took a deviled egg. "You still shouldn't smoke."

"You're welcome." She handed him a yellow plate and a matching napkin. "I'm Darcy. I just moved into the cottage down there. The stone one."
"I know," he mumbled through a mouth full of egg. He swallowed with difficulty, then introduced himself. "I live down there," he nodded toward the red peaked roof showing through the trees, "with my dad.

"Well Frank, I don't think I should offer you any wine, but how about some brie?"

Frank looked suspiciously at the white cheese, leathery on top and gooey in the middle. "Isn't it kind of, well, melted?"

"It's supposed to be like that." She spread some on a slice of french bread for him. He ate it and said politely that it was very good, then concentrated on the eggs and the celery stuffed with cream cheese. After they'd polished off nearly everything, she poured more wine into the tumbler, leaned back on her knapsack and lit a cigarette, promising to watch the embers and not burn down his canyon.

"It's not my canyon," Frank muttered. "We just rent."

"Yeah, I know."

"How did you know?" His voice cracked and he felt his face go hot.

"Frankie, my friend, don't you think Marta the Walking News Service told me about you and your dad?" Darcy grinned, deep lines crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Hey, don't scowl. All she said was you guys moved in about a year ago. She was more interested in, no, she was positively avid, to find out what she could about me."

Frank smiled reluctantly. Marta ran the store at the intersection of Stone Canyon Road and Mulholland. With wiry gray hair and sharp elbows to poke your ribs when she told off-color jokes, she managed to know everything
about everyone from one end of the canyon to the other. "So what did you tell her?" he asked.

"A pack of lies." Darcy turned toward him, leaning on one elbow. "I shouldn't have, but I hate snoops."

"So do I." Frank stared down between his feet at the green lichen like pebbled flowers on the stone. "That's why we moved someplace without neighbors."

"Is that a subtle hint for me to stay on my own side of the creek?"

He scraped at the lichen with his fingernail. "Nah. I didn't mean you. Besides, this is your side of the creek."

"Well, I am so relieved I can't tell you."

He glanced up, wondering if she was making fun of him. Her wide mouth was stretched in a goofy grin, like a kid. Then she stood up and brushed off the back of her cutoffs. "Anyway it's time I headed back."

After he helped her shove the picnic things into her knapsack, he followed her down to the path. She wasn't any taller than Frank and from behind she looked like a girl except for the dark blue veins spiderwebbing the backs of her thighs. When they reached the path she invited him to come visit her anytime. He said he would, though he wasn't sure he meant it. Darcy waved, then sauntered off into the grove of oaks on her side of the ravine.

Instead of heading home, Frank half-slid, half-scrambled down the steep bank to where the creek flowed sluggishly among brown reeds and small boulders. He broke off a reed and swished it in front of him as he walked. A dragonfly hovering above the reeds flashed iridescent purple in the sunlight. As it droned past him Frank flapped his hand absently but didn't look up.
He was thinking how odd it was, her living alone in the stone cottage, like
the canyon was a refuge for creatures who didn't know how to live with other
people.

It was different when Frank and his dad first moved in. A rock band had
occupied the stone cottage, which his dad immediately declared off limits. In
the afternoons, they gathered on the front porch to noodle on guitars, pass
around a bottle. Sweet marijuana smoke mingled with the pungent
sagebrush, and there were girls, some not much older than Frank, in
haltertops and cutoffs that showed the plump halfmoons of their curving
bottoms. Frank spent hours watching them from the wide curving branch of
a sycamore that leaned out over the ravine. Lizard flat against the
sycamore's white silken bark, he peered through the leaves at the long-
haired half-naked young men, caught up in the promise of their gestures,
their deep voices, the gutteral passion of their electric music.

On the last day of school as he silently climbed off the noisy bus Frank
saw the band moving out. By dusk all that remained was a tissue paper bird
kite fluttering from the cottage eaves, its bright colors faded to pastel pinks
and grays. For a month the cottage stood empty, the tissue bird the only
sign of life. Then the woman moved in, and now Frank had met her. Darcy.

Frank still remembers feeling solemn and excited as he walked beside the
creek that day. It was like the first time he met Lara, years later at a college
football game; when the crowd roared as the Bruins trotted out onto the
field, Frank felt as if the thunderous cheers were for the moment this
slender girl looked into his eyes. He hadn't stopped looking at her until his
buddies told him to sit down, the game was starting. It hadn't been love at
first sight, but he'd felt that the girl's quiet glance was significant in ways he would soon understand.

After dinner, he asked if his dad knew anything about Darcy. They were in the pine panelled living room, Frank sprawled on the oval rag rug with Dune, one of the books he'd checked out for the summer from the school library. His dad was in the armchair next to the fireplace. The second time he asked, his dad looked up from his book, ran his hands through his thin black hair. "What's that, son?"

"I asked if you'd heard anything about the woman who moved in next door."

His dad reached for his pipe, the bowl glowing as he held a match to it and sucked once, twice, then shook out the match with a flick of his bony wrist. He smiled around the pipestem. "Kind of young to be thinking along those lines, aren't you Frank?"

"Dad, she's a grown-up." Frank felt his face grow hot. "I just wondered is all. It's not like we've got so many neighbors."

"Is it starting to bother you? Living so far from your school friends?"

"Nah. Half of us bus in. It's no big deal." Frank glanced up. His father's thin face was lit by the floor lamp behind his armchair, and Frank could see the concern in his owlish gaze. "Really Dad. I like it here a lot better than the old neighborhood."

"Small wonder," his dad said dryly. They were both quiet, remembering the last awful weeks when Frank's mom and their nextdoor neighbor, Mr. Harris, had stopped even pretending they weren't having an affair. It seemed like the neighbors spent every minute working in their front yards, or
peeping through their living room curtains, waiting for something to happen. And they'd ambush Frank on his way home from school with innocent questions like how were his folks doing these days. In retaliation, Frank took to skulking outside their windows at night, so when they asked how his mom was, he could say, "Just fine, Mr. Saunders. And how was that porno film last night?"

Frank had liked putting on his black sweatshirt and jeans, prowling through dark streets smelling of woodsmoke from fireplaces lit against the autumn's thin chill. But when Theresa Aguilar looked out her bedroom window and caught Frank crouching in the hedge below, she told the whole junior high, and everyone called him Frank the Skank and flicked gravel at him during breaks. The worst thing was that Theresa was going steady with Mark Donaldson, Frank's best friend since kindergarten, and from then on when Mark passed Frank in the halls he looked right through him. Even tonight, standing in the garden wrestling with another kind of hurt, Frank can see Mark's blank stare, worse even than the faces turned away to avoid him. Like the drowning scene in Sometimes a Great Notion, the memory is too dreadful to forget.

Frank's torment ended when his dad and Mr. Harris got into a fist fight in the driveway, and Mr. Harris broke his dad's glasses, then his nose. Mrs. Harris tried to separate the two men and was knocked down on the lawn for her pains. Frank's mom didn't make an appearance.

Soon after that, Frank and his dad moved into this quiet canyon, without neighbors and without Frank's mom. Before they left, while his mom packed his clothes in the footlocker at the end of his bed, she told him this was the
best thing for all of them, and he'd understand when he was older. He stood in the bedroom door, methodically breaking up a balsa wood glider into small chips that lodged in the shag carpet. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her bending, folding shirts, her blonde hair slicked back into a braid, off her thin pretty face. Whenever she glanced at him he looked down at the floor.

The clink of his dad's pipe against the ashtray brought Frank back to the living room. His dad was saying something, and Frank struggled to catch up with the words. "Still, I don't like seeing you spending so much time by yourself, son. If you want me to drive you over to a friend's house--"

"I said it's okay." Frank bent over his book, stared at the small black type for what seemed like forever. Finally he heard the rustle of a page turning and knew his dad had returned to his own book, probably something about the Kennedy assassinations. His dad was a history professor, and for as long as Frank could remember, he'd been writing a book about the influence of political assassinations on American politics. His mom had called it the book that wouldn't die, which Frank thought was pretty funny. Frank closed his book and said goodnight. His dad nodded, turned a page.

The next morning after his dad poured himself a second cup of coffee and disappeared into his study, Frank decided to go visit Darcy. He found her slouched in a faded canvas deck chair on the front porch, her bare feet on the railing and a coffee mug in her hand. When she saw him ducking under a thorny mesquite tree at the edge of the ravine, she smiled and patted the chair next to her.
Frank was uncomfortable at first, not sure why he'd come. But as they watched the squirrels scampering among the acorns in the clearing before the cottage while blue jays squawked from the branches above them, Frank began to relax. The morning sunlight slanted low through the trees, occasionally blinding them. Darcy got him a cup of coffee, as if he were a grown-up, and when she came back she said she'd tell him the truth about herself, not the lies she'd told Marta. She said she was a photographer, that her brother-in-law was letting her stay in the stone cottage rent free until he found a new tenant. Frank found himself telling her about the animals he saw on his hikes, how he hated high school, how his mom never called but that was okay because he wouldn't know what to say to her if she did. Darcy listened attentively, and Frank tried hard not to stare at the swell of her breasts against her vee-neck shirt.

After that morning, Frank visited Darcy almost every day. They'd sit on the porch in the sunshine, or climb trees, or swordfight with reeds up and down the creek banks. Sometimes they even hiked up to the ridge to explore the shallow caves and watch the redtail hawks and what Frank swore had to be an eagle. Once on their way to the ridge, Frank pulled Darcy down into a crouch beside the trail, and they held their breath as three mule deer crashed through the brush and thundered across the trail right in front of them.

He warned her to watch out for rattlesnakes, and though they never saw any, she shrieked and clutched his arm whenever a lizard skittered across their path. When she did that, Frank's heart thudded slow and hard, especially if her breasts touched him. He felt guilty whenever that happened
and was glad Darcy didn't seem to notice, although after awhile she stopped grabbing his arm when lizards startled her. She began bringing a camera with her, and she gave him an extra one and taught him how to use it.

"You have to learn to see everything within the frame, and think about how it all fits together," she said as they squatted on their heels at the mouth of a cave to reload their film. "That's the composition."

"Like in a painting?"

"Just like in a painting."

Sometimes Darcy brushed her auburn hair into a shiny ponytail and went to work at the portrait studio in Malibu, but most days she just hung around the cottage, working in the darkroom she'd set up behind the kitchen or lazing around on the front porch. A few times when Frank came over in the late afternoon he found her on the porch, a wine bottle at her feet and a cigarette burning down dangerously between her fingers. Her eyes would be too bright and her speech too slow. When that happened Frank didn't stay long, because instead of Darcy he found someone who stared furiously at nothing and whose loud, abrupt comments didn't seem connected to anything he said. She was his friend, but the cigarettes, the tangled hair, and the drinking made her seem kind of sleazy sometimes, someone his mom would surely snub, a thought that alternately thrilled and shamed him.

Once they drove to the beach in her orange VW bug, stopping at Marta's to buy drinks and sandwiches. Frank didn't like the small dark store with its splintery wood floors, its bins of tired vegetables and narrow aisles of crackers and dusty canned food. As he pulled two turkey sandwiches from the deli case, he felt Marta watching him from behind the counter.
"Now where are you two off to?" she asked Frank.

He ignored her. "You want a coke, Darcy?"

"No, I'm getting a couple wine coolers."

Darcy plunked their purchases on the counter. "We're going to Tijuana to bet on the greyhounds," she told Marta. "You want us to make a bet for you?"

"Does your father know where you're off to, young man?"

Frank shrugged. "Sure he does. He gave us a hundred dollars and said we should go to Husong's Cantina."

As they bumped out of the dirt parking lot, Darcy tooted her horn. They glanced at each other and laughed, then Darcy switched on the radio to KROQ, the rock station that the driver played on the schoolbus every morning. Frank hadn't felt this good in a long time, but when they topped the ridge, the air turned cool and wet, and they saw that the entire coast was socked in with thick gray fog.

"That's okay," Darcy said as she switched on the heater. "I brought sweaters."

"But what'll we do?" Frank grumbled.

Darcy smiled without looking at him. "We'll have a photo session."

Frank was shy about posing at first, but once he got used to it he had fun. He wrapped himself up in the green quilt Darcy had brought for a beach blanket and strode across the sand like Lawrence of Arabia. Then he tossed the quilt aside and ran splashing through the low gray surf. When it was Darcy's turn to pose he had her kneel on the sand, wrapped in the green quilt, her red hair blowing across her face, her gray eyes wide and
unflinching as she stared into the lens. Frank kept that photo for years, and tonight he wishes he still had it, could take it out of his pocket and see her again.

After he took the photo he walked up to Darcy and slid to his knees in front of her, their faces so close he could see the amber flecks in her gray eyes, and grains of sand stuck to her cheek. "I love you, Darcy," he said. "You're my only friend." He searched her face. "Why aren't you happy? I want you to be happy."

She hesitated. "I haven't had a real happy life." The sand fell from her cheek when she smiled. "But it's pretty good right now."

"But are you happy?"

Darcy laughed, reached out and brushed the dark bangs from his forehead. "Look who's talking."

"I'm fine." Frank clambered to his feet, then leaned down and pulled Darcy up. As she rose, her feet tangled in the quilt and she stumbled against him. He held her close, feeling her curves and softness, before she regained her balance and gently pulled away.

On the drive home she glanced at him and said, "Sometimes people you love screw up. And you can't let it wreck your life when that happens, Frank." She shrugged, her eyes on the road. "You do the best you can, and when you have to, you move on."

At dinner a few evenings later Frank's dad surprised him by asking where he'd been all day. Frank was late because he'd stayed longer than usual at Darcy's, helping her in the dark room. As they sat down to eat, the last light
was fading from the kitchen windows, and the frogs were croaking down by
the creek.

"I was at Darcy's, the woman who lives in the stone cottage, remember?"

"I know who she is, Frank." His dad closed the book he'd brought to the
table, marking his place with his forefinger. "You've been spending a lot of
time over there."

"Yeah. She's teaching me photography. How to use lenses and filters and
stuff." Frank paused. "How did you know I've been over there a lot?"

His dad cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I didn't. That is. Marta told
me."

"And how did she know?"

"Seems you two stopped in for supplies on your way to the Tijuana
racetracks." His dad raised a hand to stop Frank's protest. "I know you
didn't really go to Tiajuana, Frank, but isn't lying like that rather childish?
And isn't Darcy a bit old for that kind of thing?"

For the first time since it happened, Frank felt a faint twinge of sympathy
for his mom. Maybe Mr. Harris was fun to hang around with, didn't bury his
head in a book day and night. Frank bit into his hotdog, chewing
aggressively and letting catsup dribble down his chin. "It was none of
Marta's damn business, anyway."

"Is this woman teaching you how to swear, too? Wipe your chin, son."

"It's still none of Marta's business," Frank muttered.

"No, but it is my business," his dad said gently. "And I don't think it's
such a good idea for you to be over there every day. You should be spending
time with people your own age."
"I told you. None of them live around here."

"And I told you I'd drive you anywhere you wanted this summer."

Frank slouched low in his chair and shoved his hands into the big front pockets of his khaki shorts. "Well I haven't made any friends."

His dad's finger slid out of the book. "Well, it takes time in a new place. But I could drive you back to the old neighborhood--"

"I don't have any friends there either."

"But Frank, what about Mark, and Tony?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Was it what happened with that Aguilar girl?"

"I guess you know everything, don't you Dad?"

"Mr. Aguilar thought I ought to know," his dad said helplessly.

"Everybody's spying on me," Frank said bitterly, but as he spoke his face grew hot and he remembered the other kids calling him a creep, and how he'd spied on those musicians last year from his perch in the sycamore tree. But that hadn't seemed like spying. It hadn't felt like he was doing anything wrong.

"Look, we're getting off the point," his dad said. "I didn't want to have to bring this up, but Marta says this Darcy woman has a serious drinking problem, and she's also a habitual liar." Again his dad raised his hand to silence Frank. "Marta's not just making this up, son. Darcy's brother-in-law told her about it himself." His dad sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "It's not safe, for more reasons than one, for you to go over there."

"She's my friend." Frank glared at his dad.

"I want you to stop going over there. I'm sorry, son, but that's an order."
Frank stood up, grabbed the back of his chair to keep it from falling, then stalked out of the kitchen.

"Where do you think you're going?" His dad shouted after him.

"Take a wild guess!" Frank slammed the door so hard the windowpanes shook.

His anger carried him across the ravine and onto Darcy's front porch. He hesitated there, suddenly uncertain of his welcome. He'd never visited her at night before. In fact, all through the summer he'd never been further inside the stone cottage than the dark room. Light spilled through the tall deepset front windows beyond the porch, but he didn't want to lean over the rail and look in. He took a deep breath and knocked softly. As he waited he heard music playing low, and his face flushed in the darkness as he realized she might have company, a man maybe. But before he could sneak away, the door opened and Darcy stood swaying in the light, barefoot in jeans and a baggy sweater, the cut-glass tumbler half full and tilting precariously in her hand. He pointed to the glass and she righted it, then stepped aside to let him in.

"It's kind of a mess," she muttered as he shut the door and glanced around. Everything was stone or moss green—stone walls, stone fireplace, moss green pillows piled under the tall windows, green curtains swirling into puddles on the dusty hardwood floor. The windows were open, but cigarette smoke drifted against the high ceiling, and the room smelled of spilled liquor, overflowing ashtrays, and the faint rotten-egg odor of the orange and black film rolls on the coffeetable. Darcy crossed the room and switched off the stereo, then sat down on the stone hearth. "So what's up, Frankie?"
He stood in the middle of the room, staring down at the dirty glasses and crumpled Marlborough packs on the coffeetable. He shouldn't have come. The sight of her messy room, the reek of alcohol, made him feel like he'd invaded her privacy as surely as if he'd peered in her windows.

"What is it?" she repeated.

"Nothing." He shrugged. "I just thought I'd drop by."

"Come off it, Frank. You're upset. What's wrong?"

She sounded okay. He ran his fingers through his hair, let his breath out in a wavering sigh. "My dad says we can't be friends anymore."

"Why the hell not?"

Frank swallowed. "He says it's not safe, that you have a serious drinking problem. You don't, do you, Darcy? I mean, you drink a lot, but not like my dad said."

Her eyes narrowed into silver slits, and Frank took a quick step backward. She deliberately tilted back her glass and drained it, set it down with a clunk on the hearth. "I guess he's been talking to Marta the Walking News Service."

Frank's hesitant smile disappeared as she added, "What's your dad afraid of? I'll get drunk and seduce you?" She winked. "Ever think about that, Frankie? I bet you do." She gave an abrupt, hoarse shout of laughter, but then the gleam faded from her eyes. "Your dad's right. You shouldn't hang around with me. So beat it, Frankie." She stomped her foot. "Scat!"

