Weather and other stories

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The Weather and Other Stories

By

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THE WEATHER

AND

OTHER STORIES
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February was unfair to me and my father.

In thirty-one days, or about the same length of time it takes the Red Sox to squander a division title, we lost my mother to a restaurant owner and our camp to nor’easter. A week before Lincoln’s Birthday, my mother, who was a season shy of forty-one, left a note on the kitchen table that said goodbye to my father and I love you and hope to see you soon to me. Like always, she signed the paper napkin with her thin pink lips. Then on the 22nd, Mr. Peas called from Rome, Maine and said that over the last two weeks snow fell and piled until the roof on the camp collapsed. “You got a pile of crap in your living room the size of an oil furnace,” he said. He added not to bother with it till spring because the road was not plowed. He promised to plywood over the hole ASAP.
The camp was the last thing on father's mind. He had invested twenty-one years with my mother and then she scooted for money and a red convertible with wide tires which our neighbor Mr. Campbell watched her speed off in after leaving her lips on the napkin. I was almost fifteen and still under the impression that she would come back because anything's possible. For example, take the sixth game of the '86 World Series. My father explained that she was going through a change, yet it wasn't an excuse to walk. He was angry and didn't think he could take her back.

"You've got to," I said. "She's my mother." They were separated, not yet divorced. She was living with him in Concord.

He learned to fix entire suppers in one sauce pan. "Pretend we're camping," he would say. Afterwards he went down to the basement and practiced billiards for two or three hours, breaking eight and nine ball racks, shooting bank shots and combinations. Then he drank himself to sleep in his leather recliner in front of the tube. Once, during a April snow storm after three gin and orange juices, he told me that he was surprised that she had stuck around so long, that she—high school homecoming queen—had the beauty and the brains to fuck anyone she wanted (That was the first time I had heard him say fuck, although in school I heard it as much as I heard horny. Everyone I knew was horny, fucking horney.). He took it back and focused on the ice cubes melting in his cup.

I wrote her enough letters my father said that I should have
been paid for it, as if it were a part time job. For my efforts, I had my letters returned with grammatical and stylistic errors corrected in green ink and notes on thick stationary telling me how much she missed me and that she was getting ready to take a big trip, a trip only you dream about.

We were too.

In June he suddenly got happy, changing over night like the time he tried to quit smoking. Cold Turkey he called it. Now, before practicing billiards he paid close to attention to the detail on his boots and badge, shining and polishing the brass and leather as if it were his trade.

"I think it also had something to do with me being a cop. The hours. The danger," he said, on our way to see the pile of crap.

He was a sergeant and worked the three to eleven shift until she left, then he put himself on the day shift so he could watch me during the evening. Sometimes when mother was around we didn't hear his tires crushing the gravel drive until two or three in the morning and this bothered my mother, who waited on the couch for him. After years of waiting she developed an ulcer and since then left out the onion in her famous tomato sauce.

Since she walked, this was the first time I heard him speak of her without a drink in his hand. I stopped my card shuffling and held the deck in my palm. Shuffling cards kept me from biting my
fingernails and chewing the skin around them. It was my father's remedy, one that kept him from chewing his when he was young and waiting for war on a carrier. I carried the deck in my back pocket in place of a wallet and used it when I got nervous, during tests, talking with girls, discussing my mother; cards in my hands were like a warm glass of milk.

"Maybe she fell in love with somebody else. I don't know," he said, as if it didn't bother him. "Women like to be in love. They're romantics." He described a romantic as a person who believes that flowers are as precious as dollars.

"But doesn't he have money?" I asked. "He has a Corvette." We had been driving three hours and ever since last year when ever I went on a long drive I got a bonus. I felt one rising. In the back of my mind I thought of the ugliest, fattest girl I had ever seen. Brenda Bernier.

"Yes," he said. "And he buys her bouquets of flowers with it." He knew this because she told him, told him it was the little things that made her happy. I was listening on the other end of the phone line when she said this. "He even does the dishes for me," she said.

Turning to father I said, "But she made a pact to always love you."

He ran his fingers over his moustache and down his chin the way he does when he's looking to buy something and he can't make up his mind which brand to commit himself too. "That's just an oath."
He crumbled his empty cigarette box in his hand and drew another pack out from his breast pocket and lighted one. He exhaled the smoke out the window and tweaked the set of handcuffs hanging from the rear view mirror. "You can get out of anything if you really want to," he said. "And besides, You're entitled to change your opinion of something. Someone. That's why we have elections. To change what we don't like."

When he wasn't looking I pushed it down and didn't say anything. I stared out the window and into the passenger side mirror. My bangs were getting long, as long as they had ever been. Constellations of freckles orbited under my eyes and square on my nose. I was waiting impatiently for my acne. Baratz, my best friend got it as school let out. "Check it out," he said, after the bus let us off, his head titled back. Under his chin were two volcanoes ready to erupt. "I can probably pass for a junior now," he said. "Junior girls dish it out ice cream."

It took us six hours to reach the boulder which marked the property, sixty-five acres of tall grass and hardwood trees. My father stopped the Blazer as if he had spotted game. He spotted the camp through binoculars. He whispered to himself while focusing, slightly moving his lips as if he were praying. Then he said "fuck a duck," and we sped away.

A meteor size patch of plywood covered the hole in the living
room ceiling. Shingles, strips of pine, and red chimney bricks lay in a heap on the carpet. Mr. Peas had patched the roof but never cleaned up the mess: The carpet was water stained. The camp smelled of rotting eggs. Father circled the pile and went to the picture window and fingered the molding, he inspected it. He had taken his shirt off and his arms were still big, white and solid as cinder blocks.

"We need mom to help clean it up. She would know what to do," I said. I had never spent a single night in the camp without my mother being there. It felt unnatural. "Why don't you call her. Not now but when we get home? You know it's not going to be the same up here with out her." I chucked soggy shingles off the porch; they crumbled in mid air like skeet ducks.

"What do you say we go see Rueben the bear tonight. Make the trip worth while?" he said. Rueben was a wild bear that ate her dinner from the hand of a old man. After supper we would spray ourselves down with bug juice and wait for Rueben to come out of the woods. We had been doing this since my father bought the camp.

"Andrew, your mother is out of the country now. I can't. Now just forget it." I knew all of this but I asked him on a wing and a prayer.

"She's gone until the middle of July," he said. "Trust me. We don't need her to help. We're big strong men."
That night we stayed in a motel. My father called acquaintances in three other camps built by the same carpenter and they reported just normal winter damage: bowed window frames, broken windows, frozen pipes. While he was on the phone, I studied a white water rafting brochure, first trying to spot the nipples on the blond girl all wet from rafting, then trying to identify the nouns and the verbs as an exercise in which my remedial reading teacher assigned me for the summer. She said, "A sentence without a noun and a verb is like a gun without bullets. It won't work." I spoke aloud: Raft, steak, wetsuit. Float, relax, thrill.

I could ace any sneak algebra quiz you dropped on me, or pass a vocabulary test, but I had a hell of a time writing words on a line with a dot at the end. It was like skating with a hockey stick and not being able to control the puck with the blade. It got late and my father fell asleep on the bed and we never went to see Rueben the bear.

He decided to rebuild the camp by himself and not hire a local outfit. "Why shouldn't I," he said. "It's my place with my touches." I was to help too. We worked weekends and during his two week July vacation. He bought a tent which slept six, a Coleman propane stove and lantern. And every Friday the two of us left when he got home from work--eating submarine sandwiches on the way--and came home late Sunday which was technically Monday morning.
First we cleaned up the mess in the living room and then he disassembled the rest of the roof which was veined with stress fractures. For this he had two officers help him. They were much younger than him. At night they drank beer and farted. I sawed what I could into firewood. And covered the furniture with plastic and pulled up the carpet with a claw hammer, all the time wondering why our roof collapsed and nobody else's did. We had enough problems as it was. Why this?

On a lunch break I climbed up on the roof and asked him. "It doesn't make any sense. They were built by the same man." He didn't break for lunch. He whisked a nail through the hair on his head, lubricating the nail so it entered the plywood easily.

"Luck of the draw," he said, and pounded a nail. "Just like cards." He got great satisfaction working with his hands. He explained that all the great works of art were built by calloused hands: The Pyramids, The Sistine Chapel, Notre Dame. "This is my work of art," he explained one night after dinner. At the end of the day his hands would be chapped and swollen and when he greased them with lotion he called it oiling the machine.

He paused and wiped his forehead with his forearm. "You don't get it do you. Cut your cards," he said. I cut a jack of hearts for him. "Now cut them again." I cut a seven of diamonds. "I win," he said. "By luck. You see what I mean. You could have cut an ace and you would have won but you didn't. Now do it again." And while I cut
them he smashed a nail through the wood. This time I cut a higher card.

"Voila. You win. You don't have control over it. Like the weather. A baseball game. Your mother leaving."

The cards fluttered in my hands and off the roof. He grabbed my belt and the cards slid down off the plywood.

"What I mean is," he said, "We didn't have any control over her decision, just like the jack of hearts you dealt me. You gave me 52 chances. Your mother had just as many. She was going to do it whether we wanted her to do it or not. I would have never guessed that god would deal me bad card." He let go of my belt. "But," he said. "If this is seven card stud I have six more cards. Good players always get more than one chance."

After the third weekend we could sleep in the camp under a new frame and tar paper. "Maybe you want to bring a friend along," My father said. I heard gun shots coming from the dump, a mile away through the woods. Boys I had met shot the rats when they came out just as the sun was going down. They told me they met girls this way, by scaring them with dead rats in milk cartons.

"No. I don't know," I said, poking a hot dog on the charcoal grill. From the porch I could see the other side of the lake over the pines. Our little beach was just through the tall grass and down a wooded path. We kept a canoe and 16" aluminum boat with a 5 1/2 Johnson
outboard tied to a tree trunk. "Baratz doesn't like the outdoors," I said. "He likes air conditioned shopping malls."

"Well I might. Once the roof is on," he said, spraying himself with bug juice. He had set the table with a checkerboard cloth and paper plates and old birthday napkins. Before dinner we had gone for a swim and I could smell the fresh water still in his hair. His hair dried right to his head so you could spot gray hairs; he had plenty on his chest but only a few on his head.

"Who? Officer James. I like him," I said. "This is ready." James was one of men who helped with the roof and was awarded the gold metal in the farting contest.

"No, Andrew. A woman. A friend. You've never met her but I know you'll like her. She's special." This was the first woman friend my father had since my mother took off, or so I guessed, and for some reason I wasn't surprised. We shared the same desire.

"Oh, for our July vacation," I said as if it didn't bother me, but I reminded myself that it wasn't him that was out of the country, touring Italy and Greece and Spain, as she said in the postcard, saying how she wished she had done it twenty years ago and that you should see it sometime. I started to think that maybe he was right, we didn't need her, not if she didn't want our company. He nodded his head and opened the ketchup bottle. "We'll be sleeping together, in the bedroom."

"So," I said. He didn't mention her the rest of the night.
Before bed I read the postcard mother addressed to me, a photo of a naked cement man in the middle of a square, post marked from Florence. I had read it many times because its meaning was unclear to me and her choice of nouns and verbs were new. She wrote that since being in Europe she realized how small she really was. “We were.” That you have to make the best of your time and do what you have to do to survive. I never showed it to my father nor did I entirely understand what being small meant. She wrote with words she never spoke with: Enveloped, ethereal, meander, torrid, and my favorite one, liberated. She wrote, “I have been liberated from a way of life not suitable to my personality,” and moreover she expected me to understand.

I took the card to my teacher who was teaching summer school and we went through the dictionary and then she interpreted the phrases for me. “Your mother is changing. You probably don’t know it but you’re changing everyday too,” she said. “It’s subtle. Like the Earth rotating around the sun, you don’t see it or feel it happening, but we’d freeze to death if it weren’t.”

She came up for the second week of the July vacation. The roof was finished. “We rebuilt it,” my father said, breaking a champagne bottle on it. “Do you know what that means? It means we can live in it again.” However, he said it hadn’t under gone the test yet. Rain.

