Spirit Waters: A collection of short stories

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The University of Montana

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THE SPIRIT WATERS

a collection of short stories

by

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CRAWLSPACE

I think of my childhood as a crawlspace—a dark, cool, spidery hole where hiding was sometimes a diversion, sometimes a necessity. Under our trailer, the dirt floor smelled of cool, damp concrete, of musty wood. Above me, Ma clacked across the floor in high heels. My papa’s voice boomed and shook the panel above me. "Where’s Tina?" he would say. "Probably outside," Ma would say. Unseen in a hole below, I could hear entire conversations between my parents.

Of course, I always waited to hear something about me. I wanted to hear my parents marveling over me, at how smart I was, how pretty, how mysterious. I wanted to hear their voices discuss me as they would an important grown-up, their tones deep with respect and reverence, pride and love. Almost always I was disappointed. If my name passed their lips, it was usually in the context of what a financial burden I was, how I couldn’t go another winter in "that shred of a coat" or "those ratty shoes." I felt like a big
rock in their pockets.

My papa was a giant, red-haired, bearded man with hands so big he could have squeezed my head, one-handed, and popped it like a balloon. I couldn't trust his hands. I never knew if the thick, calloused sausages of his fingers would descend on my head for a pat or punishment. Even the pats were sometimes punishment, for my father had a mean streak and occasionally slammed his hand on my crown as he grinned and said, "Love pat. It's just a love pat."

My ma was a gypsy, disowned by a band of gypsies who worked summers at the amusement park and raised horses on small plots of land near Wakema, the town two miles down the lake. Although she grew up with them, they disapproved of her marriage to my father, which was predicted to fail since he was pure Irish and called her family the "Jolly Gypers." None of Ma's family came to her wedding, though two brothers were present long enough to throw cooked rice in the gas tank of Papa's car, delaying their honeymoon to Minneapolis.

My ma earned us groceries by palm and card reading, which she did in our living room. The living room was always dark, hung with thick curtains and tapestries which made it seem like a cave. When customers came, she burned carved red and black candles which she bought wholesale from some Hari Krishnas who had a community across the lake at Miller's Bay.

She was also afraid of my father's hands--not just
because they could hurt and tease, but because of what she'd seen on their wide, calloused palms. His lifeline was bisected again and again by small, hairline creases, suggesting a stormy life and temperament. The end of the line was obscured by a scar where he had punctured his right hand on a nail as a little boy, suggesting sudden and violent death. But Ma believed that prayer and the rosary could undo whatever ill was decreed by the lines on his palm. She married him to get away from her gypsy family, who were notorious around Lake Wakema for fighting and stealing, but she found herself unable to dismiss parts of their heritage and beliefs.

I often thought that neither one was my parent, that I'd been found floating in a basket among the cattails in Miller's Bay. My red-gold hair was similar to my father's, and Ma's shy, quiet way was like my own, but often I felt I was in the middle of a high wire strung between my parents. So I hid, in one way or another, from my father's hands and my mother's dark, knowing stare, often hiding just to hide, to feel invisible.

I had a theory when I was six years old. I believed that if everyone could turn themselves inside out, everyone would look the same. I tried it once--turning myself inside out--tried starting at the mouth and pulling my cheeks back,
coughing to make my insides outside, tried to make my mouth
swallow me whole backwards so that whatever was inside of me
would be on the outside, and no one would recognize me. It
was a way I had of hiding from myself, hiding myself within
myself, but I couldn't do it, no matter how big I stretched
my lips, opened my mouth, tried swallowing backwards.

Hiding was more possible. Under the couch, with my
cheek crushed against the Oriental carpet, I could peek out
at the living room and see it as a mouse would see it—the
wooden legs that rose from the floor to hold up the black
sky of the couch; the broad expanse of the red and black
carpet, like a tufted plain of colored corn; the folds and
drapes of Ma's long red dress as she sat at the card table,
leaning into someone's hand. I felt my being reduced to the
simplicity of an eye, an ear, a nose, a tiny sensing
presence curled in the dark like an infant's fist, or a
snail.

I always tried to make myself as small as I possibly
could. I believed that if I tried hard enough, I could make
myself too small to be seen. Then the dresses in Ma's
closet or the underside of the couch or the roof of the
crawlspace would seem like a big foot coming down, the big
foot of the world, stopping miraculously just before it
crushed me. I believed I had a magical cushion around me
that kept that big foot from grinding me into the ground.

****
My father was often gone during the week, working for the Minnesota Highway Commission on the road crew. He shoveled cement with his wide, thick shoulders, which reminded me of an old wing-back chair. His broad face always looked beefy and unhealthy from sunburn, as though it had been molded out of hamburger, his eyes peering out of his face like two slivers of a broken milk glass, cloudy and pale blue, slitted and sharp.

On payday he was always in a good mood. He'd take me to the amusement park down the beach, buy me root beer, take me on the roller coaster, buy me salt water taffy at the taffy place. In the winter, when few people were around, he'd clear a patch of snow off the lake and we'd ice skate. He taught me to play hockey, how to do a slap shot. "M'girl," he'd call me. "Nice shot, m'girl."

But over the years he became unpredictable. Sometimes he'd slap me for clinking my spoon in the cereal bowl, moments later he'd sit and listen while I practiced playing the flute. I grew to anticipate these moods. Thick lines across his forehead and a deep wrinkle across the bridge of his nose meant trouble. But a smooth forehead and wide eyes meant clear sailing, laughter, often presents.

We used to walk along the lakeshore together, Saturday afternoons, following the path to Pillsbury's Point where the oaks dropped big, hand-like leaves in the fall. One September, Papa found a glass eye. "Hey, m'girl, look at
this," he said. I recoiled when I first saw it, but I was fascinated by its smooth white, the brown iris with its black center. "Here's looking at you, m'girl," Papa said, laughing. I took it, rolled it in my hand. It stared up at me, cool in my palm. I tried to imagine its owner, some part of him or her caught in that eye like an image in a crystal ball, a wavering spirit floating somewhere in the depths of that black center.

But when we took it home to Ma, she shouted at us to get rid of it. She said it was evil, said the man it belonged to was dead and that this was his spirit, his evil spirit, haunting whoever picked it up. "Take it back, right where you found it!" she cried.

Papa gave it to me on the sly, saying, "This here is my third eye, Tina. I'll always be watching out for you, long as you keep it." I hid it in a little box on a ledge near my bed, taking it out to look at it sometimes when Ma wasn't around.

My father got headaches. Really bad ones, where his face screwed up into a kind of African mask, like one I'd seen in a magazine somewhere, and he'd lie on the couch with a glass of water and a pile of aspirins on the table. His voice was soft and hoarse whenever he dared to speak. My father's headaches worried Ma, but he claimed there was no
doctor good enough in Wakema or anywhere near that was worth the money it took to see them. "You go to a doctor for a broken leg, or for coughing up blood, but not just for a few headaches," he'd say. "Colds, headaches, flu--you get over them sooner or later, doctor or not."

But sometimes his lasted several days, and he'd moan on the couch while Ma brought him cool washcloths and laid them on his wide, red forehead. Often she tried to heal him, secretly convinced that demons had entered his skull and had made a nest there. She prayed over him with a rosary and burned candles and incense, whispering her prayers. He ate aspirins continually, saying in a faded voice, "Don't know why I bother, these damn things don't touch it."

It sent a thrill up my spine to see my big, noisy, strong papa lying flat on the couch, robbed of all his energy and strength. He was like an animal demoralized by capture, his voice soft and thin, each movement of his big red hands slow and careful. Those were the only times our family was really together, and I liked the quiet, liked the goulash Ma would make, and we'd eat in the dark of the living room with a candle on the card table.

All that was required of me was that I keep quiet, so I'd go outside and build little houses out of bark and mud under the maple tree in the back. In these houses, little families lived. They were farmers in a valley between two big tree roots, and they raised hay and corn for their
horses. One family had a daughter my age, and she could spin straw into gold, like the girl in the fairy tale. At night she'd spin the straw on her mother's spinning wheel into strands of gold that she concealed in her red-gold hair, and early in the morning, when everyone was still asleep, she'd walk through the countryside and leave strands of gold on the doors where poor families lived.

The little girl was me. I pulled out strands of my own hair, pretending I had spun them out of straw, and put them above the little doors on the houses. The poor families were very grateful; they thought God had answered their prayers.

Sometimes I wished I could make myself small enough to fit into one of the bark houses in the valley. Then I'd live in a house instead of a trailer, and have a special talent that no one knew about, and I'd feel good from the inside out because of it, because I helped other people and because I was a sort of saint.

My mother didn't get a lot of palm reading customers, just two or three a week. When a customer came, I'd crawl into my bed, where I could see part of the living room and the velvet-covered card table where Ma did her readings. She was a good reader, always took the chance of personalizing the reading somewhat, like saying the customer
would have two children, or two marriages. She was not like others I'd seen read, who would make predictions based on their own fantasies of becoming rich or meeting a true soul-mate.

There was one male customer who came quite often—sometimes twice a week. Virgil was in his early twenties and lived down the lake in Wakema, where he washed dishes at the Red Rooster Cafe. He could play the guitar, and in the summers he'd play along the midway at the amusement park for donations from passersby. That's how he met Ma, when she set up her own booth and read palms at the amusement park the summer I turned twelve.

As I lay in my bed, I could see Virgil's thin, quivering hands on the table and his almost concave chest trembling, like a sheet hung out to dry. Virgil's face, too, was thin and pale, with a wide mouth that looked like a mail slot. His laugh was a high gurgle, and he was fond of telling jokes to Ma, who made him whisper them when I was around.

I knew they liked each other, maybe even loved each other. I liked him too, for often he'd bring his guitar and sing songs he made up. He could juggle anything, even fresh eggs. When Ma read his palm the first time, she told him he would achieve recognition for his musical talents around the time he became forty. I think Virgil was just relieved to be told he'd live that long.
Virgil often tickled me unmercifully. "Teeny Tiny Tina!" he'd screech, and the fingers would dig between my ribs and burrow into my armpits until I was laughing so hard the tears ran down my face. It was always half torture, half ecstasy, but I liked it.

But then something funny happened. It wasn't funny like Virgil's songs were funny; it was funny-strange, funny-weird, a feeling in my stomach.

Ma didn't know I was home from school early that day, since there was no flute practice. When I heard her come home from the Red Rooster, laughing and talking to Virgil, I dived under the couch without thinking, only knowing I wanted to hide. They came in and sat across from each other at the card table. I peeked out. They were trading drinks from a big green jug of wine.

"Wine's a healing thing," Virgil's high, thin voice said.

"So are you." Ma's voice was light, almost tittering.

"And so are you," Virgil replied seriously. "You've healed me more than anything, ever, in my life."

"I am a woman of experience," Ma said. By her filmy voice, I knew she was already drunk. She didn't drink often, but when she did I knew that voice right off.

"You ARE an experience," Virgil said, laughing. "Tell me something--have you ever thought you'd meet a man that you wished you could just drop everything and run away
"The world's full of them," Ma laughed. "But you are definitely one of them."

"Then why don't we?"

"Why don't we what?"

"Run away together."

I peeked under the skirt of the couch again. Virgil's penny loafer came off, and his thin foot slid across the floor to Ma's sandalled foot. A feeling in my stomach made me realize that this was not new between them.

Ma cleared her throat, then giggled. "I suppose we could... This is beginning to sound like a couch talk."

"You're right," Virgil said. "Shall we migrate?"

With horror I saw them rise and move toward me. I slipped as far under the couch as I could, trying to get to the back, but the "whump" of my mother's and then Virgil's body sagged the bottom and pinned me to the floor. The blood pounded in my head and I could barely breathe, caught between saying something to get them off me, and so expose myself, and staying quiet to see what would happen. In my indecision, I did nothing.

"Allow me to remove these silly accoutrements," Virgil was saying. There was a sound of clothes slipping off, of wet lips smashing together. I winced. I didn't want what was happening to happen, and I tried to make myself smaller, small enough to be unaware. But I sensed my physical
discomfort was going to worsen soon, if they proceeded to the pumping up and down stage, which I had only just learned about. I tried to scream, but a grunt was the most I could muster. "Uh!" I said. They stopped immediately.

"What was that?" Ma said.

"Uh!" I said again.

My mother's head appeared upside down under the raised skirt of the couch. "Tina!" she shouted. They got off the couch and I crawled out, hiding my eyes at the sight of Ma's thick, round breasts and Virgil's white, veiny legs. They scrambled to cover themselves.

"Don't you tell! Don't you dare tell! I'll blister your butt!" Ma screamed. I was grounded to my bedroom the rest of the day, despite Virgil's trying to stick up for me. All day long I felt sick, horror-stricken, and could not bear to look at Ma.

