Shadow voices| Short stories from the northern Rockies

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SHADOW VOICES
SHORT STORIES FROM THE NORTHERN ROCKIES

by
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B. A., University of Washington, 1976

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What God Looks Like

I have avoided driving up the Bitterroot Valley for a period of two years. But last weekend, I drove, and when I passed Medora Lane, I pulled off the highway. I looked from my car window at a log house, framed by trees in the countryside. It used to be my log house. It was new seven years ago.

Then, Todd and I stood in the middle of a flat piece of land that flowed out from soft green hills and paced off where our house would sit, at a slight angle, facing up to the low mountains. We wanted to look at the mountains out our new front window.

A yard sale was going on. It was Saturday. I drove home to my apartment, where I now live alone, and dug out the morning paper. I scanned the yard-sale ads
until I came upon his: "Downhill skis and parka. Wedding dress, size 10. Hunting knives and lots more."

Todd never hunted. He read books on nature with detailed accounts of animals in their natural habitats. He became angry when he read of someone shooting geese on opening day as geese mate for life. He built bluebird houses and attached them to fence posts surrounding our property.

He tilled a portion of the land and made a large garden. The second year we lived there, he dug a trench and planted asparagus roots that take three years to grow. We bought apple trees and cherry trees, two each, and planted those. When the deer came down from the mountains at night and stripped the leaves from the fruit trees, he was pleased. The animals were comfortable with us. Through our open bedroom windows in the summer, we listened to deer snorting and grazing in the front yard and in the fruit orchard.

He hated downhill skiing. Too many people, too much land wrecked for self-indulgent sporting. The skis and parka, like the wedding dress, I knew were hers, bits and pieces from her previous life that no longer had meaning in theirs.

With a certain amount of bitterness, I thought of the saxophone my grandfather had given me when I was fifteen, which I had kept in our bedroom closet the six
years of our marriage. Todd had wanted a pair of Nikon binoculars so he could watch the elk herds that gathered on the mountain in spring. I hadn't played the saxophone for years, so I'd agreed that he could sell it. I bring up the saxophone not because it had sentimental value to me. The grandfather who had given it to me, my paternal grandfather, died when I was sixteen. The sax had a flat tone. But I had kept it, hauling it from dorm room to apartment to Montana, along with my violin, because it was part of me, my past.

When we married, I sold all of my second-hand furniture that I'd acquired since college. It was inexpensive and hardly worth hauling anywhere, I'd reasoned. I kept only enough of my personal belongings to fill up his car, and we drove from Idaho to Montana. It was two hundred miles.

Todd and I met at the Nez Perce Indian Museum in Spalding, Idaho. He was returning from a sales trip to Montana, and had wanted to browse among the artifacts of the Nez Perce, before driving home through the mountains. I'd been interviewing the archivist for a feature story in the Lewiston Tribune. We walked out of the museum at the same time and began talking.
The first time he came to my apartment, he went around to each room to see what needed fixing. He tightened leaky faucets, chair legs, and vacuumed before I got home from work. He cooked dinner for me, and we drank expensive wine. He wanted to get married right away, and after he left, he wrote a long, beautiful love letter from Missoula.

After we married, we lived in an apartment in Missoula. In between moments of serving me my food at the table, "no, don't get up, let me do that for you," he would say sweet things that I hadn't heard from anyone before. He said that he loved me.

Our last year started in August. My father had come to visit us. He didn't visit often, and though Todd liked him, identified with him in some way, he couldn't take the pressure of my father imposing his needs on our days. Todd thought out, in advance, how things would go, constantly, in order to reduce the terrible tension that would build inside him when events and people naturally collided with his life. I know that he was aware of this need in himself, aware of the limitations it imposed. He valued peace more than anything.

* * * *
My father has been visiting at our new log house for three days. He pretends not to notice the tension between Todd and me. He sits in our living room, alone, smoking cigarettes. Todd says all he does is sit and smoke, that he's rude and completely self-centered. He says those things to me when he and I are in the bedroom. Todd thinks I'm so stupid that I don't see what he's up to, being so nicey-nice to my father's face, then badmouthing him to me when we are alone, punishing me for his being here. Of course I see, but I'll be damned if I'll play the game. I'm lying on the bed with a headache. I watch him hang up my clothes.

"When he leaves, that's it," Todd says. "I won't live like this anymore." My clothes are piled on a chair by the bed.

"And how is it that you are living?" I say. I wish he'd leave my god damned clothes alone.

He drops my pink silk blouse on the floor, says nothing. He leaves the house to go mow the lawn. That was something else he'd needled me with. I don't do enough to suit him when we have company. He's going to clean up the house, he's going to mow the lawn. My father and I can sit on our fat asses and smoke.

I get up and go to the living room. I don't want my father to know we are fighting. He visits only once
a year. I say, "my headache's better," when I enter the living room. He is standing in front of some pictures that I took when Todd and I camped near Trapper Peak the first year we were married.

"You take these?" he asks, and lights a cigarette for me. He asks me the same question every time he comes. It's not that he's forgotten the answer. He's just making conversation so we don't have to talk about the ice between Todd and me.

I nod. "We backpacked to those peaks and the lake. We camped there," I say, and point to a slab of rock with trees growing out of it that extends into the lake. I gaze into the lake water, deep and opaque, and I remember the freezing winds that blew down from Trapper Peak in August.

Todd steps into the house and says, "I hurt myself." I see that he is cupping his hand over his knee and there is blood running between his fingers. "I ran the mower into a ditch," he says.

I rush to the bathroom and collect gauze bandages and first aid cream. While I dress the wound, Todd relaxes on the couch, and we become friends again.

We sit down to dinner two hours later. The tension has eased. We eat roast beef and talk and laugh about the mowing accident.

My father says, "I'm going to Spokane tonight."
When I walk my father to his car, he hugs me. This is something that he never used to do. But now, I think we are closer. He's fifty-eight, lives alone and I worry about him. He drinks too much. Sometimes when I talk to him on the telephone he says funny things like "I'm invisible. After ten drinks you start to disappear," he says. I want to whisper to him, "ask me something about my life, go ahead, just ask me." I want to tell him about Todd and me, the way our life is either perfect or disastrous. "You sure you won't stay?" I say instead.

"Nope. Got itchy feet," he says and tosses his suitcase in the back seat. He is beginning to look like his mother. His gray is her gray. She has long, ninety-four-year-old braids that touch the floor when she lets them down at night.

"Write a letter once in awhile," he says and lowers himself into the Thunderbird. He waves as he disappears down the highway.

I watch the ten o'clock news by myself. Todd has gone to bed, but he gets up and limps out to the living room and sits on the couch next to me, watching me. I pretend to be absorbed in the newscaster. The visit is over. We should talk about the way we treated each
other, but we won't. I know that's the wrong thing to do, to bury it, and it makes me angry that we can't risk talking about it.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you about the oven," he says quietly. Three days before my father arrived, I had sprayed the oven with Easy-off cleaner and then forgotten it. Today when Todd set the thermostat at 350 to roast the beef, smoked curled out the edges of the door. "It's your problem," he'd said and stalked out of the kitchen.

"It wasn't crisis material, was it?" I say.

"I like your father, but he's hard to have around. He doesn't do anything," Todd says.

He is trying to make up with me. I weigh responses in my mind. I don't want to fight. I want to escape this. "Why do you threaten me?" I say. "You always threaten me." I know I'm gambling. This is crisis material, hitting a problem square on the head.

"You don't accept me," he says. "No one can change for you, Violet."

"And you have to accept me." I watch myself, what I say. He has told me my face changes when I'm angry, and I can't hide it from him. It changes, he says, from soft pretty lines to a slack, angry mask.

He sighs. "Let's not fight." The newscaster has gone from the television and an old black-and-white
movie has replaced him. Todd gets up from the couch and covers me with a blanket. He won't say it, but it's understood by both of us. He doesn't like to sleep with me when I'm upset.

After he's gone, I cry and it feels good. I sit on the couch in the dark and listen to the clock tick. It's a Seth Thomas, three-hundred-sixty-dollar clock that runs on gears and has to be wound. He bought it because he admires fine craftsmanship. I can't get tired listening to the damned pendulum swinging back and forth. I sit in the dark. I'm not angry anymore. I feel like I'm disappearing.

When I am sure he is asleep, I get a sleeping bag from the front closet. I feel like a thief, an intruder, and I know that I can't let him catch me. I quietly leave by the back door, and make my way in the dark to the Jeep. Even when I'm ten miles down Highway 12, I check my rear-view mirror to see if he is following me.

As I drive through the Bitterroot Mountains, I think it is remarkable that only this two-hundred-mile stretch of highway has separated my married life from all that I was before. I can't see it now, but I know the Lochsa River spills westward with me, slowing slipping over rocks this time of year. There isn't another light on the highway.
I follow a dirt road at the sign for Horsetail Falls, through the cedar trees to the road's end. Where the falls leave the mountainside, I undress at the water's edge.

The cold numbs my skin as I swim down. I feel for rocks and hold my breath. I wonder how long can I hold my breath, take the cold, what if I get lost inside this water? My lungs grow tight, and I open my eyes but see nothing. I reach out for a river rock, and my hand slips off it. I propel myself upward toward the warm midnight air, dry myself with my clothes and crawl naked into the sleeping bag.

At six in the morning the sun isn't up yet. I can see the tree shadows against the mountains. I think of God. Today God is the sky, God is tangible, the river or a glacier lily. When I was a child, God was a wise old man sitting on a gold throne in the heavens.

My father wades into the clear green river water. I stand on the banks waiting for him to come back for lunch and show me the fish he has caught. I am missing church, it is Sunday, and so I ask him, "Daddy, what does God look like?"

He loads a sardine on a soda cracker, looks at me and says, "God doesn't look like anything." He says it like it's common knowledge.
The sun is creeping up to the trees. The river gurgles quietly and the sand is cold. In the fall of 1960, I knew I would go to hell. My friend and I robbed the Twenty-first Street Market in Lewiston, Idaho. We were on our way to Marcus Whitman Elementary School. I knew who Marcus Whitman was. My long-haired grandmother, a schoolteacher, had told me about the Whitman massacre at the hands of the Indians. Our crime would be penny candy. We stood in front of rows of it laid out neatly behind the cashier's stand. He was busy with a customer. My friend pocketed the candy and we ran.