She drove up in a small Dodge and she brought along her dog,
an Irish setter named, Karmin. She pulled up at noon as we were coming up from the lake after a swim. We were still wet and our beach towels were around our necks. She pulled him close with the towel. They kissed on the lips for a few seconds. He introduced her. Her name was Ellen and I immediately liked the looks of her. He said that she was going to be a doctor of Sociology someday.

"I study groups of people," she said interrupting my father.

I guessed she was a few years younger than him just because she looked it. She wore dark sunglasses and her body stuck out in all the right places. Her legs were milk and coffee colored and her toes were painted the same color red as her lips. She introduced her dog to me as her pride and joy and unpacked the car, handing me a duffel bag and my father a bag of groceries.

She asked me how old I was and if I had any girlfriends. "Well you will soon enough," she said. She had garlic on her breath. "My first boyfriend I met when I was fourteen. So be ready. It can happen like that." She snapped her fingers. "And then watch out. It's all over."

"Women are trouble. Stay clear of them," my father said, and opened the screen door for her.

"What a gentleman," she said. She asked me, "Do I look like trouble?"

Once in the house she put her things down and went after my father with a dish towel, whipping him right into the bedroom. From
the kitchen I said that I was going to take Karmin down to the lake.
"Don't let her out of your sight," Ellen hollered. "She likes to chase
animals. I'll kill you if anything happens to her." She laughed
loudly.

I pretended not to hear her and walked out saying, "No, Karmin.
No."

Karmin retrieved the sticks I threw. She did this for almost
an hour. I told Karmin that her mother was pretty and had a
swimmer's chest. That was my father's expression. Built like a
swimmer. In shopping malls we'd pass mother's pushing strollers,
college girls swinging book bags, and I would hear my father
mumble, "Butterfly. Breast stroke. Freestyle." That was what he had
won trophies for in high school, all five of them rested on a shelf
above his workbench in the garage. My mother was not a great
swimmer but a reader. Floater, he called her.

Yet he had taught us to swim here off the tiny beach, each of
us wearing water ski vests while stroking to the left and to the
right. By the time I was ten I could swim out to the channel off
little bay where at night and in the early morning we fished for bass
and perch, that is my father and I did. The nights he took my mother
out they didn't fish but drank wine from a thermos and played his
cassette deck. From the porch I could see the green and red bow
lights bouncing and hear the music lifting over the trees. He played
the same tape over and over. CCR'S Cosmo's Factory. Proud Mary. My
mother acted like she hated the tape. She said moonlight on the lake called for opera, although she didn’t own a single opera tape.

Ellen was playing one of her tapes when I walked up on them sunbathing on the porch. It sounded like jungle music. I explained to Ellen that her dog was a good swimmer. She answered petting her pride and joy, “She should be. She practically lives at the beach.”

Ellen looked as if she did too. In her bathing suit the only parts of her body that weren’t the color of the iced coffee my father was drinking was the bottom half of her boob where I could see a vanilla tan line and what Baratz called home plate which was covered up with pink nylon.

Karmin rested beside her, panting. “It looks as if you two have started a friendship,” Ellen said, reclined in a chaise lounge with a glass of iced coffee in her hand. She had a belly button the size of a half dollar. It moved in and out slowly, as if it were going to blow a bubble. Her top was on inside out. The white label flared under her boob. “She’s not like one of those pit bulls that eat children. She won’t turn on you.” She slipped her sunglasses off her nose. “She’s your pal.” She stared at my forehead and asked me to sit down.

My mother was beautiful but I never saw her in a bathing suit. She said they were uncomfortable so she did her swimming in the dark. I could look at Ellen not as a mother but as a beautiful woman I’d like to have as a school teacher and I could think of her in ways Baratz would. And I did. Father went to make lunch and Ellen made
room for me on her chaise lounge. She kept my head from moving by holding my chin and then plucked out my wild eyebrows. I had two of them. She smelled of coconut milk. I sat between her knees and she brushed my hair. Her chest knocked against my back more than once. "First thing I ever wanted to be was a beautician. To make people beautiful is a wonderful thing," she said, and stroked the brush over my scalp. "But my father insist I be a doctor."

She finished and started drawing letters on my back with her finger. "You're father's a very nice man," she said. "I like him a lot." She hugged me. "I feel some muscles," she said. She was being kind because my muscles were as big as clams. I was just tall.

He came out with lunch and said he was happy to see us getting along. I stayed between her legs until I finished my sandwich and ran to the lake. If my mother were here she would have said, "Wait forty five minutes or you'll drowned." Ellen said, "Watch out for blood suckin' leaches!"

Last summer my mother tried to explain intervening with nature to me as we sat on the hood of the Blazer waiting for Rueben the bear. She said that Barker was coming in between the tame being us and the wild being the bear. "He's breaking a barrier. He's infringing on nature. Interfering with it." She disliked the show and often stayed home with a new magazine while father and I went. Once she explained it like this, "It would be like a woman
playing major league baseball. Think of that. It's just not natural. Think of the uproar it would cause. A woman catching fast balls." I started to think about the new man in my mother's life and how he had intervened with our family. The uproar he caused. How he did something unnatural, yet my mother went for it the way Rueben devoured free meals. I wondered if Ellen would feel the same way, if she knew something we didn't.

After dinner we went to the cafe to watch Rueben the bear. It was a diner, a skinny silver tube with a sloping lawn out back for jamborees. Out front under the neon sign three plastic life size caribou grazed. "Do they really get that big?" Ellen asked. She had showered and her hair smelled of herbal shampoo. She fixed her chestnut hair in a short ponytail hair. My father warned her about the bugs but she insisted that it was too hot to wear slacks and a shirt so she wore cut-offs and a sleeveless shirt. I sprayed both of us down with bug spray in the parking lot. Her dog went to sleep in the truck.

Mr. Barker welcomed us and told us the story of Rueben. How he'd been feeding Rueben for eleven years, since the day he caught her in the dumpster eating rotten vegetables. "We have developed a serious relationship," he said. "No kidding." Then he made a joke about his wife. He finally explained to us if we wanted to see Rueben we would have to be quiet and when Rueben appeared we were not to get worked up and "act like retards."
The four rows of bleachers he had built were full; styrofoam coolers, picnic baskets and large rear ends bowed the pine next to us. Mr. Barker was old and thin. His hands trembled when he chopped fat. Ellen sat erect with a notebook on her lap. She did a lot of staring and scribbling. Mr. Barker tossed a slab of suet over a hot bed of charcoal. It scented the humid air with the smell of fat and Mr. Barker coned his shaking hands over his mouth and called "Rue-ben, Rue-ben, Rue-ben," as if he were calling his own daughter for supper.

Ellen and I were sitting on either side of my father. First we heard branches and dried leaves cracking then Rueben's claws tearing at the bark of a maple, this sounded like unwrapping a Christmas gift. She grabbed him around the arm at the sight of Rueben coming down the grass. "Richard. I'm scared," she said. She put her other hand on his leg near his knee then looked over at me. The man next to her was speaking a foreign language to the woman he was with.

"Of what?" I said, and held back laughter.

My father knocked me on the scalp with a stiff finger. "Ellen grew up in the city. She's never seen a bear."

"I've read about them and they're dangerous," she said. "More dangerous than sharks." Rueben was a big fat black bear, the color of movie theatre liquorice. Mr. Barker had taught her to stand on her hind legs, sit, and roll over, and after the very first time I watched
Ellen whispered, "Bravo," when Rueben walked on her hind legs. Mr. Barker clapped his hands twice and Rueben went down to her fours. He rewarded her. The foreign woman clapped her hands fast but quietly, making a ticking sound.

"Now you have to be very quiet," Barker said. "I'm going to try and lure a cub out." This was a new act in his show. The cubs were always on the fringe but rarely did they step out.

Mr. Barker reached into his plastic bag and came out with a handful of livers and hearts. He underhanded some to Rueben, who was on the other side of the lawn. Then he quietly moved up to the edge of the woods with more food. He kissed the back of his hand making a sucking noise. Rueben lifted her head and stared at Mr. Barker then resumed eating the scraps. Ellen acted as if she were in a trance. Father squeezed her rear end with his whole hand, yet she didn't move.

Barker peeked into the woods and looked back at us with his shaking finger against his lips. He started backing down the slope and out from the edge of the woods and the cub followed. It was brown. It rested in the center of the lawn. Ellen said, "How cute."

The foreign man stood up and took pictures of the cub, his flash lighting up the hovering mosquitos, the cub and Rueben, and Mr. Barker's bony face. He snapped off three quick shots blinding all of us. "Knock it off," I heard some man say. "Are you crazy, man."
The cub whimpered and ran for the woods. Rueben dropped the livers and charged Mr. Barker. He hollered for her to stop. Then clapped his hands three times quickly. But that didn't stop her and she trampled over him. He curled up into a ball, his head tucked under his knees, his hands covering his neck.

Ellen screamed and watched our reactions. I heard Mr. Barker's overalls tear. Then he let out a grunt. Rueben snapped at his leg then ran off after her cub. We all stood up but didn't leave the bleachers until Rueben was out of sight then all the men ran over to Mr. Barker and the women screamed and hollered and put their children in the cars.

And for the first time without trying I identified the parts of speech. I heard words flitting in the parking lot. Vicious, wild, scary, dangerous. "That bear Rueben is vicious," a woman said. "Yes," I yelled out. "That bear Rueben is vicious." I felt as if I had just discovered gold. My father had me wait with Ellen while he ran over to Mr. Barker. Ellen put us in the Blazer. She lit up a cigarette and glanced in the rear view mirror. "I thought you said Rueben trusted him," she said. She rolled up the windows and locked the doors. I had told her this on the way because she acted concerned for the bear and Mr. Barker.

"That bear, Rueben, is vicious," I said again, understanding each word and its place in the sentence. The gun fired.

"No. Shit Sherlock," Ellen said and started the truck.
"No," I said. "You don't understand." And I let her in on my secret.

She was surprised. "I would have never guessed it," she said.

We waited ten minutes. My father came back with blood on his hands and without his tee shirt on. He had used it as a bandage. "He'll be fine," he said. "Just a few stitches." Then he started to laugh. "Did you see that son of a gun's face when Rueben went for him. White as a ghost." He laughed harder.

"It's not funny," Ellen said. "He's lucky he wasn't seriously hurt."

"But he wasn't," father said. He laughed so hard his chest heaved. Once he told me that he had seen so many accidents that now when he faced a weird one, one in which nobody was seriously hurt, he would burst out laughing when he filled a report out in the car. Mother said it was his way of dealing with the deaths he encountered. "He shit his pants," my father said. This is tickled me, then Ellen. My father turned off the truck and waited until he stopped laughing, then he drove us back.

"It's not that funny," Ellen said.

When we got in my mother called. It was early morning there. Ellen answered the phone and called for my father. "Long distance," she said. I don't know what they talked about because he took the phone in the other room, and when he called me in he said, "Make it quick. It's very expensive." He looked as if he were sleep walking;
his face was blank; He followed his legs around the room and then out, leaving me alone.

I explained to her what Rueben did.

"See, I told you," she said. Then she asked me questions like how old Ellen was, was she pretty, did I like her, what did I think of her. I told her she reminded me of a pretty school teacher. I told her that she was young and beautiful but not as beautiful as her, this was a lie. Then she told me that her trip to Europe wasn't working out well and that she was coming home early by herself and wanted to see us. "Would that be all right with you?" she said.

"Of course," I said. "But I think Ellen's going to be here."

She said that didn't matter one bit.

When I came out the Do Not Disturb sign which my father had stolen from a hotel was on his bedroom door. The radio in the bedroom played too.

During the night the kitchen light woke me up. Ellen sat at the table crying. She said, "They're going to shoot that poor bear now. I know it." She was wearing a long holy tee shirt and already her arms and legs were bumpy with bug bites. I poured her a glass of water. I assured her that Mr. Barker wasn't going to shoot the bear. "That would be the end of show. Rueben is not just any bear, he's Mr. Barker's whole life," I said. I told her that Rueben was like a neighborhood dog. "I was bitten by a dog and they didn't kill it," I said.
"You'll see, Andrew. It's the law of the land." She found it hard to explain. "Just like that your friend can become your enemy." She snapped her fingers. "What are you suppose to do but fight back. It wasn't the fuckin' bear's fault. She was protecting her cub."