"But we're friends!" His voice rose and broke. "I know you drink. I know you're drunk right now--"

"No shit, Sherlock."
"Why do you have to be like this, Darcy? Damnit, do you have to be like this now?"

Darcy fumbled with a cigarette, got it lit and waved the smoke from her face. She looked around the room like she was seeing it for the first time. "I have to move next week," she said. "The bro called tonight, said he found a new tenant." Her gaze slowly focused on Frank. "So the party's over any way you look at it."

"You're moving?"

"Do I hear an echo in here?"

If he tried to speak he'd start crying like a baby, and besides, he didn't know what to say. She'd left the cigarette smoldering on the stone hearth and was rummaging though a chest of drawers at the back of the room. He flinched when she whirled around suddenly and came toward him.

"I was gonna give you this when I left but you'd better take it now." She held out a small picture in a dark wooden frame. It was the photo he'd taken on the beach.

"I don't want it."

"Please take it, Frank." Her rough voice was pleading. She raised the picture to her lips and kissed it, then held it out to him. "I'll be so very sorry if you won't take it." Her fingers slackened on the frame, and Frank grabbed the picture to keep it from smashing to the floor. He looked down at the woman in the photograph, her heart shining in her gray eyes, then at the flushed, unhappy face of the woman swaying beside him.

"Okay, Darcy. I'll take it."
Her eyes softened, and he thought he glimpsed the woman on the beach. "You better go," she said. "We don't want your dad barging in to rescue you."

She touched his arm and urged him toward the door. He slid the photo into his front pocket, felt the cloth sag with its weight against his thigh. The door creaked as Darcy opened it. He stepped out onto the porch, then turned to her. "Darcy--"

"It wasn't a lie, Frank," she said. "It was never a lie."

He wanted to ask what wasn't a lie but he didn't think she'd tell him even if she could. So he nodded, then turned and walked slowly down the porch steps. Halfway across the clearing in front of the cottage he stopped, took out the picture. His lips trembled as they touched the glass that still felt warm from Darcy's kiss. He looked back over his shoulder. She was a slender shadow against the light flooding through the front door. Then the door shut, and a moment later the curtains leapt across the deep windows and the stone cottage was plunged into the shadow of the hill rising behind it.

Frank left the clearing by the path through the oaks leading up the waterfall. As he walked, a warm breeze, fragrant with sage and dusty oak, sighed through the canyon and stirred the gnarled branches above him. Maybe dead leaves crackled under his tennis shoes, but Frank doesn't remember it that way. He remembers a low birdcall fluting through the still air and an ivory moon rising over the canyon, its pale light fragmented by black leaves. As he crossed the ravine on the fallen log, small nocturnal sounds rose from the creek below, and on the path on the other side he looked up and saw a spider trapezing in graceful arcs between two branches, suspended by glimmering threads spun from its own body.
He hadn't known the words that summer night for what Darcy had salvaged from her drunkenness and his pain. He isn't sure he knows them now. But as he stands in his dark garden listening to the distant yap of a dog and the nearby squeak of a window opening out into the cool night, he knows that when he goes inside and climbs the stairs to the bedroom where Lara lies asleep, her soft brown hair swimming down her bare shoulders, down her pale arms, he won't blame her for the secrets between sisters he wasn't meant to hear.

The world will rain down its unwelcome revelations, he thinks, but truth can't make love a lie.
DANCING AT THE WATER'S EDGE

Madeline has seen something terrible and now she can't stop thinking about it. The unwelcome memory sneaks up on her as she stands at the kitchen sink washing the dark ruffled leaves of romaine lettuce, when she slouches in her neutral gray armchair listening to her patients. The scene she witnessed keeps washing through her in chill, unexpected waves, driving her out of the house, out of the office, to walk the damp February streets until, her hands numb with cold, she seeks shelter in one of the warm, light-flooded coffeehouses on Main Street.

She usually ends up at Higher Grounds, which has an espresso bar by the front windows where you can sit with your elbows on the marble counter and gaze beyond the heavy glass jars filled with scones and biscotti to the sidewalks crowded with tourists and shoppers. Madeline will perch on a stool, a small, pretty, gray-eyed woman with pale freckles and gray streaked auburn hair. After ordering a cafe latte she'll stare out the windows, rubbing each terrible image like a smooth round stone, her fingers unable to resist
its hard grainy touch. The smell of brewing coffee, the clink of teaspoons, and the murmur of conversation will fade and she’ll be back at the state beach, following the path along the cliffs like she did that Saturday afternoon.

She was walking slowly, so she wouldn’t overtake the couple who’d entered the path in front of her off a trail winding across the bluffs from the highway. She didn’t want to intrude on them because they seemed so in love, the man’s arms wrapped tightly around the woman so they walked in a slow embrace. When the woman stumbled, he caught her and bent his head to whisper in her ear.

Madeline stepped off the path into the high weeds to let the couple outdistance her as she gazed at the dark blue line of the horizon, but she continued to see them in her mind. Although she hadn’t managed a good look at their faces, she had the impression they were in their mid-thirties, caught up, perhaps, in the giddy bliss that can overtake those who rediscover love after they’ve resigned themselves to a life spent in the wreckage of a failed relationship. As Madeline listened to the booming waves on the beach, she smiled, remembering how it was with Samuel. They’d been much younger than this couple, but just as blissful, floating in the euphoria of love recognized and returned.

Maybe it was the man’s red sweater, or a seagull’s thin scream, but something caught Madeline’s attention and she glanced down into the cove and saw the couple dancing at the water’s edge directly below her. The woman had her arms around the man’s neck, her gauzy pink dress flirting around her bare calves as they swayed from side to side. Then the man
yanked her arms from his neck and shoved her away. As the woman reached toward him he grabbed something from his belt, it looked like a knife, and slammed it into the woman's chest. Madeline pressed her knuckles to her dry chapped mouth as a ragged scream floated above the pounding surf, and the knife rose and struck again.

It took only seconds, then the woman slumped onto the sand and the man flung the knife into the sea. Madeline watched as the woman struggled slowly to her feet and staggered toward the man. At that moment he lifted his head and looked straight up at Madeline. His hair and eyes were brown and his face was expressionless. When the woman clutched at his shoulders he broke loose and knocked her backward into the tumbling surf, then ran toward the wooden staircase that led up to the bluffs.

Madeline thought he was coming to get her, maybe throw her over the cliff, and she turned and fled back along the path toward the lifeguard tower, her raw gasps louder than the waves, louder than the footsteps that must be thudding behind her. When she reached the lifeguard tower she clung to the rusty ladder and screamed, pointing frantically toward the cove. A stocky blond lifeguard with zinc oxide on his nose scrambled down from the tower, and people came running from the parking lot. She was safe.

The woman was lying dead, face down on the sand with outstretched arms, when the paramedics, and then the police, arrived. They questioned Madeline for what seemed like hours, but they haven't found the man, or identified the woman. When her memory reaches this point, Madeline will sip her tepid caffe latte, her gray eyes sad and wistful. "She died reaching out to him," she'll whisper. "They were so in love."
It's a Sunday, four weeks after the killing--she still can't bring herself to call it murder--and Madeline's sitting in the living room with Don and Peggy and Samuel. Don kneels beside the big front windows at the fireplace, one of those round metal fireplaces with glass sides and a black flue rising to the ceiling. He holds a lit match to the crumpled newspaper and soon the wood crackles and the fragrance of burning oak fills the room. Outside white seagulls wheel through the fog, half visible like ghosts. They've just finished a late breakfast of crab and monterey jack cheese omelettes, Samuel's specialty, and they're waiting for the coffee to finish brewing.

Madeline lives with Samuel, Don, and Peggy in a two-story house right off the ocean boardwalk in Venice. The beach here is flat and wide and tame. Every night yellow tractors drag heavy iron rakes across the sand to smooth it out. Madeline prefers the rough coast north of Malibu, where black rocks jut out of the sea and sometimes brown California seals bob in the waves, staring curiously toward shore. She likes to drive her white Audi up to the state beaches on the weekends, and sometimes even during the week, canceling appointments, losing money. Madeline's a therapist, and her clients are mostly wealthy women with addictions and food disorders. It pays well, but you have to keep racking up those billable hours, especially now with the recession.
Their living arrangement is a recessionary measure, the two couples splitting one mortgage just until the economy picks up and Don and Peggy can finish their half-built dream house in Topanga Canyon. Although they'd be embarrassed to admit it, they're all enjoying the communal atmosphere, reminiscent of the ramshackle house they shared back in college. Now both couples are married, although Madeline and Samuel have their own bedrooms, separate bank accounts, semi-detached lives. Samuel's a therapist too, but he specializes in men's issues.

Peggy gets up from the half circle couch, a lithe, sandy haired woman dressed in stretch pants and a long cashmere sweater. She raises her arms above her head and stretches, then goes into the kitchen and pours only three mugs of coffee because Don's already fixed himself some lemon grass tea. She brings a mug to Madeline, kneels beside her chair and says stop thinking about it for godsake just put the murder behind you and go on. Madeline hasn't said a word but they can see it in her eyes and they've all heard the story so many times now that they too see the small vivid figures struggling on the shore.

Madeline shakes her head. "It was so terrible, and I just stood there and watched it happen."

"Well what were you supposed to do?" Peggy asks indignantly. "Yell at him to cut it out? Besides, it happened so fast you didn't have time to react."

"I could have thrown a rock at him or something."

Samuel's in the kitchen stirring cream in his coffee. He leans his elbows on the tile counter separating the two rooms, cradles his coffee mug in his
hands. "I'm glad you didn't get involved. I'm glad you were smart enough to get the hell out of there." He's tall and lanky, with a thick mane of prematurely silver hair, big dark eyes and a year-round tan. "I know I've said it before, but I wish you'd be more careful, stop roaming the streets and disappearing to god knows where. That murderer saw you, remember?"

He's been telling Madeline this ever since she came home that Saturday, white faced and trembling. She shrugs. "I'm not afraid of that. He's not a serial killer, or a hit man who'd come after me." Madeline looks out at the fog. It's a blank whiteness beyond the window. "It was more personal. They were a couple. They loved each other."

"How can you keep saying that when he killed her?" Peggy looks at Madeline incredulously.

"That's what made it so shocking," Madeline says. "I mean, I know all about abusive relationships. Hell, my patients with their perfect hair and perfect skin and designer clothes, half of them are married to rage-aholics or worse, and the other half were molested by their dads or uncles or grandpas, so they're eaten up with shame, and they think they deserve abusive relationships." She pauses. "But this couple didn't look like that. They looked like they were in love."

"Maybe the man was fooling her. Maybe he lured her down there and then killed her for insurance money or something," Peggy suggests.

"If you want to collect insurance you don't leave a corpse stabbed to death on a public beach," Samuel interjects dryly as he puts the carton of half and half back in the refrigerator.
"I bet it was one of those fatal attraction things," Don says. "I bet she was stalking the guy and he killed her in self-defence."

"Oh, right, Don." Peggy sniffs. "She was asking for it."

"Besides, he had his arms around her. You should have seen them."

Madeline's voice comes out high and strained, and Peggy pats her hand, makes shushing noises.

"You're letting it get to you," Samuel says.

"Well of course it's getting to her," Peggy snaps. "It's one thing to read about this stuff in the newspaper but it's another when it actually touches you. Like when Jack Sanders killed that girl back in college. Remember, Madeline?"

"Don't remind me." Madeline shudders. "He asked me out once, did I ever tell you? Our freshman year. God."

"But this isn't like that," Peggy reminds her. "I know it's awful, but you didn't go out with this man. You never even spoke to him."

"Maybe he was schizophrenic," Madeline says. "Maybe he heard voices telling him to kill her."

Don nods. "Like Son of Sam, that nut who said a black dog told him to kill people."

"They aren't nuts, Don," Madeline says wearily. "They're sick people and it's not their fault."

"Yeah, tell that to their victims."

Samuel prowls back into the living room, sinks onto the couch. He usually radiates energy but today it seems forced. Madeline feels guilty because she's barely slept since it happened, and for weeks either Samuel or
Peggy has stayed up with her, listening to her spin out theories about the killing, the words gushing out in a ceaseless torrent. It's not that she's excited by what she saw, but every time she tries to sleep she sees the man's red sweater, the raised knife, the woman's dark tumbled hair flying out like a ragged halo when he knocked her into the gray winter surf.

"Listen honey," Samuel says. "I understand why you're so upset. I really do. But, well, I think you're starting to get obsessed with this thing."

"Physician, heal thyself?" Don asks as he feeds kindling into the fire to make it blaze up. Madeline and Peggy roll their eyes. Don has a sonorous deep voice and sometimes Peggy says she fell in love with him because its rich timbre kept her from noticing how obvious his comments were. But she only says this to Madeline, and she always adds that she really fell in love with his gentleness, the way his kind blue eyes smiled out at her through his shaggy blond hair.

A smile plays around Samuel's mouth. "What would you say to yourself, Madeline, if you were your own patient?"

Madeline leans her head against the back of her armchair and glances at Samuel. Her look says I know what you're doing, sweetheart. Peggy's knees crack as she rises to her feet and moves over to the picture windows. She has her back to the others but they know she's still listening.

"I'd tell myself to try to confront what it meant to me, and that's exactly what I'm trying to do," Madeline says.

"But what if you thought the patient was getting obsessed?" Samuel insists.

"After only one month I wouldn't label it an obsession."
"But just for the sake of argument, what would you say?"

Madeline sighs. "Obsessions so are hard to deal with, since they're usually just symptoms." She sips her coffee, then sets it down on the table next to her. "Even if you can cure a patient of one obsession, chances are, the next week she'll come in with a new one."

"So how do you cure them?" Don asks. He slides his hands into his pajama pockets and winks at Samuel, which Madeline sees but decides to ignore.

"Obsessive patients usually attach huge fears like death or abandonment to a relatively small thing, which they build up in their minds until it paralyzes them." Madeline plucks a yellow thread from her jeans. "So you try to get them to detach the obsession from the fears, and to realize those fears are just a part of life."

"Well then--"

"What I saw, Don," she adds calmly, "was not a small thing. I saw a loving heart literally stabbed to death."

"How do you know it was a loving heart?" Samuel asks. "Maybe he was in love with her but when they were down on the beach, she told him she was leaving him."

"Then why was she trying to cling to him like that?" Madeline's voice rises again. "When two people are in love, how does one of them end up dead? That's what I want to know." She lifts her coffee cup, sets it back down. Samuel and Peggy exchange worried looks. "Maybe it's all the violence on television and the movies. Maybe people don't know the difference between Hollywood death and real, forever death anymore. Except it's not like you
have to go to the movies to see violence. Christ, if people only knew what
goes on in most families."

"Not most families, Madeline. You're a therapist so you see people with
problems," Peggy says. "But that doesn't mean everyone's like that."

"Yeah, like being a cop," Don says. "Just because you see criminals all
day long doesn't mean everybody's one. Hey, did you hear the one about the
cop who arrested his mother?"

The others groan, and Don grins. "I guess I told you guys that one
already."

Samuel looks at his watch. "Shit. I've got my support group at two."

"And we've got a meeting on the Carlson project," Peggy says. She looks at
Madeline. "Are you gonna be okay? You want to come with us? Or Don could
go alone and I could stay home with you."

"Or you could drive into Westwood with me, go shopping and then maybe
we could catch a movie." Samuel looks anxiously at Madeline, and she
thinks for the millionth time how attractive he is, how she loves his energy,
his dark eyes and thick silver hair, the way he looks at her like he still finds
her the most interesting person in the world.

Madeline smiles. "I'll be fine. Really."

"I want you to keep the doors locked while we're gone," Samuel says.

Don stands up. "I guess I'd better get dressed. No rest for the wicked."
Peggy rolls her eyes at Madeline, who tries to smile back.

* * *
After the others leave for the afternoon, Madeline rinses the breakfast dishes and puts them in the dishwasher, scrubs the hardened egg out of the frying pan and dries it, then hangs it on its hook above the stove. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen is mostly windows. Outside, the fog has thinned to reveal patches of blue sky. When she's done cleaning up, Madeline sits at the pale oak table in the kitchen to work on a paper outlining a Jungian approach to food disorders for the Women in Mental Health Professions conference. It's only a few weeks away but she can't concentrate. The terrible images float between her and the black typescript. And although she's not afraid exactly, she keeps glancing at the windows, half expecting to see a brown eyed man in a red sweater watching her.

Finally she gives up and goes to the coat closet by the front door. She drags her purple pullover jacket over her head, shakes her hair out, and goes outside. The small front garden is quiet and still in the cold sunlight. A sparrow hops from branch to branch in the pink bougainvillea growing against the high redwood fence. She can't hear the ocean as she unlocks the gate, lets herself out and locks it behind her. She strolls down to the boardwalk and heads south.

At first the boardwalk is as quiet as her garden, but when she reaches the open-air shops that sell everything from expensive leather jackets to postcards, the boardwalk becomes crowded with people of all shapes, colors, and sizes, from a red-faced muscle-bound giant swaggering like Moses through the crowd parted by his straining, snarling rottweiler, to the slender black woman checking out sunglasses while a toddler with beautiful dark eyes clings to her leg. Even though the day is brisk and a little windy, people
stroll by in bathing suits or shorts and tank tops, soaking up the chill sunshine. The heavy odor of frying meat wafts from a hamburger stand and makes Madeline slightly sick.

On the booths set up in the grass between the boardwalk and the beach, cardboard signs advertise acupuncture treatments, tarot card readings, back massages on beach towels spread on the grass. Jugglers twirl chainsaws and burning sticks, and homeless people squat beside suitcases open to receive spare change. Madeline strolls past a trio of teenage boys breakdancing to the percussive blast of a boombox, then enters a new music zone of flutes and drums and whistles with four retro hippie girls in long tie-dyed skirts undulating in front of the musicians. A young man with bloodshot blue eyes and scraggly yellow whiskers, his skin a leathery brown patina of dirt, suntan and windburn, harangues the crowd.

"Your mother told you to do it!" he shouts. "Your father told you to do it! Your brother told you to do it!" He pauses with exquisite rhetorical timing. "But by god you didn't do it!" Madeline smiles, careful not to make eye contact with him. Maybe he was a preacher once, or maybe his father was, and he's internalized daddy, doesn't know his mind is an echo chamber.