"Stop right there!" The clerk's voice boomed across the cool morning. He caught up to us and commanded, "empty your pockets."

My mother hadn't sewn pockets into the dress I was wearing, but I wished that she had, so I could show him I hadn't stolen anything.

"I was just about to call the police," he said. "Maybe I will, and your parents, too. What's your names?"

When I got home from school, the police hadn't called yet. I hurried to my bedroom. Jail. I pictured it dark with earwigs crawling out of cracked cement, like they look when they crawl out of an ear of corn.
from the garden. I'd seen a television movie once where they shaved a girl's head before throwing her in a cell. I thought if I prayed, the storekeeper wouldn't call the police. I wondered how long I'd have to wait before knowing whether he'd called someone. Maybe the police wouldn't believe him. I buried my head in my pillow and prayed. Please forgive me God.

My mother had been in the kitchen that day, but I hurried past her. I have never told her. It was six months later, when she served my sisters and me our scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast, that she said, "I have something to tell you."

We looked at her. Her voice was low and serious. She turned and spoke to the toaster, "your father and I are getting a divorce."

"Why?" I'd said. My sisters had cried.

She mumbled something about some money he'd put in an account and hadn't told her about. She said she was tired of having nobody appreciate her, she said "be quiet and eat your breakfast."

The last night in our house with our father, my little sister Marie and I huddled together in my bed in our upstairs bedroom across the hall from theirs. Our two older sisters slept downstairs. We listened for an argument, some kind of explanation. They were in their room talking in quiet voices. The talking stopped. A
car rumbled up the street, going to somebody else's house. I cursed because I couldn't hear them anymore. Then there was nothing to hear.

The sun is burning hot above me. I put on my clothes. I don't want to go back to Montana. I could drive as far as my sister's place in Oregon. I could drive to Grandma's in Kooskia. I picture Todd calling all of the hotels as he did the last time I left.

He had a girlfriend last summer, Erica. The morning after the Saturday night she called him, I packed all of my suitcases. He stood in my way as I pulled my clothes from drawers and shelves. "You don't know how to treat anyone," he'd screamed at me, "you can't love anyone."

He stepped toward me, blocking my movement from closet to suitcases. He didn't want me to leave.

"Bastard," I said.

"What did you call me?"

My mind moved in slow motion.

He grabbed my shoulders. "God, I'd like to kill you."

I wished morbidly that he'd do it, but I didn't believe he would. It was a bluff to scare and intimidate me. He shoved me to the floor.
I stood back up and screamed in his face, "don't you dare touch me again." His hands closed around my throat, and his warm fingers frightened me. "Get out," he shouted. "Get out or I'll kill you."

At the hotel, I smoked cigarettes and tried to make a plan. I would leave him, get my own place, try to build some kind of life for myself. Then I cried. I didn't want another life, I wanted the one I had, without Erica, without the fear. We had been capable of that. The phone began ringing in the hotel room, and I answered it.

"Come home," he'd said. "Let's talk. I don't want you to stay in a hotel tonight. I love you." He had called all the hotels in town until he had found me, and to me, that meant something.

Grandma is digging in her garden when I arrive. She lives in a modular house in Kooskia, where there are two tipi burners, a Forest Service office, three bars and a grocery store. The river banks are covered with poison ivy and wild black berries. The people who live in Kooskia are shy and direct and purposely isolated from the rest of the world. I know these Kooskia people. They are my mother's people. My maternal grandma and grandpa, their six brothers and sisters
married one another. There have been four sets of them in Kooskia, having children and grandchildren.

Grandma is eighty, wears a blue sun bonnet, bibbed overalls and has a little trouble pulling up cheat grass from the corn row. Her hair is short and thick. I lie to her. I say I'm on a holiday by myself. "Todd has to work today," I tell her. We go to the Selway Cafe on Main Street and eat hamburgers. In a little while, her brother and Grandpa's sister come in and ask if we are going to the cemetery. Grandma wants to go there and gather the plastic wreathes that she left on Memorial Day.

At first, as we walk down the graveled road between sections of tombstones and fresh-cut flowers, I avoid Grandpa's grave. When he died two years ago, our family gathered in Kooskia in a hard circle of grief. There was a potluck dinner after the funeral, at one of the aunts' and uncles' houses. My paternal grandmother was there with my father. She had taught elementary school to most of the aunts and uncles, and their children, when she, my grandfather and father lived in Kooskia.

My widowed Grandma sat on a couch, crumbled and comforted by relatives. My schoolteacher grandmother and I ate potato salad in a tiny alcove filled with folding chairs.
"This house belonged to Major Fenn," Grandmother said, between spoonfuls of salad. Major Fenn had been the forest supervisor in Kooskia, in the 1920s, when she and grandfather married and lived in a tent in the wilderness.

Todd hadn't come with me to the funeral. He liked my Grandpa, the farmer. He envied him. Grandpa lived on one piece of ground, working diligently for forty years, alone and away from people.

Grandma and I gather the last of the wreathes from his grave, then I look across the brown hills toward the farm, less than a mile away. She was born there, and so was my mother. I see my sisters and me taking baths in the kitchen. It is the summer of 1961. My mother has separated from my father. No one knows that I robbed the Twenty-first Street Market. I pray every night. Grandma lifts down the tin tub from the porch, partially fills it with well water. Two kettles chirp steam from the wood cook stove, and she pours hot water from them into the tub. My mother soaps our four backs, then leads us upstairs to bed in the attic over the kitchen. When she goes back downstairs, we giggle and talk about her. I try to remember more of the farm, but I cannot, so we decide to drive over and look at it.
We are intruders. I haven't visited for fifteen years. A woman crouches on the cement patio that Grandpa had poured, watering petunias. She invites us in, but we are embarrassed and we don't want to get any closer. When we drive away, I say, "they have killed the vine that grew over the root cellar."

Grandma gazes out the car window. "Looks real cute, everything red and pretty."

"Like Knott'sberry Farm," I say, but she has never been to California and doesn't understand what I'm talking about.

In Grandma's living room, I drink a cup of tea. Pretty soon she suggests that we go to the basement. She wants to show me where she found him. He'd arranged a couch and chair in front of the woodstove down there, so he could sit and read in his old age. Shelves filled with glass insulators for telephone wires, Hall vases and other useless gadgets, butter paddles and cream cans encircle his reading room.

"He was unconscious," Grandma says, sweeping her arm out over the area where he had collapsed. She had come down the stairs slowly, she says, afraid of falling and breaking a bone. She called to him and continued down the stairs, thinking, when he didn't answer, that
he'd gone outside for more wood. In her backyard, a small 1930s house is crammed with firewood. It is where Grandpa's parents lived.

When she saw Grandpa lying on the cement, she went to him and peered into his face. "He wasn't quite dead," she says. "His face was so white and it was paralyzed." She replays the last moments of his death as if there is something more to understand about it.

At three in the afternoon in August, Kooskia is unbearably hot, but today, we sit on my Grandma's front porch and a cool westerly wind blows across it. We watch the river.

"You've got trouble," she says.

I shake my head. It is quiet on her porch. Artificial flowers hang in baskets from the beam. The leaves are dusty. "Did you and Grandpa fight?" I ask.

"Everybody who's married fights," she says. "Once he wouldn't take me to town. When we were up on the farm. I needed lard. He wanted pancakes and I needed lard. But he wouldn't take me."

I'm ashamed of the violence, my dependence on these Kooskia people.

"You forget the fights when they are gone," she continues.
I think of the fights between Todd and me. People go beyond shouting, refusing to take you to town for lard. I think I am to blame. I provoke him. I have to take the first step to right things.

In the night, after Grandma has gone to bed, I call him. His voice is low. "Violet, don't do this."

I tremble, wrapped in a blanket, standing by the wall phone in her kitchen.

"I'm not perfect," he says. "Damnit, you want me to be. You've never loved me."

"I have," I say. "I just don't know what you want from me."

"It doesn't matter," he says.

"Why do you torment me?" In frustration, I slam the receiver against the wall.

When I prepare to leave Kooskia, I look again at the photographs that clutter my Grandma's living room. My mother's beautiful face, a high school senior in the class of '47, smiles at me. My sisters and I sit under the crabapple tree on the hill behind the farmhouse. There is a decoupage poem on a piece of pine board that
my Grandpa sawed and sanded in the woodhouse. It says Kooskia is God's country.

As I drive through the mountains toward Montana, I think about crazy things. The road I'm driving on. My father's parents living in a tent in these mountains the first two years of their marriage. Grandfather blasting away chunks of the mountainside to make the road, Grandmother baking bread on a wood cook stove in the wall tent. How far away from these people are Todd and I.

My nerves begin ticking as I drive the loop around the neighbor's pasture. I have been absent for two weeks. What will he say to me, will he be angry, will he even be home? The house comes into view, and I can see him out near the garden. Someone is there with him. A neighbor perhaps. I hope the neighbors don't know the extent of our troubles. I park the car near the garden and step onto the gravel road. He has been watching me drive up. He stands. The woman crouches at his feet picking blueberries.

I walk nearer to them and he continues to stare at me, an unknown stare. The woman turns, and my knees flow with insecurity. "Erica?" I ask. "What is this?" I ask him. I turn and run from them toward the house.
Todd comes in behind me and closes the door. "You left me," he says. I can't tell if he is stating a fact or asking me to confirm it.

"Is she sleeping here, too?" I say. Then more to myself, "of course." An explosion rips through me. I pick up anything near, books, vases, the mountain photographs, and throw them to the floor, screaming, but he stands still and doesn't move to stop me. When I am quiet, he turns from me and walks out the door.

I want to kill him. I run after him and watch as he bends down to whisper something to Erica in the garden.

The wailing voice, my own, sounds strange to me. I watch them for a moment, and I believe that Erica looks like me. I choke, and I scream at him, "how can you?" They sit by the garden, silently, staring back. I know what they are waiting for.
Winter at Running Creek

I.

