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Confidence game | Three essays and two stories

Margaret Leigh Tillman

The University of Montana

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THE CONFIDENCE GAME:
THREE ESSAYS AND TWO STORIES

by

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B.A., College of William and Mary, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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For Carl

I’m coming for you Carl Sagan.
Driving east from Montana on I-90 under April crescent moon.
Carl, I have the top down.
I name the stars as I drive.
I’ll show you stars you’ve never seen.
Renamed. Reborn.

And you Carl.
Your shy grin.
You swing the iron gate shut,
    and name the flowers as they burst and fade
moving across my garden
    following sun, days, heat.

From our rumpled bed, you’ll name them.
Ruffled quarks spreading bi-colored petals.
Pink asteroids, yellow comets, pale blue moons.
Cascading fuchsia nuclei, fragrant inertia,
Spikes of galaxy, purple and coral.
    Beneath the leafy varigated barium
Clusters of bright white chaos, lavender velocity.
Across cool white sheets
Sprays of spicy supernova, lacy entropy,
    and relativity, just about to bloom.
Elbows on windowsill
we’ll watch Schrödinger’s cat wind through thick tangles of climbing
    planet,
    white dwarf, luminosity, and deep red eclipse.

Later.
Sweet meteor woven in our hair, we’ll keep watch over our gardens,
Counting.
Naming.
Planning.

I’m coming for you Carl Sagan.
The Confidence Game

Forty-five minutes until post. George and I walk into the
grandstands of the Ravalli County Fair. White wooden doors still cover
the pari-mutuel windows, but the stands are already sprinkled with
handicappers, bent over their programs for concentration and wind
protection. We settle into a sunny spot on the wooden bleachers.
George props his hiking boots on the seat in front of us and opens the
racing program, pen in hand. Gas Bubble, my favorite horse, my sure
thing from Great Falls, is not running today, so I'm not betting.

Early fall afternoon in western Montana. The change of weather
has awakened me. I feel maddeningly alert, almost feisty in the newly
sharp light. The leaves on the row of poplar trees, the glittering
windshields of the cars and trucks parked on the backside, the men and
women standing in the infield -- everything is outlined by this clear
light. I know that light is both wave and particle, but today, I would
say "particle," if pressed for an answer. Light in waves seems too
indistinct, more like the hot vagueness of summer skies I've seen for
the past two months. Autumn light is particular light, precise light.
After the hazy heat and dust, the details are overwhelming. I can read
the sign on the door of the helicopter that springs, chopping blades
flashing in the sporadic sun, over the poplar trees: "10 Minutes For
$10." I wonder what Hamilton, Montana and the Ravalli County
Fairgrounds look like from the air, what sort of cosmic pattern could be
read from above.

A chilly wind sweeps across the grandstand, and I huddle against
George. "I'll buy you a windbreaker if I hit a trifecta," he says.
He kisses my forehead, then turns his attention back to the program, his
blue eyes narrowed against the glare of autumn sunlight on the white
page, his hand resting on my shoulder. We play this game in different
variations. What to do with the trifecta winnings. What to do with the
Publisher's Clearinghouse money. I'm sure there is a system, some
pattern to buying magazines or picking horses, that we could tap into if
only we studied the Kabbalah, or quantum physics, the study of matter
and energy.

I don't always go to the races. George likes my company, but I
blow his concentration. I want to go upstairs to the turf club and
drink Scotch with the owners. I want to walk around the backside and
see the horses, the trainers. I can't sit still while he handicaps.

"First you look at the horse," George explained to me once, "then
at the jockey, and the trainer, and the past runs, and their times and
lengths. Then you get to the window and try to decide whether or not to
second-guess yourself." It doesn't help if I'm standing next to him,
breathing "Oh, number three's gorgeous."

Clouds race across the sky, pushed by the cold front moving toward
Tomorrow the temperature will drop again, the prediction is highs in the thirties. Two weeks ago, we were hitting one hundred. Last month, I came home from the Western Montana Fair with salt stains on my shorts, a tideline of sweat at my waist. Tonight, I'll have to cover my tomato plants and bring the potted plants inside. Tomorrow, I'll make soup with the last of the garden vegetables.

Down at the paddock, they don't sound like they're speaking English.

"Yesterday, I bet a two-one box in the fifth, and hit a six-three exacta in the sixth," says a woman in mud-spattered turquoise boots.

I walk out into the fairgrounds and buy a cup of coffee from the Boy Scouts. Everyone seems to have a system, secrets, hunches, insiders' knowledge.

"I bet on Blank Label and Your Career. Great names, huh?"

"I always bet on the number three horse, because I've always lived on the third floor of apartment buildings."

"I bet on any gray horse. They're lucky."

During the 1992 Western Montana Fair, the Missoulian ran an article about betting methods. One man bet on jockeys' underwear. He said if you get down close to the track, you can see right through the white pants. He bets on the wildest underwear. The next day, I stood by the fence as the jockeys rode by before the race. I had a hard time deciding which pair was wildest, but finally chose a bright orange with red polka dots. You really can see right through the silks.

Light outlines George in his teal green Racing Journal cap. He
edits this subscription-only, north-western horse-racing magazine. The owner of The Racing Journal wanted a "real" journalist, and George fit the bill, even though he hadn't worked as a journalist in two years, and his only knowledge of horse-racing came from reading Bukowski.

Jobs are hard to find in Missoula. George's biggest gamble was deciding to come with me, packing up his life and moving 2,500 miles from home, with no job. I had a job teaching freshmen composition at the University of Montana and the instant connections of a graduate student. He delivered pizzas for Domino's for the first three months. He would come home late, tired and disgruntled from dealing with rude customers who never tipped.

"I drove all the way up the fucking Rattlesnake and all they can say is 'It's been thirty-two minutes.'"

He made the decision to quit over hot pepper cheeseburgers and a pitcher at the Missoula Club. It was a month before he found a temporary job at the Bon, selling furniture.

I wonder if I would have moved into his dream, with no commitment? Before we moved in together, George was my best friend as well as the man with whom I was having an on-again, off-again relationship. Every time I thought things were finally working out, he'd back away. The move seemed the ultimate risk to me, and it's worked out better than either of us could have imagined. He knows more about me than anyone else. He understands my struggle to make connections, to see patterns, to understand how matter and energy work together to create life.

I settle back on the wooden seat, holding my white cup in both hands, breathing onto the coffee so that the scent and steam will
envelop my face. Three high school girls bounce down the bleachers, their long blonde hair whipping in the wind. All three are slender and very pretty -- one wears tight turquoise leggings and an oversized black sweater, the others are in snug Levis and sweatshirts. I look over to see if George has noticed, but he doesn't seem to. He is not a habitual gambler; Montana's poker and keno machines lost his attention fairly quickly. But he takes horse-racing very seriously. He dreams of winning consistently enough to make a living.

George's personality is freer than mine. I am not sure I would have followed him to the Southwest. He prefers the desert; I prefer the mountains; we both dreamt of the West. I think I would have let my family and friends talk me out of it. I think I might have said that my parents wouldn't let me.

"Not unless we're married," I might have said, and then watched him leave the South, driving west alone. I can't outbluff him. I have three years invested in this relationship. The longer we last, the harder I'll try to make it work, the more devastated I'll be if we break apart. I'm not giving odds here. I'm just interpreting what I see.

"It's a game," George says, "and I'm good at it."

When I bet, I place win bets. Win bets are an small act of pure faith, choosing one horse, one result. I've tried different systems. At Playfair in Spokane, I bet a quinella on the two horses that looked right at me and whinnied as they walked around the paddock, then watched as they straggled in twenty-five lengths behind the winner. One gray winter afternoon at the simulcast, I bet $2 to win on every gray horse.
I won four out of six bets.

George makes more complicated bets. He likes numbers, combinations -- exactas, trifectas, quinellas. When his concentration is good, he hits at least half of the races. The first time, he called.

"I'm ninety dollars up. Get dressed, we're going out to eat."

Now he just slides in the door with a grin.

In Great Falls, I bought the steak dinner. I placed two $5 win bets, on Big Will James and Gas Bubble, and walked away $22 ahead. They were good horses, both ridden by Darrell Brinkerhoff (who was wearing turquoise underwear with white stars), the best jockey at Great Falls, and trained by Greg Tracy, the top trainer. Besides, they were beautiful horses with great names. Gas Bubble pranced out looking like a miniature horse compared to the others. Tiny and solid chestnut, he glinted and danced in the sun, Brinkerhoff drawn up and clinging to his back like a tenacious fly. Gas Bubble has won twice for me, once in Great Falls, once in Missoula. I recognize some of the horse names today from the fair in Missoula last month, but I have no connection with them.

I want a safe bet, but there's no such thing. When George loses, it's usually because he second-guesses himself. He doesn't have faith in his handicapping, even though he knows he's good at it. He has theories, systems. Events come together in patterns in his life, and in mine. At these small Montana fairground tracks, sometimes it takes a few minutes for the results to be posted. George listens to the track announcer, who usually calls it right. Then we stand around for a few
minutes, listening to the other bettors mumble, while the stewards take a look at the photo. Or maybe an objection has been filed against a jockey, or the stewards have posted an inquiry, and we wait while they watch the videotape of the whole race. This time between the race's end and the official results can be tense, particularly when George has picked the unofficial winners.

"I didn't see any bump," he'll say, staring at the tote board. "They won't allow it. They won't throw out the winner." The first time I felt confident.

"They never allow an objection, do they? I've never seen one allowed."

"Of course they do. Otherwise, no one would ever file one."

Seconds later, the announcer noted that the objection had been allowed. The longshot winner was thrown out, and George's ticket, which up until the announcement might have been worth two or three hundred dollars, became worthless. Nothing I could say would fill the silence gracefully. Now that I've been reading about physics, I think of Schrödinger's Cat.

Schrödinger's Cat is a friendly-sounding concept, but it's actually a bit horrifying. You put a cat in a box, hypothetically, of course. You also put in a small capsule of lethal gas, then you seal the box. The capsule may or may not emit the gas -- the event is completely random. A minute or two later, the gas has either been released, or not. Without looking, how do you describe what is inside the box? Classical physics says the cat is either dead or alive; all we have to do is look and see.
Quantum mechanics, however, describes the inside of the box as possibilities. There is a possibility that the cat is alive, and a possibility that the cat is dead. When we look in the box, one of these possibilities becomes reality. But the reality isn't there until we observe it. Both possibilities exist simultaneously until we open the box.

Schrödinger's cat falls into the "if a tree falls in the forest" category of ideas that keep me awake at night. I get into all sorts of ethical quandaries. If I don't open the box, the cat wouldn't be dead, but what sort of a life would he have in the box if he were alive? I finally fall asleep by beginning to carefully plan the construction of a box able to support the possibly living cat indefinitely.

It could as easily have been Schrödinger's win ticket. Until the stewards make their decision, based on the win photo or the replay of the race, the possibilities exist simultaneously. And the possibilities are actually more complex, although they don't involve life or death. Suppose the horse who crossed the line first is not tossed out completely, but moved back to third place? What if a photo finish and an objection occur? The possibilities are almost endless, and only one will finally become reality, depending entirely on the stewards' interpretation of what they see.

George studied art before he studied journalism. He understands the way spaces and colors work together, and how to place words next to each other in the most concise pattern possible. He understands that gambling is a split brain activity. The left side of the brain must take in the numbers on the racing form and analyze them, and keep the
methods of betting orderly and within reach. But, George says, the right brain, the intuitive side that recognizes non-linear patterns, is the side that you want to dominate. You must learn to have faith.

"You can't always be right but when you win, well, it seems your brain did take everything into account. You think you're really smart when you win," he says.

I think of the jockeys, the horses. You never know when the jockey had a fight with his girlfriend that morning or when a loosely latched door banged in the breeze and kept a horse spooked all night. How can there be a pattern to all this? I'm not sure I have enough faith for gambling. I don't bet often because I can't see losing as anything but handing my money to strangers. George sees it as an investment, learning a skill.

