Every building wants to fall| [Stories]

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Every Building Wants to Fall

by

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EVERY BUILDING WANTS TO FALL

STORIES
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Air is air.
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.
Its sounds are not angelic syllables
But our unfashioned spirits realized
More sharply in more furious selves.

—Wallace Stevens, from
"Evening Without Angels"
My father blew up buildings. You wouldn't guess it to look at him. He was small, with long delicate fingers and the wispy fine hair you see on baby boys, and in his yellow hard hat he seemed overwhelmed and top-heavy, like a toadstool. He spoke so softly that if we were watching television while he talked, we had to turn down the sound and watch his mouth move. Nonetheless, he was famous for his demolitions. He blew up a five-building public housing project in St. Louis, a turn-of-the century resort hotel in Atlanta, and a jail in Houston that could no longer keep its prisoners in, all without breaking so much as a window in the surrounding neighborhoods. He took pride in the gentleness of his destruction, and called it "bringing down," never "blowing up."

"Every building wants to fall." he told reporters who gathered at the sites. He believed it, too. Nothing moved him more than the sight of a building in collapse. He filmed each of his demolitions on a jumpy little super eight camera, but sometimes became too overwrought to hold
it still. He'd lose focus, let the ground tilt upward, maybe catch a glimpse of billowing dust or a wayward, hurtling brick. He showed us these movies in the dining room of our house in New Orleans—a structure, he told us more than once, that was a mere two well-placed sticks of dynamite away from oblivion. With the shades pulled against the sun and my mother passing around a colander full of popcorn—a bribe to get me to humor my father—we watched building after building disintegrate on our plaster walls. Each warehouse or flophouse or abandoned orphanage seemed to take a last breath; you could see the walls swell outward just slightly before falling in, a movement so inevitable and deliberate they really did seem relieved to go down.

My mother never shared his enthusiasm for leveling. When she cried during the movies it was out of plain sadness; pity for the people who lived and worked in the buildings, never considering the impermanence of their walls. She didn't accompany him on jobs, and was satisfied to get postcards from all over the east coast. Once he drew himself holding a little detonator next to a picture of the Empire State Building. DREAM COME TRUE!!! he scrawled across the sky, only half joking. He didn't have much business in New Orleans. The houses there are allowed to die lingering, natural deaths, shedding their bricks onto the sidewalk and slumping into the soggy earth. Every couple of years there'd be something in town to blow up,
and I'd go with him to watch—a hotel so infested with roaches no one could stand to stay there, a gloomy, graffitied high school, and once a beautiful old cathedral the police had to chase protesters away from, though the pews and altar had been taken out and the colored windows rescued. My father gave me an uncomfortable hard hat that matched his, and a pair of goggles that squashed my nose and made me breathe like a landed fish.

It was on the cathedral job, watching the gothic arches cave in on themselves through the scratched plastic of my goggles, that I first saw something go wrong. I was eleven, and had seen maybe a hundred buildings go down flawlessly. Someone leapt the yellow police barrier, sprinted across the street, and ran straight into the storm of rubble just as the middle transept began to implode. The thunder of falling rock hid the normal sounds of the world, so the sight of the little man running into the cathedral had a muffled, distant quality, like one of my father's movies. I thought of this and realized it was him at the same moment: I didn't recognize him at first without his hat.

My mother and I stayed in New Orleans another six weeks, just long enough to sell the house and give away our things. She had always been a nervous person—tall and thin, with huge, awkward gestures that knocked over glasses and flower vases—but she became increasingly restless
indoors. She made excuses to go to the grocery store and spent whole afternoons pulling weeds in the yard. I came home from school one day to find her staring up at the house. The upper windows were streaked with pigeon droppings, the rain gutters dangled at absurd angles, the plaster was fuzzed with brown mold. Roof tiles from the last wind storm were scattered across the tiny square of lawn. She shook her head.

"I think your father was right," she said. "This house is beyond saving."

Soon, her discomfort spread to the city at large. She said she couldn't stand being surrounded by buildings she knew were aching to fall, bricks that strained free of their mortar. Every crack in a plaster wall sent a shock of worry to her heart. She even imagined that houses were lurching toward her when her back was turned, she said. It made her too jittery to eat, and she took up chewing gum.

But I liked the city. The streets were narrow enough so that walking down them, you felt like you were passing through two cupped hands. Trees grew out of cracks or spread themselves overhead, and you could hear voices echoing in hidden courtyards. The walls you could touch from the sidewalk were always warm, and you knew that people were sleeping and eating and taking baths on the other side of them. Our own house was narrow and long, and in bed at night I sometimes imagined I was tucked into a deep drawer, among folded socks and sweaters. I didn't
want to leave. Every time the real estate lady brought people to look at the house, I'd run out the back door and stomp angrily up and down the sidewalk, planning the little fort I'd build in the alley, the garden I'd plant to feed myself.

The people who finally bought the house were a blond couple who had a tiny bald baby they carried around in a backpack. His name was Jocko, and his head bobbed over his mother's shoulder like a jack-in-the-box. I watched from the sweet olive tree in the back yard as the real estate lady showed them around, moving from room to room, window to window, my mother trailing several feet behind. The small white circle of Jocko's head infuriated me. I imagined pulling its little pink ears off, bloodying its little pug nose. I wanted to kick it across the yard like a soccer ball.

As I was thinking these things, watching the real estate lady and the little family pass by the round-topped window on their way up to the third story, I noticed my mother had stayed behind. She had gone into the bathroom and shut the door; I saw the back of her head, the thin reddish hair pulled up in a bun. She leaned over the sink and washed her face, then dried herself on the towel that hung by the tub. She stood staring into space for a while before she turned and looked out the window.

She didn't know I was there, at first. I knew this because the expression on her face was one she'd never let
me see; it was panic, pure and immovable fear, and it terrified me. Then my foot slipped, the branch shook, and her eyes swiveled up to mine.

We looked at each other for a long moment. It was as if my father—not this building—had been the house we lived in, and now that the dust had cleared we could only stare at each other over the rubble, completely lost with each other.

I turned away from my mother, and climbed higher.

We went to live with my grandfather, a seventy-year-old doctor who lifted weights in his office and ran for an hour every day, wearing nothing but sneakers and a pair of red nylon shorts. He still lived in the town my mother was born in, Faberville, Louisiana. I had only been there once or twice, because my grandfather liked to visit us in the city, and I didn't remember it well. He brought me gifts whenever he came to New Orleans, things like apples or yo-yos, stuff you'd give to the neighbor child to make him stay out of your yard.

"Goodness, Noreen," he said to my mother when we got out of the car. "You're looking scrawny."

I felt her stiffen beside me. "Daddy..." she said. "Please don't."

He stepped up to her and gave her a hug. He was wearing a pair of blue corduroy shorts and no shirt, and he
looked sweaty. White hair prickled his chest. I hoped he wouldn't hug me.

He shook his head. "I mean it. It's like squeezing a sack of tools." He gave me a quick nod and then said, "Well, I'm in the middle of cutting the weeds out back. Go on in and get comfortable." The he waved and was gone.

My mother sighed.

We unpacked the car and took our things inside. The house was low and brick: ranch-style, with air-conditioning and soft carpet in every room, even the kitchen. Unlike most houses in Louisiana it was built directly on the ground, on a cement pad instead of up on pillars. Everything was solid and cool. My mother sat down on the green leather sofa in the living room, and her mood seemed to brighten. "Anyone around here interested in ice cream?" she asked.

"I don't think so." I said.

She raised her eyebrows. "If I remember correctly," she said, "there's soft serve at the Cock-a-Doodle Palace around the corner."

"No, thank you," I told her.

She looked at me, then shrugged. My grandfather was right; she did look pretty skinny, all elbows and knees, and her hair was thinner than ever. The gold bobby pins had little to cling to. They glinted on her head like centipedes. "You know," she said, patting the armrest and
looking around the room, "I never did like that old house. We should have been living in a place like this all along."

We settled in. My grandfather was nice enough. To my mother he communicated mainly in pithy sayings and health advice, to me he made gestures—a tip of an invisible hat, a salute, two fingers held in a peace sign. The town itself wasn't much: two blocks of stores on either side of the train tracks, a short commercial strip outside of town with a movie theater and two or three burger places, and a large blue water tower looming over everything—the only tall thing in town.

After some argument I was enrolled in the local school. My grandfather wanted me to go the private school in the next parish, but my mother balked; one school was as good as the next, she said, and none of them taught you anything interesting. "Anyway," she added, "private schools are for ninnies." apparently forgetting I'd gone to one in New Orleans.

As it turned out, I was the only white child in the class, one of only half a dozen in the entire school. Although he probably would never have said so, I knew this was the reason my grandfather wanted me to go to St. Mary's. My mother, I was sure, neither knew nor cared. The teacher was a young white woman with big glasses who treated me with mild indifference; if anyone accused her of playing favorites, she'd remind us she disliked us all
equally. At recess I jumped rope with the white girls from other classes. They were fat and scabby and smelled faintly of old underwear, and would get hysterical thinking up insulting names for black people. They weren't much fun, but no one else would have anything to do with me.

To my horror, my mother began dating almost immediately. The men were, I thought, wildly unsuitable for her: a pimply, chinless man who worked at the McDonald's, a huge Italian with a walrus-like mustache and a white sports car, the guy who stacked produce at the Sunflower and couldn't possibly have been more than eighteen. She'd bring them home, sit them at the kitchen table, plunk a cup of tea and a plate of chocolate cookies in front of them, then sit with her chin in her hands as they talked. She seemed to pick the kind of man who didn't need much in the way of response—-a few Reallys and Uh-huhs kept them going.

When she went out, my grandfather was left with babysitting duty. He took it seriously. He'd turn off the television and herd me out of my room, then make me sit at the kitchen table with a stack of board games. We'd play a game or two of Parcheesi—-or something else I could win at—-before he brought out the backgammon. He tried several times to explain the rules.

"The goal," he said, "is pure strategy."

And, "Never let your opponent get the jump on you."
He was mystified and hurt when I burst into frustrated tears, as I inevitably did.

"Now, now," he'd say, "it's just a game." He'd make my moves for me while I sat there sniffing and wiping my nose. "Anticipation is the key." He took an obscene delight in winning.

I took to hiding out in the bathroom. I'd excuse myself while he debated his move, and ten or fifteen minutes later he'd come looking for me.

"Hey," he'd yell through the bathroom door. "You alive in there?"

"I'm still using it!" I shouted back.

I'd hear him clicking the pieces as he played both sides, mumbling advice to himself.

Once I fell asleep on the bathroom floor, my head in the Sears catalog I'd brought in to look at while I waited out the backgammon. I woke up when one of my mother's dates bumped me with the door.

"Oh, hey," he said.

I thought, for a moment, that I was in my old bedroom in New Orleans.

"Dad," I said.

"Whoops, sorry," said the date. "You got the wrong guy."

I sat up, embarrassed.

"Um," he said. "I really have to go. You don't mind?"
I grabbed the catalog and ran out.

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I made a friend. Her name was Phyllis and she sat next to me in the back of the class. She was tall and pretty, had beautiful handwriting, and kept her hair in a stubby pigtail. Her front teeth were perfectly square, like Chiclets, and sat on her lower lip when she smiled. For the first week or so I didn't know why the other girls avoided her. She spent recess walking around the edge of the playground, dragging a stick along the chain link fence.

Then one afternoon, during math. Miss Olson took the flag off the wall and started slapping her desk with it, the fabric bunched in her fist.

"Listen!" she said. "I'm not talking to myself up here! Do you think I'm talking to myself?"

She whacked her desk so hard the stick that held the flag snapped in half, and the broken piece whirled in the air. It landed in the trash can with a bang.

"Oops," she said.

Next to me, Phyllis let out a low cry. Then she threw her head back and fell out of her chair. On the floor, she began to shudder and thrash.

A girl named Tamitha jumped out of her desk and went to Phyllis, wrapping her arms around the girl's chest and pulling her head onto her lap. The fit lasted about a minute. When it was over, Tamitha laid Phyllis back on the
floor and went to her desk. Phyllis lay there a while, blinking at the ceiling. There was a trickle of spit at the corner of her mouth.

Miss Olson fished the broken stick out of the trash, set the crumpled flag on the bookshelf, and went back to teaching math. When Phyllis stood up, a little shakily, I noticed that some strands of hair had escaped her pigtail and were standing over her forehead like antennae, and that the back of her pink pants was wet. She went to the closet, took out a clean pair of pants and a plastic bag, and went out into the hall. When she came back, her wet pants were in the bag and she clutched a handful of paper towels. She put the bag in her book sack and wiped the urine from the floor, then threw the towels in the trash and sat back down again.

My heart was beating so fast it made me tremble. What I had witnessed was terrible and amazing. It made me think of the time I'd seen a cat get run over, then leap up and run away with its guts dragging along the ground. I wanted to touch Phyllis: I thought she was charmed.

Phyllis had more fits, one or two every week. A fire drill triggered one, the horn of a passing car set off another. Twice she fell to the ground at the noise of a slamming door, and once it was the sound of whistle blown by a kindergartner at recess. Clapping was forbidden in
our class: after movies and oral reports we cheered silently instead.

I became her friend through sheer persistence. Though she was nice enough—certainly not mean, anyway—she didn't seem eager for friends. I followed her around at recess and asked her questions.

"Do you watch TV?"
"No."
"Do you like movies?"
She shrugged.
"Do you like boys?"
She squinted her eyes. "Nuh-uh."

Phyllis didn't know how to jump rope, but she was willing to bounce a ball back and forth with me. One day I snuck a bag of potato chips out of our house and gave them to her.

"Thank you," she said, a little confused.
"Oh, sure," I said. "We have a lot."

