Dearest darling, darling dear| A collection of short stories

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The University of MONTANA

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DEAREST DARLING, DARLING DEAR

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By

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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date

5-15-96
This is a photograph of silent screen actress, Mary Pickford. 
April 9, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

I have named you for movie stars.

The nurse brings you to me every few hours, and I try that juggling act which is feeding both of you simultaneously. I am not very practiced yet, but this evening I managed a little. You quieted, and I told you useful things. "Lillian," I said, "You mustn't flare your fingers out like that. We are not a windmill. Clara, pumpkin, don't gawk." My voice puzzled you. This is that wondrous time beyond memory when voices float as melody, a mysterious background score. You stared at me with your mouths open, until your eyes fixed on my face, and then you reached your tiny hands toward it, as if my nose and lips were candies.

The nurse came and took you away. I asked her for some writing paper and pens which she kindly brought, and now I shall try to get down the things you should know, so that when you are young ladies and interested in your own faces,
you’ll understand something about their ingredients. I am really too exhausted for this, but it won’t be long before we’re parted. There is a great deal to say, and so I begin . . .

I suppose you will want to know first of all that your father is not dead, though you shall believe all your lives that he perished, falling from a tall tree at Pickfair. This is agreed upon. You’ll picture him high among the oak branches with a pair of opera glasses pressed to his eyes, trying to glimpse Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. These are his last moments, just before a great wind knocks him from his perch to the green lawn far below. Mary, hearing the crash, runs out of the house in her apricot dressing gown and feathery slippers. She drops her copy of Photoplay which pinwheels across the front yard to flash its pictures of celebrity at the camellias, the calla lilies, the birds of paradise — as if it were an animation flip-book. Mary does not watch it go. She takes one look at your father and screams for her husband, “Douglas!” She cannot bear the horror of death before breakfast.

Douglas dashes to Mary’s side, his smoking-jacket properly cinched at the waist. He fairly leaps across the lawn and secures Mary’s shoulders. His fingers disappear into the drape of her robe, and he feels her lean against him as if she might swoon. He braces her up and inhales the perfume of her nutmeg hair. He says, “Oh my darling, my dearest darling dear, sweet Mary. You mustn’t frighten me this way. Your scream stops my breath. It is so convincing.” Mary raises her dainty hand to Douglas’ velvet cuff and regards the body of your father with
generous pity. "Poor man," she whispers, for your father looks dead to her, twisted and unmoving. She turns suddenly, buries her face in her husband’s lapels and sobs.

The couple’s many servants have, by now, gathered in Pickfair’s doorway. Holding handkerchiefs to their lips, they are a respectful gathering of uniformed mourners. The maids gaze down at their ruffled aprons. The valets raise their chins to the breeze of Beverly Drive. The cook removes his hat. He does not wear one of those silly hats that looks like a Yorkshire pudding; he prefers to wear the Conte cap given to him by Mr. Fairbanks himself. This assembly watches as Douglas Fairbanks tilts Mary Pickford’s face up toward his. Her eyelashes sparkle silver in the sunlight. He dabs his pinkie at her tears, ever so gently, as if her skin were made of rice-paper.

Your father, meanwhile, is not quite dead. Though injured and in a great deal of pain, he’s still alive, and his eyes are open. He sees, towering above him, the two lovers. If only he were not paralyzed with shock, he could touch Mary Pickford’s lacy hem. Alas, just as your father begins to feel a hopeful tingling at the back of his right calf, Douglas groans and kisses Mary full on the lips. She sighs and he sweeps her up into his arms. Her skirts billow a chiffon sunset as Douglas carries her over the threshold of their home to the scattering of servants. And while all this happens your father’s heart trips over itself. It trips and trips, unable to regain its composure and sadly, tragically for you girls, he is quickly finished.
Doctors are called and all of them agree there is no hope. I'm left
devastated, but with resources enough to await your birth in quiet seclusion, to ease
through my sorrow and to make plans for us, to devise a future — this story.

◇ MFP ◇

Chief Thomas Armstead
Beverly Hills Police Department
1720 Randolph Crest
Beverly Hills, California

Dear Chief Armstead:

This morning, our gardener, Mr. Jack Ivy, reported seeing a figure balanced in
the branches of the large oak tree on the Summit Avenue side of Pickfair. He shouted
at the trespasser to get down, and the man leaped out of tree to the other side of the
wall. The tree is tall, and Mr. Ivy was sure the culprit had been killed or at least
severely injured in the fall. When he looked, however, to the place where the man
should have lain, he saw nobody.

This, I suppose, is just as well.

Please send an extra patrolman by during the early morning hours for the next
three weeks. Mr. Fairbanks and I are terribly busy at the moment and wish to preserve
tranquility where we can.

Sincerely,

Mary Pickford Fairbanks

April 7, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

You are good girls who sleep through the night, as if you understand how difficult things are going to be . . . Here in this apartment your early days are cramped and impoverished, but this should not worry you. Mary Pickford’s father died when she was very young. He was a drunk who stumbled, hit his head on an iron grate and never recovered. Her mother was left with nothing but her three children, and she sewed and sewed for a dollar here and a dollar there — until her eyes grew small.

I will not sew. I have never learned to type.

On the other hand, I am a very beautiful woman. I tell you this because by the time you are old enough to read these letters, age will have settled me into a different sort of beauty; it will be an indoor loveliness, the kind which places itself against a backdrop of blue damask wallpaper and smiles with its hands folded, knowing poise is the greater part of mystery. It will be the kind of beauty best lit through the filter of sheer drapery. Today, I am a daylight beauty. The bright
California sky cuts me out like a paper doll, and favors the red tips of my curls. I walk quickly to assure a bloom in my cheeks and to better catch the breeze in my skirts. I touch leaves and flowers as if I am touching myself, and when I smile at a man I always exhale and lift my face toward his so he will think me sweet and vulnerable—a woman without air, a woman who sheds breath for a nod, who needs breath, perhaps from his lips.

I am, therefore, not without talent.

I watch you now, tucked together in my dresser drawer on the quilts given to you by the old woman who lives downstairs in the basement, and I see you've inherited my knack. I watch you, Lillian, open your eyes for a moment to blink at Clara, while Clara sleeps stubbornly. Someday you, too, will find yourselves picked out of an assembly of women lined up in a parking lot. These women coo like children and wave at the casting director, but you're savvy enough to appear vaguely surprised when he walks by; you feign disinterest.

Before long you are seated in the corner of a great hollow room on a disorderly stack of Tabreze rugs. You're dressed up in caftans of beaded satin, eyes painted black—feet, bare. Around you lay stacks of tasseled pillows and other costumed girls. This is your very first movie set. You listen solemnly as the director tells all of you to act enthusiastic and to repeat either the word "loganberry" or the word "cantaloupe" over and over again as if these were the most important words in the world. "The effect will be that of excited chatter," he tells you. "When Mr.
Fairbanks comes on the set,” he says, “you are to stop talking and you are to lower your eyes as if in shame.”

The director moves a few girls here and there.

You practice your word — “cantaloupe” — over and over in your head until the music starts, and by then the word sounds like “can’t elope.”

“Can’t elope! Can’t elope!” you say to the woman beside you. She shouts, “Loganberry” in a mean southern accent. Over her shoulder you catch the gaze of a young man. He’s standing aside, holding a coil of electrical cords out of the way. They look heavy and dangerous to you. He lifts the cords a bit higher and brushes some hair out of his face. You ignore him and concentrate on your part.

Douglas Fairbanks fastens his eyes on the lights and strides onto the set. The gleam on his pupils makes him look blind. He’s a small man with a head like a round wax candle. You lower your chin per instruction. Still, you can see his boots, black and shiny as garden shears. You try to keep from smiling.

Later, the assistant who held the cords pretends not to have waited for you outside the wardrobe room. You seem familiar to him. “Or is zees your first time, your first peecture?” He sounds foreign. He salutes a few passing fellows to show he knows his way around. They also wear knickers and dreary oxford shirts with the sleeves rolled up.

“Look zare!” he says suddenly, and he turns you around. “Mary Peeckford,” he says, and outside the stage exit, America’s Sweetheart slams her car door and
adjusts her flowered hat. A man attends to carrying her coat and satchel. She talks to him, then swings her arm toward the gray afternoon sky and shakes a fist at it like an angry child demanding coconuts.

TELEGRAPH WIRE — TUES. 4/19/26 11:13 — WESTERN UNION
To D. Fairbanks
From M. P. Fairbanks

THIS MORNING GARDENER FOUND ABANDONED TWIN GIRLS ON OUR FRONT WALL. BABIES LYING IN A DRAWER. HAVE PAID GARDENER AND OTHER STAFF TO KEEP MUM.

TELEGRAPH WIRE — TUES. 4/19/26 13:28 — WESTERN UNION
To M.P. Fairbanks
From D. Fairbanks

YOU’RE IN NO SHAPE FOR A HULLABALOO AND NEITHER AM I. IF WE NEEDED FAVORABLE PRESS THAT WOULD BE ONE THING. DISPATCH THE BABIES TO A HOME. LEAVE A BIT OF MONEY IF NEED BE, BUT UNDER A FALSE NAME. WE DON’T WANT EVERYONE DONATING THEIR CHILDREN. THERE’S MY ADVICE.

April 13, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

You will want to know that your father had a French accent. It was quite charming. The first time he said my name, “Maisie,” I laughed at the way the “zee” part sounded like the buzz of a wind-up toy. Weeks passed between our encounter
on the set of *Desert Dragoon* and our next rendezvous. I’d just finished my third job as an extra, dressed this time as a street urchin in burlap and black chintz, and there he was stacking dollies and watching me. I let him take me for a ride on one of the wheeled platforms. He held my arms and pulled me from one side of the stage to the other, and I closed my eyes and felt the light from the big bulbs play warm games in my hair.

“You look just like Mary Peeckford, Mai-zeeee,” he said, and then he rolled me into a dark patch and kissed me.

His lips pulled at mine and were not unpleasant, but I demurred; crew men falling in love with extras is as common as coins — and hence embarrassing. I backed away and stared at my bare feet on the concrete. They looked tiny

“Sweetheart,” said your father, coaxing me toward him again, but I ran off in the other direction, out the stage door and onto the hot pavement, still in costume, toes burning all the way.

I reached the casting bungalow out of breath. The receptionist jumped when I clattered through the door. She’d been twisting the end of a paper clip. “Excuse me please,” I said, “but it’s come to my attention — that is, I’ve only just now realized — I look remarkably like Mary Pickford, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” the receptionist said, “what of it?”

