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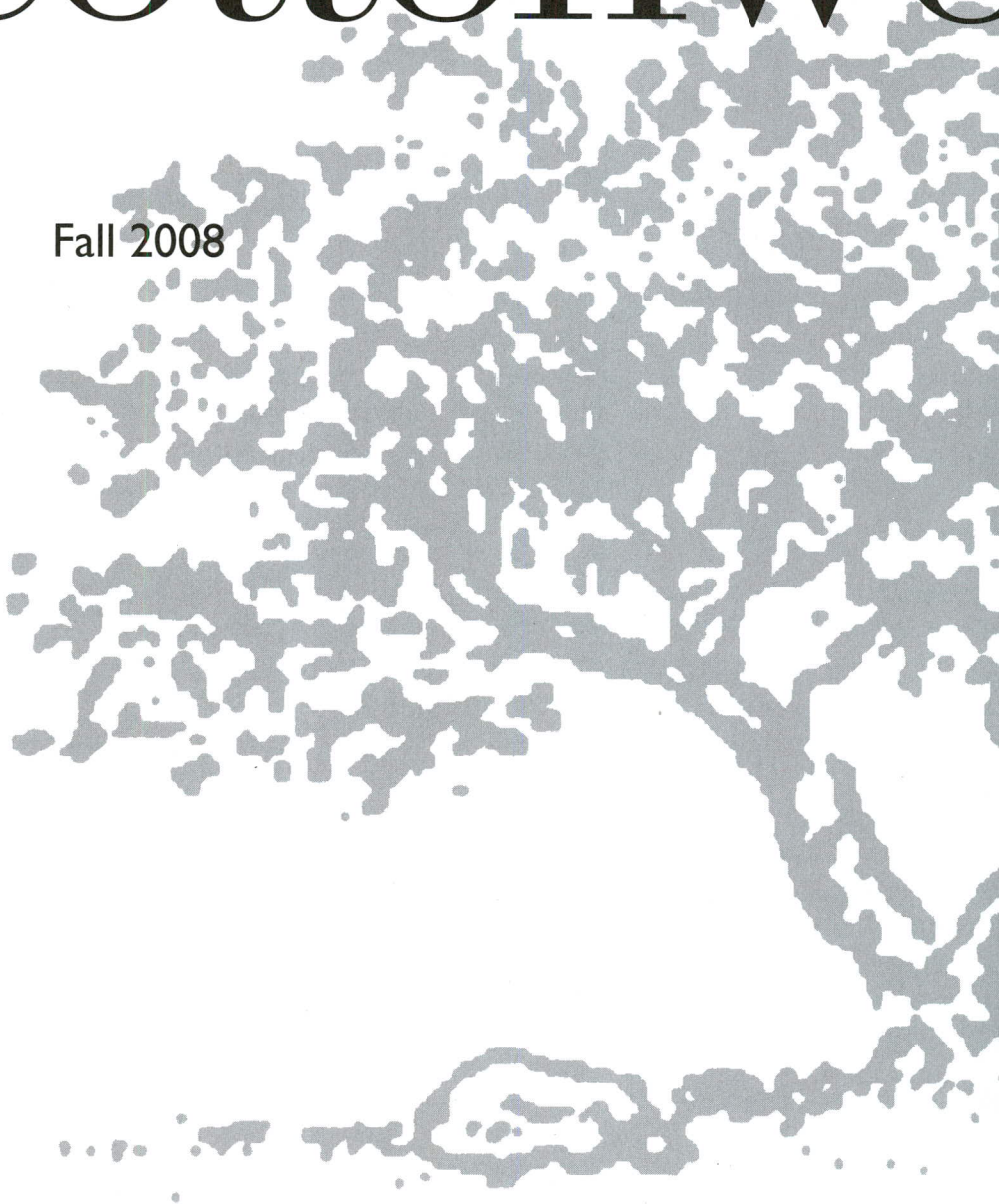

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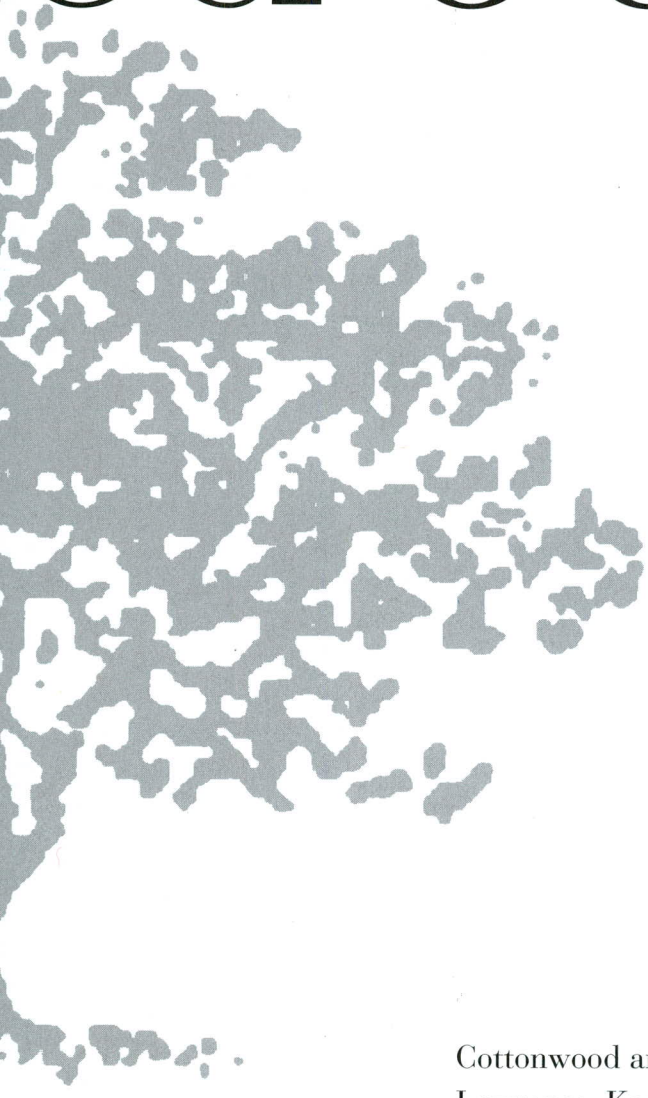

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Marsha Lee Berkman

Ghosts

The first time Nina had seen him in years was while his mother was dying. At first she wasn't sure it was really Hugo. He was heavier, the edges of his unshaven face had taken on a bitter turn, especially around the lips, and his eyes, his mother's eyes, but slightly hooded and sleepy-looking, were fastened on the floor, intent on whatever he had to do. He was dirty, too. She recognized his jacket, a navy one with a red plaid lining that Ingrid and Walter had given him for his sixteenth birthday. It was of an indeterminate color now, and across his broad shoulders it was filthy, she saw. His gray pants had lost their crease and hung in wrinkled folds across his muddy, scuffed shoes.

It was the time of night when strange-looking people came out, a sort of assorted underworld you didn't see during the day, and Nina wouldn't have been there herself if she hadn't run out of eggs for a late-evening omelette she had fancied making while her husband was out of town. Under the muted glow of the dimmed lights his pallor looked sickly. Perhaps it was not him at all, but someone else who merely looked like Hugo. It was a name she had always loved. Slightly foreign, and exotic, and very European, like his parents, if indeed it was him. It was his walk that finally decided her. With his head down and his hesitant steps, it looked as though he was walking across earth that was infested with land mines. He was the son of a friend who was dying. *Ingrid.* Her name had originally been Irmgard, then Irma for a long time. Hadn't there been a radio program called "My Friend, Irma" about a dizzy blond years ago? But she had changed it to Ingrid, after the actress. The Irma/Ingrid Nina knew was no dizzy blond. She was solid and responsible, a teacher in one of the local grade schools. In fact, both of Hugo's parents had been teachers. His father taught history and painted in his free time, working in watercolors. Nina was always surprised at how good Walter was. One or two had actually been taken by middle-of-the-road museums and were often displayed at the town library. When he wasn't working or painting, Nina

was used to seeing him puttering around the yard, with its lemon and orange trees and tomato vines in the back and Ingrid's tree roses lining the front walkway, or making repairs to the house. It was nothing but a cottage, really, added on to by the previous family, but Walter was still making improvements until he died, after the trouble with Hugo started.

Hugo had problems. Nothing that you could put your finger on, but Ingrid and Walter couldn't control him. After he turned eighteen, there was nothing they could do. He refused to get help, or to take his medication. He started college nearby and then dropped out to take a job selling the new tech gear that was suddenly appearing. But that hadn't worked out either. He had been a precocious child, a math prodigy, and now he spent all his time cooped up in his room devising problems no one could solve.

"That's the law in this state," Ingrid was told. "Once a child reaches a majority, your hands are tied." Finally, Hugo left the quarrels with his parents behind, staying with one friend after another, at last renting a small room on the other side of town.

They had doted on the boy, a child of their later years, who had come after they gave up having any of their own. Ingrid was nearly in her mid-forties when she became pregnant. In despair, some time before, they had already adopted a girl who was entering puberty. An orphan who had lost both her parents, survivors, too, friends of Ingrid and Walter's who had moved to another state. An orphan. What an awful, hollow sound that had, Nina decided. But Heidi was an adult now. And not a young one, either. She never came to visit. She was afraid of bridges, but she had moved north of the city, and the only way you could come to Ingrid's was over the bridge, unless you wanted to go completely out of your way. But Heidi hadn't done that, either.

Hugo—for as Nina followed him around the store she realized without a doubt that it was really him—stopped to pick up bread and a carton of milk, while she waited out of sight. She wanted to just go up to him and say, "Hugo, it's Nina. Don't you remember me?" Cameos of Hugo at an earlier age, his beautiful angelic face, popped into her mind. She thought of how the past could come back but all scrambled up, the way you saw it in dreams. "Your mother's dying. Don't you care? Don't you even want to see her?"

He looked up, as though Nina's thought had actually leapt out of her mind and into his brain, but then stared straight

through her without a sign of recognition, which made her want to throttle him by the shoulders and shout, "If you don't see her now, it will be too late. Something's eating up her stomach."

In the late sixties Ingrid lived just down the street. That is how Nina met her. They were always getting each other's mail because their house numbers were reversed. Usually Ingrid simply gave it back to the postman, she explained, which is exactly what Nina did, too, but this time she decided she'd just march down and bring it herself since it was a package, and a nice enough day. Actually, she hadn't marched at all, she'd hopped on her bike, a good-looking Schwinn Sting Ray with a banana seat and high handlebars, even though it wasn't very far, throwing the package in her basket. Nina had often seen Ingrid on her bicycle, but she hadn't known until then that she was Hugo's mother. Her own Ben knew Hugo, although he thought he was a bit of a show-off and too smart for his own good. They were the same age and in the same class at school, and they often walked home together and stopped in for a snack. Nina liked that. Her daughter Becca and her friends, a year younger, did the same thing. Nina wasn't working, at least not at any job where she got paid, although the housework and cooking and taking care of the children with her husband traveling all week took up all of her time. But she didn't work like Ingrid did, with a paycheck at the end of the week or month and the expectation that she would be someplace at a certain time every day, and so she was usually home. She liked to listen to the children's chatter, and hear them talk about their coming tests and teachers. She liked to bake, too, and there would always be something to go with a glass of milk—brownies or cake or cookies that had been taken hot right out of the oven, resting on a plate to cool before you could pop them in your mouth.

"I thought it might have been something important," Ingrid said as soon as Nina opened the door. "I didn't trust the postman. I've heard too many stories."

Nina had heard them, too. There was a rash of them in the news. One had an entire room of undelivered mail. Another had merely thrown all those letters away. What had they been thinking of? Nina wondered. Now she was always surprised when the mail actually came without going astray. But a package was a different thing altogether. Only her sister sent packages. Or her mother. Something they had picked up for the children most likely. She looked at the return address and saw that she was

right. It was her mother's wobbly handwriting in the upper left-hand corner. She thanked Ingrid, who introduced herself, and Nina invited her in, eager for company.

They found out they liked each other. They became friends and then best friends. They had a few things in common, even though Ingrid was older. And something else. They were both Jews, floating alone in a place that had few of them. Nina's Ben and Becca, and Hugo, were the only ones in the town school. Ingrid taught in a nearby area and so did Walter, where there weren't as many problems with that. But this principal was intractable, Nina saw. Once, when the children stayed out on a religious holiday, Nina received a letter from him: *Wouldn't it be a fine thing if everyone stayed out for every holiday that comes around instead of the ones that are legally mandated...* It was the words "legally mandated" that set Nina off. She went down to the school to tell him just what she thought of it, but it hadn't improved the situation. If anything, it made it worse. After that, Nina was certain that tests were deliberately given on those days, just to be sure that the children (and their parents) would be punished for their transgression.

Nina found out that Ingrid was strong and capable, and in bits and pieces, other things as well. In her youth she had been a champion swimmer. She came from a town not far from the Rhine where, she said, "Nothing had really changed since the Crusades." She and Walter, who had survived in their own separate ways, had come after the war, met a few years later, and promptly married. It was a time when no one wanted to hear about the past, or what had happened.

"What good does it do?" everyone asked when the subject came up. No one wanted to hear about the dirty secrets of those years—that Jews had become victims again. And in the twentieth century yet. It was easy enough to forget. To let it go and move on with lives that had become increasingly comfortable. Almost everyone was dead, after all. How would it help them now? But it was still fresh in Ingrid's mind. She would tell Nina about being taken on a school field trip to hear Hitler speak—a madman, she said, if ever there was one—or the day the school headmaster came in with two burly men to take facial measurements of all the children to ferret out Jews. Finally she was told that she wasn't welcome at school at all. But Ingrid spoke about these incidents dispassionately, as though they had already been

repeated too many times to feel any emotion. Almost everyone she knew was gone: friends and relatives and schoolmates.

Ingrid came from a wealthy family, a family that was able to buy their way out of the chaos, her mother calmly planning an escape while violence swirled around them. The first thing Ingrid did when she came here was to get rid of her accent and improve her English. She didn't want anyone to know she was one of those who had survived such unspeakable times. She didn't want to be pitied or feared. Yet she was still living out her girlhood, Nina decided. Ingrid was cautious. She made friends slowly. And she liked to ride her bicycle everywhere, her strong, thick-veined hands firmly on the handlebars. She rode it to work and to shop and to the post office, as though she was still in that other country where everyone got around like that.

Everything Nina knew about "that time" came from Ingrid. No statistic was as powerful as Ingrid's stories. But Nina knew something else. There would always be a barrier between them that would never be crossed no matter how many stories Ingrid told her. After a time she simply tried to forget about it. They went bicycling together, although Nina hadn't ridden for years. They went to the park without their husbands on Ingrid's days off and took a picnic lunch and the children. A number of times they went up to the city, took a ferry across the bay, and went hiking on Angel Island. She got used to Ingrid's sharpness, her tendency to say whatever was on her mind. They had begun to speak hesitantly about their lives now, laughing about their husbands' small peculiarities, one of those friendships that women form to keep their sanity. They exchanged news of their children. They were growing up, after all. It wasn't long before the years began to slide into each other. And then one day, Nina couldn't remember anymore when their children had been younger, or even what they had looked like. Coming across a picture of Ben and Becca she was shocked to see how small they had been, how vulnerable, how much they had changed. Remembering earlier events, an outing or a special occasion, a birthday, perhaps, she could barely recall just how many years had passed. Her children went off to school, took jobs, and went to live in distant cities. They were on their own now and didn't need her. Her husband was always busy with his work or traveling. But she had felt a closeness to Ingrid that she couldn't explain, one that went beyond friendship. Eventually, Ingrid

stopped working, and her hair, which had been a vivid black, was streaked first with silver and then turned white. For the first time she began to look old. Little complaints started appearing that Nina attributed to Ingrid's age, and now a number of years had passed, and suddenly she was dying.

Dying, Nina thought, although it seemed a made-up drama for someone like Ingrid, who was the healthiest person Nina had ever known. She was solid and well built, with ruddy coloring and a swimmer's broad shoulders. She had never been pretty, of that Nina was certain, but her good health had given her a fresh attractiveness. She never wore makeup, unlike Nina, who had a dozen assorted lipsticks. Never tried to make herself more than what she was. "No, thank you," Ingrid said. "All that artifice. And for what?" Ingrid held strong opinions that were reflected in her dark eyes and penetrating gaze, as though she could see right through you. Now that she was in the hospital, Nina went to visit her alone. Howard had begged off

"What on earth would I say, Nina?" Her husband didn't like hospitals or visiting women who were barely dressed in hospital gowns. Or even sitting in a chair trying to make conversation. Ingrid was really Nina's friend, after all. "Just tell her I send my regards," Howard instructed. And so Nina went by herself, picking up some flowers at the hospital gift shop on the way, and uttered Howard's words the moment she walked in the room.

"Oh, I didn't expect *him*," Ingrid said. "It's you I want to talk to, Nina."

Ingrid was surprisingly cheerful. Nina thought that perhaps she wasn't dying after all, that it was something she had exaggerated to make a more dramatic story. But Ingrid wasn't like that. At least she never had been. People who were dying weren't sitting up in bed talking and answering phone calls, were they? A cousin of hers was sitting by the bed knitting. Nina had only met Carlotta a few times. She was tall, and slender, and impeccably dressed, an aristocrat from the old school, wearing one of the sweaters she had made herself of colorful marled yarns that Nina found stunning. Her manners were discreet and beautiful, too, and once, after Nina had invited Carlotta to lunch, she received a note in return on thick parchment thanking her in penmanship as elegant as the brush strokes on a Japanese painting. Now Carlotta excused herself and went out the door and into the hallway, motioning her own place for

Nina by Ingrid's bed. There were three other patients in the room, Nina saw, in various stages of illness, a TV turned on at low volume, and by each bed one or two solemn visitors.

There was something awful about a hospital room, she decided. Not the usual complaints, but the outrageous exposure of being out in the open. People coming to visit, just dropping in no matter how you felt or looked, holding you hostage. Not that Ingrid looked bad, but beneath her flimsy hospital gown (she thought of Howard's comment) her breasts sagged, and her neck, suddenly naked without the subterfuge of collars and scarves, revealed just how old she had become.

Yet in the same way she spoke about those years of her childhood, Ingrid was determined to speak about her imminent demise, as though it was only a passing occurrence. But then she added, "The only thing that bothers me is the children. It doesn't matter how old they are. I still worry about them. How will I know they'll be all right?"

"But you won't," Nina said. "And there's nothing you can do about that, Ingrid. There's nothing anyone can do."

Ingrid was silent. "Don't you think they could have come? Heidi called, I'll say that for her. But Hugo hasn't. In fact, no one's seen him lately."

"I have," Nina nearly blurted out, but she stopped herself. It would only hurt Ingrid to know that. She regretted not talking to him, or following Hugo home to see where he was staying, but she was not sure she wanted to know. He didn't look like someone who was working, either. Who in his right mind would employ him now, looking the way he did? Nina wasn't sure but she thought that Ingrid was still sending him money. Depositing it in his account without even a thank-you. It was just as well, she thought, that he had not come to visit his mother looking like that, but nonetheless Nina felt a stab of guilt for not telling. Carlotta, Ingrid said, had gone to the place where he was supposed to be living and left a note taped to the door telling him that his mother was sick. Even though Ingrid seemed all right, she was in the hospital, after all, and who knew what would happen now? As for Heidi, Nina had never really known what to make of her.

When Walter was busy and after he had taken ill, Nina drove Ingrid up to see Heidi, Hugo in the back seat

amusing himself with a book of Mensa puzzles, bicycles (Ingrid's, Nina's, and Hugo's) placed on the roof of the car. Although Ingrid had chastised Nina for the Volkswagen (How *could* you, Nina?) she did not mind riding in it to see Heidi. They had to cross the bridge, of course. The same bridge that Heidi was afraid of traveling across. Had she seen an accident? Had someone jumped off right in front of her, flying off the edge, like a character in a Greek myth? Or was it the memory of that fiery crash long ago when her parents had been killed? It was a spring day but puffs of ghostly fog swirled about the bright orange railings, and tiny boats and colorful kayaks below appeared wrapped in gauzy cocoons, floating like miniature toys against the hazy silhouette of the city in the distance. People walked the span bundled up against the cold, and breezes, and blustery winds, tourists snapping pictures and small children hopping or skipping ahead of them, reminding Nina of a party that never stopped. A tunnel appeared, and after that, an exit. The sun broke briefly through a cathedral of eucalyptus and then the sky grew black again. She veered off, made another turn, and they climbed into the hills, first grassy slopes that twisted around and around and then pines and firs, dense and deep and dark, shrouded in a rolling fog of silvery mist. Settled on an incline, it was a wonder that Heidi's small house didn't fall down. Mudslides threatened during the rainy season, and some of the brown shingles had come off, but so far it had held its own. Over the years various men had shared the house with Heidi. None of them had what Nina would call a real job. One published small chapbooks of poetry; another tended bar in town; still a third did odd jobs for people. They all got by, mucking about whenever Ingrid and Nina came, dressed in ratty turtlenecks and jeans no matter what the season. It was cold in those hills, and at night downright frigid. The winds howled through the giant oaks and redwoods. Going there, Ingrid would be talkative with anticipation. But all Nina could think was how gloomy it was. Gloomy but austerely beautiful. That day it was breathtaking, the open spaces growing green following the rains, covered with bright orange poppies and stalks of blue lupine. Pink and white wildflowers clung to the shoulders, and clusters of golden asters tumbled down ridges. The desolateness canceled out civilization, as wild-looking as if no human had ever stopped there. At twilight black-tailed deer came out.

Once a whole family of them, ears twitching with alertness when they saw the car, their light feet leaping back into the hills where they had come from.

While Ingrid and Heidi sat down for a chat over a cup of tea at a painted tea table, a tea cosy perching on top of the teapot (an old German doll carved out of wood with a voluminous dress to keep it warm), Nina puttered amongst the antiques. That is what Heidi did to earn a living. They spilled out of the house and onto the front porch. It was all pieces Heidi had culled from estates or picked up in the north country, relics that had once belonged to other people, remnants of their lives, always changing, depending on what she had found. A spinning wheel that waited for a spinner in a corner of the living room; a dry sink used as a buffet in the dining room with a rustic table and four ladderback chairs; a basket to dry apples hanging on the wall not far from a picture that looked like an original Gilbert Stuart, and was not. Amongst all of those antiques Heidi was wearing a brightly colored smock, her dark hair cut in a helmet style, lips painted a vivacious cherry red. She was tall and very thin. A dancer's figure. She should have been Carlotta's daughter. The nipples of her small breasts pointed beneath the softly gathered material, and her face was smooth and polished to a glossy sheen with creams she made herself.