A tall black man in a turban, dark glasses, and an orange leotard rollerblades past in a noisy blur, leaps into the air and executes a tight spin, lands with a stumble, then crouches to build his speed so he can whiz dangerously through the crowd. In the space he's cleared, Madeline finds herself staring at a young couple leaning against a turquoise wall. The girl's straight blonde hair has horizontal violet streaks and she's wearing a black demim halter top and jeans. She's so thin Madeline can see her ribs. The boy
is white rat pale, in a dirty tee-shirt that clings to his bony frame, his jeans baggy like he can't quite fill them. The girl puts a hand on her hip, her elbow jutting out. The boy looks away like he doesn't know her until she shakes his arm, makes him pay attention. Madeline wonders if it's a lover's quarrel or a drug deal gone bad. When the boy pushes himself off the wall and saunters away, the girl on his heels hissing in his ear, Madeline can't help herself. She follows.

"I'm not obsessed," Madeline mutters under her breath. "It's just I've got to know." She isn't sure exactly what she expects to learn, but the flashing fragmented images are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle she can't put together, and this raggedy couple feels like a missing piece, like they might complete the picture, and the pieces will all fall together and then fall away. She knows what Samuel would say, that she's acting obsessive, but she doesn't worry about his disapproval anymore.

Samuel's fierce impatience used to scare Madeline, and her timidity always made him angrier. But that changed years ago. A few weeks after her mother died in a car accident, when Madeline was twenty-three, they were on their way to a party in Westwood. It was drizzling, and Samuel was driving with his usual aggression—tailgating, honking, stomping the brakes. At a stoplight Madeline got out of the car and walked away. He pulled over to the curb and ran after her, shouting, "Are you out of your mind?" She turned to face him. "I won't do this anymore."

"Do what?" He'd been dumbfounded, furious.

"Look, my mother's dead because of some jerk like you, who just had to get somewhere five minutes faster, even if he killed someone. And that's the
way you live your whole life." Her voice shook, but Madeline felt more sure of herself than she ever had before.

Samuel was silent, the angry intensity pouring off him like black lava. His face was wet from the heavy mist and his breath came out in white puffs. Then he took her hand and said he could change.

The arguing couple turns off the boardwalk into a one-way alley between tall stucco apartment walls. Madeline hesitates, sees the knife rising and falling, then takes a deep breath and hurries after them. It's immediately quieter, and through the apartment windows she hears rock and roll, the screams and gunshots of a tv drama, an elderly male voice whining something unintelligible. A black dog with a red bandanna around its neck sniffs his way around a dumpster, his tail wagging like he smells good news. Madeline slows her pace when she realizes that the alley deadends up ahead in a huge faded wall mural of the boardwalk, the turbaned rollerblader painted in mid leap. The couple stands directly beneath him, and as Madeline watches, the girl screams at the boy, then turns on her heel and tries to stalk away but he grabs her straight blonde hair and yanks her back.

"Oh no," Madeline moans. "Oh no."

The boy grabs the girl's shoulders, presses her against the wall as she writhes to get free.

"No! Please, don't!" Madeline shouts as she runs toward them. The boy lets go of the girl and they whirl to face Madeline, their eyes blazing like fighting tomcats caught in a flashlight beam.

"Fuck off," the girl says when Madeline halts a few feet from them. The boy's anger flickers in his watery blue eyes like a match flaring in the fog.
"Yeah, fuck off, lady," he mumbles. "We're not doing nothing."

The mural's heroic figures dwarf the young couple. The girl scratches her ribs, smiles at Madeline. "I said fuck off. Are you deaf or something?"

Madeline wants to turn and walk away but she can't seem to move. She thinks she feels the heat off their bodies. The boy sneers, yellowish teeth in a pale acne scarred face, hard to imagine the childhood he so recently left.

Madeline shakes her head, tries to rouse herself to tell them something important. Her mouth opens but her throat is too dry for speech.

The boy and girl grin, mutter "shit," as they brush past Madeline. She watches them saunter back toward the boardwalk, then she turns to the mural, uneasily seeking a brown eyed man in a red sweater hidden in the pastel pantheon. She doesn't find him. Her pullover is damp with sweat, and she shrugs out of it, then freezes, looks around. The alley's empty, no flick of a curtain in the windows, no shadows slinking furtively into stairwells. She ties the pullover around her waist by its arms and hurries back to the boardwalk to become part of the crowd and bustle again.

But when she reaches the boardwalk instead of turning north toward home she crosses the human stream and cuts through a space between a palm reader's booth and a cardtable strewn with beaded leather bracelets. She walks straight out across the flat beach, the sand dragging at her shoes, until she reaches the water's edge.

A man and woman jog past in matching royal blue sweatsuits, accompanied by a panting golden retriever, and just down the beach two latino men and a hefty latino woman frolic in the surf, splashing each other, their jeans and sweatshirts soaking wet. The woman's presence allows
Madeline to categorize the two men as harmless, so she sinks down in the cool dry sand, crosses her arms on her knees, and watches a flock of brown pelicans gliding low over the gray ocean. It's colder down by the water, and she puts on her jacket.

That young couple made her feel foolish—a nosy, middle aged woman barging in on a private quarrel. But she also feels relieved, like her intervention averted tragedy. Madeline scoops up a handful of sand, lets it dribble out through her fist as she remembers the red-sweatered man's arms around the woman as they strolled along the cliffs, his face bent lovingly down to hers, the woman staggering to her feet on the beach to embrace her killer again.

Even in her worst fights with Samuel, she's never been afraid he'd hurt her, not even when she's had the sensation of staring into a cobra's eyes, his rage flowing into her, feeding her own anger. Their last bad fight was the usual one, Samuel wanting them to share a bedroom, a joint bank account, and Madeline insisting she needed her independence. It must have been about three years ago because it was when they still had the beach house to themselves. In their privacy, in the living room with the windows open to the pink summer twilight, Madeline had, yes, she had shrieked at him, shoved him, her small hands slamming into his gaunt chest. And without even thinking about it she'd assumed that her fragile size and his love would protect her from reprisal. Maybe that woman on the beach hadn't been afraid either. Maybe she'd missed the warning signals, couldn't quite believe it when the knife blade touched her warm skin, then slid burning into muscle and bone.
Madeline shifts her weight uncomfortably, feels a twinge in her lower back and rubs her hands along her thighs. They feel tender and swollen, which means her period will start in a few days. A life, not her own, will seep out of her in dark clots. She closes her eyes, knows her body as a glove blindly groping through the world. An unseen knife, a slamming fist, can split the glove open so her life spills out onto the sand. For the first time in years, Madeline comforts herself with the memory of her mother's soft breasts and protecting arms. She closes her eyes as drowsiness creeps through her limbs, into her eyelids, an escape from the sharp world waiting for her to fumble against its razor edges. As she rests her forehead on her arms she sees them dancing at the water's edge, the red sweater, that ragged scream.

When she lifts her head, everything is fog and darkness. She peers at her tiny gold wristwatch. Six o'clock. She must have fallen asleep sitting up. The beach is deserted, and even the boardwalk carnival's entrepeneurs will have packed up their wares and left. Her muscles feel stiff and sore as she struggles to her feet and starts walking slowly up the shore toward home. It's ebb tide and the fog hides the flat ocean, but she can hear the waves hissing across the sand.

As she shivers and tucks her hands into her fleecy jacket pockets she sees a dark shape coming toward her down the beach, and her throat tightens. She has no business being out here alone. She knows better, and didn't Samuel warn her? Christ, she's witnessed a murder and she's alone at night on an empty beach like those stupid stupid women in the movies where you think, nobody would be that dumb. Stealthily she backs away from the water, toward the dark and deserted boardwalk far off across the wide flat
beach. Then something familiar in the approaching shadow makes her pause. The long strides, the silver glint of hair must be Samuel. But she's afraid to trust her eyes so she keeps backing away. Then she realizes how foolish this is. If she can see him through the fog, he can see her too.

"Madeline? Is that you?"

She's afraid to answer.

"Madeline?" The voice cracks and she knows it's Samuel and stumbles toward him. When she peers up at his face, she sees he's furious.

"Why the hell didn't you say anything?" he shouts.

"I was scared."

"Oh really? Well you've scared the hell out of me." Abruptly he sits down in the wet sand. A flat wave races up the beach and licks at his tennis shoes but he doesn't seem to notice as he glares up at her. "What in the hell are you doing out here?"

Madeline crouches beside him. "I'm sorry. I fell asleep."

"It's been dark for over an hour, Madeline. I came home and the house was dark."

"I went for a walk."

He stares at her coldly, and his jutting nose seems predatory. "Do you think it's so exciting to be murdered that you've gone out looking for it? Is that what you want?"

"No! How can you say that? I just fell asleep, or something."

"Or something? God, Madeline, I could kill you."

"Don't say that!" It comes out almost a scream. Madeline takes a deep breath to calm herself, like she tells her patients to do, then stands up and
holds out her hands to him. "I'm sorry, Sam. Really. I'm sorry I scared you. Now come home with me, please?"

"I don't understand why you're so sure they were in love, Madeline. We can't ever really see inside another person, much less a complete stranger."

He gets up, feels his rear, his sweatpants gritty with wet sand, mutters "shit." Then he turns and walks back up the beach without looking to see if Madeline's following. As she trudges after him, the fog chills her and she thinks about just stopping, standing on the beach like a pillar of sand, waiting for the high tide to rush over her and carry her, grain by grain, out into the dark sea. Then Samuel turns and holds out his hand. "Come on," he says. "It's cold." She hesitates, then moves forward. When he takes her hand, she's shivering uncontrollably.

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Peggy makes lasanga for dinner, and afterward she and Don closet themselves in their office at the back of the house to iron out the details from their meeting this afternoon. Madeline washes up, still jittery from her scare and dimly resentful because she's done the dishes twice today, Don skipping out as usual. It just never occurs to him that it's his turn, and tonight Madeline didn't feel like reminding him. Samuel comes in and leans against the kitchen table. He's got something to tell her. She can tell by the way his foot taps a nervous staccato on the hardwood floor. After she runs water into the baking pan to soak overnight she shuts off the faucets and turns to face him. "Go ahead and say whatever it is, Sam."
"I just read something in the metro section about your murder."
Madeline feels her stomach tighten. "What did it say?"
"They've identified that couple. The woman moved here from Houston three months ago with her ten year old son." He pauses, clears his throat.
"And the man?"
"It kind of wrecks your true love scenario. He's her ex-husband, and he'd been threatening to kill her and the boy, but nobody knew he'd followed her out here from Texas. The police think he must have forced her into his car and then down to the beach at knifepoint."
Samuel meets Madeline's troubled gaze. "She wasn't clinging to him because she loved him, Madeline. She was pleading for her life, and when it was too late for that, she pleaded for her son's life. Her name was Debbie Atkins."
Madeline presses the back of her hand against her mouth and thinks she'll be sick. When the nausea stops welling up in her throat, she asks, "Did he get the little boy?"
"The newspaper didn't say, so I guess not. Are you okay, Madeline?"
"Why did he want to kill them? Did it say why he wanted to kill them?"
Samuel shrugs. "I shouldn't have to explain that to you, Mad. It's the typical wife-beater's mindset. He owns his wife and kids, and he can kill them if they try to escape. Not that the newspaper put it like that."
Madeline gray eyes are wide and unfocused. What Samuel has said is true but his words don't have any weight or color. She walks shakily past him into the living room, which is dark, lit only by the dying fire, and leans her clammy forehead on one of the front windows. Outside the fog has blotted
out the crescent moon and the faint stars. A couch spring creaks as Samuel sits down behind her. Madeline turns, leans a shoulder against the window and says, "I was afraid of you on the beach tonight."

His mouth sags open in disbelief. Then he clamps it shut and she sees the cobra, his eyes cold and blazing, his hands clenched into bony fists on the couch. A burned-out log collapses in the fireplace and the embers flare briefly, casting an orange glow on his anger. Madeline flattens her hands against the windowpane and looks down at her husband, this man she's lived with for over twenty years, who is more real to her than anything except her own body, who has a large dark mole on his right inner thigh and who loves and despises his father. The distance between the windows and the couch seems immeasurable, but somehow she crosses it. She sits down next to Samuel and touches his cheek, her fingertips prickling on the stubble along his jaw.

"I didn't know who you were in the dark," she explains. "So I was afraid."

The cobra is gone and it's just Samuel angry and confused on the couch beside her. He looks at her silently, then pulls her close, strokes her hair as she leans against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I told you about the newspaper," he says. "I didn't mean to upset you.

"No you're not," she mumbles against his sweater. "You could barely wait to tell me."

"Well, I'm not sorry if it means you're going to get over this." He gently holds her away from him. "You were starting to scare me, Madeline. I didn't know where you were going with all this." Before Madeline can say anything
he pulls her against him, buries his face in her neck so she feels his eyelashes flutter on her skin.

Peggy and Don wander in from their office, stop abruptly because the tension at dinner wasn’t lost on them. Samuel and Madeline look up. Don raises an eyebrow. "In spring a young man's fancy turns to love?"

Peggy looks at Madeline. "Did you see the article?"

"Sam told me about it," Madeline says. "It's so horrible."

"That poor woman," Peggy says softly. "And that poor little boy."

"I know it's really awful," Don says, "but I think it was more terrifying when it was a mystery." Madeline is surprised because she's not used to Don expressing her thoughts. Peggy does it, Samuel does it, but not Don.

Peggy yawns, leans her head on Don's shoulder. "I'm going to bed."

"Me too," says Don. He smiles at Madeline. "Don't wander off in the dark again, okay?"

They climb the stairs together, Peggy's hand resting on Don's back. Samuel strokes Madeline's hair as she stares into the dimming glow of the fire. Instead of a red sweater, the flashing knife, she feels the heat rising from those thin bodies under the boardwalk mural, their love twisted into anger but not deadly, not yet. She looks up at Samuel, at the wrinkles around his dark intelligent eyes, the skin beginning to crinkle under his jaw. His arms tighten around her and she relaxes against his chest, feels their hearts beating steadily against each other, beneath their warm skin, beneath the muscle and bone.
"It could have turned out all right," Lee said.

"No it couldn't have, Mom. That's the point." Suzanne took a drag on her cigarette as Lee crossed to the window and tipped back the edge of the curtain to peer out at the quiet street.

"Why don't you just open the curtains if you want to see out?" Suzanne asked.

Lee glanced over her shoulder at Suzanne, who was lying on the couch in her red flannel bathrobe, her long bare legs smooth and pale in the hazy sunlight shining through the patio windows. "So the whole street can see you lolling around half-naked at two in the afternoon?" Lee shook her head. "No thank you."

"It's Sunday, Mom. It's my goddamned day of rest." Suzanne ground out her cigarette in a small cut-glass ashtray on the coffee table. "Besides, it's daylight out there and it's dim in here. The only way anybody's gonna see me is if they use binoculars."
Lee sniffed, then drew back the curtains. In the sudden flood of light, Suzanne glanced around the living room, at the lace doilies on the armchair backs and the china figurines on the glossy walnut television console. Except for the powder blue carpet that had replaced the green one five years ago, the room hadn't changed since she'd left home. Her mother hadn't changed much either. A few more lines in her face, the skin beginning to sag from the high cheekbones, but she'd kept herself up, her figure still trim, her short blonde hair brightened and neatly molded into upswept waves at the beauty parlor every Saturday.

"Satisfied?" Lee asked.

Suzanne grinned, waved her arms above her head. "Hey, Mrs. Rodriguez, look at me!"

"You're acting like a ten year old."

"It's this house, Mom. When I'm back here, I revert." Suzanne swung her legs off the couch and lit another cigarette.

"You smoke too much," Lee said mechanically. "Want some more coffee?"

"Please."

Lee took the strawberry leaf wedgewood coffee cups she'd inherited from her mother to the kitchen. When she came back, she set Suzanne's cup and saucer on the coffee table, then sat in an armchair, holding her saucer at breast level, elbow out, delicately sipping her coffee in what Suzanne thought of as her mother's royal manner, probably learned from old British movies.

"If Julie had been in the least bit understanding, things would have turned out fine," Lee said.
"Let's not argue about it, okay?"

"Well I just don't understand why you're so willing to take her side and believe the worst about your own uncle."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but Uncle Larry's a jerk. He's bad-tempered, he's an alcoholic, and he has the worst dandruff I've ever seen. What surprises me is that a woman like Julie would go out with him in the first place."

"He's a generous, loving man, and you have no idea what he's been through," Lee said stiffly. "It's easy for you to sit there and judge, but you don't remember him like I do, when he was a boy." Lee's blue eyes filled with tears. "He was the best dancer in Filmore County. All the girls were wild about Larry."

"Well they aren't anymore." Suzanne squinted at the junior grandfather clock in the gloomy dining room. "Guess I'd better get moving."

"Oh? What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Meeting Godfrey for coffee, maybe a movie." Suzanne paused, then asked reluctantly, "You want to come?"

"Oh, no. I've got things to do around here." Lee smiled suddenly. "Did I tell you? They're reviving my favorite television show. Remember how we always used to watch Queen for a Day? Well they're doing it again, imagine, thirty years later, and it starts today."

"Mom, that show was stupid," Suzanne said. "Some poor housewife coming on television to get her wish granted, wearing that stupid crown, and that robe with the fake fur trim, and the fun was watching the poor idiot dither, trying to decide what would make her happier, a maid for a month or a new washer-dryer."
"But you loved that show, Suzanne. You always watched it with me."

"That's because I was too young to understand what was going on."

"And now you're so smart, right?"

Suzanne grinned. "Right."

"Well anyway, it'll be me watching it, not you." Lee set her cup carefully down on her saucer. "Are you and Godfrey, well, is this a date?"

"Jesus, the ink's not even dry on my divorce papers. Anyway Godfrey's just a friend."

"It's been three months--"

"What about you, Mom? It's been twenty-five years."

Lee winced as if she'd been slapped. Suzanne glanced at her mom, sitting erect in the armchair, eyes downcast, legs crossed at the ankles, and wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "I'm sorry," she said.

"That's all right. I'm used to it," Lee answered.

Suzanne felt the threads holding her temper stretch taut. "Oh. So now you're a martyr."

"I didn't mean it like that. You always twist what I say."

As Suzanne rose and carried the coffee cups into the kitchen, Lee called after her, "Be careful with those."

Suzanne set the cups down on the counter, then returned to living room. She enunciated each word slowly and clearly. "I want you to stop telling me what to do."

Lee looked up, startled. "Well, I'm sorry if I--"

Suzanne turned and walked swiftly down the hall to the bathroom, shutting the door with a sharp click. Lee sat perfectly still, her vision blurred
by tears. Then she wiped her eyes with a surreptitious finger. She was overreacting. Suzanne didn't, couldn't, mean the unkind things she said.

