63 cottonwood

Terri Brown-Davidson
Kim Chinquee
Jane Eaton Hamilton
Lyn Lifshin
Roberta Murphy

Spring 2005

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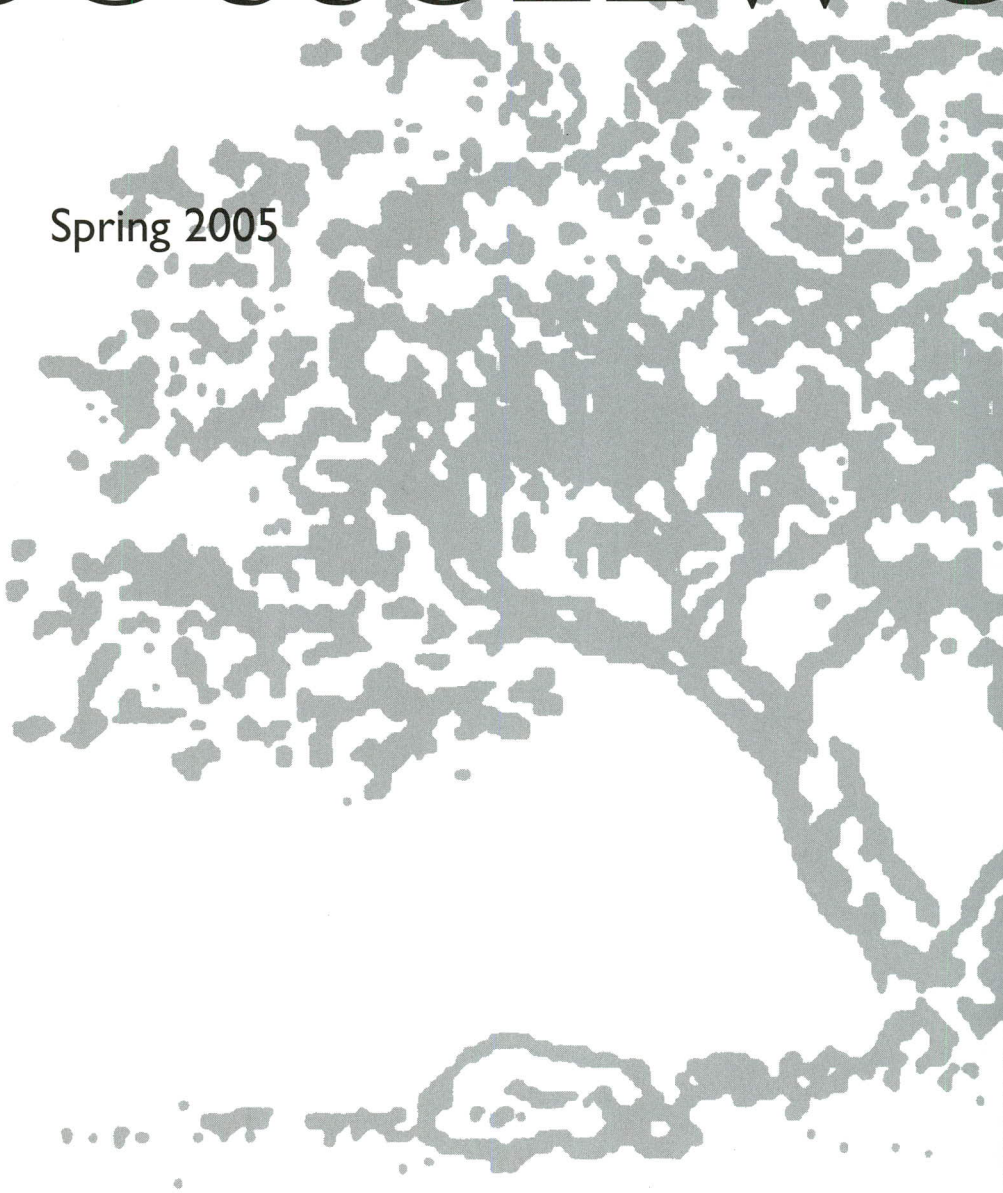

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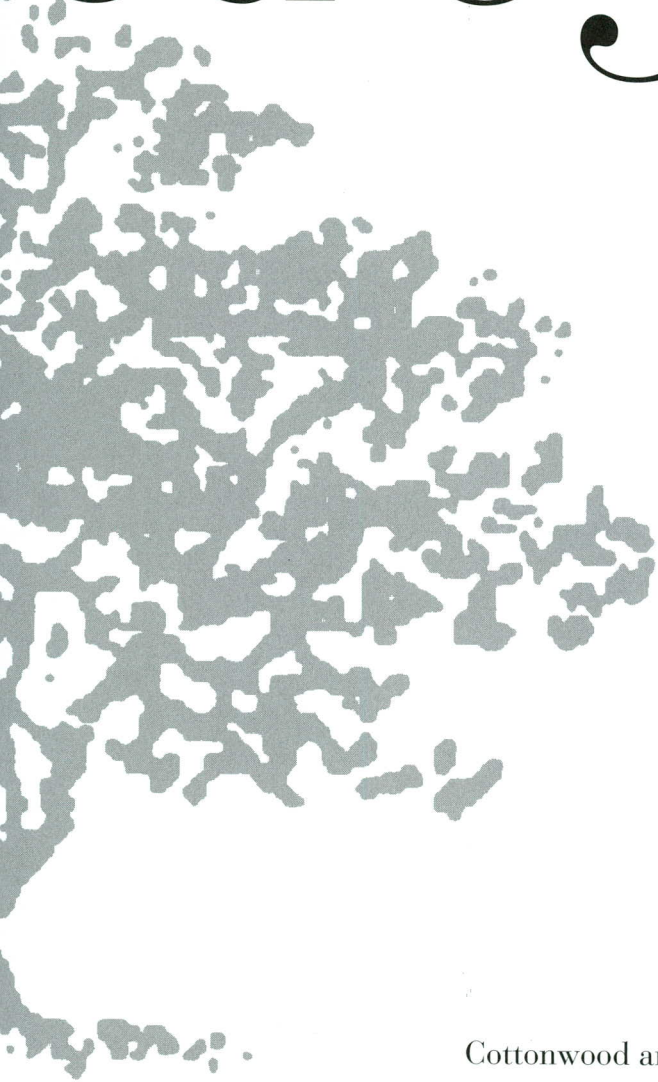

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Roberta Murphy Swells

My mother wanted my father to dress up in her clothes. She still had the smocks from when she was expecting me nine years ago, and she was holding them up in front of her, one by one, asking my father, "Do you like flowers or stripes? Do you like this blue organdie to match your eyes?"

My father was sitting at the dining table, waiting to drive me to Grandma's, when my mother came downstairs to show the dresses. I was trying to eat the tea of Spam and baked beans I didn't want and thinking of Grandma's better food and why Grandma never learned my mother to cook when she'd learned me so much.

"They're too short for Daddy," I said. "Everybody will see his legs."

My mother made a you-hush-Cati face at me. "Your legs are supposed to show, Alford," she said, "so people can crack up laughing. You're not supposed to look like a real woman. The judges will pick the contestant who gives the audience the most fun. We could win a hundred pounds. It would pay for a new suite in the front room. Please, Alford, do it for me. Betty Pugh's husband is doing it. He's wearing a Carmen Miranda outfit, and Alun Thomas is going as Esther Williams in a bathing suit. You'll have plenty of company."

"Not any company I want to keep," my father said. "Cati, will you eat that damn Spam so we can go to Grandma's?"

"I'm asking you for the last time, Alford, *will* you be in the Men Dressed as Ladies competition and win a hundred pounds?"

"I'm glad it's the last time," my father said, "and my last answer is no. I wouldn't dress as a woman and make an idiot of myself for a *thousand* pounds."

My mother said, "You've just proved you don't love me," and she threw the dresses at him and ran out. We could hear her running up the stairs and slamming the bedroom door, that I would have got a smack for, but I was eight and she was twenty-eight, so nobody smacked her. The dresses landed on the table as well

as on my father. He said, "Look what she's done, Cati. Look at that white sundress I bought her lying in your baked beans."

"I can't eat my tea now," I said, "with a dress in it."

My father said, "Ready to go to Grandma's then?" and I ran to get my packed bag. I was sleeping at Grandma's house because it was Friday, my parents' night out.

"Ta ta, Mam," I shouted up the stairs. "I'm going to Grandma's."

"Tell her how mean your father is," she shouted back.

"I'm in for a night of it," my father said as we got in the car. "Can *I* stay at Grandma's?"

I told Grandma and Grandpa while I was eating my second, better tea of rice pudding and toast with strawberry jam, "Mam wants Dad to dress as a lady and go in the parade tomorrow and win a hundred pounds and he won't."

Grandma said, "She's daft. Your dad would never win."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"He's not the right build. Your Grandpa'd make a better woman than your dad."

"Thank you very much, Arianwen," Grandpa said. "No woman could do the work I do, underground eight hours a day."

"I'm not saying about your work. I'm saying about your build."

"I'll be going to the Fete and Gala dressed as myself," Grandpa said, "like I do every year. What about you, Cati?"

He knew what I was going as. He was just giving me a chance to tell again because he knew I liked to. "I'll be going as a Couple of Swells. One of them. In Mam's old dance dress and a hat with an ostrich feather."

I was the lady Swell and Josephine who lived up the street with her father and granny, her mother was gone, was the gentleman Swell. She didn't want to be the gentleman Swell, but Grandma said she had to because she was the tallest. If we won the Twelve and Under Dress-Up we'd get ten pounds each. Grandma was training us to win. When Grandpa went out to dig vegetables in his garden, Grandma and me brought the costumes out of the front room for a try-on. We'd just laid them out on the couch when Josephine came in.

"That's a smashing hat," she said.

"It's for Cati," Grandma said. "Yours is the bowler."

Josephine made a face but she didn't say anything.

"Right then, girls, get into your costumes," Grandma said, and we stripped to our knickers and liberty bodices, and Josephine pulled on the black trousers Grandma had tucked and shortened, and the white shirt and black coat and bowler hat. Grandma was going to paint a moustache on her for the parade. I put on the long satin dress, rose pink, that used to be my mother's dance dress, and a pretend fur stole with a pretend fox's head Grandma got from a jumble sale at a dead lady's house, and the dead lady's hat.

When we were ready, Grandma said, "Right, let's practice the routine then. Go and stand in the passage, and when I count to three, in you come, arm in arm, singing," and we went into the passage, and Grandma counted, and in we went, singing, "We're a couple of swells\We stop at the best hotels," and so on, like that. We practiced for a long time, till Grandpa came in with the potatoes and peas and it was time for Grandma to cook dinner. She told Josephine and me to take the costumes off and go out to play for half an hour before it got too dark.

There was a game of chasing going on in the street, all the boys and girls racing up and down between the joined-together houses on one side and the gardens on the other. Josephine and me had to wait until everybody was in, and then Josephine said, "Let's play, 'What's the Time, Mr. Wolf.'" The other children let her change the game. We were all supposed to feel sorry for her because her mother was gone. *Who can blame her for going?* Grandma said. *What wife could put up with Handsome Danny? She shouldn't have left Josephine, though.*

Josephine was Mr. Wolf. She liked to shout, "Time to eat you all up," and make us all run screaming. But we'd only got as far as, "The time is five o'clock," when Josephine's gran, Auntie Blod, came to her front door. She wasn't my real auntie, just Grandma's best friend. "Josephine, I've got something to show you," she called. "You won't believe your eyes. Come in the house. Cati can come, too."

All the children were listening. "Can I come?" they started saying, but Auntie Blod said, "There's too many of you. You'll see it tomorrow. Only Cati till then."

Josephine and me followed her gran down the passage into the kitchen. Standing in the kitchen was the most beautiful lady I ever set eyes on. She was tall and slender, like the fairy-tale books say about princesses, with long golden hair in curls, and

a silky dress on her of changing green colors—shot-silk it's called—and high-heel shoes and red lipstick and white gloves up to her elbows, and she smiled at us. I thought, *Can it be Josephine's Mam come back?* but Josephine said to her, "You're bonkers."

The lady wasn't upset. She twirled around so the greens flowed in the dress like water, and she had lovely legs, too, in nylon stockings. "So what do you think, girls?" she said. "Who'll win the Men Dressed as Ladies tomorrow?" and it was Josephine's dad's voice that spoke out of her. You could have knocked me down with a feather.

"Whose dress is that?" Josephine said. "Where did you get that hair? Where did them shoes come from?"

"They belonged to your mother," her dad said. "Not the hair. She took her hair with her."

"You shouldn't wear my mother's clothes."

"She left them. Like she left you and me."

"Take them off. You don't have permission."

"It's only a bit of fun, Josephine," Auntie Blod said.

"I want to wear that dress. I should wear my mam's dress, not him."

Auntie Blod said, "Well, if Dad wins a hundred pounds, he'll buy you a lovely dress. Let's go down and show Arianwen, Danny."

"No, it's a secret," Danny Parry said, "until tomorrow. Cati, can you keep a secret? Cross your heart and say, 'Hope to die.'"

"I wish *you* died," Josephine said. She wasn't crying and that it made it worse, what she said.

Auntie Blod said, "Go home now, Cati."

When I went into our kitchen, Grandpa was sitting at the table, all laid with plates and big, steaming dishes, and Grandma said, "I was just coming to call you, Cati. Pork sausages, we're having, with mashed potatoes and peas from the garden. Rhubarb tart and custard for afters." I was very happy to hear all my favorites.

"So, Cati, what do you give for your chance of winning tomorrow?" Grandpa said when we were all tucking in. "Ten out of ten, I'd say."

"They do have a good routine," Grandma said.

"But Josephine might spoil it being sulky. And I can't win unless she does as well."

"You should have entered on your own," Grandma said. "You're a great little actress."

"I know," I said, "but I want to be the Swells."

Just as Grandma was saying, "Are we ready for afters?" we heard someone coming down the passage. The front doors were always open in Nantyglo Street. Nobody had to knock.

Grandpa called, "Is it you, Will? You're just in time for rhubarb tart."

Uncle Will lived up the street. He always called for Grandpa on Friday nights to go to the pub. A lot of times, he came early to have Grandma's afters with us. He didn't have his own wife, she was dead, only a dog named Milly, and we all looked at the opening to the passage, ready to welcome him nice, but my mother came there instead. She was dressed up for her Friday night out, and she was crying.

"Good God, what's the matter, Bethan?" Grandpa said. "Where's Alford? You've never had a car accident, have you?"

"I got out of the car and walked here," my mother said.

"You left Alford? Is he injured? Did you call an ambulance?"

"Hush, Gwylim," Grandma said. "There's no accident."

"I'm sorry to tell you, Cati," my mother said, "I've parted from your father."

"Don't be daft, Bethan," Grandma said. "Sit down and tell us what's happened."

My mother sat on the couch and Grandma sat beside her. "He'll never do anything I ask him. He's stubborn and selfish. He won't enter the Men Dressed As Ladies competition. All my friends' husbands are entering."

Grandma and Grandpa looked at each other.

"I asked him nice in the car and he lost his temper. I said, 'Stop this car. I'm leaving you,' and he stopped the car and said, 'Go on then,' and I said, 'Forever, I mean,' and he said, 'Right. I'll hear no more about the Men Dressed as Idiots then.'"

Grandpa shook his head. Grandma said, "You can't leave him just because he won't go in the parade, Bethan."

"It isn't just that. He spoke to me nasty."

"If I left your father because he spoke to me nasty, I'd be leaving every day."

Grandpa looked surprised to hear that.

"We were going dancing. Now he'll go on his own and find another woman."

"No, he won't. Alford's daft on you. He'll go home and mope. Go home and make up with him."

We heard someone else in the passage. Josephine and Auntie Blod came into the kitchen. Auntie Blod had her arm around Josephine, and Josephine was looking sulky, and I thought, *What have they come for?* And then, before Auntie Blod spoke, I *knew.*

"Arianwen, Josephine isn't going in the parade with Cati tomorrow. She doesn't want to be a man."

"Oh, no," I said. But I knew it.

"You can't change your mind now," Grandma said to Josephine.

"She can and she has," Auntie Blod said. "I'm not making this motherless child do what she doesn't want to do."

"How can Cati go in the parade without her? You're letting Cati down at the last minute."

"You can ask somebody else. Plenty of children in this street. Ask one of the boys to be the gentleman Swell. That would make sense."

"I've altered the suit to fit Josephine, and they've practiced—"

"I can't help that. You'll have to alter it again. Or maybe her father can go with her in one of his own suits."

"Her father's not under twelve, Blod."

"And I've left her father," my mother said.

I screamed then. They all looked at me in astonishment, and I banged my fists on the table and squeezed my eyes tight shut and screamed, "No! No! No!" all the no's coming out of me like vomit.

"She's having a turn," Grandpa said.

"Slap her face," Auntie Blod said. "She's hysterical."

"Hello, hello," Uncle Will's voice shouted in the passage. "Look who I met in the street."

"No!" I screamed with my eyes still shut.

Someone lifted me out of my chair and put me on my feet, and when I opened my eyes to see who it was, I was so shocked I stopped screaming.

My father said, "What's the matter, love?"

"I thought you and Mam had parted," I said.

"Never," my father said. "Never in a million years." He held my hand and took me to the couch where my mother was sitting and put me on her lap and sat down beside us.

Auntie Blod and Josephine were still standing by the passage door, Uncle Will behind them, like people queuing up to buy something. Uncle Will was tall and thin with thin hair. Will o' the Wisp his nickname was. He was looking at Grandpa sitting at the table as if to say, *What's going on?* Grandma was standing next to the table with her arms folded, looking at Auntie Blod. Josephine was looking at me sitting on my mother's lap.

"We'll be going then," Auntie Blod said. "I have to make a costume for Josephine."

"Blod, let's talk this over," Grandma said.

"You've got more serious matters to talk over, Arianwen." Auntie Blod slanted her eyes at my mother and father. "Family business. We mustn't interfere. Come on, Josie."

"Good night, Blod," Grandpa said. "Sit down, Will. We're having rhubarb tart and custard in a minute."

Uncle Will sat at the table. "Do you have Ideal milk?" he asked Grandma. "Custard don't agree with me. Too heavy for my stomach."

"I do, Will. Ideal milk or custard for you, Alford?"

"Neither, thanks," my father said. "We're not stopping. Bethan and me are going dancing."

"You think I'll go dancing with you after the way you acted?"

"I'm sorry, love. To prove I'm sorry, I'm going in the damn parade tomorrow."

"Dressed as a woman?"

"Dressed as a monkey if it makes you happy."

"Let's go home," my mother said, "and put your costume together. Never mind the dancing." She lifted me off her lap onto the couch and stood up. My father stood up as well, and they kissed each other.

"There's lovely," Uncle Will said, "to be married and in love."

"Are we having that rhubarb tart now or tomorrow, Arianwen?" Grandpa said, and Grandma went to the pantry.

"See you tomorrow, Cati," my father said and danced my mother to the passage door.

"Ta ta, Cati," my mother said.

"Here comes the rhubarb tart," Grandpa said. "At last."

"Are you all right then, you two?" Grandma said to my mother and father going out.

"We're going to win a hundred pounds," my mother said. No you're not, I thought, Handsome Danny is. She didn't know

that. I felt mean not telling her, and it was nice to feel mean because she didn't care about the Swells that I couldn't be without Josephine. My mother blew me a kiss. "See you at the parade tomorrow," she said, and then they were gone.

"Come to the table for your afters, Cati," Grandpa said. He was slicing the rhubarb tart. Grandma was heating the custard in a saucepan. Uncle Will was looking at the cut-glass jug of Ideal milk like it was a jug of diamonds.

"What about me?" I said to Grandma. "Who'll be the other Swell with me?"

I started crying again. I didn't feel like screaming this time, only a pain in my chest like the flu when it's hard to breathe, and I started making a noise from my chest.

Grandma put the saucepan of custard on the table and came to me. "Her little heart is breaking," she said. "Hear it, Gwylim?" I didn't know till she said that the noise was my heart breaking. "You'll go in the parade, Cati. We'll change your costume into something else and you'll go on your own. Let's go upstairs and look at your costume."

"That's right," Grandpa said. "Go upstairs with Grandma, Cati. Bit of peace then to eat our tart," he said to Uncle Will quiet, but I heard.

Upstairs, Grandma laid my costume on her bed. "I could cut it short," she said, "and you could be a ballet dancer."

"I haven't got ballet shoes."

"Well, the pink satin I cut off the dress I can glue to your sandals so they look like ballet shoes, and there'll be enough left over to make a crown and a wand, too. We'll get wire for the crown and a stick for the wand from Grandpa's garden shed and cover them in pink satin."

"That's a fairy not a ballet dancer."

"A ballet dancer *dressed* as a fairy."

I could see it. Even though I still rathered to be one of the Swells, I could see it.

"All right," I said. "I'll go as the ballet dancer fairy."

"Great," Grandma said. She blew air into her cheeks and then blew it out. "Right, let's get to work on this trump costume."

The parade was starting at the Town Hall at ten o' clock and making stops on the way to Cyfarthfa Park. Everybody in it could either go to the Town Hall or join at one of the stops. It

would be coming to Caegwen Square at eleven, the announcement paper said. When Grandma and Grandpa and me walked down Nantyglo Street on Saturday morning at half-past-ten, children in not very good costumes were coming out of all the front doors, and Grandma said, "You've got no competition that I can see, Cati."

"*Eisht*, Arianwen," Grandpa said. "Their mothers aren't rolling in money to buy fancy stuff for costumes."

"Hello, Olwen, there's nice Daphne looks. What is she? Hello, Minnie. Raymond's going as a coal miner, I see. How did you think of that?" Grandma was saying as we passed people. In a low voice she said to Grandpa, "I'm not rolling in money, either. Imagination I'm rich in."

Grandma looked lovely in her best summer dress, not like a Grandma, like a Lady Somebody, and Grandpa was in a nice sports coat and trousers and his best cap, only his limping from the pit accident spoiling him a bit, but he had his fancy Sunday walking stick with the silver swan head. I knew I looked smashing. My pink dress was short and full like a ballet skirt, and I had my wand, and a crown on my head, and my pretend ballet shoes on, and my hair in ringlets.

When we got to The Square, it was packed with people and strings of colored flags on all the buildings, and I saw Josephine with Auntie Blod and she was wearing one of Auntie Blod's old skirts, safety pins lifting the hem of it, and a Welsh shawl around her with holes in the wool, a doll in the shawl, and her hair done ragged. I was shocked. She looked terrible.

"Hello, Blod," Grandma said in a not-friendly voice. "I see you made a costume for Josephine. What is she supposed to be?"

"A beggar woman," Auntie Blod said. "Where's your begging bowl, Josie?"

"I forgot it," Josephine said, sulky. She wouldn't look at me.

"Oh well, remember to hold your hand out then when you pass the judges, or they won't know what you are."

"Plenty of beggar women and coal miners in Avon Fach," Grandma said to Grandpa in her low voice. "We don't need to see them in the parade."

"*Eisht*!" Grandpa said. He moved away from Grandma and me.

"Where's Danny?" Grandma asked Auntie Blod. "Isn't he going to walk by Josephine like the other parents?"

"He's gone on ahead to the park," Auntie Blod said.

"Why?" Grandma said.

"To be in the front of the crowd and get a good view." And that was a lie. He meant to mystify everyone, it came to me, joining the Men Dressed As Ladies in the park so nobody would know who he really was, like in Cinderella when she comes to the ball.

Then we heard the music of the parade and all the crowd went quiet, and then we saw it coming up Dynevor Street, the jazz band coming first in their red and gold jackets, playing trumpets and bugles and drums, and behind them marched the judges in their black suits, walking serious, the Mayor in his gold chains, and other big men of the town, and Grandma started telling me, "There's Mr. Tudur Rhys-Powell, the Conservative MP," and Mr. This and Mr. That, but I couldn't listen. I was too excited.