It was five o'clock and the last day in January when Ralph Thompson stopped reading the road inventory file that had covered his desk for the better part of the afternoon. He stared out the picture window at the snow falling in the twilight. Two magpies chattered on the rail fence. One swooped down and picked at the carcass of a road-killed deer. The station was deserted except for Ralph and Jerome Devereaux, who was shoveling the front walkway. There had been a foot of snow in October that year. The zucchinis had frozen black in August.

Jerome was a handyman, and he worked on trucks. He had tinkered with all the Forest Service trucks at one time or another, and he was damned good at it. He was a
Nez Perce Indian, and since people never included him in their churching and drinking, they knew little about him and thought he was slow. He wasn't. He would talk if he had something to say, but most of the time he didn't say anything.

Jerome had come into Running Creek on the mail truck in June. He was six-feet tall and during his job interview, Ralph noticed he spoke softly. He showed Jerome around the place, pulled open the steel garage doors and pointed to a GMC rental pickup. One of the fire crewmen had run it into a ditch on the Sourdough Lookout road. "Why don't you get under there and see what you can do for it," Ralph had said. Jerome slid under the truck on the dolly and Ralph waited.

The wheels of the dolly squeaked around, and Jerome's feet and legs circled the edges of the pickup. After a while he stuck his head out from the front grill and said, "U-joint."

"Take care of her," Ralph had said, and he went back to the office. Jerome had been hired.

Ralph rapped on the window, and Jerome looked up from his work. His breath swirled in a mist around the porch light, and Ralph motioned for him to come inside.

When Jerome stepped through the front door he dropped one of his gloves, bent to pick it up and
cracked his head on the door frame, clumped into the bathroom and slammed the door. He had taken the snow shovel in with him.

Ralph heard the shovel scrape concrete and clink against the wall, followed by the sounds of running water and urinating, and he shook his head. He thought it was amazing that Jerome handled his mechanical work so well. Jerome came out of the bathroom and Ralph said, "mop up the floor where you dragged that shovel, Jerome. It's time to punch out."

The two men walked out of the office together. Jerome headed up the hill to the bunkhouse, where he lived alone. In the summertime, fifteen or twenty young men lived there, too. They came every year in June, anxious to fight fires and draw over-time pay. Summer tuned-up Running Creek. Between each thunderstorm, the crew members prayed for wildfire and waited for the call on the radio. While they waited, they painted houses, stained fences and attended Ralph's weekly safety meetings on Fridays before morning coffee break.

Ralph looked in his rear view mirror and watched as Jerome disappeared into the bunkhouse, then he started up his truck and drove out of the compound toward his own place where Doris was fixing dinner.

Ralph liked his job because he liked order. He'd served four years in the Marine Corps and had worked ten
years for the Forest Service. As fire crew chief at Running Creek Ranger Station, Ralph could mold an entire unit, command every item and man into place as he saw fit.

Harley Hegstad had been transferred to Running Creek from the Timber Point Supervisor's office in the fall. Harley had been with the Forest Service almost eighteen years, and Ralph suspected he was just putting in time until he had twenty and could retire. Harley didn't have a set job description when the Supervisor's Office transferred him. That bothered Ralph. They were equal in command, and the compound wasn't big enough for that.

Ralph had pegged Harley as a weed in the garden. He moved in a big oak desk and canned Ralph's weekly safety meetings. Harley wanted to know why all the houses were getting paint, and why didn't they build some wood sheds next to the government homes where the district families lived. That was something people could use, Harley had said. So, while they waited for the forest to burn up, the fire crew started building wood sheds. They built one on the end of Harley's porch first.

At least fate had taken a turn in Ralph's favor. Harley tripped over a lawn sprinkler in October and threw out his back. He took three months off. Before
the accident, Harley had agreed to write the road inventory report and to review the timber contracts planned for spring. Ralph had agreed to hire next year's seasonal crew and to do the inventory of supplies in the fire cache. But Ralph had to do it all. Harley was coming back to work the first of February, and Ralph couldn't decide which was worse, Harley's absence or the prospect of his face coming through the door.

Doris had already dished up the soup when Ralph came in, so he took off his coat and sat down to the table. She was plump and beginning to gray, like Ralph was. She slid the butter and bread closer to him when she sat down. "You going up to Harley's with that wood, like I asked you?"

"Hegstad's always idling," Ralph answered. "Why can't he drive his rig down here tomorrow and load up the goddamn wood himself?"

"You know he hasn't been good," she chided. She had spent the day mending socks and working on a jigsaw puzzle of Mt. St. Helens. She had been fitting together the last nineteen or twenty pieces, when Carol Beth Hegstad called and reminded her they were running low on firewood.

Doris watched Ralph tense up. She had memorized Ralph's idiosyncrasies after fifteen years together and fancied that she could see the hair on his arms curl a
little tighter at the mention of Harley. Ralph looked straight at her, tented up his brows and nodded.

"Oh, all right," he said. He reached for some bread, dipped his knife in the butter and smeared it across the slice with even strokes, first one way, then the other. He chewed in silence, then wiped out his soup bowl with the crust.

The road to Harley's curved by the station. Everything was frozen, icicles hung along the gables of the bunkhouse. Ralph pulled into the parking lot.

There were ten bedrooms upstairs in the bunkhouse with two bunks each for the seasonal crew. A light burned in a corner room. Ralph walked around to the side door and shoved it open.

The bunkhouse kitchen had a cement floor, cupboards without doors lining the walls, a stove and refrigerator. In the recreation room, a fire in the large barrel stove cooked the air. A pool table, some couches and chairs donated from B & B Bargains in Timber Point, filled up the rest of the room.

"Anybody here?" he hollered. He heard the shuffle of feet and soon Jerome's round face appeared at the top of the stairs. At work Jerome wore his thick black hair in a braid most of the time, but he had been combing it, and it hung wild down to his waist.
"Hey, Ralph," Jerome said, as he clattered down and flipped on all the lower level lights.

II.

Jerome Devereaux was used to being alone. He got lonely sometimes, when he hadn't seen his sister, Ella, and his nephews for a while. Ralph would come over to the bunkhouse and sit by the barrel stove with him and gossip about the station. He'd done that quite a bit since Harley had shown up. Jerome would carve on a stick and listen and nod. He wasn't interested in Ralph's problems, but he did occasionally get lonely.

Ralph asked Jerome strange questions. One night they sat by the fire and Jerome whittled a bob-cat. "Can you see real well at night?" Ralph asked him. Jerome's eyes were exceptionally sharp. "I don't know," Jerome had answered, "I never thought about it."

Jerome watched Ralph back up to the heat of the barrel stove. "You want some coffee?" he asked.

"No thanks. Going out to Hegstad's," Ralph answered. "Would you help unload some wood?"

Jerome busied himself banking the wood in the barrel stove. "I 'spose." He had thought about going ice fishing before Ralph dropped in. He unplugged the
coffee pot, then went to the big closet behind the pool
table and pulled out his wool jacket.

Jerome had met Harley and Carol Beth Hegstad in
September while he was working in the garage on the
pumper truck, trying to get the motor that reeled in the
hose working again. He remembered talking gardens with
Carol Beth. Jerome had raised a tomato plant under a
sheet of plastic. It had produced four green globes the
size of a baby's toe when the temperature dropped to
eighteen degrees at night and everything froze up.
Carol Beth had said she lost her zucchinis.

Harley inspected Jerome's work that day. He got
his hands greasy, and scrubbed them with pumice soap at
the sink. Carol Beth strolled over and asked him
whether Jerome could look at the engine on her Buick.
Harley picked at his fingernails with a pocketknife.
"Not qualified," he said.

"Seems like no one's qualified," Carol Beth snapped
back. "Damned thing's been sitting in the yard busted
since we got here."

Jerome gripped the door handle in Ralph's truck as
they slid sideways on a patch of ice. He watched the
road unwind in front of them. It took an hour to drive
to the end of the district where Harley lived. It was
only thirty-two miles, but the road curved up a steep hillside, through a meadow, up higher, climbing away from the bottom of the creek canyon fifty feet or so, then it came back down again. Ralph's truck, a one-ton Ford, was loaded with two cords of fire wood, Tamarack, split and dried.

"Harley's a lazy son-of-a-bitch. He pokes around his place and creates more work to be done than he ever did himself, since he first got here," Ralph complained as they drove. "You got any family around here, Jerome?"

Jerome thought of his sister, Ella. She lived on Social Security from her dead husband and babysat for the neighbors. She had wanted Jerome to come and live with her for the winter, but he liked living alone.

"My sister lives at Wild Horse Lake," Jerome answered. He was twenty-five and nice looking, and Ella had tried to fix him up with a nineteen-year-old girl who came to visit her from Montana over Christmas.

He looked out the window for a while at a raven sweeping the sky over the trees. Jerome thought he might end up painting that picture, the raven, the black trees and a field of snow in the foreground. He painted, carved wood, made little leather toys. "She's got two kids," he said.
They pulled up to Harley's, and Ralph backed the truck up next to the woodshed.

"I'll tell them we're here," Ralph said and shut off the engine. Jerome began stacking wood. Ralph pounded on the storm door, and after a few minutes Carol Beth came to it. She wore a blue terry cloth robe, and her hair hung around her eyes in soft, gray angel wings. Jerome and Carol Beth nodded to one another.

"Harley's out in the kitchen," she said to Ralph as she pushed on the storm door. She left the inside door open and disappeared into the living room to watch "Dynasty."

III.

Ralph stepped into the hallway, past a pile of newspapers and a lava lamp, toward the kitchen. He watched Harley stand on his tiptoes and carefully guide a bottle of Old Grand Dad to the edge of the top cupboard shelf. He tilted it, and it fell nicely into his hands. Then he limped over to the cupboard next to the sink and drew out two small water glasses. "You'd have a drink, wouldn't you?" he said.

"Pour me just one shot," Ralph said and sat down. "Doris wants to know, how's your back?"
Harley adjusted himself in his chair. "Can't lift anything, the doctor says. Can't sit too long, either, that's the hell of it."

