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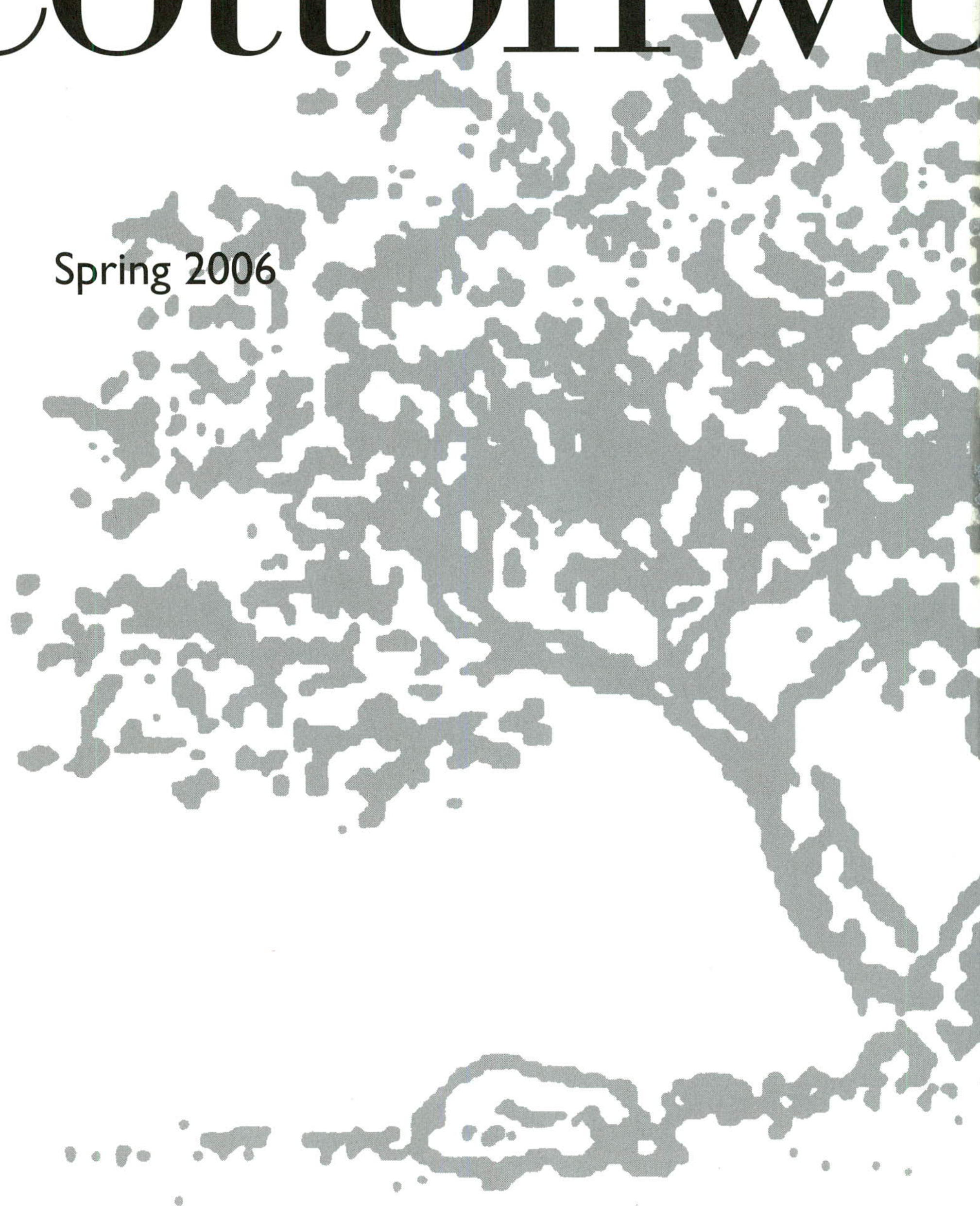

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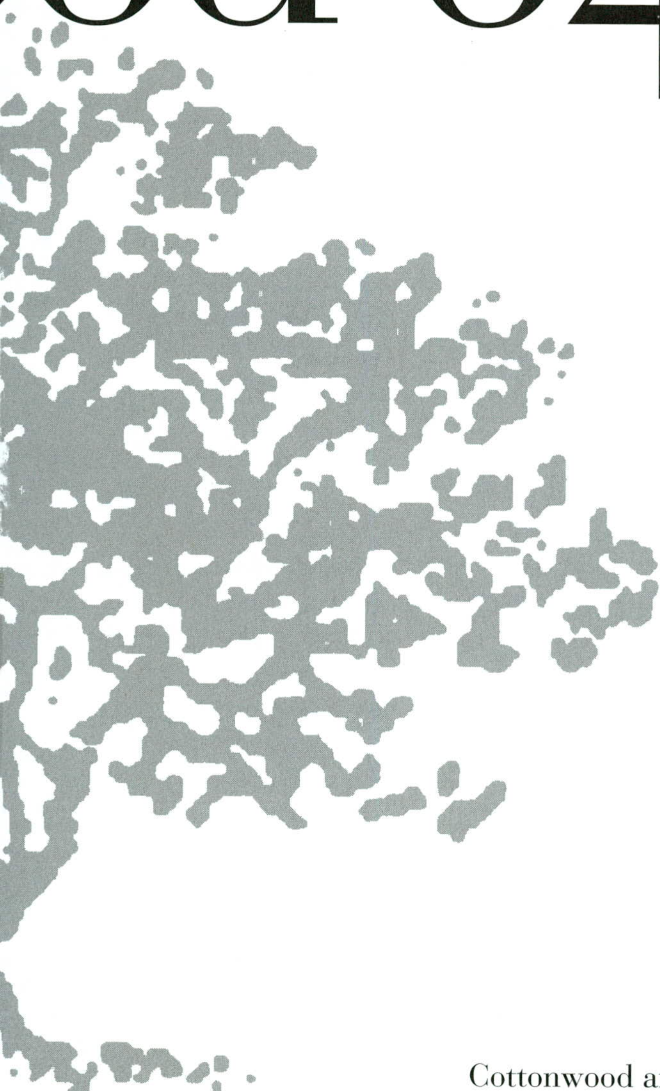

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Lawrence, Kansas

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Mark S. Darrah

A Treasure in Crow Canyon

I speak the truth, despite my profession. I am a lawyer. I prosecute common claims for common people. I draft wills, probate estates, and look at an abstract of title occasionally. I defend ordinary cases for ordinary people. Most of the time, my business is handling open accounts, contract disputes, and a car-wreck whiplash when one shows up in my office. Typical legal stuff for ordinary people.

If I leave out Jack McLoud.

I've breached a confidence. Jack can file a complaint on me with the state bar association. That would be okay. I'd like to hear from him. Actually, telling you Jack's name might not be a problem. I'm not sure if he's a client or a friend now. Both, I suppose. Well, I won't tell you my name or the city where I live. Maybe that will disguise it enough to keep me from having to explain my ethical lapse to an overweight bureaucrat at the state capitol. You have to know something about where I'm from, though. That's part of Jack's story. My story now.

The land spreads flat here. Red-bodied, white-faced cattle fatten themselves on corn pellets in smelly stockyards just southeast of the city limits. Winter wheat grows green in February and is harvested gold in late May or early June, leaving the red fields bare and broken. When the temperature is one hundred and seven and a blast of southeast wind picks up the dust from the plowed ground and the odor of the feedlots, we know we aren't on South Padre Island.

The founders of this city are revered as pioneers, but I think maybe somebody's covered wagon broke down here on a trip to someplace else and they just stayed. On clear days, our skyscrapers and wheat elevators can be seen seventy-five miles away. Keep this our secret: I think the grain elevators are more majestic. North of town, the earth belches out more natural gas than anywhere else in the country. If you passed seventh grade

geography, you'd recognize the name of this place with no problem.

Jack McLoud first hired me to represent him in a lawsuit. I had defended a widow in a foreclosure action filed by a thieving lender. The television and radio love melodramas and my picture appeared in the newspaper. The lady got to keep her home. Jack said he saw me on TV and liked what I did. Had never heard of him or met him before.

That first, and only, lawsuit for Jack was a convoluted mess over a syndication deal that went bad involving an Edward Hopper painting. Jack had gotten sued by a woman investor who claimed fraud. His check for my retainer bounced, which doesn't make you feel like you're on the side of light and justice when your client is accused of being a con. Jack said he made a mistake balancing his checkbook and showed up at my office that afternoon with cash. Afterwards, Jack paid like a Jaycee's conventioneer in Las Vegas. Sometimes he sent a check even when I hadn't sent a bill. He'd just say put it on the account.

That first and only case got resolved without a trial. One day Jack called.

"Hey, you know on this lawsuit, I don't want you to do anything but to slow it down."

"Lawyers do that without trying."

"I'm working, and it's working well," Jack said. "She's going to drop it. I promise you. She'll drop it. It'll just take time."

She was Barbara Blake and was represented by Carson & Hauerton, the biggest law firm in town. Jack had told me she was an heir to the Thorrington fortune, the family which had owned the first feedlot in my city. I believed Jack. Attorneys are supposed to believe their clients, but I only knew it was true when her lawyer told me.

Jack continued talking to me over the phone: "This is a damn beautiful place I have here, Phil. I've got these women who love to come out. I'll get you and them, and we'll all play some water volleyball in the pool. Wet women, man. We'll have a great time. Don't worry about this Blake lawsuit. Just do what you can to keep it slow. She'll drop it."

No one "drops" a civil lawsuit. Each is too much of a quagmire. The only way they are "dropped" is if someone pays some money or a court orders them dismissed after lengthy battle and too much expense.

Two months later, I received a copy of a voluntary dismissal filed by Carson & Hauerton in *Blake vs. McLoud.* Jack hadn't paid any money I knew of, and I hadn't settled the case for him. I called my opposing counsel and asked her what had happened. She said I didn't want to know. I called Jack and he told me the same thing.

McLoud stood about six foot three and must have weighed about two hundred and forty pounds, mostly muscle and bone. Blond hair curled up on top of his head like a diadem and a shiny white smile lightened his always tanned face. A big black mole grew on his right jaw line. On a scrawny, pasty-faced guy, the mole would have been ugly, but not on Jack. He claimed he was from Grangeville, Idaho, but was partial to yellow Hawaiian shirts, blue shorts, and sandals. Except for his accent, you could have mistaken him for a California surfer.

McLoud came here during the oil and gas boom, he claimed, not the last one, but the one before that. He said he made a mountain of money. I never saw his financial statement or his tax returns so I can't really say. He never had a job while I knew him. Only deals and day-trading stocks and options on the Internet.

Jack would call my office to check in, he'd say. He'd tell me he had scored a hundred thousand dollars in the past week playing the market. A month later, he'd telephone and tell me he'd lost it all on bad calls, the same way you or I might say we had to call the plumber out to unstop a toilet.

"Listen," he said over the line one day, "there's a little biotech company out of San Jose called Blores Devices, Ltd. Traded over the counter. Sometime this week—hey, this isn't insider information—good source, yeah, but not an insider. I promise you. I won't get you in trouble. Sometime this week, the company is going to announce it's applied for a patent. It'll fucking turn upside down the way they do these scope surgeries. You know, where they stick that little TV camera up your butt or down you nose or into your knee. This little device, honest to God, will flat out turn it upside down. Stock will shoot up like sticker weeds in Longabaugh County. If I were you—now I'm not your broker—I'd put twenty or thirty thousand in it today. Nothing you can't afford to lose. You'll triple your money, Phil, I promise. Stay in for the run up and then sell it. Not a day longer. Great deal, I promise."

"Jack, if the tip is from a friend who has a friend who has a friend who has a friend, if it starts out as insider information, it's still insider information and you can get nailed."

"Nothing inside, man. I've got this friend who works in the U. S. Patent Office in Washington. He lets me in on stuff like this. Public record. The guy hasn't been wrong yet. It's a great deal, Phil. You'll thank me for this."

I did with that as I do most unsolicited investment advice. I ignored it, except I checked the price of Blores Devices, Ltd. on the business pages. Four dollars and seventy-five cents. The stock traded higher the Monday Jack called. That week, I checked the company's webpage every day for press releases. Nothing. By Friday, the stock got stuck at a dollar twelve cents and stayed there, give or take a few cents, for months. I would have lost twenty-three thousand dollars had I followed McLoud's advice.

Jack lived in Crow Canyon, one of the Five Finger Canyons that all connect with a sixth west of town. Only one is open with a road through it. All drop straight into the flat earth. From the surrounding prairie, they are visible only as outcroppings of trees. You can walk through a field three-quarters of a mile away and not know the canyons exist. When you follow their descent, the world changes. On the plains here, you find prickly pear, some mesquite, and an occasional cottonwood. Down in the canyons, though, life grows wild with sassafras and grapevine, redbuds and dogwoods, and sugar maples in dense thickets of blackjack. It's a jungle with creatures that don't usually live any closer than three hundred miles to the east. Dull Knife and his Cheyennes hid out here on their exodus from the reservation in Oklahoma to their home near the Powder River. The Dalton's gold might be stashed in a red rock cave. At night, coyotes prowled the canyons' rims. Jack McLoud said it was the finest place on earth to live.

After that first lawsuit, I really didn't handle any regular legal business for him. Every two or three weeks, he'd just call. One day, Jack came to my office with a skinny file folder. I didn't know he was coming. He didn't have an appointment, hadn't called. He wore a bright red Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and sandals. It was December.

"Bom Dia!" he said when I met him in the reception area of

my office. "Have you ever been to Brazil?" He walked back to my office and I followed.

"Never have been," I said, taking a seat behind my solid walnut desk.

"You've got to go. One of these days, I'll take you, on me. It's a great country. Wonderful women, great weather, beautiful beaches. Life there's a party."

"Maybe someday," I said, knowing I never would.

"Most people think about the rain forest or Rio when they think about Brazil, but you gotta go into the back country. Mountains, flowers, incredible people. They just love life. I'm leaving Thursday."

"You'll return by the first day of spring, I suppose? The snow and ice and the northers will be gone by then."

"Don't know when I'll be back. Someday I'm going to disappear and you'll never see me again. I'll be drinking *cachaça,* sitting on a balcony overlooking Ipanema beach at dusk. One of the prettiest scenes in the world. Not this time, though. Solid business. This deal is going to make me some real money."

Jack's deals usually scared me. It was his life, though. "I hope you do," I said.

"That's why I stopped by. Do you have time for this? I didn't even ask."

I nodded. I had made time.

"I need for you to draft up a power of attorney for me for while I'm gone. I might need somebody to open a bank account and get a safe deposit box. Can you get that written up while I wait?"

The brief I had been working on dealt with the priority rankings of mechanics and materialmen's liens, which is almost as exciting as televised golf. I had already been interrupted.

"Do you really need it today? You aren't going until Thursday."

"I'm here. I'm ready. I have cash."

"Why not?" I pushed my law books and legal pad aside. "Who do you want to appoint to act on your behalf with this power of attorney?"

"You."

I looked at him.

"This is all completely legitimate. You get semiprecious

stones down there for pennies. You buy these geodes like you're buying pit gravel in Arkansas. A few cents and you have a handful of rocks worth a fortune. Might need to wire some money up here and may need a safe deposit box for my stones precisely when I get back."

I looked at him.

"So make it the only thing you can do absolutely is to open the account and get a box in my name with my social security number. You can't do nothin' else. Make it so you can't even get in the box or sign a check. That can't get you into trouble."

"I usually don't do this kind of thing for clients."

"Am I your client or your friend? Phil, I don't trust anyone else. You probably won't have to do anything at all. I'll call you or send you a wire if I need you to go to the bank. May not ever call. I'll make it worth your while. It's all legit."

My secretary and I kicked out a power of attorney, and Jack signed it and left it with me. There were no calls, wires, e-mails, or faxes from Jack for the next four weeks. He then showed up at my office wearing Round House overalls and a Dartmouth College sweatshirt. He had an accountant's briefcase like Ward Cleaver would have carried.

"Shit, you get used to the tropical weather and you just fucking freeze when you get back here to the great plains," he said. "I've got something for you."

I brought Jack back into my office. He opened his briefcase and took out a little felt purse.

"So, how was your trip? Lucrative?"

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

Jack pulled the drawstring on the felt bag and dropped two big purple jewels on my desk.

"Amethysts?" I asked.

"They're for you."

I took them to a gemologist I represented who had a little shop in the mall on the second floor of the rebuilt Farmers and Exchange Bank. I asked him to appraise them. He told me it might take awhile. I went back the next day.

The gemologist opened the little felt purse and rolled the two purple crystals onto a pad. He touched one with a pair of tweezers.

"I'd insure this stone for about twenty grand, if that's what you're interested in."

I wondered how much the other would be valued. Its color was deeper and more brilliant. The gemologist touched the other stone.

"This one is glass."

"What does that mean?"

"Glass. Like your windows. Has some pretty purple dye in it, though. Hope you didn't pay much for it."

"They're both gifts."

"This is the finest amethyst I've seen," he said, tapping the McCoy.

I put them both in my safe deposit box.

One Friday in June, Jack called. He wanted to meet me that afternoon at the Round-Up Tavern near the Five Fingers Canyons at six-thirty p.m. precisely. He had something he wanted to show me. It was quiet. I'm not married and am beginning to think that not only are women from Venus, all the available, sane women still live there. As usual, nothing good was scheduled on television Friday night.

"What is it you want to show me?"

"If I tell you, you'll try to convince me it's not worth doing. If I don't tell you, you'll think I think whatever I'm going to show you is pretty lame so you'll go to prove me wrong."

Jack knew lawyer's logic: Always be contrary.

I agreed to meet him.

The Round-Up Tavern is on State Highway 49, the main thoroughfare through our town before the interstate was built. Now only farmers and those wanting a scenic drive or who had to get to the Crow Canyon turnoff drive the road. The Round-Up Tavern had an exterior of gray faux adobe and a lariat on the old neon sign out front. Jack's car wasn't in the parking lot at five twenty-nine p.m. when I pulled up.

I took a seat in a corner booth. Real cowboys came to this bar and drank Pearl beer from sweaty brown bottles. The bulletin board by the door advertised an all-night revival three nights in a row, and a flyer had a picture of a middle-aged man with this question printed in big black letters: "Have You Seen My Daddy? Missing Since . . ." My waitress had a beehive hairdo and pink polyester pants and a matching shirt that were both too tight on purpose. She called me "Hon" and asked what I wanted. I told her whatever they had on tap. I thought I smelled a scent of Aramis through the cigarette smoke and the greasy fumes of the short-order grill.

A game of pool was being played beneath a plastic Coors light. One guy wore a sweat-stained International Harvester cap. The other wore a green T-shirt that read "My Mother-In-Law Can Whip Your Mother-In-Law." I couldn't imagine Jack in this beer joint with his funny accent and Hawaiian shirts and shorts.

About the time my beer arrived, Jack did, too. It was like the governor visiting the local Kiwanis Club. Just about everyone in the room greeted Jack and he shook hands with most. He wore his familiar yellow Hawaiian shirt but with faded denims and fancy-cut cowboy boots. He was as big as any man in the room.

The waitress had a beer for him as soon as he began to sit down.

"Bring us both the house special with the onions fried in," he said, slipping his arm around the woman's waist. "And, Ruby, have John put an extra squirt of Worcestershire sauce in both of them." He winked at her, and she went back to the kitchen.

"Greatest hamburgers in the world. Right here fifteen minutes from my home. How could life be better?"

"So what do you want to show me, Jack?"

"Hey, not yet, not yet. Enjoy the beer. Feast on the world's best burger. On my tab. What I have to show you isn't quite ready; it'll take a little while. Hey, what day is today?"

"Friday," I said. I looked at my watch. "June twenty-first."

Jack told me about his latest escapades as a Crow Canyon day-trader. The economy was going to hell, and he claimed he made money on everyone else's losses. He had been seeing a woman in town. Older than him, a practitioner of marathon tantric sex, and richer than Warren Buffet or God, depending on how the stock market was doing that day. After we had finished our burgers and fries and two or three beers, he excused himself, walked to the front door of the tavern, looked out, and came back.

"It's just about time," he said.

Jack still hadn't told me what he wanted me to see. We drained our beers and got into Jack's completely restored blue and black 1969 Monte Carlo. He drove like a madman and with the confidence of a saint. He took dusty county roads around the canyons until we got out to their desolate west side. He pulled over and stopped the car. The red sun was starting its descent among the blues and lavenders and golds of the southwest plains' dusk.

We crossed the dirt road and climbed over a barbed wire fence into a recently plowed field.

"This is probably trespassing, Jack," I said.

"Ah, the guy who owns it is a friend of mine. It's not hurting nothin'."

"So, what are we going to see?" I asked.

"What day is it?" Jack asked.

"I already—it's Friday, June twenty-first," I replied.

"What day is it?" he asked again.

"I told you already. Twice."

Jack stopped and pointed toward the large copper disc in the broad sky. "Okay, what significance is today, friend lawyer?"

Before I could answer, he said, "Solstice. The longest day of the year. The earth at full tilt. If you were one of the ancients, Phil, you'd perish. Had to ask you three times."

"You still didn't tell me what we came to see."

Jack ignored me.

We crossed the field toward a thicket of trees. Only then did I realize we approached one of the Five Finger Canyons, from a fallow and flat wheat field to a steep descent deep into the earth.

As we followed the trail into the canyon, I asked Jack whether he thought we ought to have a flashlight.

"Hey, I know this place. I mean I really know it. Don't worry. The way dusk settles in here, it's like the place is candlelit for an hour after the sun goes down. If you get scared, you can hold onto my belt and I'll lead you out."

Jack didn't criticize my lawyerly prudence, but I did to myself. If I were twelve years old, this would be a great adventure even with the diamondback rattlers slithering under the rocks and coyotes roaming the rim.

When we got about halfway down into the canyon, Jack stopped at a clearing. He pointed upwards to the top of the canyon wall on the other side, a shear drop-off of red rock.

"That's what we came to see," he said.

A wall of red rock.

Jack looked at the sky and then at his watch. A tiny bug flew around my head. I could smell cedar and the harsh fragrance of prairie flowers.

"It'll be just a few minutes," he said. "Just watch it."

As we stood and waited in silence, the fading sunlight hit the red wall. As it did, outcroppings of similar red rock appeared

and threw small shadows. As the sun descended, the stone formations grew more distinct and the shadows grew bigger until the rocks looked like red jack rabbits and the shadows looked like identical but bigger black jack rabbits.

"It only happens on the summer solstice," Jack said. "The one day of the year. Ain't that hot! A herd of giant red and black rabbits right here in the middle of fuckin' nowhere."

As we drove back to the Round-Up Tavern, I asked, "So is this the reason you stay here? The canyons?"

Jack shrugged. "It's a good place to be right now. Who knows, someday you might just not hear from me anymore. May go back to Brazil or trade my place here for a beach house at Malibu or go over to the Ozarks and live in a cave. For right now, this is great."

We drove silently on the flat land, the stars lit like a million shimmering butterflies dipped in silver.

"This is the good life," Jack said. "You're going to have to come over to my house one of these days in Crow Canyon. Backyard swimming pool, a babe on each arm. It's great. In the living room, my computer hooked up to all the world. I go over to my bar and pour me a drink. I can call my concrete-assed friend, Phil. If I want, I go upstairs and go out onto the balcony and watch the constellations in the sky like you could reach out and feel 'em. You wouldn't believe the place, Phil."

"I'd like see it someday," I said.

"You'll have to come this summer to enjoy the pool."

I didn't know where it was. Jack never invited me to his home. It was always "One of these days . . ." Everything I had with an address for Jack McLoud had a post-office box listed.

When we pulled into the red dirt driveway of the Round-Up Tavern, Jack told me he would be leaving for L.A. on Sunday. He had some business to take care of and friends to see out there.

In the shadows of the flashing green light, Jack asked, "Do you want to see a big fight, huh?"

"Not particularly," I replied.

"Hey, why not? You wanna see a good fight, huh?"

I shrugged.

Jack pulled a one-hundred dollar bill from his shirt pocket and tossed it at me. "Here's how you get a big fight going. Go in there," he said, pointing at the beer bar, "and say, 'I'll pay one

hundred bucks to any of you Republican cowboys who want to suck my big Democratic dick.'"

"I'm a Republican, Jack."

"Do you really think that will make any difference?"

I threw the hundred-dollar bill back at him.

Jack didn't call, e-mail, or fax for the next four or five weeks. After paddling the Internet one day, I got curious about Jack's strongest stock recommendation. I checked the price of Blores Devices, Ltd. Twelve dollars and sixty-two cents. I would have tripled my money. Would have done even better had I bought it at a dollar twelve cents. I clicked on the company's website and found their recent press releases. Two weeks earlier, the company had announced the granting of a patent by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for a new device the outfit had developed to improve the accuracy of medical scoping. I looked at the price before the day of the announcement. It hadn't moved much since I last looked months ago. Jack had been right, except the jump occurred when the patent was granted, not when it was applied for. Maybe I should have taken Jack's advice.

Around the first of August, I came back from court after trying a lawsuit concerning a real estate title problem. I'd tell you about the case, but you wouldn't understand. The judge didn't. He slept through most of the trial, reserved making a decision, and then adjourned. He would probably call some friend of his who knows a little about property law and ask him what to do.

Jack stood at Susan's desk. My secretary is in her late twenties, has two kids, and an ex-husband who is worthless on his best days. She does good work and won't be a secretary forever. She takes night classes at the local junior college and spends her Wednesday lunch hours playing Chinese checkers with her grandmother at the senior citizen center.

"Now, this is what you do," Jack was saying, "you get that degree and get your bachelor's. Get your master's if you want, but you figure out how you're going to make your millions and do it. And, don't let any man sidetrack you or promise he will take care of you. They'll totally fuck up your plans. You do it yourself. You don't need to be typing in legal purgatory forever."

I picked up my messages and thumbed through them. I wished he wouldn't encourage my secretary to get out of here any faster than she was already going. I headed back toward my office and Jack walked along with me.

"If I can help you along the way or if I can give you any pointers, don't hesitate to let me know," he said over his shoulder to Susan. "I mean it. No strings attached."

Jack sat in one of my client chairs before I set my briefcase down. "If they'd get rid of the morons, the basketball-colored air, and the people who park their cars on the freeway and call it driving, L.A. would be great."

"Glad you're back home," I said.

"Yeah, me too, but I had a tremendous time. They love me out there. They love cowboys. They do!"

I looked at his Hawaiian shirt and shorts. "You aren't a cowboy, Jack."

"Who said reality makes any difference? Went to this great party in Holmby Hills. You talk about nice. The studios have these for people who are financing their movies. You know, bring in the people with the money, schmooze 'em with the stars, the director, the producers, you know, and give 'em lush drinks and exotic food. It was hot stuff."

"How did you get an invitation?"

"Like I said, they bring in the people with the money. This is for this movie *The Past Never Ends.* Some guy out of Tulsa wrote the book, optioned it out for a screenplay. Monaco time for that guy. Filming it right now. I'm telling you. Johnny Depp—man, he's a weird fucker. He's the lead. Salma Hayek plays the romantic interest. Got to meet her, Phil. Whoo-o-o-a! I told her all about you—"

"I thought you said it was a great party."

"Hey! She's really interested in you."

"Right."

Jack opened a manila envelope he had been carrying. "I've got something for ya." He handed me two studio pictures: one of Johnny Depp, signed "To Whoever You Are, Johnny Depp"; the other of Salma Hayek, inscribed "To Jack's Friend Phil, Love Salma Hayek."

"Okay, Jack, tell me the real story."

"It was a great party! These movie people are just like you and me, except they aren't. Are you all right, Phil? You look like the only survivor of an armadillo stampede."

"All day in court. Biggest challenge was asking questions offensive enough to get the other side to object to keep the judge awake."

"Well, get some rest. You need to have some fun. You work too hard." He stood up. "I've missed my excellent hacienda, my balcony, my bar, my pool. I'm going to go home. They think they got nice places in Beverly Hills. Let 'em come out to Crow Canyon sometime."

Through the fall, Jack called or sent e-mail regularly. He was a big fan of Ivy League football. God knows why. In this part of the country, it's the equivalent of girls' flag football, and admitting you keep up with it is like saying you enjoy watching ballet.

Law school doesn't teach you what to expect. Mrs. Hanover, for example. Whenever she had a crisis, she called. She always paid me even though what I did was more like social work than law. When I suggested she hire someone else who cost less, she had another crisis. Hysteria. She was a seventy-year-old widow. She stood five foot six and weighed somewhere around three hundred pounds.

One November Saturday morning, she called. Her two private duty nurses hadn't shown up, and she couldn't get out of bed. She needed help. I telephoned every home health care service in the yellow pages. No one was available and I needed two aides. It took a lot of heft to move Mrs. Hanover. What do you do with a three-hundred-pound woman stuck in bed? My professors never covered that in Torts or Contracts. I couldn't think of any women big and brawny enough to help.

I called Jack. He was the biggest, strongest guy I knew. He asked for the address and said he'd meet me there. I arrived first and got the house key out from under the bullfrog statue on Mrs. Hanover's front porch. She wept when she saw me.

A few minutes later, Jack pulled up in his restored Monte Carlo. It had a new bumper sticker there on its front. It read "Fly with the Crow!" Jack went to the trunk, got out a wheelchair, unfolded it, and pushed it up the sidewalk towards Mrs. Hanover's front door. About that time, two large women in tennis shoes and floral print approached from the other direction. Turned out Mrs. Hanover's home health service had found two workers to send over, so Jack and I didn't have to do the heavy lifting.

I walked Jack back to his car. After he folded the wheelchair up and put it in the trunk, he opened the passenger door and patted the blue seat cushion.

"This afternoon I'm going to have a woman wearing a bikini sitting right here." He patted the seat again. "You know, the itsy

bitsy teeny weenie yellow polka dot bikini, just like in the song. A woman well padded in all the right places, know what I mean, huh? With blond hair all teased and sprayed into a flip. Sitting right here."

"Jack, it's cloudy. It's November. It's about forty degrees and a norther can blow in anytime."

"That makes it all the better, doesn't it?"

Jack winked at me and he got into his car. *"Bom Dia!"*

I haven't seen Jack McLoud since.

The e-mails and telephone calls stopped. No faxes. His cell phone was disconnected. My calls on his landline haven't been returned. I sent him notes in the mail. No response.

I missed Jack. The town was gray that winter.

I put the studio picture of Salma Hayek on the mirror in my bedroom and gave the one of Johnny Depp to my fourteen-year-old niece. Midwinter, I plugged *The Past Never Ends* into my search engine on the Internet. No hits came up for a movie. I checked the websites of the two movie stars. No mention of a film together and no mention on either of *The Past Never Ends.* I even started reading *People* magazine at the barbershop. The closest I came was a website for a self-published novel by some idiot out of Tulsa.

In my next e-mail to Jack, I asked if he had heard from Salma Hayek. No response.

I watched the Super Bowl that January and when March came around, I turned on the Academy Awards. Early. It had been a quiet Sunday. I ate popcorn and watched the actors and actresses arrive at the front door of the Shrine Auditorium. Several big stars exited their limousines. More small names, but still important enough for pre-ceremony hype.

The female TV announcer said, "And here is Daphne Starling. She's wearing a pink and tourmaline tea-length chiffon gown by French designer Rene DuBois." The male TV announcer continued the scripted prattle: "Yes, Daphne has to be a little disappointed tonight. She had been mentioned as a possible nominee for best supporting actress in *Dead Week,* but didn't end up getting the nod. Maybe next year for delightful Daphne."

Then, I saw Jack McLoud in a tuxedo with his hand on the small of Daphne Starling's back, accompanying her across the red carpet, both of them smiling into the cameras.

"What?" I spilled popcorn all over my couch. I squinted at the television screen for a different view, but the camera switched to another arrival.

I called my secretary Susan. She hadn't turned on her set yet and didn't believe me when I told her. Watch for Jack McLoud, I told her. There wasn't another shot of Daphne Starling and her escort all evening.

I tried to get a copy of the broadcast from the local network affiliate. They didn't have one and didn't own the copyright, so I had no luck. I got on the Internet to find a rebroadcast of the show. There wasn't one. The next weekend I went to the grocery store and thumbed through every magazine and tabloid to see if there was a picture of Daphne Starling and her Academy Awards companion. I saw one photograph of her, but whoever was with her had been cropped out. I checked her website. No clue. I sent an e-mail and got a form response back: "Catch Daphne's newest movie . . ."

I sent Jack McLoud another e-mail. No response. I phoned. No return call. I faxed. I wrote. Nothing.

Two weeks later, an insurance investigator who has his office upstairs stopped by with a few simple legal questions. I almost didn't charge him, but changed my mind. I got Jack McLoud's file, gave him Jack's date of birth and social security number, and told him he could pay my fee by checking his data base for every parcel of information he could find about Jack McLoud.

The investigator called back forty-five minutes later.

"This is almost like checking you out," he said. "Not much there. Twelve years ago, he was arrested for disturbing the peace. The charge was dropped without explanation. Ten years ago, arrested for actual physical control of a vehicle while under the influence. That means the cops might have found him sleeping it off in his car. McLoud worked out a plea where the charge was dismissed after he did some community service. Pretty light as it goes. Otherwise, he's clean."

"What else do you have?"

"What else do you want?"

"Where's he from?"

"He graduated from Grangeville High. That's in Idaho. It looks like he's been around here for about fifteen years. His name is on a couple of civil lawsuits. You represented him on

one. The other was before that. An oil deal gone bad, breach of contract. It looks like it settled."

"Is there anything in what you've found that makes you feel something is just not right?"

"No, just ordinary stuff about an ordinary person."

"Were you able to get a physical address for him?"

"This data base got everything, even utilities. He lives at 13703 West Crow Canyon Road."

"Thanks."

I left the office early that afternoon and drove out to the Five Finger Canyons. Crow Canyon Road wound and twirled through the dense western woods. A mail box marked 13703 stood next to a gravel drive. I turned in.

Down the road and behind a bunch of sycamore trees stood a small white two-story clapboard house. The gravel driveway split off toward a detached garage and the main part circled around to exit. The house may have been a hundred years old and built from a Sears kit. I stopped the car in front. I had imagined something bigger, grander.

I walked around toward the back of the house to see the swimming pool. When I got there, I saw a pink and blue aboveground pool about three feet deep and ten feet in diameter. I checked the yard for places where Jack's real swimming pool might be. It was all wild overgrowth and red rock canyon there. No other place to swim.

"I'm going to have a woman on each arm in my pool . . ." he would say.

A wading pool?

I knocked on the back door.

Silence.

I knocked again.

I could see no neighboring houses from the backyard, no decals for burglar alarms on the windows. If one went off, I could say I was worried about my friend and thought my client was dead. I didn't have a key and broke into the house to check on him. I wouldn't say anything about the Academy Awards.

I jimmied the lock with a paper clip and a credit card. The door opened into the kitchen. The house felt even smaller inside.

The kitchen smelled like old, dank potatoes, but was much more tidy than I would have imagined.

"Jack?" I called.

No response.

A wooden fruit crate stood on the kitchen counter. It held partially empty bottles of Absolut, Bacardi, Jose Cuervo, and Cabin Still. A little white paper sign had been taped to the front of the box. In black handwritten Magic Marker, it read: "My Bar."

The living room had a big-screen TV and a computer. A dilapidated green couch leaned against the wall. A deserted comic book lay open to an advertisement: "Geodes from South America! Key to Your Good Fortune!" For ten bucks you could receive ten geodes guaranteed to hold valuable crystals. I thought the return address might be Jack's. It wasn't. A Naomi Wolf book poked out from under the divan. I picked the book up. Paragraphs had been bracketed and sentences underlined by a blue ink fountain pen.

I looked around to locate something with Jack's name or e-mail address. I couldn't find anything. The stairs led up to one big room. Jack's bedroom? The bed had been made and the place smelled dusty. I opened the closet and saw a bunch of brightly colored Hawaiian shirts hanging. Worn sandals neatly lined the closet's floor.

There was a door opposite the closet and sunlight glowed through its curtains. Must lead to the balcony, I thought.

I unlocked the door and stepped out. That was as far as I could go. Two people could stand here, but it'd be tight and neither could have big hips.