“If I lightened my hair just a bit, don’t you think I would look exactly like Mary Pickford?”
“The spitting image, lady.” The receptionist licked the flap of an envelope.

I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe I am Mary Pickford,” I said. “Maybe I’ve just come out of wardrobe where they set a brown wig on my head and dressed me in these rags. I had a few extra minutes, so I thought I’d visit the offices and test the politeness of my employees. Then, dear, you might assume you had failed my test. You might expect a pink slip in your mail tomorrow, mightn’t you?”

For a sliver of a second the girl looked petrified. Her cheeks betrayed a blush before she turned suspicious again. “I’ll thank you to leave,” she said.

I did. I ran happily back to find your father who was sulking around a stand of flats. “Darling!” I said. “My dearest darling dear! I’ll never frighten you like that again! I am such a silly, silly little girl!”

We kissed, and neither of us minded the oily taste of my make-up. A few milling set-dressers applauded. Your father lifted me up and carried me back to wardrobe. I giggled. I fastened my eyes on the lights in the rafters.

United Artists

Memorandum:
To: D. Fairbanks, C. Chaplin, D.W. Griffith
From: Mary
Re: My new scenario

April 21, 1926

Gentlemen, if Charlie gets six or seven story meeting a week, then surely you can listen briefly to my proposal. I did not appreciate your collective snub at
dinner last night. Were you not fellow owners of this company, I’d fire you all summarily.

Here’s the scenario: A young woman who cannot financially manage to raise her twin baby girls but who cannot bear to separate them, packs them into an antique drawer and leaves them in the garden of a senator and his wife. The babies are beautiful and the wife is moved by their plight. The senator, however, does not want children: “Pack them off to an orphanage!” — that’s his initial reaction. His wife is appalled. Repulsed, really. Then the press gets hold of the story (informed by the senator’s wife?) and so the senator is forced to make a good show of it. No longer may he toss those children out with the evening trash. He must parade the little ones before the cameras like a proud father, and smile. His popularity surges overnight. Unwilling to sacrifice this new political advantage, he adopts the girls—though he dislikes them and ignores them altogether upon his re-election.

The two girls grow into charming and spirited young ladies, practically unbeknownst to their adoptive father — and then he runs for president. His advisors recommend that he bring his daughters along so that he will not look such the stuffy bureaucrat. He is reluctant, but eventually agrees to the plan, and the girls are furnished with smart new wardrobes and lessons with a charm instructor. They learn quickly, but cannot quell their delight in pranks. Naturally they cause hilarious havoc on the road.
In the end, the girls get under the senator’s skin, and while he loses his election, he gains a family.

Or perhaps he should win the election . . . Griffith, what do you think?

Douglas shall have the part of the senator if he is interested. If not -- perhaps Lesley Howard, though I fear he is a bit too mossy-eyed. I have myself in mind for the roles of both twins. (I want to split some frames, boys.)

To direct?

The technical costs will be high, to be sure, but I need a new project and am excited by the prospect of this one. Do not even suggest hiring another scenarist. This is all mine.

I’m ready for your objections, lovers, but won’t listen to a word you say.

Tootle-oo!

MPF/ag

April 15, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

Where do we go from here? Would you like to know about this dark room which is our apartment? The courtyard outside soaks up all the sun. Children are not allowed in this building. You are illegal. It’s likely, though, that you’d rather hear more about how I came to be Mary Pickford’s double, her stand-in. You will see me in distant shots of Mary, or fuzzy on the sidelines when the camera is on someone else. Occasionally you will get a good look at the back of my head. I will be
gazing off into the mist after my hero, or prosperity. Sometimes I will turn slightly to the right and then to the left and you will spy my profile. Look closely. I appear to be saying something. What is it? Why, your names, of course. “Lillian! Clara!” I am looking for you. I am picturing you at Pickfair, growing up among the sculpted bushes in the merry flutter of canvas awnings.

I have been told by people who have been there that Pickfair’s highest ceiling is edged with a molding of carved Egyptian cats who walk along the bottom in a synchronized line and peer with their green eyes at the people far below. When nobody is there, they look out the French doors which line the east and west sides of the house. From there they can see Benedict Canyon with its winding roads and wild palms dug into the brush, or far out in the other direction, the ocean. The floors are wood, but shine like glass where they are not lined with thick, persimmon carpet. There’s a grand player piano in the living room which accompanies the fireplace’s flickering. Guests sit and listen, swirling scotches around in crystal tumblers while awaiting their call to the dinner. The dining room is royal, papered in lipstick red. It’s decked with two heavy mirrors which triple the glitter of the Venetian chandelier, the sterling coffee set.

On nice evenings, and on less formal occasions, the Fairbanks and their friends dine outside, on the patio. Mary’s shoes click on the Spanish tile. When she is bored she stares at the jasmine growing leafy on the trellises, or she gazes through the living room window at her own portrait where it hangs over the mantle.
She looks irresistible in it, pale shoulders and blond curls above a haze of blue silk.
The portrait troubles her, though. In it, her expression, the one of vague surprise, is
not precisely her own. She wonders if it's the artist's idiom, or whether he fashioned
it after the face of that other girl, that girl who looks so remarkably like her and who
sat in for her while she was too busy to pose for the painter. Mary's thoughts are
interrupted by the valet's offering drinks. He serves from an umbrellaed cart. He
uncaps the bottles with white napkins.

After dinner everyone smokes long cigarettes and laughs. You will hear the
laughter, girls, late at night, like the sound of intermission, as you pass from one
dream into the next.

*United Artists*

Memorandum:
To: Mary
From: Douglas
Re: Role

April 22, 1926

I am not interested in playing your senator.
United Artists

Memorandum:
To: Douglas, Charlie, Griffith
From: Mary
Re: Role

April 22, 1926

Douglas informs that he is not interested in the role of senator. Too bad, for I do think, Doug, that you are supremely able to affect the proper aloofness, the stalwart posture of one distractible only by daydreams of personal glory. You’ve got the stuff a person would require in order to reject sweet baby girls. Indeed, I can hardly think of another actor up to the task. But I’ll hush my complimenting (you’ll scold me later for such gushing), and I’ll open the forum for casting suggestions.

Oh but I’m crushed! Douglas dear, perhaps your apprehension at taking the part stems from your sense that the scenario lacks something . . . Yes, yes darling, you’re absolutely right. How lucky I am to have such a clever husband. You are my genius, my muse! What would I do were my brain not matrimonially fused to yours? It is unbelievable that a senator could ignore or hardly notice two children growing up in his own house. Well, of course. The story requires a B Plot!

Imagine that the senator, upon deciding to keep the girls, was advised by his lawyer to avoid future legal imbroglios by getting someone else to sign the
adoption papers. It only has to LOOK as if he’s adopted the children after all.

He will tell the press, “The babies are going to live right here on this property.”

He will make no mention of becoming their father. Instead, his gardener — let’s
call him Jack Ivy after Pickfair’s own gardener — will do the adopting (The
senator will compensate him generously.) and the twins will be raised in the
servants’ bungalow, under the kind watch of Ivy’s wife and Mrs. Senator, who
will let the little ones play in the main house when the senator is not at home.

I’ll grant you that this is a rather complicated scheme, but I think it can be
expeditiously conveyed through an on-screen letter to the orphanage, a letter the
senator forces his wife to write. I have been working on drafting such a letter,
Douglas. Please see the attached.

attachment:

Mrs. Jean Cartwright
St. Angela’s Home for Children
Los Angeles, California

April 21, 1926

Dear Mrs. Cartwright,

I offer my highest recommendation for Mr. & Mrs. Jack Ivy to serve as adoptive
parents for the young twin girls who were abandoned earlier this week here at my
residence. The Ivys are trusted members of our staff who have proven themselves to be
industrious and possessed of strong personal integrity. Mr. Ivy is our gardener and Mrs. Ivy keeps our house. It was Mr. Ivy who found the children shivering in a drawer and Mrs. Ivy who immediately warmed them up and fed them teaspoons of sugar water. Upon seeing the children, Mrs. Ivy developed a deep attachment to them. She can think of nothing else and lies awake at night praying that they might be her own. She cannot explain her reaction, for she has always been, as she puts it, a working girl striving for professional perfection. But she found there was something of her own face in the girls' and now she wants, more than anything, to watch them thrive beyond the glimmer of her own resemblance.

Mr. Ivy shares her enthusiasm, one hundred percent.

The Ivys, however, wish their privacy to be maintained. They do not want their names in the papers, for they fear publicity may jeopardize the safety of the children. I quite agree. The press should be led to believe that the girls will be installed in the Senator’s and my home, when in fact, they will grow up in the Ivys’ home, situated on the southern edge of our property.

I have enclosed a donation to your organization on behalf of the Ivys’ privacy.

Should you need any further endorsements, please contact me.

Yours very truly,
'Et ceteras

MPF/ag
Dear Lillian & Clara,

I’ve been reviewing these letters, trying to make sure they are complete, and I find that I have fibbed. It is not Mary Pickford’s mother whose eyes grew small while she sewed and sewed to support her family. The woman who sewed was my mother, the woman I mentioned who lives in the basement downstairs. She is blind now. The quilts you lie on are lopsided things because she made them when her vision was nearly gone. She gave me these, along with other articles whose defects she could not see — dresses with differently colored sleeves, shirts with disproportionate collars — and told me to sell them. I stored them under my bed and sold cigarettes at Piccolo’s instead.

“You’re being cheated,” your grandmother said, when I came home with my nickels. “I expected ten dollars at least. For pete’s sake! You can’t just give things away.”

Your grandmother wears the face of an angry wolf, always baring her top teeth because of her powerful squint. She cranes her neck into the space before her as if trying to get closer to some far off light. You would be afraid of her.

In the mornings, I cut apple sections for her and slice cheese for her cheese sandwiches. This is what sustains her. She’s grown distrustful of foods she cannot pick up and eat with her hands. For dessert she likes eclairs from the bakery which I buy when I get paid. I slip caramels into her pockets, too, so she shall have
pleasant surprises. Whenever she finds one, she rolls it between her palms. “What do you suppose this is?” she says, though she knows full well it’s a caramel.

I like to watch her eat these, because, unlike sandwiches and cakes, she has to chew caramels for a long time. She chews and chews and her features relax and she glazes over a bit, like a person watching ducks at play in a garden pond or like a person taking in a movie. What does she see in her magic lantern show? Is it a memory of her little daughter scurrying down the sidewalk in her rumpled plaid jumper, on her way home from St. Bede’s School for Girls? The child’s faces is flushed. The mother knows that in the plaid jumper her daughter pretends to be a Scottish princess running as fast as she can to escape the chilly fingers of ghosts trapped on the moors. It’s for her daughter’s princess fancy that the mother works late into the night to pay for the child’s dancing and elocution lessons — but for now the mother just watches.