"That's why it's called gambling, Leigh. You don't win all the time."

We talk about gambling in this analytical way over T-bones and red wine. He goes back over what worked, trying to burn this knowledge into his left brain to draw on later. When he loses, he berates himself for lack of faith in his own handicapping. It's a confidence game, in a way. He knows he's a good handicapper, but then he sees a horse that looks ready, or bets a quinella with three horses but leaves out the third combination and the third combination comes in. The bad days, we drink Maker's Mark, or whatever expensive whiskey we have left from the last win, and play another version of the game. Where we'll go in the Jeep Cherokee we're bound to win from the American Express sweepstakes. Where we'll go with all the money from my first book advance.
The grandstands slowly fill up as the minutes to post tick down on the tote board. A John Deere tractor, courtesy of Evergreen Square, "Power Products for all Seasons," slowly circles the track pulling a harrow behind it, smoothing the powdery brown dirt. George has handicapped the first six races, but won't make his final decision until he sees the horses.

A couple lift a baby carriage down the bleachers and arrange themselves for a long afternoon. They are both young, seventeen or eighteen, and he has a bulging blue nylon bag slung over his shoulder. They handle the baby as a team. He climbs back up the bleachers and returns a few minutes later with corn dogs, popcorn and Cokes. The corn dogs smell warm and meaty and my stomach growls. We'll go to the fairway for food during the third race, a mule race. Lucky Penny will probably win because she's come in first or second in her last seven races. All the bettors know this, and the odds will be so low that the race won't pay well.

"Scratch number four in the eighth." George cocks an ear toward the announcer's disembodied voice hovering over the grandstand, and then squints at the tote board. He flips a few pages, finds the horse and draws a wavy line through the box. Lots Of Speed Girl will not be racing today. He turns back to the first race. Twelve minutes to post.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your horses for the first race are entering the track. The number one horse is Montana Trucker, owned and trained by Lamar Mower. Jess DeRoche is in the irons. . . ." The announcer's voice echoes out over the track and the bettors look up from their
programs. They are all looking for something, gray horses, underwear colors.

The horses are wired and beautiful. The number four horse dances by sideways, crabwalking down the track, meeting the eyes of the bettors standing by the fence. Other horses stay right with the horse ponying them, faces turned into their companions' necks. Some are haughty and confident, others nervous and jumpy, and some seem to whisper into the necks of the pony horses, "I can do this, I'm going to win, I know it."

"The number four horse is BJ Needs A Screamer, owned by Bobbi Jessop, trained by Randy Schalla. Charlie Hoffman is up, one over at one twenty-one."

The three girls in front of me are picking the prettiest horse in each race to root for. They lean against the wooden railing, arms folded, various shades of blonde hair blowing away from their faces. The girl in the middle writes all of their choices on her hand with a blue pen.

"I want number one," she says, inking in her number. By the sixth race, her hands will be tattooed with blue lines and curls, a record of the aesthetic winners of the day. She carefully circles any winners that they pick. The girls agree that whoever picks the most winners will be bought a chocolate-covered frozen banana from the Women of the Moose stand.

"He looks ready." George nods at the number three horse again, in confirmation of the numbers he has written in the little boxes at the top of the page. This first race is a two-hundred-fifty yard Quarter Horse Futurity Trial. There are a series of these trials, and the eight
horses with the best times advance to the $8,000 Futurity finals. I glance at the horse's name. Balistic Mama.

"How could they name a male horse Balistic Mama?"

"She." George corrects himself, eyes still on the horses. As the post parade passes by, he stands up and hands me the pen. I take it, and look up at him, outlined in the sharp light. For the past two years, I wished on shooting stars and birthday candles for George and I to be happy together. Now that we are, everything seems to have become more complicated. Every baby he sees me smile at, every slender blonde I see him admire, every disagreement we have about money or washing dishes -- the seeds of our dissolution are all around us. We counter them with walks by the river and lazy Sunday afternoons on the couch with newspapers and football games. I try not to imagine what I will do when this portion of my life ends.

There is still so much I don't understand about racing, about gambling, about faith. George's faith in the horses, our still uneasy, unspoken faith in each other. I don't have faith in much these days. But all of this, graduate school, George, racing, Montana, all of it involves faith and risk to a degree that I've never faced before. The older I get, the higher the stakes.

My decisions have become more important. If I don't make it as a writer, then I'm thirty years old with a string of degrees that will qualify me for retail or secretarial jobs. If George and I don't last, then I'm thirty, ready to buy a house and have a baby; instead, starting the whole dating process over again. Trying to handicap men without a
racing form, measuring them against the others who couldn't commit, weighing their past performances, feeling my body tick off the years.

"You'd better have all your children before you're 39," says my mother, ominously. "Women in our family have serious trouble after 39." Miscarriages, breech births, hemorrhages. My mother spent a month in the hospital after my Caesarean birth in her 39th year. She came so close to dying she had an out-of-body experience. My mother is not a doomsayer, she is just interpreting the facts.

When I was in college, I was desperately in love with the same man for four years, a man who did not love me. Then, my passion didn't seem like a waste of time. It was an adventure, a hopelessly romantic cause. Now George and I approach the four year mark, and the thought of these years as a phase, of George as "the guy I lived with in Montana," causes panic. Somewhere in those intervening years, time settled around my shoulders like a wraith. Some mornings, it ticks louder than others.

Soon after I began going to races, I began reading about quantum mechanics. I would rather read non-fiction than fiction any day, but quantum mechanics is something I never thought I would read about, much less understand. I have always disliked science for giving me such non-mystical answers to my questions about the world around me. I gave up long before I got to physics, which seems fortuitous now. But I've been looking for some greater pattern of thought to back up my theory of life, that everything happens for a reason. This is not predetermination, but something else. I'm not sure what is controlling the universe, but I'm fairly certain it isn't an old man with a long
white beard. I am a romantic. I believe that good triumphs over evil, and that once I marry, I will have a mate for life, like a crane, a wolf, or a swan.

What I don't know concerns the immediate future. Whether Balistic Mama will win the race, how long to risk the frost and leave my last five tomatoes on the vine. In quantum mechanics, only collections of events, group behavior, can be predicted, not individual behavior. We're talking subatomic particles here, not humans or horses. But humans and horses are made up of subatomic particles. I'm not sure how deep the connections go. Neither are the physicists. All I want to do is understand my own life. It comforts me -- the idea that somewhere in the world many people try daily to understand what they cannot reason out. Physics is a religion, an investment of faith; just like horse-racing, and love, there are no sure things.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your horses are entering the starting gate."

So what happens next? Newtonian physics with its idea of the universe as a Great Machine, reinforced the Calvinist idea of predestination. From the moment the Machine groaned and whirred into motion, everything that was to happen was already determined. This race is already won; the win photograph frozen in future time, waiting to be awakened into reality by the sharp autumn light. Quantum mechanics tells us that we cannot observe reality without changing it, because the results we see are affected by the fact that we are watching and
interpreting. Because George has money on Balistic Mama, he will watch this race in a certain way. This leads to the idea that our reality is what we choose to make it. Until the connections are defined, quantum mechanics cannot help George win at the track or help me relax into this relationship. But I feel better knowing connections are out there, and I have put my faith in physicists who are working late.

With a clang and a shudder, the gates open and the horses run. The race is all sounds at first, thunder moving toward us, shouts from the people further down the grandstand, the announcer's voice washing over us in waves. I cannot see anything except the people around us straining forward, trying to catch the first glimpse of the sprinting Quarter horses. George leans forward, on his toes, trying to see where Balistic Mama is running. I cannot understand the announcer. Sounds are echoing off the grand stand, but I can only hear unfamiliar names of horses scattered between words like "outside" and "rail." One of the teenaged girls steps backwards and knocks over a Coke.

The noise grows quickly, sweeping toward me, and I can hear voices, urging on horses.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," George chants under his breath, clenching a rolled-up racing program. I hear the announcer say "Balistic Mama."

This race is only two hundred and fifty yards long. The winner runs somewhere around fourteen seconds. No dramatic rounding of corners, no big moves on the backstretch, just pure speed, motion, bodies flickering in light. The announcer barely has time to name all the horses, even if there are only seven.
What I see from the grandstand is this: a many-legged blur, a blur of bright colors and shiny, muscled horses. The jockeys' bent, white-clad legs are the most visible pattern, white triangles like some abstract rendition of migrating geese, speeded up to a mere flash. They thunder past, arms rising and falling, whips slapping the black, brown, chestnut, gray flanks. Clods of turf catch under the hooves and fly back over the fence, spattering those who choose to stand close.

Perhaps subatomic particles are simply another disguise of the old bearded man in the sky. I am learning to trust, putting all of my faith in patterns that I cannot see. If the physicists are right, I'm just admitting that I create my own future. If the physicists are right, no event stands alone in the course of human history. Living in this universal web of relationships, every move we make shakes a million strands of web fanning out in other directions. The possibilities are endless.

In another few seconds, the race will end. One horse's flared nostrils will cross the plane defined by that white post, and that horse will win. Money for the owner, the trainer, the jockey, the bettors who made the connection. George's arms will wrap around me, either in resignation or celebration. I will hug him, hard, pressing our bodies, our atoms, our sub-atomic particles together, looking over his shoulder at the clouds racing across the deep blue autumn sky.
I never planned to eat fried bull testicles. Truthfully, I never even thought about it. Before I moved to Missoula, Montana, my idea of a wild culinary experience was steak tartare or sushi. Eating strange dishes has always been mind over matter, a technique which has served me well when confronted with caviar, escargot, or raw squid. But as newcomers to the west, George and I felt we needed an initiation experience, a baptism by immersion, and when we saw the ad for the 23rd Annual Testicle Festival at Rock Creek Lodge, we felt sure we had found the path to enlightenment.

Rock Creek Lodge is not a subtle establishment. We could see the large yellow signs from I-90: "Rock Creek Lodge -- Gifts, Food, Gas, Museum, Beer" and a banner proclaiming "Home of the Rock Creek Testicle Festival 1991." In the parking lot, guiding my Volkswagen Golf past rows of pick-up trucks and RV's, I got cold feet.

"Do you think we should? Maybe that ad was just in the paper to lure unwary Easterners up here."

George looked at me, eyebrows raised, smiling. He's been my best friend for three years. He's used to these outbursts. A station wagon
pulled up next to us and a family poured out the doors -- mother, father, and four children, including one in a stroller. That was all the reassurance I needed. We heard music before we opened the door. Inside, the familiar impressions of a bar -- laughter, smoke, dark, wood and mirrors. A large collection of baseball caps and football helmets, ranging from professional to local, were nailed to the rafters. Across the top of the bar, a collection of Testicle Festival panties had been strung, and right below them were photographs of past Festival-goers, men and women, modeling the panties.

Beer seemed the proper appetizer for a meal of bull balls, and so we ordered long-necked Budweisers and settled into a corner to get our bearings.

The band was Southern Comfort: a man in a cowboy hat with a keyboard and a microphone. He sang the most obscene song I've ever heard. The title was something like "There are cum stains on my pillow where your head used to be." Two couples at a table next to us sang along. I felt myself blushing in the darkness of the bar.

"Let's eat," George suggested after a couple of beers and a round of Keno. We angled through the crowd to the restaurant side of Rock Creek Lodge.

All the tables were taken, but a nice-looking middle-aged couple, who were about halfway through their dinners, invited us to sit with them. They turned out to be from Missoula -- his name was Vern and he was a fireman. I never caught his wife's name, but she worked at St. Patrick's Hospital. Vern was having the testicle platter, and I asked him if they were good.
"Well, they're alright, but I've had better." The time to eat testicles was springtime, "when they work the calves." Did I know what that meant? I nodded, thinking of several descriptions I'd read, the most recent being in a book called *The Last Cowboy*. A dusty, sweaty, early springtime event, working the calves is simply a polite, succinct way to describe a day of branding and castrating, a day of piss and blood and animal fear.