She carried the puffy bag all during recess, afraid it would get stolen if she put it down. She couldn't play ball with her hands full, so we walked around the playground a while, then leaned against the school building.

"Hey," she said. "You want to come by my house?"
"O.K.," I said. Then. "Where is it?"
"It's far," said Phyllis. "You can take my bus tomorrow."
I decided against telling my mother. It was none of her business, and anyway, she was busy with her new date. Prentice, who seemed to be over all the time. He was short and bald, and had a loud voice and a glass eye. He called my mother 'Reen.

"Hey, 'Reen!" he'd shout across the kitchen at her. "How about that sandwich you mentioned?"

Or, "'Reen! Where'd I leave my beer?"

He always seemed a little surprised when I came into the room, as if he'd forgotten I lived there too.

"Oh, hey there, kiddo," he'd yell. "What's cooking?"

"Nothing," I'd say.

I didn't know what my mother liked in him, unless it was his loudness, his lack of pretense. My grandfather called him A Solid Fellow.

"You know what you're getting with old Prentice," he said. "What you see is what you get, with him."

So, with a permission note I'd written myself in a careful imitation of my mother's backhand, I got onto Phyllis's bus. The children who rode this route seemed a slightly rougher crowd; a little dirtier, shiftier. I sat squeezed in between Phyllis and Tamitha, who, she said, was Phyllis's cousin. They lived next door to each other.

We took the highway out of Faberville, then turned on to a red dirt road that wound through pine woods. There
were deep green ditches on either side of the road, and garbage—old appliances, tires, sofa cushions—scattered among the trees. The houses we stopped at were sad and dilapidated; some appeared to be tacked together out of flattened coffee cans, some had boarded up windows and no doors. Old cars, chickens, dogs and trash filled the yards. There were no lawns.

Phyllis's house was a trailer—blue metal with an addition made of planks. Chairs circled a smoking pile of trash in the yard, and a big spotted dog was twisting around on a rope tied to a tree.

"He don't bite," said Phyllis. "Don't even bark. Barking dogs give me fits."

Several small children got off the bus with us, and two or three ran ahead of us into the trailer. Before we got there, though, a woman came out the door, a toddler dragging on her skirt.

"Who you got there?" she said to Phyllis.

"My friend," said Phyllis.

The toddler was waving what looked like a hard-boiled egg at the mother and saying, "Peel a egg! Peel a egg!"

The mother picked the child up and took it inside.

"We should play out here," said Phyllis.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

She shrugged.

We sat in the chairs and poked the trash fire with sticks, and Phyllis told me about everyone who lived in the
trailer. She had three brothers, a sister, a mother, and her mother’s boyfriend, a man named Paul who was turning white.

"Turning white?" I said.

She nodded seriously. "Whiter than you." Then she added, "I also got a dead sister. I'm the only one can see her."

I said, "You can't see her if she's dead."

"I can," said Phyllis. "I got power."

"Huh."

"It's true."

I didn't say anything. The fire was going out, so I bent down to blow on it. Ashes swirled up and got in my hair.

"Well," I said. "My father used to make movies."

She looked surprised. "He did?"

"Uh-huh."

I spent the next half hour describing, in careful detail, the plot of the last movie I'd seen—a spy thriller called **Double Duty** that my grandfather took me to. In it, a spy murders a woman by putting a poison snake in her purse. Phyllis listened patiently, then showed me a nest of snakes behind the trailer.

It was getting late. I asked her if I could use her phone to call my mother.

"Don't got a phone," she said.
The nearest telephone, it turned out, was at Tamitha's house. Phyllis held my hand as we walked there through the weeds.

My mother was surprised to hear from me.

"I thought you were in your room," she said.

"I'm at my friend's house," I told her, and tried to tell her where it was.

There was a long pause. Then, "What are you doing out there?"

"I told you. I'm at my friend's house."

"Well," she said.

Phyllis and I sat by the road to wait for her. It had begun to get dark, and a thin mist floated over the ditch. Frogs cried from the trees.

Then, for no reason that I could tell, Phyllis had a fit. She struggled quietly in the grass for several seconds, and then I pulled her onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her chest as I'd seen Tamitha do. I held her loosely while she shuddered, her head bumping my stomach and her hands fluttering in the weeds.

I looked away.

When she woke up, I slid her off my legs and watched her blink up at the trees.

"That trailer," I said after a while, "is about two sticks of dynamite away from oblivion."

Phyllis sat up and wiped her mouth. "Fell over last time it flooded," she said.
When I got into the car with my mother, I felt like I had forgotten how to talk. I wanted to say something about Phyllis—her fits, her brothers and sisters, her mother's boyfriend who was turning white. Though my tongue moved, nothing I said sounded right; it was as if I was speaking a language I hadn't heard in years. My mother didn't notice. She seemed preoccupied.

"I'm glad you have a friend," she said.

She chewed on her lower lip, fiddled with her hair in the rear-view mirror as she drove. After a while she said, "You know. I think I'm going to marry Prentice."

I couldn't think of anything to say to this.

"I mean," she said, "he asked. He said he'd build me a house, one of those log cabins from a kit." She glanced at me, then looked back at the road. "You'd say yes, wouldn't you?"

"I guess."

We rattled down the dirt road, passing houses and trailers that were lit up inside. People were eating dinner. When we hit the highway everything got suddenly quiet: the tires made an electric hum on the grooved asphalt. It reminded me of the sound before a movie begins, the scratch of film threading through the machine.

She might help him put it together, she said. It would take a long time, maybe a year. Until then, she
could live with him in his apartment in Hammond, about twenty miles away.

"It's pretty small, the apartment I mean," she said. "I guess what I'm saying is, you should probably stay here with your grandfather. Don't you think?"

"I don't know."

"You can visit any time you like."

Over the next few weeks, I began to spend more and more time at Phyllis's house. After school and on weekends, sometimes until dark, and I rode my bike so no one had to drive me. I got along well with Paul, the boyfriend—his face and arms were splotched with pale pink, and his hair was an odd, artificial blond—but Phyllis's mother didn't seem to like me much. She stayed in the house when I came over, and didn't invite me in.

I brought candy for Phyllis. My mother got it for me, paper sacks full, and even whole boxes of chocolate-covered cherries. She hadn't left yet, but she was getting ready; she had a new gold engagement ring and spent much of her time leafing through furniture catalogs. I stuffed the candy into baggies and put it in the pocket of my jacket, and took it out when Phyllis went into one of her quiet spells. She could go hours without saying anything more than "okay" and "all right."

But I think she was getting tired of my bribes, uncertain what she owed me. One afternoon I gave her a
whole bag of suckers. She took out a green one and left
the rest of the bag in the grass, without saying anything.

"You want to look for snakes?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

We kicked some rocks into the ditch, broke some twigs
and threw them in too. I was thinking I might go home when
I heard a car come up the road.

It was my mother driving by, very slowly, peering out
the windshield. Prentice was in the passenger seat, and
the back of the car was full of her things.

When she saw me she stopped. I thought she'd get out,
and she might have, if I'd gone running toward her. But I
didn't. I folded my arms and looked at the ground, looked
at the grass. I heard the car start up again, and watched
it bump gently over the ruts in the dirt road. I watched
it go and didn't move.

"That your mama?" asked Phyllis.

I turned to her. The sun was brilliant. It shined on
Phyllis's arms and forehead, and I realized how beautiful
she was, how tall and lovely. It enraged me.

"Fall!" I shouted.

To my shock, the green sucker flew from her mouth and
she pitched to the ground. I watched as she thrashed in
the dirt. When she got up again, there was a twig in her
hair, a streak of blood on her lip, a wary smile on her
face. Her hand shook.

"Fall!" I shouted again.
The fat girl had pimples and greasy, looping blond hair. Her clothes were held together with safety pins, she never wore socks, and she gave off the stubborn, insolent odor of sweat. Any of these qualities alone could doom her, but on top of all this she had a lazy eye. It was round and blue like her other one, but slightly larger, and now and then it drifted off, like a moon breaking free of its orbit to wander the ether. It could be unnerving—she might look at a person with one eye while the other scanned the horizon, or stared at a soup can on the counter, or rolled back under her eyelid.

They called her lots of names—Dough Girl, Bowling Ball, Stinky—but Lazy Eye's the one that stuck.

There were lots of stories about Lazy Eye going around that year. The one about the sixth grade Christmas party, for instance. Miss Oaks had put a record on and moved the desks to one side to make a dance floor, and the girls all stood on one side and the boys along the opposite, and no
one would dance. Not until Lazy Eye stepped out, whirling, her good eye and her bad one both shut, her arms flailing. She stomped her feet, shook her behind. This was in the old school building, before it burned down, and the floors were wood and not all that sturdy. A girl named Francine was the first one to notice the Christmas tree in the corner, the way it was flopping back and forth in rhythm to Lazy Eye's dancing. She pointed and covered her mouth. The whole line of girls turned and looked, and just then, at a particularly powerful STOMP, the star on top of the tree went flying off and stuck itself, by one point, in the cork board behind Miss Oaks's desk.

Another time, Lazy Eye was spotted at the Apollo, the movie theater downtown, eating a jumbo popcorn, a box of Junior Mints and a root beer. Four or five boys from her class sat two rows behind her and started flicking popcorn at her head. She ignored them for a while, though the boys could hardly control themselves at the sight of Lazy Eye's head, silhouetted by the light of the screen and bumpy with the popcorn caught in her hair. They laughed so hard they had to bite the insides of their arms to keep quiet. Finally Lazy Eye turned around, threw the empty Junior Mint box at them, then bent over and vomited enormously into the aisle. When she was done, she got up and ran, knocking into an usher with a flashlight on the way out.
There were others. The time she nearly killed a first grade boy by sitting on him, the time her pants split open during a kickball game and revealed the fact that she didn't have any underwear on, and the time her eye rolled up into her head and wouldn't come down, some people said, for three days. After that, Lazy came to school with a pirate-patch over her good eye. Someone snatched it off her during recess, though, and, discovering the string that held it on was made of elastic, shot it into a tree.

The plan to kidnap Lazy Eye was hatched at a later recess, one afternoon in March. It had finally cleared up after three solid weeks of rain, but half the playground was still under water, and mosquitoes roamed in predatory clouds. The children stood on high ground and scratched the bites on their legs, blood dripping into their socks. None of them had slept much recently. Mosquitoes sang in their ears all night and attacked them through the bed sheets and frogs exulted in the trees outside their windows.

"Look at that Lazy Eye," said Brother Palmer. He and his twin brother, Clifford, were small and had pinched faces. Their father was caretaker of the town cemetery. "Look at her run!"

Lazy Eye was loping across the yard, her big feet splayed wide and her arms flapping around. She was headed for the girls' room.
"Someone ought to put her in a cage," said Clifford Palmer. "Lock her up and don't give her no food 'til she gets skinny."

"Someone ought to poke out that spooky eye," said Jerry Lea. He had failed sixth grade twice, and was so big and ruddy he gave off steam.

"I'd like to slap her good," said Brother.

Clifford squinted at them. "It'd be easy to catch her."

"Sure would," said Jerry, stuffing his hands into his shorts pockets.

"That fatty butt," said Brother.

Clifford frowned and said. "No, I mean it. We should set a trap and catch her." He bent down, picked up a stick, and poked at the water. "I hate that girl," he said.

Lazy Eye came out of the girls' room then, and with her hands on her big hips stood and surveyed the playground. Her hair was loopier than ever, smashed on one side and sprung out on the other. She saw Clifford and Brother and Jerry, looked away hurriedly, and then, as if she'd spotted some invisible friends, took off toward the monkey bars. The boys watched her go.

"Bengal tiger trap, maybe," said Brother.

"Or one of them noose things that'll hang her upside-down by her ankile," said Jerry.

"Huh." said Clifford.
"You know what I mean," Jerry said, flapping his hands. "You step in them and they squeeze around your foot and you go flying up."

Brother snorted. "I want to see that."

Clifford was staring at Lazy Eye. She sat on the silver monkey bars, kicking her sneakered feet and talking to herself.

"They had them in wars," Jerry went on. "I saw them in movies. You could do torture things to people when they were hanging there."

Clifford turned to Jerry. "Like what?"

"Oh, like lots of stuff. Like anything. I mean," he said, rubbing his hands together, "squirt water up their nose. Or throw rocks at them. Set them on fire."

"Shoo," said Brother.

"Rope would break," said Clifford, snapping his stick in half and throwing it into the water.

"You could get real strong rope! That plastic stuff like you tie up boats with. We got some of that at our house."

Miss Grimm, the playground lady, blew her whistle, and everyone stampeded toward the school building. Clifford and Jerry and Brother walked slowly, not getting into line with the others, and Lazy Eye walked even slower, stopping to fix her shoes and scratch herself and look around. Some girls turned cartwheels and some boys knocked each other over.
Miss Grimm yelled for a little while about how nobody better track mud all over everywhere, and no one better talk in the hall or they'll be mopping up the lunchroom all afternoon, then shut up and stalked inside.

For a few minutes, before their teachers came to lead them, single file, back to their classrooms and math drills and spelling books, the children were alone on the playground. No one was in charge, and the air tingled with nervousness. Anything might have happened then, but nothing did: Miss Oaks came out in her brown dress, drew her hand across her throat to signal the sixth grade to be quiet, and everyone trooped inside.

It happened the next morning, when Lazy Eye was walking to school. Her house was on a dirt road that veered off of the highway, skirted a pond big enough for ripples and boats, cut through some woods, and went over the railroad tracks to the school. The road itself was a mess of puddles and bumps because of the rain, and the pond slapped over its bank. Lazy Eye was scared of water, because she knew a little boy once who drowned in a pond like this. She always imagined that the water had lurched up and sucked him away—that's what the word "drown" sounded like to her—though she knew that's not how it was. Still, she kept close to the far side of the road, hopping from one dry spot to the next, now and then stopping to rake at her bit-up ankles with her fingernails. They'd
grown long and it felt good, even when she scratched so hard that blood came.