The ghost chasing her daughter is a harmless boggart; it’s likely the ghost of her husband, that prankster. He’d had a penchant for foolishness. When he’d dropped dead unexpectedly one night in the kitchen, she’d scolded him — “Get up you sack of green potatoes.” — because she thought at first he was joking.

It occurs to the mother suddenly that there is no boggart at all, that her daughter is running to catch up with someone — a man who looks very much like her dead father. She cannot hear her daughter’s voice, but can see her mouth is
moving. “Loganberry?” No, the child is running so quickly now, straight past the house. She must be shouting, “Wait for me! Wait for me!”

The movie turns sad. The caramel wears thin. The man walking up the street, ahead of the galloping girl is not her father at all, but a stranger who resembles instead the young French man who she is destined to bring home one day.

“We’ve eloped,” the daughter will say.

The mother will say, “You’re joking.”

The young man will hold the mother’s hand, and he and the daughter will act joyful. They will bring eclairs from the best French bakery in town. “A real patisserie,” the man will say. They will eat the creamy cakes together in the courtyard where the sun drops in every afternoon. Her French son-in-law will laugh when he spills custard on himself, and the mother will think, “How long has my daughter’s been pregnant? Where will they live after the baby comes?”

United Artists

Memorandum:
To: D. Fairbanks, C. Chaplin, D.W. Griffith
From: Mary
Re: Amends

April 23, 1926

Griffith, you missed a humdinger of a breakfast meeting this morning.

First there was the excitement of spotting our tree-intruder again (I suggested to
DEAREST DARLING, DARLING DEAR

Douglas that we build a small watchtower there to save the fellow some trouble.) and then I tore into Charlie —accused him of trying to squeeze me out of comedies. I’m sure you’ve heard about THAT by now.

Charlie, I apologize. I over-reacted. And now I’ve sat and thought about what you said, and I still disagree with you.

You advised me to shift the focus of my story to the senator’s wife, whose character, you said, was potentially more interesting than the children’s characters. You told me to play the wife, hire some twins, and “do something with depth for God’s sake.” Douglas sat and nodded his head, agreeing. Perhaps both of you find my work consistently shallow . . . but I’m going to let that slide for now.

Here’s your outline: woman abandons babies in a weepy farewell scene; senator’s wife finds babies and falls in love with them; senator snubs babies and wife; wife calls the papers; babies are adopted; senator’s wife is caught between her loyalty to her husband/husband’s ambitions and her love for her daughters; in the end, when the senator’s victory hinges on his final sweep of speeches, the senator’s wife leaves with her daughters and the senator is forced to decide between losing the election or losing his family blah blah blah.

And suddenly my movie goes from heartwarming comedy to heartwrenching drama! Well you can forget it. I’m not going to make that film for two reasons: First, it’s boring and second, it would be a flop. And you all
know it. Your suggestions are aimed at sabotage — or else you’ve lost your minds.

The senator’s wife is nobody in this. Her part could be cast on a street corner. In fact, I’m going to kill the senator’s wife. There. She’s dead. All that remains of her is her portrait which hangs over the mantle, at most a tableau vivant with a benevolent gaze. The senator has to adopt the girls all by himself after a servant reports the babies’ abandonment to the papers. The girls are raised exclusively by his gardener and his housekeeper (who will both have to be worked into the ending.) The housekeeper dusts the portrait and the girls admire its elegance. They keep it in mind as they grow. Maybe they wonder how much they resemble the woman in the picture. Perhaps she is, to them, an ideal, perhaps she is quite the opposite. In any case, she is their legend, a presence according to which they can measure themselves as women in one direction or another — nothing more, nothing less. Don’t you agree, boys, that this is the best a dead woman can do?

April 17, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

Your father treated me to ice-cream nearly every afternoon and in the evenings, we sometimes took rides in taxi cabs or went to the movies. He was mad for Pickford films; he’d never worked on one. At the studio, Pickford kept her crew
very tight, a hard circle to crack. Together, we watched Miss Mary spin across the screen over and over again. He didn’t mind seeing the same film half a dozen times. Afterwards, his favorite thing to do was to take me to the park where he would pose me under the moon and pretend to film me. He stood with his eye pressed to his imaginary camera, turning an imaginary camera-crank, and dictated scenes to me.

“You are deep in a dungeon in a castle by the sea. The evil queen has locked you there. You sit on a small box. It is the only thing raised above the wet floor. Hanging above you are great clumps of seaweed which frighten you because they look like rotten bodies. They slap at your shoulders. You hear the sea crashing outside and notice the water is rising around you. You are sure to drown!”

I fashioned and re-fashioned my expression throughout his narration, knowing well that he would abandon his camera to become my hero, to rescue me at the last moment as the salt water edged over my chin. “My little Mary Pickford,” he would say, whisking me off to mysterious safety.

“You make me Mary Pickford,” I said to him, though this was only partly true.

Soon, your father talked to someone who talked to someone who got me an appointment to meet D.W. Griffith.

“Your resemblance to her,” he said to me, “is uncanny.”

Within hours I signed on as Mary Pickford’s double for a film he was to direct, securing your father a place on the crew as part of my contract.
To celebrate, your father and I took a ride to Beverly Hills and walked miles and miles up to the top of Summit Avenue to Pickfair. A heavy wall surrounded the property, but there was a place where a branch dipped down from a tall tree like a beckoning finger. I climbed up onto your father’s shoulders, grabbed hold of the branch and pulled myself up.

“What do you see?” he said.

“There’s a party,” I said, “on the patio.”

Before I knew it your father had scaled the wall — I still don’t know how he did it except by sheer determination. His hands bled. He crawled along the top and joined me on the branch. We sat there and watched the Fairbanks entertain beside their luminous house. Mary wore periwinkle and a long strand of seed pearls. Her shoes were suede and topped with bows. Charlie Chaplin was there, too, though at the time I didn’t know it was he; out of costume, he is a handsome fellow. There were others. Douglas must have been there, obscured by the trellis. Your father and I stayed stock still for a long time and listened to voices tumbling over one another as we had never heard them at the studio or in the movies, and it was as merry as the music of a far-off carnival.

Afterwards, your father jumped a bit too far to the ground below. I think he twisted his ankle, though he would not admit it. The tear in his eye, he said, was for my beauty. I swung down and he broke my fall. We walked back to town slowly.
He limped and I leaned into him to make his progress easier. When we got to my house, he followed me in, and we made you.

Or perhaps we made you the time before that or the time after that. I'm not sure, but I like to think it was that night, because that was the night we made love in sparkling silence. Our heads were filled with the secrets of Pickfair and we set these secrets beside our own secrets — our private caresses in the bedroom above your grandmother's — and treated them all with the utmost care. We sank into one another gently; even our kisses were soft and unclinging. And in the gray light which haunted my midnight bedroom, I watched your father playing his love scene, larger than life, weightless as a projection, and he saw me the same way. His Mary Pickford.

FROM THE DESK OF DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS

April 24, 1926

Dear Mary,

You will note that I am sending this letter to you and you alone. Why do you insist on dragging our personal quarrels in front of Charlie and Griffith?

You know as well as I that you are not going to make this proposed film of yours. If you do, it will be the product of your own bombastic stubbornness. A temper tantrum of a movie. I, for one, don't want to play straight man to your
anger each day as you prepare yourself for work. I'm tired, Mary. I've arranged a train to New York at the end of the week, and from there I'll float to London.

Come with me. We'll have spring in Ireland. Charlie and Griffith are busy with projects, the stages are booked through June, so why not get some rest? You're wound up, and I haven't slept in days. Nightmares. Last night I dreamed of screaming babies. I could have sworn I heard babies crying not too far away. And Mary dear, before you use my insomnia against me as further evidence of my "brutishness," let me assert that the sound of wailing children outside, in some nearby place, was not abhorrent to me; it was fearful. My impulse was to get out of bed, grab my robe and rescue the children before some possum or fox got to them. Make no mistake — had there actually been children outside, had I rescued them from the perils of night, I would not have "dumped them in the trash" as you say; I would have brought them inside our very own house.

But of course, there were no babies. There are no babies. It was only the whiskey I drank added to our recent unhappiness which effected the voices.

Drop this phantom project and come with me to Europe. And don't answer this proposal with another one of your chilly letters. I'd like to watch your lips move when we talk to one another. Is that too much to ask?

I love you as ever, despite your preposterous behavior.

Your Douglas
April 18, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

One day, darlings, you will sit at your vanity tables, and Clara, you will realize that you are not Clara Bow, and Lillian you will seem nothing like Lillian Gish. You will bite the insides of your cheeks to try to elevate your cheekbones; you will widen your eyes and fiddle with your hair to no avail. You'll be sad to find yourselves removed from your namesakes. Try not to let this sadness worry you.

Sadness forms the highest drama of life; it is the emotion which adds credibility to any human performance. Study your sadness. Bow and Gish have fluttered away. What do you see before your mirrors? A transformation — a wrinkle of the brow, a flinch of the chin, a slow, fluid unbending of your mouths — and soon you are crying. Do you collapse onto the vanity tables, your faces hidden in the crooks of your elbows? Do you sit very straight and allow the tears puddle and stream? Perhaps you do not cry at all, but bite down on your sorrow like proud revolutionaries marching solidly to the guillotine.

Have you background scores, my dears? Are they played by violins, trumpets, flutes, harps, somber piano, and do these remind you of distant voices? Maybe your unhappiness is as silent as the empty space which will be left in my dresser late tonight once your drawer is gone. So much the better. This way you will not miss that rustling noise. Listen. What could it be?
Someone is climbing your trellis. You look in your mirrors to the window reflected behind you. It is Clara Bow peeking over the sill. And here comes Lillian Gish and there beside her, Mary Pickford appears, then Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and also Harold Lloyd and Leslie Howard and Valentino. They all balance precariously, ready to fall, clutching the sash, the trellis, each other. None of them dares so much as a breath. Even Chaplin is frozen. Valentino's cloak hangs limp; Pickford's curls do not catch the breeze; Howard's romantic gaze lies flat on the back of Douglas Fairbank's shoulder. "Action!" you want to say, but they remain immobile. They have no scenario. They all look to you as you stare at yourselves in your vanity mirrors above your vanity tables. You recognize their expectation, the terrible suspense. Waste no time. Move the bottles and ribbons and brushes and pins into orderly stacks, clear your tables as if you were sweeping the clutter from abandoned stages, and begin.

