1987

Slanted light | A collection of stories

Deirdre McNamer

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SLANTED LIGHT
A COLLECTION OF STORIES

By
Deirdre McNamer
B.A., University of Montana, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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SLANTED LIGHT

A Collection of Stories
By Deirdre McNamer
# SLANTED LIGHT

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The summer began to weigh on Margaret when she saw the
double-year-old giant standing beneath the crabapple tree
at the Olson farm. He had flaxen baby hair and a line of
peach fuzz above his full, sagging mouth. His head peered
out from knotted shoulders. And he was immensely tall;
taller than any adult.

"That's Dougie," Rita Kay hissed in Margaret's ear.
"He has a gland that will make him keep growing until he
has an operation." She cocked her head, locked her knees
and stared, delighted, at the massive boy. Dougie stood
there under the tree, his head among the lowest branches,
and watched Margaret and Rita Kay with the calmness of an
old hound.

This was 1959. Margaret and Rita Kay, both nine years
old, knew children who'd had polio; who were growing up
with feet in old men's shoes because that's the kind you
needed if you had a silver leg-brace. This Dougie, Margaret
thought, belonged to that class of children who had been
attacked by something that pulled them out of being children,
the way polio did. But he hadn't been shriveled. He'd
been stretched. And there he was now, completely unexpected,
turning the day as heavy as death.

She felt the way she had, on the playground, when she almost bumped into Teddy Barron. She and two friends had been twirling around with their eyes shut, giggling, trying to guess where they were. And she had suddenly looked around to find herself a foot from Teddy, whose cancerous eyes had been removed as a baby, and who now went through school, through life, with the slits tilted upward for messages.

But the quick, sick shock she got from Teddy had been replaced by a feeling that he could be avoided, like a dead cat in the street. You didn't have to look. Now, it seemed, danger was in more places than she had thought. Like mortal sin. You could be going along, safe and sound, and you might happen to slip up seriously. You might commit an impure act with yourself or others, say. And you might happen to die before you got to confession. Then what? You're finished. Forever. Something lethal was lurking there on the edges of all sunniness, waiting for an opportunity.

This morning's sweet, crunchy greenness. An ordinary drive with your friend Rita Kay and her realtor father to a farm to talk to some people named Olson. The leisurely drive through rangeland and ripening wheat. The ordinary white house, ordinary barn, ordinary apple tree. And in the middle of it, this horror, Dougie, standing there in faded overalls like a big old mortal sin.
Margaret backed away from him slowly.

"He's going to have an operation in a year. A gland operation." Rita Kay said it loud enough for Dougie to hear. He smiled bleakly. Margaret gave her friend a pleading look. But Rita Kay just stood there, examining Dougie and fiddling with her pop-bead bracelet.

Margaret began to shriek. She twirled in circles, batting frantically at the air. "Bees!" she screamed. "Hornets! One landed on my ear. It's after me!" She sprinted away from Rita Kay and Dougie, then turned. "Hornets!" she screamed at Rita Kay, who hadn't moved. "They were after YOU! One landed on your head."

Rita Kay and Dougie watched her calmly, with faint, curious smiles, making her lonely. Then Margaret did, actually, catch sight of a hornet. More than one. A filament of them, drifting through the air, lazily seeking a target. She gave herself to a delicious panic, flicking her fingers, lolling her head from side to side, a crazy person.

She looked back. Now, Rita Kay was running, too, laughing, fluttering her small hands through the air; leaving the dim boy behind in the leafy shade.
Margaret and Rita Kay lived in a very small prairie town that was full of light, wind and gaps. It's name was Crane.

Summer in Crane began with a burst of lilacs and the shouts of children in the municipal swimming pool. By July, it took on a buzzing dreaminess, especially during the long afternoons. Lawns became faded and crackly beneath bare feet. Flies droned against screen doors. Mrs. Dumontier, the only adult in town who rode a bicycle, peddled more slowly than usual to the grocery store, knees scissoring up and down, stately and ridiculous.

Cottonwood trees had been planted in Crane because they grow well in dry country. Their leaves had undersides like grey cloth. When the cotton pods burst, silky tufts of the stuff floated through the air like slow-motion snow.

Margaret and Rita Kay liked to spend time in the weeds behind the Assembly of God church. The weeds were pale green and shoulder high. They had grown up where the minister's house had burned down, and no one bothered to cut them. They offered shelter and shadows and a peculiar rippling light. If you crouched down, no one could see you from the sidewalk.

The two of them had seen "Green Mansions" at the Orpheum Theatre the day school got out. They pretended the weeds were a jungle and they were the jungle-girl, Rima. Rima had long black hair which she wore in a silky braid.
She ran gracefully through dense foliage and shafts of sunlight, ministering to injured animals who became tame in her presence. At times, she would hear in the distance the faint, plaintive cry of the jungle explorer who loved her and wanted her for his wife: "Riiimaaa. Riiimaaa." But she didn't answer because she had to be free.

Rita Kay sometimes had to be coaxed into playing "Green Mansions." Often, she wanted to play Teenager, so they could put on the lipstick she had stolen from her mother's makeup drawer. But Margaret insisted, and she patiently coaxed Rita Kay in her lines. They had to pretend they were identical jungle-girl twins. Margaret named herself Rima and Rita Kay named herself Annette.

Margaret might say in a solemn Rima voice: "Perhaps, if we do not run into too many snakes, we shall gather melons for a salad." Or she would turn to Rita Kay and say, with quiet fervor, "Annette. Where on earth could this young monkey's mother be?"

Margaret liked to say "where on earth." Her own mother always said "where on earth" and Margaret liked its scope. "Where on earth are your socks?" Margaret's mother might say. And Margaret would think of a small pair of white anklets draped on the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, or wadded, on a ledge, halfway down the side of the Grand Canyon.
As the summer wore on, Margaret grew moody. Sometimes she cried for no reason. Her legs ached at night from growing pains, but something else made her draw into herself and brood. She didn't know what it was. She completely ignored her younger brother, Ricky, even when she knew he was bored or lonely. She spent time with Rita Kay, who made her feel better, and she read magazines. Always, she read the Medicine section of Time magazine. She couldn't seem to ignore it, even though she knew it would make her feel strange.

She read about an aircraft mechanic in California who could stop his heart, for seconds at a time, whenever he wanted to. His fear was that he might not be able to start it again; but, so far, he always had. "Although yogis have claimed to be able to control the heart," Time said, "there are no well-documented cases in medical literature of an individual stopping his heart at will. What enables Mechanic Hanson to turn the trick is still a mystery."

She read that this summer was the worst year for polio since the Salk vaccine became available. Eleven iron lungs had been flown to Des Moines where things were very bad.

She read about a family dinner at Aaron Gruwell's farm in Idaho Falls. Grandma Gruwell served some beets that a neighbor had brought over. She thought they seemed a little
too sweet. As it turned out, they contained a deadly toxin.

"Last week, because of the beets, Aaron Gruwell was dead," Time wrote. "So were Kenneth Nelson and daughter Wanda, 15." A photo of Kenneth Nelson in a hospital bed accompanied the story. The caption beneath said: "Grandma wanted more vinegar."

She read about a procedure in which doctors sawed apart the leg bones of people who were taller than normal -- very tall ladies, for instance, who didn't want to tower over their boyfriends. The doctors just took a chunk of bone out and let the edges knit back together. Margaret looked down at her legs when she finished the article and realized something she should always have known -- her own legs were far, far too long. Rita Kay's weren't nearly that long. That's why they ached, her legs. She was going to grow into a hulking teenager like the farm boy with the bad gland.

Margaret started taking sips of her parents' coffee. One morning, she poured herself a full cup. "That'll stunt your growth," her father said amiably. "So WHAT!" Margaret shouted. She clattered the coffee cup down and ran from the room in tears, trailed by her parents' puzzled murmurs.

That afternoon, she and Rita Kay were in Margaret's bedroom cutting up catalogues for paper dolls. They each had to find a model who was standing straight-armed and straight-legged in her underwear. Then they cut out skirts, sweaters and dresses that were the right size to hold up to her. Margaret tried to find cocktail dresses for her
model so she could pretend she was having a party in a penthouse, with a grand piano, and cigarettes, and a huge window that looked out on canyons of city lights.

They snipped silently.

"Did you know," said Margaret, "that you can die from laughing?"

Rita Kay broke into choppy giggles, then clunked over on the floor, tongue out.

"You can," Margaret said airily. "It's not so funny if you're the one who's dying."

The article had been titled "Laughing Death." The disease was called Kuru and it had already stricken a hundred members of a primitive tribe in New Guinea. It was characterized by "maniacal laughter and fits of giggling." And, said Time, no authentic Kuru victim had recovered.

Margaret had read the article, chewed the ends of her braids and brooded. What guarantee was there, if you started laughing, that you didn't have Kuru? How could you ever know?

She sought to ward off her great and growing unease with bouts of holiness, patterned on her Stories of the Saints book. Only saints, it seemed, were vigilant and imaginative enough to cover all the bases. Margaret tried to sleep on a hairbrush one night, bristles painfully poking her ribcage, as a small bribe against the possibility of Kuru. She put a rock in her shoe and walked around with
it for an hour, limping bravely, offering it up to God with a request that she never see an iron lung.

These things, of course, she kept from Rita Kay, who wouldn't understand. She quit talking to Rita Kay about fatal diseases at all, except sometimes, in passing. "Do you ever think you might have tuberculosis?" she asked her casually as they walked to the swimming pool. Rita Kay didn't.

On the Fourth of July, Rita Kay's parents had a Hawaiian luau in their backyard. Margaret's parents weren't there because they had a different set of friends, but Rita Kay invited Margaret. It was a barbeque. The adults drank hi-balls out of glasses with cartoons on them. The men blustered around, red-faced, in Hawaiian shirts and bermudas. The women wore halter tops and flowered skirts. Ukelele music drifted from the record player. Margaret's dentist, Dr. Dunker, had his arm around the bare shoulders of a woman who wasn't Mrs. Dunker.

Rita Kay's step-grandmother, Nonny, was there -- a stout, blue-haired woman with charm bracelets on each chunky wrist. Rita Kay's father hid a whoopie cushion in the chair he brought outside for Nonny. When she sat on it a giant fart sound went off and Nonny shrieked. Rita Kay's father roared with laughter; the women giggled and clucked.
Nonny jumped up, smoothed her stretchy blouse over her hips, looked triumphantly around and sat back down, setting off the whoopie cushion. Rita Kay's father laughed so hard he spilled his drink on the barbeque and the coals expelled a small cloud of steam.

One woman at the party looked different from the rest. She wore a black sleeveless dress and sandals. Her dark hair was in one long braid and she wore no make-up.

"That's Marie Phillips. She's a divorcee," Rita Kay said, drawing out the last syllable of the glamorous word. "She had to come back to town because she married a beatnik in New York City and they got a divorce. She's broke and has a little boy. They live above Drake's Drug because her dad owns the building and she can stay there for free."

Rita Kay knew all this because her mother and Marie Phillips had gone to Crane High together. It was hard to imagine. Rita Kay's mother looked like a larger version of Rita Kay; compact and fluffy. They even had matching shorts outfits. The divorcee looked like someone who had never lived in Crane. She was pale and quiet and she left the party early.

Margaret wondered what it would be like to live above Drake's Drug. Crane had about six blocks of stores, and some of them had apartments on the second floor. You could tell because there were curtains at the windows, or knick-knacks. But they were strange places to live, up there above the
street, above stores that turned ghostly at night. Strange people lived in those rooms. The lady with the Pekinese dogs lived above Drake's Drug, too. She had wild grey hair and violet lipstick which she applied in high points above her upper lip. And she never went anywhere without her two tiny Pekinese on rhinestone leashes. When she walked across the wooden floor of the dime-store in a cloud of perfume, her heels clacked and the tiny toenails of the dogs made a small echo. Margaret's mother said she had a checkered past and the kids shouldn't make fun of her. She called her a "poor old doll." Margaret and Rita Kay called her the Pekinese Queen.

People like the Pekinese Queen and Mr. Abercrombie, the piano teacher with one blue eye and one brown one, lived in rooms above Main Street. And now Marie Phillips, too, who used to be as much a part of everything as anyone else.

"Let's pretend we're married to beatniks," Margaret suggested the next time she and Rita Kay were crouched down in the weeds. "I'm a beatnik's wife," Rita Kay said cheerfully. Margaret gave her a disgusted look. She made her own voice dreamy, trying to conjure something up. She closed her eyes and tipped her face up to the sun. "Here we are in a beatnik house in New York City...." But it was useless. She couldn't fill it in.
Margaret's chain had come off her bike and she was wheeling it home. It had showered briefly that morning and, as she passed Felska's lawn, she noticed some toadstools on the grass. She wheeled past the lawn slowly, then wheeled back, scrutinizing the toadstools nearest the sidewalk. Toadstools were poison. They could kill you. She wheeled up to one of them and stared down at it. If you just touched one, there was no problem. You had to eat it. She set her bike down and kneeled down. If you just touched it. She touched the small tan dome; ran her finger over its velvety surface. And then -- quickly, deliberately -- she bent over and touched the tip of her tongue to the toadstool's top.

There was a moment of awful silence. Then the sounds of the world came rushing in on her -- a car, a chorus of cheeping birds -- and she knew she was lost. She broke into sobs; screams, really, and ran home heartsick. She wailed so loudly that Mrs. Schmidt, the next-door neighbor, rushed out and intercepted her on the sidewalk.

"What happened, Margaret?" she said, grabbing her elbow.

"I fell off my bike and hit my head," Margaret
shrieked, pulling away.

