Are you going to be spitting?

Shelby Lynn Monroe

The University of Montana

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ARE YOU GOING TO BE SPITTING?

By

Shelby Lynn Monroe

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Dean, Graduate School

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NAKED FOR DANNY

I first got naked for Danny in the bedroom. I've always been one of those people who associate nudity with the bedroom, specifically the bed, ideally under the covers. Some people will seek out situations where they can disrobe in front of others, say, around a hot tub. A hot spring. At least they have the sense to do it someplace hot. But for me the bedroom is the place. So when Danny suggested getting naked I was perfectly willing. Perfectly willing. We even took turns removing our garments. My chiffon blouse for his sansabelt pants. It was a shared experience, a
cherished aspect of our commitment to one another. Our indestructible bond.

During the first months of our marriage I was never required to take off my clothes anywhere outside of the bedroom except, of course, in connection with matters of hygiene. This pleased me. I felt our union was indeed a strong one, one brick of its foundation being our mutual desire to save our naked selves for the safe haven of our Perfect Sleeper.

But time will inevitably erase the honey from honeymoon. Danny went away on business. Hoyle playing cards, hopefully selling more than playing. Las Vegas, needless to say, because it was written all over his face when he came home, and in the newfound vigor of his hug.

If it had stopped with that gesture, however startling it was, there's no telling how long I might have held onto that contented feeling that distinguishes the newlywed. Unfortunately, Danny had a plan, a plan in which I figured quite prominently. He seized me by the elbows, which had nearly merged with my ribs thanks to the prolonged embrace, and pushed me towards the kitchen.

"Hungry for a burger?" I asked. I felt a chill, as if my clothes had been stripped away, and that's when he said it.

"Why don't you take off them things, darlin', and hop up onto that kitchen table."
Take off them things. Them things. He was possessed with the idea of humiliating me and didn't even have the decency to express this desire properly.

"I don't think so. You know the legs on that table are loose."

"And that don't give you no ideas?"

During our courtship, which now seemed recklessly brief and caused me to question my success in unearthing Danny's true nature, he had, if memory served, been capable of speaking intelligibly. The moral and verbal deterioration I was now witnessing caused me to recoil.

"Them things?" I was determined to get at least one of his squeaky wheels back on track, and felt that perhaps his grammatical lapse was a sensible place to start.

"You know, baby. Your slacks and whatnot."

It appeared the mind we had however briefly shared was now divided. His half had abandoned the English language as its means of communication, replacing it with a primitive systems of grunts and gestures. Careless fragments of partial thoughts.

I comforted myself with the notion that this could be a stage, albeit an alarming and decidedly deviant one, but nevertheless a stage that would pass and someday serve as one small square in the patchwork quilt of our married life that we would point to and chuckle over, again as one.

"Listen, sweet thing, it would do my dick just a world
of good to see your cute little ass shakin' over that Lazy
Susan there."

Hadn't his interest in chewing tobacco turned out to be
merely a flirtation? An experiment in the flight pattern
and velocity of gritty brown saliva? Surely this was no
different. Indulge him this once. The sooner this dreadful
scenario was played out the sooner we could resume our
normal pattern of love making, our vulnerable flesh viewed
only by our equally modest Wamsuttas.

"You can get naked either here on the floor, or up on
the table. I don't care." Danny said generously, but with
a look in his eye that suggested this was the only point I
might feel free to argue, and as its importance was slight
in relation to my impending loss of dignity, which I knew
would be thorough and complete, I saw no need to quibble. I
undressed on the floor as a matter of safety.

Danny, forever the gentleman, steadied the table as I
gingerly made my way from the carpeted edge of the living
room to the clammy linoleum of the kitchen, to the greasy
vinyl cushion of the dinette set chair, and finally to the
slick, chilly green laminated tabletop. Danny stepped back
slowly, cautiously, as if he had just finished putting up a
house of cards. And there I hovered, certain that any
movement on his part or mine would send me skidding across
the kitchen floor.

"You think you might jiggle them things for just a
shred of a second?” Danny poked his fingers into the air to indicate which things them things were, but it didn't matter. A drop in temperature had accompanied the change in altitude and my skin gripped my bones in a desperate search for warmth. Add to that the dubious nature of the construction upon which I balanced and no amount of begging could have convinced me to jiggle anything, let alone them things.

"Look alive up there."

It was one thing to be lured into his unpleasant experiment, and yet another to be badgered as I so graciously participated. I longed to abandon the whole exercise and flee for the safety of the bedroom, but a risk free dismount was impossible without his cooperation. So I attempted to jiggle and found my paralysis unshakable.

"I'm frozen, Danny."

Either my heartfelt plea struck a chord or Danny had grown bored trying to turn the kitchen table into a Las Vegas stage but, for whatever reason I didn't really care, he stepped forward and pressed his palms into the laminated surface. I stepped down.

For as long as Danny was not asked to fly anywhere, likewise I was not asked to leave the ground either. I had all but forgotten the original episode when Danny was called away on a week-long business trip. He tossed his bags into the trunk of the taxi as if he had nothing on his mind, and
waved good-bye in an equally carefree manner, but I knew the cards had been dealt. I knew my hand, and there was no use trying to bluff my way around it.

I got Danny's toolbox from the garage. I felt the authority of the tools as if Danny's hands still gripped their handles and guided me in my work. The table should have been less intimidating, flipped over, its wobbly legs refusing to stay perpendicular to the floor. But I knew no amount of screw or hinge tightening would make it any more inviting. Maybe it was me. Maybe just as the table needed tightening, I needed loosening.

I drew the curtain, doubtful whether pulling the material over the glass would guarantee privacy. Superficially, yes, but how could I be sure I was truly alone. What would it feel like to be completely alone. No Danny. There must be a freedom in absolute privacy, in knowing any action, however forbidden or strange, is safe from judgment. And if such a state could be reached with, say, a husband that would have to be considered rather special. Marital perfection. I felt it was my duty to take the first step, so I removed my clothes, as if engaged in a slow, solitary game of strip poker.

I paused with one sock on, and stared down at the purplish-beige skin of my naked right foot. My toes curled under, shrinking away from the cold, curious air that was
nothing like a blanket. The exposed foot was an open
invitation to an icy chill that travelled quickly through my
body and delayed my progress. My fingertips were pinched
and numb, and lost the ability to distinguish between the
elastic edge of my sock and the skin underneath. The
buttons of my blouse grew slippery and it was impossible to
force them through the shifting buttonholes that seemed to
be shrinking. I was never schooled in the art of the strip-
tease but had a hunch that by neatly folding each garment
upon its removal and forming a tidy pile between the toaster
and microwave I was perhaps violating standard procedure.
But why ruin an outfit.

I climbed up onto the table normally reserved for meals
and an occasional game of bridge, and remained on my hands
and knees, feeling somehow warmer in this crouched position,
wondering what it would take to get me to stand up. I could
no longer blame the table which, thanks to me, barely
flinched under my weight. It was all up to me now. I was
alone in a house that was growing darker by the minute and
the thermostat was set at a balmy seventy-five degrees,
warmer even than Atlantic City had been on our honeymoon.
There was no reason to feel cold, no reason to feel any
different than the dishwasher or the couch. I was just
another object.

I was in the bedroom when Danny got home. I had been
preparing all week for his return. The kitchen table was as familiar to my feet as the bedroom floor. I heard him drop his things down in the front hall while he whistled his way around "Seven Year Ache" and never quite hit the chorus. I was fresh out of the shower, still in my robe, and knew Danny was waiting for me so I stepped into my slippers and went to him.

"Baby, hi. Come on over here." Danny hugged me, again with a zeal he seemed to have borrowed or stolen from somewhere, and I caught him glancing over my shoulder towards the kitchen table. He pushed me with the wall of his body and I resisted just enough to keep us together. In this manner we worked our way to the kitchen, dancing the world's slowest tango.

"Now, do I need to tell you what to do, honey?"

I hesitated before backing out of my slippers. Danny folded his arms and cleared his throat as if preparing to give me an authoritative pep talk. But he could save his breath. I stepped up onto the table before he had a chance to hold it steady for me and he lurched forward, his arms reaching out for me, grabbing air. I stood motionless long enough to convince him I wasn't going anywhere, and then I threw my shoulders back and let the robe drop. I shimmied ever so slightly, just barely moving the air around me. Danny had stopped moving altogether.

"It feels a little cold in here, sweetie. Maybe you better come down from there before you catch something."
But I was just warming up. I cocked my hip and traced a circle around me while Danny choked on a piece of oxygen. I jiggled everything I had, including things I had only recently discovered, and watched Danny’s eyes searching the corners of the room for something he must have lost.

"Danny, I'm right here, baby."
DANDELION TERRORISM

Wayne Frame paused on his front step, turned, and drank in every inch of his lawn, every carefully manicured blade of grass. Not a weed anywhere. His chest swelled proudly as he inhaled the early evening air. Reluctantly, he opened the door, deeply sorry the pristine greenness could not be brought inside.

A rubber dart grazed his cheek. Wayne placed his briefcase on the floor, his eyes shooting down the hallway, and up the stairs.

"Okay. Who's the wiseguy?" he asked, his chest returning to its original size. He listened for the sounds of laughter or retreating footsteps, but detected only the rasping, cranking sound of a dart gun being reloaded. He was a sitting duck. In his own home. Wayne gri-
maced and questioned the wisdom of entering the house. He toyed with
the idea of stepping back outside, of wrapping himself in the peaceful
serenity of the breathing green blanket he had spent many weekends
weaving. But if he left now, there would only be a shower of darts
waiting for him later. His thoughts were interrupted by a direct hit.
The bridge of Wayne's nose tingled and he blinked several times to re­
store his equilibrium.

"Someone is going to get it," Wayne said feebly.

He attempted to recall his last run in with the sniper, believing
the memory would provide him with a solution, an escape plan. Hadn't it
just stopped, he thought? Yes. He had shut his eyes patiently, and it
had just stopped. He would shut his eyes now. A dart bounced off
Wayne's left ear lobe. No, that must have been the water balloon
assault of '88. Wayne stared at his polished leather shoes. Three
rubber darts littered the floor. He bent over and quickly gathered the
darts together in his fist. How many rounds did the kid have left? He
breathed heavily. Who had bought the goddamn gun in the first place?
He paced. What was the point of having sex if this was the outcome?
Wayne felt dizzy and wondered what the statistics were on rubber dart
fatalities.

"Hi, Daddy. What's the matter with your face?"