When the shower hissed on, Lee got up and went to the front window to gaze out at the shrubless, treeless front lawn, bare except for the rose bushes between her yard and the Hoffmans, next door. Sparrows twittered somewhere close by, and she heard the crack of a baseball bat and the muffled shouts of the neighborhood kids. For thirty-five years she'd lived in this tract house, and now, watching the empty street, Lee felt a familiar surge of expectancy. The mail would come soon, and maybe there'd be a letter from her cousin Joyce. Or maybe today she'd hear from the publishers sweepstakes that she'd won ten million dollars, and she and Suzanne could take a trip around the world, or move into one of those big new homes in the hills above the Valley, no, Suzanne wouldn't like that. One of those expensive glass houses right on the beach, in Malibu where the movie stars lived.

***

This was the worst kind of day to be in the San Fernando Valley, hot, smoggy, and humid. The Toyota's air-conditioner had gone out during the fourth of July weekend, and Suzanne couldn't afford to fix it. Driving down the gray streets past rows of pastel stucco houses and apartments, she remembered why she'd sworn never to live here again when she left home.

The route to Ventura Boulevard, where she was meeting Godfrey at Le Cafe, took her past the Encino Business Plaza. As she drove by, Suzanne
checked her mood like a convalescent checking her own pulse. And, yes, she still felt bitter that Tom was there on the second floor, running the public relations firm they'd built up together, while she was now temping as a receptionist and sending out resumes, discovering that you can't outdeliver and underbid all your competition and then expect them to hire you. And, yes, she was bitter that Tom was still living in their condo in West LA, on the other side of the Santa Monica Mountains. Over the hill, people said. I live over the hill.

Suzanne had wanted out so bad she'd signed everything Tom's lawyer put in front of her, but Tom had kept his head, channeled his anger into the divorce settlement. Now she couldn't even afford the therapist who'd helped her find the guts to end her marriage. She smiled, yes, bitterly, as she remembered how Jill Harrison's deep, personal concern had dwindled in direct proportion to Suzanne's cash flow. She stopped at a light, then turned carefully onto Ventura Boulevard and drove past Le Cafe to a sidestreet where there were no parking meters.

As she walked by the plate glass front of a furniture store, Suzanne glanced at her reflection, sucked in the pooch of her stomach and thrust back her shoulders. She should have worn something else. The denim skirt was too short for a thirty-five-year-old. And she should probably cut the too fine, too flyaway reddish brown hair, inherited from her dad, which fell loose to her shoulders. She should go see him soon. Sad, living in that awful apartment in Sun Valley, fat and balding and drinking himself to death because the woman he left her mother for had left him.
Godfrey was seated on Le Cafe's front patio, sunglasses on, his dark handsome face impassive like he was posing for a fashion photographer. When her shadow fell across the table he glanced up, his white teeth flashing in a quick smile.

"How you doing, beautiful?" he asked as she sat down.

Suzanne leaned back in her chair, arms dangling limp at her sides.

"More."

"You're the most gorgeous woman in this restaurant, on Ventura Boulevard, and possibly in the whole Valley."

"The greater Los Angeles area?"

Godfrey shook his head. "I never exaggerate."

"Shit."

"I like your skirt."

"Bless you. May you have more boyfriends than you know what to do with."

"Already true, sweetheart. In fact I'm thinking of changing my phone number just to cut out some of the heavy breathers."

Suzanne grinned and nudged his foot with hers. "My mom asked if this was a date."

Godfrey threw back his head and laughed, beckoned a waiter over. "What do you want, Suzanne? It's on me."

"I don't know. Just coffee I guess."

Godfrey shook his head. "You drink too much coffee. You smoke too much, but I guess you don't need me to tell you. So really, how you doing?"
"Lousy. I can't find a job. In fact I think people positively enjoy not hiring me. And living with my mom's driving me nuts." She sighed and took out her cigarettes, tapped the pack against the glass tabletop. "I'm thirty-five and I don't have a life anymore."

"No pain, no gain. This is the hard part, but once you're back on your feet, you'll wonder why it took you so long to do it."

"I've got to get a real job." Suzanne paused while the waiter set down her coffee and made a fuss about arranging the cream and sugar, the rolled linen napkin and tiny spoon. He snuck a glance at Godfrey through fluttering blond eyelashes as he made his lingering departure, which Godfrey ignored.

"Any prospects at all?" Godfrey asked.

She hesitated, stirred sugar into her coffee. "The company my mom works for offered to hire me at double what I'm making as a temp, plus benefits."

"Doing what?"

"Same thing I'm doing now, secretary receptionist, like my mom."

"Shit, Suzanne."

"What?"

"You can do better than that."

She shrugged. "It's been three months, Godfrey. And so far, I can't."

"You just said you're going crazy living with her."

"Yeah, well, we'd be working in different departments."

***
When Suzanne got home, her mom was in her usual evening spot, on a chaise lounge by the swimming pool, watching the sun sink into the brilliant orange haze above the fences and low gray roofs. The evening was warm, but shadows stretched across the pool, and the water looked dark and cold. Suzanne paused by the back door to switch on the pool lights. Lee twisted around and smiled at her.

"I'm having a glass of wine," Lee called. "Want to join me?"

"Sure." Suzanne went inside, came out with cigarettes and a glass of wine and sat in a low deckchair next to Lee, who asked how the movie was.

"Massive body count and no plot to speak of."

"You've got money to burn on bad movies when you can barely afford your half of the groceries? Or did your friend Godfrey pay for you?"

Suzanne lit a cigarette before she answered. "Godfrey paid."

"That isn't a date?"

"He's gay, Mom. He likes to have sex with men, not women."

"I know what gay means." Lee coughed and waved a hand in front of her face. "You smoke too much. I don't know how Tom could stand it, dirty ashtrays in every room of that beautiful condo."

"You got something on your mind you want to say, Mom?"

"I'm just wondering, is all. You're dad doesn't smoke and I don't, so I wonder why you picked it up. It's such a dirty habit."

"Maybe I wanted to be different from you."

"Why would you want to be different? What's so bad about being like your mother?"

"Nothing, Mom. Forget it."
They were silent for a few minutes, then Lee murmured, "It's pretty out here, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's nice."

"Do you remember when we built the pool? When you were ten? I think your dad and I thought that if we could only get it right, have the pool, Saturday afternoon barbecues and two point five kids, then our lives would be perfect, and maybe our marriage would work out after all." Lee's voice hardened. "Or maybe only I thought so. Maybe your dad was already planning on leaving, and the pool was a sop to his conscience, like he was giving us a consolation prize."

Suzanne remembered how happy she'd been the summer they got the pool, swimming every day, drenched in the sharp smell of chlorine, inviting her friends over to share the miracle of cool blue water on the hot, smoggy afternoons. And then in the late fall, after her dad had left them, she'd watched the brown and yellow leaves from the maple tree next door drift onto the pool's surface, and wondered if she could walk on them, if they'd support her weight. She could call up her daddy and tell him about it, and he'd come home to see her do it, and then he'd stay. But the water was cold by then and she was afraid of what might be hiding below the leaves, so she never tried.

"You never told me that before," Suzanne said.

"You were so young, honey. I thought it was my duty to protect you as much as I could. And then you grew up so fast, and went away to college, and when you came back and got married, you had your own life and you
seemed happy, so I didn't like to say anything." Lee shrugged. "There's a lot I've never told you."

"Yeah, well, I might have been better off if you'd clued me in on a few things," Suzanne muttered.

"Like what?"

"Like, if you made mistakes, you might have told me so I could learn from them."

"But you were happy, weren't you?" Lee's voice rose protestingly. "At least at first?"

Suzanne's anger died. "It's hard to say, Mom. Yeah, I guess at first I was happy. But I figured out pretty quick that Tom wasn't at all like I thought he was. I mean, he wasn't easygoing, like I thought, or concerned about other people's feelings. That was his modus operandi--"

"His what?"

"His method of operating in the world, to make people like him, make life easier. But after we were married he quit bothering, at least where I was concerned." Suzanne gulped down the last of her wine. "But who wants to admit their husband's a creep? It was easier just to ignore it when we were starting the company, buying the condo. But later, when everything was going smooth, I finally let myself stop and think, this is your life, do you like it?"

"So you decided to smash it to smithereens and start over, just like your dad. Look where it got him."
Lee's voice was flat. Suzanne clenched her wine glass to keep it from sliding through her fingers as she turned to stare at her mother. For a moment there was no breath inside her to speak.

"If that's how you see it, Mom, I wonder why you let me move back here."

"I've been wondering myself." Lee glanced at Suzanne, swallowed nervously. "The way you've been acting, like it's my fault you got divorced and lost everything you had."

"I never said it was your fault."

"I don't understand why you let him get everything, Suzanne. I told you, over and over, to fight for what was yours or you'd be sorry later."

"I wanted out, Mom. Can't you understand that?" Suzanne set her wine glass down on the low plastic table between them. "I'd already wasted ten years, and Tom was gonna fight me for every damn plate and pillowcase, not to mention the company and the condo. He was gonna chain me to him with lawyers." She took a deep breath. "It was worth it just to walk away from the whole mess."

"You won't think so later. I've always been glad I fought for the house."

"At least I won't turn the condo into a museum for a dead marriage."

Lee blinked rapidly, turned her head away. "I'm not like you, or your dad. For me, marriage is for life. I couldn't stop your dad from leaving me, but as far as I'm concerned, he's my husband until I die. That's why I'm Lee Johnson, not Meriden."

"Then why aren't you trying to help him now?"

Lee gave a short angry laugh. "As if he'd let me."

Suzanne glared at Lee. "Have you even tried?"
"Have you? Anyway, he left me, Suzanne, remember? He left me, not the other way around."

"This is stupid." Suzanne stood up, the legs of her chair scraping on the concrete. "I can't believe I'm arguing with you about this." She picked up her wine glass without looking at her mother and went inside.

Late that evening when Lee tapped on her bedroom door, Suzanne wouldn't answer. A narrow bar of light shone on the carpet under the door, and when Lee pressed her ear to the door she heard the faint whisper of radio voices. She hesitated, touched the doorknob with her fingertips, then let her hand drop to her side. As she stepped away from the door she was careful to tread lightly so the floorboards wouldn't betray her presence.

In her own bedroom, at the end of the hall, Lee switched on the ruffled yellow lamp on her dresser, unscrewed the cold cream jar and began wiping off her makeup with a tissue. Tomorrow she'd have to pluck her eyebrows again. Lee sighed. She'd had a nice day until Suzanne came home. Larry had stopped by unexpectedly, right after Queen for a Day, which had been wonderful, with even better prizes than the old show. Today's lucky winner got to choose between a weekend for two in Las Vegas, a mink coat, and a set of dining room furniture made of solid oak. Lee would have chosen the weekend in Las Vegas, because she already had a good dining room set. And even if Suzanne wouldn't go with her to Las Vegas, and she probably wouldn't, would probably say something awful and true about crass commercialism and sucker bets, Lee could go alone and who knows? Maybe she'd meet a rich Texan who knew how to treat a lady, or she'd run into her ex-husband in a casino and he wouldn't recognize her in her new mink coat
and—but that was thinking she could have both prizes, and the rules didn't work that way. Suzanne might scoff at her, but Lee wasn't so foolish that she didn't realize even good luck has its limits.

***

On Monday afternoon Suzanne was typing up contracts at Franklin Engineering when Tom called. She wedged the telephone between her chin and shoulder and kept typing as she talked to him.

"How'd you get this number?" she snapped.

"I called your mom and she gave it to me. Listen, Suzanne, I've got some news that might interest you."

"They don't like me to get personal calls here. I'm just a lowly temp, remember?"

"Yeah, right. Look, just meet me at Toby's for a drink after work, okay? I've got a proposition that might solve some of your problems."

"I don't know."

"You have a hot date or something?"

"I knew you'd get nasty."

"Suzanne, I'm trying to do you a favor and you're not making it easy. You want to hear me out or not?"

Another line buzzed, its red light blinking on the switchboard, and Suzanne heard Joe and Bill Franklin out in the hall returning from lunch. "I'll meet you at six," she said. "I've got to go." By the time the Franklin
brothers opened the door, she'd put Ray McCoy through to Eleanor and was typing up a storm.

At a little after five, as Suzanne was straightening her desk to leave for the day, her mom called. Suzanne ran her fingers through her hair in exasperation, felt the strands cling to her fingers with static electricity.

"What is it that couldn't wait until I got home?"

"I just talked to Phyllis in personnel. They want to fill that secretary position this week, so I need to know if you're going to take it or not."

"You need to know right this second?"

"I told Phyllis I'd call you today."

"Well tell her I've already left. Tell her you'll let her know in the morning."

"Is anything wrong? You sound upset."

Suzanne lowered her voice and cupped her hand around the receiver. "Tom called today. I'm meeting him for a drink. He said he had a proposition for me."

"Do you think he wants to get back together, honey?"

"Jesus. No. I don't know what he's thinking."

"People do, Suzanne. Couples remarry all the time these days."

"Mom--"

"Did I tell you Larry apologized to Julie and she agreed to have dinner with him tonight?"

"Great. They can prolong their agony."

"You don't know how it's going to turn out, Suzanne."

"Neither do you."

"Suzanne?"
"What?"

"I'm sorry if I upset you last night."

"Look, I've got to go."

"What time will you be home?"

***

Toby's was a brightly lit, high-tech Italian restaurant on the second floor of the Encino Business Plaza. Customers waited for their tables at a bar in the front, which toward the end of the week was a major pickup scene, with accountants, secretaries, salespeople eyeing each other three deep between the bar and the polished brass rail separating it from the restaurant. But this was Monday and the work week hadn't gained enough momentum to set people on the prowl, so Tom was alone at the bar. He was wearing a suit and tie, which meant he'd been to a client meeting today.

He had a beer in front of him and was staring down at his clasped hands. As she tapped him on the shoulder, Suzanne noticed he'd finally taken off his wedding ring, but you could still see the pale stripe where it had been. He pushed back his dark hair and smiled at her, the same slow, easygoing smile that had first beguiled her. She didn't smile back, just said hello and sat down, busied herself with looping her purse strap on the back of her barstool.

"So what's up?" she asked briskly.

"How are you, Suzanne? You look great."

"I'm fine. What did you want to see me about?"
The smile slid from his mouth and out of his eyes. "You know, you're the one who left me, so what's with this anger shit?"

Suzanne smiled at the bartender. "Chardonnay, please. No, on a separate check."

When she glanced at Tom, he shrugged. "Have it your way. You still looking for a job?"

Suzanne nodded.

"Royal Mexico Cruises is taking their PR in-house, and they're looking for someone to head up the department. When I told Fred Drieser you might be available, he practically did a jig on my desk. You interested?"

"What's the catch?"

Tom raised his eyebrows. "No catch."

"Tom," Suzanne paused, then stumbled on. "You're not doing this to, well, get back together, are you? Because if you are--"

Tom grinned. "The last thing on my mind, sweetheart. See, I've met someone, and I'm happier than I've been in years. In fact I'm even willing to try to make it up to you for being so hardnosed over the divorce."

She gave a short, angry laugh. "Hardnosed. Vindictive is more--"

"Hey, don't start, Suzanne. If you're interested, say so. If not, that's fine too." He put his hand on hers to still the fingers busily shredding the edge of her paper napkin. The warm touch startled her, set off a faint alarm in the back of her skull, something she'd been thinking of earlier, leaves on the pool like solid ground. She slid her hand from under his. "What's in it for you? Come on, Tom. There's got to be something."
"Drieser wants to do some television spots and it would be nice if you used me to buy the air time," Tom said smoothly. "But that shouldn't be a problem. We always worked well together."

"Does Drieser know about this?"

"What do you think?"

"I see." She crossed her legs, leaned back a little. "What's to stop me from getting the job and then using Blaze, or Media Time?"

"I think you're too smart to want me for an enemy." Tom reached into his breast pocket. "Here's Drieser's card. He said he'd be in his office by eight tomorrow if you want to call him."

Suzanne took the card and held it tight between her hands as she tried to still her excitement at the thought of starting a new public relations department, moving into her own place. "I'll call him."

"Don't shred it, okay? Put it in your purse."

"Okay. Thanks, Tom. I know why you're doing it, but thanks."

"Like I said, I'm so happy right now I'd help out the devil's own daughter."

"Yeah. That's good. That you found someone." Suzanne forced a smile.

Tom rubbed his jaw. "I was hoping it would make you feel bad."

Suzanne laughed. "No such luck." But she was lying. It hadn't really registered yet, but she knew that tonight, alone in bed, she'd be miserable about it. How did that song go? Nobody loves you but your mother, and she could be lying too.

"Well, I've got to run." Tom raised his hand, grinned. "No, don't thank me. It's the least I could do."

"Yeah. It is."
"So I'm gonna call Drieser in the morning."

"I thought you weren't supposed to make personal calls at work." Lee and Suzanne were sitting out by the pool again with the sky turning purple above the black rooftops and the crickets singing in the hibiscus along the brick fence.

"I can call from here, before I go in."

"What am I supposed to tell Phyllis?"

"I'm gonna talk to him at eight-thirty, Mom. If I get this position, I'll call you and you can tell Phyllis that I've found something else, and if this falls through, you can tell her I'll start whenever she wants."

"Are you going to tell this Mr. Drieser what Tom wants?" Lee sniffed.

"Yes I'm going to tell him." Suzanne paused, lit a cigarette. "I'm also gonna tell him I think Tom will do a better job than anyone else, because it's true. Then Drieser can make up his own mind."

"I don't understand how you can want to work with Tom again, after all you've been through."

"I really want this job, Mom."

"It's not like you're out on the street, Suzanne. You don't have to snatch at the first offer you get."

"Jesus. I thought you'd be happy for me. It's a chance to get my life back together."
Lee held up her wine glass so the pool light refracted off the side, like a star. "I guess I'm a little disappointed, is all. I was thinking how nice it would be for us to work at the same place, just for awhile, how we could have lunch together, not all the time, but sometimes." She lowered the glass and sighed. "Now you'll move back over the hill, and I'll never see you."

"You'll still see me."

Lee shook her head. "No, I hardly ever saw you when you were married."

"You want my life to turn out like yours so I can keep you company?"

Suzanne flicked her ash onto the deck. "Is that what you want?"

"I'm not saying that!" Lee twisted her head slowly from side to side. "Of course I want you to get married again, have children if it's not too late. Of course I want you to be happy. It's all I've ever wanted. You're just twisting my words like you always do."

"Like you want Larry and Julie to get married and live happily ever after, right?"

"What's wrong with that?" Lee peered sideways at her daughter.

"Nothing's wrong with it, Mom, but it's not going to happen."

"So what are you saying, Suzanne? That you aren't ever going to get married again?"

"I'm saying that it's not going to happen by me getting a secretarial job and waiting for something or someone to come along and save me. You of all people ought to know life isn't like that."