**United Artists**

**Memorandum:**

To: D.W. Griffith

From: Mary Pickford Fairbanks

Re: DEAREST DARLING, DARLING DEAR — Wretched Delays

July 21, 1926
DEAREST DARLING. DARLING DEAR / 29

Well, we’re two days behind schedule for sure now and I’m furious, furious! Have you time later to go over the schedule and help me figure out how we can cram as much into the night shoots as possible?

DEAREST is a cursed movie and I am cursing myself for making it when I could be listening to bagpipes in Scotland with Doug. Case in point: today’s shoot began with little irritations — a candelabra arrived broken, the banister on the staircase needed reinforcing. Just when we had everything fixed, we discovered a ghastly shadow on the face of the senator’s wife in her tableau vivant. The crew spent hours trying to light the blue box she sits in. The poor girl (My double. I can never remember her name.) stayed stock still and nobody noticed her make-up running until it dripped onto her costume. (I fired the make-up man.)

Whose idea was it to have the senator’s wife’s portrait “gaze benevolently?” Was that mine? If so, I regret it.

By the time we’d refurbished the portrait-girl, the twins, the infants, were missing. Maggs from wardrobe reported seeing their mother outside, strolling them around in a carriage. We sent two boys to run and fetch them, but the babies were nowhere to be found. One French fellow searched for a full hour, dashing back and forth over the lot. He said he thought he heard them, and kept running after the sound, but he came up empty handed and in the end we had to resuscitate him with lemonade and cold rags.
And we never found them! God knows what happened. I’ve got casting tracking that mother down. I’d like to shake her until her head snaps off.

Oh, Griffith. I need new babies . . . or maybe just a couple of good martinis.

MPF/ag

April 18, 1926

Dear Lillian & Clara,

Mary Pickford is near. I have missed her.

I await your father who has gone to find a longer length of rope with which to lower you over Pickfair’s garden wall. The night is colder than I anticipated, and so I am collecting pieces of cloth to tuck around your feet. When he returns we will read through these letters and then slip them between the two of you with our instructions that they be given to you on a distant birthday. Your father has borrowed an automobile, and we’ll sit inside of it with you for as long as it takes you to adjust to the night air and fall asleep. Only then will we drive to Pickfair.

We’ve made a harness which slips onto the drawer and loops at the top so a rope can pass through it. We’ve rehearsed assembling this rig quickly, with a minimum of jostling. Your father has practiced scaling the wall at Pickfair. His hands are callused now, and he can do it quite easily. I will hold you in your drawer high above my head and he will lean down from the wall and lift you from my finger
tips, and I will reach after you for a moment, in case you might fall back to me. But you will not. Your father will place your drawer over a great strong branch, a branch which points to Pickfair and beyond. We will lower you down together; I'll feed the rope to your father as he conveys you to the grass below with the smooth rhythm of a camera man cranking his film. You will feel nothing, except maybe the dream of drifting.

I will weep, silently. We cannot risk being heard. I will cough my cries without voice and my breath will come in quiet catches. Your father will tie the end of your rope to the tree branch and then leap to my side. He will hold me, his fingers disappearing into the folds of my coat, and he'll inhale the perfume of my nutmeg hair. I'll bury my face into his lapels and sob. Behind us, dawn will gather, illuminating the roofs of Beverly Hills and Santa Monica. It will just be the two of us, backlit by the city, just the two of us in a scenario which accommodates nothing more. Is the camera lens larger than a whale's eye, or smaller than my hand?

The scene cannot end, I feel, the credits cannot roll. I tilt my face toward your father's and he is weeping, too. This is not part of the script. "My dearest darling, dear sweet ..." he says. His words are waxy and slurred, but in the caption they will read as passionate. Nobody will know. The director will not cut this off. Your father must dab his pinkie at my tears, ever so gently, as if my skin were made of rice paper. He must kiss my lips, and I must sigh as if he were my hero, the one who saved me from the drowning dungeon, the one who gave me life. I do this, and
then he sweeps me up into his arms. My skirts billow. I embrace him and rest my head in the cradle of his chest. I think, this is how it feels, this is what it is to be carried off, into the sunrise.
Shelf Life

I'm out of lime Jell-o and crème de menthe, so I'm on my way to the grocery store, and I'm thinking I might be in the mood to cook a real meal tonight — a gut buster with five or six dishes plus dessert. Something Slavic maybe with lots of brown, meaty sauce and mushrooms is what I'm picturing, but then Mr. Peloquin drives by in Tom's Jeep Cherokee, and I lose my appetite altogether.

Today is August 17th, my mother's 67th birthday and two days past my self-appointed, absolutely positively no-more-putting-it-off deadline for telling Tom I sold his car to Mr. Peloquin who drives it much too fast but seems to wash it regularly. Wilcox is a small basin of Rocky Mountain dust during the summer, but the Jeep always sparkles. This, I'm sure, will be no consolation to Tom who really loved his car. He used to pick me up after I finished work at the Linen Napkin, weave through the cobblestone alleys of Beacon Hill and then out onto the turnpike. He'd flip the four-wheel drive switch with happy flourish and
away we'd go into a grove of trees or down by some river to turn off the lights like naughty teenagers and kiss.

"Mmmmm cozy," he used to say, and I wasn't sure whether he was talking about my body or the interior of the car.

It's wrong to sell something that doesn't belong to you. It's flat out stealing. My mother would be ashamed. "You deserve a good thumping," she'd say, if she ever said anything that made sense anymore. She doesn't, though, and I don't think she will. It's been eight weeks since her stroke. Doctor Neef, the neurologist, has informed me that indications of recovery are usually seen early.

"When's early?" I asked.

"A little while ago," he said.

"Oh," I said, and then he spoke about making long term arrangements for keeping Mom at Friendship Manor and if you have any questions, just call, and yappedy yap yap. I watched his mouth cranking along and thought, I'm going to have to sell her dolls-of-the-world collection, her brass trivets, her blankets from the Pullman cars. I'm going to have to empty the closets and the shelves, pawn what I can and then put the house up, too. I didn't feel good about it. When Dr. Neef left, I knelt down very close to Mom and said, "The thing is, you can't live in both places." But she just stared past me like someone who'd been watching TV for ten solid years.
So I sold the car. Tom had insisted I drive it out here to be with Mom. I will not get on airplanes.

"What if I crash?" I said.

"You won't," he said. "It's full of gas and I just changed the oil. Go ahead. Take it. It's all yours."

I sped the whole way and the Jeep never faltered, but even so, by the time I arrived Mom's hospital bills had exhausted her savings, and then there were deposits to make at the nursing home and special machines to rent and no Blue Cross, no Blue Shield. Mr. Peloquin wrote me a check — paid in full — and I handed the keys to him the same way Tom had handed them to me. Swiftly. With a little toss. Pretending not to care.

Now I walk to the nursing home every day to visit my mother and bring her her dose of lime Jell-o and crème de menthe, a concoction combining her favorite flavor and her favorite color. I pack it in an old Aladdin thermos and serve it to her warm. I used to chill it and bring it as a food, but she couldn't get her mouth around the wiggly lumps. They kept dropping off the spoon and splattering onto the wheelchair tray where she'd smear her cardigan cuffs in them or muck up her fingers. I couldn't stand that. My mother's always been tidy. Cups and bendy-straws work much better for her. Now she drinks up every drop clean as a whistle, with an enthusiasm she shows for nothing else. The aides who fight all day to get calories down her throat watch in awe.
"She goes after that like a fish to flakes," said Tamarin once. Tamarin's a skinny trainee who chews gum like a hungry metronome. "What's in that stuff?"

"Catnip," I answered.

They haven't figured out I'm giving Mom booze. I'm not sure they'd put a stop to it even if they knew, because it calms her, makes her easier to bathe and put to bed. Sometimes, if it's a very good day, she'll say a few coherent words. Once she said, "Snails, snails. It's best to poison them." Last week she shouted, "Buckle down! Snap to it! Eyes front!"

"What's that?" asked the aide, as if my mother might have been making a rational request.

"She's talking to me," I said. And she was. Somewhere in her wreckage she found the piece where my dreamy lack of focused ambition drove her to daily seizures of military-ese. I snapped my fingers next to her ear. "Mom?" I said.

The aide popped Mom's parking brake and pushed her into the recreation room where the Oak Street Lutheran Assembly Youth Choir was slated to sing *Yellow Submarine* and *You Light Up my Life* while doing sign language. I stood in the hallway watching the boys and girls prepare to file in.

At Friendship Manor, all attempts at cheer — foil-wrapped pots of chrysanthemums, greeting cards taped to the doors, scrubbed Christian children — shrivel like Shrinky-Dinks within the toothpaste colored hallways.
Fluorescent lights gobble up shadows so that people passing underneath seem to have no substance at all. The whole place and everyone in it looks and smells dipped in Clorox.

The kids straightened up and strode in at the bang of their piano intro, their voices flat like cold coffee, and I was thinking about cold coffee and breathing that clean Clorox air when I decided my mother's birthday ought to sport a little pizzazz. I had planned on giving her a new pair of Isotoner slippers and maybe just a box of candy, but right then I wanted more. I wanted streamers, candles, a sheet-cake — enough cake for everybody — and all the geezers assembled in the rec. room ready to do the wheelchair boogie.

"No candles," said Head Nurse Heddy. "And her birthday falls on crafts' day. No cake on crafts' day. We don't want them eating glue. We'd have to weed out the diabetics, and then — oh lord — we'd have to find something else for them or they'd feel left out. It might be more trouble than it's worth. I know your intentions are good." Nurse Heddy chewed on the end of a Papermate.

"Please," I begged. "I make really good cake." I told her I was a pastry chef — which I am. "I'd like to do this," I said, trying to sound vaguely southern.

I thought I was going to have to conjure tears before Nurse Heddy relented, rescheduled crafts and penciled me in for today, after lunch. I was up half the night making the cake, which is huge and heavy with its five cups of
sugar. It's a white sponge in three thin layers, filled with chocolate mousse and drizzled with just a breath of — what else? — crème de menthe.