I lay in bed under the covers while Ma lied to Papa that I'd skipped flute practice and needed to be grounded. I could have told him what really happened then and there, but I could feel the black points of Ma's eyes from the living room, pinning me down like an insect specimen. I curled up tight under the covers with the glass eye in my fist, thinking I could see whatever it saw from its place in my hand--the black curl of fingers over a palm whose pale
Several nights later, my mother and father came home together late, and very drunk, an infrequent occurrence. I woke up to hear them in the kitchen, my father's voice booming, my mother's voice a screeching retort. I heard Virgil's name. My father called him a "punk," "a glass of milk," "a scummy ball of shit." I plugged my ears and hid under the covers, gritted my teeth, and could not tell if the pounding I heard was my father's fist or my own heart.

Then I heard Ma at my bedside. "You've done this!" she cried. "You told him!" She yanked me out of bed.

"I didn't!" I screamed. "I didn't tell!"

"Leave her alone!" Papa shouted. "No one had to tell me--it's all over the goddamn town!" He grabbed her arm, twisting it behind her back. He threw her on the card table, which collapsed. "You are going to die, woman!" he shouted.

Then he tore out the back door. I thought he was going out to his truck, where he kept a gun. But I heard his pickup door slam, and the wheels sprayed gravel against our trailer. Ma got up, the arm he had twisted held across her stomach. She looked at me blankly, as though she didn't recognize me. Her face looked pale, flabby, lined. "I didn't tell him, Ma, I swear it," I said.
"Three reduced to two, and then one," she said in her quiet fortune-teller's voice. Then she sighed. "He’ll be back soon." Ma rubbed her dark eyes, smears of mascara under them.

"I know a place we can hide," I said. I took her arm and led her to the kitchen, where all the lights were blazing. The light seemed blinding, glinting off the toaster and the handle on the refrigerator, making everything seem still and unreal. I felt old, grown up, as if my mother had become the child and I the mother. I bent down and slid back the panel in the floor that led to the water meter under the kitchen. "He’ll never find us here," I said. My mother stood, wide-eyed, one trembling hand tugging at her lips. She seemed to stare past me, or through me. I took her hand.

She stepped down into the crawlspace and squatted in the dirt. "There’s a little tunnel under the living room," I said. I climbed in after her, pulling the panel shut above me. The cold darkness enclosed us. We lay down together in the tunnel; October cold came through a loose panel in the skirting six feet away. I pulled my blankets and pillows around us. I thought for a moment that it must be like lying in a grave.

We didn’t talk. I listened for the scrunch of gravel in the driveway, the slam of the truck’s door, the voice of my father, but all was still and quiet. The dark expanded
and contracted around me, like a balloon, and I imagined I saw the big foot coming down, coming down, blood and bones on its sole as it hovered just above my face.

I closed my eyes. I heard my mother’s breath as she fell asleep, or passed out. There was a wheeze deep in her throat, and each time she exhaled, the wheeze sounded like many voices crying out in the distance. Over and over, they cried out as she breathed, and in the darkness I saw an image of many people trapped in a pit, far down, helpless and unable to get out.

Sometime during the night, I thought I heard Papa come back. The clumping of his boots across the trailer floor wound in and out of my dreams, and I could not tell what was real and what was dream. I dreamed of my bark houses under the maple, where I lived spinning gold, and of the day the sun disappeared when a big black boot came down--dim crunch of bark and bone.

In the morning I woke shivering. I shook Ma awake. We crawled out the door to the side of the trailer, daylight stinging our eyes. Papa’s pickup was gone. Inside, clothes and newspapers and emptied drawers were strewn across every room. A suitcase and Papa’s things were gone.

I skipped a week of school. Ma and I sat at the kitchen table playing King’s Corner and drinking tea. Every
few hours, I asked, "Do you think he'll come back?"

"I don't know," Ma said.

"Where do you think he went?" I said, dumping three spoons of sugar in my tea.

"I don't know," she said, dealing. "Maybe Minneapolis or Madison."

"He can't just up and leave like that."

Ma shrugged.

The next Sunday a policeman came to the door. They'd found Papa, dead in a motel in Jackson, Mississippi, hundreds of miles away, cause of death unknown.

My ma turned away from the door after the policeman had gone. Her face looked drawn, stretched, as though her hair were pulling her skin too tight. She said, "I don't know what to think about this." She put her arm around my shoulders.

Later, an autopsy revealed a fast-growing tumor in my father's brain which had finally blocked the flow of blood to his cortex. The tumor, they said, was the size of his fist.

After the funeral I walked down along the path towards Pillsbury's Point with a small box in my pocket. The path was thick with oak leaves, and I kicked them in front of me as I went. They made a loud shushing sound.
I kept my hands in my pockets and fingered the box in my right hand. My mind was empty. I reached the point and gazed out at the grey lake, where a cold wind stirred the waves to whitecaps. I must have stood there for half an hour, shaking with the cold, and then I took the box from my pocket and opened it. Papa's "third eye" stared up at me. I took it in my right hand and threw it, as far as I could, into the lake.

As soon as I'd done it, I was sorry. Part of me believed that the eye was truly evil, and part of me believed the eye was a symbol of my father, which I should always remember and hang on to. And yet a third part of me believed it was just an ordinary glass eye, maybe even the kind a taxidermist would use, and it meant nothing at all. But now it was gone.

Ma got a job as a maid at the Spot Motel and spent her time working and praying. She rarely saw Virgil. Often, late at night, I'd wake up in my bed and watch her at her table, laying out the Tarot again and again, burning the big Indian candle that was supposed to drive away all evil spirits.

When the Red Rooster Cafe closed and was replaced by a real estate agency, Virgil left town. He went back to New Jersey with his guitar and his grin. Ma put her dark head
on the card table, and I watched from my bed as her shoulders heaved and sighed as she cried silently. When I went over and put my hand on her shoulder, she turned and hugged me tight, her tears dampening the front of my nightshirt. Then I cried too, in a sorry, confused way, not really knowing what I cried for.

In the wintertime I walked to the amusement park, where everything was all closed up. Snow drifts hunched along the buildings, and the roller coaster's tracks looked frail and shaky, like the skeleton of a dinosaur. No one was around.

I found my hiding place on the miniature golf course. It was a place I used to hide, when I was smaller. The top of a miniature windmill slid off, revealing a small space inside. When I removed the top, a rabbit dashed out and tore away, springing lightly over drifts of snow.

Even now, ten years later, I still find myself trying to hide, noticing places where a young woman can curl up, invisible, silent, and small. I've seen places like that all over the world--quiet, safe places where everything beyond dissolves with the slide of a panel, the thump of a scuttlehole's square door. Sometimes all I need is to shut my eyes--to spend a moment in that black velvet space scattered with the soft branches of colored trees, where straw becomes gold, and where the stomping foot always hovers miraculously, never quite coming down.
"A mummy in a gazebo?" Meg said, sitting up straight on the dock and pulling a towel around her fleshy middle.

"Yeah, can you believe that?" Meg's friend, Val Kitterson said, straightening the *Wakema Weekly* in her thin, tanned lap. The sun blazed on the white dock and scattered itself on blue Lake Wakema. A boat towing a skier spanked across the middle of the lake.

Val's mother, Mrs. Kitterson, twirled her glasses by the bow as she sat in a deck chair. "How do you suppose it got there?" she asked. "Why didn't someone find it a long time ago?"

"It was in an attic of the gazebo, a crawlspace, like the one we've got above the guest bedroom," Val said, indicating her parents' house on the shore.

Carefully pruned trees and a well-kept lawn sculpted a slight rise to the Kittersons' summer home—a large airy house which Val's family called, without blinking an eye, a
cabin. It was twice as large as Meg's parents' house in St. Paul, where she'd grown up fighting with her two brothers and sister over one bathroom. Meg pictured the house she grew up in, with its tattered screen door and her father's junked cars on the muddy lawn.

Meg and Val had been roommates all through college at Kansas State, united in their freshman year by their common hometown and Val's experience with an abortion. Meg had been her chief confidante and supporter, and they'd become close friends despite differences in their background. This was Meg's first visit to Val's lake house, though she'd visited the Kittersons several times in St. Paul. Meg found herself once again chafed and irritated by luxuries she'd never had herself. Keeping a mummy in the gazebo, she thought now, was one luxury she could do without.

"Have they discovered who the mummy is?" Aunt Joy, Mrs. Kitterson's angular, thin-faced sister and next door neighbor, said from her spot on the diving board.

"Read the article, Val. Read it out loud," Meg said.

Val crackled the newspaper and cleared her throat.

"The mummified body of a middle-aged man was discovered Wednesday in an abandoned gazebo on the Thomas W. Jordan estate, 111 Sunset Beach Road. A .22 caliber rifle was found next to the body, and the cause of death appeared to be a self-inflicted shot in the head."

"Wow," Meg said. "A mummified suicide, no less."
Val smiled and continued. "'The body, found by two children in an attic crawlspace of the gazebo, had mummified over an undetermined amount of time. The children found the body around 4 p.m. and notified their parents, who immediately reported it to police.'"

"Those poor children!" said Mrs. Kitterson. "They'll have nightmares for years!"

"Listen," Val interrupted. "It gets even weirder. 'Neighbors told police that the Jordan estate had been vacated five years ago, and that in the past the Jordans often had parties at the gazebo. A former guest who wishes to remain anonymous said that Jordan often showed guests the mummy as part of the evening's entertainment.'"

"That's horrible!" Aunt Joy cried.

"Mr. Jordan was known for being a little strange," Mrs. Kitterson said.

Val continued. "'Police are presently unable to locate Jordan or identify the body. An autopsy and further investigation are pending.'"

"I wonder who the man is," said Aunt Joy.

Mrs. Kitterson shook her head.

"Maybe it was some relative of the Jordans," Meg put in. "Someone they didn't like. You know, skeletons in the closet, mummies in the gazebo..."

"Those Jordans had quite a reputation up here five years ago," Mrs. Kitterson said, nodding knowingly. She
flipped open her glasses and slid them to the top of her head. "They threw some very large parties."

"I bet you went to them!" Val teased her mother.

"No, I never went to one, but the Polsons, who lived next door to them, were always complaining about what a loud bunch they were, and how they invited all these people straight off the streets of Chicago—prostitutes, drug addicts, street bums..."

"People who were probably used to seeing dead bodies anyway!" said Val, grinning at Meg. "They probably didn't bat an eye when they saw that mummy!"

Aunt Joy leaned forward in her chair. A frown folded itself into the thin skin above her eyebrows. "Why do you suppose they didn't report the body?"

"They must've known who it was," Meg stated. "A gardener, or a butler, or maybe some guy who was at one of the parties and did himself in. Somebody they didn't care much about."

"That's just horrible," Aunt Joy said.

"But you'd think it would decay." Mrs. Kitterson stirred a glass of iced tea with a bamboo straw. The ice cubes made a musical sound.

"The attic area of the gazebo must've been very dry," Meg said. "And cool. They find mummies in Greenland all the time."

"I wonder if its eyes were gone," Val said.
"Oh, Valerie! Stop!" her mother cried.

"I was just wondering what it looked like."

"You couldn't pay me to see that!" Mrs. Kitterson said.

"Imagine, going to a party and being dragged up to see a mummy. It’d ruin my evening, that’s for sure."

"I don’t think I’d mind being dead and still being the life of the party," Meg said quietly. Val groaned.

"Well, it’s too bizarre for me," Mrs. Kitterson said. "I don’t understand how those people could go along with it. Who’d want to see a mummy? Ever!"

"People in Russia flock to see Lenin’s corpse," Meg said.

"Well, they’re not in the middle of a party," Mrs. Kitterson said, a little stiffly.

"I don’t know about that," Meg said, grinning. "They’re in the Communist Party. Anyway, I bet it’s a favorite pastime of Russia’s teenagers to get stoned and go look at Lenin."

Val giggled. Aunt Joy and Mrs. Kitterson said nothing.

"But you’re right," Meg added hastily. "It’s hard to understand. It’s all hard to understand."

The group on the dock fell silent for a moment. Meg gazed out across the lake, shading her eyes. She imagined Sunset Beach was just across the lake, and she squinted, trying to pick out a gazebo among the trees and tiny houses. She imagined the gazebo set afloat on the lake, Mr. Jordan’s
guests dancing across the gazebo floor with mummies in their arms.

Meg's vision was quickly eclipsed by a big white boat with silver horns and lights. It passed close by, its motor gurgling and chugging. "Is that the police?" Meg asked Val.

"Lake Patrol," Val said.

"They're still looking for that skier," said Aunt Joy.

"What skier?" Val asked.