When Ellen got serious her eyebrows moved like a puppet on a string, yet her eyes remained still. "Pardon my French," she said. "But it's true. If you're lucky. You make up. Do you know what I mean?" I told her, yes, and got her to settle down. "You don't know what I mean. But you will soon enough when they shoot that poor bear." She finished the water and went back to bed.

In the morning they came out from behind the locked door dressed to go boating and already smelling of tanning lotion. They both looked very happy, their faces shiny. He did not mention Rueben but asked if I would like to come fishing for bass and perch with them on the other side of the lake. I let them go by themselves because I knew that's what they wanted. I told them I would watch Karmin.

They weren't gone more than two hours and I knew that I had made an enemy. Karmin chased after a deer in the field behind the cottage and didn't come back. She ran due north as if she were running to Canada. I looked for her until time ran out. Then they came back, their faces still shiny.

"It wasn't my fault," I kept telling her. And she kept saying, "That's my baby. I told you not to let her out of your sight. I've had
her eight years. " Two days later Karmin hadn’t come back and Ellen drove home in the dark because my father sent her away for calling me names and putting all the blame on me.

She said things like, "Can’t you even baby sit a dog? Of course not, you can hardly write a sentence." She drove off without even packing. She faced my father like she was going to hit him and kissed him on the cheek. She said, "Goodbye! You have my number."

She left and my father apologized for Ellen and for all the yelling. He said Ellen really wasn’t a mean person. That she was a good person and that he was real sorry she left but he wasn’t going to let her act like this. "Is it over then," I asked.

"The hell if I know. Women are like the goddamned weather. Their moods change from day to day."

Three days later my mother showed up driving the corvette. I was glad to see her although I hadn’t forgiven her. Yet I could’ve. Her hair was tied down with a kerchief and her face was sunburned. She called it her second sunburn in all her life. She was wearing white shorts and a white blouse with a florescent pink bikini underneath which she said she bought in Italy. "Custom fit," she said.

She gave me a present. A pair of black leather hiking boots. "There for up here, or whatever," she said. "I bought them in Spain."

We were sitting on the porch under the awning away from the
sun. Then she gave my father a present. She handed my father a folder of papers and proceeded to explain to me that she was filing for a divorce, leaving my father forever. She said even though I wouldn't be living with her I could visit anytime I wanted, wherever she might be. She touched my hand. She said this after my father told her she wasn't taking me. She put up zero defence for me and this surprised the both of us. "Your father can do a better job than I can," she said. "Don't be mad. Now try on your boots for me."

He acted as if he knew it was coming or he was just happy that she was leaving. He rushed his two bits in and read over the papers. She asked him where Ellen was and he said she went home early and that was that. Then she spent a few minutes with me before she drove off. I was in my bathing suit and I put on the boots for her. I felt as if I was dealt a bad card.

By the water and she took off her kerchief, her shorts and blouse, folding them and setting them on the sand before diving in. Her entire body was burned. She looked like a flamingo. She entered the water quietly and then dove under when the water reached her tan line. She glided underneath the water, her legs and arms pushing and pulling at the same time. I counted to ten before she burst through the surface. "It's invigorating," she said. "Refreshing," she explained.

Then it came out like salt from a shaker. She apologized for herself. She told me that she was selfish and that she had just
found this out. "Can you believe it. My life is more than half over and I'm just finding out who I really am."

I waited on the shore and she told me all this from the water she was treading in. She said, "I went scuba diving in the Mediterranean Sea. I swam with beautiful fish. At first I was scared, but once I took the chance and went under I was amazed at how marvelous it was. It was like a painting in a museum."

I sat on a rock listening, wishing I had my deck. I was interested in her stories but that wasn't important to me. I said, "But what about you and dad."

She floated on her back. "I'm a beautiful intelligent woman who needs more than your father can give. I really thought he was the one, forever. But he's not. That doesn't mean that your father isn't a good man." She did a somersault and swam to shore. She looked taller and younger coming up from the water. She toweled herself off then brushed the sand from between her toes. "Your father is a good man but--," she said.

My father had given me a piece of advice one evening after I had gotten in a fight, my first and last. I had not wanted to fight but this boy who was in the mall just picked it with me because I was hanging around with another boy who was fat and wouldn't fight. He told me when he meets a stranger he looks him in the eye and sets the rules. "I make the first move," he said. "Show him who's boss."

I was looking at a stranger that I would someday get to know.
I said, "Fucking A right. He's a great man." This is something Baratz always said. She said I beg your pardon and started to lecture me and I told her that she had no right because she wasn't around.

"But I'm still your mother," She said, over and over again. "I'm still your mother and you don't talk to your mother like that." I thought about what my teacher said. How we change everyday, how the planet we live on is constantly changing and, yet, we don't feel it. This was something I wouldn't have said last year and it was something my mother wouldn't have taken if she were around. But after a minute she seemed to understand and moved to get her towel. She stopped. "Oh, forget it. Let's just be friends." she said. "Can't we."

We walked back to the camp and she got her things together. "I'll see you in a couple of months," she said and hugged me.

My father shut the red door behind her. "I would put the top up. I looks like rain," he said. She didn't and drove off, hanging a trail of dust in my face and across our property. When the dust settled the red Corvette was invisible. Then I went to my room, re-read the postcard of the naked cement man and got it all out. My mother was not coming back. She was liberated.

That night I swear I felt the Earth move. At dusk we were on the porch barbecuing. The bugs were starting to come out. It was the time of day when Mr. Barker intervened with nature. It was too late for rat shooting when we heard what sounded like a firing
squad. "You know what that was?" my father said.

"Rueben," I said, and he nodded. I started shuffling my cards. I knew this because I ran into one of the rat shooters on the lake while I was looking for Karmin and he told me everything. That Mr. Barker had planned to lure Rueben and her cubs out of the woods the way he always did and then he, the boy's father and a dozen other fathers were going to 'plug them.' I didn't believe it until I heard the shots. It didn't come as a surprise anymore. I said to myself: that bear Rueben is vicious.

My father said, "Mr. Barker just shot his bread and butter. What an idiot."

After dinner when it was pitch black my father gathered up empty buckets and put them in spots on the floor where he thought the roof would leak. We waited on the porch for the rain. First it clouded up thick as smoke, then it thundered and lightened. It sounded as if shotguns were going off. Before long it poured cats and dogs. The roof we rebuilt didn't leak, not even a drop. "Can you believe it," he said and shook my hand. "Hell of a job. Partner."

The rain stopped about an hour later and who came running out from the woods soaking wet and smelling like a sewer but Karmin. She looked as if she hadn't eaten in weeks. She ran in the house and over to where Ellen kept her bowl. "How do you like that," father said. "The son of a bitch found its way home." I dried her off with a towel and fired the grill up again. I put two hamburgers on for her
and my father got on the phone to Ellen. "Yes," I heard him say. "Get your ass up here as ASAP." I looked up and the clouds started to clear, leaving cracks in the sky where stars shined through.
Tit Delegro located the thermostat on the wall next to the closet and adjusted it to high. The pilot ignited the furnace in a whooshing gush. "I found it," he said to his wife, who guessed the dial was by the window. "Well aren't you the smart one, today," Jane said. Jane drew the drapes open, exposing the dark room to grey damp light, and now it was more and more apparent that they had gotten what she had paid for.

"This is just great," Tit said, shaking his fist. The rain outside was teeming; wind stripped foliage from swaying limbs, oil ran off the crown of the old highway and into the rocky loam. "I go on vacation and it rains. That's the story of my life. Now how am i
suppose to exercise. I can't play golf in this weather." He moved out of the light. "And for God's sake close the curtains." Tit sucked on his cigar, unzipped his windbreaker. "I don't want to look at it. It reminds me of Normandy out there. Close the damn curtains."

"If you would just learn to live with it. There is such a thing as a rain coat, dear. People have fun in the rain all the time. Besides, you know what they say about the weather in New England, if you don't like it wait a minute." Jane closed them, leaving just two inches open.

She said, "Get use to it. This is home for the next three days." Untying the silk kerchief from under her chin, she heard someone in the next room, room seven. She put her ear to the plaster above the t.v. "You hear that, Tit," she said. "Shhhh, listen. It sounds like a man snoring."

Tit listened, his windbreaker half on the wire hanger in his hand. He cleared his throat. "Someone's probably sleeping, dear. There is such a thing as sleep." The floor under the carpet creaked like a staircase as Tit crossed the room. Tit was a big man with big catcher mit hands and big Italian floppy breasts, yet for such a large man he was agile and still had a good throwing arm. And each year he showed it in the adult kick, pass, and punt competition during half time of the Revere-Peabody football game, sometimes throwing the ball fifty yards. He signed his checks Cosmo Delegro. Now he glanced through the opening, and drew the drapes flush.

"Tit, you're a chuckle," Jane said, who was not as agile as her
husband, however, at fifty two, the same age as her husband, she looked younger than him. She pushed her sneakers off with her rubber heels. "The walls are like paper is what I'm getting at. We better be careful what we say." Jane stuck her tongue out at him and slung her coat over the desk chair.

"Everything else was full when I made the reservation," she said. The idea of striking a golf ball down a fairway on a championship course in peak foliage season—red and yellow and orange leaves funneling a green fairway under a blue sky—was a romantic anniversary gift to Jane. Autumn in Maine. She jumped at the offer without reading the fine print. The accommodations in the brochure read as if they were in the resort with the hot tub and the French Restaurant, yet, they were two and one half miles out of Rangely on the old highway.

"Well," Tit said, "Do you still feel like Sofia Loren in this shit hole?"

That was the hint she had given Tit, that the cottage would fulfill her dream of feeling like Sofia Loren, his favorite movie star next to Bo Derek, and fulfill his dream of having an affair with the Italian born actress. She had even gone out shopping for a Sofia Loren outfit which she planned to wear for their anniversary dinner. She bought a brown cotton turtleneck which fit tight over her pointy breasts, red blended slacks which also fit tight around her thighs and loose around her ankles, and a silk kerchief which she tied around her neck when it wasn't raining. "In fact I do," she said. "It's
kind of campy here.”

Outside a car pulled up. Two doors and a trunk slammed shut, then voices echoed under the awning. Jane peeked out the window. The car in room nine’s space was decorated with streamers and vestiges of shaving cream. There was a condom unrolled strung to the antenna and when the wind blew it erected it. “How do you like that,” Jane said, looking back at Tit. “They’re newlyweds.” She looked back out the window. On the driver’s side rear window, a red lipstick heart with Karen plus Richard was smeared, pink rain water sliding fast across the glass, the bottom of the heart pulling away and down the sleeve of the door jam. “Can you believe it. Same anniversary as us.”

The groom ran out to the car and lugged a plastic cooler back to his room. “There’s the groom,” Jane said. “He’s just a baby. He can’t be older than our Joseph.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Tit said.

Tit Delegro built in-ground pools for a living. He had been doing it for twenty-six years, half his life. Two disc operations forced him out of the hole and then off the shovel. But his arms and face still stayed brown through the winter. His crew sometimes started digging as early as March and was often interrupted by a New England spring snow storm. He employed the children of the men he grew up with in Revere, where he still lived, a city of concrete, and halls for veterans of foreign wars and immigrants, western and
eastern. His crew, speaking in half English half Italian spoke highly of Tit, even on late August afternoons, twelve feet deep under the ground, while Tit, cheese steak sandwich in his left hand and clipboard in his right hollered "vino dentro, senno fuori!"

Although sometimes he wished he had gone to college and landed a job in which he wore a nice suit he worked as hard as a man could with his hands, and kept the possibility open that maybe some day he would be a city official or maybe even mayor. His friend Peter was a mailman before he was elected a mayor.

Jane said I will to his proposal in her senior year of high school. He had already been graduated two years. She gave birth to their first boy before she was legal to drink alcohol. And then she did as her mother did and as her mother's mother did: raised two more children and her husband on good food and clean laundry and all the time staying out of Tit's business, receiving him anytime, and thanking God every night for the roof over their heads. She did this until her last boy left the house. Then, as she said it, she "started to live her life." She had her hair and nails done each week, joined a women's spa and sweated in the steam room, ate out more often with her husband, and picked up a hobby. Golf.