In her mother's arms, she confessed. "I licked a toadstool. I don't know why, but I did it. And now I'm going to die." She broke into fresh sobs.

Her mother smoothed her hair; rocked her as if she were four years old instead of more than twice that. "You aren't going to die," she announced. "You're being morbid again. You can't die from licking a toadstool. You have to eat one." She peered at Margaret's face. "More than one," she added graciously.

The toadstool incident convinced Margaret that something was running amok inside her. A part of herself had sprung up, something rampant and willful, that didn't care about keeping the rest of her safe. There had been earlier clues. Sometimes, riding beside one of her parents in the car, she would think: I could just grab the steering wheel and we'd bash right into that tree. What if I did? But the toadstool was the worst, so far. Where would it lead?

She decided she had to make some kind of vivid demonstration of her real self's good intentions -- something to show God that she didn't REALLY want to commit suicide or crash the car into a tree.

Behind the hospital, four blocks from her house, was a large, well-tended garden with flowers, footpaths and clipped shrubs. A statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary stood in a small grotto at the back. Margaret put her bottle of "Evening in Paris" perfume in her pocket and went to the
garden. There was Mary, pure and stony white, bending down blank-eyed in prayerful attendance. Margaret cradled the cool, midnight-blue container and thought how much she loved that perfume. She opened it and inhaled its essence, a mysterious blend of flowers and maple syrup. Then, very slowly, she poured the coppery liquid over the virgin's tiny rock feet. All of it. The perfume trickled over the toes and plunked softly onto the loamy dirt below.

When Margaret got home, she was spent. She poured herself a glass of lemonade and stretched out on the porch swing. Ricky had gone somewhere and Margaret's father was still at work. Her mother's opera records were playing. Her mother was in the backyard, digging up dandelions.

Margaret let the music wash over her. A man and woman sang a duet in a foreign language; then a huge, grave chorus joined them. They sounded distant and triumphant. Margaret thought of the divorcée, alone with her child in an apartment above Main Street -- of the life she had had to give up: traffic, jazz, beatniks, penthouses. The porch swing creaked. Someone down the block started a lawnmower. She wanted her "Evening in Paris" so badly she ached.

The Cloverine Salve arrived in a large cardboard box; fifty tins of it. Rita Kay had ordered it from the back of a comic book so she could get the bonus prizes. The salve
was a white cream with an extremely powerful, mentholated smell. It had more than a dozen uses.

Each tin was accompanied by an envelope addressed to the salve company. The customer was supposed to put two dollars in the envelope, fill in Rita Kay's name at the bottom, and send it off. When the company had twenty-five sales in Rita Kay's name, they would send her, first class, a silverplated ring with a stone that looked like a diamond. Experts couldn't tell the difference. Another twenty-five sales, and she could get another ring, or her choice of other gifts. Rita Kay and Margaret decided to sell all fifty tins and get a ring apiece.

The salve came with a small pamphlet filled with helpful sales tips. A detailed drawing of the huge, flashing ring was on the cover.

"Hello," they were advised to tell the customer. "My name is (fill in the blank). I am selling a product that is useful and guaranteed -- Cloverine Brand Salve. This salve has a wonderful soothing quality. It is useful for chapping, insect bites and chest colds. If you send two dollars, promptly, in this envelope, I will get this lovely piece of jewelry." (Show customer the ring.)

Margaret got out of bed early, the first sales day, because she was so excited about her prospects. She and Rita Kay alternated houses, and sold ten tins of salve, right off the bat, to their closest neighbors. They felt
light and busy and giggly.

The second day wasn't so good. They were out of their immediate neighborhood now. The people only knew them vaguely and felt free to say no. Margaret and Rita Kay took a break to go swimming. Then they started again. The day was glittering, hot, still. They only made six sales. People weren't home or were busy or said maybe tomorrow. The salve, when they opened a tin to display it, was runny and fiery-smelling.

The next day, Margaret wanted to stop selling. Every house they went to seemed the same. It was hot. She didn't want the diamond ring. But Rita Kay did, and she wouldn't stop. Finally, Margaret convinced her to stop at Drake's Drug for marshmallow Cokes. They took their salve with them. In the booth, Margaret jammed her straw into the thick marshmallow layer on top of her Coke, instead of carefully spooning the marshmallow into her mouth, and the Coke fizzed up through the hole and ran all over the table. This made them giggle helplessly.

Margaret hoped the Coke would help Rita Kay forget about the salve, but it didn't. When they were done, she wanted to go out selling. She was going to her Aunt Diane's out by the edge of town. Diane would buy some, and so would her friends. "C'mon," she urged Margaret. "What else are you going to do?"

"I don't want to sell anymore stupid salve," Margaret said coldly. "It stinks."
Rita Kay's face got pink. She stood up, hitched her share of the salve under her arm and turned to Margaret. "YOU stink," she said. She walked rapidly down the drugstore aisle, turned briefly at the door to look at Margaret, and pushed through the heavy door. Margaret watched her go.

She got up and walked aimlessly around the store, the box of salve under her arm. Stairs at the back, by the hair supplies, led to the apartments on the second floor. The divorcée lived up those stairs, and the Pekinese Queen. Margaret thought about them both, in rooms, above her head.

Maybe she would try to make one more sale, to the divorcée. She could just go up the stairs and look. She could see how it seemed up there, then she could decide what to do. She walked rapidly to the bottom of the stairs. Maybe she would just go to the top of the stairs, look around and come back down.

The stairs opened onto a long hall with a linoleum floor and a window at the far end. Its thin white curtain floated out on a faint breeze. Someone, somewhere, had a radio on.

She knocked at the first door. She heard some creaking footsteps. If it was the Pekinese Queen or an old man or something, she'd just run. She was ready to. The door opened and the divorcée stood there in funny baggy pants and a man's white shirt, sleeves rolled up. She was smoking and she looked tired. A desk on the room's window was
side was littered with piles of papers, books and an old typewriter. Her little boy didn't seem to be around, but the floor of the adjoining room was covered with toys.

They stared at each other.

"Hello," said Margaret. "My name is Margaret. I'm selling a product that is useful and guaranteed -- Cloverine Brand Salve. This salve," she indicated the box with her eyes, "has a wonderful soothing quality."

She fished around in the box for the pamphlet. It was crumpled and had something sticky on it. She held it up so the divorcee could see the huge diamond ring.

"If you buy this product, I'll get this lovely piece of jewelry."

Silence. Margaret looked awkwardly around the room to avoid the divorcee's eyes. She noticed a photograph on the coffee table. It was a picture of a man with rimless glasses, head tossed back, laughing, throwing a very small child into the air. The child's face was ecstatic. He was just beyond the man's stretched, waiting hands. Margaret felt an inexplicable pang of nostalgia.

The woman looked at her, looked at the tin of salve. Her face relaxed. She began to smile. Then she tried to hide the smile. She leaned against the doorjamb and hid her face in her arm. "Oh God," she said, and she made small sounds while her shoulders went up and down. Margaret backed slowly away. Then the woman's head came up out of her arm and she had a broad, beautiful smile on
her face. Her eyes were damp. "Come in," she said.

Margaret and the divorcee sat in the room together for awhile. They drank iced coffee, and Margaret answered some questions about school and her parents and what she liked to do. Her chair was comfortable and deep, and she leaned her head against its back. She smiled.

Then they just stopped talking. Both seemed to be taking a rest. The divorcee's venetian blinds clattered softly in the hot breeze. Outside, Don Drake swept the sidewalk with his big broom. The long, rhythmic hisses sounded, to Margaret, like the summer, like a memory. It was strange. Sometimes, for no reason at all, during the snowy winter, she would think of the lovely, jetting sound of lawn sprinklers. Or on the hottest summer day, she might remember the soft scrape of a snow shovel. It was like that.

* * *

* * *
Margaret had just gotten her first pair of eyeglasses, perfect little cat-eyes, and she was amazed at how much she could see. She lay in the scrubby grass beneath a stand of cottonwoods, took them off, and peered up through branches that were now gauzy and familiar. Then she put the glasses back on, bracing a little for the barrage of detail. Thousands of leaves leaped out, trembling and hard-edged. A few yards away, the little river turned crunchy-looking again. Everything looked slightly smaller, and intimidatingly specific. Near the riverbank, downstream, Margaret's mother and her mother's best friend, Julia Torgerson, and the priest, Father Dan, were spreading a picnic blanket. The tailgate of the station wagon was covered with thermoses and Tupperware containers and sandwiches. With her glasses on, Margaret divined every detail of the lunch. Squinting, she thought she could even pick out her own sandwich, the one without the crusts.

Julia Torgerson wore loose slacks and a billowing blouse.
the color of cotton candy, and she transferred food to the picnic blanket with oiled, backward-leaning movements. The baby was due any time; maybe today. Maybe right here at the Rising Wolf Rodeo. It wasn't impossible. When they had all climbed into the big station wagon that morning -- Margaret, her mother, Julia and Father Dan -- Julia herself had raised the possibility. "But we can always be home in just over an hour," she had said. "No decent baby would give less warning that that."

Margaret was grateful for the possibility of catastrophe that Julia Torgerson brought with her. It made up a little for her own exclusion from the men and horses. Margaret's father, Skeet Torgerson and Margaret's little brother Ricky had driven to the rodeo in the pickup, pulling the men's rope horses in a trailer that Skeet had built himself out of boards and scrap metal. They had left early, horses whinnying, Margaret sobbing in the driveway. She had begged to go with them, even flung herself briefly at her father's knees, but they had insisted there wasn't room. Now she was cultivating an attitude of dignity and containment. She imagined a large funeral, hers, with hundreds of inconsolable mourners. She threw a few sticks into the river and looked around. In Crane, the prairie town where they all lived, the mountains were visible as small blue peaks lying low along the western horizon. Here at the Rising Wolf rodeo grounds, they were near and gray; they had a hunched, big-shouldered look, like
The day was hot already, the air brittle with crickets and smelling like baked grass and cottonwood leaves. Margaret's mother, pretty and crisp-looking in blue jeans and a blue checked cowboy shirt, set up lawn chairs. Father Dan anchored the picnic cloth with rocks, then rustled around in a canvas bag and dug out a tall silver flask. He shook it festively. "Martinis!" he announced. Margaret ambled over to them.

She was curious about Father Dan, and a little uneasy. He looked formidably casual today in his tan knit slacks and sport shirt and new canvas shoes, so different from the way he looked in his vestments, up there on the altar at church. The vestments made him look muffled and heroic, like a knight in mail. And the black suit and Roman collar that he wore around town somehow managed to preserve that sense of dignity and remove. But these picnic clothes looked like someone's Grandpa visiting from Arizona. On Father Dan they looked sad; sad because they looked so eager. And they were all the wrong thing for any man to wear at a rodeo. Men at rodeos wore faded denims and boots and chaps, and they smelled like the good sweat of horses.

Father Dan looked a little like Dick Tracy, Margaret thought as she studied his face; but not so square-chinned. She thought about the times she had whispered her sins to him in the dark confessional; thought of his profile through
the dark screen; the weary angle of his head. She wondered if he recognized her voice now; if he ever tried to match the whispers that came to him through the screen with the people he talked to in real daylight life. She hoped not. Not too long ago, she had had a kind of panic attack in the confessional. It was just after she had learned about the sins of omission. There were sins of commission -- the bad things you had done. And now, it seemed, there were also sins of omission -- the good things you had NOT done. She had started thinking about her sins of omission, and the possibilities began to seem endless. When she got into the confessional and began, she couldn't seem to stop. "I could have dropped my allowance in the collection plate, and didn't," she had hissed. "I could have prayed for the pagan babies. I could have fed Fabian before he started whining." Fabian was their Scottie dog, and it was Margaret's job to feed him every day. The list grew; her voice rose. She felt a pure kind of exhaustion, as if she were running on fumes. Finally, Father Dan raised his hand slowly and made the sign of the cross in mid-air, giving her absolution in mid-sentence. "Go in peace, my child," he said. "Your sins are forgiven." Then he paused. "Relax," he said softly and slid the screen shut. And she had, actually, relaxed then. She had left the church feeling light.

Father Dan shook the silver canister and poured Margaret's mother a martini in a purple, plastic picnic glass. Julia sat back in her lawn chair, regal and full, and she had just a little bit, too. They toasted quietly, calmly. A toast to the
summer. To the baby. Father Dan looked pleased to be included.

Not too far away, in a large open space beyond the river trees, Margaret could see the silvery, split-rail arena. The rodeo hadn't started yet, but some of the contestants were galloping their horses around at random, warming them up, kicking up little twisters of dust. Then they all heard a clatter of hooves, and Skeet Torgerson and Margaret's father rode up on their tall sorrel horses. Ricky rode behind Margaret's father. He wore a huge cowboy hat and had a purple soda pop mustache on his face. They all looked young and excited. The rodeo would begin in just a few minutes, so they didn't even get off their horses to eat. Margaret's mother handed up sandwiches and beer and a glass of Kool-aid for Ricky. The men talked in eager, terse voices. Their horses stepped softly in place, as if they, too, were anxious to be off. Margaret's mother, Julia Torgerson and Father Dan sat in a semi-circle, Julia in the middle, and smiled up at the men as if they didn't quite know them but thought them remarkable. For just a moment, Margaret thought they looked the way her parents did when they stopped a conversation to listen to Margaret or Ricky say something they badly needed to say.

Skeet Torgerson was blond and freckled and had eyes like a nice dog's -- earnest and thoughtless. He was a daring person. Not only did he rope calves, but he bull-dogged --
jumped right off a galloping horse onto the neck of a
galloping bull and twisted the bull, by the horns, to the
ground. He was very good at it; Margaret had seen him do it
at other rodeos.