"Oh--there was a boating accident just off the point a few days ago, before you girls came up. Terrible thing. Terrible." Mrs. Kitterson shook her head.

"What happened?" Val asked.

"A boat with four people in it and a skier hit the rocks off the point. Went inside the buoy, for some reason," her mother said.

"I think they were drinking," said Aunt Joy.

"Were they hurt?" Meg asked.

"The people in the boat survived, but the skier drowned. They're still looking for his body," Mrs. Kitterson said.

Aunt Joy shook her head. "The Lake Patrol's been out there every day, dragging the lake, sending out divers...." "That point isn't very far from here at all," Meg observed.

"No."

Mrs. Kitterson twisted the plastic belt on her swimsuit. "It isn't very far."
"Let's not talk about it!" Val said.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Mrs. Kitterson sighed and put on her glasses. "Well, I think I'll go up and get out of this sun," she said, rising.

Meg watched her walk up the dock, the thrust of her stride jiggling the dock with each step. Meg saw her pick up a life jacket on shore and throw it in the boat shed as she passed it on the way to the house. She wondered if the drowned skier had worn an expensive Stearns like that one.

"Boy, a lot of strange stuff goes on up here," she said, turning to Val. "You didn't warn me about that."

"So?" Val said.

"I don't know," said Meg. "I just thought I got away from those things when I left the city--all that life-or-death struggle for a living. This place is so rich and beautiful, like a paradise."

Val said nothing. She pinched at a loose thread on her bathing suit, pulling it off with a barely audible snap.

Meg peered over the edge of the the dock into the deep green water. She stared at the dark, amoeba-like reflection of her head as it twisted and changed with the undulations of the surface. She looked at Val again. "Do you think it's all right to swim here?" she asked. "I mean, since they haven't found the body yet?"

Val looked up, annoyed. "Oh, Meg. Don't even think about it. Of course it's all right. Don't be stupid." She
picked up the newspaper and opened it to the classifieds page.

"I guess at this point I'm too hot to care," Meg said, standing up.

"That's right. You've got your priorities straight," Aunt Joy said, squeezing a line of suntan lotion down her shin.

Meg climbed on the diving board and stepped around Aunt Joy, bouncing slightly as she walked to the end. The water sparkled so invitingly that she hesitated only for a second, then dove off. The water engulfed her with a crash of sound, and when Meg opened her eyes she was plummeting down through the green dimness, countless glassy bubbles swirling around her face. The cold shock of the water almost made her gasp. She saw the rocky bottom not far below; the mossy, rounded rocks looked like sponges scattered on the lake's floor.

Meg reached the bottom and squatted over a large rock. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw it—the corpse of the drowned skier swimming towards her through the dim, green gloom. Its white face, bloated and eyeless, looked like kneaded bread dough, a round hole punched in for a mouth. The thin white arms spread to grab her.

Meg sprang upward through the water, envisioning the man's white arms trying to pull her down. She broke the surface gasping and thrashing, swimming the ten feet to the
dock with clumsy, desperate strokes. She sprang up the ladder.

Val looked up. "What's the matter? Water too cold?"

Meg shook the water from her short red hair and grabbed a towel. "I thought I saw the body," she said.

Val looked out into the water. "It's just your imagination," she said. "I don't see anything at all."

In the evening sunlight, the monument looked to Meg as if it were encased in gold. Past the cemented pile of stones, she could see a glimpse of the lake through the trees that lined the beach not far from the Kitterson's home. Val stood beside her, reading aloud the plaque on the monument in a low voice.

"'On June 21, 1845, Alvin and Clara Adamms and their four children were massacred on this site by Sioux Indians. This monument was erected over their graves in honor of their hardships and in remembrance of their deaths.'" She looked around. "This place always makes my skin crawl," she said. "The cabin where they used to live is over there. It's all fixed up inside. It's pretty strange, too."

"I want to see it," Meg said, walking across the clearing towards the small log cabin. Val trailed behind reluctantly. Meg peered in one plexiglas window.

The cabin consisted of one small room with a stone
fireplace. A double bed stood against the far wall, covered with a clean patchwork quilt, and a wooden cradle, unpainted and empty, sat at its foot. A ladder nearby led up to the loft.

Meg looked across the room at the only door, a thick slab of wood reinforced by a metal door and a deadbolt lock to prevent entry by unauthorized visitors. A butter churn stood next to the door, and a rifle leaned against a rough table with four chairs around it. Tools and utensils lay displayed on the table and on a clumsy wooden cabinet. Braided rugs covered the wooden floor.

Meg uttered a low whistle. "How would you like to live all your life in a house like that?"

"I wouldn't," Val said. "I sure wouldn't."

"With four kids?"

"No way."

Meg shook her head. "And I thought I grew up in cramped quarters!"

Val said nothing.

Meg looked through the window again. "That light bulb hanging from the ceiling is a bit of an anachronism, isn't it?" The bulb cast a sharp eerie light over the room, making the sparse furnishings look even more sparse and austere.

"They put that in so you could see," Val said.

"But it's not very authentic. They should have left
things the way they were when everyone was massacred...you know, preserved the bodies and not cleaned everything up."

Val frowned at her. "Yeah, real nice."

"I wonder why they didn't do that. It would give it a touch of realism, hammer home the hardships of living in the 1800's."

"You can't be serious."

"But really!" Meg cried. "Why don't they do things like that?"

"Because it's not respectful. Like that man in the gazebo. How would you like to be preserved and have people gawking at you?"

"I'd be dead! I wouldn't care!"

"Well, I'm glad they didn't preserve these people," Val said. "The monument is a tribute to their deaths, and this cabin is a tribute to their lives. That's how it ought to be."

"But it's not very realistic," Meg said. She peered into the cabin again, trying to picture the disorder of June 21, 1845--how Clara Adamms hurried the children into the loft as the Indians shot arrows through her husband's body outside, how the Indians broke down the door and swarmed in, how the clubs smashed relentlessly against her head, how at the last moment of consciousness she saw her baby thrown into the fireplace. Meg shivered. She looked at the stark light and shadows in the small, tidy room. Nothing of this
present scene conveyed the horror of those moments long ago.  
"You know," she said to Val, "it’s really strange, the way this little pioneer cabin is here, surrounded by all these mansions and summer homes, with the country club just down the beach."

"What’s strange about it?"

Meg stroked the wings of a dead moth on the window ledge with her fingertip. "Oh, I don’t know. Just the contrast."

"I don’t see anything wrong with it. That’s just the way it’s turned out. This is a historical monument."

"I mean, I wonder what Clara Adamms would think if she rose from the dead and looked around at things the way they are now."

"She’d be glad some idiot didn’t have her preserved," Val said.

Meg glanced at Val. "Really, though. I wonder what she’d think."

"I don’t know what she’d think. Or care a whole lot."

"Just imagine," Meg said, beginning to laugh, "if she broke in on one of your mother’s bridge parties and someone were in the midst of complaining how her skin just wouldn’t tan...."

Val looked at Meg sharply.

"...or if someone were trying to decide whether to go to the club for lunch or have the maid fix crabmeat
quiche..."

"Yeah, that would be really funny," Val said harshly.

"Someone would be all upset about a mummy in a gazebo and Clara Adamms would walk in, her scalp gone and a dead baby in her arms--"

"I've heard about enough."

"It would be priceless, the look on those women's faces! They'd forget whether they were playing bridge or canasta!"

"Laugh yourself to death, why don't you!" Val said. "I don't think it's funny!" Meg's smile vanished as she looked at her friend.

Val stared back.

For a moment Meg felt her face grow hot, as though Val's eyes were burning holes into it. Meg looked at the ground. In the twilight, the worn spots on her tennis shoes looked like little half moons on her toes.

"You seem awfully uncomfortable here," Val said.

"Well, I don't like things being taken for granted, glossed over," Meg said, still looking down. "It seems the richer people are, the more they tend to do that."

"So who are you all of a sudden, Miss Down-to-Earth? Mother Superior of the Empty Pockets?"

Meg was silent.

"This kind of thing didn't used to be important when we first were roommates," Val said. "You helped me and I
helped you. Our backgrounds didn't matter. But if you're going to make it an issue, I can't stop you."

Meg scuffed a toe in the dirt. She looked at Val. "I can't help it, Val. It's always bothered me. Like this place, your house, this beautiful lake--you take it like your birthright."

Val blew a gust of air through her lips. She whipped the dead moth off the window ledge with a flick of her wrist. "Go back to St. Paul, then. My dad's leaving tonight. Go back where you're more comfortable." Val turned and left.

Meg watched her walk briskly down the gravel path, her white shirt disappearing among the trees like a slip of paper.

Meg stood for a long time looking into the cabin, picturing Clara Adamms at the spinning wheel, far away from the clinking of iced tea in sweating glasses and the shuffling of cards, far away from the hum of the majestic tour boat as it thrummed along the shore.

The light was gone now. Meg followed the path past the stone monument, down through the trees, and back down the beach. The Kitterson's house lay ahead, its warm, lighted windows an invitation from the eerie darkness.

*****
Meg was up early the next morning before Val had awakened and before Mrs. Kitterson came down to fix breakfast. Only the maid, who'd let herself in, was downstairs, dusting the antique furniture and collecting the silver for polishing.

Meg sat in a wicker chair on the porch, gazing out at the placid lake at the end of the lawn. The lake, so still in the early morning sunlight, looked like a giant coin placed on folds of green velvet. Down the beach a fishing boat wallowed through the water out of Miller's Bay, the sputter of its motor distant and uncertain. The cloudless sky promised another day of sun and heat.

Meg had not slept well. She had returned from the cabin too late to leave with Mr. Kitterson, but that was her intent. Val had already gone to bed, and there was no time to apologize or sort things out. Meg had gone to her own room and lain uneasily in the canopy bed, staring at the dim patterns in the lace above her head. She awoke several times to look out toward the lake, opening the window to feel the wind's cool breath on her cheek. Around 3 a.m. a storm had rolled in, and lightning strobed the frenzied waves; thunder cracked the air in two. It didn't last long; almost as soon as it had begun, the thunder rolled away like heavy furniture across a wooden floor, and the crickets cheetered again in the wet grass.

The storm had refreshed Meg, but this morning she was
uneasy again, wondering how Val would treat her, if Val would be angry that she hadn't returned to St. Paul. Meg felt a wave of irritation, remembering Val's last words.

"Morning, Meg!" Mrs. Kitterson's voice startled her, and Meg jolted to see her step through the French doors onto the porch. "Looks like another beautiful day!"

"It sure does," Meg said, smiling up at her.

"Did you walk up to the monument last night?"

"Yes, we did. Pretty interesting," Meg said, watching a boat approach from Wakema, the town across the lake. It plowed through the glass-like water throwing fans of spray to each side, its wake spreading behind it.

"That looks like the Lake Patrol," Mrs. Kitterson said, watching the boat. It began to slow as it pulled nearer, its motor churning away the silence near the beach. "Still looking for that skier."

Meg watched the boat pull up at Aunt Joy's dock next to the Kitterson's. Several uniformed men got out and walked up the dock toward the beach. One waded into the water from the shore.

"Maybe they found something," said Meg.

"Oh, God!" Mrs. Kitterson gasped. She hurried into the house.

Meg watched as two other men joined the one in the water. She couldn't quite see what they were doing, since her view was obscured by a row of thick bushes along the
shore, but she guessed they had found the body of the
drowned man. With a shudder, she wondered if the thing
she'd seen while swimming had been the real corpse.

On the shore, a police van pulled up behind Aunt Joy's
house. Aunt Joy appeared at the back door and stood talking
with two policemen. She was pointing toward the dock. The
police radio coughed, its garbled voice sounding unnatural
over the calls of birds and the lapping of the lake.

The police unloaded a stretcher from the van and headed
down to the dock as Aunt Joy started across the lawn to the
Kitterson's house. Mrs. Kitterson came back out to the
porch. "Joy?" she called.

Aunt Joy continued walking toward the house, looking
down, her walk stiff and angular. She looked up briefly at
her sister's call, then looked down again. At last she
reached the porch.

"Joy?" Mrs. Kitterson said again. "Did they find the
body?"

Aunt Joy nodded. She swallowed. "Yes."

"How did they find him?" Mrs. Kitterson asked, her
voice hushed.

"I found him. He was down by the dock," Aunt Joy said
quietly.

Mrs. Kitterson put her hands on her sister's thin
shoulders, her mouth working. "Oh," she gasped, pulling
Aunt Joy close.
Meg looked away. On the beach, four men had lifted the stretcher, the recognizably human form upon it covered by a grey blanket and strapped down. They began carrying it slowly up the bank over the lawn between Aunt Joy’s house and the Kitterson’s.