"Well," Vern continued, "you get a bucket of calf balls and clean 'em, and saute 'em up with sweet butter and morel mushrooms. Then, you've got something. Just find a rancher and tell him what you want. They don't want 'em, they just throw 'em out."

I imagined asking my freshmen composition students if anyone could bring me a bucket of calf balls from their family ranch. I asked Vern how to clean them, in case I worked up the nerve.

"Well, you cut the sac, and . . . um, I'm not embarrassed to talk about this if you're not."

"Oh no," I reassured him. I didn't meet George's eyes, and Vern's wife was preoccupied with her chicken platter. "Well, you cut the sac, remove the membrane, then cut THAT, and slide out the two nuts. Then, you just saute the nuts in a cast-iron frying pan with sweet butter and morel mushrooms, and a little freshly ground black pepper."

"With French bread and a green salad?"

He nodded behind his upraised beer. I nodded back and swigged from my own bottle.

Vern's wife asked what had brought us to Missoula. "She's in graduate school, in creative writing," said George. She didn't seem to
mind that I'd discussed balls with her husband, and they bought us a round of beers and told us where to find the best calamari in Missoula before they left the table.

I decided to try the testicles, and George ordered two testicle platters on one of the waitress's darts by the table. We had each finished two beers by the time she came around again, balancing a tray packed with large cream-colored plates.

The baked beans tasted canned, unembellished. No familiar taste of brown sugar, bacon, catsup, molasses and tabasco. The slab of warm Texas toast was stained bright yellow with margarine. The mound of "oysters" took up most of the plate. We ordered more beer, and then gingerly picked up testicles. Each slice was about fist-sized, thin, and batter-fried. I tried not to think about what I was eating as I took the first bite. The testicle felt tough and chewy, and the batter was spicy. I concentrated on tasting the meat. It tasted slightly fishy, and I thought I could taste the beer marinade. I scraped some batter off one, uncovering a slick, brown, muscled-looking spot.

"Dip them in this sauce," said George, gesturing to the cup of reddish-brown sauce on the side of my plate. The sauce masked almost all of the fishy taste, and added a peppery, tomato-based barbecue flavor.

"These are really good," I said, wiping a thin sheen of grease off my fingers. "Do you feel funny eating them?"

"No," said George, "but I feel a little primitive."

There was something ritualistic about the pounding music in the next room, boot heels stomping on the floor, and the yeasty smell of
beer everywhere. I thought about what I was eating, the vessels of the essence of the bull. How would I feel if we were at an Ovary Revelry? Would I eat ovaries? Was there a limit to my carnivorous curiosity?

I didn't feel like less of a woman or more a woman for eating bull balls. I did not feel I was treading on some sacred sexual ground. Since that night, I've heard of other such events around the state, in the springtime.

"Most of them are kinda rough," a native Montanan told me. "Just a bunch of old drunk guys eating balls. No dancing, no souvenirs, and no women."

I imagine dark forms hunched over plates lining a bar, boilermakers at hand. If I could slip, unnoticed, wearing Wranglers and ropers, up to that shadowy bar, and eat small tender calf balls; if I could wash them down with whiskey and beer back, I might feel the power then, might feel the strength of the bull in my veins for a few hours. What I felt instead was a small initiation, a sense of brief communion, a glimpse of what living in the West could mean.

I consider myself a Southerner, born and raised a fifth-generation Georgian. I grew up thinking that the best way to prepare any food was to fry it. Now that I live in Montana, I venture home for Christmas with a full list of foods I've been craving, and eat my way through the holidays. Pone cornbread, turnip greens, black-eyed peas, fried okra, fried chicken, and biscuits and gravy top the list. But an even longer list would be the Southern foods that I won't eat. I've been wondering lately why I'll eat bull testicles and raw squid, but have only tasted pickled peaches once, under duress, and chitterlings have never crossed
my lips. I won't eat grits either, but the texture is what I object to, not the taste. Grits, cream of wheat, oatmeal -- it all feels like it's already been digested. I can't bring myself to swallow it; texture cannot be conquered with mind over matter.

Living away from the South has made me proud of my Southernness, the heritage I tried to suppress for years. I stretch my vowels out longer, drink Southern Comfort on the rocks, and turn up my nose at the peaches offered in Missoula supermarkets. Eating bull balls may help me feel at home in Missoula, but I haven't figured out what I can eat to overcome my alienation from the South. Chitterlings are a family joke, neither of my parents have ever tasted them either, but cracklin' cornbread and gravy with giblets are not. Neither are fried chicken gizzards and livers.

Food defines us. Our idea of what barbecue sauce tastes like, or what we call a carbonated beverage can place us quicker than a regional accent. Is barbecue meat covered with vinegar or tomato-based sauce or has it been smoked? Are you drinking a tonic, a soda, a pop, or a Coke? We cannot imagine eating grubs, yet Missoula's Oxford Café serves brains and eggs daily. My mother told me once that my grandfather loved brains and eggs. Mind over matter seems like a bad joke on that one.

What we choose to take into our bodies as nourishment can affect our entire world view. This Christmas, if I give my mother ample warning, she can have watermelon rind preserves and hot chow-chow on hand, and maybe some pickled green tomatoes. I could wash it all down with Scuppernong wine or Kentucky bourbon, sitting on the screened porch, looking out over the brown azalea bushes, the dry brown grass,
and the occasional glimpse of red earth on the creek banks. Maybe then, just for a minute, I could feel like a Southerner inside and out.

But if I don’t take a chance with food, if I stick with tried-and-true favorites like Sally Lund bread, fried green tomatoes, Brunswick stew, and sweet potato soufflé, I may never feel truly connected to the red clay of Georgia. Maybe I’m afraid I’ll become addicted to pickled peaches and pickled okra, and my parents will ship me three or four jars a few times a year, the way they do for my older brother. It seems strange that my oldest food prejudices, congealed during my first ten Thanksgivings when I was a child and almost unaware of the stigma attached to being a Southerner, are the hardest to shake. After all, I started eating Chinese food when I was twelve, and never looked back.

Back in the bar, steadying ourselves against the Keno and Poker machines, we watched the dancers stomp and twirl. The dark, shiny boards of tables stretched away in front of us, overflowing with amber bottles and white cups, crumpled napkins, empty plates, and elbows. We didn’t know the words to the songs that the dancers shouted, didn’t know the steps to the dance. Too many people, too much noise, too much laughter and music separated us from the festival. We were party-crashers, outsiders, and we stood in our assigned places on the sidelines. The scene took on an amber tinge from the beer, and looked more like a movie than it had before. Time to go home.

We walked through the restaurant and into the gift shop to check out the Festival sportswear. Tee-shirts, caps, panties, shot glasses, coffee mugs.
"No refrigerator magnets?" George asked. He'd started collecting them during our week-long move across the country. The man at the cash register told us they added a few new souvenirs every year. "Next year," he said, "we'll have magnets."

"We'll come back," said George, taking my hand as we walked out the door into the dark cool Montana night. "Next year, maybe we'll dance."
Remains

One evening Goha's friends said to him: "O Goha, as you know all about astronomy, will you tell us what happens to the moon when it has passed its last quarter?" "Were you taught nothing at school?" cried Goha. "When the moon has passed its last quarter, Allah breaks it up to make stars."

-- The Thousand Nights and One Night

For one year, I watched a friend slowly die. It was not what I expected. There was no soundtrack, no romance. No white linen gowns at twilight, no saxophones, no wringing of hands. There was anger, at the beginning, when we found out. Disbelief, even some activism. Then we slowly settled into our roles, and helped him through that year. I was twenty-four, and experiencing death for the first time since becoming an adult. He was thirty-one. He had been watching his friends die for five years.

To watch a young man die is to watch a tightening of body, and condensing of form. All of the unnecessary parts dry up, split off,
curl up, petrify. What remains is the concentration of a friend, the essence of a man that we thought we knew, and a courage and resolve that should be embroidered on medieval tapestries by dozens of maidens stitching for years. To watch parents grieve silently, alone, their faces turned away, and then turned back with forced smiles; a year of this was devastation. This death was not natural; this death was an outrage.

The final vigil began in October, a month which pressed down on Atlanta with clouds and rain and wind. We drove at twilight to the hospital, leaning forward over steering wheels, peering through wet glass, sitting in traffic. We came together from various ends of the city, and at the end of the pilgrimage we sat together, waiting for an audience. One or two, or more of us, filed into the room for a few minutes of jokes and one-sided conversation. We did our worrying in the antechamber, and left it behind at the doorway.

During those October nights, I believed nothing. I could not pray; I had passed the point of prayer. More strength and more hope lay in hands clasped together, one to another, than in any number of prayers. We had hands and bodies, and we held each other. We waited, and held on.

One night close to Halloween, I sat with him. I stood by the metal bed, and told him I loved him, and that I would miss him. I could not ignore the rare chance to say a final goodbye, and be heard. I felt guilty saying goodbye to a person who was dying, but who was not yet dead. I felt I was holding the door open for Death by making my peace. I could have repeated my actions of other nights, holding back tears,
chatting, refusing to acknowledge that Death hovered over the bed. But he had requested we all say goodbye that night, while he could still talk, and listen. He needed to make his peace. Reason tells me that saying goodbye is not an invocation of the angel of death. But it was the hardest thing I've ever done.

I held his hand, and cried, and apologized. He said, after several tries, that he was glad I was crying. In a year, I had watched his handsome face collapse and draw inward, sinking down on its structure, taking on the peaceful translucent hollows of a medieval saint. For a year, he had watched the people he loved talk around his death, laugh, make plans for years to come. He had had enough. He wanted to see us accept what he had accepted. He wanted to see the people he loved, standing unafraid and emotional, with our façades in shards at our feet.

"I have no regrets," he told me, his tongue thick from medication and weakness. "I have lived the way I wanted to, and I have been happy." Each word was sluggish and careful, his blue eyes, the only unchanged feature, stared intently into mine long after the words were finished. Millions of words flickered between us then, and if I remembered any of them, I would not commit them to paper. I pressed his hand a little tighter, and blinked. He opened his mouth again. Momentarily released from the prison of the oxygen mask, he had one more thing to say. "Wash your hands."

He knew we could not contract the virus by holding his hand. We stood in his room, by his bed, unencumbered, talking. The nurses entered, wearing disposable gowns, gloves, hats, masks. They moved
about in their protective shrouds, adjusting and measuring, ignoring Death who lurked in every corner of the room. They eyed us from behind their masks, and their eyes expressed a little fear, a little pity. We stood, encircling Death with our arms, blowing in his ear, whispering his name, but his eyes were fixed on the bed. Death came into the room to ask one man to dance, and would not be distracted.

At the end, the living had much work to do. We dusted off the china and crystal to throw a last party in his honor. The house was stuffed with food, groaning at the corners. We ate away at our sorrow, gnawing it down to the bones and swallowing, until we felt bloated and sluggish. We allowed the sorrow to drain from us, another bodily substance to be washed away. Our task was, and still is, to forget the slow wasting away. We push our minds back to the summers and winters that came before. What remains are memories, photographs, stories. We made promises to a man now dead. Condoms will be worn in his honor.

Silence no longer exists as a world, but only in fragments, as the remains of a world. And as man is always frightened by remains, so he is frightened by the remains of silence.

Sometimes in a city a man suddenly collapses and dies in the midst of the noise of the highway. It is then as if all at once the shreds of silence, still lying around, amongst the tree tops by the roadside, suddenly descend on the dead man. It is as if these remains of silence had crept down to the silence of the dead man in the roadway, and there is a momentary stillness in the city. The remains
of silence are with the fallen man in order to disappear with him into death, to disappear through the fissure of death. The dead man takes the last remains of silence with him.

-- Max Picard

Death leaves gaps in our lives that may fade from view, but are never filled in. What happens to the people we love? As a child, I was satisfied with the explanation that someone had gone to live in heaven, but as I grow older and acquire more knowledge, the question makes me increasingly uncomfortable. I plan to have my first child during the next five years. I need to start coming up with answers to these big questions, answers that I am comfortable with. My romantic mind simply will not let me believe I’ll never know these people again, in some form. I am too egotistical, most days, to believe that we all simply cease to exist, turned out like a light.

On the other hand, I feel self-conscious discussing death at all. I’m only twenty-seven; I have no answers, no real beliefs except a denial that I know is childish. I read murder mysteries by the bundle, fairy tales, myths, and bits and pieces of texts from all religions. As a writer, I know very well the limitations of words, language. The fact that I’m looking for an answer outside myself proves to me that whatever the answer is, I’m not ready for it.

Three lamps lighted together mean death.
An old, disused clock strikes and signifies death.
If a girl is married in black, one of the couple will die.
Leaving part of a potato bed unplanted means death within
the year.
On the death of the first child in a family, all its clothes
must be given away, or the succeeding children will
die.
It's unlucky to put the baby to a looking-glass before he's
a year old. The child will die.

These superstitions concerning death come from Newfoundland, and I
can guess how some of them began. Leaving part of a potato bed
unplanted would be a sign of sloth, and could mean starvation if disease
or a frost wiped out most of the yearly harvest. If a child died of
disease, then the wisest thing to do would be to burn the clothes, not
give them away and risk spreading the disease. The idea, though, is to
get the clothes away from one's own children, and there is certainly
logic there.

The child and the looking-glass is an interested superstition.
Broken mirrors bring bad luck, mirrors are covered in sick rooms, at
death, and in some parts of England, during thunderstorms. Mirrors are
used for divination, to see one's future husband. It's unlucky to look
in a mirror by candlelight, or when dressed for your wedding, or with
another person. All of these superstitions revolving around reflection.
Reflections show us another view of reality; mirrors let us see a
reversed image of ourselves. With two mirrors, I can see the back of my
head, the back of my body, things I will never see without the aid of a
reflection. In two mirrors, face to face, lie an endless progression of
mirrors. The key to reflections, I believe, is that they prove to us our mortality.

We have images of ourselves in our minds. In my mind, I am taller, slimmer, my eyes always sparkle, and I'm always smiling. In the mirror, I see the real story. Our reflections horrify us. We look in the mirror and see fatigue, stress, a new wrinkle, another gray hair, a few poppy seeds caught in the teeth. Fluorescent lights make my skin appear greenish, patchy. There in the mirror is the unavoidable truth. You are getting older. You are going to die. When we hold a baby up to a looking glass, perhaps the fear is that the baby will recognize its own mortality and accept its fate too readily.

I will tell you the greatest secret... Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. Besides, look at yourself in the mirror throughout your life and you will see Death at work like bees in a glass hive.

-- Jean Cocteau

Two years after I graduated from college, a friend who was still in school died suddenly. We all knew Eric had some sort of medical problem that kept him from driving, but he never talked about it and we never asked. I'm still not sure what kind of epilepsy it was. Eric's roommate found him dead in their dorm room just before dinner once night. I had not seen Eric in over a year.

I did not fly to New York for the funeral, but I did fly up to Williamsburg, Virginia the next weekend for the memorial service. This
was a formal gathering of friends, during a thunderstorm so melodramatic that we all finally had to laugh and agree that Eric was trying to tell us to lighten up. The rest of the weekend was spent in quiet conversations, catching up with people I hadn't seen since graduation.

I suppose Eric knew he could die any day. At the end of any ordinary school day, he might collapse alone in his room, and never get up. I believe he lived every day like it was his last; when he died at twenty, he might have said, "No regrets so far." He was no larger-than-life hero, he was an intelligent, funny young man. When I think about Eric, I don't think of his death. It's been five years since my graduation from college, and I haven't seen or heard from lots of people since graduation. Perhaps going to his funeral and seeing the body would have confirmed his death somehow. But I can't comprehend that I'll never see him again, and I'm not sure why I need to accept his death, or anyone else's.

_Eros and Death_

It was a hot, sultry summer afternoon, and Eros, tired with play and faint from the heat, took shelter in a cool dark cave. It happened to be the cave of Death himself.

Eros, wanting only to rest, threw himself down carelessly -- so carelessly that all his arrows fell out of his quiver.

When he woke he found they had mingled with the arrows of Death which lay scattered about the floor of the cave.
They were so alike Eros could not tell the difference. He knew, however, how many had been in his quiver, and eventually he gathered up the right amount.

Of course, Eros took some that belonged to Death and left some of his own behind.

And so it is today that we often see the hearts of the old and dying struck by bolts of Love; and sometimes we see the hearts of the young captured by Death.

-- Aesop

A number of people have written to Dear Abby lately, sharing their memories of uncontrollable laughter at funerals. Some of them leave the service, horrified but unable to stop. Others sit and bury their faces in hankers, hoping that their shoulders appear to shake with sobs. I’ve never laughed at a funeral, but I did breakfast with a dead man once.

During high school, I volunteered at a Methodist nursing home three days a week in the summer. I earned my tiny sapphire chip for fifteen hundred hours of service before a driver’s license and a minimum wage job drew me away. My first daily duty was to deliver breakfast trays to the residents, and feed a few people who couldn't feed themselves.

One morning, I delivered a tray to Mr. McPherson's room. I'd known the man for two summers, known him as well as you can know someone who lays in bed all day saying nothing. I talked to him as I fed him, not knowing how much he hear, talking more for my own comfort than his.
That morning, his lights were off, and his bed was still flat. I turned on the light and cranked the bed up, calling his name loudly. No response, which wasn't unusual. I shook him gently, and then took the covers off of all of his pureéd food. Of course, you already know. I pushed a spoonful of pureéd eggs right against his mouth, still saying his name loudly.

I'm not sure what tipped me off, why I suddenly realized that something was very wrong. I re-covered the food, cranked down the bed, turned out the light, and ran into the stairwell. A few minutes later, I peeked out and saw the velvet-covered stretcher being wheeled into his room. I've always wondered what the mortician thought about that trace of eggs on the lips. Maybe I unintentionally started another superstition.

I laughed. I had to. And then I cried. I spent the whole morning in the stairwell, moving up and down between floors when I heard someone coming. I spent my lunch hour smoking cigarettes in the woods surrounding the home, trying to feel adult enough to handle death.

That was the last summer I candystriped. Fifteen years old, and I didn't know what to make of death. I don't remember feeling invincible, although I was sure the popular kids did. I don't think I felt immortal. I know I wanted to live more than anything else, and I felt trapped, that last summer before I could drive. At twenty-seven, I have less of a handle on death than I did at fifteen. I can analyze death in more ways, but the non-answers make me more nervous.
And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,
No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God
and about death.
I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God
not in the least.

-- Walt Whitman

I lived in New York City my first year out of college, and I did
not think much about death then, although death was all around me.
Sirens constantly, day and night, sensationalist New York Post headlines
screaming across the lurching subway car first thing in the morning
"GANG SLAYING!" or some other similar news.

For a few weeks that winter, around six o'clock, I'd walk twenty
blocks down Sixth Avenue to have dinner in my café. My café because I
discovered it, divined its warm brown existence from the long grey
hallways that are called streets in Manhattan. I needed someplace to go
after work, a purpose, an appointment. I lived in New York, and I
wanted to be a New Yorker, with someplace important to go, instead of
sitting in my dark basement apartment, night after night, watching TV or
reading.

In the café, everything was golden or brown: walls, tables, the
floor, the air, all golden and brown. I would settle into a small table
near the back, and order coffee, and something warm and inexpensive for
dinner. My café was full of writers, everyone reading or scribbling in
journals or on legal pads.
My last night at the café, two women sat to my left, discussing racism, rape, and mutilation. One was black, and the other white. They both wore black. I stared into my white mug, noting the thick brown coffee scum on the sides of the mug and imagining what my insides would look like after years of drinking black coffee, and I listened.

The white woman, who mentioned her days as a playwright at Berkeley, told a story. She spoke in dialogue, as if auditioning for her companion. One night, she had gone to Brooklyn to visit the dying mother of a close friend. She planned to arrive at eight o'clock, but she lost her way, and drove around Brooklyn, becoming more and more disoriented. She finally arrived at the hospital about ten, and rushed inside, afraid that she would not be allowed to visit the dying woman.

"Have you ever arrived late at night at a hospital," she asks, leaning dramatically toward her companion, and lowering her voice, "dressed all in black, and frantic?"

"No," her friend replied calmly, taking another sip of her coffee.

"I went to ask which room my friend's mother was in, and the attendant seemed frightened, and she hesitated before she gave me the room number. She looked at me as if I was the angel of death, and said 'God bless you.' Then, I got onto the elevator with two nurses. One of them asked me which floor I wanted, and I said 'the tenth floor. The terminal wing.' Their faces changed, and they stared at me. They seemed frightened too, and they looked at me as if I was the angel of death." The storyteller paused to take a drag off her cigarette.

"They stared right at me," the storyteller continued, "as if they wanted to know, after years of working in a hospital, what the angel of
death looked like, perhaps so they could recognize the face of death's angel again. When the doors opened onto the tenth floor, one of them said 'God bless you.' I walked to the room where my friend's mother lay dying. By this time, I had begun to fantasize that I was the angel of death, and I thought, 'I will visit this woman and she will die, because I have been here.' I did not want to go into the room, I felt a terrible dilemma. But then I did go in, and looked at the woman lying in that hospital bed, and I saw death in her face. Death was peaceful, not horrible, and I looked closely, not knowing if I had brought death with me, from the streets of Brooklyn, into the room. I looked closely at death, because I too wanted to be able to recognize the face of death when I saw it again." The storyteller stopped speaking and crushed out her cigarette.

For fifty-four years I've put stars in the sky
Now I leap through it all.
What a shattering!

-- Dogen

On January 3rd, 1993, my mother and I found my grandmother dead in her apartment. I was due to fly back to Montana in a few hours; we had gone over to say goodbye, and to pick up a cutting from my grandmother's Christmas cactus for my houseplant collection.

My mother and her mother had had their nightly talk the night before. When we arrived, a little after noon, the front door was locked and the morning paper still leaned against it. My mother hesitated,
opened the door with her key, and we went in.

My grandmother had died in her sleep. She looked so comfortable that my mother shook her, trying to wake her, as if some horrible joke was being played. I thought saying goodbye to a dying friend was hard. It was equally hard to leave my mother there in the darkened apartment and drive ten miles home to pick up my father and the envelope of instructions my grandmother had left for this occasion.

My grandmother was ninety-three when she died, still living alone with the help of a devoted daughter and friends. She died in her sleep, peacefully.

"That's how we'd all chose to go, if we had the choice," my father said again and again.

Her neighbor, ninety-five, told me that my grandmother had been talking about death more frequently lately.

"Elsie knew she was running down," Mary told me. "She was so afraid she'd have to go into a home. She said she was ready to go, and didn't understand why God wouldn't take her. The only thing she was afraid of was that E.C. wouldn't recognize her." E.C. was my grandfather, dead of lung cancer three years before I was born.

"It's been thirty years since he's seen me," my grandmother told Mary. "He won't know who this old lady is."

Part of me has accepted this loss, part cannot. I still dream about her apartment, which I helped clean out, a five-room space which no longer exists. I wake and want to call my mother and say, "Go check again. Maybe she didn't hear you. Just shake her one more time." The dreams were nightly in January and February. Now, in October, they come
once every three or four weeks.

The cactus cutting was right by her kitchen sink. Pinching off that cutting must have been one of the last things she ever did. I brought it back to Montana a week later, and set it in a glass of water to root. Nothing happened. After a few weeks, it began to droop and I began to panic. This cutting had taken on all of my excess emotions; I was melodramatic about it. I planted it in finely sifted potting soil. It drooped further, and began to shrivel. On the verge of hysteria, I drove to Rattlesnake Cactus Gardens, and thrust the puny plant at them, begging for help.

"It's suffocating," they explained gently. "See all these little dried white things? Those are the roots, coming out from between the leaves. The roots were looking for water, but couldn't find any. Take it home, plant it deeper, so that the first set of shriveled roots are covered, and water it."

Any metaphor I could draw out of the cactus plant would be too obvious. The plant thrives on my kitchen windowsill, and I don't cry every time I see it now, only when I think about that cutting carefully tucked into a jelly glass full of water on my grandmother's kitchen counter.

And what remains? Memories like golden leaves, cascade through my mind and then swirl away. I imagine my memories falling into the great stream of collective consciousness, forming a flood to wash away all of our vain egos and the material goods that we hold dear. I think of being buried in leaves as a child, lying with my back against cold damp grass and the leaves shifting and whispering as I breathed. It seemed
to me then that I could suffocate under their lightness. I exploded out of my pyre, shrieking and brushing at the spot on my neck where I had felt something cold and wet in the leaves. A snail, a slug, or something even more disgusting, as I thought then? Or something more primitive, some glimpse or mortality intruding on my childish play?

We cannot know what happens at the moment of death or beyond, and here in my twenty-seventh year, I can say that I don't want to know. If I could look up the moment of my death in some ancient leather-bound book, if I could measure the length of yarn that the Fates have spun for me, I would not. The knowledge, I think, would be too much for me to bear.

One year ago, my father discovered he had prostate cancer. The initial prognosis was not good, although I didn't know until much later. After a year of treatment, the cancer has stopped growing, and my father is learning to live with the idea. He has been diabetic for over ten years; I think at first we were all overwhelmed with the injustice of piling another disease onto a sixty-five year old man.

I don't know when the next death is coming, or whose it will be, and I don't want to know. A few days after the funeral, my friend's mother said, "I suppose I'm glad we got the extra time with him, but it would have been so much easier if it had been sudden, like a car accident." By allowing ourselves to love, we set ourselves up for the pain of separation.
A pious old Jew, a man whose life was devoted to obeying all the commandments, said on his deathbed, "Wouldn't it be funny if there was nothing over there either?"

Finally, I think the best ideas I've heard about death come from the writings of Plato. The idea is that after death, either there is no consciousness, in which case death is like an eternal night of dreamless sleep, and that wouldn't be bad. "But if it is a journey to another land, if what some say is true and all the dead are really there, . . . what greater good could there be?"

We have no choice in the matter. We can subscribe to whatever religious or philosophical ideology we want, and pray with all our might, but we cannot control whatever it is that happens to us when we die. When I was younger, I believed that whatever you believed in would happen, and so I tried never to think of any alternative but a heaven filled with light and angels. Now I try not to think about it at all.
Heat rose off the dusty asphalt in waves. Rachel MacKenzie Strickland sat slumped in the passenger seat of her husband's Jeep Cherokee, fanning herself with a folded road map, and watching the brown hills of southwest Texas roll past her window. The back of the Cherokee was full of camping gear -- backpacks, sleeping bags, all brand new and top of the line, the lightest weight equipment that R.E.I. stocked -- Jim's wedding present to her along with the three-week honeymoon trip. Jim scanned radio stations, squinting at the highway through his polarized sunglasses.

"Rachel, honey, could you dig out some music? I can't find anything but country on the radio."

Rachel sat up slowly.

"Sleepy? I'm feeling groggy myself. But we'll be there in a couple hours."

Rachel wasn't sleepy. She was thinking. Remembering stepping on the hem of her wedding dress and pulling the seam at the waist loose. The small net bags of birdseed waiting on a silver tray. Her father letting go of her arm, and Jim taking it. Thinking about anything
except what that man at the gas station said to her.

"What do you want to hear?" She reached down for the CD case. "Harry Connick, Jr., Van Morrison, or Vivaldi?"

"Van Morrison, I guess. I can't believe you left all my Neil Young CD's in Atlanta."

Jim slipped the disc into the car stereo.

The oversight was deliberate. Rachel didn't think Neil Young was appropriate honeymoon music. She wondered if Jim was having a good time. Maybe he was bored. "I should have brought a car game, or some sexy book we could read out loud," she thought. "I should have looked over that honeymoon checklist in Modern Bride one more time."

Rachel picked a piece of lint off her shirt and tugged her shorts further down her thighs.

"I know what you rich cunts like," the man had said. "I'd like to shove my dick right down your pretty throat. Fuck you good, make you scream. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" His voice was almost a whisper, his face right next to hers. She smelled the gasoline fumes rising from the tank of the Cherokee, smelled his sweat, saw the dirt-filled pores on his nose, and knew he was about to touch her. She backed up, tripping over the concrete island, then turned and walked over to Jim at the Coke machine.

Rachel unfastened her seatbelt and massaged the side of her neck where the seatbelt had rubbed all morning. She twisted her wedding ring around her finger. After they camped in Big Bend National Park for a week, they were flying to Cancun. She hadn't worn her engagement ring. She'd heard things about Mexico; her friend Cathleen told her not to
wear flashy jewelry. Maybe the guy at the gas station hadn't seen her wedding band.

"We could play a game," she heard herself suggesting to Jim.

"No, that's okay."

"You don't want to?" Her voice rose slightly.

"I'm having a good time driving and looking. See this hawk here?"

"I just thought, you might want to do something together."

"We're riding together."

"What are you thinking about?" she said.

"Huh? Oh, nothing really. Just about getting there and taking a hike. A swim in the wash. By the way, you look really good in those shorts. Your legs are already getting tan."

He reached over and set his hand on her thigh, stroking gently.

Should she tell Jim? He had vowed to love and cherish her. He should have vowed to protect her too. She thought that was understood, that you looked after each other.

"Jim, you know that guy at the gas station? The one that pumped our gas?"

"I guess. I didn't really notice him. Why?"

"Well, he said something to me."

"What did he say?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Then why'd you bring it up?"

"He said something suggestive to me, and I thought you should know."

"Well, what did he say?"
He doesn't sound angry, Rachel thought. He isn't going to turn around and go find the guy.

"He said something like 'I want to shove my dick down your throat.'"

"Jesus. He was just an old redneck, Rachel. Don't let it upset you."

"I just wasn't expecting anything like that to happen on our honeymoon."

"Well, I'm sorry it happened, but it happens everywhere. You can't expect everyone to be nice to you just because we're on our honeymoon."

Rachel shifted against the soft leather seat. They'd been driving for three days. Staying in nice bed-and-breakfasts, but still, driving. Jim didn't want to fly. Mobile the first night, Lake Charles the second, San Antonio last night. Eating seafood in tiny restaurants that Jim knew about from his days at Tulane.

Rachel had wanted to go to Aruba. All of her friends had gone to the Caribbean on their honeymoons, mostly on cruises. But Rachel had read about an adults-only resort on Aruba. The pictures in Modern Bride showed tanned men with washboard stomachs running down beaches with barely-bikinied women. Everyone looked happy, relaxed, glowing with sex and sun. Jim had handed the magazine back to her, wrinkling his nose. They were sitting on his screened porch in midtown Atlanta, planning the honeymoon, drinking iced tea.

"I had something a little less conventional in mind."

"Oh? What, a cruise to Galapagos? A volcano tour of the Ring of
Fire? Llama trek in Patagonia? At the end of the earth lies the Land of Fire!" She read from "Ten Honeymoon Trips You'll Never Forget!"

"More like a camping trip in the desert."

"The Land of Fire sounds like a desert."

"Not Tierra del Fuego. I was thinking more like, Texas."

Rachel sipped her tea.

"I want to be alone with you Rachel, away from the city and my job, and phones and ATM's. Just the two of us sleeping out under the stars. You'll love the desert, it's beautiful. No pressure to look or act a certain way. No thirty other honeymoon couples underfoot. Just us and nature."

Rachel said nothing.

"I went to Big Bend when I was in college with some buddies. We had a great time, driving from New Orleans, camping out. We were totally free. I'd like to do that with you."

The chains of Jim's porch swing creaked under their weight as they rocked in the cool spring evening. Rachel's glass dripped condensation on her cotton dress.

Backcountry camping was not anything she had ever considered for a honeymoon. Not in Texas, anyway. France, Italy, or Jamaica, maybe.

Rachel took another big sip of iced tea.

"There wouldn't be anybody there in September, even the RV campgrounds would be less than half full. We could go on hikes and not see anybody else. We could swim naked in the washes. Lots of wildflowers still in bloom. It gets pretty hot in the daytime, but it's dry heat. It's cold enough to snuggle at night. And there's a great
campground up in the Chisos Mountains — peaks all around, it's gorgeous. Prehistoric looking. And it's quiet. Unbelievably quiet."

Jim took her hand.

"We'll have plenty of time for fancy trips later, Rachel. Don't you think our honeymoon should be an adventure that we'll always look back on?"

"Yes, definitely. But Jim, I know this sounds stupid, but I want to go shopping. I want souvenirs. I don't want to end up with some dried flowers and a pile of photographs. I want local crafts and a big piece of artwork to hang over the sofa. I want honeymoon artifacts."

"Okay, how 'bout a compromise? We'll go camping for a week, which is what I want to do. Then we'll drive down into Mexico, or better yet, drive back to San Antonio and fly to the Yucatan Peninsula. We can stay in Cançun for a week, then drive back to Atlanta from San Antonio."

Rachel sucked on a piece of ice.

"Cançun sounds good. We camp and get all grungy, and then go stay in a really nice hotel and eat in expensive restaurants."

"Okay, Big Bend and Cançun it is. Agreed?"

They hadn't said much after that. In bed, while rain clattered against the window, flickering lightning caught her body arched pale above his. As she lay against his chest afterwards, he had said "I love you Rachel" three times, whispering the words into her hair.

"Three times is the charm," she said, raising her head to look at him. "You must mean it."

"I do. That's why we're getting married."

That night could have happened to two different people. Rachel
sighed, watching the endless line of brown hills receding in the side-view mirror. What happens in the dark doesn't always last. She always needed to talk after sex; she couldn't stand to just lie there in silence. Jim didn't talk much. He would say he loved her, but then he would lay quietly and stroke her hair while she babbled.

Rachel looked at the ring on her left hand. Her hand looked older with the ring there, but she didn't feel older. She felt much younger than twenty-one, at that moment, and she didn't feel married. They had taken vows, sacred vows. She should feel different. She should feel holy, and part of something inviolate.

She remembered looking at Jim through the veil and watching his lips form the words. In sickness and in health. For richer or for poorer. Until death do us part. The same words everyone says. Did they still mean anything? She hadn't thought about the vows until the wedding, when she said them. She had told the minister that she wouldn't promise to obey, and that was that. She had so many other things to think about, dresses, hors d'oeuvres, flowers, photographers. She had chosen the traditional vows because she thought they meant something. She realized now that she had imagined a potency to those words that they hadn't had.

"Jim, do you love me more now than you did when you asked me to marry you?"

"More? I don't know, honey. Is this one of your magazine questions?"

"Remember how nervous you were to tell me you loved me that first time? We kept joking about those three little words that you couldn't
say and I needed to hear. What is it about the words "I love you" that is so powerful? Do you know what I’m saying? They’re like magic or something."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Well, what about our wedding vows? Did you feel anything? Do you feel different? 'Till death do us part.' Did you mean that?"

"Rachel, we're married, we love each other, we're on our honeymoon. I don't understand what the problem is, if there is one. What's going on over there?"

"Do you think if we love each other enough we'll get to be together in heaven? Like the Mormons? Do you want to be with me in heaven?"

"I don't know what I believe, honey. I'm trying to drive."

"Could you please pull over?"

"What's wrong? Are you sick?" Jim eased the Cherokee over to the side of the road.

"I don't know. I need to be alone for a while," she said, opening the car door. She slid out, dragging her daypack with her.

"Rachel, what are you doing? We're on our honeymoon. For Christ's sake."

"I'm just going to take a walk. I'll be back."

She slammed the door, and walked quickly back in the direction they had come. She had imagined her wedding and honeymoon ever since she was a little girl. Three days and they weren't even there yet. How was she supposed to be sexy on a backpacking trip? How was she supposed to be sexy when he drove all day and looked at hawks, for God's sake.
This was their honeymoon. They were supposed to spend all day in bed. She walked north, feeling the heat of the west Texas sun on her skin. Tears streaked the dust on her face. She couldn't hear the Cherokee's engine anymore. She wondered if Jim would turn around and come after her, or keep heading south towards Big Bend, his honeymoon trip, his swim in the wash and his secret restaurants. He didn't seem to want to look at her. She was afraid he would be bored with her now that they were married. *Cosmopolitan* said you should always try to be a little mysterious, even with your husband. A man should never feel like he really knew you, or he would be bored. She wondered what he was thinking, if he thought she was mysterious, or just crazy. Maybe she was crazy, reduced to dramatics to get her husband’s attention on their honeymoon.

"What kind of fucking honeymoon is this?" she shouted, flinging her arms out. She looked at her hands, freckled and pink against the sky, the bright gold band blinding in the sun; then brought them down to wipe strands of hair away from her forehead.

"What kind of fucking marriage is this?"

Rachel eyed an unusually large clump of sagebrush. Its size defined it, allowing it to seem significant in the dusty, wide landscape. She was hot, and thirsty, and beginning to feel silly. She wanted Jim to come get her. She wanted to write *Modern Bride*, and tell them that their magazine was a crock. Marriage was just life, same as ever.

"We didn't change," she said softly. "I thought we would."

The heat slowed her steps. How could anything ever be the same,
after she walked out on her honeymoon? Her marriage was over before it had even begun. She would have to explain to her parents, her friends, box up all the presents and send them back with notes of apology. She wasn't sure she could climb out of this pit she'd stepped into.

"Okay, I can't just abandon my honeymoon. A honeymoon isn't something you just walk out on, it's supposed to be the best goddamned vacation of my life! I promised to love and cherish. So did he. We made promises. That's a change."

"We've been sleeping together since we got engaged," she continued, "I mean, it's no surprise he doesn't want me all the time. I don't want him all the time either."

Rachel looked around for an answer. Over to the right, she saw a hawk riding thermals, gliding slowly back and forth over the hills and sagebrush.

"All those bridal magazines in Mom's laundry room. I must have ten of those stupid things. I kept saying I couldn't find a wedding dress I liked, but I wanted all those articles about "Best Romantic Getaways" and "Your First Year Together" and "How to Decorate Your First Home." I wanted a game plan to follow, but I still expected everything to be magical, like a Disney movie or something."

She looked out at Texas, dry and brown, and felt a slight breeze against her forehead.

"We took vows, in a church, in front of God and everyone. I did feel different that day, in that dress, but now I just feel like Rachel again. I thought we bonded together, I thought we understood each other. If he really understands, he'll come after me."
Something was lying by the side of the road just ahead, moving, and she approached slowly, thinking her eyes were playing tricks on her. The movement was the largest crow she had ever seen, picking at something underneath it, something small and defenseless, something that might have been abandoned. Rachel walked faster. The one tremendous crow dissolved into three average-sized crows, their glossy black feathers dulled with brown dust.

She ran at them, waving her arms and yelling like a madwoman. The crows rose with loud flaps of long black wings to circle the spot, waiting for her to leave their prey to them. Rachel looked closely, but not too closely, and identified the broken red and grey mass as an armadillo. Her stomach churned. She walked up the road a little further, and then stopped.

She squatted, hugging her knees, and looking at the rocks and sandy dirt in front of her, squinting to see them as abstract patterns, a blurring of red, brown, ochre, tan. She picked up a small red rock marked by a thin line of white and squeezed it.

"So this is Texas. This is my marriage. Jim thinks I'm crazy. He married a crazy woman, and he's just going to leave me here. 'I'm sorry Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie, she fell over a cliff in Texas. She went round a bend in Big Bend.'" She squeezed the rock again. Her honeymoon souvenir. She slipped it into her pocket.

Rachel straightened up, feeling a new breeze touch her sweat-soaked body, and she saw clouds building up quickly in the west. The wind grew stronger, and held her upright, and she walked a few yards toward the darkening sky, and then stopped again, letting her pack slide
off her back. She danced around in a circle, around and around, she got
dizzier and dizzier, and the wind blew even stronger. The circle grew
tighter, until she was whirling around, rooted to the dust, and
suddenly, she was sitting in the dust, her head reeling, and her body
throbbying from the fall. The dirt continued to turn, halfway around one
way, and then back, until finally it swung into place and stopped
moving.

She heard the Cherokee grinding up behind her, and she stood up,
looking around, considering running from the road, through the dry
scraggly brush of west Texas, running south toward Mexico, or running
west toward the storm. If she could reach the storm, she could hide in
its grey feathery folds and he could never find her. She would become a
legend, "The Woman Who Ran Away to Marry the Wind." But Jim could chase
her on foot and catch her easily, following her bright red shirt through
the dusty browns and greens. They had argued before. One of them would
apologize, and then they would talk it out. She realized she hadn't
asked him how he felt about the wedding. She hadn't come right out and
said, "So do you feel different now that we're married?" She waited,
staring down at her new hiking boots. The Cherokee pulled up next to
her.

She looked over, not raising her head, to see the dust-covered
white door. Jim reached across and opened the door for her. Rachel
raised her head. She did not see his face, only his blue eyes under his
Atlanta Braves cap. Her focus shifted, and she saw the dust on his
face, but still not his face.

She walked around to the back of the car, raised the hatch, and
threw her pack in with the rest of their gear. She slammed the hatch closed. Her hands rested on the hot metal, and she shut her eyes tightly, seeing patterns of white light on the inside of her eyelids. She heard his door open, and the car moved slightly under her hands. His boots crunched across the gravelly pavement, and then he stood behind her. She felt him there, smelled him. His hand gripped her shoulder, and his voice was low and soothing.

"Are you okay now?"

"I guess."

"Well, we'll be there soon. We're both tired. We should have flown, I screwed up on that. But let's go before the rain comes."

He waited there, suspended, his hand warm and strong on her shoulder. She felt him breathe. He sighed, a deep, long, exhalation, then the warmth of his hand was gone. His boots crunched back to his side of the car. His door slammed.

Rachel did not move. She stood still, holding her head down. The air seemed very heavy, and she opened her eyes. She saw a clear spot appear in the dust on the back windshield. Another spot followed, and then a third, and then more, now making a hard plunking sound as they hit the car. At her feet, dark spots sprang up in the light brown road dust. The spots on the Cherokee became streaks, and they began to run together, brown drops of water at their tips. Rachel heard a low drumming sound begin far away, and rush closer and closer until it surrounded her, rain hurling itself at the parched earth. Then the whole sky seemed to open and the rain stopped for a second; lightning crackled and she felt her skin crawl. When thunder rocked the car, she
felt a low, weird laugh rumble up from inside her and when she heard it a second later, she did not recognize the sound as coming from her body. She raised her head to the sky, closed her eyes, and let the rain wash over her.

He told her once that the smell of her body clung to his for a few days after they made love, that he could smell her on his fingers, his skin, even after a shower. Her body carried the odor of him, too, but whereas he spoke of the scent as a stain on the surface of his skin that could not be soaped away, she thought of it as an essence seeping out from her pores, substantive proof that he had been inside her body, and that a part of him was still there, mixing with her fluids and dripping from her skin. She thought she smelled him now, rising from her skin, and herself too, the smell of their sex, their hushed, musty fumblings in bed-and-breakfast rooms. The smell rose from her, thick like the summer steam from rain on hot asphalt.

Is this what love smells like, rather than roses and chocolates? Is sex what keeps men and women together; the physical thrust and sweat and coming together of sex, and nothing deeper, more lasting? Is love something that only exists in the afterlife, when physical communion is no longer possible? She wanted it to be more. She wanted love to be as big as the vows they had made.

Rain washed over her body, soaking her, washing the dust away, diluting the smell of sex. She thought about the day behind her, dry and dusty, and then, at the end, a dive into the roiling water of a wash, cloudy with rain, the water warm from hot rocks. It seemed that she stood there, head thrown back, for a long time, years maybe, and
then Jim's door opened again.

"Rachel."

She heard urgency in his voice, and worry. She heard his boots on the gravel again, wet rocks pushing together into wet earth. She wanted him to say something, she needed words, but she didn't know what words.

"Rachel, please."

Rachel did not open her eyes. If he touched her now, if his arms encircled her, her confusion would crumble, the light would fall blue and soft, and their bodies would dissolve in the rain. If he touched her, if she could feel words in his hands, the words she needed, he could lead her back to the car, into her new life. He stood behind her. She could feel his warmth on her rain-cooled skin. She could feel the small weight of the rock in her pocket.

She drew in a breath, and waited.
Dance of the Hours

First Day. The herbal tea tasted bitter, grassy. Little dried leaves escaped from the tea ball, and floated in the brownish water -- pennyroyal, lobelia, blue cohosh, and black cohosh. Janey Stevens set her mug down on the wire rack that stretched across the high iron sides of her bathtub. George Eliot's Scenes of a Clerical Life was propped open in a little metal bookstand on the rack, open to page 43. A bright orange highlighter pen lay there too, waiting. Eyes shut, Janey sank back in the water, feeling the curve of the terrycloth-covered bath pillow with her bare neck and the swirl of warm soft water on her skin, hearing the quiet slosh of tub water.

She breathed in, smelling the lavender bath salts, the slight tang of the grassy tea, the moist hot smell of her bathroom. Downstairs, the cd player randomly rotated its fan, flipped Bach neatly out of the way and settled its tiny beam on the third song of Van Morrison’s No Guru, No Method, No Teacher. Music flowed out of the two tiny speakers above the bathroom door. Dan had wired her whole house to the stereo.

Janey slid her hands over her body under the water. Not bad for a twenty-eight year old, thanks to daily swims at the YWCA pool and three
dance classes every week. Her stomach still felt flat; her breasts soft and slippery from the water; her hips narrow enough to wear skirts cut above the knee. She had watched a senior in her fourth period British Literature class checking out her legs yesterday, frank admiration caught in the curves of his faint smile. When he had looked up at her, seen that she had seen, he did not blush. He returned her look of amusement with maybe a hint of interest. Flattering, but Dan was too young at twenty-three. A seventeen-year-old would put her right over the edge.

Her hands lingered at her stomach, then inched down her abdomen, pushing until she felt the bite of her short nails in her skin. Push, push, waiting for something to give way beneath. She opened her eyes and sat up, looking at the gray-blue water for some spot of bright red. She saw only a few scattered colonies of dried herbs, floating up toward her breasts.

"Shit."

She reached for the mug, and finished the cooling tea in one bitter swallow, pushed the wire rack down toward the end of the tub, ran more hot water.

I can't be pregnant. I use birth control. I go to church on Easter and Christmas. There's just no way. I'm not ready. I don't understand this. Janey shut off the thoughts like a tap and forced George Eliot back into her mind. I'd like to begin by asking you to make a list of ethical dilemmas you've faced in the past four years, since entering high school. You don't have to indicate what choice you made, but I'd like you to be specific about the decision. For example,
I was walking down the hall during class, and I found a gold necklace on the floor. No one was around, and there were no identifying marks on the necklace. I'll give you fifteen minutes, please write down as many as you can think of, big or small. No one will see these except you. Then a list of the ethical dilemmas in Scenes of A Clerical Life. Then a discussion of how much more complicated life is these days. The things kids had to deal with. Drugs, guns, abortions.

The hot water moved higher up her legs and Janey opened her knees suddenly, letting the heat slam into her in a wave, willing the water to draw blood from her body. She waited a moment, exhaled, contracting her body in an adapted dancer's motion. Fully contracted, holding, and then relaxing, inhaling, opening one eye to look for a swirl of color on the water.

"Fuck."

She sank back into the water, up to just below her nose, drew her knees to her chest and held herself in the increasingly hot water.

"Foreign Window" ended, and the cd player rotated onto Stravinsky's "Petrouchka." Just after she turned off the water, she heard her back door slam.

"Margo. Jesus, it's 3:15 already."

She counted Margo's steps to the refrigerator in her head, then steps to the drawer for the bottle opener, through the kitchen, around the abandoned ladder and paint cans in the hall, up the stairs.


Tap, tap, tap.
"Come in if you're Margo."

"Hey."

"Where'd you look for me first?"

"I thought you might be in the sunroom. That's where you should be, it's almost gorgeous out. How's it going?" Margo closed the toilet seat and sat down, holding a long-necked Budweiser loosely between her fingers.

"I've decided to write my professional paper on using Victorian women's fiction to introduce the topic of historic and contemporary ethics, and I think I've finally chosen the wallpaper for the bedroom and the colors I want in the guest bathroom. I've also decided you were right about the lace curtains in here. The sunlight moving across the wall is wonderful."

Margo grinned and took a swallow of beer. Janey continued.

"I also found a couple of framed prints in that Smith & Hawken catalogue that I want for the sunroom. I've had a very productive afternoon."

"Great. I won't say I told you so, but I will concede that the blue ticking would have looked nice, too. How's it going in the tub there, with the tea and all?"

"Nothing yet. I keep having to get out and pee. I must of had eight cups of that stuff already."

"That would be why the floor is one big puddle over here. Let me see your foot."

Janey lifted a foot high into the air, dead white, wrinkled, puffy.
"Gross. I think it's time you emerged from your bath. I'll meet you in the kitchen. I brought slightly stale finger sandwiches from Beth's party last night, and I brought in your mail."

"Okay, I'll be there in a few."

Janey sank back into the water for one more concentrated soak. She tried to picture the golden tea pushing through the walls of her stomach into her veins, and from there into her uterus at the same time that the herbs in the bath water pushed their way up her vagina and through her cervix to flood into the uterus. The herbs swirled together, lapping gently against the sides of her womb, cleansing, refreshing herbs. Gently, Janey thought, but totally cleansing. She didn't visualize what might or might not be clinging to the sides of her uterus.

Margo had gotten the recipe from a woman in her yoga class, and brought it to Janey, joking that she'd become a lesbian to avoid birth control hassles, and here they were anyway. Janey tried to smile. Margo paused for a moment, and then said that her friend got the recipe from someone who had used it for an abortion. It took three days. She said the recipe was originally from an old black woman in Louisiana.

"Oh please."

"Seriously. Very authentic."

"It might as well have been dug up in Old Salem, carefully preserved in a resin-sealed terracotta jar." Shaking her head, Janey reached for the piece of paper.

"Still, I'm willing to try."

"I think you should try a pregnancy test."
"I don't want to know."

"Oh, is this your great attempt at morality? If I'm going to abort my baby I don't want to know about it? Come on, Janey."

"Maybe I'm just late."

"Here's the recipe. I wrote it down for you. And here," Margo tossed a plastic Eckerd's bag down on the table. "I bought you an E.P.T. I don't give a shit if you use it or not."

The four jars at Sevenanda Natural Foods all had warnings on them: "Warning -- uterine stimulent. DO NOT USE IF PREGNANT." Janey hadn't been convinced until she saw those labels. She measured out two ounces of each, and bought a little tea ball to hold them. She bought a handful of empty gelatin capsules too, so she could take concentrated doses a few times every day.

Janey liked the idea of a natural abortion using herbs instead of whatever they used at clinics. These herbs were uterine stimulents, and that's all she had to believe. Just something to shake up her sluggish body, get her back on schedule. She told Dan that she couldn't see him for a while, that she had caught the chicken pox from one of her students and didn't want him to catch it too. She knew he had never had them. He sounded distracted when he agreed, asking her to call as soon as she wanted company again. That clinched it. She couldn't tell him anything. Not until it was over. Janey sighed, and pulled the plug out of the drain.

A few minutes later, Janey leaned against her kitchen counter, staring out the window above the sink. God, this window is filthy, she
thought, taking a drag off her cigarette and blowing the smoke out against the glass. It hadn’t been washed since the fall, right after she and Dan finished the wallpapering. Winter always seemed to last forever in the South, with no snow to lighten everything and soften the bare edges. Outside, she saw the same dead grass, the same twisted stalks of her dead flowers, the same bare trees against a pale blue sky. The only spot of color was the ground under the forsythia bushes, scattered with the torn yellow petals that hadn’t blown away during the heavy rain last weekend. Janey had planted the forsythia bushes first thing last summer when she moved into the old Victorian house, remembering their cheery February color from her childhood. This year, nothing had bloomed on time. The cold, damp weather dragged on and on, discouraging all but the most persistent early shrubs and flowers. All her neighbors had crocus and snowdrops. Janey had dead grass and weather-beaten forsythia. She turned away from the window.

"Hey, Janey, are you hearing me at all?" Margo sat at the table, cutting pages of yesterday’s Atlanta Journal into squares. A small pile of newspaper origami cranes leaned toward the ashtray next to her empty beer bottle. She put down the scissors and shook another Marlboro Light out of the pack on the table.

"Sorry. You were saying?" Janey turned, pushed her short red hair back with her left hand, and then raised her cigarette to her mouth, holding it there with her lips.

"I was saying I think you should tell Dan you think you’re pregnant, which explains why you didn’t hear a word of it."

"Let’s change the subject. How did the party go last night? What
time did Beth get home?"

"She got home around eleven. It was a big party, for eight couples I think. Big house over in Buckhead. You should have seen the food. They wanted all pink, red, and white food, for some unknown reason. The guy's a heart surgeon; Beth was afraid to ask. Anyway, we had cold smoked salmon, red caviar on toast points, lobster bisque, pink champagne, and this incredible chocolate raspberry torte with white chocolate filigree on top."

"Jesus, Margo."

"Listen, why don't you and Dan go up to the cabin this weekend? Beth has to do a party on Saturday afternoon, so we can't go. You could be alone and talk this whole thing out. It snowed up there last night. Weekend of romance by the fireplace? Backgammon, brandy, and proposals on bended knees? I'm sure Beth could whip up a few picnic meals for two."

"I'd rather go up without Dan, Margo."

"Janey, why do you want to deal with this by yourself? Dan helped get you into this mess, he should help get you out."

"I don't want to bother him Margo. He's got those interviews at Coke coming up next week and he's really uptight right now."

Janey stubbed out her cigarette and went back to the window. She didn't say anything for a few minutes, and Margo waited. Finally she got up and stood behind Janey, her hand resting on Janey's shoulder. Janey didn't turn around. When she spoke, her words were measured and careful.

"I just feel like I'm going to jump out of my skin sometimes.
Like I'm trapped in here. I need a change. Maybe I should dump Dan and try women."

Margo grinned. "Oh, that'll solve all of your problems, believe me. Besides, you're every lesbian's dream woman -- an unmarried, possibly pregnant, insecure heterosexual who wants to find herself. They'll be camping out on your doorstep."

"You're being very flippant about this."

"So are you. Janey, you have a romantic view of it. I think you've convinced yourself that only lesbians count as women, and that's stupid. It's taking "politically-correct" a bit too far."

"Maybe. It's just that the idea of being with a woman sounds so comforting right now. Someone who really understands what I'm going through here. A purely feminine relationship, with no egos, no communication problems. Like what you and I have."

"Except with sex, which always causes trouble. We don't think of ourselves that way, Janey. You know I've got problems, just like you do. I don't have to worry about getting pregnant, but I have to worry about getting beat up by rednecks every time I go out at night. Besides, you love Dan. At least you thought you did last week."

"I don't know, Margo. I thought I loved him, but I don't know anymore. How can I love someone who won't say he loves me? Isn't that self-defeating or enabling or co-dependent or something?"

Margo was silent for a moment. "He's only 23, Janey. He has no idea what he wants or what he loves, or even who he is yet. He thinks saying it would be a commitment, and it is, if he means it."

"I can't tell Dan. We had a huge argument about our relationship
last week, about commitment. He'll think I'm trying to get him to marry me."

"Oh, bullshit. I don't know Dan as well as you do, but I've known him as long as you have. He's not that kind of guy. I think he really cares about you, as much as someone that young can care. If he thought you were that shallow and manipulative, I don't think he'd still be coming around. He's still got that young guy wariness from fighting off coeds looking for M.R.S. degrees."

"Maybe."

"Look, Janey." Margo put her arm around Janey's shoulders. Janey didn't look at her. "I'm right here with you, okay. I'll be with you in whatever way you need me to. But this is partially Dan's responsibility. He should know. He should be with you too. I don't believe in this letting-the-guy-off-the-hook bullshit. It's his kid too."

"There's no kid!"

"Jesus Christ. Janey?"

Janey was quietly crying, pressing her lips together, staring hard at the ceiling. When Margo spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. "Would you really want to spend the rest of your life with a man who would desert you because you're pregnant?"

"I'm late, that's all."

"Okay, fine. Be that way. Take it all on your poor little martyred shoulders. Not that I won't be here for you, unless you want to leave me out of it, too."

"Thanks. Maybe you should go. I have some thinking to do."
Margo stepped away from Janey, dropping her arm back to her side.

"I've gotta go anyway, I'm meeting Beth to swim at 4:30. Why don't you come over later? I finished those bracelets I've been working on, and I want your opinion. The Virginia-Highlands Arts Festival is only six weeks away. We could order take-out from that Thai place on Ansley, and watch a movie."

"Okay. I have to call Dan at some point. It's our one year anniversary." Janey paused.

"I'll call you later, Margo, thanks for everything. Oh, your cat is on my sofa again. You might want to take him home."

"God. I don't know what he'd do without you down the street. Drive everyone in the neighborhood crazy, I guess."

Margo walked into the living room and came back with a large orange cat draped over her shoulder. Janey was leaning against the kitchen counter with her arms folded tightly in front of her.

"Say goodbye to Aunt Janey."

The cat yawned, his hinged jaws opening wide and pink tongue curling. He blinked at Janey. Margo paused at the door.

"Tell Dan, Janey. He cares about you. He should know."

Janey gathered the newspaper clippings and dumped them in the trash. She put the cranes in a basket on top of her refrigerator. When Margo had made a thousand, they were going to spray paint them gold and string them up in Janey's study in the cupola. One thousand blessings, Margo told her. All she needed right now was one blessing. Just one and she would never ask for anything else. She wondered if Dan would
marry her. She didn’t even know if she wanted to marry him, but she wanted him to ask. Twenty-eight and never been asked. She thought about telling Dan she was pregnant. She imagined him saying he’d do the right thing and marry her, not even asking, but telling. She imagined a short ceremony at the courthouse at noon, she and Dan and Margo and Beth for witnesses. She imagined him walking out, leaving her with a two-year old, screaming, food-smeared child, saying "I never loved you, I never wanted a baby. You wouldn’t listen." It was all a bad dream. Her period would start any minute now. That’s why she felt so grumpy.

She walked into the living room, picked up the phone, and dialed Dan’s home number. A slightly different dismal view of her back yard stretched beyond the French doors. She had chosen the pale yellow walls and flowered chintz couch thinking they’d be cozy and cheerful all year long. Against the brown grass, they seemed to mock her.

"Some spring break," she said, listening to the Dan’s phone ring and wishing teachers were allowed to do stupid things like spend all night driving to Daytona Beach and then staying drunk for a week.

"Hi, you’ve reached 373-0914. There’s a beep and you know what to do."

"Hey Dan, it’s me. I forgot you’d be at work. We, um, I don’t know if you remembered, but our first date was a year ago today. So, I just called to say hi, and thanks for the year, and I’ll talk to you later."

Second Day. Janey felt nauseated from the tea, and occasional shooting pains in her abdomen. Maybe it was working. She was craving a
QuarterPounder with cheese.

"Knock, knock!" Margo called, as she opened the back door.

Janey heard Margo's boots on the kitchen floor, stopping at the refrigerator for a beer.

"How's it going?" she asked, pulling a chair up to the side of the bed, and twisting off the beer cap.