She was too engrossed in the puddles and her bites to hear the boys come up behind her, though she wouldn't have been able to get away, anyway, since they could run so much faster. Jerry threw the rope around her middle and yanked her book sack off her shoulders. She was so surprised that she didn't say a thing, just squealed a little.

"Got you, you fat Lazy Eye," said Jerry Lea.

Lazy Eye stuck her fingers under the thick yellow rope and tried to pull herself out of it, but Jerry and Brother pulled it tight and knotted it. Then Clifford grabbed both her hands and twisted them behind her.

"Ow, ow," yelled Lazy Eye.

"Shut up, Bowling Ball," said Clifford. Jerry gave him a roll of silver tape, and Clifford taped Lazy Eye's wrists together.

"Hey!" she yelled.

"You better be quiet or we'll throw you in the pond," said Clifford.

Lazy Eye shut her mouth. She felt her bad eye zigzagging around.

Jerry pulled on the rope and jerked her forward. She stumbled into a puddle. Mud filled her sneakers. She tried pulling her wrists apart, twisting them, but they were stuck tight.
The boys began dragging her toward the woods. Clifford leading the way. As she struggled, she saw her yellow book sack lying in the road, papers sticking out of it.

"My book sack!" she whispered.

Clifford stopped, went back, and picked it up. He felt around inside it for a minute or so, then, finding nothing interesting, zipped it up and gave it a hard fling into the pond. It floated for a few seconds before drifting under the green water. The padded shoulder straps disappeared last.

Lazy Eye let herself be hauled into the woods. It was scary, but almost flattering, in a way, to be the center of so much attention. Branches and leaves slapped her face. She squeezed her eyes shut and staggered blind through the bushes and weeds. It felt strange not to have the use of her hands, and she couldn't get used to it. She fell two or three times, landing on her knees and side, and the boys pulled her up with the rope. It cut hard into her stomach.

The boys didn't say much during their trek, but Lazy Eye had an idea where they were going, anyway. The cemetery, the one that Mr. Palmer took care of, was on the other side of the woods. Clifford and Brother's house was there too, and Jerry lived a little further down the road. In between the two houses was a big wooded swampy area, and that seemed to be where they were headed. She opened her eyes now and then to check their progress.
Sure enough, before long they were out of the woods and tromping across the slick grass of the cemetery. Half the graveyard was old, with big limestone tombs and granite urns: the other half had new, flat stones set into the ground. The boys tugged Lazy Eye around the perimeter of the cemetery—whether out of fear of being seen or of walking over dead bodies Lazy Eye couldn't tell.

"Your dad's not going to see us, is he?" asked Jerry. His normally ruddy face was flushed the color of cooked crab.

"He don't get up 'til dinner time," said Brother. "Stinky old slob."


Lazy Eye remembered, suddenly, that she was supposed to be in school. They'd be doing the pledge about now, maybe, or math facts off the board. She wondered if she'd been missed yet, if Miss Oaks had written her name on a pink absent slip—as if she were just at home, sick in bed—and sent it down to the office with the lunch money.

They were going back into some woods again, on the other side of the cemetery, somewhere between Jerry's house and the Palmers'. These were bigger, less brushy woods, and Lazy Eye could keep her eyes open without the fear of smacking branches. It was a little marshier, too, though, and Lazy Eye kept sinking up to her calves in muck. It was slow going. Brother whined bitterly.

"Should of worn boots, for Jesus Christ's sake."
"Better not swear so close to the graveyard," said Jerry.

Lazy Eye had begun lagging, worn out with fear and the effort of slogging through the marsh, and Jerry pulled her harder. Sweat dribbled out of his hair and slid along the sides of his face. He had to keep blinking to keep it out of his eyes.

Then, finally, Clifford said, "Here we are."

They were in a small clearing, no bigger than an roomy kitchen, up on firmer ground. In the center of the clearing was large chicken coop, but there were no chickens in it. The trees met overhead like a green, vaulted ceiling, and so the light had a greenish color, too.

"Get in," said Clifford, swinging down one side of the coop.

"No," said Lazy Eye.

All three boys pulled hard on one end of the rope, and Lazy Eye fell, hitting her head on the chicken coop. Her eyes watered, and dirt got in her mouth. The boys began kicking her. She rolled away from the chicken coop, and they kicked her more fiercely, and shoved her with their hands. She lost her sense of direction and found herself rolling straight into the chicken coop to get away from their feet and fists, and Clifford snapped the door shut. He took a padlock out of his pocket, hooked it over the latch, and locked it with a key.

"There," he said.
"Whew," said Jerry.

Lazy Eye sat up. Her head just brushed the ceiling of the chicken coop, and her feet were bent under her. Her hands were still taped behind her, and so numb she couldn't tell if they were attached to her arms.

"Let me out," she said. Her tongue felt swollen: she must have bitten it.

"No," said Clifford.

The boys sat down a few feet from the chicken coop, resting their arms on their knees. They looked at Lazy Eye without malice, now; they mostly looked tired. Brother's lip was bleeding, and he dabbed it with the bottom of his tee-shirt.

"Please let me out," said Lazy Eye.

"Nope," said Jerry.

"Not 'til you get skinny," Clifford added.

Lazy Eye leaned against the chicken wire wall of her prison. It sagged under her weight but held.

"My dad and me made that," he said proudly. "We used to have chickens but we ate them all."

The boys fooled around in the clearing for a while, throwing rocks and punching each other. Lazy Eye lay down in her coop, seeing tiny white feathers close up and smelling ground corn feed.

"Jerry," said Clifford after a bit. "You watch Lazy Eye. Brother and me's got to go make our dad's dinner. He'll be getting up about now."
"Well," he said, scratching his ear. "Do I have to? Where's she going to go?"

"Just watch her," he said. "We'll be back."

Jerry frowned. "Bring me something to eat. all right?"

"Okay, okay," said Clifford, before he and his brother disappeared into the marsh.

Jerry glanced nervously at Lazy Eye. "Don't you do anything funny," he said.

Lazy Eye didn't answer. She was lying on her side, feathers and chicken dung in her hair, licking blood from her upper lip. She felt safe, somehow; he couldn't do anything to her in here.

Jerry squatted down a few feet away from the coop. He was smirking. "What's your name?" he asked. "Your real name?"

Lazy Eye looked past him, at a big bird hopping around in a tree.

"Come on, what is it?" He poked his finger into the cage and wiggled it. "Well? Can't you talk?"

"Yes." she said. Her eyes, oddly, were working in tandem, and she gave Jerry a long, two-eyed stare.

"So tell me your name."

"Shut up!" she yelled. "It's Sheila!"

"No it's not," said Jerry. "It's Lazy Eye."

He stood up, and Lazy Eye watched the boy wander around the clearing, kicking at clumps of dirt and yanking
leaves from trees. He was older than the others, by two
years or so, and should have been getting ready to enter
high school. Somehow, though, he looked younger, big and
burly as he was; his eyes were far apart and babyish, and
his chin was soft. His voice was still high, too, and his
mannerisms were childish. He kept rubbing his nose with
his forefinger.

Lazy Eye remembered that she used to like Jerry; she
had liked the way he looked, and had something of a crush
on him for a while. Actually, she'd thought he'd make a
good brother. She didn't have a brother, but thought it
would be nice to have one; a big rude boy who'd hang around
her house and do things for her once in a while.

She must have fallen asleep, watching him, because
suddenly she found herself looking into the small black
eyes of Brother Palmer. He was poking something through
the holes in the chicken wire. Lazy Eye sat up quickly,
startled, and felt blood rush into her head.

"What's that?" she asked dizzily.

"Chick-O-Stix." said Brother.

She looked at the floor of the coop. Three Chick-O-
Stix, still in their wrappers, lay among the chicken
detritus. Brother frowned and stood up.

"You better eat them," he said, "before those others
came back and find out I gave them to you."

"I can't." said Lazy Eye.

Brother looked at her, puzzled.
"My hands," she explained.

"Oh," said Brother. He knelt down and stuck his fingers through the chicken-wire walls. Lazy Eye pressed her wrists up to them, and he tugged at the tape until it peeled off. Feeling came back into her fingers gradually: an awful prickle of pins and needles, first, and then she could wiggle them. She clenched her hands open and closed a few times, then gingerly unwrapped one of the Chick-O-Stix. She ate it quickly, sucking the peanut butter off her teeth.

"I'll tell them you did it yourself," Brother said. "I have a Full Dinner Bar in my pocket, too, if you want that."

"No, thank you," said Lazy Eye. She tucked the other two Chick-O-Stix in her pocket for later.

A couple hours later, the Chick-O-Stix were gone and Clifford and Jerry still hadn't come back. Brother paced around nervously. The sun was getting low; Lazy Eye could see it from her coop.

"They better come back," he said, rubbing his hands on his pant legs. "Clifford's got the key."

"He wasn't going to let me out, anyway," said Lazy Eye.

Brother shot her a look. "Well, that's dumb. You can't just keep someone in a chicken coop forever."

"I guess not," said Lazy Eye, "but that's what they said." She wondered if her mother had missed her yet—
probably not; sometimes she didn't come home right after school. Once in a while she went over to Mrs. Copper’s house to help her with housework in exchange for snacks or quarters, and sometimes she went over to her Aunt Lynn’s and watched television. Probably no one noticed she was gone.

"Can I have that Full Dinner Bar now?" she asked Brother.

"I already ate it," he said, guiltily.

Lazy Eye lay back down, chin on her hands. Stretched out like this, her feet just hit where the chickens would have had their nests. She imagined them roosting on her heels, pecking her ankles.

"Hey!" said Brother, alarmed.

Lazy Eye rolled over and looked at him. He was squatting down, pointing into the coop.

"Snake!" he said.

The girl got on her hands and knees and scuttled to the furthest end of the chicken coop. It was a cottonmouth, its long brown and black body slipping through one of the octagon-shaped holes in the chicken wire.

"Sweet Jesus," said Brother Palmer.

Lazy Eye watched as it came toward her, its head lifted slightly off the ground like the prow of a boat. It made no noise as it moved, not even a scratching or a rustle. Lazy Eye tried not to make any noise either.
hoping it would not recognize her as a huge juicy fat girl within striking range.

The snake stopped. It lifted its head a little higher, looking at her with its small, pupilless eyes. It was so much smaller than she was, but Lazy Eye could think of no way to stop it.

"No!" shouted Brother, as it struck.

The cottonmouth bit Lazy Eye on the side of her leg, right below her knee. It felt like the smack of a hand, no worse than that, at first. The snake reared back and slid away, disappearing into a hole in the floor of the chicken coop.

"Suck it out!" yelled Brother. "Suck the poison out!"

"What?" said Lazy Eye, confused. She prodded the two bite marks with her finger, and pain shot through her.

"Oh." she cried out.

Brother shook the walls of the chicken coop, but they held fast. He tried kicking down the door, tearing off the roof. Nothing budged.

"Look," he said. "I'm going to find Clifford. I'll be back. You better try sucking out that poison." He ran off.

Lazy Eye looked at her wound. Dark blood dribbled from each round fang hole. She tried to imagine pressing her lips to that, and began to shake.

Instead she tore at the wire walls of her coop. She found the staples that held the wire to the frame, and dug
her nails under them. He nails tore. She looked around and found a small metal tack, and used that to try and pry up a staple. After a few minutes it pinged free.

Her leg was swelling by this time. The whole thing was pink and it looked shiny around the bite. The pain was making her head feel funny, and she had to stop for a while to get her bearings. Then she dug at another staple until it popped out, too.

Lazy Eye leaned her body against the wire wall until the whole thing tore loose, and she was free.

She crawled out of the chicken coop, pulling her bitten leg behind her. Her clothes ripped on the raw edge of wire, but Lazy Eye just wanted to get away from the coop, where she knew the snake was waiting to bite her again. She tried running but her leg wouldn't work, and hopping made the pain shake through her whole body. She sat on the ground and pressed her teeth into the knee of her unbitten leg. Her small, square teeth made a neat row of indentations in the flesh.

Maybe she should keep still, she thought. The world was unspooling around her.

She lay on the ground, feeling the dirt with her hands. It got hard to breathe, kind of like when it was cold in her house, and she tried breathing with the bed covers pulled over her head. It made her want to cry, but she didn't. Instead she took pinches of dirt and rubbed
them in her fingers, then stuck her fingers in her mouth. She was hungry, and the dirt tasted good.
A tiny alligator lives in a ditch near the bar we go to. I don't know how he got there; clearly, he made a bad mistake somewhere along the line. Thursday nights I leave our friends and the man I married to look for him, and sometimes see his dark shape snapping at a water-soaked slice of white bread, or floating still by the mouth of the culvert. More often I do not see him at all. I worry that school children have caught him in a net and taken him to a classroom, keep a rubber band wrapped around his jaw and prod him with pencil erasers. I assume it is a he.

The bar is called Hazel's. Hazel is a he, a definite he, and he's decorated the place like an army bunker, with camouflage drapes and Playboy pinups. The cigarettes people smoke in Hazel's are cheap and particularly vile. It's good to get out when no one's looking and wander up the street, past the vacant lot and the chain link fence and streetlight, to the place where the culvert goes under the broken sidewalk, where the alligator lives. I'm the one who throws him the bread. The alligator chews on it sometimes, but usually it stays whole for days, then
dissolves and sinks into the murky ditch-water. I can't imagine what he eats, if he's not hungry for bread.