"Oh," Mrs. Kitterson said softly, looking over Aunt Joy’s shoulder. "How awful."

A loose buckle clinked against the stretcher’s metal frame as the men walked, an insistent metallic noise that sounded to Meg like coins dropping one by one into a pile. The men reached the van. Aunt Joy shook her head, watching now. "How awful," Mrs. Kitterson whispered again.

The three of them stood silently as the men loaded the stretcher into the van. The doors slammed shut and the van pulled away.

Mrs. Kitterson sat down in a wicker chair, twisting the ends of the belt on her dress with her small fingers. "You just don’t know what to do," she said. "What to think."

Meg smiled sadly at her. Aunt Joy stood with her hands clasped, looking blankly out at the lake. Meg sighed. "I guess I’ll go see if Val’s up yet," she said, and she turned slowly and went into the house.

Meg mounted the stairs to Val’s room and gently pushed open the door without knocking. In the dim light, she could see Val’s form lying on the bed, still relaxed in the posture of sleep. As quietly as she could, she raised the
shade over the lakeview window, standing there for a moment to gaze out on the water as it turned sparkling blue in the full sunshine.

She thought of the skier, and how Mrs. Kitterson had said at dinner last night that he'd had a family, three young children, one of them handicapped. "Tragedies happen to anyone," Mrs. Kitterson had said, shaking her head. "It could have happened to one of us. There's no rhyme or reason."

The light flowed into the room across Val's sleeping form. She lay with one arm over her stomach and the other behind her head. Curls of blond hair lay feather-like on the pillow. For a moment, Meg imagined she was looking at Val's dead body, pickled and preserved with life-like veracity, a relic of a time and life that would mean nothing to a person 100 years down the line, a beautiful mummy in a sealed lakeview summer home.

Meg shook off the thought, greatly relieved to hear the soft rise and fall of Val's breath as the waves broke against the shore outside. Once again the body became Val, her closest friend, alive and familiar.

Meg crossed to room to Val's bed. She gently touched her friend's arm. "Hey, Sleepyhead," she said softly.

Val's eyes opened. She stretched and smiled at Meg. "You're still here," she said.

"I wouldn't have gone," Meg said. "I couldn't leave
things like that."

"I'm glad," Val said.

"Hey." Meg took Val's arm. "Come look at the lake."

Val followed her to the window. Sunlight poured across the yard to the shore, where waves slapped the rocks. The trees moved gently, hints of blue water glittering between the leaves.

"Great day for a sail," Meg said. "We could sail to--is that Pillsbury's Point over there?"

"You got it," Val said, laughing. "We'll do it."
I've been in this forest before. Many, many times. The tall green trees lean over me, dropping their leaves, like wet hands falling. If I look closely, I can see the path is made of tiny bones--bird bones, or mouse bones. It leads like a wide plank into the forest, and when I strain my eyes, I see someone down the hill. It is Mama. She's turning in a circle of sunlight, smiling, beckoning to me. She spells my name on her fingers in sign language, R-U-T-H-I-E, then beckons again, her signs pulling me. I start down the path, the little bones crunching under my feet.

Mama turns away, slipping into darker regions down the path, appearing in a sunlit clearing farther on, turning to beckon again, signing words on her fingers that I cannot understand. I run faster, tripping over bones the size of cat bones now, or rabbit bones, and I cannot reach her. She slips away, her dark hair swinging across the middle of her back, her bare feet flashing white.
The bones are very large now. A long thigh bone trips me, and I sprawl near a bush with a window in it. When I look in, I see a grey room where my father sits in a rocking chair, rocking back and forth in jerks, as though the rockers were square. I wave, then tap and scratch at the window, but he seems to be looking past me, his blue eyes watery. As he rocks, the chair moves closer to the window, and then he pulls the shade.

I turn away and find a pile of leaves around my knees. Something flashes in the leaves, and when I dig, I find an open box full of knives, their handles intricately carved. I pick up several of the largest ones, turning them against my chest, plunging them deep into my own body. Effortlessly I tear at my chest, the thick, painless blood running down my legs, flowing in hot red rivers over the wet leaves.

"Mama!" I cry, but even in this weeping forest where she has been resurrected, her ears are still deaf, her mouth still mute. Her figure is only a twinkling in the distance.

I wake up with a start, not knowing where I am. The man beside me touches my shoulder, and I draw back. When he speaks, his voice tells me he is Raymond:

"You ok, Babe?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Just a bad dream."

"Another one? You want to tell me about it?"
"No, it's ok. Just go back to sleep."

His hand rubs my shoulder. In the dim window light I can see the bushy outline of his dark hair, tinted pink by the neon sign outside, which bleeds the words "Rooms & Kitchenettes" into the early morning darkness. "You sure you're ok?" Raymond asks.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just go back to sleep, ok?"

"All right." The bed heaves as he rolls over, the dim light tracing the valley down the middle of his broad back. I stare at the shadow of the light fixture on the ceiling, remembering Mama's thin hands signing my name, the rivers of blood that poured from my body onto the big leaves at my feet.

I see my father twice a year. He likes me to come home so he can check up on me. Although he never admits that he's lonely, I sense that he is.

He is always waiting for me when I go home. Waiting and pretending not to wait. This time he is out in the yard hosing a stream of water over the lawn, snaking the hose and turning the water in a spray that shushes over the grass, miniature rainbows arced over the nozzle. He glances up as I pull into his driveway, a slight smile on his lips.

In the yard he is a tall, solid monolith, a snow-capped mountain. His yellowing white hair straggles across his
pink scalp; his black-rimmed glasses tilt above his reddened ears. He is wearing a short-sleeved white shirt with a pocket full of pens and a tire gauge. Brown polyester pants, belt tight around his round, hard stomach.

I get out of the car and cross the wet grass to where he stands looking down. "The lawn looks good this year," I say.

He smiles, still watching the spray from the nozzle. "Got rid of that webworm. That stuff I used did a lot of good. D'ja have a good trip?"

"It was all right. Long drive, though. Seems like it gets longer every time."

"Oh?" My father looks at me for the first time. His face relaxes. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Bet you could use a beer."

"That'd be nice," I say. He goes to turn off the water. In the kitchen, he opens two beers. "Want a glass?" he asks, handing me the can.

"No, this is fine." We stand side by side, leaning against the counter.

"So. You had a long trip. Car work ok?"

"Yeah, fine," I say, nodding.

"How are things in Omaha?"

"Not bad. Can't complain," I say. He is appraising me carefully, his blue eyes shining.

"You still living with that guy? Ray? Roy? What's his
name?"

"Raymond. Yeah, we're still together."

"Is he workin' yet?"

"Yes, he got a job last month. He's making $8 an hour."

My father raises his eyebrows. "Is that so. Factory work?"

"He's driving a forklift for Blue Star Foods."

"Well, I hope he can hang onto it," he says, his voice filling the room. "Seems to me he had a job before, when you first met him, and it was only a couple weeks before he was tryin' to collect unemployment again."

"It was two months. And he got laid off."

"Yeah, well, whatever..." My father looks at the floor. The cuckoo clock on the wall in the breakfast nook ticks loudly, the wooden leaf on the pendulum swinging below it. I squeeze the damp sides of my beer can. My father looks over at me. His eyes run up and down my bare legs and tank top. "You got quite a tan, Ruthie. How'd you manage that?"

"Not bad for June, is it?" I say, looking at my arm. "The nursing home switched me over to the 3 to 11 shift. I lay out till 2 almost every day. By August I'll be as tan as I used to get up at the lake."

"Whew," he says. "I remember that. You used to look like a little pickaninny by the end of the summer. You and
your mother."

"I got my skin from her, I think."

My father is silent, staring off over the kitchen sink to the window, where the branches of the honeysuckle bushes outside extend, obscuring the view of the brick house next door.

When he speaks again, it is to ask if Raymond and I are going to marry. He's concerned about me having stability in my life, the kind of stability he and Mama had. When he talks, he doesn't look at me. He looks at his beer can, frowning, squeezing it so the aluminum sides pop loudly. When he talks about Mama, his voice sounds coarse, and his eyes blink rapidly.

Then he inhales deeply and says, "That guy should pay you back for all the free rent and food he got off you when he wasn't working."

I stand silently, ignoring him, thinking of Raymond in the mornings, when I get him up for work. I rise early to fix his coffee, moving carefully and quietly in the kitchen, so it will be ready the moment he wakes. I wake him gently, rubbing his shoulders, but he thrashes away from me, yanking the covers over his head. "Go away, Ruthless," he says. But the mornings he doesn't have to work, we stay in bed all morning, and he tells me about his dreams and stories he's made up. Sometimes we play cribbage. These mornings remind me of times Mama and I used to play cards on my bed and tell
stories on our hands.

I glance around the kitchen, looking at the little yellow curtains in the windows and the collection of ceramic bowls on the shelves in the breakfast nook—things from the house at the lake that my father moved here to St. Paul after Mama died. Next to the napkin holder on the table is a clay toothpick holder I made in fourth grade, little flowers scratched into the sides of it. Mama was so proud of me when I made that. Beautiful, she signed, and she hugged me.

I stand there, remembering that, and I’m startled by my father’s voice when he speaks again. "You can’t trust everyone, Ruthie," he says, shifting his weight against the counter. "That was your mother’s problem. She trusted too much. Maybe that was part of being deaf, I don’t know. Guys took advantage of her. If I hadn’t come along when I did, some guy would’ve had her rented out to his friends. Yeah, I came along just in time."

I stare at the linoleum floor, notice the way the off-white specks look like bone chips. "Raymond wouldn’t take advantage of me. He loves me."

"You two aren’t committed to each other. That’s what’s botherin’ me."

"We love each other. That’s our commitment."

My father blows a gust of air through his lips. "Suit yourself, Ruthie. I can’t tell you anything." He drinks
the last swallow of beer and sets the can on the counter, leaving his fingers around it.

I put my half-empty can down. "I might as well get my stuff out of the car," I say. My father moves to go with me. "I'll get it myself. It's just a small suitcase." And I leave the kitchen.

On summer evenings, Mama and I spent long hours together in the wide hammock my father had stretched between the two white oaks on the beach of our resort. We'd lie on our backs, nestled like spoons, my head cradled against Mama's chest, looking at the moon and stars hanging over the lake as though suspended by threads. Sometimes we read together with a flashlight; sometimes we drew pictures and words on the little pad of paper Mama always carried.

One night, when the moon was just a sliver, like a bowl pouring blue-black water into the lake, Mama drew a picture of us cupped in the hammock. She drew her long hair flying in the wind, and she drew me with braids in my hair, braids so long they hung like a ladder from the hammock. Then she drew the moon, and made it attached to two trees like a hammock, with us lying in its slender crescent. Below the picture she wrote, "Here's Ruthie and Mama swinging in the moon." I laughed and pulled her arms around me and made us swing, our bodies cutting a wide arc through the night.
I was seven years old when I found out about sex.

It was winter at the lake. The snow had piled up in huge drifts around the cottages my father rented to tourists in the summer. Mama was doing book work in the resort office, and my father had gone to Sioux City to check on getting new mattresses for the cabins. I was left to my own devices, and I wandered down the row of cottages looking for caves in the snow where the drifts had licked over the eaves of the cabins and sometimes made little tunnels. The canvas covers over the windows flapped and snapped in the wind, momentarily disguising the sound of hammering in the tiny cottage at the end of the row--the one named "Wee Home." I stopped to listen to the faint noise, and suddenly the yellow door opened. A man wearing a thermal shirt, jeans, and a nail belt appeared. He had a reddish mustache, and curls of red-brown hair fringed the bottom of his green baseball cap.

"Howdy!" he said.

I stared at him.

"What's the matter--you never seen a man sweatin' bullets before?"

I looked at him silently. He had the kind of mustache that could be easily twisted and waxed into long feelers.

"It's hard work, let me tell ya," he said, taking off
his cap and wiping his forehead with his arm. "I figure it's about break time, so I came out for a little fresh air. Mind if I take a break?"

I smiled and shook my head.

The carpenter looked around, peering down the row of little cottages. "Pretty neat snow drifts, huh?" he said. "Must be a lot a' fun to climb those. I can't do it--I'm too old and heavy, but a little girl like you could prob'ly climb to the top of one without sinkin' in too much," he said, grinning.

I looked at his twisted brown teeth and said nothing. "Well, you're sure a quiet one. Cat got your tongue?"

"What are you building?" I finally asked.

"I'm doin' some work for your dad. Got some floor boards rotted out underneath the sink. You wanna see?"

I hesitated, looking at him.

"Come on in," he said. "Get out of the cold for a little while. It's plenty warm in here." He held the door open. I glanced down the row of empty cottages, then stepped in.

The cottage was one of the smallest at the resort—a tiny bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette, and living room. The carpenter had the gas oven on, for the cottage didn't need a furnace with the resort closed in the colder months. It was warm inside, and I took off my mittens and my hat.

A stack of boards lay against one wall of the kitchen,
and scattered piles of sawdust covered the floor. The carpenter’s tools surrounded the sink area. The room smelled like sawdust and sweat.

"That oven does a good job of warmin’ up the place, don’tcha think?" said the carpenter.

I nodded.

"You got a name, don’tcha? Wait--let me guess. Your name is Marie. You look like a Marie."

"Noooooo," I said, twisting in embarrassment and trying not to smile.

"Ok. Then your name must be Cindy. Only your dad calls you Cynthia when he’s mad, right?"

I shook my head, hiding my smile with my hand. His eyes were so bright and his voice was so high and clown-like that I figured I could like him. I figured we might be friends.

"I give up then. You tell me."

"Ruuuuuthie," I said.

"Is your real name Ruth?"

I nodded.

"Well, that’s a good name. Now that I think about it, I kind of see some Ruthie in your eyes. And you have sort of Ruthie-type hair. It’s always a good thing when your name fits what you look like."

"Let me guess your name," I said.

"I bet you can’t."
"I bet I can. I bet your name is Woody."

"Woody! Now where in the world did you get that?"

"'Cause you got wood chips in your hair."

"Nope. Try again."

"Larry. Your name is Larry."

"Nope. One more try."

"Oh, I don't know..." I said.

"You're right! My first initial is 'I,' which stands for Ira, and my last name is Dunno, spelled D-U-N-N-O. You've just won a free handful of sawdust!"

I giggled and twisted in my coat.

"Here," he said, reaching for me. "It's warm enough--take off your coat." He helped me off with my coat and laid it on the counter by the sink. Then he stood back and grinned at me. "Ruth. I like that name. That's a name that deserves somethin' special," he said, picking up a piece of board. "I'm a carpenter by trade, but in my spare time I'm a wood carver. How 'bout if I make you a present?"

I smiled broadly. I watched him take tools out of his metal tool chest and begin carving something into the board, hunched over it on the floor with the board braced against the wall. I sat next to him, watching long shavings of wood curl off the board as his hands maneuvered the tool in smooth, quick strokes. I saw the letters of my name emerge, written in fluid, curving grooves and surrounded by swirls and spirals.
"There," he said after a long period of concentration. "You can put this on the door of your room. Pretty nifty, eh?"

"Thank you," I said.

"Tell your dad an elf made it," he said. Then he leaned close to me. "You sure are a pretty little girl. You got a boyfriend?"

I looked down, drawing a line in the sawdust around my legs. "No."

"You don’t? A pretty little girl like you?"

I looked up at him. He was leaning towards me.

"Every girl oughta have a boyfriend. But in order to get a boyfriend, a girl’s gotta know how to kiss, ’cause boys like to kiss. You ever kissed a boy before?"

I shook my head, looking down at the sawdust that had stuck to the knees of my pants.

"Now, I could teach you how to kiss so you’d always have a boyfriend, no matter what. Here--" he said, rearranging himself on the floor. "We’ll make a game of it. First you gotta lie down."

I didn’t want to lie down. I looked around the kitchen, thinking I’d better go.

"It won’t hurt. I’m not gonna hurt you," the carpenter said, putting his hand gently on my shoulder. I lay down, only slightly resisting the push of his hand. He pulled up my shirt as I clenched my jaw, staring at the ceiling.
"I'm gonna draw a picture of an animal on your stomach with my finger, and I want you to guess what it is," he said, leaning over my face. "If you miss, I get a kiss. If you win, you get to kiss me." I stared at the ceiling, my fists clenched as his cool finger traced an unrecognizable shape on my stomach. "Ok. What was that?" he asked, leaning over me again.

"A dog," I guessed desperately.

"Nope! A bear," he said. "I get a kiss." His face loomed over me. I could see flecks of sawdust in the hair around his face and in the bushy lips that descended to my mouth. The whiskers scratched my face, and the wet cave of his mouth opened against my pursed lips, his tongue seeking to pry them apart. I squirmed. "Hold still," his voice mumbled into my cheek. I felt his cold hands caressing my stomach. He lay on top of me, and I could hardly breathe. Tears rolled out of my eyes.

"Now listen," he said. "You better stop that cryin'. You see this saw?" He pointed to the circular saw on the floor. "If you tell anybody about this, I'm gonna cut you in two with this saw. I'll come into your room at night and do it, if you tell anybody."

I tried to wiggle out from under him, but he held me. His bushy lips smashed my mouth again. My fingers signed messages to Mama as I lay there, flashing out the spellings of "Help Mama Help Mama." My fingers worked out the words
quickly, mechanically, over and over. But she was not there to see them.

When he let me go, I forgot all about the board he had carved. I never saw it or him again, and I never said a word to anyone about what had happened.

Mama and I often swam together. She was shy about going down to the dock at the resort, especially if there were crowds of guests there, so when we swam, we’d go down to the beach near Gull Point to an isolated inlet, where the trees crowded the shore and the pebbles in the shallow water were too small to hurt our feet as we waded in.

We waded in together, Mama holding my hand till the water reached my neck and her waist. At the inlet, the water was calm, and I could look out past the curving point to the blue lake beyond, where skiers tore along behind speeding boats and white triangles of sailboats dotted the water. Mama dipped down and swam underwater, tickling my legs.

I dove and followed her, pulling myself along the pebbled bottom by digging my hands into the gravel. Her dim green legs fluttered ahead of me. I stopped and looked up at the lake’s surface from underneath, wondering at its undulating mirror, imagining myself crashing through it when I rose for air.
Mama and I swam back to shallow water, slapping the water with cupped hands to send a spray into each other's faces. You and me--secret fish, she signed. Me--giant shark, I signed back, and I tried to chase her, the water thick around my running legs. She stopped, and I dove to swim between her legs. She made a circle with her arms, and I swam through. Under water we made faces at each other, and she made sounds--long, groaning sounds with big glassy bubbles rising from her mouth. And then she swam away, disappearing and reappearing in the green water, her skin dim and ghost-like.

It was a warm day at the end of March. The lake was still flat and white, like a giant dinner plate, with grey spots in the middle where the water was seeping through the ice. In my 12-year-old fantasies I saw a giant finger of sun pushing down from the sky on the center of the lake, poking holes way out in the middle.

I was inside, reading. Beyond the living room window, I could see the snow drifts turning to grey, untidy lumps. Puddles outside the window reflected shimmering pools onto the ceiling, and their rings and circles danced there as melting ice dripped from the eaves.

Mama tapped my shoulder and pointed to the reflections on the ceiling, smiling. Sun circles, she signed. I
nodded. She pretended to take one down and put it on her finger, admiring her hand from a distance. I laughed. Very pretty, I signed. I took one down and pretended to put it on my earlobe. I swung my head from side to side, imagining I felt the warm glow of the sun dangling from my ear. Mama reached for another reflection and put it around her wrist as a bracelet. Ready for a night out, she signed, grinning.

Mama took off her imaginary bracelet and ring and threw them back up to the ceiling. Come, she signed, let's walk outside. I closed my book and followed her out to the kitchen, where she took down coats and hats from the coat tree by the back door.

I said good-by to my father, who sat in the kitchen reading the newspaper. "Mama and I are going out," I said. Mama blew him a kiss with her mittened hand. He smiled up at her. Then she swept her hair into a pony tail and went out, putting on a knitted hat.

Outside, the sun glared off the melting snow. We walked down to the lake. Caves of ice along the shore melted and trickled like thousands of tiny faucets dripping, musical in the still air. Mama heaved a big rock onto the lake near the shore, and it rolled a short way across the thick ice, making a sound like an empty plastic bowl on a kitchen floor. Mama stepped cautiously onto the ice.

The surface of the ice was pitted and uneven, but still slippery enough to slide on. Once Mama had determined that
the ice could bear her weight, she ran a few steps and slid. She turned to me and laughed—a high, chuckling sound that always seemed genuine and joyous to me. I always wished that she could hear herself laugh.

I followed her out onto the ice. I ran and tried to slide, but the rubber soles of my overshoes would not allow me to slide far. I signed to Mama, Can't slide. Boots off? She nodded, then continued running and sliding, each time venturing out a little farther.

I sat on a rock by the shore, tugging furiously at my overshoes, glancing up at Mama's thin figure in her black coat skating across the ice out beyond where the dock extended in the summer.

Then I heard the ice. It made a dull, groaning, popping sound. Mama was out where the mooring post was in the summer. I stood up. "Mama!" I cried, waving my arms. I could hear the ice popping beneath her. "Mama, no!" I yelled.

I was 13 when I became a woman. Mama would have been happy, had she known. It was the first fall after she drowned. Cold October rain mixed with tiny shards of sleet pelted the windows. The ticking and pitting noises woke me from a light sleep. My stomach felt leaden and heavy. There was a dampness between my legs.
At our house at the lake, the upstairs bathroom adjoined my father's bedroom with a sliding door that had long ago come off the track and required considerable tugging and bumping to pull it closed. If it was open, I usually went downstairs rather than wake my father with my efforts to pull the door closed.

On that October night, I crept into the dark bathroom and saw the sliding door open to my father's room, where his dark form slumbered alone on the far side of the double bed, the heavy blowing of his breath rising and falling as the tiny particles of ice clicked against the window. I stood for a moment, holding the ache in the bottom of my stomach, wondering if I could close the door without waking him instead of going downstairs. He stirred in his sleep, the rhythm of his breath momentarily arrested. I waited till he breathed regularly again, then crept into the hallway to the stairs.

My father slept lightly and always investigated noises in the house at night. I imagined he was used to protecting Mama. I crept down the stairs close to the wall, clinging to the railing, avoiding the loudest creaks. I maneuvered my way down successfully and went into the bathroom, closing the door and switching on the light. The lower half of my nightgown was drenched by a huge spot of fresh blood, as though I had stabbed myself. I stared at it, touched it fearfully with my finger.
"Menstruation," my mother had spelled out on a 3 by 5 card two years ago, "is the change from girl to woman. Completely normal. Four or five days every month, the blood flows between the legs and you must wear a belt and napkin." She had given me the card and several pamphlets with a little kit that I kept under the dresser in my bedroom. I crept upstairs again and retrieved the kit, but I woke my father in my haste to get back downstairs. I heard his footsteps cross the bedroom and pause at the head of the stairs. I ducked into the bathroom.

My heart pounded as he came down the stairs. I heard his footsteps in the kitchen. "Ruthie?" he called.

"Yes?" I answered through the closed door.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes. I’m ok." I clutched the kit to my aching stomach, staring at the door.

"I heard noises down here. You sure you’re all right?"

"Yeah, I’m fine. Just came down to use the bathroom," I said.

"Ok. Good night." His footsteps retreated through the kitchen and back upstairs.

In the morning, I tried to figure out if he knew. His smile seemed smug and secretive, though I never told him anything. Mama would have celebrated after I told her. But with my father it was different. I felt I’d done something wrong, something to be ashamed of, and Mama was not there to
tell me it was all right.

Raymond has a little ritual for luring me to bed. He comes up behind me, puts his hands on my shoulders, bends low to whisper in my ear. His hands slide down to cup my breasts. "Let's roll," he whispers.

He takes my hand and guides it to the light switch. I balk at turning off the light. I let my hand go limp and useless. "Come on, Babe," he whispers, pressing close to me. "Let's rollllll..." He takes my index finger in his hand and prods the switch with it. In the darkness his arms wrap around me; he squeezes tight and hard.

His arms guide me to the bedroom, and his hands loosen my clothes and pull them off my body. I stand, staring down past the points of my breasts at the little shells of my toenails and the pink glow of my skin in the glare of the neon sign beyond the window. The black shape of his body moves smoothly toward me, like a cat.

In bed, I lie staring at the ceiling as Raymond moves over me, the patterns of his movements familiar and ancient. My soul exits my body through my eyes, and my body is left numb and inert, like a dead thing, my hands stroking his back in a mechanical rhythm. I think of myself as a link in a long chain of men and women doing this very thing—against the backdrop of the ceiling I see caves full of them,
seething, writhing.

Raymond shivers and collapses next to me. Then he wraps his arms around me, his breath warm against my face. I curl into the circle of his arms, wishing we could stay like this, just like this, without having to go through the other part to get here.

The glowing orange dial of the bedside clock says 3:40 a.m., and I'm thinking about Mama's death.

When I close my eyes, I see Mama finish another slide on the ice, stop to look at me on the shore. I am waving my arms, shouting for her to come back. But the ice tears open, plunging her into the dark water. As she falls, her eyes wide and her mouth open, her hands fly up almost as though she is making the sign for "angel." She disappears into the wide black hole. "Mama!" I cry. I run down the shore and out onto the ice, clomping over the slippery surface with one boot on and one boot off, the saddle shoe on my left foot slipping with each step. The ice begins to crack and pop about fifteen feet from the hole, and I step back, looking at the hole, the water black and empty as it sucks at the edges of the jagged ice. I look for Mama's head to appear, for her arms to reach over the edge, but the hole yawns open and empty, the water unbroken.

I see her resurrected in my dream, the one I just had,
the one I've had so many nights now, and night after night she disappears again. I heard somewhere that you can go back into a dream and change things so you feel better at the end of it. I'm wondering if I could change the dream myself, and how I could do that:

_I'm thinking of the forest again, of the trees, the leaves, of sparkling droplets of water. The little bones on the path are clean and white--they look like matchsticks, or toothpicks made of ivory. The leaves are falling on my shoulders, heavy and warm._

_Mama is in the distance, dancing with my father in a clearing where the sun is bright, like a yellow circle around their bodies. Mama is wearing a white dress so long it almost touches the ground as my father swings and swirls her across the yellow ground. They turn and see me, my father smiling, Mama signing my name. I move toward them as she beckons to me. The bones, larger now, crunch under my feet._

_When I reach the clearing, my father is gone, leaving a wooden chest that Mama is bending over. When I look in, it is filled with knives--penknives, paring knives, carving knives--Mama is picking up each one and inspecting the beautifully-carved handles, showing me the curving patterns and flowers._

_Then she picks up a long bone and begins to carve it, sitting cross-legged on the forest floor. She carves swirls_
and moons and stars deep into the dry white bone, and when she finishes one, she picks up another, and another, carving them and putting them in a pile in front of me. At last she takes the biggest bone she can find and whittles it down, carving tiny flowing designs into the narrow band of a ring. She puts it on her left hand, then signs for me to give her my left hand.

With the tip of my ring finger pressed against hers, she slides the ring across to my finger, smiling. Her arms circle my shoulders.

In his sleep, Raymond slides his arms around me. He pulls me against his chest, where I curl into sleep again.
The patch of sun on the brown carpet had already moved over to the dresser and was beginning its barely perceptible ascent up the dark wood. Laura had watched its progress all afternoon as she lay in bed on her side, her elbow cradling her head. In the shaft of sun that slipped through the window, squiggles of lint and dust motes drifted, caught in a slow, floating dance. The dust reminded Laura of her thoughts, the way they drifted and eddied, recapitulating the empty theme of her 29 years, "I'm so dead inside."

Almost every month she'd seen him, she'd told that to Dr. Hennings, her psychiatrist in Milford. He had never replied, only looked down at his soft white hands and examined the moons of his fingernails. He became silent whenever Laura gave him any information other than the mundane facts about her appetite, sleeping habits, or daily routine. Then he'd turn to his desk and write out her prescription, frowning and licking the tip of his pen.
Laura always left with the feeling that her relationship to Dr. Hennings was no more than one of machine to repairman.

Laura's eyes followed a speck of dust as it rose toward the window on a current of air. Outside, bare trees extended into the pale horizon like the thin hands of old men, twitching in the cold. Laura sat up and looked at the lake, covered in snow, flat and white as a dinner plate.

She heard a soft grunt and the clink of dog tags as her old cocker spaniel, Plato, entered the room. He moved slowly, grunting on his arthritic legs. "Hey, Plato," Laura said. The dog looked up through a thatch of hair, his eyes white from cataracts, his short tail wagging faintly. He waddled over to the patch of sun and eased himself down.

She'd gotten Plato 13 years ago, before all the crazy stuff, before her parents retired, before they'd bought this house on Lake Wakema. A boyfriend had given her the dog on her 16th birthday, and she'd named it Plato after the boy's current idol. Her senior year, she'd gotten pregnant by him, and he'd left her for another girl, not helping even a penny's worth toward the abortion. Now he was married to the other girl, had three children and a top job in Seattle.

Laura blew a blast of air through her lips, then rolled over to look at the dust again. The sun had disappeared. She imagined the dust sifting and settling as it covered everything in layer after fine, grey layer, like years piling up and settling, the way they did on her parents'
Laura is in Longview State Hospital, in Ohio. She is 20 years old. It is a year after she left Iowa and tried to get to Boston. Her job as maid at the Green Star Motel is gone, her apartment is gone, all her money is gone. She stands looking out the heavy screens of Longview State Hospital, watching her parents approach up the long sidewalk from the parking lot to Building 20, where she’s been on a locked ward for almost two months now.

Her parents have driven more than 15 hours to get here. She watches them walk. Their heads are down; they move slowly, reluctantly. Laura watches the tall, solid monolith of her father, his black-framed glasses sliding down his nose; and the small, slow figure of her mother, holding her purse in front of her with both hands.

Laura notices that they look much older than when she last saw them—noticed the grey streaks in her father’s thinning hair, the thickness around her mother’s waist. Laura wonders if she is responsible for this—for lining their faces and streaking their hair with grey, as though through telekinesis she’d etched those things on them by scratching her own face with her nails, tearing out her own
hair. Laura feels the desire to heal them, to turn their faces and bodies young, pink, healthy.

They enter the building. In a few minutes, one of the nurses unlocks the door and leads them in. Laura sits near the window, then stands up. Her parents look at her, then look away. No one says anything. Then her mother comes to Laura in a rush, takes her in her arms, squeezes her tight, runs her fingers through Laura's hair again and again.

Laura rolled to her side. The wind picked up and sifted dry snow against the window, and she could almost feel its dust-like coolness as it blew against the glass. There would not be this snow and ice in California, she thought. She longed to be free of the oppressive dust and snow and cold. Although she envied her parents' upcoming trip to Miami, she was glad she was not going with them. But perhaps when they returned she could move to San Francisco, perhaps even with their blessing. Laura fell asleep again, dreaming of bright sun and ocean waves. And that evening at dinner, she told them her idea.

"What makes you think moving to California would do you any good?" Laura's mother asked.

Her father pointed a fork at Laura. "If you move, I guarantee it, you'll find yourself in trouble again."

"Give me a chance," Laura said. "I want to go there
because it's warm, and I could go to school there and finish my Bachelors."

"Honey," her mother said, "you know what Dr. Hennings said about your going back to school."

"What? What did he say?"

"That you'd probably never be able to handle it. Your concentration is too poor," her mother said.

"I don't believe that at all. Dr. Hennings just wants to keep me coming back to him, taking our money, eating pills from his hand," Laura said.

"It's that kind of attitude that gets you in trouble," her father said. Laura looked at his thin, creased lips. The dentures behind them chewed rhythmically. She wanted to yank them out, throw them through the window.

"I think if you move to California," her mother said, "it's another example of setting yourself up. You're setting yourself up for another failure. So you get your residency—which takes a year or so—and assuming you last long enough to start school, the stress will get to you, you'll get sick again, and you'll end up in a hospital. You'll feel like a failure all over again."

"She's right," her father said, nodding. "You're setting yourself up for the same thing all over again."

Laura stared at them, twisting her napkin under the table. "That's one thing I hate about living in this house," she said. "You just keep tearing me down, tearing
me down, never letting me try to rebuild myself the way I want to. Both you and Dr. Hennings are all in it together. You just want me forever shuffling around this house or some state hospital in carpet slippers!"

Her mother looked at her father. "That's not true," he said. "It's part of your history--"

"Dad--"

"Listen for a moment. It's the same thing. First it was off to Boston. You didn't make it there. You got sick. Then you're home with us for awhile. Then it was Denver. You got there, went off your medication, got sick. Now it's California."

"Why do you assume things are always going to be the same?" Laura said, her voice rising. "This isn't the same!"

"Laura, Laura." Her mother put down her fork. "You seem so edgy lately. Have you been taking your medication? We don't want you not feeling well when your father and I leave for Miami next week."

"Yes, Mother, I have been taking it."

"At the dose Dr. Hennings prescribed?"

"Yes, Mother."

Laura looked at her mother, directly in the eyes. Her mother's eyes were blue. The right one had a little brown fleck at the top of the iris. Laura stared at the brown fleck, trying to absorb through the periphery of her vision the rest of her mother's face—the grey, permed hair, the
sharp nose, the pale, sallow skin with deep wrinkles around the mouth. As she looked into the eye, she was sure she could see a little reflection of herself, a quarter inch tall, a little woman trapped in her mother’s eye.

Laura is in a Colorado hospital now. She is in a seclusion room because she had slipped out the locked ward door and run barefoot in the grass outside. All she’d wanted was to go outside, to feel the summer sun on her back, to feel green grass cushioning her feet. She’d been making circles in the grass; the circles were a symbol of blurred beginnings and ends, a ritual for warding off discord, for blending with the soft blades of grass under her feet. She’d been trying to re-create her self, and they’d dragged her back inside.

Laura paces the room, curls up on the plastic mattress, gets up again to peer out the small window in the heavy door. Outside, she sees the dim hallway which leads to the dayroom. The linoleum floor is bare. The plastered, light yellow walls are bare.

Inside the cell, the walls are made of blue tile, the color of a swimming pool. Laura feels dizzy, as though she must rise to the surface for air. The shot the nurses gave her a half hour ago swims heavily through her body. She lies down and closes her eyes, thinking, I’m going to drown
in this place.

Her mother broke the gaze and looked down. "With your problem, it's important to do what Dr. Hennings says," she said.

"I think it's time you got re-integrated," her father said, cutting a piece of meat. "I think every time before, you've let things slide too much. And then you suddenly want to move--to Boston or Denver or some other distant town--and before you know it, you're off your medication and in the hospital again. We need to do things differently this time. After nine years of this, we really need to do things differently."

Laura got up from the table. "Whatever you say," she said. "Whatever you say." She went upstairs to her room. Plato followed her, and she waited patiently for him, noticing that he seemed slower and in more pain than usual.

Over the weekend, Plato did not feel well. Laura begged her parents to take him to the emergency pet clinic in Milford. All day Saturday, she followed him around with a damp cloth, cleaning up little spots where he vomited. Her parents were not too alarmed. They said he'd been sick before, and if the vomiting persisted, they'd take him to his regular vet Monday.

Sunday afternoon, Laura walked briskly through the
fading light along the lake. The lake looked like dulled silver or pewter, a giant coin on folds of linen. It had snowed heavily two nights ago, and the drifts, nearly ten feet high in some places, swept up to the eaves of the empty summer cottages along the beach.

The amusement park was not far. The dragon’s skeleton of the roller coaster stood silently, the bleached wood of its tracks rising and falling and curving as Laura’s eyes followed it around the park. The Fun House was boarded up; the Bug House’s door still proclaimed the same painted announcement: "We could explain it to you, but you just would not understand"; the House of Horror, with its stone facade and gigantic painted spiders, loomed impotently, almost comically, like a cartoon monster.

Laura heard only the wind moaning through guy wires and niches and crevasses as it sifted fallen snow across the sidewalks. The snow swept along the midway, sending knife-like fingers through Laura’s coat. She was shiverering, and it was getting dark. She thought of warm California, where she could be right now, by the rolling green ocean in the sun. Her parents would soon be in Miami. Even though Plato was old and sick, she could board him at the vet’s, where he’d get the care he needed. Then she could take the bus to San Francisco while her parents were gone. Now that the plan was decided, she felt better.

She turned along the boardwalk by the lake and started
back, the full wind making her face tingle with cold. She walked along the beach, struggling through drifts, and soon she could see ahead the lighted windows of her parents' house. When she walked up, Plato was at the living room window, peering out with his dim eyes and wagging his tail, somehow sensing her presence, Laura thought, like a little seer.

Monday morning, Laura slept later than usual. She awoke to find her mother sitting on the bed, whispering her name. Her mother wore a sad, apologetic look that alarmed Laura immediately. Her father came in and stood at the door.

"Laura," her mother said, "we have some sad news." She put a hand on Laura's shoulder. "Our little friend Plato has passed away, this morning at the doctor's. Plato was very, very sick. He was a very sick little dog."

The tone of her mother's voice irritated Laura. She rose on one elbow. "I was telling you all weekend to take him to the vet!"

"We did take him to the vet, Laura," her father said. "Not Saturday! Not Sunday!"
"It wouldn't have mattered," he said. "He was too sick. His kidneys were failing. He was just old."
"Think of the good years he gave us," her mother said. "So he died at the vet's?" Laura asked.

Her parents said nothing for a moment. Then her father
cleared his throat. "He had to be put to sleep."

"Put to sleep!" Laura cried. "You had him put to sleep? What gives you the right to do that--without even asking me?"

"Laura, we didn’t want you to see him. He was in such pain," her mother said. "We didn’t want to upset you."

"He was my dog!" Laura cried. "You killed my dog!"

"Settle down, Laura," her father said, stepping closer. "It was for the best. It really was. The vet said Plato didn’t stand a chance, and the most he’d live is another day or two. He was in terrible pain. And we didn’t want him to die when we were in Miami. That would be terribly hard for you."

"Get out of here," Laura said, sitting up. "I don’t want to talk to you. Get out!"

Her parents left reluctantly, pulling the door shut behind them. In the silence that followed, tears came to Laura’s eyes and she lay down again, hoping so hard to hear Plato’s tags clinking and his soft, grunting walk, that she was almost sure she did. She stayed in her room, and after a few days, Laura’s parents cancelled their trip to Miami.

Laura listened to the rise and fall of their voices downstairs, knowing that the high, sharp tones of her mother were persuading her father’s deeper, softer tones that Laura was too upset, and that they didn’t dare leave her to care for the house alone.
Her parents' cancelled trip secured the pall over Laura's mood, for now there was no escaping to California, as previously planned. She lay on her bed, not speaking to her parents when they came in, watching the dust motes settling on the windowsill. Again and again she heard the faint tinkle of Plato's collar, saw him from the corner of her eye as he came in the room. But when she sat up to listen or look, he was not there.

The dust continued its carefree, floating dance, and as Laura watched, hour after hour, it seemed significant in the way it moved, unhindered, now bouyed by a current of air, now drifting gently down. She saw in it a beautiful freedom, a way of responding to the air around.

As she watched the dust, a plan formed in her mind--she would go to California after all. She would leave while her parents slept, catch the 3 a.m. bus in Wakema, and be well on her way when they awakened.

The next night, her small suitcase packed, her Disability check cashed and the money in her pocket, Laura crept past her parents' bedroom as they slept. Her mother's breath hissed quietly; her father's light snore slipped out of the darkness from the other side of the bed. Laura descended the stairs, stepping only on the tread along the wall, where the squeaks were not as loud.

In the kitchen, she turned on the light above the sink and made a last check of her belongings. Her eye caught
Plato's old collar on the counter, and she picked it up, listening to the faint jingle of the tags and feeling the worn red leather in her fingers. A few strands of his brown fur were caught in the buckle. She wanted to speak to him, to call him to her.

She stood thinking of him and the way he'd curl up on her bed, or lick her face, or bring her an old, dirty sock when she walked in the door. The sense that he still lived, that he still played and slept and followed her, overwhelmed Laura, and she was barely aware of footsteps on the stairway as she wiped her eyes.

Her father stood in the kitchen doorway. Laura looked at him.

*She is four years old. She crouches behind the water heater in the basement of the old Iowa house, cutting George Washington's picture out of a dollar bill for her dollhouse. She hears her father's voice shouting her name as he roars down the basement stairs.*

*She tries to hide the bill, to stuff it into the heater's pilot light, but her father grabs her arm, his breath heavy with a beery smell. He drags her to an old piano stool and throws her on it, yanking her pants to her ankles. With a strip of inner tube, he whips her, whirling the stool seat around and around. Her ears and skin sting with the snap and crack of rubber.*

"Going somewhere?" he finally said, indicating the
suitcase.

Laura said nothing, just looked at him. She thought of her father now, of how the years of her mother's religious faith, the magical appearance of enough money, and his treatment and hers, had changed him so completely, had made him almost painfully kind as he strained to make up for the mistakes of the past.

"You know," he said, "I can't keep you from going, wherever you're going. I realize that. You're 29 years old. You can make up your own mind."

Laura nodded.

Her father leaned on the door jamb. "All I can do is say I don't think it's a good time, and that I think you're on your way to more hardship and pain if you go now. That's something I, as your father, who cares very much about you, don't want to see."

Laura felt doubts crowding her mind. Was this an act?

She swallowed. "I just want to do the best thing."

"But it's hard to know what the best thing is," her father said. "Back when I was drinking a lot and giving you and Mom nothing but a miserable life, I thought the best thing was to drink and forget, let things take care of themselves, just forget and keep doing the familiar thing."

Laura looked down at the linoleum floor.

"I don't know if I ever said I was sorry for that, Laura." Her father shifted his weight. "But I am sorry.
There were times I didn’t even know what I was doing, to you or Mom or anybody. I have a lot of fears about what it may have done to you."

He was looking at her intently, his hands open at his sides. Laura twisted Plato’s collar in her hand.

"I’ve made some bad choices, thinking I was doing the best thing," her father said. "Maybe Plato was one of them, I don’t know." He straightened. "Anyway, it’s up to you. If you stay, you’re more than welcome. If you go," he shrugged his shoulders, "all I can do is wish you the best." He smiled at her and extended his hand. When Laura took it, he folded her into his chest and held her there. His robe smelled warm and clean, like a place she’d been before and had wanted, for a long time, to be again.

When he was gone, it seemed as though the kitchen were suddenly empty, as though a whole crowd of people had been there and gone. Laura heard the bed creak upstairs as her father got into it. The smell of his robe came to her again, lingering like the sense of his arms around her, speaking of warmth and security and permanence. It was a place she could be again.

Maybe she could still go to California, she thought, when things were better planned, when she had more money, when the time was better. When it became the right thing to do.

She looked at the collar in her hand. Gently she
looped the end through the buckle and fastened it. Then she set the collar on the counter, turned off the light, and headed back upstairs.
Reynold stopped whistling when he got to the back door. The door was partly open, the lock smashed and gouged by the teeth of a crowbar, the varnished wood splintered along the jamb. Reynold drew back and set down his suitcase. He inhaled, then warily pushed open the door.

The kitchen was unchanged except for a half-empty can of warm beer on the counter and a cigarette butt in the sink. The scene looked to Reynold like a photograph that was supposed to display a sense of uneasy incongruity. Incongruity, Reynold had taught his high school English classes before he'd retired, was one element of humor. This, however, was not funny.

Reynold went into the dining room. The bureau stood with all its drawers open, the lace tablecloths hanging out and wadded on the floor, the top drawer picked clean of his wife’s silver. Only the camphor chunks, which Clara had put in to reduce tarnish, remained.
Reynold's eyes took in the rest of the house as he moved cautiously from room to room, the scene unfolding like a movie, but ghostly in its graphic silence. It was the work of a pro. In their bedroom, Clara's jewelry boxes had been dumped on the bathroom floor, hastily sorted through. The most valuable pieces—the diamond earrings Reynold had given Clara on her 40th birthday and the sapphire ring that had been his mother's—were gone.

Something between a sigh and a sob rose in Reynold's chest. He went to the phone and dialed the police, his hands shaking.

That night he called Clara in California, where she was spending the week with a few old chums. The group of women met once a year and still called themselves "The Quilting Club," though the last quilt they'd made had long ago been folded away into his 35-year-old daughter's closet in Connecticut. It was his daughter that Reynold had just returned from visiting this last trip.

Dorothy, Clara's best friend, answered the phone. Reynold could hear them in the background--"Clara! It's your be-all and end-all! It's your Significant Other!" He could hear Clara's laugh, breathy and musical, as she came to the phone.

"Reynold! You made it home! How was your trip?"
"Good. Good. It was fine," he said.
"And how are my grandchildren?"
"Good. Grand."
"Everything all right at home?"
"Well, no. The house was burglarized..." Reynold didn't know how else to say it.
"What? You mean, broken into?"
"Yes." Reynold proceeded to tell her of his discovery, of the things that were missing. When he got to the silver, Clara gasped and began to cry. Reynold waited for her to calm, knowing that in her mind she saw the faces of her great-grandmother and grandparents, mother and father, laying out that silver again and again.

When he hung up, he felt exhausted. He opened the window by the bed and lay down, sorting through a barrage of thoughts and images. He'd told the police he had no suspects, but as the lake washed against the shore below, one person kept coming to mind like the insistent note of a bird--Chris. He was the boy (well, no longer a boy) that they had been foster parents for when their own children were young teenagers.

Reynold had heard three weeks ago, before he left for Connecticut, that Chris was in town, panhandling at the amusement park and hanging out with the gypsies who ran the House of Horror. Reynold had known he'd show up sooner or later, begging for a handout or a favor. He never
underestimated Chris' desperation. But he was reluctant to think Chris would steal anything from them. Still, Reynold thought, it was possible.

Clara came home two days later. It was good to have her back home. The kitchen was in full operation again, cluttered with baking utensils and smelling of pies and rolls. Reynold sat at the kitchen table and watched her thick, strong hands kneading dough, peeling apples. He loved those hands. They were the first part of Clara he had ever touched and known. He remembered that as young lovers they'd gone to the palm reader's booth at the amusement park on the lake, and learned that they would someday marry, have children, be happy.

Clara's hands had aged, had thickened, had grown large knuckles that ached on rainy days, had mottled with brown spots and freckles, but so had his. As Reynold sat watching them slice an apple into a bowl, he was struck by their tenacious beauty, by the fact that her hands and his had aged together.

The burglary, it seemed, had been forgotten. At least they did not talk about it. Reynold had silently filled out the insurance claim, slipped it into the box at the post office. They had about $5000 coming, but the figure seemed small and meaningless in the face of what they had lost.
Their son, William, a carpenter in Wyoming, had been outraged at the news. Outraged, not at the crime, but at them, for not securing their property more safely. "That stuff should’ve been in a deposit box," he said. "Or you should have an alarm system. You can’t just leave stuff like that right out in the open where any crook can get it."

The loss, he said, was minimal--"At least you’ll get the insurance check," he said. "At least they didn’t take your VCR or your microwave."

Reynold recalled these words with bitterness. "You’d think I could raise a son with some sense of values," he’d said to Clara after the phone call. "'Put it in a deposit box'—hell, what good is it there when you can’t have it out to enjoy?"

Their daughter, Rachel, had been equally unsympathetic. "What’s the big deal? If you guys really valued who you are instead of what you have, you’d be happy even if they stole the rug from under your feet." This was even worse. He had just spent a week with her. Reynold had scoffed and said to Clara, "Who raised these kids, anyway?" Of course they valued who they were.

Reynold rose and crossed the kitchen to Clara. She half-turned to him. Without speaking, he lifted her flour-coated hands to his lips and kissed them on the knuckles. Clara laughed. "You’ve got flour all over your nose, you old man," she said.
The boy's name came to Reynold at odd times—when he was hanging up the hoe in the tool shed, when he was driving down Wakema's quiet main street, when he looked down at the lake from the screened porch and saw the gulls swooping low over a spot of calm water.

Chris had lived with them in St. Paul for three years, from age 12 to 15. Those years had been very difficult ones. Chris was on his eighth foster home in five years, his father sentenced to life in prison, his mother a crippled drunk who lay in bed all day with her chihuahua, issuing orders and other nonsense on the phone.

Taking Chris in, Reynold thought at first, was the right thing to do. An opportunity to mold and save this boy from a life of more of the same. A challenge that their family could meet and triumph over, given the strength of their faith and honesty. They did triumph, in a sense—Chris stayed with them longer than he had with any other foster family, which, Reynold thought, had to be worth something. Some kind of testament.

But it almost tore them apart. Three years of nights spent lying awake when Chris had run off, arguments that rang loud and late when Chris came home glazed-eyed and stupid from taking some drug, the gut-wrenching ache when the police brought Chris home for shoplifting, their son and
daughter's cold stare at the dinner table when the topic was always Chris--"Chris this, Chris that," they'd say, and leave the room.

But it hadn't all been like that, Reynold tried to remember. There had been times he felt he and Chris had connected, like the time Chris caught a slow, old sheephead with his bare hands and they'd cleaned the fish together, eaten it together, grimacing over its muddy taste and dirty white flesh. And there was the time they'd gotten second place in one of the weekend sailboat races, all because on the slow downwind leg Chris had had the idea of sitting in the sail, his legs dangling over the boom vang, to make a cup for the wind. He'd sat up there like a leprechaun, chanting and willing the wind to take them forward.

It hadn't all been a disaster. But Chris was 34 now, a vagrant, an alcoholic, a regular in county jails across the country, a con artist, a bum. The last time Reynold had seen him, a year ago, he'd noticed Chris' yellowed, rotting teeth and a scraggly beard, tangled and dirty. The look in his grey eyes had been one of desperation, of pleading, of "gimme just one more chance," and Reynold had reluctantly given in--given Chris five dollars and a pair of shoes that Reynold never wore.

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As far as the stolen silver and jewelry were concerned, the police had done little. Reynold’s phone calls to the station dwindled as the days and weeks went by. They’d found no fingerprints--only two formless smudges.