Ralph had noticed that Harley was sitting straight up in his chair. He wondered if Harley's problem was partly mental. He'd heard about people being able to make themselves sick, just by worrying about it. An electric clock shaped like a frying pan hung over the sink. It buzzed as an orange minute-hand circled its face.

The kitchen was too hot. Carol Beth did all her cooking on a Monarch wood stove Harley had hauled out of one of the lookouts last fall. The belly was crammed with newspapers. Harley cracked the back door a little. They could hear Jerome stacking wood chunks into the shed next to the porch with a nice, even rhythm.

"So you got Jerome out tonight?" Harley said. "Say, did I ever tell you about the time he was up at the store trying to figure out what to buy for dinner?"

"Nope, can't say," Ralph replied and sipped his whiskey.

"First he'd pick up a handful of those cupcakes, look at them like they were steaks, and he hadn't ate for a week. He'd put them down, grab some candy bars, then count his money real slow. Then he'd go back to
the cupcakes," Harley said. He stretched out a leg under the table and kicked Ralph's chair for emphasis.

"Old Hank Reuben came up to him and tried to tell him about how he should eat right. He took him over to the vegetables and meats and discussed, oh, for what must have been a half-hour, the pros and cons of good cooking." Harley laughed. "Jerome looked like he was real impressed with what old Hank was saying. Hank was all puffed up. Then Jerome headed right back to the cupcakes and bought three dozen of 'em."

Ralph swallowed the rest of his whiskey and laughed a little. That was just like Harley, he thought. There wasn't anything funny about the story that Ralph could see. He didn't know if it was any of Harley's or Hank's business what anybody else ate. But Harley would think it was real hilarious to pick on someone's habits. Ralph motioned toward the whiskey bottle. "Give me another shot." He eased into a new subject. "What day are you coming to work?"

IV.

Jerome finished stacking the wood on the porch. It had taken him the better part of two hours. He got the broom out from behind the seat of the truck and swept all the wood chips onto the snow. Then he sat on the porch and began carving an owl from a piece of Tamarack.
Carol Beth came to the storm door to watch. He looked up at her once, and she asked, "what're you making?"

"Just an old owl," he said.

She watched a while longer.

Jerome pushed back his hair. "What've you been doing all winter?" he asked.

"Nothing much. I made a patchwork quilt for the couch," she said. "You ought to wait inside. It's cold out there."

In the Hegstad's living room a small couch lined one wall, across the room a recliner faced the television. Carol Beth stepped over a coffee table in the center of the room, changed the channel to the eleven o'clock news out of Spokane and adjusted the rabbit ears. Jerome sat down on the couch, and Carol Beth went to the bathroom to get the wastebasket for Jerome's wood-carving scraps.

She sat down next to him and bent close to his hands. He carefully scraped delicate curves into the top of the owl, making feathers. He could smell her cigarettes. She ran a finger along the edge of the owl's face. The owl was sitting on Jerome's leg, and her fingers slipped down to the bottom of the wood piece, brushed his Levis for only a moment.

"It's real smooth," she said.
Jerome looked up to her. Her robe was open a little. It was pleasant sitting with her. He'd finished his carving, so he gave the owl to Carol Beth. She pulled the patchwork quilt from the back of the couch and showed it to him. He took it from her hands then gently pulled her to him.

She rubbed his back slowly with her fingers, first in circular motions to his shoulders, then around to his pants.

"Where can we go?" he asked.

She kissed his eyelids. "Not here... outside".

They moved quietly. Jerome watched her guide the front door shut with her slender hands. He picked her up from the porch, so her slippers wouldn't get snow in them and carried her to Ralph's truck.

He put Carol Beth in the passenger seat then climbed into the driver's side. While they rearranged clothing under the quilt, he could look in the side-view mirror, back at the patch of light coming through the doorway. His long hair fell over her, and she wrapped her fingers in it as they made love.

V.

Ralph and Harley had out the cards and were playing blackjack. They placed quarter-bets, and Ralph had won twenty dollars off Harley. It was the first time Ralph
had played anything other than Pinochle all winter. Doris and he played in a Pinochle tournament at the community church on Wednesday nights.

"You and Carol Beth play any Pinochle?" he asked. "We got a club going this winter. You could come down to the church and play with us."

Harley picked up the cards and put them in their box. "Oh, we don't like socializing much." He got up from the table, picked up the empty whiskey bottle by the neck and slowly made his way to the garbage can outside the kitchen door. It was past midnight, and the TV blared a late night news program from the living room.

VI.

Carol Beth and Jerome lay across the cab seat. Jerome cradled her in his arms to keep her warm. Their feet were stretched out to the passenger door. "Maybe you better go back," he said.

They gazed out the cab window. "Look how steady everything is," she said. "The rest of the world could be blowing up right now, and look how steady everything is."

Jerome looked. A tree had fallen, sometime, and had caught on another tree. "Right there," he said and pointed at it. "That leaning tree. It fell in autumn."
"Why autumn?"

Jerome looked back at the house, at the light from the lava lamp in the front doorway a thousand miles away. "Early snow. I guess that's why."

She looked at the tree a long time, then nodded. "It's the only thing that's moving," she said.

She gathered up the quilt. "I'm going back in."

VII.

Ralph shoved his arms into his coat sleeves. Harley set their drink glasses in the sink, then walked Ralph to the front door. They passed Carol Beth on her way to bed. "Goodnight," she said, as she moved up the stairs. They heard the truck rumbling as they stepped onto the front porch. They watched it head down the hill and disappear in the meadow.

VIII.

Jerome drove freely down the creek canyon road. He stopped by the bunkhouse and picked up his fishing gear. He wished he could have brought Carol Beth with him. She knew life with her eyes, and he liked that about her. As he moved on toward Wild Horse Lake, the sky had developed a cool blue tint. The truck wouldn't make it the last stretch of road before the lake, so he parked it and began walking.
He walked in cold heaps of snow. It wouldn't be like summer, he thought, the trout slithering up into the air for a moment to catch a bug. He walked out onto the lake, stood on its smooth-ice surface and looked around at the ragged trees on the shore.

He fixed up his fishing pole, kneeled down and chipped at the lake ice. It was perfectly quiet while he fished. He watched the water eat at the edges of the lake, and he thought he could see the ice turn into spring.
Our Place

My first impression of the trailer was that feeder hogs had lived in it. The front screen door hung wide open and mud from the flower beds was splattered like finger paint against the trailer skirting. It had a corrugated tin roof. We heard the whine of a pickup truck gearing down. We looked up toward the place where the cattle guard crosses the road, and we saw Bates pull his Dodge Power Wagon in next to my '69 Barracuda.

"Nate Hoyle?" he called out as he lowered himself from the pickup and stuck out his hand toward Nathan. "This is a real good buy," he said, "fine buy."

That was Bates. He'd subdivided his own sixty-acre parcel, and the property he was trying to sell us was in a low meadow, maybe a mile from his 1970s-style ranch house. While he talked with Nathan out back, I slipped
inside to inspect the kitchen. The sink was stained where someone had thrown lit cigarettes and let them burn out on their own. The place smelled damp and stale. I bent down and looked out the tiny window over the sink and listened to the rain dripping down from the gutter.

"Alecia, come out here," Nathan hollered. He stood with Bates near the back door, next to a pile -- a mattress, a busted-up chair, tin cans and plastic plates for micro-wave dinners. I let go of the screen door, and it slammed into the door jam a couple of times. Bates turned toward me and looked up. I stood there on the back porch with my arms folded in front of me.

"You could have a nice garden back here," he said. He pointed his cigarette in the direction of a man-made ditch. "Diverted the creek for irrigation. Used to run right where Nate and me are standing."

Bates was in his sixties. Every time he blew out a lung full, he'd follow with a raspy cough. I figured it was Bates who'd used the kitchen sink for an ashtray. I stepped through the mud to where he and Nathan were talking. I was a good head taller than Bates, and I noticed he had a perfectly bald skull. "How long's it been since anyone's lived here?" I asked.

"Rusty left in the fall." He calculated backwards on chunky fingers. "What's that, six months?"
The rain drizzled down into puddles of horse manure and mud. What could have been a backyard was strewn with manure, straw, a few boulders here and there. There was a small log building leaning a little to the east. Bates said it was a goat barn and had probably been built in the early part of the century. It looked it. Next to the barn was a breaking corral. The rotten posts and poles had chew marks from the mustangs trying to get out, I supposed, while Rusty rode them, tamed them so they could become cow horses.

Nathan had been quiet while Bates and I talked. Bates seemed to take it that the sale was slipping by. He just didn't know Nathan. He's always quiet. I reached for Nathan's hand, and I could tell just by looking at him, he wanted the place.

In two weeks we negotiated terms and a price. Bates had his lawyer draw up the contract and we signed. We gave him a thousand down, agreed to make a balloon payment of four thousand more in five years. There would be three-hundred-dollar monthly payments in the meantime, beginning the next month, May, and that was pretty much it.

The place depressed me at first. The trailer needed a new hot water heater. I guess I had pictured my first house as a house, not a trailer, with a clean backyard, lots of pretty trees and humming birds in the
summer. We moved in at the end of April, and by then the weather had straightened up.

Nathan is a carpenter. He makes furniture, houses, fences, anything. For the last three years, he also has worked as a janitor at the Stevensville Elementary School. He quit that job after we bought this place. He built some cabinets for Bates when we got to know him a little. Another neighbor needed a section of fence replaced.

Even though Nathan hasn't had steady employment lately, he's spent the past three months cleaning up the awful mess left by Rusty's horse-breaking operation. He's worked the manure and straw into the soil, dug up the whole back yard and sewed grass seed. The goat barn wasn't so ugly once the yard was cleared up. We thought we'd raise some chickens in it. The corral looked out of place, but we thought maybe we'd get a pony some day, so we let it stand, too. Sometimes this summer I've looked out the kitchen window while doing the dishes, and I've imagined a nice pony in there, fat with a shiny mane and tail, waiting for someone to bring him a pail of oats.