Floats went past after the important men, doctors and nurses on one, and a bandaged-up person lying on a stretcher, and two other persons in pajamas holding a banner, "Avon Fach Hospital," and then the Fire Brigade on one of their fire engines, and then the Welsh Fusiliers marching in uniform and carrying the Welsh flag with the dragon on it, and so on, and then we could see the Men Dressed As Ladies coming, and the crowd started roaring and cracking up, and they all looked ridiculous trying to look like ladies, the wrong shapes for the dresses they'd stuffed in the chest parts, and some of them falling into each other on high heels. Men in the crowd were shouting rude things, and whistling when Alun Thomas went past in a bathing suit—he didn't look a bit like Esther Williams—and I couldn't see my father, there were too many, and then the Thirteens and Up came, mostly thirteens it looked like, not so many, and then the Under-Twelves, a ton of them, and Grandma said, "Go on, here's where you join in, Cati. Stay on the outside so I can walk with you," and I got in next to a boy dressed as a pirate and I started walking. I didn't notice where Josephine got in because we weren't looking at each other.

As we went up Dynevor Street, the pirate boy said to me, "I'm not going to win," and I thought, *I know you're not, I am*, but I said, "You might," to be nice, and over the Pandy Bridge we went and up the Cardiff Road towards the park gates, and the pirate boy said, "A dragon joined at the Town Hall. The dragon is going to win."

I stepped out of line and walked backwards to look at this dragon, but I couldn't see it, the Under-Twelve part of the parade was so long, and so many grown-ups crowding beside us, I couldn't even see Grandma. A man with a paper pinned to him saying, "Parade Official," shouted, "Get back in line, little girl, or I'll disqualify you."

"There's one in the head and two in the body," the pirate boy said, "but you can only see their legs. Otherwise it's like a real dragon with a long, twitchy tail and joking fire coming out of its nose."

The dragon sounded super. "It'll be disqualified," I said. "You have to dress up human."

"No, you don't. There's nothing in the rules paper saying *must be human.*"

We had to stop at the park gates so the judges could take their seats on the stage and we could parade past them, and officials were shouting, "Move back, please. Give the contestants room," and when our part of the parade got onto the park lawn and lined up, I could see the Men Dressed As Ladies going past the judges one by one, everybody laughing at their hairy legs and their falsies, and then I saw my father in a blue organdie dress and curly hair made of cotton wool, and his own sandals—I suppose none of my mother's shoes would fit him—and he looked the worst of all. He wasn't even *trying* to walk like a lady. He went past with his own walk, except his head and shoulders were down and his arms stuck to his side, and he was so big and stiff he looked like a zombie.

And he was the last but one. The last was Handsome Danny. He came out of nowhere it seemed—but out of the rhododendron bushes really—and slipped off a long rain coat covering him and let it fall on the grass, and everyone gasped when he showed himself, so slim in the shot-silk dress, with nice, smooth legs and his falsies not huge, the right size for the rest of him, and he had a better walk than a model on TV. If I hadn't seen him like that already, I'd have thought he was a real lady cheating. "Name, Madam?" one of the judges said, and he said, "Daniella Parry," in his own voice, so everyone knew he was a man, and all the hundreds of people clapped so loudly nobody had to think, *Is he the winner?* And when he joined the other Men Dressed As Ladies standing on the side of the lawn, they all stopped showing off and just stood there looking silly.

Then the Thirteens and Up went past, that didn't take long, and then it was our turn. I saw Josephine go. She held out her hand as she passed the judges, and one of the judges said, "What do you want, love?" and Josephine said, "Money," and Mr. Tudur Rhys-Powell, the Conservative MP, said, "Well, we don't know if you've won yet, do we?" and that showed he didn't know what she was. Raymond went past as a coal miner and nobody clapped, and then the pirate boy, not acting like a pirate, all the children were too shy to act, I could see, and that was my chance. When it was my turn, I went doing ballet, pretend on my toes, waving my wand, and a woman said, "She's a little love," and another said, "The Sugar Plum Fairy," and I knew I must have won.

I didn't stand with the other Under-Twelves. I went to stand by my father so I could cheer him up when he didn't win. "There's nice you look," my father said, and I said, "I like your dress," and it sounded daft, saying that to my father. Then he said, "Oh, look, Cati, a dragon," and the dragon was coming across the lawn past the judges' stand, all shiny green, sequins stuck all over its green cloth body, and a big head made of some sort of painted green paste stuff, with gold foil streamers coming out of its big nose for fire, and it was prancing and turning its fierce head this way and that and twitching its tail, and roars coming from it, and all the judges smiled and the people shouted, "Hooray!" and one man shouted, "It's our Welsh dragon," because it was on our flag, and there was much more clapping than I got, and I wasn't so sure I'd won anymore.

Then the parade was over and we all had to wait for the judges' decisions. "Look at Handsome Danny preening," Gerald Pugh said as we waited. Gerald Pugh was Carmen Miranda with a bunch of bananas on his head. "You'll be losing Bethan if you're not careful, Alford."

Handsome Danny was posing under a tree for the photographer from "The Avon Fach Express," a lot of real ladies crowded around him, and my mother was one of them. She had her arm linked with Danny's to be photographed with him.

"They all fancy Danny," a man in a black evening gown said.

"A lot of good it will do them," Alun Thomas said. "He only fancies himself."

"Maybe he'd fancy you, Alun, if you had trousers on instead of a bathing suit."

All the men laughed nasty, and my father said, "Hush up, please. Can't you see there's a child here?" and the men said, "Sorry, Alford," and Handsome Danny, Beautiful Danny now, was giving the photographer a film star smile, and just as the photographer took another snap, my mother kissed Danny on the cheek so she might be in "The Avon Fach Express" kissing him, I thought, and that wasn't right. Just as I thought that, my father said, "That's enough," and he went over and caught my mother by her arm and pulled her out of the group around Danny, and it looked scary, a big zombie woman pulling my mother and my mother pulling back, and then the Mayor announced from the judges' stand that the judges were ready, and everyone shut up and listened. The dragon was squatting on the grass, like a real dragon, and some very little children, too small to be in the parade, were petting its body. *It's won,* I thought. *It's only fair.*

The judges handed their papers to the Mayor and he said into the microphone, "The loveliest lady in the parade is Miss Daniella Parry," and we all knew that already, and Danny went up on the stage and was photographed with the Mayor handing him the check for a hundred pounds, and then the Mayor sent him to sit with the judges, and all the judges were leaning toward him and smiling silly, and Gerald Pugh said, "Old Danny's in seventh heaven. Everybody wants him, the men as well as the women."

A girl come as a Catherine wheel won the Thirteens and Up. She had a lot of sticking-out wires attached to her with different colors of raffia paper wrapped around them, it would be a job to get all that off, and when she got on the platform, she started twirling and nearly poking the judges in their eyes with her wires, and the Mayor said, "Stop that," and she stopped.

"Last but not least, the winner of the Under-Twelves," the Mayor said, and the dragon on the grass lifted its head towards the Mayor, and we all waited for him to say it was the winner. "A very hard decision, ladies and gentlemen. Aren't they wonderful? Haven't they made us proud today? They should all win, but only *one* of them can, and the lucky *one* is Robin Hood."

Robin Hood? I couldn't believe my ears. I didn't even know there was a Robin Hood in the parade. Then I couldn't believe my eyes when he went forward. He had on a green tunic and cap and a bow over his shoulder and arrows in his belt, it was a

catalog costume, anybody could see, that wasn't fair, but he still wasn't the best by any means, definitely not better than the dragon, and I knew him, we were in the same class in school. He was Humphrey Rhys-Powell, the son of Mr. Tudur Rhys-Powell, the Conservative MP, and when he went up on the stage a voice in the crowd shouted, "Foul play! The dragon should win!" and the Mayor shouted back, "Be a sport, sir," and someone else shouted, "Fixed! A judge's son can't win," and the Mayor said into the microphone, "Quite right. We barred Mr. Rhys-Powell from voting. Refreshments served on the other lawn, ladies and gentleman, and rides for the children," and he waved his hand at the jazz band and the band struck up "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" and then nobody could hear anything but the music.

I went away. I didn't want to see the winners being photographed, and the dragon lying flat on the grass like a slain dragon. I followed the crowd going for refreshments. I was nearly crying, it was so mean and bad for the dragon, but I still wanted candy floss and a ride on the dodge 'em cars, and I saw some of my friends from Nantyglo Street, Raymond as a coal miner, Daphne as something, and Josephine shoving her doll into a rhododendron bush.

Josephine said, "You didn't win, Cati."

"Neither did you," I said.

Raymond said, "It was fixed." He always said what he heard other people say.

"Let's queue up for the dodge 'em cars," Daphne said.

Josephine put her arm through mine. "We should have gone as the Swells. I'm sorry we didn't."

"It's all right. Humphrey would have won anyway."

"Aye, it was fixed," Raymond said, and we all went to where the rides were.

A long time later, when the refreshments and the shows were packing up and nearly everyone had gone except the Under-Twelves cadging left-over candy floss and saying to the showmen, "Don't go yet," I saw Grandma and Grandpa coming to me.

"We've been looking for you all over the place," Grandma said. "Sorry you didn't win, love. It was fixed."

"Where are Mam and Dad?" I said. "Are they friends or not-friends?" I was remembering now my mother and father pulling each other.

"Friends, of course," Grandma said. "They're off to the pictures, a night out because they didn't have one last night. You'll be staying with us, love."

"I'd like to go to the pictures with them."

"It's a grown-up picture, Cati. I'm doing roast lamb and mint gravy for dinner. Trifle for afters."

"Cati and me will stop in the park for a bit," Grandpa said.

"What for?" I said. "Everything's finished."

Grandpa winked at me, so I knew then he had a secret up his sleeve.

"Be home by six," Grandma said. "Ta ta, Cati," and she hurried off to catch up with some Nantyglo women.

"What?" I said to my grandpa.

He put his hand in his pocket and brought it out with two half-crowns and a sixpence in it. "Found in the grass. More where they came from."

"Whose money is it?"

"We could never know, all the hundreds of people here, so it's finders, keepers. Come on, let's treasure hunt," and we went all across the lawn and found pennies and sixpences and shillings, and when Grandpa counted it all we had over a pound. He said, "We're in the money, Cati. Bracchi's Cafe for ice-cream, is it?"

"We can afford orange pop and cakes, too."

"If it spoils your dinner, tell Grandma the sun made you sick."

"I did feel sick," I said, "but I don't now," and off we went, arm in arm, the coins jingling in Grandpa's pocket, down the Cardiff Road to town as fast as Grandpa's limping leg would go to spend our money, and as we went, I sang, "We're a couple of swells," and Grandpa joined in, "We stop at the best hotels," and so on, like that.

Lyn Lifshin

Champlain, Branbury, The Lakes at Night

always women in the
dark on porches talking
as if in blackness their
secrets would be safe.
Cigarettes glowed like
Indian paintbrush.
Water slapped the
deck. Night flowers
full of things with wings,
something you almost
feel like the fingers
of a boy moving, as if
by accident, under
sheer nylon and felt
in the dark movie house
as the chase gets louder,
there and not there,
something miscarried
that maybe never was.
The mothers whispered
about a knife, blood.
Then, they were laughing
the way you sail out of
a dark movie theater
into wild light as if no
thing that happened
happened

Lisa Roullard

Due East of George

Out my cracked K-car
window: a farm truck, flatbed
stacked with hay bales: a pyramid,

and three dogs,
each a different breed, steadied
on all fours facing forward. Mind

foggy from tracing worn interstate
for hours—I lose track of what
I know is mine. The flat land

can't really belong
to anyone, but I drive straight
just to hold it down. Exhaust

clears the tailpipe mile after mile
per minute. Then crop names
begin to appear

in the fence: peas, corn, green
beans. Each dog
on the truck claims its own stack

of hay—like chromed greyhounds
on the hoods of old Lincolns. The sky
keeps reinventing clouds.

Stacia J. N. Decker

Farm Narrative

"If I don't come back, throw me a line."
—Rancid

For as long as we had known, there was a disk stuck in one of the telephone poles in the field along the hedgerow. It seems Barbara got too close with the tractor one day, and, well, the disk is still there. When Kirk and Barbara were kids, Dad wanted—expected even—them to help out on the farm. (After all, his grandmother, my grandmother told me, had said he was too old to play without doing any work when he was four years old.) Kirk, who was an award-winning professional photographer in his twenties and a Teamster for UPS in his thirties, still knew what he was doing when he came down from Missouri occasionally to help out with harvest. But then, I guess he did spend a summer custom-cutting when he was a teen.

When we were little, our birthday always seemed to be during harvest. One year, my mother collected juice concentrate cans and made us a whole bunch of little firecracker cakes.

Harvest is fun when you're little because you can ride on the combine with Dad or in the truck with Mom and, sometimes, someone will let you drive in the field.

But, always, it's too hot.

Mom stands in the kitchen and makes sandwiches on the counter to take out to Dad.

You have to be careful walking out in the field because the stubble will scratch and sting your bare legs.

The combine getting closer, here Dad comes. Dad pulls us along the truck and the header's up, blades rotating, teeth scissoring the empty air, and there's dust and noise everywhere. He

pushes the lever on the floor beside his seat and the wheat comes; you can hear it shimmy in the auger loud. The wheat pours out with a cloud and the dust and chaff flies around your head while you run from the truck to the combine, reach up and grab the metal stairs, haul yourself up with jerky pulls with the small water jug in one hand. Yell to Dad. He unscrews the lid and drinks in gulps, water and sweat running down the dirt and stubble on his chin, his skin permanently burnt by the sun, a color darker and redder than the one he was born to. Hold on to the rail. The combine lurches forward, making a new mountain of wheat in the truck bed, grain pooling and running down from the peak. He eats the sandwich, but he'll never eat anything else Mom sends out.

By the time we were teenagers, though, Steph and I had already grown up spoiled and good-for-nothing. (The whole reason Mom and Dad had had children again, when Kirk was fifteen and Barbara was thirteen, was for us to take care of them in their old age. If only they could have foreseen the tuition bills . . .) I never did learn to do much more than fetch and haul, to ride along, to pull *that*-one-not-*that*-one lever *just-a-little-WHOA*. I could wave back Dad in the truck or the tractor onto the tongue of the plow or the disk and drop the bolt through the holes when they lined up. Eventually, I could follow in the truck while Dad took the combine to grandma's or brought it back. I could drive close behind him on the paved roads until the cars that piled up behind him could sense that I was with the combine, was part of the farmer, and would pass us both when they could. And I could turn off behind him onto the back road, and eat some carrot sticks and sing to the radio and look at the big houses people are starting to build out there in the middle of nowhere and at the houses that have always been there, and drive in the mud of the road behind him in second gear.

But I was too squeamish to climb up the rotting board ladder that looked like it had been homemade when my father was a boy and scramble up the top of the bin at grandma's to close the bin door. And, watching Dad tromp up the ladder with it wiggling and squirming under him, I held my breath and thought damn, damn, I should've done it, he's too old and way too big and now he's going to fall and kill himself getting back on it off of the bin, and I should've just done it, I would've mended eas-

ier when I fell and broke something. And, still, I was glad that he had done it.

It's three in the morning and how can I sleep with the thunder and lightning and wind right outside the house? And this is it; tonight's the night it's going to happen, the house is going to blow away and we'll all be killed. Can you hear a train, does that sound like a train? They say it sounds like a train. What if I hear something that sounds like a train, hear it outside, coming toward us? It'll be too late. I'll know it's coming, that I'm about to die, but it'll be too late. If someone broke into the house to murder us all and take everything (they wouldn't even have to break in, they could just open the door and walk in and nothing to stop them, nothing is ever locked), I could at least try to hide, to sneak out a window. Where would I hide? The house is too small and they'd know to look under the beds, so that leaves the closets and I could burrow back into the closet and curl up under some clothes and hide. It wouldn't work; they'd find me and drag me out and kill me and maybe it's wrong to try to save myself while they kill my family but I couldn't stop them. Maybe I'd see them coming in and they wouldn't see me and I could run down the hall and wake up Mom and Dad and warn them—they'd probably still get Stephanie while I was telling Mom and Dad. But even then I might not have enough time and what if I couldn't get Mom and Dad up fast enough? And what if I still couldn't save Mom and Dad because what could Mom and Dad do? Daddy would get mad and go out, storm down the hall, and then they'd—Don't think about it. *It wouldn't work, but I could at least try to hide, maybe I could get away, but you can't get away from a tornado. If it comes, that's just it. Please, God, please don't let there be a tornado, please don't let there be a tornado, please don't let there be a tornado . . . Look out the window, how bad does it look, how much are the trees swaying, how hard are the tree branches blowing? Get up out of bed go into the hall go turn on the TV. If it's bad the news will be on and the radar will show if the tornado is coming, how close it is, where it is. I'm in the hall coming into the kitchen, looking over at the sliding glass door that's like a big mirror at night when the curtain is pulled back and the light from inside is reflecting everything back in, and the lightning strikes and suddenly I see through the glass. The sky lights up and there's Dad outside, up*

against the sky on the edge of the grain truck, fighting the wind for the tarp, struggling in silhouette to cover the wheat from the rain.

I got home late and Mom and Dad were already in bed and the mail was on my bed, opened. The Georgetown envelope was thick, and I read it and ran down the hall to jump up and down and call the boyfriend who had just dropped me off. Mom and Dad made a show of thinking about it, but I knew they had to let me go, they wanted me to go. Dad told me they'd see to it that I got the first year, at least. The second year he told me that, even if Mom got laid off, I'd get to graduate. The third year we were on the phone and Dad told me something that happened at work the other day he thought was funny. One of the other crane operators got a false positive on a drug test and a pipefitter was teasing the safety guy: you better be careful and not do anything to him too quick—you know his daughter's the attorney general for the state! The fourth year they sold Grandma's land and Steph said you might as well, there's nobody who's going to farm it now.

If you go along to dump the wheat, the men at the co-op give you a sucker when you weigh out. They come in different colors in a plastic co-op wrapper, flat on one side with ridges forming squares on the other. If you go to Sedgwick to dump the wheat, you can go to the little general store with the big milk ad painted on the side of it and the wood floors and the meat and cheese counter at the back and the room on the side with the boring stuff like laundry detergent in it and get all kinds of good stuff. You'll have to at least stop at the convenience store for some ice and a two-liter. You don't want to go to Furley to dump the wheat, because there's nothing there but the elevator except for maybe that brick building where sometimes Mom will get you a pop in a bottle and that gas station at the back of town that has a vending machine, I think. That's like, when you go get parts, you want to go to Bailey's, the store that has all the other stuff, because it has all the candy on that little wall by the check-out. (Yes, all those bags of generic candy . . .) You don't want to go to the other one right by it, J&H, because all they have is parts, except it does have those round chairs in the corner that you can spin on till you feel kinda sick and you can get Mom or Dad to

buy you a pop from the cooler over there. They have the toy tractors, and those are cool, but they're always in a box, so you can't play with them, so that's no good.

On the phone Dad said what are your plans? And I said grad school, I don't want to work. And he said whereabouts? And I said New York! And he said no, don't go *there.* And I said yes! And he said Staci . . . And he said I'd like to see you come back to the Midwest some day, you need to get back to the Midwest. And I said yeah . . . well . . . we'll see. And I went one day after work and got a head of wheat tattooed on my foot and woke up scared in the night a couple times a month, afraid they would find out and it wouldn't matter that I got it for them.

When he was in college, Dad was offered a job with the Farm Bureau, but he just wanted to come home and get his own farm. Dad was the president of the VOX club in college and they had white jackets with purple and gold lettering on the back that "some fruity art student" designed, but I never saw Dad's because he burned it one day before I was born with some old 4H ribbons and a lot of other stuff.

On the phone Dad said should we use the money to buy more land or do something else with it? And I said buy more land. And he said do you care one way or another if we sell where we're at now, maybe move farther out? And I said you can't sell the land I grew up on; you can move, but I want that land. *Oh, Daddy, you don't know it, but, I promise, some day I'll come home and set my lands in order.* You know the old joke, don't you? What would the farmer do if he won the lottery? Keep on farming till it's all gone.

Later, you'll kind of like J&H because you can sit at the counter on a big square metal stool with the old men in overalls or the younger men in jeans and a plaid shirt, boots and a John Deere cap, wire cutters on their belt, who bring in their boy, teenaged in an old Bulls t-shirt and a baseball cap, and you can buy Chiclets from the counter dispenser while the old couple and their son behind the counter look up the right number and find the right box and write it up on a little pad, saying what else? because a farmer always needs another part. Something else is always broke, or about to go.

And, later, Dad will send you in his truck with a blank check, signed in his tight font, his name the only cursive he ever writes, and the owners' manual, with the page already found and the number already pointed out to you. And you can walk into the store as if you know what you're doing, as if you're the daughter you wish you were—the daughter it's too late to be with your education and no knowledge, with your boyfriends who aren't men, with your sublet on the East Coast and all the bar clothes you bought last year—you can walk in and up to the counter and buy a couple hundred dollars of parts in little white boxes each time.

Alice Stern

Animals

We never had any animals, Al and I, never wanted any. The way we looked at it, we had the children instead. Plus we had the house, one of those very old houses far from the city as possible that everyone we knew was buying, so of course we had to do the same, and it had lots and lots of rooms. What with all the rooms and all the bodies to keep clean—the children's bodies and our own—and wanting them to be clean all at the same time, especially if company was coming, but even if company wasn't coming we didn't want any animals.

I didn't think Ricky did either. He said as much once when I was reading to him and he was sitting next to me on the couch the way three-year-olds sit, all the way back with his little legs stuck straight out in a V-shape. I was reading aloud the story of "The Foolish, Timid, Little Hare" and thinking what a good story this was for a three-year-old. They're supposed to like animals and they're supposed to like repetition, predictability; it makes them feel secure. "The Foolish, Timid, Little Hare" was full of animals and repetition (one long boring litany, in fact) and predictability. So I assumed our youngest was feeling more and more secure as each animal jumped on the-sky-is-falling bandwagon, and we'd finished with the deer and the elephant and the tiger and were heading straight toward the King of Beasts when Ricky stopped me, right in mid-litany.

"That's enough," he grunted (he had an unusually deep voice for a three-year-old). "*That's enough animals.*"

I was surprised, but I said, "my sentiments exactly," and snapped the book closed. So naturally we didn't think Ricky wanted any animals (we always called them that—animals—never pets).

Ricky at three was a man of few words, and when he grew older he still was. Once when the SPCA came to visit the elementary school, I asked him about it and all he would say was, "we had an assembly." When I pressed him for details he expanded grudgingly: "The SPCA came."

If I wanted to know more I had to get it from his sisters, be-

cause Ricky wasn't a talker; neither of our two boys were. I supposed it was because the way it felt to have two older sisters just up the road who were perfect prodigies at talking.

The girls spent their childhoods following me around, getting everything they wanted (actually making me do 180-degree turns) through Word Power. When the boys saw how good Becky and Mimi were at talking, I think they just gave up, resorting to the briefest possible utterances. In a way it was nice for me, restful. When I had to go somewhere in the car, I'd often take one of them, Robbie or Ricky, along just for ballast. They'd sit beside me strapped into their harnesses, looking as full of interest and contentment as if they were off on a round-the-world journey or a trip to the moon. It had a calming effect, the way they never said a word, never interrupted my thoughts.

It was a problem, though, when they got sick. Sometimes I wouldn't even know till they didn't show up for a meal. Then I'd investigate, go upstairs to the second floor, because the way our house was laid out all the children's bedrooms were upstairs while our bedroom was downstairs. It was that way when we bought it. I had my doubts, but Al loved it.

"What could be grander?" he said, "than a master bedroom on the first floor? So much more *privacy*, and safer, too."

"Safer from what?" I asked.

"Safer in the event of burglars," he said.

But I'd found it hard when the babies cried in the middle of the night—hard enough to haul oneself out of a deep exhausted sleep, but then to have climb stairs to a different floor! I felt separated from the children, it seemed unnatural, and I grieved over it. Sometimes I'd even forget, be so busy downstairs I'd forget all about the second floor as if it were a different world. But when Robbie or Ricky didn't show up for our six o'clock suppertime I'd go upstairs, and a wave of heat would hit me as soon as I entered the room; the air would be positively shimmering over the bed where Robbie, or Ricky, would be lying quietly stretched out on his back.

"Are you sick?" I'd ask.

"I think so."

That was pretty much it, all they'd say, even when they were burning up with fever, while their sisters would come down to breakfast every morning wearing something I didn't want them to wear and they knew perfectly well I didn't (last year's out-

grown shorts on the first day of spring, worn with black tights to mollify me but which only made them look like they belonged in the chorus line of "Can-Can") and announce, "I have a headache." Or, "I have a stomachache." Sometimes both. It was a kind of covering statement, a daily insurance policy they took out against all contingencies.

"I don't believe it," I'd say. "How can you have a headache when your own mother never had a headache in her whole life? I don't even know what one feels like, and as for stomachaches, when I was your age and had a stomachache I'd be bedridden and retching. They had to call the doctor in the middle of the night and I had to suck on a piece of ice, that's all I was allowed for twenty-four hours, so what do you mean you have a stomachache?"

They never forgave me for this, for not believing them and for not paying enough attention to them when they were *really* sick and bringing them chicken soup. They said I never carried soup or cups of tea upstairs to their room on a tray the way *other* mothers did, and when I said it was because they "cried wolf" so much, they said that wasn't fair—or true—or nice; and I was very mean and they never did forgive me.

So when the SPCA came to the children's school and all Ricky would tell me was "the SPCA came," I knew I could find out the rest from his sisters. They told me that propaganda had been handed out.

"Pet Cards," the girls explained. "You got to choose a Pet Card and then you could take the card home and show your parents and your parents would get you that kind of pet."

Becky and Mimi, knowing how their parents felt about animals, had chosen, respectively, a turtle and a goldfish, so as not to be too terribly disappointed. Ricky didn't show me any Pet Card, and for all I knew he didn't have one.

It was only some time later when I was putting away his clean clothes, rolling up his socks into nice neat balls, that I came across a Pet Card way back in the drawer under one of the rolled-up socks. It was shaped like a bookmark and had a picture at the top of an adorable kitten, a redundancy, as what other kind is there? Ugly cats maybe, but it's pretty hard to find an ugly kitten. Underneath the picture of the adorable ball of fluff was the heading: HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR NEW KITTEN, followed by a list of do's and don't's, all the things you

were supposed to do and all the things you should never, ever do (like drowning them—no, of course it didn't say that, but it crossed my mind that they might have).

Along with the Kitten Card I discovered two other curious objects—a rock and a tin box. The rock, I remembered, was a present from Ricky's sister Mimi—she'd found a nice egg-shaped one at camp and crayoned it very prettily for her brother's birthday. The tin box had once held cookies and was a Christmas-stocking present from me. I'd spotted the box while doing a walk through of Bloomingdales' gourmet foods department on one of my trips down to the city. The box in its cellophane wrapper had a lithographed illustration, an old-fashioned-looking little boy playing with old-fashioned blocks. I think he wore a Buster Brown collar or maybe a sailor suit—at any rate, it looked very turn-of-the-century. Since this was well before nostalgia items caught on and flooded every dime and discount store, I thought it a treasure and grabbed it. Even though the little boy playing happily with blocks had little to do with my son. Ricky had never been particularly happy. And we never could get him interested in blocks.

I had to admit I bought that Bloomingdales' cookie tin to please myself, and I was afraid Ricky would despise it. Especially since the cookies, which were shaped like old-fashioned toys—drums, tops, sailboats—were minuscule and singularly tasteless (up in his room I'd sampled one). I was surprised, and strangely touched, to find that he'd eaten every one and then kept the box.

Every time I went to put away his clean clothes I'd see it, along with the Pet Card and Mimi's rock. Then the time came when I wasn't allowed in his room anymore (he and Robbie had their own rooms now that their sisters were away at college), even to put away his laundry. Ricky was in his teens, and his body had finally caught up with his voice.

The deep gravelly voice he'd had since he was a toddler had been his trademark, and we thought it was so cute. Both of us did, *mea culpa*, but his dad especially. Al would even say things on purpose to make Ricky growl, and since growling was Ricky's way of stifling his tears, choking them back, I had the grace to wonder if this wasn't cruel. "Can't help it," his father said. "That growling coming from a creature so small and pink and white, and tear bedewed?—it's just too delicious!"

We didn't find out till much later that you are not supposed to do this to children. I found out by reading books on the subject and I tried to get Al to read them, too.

"I can't read this stuff, it's too boring, the author doesn't know how to write," he'd say and hand the book back to me. "Furthermore," he'd insist, "it's just nonsense that all Ricky's problems started by my teasing him. It's just the spirit of the times to lay everything on to parents, blame them for everything." Instead (he said) of accepting the truth: that WE ARE ALL MASTERS OF OUR OWN FATE!

Then Ricky grew tall. Taller than me. Taller than his father. And Al said: "I'll be damned if he doesn't murder us some night when we're asleep!" He actually predicted that. "He'll murder us in our beds, you wait and see."

I said I didn't think Ricky was the type, he was so quiet.

"Exactly! That's what they always say, 'oh he was so quiet!' It's the quiet types, they're the very ones who do it. You read about it in the paper all the time."

I mumbled something about poetic justice.

"What? What are you talking about, what poetic justice?"

"You know. Buying a house with a downstairs master bedroom against burglars, and then being done in by an insider, our very own son."

Even though I was officially barred from Ricky's room, I did manage to sneak in twice a year at the change of seasons. This so I could spirit away his outgrown clothes and replace them with the clothes his brother Robbie had outgrown.

Ricky never seemed to notice—either that his clothes had disappeared, or that he was now wearing his brother's. He'd find Robbie's shirts and pants in his closet, put them on, and walk downstairs in them. Simply because *they were there.* Like the elves who found the tiny garments the shoemaker's wife had made. Or like the six enchanted swans who donned the shirts their sister had labored years to weave in order to break the enchantment, no questions asked, just put them on; or like my little dog, Fritz.

Yes, I did get to have a pet when I was a child, a smooth-haired chocolate and vanilla terrier I called Fritzy. He had a little wooden dog house out in the yard where I could see it from my window, that looked just like the dog houses in cartoons. Only unlike the dogs in cartoons, Fritzy lay on top of his house in-

stead of in front of it, right across the sharp ridge of the roof that must have hurt his tender, pink-mottled belly. And it was because of me. I taught him to lie across the roof instead of on the ground in front of his arched doorway, where he'd always lain before and where he looked altogether nice and proper lying.

I'm not sure why I did this to Fritzy. Idle mischief? Power play? Boredom? Because I had nothing better to do? Actually, I did have better things to do, lots and lots of better things, enough to keep me occupied all day and (if I wanted to get my relief map of Peru handed in on time) half the night. I could also finish the apron for Home Ec, practice the violin, clean my room, or at least make my bed. But I didn't want to do any of these things; instead, I amused myself instructing my dog to lie on top of his dog house.

I'd come home from school and get straight to work, assisting Fritzy, pushing his rump back up when he scrambled for footing and slipped, disciplining him with a rap on the nose the way the *Sergeants Flea Powder Dog Training Manual* I'd sent away for said to do. I must have resembled the old woman in "The Story of the Three Sillies" who pushed her cow up on the roof of her thatched cottage so it could graze there. "Look at all that nice grass going to waste!" she said. At least she had a reason.

Then one day something terrible happened. I was in my room doing absolutely nothing, sitting at my desk and staring out the window, when I noticed that Fritzy was lying on top of his dog house. But I hadn't put him there! He'd gotten up by himself! There he was, draped across the roof beam, his front paws crossed in an attitude (I thought) of patient resignation. What had I done? I felt sick with remorse. And fear! I'd trifled with nature, tinkered with evolution, created a new species of roof-lying canine who might never take his ease on the ground again. In fact that is what happened. From that day forth Fritzy always lay on top of his dog house, looking absurd. That's what broke my heart: that he looked so silly and didn't know he did.

I'd really wanted a dog. But then I turned into an adult and had children and I didn't want a dog anymore. It was as if I'd crossed over an invisible line, crossed into enemy territory; I'd *become* the enemy! Now I was the one who wanted to "get things done," and my children who didn't. They didn't mind "doing things," they just didn't want to get anything done; there's a big difference. And now I wanted everything and every-

one to be *clean*, and they weren't interested in that either. They left that strictly to us. So we didn't want any animals.

And I didn't think Ricky did either (ever since that time he'd announced *that's enough animals*). Then I found the card from the SPCA, and I'd check from time to time to see if it was still there, nudge aside a pair of rolled-up socks, and it was. Along with the rock and the tin box.

They say it's what people keep in their sock drawers that really counts. I heard a joke about that once—about drawers and about what "counts." There's a little girl in military school and she's undergoing room inspection with her classmates, who are all much older than she. They've been warned to clean the hair out of their hair brushes. "Ten demerits if I find any hair in your drawers!" barks the tough drill sergeant. The little girl raises her hand and asks, "Does fuzz count?" I always thought that joke was more sad than funny. I mean, what was that little girl *doing* in military school?

People keep very private things in their sock drawers, things that others aren't meant to see. Like my "Fourteen Steps to Achieving a Dancer's Body"—a pamphlet I've kept for years in my top drawer, hidden under my pantyhose. It came in a package of pantyhose, Capezios. I wouldn't want anyone to see it, and I don't know why I don't throw it away since I'm never going to achieve a dancer's body.

When I look into Ricky's sock drawer, I get the same feeling that I got long ago when I saw Fritzy lying on top of his dog house. Mimi's rock is still there, and the cookie tin I gave him, and the Pet Card with its set of instructions against the day he might acquire a new kitten. I see them at each change of seasons. It's the word "New" that gives me that bottomless sadness. How to Care for Your New Kitten, after all these years.

Philip Singer

The Two-Seater

Right after my cousin Landis got out of community college, he bought a one-twentieth share of an airplane just big enough to seat two—the pilot plus one passenger—and took lessons to get his private license. He dropped by the house to tell us all about it.

This is why I never fly anywhere, my father said.

You never fly anywhere because you don't have anyplace to go, my mother said.

Still, he said, even if I did.

If you're so hot on flying, my mother said, we could have taken up Vi Haines on that vacation package to the Bahamas, the one she could get for us for a discount from her nephew at TWA.

Did I say I was so hot on flying? he said. And, anyway, I don't call that much of a discount.

What do you call it? she said.

For that kind of money, he said, we could have driven down to, I guess, Miami, Tampa, one of those, and had a nice time on the way, and still flown first class over to the islands.

Do I have to sit in the back seat with *him*? my sister Jenny said, leveling a finger at me. He always puts his leg on my side.

Honey, we're just speculating, my mother said. Your father doesn't have any intention of going anywhere, by plane, train, boat, or any other way. But if your brother put his leg on your side, he would regret it.

What did I do? I said, We're not even going anyway and I'm already in trouble.

My mother patted her lap, and my sister climbed aboard. He's Mr. Innocent, my mother said.

Mr. Innocent, Jenny said. Mr. Big Leg.

Why not join the Air Force? my father said to Landis. That way, you could learn to fly and see the world, both.

I'm considering it, Landis said. I'm considering all my options.

Considering, considering, my father said. You're a young guy, no wife, no kids, no responsibilities. Next time you turn around,

you'll have three kids and a mortgage. Try to go see the world then. Then you might as well give up.

Poor you, my mother said.

Maybe, Landis said. There are considerations.

Can I fly with Landis? Jenny said.

Don't even start, my mother said.

On weekends, Landis packed sandwiches and sodas and chewing gum and flew the little plane along the highway to the southern part of the state, using a map he bought at a gas station for twenty-five cents. If the weather was nice, he would sleep in the grass under the wing. If the night was chilly or rainy, he would sleep in the cockpit, then fly back home in the morning.

Why not take an air mattress? my mother said. Why would anybody sleep on the ground when he could sleep on a perfectly good air mattress that's hardly been used?

No room, Landis said. I have to keep that back seat open for passengers.

What passengers? my mother said.

Just in case, he said.

You watch, she said. You're going to wind up getting hemorrhoids, sleeping on the cold ground.

I think it's *sitting* on the cold ground that gives you hemorrhoids, my father said. Not lying. Lying on the cold ground'll just give you a stiff back.

If you insist on sleeping on the cold ground and wind up with hemorrhoids, don't come to me, she said. Either of you.

If I get hemorrhoids, I won't be coming to you, Landis said. That's for sure.

I'm not sleeping *or* sitting on the cold ground, my father said. Why would I be getting hemorrhoids?

Mr. Innocent, my sister said.

The minute my mother saw Landis's little airplane, she grabbed my shoulder and squeezed.

Ow, I said. She had a great grip.

Landis's mother had come along to see the plane. She was a tiny woman who finished all the food on her children's plates but stayed thin to the edge of emaciation. She turned to my mother and said, I could cry, I could just cry.

For the good it'll do you, my mother said. And to Landis, she said, Not even to look. I'm not getting in that flimsy little thing even to take a look.

Landis spread his hands. Who asked you? he said.

Ow, I said. What did *I* do? Did I say anything?

You were about to, my mother said.

The airfield had a low steel hangar with a windsock on a pole. A man in overalls came to the doorway, waved to us, and went back to talking on the telephone. Landis gave him the thumbs up. At the end of the field to our left, a half-dozen gliders were parked at all angles, skinny and long, tilted over onto one wing, and at the other end of the field, a hundred yards to our right, cattle stood with their noses against a chain-link fence, watching us.

This isn't an airfield, my mother said. It's just a *field* field. Those cows are waiting for you to get off their grass so they can come back and graze here.

Where's that little Jenny? my aunt said. She's such a sweetheart.

Little pitchers, my mother said.

If you hit one of those cows, I said, it would be a mess.

I knew a guy who hit a cow, Landis said. Cut it right in half. Of course, he wound up in the hospital, must have been six months. Talk about a mess.

We're going, my mother said.

Ow, I said. Let go. Squeeze *his* shoulder, why don't you? *I* didn't go around cutting any cows in half.

Of course, Landis said, the guy who hit the cow, technically speaking, was not an aviator, not at the time. He was riding a motorcycle. Motorcycles hit cows all the time. Now, if you want to talk dangerous, there's dangerous for you.

Aviator? I said.

So who wants to go up with me for a little spin? Landis said. A little taste of the wild blue yonder?

We're going, my mother said. Your brother has to practice the clarinet.

You know I never practice, I said. Why start now? *Ow.*

While the rest of us waited in the car, Landis bumped his little plane down the runway, just cleared the fence at the end, and disappeared over a little hill beyond the cows. My aunt put her hands over her eyes, and my mother shook her head. In a couple of minutes, we heard the grumble of his motor, then saw him come skimming in from the opposite direction, behind us. The little plane bounced on the grass a time or two before rolling to

a stop. Landis wedged chocks under the wheels and came over to us, brushing off his sleeves.

Well? he said. Any takers?

My mother said to him, You're going to go deaf that way, listening to all that noise.

A thousand times, my aunt said. I've told him that very same thing, exactly, a thousand times.

Technically speaking, Landis said, it's louder for you, that is, you civilians on the ground, than for the aviator. Keep in mind that I'm sort of staying out in front of it, if you follow me.

I'll keep it in mind, my mother said.

Later that summer, after he lost his job downtown at the Power & Light for accidentally knocking a drinking fountain off the wall with a hand-operated forklift, Landis planned a trip to Atlanta, Georgia. He and my father spread out roadmaps on the kitchen table and argued about the best routes.

I thought you were flying, I said. Why do you care what route goes where?

In an aircraft this size, Landis said, you have to navigate by landmarks down below. This is like the pioneering days of aviation.

You can say that again, my mother said.

What I have to do, Landis said, is follow the roads. Actually, I'm not going much faster than the cars down there. You take a Corvette now, wide open, he'll be going faster than me. I'll just be going higher.

How about an Oldsmobile Super 88? I said.

Who's driving? my father said. Me or your mother?

Here we go, my mother said.

This is not like one of the big passenger planes, Landis said. I can't just set her course, put her on autopilot, and take a nap. The only real instrument I have up there is a compass, after all, which won't get you to Atlanta, Georgia.

Let's just hope no drinking fountains get in the way, my mother said.

I can use a compass, I said. Atlanta, Georgia? No problem. You tell me you want me to go so far south and so far west, or east, wherever you like, and I can do it with a compass. Try me.

Go a half-mile south and a half-mile east and pick us up a carton of eggs at the San Rae Market, my mother said.

You have the distances all wrong there, my father said.

Maybe a half-mile, total. And it's southwest, not southeast. Besides, he knows the way.

From up there, Landis said, the world's just another map, you know, except there are ants on the roads. You all are the ants. Little ants, running along all bunched together, nose to tail, six or a dozen of you, and all that wide open space to spread out in, but you're all bunched together. Nobody wants to just spread out. It's the funniest thing. That's why I'll be up there.

Is anybody going to get eggs? my mother said. Or do I need to draw a map?

Eyes closed, I said. I could do it eyes closed. Well, not all the way closed—I'd have to look at the compass. But you have to get the directions right. If the market is north, and you send me south, who knows where I'll wind up?

Atlanta, maybe, my father said.

So if we figure out the exact direction and the exact distance, you'll go to the store and pick up eggs for the cake? my mother said.

Cake? my father said. I'll go.

In the end, the closest Landis could get to Atlanta was a small airfield on a farm outside Good Nabor, Georgia. From there, he hitchhiked into Atlanta, had lunch at a diner where the juke box featured the collected works of Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis. Landis got directions to the capitol building from a waitress, but got lost on the way and hitchhiked back to the airfield with a pocketful of postcards.

On his flight back north, he put down for refueling outside Hampton, South Carolina, and discovered, as he stood whistling in the sunshine, that fuel was pooling around his feet. A man in a jumpsuit came riding down the field on a bicycle and asked Landis if he would mind shutting off the gas before they were all blown to their maker.

For a week, while the parts were shipped from Indiana, Landis slept in the hangar at the airfield. He made coffee and eggs in the morning on a hotplate in the office and helped launch the hot-air balloons every day at dusk, holding the ropes while flames shot into the balloons and the baskets were gradually pulled aloft. Then he and a red-haired girl home for the summer from LSU piled into a pickup truck and tore down country lanes in pursuit of the balloons. Sometimes, if conditions were favorable, the balloons finally settled in a patch of grass away from

cars or powers lines, but once one bumped down the side of a shed and landed on a pile of bicycles, and another time one came down just past shortstop in the middle of a late-inning softball game and almost crushed a man trying to steal third.

It was colorful and all, Landis said when he got home, but the whole idea of flying under the power of a balloon—just a bag stitched together with pieces of cloth and held up with gas—standing in a wicker basket hundreds of feet in the air, at the mercy of the wind, just you and the clouds and the crows, was nutty, totally a thing of the past, and he would stick to planes, thank you.

When he moved to Arizona, Landis had to give up his twentieth share of the two-seater. Faced with the open distances of the desert, he forgot about flying and collected old cars instead, beginning with a fifteen-year-old MG convertible, which my father advised against. The postcards from Landis went up on the refrigerator, along with my sister's drawings of bears and my prize report card of straight C's.

When a boy hits twenty-one, my father said, you can stop putting everything of his on the fridge.

Says you, my mother said. I think it's sweet that he sends his aunt and uncle so many cards.

He sends cards just to rub it in that he's making more money than he knows what to do with and he can throw it away on sports cars that'll break down every time you look at them, my father said. What's he say in this one?

It's a picture of a couple of saguaro cactus in the desert outside Yuma, Arizona, my mother said. Both of them are signaling left turns. And Landis writes:

Looking at a Ford Mustang, low mileage, good tires, one owner, good for day to day. Yesterday morning, drove all the way from Yuma to Phoenix and only passed one other car. Picked up a hitchhiker, hiding under his shirt. Looking for a ride all the way to Columbus, Ohio—now there's an optimist. This country out there is something. So empty and no cops: you can do a hundred, you can fly. Lan.

What does that mean? I said. Hiding under his shirt?

I think it means he was holding his shirt over his head, something like that, to get out of the sun, my mother said.

Since when is he Lan? my father said.

Since he got back from Georgia, I said. That's what they

called him down at the balloon place, where he chased the balloons. He liked it.

If his parents had wanted him called Lan, they'd've named him Lan, my mother said. To his mother he's Landis. To *me* he's Landis.

And now a Mustang to drive while the MG's broken down, which is usually—where's the sense in that? my father said. But try telling him. Wait a minute while I get a Coke from the basement. Then read it again.

Anele Rubin

Praying

Praying you do with your body or your mind,
opening or closing your eyes,
sitting or curled like an infant,
kneeling or in motion.
The gesture this willow makes
is a gesture I feel.
The ancestors, I think,
are sometimes soil
and sometimes little blades of grass.
Dandelion leaves are as beautiful
as the leaves of the rose bush.
The sky I believe in
though it isn't anywhere.
I listen to the quiet
sounds of morning.
It all fits into place,
the way I feel now
alive in the skin
even though someone has died,
even though my heart
beats differently now.
I am still noticing
the way the sun shines
on the short grass
and the way it shines
on the tall grass
and the way it shines
on the goldenrod
and the Queen Anne's lace
and the way it shines
on the pale blond hairs on my arms
and the way the leaves on all the trees
shake and leap in the momentary breeze.
I see the dandelions reaching

their yellow heads to the sun.
She went to her death talking
about letting the mockingbirds eat
the persimmons in her garden.

Jane Eaton Hamilton

Blow Out Your Candles, Sweetheart

It was Bryce's birthday, the big one, 4-0. He'd been refusing for years to entertain its arrival, but it was here anyway.

Days, Bryce never saw sunlight. He took portraits of annoying high schoolers on a contract basis for Carver Studios, or worked for the morgue, taking pictures of less lucky kids: babies stillborn after complications; toddlers dead in car accidents; youngsters with the bloated faces and bald pates of cancer.

Bryce lived in a renovated garage in Mount Pleasant, the diseased heart of the city, in an artery clogged with needles and condoms. An architecture student had turned the place into an apartment as a class project—Bryce had a loft, a bathroom with a claw-footed tub, a living room, a diminutive kitchen and, best of all, long and squeezed down one side, a studio and darkroom. The rest of his love shack could vanish into some junkie's vein and it would be days before Bryce noticed.

He had a mini-fridge filled with beer he could find in the dark, as well as jugs, chemicals, tanks, timers, enlargers, and papers in the darkroom. He had a G-5 Mac with Photoshop 6 and Extensis plug-ins. He wanted to set himself up to take digital shots—a digital SLR, a pricey dye sublimation printer. He was saving up.

He shrugged out of his back pack. Sam the Cat was pacing, meowing, wanting wet food, wanting to lift his leg and piss Bryce off, but Bryce ignored him, cracked the studio door and flicked on art lights.

He had a new display up. He still admired it after being away from it all day; scary how much. So far, only Tannis had seen it, but he had hopes of unveiling it more publicly soon.

His old series, the elbow series, was now stacked in a corner under the enlarger table. The new shots were black-and-white portraits of a child from the morgue. Bryce didn't have the boy's whole face in the shots, just his nose, mouth, or just his eyes. The images were large format, square, and Bryce had arranged them in triptychs down the room.

Bryce strolled up and down with his hands clasped behind his back, frowning, looking for flaws and not finding them.

A minute later he still thought the same thing: The new photos were good, very good.