Margaret's father was calmer and quieter than Skeet,
and liked to take long rides on horses as much as he liked
to take them to rodeos. But when he was with Skeet, he
catched the spirit.

They ate their sandwiches quickly; washed them down
with beer. Someone was revving up the sound system at the
arena. It crackled and screeched -- 'testing,' 'testing,'
came a twangy voice -- and made a little island of tinny
sound in the midst of the calm swish of river, and the hot
breeze in the trees, and the faint, sharp sound of children
playing among the parked cars over by the arena.

Julia got up grandly from her chair, her hand tracing
automatic circles on her taut belly, and she smiled at her
eager, pale-eyed husband. She patted his horse; brushed
some dirt off Skeet's chaps; made him take a candy bar with
him for quick fuel later on. "We'll come over when things
get going," she said, and sat back down between Margaret's
mother and Father Dan, who smoked a cigarette and drank his
martini and looked like a different species of man than those
on the horses. He wished them luck, robustly, and they
clattered away, Ricky waving his arm high in the air.
Margaret ran after them on foot.
Margaret and Ricky hung on the splintery arena fence and let the sun beat down on them. Ricky already had a burned nose.

It was time for the calf-roping, and Margaret's father was up. He paced his horse back and forth, rapidly, in front of the roper's box, twirling his lariat, examining the size of the loop, shaking it out a little further. He looked around, looking for somebody, squinting. Margaret and Ricky waved frantically. He smiled and waved, but kept looking. He kicked his horse gently into the roper's box, turned around to face the arena, and nodded his head sharply. The chute flew open and the calf ran, panicked, down the arena, Margaret's father racing behind. Her father twirled his lariat three times and threw. The rope landed on the calf's head, caught on one ear. But it wasn't over the head completely. They ran for a few seconds, calf and horse, fragilely connected by the unanchored rope. Margaret's father gave it a flip, trying to get the loop over the calf's head. But it slipped off, finally, and the calf ran away, free. A long "ohhhh" from the crowd on the fence and the announcer up on the observation deck. "Tough luck for that cowboy," said the announcer bouyantly.
Margaret's father rode his horse over to the fence where Margaret and Ricky hung. His horse, the one Margaret had named Hocus Pocus, puffed sweetly, warmly on Margaret's sunburned arm. Her father wiped sweat off his forehead with a red bandana. "Where's your mother?" he asked. "She's coming," Margaret said, patting the horse's velvety nose.

As Margaret approached the picnic spot by the riverbank she heard a burst of laughter from the three adults in their lawn chairs -- full, easy laughter. When she got to them, they were talking. Their talk seemed, to Margaret, like that of old friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time.

Once, during a spring storm, Julia had come to Margaret's house. She and Margaret's mother had taken tea to the bedroom, shut the door, and talked. Margaret had leaned against the door for a few minutes, listening. The conversation had been about babies, and about something Skeet did when he was on a trip. But what Margaret remembered the most was the tone of their voices, a stripped-down quality that was sadder than this picnic talk, but somehow similar.

Now, Julia was telling about a high school friend who had married two men who died in the war, one after the other, and
how the friend had become so old. Father Dan listened intently. He asked what had happened to this friend; how this friend was shaping her life; how bitter she was. Then they talked about bitterness; what a spirit-killer it was; how it must be fought. Father Dan began to sing a song, in a lilting tenor voice, about women and roses. And they all laughed as if he had told a wonderful joke.

They looked perfectly content in their lawn chairs, the sun dappling down on them through the trees. The rodeo sounded a long way away.

Margaret pulled at her mother's hand. "Hurry," she urged. "Come to the rodeo."

She was having a peculiar feeling. Something bad was going to happen to her father if they didn't go to the arena right away. That's what she thought. His horse might fall on him. A bull might run him down. These kinds of feelings came to Margaret from time to time -- the sense that she was in the presence of avoidable disaster.

It was late afternoon now, with the heavy feel of a thunderstorm in the air. As they walked toward the rodeo, Margaret saw Father Dan amble down to the riverbank. He picked up a rock and skipped it across the water, six, seven times. The muscles in his arm showed. His back looked
lonely. It was a very competent throw for a priest, Margaret thought.

She and her mother walked through the dry bunch-grass to the arena to watch the rest of the rodeo. Margaret's father roped again, and this time he caught. It wasn't winning time, but it was pretty good, and Margaret's mother reached inside the open window of an empty car parked near the arena fence, and she tooted the horn for him.

It was a breezy, flamboyant gesture. But it seemed out of place, because the day was growing dense, electric. The white, puffy clouds had bunched up and darkened. Gusts of heavy wind skittered across the arena, back and forth. Margaret felt grit in her teeth. Ricky fell down and cut the top of his mouth with a popsicle stick, and Margaret's mother had to blot the blood with the hem of her blouse.

The bucking horses began to get restless in their holding pen. Margaret watched them trot in tight circles; trot and whicker. One kicked another. And they were getting harder to get into the bucking chute. Margaret moved to that end of the arena to get a closer look. The riders in the pen ran a young-looking, high-headed horse into the bucking chute, where it didn't have room to move. Men hanging on both sides of the chute managed to strap a bareback riggin' onto the horse -- just a strip of wide leather, really; something for the rider to hold on to.
The rider wore a broad black hat. He sat on the side of the chute and watched the other men cinch the bareback riggin' on the struggling, puffing horse; watched the horse twist and lunge. The rider's face was expressionless, but he gripped the side of the chute very tightly; Margaret could see that. He spit three times, rapidly, in the dirt below. Then he lowered himself onto the struggling animal.

Skeet Torgerson was one of the men hanging on the side of the chute. He was the one who had finally cinched the riggin' on tight. Margaret watched him. He swore and grinned. He seemed a little drunk because he looked right at her and didn't seem to see her, and he was yelling shrilly as the horse struggled. When the rider placed himself on the animal's back, the young horse twisted inside the chute and somehow fell onto its knees, pinning the rider up against the wall. Everyone yelled and scrambled, Skeet Torgerson loudest of all, and they managed to pull the horse upright. The young rider looked pale but he seemed to be okay. He pulled on the rim of his black hat, leaned back, gripped the leather hand-hold, and nodded.

The chute door flew open, but the horse didn't move. It stood stock-still. The rider spurred its shoulders, as he was expected to. The horse didn't move. Its feet were spread and planted. Its eyes were wild. It stared straight ahead and puffed while the spurs raked its shoulders. Margaret heard a murmur of thunder toward the mountains. She
heard a baby's wail somewhere among the small crowd of spectators.

Then Skeet Torgerson leaned over the side of the chute with a short board in his hand. He brought the thick, short stick down on the horse's rump, so hard that it sounded like a shot. "Move, you sonofabitch!" he cried happily. "Move!"

The horse bolted out of the chute; stopped. He bucked three or four times, stiff, croppy bucks; stopped dead. Everyone waited in silence. Then the young horse flattened its ears and took off in a flat-backed run toward the far end of the arena. The rider jumped off just before the horse crashed through the wooden rails of the arena, somersaulted, hooves flying through the air, and came to a rest, and didn't move.

Margaret looked at the shocking hole in the arena fence, at the men rushing toward the fallen horse on foot and on horseback, and she had an odd thought: We got here in time, she thought. Just barely. The disaster shifted targets.

The men at the far end of the arena were huddled around the horse. Someone broke from the circle and ran to a pickup. They ran back with something -- medicine? The circle of men closed again. Minutes passed. Then all the men stepped back and one of them stepped forward again, toward the motionless horse. The man wore a bright pink vest over his denim shirt. He was fat and short-legged. And he had a large pistol in his hand. He raised the gun, took aim
slowly, and shot the horse in the head. The men put ropes around the horse's back feet. Someone jerked off the halter and bareback riggin' and the riders dragged the young horse off in the direction of the river.

Julia's pink blouse was speckled with rain drops, but she still sat in the lawn chair. Father Dan and Margaret's mother scurried around, loading the picnic supplies back into the car. The sky was charcoal-colored now and everything smelled like rain, though it hadn't begun to fall in earnest. It was just spitting.

Margaret and Ricky wandered away from the picnic spot, passing the time while the adults got organized, and they came upon the dead horse. Blood pooled from its nose in a large, perfect circle. Its eyes were open. Margaret watched a large raindrop fall on the horse's neck and slide down, onto the ground. She watched a fly land on the tip of its ear, and stay there.

Soon, Margaret's mother came upon her and Ricky and ordered them back to the car. Her voice was very quiet, gentle almost, and she had a set look on her face. Margaret thought the look was because of the dead horse. But when they got back to the car, she saw that something else was
happening. Julia looked at them, smiling, and then an expectant look came over her face, as if she were trying very hard to hear something. Then her eyes shut and her face clenched up tight. Then she was smiling and relaxed again. Margaret knew the baby was coming.

Margaret's mother ran to the arena to get the men. Julia sat in the lawn chair and smiled. "Don't worry, kids," she said to Margaret and Ricky. "This baby is just beginning to get a little restless. He won't be here for quite a while." Father Dan had finished loading the car. He put his windbreaker around Julia's shoulders and she stood up so he could load the lawn chair, too. The wind had come up strongly.

Margaret's parents showed up, grim-faced. "The pickup has two flat tires," said Margaret's mother tonelessly. "Glass or something. Maybe some kids. Who knows? We have to pull the horse trailer with the station wagon."

Everyone climbed into the huge blue station wagon, and Margaret's father drove them through the bumpy grass to the horse trailer. Skeet had moved the disabled pickup out of the way. The two rope horses were tied to the horse trailer. The rain was coming harder, and the horses leaned against each other, heads turned from it.

Sheet lightning lit the sky, and Margaret began counting. One-one thousand; two-one thousand. Three. And then a deafening clap of thunder, so loud that she and Ricky
shrieked and the horses jumped back from the trailer. Skeet's horse pulled back so sharply that the reins broke and the horse ran off toward the cottonwoods by the river. Skeet ran after it.

Julia and Father Dan and Margaret were in the back seat of the car. Ricky was huddled in the luggage space at the far back. Margaret's parents were standing outside in the rain. Julia watched her husband run through the storm after the horse. Her face clenched again, and, this time, when it relaxed, two long tears tricked down her cheeks.

Father Dan began to tell her a story about his mother and her cronies; how they read tea leaves, every last one of them, and based their decisions -- large and small -- upon what they saw in the bottom of their teacups. Then he told a funny story about the tea leaves, and a neighborhood kid who didn't believe in their forecasting power, and how the ladies gave him his comeuppance in some elaborate way that Margaret couldn't quite follow -- or didn't, because she was also trying to see what was happening outside in the rain.

Julia listened to Father Dan and encouraged him. "Uh huh?" she said eagerly. "And then?"

There was a clanking in the horse trailer. Margaret's father had loaded his horse. But Skeet still wasn't back with the other. Margaret could hear her mother's voice out in the storm, some distance from the car. "Let it go," she screamed. "Come back later."
But then Skeet came out of the trees with the horse, a broad smile on his face. The rain had plastered his hair flat on his forehead. He loaded the horse, checked the trailer hitch, and the three of them -- Margaret's parents and Skeet -- got into the front seat of the car, smelling like horses and rain.

Skeet turned around and put his leather-gloved hand on Julia's knee. "How are you doing, sport?" he asked. His face was flushed. He looked happily tired. "Okay," she said quietly, and put her hand briefly on his sleeve. Then she asked Father Dan a question about the tea leaves and he started talking again. They drove slowly down the rutted, slick little road that led to the highway. The trip seemed to take a long time. Ricky fell asleep. Margaret listened to the low voices of Julia and Father Dan, and of Skeet and her father. Margaret's mother didn't say anything. Once in awhile, she turned around and touched Julia lightly. Once in awhile, Skeet turned, too, and asked how she was. Father Dan kept talking.

Three hours after they got home, Margaret's mother answered a phone call from Skeet. He was the father of a new baby boy.
Two weeks later, Margaret and Ricky and their parents met the Torgersons at the church to baptize the new baby. Father Dan, to Margaret's great relief, was dressed in his white linen cassock, and he was polite and friendly and remote.

Skeet looked strange in his Sunday suit. Without his cowboy hat, he looked weaker and smaller. Julia's cheeks were pink and she wore a slim grey suit. She leaned on Skeet, cradling the little bundle, and gave Margaret a friendly wink. Everything was as it should be, Margaret thought. Everything was calm. They gathered in an alcove at the back of the empty, incense-smelling church. It was a cool, marble room just for baptising.

Father Dan began the prayers, and Julia transferred the bundle to Skeet, who grinned and held it expertly.

At this point, Margaret felt a completely unexpected wave of sick foreboding. It rippled through her stomach and fanned out through the tips of her fingers. She thought of the dead horse at the Rising Wolf Rodeo. Thought of it crashing through the fence. Thought of the fly on its ear.

She looked at Father Dan, at Skeet, at the rest of them, and felt she could see them all in too much detail. She took off her glasses and cleaned them with the hem of her skirt, enjoying her myopic fuzziness for a few moments; the soft blurring. Then she put them back on and found that she felt better. Maybe Father Dan made her think of the horse.
Maybe she should have eaten breakfast.

Father Dan continued to pray. He raised his head and looked around at the little group, a faint, priestly smile on his face. He held a small pitcher of holy water aloft. Then the baby's fuzzy head was tipped back over something that looked like a giant birdbath, and Father Dan called him, in Latin, from limbo into the world.

* * *
Kristen Amdahl has just spent two hours teaching English to a group of Japanese businessmen who devise marketing strategies for women's make-up. It is April and almost dusk, a salmon-colored Tokyo evening smelling lightly of diesel. She rushes out broad glass doors toward a staircase, four buildings distant, that plunges into a white subway tunnel. She might be late.