I work full-time down in Missoula at the Credit Union, so I drive forty miles to work every morning, forty miles back out every night. I don't mind the drive. The Bitterroot River flows next to the highway.
Stands of Mountain Ash and wild choke cherries grow along its banks. I've seen a pair of bald eagles catching the air currents up over Maloney Ranch. The Bonneville Power Administration strung a huge power line across the Bitterroot River, with hundred-foot towers, bright orange balls to warn aircraft. Most folks down the valley had a heart attack over that. They went to hearings and wrote petitions, but it didn't do any good. Once the government makes up its mind its going to do something, the hearings are just a stage show.

Our place is real quiet. In the summer we leave the bedroom windows open, and sometimes we can hear an owl hooting off in the mountains. But last Saturday night, we had a situation develop. I was trying to sleep, and the next thing I knew, Nathan was talking right in my ear.

"Alecia, wake up," he whispered. I didn't want to, so I pretended I was asleep. Bates' dogs barked, and I felt the bed shift as Nathan pulled himself out. I opened my eyes then, and saw him crouched by the window. He was peering out from behind the curtains.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Sshhh! There's somebody out there."

I crawled out of bed and squatted next to him. I couldn't see anything. A pickup motor hummed quietly then died. A door clicked shut.
"Damn!" Nathan said, and he began pawing through a stack of clothes at the foot of the bed. He located his jeans, put them on, then grabbed his shot gun from the closet.

"Don't go out there, you don't know who it is," I hissed at him and dug in the clothes pile for my jeans. I crawled into a sweat shirt and headed out the door after him.

When I came upon Nathan in the dark, he was standing by the corral a few feet from two men I'd ever seen before. His right arm was stiff holding the shot gun, but he hadn't raised it.

"What are you doing here?" Nathan asked.

"We came to get Rusty's corral," the younger, leaner one said. He had a knit cap pulled down to his eyes, and it was hard to tell what he looked like in the dark. A husky man stood next to him. At first I thought it was Bates, but it wasn't. He had his arms stuck out from his body. He was frozen like that, as if he thought Nathan really was going to shoot him.

"You won't be taking anything off my property," Nathan said, and he raised the gun.

"This corral belongs to my brother, Rusty," the older man said. "I saw an ad in the Messenger. Looks like you're trying to sell something that don't belong to you."
I stepped out from behind the goat barn, thinking to myself, there goes the hot water heater. "Where do you get off? If Rusty wanted the corral so bad, he should have moved it out before we bought this place. Bates told him to."

"Alecia, go back, I'll handle this," Nathan said.

I kept talking. "We bought the place with everything on it. What are you sneaking around the middle of the night for, if you think you've got a legal right to it?"

"Alecia, please," Nathan said.

I couldn't believe he was taking crap off those two. "I'll go put on some coffee," I said to Nathan, then I turned so the other two could hear me, "might as well, now that we're up at four thirty on a Saturday morning," I went back inside the trailer.

I fiddled around making coffee and trying to see what was going on out the kitchen window. The sun was starting to climb up to the edge of the mountains and a little light poked in. I heard foot steps on the front porch and hurried to the living room to listen through the door.

"If you really feel, deep down in your heart, that you've got a legal right to the corral, then we'll get off your property," I heard one guy say. Nathan stepped a foot inside the trailer.
"Go on, just take it. Then get out of here," he said and slammed the door. He laid the shot gun across the kitchen table, poured himself a cup of coffee and flopped down on the couch.

"So, there goes the money," I said. "There goes a hot bath, gone for another two months."

"We'll make it up somewhere else."

Nathan ran a hand through his hair. A gray patch was sticking up on the side he sleeps on. He was wearing the old plaid shirt his dad got him for Christmas when he was eighteen. It was worn through on the sleeve, but I fixed it for him.

I know he feels guilty because I work a steady job and he doesn't. You've got to work in a bank, a law office or for the state of Montana anymore, to make ends meet. He wants to work with his hands. People around here think we're left-over hippies, just because Nathan doesn't work a steady job. But when he had the janitor job at the grade school, it was a drain on his self-esteem. You've got to have your self-esteem.

It was the fourth of July when my mom and dad, my sister and her husband came to stay with us a few days, and they didn't like hauling water from the stove to the
bath tub. I was helping my mom fix her bath; Nathan and I just take them cold.

"You know, Randy says there's jobs opening up with the phone company," she said as she watched me pour hot water from the tea kettle into the tub. "Starting wage is maybe eight, nine dollars an hour."

They live in Helena, my mom and dad, my sister and Randy. "Nathan and I don't want to live in Helena," I said. That's when I told her. "Besides, I'm pregnant. We're going to get married, make our home here in the valley."

She stopped swishing her hand in the bath tub, turned and looked at me. She was shocked, first, then she sort of smiled. "When?" was all she said.

"I'm a couple weeks along."

Later that evening, after they'd all settled in front of the TV, Nathan and I walked down the road in back of our place. I told him I'd broken the news to my parents.

"What'd they say?" he wanted to know.

"Not much. Guess they are glad in a way. We're getting married, making moves in a direction," I said. "That's the main thing, having a direction."
The day after the corral theft, I was depressed. We decided to go fishing in the afternoon. I had puked all morning. I'm thirty years old, and the ladies at the Credit Union told me pregnancy hits you harder at thirty.

I work as a collections agent. I figure Rusty and his brother are like half the people I see through my department every day. Dead beats. They go around expecting everybody else to make decisions for them, move on things. Then when their business goes bad, they act like it's somebody else's fault.

Just take Rusty for instance. He pulls out and heads down to Arizona and leaves his stuff on someone else's place, like he's got a right to. He didn't just leave the corral. He left a pregnant mare on Bates' pasture, and never asked anyone to look after her. She foaled in March, and by the time we moved onto our place, he still hadn't asked anybody to look after them. What does he figure? They'll just take care of themselves? It was cold this spring. The foal was born with a deformed leg, and Bates had to shoot it. Bates said it was the only humane thing to do. The poor little thing couldn't walk on its own.

It was Sunday, and we don't go to church. I packed up a lunch and Nathan got together the fishing gear. We
hiked over to Burnt Fork Creek, settled on a spot where you can see a couple of large rocks down deep under the water. Nathan says fish hide there. I got out Victoria Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn*. I like to watch Nathan fish while I read.

"You call the paper and cancel that ad we ran for the corral?" I asked him. We'd paid to have it run for two weeks.

"Slipped my mind," Nathan said, and he cast into the creek. "You know, I think I could build a corral."

"We can't afford the materials."

"I could cut the poles off our property. Materials wouldn't be much," he said.

"Suits me. Build one if you want. How much could we get out of one, a new one, hand-made?"

He put down his fishing pole, and drew a diagram in the dirt for me. "This is the way steel corrals go together. I saw one in a catalog." He drew in imaginary horses and big dollar signs with four figures following.

"Like a thousand bucks each?" I asked.

"Um hm. That's what steel corrals go for."

"Then build one. How much? Maybe we could get at least eight hundred," I said.
"At least. Wood's better, anyway. Easier to take down and move if you have to. Maybe a thousand we could get," he said.

That evening we spread a cloth out in the backyard and ate dinner in a shady spot. Nathan had spent most of the summer watering the grass, pulling up weeds. The lawn had grown high enough to mow once. He was building a small pond, where we could raise blue gills. We sat down to a dinner of fresh trout, lettuce, potatoes and corn from the garden.

"A toast to our place," Nathan said. He picked up the bottle of wine and poured us each a glass. I had fixed my hair in braids, and when I bent toward him to reach for the glass, I dragged one through the butter.

Nathan picked up a napkin and gently wiped the butter from my hair. It reminded me of when I was a little girl, and my mother used to comb my hair. The memory made me sad. I wasn't sure I wanted to give up being someone's child. That's what pregnancy ultimately meant. Suddenly you are no longer focused in the world as a daughter, a child, but as a mother, a shaper of someone else's life.

"Do you think we have enough, to give a child?" I asked Nathan.

"We have as much, more probably, than lots of people do," he said.
"I don't mean material things. I mean patience, love. Sometimes I don't know if I'll love it," I said. "You will."

"How do you know? It's another person. I don't love just everybody."

"But it's part of us. You'll love it."

The phone rang and Nathan jumped up to answer it. I played with the food on my plate and listened to his part of the conversation.

"Nope. Sorry. I already sold it," he said. He was quiet for a time. Then he said, "I'd sure build you one. Sure. The same deal."

The back door slammed and Nathan strolled over. He lowered himself to the ground, stretched his legs out full, until the tips of his cowboy boots rested against my hip.

"What was all that about?"

"Man who lives up Nine Mile wanted the corral. I told him I'd sold it already, but I'd make him one."

"How much will he pay?"

"I told him I'd build one for three-fifty."

"That's a far cry from a thousand."

"We agreed on three-fifty. That's what the ad said, and that's what he's willing to pay."

"But it's not enough. You said you could get a thousand."
"I haven't build one before. I wouldn't feel right charging him more. Besides, the ad said three-fifty."

Every time he gets a chance to get ahead, he blows it, I thought. I got up from the grass and went inside. He followed me.

"It'll take a week to build it, maybe more. Your time is worth more. He's taking advantage of you."

Nathan looked at me for a long time. His jaw was set hard. "Alecia, think about it. I don't have work right now. What else am I going to do?"

"How about get a job."

He glared at me. "What's going on with you? First you don't know if you're cut out to be a mother, now you're telling me I don't know how to do my own business." He began pacing the trailer and flinging his arms out in the air. "You've got to take some chances in life. You can't expect everything to map out a certain way. Well, this isn't so easy for me, either you know. I'm trying to do something here. Let's have a little support."

He slammed the screen door and kicked a flower pot across the back yard. I crossed to the window, made a move to follow, then let him go. I watched him walk down the road back of the place.

I was sorry I'd exploded, but I couldn't tell him that. My stomach began to ache, so I went to lie down
on the couch. I didn't feel good about myself or anything any more. I guessed Nathan wasn't feeling so good either. Fine parents we'd make.

I'd seen a picture in a magazine of a young woman with a sassy, short haircut. She was dressed in breezy white pants and was hanging off the side of a sailboat somewhere in the Bahamas. Just for a day, a week, I wanted to be her. I could see her on the beach in the islands, stretched out, sinewy and tanned.