He wasn't supposed to eat, but his stomach was rumbling so he dug in the cupboard above his trays and found a nearly empty bag of stale pretzels. Allison was bringing dinner, or so she said. Bryce was secretly expecting a surprise party. Allison had asked what he wanted and he said a quiet dinner with good friends, but he didn't think she believed him; quiet functions weren't her style. She was co-owner of a successful modeling agency.

Allison, Allison—what was he going to do about Allison? All his relationships burned quickly out, but this one was strong, really strong, at half a year. It was time for her to get to know his friends. Tonight she'd get to meet Tannis, the friend he'd gone through school with, the one he worked with, the *girl,* and if there was a secret party, his other friends too.

He'd promised Allison he'd clean, though there wasn't a lot of point. Allison hated the love shack; Allison called the neighborhood Mount Unpleasant. She said she hated the crime, Bryce's cat, how overheated his place always was, the filth. She was angling to have Bryce move into her condo. She insinuated that if they committed, he could quit the morgue, quit Carver Studios, work full time on his photography projects; she had enough money, enough for both of them, she said.

But Bryce was waiting, he didn't know for what. He was always waiting. For his surprise party. For a phonecall, a knock on the door, an email, something that would bring him some news and a direction he saw clearly. Marry Allison, the news might say.

Or it might say: Move to San Francisco.

Or: Nice elbow series, man. I'll take forty for my design store at a hundred bucks a pop.

Usually, Bryce set aside a month to clean, managing a room a week. He had assorted cleaning supplies left behind by his mother and various exes who'd made stabs at cleaning Bryce up: Comet, Windex, Fantastik, Vim, Brillo pads. He bent over the tub and sprinkled Comet in blue puffs down the white enamel, then scrubbed it in with a wet Brillo. He swished around some water until the tub looked clean enough.

He dumped more Comet into the toilet. He couldn't find the brush and he wasn't about to stick in his hand, so he just left it there sending up blue burps in the hopes that Allison would know he'd tried.

He forgot to clean the sink, where clots of toothpaste had formed a bumpy finish. He swept the floors. He cleaned out Sam the Cat's litter—tossing the used stuff out and pouring in a dusty waterfall of new. He even climbed into his loft and shook his bedsheets out through the gap to the living room; cat hair silted through the air like dashes of snow.

It was his birthday. Shouldn't someone else have been cleaning? But Allison said he had two choices: clean, or have dinner at her place.

Who needed a surprise party, really, when life itself was a surprise party—how it always tried to yank him off his feet and fling him into Allison's future. They were a couple through attrition. At her age, Allison didn't want to waste any more time. She wanted Bryce to be the one. It had been a pretty good six months. They'd been okay together, not miserable, and not miserable was Bryce's definition of happiness.

His back hurt from bending. He sprayed Lysol, letting the mist settle down on the fine hairs along his arms. He sprayed towards the ceiling and stood under the mist with his eyes shut so he'd smell clean.

He tried to get Sam the Cat to sit still while he combed him, but Sam the Cat wouldn't do it. Sam the Cat sharpened his claws on the couch, his coat rippling its stripes.

Bryce thought of the deceased boy, who'd been born with cystic fibrosis, a boy as thin as a print and as still as a butterfly caught in amber. Jon Smith, DOB Feb 12/88. Bryce knew nothing about him—not the names of his parents or whether or not he had brothers and sisters. But still Jon Smith had risen like a spectre from his gurney and fluttered black wings until, mysteriously, he was inside Bryce, fitting perfectly, his slim elbows inside Bryce's, his slim kneecaps underneath Bryce's, his poor tired lungs held aloft by Bryce's fully functioning ones. Bryce hadn't had permission to take the pictures outside the pictures necessary to document Jon's death for the city, but there was something about the child that had made it impossible to leave, that made Bryce dig deep into his satchel to find special lowlight film that could be used without flash for the kind of intimate por-

traits he visualized. He supposed what he'd done had been unethical, but it hadn't stopped him. Also, Bryce made up stories. How he used to pitch balls for the kid. How he carried him downstairs Christmas mornings to check his stockings. How he'd taught him to swim.

Kids were the biggest surprise party going. Things could gobsmack you if you had kids—they could be there with you and then not be there. Bryce didn't want to want them. Too risky.

Tannis called to say her mother-in-law had the flu and was it okay if she brought the baby? The baby wasn't any damn trouble, usually, said Tannis. He knew that, right? Patti was usually very quiet. She'd feed her before they came and after that Patti should just sleep. Tannis laughed. "I'll smother her if she doesn't, I promise."

Allison smiled and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. She wore lipstick the color of strawberries and Bryce felt its oils imprint on his lips. She smelled of nicotine. Bryce waited to feel his heart lift, a perk like coffee brewing, the dilation of a love vessel. And then he felt it.

"Happy birthday," she said and touched his chin where he'd nicked himself shaving. "I missed you every hour. Good day?"

Bryce hadn't told her about Jon Smith. She hadn't been to the love shack other than to honk in the driveway since he'd put up the new series. What was he supposed to say? Come see my favorite dead kid? He drummed his fingers on the counter and to distract himself looked pointedly around.

"Uh?" Allison said.

Bryce said, "Is this not the cleanest shack west of the Rockies?" Even though Allison was likely just going to whisk him away, he'd still done stuff he never did—ragged out the cutlery drawer, Windexed the coffee table—all for her on his birthday.

She flicked on his oven, looked inside, looked back at him.

Maybe she'd found crud. Was he supposed to clean the oven, too? "I did clean." Bryce felt his spirits sink. He was supposed to be happy, but he was going flat as a soda. His whoop-de-doop birthday.

Allison put her hands on her hips. She was a good-looking woman, round in the right places, with bright teeth and an infectious laugh. "Forty. Damn, Bryce, you're old."

"Tell me," he said.

"I am telling you." She gave her lopsided grin.

"I am old."

She came to give him a hug. "Buddy, if you were a tree you'd have forty rings. You'd be old growth. You'd be Carmanagh Valley."

He kissed the part in her hair. A fog of tobacco smoke rose from her head.

The oven light clicked off.

Allison said, "I have a surprise for you." She pulled out a wrapped gift box. "Go on. Open it."

Bryce shook it.

"You have to already have it open when they get here."

The gift was a Sony digital camera with a 4x optical zoom. "Wow," he said. It wasn't the camera he'd been saving for, but it was a good one. He turned it around in his hands looking at features. "It's too much. Honey, this is too generous."

Allison's cheeks flushed. She went up on her toes and clapped her hands.

Bryce felt as if he was making a deal for something he wasn't sure he wanted.

Allison showed him how to work it. She took a picture of Bryce, then showed him the shot on the LCD screen. "Just get rid of it if you don't like it," she said and pressed a button to erase it. "Take another," she said, "take another!"

He didn't know what to take. He took Allison. There was a lag time between when he composed the shot and pressed the button and when the shot was actually taken. By then Allison's smile was megawatt.

"This is fantastic," he said. "I'm one lucky guy."

Allison beamed.

"My thanks," he said and bussed her cheeks, small fluttering kisses that made her giggle delightedly.

Allison slid something under tin foil into his oven. Humming, she retrieved a plastic container of Vietnamese salad rolls, orange curled shrimp, and lettuce visible under the translucent wrapping. She jumbled his counter with bags of spinach, two fat pears, and salad greens. She set out containers of mustard and vinegar. She cracked the barred kitchen window so that rain and wind whistled in.

"What do you mean, their baby's coming?" Allison's voice rose.

Wasn't it a moot point? Wouldn't there be a party instead? Why was she even preparing dinner? Bryce shrugged.

"I'm not good with babies," said Allison. She was cleaning out his sink with Windex, washing it down.

"It'll be asleep."

"Babies never sleep around me," said Allison. "I make them edgy. They wake right up when I'm around."

"It'll be fine." Bryce lifted her hair and kissed the soft skin of her neck.

Allison shook spinach into a basin of water then turned around. "Can I ask you something I've wondered? I've wanted to meet your friends before. Remember that Labour Day party? Tell me the truth. We run in different circles. Are you embarrassed of me?"

Bryce blinked. "Why would I be embarrassed of you?"

"People aren't usually embarrassed of me. People usually like to have me around."

"I like to have you around. I love having you around."

"I'm incredibly nervous." She swiped at her upper lip. "See? When I go ballistic, I sweat right here."

"Relax. They'll like you fine."

"What if the baby hates me?"

"Who could possibly hate you?"

Bryce was intrigued by the direction Tannis's life was taking, but it was also troubling to see her—Tannis the indefatigable—become such a product of her body; he would prefer to believe humankind propagated magically, by storks and cabbages. She often snapped at him, and sometimes she showed up at his door late at night, weeping about the mess she'd made of things marrying Peter and having a baby at her advanced age. Now she had dark circles hammocking her eyes. "Patti's just drenched," she said, pushing past him. "What if she catches another cold? I won't survive it, Bryce, I mean it. I won't make it any longer without sleep." She caught sight of Allison grinning shyly. "You're Allison. Hello, Allison. Any friend of Bryce's and so on. You're the model?"

"I'm not a model," Allison said. "I just co-own a very small agency."

Peter pumped Bryce's hand, clapped his shoulder, lifted Allison's hand and kissed it. "Any model Bryce knows is a model I want to know too."

Allison smiled politely and said, "Welcome to a genuine Mount Unpleasant evening."

"Bryce, get a towel, and close that window, it's positively sub-Arctic in here," said Tannis.

Allison grabbed the camera and took several quick shots. "Bryce's new digital camera."

"Look at those shots, would you?" said Peter taking off his coat. He bent his head close to Allison. "We could use one of these."

Allison snapped several of the baby while Tannis towelled the baby's hair.

"Oh, look," said Tannis when Allison showed her. "Look at her hair sticking every which way. Oh, oh, oh, she's adorable. What a little skuddleywunkin. Who's the little skuddley-wunkin?" She stuck her tongue out at the baby.

Allison said, "Wait, wait. I'm being a bad hostess. Let me take your coats."

Tannis raised her eyes at Bryce as if to say well done, good choice. Keep her. "Bryce, babe, stick on another log, will you? I'm just waiting for Patti to catch pneumonia. She had an ear infection that wouldn't quit. What if she gets chicken pox?" She began to talk to the baby again: "Snookums could get chicken pox. Couldn't snookums get the nasty old chicken pox and drive Mommy right over the edge? Mommy's little scab girl."

"How would she get chicken pox?" asked Peter. "Does anyone here have chicken pox? Where would she be exposed to chicken pox?"

Tannis clutched the baby to her shoulder like a football.

Allison shot Bryce a look that said help, oh help me.

"Patti's sniffly. Why is she sniffling? Look here. She *is* getting sick. Peter, find me a tissue; her nose is dripping." Tannis held her out under her armpits and jiggled her. The baby's head bobbed like a dashboard dog. "Poor itty bitty snoogs."

They sat in the living room watching Tannis with the baby. It came to Bryce that he and Allison were entertaining. He imagined people talking about them as a couple, Bryce and Allison, like they were one word, indistinguishable.

Allison politely asked about the baby. Was Patti talking yet?

Peter laughed. "She's three months old, Allison."

"What can I get you to drink?" Bryce said, slapping his knees. "I have wine, beer. I even have a little ten-year-old Scotch."

Tannis said, "Fuck, fuck. I know she's getting sick. Hon, look

how red her nose is getting. It's red. Are her eyes red or is that my imagination?" The baby screwed her fists into her eyes and when Tannis pulled them free, clonked herself in the forehead.

"When do they talk?" Allison moved forward as if leaning on every word.

"A year," said Peter.

Tannis said, "What if it's meningitis? I was listening to CBC and they mentioned there's an outbreak of meningitis in Abbotsford. Until I had a baby, I had no damn idea there were so many diseases."

"So she wouldn't be talking yet," said Allison.

Tannis put Patti on her knees facing her, holding her under her armpits with her thumbs supporting the baby's wobbly chin. "Pooky wooky," she said in a sing-song voice. "Is Mommy's little aardvark getting sick?"

"Well, I for one could use some chilled Chardonnay," said Allison. "Tannis? Peter? Hon?"

Tannis propped the baby on her lap and fished around in her mouth as if she was looking for a lost gumdrop. "I should have brought the Gripe Water. I think she might be teething."

"She's a little young for teething," Peter told Allison. He was a big man with a barrel chest that he expanded like bellows. "But she's already getting a tooth."

"Her gums get sore," said Tannis.

"Excuse us," Allison said. She followed Bryce into the kitchen and sagged against the counter whispering, "This is going to be one long night, honey."

Bryce held his finger up to the side of a glass to measure two fingers of scotch.

Allison said, "I told you babies hate me."

"That baby doesn't hate you. That baby hasn't even noticed you're alive."

Allison raised her eyebrows. "Just wait till she does."

Bryce took in drinks while Allison carried plates of salad rolls and bowls of peanut sauce. Tannis had a strip of something black pressed to the baby's forehead; she was watching it change color.

"A heat sensor," she explained. She held it up. "Look, Patti does have a fever. She has a fucking fever, Peter."

"That's nothing," said Peter reaching for the strip. "She's okay. That's just 99.2. That's virtually normal."

"You guys are so lucky you don't have kids," Tannis said. "What I wouldn't give."

"I don't believe that," Allison said and passed out the plates.

Were they lucky? thought Bryce.

The baby began to cry. Tannis said, "I didn't mean her to even be awake for tonight. Maybe she's hungry again already. You guys go ahead. Really, don't mind us." She turned on the couch so her back was half to them. Sam the Cat wound around Tannis's legs, butting into her shins.

Allison slipped a salad roll in front of Tannis, but Tannis was hunched up over herself.

Bryce said, "Isn't that camera something? Allison gave me that camera earlier tonight."

Tannis pulled up her shirt. The last time Bryce had seen Tannis naked was when they were sleeping together; he'd never imagined her body would turn out this way, her breasts being used as baby bottles. He was surprised at the noise of the baby, how it snuffled and snorted.

Peter took a big bite of his salad roll; shrimp and glass noodles went flying. "How does it feel? 4-0. I'll be there myself in a few years."

"I thought Allison was planning a surprise party. I was getting used to the idea of a surprise party."

"You said no parties!"

"You listened, Allison?" Tannis asked, looking back over her shoulder. "Don't you know by now that when Bryce says he doesn't want fuss, it means go crazy? Go nuts, young woman."

Bryce touched Allison's hand. "But this is perfect. This is all I actually wanted."

"Oh," said Allison. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought— I wanted to please you, is all."

Tannis pulled down her shirt and put the baby back up on her shoulder. The baby had on a blue stretchy outfit; she kicked her feet like a frog.

Peter said, "What's that smell?"

"That's just dinner," said Allison. "I made chicken."

"That's Lysol deodorizing cleanser," said Bryce.

The baby burped. Juggling, Tannis unsnapped the baby's pajamas near her crotch and stuck a finger in her diaper. She pulled her finger out, looked at it, and sniffed.

Bryce shuddered. He wondered where his Tannis had disappeared to, and who had left this woman in her place. He was a little befuddled at all the attention she was paying her baby; she'd gone to some other country and left him behind and just sent this postcard: *Baby's weird. Wish you were here.*

"She needs changing. I'll change her. I need to check her bloody diaper rash anyhow. You wouldn't believe the size of the blisters this kid's got."

"Too much information," said Bryce.

"Uh," said Allison stiffly. "I could help if you need help. I mean, I'd be happy to help."

"Okay if I change her here?"

Bryce couldn't speak. Not here, not here, not here, he thought. "Why don't you change her in the darkroom?"

"These are great salad rolls," said Peter, wiping his hands. "Great. All we've been eating is canned soup. I'm trying to remember the last time we had a good meal."

Tannis stood up. "Eat mine, honey, if you like them so much." She jiggled the fussy baby. "So, how do you like Bryce's new series, Allison?"

"The new series? You mean the elbows?" said Allison, standing. "I love them. One of those elbows is mine."

They filed into his darkroom and Bryce followed, flicking on display lights. He stood back while they took in his new shots. The baby was still fretting, but no one seemed to notice her. Tannis carried her from photo to photo paying her no attention.

Allison whispered, "Good lord, Bryce, where did these come from? When did you do these?"

Peter said, "Whoa. Tannis was telling me."

Allison said, "Oh honey, sweetie, this boy is dead." She reached out to touch a close-in shot of Jon Smith's blond eyelashes, then drew back her hand as if scorched. "Who is this boy? Who was this poor boy?"

Tannis said, "Note the brilliant composition."

"Hon," Allison said tight at Bryce's side. "Where are the elbows? The elbows were going to make you famous." Her voice was stuffy; she sounded like she was going to cry.

"You've got a shrewd eye," said Peter to Bryce.

Bryce turned to look at Tannis. She was spreading a small quilted mat on Bryce's drafting table; she held Patti down with a hand on her tummy while unsnapping her sleeper and pulling

out her feet until the baby's creased, plump legs sawed the air. "His name was Jon," he said. "He died of CF a few weeks ago."

Allison touched his elbow.

"It's tough," said Bryce. His back still hurt. He thought it might be getting worse. He couldn't get rid of kinks and pulls like he once had been able to. "It's been hard."

Tannis folded the baby's diaper into an efficient square shut with its own tapes. She lifted Patti by her ankles and slid under a new diaper. "Bryce, you've done it, finally. These photos are magnificent. Top-rate. Worthy of Stieglitz or Cartier-Bresson."

Bryce nodded.

"You're your own best birthday present," Tannis said.

The main course was chicken stuffed with spinach and cheese and spices. The cheese was oily—when Bryce stuck his fork into it, it squirted onto his arm and scalded him; he pretended it didn't hurt. Tannis tucked in to the chicken and mounded rice on her plate.

"I scarf food down now," she said. "I never know when the baby's going to wake up and that'll be it for me."

The baby was already awake, wailing in Peter's arms.

Allison sighed. "I don't know how you two do it. I'm too selfish to have a baby."

Bryce looked at her. Was she selfish? He thought she could be a good mother, if she'd just let herself get pregnant. With him? She liked where they were headed together; that's what she said. He kept seeing his favorite image of Jon—Jon's earlobe panning across to Jon's cold lips. That's what came through in the shot—a cold that was colder than the coldest night at Allison's condo.

Tannis said, "Did Bryce ever mention we almost had a kid together?"

Allison whipped her head around, nearly choked on a piece of broccoli. "You almost had a child?"

Bryce said, "Just a flicker of insanity when we were young and didn't know better." He was so old that if he had a kid now, there was a reasonable chance they'd both be in diapers at the same time. He was aging, broke, inflexible. A son or a daughter marauding through the love shack, crayoning in his books, upsetting his chemical trays, yanking Sam the Cat's tail? He could barely support himself. Any extras—dinners out, a week in Hawaii—were already on Allison's dime. "We weren't seeing

anyone, so we just thought maybe it was something to do together."

"That kid would be ten already," said Tannis and raised her eyebrows. She was quiet a minute, then said, "Our son."

Bryce frowned. They hadn't known if it was a girl or boy. Maybe it was a boy. He thought of Jon again, this time of Jon in his clawfoot tub with suds in his hair and a cocky grin on his face.

Tannis said contemplatively, "What I didn't know then that I know now is that parenting makes you a bigger person."

Peter laughed. "Around the middle?"

"Oh god," said Tannis and looked down at herself.

Rain pounded on the roof.

Bryce didn't want to remember how they signed a contract for joint custody. He didn't want to think about how the fertilized egg got lodged in Tannis's fallopian tube and nearly killed her. He said, "Anyone for more wine? Beer? Coffee?"

"I'll take that beer," said Tannis, pushing away her plate. She looked at Peter, the baby wriggling and complaining on his lap. "Sure, why not? One can't hurt. Calm me down." She crossed her legs and swung her foot, her sock thick with cat hair. "Goddamn, though. Goddamn. It's the toughest thing I've ever done. It makes me weep. No, it does, don't laugh, Peter. It makes me plain weep."

Peter jiggled Patti, who intermittently wailed. He accepted a beer. "Or so terrifying. All Patti's got is us, standing between her and disaster. You stop taking risks." He picked up a lime from a saucer Allison held out and tried to get it through the neck of the bottle one-handed. It finally slid down slowly, dunking murkily into the beer. "Man, I can't stand the idea of leaving her to go anywhere. With Tannis, sure, or my mother, but this babysitter crap, uh-uh. Man, if something happened."

Tannis said the beer tasted good, too good. She drained it. She pulled the baby from Peter's lap. Tannis tried lying her down, but the baby cried. She walked her, trying to soothe her. "We even take Patti to the movies."

There was a scritching noise outside against the apartment's walls. "We have company," Bryce said. "That's Laura. That's the hooker in the alley. She's got some john up against the side of the love shack under the eaves."

"Peter," said Tannis, "What if this is allergies? Maybe Patti is allergic to the cat."

Allison said, "You take that baby to the movies?" She put the camera down beside her plate.

"I think I'm getting stuffed-up myself. Bryce, your fucking cat is making my daughter sick. Put him out."

"You take Patti to the movies?" repeated Allison, more loudly.

"There was some *witch* there last time," said Tannis. "Patti was trying to go to sleep and this woman was saying, 'Lady, shut that kid up. Lady, I'm warning you. If you don't shut that baby's trap I'm calling the manager.'"

Allison frowned hard. "I think that might have been me."

Tannis flared her eyes.

Allison put up her hands. "Kidding. Honest."

Tannis said, "I felt about two inches high. I felt as small as a flea. I was mad at Patti, too, because she was cranky and I just wanted her to shut up. I wanted my old life when I could just pick up and go to a goddamn movie when I wanted. I couldn't bring myself to stand up and leave, though, with everyone watching. I had the right to be there. I did have the right to be there! Patti had the right to be there!"

Allison cleared her throat. Her chin was sunk so low it hit her chest.

"People shouldn't treat other people like that," said Tannis. "Trying to humiliate them in public. Why would people fucking do that to a new mother?"

Bryce thought: Why does anyone do anything? They just do. It's the surprise party theory of life.

Allison said quietly, "Maybe they just wanted to watch the movie."

"Babies can be loud," said Bryce. "I mean, not Patti, but—" Except Patti *was* noisy—who was he trying to kid? "I guess I'd want to watch the movie if I paid my money. It's not cheap to see a flick anymore. It's a chunk of change." He stood and picked up Sam the Cat and put him out in the rain. He was trying to make things better, but he could see it wasn't working. He started clearing the plates.

Allison was making a rope from a napkin, twisting it in tighter and tighter curls.

Tannis paced.

Peter said, "Can you believe Bryce is forty? Forty? Geez. It's the age our parents were when we were teenagers."

Bryce stacked the cutlery on the top plate. "My father didn't have hair and my mother was a piss tank." Bryce thought about it for a minute, how much he'd hated his parents when he was a teenager. Now he just thought they were sad. "Back then, forty was older than forty is now."

"I'm coming up behind you, buddy," said Peter. "I'm two years from forty now myself. I can't picture it. I can't fathom it."

"You can't go backwards, though," said Bryce. He was thinking he should have asked for something else to mark his birthday—a hot air balloon ride, maybe, or a cruise through the Mediterranean. Everyone could have called it a night and never mind the dishes.

"People in their forties die of age-related illnesses." Peter started counting dead people off on his fingertips, telling what disease had taken them out. Breast cancer, prostate cancer, lymphoma, Crohn's disease. When he got to four, Tannis pushed down his fingers.

"That is too grim," she said. "I can't stand this negativity. I have to believe in a future that's at least twenty years long, so Patti can grow up."

Allison left the room.

Bryce wanted to believe in a future that was twenty years long, too. Longer. A person didn't need a kid to wish for that. Bryce told Tannis he wanted Patti to live to be a hundred and fifty. Bryce could hear coffee burbling in the kitchen. He picked up the plates; found Allison facing the sink drinking vodka straight from the bottle.