With no warning, two children in woolly black school uniforms speed toward her on small pastel bicycles. Their eyes fix on her face. Then they part and sweep silently past her elbows, wobbling a little, their sweet camellia faces ringed with wind-spiked hair.

She stands for a moment and closes her eyes, queasy with self-hate. It comes over her unexpectedly like this, the leaden conviction -- the discovery -- that she is ludicrous to them, towering and mottled, a creature with arms too long and hair the color of demons.

He left her five months ago, and since then she has
felt herself coarsen and grow until, at these moments, she is a 32-year-old giantess from a land of blue wind and caves. Gaijin. Outside person. She with the leg hair and meat-eater breath; the hammy, freckled hands; the braided ginger-colored hair with its hidden strands of white; the thighs and breasts so naive and excessive; the sheen of oil across her broad, flushed forehead; the fine capillaries breaking so silently in the curves of her powerful nose.

A neon sign, three stories tall, flickers to life in the corner of her vision -- Sanyo...Sanyo...Sanyo. Heart thudding, she runs for the train.

A teenaged girl sits next to Kristen on the subway. She wears a shapeless skirt and a tailored blouse, cuffs buttoned. Her pale, almost boneless hands lie folded in her lap. Her feet, in white cotton anklets, point inward beside a canvas bookbag that's decorated with a long row of English words: Happy Surfer Chick. Heart is Express.

Across the aisle, a businessman with tassled loafers and a huge Seiko watch on his slim wrist is buried up to his jack-knifed eyebrows in a newspaper. Above him is a large poster advertising a camera. The design is very sleek, very avant garde. The camera is in the foreground, utilitarian and black, its large glossy lens pointed directly at Kristen's face. A man with high cheekbones looms over the camera in a coital crouch, also facing her.
His bent arms are golden and muscled; his mouth elegant and unsmiling. And his eyes are the palest acid green, a shocking mannequin green. He surveys her with pinprick pupils. He loathes her.

Sete was where Kristen first discovered the power of accident. Six years ago, she worked for a year in that tourist town on the French Riviera, a benign, silver place that seemed to breathe the sound of lapping water.

A long promenade divided the waterfront and the outdoor cafes. Behind the cafes ran the back streets that became silent and shuttered during the summer afternoons when the heat buzzed and the breeze died. Hills rose in the older parts of town and Kristen lived up one of them in a three-hundred-year-old house that smelled of ancient urine and mildew. She had a room; a young trust-fund couple from Pittsburgh, Franklin and Doll, had the rest. Franklin and Doll made necklaces and bracelets from Moroccan beads and sold them on the promenade during the long copper evenings. Kristen can't remember their faces but she can recall, exactly, the way her room smelled like damp rocks, the way the sun blasted the water late in the afternoon.

In the mornings, she worked in a bookstore that sold used English paperbacks. It was off the waterfront, but not far from it, and was owned by a fifty-year-old hippie named
Blue who wore an emerald ear stud and had once studied
hotel management in Phoenix.

The bookstore had a film of dust and a cat named
Minneau. Kristen sat on a high stool, waiting for customers,
drinking anisette-flavored coffee. She remembers all those
things. But what she remembers the most -- what she broods
over, dissects, fails still to understand -- is the
emergence in Sète of something in her that made men believe
they were in love with her.

There were many. They visited the bookstore, bought
her wine in the cafe, took her for drives, invited her to
t heir boats, to their beds. They left her notes in the
rusty mailbox of her house. You will please have coffee
with me this evening at the Trocadero. Kristen you have a
golden aura.

She was not beautiful, she knew that. She had a
well-proportioned, compact, healthy American body. But
her mouth was too thin, her nose too prominent.

She thinks her hair had something to do with it. In
Sète, it bleached white in the sun during her daily after­
noons at the beach. She wore it very long and very straight,
never pulled back or braided. For the first time in her
life, it became a silver sheet that shadowed her face.
And as its length and whiteness increased, so, it seemed,
did her hold on people around her. She was amazed. Nothing
in her life had prepared her for this.
One day, she pinned her hair up on her head and covered it completely with a full, dark scarf. She put on her sunglasses and walked along the waterfront. It was as if she had become invisible. A group of men she knew -- one had slept with her -- walked past her on the other side of the street and didn't give her a glance. The fruit dealer who had always fawned was distant and vague. She had subtracted one part of herself, an accidental part, and she immediately inhabited a different realm. She began to feel herself walking differently, cramped, somehow, and apologetic.

She rushed home and took a shower, washed her hair and dried it in the sun. Then she poured herself a small glass of wine and slowly put on the same clothes she had worn earlier, minus only the scarf. Her choker of tiny turquoise chips, her gauzy peasant blouse, her faded jeans and sandals. And she went back.

And now it was her home again. The sun slanted golden across the water. People waved, invited her to their tables; chairs were scraped aside to make room; new eyes followed her. Her hair lifted gently in the breeze like a flag.

Soon afterward, she had a nightmare. She was standing under her rusty shower, washing her hair. She took a long time because, for once, there was warm water and a seemingly endless supply of it. She washed her hair and her body, dried herself and walked to her bedroom, where she glanced into the mirror.
Her hair had turned mouse brown and jagged. Large clumps of it were missing. She ran, sick, into the shower room and saw that the drain was furred and clogged with hair -- hair that had once been three feet of cornsilk and now was just matted, scummy and dead.

Her hair was a clue to her power. And there was something else. For a long time she thought of it as a quality of containment that she possessed most strongly at that time in her life. But now she knows that she was simply young and very unsure, and that she had found in Sète that those qualities made her potent. Reserve, mystery, a refusal to explain herself -- they allowed men to pour their fantasies into her and, for that, they loved her.

She cultivated minor eccentricities -- a perfect peacock feather attached to her cigarette case, a small notebook in which she penciled abstract designs, a habit of ordering an expensive, somewhat obscure, brand of gin. And she didn't talk very much. At parties, men tried to draw her out. If they succeeded, they had scored a small triumph and were grateful.

She gave herself to whimsy. She might say something like this to a man she wanted to know: "Are you an only child?"

"No," he would reply with a confused smile.

"Oh," she would say faintly. "That's too bad."

"Why?"
A secret shrug. A smile. Then she would move to another part of the gathering. He would follow her with his eyes; contrive to talk to her again. It always happened that way. Everyone was young.

She met Daniel eleven months after she arrived in Sète. First, she saw him at the cafe; overheard him talking to a plump and creamy woman with a South African accent. Kristen could tell they had just met. She gleaned from their conversation that Daniel was thirty and recently divorced; that he had left his job at a research institute in Berkeley to travel the world on his savings; that he studied the martial arts.

He was tall and long-fingered, with reddish-blonde coloring that took the sun badly. His eyes were a very light blue. He wore bleached cotton pants and a kind of smock shirt. He had a tensile, arrogant body. Twice, he looked over at Kristen.

The next morning, he came into the bookstore, looking for maps that would show back roads in the area. The store didn't sell maps, but she had one of her own. She spread it across the old wooden counter and they leaned over it, their heads almost touching. She could smell his skin. She traced the thin blue road on the map with her finger, and his finger followed. She looked up and he was looking at her. She felt her face turn warm.
"Here," she said suddenly, standing upright and nudging the map toward him. "Take it. You can have it." She smiled.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

They stood there for a few seconds looking at each other, their fingertips poised on the map, and she felt the muscles just below her ribs give a small, fluttery lunge.

Now, more than five years later, she is rushing to meet Daniel at a restaurant that specializes in small speared chunks of chicken. Daniel wears a charcoal-colored suit these days. He is in love with a twenty-one-year-old Japanese woman. They plan to marry and move to California within the month. Kristen has never met her. She seems able to imagine her only as a perfect white oval, slightly luminous; a pearly amulet small enough to slip into a pocket.

This meeting is Daniel's idea. He says he wants to nail down a few things. They will talk about the apartment lease, and about a package he will carry to Kristen's niece in California. They will talk, Kristen supposes, about his new job at a Japanese bank in San Francisco, and what it could be like to live in the United States again after so long a time away. Daniel will act as though they long ago
reached some kind of understanding. At some point, he will mention the name of his soon-to-be wife, trying to slide over it matter-of-factly, neutrally, and it will remain between them on the table like a small, flashing sign.

Kristen stands at an intersection, flanked by two women in their twenties who come to her chin. She remembers a photo she once saw in a news magazine of a peculiarly oversized Appalachian girl, all jutting elbows and massive unlaced oxfords, listening blankly to a trim social worker whose eyes were level with the hollow of the girl's throat.

These strange and detailed snatches of memory come to Kristen unbidden. They race into her mind like fire engines onto a golf course. It's difficult to tell what, exactly, summons them; the connection is made outside her ken.

Now, for instance, a small panel truck zips past. It is emblazoned with a picture of a steaming cup of coffee. The coffee company's slogan, in English, marches below the cup: "The Persistent Pursuit of Dainty." Kristen reads this and recalls a row of train seats, each headrest equipped with an immaculate white square of cloth.

She and Daniel were on that train. It was their first weekend in Japan, two years ago, and they were going to the countryside for the day. They had lined up tutoring jobs, rented an apartment, and unpacked their boxes and duffel bags. Then they took the train to the country because they were vaguely uneasy.
They had been traveling since they met, stopping for several months at a time, never longer, in Greece, along the African coasts, in Southeast Asia and the islands of the South China Sea. They had taught English; peddled patched American Levis a friend sent them in cartons; bought moonstones cheap in Sri Lanka, and sold them expensive in South Africa. They got by.

And, always, they moved on. They had learned early that their best moments came when they were among strangers and in motion. Then, they had themselves. Daniel the explorer, the adventurer; Kristen the observer, the interpretor of the nuance. They fed the world to each other.

But from the beginning, Tokyo felt permanent. Neither could have said why. To keep traveling in some small way, they took the train to the country.

They got off two hours from Tokyo and walked a mile to a small village they had heard was famous for its handmade paper. They had misunderstood the ticket agent, and they had the wrong place. But the tiny town was lovely anyway, and they walked through it slowly.

Tidy, blue-roofed houses flanked a small creek. A child with pink shoes stared at them and backed shyly into a doorway. Kristen and Daniel smiled at her, encouraging and confident. A thin, leather-skinned man walked past them with a pile of spindly poles on his shoulder, and bowed severely.
At one end of the village, through a wooden archway painted deep red, was a small graveyard. Its narrow, etched stones were scattered among soft shrubbery. Sunlight the color of old brass fell through a canopy of trees onto the markers for the dead, onto a stone well with a metal dipper on the ledge.

Kristen leaned against the well and closed her eyes while Daniel explored a small footpath at the far end of the graveyard. She heard nothing at all but the faint glittering sound of invisible wind chimes and the muffled crunch of Daniel's footsteps.

They didn't start walking back to the train station until the sun was dropping and the air had begun to chill. The narrow road was empty, so they stopped to do Tai Chi, the slow-motion Chinese martial art they'd made their daily stretching ritual.

For twenty minutes, they silently went through the long, dreamlike movements, so slow they looked as if they were done under water. They smiled at each other. Kristen's muscles lengthened and warmed. The place, the day, seemed to her perfect, like the lunchboxes they had bought on the train -- brightly wrapped containers made of the thinnest wood, filled with elegant, tidy arrangements of pale smoked fish, papery seaweed, pink flowers of gingered cabbage.

Her shadow reached across the road; grew and melted toward the horizon. It was her, transfigured. Her flesh
was simply the pivot of this incredible being that stretched out possessively across a world where everything fit.

It wasn't that she woke up one morning and everything had turned sour and desperate. Rather, she thinks, it was a series of slips -- a succession of small, unexpected failures that, at some point, began to converge.

Each time, her first feeling was that she had grown a size; or that everything around her had taken a sharp breath and held it.

It first happened the night she wore the kimono. She had found it at a flea market and bought it on impulse. The silvery green color reminded her of the kimono worn by a courtesan in a Utamaro woodcut she and Daniel had admired.

Daniel had liked the courtesan so much that he bought a cheap copy of the print and hung it in their apartment. They had also acquired small ceramic chopstick holders, a futon, tatami mats and rice-paper sliding doors. Kristen took a class in the art of flower arrangement, and Daniel studied the Japanese language with near fury. He had begun, sometimes, to bow very slightly when he greeted her.

The night she wore the kimono, Kristen and Daniel were meeting a Japanese couple in a restaurant for dinner. They
had been in Tokyo almost a year and this was the first time they had been invited out.

Kristen felt happy as she got ready. She bathed and put on a pair of slim grey slacks, a grey turtleneck, and the silvery kimono which reached just to her calves. She flicked a brush through the pale, Sète-colored tip of her darker braid.

"You're wearing that?" Daniel protested as she came out of the bathroom.

"I like it. I'm feeling adventurous, and it's beautiful," she said, smiling.

"You can't wear a kimono," he said. "They're for prescribed formal occasions. They'll think you're ridiculous."

"No, Daniel, it won't matter," she assured him. 
"Look. To them, I'm tall and strange and heedless, anyway. I'm ignorant. They know that."

When she said it, he looked at her with curiosity, as if he were noticing something for the first time.

As they walked into the night, her kimono sleeves slapping lightly, he was silent. She felt luminous and ponderous, like a large moony child that he had to take for a walk. Fear drizzled down her spine. Throughout the evening she felt cramped. Her movements were too broad for the low table. One edge of a silken sleeve brushed through the soy sauce. As they left the restaurant, her hem caught briefly in the sliding door.
It also happened the day they saw the street musician. She and Daniel had agreed to meet for sushi at a department store midway between their jobs. Kristen was ten minutes late. When she arrived, Daniel was standing on the sidewalk, watching a long-haired Westerner play the marimba for donations, which he collected in a quart-sized yogurt container at his feet.