I shop at the Brown Cow Express, a store which is neither brown, nor full of beef nor speedy about getting customers through checkout. But it does have all the grocery store essentials plus occasional exotica like canned water chestnuts and starfruit from New Zealand. In truth, the Brown Cow Express is my refuge. Besides the fact that it's bright and colorful and packed with good things to eat, it's a low-stress establishment. A person can wander the aisles for hours and nobody takes any notice. I usually spend a good twenty minutes in produce, smelling cantaloupe rinds and looking for white stems on lettuce heads, the way we learned at cooking school. I try not to be indulgent. Still, a person needs vitamin A. I deprive myself in other ways, breezing by the meat chiller without a glance or commenting aloud on the high price of glistening, newfangled beers. I'm allowed to linger for as long as I like in the baking aisle, though. I stand there coveting canisters of Dutch cocoa and reading recipes off the sides of Softasilk boxes.

I secretly wonder if the checkout people notice my long and frequent visits, my odd extravagances, the suspicious quantity of lime Jell-o I buy. They don't chitchat much. There's Debbie — young, blonde and grumpy. She sighs
loudly if you have to forage your purse for change. Wade is full of good wishes, but coupons confuse him. And then there's Reynolds. He's earnest about his job and concentrates so that he hardly notices there's a person on the other side of the cash register. He's always surprised to get to rubber divider bars; he looks up, startled, and has to squint his eyes to re-focus.

"I guess you have to pay for these," he says as if he's sorry.

Reynolds wears turtlenecks, even now in the summer. He's been burned. His fingers are permanently bent, trapped by the shiny skin stretched over his knuckles, and his face looks like someone ironed a huge spider web to it. I've noticed that he lingers over the frozen foods. He picks up ice-creams, Lean Cuisines and such with both hands and holds them just a second too long over the scanner. He especially likes the feel of frozen corn. I eat more of it than I should because of Reynolds.

I'm one block away from the Brown Cow Express when I notice a baby. There's this baby sitting in a macramé swing, just dangling there from a roadside maple tree. It's a safe swing, the kind with two leg holes and a wooden bar across the front. I've seen it lots of times on my way to the store, but never before with a baby in it. The baby can't be more than nine months old, and naked as can be.

"Hi there," I say, coming close.

It's a boy.
A car whizzes past and wafts the swing. The baby's heavy head wobbles, but he concentrates on the ground as if he's studying some very interesting grass. I guess he must belong to the nearest house, a weather-beaten New England style which looks like it's crouched behind its own front porch. There's a splintery half-fence around the lawn, and I peek behind it just to make sure I'm not missing someone back there. All I see, though, is a kiddy pool full of mucky water with some feathers floating on top. The house looks shut tight. I jog back a few steps and check the side of the garage, and the baby lets out a squeal, kicking his legs. He reaches down, grabs one foot and tips himself over.

"Oops," I say, dashing back, catching him, propping him up in his swing. He's floppy like an uncooked chicken, but warm and smooth. I leave a hand on his shoulder to steady him. His mouth is open, and his face is squinched up because of the morning glare. He's not a very cute baby with his features clustered together and sunk into all that chub. His top lip is bigger than his bottom – a drooly, pink overhang – and his nose is oddly rectangular. He's well-behaved, though. He doesn't scream.

I kneel and see two fat mosquitoes perched on the inside of his leg, and I brush them away, feeling strange about touching the thigh of a baby which does not belong to me. There's a third mosquito sucking on his elbow. I flick at it.

"Hey!" I yell toward the house, "is anybody there?"
My shouting frightens the baby. He kicks and whines. He tugs at the wooden bar, wanting out of the swing, so I give him a diversionary push. "Fuuuuun," I say absurdly, sounding like one of the dippier nurses at Friendship Manor. "Swinging is fuuuuuun."

I push the baby again and wonder if he'll be okay on his own while I go ring the doorbell. He looks bewildered and groggy, and I'm thinking he'll be safe if I go really quickly, but then he suddenly reaches again for his foot, wrecking his trajectory, careening toward the tree trunk. I nab him. His chin bounces off of my stomach.

"Sorry baby," I say, and I pick him up. I have to shake him to get his legs out of the swing. He babbles wetly and stuffs his fist into his mouth.

I'm not sure how to hold him, especially with him naked. I'm hoping he doesn't have to go to the bathroom, and I just suspend him out in front of me for a few seconds before leaning him against my shoulder, like a hot-pack for an injured collarbone. I support his behind with my bare forearm, and breathe in his doughy, little-boy smell. We are breastbone to breastbone. He plunges a hand into my hair and gives a yank.

"C'mon," I say.

I march up to the front door and ring the bell twice. Then I knock, hard. No response. I walk to the neighbors' houses, too, but nobody's home there either, so I go across the street to a house with plaster bunnies in the flower bed
and astro-turf on the front steps. A buxom woman answers. She looks older than my mother and wears a polyester shirt with a drawstring at the bottom and some too-short-for-her-age tennis shorts. There's a cigarette lodged between her lips which strikes me as odd because she smells just like multi-vitamins. I take a small step back.

"Hi," I say. "Sorry to bother you, but — um — I found this baby." I turn around so she can see his face. "Do you know who he belongs to?"

"Found him?"

"Uh-huh. Across the street." I point.

"No diaper even." She shakes her head. "It figures, what with the way they keep that house. Would it kill them to paint? Plant some shrubs? A snake hole is what it is."

"Maybe I should call the police," I say, "about the baby, I mean."

"Oh, I don't know." She tilts her head and stares at him. "The police make such a stew. I'd sit tight. She'll be back for him. It doesn't take long to notice one's missing. I left mine places lots of times. God, he's so quiet." She pokes at his side to roust him and he turns. "Aren't you a sweet baby? What a big boy! I could eat you right up. I sure could." She lunges in close to make a monkey face. Smoke leaks out of her nose.
I tap my foot out behind me and feel my way down the top two stairs. “I’ll just wait with him, then,” I say. “Okay,” I say. “Bye.” And I’m halfway to the curb already.

"You could leave him with me!" she shouts, mugging still from the doorway.

"No thanks," I say. I wave.

"You're lucky I didn't fork you over," I tell the baby, and he gurgles as if he's responding. Only I'm mistaken. He's not responding. What he's really saying is: Sorry lady, but I'm no prodigy of bladder control. His baby pee soaks my T-shirt in a hot, watery bloom. I pretend nothing's happening in case the crazy lady is still watching, and then I look both ways and run across the street. I run fast, as if I can drop him when I get there. But you can't drop a baby. Everybody knows that.

He frog kicks when I try to put him back in his swing. "Easy does it," I say. He kicks again. This time his face turns red, mean -- and then he starts yelling. I lay him across my shoulder, but when his stomach lands on my clammy T-shirt he cries even louder. I walk him. I pat his fuzzy head, but mosquitoes are hunting, the sun is shining in both our eyes, and he's wailing away. I'm thinking the world can't possibly get any noisier than this when I hear the squeal of car brakes behind me. Without looking, I'm sure it's the baby's mother -- post frantic U-turn, post reckless endangerment -- but actually it's Mr.
Peloquin, rushing through stop signs on his way to somewhere. He's got a glazed donut stuffed halfway into his mouth, and with his face full of breakfast and his eyes fixed on destination, he doesn't notice me. I imagine he's using the Jeep's special retractable cup holders. I bet he uses them all the time and thinks to himself how handy they are.

"Poor Baby. Shhhh, shhhhh," I say, bouncing and walking, walking and bouncing — which feels so useless. This baby needs taking care of. This baby needs food, diapers, baby-scented baby wipes — and here I stand with the Brown Cow Express only 60 yards away. I swivel him around and balance him on my hip so I can get at my wallet. My driver's license picture is awful. I look like a sleepy hoodlum, but at least she'll know who took her kid if she comes back. Julie Marie Wheeland. I drop the license on the seat of the swing. The gleaming imprint of Massachusetts lasers a quick rainbow.

We're in the store.

This naked baby is screaming bloody murder now, and people are looking at me like I've stolen him. A woman pushes her little girl along. "Don't stare," she says, and I'm getting nervous. I jog to the baby aisle without thinking to get a basket, and I almost slip turning the corner. An old man switches into a longer checkout line to get a better view of us as we search through the shelves and
shelves of diapers. There are extra thin Huggies and extra cushioned Huggies and gender specific Huggies with different "wet zones" for boys and girls. And then there are a dozen different sizes. Is he a 10-18 pounder or maybe heavier? I touch one bag and then another. I glance up at the old man. He's holding a newspaper and a pack of Lemon Coolers, waiting for my next move. I watch him finger the top of his cookie box and before I know it, I'm tearing into the side of a diaper package labeled, "for the active child." I tuck a couple of diapers under my arm, choose a box of Wet Ones, then plunk down right there, right in front of everyone, and begin diapering the baby.

I lay him face-up on my outstretched legs. "Shhhhh," I say, but he keeps on yelling, vibrating with the effort. I run a baby wipe over his hands first, cleaning even his nails, then I clean his arms, his chest, his stomach, his tiny privates and pudgy legs. I polish him all over, gently and carefully, the way I've been dusting the contents of my mother's house, and when I'm done I secure a diaper, sweet as a brand new Band-Aid, and kiss him on the nose.

I look up. The old man is gone. Other people are working hard at pretending not to notice me. I hug the baby to my clean side, stand up and finish my shopping.

On my way out of the store, I pass Reynolds who sits on a stack of Atta Boy dog food bags with his apron crumpled on his knees, sweating in his winter wear. I assume he's waiting for his shift to start. He does not look up when I
walk by, even though I'm walking slowly and the baby is still crying. He's staring at his hands, bending and unbending his fingers, stretching them out as far as he can — until the tips turn white — and then letting them snap back again.

I bought so much stuff they loaded my bags into a shopping cart. They assumed I had a station wagon or something. Their mistake. But I didn't want to make an issue of it, so here I am, with wheels.

Whereas selling a boyfriend's car to pay hospital bills and living expenses is unadulterated theft, I reasoned that making off with a shopping cart for the afternoon — with every good intention of returning it later — was, at worst, a minor, temporary kind of stealing. Still, I decided it would be dumb to get caught, and so I took a less public route home. The baby's swing is on the main artery into and out of the Brown Cow Express, so of course I couldn't stop there.

Now, the baby sits in the cart's kiddy seat, quieter. We're just about home. It's hot, and I'm walking on the asphalt instead of on the shady sidewalk because I don't want him to get hit with spray from people's sprinklers. People sprinkle here in the morning to prepare their gardens for the afternoon bake. Today it was warm even before it got light, and now the water is evaporating quickly, making the air all spinachy. I think of spinach — the way a huge springing pile
of it shrinks down to nothing and droops over the colander, dead tired. How much more generous is spinach before it's cooked, or mushrooms for that matter, or tomatoes or leeks?