"Hey," he said and held her shoulders.

"She doesn't even see what she's doing."

"It's okay."

"She thinks she owns the world," said Allison. "Her and the other mothers."

"Tannis? Tannis doesn't think that," said Bryce.

Allison was crying. "Do you know how sick I am of having to stay late at work because all our employees are mothers? They don't pull their weight, but I'm not allowed to discriminate."

"But that's not Tannis's fault."

Allison's upper lip was beading. She said, "I need a cigarette. I'm going out for a cigarette to clear my head."

She stood under the stoop huddled into herself with the rain whipping the bamboo beside her. Smoke clung to her head like

an angry cowl. Sam the Cat jumped up on the ledge and batted her shoulder, but she ignored him.

"Hey," said Tannis. "What gives? Did I tick her off?"

Bryce shook his head. "I honestly have no idea." He rubbed his hands on his pants. He knew he should say something nice about Allison, be sympathetic. Patti was not even a cute baby, so why were they fighting over her? But still, still—there was something in the persnickety infant, in the beaming father and the stressed mother who was his good friend that drew him, like they were light bulbs and he was a bug bashing up against the bright glare of a possible future, all instinct and foolishness. He would have to give up too much to have a kid. Independence, certainly. His entire life as he knew it. Allison? Plus he could have a kid and then not be able to protect it. "She's a really nice woman. I really like her."

Tannis said, "Oh my god. Is she infertile? I'm about as sensitive as a rock."

"She's not infertile," said Bryce. He thought about whether Allison might be infertile. It had never crossed his mind. If she was infertile, it would explain her shrill defense of childless women. Would he feel differently about her if she wanted kids but just couldn't have them? He guessed it wouldn't change much, really, all told. No kids was no kids, no matter how you didn't get them.

When Allison came back in, her voice was high and unnaturally bright, accompanied by a smile nailed in place. "There's cake!" she chirped, rubbing her hands. "This is supposed to be a celebration." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Peter said, "Is Patti finally asleep? Did our allergic baby finally drift off?"

Nobody said anything for a minute, just looked at the baby slumbering quietly on the couch.

Allison called for Peter to switch off the lights, then appeared looking spectral in the candlelight. She set the cake carefully on the coffee table. It was a small, bakery-bought chocolate, with *Happy birthday, Brice* in wobbly blue icing across the top.

"I asked them to fix the spelling, but the man who does the lettering had already gone home." She picked up the digital camera; the flash went off like a strobe light. She squeezed Bryce's

shoulder. "Make a wish. Blow out your candles, sweetheart. Then we've got some presents for you to open."

Bryce said, "My best girl and my best friends to help me celebrate going over the hill. I hope everyone's still here while I'm rolling down the other side." He filled his cheeks and blew until every candle flickered out. He supposed this was it, then—no party.

Tannis leaned back. "What did you wish for?"

"He can't tell you," Allison said, "or it won't come true."

Bryce had wished Jon could come back to life, even though, if he did, Bryce would not know him, would not even be aware of his existence. He wished he knew what to do with the rest of his life.

Allison sat on the edge of the couch as if she might at any second bolt. She kept tapping a tissue to her face.

Bryce said, "Get the presents, honey, okay?"

Sam the Cat jumped onto the lip of the window outside and swished his tail. He was wet; they could barely make out his angry meow.

"Tannis? Let me ask you. What is the difference," Allison said, "between you putting Bryce's cat outside because he was bothering your baby, and me putting Patti outside the movie theatre because she's bothering me? That's what I need to know."

Bryce looked at Allison. His heart began to beat too fast—he thought it was fear. He reached out for a package from his parents. He shook the box. "Every year, my mother gives me a sweater. I get two sweaters every year, one for my birthday and another for Christmas. I have drawers full of sweaters."

"There is a difference," said Tannis. "Do you need it spelled out? Patti is human. She isn't a pet."

Allison coughed.

"My baby isn't human?"

"Did I say that?" Allison looked injured. "I didn't say that."

Bryce opened the box to find a blue sweater with white zigzags across its chest. "Wow," he said dully, "a sweater."

"You might as well have said that. Like childlessness is—"

"I'm childless? I'm childless?"

"What the hell would you call yourself?" Tannis threw up her hands. "I can't talk to you. Bryce, I can't talk to her."

"You make it sound like I've lost something peremptorily. I chose." Allison dabbed at glassy eyes.

"But Bryce wants kids, so where does that leave you?"

"A blue sweater," Bryce said. He held it up in front of himself. "Look at that. Mom's never sent a blue one before."

"Bryce does not," said Allison hotly.

"Grow up, Allison. He just doesn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Bryce, do you want children?"

"I tell my mother I've already got enough sweaters. I say, 'Mom, I haven't worn the ones you sent last year,' but still, what does she send? A sweater." Bryce heard Sam the Cat's silent meow outside the window and couldn't figure out which of them was the more miserable. He knew which of them he wished was safely outside in the lashing rain, and it wasn't Sam the Cat.

"Bryce, I'm talking to you," said Allison.

"Tell her, Bryce. You want a son, don't you?"

Had he let this slip? But then Bryce recalled admitting his fantasy about Jon Smith being his own kid when Tannis was first looking at the photographs.

"Honey? Bryce? Is this true? Why would Tannis know something that intimate and I wouldn't?"

"I don't know," said Bryce helplessly.

Tannis said, "For fuck's sake, Bryce, tell her you want kids. Go on. You're forty. Grow a spine before you atrophy into a wimp."

"I want kids," he said, and when he finally admitted it, he understood it was true, and it had probably always been true. One of the images of Jon, one he hadn't hung, of Jon's entire face, rose in front of his eyes with skin so translucent Bryce could see the structures beneath. This was it, the doorbell ringing, what he'd been waiting for.

Allison sat back. "Oh," she said. "Well then. That's different, then. Well, then."

Everybody was quiet. At the window, Sam the Cat let out a yowl so loud Allison jumped.

"Peter, we're going," said Tannis. "Shouldn't we be going?"

Bryce and Allison stared at each other, until Allison looked down at her lap.

"All right," said Peter. "Let's. Let's go home and leave these two lovebirds alone."

Allison looked up. "I just wanted your friends to like me."

"We're going," said Tannis. She shoved the baby like moldable clay into her tiny coat, pulling fingers through armholes, zipping her up. She lifted Patti and grabbed the diaper bag. She bent

to Bryce's ear. "You're on your own, birthday boy. We got you Bose speakers, by the way." She nodded at the small stack of gifts.

Bryce said he'd walk them out. As they left the room, Allison said, "I just wanted to make a good impression."

Bryce took Tannis and Peter into the alley. It was a Friday night in Mount Pleasant in the middle of a wind and rain storm. He was forty years old. He had been forty years old for a day. Nothing had changed, but everything was different. He heard thumps around the corner. Somebody down the alley told somebody else to shut the fuck up. He could see his breath in the streetlight. He helped Tannis strap the baby in.

"You okay?" said Tannis, touching his elbow.

"Sure," Bryce said.

Tannis searched his eyes. "You've got your work cut out for you."

Bryce nodded.

They said their goodbyes and he went back inside. "Allison?" he said. "Allison?"

"What?" she said, her voice thick with hurt, snapping a photograph that momentarily blinded him.

He rubbed his sore back. "Never mind."

"What?" she said. "What?" She held out the camera. "Look. Look at this one. Look how sad you look."

"Yes," Bryce said.

Laurel Loustau

Power Con Dolcezza

Even her fingers looked important. Nine of her high-salaried appendages curled calmly around the steering wheel while her right index finger reared up and down, tapping the wheel as if it alone were responsible for counting the nation's seconds or for casually thumping a drumbeat to the world. The cogs of a Swiss watch couldn't have been more durable than his mother. If she set her mind to it, Liam thought, she could probably keep that finger tapping even if she was being shot at, or even if she was actually shot.

Liam wished his bulletproof mother were counting her second thoughts, but more likely she was ticking through a to-do list. Liam pictured her entering the oval and square offices of leaders around the world. His mom discussed terrorism and counter-terrorism, and she also discussed nuclear bombs with people. She could also play the piano, not just one or two-note ditties but what seemed like all 88 keys at once. No wonder she was on the board of directors of the San Francisco Symphony. The globe was the limit for a smart, savvy National Security Advisor like his mom.

Liam wondered if there were a cabinet somewhere on Capitol Hill holding a file folder dedicated to him. Maybe not, he thought. She wouldn't want to leave a paper trail, but maybe there was a file labeled something discreet like "IL" for "illegitimate," or maybe just "L" for "Liam," or "ILL" for "Illegitimate Liam." He wondered where she would put the file. He fantasized that all her files would be subpoenaed one day, and he would no longer be a secret.

As they sped along Interstate 70 to the Little Sweden International Chess Tournament at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, Liam looked at his mom's hands, which were cuffed by her suit sleeves. He had given her a nondescript sweatshirt without his boarding school's name on it, but he had not seen her wear it yet. At the last gas station, Liam saw a woman who wore a t-shirt that said, "Grandma," with little painted handprints decorating it. Liam wondered what else that woman did besides act like a grandma.

Last year, for Christmas, his mom had sent him Thoreau, perhaps as a philosophical justification for deliberately sending Liam to live in the woods. Liam didn't get very far, but he did get to "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Liam didn't know much about grown men, so he tore a page out of his math book and wrote next to x +1 = 3, x =2, "The mass of *boys* lead lives of quiet desperation," and stuck it to his bulletin board. His mom paid for him to have a private room in the Elite Boarding School for Boys, tucked behind a hill and among the thickest trees in Virginia.

As she drove, Liam looked at the nice black curl of his mother's hair. The longing came and he tried to gulp it back down, but his mouth was too dry to swallow. "Mom, I'm thirsty."

"Hmmm?" She raised her eyebrows. Liam waited for her mind to join the two of them in the car. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I'm thirsty. Could we stop for a drink?"

"You're so smart, darling," she said, looking at him. "I'm so proud of you."

Liam shrugged and looked out the window. "Let's face it, mom. I was your mistake."

Condoleezza put her White House shoe on the brake and decelerated. Then she set the cruise control.

"Where did you get that idea?"

"Jeff Ellington said he was his mom's mistake."

"So you got that idea at school?"

"Where else? I'm pretty much caged into that place."

"It's not a cage. It's like a summer camp and school all in one."

"It's a hideout, I guess."

Liam saw his mother was blushing.

"Mom, it's okay. Being the bastard son of Condoleezza has its perks."

"Sweetheart! You aren't a mistake."

"I didn't say *I* was a mistake. I said I was *your* mistake."

"No. I didn't make a mistake."

"I was an accident at least."

"You were a pleasant surprise."

"You hid me right from the beginning. You went to live in the Soviet Union."

"I was already practically living there. I was a Soviet analyst. I had little social life at the time and there was no threat of preg-

nancy. I mean the general possibility was there—everyone knows the intentions men and women *can* have for each other, but I didn't have any specific reason to believe that on that date in that place—"

"You met my father on an airplane, right Mom?"

"Yes."

"And he handed you his peanuts after you ate yours?"

"Yes."

"And he placed his napkin almost instantly to soak up three drops of water that spilled from your cup onto the book you were reading.

"Yes."

"And he had the torso of an ancient Greek god and his face was that of a brown-skinned angel."

"Yes."

"But you didn't know where he was going or where he came from."

"If your father had only spoken one of the languages I *know* —English, French, Spanish, or Russian—if I could have understood even five of his words. . ." She shook her head and stared out the window at the passing telephone poles. "Listen, Liam. You've turned out to be so brilliant. I AM so proud of you."

"Mom, you don't admit I exist. How can you say you're proud of me?"

"I don't need other people to know you exist to know that I'm proud of you."

"I do."

"The reason I didn't tell everyone right from the start was that my job was to abet the fall of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. Talking about my newborn baby would have been unprofessional."

"But you didn't lose your job."

"No."

"And then Stanford made you provost and they didn't know, and everybody kept not knowing you were my mom and you never lost your jobs."

"Right. You're right. We've been through this before, right?"

"Yeah."

"So let's get going," she said, speeding up again and focusing on the road. "We don't want to be late for your tournament."

Liam's mom loved to watch him develop his chess skills. That

was her main claim to parenting him. Over the years, she had arranged and taken him to a series of experienced chess tutors in remote corners of the United States and Russia. The tutors fascinated Liam. One man had gray wild hair and a permanent sneer, as if he had just made the better move and his opponent would find out about it soon enough. The man reminded Liam of a wolf, and after that, all the tutors resembled wolves to Liam. The lone wolves would meet in dimly lit studio apartments and the pack wolves would be milling with their kind at a park, growling inaudibly at certain points in their games. The wolves taught him when to steer toward a Closed Sicilian, when to steer toward a King's Indian, when to pontificate his bishop, and how to choose whether to try to dominate the dark squares or the light squares.

When he turned ten, Condoleezza started taking him to tournaments. Liam's favorite part of their chess weekends was at the beginning when they exited the school together. Liam's mom would put her arm around his shoulder and her shoes clicked forward on the tile floor. Her steps sounded like confident plans, engaged in what he fantasized was the dangerous business of picking him up.

In his spare time, he worked out outrageous greeting scenes, too—himself pushing through throngs of elderly teachers and sprinting toward his mother where she stood looking lost in the hall; he and his mom embracing in slow motion to a special CD of his mom slamming the chords of "Chariots of Fire." But that was just a dream. Because after the secretary announced his mom's arrival on the intercom in his room, his mom didn't wait for him in the hall. She busied herself in the headmaster's office pitching resumes. As she made yet another determined attempt to revolutionize the teaching staff so that her son could have the best education possible, Liam usually ended up waiting for *her* in the hall.

At his tournaments, she sat on the sidelines smiling, wearing a wig and dark glasses and trying not to act too Washington D.C. Liam concentrated on the board and occasionally looked over at his mother. Her absurd hair and glasses usually made him smile and relaxed him when the game got complicated. He knew she was pleased with the idea of helping him be a better chess player, and when he really wanted her serotonins to zip he would tell her how a certain game had helped him build logic skills.

"I could feel my brain grow, Mom," he would say, and she would grin uncontrollably with her lips peeled back, like a horse.

Throughout the year, Liam practiced chess at school on his computer or with the school's newest hire, Mr. Schultz, so he could impress his mom on their next tournament weekend together, but it was *Liam's* secret that he really wasn't so interested in chess. In fact, he would rather eat Pringles potato chips at any given moment than sit down in front of those 64 black and white squares. Also, in the last three months, he and his best friend, Jeff, had developed a liking for hockey because it made them both feel great to slap sticks, whack a puck, and bash their chests in killer 12-year-old spills onto a surface as solidly cold and hard as ice.

This weekend, the genius Condoleezza and her genius son drove a silver Ferrari, which shot down Kansas Interstate 70 like a silver bullet. A group of farmers looked up from a field where they stood around a tractor. They stopped chewing their tobacco and their cows simultaneously stopped chewing their cuds, and the men and beasts all sort of mooed together when they saw the Ferrari whiz by, and it took at least 30 seconds after it disappeared for their mouths to resume mastication.

The rest of the world could never catch up to Condoleezza, Liam thought, watching those farmers stare. He understood how they felt.

The brilliant red cannas of some ostentatious Kansas gardener nodded to the car as it zipped through on its high-speed parade.

"Nice flowers, huh, Mom?"

"Why don't you get out the computer chess board that George gave me and practice the Spassky opening that Mikhail taught you?"

"Oh, yes, the wonderful present. Aren't we all overjoyed?" Liam smiled and elbowed his mother. "Was that from Bush or Tenet, Mom?"

"I'm not sure George Bush knows how to play chess, honey."

Condoleezza reached into the back seat and dug around in her son's duffel bag until she came up with the electronic chess board George Tenet had give her on the assumption that she was the one who competed in the chess tournaments she occasion-

ally disappeared to. "Here!" she said with a big motherly smile. "This is a nice gift, Liam. We've got a couple more hours on the road. You should make use of it."

Liam looked at his mom. Her face was so hopeful. He took the board and pushed the "on" button. Waiting for it to warm up, he looked out the window and watched the haystacks approach slowly and then fly into the past. The years go by in a person's life the same way.

Liam sighed. "I had hoped that this trip could be a little different, Mom."

"Perhaps we should review our goals for the trip."

"No, Mom, I know the goals. Look! There's a gas station. Can we stop for a drink?"

"Not now."

Liam stuck his finger in his mouth. "My mouth is parched, Mom," he whispered in a faked hoarse voice.

"Honey, if I had known that you would be thirsty right now, I would have moved heaven and earth to prevent it. But there's no point in stopping with the gas tank still three-fourths full."

"How do you move heaven, anyway, Mom?"

"Well, it's just—

"Right, right. It's just an expression. Never mind."

"Liam, you've asked me a question. I'd like the opportunity to answer it."

"Get me a drink, and I'll listen to your answer."

Condoleezza smiled. "That's funny," she said.

"What?"

"You—talking like that. It must be genetic."

"Am I filibustering you, Mom?"

"You're manipulating a deal," she said, running her hand through his short curls.

Liam blushed a little and looked out the window. The crooked smile of the moon hung in the blue sky.

"Look, Mom, the moon's out in the daytime! That's cool."

"Yes."

Liam moved closer to the window and squinted at the moon as if he were reading a greeting card. "It's for us," he said to his mother. A smile curled her face, as crooked and genuine as the moon's. He lifted his eyes back to the moon for a beat and then indulged another look at his mother. Then he had to turn and face his mom to see for sure.

"Jeez, Mom, are you crying?"

Condoleezza shooed away the emotional buzz and pasted on a power smile.

"That just surprised me," she said and pointed to his game. "When your board's warmed up, why don't you plug in the game you lost in the semi-finals last year and see what your margin for error was on each move."

"Okay, Mom."

Liam went right to his work, plugging in his errors to learn from them, to learn just how wrong the computer judged him to be on each move.

There's never been a time like the present, he thought to himself. I feel powerful. I'm starting to be a force in this world. This must be how gravity feels. He felt a new confidence, as if, after all these dozen years, he now had the mental muscle to pull his mom into his world.

Before they got to the tournament, they stopped on the side of the road so Liam's mom could put on her wig and dark glasses.

"What's it going to be this time, Mom? Blond?"

"No. Beautiful locks of auburn hair," she said, pulling a handful of curls out of a black leather bag and fitting it onto her head.

"Mom!" Liam was horrified.

"Is it that bad?"

"Yes. It's bright."

"Well, we'll have to deal with it. It's all I brought."

"How about my baseball cap?"

"That's not enough these days, dear. I actually thought about getting a nose, too, but I didn't have time."

"I'm glad you didn't," Liam said. "I like your nose the way it is."

When they pulled up to the tournament, Liam saw Stephen Rasket, his best chess buddy. Stephen didn't like chess either. He wound up at tournaments because his parents were divorced, and the weekends his dad had custody he wanted to show Stephen's mom that he could be a better parent in one weekend than his mom was in a fortnight. Stephen's dad and Liam's mom were the same in that they thought chess tournaments functioned like spray-on intelligence polish.

Liam and his mom entered the air-conditioned tournament hall, and Liam walked up and tapped his buddy on the shoulder. "Hey, Steve," Liam said.

"Liam! Mrs. Jones."

"Hi, Stephen," Condoleezza said. "Excuse me for a moment."

As she walked toward the women's restroom, both boys stared, spellbound by her confident walk and shocking red hair.

"Wasn't your mom's hair brown last time?" Steve asked.

"She has cancer," Liam said quickly. "Chemo—you know—hair falls out—so she likes to have fun with the wigs."

"Is she going to be all right?"

"Oh, yeah," Liam said. "She's, I mean, the cancer's not spreading."

"That's good."

"Hey, I play hockey now."

"Oh, yeah? That's cool."

"How about you? How's your pitching arm?"

"Aw, it's okay," Stephen said. "I asked my dad if I could join the little league team this summer, but he said, 'Why would you want to join the little leagues of life when you can be in the big leagues?'"

"Aw, man." Liam and Stephen both stopped for a minute and shook their heads at the sad misjudgment of the powerful.

The tournament began, the thinking and the thumping of pieces. Liam and Stephen won their brackets that day and would play in separate semifinals the next day.

"My dad'll probably head to the hotel bar tonight if you want to come over to our room and listen to some CD's," Stephen said.

"Maybe," Liam said. "I'm having dinner with my mom, first."

At dinner, Liam's mom told him to order whatever he wanted. He got a Kansas City strip, medium rare, and a baked potato with butter. Liam looked around. Everyone else in the restaurant was white. Everyone who came into the restaurant stared at Liam and his mom and pointed at his mom's wig, but his mother was completely unrattled. Once, after a young man in overalls guffawed rather loudly, she fluffed her hair jauntily and then leaned over the table and spoke right in Liam's face.

"You can be anything you want," she said fiercely. "Back in Birmingham, my mother used to tell me, and I'm paraphrasing now, 'You may not be able to sit down and order a soda at Woolworth's, but you *can* be *president* of the United States.'"

Liam nodded. "Okay, Mom."

"You just need an education and drive, Liam."

"That may be, but I'm not you, Mom. You were in college by age 15."

"You don't have to be me. Just be you."

"I wish I could tell people who you were, Mom. I'm proud of you."

Condoleezza nodded, her lips firming. She was closing up and that's not what Liam wanted.

"It's okay, Mom," Liam rushed in.

Their food came and they placed napkins in their laps.

"In that last game, bishop to c4 was brilliant."

"Yeah, that worked out, didn't it?" Liam said, nodding. "It gave me some attractive spots when his pawn fell. So, Mom, how's life on the Hill?"

"Stressful. Challenging. Fun."

"I heard you on '60 Minutes.'"

"Did you?"

"You did a good job."

"Thanks."

"Mom, do you ever feel . . ."

"What?"

"The gap. It's like there's the Grand Canyon between us."

She nodded. "I feel it every day, Liam, but I made my choice and I have to stick with it now."

"Mom," he said, "I'm glad you didn't abort me or give me up for adoption or leave me in the former USSR with a nanny. You're the most amazing woman in the country, and I'd prefer to be your son a few weekends a year than never."

"I know you want us to be a family, Liam. You've told me that before."

Liam shook his head and charged on. "Remember the Thoreau book you gave me last Christmas?"

"*Walden*. Did you read it?"

"Some of it."

"Thoreau says, 'A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.'"

"So I guess your life is richer if you can let me alone, right, Mom?"

"That's not what Thoreau meant," she said softly. "He wasn't talking about people he loved."

"I agree, Mom. I don't think he was in love with anyone but himself."

Liam waited.

Condoleezza was silent, thinking.

"I miss you," he said.

"I miss you, too."

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

"We could just tell everybody and I could come live with you. I wouldn't get in the way. I promise."

Condoleezza suddenly looked sick to her stomach and bit her lip, and that's what Liam wanted. He waited, hoping her love for him would just forcibly come spraying and then gushing out like water that's too high will burst through a crack, trying to find its own level.

But his mom was Condoleezza and she was incredibly strong. Weaklings don't get picked to be the National Security Advisor of the United States of America, Liam thought. Condoleezza dammed up the motherly possibilities neatly and turned to her son as a professional.

"Good luck, Liam. I hope you win tomorrow."

Liam nodded and bit his own lip. Reality is harder than ice, he thought. "I hope I win, too."

Terri Brown-Davidson

O'Keeffe Sleep Sonnet #3: Georgia Frying Bacon

Gray haircoil releasing strands across her forehead. The black
spatula an addendum to this tableau of the cocky artist, one hand
squeezing the apron draping a hip. Does she fry her bacon
like she drags stretched canvas across a studio, eyeing nourishment in bags
of bones, in sizzling withering strips leaking grease, in the grit and effluvia
of pink-red sand that wafts the remains
of animals never encountered? Nourish me, Georgie O'Keeffe.
Fill me with your gaunt, stark, love-songs of death. I'll be nagged
by your pelvises as I sample French Roast on the couch;
I'll pass one hypercaffeinated hand, trembling,
over a forehead white and cool and immense to conceal visions of calla
lilies flooding open to midnight blue. I'll riff out a jazz tune sotto voce, bad-assed,
while I dream of you in bed, the housewife who gnaws bacon strips until her flat
chin dribbles grease, the woman who fondles cow skulls but never dreams of sex.

Kim Chinquee Pretty Eyes

I was sitting on a barstool at The Doorstop, a place I'd never been. I had to get away, somewhere Robert wouldn't find me. I'd been dating Robert six months—he'd been married until a year ago when his baby drowned in a plastic pool, and he finally got divorced. He told me his wife probably killed the baby, but that he drove her to it. I figured it was Robert's way of dealing, but he talked about it night and day.

I sipped red wine and smoked a slim cigarette I bought from the machine far off in the corner. I looked around the bar. The lights were dim, and the air was hazy. There were only a few people at the bar: an older couple on the other end, a man with a blue-striped shirt two stools away from me.

The bartender kept asking if I needed more, and I stared at the cowlick in his hairline, which reminded me of Robert, who had one just like it, only on the other side. Robert's hair was thinner, but it was that same brown, same style too, almost, bangs flipped, the sides shaved like a military cut. The bartender had nice eyes. I thought about what it would be like to take him home, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought about being with some guy who wasn't Robert. I asked the guy for another glass of wine. Told him my name was Cindy. He grinned at me.

I used to bartend, too, and I'd been a dancer, but that was long ago, before I changed my ways, before I became a teacher for disabled kids. Tonight I felt overanxious and excited, like I was on a one-night pass in army basic training.

People started pouring in. The blue-striped shirt guy moved to the chair right next to mine. "You want a drink?" he said.

I smiled at him and glanced away, exhaling smoky rings. Then I sucked the Slim again.

"What's your name?" he said.

I looked at him. "Whatever you want," I said. His eyes were more beautiful than Robert's, sexy in a way. I guess I have a thing for eyes. He had a pretty face, nice dimples, and I thought if I was going home with anyone, it would be with him, as long

as he didn't have some story I'd have to listen to. His face was distinct and charming, his skin smooth and babylike, and his lashes were dark and long, outlining his deep blue eyes like some kind of painting. He looked like a watercolor of an angel.

He told the bartender to get me a drink, to put it on the tab. "I'm Darrell," he said. "You're pretty cute."

"Yeah, whatever," I said, waving him away. "So are you." I laughed and grabbed the wine.

"I mean it," Darrell said. He sipped his Michelob. The place was filling up a little.

"Yeah," I said. I leaned over the counter. "Look, I don't know what you want. If you want to fuck, that's fine, but spare me the patter."

He grinned. "I like to fuck," he said. He touched the back of my neck, rubbing his thumb across it. He smelled like sexy aftershave.

I smiled, thinking maybe I'd been missing out. Robert was good in bed, we had fun and everything. He'd said the sex made him feel better about his wife and baby, so he savored every moment. He did certain things to me that no one ever had.

I felt an elbow in my side so I looked over, saw a drunk woman toppling over, almost falling on the floor. She caught her balance.

Darrell got up to use the bathroom, and I ordered another drink, put it on his tab. When Darrell came back, he said, "Let's pretend we just got married."

"Okay," I said. "But first, tell me something funny. I don't care if it's a lie."

"You're really cute," he said.

"Fuck you," I said. "Try again."

It took him a while, and then he said, "My wife divorced me. I got two kids." He took out his wallet and showed me pictures of the kids. I looked through his wallet. Didn't find anything exciting.

"Not funny," I said. "I told you, I hate guys with stories."

"You're a bitch," he said.

"Fuck you," I said again. I gave his wallet back.

He put his hand on my bare leg. I thought about his fingers going up my skirt. I got close, smelling all of him I could. He moved his arm, putting it around me, and I imagined sucking on his neck. Then he leaned over, kissing me. I told him he didn't ask if he could do that, then I sat back and took a long swallow of wine.

We were in his Jag when he told me he was FBI.

"Please," I said. "Do you have a decent house? I don't want ordinary."

"My wife just left."

"Okay, let's try a hotel. A suite, room service, champagne—then we can do the funky things. I don't want to hear about your wife."

"What's up with you and people's problems?" he said.

I held up my hand. "Once I get started, I won't stop." I looked out the windshield at the traffic light turning yellow. He stopped, waited for the red, then went on green, probably going no faster than the limit. I stared straight ahead, focusing on a sign that looked like a green tack that got bigger as we neared it. I said, "I'm dating this guy. Says his ex-wife killed his baby. He stays glued to the TV, watching the news to see how people drown, always on the Net, checking the latest crime report. Say homicide, and he jumps about ten feet. He watches "Law and Order," "NYPD Blue," anything that has to do with people dying. He even saves them on his tapes. And, every single Sunday, he requests a prayer for his dead baby at our church, although he says there's no reason to believe in God. Anytime we go to Wal-Mart to get groceries, he lingers in the baby section, touching all the frilly dresses for the two-year-olds. It doesn't help that he sells swimming pools."

The green sign told me we were going toward the airport.

"Sounds awful," Darrell said.

I watched the lights blinking on the pad, the planes taxiing the runway, some ascending, some descending, and I thought about their destinations. I loved to fly, had almost been a pilot, but my ex-husband talked me out of it, saying our marriage would never work if I was always flying off to other countries. I could still fly, I thought, if I really wanted to. But I loved the kids I worked with at the school, where I met Robert, who was a teacher too, until his baby died and then he couldn't stand to be around kids. Now he was selling swimming pools and telling people about unattended children. I figured Darrell had been lying about being in the FBI, but I went along with it. There was nothing in his wallet that said the FBI. "Tell me about your latest bust," I said.

"Top secret," Darrell said. "If I tell you, I'll have to kill you."

"You're a card, Ralph," I said.

The hotel was booked, so he took me to his place. It was on the upper side of town, near the river, with a huge driveway that was barricaded by an iron-looking fence. He had to unlock it with his remote in order to get in.

"I thought your place wasn't very fancy," I said.

"It's just my ex-wife," he said. "I didn't want to fuck you with all her stuff around."

"Just pretend I'm your prostitute or something."

He laughed, and stopped the car. "Remember, we're faking that we're married."

"Oh yeah," I said. I got out and smelled the flowers that were lined along the lighted walk. They sort of looked like roses. I followed him to the door. "Where we going for our honeymoon?"

"I have some great champagne," he said.

He had to use the bathroom. I walked around, admiring everything he had. The ceilings rose high like a cathedral, and the floors were like a creamy marble. The beams could have been cement. I lived in a small apartment with bare windows and a sofa I bought for twenty bucks at a garage sale. I felt as if I were in a castle, stealing someone else's life for just a moment, like I was a peasant at the royal family's home, asking if I could use their phone, worried about getting my dirty hands on their receiver. It made me feel uncomfortable for a minute, but then I thought that just because he had a better place didn't mean that he was any better off.

I went into the kitchen. A Pampers bag sat on his kitchen table and a box of baby wipes was on a chair. Toys were scattered on his floor: a See-N-Say with goofy animal faces smiling in a circle, and some stuffed red-and-yellow clown. They looked really out of place. Darrell came into the kitchen.

"Nice place you got," I said.

"It does its job."

"The FBI really pays its people."

He walked over to the bar and opened the champagne, the cork spinning across the room until it hit a wall. I sat on his fancy counter and he handed me champagne, and then he started smoking.

"I didn't know you smoked," I said. I held up my Slim and he lit it with the cheapest plastic lighter.

"I didn't know you could be so sexy," he said.

I laughed again. "I'm Bridget," I told Darrell. "You got anything to eat?" I got down from the counter and looked in the fridge, then searched for a glass and poured myself some orange juice. After I finished up my glass, I swirled the carton, mixing up the pulp. There were only sips left so I drank it straight from the container.

"You're kind of cool," he said.

I rummaged in his fridge some more. It was pretty full. I got out a slice of bread and tore off a piece and put it in my mouth. "Let's have sex," I said.

His room was like the rest, except the floors were carpeted with white. It was on the second floor. His bed was in the middle of the room, and it was the biggest bed I'd ever seen, with silky golden sheets. Huge windows took up three sides of the room. The fourth wall was covered with swirls of black-and-blue. Looking down, all I could see was water, the lake that circled the backyard of his home. "This is beautiful," I said. We kissed, and I took off all my clothes. Darrell wasn't bad. At least he didn't mention his ex-wife while we were fucking. I'd begun anticipating it, had gotten used to it with Robert. I told Darrell I was pleasantly relieved.

"Jesus," Darrell said, starting up a cigarette. "What do think I am, some dork?"

"Robert always talks about her during sex. Tells me the things they used to do, and we do them too, only ten times better. He says since we can top what they did really says a lot." I took a drag of Darrell's cigarette.

"Looks to me like you ought to marry him," Darrell said.

"Better," I said, puffing on the smoke. He started another for himself. "They were married four years, had an eighteen-month-old baby. They'd been fighting, and she was outside with Samantha in the tiny plastic pool with patterns of little fish swimming all across it, and he came outside, asking her where his polka-dotted tie was. Anyway, the wife told him how would she know, she wasn't the one always leaving stuff on floors, she was tired of cleaning after him, and then he stormed inside, slamming things around, yelling out that he'd be late to his noon meeting. She ran inside, slapping him across the face, telling him that she was tired of his complaining and his bullshit. He pushed her against the wall, and went back to work without his tie, and af-

ter she got up and went outside, she found the baby face down in the pool, blue and bloated, like a Baby-Alive doll who wasn't even breathing. She called him at work, but he wasn't there yet, so she left a message, and *then* she called the paramedics."

"God," Darrell said. "Holy Jesus."

"So Robert said it was probably her fault that the baby drowned, that she probably killed it, but he probably drove her to it."

"Fuck," Darrell said, turning on his side to face me, grabbing on my hand. "What if she really did it? I mean, killed the kid on purpose?"

I lay back, staring at the ceiling. I guess I hadn't thought of that, hadn't thought of it at all.

"Or what if it was him?"

"Oh shit," I said. "That can't be." I put my hand over my bare stomach. I thought I might be sick.

"That's why he's obsessed."

I heard the ticking of a clock. The room was almost empty except for the bed, and some sculpture in the corner. The art was black and tall, solid, curved, with thin lines spindling in various directions. My head was spinning.

I woke up in his room, and my watch said six a.m. I was naked, sleeping all alone. I was tired, felt a little funny, out of place, so I just closed my eyes and tried falling back asleep.

He came into the room. I wasn't watching, but I could hear his footsteps. He crawled under the sheets. He rubbed up against me. He was naked. He blew into my ear. Moved between my legs. Started kissing on my neck. I didn't feel as strong as the night before, more like a whore. It wasn't a terrible feeling, but it wasn't a thrill, either. I got up and told Darrell that I better go. He found his keys and we got dressed, and then he took me back to get my car.

When we got to the lot, he squeezed my leg and wished me luck with Robert. "We can investigate," he said and winked. "I mean, if you want."

There were six messages from Robert, asking where I'd been. I dropped my purse by the door, and then brushed my teeth. The phone rang, and after I rinsed my mouth, I picked up the cordless. "Cindy," he said. "Where've you been?"

"I went out last night. I needed time away," I said. I slipped off my shoes and put them by the door, then sat on my twenty-dollar sofa.

"For what?" Robert said.

"I met a guy from the FBI. He said he could help us out with your investigation."

"I have a fever," he said. "I went to the hospital this morning. This girl stuck this big stick down my throat that made me gag."

"Uh-huh," I said. Then, "You want me to come over? You need some medication?"

"Yeah," he said. "I missed seeing you. You could have told me where you were. I missed watching the reruns of my tapes with you. I sold two pools yesterday."

"I'll be there around noon," I said.

"Honey," he said. "Don't forget I'll always love you."

"Gotcha," I said.

He still lived in the house where his baby died. His wife had wanted to move, but he didn't, so that's one of the reasons why she left him. It was pretty nice, a two-story home with friendly neighbors always asking how I was when Robert and I passed on our daily walks, like the ones he used to take with his ex-wife. He had a fenced backyard, now absent of any pool, of course, but there was enough space if he wanted one. Sometimes we lay in the back, soaking in the sun, eating sub sandwiches on the picnic table, and I would always wonder where the baby really died, although Robert showed me where the pool had been. I wondered what Samantha had been like alive—I'd seen tons of pictures, watched the videos—I knew her as a ghost, but I didn't know what it was like to touch her skin, and I tried to imagine what she smelled like. I wondered a lot about those things. I'd always wanted children, but it seemed like such a scary thing to do, to have this helpless life depend on you. I didn't know if anyone was ever ready. Robert told me that the baby came unexpectedly, that they were never really ready, that they got married with the agreement of never having children.

He was in bed when I got there. I walked right in, like I always did, passed the living room where there were baby pictures everywhere, a wall lined with portraits of Samantha from birth until the day before she passed away. She had cute blonde curls, the prettiest blue eyes just like her father's. I couldn't imagine be-

ing blessed with a child as beautiful as she. Her ashes were on the top shelf of the bookcase — there'd been an argument between Robert and his wife over who would get the ashes, so they split them, putting each half in a separate urn. It was pretty crazy.

He was watching "ER," rewinding the scene of the staff working on a baby. I had that scene memorized.

I sat on the bed. "How're you feeling?"

He didn't look so well—he was sweaty, looking sort of pasty, dark bags under his big eyes. It was hard for me to see a guy as tall and fit as Robert looking so pathetic. "I'm really sick," he said. "My temp is 104."

"I'd kiss you on the lips, but I'm not getting sick." I kissed his forehead.

"Tell me about this guy," he said.

I took off my shoes and crawled under the covers, got on my half of the bed. I faced him, lying on my side. "I had sex with him."

Robert turned away from me, moved closer to the edge. I thought he might fall off. "How could you?" he said.

I shifted to my back, stared up at the ceiling. "I met him at a bar."

"Jesus, Cindy," he said. "I hope you're not going back to your old ways."

I thought about the old ways—stripping and something sort of like prostitution. I thought about how awkward I felt this morning, waking up in Darrell's bed. "I'm sorry," I said, facing Robert, reaching out to him. "I don't know what happened."

He turned toward me, moving close, staring at me for a minute, then he ran his finger lightly across my cheek. "It's okay," he said. He frowned. "Maybe I drove you to it."

A train rolled by in the distance. It sounded like an airplane. I said, "Did your wife really kill Samantha?"

Robert reached out for me. He was silent, then he cried. He was burning up. He clung to me. I was tired, and I felt like crying too, but instead, I held him up.

On Sunday, we went to church as usual. The church was almost like the one I'd gone to as a kid, with the varnished wooden pews, the Jesus portrait with outstretched arms up behind the altar, the cream-colored tiles on the floor, and the organ sounds that used to make me feel as if I were in heaven, at least that's what I'd imagined. I loved turning the crispy hymnal pages, and the

church usually smelled like pine and whomever I was sitting next to. It used to be a place for me to get away, forget about the troubles of the world, where I believed that there were things beyond my little life. Now I didn't know what church meant.

But looking at the pastor preaching in the pulpit in his faded robe, I thought about Samantha, and I felt as if she were mine, as if I'd absorbed Robert's obsession. I had an eerie feeling. I looked at Robert. A baby cried. Robert squeezed my hand.

As we sat in the pew and listened to the sermon, I glanced in the next row, and I saw someone familiar. It was Darrell. His profile was clear and as he turned his head, I could see the bright blue of his eye, the slight tilt of his upper lip. He bowed his head, and it looked like he was praying. I wondered if he was having any luck.

I prayed. I remembered how I felt as a kid, and I sort of felt that now, sort of small but still worth something, feeling as if there was hope somewhere in the world, not having all this weight pounding on my shoulders, stored up in my body. I remembered what it was like having faith in something, knowing that somewhere in the world, in some way, things would be all right. I wanted to hold onto that safe feeling, but I knew as soon as church was over I'd forget.

After the service, in the lobby, Darrell walked up to me and Robert. "Hi," I said to Darrell.

"Bridget," Darrell said, holding out his hand. I shook it, my sweat rubbing onto his.

Robert looked taller next to Darrell, who was about my height. "Bridget?" Robert said.

"Cindy," I said to Darrell. "My name is really Cindy."

I introduced the men, and they shook hands. I told Robert that Darrell was the FBI guy who said he could help us out.

"You want to go somewhere for coffee?" Robert said.

IHOP was pretty packed, so we settled for nonsmoking. The bare skin of my legs stuck to the seat of the booth. Robert sat right across from Darrell, and we all ordered coffee and blueberry muffins and they also ordered omelets. I drank my coffee black and so did Darrell, and Robert added tons of cream. He blew on his cup, lifting it to his chin, some coffee spilling on his saucer, the cream dribbling on the wobbly bluish table. The waitress cleaned it up.

"So, tell me," Robert said. "You're in the FBI?"

Darrell wiped his lips with a napkin. There was a crumb left on his chin, next to a tiny scar that I hadn't noticed until now. "I hear you had some troubles with your wife," Darrell said.

I put my hands around my cup, looking at the marks my lipstick left. I wished I had a cigarette. I glanced at Robert, then at Darrell, who placed a portion of his omelet on his fork as if it were an aesthetic object, and I wondered if he was a chef or in the culinary arts.

"Lord knows, Cindy's tired of hearing about it," Robert said. "Maybe it would help to get it off my chest."

"Talk away," Darrell said, wiping his lips gently with his paper napkin.

Robert swallowed, looked at me, took a sip of water, wiped his chin with his index finger. He sighed, then sighed again. "I don't want to file charges," Robert said. "I just want your opinion."

"Can do," Darrell said.

I was prepared to hear what I'd heard before, so I got ready to tune out. Silverware clinked from the nearby tables, muffled voices all around, the waitress asking a man in the next booth if he wanted sugar for his coffee.

Robert moved his plate out of the way, put his coffee next to mine, and he leaned toward Darrell. Robert grabbed my hand, lifting it up to the table, locking our fingers together as if they were in prayer.

"My ex-wife," Robert said. "She told me that she was so mad at me, she put Sammy's head under the water and watched her gasp for breath. She said if I told, she'd say *I* did it. It probably was my fault for being such a shitty husband, for being such a shitty father."

Darrell looked at me, then looked back at Robert. We both stared at him. "Really?" I said to Robert.

Robert looked at me. "Yeah," he said. "Boy it felt good to get that out."

"Uh-huh," Darrell said, putting down his fork.

"Well, what do you think I should do? I don't think she really did it. I mean, she's probably just trying to guilt-trip me."

"Robert," I said. "You need to tell someone."

"I just told Darrell. He's FBI, right? How much higher can you go?"

Robert put his big hand over my bare shoulder, fingering my

spaghetti strap. "How well do you know Cindy?" he said. "Did she tell you about her prostitution? She needs a guy who understands."

I looked at Robert and I couldn't believe him. I was angry, yet almost ashamed. Darrell laughed. "Not that well," he said. "All I did was fuck her." He waved both hands, then got up and walked away.

At the door he turned back and waved again.

Robert opened up my car door, then got in on his side. He said, "That was stupid." He started up the car, pulled out of the lot.

"You think so?"

He put a stick of Big Red in his mouth. "You want to fuck?" he said. I guess he wasn't always very cordial.

"After all of that? Jesus, I can't believe what you told Darrell." I looked at the trees that we passed by, the wind shifting crispy leaves in every direction. "Besides, we just went to church."

"God doesn't care."

I thought about everything he said. I finally said, "I care."

Robert told me that he loved me. He asked if he could come inside. I looked at him, at his eyes, and I felt a little sorry. I wished I could be his friend and love him without hurting. I felt like I'd lost. I thought about Samantha, and I wished that she'd been mine.

Alex M. Frankel

The Life Don't Easy With You

It was still dark, but he could just barely make out the first signs of an antiseptic airline dawn coming over the wing. No use trying to get any rest now, so—gingerly—Dan climbed over the sleeping people next to him as credits rolled on the screen and arms popped up to switch on the reading lights. In the galley he asked for a cup of coffee and stood looking out the window of one of the rear doors.

I have your letter of November 12 and what I feel is a great emotion because everything you write is exactly what I would have written. . .

The cabin had the clean, metallic smell of liver paté—it was the smell of travel and novelty. He looked out the window, but what he saw was mostly the same face he'd been concerned with all his life; there was pallor and fatigue on it now, besides the usual wistfulness.

It is very depressing, Dan, for me to be thinking of nothing but you. Such a short and strong romance as ours was (less than a week!) leaves its scars, and I tell you they are love scars. The day you left I went up to the observation deck and watched your plane disappear into the sky, and I cried, I'm ashamed to admit it.

He drank his coffee and peered out at space and himself. It wasn't so much that he was *thinking* about the letter: rather, it had become part of him now. Or he had become a part of *it*, flattened himself into a two-dimensional being that inhabited the pages, the lines of that letter, breathing in and feeding on its Spanish vowels and its simple thoughts—it had been, after all, written by a twenty-year-old.

It made me so happy when I read you want to move to Spain! We'll be the happiest lovers in the world, I know we will. And

the picture you sent me made me feel content. I do want to be honest with you—as our relationship was. And I will tell you everything, *if I go with boys. These days I have had a chance to be with many. There is one very blond norteamericano who is 24 but I couldn't, I couldn't! He's so different from you.*

Do you think you'll forget me very soon?

In another message—this time a card—Víctor had drawn two excited stick figures on either side of the Atlantic, one in New York, one in Barcelona, and above them like a banner he'd written: WAITING THE MOMENT OF THE COLLISION. The printed message on the card said, in Spanish, *La vida no es fácil sin tí*, or, "Life isn't easy without you." But Víctor, with his limited English, had tried to translate it for Dan and had come up with, "The life don't easy with you."

And there had been other cards and letters, and Dan had even called a few times. By the end of November he'd made his decision to give up his apartment and his job as a paralegal and leave New York.

After your plane flew into the clouds it was very hard, very hard! Walking by the places where we'd been was always terrible. You say that soon we'll feel all right again, but all right in what sense if we're always going to want to be together? This city is so big and so sad in the autumn and in the winter, Dan, you have no idea, you can't imagine.

He felt more refreshed than anyone, though he hadn't slept. Woken up by lights and flight attendants coming around with breakfast, the passengers' faces looked puffy and disoriented.

Then, a few moments after breakfast, Dan did close his eyes. He didn't have to think about Víctor's body because that body was there always, in him, now even a part of Dan's way of viewing the world: it was young and sullen, worked-out and smooth, conscious of its effect on others. It was active, agile, alive, edible, but still finding out who it was and what others wanted it to be.

And as the sun warmed him for the first time in months and the plane began its descent, he finally fell into a sort of sleep. And in this semi-sleep he saw Víctor standing in a shower like a statue as water poured over him; one after another, men passed

by and paused to take in the sight. Víctor didn't smile but allowed himself to be admired. Nor did he make any of the funny, hedonistic movements people make as they're showering. *Madre mía!* someone said, with the hoarse voice of a man old enough to be the age of Víctor's father's father. He stood unsmiling, physique glistening, matchless.

At the Madrid airport the immigration officers looked bored. They stamped passports and smiled indulgently at the passengers and waved them into Spain. Dan wanted to stick together with the American people who had been his neighbors on the flight, but now that they were on the ground they worried about changing money and taking care of other business, and promptly left him to his own devices.

On the half-empty shuttle flight to Barcelona the Spanish crew perfunctorily handed out nuts and juice. Dan was reading the in-flight magazine and missed out on the snack: the flight was so short that apparently there was only time to serve those who waved and shouted for their food.