The room was warming up. Jane filled the tub six inches deep with warm water. Tit got the two sets of golf clubs from the trunk of the car and gave them to Jane, who set the heads in the warm water. "It's dismal out there," Tit said. Jane gazed at the tub water
as if it were a camp fire and watched it suddenly brown, quick as a marsh-mellow. She sat on the toilet seat cover—her sweater sleeves rolled back, her jewelry on the porcelain tank cover—and with a nail file picked the dirt from the grooves and scrubbed the steel face of each club with a face cloth before handing it to Tit, who rinsed it in the sink, dried it with a hand towel, and returned it to its respective bag and slot.

Tit said, "We should have gone to Florida. This place gives me the creeps."

"It's monsoon season in Florida, dear." Jane said, looking up at him. "Maybe you should go out and buy a bottle of scotch. Isn't that what you do at the club when it's raining? You drink and play cards? That's what you tell me, right? 'A whole another game,' as you say." Jane winked. "You been doing that since I met you. So what's the big secret Mr. Las Vegas?"

Tit extinguished his cigar under the faucet and flicked it in the metal can under the sink. "How many times do I have to tell you. A man don't drink scotch with his wife, wives don't drink scotch. They drink grasshoppers or pink cadillacs. And they don't play poker. They talk on the phone and shop for things. Men play poker."

"Oh, come on," Jane said. "This isn't the locker room. I won't tell anyone. How 'bout a scotch and water? Let me play your game. We'll have some fun."

Tit understood her pass and grimaced at the thought. "You don't want to play my game. Let's go now. Finish the clubs."
In his spare time Tit dug up more grass. He shot a sharp game of golf. "How the hell do you get your arms around your belly," Jane asked after Tit's first lesson. He learned to play on the public course after their first child was born. Every Sunday was devoted to golf. This also was Jane's first introduction to the capricious game. Tit would back out the drive at six am and return for dinner, sweaty, smelling of cigars and scotch. At the table he would empty his pockets. Some nights he would just slam change on the oak, and other times he would toss a wad of fading bills into the air and watch them float down over the entire table and into his open shirt. Then he might say, "Clear the table and go buy yourself a new dress."

Now a days, after a round at the private country club—where private meant no blacks, no jews, and come hell or high water no wives in the club house lounge—he might come home and tell her to go buy a television, or he might come home with another wrinkle on his forehead. Jane was prohibited from the club as were most of the other females. If they weren't big busted tight ass young cocktail waitresses they were just interfering. For twelve years Jane had let it be his workshop. "Some things are private, Jane. That's why it's a private club. A man's scotch and a good poker game is privy to his wife," Tit said combing his hair while waiting for Jane to pass him a club.

"This isn't *Gunsmoke*, Cosmo."

Tit unwrapped the cellophane from another cigar. "Why are we
having this talk now. It's our vacation.” On Wednesdays and Fridays it was customary for him to come home from the club late, smelling fresh, as if he had just stepped out of the locker room shower, *Old Spice* on his neck, his hair neatly parted to the right. And with scotch on his breath. He came home happy. She just wanted him to share it.

"Because some day the rules will change, and they'll allow us in the bar. You'll see."

"I told you already," he said, inspecting a dent in the toe of his five iron. "Scotch isn't for women. Now don't try and play a man's game."

"In some parts of the country we already do," Jane said and pulled the plug to the tub.

Jane had taken it up seven years ago, the spring after her forty-fifth birthday. "It will be good for us, a hobby we can both enjoy as we get older," she said. They had been married twenty-nine years. They had fallen out of touch some time after their last child was born and that's when Jane took up magazines. She read articles on love and marriage and how to spice it up and preserve it. One article said couples were suppose to fall in love again once their children left the nest. This was that time and Jane looked forward to spending it with Tit on the golf course or wherever he wanted.

"Women don't belong on a golf course," Tit said after Jane bought a set of starter clubs. "It's too complicated of a game for
them to comprehend. Too many rules. Take up tennis like Frank's wife."

This was also the same year she had stopped smoking and was gaining weight rapidly. She was not fat like Tit, and his fatness never bothered her in a vanity sense; it was a complement to her cooking and Tit's lifestyle, but she did worry about it shortening his life. Yet, Jane knew that Tit wouldn't stand for her obesity, and he let her know it by saying things such as "I'm going to get a pair of red flags for your hips." She would joke back about his weight just for laughs. And he would say, "Being fat is one thing, being fat and with a fat wallet is another. Money makes a man skinny."

When she no longer could slip her wedding ring off when she washed the dishes she did something about the her weight. "I need the exercise, too. Golf will take it off." She was small boned with wide hips and a round pale face and red Irish hair.

They finished up with the clubs and Jane rested for a moment. She fell back on the bed, her skirt slipping above her knees. The cracks in the ceiling intersected and went in berserk directions like the lines on her palm. She held her diamond over her head; on her ring finger it glowed like burning birthday candles with the lights on. Staring deeper into the rock she imagined the room bedding a traveling Amway salesmen or college students on their way home for Christmas.

"I'm bushed," Tit said. "I need a nap. Move over."

"How can you be bushed? You haven't done anything but drive."
Jane got up.

Tit sat on the foot of his bed. Meticulously, he untied his shoe laces, nudged his shoes off his feet, and folded his socks inside the black wing tips. Jane caught him staring in the mirror on the wall over the desk. He held his breath; under his tee shirt his chest expanded; his waist contracted. "Okay then, I need my beauty rest as you would say."

"You need to start walking," she said watching his belly pulse. No more of this electric cart business on the course. We've got to start worrying about your heart."

"My heart's fine."

"How do you know, Cosmo. How do you know. When was the last time you saw a doctor."

"Because I know," he said. "I use it all the time." Tit checked the time then set his watch and wallet on the night table. He undressed and pulled the covers up over his head blacking out the drabness. "Wake me in an hour, Jane."

Jane changed into her sweet suit and practiced her putting on the rug. She placed the ashtray from the desk upside down ten feet away and worked with five balls, putting over stains and cigarette burns. When she hit the ashtray five consecutive times she moved two feet closer. She did this until she was two feet away. She worked on her game religiously, seven days a week either at home or at the public course after work. Her palms were calloused from playing. She walked the golf course, towing her bag on a pull cart.
This strengthened her legs, they were muscular—waitress's legs—and looked terrific in stockings, making up for her hips and rear end, which Tit said had the shape of a prune.

At first, she didn't hear the noises in the newlywed's room. Striking the ball, she heard only the video tape running through her mind, telling her that the left hand acts like a pendulum and the right sweeps the putter like a broom. But as the couple got louder and more repetitious she stopped and put her ear to the wall and listened to the young attractive couple in the next room. She blushed and listened until Tit's turning spooked her. She lost her concentration. She was now four feet from the ashtray.

The noises sounded like a record being played backwards. They were warm muted noises and didn't bother her conscience. If anything she was jealous. It had almost been five months since the last time they made love, Memorial Day. Jane could count on holidays for physical attention but not much in between. Tit didn't say anything, he put her pillow over the covers and his head, and made noises like he was asleep. She couldn't hit the ashtray for the life of her now. She putted one long and it ran off the carpet and onto the wood floor and the ball made a loud run, clattering like a roulette wheel. She looked at Tit to see if it had woken him. Her husband's figure under the cotton blanket looked like a piece of stored furniture.

The big noises came. The woman's cries came at intervals opposite her partner's. She moaned as if a masseuse were loosening
muscles she never knew she had. Occasionally they would rise full octaves like notes on a piano. On a four count the man grunted as if he were in a dead lift competition. The woman let out a terrifying shriek.

Tit rolled over, uncovered his face. "What the hell are they doing? It's four o'clock in the goddamned freaking afternoon."

"It's sounds like she's having a baby, Tit," said Jane.

Tit focused on Jane for a moment before he said anything. "I'm not going to put up with this all night," Tit said. He looked for the phone beside the bed but their wasn't one. He lifted himself out of bed and sat on the desk with Jane; they stared at the wall, waiting for it to crumble. Then Tit skirted over to the night table and snatched his wallet and watch from the veneer. Jane read a cross country skiing brochure which she had found on the top of the tv. Tit stormed into the bathroom and shut the door. Then he came out, leaving the shower running. "It's no better in there," he muttered to Jane. He rummaged through her bag and found an unopened bottle of aspirin. He opened it, swallowed two, and put the cotton in his ears.

"Now you really look like a nut," she said. He was in just his boxers and his body was as fair as his ankles and he was pacing from the bathroom to the front door.

"It's not funny," he said, defiantly.

"I know," she said, but it was. She turned on the t.v. "What should we do? The newlyweds are making love." She burst out
Tit glanced her over. "It's not funny. It's just embarrassing. They don't have to tell the whole freaking town."

He grabbed the putter from Jane and putted a ball.

"Titi!" Jane said. "I was putting."

Tit looked around the room, at the bed, the mirror, the nightstand, the closed curtains, and at Jane. "Keep your head still when you putt," he blurted out. "Line your eye up with the insignia. And sweep it," he said authoritatively, and stroked one. The ball rolled against the target, the toe of his shoe. He putted two more balls perfectly. The noises continued getting louder and louder.

"My, God," Jane said and thought about her son making love to his little wife. In her day you were considered a floozy if you acted like that.

"Don't they have any respect for their neighbors?" Tit said. "Wait to they have children. Then they'll learn how to be quiet. Give me my sand wedge. Will you."

"Not in the room, Tit. Please. You'll break something."

She pointed to the overhead lamp.

Tit got it himself. He took a couple of practice swings. "Hit down on the ball," he said, "down on the ball. Nobody can hit this shot like me." He chipped the balls over the putter which was lying a few feet in front of him on the carpet. They spun backwards when they landed. "Back spin. That's what you want. There's a tip from the club. You got that."
"Oh, Chief," the woman in the next room screamed. "Chief, Chief. You beast."

"For Christ's sake," Tit said. He pulled the cotton out of his ears and swung at the airy balls with full force. "Shut the hell up," he shouted.

Jane snatched the club out his hands. "Relax. Your heart, Tit." she said. "Relax for God's sake."

Tit started dressing himself. "Get dressed," he said. "We're going out for dinner."

"It's only four-o'clock," Jane said.

"I don't care what time it is, get dressed."

Tit waited in the Cadillac while Jane put her makeup on and got dressed in front of the desk mirror and listened to the newlyweds. Tit tooted the horn. He waited impatiently listening to a hockey game on the radio. It was only this year that he begrudgingly allowed her to play along with him. After he signed her up for instructions, he made her devote tedious hours on the practice tee, weeks before she set foot on a fairway. When she could hit the ball consistently off the tee with each club—three iron too—he found her a women's league.

He insisted she turn in her score cards for a handicap. And only when she could break 100, did he give in. She joined her husband once a week. They started playing on a week nights together, usually Tuesday after the leagues went out when the course was slack. But never at the club. "That's off limits," he had said. "When
you can break ninety consistently, then we’ll think about it.”

“That’s a six handicap. That might be ten years from now,” she had said. “Maybe never.”

“I know,” Tit said. “But those are the club rules.”

Before Jane changed into her heels she chipped three balls over the putter. The balls spun backwards when they landed. She would tell her husband of her skill and he wouldn’t believe it.

They ate dinner at the french restaurant in the resort and even Tit wasn’t able to finish dinner, the food was so rich, yet delicious. It wasn’t as romantic as Jane would have liked, but they did share a bottle of wine and talk about golf and family. She wore her Sofia Loren outfit and this time used the silk kerchief as a baret to hold her brown hair back. On her ears and her ring finger were her diamonds. Her nails and mouth painted red, her lashes curled and black. After dinner they had a night cap at the bar and now on the way home Jane wasn’t ready to stop celebrating.

“Will you pull over when you see the package store,” Jane said. “I wouldn’t mind a glass of chablis in front of the t.v.” It was dark now but still wet. The rubber on the pavement shushed. She was leaning against him, speaking into his ear. His neck smelled of the inexpensive cologne his children bought him for Father’s Day. “How’s that sound?” Tit sealed his window shut and immediately cigar smoke hovered over the dash. “Say again?”
"Let's buy some wine and watch some t.v." Tit cracked his window and the wet air sucked the smoke. He stopped at the package store between the resort and the motel. Jane went in and came out with an inexpensive bottle of chablis and a bottle of Dewars Scotch, the scotch hidden in the bag between her feet on the floor of the Oldsmobile.

"What's taking you?" Jane said. She heard the toilet swirl.

The two bottles were on the desk when Tit came out of the bathroom with two glasses wrapped in paper. Jane had powdered her face and painted her lips red again. She held her sand wedge and smiled at him, leaning against the desk. "I thought maybe you were shaving," she said and smiled. "You look like Marlon Brando with that shadow." From a distance she couldn't see his wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead and he looked the way he said he felt, young.

He looked over her shoulder at the two bottles. Jane said. "It's in case it rains tomorrow."

"What's with you and scotch fascination, lately. Huh. You think there's something magic about it?"

"That would be nice," she said in an Italian accent. "A little magic we could share."

She hugged him around his waist, stretching on her toes to kiss his chin. The sand wedge slipped away and she snapped his elastic underwear. "Tell me you love me."

He said it and his hands dropped from her shoulders. "Oh, know."
We don't have corkscrew," he said, returning the scotch to the bag.

"Then use your big strong hands." Jane said still holding him. Tit went to the motel office with the idea of if he could get the wine open they wouldn't fight over the scotch.

A tractor trailer pulled off the pavement and onto the gravel near the dumpster across the street. The old highway was spotted with motels and soon after Thanksgiving all the neon would flash "No Vacancy." Jane pushed back the curtains and put her face to the window when she heard the loud engine. The driver, a german shepherd, and a skinny young woman jumped down from the cab and ran with their jackets over their heads through the drizzle and into the office of the lesser motel, the dog waited outside under the carport. Jane wrapped her arms around herself and turtleneck, it gave her a warm feeling.

Tit came back empty handed. The clerk was out. "I'm not going out in that again," was the first thing he said to her.

"I bet zee couple next door has one," Jane said with an accent. "Or we could just open zee scotch." She was feeling the wine she drank with dinner. It made her goofy.

Tit brushed the water out of his hair which was still dark and thick. "I say, just call it a night. You'll feel better in the morning for it."

"It's our anniversary, dear. It's only seven o'clock. I'm in the mood. You know what I mean." Jane untied the kerchief and let her hair down. She wrapped the ends around her fingers and brushed her
lips with her bangs.

Tit tried pushing the cork through with a pen. It was too tight. "Damn it," he said. He sat up on the bed, resting his back against the wall. "I'll buy a stupid corkscrew tomorrow and we'll drink some."

"But I had my mind set on a drink. And I'm going to have one," Jane said, winking. She was feeling the alcohol in her head and hips and as she walked past him she exaggerated her walk and went out to the ice machine.

"Jane, please," he raised his voice but Jane kept walking.

They started to argue when Jane returned; their voices rose. "Give me the bottle," Jane said. "Please." She was drunk and getting loud. "I just want a drink. Please, Tit. It's our anniversary."

Tit refused her and they argued louder, until they heard a knock on the wall over the bed. The groom yelled out, "Tits. Let her have a drink for God's sake." Then the newlyweds burst out laughing. Tit and Jane stopped and put their ears to the wall. The bride said, "Yeah, give her a drink, Tits. It's your anniversary."

"Go to hell," Tit said, and went over to his golf bag. Jane heard a champagne cork pop and the couple laughing.

"See," she said. "I told you we have to be careful what we say." Tit said, "If it means that much to you. Drink it," he said. "Get stewed." He handed her the bottle.

She cracked the bottle of scotch and poured two fingers of it over ice. She sat on the desk chair and watched her husband who sat on the bed with an one iron. "I'm sorry," Jane said. "I just want to
celebrate. We never really celebrate anything anymore. We're still young. Not young young like Joni the bartender you were flirting with. But think of it this way, we're not grandparents yet."

"Maybe you should join the couple next door," he said. He was fuming.

"Don't be such a poor sport," Jane said. "Break a rule or two. I'm your wife remember. And I told you that someday I would drink your scotch."

Tit watched her drink one. The newlyweds started chanting Go Jane Go Jane Then they started making love again. Tit pounded on the wall. They pounded back. He got up and went outside, carrying his one iron. Jane watched him through the window. He stood in front of room nine's door, the club in his hands like a baseball bat. Jane knocked on the window. He waved her away, but she didn't budge. He didn't knock. He unlocked the car and sat in it. The porch light illuminated his chin and his hands gripping the wheel.

Minutes later he came in, huffing and puffing. "Ok, you want to drink scotch with me. Let's do it. I could use a drink." Tit shut off the over head. He turned the desk lamp on. The light in the room was twilight. He slammed his cufflinks on the desk as if they were loose change, loosened the tie so it would slip over his head, and slipped out of his shirt as if he were getting ready to fight a man. Tubes of fat outlined his tank tee-shirt.

"Ok," he said. "Let's drink. Let's celebrate. Women. Scotch." He found the rock video station on the t.v. "Dewars," he said, reading
the label. "I drink Pinch, but this will do. Is the music loud enough?"
He filled the juice glass full and swallowed it all. In room nine the
newlyweds made noise and their bed bumped the wall. Tit filled
Jane's glass halfway and his all the way. "Drink up," he said. He
refilled the glasses. He took his watch off.

"I didn't say we had to drink the whole bottle. Slow down,"
Jane said.

They swallowed the scotch. Tit grabbed her by the triceps and
kissed her hard on the mouth. Jane didn't resist. He kissed her
neck, her shoulders. She unfastened his belt and his pants fell to his
ankles; his buckle knocked the floor. Tit hoisted her turtleneck over
her head and Jane stepped out of her slacks. She unsnapped her
brazier. It felt good what he was doing. It felt like it did in the
back seat of the stranger's Ford, many years ago, when the young
soldier just couldn't wait, and she received him with her skirt high
up on her waist.

In ball and chain steps, he carried her over to the bed like he
was carrying a child--her legs wrapped around his waist her arms
around his neck--setting her down on the foot of her bed, she
wiggled out of her underpants.

"Yes," Tit said. "Hold on." He got the bottle of scotch and Jane
toasted Sofia Loren, then they each took another swig from the
bottle. Tit drank from it as if were coca cola. Jane felt her eyes
roll back. "Listen to them," she said. "They're animals." She was
sitting on the foot of the bed, naked except for her nylons and
jewelry. Tit stood in front of her, stared down at her forehead with brandy and creme de menthe breath. "Ok," she said.

Tit trembled. She stood up and hugged him. He shifted her around fast and they got on the bed. She did as he said and flattened her palms against the wall, under the framed Vermont covered bridge. "Jesus," she said. "Jesus Christ, Tit."

"Louder," Tit said. "Let's show those wise asses how." Tit exaggerated his moans and Jane did the same at his request. The newlyweds topped them by screaming louder, their bed posts slamming the wall. Son of a bitch's Tit said to himself. "Louder, Sofie, Louder." And Jane let out an authentic scream.

Tit came and crumbled like a wounded soldier.

Jane closed her eyes and waited for it to stop, she didn't feel Tit move out, and the vision of her in the back seat of a car with her skirt up over her belly moved across her eye lids like Santa moving through the sky. And as the flashback tailed off--the boy crashing on top of her--so did the good vibration. "Where are you going? Tit." She said, her hands still against the wall. She heard the values squeak, then water splashing the tub, and the shower curtain shuffling, water rinsing Tit's body.

"Tit, what are you doing?" She turned on the overhead and saw herself in the mirror, her lipstick smeared on her chin.
Beverly gazed out the kitchen sink window that spied on the back yard. The grass was beginning to climb the chain link fence. Her husband, Michael, became her center of focus. He was swearing at the lawn mower under his breath. Bitch, she thought she read reel off his lips. With tight fists he clutched the frayed clothesline, his hands shoulder length apart and bent at the elbows, and gave the stubborn Briggs & Stratten a desperation kick. The rubber sole thumped the aluminum frame; the sneaker vanished into grass. His face reddened and more silent words jumped off his lips. It was reminiscent of her childhood; her mother and herself held at bay.
while her father struggled to fix the car, lying on his back beneath the cool engine.

Just breath exited her mouth as she craned her head over the sink full of dishes to the screen, her painted toes on their tips. The thought of hollering to her husband was a fleeting one. Beverly returned to her heels, found her slippers underneath a kitchen chair and quietly walked up behind him with a glass of iced tea.

It was early for an August Sunday morning.

The sun had risen without anybody seeing it. It came up behind a sticky sheet of cloud, leaving the sky the color of fog. It was coolest in the shadows, under the picnic table, on the side of the house, or in the basement, anywhere but smack dab in the middle of the back yard yanking a cord with the heavy air swarming you.

"Honey, here's some iced tea for you," Beverly said. The dewy grass latched on to her feet. "God, it is hot."

Michael was silent, his face flush. Beverly walked underneath the clothesline and around the front of him. "Honey, here's a cold iced tea. I just made it this morning," she said, her arm extended, the cold glass inches from his clammy belly button. "There's lemon and sugar already in it. Don't you want some tea, Michael. It'll do you some good. You'll get dehydrated if you don't drink it."

Her father drank iced coffee with three heaping tea spoons of sugar and a dollop of whipped cream. Beverly and her mother used to take turns serving him in the driveway. Now, just her mother waited on him.
Michael didn't say boo. His eyes wandered off the back yard and unto the beagle on the neighbor's back porch sleeping underneath a lawn chair.

"Well it's right here on the picnic table when you want it. Okay. It's right here," Beverly said, and she set it down next to his wristwatch and his tee-shirt and went away.

On the steps of the back porch, Beverly heard her husband grunt. She stopped and turned. "What's that dear," she said, fondling the crucifix which hung around her neck from a silver chain. Under her full length robe, she smelled tiny ringlets of perspiration congregating on the inside of her thighs, on the nubby skin under her arms, and on the back of her neck underneath her sandy ponytail. Michael's dark curly hair, not a grey in it yet, stuck out more than the whiteness of his legs and chest. She tried imagining what her life would be like after the black turned grey. Would she still be living in Prospect Circle, where each lot was divided by a chain link fence and a dog. Would he ever let her work. Would she ever own a car to visit her mother with.

Her mother parents lived in the western half of the state on forty seven acres of apple orchards. Beverly only saw them two or three times a year, yet called her mother often. Six summers ago, she left the orchards and came to Boston to get away from the isolation and quietness of the barn, the orchards, and her bedroom. She met Michael in a bar in the South End and lived in the city for two years while they were courting. It wasn't until he found a new
position with the plant that they moved away from Boston and to Gloucester, home of Gordon's Seafood, the Blessing of the Fleet, and a large Puerto Rican population.

Michael looked up and blew a deep breath out. Their eyes met for the first time that day. Before Beverly could crack a smile Michael had let go of the wire and started for the garage, his hands behind his head, his legs moving slowly. He began to hum loudly and roll his neck. Beverly felt the ringlets of perspiration loosen from her skin and stampede toward her feet, stripping her vitals from her body. The ice in the tea began to melt. She went inside and her mother called. They spoke for one half hour and agreed to speak later.

Her neighbor, Elizabeth Fortin, joined her for lunch with her baby, Barrence. She was a few years older than Beverly and had only lived in Prospect Circle for three months. The three of them had been spending many afternoons together in Beverly’s kitchen, or on hot days in the basement, eating tuna fish and onion sandwiches, and talking about and babies and husbands.

"Beverly, I swear he runs my life. My life rotates around him. I don't make a single move without thinking of him first," Elizabeth said. She breast fed Barrence, her yellow sleeveless blouse unbuttoned half way to her waist, her veined, milk bloated breast drooping out. "You think about that before you have one. Hard to believe but baby Barrence sucks life right from me, right out my
spark plug,” she said, holding Barrence in one hand and a Marlboro and a handkerchief in the other. Barrence was seven months old. “But I wouldn’t give him up for the world. He’s mine. Nobody can take him away from me.”

The three of them were in the basement. Beverly had set up a card table, a fan and two chairs. They sat with the lights off and let what foggy light there was outside come in through the small window above the foundation. Michael planned to make the cellar into a game room this winter. Already there was a used refrigerator with a calendar of naked women on it and a pinball machine which needed repairing.

“I want a baby,” Beverly said. “But the grump won’t let me have one. He says they’re too expensive. But don’t mention that to him.”

While Elizabeth fed her baby, Beverly stroked Barrence’s head softly as if she were petting a kitten. A finger on her other hand was in her mouth. Beverly had been pregnant without Michael knowing it, yet miscarried in the cellar before breaking the news.

“Well they are spendy,” Elizabeth said, “But nothing compared to a bad habit if you know what I mean. All your money goes up your nose or wherever and you have nothing to show for it. I got the title to this little tike. He’s my inspiration.”

“And the only other bummer is you get fat,” Elizabeth added. “As you can see. Michael hasn’t touched me since I came home from the hospital. That was twelve weeks ago. She leaned back in her chair. “Look at this Beverly. I can’t get rid of this. Look,” she said,
and grabbed a handful of flesh from her thigh. "That's blubber, Beverly. And here too," she said, this time jiggling the skin on the back side of her arm. You're lucky, Beverly. You're not fat. That's something else you might think of. You get fat as pig and men don't want to touch you."

"You'll lose it, Elizabeth. It takes time." Beverly had the physique of an Asian woman, small and thin with fragile limbs. Although she had no desire to be as heavy as Elizabeth, she wouldn't turn down some extra weight for cushion and insolation here and there.

"Tell that to Hank. He says my ass feels like a sofa cushion," Elizabeth said. She took a long drag off her cigarette. "He's got some nerve to speak of my ass, he wishes he had ass. His is as flat as an ironing board." Elizabeth changed Barrence to her right nipple. "But hey, sometimes I really don't give a damn."

Beverly agreed. She ripped and spit a fingernail out onto the floor.

"Stop biting your nails," Elizabeth said, slapping Beverly's arm. "They're bleeding for God's sake." She grabbed her hand. "Jesus," Beverly pulled her bleeding fingers away from Elizabeth's grip and hid them under her leg.

"Christ, why do chew your fingers like that? It's disgusting," Elizabeth said.

Beverly answered speaking into the fan. "I don't know. Just a nervous habit." Her voice sounded like a robot. The breeze evap-
orated her perspiration on her face. "Try this," she said. "It's soothing on hot ones like today."

Elizabeth nudged her face in front of the fan. "You chew yourself like a dog," she said. She closed her eyes. "You can get worms from biting your nails. Don't you know that?"

Beverly's lips met the metal lattice. "Very funny. You don't scare me," she said and let Elizabeth have the breeze.

The two of them could hear Michael stomping around the back yard, huffing and puffing, talking to himself. Beverly got up and stood on the foot stool under the rectangular window and sneaked a peek at the back yard. She looked hard through the long grass.

"Michael's trying to start the lawnmower. He's been at it all morning," she said and got down. "He's a hard worker to be doing that today."

"For God's sake he's a fool. It must be a hundred and ten degrees outside with the humidity. Why doesn't he wait till it cools off like the rest of the neighborhood. Bill waits till after dark."

Beverly tried to pass the question off, and went on fingering the calender on the refrigerator door. Miss August. She traced the southern girl's perky figure. Elizabeth asked again. "Why? Are you trying to kill him?"

"I just told you he wants to go to bed early," Beverly said. "He's a go getter, doesn't like to sit still."

"Then why don't you mow it for him? You're always looking for ways to surprise him."
Beverly's slapped her bare thighs. She puffed her cheeks. "Because he says that's an insult to his manhood, that's why. Okay," she said, slightly raising her voice. "He won't let me."

Michael sold plumbing supplies in the Northeast. He worked one week in the office one week on the road. Beverly explained to Elizabeth that he had to hit the road early the next morning. He would be off to Vermont, New Hampshire and Connecticut. "He wants to be out the door by five o'clock. He said if he didn't mow it today it would look like a field by the time he got back."

Michael fished through his tool box for a spark plug socket. He found one and got the plug out and wire brushed the contacts. Then he screwed it back in and yanked the starter cord. Beverly heard the mower cough and sputter and she stretched on her tippytoes to see more. The mower stalled and she returned to her heels. He continued to yank harder and harder on the cord with each pull, but the mower never stayed running. He gave up and unscrewed the plug from the head. He looked at it closely. Then he chucked it against the house and hollered, "Son of a bitch." It came through the window like a baseball. Beverly backed away from the window. She glanced back at Elizabeth. "What," Elizabeth said. Michael punched the side of the house. "Son of Mother Freaking Bitch," he hollered.

Beverly thought he'd come in now but he didn't. He sat on the picnic table next to the full iced tea, but didn't touch it. His elbows rested on his knees. He blew on the damp cigarette that had been behind his ear. When it was dry, he smoked it. Then he put on his
shirt and walked fast with his head down around the side of the
house, got in the car and drove off, burning a patch of rubber in front
of the house, tooting the horn as he sped down the street.

Beverly said, "You better get going. He's not happy." Then she
started to wet her pants. She did this when she knew he was going
to hit her. She could not control it. It ran out her shorts and on to
the cement floor. Elizabeth froze. Beverly went on urinating,
squatting now in front of the washer machine, her eyes closed, her
fists clenched.

"Beverly," Elizabeth said. "Beverly, stop it. What's the
matter?" She set Barrence in his baby seat.

"Please, don't tell anyone," Beverly said and started to cry. Her
mother said crying was a sign of weakness. "It's like cleaning a
wound with whiskey," she had told Beverly over the phone. "It just
makes it hurt more." When her bladder was empty her shorts looked
as if she had been wading in the ocean up to her crotch, but the urine
was as warm as a lake.

"Are you sick?" Elizabeth said. She was scared to touch her.

"I've got to take a shower," Beverly said and ran up the steps.

"No," Elizabeth said. "What's going on?"

"I'm okay," Beverly said in her bedroom. She put her robe on
over her clothes and rinsed her face under the kitchen faucet. She
thought about telling Elizabeth but blocked the thought out. It was a
sin to tattle tale on your family, that was what her father told her.
He used the mafia as an example. Beverly looked up at her and said.
"I can't control my bladder. Just don't tell anyone. It's embarrassing. Please, go."

"I'll call you later then," Elizabeth said. She hurried across the front lawn and the driveway and unto her property. Beverly's toes were dangling off the top step and her hand was holding open the door. Elizabeth smiled back. And like a child backing off a high dive, Beverly inched her way back into the darkness of her house and disappeared.

She took three deep breaths and showered quickly, just washing from the waist down. She put on three pairs of underwear and two pairs of socks. She removed her jewelry, and wrapped her biceps and thighs with folded layers of paper towels. Then she finished her chores. She packed his bag for his trip. She made sure he had extra underwear and socks and a pair of new pants. She packed his toothbrush and some paste, a razor, and deodorant in his attache case, then left the case at the foot of the bed. She hurried. She straightened up the living room. Found the t.v. guide and placed it on the arm of his chair, and put the evening sports page on the hassock with the phone and a pen.

The engine roared in the driveway before it shut off. Beverly heard the door slam and his sneakers dragging on the concrete walk that went around to the back yard. She hadn't finished making supper, yet. The casserole was in the oven, the corn simmering on the stove, and she was in the middle of making a salad, when she
saw him sitting back on the picnic table. He appeared sober, and she was thankful for that. He was smoking again, using the melted iced tea for an ashtray. She couldn't make out what he was rolling in his hands.

"Honey, where'd you go," she said through the half opened screen door as if she had never heard him leave.

Michael said nothing, just kept rolling the object between his fingers, smoking his cigarette without using his hands.

"What'd ya buy," Beverly said, starting down the steps, but stopping abruptly when his nubby, shadowed face rose in the light.

"I'm fixing you a nice supper, honey. Tuna casserole. Corn. And salad." Michael's face dropped again and he let out a long stream of smoke through his nose, which enveloped his face. His hands ran up his cheeks and through his hair. "Please don't be mad at me," Beverly said. Michael glanced up at her and shook his head. Beverly ran back inside and continued fixing the salad.

The lawnmower fired up when she was setting the table. She heard the lawnmower run and stall, stalling always at the end of the house where the grass was deepest. Through the kitchen window she watched Michael, his back to her. He had the mower on its side and he was cleaning the excess grass away from the blade, wiping his hands on his bare thighs. It happened each time he was at that end, and each time the mower stalled, he hollered, "Goddamn it."

She went on setting the table, anticipating the stall, wincing every time it did. The second time over the lawn the mower stayed
running, sending a warm feeling through Beverly's body.

The table looked nice. Matching salad bowls to go with the supper plates, tall milk glasses at the tips of the knives, paper print napkins under the forks, the butter dish next to the loaf of sliced white bread, and a jar of sweet pickles in front of Michael's plate. The only thing that wasn't tidy was the kitchen sink, it was full of the day's dishes.

"You can rake it, Michael said, when he came in. It was the first thing he had said to her all day. She knew the yard was finished when the screen door slammed behind him. She had watched him cross the yard and make his way to the door. Far away from the window, she sat at the set kitchen table and pretended to read a magazine, when he came in. She looked up and gave him a big smile when he entered. His arms, his legs, his ankles, his chest, and his sneakers were green, his face was dark with nubs. Then he wiped his face and hands on a dish towel. "After supper," he said. He left a trail of grass through the kitchen and down the carpeted hall.

He came to the table in his underwear, bare chest and smelling of Prell. Beverly set the fan on the kitchen counter and pointed it in his direction. She scooped some salad into his bowl, then took his plate over to the stove where she ladled some corn and cut a big block of casserole for him. He ate his supper in great heaves, mixing corn with his casserole, staring at the wall paper to the left of her face.
Beverly sat patiently across from him and didn’t try to make conversation with him. She tried not to look at him, just listened to him, his heaves of food chomping away in his open mouth, sucking air in through his nostrils. Then he spoke.

“Pack my case, yet,” he said, looking at his plate while he spoke.

“Yes, honey. It’s already.”

Next door Elizabeth and her husband were barbecuing. She was sitting in a lawn chair nursing Barrence while her husband flipped burgers. Beverly smelled the meat cooking. Elizabeth laughed.

“You sure you packed my razor this time.”

“Yes, honey. I’ll double check if you want me to,” She said.

That’s all he said until after supper. Beverly cleared his plate. Then she began to clear the rest of the table, putting the dirty dishes on the counter, refrigerating the butter and the pickles, and returning the loaf of bread to its plastic bag. When she finished clearing she started in with the dishes.

“Honey, why don’t you watch some t.v. while I do the dishes. Then I’ll fix you a bowl of chocolate ice cream.”

Michael didn’t reply but eyed the back of Beverly from the table. She had all the dishes and the pots and pans on the counter while she filled the sink with water. The sight of the dishes set him off.

“Go ahead, Michael, watch your t.v. We’ll have chocolate ice cream for dessert. Just let me do the dishes. Or do you want some now. Or do you want to go to bed. That’s not such a bad idea either.”
Michael rose from his chair and went into the living room. He turned the stereo on loud and went back to the kitchen. A Beach Boys's song filled the small house with music. Elizabeth's laugh could no longer be heard. Michael wasn't but an inch or two taller than Beverly but he was much broader. Beverly saw his reflection in the kitchen window, a white figure with a dark head, moving up behind her. She turned around and faced the figure when its reflection was bigger than her own.

He locked her against the kitchen counter with his stubby arms on each side of her. "What the hell is all this mess," he hollered over the music.

"Michael, it's just the dirty dishes, I'm cleaning them up. Don't get upset."

"You're damn right they're the dirty dishes. They're yesterday's dishes too. I've been sweating my ass off all day and you've been sitting on yours, haven't you," he hollered, and then cleared the counter with a swipe and the dishes and the pots and pans crashed against the tile.

"Michael" Beverly said. "Please."

He quit when the song was over.

"You rake the yard after you wash the dishes," Michael said, knocking on the bathroom door. "But you wait for your friend to go in."

Beverly buried the padding in the waste basket. She came out and started on the dishes after she brought him his ice cream. The
phone rang. It was Beverly’s mother. “How did you know,” Beverly whispered. Elizabeth and her family were still barbecuing.

“I can smell it.”