"What?" Wayne started. Where had this one come from? Why
was she smiling so sweetly? What was she hiding? "Oh, yes. Hello.
And what are you looking for, hmm?" He felt certain a confession was
imminent, followed by a heart felt apology. He could wait.

"I was looking for you. Mommy says supper's ready." The child
turned and walked to the dining room.
Wayne found himself caught in the throes of a moral dilemma. If he retreated to the dining room he would never know his assailant. He would be accepting defeat. Surrendering. His paternal integrity would be destroyed. Wayne knew it was his duty to track down the unruly juvenile and deliver a suitable, yet stern lecture, perhaps accompanied by a vigorous spanking if it turned out to be one of the smaller ones. But he was also hungry. And his wife did have a way with meatloaf.

"Oh. There you are. Where were you? Looking at the lawn?" his wife asked, looking up from the table.

"That. And,..." Wayne examined the faces of his family for clues. Someone would slip. "I had a little episode," he added, watching everyone closely.

"Why don't you sit down and have some meatloaf before it gets cold, dear," his wife said.

"Sure. Why not." Wayne saw that the chair at the head of the table was occupied, possibly by the guilty party, and collapsed in a vacant spot near his wife. "Maybe we should have a family meeting," he suggested.

"I don't think so, dear," his wife answered.

"But,--"

"Relax and eat your dinner. Oh, somebody moved into the Russell house."

"Really?"

"Yes. It will be nice to have a new family in the neighborhood."

"I'll tell you what will be nice," Wayne said, chewing a small piece of meatloaf, "It will be nice to have that lawn cleaned up. It
will be nice to leave the house in the morning without having to look across the street at that mess. It will be nice not to have to worry about all those goddamned dandelions—"

"Dear. You're ranting. Please. Calm down and eat your dinner."

Wayne glared at his wife and children, who had stopped eating and watched him nervously. He cut a piece of meatloaf and pulled it from the fork with his teeth. No one moved. He lifted his eyes from his plate and let the meat fall from his mouth.

"What? What are you looking at? Don't you have places to go, ambushes to plan?" He snorted and returned to his meal.

"It's just that,--Well, when you talk about lawns, you get that maniacal gleam in your eye, dear. It scares the children."

"Yeah, well, that's because they've been spoiled. It's my fault. If I made them help with the weeding and fertilizing, or the mowing, well, then. Then they'd be just as disgusted as I am by that tangled mass of weeds and crabgrass that threatens the very air we breathe. If it didn't take all day Saturday and Sunday to keep our lawn in shape, why, I'd go over there myself with the mower, and--"

"Dear. The children."

"Daddy, can we get a puppy?"

"No. Quit asking me."

"But,--"

"No. There's no way in hell I'd allow a dog. Crapping regularly all over the lawn. Patches of withered, yellow grass. No way. And that reminds me. The Belber's have been walking that goddamn poodle on our property again. You would think with all the free time you people
seem to have that you could work out some kind of a schedule, some way of patrolling our property to protect it from filthy, destructive beasts like that poo—"

"Get a grip would you, Wayne. You're sweating all over your meatloaf which, by the way, is cold now. And what makes you so sure it was the Beiber's poodle?"

"Oh please. Don't you think I know poodle crap from Saint Bernard crap, and Saint Bernard crap from cocker spaniel crap, and--""

"Are you happy now? You've cleared the room."

"They do that on purpose, you know."

"What?"

"The dog thing. The puppy question. They do that to set me off. Don't think I don't know it."

"You seem a little more paranoid than usual. Maybe you should go to bed early tonight, dear."

"Oh, sure. As if I can fall asleep when the burden of the detection and removal of all bowel movements on our lawn rests solely on my shoulders. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to put together a schedule. These children are going to share in the responsibility of the front lawn. Enough of that devil-may-care lifestyle of theirs."

"Well, you know, they are in school all day. You can't blame them for wanting to play when they get home."

"Yes I can. And while they're in school, I think you know who will be watching the lawn." Wayne broke off a piece of meatloaf and carried it upstairs.

After a fitful night of sleep, Wayne awoke to the sounds of
slamming car doors and excited voices. He stepped over to the bedroom window and parted the curtains. A man and a woman were removing a trunk from the roof of their weather-beaten van, while two children played catch, a golden retriever chasing after the ball. A golden retriever chasing after the ball. "No," Wayne said, seizing his uncombed hair in his hands. When the initial trauma was completely absorbed, he lowered his hands and searched the room. He glanced at his wife, who slept in blissful ignorance of the new developments across the street. Finally Wayne found what he was looking for. He grabbed his carefully rendered "Canine Removal And Punishment" chart and, still in his pajamas, hurried down to the kitchen to post it on the refrigerator.

He dressed for work. Before stepping outside, he took a moment to kneel on the living room couch and peer through the vertical blinds at the scene unfolding across the street. Just outside the window, the golden retriever was crouching tensely in a position that could only mean--"Stop. Stop." Wayne's lips quivered, his voice temporarily lost. He rushed to the front door, grabbing his briefcase.

From the front step, Wayne watched the dog trotting across the street to the safety of its family. Wayne surveyed the damage. The diameter of the fecal deposits did not disprove his theory that the overall size of a dog corresponded directly with the size of its crap.

With briefcase in hand, Wayne strutted down the flagstone path and across the street to confront the party responsible for the steaming pile of excrement that was presently suffocating between eighty and one hundred and forty blades of grass. It was a race against time.

"Excuse me," he said, waiting to be acknowledged.
"Oh, hi. Honey, look. A neighbor. One of our new neighbors," the man shouted cheerfully to his wife, "We're the Farley's. I'm Bernie, and that's my wife, JoJo."

"The welcome wagon doesn't waste any time," the woman said, emerging from the van.

"No. I couldn't waste any time. Wayne Frame. I'm afraid there isn't much time. Your dog has left something on my lawn that must be removed immediately."

"Oh. Heh, heh. Well, you can just toss it back over here."

"What? Oh, no. I am not referring to a ball. Your dog has relieved himself on my lawn. Please. I must leave for work."

"Not to worry, neighbor. We'll get right on it."

"That would be appreciated. I've put a great deal of time and effort into the maintenance of my lawn, and--"

"And you don't want a lot of dog shit getting trapped in your Toro. I hear you, man." Bernie clapped Wayne's shoulder and laughed.

"Fine. Good. Well, then. Welcome to the neighborhood, Bernie. You're probably anxious to get to work on this mess, aren't you?" Wayne asked, gesturing to the overgrown plot in front of the house.

"What? Oh, the yard. Sure. Maybe plant some flowers."

"Yes. That sounds nice. And you won't forget the--"

"Don't sweat it, Wayne."

Wayne crossed back over to his side of the street, relieved that the confrontation had been civilized and successful. He left for work comforted by the knowledge that the new neighbors were aware of, and respected, his concern for the health of his lawn.
Returning home, Wayne grew excited as he turned off onto the cul-de-sac that constituted his neighborhood. He observed Homer Darby adjusting his sprinkler system. Good luck, Homer, he thought smugly. All the water in the world isn't going to disguise the fact that you use an inferior blend of seed. He smiled securely. None of these lawns stood up to his. He was the God of Grass. Mr. Green. There it was. His lawn. In all of its lushness. It was so, so green.

Wayne jumped out of his car almost before it had stopped. He rushed to the edge of the driveway, where he caught himself, and quickly slipped off his shoes. Tiptoeing delicately over the lawn, Wayne marvelled at the density of the growth, and the intensity of the color. Overseeding. His brilliant choice of overseeding. He felt the house looming over, and ending, his moment of peaceful meditation. It occurred to him that he had a family. Neighbors. Neighbors with dogs. Wayne longed to become a blade of grass, to join in the harmony spread before him.

"Yo! Wayne!"

Wayne rotated his head.

"Hey." Bernie swaggered across the street, treaded carelessly over Wayne's lawn.

"The foot path," Wayne suggested. He noted the absence of the dog.

"Whoa. Sorry," Bernie said, lurching over to the path. "You take this stuff pretty seriously, huh?" he added.

"Well, yes, I do." Wayne gripped his briefcase and shoes tightly.

"That's cool. Everybody should have a hobby."

"What would yours be?" Wayne asked, annoyed at the assumption that his lawn was merely a hobby.
"Oh, I don't know. I guess you could say I dabble in herbs."

"Herbs? Interesting. So you'll be planting a flower and herb garden after you get that jungle cleared away?" Wayne asked hopefully.

"Oh no. Heh, heh. No. I don't think that would be a good idea. Probably just leave the front as is. Use the backyard for the, uh, garden."

"You can borrow my mower. I could help with the reseeding. I have some vacation time coming," Wayne gasped.

"Well, that's mighty white of you, Wayne, but it's no big deal."

"But. But. The weeds. The weeds. For God's sake, man--"


"I think I should,..."

"Mix a pitcher of martinis. Or whatever it is you guys do. But do it fast, pal, or your head's gonna pop off." Bernie shook his head, as Wayne pivoted on his toes and made his way to the house with the grace and speed of an inchworm. "Oh, by the way, Wayne, I got rid of that shit for you," Bernie said, temporarily arresting Wayne's movement, his right leg hovering in front of him. "Thought you'd like to know," he added, turning back to his own house.

Wayne reached for the knob of the front door, but, in a welcome wave of self-preservation, opted for a more discreet entry and made his way around the side of the house to the kitchen door, which was locked. He sensed a menacing presence, and jerked his head from shrub to shrub attempting to avoid another uninvited assault.

"Hey, mister. Look."
A child had materialized at his side. Popping up out of nowhere. Like a weed. It was holding a weed. It was showing him the weed. Presenting it to him as if it were a precious work of art.

"Get that out of here."

"But, look." The child gripped the dandelion firmly and popped the yellow flower off the stem with a violent upward thrust of her thumb.

"Well, you've got the right idea," Wayne said, stooping to retrieve the dandelion's severed head. "Now take this, and go back to wherever it is you came from." Wayne held the weed away from his body like a ticking package. The child obediently collected the flower from Wayne and he watched her skip down the driveway and across the street.

He looked through the window of the kitchen door and saw his wife watching him. He gestured towards the doorknob and mouthed the situation to her. She didn't move. Wayne repeated his actions and waited. He rolled his eyes and pounded on the door with his fist. Finally she stepped forward and flipped the latch.

"Do you have a problem?" Wayne asked, throwing down his shoes and briefcase.

"I saw you run that little girl off our property."

"And this is the thanks I get?"

"Thanks? She was just being friendly."