And then the coast came into view: the waterfront of Sitges, with its palm trees, its church, its jetties, its light blue little harbor. Víctor had showed him the town back in November. They had been walking on the promenade when suddenly, as if determined to form a moment of complete and overpowering beauty, Víctor began quoting poetry, something by Machado:

Caminante, no hay camino,
Sino estelas en el mar.

(Wayfarer, there are no roads,
only wakes in the sea.)

After Sitges, the Garaf Mountains, and he saw the winding road they had taken on Víctor's motorcycle. And then swiftly the plane descended, passing low over the huge city, sunny and sleepy in the morning.

When they landed Dan began to fret: What would Víctor think of his looks? He'd been improving himself at an expensive gym during his last months in New York, and he'd bought stylish clothes he hoped were flattering. Perhaps Víctor hadn't really liked the clothes Dan had worn on his trip, during their time together.

As he waited by the carousel he could already see Víctor waving to him from among a handful of people collected outside the baggage claim area.

His luggage came out quickly. People stared at the piles of suitcases. He pushed the heavy cart through the exit, and Víctor held out his hand. "How was your flight?"

"It was good—I didn't sleep too much. Thanks for coming out to meet me. God, you look great! Different somehow."

"They tinted my hair."

"'They'?"

"The modeling people. I work as a model now. It doesn't pay much."

"Where are we going?"

"To *a pensión.* It's called Hostal Soledad."

"I see," said Dan. "Hotel Solitude."

"If you don't like it," said Víctor, "we'll find something else for you tomorrow or the day after."

"Good idea." Dan was heartened by "we."

"Let's get a taxi." And he led Dan to the taxi stand. "Time's passed quickly."

"I knew it would."

"And a lot's happened," said Víctor.

They got out of the taxi in front of the *pensión,* on a dark little street in the Barrio Chino near the red-light district. The driver wanted to charge too much. "It's the heavy bags," he kept saying, "they have stones in them." Víctor argued. Finally he got the man to lower the fare and they brought up the suitcases, which did feel as if they were full of stones.

"That driver was a son of a whore," Víctor said.

It was cold in the *pensión.*

They talked to a big woman who seemed to know Víctor. She showed them a small room, almost a cubicle, with a balcony overlooking the street. There was a single twin bed—and Dan's heart sank. There was a night table. There were no pictures on the walls.

"Yes, fine, I like it," said Dan.

"Sure?" Víctor asked, coming up very close behind him—almost touching him!

"It'll be fine for me."

Víctor kept on talking to the landlady, a talkative woman who started into a very long story. Dan didn't get any of the Spanish now. Understanding native speakers talking to each other was always a challenge. He sat down on the bed, resigned.

But when the woman finished her story, they hauled in the bags from the front entrance of the *pensión*. Once they were all in, there was barely any room to move around.

Dan did not want to be in that room with Víctor. What was the use? Nervously he started taking things out of his backpack and setting them out on the bed—the novel he was reading, the shabby cosmetic bag he'd had since he was thirteen, his ticket back to America which he suspected he would never use.

Víctor—leaning against the wall, watching him—had never looked better and probably knew it. "You've come so bundled-up from New York," he said to Dan. "But it's mild here. Nineteen degrees." And still Dan could not look him in the eye. He was afraid. "I didn't sleep all night," Víctor said. "All night I was thinking of coming to meet you. Shall we walk?"

Dan smiled. "You love walking, don't you?"

They walked along Las Ramblas. It was Saturday morning. Businesses were opening for the day. *This is where I am going to make a new life for myself. A new country. And I am twenty-three. I am twenty-three . . .*

They walked to the bottom of Las Ramblas, to the statue of Columbus, and toward the beach at the Barceloneta.

"I've got a lover," said Víctor.

"Yes, well, I think I knew. I wasn't sure."

"It's the person I mentioned on the phone, the second time you called."

"But at that time. . . ?"

"Yes, at that time it wasn't serious. But it's been over a month. That's a long time for me."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Dan."

"Yes."

"I feel for you."

"I know."

"I can't tell you how hard this is for me."

"Yeah."

"And my lover wants to meet you. He wants to be your friend, too."

Dan turned quickly and looked at Víctor, who was looking down at his feet and picking at his calluses as he walked.

"Yes, he wants to meet you. I think it would be fun! He understands what's going on. He knows everything! God, it's been hard." Víctor sighed. "His name is Fernando. You'll like him."

"Oh?"

"It was so hard last night I couldn't sleep. I want to hurt you as little as possible."

"Nice of you," said Dan, "but couldn't you have said something before I sold my things and gave everything up?"

Víctor raised his voice a little now; it sounded very young. "But I needed to take a look at you again, to make sure. And when I saw you coming out of customs, I knew right away. You see?"

"Yes, now I see."

"When you left two months ago, that was it. You never mentioned coming here to *live* until your letters. But in the meantime what was I supposed to do?" And Víctor walked on in his usual way, head lowered, picking at the calluses. "I went out. I was miserable after you left. I cried when I saw your plane disappear into the sky—I cried."

"Yeah, I know."

They passed the jungle gym they had climbed together back in the fall. They passed the jetty where they had gone to watch the waves.

"But we're going to forget the past," said Víctor, "and we're going to be friends. I don't have many friends here. I need more friends."

"Yes."

"It *is* a little hard for me to be around you, Dan—you seem so sullen. But we've got to try! And now I'm going to leave you because last night I didn't sleep a wink. And tomorrow at nine o'clock sharp I will be at your *pensión* with my lover and his car and the three of us are going to the mountains."

But Víctor never showed up the next morning.

Alone on his first full day in Europe, Dan did the *paseo* by himself. He ate his meals in cheap restaurants. Early in the evening it started to rain and he went back to his *pensión,* happy to have his book. Still on New York time, he sat up reading all night.

On Monday he started looking for work, and on Wednesday he found a job at a small, Spartan little school called LOOK

English. The pay was pretty low. By the end of the week he still hadn't heard from his friend.

Maybe if I had worked out a little more fanatically back in New York. . . Maybe if I'd lightened my hair or worn my contacts I would have been more appealing as I came through that door. Or if I'd worked on my posture a little bit.

His first Friday night in Barcelona Dan stole out of his *pensión* in a long black overcoat. *They don't know, no one knows what happened. I will be new for them, I will still have a chance.*

It was snowing in the mountains and it was bitterly cold. His room had no heating, and he walked the streets more bundled-up than he had been in New York.

He passed bars and people passed him, singing and clapping. Around the opera house prostitutes, male and female, waited in the cold. He recognized one of the women from his *pensión,* where she lived with her baby. Her dusty clothes hung on her like the wings of a fly.

Young people noisily crowded into cars and tumbled out of bars and clapped and sang and gave each other very public, very long kisses mixed with drink and fun and music. Shining motorcycles covered the sidewalks in front of the discos. Dan went to Gris, Monroe's Gallery, Bronx, Martin's. By three o'clock he was heading back to his *pensión* when a young man asked him for a hundred pesetas.

"I don't have any money."

"You afraid of us?" There were four or five of them.

"No!"

But then Dan started running, near all the cars by the Plaza de Cataluña. Drivers braked when he saw them. Someone was running behind him, running fast, determined, strong. Dan pounded on the windows of cars, begging for help, unable to believe this was happening. Then he decided to stop: if he ran much farther he would end up in dark streets, so it was better to let whatever was going to happen take place right there in the middle of the crowds and the cars—maybe it wouldn't be so bad. He sank to the pavement in the middle of the square and accepted the blows in a fetal position, shielding himself as best he could. When the youth vanished, Dan got up and went over to a taxi. The driver was looking at him. "Am I. . . am I. . badly.. . damaged?" he asked the driver in his Spanish.

"Would you mind holding on a second?" the driver said, glaring at him. "Can't you see I have a customer here who is trying to pay?" And in fact there was a man hunched in the back seat carefully counting out his money with the dim help of a flashlight that the driver was shining on his hands.

February 19, 1985

Dear Steve—

How's life in New York? I'm doing well here. Sorry I haven't written so far, but my life is so full! As I wrote you in my other postcard my friend met me at the airport and we've been inseparable ever since. He spends the night whenever he can and the landlady brings us cafe con leche and croissants to the room, and we eat on the balcony. It's warm for February. Sometimes we put on helmets and drive to the beach or rent a car and drive all the way up to the mountains to go skiing. He has taught me how to ski and snowboard and I'm getting to be almost as good as he is! Teaching is great and I barely have any time for reading. For Holy Week we're thinking of going to Mallorca or Marbella. Anyway hope all's well with you—

Take care—

Dan

During the next few weeks his classes in the LOOK English Academy started out with comments about his injuries and how his recovery was going. His students shook their heads in disbelief at what their city was coming to.

He ate in restaurants. Once, he had coffee with one of the other teachers. He said good morning and good night to his landlady. The room was cold and he slept in his clothes.

In a bar one night he had a few beers with a young man named Pablo, a law student. They got excited by each other and talked about the differences between America and Europe. Dan was pleased to be practicing his Spanish a little, although in the beginning of the conversation Pablo had been determined to try out his English.

"Come back to my room if you want," Dan said. "The landlady will be asleep."

Walking in the streets of the Barrio Chino, they spoke of movies, language schools, and, again, the differences between

America and Europe. Dan liked Pablo. He liked his voice, his enthusiasm. And Dan smiled—he'd always known it would just be a matter of time before someone new came along and his Spanish life would start to take off; it was just a matter of persevering. And the streets no longer seemed dingy and run-down but full of a typically Spanish blend of romance and poetic mystery. Dan was happy.

"How can you live like this?" Pablo said, seeing the mess in his room.

They spent an hour together. When Dan asked for a phone number, Pablo, dressing quickly, said, "Sorry but that's not usually a good idea—it's to protect the families, you know."

A few weeks later, at the baths, he met a young man who worked as a mechanic in the metro. His name was Mariano.

They made a date to see each other again, and Mariano came over with a lot of presents: some sweets, a metro key-chain, and the "International Herald Tribune." They had dinner in a Chinese restaurant, but by the time they got back to the hotel they both seemed less excited by each other. Mariano was unhappy with some of Dan. "You're starting to lose your hair," he remarked, a little appalled, in the same tone he might have used if he'd said, "I didn't know *this* was going to be the deal!"

April 30, 1985
Dear Joseph and Debbie—

How have you been? I was hoping to hear from you. Life's good here. Holy Week was great. We went to Ibiza. My lover has friends who own a disco there. One day we took a ferry to Formentera—it was the best time I've ever had. Take care, stay in touch—

Dan

It was summer and Dan was teaching an intensive English course at the LOOK English Academy. At night the Hostal Soledad was unbearably hot and he couldn't sleep, so he'd given up on sleep and started spending more time in the bars.

At one of these bars he met Javier, a dapper, awkward young man several years younger than Dan. "Where are you from?" Javier asked.

"Berlin."

Because of the AIDS scare, Dan often concealed his nationality and told people he was German or Dutch: he could have passed for either.

They left the bar together. Kittens scurried by in the moonlight. Shutters banged shut. Old facades sheltered quivering pigeons.

"Are we going to my place?" said Javier. "I've got an arsenal of hashish up there."

Javier's room was even barer than Dan's. Besides the bed and a sink, there was a table with some money on it, a Bible, and a box of cookies. Javier had several joints already prepared and gave one to Dan. He didn't take one for himself but just sat on the bed and talked. "Have some cookies."

Dan smoked and ate some cookies, and began to get very stoned. Suddenly Javier said, switching from Spanish to English—in a perfect Cockney accent— "You know, I 'ate Germans."

"What?"

"I despise Germans. Look at my face. Look carefully. Do I look Spanish to you?"

"I don't know. . . I knew there was something about you . . ."

"I'm Israeli."

"Oh?"

"And I 'ate Germans. Do you want me to tell you what 'appended to the last German I 'ad up here?"

Dan stared.

"Them cookies you're eatin'."

Dan froze: the accent was authentic. Gradually Javier's face seemed to elongate.

Javier went on: "Do you want me to tell you what's in them cookies? Do you want me to tell you what I did? I 'ate Germans."

Dan stood up. "These cookies are fine. Don't try to tell me they're not fine!"

Javier laughed. "Count to ten and you'll see. Go ahead. Count slowly!"

Javier's face became paler and paler, more haggard, the nose longer.

"So—you're an Israeli."

"And I publish leaflets."

"Leaflets!"

Dan ran to the door, opened it, ran to the front door—and

out. He didn't trust the elevator, so skipping steps, sometimes three at a time, he rushed down four flights. Halfway to the bottom he heard a voice not far behind him. "Are you afraid of me?" And then laughter. . . laughter. . .

He walked through the streets waiting for the poison to take effect, ready to hail a taxi at any time. It was late. Occasionally at intersections he'd come across bonfires not understanding what they meant, not appreciating all the customs of La Noche de San Juan. He walked until he came to the Paseo de Gracia and realized he would probably live. He went into the Drugstore, a meeting place for foreigners of all types, transvestites, punks, Arabs, whores, pushers, madmen. The usual middle-aged painted French woman approached him. She was not selling her body. She sold poetry. She recited in thickly-accented English as he swigged beer to celebrate not being poisoned. Her poem ended:

I am Queen of the sweet life,
And you beautiful slaves
Make Company to me.

He paid her a hundred pesetas and she went away, to serenade others. A few minutes later he could feel the ineluctable pull of Kiss.

As he paid at the entrance he couldn't help noticing the swastikas. They were advertising "Salon Kitty Night," which was supposed to happen in two weeks. "Be sure to come on Salon Kitty Night, boys!" said the man in the cloakroom. The posters with the swastikas showed several Nazi officers at a table enjoying a cabaret evening, behind them a *travesti* spotlighted on stage. "Daft cunts," said the man next to Dan, in a Scottish accent. "Never seen such bad taste in my life! Homosexuals exalting their murderers!" Though the man was speaking English, his tone drew the attention of some of the patrons and staff, who gave him a worried look. Dan went inside.

It was three a.m. and full and dark. He'd come at the right time. He ordered a whisky at the bar and stood watching the dancers under a poster of a bare-chested brawny youth and the words—in English— NOT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL. And for a while he danced by himself, his drink in his hand. "Smile!" someone said, "it'll look much more attractive."

They played Alaska Dinaràma and the music from *Rambo* and Prince and Boy George, and Dan drank and watched those who really could dance. His contact lenses began to bother him in the smoky air and he felt tired, but it was too early to be tired and it was Saturday. Out of the corner of his eye he could make out the mute spectacle of the Scotsman tearing down one of the Salon Kitty posters that lined the walls. The bouncer and another employee grabbed him before he could do too much damage and dragged him out. No one seemed to pay much attention, and the late-night life of Kiss went on.

After a while he was saturated with images of Spanish youth, and the call got harder and harder to resist. Dan went down the steps to the "dark room"; here they noticed him a little more. There was life in this subterranean landscape, and his body surrendered to it, to the possibilities of escape. He unbuttoned his shirt and felt a cold hand on his neck and a warm hand on his chest. *I'm home. I'm home.* It was easy and predictable, and no matter what happened in the world there would be a welcome at the end of the week for him here—a seemingly endless supply of welcome. Then, under dim red lights, sprawled and half-drooping against the wall, he saw a young figure, familiar somehow, being slowly devoured by a trio of famished admirers. It was a memorable tableau of frenzied need. Something strange—more than excitement—happened inside Dan as he looked on. He couldn't believe his eyes, and yet he could: it was obscurely, obscenely right, because sooner or later *everyone* ended up at Kiss. Occasionally the youth would come out with a word or two of Spanish slang meant to excite. He was in good shape, terrific shape. And sometimes he allowed himself to be kissed. What had happened to his shirt? It was gone, in his back pocket or on the floor, like other shirts in the room. He didn't smile. For a moment he glanced at Dan but didn't seem to recognize him, or pretended not to. And it was all right: this was no place for crying or reminiscing; it was a dungeon packed with fifty, a hundred men all with high hopes. Dan got very close.

His dried-up lips dipped into the damp salty skin of Víctor's neck.

Wayfarer, there are no roads, only wakes in the sea.

It was light when Dan got back to the Hostal Soledad. He called in sick and went out on his little balcony. Trucks rum-

bled by, rolling doors came up with a thunderous noise, pigeons descended on the narrow streets and the roofs across the way. It was smoggy and hot. Dan got out his pen and pad and started a letter to his former college teacher:

July 18, 1985
Hi Professor Danto,

I know you won't remember me, but I was your student once. You told us we could get in touch with you anytime if we had a "philosophical brainstorm" to share. I always admired your style, you know. In fact you are one of the most admirable people I have known, so that's why I want to write you even though my brainstorm isn't particularly philosophical. I want a confessor, I guess. Could you be my confessor, please?

I died. It was the other night. I was doodling a spider web here on my bed when something went wrong. I stared and stared at the web and got lost in it. I spiraled into it and couldn't get out. I heard voices. A choir of voices. I couldn't make out exactly what they were saying but I knew what they meant. They were reaching out to me. I left my room and I walked. But in my mind I'd died. Has anything like that ever happened to you, Professor? I would have liked to talk to someone. There are a few teachers at the school where I'm working, but I didn't want to bother them at three o'clock at night. I walked for an hour and it passed. Nothing like that had ever happened to me in my entire life.

I can't stand looking at the walls here. They're full of stains on the right side of my bed. I'm surprised the landlady hasn't said anything. I try to cover the area up with pillows, I try to be careful, but more stains just accumulate. One day she'll notice and then what am I going to say? Should I just sneak out of here in the middle of the night? Sometimes I can't sleep thinking about all those stains, they could be scars on my face.

This is my storm. I'm telling you this because I always looked up to you in class, even though I was quiet and didn't participate. I guess I saw you as a father figure, because I didn't have any father. The days are getting short. This is Barcelona, España, and it's one in the morning in New York. You are sleeping. Or are you? Before I left New York I thought of going to see you in your office. That would've been nice, but

He was very tired. The sun hit his face and the swallows wheeled wildly through the morning air. He leaned over and looked down at the street below. The owner of the shoe store was having a smoke in front of the bar next to his store. He stood directly underneath and Dan could easily have spit on his head. A motorcyclist was waiting on his rumbling Vespa for the light to change. He wasn't wearing a helmet—or socks. Dan was only three stories up and could almost see the hair on his bare ankles. Another rolling door went up with a horrific noise—this was Mister, a men's clothing store. Two or three old ladies, pulling along their little shopping carts, walked heavily toward the market like grey old urban pigeons. A decrepit little man stationed himself at the entrance to the Hostal Soledad and began selling garlic. *"¡Ajo!"* he cried. *"¡Ajo! ¡A veinte duros la bolsa! ¡Mire que ajo más majo! ¡Ajo! ¡Ajo!"* Look what nice garlic I have at a hundred pesetas a bag! Garlic! Garlic! He was there six days a week, that old, old man. Sometimes it sounded like the beginning of a chorus of different kinds of green grocers gradually joining in until the immense lament of the sellers reached a grand climax to drown out every other noise of the city. But this never happened. He was never joined by anyone and just went on alone: *"¡Ajo! ¡Ajo!"* A taxi drove by with the serious, urbane voices of the morning news commentators from Madrid. Dan smelled coffee and seafood and liquor and exhaust as the sun warmed him.

He tore the letter to Danto out of his notebook and crumpled it up.

The sun lit the balcony and the swallows did their swirls and people shouted their Spanish shouts below. A scabby, obese woman began to mop up the balcony right across the street. She gave Dan a suspicious look, as if he had no right to be standing there in the sun of his Hostal Soledad.

Waiting for the plane, he wore his long black overcoat. It was a small airport. Perhaps there was a strike going on, because the floor was littered with waste from days and days. Barcelona had looked so important and imposing to him, in the beginning, almost a year ago.

"Will this be your first time in Italy?" an Englishman reading a paper asked him.

"Yes, that's right. Never been before."

"But you've got people there?"

"No, no one," said Dan, smiling.

The man sat back, looked at him thoughtfully.

And then someone came along offering to shine shoes. Dan refused at first, but then realizing his mistake he changed his mind.

And for a few minutes, for a few pesetas, he let a stranger take care of him—he felt the shoeshine's hands almost massaging his feet. The hands were massive, powerful; hands of labor, struggle, dirt. Expert hands. With black, badly kept nails. Dan wanted to remember them. It was important to remember them. One of his last images of Spain. He thought of all the other things those hands—usually the right one—almost certainly did besides shining shoes. He saw the warm hand manipulate a cigarette and a cold can of Coke, he saw it fork food to the man's mouth in a blue-collar restaurant with *a menu del día* for five hundred pesetas, he saw it handling the levers of a game in a penny arcade, he saw its nails being pared, the parings falling away uselessly to a bathroom floor, to be gathered up later and thrown out like trash.

Too soon it was over. He paid and watched the shoeshine walk off, pointing to men's shineable shoes and then to his kit, moodily muttering his pitch.

Nathaniel Scott Gin

The pictures of my grandfather
Stationed in New Guinea—
Crouching in someone else's rain
All skinny and sea-rationed,

With the tags he wore
Like a blind man's locket
Slung from his neck
So they could tell him from Adam—

Lay among the postcards
And medals and shiny brass pins
He sent home in a box
I found in the basement

Next to the flimsy old card table
We'd drag upstairs
On Sunday afternoons, perfect
For our foldable games of gin rummy.

He'd shuffle and deal,
And I'd slice the deck.
Cut your throat, he'd snarl,
Not about to surrender.

Three fours. Straight clubs.
A pair of bloody eights
He couldn't wash from his hand.

Last Straws

I don't fully register the purple discoloration under Patrick's eye until I say hello and he looks up. He's wearing sunglasses but the shiner spreads under the frame, a murky half-moon that fades into his cheekbone. He smiles his yellow-toothed smile that always seems pitiful, but it's hard to pity him. We shake hands. His grip is weak and sweaty.

"How are you?" he says, putting an upbeat lilt to his soft voice that makes it sound even more Irish. It's obvious that Patrick isn't doing so well.

The people coming out of Balducci's all carry full grocery bags of fresh produce, prepared pastas, homemade breads and desserts. There's something happily domestic about their purchases on a Saturday afternoon, and I can picture the various delicacies presented on large platters in their living rooms, smiling friends and family standing around, talking, eating, thinking this is the life.

"What are you doing in this neighborhood?" I say.

"Walking about."

"It's a great day for that."

"There you are," Patrick says. "But I shouldn't have worn my jacket. It's a bit warm."

"I guess I don't mind the heat. Have you seen Mike?"

Mike is our connection. Patrick knows Mike from when they taught together in the same school before Mike moved from elementary to high school. I know Mike from the Thomas Jefferson Boxing Club. Most afternoons, we were the only white guys hitting the heavy bags, and after we sparred for the first time we went out for beers. Now we drink together more, work out together less. I've met Patrick a couple of times. At Mike's bachelor party. At Mike's wedding.

"I haven't seen him recently," Patrick says. "Have you?"

"I saw him Thursday. He's looking forward to starting school."

"He was applying when we last spoke."

"He applied and got in. NYU Law. If we ever get into trouble we'll know the man to call."

"True," Patrick says.

Patrick shifts his feet. It's 80 degrees out, a weekend short of Memorial Day, but he's wearing corduroys, heavy shoes, a windbreaker over a button shirt, and a t-shirt under that. Maybe it's winter in the Bronx.

"What's new with you, then?" Patrick says. "Are you still at the college?"

"Still teaching. My students get stupider each semester. Sometimes I feel like talking to the dean about changing the name of the course. Might as well be honest. There's no such thing as Mathematical Theories at City University. It's Addition and Subtraction 101."

"The students are not too bright, then?"

"Not even dim."

"I miss teaching some days."

"You should get back into it."

"I get on where I am. I finish by four every afternoon. One of my bosses is a bit difficult, but usually I can do my work without bother."