There'd be sand everyplace, and she and her bronze lover would be building castles with two tow-headed kids. A bright orange beach ball would bounce toward the sea. She'd dig in an Esprit canvas bag, smear lotion on herself and smell like coconut oil.

I don't really know why I did it. I was standing there, gazing into the mirror above the bathroom sink, I took the rubber bands out of my braids, then threaded out the twists with my fingers. It felt good running my fingers from the top of my head, fanning out hair, strands of auburn, ten years old, down my back and arms to the ends. I was sweating, and I raised a clump of hair at the base of my neck and snipped it quickly with the scissors. I cut around my face and ears, and it wasn't turning out just right, so I evened it up some more in the front. Tears started, they kept coming and the sink filled with hair.
"What are you doing?"

I didn't know at first if a voice inside me had spoken, or if Nathan had. He was standing in the bathroom doorway.

"I'm cutting my hair," I said. The tears kept flowing, so I rubbed them away and bits of hair got into my eyes. The sobs came so quickly I thought I might choke, trying to get a breath.

He looked anxious, frightened. I let go of the scissors and placed them in the sink on top the clumps of hair. He folded his arms around me tentatively, and I buried my face in his shirt, felt his cool fingers, smooth my hair.

"It's fine," he said, "it looks just fine."

"It's like standing in front of a huge, open door," he said to me, that night, as we lay in bed, listening to the creek run. "On this side, I look through it, and it's pitch black over there. I like that. Then I get an idea about something, and I step through the door."

"Then what happens?" I asked. I snuggled closer to him, lying comfortably on my back, looking at the curtain flap in the breeze.

"Things light up. I see something that needs to be done, I do it. Some more things light up," he said.
"Then pretty soon, I look back, I see things back there, I didn't see before."

I heaved a sigh. "I guess there's no reason why a father can't stay home with a baby. Still, I can just hear my folks."

"We'll get along all right."

"Not knowing how life will turn out, that isn't scary for you, is it?" I said. My eyes were closed then. I was relaxed, and I didn't hear if he answered back.

Every night this past week, I've pulled in the driveway, dropped my purse and sweater on the kitchen table inside, then I've gone out back to see the progress Nathan's made building the corral.

He cut lodgepole pines, peeled them and began assembling the seven sides of the corral early in the week. He sawed them to the proper length, thirteen feet each, with a cross-cut he borrowed from his father. A couple of larger pines he left tall for the archway above the gate. He notched the ends of the seven fencing sections so a person could take down the corral and move it easily.
By Friday when I walked around back after work, I could see the corral assembled in the pasture. Nathan was sitting on a tree stump nearby, drinking a beer.

"Finished?" I asked and walked over to it.

"I like it," he said. I'd had my hair shaped by a beautician earlier in the day.

We walked around the corral. He bent over the braces and explained how it was built better, stronger, than the corral Rusty's brother had taken away. I felt the smoothness of the peeled logs, admired the skill with which he'd joined the posts and poles. I wanted to climb to the top of it, so I did. I sat for a moment and inhaled the fresh, sweet wood. Looking across the valley from up there, I could see far away to the mountains, carpets of green trees, wide-open places, where the country looked pretty.

He helped me down from the railing, and we walked down the road that separates our place from Bates'. We talked about the baby coming, the work that needed to be done before fall set in, the prospects for selling winter cord wood. We just kept walking, because the evening was fine, and the air smelled promising.
World Tennis

Amanda and I are watering the flower garden. She has a ten-year-old's energy and curiosity. "What time do we go to the tennis game?" she asks. She strips the blooms off a snapdragon.

"Six o'clock tonight," I answer. She's a cute kid, freckles and bobbed hair, but she wants long hair like Jennifer's and she wants it permed.

Jennifer, who is sixteen, arises at nine-thirty every morning, combs her hair for an hour, dresses for another hour, then sits on the couch and watches MTV. Amanda follows me around and asks questions about my life. She wants to know what it was like sharing a bedroom with her mother all those years and whether I'll ever have babies.
My nieces have been visiting Mike and me for a week. At five o'clock, I put Jane Fonda's Workout album on the stereo and begin to limber up. Amanda bends and stretches with me just for fun. She and my husband will be my cheering section in the No-Champs Tennis Tournament at Playfair Park this evening.

I love competition. Me against someone else. I only play singles. When I'm playing a match, if I'm killing my opponent, and she hits a shot that is just barely out of bounds, I give it to her, to help even things up. Or, conversely, when I'm getting killed, I'll think, O.K., so I'm not absolutely positive about her last shot. I have to call them how I see them. "It was out," I'll say.

So much happens in competition, so many factors are considered at once and quickly. How do you know if the mind sees what is there, or what it wants to see? There is no instant replay, and in No-champs tennis, there is no line judge. Close calls often boil down to gut calls.

When Mike, Amanda and I load in the car and drive to Playfair Park, the August heat moves with us. Clouds are forming huge sky-pillows to the west. A thunderstorm brews, and we can hear it gathering speed in the mountains.
At the park, the tennis courts are paved green, and in a few places weeds have forced their way through cracks. Some of the tournament players are deadly serious, dressed in all-white, and they pound warm-ups back to opponents who are dressed in old running shorts and faded tee-shirts. The parking lot is full when we drive up, and two women stand by the gate to the courts.

"Hope it's the short, dark one," Mike says.

"The one with the clipboard?" I ask. She's the tournament official. She records scores at the end of matches. I have to win two out of three sets to win my first match. The other woman is blonde. So am I, but my hair isn't bleached. She is dressed in pale pink, and she can't be more than nineteen-and-a-half. Probably too young for the tournament, I tell myself.

Mike and Amanda sit on the bleachers and exchange stories about the tallest buildings in Missoula and Spokane, while I sign-in with the official. The girls live in Spokane, and they rode over here, to Missoula, on the bus. They spent the six-hour ride bored out of their minds, devouring four candy bars, a bag of potato chips and one bite of the sandwiches my sister, Edna, had made for them.

On the court, the tall blonde extends her hand to me. "I'm Joni," she says, "are you Sylvia?"
I smile and resignedly accept the challenge. "Which court would you prefer?" I say.

She chooses the one nearest the bleachers. While she sheds a sweater, I confer for a moment with Mike through the fencing.

"She looks tough," he says. "Just get the ball back to her, concentrate on that."

"How old do you think she is? Seventeen?" We turn and watch her slam balls against the backboard.

"First game, second set," Joni says and fires across a serve. She beat me in the first set, 6-2. I kept repeating to myself, "watch the ball spin," like Mike had told me to do, but it didn't matter. Her shots were fast and hard. My arm crumbled when my racket met her forehand shots.

She top-spins everything.

In the second set, I win two of my service games. Take that, Valley Girl. I'm good for an 34-year-old, ex-high school player. I don't know where they got her, but I'll bet she started on Sentinel or Hellgate High School's tennis team within the last two years. Her boyfriend comes to the fence between games, and she giggles with him. I stand in the advantage court and pound the ball against the pavement, waiting.
"Like what's the score?" she says when she comes back onto the court. I smile when I tell her. My score 15. Her score 30. Wap, wap. 15-40. Between games I go to the fence and talk to Mike.

"You're doing fine. At least she isn't acing you," he says.

"How much longer Aunt Sylvie?" asks Amanda.

We finish the second set at 6-2. "Would you report our scores to the official?" Joni says after we shake. "I've got plans." She's hanging on the boyfriend, swinging her racket and smiling.

I bend over, pick up my racket cover and hand her the new can of tennis balls that I brought (loser pays). "I beg your pardon?" I say.

"Oh never mind, I'll do it." She rolls her eyes and giggles off with Mr. Acid-Washed Jeans.

"She beat you bad," Amanda says as we drive home.

This is double-round elimination. It is Saturday evening and Amanda and I have spent the day driving back and forth to the tennis courts to check with the official on rescheduling. The sky clears for an hour, then it clouds up and rains. After the rain stops, we hang around the courts long enough to help push rollers and soak up the extra water.
"Come back at 7:00 tonight," says the official. If the courts are dry, we'll schedule a round." Amanda and I climb in my car and drive home.

I make another trip to the courts, alone, at 7:00 o'clock, but there's no one around. A sign says the evening match has been postponed until morning.

Back home, Jennifer still is sitting on the couch watching MTV. Mike is reading a magazine. We've decided to take the girls out for a hamburger tonight. We go to a place called Moose McGoo's. The kids look at the decorations and laugh because who'd feature a restaurant with rocking horses, toy trains, junk from an old farmstead crammed in there, all at once. "Spokane's got a million restaurants," Jennifer brags. She discreetly checks the place for boys.

At night I lay in bed, and I can't go to sleep. Mike is tired, but he turns over and props up his head on his arm and spells it out for me. "Face it Sylvie, she beat you, and you're not taking it too well."

"She was obviously on a high school or college tennis team within the last two years. According to the tournament rules, she's barred from participating," I say. "And, it was her attitude. She wouldn't call serves in or out."
"If she didn't call a serve out, it was in," he says. "That's the way you play it in No-champs."

"She'd hit it even if it was out, because she had a good angle on it, and knew she could kill me with topspin," I say. "Well, that's cheating."

"She was good. Luck of the draw, Sylvie. You'll do better tomorrow." Mike crawls under the covers to go to sleep.

On Sunday morning, Amanda and I drive to the courts again, check on whether I'll play. Today they have a new official, a young man. "Can you come back at ten o'clock?" he says.

"Ya, sure. Who do I play?"

He runs a pencil down the surface of the first-round loser's chart. "Blanche Merriam. She has a doubles match before this one, but she'll get here by ten-fifteen."

Amanda and I walk away from the courts, and I see the young blonde from yesterday pouring over the chart of winners.

"Hello Joni," I say, as I pass her. "Have you played another match, yet?" I hope she is winning the tournament, since it's not so bad if you are beat by the best player.
"Like, you won't believe it," she says. She
throws her blonde hair back and shakes her head. "I
over-slept my match this morning." She searches the
crowd for someone. "If I can't get my opponent to
reschedule, like I blew it."