Beverly listened to her mother and watched Elizabeth through the window. Elizabeth held Barrence over her head and gave him little shakes. Beverly described to her mother what happened and how she was this close from telling Elizabeth everything, exposing herself, her mother, and her family. “It’s not fair,” she said.

Her mother told her to use ice. “And for God’s sake, don’t you tell anyone. They’ll treat us as if we have a disease when all we have is a common cold.”

Beverly looked once more at Elizabeth. Barrance was sucking life out of her exposed breast. One day he would grow up to be a man.

“Say hello to Dad,” she said.
After the jet leveled off Jagdish reclined his first class aisle seat and with enthusiasm read the June issue of *Car & Driver*. A lemon scented stream of cool air showered him from above, cleansing his face, tickling his narrow nose. Everybody who knew Jagdish was aware that he was a car freak, that he had a fascination for fast American sports cars. He drove a '65 Ford Mustang Coupe which he had restored himself. For the last six years, it seemed as though he had spent every free moment on weekends and after dinner fixing this, polishing that, and so on until the car was finished. He had found an article on the Ford 287
engine (a 287 engine powered his car) and began reading it when the flight attendant interrupted him.

"May I get you cocktail?" The younger flight attendant asked. Simply put she was lovely, adolescent looking with her creamy complexion and brown eyes which were swollen and streaked as if she had been crying.

Jagdish gave her his attention. "Where is everybody? There can't be more than thirty passengers on the plane?" he asked.

"They were on the 7:15 flight," she said. "What you see is what you get."

"Marvelous," he said. Jagdish studied the bottles on the portable bar under the movie screen and then chose a brand not on display. She apologized and said they stocked Beefeater and Gordons.

"Good God. I guess a Budweiser then." When she turned her back and went away he looked her up and down. Jagdish marveled. *Eek, a moose,* he whispered. He imagined she was a few years older than his daughter, who was eighteen and enrolled in a theatre program at El Camino Jr. College. He couldn't understand how anyone could take pretending seriously. He didn't, yet, did it all the time. When he was in college he couldn't help but giggle at the girls and boys who, in sophomore literature class, read aloud the plays of William Shakespeare so melodramatically. Yet Marisa did it seriously, incessantly reciting lines in dialect during breakfast and dinner.
“Speak new English. Shakespeare has been dead for hundreds of years,” Jagdish would say with soft boil egg on his spoon, Or ye will end up in the poor house.

"I am ashamed women are so simple," she would say and badger him until he left.

The plane hit some turbulence on its course to L.A. Jagdish leaned over his arm rest and looked out the window, watching the Omaha sky line fade out of sight. He thought of his family in Los Angeles, his brothers in India and Boston, and his nephews and nieces in Paris as the jet bumped through the rough air.

She returned with a frosted glass and his beer. Jagdish was overcome by her figure and grace. It reminded him of an early model Jaguar. It was sleek, yet in her brown polyester uniform it curved dramatically at her chest and hips. Her legs were thin and sturdy as steel, supporting her erect posture.

"Here you are, Mr.---" she said, handing him his beer and then his boarding pass which he had dropped in the aisle.

"Chopra," Jagdish said politely. "It's an Indian name. From India. You won't find many in the phone book." He winked. "In fact there isn't a single other Jagdish Chopra in Los Angeles County." He proudly informed her that he was an American citizen, a Californian who hadn't lived in India for almost a quarter of a century. "They're barbaric in that part of the world," he said.

The custom of drinking and flirting was not brought over from
Poona but learned from the slew of engineers he had traveled with over the years. It happened the moment they freed themselves from their wives and offices. Sometimes they acted like crazy wealthy bachelors and other times like serious philosophical know it all's. There wasn't an engineer on the face of this earth who you could trust not to flirt with a pretty young woman once he was away from his wife.

"Indians will eat a rat before they eat a cow," he added. Simply barbaric.

Her name was Denise. She wore a pear shaped diamond ring on her right hand ring finger. Jagdish had never seen such a ring on such a young woman; it was the size of a pinkie nail. He was impressed by the elegance it lent her, an air his daughter was lacking. Marisa rejected jewelry, make up which was tested on animals, and tight fitting clothing which exploited her large, eggplant shaped breasts. Jagdish once told her if EST were ever to fashion a clothing line she could be the spokeswoman.

Jagdish asked Denise where she was from. That was always an engineer's first line. Where are you from? Because engineers that travel had a story about almost any town or nearby town in which the young woman said she was from. It was perfect conversation.

"Champaign, Illinois," she said. "Land of Lincoln."

"Of course," Jagdish said, "I've been to Champaign several times on business."

"Really," she said.
"Home of the best corn on the cob in the world."

She smiled. Creases pushed her cheeks up and pulled her lips apart, showing her slightly discolored front tooth. "You can say that again. And do I ever miss it." Then her smile collapsed like a cake. "I haven't lived there for two years, though. Once I graduated from college I high tailed it like a fool. Now I'm based out of San Francisco." She secured the carry-on luggage in the over head in front of him and found the pillows. On her tippytoes her vest stretched firmly across her upper body revealing a safety pin at her waist where a button should have been.

She asked politely, "And what do you do in Los Angeles? Have I seen you on cable t.v. before?" This was not a come on question but extra attention given to first class passengers. They paid for it.

"Me," Jagdish said, and he thought of someone interesting, someone who might drink a Boodles and tonic. His brother who was an anesthesiologist was always bragging about the women he met in the hospital. "Promise you won't be frightened? I'm a doctor," he said. "And, no, you haven't seen me on t.v." Engineers rarely disclosed their occupation when they flirted because engineers and women have nothing in common. Engineers were smart enough to know that blueprints bored women.

Jagdish was an handsome Indian who looked more like a symphony conductor or a retired tennis player than an engineer. And ever since moving to Los Angeles twenty-two years ago he was often mistaken for someone else, like many attractive people in L.A.;
everybody looked liked somebody. He had a trim shapely frame that appeared flexible in a suit, skin that turned the color of cedar stain in the summer, coarse dark hair with weeds of silver over the ears and forehead, and soft, bony women's hands.

He swallowed some beer and stared up at Denise’s chin as she checked the compartment in the next row. There was a crooked scar under it. “I’m a Doctor of Psychology,” he said. He had never used this disguise before but he found the title amusing.

Denise glanced down at Jagdish with pillows in her hand and almost drop them on his lap. She rested a pillow behind his head. Jagdish locked his briefcase and stowed it under the seat in front of him. Then she turned away quickly and said something to the man a few seats in front of Jagdish. He took a pillow from her hand. She twisted in Jagdish’s direction. “I’ve never met psychologist before.”

“We love to talk,” Jagdish said, sensing her need. “Free consultation in the sky.” He winked again and had another swallow.

“Free?” she said, and returned to the galley.

He finished his beer and returned his attention to the article.

His trip to Nebraska hadn’t been successful. For seventy-two hours he tried to convince R&D in Ogalala that its D-03 diode needed revamping, that it was insufficient in transferring maximum power to other components. He had known all along that the diode was capable. It worked fine. But Jenkins, the company vice president, had told him that if the plant did get a contract for a improved diode
It could mean a possible promotion and for sure more money and an added bonus. A Corvette. The Dolly Parton of sports cars.

"Do you like San Francisco?" Jagdish asked when she came back.

"San Francisco is too busy for me, so not really. I think someday I'll go back to the Champaign." She placed a new napkin and a bag of roasted peanuts on Jagdish's tray table. "My mom and dad are the only ones left in Champaign. Both my sisters married and moved to Chicago, and my brother is in the Air Force in Florida. But I still want to go back. Isn't that funny? Who in their right mind would want to move back to Champaign, Illinois when you could live in just about any city in the United States."

She smelled of bubble bath. Jagdish imagined her soaking in one at her hotel room before getting ready to catch the shuttle bus to the airport—her fine Scandinavian fair hair bobby pinned up over her ears. That was another vanity item Marisa had an aversion to, unnatural odors. Her reasoning was that she didn't know of another animal on the face of the planet that had a desire to smell like a flower. Personally, she had said, I like the smell God gave me.

Up close Denise's faint make-up around her eyes, on her cheeks and on her lips reminded Jagdish of a mountain wild flower. He wished his daughter had been so ambitious, leaving home, traveling the country side, earning her own money. Jagdish remembered something he had read in one of Em's magazines. He said to Denise, "We're all rooted to something. Like a tree. Some of
us more deeply than others." He gestured with orchestrating hands. "In your case, you're like a hardwood tree with deep roots. Me, I'm like a pine tree, shallow roots. It wasn't hard for me to leave India with all the perks here in the States." It went over well, as if he were a poet. Denise told him that was a beautiful way of looking at it and that it might explain her loyalty to people and places.

But she added cautiously, "Well, I had this boyfriend you see in San Francisco. I haven't said anything to anyone about him. It just ended two days ago. That's why I really want to leave. I think." Her eyes began to flood. "For a while there I thought I was going to be," she paused, "married." She made a steeple with her hands and fingers. "I really did. I really wanted to be married."

He thought quickly. "You dumped him?" Jagdish said, trying to make light of a difficult situation. He was inexperienced at consulting emotional problems.

"I wish," she said. "It's a long story. The bottom line is I'm single again. The thought of it makes me feel sick." The other flight attendant signaled her from the galley to prepare meals. Denise made a sad face at him and followed her instructions.

Though he hadn't realized, when he boarded the plane Jagdish had been in a state of gloom. He was driven straight from the plant to the airport by a man named Mobley and was too exhausted to call his wife to let her know what time to expect him, or, call Jenkins who wanted the good or bad news immediately. Now Denise's beauty had lifted his spirits. He pulled himself from his chair and called
them on the satellite phone.

First he called Jenkins with the company credit card. Mr. Jenkins' wife answered and passed the phone to her husband. Jagdish heard a t.v. in the background, then a laugh track. He told Jenkins the truth and then moved the phone an inch away from his ear and waited. Jenkins said, "Oh for Christ's sake, Chopra. You let a herd of martini drinkin' rednecks out smart you. Do you know what this means?" Jenkins paused. "It means that I'm not going to the South of France this year and your not going to blow your load on a corvette." Jenkins huffed. "Monday morning. Bright and early," He said and hung up.

Jagdish re-dialed his home number. As the phone rang he watched Denise in her vest and polyester uniform move around the cabin. She moved gracefully on her feet as if she were waltzing. He thought how much he'd like to lead her on a ballroom floor.

"It's me," he said. "I'm calling from on board the plane. Thirty-two thousand feet in the air. I'm looking out the window now."

"What do you mean?" she said. "Calling from the plane." He explained it to her the easiest way he could. "It works like Satellite t.v. Think of it that way. It's very expensive, too." A woman from first class passed him as she went to the lavatory. She said hello. "So listen. Don't get too excited because things went awful in Ogalala," he said. He told her everything.

Jagdish's wife was not ugly nor pretty but average and Jagdish did make out better than many of his buddies whose marriages were
also prearranged. She said, "I wish I could say things were better here. Are you ready this?" she said.

"Wait. Don't tell me," Jagdish said. "We got the phone bill and Marisa's calling Connecticut again."

"Ha. I wish it were that." Jagdish heard her burp then take a deep breath. Her manners embarrassed him. After a good meal she burped two or three times. It was her way of showing the chef her appreciation. "I wasn't going to tell you until I remembered how much you like surprises. Marisa ran over a curb with your mustang and ripped a hole in the oil pan. She's fine but the car isn't."

Jagdish grit his teeth and said, "Goobannifar. My mustang. What the hell was she doing driving my car without my permission, Em?" Friday nights with the top down and with his leather racing gloves on, he showed it off, racing gear heads down Aviation Boulevard.

"I had mine and she needed a car for the damn drama party. So she just borrowed it when I wasn't home of course. She's driven it plenty before."

Jagdish listened to her go on and on then he lit in to her. "To the store for a carton of milk. And not without my permission. Oh, god."

She apologized. Then she said, "Listen, don't blame it all on me. You know you really have to do something about her tone, about her white lies, about her conniving, about everything, Jag. You are her father after all. I'm getting sick of it. If you want her to be a
doctor you better start getting involved. She's running out of time. She's not a little girl anymore. She'll be nineteen in October."

"She has to take the initiative," Jagdish said. "Like take real college courses to begin with it. My car. How bad is it," he said. He smiled at the woman leaving the lavatory.

