Way home| And other stories

Laurel Pecukonis

The University of Montana

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The Way Home: and Other Stories

by

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B.A. The University of Wyoming, 1978

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Acknowledgement

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We never meant for the old lady to get hurt. At least, I never. But when Joe started doing all those things, I didn’t stop him. I didn’t tell anyone. I went along with it until the very end. So, I’m as guilty as he is.

Joe’s my ex-husband. We had a couple of good years. Then things weren’t so good. We broke up. I left town. Joe wrote me a letter, asking me to come and try it again. So I moved back to Casper, a dead town in the middle of Wyoming, now the bottom’s dropped out of the oil business. He was living with his parents, and it was up to me to find us a place to live. That’s where the old lady comes in.

She had put a classified in the paper, for a basement apartment. I went to look at it. Her house was on the corner in the old part of town, where all the big trees are. Or were. A wind from the east blew in with Dutch Elm disease; and now, if you drive down those streets, you won’t see any big trees. Just saplings, staked with string, and circled with aluminum to protect the bark from squirrels. The old lady had eight new trees, four on one side of her house, on Beech Street, and four on the Grant Street side. It was a nice house, with a covered front porch and a redwood swing.
When I knocked and she came to the door, she didn’t remember anything about an ad in the paper. I had to show it to her, then she remembered. She was a funny old lady. Gracie Sullivan, a widow. A real lady is what I mean, with this old-fashioned gentility and good manners. Only other person I’d ever known like that was my grandmother, back in Nebraska, before she died.

Gracie led me through her dining room and kitchen to the back door.

“Here’s the way you’d come in,” She said.

The stairs went down into a laundry room.

“We’d have to share this,” Gracie said, pointing to the washer and dryer.

Then she showed me the bathroom, the bedroom, the living room, the kitchen. The place was clean, but smelled damp and musty. But the thing was the ceiling. It was low. A shallow basement, short a few inches. Joe’s head would touch the ceiling, and he’d have to duck every time he went through the doorway. But she didn’t want a deposit, and she didn’t need references, like all the other places I’d been that day; so I said, well, if you could knock off ten dollars a month, I’ll take it. I explained about Joe being so tall. She said okay, as long as you don’t have kids. And I said, no we don’t have kids. It’ll just be me and Joe. I’m Wanda. Can we move in tomorrow?

I went back to Joe’s folks’ house. Joe was lying on the couch, passed out. I couldn’t tell if he was drunk or stoned. Before I go any further, I have to say Joe used to be a heroin addict. He quit though. And for a long time there, Joe and I, we used to get high on cough syrup. The kind with codeine. The first year we were married, we’d take the car and go all over the state, stopping in these little towns like Shoshone or Saratoga, and walk in the drugstores and buy this syrup. You have to sign for it, and after awhile
they catch on and won’t sell it to you anymore. We had a lot of friends back then, and we’d get anybody we knew to come along and sign. Anyway, this part comes in later, when I found out Joe hadn’t changed. Not at all. He’ll always be the same old Joe. But I didn’t know this when we moved in with Gracie. You have to understand that much.

We’d been living there a couple of weeks, keeping to ourselves, when Gracie came downstairs one evening, just before dinner. She knocked on the door and asked us if we’d care to eat with her. She’d made a big pot of spaghetti.

“I don’t know what I was thinking of,” she said. “I made enough for a family of ten.”

“Well I can fix that,” Joe said. He told her we had some friends who loved Italian food.

“Call them,” Gracie said.

After that first time we started eating with Gracie every night. She didn’t like to eat alone. Evening was the hardest time for her, she said. That’s when she missed her old man, Richard, the most. She’d pace around the rooms right before dinner, pulling down the shades, turning on all the lights. She’d make sure the door was locked.

“He liked his food,” Gracie said. “He was a gourmet cook. He’d fix all these fancy dishes. I don’t even remember the names of them now. That’s why I’m such a terrible cook.”

But Joe was polite. Every night, she served the same things: tuna casserole, burned meat loaf, undercooked chicken, and so on. In the same order. But Joe, he praised everything. I liked how she used matching placemats and napkins, and the china plates had different colored roses painted on them, all edged with gold. It was nice, eating with Gracie.
Then our TV broke down, and I mentioned it to Gracie when we were both getting our mail, on her front porch. I asked her how Erika was doing on All My Children. That’s all it took. From then on, every afternoon, I was upstairs with Gracie watching the soaps. She made us fresh lemonade and served it in tall glasses made of real crystal. When we were watching the show one day, I noticed a small picture in a silver frame, sitting there on top of the television set. I asked Gracie who it was and she said it was Richard.

“But who’s that kid he’s holding?” I asked. For the picture showed a little girl dressed all in white sitting on a man’s lap.

“It’s Emily, my daughter. She died a long time ago,” Gracie said. “Now, please, don’t ask me another thing.”

And we went back to watching the story on the television.

Joe got himself a job of sorts. A buddy of his took care of lawns, mostly for retired people. Every afternoon the two of them went off in Walt’s Ford pickup, with their rakes and the lawn mower bouncing around in the bed of the truck. It was early spring and the trees were just starting to leaf out. A month went by, and we had enough to pay our rent.

Then one night, Joe and me are in bed. We can’t sleep. Joe’s restless, tossing around, throwing the blankets on the floor. He sits up and flicks on the lamp, lights a cigarette. He’s thought of something. I hear him out.

Then I say, “She’s just an old lady, Joe.”
“Listen. We’ve been here a month now and the phone hasn’t rung once. Nobody’s been by. You’ve heard her yourself, how she’s got nobody. I think we ought to try it.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right, somehow,” I say.

“You want to get high tomorrow, or not?”

The next day, there aren’t any lawns to do. Joe comes upstairs with me. Gracie’s flustered at first. But Joe puts out the charm and soon we settle in for the afternoon’s stories.

Then Joe says, “Hey, Mrs. Sullivan, I got a favor to ask you. Soon as this show’s over, would you mind coming over to Driscoll’s pharmacy with me, and signing for some cough syrup. We’ll go for ice cream after.”

“You’re not feeling well?” Gracie asks.

“I got a cold. That’s why I didn’t go out to work today. But this medicine, it’s got codeine in it, so the dumb ass... I mean, they make you sign for it. Some kind of government regulation.”

“Why can’t you do that?” Gracie asks. She drinks some of her iced tea, and looks right at Joe.

“I just had some a few weeks ago,” Joe says. “I can’t seem to shake this thing. Anyway, you can only get it twice without a doctor’s prescription, and you know, it’s the only thing that works. Come on, what do you say?”

When she finally says yes, we call Walt, and he comes by in his Cadillac, made back in 1962. It’s green and looks like a sea monster, with its tail fins and those big
round headlights looking like eyes. Walt keeps the chrome all shined and polished, and you feel like something riding in that car.

Driscoll's is only four blocks from Gracie's house, but we don't think it would be too smart to walk there. People with colds aren't up to that kind of thing. I go in with Gracie. It's a tiny place, about as big as a closet. The pharmacist is in his white coat. He's bald and has a handlebar mustache. Gracie tells him what she wants. And he says, I would have delivered that, Mrs. Sullivan. It never occurred to me that the guy might know Gracie. I turn away from him, keeping my head down, pretending to be totally absorbed in the various boxes of Band-Aids. He goes back in the shelves and gets the bottle. It's a deep amber color, and seeing it, I am suddenly filled with memories of those other times with Joe. Gracie signs her name, address, phone number, physician's name, in a spiral book. The pharmacist asks her how she heard of this brand of medicine. And Gracie tells him, smooth as butter, that her friend's doctor said it was the best. Well, you take care of yourself, the pharmacist says as we leave.

In the car I notice Gracie's hands are shaking. Joe snatches the brown paper sack away and takes a big swallow, before I yell, Joe!, and he remembers he's supposed to be sick, not wanting to get high. Walt isn't too happy about the side trip for ice cream. At Lou's Drive-In he and Joe go in to use the bathroom, and when they come out, I can tell by their walk they have already used up the bottle. Maybe Joe will have saved some for me, but maybe not.

Gracie is pretty quiet while we work on our hot fudge sundaes. Maybe she can sense this whole thing isn't what it's supposed to be. Joe starts talking in a loose way, his words spilling out too fast, and the point of his story lost in a sudden burst of laughter.
After we get home, Walt and Joe rush down the stairs, and I’m left to tell Gracie thank you. She gives me small, uncertain smile.

In our kitchen, I tell Joe, “You could’ve at least waited till we got home. You really upset her.”

“Who cares?” Joe says. He hands the bottle to me. “Look, we saved you the rest.”

And I take it. It glides down my throat warm and smooth, and it’s like nothing matters then. Your bones turn to water; your whole body goes limp. At the same time, there’s a rush, a wild, sweet feeling, like being set free, a bird on the wing up through blue sky and beyond.

The next afternoon Joe remembers to cough a lot. He offers to mow Gracie’s lawn. Of course she says, no, you’re sick, let me make you a hot toddy. And Joe says, you know what you could do for me? I knocked that cough syrup off the dresser last night. It spilled all over the floor. Do you think you could call and have Driscoll’s deliver another one? He doubles over and hacks away. And Gracie says okay, but maybe Joe better go see a doctor.

“Nothing I’d like more, Gracie. But we can’t afford it.”

“I’ll loan you some money,” Gracie says. “Richard nearly died from pneumonia one time. It’s important to get it taken care of.”

She goes to her bedroom and comes back, handing Joe a fifty-dollar bill.

“Now, don’t worry about paying me back right away,” she says.

Joe and I are both stunned. No one we know has ever been this generous.
“You’re a good woman,” Joe says, folding the bill and putting it carefully in his wallet.

In a few days Joes goes back to work with Walt. But I can tell he’s thinking. He starts asking Gracie all kinds of questions at dinnertime, like how does she get around, buy food, and go to the bank, if she doesn’t have a car. She tells him her food is delivered from the Grant Street Grocery, one of those neighborhood markets you don’t see much of anymore. They come around with her food in paper boxes every week, and she walks there sometimes, and they always cash a check for her. She tells Joe her social security check is a direct deposit at the bank. She rides the city bus when she needs to go out to the shopping mall. Church is a few blocks from that pharmacy we went to, and she walks in the summer, and in the winter some people give her a ride.

By now it’s early June. One afternoon Gracie asks me if that man who took us for ice cream would mind taking her out to this nursery she goes to every year to buy her flowers. She seems hesitant, like she doesn’t know how to ask for a favor. She says she could take the bus, but it’s always a job, trying to get back home then, when you have to carry the flats of pansies. It’s rather awkward, she says. I tell her, no problem, we’ll go tomorrow. It’s the least we could do, I say.

I’m pretty sure by now that Joe and Walt aren’t doing all that much in the way of lawns. But I’m reluctant to know exactly what it is they are doing on these long, hot afternoons. Surely not mowing grass. Smoking it would be closer to the truth. Joe is too relaxed, too easy going. But it’s like I think, if I don’t know the truth, then it can’t hurt me. A few years back Joe and Walt were stealing stuff out of houses. Doing yard work they got to know different neighborhoods, who was working, who was out of town. They
were always careful not to take things from the houses they actually worked at; but it wasn’t any big deal to hop over a fence into a house next door, jimmy a lock, and come out with a power drill or chainsaw.

The next day the four of us go out to Johnny Appleseed, a greenhouse on the west side of town. We wander around looking at all the color. Table after table covered with bright petunias, yellow and orange marigolds, big-faced pansies, red geraniums. There’s a thick, sweet smell. Gracie has to look at everything first. Then Joe and I hold the cardboard boxes while she puts in her flowers. Walt waits out in the car.

At the cash register it’s Joe who notices that Gracie doesn’t write down the amount in her checkbook. When he asks her about it, she laughs and says she never does. Richard took care of that; she never understood it. She just goes by the bank statement. Joe looks at me. And it’s right there, in that warm and good place, with the sun shining down through the glass roof on the flowers, that I see the badness in Joe. When a person is no good, you can’t see that. You find out about it by what they do or don’t do. But Joe’s eyes. They narrowed and a hard look came into them. For a split second I was scared. And that’s when I should’ve got out. Right then.

We stop off for ice cream again. Walt bristles up there in the front seat, making comments about how it’s a pretty sad day when a man’s sunk so low he’s become an old lady’s gofer.

“Go for this, go for that. Man, Joe, what are we doing here?” Walt doesn’t care if Gracie hears or not.

Joe tells him to ease up. Real quiet, he says, “Our reward is coming, man. You just need patience.”
It isn’t long before Joe has Gracie convinced that he can save her a few bucks, as far as her groceries go. All she has to do is sign a check, give him a list, and he’ll walk to the store over on Grant Street. Which is fine. Except what he does is write in an amount higher than the actual cost of her food. I don’t know he’s doing this at first. He always goes alone. He never brings Gracie the receipt. It’s not till I go with him one time, even though he objects, that I discover what he’s been doing.

The store is small and dark. The wooden floor creaks. There’s penny candy in glass jars. Most of the produce isn’t too fresh, but the meat is good. Naturally everything is higher priced than Joe would find at a big supermarket. But there, he wouldn’t be able to cash Gracie’s checks. The total comes to something like twenty dollars. As I watch, Joe writes the check for thirty.

“How’s Gracie feeling these days?” the man behind the counter asks.

“She’s a little better,” Joe says.

And the guy says, handing Joe a ten-dollar bill, “Well, it’s lucky for Gracie she’s got such good renters, willing to take care of her and all.”

Joe picks up the food. Outside, boys on their bikes lick Popsicles, their tongues purple and red and orange. There’s a deep pool of shade from the trees near the door.

“What was that all about?” I ask Joe. “What’s with the change? I never see you giving Gracie any change.”

“Come on. Don’t go getting all righteous on me,” Joe says. “This is the perfect set up. You saw yourself how she doesn’t handle her checks right.”

And this is what’s so hard to accept: I didn’t do anything. I didn’t protest, or go tell Gracie what was going on. There was something in me that was bad and lazy,
wanting something for nothing. If anything, I was worse than Joe because I knew what we were doing was wrong, and I didn’t do anything.

But Gracie’s check from the government wasn’t that big. Joe skims by the month of July, keeping what he took down to fives and tens. But in August, he went too far. Gracie hears from the bank she’s overdrawn.

It’s late afternoon. A small fan blows the stale, hot air through the room, moving the leaves of the plants in the window. We are waiting for The Edge of the Night to come on. Gracie stares at the bank statement, her face pinched and frowning, clearly puzzled by the numbers. She takes off her reading glasses and holds the paper close to her eyes. She has no idea what to do. And before I can say something, I hear the truck pull up in front of the house. Joe and Walt stomp up the stairs and come through the door. I know instantly they are very high on something. Their eyes, with a dreamy expression in them, shimmer hard and bright. Joe puts the twelve pack of beer in Gracie’s refrigerator and the two of them come and sit on the couch. They sink back into the cushions and stretch their legs out. Just like that Joe reaches for the remote and switches the channel to a baseball game.

“Hey Joe. Gracie’s overdrawn at the bank,” I say. I want to see what he will do and it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

The muscles in his face change. He clenches his teeth. He becomes aware of Gracie in the big overstuffed recliner, her hands wrinkling the paper with numbers.

“Let’s see that,” he says.
He knows very well what’s wrong. Then he says, “You don’t have any savings?”
And Gracie tells him about some kind of account Richard kept, but she doesn’t know
how to use it. She gets up and goes to her desk to find the papers.

“Joe, don’t do this,” I whisper.

He won’t look at me. It’s as if I’m not there.

What Gracie has is a money market account. There’s a penalty for closing the
thing, but Joe doesn’t care about that. He tells Gracie all she has to do is go withdraw the
money, transfer some of it into her checking account, and with the rest, she could open a
savings account. Or take a trip.

There is something very powerful and scary in that room. Joe’s whole body is
tense and ready to move. He has taken this thing with Gracie to the edge and he’s not
pulling back. From the TV comes the crack of a bat against a ball. The crowd starts
cheering.

I tell Gracie she shouldn’t cash in her savings. I tell her she’ll lose the interest.
Just withdraw enough to cover the overdrawn checks, I say. Joe’s hands curl into tight
fists. I see them, pounding very lightly on his thighs.

“Shut up, Wanda,” he says.

Walt is leaning forward. He carefully puts his open beer on the floor next to his
black work boots, but out of the way.

But I don’t shut up.

“Joe’s been stealing your money,” I say.

And then Joe is up, off the couch, and over to where I’m sitting on the rocking
chair. He jerks me up. One hand goes around my throat, and the other, a fist, slams
against my cheek. It’s like something out of a movie, clawing, kicking, I am on Joe and Joe is hitting back. Walt pulls us apart. You’ve really blown it now, he says. Gracie is just putting down the receiver of the phone. The cops are on the way. Joe and Walt bolt out the door and are gone, the truck screeching off down Beech Street. Gracie looks at my face. “You’re going to have a black eye,” she says.

The two officers who come are young. They are polite. Gracie tells them Joe was possibly drunk; she doesn’t mention the money. They ask me if I want to press charges. I tell them I have to think about it. Joe has never been violent; he’s never hit me before. After they go, Gracie fixes us iced tea. Her hands are trembling when she drops the ice cubes in the glasses. “Tell me about it,” she says. So I do.

I think I know why Gracie let things go as far as they did. She was lonely. It’s that simple. The day after we’d been out to the greenhouse, I helped her plant those flowers. It was a perfect summer morning, the air still cool and fresh. The rich black earth along the south side of the house was speckled with light and shadow from the new young trees. I raked the beds smooth while Gracie, sitting on a campstool, decided where she wanted everything to go. Then the two of us, kneeling on the grass, the dew getting our knees wet, dug the small holes and set the flowers in, patting the earth firm around each one. Gracie told me the names of what she’d picked: rocket snapdragons for the back row. Because they get three feet tall she said. Then a row of yellow crackerjack marigolds. In front we put the petunias and pansies, the blue ageratum, the Rosie-O-Day alyssum. Every bright color mixing into the next, because Gracie said she didn’t like
color schemes. Every year Richard picked the colors, he wanted it to be perfect, she said. To match.

I asked Gracie that day to tell me about her family, if she had anybody around. And she told me then about her daughter, Emily.

“It's why I hate to eat alone,” Gracie said. “I hate twilight. That's when Emily died all those years ago. The shadows go blue, and if I'm not careful I remember her.”

Gracie straightened her back and looked up at the sky.

“I killed her, you know. I pushed her down under the water in the bathtub. She wouldn't stop crying, and I couldn't take any more. It was like being under a spell. When I came back from wherever it was my mind went, there was my girl, all quiet. With her hair floating and her eyes staring.”

As Gracie told me this, her own blue eyes were open wide and looking back at something I could not see.

“Richard put me away for awhile,” Gracie said. “In a hospital. And then we went on from there. We never had more children.”

The hot sunlight fell through the leaves of the trees in a pattern of light and shadow across Gracie's shoulders. She was holding a geranium and before she handed it to me she snapped off the stem and put the red flower in the pocket of her blouse. She stood and turned away from me. She went over and turned on the faucet to the hose so we could water all the plants.

I can't stay with Gracie. We both know this. We have taken the icy glasses out to the porch swing, where we talk, for a brief space of time, like old friends. We let the
evening slip down around us and admire the tall asters, a big patch of them, the neighbor across the street has planted. Their colors are so pastel and cool against all the yellow and red. Gracie gets up quickly then, and goes around to the side of her house, where her own flowers are by now a bold mass of color, just like she wanted. When I follow her around, she waves her hand out and says, look, I forgot to buy them. How could I forget to buy my asters? I tell her there is always next year, and she smiles at me and we go in then, because it is dark and the stars are coming out.
THE WAY HOME

Warm, rugged, survivalist man (32)—enjoys skiing, sailing, nature, good books—longs to share rustic mountain home with slender, loving, earthly lady. Joe, Box 10, Casper, Wyoming.

My friend, Louise says, "You haven’t got the brains of a bird, Ivy Mae," when I tell her I’m going to Wyoming to meet Joe-the Survivalist. "For Pete’s sake, you didn’t really send that letter, did you?" she asks. Louise is the only person besides my great-aunt Dora who says that. "For Pete’s sake, Ivy Mae, when are you ever going to learn there’s more to life than a man."

"Maybe he’s a cowboy," I say as I toss my jeans and pajamas into the red-flowered suitcase Mama gave me last year when I graduated from the Algona School of Beauty. "We’ll live under the pine trees and ski to town for groceries," I say.

"You’re something else."
Louise is my best friend, but there’s some things she just doesn’t understand. I’ve lived in West Bend forever. The houses, and the people who live in them, are as familiar to me as the taste of apple pie. Every year Mrs. Purdy plants three rows of crackejacks marigolds along the front of her house. Elmer Stryker has sold stamps behind the grilled window in Daly’s Grocery Store since I was five years old. I’ve gone up to the counter with a dozen eggs and said, “I need ten stamps, too, Elmer,” and he frowns and thrusts out his lower lip. “You know stamps come from the post office, Ivy Mae.” Then he goes to the other end of the counter, where the window is, pulls on this yellow visor, and says, “May I help you?”

Years ago all of us kids would go in one at a time, pick out our jawbreakers and licorice, then ask Elmer for a stamp. And he would go back and forth, pulling his visor on and off like a blinking neon sign, while we laughed and thought we were smart.

It’s the sameness that gets me. Just once I’d like to hear Mama say, “No Sunday dinner today. You kids get what you want when you’re hungry.” But we always have roast beef, mashed potatoes, green beans, and carrot cake. Always.

So that’s why I want to go to Wyoming. It’ll be nice to wake up on Sunday and say to Joe, “Let’s have tacos for dinner.”

“What’s your Mama think about all this?” Louise asks.

“Well, she doesn’t exactly know. As if you tell her...”

“Then...”

“I told her I’m going to a workshop. ‘Color Me Right.’ When I get back I’ll be able to tell Edith Landryville that she should wear blue silk blouses to compliment her platinum hair, and peach foundation will make her look warmer.”
Louise laughs. "For Pete's sake, Ivy Mae, where did you think that up?"

As the bus pulls out, I wave to Mama and Louise, glad that Clive Junior is still on the road. He drives for Garrett Freight in the summers. Clive plans to be an orthodontist in two years. Well get married (he thinks) and move to Mason City and I'll be Clive's first patient. He says he can't wait to get me in braces. "Won't it be nice to have straight teeth, Ivy Mae. Then you'll be just as pretty as...as anybody," he said to me once.

At least I'm the only passenger. I don't have to sit and listen politely or explain to anyone why I'm going all the way to Wyoming to learn about make-up. LeeRoy drives the bus and I sit in the very last seat so I don't have to talk to him. In the eighth grade, every time I walked past him, he'd ask me, "What planet did you come from?" Just once I wish I had said, "Saturn. And how about you, LeeRoy? What galaxy kicked you out?" But I never did.

I've been teased to death about my vampire teeth, my hair-dry and frazzled as a haystack-my thick glasses. It finally doesn't matter anymore. I'm me and there's no escaping it.

As the sun drops behind the fields at the horizon's edge, I wonder how Columbus ever thought the earth was round. If he had lived here, the idea of roundness would never have entered his head. This place is as flat as a dinner plate. Surrounding the white houses are huge fields of young corn. Houses and fields--as far as you can see, that's all there is.

At least the sky changes. The cloud shows are better than movies. In June thunderheads pile up like giant mushrooms and I see it raining somewhere else. One time
my brother Sam and I drove the back roads watching tornados. Funnel-shaped clouds were spinning high above the cornfields. But before they touched down, those black clouds dissolved and floated away. The sun came out, leaving Sam and me to wonder if we had made up the whole scene. What's the sky like in Wyoming? Surely the stars shine there, too. Does Joe notice them?

I know it's strange to set all my sights on a man I've never met. What does he look like? Will he be funny or serious as Sunday Mass? I don't let myself think what will happen if Joe doesn't like me. He has to. I'll get a job in a beauty shop, fixing up ranchers' wives' hair, and at night Joe and I will sit in front of a roaring fire and read books.

LeeRoy hollers, "How come you're acting so stuck up? Get on up here and talk to me."

"LeeRoy, you just don't order people around like that," I say as I move to the front seat.

"How's Clive these days?"

"The same."

What is there to say? And why is LeeRoy talking so nice to me anyway? Clive and LeeRoy and I practically grew up together. In junior high school Clive and LeeRoy poured gas on stray cats and lit them on fire. Once we concocted a mixture with Clive's chemistry set and gave it to old man Riley's chickens. They flapped their clipped wings and cackled for hours until Mrs. Riley called the sheriff.
We know too much about each other, that’s the trouble. I’m sure LeeRoy knows Clive and I have made love twice. They both remember the day I came to school in my first bra. I want to live in a place where the mailman won’t recognize me, where my neighbors won’t recall that time I let all of Pop’s rabbits loose, where I can have a secret or two.

At Ruthven I say good-bye to LeeRoy, change to the Greyhound express, which will take me across South Dakota with only two stops. A night journey with the blackness pressing in so that all I can see is my face reflected in the window.

Two ladies sit across from me discussing Amelia and Stephen. “Isn’t it too bad everyone knows about it,” one of them says.

“Stephen deserves more. He’s given Amelia everything and look how she thanks him,” her friend replies.

I realize they are talking about Mama’s favorite program. They both remind me of Grandma Cutler with their soft sagging arms, flower print dresses, thick black shoes.

“How far are you going, dear?”

“To Wyoming,” I reply.

“My. You watch out now. I’ve heard those westerners are a wild bunch.”

Tiny globes over the seats give off just enough light for them to crochet. From the last row of seats comes the loud raspy sound of someone snoring.

We pass through Rock Valley, a town which seems deserted. The winking glow of neon signs lights the main streets, and the power company’s window displays two
quilts, pillows, and a butter churn. Beneath them a sign says, “In Celebration of Rock Valley’s 100th Year.”

At Sioux Falls the driver shouts back at us, “There’s time for a cup of coffee if you want it.”

A woman with two young children and a baby in her arms steps aboard. As they walk down the aisle, I notice the string around each child’s wrist and then the end of it looped around the woman’s belt. The little boy drags a tote bag with yellow ducks sequined on the side, and the girl holds a greasy brown paper sack in one hand and a Raggedy Ann doll in the other. The smell of French fries invades the bus. They settle in front of the grandmothers.

“Now, Mama?” asks the girl.

“I want catsup on mine. Not salt,” the boy says. He puts the packet between his teeth and yanks it; catsup splatters to the floor.

“Charlie! Be careful,” says his mother. She sits in front of me and I see only the top of her head.

Soon we are on our way. The two old ladies have put away their crochet, the person still snores from the back, the little boy’s head rests on his sister’s shoulder.

I can’t sleep, but sit with my nose pressed against the window wishing I could see something besides florescent-tipped posts flashing by. I try not to think about what I’m doing. Of course, I’m going to miss Clive. He fits me like my ratty old bathrobe with the hole under the right sleeve. Comfortable, easy, he’s more like a brother than a boyfriend. He comes over for Sunday dinner sometimes and has two pieces of Mama’s carrot cake.
I remember when Clive first moved to West Bend. His mother had her very own electric organ. She hung lace curtains and made us use the back door so we wouldn’t ruin her Persian carpets. Clive was an only child who had a room all to himself. He built model rockets and when he finished them, we all went out to the empty lot behind Daly’s and watched as he lit the fuse and the red-and-white spaceships shot up in to the bright blue sky. Most of the time the parachutes that were supposed to open didn’t and the rockets crashed. How could Clive spend so much time on something, knowing it was going to be wrecked, I used to wonder.

As the sky lightens to a pale lemon color, I see red hills, miles of sagebrush, and grazing cattle. Near a fence swallows turn in circles, the undersides of their wings catching the sunlight.

The boy stands in the aisle shaking his mother. “I have to pee,” he says.

“Charlie! You have to use the restroom.”

“I know, Mama.”

The woman sighs. “Annabelle, come and sit here. Don’t let your brother fall off.”

Where is she going with her children? Where is their father? As she passes me, her jacket catches on the seat and I notice she is pregnant. For a second I see my mother, how she must have looked years ago when I came along, then Sam, then Alice and Andy, and Paul and David, and, finally, Judy.

I remember a story Mama told me. She picked an ivy leaf off her mother’s plant and put it in her pocket, believing the first man who spoke to her would be her future husband. All the girls did that. Mama said she was walking home when a car with
Tennessee license plates stopped and a young man rolled down the window and asked her the way to the old Cutler homestead. That young man is my father and when I was born ten months later, Mama named me Ivy.

Annabelle turns around, giving me a wide grin, a black hole where her top front teeth should be. Her sandy hair is parted in the middle and tightly braided. "Where you going?" she asks.

"To Casper."

"What for?"

"To meet Joe."

"What for?"

"Annabelle. Sit down and stop pestering the lady," her mother says. "Go back over to your own seat." To me the woman says, "She asks that nine thousand times a day, I swear."

"She's just like my youngest sister, Judy," I say.

"They ought to make the Pope listen to a roomful of three-year-olds for a day. Then I bet we'd hear a different tune," she says. Her baby starts crying and she turns away before I can reply. I've heard Mama say that, too.

At Rapid City we all get off for breakfast. The snorer from the back of the bus is a man with bushy white hair and a face peppered with whiskers. He slumps over the counter and pulls a whiskey bottle from his jacket pocket and mixes it with his coffee. The woman and her children wave good-bye to me, and as the grandmothers gather their bags, they warn me not to talk to strangers.
Eating scrambled eggs, I almost cry. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Everyone I see reminds me of who I’m leaving behind. Judy is over the “what for” stage. Now she sings “Jingle Bells” and colors on the walls.

I get off the bus in Casper, stiff from sitting so long. Of course, Joe is not here to pick me up. His postcard gave me a number to call. The pay phone takes two dimes. The phone rings and someone says, “Star Lounge.” I’m surprised and can’t reply. “Say, I haven’t got all day,” the voice says.

“Oh. Uh, is Joe there?”

“Lady, it’s nine a.m. If this Joe wasn’t with you last night, that’s your problem.” He hangs up. I drop in two more dimes.

“Listen,” I say quickly, “Joe gave me this number and told me to call when I got in town. Wait. It says here to ask for ZB.”

I hear a snort of laughter. “Well, why didn’t you say so. ZB’s at work, I imagine. He comes in around five.”

“Does he live there?”

“What? This is a bar, lady. He comes in to drink beer. Look, I got work to do. Call back later.”

I go over to the wooden benches in the waiting room and sit down. Something is wrong here. I thought ZB was Joe’s friend, but Joe is ZB. I read the postcard slowly. Can’t wait to see you. Call 267-9191 and ask for ZB. But the ad was signed Joe. Doesn’t he want me to know who he is?
I can’t sit in the bus depot all day. Maybe I can walk to the Star Lounge and meet Joe, I mean ZB, when he gets off work. The boy behind the counter draws a map for me. I check my bag in a locker and set off.

Casper isn’t West Bend, that’s for sure. The cars are backed up for blocks, a few inching through the stoplights that stand on every corner. The people walking are in a hurry; they don’t look at me when I smile hello, but stare at some point in the distance. It hits me that here are the strangers I’ve been wanting, the unfamiliar faces, and it’s not at all how I thought it would be. These people frown and rush. They don’t stop to chat about baseball and gardens, blocking the doorway to the Rexall Drug.

I pass a café with the words “The Cheese Barrel” carved on a big wooden sign. There are round wooden tables and black iron chairs on the sidewalk under the awning; marigolds bloom in apple baskets. The place looks so homey, so inviting, I sit down. After all, I have seven hours to fill.

At the table next to mine a couple weave their fingers together and I think of Clive’s strong, work-hardened hands, his gentle touch that could sooth a skittish colt, that could ease me into stillness. Whenever I felt sad, Clive would take me over to watch Nickel’s latest batch of puppies and it wouldn’t be long before I started smiling again. What am I doing here? Louise was right: I haven’t got the brains of a bird. But I can’t go back, not yet.

“Aren’t there any waitresses in this place?” I ask the couple.

“You have to go inside and order. They bring it to you when it’s ready,” says the girl.
Inside a blackboard covers one wall, the menu printed with pink and blue chalk. The rest of the walls are covered with a pattern of chickens and baskets of eggs. A dairy case overflows with cheese. I order and go back outside. Watching the constant stream of cars, I am overwhelmed by the motion. How can there be so many cars and people in one place? Where are they all going? In the distance, sirens wail.

The waitress slams the plate on my table and flips the bill down. “Thanks. Have a nice day,” she says, not seeing me, not smiling. She doesn’t know me the way Irene does at West Bend’s Corner Café. If she’s not busy, Irene will pour herself a cup of coffee and sit with her customers, filling them in on her grandchildren’s latest accidents. This girl seems stiff and mechanical, like my brother’s GI Joe doll.

I spend the rest of the afternoon drinking beer in the Star Lounge, so that by the time they walk in I am quietly drunk, totally off-balance. I hear one of them slap a burly guy on the back and say, “You’re crazy, ZB. You know that?”

He’s not what I anticipated. But then, what did I expect? Red-brown curly hair, bearded, it is hard to see his face. I think of a massive bear as I see his barrel-shaped chest tapering to slim hips and thighs. He wears glasses that hide the color and shape of his eyes.

Watching him with his friends, I feel myself drawn toward him. I am struck by his hearty laugh and the way he is the focal point of the group. His voice is loud and he speaks with a fast, clipped pace, cracking jokes. He says, “Things are tough when you’re a kid,” as he downs a Miller in one clean swallow.
I take five deep breaths and walk deliberately into their midst. "Hello, Joe. How's the rustic mountain home these days?"

They are as still as the air in West Bend before a tornado strikes. Then ZB laughs. "I'll be damned. You really came."

Perched on the barstool, I am entertained by four fascinating men. Louise would just die if she saw me now. I've never been with anyone so funny. His name is Zacharias Bartholomew Kovnesky—ZB—and he's Irish. Winking at ZB, his friends leave. The two of us share a pizza and another pitcher of beer while he tells me crazy stories.

Why does most of this trip happen at night? As we go up Casper Mountain in his jeep, wind swooping in the windows that won't close, I can only sense what a mountain looks like. The bottoms of pine trees flash in the headlights' beam and the air smells cold and fresh. For a second my head feels full of water, and ZB asks, "Did your ears pop yet?" Right then, they do, and I laugh. ZB carries on an endless monologue, talking so fast that I lost the thread of meaning that must lie behind his words.

We stop and I see the darkened shape of a cabin nestled against fir trees. ZB comes around to let me out, but before I step down, he picks me up like I'm a new bride. "Hey! I can walk."

"The wolves might get you if we don't hurry."

In the morning, clear green eyes look back at me. We lie under a heavy quilt in a big wooden bed under the eaves.

"What happened?" I ask.
“You fell asleep on the couch. So I took certain liberties with your body,” he says and grins. And before I can move or say anything, he rolls over onto me and I want to cry. What did I think would happen? Did I really believe he would be a gallant knight and rescue me from West Bend's monotony or that he would propose and I would wear a lacy white veil before we climbed these stairs to this bed?

He leaps up and pulls on his jeans. “I’ve got to get to work.”

“What about me?” I ask.

“Just make yourself at home. I’ll be back when I get off. There’s a party on at Suzanne’s.” And then he’s gone.

In the refrigerator is an opened Miller bottle and in a Kentucky Friend Chicken box, congealed gravy and one half-eaten wing. Rummaging through cupboards, I find some instant coffee.

I discover that I take things too literally. This cabin is not rustic (there’s a shower, electric heaters along the baseboards, even a built-in dishwasher), ZB does not read (The Martian Chronicles and a magazine Alternative Lifestyles are the only evidence of his literary pursuits), and I wonder if he wants to share his mountain home with me, permanently, the way it matters.

On a balcony outside the kitchen, I sit with my coffee. There is nothing to see but towering trees and a small blue patch of sky directly overhead. Not like home, where my vision is free to rove to the horizon and back, where I can watch the clouds march across the wide arc of the sky.
Perhaps with ZB comes home we can start over. I can explain that I was tired and drunk, that I don’t hop in just anyone’s bed. I feel cheated. Love is not supposed to be abrupt like a door banging open and shut.

Flipping through the magazine I see the letter I wrote in response to Joe’s ad. I am startled by its frankness as I reread the lines: *As to loving, I love many things---cats, wild sunflowers, the way the sky becomes mysterious when it is filled with clouds and a full moon. Loving people has been harder.* What did ZB think when he read that?

That night ZB brings in three friends and they wear smug grins, as if they know something I don’t. ZB wouldn’t tell them about last night, or this morning, would he?

“How’s my Nebraska farm girl? Come on. We’ll eat and go to Suzanne’s.”

“ZB, I’m from Iowa. West Bend, Iowa.” It is suddenly important that he understand.

“Iowa, Nebraska, whatever. They’re all the same, aren’t they?”

We go down the mountain, again in darkness, around and around the hairpin curves, while ZB keeps us laughing the whole way.

“Do you know all these people?” I ask ZB at Suzanne’s as we thread our way through the crowded room to the keg in the bathroom.

“I’ve met Sonny before. Suzanne’s current boyfriend. Some of the others I’ve seen around,” he says. He wanders off and I stand on the edge listening in.

“Man, he hit that ball over the fence like there was no tomorrow.”
“You know, she’d be great if she just didn’t bitch all the time.”

Their words graze the surface, the way a dragonfly skitters over a creek. They don’t know each other but stop here in Casper on their way to somewhere else. I meet people from Wisconsin and Vermont and California, people with no ties, out to make a fast buck and split to finer places.

The next day is Saturday and ZB shows me his town. For a while I am bewitched by his charm, his exuberance, his whimsical sense of humor. He is like a big delightful child. We wander through a shopping mall, eat corndogs and popcorn, drive through fancy neighborhoods with backyard swimming pools, and go to the tenth floor of a hotel where flashing strobe lights turn the dancers into jerking puppets.

The weeks pass and we get to know each other better. ZB tells me stories about the people he met at Woodstock, the time he sailed his boat down the Atlantic coast to Florida. He sold the boat to buy acres of timber behind Casper Mountain so he can build a cabin and spend his life skiing and partying.

“Why do you want to build another cabin? This one seems nice enough,” I say.

“Yeah. But it’s not mine. I rent it and I have to move in a month anyway. The owners sold the place.”

“Is your other place ready then?”

“Are you kidding? I haven’t even bought a saw. One of these days…”

“But what about your furniture? Where will you live?” I ask.

“The furniture goes with this place. I’ve got a suitcase of clothes. And that’s the way I like it.”
Finally I see Casper Mountain, which is not a mountain, but a pine-covered ridge jutting up in a barren prairie. Looking down from Lookout Point, the town spreads east and west, the Platte River meanders in a lazy S-curve, and the refinery sends up plumes of smoke. Huge tanks filled with oil cluster on the outskirts of town, beyond which is a desolate wasteland. There is the effect of earth and sky, of space and openness, but here the land is stark, empty, bleak. West Bend’s plains are tamed and fertile, a place where dairy cows graze and corn grows.

In spite of everything, I still feel drawn to ZB’s lighthearted approach to life, his irresponsible ways. Then he shares his ultimate goal--to be like two old men he met one time at Muscongus Bay, off the coast of Maine.

“Eighty years old, but they looked fifty. Here they were, sitting on the deck of this big yacht, sipping bourbon. They were in great physical shape, you know, and all they did was sail. Winters they went down to the Caribbean and did some deep-sea fishing. No women, no kids, no ties,” he says.

“That sound nice, ZB. But don’t you think they had families and jobs before?”

“God. You’re missing the point. I want that sort of life. Now.”

Then one night he doesn’t come back up the mountain until very late. The cheese sauce for the cauliflower sticks to the pan; the baked chicken is cold.

ZB tells me he was at Suzanne’s. He looks at the ruined food and pulls me down to the couch.
“Look, Ivy. We’ve got to get something straight here. I don’t want a cozy little domestic scene with you. Or anybody, for that matter. It’s been a nice two weeks, but you’re cutting into my life. OK? Do you get my meaning?”

“But you said you wanted to share your…”

“Damn it! That whole thing was a joke. We were bored one Sunday and wrote that ad during halftime. Bryan mailed it in just to see what would happen.”

His words knock my breath away. I can see them, sitting around with their beer, laughing. “Put in loving. You want a loving woman,” one of them would have said.

“What gives you the right to trample on people’s feelings? So that’s why all your friends have been grinning like monkeys. How could you? God, how could you?” I scream.

Rushing around the room like a windstorm, I gather my clothes and jam them in my suitcase.

“Where are you going?” ZB asks, blocking the doorway.

“To the bus depot.”

“You can’t walk down the mountain in the middle of the night. Wait. Let’s both calm down.”

“If you don’t drive me to the bus depot this very second…”

After the long silent ride down the mountain, he says, “Look, Ivy.”

“Don’t say anything. I feel sorry for you, ZB. You don’t know what
loving means. You’re going to wake up some morning and find the party’s over and everybody’s gone home.”

ZB cups my chin in his hand and says, “Maybe I will. Till then—we had a good time, Ivy, didn’t we?”

I have to drop my eyes. I don’t know what it is we’ve had.

“Remember that, OK?” he says. I get my suitcase and he drives away.

The boy tells me the bus won’t be in for three hours. I ask him if we’ll cross South Dakota at night. “The sun comes up at five and the bus leaves at six. What do you think?” he asks in a sarcastic tone.

So I sit on the hard wooden bench, close my eyes, and imagine thunderheads that foam above the fields south of the Cutler place, while Mama pulls clothes off the line and Judy shoos the chickens into the shed. “For Pete’s sake, Ivy Mae, you always have to learn the hard way,” Louise will say as her pink Rambler bounces over the ruts in the road on the way home.
A REMEMBERED PLACE

Waiting for his wife to dress, Owen looks out the hotel window. A driveway, shaped like a horseshoe, is lined with palm trees, and the curved fronds seem to sweep against the hard blue sky. The December sun bounces off white gravel, making it shimmer, and Owen thinks of snow: the long stretches of land back home would be covered with snow. An immaculate white world, cold and alive.

Owen feels out of place in this warm resort town. The loud colors, garish shades of green and red, blue and yellow, snap and strain against his eyes. Seeing bare flesh against sand at this season astonishes him; being in the midst of summer when it is cold back home makes him uneasy. His wife Jesse delights in this. Just think how cold it is. Why, we’d have the wood burner roaring, she says. At night Owen watches her fill out postcards, each message to their friends carries a tribute to the heat and the sun.

Another breed of men live here, he thinks. They have trim bodies with strong muscles and honey-gold skin and gleaming white teeth. All this time he thought Florida was a place where retired people flocked for the winter warmth. Yet he has seen mostly young people who looked like gods.
At last Jesse emerges from the bathroom. Owen smiles at her attempts to look younger—the darker shade of lipstick, the bright pink toenails peeking from her sandals, the matching shorts and top in a color she’s never worn before, lavender.

“You look nice,” he says.

“You really think so?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

Owen can be gentle with her. This trip will be over soon. He is proud of the fact that they have been married forty-one years. Nobody understands commitment these days, he often told his sons. That’s what your Mom and I have. We’ve been happy. We’ve survived.

After breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, they go to one of the shopping malls. Jesse plans to bring Christmas back with them, to hand out gaily-wrapped packages, saying proudly, “This came from Florida.” Owen promised her this trip years ago, before the north country captured him in its cold spell.

Owen doesn’t understand why Jesse enjoys this. Wandering in and out of stores, he hears the piped Muzak and watches the crowds with their dull eyes grabbing shoes and records and picture frames. The long corridor of the mall overflows with red and white poinsettias. Fountains swirl with noisy water. The odor of popcorn and people saturates the air.

Later in the afternoon they sit in lounge chairs on the sand near the water. Watching the seagulls wheel above the boat dock, Owen finds himself thinking of sage grouse and that sharp tingle in his nose of the crisp autumn air. He almost feels the
comfortable weight of his gun across his shoulders on those early mornings when the hoarfrost glazed the willows, burnishing the branches with silver.

"Wouldn’t you like to live here?" Jesse asks. "We could live in one of those condominiums and never be cold again."

Owen is surprised. "I didn’t know the cold bothered you."

"There’s some mornings when my bones ache."

He watches as Jesse opens a new pack of cigarettes and rummages in her bag for matches. "You know you’re supposed to cut down."

"I know," she says.

"You would really want to move? Why?"

"Winter seems longer, anymore. But I get lonesome, you know? The kids gone. No stores to shop in. Just you to talk to."

"Since when did you start wanting to shop so much?" Owen asks.

Jesse begins to cough, that low rasping sound which he has come to hate. They have argued about her smoking for years. It’s a fact: she has emphysema, yet she persists, making jokes about her rotten lungs, about how she can’t stop making the tobacco companies a little richer.

"There’s no reason we have to stay there," Jesse says. "You’re retired. We could sell our house and move here."

"What would I do?"

"You could fish. And read. Maybe play golf."

"I’ve never golfed."
Owen is exasperated. She must know him better than that. After all these years, she must. Would she leave their home so easily?

"You could learn. I’ve heard it’s good for your lungs," she says.

"There’s nothing wrong with my lungs."

Owen listens to the incessant drone of motorboats, which crisscross the bright bay, churning up the water where the gulls circle, and all along the beach the people drink up the sun.

No, he will not come here to live. She can’t mean it. If she does, she’ll have to move here alone, he thinks. A man can’t give up everything. He will not put on a printed shirt and Bermuda shorts and spend his old age sitting on a deck chair watching young women parade by. He will not give in to games like bridge and golf. He will cut pine trees in the brittle October sunlight, the buzz of the chainsaw loud in the forest silence. He’ll pull on long underwear and wool shirt and tramp through fresh snow looking for deer tracks. He’ll break ice on a mountain creek and drink the clear water. And when it comes his turn to die perhaps he will be lucky enough to be on the mountain with the wind shearing the crowns of the lodgepoles.

Dappled with sunlight, this Florida sea shimmers, and again Owen thinks of snow: of how the wind dies down until the mountain is silent, and the sky lightens to a gray-pink, and without introduction, the snow is there, falling, the world reduced to white flurries and silence.

A long time ago he and Jesse loved to stand in front of the window and watch the snow. Later they would make love under the heavy quilts after the fire in the wood stove
died down and the room turned chilly. One year he made a terrible mistake and bought Jesse an electric blanket. Was that when they started sleeping on opposite sides of the bed? Or was it just the passing years. He remembers waking up one morning wondering why the curves of Jesse’s body, the secret places, no longer gave him any surprise.

Now Owen looks at Jesse. With age she has thinned down until the blue veins in her hands and across her shoulders seem too close to the surface of her skin. He almost sees them pulsing. Yes, the cold probably does bother her. Strange, how he never noticed before.

“You’re not enjoying this vacation, Owen.”

“It’s great.”

“Don’t lie. You’ve been scowling ever since we got here. You’re about as much fun as a hibernating bear.”

“It feels wrong, Jesse. We’ve spent our lives in the mountains. In December it’s winter. The lakes are frozen, not full of water-skiers.”

“You’d be going ice fishing pretty soon, wouldn’t you?” Jesse asks.

The first time he took Jesse out to the lake in the winter, she fixed a thermos of cocoa while he piled the gear in the truck. Bundled up in layers of long underwear and flannel shirts, in his olive green wool pants, and a pair of his felt pack boots, Jesse looked huge and clumsy. Wearing gloves, a hat, and a scarf wrapped around her chin and nose, he could see only her gray blue eyes. The radio said the chill factor was fifteen below. Out on the lake the wind raced. The dog loved it: dashing back and forth, a black streak in a landscape of white, her breath rising, her pink tongue the only warm color around.
Owen put poles through the ice and they stood there, hands in their pockets. So this is ice fishing, Jesse said. You just stand here and freeze for a stupid fish.

The scarf slipped down and he saw her grin. I should have brought some chairs to sit on. Some guys have huts they set up over the ice, you know. It’s not too bad then. And Jesse said, what do you do to pass the time? Tell fish stories? That day, with the sun a pale disc in the polished blue sky, the fish weren’t biting. The wind tore through their heavy clothes, chilling them, and they ran back to the truck. At least the cocoa was laced with peppermint schnapps.

"Would you like to go ice fishing when we get home?" Owen asks.

"It’s insane."

Owen sees that even though wrinkles surround her eyes and mouth, Jesse’s smile is there; one thing time cannot alter.

On their last night Owen takes Jesse out to dinner. They go to a restaurant on Sanibel Island. Orange trees in big clay pots are scattered through the dining room. Baskets of bougainvillea hang above the windows. At one end is the long buffet table, with more food than Owen has seen in one place before: clams, oysters on the half shell, crab, lobster, halibut. A rich display that delights Jesse. She takes a sample of everything. Owen wishes he could have a steak. He keeps tugging at the tie and feels the tightness of the suit coat across his shoulders. Jesse has on a long black dress with a lacy shawl, and wears on her wrist an orchid corsage Owen bought at the flower stall outside. They sit at a table near the windows overlooking water. Owen hears the subdued chatter from the other couples nearby. He and Jesse talk about the wildlife refuge they went to before dinner, where they saw alligators and pelicans and flocks of pink spoonbills flying across
the sky at sunset. Owen picks at his salad. He watches Jesse crack open a crab leg on her plate. He finally takes a bite of it from her fork; but the taste makes him choke. He reaches for his wine glass. Jesse claims this is the best food she’s ever eaten.

After dinner, they go in the lounge, where a band is getting ready to play. Owen is surprised to hear songs from the forties when the big bands were the rage, when he and Jesse used to go out dancing. Owen and Jesse sit at small round table and just before Owen is ready to ask Jesse to dance, a man comes over to their table. He is tall and dressed in a black suit. He has a full head of white hair and he seems worldly in a way that Owen is not. The man bows to Jesse and then turns to ask Owen if he can have this dance. Owen nods. Jesse is flustered at first, but then she laughs. The two of them walk carefully on to the dance floor. Owen watches them. He sips a glass of bourbon and feels a tiny prick of envy. They look good together, moving to the tune of a song by Glenn Miller. Jesse’s dress swirls out around her legs. But Owen can’t take it. He goes up and taps the man on the shoulder. He says he’s sorry, but he’s cutting in. The man smiles at Jesse and thanks her. He bows again to Owen and walks away. Owen takes Jesse into his arms and they move together over the dance floor. Jesse follows his lead; they keep in perfect step. With her arm up on his shoulder, Owen smells the sweet perfume of the orchid on Jesse’s wrist. He pulls her closer. He thinks he can feel her heart beating. He can tell if he isn’t careful, she might fall all the way into this new life here in Florida. Hang on, he tells himself. This is the last night and then we’ll be on our way home.

When Owen and Jesse pull into their driveway, they see the cat perched on the windowsill, her favorite spot when she’s not outside trying to catch birds.
“Five degrees!” Jesse says. “And to think, a few hours ago we were in the tropics.”

“I’ll start a fire. Take the chill out of here in no time.”

Home is three acres south of town on a dead-end road where Owen built a white frame house with windows on every side. All the windows open to a view of smooth bare hills to the north and west; and to the south, is a ridge smothered with aspen and pine. Every year in late September they watch as this hillside seems to ignite when the aspens turn, their leaves like yellow fire. They see it happen again in the spring, only this time, when the trees open, the color is a pale lime green. Between the house and the road is a creek, its sound always present; and bold-feathered magpies swoop above the willows all summer long.

Since his retirement five years ago, Owen gives himself a new order of things to accomplish. Each morning he fills a pitcher with seed and goes out to the birdfeeders. If someone had told him he would become a bird enthusiast, he would have laughed. But after his son gave him a feeder one Christmas, Owen discovered watching birds wasn’t something to scoff at. All winter chickadees come, one at a time, take one sunflower seed, and flit over to the red branches of the wild plum tree to eat their prize. Underneath the tree the crusted snow is speckled with hundreds of broken shells. In the spring bluebirds nest in the houses he built, and the Cassin finches arrive, the males looking as if they have been dipped in red wine. Owen bought himself a good pair of binoculars and Leahy’s *The Birdwatcher’s Companion.*

After he fills the feeders, Owen moves the truck. So the cat won’t hide beneath it, rush out and kill his birds. A crazy thing to do, really. Backing the pickup out of the
garage and leaving it parked at the bottom of the driveway. Spinner is an old Siamese that
Jesse pampers, now her sons are grown. Years ago she started up the car and heard a
terrific yowling; and when she dragged the cut and torn cat out from underneath the car,
they rushed it down to the vet. Paid two hundred and seven dollars to put in an artificial
hip. Ridiculous, the things he does for Jesse.

The rest of the day Owen cuts wood. Or clears the driveway with his snow
blower. He walks to the mailbox at two-thirty. He’s thinking of building a small
greenhouse when summer comes and trying his hand at growing tomatoes.

One night, after they have been home a week, Owen wakes and discovers Jesse
isn’t beside him. From the kitchen he sees the light, hears that persistent cough which
hangs on like winter, stubborn. He walks down the hall and there’s Jesse sitting at the
table, a thick layer of blue smoke suspended above her.

“Hell, Jesse. When are going to stop trying to kill yourself.”

“Don’t start on me. I think I’ve got the flu or something. Ever since we’ve been
home, I can’t shake this cold feeling.”

“Come back to bed. I’ll warm you up.”

The rest of the night Owen lies awake listening to the sounds of Jesse’s breathing.
In the morning he tells her to stay in bed, and he fixes her a tray with scrambled eggs and
toast and a tall glass of orange juice. Instead of eating Jesse asks him to put more wood in
the stove; and she burrows under the quilts, the electric blanket on high, nose and eyes
peering out at him like a rabbit from its den. By the end of the day her breathing is even
more labored, her cough harsh and ragged. Owen calls Dr. Davis, who tells him to bring
Jesse to the emergency room. Sounds like pneumonia, he tells Owen.
For a week Jesse is too sick to know he is beside her, sitting in the hard chair, holding her cold hands. Her face, tan from the Florida sun, pales to an ashen color. Owen sees for the first time the outline of her bones beneath the waxen skin. The gray in her sandy blonde hair. Against the white sheets, she looks diminished and breakable.

Every afternoon during visiting hours, a woman comes around with her cart of magazines and candy bars. Owen buys a Reader’s Digest, which he hates, preferring whole stories to chopped up versions. He reads out loud to hear another sound besides Jesse’s strained breathing. Around him the dissonant clatter of the ward spills into this private room: the soft shuffle of nurses’ shoes, ringing telephones, tinny TV laughter, and the rising and falling voices of people talking. “That’s some storm blowing up,” he hears. “You should have seen what that son of yours did last night.”

After eight days a neat pile of magazines is stacked on the table, the kind Owen never reads unless he is waiting—in doctors’ offices or outside delivery rooms—for something to begin or end.

When his first son was born, in the days before fathers participated, Owen stayed in a small waiting room. He remembers the black vinyl chairs, the stack of outdated magazines, the overflowing ashtrays, and the sign on the wall: We haven’t lost a father yet. Four potted geraniums were lined up on the windowsill. Every time he looked up from the magazine he gazed at fat green leaves, at the crimson red buds, almost ready to bloom. When the nurse came through the doors and told him he had a son, he went over to the window, pointing to the plants. He waved his hands, trying to show her the flowers, and ended up knocking one of the pots to the floor.
Owen laughs. He looks down at Jesse, sleeping, and wonders at the strange way memories keep floating up from somewhere. It happens more and more and by now, he just lets them come. Looking outside the window Owen sees the park across the street and then he's thinking about the first time he saw Jesse. She was swinging in a deserted park on an afternoon in October. He remembers the month because he'd just enlisted in the Navy and was going to the Pacific. He was walking in the park, waiting to take the train to Portland, and there she was, wearing a blue dress and her legs were painted brown and it was 1942. He remembers the yellow leaves on the ground and the crunching sound they made as he and Jesse walked. They'd known each other in high school, but it was only when he was leaving that they grabbed at love, just like everyone else at the time.

During the week alone at home, while Jesse is in the hospital, Owen eats up the frozen dishes Jesse makes so she doesn't have to cook so often. Lasagne, cabbage rolls, hamburger casseroles. Without Jesse he feels lost. An intangible fear nags at him, follows him from room to room, nameless, threatening. Is the cat frightened too? It seems so, for she follows Owen, becomes his second shadow, meowing. At night she climbs up on the bed and he finds reassurance in her loud purring.

Awake in the wide empty bed, Owen senses, for the first time, that final parting which will come as surely as spring. In those early years, with the newspapers full of war news and the names of soldiers killed in action, Jesse had once asked him if he was afraid to die. How did he answer? He remembers Jesse saying she was, not so much of the pain or of what came after. But afraid of the suddenness: one minute you were alive, the sun
hot on your arms as you pulled weeds in the garden, and the next minute, well, who knew? Owen’s tour of duty in the Navy didn’t lead to time on a battleship as he’d hoped. He did administrative work from a desk in an office stateside. He never saw action.

Owen runs his fingers over the cat’s soft fur. He leaves the lamp on through the night. He sleeps on Jesse’s side of the bed.

The next morning when he is marking off time until visiting hours, Owen takes out the photograph album. Outside it seems more like evening, with slate gray clouds locking out the ridge, with snow brushing against the windows, and the wind shrieking down the stovepipe. Owen looks at the pictures slowly, with careful deliberation, as if he expects them to tell him about this great riddle called time passing.

Here is a record of every Christmas and Fourth of July picnic, of two sons growing up, of five grandchildren’s First Holy Communions and new Easter outfits. Here are the before and after pictures of their house: a shot of an aspen grove, of the open framework and Jesse up where the roof would go, grinning in his carpenter’s cap. Then the finished house with the clean white paint, the manicured sweep of the lawn, the peony bushes bending down under the weight of their lush burgundy flowers. In the back of the album he finds their wedding pictures. Jesse alone in her veil and dress, holding his mother’s prayer book and the single red rose. The two of them feeding each other cake. A close-up of his hand and her hand on top, ring fingers circled with bands of gold.

That afternoon Owen finds Jesse sitting up in the hospital bed, pillows propped behind her back, holding a mirror.

“I’m going bald, Owen. Look. My hair’s coming out by the handful.”
"You’ve been pretty sick, you know."

"Tell me about it. Feels like I’ve been run over with a steam shovel. Would you mind going down to the gift shop for some lipstick?"

The waiting is over.

Jesse’s coming home.

While the coffee perks, Owen watches Jesse play with the cat. She sits at the kitchen table, wiggling her fingers, teasing Spinner, who curls on Jesse’s lap, refusing to move. There is so much he would like to tell Jesse. Instead, he looks out the window at the six aspens he left when he built the house. A thin band of sunlight shines along the edges of the smooth greenish white trunks. The trees curve with pretzel-like twists, shaped that way over the years from the wind. The fresh snow beneath them is marked with hundreds of tiny bird tracks.

"Not Florida," Owen says, handing Jesse a cup of coffee.

"What do you have against Florida?"

"There’s too many people."

"That rules out California," Jesse says. "Remember when we were through Utah that summer. Down around Zion National Park. Didn’t you like that?"

"Sure. But I never thought I’d live there."

"How about Hawaii?"

"Jesse."

"Just an idea. That leaves Arizona and New Mexico. You always said you’d like to see the desert."
Maybe the desert would be the place to go. Maybe they are grasping at straws. Dr. Davis said a warmer climate might help.

“Owen, when I said that before, about moving, I didn’t mean it. I know how much you love this place. Maybe we should just try it someplace for a month or two.”

“Don’t Jesse. You’re more important than any house.”

Owen reaches for her hand, knowing his words are inadequate, deficient somehow. He would like to tell Jesse how empty the house was, how night comes too soon in the winter for an old man alone. He would like to tell her about the fear, which seemed a premonition of a day approaching when it would be just him and the cat, a handful of photographs, and memories of a couple who lived in a house under a sky bright with white stars. Instead, he asks Jesse if she thinks the cat will like cactus and the hot sun of the south.
SUMMER STARS

On Saturday nights my husband Luke and I come to a bar called The Hungry Buzzard. It’s a small bar that’s seen better days here on the main street in Philipsburg. The front’s been covered with sawmill lumber, and there’s an awning, the whole thing made to look like an old time western saloon. Inside, Luke and I sit on tall stools, drinking and smoking, letting the night slide by.

“It’s the eclipse,” Luke says to a man sitting on his right.

“I’m telling you, it started with the atom bomb.”

“Are you two still arguing about the weather?” the bartender asks. She is a petite woman, with a Dolly Parton hairdo, and she makes the drinks strong. I watch her fill the glasses more than halfway with whiskey or gin, adding a dash of soda or tonic.

“Well, what else can you blame it on?” the man asks. “It’s July sixteenth and the temperature this morning was seventeen degrees. My tomato plants shriveled and turned black as soon as the sun hit them.”

The man is in his late fifties, I would guess, and he looks like he might be some kind of professor. His white hair and white beard are neatly styled; he’s wearing a
summer leisure suit with a pale yellow shirt and green tie. I've never seen him in here before.

Luke is still back in the sixties. His hair touches his shoulders, but the top is thinning. I can see his skin there, translucent, oddly smooth and white, like porcelain. His beard is scruffy and long, shot through with silver. He wears bell-bottom jeans and hiking boots; his flannel shirt with the blue and white stripes is unbuttoned halfway, with thick black hair curling out.

And Luke is very drunk. He props his elbows on the bar, and leans over, falling slowly forward, as if his neck can't support his head, and he sleeps. I nudge him every now and then, and he jerks upright, like a startled puppet, only to cave in on himself after he finishes another beer. The man nods sympathetically at me.

This used to be a good place to come on the weekends, when they had live music. Though the music was nothing to brag about: Donny Von and his one man band or Vern and Lila singing country duets. Luke and I used to come out dancing then. We'd wear our western cut jeans and sharp-toed cowboy boots, and we'd swing around the dance floor in perfect step, never missing a beat. But that was when we were first married. When Saturday nights were still special and we looked at each other with pride and desire. The new owners have placed a pool table right in the middle of the dance floor, and that whole end of the bar is dark and quiet now. The floor shines dimly. Black tile in the ceiling reflects all the bottles; a mirror behind the bar flashes a double row of Seagram's and Christian Brother's and Gordon's. There is the illusion of escape.

A woman at the other end of the bar loses at the game of peas, and taking her fifty cents, she walks over to the jukebox. I like her first choice: Merle Haggard, singing What
Am I Going to Do? It's late. The guys Luke drinks with after work have gone home. I'm glad he has sense enough not to drink on the job. He drives the skidder for a logging crew taking trees out of the Black Pine forest west of town.

"My name's Jonathan," the white-haired man says. He has come around from the other side of Luke to a stool beside me. "Looks like he's had too much to drink."

"That's nothing new. I'm Annie Bowen." We shake hands. When I reach for a cigarette, Jonathan is quick to light it for me.

"So, you try to grow tomatoes here," I say.

"I didn't think it would frost this late. It's summer, after all."

"I've seen snow in August once or twice," I say.

"You've lived here a long time?"

"All my life."

I think of that. How this small town in southwestern Montana has one main street, with a stoplight stuck permanently on yellow. The stores with the most to look at are the NAPA Auto Parts Center or the Angle Hardware Company. Clothes come from Big Sky Western Wear or the Sears catalog. The Valley Theatre is open two nights a week. People buy food at Huffman's Grocery, where I work. The biggest event of my week is the arrival of the produce truck, bringing in fresh oranges and lettuce. Some of the fruit comes from Washington, and when I unpack the wooden crates, I remember how I used to think I would go there, to Seattle maybe, and make a new life for myself.

Jonathan tells me he is renting a small cabin and using his summer vacation to write a book about cowboys. He has found some old ranch hands around the Flint Creek valley to talk to.
“It’s something I’ve always wanted to do,” he says. “When I was a boy, growing up with nothing around me but city streets, I used to go to every western that came to the Fox. Read every book I could find on cowboys. Their lives seemed just about perfect. Anyway, I teach history at a city high school, and it came over me last winter that I better get a move on, if I was ever going to get my book written.”

We talk some more. He tells me he’s married, with two sons in college. He thought a small garden would fill up the hours when he wasn’t writing. I ignore Luke, who is dozing, his head turned away from me. He makes me so mad.

“What’s your wife think about you coming out here? Why didn’t she come with you?” I ask.

“She was all for me doing it. She went to Japan with some of her friends. We decided a long time ago that any relationship has got to have some breathing room.”

When he is getting ready to leave, putting his change in his pocket, he invites me to his place. “Come anytime,” he says. “I’ll show you what I’ve written.”

After he is gone I order another rum and Coke. It’s embarrassing, being with Luke. Here I am, all dressed up in my new suede jacket, jeans cinched tight with the turquoise belt buckle I bought at the fair last year. Eagle feather earrings. My hair in the French braid Luke likes me to wear. And he doesn’t even know I’m here.

Luke didn’t used to be like this. When I first knew him, back in high school, he was the star of the track team and he was going places. He had dreams. He subscribed to a Seattle newspaper, and I remember how he would draw circles around the different help-wanted ads, especially the ones for freighters, offering you a chance to work and see the world. Imagine sailing down the South China Sea, he’d say. We’ll cross the equator
and land in the harbor of Katapang on the coast of Borneo. We would spin the globe he kept in his bedroom, picking out names of places we hoped to see. The Bay of Bengal. Zanzibar. Oodnadatta down in Australia. The globe had little ships on it, with dotted lines showing the routes the explorers took. I’d put my finger on the tip of South America, where Magellan went sailing by in 1522, and Luke would put his finger on mine, his touch barely there, a whisper of a touch. Our hands would move together over the smooth ivory surface of the globe, tracing out the past or inventing a new path, and then we would turn to each other, lost. By the time we graduated I was pregnant and Luke went to work right away for the logging company. That was almost fifteen years ago.

Taking some quarters from my purse, I go over to the poker machine and drop them in. I’m not very good at this game, but what you need to win—the flushes and straights and pairs—is printed beside the screen. This machine even has flashing blue lights to tell you which cards to hold. I would like to take the keys from Luke’s pocket and drive home. But I don’t want to leave him; for sure, he’ll get into trouble if I do.

I play a few games, until I lose my money, and then I just sit there, staring at the screen but not seeing it. I think about my friend Beverly and what we talked about this afternoon. We were sitting in the lawn chairs out back of my trailer. We wore one-piece bathing suits, to hide our c-section incisions, and our bodies were shiny with olive oil. The gin and tonics were cold and good. We’d been talking about nothing, really, the way you can when you’ve known each other forever. Our kids were down at the park playing softball and it was just the two of us, enjoying the ease of a summer afternoon. I could hear the swish of the sprinkler moving over the bright green grass and the birds chirping in the aspen trees. In the heat of the sun I felt like I was drowning.
Then, out of the blue, Beverly asked, “Do you ever feel, I don’t know, like, trapped?”

“Are you serious?” I said.

“Yeah. Tell me.”

I took a long swallow of my drink and thought hard. “I remember one time, I was working in the garden. When Sam was four or five, and Mark and Susan were babies. The kids were in the house, taking a nap. It was hot, and the only thing I could hear was the grasshoppers. And for a while there I had this feeling of being able to breathe. I felt free, you know? And then I heard the babies crying. I didn’t want to go in the house. I stood there, holding the rake, and I didn’t want to go in there.”

I heard Beverly sigh. She reached over, picked an ice cube from her glass and popped it in her mouth.

“I get that feeling a lot,” she said. “It’s like Bill and me aren’t going anywhere. Do you ever think about running away?”


“I know,” Beverly said.

I feel a light tap on my shoulder. A tall guy in a cowboy hat asks if I’d mind moving since I’m not playing. I go back and sit beside Luke. I wait for the moment the bartender will ask us to leave. I rummage in my purse for my lighter. It is when my fingers close around the smooth shape of the lighter that I do it. I don’t think. I simply reach under Luke’s arm and light his shirt on fire. The flame shoots out and Luke bolts
upright, his right hand swatting frantically at the blaze under his left arm. His eyes are wide with amazement. I feel far away from myself, as if I have already moved years into the future, and this event is a story I tell at parties when I have had too many tequila sunrises. Watching Luke slap himself, I think of a large, unwieldy bird trying to fly. Then the fire is out. A big ragged hole gaps from his shirt.

Luke looks at me. “What the hell was that for?” He shakes his fist at me. “If you ever do that again, I’ll kill you. You hear me?”

Luke asks the bartender for another beer. She silently twists off the top and pushes the bottle toward Luke. She doesn’t say a word. The other people—the woman by herself, the two old men, and the cowboy at the poker machine—don’t even know what happened. Or, they pretend they didn’t see anything. They go on talking and drinking as if it were any ordinary Saturday night.

It isn’t long before I tell Luke I’m sorry. “I don’t know what got into me,” I say. “We can always get a new shirt. It didn’t really burn you did it?” I hesitate and then touch Luke’s arm.

“I don’t know about you anymore,” Luke says. He seems about to say something else, then hangs back, stops. He pulls at his shirt and looks at the hole. He shakes his head at me, a puzzled look to his eyes.


Outside it is warm and thousands of stars sparkle. I tell Luke that I’ll drive, and for once he doesn’t make a big deal out of it. He slumps back against the seat, but a few blocks before I make the turn up the hill toward home, Luke says, “Don’t go home yet. Let’s drive out to the falls.”
And we do. We leave behind the lights of town and take the frontage road south. After a few miles we follow the signs to Lost Creek, a picnic area during the day and by night the place where kids from high school hold their keggers. No one is here tonight. Luke leads the way over the narrow trail. He aims the flashlight beam at the ground and we go carefully upstream, coming to the waterfall spilling into a deep still pool. The night air holds droplets of mist that I can feel on my face, and by the faintest light from the moon I see tiny crystals of water clinging to the back of Luke’s hair. There is a cold, clean smell. Luke and I find the large smooth rock where we first came together all those years ago. Above us the pine trees make a frame around the stars.

We don’t say much at first. It is almost as if we have met only tonight and our future is still out there, unformed, nebulous as the Milky Way.

“Remember when we used to talk about going out to the coast?” I say. “There was so much we wanted to do.”

“Those were kids’ dreams,” Luke says. He turns on his side and looks at me. “What is it, Annie? What do you want? We have three good kids, a nice trailer. We both have jobs. Our truck’s paid for. What else is there?”

His strong, work-hardened hands brush back and forth over my hair. The warm wind carries the distant sound of an owl, hooting.

“But there is more. There has to be.”

“So you want to move somewhere?” Luke asks.

I can tell Luke is not getting it. He’s missing the point. I want to tell him we can stay right here forever. He can work for the company till he retires. But we can’t just drift. We have to make what we do count. And maybe it’s just something in me that
longs for a larger life, one that won’t be the same day after day. With a few lines of
friendly talk, a stranger showed me the way a marriage could go and I wanted to find a
way to claim that kind of a place.

Luke rolls away from me, on to his back. We stare up at the circle of sky. A star
flares and cuts its way down through black space.


“I don’t know why. Maybe I wanted to wake you up. Maybe I wanted you to see
me again.”

“Well all right then. Let’s shed these jeans and go for a swim.”

And he is up, pulling off his boots, unzipping his pants, tossing his shirt on the
ground. He dives in. The sound of the splashing breaks the deep quiet. I watch the dark
water close around Luke and then he rises up through the ripples, shaking his head.
Treading water, he calls to me.
Daniel felt a sense of relief in knowing what he should do. He had been sitting on the deck outside the bedroom, on the north side of the house, smoking and drinking gin since sundown. He had made up his mind that this would be the night to leave his wife. In the distance the lights of town flared in the cool evening light, and the sky turned indistinct and pale once the sun dropped behind the Highland Mountains. Feeling the wind come up, Daniel went back into the house for a sweatshirt. He sliced another lime and carried this, along with a newly opened bottle of tonic water, back out to the deck, where he put everything on a small wicker table. He settled into the canvas chair and waited. Waited for Jeanne, who should be coming home from the bank where she worked, waited—knowing when he heard the phone ring from the dim recesses of the house that it was her, calling with an excuse. He wondered if she would invent something new, or go with the one she had been using for over a month: drinks after work with Sandra and Cathy. Instead of answering the phone he hurled the empty gin bottle out from the house, and it was almost as if he expected the bottle to make it into town. He heard a whoosh of air and a shattering clatter against the rocky hill. Maybe it was time to get the show on the road. To start loading his clothes in the car.
Walking back in the bedroom, Daniel looked at the rumpled sheets on the bed, the blankets curled back and tossed on the carpet. He thought of last night, of how Jean turned away from him, not wanting to be touched. Wasn’t this the way it always started? He wondered at Jeanne’s needs, not understanding why his love was not enough for her, or why she went out, seeking other men. He was a good man; he knew this.

Stepping over to the bed, he stripped the sheets off and carried the bundle down the heavy log stairs to the main floor, then down another set of stairs. He started to put the sheets in the washing machine, but stopped, seeing it already full of wet clothes. He dropped the sheets to the floor, realizing he had come down here to open the door to the cave-like room Jeanne had wanted and he had built for her, a room with shelves where she could store her canning jars. He kept his cases of vodka and gin in here too. The cement walls and floor were cold, and when he switched on the light, the clear bottles of peaches and beets and pickles, the dusky blueness of plum preserves, seemed to leap out at him, the colors defined and exact. From a large stone crock in the corner he smelled the sharp odor of cabbage fermenting. Jeanne planned on trying her hand at sauerkraut. Daniel thought of Jeanne, eating this food alone. He could almost see her, sitting at pine table, the strong morning light coming in the windows, the jam spread on a muffin, the radio turned to the country station she liked to listen to. Daniel shook his head. Now wasn’t the time; he needed to keep his anger. Daniel reached into the box of gin, surprised to find it empty. Had he really drank that much this past month? Maybe not. Gin and tonics were a summer ritual between him and Jeanne. They made them nearly every night and then sat out on the deck in the long twilight, talking about
inconsequential things. Thinking like this wasn’t good. Daniel grabbed a bottle of vodka and the empty gin box. He turned off the light and closed the door.

Upstairs in the kitchen he mixed a can of orange juice. The box was on the table, reminding him of his plan. He rummaged in a drawer and found a pack of Jeanne’s cigarettes, not wanting to go back out for his, left on the deck with the lime. What should he take first? Half the dishes? The coffee maker? A couple of the copper pans hanging above the stove, the ones he’d given Jeanne last year for Christmas?

Daniel felt a great weariness settling over his arms and legs. He didn’t want to start over. He was almost thirty-five, and he thought of himself as settled, married for good. How did you go about splitting up twelve years of marriage, he wondered.

He was on his third screwdriver when he saw the flicker of lights, Jeanne’s car, leave the main road and climb the dirt road he had made the summer before, when they built this log house on the high southern slope of the land they bought together. He didn’t hide the vodka or move the box from the center of the table.

“So you are home,” Jeanne said when she came in, dropping her purse and jacket and a plastic shopping bag on a chair near the door. “I called earlier.”

“I was out on the deck,” Daniel said.

He looked at Jeanne’s face. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes seemed too bright. She wore too much make-up these days for Daniel’s taste. Blue eyeliner, blush, and a dark, almost chocolate, shade of lipstick. She had cut her hair recently, a short blunt cut that accented her cheekbones. And she had dyed it a darker shade of brown. She looked good, but hard, somehow. Daniel wondered if this new scent, which came in with
her, was real or only part of his imagination. A smell of some kind of flower he couldn’t quite define, gardenias maybe. At any rate, a perfume she never wore around him.

When Jeanne reached for one of the cigarettes on the table, Daniel saw her hand shake. She didn’t expect me to be home, he knew, suddenly. She thought she could get home and have dinner waiting, pretending she’d been here all along.

“Have you eaten?” she asked. She looked in the empty gin box, and when she reached for it, he grabbed her wrist.

“Just leave it there,” he said.

“What’s it for?”

“That depends on you.”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

Instead of answering, he stood up, surprised to feel himself stagger. He reached for the refrigerator, thinking he’d better eat. “We got any chili left?” he asked.

Jeanne found the plastic dish and put the soup into a pan. She turned on the stove. Watching her, Daniel wondered why she was being helpful. Usually, when she came home late and he’d had a few drinks, she would go upstairs to the loft and start sewing something on her machine. She liked to make clothes. The whir of the machine would drown out the sounds of the television, where he sprawled back in an easy chair in the living room. They had these long nights when they wouldn’t say a word to each other.

“Cathy’s car was in the shop, so I gave her a ride home,” Jeanne said. “We stopped at The Bon. It’s the last day of their summer sale. You want to see what I bought?”

“Summer’s over. You should be thinking of sweaters.”
Before they sat down to eat, Jeanne put the empty box on the top step. Daniel looked at it, seeing his decision slip away, postponed for another day, another week, but still there, like the night outside the house.

What he wanted, more than anything was for his life with Jeanne to go on like before, untroubled by infidelities he didn’t understand. If Jeanne would tell him the truth, the reason she risked everything with him for a quick tumble in some drifter’s bed. Was it the predictability of marriage? Was she simply bored? If they could talk about it. But she made up lies, each time. Then suddenly, she would stay home again, the nights out with the girls would stop, and for months they would be close again. Each time he hoped it would last, and in the way of most things, it never did.

“Jeanne, I don’t have to work tomorrow. Why don’t you call in sick, and we’ll drive out to the lake and get the boat in. They’re saying heavy snow this weekend. We’ll have dinner at the lodge.”

Jeanne picked up the bowls and carried them to the sink. She turned to him.

“Okay. But no more vodka tonight.”

The first time Daniel saw Jeanne with someone else had been accidental. He was driving home early in the afternoon, taking the rest of the day off from his landscaping firm. He planned on surprising Jeanne. As he took a shortcut through the park he saw her car parked near the tennis courts. There was no one playing. He drove slowly by, and then he saw Jeanne walking on the path that circled the small lake. A man with a beard and shoulder length hair was beside her, his arm around her shoulder. They leaned close together. As Daniel watched, they stopped and Jeanne started throwing something out into the water. A line of ducks swam in close. Daniel could see that Jeanne was laughing.
He didn’t stop. Instead of going home he went for a long drive out into the country, flooring the gas pedal, speeding over the back roads. When he did come in late that evening, he asked Jeanne what she had done that day and she said she had gone shopping and then for a walk. He didn’t know, and would never know, why he hadn’t called her on it. He remembered thinking: if I don’t ask, it will go away. I won’t have to face the truth. But by now he didn’t know what kind of truth he wanted to hear.

It was late afternoon before they got away. The sky turned gray, the air humid with the promise of snow. Once they were on the highway, Daniel noticed how late the season was. The aspens high up on the ridge were already bare, their branches the same gray as the sky. Only in the protected gullies, sheltered from the wind, did the trees still have leaves, paper-thin and yellow. The willows growing beside Dry Creek were the dusky red color of a fox’s pelt.

On the seat between them were a six-pack of beer and four wine coolers. When he had stopped at the store, Jeanne gave him one of her looks, her mouth pinched into a tight frown. If you’re going to drink, then get me some wine, she said. He almost got back in the truck right then, not wanting to spoil the afternoon. But he went inside anyway, returning with a small brown bag of penny candy fish. The jellied hues of red and green made Jeanne smile.

A few miles before they reached Georgetown Lake, Daniel saw a large flock of geese flying south, their blackness scrawled across the sky. Behind them came more. He pulled the truck over to the side of the road and rolled down the window. They sat listening to the odd, plaintive calling, which sounded like the yipping of small, lost dogs.
They watched the geese form and uniform a large V: from one side, each bird would drop off and fly to a point further back.

"I always hate seeing them leave," Jeanne said. She lit a cigarette and opened one of the wine coolers.

“But they always come back through," Daniel said.

“Somehow it doesn’t mean as much to me when I see them in the spring.”

By the time they pulled into Stuart’s Landing, the clouds dropped lower, obscuring the mountains and the far side of the lake. The water was a smooth, unbroken surface, the color of dull pewter. Fog blurred the boundaries between water and sky. Most of the other boats were already gone. Theirs looked neglected and forlorn, Daniel thought, watching it knock against the wooden pilings.

While Jeanne went in the store to buy some bread and lunchmeat, Daniel hitched the boat trailer to the back of the truck and then backed it down into the water. He jumped out of the truck, and with his back to the store, he pulled a pint of vodka from behind the seat and took a long swallow. If Jeanne hadn’t become so righteous with him all of a sudden, they would both be half drunk and stoned on some good weed. He looked out over the quiet water and he wondered if she played it so straight with those other men. Somehow he didn’t think so.

Sitting on the dock they ate bologna sandwiches and potato chips. The water was so low here Daniel could see the bottom. The wind turned colder just as they finished eating and a fine spattering of snow began to fall.

“You’re going to have to drive the boat up on the trailer,” Daniel said.

“You know I don’t know how to do that. You never let me run the boat.”
"You never wanted to. Look, it's not hard. Make a circle out from the dock here, and then come back in real slow. I'll yell at you when to kill the engine. With any kind of luck, I'll be able to pull the boat right up on the trailer."

Jeanne couldn't get the boat started. With the low water and the wind, she drifted so close to the shore that the motor's propeller was dragging in the sand. Daniel had to give up the idea of an easy time. He waded out to her, climbed in, and using the oars, swung the boat out into deeper water beyond the dock. He started the engine on the first try. Jeanne kept saying she was sorry. Daniel told her to pull in and let him off at the edge of the dock and then to circle back out and line up on the trailer.

By now he was shivering, his pants wet up to his thighs. Jeanne came in right this time and he pulled the boat up on the trailer in one easy motion. But as he turned the hand crank, the hitch between the trailer and the truck broke loose. The trailer dropped to the ground. He let go of the crank, which spun wildly in the opposite direction. As it came around, it smacked against his hand. He jumped away, cussing, shaking his hand to stop the pain. As the boat floated free, scraping again over the coarse, rocky bottom, Jeanne stood up. The boat keeled to one side, tipping low in the water.

"Daniel, are you okay?" Jeanne asked.

"Sit down! You're going to fall in," Daniel shouted. "Use the oars and get the boat out where the water's deeper."

He turned away from her. He pulled hard on the boat trailer, trying to draw it back up onto the hitch of the truck. He felt his feet slipping in the water. But he hung on and shoved the steel clamp down. He wiped his cold hands on his jeans and watched Jeanne. She didn't understand how to use the oars. She had the boat turned around, facing away
from shore. He shook his head. Why did she have to make it so complicated? He opened
the door of the truck and grabbed the vodka. He tilted his head back and took a long
swallow.

“Don’t just stand there drinking!” Jeanne yelled at him.

“Why can’t you women tell the difference between forward and backward?” he
shouted back.

The boat drifted further out. It could almost be funny. Jeanne pulled the oars
toward her, and then tried pushing them away. She’s so helpless with anything
mechanical, Daniel thought. He could hear the soft hiss as the snow hit the water. The
oars splashing must have disturbed the loons, who called out suddenly, somewhere out
beyond the fog. Daniel looked at the snow, clinging to Jeanne’s dark hair and sticking on
her red parka. As Daniel watched her moving away from him, it came over him with a
rush how badly he wanted her still. She was his whole world and he didn’t want to let go
now. But he knew he couldn’t share her with anyone else. Not anymore. He dropped the
bottle on the sandy gravel and waded out to the boat. He took the oars from Jeanne and
started rowing in to shore. They didn’t say anything.

Finally the boat was secured and Daniel drove the truck away from the water’s
edge. He helped Jeanne out of the boat and they climbed in the truck. Daniel turned the
heater on high, feeling the warm air blow over his wet jeans. Removing his boots and
socks, he pushed his bare feet close to the vent. Jeanne sat near the door, dry and mad.

“Where’s the bottle?” she asked.

“Don’t start. I’m wet and cold and I don’t want to hear about my drinking
problem.”
“At least you’re admitting there is one.”

“Maybe there is. But is it as bad as what you’re doing?” Daniel asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How about a game of tennis?”

“Tennis?”

Daniel watched a few ducks swim in closer to shore, their gray feathers blending in with the gray everywhere. The snow, more like sleet, wet and thick, was falling faster. Daniel turned the windshield wipers on and watched the blades move back and forth. Jeanne stared out the window.

“You’ve known, then.”

“I saw you.”

Daniel wanted to reach out and touch her. Make a gesture that would get her to look at him. But he couldn’t.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“Something dramatic? Like kill the guy? I thought about it, a long time ago. But what would that solve? Maybe this time we should call it off. End it clean.”

Jeanne turned toward him. He saw the sadness in her eyes.

“I mean the drinking. What are you going to do about that?” she asked.

“Is it a trade off then? I quit the booze and you stay away from the other men?”

“You need help, Daniel.”

“And you don’t?”

Daniel turned the key and started the truck. He was surprised at how quickly twilight came on. The violet light behind the clouds flared and turned dim. He thought of
the fine summer evenings on the lake catching silver salmon, the kokanee, and of how
those days were over. The wind veered, coming out of the north, bringing more snow. On
the drive back into town, Daniel knew a wind like this would shear the rest of the leaves
from the trees, leaving their shapes clearly outlined against the sky, and the long season
of winter would begin.
BUT I LOVE HIM

Jason has a smile to die for. All the girls at school bend when he smiles; they swoon; they'll do anything to be at the end of that smile. Radiant and dazzling. But it's just for me. I'm his. He's picked me and I'm his girl.

My mom doesn't like him. She says he's too old for me. A senior's got no business with a freshman, she says. Dad's six years older than you, I say back. Things were different then, she says. Boys knew you meant it when you said no. Well, Jason's not like that. He loves me. Love? My mother asks. What do you know about love? So I don't tell her Jason's really nineteen, he was held back in school after first grade. We were always moving around a lot, he told me. It's not like I'm dumb or anything, he said, grinning.

Here's how we met. It was August. The carnival came to town. By nightfall the flat and dusty field on the north edge of town became, suddenly, a whirling place of action. There was something to do. All the high school boys got a job for the week. Jason
worked the Ferris wheel. My friends—Heather and Beth—and I traipsed back and forth along the fairway, pretending to ignore the cries of the boys behind the game booths and the rides. “Step right up, ladies. A dollar and this bear is yours,” they’d cry out. We’d laugh. We all knew each other. This is a dork town, so small you know everybody your whole life. The high school has 90 kids. But here we were. A hot summer night and we walked in circles around and around. We bought popcorn. We tried our hand at the shooting gallery. We kept passing the Ferris wheel and Jason was there. He’s watching you, Heather said to me. Get real. He is not. He is. There’s one way to prove it, Beth said. Let’s go for a ride.

We stepped up to buy tickets. Jason said only two could ride together. I’ll ride alone then, I said. You can’t Lucy. That won’t be any fun, Heather said. Sure it will, Jason said. He almost pushed Heather and Beth into the seat and settled the bar across them. When he checked the bar across mine, he leaned in close and smiled. You’re not afraid are you? Hardly, I said. It’s my favorite ride.

Around and around and around. Going over the top I could see the winking blue and green and red lights of the carnival, and out beyond that the streetlights of town and out beyond that the darker shapes of the hills. This town lies in a valley, it’s like being cupped in the bottom of a bowl. Sometimes you have to climb the hills, to get above it all, to think that there might be a way out of here.

I felt the ride slowing to a stop. Each person climbed out, even Heather and Beth. But Jason wasn’t letting anyone else on. As I came past him, he called out, this one’s on me, Oh, Lucy in the sky with diamonds. And I was alone on the Ferris wheel. How could he, how could he, I’m so embarrassed, and then at the top, at the very top, he stopped the
ride. The seat swayed back and forth. The air rushed around all fresh and cold. Put your head back, Jason shouted up at me. Look at the stars. It was hard to see them at first, because of all the other lights. But then, there they were, white and flickering, a hundred million of them shining.

And then I came down and before Jason would pull the bar away and let me out, he leaned in real close to me and said, Did you like that? Did you like how I was in control? Then he made me tell him my phone number.

My friends are so jealous. He calls me every night. We talk and talk. We hang up. Then he hits the redial button and he’s back. Just checking, he says. I miss you, he says. We circle each other with words, looking for answers. *What’s your very favorite...? What would you do if you didn’t have to do anything? Did you ever like, love anybody before? This much?* Wanting to close all the distance between us fast. To make up for the thousand years we haven’t known each other.

I have a phone in my room now, a birthday present from my dad. He wouldn’t go all the way and get me a separate line of my own. But at least I can say what I want. My mom isn’t like, hovering close by, trying to pick up on what I might be saying. She is unbelievable! She won’t leave me alone. What do you know about this boy? Where does he come from? I want you to bring him to dinner. That is so hokey, I yell at her. I’m not asking him over here so you can look him over like some pack of meat you’re trying to buy at the store. *Who’s the power pole in your house? Your dad or your mom?* We ask each other. Can you believe we have to put up with them?
And then school starts. Being the oldest kids at Fred Moodry Middle School is over and we are the runts of Anaconda High School. Last in line at the cafeteria. Slaves to the seniors for the first week of school. A tradition our parents try to stop, but never can.

Heather and Beth and I cling together, trying to slide down the hallways between classes like we’re ghosts. But you have to wear this stupid beanie hat the first week. Bronze and white stripe. Home of the Copperheads. And the seniors slouch against the steely gray lockers, the boys in their oh so tight jeans, or their baggy khaki carpenter pants, black combat boots, or tennis shoes (depending on who you hang with is how you know what to wear); and the girls, who are more sophisticated than we will ever be, band together and block us off. We have to carry books for them to their classes, and then run, almost late, back to our own rooms. If they ignore you though, it’s worse. Then you know you’ve been branded. A nerd. A geek. You’ll be forgotten then. You’ll be a nobody.

And Jason must have said something because the boys leave me alone. Jason stands by my locker (his wavy brown hair combed back from his face, his arms ropy with muscle, wiry and tight from lifting weights) and smiles when I come over, handing me his books, and I carry them and it feels like something then. I’m stepping through this door and I’m someone else. I’m a girl to be looked at. I’m a girl with a boyfriend.

I turn away from Heather and Beth. I leave them to their fate. I don’t care what happens to them. Up to the second floor with Jason’s books and before he goes in the room, he brushes his finger down my cheek. See you at lunch, he says.

Running back through the hall to the stairs and down without looking, taking them two at a time, and there at the bottom, they jump in front of me. Three of the senior
girls. In here, bitch, they say and push me into the restroom. They knock my books to the floor. You have to do what we say. And we say, wash off that makeup. Now. The water is cold; there's the gooey pink soap and the scratchy feel of paper towel. The morning light trying to shine through the glazed tiles of the window. A smell of disinfectant and perfume or hairspray. And my own sweaty fear because I am nobody here. You think you're Jason's girl? one of them says. She’s tall and skinny (bone-heads, we call them: the girls who won't eat, who get so thin you can see their bones sharp beneath their pale white skin) and has jet black hair. She says, he won't think much of you when he sees you plain, sees you're just a little girl. She kicks my books around and stomps on my notebook with her four-inch high clogs. The other two stand there, just watching. If we catch you wearing makeup again, it'll be worse. The door swings open and they are going out. But she turns around at the last moment and whispers: Jason better not know anything about this, you hear?

At lunch I keep my head down. I try to make myself small and unnoticeable, my hair pulled forward over my ears. When I go to the table where Heather and Beth are waiting, I look at them. They look at me. Their faces are scrubbed clean too. They do it to every girl, Heather says. We burst out laughing. It's okay then. We're a part of something. But I can't help thinking: we look so naked. We look like the girls we're trying so hard not to be anymore.

On Friday of that first week of school, it's over. Heather and Beth and I are walking home. The sky's a bright blue and the aspens on the hills above town are starting to turn yellow. It's good to be outside, away from the closed in stuffiness of the
classrooms, from teachers cranked out that we’re too restless to listen, from the high-minded seniors who think they’re studs. We toss our stupid beanies down on a street corner and walk away. We’re headed to my house, but suddenly a blue and silver pickup pulls in beside us. In the back are boys, Jason and his friends. The truck stops and they jump out. They surround us. Get in, they say. We’re taking you hostage. It’s not like they’re mean. They’re laughing and shoving and they pull us up in the back of the truck. We zoom off, heading down to Washoe Park. Where there’s a party before the football game. It’s a fake party though. There’s just pop and chips and the kids in their cars, with the same music blaring from each one. This week it’s Aerosmith’s latest CD. The real party is going to be later, after the game, out at Lost Creek. That’s where the beer will be. As we ride along Jason puts his arm around me. He tells me he’s thought of how I could look better, how I could wear my makeup different. Seeing you all week made me think of it, he says. My face feels hot. But the other boys and my friends didn’t hear him. They’re shouting and waving at some other kids walking home. Ones who didn’t get picked by the seniors.

But it’s not all innocent there in the park, with the big old cottonwood trees and the creek rushing by. Some of the boys in my class get thrown in the water. They get held down by the seniors, just long enough to come up gasping for air. Tempers flare and it seems like there might be a big fight. But then it’s over. There’s laughing and whistling and we all swear that if the chance comes up tonight we’ll be ready to kick some butt against the rival team. The buttheads, we call them. The buttheads from Butte.
And this whole time Jason stays right by me. He keeps holding my hand. I’d look
down and see his fingers laced through mine. He wouldn’t let go. His grip on me was
hard and tight. I wanted to stand by Heather and Beth, but he wouldn’t let go.

Some of the kids start leaving then. See you tonight, they call. Be ready. The
sun’s going down behind the A hill (the hill with the letter A that the seniors trace out
every year with old tires and light on fire on graduation night) and the wind coming up
off the creek turns cold. I’m going to be in trouble, I tell Jason. I was supposed to come
home right after school. No problem, he says and smiles. Let’s get these ladies home!
Jason calls out to his friends who are driving the flashy trucks and the cars they keep
shined to perfection.

Do you want me to come in and explain to your mom? Jason asks. I’ll tell her it
was a school thing. But I tell him no, he’ll make it worse. My mom’s ragging me all the
time, I say. She can’t remember what being young even looks like.

I tell Jason to drop me off a couple of blocks from home. He kisses me full on the
lips, in front of everyone, before I jump out of the back of the truck. Goooooo, Heads!
They all shout as they drive away.

We won that night. Twenty-one to seven. I listened to the game in my room, the
door shut tight against my mom who is just too unreal. So what if I don’t come right from
school? Is that a reason to ground me for a night? She wouldn’t even let me use the
phone. She answered it every time it rang and she’d say to my friends: Lucy can’t come
to the phone right now. She’s in her room. I’ll tell her you called. Imagine how hard it
was.
We live across the street and one block down from Mitchell Stadium. Cars were parked in front of our house even. I could look out my window on the second floor and see the lights in the stadium. The sounds of the game—the cheering crowd (practically the whole town goes), the band playing our stupid school song, the announcer’s voice over the loudspeakers—came into my room along with the chilly night air. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling, hanging on to the knowledge that one of those phone calls was Jason. He was over there, having a blast, but he’d taken the time to call. More than once. My mom finally stopped answering the phone. She plugged in the machine and I heard Jason’s voice every time the tape started. Missing you, Lucy lady, he’d say and hang up.

I finally can’t take it anymore and go down to the kitchen. I put a pack of popcorn in the microwave. While I’m waiting for it to get done my mom comes in from her sunroom. It’s this special room she and Dad built on, a glassed in room with wicker furniture that’s not even comfortable to sit on, and all these plants. She sits out there a lot, reading.

When she walks in the kitchen, it strikes me all of a sudden that I’m taller than she is. She’s five foot three and I’m four inches taller. I can stand up straight and look down into her eyes. She goes over to the freezer and takes out an ice cube tray.

We’re going to have to get some rules straight, she says. The ice cubes clatter into the glass. Finally she looks up at me. Does she know it? Can she tell I’ve got the edge here? (I used to wear her clothes, but now they’re too small. I’m not a petite, size two anymore, like her. I’m tall like my dad. I’ve filled out some, he likes to say). The timer beeps on the microwave. I turn away from her and she grabs my arm. We’re not finished here, she
says. Yes we are, I say. As long as you live under my roof, you’ll do what I say! she shouts at me as I head for the stairs. *We’ll see about that!* I think. We’ll just see about that.

The next day, Heather and Beth and I are wandering in and out of the stores in the Butte Plaza Mall. Heather’s mom drove us over. It’s the thing to do on Saturday. Butte’s twenty-four miles from home, but it’s where you have to come for any kind of shopping. Anaconda’s got zilch in the way of stores. And this place isn’t all that great either. A few stores under a roof. A water fountain and pond in the center aisle, with green wooden benches. We’re in Herberger’s, trying on sweaters. Heather and Beth are acting kind of funny, like they know something I don’t. They keep glancing at each and then looking away. They go in the changing booths together and send me back out in the store to get bigger or smaller sizes of pants.

Heather’s skinny, but she’s not a bone-head. She’s tall and lanky and she makes jokes about her big feet. She wears her hair pulled back in a pony tail. She spends most of her time practicing basketball. She wants to make the varsity team next year. Beth is shorter. But she’s got the prettiest face between the three of us. Dark brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a pouty round mouth that looks like a lush red berry, we tease her. She purses her lips into a kiss. I need some of that new lipstick, she says. The kind Melanie was wearing last night. Melanie? I ask. Who’s she? Heather and Beth’s eyes lock. *Whoops.* She’s nobody; she was at the kegger last night, Beth says.

You guys went? Without me? I ask.

Well, it’s not like you were around, Heather says.
It wasn’t that big of a deal, Beth says. There’s a fire going and the boys all dare each other into chugging the most beer. I don’t know if I’d go to another one.

Come on, Heather says. Let’s see what’s new in Maurice’s.

Was Jason there? I ask.

Yeah, he was, Beth says. The two of them look at each other again.

So?

Well, so nothing. He kept calling you on his cell phone. It was kind of funny, Heather says. He’s supposed to be here.

Here? He’s coming here. Shit. I look like a slob, I say.

Yeah, right. You beat us all in the fashion department, Heather says.

As we walk by Universal Athletics, there he is, Jason. Looking good. Joking around with the sales girl, trying on a pair of high tops. Two of his friends are pawing through a sales rack of sweatshirts.

Hey, ladies, Jason says when he see us.

And what happens the rest of the time we’re there (and Heather’s mom is drinking gin and playing the poker machines in Nickel Annie’s, waiting for us) is this: Jason picks out a bunch of clothes for me. Stuff I’d never even look at. Slinky little tops and these paisley colored skirts so short I’d be afraid to bend over. He picks out some plain oxford shirts from the boy’s department to wear over the tops. What’s so amazing is how good it looks. Heather and Beth are oohing and aahing. Jason’s friends, Tim and Bob, shrug and say they’re heading for the music store. I tell Jason I can’t buy all this. I don’t have the money. And he says, it’s from me. But you need the right shoes to pull it all together, he says. People go to all this trouble to look good in something and then they wreck it by
wearing the wrong shoes, he says. So that’s how I end up with a pair of black army combat boots and a pair of those four-inch clogs all the girls are wearing now. The thing is to alternate them. Boots and a mini skirt, it’s kind of weird, I say to Jason. But you look so hot, he says. My mom’s not going to like this, I say. That reminds me, Jason says. We’ve got one more stop.

The man in the Cellular One store is as nice as he can be when Jason turns on his sweet smile. He helps Jason pick out a phone and a pager. It’s a red one, a bright cherry red. What do you need a phone for, I ask Jason. I thought you already have one.

I do, he says. This is for you. Now I’ll know wherever you are. Won’t that be something?

He pays for it with a charge card. I remember you only have to be eighteen to get one. He signs his name with a flourish. He puts his arm around me and pulls me close and we go back out into the main part of the mall. Now that mother of yours won’t be able to cut me off, he says.

Sometimes when I get dressed in my room in the morning, and look in the mirror (it’s a long one that hangs inside my closet door so I can see myself whole), I don’t recognize myself. Who are you? I lean in close and look into my eyes. They’re blue. But Jason convinced me to get my contacts changed to this mossy green color. Then I go all around my eyes with this purple eyeliner. I went to a different beautician, one all the girls are going to now, and she cut my hair in the new blunt bob, and it kind of fans out on the edges, just below my ears. She dyed it this mahogany color, that’s got this kind of purple
undertone to it. She even plucked out my eyebrows, and then you draw new ones on. You can change the shape of your face that way. It’s weird.

The boss colors for fall are green and purple. So my outfits mix and match. I tug down the tight little skirt. I don’t like wearing it really. I’d rather be in jeans any day. And I still wear them sometimes. But they have to be tight. And if I don’t wear a special top, then Jason tells me I look sloppy. Your image is everything, he says.

My legs look too long in the skirt. I pull on the clogs (they are hard to walk on; they make my feet hurt). I pirouette in front of the mirror. Am I pretty, or what?

I save the last touch until I get to school: the dark and shiny lipstick, the color of black raspberries.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I make a piece of toast. My mom is sitting in her chair near the window that looks out on the backyard. She’s reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. She looks me over, but doesn’t say anything. Not today, at least. The past few weeks we’ve been at each other like tomcats staking out territory. I sit down at the table. Outside is a gray rainy morning. The leaves have fallen off the weeping birch tree that grows in the center of our yard, and it looks so amazing: the white bark of the tree, and all the gold leaves scattered over the grass. There’s the soft colors of the asters I helped plant last spring, before I even met Jason. Mauve and lavender. The palest shade of lilac. The way the colors look together seems real, somehow, right then. They look like they belong together and are not the hard purple shades of my skirt and sweater with the lime green belt. I wonder if you could find a jacket in that pale creamy ivory color. But then, it wouldn’t go with anything I’m wearing now. And Jason wouldn’t like it.
I ask my mom if I can go to the show tonight. It's just a bunch of us meeting there. Heather and Beth, I say.

And Jason?

He'll be there. But it's not like a date.

She shakes her head then. Lets out her exasperated sigh. Okay, Lucy. But straight home when it's over.

When I grab my book bag, I turn around and look at her again. She seems kind of sad sitting there, her head bent over the newspaper, with the steam coming off her coffee, the china cup all by itself on the place mat. I gave her that cup for Mother's Day one year and she uses it every morning. It's got tiny blue flowers painted on every side. They're called forget-me-nots. I'm about to say something to her, I don't know what it could be, but then the phone starts ringing. The cell phone buried in my bag. I hurry and unzip it, scramble through the books and folders, and grab the phone. Hello? Hello? I listen and nod. Okay. Okay! I didn't forget. See you in a few.

My mom is watching me. It's nothing I tell her; just some notes for English.

He's really got you under his thumb, she says.

He does not! You just wish somebody noticed you as much. I slam out of the kitchen. And you better make a hair appointment! Your roots are showing. I shout back at her.

By now I know a lot about Jason. He's not a jock; he hates all that rah, rah, team spirit stuff. But we go to the home games on Friday nights. We hang out there and then go to this apartment where a couple of his friends live. They're out of school, Cody and
Sean, and they rent this place on Third Street and Chestnut. It’s this rundown building with two stories, and inside, it’s kind of funky, with all this thrift store furniture mixed up with the new big screen TV and a surround-sound stereo system. There’s always beer in the refrigerator and old pizza boxes. We don’t do much. It’s just a place to hang. There’s two bedrooms; and sometimes, couples go in them and it’s no big deal. Jason hasn’t wanted to do that yet. When we’re at Cody’s he’s always watching the drag races or playing poker. He’s always asking me to get him another beer. Sometimes, the girls move into the kitchen. We almost get a conversation going, but then our boyfriends come in and stand by the stove and talk too. So then we can’t talk together like girls anymore. We have to listen to what the boys are saying and act like it’s all we care about. Heather and Beth hardly ever come here now. It’s too creepy, Heather said. And you know the cops are watching the place. Jason’s friends are going to get caught eventually, for selling to minors, she said.

They’re not selling anything, I said. Sean is twenty-one. He just buys beer and he lives there. It’s his beer, I said. I don’t like it there myself; but that’s where Jason wants to hang out, so it’s okay by me.

Jason likes to go for long rides in his car. We head up to Georgetown Lake (my mom thinks I’m at Heather’s) and it’s the best place to be. We make the loop around the lake. Earlier the trees were this blaze of yellow across the hillsides. But now it’s November and the color’s almost gone. It’s snowed a couple of times and the mountains just leap out almost, all covered in white, butting up against the blue blue sky. Jason drives slow and I look at his hands. There’s something about seeing his big hands on the
steering wheel of the car that gets to me. His fingers are long and tapering; they look strong. He’s got all the power and control, over the car, over me. I sit beside him and he puts his right arm around me and pulls me in close and we drive along and we don’t have to say anything, anything at all.

Beth joined the drama club. The play this year is *Othello*. I think about signing up. Not for the acting. But it might be fun to work backstage. With props. Or set design. I’m pretty good at painting. I even went to a couple of the early meetings; but when Jason heard how much time you had to commit to the thing, he said he’d be lonely. I said he could join too. He really laughed then. Me and a bunch of kids pretending they can act and Shakespeare? Whoa, Lucy! Get your brains back to earth.

When I try to talk to Heather and Beth at lunch, Jason’s right there. One time Heather said, so do you like, have to get his permission to go to the bathroom? That really cut me. And when I told Beth I wouldn’t be in the class play, she said, you should maybe think about reading it. It’s about this guy who’s so jealous he smothers his wife.

Like they know anything.

Then one day after school I’m over in this picnic yard that’s on the north side. There’s a couple of tables gouged all over with people’s names and hearts, cut by pocket knives when you’re sitting here bored. A few spindly trees try to grow, but they look like sticks now with the leaves blown off. I’m waiting for Jason. He’s still inside, held up by his math teacher. Some boys from my class are horsing around, shoving each other back and forth. They are so stupid. Why do boys get off on this horsing around stuff? Grabbing
each other in head holds, always elbowing each other. I’m sitting on top of a table, watching the boys, and I happen to look down and there it is: a big heart and carved inside, the names: Jason loves Melanie. I rub my fingers back and forth over the words. Then a boy breaks away from the others; it’s Eddie, who’s in my English class. He comes over to me. He asks me what pages we’re supposed to read for tomorrow. I wasn’t paying attention in class, he says. And we’re talking about the book, saying how much we hate it. And then Jason’s right there. He plows into Eddie and they both go sprawling. I jump off the table. Jason! Stop it! I shout. He was just asking me about George Orwell.

The other boys run over and pull them apart.

Eddie jumps up and brushes the dirt off his pants. He reaches down for his backpack.

You leave my girl alone, Jason says. You and George just better stay clear.

Eddie looks at me. He’s trying hard not to grin. He pulls on his baseball cap and nods to me. Then he walks off with his friends. I hear a loud bray of laughter as they cross Main Street, heading for football practice.

Jason grabs my arm. His fingers pinch down hard. His brown eyes blaze with something I’ve never seen before.

I jerk my arm free. Let me go, Jason. I’m going home. I don’t feel like doing anything right now.

Is there something I don’t know about? Jason asks. Are you and that little prick getting it on?

Don’t be such a moron! I shout. You’re the one with secrets. You and Melanie! I run across the street and start walking fast down Fifth Street. Jason doesn’t come after
me. I pull the hood of my parka up. The wind is blowing and it’s starting to snow. Hasn’t he ever heard of *Animal Farm*?

By the time I get home, the phones are ringing. The one in my house, the one in my book bag. The pager is beeping too. My mom is standing at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes. A bowl of carrots sits on the counter and a pan of onions sizzles on the stove. Would you mind telling me what’s going on? she asks. He’s been calling and I said you weren’t home yet. We both look down at the book bag on the floor by the chair, the ringing inside sounds like the bag’s alive and trying to signal us. Aren’t you going to answer it? She grabs the kitchen phone and I shake my head no. Well, I’m sorry, Jason, Lucy’s here and she doesn’t want to talk to you, my mom says.

He must be at home, I think, calling on his cell phone and his parents’ phone too. My mom hangs up; but the cell phone goes on ringing.

What’ll I do with it? I ask.

So my mom reaches down and takes out the phone. She pulls the antennae up and says into the receiver, Jason, this is Lucy’s mom. I told you she doesn’t want to talk to you right now. Please respect her wishes and stop calling.

Then she hands the phone to me. It starts ringing again.

Go put it out in the garage, my mom says. Take the pager too.

She switches on our answering machine and turns the sound down so we can’t hear Jason’s voice, pleading, then yelling, begging, then blasting out.
I have to hand it to my mom. She doesn’t pry. She puts on the kettle for tea and then she asks me to peel the carrots. She says with the snow coming it seemed like a good night for stew.

And then I tell her about Jason and Melanie, how I saw the heart on the picnic table. I tell her Melanie’s the girl who pushed me down in the bathroom, the one with the jet black hair and the pencil thin body.

Lucy, you can’t think Jason’s never had another girl.

He said he’s never been in love before. He said I’m the only one.

Then maybe you better talk to him. Love means being able to listen, she says.

So now you’re taking his side? I ask.

I run up the stairs to my room and slam the door. I flop down on the bed. Staring down at me are all the posters I put up last summer. The Backstreet Boys. Johnny Depp. Leonardo DiCaprio. Brad Pitt. I suddenly hate them all. Dressed up so fine, so pretty, smiling. Looking down at me.

It’s like a white dream out of the window with the snow falling in big fat flakes. The kind of snow that sticks, that covers everything up. If I were younger, I’d go back to the kitchen. I’d grab my mom’s hand and pull her out into the yard. I’d make a snowball and throw it at her. We’d laugh and have a real fight then. Not the kind we’re having now. But I’m not that girl anymore. I’m always wrecking everything now. I have to take everything to the edge. I have to push against her and see how far I can go. And maybe Jason and Melanie had something going on. I’d be kidding myself to think they didn’t.
But what I saw clear were the boys in my class crossing the street together, in on
something I should have seen before. Jason’s not the love of my life.

I pull a chair out from the desk and climb up on it. I start tearing the posters from
the wall. Who needs them! I take every picture down, roll them up, and put them in my
closet. The mirror hanging on the door catches the strange light from the snow. The gray
light softens everything. The walls are so bare. I look at my reflection. It looks like I’m
standing in the snow waiting for something to happen.