"Oh, wake up, would you? She had a weed. Don't pretend you didn't see it. I wouldn't be surprised if that loafing father of hers sent her over here just to get me--"

"Come off it, Wayne. You sound like a complete idiot."

"Oh, that's nice. I work hard all week, and still I manage to keep
the lawn in blue ribbon condition, and now I'm an idiot because I'm not welcoming the enemy with open arms like the rest of you. And where's my chart? Where's my C.R.A.P. chart?"

"I took it down."

"Took it down?"

"Of course."

"Well, you're just lucky it's Friday. I'll patrol over the weekend. Obviously I can't count on you."

Wayne was awake and outside by 6:00 A.M. He rubbed his hands down the front of his denim overalls and inhaled the morning air mingled with the dew soaked grass. Bending down to lawn level, his knees quickly grew moist. He combed through the grass with his fingers, drops of water running over his knuckles. A powerful stream of water struck a nearby patch of grass, and Wayne remembered it was time for his bi-monthly check of the water's pH level. But he didn't remember turning on the sprinkler. His head turned sharply, just in time to see the Farleys' dog loping down the street.

"Goddamnit," he grumbled. He righted himself and hastened across the street. His fists pounded the Farleys' front door, the sound echoing down the street like a neighborhood alarm clock. Several seconds passed before Wayne's efforts were acknowledged. Bernie Farleys' hair occurred in tangled tufts on his head. Wayne noted that the state of a man's hair was a good indication of the state of his lawn. He narrowed his eyes to correspond with Farleys', which squinted sleepily at the raging presence on his doorstep.

"Problem, Wayne?" Bernie asked, with a yawn that gripped Wayne in a foul-smelling cloud.
"I'll say," Wayne said.

"So?" Bernie closed his eyes, unable to tolerate the hour. He scratched himself absently.

"Don't you think you should walk your dog?" Wayne barked.

"Got one of those doggy doors. Best goddamned thing." Bernie returned to his vertical slumber.

"For you, maybe. However, the delicate balance that is necessary for a happy neighborhood hinges upon a mutual respect for each other's property. Your dog--"

"Can I get it later, Wayne? I'm about to lose a whole lotta Mexican food." Bernie swung the door shut in a sudden burst of energy.

Wayne felt a burning rage erupt in his chest. He spun around, determined to repay the damage wrought by the herbicidal hound. He bounded down the steps and began the destruction. He walked on the lawn. Stepping from one patch of growth to the next, Wayne regretted that he wore his soft-soled gardening shoes. The sharp edged heels of his business shoes would have done twice the damage. After stomping around Farleys' property for twenty minutes, Wayne returned to his lawn.

Wayne immersed himself in his landscaping duties. He became one with his lawn. Hours passed magically. The rumble of distant lawn mowers was music to his ears. He could never share this joy with his family. They didn't deserve grass this green. A drop in the level of moisture on the grass indicated his peace would be disturbed shortly by the waking household. Wayne glanced across the street. They would be awake soon, too. He could see clumps of uprooted bits of lawn, crushed weeds, all the result of his early morning uprising. He shuddered under a cloud of guilt and fear, and fled to the safety of the garden center.
With a trunk-full of supplies, including several rolls of twelve inch fencing, which he thought might deter trespassing canines without obscuring the view of his lawn from the road, Wayne attempted to anticipate Bernie Farleys' next move. Perhaps he could go over there with a rake and an apology and head off any future attacks. Yes. That would probably work. If Wayne could believe the bumperstickers on his van, Bernie was a peaceful man.

The steering wheel grew slippery with the sweat from Wayne's palms. He coasted cautiously towards his house, and noticed a group of children playing on the Farley property. He recognized several as his own. Yes, Farley was a peaceful man. Wayne relaxed and pulled into his driveway. He unloaded his purchases and prepared to encircle his precious lawn with the protective fencing. He unraveled one of the rolls and stared at the edge of the lawn, calculating the damage the installation would inflict. It would be like surgical stitches. He nodded to himself. Painful at first, but beneficial in the long run. He proceeded. The knowledge that his children were wreaking havoc on someone else's property was comforting. Wayne felt the day was unfolding splendidly. He tapped the wooden strips into the ground, carefully parting the grass to reduce blade fatalities. He hummed the theme from Green Acres. His body tingled with the excitement that came from performing a meaningful task. With the last post intact, Wayne stepped back to admire his neatly contained piece of the planet. A rush of pride propelled him across the street on a diplomatic mission.

Wayne weeded through the collection of children that blocked the way to Farleys' front door. He knocked several times. He pressed his face against the glass and searched the darkness.
"Mister."

Wayne glanced over his shoulder and flinched. It was the dand- lion-toting devil-child.

"What is it?" he asked.

"My Daddy is in the backyard," she volunteered.

"Oh. Thank you." Wayne dismissed the child and made his way around to the back of the house, just in time to see Bernie depositing a three-foot plant into a neatly prepared hole. There were several plants already in place, and Wayne was stunned by the tidy rows.

"Ah. Tomatoes," he said, startling Bernie.


"Well, I can see now why you don't have time to tackle your front lawn. You're too busy back here." Wayne laughed.

"You got it, fella." Bernie chuckled.

"Hmm." Wayne was impressed by Bernie's involvement with his garden. He saw it as a very positive sign. "You know, I really want to apologize for this morning. Your lawn. I'd like to help whip it into shape. My schedule is pretty light, just a little trimming, soil testing. What I thought I could do over here is some preliminary clearing, testing. Assess the weed situation. And," Wayne beamed, "Mix you a special blend of seed. Kind of a welcome to the neighborhood gesture." He was completely overwhelmed by this rush of goodwill and had to grab the fence to keep from collapsing.

Bernie watched Wayne teeter and patted the soil down firmly around the plant he was working on.

"Sure, Wayne. I don't see why you should bother yourself, but if
you feel it's something you have to do, then what the hell. It's all yours."

"Great. I think you'll find that when the grass really starts to thrive, you will actually enjoy taking care of it. Why," he released a giggle, "Why I sometimes daydream about it while I'm at work. The greenness of it."

"You're a wacky guy, Wayne," Bernie said.

"Yes, well. Maybe. Okay, then. I'll get started first thing tomorrow." Wayne composed himself quickly and hurried home to organize his equipment for the enormous job that lay ahead.

The excitement of his assignment, the energy expended sharpening shears, cleaning equipment he hadn't used in years, and planning and replanning the sequence of steps necessary for a successful seeding, drained Wayne. He woke up feeling like a salted slug. Some of his original enthusiasm had been slept away. The pressure of two lawns was too much. He stepped outside, hoping his doubts would disappear at the sight of his dazzling lawn. They did.

In his haste to get started on Farleys' lawn, Wayne almost forgot to inspect his own. He almost walked right past an irregular growth, a hostile interloper. He plunged to the ground and had his suspicions confirmed. It was a dandelion. But how? He scanned the area for others. There appeared to be only one. For now. He knew the source had to be Farleys' lawn. He gagged briefly when it occurred to him that he himself might have introduced the demon seed to his heretofore unsullied lawn. His mouth grew dry, his collar tight. He fled to the garden center for some extra-strength weed killer.
Returning to the battle zone, Wayne noticed the children already at play outside. His new fence appeared to keep them out, as well as dogs, and Wayne felt partially soothed, although the dandelion infestation had been a violent shock to his soul.

He unloaded a variety of chemicals and treatments, and stepped forward to launch his counter-attack. In his deeply focused state, he was barely conscious of the activity around him, until a feathery cloud brushed his cheek. He looked up. The air seemed to be full of the little clouds. Tiny little arrows. Dandelion seeds. Propelled onto his property by the thoughtless actions of an assembly of children that lined his fence.

Wayne felt the air ripped from his lungs. His face froze in a bluish-red expression of extreme anguish. He lifted himself mechanically, and forced his arms to move stiffly in an attempt to get the attention of the children. A hoarse cough took the place of words. Wayne called upon all of his emotional strength to release him from the powerless state he had entered.

"We--. We--," he finally sputtered.

The children stopped playing and looked at him.

"No. No. Stop. Weeds." Wayne swatted at the air. He pushed the children away from the miniature fence. He swept some of the loose seeds from the lawn, clenching the fragile enemies in his fist. His efforts seemed meaningless against the tide of intruders.

Racing into his house, Wayne flushed the seeds he had caught down the toilet. He ran through the halls, emerging moments later with a vacuum cleaner that reached the tainted lawn with the assistance of a
thirty foot extension cord. Wayne kicked the switch desperately, and began waving the carpet attachment in the air, before turning the suction on the lawn. Blades of grass were torn from the earth, ripped apart. Wayne turned off the machine, satisfied that he had caught all of the seeds. He turned to face the children who had escaped to the Farleys' lawn.

"Okay. Who's the wiseguy?" he asked, gasping for oxygen. "Who's idea was it to blow those nasty little seeds all over my lawn?" They were all right there. Nowhere to run. Wayne felt that he was very close to nipping the problem in the bud.

After a period of silence, he grew impatient. He grabbed a spray can of weed killer and marched across the street towards the conspirators. The children scattered in all directions as Wayne pumped the poison all over the enemy territory. He didn't rest until he was satisfied that every inch of ground was covered. His face was shiny with perspiration. His whole body ached. Exhausted, he turned to go home. The sight of his damaged lawn, of all the mutilated blades of grass, sent a sharp pain through his chest that jarred his head. He kissed the dirt. In a semi-conscious state, Wayne felt the weed killer coating his throat and lungs. He would not be sprouting any dandelions. Wayne contemplated his value as fertilizer and decided to postpone his death until he was back on his own property.
D IS FOR DORIS

Doris Appleby lifted her eyes from the foamy residue of her strawberry daquiri just in time to witness a carefully placed slap, received by her husband Donny, and delivered by the hostess of the party, Betty Jean Biljac. Doris winced. She placed her empty glass on the edge of the end table she had been keeping company all evening and began the journey through the huddles of men and women that together constituted their circle of friends.

"Donny," she spoke into the widest part of Donny's arm, in a voice so small that it was quickly absorbed by the
material of his dinner jacket long before it had any chance of reaching his ear.

"Donny," she continued, shrinking into her Evan Picone outfit like an ice cube melting in a drink. "Donny. I think we should go now. Or soon. Okay? Donny?" She looked up at Donny's face and noticed a drop of blood emerging on his cheek where it had been pierced by Betty Jean's wedding ring. She watched a scab begin to form.

"Donny, I feel a little dizzy. I think I've had too much to drink. And you. Maybe you, too."