"I'll step out onto my balcony and look at the constellations . . ."

The insurance investigator was good and everything else he had told me about Jack sounded correct. I had checked the address on the mailbox twice. Maybe it wasn't his house, I thought. No. If only I could find something with Jack's name on it to be sure. No luck.

I walked out the back door to the detached garage. Its panes were covered with red dust. I went around to the back and brushed off one of the windows.

Parked inside was a blue and black 1969 Monte Carlo with a bumper sticker on the front that read "Fly with the Crow!"

R. G. Cantalupo

Some Gift

10/11/04 Seattle, Washington. Teen Found Alive With Blood Clot In Her Brain. "A 17 year-old girl who survived without food or water for eight days may have been saved by her own dehydration." —*Seattle Times*

I did not see the blood-knot in my dream,
nor the crushed car hidden in black oaks.
All I remembered were the dark branches,
the steep slope down, and the words *"keep*
going, keep going" when I woke. The police
said she was probably a runaway, but those
words kept singing in my head like a bad
jingo so I went back up Redmond Mountain
and drove past where the search had ended.
There. Not there. Alive. Not. How did I know
the mystery before the mystery was? Her voice
sounding in mine, mine in hers, both of us
rising in the half-waking hours, in the leaves
fluttering like prayer flags, in the whispered
blessings from the mouths of trees—I heard
"keep going, keep going", and so I did. I can't
say who told me to stop—maybe no one, maybe
just some gift I have, some voice, but when
I rounded a curve—even before I saw her
red paint scraped across the concrete barrier—I
knew that's where she was. *"Laura, Lau—*
ra", I called, but after eight days only the quail
and bush wrens flew out the thickets as answer.
I climbed down anyway, down to where the torn
branches cut across a clearing, down to where
blue shadow and the severed arms of alder
closed over where she fell, and when I lifted
them, I saw her and the dream part I forgot.

Kurt Brown

Snapshot

Ten men on a postcard   clinging to the cables
of Brooklyn Bridge   they look   *one can't help it*

like insects glued to the struts of some unspeakable web

some things will die with us   memories   words
almost everything will die with us unspoken

it's nearly gone   the sound of waves
pummeling the beach   a seagull's sharp demands

a hundred years   if we had them
won't matter   much less the years we've had

those men   suspended in air   dry leaves
caught in a fence before the wind hauls them away

what do *they* say   in their best suits
perched nonchalantly above the flames of the East River

what matters is that we have been here at all

waves heave up and burst in bright concussions of foam
seagulls weave above it   slandering

in the distance   flags of smoke that never touch land

why not speak of what we know
instead of dangling   always   above the ineffable

on the opposite side   no address   no message

what matters is that we have been here at all

so they say   but what does the wind say
after the men are gone   blowing through those empty cables

Carol Lee Lorenzo

Johanna's Brother

Her brother was coming—but not for a visit. Johanna had talked the family into trying to make room for him to live with them.

A trailer sat beside a sealed foundation. The front yard grass was cropped close to its roots, grazed. At the back of the trailer a shed was attached, and a set of stairs led up from the capped dim warrens of a completed basement. Their real house was yet to be built above ground.

Johanna's husband, Garth, could put the oddest things together. But he was ingenious at delaying completion. He was a master carpenter, a perfectionist, which meant he could do fine work for hire. But he could not do work for himself. Johanna waited for him to get the courage to prove himself perfect on their house. A mark appeared on the family calendar, in his hand. The house raising was scheduled this summer. That left them all curious and disturbed.

The family believed in discipline. They tried charity—to take from each other and give to someone else. It was part of their way to watch and witness on each other. Their three daughters knew what was expected. Every Saturday morning, coming up from their bedrooms in the basement, they settled in the trailer for the family breakfast and reading of the lesson. They reported the mistakes and weaknesses they'd witnessed in the family. They believed telling made the whole family better. They never protected each other.

Already nearing summer, one Sunday after church, Johanna went ahead of the family, opening the car door and windows to cool the car for them. When she broke the seal of the hot car door, her fingertips felt like she'd touched fire on the chrome. She leaned into the trapped heat and heard a voice. It could be speaking in tongues. A temperament let lose in another language. When she stood, lowered her hands, and looked back at her family, the voice went away. Later she stepped into the dark basement washroom. Her fingertips led her across the rough

foundation wall. The voice waited for her. Now it was speaking clear enough for her to understand, "Save him. Save him." She knew the voice. It was her brother's, asking for himself. It found her again in the kitchen frying the bubble and squeak of onions and cabbage, grease spattering hot freckles that stuck to her fingers. In daylight it caught her fingers thrust down in the garden between rasping squash leaves, dirt tight under her clipped fingernails. It sounded again while she lifted bales of feed for the goats, hands too occupied to protect her eyes; it came over and settled on her like chaff from the feed.

The family was not concerned with the sudden upheavals in her usual controlled expression, her eyes could be steady as the smooth shine on a newly pressed blue dress. The expressions on her face were taken as a woman's break in life. She was coming into the change, as it had visited her mother, early. Leaving the possibilities of new motherhood behind separated her from the family. For the first time, she protected her body, and didn't witness against herself next Saturday meeting. To assuage this sin of not telling, she told a church Elder that a voice had come to her, but no one was there and the voice was small. The Elder advised her that it was the voice of God speaking in disguise and she should answer the voice that called her. She did not tell that she knew it was the voice of Brother. She'd never forgotten his ragged sound when their parents dealt him punishment, though as a child she had been confused, kept away from understanding, and out of the room when they showed him what he'd done. When he reached puberty, her parents separated him from the family and sent him away when she was still in grammar school. The older she got, the more she gave his pain the same grave regard as love.

This morning Johanna's hair had come out wrong. She had rolled it just for her brother's coming. The kind of blond that light streaks red, it seemed a tight burning bush. She swept her hair with the comb hard as if she were sweeping a difficult floor. Still her hair wouldn't lie down and make her look calm.

The family gathered to wait for Brother to arrive from the depot by taxi. Johanna waited in her pressed blue Sunday dress. The daughters, with their long hair straight as new brooms, waited in their close flock of three. Today they wore big shirts, a cover of innocence because underneath Johanna guessed were short shorts and midriffs. They played their father's temper as a

game. With him they'd sneak, tempt, succeed, and watch their father build up to the explosion. They tested his attention to them and they survived it.

But they watched their mother, too. These were the children she'd wanted and had. Yet she was wary of them. They had power by just staying so close together. They often didn't know to stop before it raised the flap of wrath from their father.

All this waiting in the yard for Brother made Garth hot. He leaned his tall slender body against a tree.

Thin clouds hung below the sun and made a still stream down the side of the sky. The sun was partially muted.

The goats were loose, foraging indiscriminately. They knelt together and rested, sides touching, like too many hard, white beds airing out in the yard. Then their bones, sensitive to vibration, told them something. They rose and waited.

Brother arrived sitting in the back seat against what would be the sun side. His face had carved flat planes of cheekbones and clean jaw edges. He was wearing a set of headphones and a small player-radio clipped to his shirt like an old hearing aid.

Garth opened the taxi door. Brother removed his heft and height and packages from the back seat. The daughters nudged each other, like those packages might be presents. He carried essentials in an imitation suitcase of pressed cardboard that Johanna recognized, the family had had only one. No one left to go anywhere but Brother. Next a kit for toiletries, an open bag of medications, and a cloth drawstring bag. His skin had one new sun streak. He'd been indoors for years, his body rock-hard, his muscles maximized, like men build their bodies in jail or institutions.

The headphones slipped back from his ears, antenna thin as a darning needle. His sunside eye was drenched, watering from muted sun. He watched goats surround the taxi, the sinuous slope of their necks, their sharp backbones following a downward slant to the strong spring in their haunches.

One daughter giggled, passed it to the other two, closest they'd been to Uncle Brother. Johanna had not been in private with him since she'd been a child. As an adult she'd visited alone, sitting behind a glass partition, or at a table watched by the caretakers.

Brother counted out the fare to the taxi driver, licked his thumb to separate the bills, and made a quiet spit sound surely at the taste of each single. His eyes moved sideways.

"Goats scare you?" asked Garth. A smile eased past his mouth like it was sneaking away. "Aren't you a country boy?"

"Not for a while," Brother said, his lids lifted. "That was Johanna's brother when she had one."

Garth's tongue shot against his inside cheek, it looked like a plug of chewing tobacco. He hated a joke back.

For the moment, Johanna wondered if Brother had been wrong at birth; they'd both come out of the birthing bed from mother, at home not at a hospital. Or was it the wrong man turned out from the boy who'd gone into the mental institutions? Their parents had died years ago from taking improper care of themselves. For some time, their father was tough enough to survive all his own punishment. Even on himself, he'd used leftover veterinary medicine for their animals to cure what he called weaknesses.

Brother looked only at Johanna. His hair was buzz cut down to the gray coming into his blond. His eyes were more tint than color, the dot of each lens a flaw blown into his eye. His eyes moved. "Do you eat the goats?"

"The goats are pets," said Johanna. "They eat my flowers."

His gaze back to steady on her. "Is that your hair?"

"I look different because you're seeing me outside this time." Her face went hot with shame at her wrong hair.

When the daughters looked away he watched them, the pupils in his eyes long. He spoke in Dutch and asked Johanna, "What do you want with me? What are you going to do with me here?"

"You called me," she said quietly, in that language hard to remember with no more than a child's collection of words.

Garth gave them the double evil eye, and they silenced.

The taxi backed down the length of the gravel drive, the driver holding his fare still in his fist, looking behind all the way.

Johanna, standing in the heat of the flat yard, suddenly felt memory run across her skin. A picture of the preacher bending her backward, submerging her to be saved, his fingers up her nose plugged against drowning.

The toe of Garth's work boot touched the cloth drawstring bag, the shapes inside showing workout weights. Brother said, "Mine. I'll carry it all."

The trailer was toured with its tiny carlike windows. Johanna led them downstairs. The daughters followed, peeking in doorways of their own underground bedrooms.

"Glad to be out?" Garth asked.

"Know what happens when you don't go where told?" Brother's answer, bags and suitcase bumped like extra knees. The hallway stacked with big furniture and boxes waited underground for the house on top. At the end, daylight poured toward them in a flood. The tail end room stuck out above ground on the slope side. It had a big window.

"It was extra from some job. Never did catch who counted wrong," said Garth. "So I just put it there."

The eldest daughter said, "No one wanted a room where somebody can peek at you."

Brother walked right in, blocking the sun. The daughters followed. When he turned, the light slipped and surprised them and they pinched their noses. A blush shone through their unpolished fingernails, and their lips opened pink as the lining inside their mouths. "What do they mean by holding their noses?" he asked Johanna.

Quickly, Johanna said, "No offense, Brother. They believe sun makes them sneeze."

Brother claimed the bed by sitting on it.

Johanna touched her fingertips against her palms. The sudden sunlight roared in her head. What was Brother's voice from? Head injuries or mental illness, rural cases weren't investigated back then. Garth refused to hear about it, and he simply didn't want to know what he couldn't understand. He didn't want to hear Johanna wonder about it. Her worry was Brother had paid, but he was still being punished for what he'd done so long ago. In this light from outside, she felt closer to Brother than her husband and daughters.

This season Brother was to be the tripwire that set the daughters giggling. Helen, Arlene, and Molly—thirteen, eleven, and eight. They appeared where they shouldn't, whispered, disappeared behind doors. He had no experience out in life with young girls. The girls teased, and music flooded out from the earphones. Garth watched through the big window. Johanna listened from upstairs.

The flat sound of Brother's shoes echoed up and down the stairs, the toes of his shoes stubbed noses.

Garth hunted Johanna. "Is that brother of yours on his medicine?"

"He never forgets. It's like his meals."

Brother came to the small window at the kitchen sink to get his pills. Johanna leaned toward the window with him. Goats were outside. "I watch them for pleasure, Brother. I've grown to love goats. They do funny things." One goat, with limber lips, plucked flowerheads on stems, patiently chewed sideways, and swallowed. Another ran its horns along the wooden fence like a child who's found the joy of a stick. Johanna handed Brother his yellow capsules and he swallowed his medicine. He looked up from his empty hand and showed her his tongue, like a boy, to say the pills were gone. They watched goats until she saw the screen formed by the medication drop behind his eyes.

The medication collected in his face, feet, and hands, and bloated his body. On the way to church, Garth said, "He looks kin—but the trouble is it's like pieces of us stuck together wrong."

In church, Brother sat quiet. Garth lost his attention span. The preacher talked, and Garth filled with opinions that he couldn't give. His nostrils ticked. The daughters fed him peppermints to calm him. He sat sucking, the tip of his tongue stuck in a lifesaver hole. After the service, the Elders congratulated Garth for giving a home to Brother and Johanna for listening to God.

The family settled into the monotony of daily things. Now and then it broke. When Garth tried to teach Brother how to do hard work, he found that Brother already knew. He could hoe, saw, and chop; his skin burning, peeling as if shedding skin came natural.

The daughters, when free from summer chores, kept at their game. They played I Spy. He went to lock his door, but the doors were unfinished, no knobs, just holes to stick your fingers through and pull. "We don't believe in locked doors, here, Brother," Johanna said. Brother stuck a sock in the knob hole. Johanna saw the girls had socks in theirs, too, socks she'd last seen poked down in the eldest's training bra. Their giggles got wilder.

Saturday morning, they confessed that they were trying to get Brother's goat.

During the lesson, a thump was heard from the basement. The daughters wanted to sneak outside to the big window. Garth wanted to take a billy club. Johanna went and reported, "He's wrestling with himself. He's just playing." Garth sneered.

At the table, each night when they bowed heads to the bless-

ing, Brother bowed his head, too, but didn't lift it. When they began to eat he'd already finished eating, leaving the level of the vegetables in the bowls way down low.

One night over dinner, Garth questioned Brother. "After you finish your portion, why do you give that screwed-up look at the rest of the food?"

Johanna answered simply, "He can't stand the smell of meat."

Brother smelled his own hand, and added, "My hand doesn't like the smell of meat eaters, either."

Garth's anger was sudden, it gagged him. His body jerked to rise from the chair. Johanna stopped him. "Brother's merely saying he's a vegetarian."

Garth's temper wouldn't sit down, his voice hit the trailer's metal ceiling. "Vegetarian? With him it sounds like something perverts do."

Brother slipped his headphones on, though no sound came from them. The daughters sprayed laughter and tiny bits of food. Garth yelled at their bad table manners and then petted them. He took dessert to the end of the narrow room. His daughters, around him like favorite pillows, fed him his ice cream to cool him down.

Johanna walked Brother out into the yard. He called his favorite goat, the youngest, training it to come to him. When he spoke about the goat it was in a small voice. He slipped his hand along the goat's beginning horns. "They have shock absorbers in front of their brains," he said. He put his hand in his pocket. "Present," he said. She wondered if he'd ever had a birthday with presents, she'd never had one until she married Garth. He handed what he had to the goat. Its nostrils alert, the split of its nose wide, it thrust out its tongue. Then dainty with delight, its long pupils squared off with goat pleasure, it took his offering—salt in the palm of a hand.

That night, Johanna woke, the bed hot under her. Garth slept, his bedclothes cool after his earlier lovemaking. She sweated fire as if she'd swallowed it—and stayed as silent as she could.

Her loss of menstruation and her dryness provoked Garth. It was hard on the perfectionist. Nights when he began loving, under his thrust and fondle, her body groaned and roared. She thought it spit heat.

She sat on the edge of the bed and put her fingers into her mouth to cool them. The voice came. She was back with the

voice from their far childhood. "How soon will it stop?" The small voice of Brother. A child's head shaved looks fragile.

The sheet stuck to her heat, threatened to strip off her skin.

The childhood wallpaper, squares of yellow, had hung torn by his bed. "Where am I going?" Brother with the old suitcase that was big then. His back small, a child trying to stay. But their daddy kept right behind him, kept him going. "When will you come get me?"

Johanna tried to stand without waking Garth. It would take the breath of God to cool her now.

In the way-back, Daddy had beat Brother on the head with a leather strap until Brother was against the wallpaper, beating his own head. At each stroke, his face was stunned, helpless. Johanna had screamed at the sight of his face accepting pain, her breath smelled metallic as blood.

Then Mother punished her for watching and screaming. Shamed her by making her stand with arms raised over her head for humiliation. Her fingers shook from being held high so long, and they turned into antennas. She learned to hear voices, to catch them on her fingertips. Voices ran down her arms, at first her own voice singing hymns, pretty ones she'd learned as a younger child when Brother had been quiet, before his puberty. In the singing, she was free of pain—of anybody's. She made herself heal.

Fall came, quiet, simple, beautiful with trees. The family lived like doves almost too big to fit in their basement body-warm alcoves.

Johanna took Brother out in the yard with her. Brother made the goats bouquets of the last of Johanna's flowers. They ate them. "They're vegetarians!" he said proudly. He polished their hooves and horns. He transformed the goats into play pretties she'd never had. They laughed together at this, she like a child, too.

The goats took their shining hooves over the yard and danced, clicking like diviners, on rock rising from the ground. Their clicking gave Garth a migraine. Left out, he never played. Johanna sent the goats springing toward the woods, so fast they were like rolling white hoops of fur and horns.

At dusk, in the best grass, Johanna came upon the daughters, all quiet, contained. She, unseen, watched the older one teaching

number two and three cartwheels, handstands, somersaults. Just before school started, the girls were back to innocent.

But at the start of school, there were new boys and new outfits. They came home aroused. Johanna was in the kitchen when the eldest shrieked, "Brother took out his pink thing!" Johanna's skin went slick with sweat. The tread of Brother's shoes sounded on the stairs. Garth roared into the unbearably tiny room. The eldest daughter got scared and confessed, "Brother took a pink thing out of his mouth with teeth on it."

Brother touched his mouth, his big hand trembling. He had no real teeth. "Pulled," he said.

Garth's face tightened. "Don't you use being sick to turn my house upside down and humiliate me."

Brother's eyes moved back under his lids.

Hard and quiet, Garth said, "Or I'll kill you."

The rains began. Bad weather was against the perfectionist. The solid line on the calendar was too close, he wouldn't get a section of his own house raised this year. The church wanted him for their repairs. "Let the church leak," Garth said.