The musician, who thanked the small group of clapping onlookers in American English, stood before the store's huge display window. It contained an elaborate European medieval wedding scene, complete with a life-sized white horse. The mannequins had the shocking, attention-grabbing features that characterized the most aggressive advertising. They did not look Japanese. They were fierce, blank Caucasian aliens -- their hair in shades of mauve and orange; the irises of their lidded eyes as light as ice.

The musician played a tentative version of "Michelle." There were lines beside his mouth and his eyes were flat and unsmiling. His bare feet looked worn and ridiculous. In some vague way, he looked like Daniel had looked when they were traveling; tall and weathered. But, in front of the gleaming department store, surrounded by a half dozen clear-eyed, chattering teenagers, the musician seemed weary and date
Kristen stood apart from the group. Daniel still hadn't seen her. She watched him study the marimba player, then study the teenagers. Two of the girls wore brightly colored sweatshirts with English slogans on them that very nearly made sense. They read, to Kristen, like urgent coded telegrams. Hello, Have a Good Weather. Charm Sister. My Favorite Family Car.

Daniel moved a few steps closer to the girls and smiled at them. Kristen had the odd sense that he understood those garbled messages. That something was advancing without her.

Now she walks rapidly, heels clacking, down a crowded, neon-rimmed sidewalk. Two blocks away, an arm and a leg in a charcoal-colored suit disappear into the door of the restaurant where she and Daniel are to meet. She doesn't see a face, but knows who it is. There is something about the forward tilt of the body, the lankiness and decision. She did not know him for so long, not to know him from afar.

She calls to him. Several passers-by look at her shyly, embarrassed for her. She calls once again and breaks into a slow trot. She passes a bent, silver-haired woman and calls sharply again. Her purse flicks out from her body and smacks the old woman on the elbow, but there isn't time
for apologies. She swerves to avoid a life-sized cardboard Colonel Sanders on the edge of the sidewalk. He doesn't know where he is, but his eyes are happy. He wants her happiness.

Now she is in a full, long-legged stride, covering the ground powerfully. A passing child points at her and looks anxiously at his mother for confirmation. Kristen strides on. Her blood is pumping. Heart is Express. Heart is Express.

She enters the restaurant breathing hard. It is crowded, but she spots Daniel at a low table in the corner, sitting tailor-style on a mat. He looks folded, neat and pale. She yearns suddenly for sun on water; for Daniel in a sun-smelling t-shirt.

She stands over him, looming, hoping he will stand. He doesn't, but smiles. She tucks her legs under her. Her breathing seems loud. She is sweating lightly. While she struggles briefly with her coat, she fixes her eyes on Daniel's right hand, rimmed with a white cuff, resting casually on his leg. She imagines a tiny woman's hand cupped inside it.

"Well, here I am," she says. Her voice thunders in her ears.

"Yes," Daniel smiles carefully. He has a small new mustache.
"How long has it been?" she says, trying for lightness.

"What do you mean?" he answers, pouring a slow stream of tea into a cup as dainty as a quail's egg.

***
She is alone in a Mexican-Chinese restaurant in a small Midwest city, sipping a Dos Equis, listening to a pock-marked guitarist play "Love is Blue" with a flamenco backbeat. Outside, the season's last fat snowflakes blunder into each other and disappear on wet concrete.

She fights off an impulse to lean casually toward the next table and talk to a fresh-faced couple stirring enormous margaritas. They look happy and relaxed and immune from doubt. "I am like you," she wants to assure them. "I usually go to restaurants with my husband. We are an attractive couple with two delightful children. I jog."

The guitarist, who wears a white bell-bottomed suit and patent leather shoes, finishes his number and throws her a practiced grin. She turns her eyes quickly to the waitress and orders another beer. It is May 1 and she is afraid she is going to die.

The restaurant is on the first floor of a low brick hotel, just a block from a towering medical complex that
specializes in the difficult, the sophisticated, the extreme. It is the reason she is here; the reason she is staying alone in this hotel, eating alone in its peculiar little restaurant while a May Day storm blurs the sky.

Her family doctor in Cincinnati has sent her for a complete work-up. What price peace of mind? His eyes, when he says it, slide off her face.

She does, in fact, have a husband and two lovely children. They all took her to the airport, early this morning, to send her off. The children were in frantic good spirits; her husband steadfastly reviewed the pros and cons of buying a small sailboat. Everyone talked louder than usual. She tried to join in, but found her attention fixing on the gap in her son's front teeth, the sleepy tangle of her daughter's pale hair, the tendons of her husband's wrist.

At the airport, the children and their father held hands as they waved her down the carpeted ramp to the plane. For just an instant, they looked like people she had never met but thought she would like. They looked jolly and frozen, like tourists glimpsed from a speeding bus.

At the clinic's admission desk, a receptionist handed her a small tan folder and warned her not to part with it. The folder contained a sheaf of appointment slips, each with
a computer-assigned time and location. She would go to X-ray at eleven a.m., Neurology at one-fifteen, Physical Medicine at two-thirty. Her records would be shuttled from one department to another. It was all arranged.

She took the elevator fourteen floors up and walked down a long, orange-carpeted hall to the large waiting area in X-ray. The chairs were arranged in long rows, like seats in a movie theater or a jumbo jet, all of them facing a gleaming U-shaped counter. Nurses stood on either side of the counter, calling out clusters of names in high, flat voices. "Mrs. Jorgenson? Mr. Sheehy? Mr. Roberts? Miss Helgeson?" The women who drifted forward were directed down one long hall, the men down another.

She watched a small woman with hands like crab claws and polished red fingernails zoom to the front of the room in something that looked like a miniature golf cart; watched her disappear down the long hall, her receding back as small as a child's. Polished red fingernails. She closed her eyes.

Muzak floated from invisible speakers. She pretended she was on a large airplane. She was going to Greece, say, with her husband. They were at 30,000 feet and cruising. It was sunset, and everything -- the sky, the billowing clouds below, her husband's face, even the ice cubes in her drink -- was bathed in a rosy glow. They were on their second gin-and-tonics. The plane hummed solidly and light glinted off the wings. Her earphones poured Vivaldi
into her head.

Some trick, she thought. A handsome young man seals three hundred willing people into a metal cylinder, climbs five miles into the sky, and plunks them down ten hours later near the ruins of Athens. And most passengers have no idea where they really are. No clue. The plane is disguised as a small movie theatre; the temperature is constant. The earphones offer comedy, country, classics.

What if, instead, they played the sound of the wind on the huge jet's wings, or the heart thump -- just the heart thump -- of the pilot? Could anyone bear it?

The guitar player is having trouble with "Michelle," a request from the couple with the margaritas. His brow is furrowed; he hunches over his guitar. He glances up, smiles and shrugs, then finishes with a ferocious, drawn-out chord. His face has a light sheen of sweat.

She studies his flawed skin, the tired lines along his mouth. She imagines him navigating his way, weary and strangely serene, through a life of predictable crises: the kid in trouble, the unpaid rent, the unfaithful wife, the broken amplifier. The notion is inexplicably appealing.

The guitarist lights a cigarette and begins something new -- a sad and lacy Spanish tune, a wordless afterthought.
Somewhere else, some other time, it would sound contrived and sentimental. But now, to her surprise, her eyes fill, and her throat constricts with yearning for something ordinary she can't begin to name.

A couple sat next to her in Neurology, filling out a long form. Both were silver-haired and tweedy. The man had the furious, amazed look of a child whose best friends have tied him to a tree and gone home to watch television. He had once been handsome, but his skin now had the color of old wax and one side of his mouth did not move. The woman read to him from the clinic's checklist. Do you have difficulty urinating? Do you frequently have trouble sleeping? Have you ever been treated for depression? Have you ever been paralyzed?

"I wasn't paralyzed," the man was insisting in a low voice. "You couldn't really say I was paralyzed. I was... weak."

Across the room, a tall man with fierce white eyebrows and the clotted muscles of an old farmer talked much too loudly. He was angry because a man in a red windbreaker had told him a chair was already taken. "Jesus Christ," he yelled as he heaved himself into another chair. Heads swung toward him. Magazines rustled. "Jesus Christ," he muttered.
The old man was like a drunk in the library. He was worse. There was a tacit agreement in the room to be decorous, to be unruffled, to be patient troopers. A kind of aggressive good will, a daunting politeness. Some kind of bargain had been struck, and this old man was breaking it.

The man in the red windbreaker got up and headed for the men's room.

"Look at that," the old man boomed, flinging an arm in his direction. "Says it's his seat and doesn't even sit on it."

The man in the windbreaker turned, infinitely polite. "Please," he said.

"I got nothin' to do with you!" the old man hissed.

The cheerful young doctor snapped her bone scan onto the viewing screen. He wore rimless glasses and his face was smooth as an egg.

He peered at the shadowy film -- intent, divining. She guessed he was not yet thirty. She leaned toward him and peered, too. He smelled like a laundered sheet.

The doctor liked his business. He pointed to "the spot we will have to take a closer look at," saying it with the exuberant nonchalance of an astronaut reporting to Mission Control.
She stared hard at the supine skeleton, the stranger who would outlast all the rest of her. She searched for something distinctively hers. A high forehead. Her forehead. The shape, the structure of her face. But she found nothing more than an anonymous Halloween spook.

She studies her dinner with affection. An eggroll and a chicken enchilada. She knows she cannot eat, and orders another beer. She wants to stay in this cornball restaurant forever. They do everything wrong. They bring her the wrong kind of enchilada, then apologize profusely and rush her a free beer. The hot sauce is horribly riddled with coriander; the music is too loud. But she has come to feel included in the good-natured chaos, and eager for each new glitch. Alcohol is calming the whirl of fear in her sternum.

She walks through the bar on her way to the bathroom. The guitarist is taking a break. He leans on the bar with two other men. When she walks past, they grin and follow her with their eyes. The guitarist proposes something in Spanish that she can only guess at, and she smiles faintly in his direction.

The bathroom light is peculiar. It clicks on when the door is locked, like the light in an airplane lavatory. It is an aggressive neon that sucks the color from her mirrored face and puts the sound of a very thin wind in her
ears. No one else is in the room.

She feels her heart pound. Don't stop, she orders. She examines her fingernails, her hands. She wraps her arms around herself. Don't stop. She reaches out slowly to unlock the door, standing in the dark until she begins to hear the faint clatter of dishes, the whir of the bar blender. She will very casually open the door and the restaurant will be there for her.

She is back at her table. The guitarist is returning to the tiny stage to play his last set. He will pass close to her table. Somewhere, a glass breaks. She will touch his sleeve. She has a request.

* * *
RIVERBEDS

Maren and Dennis are on this nowhere road, this broken line on the map, because it's the kind of detour they often take on long trips. They choose back highways and gravel roads, especially here, out West, where the out-of-the-way spots look so peculiarly innocent and used up.

Maren thought of the grim young mother and child she saw that morning in front of the motel; the way they had walked, slanted, along the empty sidewalk into the smacking wind; the metallic look of the spare buildings in the early sun. It was the kind of bleak and glowing scene that Dennis photographed best. Daylight life on its eerie margins. But he hadn't taken his camera gear out of the trunk since they left Milwaukee, and he didn't then. Maren had learned, during these past few months, not to urge.

Now it's afternoon, gritty and hot, and they are traveling across empty prairie, just south of the Missouri River. Gravel crackles under the wheels. They haven't spoken more than a few words for the past hour. Maren's head is against the passenger seat, her eyes are closed. She is trying to remember when she and Dennis began this
incremental, killing carefulness.

"I've been thinking," Dennis says. Maren looks at him, ready. "This might be a stupid idea," Dennis says. "But do you think if we took Cynthia to a trainer a few times, she'd stop digging all those holes?"

Maren feels her face tighten. "Jesus, Dennis. I don't know." Her voice is too shrill. "Why do you think I would know? TRY it if you want to. Don't ask me. Just do it if you want to. She's your dog."

"I was just wondering what you thought," he said quietly.

She closes her eyes and tears squeeze through the lids. She can feel him looking at her. He pats her bare knee. "What's wrong," he says.

"I don't know. We're supposed to be on vacation, and the last thing on earth that I want to do is make decisions about a golden retriever that's nine hundred miles away."

"I didn't ask you to make any decisions," he says.

They drive on across the empty country until they find an abandoned homestead on the banks of the Missouri, an empty silvery shell of a house with an apple tree on its south side. They spread out their large Hudson Bay blanket and arrange on it their lunch of beer, bread and cheese. This side of the house is protected from the wind.
After lunch, Maren stretches out on the blanket, her arms behind her head. Dennis leafs through a photography magazine.

"You know," Maren says. "I bet the art department adds a lecturer's position this fall. They'll need it if they don't want to be turning students away." In a round of budget cuts at the university last year, Dennis lost his job as a photography instructor. Maren's department, classics, was spared.

"I bet they don't," Dennis says mildly, looking at an ad for telephoto lenses.

Maren stretches out. She rubs her foot lightly on the calf of his sun-warmed jeans. "Their loss," she says, a little too spunkily. Dennis looks up and smiles, then looks back down at his magazine.

Maren reaches for her sunglasses, puts them on, and lets the sun blaze down on her face. I'll get wrinkles, she thinks. She remembers a line from an article she read somewhere; she can't remember where: "After thirty-five," the doctor said, "the body takes a dramatic turn deathward. Physiologically speaking."