"I never said it was," Lee whispered.

"Yes you did. You've said it your whole life. You say it every time you enter a contest, or buy a lotto ticket, or watch game shows like that stupid Queen
for a Day." Suzanne paused, shook her head. "Like happiness is some ham emcee putting a rhinestone crown on your head and expecting you to faint with excitement because you've won a self-defrosting refrigerator." Suzanne dropped her cigarette onto the deck and ground it out under her heel.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Lee said softly.

"You're still waiting for that call, Mom. You're still waiting for someone to make you queen for a day. And you want me to keep you company while you wait." Suzanne stood up and looked down at her mother, expecting to see the tears that would make her feel guilty and then more angry, but Lee didn't cry. Instead she stared into the lit blue pool and said, "I do believe good things can happen, unexpectedly, yes. I don't expect you to understand that, but I do." She looked up at Suzanne. "And I don't think it's very nice of you to try to take that away from me."

"Why is it I'm always the bad guy, Mom?" Suzanne waited for Lee to say something, then gave the low table a small, angry kick. "I'm not trying to take anything away from you. I don't want anything from you. Not a goddamned thing."

Suzanne turned and stomped across the patio to the house. Inside, she grabbed her purse from the kitchen table and went out the front door. She walked quickly up the dark street, her shadow darting first ahead of her and then behind as she crossed through the dim yellow circles of the streetlights. She didn't know where she was going but she had to get away, had to get that job tomorrow and move into her own place before she got stuck in her mom's goddamned post-marriage twilight zone, a hopeless gray half-life, dreaming of impossible escapes.
As she turned the corner, safely out of sight, Suzanne slowed her pace. Mosquitos and moths fluttered around the amber porchlights she passed, but the street was quiet, everyone inside having dinner or watching television, the children called in from their last game of hide-and-go-seek in the fading dusk. This was ridiculous, running away from home into the night like she had as an angry teenager. And it seemed like that’s all she’d been doing the last couple days, storming into her bedroom, storming out of the house. Hell, it was all she’d been doing for the last year if she included the times she’d stomped away from fights with Tom.

The hollow rubber thump of a ball bouncing on a driveway made her look across the street to see a skinny boy, about ten, trying to shoot a basketball through a hoop nailed above the garage door. As she watched, a shining black sedan cruised down the street and turned into the driveway. The ball slid through the hoop’s steel mesh and the boy caught it and spun it on his fingertip as a man got out of the car. A slender woman in a sundress opened the front door and called, "Dinnertime! Come in, you two."

Suzanne didn’t linger to see more, but as she walked away she couldn’t help remembering her mom waiting at the door for a husband who wasn’t coming home that night, wasn’t coming home ever again. Maybe her mom was standing at the front door now, or peering through the curtains waiting for Suzanne to come back, wondering if Suzanne would disappear into the night just like her father, become an object of the same bitter, grief-stricken love and anger.

She turned another corner and headed quickly toward the bright lights of the QuikMart store and the Shell gas station on Devonshire. As she crossed
the convenience store parking lot she fumbled in her purse for a quarter, pulled one out as she stepped into the phone booth.

She had to let it ring for a long time, but finally she heard the click of the receiver lifting, a soft voice saying "Hello?"

Suzanne cleared her throat. "Is this Mrs. Johnson?" she asked.

"Yes, who's this, please?"

"Mrs. Lee Johnson?"

"Is that you, Suzanne? Where are you?"

"Congratulations, Mrs. Johnson. You've been chosen Queen for a Day."

There was a pause, then Lee said, "Thank you, honey. Now come on home, okay? It's dark out. You shouldn't be out by yourself."

"I'll be home in a couple minutes."

"Suzanne?"

"Yeah?"

"This isn't the life I wanted, but it's not so bad. I have my house, and a good job, and my friends, and you. And who knows what else will happen? Maybe something wonderful."

Suzanne stared across the parking lot, at the teenage boys piling out of a van, a fat man and woman holding hands and laughing together as they walked into the store. She tried to think of something to say to her mom.

"And now," Lee added, "I'm Queen for a Day."

Suzanne smiled as her mother hung up. Change clattered into the coin return slot, and Suzanne reached in to take it, then decided to leave it there, a small piece of unexpected good fortune waiting for someone to find it.

When she got back on her feet, maybe she'd take her mom on a vacation to
someplace exotic, where they served pink umbrella drinks and the ocean was as clear and blue as the swimming pool.

As she strolled home through the dark streets, Suzanne felt a sense of expectancy, as if something good were right around the corner, and all she had to do was keep walking to meet it.
My brothers and I used to scare the bejesus out of our housekeeper Maria by playing a game, inspired by our comic book heroes, called Saran-O-Man. Stripped down to his underwear and swathed from head to toe in a roll of clinging plastic wrap, Saran-O-man was impervious to bullets, knives, and spit. And because his plastic skin kept him fresh, he could pop back from the beatings inflicted by his two fiendish brothers, villains out to destroy San Francisco. The perils of this game loomed large not only in Maria’s mind but in ours--the ghostly multitudes of children who'd poked their heads into plastic bags from the dry cleaners and suffocated to death in a slick mask that inexorably tightened as they gasped for air. We always tore mouth and nose holes, but whenever the game palled, Saran-O-Man staggered into Maria’s presence clutching his throat and bugging his eyes. She’d fling down her vacuum cleaner or dust cloth and let loose a shrill torrent of Spanish, so for us the joke never staled.
As I hunched over the pay phone and strained to hear Tom's voice, I felt like I'd turned back into Saran-O-Man, slick with sweat, sounds deadened by a transparent film. He mumbled something about visiting in-laws, tied up all week, then added, "Real sorry we can't get together this time, Jay."

"Sure, sure." I nodded. "Give my love to Darla and the kids."

A dime clattered delicately into the coin return dish as I leaned against the pay phone's plexiglass privacy shield. I was alone in the shadowy lobby of the hotel's rooftop bar, looking through a huge diamond shaped window at the blue Pacific. Sunlight glinted silver across the ocean's flat wrinkled surface, then I turned away and flipped open my leather address book, scanning my cramped black print for another Los Angeles number, for someone, anyone, to help fill the hours until tomorrow's first appointment. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, the anonymity that swallows you on a sales trip. No one recognizes you, and as far as anyone back home is concerned, you've vanished into the fourth dimension. When I was a kid I imagined purgatory as a pitch black void where unbaptized babies, their bodies curled in fetal positions, floated like tiny shrimp in a frigid dark sea. Now I see it as a plush hotel with room service.

After calling two numbers that were disconnected and getting the brush off from an ex-girlfriend who moved here a couple years ago, I gave up and returned to the bar. As I signaled for another scotch and soda I stretched my neck and poked a finger through the knot of my tie. I wanted to take off my suit jacket but the nice blue shirt underneath was rumpled and so sweaty you could probably see the ponytail I tucked into the collar. It prickled my damp skin and made me consider hacking it off for the first time in years.
"Don't you have air-conditioning?" I asked the bartender, just a kid really, despite his bored mouth, the dark circles under his eyes.

He slid my drink across the polished mahogany bar. "It's on."

"Christ, it's an oven in here." I gave my tie another tug. "Can't you open a few windows?"

The bartender slapped down my upwardly adjusted bar tab. "They don't open."

"Oh." I took a sip, thankful for ice cubes and the smell of strong scotch. "Afraid of jumpers, huh? Well if the windows don't open, you ought to get some decent air-conditioning."

The bartender smoothed back his dark hair, touched the gold stud in his ear. "I don't own this palace. I just work here."

"Yeah, I hear that." I nodded. "Some days I want to tell my boss where to stick the whole operation, but there's bills to pay, so what can you do?"

When he didn't answer, I gave an apologetic shrug. This kid made me feel like a jerk. "Guess I'm not used to the weather down here. It's a hell of a lot cooler up in Marin. That's where I'm from, north of San Francisco, you know?"

"Duty calls, man." The bartender nodded toward a noisy group of businessmen at the other end of the bar.

"What? Oh, sure, sure, go ahead." As the bartender moved away, I clicked the stir stick against my glass and examined the row of faces in the mirror that ran the length of the ornate floor-to-ceiling bar. Two women came in and seated themselves just beyond the empty barstool next to me, now the only vacant seat in the place. They smoothed their skirts, settled their
purses and ordered drinks. Their voices lilting above the rumble of conversation and the clink of glasses.

"If only you'd called, or written. A postcard even. Having a wonderful time, glad you're not here."

"We've already been through this. It had to be a clean break."

The way the older woman wrinkled her straight, powdered nose each time she sipped her drink I figured she rarely indulged. On the other hand, a martini straight up with an olive drowning in its clear depths is pretty serious stuff. She held the martini's flying-saucer glass between her hands, her long fingers in constant motion, tapping the rim, sliding suggestively down the slender stem.

When the younger woman slid off her stool and sauntered toward the restrooms, I shifted my gaze to my own reflection, reassured by the pleasant clean-shaven face smiling back at me, the wavy sunstreaked hair. I've tried to cultivate an easy, open expression, and I'm lucky because it seems I have the kind of face people like immediately, want to trust. But lately, I didn't know. Those brush offs on the telephone, Sara's parting shot. I shrugged, watching the orange glow suffusing the mirror as it caught the sunset through the windows along the opposite wall. In the middle of the soft flaming light the older woman was looking at me quizzically, as if she'd noticed me watching her. She leaned across the empty barstool between us, and the scoop neck of her cream-colored silk blouse swung forward to reveal her bra's black lace trim.
"Lilly Brundage." She smiled and extended her hand. A diamond flanked by two emeralds glinted on one long white finger. I caught a whiff of faint floral perfume.

"Jay Sampson. Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Brundage." Her hand was soft, the palm damp.

"Please. Call me Lilly. Are you staying here at the hotel, Jay?"

I nodded. She was attractive in an expensively insistent way. Probably spent hours with hair stylists, manicurists, a colorist named Anthony.

"I've always loved this hotel," she said. "And frankly, this is one of the last really civilized bars in town." She smiled and gave an extravagant little shiver, probably remembering the less civilized ones. I'd visited a few of those myself last night, entertaining the boys from Fujimo Bank.

She was smiling expectantly, so I said, "You look like someone who's used to a classy setting."

"Oh, thank you." She looked down at the diamond ring, her dark blunt-cut hair swinging against her jaw. "I do love beautiful things." She fixed her faded blue gaze on me and added, "I'm an artist."

"Really?" I was surprised. She didn't fit my idea of an artist. "What do you do? I mean, what kind of art?"

"Um, soft mediums. Right now I'm doing food sculpture."

I rubbed the condensation trickling down my glass and tried not to smile.

"You mean like carving tomatoes into roses?"

"Well, yes. Really it goes beyond that."

"Isn't that, well, kind of temporary?" I asked.
"Oh, there's fixatives. But really, it's sort of an offbranch of performance art." She narrowed her eyes, as if trying to recall a speech she'd memorized, and I pictured her listening raptly to an earnest young woman with an untidy bun and no lipstick, the teacher of a Tuesday night enrichment class. "It's art in time," she pronounced. Then she leaned back, a dreamy look on her face, and explained that she'd always wanted to be an artist, had always felt there was something inside her and if she could only express it, then people would understand, and love her for her true self. But somehow other things, family problems for instance, always got in the way.

"And now that Terry's back, well, things are complicated again." She smiled, gave a little shrug.

"Is Terry your," I caught myself in time, "your sister? The woman who was sitting with you?"

"Oh, no, how sweet of you to--she's my daughter." Lilly glanced toward the restrooms. "I can't imagine what's keeping her so long. I hope she hasn't gone off again."

"Excuse me?"

"What would you say," Lilly asked, "if your only daughter vanished, apparently abducted on her way back to college, and after the police investigations, the private detectives, the whole family going through grief counseling, what if after three years she turned up again, and her only explanation was that she'd followed a more compelling vision of life?"

I blinked. "I guess mostly I'd just be happy--"

"We were thankful, of course. But what no one understands is that when your child dies, it cuts you off from the future." She lifted a graceful hand,
palm up as if displaying something precious. "What you thought was a road turns into a deadend, and the really awful part is even when you find out she's alive, the future stays buried."

"Look, are you two waiting for your husband?" I asked hurriedly.

"Because--"

"Oh, no. I'm divorced." She smiled apologetically. "Have been for years. And what line of work are you in, Jay?"

"Computers. I sell software." I shrugged, unable to describe the mysteries of corporate sales, how in the space of a handshake you had to grasp what kind of person your customer wanted you to be, and then become that person. I wished I did something easier to explain, or more unusual. Pottery maybe, kilns and sensuous mounds of wet red clay. I looked at my well-manicured hands, saw her looking at them too. "Do you think maybe you should check on Terry?" I asked.

"She'd snap my nose off if I did. Accuse me of invading her space." Lilly tossed back her hair, flashed a bright smile. "Anyway, she's probably praying or something."

While Lilly gently complained about her daughter's latest idiosyncracy, the Tibetan prayer wheels in the kitchen, mandalas in the bathrooms, kachina dolls and plaster virgin marys scattered through the house, I drank down my watery scotch and pictured the younger woman praying on the toilet, hunched over, her brown work boots shuffling back and forth on the dirty pink tiles. When she didn't receive a sign, no angels treading air above her, she'd sigh and get up, tugging her black tights up over her thighs and smoothing down her gauzy brown dress. In the bathroom mirror, she'd check
her plum lipstick for smudges, flip back her lank dark hair and poke at a
pimple on her chin. Then she’d sigh again and walk out, leaving the mirror
uninhabited, reflecting a row of empty stalls. I wondered what she’d pray for.
Maybe that Lilly would be gone when she came back to the bar.

Lilly’s voice trailed off. I followed her gaze and saw Terry approaching,
something deliberately feline in the way she prowled toward us. She passed
her original seat and leaned on the back of the vacant barstool. Since Lilly
was leaning forward too, I was confronted with a double-barrel blast of
Brundage breast.

"What’s the problem?" Terry asked.

I wrenched my gaze up to her face, flashed the smile reserved for new
clients and pretty women. "No problem."

"You’re slowing down, Mom." Terry grinned as Lilly’s mouth went rigid.

"Aren’t you staying in this hotel Mr.--"

Lilly broke in rather breathlessly. "This is Jay Sampson, darling. He’s in
computer sales. Software. Isn’t that interesting?"

"I prefer hardware myself. Hi Jay. I’m Terry."

Bemused, I shook another soft white hand, but this palm had a faint
underlay of recent calluses, and a cheap brass ring had stained the skin
green below one knuckle.

"So I thought you two would be riding the elevator by now. Or were you
waiting for me, Jay? Because if you were, my price is two grand."

"Terry!"
Terry raised her eyebrows. "Did I say something wrong? See, Jay, Mom's a romantic. She's looking for love. Me, I'm just trying to raise the airfare for a trip to Hong Kong."

I watched her small, vivid face and was struck by the suspicion that they were call girls, chatting me up, and everyone knew it but me. That's one thing I've never had to pay for, so I reached for my bar tab, then hesitated, I couldn't say exactly why. I was lonely, with a boring empty evening ahead of me, but it wasn't just that. It was more like I saw a boring empty life stretched ahead of me, flat as a desert, no Tibetan prayer wheels, no roses carved from tomatoes. I nodded to the bartender for another round and asked, "Why Hong Kong?"

Terry shrugged. "The zen of capitalism, east meets west. Something different, anyway. Coming home was a mistake." She nodded toward her mom. "She won't admit it but I cramp her style."

"Now Terry," Lilly began.

"Come on, Mom. Admit you got used to me being dead."

A sudden pallor made the rouge stand out on Lilly's cheekbones as she rose abruptly, clutching the back of her stool with one hand and smoothing her narrow silk skirt with the other. "What you don't understand, Terry, and I hope you never have to, is that a mother doesn't get used to her child's death. It was very nice meeting you, Mr. Sampson, and I hope you have a very pleasant stay." A tear quivered in her spiky black eyelashes, and I started to get up, but Terry, lolling on the back of the empty barstool, slid sideways to press her hands on my shoulders. Her breath fluttered warm and
sour on my cheek as she whispered, "Let her go. You'd just hurt her feelings when you kicked her out in the morning."

"I wasn't gonna sleep with—"

"Night, Mom!" Terry called after her. Without looking back, Lilly fluttered one hand over her shoulder in a jaunty wave, only the slightest wobble to her gait. Terry's fingers pressed into my shoulders, her grip turning into a massage. When she felt the soft mound of my ponytail beneath my suit, her pale blue eyes met mine in the mirror and narrowed in amusement. I glared at her, then gave a helpless shrug and grinned.

"You hiding anything else interesting, Jay? Hmm?"

"I'm not gonna pay you anything, you know," I said loud enough for the bartender to glance at us, shake his head in a tiny warning.

"Well, you can't afford me, can you?" Her hands felt wonderful. I couldn't believe she was serious about the two grand, but she might be.

"Why do you give your mom such a hard time?" I asked.

Terry hunched one shoulder impatiently. "She's such a liar. Pretends she wants 'a civilized drink in a civilized bar' when she knows damn well she's going trolling."

"Maybe she's lonely. Sounds like you were gone a long time."

"Listen, Freud, I lit out because I didn't want to get trapped in the bullshit." She patted my ponytail. "Like you've been." Her hands slid up to rub the taunt muscles in my neck. "What's with the limp little rebel flag, anyway?" she asked.

"Ponytails don't go over real big in corporate American."
"You didn't answer my question," she said severely, then switched to a bright talk show voice. "You married, Jay?"

"Nope."

"Got a steady?"

"Not anymore."

"Then why stay glued to the corporate ladder?"

I tried to keep my smile pleasant. "Look, I'm real good at what I do. I've got, I don't know, a knack for seeing inside people, knowing what to say so they'll trust me. And the money's great. You should see my porche, and my place in Marin--"

"So what do you see inside me?"

"I don't know. I can't figure you out."

A spurt of laughter hissed through her teeth. "Know what I see inside you, Jay? A man with a brilliant future behind him."

I could have slapped her pretty, jeering face. Who did she think she was, saying something like that? And it was none of her business how the ponytail had started, on my birthday a few years back. With Sara pissed off at me, no that year it was Janet. I'd phoned some buddies, but everyone already had plans. I told myself I'd rather be alone anyway, and after dinner I carried a bottle of Dom and a champagne flute to the leather couch in front of the cathedral windows, the cold scent of last night's fire lingering in the chill air. As I drank I watched my movements in the dark windows, comforted by my sharply defined reflection. But the silence made me uneasy, too much like the hotel rooms where I wait for sleep to carry me into
morning when people will speak my name, their warm skin touching mine as we shake hands, my smile reflected in their eyes.