Reynold thought it interesting that the police had evidenced two thieves, one who’d done the work and one who’d stood by and kept guard. The beer can and cigarette enhanced this conclusion. However, their brands--Schlitz Beer and Camel Filters--seemed to point to no one in particular. "There must be a hundred bums in this area who drink Schlitz and smoke Camels," Reynold had ranted to Clara. "Walk into any bar within ten miles of here and there will be 20 of them, lined up, grinning like chimpanzees!"

The burglary, evidently, had taken place the night before Reynold returned home from Connecticut. There’d been no witnesses, no suspicious noises reported by the neighbors on either side, no report of strange cars or other vehicles. The police advised Reynold to look for his valuables, for catching the theives was far much easier if the valuables were found. Reynold shook his head. The chance seemed unlikely.

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At first, Clara had grieved the loss of the valuables. Reynold had watched her look through the empty bureau drawer for what seemed like hours, picking up the camphor chunks and rubbing them with her thumb, then laying them down again. She seemed to think she'd hidden the silver somewhere else before they'd left—somewhere in the tool shed? Downstairs closet? Buried behind the propane tank?—and that she'd merely forgotten the hiding place.

Reynold teased her gently about this. "Are you sure you didn't sell it to your cousin in New Hampshire? Or is it in your purse?" When she only smiled tiredly and said, "No, I don't think so," Reynold took her in his arms. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "My mother gave me that silver on my 18th birthday," she said. "She got it from Grandmother when she married my father. I've loved it as long as I can remember, and way back before that."

But now she was over the worst of it. Reynold had seen Clara, several times, mentally rub out the thought of it as she wiped an eye, inhaled, and rolled up her sleeves to do the dishes or pull weeds in the garden. He knew she was thinking, "What's Done is Done" and "No Use Crying Over Spilt Milk."

Now, after two weeks, she was herself again—busy, talkative, and cheerful. But for Reynold, the invasion of his home by the thieves remained an insult. As time went by, Reynold's belief that Chris was involved became a near
Reynold paced through the aisles of a department store in Minneapolis, looking at glass cases of jewelry and perfume. The high-pitched sound of the escalators whined in his ears, making his head ache slightly. People jostled around him—teenagers giggling and cracking gum, women tugging the hands of whining children, young men in suits, packages under their arms.

Reynold hadn't thought much about what to get Clara for their upcoming 43rd wedding anniversary. She was a difficult woman to shop for, after years of Christmases, birthdays, and anniversaries. Still, he thought, whatever he gave her was received with genuine joy and enthusiasm, be it a new embroidery pattern or a diamond, a coupon wallet or a key chain.

Seeking out a quieter, less populated place, Reynold found himself in the dishware section. He recognized several place settings of Clara's china pattern and wondered if two more settings would be a good gift. But he discarded the notion, remembering they had twelve at home already. He moved on to the silverware, his hands clasped meditatively behind his back.

After several minutes of standing in front of a glass case of silver utensils, he realized one particular pattern
on a set of silver forks seemed to be carving itself into his vision. "Grand Baroque," the little tag said. It was the same pattern Clara had had. He stared at the silver luster of the tines as they glowed under the harsh fluorescent light.

Reynold felt a twinge of irritation. All these years, he’d come to think of Clara’s silver as unique, special, irreplaceable. And now, here was a whole new set with the very same pattern. Sterling, too, just like Clara’s.

All he could afford was two place settings. The clerk, a young man with sharp black eyes and short dark hair, smiled expertly and efficiently as he removed the silver from the case, wrapping it in tissue paper. Reynold wanted to tell him, "I should not have to pay for this. It is mine. It was stolen from me three weeks ago, and it is rightfully mine." His unspoken words teemed in his brain. Silently he wrote out the check, his fingers tight and cramped.

An evening storm rolled in just as Reynold returned from Minneapolis, and it split Lake Wakema with shafts of lightning, spewing tornado warnings across the county. He and Clara had flitted around the dark house with candles and flashlights when the power went out, closing windows to an inch and pulling the TV away from the side window. The wind
plastered rain and leaves to the screens on the porch, dumped sticks and branches in the yard.

Around 11 p.m., after the power returned, they went to bed, listening to the thunder roll away in the distance and the quiet patter of rain. Reynold fell asleep on his back, listening as the rain's steady fingers drummed out the night.

The clock radio said 2:32 a.m. when he awakened. He lay restlessly for awhile, wondering why he couldn't get back to sleep and why he'd woken up to begin with. He looked at Clara, turned on her side, her breath heavy and peaceful. Her curled hair, grey-white and ghostly, looked like a small, luminous cloud on the pillow.

Reynold sighed and got up. He crept downstairs to the porch and sat in one of the wooden rockers, looking out at the dark expanse of the lake and listening to the still-steady rain. He thought about times he'd sat on his parents' porch, looking at this same lake, after wild thunderstorms or an evening spent wandering through the garish lights and thundering cacophony of the amusement park. This was a good, quiet, sweet place to be after such things.

Then the screened door opened. Reynold's heart leapt wildly. A thin dark figure slipped in and closed the door. It crept across the porch to the hammock and began getting in.
"Hey!" Reynold said, his heart racing.
The figure stopped and turned.
"Hey!" Reynold stood up. He reached over and pulled the chain on the reading lamp. Chris stood there, his dark hair plastered to a cut on his forehead, his narrow eyes bright with alarm. He wore a dirty, wet T-shirt with a faded Harley-Davidson emblem and torn, dirty jeans and canvas tennis shoes. Rain glistened in his stubbly black beard.

"What the hell--?" Reynold said.
"Mr. Stone, I just--"
"What do you think you're doing?"

Chris shifted his weight to one foot. "I'm just getting out of the rain, is all. Thought I could get some sleep in your hammock, is all."

Reynold stared at him.

Chris gestured vaguely with one thin white arm. "I didn't think I should wake you up to ask." He shoved a lock of hair out of his eyes. "I'd be gone in the morning...you wouldn't even know I was here." His arms quivered at his sides. "It's raining," he explained.

"I don't care if it's 90 below zero!" Reynold said.
"What gives you the right--?"

"I'm sorry!" Chris said. "But I haven't slept in about three nights and all I wanted was a dry place to lie down and I didn't think it would hurt anybody if I just--" He
dropped his hands to his sides again.

Reynold's eyes felt hot as they poured over Chris' frail body—the wet hair, the stitches over his eye, his dirty beard—and Reynold felt the rage that always replaced pity when he dealt with Chris--rage at the apparent helplessness, at the way Chris always seemed to be a victim of forces he couldn't begin to control. It sickened him, turned his stomach and his heart.

"What is it you want?" Reynold said finally. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing!" Chris said. "I don't want anything but a place for the night!"

"The hell that's all you want!" Reynold cried. "Every summer or so, you come around. I can count on it," he said harshly. "First it's a job. So I say, 'Ok. Mow the lawn for ten bucks.' And you don't want to do that. Then you're off to Wyoming or some goddamn place, hitting up William or somebody else. Then you're back. 'Just five bucks so I can feed my dog,' you want. Or a sandwich. Or to talk to Clara. And meanwhile you're all strung out with your gypsy buddies, doing God Knows What in little back rooms and starting fights and getting the shit kicked out of your mamby-pamby self so you can come crying back to me again!" Reynold felt the words boiling out of him. "Then you bust in here with your buddies and steal everything we own. I knew right away who was responsible for that. It had you
written all over it!"

Chris stood shaking, his eyes hurt and puzzled.

"Admit it!" Reynold said. "You're back to gloat over
the scene of the crime, just like every half-assed crook
does sooner or later."

Chris shook his head. "Mr. Stone, I didn't--"

"What did you do with the silver? Melt it down? Sell
it for drugs?"

Chris' mouth hung open.

"For once in your life, Chris, be straight with me.
Just admit it."

"I didn't steal anything, Mr. Stone. I really didn't.
I couldn't," Chris said. "Not from you."

Reynold clenched his jaw. "You make me sick. I
wouldn't believe you if my life depended on it. You never
could lie worth a damn."

Chris' wallet chain jiggled against his hip as he
shook.

"Don't ever come around here again," Reynold said.
"Ever. Now get out."

Chris moved to the door and opened it. He looked at
Reynold. He seemed about to say something, but he closed
his mouth and turned away.

Only after he was gone did Reynold realize that he too
was shaking. He sat down again in the rocker, watching his
thin, aching fingers quiver on the wooden arm. In his chest
was a wrenched feeling, as though every bone and muscle had been twisted by a huge fist. He saw Chris' face in his mind—the rain-wet beard, the desperate eyes, the quivering lips—and Reynold began to believe that Chris had been sincere.

Labor Day weekend had just passed, and the park was virtually empty except for a few carnies taking down the rides and stray dogs scratching themselves in the sharp morning sun. Reynold wandered past the old Bug House, its door boarded shut, and Madame Marko's Palm and Card Reading Booth, where he and Clara had gone years before to Madame Marko's predecessor. A large gypsy woman was tying canvas flaps over the windows. Wind came up from the lake, fresh and biting, scudding a few leaves and popcorn bags along the midway.

A group of carnies hung around outside the House of Horror. They smoked cigarettes and laughed loudly, beating each other on the back. Reynold felt out of place with his stooped shoulders and nearly white hair, but he set his jaw and approached the group with long strides. They watched him walk up.

"Any of you know Chris Eisler?" Reynold asked.

One in front started shaking his head, but was roughly elbowed by a mustached man in a beer T-shirt. The man in
front, a gypsy with black hair to his shoulders and large biceps, looked at the others and then said, "Yeah. We know him."

"Could you tell me where to find him?" Reynold said, taking care to speak clearly and politely.

"Well, ah...Are you a cop? Is he in some trouble?" the gypsy asked. His eyes narrowed as he flicked his cigarette off to the side.

"No, I'm not the police. He's not in any trouble. I just wanted to speak with him," Reynold said, beginning to feel edgy.

"Well, he was here a few days ago," the gypsy said. "But I believe he took off."

"Took off for Arizona," another man volunteered.

"Left in kind of a hurry," the mustached man in the beer T-shirt said.

"Do you keep in touch with him?" Reynold asked.

A couple of the men smirked. "He only stays in touch if he doesn't owe you money," one said. "He borrowed $50 from me, so I don't expect to ever see him again."

"Where in Arizona did he go?" Reynold said.

"Tucson, or outside Tucson," the gypsy said. "But like Johnny said, if you gave him any money you're out of luck."

Reynold looked at the ground, pursing his lips. "So he's really gone, right?"

All the men nodded, saying, "Oh, he's gone all right."
He's split all right."

"Okay," Reynold said. "Thanks." He walked away out of the park and down the shore towards home, thinking of Chris in the rain, Chris owing money, Chris taking off maybe because he did steal the silver and knew Reynold was on to him. But that idea fell dully in his head. In the end, he thought, it didn't matter. Chris was gone, possibly for good, and the silver itself was long gone.

The night of their anniversary, Reynold and Clara dined at Crandall's Lodge and came home laughing, their stomachs full of prime rib and baked potatoes. Reynold pulled a box from behind the vacuum cleaner in the downstairs closet. "Got a present for you," he said.

"Reynold, really...you're present enough," Clara said, laughing. She opened the box on the porch, while the dying sun lay a path of gold across the lake. Reynold watched the purple martins swooping around their apartment house. He heard their burbling cries and the rustle of tissue paper from the chair where Clara sat. Then there was silence, except for the distant wash of lake water on the shore.

He looked at his wife. She sat quietly, bent over the unwrapped silver, tears glistening down the creases in her cheeks.

"It's just like ours," Clara said.
Reynold nodded. "Two place settings was all I could afford," Reynold said.

"It's the same," Clara said. "My god, it's the very same."

Reynold shook his head tiredly.

Clara looked up at him, tears pooled in her brown eyes. "You sweet man," she said. "You sweet, sweet man..."

Later that night, Reynold lay in bed next to Clara, brushing her silver hair off her forehead in slow, rhythmic strokes. The breeze through the window was cool, and when Reynold turned his head he could see the cold, sharp glitter of stars imbedded in the black sky.

As Clara fell asleep, he watched her, watched the warm, heavy blanket of dreams draw across her face, and he knew that after 43 years of triumph and agony and the day-to-day, turtle-slow movement of time, he loved her still.

He turned onto his back, staring at the dark ceiling. In Connecticut, Rachel would be looking in on his sleeping grandchildren. In Cheyenne, William would be packing his lunchbox for another day's work. And Chris would be somewhere in the same world, maybe still up drinking in a bar, maybe hitchhiking down a black highway, maybe just now getting a ride from someone who would really change his life.

Reynold closed his eyes against the thoughts, the images. All he could feel now, after all the days, nights,
months and years, was the warm push of blood through his arms, through his legs, through his head, through his chest, through his heart.