A fly punctuated Doris' plea and began to zero in on the dried blood of her husband's cheek. His hand swung at the insect and backhanded Doris in the same motion.

"Oh," she said.

"Oops," Donny said.

"So Donny. Can we go?" Doris spoke up quickly while his attention was still focused in her general area. He looked around the room as if making sure he had explored all of the possibilities.

"Yeah, sure. What the hell," he said.

Doris pulled a heavy twisted mass of clothing from the hamper and watched a small foil packet skid across the bathroom floor. She raised her eyebrows. Their honeymoon and the first six or eight months of their marriage had been distinguished by an activity that now seemed vague and
somehow preposterous, but that nevertheless allowed her to recognize and identify the contents of the small package as a prophylactic device. A penis sock, as Donny had so delicately put it almost ten years earlier.

It occurred to her, as she was pouring the proper amount of bleach into the washing machine, that it was her birthday. Donny somehow managed to remember her birthday and their anniversary in spite of the fact that on several occasions he had been unable to recall her name, often substituting one with a similar sound. Dolores, Dotty, Desiree. Desiree had been quite a leap, she realized.

The yearly acknowledgement of her birthday and their wedding day sucked whatever make-believe world Doris had been able to conjure up right out of her head, leaving her spirit shaken and dismayed. The presents Donny gave her did not help. Mousetraps one year, though mice had never been a problem. A cat the following year, though if mice had been a problem the mousetraps would have sufficed. And she had, of course, been allergic to cats so instead of being given something she had been forced to give something away.

The most thoughtful gift she had received was a personalized bullhorn. Donny had developed a megaphone, the MegaMouth, that quickly became the favorite at high school pep rallies, political protests, and major drug busts, and had presented his wife with a deluxe model, her initials, D.O.A., engraved on the handle. It was obvious that Doris
had no use for such an instrument, as even her breath was
too loud for her, but the fact that a small amount of effort
had been put into the personalizing of the gift was not lost
on her, though she couldn't help wondering if on that day
the D had stood for Doris or, more probably, Delilah or
Darlene.

Doris heard the phone ringing. She uttered a hollow
cough in an attempt to find her voice, then hummed at
various pitches to adjust it to the appropriate volume.

"Hello?"

"No. Donny isn't home yet."

"This is his wife, Do--"

"Yes, he is married."

"I'm sorry. Yes, he should have told you. I would
have."

"Okay, Daisy. I'll give him the message. Bye-bye."

With the receiver still pressed to her ear, Doris
searched for a pen then scribbled Daisy's name across a memo
pad. She stood solemnly, breathing only when absolutely
necessary, and wondered if she was visible at all times or
only when the lighting or the planetary alignment was just
right. The mirrored medicine cabinet and an occasional
glimpse of her shadow were the only signs outside of herself
that suggested she was in fact alive, existing side by side
with other human beings and, of course, Donny.
A blast of Canoe engulfed Doris' head and her eyes filled with tears. She blinked and ducked beneath the overwhelmingly masculine cloud. Her fingers groped among the waxed cucumbers and fresh carrots until her vision was restored. She backed away from the produce and into a man who seemed to be waiting for her.

"Excuse me." Doris clutched her vegetables to her chest and felt the sting of his cologne in her eyes.

"You make it want to be long," he said.

"Pardon?" Through a blurry haze of tears Doris thought she saw him gesture in a way more suited to a baseball player than a grocery shopper in the produce department.

"You make it want to be long," the man repeated in a lilting Caribbean accent which hurled her back to her honeymoon, her condom education.

"Pardon me? Make what belong where?" She squinted into his beaming face, her voice swallowed in the swishing of his slacks.

"It, my sweet lady. It wants to be long. Not one but two words."

She wiped away the tears just in time to see the startling gesture repeated. His tip must be stuck, she thought, recollecting Donny's explanation for the action, volunteered at a college baseball game where he had been test marketing a compact version of his best selling bullhorn, the MiniMegaMouth.

"What? Is it some kind of a club?"
"Oh, you are very kind, I am sure. Shall we go to my Pontiac?"

Doris dropped her cucumbers. She felt that the journey from where she had been in her heart and mind two minutes ago to the place he was asking her to go would be a long and treacherous one. But it appeared she was visible to him in spite of the harsh lighting and the haphazard arrangement of the planets, and he didn't exactly specify just how much of her he wanted, leading her to believe her mere body might be enough. The realization that she was inches away from being sweet talked into a potentially dangerous and even possibly erotic situation, and that there had heretofore been no difference between the two, forced Doris to take a look at herself.

"My eggs are getting warm," she whispered, and steered her cart away from the panting man.

In her stocking feet, Doris gingerly lifted one leg and guided it into the trash compactor. She gripped the formica countertop firmly and brought the other leg into place beside the first. Expired beef oozed from beneath her feet and soggy paper towels embraced her ankles. Doris paused to examine her kitchen from this new perspective. The clock above the oven indicated she could expect Donny home within the hour. She pictured the scene--Donny grabbing a beer from the refrigerator, quickly chugging it down, pulling
open the trash compactor, preparing to toss the can in, when—there she would be, a tidy little package to be set at the end of the driveway in the morning with all of the other little packages. In place of her tired body nothing but a faint sigh of relief.

Doris shimmied in the deep drawer as she attempted to simultaneously squeeze into the space and push in the drawer. Her head pressed the control panel and she was hugged briefly then released. The machine would not operate unless the drawer was sealed shut. She could not, as she had somehow imagined, be compacted in sections, ending with her head, and of course the finger needed to flip the switch.

Donny pulled into the driveway as Doris slipped her shoes back on. She listened from the bedroom as he enacted the scene she had visualized moments earlier, but she was not there to greet him. She lay on the bed with her eyes closed and heard the thudding of his footsteps coming up the stairs. He tossed a package on the bed and opened his mouth to say happy birthday but belched instead.

Doris rolled over and eyed the small box. Real wrapping paper and a satin bow. Not the hardware store bag or the cardboard box she was used to. She slowly pulled loose the ribbon, allowing her excitement to build, then tore away the paper. From the hinged jewelry box she lifted an engraved bracelet. Shivering slightly, she held the bracelet up to the light and read the inscription. Donna.
"Donna?" She said.

"Donna? Oh well, goddamn. Goddamn." Donny snatched the bracelet from her. "Somebody goofed up. Goofed up big." He huffed dramatically, slid the bracelet into his coat pocket, and left.

Doris awoke to the rise and fall of Donny's deep, heavy breathing and raised her head to better witness the soundness of his sleep. A stream of saliva trickled from his mouth, which maintained a loose grin. Doris did not know how she looked when she slept but could not imagine she appeared anywhere near as peaceful. She went for the bullhorn.

It had been sitting in the closet for several years, dust nearly obscuring her initials. She practiced pressing the switch and raising the thing to her mouth. In five minutes the deluxe MegaMouth felt comfortable in her hand. She walked over to Donny's side of the bed. She had no speech in mind. No carefully chosen words. She turned the instrument on and breathed. The amplification changed the delicate swirling air into a crowded, cheering baseball stadium. Donny's smile widened as if he had stepped up to bat in front of the home crowd. Doris breathed steadily, in and out, losing herself in the sound that had originated in her. Maybe the cheering was for her. Maybe she was at bat. The pressure to perform, to please, was great. Doris closed
her eyes and listened to the crackling hum of her breath. What was expected of her? She strengthened her grip on the handle and breathed harder. What was she capable of? The room erupted in an enthusiastic roar and Doris felt encouraged. Donny swung his arm through the air. His fingers grazed her hip. She could walk. He had hit her with a pitch and all she had to do now was walk.
Perry's grandfather smothered the Ulster County map with his massive midsection while Perry reluctantly anchored the map to the wall with a handful of green thumbtacks. They stepped back. The old man reached for the greasy dipstick that would serve as his pointer, and gestured to a spot in the northern region.

"We are here."

He allowed the information to be absorbed and, sensing his grandson might not be giving the matter his full attention, delivered a carefully worded follow-up question.

"So. Where would you say we are?"
"Here."

Satisfied, Grandpa Pete continued.

"Heist Number One occurred here." He slapped a point on the map with his dipstick. "You stormed in there like a madman. Had those cute little tellers curtseying and blowing you kisses on the way out. Sweet." He giggled and ran a chubby finger up and down the length of the dipstick. "You wanna take part in this? It does a man good to boast about his accomplishments. Come on, son," he poked Perry with his pointer, "Strut your stuff."

"Strut my stuff? My stuff, Grandpa, is something you would like to see me strut? Is that right? Well, at the risk of disappointing you, I think I would rather take this opportunity to remind you that I was not a willing participant in this, this--activity. I--"

That'll be all, boy. Mr. High Horse. You're kinda cute when you get all fired up like that, but mostly it's just tiresome. Bein' talked to like I'm some baby. Some little baby who don't know the difference between right and wrong."

"I'm sorry it had to come to this, Grandpa. Truly I am. And if you do, in fact, know the difference between right and wrong, which, judging from recent events, I seriously doubt, then I apologize. From the bottom--"

"Cut the crap, okay? You've just about taken all the fun out of this. Makin' me wonder if we should even try for Number Two with this attitude problem of yours."
"Oh, I feel just terrible. My conscience is cramping your style. How will I sleep knowing I've deprived you of a little fun. A little highly illegal fun."

"Well, I could knock you out. Slip a little something in your Yoo-Hoo."

Perry's grandfather pushed past him and spread his body out on the couch, exhausted from their debate. Perry sat down in a wooden rocking chair, a tired creaking sound accompanying each of his nervous kicks.

"I'm disappointed in you, boy. I thought you had the stuff. The way you knocked off that first one made me think I had me a real partner." His voice trailed off and he let out a melancholy sigh.

"God. Do you have to say 'knocked off', Grandpa? I told you what happened. The way you talk about it makes it sound like I levelled the place with a barrage of bullets. Like I had to use force. You're the one who used force--making me go through with it in the first place. You took advantage of my weakened state." Perry rocked vigorously, a high-pitched screech punctuating his concerns. "It was like a bad dream. A crazy, blurry journey through some underworld that you find strangely appealing and that is, to me, loathsome and reprehensible. What we must do now is wash our hands of it. Make amends. Turn ourselves in."

"Turn ourselves in? Are you nuts? We made a clean getaway. You don't mess with something like that. We got a
bagful of money that's all ours. Count it again if it'll make you feel better. But I say it's time we looked ahead. We're on a roll, and I don't want you jinxing it with your silly whining."

"How many times do I have to tell you it was just dumb luck I happened to pick a teller with a grudge--she practically jumped over the counter to shake my hand. I think it would be very naive to assume that all tellers are going to be so cooperative."

"Boy, it's obvious from your vocabulary that you don't get out enough. Spend too much time plowing through silly books that don't have no connection to nothing."

"Oh, so this is about getting me connected to something like, say, a prison. Well, I had hoped to do a little fishing, maybe make a connection with nature, but your idea might be better. Perhaps some lifer named Bubba will take me under his wing. Oh yes. I'll write the book and Disney can make the movie."

"You may be high on sarcasm, but you're still miserably low on moxie."

Perry lay silently in his sleeping bag on his grandfather's couch. His eyes followed the tongue in groove panels of the ceiling. A sudden flurry of flashing lights sent a shiver through his body, but when he finally found the courage to look out the window, he saw only an occasional firefly.
He slept in short, tortured fits, haunted by visions of his sizeable transgression. In his mind the Greyhound bus that had transported him upstate became a stinking tube of corruption, delivering him and other lawless thugs to their fearless leader, his grandfather. He saw a string of robberies, each more dangerous than the last, the weapons his grandfather forced upon him growing in size and strength, enabling him to blow away not only innocent tellers, but also elephants and rhinos. He saw no happy ending.

"I see no reason to keep you gentlemen," he began deep in his head, cornered by a vaguely imagined team of heavily armed officers. "You've obviously come here with the idea of arresting me and the old man." He was pleased at how mature and calm he sounded. "I knew it would end this way. You guys are too good to let a couple of amateurs get off scot free. I'm just thankful there was no gunplay. Frankly, this could've been a very ugly scene if you had faced the old man instead of me. He's wild. No telling how you would've fared. He's very fond of firearms." Perry's body twitched excitedly. "I, on the other hand, am a gentle soul not tempted into outward displays of masculinity which often erupt in acts of violence." Perry felt seduced by his own speech. He hesitated to complete his confession, knowing an admission of guilt was all the men really wanted, all they needed to hear. He enjoyed having an audience and, for a
moment, was tempted to deny his role in the bank robbery as
a way of prolonging the exchange, although it had, thus far,
been fairly one-sided.

"Perry. Perry."

The voice was soft, seductive. One of the officers was
a woman? No. The men were gone. A change of plans. They
had sent in a nubile, young temptress to distract him, to
squeeze a confession out of him. This was an insult.

"You're wasting your time, young lady. I can't reveal
information so seamy in nature to a woman. That would be
 crude."

"Perry. Perry what are you talking about? Don't you
remember me? Tami? From the bank? I--helped you?"

Perry's thoughts were taken to a different part of his
brain. The shift almost woke him. His body inched deeper
into the sleeping bag.

"Tami, what are you doing here? You're going to get
yourself in trouble if you're seen with me."

"But I want to be seen with you. Why do you think I
gave you my number? Why didn't you call?"

She leaned into him, her lips quivering, her blouse
falling open. His sweat drenched the lining of the sleeping
bag. He searched his soul for the strength to resist her
advances, to set her straight, to come clean.

"Tami, you are delicate flower and I, I am a fugitive.
You mustn't imagine that you could have any kind of a life
with me. It would be best if you left now and didn't look back. I allowed myself to be led astray by my grandfather, I suppose out of a kind of loyalty, and I expect to be punished. I will accept my fate like a man. Even if I was no more than a pawn. A tool. Powerless in the man's hands--"

"Perry."

"Tami?"

"Perry."

"Tami? Where are you?"

"Wake up you idiot."

Perry's grandfather switched on a lamp.

"I thought we'd go fishing today. Thought you had your heart set on it. Now you seem to be leaning towards, I don't know. The rack."

Perry squinted at his grandfather's form. Overflowing out of his waders, rusty flies hanging down over his eyes, the old man looked more lost than Tami.

"So, I,...I was talking in my sleep?"


"Thank you for being there for me."

"Wish I hadn't been, wiseass. You better get your butt moving if you want to catch anything. Maybe the fresh air will put a little color into that pasty face of yours."

"Just getting a start on my prison tan."
Perry rowed the crude wooden boat to the center of the lake. He watched his grandfather pinch a wad of tobacco from his pouch and insert it between his lip and gum. He stared at the lump it produced in the slack flesh.

"Are you going to be spitting?"

"What the hell do you think? You want me to blow bubbles?"

"What if you scare away all the fish?"

"Big deal." He pursed his lips and spat over the side of the boat.

"But I wanted to catch something for dinner."

"Perry, son, we got wads of cash back at the house. If you don't catch anything we'll just go into town for a steak."

Perry had almost let himself forget the money, and the means by which it had become theirs.

"Let's try a different lake. This one doesn't seem to have any fish in it." He glanced at their cabin beyond the shore, through the trees, and thought if he listened carefully enough he would hear sirens screaming up the dirt road towards them. A team of machine gun-toting officers would line the shore and fire at the boat, blasting them into small pieces of meat, laughing as they sank into the muck at the bottom of the lake like so much fish bait.

"We've been here maybe five minutes. Snap out of it."
You wanted to go fishing, we're fishing. So fish." Brown saliva squirted into the calm lake water.

"May I speak frankly?" Perry asked, wincing at the tobacco snake.

"Whatever. Just don't piss me off."

"So the answer is no."

"Quit fidgeting and speak. No sermons."

"I understand you've grown impatient with me. I'm a guest in your house as well as your grandson. Theoretically, I should do as you say."

"Now you're talking. Let's get this dinghy ashore and hit Number Two."

"I wasn't done. And that wasn't where I was going."

"I think you lost your bait."

"I don't care. Let me finish."

"You'll never catch anything now."

"Cut it out. I'm trying to talk some sense into you."

"Maybe that's not your job."

Perry looked away from the old man. He followed his line to the point where it entered the water and imagined the fish swimming safely around the exposed hook.

Perry sat on the edge of the cabin porch and pitched pebbles into the loose, sandy dirt. He heard his grandfather moving around inside, dragging the dipstick beside him. The clicking, scraping sound made his stomach cramp up. It seemed to move into his throat as his grand-
father's plodding footsteps drew closer.

"You just gonna sit there? Don't you have one of those stuffy old books to bury your face in?"

"I finished all my books." Perry rested his chin on his folded arms and looked out at the lake. He had lost his enthusiasm for fishing. A quick study of his grandfather's bookshelves told him their taste in reading did not overlap. Growing Marijuana for Fun and Profit, Striking It Rich, Turning Your Neighbors' Garbage Into Gold. Even a walk through the woods was no longer enjoyable, every clearing a would-be weed garden.

"How 'bout we take a drive?"

"Now?"

"Well, yeah. You've been sitting on your ass for weeks."

"Yes, well, my mind is very active. I'm thinking all the time."

"Must be real exciting being you."

"It is." Perry braced himself for his grandfather's next words.

"What if we go to this bookstore I know. I'd hate to see that brain of yours grind to a halt."

"Some kind of a criminal bookstore? How to Kidnap Your First Baby, complete with sample ransom notes. No thanks."

"Could you give this saint act a rest?"

"I can't tell you how sorry I am I have a conscience."
"The thing is, son, I'm feeling a little stir crazy. Let's just cruise into town. You can get some books. I'm low on tobacco. I'll let you drive."

"But what if there's an A.P.B. out on us, or the car?"

"No way. Nobody saw us. Your teller friend wouldn't let you get caught."

"She's not my teller friend. God, Grandpa. You make it sound like we keep in touch."

"Sounded like you were missing her last night."

"She's not my type. Too careless. Perhaps I could send her your way. She'd be the perfect partner for you. I liked her enthusiasm. I admit it."

Perry steered the sky blue Cavalier into a parking space and shut off the engine.

"You getting out?"

"In a minute." Perry took a deep breath and glanced out the window. He thought as soon as he and his grandfather set foot on the sidewalk they would be snapped up by some neighborhood crime watch team, exchanged for a reward which would, in turn, be given back to the community in the form of a new backstop for the little league. Those were his people. Not the shifty old man who was poking him in the ribs impatiently.

"Boy, I don't know what's bugging you, but I'm gonna go do a few things. If you decide to get out of the car, put a nickel in the meter. I don't want a ticket." His grand-
father got out of the car and headed down the block.

Perry contemplated the inconsistency of the old man's moral code—he objected to a parking ticket but not an armed robbery. Not encouraged, he slipped out of the car, popped a coin in the meter, and hurried into the bookstore.

He emerged with a shopping bag full of books, and spotted his grandfather shuffling up the sidewalk, a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, which were also shielded by a pair of sunglasses. They ducked into the car, Perry for cover, his grandfather for Perry.

"I got a plan."

"No. No. No."

"It's easy. Two tellers. A few napping loan officers. And they all wear these vomit colored jackets so they're easy to spot. One of the tellers even looks like your type. There's a perfect parking space around the corner, if you get going."

"No. Grandpa, please. No. God."

"Calm down. Listen, if it upsets you that much, I'll let you do it without the gun this time."

"I'm not doing it period. No. Guns or no guns."

"Then I'll do it, and you can drive."

"No."

"Come on, boy. Don't let me down. We can't let this one get away."

Perry held his face in his hands. He breathed heavily.
He tried to determine what it was that scared him. Was it getting caught, or, possibly, getting away?

"Drive down to the stop sign and turn right. Come on. I'll just duck in, wave the gun around a little. Be out of there in a jiffy."

"You can't go in a public building and wave a gun around. That's just not done anymore. Besides, that's how you get caught." Perry shook his head and tugged on the steering wheel. "Oh, God."

"Don't fight it, son." The old man smiled wildly. "Maybe we oughta stick with our original set up. If it ain't broke, don't--"

"This is the last one. Promise. And if we get caught, you're going to tell them you forced me into it. Promise."

"Sure, sure. I promise. Where you gonna conceal the weapon? You shoulda worn a jacket."

"I can't believe I fell for this. You led me to believe we were going to pick up a few things and go home. That's all we were going to do. So while I was buying books, you were staking out the site for Heist Number Two. Typical. I even bought you a book. *Crime and Punishment.* Obviously, you are beyond educating."

"Well, thanks for the book, but I already read it. Didn't like it. The guy was a sissy. And I haven't killed anyone, so what's the problem? Now, you wanna put the gun somewhere you can get to it."

"I won't be needing the gun."
"Oh?"

"No. My weapon will be words."

"I don’t recommend that. You’re not all that quick."

Perry started the car and drove around the corner to the scene of the impending crime. He parked in the predetermined spot. His grandfather took off his baseball cap and clapped it down on Perry’s head. Perry emptied the books from the paper bag and tucked the bag under his arm.

He walked across the street, his jaw and fists clenched tightly. A quick glance through the glass doors revealed a nearly empty bank. He shook his head disgustedly and pushed through the doors. One teller stared blankly at a stack of complimentary calendars. The other winked at Perry. He countered with a scowl, and approached her.

"May I help you?" She leaned forward.

"Yes you may, Eileen," Perry said, glancing at her nametag.

"Anything."

Perry scoffed and looked at the ceiling. He felt certain their luck would run out here but, watching Eileen run her tongue over her lips, he realized it wasn’t going to be that easy.

"Well, Eileen. I don’t want you to be scared, but there is a bomb planted in this building, and if you don’t give me all of your cash, I will be forced to activate the aforementioned explosives."

"Can I see the bag?"
Perry blinked and handed her the bag. He watched as she filled it with the nonchalance of a bagger at a grocery store. She returned the bag with a smile. The other teller stared, open-mouthed, at the fishy transaction, but made no move for the security button. Perry looked at Eileen, then at the other teller, and shook his head at them disappointedly. He walked past two chattering loan officers. The third returned from an errand as he exited, and held the door open for him.

His head continued to shake as he crossed the street. The door on the passenger side clicked open, and he got in, tossing the bag into the backseat. His grandfather glanced up and down the street, then eased the car out of hiding and began the drive home.

"Judging from your face, I'd say mostly small bills. Don't worry. It all adds up. Better luck next time."

"I thought this would be the last time," Perry gasped, "I thought I would definitely get caught this time. I had it all worked out, but then I walked up to the counter, and this teller just bought my line. She didn't even take a minute to think about it. She actually asked for the bag so she could fill it. Large and small bills. I thought she was going to ask me which denominations I'd prefer. She would have validated my parking ticket if I had one."

"Eileen, right? I figured you two would hit it off."

"God. Will you stop it? And for your information
their blazers are mustard, not vomit." Perry tried to catch his breath. "Just be quiet."

"What? You hear something?" His grandfather jerked his head from side to side, and checked the rearview mirror.

"I didn't hear anything. Don't worry. I'm sure they're just now figuring out they've been robbed. It'll be another day or two before they get around to calling the police. The crime here is not that a bank was robbed, it's how easy it was. I could probably go in there tomorrow and open an account."

"Atta boy. I knew you had it. Want to try for one more on the way home?"

"No. I'm not doing this anymore. Where's the challenge?"

Perry pushed the boat loose from the shore and walked it into deeper water. He climbed in and paddled with the oars, then allowed the boat to drift on its own. He stretched out on the bench seats and felt the boat settle into the peaceful lake water. Occasionally he lifted his head to peer at the distant cabin, but no imaginary sirens or gun-toting lawmen disturbed his peace. He was horrified by this absence of fear. He watched the shoreline in an attempt to bring back the paranoia that had kept him company until Heist Number Two, which had been an education in reality. A crowd of tellers appeared on the shore, waving
and throwing bundles of money towards him. He shut his eyes, but a gust of wind felt like a shower of dollar bills, and a splash of rain felt like a smothering kiss from an overzealous teller.

"Never shoulda let you buy all those books. That's no way to spend a summer."

"Helps me relax. Keeps my mind off other things,"

Perry said, staring into the fluttering pages.

"We could try the fishing thing again."

"I don't want to hook anything."

"Not exactly the attitude of a sportsman."

"I just don't want to go on being the bad guy. I feel like I could do anything and get away with it."

"Take a lesson from me, boy. The world is full of bad guys, so get away with as much as you can. You're a fool if you think everyone else isn't doing exactly that."

"Well, that's quite encouraging, Grandpa. That's a fine little pep talk you've put together there. You've really captured the human spirit."

"Just a little something I do."

"Mom and Dad had nothing to worry about when they put me on that bus. You are a role model and a half."

"I know, I know. Don't get mushy on me now."

"I feel like giving you a big hug."

"Don't talk like that."

"A little squeeze."
"No."

"Well, okay. Don't worry. I know how precious your image is to you. But just remember, in my brain I'm giving you a big hug, and a little squeeze."

Perry closed the last of his books. He saw his grandfather's face light up, knew he had been watching him restlessly for days, waiting for him to finish with his reading. The old man's approach to life scared and fascinated him. It occurred to Perry that by playing along with his grandfather's scheme a little longer he might better understand his own approach to life.

"We need to get going with Heist Number Three," he said, verbalizing what he had seen in the old man's eyes all week. The expression that crossed his grandfather's face made Perry feel as though he had been hugged.

"Really? You want to do another one?"

"I think we should knock off one more, Grandpa."

"I have some possibilities marked on the map inside."

He beamed like a child.

"Excellent. Let's take a look."

Perry followed him into the cabin, and they studied the map.

"Woodstock Savings and Loan. I like the sound of it."

"I don't know what's gotten into you, boy, but I like it."

"Maybe I thought about what you said."
"I'll teach you more than all those books."
"Maybe this will be an education for both of us."
"You gonna bring a weapon this time?"
"Words, Grandpa. Just words."
"Suit yourself."

The old man drove excitedly through the tree-lined streets. A breeze lifted his thin white hair in feathery tufts. Perry pressed the folded bag from Heist Number Two into his lap, leaving sweaty palm prints on the paper. He watched his grandfather's eyes dancing from one side of the road to the other. They both breathed in quick gulps, exhaling small bursts of air that carried the moisture from their mouths.

After two investigative passes through the village, Perry's grandfather settled into a secluded parking space.

"I've been thinking, son. Maybe you oughta mix things up a little. So they don't connect this job with Number Two."

"Leave it to me, Pete. I'm two for two. Remember?"

"What was I thinking? Do your stuff, kid. I'll keep the engine warm."

Perry stood on the corner and organized his thoughts. He studied the quiet streets, and looked back at his grandfather, who gave him the thumbs up signal. He walked past the bank and peered through the window to assess the
situation. A line of five or six people waited for one of three tellers. A small crowd gathered in the clerical section of the bank, by the refreshment table. Perry didn't see how he could fail.

He stepped into the lobby and struck a menacing pose. He allowed the impact to be absorbed and moved forward, taking his place at the end of the line. Several minutes passed, and he knew his grandfather would be struggling to sit still in the car. A spot opened up at the counter, and Perry found himself facing the bobbing head of a young male teller. He smiled, certain he would not meet with the generosity of the previous tellers.

"How ya doin'?"

"I'm just fine, thank you. Gordo."

"Cool. That's cool. What can I do for you?"

"Have you worked here long, Gordo? I mean, if, say, there was a hold up, would you know what to do?"

"Wow. I never thought about it. I know just about everyone that comes in these days. Hey, did I see you at a Dead show last summer? You look real familiar."

"Do I?" Perry imagined a blurry black and white photo of himself hanging on the post office wall. He felt a comforting wave of paranoia, a tiny reminder of his once fertile conscience.

"Maybe it was the summer before. They get kind of mixed up in my head, you know?"
"Of course. Gordo, what would you do if I told you there was a .44 caliber thesaurus aimed right at your head. And unless you fill this bag with all the money in your drawer, I'll have to kill you. It's a Roget, Gordo, and I'm not afraid to use it."

"Gotcha. Better give me the bag."

Perry slammed the bag down on the counter and spun around, exasperated. The remaining customers and employees eyed him briefly, then returned to their business. He turned to face Gordo again, who was carefully placing each bundle of bills into the bag. Perry leaned forward to examine Gordo's face.

"Gordo?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah. Am I going too slow?"

"Gordo, I said I had a thesaurus aimed at your head."

"I know, I know. A Roget, and you're not afraid to use it. I'm moving as fast as I can. I swear."

"Have you always been this frightened of synonyms, Gordo?"

"Well, sure. Peace, you know? Celebrate life. Here. I think that's everything. Did you park in our lot?" Gordo reached for the rubber parking validation stamp.

"Gordo, do you know what a synonym is?"

"Well, I guess it's, like, a word that's, like, like another word. Right?"
"Right. Now, does that sound like something that could kill you?"

"Well, like, if this is a, you know, a R-O-B-B-E-R-Y then maybe they're, like, special."

"Special synonyms? Gordo, I expected more from you."

"Sorry. I guess, come see us again?"

Perry grabbed the bag from the crestfallen teller and took his time walking to the door. He paused before exiting, waiting for a pair of guards to emerge from the shadows, waiting to be thrown against a wall and handcuffed. Waiting for the punishment that had to come. He let out a confused sigh and left the building.

Perry sat in the shaded area of the porch, trying to concentrate on the pages of one of his grandfather's books. Guilt, Who Needs It? He saw only swimming words and voices. His grandfather had kept his distance after Heist Number Three, troubled by Perry's lack of emotion. None of the fear of Heist Number One, or the anger of Heist Number Two was evident during the days that followed the third, and most successful, outing. Only a tired frustration.

"Like a little lemonade, son?"

His grandfather gingerly placed a tall glass by Perry's elbow. He watched Perry lift the glass to his lips, and sat down in the chair beside him. They listened to the silence of their surroundings. The lake water shimmered in the distance.
"I was thinking maybe we should try fishing one more time."

"Isn't it too late?"

"You never know. Let's go. You've been sitting here long enough. Besides, the summer's almost over and those parents of yours would be pretty upset if you haven't caught anything."

"Think how they'd feel if I had been caught."

"Oh, come on now. You weren't."

"But I wanted to be."

"That's a good one. I'll go get the tackle."

Perry had replayed the scene in his mind over and over again, searching for the flaw to Heist Number Three. He always arrived at the same conclusion. He had done everything short of turning himself in. They didn't seem to want him. There hadn't been any high speed chases, or helicopters sweeping over the woods. Maybe he was too small so they threw him back.

"Ready?" His grandfather appeared with the fishing equipment.

"Why not?" Perry watched the old man ambling down to the boat. He had stopped seeing him as the villain when it occurred to him that all his grandfather was really guilty of was presenting Perry with an idea, and driving the getaway car.

"They rowed towards the other side of the lake, and
Perry baited his hook as the boat came to a stop. His grandfather reached into his back pocket and pulled out his tobacco pouch.

"Grandpa. The fish."

"You just make sure you keep the bait on that hook. Don't worry about a little tobacco juice."

"It's your fault if we don't catch anything."

"Kids these days. A bunch of whiners and sissies."

"And bank robbers."

"Well, even that's not what it used to be. Words instead of guns. Jesus."

"Had it pretty rough, did you?"

"Hell yes. Used to walk five, sometimes ten miles to school everyday."

"I have a problem with that."

"With what? Watch your line."

"Five? Sometimes ten?"

"Okay, five mostly. But sometime the wind would be blowing so hard, you'd take two steps, get blown back one. Get it?"

"Funny."

"Loosen up. Laugh a little. You're too stiff."

"Just because I didn't crack up over that corny joke?"

"You're supposed to laugh at all of my jokes. Funny or not. I'm your grandfather."

"So I'm supposed to worship you?"

"Basically. Took you long enough."
FORGETTING

Her fingertips pressed into the worn wood of the swinging kitchen door. The weight of her body gathered in her timid hands and pushed forward to create a narrow opening. Grumbling voices erupted in a dirty cloud of smoke. The door skidded over her body and swung shut behind her.

"Hey. No chips?" One of the smoking men said, glancing at her.

She looked at the collapsed shag carpet around her feet and at the resting kitchen door. "No, I don't see any." She stared into the oily mesh of his baseball cap.
"Cute. Isn't she cute," the same man said to the other card players before tossing a dollar into the pile they huddled around. "You better try again. No more jokes," he said, concentrating on his hand.

She bowed under the smoke and took a cautious breath. It seemed he was talking to her, and he was growing impatient. But who was he?

"I don't understand. Your chips? I don't know where they are. I don't know what makes you think I have them." She paused. A dull pain began to work behind her eyes. "And I don't know who you are. I have to get outside. I can't breathe."

A round of confused coughs and snickers sprayed her back as she hurried out of the house. She reached the crumbling sidewalk and turned around. The peeling paint gave the house the appearance of scraped toast. She shuddered against the foggy, shifting air. Resuming her study of the house and those around it, she perceived only superficial differences in color and upkeep. Cars equally vague and suspicious crowded the driveway and the street. Was one of them hers? Could she drive away from this place? And if so, where would she go?

The cigar smoker lurched through the screen door and glared into the moist haze.

"You want to tell me what the hell has gotten into you?"
She shrank from the dank, musty smell that leaked from his clothes. His voice made her bones feel naked and cold. She resisted looking at him, instead examining the clothes she wore. The shiny, tight pants squeezed the warmth from her legs, and the sharply pointed, high heeled shoes made her feet ache.

"Are you gonna say something or just stand there looking dumb?" He moved in closer and laid his hands on her shoulders, almost pushing her down into the concrete. His breath was soaked in beer, and she turned her face away. His anger pinched her skin. Where had he earned the right to bully her?

"I know it doesn't make any sense. You probably don't believe me, but I don't know who you are. I have no idea." Her voice stretched and splintered and a glimpse of his stubborn, indifferent face made her eyes water, though she had told herself she wouldn't cry, knowing tears would only make it worse. The muscles of his jaw jumped under the shadow of his cap. Regal Pest Removal, read the embroidered patch over the bill. The words were as foreign as the man, whose eyes, after a brief study, revealed nothing familiar or reassuring, no understanding of her despair. She thought he might hit her and considered going back inside and finding his chips and whatever else he needed. And he would need something else, she could see that. It would be too easy if it was just a matter of fetching things. She could almost do that.
"What do you want? Should I be calling a doctor or something? Have you carted away? Come on. Cut the crap. Get inside before everyone thinks I've got a lunatic for a wife." He stood by the door.

"Maybe you should call someone. Maybe this can be explained." She struggled to work around the lump in her throat. "I think I might like to go to the hospital."

She watched him shrug and return inside to his card game. He didn't appear to know her any better than she knew him. He had not used her name. Perhaps he didn't know it either.

She stood outside and watched the gray sky gather into rain clouds. Drops hit her fast and cold. If even a little bit of herself could be unearthed, she thought, the rest might follow. But looking at the smudged windows, carelessly painted shut and streaked with rain, she didn't believe there was anything of hers in that house.

Water ran into her eyes and ears, and the clothes she wore wrung her body in a chilling wet embrace. She wanted to shake herself free of the intrusive rain, the drab smell streaming from her hair, and the hostile possessiveness of the cigar smoking man inside.

She realized she was free. Memories and commitments were the only chains that might have held her but they were gone. She discarded the shoes, preferring to let her feet slap the slick concrete sidewalk, and began to walk down the street. Her newfound freedom raised two immediate questi-
ons. Where would she go and how long could she handle being anonymous? She read mailboxes and street signs but none touched her with their familiarity or offered any direction.

A man dragging his lawn mower into his garage stopped and watched her. She saw him squinting through the rain. Was she supposed to know him too? He seemed to expect her to wave or smile, but she couldn't. She didn't want him to summon her up the driveway, into the house that looked just like the one she had left, and then to the kitchen. She didn't want him to say she was his wife.

Her feet were blue with cold and the sidewalk stabbed through their soles. She felt glad for the rain because it had driven everyone inside, though she would have preferred the indoors herself, her hair now clinging to her face in icy ropes, her skin mottled and numb. She knew of only one place where she might go to escape the rain, but the dusty house seemed too far away now. If she were to go back she imagined the space she had occupied before would be filled with smoke, and the cigar smoker would not welcome her, or even acknowledge she had been gone.

She noticed a face poorly camouflaged behind a gauzy curtain. The eyes followed her intently. She saw a slight figure dart towards the door. She stopped and watched the door open an inch. Her eyes met those inside. The door opened wider and a tiny head peeked out.

"Can I help you?" she asked the older woman who
stepped outside and trembled beneath each drop of rain like a flower that had outlived its season. "You shouldn't be out here in this rain," she said, cupping the old woman's elbow. The wilted eyelids lifted with a desperate flash of recognition and she wondered if they had been friends.

"You're home, Emma," the old woman whispered finally.

The cigar smoker had called her his wife. Now she was Emma. She had expected to step into the correct identity when it presented itself. When this would happen she hadn't ventured to guess, not wanting to introduce the possibility that it might not happen. But she felt herself hesitating to become Emma. To walk away seemed more difficult this time, though she felt no bond, however deeply buried, to the old woman. She was fairly certain that she wasn't Emma, and was reluctant to relinquish her freedom, but the old woman needed her to be Emma. And she needed to get inside where it was dry and warm.
REMEMBERING

The old woman rubbed a vague spot on her dress, back and forth, working her knuckles into the abrasive knit that remained cool but turned her skin red and hot, and awakened in her a dim desire to set herself on fire. The sleeveless, shapeless dress was the same dull pink of the chair where she passed most of her day. During the moments when her arm rested, she seemed to vanish into the threadbare jacquard.

She shot from the tired cushions like rebellious stuffing and crossed the room. She plucked a pad and pencil from the edge of the windowsill, her knuckles still glowing
warm from the rubbing, and returned to her chair. She stared beyond the sweet, powdery haze of the room and followed the rain's steady course. Her teeth caught the ragged skin of her lip and chewed. Hypnotized by the rain, she let several minutes pass before collecting her thoughts and scribbling out an urgent message.

**Before I had my tuna, I heard a scratching sound coming from the back of the house.**

**Like a rabid jackal digging a bed out of the soil.**

She had outgrown the habit of sleep, restlessly watching day become night and then day, dozing just long enough to wake up disoriented, so naturally her thoughts ran to images of beds being made. She dated the frantically worded note and ripped it from the pad. Stuffing it into a tiny drawer full of similar notes, she rose serenely and went to the kitchen for her tuna.

The old woman licked the mayonnaise from her fingers and stared pensively at the door leading to the basement. She abandoned the bowl of tuna fish and pressed her ear to the suspicious door. Her finger dug into the thick layer of paint that bubbled up from the door and pulled it away from the wood. She seized the knob, rattled it furiously, then bit her tongue and cracked the door open. She poked her head into the darkness and released her tongue as if preparing to speak. Instead, she slammed the door shut and rushed to her pad and pencil.
Must have the basement checked for bears.
Possibly hibernating and sleepwalking--
I heard boxes of mementos being jostled
during my tuna.

She wedged the note between two books and returned to
the kitchen. Her body swayed. She gripped the rim of the
bowl of tuna fish, which now resembled the matted fur of a
stray animal, and carried it back to her chair. She sat
with the bowl resting in her lap and pinched small amounts
of tuna with her fingers, sucking them into her mouth.

She licked her fingers clean and reached for the phone.
She dialed a series of numbers, misdialing and starting over
four times, each effort accompanied by an exasperated grunt.
She combed over her lips with her teeth and watched the rain
pour in a heavy stream from the corner of the roof, flooding
out of the clogged gutter.

"My sister is missing. Maybe you've heard something."

She began to rub at the spot on her dress again. The
skin of her knuckles burned and specks of blood smudged over
the old stain.

"I thought she was just going out for some tea."

The old woman sighed into the receiver and tried to
hold a picture of her sister in her mind.

"It's been a very long time. She's my twin. I need
her here."

She dragged a finger up and down the short, bloody
streaks on her dress. She worked to understand the opera-
tor's instructions.

"No. I couldn't give up a picture."

She frowned at the receiver and hung up, then reached for the pad and pencil.

I think there are worms or mice in the phone. Something small and menacing. Just at the end of my tuna I called and got nothing but a shrieking crackle.

The old woman took the remainder of her lunch into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and let the bowl slip from her hands, scolding it for clanging against the metal shelf. Through the window she watched raindrops tossed from bouncing leaves and saw a blurry figure splashing into a puddle. She blinked. She pressed her face against the glass and saw the woman's rain-soaked body more clearly before her own breath obscured her discovery.

She hurried back to the living room. Her fingers clenched the dusty, yellowed curtain and she narrowed her eyes in an attempt to make out the face. "Yes, that's her. It must be." She ran her palm over her limp, ash-gray curls. "She looks a little tired but that's natural." She straightened her dress, a quick survey bringing to her attention the rusty stains that now surrounded the original spot. Her eyes checked the progress of the woman. She tip-toed over to the pad and picked up the pencil.

My dress has become a target.
She dropped the pencil and turned back to the window. The woman had slowed down. "She remembers the house. That's a good sign. What if she didn't? What if she had walked right by and I hadn't seen her? Look at those clothes. We always wore dresses. Where did she get those pants. She looks like a --Oh my--" She beamed finding she had been spotted. "I'm coming, honey. Don't go anywhere." She hurriedly scratched out a final note.

It's very quiet. I don't know what this means--Perhaps they're having lunch.

Wouldn't they love my tuna.

She jammed the pad into the drawer packed with notes and rushed to the door to let her sister in.
Returning to his apartment after an unimpassioned rehearsal, Ricard seated himself at the living room window, which was carefully veiled in lace, and called to his assistant, Hemmings.

"Hem, would you adjust the telescope for me, please?"

"Of course. Which floor will it be tonight?" Hemmings stood beside Ricard and anticipated his next direction.

"Shall I remove your coat?" He gripped Ricard's coat tentatively, which he wore draped over his shoulders to conceal his useless arms.
"Thank you. Maybe the afghan over my legs. I feel a slight chill through the window, don't you?"

"An unfortunate property of glass." Hemmings hung the coat in the closet and stripped the afghan from the back of the couch. He spread the drabbly colored blanket over Ricard's lap. "Have you decided?"

"Pity the angle is so sharp to the ground floor. I sense the living is quite a bit richer so close to the earth."

"What say we try for the second or third floor?"

"Why not? Work your magic." Ricard watched patiently while his assistant loosened and tightened the knobs of the tripod, pausing frequently to check the view. "The rehearsal didn't go very well today, did it? There seems to be a lack of emotion. No sense of urgency."

"You give of yourself entirely. This company doesn't know how to take direction, to put it simply. How is this?"

Hemmings stepped aside and Ricard lowered his head, trading the overwhelming blur of floors, windows, and vague silhouettes for one specific circle of life.

"Oh, this isn't too bad." Ricard blinked moisture back into his eyes. "The last company couldn't take direction either. Has the quality fallen off, or is it my imagination?" He watched a young woman enter the foreground of the distant apartment. "How do you do it?" His thoughts dissolved into a single pleading heartbeat. "Hem, I must thank
you for the generosity you have shown me tonight." Ricard spoke deliberately, his eyes absorbing every unconscious gesture and vibration that flowed from the woman. "This is a great discovery."

"It was your idea to drop down."

"Perhaps, but you have found this woman."

"A woman? I only found a room. The woman is your discovery."

"Is she? I don't know. I am still grateful to you, and I think I have enjoyed more than my share of your time today, so why don't you spend the rest of the evening as you please."

"Can you manage?"

"I think so. Yes. Absolutely." Ricard's eye remained fixed on the woman.

"Well, then. I might take in a film. You won't join me?"

"No, no. I've seen enough false emotion for one day."

Ricard surrendered to the image enclosed in the telescope. He followed the woman to her sofa, where she fell into the cushions and held her waist firmly with her delicate arms. She rocked gently, back and forth. His despair flowed through the telescope, in search of the invisible point where it would meet hers.

Where does your sadness come from? He asked, certain
that just as he could see her, she could hear him. Tears washed over his cheeks when she bowed her head, and he imagined her shoulders trembling with a grief he understood. Please, he whispered. Please don't look so alone. I wish I could appear at your side and take your hand. The feeling of one hand enfolded in another, you must know the magic of that feeling. I am so powerless.

Ricard lost the strength to sit straight in his chair. His arms hung like thick ropes. His pale, dead hands spoke hauntingly to him of the elusive nature of happiness and love.

If only I had a pleasant memory to wrap around me. A hollow, impersonal hum spread through the apartment and rang in his ears. The people and places I treasure drift away and into the clouds. I have no grasp of anything. I cannot lift a comb to my hair, or a pencil to a piece of paper.

His attention returned to the building across the courtyard, to the room that reflected his pain through the telescope. The woman stretched out on the sofa, her face concealed in her folded arms. Ricard's eyes grew dry and tired. He could no longer bear his helplessness and waited for the lock to turn and Hemmings to take control again. He saw the woman sit up. She ran her hands over her tangled hair and straightened her dress. She would prepare for bed and be asleep as soon as her body quieted her mind. He had to sit and wait.
"Oh dear. That doesn't look very comfortable."

Ricard felt Hemmings' comforting presence and opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep with his chin resting on the telescope. The afghan surrounded his ankles.

"Hemmings? Did you enjoy yourself? What did you see?"

"Something ordinary. Actors and actresses. You should be in bed. You look very tired. I shouldn't have stayed out so long."

"Nonsense. I'm fine. I'm sorry you didn't share my experience." Ricard rose to his feet, Hemmings' hands holding him firmly under his arms.

"Oh yes, the woman. Some genuine emotion?"

"Quite a bit. Quite a bit." Ricard allowed his assistant to lead him to his room. He almost fell asleep in his arms.

"What would you like to do today? Shall we read over some scripts?"

"Don't we have a rehearsal?" Ricard's eyes followed his assistant around the apartment. He watched Hemmings water the hanging plants and envied the nonchalance of his movements.

"Not until this evening. It's a dress rehearsal."

"Oh. Already?"

"I thought it might provide some much needed motivation and help get them focused."
"Excellent thinking. And have we got some new scripts to read?"

"Just a few. I'm afraid the quality may disappoint you."

"I see. We haven't read a decent script since--well, it's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"I'm sure it's only a temporary lull. Things will turn around. I'll make you some breakfast."

"Thank you. I think I might take a look in the telescope."

Ricard sat down at his familiar spot by the window, and checked the position of the telescope. The room looked like a stage long after the curtain had gone down, abandoned and transient without her there to give the walls and furniture a purpose. He looked to the edges of his limited view of the room, hoping she would emerge from the wings.

"Anything?" Hemmings asked from the kitchen.

"Not yet. Our heroine must be a late sleeper. Oh, there she is. Showered. Smiling. It looks like a marvelous day, doesn't it? I slept quite soundly."

"We could go for a walk later, if you like. Some fresh air might be good for you."

"Yes, Hemmings. That's a fine idea. Or--No, maybe I'm mad."

"What is it?"

"I, well, I thought we might invite the young lady over, say for lunch."
"The one from across the way?"

"A crazy idea, I know. But she's so refreshing. Tell me what you think, honestly."

"It's an interesting notion. Of course, we'd have to hide the telescope. Perhaps tomorrow would be better, so everything is perfect. I could extend the invitation today, though it may take some artful persuasion." Hemmings ran his fingers along the arm of the sofa.

"Yes, yes." Ricard would have clapped his hands together, but settled for bouncing slightly in his seat. "You can do it, Hem. You're awfully sharp."

"All right. It's decided." Hemmings placed a tall glass on the dining room table. He assisted Ricard to his place at the table, and aimed the straw in the direction of his mouth. "I think you'll like this. Five sorts of fruit, including kiwi."

"Splendid."

Ricard found himself alone again. He considered watching through the telescope as Hemmings and the woman came together, watching as she was drawn into the man's carefully chosen words, into the drama he, Ricard, had created with his simple idea. But this he did not want to see.

He was relieved when Hemmings returned so quickly, but instantly read the disappointment on his face.

"Have we been declined, Hem?"
"Oh, no. There was no answer. It's possible our heroine has stepped out. Have you checked the telescope?"

"Not since you left."

Ricard peered anxiously through the lens. Could she have slipped away while his back was turned? He would wait now, for hours if necessary, until she returned. He sent Hemmings to the gourmet store so he could be alone at his post.

Each minute spent at the telescope only added to his yearning. Where have you gone? He sighed. Please don't hide from me. He felt certain she was there, behind a curtain somewhere, readying herself for him, her private audience. He studied her couch.

Hemmings swung the door open with a shoulder, his arms weighted down with groceries. Ricard was startled by the sudden rush of air and the rustle of paper.

"Tomorrow at twelve sharp."

"You spoke to her? But--"

"She was just arriving back from her exercise class."

"Oh." Ricard smiled slightly and hesitated before turning back to the telescope.

Ricard sat stiffly on the sofa. He looked over his shoulder towards the door. The anticipation made it impossible for him to concentrate. He wondered what Hemmings had said to her. What would she say? She might be
very shy. His feet twitched impatiently. He heard voices in the hallway.

"Here we are, Miss Dorset. Come right in."

"My, what a swell spread. Where is--Oh, hi."

"Please, come sit down," Ricard said from his position on the couch.

"Miss Dorset, this is Mr. Ricard Worley."

"But please, call me Ricard."

"And I'm Dot. Ricard. What is that?" Dot sat next to Ricard on the couch. "Spanish? French?"

"Nothing quite so glamorous, I'm afraid. It was meant to be Richard. My mother was not much of a speller."

"Oh my. What a sweet little story." Dot patted his arm hospitably, and watched as it waved loosely from his shoulder. "Gosh. I'm sorry. Should I stop it?"

"Relax, Dot, it's nothing. A little accident, that's all. Hemmings, would you get lunch started?" Ricard shifted awkwardly and watched Hemmings walk to the kitchen. He smelled the cloying sweetness of Dot's perfume, and imagined it would linger long after she was gone. He heard her muffle a yawn.

"Dot. What a nice name."

"Oh, thanks. It's really Dorothy. Don't you have any feeling at all?"

"No, Dot." He was startled at her frankness. "It is the same with my right arm."
"How awful. This doesn't sound like a little accident to me. It's tragic. It must have been simply horrifying."

"Well, you see, I was in Pamplona."

"Oh my God. Not the bulls. Why don't they put an end to that." Dot stared at the lifeless form concealed in Ricard's shirt sleeve.

"I tell you what, my new friend, if it would make it easier for you, just imagine that I was trying to flag down a cab to get to the running of the bulls, and two huge trucks blew past me out of nowhere, causing extensive nerve damage to my arms."

"Oh, God. Wouldn't that be sad. Getting all the way there and missing the show because two trucks tried to tear off your arms. Now that would be really tragic."

Hemmings reappeared with a tray of cheese and crackers.

"How are we doing? Would you like a beverage, Miss Dorset?"

"Okay. How about something pink?"

"Excellent." Hemmings departed.

"Can I fix you a cracker?"

"Why, thank you, Dot. Now, tell me about yourself." Ricard noticed the nimbleness of her tiny fingers.

"Oh, there's not much to say really." Dot placed a cracker in Ricard's mouth. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened to me in a long time. I had just sat down in my apartment. I was getting ready to go through some of my exercises for acting class,--"
"Acting class?"

"Can you believe it? Yes, acting class. And there's a knock on the door, and this guy--Hemmings, of course--says there's a world famous director who has seen me, and wants to meet me. I almost died. What an opportunity. Do you want me to do something for you, I mean, now?"

"That won't be necessary. You are here to have lunch with us. Hemmings? Is lunch almost ready?" Ricard sighed.

"Two minutes."

"I could do an emotion for you. Just pick one. Do you want to see despair? Not to brag or anything, but I do a flawless despair."

"I'm sure you are very convincing."

Ricard lowered his head. He listened to the sound of Dot chewing crackers.