Rainy day one Sunday, everyone restless with no church, Garth had let church go. He was washing up in the trailer after reprimanding his daughter.

The eldest daughter was acting like she was caught in nettles. She wanted to start dating and wanted to date a church boy and had been told they weren't even going to church again. She slammed outside into the leftover rain.

In a minute, she came running with the other two, leaving Brother in the far yard calling the goats. Her face still pouched with anger at her father, she said, "We saw him, Brother did it right in front of us!"

Garth plunged outside, the wet of his face flying off him. "You better be right this time!" Johanna thought the trailer started to roll down the drive. She took in air to shout. She could read the daughter's expression, it was her daughter's release to cause confusion. The air outside tasted like lightning. She meant to say, Garth, stop! First ask Brother what he did. But he was stubborn to believe his daughter. Instead she yelled, "Garth, you idiot. You fool. You perfectionist!"

He scooped a stone from the wet clay. "I'll kill him."

The eldest daughter screamed too late, a fast answer. "Disgusting. Brother picked his nose in front of us."

Brother, headphones on, his hand held out, the naïve goat was coming to him.

"I'll kill you, you filthy vegetarian."

Johanna tried to stop the stone even after it left Garth's hand. The daughters broke their cluster and scattered.

The goat with Brother turned. The stone struck it deeply in the eye. It staggered, tried to stay up, fell. Johanna leaped and got it up from the clay, it fell again. One eye gone. Injury behind the eye. The terrible sound of an animal stricken—it was coming from Brother. The goat's mouth was closed in the wet clay. One eye, such small damage to pay with a life. But it had to stand up to live. It couldn't. It had to be destroyed. "You made me have to finish off the goat," Garth said. He'd have to be the one. Brother had fresh blood, a slight spatter from the knees down. The stone at his shoe, like any stone on the ground.

They waited as long as they could before dinner was upon them, called by Garth. His and Brother's ruined shoes at the door, new pants on, both in sock feet now. Brother fed his face, a terrible one of withheld things. The daughters kept their faces down, food wasted on their plates. "Pass the salt," Garth said.

Stiff as a conscience, Brother spoke for himself now. "I didn't come here to die. I'm going to leave."

Transportation and certification for reconfinement were set. Brother's child voice—her fingers pressed against the small trailer window, she let it tell her he wanted back where there were locks on doors. He couldn't live in this odd house. Then the child voice stayed silent. Sound came from the remaining goats ticking their hooves on wide rock rising from the ground.

She worked in the yard with Brother awaiting his return to the city and the institution. She began to dig up the rock. The goats watched her trying to find the edge.

Johanna kneeled, worked harder. When the eldest daughter came out, Johanna looked up and wondered how old this daughter was now. Across her forehead was skin cream in dots, small swellings, her skin breaking out, her body working toward becoming a woman. "Mother, stop it, please," the daughter said. "That rock probably goes all the way under our property."

Johanna thought, the silly daughter finally turned wise. Still she dug for the edge. Dirt dried on her skin. She got a shovel. To make the shovel stronger, she used her whole chest as a lever as if she had no breasts to care for. She slept with her eyes open and

let violent dreams in. She ruined her hands, tore them at the rock. The staff of her back went. The goats avoided the humans, kept to themselves. Brother, silent, worked alongside her now, trying to get his hard body back for confinement, trying to keep the goats' ticking from hurting him. How hard his body and hers, they bumped and pushed as they worked together. But the rock would not be removed.

The day came when the taxi was called. Her daughters slipped a pair of their mittens over their mother's damaged fingers.

When Brother saw the taxi coming, the tint in his eyes spread, ran wild to the corners. He wanted Johanna to wait with him, like children, this time together. She was there to help him into the taxi, the family suitcase, his headphones dangling, the weights in a cloth bag, the medicine in an open one. Inside the wool mittens, the ends of her fingers torn past the quick begin to draw and she thought it the beginning of healing. She held the knob of his elbow to help him in. "I'll remember the goats," Brother said. "When they were all alive."

Shriven by the throbbing of her fingers, she could feel with him—those beatings had sometimes left him unable to rise from his bed. It had taken everything away from him—except feeling. She saw that it left him able to feel—but without a soul to guide him.

Garth stood carefully back in something near worried puzzlement. His fresh shirt breathed against him. He was amazed at himself. He'd told Johanna this was the first time he'd ever cared what happened to anybody he'd hated. The daughters were poised and quiet, muscular from the summer, leg muscles hard.

Later, Johanna cried when she saw the goats go, though she was the one who called to have them taken away. The truck came for them. For a minute, she pinched and crushed the mittens against her hands.

Garth said, "Johanna, this is not your failure. Your brother is God and Jesus' failure. He just can't take regular life. And these goats are only going to a farm, a new home."

"I know that and I don't believe it," she said.

"Oh, Ma'am, yes, Ma'am, you can believe that," said the new goat owner at his truck. "Ma'am. I know they're pets. They'll be pets, Ma'am. We won't eat them."

In her unmenstruated state, she stood in the changes. Sadness dropped down to wisdom. No monthly loss of blood, no interruption, no counting days. A self separate from producing family. Even before the goats were gone, inside herself, in her body, she felt like she was alone in a new room. She was the first to turn and go back in the house they hadn't built yet.

William Virgil Davis That Day

I am thinking of you,
and the way, for years,
we existed together,
so close we never needed
to know what intimacy
meant. We almost never
spoke about it, even late
on, when you certainly
knew there was not
much time left, and I
couldn't yet think
that far ahead.

This is a day very much
like your last day, cold
and wet, the pooled water
just beginning to turn
to a fragile glassy surface,
sleet about to change
to snow. We stood still
and silent, watching
as your boxed body slid
into the opened ground.

When we drove away,
I turned back to see where
we would say you were,
although I already knew
you were nowhere near
there, that you had slipped
quickly away while no
one was looking and
were already waiting,
as you always had, for as
long after dark as it would
take for me to return.

Peter Ludwin

In the Crosshairs, Comanche National Grassland

Fire sears the air this morning:
in my friend Katie's poems,
the autumn colors,
twinges in my throat and jaw.
When cancer struck at twenty-five.
it bore no pain, gave no warning.
Do I now, so many years later,
harbor malignant seeds
instead of geese on the wing?

Surely the truth lies elsewhere.
In the cottonwoods, for example,
that line the Purgatoire River,
the blazing of their gold
against the white peaks
a climax fever my bones inherit
as kindling flares to match.
Or in the blueberry muffins
Katie baked with flax flour,

how butter and steaming,
crumb-filled texture melting
on the tongue felt almost too sensual,
like an itch when the blood's inflamed.
Then again, what of this ember
glowing deep within the marrow,
this coal that scores
even the most resistant wood
with blackened grooves?

There is the need to get things down,
to leave a mark, an imprint,
some sign that validates a life.
This is what the cottonwoods demand,
these stunted prairie grasses:
a voice that insists,
that announces to no one in particular,
ah Consuelo, *mi vida*,
I was here, I sang your song.

Daniel A. Hoyt

This Document Should be Retained as Evidence of Your Journey

Patterson pulled on bleach-stained khakis, glared at his sleeping wife, tucked frustration into his waistband along with the tail of his shirt, and glared again. He helped lots of kids, troubled or not, but that didn't mean he liked them sleeping in his house.

"I'm awake," Vicki said. "I feel you looking at me."

"Love," he said, "I'm going to wake that kid good and up."

The stranger was one of those fucked-up white kids, one of those suburban druggies who made Patterson reconfigure infertility as a kind of blessing. Vicki's cousin's kid, a once-removed type or some other questionable and ill-defined relation. He was seventeen and asleep on Patterson's couch.

First, Patterson shook a woolly shoulder, and then, after the kid—fully dressed and pre-dirtied—stood up, stretched, and slipped into a grimace, Patterson shook his hand.

"I'm Patterson. Jim Patterson, but Patterson's fine, not Mister or any of that shit."

The grimace looked back at him, said, "I'm Jacey."

Jacey looked as if he were knotted together with twine. Born to slouch. He had a gristly pimply face and floppy blond hair that fell across bloodshot eyes. Patterson brought the kid into the kitchen, where Vicki was making things work. She placed a bowl in front of Patterson.

"Be careful," she said. "It's hot."

"Hot hot or spicy hot?" Patterson asked.

"It's oatmeal," she said.

The kid refused sustenance, watched Patterson eat.

"Hunger strike," Patterson said. "It's not going to work."

The oatmeal boxed Patterson's ears, and the coffee cheered him. On the way out the door, he grabbed the hammer he had left in the bathroom, found a mysterious gentle hum rising from his throat, told the kid to get moving.

"Shut up, my love," he said to Vicki as he sealed her lips with his own. He pinched her ass through a minimum of three pajama-like layers. He felt the ghost of the springiness that had been her young flesh.

"You think you're some young fresh buck," she said.

He did think as much, and the kid said, "She's still pretty," and Patterson said, "You keep your mouth shut and let me drive."

Patterson didn't mind the drive. It allowed him to build a Detroit of his mind. His brain glazed windows and repaired potholes. His brain bulldozed collapsing buildings, sucked up the trash, killed all the seagulls.

Back when he was a boy, his parents left Detroit the way everyone left it: gladly. Now he kept coming back. Patterson owned eighteen apartment buildings right in the city, Cass Corridor, not the worst area, not the best. Mostly he rented to People of Color, and he capitalized this in his head. A softy 1980s term, made him think of purple folks and tangerine ones, but he used it too, sometimes.

They were his people and this was his journey: Six days a week, sometimes seven, he drove the twenty-five minutes down 1-75 to fix toilets, patch drywall, flush rats from the basements.

He got his rent checks in the mail, tried not to think of the city as rot and rust and garbage, left folks alone. He hired the kids in his buildings, though, lots of them. He liked the kids. They had not yet fucked up their lives, and Patterson handed out a few sly dollars here and there, to scrub the odd floor, to scrape the sooty paint off a tired wall. He paid up front, smiled, and said, "thanks," "good job," "what about a you're welcome," "say hi to your mom," "behave yourself," "take care of yourself," "stay in school," "how's your dad," "keep that yelling down," "don't you end up like those guys out there," "if you need help you just ask."

This Jacey had been foisted on him, but he was a worker. Patterson had him hosing down a bathroom, bleaching it back to as close as it could get to new.

At noon, Patterson went out to get them meatball sandwiches and Cokes, down the block and up past the place where the hookers hung their lips out like nooses.

"Let me suck your dick," one of them said in a way that made it unclear who would be doing a favor for whom.

"Do I look like I need to pay for any dick-sucking?" Patterson asked. "No, stop. Don't answer that."

She was the skinny dried-out one, the oldest teenager he had ever seen. He kept his feet moving the way he kept his money in his pocket, his dick in his pants. Around here, a bill turns into crack faster than it can turn into quarters.

Patterson pushed his feet into a trot. When he came back the kid would be stalling, plotzing around, pressing his greasy face up against a window. Patterson would sneak into the apartment and throw a spark into him.

The kid was in up to his elbows in the toilet bowl.

"Wash up, and we'll do some fucking eating," Patterson said.

In the afternoon they painted, Patterson with the roller, the kid cutting in the corners with a brush.

"You should have a radio," Jacey said. "I like DMX and D-12, Jay-Z. I like Eminem *and* Insane Clown Posse. I was in that Kid Rock video, the one they just shot. I like all that. The usual stuff. Mainly I just hang out with my niggaz."

The kid was pale and loud and frail, and he positioned the bill of his baseball cap at a careful and ludicrous angle. Patterson whittled Jacey down with his eyes. A child.

"You watch your fucking mouth," Patterson said.

Jacey went to something called NA, stayed with some friends in the city, worked with Patterson three days a week.

Jacey worked hard, sure, but he was a talker. Blah, blah, blah. Pistons, crack whore, Eminem. The kid's mouth was a leaky faucet, and the MTV bullshit just dripped out of it.

Each morning Patterson said, "I pick what we listen to, and if you don't likey-like, don't listen."

And each day at some point, the kid tuned in some rap-type shit on the radio, Patterson's radio.

Man, the kid pissed him off.

Jacey just couldn't leave anything alone.

That time they cleaned up the alley, three little black kids, maybe preschoolers, were taking crazy looping shots at a basketball hoop. It was forty degrees, and none of them wore a parka. Patterson and Jacey watched, hooted after a good play.

One of the kids was smaller than the ball, and he had to dribble with both hands. Didn't matter. These kids laughed and chattered, and one of them said, "There's Mr. Patterson," and

it was a happy coincidence when the ball went through the hoop.

Just watching them made Patterson feel like a crisp fall apple, still juicy with life. The cold didn't stop these kids. They didn't care that the ball was half-flat and balding.

Just watching them was enough. But Jacey had to join in, take some three-pointers, high-five the kids.

"Man," Jacey said, "they're cool little niggaz."

Patterson's apple turned to mush.

He told Jacey to shut his pie hole, fuck off for the afternoon. Patterson gave each of the little kids a five-dollar bill.

"This is money I'm not paying you today," he said to Jacey.

That night at dinner, Vicki ladled stew into Patterson's bowl, and Patterson ladled it into his mouth with a crust of bread.

"That Jacey," he said. "Every other word is nigger-this, nigger-that. Any angle you look at him, he's one-hundred percent fuck-up."

The skin around Vicki's eyes crinkled. Patterson didn't like what that meant, but he liked the way it looked. He liked her long fingers, too, even the way she scratched. Right then and there, she was reaching out and tugging on a tuft of short gray hair above his left ear. Yanking really.

"Around here," she said, "we take care of our people, no matter how they behave."

Alone in the house, Patterson let the phone machine click to life and pick up the call. The message was long, even though the machine spliced it down. "Patterson. Are you there? Patterson? Vicki? Will you pick up the phone? It's me, Jacey. I'm sort of stuck here, downtown, at, like, the bus station, at the big one, where the Greyhounds stop. I need some help. I don't have any money . . ."

Patterson heard a shuffling of wispy noises in the background. Maybe Jacey was talking to someone else, holding the phone away, muffling the receiver with a dirty shirtsleeve. Then Jacey was talking again.

"I really need a ride, and I don't have anyone to call. Except, I guess, you. I'll be here. I'll be here for . . ." The machine decided that Jacey had said enough.

Patterson let this message play four times in succession,

strained his ears during the silent part, heard nothing, heard no fear, heard a little need, heard a little hitch in the voice that sounded like a practical joke. He didn't even like the kid.

He was too old for this bullshit.

As he walked out to the garage, Patterson thought that if Jacey were there and in trouble the kid would learn a tidy little lesson. If Jacey weren't there, Patterson would have a lesson of his own.

Two weeks later, winter settled in and stretched itself out. Patterson pulled on his burnt-orange parka and took on the snow. He was ungloved and puffing. When his nose started to run, his fingers searched for a Kleenex, and all they found was an old boarding pass: Detroit to Miami it said on the front, along with his name, the flight number, the boarding gate. On the back, it said: "This document should be retained as evidence of your journey." The wording made no sense.

It was probably five or six years ago, when his parents were still alive. He had flown down to Miami, shed the parka for a slathering of sunscreen, visited them for a few days. They had left the suburbs behind the same way they had left Detroit. When green pastures beckon, you don't stay and fertilize the fucking parking lot.

They had traded Michigan for the old-people Florida fantasy: condominium gates, middle-class sunshine, Bingo games, sand in the shoes, skin-cancer fears. They covered themselves with hats and mint-smelling sunscreen and long-sleeved shirts and faded cotton-twill pants.

Patterson blew his nose on the boarding pass and crumpled it back into a pocket. Now, he and Vicki were the last of the Pattersons.

Jacey was not a Patterson. Vicki knew that, whether she'd admit it or not.

It was all bullshit anyway.

No matter where you go, you have some fresh new shit—falling out of the sky, falling out of your head—to shovel.

The snow seemed to muddy itself long before it hit the earth, and Patterson sped up, tried to keep pace with the clouds. Two weeks ago, on the way downtown to the bus station, Patterson had backed slowly out the driveway and puttered all the way down Maple Street before he said *fuck this* and headed back to

the house. He erased the phone message, said nothing to Vicki. For all he knew that Jacey kid was still there.

If he liked the kid, sure, he would have picked him up. And if the kid had been a real relative, Patterson would have picked him up then, too. And if Patterson had been completely positive the kid wasn't fucked up on some kind of drugs — sure. And if the kid had been sick or injured, then, too. And if the kid had been black, Patterson would have definitely picked him up.

Patterson told his mind to hush. He concentrated on shoveling snow, one of the last of the Manly Missions, like whittling and burning acrid piles of spent tires and gobbling up the fatty meat that wants to kill you.

Patterson scratched the brown-gray scrub of his naked head, and the shovel scraped against the tar of the driveway. Piles of white began to surround him.

From the house, Vicki yelled, "Don't overdo it." She waved, and then the futzy red door closed behind her.

That was the nicest thing she'd said to him in two weeks.

She knew about the kid. Somehow she knew. Every day, it was "Did Jacey show up today?" Or "Don't you think Jacey would've called by now?" Or "I wonder what Jacey's doing, right this very second."

Yes, Vicki knew. She'd talked to her cousin. Or she'd talked to Jacey. Or she'd twirled her long fingers into Patterson's ears and picked out his thoughts as he'd slept.

Patterson spit on his hands, dug his boots into slippery traction. He got his arms pumping, felt his heart get a little flustered. Air puffed into his lungs and then bit like a rusty saw blade on the way out.

God. Scoop.
Damn. Dump.
White. Scoop.
Kids. Dump.
God. Scoop.
Damn. Dump.
Black. Scoop.
Kids. Dump.

He was in a rhythm now. Just scoop the snow and then dump it. That's how it goes, and then you repeat.

The bare skin of Patterson's hands blistered and surrendered a layer or two. Redness wept to the surface. In the snowbank, he buried all of his children.

Stephanie Holland

Maybe Out of Obligation

For years I hated my sister. I'd say maybe it was for thirty years, but it could have been even longer, closer to the day she was born. I hated Julia so much that it seemed normal, like I didn't know what not hating her would feel like.

Julia and Tom used to live out in the Alaskan Bush in a little Yupik village near Bethel called Tuluksak, where they taught at the only school in town.