Desserts are the anti-spinaches of the world. Desserts never reduce or deflate; they rise and expand and crisp and thicken. Sallow egg whites quadruple magically into meringue. Hydrogen and oxygen bubble up and build the intricate crumb of a pound cake or a pie crust, or a cream puff on its way to becoming a profiterole, stuffed with good, solid ice-cream and slathered in chocolate rum sauce. Dessert doesn't boil down to anything the way other things do — your boyfriend's Jeep, your mother's rugs, that rosy capped Miss France in the dolls-of-the-world collection. Most everything just shrinks away. And then what do you do with what's left over? Puree it. Add a little salt. Feed it to a woman in a nursing home.

My mother's house is short and fat like a molar. The roof hardly slopes at all and the chimney is just a metal pole with a little helmet of vents on top. There's no front porch, only a small rise of cement steps with a wrought iron rail leading to a flat, brown door. It's a house built for one, and would be ugly and depressing except that it's hidden by its own garden. One side of the house is completely covered with ivy, and the carport on the other side is so overrun with wisteria that it's starting to crack. Hers is the only house on the block without a lawn. Instead there's a jungle of tall flowering plants. Actually, it's excessive. In
the spring it must look way too cheery, like a funeral home, and believe me, it's a real pain to try to get a shopping cart through it. Redwood chips get stuck in the wheels, and you have to make sure babies don't grab dangerous, thorn-covered branches.

My mother moved here four years ago, after reading about Wilcox in a magazine. I was already living in Boston, and knew nothing of her plans until I got a polite change of address card and a box full of teacups she didn't need anymore. She enclosed a note: "Julie dear, I've moved to a sensible place. Do not use this English china to scoop laundry soap. Love, your Mother." Sensible place, translated into mother-speak, means Wilcox looked to her like a place where she wouldn't have to talk to anyone. She dreaded most visitors, would see relatives only if they were dying, and preferred all her communication to be handled by the post office. She would have liked this baby, though. She loved other people's children. She fed them sugar cookies and apple juice and sang Robert Louis Stevenson verses to them until they smiled.

Inside, the house still smells faintly of my late night baking, and I leave the windows closed, despite the heat, just so the sweetness will stay.

First things first. I can't serve cake in the nursing home, covered as I am with baby urine. I go to the bedroom and pick out a white blouse and a fresh bra. I put the baby on my mother's bed, thinking he'll be all right there while I wash and change my clothes, but — and I'm stupid for not expecting this — he
crawls. He crawls fast, too. I'm still three steps from the bathroom when I see him teetering on the edge of the mattress, ready to fall and crack his skull.

"Oh no you don't!" I say, pouncing. And then he's in my arms again, mouth open, looking around at my mother's lace doilies and framed Seurat reproductions. I think about setting him on the floor, but there are electrical cords, hard furniture edges, probably venomous insects luring in dark places — so I decide to keep holding him, and I take him with me into the bathroom.

The phone rings. Almost nobody calls my mother, and the only other person who calls is Tom. I wait, and the answering machine picks up.

"Hello," says my mother's voice, "you have reached the home telephone of Helen Wheeland. Please respond with your message after the tone. Thank you." Beep.

The baby lets out a yelp. I cover his mouth.

"Julie. Jooolioolie, are you there? C'mon, pick up the phone. I know you're there." Pause. "Okay, I guess not. Whatever. God, that greeting is unnerving. I've said this before, but — I think you should change it. It's misleading. And kind of macabre. Sorry. I didn't mean that." Pause. "Soooo do you think you could give me a call tonight? I haven't . . ." Beep.

I wait for the phone to ring again, which it does.

"Goddamn it," says Tom. "That machine hates me. Umm, look. I don't want to pressure you. I'm not. It's just that I need to know whether you're
coming back in time for our trip to Lake Sunapee. I've got to let them know by
tomorrow if I want to cancel the cabin reservations. Okay? I know your mother
needs you. 'No' is as good an answer as 'yes' on this. So don't freak out. Please
please please please call me. Also call Artie at the Linen Napkin. He left a message
here, wanting . . ." Beep.

I hug the baby. I lean against the bathroom wall with his weight against
my chest and close my eyes, letting the quiet and the cake smells take over again.
Then, I sit down on the rug so I can cradle him on my legs. I take off my shirt
and unhook my bra and he ogles in his baby way, as if he's looking at a mobile.
He is cute, on second thought, and I stoop my head to swing my hair down for
him. He swats at it, then he takes hold of some and stuffs it into his mouth. I
dance my fingers lightly on his belly and he laughs, his mouth full of hair and his
feet kicking. He's a baby who likes his feet. I kiss them. I flip my hair up, grab
his toes, and he looks shocked, like they might be gone forever, so I let them go.
"Watch out," I say, smiling. "Keep an eye on those, or I might steal them."

I arrive at Friendship Manor twenty minutes late with the cake dripping
whipped cream icing through the bottom of the shopping cart and the baby's
face a watercolor of green lime Jell-o. I tried to get him to eat anything else.
There are six jars of Gerber's laying open on my mother's kitchen table, all
vetoed, some with violent swings of his fists. He pouted and screamed until I stuck my Jell-o covered finger into his mouth. Liquid lollipop. His eyes rolled around and he flung his arms toward the emerald mixture like an addict. I made a double batch — spiked for Mom, unspiked for him — and I filled his bottle which he sucked dry before we were halfway here, and now he's looking sort of loopy.

I leave him and the Aladdin thermos sitting alone for a moment while I hoist the cake out of the cart. It's ruined. Sodden. Fished out of the Dead Sea. I open the front door with my shoulder and flash panicked eyes at trainee-Tamarin who's standing at the reception desk. She dashes over, chewing her gum double-time.

"Powdered sugar," I say. "I need lots."

"We got a ton," says Tamarin. "Goes on the French toast every Sunday."

Nurse Heddy moves in behind Tamarin. She's got her big arms crossed, eyes darting at the wall clock. She motions to the baby with her head.

"Is that your baby?"

"Yes," I say, not wanting to explain. Tamarin and I are shuffling fast to the kitchen. We push through the swinging door and set the cake down on the counter. Tamarin hands me a restaurant-sized bag of powdered sugar — something I haven't seen since the Linen Napkin — and I reach my hands in and
drop piles of it on the melted cream. Then I hear the baby crying. I shake off my fingers and go running.

Nurse Heddy holds him, having retrieved him from the cart, and all the old people lingering in the hallway are gawking. Nurse Heddy looks ready to talk.

"You ought not to leave him," she says.

I'm guilty.

"What a big booooy," she says. "What's his name?"

"Buster," I say.

"Let me get you something to wipe his mouth with," says Nurse Heddy, making for the nurses' station, but I force my hands under his arms and grab him rudely away with a "Thank you. I'll take care of it."

His body feels sweaty and taut with crying. The powdered sugar from my hands melts into his skin so that by the time we reach the cake we're both sticky. I don't care, and I hug him to me and rub his back is gentle, comforting O's.

"OK, my sweet," I say. "Watch this."

Holding him up with one arm, I sprinkle the cake with more sugar and then I take a spatula and work it into the cream, ever so softly. Piles of sugar and more mixing, and then I'm ready to spread the newly thickened confectioner's creme into great sweeping swirls. I pluck daisies from some bud vases and use
them to ornament the sides. I wipe the edge of the tray. The baby has stopped crying.

"How about that?" I say, and we both look.

It's not beautiful, but it is tidy.

Tamarin and another aide carry the cake in and set it on the piano while Nurse Heddy and some of the others wheel people in and out of the rec. room. An Einstein-haired woman in a terry cloth robe comes in and demands to know where she is. The nurse puts her next to an old man in a tweed cap who pats her hand and points in Tamarin's direction.

"Over there," he says. "Cake!"

Amid the usual crowd of snoozers and nodders sits my mother, poking at the blue pilling on her sweater. A nurse guides her into the center of the room, and I help by holding Mom's elbow up while a silver tray is clipped onto her armrests. I kneel down to say hello and to introduce her to the baby, but she resumes her sweater ball poking and pays no attention.

Nurse Heddy brings the cake over and slides it onto Mom's tray. She swings her strong arms around — arms which have lifted thousands of bodies out of bed and into whirlpool baths — and she shushes the room. Something about the quiet makes my mother seem very, very small and I can't stand watching all the people not looking at Mom while they're trying to figure out why the big nurse is going to make them sing. They move their lips in vague
recognition and groan out *Happy Birthday.* I hold my mother's hand and stare stolidly at my green-lipped baby. The final notes drift off like ammonia, and then it's over.

My mother is none the wiser. I lead her hand to the flowers at the edge of the cake and hold it there. No connection. The old folks start to stir, and an aide walks over with a bag of paper plates and a cake knife. I scoot around so I'm down in front of Mom's knees and I raise the baby up close where she can see him. He squeals and bicycles in the air. Finally her eyes move, and for one breathless moment she actually looks at me and sighs. She dabbles her thumb in the frosting at one corner. I'm standing up, swinging the baby back to my hip when I hear my mother yawn enormously, like she's just fed-up. She turns her head, and in the time it takes me to figure out what's happening, she lays it smack in the center of the cake.

"Oh lordy," says Tamarin. She and the other aides scramble over and jockey for inconvenient positions, trying to avoid having to reach into the glop. I'm the one who does it. I slide my free hand under her submerged cheek and pull her out.

"Damn. No cake," says the tweed-capped man, too loudly.

Someone gives me a towel. I wipe my hand on it and then hold my mother's face while a nurse smears the frosting off her. There's cake in her hair,
and chocolate stuffed in her ear, and three or four people start to laugh. My mother is stunned.

"It did look like a pillow, Mom," I say. "It did. You were right." I could talk and talk forever. She just blinks while nurses remove her tray, dispose of her cake, wipe her hands, take off her sweater and wrap a piece of plastic around her neck. I hover around, uselessly, stepping one way or another to keep out of the staff's way. It's a clumsy dance I'm doing, missing my partner on the approach, trying to tell her how sorry I am even as she's past me. Nurse Heddy frowns from the corner, and the baby coughs some anxious cries.

I'm bouncing him up and down, trying to avoid Nurse Heddy's gaze when I see a young woman in the doorway, stuffing a wad of Kleenex into her purse. Her face is swollen, pickled looking, and she recognizes me. She's wearing a yellow T-shirt and a denim skirt. Her hands are a frail, her fingers chewed, and she's got a tattoo, a shamrock, at the base of her neck. I walk the other way as if I don't already know this baby belongs to her — as if maybe there's a prayer that she won't come after me and tap me on the shoulder and ask if I am Julie Wheeland, and say that she's been calling all over town looking for a Wheeland, that the Wheeland house was empty as a bomb shelter and that the only other Wheeland she could find was here in this nursing home . . .