She hears the wind but doesn't feel it in their sheltered spot. She remembers going to the beach with Dennis, seven years ago, shortly after they met; a day of high thin sun and a stiff breeze. They wrapped themselves in an Army blanket and lay behind a fat log on its windless side.
When someone walked by, they pretended they were sleeping.

Maren hears the leaves of Dennis's magazine. She withdraws her foot from his leg and gets up. Dennis stretches out on the blanket. Maren says she is going exploring, and heads toward the river bank. When she returns, a half hour later, Dennis is dozing.

The gravel has turned to old pavement and the afternoon has grown so hot that a small, watery mirage has appeared on the road ahead of them. The car is burning oil; the exhaust plumes out, white, behind them. The dashboard is covered with a film of pale dust. They come to an intersection. A wooden sign tells them to go straight ahead thirty-one miles and they will reach U.S. 2, or turn left on gravel again and go one mile to Toledo. "I'm parched," Dennis says, and he turns toward Toledo.

Toledo is two buildings, the shell of a small post office and the Toledo Bar. The bar has a sagging roof and a new coat of yellow paint. In front of it is a gas pump and a water trough, half full of rust-colored water. A sorrel horse is picketed to the pump.

The bar is a cool relief from the wind and light. Half a dozen people listen to the jukebox thump out Merle Haggard. Maren and Dennis slide onto bar stools.
The bartender, a worn-looking woman, not old, wears large silver and turquoise rings on every digit except her thumbs. She moves with a quick, distant efficiency, smoking an Old Gold as if it were fuel. A tall man lounges against the wall behind the bar near the rack of potato chips, sipping a six-ounce Miller. He has the bad color, the wetly combed hair of a drinker.

"Howdy folks," he says, saluting them with the tiny beer.

"Hi," they reply in perfect unison. Maren imagines how she and Dennis must look to these people -- she with her cropped dark hair, her lavender L.L. Bean t-shirt and shorts; Dennis with his trimmed blond beard and wire-rims, his too-new jeans and boating shoes.

They order beers. The jukebox finished the song. Wind clatters down the flue of the hamburger grill. The man by the potato chips sips his beer meditatively. The bartender takes a greedy drag on her cigarette and begins to fill two plastic ketchup bottles from a large tin can with a spigot on the side.

Two seats from Maren, a man sits alone. She glances at him and finds that he is looking at her gently. He has a hard, good-looking face with deep lines by his mouth; gravelly skin; the self-contained look of someone who has been alone for a long time; on the road, maybe, or even in prison. She looks away, then back at him. He nods. Just that.
"When's the last time you folks got any rain here?"
Dennis puts the question in a hearty voice to the man near
the potato chips.

"Haven't had a drop of anything since April," the man
answers. "And then it just sorta spit on the dust. Water
table's gone. You could dig to China and not find nothing
but topsoil. Three years of this. Sucked 'er dry."

No water table. Maren imagines a water table as a
wide underground river, soft and glassy, flowing through
the earth's dim interior. Something that is always supposed
to be there. Its disappearance, its withdrawal from a bed
of slowly parching clay, makes her strangely nervous.

She examines a large oil painting behind the bar; a
grey horse posed on a slash of green meadow. The body is
muscular and sleek, but the legs are far, far too short.
They make the horse a monster, like a dog she saw once that
had a bulldog's body and a dachshund's tiny legs. It
looks, this sad painting, as if one painter did the legs,
and another, everything else. The horse would mince, topple,
flail.

Next to the horse is a blurry photo of a snarling
coyote. "Is that coyote from around here?" Maren asks,
realizing as she says it how foolish she sounds.

"Not far," says the woman with the turquoise rings.
"My son trapped it. He took the picture right before he
shot it. Stood on the hood of his pickup and took that
picture." Her voice is brusque with pride. "He don't look
too happy, I'd say."

There is a sound outside of crunching gravel -- faint at first, then louder. A large car or truck. It halts with a faint screech and a door slams. The bar door opens and a long bar of light stretches across the floor. Behind it, briefly, Maren sees a large salmon-colored Cadillac -- rusted and dirty and slumped low to the ground.

A spindly-legged man enters the room and removes a huge hat. "Hey, Roy. Hey, Darlene," he says to the man and woman behind the bar. His heels thump loudly as he crosses the wooden floor.

"Lonnie," says Roy. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, Schmidt gave me the weekend off and I'm heading to Chinook," Lonnie says rapidly. "Two girls are waiting for me there, you know. Have to decide which one I'm going with. Ya, I do." He gives Roy an elaborate wink.

Dennis looks at Maren and they both smile faintly.

"Say, Roy, I was wondering if you could let me put ten bucks of gas on my tab," Lonnie says. "I'm good for it, you know."

Roy takes a long draw on his little beer. "Well, I don't know. Hang on a minute. I got to think about it. We're a little low."

"Well, you know I'm good for it."
Dennis has joined three men at the far end of the bar who are watching a baseball game on television. Maren has smiled and waved him off. She stays where she is. The man to her left is looking at her.

"What's your name?" he asks in a low voice. She turns to him.

"Maren," she says.

"That's a beautiful name," he says. She moves her eyes away.

"It is," he says. "Maren, Maren. It's a beautiful name and very sad. But tough. Sad but tough."

Maren glances down the bar at Dennis. He has two beers in front of him and is talking to a huge man with a small baseball cap.

"Trouble," the man next to her says to her in a near-whisper.

I should leave, she thinks.

He extends his hand formally. "I'm happy to meet you Maren," he says. "I'm Galen." She takes the offered hand and shakes it; laughs lightly.

"I really am," he says. "But you know that. You know me, I can tell that. Does that sound strange? Well, it shouldn't. You do."

He taps a finger lightly on her hand that is resting on the bar. He looks at the hand intently, smiles gently, as if he is affectionately remembering it.
Dennis is gesturing at a ball player on television, arguing statistics with the guy next to him. He waves at her, beckoning her over. He looks more animated than he has in a long time, and Maren feels a wave of unutterable sadness. She smiles at him and shakes her head. Galen is studying her.

"You make me nervous when you look at me like that," she says quietly, knowing she has conceded something. They are silent. "Do you work around here?" she asks lamely.

"Around here," Galen muses. "Sometimes. Yes. It doesn't really matter." He taps her hand again. "Do you think it matters? Is that what you really want to know, or are you just saying that?" He laughs softly, shaking his head, tolerant of all her old tricks.

"I want you to stop saying things you don't mean," he says gently. "You do that too much. You don't have to. You're too careful, Maren. Don't be like that with me."

Maren's throat aches. She thinks, for no apparent reason, of the plants in her kitchen at home.

Darlene moves down the bar with fresh beers for them. "He bought," she says, nodding at the large man with the baseball cap. Dennis catches Maren's eye, turns his hands up and shrugs helplessly. He has two fresh beers in front of him.

"God," Galen murmurs. "You have the most incredible face. I'd love to touch your face."
Lonnie is putting quarters in the jukebox. He twirls around.

"Hey, Roy! Do your water-glass trick."

"You gotta see this," he tells no one in particular. "It's something else. Hey, Roy!"

Roy is pleased. He lights a cigarette and leans back against the wall.

"Well, now, I can't just do this sort of thing on a moment's notice," he drawls. "I've got to meditate on it. You don't just jump into it." He makes sure a few people are paying attention. He blows a langorous stream of smoke.

"It's really something," Lonnie assures everyone as Roy picks up a bar cloth and pretends to clean off the counter.

"Okay," Roy says, when no one is looking at him anymore. "Now I'm ready. Now I'm in the right frame of mind."

Galen does a very quiet drum roll with his fingertips. He smiles to himself and then to Maren. "Accomplice," she whispers. "Whose?" he says.

Roy reaches under the bar and brings up two beer glasses. He fills each to the halfway mark with water and places them about two feet apart on the bar, in front of Maren. Then he rummages in a drawer until he finds masking tape, tears
off two strips and wraps one on each glass. With a felt pen, he writes 'yes' on one glass, 'no' on the other.

He hums to himself and reaches beneath the bar for a strip of metal the length of yardstick. It's about an inch wide, springy, curved downward at one end.

"I caught a coyote like that one once," Lonnie says, pointing at the photograph behind the bar. "I did. It almost bit my hand off."

Roy weaves his fingers together and cracks his knuckles. He looks at Maren. "Now here's how this works." He raises his voice. "I'll have to concentrate here."

He grasps one end of the metal strip with the thumb and first finger of both hands. He backs away and stretches out his arms so that the other end of the strip is about six inches from the glasses, equidistant from them, bobbing slightly.

Roy closes his eyes dramatically. "Now, I'll ask a question that can be answered yes or no." A long pause. "Does this young lady have more than one gentleman friend?" He winks broadly at Dennis.

Maren's face flushes; she can feel it. Lonnie grins delightedly. "Whooaaa," he exclaims. Dennis moves down the bar to Maren's side. He looks at her with mock curiosity and her face flushes more. Galen watches Roy.

Roy stands with his eyes closed, arms outstretched, the metal strip poised, unstable, nervy. Slowly, almost
imperceptibly, it begins to move. The bobbing tip slowly moves toward the 'no' glass. Then it stops and bobs in place. Maren watches hard. The metal begins to move again, in the opposite direction. Slowly, slowly; until it has stopped with its tip aimed at the 'yes' glass. This time, it stays there.

Roy's eyes pop open and he grins. "There you go," he says. "True or false?"

"Is that your standard question?" Maren says, trying to sound offhand.

"Well, it is, actually," Roy chuckles. "But I always give the gals a chance to get back. Or the guys, as the case may be. Try it, young lady."

"I'll pass," she says.

Roy insists. He wraps her fingers around the metal, patting them in place with his cool hands. She studies the metal; studies the glasses of water. Wonders if there could possibly be something in her, something fluid beneath the surface, that would impel her unwitting hands toward one answer or the other.

"C'mon," Roy urges. "You want to know some darn thing."

Maren shrugs and steps back, extending her arms; positions the quivering wand equidistant from the glasses. She feels a wave of anger. She glances at Darlene's face, papery and finely lined.

"How long will it stay so dry around here?" Maren asks.
"You can't ask that," Roy says patiently. "It only knows 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Will it stay dry much longer?" she asks.

The wand doesn't move for half a minute. Maren fixes her eyes on its tip. She feels alone on stage before an unpredictable audience. The metal strip begins its infinitesimal journey, and it rests, finally, at 'yes.'

Dennis has moved back down to the far end of the bar. He is watching the huge man draw something on a napkin.

"I want you to come with me for a drive," Galen is saying.

"That's impossible."

"It's impossible if you think it is. What do you want to do, Maren? You." She doesn't answer. She feels as if she has known him forever.

The clock above the cash register says seven. They've been here more than three hours. Dennis walks up to her, listing almost imperceptibly.

His boating shoes squeak a little.

"I'm ripped," he grins. "How did we do this? You wouldn't believe those guys. I've been listening to the most incredible stories. What's happening down at this end?"

"We need to leave," Maren says.
"Righto," says Dennis. "You'll have to drive. Be with you in a minute." He walks carefully toward the back of the bar, into the restroom.

Maren motions Darlene over. "We're going to check the engine in my car," she tells her, indicating Galen. "It's burning oil. Would you tell Dennis when he comes out?" She gestures vaguely toward the restroom.

"Right, hon," says Darlene.

"Interesting," Galen says as they walk out the door.

Outside the bar, it's golden and long-shadowed. The wind has died down. They get into Maren and Dennis's car, Galen at the wheel.

He drives very fast. Maren reaches automatically for her seat belt, then doesn't fasten it. She rolls the window part way down and stretches out, enjoying the speed. Galen doesn't say anything. He's tapping the steering wheel, humming, accelerating. They travel in silence, flying down the road. Five miles. Ten.

"I feel as if I've known you a long time," Maren says to Galen. It sounds like a line out of a bad movie. "And I can't even say that without sounding like something out of a bad movie."

He says nothing. His hand, very pale and freckled, rests on the console next to Dennis's Cubs sun visor. The nail of the smallest finger is very long. Maren wonders why she didn't notice that in the bar.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.
"About not thinking, Maren. Not thinking." It's the first comment he's made that sounds as if he's said it before. Maybe he's nervous, too, she thinks.

The smell of something burning, faint from the beginning of their drive, grows stronger. Without a word, Galen stops the car, too fast, so that it fishtails. He gets out and opens the hood.

They are in front of an old farmhouse. A little blue-heeler dog runs toward them, yapping frantically. Maren, still in the passenger seat, watches the dog run up to the front of the car. She can't see Galen -- he is hidden by the raised hood -- but she sees a booted leg fly out and hit the dog. The kick is so hard that the small dog is lifted into the air. Its bark turns to rapid little yelps and it runs back to the farmhouse, hunched to one side.

Galen gets back into the car. Maren can't look at his face. She is exhausted. "It's not my problem, I figure," Galen says. She doesn't ask him what he means. He starts the car and drives, slower now, to a crossroad, where he makes a U-turn.

"You want to go back, Maren," he says. Maren says nothing. They drive back toward the bar, into the sun, sedately. Not until it's in sight does she say anything. "I think I would have kept going with you," she says.
Dennis is sitting on the front steps of the bar. He looks tired and alert. Maren and Galen get out of the car.

"I was kidnapped!" Maren says, touching Dennis' arm.

"You're burning oil," Galen says.

"Right," Dennis says.

Dennis reaches into the car the pulls the keys from the ignition. He unlocks the trunk and takes out his camera bag and tripod. The evening light is beautiful; coppery, with long purple shadows. Dennis loads his film briskly.

He starts shooting the bar, the horse picketed to the gas pump, the pump from another angle, the brilliantly lit shard of window in the abandoned post office. He is absolutely intent, the way he can be when the light is just right.