Julia is small, with cropped brown hair and a skinny neck. She always has a runny nose or a sinus infection or something, and no matter whether it's winter or summer she has a tissue in her hand. You're going to blow away out there with the first snowflakes, Mom told her when she moved there.

Julia and Tom shopped for almost everything they needed in Anchorage because there was no variety at the grocery store in the wasteland of Tuluksak. The village isn't on a road system, so the only way to get there is by airplane or snowmachine. When they got married last year, I wanted to give them something practical, something that would be of use to people in a wasteland.

Phil and I went to one of those specialty kitchen stores, where everything is overpriced. We walked down the tight aisles, and I was careful to keep my purse tucked in tight to my side so I wouldn't knock any drinking glasses or ceramic bowls off the shelves.

"Don't you see anything you like?" Phil said.

One of the walls was lined from bottom to top with wire baskets full of kitchen gadgets. There were dozens of stirrers and slotted spoons, something that looked kind of like a garlic press but wasn't, and five kinds of kitchen timers.

"What about this roasting pan?" Phil said. "Everyone needs a roasting pan." He picked up the box and turned it over until he found the price tag.

"Whoa!" he said. "Look at this. It's almost a hundred dollars."

I picked up a tea kettle with a handle wrapped in bamboo. The paper tag tied to the handle said it had a special whistle that sounded like a faraway train.

"You thinking about the tea kettle?" he said. "I like it."

I put down the tea kettle. The pizza section was nearby, and I wandered over. Phil followed me, pointing out the pizza stones and pizza cutters and red plates in the shape of a large slice of pizza.

"We've been here fifteen minutes," he said. "We've been through the entire store."

"I can't decide what would be right," I said. "I don't want to pick up the first roasting pan I see. What kind of gift is that?"

Next to the pizza stones was an Alaskan cookbook that had illustrated instructions for making forty-nine different kinds of pizza. Pizza with moose meat, reindeer sausage, smoked salmon.

"You hate your sister," Phil said. "Why are you so worried about her wedding gift? You've been telling me for a month that you're trying to find some excuse so you don't have to go."

"I'm trying to be a better person," I said. "A marriage is important."

I handed a pizza stone and pizza cutter to Phil and picked up the cookbook. "Let's go," I said.

When Julia and Tom first arrived in Tuluksak, the women in the village invited Julia to a throw to celebrate a boy's first hunt. The women in the boy's family stood on their small porches and threw unwrapped gifts to the other women in the village who waited in the road. The gifts were ordinary household items—dishcloths, wooden spoons, spatulas, plastic measuring cups.

The men in the village invited Tom to the sweat lodge. The town was supposed to be dry, but Tom often went out with friends and came home drunk long after Julia had gone to bed. One night last year, Julia told me later, she woke up in the middle of the night to find him passed out in the bathtub with the shower spraying down on him.

Phil and I had been fighting all winter, and maybe even before that. I hadn't been paying much attention. By the time spring came, I was resigned to the way things were and didn't have enough energy to try to fix whatever had gone wrong.

In early June, he started sleeping in the basement with his antler lamp. He came home with the antler lamp on a Sunday afternoon. He walked in from the garage holding it out in front of him, being careful not to bump it coming through the door.

"Look at what I found," he said.

I was on the couch reading the Sunday newspaper and didn't feel like talking.

He set the antler lamp on the coffee table and turned it around, like there was a front side to it.

The curves of the antler were smooth and graceful, but the look was spoiled by the lampshade and cord sticking out of it.

"What is that?" I said.

He plugged the cord into the wall and turned on the switch so the antler lamp lit up. He adjusted the crooked shade.

"What does it look like?" he said. "It's an antler lamp. It's lighting, it's art."

Phil nudged the lamp a little closer toward me.

"I thought maybe you'd think it was interesting," he said.

"Somebody went out and shot an animal so they could steal its horns for a lamp?"

"It's from a reindeer," he said. "They shed their antlers every winter."

He was admiring the lamp, looking at it in wonder like you would a new baby.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's ugly," I said.

I opened the section of newspaper I had been reading and held it in front of me at an angle where I could read it without seeing Phil in the background. I heard him turn off the lamp and unplug the cord from the socket.

He stood over me holding the lamp, and there was no more newspaper to hide behind.

"I'll be in the basement," he said.

He said it quietly, like he was saying the last thing he was going to say for a while. I stared at the lamp until he turned to go downstairs.

My throat got tight, like I had swallowed a huge lump of something that wouldn't slide down. There was a lot of fighting this winter, so this wasn't the first time. But every time my throat tightened I didn't feel like dealing with whatever was stuck there. I kept reading. There was baseball coming from the TV in the basement.

After about a week of Phil living in the basement and me continuing to read newspapers, books, magazines, and anything else I could find, Julia called.

She called once every six months or so, maybe out of obligation. It was usually to tell me something important. She and

Tom weren't coming to town over the summer break, did I know Grandma was going in for eye surgery, did I know Mom's car broke down. I know people who talk to their family every week, spending hours on all sorts of trivial things. That wasn't us.

"Is something wrong with Grandma?" I said.

"It's not Grandma," she said. "It's me and Tom."

I could hear my Mom singing in the background and the sound of a vacuum cleaner.

"Are you in town?"

"I'm staying at Mom's," she said.

Mom always sang when she vacuumed. Vacuuming was the one chore we never had to do when we were kids.

"Can I come over?" Julia said. "She's driving me crazy."

While Julia drove over, I boiled some water for tea and moved the clean laundry off the couch to the bedroom. Phil's laundry was mixed in with mine and I hadn't separated it yet.

I hadn't seen much of him during the past week because he'd been coming and going through the back door and living almost completely in the basement. He must have bought some food because he never even came upstairs for milk.

A couple of days ago, I decided that if he was so self-sufficient there was no reason for me to keep doing his laundry, taking the extra time I did to match up all the different kinds of white sport socks he had. But then I saw him out back mowing the lawn.

Julia arrived later than she'd said, which I should have expected. There was always something slowing her down, getting in the way of her going where she should have been. There was traffic, she lost her keys, Mom called her at the last minute. When I opened the door for her, she was dabbing her nose with a tissue. She tried to put an arm around me, but I had a laundry basket full of whites in my hands.

"Thanks for letting me come over," she said. "I wasn't sure if you'd want to hear about all this."

She took off her coat and laid it on the couch. Her clothes hung more loosely on her hips than they did at Christmas. Her eyes were red and I could tell she'd been crying.

"I thought you told Mom your secrets," I said. "You used to tell her everything."

"She gives too much advice," Julia said. "It's not what I need. Do you have any tea?"

"There's some hot water on the stove."

I followed Julia into the kitchen with the laundry basket in front of me against my stomach. The whites took the most time to fold. Everything the same color, and all those different sizes of socks, different styles, that had to be matched up.

I got out some tea bags and put a mug of hot water in front of her at the table. I put the laundry basket on the chair between us and cleared a space on the table for stacking.

"Tom's gone," she said.

"I figured as much," I said. "If you don't feel like talking, we could watch a movie or something."

On the top of the laundry pile was a bunch of Phil's underwear. It was always turned inside out, and that took more time, to make it right. Julia stuck her hand into the clothes and put some on her lap.

"I know you don't like talking about this stuff," she said. "It stresses you out."

Phil's underwear, with the faded yellow stains, was lying across her thighs. Julia was talking, not folding, and I wanted to grab the underwear from her and put it back in the basket.

"It doesn't stress me out," I said.

I poked through the tea bags looking for something decaffeinated. The selection had dwindled in the last week. Phil must have taken some downstairs.

"I thought you were in Florida visiting Grandma," I said.

"I got back yesterday," she said. "Mom picked me up from the airport."

Julia picked up Phil's underwear and socks from her lap and put them back in the basket so she could get the sugar bowl on the counter behind her. When she stood up, I moved the basket out of her reach.

"When we got back to her place, there was a letter for me," she said.

She wrapped her hands around her mug of tea, her fingers covering part of the black-and-yellow honeybees on the sides.

"What did it say?"

"What do you think it said? It said he wanted a divorce."

"Wow," I said. "Just like that?"

She rubbed her temple, something she'd been doing since we were kids, and it always made her stories seem grave.

"It also said he sold my truck. Can you believe that? I quit my job so we could move to that pathetic little town of his."

She sat and leaned back in her chair and started chewing the little fleshy bump of skin on the inside of her cheek, which was my nervous habit until two years ago, when I quit.

"Where's all your stuff?" I said.

"He put it in storage," she said. "He sent the key to the storage unit along with his letter." She sipped her tea. "I was only gone a week."

I had folded most of Phil's T-shirts and the few things that were mine, and some of Phil's underwear. I always left the socks until the end because they took so long to put back together. Some socks had a thick ribbing at the top, some no ribbing, others long and narrow with thin ridges up and down. The new ones bright white, the old dirt-stained ones smelling of bleach.

Julia looked at the clothes that were stacking up around us.

"Where's Phil?" she said.

"In the basement."

"What's he doing?" she said.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Julia wiped her nose with her tissue.

"We've been arguing a little, for a while," I said.

Julia crossed her arms, tilted her head to the side, and looked at me the way Mom used to when she thought we were lying.

"What happened?"

"Last week he brought home an antler lamp and moved into the basement," I said.

"A what?" she said.

"It's a lamp made out of a reindeer antler," I said. "You should see it."

"It sounds interesting," Julia said.

"It's ugly."

"Where is it?" she said.

"Phil took it with him."

She sat forward in her chair and tucked her tissue into her pants pocket.

"Let's go get it," she said.

"We're not talking," I said. "If we get the lamp, it'll open everything up."

"I just want a peek," she said.

Julia opened the door to the basement just a crack; I could have stopped her. She hesitated at the stop of the stairs. There

were no sounds of Phil moving around, no forks scraping plates or baseball on TV. She headed down the stairs.

"All right, but don't mess anything up," I said.

I stepped over the laundry basket and followed her. The basement was cool and smelled like canned chili. Dirty dishes were piled in the little sink Phil installed a couple of years ago.

We found the lamp sitting on the scratched-up end table near the recliner. Phil had bought the table at a secondhand store for our first apartment. There was a framed picture of the two of us from ten years ago.

Julia touched the curve of the antler and turned on the lamp. It was the only light in the room besides streaks of daylight coming from the small windows.

"Wow," she said. "That is ugly."

There was a rumpled sleeping bag on the floor and an old misshapen pillow with no pillowcase.

"Look, he's got your photo next to his recliner," she said. "That's sweet."

"That's always been there," I said.

"Well, at least he didn't stick it in a drawer somewhere or smash it against the wall," she said. "That says something."

There were balled-up white socks on the floor next to the recliner, an inside out T-shirt on top of the sleeping bag, jeans hanging over the back of a folding chair. White underwear, T-shirts, and socks were piled in the corner.

"You know," she said, "you can call me if you want to talk about your Phil problems."

"Maybe I will sometime." I gathered up all the dirty clothes. "What are you going to do?"

"Probably stay with Mom," she said. She sat down in the recliner. "It's not bad down here."

If Phil ever moves back upstairs, I could let her live here awhile. I picked up the jeans off the folding chair and added it to the pile in my arms.

"Let's go back up," I said.

Julia followed behind me and picked up some socks that fell out of my arms.

"Do you want me to turn off the lamp?" she said.

The light coming in through the windows was dim. It was getting close to dinnertime.

"Leave it on," I said. "He should be home soon."

Eileen Hennessy

Off Shore, Tall Silent Sail-Shape Moving

in the night of the sea, sky, cover-cloud.
Not a pinpoint of light to hold us
steady in this foreign place.
What can we see here? know?
When we were growing up,

there was always
the oncoming eye of God looking
for an easy example.
By turns silent or riven with cries,
our tall, thin houses swayed
above their cellar doors,
their yards shredded by the heaving
roots of the blue spruce tree.
We sandbagged against the bloodtide,
piled branches on the roof.

On darkest nights, caught the glimmer
of the deep, rose flowers
on the quince-apple tree.

Amy Spade — Gawking at a Stranger

I stop for the slow rail out of Zug Island, cursing my luck, but in truth
the mottled lanes of Jefferson Avenue in Del Ray seem a relief.

The Detroit River. Have my feet ever touched this water I love?
Treacherous currents, they say, keep many a swimmer underwater.

I face Detroit in myself as I might face the cheekbones of a young Polish peasant,
the grit of a shirt stiff with sweat and coal, the tiniest bit of green
shooting its head up through resource-poor, thin soil.
I am almost surprised to discover my hardiness, my alien grace.

Light reflects off the steel girders of the Windsor-Detroit bridge in the spring,
in the summer at sunset, in the harsh icy mornings of January.
The sun shines still, some smidgen of warmth remains.

In the windows of abandoned apartment houses, I watch for some trace
of young love, my mother and father as eighteen-year-old new parents.

Is there a flicker of a face lighting an old, barren window?
No. Only stripped cars, spray-paint, flames hanging in the air,
the sulfur catching at the back of my throat, the crossing arm rising.

Why am I a stranger to this place I hold tenderly in my heart?
Broken glass litters the road and grows out of me, vine of conscience and rebirth.

Dennis McFadden

One Good Turn

Trapped like a rat on her bathroom floor between tub and toilet, Lulu explores new frontiers of consciousness. How easily the black holes of sleep alternate with awareness in living color, featuring varying degrees of cohesion and possibility. How seamlessly they shift, thought into daydream into dream into oblivion. A sensation of falling rears up in her memory, eclipsed by the highball-induced circles and whirls. Her husband, Ray Hidinger, romps with the dog, frolicking on the green grass of the yard behind the store, holding high a stick, waving it gleefully about like a mad conductor. Then her thoughts stagger to a steadier place. Ray Hidinger is dead, has been for thirty years. The store is long gone too. And the dog?

They never had a dog. This distracts her for some time, bringing her alert enough to notice the mold spots like freckles on the bathroom ceiling, till she finally, wearily concludes the dog must have been a stray—Ray was always so kind to strays and strangers, forever taking them in. It was one of the things she'd hated about him. The money he'd wasted on dumb animals, the time.

Lulu is sick and tired of the whole damn thing, of all the dependencies and indignities, the waddling and wobbling—the falling—the utter inability to open a jar of pickles. If they didn't ache so, she'd swear she had no muscles left at all. And the ultimate indignity, trapped—again—on her own bathroom floor, wedged between tub and toilet, a giant pair of pliers squeezing her shoulders shut. She's tempted to just lie there and die.

She's sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Little Lulu comes into her brain like a whiff of ammonia; there is no one left on the face of the earth to call her that. There is no one who even knows she was ever called that, no one to even imagine it. She grinds her teeth, growling. She's sick and tired of feeling sorry for herself.

The temptation to just lie there and die ends abruptly when

Anna Baxter, her dear childhood friend, barges into her daydream. Damned if she'll let that old biddy outlive her.

"Heeeelp," she calls, but her gravelly old voice is thin as a kitten's.

Who will hear her anyway? There are four apartments on the first floor of the Queen Anne Apartments, but Wilda Wingart, next door, is deaf as a turnip. Across the hall, Jacey and Elva Plotner are nearly as old, nearly as deaf, and Jacey generally has the TV going all day, loud enough to drown out thunder. Next to them, across from Wilda, a young couple has moved in, Amy and Jack, but they're kids, city kids, from out-of-town—three strikes against them right there. Most of the time they're out gallivanting around anyway, never home.

A flush of anger seethes through her, at all of them. Especially at Ray, out romping with the dog, having a grand old time, while she lies here helpless and trapped. Never there when you need him. She's never forgiven him for dying before her, abandoning her, leaving her to cope with the nuisances of life all alone. She never will.

It's one of the things that keeps her going. "*Help* me!" She demands it.

Down the hallway her door knob rattles. "Mrs. Hidinger?" someone calls, a girl's voice—Amy, her new neighbor? "Are you all right?"

"*No!*"

"Do you need help?"

"*Yes!*"

"The door's locked."

"Of *course* the damn door's locked. Elva"—here the loud, splintering crunch interrupts her, footsteps stomping in a hurry down the hall—"has a key."

Freckles of flesh replace freckles of mold. The girl is in Lulu's face, bony arms, frizzy red hair, wild eyes pointing this way and that at once. A laugh catches Lulu by surprise. "If you ain't got the jolliest green eyes I ever seen."

"Actually, they're not even a matching set," says Amy McKillip.

The average age in the Queen Anne Apartments, Ray used to say, is deceased. Then he went off to add to the average. The foyer shared by the four apartments—dim, windowless, buried

by a deep red shag carpet—is usually hushed and solemn as a mausoleum, Lulu has come to notice—or was it merely Ray's suggestion? Now she feels an odd, curiously immobile sensation, her old legs taking root in the carpet, as she and Elva inspect her damaged door.

"I wish you'd told her you have a key," Lulu says.

"She didn't come over and ask me," Elva says. "If you'd use your walker, you wouldn't fall down in the first place."

"Oh, be quiet," Lulu grumbles.

"What if Amy hadn't heard you?"

"Then I guess I would've learned how to pray," Lulu says. Elva is a churchgoer.

"And what if God hadn't heard you?"

"God'll hear me if I wear this?" Lulu holds up the Med-Alert necklace that Elva has brought her. "What's He, hard of hearing too?"

"The staff at the emergency room will hear you, when you press this button. And they'll call me."

"I doubt it. You'll be out somewheres building up your obituary." Besides being a Senior Warden in her church, Elva is also the Senior Citizens Advocate for the Hartsgrove Borough Council, active in her bowling league, and a member of the VFW Ladies' Auxiliary. And probably more. Lulu can't keep track. Activism is a trait Lulu has little use for, one she considers akin to not minding your own business. She's known Elva for thirty-five years, they've been friends and neighbors for fifteen, and she's never much cared for her. Elva's husband Jacey had his charming moments before he quit drinking, but now he seldom says two words. When he was a young man he pitched for the Hartsgrove Grays, which Ray—Hidinger's Market—sponsored one year. Then, around 1957, Elva Plotner had been a leader of the nurses' strike up at the hospital. Lulu and Ray never had much use for unions.

"You have to have an alternate they can call, in case I'm not around," Elva says.

"Who?"

The door to the outside opens, and Jack comes in, trailing Amy. Lulu has seen Jack, Amy's young man, only once or twice; he's tall, dour, and pudgy, rain dripping from his yellow slicker. Amy's sleeveless blouse is soaked, clinging to her flat chest, her

wild, frizzy hair tamed and matted. "You're taking the hot plate?" she says.

Crossing the foyer, they don't seem to notice the two old ladies. "What do you need the hot plate for?" Jack says. "You got the stove."

"I've got to get new wipers on my car, which reminds me, did you ever tell Lawrence about the refrigerator?" Lawrence is the Queen Anne's manager. They vanish into their apartment.

Lulu looks quizzically at Elva. "A sign from God?"

"I was thinking maybe Wilda," Elva says.

"She'd never hear the damn phone. I have to bang on the wall with a frying pan to let her know when it's ringing."

Jack and Amy come out of their apartment carrying boxes, Amy still trailing, still ignoring the old ladies. "What about the Lou Rawls records?" Amy says.

"Whoa, girl," says Jack.

"I can't find my earring anywhere," Amy says. "I think I put it in the ashtray."

"We don't have an ashtray," says Jack.

Lulu and Elva listen to Amy's chatter dwindling down the hallway, through the outside door. "She's certainly an excitable girl," Elva says.

"That's certainly a nice way to put it," says Lulu.

Time was, Lulu knew just about every kid in town, at least by sight. She and Ray owned Hidinger's Market, on the north side just down the hill from the old schoolhouse. Kids would stop after school to buy a bottle of pop or a candy bar. Or to steal it. Lulu knew which ones to watch. She knew which ones came from well-off families, which ones were poor, and it was one of her secret pleasures to treat a poor kid to a candy bar or pack of gum now and then, and watch the shock on the kid's face; it was the last thing he or she expected from the mean old woman behind the register. Never more than once in a lifetime to any given kid, of course; that way, they were forever off-balance, forever in her debt.

What had been their store is now the Hartsgrove Library, not far down the hill from the Queen Anne Apartments. And the schoolhouse itself—a grand old brick and stone building that had once crowned the north side—is gone from what is still

known as School House Hill. A playground and park have replaced it, green grass, tall trees. A new, modern school (modern thirty years ago!) sits out near the new interstate highway (new thirty years ago!).

Amy McKillip isn't a Hartsgrove kid. The new interstate opened up the town. You didn't know everyone anymore. Lulu hasn't given it a lot of thought, but she's given it some, and while she can't put her finger on exactly what makes a Hartsgrove kid a Hartsgrove kid—The way they dress? The way they talk? The look in their eyes?—she would no more mistake Amy McKillip for a Hartsgrove kid than she would mistake a groundhog for a squirrel. It takes her a week to decide to ask Amy to be her Med-Alert call backup. Sure, she's an out-of-town, city kid, but she has a certain pathetic quality about her, and that counts for a lot.

"Sure," Amy says, "but do I need to know CPR or anything? I mean I could probably stick a tourniquet on you, but I don't think I could perform an emergency appendectomy or anything like that. Well, I guess maybe I could if it was a matter of life and death and I had a real sharp knife. Although I'm not exactly positive where the appendix is. Is it on the right or the left?" Amy gropes for her appendix.

"Mine's history, so you don't have to worry about it," Lulu says, her legs again taking root in the foyer carpet. "Gall bladder too. You name it, it's gone."

"Tonsils?"

"Gone."

"Ovaries?"

"Hell, I forgot—I haven't used 'em in so long."

"I use mine every month."

"Listen, all you're ever gonna have to do for me is call me an ambulance or call me a hearse. If Elva doesn't do it first. She's number one on the list."

"She'll probably be at church," Amy says. "She goes Thursdays. Vespry meetings."

"Vestry," says Lulu.

The outside door opens and Jacey Plotner comes in, swaying on his bad hip, tugging his fat poodle Fluffy by her leash. He stoops to wipe the rear of the dog with a wad of toilet paper before noticing Amy and Lulu. A flush of red floats over the gray scowl of his face as he straightens up again, as close as he can, hobbling into his apartment across the hall.

"I wonder if he treats Elva that well," Amy says.

Lulu laughs. "True love!"

Amy flinches. Lulu looks into her face, at the diverging green eyes, trying to decide which to look into, first her right, then her left, then back again.

"This one," Amy says, blinking the right.

"You see all right with them eyes?" Lulu says.

"Oh sure. Sometimes I see two of stuff, but not usually. Every now and then when I'm daydreaming, my left eye goes off on its own, like it's just taking a stroll, to see what's going on across the street or something. Of course the same thing happens when I get too excited too—like every eye for itself."

"Elva said you were an excitable girl."

"My Mom always said that too. I just wish I knew heart massage or mouth-to-mouth or something."

"Why, have Jack give you some lessons," says Lulu, to see Amy's reaction.

"He'll be back," Amy says, like a chant in a church.

They ran their market from seven to seven six days a week, and every day when they got home at seven-fifteen, Ray would make highballs. It got so Lulu's mouth was watering for a ginger ale and bourbon by noon. Ray Hidinger knew how to husband. He would make her highball, change their daughter Bex's diaper, fix the faucet, coax the splinter from her finger, swat the bat that had got into the house, then say, There you go, Little Lulu, his strong jaw stretched in a smile. Little Lulu, even after she'd gained fifty pounds.

On a typical evening, Lulu soaked in the tub while Ray fixed them dinner, which they enjoyed in a leisurely fashion with wine. When she was younger, Bex liked pretending to be their waitress.

Bex tired of that game, and by the time she was in high school, she'd become a handful. She started dating a boy four years older who was drunk when he ran through a stop sign on a back road out toward Coolbrook, plowing head-on into a bank, killing them both. Bex went through the windshield, and the boy was impaled by the steering column. Lulu thought of his name, Bobby Wood, every time she heard *Hollywood.* He was a kid from out-of-town, and nobody knew his family.

She and Ray carried on, grieving quietly. Then Ray decided four years of grieving was plenty, and he died too.

Lulu couldn't meet a young girl without thinking of Bex. Hadn't Bex been prettier? Taller? Wasn't her hair about the same color in the sunlight? Didn't she laugh the same way? Bex would have worn a dress like that, only it would have looked better on her. Lulu finds herself doing the same with Amy McKillip when she realizes in a moment of odd clarity that Amy is young enough to be Bex's daughter. Amy might have been the granddaughter Lulu never had. It could have happened. Who knew? If Bex had married a small, bony, freckled man with unruly red hair and wild, rowdy eyes. . . .

Old habits die hard. Strong jawlines and Old Spice still remind her of Ray, and young girls always make her think of Bex. And every day, around noon, her mouth still waters for a ginger ale and bourbon.

She considers bourbon a blessing, as comforting as Elva finds prayer, though much more immediate and practical. Amy proves to be an angel, delivering her bourbon blessings with unstinting good cheer, a far cry from the niggardly and reluctant dispensations provided by Elva, or by Monica, Lulu's tattooed home health aide, or by anyone else she can persuade to stop at the state store on Main Street for her.

A month after giving Amy her key, Lulu finds herself on the floor again, immobilized, her button pressed.

Amy bursts in to find her on the carpet between the couch and the dining table. "Lulu! Lulu, are you all right?"

Lulu smacks her lips. Amy skids to her knees. "Lulu! Are you hurt?"

"No," Lulu mumbles, Amy leaning close over her face. "But I am drunk."

Amy prods her chin. "Just drunk?"

Lulu nods. And nods. "But *real* drunk."

Amy sprawls on her back beside her, grasping the flaccid old hand. "Thank God."

"Thank God I'm drunk?"

"Yes," Amy says, "and not dead."

"Drunk, dead, what's the difference?"

Amy thinks about it. "It probably has to do with sentience—"

"Now you're talking," Lulu says. "But you're not making any sentience."

This makes her laugh; Amy catches it, joining in, continuing

even after Lulu's has collapsed in a spasm of coughs and wheezes. Amy squeezes her hand.

"The drunkest I ever got was the night I met Jack," she says. "I opened my eyes next morning and had no idea where I was or who he was. There was just this face—his face—right above me. Jack. God, was he gorgeous. He still is. Maybe it was just me being so drunk, but his eyes seemed big and clear and blue like a spring morning, and they took up the whole room. Right now he'd be saying *whoa, girl* if he was here. But I don't feel like whoaing. He's not here. He picked me up that night. I mean he *really* picked me up. Literally. I got in a fight with my girlfriend and Jack said I would have beat the crap out of her if he hadn't grabbed me off her. Sometimes I get mad and lose it. Do you ever get that mad? I probably shouldn't even drink at all either. Did I tell you Elva doesn't want me to buy you any more bottles, she thinks drinking will be the death of you, if you don't fall asleep with a cigarette and burn yourself to death first. And all of us too. Anyhow we went to another bar, all my girlfriends were mad at me, but it turned out a lot better because I got Jack. I don't remember much till the next morning. That was in Pittsburgh. Jack says I ramble sometimes. Am I rambling?"

Lulu says, "Jack who?"

Then she begins laughing again, but coughs instead when Amy doesn't join her. Lulu manages a sideways glance at the girl on the floor beside her.

Then she rolls her face toward the ceiling again. "That reminds me of a song. When I was young." Lulu sings in a gravelly old howl, "I got tears in my ears / From lying on my back / In my bed while I cry over you—

"Just jump in if you know the words," she slurs.

Nearly every Saturday night, Lulu and Ray ate out. In the early days a favorite spot was the Slabtown Hotel, twenty-two miles from town, famous for its fish fries and dancing; how they'd loved to dance. Just before Ray died, a new restaurant opened out by the interstate and became another favorite: the Golden Steer, where Amy waitresses now.

With Jack gone, and little schoolwork—Amy is taking only two courses this semester—Lulu finds herself spending more and more time with the girl. It occurs to her that in her younger days

she wouldn't have tolerated Amy's company at all. But such judgmentalism has long since withered away, along with her muscles. Beggars, her friend Anna Baxter was always fond of saying, can't be choosers.

Lulu never went to the Ice House Restaurant with Ray; it was a drug store up until ten or fifteen years ago. Amy likes to sit at the table in the old store front window, virtually on Main Street, across from the courthouse. She likes to track the time and temperature on the bank sign four doors down (53 degrees at 7:34), and she likes to watch the people walking up and down the street in the glow of the faux gas street lamps, past the store and office fronts of stone and brick, all older than Lulu.

The Ice House had been Sandt's Drug Store. The original front door was mounted high on the wall beneath the original tin ceiling, and an old, weathered sign—*Sandt's Drugs and Tobacco*—hung on the wall above the cash register. Lulu remembers coming into the place as a child with her father to buy penny candy (gumdrops for *Little Lulu*). She remembers seeing old man Sandt—the place was run by his grandson then—hobbling on his cane, with his long, wispy white beard and earlobes that dangled like earrings. He had built the place before the Civil War. He must have been, Lulu realizes, about the same age then as she is now.

Near the end of the twentieth century, the middle of the nineteenth is tapping her on the shoulder. For a moment, she feels dizzy, looking down from the sudden height of history. She's always taken them for granted, these strands of the past that run everywhere, fixing Hartsgrove as though on a spider's web, and she wonders for an instant what this place looks like through Amy's eyes, without the strands, the web, the heights of history. What makes Amy so dizzy?

Lulu can't keep up with her. She usually doesn't try.

"Were you a good mother?" Amy says, hard on the heels of a sharp complaint about the Chicken Parmesan, which had followed country line dancing, and the recent surgical removal of Jacey Plotner's toe, his seeming penchant for leaving this earth one little piece at a time.

"Of *course* I was a good mother," Lulu growls. "What kind of a question is that?"

"My mother dresses hair," Amy says, "at least I think she still does. We had the front of our house remodeled once and the

tarpaper leaked. I wish I'd known Bex. Do you like living alone? I can't get used to it. It seems like Jack and I lived together forever. Of course it wasn't but it seems like we'll always be together. I mean, I just can't accept that he's not in the bedroom or the bathroom—I keep sitting on the couch waiting for the toilet to flush."

"Shh, honey," says Lulu, patting her arm, "I ain't deaf."

"Here's an idea. Let's go visit Anna Baxter."

Lulu doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. She's amazed the girl even remembers Anna Baxter. "No! I don't want to go visit Anna Baxter. I want to go home."

"Aren't you friends anymore?"

"No. We're not friends anymore."

"How come? Did you have a fight or something?"

"I don't know why. I don't remember why. I don't care why."

"It must have been a fight. Was she trying to get into Ray's pants or something?"

"Have you heard from Jack yet?" Lulu says.

Amy looks abruptly out the window. At 7:47, it's 52 degrees. In unison, they gulp their drinks. A window-shopping couple in the shadows of the sidewalk dodges their eyes, quickly seeking the next, more inanimate, window. "No," Amy says, "not yet. But you have to know Jack as well as I do. It took him an hour to change a light bulb one time."

Well, my Ray Hidinger drank every day of his life and never missed a day of work," Lulu insists. "Not a one—hardly ever even got a cold."

"And he died when he was fifty-three years old," Elva says.

"That wasn't from drinking, that was from a heart attack," Lulu growls. "Why, your heart can attack you any time, like those basketball players struck down in their prime, just like that. Just like Ray."

"Jacey quit drinking over twenty years ago," Elva says.

"Yes, and he's been miserable every damn day since," Lulu points out.

Eyes big as snowballs behind her thick glasses, Wilda looks from speaker to speaker, as though watching a ping-pong match. Lulu wonders if she can hear a thing.

Amy comes from the kitchen carrying a tray of drinks: ginger ale for Elva, ginger ale and bourbon for Lulu, hot tea for Wilda,

and a long neck bottle of beer for herself. Lulu licks her chops. "There," Amy says. "Make yourselves comfortable—dinner will be ready in about half an hour."

"It smells wonderful," says Wilda.

"Actually, I haven't put them in the oven yet," Amy says. "I was going to try a real turkey, but Swanson's Hungry Man are just as good."

An awkward shifting of postures. Elva and Lulu sink deeper in the threadbare sofa, while Wilda's old bones scarcely strain the canvas bottom of a director's chair. Books heaped on shelves of boards on bricks sit against the opposite wall. On the television, tuned mutely to a football game, sits a candle in a wax-encrusted wine bottle. A man's jacket and hat hang from the coat tree in the corner; beside it sits the moldy basket that Amy bought at a yard sale for a quarter last month. She'd shown it excitedly to Lulu and Elva in the hallway—how Jack loved picnics! Neither had the heart to tell her it was an old laundry basket. Amy in her apron straddles a kitchen chair backwards like a cowboy, elbows resting on top.

"Happy Thanksgiving," she toasts, taking a long pull. "I hope no one minds if I drink straight from the bottle. Freudians say it's a substitute for oral sex, but I don't see any similarity at all."

Wilda's thick lenses go blank. Elva quickly fills the lull, saying, "I always thought that was a lot of hogwash anyways—not 'ladylike.'"

"Yeah," Amy says, "they don't say it's a substitute for oral sex when men do it—that's because the Freudians are all men. Just more male fantasies. They all wish they had one this big." She admires the long, tall bottle.

Lulu speaks up. "Men can drink it anyway they want to, just chug-a-lug it straight out of the bottle like that, and then burp as loud as they can. That's their idea of high humor."

"But don't *you* dare burp," Elva says.

"I don't believe I ever heard my Will burp," Wilda says.

Amy belches. "Sounds like that."

The ladies giggle. "You're a pistol," Lulu says to Amy.

They talk about men. Lulu doesn't stint. For every fond memory Wilda had of Will, Lulu has a fonder one of Ray; for every good trait that Elva loves in Jacey, Lulu loved one more in Ray.

And for every annoying quirk of either man—which far outnumber the fond memories and good traits—Ray had one more irritating.

"How long were you and Will married?" Elva asks Wilda.

"Over forty-eight years." Then Wilda flashes her beaming lenses toward Amy, who's been quiet. "How long have you and Jack been married?"

Popping from her chair, Amy follows her wandering eye toward the kitchen, hurrying past Wilda's faltering smile.

"Wilda, Jack's gone!" Lulu says in a hoarse whisper.

"Oh," Wilda says. "Where to?"

"Why, he's been gone for months!" Elva says.

They listen to the sounds from the kitchen, the running water, the rattling dishes, the slamming oven door. The loudly blowing nose. "That child," murmurs Elva.

Lulu grumbles beneath her breath. A small stained-glass lightcatcher in the window gleans a sparkle of color from the November gloom, and the glitter of Amy's tears refuses to fade from her mind. They are foolish tears, and she has no use for them. It's one thing to pine for a good man dead, another entirely to pine for a loser best gone. But she can't dismiss the tears altogether, she can't seethe. The girl looked too helpless, following her eyes out of the room, like trying to walk down two paths at once.

After dinner Lulu excuses herself and shambles down the hallway toward the bathroom, listening to the fading chatter of Elva and Amy. She goes directly into Amy's bedroom, knowing that old age—perhaps its only blessing—would provide all the excuse for confusion she would need, should Amy find her there.

The dim light through the curtain on the single window slowly surrenders the shapes of the room: a small desk, a murky mirror over a dresser, a chest of drawers, a double bed. Lulu clucks her tongue, shaking her head at the state of the place, an obvious shrine to Jack, the men's clothes, the photographs, the masculine memorabilia. She grumbles, turning her attention to the desk drawer to find what she came for, Jack's social security number.

Overcoming every instinct she possesses, Lulu has decided she's obliged to become involved. One good turn, after all, deserves another.

Lulu stays in bed till noon every day, dozing on and off, experiencing altered states of consciousness and unconsciousness, existence and nonexistence. At eighty, having outlived both her parents, the irony is not lost on her. Some mornings she lies in bed dreading death but too tired to be terrified. She imagines Ray is there, still alive, to turn on the radio and bring her a cup of coffee: There you go, Little Lulu. Then her blood begins to stir in resentment again, at the thought of him abandoning her. Then she imagines Ray is still alive but not here; that he has abandoned her not for death, but for another life. And her old blood boils, soon bringing her out of bed. Why is that child so stupid? Why can't she see?

Buster Clover works for the *Hartsgrove Herald*. He'd been a classmate of Bex, and is a good friend of Elva's son Jimmy. Lulu called him with Jack Shea's social security number; a week later he called back with Jack's current employer, the Post Road Tavern in Murrysville, not far from Pittsburgh.

"It's none of our business," Elva says. "It's none of *your* business."

"Well, of course it ain't," Lulu says. "But wouldn't you want somebody telling you?"

"They just have to work it out for themselves."

"He *has* worked it out," Lulu says. "*She* hasn't." Lulu watches Elva's spotted hands at work opening her box of cereal; Lulu hasn't the strength. It strikes her odd that a woman she's never much cared for is opening her Bran Flakes for her. If you live long enough, Lulu thinks, you reach . . . accommodations; the weight of all the years flattens everything beneath it. She can't look at Elva without thinking of the union, of the nurses' strike, the understaffed emergency room, of Bex being wheeled into it, dead. The events are one in Lulu's mind, even though . . . even though they'd been months apart.

"Shall I put up your Christmas tree for you?" Elva says. Lulu has a small ceramic tree in a box on her top closet shelf where Elva put it last January.

"No. Don't bother with the damned old thing."

Elva sighs. "Then *tell* her. You're not going to rest until you do."

"Oh, it ain't just that," Lulu says. "I can't even open my own cereal anymore. Maybe I ought to just pack up my bags and go on over to the Memorial Home."

"Nonsense," says Elva, "not yet. You've got me, and Monica. And Amy."

Lulu looks at the round and wrinkled face, at the eyes seemingly incapable of resentment. "Maybe I ought to go see Anna Baxter while I'm over there. See what she's been up to." She wishes she could remember why they haven't spoken in fifty years.

"Why, Anna Baxter's dead," Elva says. "You remember. She died about three years ago, I think, around the time Jacey got his new hip."

Kids. No sense of tradition. On Christmas Eve, you drink eggnog. Period. On Christmas Eve Lulu banishes Amy, sending her away with her ribboned bottle of bourbon, telling her not to return until there's eggnog under her arm. Lulu's had eggnog for sixty straight Christmases, or more. She almost gagged on it the year she was pregnant with Bex, but she managed a glass or two; the next year she made up for it. For a few years there, when they were entertaining, she and Ray bought it by the gallon. Ray liked it with whiskey, she liked it with rum. One of their friends—who was it? Mrs. Holt?—had liked it with red wine, the thought of which, to this day, makes Lulu gag.

Amy has so much to learn, so much time to learn it. She might as well start with eggnog. As it turns out, Amy likes it with bourbon. Lulu has to admit it isn't bad.

Elva and Jacey are Christmasing with their son in New York, and not a creature is stirring at Wilda's. From the great height of history, Lulu looks down at Amy, the lonely little walleyed city girl, and sprinkles her with magic stories of Christmases past: Currier and Ives scenes of horses drawing sleighs over snowy hills, of tramping through the woods, axe on shoulder, snow up to your bellybutton, of real candle flames guttering on evergreen boughs, of rag dolls and wooden sleds and iron scooters. And no fake Santa on every damn corner.

She tells Amy about the year Bex got her tricycle, how she rode round and round the Christmas tree, making her and Ray dizzy on their eggnog. Of course she'd been a good mother. Just because you decide later in life that you might have done some things differently doesn't mean you weren't a good mother. You made the best decisions you could at the time. You loved your little girl the best you knew how. When Bex was sixteen, Lulu'd

given her her grandmother's locket for Christmas, probably 150 years old by now, carved of ivory; it might have even been worth something, Lulu isn't sure. Bex gave it to Bobby Wood, and they never saw it again.

Amy shares her own Christmas story: When she was ten, her father had turned up drunk on Christmas Eve, and when he found Amy's mother with her new boyfriend, all hell had broken loose. He threw their present—a box of chocolates—against the wall and stomped the candy into the rug; then a fight broke out between her daddy in his leisure suit and her mommy's boyfriend in his underwear, and they rolled punching and kicking and grunting and swearing out into the backyard snow till the cops came and took them away.

Which reminds her, did she tell Lulu she got a fifty-dollar tip two nights ago? And that she needs only six more credits to graduate?

"Here's an idea," Lulu says. "Let's go for a ride and see the Christmas lights. Emory Chestnut used to have about an acre full of 'em, I don't know if he still does or not."

"We can't," Amy says. "I have to stick around in case Jack calls—I left my door open so I can hear it."

Lulu frowns. "What makes you think he's going to call?"

"It's Christmas. I turned my ringer up. I suppose he could even show up in person, that wouldn't surprise me."

"Honey—Jack ain't coming back."

Amy's eyes flash further apart. "How do you know? You don't know Jack. You sound just like his mother. I called her and she claimed she doesn't know where he is. She claimed she'd never been sick. She's lying. Jack could never take me to meet her because she didn't approve of us living in sin, if you can believe that in this day and age. She must be a dinosaur. Something like that wouldn't bother you if it was Bex, would it? No, of course not. But that probably wasn't really even it anyway, that's probably just what she told Jack, because she really liked Linda. I can't concentrate anymore. I don't know if I'll ever graduate."

"Linda?"

"Linda dumped him just before he met me; in fact, it was the same night he met me, and I think it took Jack a long time to get over her."

Lulu doesn't know which green eye to look into; both are

scurrying. "Honey—pour us another eggnog and sit down over here." Amy lights a cigarette, staying put.

Lulu says, "Jack ain't coming back." She tells Amy everything, about the social security number, Buster Clover, the Post Road Tavern in Murrysville. She tells her she called Jack, that he pleaded with her not to tell Amy where he was. As she speaks, Lulu watches the color drain from the girl, making her hair go redder, her eyes greener, wilder.

"I'm sorry, honey," Lulu says. "But you gotta know."

Amy puts out her cigarette, leaving without a word. Lulu waits, but nothing happens. Amy left the door open, and Lulu thinks she hears a sound, a sob maybe, or a gasp. The sound of air, of breathing, of living. Lulu is surprised at the rate of her own breath. Should she close her door? No. The child may need her; surely she would. Lulu struggles up, gaining the edge of the recliner, then heaves herself wobbling to her feet. She waddles into the kitchen, past her dusty walker, for one more eggnog.

It's Christmas Eve. And she's a good mother.

Two days later Elva finds Lulu on Lulu's kitchen floor, a patch of rust-colored blood caked beneath her head. Her eyes are closed and she looks quite grumpy, the same way she always looked, especially whenever Elva refused to buy her bottle.

As her death was presumably unattended, an autopsy is performed. Cause of death was cerebral hemorrhage, blood alcohol content quite high. She was drunk; it's presumed she fell, hit her head on the floor. There's no reason to suspect foul play.

When the police are done, Elva scrubs the blood from Lulu's kitchen floor. She'd been a nurse for over forty years; scrubbing blood is nothing new. She does the best she can, but the blood is old, leaving a permanent shadow on the linoleum. She does the dishes too, thinking nothing of the two eggnog glasses that need to be soaked, as she washes out the horrible ashtrays.

She offers Amy a ride to the funeral two days later, but Amy declines, never opening her door. "Will we see you there?"

"No," Amy calls through the door. "I don't have a thing to wear."

Elva bites her lip. "Are you upset, honey?"

Amy doesn't answer at once, as though she's thinking it over. "Did Lulu ever tell you about the time she gave her grandmother's ivory locket to Bex?"

"No. I don't believe she did."

"I didn't think so," Amy says.

Returning from the funeral, Elva, Jacey, and Wilda cast nervous glances toward Lulu's. They hesitate at their own doors, glancing again. The foyer is hushed and dim, more solemn than ever, sounds buried deep in the red shag carpet. They never glance at Amy's. Two days later they learn that Amy left with a few of her things while they were at the funeral, leaving no forwarding address, owing two month's rent.

Elva always cooked pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day, a family tradition handed down from her grandmother, and probably from her grandmother's grandmother as well. They have Wilda over for dinner, as they have for years, her and Lulu.

"It smells wonderful," Wilda says.

Fluffy the fat poodle sits next to Jacey's chair, on the far side of the table where Jacey can see the football game on the television across the living room. Wilda and Elva sit on the other two sides, while the fourth—the side where Lulu always sat—remains against the wall. Jacey turns down the television with the remote as Elva says grace. Then he turns it back up again.

Elva sighs. "Poor Lulu."

Wilda says, "Amen."

They heap steaming mounds of pork, sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, and carrots on their plates, drowning the vegetables in margarine. Jacey blackens his with pepper, throws a scrap to Fluffy, and turns up the television another notch.

"She lived a good, long life," Elva says, "at least I think she did. But she seemed unhappy so much of the time, so lonely. I think it all went back to Bex, and what happened to her, that tragedy. Then Ray. Then to die all alone like that—it must have been awful. And I can't help feeling it was partly my fault."

Wilda's jaw freezes in mid-chew. Her fork falters. Thick lenses flashing, she passes the salt.

John Noland

Cougar and the Mysterious Stones

i.
You are silent
as a white stone
in the rain.

ii.
I have always known you
in the way tree roots know
the river, a hunger
beneath seeing
like a wild goose calling
and calling
through the fog.

iii.
You are beads
and smoke-tanned buckskins,
the drawings on the walls
of mountain sheep, lizards,
the spiral
of one seeking himself,
one who never needs to pray.

iv.
You are the one now,
the only one left where rivers run dry,
where salmon can no longer
go home, where even lakes
are traded for money.

v.
You are the only one
we believe in as you
fade into the trees,

your wildness
one with the mountain,
one of six white stones
taken from the river
and in the moonlight,
shining.

David Radavich

Out of Place
An Autobiography

The man
is a mongrel

bit player in a drama
he did not write

moss on a rain-
strewn rock

clinging
as alien form

grey cloud
mottled against wheat

Dennis Must

The Day My Father Died

When he pulled me out of the swells in his seersucker suit and stocking feet, he promised me I wouldn't die. And when he laid me on the sand and pumped my boney chest, urging I give the green water back to the Great Lake, he cried, "You won't die. I swear in God's name . . . Everything's gonna be okay, Tom. Now pass it up, boy. Spit it all back up."

After the panic subsided and I'd begun taking deeper, more peaceful breaths—looking back at the high waves, they almost laughing, *Next time, kid. You were nearly ours*—I turned to my father and saw that he, too, had begun to assume a come-unto-me smile, the very reason I'd entered the water unafraid. Two-toned shoes kicked off several feet away, jacket and trousers clinging to him like wet newsprint, his belt buckle glinting in the morning sun—I wondered where he'd come from for I'd gone to the shore alone that morning.

With a pleasant rain imbuing the sand a muddy brown and the lake's waves breaking louder, to grow fully awake, I'd decided to walk into the surf when its grainy floor suddenly collapsed and an undertow pulled me out toward the horizon line.

Nobody was around. I screamed back to our cottage, the one that sat at the edge of the precipitous drop-off.

Where had my father been?

And why was he dressed so handsomely for the occasion?

Years later when I became a man, I recalled that incident and confessed it had caused me to bond to him like a child to a mother. With me in his arms, he'd climbed seventy-two wooden steps up the eroded shore to our rented cottage.

"Miraculously you appeared out of nowhere, Dad, in your blue seersucker suit, your hair slicked back, and that iris tie with a splinter of yolk tearing down its front—Christ, I thought you were the cat's ass."

"I was, boy, until you interfered." His dismay masked a pale grin.

"Interfered?"

"On your way to the stony deep."

"What did I disrupt?"

"Somebody other than your sweet mother. One lane over from ours, waiting in her doorway."

"Another woman?"

"The yard outside our cottage where we played badminton . . . remember how it eroded over the winter and spring each year, and we knew one summer we'd return to the lake and even the rental cottage would be gone?" He rubbed his eyes.

Once the azure of a calm Lake Erie, his irises were now occluded like pearl seeping across blue marble.

"Who was she, Dad?"

"I don't recall," he muttered.

As a teenager—several years after my near-drowning incident—I returned home from school one afternoon to discover my mother in our cellar slumped over a cast-iron grate that she used for canning peaches and tomatoes in the summertime. Her face lay on its starfish burners—unlit, of course—the onion-scented gas purring out of their vents. A handwritten note she'd obviously discovered in one of my father's suit pockets lay crumpled at her side. *Till death do us part,* it read. No signature.

I carried her up into the living room and began pushing on her chest as he had on mine, crying, "Please, God, make her come alive. For if she doesn't, I fear I will die, too." Then, "You sonofabitch, Dad. You dirty, motherfucking sonofabitch."

When she did gain consciousness, she wore the oddest smile—a mixture of horror and gratitude. Thanking me, her eldest, but condemning me for having pulled her back to a life she found oppressive. Mother yearned to visit that eschatological vacationland—not by the wonderful lake, but alongside the Man of Sorrows, who, incidentally, would have looked stunning in a blue seersucker suit with his shoulder-length hair.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

For which I still have no answer.

And when my father came home and she lay up in their dark bedroom, I bore the blackest of urges to kill him. He stood motionless in the doorway, as if he sensed what had happened.

"Where is she, Tom?" he asked.

"In your bedroom."

He waited for the full answer.

"Breathing. She's breathing."

He slumped into a chromium dinette chair, pulled out a cigarette, and stared out the backdoor, his trousers mussed as if he'd been on his knees.

I yearned to lift him to his feet and jam him against the periwinkle wall—striking his face, killing its seductive shine—for he'd raped her sense of self-worth.

She was a dated, satin dress—stained with a faint, unrequited memory—hanging limply in their musty closet.

But he, too, looked forlorn and smelled as polluted as the Neshanock River that knifed through the center of our town.

I couldn't save him.

And thought, *Die, you miserable bastard. Die.*

But then I recalled how he'd heard my cry in a vacationland—how he'd detoured down those perilous steps two, three at a time, kicking off his brogues and diving in his peacock flummery to yank me back from an early demise, to snatch me back for more summers at the shore.

He glanced up at me.

"The paradoxes, boy. They're the paradoxes we're doomed to carry up and down the steps of life. Bring them to your breast and howl. It ain't easy. Oh, Christ, it ain't easy."

Surely it was the same woman who wrote that *Till-Death-Do-Us-Part* note.

But he would never identify her.

Even when I named her "Mother's best friend who once shared that first week in August each summer at the Lake Erie shore."

"No, you're absolutely wrong, Tom. You accuse her unjustly."

He'd become petulant and pace the dark room we shared somewhere, before thundering, "Wrong, goddamn it! You accuse a good woman falsely," then wandering off to bed.

What tormented me as I grew older—acutely aware he had only so many more years to live—is that I couldn't let him die without his opening up the full text of his heart to me. I admit he'd of late been painfully candid regarding much of his life. We'd, in effect, become each other's confessor, trading

places in a traceried stall. I would have surely welcomed his telling me who stood expectantly at the top of the ravaged shoreline that morning, that it was Eunice McGuire, the libidinous thread who wove through his entire life like crimson. But he wouldn't.

"Spit it up," I urged. "Spit it all up."

He'd stare at me as if somehow I had disappointed him, as if a part of me was still a boy, one crying for his help, fearing I'd perish alone.

How could a man tell a boy his most intimate secret?

Yet, there was something extraordinary about this "other woman" I believe he wanted me to know. Why our vacations were synchronized. Why the note lay at my suicidal mother's body.

Why I had to beat life back into her . . . as he literally and figuratively beat into mine to keep me alive. For the confession?

Was that my shortcoming?

The last time I saw him he came by airplane to visit. I lived near the great Atlantic. He stood on its shoreline, marveling at how much more expansive it was than Lake Erie, then he pointed to the horizon line, saying, "Over there is London, Son," instead of Canada.

When I took him home, he asked if he could bathe. "It's been a long flight. I feel dirty." I led him downstairs to a shower very much like his own.

He hesitated in the cellar's mild darkness, looking exhausted and confused. I removed his iris tie, unbuttoned his shirt, unbuckled the monogrammed belt with the Palmer script J, and lowered his seersucker pants to his chalky ankles. Then I sat him down on a wooden chair, got on my knees, and removed his brogues and silk stockings, the ones with pearl diamonds veining their sides.

I turned the water on in the tin stall.

When I parted its plastic curtain to gesture him inside, he stood naked and white as albumen, asking that I hold him.

"Son, I'm dying. Honest to Christ, I'm dying," he whispered.

I didn't know what to say. And as the winds blew the sand against our bodies, spitting it until it felt like stinging insects, the water in the shower turned green as the sea, and the seersucker pants slipped off the wooden chair to the damp floor.

I finally spoke. "Dad, she's up there waiting for you. Go on up, seventy-two fucking stairs. You can make it. I'll wait."

He pressed tightly into me. "Death has no dominion," he cried.

Then he kissed me on the lips, muttering under the water, *"Till death do us part"*. . . Cheek by jowl, the pair of us, I in my two-tone shoes and shantung suit with purple tie, clinging to me like cerecloth.

I'm at peace now.

Today my brother, Jeremiah, phoned saying he'd returned to our boyhood home as he did each morning since Mother's death. He'd found Dad lying on the kitchen floor. A slight abrasion on his forehead suggested he had struck the chromium table as he tumbled to the linoleum. And barely within his clenched fist lay the telephone receiver, its black base dangling off the kitchen counter. The line long since dead.

There was no note of course.

"Tom, it was over in minutes, maybe seconds," Jeremiah said.

Yes, I thought, time enough to get to the phone—but not long enough to dial the ring.

I wish to think he was phoning me up to say those last words. To close the book. For our sake.

Or was it her daybreak call? Waiting behind a summer morning's screen door, the sun bursting blood-orange on Lake Erie's horizon.

Mark Walters

Rest Stop

The parking lot is filled with men in khaki shorts and clean
tennis shoes, studying maps, leaning against car fenders,
waiting for their wives to emerge, like butterflies, from
the shelter. And out comes a redhead! made cross by
the wait, the work of suspending herself above the seat.
This morning she'd shooed him out of their motel bathroom,
though they'd just made love. "Out," she said, pointing to
the door. "Get out." This sudden shyness about her body's
demands strange to him, who once allowed a girl he barely
knew to attend him in a bar, hold his penis while he swayed
before the toilet. "I've always been curious about this,"
she said, looking down, handling him with blunt delicacy.
"Well, now you know," he said. He sees his wife's lashes
and brows, gone from rust to white in the sun. Ten summers
ago she'd called him to the basement of her parents' house,
to a sunlit corner of exposed pipes and a concrete floor
dipping to a drain and there, beneath a showerhead, she stood
bathing, arms uplifted as she lathered her hair, the buds of
her breasts pink, her skin, which blushed rather than browned
in the sun, gleaming, swollen slightly at the belly, blonde
down swirling in a slender line to her tuft, shaggy between her
thighs, heavy with water, bearded with white. "Let's go,"
she says, and touches his hand, and he feels the flutter of
something secret and fine at his fingertips.

Kim Stafford

A History of Falling In

My daddy told a story from the war
when he and the other pacifists were
together in a camp in the mountains, and this
Forest Service supervisor, acting like a sergeant,
shouted to them all, "All right, men. Fall in!"
They looked at each other and smiled.
He was furious, but could do nothing.

Later, as boy explorer, I was always
falling in. "What happened? You're all
wet!" "I fell in." Nothing anyone could do.

And later I fell in love, and out, and in again
with you, still falling, falling—for good.

And when I fall toward earth a last time—
stunned by some *coup de gras* that life offers
or sifting as ash from my children's hands—
it will only be one more hilarity in this long
and happy path toward where I mean to be—

falling, falling, falling in.

Stanley Alan Williams

The Absolutionist

Nell struggled backward into the bedroom with breakfast in her arms: pork sausages, small tart apples from one of the trees in the yard, banana bread, and water. Breakfast was the same every day since her failing father had come to stay with her. Pledger Brown was not allowed anything to drink other than water, and even the sausages and apples were a concession wrung from her by pity. His kidneys functioned at five percent of their ideal capacity on good days, and the medicine that enabled them to do that much weakened his heart. The doctors had admitted that from the beginning, and the truth of what they said was evident. His heart no longer kept a strong beat but instead uttered an indefinite, arrhythmic squish: the sound of walking in wet sand.

Pledger lay with his hands crossed over his chest. He had heard the bedroom door open, but mistook the sound for the creaking stall doors in his father's barn. They had taken turns feeding the horses once Pledger was old enough. Before that he and his father had worked together, Pledger trailing him around their small farm outside of Hillsborough. He could still hear the creaking, and he could see his father cutting the wire binding from a bale of hay.

Now, after over eighty years, Pledger's skin hung in loose folds like parade bunting along the line of his jaw and was drawn tight across the distended lobes of his ears. His large blue eyes were fogged like milk glass, their whites spongy. His lips were full in the middle, red and bulbous, but they ended in thin, desiccated points of colorless skin as if all of the blood had been squeezed inward from the edges of his mouth. His nose fell from a broad base to an avian point, and above all this his hair rose in a troubled gray wave crested by white. Still, the sun-ruined old face retained its expression of self-satisfaction born of a strong, unexamined will, and the man himself retained the characteristics that had shaped the face over eighty-nine years.

Nell placed the breakfast tray on a rolling cart by the bed and spread a napkin over her father's pajama top and tucked it tightly into his collar.

"Susan?" Pledger asked, struggling to open his eyes.

"Susan isn't here," Nell said, "you know that." She cut the sausage into tiny pieces and the apple into thin, translucent slices, and then she used the back of a spoon to crush the bread into a paste and combined it with the apples and sausage. "Now Dad," she said, "breakfast is ready."

Nell fed him his breakfast in a small spoon, bite by bite, talking the whole time of nothing. She said something about Scott, his grandson, but he didn't catch anything more than his name. He only heard the words she emphasized by looking directly at him, and his mind balked at the effort of filling in the rest. Why should he work so hard now, today? He'd spent his whole life working.

Susan isn't here, Pledger thought. I'm dying and she isn't here, but it's not her fault. I've done something unforgivable and this is my punishment. But what was it that I did, Pledger thought, what could I have done?

After a time Pledger saw that Nell was angry. He knew because of the way she held her mouth. Even when she was a baby her mouth had done the work of expressing her emotions, and today she was angry. Susan had been that way too, he thought, easy to read. Somehow, though, she was sweeter, better natured, easier to be around, even as a baby. He smiled, thinking of his younger daughter, and Nell smiled back at him.

Nell hadn't been young in a long time. She was well past sixty—her son was already middle-aged—and another man might have found it painful to see that through all of those years her life had been resolving toward cleaning her father's dead skin from the bedclothes and emptying his urine from a plastic bag. But Pledger was not that kind of man. Men were not accustomed to emotion, he'd told Nell forty years earlier or more, and they distrusted it. Even he had known that he wasn't telling her the whole truth, that he was omitting the emotions he did feel, the ones that ruled his life.

Breakfast done, Nell cleared the tray from the bed and then, without ceremony, pulled the thin white coverlet down to her father's ankles. His hipbones and rib cage strained against his skin, and his chest had fallen away to nothing. He had been a broad,

well-shaped man, even in his sixties and early seventies, but now he was merely old. Pledger's skin always itched, especially in those places where it bore his weight, even though his weight was not what it had been. Now, if Nell missed a spot when she applied the creams and lotions she had been given by his doctors, the skin around it sloughed off of him in broad sheets. There is some comfort in it, he thought, when the itching subsides and I can float away, the comfort of that third, long pull on the bottle.

The pungent yellow lotion that Nell was working into his legs reminded him of cornbread batter. His mother and his wife had both made good cornbread, sweet and airy. When he was a boy he'd wrap a piece in his bandanna to preserve every crumb and take it with him as he did his chores on the farm. On the farm the morning sun slanted through the open barn door behind the twelve-year-old Pledger, and in it he could see hay falling stiff as uncooked spaghetti into the feed trough from his father's pitchfork. The penned plow horses stretched long necks toward the hay, their wide granivorous mouths already in full grind before they were full. Pledger held onto the memory as best he could, knowing that something would happen. But the image faded and left him feeling that he'd left something undone that couldn't wait.

When he woke up late in the evening he called for Susan, but no one came. He called her name again and again until he didn't have any strength left. Through the window by his bed he could see a man and a woman standing among the fruit trees behind the house. No farmer had planted those trees. The small grove could never have produced enough fruit to justify the expense of tending it. The evening breeze shuffled the leaves and lifted the man's hat from his head. He and the woman chased it, running with their mouths open and their arms out like children though they were far from young. The couple looked familiar to Pledger, but soon enough he admitted to himself that he couldn't remember who they were. It was important to remember them; they were important people. But they were lost to him, and he knew that he might never recover them. Now the two had caught the hat and they were holding hands, moving away from the house into the lengthening shadows, winding down the hill like water. He watched until he couldn't see them at all, not even a glimpse of the woman's white dress in the dark.

I'll be dead soon, Pledger thought, maybe today. The thought was a familiar one, and he pushed it aside as if he were swinging a broom. In truth, he had no right to be alive, no right that could have been supported by the condition of his body, anyway. The doctors were forever pushing their cold thick fingers into his ribs and anus, fixing one another with conspiratorial looks when he gasped, waiting for that one undeniable sign of imminent mortality known only to them, but they had succeeded, really succeeded, at nothing. Pledger could sense their frustration. He had shared it, at first, but his interest in their doings had faded into the background as the weeks passed. He was eighty-nine; he would not live to be ninety. Toward the doctors he behaved with the straight-faced reserve that he had admired in his father, dead now for sixty years.

His wife—Susan's mother, Nell's mother—was dead too, had been dead for three decades. Lily. When she died, crumpled like paper by the steering wheel of her own car, he had felt relief. Relief. Oh, he'd felt all of the other things too: anger and loss and pity. But underlying all of those notes had always been the sweet, steady, angelic hum of relief. Susan had taken it hard, of course, when her mother died, and it was her grief that he had felt the most. What was it he had done that kept Susan away? Had he done anything? He couldn't remember, and there was no one to tell him. The sun had set completely now, and when Pledger looked out the window he could only see the room reflected in it: a piece of the floor, the bed, and himself —wide-eyed and gaunt—on top of it. He closed his eyes, listening for his heart's next tentative footstep. When at last he heard it, he remained unconvinced and listened for the next one. Just before he fell asleep, he thought he saw the headlights of a car turning into the driveway cross his window. That will be Susan, he thought, coming to see me.

Breakfast again: sausages, apples, and banana bread. He felt a premonitory pressure low in his abdomen at the sight of the dishtowel-covered tray. Smiling in spite of his stomach's complaint, he asked the familiar woman who had brought his breakfast whether she knew his daughter Susan. "She's wonderful," he said, "we're very proud of her." When he saw the look on the woman's face, the twisted mouth, she seemed even more familiar. "I know you," he said, still smiling, "I saw you in the fruit

trees last night with your beau. The two of you chased that hat. You were courting."

Nell fed Pledger his breakfast one spoonful at a time, and when a last bite was refused cleared the meal from the bed. She pulled down the blanket. Something was not right. The skin on his left leg was black and scaly, even though she had not missed a day or a spot. Nell ran to the bathroom to be sick. When she returned to her father's side with warm water and a rough towel, she called her husband into the room that he almost never entered, and together they chafed the dead skin from his leg. When that job was done, they did their best to make the old man comfortable, rubbing the lotion into his skin as if they were saying a prayer in unison.

Who were these people helping him? They weren't old enough to have been friends from his childhood, and surely he would remember his own family. He remembered Susan, didn't he? She had come into his life the way sun takes a dark room when you open the curtains. And he could remember Susan's mother, whose long neck and wide face were Susan's too. Where was Susan? What had happened to her?

"I saw the car last night," Pledger said.

"Yes, Dad, I mentioned it to you. It's Scott. He drove here to see you." Nell drew the coverlet up to her father's chin. His eyes were almost closed and his heavy head had fallen to the side.

"Is that Scott?" he asked.

Nell looked out the window and saw her son walking from tree to tree in the grove, gesturing and talking to himself. "Yes, that's Scott."

"He's a big man," Pledger said, "thick waisted."

"He's had a hard time." Nell was still watching Scott through the window. He seemed to be talking to the trees one by one but not waiting for an answer. "Scott came here to see you," she said.

"Does he have news?" Pledger's cloudy eyes seemed to clear for a moment at the idea. He struggled up onto his elbows and waited for Nell to rearrange the pillows. This she did with an almost professional ease, accustomed to the task by the growing months of her father's invalidism.

A memory of Scott was growing in Pledger; he was all but certain that Scott was the boy in his memory. He could see the

sun slanting through the open door of a barn, and inside a boy—around twelve, but big for his age—stood watching a man pitch loose hay into a trough for two plow horses. Pledger could feel the warmth of the sun there in the barn, could smell the horses and their leather and brass tack hanging from hooks along the wall. Now he had the boy's view of things, and the boy was hungry. He envied the horses their hay. Pledger knew, then, that he was the boy and that the memory was his. Both of the horses were thick, slow, and brown, but one was dappled with white. She was the older of the two, almost too old to work, but Pledger had sometimes ridden her on Sunday afternoons. He could feel his love for her in the barn, but that wasn't all. There was in the barn something besides the boy and his father. Pledger was burdened with knowing, but not remembering, what came next. Something did come next, he knew that much. He saw that his father had replaced the pitchfork with his carbine. The gun was familiar to Pledger. He knew the smell of the oil on the receiver and the weight of shouldering the gun, but he had never fired it. "Come on, son," Pledger's father said. "Get on with your work. I'll finish up in here." Something was going to happen. All of the noises in the barn—the rustle and struggle of the horses to reach the hay, the creaking of the barn moving in the wind, even the sounds of his own body—fell away to nothing. Pledger turned and ran from the barn into the broad, chicken-stained yard. He ran on through the mud, struggling with each step to pull his boots free from the earth, temporarily blinded by the bright sun.

Pledger's old heart grumbled on through the day, keeping a sporadic and faulty rhythm that would not allow him to sleep. He wanted to keep living. There were things that he had to do, important things, and there were mysteries he wanted to solve. What if his heart stopped? He would not allow it. That was one failure he would not allow. No one wandered among the fruit trees outside; no one tended to the yard and to the things outside when a strong wind came over the ridgeline in the south and rattled the glass in the window frames. Downstairs Nell and Scott sat talking. Pledger could hear the low murmur of their voices rise and fall in the space between his heartbeats. I'm supposed to be doing something, Pledger thought, there is something I need to do. The wind grew stronger still, pushing heavy clouds across the sky, and his heart beat: *again again again again.*

Scott spread a wool blanket over his grandfather and tucked it under his feet. He resumed his seat by the bed. His face bore the same shape as his grandfather's, but the features, other than the nose, differed. The nose was enough, though, to tell that the two were related. The old man was awake now, stirred by the rumbling storm. In the cloudy half-light they watched the rain falling through and among the fruit trees, here and there ripping leaves and even apples from the branches as it fell. It was thick, violent rain, and it fell in curtains, separating the old man and his grandson from the rest of the world.

"I know who you are," Pledger said. "You're Susan's boy."

"No, I'm not. Susan is my aunt."

"I remember you as a kid, running all of the time. Now you're fat." Pledger smiled at Scott, waiting. "Susan was never heavy." Outside even the half-light had faded to darkness. For Pledger the window had once again become a mirror, revealing only himself, absurdly small compared to the bed and to his hulking grandson. His stomach felt like a stone in his belly, heavy and sharp-edged. It seemed to be pressing against his spine, hurting him so bad that his vision blurred. He had the feeling that time was passing far more quickly than he thought; every minute that he registered was really an hour, as if he'd been jettisoned into space and so stood in a different relationship to the world he'd always known.

Time was passing. Pledger's past was passing through him into darkness, and in the ebb and flow of his memory he could no longer fight the current. He could see Susan playing when she was five, rolling canned goods across the broad-planked kitchen floor; Susan and Nell—now he could remember Nell and it was as if he'd never forgotten her—dressed for church in lemon dresses; his wife fanning herself with a newspaper on the porch swing. He remembered Lily soothing the girls in church, passing them hard candy to keep them quiet. That must have been Easter, he thought, if we made it to church. The four of them had been happy, eating together, laughing. Lily was stretched out face up in the middle of the street. One leg was still in the car, and her blood had spread like lipstick down her cheek and into her hair. She was so beautiful, but he could tell that she was still mad. Still furious with him, and had died driving too fast in her frustration. He could see, too, his father in the barn with the gun. Pledger could see all of those people at once, hovering un-

ordered and without place in his mind for one brief, bittersweet moment and then they were swept away.

"Is Susan going to come see me?" Pledger asked.

"I don't think so." Scott said. "But Mom, Nell, is already here, taking care of you." The blanket had slipped down to Pledger's waist, and Scott twitched it back into place. "She's been here all along, ever since you got sick."

"I've been sick," Pledger said, "seems like forever."

"You don't remember what happened, do you?"

Pledger closed his eyes. He remembered something bad. After the barn he'd spent the rest of the day clearing a drainage ditch of mud and weeds on the far side of the farm. Without gloves his skin had risen in blisters when he swung the scythe through the thick weeds. By midday the blisters had split and grown again. "Yes," he said, "I remember."

"Susan's not coming back because she doesn't want to."

Exhausted and starving, Pledger had crept home after the sun went down. His hopes rose no higher than potato soup—watery from being stretched too far—and cornbread, but even that seemed like a feast to him. He had learned already in his short life to be grateful for anything that he got. All around the Browns' tiny farm other farms were failing. His father was the only man he knew who could still afford two plow horses.

Pledger's parents were at the table when he came in. They didn't speak. His place at the table was set, and he quickly loaded his plate with cornbread. But there was more than that. He could smell meat and saw the thick steak left on a platter in the center of the table. Pledger wanted not to react. He wanted not to eat in front of his father, not to be hungry at all. But it was a losing battle. The meat was too much to resist. The three of them ate in silence until nothing was left at all.

"She'll come," Pledger said, "she knows I'm sick. You all told her that I'm sick." He let his head fall back on the pillow and fixed his grandson in his vision. The younger man was heavy, but the Brown blood was visible to even an old man. Scott wasn't all Brown, though, and that too was visible. He carried with him a heavy load of sadness, and his bearing, the look on his face, the sound of his voice, asked everyone he met to help him with his burden. It was disgusting, Pledger thought, to allow oneself to waver.

"It's not that simple," Scott said.

"Help me." Pledger raised his head from the pillow and tried to sit up. When his grandson had rearranged the pillows, Pledger said: "Buck up. It's disgusting to see people who let life push them around. Susan always stood up for herself. Susan doesn't get pushed around."

"Susan? Please. You only know what you want to know. Susan doesn't want anything to do with you."

"I know," Pledger said, "I know it. Please stop telling me." The old man's face was wet. Pledger turned away and looked into the darkness outside the window. The rain was still falling, the drops tapping arrhythmically against the glass and sliding down the window. He had known, from the second or third bite, what he was eating. In that moment, at that table with his mother and father, eating meat that was heavy with the memory of the plow and with his love for the horse, for riding the horse on free Sundays, he'd made a decision: Pledger Brown would do whatever it takes to get by. He was hungry. He had to eat, and if there were something to eat he would eat it. Pledger was always going to fall on that side of the issue. He decided that day, too, that he would always be happy; he would tend toward happiness the way other people tended toward fat, or laziness, or churlishness.

"Susan is disappointed in me," Pledger said, "I know. She loved that horse."

"It was your horse, Grandpa," Scott said. "That was a long time ago."

"We didn't have anything else to eat. We were so hungry. I didn't have any choice but to do what I did."

"She left. That's all. It didn't have anything to do with any horse. The horse was your horse, when you were a boy."

"No. That's not true," Pledger said. "I had choices, but I made the right one. I took control."

"Listen, Grandpa, don't get excited. It's not good for you."

When Pledger opened his eyes the sun had come up. Nell and Scott stood between the bed and the window, looking at him. Those two, he thought, look just like each other. They even cry the same way. I'll tell them, he thought, what I did. I'll give them a reason for those tears. "Listen," he said, closing his eyes, "We didn't have any money. No one had any money. I fed the family what there was to feed. Do you think that was easy?" Susan had never forgiven him when Lily died, and she never would. He

knew that. Pledger's stomach had grown inside him during the night. He could feel it swelling even now, stretching his belly the way a baby stretches its mother. Pledger could feel the fibers of his skin stretching and stretching and then he knew that they were finally parting. Among the fruit trees he could see his two daughters playing together with his wife. "It wasn't easy," he said, "to do what I did."

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