"I'm not going to fight with you right now. I'm just saying you need to spend time with her. I've spent the first eighteen years with her. The car," she said. "Jag, she drove it home from the party in Palos Verdes with the oil leaking out." Jagdish bit a knuckle. "The engine seized and it had to be towed. The garage said it's shot to hell. It's right out front. She just cleaned the oil off the hood this afternoon."

He lowered his voice. "I'm going to kill that little brat. How could she be so stupid. Maybe we should throw her out so she can see what the real world's like. Let her live with her grandmother. That would teach her. My car. My car. My car."

"She's been crying for the last three days, Jag. She's convinced she can't do anything right. She also didn't get the part in Romeo and Juliet. She's been running around the house cursing Juliet out of her body. Now she says she's Katherine. Who's Katherine?"

"My car, he said." Jagdish felt the plane start to shake then he heard a ding and a return to your seat sign illuminated above the phone. "I have to go. You make sure and tell her I want her home in the morning. Do you understand? I'll get a cab home."

When he returned to his seat Jagdish noticed the cabin lights
had been lowered. The section was dark and the two other
passengers were quiet. Jagdish moved to the window seat and
turned the overhead light on. Who's Katherine, he thought. He felt
sick and passed on his dinner. The captain came over the intercom
and said that Las Vegas was outside the right side of the aircraft.
Below it was black like above the corn belt and from 30,000 feet it
was impossible to tell if they were flying over Nebraska or Nevada.
He glanced out at the flashing light on the wing and caught his own
reflection in the window and behind it Denise's. She was standing
with another beer in her hand, her teeth showing, her shoulders
square.

"You belong down there," Jagdish said, pointing to the lights,
"in a show with beautiful dancers."

Denise placed the bottle of beer on his tray table. She said,"
You think so? I'm not tall enough." She looked at the fat man
sleeping in the seat across the isle. He was breathing heavily with
his mouth open. The other flight attendant was straightening up the
galley. Jagdish knew on slow flights attendants took turns working
and resting and were encouraged to spend time with first class
passengers. Denise sat down beside Jagdish and said, "The Bastard
dumped me."

He pushed back his sport coat sleeves and loosened his wrist
watch a notch, he folded his hands across his knees. She looked as if
she were going to start weeping any second. She pushed her straight
hair behind her ears. "My mother and father would disown me if I
told them what I'm going to tell you. It's confidential, right," she said.

"Strictly," he said. He was genuinely surprised with her trust in him. He put the Mustang out of his mind.

She said, "It's better to get it out than to keep it in, right?"

"Of course," he said. He wanted to take her head and shoulders and bring them to his breast, hold her, kiss her and make her better.

"How was I suppose to know that he was a jerk." She had started and now she couldn't stop. "I never had the slightest idea. I walked right into a trap with out any warning."

Jagdish sat on the edge of his seat so he could face her. He thought what is it with young people today. They're either wrecking cars or getting into jams. His guess was that she was pregnant. It would be curtains for Marisa if she got pregnant before getting married, and if she did, God forbid, he wasn't the right person to tell.

"He was older than me. An Investment Banker. He made people rich," she said. She paused and took two deep breaths in through her nose. "Forty-two," she said with her head down, then she lifted it. "Twice my age. I know. I couldn't believe it either. But he was nice looking, sincere. And he was mature. Everything a woman wants."

Jagdish felt his heart speed up. Forty-two, four years younger than himself. "That's not too old," he said. "There's nothing really wrong with it if you enjoy the company," he said. "It happens quite frequently nowadays. Especially to beautiful women," he said, "like yourself."
She blushed and said, "And he was successful. Where I come from that's a catch. You don't let those get away so easily. But I went with him fourteen months and never said a word to mom and dad because they're old and still think I'm a virgin for crying out loud." Denise paused. "I lost my virginity when I was fourteen."

Jagdish held a swallow of beer in his mouth, then let it go down after he digested Denise's honesty. He almost blurted out to whom, where. Lost her virginity at fourteen, his daughter was eighteen and as far he knew she still had it, or better have it. His wife lost it at nineteen. Denise looked up the aisle for Sharon, the other attendant. She was busy. Denise lowered her voice to a whisper; it cracked when tears flooded her eyes.

She lowered her voice. "He was into drugs. Marijuana and cocaine." She paused. "It wasn't like I had never seen it. It was all over high school but I never did any of it. Once I tried marijuana. But I didn't feel anything."

Jagdish was about to say this topic required a different counselor but she went on. He pushed his cuticles down with his thumbnail. "That's not all. After I moved in with him--"

The captain came over the intercom and said that they were starting their final decent into Los Angeles. Sharon glanced back at Denise from the head of the plane, gesturing with her fingers again.

Denise clenched her fists and rested them against her eye sockets. She said, "I let the fucking pervert take pictures of me." Jagdish put his arm around her. He didn't know what to say.
"Pictures," he said.

Sharon's voice came over the intercom. She told the passengers to secure all carry on luggage under the seat and to return seats to an upright position. Denise squeezed Jagdish's wrist and said, "I am in big trouble," she said. "Will meet me at the ticket counter. Twenty minutes after we land. Her face was contorted. It looked as if it had just hit a windshield. "I'm desperate."

"Oh," Jagdish said. His face was blank as a pudding. Words eluded him.

Denise said, "Will you, please. I'm in major trouble."

He didn't even hesitate. "At the ticket counter," he said. "But you better make it twenty-five minutes."

His luggage spun out first on the claim wheel. He checked it with the claims's officer and got the hell out of the airport as fast as he could, all the time thinking about leaving a message at the counter, yet opting not to because of the possibility of running into her. He waved down a taxi in the middle of the street and asked the driver to take the shore route through Playa Del Rey, El Segundo and into Manhattan Beach.

The road was deserted near the state park in Play del Rey. With the window down Jagdish took in the eucalyptus and salt aroma. It was damp and pungent. Big waves peeled away, the fluorescent white wash wiping the shore line. He could see the white wash falling away from the blue crest but could not hear it splash.
He gave the driver a twenty dollar bill and asked him to speed up.
The driver flipped a switch under the dash and accelerated straight
down the strip. "Faster," Jagdish said. "Faster." He stuck his head
out the window and closed his eyes.

The driver went 70mph and Jagdish's hair blew wildly on his
head. The air pushed his cheeks back to his ears. The driver said,
"Are you crazy, man. Be careful." Next his arms went out the
window. He raised them above his head and they hung like kites. The
sensation he usually got from speeding didn't reach the peak of
tingling his bones. It was shortened by the image of Denise in
despair waiting for him at the counter. He thought about going back
but just couldn't. Then he thought about his name being the only one
in Los Angeles County.

Jagdish's adrenaline dropped like mercury as the taxi slowed
into his home town, stopping in front of his house, leaving him in
the street between lamps next to the yellow mustang. The porch
light was glowing. Em's Lebaron was in the drive. The entire street
was dark and quiet. He set his luggage on the sidewalk and got in the
mustang. He turned the key and the battery still held the charge; he
turned on the lights, the radio, the wipers, it all worked. He turned
the key further and only a click. Then he turned every thing off but
the am radio which played a sports update show. He listened for
some scores until he fell asleep.

"Are you all right, Mr. Chopra?" Kevin, the paper boy said,
knocking on the window. It was partially rolled down. "Are you sick or something? Should I wake up Mrs. Chopra?"

Jagdish rolled the window down all the way. At first he was disoriented. When he got his bearings he said he was fine, just sleepy, and not to get his wife.

"Then here," Kevin said, passing him the Sunday paper. Jagdish decided to sit there and read it and wait for his wife and daughter to wake. The battery was now dead. By eight the sun was warm over his yard and Jagdish put the top down. He looked in the rear view mirror to fix his hair, it was a mess and for the first time in a few years he noticed that his hair line had receded another inch or so. The thought of poor Denise flashed in front of his eyes, making him nauseous.

The front door opened with a sucking noise. Jagdish turned and saw his daughter, her long dark Indian hair hanging down over her big erect chest and pink robe. She did not hesitate. Her slippers scratched the brick runway from the front door to the sidewalk, she slapped a script against her leg.

"I'm sorry, daddy" she said from the sidewalk. "It was a total accident. I'll pay for it. I promise I will. I screwed up. A dog ran in front of the car and I panicked. What can I say? I wasn't going to hit him."

Jagdish got out of the car and crossed the sidewalk and stood over her. Her hair was parted down the middle. She smelled like a fresh bath. He raised his voice. "You say that for everything. Do you
know how much time and effort I put into that car. Do you know what that car means to me? Do you know anything?"

Mr. Evans, Jagdish’s neighbor, came out for his paper and watched from his steps. Embarrassed, Marisa dropped her script and ran back to the door crying. “I said I was sorry,” she hollered.

Jagdish said Good Morning to Mr. Evans. He picked up the script. Marisa’s part was outlined in yellow highliner. Notes to herself on the side. She had a big part.

Jagdish said, “Don’t run away from me like that young lady. I’m not finished.” He flagged her with the script at her. “You’re a big girl now. You have to learn to grow up.”

Em stuck her head out the bedroom window. “Jag, is that you?”

Jagdish answered, “Yes, dear. I’m trying to spend some time with my lovely daughter but she won’t listen.” Mrs. Evans stepped out on the front porch. Marisa began to holler back that he was doing dirty laundry in front of the Evans. “Such mockery this is,” she hollered up to her mother. “He’s made a fool of me.”

“I said I wasn’t finished, Marisa,” Jagdish said. Em yelled at him to go easy on her.

Marisa opened her robe as if it were a cape, exposing her huffing breasts underneath an extra long tee shirt with cuddling bears on the front of it. “I pray you, sir, is it your will to make a stale of me amongst these mates.” Mr. and Mrs. Evans moved closer to the property line.

“Hey,” Jagdish said. “Don’t get fresh. Let me finish.”
Jagdish found the part she was reading and began to follow, checking her lines. She had a good memory.

"I'faith, sir, you shall never need to fear: I wis it is not half way to her heart," Salvia flew from her lips as she spoke.

Jagdish said, "Okay then. Have it your way," and he answered her with lines from the script. "From all such devils, good Lord deliver us!" He changed his voice and read the other parts. "...That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward." He kicked a hubcap. He had not read Shakespeare since high school and still he found it humorous. Marisa twirled on the lawn reciting her lines. Jagdish moved up the cobblestone walk.

"A pretty peal! It is best Put finger in the eye, an she knew why."

"Jagdish stop it. You're making a fool of yourself," Em said from the window.

"My father, a Laplander, a Pantaloon, a Malt-horse," Marisa cried out, bashing him with Elizabethan English.

"I'm trying to talk with my daughter," he said. "In her language. You told me too." Em darted away from the window and hustled down the stairs and outside to the front lawn. She moved in between them. Jagdish nudged her aside and tackled his daughter on the lawn, pinning her with her arms under his knee caps. He checked her ears for holes. There was still one in each. He gave a tiny tug on her lashes. They were real. "Where's your brassiere?" he said.

She squirmed and yelled, "Have you gone mad. Let me go!"
Mother, help me.” With all her might Em pulled at Jagdish’s neck.
She didn’t even budge him. The wrestling match frightened Mr. & Mrs.
Evans, and Mrs. Evans ordered her husband to get the hose. “Now,”
she said.

Jagdish read a line from the script. “Bad Tempered.” He kissed
her forehead.

Marlsa lost her place. “Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes,
that have been so bedazzled with the sun That everything I look on
seemeth green: Now let me go,” she hollered, her face reddened.
“You’re embarrassing me. I don’t know you.”

“Have you gone mad, Jag,” Em said. She karate chopped him on
the back, over and over.

Mr. Evans came around the side of the house and across the two
lawns carrying the hose as if he were going to douse an inferno.
When they were in reach, he said. “Enough,” holding the gun handle
with both hands.

“Never,”Jagdish said. “I will never let thee go.” Em freed
herself from the spectacle. She ran to front steps and hollered “let
her go, let her go.”

Jagdish did not listen to his wife.

“Do I now perceive thou art a reverend father. Pardon, I pray
thee, for my mad mistaking,” she said and gave up. “Just let me go.”