"That too bad," I say. "Well, good luck." She's
on the ropes, I tell myself, as far as the tournament's
concerned.

The girls are leaving on the bus this afternoon at
two o'clock, so they are staying home packing, and
picking at each other. They've done all right, for the
most part, being away from their parents for a week.

This morning Jennifer put a cassette tape into the
stereo system and taught Amanda how to do a dance. Her
high school drill team had performed it at a basketball
game last winter. I came downstairs, racket in hand,
and stopped to watch her from the hallway. Jennifer sat
on the couch and nodded her head in time with the beat.
Amanda pranced through the living room and then froze.
She started crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked in amazement.

Jennifer sat on the couch, smiling, "she's just
sensitive," she said.
"No sir," Amanda sobbed. "You were making faces." I didn't know whether Jennifer had been making faces.

"Go on upstairs and get all your things together," I told Jennifer. "Maybe Amanda and I should look at those color books she brought."

Jennifer agreed but she still was smiling. Amanda and I colored six pages of Nancy Drew pictures before it was time for me to go. "Can I call Momma?" she asked. I dialed the number for her.

"Hello, Edna?"

"Are you ready to go crazy?" she asked, right off.

"I think Amanda's a little homesick. She wants to talk to you."

"I hope they haven't been fighting," she said. I explained the dancing episode. With extra-sensory perception, Edna recognized the dynamics of making-a-face-or-just-innocent-staring. Her arm-chair ruling came down in favor of Amanda.

When I handed over the phone, Amanda said shyly, "Momma?"

At ten o'clock Mike wanders around Playfair Park while I hit tennis balls across the court to no one, waiting for Blanche Merriam to show. Some of my shots are pretty good, I think. My serve is really on, today.
At last a Volkswagen Beetle pulls into the lot, two women and a junior-high-aged girl get out. One of the women is forty-ish, the other late fifties. All three go to the tournament official, but only one, the fifties lady, comes onto the court to greet me. We shake hands and exchange names.

She carries a tote bag with all manner of pamphlets, food and a water bottle sticking out of it. She parks it by the net, then asks, "you want to practice some warm-ups?"

"Sure," I say. "Let's just hit for a while."

Her strokes are even and strong, but so are mine. I'm feeling a little guilty. This woman is old enough to be my mother, and I'll wear her out.

"Do you want to practice some net shots?" she asks. She gathers up the balls and sprints toward the net.

"O.K., ya, a couple."

I stand a racket-length away from the net, and she begins firing tennis balls at me. I hit them back, but she stops the volley and comes to the net.

"Let me show you something. When it looks like it'll be over your head, start moving back. Point a finger up at it, trace the ball's fall. Then overhead it, like this." She swoops her arm down in a graceful move. "You'll get pretty good at it, if you practice," she says.
"O.K. Thanks for the tip." I laugh to myself. It's nice of her to decide I need a lesson. I wonder how long we should keep practicing. It's to my advantage to wear her down. I'll just keep hitting with her until she says she's ready.

She comes to the net after we practice some serves. We spin the racket to see who'll serve first.

"How long have you played?" she asks.

"Off and on for fifteen years. How about you?"

"I learned when I was forty," she says.

I calculate that she's fifty or fifty-five, so probably she's been playing as long as I. "That's wonderful," I say.

She goes to her tennis bag and munches on a piece of banana. "I didn't get any breakfast this morning," she says. "I played a doubles match earlier. My partner and I lost." She takes a gulp of water and walks to the receiving court. I'll serve first.

My first serve is out, so I dink over a second one. She nails it right away and slices it back over the net, so that it barely catches the line on my side. I scramble to the net after it, and it bounces just out of my reach. Service, love-15.

She nails me again with the same shot, and I cuss myself. Why don't you hit it right to her for God sake. She's stout and fifty-something. So hit it right to
her, so she doesn't have to move to get it. Like, smart.


I win the first game. She serves the second game, and we battle down to the last point. The score is advantage mine. This point, and I win two games, I tell myself. Her first serve is no good.

Four women are playing on the court next to us, part of the same tournament, but B class. Their ball rolls behind Blanche. She takes her second serve and it doesn't clear the net. Two games are mine, but instead of gathering the balls and giving them to me, she winds up for a third serve from the ad court.

"Excuse me, but that was game," I say.

"Oh no. There was interference, I get to start the point over."

I see. She wants to count the ball that rolled WELL behind her as interference.

"No. If there was interference on your second serve, you only get to re-serve the second one," I say.

"I'm certain, Sylvia. I get two new serves."

I tell myself to let it go. Her interpretation of the rule doesn't make sense. She has assumed an attitude of authority in the match. Maybe she is right about interference. "Go head then," I say, but I'm
beginning to suspect her motives. She's using every advantage possible to slow the play, rest up between shots. She serves for the fourth time from the ad court. I get the point and the game.

"Let's check on that rule," she says, coming to the net. "I just want to be sure I'm right on that."

Now I'm certain about what she's up to here. She takes a drink of water, pulls out two rule books and hands me one. "You look there," she says.

I quickly thumb to the section on interference, and read, "interference during a serve shall be treated as a let serve, and shall entitle server to take one to replace it."

"Well, you were right," she says, as she munches on the banana again. "You got the game anyway, so no harm."

My temper flares. And what if I hadn't won the game? She stretches her arms above her head as she walks to her back court, stops and twists sideways, then continues walking. I talk to myself. I'm sure she must be a nice lady, but these delays are unsportsmanlike. I wind up for my serve, then catch the ball in mid air. My eye focuses on her receiving court, and she's not in it. She's talking to the women next to us, explaining how to play a tie-breaker.

I thump the ball against the court and wait.
When she is ready, we play.

I win the first set 6-3. My momentum is going strong. Mike has been sitting on the grass behind our court watching. Confidence swells my expectations. I wish I had been playing this well yesterday, when I played Joni.

I could play Martina Navratilova right now, and hold my own. My concentration is drawn to a fine point. I have Blanche down 3-0 in the second set.

I am maybe ten years older than Joni was, but Blanche is one hundred years older than me. I don't feel good about killing her. So what? I rationalize. She's good. She has a different style than Joni, but we are all in A class and we all have good games. I'm on to Blanche's slice across the front of my court, and I've been firing it back to her.

Someone calls out from the fence. We are in the middle of our fourth game, second set. It is the woman and girl who brought Blanche to the match in the Volkswagen. They come out on the court, even though our game isn't finished, and ask her where she'd like to go for lunch.

I should say something to Blanche, to these intruders, like get your asses of the court, there is a game going on here. But I don't. That would be unsportsmanlike. Even worse, that would draw attention
to my deteriorating mental state. Blow my concentration. The important thing is to remain calm, I tell myself. She is working this distraction-delay thing to her advantage. She knows I want to get the match over with and the more quickly, the better. I walk over to where Mike is sitting.

"Can you believe this?" I ask.

"Tell her to play. You don't have to stand for this," he says.

"I know. But she's chipping at my concentration. I can tough it out. I'm not in a hurry, either. As long as we finish by one o'clock."

"If she's going to play in A class, she should follow court etiquette. Nobody takes that much time," Mike says. "Do what you have to."

Her friends are winding up lunch plans when I get back on the court. We'd stopped in the middle of the fourth game, and I was ahead, 30-love. We resume, with her serving.

I know she's working on my mental game. I can't get her center-court lunch party out of my head, and I start missing shots. In no time she ties the score. She lobs it and I can't run back fast enough to get it.

So she gets one game. Big deal. The second set score is 3-1, my favor. I'll get the next three and the match will be over. My mind has begun to drift. I
remember when my sister and I played and she beat me. She felt terrible afterwards, and I let her know that she should. I didn't talk to her for a week.

Blanche calls out the game score: 3-3, second set. Shit. What happened here? Concentrate. Blanche pulls me around the court like a hooked fish. I think of the lilac bushes that surrounded the high school courts where my sister and I played. The lilacs smell sweet in May. My best friend from high school lived in a house across from the tennis courts, and I wonder if her parents live there still.

This is bad, I tell myself, you can't blow concentration like this. Blanche has closed around the game, driving it like a hot car. She wins the second set, 6-3. O.K., I tell myself, I'll win the third set, but I'm starting to get nervous.

Mike and I sit on the grass. Blanche wanted a lunch break. I've never heard of taking a lunch break in the middle of a tennis match. Not in high school, college or any amateur tournament, ever. I give her fifteen minutes. It's already 12:30. I walk over to the drinking fountain and slurp water. It reminds me of Blanche sauntering over to the net between each game, taking a drink from her water bottle, then slowly
sauntering to the back court. God that burns me up.

I've never played anyone who has taken so much time between games, between points. I decide to go over to the Volkswagen and prod her back onto the court. The woman and girl who had come to the court with her earlier, brought her a sandwich. She is chatting with them and eating her sandwich.

"Excuse me, Blanche," I say. "We need to get going, stop taking so many breaks. I have to get my nieces to the bus by two this afternoon."

She swallows. "Can't your husband take them?"

"They are my nieces," I bark at her. "I'm going to take them. Now let's play."

Back on the court, things are clicking for me. I feel a little guilty for snapping at her, but so what? If she's going to play tournament tennis in A class, what does she expect? They have a category for 35 and over. I'm killing her 5-2 in the third set. We start the last game. I know it's the last game because I'll win it, and my serve is really on today.

I serve the first point and ace her. She's not taking as much time between points, though I can tell she is tired. I'm wearing her down.

I serve again. She pops it back with the same slice shot she was using when we started. I'm slowing
down a little, and I miss it. No biggie. 15-15. She does it again. Damn, get over to it, I chide myself. My confidence is shaken a little. 15-30. She could win this game, but the worst that can happen is the final set score will be 6-3 instead of 6-2, because, if I lose this game, I'll win the game after this one. I serve again, and she cracks it past my backhand. 15-40. She wins the next point and the game.

Too much thinking ahead to the next game. Concentrate on this one. The pressure is on. She lobs it over my head as I rush the net. I can't make it to the back court fast enough.