We've lived in Leesville a year now and the alligator is the only clue I've seen that we're still in Louisiana. Coming here might be our mistake, too. It's a small, shoddy town, pushed up tight against the Texas border. It's as dry as the southern parishes are wet: a handful of cheap buildings in the piney woods. Tom, who is a lawyer from New Orleans, is used to better. There's an Army base nearby, tattoo parlors up and down the highway, and log trucks loaded with spindly trees rumble through all day and night. I work in the parish library. Since I'm young they put me in charge of the children's section, a piece of convenient logic. The job includes reading to preschoolers for an hour every morning and thinking up a weekly, book-related art project for the older kids. I pretend to be good at it. Often, in the middle of *Murdock Moose* or *The Bunnies' Christmas*, I find myself thinking of beer. I'm not really a drinker, but there's something about Leesville. Plus, Tom is not happy here, and I think it might be me.

I met Tom in school. He was a law student, and I was fooling around with an history major that wasn't getting me anywhere, and working in the cafeteria. Tom came through
my line the same time every day, asking for rice. I had to wear a white apron and put my hair up in a net. Most days the air conditioning barely struggled along, and by the time Tom came through with his tray I could feel sweat trickling unattractively down the side of my face. To compensate I made fun of him.

"Riiice?" I'd say, in an exaggerated cracker accent.

"Thank you, ma'am." That's all he ever said. But he'd move his eyebrows—thick, dark eyebrows that just about ran together in the middle—with such subtle self-mockery I was floored. Normally I went for the short, loud boys who could keep a roomful of people hysterical for hours, then would say something foolish and feel terrible for days after. I had just broken up with one such boy. It was my fault: another mistake. I went too far, told him he embarrassed me, and he stared at me for a long time with stunned incomprehension on his face. This was in a bar out past Rampart Street, one of those places with sticky, unwashed tables and amateur surrealist art covering the walls. He just got up and left. I was too proud to follow him, and anyway, I thought I was right.

I began to grow curious about what Tom ate. It did not seem possible that he could live on rice, though he was thin, so when I was through serving I took my hairnet off and wiped tables, searching for him. It is strange how people look right through you when you're working for them. I'd washed tables all around people I'd consider friends
but who jumped in their seats, startled, when I said hello. Normal though, I didn’t mind being anonymous. It gave me a certain freedom. I walked around invisibly, watching people, authoritatively flicking my damp rag wherever I wanted to.

The dining room was huge, with high ceilings and diamond-paned windows that let in a lot of light. I found Tom where I expected to, at a corner table with the other well-dressed law students. He sat right in the middle of them but his silence, somehow, set him apart. I noticed that when he spoke everyone else shut up.

I wandered over to his table, and, vigorously sweeping crumbs onto the floor, took a good look at his plate. Besides the rice it was loaded with cottage cheese and kidney beans from the salad bar.

"Vegetarian?" I said to him, sotto voce.

"Health-conscious." he whispered back. None of the other law students noticed a thing.

We played like this for a long time. I was not used to such gentle, drawn-out flirtation. did not know what to make of it, but it aroused in me such a powerful eroticism I could think of little else. My grades suffered. I spent most of my time in my room, examining the ends of my hair and cutting my nails. I missed Mardi Gras. The first morning of Lent I went out and collected handfuls of
plastic beads from the gutter, yanked them out of trees where they hung from twigs and branches. I thought about giving some strings to Tom. but I didn't; it seemed too gaudy, too tacky a gift.

It was close to the end of the school year before he asked me out. I was about to graduate with my history degree and neglected G.P.A., but Tom still had another year to go, then bar exams. He asked me for coffee while I was scooping rice onto his plate. I just nodded. didn't look at him. couldn't think of a wisecrack.

He took me to an artsy cafe at the edge of the French Quarter. Normally I wouldn't have been caught dead in the Quarter with its tourists and mimes and street children tap-dancing in sneakers: in my crowd it was monumentally uncool. Tom's self-consciousness was of a different ilk, it seemed. He was confident he could go anywhere and do anything he pleased, never worried what people thought. I decided it was because he grew up rich.

We sat at a high, tiny table. It was painted black with stars and moons all over it, and it made me uncomfortable: I was afraid I'd make a bad move and knock it over. Tom bought us coffee and bagels. I told him briefly of my childhood in the suburbs--Metairie and Kenner--my uncle who was not above attending an occasional KKK rally, how we always seemed to live in neighborhoods with no other children, and how I spent hours riding my
biked up and down the sidewalk, hoping some new child would see me and come running out to play. It came out less funny and more pathetic than I meant it to. After a while I shut up, scraped at the sugar in the bottom of my mug.

Then it was Tom’s turn. When he started speaking I found myself staring at him, open-mouthed. I had never heard anyone speak so beautifully. He told me about his family’s summer home in the Mississippi Delta, about the dead body he’d found in the weeds when he was nine, purple and swollen up like a fig, with the skin beginning to split. It was not what he said, but how; the careful manipulation of pauses, the almost imperceptible movement of his eyebrows, his voice. It was a soft voice, pregnant, I thought, with restrained humor. He moved his hands, too, neat square hands, lightly hairy. I couldn’t eat the bagel. I had been turned inside out.

Sometimes I think that my mistake was this: letting myself sit there at that ridiculous, tiny table, in that unreasonable chair.

From then to our getting married was a kind of slow motion skid: I decided it was out of my control. I worked at a seafood place called Jojo’s, a little way out of town, saving money and seeing Tom on weekends. Not every weekend, either. He seemed to like controlling the times we didn’t see each other much as he did silence in our
It broke my will. It was like living underwater: by the time I got to the surface and breathed I was too relieved to complain. I fell into Tom and was grateful.

Proof that Tom is not happy here: At night he lies with the sheets kicked off, stiff as a telephone pole and staring at the ceiling. If I ask him what's wrong he says he's not tired enough to sleep. and if I ask again he leaves, sits in the green chair in the living room, reads till late. I can't sleep when he's gone. I roll over and look out the window. Across the street is a permanent yard sale, it's where I bought the green chair, and in the dark I can make out the shape of a dresser and a child's rocking horse on the lawn. Down a way is the video store with its bright blue and yellow marquee. The light is always on, and I am glad I have it to look at while I'm trying to fall asleep.

Leesville is a religious town. Wednesday nights there's a traffic jam when the Pentecostal church lets out, and at the library the ladies won't let me alone about which church I go to. I tell them Tom and I haven't chosen one yet, which is a bald lie—we're not religious. I don't want to tell them this. I figure they'll take my job away, hold prayer meetings for me in the back. They are constantly offering invitations. It's difficult to come up
with excuses, and one evening I accept. I dress up in a pale blue dress and white stockings and Tom laughs at me, refusing to come too.

"Don't come home trying to convert me." he says, watching me try to do something with my hair.

"Oh." I say. "don't worry. You're beyond redemption."

Still, he looks at me a little distrustfully as I go out the door. He is never sure what I'll do. He has some idea, but not enough to satisfy him. Sometimes I think this is what he likes, the unknown quantity. It is not what I like about him. Often I miss the boys I dated in college, the ones who would not close their mouths until everything was out on the table. See-through men. What a relief that would be.

The woman I go to church with is named Roxanne. an awfully whorish name, I think, for a woman who never cuts her hair or wears pants. She has two or three little girls who are miniature versions of their mother, with long hair in ponytails and short denim skirts. Roxanne has a bland, wholesome sense of humor it takes a certain state of mind to appreciate--it works well in her car. when we ferry the children to bible study before church.

"Well." I say, wiping my sweaty palms on my skirt.

"It's a deep subject." says Roxanne.

The Pentecostal church is the largest building in town by far. much larger than the fire department or the school
or even the Price-Lo. It reminds me of a basketball arena, with the same air of excitement and anticipation. I see lots of library regulars there, heavy-set women who look like Roxanne, some others who surprise me. My optometrist, for instance, who has a bad shake in his hands and smokes too much.

I'm nervous at first, there are so many people, and they all stand up after a few minutes of preaching. I stand too. The preacher's voice is powerful and rhythmic. People up front are dropping, really fainting, and it's a strange thing. I think, when the preacher's arms rise up and all the arms in the congregation go up that it will be hard for me to do it, too, but it isn't. It's the easiest thing in the world. I just go along, sway with the crowd. This is easy. I keep thinking, this is so easy. I ought to be religious, I tell Tom later. I'm good at worship.

Wednesdays I go to church. Thursdays I go to Hazel's. Tom likes to play pool. The precision of it, the inalterable cause and effect of the game is like the law, he says. Or how the law ought to be. Tom looks out of place in Hazel's, with his white shirt and ties and khaki pants, but he doesn't notice. When his lawyer friends show up they're in sweatshirts and jeans. Sometimes I'll play a game or two with them, but more often I just watch, drinking beer from a bottle.
The air gets hazy from smoke after a while, the clicking of the pool balls becomes hypnotic. I often get melancholy. I miss Tom. I’m watching him, seeing his brow wrinkle up in concentration, seeing his pants pull tight across his behind as he leans to make a tricky shot, but I miss him. He’s not thinking about me. His mind is on the game, and he likes it. I miss him more than when I’m in church, away from him, because then it is me that’s gone, not him.

I’m being stupid. I’m being sentimental. I set my bottle down carefully and leave Hazel’s, and again, no one notices. The air is damp and boggy but clean. It’s late, no one drives by. This is good. Because if the library ladies see me outside a bar late on a Thursday night I will be the subject of much gossip, and, no doubt, prayer meetings.

The little alligator is not there. I want to put something down in the ditch. I want to lure him out of the culvert. I want to see him clearly and whole. I want him not to be a shadow but an alligator in daylight. I’m not sure, suddenly, that it’s even an alligator. Could it be something else, a different kind of animal? I crouch down, smell the ditch. It won’t come out.

We were living on the coast, in Cameron Parish, when we had our first strange, disturbing argument. Tom had a temporary job working out some legal mess at the school
district, and it had gone on much too long. The house we rented was small, damp, and ugly. The floor was tile, the walls were a deep, bloody, fuchsia, and the curtains were plastic. The roaches were so bad we only felt comfortable eating outside, on a card table set up in the weeds. From our yard all we could see was the dirt road and a lake filled with stumps. Cameron Parish was low, wet, and cleaned out periodically by terrible hurricanes that rearranged the landscape, leaving water where there was land, and piles of junk where there was water.

We were eating breakfast at the card table, eggs and sausages I had fried together—Tom was less health conscious now, after we'd been married a few months—and listening to the radio. It was set in the kitchen window, far enough away so you had to make an effort to hear it sometimes, when cars rumbled past. Tom looked bad. A grayish sweat prickled his forehead, along his hairline. It didn't seem that warm to me, though it was close. The air was sticky and did not smell fresh. Tom stopped poking his food and stared at me.

"You're fat," he said in a strained voice. "You could really stand to lose a few pounds. I don't think I can keep looking at you." Then he leaned away from the table, turned his head, and vomited carefully into a patch of weeds.

I was not sure if being sick made him say that, or if it was the other way around. It seemed possible to me that
Tom could be made ill by the very effort it took to express his nastiness.

He went to bed and stayed there, reading, for two days. I didn't talk to him; I slept on the sofa and went for walks on the beach. There was not a whole lot to see. I walked along what passed for shore, though it was hard to tell where the ocean started and Louisiana stopped. There were sand bars and inlets as far as you could see, and garbage buoyed along by the sluggish current. The sky was usually a hard white. Small blue crabs scuttled out of my way as I walked, and water filled the shallow prints my shoes made. I realized that for a long time I'd been trying hard not to be lonely, but it wasn't working. I needed some friends before I began to hate my husband.

I had an idea and Tom agreed. The last weekend we were in Cameron Parish, we went camping at Holly Beach with some lawyer acquaintances and their wives. We brought a big steel pot to boil crabs, made a huge bonfire out of the furniture we weren't going to bring to Leesville. Our lawn chairs sank deep into the sand. The lawyers talked law and their wives and I pretended to be interested in each other, and when Tom and I crawled into our tent we whispered for a long time, making fun of everyone. We'd had a lot to drink.

"How about that SIMONE," said Tom, drawling her Cajun accent.
"What about Francis?" I said. "Did you see the way crab just kept flying out of his mouth?"

We giggled and played with each other long past midnight. In the morning we made love. At breakfast, Tom proposed that we all go on the alligator tour.

"Where you from, boy?" said one of the lawyers. Francis, a man who was not much older than Tom but whose face had already taken on a ruddy, swollen color. His shirt buttons strained to keep his belly covered. "You a tourist?"

"Just a city boy," said Tom mildly. "It'll be fun."

"Count us out," said Francis, shaking his head. "I hate them damn lizards."

"Ralph? Simone?" said Tom. He raised his eyebrows at them.

"Well, sure," said Ralph.

"All right," said Simone. "My daddy wrassled them things."

We said good-bye to Francis and Pauline, then drove up the highway to the Sabine Refuge. There was no one else on the road. On either side of us stretched miles of shrubby trees and grassy, water-logged fields. The sky was pale and empty and I felt good. I think Tom did too. Now and then he broke into song.

"Oh, please!" drawled Simone.

Right then I loved him, powerfully. I loved everyone in the car. I thought maybe we ought not to move, that we
should stay here, where we at least had friends. Now, though, I wonder if that feeling’s something else, a by-product of sadness, maybe; one that feels very much like love. It's a desperate feeling, a lasso tossed out of loneliness that grabs onto whatever's there.

The refuge was a huge section of swamp. It was tightly crowded with trees, so tightly that boats couldn't navigate. The only way in was via a raised, wooden walkway that twisted out of sight a few yards ahead. We walked in single file, Tom in front, me behind him. then Simone and Ralph. Simone squealed now and then. "A gator!" she'd say. "Y'all see that? Sweet Jesus." I didn't see a thing. Tom had his hands stuck in his pockets, walked along like he was by himself. Ralph made interested, humphing noises. The trees in the swamp were not high enough to meet overhead and I felt the sun burning my hair. Suddenly the walkway ended, rounding out into a wide platform.