I'd splashed more champagne into the narrow glass, the bubbles racing up to the rim and frothing over. Nobody knew where I was. My family had sent cards, but no one had called. It wasn't how I'd ever pictured my thirtieth birthday, and for the first time the future felt threatening, not distant but right here, an unseen presence like the redwoods beyond the black windows. As I downed my champagne I swore I wouldn't cut my hair, well, the back of it anyway, until I'd figured things out better.

Terry was watching me in the mirror so I asked, "How long since you resurfaced?"

"A couple months. I'm still looking for a place without the bullshit, and this sure ain't it." She paused, shrugged. "I wish my mom would act her age."

"Christ, she can't be much more than forty, forty-five tops."

"Oh ho! Cut too close to the bone, didn't I?"

Stung, I said, "I'm only thirty-four." I leaned forward slightly, worried she was staring at the thin spot I camoflage with careful combing. But she wasn't even looking at me. "Oh lord," she muttered. "Mom's back." She leaned around to peer into my face. "Are you fond of loud public scenes, Mr. Sampson?"

Lilly stalked up to us and said in a low, controlled voice. "Terry, I want you to come home with me. We've got to have this out once and for all."

"What's wrong with having it out here, Mom? You usually like an audience."
Lilly sank onto the empty barstool and whispered, "Why are you so angry with me, Terry? What have I ever done but love you the best I could?"

"I'm not angry with you, Mom. You're angry with me because I won't help you pretend you aren't who you really are."

"What self-help book did you lift that from?" I cut in. I didn't know why I was defending Lilly. It didn't matter because they both ignored me.

"That's not true, Terry--"

"Hell if it isn't." Terry was loud enough to attract considerable attention. "It's fine with me if you want to run after men, but at least have the guts to admit it to yourself."

"Terry, Lilly, calm down." I pumped as much authority into my voice as I could, vaguely aware that Terry was fumbling at my collar. She pulled out my ponytail and I felt it flop in a curly flattened mat down my back.

"See Mom? I'm just protecting you from a two-bit, granola crunching hustler."

"Hey, at least I don't go praying in public bathrooms," I protested.

"You told him about that?" Terry grinned.

"And the prayer wheels." Lilly glanced at Terry, her face blandly expressionless. "I couldn't leave them out." To my surprise, they both started laughing. Laughed so hard, in fact, they had to grab each other's slender shoulders for support. And when they'd subsided they stared at each other, then started in again, hooting like teenagers.

"Oh Terry," Lilly gasped. "Just when I think I can't stand you for another second." She flicked my ponytail with her fingertips. "Mr. Jay Respectable Sampson, what a surprise."
The bartender drifted over, leaned forward and palmed a wet wrinkled napkin from the bar. "Mrs. Brundage, I think maybe--"

"I've invited these ladies to dinner, so after another round we'll be out of your hair." Silently thanking the gray-haired god of expense accounts, I extracted two twenties from my billfold and slid them across the bar with a wink and a warm, sincere smile.

"You're too kind, man." The bills disappeared and the bartender faded into the woodwork. "You two hungry?" I asked.

"We're high on cocaine," Terry said. "We won't be hungry for hours." That set them off again.

Maybe they really were on drugs, I thought tiredly. Maybe they really were hookers. No, there wasn't a pimp alive with the humor to dream up this duo. I rubbed my forehead and wished I was home, lounging on my sundeck in the filtered green morning light of the redwoods, the dogs barking down by the creek, maybe the crackle of sizzling bacon through the windows as Sara cooked breakfast, her long honey blonde hair tucked behind her ears, or another woman cooked it because life was complicated that way and men weren't meant to be monogamous. Only it wouldn't be Sara anymore because on the way to the airport she'd told she was moving back to Seattle. She said she couldn't picture me hanging in there for the long haul, so what was the point? I hadn't argued, because I couldn't see the future with us in it together either, but I wasn't crazy about being alone again.

Terry's small hand tugged insistently on my shoulder. "Come on," she said. "You've got to see this." Lilly swayed to her feet, crooning, "Oh yes, you really must, Jay. It's the best view in Los Angeles. Especially at night."
"What is?" I asked suspiciously.

"The bathroom!" As they pulled me to my feet I looked a question at the bartender. He winked, his smile too warm to be anything but a parody of my own. I turned away and followed the two women down the bar to the restrooms.

Lilly and I leaned against the wall in the narrow passageway at the back of the bar while Terry scouted the women's bathroom to make sure it was empty. Lilly sighed, leaned lightly against my shoulder, the faint floral scent rising from her skin.

"Where did she run off to?" I asked as we pressed back against the gold-flocked wallpaper to let a bar boy lugging an ice bucket scuttle past.

"Hmm?"

"Where did she disappear to?"

"Oh, Terry. I think first it was Vancouver, then upstate New York, then an ashram in Colorado where they farmed organic vegetables." Lilly shook her head. "Her nails were a mess when she came home. And her hair. Absolutely no sheen. Lack of protein, according to Phyllis, that's my beautician. Of course I took Terry to see her right away."

I pictured Lilly writing a large check, handing it to Phyllis with a gracious smile. "Mother love," I murmured. "Spare no expense."

"Well of course."

I glanced down at her, then rested my head against the wall and laughed. Lilly bridled like she might take offence, then she laughed softly.

"Oh dear." She fumbled in her purse for a tissue, dabbed the corners of her eyes. "I suppose it sounds funny, but, well, we each do what we can. I
always wanted to have babies, and nobody could have loved Terry and Gordon more than I did."

I stared. "Gordon?"

"My son. He's in Boston with my ex-husband, finishing college." Lilly's fingers tightened on her tissue, then she dropped it into her purse and smiled. "He's going to be a doctor. What about you, Jay? Any children?"

I shrugged. "Not that I know of."

"Oh, you're horrible." She laughed at me but I felt a little ashamed, like I'd said something wrong.

A toilet flushed in the restroom, and a few seconds later a petite redhead in a black minidress came out and swished past us. Terry poked her head around the door and hissed, "All clear!"

Lilly took my hand and hurried forward, pulling me after her. As soon as we were inside, Terry switched off the lights, and the huge picture window along the far wall seemed to melt away, revealing a dark expanse of ocean hung with a necklace of soft amber lights where Pacific Coast Highway hugged the shore. Out at sea, a cluster of white diamonds glittered against the night as a ship cruised down the coast. We stepped closer to the window. Terry took my arm and pointed south to a blaze of colored lights jutting out over the water, where I could just make out the slowly revolving red pinpricks of a ferris wheel. "That's Santa Monica Pier," she whispered. "Isn't it beautiful?" On my other side, Lilly tucked her hand in my arm and pointed north. "Those lights you can barely see, out on the last point? Our house is one of those."
In the silence that followed I cleared my throat, but they both murmured, "Hush." I glanced from one pale profile to the other. There were probably twenty years between the two women, but in the darkness they looked identical as they gazed out into the night at a more compelling vision than their lives had offered, or I had ever known.

I waited until I felt them stir beside me. "Which of those lights," I asked carefully, "which one of those lights do you think could be mine?"
Pam’s walking fast, her compact body thrust forward like she’s leaning into a hypothetical wind and her short yellow curls bouncing on her low forehead. Behind her the campus lawn is dotted with people, and when someone calls to her, Pam turns and waves without breaking her stride. She hasn’t seen me yet, but when she does her face will crease in a deep smile, and she’ll hustle across the narrow, leaf-strewn lane with a muscular swagger like she’s elbowing people aside. That’s my girlfriend, my scrunchy face, and as I watch her cross the lane, her eyes squinting into the morning sun, I simultaneously want to step out into the sunlight so she sees me, and slink deeper into the pine shadows by the steps of Harding Hall.

I wait until she reaches the steps before I clear my throat. She glances at me, squeaks, "Derek!" then plunges into my arms so hard I have to brace myself. And I can’t help it, I pull her close so her breasts push soft and warm against my chest. Her green eyes are glowing, which is awesome because mostly they’re a hard murky green like tarnished bronze. I hug her tighter
and she ducks her head under my chin, rests there for a moment, then wiggles out of my arms. My hands linger on her warm skin, her fading summer tan the color of apricots. The hair on her bare arms rises like cat's fur under my palms. I don't want to let her go.

The softness lingers in her eyes as she backs away, shaking her head like she's trying to shake off happiness. "I'm gonna be late for Mathewson," she says. "Come over tonight, okay? Around eight-thirty?"

"Hey, no, Pam. Wait. Why don't you come over to my place?"

"Why?" She frowns at me, then glances at her watch. "I've gotta go. Call me later?"

"Okay." I smile my most killer smile, see it reflected in her eyes.

"See ya," she says. Then she rushes up the shallow stone steps, wrestles with the heavy wooden doors. As I watch her disappear into Harding Hall, I roll a small pinecone under my tennis shoe, then crunch it against the sidewalk as I try to think of a good argument for staying at my place tonight.

Pam says my basement apartment depresses her, and I guess I can see that, since it's down a subterranean piss-yellow hallway, the rooms dark and spidery with small square windows high in the walls and a carpet so thin that the cold seeps up from the cement slab. Pam also doesn't like how everything's black and white--the living room walls are hung with black and white posters of Wynton Marsalis, Jim Morrison and Marlon Brando, and in the kitchen is the Jack Kerouac poster I got at City Lights Bookstore back in San Francisco before I moved to Iowa with my mom and little sister. I've painted the bathroom black, and in the bedroom there's a black throw rug, black bedspread, and black sheets that I don't wash often enough.
It's not that I'm morbid. I just think black's cooler than most other colors. My little sister calls it my somber film noir phase. She said I'll probably emerge into lush and vibrant color schemes, revel in a technicolor ambience. I told her to quit calling me a fag. She cracks me up sometimes. She's only sixteen, but we look a lot alike, long pale faces, wide gray eyes and dark eyelashes, pouty mouths. We used to fight sometimes, but we've gotten closer since our parents' divorce.

Pam calls my apartment the cave and tries to avoid it, but I don't think I can deal with her place tonight. She lives in a three bedroom on Tor Street with Alexis and Karri, and the cuteness quotient is through the goddamn roof. We're talking stuffed animals on the flowered bedspreads and every surface cluttered with dried flower arrangements, inspirational friendship cards and white china cherubs. On the refrigerator door there's a yellow happy face post-it that says, "My loss is your gain, weight, that is! Love, the refrigerator."

But how do you tell your girlfriend that her apartment and everything in it makes you want to puke? Whenever I go over there, I'm back in my mom's house, where the bathroom is boobytrapped with pink seashell guest soaps that you aren't supposed to use, even if you're a guest, where the living room's one big taboo of off-white carpet and a white couch you can't put your feet on. How do I tell scrunchy face that the menagerie of china animals on her dresser reminds me of the poodle army marching across my mom's sweaters, across the throw pillows in the spare bedroom, the toilet seat cover, the tea cozy covering the toaster. Pam's apartment is everything I came to college to get away from. You'd think I'd be used to it after a year,
but it's just gotten worse. As soon as I sit on Pam's pink floral couch my knees start to jiggle and my hands start fidgeting, looking for something to break.

I sigh, hoist my bookbag to my shoulder, and head over to Decker Hall for my senior lit seminar. Students throng the sidewalks, hurrying to their next class. It's late September, one of the last warm days we'll get this year. The trees are still leafy, the grass is still green. Squirrels and chippmunks scamper across the lawns, their cheeks bulging with nuts and seeds.

"Hey Derek!" Karin Cummings stands in front of me, arms out to keep me from mowing her down. She's a sorority girl and she really runs true to a certain type—a loud, raspy voice like she's forty instead of twenty, shorts and a vee-neck shirt to show off her smooth waxed legs and bodacious cleavage. Her hair's permed in a kinky brown mane that she constantly tosses from side to side. "You coming to our party Friday?" she asks.

"I might cruise by." I push back my shaggy black bangs, which my sister says makes me look like a young Mick Jagger, and smile into her eyes.

Karin steps closer, makes like she's gonna touch my shirt collar but doesn't. "You should come. Tod's band's gonna play."

"Oh that's real special."

She laughs her throaty laugh. "Ah, they're not that bad."

"I'll try and make it." I raise my hand in a papal blessing as I walk away. Never let them think you're grateful for an invitation, a date, anything. That was my big mistake with scrunchy face. I got on my knees and begged, and after that I never could regain the upper hand.
The sidewalk crowds are thinning but I'm still wading through a sea of babes, which makes it even more of a pisser that I'm so hooked on Pam because I can't hardly look at a woman without thinking about what it would be like. Right this second I'm falling in love with an asian girl walking toward me, her face a pale heartshaped flower with glossy black petals. Her dark eyes freeze mine so I know I'm just another faceless monster-sized american. But I don't care. The air is soft like warm breath on my face, like it's spring instead of fall, and when I see a lanky girl in blue jeans and a tank top strutting toward me, little freckles sprinkling her cheekbones, eyes pale as the morning sky, I fall in love with her, too.

The worst thing about the whole Pam situation is, it kind of snuck up on me. I mean, we started out as just friends. I met her in the feminist literature class I took last fall to fulfill my multicultural requirement, which turned out to be this biweekly trial by ovaries. The only other guy in the class was a jerk who got off on lobbing sexist grenades, then grinning while the women students frothed at the mouth. So I ended up playing apologist for the entire male race, and I must have done okay because halfway through the semester I noticed that the little blonde bulldog to my right was really listening to me. Pretty soon we were loitering after class to hash out the symbolism in "The Yellow Wallpaper," or having coffee in the Student Union, arguing about Madam Bovary. Pam's take on it was that patriarchies punish women for their sexuality, but I argued that you can't look at great literature from such a narrow political stance, and anyway the point is, when sensitive people like Emma try to fulfill their dreams, they end up getting kicked in the teeth, end of story.
Scrunchy's eyes crinkled in a smile. "You don't really believe that."

"Not when I'm with you." I gave this goofy smile, then tried to look
nonchalant. It was as close to flirting as I'd gotten with her, and as soon as
the words were out of my mouth I wanted to take them back.

But I know exactly when I really fell for her. She told me she played
raquetball so we made a date at the rec center, and I gotta admit she kicked
my ass. I chased that black rubber ball until I thought my knees were gonna
melt, its slam and echo pounding in my blood. After she slaughtered me I
bent over, hands on my knees, and panted. I'll admit I was goddamned
pissed. When I looked up, she was slumped against the side of the court, her
gray tee-shirt dark with sweat, her serious little face transformed by this ear
to ear grin. Our eyes met, and I swear my heart actually stuttered, then
started beating again.

The sidewalks are empty and I realize I'm gonna be late to class. When I
reach Decker Hall, I heave back the door and pound down the stairwell to
the basement. The other students are standing around talking in the
hallway, so I know Professor Smith-Gordon hasn't shown up yet. As I amble
toward Diedre and Jim, I try to think of an argument to use with Pam about
tonight. If I come right out and tell her she's got the taste of a lemming, I'm
afraid she'll take offence and dump my bohemian ass. And I want that but I
don't, if you know what I mean.

When I call Pam, she wins the argument but I gain some major
concessions. Instead of hanging out at her place, we catch the bus
downtown to the old Lexington Theater, where we neck in the balcony while
a subtitled art film splashes the darkness with color and sound. Pam's
small, deep kisses make me feel like I'm drowning in a blissful dark whirlpool, but I'm distracted by this creepy older guy a couple rows behind us. You know, sideburns, pasty complexion, big black rimmed glasses that flash back the light from the screen like he's a hungry praying mantis waiting for me to have sex so he can bite off my head. Since scrunchy face keeps her eyes squeezed shut when we make out, she doesn't notice a thing.

After the movie I'm still not ready to face Pam's apartment, so when we get back to campus town I drag her to Caspers A Drinking Establishment to hear a grunge band, even though she hates grunge. She likes that "our love was meant to be" crap they play on Lite 104. We wedge into the packed bar, which reeks of sweat and spilled beer, and through the blue smoke haze Pam sees her roommates Alexis and Karri playing pool at the back, which means I have to suffer through the ritual squeals of recognition. I buy Alexis and Karri fishbowls so they'll get plastered and stay out late. Alexis is a plump cheerful redhead from Chicago, and I get along with her fine, but Karri's a sullen brunette with a male-bashing attitude that just doesn't quit. Even as she lets me buy her a drink, I can practically hear her thinking, what a scumbag, just wants to get us toasted so he can get Pam alone in our apartment. Karri's right, but I don't have to like it.

Pam sits beside me on a bar stool and alternately sulks and nibbles my ear as we watch her roommates play pool. Sometimes she makes me goddamned crazy. I stick it out until Alexis and Karri finish their fishbowls and graciously let me buy another round, even though at this point all four of us know exactly what I'm up to. Then I tell Pam I'm ready to leave and
follow her as she bulldozes through the crowd at the bar. She looks so fierce that none of the guys even thinks about messing with her.

The night's turned cold, and in the blue black sky the white clouds are getting thicker, like angry cats fluffing out their fur. I put my arm around Pam, whisper "scrunchy face" in her ear, which usually makes her giggle, but not tonight. She shrugs off my arm, and as we walk down Tor Street past the old stone Lutheran church and the colonial brick Delta Phi Delta house, she squints up at the clouds while I wonder if I've committed some crime or if Karri's man-hatred has just rubbed off on Pam tonight.

"Do you think we'll stay together after graduation?" she asks.

What do I say? Sure, baby, we'll be together forever, or, I don't even know if we'll be together at graduation. I opt for wordless reassurance, pause under an elm tree and kiss her. She kisses back but then she pulls away. I reach for her, then shove my hands in my pockets. "I don't know, Pam. If I go to grad school that's another two years." It's too dark to see her face, but the rigid set of her shoulders tells me I'm not off the hook.

"That's not an answer, Derek." She spits out the words like she's trying to be patient but it's not working.

The cold's creeping up out of the ground, so I take her arm and start walking. A car full of whooping frat boys screams past us, then it's quiet except for the crickets singing in the bushes, and I don't know why but they remind me of my mom's tears falling into the skillet as she cooked hamburgers, my dad in the living room pretending to grade papers except his face is buried in his hands. "My parents met in college and look what happened to them," I say.
Pam walks faster. The way her loafers slap the sidewalk makes it pretty blatant that this conversation isn't over unless I want to sleep alone tonight. So I grit my teeth and dig out another gristly little lump of truth. "Sometimes I think what I'm trying to do is live my dad's life the way he should have done it."

Pam doesn't say anything, and I'm thinking I hate this. I feel like I'm on the goddamned rack. But then she turns and strokes my cheek like I need comforting. When we reach her apartment, she leads me straight back to her bedroom instead of the usual crap of chatting in the living room for awhile, like we don't both know where we're gonna end up.