I know from Mike that Patrick is now working as a janitor in a junior high. When he'd taught, his fourth graders supposedly liked him, but he must have had problems there, too. I would have called him Patricia if I'd known his first name, something fourth-grader smart like that. He'd been yelled at during a parent-teacher conference, and the school administration had terminated his position over the winter break, claiming financial difficulties. According to Mike, Patrick's year had been a spiraling fall from grace. He'd gone from schoolteacher to janitor. He'd left a nice apartment in Riverdale to move in with a horrible woman in the Bronx. She worked in a laundromat. She was ugly and ignorant. She was obviously beating the shit out of Patrick after bad days folding other people's underwear and socks.

"Report the guy if he bothers you too much," I say.

"I know."

"What is he, a head janitor or something? "

"He's in charge, yes."

"File a complaint."

"I know," Patrick says.

He looks down at his feet, and maybe he sees his year-long fall down there, heavy shoes scuffed against the backdrop of pavement, shoes he probably wears while mopping tiled corridors, cleaning gum from under desks. Patrick's bent neck, his slightly curved back, his loose hanging arms admit defeat.

"I'm showing the Holyfield fight at my apartment tonight. A bunch of guys are coming over. Mike will be there. Why don't you come by?"

"Luz cooks dinner on Saturdays," Patrick says.

And she beats the shit out of you on Fridays, I think, pronouncing shit *shite* in my head the way the Irish do, but I don't say it.

"Tell her to keep it warm for you," I say.

"I don't know," Patrick says.

"Come on, Patrick. Boys' night out. Beer. Booze. A championship fight. You'll have fun."

"Sure I would."

"I'll tell you what. I'll speak to what's-her-name. Luz. I'll speak to Luz. I'll tell her you need a night out with the boys. You look like you could use a night out."

"I could at that," he says and smiles weakly.

"You don't want to miss this one. It's Holyfield's last fight and Holyfield's got heart. I want to see him beat this young punk and retire with a win."

"It should be a good fight, then?"

"A great fight. Come over. You'll have a good time."

"I was planning on walking about the city for a while."

"So I'll see you tonight. Come by about nine."

"I'll try, then."

"Try hard. Mike will tell you about the interview he had at NYU. It's a funny story. And there should be plenty of beer."

"Grand," Patrick says.

We shake hands. Patrick turns and walks slowly off. I go into Balducci's, wipe Patrick's sweat from my palm, head to the meat counter for sopressata sausage.

I unpack the groceries and give Mike a call. His wife answers, and she's good about keeping the small talk small and hands over the phone to Mike. I tell Mike I've seen Patrick and that he

had a black eye. Mike can't believe it. I hear him repeating the news for his wife.

"He was wearing sunglasses," I say. "But the shiner was peeking out in all its glory."

"That bitch is hitting him now. I told you about the cats, didn't I?"

"What cats?"

"She's got cats. After Patrick moved into her place, she picked up some Siamese cats even though she knew Patrick was allergic to them. He asked her to find the cats a new home, but that Luz bitch wouldn't get rid of them. One night Patrick started wheezing and an ambulance had to take him to the hospital. He almost died. Right afterwards, when Patrick was still pissed off, I spoke to him and Patrick said the cats were the last straw."

"The last straw," I repeat in my best Irish accent, impersonating Patrick's weak voice. "I sneezed me last sneeze and those bastard Siamese are the last straw."

"She encourages him to keep his janitor job," Mike says. "She has him help her out at the laundromat after he's put in a full day's work. She took all of his savings and gave the money to her own mother so her mother could move to Orlando. She kicks him out of the house some nights and leaves him to walk around the Bronx until morning. Remember I told you how he almost got pneumonia?"

"Aye-aye, Captain Kirk."

"Now she's beating the shit out of him. I hope this will be the last straw."

"I doubt it. He sounded like he was going back for more."

"I've got to talk some sense into him. She'll end up killing the poor bastard."

Outside a siren starts at the fire house and gets louder. My Bedford Street studio is on the direct route from the station to Eighth Avenue. I live on the top floor of a five-flight walk-up. When I fold the futon up, it's just a couch, some chairs, and a big-screen TV, which we'll crowd around tonight come fight time.

"I invited him to come over."

"Is he coming?"

"He said he'd try."

"That means nothing. Where did you see him?"

"Downtown. Near Balducci's."

"Did you pick up those cheese sticks I like?"

"I got them."

"He probably went over to Jack Dempsey's. They serve Murphy's stout and that's Patrick's favorite. Maybe I'll find him and stay with him until fight time, talk some sense into him, keep him away from the Bronx."

"Savior of the day," I say.

"He needs to be saved."

"And you're just the man to save him."

"Certainly more man than you."

"That's it. That's the last straw."

We say goodbye. The futon isn't folded up yet. It's four hours to fight time. I'm still hung over from last night and tired from another one-night stand. I left her place at five in the morning, drank YooHoo on the subway to settle my stomach, slept on and off through the morning. I set the alarm for seven and lie down. I wonder what Holyfield is doing. If he's resting. If he's looking in the mirror to see how strong his muscles look. If he's thinking about the kid who wants the championship belt. Holyfield says it's his last fight, and when it's over he'll take his twenty million and put it in the bank. Twenty million. When we're sitting around the TV, one of the guys invariably says that he'd step into the ring and have the shit beat out of him for just one million. A broken nose or a shattered cheekbone is worth it. I used to respond to their stupid hypothetical. If they were afraid to fight on the street for free, think what it would be like to fight a professional in front of a crowd. That's the kind of loss that's hard to face. You can't make up a story to smooth over the defeat because everyone was there, everyone saw you get your ass kicked. And it's a stupid hypothetical. No one would pay money to see such a one-sided fight. The odds are 2 to 1 against Holyfield, but Holyfield is Holyfield. He has a history of heart behind him, he's fought as a champion many times and we'll all chip in for the fifty dollar pay-per-view.

"Holy Holy Holyfield," I say out loud.

I fantasize about him finishing strong, a clean knockout punch flush on the kid's jaw. I see him raising his hands one last time. Then I'm out.

Steve shows up first. It's 8:45 and he carries a six-pack of beer and a bag full of snacks. Barbecue potato chips. Doritos.

Dipsy Doodles. It's the kind of shit I never eat, which is why I'm in better shape than all of them, why my students look at me. I put the beer in the fridge, pop one for myself, one for Steve. Jason shows at nine with two six-packs. The pay-per-view channel comes on. There's the usual pre-fight hype. I keep the sound low and me and Steve and Jason catch up. The buzzer rings and two minutes later Klemmer walks in out of breath with two six-packs and a forty-ouncer in a paper bag that he's already working on.

"These stairs are a killer," Klemmer says.

"Maybe it's time to lose that gut," I say.

"I like my gut," Klemmer says.

The buzzer rings again and it has to be Mike.

"Who do you like?" Klemmer asks the room.

Steve and Jason pick the kid. Klemmer says it's definitely the kid. I say I'm going with Holyfield.

"Snacks," Klemmer says and starts loading up on sopressata sausage.

The door opens, Mike walks in, and behind him is Patrick. They're each carrying two six-packs. Mike's eyes look buzzed, and I guess that Patrick's eyes are the same only he's still wearing sunglasses.

"Welcome," I say. "I'm glad you made it, Patrick."

"There was no getting away from Mike."

"I bribed him with Murphy's," Mike says.

"There you are. Murphy's stout is my weakness," Patrick says and he laughs. It's the first time I've heard him laugh. It's high-pitched and almost manic, a staccato explosion that peaks and then ends abruptly when Patrick covers his mouth with his hand.

"How come you never bribe me?" Jason says.

"Because you Wall Street types make too much money to be bribed with beer."

"What about me?" Klemmer says.

"What about you?" Mike says. "You're a drunk. I don't want to be responsible for your swollen liver."

"That's my stomach, not my liver."

I introduce Patrick as an old friend of Mike's. Everyone says hello and shakes Patrick's hand. I check to see if any of them wipe their palms. Maybe Patrick's hands are less sweaty now, now that he's had some drinks, now that he's been away from Luz in the Bronx for more than a few hours. Maybe he's even thought about smacking her back the next time she smacks him,

but I doubt it. His meek voice. His pitiful smile. Miss Lally. Patricia Lally. I could think up a few more names. The introductions are over and Patrick stands in the middle of the room, not sure what to do with himself. I take the six-packs on the kitchen table and put them in the fridge. Mike comes up next to me.

"She really beat the shit out of him," Mike whispers.

"You should teach him a few moves. If he throws a well-timed left hook at her, maybe she'll think twice before she hits him."

"She's hit him before."

"How can he live with himself," I say. "He's a man. He's got balls, right? How big is this Luz?"

"She's actually pretty small."

"Anyone want another beer?" I say to the room and Klemmer calls for round two.

I hand Patrick a beer, pull a chair around from the kitchen table, and motion for him to sit down. He keeps his windbreaker on. I hand Klemmer a beer. Mike takes a seat on the futon. One of the preliminary bouts starts, a couple of welterweight contenders fighting for a shot at a title. I keep the sound low. We talk about the upcoming fight. We talk about what's new, which isn't much. Klemmer asks Mike if he'll really be able to handle the law school load, and Mike says that now that he's a married man he better handle it.

"Ball and chain," Klemmer says, belches, stands, gets another beer.

Steve asks Patrick what he does for a living, and Patrick says he does custodial work. He says he used to teach but he took some time off.

"It's a burn-out profession," I say.

"I'll drink to that," Mike says. "That's why I'm getting out."

"Lots of luck," Patrick says and drinks.

"What happened to your eye?" Klemmer calls from the fridge.

Sometimes Klemmer is an idiot, but it is a fight night, and it is a black eye, and the more beers we drink, the bigger our muscles seem to get. I've seen these guys fight when they're drunk but I've never seen them fight sober, and when Mike and I put on the gloves in the gym it's only to spar, punches checked with less than bad intentions.

"I had an accident," Patrick says and his voice is quiet, quieter than it's been since he arrived.

"You hit someone's fist with your eye?" Klemmer says.

"He got hurt on the job," Mike says. "If you worked more than part time, you'd know something about that."

"I know something about these Dipsy Doodles," Klemmer says and takes a handful.

"What did you used to teach?" Steve asks.

"The little ones," Patrick says. "Fourth grade."

"I had a crush on my fourth-grade teacher. Miss Koritowsky. She got married and left town the summer after she was my teacher."

"The one that got away, then," Patrick says.

"There have been plenty of others," Steve says.

"She lived unknown, and few could know when Lucy ceased to be. But she is in her grave, and oh, the difference to me!"

Patrick recites the verse beautifully, almost forcefully. His accent makes it sound sadder still, adding melancholy to the words *difference* and *me.*

"Where's that from?" Steve says.

"Wordsworth," Patrick says. "The nuns made us memorize it in school."

"What school was that?" Klemmer says.

"Our Lady Of Grace. My school back in Ireland."

"I'm a poet and I know it," Klemmer says and walks around with a six-pack, hands each of us a beer. I watch Patrick finish his bottle and reach for a new one. One of the young welterweights on TV takes some punishment against the ropes.

Holyfield moves toward the ring singing a spiritual, his eyes looking toward heaven, his face calm. The song is far different from the usual rap music that accompanies fighters as they walk from dressing room to ring. We're passing around a bottle of tequila. My hangover from this morning is smoothed over. Everyone's talking louder now. When the fights are over we'll go down to a bar and drink some more and talk about the fight, but by then my eyes will wander. I'll pretend to listen while I check out the women, and then I'll separate from the guys and concentrate on making the rest of the night last into morning.

"Swing low, sweet chariot," Mike sings.

"Rock my soul to the bosom of Abraham," Steve sings.

"That old man river," Klemmer sings.

"That's a show tune," Mike says. "Not a spiritual, you moron."

Patrick laughs, covers his mouth.

I remember a story Mike told me. He and Patrick had driven upstate together, and while hiking they got lost in the woods. I forget the details but I remember the end. It had started to get dark and Patrick became terrified. He held onto Mike's arm and wouldn't let him go. Mike said he couldn't believe it. When they finally got out of the woods and found their bearings, Patrick thanked Mike for not leaving him. He was practically crying and he kept saying *thank you, thank you, thank you.*

Holyfield steps into the ring singing the final verse, the spiritual now background music for the cheers of the crowd.

"You better pray, old man," Klemmer says.

Klemmer always roots for the up-and-comer. I always root for the underdog. When I started teaching I gave and gave and gave, trying to help my students progress, pass their math exams, go on to graduate. Then I got sick of giving and them not doing any work. Then I started sleeping with my students. When we were out drinking one night, after three rounds of sparring, Mike said I was corrupt. I said I was a teacher who reaped the benefits of his student bodies and that I didn't care how corrupt I was as long as no one found out.

"Who do you want?" I ask Patrick and I'm genuinely interested, curious if he likes the favorite or the underdog, the young buck or the old warrior.

"I want Holyfield," he says.

"I want him too."

"Would either of you losers like to put money where your mouths are?" Klemmer says.

"You still owe me from last fight."

"Double or nothing," Klemmer says.

"Pass me the tequila," I say and he does and I drink and pass the bottle to Mike and he drinks and he passes the bottle to Patrick and Patrick drinks a long swallow and the bottle bumps his sunglasses and for a moment I see most of the purple around his eye.

"She's a beauty," Klemmer says.

"She?" Patrick says.

"You should put a steak over that eye."

"You don't know her so don't speak about her."

"Interesting. Then I probably don't want to know her."

"Why don't you shut your fucking mouth," Patrick says. The

way he says *fucking* is straight off-the-boat Irish, not poetic at all.

The room goes quiet.

Patrick adjusts his sunglasses.

"Was that Wordsworth too?" Klemmer says.

"Watch the fight, Klemmer," Mike says. "Let's see if your boy can win."

"You want to bet?"

"Watch the fight," Mike says.

"You afraid of getting disbarred?"

"I'm afraid of hitting you in the liver and getting sprayed by bile," Mike says.

Patrick laughs. A staccato explosion. He covers his mouth.

"You think that's funny?" Klemmer says looking at Patrick. "Listen to this. An executive gets arrested for tax fraud and is sent to prison. His roommate turns out to be this big black guy. That night the big black guy says to the executive, *You want to be the husband or the wife?* The executive says, *I don't know what you're talking about.* The black guy says it again, a little louder, *You want to be the husband or the wife?* The executive says, *I don't want to play this game.* The black guy says it again, real loud, *I said, You want to be the husband or the wife?* The executive thinks a second and says, *I guess I'll be the husband. Good,* the black guy says. *Now get over here and suck your wife's dick."*

Everyone laughs except Patrick. He drinks from the tequila bottle, more carefully, making sure not to disrupt his sunglasses. I take the bottle from his hands and have a drink myself. My heart is racing the way it does before a fight I care about.

"Holy Holy Holyfield," I say.

Round five ends. Holyfield walks back to his stool, looking old, looking frustrated. When a fighter ages, the last thing to go is his power but by then it usually doesn't matter. The old fighter is too slow, he can't get his punches off, he doesn't have the reflexes to block the shots coming at him. There's a welt on Holyfield's forehead. When he spits out his mouthpiece, red saliva drips down his chin. He breathes heavy.

"He looks like shit," Klemmer says.

"He still has his punch," I say.

"The old man is washed up."

"Tell us," Patrick says. "What do you mean by washed up?"

"You never heard that expression before?" Klemmer says. "They don't have that expression in Erin Go Bragh land?"

"Washed up. He's finished," Steve says.

"He's finished?"

"I'm just translating," Steve says.

"Forget it," Mike says.

"Tell us what they mean by washed up," Patrick says. "I don't like the sound of it."

"Forget it."

"Tell us what they mean."

"You're drunk," Mike says.

"I know what I am. We're all drunk. Maggoty drunk. Boys' night out. Isn't that right?"

The bottle of tequila is in his hands and he takes a drink.

"That's right," I say.

"That's right," Patrick repeats. "You think I'm washed up, then?"

"I don't really think about it," I say.

"You're thinking because I work as a janitor that I'm washed up? I know the way you look at me. I knew this afternoon. You looked at my eye and you looked at me and you're thinking I'm a pufter."

"What do you care what I think?"

"Nothing for it now. But I know about you too. Mike told me you fuck your students."

I lean forward in my chair and look into Patrick's bad eye.

"I like students," I say. "You like laundromat workers who beat the shit out of you."

"My fourth-graders were a bit young, don't you think?"

"What's a pufter?" Klemmer says.

The bell rings. The seconds pull the stool and Holyfield stands. He moves forward but his heart doesn't look in it.

"Who else did you tell?" I ask Mike.

"No one," he says.

"You didn't tell your wife?"

"She's my wife."

The referee stops the action, asks Holyfield's corner to clean up the spilled water so the fighters don't slip.

"So you're thinking I'm a pufter, then?" Patrick says.

"Watch the fight," I say. "Or I'll ship you to Vegas to mop up that mess."

Patrick laughs, keeps laughing, doesn't cover his mouth.

"I could," he says. "I'm quite handy with the mop. Quite handy."

He lifts the bottle of tequila but Mike grabs the bottle away from him.

"No more for you," Mike says.

The corner does its appointed task, rubs the canvas dry with a towel, and the referee signals time in. The two men start to fight. Holyfield throws a looping left hook that misses. He looks like an amateur and pays, gets hit with two fast jabs. Holyfield follows the kid around the ring but he can't get close enough. The kid moves to the side and to the side again, keeps landing the jab.

"Kick her fucking ass," Patrick says to the TV.

"Her ass?" Klemmer says.

"Shut up," Mike says.

When the fight's over I'll tell them all to leave. I'll wrap up the leftover cold cuts, gather up the empty bottles, go down alone. One of my students works as a hostess in a nearby restaurant. She's asked me to come by for a drink. I told her I'd wait until the semester was officially over, but my semesters end earlier and earlier each year.

Holyfield misses with another hook and the kid hits him hard and hard again. The second punch opens a gash over Holyfield's eye and Holyfield backs up, wipes his brow with his glove, looks at the blood. It's a deep cut in old skin. Holyfield blinks. Patrick is out of his seat. Blood fills Holyfield's eye. Patrick pulls his arm back and throws a punch at the big-screen TV. The glass breaks. The image is gone. The picture tube inside is all metal and wire, and it's amazing that this inanimate clutter can produce an image that moves, two images that move and punch at each other. Patrick turns to face us. We are all seated. Spectators. He takes off his sunglasses with the hand he punched the TV, fingers cut and bleeding, a shard of glass sticking out of his pinkie knuckle. Around his eye it's dark purple. The eye itself is almost completely closed, red where it should be white, a sliver of glossy pupil.

"Do you think I'm proud of this?" he says. "I'll go to work Monday morning and they'll all have a good laugh. They're al-

ways laughing. She laughs too. She laughs when I sneeze from her cats. She laughs when I'm tired after a day's work. She calls me worthless and laughs. She laughs after she hits me."

"Hit her back next time," I say.

"I can't."

"What are you? You've got balls, don't you? You've got balls between your legs. You know how to make a fist. You just busted my fucking television. Hit her next time she hits you."

"I get lonely," he says.

"There's plenty of women out there," I say.

"Not for the likes of me. I get lonely and she knows that. If you haven't noticed, I'm not very social. If you haven't noticed, I don't get on well when I'm around people, especially women. When she hit me this morning, I told her that was the last straw. I didn't take the trash out right away and she hit me and I told her that was the last straw. *That's the last straw, Luz,* I said. But she only laughed."

Patrick puts on his sunglasses. The staccato explosion builds, but instead of ending abruptly it changes over into sobbing and he cries like a child, not able to catch his breath. Mike goes over to him and Patrick holds onto Mike, much like I picture he did when they walked through those dark woods. Steve and Jason sit there. Klemmer keeps his mouth shut. He hasn't had a woman in two years.

"I'd laugh too," I say.

"No," Patrick says on an exhale.

"Yes I would. After all the shit you've taken all you do is tell her it's the last straw? I'd laugh my fucking head off."

Patrick lets go of Mike. He wipes at his snot-filled nose and the sleeve of his windbreaker glistens.

"Then you'd be as cruel as that bitch I live with," he says.

"You're the bitch. I wanted to see the end of the fucking fight. Holyfield had the heart to pull it out."

"He has no chance," Patrick says. "His heart is gone."

"You're wrong," I say.

"He's not the man he was," Patrick says. "He's getting washed up. He's getting old. He has to accept that. We all have to accept things."

"Holy Holy Holyfield."

"You too," Patrick says. "That's why you fuck your students."

I get up and charge him. I throw Patrick against the wall, turn him around, lock his neck in my arm. I pull his pants down to see what kind of balls he has. I pull down his underwear. His balls are small and pink, hanging low like he's sick. I take the back of my free hand and slap his balls as hard as I can. Patrick folds and I let go of his neck. He falls to the floor.

"Pussy," I say.

Mike lifts Patrick and walks him into the bathroom to clean him up. The guys leave. The fight is over, at least on my big-screen TV, and if they hurry they'll be able to catch the last rounds at a sports bar. If the fight lasts. If Holyfield's eye has stopped bleeding. If Holyfield still has the heart. If not, they'll be able to watch the press conference with Holyfield sitting in front of a microphone, tinted sunglasses hiding the damage.

Mike and Patrick come out of the bathroom.

"We're going," Mike says.

I don't say anything.

"Tell us what I owe for the repair," Patrick says.

"Whatever."

"Tell us what I owe. I'll pay."

"Come on," Mike says.

"I think I'm going to puke," Patrick says.

They're out of my apartment before he does. I stay seated. I hear someone retching on the street below. Then the siren sound starts and gets louder as the truck moves toward Eighth Avenue and drowns almost everything.

I lift the bottle of tequila and swallow.

Later, when the night is over, I know that each of us, in our rooms, will throw punches at the air. Pretend punches with no punches coming back. We'll throw punches, throw and throw, like we, too, are fighting for the championship.

Adam Berlin's second novel is *Belmondo Style* by St. Martin's Press. He lives in New York City.

Terry Brown-Davidson has published fiction and poetry in numerous journals, including the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Puerto del Sol.*

Kim Chinquee has published stories in *NOON*, *Denver Quarterly*, the *South Carolina Review*, and other journals. She teaches at Central Michigan University.

Stacia Decker is a graduate of the writing program at Columbia University. Her work has appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and other journals.

Alex Frankel's poetry has appeared in the *CWC Journal*, *Haywire*, *Pudding Magazine*, and other journals. He lives and teaches in the Los Angeles area.

Jane Eaton Hamilton is the author of six books, including *Hunger*, nominated for the Ferro-Grumley Award. Her stories have appeared in *Best Canadian Short Stories* and have been cited in *Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize.*

Lyn Lifshin has published more than one hundred books of poetry, including *Marilyn Monroe*, *Blue Tattoo*, and has edited four anthologies of women's writing, including *Tangled Vines*, *Ariadne's Thread*, and *Lips Unsealed.*

Laurel Loustau teaches at the University of Kansas and has worked for the *Mexico City Times*. Her story in this issue is her first published work of fiction.

Roberta Murphy's stories have appeared in the *Georgia Review*, *Nimrod*, the *Antietam Review*, and in *Best American Short Stories*. She is a native of Wales.

Lisa Roullard has published her poetry in *New Orleans Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Literal Latte*, and other magazines. She lives in Boise, Idaho.

Anele Rubin's poems have appeared in the *Midwest Quarterly*, *River Styx*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and other journals.

Her first book, *Trying to Speak*, was published last fall by Kent State University Press.

Nathaniel Scott has published his work in the *North American Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *West Branch*, and other journals. He has a master's degree in religious studies.

Philip Singer's stories and poems have appeared in the *Sewanee Review*, *Yale Review*, the *North American Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, and other journals, and he has published two collections of poetry. He lives in Vermont.

Alice Stern's work has been accepted by *Primavera, Lullwater Review*, the *Louisville Review*, and other journals. She lives in Woodstock, New York.

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