"Good God." said Tom.

In front of us, collected in a watery clearing, were at least a hundred alligators. Some were no more than a foot long, others—massive, dark, knobbly creatures—stretched three yards from snout to tail. It was completely quiet. We didn't move.

After a couple minutes, a few of the little alligators had jumped off their logs and swum away. We shifted a little, Ralph coughed. The big gators just sat there.
"Hey." I called, experimentally.

"Shush." said Tom.

"Hey, gators." I said, a bit more loudly.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tom whispered.

"I want to see them move."

There was one exceptionally large alligator I had my eye on. Its back was wide as a steamer trunk. Its skin was so crusty and leathery it could have been a hundred years old, it could have been dead, if it weren't for the one glittering eye I could see from the walkway. I broke a stick off an overhanging branch and tossed it.

"What the hell?" Tom hissed.

"I need to get a rise out of him." I broke off another stick and aimed carefully. It seemed important, for some reason, that the alligator notice me. We were standing there in awe of the big, scaly things, just gaping, and it made me mad. I saw Simone and Ralph were hustling down the walkway, trying not to make it shake. Tom grabbed my arm.

"You're trying to kill us," he said. "You're insane."

I shook off his hand and threw the stick. The alligator lifted its head slightly, as if thinking about something.

"Satisfied? Let's go. All right?"

The alligator had turned its head enough to make eye contact with me. I tried staring it down. I wondered if it would lunge. It seemed to me, though, that it knew
exactly what I wanted out of it, and it had decided not to
give me that thing. It just sat.

I followed Tom out of the swamp. He would not talk to
me until much later that afternoon, and then it was to ask
if I would kindly turn down the radio, the noise was giving
him a headache.

In Leesville we bought a house. It is big and mostly
empty. Tom is a strange kind of snob; he insisted on an
old house with wood floors, even if that meant living in a
bad neighborhood. The house is a rambling twenties' model,
with wide eaves and a haze of greenish-black mold obscuring
the stucco. A low brick wall circles our house and keeps
nothing out. On moving in, the first thing Tom did was
tear the foil off the top of the windows, in spite of my
protests that it would help keep the house cool. We don't
have air-conditioning: Tom is a snob about that too.

One day the alligator is gone. I know it's gone, not
just for now, but for good. Tom and I are walking home
from the jailhouse when we pass the ditch, and I notice
that the water has dried up. I kneel on the sidewalk, lean
my head over, and look upside-down through the culvert.
It's empty; my voice echoes. All I see is a little circle
of light at the far end.
I've decided that, really, our neighborhood is not so bad. The houses are mostly neat, though the porches tilt and are crammed with broken furniture. Once in a while we wake up in the night to yells and screaming. We are sure it's murder but it never is. In hot weather there are more fights, and it is harder to get back to sleep. We lie in bed with the sheets twisted around our waists, not touching. Just listening. It's not us, we think. We're not screaming.
Bess was arrested for shoplifting one Friday morning in March. It was at the supermarket where she used to work. The police came, handcuffed her, and led her through the crowd of people to a squad car in the parking lot. She sat there waiting while the police talked to the store security guard, and she tried not to cry because people were watching and she probably knew some of them; plus, she wouldn't be able to wipe her face because of the handcuffs. It was the first nice day after winter. Crows were flocking in the trees at the edge of the parking lot, and small fluffy clouds skidded across the blue sky.

At the station they fingerprinted her and took her picture and asked her questions. They snorted in surprise when she said she was a student teacher. "Some example," said the fat cop. He had snagglety teeth and his name tag said HAMMER. Bess wondered if that was his real name, or if they were allowed to put nicknames on their tags. He didn't look like a Hammer.

When they were done with her and had given her a slip of paper that told her to be in court on Monday for a
she called her boyfriend Daniel. The phone in their apartment rang four times and then the answering machine came on. She listened to her own voice telling her to leave a message, but when the tone sounded she found she couldn't speak; her throat had closed up. She had to hang up and wait for a few minutes, then she tried again.

She was still sitting in the plastic chair by the phone, trying to rub the black fingerprint ink off her fingers with a paper towel, when Daniel came in. He looked windblown, as if he'd run the whole way.

"I can't believe this!" he said. He ran his hands through his hair, making it stand on end. He looked more excited than disbelieving, somehow.

"Let's go," said Bess, standing up and shoving the paper towel into her pocket.

Daniel shook his head. "Not just yet. I want to talk to these fellows. I want to know what's going on."

Bess said, "Please, Daniel," but it was no use. He was hustling off, looking for someone official. Bess noticed he was wearing those pants she didn't like, the burgundy corduroys that were so short she could catch glimpses of the stripes on the tops of his socks. She sat back down with a sigh and stared at the posters on the walls. They were in Spanish as well as English, and Bess occupied herself trying to work out what they said without
looking at the English. She'd taken two years of Spanish in high school.

**Prohibido fumar:**

That was easy.

**Tienen los visitantes que irlos a l'escritorio al frente.**

She couldn't figure that one out. Her head began to throb.

When Daniel came back he was wearing an expression of grim pleasure. Bess had a feeling he was glad that she got caught. It would appeal to his moral sense. "Well," he said, shaking his head. "I don't know what you were thinking."

Bess drew herself up and smoothed her coat. "I need to go to the desk to pick up my purse. They took my purse away."

Daniel looked at her for a moment. His eyes were cold and she had to look away. "Is that where you put it? Huh? Did you just shove it in your purse?" He made a small movement, as if to lunge at her.

Bess didn't answer. She went to the desk and got her purse, then turned and walked stiffly through the big glass door.

Outside, the street shined and glittered in the sun. The cars hurrying by were covered with beads of water, like they were encrusted with diamonds. It must have rained briefly while Bess was inside. She smelled wet concrete
and exhaust, and the damp earth smell of spring. She looked up and down along the curb for Daniel's car, shielding her eyes from the light.

In the car he was apologetic. He even cried, putting his head in her lap.

"I'm sorry," he said over and over.

Bess patted his head. "Quit it. Please quit it. It's not your fault."

"I don't give you enough."

"Don't be stupid."

When he picked his head up there was a big wet patch on Bess's skirt. He looked at it, frowned and tried to rub it out.

"I just remembered," said Bess. "I have to be at the school in half an hour. You'd better take me right over." Bess worked with a kindergarten across town. The morning session had been canceled because of boiler problems, but she was supposed to give a lesson this afternoon. It was on the letter G.

"Are you crazy?" said Daniel. "After this? I'll call in for you and say you're sick."

"No," said Bess. "I just want to forget it. I think it would be a good idea if we just pretended it didn't happen."

one, am not going to forget this in a hurry. No, I certainly am not. I don't think you should either."

"For now." said Bess. "Let's forget it for now."

"Maybe," Daniel said. He started the car and it came to life with a shudder. "It'll be in the papers tomorrow. Everyone will know. But everyone."

Bess said. "I know."

Bess got a ride home from another student teacher at the school. She was a round, red-cheeked girl named Deb. Deb talked the whole way to Bess's apartment, pausing only to giggle.

"You live with your boyfriend? Oh, my God. My mom would die. My mother would just curl up and die." She indicated a tiny gold cross hanging around her neck. "We're Baptist."

"Oh." said Bess.

They stopped at a stoplight. Deb turned to her and gave her a hungry, envious look. "Do you have a lot of sex?"

Bess started. "No more than anyone else. I don't think."

"Oh, my God." said Deb. "I can't believe I said that. I'm sorry. I must be going crazy from stress, or something."

"It's all right," said Bess. She looked out the window. They were passing the county jail, a tall brick
building with a small, fenced basketball court attached. The fence was topped with curls of razor wire, and there were three or four men in orange jumpsuits bouncing a ball around. One of them waved.

"Did you see that?" said Deb. "That jailbird waved at you. Do you know someone in jail? I bet he'll get in trouble for that. They're not supposed to wave at people, I'm sure."

"What makes you think he was waving at me?" asked Bess.

"Well he sure wasn't waving at me."

When Bess got home, Daniel was practicing the keyboards and singing. He had his headphones on and couldn't have heard Bess come in. She set her book bag quietly on the sofa, and took her shoes off without bumping into anything, but somehow he knew she was there. He didn't even turn around.

"Hey, Bessie." he said.

Bess went into the kitchen and filled the kettle with water. She got her favorite mug out, put a tea bag in it, and got the milk and honey ready. Then she turned the stove on and waited for the water to boil. Daniel came in, his headphones around his neck.

"Are you okay, Bess?" he asked.

"Yes." she said.
He looked at her. "I don't know." he said. "I don't think you are."

"I am," she said firmly.

"Well, all right," Daniel said. He opened the refrigerator door and stuck his head in. In a moment or two he pulled it out. When he turned toward her, his face was taut.

"Look Bess," he said. "We need to talk about this thing."

The kettle began to shriek. Bess took it off the burner and poured water into her mug. The tea bag inflated and floated on top of the boiling water. It reminded Bess of a life preserver, tossed out of a sinking ship, but then it sank. She poked it with her spoon and watched the darkness seep out of it.

"Are you listening, Bess?"

"It seems to me," Bess said carefully, "that we agreed not to talk about this."

"I changed my mind."

"I didn't."

Daniel sat at the table, tapped his fingers on the formica. Bess added the milk and a little honey, and turned to the kitchen window to drink it. Outside, a big red squirrel sat on a tree branch, giving her a look.

"Look at that thing!" said Bess. "It's as big as a raccoon."
"Just one thing," Daniel said. "Just tell me this. Why did you do it? I know we don't have a whole lot of money. I know you don't have the stuff you're used to. but why steal? Why..."

He stopped, then put his hand over his mouth and shut his eyes.

"I just..." said Bess. "I just, I think I went a little crazy. From stress." She turned back to the squirrel. It had gone.

Daniel came up behind her then. He put his arms around her, squeezed her and rocked her. "Oh, Bessie. I'm so sorry. My Bessie. Oh, my."

They stood there a little while, Bess wishing he'd let go so she could get back to her tea. He breathed on her, his odd milky breath that Bess usually associated with the smell of children.

"Well," said Daniel. He let go of her and pushed her back, so he could see her face. "Don't forget we're going to dinner tonight."

Bess frowned. "I did forget."

"I figured," said Daniel, grinning. "They'll be here in an hour to pick us up." Daniel had tuned his sister's piano, and she and her husband were taking them out to eat in Hollington.

"Where in Hollington, exactly?"
"I don't know. It'll be a surprise." He took the headphones from around his neck and set them on the table.

"Why don't you go change?"

"I don't want to change." said Bess.

Daniel shrugged. "Okay. That's fine. Those clothes are fine." Bess was wearing a pink blouse and a pink and blue plaid skirt. She had her thick blond hair in a ponytail.

"Put your hair up?" asked Daniel.

"No." said Bess.

Bruce and Eliza arrived early. Bruce always nervous and liked to get places before anyone else; he was tiny and wiry and had little hair left. Eliza was small too. Her veins showed through on her white arms and her hair was spiky, dyed black.

"Bessie!" said Eliza when Bess let them in, giving her a bony hug. She smelled like cigarettes and a lemony perfume. She made Bess feel huge.

"Besserino." said Bruce, holding out his small, sweaty hand.

"Daniel's still in the shower," said Bess. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Gotta drive, gotta drive," said Bruce. "But thanks a bunch, anyhow."

"Do you have any mineral water? I'm dieting," said Eliza.
"Well, no." said Bess. "But the water here is good. Daniel and I think so, anyway."

"No thanks. All those impurities." Eliza had a blue chain tattooed around her wrist. She wore a green leather skirt and silk blouse. "I'll just wait."

Bess asked, "Do you mind my asking where we're going?"

"I certainly do," said Eliza. "It's supposed to be a surprise."

Just then, Daniel came out of the shower. His face was red and shining, his hair combed brutally back from his forehead. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and he was dripping all over the floor.

"You guys are early," he said.

"We're always early," said Eliza, rolling her eyes. Bruce was examining Daniel's keyboards. He turned them on and hit a key. A loud Ping! filled the apartment.

"Oop," said Bruce.

"I've got to get some clothes on, and I'll be right with you," said Daniel. "Does anyone want anything to drink?"

"I've got you covered," said Bess.

They got into Bruce and Eliza's car, an old Datsun station wagon that had spokes on the hub caps. Two of the hubcaps were missing, and Bruce explained how he lost them every time anyone got in their car.
"It was this HURRICANE I was in, selling components down in Beaumont, Texas," he said, pulling away from the curb. Bess felt for her seatbelt. "And I mean a HURRICANE. Hugo, or Horace, or something. The wind was so bad I kept going off the road. There was this BANG, and there went one wheel cover. I saw it roll away. A mile later, another BANG. I know where they are," he added. "If I'm ever in Texas again, God forbid, I'll pick them up."

Bess and Eliza were sitting in back, since Bruce was driving and Daniel needed the leg room, and every now and then during Bruce's monologue. Eliza prodded Bess with her sharp little elbow. She thought Bruce was cute, apparently. They'd been married for two years. Daniel set them up.

"Come on," said Daniel, when Bruce had finished. "The suspense is unbearable. Where are you taking us?"

"Should we tell them?" asked Eliza, leaning forward and nuzzling Bruce on the neck.

"To the briny, briny deep!" said Bruce ominously. He wiggled his eyebrows at Bess in the rear-view mirror.

"Actually, it's this place we've never been to," said Eliza. "We've heard a lot about it. It's called the Magic Parlor? They have magicians there, performing while you eat."

"Huh. I think I have heard of it," said Daniel.

"It could be cheesy," Eliza said. "But I heard the food is top notch. anyway."
"High budget." said Bruce. "Definitely high budget."

"It should be interesting," said Daniel.

"You're quiet tonight." Eliza said, elbowing Bess again.

Bess said, "Sorry," and smiled. It hurt her face, but she didn't want anyone thinking she was a party pooper.

The Magic Parlor was in a new strip mall at the edge of town. There was an optometrist on one side of the restaurant and a pet store on the other side, which had a big sign in the window advertising electric fish.

"That's what I'm eating!" said Bruce. "Electric fish."

"What a goof," Eliza said, taking his hand in hers.

They walked across the parking lot. It was brand new, and someone had planted trees around it in several sprightly, landscaped clumps. The cars all looked new and shiny in the setting sun.

"Hey, Bess." Daniel put his arm around her as they walked. "Be happy. Right?"

"Right." said Bess.

It was dark inside the restaurant, and it had the close, heady air of a nightclub. Bess could tell that even though it was still early, a lot of alcohol had been consumed.

"Table for four?" asked a man in a tuxedo.

"You betcha," said Bruce.
The tuxedoed man led them to a small, round table covered with a floor-length cloth. "You want to be close to the stage, right?"

"How could you tell?" asked Eliza.

"I just could," he said, and set some big menus on the table. "Special's Cajun shrimp."

"Yum, yum," said Bruce.

"No kidding." Daniel said, pulling out a chair for Bess.

They took a while to order. Eliza couldn't decide if she wanted a salad or real food.

"But I'm **dieting**." she said. "This'll all go to my hips."

"Big deal. Get the Porterhouse." said Bruce.

"I'll have whatever you're having." Bess said to Daniel, closing her menu.

He looked at her over the top of his. "Get something you want." he said.

"I don't care what I get." she said. Then she added, "I mean, I'm sure it's all good."

While the others were deciding, Bess looked around. There were a dozen or so other tables, mostly occupied by older people in formal clothes. The lights were low, with a candle at every table and a blue spotlight on the stage. The walls were draped with velvet.

"Where are the magicians?" Bess asked.
Eliza looked up. "They're probably on break," she said, looking back at her menu. "I hope one of them saws people in half. I'll volunteer. I've always wanted to be sawed in half."

"I'm sure they won't saw just anybody," said Bruce, frowning.

"Why not?" said Eliza. "Do you think it's a skill?"

"Of course. If it were easy, everyone would get sawed in half, all the time."

"I don't think so," Eliza said. "Just watch. I'm going to do it."

"Hmph," said Bruce.

The waiter came and took their orders. Bruce ordered the steak. Daniel and Bess ordered the shrimp, and Eliza asked for a salad.

"Wuss," Bruce said to his wife.

The waiter gathered up the menus. "I forgot to ask," he said, "but will there be any wine with that?"

"Wine!" said Daniel. "Yes, indeedy. Something white. If that's all right with you," he said to Eliza and Bruce.

"Of course," Bruce said. He leaned conspiratorially toward the waiter. "This young man is Harry Blackstone, Junior," he whispered, patting Daniel's shoulder.

"Ah-hah," said the waiter. He tucked his notepad in his pocket. "The next show begins in a few minutes. Would you like your wine now, or with your meal?"

"As soon as possible," said Eliza.
They were drinking wine and eating free rolls when the magician came up. He looked like a teenager not long out of acne. He twisted animals out of balloons, and the squeaking it made was unbearable.

"How's this magic? That's what I want to know." said Bruce grumpily.

The boy reached over the stage and gave one of the twisted balloons to Bruce. "What is it?" he said, holding the balloon in the air. "I don't get this, not one bit."

"It's a hat, dummy." Eliza said. "Put it on your head."

Bess leaned back in her chair. The wine was good, coursing through her like new blood. "Yeah, put it on," she said.

Bruce lifted the balloon hat to his head, but it slipped down, covering his ears and eyes.

"Your head's too small," Eliza said.

Bruce took it off and put it on Daniel. "This boy's Harry Blackstone, Junior!" he said to the teenaged magician.

"I'm about to disappear into the men's room," said Daniel.

"Would you cut out the Harry Blackstone stuff?" asked Eliza. "I mean, really."

"All right, all right," said Bruce.
The next magician seemed better. He did card tricks, but they were hard to follow because no one could see the cards from the audience. "It's the King of Hearts," he said. "Trust me."

They were getting bored by the time the food came. Daniel and Eliza had eaten all the rolls.


Daniel ordered more wine and they began to eat. Bess thought she was hungry, but when she looked at the shrimp she felt a little sick. It seemed to glow, brilliant orange in the candle light.

"Dig in," said Daniel, looking at her. "Just a minute," she said.

They ate in silence. The card trick man droned on and on. Daniel put his silverware down, all of a sudden, and looked at Bruce and Eliza. Bess noticed his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot.

"Hey you guys," he said, wiping his napkin across his forehead. "You'll never guess what happened today."

Bess jerked up. "Daniel..." she said, alarmed.

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "They're going to find out soon enough. It'll be in the paper tomorrow."

"Maybe not," said Bess. "You don't..."
"Paper? What?" Eliza said. A leaf of lettuce dangled from her fork.

"Bess got arrested today," said Daniel.

"Oh, my God! Bess!"

"Bess?" said Bruce.

"Shoplifting," said Daniel. He paused for a meaningful amount of time, then picked up his silverware and resumed eating.

"Bess!" said Eliza again.

Bess looked down at her plate. She couldn't say anything.

"What was it? What did you take?" asked Bruce.

"Oh, my God," said Daniel. "This is the best part. You won't believe this."

"What? What?" said Eliza.

"Tell her what you took," Daniel said.

Bess was silent.

"Come on," he said, encouragingly. "Tell them."

Behind him, a new magician took the stage. He called himself Edward Moon, or maybe that was his name. He was old and had a red, alcoholic nose.

"She won't tell us," said Eliza, disappointed.

"All right," said Daniel. "I will, then. Are you ready for this?" Eliza and Bruce glanced and Bess, then back at Daniel.

"Uh-huh," said Eliza.
“Okay,” Daniel said. He smiled. “It was. believe it or not, a lobster.”

“A who?” cried Bruce.

“An Australian Rock lobster. worth $24.95. No kidding.”

Eliza was dumbfounded, staring at Bess. Bess turned a little in her chair and looked at the grizzled old magician. He was pulling things out of his sleeves. A white bird flew across the restaurant.

“Ha! You’re joking. One of those out of the aquarium, with the claws?” said Bruce.

“Frozen. actually.” Daniel said. “Bessie didn’t want to get bit, I guess.”

“Oh, God, oh God.” said Eliza. rocking in her chair and stifling laughter.

On the stage, Edward Moon was shaking out a large blue handkerchief. It reminded Bess of something, of a dress she had once. or maybe a hair ribbon. The color was a few shades deeper than the sky. She couldn’t take her eyes off it.

“But why?” Bruce was saying. “Does it run in her family?”

“Couldn't tell you.” said Daniel.

The magician was asking for volunteers. “I need a lady.” he said. He had a wheezy old voice. No one wanted to come up.
"You," he said, pointing at Eliza. "Come on up. You with the tattoo."

"Nuh-uh," said Eliza. "Not unless you're sawing people in half."

"Not tonight," he said. He peered around the room, squinting in the spotlight. "Can't hardly see a thing," he said.

Bess stood up. She swayed a little, and held the back of her chair.

"All right!" said the magician. "You just come on up here, little lady. You'll do fine."

Bess held herself straight and walked up to the stage. She mounted the steps, illuminated by blue light, then turned to face the audience. There seemed to be more people than there was before; there were people lined up against the wall, she noticed, and the white-aproned kitchen staff was gathered in a doorway.

"Here, here" said the old magician, showing her where to stand. "That's good. Now. This handkerchief. Just a handkerchief, right?" He waved it around her head a few times. Bess put her hand out to touch it, but he snatched it back. The audience tittered.

"Not so fast!" said Mr. Moon. "Now, this handkerchief might look normal, but it isn't. Nope! This is no ordinary hankie. This is a particularly devilish hankie."

At that, the piece of blue silk suddenly jerked up on its own. The corner folded over, giving the handkerchief a
small, animal-like head. The head turned warily from side to side, as if surveying the audience.

"What?" said the magician. "I can't hear you." He put his head up close to the handkerchief. "Is that so!" Mr. Moon leaned back and gave Bess a surprised, goggle-eyed look. "The handkerchief has a tiny favor to ask you."

He stopped and shook his head, pretending to change his mind. Strands of white hair floated around his ears.

"No, Mr. Handkerchief. I'm afraid that's not possible. This here's a lady. What's your name, young lady?"

"Bess," said Bess.

"Beth! Lovely name. Now, I hate to ask you this, but my little friend is insisting. He wants to know if it's possible—" and at this Edward Moon leered at the audience. "If there's the tiniest chance you might consider...well, frankly, he wants to get down your shirt."

At this the diners roared. Bess thought she could make out Daniel above the rest, his particular goony laugh.

"Well, I guess so." said Bess. More laughter.

"Oh, he'll be so pleased!" said Edward Moon. "Here. Take him gently. That's right. Just tuck him into your blouse. Make sure you leave his head peeking out, so he can breathe!"

Bess slid the blue silk down the front of her blouse. It was cool, and felt good against her skin.
"Now Beth," said Mr. Moon. "You let me know if he gets into any mischief, will you? Like I said, he's a devilish old thing, when he feels like it."

Bess nodded, and smiled at the audience. She saw Eliza waving madly at the edge of the stage. Bess gave her a little wave back.

"Oh, no! No!" yelled Edward Moon. "Mr. Handkerchief. how dare you!" With that, he yanked on the silk and pulled it out of Bess's shirt. A lacy white bra was knotted to the other end.

Bess stood there, smiling faintly, as the audience hooted and laughed. Mr. Moon pretended to wrestle with the handkerchief. In the scuffle, the bra went flying out into the dining room.

Bess kept standing there in the circle of blue light while the waves of laughter rolled over her and over her. Mr. Moon was bowing and waving—she was his finale, it seemed—and went off stage. When the laughing faded, Bess carried herself back to her seat, regally and still glowing in her humiliation.

Bruce, it turned out, had had too much to drink, and was in no condition to drive. Eliza, too, was far gone.

"How about," she said, teetering. "you folks take the car. You can drive us home and return it tomorrow, when we have some business even thinking about driving."
"All right." said Daniel. His jaw was set. The wine he'd had with dinner seemed to have worn off.

"Hey, Bess," said Bruce, leaning heavily against his wife. "I got a joke for you. You listening?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. This is a good one. What kind of bird don't fly?"

"I don't know. What?"


"We get it all right," Daniel said. "Look, folks. Let's see if we can make it into the parking lot without falling over. Bess, take Bruce's arm, would you?"

They staggered out to the parking lot. The moon was out, just past full and sending cold light down onto the cars. Bess and Daniel helped the others into back seat, where they promptly embraced and fell asleep.

Daniel didn't say anything on the way to Bruce and Eliza's. Bess braided and unbraided her hair, watching the road. Here and there, the headlights caught a set of glowing eyes sitting huddled in the ditch.

Bruce and Eliza seemed to have recovered some by the time they got to their house. They sat up, rubbing their faces and kissing each other.

"Need any help getting in?" asked Daniel.

"Don't think so," said Eliza sleepily. "Honey, do you have the keys?"
"Keys?" said Bruce. "Give me my keess." There were more smacking noises from the back seat.

"All right, all right." said Daniel.

"Okay." said Eliza. "'Night, you two."

"'Night, jailbird." Bruce said.

They watched the two small people cling to each other up the walk. They took a while to get the key in the door, but at last they waved Daniel away.

He and Bess were still some distance from home when Daniel pulled alongside the road and turned the engine off. He unhooked his seatbelt and turned to her.

"Bess," he whispered. "Bess, come back to me. Please." He unhooked her seatbelt and reached his arms around her.

"I'm here." she said.

Daniel yanked her coat off. She fell against him. He moved his hands over her, roughly. He pressed his mouth to hers and his teeth crushed her lip.

"Hey." Daniel said, pushing away. "What's this?" He fingered something at the back of her neck.

"Just a tag," she said.

"But it's on the outside." said Daniel. "Your blouse is on inside out."

"Oh," said Bess.

Daniel looked at her. In the moonlight his face was black and white, his eyes dark circles of shadow.
"Did they search you?" he asked. He took her arms and shook her, angrily. "Did they search you?" he said again. "Did they?"

She let her head fall back. She wouldn't look at him.

"God damn it!" he said. "Those fuckers took your clothes off."

He pulled away from her. Bess closed her eyes and thought about going home. They ought to go soon, because it seemed like a long way. It seemed like an impossible distance.
The woman who stole my baby was wearing a pink raincoat and white rubber boots that clomped. I could hear them from across the parking lot where I stood, frozen, by the automatic doors. She was heading for the highway. As she waded into the dead weeds along the road, I saw that she'd given Carla, my daughter, something to hold. It was dark and square; it looked like a kitchen sponge, and Carla waved it in her fist. As I watched, Carla stuck the thing into her mouth just as the bag boy began galloping toward them in his red and blue uniform.

Get that thing out of her mouth. I wanted to yell. But for some reason I could only think it, and I thought it over and over.

The bag boy grabbed the back of the pink raincoat. It was cinched around the woman's middle, so tight it made me think she must have had a waist like an ant's, like she was in two parts. I watched as they struggled—the burly bag boy snatching for Carla, and the thin awful woman screaming, tripping in her white boots, and fighting the boy off with one arm. Carla took the thing out of her
mouth and shrieked. Then, in one swift movement, the bag boy knocked the woman over and scooped my daughter up. The woman fell into the weeds. She was howling furiously.

The bag boy left the woman there and carried my daughter back to where I was still standing, still frozen. I noticed that the color of Carla's little jacket was exactly the same as the woman's— they looked like they belonged together—and for a moment I was jealous, and knew why she'd stolen her.

"Here you go," he said. I took her.

The thing the woman had given Carla was a kitchen sponge, the kind with the rough scrubby surface on one side, still wrapped in cellophane. My daughter clutched it tight with both hands.

The bag boy wiped sweat from his face with a handkerchief. There was a streak of blood on one of his cheeks.

"Are you going to call the police?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," he said, stuffing the handkerchief in his pocket. "No rush though. She's done it before: they know who she is."

I tried pulling the sponge away from Carla. She wouldn't let go. Her face was red and damp and the veins pulsed in her temples. She was one and a half, still had no hair, and her large bald head made her look wise and secretive and odd, as if she kept things in there that I had nothing to do with.
"Come on, baby," I said. "Give it to mama."

"No!" she yelled.

The bag boy looked at the sponge curiously.

"Hey," he said. "You pay for that?"

"No," I said. "I don't want it."

"Looks like the little baby does."

"Give it to mama," I said, and shook her a bit.

"Shouldn't shake babies."

I tugged at it. Carla's small, sharp fingernails dug in. I wanted to cry.

"Just give me a dollar. all right?" said the boy.

"Just pay for the damn thing."

In the parking lot, the woman was walking in circles, her raincoat undone, her hair in her eyes. Her white boots—galoshes, I could see now—flopped open.

I gave the boy his dollar. He tucked it into his vest pocket and gestured toward the woman with his head. "Loopy Lou," he said. "That's her name." He went back inside through the automatic doors.

I left my groceries. I'd had half a cartful when Carla disappeared, but I'd abandoned them by the meat cooler.

Our red wagon—it was the kind I had when I was a kid, with wooden sides; the kind we always left to fill with water and breed mosquitoes in the yard—was still waiting by the bike racks. I set Carla, sucking on her sponge, in it, and picked up her plastic rat toy.
"Here's Ratty, baby," I said. "Look at Ratty!" I danced him around the edge of the wagon. Carla gazed at me with big silent eyes.

Behind us, I heard the woman wailing. "Fuckers!" she cried out. "Motherfucking fuckers! You're all just fucking motherfucking fuckers is all you are!"

The clomping of her boots told me she was still pacing around the parking lot, but I didn't want to turn and look. It frightened me. She made me think of those women in old plays who went mad with grief when their sons died, though apparently she'd been mad all along.

I was crying now, too. My baby sat in her wagon, contentedly biting that sponge. The crazy woman was pounding her fists on the hood of a car, and the sound of it filled the lot, a desperate and hollow racket.

"Let's go, let's go," I mumbled to Carla, put Ratty in her lap, and took the handle of the wagon. I turned us around, headed for our house. I couldn't stop crying. I felt snot make wet bubbles as I breathed, and rubbed my nose with the sleeve of my coat.

We bumped along the sidewalk. Each square of the sidewalk was divided from the next with a thick rope of tar, or rubber, something that got soft when it was hot. It was spring though, and still cool, so the wagon jolted every few feet. I glanced at Carla. Her head bobbed. She looked like she might fall out backwards. It worried
me, though she'd never fallen out before, so I picked her up and carried her. The wagon rattled emptily behind us.

The yards we passed were full of wet grass, flattened down by the snow that had only just melted. It made me think of William, my husband, and how he combed his hair down with water each morning. He didn't like grease, and didn't seem to notice that his curls sprung right back up again when they dried. I decided, then, that we would not go home; we'd go to William's work—the college across town where he was getting his Ph.D.—and tell him what had happened. I knew that if I went home, I'd sit there by myself and I wouldn't be able to stop this bawling.

We passed a yard that held a child about Carla's age, an androgynous baby wearing a snowsuit with a pointed, elf-like hood.

"Baby!" shouted the other baby, pointing at Caria.

There was no mother, no father, no baby-sitter in sight. Just this baby in its snowsuit, and a plastic bucket on the grass.

"Go inside." I told it. "Go on!"

"Baby!" screamed the baby, even more excited.

I looked around. The mad woman was far away, probably still in the parking lot of the Safeway, but I didn't think I should leave the child like this. I pulled our wagon up the front walk and rang the bell.
The door opened right away. A woman with close-together eyes and long black hair stood there with a hand on her hip.

"Your baby..." I said. "He's...he's?"

"He, yes."

"He's all alone out there."

"Baby!" I heard him cry.

The woman shrugged. "I watch him from the window," she said. Behind her, a little girl with the same black hair and close-set eyes was slapping her hands on the kitchen counter. She seemed to be making something out of clay, or dough. The woman looked at me hard. "You okay?"

Tears were slipping down my face with reckless abandon. I caught some with my tongue and lips.

"There are crazy people out here," I told her.

"I know a few of them," she said, nodding. "Well, you're right. I'll bring Dylan inside." She stepped out onto the walk in her slippers. "Dylan honey! Sweetpea!" The little boy trotted up to her and she hauled him inside by one arm.

"Thanks," she said. She looked up and down the street. "You sure you don't need anything?"

"Oh, no, thank you." I noticed there was a strong, pleasant smell coming out of the house. It wasn't a smell I could put my finger on, but it was a familiar one. Sweet and sharp—it reminded me of cookbooks and china figurines. When I was a little girl, I knew people whose houses
smelled that way. I wondered why our house didn't have that scent. I wasn't sure it had one at all.

"You have a good day, now," the woman said, and shut the door.

My mother, who died when I was seven but who I remember fairly well, considering—told me once that everyone is lonely, most of the time. That the smell of barbecues makes everyone sad, because it reminds us that sometimes people don't think to invite us places, and that really, very few people care if we're ever around or not. I was four, I think, so she must have been about twenty-six, my age now. We were sitting by the screened window of my bedroom, it was night, and we were waiting for the rocket experiments they held once a month at the Air Force base near our town. If we pressed our faces to the screen, we could see the streaks of light arcing above the apartment buildings across from us.

My mother loved space, and she wanted me to love it too. She got magazines in the mail, heavy ones with pictures of planets and stars and things on the front. They were beautiful, full color. I remember thinking how strange it was that space seemed black and white from earth, but close up—color! She explained the solar system to me with a bowl of fruit and a flashlight. To this day I think of oranges when people talk about Mars, grapefruit when Saturn comes up. She told me she wanted to live to be
ten thousand years old, so that she could see how things turned out.

But that would be really lonely, I told her. Everyone you know would be dead.

I guess that's the problem, she shrugged.

We continued down the sidewalk. I wanted to hold Carla with both arms, so I kept my eyes open for a good place to hide the wagon. All the yards in this neighborhood seemed bare--the wagon would be noticed right off. I was getting frustrated. Plus my arm ached. When we passed a playground. I called to a kid who was sitting on the swings.

"You want this?" I asked, shifting my daughter to my other arm.

"That wagon?" he said. He had yellow hair and big teeth, the kind that just scream Seven-Year-Old. "How much?"

"Free." I told him.

"All right," said the boy, and took it from me. He put one knee in it and propelled himself with the other leg. He took off across the playground. I wrapped both arms around my daughter. She whined and pushed me away with one hand; the other still gripped the sponge.

We hadn't gone far when I thought, Oh, no--Ratty. He was still in the wagon.
I ran back to the playground. Carla bumping my hip. The kid was gone. The slide glinted in the sun. the swings rocked with invisible children. I walked around for a little while, thinking he might come back, or that maybe he found Ratty in the wagon and tossed him out. I kicked through the grass. No rat.

I mourned Ratty. William had bought it for Carla's first birthday. It was supposed to be a dog toy. I think. We'd helped her tear off the wrapping paper, and as soon as she got her baby fists on it she picked it up and stuck it in her mouth. head first. William got a big kick out of that. He wanted to take a Polaroid to show his friends the other biology grad students, but I never let him.

We walked the rest of the way to campus. Carla kept squirming and knocking my chin with her big downy head, and I sweated in my coat. William's building, Wicker Hall, was the first one we came to. Most of the buildings on campus looked the same, boxy and brown, but Wicker Hall had a greenhouse attached. I liked the greenhouse, the way the steam condensed on the glass walls, and the big green tropical leaves that pressed against them like hands, but the rest of the building spooked me. There was a skeleton hanging from a wire in someone's office; its toes pointed down and its eyesockets stared grimly forward. And there was a smell you couldn't get away from, a chemically odor that made me think of ants. Ants in vinegar, more
precisely. Sometimes William came home with that smell in his hair and his clothes. He didn't even notice it.

Since it was the middle of the class period no one was around. My shoes slapped the hard tile floor, echoing. I had more or less stopped crying, though my eyelashes felt like I'd dipped them in glue, and my ribs hurt. I carried Carla up the stairs to William's office, which he shared with four other teaching assistants, and pushed the door open. William's desk was empty.

"Hey, Ann," said someone. It was Freddie, a woman I'd met at some graduate student function or other. She had red hair, and was short and round. People like her made me feel too tall—cumbersome, even.

"Hi there. Carla. Whatcha got there, baby?" She tickled my daughter's belly with her fat fingers.

"Hello," I said. "Is William around?"

"Teaching. I believe," said Freddie. She cooed at Carla some more. "Lecture hall, downstairs, if you want to check."

"I think we'll just sit here a while. Would that be okay?"

"Sure, sure..." said Freddie. She smoothed her hand over Carla's head, pretending there was hair, then glanced up at me. "Did something happen?"

"Someone stole our wagon."

"Station wagon?" she cried, shocked.
"Oh. no. no." I set the baby on William's desk and shrugged off my coat. I tried to do it without letting go of Carla, putting one hand on her head, then the other, and I knocked a sheaf of papers to the floor. Freddie was on her knees in a second. "I can...you don't have to do that," I said.

"No problem."

"It was Carla's wagon, the one we take to the store. Her rat was in it."

"Oh, dear," said Freddie, setting the papers on William's desk. "Well, speaking of rats, I have some I have to feed. Want to help?"

"Actually." I said, hauling Carla into my arms again. "Maybe I will go check on William."

We clattered down the steps. The lecture hall was at the end of the hallway, behind big double doors. One of the doors was propped open with a triangular piece of wood. I peeked inside.

William's lecture was on ornithology. He'd been covering birds for a few weeks now, and today he was talking about songs and calls. I sat on the floor and listened, with Carla gnawing her sponge and rocking back and forth in my lap. She'd chewed her way through the cellophane wrapper, and scraps of it stuck to her lips and fell from her mouth.

He was talking about bird accents. He described how a crow on the east coast will sound noticeably different from
a western version of the same thing, though they're exactly the same species—corvus brachyrhynchos. The greater the distance, he said, the greater the difference. This was an upper-level class, but William got to teach it because of his research, which was on bird calls, and I had heard this before. William had one of those mouths, those muscular, precise mouths, that made him good at imitations. He showed off for his class now, doing an eastern crow and a western crow.

"Kaw!" he said.

And then, slightly higher, slightly hoarser. "Kaw!"

"Daddy!" yelped Carla.

William looked straight at us and raised his eyebrows. Students giggled. He tapped his watch. I checked my own and saw that he had another half an hour to go, so I hauled Carla up again and wandered down the hall. I wouldn't tell him. I decided, about the crazy woman at the Safeway. It was why I'd come all this way, of course, but now I saw that I would not be able to convey how terrible it was. It might even seem funny to William: most things did. Besides, I was beginning to like the idea of having secrets from him.

A few doors over from the lecture hall was the Biological Research Museum. William called it the Bird Museum, because the birds were all he was interested in. I'd gone there with him a few times. William examined the stuffed birds, the bird skeletons, the unhatched eggs. He
leafed through pages of bird song sound prints. This was the first time I'd brought Carla.

When I pushed the door to the Bird Museum open, the ants-in-vinegar smell floated out. That's what it was. I decided; preservatives. Carla wrinkled her nose and pressed her sponge to her mouth. Nobody else was here. A very thin layer of dust covered everything: shelves, windows, light fixtures, furniture. We walked past glass cases full of depressing taxidermy. A small red fox looked at us cockeyed, and an albino turkey posed with his white tail fanned out—proud, but beakless. A mother platypus anxiously crouched over her eggs, incubating them forever.

"Ratty!" cried Carla, reaching for a stuffed mongoose that was arranged on a tree stump. It was posed rearing up, snarling at a cobra about to strike. My daughter's hand bumped glass. I set her on the floor; my arms were tired, and there was nothing to hurt her there.

On one side of the museum, there were tall metal shelves lined with jars. The jars were of various sizes and held various things—fish preserved in cloudy water, frogs, a cow heart, a set of dog lungs. The delicate skeleton of a goldfish floated in pink fluid. Most of the objects in the jars were quite old, and had become shapeless and difficult to distinguish from each other. Little yellow labels gave the Latin name and a date—1948, 1963, 1925. I found myself drawn to the jars, ran my
fingers over them, and tried to figure out what was in them.

One set of shelves was reserved for human fetuses. I'd seen the jars before. the first time I came into the museum with William, but since then I'd avoided them. They were terrifying and sad. Their skin was bloodless, blue, and looked like it would flake apart like over-cooked fish if someone poked it. Their eyes were closed—no lashes, no hair. The baby boys' penises were tiny nubs of skin. Remnants of umbilical cords twisted around them. Some were very small, and hardly human yet, but others were several months along. The largest was in what looked like a pickle jar. Her hands clenched into small blue fists. Somehow, all of them floated.

There must have been fifty of them. An entire wall of fetuses preserved in cloudy light, but they were less shocking, somehow, than beautiful.

I kneit down. The girl in the pickle jar was on the bottom shelf. I took the jar in both hands and lifted it up, then set it on my knees. Sediment from the bottom floated around the fetus, muddying the water for a good minute or so. When it cleared I took a good look at her. There were wrinkles on her stomach, on her behind, her arms. Her umbilical cord was lumpy and wrapped around her neck. Her mouth was open a fraction, and a tiny bit of tongue protruded.
I gripped the lid of the jar and gave it a good twist. A little gush of air escaped. It smelled very bad, oddly salty, like fetid ocean water. Inside, the fetus swiveled, and I understood then that the fetuses were all suspended from wires that were attached to the jar lids. I stopped. The fetus rocked.

It was Thanksgiving Day that Carla was conceived. William and I were at his parents' house, and after dinner, when everyone sat around in the family room and fell asleep or watched television, we crept out. It was dark and drizzling. We made our way to the town cemetery, and decided we wanted to have sex there, standing up, against the cemetery wall. Since he was quite a bit taller than I was, we gathered a pile of rubbish—clods of grave dirt, branches—for me to stand on. I pulled my skirt up around my waist, he felt me, he pushed his way in. The dirt gave way, the branches broke, and I slid a little way down the wall. He kept himself in, somehow, bumping me hard against the stone. He had a key chain in his pocket that kept making noises—laser sounds, beeps and buzzes—and I remember wanting to laugh. Rain dripped down our faces, and I could see it caught in William's springy hair, silhouetted against a distant street light. It was a release, to sweat and breathe hard at last, to gasp in the dark, dank graveyard air. When we were done we stood together, wet and steaming, and looked across the unmown
grass. No one took care of this place. Here and there, sometimes, you might find a piece of bone. Maybe someone's hip, someone who died two hundred years before, pushed up through the soil like a bulb.
A Clear Day and No Memories

I was sleeping in my car then. For safety I parked at a rest stop outside of the city, and all night the headlights of trucks swept over me. Sprinklers rained against my windows. Mornings I would wash my face and armpits in the rest stop bathroom, then comb my hair and drink some water from my hands. Sometimes I got chocolate bars out of the snack machine and ate them while I read from my Bible. It was small and had a green plastic cover. It was given to me by a happy, good-looking family who ate lunch at the rest stop once and invited me to join them. I didn't meet many other people there. Once in a while a cop would knock on my window and ask if I was okay, and I'd tell him I was.

This was a temporary situation. I had a job at a convenience store deli and almost enough money for a new apartment. I wanted a nice one, with tall windows and wood floors, but I didn't mind if it was small. I spent much of my time at work thinking about this apartment, planning the arrangement of furniture and the different meals I could
cook there. I imagined reading magazines and drinking coffee by the gas heater. In winter condensation would run down the inside of the windows, which was what I liked about gas heat. I even thought I might get a pet of some kind, and let it sleep on a blanket nearby.

My job was to make sandwiches, fry up chicken, and fix the various macaroni salads that we sold in plastic containers. It wasn’t as bad a job as you might think.

One morning I got a phone call at work. It was Geraldine, who had been my girlfriend some months before. I had liked her, quite a bit in fact, but she was young, eighteen or so, and it made me feel wrong to be with her. I had stopped calling her when I no longer had a telephone. She was crying, almost screaming.

"What am I supposed to do with this baby?" she asked.

"What baby?" I said.

"This baby!" she shouted. "Your baby!"

"I don’t know what you’re talking about." I told her. She cried for a while. Strange, sad noises escaped from the phone. Lila, the cashier, gave me angry looks. We weren’t supposed to get personal calls.

Finally Geraldine said, "I had a baby."

"Okay," I said. "I understand that."

"It doesn’t look so good. It might have something wrong with it."

"Did you call a doctor?"
"I'd rather not," said Geraldine.
"Is it breathing?"
"Oh, yes." she said. "It's doing that all right."
"Well, look." I told her. "I'm a little confused here. Will you hold on a minute?"
"Okay," she said.

I laid the receiver on the counter and tried to think. I glanced around. Lila had disappeared, probably looking for the manager to try and get me fired. There was no one in the store; nothing moved except for a large cardboard bottle of beer that twirled from the ceiling. I took a packaged brownie from the counter display and ate it quickly, stuffing the wrapper in my pocket. I sucked my teeth until they felt clean, then tried to decide if I should hang up the telephone.

"Hey!" It was Geraldine's voice, a tiny version of it coming from the receiver. "Are you there?"

I picked it up. "I'm here." I said.

"I just don't know what to do," said Geraldine, beginning to cry again. "I mean, I just..."

"When did you have this baby?" I asked.

"Yesterday. I think." she said.

"Look." I said. "I'll come visit you. I'll come after work. Where are you right now?"

"I'm at home." she said.
Geraldine lived several blocks from the convenience store, in a large pink apartment house with green shutters. It was in a run-down part of the city not far from the river. I had lived near here when I was a child, and it hadn't changed much since then, though a couple art galleries and coffee shops had opened and many of the houses had been painted strange, slightly disgusting colors.

I had to go up some stairs to get to Geraldine. Her apartment was in the attic, just two rooms. I remembered how the ceiling of her bedroom sloped down on both sides, and was so low I had to stoop. I remembered that and the wallpaper covered with roses, and the blue paint around the window frames.

Geraldine wasn't crying anymore when she let me in. She looked bad, sort of yellowish and gray around her eyes, and she wore a tee-shirt and no pants. Her breasts wobbled around under the fabric. Her red hair was tied back in a ponytail.

"Shouldn't you still be in the hospital?" I asked.

She stared at me a moment, then looked down at the floor. "I didn't go," she said.

"You had it here? You had it all by yourself?"

"I didn't think it would come this soon. I didn't want it to." She sat down on the sofa and covered her legs with a blanket. She picked up a magazine, frowned at it, and put it on her lap. "I don't know what to do with it."
If I take it to the hospital and it dies it'll be my fault."

I noticed, then, that there was a funny smell in the room. It was meaty, a little rancid.

"Where is it?" I said.

She got up again and went through the doorway to her bedroom. I saw clothes on the floor, cups and glasses and books. When she came out she had the baby wrapped in a shirt. When she handed it to me I knew it was mine. It looked like me, or what I would look like if I had spent my life in a chrysalis and had just crawled out.

"This baby is too small." I said.

"I know that," said Geraldine.

"It had better go to the hospital."

"Will they keep it? I don't want it."

The baby made no noises. It was a dark color, like a bruise. It wasn't wearing a diaper and urine soaked into my shirt. It was a little girl. Her arms flopped.

"Give me something to feed it."

Geraldine looked around. She had a small refrigerator, and she knelt down and took out a carton of half and half. She handed it to me. I put the baby on the sofa and dipped my finger into the carton, and then put into the baby's mouth. Nothing happened. A white drop slid across her cheek.

"Is it dead?" said Geraldine.

I shook the baby. She made a sound like a cat.
"No," I said.

I tried again. I got the baby to take some of the half and half, and it even sucked once or twice on my finger. I could not imagine that my fingers tasted very good at all.

"I should wash my hands," I said to Geraldine.

"Yes," she said uncertainly. She seemed confused and was rubbing her hand back and forth over her mouth. "You should."

Her bathroom was small and hot and full of clothes. The bad smell was stronger in here; bloody towels were heaped next to the toilet, and blood smeared the sink. I couldn't find the soap, so I rinsed my hands in cold water and wiped them on my pants.

When I was done I dug around for the telephone. Geraldine was sitting on the sofa again, looking at the baby like it was an animal that had snuck in through the window.

I found the telephone under a blanket and called a hospital.

"St. Mary's, how can I help you?"

"I just found a baby," I said. "What should I do with it?"

"You found a baby? Where? Is it all right?"

"I think it's all right. It was in a little box next to a convenience store. It doesn't look exactly normal."
"You should bring it in. You should bring it right away. Should I send an ambulance?"

"Oh no." I said. "My car is fast." I hung up.

Geraldine had her hand over the baby's face. The whole of it fit into her mother's palm, like an apple or a baseball.

"Hey!" I said, slapping her arm away.

Geraldine turned to me. She looked insulted. "I wasn't hurting it. I was just feeling it." She sulked. Then, "You know, I've had lots of boyfriends besides you."

"This baby is mine." I said.

She said, "Take it. then." and disappeared into her bedroom.

I wrapped a different shirt around the baby and carried it out to my car. I settled it in the passenger seat and then I remembered the half and half. When I went back for it the door was locked.

"Geraldine! Geraldine!"

She didn't answer. I took my little Bible out of my back pocket and slid it under the door to her. I don't know if she found it. She didn't thank me.

I decided not to drive straight to the hospital. First I went to the convenience store and bought a box of tiny diapers. Even the smallest ones were too big for the baby; if I'd held her up and shook her they'd have fallen right off. I wrapped the shirt tight around her to keep
them on. It felt good to have her in my car. She radiated a slight warmth, which was a miraculous thing. I could feel it from the driver's seat.

It was fall. Rain came down in fist-sized drops. Soon I couldn't see out of my window because the wipers didn't work, but I knew where I was because I'd lived in that city my whole life, and even the vaguest of shapes made sense to me through the windshield. When I stopped at the St. Charles tavern, I brought the baby with me.

It was warm inside, and beery, and a man sat at the bar with a cloth over his head. Pinball machines sang from the corner. I didn't sit down but stood by the door with the baby, waiting for the rain to let up. A crowd of women ducked in, newspapers and pocketbooks over their heads, hooting.

"Can I get you anything?" the waitress asked. She was so thin her hipbones showed through her skirt, and her hair was short and spiky.

"If you have some half and half for the baby, it would be appreciated," I said.

"Well," she said. "We have milk."

"All right."

She came back in a minute with a yellow tumbler of milk. She set it on a table and I gave her a dollar. I fed the baby with my finger again, and she sucked and sucked.
A woman approached me. She tottered on heels. "Can I see the baby? I'd like to see it." She peered over my arm. Her face changed.

"Oh, my. Is that baby all right? It's awfully small."

"It was a little early, is all," I told her.

"Well, what they do with incubators these days?" she said.

I didn't say anything.

"Come sit down with us," said the woman.

I did. I held the baby close to me and no one else asked to see it. The women were waiting for someone and had things on their minds. They bought me a drink or two.

I found out the person they were waiting for was Florence of Arabi, a medium who showed up at the tavern once a month and gave readings to customers in exchange for drinks.

"If you give her a ring or something, something that belongs to you, she'll hold it against her teeth and get vibrations from it," the incubator woman told me. She was drinking a white Russian, and her lips were milky.

"Do you really believe in that stuff?" I asked her.

"Only enough for it to be fun," she said, shrugging. She took a long slurp of her drink and turned away from me.

We waited a long time. The incubator woman's friend, a small round lady with long, fuzzy black hair, smoked
cigarette after cigarette and refused to tell her friends what she was going to ask Florence of Arabi.

"It has to do with Buell, doesn't it?" someone asked.

The woman smashed out another cigarette. "Nope," she said.

"I bet it is about Buell," said the incubator woman. "See? She's all mad now."

"Who's Buell?" I said.

"No one," said the black-haired woman. She fished around in her purse and brought out another pack of cigarettes. "What are YOU going to ask her?" she said, glaring at me.

"Me?" I said.

The women waited for my answer. I looked around the bar, trying to get ideas.

"Is that guy Iranian?" I asked, pointing my elbow toward the man with a cloth on his head.

"Oh, for God's sake," said the incubator woman. "Don't you have any better question than that?"

"He's just drunk," her friend said, pushing another empty glass away. "That's his tee-shirt on his head."

I thought some more. "I don't know. I'm looking for an apartment. Maybe I'll ask where I can find an apartment."

The incubator woman slammed her fist on the bar. "No!" she yelled. "She won't tell you stuff like that! What do you think she is, a real estate agent? She deals
with matters of the heart! Matters of the HEART!" She put her head down on the bar and cried. Her black-haired friend patted her on the back and gave me a pestilential look.

The rain got worse and then it got better, and sunlight puddled on the street outside. A couple of the women left, but the others were too far gone.

"I guess she's not coming," said the incubator woman, lifting her head and wiping her nose. She waved at the waitress and ordered a cup of coffee. For some reason, that was one of the saddest things I'd ever heard.

We'd been waiting forever. We had all grown old and died in that bar, and then been reborn. The baby too. She spent an entire lifetime in my arms.

It was time to leave.

I drove the baby to the hospital. I still felt bad about Florence of Arabi, because I imagined she could have given us some good advice, saved us from some trouble. Maybe she really could have told me where I could find an apartment, so I could give this baby a home.

Yellow leaves flew down and stuck to my windshield.

The hospital was run by nuns. They were everywhere in their white habits, pushing the dying up and down the hallways. It smelled like warm cardboard in there, the food they made the sick people eat.

Someone sent me to the emergency room. "I found this baby," I told them. "Someone left her."
An old nun took her from my arms. The baby was sleeping for the first time. Her hands were curled into fists the size of olives.

The nun rocked her. She was a beautiful nun. Her skin looked like it was made from wrinkled velvet. "Who could do this?" she said. "Who could do such a thing?"

I stood for a while in the white room. I wrote some lies down on some forms. They did not want me to leave but I did, escaping through the door the ambulances come to.

Back at the bar, the incubator woman put her hand on my knee.

"I miss my daughter." I cried.

"There, there," she said.

We drank sweet drinks from tiny glasses. We danced to the music on the jukebox, knocking into tables and chairs.

"Let's go to your house," she said.

We stumbled out to the curb, but we could go no farther. There was my car.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I live right here."

She laughed and took my hand. A gust of wind swirled yellow leaves around us. I was dizzy. When I looked more closely I saw that they were not leaves at all, but hundreds of butterflies, blown and dampened by the wind. They landed on our heads and shoulders, seeking rest.
Cars slowed down. People came out of the bar. Everything was covered with butterflies: they were on our lips and ears and hands, gripping with their tiny feet. We moved slowly in order not to squash them.

We stared at each other. I think we were beautiful.