So we're finally in bed, where I've wanted to be all day. We're under the covers and I'm on top of her, her warm silky thighs squeezing my legs as I push back her yellow curls. I'm bending my face down to hers when she whispers, "I think I might be pregnant."

I've hauled myself off her and onto the edge of the bed, fumbling for the switch under the ruffled lampshade, before I even realize what she's told me. I stare down at her scrunched up worried face and realize my reflexes have been less than politically correct. What I blurt out next is even worse.

"I gotta say your timing really sucks, Pam."

"I know. It just came out. I've been so worried and trying to hold it back."

Her voice is tearful. Not standard-issue Pam at all.

I smooth her bunched-up forehead, whisper, "It's okay." When I kiss her, her lips are soft but her eyes are wet bullets, so I ask my next question with care. "What do you mean, you think you might be?"

"I'm a week late."
"So what went wrong?"

"I don't know!" Her eyes close and her face crumples up again. We got AIDS tested last spring, but Pam won't use the pill because she says female reproduction shouldn't be treated like an illness, so we depend on her diaphragm. Right now I'm picturing one of my sperm wriggling through a pinprick hole in that beige rubber dome. I close my eyes, shudder, then make myself crawl back under the covers next to her. I pull her close so her head's on my chest. "Maybe it's nothing," I say. "Have you done a test?"

"You have to wait seven days," she hisses, like I'm an idiot for not knowing.

"Okay, okay." I cradle her against me as I reach over and turn out the light. "We'll have to wait and see." I stroke her neck, her back and start to caress her ass but she reaches down and grabs my hand, pushes it back up to her spine. I sigh and resign myself to just holding her while my groin aches. After awhile her breathing smooths out. I lie there, my mind too racked to think past the mere fact of pregnancy. I've already applied to six graduate programs and in my head I've been accepted to all of them. Rain patters on the windowpane, swells to a loud roar. Summer's over, and I think that means something, but I'm too tired to figure it out.

I wake up to a door slamming and Alexis' drunken giggles, cut off by Karri's loud shush. There's a silence, during which I picture Karri nodding toward Pam's bedroom door. And it all clicks--Karri's hostility in the bar, Pam's sullenness, her question on the way home. I feel caught in a sticky web of shared menstrual details, whispered fears around their cozy kitchen
table, and I want to blast my way out of there but I'm trapped by Karri's sibilant whispers in the living room.

The kitchen faucet moans and the tea kettle rattles, so I know they're making hot chocolate, though how they can drink it after those fishbowls is beyond me. I'm still listening to Karri's sharp whispers and Alexis' soft murmur when I fall back asleep. I dream that someone's attacking my mom in the supermarket but when I gun the assailant down he turns around and it's my little sister. The dream's black and white but red blood drips from the corner of her down curved mouth.

In the morning when I open my sleep sticky eyes, Pam's sitting at her dresser doing her face. When we first met I didn't think she wore makeup but now I know better, although it's just blusher and subtle beige eyeshadow that makes her eyes look greener. I'll say one thing for Pam, she's been an education.

"I'm taking the test today," she says. Blam. No good morning lover, no hey sweetie, how'd you sleep. I untangle the covers and start getting dressed. It's still raining. I'm gonna get soaked going home.

"When?" I ask.

"When what?"

"When are you gonna take it?"

She pauses, the eyeshadow wand an inch from her face. "After I buy it."

"I thought you had to take it in the morning."

"I wouldn't know, Derek. I've never done it before."

Right. A reminder that she was a virgin when we got together, saving herself for the altar, though how that jibes with the feminist rhetoric is
beyond me. I concentrate on tying my shoe laces until my resentment subsides. Then I go over and put my hands on her shoulders, kiss the top of her head. "What I mean is, when should I call you?"

"Oh. Call me at ten, okay? I have my 405 lab tonight."

"Okay, baby--"

"Don't call me that."

I drop my hands and step back. "Listen, Pam, this isn't something I did to you, all right? It's something we did together." I make the mistake of looking at her face in the mirror, see the tears rolling down her checks. I hate the way my guts clench when she cries. It pisses me off and scares me, so I stomp out of the bedroom, brush past Karri glaring like medusa in a pink bathrobe. Then I slam out the front door and down the concrete stairs, making as much noise as I can to wake up all the goddamn neighbors.

The rain's eased to a soft drizzle, and as I cut across campus to my apartment, I start to calm down. I take the pedestrian path through the trees and over the creek, my tennis shoes squelching and sliding in the mud that's trickled across the concrete walk. Rain drips from the branches, pocks the stream's brown surface. I'm still me, Derek Thompson. No chains on this boy. If Pam's pregnant, we'll just have to get an abortion. I'll go with her to the clinic, be one hundred percent supportive. Considering all the pro-choice rallies we've been to, I'm surprised I didn't think of this sooner.

My apartment is damp and chill, dark from the overcast sky outside, but it still cheers me up. I switch on the floor lamp and put on a Percy Sledge tape real low because I know the German girl who lives upstairs likes to
sleep late on Wednesdays. My kitchenette's a garbage dump, but I find a halfway clean coffee cup on the counter and make some instant, stir in lots of sugar with no one around to tell me it's bad for me. I don't smoke, do drugs, or drink too much, but I catch flak for putting sugar in my coffee. Go figure. After I take a scalding shower and change into dry clothes, I chow down three big slabs of cold leftover pizza while I study for tomorrow's Southern Gothic lit exam. Then I head out to school.

For the rest of the day I try to put our problem out of my mind. In western history I slide into the seat next to Joyce and stretch out my legs so I'm invading her space, then lean back and grin while she fusses at me. But after class I run into Craig and Dave outside the library, and when they ask if I want to shoot some pool and down a few brews at the Eight Ball, I say I need to study, because I want to be sober as a judge when I call Pam tonight.

I can tell my answer pisses off Dave because his freckles go dark and his face turns red. Craig's blue eyes jeer at me as he mouths the words, "pussy whipped." He smirks as I try to think of a comeback, then says, "Come on Dave. Derek can't come out and play today."

They walk off, and I feel like shit because they're my best buds. Freshman year we blew up a watermelon in the dorm elevator, and the next year we smoked our first cigars at a poker game in my room, and Craig and I practically pissed ourselves laughing when Dave turned green and puked all over his straight flush. We were Iowa's three musketeers, but since I got together with Pam I don't hang out with them as much.

As I walk home, dark clouds drift across the sky. My chest feels tight, like when I was in the sixth grade and I mouthed off to Joe Franklin and he said
he was gonna beat me up after school. By lunchtime everybody knew about it and Joe was bragging that I was too chickenshit to fight. When the final bell rang and I went out with the other kids through the big double doors, I saw the mob around the flag pole, Julie Becker among them. She was one of the guys because she cussed and played baseball, but she was big and blonde and had breasts when the other girls were still trying to fill out their training bras.

Julie was perched on the flag pole's concrete base, swinging her legs, and I swear the only thing that kept me from bolting was her narrowed glittery eyes staring at me. So I sauntered into the crowd and said, "Looking for me, Joe?" He grinned and rolled up his sleeves, and we circled for a minute with everyone yelling. I swung a wild left that cuffed Joe's ear and then tried to stay on my feet while he beat the shit out of me. When Joe finally knocked me down, he kicked my ribs for good measure, then swaggered off, everybody tagging after him, including Julie.

After I limped home, I crawled into my old hiding place under the oleander bushes behind the house, and pretty soon my little sister found me there. Trina was only six so I wasn't ashamed to cry in front of her, and when she crawled into my lap I hugged her as tight as I could. After my ragged gasps subsided, she stared at my puffy split lip and black eye and said, "What did you get in a stupid fight for? Mom's gonna have a cow." Typical Trina, on the money even at age six. But I didn't see how I could have avoided fighting Joe, even though I was whipped from the start. That's just the way it is. Try to be a hero and you end up getting your ass kicked.
The basement hallway smells dank, and my key grates in the lock as I open the door. It's only five but already the light's dim. I switch on the lamps, grab a coke and sink onto the lumpy couch to read "The Wife of Bath's Tale" for senior seminar, but I can't concentrate. I get up and fidget around the living room, ask Jim Morrison what he'd do in my shoes but he just shrugs because he's dead and no longer concerned with the living. I end up calling Trina, and I'm lucky because she answers on the second ring so I don't have to deal with my mom.

I ask Trina how school's going, tell her about this bonehead at a party who fell off a balcony and broke his leg. Then she says, "So what's up?"

I make a fist, look at my thumbnail shining white in the lamplight. "Pam thinks she's pregnant."

"Oh shit, Derek. What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know. I mean, we don't know for sure."

"Well, look on the bright side. If she is, I'll be an aunt."

"That's so comforting." I can't help grinning even while my stomach does this sickening lurch.

"Do you guys think she is?" Trina asks.

"I'm gonna call later and find out."

"Why the hell did you call me before you even know?"

I picture her rolling her eyes in bored exasperation. Sixteen and already a cynic. "I'll call you tomorrow," I say. "Don't tell mom, okay?"

"Oh yeah, like I'm gonna do that." She heaves a sigh like only a teenage girl can. "I swear, Derek, mom's worse than ever."
"You gotta give her a break sometimes, you know?" I clear my throat. "You were too little to remember, but she used to be different."

"Yeah? How?"

"I don't know. Like she'd sing to us when we went to bed at night." I feel like a big weenie saying this, but I can see mom smiling down at me as she dimmed the lights, her hair soft and dark like Trina's is now, and I want Trina to know this.

"Well I don't remember that." Trina's voice is flat, so I give it up and say I have to go.

When I call Pam, the news is not good. The urine turned hot pink, meaning she's pregnant as all get out, according to Karri, who's somehow become an expert on pregnancy tests. Our conversation is tearful on Pam's end, panicked on mine, because somehow I can't bring the discussion around to our options, can't seem to say anything but, "Oh damn. Oh shit. You want me to come over? I'll come over right now, baby. Screw my lit exam."

She keeps saying no, that's okay. And I swear I hear Karri in the background, hissing, "What's he saying now?" Before we hang up, Pam asks me to come over tomorrow afternoon, but I say I want her to meet me here so we can talk without interference. We finally agree to meet at the Student Union at two o'clock.

It's not as weird a rendezvous as it sounds. Up on the third floor there's a study lounge no one ever uses because it's behind a narrow unmarked door that looks like it's a broom closet or something. But when you go inside, you're in this high ceilinged room with a stone fireplace and huge windows
overlooking the campus lake. There's comfortable old couches and armchairs
big enough for two people in love.

Scrunchy face and I stumbled on this lounge one night when we were
cruising around the Union, rattling every door we passed and arguing about
Raymond Carver's short stories. He published different versions of the same
stories, and Pam likes the long versions with the life-affirming endings while
I prefer the painfully bleak, chopped off endings, because they're truer to life.

We never did agree about Carver, but I think half of why I fell for Pam was
because she'd argue as hard as I did about literature, cared just as much.
But after awhile it seemed like when we argued about books or politics we
were really wrangling about how far she'd let me go in bed. When we started
having sex I thought things would get better, but even now it seems like
there's a murky undertow beneath our surface words. I got so tired of it that
last summer while Pam was in Chicago I dated Lori, the quietest girl I could
find. But when I was with her all I could think about was scrunchy face,
how her lips feel when we kiss, her soft little gasps in bed, the way her green
eyes light up when she thinks she's won an argument.

I push open the door to the study lounge breathless and ten minutes late,
but Pam's not there. Relief and panic flood me as I drop onto a couch, figure
I'll wait ten minutes in case she's late, too. I stare at the huge red rug on the
parquet floor, breathe in the room's musty smell and remember Pam sitting
crosslegged on the rug with a book open on her lap as she laugh up at me
with narrowed eyes, and I thought to myself that I'd never been so happy.

The light through the tall windows is thin and gray, and that's how I feel
right now waiting for scrunchy face. The door creaks open and she pokes her
head around, comes inside and shuts the door. She takes off her bright yellow raincoat and hangs it on the coat rack. I pat my knees for her to sit in my lap, but instead she sits in an armchair, looks down at her hands. It hurts my feelings, makes me want to hurt her back.

"So what do you want to do about it, Pam?"

She raises an aggrieved face. "It's your problem too, Derek."

"I know that." I take a deep breath. "Okay, you want to know what I want? I think we should get an abortion."

"We?"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't know what I want to do," she mutters.

"But Pam, you've always said--"

"I know what I always say, Derek. I know that. But now it's me, and I don't know if I can go through with it. I'm not sure I want to do that."

"Well, listen baby--"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

I shove back my bangs, slouch lower. "Okay, okay. But we don't have to make a decision this instant, do we? You need some time to think about this."

"Yeah, but what if I do?"

"What?"

"What if I decide to have it?"

This is much worse than I expected. "Gee, uh, I don't know, Pammy. I don't think I'm ready for fatherhood."
"You think I am?" Her voices rises and she cuts herself off with a gasp. "I want to get a real job, and have an apartment, and travel, and see what's out there, you know? I don't want a baby anymore than you do, but I love you, and it's our baby inside me, and I don't know if I can kill it."

Her eyes are so fierce I have to glance away. She looks frightened and miserable, and my throat tightens but at the same time I'm scared shitless. I stand up, the room suddenly too musty, too dim. Pam stands up too, and I notice her cheeks are pale and tear streaked.

I help her on with her raincoat, keep my hand on her arm as we go down the stairs and outside. Without saying anything, we turn toward the path around the lake, and again I'm hit with memories of last fall, when we lingered here late at night on our way home from the library, watching the red neon from the campus bookstore reflected on the dark water. This afternoon is overcast and cold, and the shore's littered with trash from Burger King and MacDonald's. Pam's head is lowered in her usual bulldog stance, but she's walking slow, like for once she doesn't know which direction she wants to charge off toward. It starts raining but she doesn't seem to notice.

"I look around and nothing's changed," she says. "It's like the world's going on as usual, but inside everything's different." She kicks at a styrofoam cup, misses. "I bet this is how people feel when they find out they've got something terminal, and they leave the hospital and the sky's still blue, and a couple walks by laughing and talking because their lives are going on as usual."
Call me insensitive, but I try to push my advantage. "If you don't have the baby, then nothing has to change."

She doesn't answer, and we trudge halfway around the lake before she stops and looks at me. Her eyes aren't bullets anymore. They're bleak, reflecting the pebbled gray of the lake. "I feel so alone," she says. Then she whispers, "Okay, I'll get an abortion."

When I try to put my arms around her, she stiff-arms me, palms out like a traffic cop. "Just leave me alone, Derek. You don't want to be part of it, fine, don't be part of it. Just leave me alone."

"Ah, that's Karri talking, not you, scrunchy face--"

"Don't call me that!"

It's raining hard. Her face is squeezed tighter than ever. Her limp wet curls cling to her scalp, and her ears stick out so she looks like a pumpkin. When she hugs herself, it hits me that what's inside her is ours, something we made. A wave of sadness washes over me, because I still don't want her to have it. I move closer to palm my hand to her belly but she steps out of reach, arms waving, warding me off, then turns and plunges back the way we came.

I watch her bright yellow raincoat getting smaller as she hurries away. The rain sluices down my face so the whole world seems water, and I think that when she disappears behind the clump of trees where the lake bends south, I'll let her go forever. I'll trudge back to my apartment and be lonely and sad and my life will go on like I've planned it.

I shuffle from foot to foot, and my leg jiggles up and down. When she's almost to the trees I start a sprint but pull myself up short because what
can I say that will make a difference except I love you, let's have the baby, and I just can't say that. So I stand there watching scrunchy face walk out of my life, a bright yellow raincoat disappearing into the trees.

As I turn away and start slogging home through the rain, I try to tell myself that after it's over she'll come back to me and everything will be like before, only better. But I don't believe a word I'm saying, and wherever she is, I know scrunchy face doesn't believe me either.
WOMAN OF THE WORLD

It will be the first wedding Margaret has attended since her divorce two years ago, so deciding what to wear is particularly important. A quick tour of her closet confirms that nothing she owns will do. The pastels are too wistfully bridal, the dark blues too defensively careerist, and Margaret has too often silently censored women who wear black cocktail dresses at afternoon weddings to even consider wearing her black lace with the handkerchief hemline.

Shoes pose an even greater dilemma. Spiked high heels are flattering, but at afternoon garden receptions they tend to sink into lawns, making the wearer lurch across the grass like someone on crutches. And flats are death to a short woman like Margaret. No matter how sophisticated the rest of her attire, they make her look like a stump, or an earth mother into natural childbirth and seven-grain breads.

Margaret ends up using a credit card already as highly charged as a nuclear bomb to buy a cream-colored silk dress in a tiny red parrot print
with a snug waist and flaring skirt. Then, holding her breath in case the credit card explodes, she splurges on a pair of red leather pumps with narrow, but not spiked, heels.

On the day of the wedding she stands in front of the dim mirror on the back of the bathroom door and surveys herself critically. The outfit works. It's festive, a bit exotic to match her dark coloring, but not so flashy that she looks like she's seeking attention, like she's desperate to find a marital replacement. She's thirty-five, and even though she hasn't told many people here that she's divorced, it seems to be a truth universally known, to mangle Jane Austen's elegant prose, that a single woman over thirty is in need of a husband.

God knows she doesn't want a replacement for Garrett, but nobody else seems willing to acknowledge this fact. And sometimes even Margaret isn't sure if it's fact or simply what she tells herself because it's what she wants to believe. But as she suffers the stifling heat of her two-door Honda to drive over to the wedding, she's sure it's fact, because she's glad she's not the star of today's show, with all the responsibility of its success on her shoulders. And the responsibility and anxiety do fall most heavily on the bride, because even if the groom helps with the planning, he's rarely as concerned about the outcome as the bride is. If the multi-tiered wedding cake collapses, if the reception is rained out, if a stout, purple faced man dancing far too vigorously has a heart attack, the groom won't necessarily see it as an omen that his marriage is similarly fated. But the bride, even if she's an intelligent, reasonable woman like Luce, is much more likely, Margaret believes, to be superstitious about such things.
Margaret and Luce are officemates in the ancient, overheated building reserved for the English department's graduate teaching assistants, but that's not why Luce invited Margaret to her wedding. Luce is twenty-six and, claiming to have waited more than a quarter of a century for this day, she's invited practically everyone she knows.

The wedding is at the Episcopal church across the street from the university, and the reception will be held on the main campus lawn, beneath the looming bell tower that has been an imposing, if phallic, symbol of romance for generations of students. It is, Luce confided to Margaret, where she and Jack exchanged their first kiss during their junior year, and where he proposed to her last spring. Fraught with symbolism, the whole damn scene, Margaret thinks as she parks her car in the lot behind the church. She gets out and checks her reflection in the car window. She's gathered her dark wavy hair in a loose ponytail tied with a floppy red ribbon that matches her shoes and lipstick. The dress flatters her, and the narrow heels keep her from feeling dumpy.