It is her serve and the set score has climbed to 5-4. O.K. I'm still ahead. This is the last game, I tell myself, but soon I see that it won't be. She's fighting me, and on my ground. No longer is she sauntering up to the net between games and taking swigs off the water bottle. She moves with determination, never stopping between playing and re-positioning for the next serve.

The set score is tied 5-5, and I'm about to have a heart attack. Good Christ, I tell myself, how can you let her beat you? You had her 5-2. She wins the next game. I win the one after that: 6-6. We must play a tie-breaker.

Of course she knows the rules for a tie-breaker -- cold. She's cruising, but she takes time to carefully
explain the tie-breaker to me. I know tie-breakers already, but I let her tell me. Our last games have bounced between ad-ins, deuces and ad-outs, but this round is final. We will play twelve points, the winner must win by two, and it's over. She fights me point for point.

My legs ache and I know I'm past the mental high where action and reaction are one fluid motion. My energy is evaporating to nothing, and I keep thinking about other things. The ball dribbles over the net, and she gets a point. My mind shifts from the game to what Mike and I will eat for dinner, whether we'll get Amanda and Jennifer to the bus in time. It's her serve. I pound it back to her and it catches the base line. We each have five points. I need two more.

She winds up for the serve; I rush it. It's on my backhand side, so I swing a little late and it goes into the net. She moves to the ad court, and my gut clutches my heart.

She aces me.

I am so angry with myself that I consider pounding my head on the pavement. She hollers, "I did it," and jogs to the net, sticking out her hand for a shake. "Thank you. It could have gone either way," she says, and she hugs me. I don't feel like hugging her.
As I walk off the court, one of the four women who was playing next to us, asks me, "do you know how old she is?"

I'm not thinking clearly, and I perceive she is asking me Blanche's age, not that she is getting ready for the crowning blow. "No, I don't," I say.

"She's sixty-five," she says dramatically.

God that pisses me off. I turn and snarl at the woman, "well good for her."

At home, in the bath tub, I sulk. We did get Jennifer and Amanda to the bus station on time. Mike is giving me space tonight. As I soak, I think about my defeat. There is a notion nagging my insides.

I know it was losing to someone Blanche's age that really defeated me. I thought I should have beaten her just because she was sixty-five. She out-smarted me, and finally out-played me. I wonder if she is religious about tennis, if she has she spent her life pitting herself against opponents, one-on-one. I comfort myself. That delaying tactic was bull shit.

Later in the week, I call the Parks and Recreation Office and get Blanche's address. I'm curious about her more than anything. I want to find out where inside herself she had tucked the stamina to finish me off. I
knew she had analyzed me. All of that "shall we practice a few shots," and "here's how you hit overheads," was calculated. She tested me. She uncovered my weaknesses and began the attack.

She had told me she'd come into town for the tournament from somewhere in the Flathead Valley. The Parks and Recreation office provided me with a P.O. Box number, and I wrote to her. I didn't mention her age or my gradual turn from feeling sorry for her to being angry with her, to admiring her perseverance. I just told her she inspired me, and how badly I had wanted to win that match.

She responded quickly:

Dear Sylvia:

You really made my day when I received your letter. I realize that you had to do a bit of searching to get my address, too. . . ."

I chuckled. Blanche knew exactly how much searching I'd had to do.
"May I drive?" I ask him. He is driving slowly to irritate me. I watch the Ionian Sea coast pour in from the horizon.

He jerks the car over to the roadside, slams the door and we get out. We stand there, looking toward the globe of old brown hills. Olive trees twist up edges of cliffs far away. It is hot today.

I maneuver the Citroen back onto the highway. The side-view mirror is missing and the car is coated with road dust.

We met yesterday on the ferry boat from Corfu. He is nice looking, but he knows it. He looks younger than he is. It's hard to tell the age of Greeks. He speaks perfect English. He is at least fifty, I'm sure. He told me he was thirty-eight. Ha! This is my rental
car. I have let him ride with me to Olympia and Athens for half the fee.

I light a cigarette. We've been driving for three hours.

"Do you have to smoke?" he asks.

I am a letter carrier in Pocatello, Idaho. During the day, when I carry letters to people's mailboxes, my white Angora cat, Fire, sits in my front window and watches the cars speed down Fourth Street. We live alone. My house was owned by an ancient railroader. He died and his son rents to me. The railroader had an electrical outlet put in the ceiling over the kitchen table in my house. He plugged his toaster into it.

My travel companion is in the import business. Yesterday he stood near the bow of the ferry boat on the top deck retching. I asked if he was all right.

"No. Yes. I think I'm getting better," he'd said.

"I'll get you a glass of water," I'd offered.

I thought he must never have traveled by boat before, but he told me he takes the Brindisi ferry at least twice a month. He sells goods in Italy and rides the ferry down the Ionian coast to Patras, Greece. He travels all over Greece and Turkey buying wool and gold. We slept together last night.
It is noon when we reach Nauplia. The water lulls us into stopping. We walk up one thousand stone steps to a Venetian Fortress. Palamidi it is called. Inside its Lion gates are rooms, open terraces, more rooms, teeny tiny rocks plastered together making walls hundreds of feet above the sea.

Later he improves his tan on our private beach. My hair and skin are dark, and I don't worry about tanning. My parents were Basque sheepherders, and like him, they were wanderers. They traveled the Snake River Plains near Twin Falls, Idaho, tending their herds.

Under the sea water, I watch little fish eat seaweed. Something brushes my back, I turn and he swims up to me.

We lay on the beach for an eternity, packed into a bed of sand. I lean over him and watch the tiny droplets of water from my wet hair fall down and prick his skin. "I'm going back to the hotel," I tell him.

He groans. He is asleep. I start up the rocky ledge overlooking the sea. To the west I can see nothing but shades of blue and violet water. I climb down through large, flat rocks where people have found islands of sand and have sunbathed nude all day. I stop and look back at him drifting near the sea.
In the village, the wind off the water blows up ladies' India-cloth skirts, and it chases bits of paper through rows of Dionysus key chains and cigarette lighters. At the end of the boat dock, next to open-air cafes, a sign clangs against the post office building. I make my way toward it to mail my postcard home.

I give the heavy Greek woman behind the counter a five-hundred drachma note, and she passes back three separate sheets of stamps.

"Which do I use? How do I use these?" I ask her.

She chatters in Greek, rips the stamps apart in proper groupings and shoves them back to me. I carry them to a table in the corner of the small room, and post my card.

I know he won't be coming back to the hotel. I stroll through the market looking for a grocery. We'll have fruit and cheese and mead this afternoon. A narrow store is open to the sunlight, packed with fresh fruits and vegetables. I scoot through the aisles of tanning lotion, crackers and candy bins looking for the bakery counter. At the back of the store I catch sight of a beautiful Greek woman weighing a slab of cheese, speaking softly to someone. I'm not sure who he is.

She reaches up to a high shelf to pull down a piece of waxed paper and her hair cascades perfectly down her
She turns, and her smooth olive face smiles as she wraps his cheese in the paper.

I run through the market up the thousand stones steps to my room. I lock myself in the bathroom and wait a long time for him. Finally he comes.

"Sydney open the door," he demands.

I am crying, but I'm not really sad. "No," I say.

"Sydney, please. Open the door," he says again.

I sit on the edge of the tub, wiping salty tears from my face with toilet paper. I smoke a cigarette. "Why did you come with me? Just answer that, honestly."

"Christ," he says. He is quiet a long time. I wonder if he has left, and I panic for a moment. Then he is back at the door, pounding. "Sydney," he pleads. I unlock the door. I wonder how long it will take him to discover it, unlocked. I watch as the knob turns. He pushes it open slowly.

I throw the cigarette in the toilet and fiddle with my hair in front of the mirror. "I saw you," I say. (I don't know why I've done this. I know I shouldn't have any power over what he does.)

"Saw me? Saw me where?"

"At the market."

He shakes his head. "So. I was at the market. What is unusual about that?"
"There was a woman with you. You bought something. I saw the way you were looking at her. You think you can just screw me, and her, and anybody you please, while we're traveling together."

He goes to the bed and puts his suitcase on it, begins folding silk into it. I didn't mean for him to leave. "Please," I say, "I'm sorry. This is a strange place, it makes me insecure. Come close. Let's be friends."

He continues to fold the colors of fabric, then snaps shut the suitcase. His face is blue and now his eyes are filling with water. Through the open hotel door, a warm wave of air flows over the bed. It ruffles the curtains behind him.

In the Plaka, the ancient city of Athens, streets are narrow and lined with crumbled buildings. Tourists pack the narrow lanes jabbering in various languages, handling merchandise, bartering with shopkeepers. This is my last day. Tomorrow I'll fly home to New York, across the world to Pocatello.

I linger at a table stacked with wool clothing. There is a periwinkle blue sweater that would look nice on him. "How much?" I ask the vendor and I peel off drachmas. You can see the Parthenon up above the Plaka.
There must be two hundred people crawling around it, up there, today.

At the hotel I check for messages. The clerk shakes his head no. He is dark and Greek and nice looking, this clerk. It is hot again today. In my room, I pull down the shades, strip and crawl under the bed sheets. They are cool next to my skin.

I want to wake up, but I can't. My eyes are open. I can make out the shape of objects in my room, but my legs won't move. I should get up and write him a postcard. I dream. The sea completely covers us. I float down to the sea floor, open my eyes and reach up to him, pulling him down to me. His face is handsome, but he is not young, as he said he was. I hold his blue-eyed face tightly in my hands. We float like that for two hours locked together. I sing to him.

A noise from the next room startles me. I stumble into the bathroom and check the time on my wrist watch. It is 8:40 in the evening. I brush my hair and get dressed.

The lounge of the Athene Palace is nearly empty. I have chosen to wear a white sundress. My oval face is without makeup or jewelry. I put thongs on my feet.

The bar is nearly empty. The hotel guests must be in the city having dinner. At the bar I brush against a
dark-skinned man (accidentally). It is the desk clerk, off duty, having a drink. I look at him and smile. He leans forward and asks, "did you get your message?"

"It came while I was sleeping," I answer. To the bartender, "a glass of white wine, please."

The dark clerk comes close to me, and I can tell that he doesn't know why.