Ingrid always brought Heidi something, a loaf of bread baked that morning or some preserves put up from one of the fruit trees in the back yard. While she went straight to the kitchen to put them away, Heidi said, "It's nice of you to bring Ingrid over."

"I don't mind," Nina told her, listening to the chimes making a pleasant sound outside as the wind exhaled through the trees. "Actually I like coming. It's so different from where we live—where you grew up."

"But it was my second home, after all. Where I lived at first there were no hills at all. In fact, it was totally flat," she reminded Nina.

Nina tried to picture that and could not. Was it possible, even though it was true? Heidi had taken to the earth here. She seemed to have been born to it, determined to lead a simple life on the land. It was peaceful, Nina had to admit. The village was beyond the hills, in the valley below. Not far away, it was hard to believe there was the town and movie theaters and places to

eat—even the bar where one of Heidi's live-ins had tended. Heidi went every week to stock up on supplies, less during the winter rains when the roads were all but impassable. Besides the face cream, Heidi made her own candles and soap, and churned her own butter. She stuffed quilts and goose-down comforters, and in the warm fall days of Indian summer when the cold rainy season was still ahead, hung them over a line to sell to whoever might be passing through. She had refused to have a television, and a phone was only a concession for emergencies. Ingrid didn't dare call her. She would write Heidi a letter and receive one in return. And there was something else that Ingrid told Nina, this time with resignation. Heidi did not consider herself a Jew anymore. She was on a path of enlightenment. She belonged to a community, Ingrid said, not a cult but like-minded people who also shunned organized religion. Nina looked for signs of this whenever she came, but there weren't any, at least none that she could see. On one of Heidi's antique tables there was only a silver oval frame that held a picture of her real parents, people who looked too young to have a child at all, her mother, who was merely a girl, squinting and smiling into the sun, holding a baby who must be Heidi, her father's older face somberly staring into the unknown photographer's camera.

Heidi and Ingrid were still talking. Tom, Heidi's male companion for the moment, offered to show her his garden. Outside Nina drew in the pure air. Hugo was working on Heidi's battered truck. Tom had asked him to take a look at it after he found out that he was interested.

"Where had he learned to do that?" Nina wanted to ask. But he was the kind of child who could learn anything from a book if he wanted to. Later in the day, perhaps, they would ride their bicycles over the hills, before it was time to go home. Songbirds were returning after the winter and their voices echoed noisily around them. Squirrels and rabbits rustled through the brush. Toward the end of late September she remembered seeing a cast of red-tailed hawks soaring overhead here, wings raised slightly above a horizontal slant, their raspy voices screaming a haunting *kree-eee-ar* as they headed south.

"Do you come up here often?" Heidi's friend was asking.

"Once or twice a year I bring Ingrid and Hugo. We were waiting for the rains to stop."

"Ah, yes, the rain," he said. He took out a cigarette and offered one to Nina, which she declined. His face was deeply lined, although he couldn't have been very old, and he was tall and lanky. "Do you mind?" he asked, and smiled with a charm she hadn't noticed before. The creases disappeared then, and he was suddenly better looking, she saw, than at first glance.

"So what do you do here?" she asked.

"I help Heidi mostly. She's fragile. Self-sufficient in many ways but fragile."

"Yes," Nina said. "I think that's true."

He showed her the vegetables he had planted as soon as the frost was over, enclosed in a fence to keep out the deer. "It's all organic, too." This was before the rest of the country had caught on to it, and Nina, looking at the thin sprouts coming up, could only nod in agreement.

"No spray, no pesticides, just good old earth, water and air," he added, poking at the dirt around a fledgling plant.

Still intent on answering her question, he continued, "I read, too. We both do. There aren't many distractions here."

They walked quite a distance before he said something else. "Heidi worries about Hugo. He doesn't talk much. He keeps things to himself. She thinks Ingrid and Walter are too old to be bringing up a boy this age."

"They've done their best. In fact, they're absolutely devoted to him."

"Yes," he said. "Of course they are. But all the same, you might talk to them. A child that age needs a longer leash."

Nina remembered that one summer Heidi had taken Hugo for a couple of weeks, and he had come back a changed child. She had let him take on some of the chores, too. Nina thought it had been good for him. He'd come home tanned and healthy, full of confidence. But Ingrid and Walter had missed him, and after that he had only come to visit instead of staying overnight. He'd never been to camp either, or to spend the night at a friend's house. Walter and Ingrid didn't believe in that. They were from the school that believed that children belonged at home.

They never took the bicycles down from the car rack that day. It began to drizzle, the sun washed out to a watery puddle, and they headed back to the house until late afternoon, watching a

brooding mass of black clouds take its place. Mist sheltered the house again. It was like a stage set, Nina thought, looking around, as though they were characters out of a story by Chekhov, their lives frozen suddenly between the past and an unknown future that lay beyond this room, beyond what they knew now, at any rate. Tom brought out a fruity Merlot laced with cinnamon, wedges of cheese and a tin of crackers. He played checkers with Hugo, who trumped him, while the women talked and sipped wine out of thin fluted glasses from another century. It was a day Nina would remember, as though there was only this moment and nothing else mattered. If circumstances were different, if she weren't married, if Tom had not belonged to Heidi, no doubt about it, she would have made a play for him. Everything turned on the "ifs" of this world. If Ingrid had not been a Jew, she would have still been a German; if she had not met Walter, she would not have had Hugo; if Nina's package had not been delivered to Ingrid's house by mistake, instead of her own, she would not have met Ingrid; if Heidi's parents had not died, she would not be sitting here, and neither would Ingrid or Nina. You could change anything if you thought about it long enough.

Ingrid was quiet on the way home. Hugo stared out the window at a streak of salmon-colored sky as they reached the highway. She remembered Tom's words and thought how much they would distress Ingrid, but perhaps he was right. Ingrid and Walter were stuck in their ways. And they were often rigid, suspicious of new ideas. Even though they were teachers, they did not understand the freedom children expected in America, and even if they had, they would not have countenanced it, either in the classroom or at home. But she did not think she would ever tell them.

The visit stayed in her mind. The day itself, a circle of light breaking through the clouds for a few glorious moments, bathing the massive redwood trees in a burnished gold, her walk with Tom, Heidi's new friend, although she wasn't sure if he slept over or was just her helper. Probably the former, because he said that he and Heidi liked to read. There was an intimacy in the way he said it. The very act itself spoke of intimacy. It wasn't something you would do if you were just coming over. He had planted the garden for her, too. Men liked Heidi. Ingrid said that when she was still in high school the boys flocked to her.

She was pretty but not *that* pretty, Ingrid added. It was beyond her. But Nina could see it. Heidi had a charm that went further than looks. In spite of all the articles that told you how to charm men in the women's magazines, she wasn't sure it was something you could develop. It was what Tom had said: Heidi was self-sufficient, but fragile, too, a combination that attracted men. And Heidi knew how to put herself together. No matter what she wore, there was an aura of enchantment about her. A scarf tied provocatively, or a poncho tossed carelessly over her shoulders, the Japanese kimono she wore.

But there was something else that made Nina remember that day. After that spring, the trouble with Hugo started. Not noticeably at first, but gradually, so that his parents weren't aware of what was happening until it was too late. Ingrid and Walter began having a time with him. There were rages. You never knew what would set him off. He had gone on to high school after that summer, but he didn't do his homework. He didn't like the teachers. He said they were down on him, jealous, because he knew more than they did. "Bitches," he called them. "Just a bunch of goddamn bitches." He played loud music until all hours, keeping Ingrid and Walter up. He refused to listen to them anymore. Once, he went out while he was supposed to be sleeping in his own bed, taken his father's car and cruised around town instead, accidentally slamming it into a tree. The police came knocking on their door in the middle of the night to tell them what had happened, Hugo in tow.

Ingrid and Walter took him to see someone. They tried everything, but nothing helped. Ingrid showed Nina his baby pictures.

"Not a sign of what would happen," she said. "He was such a pretty baby, so good-natured."

Nina did not know what to say. Ingrid and Walter quarreled bitterly with Hugo until he left.

Ingrid died, of course. Not while she was in the hospital. Not right away, but within a few months. Nina walked over every day and watched Ingrid's ruddy face growing paler and paler. She spent her days reading or knitting or listening to Brahms violin sonatas. When she felt strong enough she liked to take care of her roses. Ingrid's bike hung in the garage now. Occasionally she would ask Nina to take it down so she could ride.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I was never more sure of anything in my life."

Nina took out her own bicycle, although she seldom used it anymore. But Ingrid tired easily, and they never went very far. No hills now. Someplace that wouldn't tax her decreasing energy. Once, she stopped suddenly to catch her breath and buried her face in her hands. "I—can't—go—any—further," she stumbled.

"Breathe, Ingrid. Steady now," Nina said. For the first time since she'd known her, Ingrid looked wretched and sick.

"I—just wanted—to see—if I could still do it. I guess—I got my answer."

Carlotta came over to do the shopping and make the meals. On days when Ingrid was too ill to get out of bed, Carlotta stayed over. She busied herself in the kitchen, or ran errands that Ingrid could not do herself now. She polished the silver and straightened the drawers, dusted the furniture and did the wash. Carlotta refused to use a dryer. She strung up a clothesline and hung the sheets out with old-fashioned clothespins. The neighbors walked by just to see it, a curiosity from another time.

As she grew weaker, Ingrid talked about the life she had known before Nina met her, her childhood in that other country that Nina only knew from books and movies. Ingrid had never been religious and she wasn't now. "It would look as if I was trying to cull favors," she argued. She said that she had an argument with God. She had refused to enter a synagogue since the war. No wonder Heidi had decided she didn't want any part of it.

Ingrid's eyes held flashes of lightning, but there was a dwindling down of everything else. Sometimes she started confessing things that Nina wasn't sure she wanted to hear, regrets that had stayed hidden until now. She had only married Walter because they were both refugees. She had liked him, of course, but she felt she'd had no choice. Neither of them had much family left. He had depended on her. And, she had to admit, she had depended on him, too. But she had never loved him. There had not even been a wedding. Who would have given her one, after all? They had gone to City Hall, and afterwards there was no honeymoon. Her life was always pared down to bare essentials. There was no place she could call home anymore except where she was. All that had been taken away from her, just as there were no high school reunions either, or any that she cared to go

to. All of her friends had either been killed or were missing. She had never heard from any of them again, but in her mind's eye they were as clear as if she had seen them yesterday. Their names paraded in her mind, their faces as they had been years before were imprinted permanently upon the template of her brain.

Finally, she talked about her children. Nina never asked if Heidi had actually come to see her, or if she had seen Hugo. As far as she knew they hadn't. She didn't want to hear the answer. It was better not to know. Heidi, of course, had been half-grown when she'd come to live with them, bringing a history with her of another family and another house where she had grown up. There had never been the closeness with a daughter she had hoped for. But Hugo, Hugo was her own flesh and blood. How happy she had been when at last she found out she was pregnant with him. How much she had looked forward to having a baby. Why was he so angry? What had happened to him? Why had he rejected her and Walter? No one seemed to know what was the matter. He was born when she was too old, Ingrid decided. Something had gone wrong. "He hated hearing about the war," Ingrid said. "Sometimes I think he even hates Jews," she added, as if that explained everything.

And then one night Ingrid was back in the hospital, but only a few days this time before the end. She had already given funeral instructions. She didn't want one. She had written this out with several emphatic exclamation points, but Carlotta insisted.

Howard was three thousand miles away at a meeting. Ben and Becca couldn't make it. Nina went herself. It was a small gathering at the gravesite, and even that simple service might have been more than Ingrid wanted. Nina did not even know if the children would come. To her surprise they were there. Heidi came with a man she had not seen before. What had happened to Tom, whom she had liked so much? Hugo, cleaned up for the occasion, was there, too. How on earth had Carlotta found him? He was wearing a navy suit that was too big for him and might have been his father's, and an angry scowl on his face. It was late January, a beautiful day with budding trees that promised spring and magnolia blossoms with mauve petals as elegant and intricate as the spirals of a shell. The rain, which had been interminable the previous week, suddenly stopped, and the sun was brilliant and full and warm. Just the kind of day Ingrid would have liked to hop on her bicycle and ride up into the

hills. It was a short ceremony: a psalm, a prayer, the soil from Israel, a few words from Carlotta about Ingrid as a young girl, and then a rabbi spoke, someone who had not known her. He was very young and nervous, stroking the straggly beard he had obviously grown to look older and wiser. If Ingrid hadn't been dead they would have laughed later about his studied pomposity, the words he used, the assumptions he had made, calling her "a woman who had passed through the fire and come out on the other side." At the open gravesite, in those fleeting moments as Ingrid's coffin was lowered, Nina suddenly remembered something Ingrid had said. "We're all dying, all of us, all the time, even you, Nina. Don't think you're the only one who will be saved."

It was inconceivable that Ingrid was gone, utterly gone, and Nina would never see her again. Everything that Ingrid had felt was gone, along with her. If she knew nothing else, there was one thing Nina knew for certain: she would never have another friend like Ingrid, no matter how long she lived.

A luncheon was planned at a restaurant. Some of Ingrid's colleagues had come, too, fellow teachers, a few scattered relatives and friends, a cousin Nina hadn't known about who had flown in from a distant state, someone Carlotta must have asked.

Nina sat at a table with some of the teachers who knew Ingrid and were praising her, part of the stilted post-burial conversation. "She had a way with children. She was like a magnet drawing them in."

"Yes, a born teacher," one of them agreed.

In the middle of this Nina looked up and saw Hugo standing in a corner alone. She excused herself and went up to talk to him, to offer some solace, although he continued looking at the floor. "I'm sorry about your mother. Truly sorry. She was a friend. One of the best I've ever had."

To Heidi, Nina merely touched her arm gently. "I'm sure this must be very difficult for you."

"It's not the first time, but it never gets easier."

"It's not supposed to," Nina said in a tone that sounded as if she was scolding.

Before the end of the day Nina found out that Carlotta had decided to sell the house now that both Walter and Ingrid were gone.

"I can't live there, and neither Heidi nor Hugo wants to. What's the use of holding on to it?" Carlotta looked exhausted. Her eyes were rimmed with red and there were papery folds of skin beneath them. She wanted to get everything cleaned up and put the house up for sale and be done with it.

Nina walked over to help, going through boxes, the remains of Ingrid and Walter's lives. How small everything looked. All the things that Ingrid had loved were taken down. The house was bare and cold. She thought of the estate sales she had seen on Saturday mornings, belongings spread about on the grass as though they were nothing more than this, trinkets for the curious who happened to be passing by. She hoped Carlotta wouldn't do that, put Ingrid's possessions out on the lawn for everyone to see.

But Carlotta went about it more discreetly than that. "Would you like to choose something?" she asked. "Heidi's already taken what she wants." She handed Nina Ingrid's jewelry box. Here were all the pieces Ingrid had worn since Nina had known her, and with each she could still see the way they had looked resting on Ingrid's throat, or around the tracings of blue veins on her wrist. She chose an old-fashioned brooch on a gold chain, one she had often admired. She held it in her hand, feeling the weight of it. It had belonged to Ingrid's mother. She latched the chain around her neck and then went to look in the mirror. She wondered what Ingrid would have thought. Once, when they were going out, after Walter's death, Ingrid had asked her to latch the clasp for her. She remembered the touch of Ingrid's skin, the odor of fragrance she had put on for the occasion. How strange to wear her necklace now. She could still feel Ingrid's breath next to her own, and a shiver of recognition raced through her spine.

The day she chose a necklace of Ingrid's, Heidi had already left but Hugo was still there, skulking around, back in his old clothes. Within a few weeks he was gone, too, and the house was up for sale. A padlock had been put on the front door and the rooms were empty. It had been painted, and new shutters framed the windows. People traipsed over the threshold and trampled the flowers in the yard where Ingrid and Walter had lavished such care.

There would be money left over. It would keep Heidi and Hugo for a long time. And there were reparations, as well. In fact, Ingrid had gone back one summer to Germany. No one had returned, even the few like herself who were left alive. Other people were living in the house where she had grown up. The school was still there, and children were playing outside. "What a strange feeling," Ingrid said to Nina afterwards. "It was like looking at ghosts, as though their souls were hovering in the air and no one saw them but me."

For months that stretched into years after Ingrid died, Nina saw Hugo around town in the same ragged clothes. He looked terrible. Where was he living now? He had enough money. Of that she was sure. It broke her heart every time, a heaviness that was almost unbearable. Once, she attempted to speak to him, but he refused to answer her. He grew more ragged, and unkempt, and wild-looking. Whenever she saw him, visions of the younger, sweeter child she had known would appear. What would Ingrid think now? "You put children into the world and they travel far beyond you, so far that you couldn't even imagine the life they were going to live, a life that was not what you would have chosen for them," she might have said. Nina thought of calling Carlotta, if she was still alive, but she never did. One day she realized that she had not seen Hugo for a long time. She made inquiries, she went to the house where he had lived years ago, but he wasn't there, and no one knew where he had gone. Even Heidi had disappeared without a forwarding address, her phone disconnected. They might as well be dead, Nina thought, disappeared from the face of the earth. She never saw them again. In one way or another, she decided, Ingrid's children had been seduced by the demons that had followed her here.

Occasionally, she walked by Ingrid and Walter's house. A family with young children lived there now. Around back, the lemon and orange trees were thick with fruit, but the stalks of tomato vines were replaced with a garish play set. The rosebushes, though, lush and velvety red in the front, were still there, blooming, and Nina felt her heart rising. She wanted to pick one, remembering the bouquets that Ingrid had brought her. Pausing there one day, overcome, she tried to catch her breath, standing very quietly without moving. She could see Ingrid tending them, bending down to pull out weeds, pressing her hands on the soil, as though she had never left. What had Ingrid said

when she returned to the home that Nina could never imagine? *There were ghosts all over the place, the haunting souls of those who were gone.* That is what Nina felt that day, a heightened sense of clarity, the lives of everyone she had ever loved in the balance, the laughter of youthful voices somewhere in the distance that took her back to another place, and then the realization of time's victory over them all that Ingrid had promised her.

Judith Strasser

A Poem Not About Death

can't be about a father who died
three weeks ago, or a mother so long dead
that even the memories have ossified.
It can't be about Mojaqueras, women
of old Mojácar who hefted clay jugs
to their hips to haul water up from the fountain
and shielded their Moorish cheeks with shawls,
the saffron-dyed edges held tight
in their teeth against vagrant gusts of wind.

Those women are gone; only their pictures linger
in outdated tourist guides. Their steep dirt path
has been cobbled. In the Sierra Cabrera,
you can see it's the stones that endure,
like the basalt and granite, limestone and quartz
quarried, sorted, fitted to shape the unmortared walls
that terrace the Mojácar de Vieja plateau—
site of a pueblo built and abandoned
seven or eight centuries ago.

A poem not about death salutes the stones
and the crannies in those walls: shelter
for lizards, agave, wild thyme, scorpions,
lavender, prickly pear; cool shade
for the summer hiker; pebbled markers
for Mojaqueras, fathers, mothers;
home to all who climbed the mountain;
cairns to guide me in the hills.

Elizabeth Schultz

A Surprising Recollection of Angels

For Lou Frydman

After the snarling dogs,
no bread, but sawdust,
the loss of everyone,
and endless, shoeless
walks through snow,
then mud, the boy slid
into the stench of
the stacked barracks.

He concentrated
on daily routines,
and despite the dulling,
made lucky choices.
His hands hardened.
Cherishing his mother's
reprimands, ritualistically
he scrubbed his face
in the tainted water.
But at the end, identity
rotted among the cadavers.
He succumbed to blankness.

Until he felt the light
of strangers hovering
above him diaphanous.
He was startled awake
by the memory of angels,
white-winged birds.

Matt Piotrowski

A Disturbance in the Neighborhood

On a recent commute to work, I missed my stop. I tried to switch songs on my iPod and didn't pay attention to my surroundings. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened. I've spilled coffee while flipping through my song library; I've dropped money at an ATM as I fumbled to turn up the volume; and I've tripped over my own feet when fast-forwarding to the next track. If I can't find the iPod on the way out the door in the morning, I scream in frustration and ransack every room to make sure I have it for my bus ride. If the battery runs out midday, I'm miserable and cranky.

My previous girlfriend dumped me in part because, when we were living together, she and I rode the bus together, and I'd listen to my iPod instead of paying attention to her. But she wasn't the only one I've ignored. I've talked to cashiers at the grocery store with Arcade Fire, The Decemberists, or Modest Mouse spraying out of my earphones. I've given directions to people on the street without hitting pause. One time, while jaywalking, I was so engrossed in "Bitter Sweet Symphony" that an out-of-control cabdriver almost hit me. All this told me it was time to quit listening to the damn thing. I tried for a couple of days, but without it I felt empty. I kept at it.

Of course, it wasn't always like this. While growing up in the Eighties, I had a Walkman. It was nice for long trips in the car or by plane. But those were the only times I listened to it. It was a pain to haul along a bunch of cassette tapes for variety. The iPod, however, only the size of a cigarette pack, is much easier to carry than the clunky Walkman. The Walkman got me through the tough times growing up, but it never had the depth, variety, speed, and easiness of the iPod. Discmans? Please. I had one in college, but I hardly listened to it: It skipped, it was heavy, and I hated carrying around my precious CDs.

Although I have this love affair with my iPod, I despise technology. I actually bought one well after other people simply because of my aversion to all things tech. Technology was sup-

posed to make our lives easier. But it hasn't. Remember when setting the VCR to record was the most difficult technological challenge of the day? We now own tons of remote controls; operating a new car these days is like running the *Millennium Falcon*; and tiny digital cameras come with manuals as big as the dictionary. BlackBerries, laptops, cell phones, e-mail: Disruptions. All the time I'd see someone on the bus talking on a cell phone in one hand while e-mailing someone on a BlackBerry in the other. Some of my friends carry their laptops every goddamn place they go, and too many people can't go an hour without checking their e-mail.

My general attitude toward technology kept me from working in an office for a long time. I bartended for my first five years after college. I wore holey jeans, Chuck Taylors, and Che Guevara T-shirts to work. I gave my friends free shots. We had a jukebox that constantly played the Clash, Pink Floyd, Bruce Springsteen, U2, and Whitesnake (yes, Whitesnake). The regulars would invite me to their own parties, girls I didn't know would ask me to go home with them, and I'd go to rock shows in smoky clubs on my nights off. I wouldn't touch a computer for months; my car was a 1994 model; my 13-inch cableless TV was just for porn and sports; and my commute was a four-block walk.

I resisted working in an office as long as possible, but the long nights and constant smoke got to me. I was getting behind in my student loans and credit card debt (mainly from concert tickets and CDs), and a lot of the customers were younger than I was—by only a few years, but it made all the difference. So now, I work in an office where I edit history textbooks, drink bad coffee, and have a 401(k). I shop at J.Crew, go to rock shows only once a month, have cable (including HBO), and am looking forward to getting married—and my current girlfriend Crissy could be the one. But even so, I'll never own a BlackBerry. I'll keep my beaten-up desktop that only has a modem connection; I have no interest in getting TiVo; I always have my cell phone off and only turn it on if I have to make a call; and I never check my e-mail away from work.

But without my iPod I cannot function.

Crissy, a local news junkie, asked me to come to the living room to watch the next news segment.

"Hey, honey, did you see this, what's happened in our neighborhood?"

"Seen what," I said, looking in the refrigerator, trying to figure out if I wanted to take lunch or just buy tomorrow. "Are they talking about planting trees in the park again? That was the last thing this neighborhood was on the news for." I laughed.

"Seriously. Come here."

Though I make fun of her obsession, she always reminds me that she's on top of everything: the weather, local restaurant hot spots, the success and failures of college teams in the area, who's been elected and who's running for office, all the traffic tie-ups.

When I came in the room, she put down her Sudoku book and sat on the edge of the couch, her eyes fixed on the TV.

A commercial for toothpaste was on. "Okay," I said.

"They had a story about a couple of people who got beat up for their iPods."

"So, some people get mugged. No biggie."

She looked straight at me, as her cat jumped up on the sofa and sat on her lap.

"Not in this neighborhood," she said.

"They're hot right now. It's bound to happen."

She picked up her book and was careful not to scare the cat. "I think you need to be careful."

"Fine, fine, I'll be careful," I said. I remembered I had to iron. For me and for her. We split the chores, and this one fell on me. It was just ten past ten. "There probably won't be anymore. Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

"Sure it does." She sipped her tea.

"This is a good area. There'll be more cops here, and the muggers will move on," I said. The news was back on. The anchorman took a stab at world and national news as he talked about a report on pollution in China, the war in Iraq, and several bills in Congress.

"So, what does that mean?" she said.

"It means there'll be more police here. There'll actually be a response."

She sighed and stroked the cat. "Just be careful. Perhaps you shouldn't use the iPod at night."

"Whatever, I love that thing," I said to myself as I turned to the other room to set up the ironing board.

I took the bus home, as I did every day. I sank into my seat, listening to Bruce Springsteen's *The Ghost of Tom Joad.* My eyes fluttered. I typically prefer softer music on the ride home. On the way to work, I need much harder stuff. I liked rock more than classical, classical more than jazz, jazz more than pop.

Besides listening to music, I tried to read: the newspaper, *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, a mystery novel. Anything to keep me busy. Back in my bartending days, I never picked up the paper, and I read two novels a year, and they were usually *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Stranger.* Today I put down my magazine, since my eyes burned a little more than usual from sitting for eight hours in front of the computer. When I didn't proofread, I was reading *Slate*, *Salon*, *ESPN*, *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*. I'd read enough today to last me a month.

I watched the pedestrian traffic while the bus passed office buildings, fancy restaurants, Kinkos, a couple of Starbucks, a hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant, and some apartment buildings. A skinny Asian girl talked on her cell phone, a group of twentysomethings jaywalked, and two middle-aged men in suits crushed cigarettes before returning to their building. I felt weightless, glad Monday was finished, excited for the football game on TV tonight. It was November: cold, dark, and damp.

The bus was just a few minutes from my neighborhood, and I admit I shuddered briefly at what Crissy saw on the news last night. I confess a certain kind of fear came over me that I hadn't felt since grade school.

But what thief would strike three times in the same area in such a short time?

He'd gotten what he wanted and moved on. I only had a two-block walk from the bus stop to our garden-style apartment, past brick town houses, condo buildings, places full of young professionals, college students, and some group homes with recent graduates. But the area was also full of trees and wooded areas, where a criminal could hike or get a quick getaway.

I stepped off the bus into the cold night and searched for another album to listen to. The backlight lit the menu. Just one song. I needed just one song. With all the music at my fingertips, no pun intended, it would be a waste to walk five minutes home and not listen to anything. There it was: Lil Wayne's "Hustler Musik." The fear made me look around. But I saw nothing but empty sidewalks.

I felt a tap on my back, causing me to jump and my heartbeat to double in less than a second. I turned, and a guy my age in black slacks and a dark-gray jacket stood in front of me.

My neck and shoulders relaxed.

"Sorry to scare you," the guy said, extending his hand, holding onto a cotton hat. "You left this on your seat. Is it yours?"

"Yes, thanks," I said, letting out a loud breath. "I forgot I'd taken it off when I got on."

"Tomorrow morning would be cold without it."

"Thanks again."

At home we ate chicken and rice and a salad. Over dinner Crissy talked of how driving around all day for her job was starting to wear her down. She was a regional manager at Potbelly's and had to drive from location to location a majority of the week. I was kind of jealous at times. Although I'd adjusted to life in an office, I never got out during the day, except for lunch and trips to the post office or CVS.

"It was two-thirty in the afternoon. Why was there so much traffic at two-thirty? At eight or nine in the morning, sure. At five or six in the evening, sure."

"Perhaps they're all regional managers moving from point A to point B."

"Perhaps," she said as she took her last bite of rice. "Hey, Carla heard about the muggings."

"Really, she heard about them?" I said, raising my eyebrows. Her sister lived four hours from us.

She slipped on a thick sweatshirt that had been sitting on a chair. It was chilly.

"It's a big deal, you know, when people get beat up and mugged in a place like this."

I tuned her out for the rest of the meal and thought of what I had to do before the game: laundry, ironing, and pack a lunch for tomorrow.

After I finished my chores, I got ready for the game. I didn't feel like drinking, so I wouldn't bother with beer and peanuts. As I took my place on the couch and put a glass of water and some crackers on the coffee table, she put down her Sudoku on the coffee table. Doing the puzzle for an hour or so every night, she said, helps her relax.

"Aren't you concerned that it happened just six blocks from us?" Crissy said.

"Please," I said, sighing. "We discussed this last night. You have to stop watching the news. They're just blowing this out of proportion. It's sensationalism. They take one event and can't stop talking about it."

She nudged me in the shoulder. She looked at me with those concerned eyes again. Or were they menacing eyes? Her hair was up in a bun, and some face cream was on her chin.

"Yes, I'm concerned, but I'm not going to be alarmed," I said.

At ten she took the remote from me. I didn't struggle for it. The game was boring. Only two field goals so far. She, of course, flipped to the news. It wasn't on yet. There was a commercial for Popeye's chicken. My stomach turned over just thinking about fried food. I asked her to flip back to the game for a second. She said no.

The lead story was another mugging of a young woman who just moved to the neighborhood in August, a couple months after graduating from college. The woman on-site reported live from in front of a condo building in the back part of our neighborhood, near the community garden and the woods. Crissy cleared her throat loudly but said nothing. Since the victim went into hiding after talking to the police, the reporter had to settle on interviewing a building resident.

"It's usually very quiet here," the young man said. "In the early evening there's not much going on. It is kind of dark here. I guess everyone'll start looking over their shoulders from now on."

The news lady reminded us this was the third in the past three days. And this one, like the other two, was because of an iPod. The attacker didn't want her purse or jewelry, just the iPod. The victim, who was beaten, was a skinny, pale young woman with straight blond hair and wore a red jacket. Yes, he saw that girl every day on the bus. When coming home today, he recognized the red jacket—it stood out. He didn't personally know her or anyone else on the bus, but he felt they were all part of a large commuting team.

The attacker was black, the news lady said.

"Please, honey, just don't use it anymore, at least not at night," Crissy said, with a hint of desperation in her voice.

"Like I told you, I need it."

"You've just had it a little more than a year. You lived thirty years without it."

I laughed. "But now that I have it, I can't go out without it." I leaned back on the soft cushion. "I won't let the terrorists, sorry, muggers win."

"You know, one day you're going to get yourself killed, just because you're carrying a damn iPod."

"The chances are slim."

"Right, you never think it'll happen to you."

I reached for the remote. She pulled it away.

"I've got a forty-five-minute bus ride, and it's painful without it," I said, standing up, spreading my arms. "Anyway, it's my time to go into a different world. The music moves my soul, so to speak. It's so close to me. The music is literally inside me. I can feel every lyric, every note. It touches somewhere deep. When I'm at work or at home, all I hear is noise: coworkers, the telephone, the TV, the dishwasher. But the music, when I listen, is all I have; it touches me, moves me."

She rubbed her eyes. "You know, when you told me your ex broke up with you because of your iPod obsession, I thought it was ridiculous."

"It just wasn't that. There was much more. But her main point was that she deserved more attention, and when we rode the bus together or went for walks and I listened to music instead of talking to her, it showed what kind of personality I have."

"Perhaps your stubbornness here could be a sign of even worse in your personality."

"Don't look too much into it. I don't want to lose you. You know, for the first time, I'm really considering settling down. But I shouldn't have to give it up."

I met Crissy at a concert about nine months ago. A friend of hers dragged her along. But Crissy didn't like Neko Case, arguing she was too "honky-tonk," she told me later. At the show a couple of young drunk guys were hitting on them aggressively, and I stepped in and told the guys to back off. They did. After the show we stood outside the club, talking. Crissy, with straight brown hair parted in the middle, was looking fairly plain wearing jean shorts, open-toed sandals, and a toe ring. For some rea-

son, the toe ring made me ask her for her number instead of her blond, knockout friend. We went out the next night.

"I don't buy it. It's not worth your life."

"Jesus," I said, throwing my hands up, glancing over at the framed concert poster of Pink Floyd behind the TV. "Look, anytime I see a black guy in the neighborhood, I'll run."

She shrugged. "Fine, but you could still be caught off guard."

I finally switched back to the game. But before I could sit back down I peered out the window, where the cat was sitting, also looking out. Mostly quiet. A middle-aged man walked his dog, a car slogged on by, someone inside an Acura tried to parallel park, a bus passed in the distance. My heart skipped two beats. Out there tonight a young woman was beaten by a stranger for a few dollars' worth of technology.

Feeling down, I decided to skip the rest of the game. "Let's not jump to conclusions here and become irrational and scare ourselves to death," I told Crissy before I went to bed.

I sat on the bus in the morning, stuffed in the back corner. I did not read, and I searched for music to listen to, and I decided on Bob Dylan. I had some 2,500 songs on my iPod, and sometimes choosing what I wanted could be overwhelming.

Perhaps I could put it away on the ride home, the fear was telling me. But like I told Crissy last night, I was addicted to the iPod; there was too much emotional attachment now to put it down at a time when I could be listening to music. It provided the soundtrack of my life. Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine" took me back to my freshman year of high school; U2's "Ultra Violet" reminded me of my senior year and my high school sweetheart, Penny; The Beatles made me think of my parents' outdoor parties on Sundays in the summer, when we all ate crabs at the picnic table; Pink Floyd's "Learning to Fly" brought back the trip to Europe with my family; The Cure's "Just Like Heaven" when I lost my virginity to Tara; "Rock the Casbah" when my father took away my car keys for getting a speeding ticket; "Heroes" when Scottie Thompson played it on his boombox in the locker room before we took the court at regionals; "Brass Monkey" was what my friends and I sang while playing kickball in gym class; Crissy and I listened to Sarah McLachlan's "Possession" in the car during our first date.

And, moreover, the music was a soundtrack for the world around me. When I listened to music, the kids fighting, the homeless rattling their cups, the ambulance racing through the streets, the garbage lying in the alley all took on new meanings.

I stepped off the bus and weaved through a crowd. At the light I waited and shivered. I was longing for the warm, though static, environment of the office. It was familiar, comfortable, and safe. My cheeks turned colder. Dylan's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" kicked in. As I crossed the street, the song took me back to my freshman English class—when I read the Joyce Carol Oates' story that was inspired by the song. Professor Meyerson passed out in one of the classes. One of the students said, "Well, teacher's dead, class is over." We all laughed. It turned out he just fainted. Nonetheless, class let out early, and Audrey Jenkins and I started drinking at noon that sunny Friday, and we did so until midnight. We kissed briefly, but that was it. That was all I'd wanted. A warm, sweet, tender kiss—so random and unexpected. How I wanted a day—or just a moment—like that again.

A few days passed and nothing happened in the neighborhood. The fear still made me look over my shoulder and always stride at a brisk pace. The music, however, never stopped. I read the local crime report: robbery at a liquor store, assault at two a.m., disorderly conduct, an auto theft. Crime happened every day, everywhere. The chance of it happening to me was there, but it also might never happen. Why fret when it was a fact of life, and you had no control over it? And why fret because it might never happen?

Crissy still watched the local news every night. The usual crime reports in the worst areas of the city. There was the weather: It was going to remain cold. Sports: Local college teams still thriving.

"You know, don't get complacent when walking around with your iPod," she said one night while sitting on the couch and flipping through an issue of *Vanity Fair.* "These things are hot. It beats stealing someone's wallet."

I rolled my eyes. Then I took off my glasses and cleaned them with the bottom of my shirt. I appreciated her concern, I really did. But if I was going to change my habits, I would want to do it because I decided to, not because she told me to.

"Don't roll your eyes at me."

"Don't lecture me. You're worse than my parents."

"Your mother called today. She asked if you still used your iPod in the neighborhood."

I heaved a loud sigh. "And what did you say?"

"I told her yes, and she said, 'That stubborn son of a bitch.' We're just concerned."

She took my hand and rubbed my palm.

"That's it. I'm not talking about it at all anymore," I said. "Time for bed anyway." I kissed her on the lips. "We haven't gone to bed at the same time in a while. Let's go."

She kissed me back. "Let's go."

"Just don't turn on the news when we get in the bedroom."

"I promise you I won't." She kissed me again.

The news a few days later hit me hard—yet it was a relief in some twisted way. A thirty-three year-old woman was killed for her iPod. She had tried to fight the mugger. Once she resisted he shot her, and she died at the hospital an hour later. Crissy held back from saying anything. On the couch, while the newscast profiled the victim, she ran her fingers through her hair and blinked a number of times. I turned down the volume a bit. The phone rang, and neither of us moved. Like Crissy, I fixed my eyes on the TV. It showed a picture of the victim. Nice features: high cheekbones, thin eyelashes, straight black hair parted to the side. She was interning in the city and planned to finish her Ph.D. in urban planning next year.

Once I finished feeling sick for her, I thought of myself: Yes, that could've been me. Perhaps I should've listened to Crissy all along. I could simply put the thing away on the ride home. And even during the day it might not be worth it. Who knew that listening to songs while walking along the sidewalk could be so dangerous? I had thirty to forty years—if all went well—of listening to music of the past and what waited for me in the future. Why not put the damn machine away for a while, or at least at certain times, until this whole ordeal passes? But once this criminal was caught, would there be more and more?

Cristine sighed. She turned the channel to Comedy Central, and I thanked her. The cat let out a loud meow as she jumped up on the couch.

"I'm not going to say anything," she said, her hand still in her hair.

"No need to."

The first time I ever felt the fear came when I was eleven. My father and I were buying sandwiches and sodas in a hole-in-the-wall deli downtown around ten-thirty, after going to a baseball game. A guy wearing a thick black jacket—despite it being summer—and beat-up sneakers walked in and didn't look around to buy anything. He just stood motionless with his hands in his pockets for about three minutes. I was sure he carried a gun and would kill everyone. As my father stood patiently waiting for the sandwiches while reading the paper, I turned red and became weak in the knees. I wanted to tell him let's just leave. The guy finally purchased a pack of cigarettes and left. After my father and I got in the car, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I was scared."

"About what?"

"It turned out to be nothing."

Now that fear was a constant force in my life: The quick beats of the heart, the nausea bubbling in the throat, the throbbing of the temples. Was the fear irrational now, as it was in the deli? But fear trumped all other emotions. Fear could turn into paralysis. But the worst part was the paranoia. The constant belief that something bad would happen to you.

Music offered an escape from a life that was, at times, brutal—including, ironically, dealing with the fear. It was a liberation from loneliness. And it opened up my soul. I never liked it that Crissy never shared this passion. She was indifferent to music. She preferred movies, books, and TV. Although I'd met her at a concert, she never cared for live shows. I loved to walk the streets with the headphones in my ears. Songs gave meaning to the physical world around me. I was listening to my world—the music only I could hear.

In the next week or so, no new reports of any muggings surfaced, and the killer was finally found. News reports said he'd pawned the iPod he stole for $150. Now that the guy had been caught, Crissy got off my back. Not having music while I took walks or drank coffee at a café was indeed gloomy. Thus, all I could do was keep listening. The fear never fully subsided, but it

did ebb. I still occasionally looked over my shoulder. It had become habit. Although winter had arrived, I sometimes walked the entire way home. It was more than an hour, but I needed the exercise, and as long as my iPod battery wasn't dead the walk was pleasant.

One Saturday I went to a coffee shop about ten minutes from our place, in the business strip nearby. The sun was just about to set. It was late December, and Crissy was out of town for a conference.

I searched for what to listen to on my walk home. What could fit my melancholy mood: Crissy was away, and winter had just begun. Beck's *Sea Change*. Very even and monotone.

Once I left the café, the day had turned dark. I was wondering if I should've had the coffee. I was an insomniac anyway. The coffee tasted pleasant and warmed me up.

I turned my head. A black man was several feet behind me. My heart pounded. What could he be doing here except to mug someone? No blacks lived in this neighborhood. The fear told me from the beginning: Watch for blacks. I hated that I felt like this. Perhaps he was homeless. I picked up the pace nonetheless. The cool air chilled my throat, the wind rustled my hair. I had three blocks to walk before I was home. Should I run? A few streetlights lit the area, but they were dim.

I turned again to look behind me. His hands were in his sweatshirt pockets. I considered running. But he could probably outsprint me, tackle me, hit my head against the sidewalk, punch me in the ribs, then finally take my iPod. Why didn't I just listen to Crissy? Why did I insist on listening at night on isolated streets? If I were mugged, I was sure many—including Crissy—would say I deserved it.

I looked around for somebody, anybody. No one. I tripped a bit and imagined myself falling flat on my face. But I regained my balance and pushed up the hill. My legs burned, and, despite the cold, a warm sweat broke out on my forehead. Just as I approached an alley, my heart beat even faster. A cell phone rang. It wasn't mine. The guy behind me started speaking.

"Hey, I'm just two blocks away. Will be there in a second."

The muscles in my shoulders relaxed, and I turned the corner onto my street without looking back. For sure, the fear on my face had likely not yet faded. Before I reached my house, I stopped, turned down the volume so much that I could hardly

hear Beck. I stood still. I looked back just to remind myself how ridiculous I'd been. But had I been ridiculous?

A few minutes later I was in the apartment. I threw my iPod across the living room. It hit the wall but didn't break. There, on the floor, the poor thing looked lonely and useless. A few seconds later I picked it up and tossed it against the wall again. Nothing happened. I sat on the couch and spread my arms on the back of it. I wished I'd never had that paranoia. Perhaps it was normal, but the fear had enveloped me. I imagined the black guy who'd been behind me was now at a party, laughing, downing a bottle of beer, saying, "There was this white guy who was walking in front of me, and he was moving so fast, looking over his shoulder like he was scared shitless."

I kicked off my shoes and promised myself never to listen to that damn thing ever again.

But a week later I was back at it. I couldn't stand working out without it. The weather turned warmer than normal for an early winter afternoon. I went for a Sunday jog on the path through the woods behind our neighborhood. I put the iPod on shuffle and, luckily, had some good songs going: "Thunder Road," "Sympathy for the Devil," "The One I Love." My pace was good, and the ground was soft. I always enjoyed running during the winter. Never had to worry about the heat causing exhaustion. The sweat was always pleasantly chilly.

I stopped and wiped my forehead with the bottom of my shirt. My run, so far, had been roughly a half hour. I'd give myself a five-minute break, then run for another half hour. I took several deep breaths and lip-synced to an old song by The Smiths. A slight breeze tickled me on the neck.

When the five minutes ended, I started at a slow pace, just plodding along. My bones felt like they cracked as I lengthened my stride.

Springsteen's "Born To Run" kicked in, giving me more energy. I lengthened my stride some more, and I felt like screaming at the top of my lungs. I'd been listening to this song for more than twenty years, and each time it sounded new. *Sprung from cages on Highway 9 / Chrome wheeled, fuel injected /And steppin' out over the line.* I ran on my toes, punching my arms into the air. About a third of the way into the song, I could hear my heavy breaths. Perhaps I was running too fast; perhaps I'd soon

trip on the uneven ground, where rocks and tree branches lay in my path. Regardless, I wouldn't slow down.

A middle-aged man in faded jeans, with his hands in his pockets, walked on the trail, coming in my direction. Just as I was about to nod a hello, he stretched out his arms, hit me on my left shoulder, and tackled me into the bushes. Something pricked my eye. My forearm started to bleed. I lay on my side, and I felt a sharp pain on my hip.

"What the hell?" I said.

The guy stood over me. I realized there might not be anyone around to help, and this guy could kill me right now. He had a thin beard and wavy brown hair. Didn't look too abnormal, but then again, serial killers could fit in anywhere if they wanted to, couldn't they? Crissy, of course, always told me to be careful while running on these isolated trails. Once a year, typically, a young woman in her early twenties was either beaten or killed while running.

"Give me your iPod," he said.

If I tried to get up, he'd just knock me down. Although he was a bit lanky, the guy probably stood taller than six feet. I had no chance; he could kick my head like a soccer ball. To get back onto the trail and outrun him, I'd have to somehow push him out of the way. Again, I had no chance.

Everybody's out on the run tonight / But there's no place left to hide.

When I was eleven I went to my first concert—Bruce Springsteen's Born In the U.S.A. tour. My father and I had seats in the last row of the stadium. When Bruce played this song, the stadium shook as the entire crowd jumped up and down. The crowd noise almost drowned out the band. My dad and I were as far away in the stands as possible. But we didn't care. The euphoria was tremendous, and it grew and grew during the song, the excitement intoxicating. Never, ever will I probably feel such bliss as I did while this song played on that warm summer night.

"Just wait till this song is over," I told the guy.

The guy frowned and leaned toward me. I held out my hand for him not to come closer and shook my head. The guy then stood motionless.

"Just let me finish this song."

The man remained motionless.

But till then tramps like us / Baby we were born to run.

As the song wound down with the final guitar notes, I noticed I wasn't scared. The fear was not there. Once the song ended, I unstrapped the holder and gave the iPod to him. The man bolted, and through the ringing in my ears I could hear his footsteps crunch a bunch of twigs.

For a second I thought of getting up and chasing him or finding some phone, where I could call the cops or Crissy. But I surrendered myself to just lying there. The cold dirt felt pleasant on my back. A leaf tickled my ear. The music still traveled through my head. The voices and lyric and guitar all kept at it in my mind, as if I were listening to it for real. My memories, so many to list, came back to me, and until the music faded away, I would lie here on this glorious day and relive as much of my past that I could.

Joanne Lowery — Cassatt's Virginity

Her parents gave her the purest name,
and apparently she was never wooed.
So why would it matter if Mary lay with Degas,
both of them removing their clothes
brushstroke by brushstroke, both of them
tilting their heads to change how light
turned the other's skin from biscuit to roses
as with a well-drawn hand both of them
reached beyond their failing eyesight
to press imperfect flesh to imperfect flesh
and for a moment abolish art. Love
may have made them do it.
If so, it never showed. Childless,
her hymen a private drum, she painted babies
with women, independent of beard or sperm.
She tried to be separate but equal.
There, as she lifted a bare arm
to tie back her shimmering hair.

Brian Cronwall

Love and the Weather

From *majizogipan*,
the snow beginning light,
carried in early-winter winds,
from tiny flakes
to large clusters, dry to wet, light
to heavy fall,
to *bimipo*,
snow ending, skies
clearing, air sharper and colder:

more than ten Ojibwe words
for different gradations of snow,
yet we, we only have one word for *love*.

Sometimes, my love is *bisipon*,
light
love just dusting the ground, dancing
only briefly in a light breeze of laughter,
or I may feel *madjipo*,
larger flakes
driven by strong winds, biting to the bone,
heavily drifting passion,
or sometimes
somewhere in between.

Tonight, a chill wind outside
fades here inside, where your thighs
and mine begin the flowing fire,
zhadipon,
my love,
snow turning to rain,
rain
to quickening snow.

Aaron Hellem

Helena

1.

On Thanksgiving Day night, a woman on the keno machine next to me asked me how old I was, and I told her to guess. She said, You look just right to me. She smiled to let me know there was something between us, and it wasn't just the static electricity in the air from all the machines and the carpet. She had rough skin like peeling paint. An awful old color to her teeth. She looked like she'd been around everyone's block twice. I bet her body had once been the talk of the town, a nice shape that got her out of trouble and loose inhibitions that got her right back into it. Her hips suggested a couple of rug rats but I looked past that, willing to trust that the circumstances on that Thanksgiving Day night were strange enough already for me to feel free to take a good long look at her, thighs to neck, because she was sexy in her red sweater and orange lipstick. Sexy in her worn jeans and cheap silver bracelets. Her fake fingernails and penciled-on eyebrows. In the right light, she could've shown me a thing or two.

Can I buy you a beer? I asked her.

They're free, she said.

Right. I fed another five into the poker machine. I felt like I was doing laundry instead of gambling. I held my pair of twos by pushing on the screen face in hope for a third: three blanks.

I've never seen you in here before, she said.

There's a good reason for that, I told her. What's your name?

Rhonda.

She waited for me to tell her mine. I'd never been a Dale before. Or a Jake. I was Rick more times than I could count. I told her it was Dale because I could never pull off Jake, no matter how hard I tried.

That's a nice name, she said.

As long as she didn't show her teeth, I could fall for her smile.

What are you doing here on Thanksgiving Day? she said.

Playing poker.

That's not what I mean.

I'm with a friend, I told her, and pointed at Dan across the room feeding more money into a keno machine. Earlier that day, I'd eaten dinner with his family whom I'd never met before. Because I didn't have anywhere to go that year, he told me to tag along with him back home to Helena. His old man was in the hospital, but we went with his mother over to her mother's house where I had a two-hour conversation with his Alzheimer grandpa about the best way to cut a hole in a lake for ice fishing. I didn't know anything about it so he did most of the talking and repeating. I had to introduce myself to him seven times, even though neither of us moved from our chairs. Dan had already blown a hundred dollars on keno and didn't look like he was planning on slowing down. He had that flash in his eyes, as though he intended on gambling and drinking himself into amnesia. I was content staying back at his house with his mother, but he didn't want to.

Across the room, Dan slid in another twenty, eased back into his chair with his intense numbers stare. I glanced back at Rhonda, and she was watching me.

Did you have dinner? I asked her.

At my sister's, Rhonda said.

I nodded. I held four cards and hoped to hit a gut-shot straight. The problem with this thing is you can't bluff it at all, I said.

That's why I stick to keno, she said.

I don't know how to play it.

Come on over here and I'll show you, she said. It was like she set me up to have a reason to get close to me, to touch shoulders and share air, for her to squeeze my thigh to let me know it was all right to kiss her. I played out my last dollar and moved a stool next to hers. She let me sidle in real close to look over her shoulder. She smelled like a coat closet. She reached out and let her hand linger high up on my leg.

You pick six numbers, she said, and showed me the way to do it by touching the screen. Her small hand moved deliberate across the machine. She left her other hand on my leg and left lipstick on the rim of her beer glass. I don't have to work tomorrow, she said.

I was close enough to hear the miles of gravel road at the ends

of her sentences. I nodded to let her know I didn't have to work the next day either.

What about your friend? she said.

I don't think he has to work tomorrow, I said.

Not that, she said. It looks like he may be heading out.

I looked over at the bar where Dan was trying to cash another check. He's got the devil in him tonight, I said.

That makes two of us, she said. She squeezed my thigh high, leaned over and pressed her lips on the side of my neck, enough for me to feel her hot breath on my skin. Soft and fast, and she went back to picking her numbers: birthdays, lucky days, lucky numbers. I always pick my age, she said. Pressed her finger on forty-seven. I couldn't believe it. She still had a thirty-year-old's body. Like this, sugar, she said, and picked her other numbers while I watched.

I think I get it, I said.

You certainly do, she said. She smiled at me with the corners of her lips, watched me out of the corners of her eyes.

Dan walked over and laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. I thought I told you to stay away from keno, he said.

I couldn't help it, I told him.

You should stick to poker, he said. He was looking at Rhonda, and noticed the way we were sitting close.

This is Rhonda, I told him.

I know Rhonda, he said.

I glanced at Rhonda, and she stood up.

I have to go to the little girl's room, honey, she said. Save my seat.

I watched the back of her tight jeans all the way to the restrooms, floating side to side like a wispy string of smoke. You know her? I said to Dan.

Everybody knows her, Dan said.

No one should be alone on Thanksgiving Day, I said.

Listen, he said, I need more money and they won't take any more of my checks.

I've only got a twenty.

That's perfect. I'm about to take a turn for the better and by the end of the night we'll be eating steaks.

I'm still full of turkey, I said. I gave him the twenty and he was gone, to a different machine on the other side, and I went

back to out-of-sight-out-of-mind-until-I-need-another-twenty-spot. I tried to make sense of the keno machine, but there were too many blips, too many flashes, too many things going on all at once. I had a handle on how to pick the numbers, and I did when it prompted me to pick a few of my lucky numbers. My birthday: 13. My age: 24. The age difference between us: 23. I pressed the button, and numbers flashed and lighted on the screen, but when it was done I couldn't tell if I'd won or not. I waited for Rhonda before I picked any more. I finished my beer. Looked over at the clock. Finished hers. I got up and headed back to the bathrooms. I knocked on the ladies' room door, propped it open, and called out to her.

Down here, honey, she said from one of the stalls.

I stepped inside and saw there were no urinals or writing on the wall. Is there anyone else in here? I said.

It's just us, honey, she said from the end stall. Smoke lifted over the top and stretched across the ceiling. She opened the stall door. Come on in, she said.

Yeah? I said. I can wait out here. I peeked in, and Rhonda was sitting on top of the toilet seat cover, one foot propped on the toilet paper dispenser. She had a joint and held it out for me.

Have some, she said.

I reached for it, but she pulled it away. Inside, she said. So no one sees.

I squeezed in and shut the door. I locked it. The inside smelled sweet like something sitting in the sun. I leaned against the door and inhaled. I held it and blew it up toward the ceiling.

What did your friend want? she said.

I handed the joint back to her. She kissed it, and the tip of it glowed. He needed more money, I said.

She reached out and wrapped her hand around my belt. Hooked her fingers in my belt loop. I like you, Dale, she said.

I probably blushed because she blushed, too. She let go of my belt to brush back her hair. Long brown strands that shimmered like moving water. I felt myself staring at her chest. She sure as hell didn't look like anybody's mother. She stood up and flushed the joint. Grabbed a hold of my belt again.

I know you want to kiss me, she said.

My head spun around in circles. Colors and keno numbers. My birthday. My age. Her lucky number: 47. Next year: 48. She licked her lips. Right now? I said.

Yeah.

I mean, right here? In here? In the ladies' room?

She pressed her chest into mine. Let her other hand brush against my crotch. Women who were forty-seven didn't do those things, didn't look that good doing those kinds of things. I let my hands find her hips, my lips find her mouth. I laid one on her and she pulled me closer and opened her mouth. I closed my eyes and let myself drown in the River Rhonda.

Rhonda pulled away. I waited for her to come back, but she didn't. I opened my eyes. You're soaking me, honey, she said. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

I'm sorry, I said.

Just take it slow, she said. Like this. She cradled my face with her hands and held my head in place, nibbled at my lips with hers. Moved slow around my mouth. I moved my hands around to her seat, squeezed in there like two hard peaches. I opened my mouth to find hers. She stopped again.

What? I said.

I'm wet again, she said. This isn't the first time you've kissed a girl, is it, honey?

I let go of her.

It's just that you're kind of all over the place.

What the hell do you want?

Like this, she said. She tilted my head and kissed my lips, only my lips, soft like a slow dance. She pushed me against the door, moved her whole body into mine. I felt ready to jump out of my clothes, out of my skin, out of my head.

Then it was my turn to pull away. I can't wait, I told her.

Not here, she said. She grabbed her purse and then it was me leading her out of the ladies' room and over to our chairs for coats, across the room to the door, out to the parking lot to her Impala. I didn't even bother telling Dan I was going. She let me drive. She told me how to get to her place, a trailer a few miles outside of town.

In the middle of Montana on Thanksgiving Day night I followed Rhonda across the gravel to the front door. Through the front door and inside where the world thawed in a wet warmth. There were dolls on the floor, dishes in the sink, mail all over the table. I'll make us a drink, she said.

I'll sit down, I said.

Yeah, she said. She glowed like parts of her were halogen.

The trailer was shaped like a shotgun barrel lengthwise and there wasn't really a separate living room, but on the one end of it were a sofa and a couple of old chairs pointed at a large television. A coffee table covered with magazines, fingernail polish, empty juice boxes. It was messy like a man lived there with her, and I panicked that she had a husband, ex or otherwise. I looked around for clues, animal heads mounted on the wall, softball trophies on the shelves instead of books, work boots muddying up a corner, condom wrappers lying around. There wasn't any of that. Even the mess had a woman's touch. I could hear Rhonda in the kitchen cracking ice cube trays, dropping ice cubes into glasses, pouring club soda on top. The club soda fizzed like something melting in acid. I glanced down at the dolls on the floor, some without clothes and some with only half their clothes, dropped as though abandoned in the middle of playing. I looked at the pictures on the walls, watercolor trees, fountains, couples with parasols and picnic baskets. In the kitchen, she clanged silverware. Clinked a spoon inside the glasses as she stirred whiskey into club soda. She sang a song I couldn't quite hear.

So whose dolls are these? I called to her.

She clanged the spoon into the sink. My sister's girls, she called back. The kitchen light shut off. She came out with two highballs and her pants button undone. She handed me one of the drinks, smiled at me from behind her suggestive eyes and shiny strands of hair hanging down over her face. She moved around the room and over the dolls, turning on a lamp in one corner and another on an end table. She moved back over to the sofa where she settled in next to me. Clinked her glass against mine. To new friends on Thanksgiving Day, she said.

Is that what we are?

For now. The light from one lamp shined smooth across her cheek. The light from the other glowed golden on her chest, her arm in motion, her legs in jeans. Glittered along her cheap jewelry, which, in the light of her trailer, didn't look cheap at all. She blushed at my awe, and laid her hand on my knee. I hid behind my glass. She jiggled the ice in hers. Played with her necklace. Fingered the little silver heart hanging down between her breasts. I felt myself staring. I knew what it meant when she ran her fingers along the chain and ran her tongue along her orange lips. I wasn't ready for it. I had a turtle's confidence, too intimi-

dated by her rapids to rush in. Inside my head, I second-guessed each breath, every smile, all my movements. I tried to picture myself living there with her, thinking that might help me find the courage. I tried to picture myself in my underwear, feet on the coffee table, Thanksgiving football on the television and Thanksgiving turkey in the oven. Rhonda, my woman, in a pink robe half-done. The mess both of ours. Home was where you dropped your trash, cluttered your stuff, stacked your mail, unlaced your boots. She was ready for me.

Your sister's kids? I said.

She looked confused.

The dolls.

She glanced down at them, and the stretch of light left one side of her face gray in the shadow. I saw how the necklace chain found wrinkles in her neck. They were over earlier while my sister was making dinner, she said.

The juice boxes, too.

I'm not much of a housekeeper anymore, honey, she said.

I'm sorry, I said.

You should take off your boots, she said. Men and their boots. I've had others here where they didn't even bother to take them off.

I unlaced my boots and kicked them off. My feet sighed, and I hoped they didn't stink.

You still have your coat on, she said.

I took it off. Took up my glass. Took two inches off it. The courage was somewhere down there. I just needed to find it. Or flush it out with whiskey. I didn't feel like a Dale anymore since I hadn't earned it. I thought about telling her my real name.

We can go to the bedroom, if you want, she said.

I guess we should, I said. I drained my glass and set it next to hers. I followed her toward the back of the trailer. I watched her ass swivel side-to-side with the feminine confidence of a cat, watched her glimpse me over her shoulder. She shed her sweater on the way, dropped it in the kitchen sink. Looked at me again over her freckled shoulder. Freckles covered her back too, scattered all along the silver strap of her bra. I reached out for her. Let my fingers linger along her shoulder blades.

Right here, she said. She opened a door and flicked on a light. The bedroom was just a bed and clothes piled in the corners. She pinned me in the door jamb, smothered my mouth with hers,

her hands fumbling with my belt, my buttons, my zipper. I moved my hands around the back to get off her bra. I pulled at it to unsnap it, but it didn't go. I pulled at it to unhook it. I kissed her neck, but could feel her impatience. Here, she said, and pushed away my hands. Like this, honey, she said, and with a finger flicked it free. I laid my hands all over her and felt her breasts and the lumps inside them, hard bumps under the skin in clusters around her nipples. She pulled away and lay down on the bed. The waves rocked her back and forth. They're just cysts, she said, but I didn't know what that meant. Were they going to blow up? The word was exotic enough to scare me, something that might have been contagious, for all I knew.

There's a lot of them, I said. I could tell from her long look I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry, I said. I didn't mean that.

They're benign, she said. If that's what you mean.

That word was just as foreign.

She shimmied out of her jeans, and threw them in the doorway at me. She leaned back against the pillows, thighs parted, and beckoned me with a crooked finger and a silver crotch. She shimmered like the slate top of a lake in untrustworthy moonlight.

I shut out the lights. I felt her hands run through my hair to the back of my head where she guided me along. She was telling me what to do, but it all sounded Spanish. She held the back of my head and moved me where she wanted me to go, and I guess it went because then she was ready and slung shot her panties through the dark and into the corner. We were naked together, from every angle, until we finally lay there exhausted and the waves rocked us as though the world had liquefied under our heat.

You're on my hair, honey, she said.

I moved over. It was good, I said. The words sounded like they came across an answering machine.

She lit a cigarette and passed it to me. I watched the tip burn cherry red, then pumpkin orange. I sucked the smoke inside me where it found every sensitive spot in my body and burned every exposed nerve ending. It wasn't at all like in the movies. It was better than that because it was real and loud and almost fighting and human and afterwards felt so hot. My whole body felt plugged in.

Oh honey, she said, and kissed me on the neck. She held on to me like we were both sinking. What a Thanksgiving, she said.

I waited until she was asleep before I rolled over and curled up to her.

I woke up not knowing where I was or the time. Light came in through the window, but it was gray and muffled. The sheets were gathered around me like a dead leopard's skin. The bed sloshed under me and slapped against the panel sides. The door was open; sounds in the kitchen. Drawers opened. Pans clanked. Spatula scraped. I smelled eggs. Coffee. Cigarettes. I rubbed the raw out of my eyes. I realized then it was the day after Thanksgiving, and I didn't know exactly where I was. I tasted her stale in my mouth.

I looked out the window to see what time it looked, but it was gray as city slate, a cloud cover smothering the sun. Bits of snow fell to the ground, like small flecks of dust. A shiver settled all over. I found my shirt on the floor, pulled on my underwear, and tiptoed across the cold floor. In the kitchen, Rhonda was at the stove. A robe hung loose on her body, a cigarette dangled between her lips; smoke came out of her in timed puffs like a train's engine. Scrambled eggs with a bent spatula. A cup of coffee steamed within reach. She didn't look up. Morning, I said. I crossed my arms against the cold.

Coffee's over there, she said. She pointed at it with the bent spatula. The gravel back in her voice. Cold in both her shoulders. Her body round where she'd curved the night before. Over there, she said again. She motioned toward a corner of the counter where a small Mr. Coffee hissed at me.

I'm all right, I said.

They're almost ready, she said.

Smells good, I told her. I sat down at her small breakfast table, pushed aside the stack of mail, bottles of fingernail polish, empty Diet Pepsi cans, week-old newspapers. Her sweater was still in the sink. Still on top of the pile of dishes. She flipped eggs, lit another cigarette. I saw the spots on the backs of her hands, the streaks of gray in her tangled hair. She scraped the eggs onto a plate and dumped the skillet into the sink on top of her sweater. She set the plate down on the table and grabbed a fork from the rack of clean dishes.

Thanks, I said.

She went into the refrigerator and poured me a glass of orange juice.

Aren't you going to have any? I said.

I never eat breakfast, she said. She didn't look at me, but stared past me through the one window next to the front door. The eggs were loaded with salt, but I didn't say anything.

Looks cold out there, I said.

She got up for an ashtray, and sat back down.

This is going to be my first winter here, I said.

Where?

Montana.

She looked at her fingernails and picked at the pieces of polish coming off.

I spent one down in Colorado a couple years back, I said. Two years ago.

Spent what in Colorado?

A winter.

I've never been to Colorado, she said.

You'd like it there.

I don't like it here. When she exhaled, it looked like it hurt.

I was only down there for a couple months, I said. I worked in a kitchen washing dishes. I glanced over at the sink.

She had another cup of coffee and another cigarette. She stared at me for a long time. Jesus, you're young, she said. How old are you anyway?

It made me want to go back into the bedroom and hide under the covers, wait twenty years until it was all right for me to come out again. It made me feel like I didn't know anything or that I hadn't been to the places I had. I wish you didn't bring that up, I said. It was such a great night.

I figured you were at least twenty-one because you were in the bar, she said. But now that I really see you, you look more like sixteen. She was smiling, but it wasn't funny. If I had any kids, they could be your age, she said. She stabbed out her cigarette.

I'm old enough, I told her.

How old?

I didn't say anything.

She lit yet another cigarette.

You sure do smoke a lot, I said.

Tell me, and I won't mention it again, she said. I promise.

It was the expression on her face, half hurt and half hunger, that needed to know for whatever reason. Maybe so that when she remembered it, she could recall it with honesty. I'm twenty-four, I told her.

She laughed, and shook her head. I really did it this time, didn't I, she said.

Maybe I should get going, I said. I waited for her to stop me and tell me to stay, but she didn't.

Yeah, that's for the best, she said.

I waited, and she said it again.

I went into the bedroom and finished getting dressed. I stopped to say goodbye, but she wasn't looking at me. I zipped up my coat and walked out the door. It never occurred to me that I'd come home with her in her car and had no idea which way to go until I was outside and it was too late to go back. I shoved my hands in my pockets and headed up the road in the direction I thought might lead somewhere, against the wind blowing cold in my eyes. Snowflakes salted the road in front of me and the stretch of it behind.

2.

I got a mile down the road when the police cruiser pulled up alongside me. The officer rolled down the window. What are you doing out here? he said. He looked about my age, maybe younger. Dimpled cheeks, pockmarked and sparsely covered with coarse stringy hairs. The suggestion of a mustache on his upper lip. I glanced up the road where it bent around a corner a half mile away. Then back the way I'd come. My footprints in the trace sheet of snow dusted the ground like powdered sugar.

Can you talk? the officer said.

I nodded.

You look cold.

I am, I told him.

Where you heading?

Back into town. I told him the name of the bar where I'd left Dan.

I know where that is, he said. Get in. I'll give you a lift. It was snowing and freezing. It's a few miles, he said.

I got in and buckled up. He rolled up the window. Rolled slow up the road. The dashboard was illuminated with all kinds

of lights. A holstered shotgun stuck out between us like a parking brake. The officer kept checking his mirrors and glancing at the dashboard. It's usually a pretty slow day after Thanksgiving, he said. Everybody sleeping late. Don't have to work, and probably ate too much. He adjusted his own belt and pushed a couple of buttons on the dashboard. I glanced at the speedometer, and it bumped between twenty and twenty-five. What are you doing out this way? he said. He didn't look at me.

I was lost, I told him.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

I must have ended up out here, I said. Through the window, the world of Montana stretched out rugged and unforgiving. Cold and bitter.

It's your business, he said. As long as it wasn't anything illegal. He looked at me and waited.

Of course not.

I was just kidding you, he said. He slapped my shoulder. Besides, unless I catch you or you confess, there's not much I can do about it now. He slowed the cruiser down and then stopped it completely. He stared at me. Opened his eyes wide like I was small print. I'm a good judge of people, he said. You have to be in my line of work. Usually I can tell just by looking at someone if they've been up to no good. You know, doing drugs or vandalizing. He leaned closer to me. Gripped one hand on the shotgun butt. Sometimes I can smell it, too, he said. He sniffed at the air like a dog. Something in the blood, he said. It comes out through the pores. You know, on your skin. He sniffed again. It was quiet between us.

I didn't say anything. I held onto the side of the seat.

I'm still just kidding you, he said. Then he smiled. I had you going, though, he said. He pressed on the gas and we were going again. You out-of-towners, he said. Easy as fish. He slapped at the steering wheel. You'll believe anything. He giggled and it spurted out his nose. I gripped the side of the door. The cruiser accelerated. The snow whipped past us.

It's these slow mornings, he said. It's not that I'm wishing for any action or anything. Us good cops we never wish for action; in fact, we wish there's not going to be any action. Nothing but quiet. We don't wish for fights to break out or domestic disputes to go too far, if that's what you're thinking. He glanced over at

me again. We don't want to have to mediate those, he said. When it comes right down to being on the job, this is the kind of day we hope for. Hope, hell, this is the kind of day we pray for. Nice and quiet with everyone just living out their lives. Know what I mean? He looked at me again. You look like you might've been party to one of those domestic disputes yourself, he said.

Not me, I told me.

Just out walking. From the bar all the way out here?

I met a girl last night, I told him.

He grinned like it was the funniest damn thing he'd heard in weeks. Well, hot dog, why the hell didn't you just say so? he said. On Thanksgiving, you old hound. Then he howled like a hound. He reached up and gave the siren a whoop. It's a long walk of shame all the way the hell out here, right? he said. He slapped the steering wheel and giggled with his whole body.

I wanted to get out of the car. We'd already gone a couple miles, but nothing looked familiar. It didn't even look like we were heading back into town. The houses were few and far between on long stretches of wooded land. I looked behind us where the snow swirled to the ground.

We're taking the scenic route, the officer said. That bar you're going to isn't open again until eleven.

What time is it? I asked him.

I'll be damned, it must've been one hell of a night if you don't even know what time it is, he said. He whooped, and then whooped the siren once more. The cruiser was picking up speed. He accelerated when we hit an open stretch. There weren't any houses around, and all the pine trees shivered in the morning snow. I don't know you, the officer said. He was watching the road straight ahead. The speedometer reached and then passed fifty. I haven't seen you around these parts.

No, I said.

Not from around here?

Missoula, I told him.

He nodded. That's where all them uppity college students are, he said. College isn't everything, you know. It doesn't make you into a man.

I nodded.

Look at me, he said. I didn't need any college. A crash course at the academy, and look at me now, protecting in the interest of

the law. What do you think of that? He waited for me to say something. Well? he said.

It's not for everyone, I told him.

Not any real man, anyway, he said. Real men serve their country and their state. Either in the army or the force. His cheeks twitched when he said it. Veins in his neck protruded. I looked out the window. It was the type of landscape in between towns, rising and dipping hills, tall trees heavy with age and old growth, tall brown grass sticking up in the snow like unburied metacarpals. The ground hard and cold and unyielding for any grave. You're not one of those college boys, are you? he said.

I didn't want to say anything.

Well? he said.

No, I told him.

You over here by yourself?

I came with a friend.

What's his name?

Dan, I said.

The car cruised at sixty and tore through the middle of the snow. Dan Johnson? he finally said.

Rollins, I think, I told him.

He nodded. I know his sister, he said, but that was all he said.

It made me wonder if he knew her like I knew Rhonda. Then it made me wonder if he knew Rhonda like I knew Rhonda. If maybe he was the one who kept his boots on.

Did you have dinner with them? he said. Everyone should have somewhere to go on Thanksgiving. He nodded like it was a truth everyone believed. Then he said, His grandpa's a big fisherman. I'm a hunting man myself. Always did prefer guns to poles. You?

I haven't done much of either. We were still cruising fast, but the car didn't slide at all.

You've never shot a rifle? he said. How long have you lived here?

Not long.

You've got to know how to shoot a rifle, he said. It's not the law, at least not one written down, but it's just something understood. Everyone here knows how to shoot.

I tried to see if he had slowed down any, but the car was still coasting at sixty. We'd come five miles. The snow fell harder and

stuck to the windshield. It accumulated on the road and the ground, too. Where are we going? I finally asked him.

I know a place out here, he said. He looked at me sideways. You know what for. He slapped my thigh, then squeezed it. Your initiation, he said.

I started to sweat from the visions that flashed strobe-like inside my head.

If you're going to live here in Montana, it's my lawful duty to teach you how to operate a firearm, he said. He swelled out his chest and nodded. I held on to the side of the door and saw that it was locked. There wasn't any way on my side to unlock it.

Paved road gave way to loose gravel and made the back end of the cruiser slide to the left when we hit it at sixty. The officer righted it and kept the speed steady. The shocks absorbed all the pits and pocks we sped over, around, and through. The officer giggled to himself like a little boy with a brand new BB gun and an entire world of moving targets. He took a sharp left off the gravel road onto a worse gravel road, one lane through bare branches. Their scraping against the side of the car made me grit my teeth.

No one comes out this way, he said. He looked at me and nodded. Licked his lips. Just around the bend, he said.

Just around the bend was a small turnaround where the gravel road ended. He parked and got out. He went to the trunk. I stared out at the snow falling faster as though it were getting ready to cover tracks and bury evidence. The officer yelled for me. He yelled, Get out here, buddy! and I did. I went around to the trunk. The officer had a whole arsenal inside. A couple long rifles, a half-dozen pistols, shotguns, and a machine gun-looking thing that only a soldier should've been allowed to have.

We should start with shotguns, he said. He handed me one. A man who can't shoot a shotgun is just a waste of space, he said. He smiled sly the way men do between each other when they prepared to do things they weren't supposed to do. The way little boys do when they play with matches and start fires. Take this one, too, he said, and handed me a pistol that looked heavy-duty but only weighed as much as a bottle of beer. The guns felt like they were made of plastic. Keep it like this, he said, and shoved a pistol into his pants with the handle sticking out. It

made me feel like I was in a Western, like Clint Eastwood cutting down bad guys. Or Alan Ladd when he gives Jack Palance all the medicine he can handle. Instant toughness. I wasn't afraid of anything. You're ready now, he said.

I was ready.

I followed him up a trail off the road, to a small clearing where a stand of trees had been cut down. The stumps stuck out like grave markers. That one, the officer said. He stopped fifty feet away from one of the bigger ones. An old pine tree stump as round and big as a pickle barrel. There were teeth marks already in the sides. I listened and it was perfectly quiet in that spot. No sounds of people, cars. The snow falling faster didn't make a sound either as it gathered gently along the ground. I found I didn't want to move or breathe for fear if I made a sound it would all disappear. I closed my eyes and listened. A boom tore through it and brought me back to the world. I saw the side of the stump where the buckshot bit into it. Where the barrel breathed into the cold air. He loaded another shell. He took aim. Steady. Squeezed the trigger. The shotgun coiled like a rattlesnake and sprayed venom into the stump.

Doesn't matter where you hit it, he said. It just feels good to feel it at all. His words sounded like crackling icicles in the din of silence right after a shotgun shot. Your turn, he said.

I did it without thinking. I held the shotgun like he showed me. He told me to stand firm, brace myself for the kickback. He stood behind me with his heavy hands on my shoulders. He pushed down so I would bend my knees some. He said my shoulder would feel sore at first, like I'd been punched there a half-dozen times with brass knuckles, but that it would go away when the adrenaline kicked in. I stared down the sights, one eye squinted shut, and aimed with the other, high up on the stump like he told me to. I inhaled. Like he told me to. Held it. Squeezed the trigger. I saw the shards of stump spray into the air before I felt the burning throb spread from my shoulder into the tips of my fingers. Then, all the way down my sternum. I coughed.

Hot damn! he shouted. You're a goddamned natural. He took aim and let one loose on the same spot I hit. The buckshot chewed through it like impatient termites. We marked it black with burns that, against the white of the snow, looked like bruises. I shot another one. Focused on how it felt in my arms

and my hands; how the heat of it moved up and down my back. How it vibrated through my forearms and all the bones in my hands. I fired off another. Then another. The officer whooped like an Indian. The stump didn't move. It bled away parts where the shots burrowed in. He dropped his shotgun and pulled out his pistol. He aimed it and unloaded it into the stump. I started to count them, the small firework pops, but stopped at ten. He kept going until the gun clicked empty. I pulled out mine and held it in both hands. I aimed it tight and let it loose. The stump stood there in the cold and took it, absorbed the bullets like a soft body.

Then I stopped. The officer stopped too. It didn't make anything better.

I got to head back, I told him.

You have to go? he said. Right now?

Dan's probably out looking for me, I said.

He lowered his pistol and popped out the clip. He slipped the clip into his back pocket. Yeah, he said, I guess it's time. He didn't move. He stood there staring at the chewed-on side of the stump and the smoke in the air. I stuck the pistol in my belt and laid my shotgun on the ground next to his. I waited for him to make the first move back to the car.

It's not that we wish for any action, he said, but it gets so lonely out here. Especially at night. No one to talk to. His arms hung at his sides. He turned away. His shoulders shook. Oh god, he said. He turned back toward me. His cheeks were flushed. Tears smeared down the front of his face. It's just so lonely, he said. He reached out for me and hugged me. He smelled like gunpowder sprinkled on leather. His flashlight and hip holster poked me in each side. He squeezed me, and held on tight like he'd drift away into the snowy sky if I let him go. I held onto him while he shook like a sputtering hose. The snow swirled down around us. Our breaths mingled in the cold air. Right there I knew then, as men know sometimes about where they are and where they're going, that I'd never get out of Montana.

Carol Tufts

One Year Later

Because I cannot live
this precision of your death,
I still insist on sightings,
some signal
in the angle of a man's hat,
or the uncanny shape
of a laugh
lapping the bisecting air.

You are the sign
I watch for,
the message I transcribe
from otherworldly code—
the dropped clock resuming
its seconds intact,
the phone sounding
fathomless intervals
through the hollow night,
the voice pulsing
along the wire my own
sleepless longing.

So you remain
incommunicado, a shadow
flickering along a maze
of light I drift beyond,
your specter the pearl I have carved
from living tissue—
a perfection of luminescence
frigid as bone.

Leaving

This time he hadn't gone far. Only to the next town over, I was sure of it. Times in the past he *had* gone far, really far, taken a plane. Then I'd have to take a plane, too, and go after him.

I'd book a flight to wherever it was I'd discovered he'd gone, something I'd gotten pretty good at—sleuthing. He even said so: "You missed your calling; you should have been a detective." But of course it was hard taking off like that, spur of the moment, dropping everything. I'd have to go to the bank for money (you didn't put everything on plastic back then), take it out of the children's savings accounts, the ones for college. I felt bad about this, but what could I do? Of course I was going to put the money back, but I hated the dirty look the teller gave me.

The saddest thing, though, was the way the freezer looked before I left. I'd stock up on everything the children liked and didn't ordinarily get to have. When you opened the freezer you'd see a brick wall of rectangular packages, chock-a-block, right up flush with the door. Banquet Fried and the Mrs. So-and-So's: Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Paul and Mrs. Wagner, ladies who'd have to substitute for me, the children's mom, while she went chasing after their dad.

"I'll be back" I'd tell them. "You big ones look after the little ones and I'll be back *soon*. We'll *both* be back."

I'd find Hal and bring him home, or rather he'd bring me home, half-dead from all the little reds I'd been swallowing for courage. Sometimes we'd have trouble getting on the plane. The flight attendant (stewardess back then) would see me stumbling woozily along the boarding ramp, Hal half-carrying me, and she wouldn't want to let us on board. Arms folded, frowning: "We don't want to have to make any emergency landings!" Hal would argue with her, insist I was perfectly fine and that he'd look after me—a glaring contradiction—but he managed it; and then I'd sleep all through the movie.

Not the in-flight movie; the one we always took the children to when we got home. After one of Hal's leavings, we'd both feel

terribly guilty about the children and announce to them that we were taking them to the movies that night, some big vulgar spectacle that was just out and hadn't arrived anywhere near where we lived. This surprised them very much. Usually when they were dying to see something just out, that everyone else (they assured us) had already seen, we'd say no, it was too far away and it would be around for a long time, and they could wait—they could jolly well wait till it got to A THEATER NEAR YOU!

But whenever Hal and I got back from one of our leaving/retrieving adventures, we'd take the children out to supper—McDonalds, Dairy Queen, whatever they wanted, and then to a brand-new, just-out, everybody's-talking-about movie that was showing miles from where we lived; and we'd buy them all the popcorn they wanted and I'd miss the whole thing. Sitting between Hal and one of the children, my head would loll from side to side and I'd doze off from emotional exhaustion and all the abuse I'd put my body through, and from relief, sheer relief! that I'd brought Hal home.

He kept on leaving (if that makes semantical sense—is it possible to "keep on" leaving? I suppose it is if you keep coming back) even though I'd told him over and over, made a point of telling him practically from the first, that being left was the most terrifying thing in the world to me and I couldn't bear it. Anything else I could bear, but not that. It wouldn't be fair to say that this carried no weight with him, but it didn't stop him.

"I promise you," he'd say when he was angry, "I *promise* you that one of these days I'm going to leave you." Hal talked that way, made it sound like a treat he had in store for me, a troth he was plighting for my sake. And now once again he'd kept his promise.

He'd left. But this time it wasn't far. Just to the next town over, a city really, about twelve miles from where we lived. It's where I went to do my shopping, and where he went for his weekly nights out and where he was now, I was sure of it—and I determined to go after him.

And then my car wouldn't start. I tried and tried—nothing; dead! I thought it was a judgment against me. I thought it meant God was on Hal's side and not mine. But it was really the time and place. Upstate New York in the dead of winter, right after the Christmas holidays when everything bad happens. Every-

thing snaps and cracks and breaks. People snap and crack up and break. So do branches, and the sidewalk, underneath the ice and rock salt, cracks, and everything looks as ugly as possible, and all over our little town of Kaatersville cars weren't starting. Garages so busy they'd laugh when you phoned. You couldn't get a cab either. Mostly because cab companies in Kaatersville are here today, gone tomorrow. Sooner or later almost everyone in town takes a turn at being a cab company and then pretty soon thinks better of it. There are more crossed-out entries under "T" for taxi in my address book than for any other letter. One day someone's mayor of the town and the next he's the Kaatersville Kab Kompany and *vice versa*. And in any case it's always a second job, moonlighting.

You call the number and a woman answers and sounds very surprised. "Oh, he's at Sears, didn't you know he works at Sears during the day? You can only get him at night." Worse yet, the current number I called was double moonlighting. His wife said he had a day job, plus he worked in a restaurant in the evening and I could only get him after eleven.

Eleven p.m. that is. I knew it was around eleven when the cab rolled up because I was on the phone with our second eldest, and she's always careful to wait for eleven to phone, when the rates are lowest. That's the way it was back then—no calling plans. No competition for Ma Bell. Becky, too—both our grown-up, away-from-home daughters were carefully trained to call after eleven, and I told Cassie I couldn't talk anymore.

"The cab's here and I have to go look for your father."

That's what I told the driver, too. I told him I wanted him to take me to the city that was twelve miles away, and then I wanted him to drive me around until we found a white Ford station wagon, a nine-seater with a luggage rack and certain distinctive patches of rust peculiar to white Ford wagons of that year and make, and that it would be parked on a street somewhere and I wanted to drive around till we spotted it.

It's a comment on the character of Kaatersville's population that the man didn't bat an eye, as though he did this all the time. He didn't ask questions, either, he was very discreet. Helpful, too. He knew the city pretty well and suggested lots of streets I'd never heard of, even parts of town I'd never been in, and we drove around until about one in the morning when he said he

was out of gas. I said I'd pay for the fill and he gassed up and we rolled around town some more and along about two in the morning he said, "Well, I've covered everything."

"I've been up and down every street I can think of, you wanna keep trying?"

I said I guessed not and he drove me home. I asked would he take a check and he said yes, and I wrote him a check for forty-seven dollars, which might not seem like a lot but it was for back then.

After that there wasn't much left of the night. Which was just as well. When you're feeling scared half out of your wits you're not very keen on nighttime, having to get through it, and you don't need much sleep, either. I was wired, and out of bed at dawn. I made a tin of muffins for Rob and Ricky and Annalee, our three still-at-home children, and they were stunned. Both by my being up so early and by the muffins. And for a change I actually got them off to school in good time.

When they were gone I sat down to a cup of coffee. I made myself a cup so it would make me smart, so I could think what to do. And it did, the coffee made me very smart; I thought of what to do.

I'd look in the classifieds; that was it! Check the paper for rentals in the city twelve miles away. I did, I checked under rentals, and sure enough, there it was!

1 BR efficiencies in impeccably renovated mansion w/b/frpl magnificent river view...

That was Hal. I knew he'd go for that, a view? And a fireplace? And especially the "impeccably renovated," that would draw him—he's a mural painter and an impeccable one. But there wasn't any address, just a phone number.

I called and a man answered. "Are you the person with the efficiencies for rent?" I asked, and he said yes, he was. Then very quickly I asked to speak to Hal. It's one of the tricks I'd learned. If I suspected Hal of hiding out with a relative or friend, I'd never ask, "is Hal there?" I'd just say very quickly, "may I speak to Hal?" and usually they'd say, "uh, just a minute," before they could stop themselves and remember that he was supposed to be hiding. Occasionally, someone more on the ball would say, "he's not here!" but I could tell by the way the person hesitated and sounded uneasy that Hal *was* there.

The man on the phone hesitated. Then he said, "He's not home." So my hunch was right. "Leastways I don't think so," he added, "just a minute I'll go see if his car's there." In just a minute he came back. "Nope, it's not. He musta gone out."

"Can you give me the address?" I asked and he said, "What?" in a surprised way.

"Can you tell me the address where you're located?"

"Who's this? Who'm I talking to?"

"His wife," I said. "I'm Hal's wife. I'd like to drop by, so could you please give me the address?"

Then he got very excited.

"No, no! I can't do that, and who'd you say you were? His wife? Look, what do I know, a guy comes here, maybe he wants to get away, maybe he wants to get away from you! I can't go giving out any address!" And he wouldn't.

So I got off the phone and made myself another cup of coffee. I hoped it would make me smart again, and it did, positively brilliant. I thought of calling up a real estate lady I knew, though to say I knew her was pushing it. Her daughter and my Cassie had been in the same ballet class years ago, our relationship was that tenuous. But I knew that didn't matter. People in real estate are always friendly and obliging. They figure that sooner or later your house is going to go on the market—sooner, if they had their druthers. It's as inevitable as death and taxes, and when it happens they want the commission; so they're always nice.

The woman I called was very nice. Yes, *of course* she remembered me and my beautiful talented little daughter, and after some obligatory exchanges (each of us insisting that it was the other's daughter who was more beautiful and talented), I read her the classified ad for the renovated mansion with efficiencies.

"Do you have any idea where it is?"

"Hmmm. I *think* I might know the place, just a minute."

She left the phone, then came back. "Well, if it's the place I'm thinking of, it was sold, oh I'd say half a year ago, and it's right on top of so-and-so street, right on the hill with a view of the Hudson. One of those wonderful old houses that everyone's buying and fixing up—and are you looking to buy or sell?"

"Neither," I admitted, but assured her that if I were, I'd give her an exclusive. And meanwhile could she possibly give me directions?

"Oh, it's easy," and she proceeded to explain in the most painstakingly, foolproof way, which was very considerate of her because most people give directions that only work if you already know how to get there. I thanked her and rushed out to my car.

It started up fine, the day being so far along that there'd been plenty of time to get our mechanic to come over and fix it.

In fact, it was already late afternoon and I couldn't understand this. How could it be? Where had the time gone? But that's what being left does to me, I get into some kind of time warp where whole days go by that I can't account for. Now it was four o'clock already, and I jumped into the car and started up, and just as I did, Robbie, our middle and oldest still-living-at-home child, came running out of the house and up to the car. Through the car window he said, "Don't go! Don't go, Mom!"

I rolled down the window. "Why not, Rob?" I asked gently.

"Because," he said, "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I'm afraid Dad will kill you," Robbie said, and there were tears in his eyes. He was fifteen. I reached through the window and touched his shoulder.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll be all right."

This would make the third time I'd set out for the city twelve miles away, in I wasn't sure how long. Was it last week that Hal had driven me there for stitches? I needed them in the back of my head where I'd split open my scalp on the corner of a highboy bureau. Hal had not intended for my head to hit the bureau. He'd simply shoved me out of his way when I was trying to get *in his way,* stop him from leaving, and then he had to drive me to Emergency. He brought Robbie along to help—and for company, I suppose. Robbie had always been that kind of child; whatever you were up to you wanted him along for ballast. When we got to Emergency, I remember saying, "Excuse me," and going off into a corner of the parking lot and throwing up. It surprised me, because I thought people only did that in books and plays and movies, a dramatic device to show how upset the character was. I never really believed it, and I didn't believe it now. I was sure my throwing up wasn't emotionally related; it was just the conk on the head that did it.

The second time I made this drive was with the Kaatersville Kab Kompany, and when was that? Last night? It seemed years ago. Now here I was setting out a third time alone. It was getting on to evening and fiercely cold out. My hands on the steering wheel turned numb even through my gloves. It's a condition, they say, that affects older women. The blood vessels in the extremities constrict. I've also heard that if your hands turn numb right away it means that once, maybe long ago, you were frostbitten. You might not remember it, but you were.

And still another theory: coffee. That can do it. Coffee constricts the blood vessels, and I'd been drinking a whole lot of it. I figured all three of these theories were in cahoots: caffeine, aging, and unrecovered memory of frostbite.

Numb hands or not, I was setting out to find Hal and his impeccably renovated mansion. But first I made a stop at Giant Submarine. Hal is a pushover for food. Many a time food has saved me. Once, when we'd been married only six months or so and had a terrific tiff over something unmemorable, he went storming off to work in the morning and didn't come home that evening. I made something for supper from my *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook,* something new called Saucepot Meatballs, partly to surprise Hal and also because it was so amazingly easy. You just dropped the raw meatballs into canned tomato soup and let them simmer; no browning, sautéing, or anything. I was puzzled at first by a tiny icon of a pig next to the recipe because it called for ground beef not pork, till I realized it symbolized a piggy bank and meant: "Money-saving Recipe." So I felt very proud and house-wifely. But then Hal didn't come home for supper. He didn't even come home in time for Robert Stack in "The Untouchables," which we always watched. Not till the wee hours when I was in bed did I hear his key in the street door lock and then his footsteps climbing the stairs and the key again in the door to our flat, and I lay in bed as still as I could wondering what would happen. I heard him go directly to the stove and lift the lid off the pot, and then I heard the clatter of china and utensils. A little while later I heard the pot lid being lifted again. He was going back for seconds! When he went back for thirds I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to peek. I stole out of bed and tiptoed to where I could see him sitting at the table with his back to me, his head bent very low over his plate. He

was positively wolfing down those Saucepot Meatballs (I figured he'd been out drinking; drinking makes you very hungry). There was something about the way he looked—his bowed head, his elbows spread almost flat, even the way he'd gone to the trouble of fixing himself a place setting—that touched me. But mostly it was the back of his head; it looked so vulnerable. He looked so alone. Even his hunger made me want to cry. When he came to bed I grabbed him, entwined myself around him, or maybe he grabbed me first. It was simultaneous really, our bodies so much less complicated, so much more forgiving than our tempers.

Sometimes he'd come home from one of his absences carrying a bag of Dunkin' Donuts with one donut inside that he'd saved for me—chocolate with colored sprinkles. Or a Giant Submarine bag with a hero sandwich, a peace offering for me.

So I stopped for one now, I ordered a hero, and, while I was at it, a container of coffee to go. Even though Hal always said he hated coffee. "Bleh! It leaves a terrible taste in your mouth." But then he'd turn around and say, "How's about a cuppa?" or "What say we go out for coffee?" and he always looked so happy at those times. So I picked up a container along with the hero.

I didn't have any trouble finding the mansion, thanks to my real estate lady. It was right where she said, all the way at the top of a side street that kept going up and up and made me feel a bit panicky as the houses thinned out and the climb got steeper. It turned out to be not the sort of place you'd imagine existed in a city like this, with its depressed economy, its mom and pop deli's that always had boiled ham on sale, $2.49 lb., and boarded-up shoe repair and typewriter stores and, saddest of all, lots of EVERYTHING FOR A DOLLAR stores which, unlike their shopping mall counterparts, weren't there for novelty and kicks but sheer necessity. And here I was staring at a windswept, hilltop edifice right out of the Brontes, and surprise! We *had* driven past it the night before. My man hadn't missed a single street including this one, but we hadn't seen Hal's car. Snooping around, I discovered the mansion had a tenant's parking lot in back. So of course we wouldn't have spotted the white station wagon, and I didn't see it in the lot now. Which meant he wasn't home. Home? I caught myself. Don't use that word; this isn't home.

Steps led to a sheltered portico and a double door with leaded panels of stained glass. I rang the bell. He answered it, the man

on the phone. I knew it was him by the sour look he gave me when I said I'd come to see Hal.

"Oh, it's *you!*" he said, with utter disgust that I'd tracked him down. But I took care not to antagonize. I asked ever so humbly if I could come inside and wait until Hal got back, and he shrugged in defeat and said, "Well, as long as you're here."

"Which door is Hal's?" I asked, and he told me 102 and jerked his thumb very quickly and ungenerously down a dark hallway.

I prepared myself to sit in front of that door for a long time, a very long time if need be. I would plant myself on the floor, lean against the door, hands clasped around my knees in the time-honored manner, the age-old attitude of womankind. The desperate vigil! How many of us have done this? Both my daughters have, I know. Cassie even described to me one terrible night she spent crouching in front of the door of a Columbia professor who'd just decided to end his affair with her. He was married. He lived in Brooklyn. She'd gone all the way to Brooklyn to crouch. She told me that she'd demeaned herself because she was out of her mind. So now I got ready to demean myself because I was out of my mind. I was just sliding my spine down against the door when the landlord saw me.

"Look," he said, "I don't like this. You squatting there like that?—doesn't look good to my other tenants. You wanna wait? I'll show you where you can wait," and he led me to a small room in the front of the house, an oddly-shaped parlor—hexagonal—which was probably why he hadn't converted it into something else. Or maybe he wanted to leave it to make an impression. It did have a frigid elegance, an ornate marble fireplace with no fire in it or evidence that there'd ever been one. No evidence of heat from any other source either—the room was freezing. Exactly two chairs—French provincial? Louis Quatorze?—set at angles to each other in front of the cold fireplace, no other furniture. It reminded me of rooms you see in landmark houses or national shrines like Mount Vernon and Monticello where you think, oh how beautiful, how elegantly spare! those spindly chairs and that bare polished floor! but you wouldn't want to live there.

I sat freezing in one of the cushionless Louis Quatorze or whatever chairs in front of that cold grate, hoping any time now Our Friendly Landlord would pop in and let me know that Hal

had returned. But he didn't. Washed his hands of me, apparently, so I began to make periodic forays myself, out to the parking lot and then back again. It was black night before I finally saw it, the wagon looming out at me, ghostly white in the dark. Oh big dear familiar beast! oh big white grub! oh big white whale, I love you! I wanted to throw myself on the hood, I wished my arms were long enough to hug it. It was like seeing Hal again. Funny how seeing a person's car is almost the same as seeing the person.

The first time he left me we didn't own a car. We were still living down in the Village, and I'd stayed awake all night waiting for him to come home. At five in the morning I went outside and hailed a cab, following a hunch that he'd gone to a buddy's place not far from us. But I wasn't sure of the apartment or even the floor. I trudged up the service stairs which were steel, my steps echoing eerily in the predawn stillness. When I sat down to rest on a landing, an adjacent back door opened, as if Hal sensed my presence. He stared at me incredulously. I was holding our three-month-old daughter in my arms, all bundled up, the ends of her blankets trailing.

"I couldn't leave her," I said.

He sighed and that was the first time he made his speech about how I'd missed my calling and should have been a detective.

I was hoping he'd say that now when I went down the corridor and knocked on the door that I'd wanted to slump against if only the landlord had let me. I knocked politely, didn't use the private signal we had, nothing silly and inappropriate under the circumstances, and the door opened and there he stood. He looked very forbidding, and much taller than I remembered, and he was wearing a long brilliantly scarlet robe with flames coming out of it. For a moment I thought it was Satan who'd opened the door, and I was finally going to get my just desserts, like Punch in the penultimate scene of "Punch and Judy" being told he must pay for his evil deeds by being carried off to the Land of Bobbety Shooty. Then I realized there was a fireplace directly in back of Hal with a roaring blaze going in it, hence the aureole of flames. And at the same time I recognized what he was wearing—the red velvet dressing gown I'd just given him for Christmas, Christian Dior out of Lord & Taylor out of *The New Yorker.* I'd seen the full-page ad in that magazine, the robe not on a live model but, far more snobbishly, in a sketch in minimal

pen strokes of a man wearing the robe and looking very imperious and disdainful and unnaturally elongated. I sent for it immediately, gift wrapped in a box with the distinctive Lord & Taylor rose, and Hal pronounced it the most sumptuous garment he'd ever owned. He said that wearing it made him feel positively Lord Chesterfieldian.

I took his being attired in my Christmas present as a good sign. On the other hand finding him in such *dishabille*, looking so at home, that was a bad sign. Worst of all was his expression. He did not look glad to see me.

I thought of Winnie the Pooh (the most unlikely things pop into my head at the worst moments of my life) and how Pooh Bear went to pay a call on Rabbit and how *not glad* to see him Rabbit was. That's how Hal looked—very *not glad.*

"Well... well... well," he said. And not a word about how I ought to have been a detective.

"I brought you something," I said. I held up the Giant Submarine bag.

All he said was, "Come in." I walked in holding the bag very high in front of me so he'd acknowledge it, but he didn't. I had to say again, "I brought you something."

"Thank you," he said politely and took the bag and set it down on a coffee table.

Damn! it was our coffee table! Our black formica Parsons Design coffee table from home. How had I managed not to miss it? But then I'd been missing whole days of my life so I supposed I wouldn't have noticed a disappearing coffee table, especially a black one.

Was there anything else? I looked around and saw the highboy bureau, the one with the corner I'd struck my head against. Other than that it was hard to tell, because the light was so dim. I knew Hal liked dim lighting. We used to argue about it. I'd complain I couldn't see and he'd say—from his artist's point of view—"yes, but *dim* is so much more flattering."

What I'd hoped to see was a depressingly empty room with a lot of boxes standing around still unpacked and Hal looking miserable and at loose ends. There'd been times like that before, when I'd arrived with containers and sandwiches and we'd sat on the boxes eating and talking and making up till Hal would hug me and say, "Let's blow this joint, shall we?" and I'd be so happy helping him load the boxes back in the car.

There weren't any packing boxes and there wasn't an empty spot anywhere. The place was crammed full of things and all the things were covered with other things—throw rugs, throw pillows, and just plain throws. In the firelight it looked like a seraglio—or a thieves' den. It even occurred to me that this is what Sara Crewe's attic room must have looked like after her rich Indian benefactor got through transforming it.

I had to admit he'd done a nice job. I thought of telling him that—using a joke of his. "Vehy addragdive," I'd say holding my nose, which was Hal's imitation of a terribly sincere and adenoidal teenager telling his date, "I find you vehy addragdive;" only he could do it without holding his nose.

Better not. Better just look around and say, "nice job!" digging my hands deep in the pockets of my car coat, imitating Woody Allen in a movie coming into his ex-wife's or ex-girlfriend's apartment and bobbing his head up and down. "Nice job, I have to admit you've done a nice job," he'd say, not quite hiding his pain.

"Nice job," I said.

"*I* like it," Hal said. Then: "Won't you sit down?" He gestured toward our camelback settee, which I hadn't recognized right away because he'd covered it with a faux fur throw. "And wouldn't you care to remove your coat?"

I shook my head, shivering, and clutched my coat tighter.

"Sorry it's so cold in here," he said. Oh if only he'd said his joke: "*It's cold in here! I must complain to the janitor.*"—a line from Menotti's *The Consul* which for some reason tickled him. He'd say it every time our house was cold and he went to turn up the thermostat. I wished he'd get into joke mode. Jokes—and food—can save a marriage. But he didn't quote *The Consul*, just said, "Marty's okay but he's stingy with heat." (I hated that, his calling the landlord "Marty" in that familiar way.) "But then I bought an electric heater, and of course Marty doesn't know that, and I bought an electric blanket." He paused to let that take effect. It was another thing we'd argued about—even before the electromagnetic-field cancer scare, I was afraid of electric blankets.

"They're marvelous, so light; and without all that extra weight. I find I wake up so refreshed. You should get yourself one. I highly recommend it."

While I was absorbing this blow he went on. "And of course there's the fireplace. I keep a fire going, I've always enjoyed fire-

places, working ones, what do you think of this one? Marble front? Splendid, isn't it?"

I agreed it was, wanting to remind him that we had three fireplaces at home, all working ones, if not marble. But now he was asking, "May I get you something, some tea, perhaps, with honey?"

It hurt me a little that he didn't remember that I never drank tea, unless I'm very sick, and that I never used honey. I didn't even *believe* in honey, and we used to quarrel about that, too. And now he was telling me how many kinds of honey he had.

"I can offer you—" he pointed to a shelf that ran along the wall, unpainted, with knots and a new lumber smell so I supposed he must have put it up himself (bad sign). And sure enough there was jar after jar of honey lined up on it. I thought of Winnie the Pooh again, only these weren't little pots that said "HUNNY" in crooked letters, they were big glass jars, the kind you take to the health food store and fill yourself from various spigots and put your own labels on. I tried to read the labels but the light was too dim and flattering, so I tried to guess. Orange blossom? Clover? Primrose? Castile? No, that was soap. Royal jelly? *Raw* royal jelly? But then everything up there was probably raw. Past the honey jars were jars of what looked like raw bran—I'd never believed in bran, either—and past the bran jars there was a utensil crock full of wooden spoons. We used to quarrel about those, too. I hated wooden cooking implements because I was sure they never got really clean (food could lodge in the wood fibers and breed bacteria), and because you couldn't give your roasting pan a nice satisfying scrape and get up all the juicy bits the way you could with a metal spoon. A woman psychiatrist I went to once told me it wasn't really wooden spoons we were quarreling about, it was something deeper. The spoons and the bran and the honey and the electric blanket were just symbols. She was a very nice middle-aged lady who sat with her ankles crossed and looked like Queen Victoria, but she never did tell me what the something deeper we were quarreling about was. I got the feeling she was too embarrassed, so I stopped seeing her.

My eye continued down the shelf, past the honey and the bran jars and the wooden spoons, and I saw a blender, not ours, brand new, and an electric crock pot that was new also, and a yogurt maker, not new, a present from me on his last birthday, and a giant juice extractor—an Olympia, which he'd always

said was the best, something to do with the pulp, not just pressing the juice from it but liquefying it, or maybe it was the other way around.

"What's that for?" I nodded toward the next object in the lineup.

"You don't know what that is? Can't you see it's a bean sprouter? I'm growing my own alfalfa sprouts."

No, I couldn't see very well because of the dimness, and I felt very bitter. I wanted to say, "You're really playing house, aren't you!" But I didn't. I said, "I see you've been shopping."

"Yes, I have," he said defensively. Then he chuckled. "I bought all the things you never liked."

What could I say to that? I said, "I brought you a hero sandwich and a container of coffee. I'm afraid the coffee's cold by now."

"I don't drink coffee anymore. It's bad for you. Absorbs all the vitamin C. I only drink tea, herbal. I keep different kinds on hand—" He gestured, the shelf again, and I saw lots of boxes with pretty pictures on them, flowers and butterflies and bears wearing nightgowns and nightcaps with tassels.

"—for variety," Hal was saying, "but rosehips is the best. It's full of vitamin C." He gave me a disapproving look. "I suspect your body is crying out for vitamin C."

I suspected he was right, my body was crying out for vitamin C, but I hated tea and I hated vitamins. Still I agreed to a cup of rosehips. It was important to be agreeable. Put on a happy face. Disguise your feelings. Hal was all for that. "By *all means* disguise your feelings," he'd say, "especially if they're unpleasant." And he admired efforts. "MAKE AN EFFORT!" he was always telling the children. *"Try to be charming!"* he'd say, words they never forgot, or recovered from. "Other women," he complained to me, "grow old gracefully. They come to terms with life at last. And they get soft and wide in the hips, and they're *nice* to be around!"

So that was my job. I had to put him off the scent of despair, which is a kind of crazy. "Crazy I don't like!" he'd said often enough, and, "Nutsy I don't like."

He came back with the tea in a pot with a shiny deep blue glaze (another Christmas present from me; he'd admired it in the Gilded Gourmet right in town, so I sneaked right back and bought it) and poured two cups. I reminded him about the sandwich. I took it out of the bag and nudged it toward him.

"Thanks, but I've already eaten. I eat early now." (A dig at me for prolonging the cocktail hour and getting dinner on the table on the late side.) "It's so much better for you, I feel so much healthier. As a matter of fact I just made myself an excellent stir-fry, I could serve you some if you're interested. I bought one of those new silverstone pans, which by the way I highly recommend. They wash perfectly clean with one swish of the sponge, you should get yourself one." I thought how I hated silverstone pans because you're not supposed to scrape them, and how else can you get up all the crispy little carcinogenic bits that make the best gravy? Also, you're not supposed to scour them and I like to scour things, and I like to bite down on things—like the edge of a Styrofoam coffee container, go all around the edge till it's all bitten, and I wished I could be doing that now instead of having to sip rosehips from a ceramic mug.

"—and of course," (he was still talking about his new pan) "with silverstone you hardly need any fat, any oil even, unless you're cooking eggplant, then you do need quite a bit of oil. But then with eggplant you don't really need meat, eggplant's so much like meat, don't you agree?"

I agreed.

"I've cut way down on meat, anyway. I just buy a small piece, once a week, and shave off a bit at a time and stir it up with onions and peppers and garlic, lots of garlic. You know," he finished, "we all eat too much meat."

I was in a daze. How long had he been living here? buying meat once a week? Or was "once a week" just a figure of speech? And why was he giving me recipes?

I reminded him again about the sub. "It's the way you like it, lots of prosciutto, sliced very thin, and tomatoes and vinegar."

"You can't get good tomatoes anymore," he sighed, at the same time picking up a large chef's knife and brandishing it in a way that made me uneasy while he explained what a wonderful knife it was. "Just bought it, the very one you see advertised on those late-night TV commercials, and of course you never believe them, but you know it's true what they say about this knife? Cuts through everything like butter and never needs sharpening. You should get yourself one, here, feel the edge."

I didn't want to feel the edge. I wanted to shout: "Stop recommending things!" But the knife was descending now, right down onto the hero, cutting through it the way he said it would,

like butter. Two neat halves. He lifted them onto two plates and slid one in front of me. "You'll share, of course?"

Share? I'd meant the sandwich for him! I'd never anticipated this. I could put on a happy face if I tried hard, but I couldn't eat. He couldn't expect me to, that was so unfair. My mouth was dry. I couldn't swallow. Even if I'd managed to, there was nothing inside me for processing; no organs extant, like the Betsy Wetsy doll I'd had as a child (A tiny hole in her rubber anus enabled her to handle water but trying to force food into the aperture of her rosebud mouth was an exercise in futility.) Like her I was hollow inside.

Yet if I said that, confessed, "I can't eat," I'd give myself away.

"Hmm-mm," he'd think, *"hysteria nervosa."*

"You've given me the bigger half," I protested.

"Of course! I've already eaten." There was something too smooth about the way he said that, deliberately not looking in my direction. It was a trap. He was testing me, putting food in front of me to see if I'd eat like a normal person. Normal or crazy? Naughty or nice! Santa checking his list.

What could I do? I prayed, or rather I made a pact with God; if I managed to force down my half of the hero sandwich, then Hal will come home. Those were my terms, though there was no sign God had agreed to them, or even heard them.

Hal was watching me, pretending to be busy munching his half sandwich but keeping me in the corner of his eye. I took little bites, a teeny bite here, teeny bite there. I thought how much it would have helped if Hal had made one of his jokes, the one where someone says, "Up, your Honor, bit by bit," which he thought very funny and I never understood.

At last I finished it.

Right away I said, "Please come home."

Right away Hal said, "No."

"Please come home," I said again.

"No," Hal said again.

Then I began saying it over and over, turning it into a nonstop litany— *pleasecomehomepleasecomehomepleasecomehomepleasecome home*—running it together so Hal wouldn't be able to insert the "No's." I didn't want to hear them.

"*Pleasecomehomepleasecomehomepleasecomehome* ..." I went on chanting my mantra till Hal interrupted me.

"Stop that!" he said very savagely. "What's with this *Lucia di Lammermoor* routine? Stop making like *Lucia di Lammermoor!*"

I didn't know what else to say, so I said it again:

"Please come home."

"Go away!" Hal said. "Go away!"

So I went away.

The emergency room was the same Hal and Robbie had driven me to, I don't know how many days ago, the one with the parking lot I'd vomited in. I could still feel the little bald spot on my scalp where they had to sew me up. I went up to the desk, past all the night people, grim in the fluorescent light, the TV humming, babbling, some men not even watching, their heads hanging between their knees, the women shifting miserably squalling babies around on their laps, eyeing me resentfully. "Where's the blood? No sick baby? No blood, no bandages? No *cast?* What's *she* doing here?"

"I can't go on," I told the receptionist.

"What?"

"I *said*—I can't go on."

"Are you feeling suicidal?"

"Yes. But I'd rather not do it."

"Most people would rather not," she said very disdainfully. She turned me over to a nurse who took me into a room, and only after I'd given her all kinds of vital statistics I thought irrelevant under the circumstances did she ask, "So tell me, what's the matter?"

"I've been left."

"You've been left," she repeated. "Who left you?"

I didn't want to say it, I was seriously considering not believing it.

"A man?" she prompted. "Your husband?"

I nodded.

She let out a great gusty sigh, big enough to cover up what she'd murmured under her breath, something like "join the club," or "welcome to the club."

"I can't be left," I said quickly. I had to set her straight, disabuse her of the idea that I was like ordinary people, certainly not part of any club.

"What do you mean you can't be left?"

"I just can't. It's the one thing I can't—anything else I can bear, but not that."

She made a fake puzzled look. "I don't understand. What makes you think you can get through life without being left? Nobody can."

I wasn't going to answer a trap question like that, and I didn't.

Which forced her to go on. "You know everyone gets left *sometime.* Didn't you ever leave your children—how many did you say you have?" She glanced down at her clipboard. "Five? Oh my! Well, you must have gone out, left them sometimes, and they probably cried and felt very bad. But that's life."

"But I always came back!"

"How about when they grow up? Haven't the older ones left? It's natural, our children grow up and then they leave us."

My head plummeted to my lap. "I couldn't stand that either."

I considered admitting that on both going-away-to-college occasions I went clear out of my mind, but she was leaning toward me earnestly, talking in a soft tranquilizing purr, "and our parents, they die. *They* leave us. We have to accept it, don't we?" Suddenly she straightened up. "My husband left me."

I lifted my head and stared at her.

"That's right!" She sounded proud. "Left me with a son to raise and I did, kept up my job and raised my son and now *he's* left me. He's up at SUNY Potsdam, straight-A student, premed."

I didn't like the way the conversation was going, the way she seemed to be congratulating herself on being left, and how glad she was that her son was up at Potsdam and not with her, and how I ought to follow her example and feel glad, too.

Then I heard, "Just who do you think you are anyway? I mean where did you get the idea that you're the only one in the world who can't be left?"

Maybe those weren't her exact words, or maybe they were and it was meant as shock therapy, or maybe it was a bit of unprofessional exasperation breaking through, but I wasn't having it. I stood bolt upright. "I don't have to listen to that!" I said, and strode out of the room and past the desk and all the night people who lifted their heads and swiveled them in unison as I went by.

She'd done me a favor. I got to walk out on someone! For once I was the leaver not the left. And she'd made me angry. Anger felt good, better than mewling and begging. I'd show her, I'd show everyone! Wait! How was I going to show everyone? I

thought about it, then I knew. I'd go home and take care of my children, that's what! That's how I'd show everyone.

My poor children. I'd forgotten all about them. Hadn't even left a stocked freezer. Well, tomorrow was Sunday and I'd cook them a special Sunday dinner.

Hey! I thought. I know what day of the week it is! I must be better already. Though if tomorrow was Sunday than this must be Saturday. Some Saturday night, I thought bitterly. "Great Saturday night date, best ever! Thrilling," I muttered as I drove home, enjoying my own sarcasm the way drunks do, even when no one's listening.

Tomorrow—mashed potatoes (I riffled mentally through my recipe box for the children's favorite: Nell Nichol's Make-Ahead Mashed Potatoes, which you *can* make ahead but you don't really have to) and for dessert another favorite: Laura Goodenough's Apple Cake (that's really the name I didn't make it up), and I'd defrost an Oven Stuffer and stuff it—the children loved stuffing—and Robbie would bring me an onion, a little ritual that began when he was three years old and liked to keep me company while I cooked.

He'd watch and ask interested questions and he'd fetch things. "Robbie, bring me an onion," I'd say, and he'd trot over to the slide-out bin, which was just the right height for him, and bring me an onion, cupped reverently in his hands.

Something else Robbie did when he was three. He taught himself a Beatle's song so he could sing it whenever his dad returned from an out-of-town job. The day Hal was due back, Robbie would station himself in the front hall way ahead of time. "It's too early," I'd say. "Daddy won't be back for hours yet." But he didn't care. What's time to a three year old who isn't on caffeine? He'd stretch out languorously and stare at the ceiling, ready to jump up the moment Hal's key turned in the lock and sing as his daddy walked through the door:

You say goodbye and I say hello!

Hello! Hello!

I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello!

He didn't know why. You could hear it in his voice, an innocent puzzlement, a reproach even, at his daddy's absence, mixed with joy at seeing him again. I started singing as I drove: "*You say goodbye and I say hello...*"

Then I started to cry. It was just the music, of course, and

those lyrics. A song can do that, it's *meant* to do that, churn you up, turn you into mush. So that even while you're trying to be tough as nails, there you are with tears streaming down your face. A fool for love, whether you will or no.

Coaster

In Jay's backyard, there's nothing but sky, grass, shrubs, and his roller coaster, nothing but blue, green, brown, and his roller coaster, rising out of the ground like a sea serpent.

Jay's backyard is a prairie. Without fences or cows, with only a few squat trees, Oklahoma stretches in each direction. Even his house hugs the ground as if pushed down from the weight of the sky.

To the south, a few trailer homes huddle together, rust gathering on their flanks. Beyond them, there's more grass and sky, identical shapes and colors, squares on a quilt, all the way to Texas.

Jay pounds nail number 5,545 into his roller coaster. The alarm goes off on his wristwatch. He puts down the hammer, takes a pipe out of his pocket, and packs it with pot. The sun is behind his left shoulder, breathing hot air down his neck.

Anne is in his house this morning. Her head on his pillow, she's dreaming of leaving.

Three hours later, after laying track for the coaster's final bank, Jay goes inside. It's cool in the kitchen where Anne is naked and making coffee, feet slapping on the cracked tile.

"How's it coming?" she asks.

"It's coming."

She stands in front of the sink, looking out the window at the roller coaster while pinning up her hair. The lift hill is taller than the house, looming over the tallest tree in the yard, and the wood is unpainted yellow pine. It looks dull and dirty in the bright morning light.

Anne pours coffee for Jay. The insides of her elbows brush against her breasts when she moves. Jay sits at the table.

"How was work last night?" he asks.

"That guy came in, the one who likes naturally large breasts."

"Isn't that every guy?"

"You'd be surprised, Jay. Honestly you would. You should come in again. We've got all different shapes and sizes for all different tastes."

"So what happened?"

"Five hundred bucks is what happened."

"From one guy?"

Anne sits on Jay's lap, dangling her feet. He burrows his face in her chest, kissing the flat space between her breasts where it's damp and salty.

"Nah," she tells him. "But he did tip a little over fifty. It was just a good night overall. What'd you do?"

Jay shakes his head and Anne's breasts jiggle, bumping his ears. She puts her hand on top of his head; his hair is short and sandy blond.

"Nothing," he says.

"Let me guess. Dexter came over, and you guys got stoned and worked on the coaster."

Jay pulls his head back and picks up his coffee. His face is thin and angular, his nose sharp as a hawk's.

"I discovered," he tells her, "that I could've curved that final bank at 55 degrees, instead of 50. Fifty-five! Do you realize the difference that would've made?"

"Not really."

"A big difference. But it doesn't matter. It's too late to change it now."

"You're that close?"

Jay nods. He runs his hand along Anne's back. The knobs of her spine stick out and he rubs each one as if for luck.

"What about after it's done?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"What are you gonna do then?"

"Ride it."

"And then what?"

Jay shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "Tear it down or sell it. I could give it to you."

"Jay, what would I possibly do with it?"

"Dance on it. At the top of the lift hill. In the moonlight. Just for me."

He looks up at her. She's got three pimples on her forehead, marching a straight line across her brow. He loves those pimples.

"Let's go to bed," he says.

That night Dexter comes over to barbecue before Anne has to leave for work. The three of them sit in the backyard, swatting at mosquitoes and looking at the roller coaster.

"How much you get done today?" Dexter asks.

Jay is standing over the grill, basting chicken. His chin is shaped like a V, and he points it at Anne. "Her," he says. "Mostly."

"Now boys," she says, "play nice."

She's wearing a halter top and shorts; her skin is the color of the full moon. When she stands up, her lawn chair falls over backwards. She stretches, balancing on her toes. Both men stare at her legs. "I'll get more beer," she offers and heads for the house. The guys watch her walk away. At the screen door, she turns and flips her head and hair over her shoulder, looking back at them, smiling and wiggling her fingers. Everyone laughs.

"She sure is something." Dexter shakes his head.

"If you only knew."

"She worth it?"

"All of it—dropping out, moving here, my future career. Whatever that means."

"What's she got down there? A spaceship?"

"Best ride in town."

Dexter grunts and walks out to the coaster. Jay flips a chicken thigh, closes the lid, and joins him. They stand next to the bank after the first drop. Dexter puts his hand out and touches the wood. He pushes on it. "Feels solid," he says.

"It's pressure-treated," Jay replies. "With the 54-degree drop, I expect it to get up to 20 miles per, though it could be more if the weather's right. If the wind is blowing in the right direction, I mean."

Dexter climbs onto the track. He kneels down and runs his hand over the nails and screws. "Nice and smooth," he says.

"The ride itself'll be pretty rough."

"Hell yeah."

Dexter's knees crack as he stands up. He's a big man, twice the size of Jay, with most of his weight gathered in his stomach and chest. He's wearing a Hawaiian shirt, hula girls printed on it. He jumps on the track, testing its give.

"Speaking of which," he says, "everyone misses you at school. You should come back. Finish the program."

"Fuck 'em."

"Eberhart said he'd let you back in. No problem."

"They just want the coaster."

"Not the coaster, Jay. They want the guy who built it."

"Same thing."

The screen door slams. Anne sets a tray with beers, salad, and bread on the picnic table. "Come and get it!" she calls.

Jay takes the meat off the grill and they eat. Anne is loud, oohing and aahing, licking her fingers and smacking her lips.

"Good grub, Jay," Dexter says, but he's looking at Anne.

Later, the sun sets behind the coaster; its hills jut into the sky, and its edges glow orange. After Anne leaves, Jay breaks out the bong.

"Eberhart's serious about wanting you back," Dexter says as he exhales a thick plume. "He called me into his office to talk about you."

"Am I supposed to feel honored?"

"They might offer you a deal. Eberhart was talking research grant. Could be sweet."

"I don't need the money. Not yet."

"You'd be stupid not to."

"I am stupid."

"Anybody who can build a coaster in his own damn backyard can't be stupid. Crazy maybe, stupid no."

"Wanna help me with the cart?" Jay asks.

"Hell yeah."

"I need another hit first, though. I'm not there yet."

Jay packs the bowl. They pass the bong back and forth and watch the coaster. The moon is low, full, glowing underneath the arc of the first drop.

Dexter points at it. "Doesn't it look like an eye?" he asks.

"What?"

"The moon. See it? Your coaster is like the eyebrow and the moon is the eye."

Jay squints. "You're stoned."

"Yeah, but it's still an eye out there." Dexter pulls on his ball cap. "It's watching us."

A few weeks later, Hollywood comes to Norman, shooting a drama set in the segregated 1950s. As a child, the director had a vision: A white man and a black woman making love in

the short grass of the prairie. The couple is small and desperate, rolling on the faded green in the foreground, the hazy sky covering them like a blanket. In the distance, the horizon never stops.

Anne gets in the habit of driving her pick-up to the location and eating lunch leaning against the tailgate. On the third day an assistant producer walks over, introduces himself, and asks her to dinner.

"It's not a date," she tells Jay later.

"What is it then?"

"An opportunity."

It's late afternoon. Jay's in his backyard, working on the coaster cart, a plain pine box on wheels, big enough for one passenger. Him. Inside the cart is a crude wooden bench and he's sanding its edges. Anne stands in front of him, blocking the sun.

"Don't be mad," she says.

"I'm not mad."

"You don't own me."

"I don't want to."

"This could turn into something."

"Like what, Anne?"

"Like a part in a movie or something. He's a producer."

"An assistant producer." Jay stands up. "And since when do you want to be an actress?"

"I want people to know who I am."

"I know you."

Jay gets into his cart and sits on the bench. He runs his hand along the edge. "I smoothed it out," he says. "You won't get splinters on your pretty bottom when you ride it."

"I've got to get ready for work." She turns and walks back to the house. Jay rests his chin on the side of the cart, watching her go.

When she comes out to say goodbye—make-up covering her pimples, hair piled on top of her head—he's still sitting in the cart. The wind has picked up, gusting to 40 miles per hour. It blows Anne's dress against her legs; the coaster groans against its velocity.

"He's gonna give her a screen test," Jay tells Dexter.

"Is that what they call it in Hollywood?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Don't let her do this to you. Kick her ass out."

It's past midnight. The moon is new; Anne has been gone for hours.

"She says she wants to be a star." Jay tries to light the bowl, but the wind keeps blowing out the flame.

"Bullshit. She ever talk about this before?"

"Not per se." Jay sets down the bong. "She loves stripping, though."

"I never understood that."

"She likes the attention. The guys looking at her, ogling her, and jerking off to her later. She especially loves it when they tell her how much they love her tits."

"A true exhibitionist."

Jay pours himself another shot of whiskey. "You think she's pretty enough to make it?"

"Hard to say. There's a lot they do with make-up and lighting. She's got the body for it."

"Her face, though. It's kinda rough."

"Again, lighting and make-up'll clear that right up."

"But can she act?"

"Who knows? Has she ever even been in a school play? Did she play a friggin' tulip in the second grade Easter pageant? In my opinion, this is a whim. A shitty one for you, my friend, but wait it out and this too shall pass. Guaranteed. She'll come crawling back after that slimeball is through with her."

Lightning flashes behind the coaster, illuminating its four hills. The last two are close together, giant breasts growing out of the ground.

"You thought of a name for that thing yet?" Dexter asks.

"Not really."

"It's almost done, though, isn't it?"

"Almost. Finishing touches, mostly. Some sanding, and I've got to tweak the motor for the chain lift."

"It's the coolest thing anyone I know has ever done. It's more than just a roller coaster, dude. It's art."

"You helped."

Lightning flashes again and it starts to drizzle. Neither man moves from his lawn chair.

"You gonna charge to ride it?"

"I hadn't thought of it."

"If it was me, I would."

It starts to rain harder. Fat drops bounce off the coaster and land in the prairie. Jay grabs the bong and the whiskey and runs for the back door, Dexter right behind him.

They turn at the doorway and look back at Jay's creation.

"You've got to call it something," Dexter says. "It's too big to be nameless."

"How about My Own Private Coaster?"

"Hell no. You need something catchy like Gravity Run or Death Max. Hold on—I got it! Ultimate Backyard Coaster!"

Jay opens the door and steps into the bright light of the kitchen. He pours the bongwater down the sink and looks out the window. Lightning flashes once more behind the coaster, and Jay remembers the first night he saw Anne, dancing her heart out at Sugar's, her perfect body silhouetted by a single spotlight.

"A Coaster for Anne," he says, but Dexter is in the bathroom and can't hear him.

It rains for the rest of the night. Anne never comes home.

It's early morning, mid-July, and the sun hasn't burned off the haze yet. Jay's Own Private Coaster is still damp from an afternoon deluge the day before.

Jay steps out his back door and stands facing west, hands on hips, admiring his work. He walks toward it, passing underneath the second hill, which arcs high above his head, until he's in the center of his ride. It's complete; the track meets end-to-end, forming a circle.

Jay touches his toes and swivels his torso. He's wearing the boxers and white T-shirt he slept in. Barefoot, he jogs to the lift hill, starts the motor, and positions his cart on the track. Last week he added a vinyl cushion to the bench and painted the outside blood red.

He sits on the bench. The roller chain grabs the bottom of the cart and pulls him 20 feet up the lift hill at a 26.6 degree angle. The chain clicks and thumps and bumps. Birds hiding in the tallest tree fly away at the sound. At the peak of the hill, Jay turns his head from side to side, twisting in his seat, searching the horizon. There's nothing out there. He begins to descend.

Anne is in the Bahamas with the assistant producer. Her winter clothes are still in Jay's house. He touches her softest sweaters sometimes, but not often.

The ride is rough. Earsplitting. Jay doesn't scream or whoop. He doesn't make a sound. His face, tan and unlined, is impassive as a bird's.

Four drops, three banks, and one minute later the cart stops where it started, at the bottom of the lift hill. Jay smoothes his hair, gets out of the cart, and repositions it on the roller chain. He climbs back into the cart and rides his roller coaster again. Then he does it again. And again. All morning he rides it.

By noon, the sun is high, and the sky looks artificial in its pale blueness. In the north, the moon is visible, but just barely.

Jay's cart rolls up to the bottom of the lift hill and stops at the beginning again. He steps out, turns, and walks toward his house. His legs are shaky and his butt hurts. His teeth feel loose and his head hurts. He is hungry. He has to go to the bathroom. He opens the back door and walks into the dark kitchen. He doesn't look back at Anne's coaster.

Don Judson

Unveiling the Prophet

I.

in the final rush
horses

move through darkness like an inland sea
(bodies are being burned, the radio claims, from biblical heights)

they sit and listen to a whisper of voices within the walls:
Kurwa, she tells him. *Not souls but*
as if

memory birds

—fisted turned in, away from rain later, she waits by a window (is this the smallest space?)
the soldiers dancing high-fiving into the city one love *fingers*
hacked off leaving only thumbs pull
tightly your clothes about you fix your gaze (let love: let) *carry*
your soul in your hand

she slips away then imagining whoever comes next

II.

i am covered by the blood

of jesus amen chalked

3

times on the hotel wall fifteen yr. old whore
(the hotel called *happiness*) at dawn here
is all that can be spoken
—the sky greywhite, clotted: smoke from landfill, diesel, some
several thousand
cooking fires pressed like a half-moon thumb above sunken
piers and deserted skyscrapers—
porter-women: 40 to a room, vendors in their stalls sawmill

workers in side yards
on stacked planks hasau/yoruba wake in block houses
wooden shacks narrow corridors of
face me i

face you chambers in alleyways or curled on the handlebars of
their motorcycle taxis in car in truck cab on concrete
ledges above streets which fill with sludge sacks scraps of cloth-
ing and plastic bags *the people who use public space* fortified
by palm-wine gin or indian hemp drive suicidally the yellow
passenger minibuses file (red eyed baseball cap impossible
clean white shirt) like an unspooled line of thought down 50 ft.
cliffs of laterite and garbage into the half-mile wide landfill
dump with picking sacks & where dwellings of plastic sheeting
and scrap metal bound by bailing wire
(*i am filled with longing my world awakened*) dive
the
lagoon at city's edge for buckets of sand (40 feet single breath:
you have girlfriend? ha!
don't waste money: bye-bye safe journey) haul used car
part hardhat battery
(*everywhere is market*)

one—slight/frail from a stroke—will die waiting for justice
another already left dead beneath the expressway
everyone else struggles—

an auto yard glows with fires from oil spills, a garbage dump
steams workers
wash the feet of market women at dawn scavenger boy and
village girl

fuck
our life into longing awakened at dawn: rem koolhaas
harvard visionary

urban planner in his 14th story hotel room
3rd day in-country, he & his team of graduate students too
fearful

to leave their car and venture the streets
but today will rent the helicopter
(*did you know that i am already risen that i am gone?*)
of the nigerian
president and what was desperation chaos death will
from a vast distance
appear

an urban phenomenon the future proof of how well listen:
break the skin of this life
15 yr. old girl: from her window old men & area boys with
machetes at dawn
a child
shitting

squatting over a gutter at dawn, we are engulfed our
world not

soul but as if *to step outside of* as if Lagos bird-
ghosted
etiolate

III.

in the manner of light

et cetera
et cetera that same longing the stars—

arranged in their own particular way—cannot be
The Earth of Small Shares
cannot O treacherous mouth O little box that
knocks itself: *The Three*

Shining
Horses come next try

cutting *them* out try burning them: *They* are not the savior
they are
not
even real.

Ronald Frame

The Palm House: A Far-Eastern Romance

Gardening correspondent of the *Carnbeg Days* is Sandy Loam. She writes: "Imagine a rural garden which contains at its heart a jungle—a sweating rainforest. Here in Perthshire. There used to be one such place roundabout. The estate with that subtropical past was, and still *is*, called Bardrevach."

Two hundred acres of woodland and arable. The domestic ground is walled, and a second walled enclosure was built inside that. The "inner garden," of three acres or so, comprises geometrical areas separated by thick hedges of beech or yew.

The strath where the flat part of the estate sits is very temperate. Inside the inner garden the summer temperatures can be a full seven or eight degrees Fahrenheit higher than outside the protecting wall. This microclimate suits exotic specimens. But they fared even better when Cedric McLauchlan constructed his palm house, an ironwork and glass dome rising from ground level, above a sunken base, hung with netting in summer to provide shade from too much direct sunshine.

Inside the palm house, McLauchlan grew tree ferns as well as spiked favourites like a sugar palm and a black-trunked palmyra and the rare coco-de-mer, which is so hard to establish. He preferred his trees to spectacular flowers, which he claimed required as much attention as an opera diva. The trees retained their colour, and were chipper so long as conditions were kept warm and moist. Getting that mix right was Cedric McLauchlan's gift.

He had spent twenty years in Borneo before he sold his shares in the family's rubber business and returned home, retiring to Carnbeg in the wooded Perthshire hills. He picked up the estate for a comparative song, on the eve of the First World War.

For the next thirty-odd years he devoted himself to Bardrevach, to farming matters and then increasingly (once he had leased out the farm) to the copses and his gardens.

Carnbeg being Carnbeg, a crossing-place for colonials, ru-

mours went about that he'd been quite a different person in his youthful Borneo days: vivacious, sociable, amusing. Really? Unless it was someone of the same name, because there had been several young McLauchlans in Kuching at various points, working in the rubber trade. No, it was definitely *him*, as old Borneo hands could confirm to their Carnbeg acquaintances. But suddenly he withdrew from the Sarawak social scene, and announced that he was leaving: quitting a country which had seemed to put him under a spell, where (everyone had supposed) he'd been very happy.

His palmy days, so to speak.

Somebody in Carnbeg heard from somebody else down south who had knowledge of the family that Cedric McLauchlan had been engaged to be married—secretly engaged because the girl was Chinese—and that an announcement was to have been made at the annual Valentine's Day Ball. But there had been some to-do on the dance floor, followed by an undignified brawl on the terrace outside, and no announcement to family, friends, and colleagues was forthcoming.

Cedric McLauchlan arrived back in Scotland a single man, just as he'd left it as an only son at eighteen.

He wasn't older than forty when he bought the Bardrevach estate, and parents of daughters for miles about consulted the runes. Their hopes proved to be quite unfounded. Someone from the locale sent him a valentine's card one year, anonymously of course, and it was said that his response was to hurl plates at the wall before storming out of his own house and breenging off to lock himself inside the inner garden.

Cedric McLauchlan protected himself with walls, literal as well as metaphorical.

Few people saw the interior of the palm house. Any invitation was considered a great privilege in Carnbeg.

An occasional expert from further afield would take a more direct approach, writing to him, and sometimes McLauchlan was sufficiently impressed by that person's credentials to agree. A couple of erudite articles, illustrated, appeared in gardening journals, which became the available basis of knowledge for the curious. There was the fern *todea barbara*, a specimen reputed

to be six hundred years old—and there were his much younger indigenous Borneo palms, the rotund *arenga undulatifolia* and the *licuala orbicularis*, with broad leaves that are ripped from the trunk in the land where they're grown and used as impromptu umbrellas.

Cedric McLauchlan died in 1948. His will stipulated that the estate was to be sold, but someone in the family apparently came up with objections—and had the luck (if that's what it truly was) of a dozy, overworked Perth lawyer to deal with.

For a further year the estate remained in limbo, with its tenant farmer still in place and the house being regularly cleaned and aired. The garden, however, was neglected. Since the end of the war the palm house had been left to its own devices, as McLauchlan's illness took hold of him; responsibility for his trees and ferns, his former pride and joy, wasn't to be delegated to anyone else. McLauchlan did ensure that the heating and watering was as he required it to be, to ensure constant humidity. But the shades weren't ever lowered. Likewise the business of opening and closing the glass panels was skipped by the boy charged to do it, with the result that the hinges became stiff and eventually inoperable.

For a full year the inner garden slept—and the palm house at its centre, crowded with its many species (spiny nibung and sago and rajah and fish-tail), fell into the deepest slumber of all.

A car drew up at the house one day in February. A key was used to open the front door. The housekeeper got the fright of her life. She was used by now to the creaking floorboards in the house, as if someone else was stepping on to them, but suddenly—in the dusty light—she thought she was looking at old Mr McLauchlan himself.

Mrs Gillies' heart was in her mouth, and she had to reach out to a door jamb to steady herself.

This man's name was McLauchlan too, to confuse matters. Arthur McLauchlan.

"I'm your late employer's cousin."

She had heard from Carnbeg talk (never from Mr McLauchlan, who'd been so sparing with words) that cousins had been out in Borneo at the same time, working as Cedric McLauchlan did in the family's rubber business.

This man's skin had a weathered look, and an orange tinge, and even his English was fairly stilted—as it wasn't the only language he used.

He said something about his wife, whom he'd left at one of the town's hotels. When he picked up the telephone receiver and was put through to the lawyer, he told the man he'd thought his wife probably wouldn't want to see the place, "for her own reasons."

Mrs Gillies happened to have a niece working at the Sgian Palace Hotel, and she called by her sister's house in the evening.

Mrs McLauchlan was "not of our colour," it transpired. She was an Eastern lady, petite and dainty with fine features and slanting eyes, and shiny hair she must dye black—because surely no sixty-year-old's hair was ever so evenly, blackly black. She spoke English with an oriental accent: sounding very pleasant on the ear, it was the English of a while ago. Everything she did, Moira said, was really quite pleasant, and she didn't behave like a Madam (not like some folks at the Palace), even though her clothes were so good and even if she was clearly Someone where she came from: not stuck up at all, but quiet, and not properly attending, as if she had important private matters weighing on her mind.

The lawyer obeyed the summons at once, appearing in person for this authoritative-sounding visitor.

They walked about the house and grounds the following afternoon, and Mrs Gillies saw Arthur McLauchlan pursuing some point with his index finger, quite heatedly, and the lawyer being made to listen, and—later—McLauchlan slapping him on the back, as if he was closer to getting something he wanted.

There was still no sign of Mrs McLauchlan. The couple had come a long way, halfway round the world, to be here. It seemed strange to Mrs Gillies that the lady hadn't chosen to stay in London, preferring now to lie low at the hotel rather than make her way five miles out of Carnbeg to the big house.

People were strange. But then, hadn't she worked for one stranger than most, the real and proper Mr McLauchlan, *Cedric* McLauchlan: a recluse, speaking so little, looking lost every so often—as if he'd forgotten how he'd got to be living at Bard-

revach—and, just as Moira had said of that lady currently staying at the Sgian Palace, seeming to have secret matters weighing on his mind.

Without telling anyone, it seems, Arthur McLauchlan returned to Bardrevach the following day.

It wasn't the big house that drew him, but the inner garden—and the chief attraction to him was the glassy palm house.

He was able to get inside. (If he'd been able to find a key to the main house, then finding a key to the palm collection wouldn't have been beyond his wit and ingenuity.)

Did he close the door behind him? Or did it slam shut? At any rate, when the police came looking, the key was lying *outside* on the path, and the door was locked.

When the search party broke down the door, the heat of many months came roaring out at them. At first they couldn't see for steam. Water was pouring down the insides of the windows. The earth seemed to hiss and sizzle. The ironwork was too hot to touch.

Finally they made their find.

It was two days since McLauchlan had been reported missing from the hotel. There, spread-eagled in a puddle on the palm house floor beneath a straggling *daemonorops augustifolia* weighed down with fallen netting, was a body. It had already reached an advanced state of decomposition, as if it had been lying there for weeks instead of forty-eight hours. The deceased could only be identified from his sodden clothing.

There was evidence that the man, in his panic to escape, must have tried to break some panes with a stone, but they resisted him—or else he didn't have the strength left before his heart gave out.

The gardener's boy was traced to Glasgow, where he had been staying for the past ten days; he knew nothing. Mrs Gillies had been to the house in the interim, but she'd had no reason to look into the inner garden. "That big glasshouse always did give me the creeps."

Mrs McLauchlan was questioned in the privacy of her suite at the Sgian Palace. She was so confused that she couldn't distinguish between Arthur McLauchlan and Cedric. The police gave up, and the doctor administered a sedative.

But she rambled on.

"'I shall never forgive him,' he used to say."

"Who said, Mrs McLauchlan?"

She didn't reply, picking at a thread on the chair's loose cover and turning it round her finger.

"Forgive him for what, Mrs McLauchlan?"

"For what his cousin did."

The widow wilted under the gaze of the two officers.

"I didn't know what I should do, you see. I loved them both, each in a different way. I gave Cedric his ring back, and then he said he would never forgive him, he would have his revenge on him—however long it took. And so that made me feel sorry for Arthur ..."

Shortly afterwards she married Arthur McLauchlan. Before 1913 was out, before the Valentine's Day Ball rolled round again, Cedric McLauchlan left Borneo and returned to Scotland. He put in an offer on a run-down estate, duly received the title deeds, and retreated behind walls inside walls, into a sub-tropical world he could control, where he was perfect master.

Mrs Gillies mentioned to the police some objects in the house she didn't dust. She was superstitious about not *ever* dusting them. Amulets, peculiarly shaped shells, carved figures, bits of bone, and whatnot. She just had a sixth sense where *they* were concerned, that was the Highlandwoman in her. And perhaps that was the reason for Mr McLauchlan — Mr *Cedric* McLauchlan—being comfortable with her: because he felt that she was another layer of protection.

Then she must have thought she'd said too much to the policemen, and she stopped herself. So far as the officers were concerned, she had noticed nothing suspicious, and that was what got typed up in their report.

But Drina Gillies, her friends were aware, couldn't rest after that. She was always on edge. She was forever listening out and glancing over her shoulder on the Carnbeg streets and even in her own house, until she could stand it no longer, handed in her notice, and moved back west to the Isles, where she came from, where most of the people knew little if anything of Borneo. It wasn't in their ken, and like the decent, God-fearing folk they were, they never gave that far-off place or its heathen ways as much as a thought.

That was sixty years ago.

The estate has changed hands several times, and the haunted palm house was left well alone by its different owners.

I was asked by the current owners to give my advice, and the three of us ventured inside. We should have been wearing oxygen masks, because the air was stale and rank. It became harder and harder to breathe, and soon enough we were beating a retreat.

We had to resort to breaking some panes with a builder's hammer before covering them with canvas for night protection. A couple of days later we went back inside.

It was like a lost kingdom. I felt I had fallen into the pages of a Rider Haggard novel, or that if I looked round there would be Indiana Jones cracking his whip. A few of the palms and ferns had survived, miraculously—but most had perished, falling over or reaching out leaf-blades and fronds towards the light in a determined last bid to save themselves. It was a desperate scene. I was saddened by what I was seeing. Gardens must lose bloom and freshness and even look quite woebegone in the process of renewing themselves, but they're first and foremost living places and this was a dead garden. I *smelt* it. (Even the *todea barbara* had succumbed, after six centuries of existence.) The plants, you might have thought, had witnessed the horror that took place on that Valentine's Day sixty years ago.

The owners and I tried to discuss matters intelligently. We decided the most pressing issues were technical ones: getting the building to operate properly again, and introducing some modern technology to provide easier and more effective maintenance. Architecturally, the building must now feature in the listed category, and the owners would be limited by a preservation order as to some of the things they could do. But any restrictions were also a link to the past—to the better part of the past, when Cedric McLauchlan had raised the palm house from (seemingly) out of the bare ground as a glass temple to a remembered landscape, *somewhere he wanted to spend his time.*

It could be that again, we said, and repeated the high hope in order to convince ourselves. (What was the alternative? To seek to demolish the super-conservatory, or even to leave as it was? No, impossible.)

We asked one of the Botanical Gardens if they might be interested, and they agreed straightaway. To them it was a chiefly

horticultural challenge. We were offered willing professional advice by architectural experts and engineers on how to treat the building as sympathetically as we needed to do.

It opens to the public in a few weeks' time. Go and see it, I urge you. Enter the world of Cedric McLauchlan: home from Borneo ninety-five years ago, fully confident in his abilities to manufacture his own climate and immerse himself in its steaming floricultural, dendriform glories, a kind of oblivion which one day would be rudely challenged—and no forgiveness shown in return on that mid-February day.

No, on second thoughts, don't dwell on such extreme passions: they don't bring peace of mind. Enjoy the palm house as we've remade it, but enjoy it *moderately*, in a quiet and contented fashion.

(PS. Doors close at 6pm sharp. You've been warned!)

Elaine M. Seaman Army Star

No one remembers that June anymore—
or was it August?—when he came home
from Viet Nam carrying the dust
of a battered county on his shoes.
He only had a few private rules,
he said: no medals, no stories.

I think now that I had expected more
of a hollowness, a staggering ruin
of a brother, but he plunged into
what work was available, married
his high-school sweetheart, told
the best jokes at family gatherings.

So we never asked. Never heard
about bravery or guns or the coded
gestures among soldiers. To this day,
he has not reunited with a single buddy.

He had packed his memories
in a box and put it in Mom's attic.
We found it when she moved out.
They'll burn, he said.

Oliver Rice

There in the Afterhours Office

So as not to say what has to be said,
having Chinese just by the cathedral,
we make fictions, biographies, cantos
for those who are encountering tonight
the persons they had hoped to be,

walking afterwards in the old town,
we make diaries for the divided selves
who are engaged there in the tavern,
in the cruising sedan, the executive suite,
who some era, some season ago
fled, held on, drifted rightward, eastward,
by happenstance mutated,
insensible to the nuance of the uncle,
witless of the test quite casually failed,

so as not to say what has to be said.

Ohio #4

Rust & mist & no
kept promises,
no pennies sewn
into the hemline
of this year,

everybody envies
lilies: their little
moans of beauty
have escaped into
the waters & floated

& floated away.

Lewis K. Schrager

The Deer

Marilyn Shaw found the deer down in the lowest corner of her property, where the stone bridge on Old Glen Road crosses the spring-fed stream that marks the boundary of her land with the Reynolds' to the south. The deer lay on its left side, head and forelegs toward her, hind parts awash in the water, its left hind leg bent under it in some crazy, impossible angle. Across its flank and down its back to the level of the water, blood matted its short, brown hairs.

She approached the animal slowly, crossing the soggy gravel with tentative steps. The cool April air carried the scents of earth and water, life-affirming scents that drew her back each morning and cleansed from her the despair that came upon her in the dark, quiet hours of the night. The actual touch of the water upon her face completed the cleansing; water scooped in her small but still-strong hands, cold against the ring she wore on her left thumb against the wishes of her husband, not as jewelry but as a sign, a token of remembrance (as if forgetting ever was a possibility). And now, in the midst of the waters, this.

She came closer. Two small, bony nubs protruded from the top of the young buck's skull. She crouched down before it, steadying herself with outstretched fingers pressed into the silt. Her gaze met the eye of the fallen animal, large and brown and frozen open in the stunned ignominy of sudden, violent death. The empty glaze of the great open eye reflected the branches of a brookside poplar dense with buds, a lightening sky beyond, and then a fleeting vision of herself, barely recognizable in the concave distortion of the liquid lens. At least you do not suffer, she thought. It's only the living who suffer. Only the living, left behind to bear the pain.

And then it moved. It snorted once, then lifted its head and flailed out with its front legs, spraying sand and stone in a desperate attempt to rise. The sudden evidence of frantic life sent her backward upon the stream bank; the hoof of the upper leg barely missed her shins as she scrambled out of the animal's reach.

As abruptly as the thrashing began, it ended. The head of the animal collapsed back on the bank, its mouth half-open, its tongue and snout covered with grit. She stood and wiped her hands upon her pants. Please be dead, she thought. Please, now, be dead. But the quick, small puffs of its steaming breath, the occasional shudder that swept across the animal's hide, gave evidence of tenuous life. "Oh, God," she whispered. "What do I do now?"

She hurried back down the path, out of the cover of the trees. She ran past her terraced garden on the hill leading to the house, then across the broad lawn, through the screen door and inside. A golden shaft of sunlight streamed in through a window, illuminating the top of the hutch upon which rested the tightly folded triangle of flag that never again would fly free. Just behind the flag, a black-framed portrait: David Shaw in full Marine uniform, the medallion on his white-banded hat and the medals pinned to his dark dress jacket alive in the new day's light. She glanced at him as she did every time she passed, as she had ever since clearing off David's baseball and basketball and football trophies, along with the pictures of David and Richard fly-fishing on the upper Potomac, posing with the wild ponies at Assateague, hiking through the blue mist of the Smokies. Nearly two years since she boxed them all up and created this simple shrine. Often she lingered, to brush her fingers across the folded flag, to whisper something or other—a concern, an observation, a message of regret or love or frustration or, sometimes, anger at his stubbornness, his sense of responsibility and duty and sacrifice unrequited (in her view) by those ultimately responsible for putting him in harm's way. Now, she hesitated for only a moment, pausing directly in the path of the light, eclipsing with her own small shadow the photograph that had come to define David more in death than in life: David the Marine.

She stared at the phone in the kitchen, thinking first about calling Richard but calling information for the number of the local SPCA instead. She paced the floor, the telephone held tight to her ear, as the woman's calm voice on the SPCA recording told her to call back during regular office hours or, in case of an injured or threatening animal, to call the county police.

She looked up the number on the scrap of paper pinned to the corkboard above the phone. EMERGENCY NUMBERS—writ-

ten in her own handwriting in big, block letters across the top, how long ago? Police and fire, the dentist. Dr. Sandra Meyers, her ob-gyn, first to see and touch David when her labor proved fruitless despite all her preparation, and the dreaded C-section became necessary (after 27 hours of labor, Dr. Meyers insisted on the procedure, as much for the baby's well-being as for her own). Dr. Emily Wilcox, David's pediatrician, who thankfully had little to do for a healthy child like David except charting his growth, giving him his vaccinations, emphasizing the importance of eating right and getting enough sleep, and, when the time came, talking to him about the dangers of smoking and drugs and unprotected casual sex (nothing David hadn't heard from her). Farther down, the number for Camp Lejune, followed by an emergency number that families of Marines sent to Iraq could call, just in case. Finally, a number for Dr. Dana Simmons, the marriage counselor who told them that the blame that she and Richard shot at each other like high-caliber bullets at insanely close range was a common, but misplaced, reaction; who said that it was all too usual to have a marriage fall apart after the death of a child, particularly an only child; who emphasized that any decision about the marriage might best be delayed until the shock waves of David's death had passed.

"County police. This is Sergeant Henderson." A beep on the line, the call being recorded.

"Marilyn Shaw, 1805 Farmland Road, Damascus. There's a deer down on my property. It looks like it was hit by a car or truck or something. It's hurt bad."

"It's still alive?"

"Yes, Officer."

"Have you called the SPCA?"

"Yes, Officer. Their offices aren't open. The message said to call you."

A pause. "How badly is it hurt?"

"Very. It's back leg is shattered."

"It's not threatening anyone?"

Marilyn squeezed the phone. "It can't move, Officer. It's lying half in my stream. It's suffering, I know it's suffering." She swallowed hard against the tightness squeezing her throat. "Someone's got to do something."

"Where is it, exactly?"

"Old Glen Road, about three-quarters of a mile south of Farmland, down the hill. It's right there, just below the bridge, on the north bank of the stream."

"Give me your name again."

"Marilyn Shaw. 1805 Farmland Road."

Clicking sounds of fingers on a computer keyboard in the background. "Richard and Marilyn Shaw?"

"Correct."

A pause. His voice suddenly different, a hint of recognition and, perhaps, sympathy. "David Shaw was your son?"

She closed her eyes. Not was. Is. Is my son. Will always be my son. "Yes," she said.

"He was in school with my Tommy. Tommy used to go over to your house to play football. He said you had a great field."

She looked out the kitchen window to the broad lawn atop the hill. The field. That's what David called it, that's what all the kids called it. She and Richard would watch them out on the field, running, passing, tackling. Rainy-day games were the best; they would slide for ten feet after a tackle. Sometimes they would slide right down the hill toward the woods, clear out of sight. David's clothes would be a mess afterward, but it was worth it. The way he would smell, of wet grass and earth and cold. Boy smells.

"We were all sorry to hear."

"Thank you."

And then: "What was it? An IED?"

The question, asked as easily as you might ask someone for the time, triggered a sudden, insane rage, pulsing through her as if injected straight into her heart. An IED? As if three goddamned letters could somehow blow a Humvee and four Marines a hundred feet in the air. As if it made any fucking difference to you, Sergeant Henderson, what "it" was.

She fought her tears, but they came anyway. "Officer, right now there's a deer down on my property. Can you please send someone over? Please? Now?"

"Hold on for a minute." The line went quiet. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with her hand, then walked back into the family room. The clock on the wall by the window ticked off the seconds like a bomb. A click and he was back. "Ms. Shaw, hate to say it, but we can't help you. If the animal's not a threat—"

"Jesus Christ, that animal's out there suffering, and you can't do anything?"

"Please try to calm down, ma'am."

She took a deep breath, tried to gather her thoughts. "Listen, what I want to know is whether you can send someone out to help this animal. Yes or no?"

"Ma'am, it's like I told you, we can't unless the animal is threatening—"

She hung up. I'm calling Richard, she thought. I've got to call Richard. She checked the calendar push-pinned into the wall below the clock. Today he's in Singapore, tomorrow Shanghai. She punched in the number to Richard's mobile phone. This is a mistake, she thought as the line buzzed. He hates when I call him when he's on business. Only for emergencies, he says. She paced the floor, her hand sweeping back loose strands of her graying hair. Answer the phone, damn it. Please, just answer the phone.

He did, on the seventh ring. "What is it?" he whispered.

It was as she feared. "Please, Richard, not like that."

"I'm in the middle of a meeting." In the silence after his sharply whispered reply, in the few quiet moments when her words again stuck in her throat, she heard a woman speaking in the background, her Oriental-accented English distant and tinny. Something about profit margins under pressure.

"There's a deer, Richard."

"A what?"

"A deer. In the stream, by the bridge. It's hurt, badly. Probably hit by a car or truck or something." Silence. In the background, the woman's voice speaking of a projected inventory buildup in the third and fourth quarters. "It's suffering," Marilyn said.

She was looking at David's picture. Even her mother said there was nothing of her in him, he was all Richard. She would often search his face, looking for some sign of herself; her eyes, perhaps, or cheeks or chin. It was true, what her mother said, what everyone said. Looking at a picture of him, watching him as he sat down for dinner or did his homework or rode his bicycle or played football on the lawn outside the house with Tommy Henderson and the other boys, he was all Richard. Only when he was frightened, when his brow lowered and eyes narrowed, when his lips tightened into each other, only then did she see a glimmer of herself in him. Like Richard, he was not one

who frightened easily. Snakes, spiders, even the pediatrician's needle, nothing seemed to frighten him. Except being alone in a dark room. The one thing. The cost of being an only child, a psychologist friend once said. Certain to be outgrown. Yet, until the day he left for college, a light remained on in his bedroom throughout the night. You don't drop out of college to join the Marines if you frighten easily. And yet, when he shipped out, she saw herself in his face and wished to God she hadn't.

They would not let her see his face afterward. She had read about what the heat does, how sometimes the goggles melt through the skin right onto the bone, if there is any bone left at all. They said that he had died instantly, that he did not suffer. But with all the lies, how could she believe anything they told her? And, although three other Marines also were killed in the blast, she could not get it out of her head that he died alone—absent friends and family, absent those who truly loved him—and for this and so much more she could never forgive herself.

"It's suffering, Richard. I don't know what to do. What should I do?"

"Call the SPCA."

"I already did."

"And?"

"No one's in. The voice mail message said to call the police."

"And?"

"They weren't any help."

"Then just leave it be."

"I told you—"

"I heard. It's suffering. Get something straight. Animals don't suffer, humans suffer."

"You really believe that?" She rested her head upon crossed arms cradling the folded flag, her tears diffusing into the dark blue fabric, silent fireworks exploding amidst a constellation of smooth white stars.

"You don't?"

"No, Richard, I don't. I definitely don't."

"Then kill it yourself," he said. "You don't want it to suffer? Go kill it yourself. Put it out of its misery."

"How—how am I supposed to do that?"

"You said it's in the stream. Drown it. Drop a rock on its head. Use your imagination."

"Richard—"

"Listen, I'm sorry. I've got to go."

She put the phone down, then rested her cheek on the tear-moistened flag. With her eyes closed, she saw the fallen deer, its hind parts awash in the gentle flow of the water. When her crying stopped, she headed into the kitchen. For the first time in her life, she found herself wishing that she had a gun. She searched through the black handles of the knives in the butcher block alongside the stove, pulled out her big, broad-bladed chopping knife, and headed back out the door.

It was still alive when she reached it, its side rising and falling with each panting breath. The sun was well up now, brilliant in a sapphire sky. Rays of golden light reached through the tangle of branches from the budding trees, dappling the fallen animal. From high in the trees came the springtime songs of cardinal and mockingbird.

She removed her shoes and socks, rolled up her pants legs to her knees, and waded out into the stream. The cold water rushing by her feet and ankles, the feel of the smooth, hard knife handle in her hands, the smells of water and woods, earth and animal, awakened her past any awakening she had known since as long as she could remember. She approached the deer slowly, circling it, coming at it from behind so as not to startle it as before. All the while she spoke to it, using a soft, gentle voice she had last used when David was but a small child. "It's all right," she said. The animal fidgeted at the sound of her voice, again making an effort to raise its head off the bank, but it had weakened, and now could drag its snout barely an inch through the soft silt.

"It's all right, it's all right," she said. She circled past the injured flank, and when she saw the full extent of the damage, a deep, visceral ache ran through her, as if the injuries somehow were her own. She stopped, put a cupped hand into the stream, and brought the cold water to her face, slapping her cheeks and brow until she felt her breath return.

She slowly moved closer until she could touch it with an outstretched arm. She crouched behind the deer and laid a fingertip upon the nape of its neck. The sudden touch of skin upon hide sent a wave of panic through the animal, a spasm of nerve and muscle that seemed, for barely an instant, to lift its entire body off the ground and out of the water. And then it was down

again, flat and motionless. A sharp, hard breath scattered the sand by its snout, a final acquiescence.

She crouched low over the animal stroking its head, her hand running down the narrow space between the two bony nubs, the ring she wore on her thumb—David's high school ring—clicking up against one of the nubs with each slow pass of her fingers. She petted the side of its head, then gently around the base of its ears, as if it were a cat she had befriended. Finally, when she convinced herself that the animal had become used to her touch, she moved her hand to its neck. She eased the head back as the other hand tightened around the handle of the knife. She directed the point of the blade at the hard pulse hammering through the heavy animal musculature, the arterial spring that she must find with her first thrust. She held it there, willing herself to do what she must. And then she laid the knife down upon the stream bed.

She sat down in the stream, awash in the gentle flow of the clear, cold water. As her hands cradled the stricken animal's head, an image of herself filled the great glassy convexity of the deer's unblinking eye. There is little I can do for your suffering, she thought. But at least you will not die alone.

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