She retrieves the white-wrapped present, a silver photograph frame, from the trunk, and walks toward the church. It's a warm, humid June day, punctuated with birds chirping and red cardinals fluttering like small hot flames in the linden and elm trees. Margaret has only been in Iowa for a year, and she's still learning the names of birds and plants. Not knowing the names of things is, she finds, disconcerting, a kind of lexical blindness. Back in California she knew what and where everything was without ever having to think about it.
In the cool church foyer, Margaret deposits her present next to the other gifts on a long table. To the accompaniment of organ music swelling to a crescendo, a pimply, very pale young man asks her in funereal tones whether she's on the bride or the groom's side. She's met Jack only once but she smiles and says, "I'm on both of their sides." The young usher returns her smile, exposing a mouthful of silver gridwork, and offers his arm. As he escorts her into the stained-glass gloom of the church she wonders if he'll seat her in the middle of the aisle. But no, he takes advantage of her neutrality to reinforce the groom's contingent, which is sparse compared to the bride's solid phalanx of rustling dresses, somber suits and ties. The usher guides her into a pew occupied only by an old man fully absorbed in polishing his glasses. The organist launches into "Lohengrin," and Margaret watches the ceremony dry-eyed, thankful she hasn't the slightest urge to weep, for any reason. The groom doesn't even remotely remind her of Garrett.

After the ceremony Margaret strolls with the other guests across the boulevard and through the campus to the central lawn, where yellow tents have been erected in a horseshoe around white tables shaded by yellow umbrellas. A portable parquet dance floor and a small stage cluttered with microphone stands and speakers close off the open end of the horseshoe. The guests enter through gaps between the tents, which shelter a platoon of buffet tables laden with champagne, cold shrimp, manhattan clam chowder, and an awesome array of supplementary hors d'oeuvres. Margaret sees several teaching assistants clustered around a champagne fountain boasting faux marble birds and a circumspectly fig-leafed cherub. She starts toward them, then pauses, resting her hand on the sun warmed back of a white wrought-
iron chair, to watch an older woman, one of the English professors she
thinks, cross the open space between the tables and the parquet dance floor.

Clad in a blue and orange geometrically patterned dress, her gray-
thread brown hair pulled back in an untidy ponytail, the woman walks
with flat footed majesty across the grass. She is large, big breasted and wide
hipped, with a long nose and the most deeply complacent smile Margaret has
ever seen. Glancing around, Margaret feels as if she's surrounded by women.
They claim the tables in voluble quartets, sinking into chairs and fanning
themselves with wedding invitations; they stand chatting in twos and threes,
colorful in embroidered vests and full skirts with primitive designs, their
straw-woven purses looped over arms or shoulders, hips out-thrust to
support the flat of a hand. The more conservative contingents wear powder
blue or baby pink suits with silk blouses and understated strands of pearls.
Certainly there are men present, but in their suits or pressed jeans, they
seem only a background for the stunning variety of feminine forms.
Margaret's gaze returns to the self-satisfied English professor, whose smile
never wavers, even as she wonders fleetingly why the short dark woman in
the parrot print dress keeps looking at her.

But where another woman might direct a flickering downward glance to
make sure her dress isn't sticking to her nylons, or run her tongue
surreptitiously across her front teeth to remove any excess lipstick, Florence
Hurst does neither. Under Margaret's curious gaze, Florence continues her
dignified one-woman procession across the lawn, the broad smile intact on
her homely face. She is a full professor of English literature, and Luce,
despite her giddy mannerisms, is one of her most brilliant pupils; Florence is
determined on this happy occasion to share with the bride’s parents her favorable impression of their daughter’s scholarly abilities. It is her duty, and she will perform it graciously. Then, after maybe just a glass of champagne and maybe just a few of those tiny quiches, and perhaps a chocolate-dipped strawberry, she'll leave as unobtrusively as possible to be home by the time Henry’s ballgame is over. Of course she'll chat with Dara and Arlene and Phil before she leaves. No sense in adding fuel to the whispers that she's so stuck on herself. It's just jealousy, the petty backbiting that can spring up in the claustrophobic world of a university department. She's seen it before, and she never lets it bother her.

Of course she'll congratulate the groom, a graduate student in the biology department where her Henry teaches, although Henry says he doesn't recognize the name. But then Henry's always been bad at names. She teases him by telling people that when he proposed to her in a letter from France right after the war, he addressed it, "to whom it may concern." Her smile broadens. When she gets home, she'll change into an old cotton skirt and peasant blouse, and Henry will come into the kitchen, straddle a chair and chat with her while she fixes supper. Then maybe they'll go for a stroll in the long summer dusk, or sit in the backyard watching the grackles and robins whirring through the trees.

Florence stands at the edge of the little crowd around the bride's parents, smiling benignly as she patiently waits her turn. A flicker of movement catches her eye and she turns to watch that poor Grace Cunningham trudging between the tables, black-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose, a heavy black purse hanging from her shoulder like a bookbag.
The poor thing has been a PhD candidate practically forever, a conscientious but not a spectacular student. Florence has had her in a few seminars but really can't remember much about her. Grace is unbecomingly attired today in a long narrow purple and black dress with bulky padded shoulders that, combined with her bobbed auburn hair, call attention to the way she hunches her shoulders as she plods along. Florence almost shakes her head, almost clucks her tongue. A woman as young as Grace, surely not more than thirty-three or four, really should avoid such matronly colors.

Grace halt her singularly defeated progress when a young man rises from a crowded, rather noisy table to accost her. He's one of what Florence privately calls the new breed of grad boys, hair longish on top so it flops into his eyes, and a ridiculous little diamond stud glinting in one earlobe. This particular young man is rather handsome, tan with green-gray eyes, dark blondish hair and surprisingly red, smiling lips. He and Grace are standing close enough for Florence to overhear their conversation without much effort, and she notices how melifluent the young man's voice is as he says, "Hey Grace. What's up?"

Grace's smile seems strained as she replies, "Oh, hey Tod." Her voice is harsh and slightly nasal. Florence almost winces. Is there nothing attractive about the poor woman? Grace's red-knuckled hand skitters up and down the shoulder strap of her purse as Tod murmurs something unintelligible. Straining to hear their conversation, Florence silently deplores the unwitting parental cruelty of saddling what must have been a spectacularly ugly baby with the name, Grace. But with Grace's next words, Florence's pity vanishes, and it is only with an effort that she preserves her steadfast smile.
"I don't have a fucking clue how you caught it, Tod, but you didn't get it from me."

"Gracie, Gracie, chill." Tod glances around, takes her arm and leads her away from the tables, into the empty space in front of the parquet dance floor. Florence watches them go without regret. There are some things she'd just rather not hear. A band member wanders across the stage, lifts an electric guitar, and a shriek of amplified feedback makes Florence clutch her purse strap. If it's going to be that type of music, she'll leave immediately after paying her respects to the bride and groom. However, another musician steps onto the stage with a clarinet, so maybe they'll play something pleasant for awhile.

When they've moved far enough away from the crowd around the bride's parents, Tod tightens his grip on Grace's arm and forces her around to face him. "That was a mercy fuck, babe, and you gave me crabs. What was all that shit that you hadn't had sex in years?"

"Even if I lied, so what? That doesn't mean I gave them to you." Grace shrugs. "Hell, you've slept with half the department."

"Would you keep it down?"

"Hey, I didn't start this conversation."

Tod glares at her. She's ugly as sin and she drags her sorry ass around campus like a depressed tortoise, but she still turns him on for some reason. He can't figure it. "Yeah, well, you didn't have to lie to me. I would have done it with you anyway. But you ought to get yourself checked out." Then he drops her arm and walks away, leaving her standing by herself at the edge of the party.
There's been no change of expression on her face during their talk, and there's none now as she slowly pivots on her flat heel and trudges toward the champagne fountain. She's thirsty, and after that conversation, she could use a drink. Grace walks past a group of well-dressed, middle-aged people, nobody she knows except Florence Hurst, who reminds Grace of the Queen Mother, like any minute she'll start waving graciously to the multitudes.

Grace notices a familiar looking woman in a parrot print dress standing beside the champagne fountain talking to Sally and Julia. Squinting through her glasses, Grace sees it's Margaret, one of the masters students, about Grace's age. Rumor has it she's divorced, starting life over, the usual stuff for returning students. Grace isn't starting life over because she never really started it in the first place, as far as she can tell. She's lived in this university town ever since she was born, and her dad works here, in parking administration. Grace has her own apartment now, but she's never been farther from home than Chicago, and she can count the boyfriends she's had on one hand. That asshole Tod hadn't even noticed she was a virgin, not that she'd wanted him to.

Sally is only half listening to Margaret as she watches Grace slog toward them. When Margaret pauses, Sally whispers to Julia, "run for your life, it's Grace."

"Hey, Grace, how's it going?" Sally asks. She tosses back her soft blonde hair and smiles at Grace, feeling sorry for her because unlike Sally and Julia, who are in their early twenties and slim and pretty with nice smiles and boyfriends back home they'll probably marry in weddings just as nice as
this one, Grace is unwanted, often unnoticed, and hunches her shoulders unattractively when she walks.

Grace reaches for the ladle and scoops champagne from the foaming fountain into a plastic cup. "It's going," she says in her harsh, nasal voice.

"What were you and Tod talking about?" Sally asks. "It looked like you guys were arguing." If Sally's prominent blue eyes are more than usually avid, she doesn't mind because who cares what Grace or Margaret think. Sally's wearing a slinky black dress, and with her pale spring tan and fluffy blonde hair, she knows she looks quite striking. She'd been flirting with Tod earlier and had felt a disturbing twinge of jealousy to see him talking so intimately with Grace, of all people.

Grace ignores Sally's question, turns to Margaret and says, "I'm Grace. I don't think we've met."

"I'm Margaret. Nice to meet you." Margaret smiles, grateful for this small courtesy, although the woman's presence strikes her as somehow ominous. As if of all the patterns of womanhood she's observed today, Grace represents its darkest shape.

Sally glances over at the crowded table where Tod is sitting, sees him looking at Margaret. What's with him today that he's ogling women way too old for him when Sally and Julia make such a striking picture, Julia dark eyed and chestnut haired and Sally herself so delicately blonde. When Julia leans over and murmurs, "Let's go kiss the bride," Sally flips back her hair and releases what she hopes is a delicious peal of laughter. They smile vaguely at Margaret and Grace and drift off, arms around each other's slender waists.
Left alone, Grace and Margaret lean against the buffet table and watch people strolling among the tables, champagne glasses or small plastic yellow plates in their hands. "What strikes you most forcibly?" Grace asks.

"What do you mean?"

Grace gestures with her arm. "This gathering, this moment."

Margaret frowns, says slowly, "You don't notice the men, just the women, and I don't know, but there's something about a lot of them, this sort of forced serenity. I keep thinking there's this subliminally flashing message--I am woman I am emotionally healthy and completely accepting of myself--and, I don't know, it gives me the yips." Margaret shrugs, unhappy with the anti-feminist tenor of what has just slid out of her mouth, but Grace nods, as if Margaret is a promising pupil who's given the correct answer. This disturbs Margaret. The vague sense of danger that she felt on meeting Grace seems to draw imperceptibly closer, a high thin cloud drifting across the sun.

Grace says, "You're thinking nobody can be that serene without it being at least partly an act, right? I mean, they're denying their shadow sides, pretending they're all goodness and light." Margaret starts to answer, but she's distracted by Luce rustling up to them in her wedding dress of white satin and lace. The dress swishes behind her on the lush, damp grass that will mark this occasion with a bright green stain on the trailing hem. Luce has glossy straight black hair piled high on her head, exposing her long white neck. Her cheeks are flushed and her black eyes are shining. She flings an arm around Margaret's shoulder and says, "Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it all just perfect? Oh, hi Grace. I'm so glad you could come."
"I sure you're tickled pink."

"Well, not that, exactly," Luce admits. "Doesn't Jack look nice?" she asks Margaret.

"He looks nice, and you look beautiful."

Luce hugs Margaret. "And so do you. That's a gorgeous dress." She leans close and whispers, "Todd's been staring at you."

Margaret flushes, feeling self-conscious, on display. She wants to go mingle with the other guests, sit down in the shady anonymity of a table, but now the idea of walking the short distance between the champagne fountain and the nearest table, where Todd and some of the other teaching assistants are sitting, seems impossible. She will stumble. She will lurch. Her heels will unaccountably sink into the grass. "Were you nervous, walking up the aisle?" she asks Luce.

"Oh, completely. I thought I'd collapse, except Dad was holding my arm. But then Jack turned and smiled at me, and I remembered what it was all for, and then everything was all right."

"You were married, weren't you Margaret?" Grace asks.

Margaret becomes even more self-conscious because the question makes her realize that just as she talks about other people, they talk about her. She never thinks about that, or at least, she only did right after her divorce, when she was convinced that everyone she knew was attending an ongoing conference scheduled for the sole purpose of determining the appropriate measure of blame to be apportioned respectively to Margaret and Garrett on the occasion of their failed marriage.

"Yeah," she answers Grace, "but my wedding wasn't half as nice as this."
"Oh Margaret, you're so sweet." Luce gives her a final hug as Jack comes up to them. Margaret listens as Luce tells Jack, probably for the nineteenth time, how happy she is. Jack grins down at her, not at all bored by the repetition, probably because it matches his own state of mind so exactly. Margaret smiles to herself. Jack looks exalted, as if he's performed a particularly heroic task, a perilous but necessary rite of manhood, and from now on everything will be easy with his lovely, loving wife, and his mother will lose her ability to make him feel about five years old.

"Why not?" Grace asks.

"What?" Margaret has forgotten Grace's presence while she watches Luce's vivid face turned up toward Jack's broad one, which beams, sweaty and pink like a rising sun above the pale blue lapels of his tuxedo.

"Your wedding. Why wasn't it as nice?"

Margaret shifts her weight. Her toes feel pinched from standing so long in new shoes. As she answers she scans the tables, looking for a place to sit down. "The wedding was in the evening, at an art gallery, and everything was much more chic, much icier, than this is. There was sort of an ironic overtone to the whole thing. Like, the bride wore gold lamee and the groom wore unrelieved, monastic black."

"You're talking about yourself in the third person."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that fact. Excuse me, Grace, but I need to sit down for awhile. It's been nice talking to you." Margaret gives the low, sideways flutter of her hand that she's picked up here in the midwest as the epitome of casual farewell, and walks off, feeling that her legs are unruly stilts, that she has all the poise of a convulsing donkey. She knows she's being silly,
but she feels as if everyone at the wedding has been watching her talk with Grace, and she has become maladroit by association. As she passes Tod's table he reaches up and clasps her arm. "Hey, Margaret. What's up?"

"Don't stop me, Tod, I'm on a desperate mission."

"Escaping the state of Grace?" There is a ripple of low laughter around the table. Margaret feels guilty but relieved that it's not aimed at her.

"I'm just a tired woman in search of a seat."

Charlie stands up, offers her his chair. "I gotta split. The thesis calls, even on Sunday."


Charlie nods, gives a masculine, more decisive version of the waist-high wave, and walks off. Margaret slides into his chair, smoothing the silk dress beneath her so it won't wrinkle too horribly. She's a good ten years older than most of this crowd, but they seem to accept her as one of them. Not surprising since they all take the same classes, moan about the same professors, make the same complaints about their students. It's like a landlocked and highly institutional cruise ship, all the differences of age and income smoothed away in the camaraderie that springs up among fellow passengers on a rough crossing. Margaret glances toward the champagne fountain, but Grace is gone. She feels a twinge of guilt, shrugs, accepts a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Luce and Jack stroll past, arm in arm.

Margaret has planned to get through this day without succumbing to memories of her own wedding. But as she watches the bride and groom she
knows that she and Garrett never felt the pure glow of rightness, of inevitability, that suffuses the faces of Luce and Jack. Margaret is sure that for her and Garrett, their wedding felt more like going home with a stranger picked up at a bar, the sense of darkness and risk. And she can't help wondering if that wasn't a self-fulfilling prophecy. But she doesn't want to think about it now, doesn't want to see Garrett's luminous gray eyes on their wedding night in the elegant old pink and green Beverly Hills Hotel, when he asked her, quite seriously, if maybe they shouldn't call room service for some hemlock on ice, before life's squalor could overtake them. Margaret, twenty-six and very much in love, had replied that there was something to be said for that, but could he please make love with her first, and afterward they were too sleepy and tingling and relaxed to need any other antidote for their fears.

Margaret sips her champagne uneasily. She senses that someone's watching her, and she's right. Grace stands behind her in the gap between two yellow tents, fiddling with her purse strap and wondering why Margaret left so abruptly when it was clear they were on the brink of profound understanding. Fear, Grace concludes. Margaret fled from enlightenment because she was afraid. Grace sees Florence Hurst flat footing toward her, smiles and says, "Are you leaving, too, Professor Hurst? I'll walk out with you."

Florence stiffens. The last thing she wants to do is talk to this pathetically twisted young woman, but Grace is a student, after all, part of the academic community, and who knows what awful things she's had to
endure. So Florence smiles graciously, says, "My car's over in the church lot. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Grace falls into step with Florence. "No, that's okay. I don't live far, and I like walking on such a nice afternoon."

Thinking what a lot she'll have to tell Henry this afternoon, Florence asks Grace about her studies as they stroll through the Sunday hush of the campus, and she waves a friendly farewell when, after they cross the boulevard, Grace turns up a shady sidestreet.

Margaret doesn't see them leave. Instead, she becomes aware that Tod is watching her unobtrusively while he banterst with the other people seated around their table. Sally walks up behind him and rests her hands on his shoulders. He reaches back and pats her arm in a friendly way, his eyes on Margaret. The roar of voices and laughter breaks against the shady silence of their table. The band begins to play a soft version of a Beatles song.

Margaret turns her head slightly to watch the yellow tents flutter in a sudden breeze that stirs the warm air like the rippling surface of a goldfish bowl, except Margaret thinks she must be a different kind of fish than the others, a black molly, or a flashing neon. People are standing up, turning to watch Luce and Jack holding hands on a platform under one of the tents, preparing to cut the wedding cake. Margaret rises with the others, then drifts off toward a gap between the yellow tents. She wants to disappear from the festive afternoon, from these people she doesn't really know, and wander slowly down the warm, tree shaded streets of this small Iowan town, not really here, not anywhere, just a woman in a cream-colored silk dress,
strolling through the shadows and sunlight that illuminate and darken the face of the world.