"Stand against the post," he says pleasantly to Galen, pointing to the one nearest the bar door.

"That's okay," says Galen, and he starts to go inside.

"Stop right there," Dennis says quietly. Galen turns around and props his hand against the post. It's perfect. His arm is backlit. He casts a long shadow.

Dennis backs up. "Come here," he says to Maren. "See how this looks." She walks over to him. Dennis twists the camera onto his tripod, and she looks through the viewfinder. Galen looks diminuitive, cocksure, weary. Like a very old teenager. Dennis starts shooting.
"That's nice," he murmurs. "Don't move," he tells Galen. Galen doesn't move. When it's over, he shrugs and walks inside the bar.

Dennis pauses a minute, then keeps shooting. The little yellow bar seems to glow. The horse drinks dazzling, bronze-colored water from the trough, gulping it silently. Maren imagines the photographs. They will be very eerie, she thinks. Very beautiful.

* * *
TWILA AT THE WAR BONNET

When Twila Dunn threw up in the dining room of the War Bonnet Inn, she pretended it hadn't happened. She dabbed her mouth just once with her filmy scarf, murmured that it was getting late, stepped elegantly over the mess, and left. That's what sticks in my mind.

It was closing time when it happened, and I was filling salt shakers from a dented can. I had been working there weekend nights for almost a year.

The dining room was long and dark, with a plywood bandstand at one end that was always empty. A glass-eyed elk stared hard from one wall; a full Blackfeet headdress hung limply off another. Above the swinging door to the tiny, glowing bar was a neon Olympia beer clock with a waterfall that moved.

It was the nicest restaurant in Heart Creek, so you didn't get many kids or crashing drunks. I knew most of the customers by name, the menu by heart. It seemed like my own private club. Sometimes I was the only waitress, so I was more or less in charge. And I didn't mind the
Friday and Saturday nights. They kept me off the streets.

I didn't have to sit next to some kid in a rebuilt GTO and do that numb cruise up and down Main, a dozen gritty blocks under a swaying strand of burnt-out, year-round Christmas lights. I didn't have to pretend my life was over if we lost a basketball game, or stand around at dark dances while the local wonders tried to play "House of the Rising Sun" and Buzz Isaacson and his jock friends gave me the long cool once-over.

At the War Bonnet, I could concentrate on serving char-broiled steaks. They had little plastic cows stuck in them. Blue for rare, red for medium, and yellow for well done.

The same weekend I started work at the War Bonnet, Twila Dunn came back to town.

It's possible I saw her when I was a little kid, before she left for college and then the dance company in the East, but she would have looked like all the rest of the older girls: Hair backcombed into a modest helmet, solemn cat-eye glasses, mini-skirt, polished white tennis shoes, all that business. When she came back, though, she was a rare beauty.

She showed up at Mass with her parents, long and silky in a white wool suit -- the most regal and self-possessed creature I had ever seen. She carried a cashmere shawl and her hair looked like folded wings.
Her parents flanked her like stolid guards. Mr Dunn, some kind of manager at the gas refinery, was bald and bland with a thick creased neck. Mrs. Dunn was his size and wore a feathered hat that looked sad above her strong face. She was part Blackfeet but didn't look it. She was too done-up and stiff.

One of Mrs. Dunn's nephews was Merlin Cutfinger, the bronc rider. He'd celebrated his thirtieth trophy by drinking a couple of six-packs and driving his pickup through the front window of Dwayne Johnson's Plymouth showroom. I had a helpless crush on him.

So Twila stood there like a duchess while the moron wind howled around the corners of the salmon-colored stucco church. Father Burns, tone deaf and pathologically shy, bleated through an updated English version of a sung High Mass and a baby screamed along.

The noise made my stomach ache. So did all the same ruddy, innocent faces in all the same fiberfill jackets and polished cowboy boots and ratty fake-fur collars.

I gazed at Twila and suddenly knew, with relief, that she, too, was there only to humor her parents. She actually seemed to find the whole ragged ritual faintly engaging. When she glided to the communion rail -- dark eyes cast down, the ghost of a smile -- she looked like she was playing a small but crucial walk-on part in a ballet.

And why not? She was home for a courtesy visit. She
didn't have to live with it. Her real life was in New York with other artists. Weekends for her were brief, lovely reprieves from the rigors of grinding rehearsals, triumphant performances.

She had a lover, of course. A funny, brilliant, tempestuous painter, or writer, or dancer. They spent Sunday mornings in a huge pale bed. Bagels and steaming coffee. Vivaldi and the New York Times. A large window framing the Manhattan skyline, hung with prisms that caught the morning light and tossed shivering balls of color all over the white, high-ceilinged room.

Twila Dunn. What did people like Mrs. Hammer, my piano teacher, know about an artist like Twila? "I taught Twila piano lessons, you know," Mrs. Hammer told me, her eyes glittering behind her bifocals. "That girl puts her mind to something and she does it. No nonsense.

"When she headed back East, she told her mother she wanted to be another Isadora What's-her-name. Dugan. Duncan. And, by golly, I think she'll make it. They tell me she practices that modern dance until her feet are bloody." She repeated it triumphantly, tapping each word with her pencil: "Until her feet are bloody!"

The point wasn't lost on me. When it came to music lessons, I was spoiled. My first teacher had been a one-eyed, drastically transplanted old Englishman named Mr. Merrick, who spent most of each lesson playing the piano
"Close your eyes!" he'd boom. "Jump into the music! Take a great big chance!" Then he'd gaze off with his good eye and rip into Rachmaninoff or Beethoven. And I would sit there, seven years old, the hairs prickling on the back of my neck, as happy as I've ever been.

Anyway, he died. And, after that, I kept getting teachers like Mrs. Hammer who measured progress by bloody feet or calloused fingers. How could I tell her that for Twila, for me, the idea went beyond that. You wanted to play or dance the way Merlin Cutfinger eased down on a twisting, white-eyed horse to ride it out for eight slow-motion seconds, relaxed as a baby and waving his hat.

I think Woody Sherburne knew what I meant. He played piano, too, and we had our first real conversation at the district high school music festival. I had seen him in the halls before that, but didn't know much about him except that he smoked Gauloises and looked a little like Mick Jagger in his hungry days. Woody's older sister Ruth Ann, a real brain, had gone off somewhere and married an Indian from India. No one expected it to last.

At the music festival, Woody came out on stage in this huge brown suit, pale and tentative, then sat down at the piano and played a Chopin Ballade that was so difficult and beautiful I couldn't swallow. Afterward, I asked him if he wanted to find a cup of coffee. That wasn't like me.
Spring stretched into a fiery little summer, then into fall. And Twila still appeared each Sunday at church with her parents. They began to take on a frozen, timeless look, as if they were always going to a wedding or funeral. The parents looked careful and overdressed, like big sad dolls. I searched Twila's face, but her expression stayed serene. Her long, slim fingers rested lightly on the pew, so sensitive they trembled.

Maybe her parents are sick and that is why Twila is still here, I thought. Maybe her father is dying of cancer and Twila has interrupted her career to spend these last few months with him. They've turned over a modest basement room to her for a studio and she dances there for hours -- silent and alone. Then they have a brave little dinner. Play some cards. Go to bed early.

I asked Mrs. Hammer. Nobody was sick as far as she knew, but she thought it was awfully nice that Twila was spending some time with her parents. So many kids just left and never came back. The Dunns had given up a lot for Twila. It was only right. And it was nobody's business, anyway.

I was still working weekend nights at the War Bonnet, but now Woody was picking me up afterward to drive around. We liked to head out of town where it was a little scary -- so flat and treeless the horizon dipped a little, like you were looking through a fish-eye lens. Sometimes we'd park
by Old Maid's Coulee to talk and kiss. The wind would clatter dirt against the car so hard it shuddered, and the only lights were the radio and the airport beacon, a mile away, that pulsed white and blue across the frosted, empty prairie. When I think about Woody now, I always see a frail light sweeping rhythmically across his face.

We talked about music and school and getting out. Going for it. Sometimes he'd run his fingers lightly through my hair as we talked. Other times, he'd lean forward and squint through the night like a truck driver in a blizzard. Then he almost seemed to be talking to himself.

His favorite label for people he didn't like -- and that included most of Heart Creek -- was "embalmed." By that, he meant that they put all their energy into preserving something that wasn't worth it. Some idea of themselves. Candy Woods, the embalmed cheer queen. Buddy Reilly, the embalmed almost-war-hero. All the embalmed ranchers.

"They borrow a couple hundred thousand each year to buy calves, work their asses off, and sell at a loss," Woody pointed out. "And it's that way every year, and they know the story before they start it all over again. But they manage to hang on to their pickups and their hand-tooled chaps and their rope horses. So they can ride the range and tell themselves they're the Ringo Kid."

Woody's problem was that he wanted people to be what he thought they should be. I didn't tell him that, though.
At the city limits was a huge blue billboard erected by the Chamber of Commerce. We passed it each time we drove back into town late at night. It showed a thermometer that dripped icicles and registered forty-five below. Above it, in block letters, was the town's sporadic claim to fame: "Welcome to Heart Creek, Montana! Coldest spot in the nation!"

One March night, after most of the customers had left the War Bonnet, Twila walked in alone. She looked gorgeous. She had swept her hair into a soft bun and fastened it with a silver filagree clip. She wore grey slacks, a black velvet jacket and the long airy turquoise scarf. Up close, she smelled faintly of roses and cedar. I had never spoken to her before and was so flustered I dropped a basket of saltines.

She floated to a small table and ordered a Manhattan. She said she'd wait to order her dinner, so I made myself as busy as I could with the other two customers. Twila ordered another drink. I loved her voice; it was so calm and resonant. The other couple paid and left, so it was just Twila and I in the long, quiet room.

Neither of us said anything, but she smiled wisely at me as if we shared a secret. I felt we did.

She sat very straight, slim ankles crossed, and stared wistfully at the checkered place mat. Then she ordered prawns and another drink, this time a straight shot, water
back. She drank it down quickly, efficiently, and ordered again.

She lit a Silva Thin with a small gold lighter and blew a languid stream of blue smoke. When I brought her the drink and her prawns, she crooked her finger like she wanted to whisper something important to me. I bent close and she asked for a dollar's worth of quarters.

There were tiny beads of perspiration on her upper lip and her breath smelled like a dirty bar glass.

She scooped up the quarters and walked carefully to the jukebox. The restaurant was silent except for the faraway scrape of a charcoal block on the kitchen grill and the muted radio in the bar. The bartender and one customer were listening to the end of the Heart Creak - Wolf Ridge game. We'd just tied it up.

Twila leaned into the neon jukebox and punched some buttons. It took her a long time. The jukebox began to twang out something by Merle Haggard and she started slowly back across the hollow-sounding floor to her table. Then she stopped, smiled straight at me, and executed a wobbly series of pirouettes that landed her back at her table.

I began to fill the napkin holders and salt shakers, wanting her to leave. Wanting her, at that moment, to die.

Twila asked for her check. She had nibbled at two prawns and pushed the platter away. Her eyes were puffy and her fingers trembled as she fumbled in her wallet.
I brought her the change. "Thanks, sweetheart," she said. Then she lay her purse down carefully, smoothed her napkin, and puked.

I have to give her this, though. More and more, I do have to give her this: She walked out of there like she was taking her fifth curtain call.

I worked one more weekend at the War Bonnet, then quit and tried out for the part of the bored, rich, wife-back-home in "Finian's Rainbow," the high school's spring musical. Woody thought I was out of my mind to get involved in something so hokey. Or maybe he just said that because he knew I'd be spending less time with him. The night I quit the War Bonnet, Woody and I made love for the first time by the bubbly deep-sea light of an aquarium in his parent's T.V. room. By then, it was already nostalgic.

I haven't been back, but I heard a few years later that he had dropped out of the Boston Conservatory and joined some group that did street theater. Someone from Heart Creek saw him in San Francisco, and he had purple hair.

I had one line in "Finian's Rainbow." All I had to do was lean against a cocktail bar in a black, slinky dress and say, as snotty as I could, "Manhattan, please." It was kind of a flashback scene. I also sang in the chorus.

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Christie wears moon boots, huge blue snowboots that her home-living advisor Tammy found for her at a rummage sale. They press waffled ovals into the snow, and are so unbending that Christie must stomp flat-footed up the stairs to her apartment building. It is almost dark. She checks her mail. There is a brochure for a stereo equipment sale and a postcard from her mother, who is spending her annual January vacation in Las Vegas with her friend Evelyn from the phone company. "Saw Cher last night at Caesar's Palace," says the hurried-looking scrawl. "She looks better than she did in that movie about radiation but who wouldn't. It's always night here. I'm breaking even. Love your Mom."

Christie's apartment building smells like overcooked cauliflower. It is a two-story four-plex, a gaunt brick building occupied by three elderly women and Christie. Christie works at Partners, a "sheltered workshop" just two blocks away; a place where mentally impaired people make things and sell them. Two years ago, Christie was stitching potholders for Partners. Now she is on the Partners...
staff, an assistant file clerk. And she has this, her own apartment.

It is a one-bedroom with a tiled floor throughout. Tammy, who visits twice a week, put turquoise throw-rugs here and there to brighten it up. The bedroom is windowless and salmon-colored, and it has a large piece of paper on the wall, divided into two columns, morning and evening. The morning list says: Did I make my bed and do the dishes? Did I turn the heater dial to six? Did I take my meds? Is my key in my purse? The evening list says: Did I turn off the stove? Did I check the mail? Is the door locked? Did I take my meds? A smiley face is drawn at the bottom; Tammy's sign.