The nurses are taking my mother away to be bathed. Trainee Tamarin looks back at me, wide eyed, as if she's seeing me and the whole place and
everyone in it through x-ray: sewer pipes, wormy wiring, foggy lungs, our stomachs digesting nothing, since we didn't get any birthday cake. I know already she'll never be a nurse's aide. Later today she'll sit down in head Nurse Heddy's office and weep and say that all this stuff is just too much for her. She'll go home, wrap herself up in blankets and stay there for a day or two. She'll try to get a fun job in a record store. I don't blame her.

The baby's mother comes toward me. She's got one hand stretched out like she might touch my face, but she touches the baby's head instead.

"He's my son," she says.

I let his cheek brush against mine as I hand him over. He's sticky, a mess. "He just ate some lime Jell-o," I say. "That's why his mouth is green."

She bends over him and holds him tight for a long time. There's an hourglass of sweat on the back of her T-shirt. She ought to go clean out that kiddy pool. Scrub it with soap until all the mud and feathers are down the gutter and then fill it with crystal water from the hose. She ought to sit beside her little one in the fresh liquid and let drops fall from her palms like jewels to dazzle him all afternoon. I want to tell her this, but she's got the baby's forehead lodged in the crook of her arm, and she's counting his fingers and toes like he's just been born.
I've got to go. Forget the lime Jell-o and crème de menthe; my mother's had enough today. I leave the cake for Nurse Heddy to throw away and I'm out the door, grabbing my shopping cart, thankful that nobody took it. I start walking. I take the long route, feeling the sidewalk's heat seep through my shoes to blister my feet. Mr. Peloquin passes me twice. Zoom. Zoom. The second time, he honks his horn because the person in front of him is going too slow.

I'm almost to the Brown Cow Express when I realize I haven't eaten all day. I might like a rice dish — or pasta with garlic. I push my pilfered cart straight into the market, and nobody notices a thing. The store is quiet after the lunch rush. There are a few people wandering around the bread aisle and some teenagers choosing candy bars, but it's mostly empty. I wander here and there, searching for inspiration, but nothing looks good to me. I decide maybe I should start with meat — a main course to get my imagination humming — but the meat aisle is an obstacle course. There are pylons every two feet — CAUTION WET FLOOR — and, indeed, puddles ahead. Reynolds scampers in and out of the Employees Only door, carrying armfuls of frozen Cornish game hens and packaged perch. I wind my way through the mess and am almost to the chicken when Reynolds lays a raw looking hand on my cart.

"I'm sorry ma'am," he says. "I can't let you come through here right now. We got a broken freezer and a broken refrigerator. Electrical problems — and it could be dangerous. Please. We're getting it cleaned up quick as we can."
Reynolds holds a wet, half-thawed turkey. He's massaging it with his gnarled fingers and pressing it up under his jaw, and I'm watching him as if I'm not really there at all when suddenly it occurs to me that Reynolds, standing there in his soggy sneakers, is risking his life for my dinner — for everybody's dinner. Electricity. Water. It could fry him all over again.

"Oh," I say, trying to hold my breath, but I can't help it. I swallow hard and then I'm crying.

Reynolds doesn't know what to do. He stands there while I cry and cry and asks me if I'm all right, which he can see I am not, and then he pats me on the arm awkwardly. "Hey, lady," he says. Finally he hands me the turkey.

"Here. Take it. We can't sell it anyway, now. You should take it home and enjoy it."

He leads me out through the back room, past towers of food boxes, underneath bald, hanging light bulbs. He opens the back door and I've never seen anything as white as outside. I'm holding twelve pounds of a melting bird against my chest. I slurp in a deep breath and step out.

"Butterball is a good turkey," he says, hanging his head out of the doorway. "You don't need to do the whole stuffing and cranberry thing. A little lemon and rosemary. Garlic. It's up to you."

I rub the turkey's breast, and feel the sunlight on my shoulders as Reynolds waves me on. Condensation runs past my stomach and down my legs,
and I have to wipe my eyes and nose with my wrist. It must be 350 degrees out here on the asphalt. Maybe if I stood here long enough we would cook, together. Melt into the smell of good things bubbling.

This is an oven.

I am a kitchen.

You’re invited, one and all, to dinner at my place.
THIS IS NOT CARMEN!!

FADE IN:

EXT -- OUT OF THE BLUE -- DAY

VOICE

Kennedy was born in 1963, though he could not remember this. He was a colicky baby, and he cried endlessly. Relatives joked that he was destined to become a singer.

"Such vocal cords! A talent! A gift!" exclaimed his three old aunts, laughing like cement mixers, rocking him while he screamed.

They repeated this joke to him as he grew, and either to spite them or to fulfill their prophesy (nobody knew which) he did become a singer -- a handsome baritone, known in international opera circles for his miraculous depth of tone, extending even to his upper register.
And so it came to pass that he traveled the world, often forgetting where he was exactly, and this is how he wound up on the steps of the Lorenzo Da Ponte Theater in a city which looked like Prague with its sooty balconies and wrought iron rails -- though clearly it wasn't Prague at all.

INT -- STAGE DOOR VESTIBULE -- DAY

KENNEDY KENNEDY

A scurvy, arthritic woman clutching a clipboard stood by the stage door. She chewed something. I kept waiting for her to swallow it, but she didn't, and this disgusted me.

"I'm Ken Kennedy," I said, removing my coat and gloves, leaving my scarf wrapped firmly around my throat.

She sucked on her teeth with a sour, puckered noise. At last she asked, "What paaaaagrt?"

"Don Giovanni." I gave her my benevolent smile. I've learned that it is very rude to act as if you expect to be recognized. I am, of course, recognized everywhere I go, but I constantly wear a look of surprise, as if to say -- You know me? Why, how unusual! How terribly flattering! When people truly do not know who I am (ignorant stewardesses, clumsy waiters), I use my benevolent smile. This is why people love me. This is why the women in Vienna threw themselves over the balcony on my account.
"Come," said the woman. She turned and pushed her way through a heavy velvet curtain, not bothering to hold it open for me. I followed.

INT -- DRESSING ROOM -- DAY

DON GIOVANNI

Mr. Kennedy was late, but I waited patiently in my various parts: a white wig on a shelf, lips in a rouge pot, gold brocaded pantaloons safety pinned to a wire hanger. The stage door attendant showed him into the dressing room and spat in the garbage pail on her way out. This disgusted me. She is a revolting woman.

I applied my face carefully, drinking some lovely hot tea I'd brought with me. I drew a star shaped beauty mark on my left cheek bone, just for show, and brushed a bit more gray than usual around the corners of my eyes. I couldn't decide whether this made me look sagacious or mysterious, but either way the effect was good -- sexy, Sean Connery-esque. I swathed talc over my neck and shoulders, then patted it liberally under my arms. I would smell pure as an infant when the women undressed me, despite the hot lights. My ruffled shirt felt comfortable, soft and worn. It tied at the neck and could be easily undone to hang playfully askew for bedroom repartée. I pulled on my knee socks, pantaloons and shoes -- silver buckled slippers, really, which pinched.
The jacket was appropriately ornate, but short, a sporty bolero style. This angered me. We weren't doing Carmen, for God's sake! I soothed myself by vocalizing. My voice ran up and down the scales, untangling me, a comb through loosened hair. I sighed into the bottom notes. There was no doubt; I would get lucky.

INT -- WINGS, STAGE RIGHT -- DAY

KENNEDY KENNEDY

I did not recognize the music. I was late. I considered finding the stage manager and whispering into his headsets, "Psst! Which opera is this?" But I did not want to look the fool. I thought it might be Carmen, and I listened carefully, but it was not Carmen and it certainly was not Don Giovanni -- I knew that much. I was furious with my agent and the management. Nobody had come to greet me, to fill me in on procedures, schedules. Perhaps I was early. Perhaps I was weeks early. A woman began to sing in a linnet bird's voice. I tiptoed toward the proscenium, but large muslin flats marred my upstage view. So thin and frail, her voice; hadn't she had any training?

DON GIOVANNI

A virgin! I'm thrilled.
KENNEDY KENNEDY

And then I sensed the audience; I could swear I heard shuffling and coughing. This was not a rehearsal. I'd no business being there.

DON GIOVANNI

I relished the audience and stepped on stage.

EXT - PASTORAL - DAY

DON GIOVANNI (CONT'D)

I raise my arm high above my head and then bow deeply. The music shifts into a rapid arpeggio and the crowd applauds. I look for Leporello, my valet and dearest friend, and there he is, smiling at me -- his benevolent smile. He is dressed elegantly, for a servant, in Indian black, his hat topped with osprey feathers which wave behind him like a princess's wrist. He wears a small quiver and bow (a gift from me, given out of my pity for his perpetual longing), and he holds in his hand the red scarf of Donna Elvira whom I have lately finished seducing. She likes to keep it wound tightly around her throat to compliment her frock of seed pearls and ruby silk.

"Go on, good friend," I say to Leporello, "tell me about myself. Tell me how I will win over the lovely Linnet Virgin." But I do not pay any attention to him. I cast my eyes stage left toward the girl. She is cloaked in green
velvet, seated upon some rocks, and her hair is piled high in
a knot on her head, exposing her lovely swan's neck. Were it
not for the fact that she is an opera singer, I might have
mistaken her for Audrey Hepburn.

CUT TO:

LINNET BIRD
Don Giovanni knows nothing of this Linnet Bird, not even that
she was suckled by three large breasted aunts and that this
accounts for her allure. Some people say that my aunts were
really the three fates, disguised as rhinestone cowboys,
spinning beauty into my hair even as they planned another
tragedy. I am condemned by them to sit on these rocks for
the duration of the first act. Chances are, I will be
condemned to sit elsewhere in the second act and yet
elsewhere in the third -- unless I feel like leaving. My
aunts are dead, of course, so the conditions of my
confinement couldn't be more lax, but it's more fun to be
condemned, and god! I am sooooo bored. A prison cell
without windows would be a thousand-fold more exciting (yawn)
than my current conditions.