"I don't know," said Janey. "I feel like throwing up. I've had a few random pains, but nothing definitive. I've been feeling my body all morning, trying to feel something different. But, I don't know what I feel like when I'm not pregnant. Never paid attention to it before. Of course, I'm not actually sure I am pregnant, I'm just a week and a half late."

"Janey, I was here this morning when you bolted for the refrigerator and ate a plain bagel standing over the sink. Can you think of any other reason you'd have dry heaves at 8 a.m.?"

"Stress?"

"Honey, why don't you just take a pregnancy test? They'll do it for free at the Women's Health Center, if you don't trust the E.P.T."

"It would be so much easier if I didn't know. I've been talking to my abdomen. Explaining to the cells that may be dividing there why I'm poisoning them. I told them that I like Dan, and I want to have a baby, but not now. Our relationship is too unstable, we're too up in the air. I guess I don't feel anything emotionally because I know I've had so much of this tea that the cells are poisoned."

"You sound very calm about all this," Margo agreed, leaning back in the chair, not taking her eyes off Janey's face. "I still think you
should have told Dan. I think you'd be surprised -- I think he'd be really supportive."

"I guess." Janey set her tea cup down on the bedside table and pulled the down comforter over her. "I'm sleepy again."

"Defense mechanism," said Margo, standing up. "I'm going to go make a big pot of chicken vegetable soup. I'll bring you some."

Margo leaned over and kissed Janey's forehead, smoothing back her tangled hair.

"See you in a few hours, kiddo."

Third Day.

"The test dot matches the control dot. Bright pink, just like the picture on the box."

"Goddamn. I'm sorry Janey."

"Me too. Can I come over?"

"Of course. We just finished eating. Did you eat yet?"

"No. I'm not hungry. I'll be there in a few."

Fourth Day. Janey sat at her kitchen table, playing with an unlit cigarette. She could not smoke anymore. The smell of it, even the thought of it made her sick. It was so easy to get pregnant. Hole in a condom, hole in her diaphragm. It didn't matter now. She'd thought she wouldn't get pregnant until she was ready, made a big production out of throwing out the contraceptives. The first month, and half of the second was already over. If things were different, she'd be giving birth around the third week of November. A boy or a girl? She put her
head down on her folded arms and sighed. She couldn't cry anymore.

At the women's clinic that morning, she had sat in a counseling room and sobbed on the shoulder of the nurse practitioner who had just told her that she was six to seven weeks pregnant. The woman held Janey, rubbing and patting her back, letting her cry.

"Janey, we need to talk about your options," said the woman when the sobs finally subsided.

"I've already decided, I mean, I know what I have to do. I can't have this baby."

"Are you sure? If anyone is forcing you, we can get you out of town for a while."

"No, it's my decision. I'm just not ready. My boyfriend is up for a promotion at Coke where he'd be home four months out of the first year, and travelling the rest. We've only been dating a year, I don't know if we're going to even be together much longer. He's not ready, we're not ready. Besides, I don't think unmarried pregnant teachers keep their jobs long. I wouldn't exactly be a proper role model. I can't have a baby now, I just can't." She bit her lip hard, determined not to cry anymore.

"All right. Let me explain exactly what will happen." There was a basket on the coffee table in front of them, and the nurse reached into it.

"This is a speculum, you've seen these before. This thin tube is a cannula. The cannula is inserted through your cervix and into the uterus." She picked up a painted plaster half-section model of the female reproductive system.
"You will feel a gentle tugging as the suction draws out the tissue," she continued, moving the tip of the tube around the surface of the plaster uterus.

"Aspiration has the lowest risk factor of any form of abortion, but we'll need to see you within two weeks just to make sure all the tissue was removed. If any gets left behind, you can develop a painful infection. If there is someone who can drive you down here, we can give you a pretty effective muscle relaxer, either by IV or a pill."

"Okay." Janey felt numb, deadened, heavy, as if someone had just poured lead through the back of her skull and it was running down her spine.

"We perform terminations on Monday and Thursday. Come with me, and we'll set up an appointment."

Janey stopped at a mall on the way home from the clinic. She walked into the B. Dalton and went straight to the childcare books. She found a book called The Miracle of Birth, and turned the pages. On page 32, she found a picture of a six-week-old fetus. It was one half inch long, and had an eye and a beating heart. She reshelved the book, and walked out of the store.

Ninth Day. Janey lay on the stainless steel table, a paper sheet covering her from the waist down. She had worn sweatpants, as the nurses suggested, and now she lay, half naked, talking to the two nurses about Rebel Without a Cause.

"I just didn't see what the big deal was," she said. She had
taken a strong muscle relaxer half an hour before, and felt that it was working. She felt relaxed, her nervousness had drained away.

The door swung open, and a doctor came in. He was tall and gray-haired, and he wore a white coat and a surgical mask.

"How're we doing in here? Everyone ready?"

Janey felt all of her blood drain out of her face. She remembered through the haze of the drug why she was here. She thought about pain and death and whimpered softly. One of the nurses stepped forward and took her hand.

"Janey, I want you to look at me. Look right into my eyes and don't look away. I'm going to be right here with you, holding your hand, okay? Just a few minutes and this will be over."

Janey squeezed the nurse's hand and looked up into her blue eyes. Hot tears rose in her eyes, and her vision blurred.

"Put your feet in the stirrups and slide all the way down the table please. Further. Further. About an inch further. Thank you."

Janey could not see the doctor, she only heard his voice rising from behind the paper-draped mountain of her raised knees.

"I'm going to put the speculum in now."

She felt the plastic edges slide into her and then the pressure as he opened her body.

"Ouch," she said softly.

"Too much? I can use a smaller one."

The pressure lessened and then resumed more comfortably as the doctor replaced the speculum.

"I can either tell you exactly what I'm doing, or not. Your
choice."

"No, please." Janey shut her eyes.

"I'm right here Janey," the nurse's voice was soft, and right by her ear. More tears slipped out of Janey's eyes, and she felt the odd pain of the tube pushing through her cervix. She clenched her teeth and opened her eyes. The nurse's face was inches from hers, nodding. How had she come to this? Lying here with her legs wide open and some doctor who probably thought she was a dumb slut about to perform an abortion on her. An abortion. The word rang through her mind, and she bit her lip harder.

A dull hum, and then the tugging began, pulling, sucking. Janey had never felt anything more horrible than this insistent tugging at the center of her body. Now she knew where the center of her body was, she felt it being pulled and tugged, the horrible almost pain. An awful hand, gripping the dead center of her body, her soul, and shaking, pulling, sucking.

"Press your back into the table, Janey. Try to relax. This won't take long." The nurse's face still hovered above her. I will never forget this face, thought Janey, never, as long as I live. I will remember this face and when I think of angels I will think of this face. She looked at every tiny wrinkle, every fold, every eyelash, trying to concentrate on anything but the tugging, the pulling, the sucking.

"I can't take any more," she finally whispered to the nurse.

"Thirty seconds more, Janey, I promise. Count with me. Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight . . . "

When they reached three, the tugging and the dull hum stopped.
Janey had the nurse's hand gripped in both of her hands now, and the nurse brought her free hand over to wipe the tears from Janey's face.

"It's over. Just lie here for a few minutes while we clean up. Don't try to sit up, okay?"

She pulled a support from under the table, eased Janey's legs out of the stirrups, and stretched them carefully out. The doctor washed his hands and left the room, and the two nurses bustled around, opening and shutting drawers, talking all the while to Janey about the wonders of the recovery room, heating pads and afghans, and large bottles of Advil.

After a few minutes, she thought she could sit, and they helped her sit up. The angel gave her a cup of water and two large red pills, which she took, and a maxi pad to stick to her underwear. Then they left her alone to dress.

She stood gingerly, and carefully pulled on her sweatpants. Her socks were still on her feet, and she looked around the floor for her shoes. Right under the table, just at the edge, she saw a drop of orangish-red fluid, almost blood but not quite. Her stomach churned, she knew it had come out of her body. She thought about soaking it up off the floor with a tissue and then saving the tissue forever. The only part of her baby that was left to her.

One of the nurses came back in and saw her staring at the floor, crying.

"Come on, Janey, we have a heating pad waiting for you. I'll bring your shoes." She led her into a darkened room. A woman sat in a rocking chair with an afghan wrapped around her shoulders. A young girl
that Janey had seen earlier in the waiting room lay on one of the beds, curled in the fetal position, sniffling. Janey lay on the other bed and tucked the heating pad down her sweatpants, against her abdomen. She, too, curled up on her side, circling her body with her arms, waiting for the ibuprofen to numb her. The warmth from the heating pad slowly spread through her body, and she repeated to herself it's over it's over it's over.

Janey wasn't sure how long she'd lain there, but she knew when she was ready to go. She sat up and reached for her shoes. A nurse came in to help her out. She had already paid, so she was free to go. They gave her a small brown vial.

"If you start to bleed, the chances are very slim, but if you do, take one of these and call us immediately. We removed 31 grams of tissue from your uterus and that should be all of it, but we'll see you in two weeks, on April 10th, for that check-up."

Margo stood up when she saw Janey. She put her arms around her and hugged her, and then, with one arm supporting her, walked her to the car.

Later that afternoon, Janey lay on the couch, covered with a striped afghan. She had pulled back the curtains to let in the bright sunlight, and a view of the grape hyacinth and jonquils in bloom in the back yard. Margo sat in a chair, close beside her. They passed a soup spoon and a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream back and forth. When the phone rang, Margo answered it, shut off the VCR, and then handed the receiver to Janey.
"Hey. I got the job. Are you feeling up to a celebration yet?"

"Not yet. Margo took me to the doctor this morning, and he says I've been through the worst, but I'm still contagious. Just another few days Dan."

"Chicken pox at twenty-eight. You're such a kid, Janey."

"I try. Hey, I'm happy for you about the job."

"Look, I know you didn't really want me to get this job, but this is what I've wanted to do my whole life. I'll have an expense account, I'll be travelling all the time. I'll have so many frequent flier points I'll be able to take you to London or Paris for the weekend. Won't that be great?"

"Yeah, great. Listen Dan, I'm gonna go, okay? I'm still feeling pretty weak."

"Janey, are you sure nothing else is wrong? I haven't done anything to piss you off, have I?"

"I just don't feel good, Dan. That's all."

"Poor thing. Is Margo taking good care of you?"

"Of course."

"Okay. Well, let me know when I can come see you. Leave a message at the office, that's where I am most of the time right now."

"Okay."

"Oh, hey, did you get the flowers?"

Janey glanced over at the coffee table, at the vase with a dozen red roses and baby's breath.

"I did Dan. Thank you. They're beautiful."

"I'm glad you like them. Listen, I've gotta run. We'll have to
continue this conversation in person. Call me when you feel better and I'll take you out for a celebratory dinner, okay?"

"Okay. Bye."

Janey handed the phone back to Margo.

"So, does he know what red roses mean?"

"I'm not sure. He wants to take me out to dinner. I'll see him in another day or two."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see him to know. If he looks at me and sees that something has changed, then there's a chance. If all he sees is someone to talk to about his new job, well, that's it."

"Just like that? And what if he asks what else happened?"

Janey hugged her knees under the afghan. She thought about the women in the books she had been reading. Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, Dorothea Brooke, Anna Karenina. She had War and Peace sitting by her bed, waiting for the three days of sick leave she was about to take.

She had been living her life like a novel these past days, as if it were all beyond her control. She was the heroine. She had to stick to her ideals, even if she lost him. But what if Dan didn't know how to act? She was ready to be on her own for a while, ready to sort out her life. She wasn't sure how Dan would fit in.

"You really think it's gonna work, keeping this big a secret from him?" Margo picked up the remote control.

"It has to, doesn't it? Maybe it won't even matter. Turn the movie back on."

They were watching Fantasia. Janey opened the box of Godiva
chocolates Dan had sent, and gave one to Margo. She put the other in her mouth and savoured the soft explosion of sweet chocolate and hazelnut cream in her mouth. "The Dance of the Hours" began, and the ostrich ballerina unfolded herself from sleep, shook out her tutu, and rose en pointe.