Christie takes an ornate silver teapot from her kitchen cupboard. It is tarnished and handsome, with a large dent in the side. Tammy got it for two dollars. Christie makes tea in it, as she does every day at this time, and brings her cup into the living room. She sits on the plaid love-seat, cradling the cup, a small young woman in blue jeans and an old green sweater and stocking feet. Her dark hair is cut badly. She fingers a small necklace, a cross made out of Black Hills gold.

She puts on the earphones that are connected to her ghetto-blaster, and stretches out on the loveseat, legs dangling over the end. She clicks on the tape, closes her eyes and throws one arm languidly over her head. She
absent-mindedly runs a finger over the scar that runs under her hair from ear to ear, an invisible zipper, and rolls her head gently from side to side in time to the music, the tight and twitchy rock 'n roll. It pours into her brain and through her veins, a shade of a beat faster than her pulse, urging it on. One knee moves back and forth, keeping time. Across the hall, Mrs. Armitage is having one of her bursts of bronchial coughing. Downstairs, a phone is ringing. But Christie doesn't hear any of it. She lies splayed and sacrificial on the sofa. She can feel the red of her heart.

Once, years before, on the other side of her life, Christie and her father climbed into the tower of a church in a small town in Oregon. It is one of Christie's four clear memories of him. He was a small, fastidious man who always drove the back roads when they took vacations, and he died on an operating table when Christie was a teenager. She thinks the town in Oregon was called Mountain of Angels. The church caretaker had agreed to show them the tower clock from the inside out. They climbed the spiraling stairs into the tower, up and up, until they were in a musty room on top of it all. One whole wall of the room was the inside of a clock face. The arms were twice, maybe three times as long as her father. It was just a minute before one p.m. The caretaker watched their faces eagerly. They held their breaths. There was a buzzing of gears, a large, startling jump of the clock's hands, a long moment, and then the waving
bboooonnggg of the bell, coming up through their feet, shivering them. That long moment; that's what she feels just after she puts on her earphones, during the short hiss of the tape before the music starts. She feels just like she did before the bell rang in the tower at the Mountain of Angels.

When Christie was going to the hospital every day for therapy, Lymon, the Japanese physical therapist, used to bring a Walkman and earphones for patients who wanted to do their exercises to music. Christie never objected when he put the earphones on her head, but she didn't hear anything that mattered at first. Just noise. She felt, during those early months after the wreck, that she was watching the world from behind a windshield. People on the other side of it moved as smoothly as fish in an aquarium, and they seemed to smile constantly. She watched them and tried to imitate their movements. But a fearful thing began to happen. Whenever she seemed on the brink of matching movements, whenever she felt a link with the world of those smooth-moving people, she had a seizure. And it would feel, in many ways, like a repeat of the crash. But from the inside out, instead of the outside in.

It always began with a casual impulse. The car wreck began with an innocent urge to get her car through the orange light. How many times had she done that before? Then, the glint of moving steel in the corner of her vision, coming at
her, and the knowledge that something was going to try to annihilate her. When she has a seizure, she feels what she felt when she pulled into that intersection. The same sense that she moved into the situation innocently; the same certainty of helplessness in the face of disaster; the sense of overwhelming malevolence aimed straight at her, and only at her.

And then the crash that throws her inward on herself, instead of outward, onto the pavement. Inward, to the place where there seems to be nothing. And afterward, like those first waking moments after the car crash, absolute apathy.

Even when she knew her body and brain didn't work right. The sense that something extraordinarily violent had occurred just beyond the region where she had to care about it.

Christie walked for a long time with a cane. Her mother brought her to the hospital every day for therapy to strengthen her right side. One day at the hospital, a sultry summer day, Lymon belted the tape player around her waist, as usual, and put the earphones on her head. Christie lay on her side on the mat, and Lymon gently, firmly put his hand on the top side of her leg while she lifted against it -- two inches, three. Across the room, the arthritis group was sitting on folding chairs, watching a therapist demonstrate devices that made household and grooming tasks easier. A very old lady peered into a wide, plastic tube
with a sock stretched over one end. Another opened a jar with a long-handled vise. The rest waited their turns. Some had had hip or knee surgery and were in wheelchairs. They looked small and docile in their bathrobes.

Christie fixed her gaze on them as she pulled her leg up against Lymon's hand. Something coming through the earphones made her pull harder. She listened to it. Lymon gazed benignly into space, so crisp in his white jacket and pants, smelling of nothing. His very clean, square-nailed hand held her calf. Christie tugged against it, listening harder to the music. It had great energy and inevitability. She pulled her leg high on the downbeat, higher than she ever had before.

Lymon looked at her curiously; studied her intense face. Then he said she could stop. "You're going great, Christie," he said. "You won't be coming here much longer."

"Thank you very much," she said. He looked at her again; took in her pinched face, uncombed hair, her thin shoulders inside the pink sweatsuit, the scar that was ratcheted across her skull. Then he punched her arm playfully and went off to work with someone else.

Christie sat on the edge of the exercise mat, listening. She stood up slowly, head cocked to the side, hearing. Her arms flew out from her sides. Her head began to jerk lightly in time. She felt as if she had been attached to a source of warmth; that she had been plugged in and every-
thing was about to become alive and clear. Her body seemed to be working perfectly. Her arms moved like ferns. She took a dimly remembered dance stance, stockinged foot pointed outward, and thrust her hip upward on the beat. She felt as if she had been switched on after a long cool time. The song insisted on itself, and she danced. She ran her hands up and down her sides. She twitched her hips. She threw back her head.

Everyone in the therapy room stared at her. A woman in the arthritis group froze, the long tongs in her hand dangling a fluffy Kleenex she had just picked up from the floor. Lymon stopped adjusting the nameplate on his white smock. They all watched Christie, who didn't stop.

A small pink lady with knotted claws for hands began to laugh softly. She watched Christie and she laughed quietly, almost to herself. Someone else laughed. Christie opened her eyes. Her face looked stripped, washed, beatific. Then she closed them again and twitched more frantically. They all laughed then, all the people in the room. They laughed gratefully, easily. The woman with the tongs looked at them in her clenched hand and doubled over with a new burst of helpless giggles. Lymon smiled quietly, shaking his head. Christie danced. She danced for herself, and for all of them.

When the song ended, Christie took the earphones off her head. She gave them back to Lymon, her face impassive
and peaceful. Then she walked back to the exercise mat and curled up on it to wait for her mother to pick her up. She fell immediately asleep, her hair spiked up against her pillow.

Tammy tells Christie all the time that she must think. Think hard. That she must take ten minutes more to make each decision than she wants to. That she must make a list when she can't decide. The good things and the bad things; the pros and the cons. Then she must compare them and make a considered decision. She must use her judgement. In most ways, Christie has "come back," Tammy tells her encouragingly. But sometimes her judgement fails. Sometimes she does things that could get her into trouble.

When Christie goes to Terrible Mary's by herself to dance, she knows that she is not using the kind of judgement that Tammy wants her to. Once, walking home from Terrible Mary's, alone, after midnight; something terrible almost happened to Christie. But it didn't, and she doesn't think about it now. And she goes out every Thursday night, still, because it's what keeps her alive.

It is snowing tonight. She walks down Front Street, through the swirling flakes, in her moon boots. Her indoor shoes are in a plastic sack that she clutches in her
mittened hand.

Terrible Mary's is a seedy college hangout with a reputation for good bands. It's a no-frills, cavernous kind of place with a damp, hoppy smell to it. On week nights, in the winter, it doesn't get many people.

Christie goes to her usual table, a small one by the far wall. The barmaid brings her a 7-up, her usual. She doesn't look around much because she is not curious about anybody in the bar. She is just waiting.

A man and a woman sit a few tables from Christie, but they don't notice her or anyone else because they are having a very quiet, adreneline-filled conversation. The man, Stephen, is drinking Johnny Walker on the rocks. He is lanky, thirty-ish.

The woman, Daria, looks something like him -- thin and dark -- and she looks a little ill.

When you look at them for awhile, you see that they are on utterly familiar terms. The fact is, they have been married eleven years. They married because Daria was pregnant. And they stayed married when they lost the baby, halfway through the pregnancy, because they liked each other and their families expected them to. They stayed married, at first, because it was secure and convenient. Eventually, they weathered enough time and change, still liking each other, that they began to feel that their marriage was always meant to be. Time had given it inevitability. They
felt they had discovered what it meant, really, to be in love. A great calmness.

But now they are having this strange, brittle conversation.

"It just didn't mean anything," Stephen says. "It was stupid. But it didn't mean anything. Emotionally."

"It means something emotionally to me," Daria says.

"I know," Stephen says. His voice sounds regretful.

"But you're making something large out of it when you don't have to. If you make it a symbol of some eternal rift, some huge betrayal, it will have that effect. If you don't, it won't." There is a long pause. "You can't put it in the same realm as us."

The band is doing a nostalgia set. They begin a solid, hard-driving version of "Johnny B. Good." Couples wander onto the floor and begin dancing. One woman with long blonde hair, long legs in faded jeans, circles around her partner, moving her body so that the tips of her long mane rock back and forth through the air. Daria and Stephen sip their drinks and watch.

Christie gets up and walks to the dance floor alone. She positions herself near the stage and begins to dance. She closes her eyes and fixes her attention on the beat.
of the music. Then she lets her body go to meet it. She doesn't try. She just cooperates. She notices and she begins to move. Her arms stretch high overhead. Her head snaps to one side and her hips begin to twitch frantically. She is dancing in double-time, her arms beating the air. She lets her fingertips float on the bar air. She can feel the pulse of the music walk down her arms and out the ends of her fingers. They quiver. She pays attention to them. She pays attention to everything. She is attuned; she fits. She watches the hands of the saxophonist. His fingers have no force of their own. They are valves, releasing the music of the earth. And she, too, is that kind of conduit. She has earned this privilege by virtue of the long strange trial that began, one ordinary day, with a flash of metal in the corner of her eye.

"Christ," says Stephen, as he watches Christie, watches the band. "They act as if she isn't even there."

"Maybe they know her," says Daria.

All the people on the dance floor, except Christie,
seem to know each other. They don't pay much attention to Christie because most of them have seen her dancing before. The band doesn't, either. She is a regular. Stephen and Daria wonder about her because they've never seen her before. She embarrasses and scares them. The people on the dance floor wave, they trade off partners, they signal across each others' heads. On slow songs, they move cozily, tamely, as cuddly as cats. On the slow songs, Christie moves over to the edge of the dance floor, out of the light, into the dimness near the wall. There she stands, swaying slightly.

Stephen and Daria dance a slow song, trying to convince themselves by the ease of their motion together that they are a natural match. But they keep catching sight of Christie, off there on the edge of the floor, the daemonic whisper. And she throws them off. They miss their steps. They sink into odd thoughts. Stephen thinks of a woman's instep, descending gently onto his. Daria thinks of a nineteen-year-old, dancing with her in a dark basement with no music; quivering head to foot. They hold each other more tightly.

Outside, the snow has stopped. Christie and everyone else in Terrible Mary's heads home through the muffled streets.
Christie squeaks through the snow in her big boots, passing through streetlight circles, into darkness, back through the light. She walks calmly because, as always after a night at Terrible Mary's, she is truly at peace.

A car pulls slowly beside her and inches along at her pace. A beer can flies out the passenger window and plops silently into the snow near her feet. She looks straight ahead, though she sees everything about the car from the side of her eye. The car stops and two men get out, slamming the doors boisterously.

"Hey! It's the shimmy dancer," one calls to her. "Wanna dance?" He spreads his arms and gyrates his hips slowly. His friend barks out a husky laugh. The two of them draw closer to her. One of them puts a hand on her arm. She backs away slowly and looks at his flushed face. She tries to think. This has happened before. Something like this happened when she was walking home another time. She tries to remember who it was; what happened; what she did. But it has fallen through one of the torn spots in her brain. All that's left is the sound of screeching brakes and the feel of a near-escape.

The man with the hand on her arm is saying something. "Come to our house," he says. "We've got good tunes. We'll all dance. You can show us how." The men look at each other and laugh as if she's just told them a joke.
A second car pulls up and two people get out. It's Stephen and Daria. They pick their way rapidly through the snow in their street shoes to stand on each side of Christie.

"What's happening, guys?" Stephen says, a careful defiance in the question.

"We're offering the shimmy dancer here a ride to her house."

"Well, she's got one," Stephen says flatly. Daria puts her hand lightly on Christie's sleeve.

There is a long silence. Christie's eyes are flat. She doesn't acknowledge anyone in the little group. She stands quietly with her mittens folded.

"Door number one, door number two, or door number three!" says one of the loud men cryptically. They look at each other, get into their car, and drive slowly down the street, the radio on loud. Christie and Stephen and Daria watch the car until it turns a corner and is gone.

Daria guides Christie to their car and she goes without hesitation. They all get in, and start down the white street.

"I live at the intersection of two streets, Main and Ryman," Christie says clearly and deliberately.

They travel in silence. "It's late," Daria says. No one responds.

They drop Christie off at the narrow apartment building.
"Thank you very much," she says and walks slowly toward the front steps, her big boots crunching the new snow. Then she is at the door; and then a small yellow light goes on upstairs.

In Las Vegas, Christie's mother is still up. She is standing, in a pink dress that has grown too tight, before a one-armed bandit, playing with a deadly intensity. She will probably be there for several more hours, at least. She's up forty dollars and she has this sixth sense that she's turned the corner.

Upstairs, Christie runs her eyes down the checklist, she lays out the clothes she will wear to work tomorrow, she takes two large pills. She sets her alarm.

Outside, in the car, Stephen and Daria sit quietly, looking at each other. They both look exhausted. They wait until Christie's light goes out, keeping watch.

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