Mr. Giovanni, by the way, does not interest me in the
least. He is a cow of a man.
The day is lovely as Giovanni and I stroll in the tall grass -- the light, perfect. I've spied Flower Maidens frolicking behind the sets. There are layers of hills in the distance, and periwinkle sky beyond them. In this magic place the moon does not rise; it descends to meet lovers in gardens. But I will not wish the afternoon away, for my master is newly sated and ready to favor me with his attention. I'll amuse him with a flattering aria, addressing him as a woman to tickle my own fancy. I part my lips and begin "Madamina il catalogo è questo."

KENNEDY KENNDEY
Where the devil is the conductor? The director? I am at a loss. And this Leporello -- whoever he is -- is singing his aria to me when he should be singing it to Donna Elvira who is nowhere to be found. I pretend to focus on Leporello. I laugh heartily at his basso buffo, but when I swing my head in a great guffaw, I cast my eyes stage left toward the bird lady. She is cloaked and sitting on rocks.

DON GIOVANNI
Oh Leporello, you flatter me with your fortés and fermatas, but we waste time! I must sip from that girl on the rocks! Will your song never end? I inhale and lean into the breeze which is the breath of the audience. The strength of this
wind keeps me from flopping over, and I feel the bodices of women drawing closer, closer to the edges of balconies. There, in the shadows is Donna Elvira in her ruby silks, ready to jump.

LEPORELLO

(With gusto) 640 in Italy, 231 in Germany, 100 in France, 91 in Turkey and in Spain no less than 1,003!

KENNEDY KENNEDY

The audience applauds, only this time their appreciation sounds less like hands clapping together than like wings flapping. I am reminded of days on the shore with my aunts when I charged into flocks of swans wielding a plastic quiver and bow. Leporello takes my hand and kisses it. Then he unfolds my fingers and presses my palm against his cheek. It feels slick, oily with make-up and sweat. His eyelashes flutter beneath my index finger, and I am nauseated. I do not break character, however. I withdraw my hand slowly, and declare him a devoted servant by singing an appropriate, though misplaced, bit of recitative from the opening of the act. (Thankfully, the orchestra -- wherever it is -- picks up on my cue.) I turn from him, and stride toward the thin-voiced maid on the rocks.

DON GIOVANNI

I will throttle that cheeky valet later! I remove my bolero jacket and stride toward the thin-voiced maid, my ruffled
shirt ready for its undoing. I fill my torso with air as if I am about to scream, but then I surprise her with my gentle, "Là ci darem la mano." To my delight, she rolls her eyes at me. A challenge at last!

LINNET BIRD

Moo! Moo! Moo!

LEPORELLO

I am, again, heartbroken. As always he answers my overtures with patrimonial gestures which render me both rejected and hopeful. The Flower Maidens mock me from off stage. They are merciless.

KENNEDY KENNEDY

It is with some trepidation that I sing this most famous aria. After all, I'm only half sure I'm playing in Don Giovanni. I guard the reactions of my co-star carefully. When she rolls her eyes, I practically choke. For a dreadful second, I have the feeling I'm supposed to be singing Parsifal. "There are no women on rocks in Don Giovanni," I think. But then I remember Leporello and the red scarf and osprey feathers. I keep singing. The music follows along as I kneel beside her and fold her arm over mine. I am angry with her for misleading me. I take her face in my other hand and squeeze it just a bit too hard.
DON GIOVANNI

I press my fingers into her powdered face and tell her with my eyes that she is my servant. She joins me in duet, but there is defiance in her glance -- like a lovely swan who invites your approach only to snap off your index finger and paddle away. I calculate my risk as our voices tangle in the final harmonies, and then I press my body into hers and whisper hotly, "I love this part."

"What paaaaargt?" she asks. Then she spits in my face.

KENNEDY KENNEDY

She is a revolting woman!

LEPORELLO

I follow my master and march off stage.

EXT - OUT OF THE DARKNESS - NIGHT?

VOICE

Don Giovanni, as most people know, was fond of parties. He was a magnanimous host, and even let masked guests through the doors of his chateau without asking too many questions. On this evening the moon had descended over the town which might have been Prague or Seville, but probably wasn't either one. It was warm out and a good time for a festival.

Nobody knew exactly, but some people assumed that the walling off of the wings, stage right and stage left, was a pre-gala prank of Giovanni's. One could almost hear his
delighted laughter as the singers (Mr. Giovanni among them) each scuffed their noses on the unexpected barricade in their haste to return to their dressing rooms. The curtain had fallen, and the whole bunch of them were left alone to wander the pasture in the darkness. Flower maidens poked at their ankles with safety pins and wire hangers. Mr. Kennedy was especially irate.

KENNEDY KENNEDY
Will somebody please turn on the lights? Good god! Where's the stage manager?! These damn shoes pinch!

It seems the farther upstage I roam, the more likely I am to walk through a patch of nettles, so I head down stage - or to where I think is down stage. At this point I don't care if I exit through the proscenium into a fully lit house of milling opera goers, for I won't be in the second act; I can assure you of that!

DON GIOVANNI
A labyrinth! How jolly.

KENNEDY KENNEDY
When I finally find the curtain I run my hand along the back side of the velvet to the center and peek out. The house, thankfully, is dark, and there is a refreshing breeze. I push my way through the drape and walk onto the apron where I am suddenly tripped, whacked in the gut by a wrought iron railing.
EXT - BALCONY - NIGHT

KENNDEY KENNEDY (CONT'D)

I come perilously close to plunging over the side of the balcony -- perilously because the drop is long. Far below, Don Giovanni's guests amuse themselves in his garden courtyard which is surrounded by pasture and deep forest. A harpsichord plays on a victrola. Flower maidens dance on pointe around a stone fountain where the Linnet Bird sits stirring her moonlit reflection with a red scarf. I hear Giovanni singing "Deh, vieni alla finestra," but I cannot see him. People comment, "Such vocal cords! A talent! A gift!"

To the left is a balustrade staircase which curves down to the garden like a swan's neck. Leporello is there, guarding the entrance. He's cloaked in green velvet and he clutches a clipboard.

I have no business being here.

LEPORELLO

I suck on my teeth with a sour, puckered noise.

"Which paaaaagrt?" I ask.

He hesitates before answering which is always a bad sign. I inquire again, more loudly. He claims to be himself, Kennedy Kennedy, but he looks a lot like Mr. Giovanni, and I think the rascally seducer is joking with me. I blush. I lead him down the stairs without announcing him, for I do not know what to say. Instead, to flatter him, I
spit into a rolled up old program from a 1963 production of Carmen (he hates Carmen). He looks momentarily disgusted, but when I unfurl the pages, a small flock of swans flap into the darkness. He smiles benevolently.

EXT - COURTYARD - NIGHT

DON GIOVANNI

Leporello plays the fool. I am the one who is loved. My new frock of seed pearls and ruby silk attracts my lover as a cow to pasture. In the bedroom my love and I play rhinestone cowboys and Indians. This spring evening I have a gift for him -- a darling quiver of arrows and a sweet golden bow. He shall be the Indian and there is no doubt he'll get lucky tonight!

LINNET BIRD

Giovanni has learned by now that it is very rude to act as if you expect people to fall for your songs. People do, of course, fall for his songs everywhere he goes, but still he constantly wears a look of surprise ...He's wearing that look now, as Donna Elvira hands him the quiver and bow. He's acting as if he doesn't know what the gesture means, as if he doesn't know what's expected of him -- like an ignorant stewardess or a clumsy waiter.
KENNEDY KENNDEY

Clearly I am late, yet where are the servants? Why don't they come to greet me, to take my coat, to offer me a drink - something to sip, something on the rocks? I must look the fool here, standing before this ruby woman, having been neither announced nor acknowledged. She holds a gift out to me. Does she pity me? I am gracious. I take her hand and kiss it. She uncurls my fingers and then raises my palm to press against her cheek. Her eyelashes flutter.

DON GIOVANNI

How could you forget me when I have the same beauty mark on my left cheek bone as you do?

LINNET BIRD

Giovanni accepts a kiss. He is led into the tall grass; it's always the same; it's nauseating.

EXT - TALL GRASS - NIGHT

KENNEDY KENNEDY

I've found Donna Elvira, the soprano whom I seduce and abandon every night and who sings in trio of her regret even as her longing for me remains. Tonight, our voices will tangle, but I protest that we need a third for trio -- a bass.
I relish the audience and can feel it holding its breath, anticipating, ready to fly from the balcony. But she only sighs and points to the the layers of hills in the distance and the deep periwinkle night. Then she parts her lips and begins to sing, "Ah tacti, inguisto core..." -- and I forget about the third singer; I submit and I do not ask, What opera is this anyway?

LEPORELLO

The Linnet Bird knows I want to be seduced, and she laughs like a cement mixer, mocking me. The flower maidens giggle, too. They are pure as infants, and I reach out to squeeze their faces. One grabs my index finger and snaps it off. She beckons for me to come close, waving it like a princess's wrist, promising to give it back if I follow along. I do. I am wild! I dance and shout and poke at Giovanni's love nest with safety pins and wire hangers, singing, Moo!

DON GIOVANNI

I fill my torso with air as if I am going to scream. My latest seduction finished, I raise my arm high above my head and bow deeply. Flocks of swans applaud, clapping their wings together, and I cast my eyes in the direction of the Linnet Bird; she is lovely, all awash in gold brocade and fragrant with talc. Her ruffles hang playfully askew. She's perched on my fountain, combing her fingers through her
loosened hair. I will capture her. She will be my prisoner, condemned to sit upon those stones.

LINNET BIRD

Don Giovanni knows nothing of this Linnet Bird. I am not untrained as he supposes -- not as untrained, in any event, as he who accepts kisses from the one in ruby silk. Once again, he is seduced by his own seduction. He tells his lover, "Go on, tell me about myself. Tell me how I will win over the lovely Linnet Virgin."

He was a colicky baby. I suckled him and I am his life blood. I am the one he cannot have, for he makes no difference to me. I am his Audrey Hepburn, but he is no Sean Connery.

VOICE

I am left alone to wander the pasture in the darkness, and am, again, both rejected and hopeful. My gaze follows him toward the fountain and I remove an arrow from it's quiver. I set it straight, pull back my bow, close my eyes and let it fly into the air. It lands with a pop in the Linnet Bird's swan throat. The red scarf flows as blood, and she falls over dead.

DON GIOVANNI

Who art thou who hast killed my swan?!
I don't know

"What opera is this anyway?" I shout.

I keep walking into the surrounding forest. It's dark, but I push through. I am surprised when I come to a wrought iron rail. I lean over the side and peer down. I love this part!

As it turns out, I'm on a balcony...

Set design for "The Garden" for LaScala's March 13, 1816 production of Don Giovanni.¹

¹ The above print: