1992

Deeds of trust

Lee Esbenshade

The University of Montana

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University of Montana
DEEDS OF TRUST

by

Lee Esbenshade

B.A., Stanford University, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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[Signatures and dates]
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Dean, Graduate School
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I have one relic from those days, when we were in our early twenties: a black and white photograph. In the background is a small building made of large cement blocks. At the base of this building and everywhere around it is sand; except for a narrow ribbon of empty space at the top. This space functions like the air at the top of a jar of spaghetti sauce you are about to freeze: insurance that nothing will crack.

A girl stands in front of the building——the photographer’s subject. She could be 17 or she could be 25. She wears gym sneakers and around her neck, a glistening round bone on a string. That’s all. A pile of fabric at her feet is her green cotton dress. So the photographer told me.

Her body is rigid. She glares, furious, straight out of the picture.

The photograph came out grainy so that each individual particle of sand seems visible, a world. The girl’s skin
Andrew had a grandfather living in the desert. In all the years he and Serapha had been together, he never explained exactly what he meant by "desert." One weekend in June he took her out there.

It was a multi-purpose visit. They would see Grandpa (Andrew was the only one in his family who still visited regularly) and Andrew would work on a screenplay he'd been hired to write. And he and Serapha would be together. Besides Serapha, he brought his electric typewriter, his camera, and a change of underwear.

Andrew's beat-up orange Datsun had no air conditioning. It was a long drive from Los Angeles in the heat. They drove in silence. Andrew wanted to talk about his idea for the script, but Serapha didn't ask, as she might have, so he continued ordering and reordering the scenes in his head.

Slumped in the passenger seat, Serapha felt herself wilting. She tried to plump up a pillow of positive feelings around her: what she secretly called her aura. (Because of her name, she kept her quirkier ideas to herself.)

She tried to maintain her aura in good condition. It
seemed to draw people towards her even when she felt her most drab. It seemed to be what had kept Andrew with her for this long, three years. Lately, his attentions were diminishing; today her aura felt slippery and vague.

She thought of another trip they had taken when they lived in San Francisco, the city she associated with the best time of their relationship.

They got up before sunrise one Saturday. They drove over the Golden Gate Bridge and north along the Marin coastline. They had no destination and the only limit was that they be back by the next day. Maybe they would get all the way to Eureka, they said.

The sun had broken up the fog, and opened up the vistas: stretches of sand lapped by shimmering white foam; wet black cliffs; wild, windblown pines. They stopped at a beach and climbed down the boulders to the sea. Serapha took off her shirt and basked in the warmth of the sun, her small breasts tickled by the breeze. She felt elated: they were completely alone. She wanted Andrew to make love to her.

Andrew curled up between the rocks. "Shouldn’t you put that back on?" he asked, and closed his eyes, dozing.

Serapha blamed it on his Catholic upbringing, this prudishness which stuck to sexual things even when he’d shed it everywhere else. Frustrated, she continued to bask.
They turned back after that, through the inland forests where the pine needles crackled in the heat. Their lack of sleep caught up with them and they napped on the sweaty vinyl seats of the car.

Back in the city, as they walked from the car to their apartment, Serapha felt let down.

Andrew squeezed her hand. "It's been such a nice day," he said.

"Was it?" Serapha said, surprised.

"Don't you think? So free and relaxing."

The adventure they'd had was not the one she had hoped for. But it was, after all, something, and maybe she was only depressed that it was over. She chided herself for slipping into a bad aura. "Yes, I suppose you're right," she said. "It was. Very nice."

After that she'd begun to think it had been a perfect day. Only now and then she still wondered: what else might have happened?

This trip was already so different, the landscape barren, the time scheduled, without even that promise of romance. What were her hopes? She didn't know. She would have to find out, before it was too late: before, without her seeing how, her wishes turned to disappointment.
The last twenty minutes of the drive made a big impression on Serapha. "Almost to paradise," as she described it, they got off track. She saw it ahead of her through waves of heat as they crested the last pass, clear, mirage-like: palm trees, quadrants of grass standing out against the brown desert with garden flowers and swimming pools. She could not stop Andrew from turning off the highway, in the opposite direction. Paradise simply wasn't where they were going.

Andrew chose instead a road that was only a road by virtue of having no bushes rooted there, eight feet across and as long and straight as she could see, lolling up over the hills. They rolled up their windows against the dust.

Buildings appeared, materializing out of the dust clouds. They were square, grey shelters, each the size of one small room, set up every half mile or mile. Their boarded windows and doors degraded them, emptying them of the smallest illusion of life.

"Homesteads," Andrew said. "Most of them abandoned within a year of being built."

People arrived with the government papers in their hands, he explained, the plots measured and marked out in words. They scratched their heads, gazing on the endless stretches of sand. They mixed their mortar and stacked their
blocks, all the time watching, wondering how and when that hostile land would get around to beating them.

Andrew was the photographer. He's the one who gave me the photograph. It was three years after the break-up and he said he kept coming across it, and he didn't want it around.

He used to tell me that Serapha was an inspiration to him: not as a muse (as, perhaps, his former lovers had been), but as a steady, approving presence in his life.

Everything he did, she adored. "Galvanized" was a word she used once to describe his effect on her life. "He's taught me to take risks, to appreciate indulgence, silliness. And passion--not just for sex; for life."

I understood. I'd felt that way about men before. I just couldn't believe it was Andrew she was talking about.

Andrew took easily to her worship.

The three of us moved together from San Francisco to L.A. and lived in an odious downtown loft. Serapha found it. She was thrilled, thinking it was exactly what we would want, unable to see how unlivable it was. It had been converted from an abandoned ink factory in order to make money off of pseudo-artists like ourselves.

Andrew and I were in film school together. At night, we sat in the cockroach-infested kitchen, planning award-winning
screenplays, bad-mouthing the other students gleefully.

Across the cold concrete floor of the main room, drifted with dirt and spotted with chartreuse dyes that could still come alive under a mop, Serapha tossed on the narrow mattress she and Andrew shared (they usually lay on it head to foot). She went to bed early, but never slept. Daytimes she taught elementary school and her idealism, unlike ours, was regularly tested. She was miserable.

Grandpa did not come to the door when Andrew and Serapha arrived. Andrew switched off the ignition and the Datsun’s engine died slowly. They sat in the car while the noise and dust ebbed into stillness.

"Isn’t he expecting us?" Serapha asked.

"He’s probably taking a nap," Andrew said.

"You did tell him we were coming." Her hopes for the weekend—though she still couldn’t say what they were—had diminished.

"No. I never do." Andrew opened the door.

"But this is different." Serapha glared at Andrew. She gave up on her aura. She felt weak. She felt like picking a fight.

"Why?" He started to get out of the car.

She caught his arm. "Because I’m here."
Andrew sat back down and looked at Serapha. Her face was tight, stretched with worry. She seemed to have aged since he last noticed. The look in her eyes accused him of cruelty and neglect. What did she want of him? Only three years ago she had been happy, self-assured, independent. Now he was constantly having to reassure her. "It's alright," he said. "It'll be okay. Don't worry."

"Don't you understand," she hissed, "your rudeness reflects on me too?"

"Don't worry," he enunciated. He widened his eyes at her and slipped from her grasp. The vinyl of the seat sucked at his skin then let go, and he stood up.

Serapha saw his hand tense on the car door.

Grandpa stood on the porch, squinting at them. One arm shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun on the sand. His t-shirt, if it had ever been white, had surrendered to the infinite brown of the landscape. His khaki pants did not reach his ankles, and his old leather shoes had stretched and flattened over the years so that by now they barely held to his feet. Above him a dust-encrusted American flag hung motionless from a pole. Grandpa waited, peering at them as if from a long distance away.

Serapha felt unwelcome, and at the same time, watched for. The man looked like a sentinel for an army that had
forsaken him long-ago, standing watch, to make sure he really
was abandoned, to make sure he stayed that way.

The sight of the house brought her some relief. A red
tile roof rippled across the tops of its walls like a cloth.
This and its size distinguished it immediately from its
lifeless neighbors. It was three times as large, with a two-
foot wall marking off a piece of the desert as a yard.

Grandpa’s face softened at their approach. He gave a
frail hand to Andrew, who shook it strongly, too strongly
Serapha thought. But she saw that Andrew wore the little
smile on his lips that used to come upon him when he met her
off the bus in San Francisco, in the very first days, before
she moved up to live with him: the smile that was a sign of
unexpected and unadmitted affection.

"Hi Grandpa," he said. "This is Sera."

"Serapha," she said, gaining strength, holding out her
hand to Grandpa.

Andrew raised his eyebrows. She passed as "Sara" in
Andrew’s family. He said they wouldn’t understand her real
name.

This was the first time she’d rebelled. She was tired
of letting him name her. "Serapha," she said again.

Grandpa held up a finger. "The ninth order," he said.
"What?" Andrew’s forehead wrinkled down over his eyes.
"You are of the ninth, the highest order of angels."

"Yes," she said.

They beamed at each other, as if, Andrew thought, they had awarded each other the million-dollar prize.

Inside, Grandpa prepared dinner. Andrew walked around the room picking up and putting down small objects. He stopped, an egg-shaped rock cradled in his palm, eyeing Serapha as she sat on the couch. "What was that about 'ninth order'?" he said.

She turned toward him. She was feeling better, her aura restored along with her name. "He was talking about my name." One side of her face radiated in the last light, the desert glow, reflected off the mountains across from the house. The other side disappeared in the darkness of the room.

"But what about it?"

"In the celestial hierarchy a seraph is the ninth order of angel."

"And what are the other orders?" He stared at her, squeezing the stone, flexing his muscles around it (searching her, she felt, for possible revisions he could make in his view of her).

"Angels are the lowest. Then archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominions, thrones, cherubim and seraphim."
She counted them off on her fingers.

"Why didn’t I know this about your name before?"

Serapha turned her face away. "You did. You knew it meant angel." Her voice trailed off, disembodied, in the darkness.

"Well now it turns out that angel is the bottom of the barrel. I didn’t know about the hierarchy. I didn’t know about the ninth order." Andrew wedged the rock between his two palms.

"Well don’t get pissed off about it," Serapha jabbed back.

"I mean," Andrew said. "Who are you?"

"Don’t be ridiculous. I’m exactly the same." She sighed, wishing she could just make him take a deep breath or two. He was making her nervous. "Don’t worry," she soothed. "It’s no big deal."

"Dinner is served," Grandpa said from the doorway.

Serapha always described herself as a weed in the garden of Andrew’s past girlfriends. It was a joke, but she had evidence in case she was called on to prove it.

There was the narrow-hipped, weaving larkspur, the model. The vibrant red poppy, sweetly stout with concealed elixir, the actress. The cala lily Swede, tall, with her
smooth looks, her casual allusions to death. And the
dandelion fluff, meager, pale and freckled, of Serapha.

She said Andrew found her plainness exotic at first,
especially in contrast to her name. (The name was a legacy
from an estranged, visionary mother. Serapha had had to train
herself to claim it, as one would train oneself to sit up
straight.) She did not wear make-up. Her cheeks blushed
often, on their own, but her lips were barely discernable
from the rest of her face.

Andrew did not ask her why she left her lips unpainted.
He did not want to change her. He wanted her to already be
what he wanted. She had been, once.

The aftermath of her relationship with Andrew brought
Serapha to look for these explanations of why it never, from
the first tentative kiss on a San Francisco park bench, was
meant to work out.

A dandelion fluff is frail in the wind, and equally,
difficult to uproot. This is why she clung, and why she
suffered: she had no choice.

Grandpa’s house stood below the crest of a hill, facing
the valley. The desert rambled down ahead of it for about a
mile, then dropped off to meet the stretch of the valley
floor in the distance. Beyond that rose the mountains, a
million years ago heaved up from the plain by some violent
shudder of the earth; now settled, craggy and stark.

Serapha sat on the porch the next morning in her green
sundress, her arms lying on the aluminum armrests of a
folding chair, her skin white in the heat. She watched
Grandpa working in the yard. He squatted in a group of small
white stones, arranging them: he moved a few of them
slightly, stood up to take in the effect, then bent and moved
them back.

Serapha would have offered to help him, but she didn’t
know how. The "yard" had a style so foreign, it stunned her
mind into passive contemplation. Sand in place of lawn.
Round white stones forming patterns: circles, squares,
flourishes, reminiscent of the royal gardens of Europe, in
its way. And even, at the center of each half (a concrete
path divided the yard in two) a fountain of colored glass, a
sculpture made of bottles cemented to a central post, two
stilled cascades.

The night before, they had eaten baked beans with
frankfurters, canned spinach and a salad made of corn
niblets, tuna and parboiled rice.

"You need a cook, Grandpa," Andrew said.

Grandpa snorted. "I am the cook. I always was. You
never saw your grandmother cook. If it’s good enough for me,
it's good enough for you."

Serapha knew little about Andrew's grandmother: only that she had died of cancer when he was in his mid-teens.

Andrew fell asleep easily after dinner, on the double sofa bed he and Serapha were allowed to share in the main room. Andrew's body curled away from Serapha under the sheet. She could hear his breathing, quiet and even. She moved closer to him and slipped her arm over his side, resting it on his chest. He squirmed, then turned over and gave her her hand back.

"Grandpa," he muttered with his eyes closed.

Serapha raised herself on her elbow. "What about Grandpa?"

"He'll see," Andrew breathed. Serapha turned over and slept, some time later, with her fist under her cheek.

The hum and clacking of Andrew's typewriter woke her at dawn. He typed without interruption, the sound unremitting even now, six hours later.

Serapha watched the desert stretching away from the yard into the distance. She wondered how the stories came to Andrew so easily, how the ideas became actions, how he knew what his characters should say, though he never knew what to say of himself, to her. He rarely had strong emotions, and when he did, he did not know what they were. He would turn
away from her, frustrated and mute.

She loved his scripts. They were rarely violent, and the sex in them was as warm and intimate as his sex with her could be. They were "little stories" about people living their strange, daily lives, hurting the people they loved, and feeling sorry for it. It was partly through them, she knew, that she loved him.

Maybe you remember learning the Pythagorean Theorem: the square of the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the lengths of the other two sides. I have finally found a way to apply this theorem.

Picture me at the right angle. Andrew and Serapha each at their own acute angle. The distance between them lengthens or shortens depending exponentially on their remoteness or their intimacy with me.

I felt like that: that I was the crucial point in their negotiations those final weeks of their affair. I was the only one who knew the whole truth, and I tried to dole it out prudently, selectively, in equal measure to each side. They virtually communicated through me. It was my fault, for being involved on both sides at once. I couldn't help it. I liked them both.
But I was safe. I was lounging in the velvet-lined armchair at the ninety-degree angle, the one that doesn't change, not involved in the squeezing and stretching of that painful transformation.

When Grandpa finished his gardening, he came to sit next to Serapha, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. "You know," he said, "when they say the temperature is ninety degrees, they mean ninety degrees in the shade. I believe it could be a hundred and twenty out there."

"How do you stand it?" she said.

He turned to her and she could see the sweat trickling from behind his ears, down his neck. "You've put your finger right on it," he said. "That's what they wonder. It's what they all wonder. They've been pestering me for ten years to move back there into that hell. It's like being a teenager again. Ha!"

He lumped her with "them", Serapha thought. Andrew's father and stepmother, and the rest of his screwed up family, living in various suburbs of Los Angeles. It had been an unfortunate choice of a question. She would keep her mouth shut.

"You know it's hell there, don't you?" he continued. "My picture of hell, exactly. Air like pea soup, so full of
fumes, and people running in circles: mad dogs foaming at the mouth and all the while pretending to be pretty as peacocks."

His voice gained momentum, with excitement or with venom, Serapha couldn't tell. "If Dante could have seen it. What vivid portraits for his Inferno: for the Fourth Circle, the Hoarders and Wasters; or the Eighth, the Flatterers and the Hypocrites, or he might have created a whole new circle for Los Diablos de Los Angeles. They have their own particularly vile malignancies."

He is ornery, Serapha thought, feeling she'd been put on the defensive; an ornery old man. "I don't mind it there," she said airily.

"Well," he smiled at her. "There you go. I don't mind it here, either." He leaned back in his chair.

They seemed to have come to an understanding, and she calmed down. She felt, once again, intact.

"Things were not always the way you see it now," he said, and she could feel that he was calming down too, opening up to her.

"My wife Frances and I left Los Angeles--the hell that even in 1954 was Los Angeles--to set up a homestead here in the high desert. We were better off than most who came," he said.

He described how it was, carefully, so that she would
see it and understand it. He and Frances were not young, and had come only half for the free land, half for the escape, blissful or not. Others, families with carloads of children and beat-up furniture, arrived without former knowledge of the desolation they would face. The desert had stored up for each of them a stubborn refusal to give anything in exchange for their toil.

"But I,"--he sat up and pounded his fist against the frail metal chair arm--"I, Joseph Kastli was prepared for the battle." The old man paused and slumped back in his chair. "Frances was not. She hated the desert, hated our life here, from the beginning."

Frances had watched other younger families pack up in defeat and leave. "Bull-headedness," she'd accused him. "No other reason why you want this no-good piece of land." She had never minded the life of the renter, what he used to call "sleeping in the wrong bed." Frances was a big, awkward woman, and her body never "set" in the desert. She moved around restlessly, with nowhere to go.

"She nagged," he said with bitterness, but his face settled into a soft, puzzled look.

"After a while I stopped listening. That wasn't hard because the silence of the desert is so much bigger than anything else out here."
Frances got quiet then too and he thought she had given in. She would sit staring out over the valley for hours, entranced, her fingers worrying the frayed plastic of the chair seat. Sometimes she knitted. Occasionally, her grandchildren visited, but there wasn’t much else she looked forward to.

The old man wound his fingers together. He looked up at Serapha. "Then one day she collapsed on the couch."

She was weak and could not move on her own. Pain angled in at every part of her body. He’d carried her to the car and taken her down to the hospital in Twenty-Nine Palms. He paced the waiting room floor, slept on benches, while they ran their tests. Finally the doctor came out to him. There was too much cancer in her, he said, to even think of cutting it out. She started X-ray treatments the same week at the City of Hope.

"They used to let her out for a few days at a time, so I fixed up a little house in Duarte for her to recover in. I tried to learn to pay attention to the little things: the colors of the paint, the shelving of books, the basket for her knitting. But she didn’t care any more where she was."

Finally they discharged her, saying they had done all they could. Her breathing had gotten bad, and they suggested the low desert. She died in a trailer he’d bought out in
At the end," he said, looking away from Serapha, "the pain was constant. She couldn’t hide it. I saw that she had carried that pain around with her, in subtler versions, since we’d moved to the desert. Bitterness, festering inside her—that was her cancer." The old man stopped.

Eventually he said, "She hated the desert. Maybe she hated me too. She probably did. I never gave her cause to do otherwise."

He made a soft gesture with his hand, indicating everything in their view, the sand, the abandoned houses, the distant mountains. "Living out here is a constant reminder."

Serapha winced. Grandpa sat with his elbow on the chair arm, staring straight ahead of him, baffled, as if the pain he wished to feel eluded him. His other hand hung by his side, and after looking at it for a moment, Serapha took it and held it, hot and dry, against hers.

"Thank you," he said. "You see, there’s nowhere else I can go. There’s nowhere I remember her being particularly happy. At least here I can remember her."

Patting Serapha’s hand, he left her and went inside.

Things weren’t always this way, Grandpa had begun. But weren’t they? There was Andrew inside, typing his heart out on blank paper, giving it away to audiences he would never
see. She stood up in a panic, thinking, What will become of me? She wanted to go in and shake Andrew until the ideas and characters that peopled his head came clattering out onto the ground. "I'm here!" she would have liked to yell. "Don't you see me? I'm right here!" She sat down again, exhausted by the thought.

That spring Andrew had started spending time with Cindy. She was in the production department of the film school. Cute, chic and self-possessed, she didn't take any shit from Andrew. It was about time, he said. He needed the punishment of reality.

This is how he excused himself to me. He didn't talk about the rewards. That's why I thought it was only an infatuation.

I knew about it; everyone in the school knew about it. Only Serapha didn't know. She knew he'd gotten more social, and that she wasn't included. I heard her asking him one morning if she couldn't go with him to a party that night. He squirmed in his seat.

"You're ashamed of me," she said.

"It's not that," he said. "I just don't want us to be seen together all the time. I don't want to be thought of as part of a couple."
And another time — I encouraged her in this — she made up a list of questions she'd never dared to ask him. She conducted it like an interview, only she was sobbing the whole time. "What do you think of marriage?" she asked. Then, "I don't care about marriage. Marriage aside, do you see yourself having children? Do you see yourself having them with me? And when?" Their relationship up to that point had precluded asking those questions.

"I don't know." He kept repeating it, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I can't answer that. I don't know."

The one real bind I got into was not being able to tell Serapha about Cindy. Andrew didn't ask me not to. It was clear to me that it was not my business to do that. But hiding it involved a lot of circuitous logic.

"Of course he still loves you," I said. "He just doesn't know what he wants. Men are like that. You've told him what you want. Now you can be patient, or you can tell him to go fuck himself."

"Take her away somewhere," I told him. "You guys don't even know each other any more. Spend a little time together."

I felt like a mechanic: counseling each of them on how to tinker with the motor in order to make the thing run again.
Grandpa shuffled back out to the patio and sat down next to Serapha again, offering her a glass of water. "Drink," he said.

Suddenly parched, she gulped the water down.

"The desert is a cruel mistress," he said. "The only thing she awards is devotion, absolute, relentless devotion. They say I'm crazy to live here, but I'm not; no crazier than Dante, who wrote every word for his divine Beatrice. And I have gotten rewards beyond the spiritual."

He lifted his hand in the air and let an object drop from it. Serapha reached out to stop its fall, but the sun glinting off it dazzled her eye. It caught itself; it hung from a string pinched between his fingers.

"I found it," he said.

A distorted circle with a hole in the center, it was perhaps a bone: a piece of the pelvic bone of a small animal; or maybe the eye socket of a larger one. White as bleached paper, polished smooth by sand and wind, its milky surface gleamed.

"I imagine having given it to Frances," Grandpa said. "I imagine her having finally understood, accepted, and grown to love the desert." He shook his head. "That's my daydream. She would have despised this little charm. It's from a desert rat. It would have disgusted her."
He leaned toward Serapha and placed the loop of string around her neck. "Think of it as magical. Wear it, when you look at Andrew. He needs you. Believe me, he does. Maybe it will help you to understand him."

Serapha looked down at the bone, resting on the flat of her chest. It shone there like a little halo. "Yes," she said. "Maybe. Thank you."

To herself she said: "But understanding and accepting are two different things."

Grandpa had gone inside to take a nap. Serapha watched the valley, watched the shadow of a small cloud creep across the face of the mountains. Vague plans formed in her mind. She waited.

When the shadow of the small cloud disappeared, slipping over the ridge of mountains to the other side, she walked into the house and stood next to Andrew. He continued typing without looking up at her. She flipped the power off on the typewriter. He sat there, his fingers still poised on the keys, his eyes rolled over toward her. His mouth moved around a thought he'd been in the middle of typing out.

"You know, one day your grandfather is going to die," Serapha said. He shut his mouth, and turned to look at her. "I'm going walking," she said. "I'll see you later." She
turned to leave.

"Wait. Wait a minute. I'll come with you."

A tendril of concern in his voice reached out and caught her, wavering, on the doorstep. "Okay," she said.

She caressed the bone, feeling the benevolence of its curves, the strength that had given shape to the physical life of an animal. A charm, she thought. Protection from evil. Hope.

Probably, though, Andrew just wanted a break from typing.

He came up to her, his camera slung around his neck.

"Let's go," he said.

Andrew had told Serapha about his split with Janice, the model. He said Janice had wanted to break it off. She asked him to meet her at a café to talk. He brought his friend Bill. She turned up with her friend Lynn. Then, because Bill and Lynn were there, it passed, undiscussed. Voilà: they had broken-up.

Some months later, when Andrew needed to make a quick film, he phoned Janice. She came over and he filmed her, talking about the break-up while taking off her shirt. In the end, he comes into the picture and embraces her. It was all scripted.
They set out across the open desert between the ghost houses. Skeletons of bushes sat in shallow graves, pale sheltered cavities where the wind had been prevented from piling any sand. Nothing stirred, no cloud now blemished the thin blue skin of the sky.

The heat got inside the two of them, so small against the landscape; it weighted them, slowing their progress. Serapha felt as though she were walking through a series of walls with no space to breath in between. Coarse sand slid into her shoes and rubbed like sandpaper against her feet. It scratched in between her toes.

She watched Andrew taking pictures of the boarded up buildings, of the valley floor, of the sand, of the sun. He seemed not to discriminate between them.

The girl in the photograph doesn't pose – her slight body, the pouch of her stomach, her almost invisible breasts (they cast no shadow) don't stand out, with a supposed life of their own, like they would have to if this was to be pornography. The focal point is her face, the anger there.

The photograph is a document. You can see it in the girl's eyes: she has stripped, not for the photographer, but for herself. It is something more than her clothes that
she's cast off. She is considering what will be her next move.

"What was your grandmother like?" Serapha asked. They sat, now, in the shade of one of the houses. She didn't try to hold his hand. She didn't want to seem cloying. He sat with his arms propped on his knees.

"She was okay." Andrew’s mind was somewhere else. Serapha waited for him to drift towards her.

"Well," he went on, finally, "she seemed okay but she was unhappy. As a kid I was scared of her. She wasn’t a woman like my mother or my teachers. She was tough. That’s how her life was. She always worked because she had to, but when she retired she didn’t like that either. Having nothing to do was worse than drudgery."

"Were you sad when she died?"

"Of course. If someone has a miserable life, it’s even worse when they die. You think about how it should have been."

Serapha touched his elbow with her fingertips. He shuddered. She withdrew her hand and looked away.

He picked up the camera. Looking through the lens, he scanned the desert in front of him.

"Take a picture of me," she said.
"Hmmm?"

"I said take a picture of me." Serapha stood up and dusted the sand off her dress. "Back up a little." She waved toward the valley. "I'll stand here against the wall."

Andrew trudged away from her through the sand. When he turned back to face her, she had pulled off her sundress and dropped it on the ground. She leaned back against the cement wall of the building, her naked body relaxed, rounder than he remembered it. He stared at her. She stared back, serious.

Sweat trickled into his eyes, and when he wiped it out, he felt dizzy.

He wanted to be indifferent; he wanted her to be indifferent, so that there would be as little pain as possible. He wanted it to end on equal terms, as it had begun. He wanted to remain friends.

Andrew looked around quickly, to make sure no one saw. The picture was a ploy, he thought. She was taunting him. She had made herself vulnerable, so that he would want to protect her. He did want to protect her. His legs twitched. He took a step towards her.

"Take the picture," she said.

He stopped, but in his mind his hands were already on
her breasts. He was pulling her pelvis to him. He was squeezing her against the wall. The air burned in his lungs.

"Take the goddam picture!" she yelled.

"Okay!" he yelled back. He held the camera up to his eye and focused, then snapped the shutter. He slung the camera on the ground. It landed in the sand with a soft thud.

Serapha pulled her dress on over her head. She walked to the camera and picked it up. Andrew crouched in a ball a few feet away, his hands over his eyes. Serapha knelt next to him.

"Is there or isn't there someone else?" she said.

"There is," he whispered.

Her chin trembled. "Then tell me you don't love me," she said, her voice shaking. "Tell me it's over."

"No," he said. "I can't."

"Tell me!" she yelled. "Tell me it's over."

He remained silent, curled tightly against himself.

"You fucking coward." She dropped the camera next to him and ran.

He heard her choking and spitting, her huge obscene sobs filling up the desert as she ran off and lost herself among the empty buildings.
Once it was definitively over, I had to wonder: what effect did I have on the proceedings? I had tried to be impartial. But deep down, I knew it wouldn’t work. There were a lot of things she needed, and for his own reasons, he wasn’t equipped to give them to her.

I certainly didn’t like this thing with Cindy, and it was in the face of that that I backed their relationship. Perhaps my true pessimism slipped in between the cracks of my "therapy."

Andrew continued to visit his grandfather, as he always had. But after the time he took Serapha there, it was never the same. Grandpa asked about her continually. How was she doing? Why did she not come with Andrew to see him?

"She’s fine, Grandpa," Andrew said. "She’s at home. She’s too busy to come out right now."

After a year had passed, he told him the truth, that they had split up. Grandpa was furious. "How could you be so stupid? She was the best thing that ever happened to you." He went out to work on the garden, refusing to hear Andrew’s side of the story.

Later he said, "You keep her from me for years, finally I meet her, then you dump her. How could you let her go?"

Andrew would have shown him the picture, just to shut
him up. If Grandpa saw it, he would change his mind about Serapha. He would see that she wasn’t such a wonderful girl after all. Andrew never brought himself to do it.

Grandpa’s badgering got worse, and Andrew stopped going to see him. Some time later, the old man died.

After the funeral Andrew went with his father and brother to the desert to clean out the house. They cleared the cupboards and stripped the beds. Under Grandpa’s mattress they found a small hoard of pornographic books, with strange parts underlined. Andrew’s father and brother, sitting in the living room drinking cans of beer, made a game of reading the underlined parts out loud. They laughed and shook their heads. "That old codger," they said.

Andrew waited outside. He had been looking for something of his grandfather’s he could keep. But he found nothing. Cans of peas and spaghetti-o’s lined the cupboards. Knickknacks sat around the house dully, little stones and things, empty of significance. Andrew thought he remembered his grandfather liking literature, and reading to him when he was small, but he couldn’t find a single volume.

He went outside and squatted in the yard, his tennis shoes sinking into the sand. How long would it take for the dust to cover everything over? Grandpa was gone.

Andrew clenched his fists, wanting to smash the colored
bottles, to twist his feet among the stones and destroy their neat, even patterns. He couldn't do it. He wanted to cry, but his chest heaved once, shivered, and was still.

The photograph is mine now. I keep it in a drawer to remind me: of how we women make ourselves vulnerable, of how men use this weakness, furtively, to drive us crazy, and how they then observe us, documenting our downfall.

But then I look at the picture. I look at the emptiness around her and in her. I look at her eyes, and I think I see him reflected in them.

His pain is her pain. It is the shame they each felt at making mistakes, the strain of never having been taught to adapt.
He'll remember our dreams. We were bound for the cliffs at Carrigan Head, to see what the centuries of conflict had wrought: yielding rock, wielding water that pounded, retreated. Naked air that unblurred for an instant the flux. It was a working, we'd heard, more daring, more painful, a triumph more marked than the famed Cliffs of Moher. We swore it in blood that we'd stand at their top.

Whatever he is now, my once-faithful love, he cannot escape its echoing chant. The very seagulls of Ballybunion cry out, looking down from above as he gouges wet earth: "C’rigan Head . . . C’rigan Head . . ." They watch him dig graves for those poor boxed-up stiffs that dream no more dreams. And I, I no longer curse his cold heart. I just crave that we’d made it, brave in deed as in word, forgiving as full as our anger was quick.

Even now that I know what we both have survived to, I look back and succumb to his power over me. It’s a terror to
think it, in moments of weakness—my pain is outweighed by
the thrill of our dream—that I would go back and go with him
again, over and over, reliving that death. I’d trust him
each time, each time he’d destroy me. Then he’d look in my
eyes, he’d tell of his love, and I’d forget all I knew and
believe him again.

You who’ve been kind to me, hear me out now, as we drive
through the dusk and the rain in your car: the great truths
of Ireland sit on no map. If you ask no directions, you fool
only yourself. For the way is made up of stone walls and cow
pastures and a road that goes only from here halfway there.
By Thane’s actions I’ve died, but by yours I can live. You
give the tale meaning; heard, I live again.

Our town was not large: one thousand five hundred, and
that was at most and including the dead. I knew Thane by
sight from the time we were children. He was different, had
pennies and did not stink of fish. His aroma was richer, of
earth and of pickle; he’d been treated, preserved from
misfortune and shame. We kept from his path, son of the
mortician. The fishermen said he was bad luck to us.

I never believed it. The dead were not evil. My father
had died and he lay underground. He was lonely and idle
there, never threatened a soul. All of my life—ten years,
til he drowned—he adored me, his darling, his own fair-haired lass. He’d come home in his oilskins, I would wait at the door. He’d grab me and swing me, we’d jig round the kitchen. I shrieked with delight ‘til we fell to the ground.

For my mother sat deafly, mending the nets, and slyly she’d trip him to end all our fun. He’d laugh then and hug her, always good tempered. He’d pay her the attention. I’d hate her for that. I would but I couldn’t, I wasn’t allowed to. "Your poor mother’s deaf!" he would chide me. "For shame! You must thank God, and love her." His big voice was gentle, his concern for my soul let me know I was damned.

"Of course, Father, I love her. She’s my mam," I cried out. The poor woman heard nothing and spoke with a thick tongue. But how stupid of her to end up like that! Left out of each sound the world offered to her: foghorn and birdcry, sirens, waves crashing, frogs in the spring and the voice of her man. She sat in her rocker, throwing her shuttle. When he was dead, silence buried our house. She could speak but caught few words in her net for me.

I often walked over to visit my father, taking food, crossword puzzles, and played round his grave. The dead, they are bored; I brought gifts to amuse him. I dreamed that he thanked me for saving his soul. From shame? From iced flames? From eternal damnation? From boredom! I answered
the pestering doubts. For my ideas had changed then. I knew many things. There could be no Next Life, no Angels, no Hell. Those who believe may well glory in it, but my father went under and that's where he stayed. His life on the sea was all peril and work, his death an eternally tedious sleep. The truth I know now, my Thane knew it himself once: there is only the road, and beyond that the grave.

That's when I quit school, at thirteen and three-quarters. The Sisters told lies and punished my truth. "Evil are all books but The Book," they said of my novels. They made me sit staring for hours at the wall, and said, "Patience! Listen! The Truth will come to you."

"You listen!" I answered. "You bury me here! Let me learn from my life." But no one could hear me. Blankness, more deafness, met every appeal. I walked out. No one followed. I never went back.

I was sixteen when we met, Thane a year older: wiser? or maybe just more hurt by life. He came and saved me from the way I was living. He found me in the graveyard, waltzing with tombs. I was mad by then, outcast, alone there at midnight. "I'm a witch," I said, cackling. He believed what I said. I opened the puzzle book and cast a spell on him. It worked! He laughed with me, and danced wildly too, disobeying the code of his somber-faced clan. His black
curls were air currents, his body a slim, strong flame, he was bony, a skeleton, prancing on graves. And I was a sorceress, flame-haired and freckled, next to Thane, squat and homely, but alive. I could fly.

At last we sat down and we talked of all nature: of peat bogs and mountains, of oceans and cliffs. Of ourselves we said little, details did not matter. Town gossip'd long ago took care of that. The luck of our meeting erased all forewarnings, and on that blank page love scrawled straightaway.

Amongst our recitals, we unearthed a fantasy common to both, unlike as we seemed: to stand naked atop the great Cliffs of Moher.

"We'll do it together!"

"An adventure, a triumph!" I crowed at the thought of so daring a plan. We parted at daybreak, dew-streaked, euphoric.

The cliffs were our mark from that moment's agreement. Our alter-selves journeyed there, already free. We waited, suspended, our first summer and autumn, counting time 'til the busloads of tourists were gone. We let our love linger, tempting desire, whetting the edge of our hungering days. At last, winter came. We would stand there together, let the wind bare our souls, only rain there to see.

Thane once had a motorbike went to its grave at the dumping grounds outside of Knocknagashel. But before that it
lived! It chuckled and roared, next to my window when Thane called me to ride. As I leapt the gate, my mother ran after, moaning garbled deaf words muffled by her thick tongue: 
"Hazel. Don ya go, Hazel! Ya kill yaself! Listen!" I glanced back at her as her voice struck my ear.

Her arms full of laundry that scattered behind her, the socks and the towels all tumbling down: when she got to the door, she let the pile fall. Raising her arms she looked up to her God and cried, "Wha have I done? Wha did I wrong?" Thane revved up the motor and tore me away. I let one tiny tear drop. It blew away quickly, into my ear where it whistled and sang. The past was all pain, the future all golden. I held tight to Thane's waist. The wind glued me to him.

The Cliffs of Moher are a terrible sight, fit to subdue a mind grown engorged with itself. Our lives were returned to a proper proportion. Our wills were restored, our freedom to act.

We walked the railed path atop those vast monsters, thousands of feet above black crashing waves. Thane ached to skirt closer. I felt him go from me. I heard myself howling as mad as the wind, "Get back! Get back, get away from that edge!" He leaned farther out over rail, over rock. He craved to unite with the shattering sea. His mind made a
leap, his body to follow had I not grabbed his trouser waist, dragging him back. We flattened against wind-carved rock by the path. We craved only each other from that moment on.

You who attend me, with patience you listen. Let sympathy bear you to where once you were too. You and I both, we’ve passed up our prime, yet our youthful selves linger—why still do they call? To taunt us, it’s certain; but sometimes not quite. I think they intend to return us our hearts.

When my Thane and I had done loving each other I screamed to the wind that careened round the cliffs, "Mother! You never did wrong, you did right!" For what could be vile in the life that pulsed through me: pain and its opposite, unbounded joy?

Now when I think of the shock of that joy, I wonder if I was alone in its clutch. Did the glory for Thane lie in his thoughts of leaping, and I was a slim consolation at best? Proved to me now is the thing I denied then: his wish to destroy himself however he could. The destruction he found was a subtle one; still, if we battle our natures, what self is there left?

Back home again followed a time of more waiting, bearing the gossip and our families’ rough grip. I was mere
fishscum. I thought Thane would leave me. The taunts of his schoolmates, the fist of his father—he beat Thane to keep him from such tramps as me.

I sewed nets with my mother—slave of the trade—mending the tears that would just tear again. I vowed to trust no one, believing in nothing. I could avoid disappointment that way. With low expectations, rewards are much higher: Thane sneaked out to meet me. His love hadn’t failed. In the graveyard, in darkness, we loved loudly and freely on grass or on stones, crushing flowers with our skin. No one would dare to come catch us out there.

We found that the act we thought would relieve us only resulted in thirsting for more. I talked to the boatmen, listening to stories, and heard the next name in our litany there: Carrigan Head! the bane of the fishermen up on the south coast of Donegal’s shore. The legends they told made us more eager and in a dark corner down at the pub, over our beers we made firm plans to go.

Thane’s fast bike was gone, wrecked one rainy night on a wild ride down from the south Limerick hills. (The scars only made him more dear to me.) We vowed we would get there, to far Donegal, walking or running, however we could. We pricked each a finger, mine tough, Thane’s translucent, and traded our same-colored blood to be sure.
Carrigan Head! To make love there, our bodies celestial, the zenith in reach. We'd look back on that moment for years beyond the doing. I believed that I would have been sated with that. A twilight of the soul could come early and last long, with a sigh of relief that the great deeds were done. But Thane said he wanted above all the fast life: he must live young forever or die young at once.

"Then we'll live young," I said. "We will go and keep going. Every end a beginning, every meeting a birth. We'll be vampires of life, sucking fuel from each moment, our vitality endless, our strength always primed!" We raised up our glasses and smashed them together. The dark liquid sprayed us with a stale grainy smell.

Home we both ran to make preparations. In secret I packed up my few worldly goods. I said my goodbyes to my mother that evening, without uttering a sound, without making a sign. She'd know soon enough, she would hurt but not badly: for her I was only a trouble in mind.

We started off walking the High Road from Ballybunion. Soon we were crossing the Shannon's great mouth. A taste of our triumph we got on the bridge away up from the waters; how it seemed to sway! But a bridge is a bridge, not a thing like a cliff. We passed on to the far side in a cloud of bus fumes. From there, we decided to put out our thumbs with ten
punt between us, two hundred miles to trek.

We had fair many rides, not one over nine miles. No one in these counties ever goes far with that journeying fever that saddled us two. But the people of the south are gracious and warm. We never stood long before another pulled up.

Thane made me go first, and sit with the drivers, to look pretty or please, and to speak for us both. A talent I found for it, though Thane called me his shy girl (yes, shy in company, never with him). I sat in those cars, I saw and I knew then, I knew that I knew every driver by heart. The schoolteacher/spinster, the salesman from Guinness, the mother and father with four boys at home. I fathomed their fantasies, their hearts' desires, I could say what I knew that they wanted to hear.

The tales I told them, some lies, some part-earnest, made them laugh and feel young and full of good news. We were students on holiday studying our country; we were going into business and needed advice; we planned to be married—tell us your secrets!—one day we’ll be having six kids of our own. They bought us a drink, a meal or a bed, plied us with stories and counsel for free. Thane’s spirits were high, our success made him gleeful, the progress we followed was a map of his smiles.

We thumbed our way slowly from corner to corner, Ennis,
Ballinasloe, Rosecommon and on. Out many days, we revelled in our leisure; our hearts hurried for us, just under our skin. We never revealed to a soul where we headed, the mecca we wandered toward only our own. "The next town will do," we said. "We'll just do some shopping, fill up our knapsacks with good things to eat." Maybe in silence the secret was injured. There was no one to witness what our plans had been.

I did not think then that he'd love me the worse for learning the ropes any traveller must know. I was acting a part and he took it for real! I sat and talked blarney, he listened and judged; and I was still blissful, not heeding his frowns. I know that I said some daft things in those times, more and more foolish to Thane's burning ear. I told them I was a society girl, a travelling princess, and Thane was my toad. They laughed then, they liked me and that drove Thane mad.

We got out of one car and he looked at me darkly. The reflection I saw in his eyes was not me. A stranger had come to inhabit his gaze, a bright, laughing stranger who'd no need of Thane.

"But I love you!" I cried. "You've released me from silence. My old morbid self couldn't love as I can."

Thane grimaced and turned, feeling he'd been deserted. Nothing I said would he take as the truth.
By the time we reached Strokestown my joy had diminished. I cringed at my stories, Thane no longer spoke. Our passage was slower, the Northfolk were leary. The trouble in Ulster put danger in mind. We waited for hours in the rain and Thane blamed me. He'd misplaced his nerve and I was the cause. For I was an upstart, wresting his power from him. He no longer knew he could make it alone.

Perhaps all we want is faith in a true self. Perhaps what Thane did was pass himself to me: our spirits exchanged in a moment’s confusion. I who was doomed became lucky and gifted; he who was favored lost all he once had. My silence I loathed and was glad to get rid of; his charm when he lost it betrayed him for good.

Through Sligo Thane glowered, my chattering faltered. The coast up to Ballyshannon was rough. Huge boulders defied us, swirled round by white waters. The skies lowered down, compressed breath into gasps.

The driver who took us at last up the road was a man in a low, slug-colored car. I nearly refused him, but Thane pushed me in. Fake leopard fur clung in greased clumps to the dash. Great mutton-chop sideburns twitched when he spoke in an accent so broad I could barely catch on.

"If I could," he said, "I'd be travelling too, to America. Mayashville," he said like a Yank.
"Ay," I said to the stranger, rashly responding, "Country music. We play it ourselves when we can. I play fiddle, him banjo, but we had to leave them. We left in a hurry, you know how it goes."

"Runaways!" he crowed. "I knew it, I knew it. Runaway young 'uns, the law on your tails!"

"No, not us," I said proudly, trying to think of a mission, something to prove we had business in mind. Something--like the truth; but there the words failed me. Carrigan Head was divine. We weren't worthy, us two. And yet we kept going. By what were we driven? No longer the future, but fear of the past.

Outside the window, the sea pounded on. The foam and the spray formed me a vision: my mother, mending her endless net-tears. I stared first in shock, then in disgust, as the image dissolved in the impudent waves. The life I was groomed for had no appeal: I had run away. I would never go back. I said, "Runaways? Mister, you could call it that."

"We'll hafta lie low then! I'll get you to safety. You can trust an old shifter to do you the turn."

He drove into town slowly, leering excitement, drumming greased fingers on the padded steering wheel. I shivered at first at the truth I had told him, and next at the words Thane flung at my back.
"Let me off here. As for her, you can have her. She's caused enough trouble for twenty like me."

The man's eyebrows were raised, his mouth hanging open. He pulled the car over, put his hand on my thigh. I sat there stunned, thinking maybe I'd heard wrong and knowing I hadn't: my demon was Thane. He'd saved me from hell just to dump me in limbo. Where were my bearings? Thane took them with him.

In that ugly town, that crass tourist haven, Thane ran for his life and he left me with mine. He slammed the car door. I got out and ran after. Catching him up, I grabbed at his arm.

"You're sickening," he spat, right there on the sidewalk, in front of the gaudy, shut-down arcades. Light rasped from the street lamps to glare on dark windows; Thane's face, out of season, out of love, was dead too.

The waves' crash sent spray as far as we stood. My hair hung down wet and my coat dripped in tears.

"You lie to the best and the worst of them, don't you?" His hate clung like the water; it flooded my ears. "You don't need me now, your company's been splendid. I'll go my own way, you can try it alone!" He ran away from me, down some dirty alley that closed itself up so that I could not come.

I stood, unbelieving. What happened to memory? To
blood and to innocence, shared secrets and goals? What happened to trust that Thane loathed me so quickly? The man called him a runaway, I let him think so. So what? Who could care what a creep like him thought? But Thane’d renounced much for a mere fleeting pleasure. Now he feared he was stuck on the fringes of life.

Time passed—minutes? hours?—I moved not a muscle. My body, like stone, felt not splashings nor wind. My mind spun out wide, untied from its mooring. There was no shore familiar to rest on. Thane’d gone.

I went to sit in a gloomy old tavern. I made up no plans, I just waited for Thane. He never did come. Was he cursing? Repenting? Did I lie forgotten as he planned his next step?

In that dark tavern, I ordered a coffee, black as the devil and bitter as bile. Accepting that bitterness was my mistake. Had I added sugar to sweeten myself, to recall timid hope back to my prison door . . . what then? What is it that I am supposing? A mere spoon of sugar to save me from ruin? At the time I did wish so; for I’d no idea of what in the world could have wrenched Thane from me. A tiny, obscure, odious secret. If I could but guess it, I’d act to mend things.

The publican saw me, she filled my cup over. As I
swallowed more coffee I grew more severe. Thane’d purposely poisoned his feelings against me. Well then, I’d agree, I’d have no more of him. In sorrow or anger, he’d never come near me. Vindictiveness spurred me to ditch my last hope. I ran into the road, pressed a couple to take me, away, anywhere, at a distance from Thane.

I went where they took me, I went where I could. I let them take care of me, body and soul.

Days later, then weeks, on a regular schedule, I returned to the spot where I’d last seen Thane stand. First I thought he might be there, come back looking for me, then, obsessed, I persisted, since he’d been there that once. Phantom specks of his boot-dirt ground into the paving made it a comfort to tarry awhile.

This moment I sit here pretending I’m there, invoking his presence to fill me again.

You who are safe, in your life, in your family, travelling towards home, you whom comfort awaits...do you think I’m a moaner? Abusing your kindness? Or telling you lies like I’ve said I did once? I don’t blame you for doubting. I’ve doubted myself. But for once I can say trust would not be misplaced. Joy, pain, remorse, they have worked their way out...it is me I am showing, long-buried, unearthed. In spite of myself what I tell you is true.
I still do regret it, my headstrong behavior--I flew without knowing what he planned to do. His side of this story is bound to be different. I suspect how much different, how it changes each year. My own's evolved too, with my mood and my setting. I speak it out now, and I try to be fair. I wish he would clear me of charges against me, that I am a vagrant, a liar or a whore, the things he conceived when his anger was fresh; and of all the bad things he'll have said of me since, for never returning. Back there at home, they'll believe what he says. Two years have passed. They all know I'm not dead.

At the first I was sure I could never go back, but I did, six months after our parting of ways. I'd worked as a barmaid and I had some money; took the bus down from Ennis so no one would know. I walked out of town and I waited 'til night fell. Then I crept in and searched for Thane from house to house.

I'd no sort of lead on him, no cause to know the course that he took, the ways that he'd changed. I went first to his parents but saw no sign of him. They sat at their table, no place set for Thane. I snuck round the town in dark clothes like a thief, peering in windows, listening at walls. At last Thane strode right down the street I was walking. I
choked on my heart. I leapt into shadows. He passed me right by without glancing my way.

I followed. I wondered, could I be mistaken? His pace was so clipped, he glanced at a watch. If not for his hair I'd have thought him a stranger. It flew from his head the same as before, black and unruly, a true devil's halo. It could not be tamed like the rest of him; no.

I would have accosted him, caught him up at his door, but the house that he picked was so well-to-do: brick-laid front, leaded windows, rose damask curtains. I thought I was dreaming, and thought Thane was too. I remembered Thane's father, then. He wished this for Thane.

As I stood in the street she opened the door. In a glow of gold light, she welcomed him in. She grabbed him and kissed him in what seemed desperation, so he stumbled and tripped on the child at his feet. Quickly it happened: Thane shouted, she cringed. I saw Thane's hand raised, knew he'd hit her before.

"Stop it!" I cried.

Both of them looked. The baby was squalling, poor thing, on the floor. Thane, he went white, and his wife, she turned angry. She reached for the door and she gave it a slam. I left then, I had to. I'd no more to say.

The night that I saw Thane's poor wife shrinking from
him, there was something about her I already knew. In a flash I saw us there, Thane and myself, how I let him control me with his will and his love. She was me, or just like me. She knew how to love him, or just how to love, never mind it was Thane. What is it to love someone other that well, when we never learn how to love our own selves?

Full of this question, shaking and stumbling, I ran from their house into darkness, alone.

After a while I went to my mother’s. I looked in the window to see how she fared. Out in the back kitchen, in the dark and the cold, to keep the vile smell from entering the hearth, she sat in her rocker as ever she had done, surrounded by yards and more yards of nets. I saw her hard hands lit by the small oil lamp, the shadows that flickered across her broad face. Her big netting shuttle jabbed down then flew up. It flashed in the light with a violence I knew.

Ever since memory started, when I cried as a baby, or vowed I would die of some childhood shame, she never once said, "Wait til tomorrow. Things will be better." Every day, every hour, for her, was the same.

As I stood outside watching, the clock chimed for seven. She looked up, eyes clouded ‘til they picked out the hands. Then, her face more determined, she went back to her sewing.
What had changed since I left? Not a chime, not a stitch. She returned to her shuttle like I'd never existed, though her washing was halved and her worries were nil. She weaves at her webs til they wholly engulf her. I cried as I left her. She's weaving there now.

I've always stayed north, from town to town travelling. The poor, stark beauty of Donegal is my home. The country is stone-bound, the rainfall unending, the brutal wind beats me and keeps me alive. From Lifford and Raphoe to Millford and Creeslough, way up to the top, to Inishtrahull. My life became this: to travel and chatter and make people's stories come true in their heads. I'm a kind of a travelling good fortune bringer. I stop when I'm empty and refuel again. Sometimes I've worked. Often I've suffered. I've eaten and starved, and been drunk as a bum. And I've found my own freedom; I do as I please. I hold off the future with the flint of my will.

But as some old ghosts will haunt every place save the spot where their mortal lives came to an end, my way never leads me to Carrigan Head. I know what is best, and I find it too painful to look back and think what I wished might have been. I am no longer young. My look has got savage, not with wildness or love. Like a ravenous wolf.

Sometimes I wonder, sometimes I imagine, as I watch a
car pull off the highway for me: if by some eerie chance it was Thane who was stopping, on a generous whim, an impulse of old. I imagine him as he was once long ago. But moreso, more truly the self he was then; if his daring had lasted his life’s length, his life’s depth. If he’d dared to believe me, dared to be honest, if we’d dared to hang on to each other through change.

I still think, and often, of what we’d have come to. Would I be Thane’s wife with a child and a house? Then he’d be my home, I’d not wander in limbo.

But I can say now that was not meant to happen. I’ve seen myself truly; I know myself more. I could never sit still for the sake of a child; nor clean a clean house; nor suffer myself, like a good plot of dirt, mind and body, sown only to keep other lives. I was raised as an outcast; I must persist as one, a traveller whose pleasures are fleeting but pure. I see it is true, and I see truth is bitter, cold-blooded, hard-hearted, indifferent to love.

Kilcar? You may drop me. I’ll stay the night here, and I thank you for bringing me right to this point. If one good has come of my telling my tale, if I made sense or didn’t, if you heard or refused, it’s the choice that the telling has brought me to now.

Tomorrow I go to Carrigan Head.
Today I sit smugly making excuses for why I never took charge of my life. I am earnestly sick of complaining and longing. I sit in this car and my anger has stopped. No more lies, no more brooding; it was my goal that drove us. Why should I not meet it and begin life anew?

And while I am there, while I am revelling in the glory of knowing I’ve done it alone, I’ll kill the old ghost of a doubt that has dogged me since the moment I pledged my soul’s keeping to Thane. That beltloop I grabbed, to stop his rash leap from the heights of our tryst at the old cliffs down south? I will pull back my fingers; I’ll release him to plunge—to his death, to his life, as I plunge into mine.
The day broke early and hot, steam rising already at six a.m. from the dewy, flaking boards of the old house in Huron, Ohio. Solme Kohler sat in her bedroom, facing the window and the view across the street, over the park. Beyond the park, Lake Erie disappeared in the white haze of heat. Solme didn’t see any of this. Her fingers pleated and smoothed the front of her short dress over and over again.

The girl’s scraggly eleven-year-old’s braid, loosened by fitful sleep, hung rat-like down her straight back. She was thin-boned and small-featured and wore all black.

It was July twenty-first, the sixth anniversary of the car crash that had killed Solme’s mother, father and two sisters. With shaking hands, Solme had dressed for the annual ritual: black cloth rubber-soled slippers, a black summer dress she’d outgrown, which now fit her like a slip, a blackish half-tied ribbon dangling from the elastic in her hair.
Solme’s bed was made. Her packed suitcase lay on top of it. Today they would go to the shrine. Her grandmother had set it up six years ago, at the site of the accident. There they would meet her other grandmother, Nana Strauss. Solme would go home with Nana Strauss for the rest of the summer.

Beads of sweat stood on the Solme’s lip over a shadow of fine dark hairs. She was not thinking of her dead family as she sat in her trance. She was thinking of the terrible and inevitable meeting of her two grandmothers. Her worries occupied her for an hour before they were interrupted.

"Solme!" Abuelita boomed from the next bedroom.

Solme jumped and twisted her dress in her hands.

"Dios bendigame. Solme!" her grandmother yelled in her big, hoarse voice. "Get out of bed now. I need you here please."

Solme sighed and tiptoed to the door. Before she reached it, she turned back to slip a pair of child-sized scissors from the desktop into her pocket.

Solme’s two grandmothers met once a year on July twenty-first to exchange Solme, as arranged after the accident. At the end of August, Nana Strauss put Solme on a bus to go back home. Solme was grateful for this reprieve. One meeting was enough.
Last year had been the worst. They had screamed at each other as Solme sat between them, invisible.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Nana Strauss began. "This whole thing is morbid." She sat delicately on a folding chair she always brought with her, her thin legs crossed at the knees, her cane resting against her thigh.

Solme had just finished cleaning out the shrine and lighting the oil lamp inside, tasks she performed every year.

"Morbid!" Abuelita rolled forward onto her knees, raising her whole massive bulk in front of Nana Strauss. "This is not a sad day but a happy one!"

Nana Strauss frowned with impatience. "Every year you drag me out here for this . . . this ritual. And if I sit through it, I can take Solme home with me. It's barbaric."

Solme hunched in the grass. Nana Strauss rubbed Solme's back, not noticing how hard her fingers pressed between the fragile ribs.

"We light the eternal light in our hearts," Abuelita thundered. "We eat good food, we think of our loved ones sitting in the fields of heaven with the angels, as we sit here. We thank Jesus Cristo that they have been saved. We dance on the grave if we like!"

"This is not the grave," Nana Strauss said, her mouth
firm. "You forget, Rosario. There is no grave."

"Of course there is a grave!" A low humming noise came from Solme's throat. Abuelita raised her voice above it. "No grave! Don't tell me this lie." Her eyes clouded over and she sat back on her haunches.

"They were badly burned. You might have been unconscious, but I have told you and told you." Eva Strauss felt her superiority. On hearing of the accident she had risen from her invalid's bed to take charge while Rosario Kohler had sunk into her own bed, forcibly sedated after a fit of rage. The decision had been painful for Nana Strauss. Cremation seemed the best course. Obviously she could not consult with her in-law.

In her quiet, insistent voice, Nana Strauss continued, "Their ashes are kept in urns in a mausoleum in Springfield, above ground. There is no grave."

Abuelita arose from the blanket and stood in front of Nana Strauss. "They were crushed," she yelled, staring into Nana Strauss's drooping blue eyes. She stomped the ground with her foot, almost catching Solme's hand. "Crushed! Not burned. Their bodies were broken but not their souls! Their broken bodies were laid in coffins, and their souls rose straight to heaven. I know this myself."

Nana Strauss looked away. "Tell yourself what you must."
"I tell the truth," Abuelita said firmly. "You are the barbarian," she hissed. "You are no cristiano. You do not see the truth. The truth has not been given to you to know."

In the silence that followed they had finally heard Solme's quiet crying and recalled themselves to their habitual cold dignity. Solme's suitcase was transferred to Nana Strauss's car and Solme had gone on to Springfield as usual, but she had felt weak with exhaustion for many days.

Solme knew that if things kept going as they were, kept getting worse, a limit would be reached. Something terrible would happen, not to her grandmothers, who seemed capable of standing anything, but to her.

The bare floorboards creaked under her feet as she crossed the hall and entered Abuelita's bedroom.

Abuelita sat sweating on the throne of her vanity table. She stretched her arm behind her, the hand patting the air with a tarnished silver hairbrush. "Good morning, my sleepyheaded one," she said. "You are dressed. Good girl. Now you won't mind helping me."

The girl took the silver-handled brush and began making long, even strokes against the waves of her grandmother's hair. The black mass shone with oils, natural and cosmetic. Abuelita had put musk oil on her brush; her son--Solme's
father had preferred that scent for special occasions. The oil worked into the waxen skin of Solme's left hand as she patted the hair flat between brushstrokes. Hot morning light came through the big window. Her fingers gleamed among the black froth like pale fish.

Abuelita sat tall. She was a large woman and her posture was saintly. Her stiff black dress encased her figure like a girdle. All year the dress slept in a long metal box under her bed, its pleats folded neatly, its arms resting on its waist. Then on July twenty-first, she shook it out and stuffed herself into it. "Why buy silk?" she always said. "Pay a lot of money and then have to iron." The gabardine never showed grass stains from the picnic at the shrine.

Abuelita watched herself in the mirror as Solme brushed. "You didn't sleep again?" she asked.

Solme shook her head.

"Sí, sí, it's a bad day for me too." Abuelita raised a calloused finger to wipe stray tears from her pinkened eyes. "First I lose my Roberto, Raquel, Urania and Argentina in one swoop, and then every summer I lose you too, niña. You leave me alone, in the worst time." A sigh rumbled from her chest. Solme would be gone for a month and there would be no one to help the old woman, to fetch her things, weed the garden, dry
the dishes and such. Abuelita’s weight grew, her arthritis worsened with every passing day.

"You be good for your Nana Strauss. I don’t want to hear about moping or sad or not eating, none of that. Already your Nana’s going to say I don’t feed you."

Abuelita’s eyes flickered to Solme’s face, which hovered behind her shoulder in the mirror. "Look at yourself, mí niñita! You’re so thin you’re almost not there."

Solme brushed, watching her fingers vanish and reappear in the mass of her grandmother’s hair.

"She’ll try to give us money again," Abuelita grumbled. Behind her grandmother’s back, Solme brought the scissors out of her dress pocket.

"And look at the circles under your eyes!" Abuelita said, examining Solme’s reflection more intently. "Don’t let her give you sleeping pills, you hear me? That woman is hooked. She no longer feels pain."

Abuelita paused to scowl. The day was a mixed blessing: the pain of memory was balanced by the chance to do her Christian duty. Yet this chance was spoiled by the presence of the unbeliever, Nana Strauss.

The edged whisper of the scissors broke the heavy stillness. Solme’s heart thudded.

"What is that?" Abuelita said. She turned and drew the
scissors out of Solme’s pocket. She searched in the other pocket but found it empty. "What have you done?" she demanded.

"Nothing." Solme looked at the floor.

"You cut a piece off! Where is it?"

Solme’s lips moved silently.

"That’s my strength—my hair!" Abuelita yelled. "What kind of witchcraft are you practicing? Dios bendiganos." She slapped Solme on the cheek and crossed herself.

Solme clutched the hairbrush, her face pale behind the red splotch on her cheek. Tears stung her eyes.

"No more of this nonsense, do you hear?" Abuelita said, softening. She coaxed the hairbrush from Solme’s fist. "Now go and get ready. We will go a little early this time."

Abuelita shivered as Solme left the room. What if the child had inherited some taint of Abuelita’s own heretical mother? No, she would not think about that. She preferred to see herself as the first in her line, self-created.

"Roberto," she sighed. "You leave me this child, she doesn’t eat, she doesn’t sleep, she doesn’t even speak. And now, God knows what she is getting into. What can I do? I told you that day not to go, not to leave me for her."

Abuelita’s eyes moistened. She shook her head, again resenting Nana Strauss, and began twisting and pinning her
hair into a bun. "They never listen," she said to the mirror.

Nana Strauss had taken to her bed, ill, pale and coughing, that summer six years ago. Solme’s family had been on their way to Springfield to visit her when the accident happened. Their car hit a cascade of gravel that spilled off a truck in front of them. They skidded and ran head-on into a truck roaring toward them in the other lane.

That Solme had been spared was still a mystery. She’d refused to go along. No one knew why; she was usually so docile.

Roberto was packing the car, Rachel checking the girls’ rooms for things they might have forgotten. Urania and Argentina chased each other around the furniture, ignoring their mother’s yelled instructions to go get in the car.

Solme sat on her bed, pale and still. Rachel knelt in front of her. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Solme stared at her mother, then at the wall, her mouth working silently.

Rachel shivered. Even as a baby, her youngest daughter had seemed a stranger at moments, beyond Rachel’s reach in some way the older, more independent girls weren’t. Rachel felt it was her own failing—she didn’t understand quiet children—and she loved Solme more to make up for it.
She felt Solme’s forehead and finding no sign of fever, took her daughter’s hand. "Let’s get in the car. You’ll feel better once we get going." Rachel urged her off the bed, pulling gently.

Solme resisted the whole way, shaking her head and mouthing, "No. No." At the front door she pulled her hand free and ran back to the couch, sobbing.

"Roberto!" Rachel yelled. He appeared at the door. "You talk to her. I can’t get her to come."

Roberto swooped his five-year-old off the couch. "Into the car, Little Bear!"

But she screamed and had to be forced into the back seat, where her sisters rolled their eyes at her. "I hate Nana Strauss!" she said, and then screamed it again and again as they drove out the drive.

"It’s not worth it," Rachel said, rubbing her temples, thinking of her mother waiting, needy and expectant, at the other end of the trip. "I can’t take all this at once. Can we drop her at your mother’s? It’d only be for two days."

"Sure," Roberto said. "Whatever you want is fine with me." He was relieved at the suggestion. It was the easiest way to keep the peace. Solme’s screaming was surely a phase.

His mother lived a mile from them, right on their way out of town. Solme quieted when they stopped in front of
Abuelita’s house. She allowed herself to be led inside.

As soon as her family left her, though, Solme again became hysterical. "Take me, take me!" she begged. "I want to go now. Take me, please!"

Abuelita ignored the small hands that clutched at her dress. "You are here now, you stay here. Stop this nonsense." She dropped tomatoes one by one into boiling water to be peeled and canned.

Much later, Abuelita explained to Nana Strauss that Solme had been kept home sick. Abuelita preferred to forget about Solme’s strange behavior.

Solme couldn’t forget. Though she remembered nothing of what compelled her, she knew that at some point she had let go of her family, released them into a place from which they could not come back.

"Don’t forget to brush your hair, Solmita," Abuelita called after Solme, patting her own neat bun.

Back in her room, Solme took a small Sun Maid raisin box from under the bed. She opened her hand to stare at the two-inch tress she’d cut from her grandmother’s head. From the box she drew another lock, a thin, blond-gray curl.

Nana Strauss didn’t care about giving away her strength.
She was flattered when Solme wrote asking for the keepsake. She was happy to do little things for Solme—anything to assuage her guilt for not taking the child. No one could expect her, in her condition to raise a young girl; and yet to leave it to Rosario Kohler was unforgivable. A twenty-dollar bill came in the envelope with the curl.

Solme lay the two strands next to each other. Blond and black, thin and thick: her two grandmothers, one frail, pale, in constant need of protection, the other strong as a horse, with skin almost as thick and brown. Everything was split along these lines: her mother and her father, herself and her sisters, and even two sides of her, the part she could control, and the part that did disobedient things and made inexplicable things happen.

Solme rubbed her stinging cheek. She looked at the coarse, dark wave and the fragile yellow curl, and with a painless snip, she added a third strand. Her fingers wove the three together. She wished she knew some words to chant. Her great-grandmother would know; her great-grandmother had special powers over other people. But Solme couldn’t think of the right words, so she focused her attention on the hair.

At first the mousy brown disappeared, but as the braid formed, Solme thought, she hoped, the middle hue drew the other two closer, changing them, melding them.
Solme's great-grandmother Juana Francisca was a curandera in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Those in trouble came to the old woman and she helped them in peculiar ways.

"My mother," Abuelita said when she spoke of Juana Francisca. She looked as if she would spit on the ground, then made the sign of the cross, violently, over her chest instead.

Abuelita never tired of telling the story of her escape from Mexico, and from the influence of her witchdoctor mother.

"Your Grandfather Kohler" (she crossed herself again) "rescued me. He had travelled to our city on business, to buy certain pieces of furniture for his store. He became very sick and the hotel man brought him to my mother's house almost delirious. She used her herbs and salves on him, but he got worse."

Abuelita's dark face would brighten at this point. "Then in a moment of clarity he saw there was evil in the house. He saw me, only seventeen, training in the ways of the devil. Your abuelo was a good Catholic. That night we escaped and fled here."

Abuelita widened her gaze and spread her arms around her to include the threadbare rugs and furniture, the whole of
the old wooden house with its dingy, flaking paint, the park out the window and Lake Erie beyond. Huron, Ohio was her verdant paradise, where she had finally grown strong and righteous.

But Abuelita's eyes narrowed again, almost to slits. "After I left her, she hexed me." The death of her family was Abuelita's proof of this theory. "But I am her equal. Her better! I have no weakness of the soul."

As soon as Abuelita had recovered from the first shock of the accident, she packed Solme into the car and headed for Ciudad Juarez.

They drove for three sweltering days, fourteen hundred miles--Abuelita grim and silent, her eyes never leaving the road, Solme pale, catatonic, propped in the back against the window--before arriving at the small adobe house behind the botica shop. Abuelita decked her chest with silver crucifixes and told Solme to wait in the dusty yard.

Solme stood in the sun and watched the dust coat her shiny black shoes a dull yellow. Chickens ran squawking around her, and the buzz of flies seemed to rise from the heat itself.

She looked over the rickety fence to the street. A boy rode by on a bicycle, two dogs chasing after him. Solme pushed the gate open and went out onto the sidewalk. A
desperate loneliness led her to search out comfort. But the boy was nowhere in sight. One of the dogs ran up to her. It looked mean. She shook a stick at it. It snarled but she waved the stick again and it, too, was gone.

A few feet away, the front door of the shop waited, black and cool. She stepped inside. When her eyes had adjusted she could see rows and rows of blue glass jars, all sizes, their tops sheathed in dust, the blue of them deep and lovely like mermaids’ eyes. She breathed in, big chunks of air. The strange smells dizzied her in a pleasant way. Small bright eyes spied from underneath the lowest shelves.

On the other side of a dark curtain, Abuelita began to shout and curse. Solme backed out the door and ran into the sunlit yard.

A moment later Abuelita rushed out, grabbed Solme’s hand and dragged her toward the car. An old, hunched woman followed, a dark shape in the white arch of the doorway. As she moved into the sunlight, her red eyes watered. She reached her arms toward Solme and addressed Abuelita. "Rosario," she croaked, "Rosario, por favor." The rest were words Solme couldn’t understand.

Abuelita turned back. "Never," she hissed in English. "You will never touch my last surviving grandchild."

The old woman put a hand to her forehead, the other on
her hip and bowed her head. After a minute she turned and disappeared into the doorway.

Solme didn't believe her great grandmother was evil. She was ancient, bent and mysterious, but her eyes were kind, pleading with the darkness for the cures to life. By contrast, Solme's own eyes were dull and flat, her face had no creases or hiding places. She matched her great-grandmother in size; that was all.

Solme felt her abuelita hated Juana Francisca for the same reason she hated Nana Strauss: because Juana Francisca was not like Abuelita, and did not act as Abuelita wished her to act. Solme herself found it hard to stay on Abuelita's good side.

Abuelita had her own thoughts on the matter. She insisted to herself that Solme took after her son, Roberto: she was a dark child, but serious and usually a good worker. Any resemblance between Solme and Juana Francisca was coincidental. Abuelita dreaded coincidence, and did what she could to prevent it.

Solme waited with her flowered suitcase while her grandmother backed the car out of the paintless garage.

Abuelita Kohler had fixed a sign on top of her Buick that read "Student Driver." Never in her life had she wanted
to drive, and when her husband died she was forced to learn quickly. She had no license. The drive to Ciudad Juarez had been her test, and she had passed it. She still used the sign, for protection from other drivers but also from herself. "If I am always a beginner, I will always have beginner’s luck," she said. "And besides, God watches over novices."

After the car grunted past, Solme ducked her slight shoulder under the wooden crossbar and shoved the garage door closed. The grass had grown tall in the drive since they’d last used the car.

Solme paused to catch her breath, her back to the car. Plucking at the fabric of her dress pocket, she peeked inside. Light fell on the braided hair. Solme’s heartbeat quickened. Her Nana would be waiting for them at the shrine.

"Solme," Abuelita called. "Hurry up." Solme crossed the gravel alley, pushed her suitcase through the open car door and climbed into the back seat after it. She pulled the seatbelt to its tightest and then tucked a pillow in the gap between her flat stomach and the buckle.

Abuelita made her slow way through town, turning left at the Emerick grocery, past the electrical supplies, the dry goods store and the furniture shop Solme’s grandfather had owned, now sold to a man from Sandusky. She took a right at
the gas station and crept up to the highway. The car balanced at the top of the hill, Abuelita’s foot clamped tight to the brake pedal.

"Road hogs," she muttered at the passing traffic. "Sunday drivers." She waited until there were no cars from horizon to horizon, then swerved onto the main road, accelerating to thirty-five miles per hour.

Abuelita clutched the wheel and stared straight ahead. The sun burned on the road. Through the browning grassland, cresting the small, roller coaster hills she drove, slowly, slowly. She would not allow Solme to talk; for those two and a half hours her concentration could not be broken.

Solme peered out the side window. The ground was patched with fields as far as she could see. Farms sprang up at intervals, some miniature, some sprawling. Their grain elevators towered over the surrounding land. Solme read the signs marking the tree-shaded roads that ran off the highway at intervals. She chanted them as if they were spells: TWP316 (a township road), SR3492 (a state road). It looked cool and calm down those roads.

Solme’s eyes settled on the main road. The yellow lines wavered in the heat. The accident had happened on this road. There was only one route from Abuelita Kohler’s to Nana Strauss’s, from Huron to Springfield. Solme fingered the
braid in her pocket.

While Abuelita drove, Solme kept quiet and kept her gaze on the road. The road was a bad road. Solme focused its furred edges with an effort of her tired eyes, adding her concentration to her grandmother's. She had come to believe that if one held tightly, if one watched closely and behaved correctly, accidents wouldn't happen. Holding on this way gave her some sense of control over the meeting to come.

For Solme, too, the trip to the shrine was a mixed blessing. It was the beginning of her month in Springfield, where she didn't have to do chores and where treats were showered upon her. But the tensions that preceded her vacation did not wear off easily: the meeting of her grandmothers, and the ritual itself.

Solme accepted what Abuelita said: that they must "remember" her family at the shrine in this way. The site of their death was a sacred spot. Yet Solme's family haunted her life already, everywhere she went, even in the pleasant places.

Solme missed her mother the most. Her father usually drifted above her, not quite in reach. She could see the triangles of white between his tie and his buttoned black suit jacket, the glow of his pouchy cheeks and the one front
tooth that stuck forward. Her sisters narrowed to the two sturdy yellow flames of their ponytails, and they burned sometimes on either side of her, playing their games, by turns cuddling Solme and fighting over her. They were more willful than generous, their bodies were stronger than their imaginations, and they buffeted Solme between them.

Solme's mother came back more often than her father and sisters, and not on the outside--on the inside. Rachel walked through her youngest daughter's mind on slender, stockinged legs, heels clicking as they had on the wooden floors of their old house. Rachel's blond hair was short and wavy, her large nose crinkled over a smile. In Solme's mind her mother smiled at Solme.

No one else ever seemed to see Solme. Nana Strauss had doted on Solme's older sisters, Urania and Argentina, whose coarse blond hair and blue eyes she said were presents from her. Solme had been small and sickly from birth. In features, she resembled Abuelita: she had the high-boned cheeks of the Mayans and the slender nose of the Spanish. But even Abuelita had usually passed over her, preferring to identify with the vigor of the other two.

The accident was more than painful for Abuelita; it undermined her world view. She had to compensate, to admit change. "It is now the age of machines," she had to say since
the accident. "No more survival of the fittest."

"Majado," she liked to say in grim reproach, clapping her hands together and looking toward heaven: 'crushed' (though she sometimes used the same word in reference to Solme to mean 'annoying,' a grammatical coincidence which terrified the girl).

"The strong die," Abuelita now insisted, taking explanations where she found them. "And the weak must be strengthened to take their places." It was her job as a grandmother to raise Solme; but it was also a Christian duty, and clearly, the responsibility of a citizen of the new world, to make her a solid and stable person.

Nana Strauss only thought the accident proved the world's injustice. August mornings as she and Solme sat at breakfast in the air-conditioned solarium, she sometimes lapsed into a trance of memory, and stared at Solme with a look furious and anguished at once. Then something in her blank blue eyes snapped back to life. "Get your swimming suit," she would say to the girl cowering across the table from her. "Gigi's picking you up at ten."

Solme might have preferred not to go to Nana Strauss's at all. Somehow the treats felt undeserved--given for reasons that had nothing to do with her--and without chores to do she could not fill her time. At home, with Abuelita,
life was at least predictable.

But no one consulted her, and she climbed into the car every year and sat behind Abuelita’s stiff bulk, suitcase packed, waiting to absorb whatever would befall her.

Solme woke from a doze. Her clothes were wet against her body and her eyes felt glued shut. The drowsiness left her when she saw where they were. Her sweaty hands crushed folds into the fabric of her dress. Her eyes darted across the road surface in front of the car. This was where it had happened. Were there no faces embedded in the road, staring blindly skyward--those same faces she had refused to look at six years ago during her inexplicable fit?

Finding nothing but the highway, the same as it was every year, she slouched back and concentrated on the dampness that slithered down from her hairline.

Abuelita pulled off the road onto a dirt turnout and stopped the car. She checked an old silver pocket watch she kept in her handbag. "Ten minutes until your Nana Strauss arrives." Flinging her door open, she uncreased herself while Solme crept out the other door. Solme turned back to the Buick and pulled her vinyl suitcase from the seat.

"Don’t bring that now!" Abuelita snapped. "You’re not leaving yet. Come, come on." She took hold of Solme with
one hand, the other hand gripping the handle of a large
picnic basket, and pulled her up the grassy bank that rose
from the turnout.

Abuelita Kohler had persuaded the farmer who owned the
hayfield to volunteer a strip of land for a memorial park,
and she paid him to water and mow the small lawn she had
planted. The shrine stuck out of a patch of long grass,
burning in the heat. Atop a wooden stand shaped like a
cross, Abuelita had fixed a metal box. The box resembled a
medicine cabinet with locking glass doors. Inside she kept
the mementos of the family.

Abuelita knelt on the ground and settled her silver
crucifix necklace on her chest. "Solme, they are waiting for
you," she said. "Here is the key and when you finish, your
Nana will be here and we will eat." Folding her hands in her
lap, Abuelita began to say her silent prayers, keeping one
eye open and fixed on Solme.

Solme clutched the key in her hand and stepped up to the
shrine. A family portrait stood in the center, framed in
silver. Her father, mother and two sisters smiled out at
her. From year to year they stayed the same. They never
grew; they always smiled. Solme stared particularly at her
mother. The day before the picture was taken she'd had her
hair done and it stood up on her head like a turban. On the
right-hand side the picture had a crooked edge where Abuelita had cut Solme out of it.

Abuelita prodded her calf. "You remember what to do?"

"Yes," Solme whispered. "I remember." She fumbled with the key, trying to fit it into the tiny lock. At last it turned. The doors popped open. Solme stepped backwards.

"Go on," said Abuelita, breaking off her murmurings.

"You remember."

Solme wiped her forehead with her palm. She picked up a vial of oil and poured from it into a jar with a floating wick. The two glass edges chattered together with the shaking of her hand. She felt behind the picture for the flannel cloth and used it to dust first the glass of the picture frame, then the painted wood figurine of Jesus in his crown of thorns, the metal crucifix, the white silk lilies with their green plastic stems, and finally the floor of the shrine.

Without shaking it out, she stuffed the cloth back where it came from with her right hand. Her left hand snuck the braid out of her pocket. She shifted herself so she stood between the shrine and Abuelita, and threw the braid quickly, aiming it behind the picture. With dismay she saw it land on the side, half-visible, but she was already shutting the little doors, afraid Abuelita would notice her extra
movements. She dropped to her knees and looked bleary-eyed at the grass in front of her.

"Wait!" Abuelita said, again interrupting her prayers. Solme’s cheeks burned.

"You forgot to light the flame. How will they be kept alive in our hearts?"

Solme shook her head slowly. She leaned over and vomited onto the clipped green grass. Her whole body shook with the upheaval. She felt with a miserable certainty how her grandmother would react if she saw the braid. She would make Solme explain it, then she would punish her. She would direct the rest of her anger at Nana Strauss. They would end up screaming again. Perhaps Abuelita would even take Solme back home before Nana Strauss arrived. It was her own fault. Why had she done it? She couldn’t remember. It was hopeless to think she could change anything. Her stomach heaved again.

Abuelita looked at the sky. "Ah, Dios, que más?" she said. She pulled a paper napkin out of the picnic basket.

Solme let herself be cleaned up. Her face was pasty and covered with sweat.

"But you have eaten nothing. I don’t know what this mess is." Abuelita lifted the wayward bits of hair she held in her hand and peered at Solme’s convulsed face, then at the ground. "Nothing. Nothing comes out. Only fluid. It is
the heat," Abuelita said. "Heat stroke or heat exhaustion. Whichever. Dios mio, it must always come on the hottest day of the year. You sit still niña, I will light the flame."

Solme clutched at her grandmother’s dress, her eyes dull with fear, but Abuelita eased the fingers open. "You’ll be okay in a minute, you rest. I must finish this before your Nana Strauss arrives. You know what her opinion is of our sacred traditions."

Abuelita stood, leaving Solme to hide her face in the grass. The old woman opened the glass doors. The moment she struck the match, the twist of hair caught her eye and she gasped. The match burned down.

She recognized her own hair and Solme’s. And whose were the silver tufts? They could only be Nana Strauss’s. Abuelita stared, lost in an urgency, a nausea of her own. It was an attempt at witchcraft. But it was so pathetic it made the outrage catch in her throat.

No, not pathetic. Evil. She must remember who she was, and from what she had escaped, saving her soul. She must save her granddaughter’s too. The match flame was nearly burning her fingers. She lit the floating wick and shook the flame out. She picked up the hair in her fingertips. Pursing her lips against any outburst, she closed the doors and locked them.
Abuelita stood in the lifeless air, holding the braid in front of her like a dead rat. Solme peered up at her. Abuelita stared back, her eyes dark and angry. Suddenly Abuelita turned her big body around and flung the braid from her.

Solme’s eyes widened. A breeze had come up. It seemed to her that Abuelita’s strangely whirling form had stirred up the atmosphere around them. The breeze caught the hair, dissolving the twists and knots until each strand became a separate glint. The glittering bits floated out across the farmer’s field. Then the wind died. The strands fell.

Solme felt dizzy. Her grandmother had made magic.

Abuelita didn’t seem to notice. She knelt on the ground next to Solme. She pulled Solme roughly onto her lap and wiped her mouth and face, small and pale as a doll’s in Abuelita’s coarse hands.

Abuelita shook her head, her lips quivering. She had destroyed the charm, but she must still preserve the child. She felt moved, too moved to speak, unsure of whether to speak in anger or in love. She massaged Solme’s chest. The spasms of the earlier vomiting had become small hiccoughs. Solme lay limp, her hair wet and tangled, her eyes closed.

The old woman’s expression lost some of its severity. She stroked the hair from her granddaughter’s face. She
rocked Solme, muttering prayers under her breath.

Some time later, in the quiet, Nana Strauss's Lincoln Continental slid to the side of the road with a purr. Solme's eyes flickered open as her Nana buzzed down the electric window, threw out a cigarette stub and waved. Nana Strauss's hair was like a crisp silver hat, just-done, and she smiled at them as she opened the car door.
Colin works just outside, stooping under the first spring cloudburst, mind and body focused on dislodging some jammed windows. He never seems to stop working.

A smell of nascent growth from the grass and hedges, almost a stench, pours through the open window—so far the only openable one—where Bernadette sits watching him. Her dog Rosy lies curled at her feet. The air is cool on Bernadette’s flushed face, then warm, the unmistakeable hot flashes of far-off summer.

The flower garden Bernadette planted last week in a dryer, more hopeful period has turned into a pond. Colin’s boots are planted in the middle of it. Water drips from his short hooked nose onto his upper lip as he patiently wrenches small nails out of the window frames with his pliers. Bernadette put the nails there yesterday afternoon, so the windows wouldn’t open. So a seed of suspicion would be planted in the minds of the most recent set of househunters.
So Colin would appear a fool.

This is the third house Colin has bought to renovate and resell. By now he knows the ins and outs; he knows this one will sell too. Still, he wishes it could go smoothly.

"Why did you do it?" he asked after the sleek, well-fed couple had fled in their Jaguar muttering about trust and shady deals. "Sometimes I think you don't want to sell this house."

He said it with good humor. He smiled as if he appreciated her little joke even though soon he will not be able to afford her jokes. He is at the point in his financial cycle when he is up to his ears in debt.

This morning when the rain began to fall and he was preparing to get drenched, he brought up the subject again. "Did you have to sabotage the windows?" His hair stuck out from his head in clumps. He had not slept well and this, along with the rain, made him petulant and thorough in his grievance. "Did someone force you to leave your diaphragm like a crown on top of the cold-water tap last week? Did Rosy beg you to shut her in the closet on Sunday, so she could howl and otherwise pretend to be some family secret too horrible to be allowed in public? Bernadette, sometimes I suspect you of trying to undermine The Plan." He raised his thick eyebrows carefully, one at a time.
He only uses her full name—Bernadette—when he mocks her, and mocking is both his expression of delight and his expression of hostility. He is a seasoned clown; he can make light of heavy things and a joke of nothing. She is an unseasoned one: less subtle, more desperate.

"I don’t have to defend myself," she told him. "I hate this whole thing and you know it. You’ve never consulted me."

"I have. I asked you to marry me. You refused."

She glared at him. He giggled, then taking a rare serious turn, said, "Bernie, I am being as patient as I know how. And I’m trying to change. But we have to sell this house," and he went outside to undo the windows.

She had said she might marry him if they could stay. It is not that she is so attached to the house or the area—she’s lonely in the Welsh countryside, since the few friends she has are in London. She held out this little carrot to Colin simply because it was based on a condition he would not accept. He had laughed. "Tsk tsk, my dear Bernie. You threaten uselessly. You don’t love me enough but give it a moment. Very soon"—his eyes shone—"you will."

Watching him now, Bernadette remembers that she was once agonizingly happy and wonderfully in love with him. She had wanted to make sacrifices to prove it. Had he not felt the same? It is a haze, she sees now, this area of his feelings.
He acts as if nothing could be clearer—he loves her and wants to marry her—but his words are rocks. She can’t move them about or see into them. She can no more trust that he is serious than she can believe, today, in the warmth of summer.

She wraps her sweater more tightly around her shoulders. Colin appears real enough in his Levis and work boots, dark hair plastered to his forehead, the outline of his body only blurred a little by the rain. But Bernadette wonders. What is hidden behind his constant good humor? Maybe he is only this facade. Perhaps he will fade slowly—wallpaper, walls, beams, joists first—then vanish suddenly at the foundation, leaving her alone.

At times their life together drives her to these bizarre visions, simultaneously fraught with panic and relief. Still, she is more often sane than not sane: she knows Colin won’t disappear. If she no longer wishes to be with him, decisions must be made.

Bernadette and Colin met a year and a half ago. For many years Colin had lived in London, but by the time their paths crossed, he had moved back to Brecon for good because Wales, his ancestral home, was (he said) the one place where his spirit could comfortably float.
After his return to Wales, Colin travelled to London occasionally to do odd jobs. He and Bernadette met during one of his city stints. A friend of his with a cut-rate moving company hired him for the day; the task was to help move her into her new flat, which she had redecorated and was ready to settle into.

Bernadette now longs for her London flat with a nostalgia she truly believes is warranted. It was the only place she had ever owned, and though it was too small, and though in the end she made quite a bit of money off it, she regrets having sold it.

She spent days painting its walls in calm shades of blue, ivory and violet. Since she did almost everything herself, she could afford to do it well. The carpet she chose made walking rapturous: it was like treading atop a cloudless sky, with the soft buoyancy one expects of air when one lies gazing up into it. Throw rugs and pillows lay scattered aimlessly about to encourage ease and a lowering of blood pressure.

The furniture was also low; the center of gravity was about twelve inches off the floor. She wanted her friends to be comfortable down there because she wanted Rosy to be a part of things, and not always wandering lost at the feet of giants. Rosy is a beagle-mix, squat-legged, with pointy Jack
Russell terrier ears.

Despite her preparations, Bernadette never had a moment's peace in the flat. The chaos of the final move grew with the attentions of the mover. Two other men came with him but she hardly remembers them. Colin filled the rooms with his big voice and his confidence.

Colin is slim and boyish, and she refused to believe anyone, even the kind of moving company she could afford, would send him to lift heavy furniture. He saw her look dubious, so he rolled up his sleeve to display a smooth, slender arm.

"These muscles are bonafide cut-rate muscles," he said. "Want to touch them?"

She did want to, but she shook her head, smiling.

Her straight dark hair, the fringe long and in her eyes, her small, doubtful pout enchanted him. He beamed as though she had touched him.

Bernadette had turned to adjust a curtain rod, frowning. She thought she knew better than to take an instant attraction seriously. She had never believed in love at first sight. Every one of her affairs had been deliberate, planned minutely, inception to demise. Her emotions guarded themselves, prepared for the blow, and so, were never startled. The kind of love that sweeps you off your feet? A
hoax. The fantasy of a faulty memory.

That is maybe why she doesn’t believe in Colin now. Memory makes her present dilemma incomprehensible.

Colin brushed her hand at every possible moment that day. He shifted the living room furniture five times, insisting she be perfectly happy with it. The other men drank tea and watched. He stared at her with a sort of awe.

By the time he left, she’d agreed to go with him to the cinema. The way his green eyes shone and his smile wavered into place, uncertain, hopeful, made her dizzy and careless. "Okay, yes, give me an hour to shower." She hardly heard what she said.

Stumbling into her clothes, Bernadette understood for the first time what Rosy felt when in heat. She sat down on a box by the door to wait for Colin, crossing and uncrossing her legs. She was flushed, shameless, stripped of composure and dignity.

She spent a year like that, meeting him whenever he happened to be in town. They would begin with a meal out, a concert or film or some special event; it soon ceased to matter. A busride to Bromley and back for no particular reason could be as good as anything. It was the laughter she craved—he was always funny—the release, deep in her belly, from worry and the strain of self-control.
Later, after they made love, she would cry. This had never happened to her before. It frightened her. But it was a relief too, to feel sad about the waste of so many years, and to openly long for something indefinable, but better.

At work or with her friends she may have seemed calm. But her mind had become skittish, uncomfortable with itself. Instead of spending the evenings in between rendezvous in her usual manner--reading, visiting, attending classes in calligraphy or Spanish--she spent it waiting. She was never able to remember the next morning what she had done.

Had she ever been serene? She no longer knew. It was an easy job for Colin to convince her to sell her flat, put her furniture in storage, quit her post in the Gypsy Hill Elementary School headmaster’s office (one of several uneasy positions she’d held over the past five years) and come live with him in Wales.

She has known moments of peace in Wales. But this house is not home. In six months she has never got herself to completely unpack. Her belongings have all stayed in very defined places, many still in suitcases, and have not got mixed up with Colin’s things throughout the house. She has always been organized. This goes beyond organization.

Colin hasn’t settled in Brecon either, but he hadn’t
planned to. He hovers purposefully in the vicinity of his parents, his brothers and their wives, children and dogs. He is a bee sipping nectar in their kitchens and treading up particles of stability on his wandering feet. His dependence makes his family happy.

When he talks to Bernadette about it, Colin refers to his lifestyle as The Plan, as if it is meant to achieve a goal common to both of them. As if it will sometime have an end.

Colin’s life is dictated by his work; or his life and work are dictated by his temperament. Bernadette is not sure what runs the machine. He does have a true talent for house repairs: carpentry, electrics, plumbing, decorating. That’s why when he moved back to Wales he bought a dilapidated old house. He lived in it while he worked on it. Eventually he sold it and bought another. The scheme is ideal: he works for himself, so has the freedom to work and create as he pleases. And he always has a place to live, most often a grand old country mansion.

The Plan involves continuing in this vein as long as possible. At the moment his dream is eminently possible. Everyone with any savings is moving out of London. In that exasperated way that shows they are no part of the problem, they say London is unhealthful and unnecessary: impossible.
Bernadette loved London. It was bursting with life—life at all levels and stages—and there was the sense that even a single person, even one without meaningful work, was not a failure. She left because Colin seemed to her perfect.

Pre-Colin, the men she met had clearly all passed the same sort of basic training, specializing in fickleness, doubt and indecision. In Colin she discerned a man ready to make a commitment, to enter into the coarse marketplace of haggling compromises. He was what she had long wished for.

What she got was the constant banging of nails and whining of drillbits in a place five miles from the nearest supermarket, a place where she could not for any amount of desperation find a regular job to get her out of the house. Colin welcomed Bernadette and Rosy with open affection and visible delight but, as she soon realized, with no idea that he might rearrange his life too, so that both of them might find satisfaction.

She cried on and off for the first month.

"I never meant to deceive you," he said.

But he had deceived her: he’d got her up to the house three times on the weekends, made her sumptuous dinners, taken her walking in the solemn silence of the Beacons, through green meadows where sheep grazed and to the tops of ridges that afforded splendid views of peaks and valleys,
dells where farmhouses nestled, small stone-built towns far below. Then the tools came out and work took hold: the truth was revealed.

"I can buy you earplugs. A lifetime supply. And we can go round to the pub tonight, just as soon as I finish this shelving, I promise. Bernie," he begged, "it's my work. It's what I do."

The noise, dust and loneliness has only made Bernadette more determined to keep the house.

Now that it is ready to sell and she is rebelling, Colin feels he owes her a certain amount of tolerance.

Today, Bernadette and Wales are brooding. She stares. Colin works, oblivious to the dripping misery of his condition. He is extracting the thorns of her ill will from the side of his good will. Why is he out there doing it instead of her? He is like a mother still tying the shoes of her eight-year-old child. Then she thinks of herself, the needy child. She is the real fool.

Though she has managed to scare off three sets of prospective owners, someone will buy the house. Why wouldn't they? It's an old stone country house that sits at the curve of a lane near a sweetly-talking brook, a short walk through high-hedged roads from a spot where paths lead up into the
Beacons. And Colin has done a fine job on it. He’s put in skylights, brightening the upstairs rooms, while leaving the downstairs with its original oak-beamed heaviness, always a draw for the London crowd.

Why is she trying to prevent a foregone conclusion, one that she should desire as much as everyone else? Colin will be solvent again. Maybe she could persuade him to rent a flat in a nearby town; maybe if they normalize their daily life, other things will fall into place. But it is the house --the house has become inexplicably important to her. As justification she can only think of Rosy, who has been happy here, prowling the half-furnished rooms in the twilight in search of new hiding places for treasured biscuits.

The door bangs as Colin comes in from unnailing. "Hooey!" he says, shaking the water off himself. He dries his fine long hair in a kitchen towel, one she used this morning to wipe up spilled egg. His clothes drip a puddle on the floor. Throwing the towel down on the pooled water, he jumps on it and does a stumbling dance step across it in his muddy boots. He ends by throwing himself onto his knee in front of her, grinning, his arms outspread.

She doesn’t smile as he expects, as she usually does. Her mouth twists. Tears of anger and others of remorse fight at the corners of her eyes.
Colin sighs. "Oh dear. We’ll have to do something to cheer you up. Party number four, Everett Bloom and partner, are due to arrive in just over an hour."

"'And partner,'" she sneers, snuffling. "I hate them all, these modern, rich, sensible couples. None of them have children, they’re all sterile. This is a huge house. Five, six, seven children could fit happily just on the upper floor."

"My poor only child. Let’s populate it ourselves." He squeezes his eyes shut and humps her leg. They haven’t made love—he is reminding her—since he finished work on the house three weeks ago. "Seven children in seven years," he squeals. "What fun!"

"Don’t be silly," she tells him. A familiar, dull pain throbs in Bernadette’s gut. She doesn’t need her mother’s reminders. At thirty-four, her chances of having children are getting slimmer by the moment. She would be crazy to leave him.

"Yes, don’t be silly," Colin agrees, which makes the pain burn a little more fiercely. "Truth be told, we’re asking too much money for family types. We must take what we can get. Now cheer up." Colin’s face brightens. "I know what will work."

He runs from the room and Rosy dashes after him. A few
minutes later he comes back carrying the dog. He has unrolled two condoms and stuck them over the upright triangles of her ears. The point is that he has nothing better to do with them. They are the lubricated kind and they hang glossy, limp and rubbery, to her jowls.

Bernadette smiles foolishly. She misses sex too, but after a long day in their separate realms, when he strokes the hair from her face and begins kissing her shoulder, she suddenly becomes too angry and disgusted to go through with it. It depresses her. If she loves him, how can she feel so repulsed? Colin is eternally patient.

He revs up his carnival act. "And now ladies and gentlemen, in ring number three, for your entertainment, the famous Rosyphus!" He holds Rosy out in front of him so her stumpy legs scramble the air. She gives her head a vigorous shake to get rid of the false ears, which hit the linoleum with two distinct plops. "Part human, part horse," Colin drones on, "part pig, part dog, this creature is forever doomed to chase her own image, endlessly searching for her true self. Ladies and gentlemen, watch, and take pity."

Colin sets Rosy on the ground. She immediately begins to run in tight circles, her teeth snapping after her tail, her long black toenails slipping across the linoleum floor. She barks like a battery-operated toy. Colin claps and
laughs and adds to the frenzy.

Bernadette’s skin begins to flush and tighten all over her face. Rosy never used to do this. She was a placid dog, an early-mellowing sort, mature enough to forget her recent puppyhood. Then Colin burst onto the stage of her life. He showed her the real meaning of "play" and taught her these instant aerobics that boggle the senses. She took to the new concepts better than Bernadette did. Rosy has evolved. She is no longer tempted by their former sedentary lifestyle.

Bernadette used to laugh at this particular antic. Now it unnerves her and makes her heart beat in a sickly sideways fashion.

Colin yelps. "Look! She’s caught it! She’s finally done it. Her goal is achieved. Her life is over. The famous Rosyphus. What will she do?"

Rosy sits motionless for an instant in the tortured position of a bagel, the final hairs of her tail clamped in her mouth. She allows her mouth to open a crack and snaps, quickly, to get a better grasp on the wayward appendage, but with a self-willed wag of its own, it leaps away, and Rosy is off after it again with her maddeningly monotone "arf! arf! arf! arf!"

"Oh, that’s enough," Bernadette says. "I can’t take it. I’m going out for a walk." She gets up and throws her mac on
over her skirt and sweater.

"Rosy, come here Rosy," Colin croons. Rosy slows, then stops.

Bernadette stands by the door, behind Colin, and holds her hand out to Rosy, offering her company and a walk. Rosy looks at Bernadette and at Colin, then goes to sit at Colin’s feet, hanging her head. Bernadette’s face burns. She is glad Colin didn’t see.

"That’s a good girl," Colin says. He turns to face Bernadette. "Now then, you won’t leave us, will you Bernie? How could you. We’re so pathetic. We’re so well-behaved. We try to be."

"I said ‘for a walk.’ I didn’t say I was leaving you."

"Ah, but you will. You threatened us yesterday."

"I didn’t . . ." She trails off. What had she said? Something. That he has taken her little gibes seriously startles her. It also strikes her that he includes Rosy in the jilted party.

"I can tell you’re unhappy," he says. "Don’t be. Let me make you laugh." He rolls his eyeballs to the ceiling and presses his palms to the sides of his chin. "My tulip?" he pouts. He can do Charlie Chaplin imitations of flowers for hours. He gives her his most endearing look. "My rose?" he offers.
"No," she says, looking away. "Not right now, please."
She pulls on Wellingtons and tugs at her hood. "I’m going to
go out and I will be back—soon—before Bloom and partner
arrive," she promises as she hurries out the door.

"Oh?" Colin calls after her. "What are you planning
this time? Bernadette? Will you appear sleepwalking in the
nude? Turn on the garbage disposal backwards? Maybe you’d
better stay in the woods. Live off nuts and berries for a
while."

When the door has slammed she stands still outside the
half-open window. Cold air seeps in at her cuffs and neck,
crawls up her skirt. She would rather be in the warm, dry
kitchen with Colin. Pride pushes at her but she is reluctant
to leave. To go off now, by herself at a moment when he
wants to be together, feels like more of a betrayal than all
her pranks.

She hears Colin sigh. The sigh floats out the window
and over the air like a scent, strong enough to provoke a
memory: lying on her bed in London, her head resting on the
soft spot just below his collar bone, her after-love tears
wiped away. She hears her own sigh: of contentment, at
wanting so much, so urgently. Bernadette stands rooted.

"We’re losing her, Rosy girl," Colin says. "What will
we do? Our act is slipping."
Bernadette looks in at his slim, tapered back. He is on the chair, slumped over to pat the dog's head. His face is cocked sideways toward the refrigerator door where a jumble of alphabet magnets only semi-obscures the message she left when the first prospective buyers came (there was only one of each letter): 'hantd ouse.'

"We're getting too old for this, Rosy," Colin says. His voice is like she's never heard it before: tired, devoid of comedy, bleak.

She feels sick to her stomach. Turning, scattering the gravel with her feet, she runs into the wet, gloom-filled afternoon.

Across the road she slows down and climbs the stile leading onto the beck-side footpath. Willow and silver birch overhang the path, thickening into a copse that climbs the rise and serves as a fence for the farmer whose pasture borders it. Water drips on her from every tree, every branch, every new leaf. The stream splashes along, masking the obscene sucking sound her Wellies make in the mud.

She's walked here often. The way is familiar and comforting. Colin never walks here. The house provides him all his exercise, his company, his mental challenge, his emotional solace. Then what is her purpose? What is left?
It is easy to walk calmly while Colin is working; harder when he sits unhappily awaiting some kind of decision from her. She tries to apply herself to the problem. She tries to conjure up a normal life for them. A home that she cleans and he occasionally repairs. (But how would they decorate a house? Their personalities are so different.) Meals they cook together after a weekend day spent playing in the hills, or after a working day, sharing their news. (If he worked away from home, would he be likely to tear himself away for meals?) Making love, again, in a soft, resplendent place. The flush of discovery has worn off though, and she can’t envision his tender seriousness anymore; only his jollying gags, his forbearance and forgiveness.

Though she resists, another possibility presents itself. She will go back, change her clothes. Repentant and well-behaved, she will help Colin sell the house. Then, gracefully, easily, when they have packed all their separate belongings in separate boxes (the separation engineered cleverly by her), she will go her solitary way, and catch the train to her mother’s in Tunbridge Wells. Her mother will be a good transition point. She will take care of Bernadette in her calm, constant, critical way. She’ll pummel her gently back into shape.

Unlike the scenes she first tried to imagine, this one
unfurls of its own accord. It makes her blood run quickly and evenly. Objections pop up—is it fair not to warn him? what if Rosy won’t go?—and her mind retorts: the faster you pull off the bandaid, the sooner the pain will be over. She pulls herself up short, stops the thought in its tracks.

Just ahead of her the path ends. The water goes tunneling underneath the road. She wishes she could follow it, down to where no strong arm or pleading eyes or voice of reason would reach her. She can’t go back yet. So she turns to the side, off the path and into the copse.

Branches catch at her skirt and her buttons and scrape across her face. She is running through the close-grown trees. She is as she was at the beginning: oblivious, flushed, lost. Obscurely she hopes she will be blinded, or pierced, or in some way wounded, disabled, and so, cleared of responsibility for him, and for herself.

When Bloom and partner arrive Bernadette is in the bedroom changing out of her wet skirt. She hears Rosy scrabbling up the stairs towards her in haste. Rosy hates strangers.

Bernadette pauses, looking at herself in the big mirror. A little scheme pops into her head full-formed, like all her schemes have, as if she’d mulled them over subconsciously.
when all the time she thought she was working out real
solutions. This scheme is more daring than the others, more
personal.

But no, she remembers, one way or the other, she is not
going to play any more tricks. Rosy hurtles into the room
and scrunches herself down in the corner. Colin’s voice
carries up the stairs. He is assuring the sharks that they
will have plenty of leverage if they want to resell.

"This wood is so old it’s beyond aging," Colin says.
"The main beam will never crack. It only gets better,
compared with what they’re using now." His realtor persona,
suave, knowledgeable. They move into another room. Then
they are at the bottom of the stairs. "I’ll let you explore
up there by yourselves," Colin says. "Just shout if you have
any questions."

Footsteps mount the stairs. Rosy cowers.

Why is he doing this? He’s sending them to her
deliberately. His trust in her is stubborn; it’s perverse.
Unless—maybe he is counting on another prank; maybe he is
looking for a way out? But he could never give up the sale.
That would mean a year of work unpaid—wasted.

She mustn’t think about Colin any more. She can’t
possibly guess his motives. She feels she hardly knows him.
A vision of him as she first saw him flashes into her head:
slim and graceful, pliant, whimsical, flawless. This is still her fantasy of him and because of it, she can’t see through to the real him.

In the mirror she studies herself. Mud is splattered up her tights. Her face is scratched in livid streaks. Twigs poke from her matted hair. She rebuttons the wet skirt, bends down and calls Rosy to her. Stroking head to tail, head to tail, she soothes the shaking dog.

The househunters shuffle around the guest bedrooms for endless minutes then inspect the bathroom. Bernadette was supposed to clean it. The sink is grimy and clogged with hair, the toilet unflushed. "Plenty big," is all they say.

Bernadette gathers Rosy in her arms. Standing by the window, she gazes into the deep blue-green afternoon, ready. She thinks of the diaphragm perched on the tap, poor Rosy shut in the closet, and she knows it is too late. She has crossed the line after which what is imagined becomes inevitable.

The master bedroom door opens with a whisper. Behind her back, the couple steps into the room and stops, startled by her presence, her muddy, rigid back.

She doesn’t wait. Into the silence she hisses, "What did he tell you? What?" She begins to shout in a high-pitched sing-song. "Did he tell you the truth, that he stole
this house from me and now he’s evicting me? Did he tell you I inherited it from my grandfather, and he married me just to get possession of it, and now he’s divorced me and is kicking me out, and I have nowhere to go? Nowhere to go?"

Her voice has risen to shrieking pitch, she doesn’t care if Colin hears every word, Rosy is howling too and as she turns to them she is sobbing. It’s so unfair. Months of his hard labor, every moment of it begrudged by her, endless days of her seething patience; the work and the resentment fused together in every fiber of what this house now is. That all this should be virtually handed on a platter to strangers!

The couple stands silent in the doorway, the one’s hand on the other’s elbow. They move into the room and, discreetly, they close the door. Bernadette’s sobs wane to snuffles. In the sudden quiet, she can hear the song thrush that comes out after a rain, trilling in the courtyard. She can almost hear buds blossoming, leaves unfurling.

Bloom and partner are not another young, gentrified couple. They are two men, one about forty, one nearing sixty, dressed in casual clothes: jeans, t-shirts, trainers. She understands that she was counting on a typical husband’s response: to hustle his wife out of range of a lunatic; a wife’s response: to turn away from suffering because she’s got enough of her own. She has forgotten her intentions,
forgotten the scheme altogether.

The younger man steps forward and bows slightly. "I'm Everett Bloom. This is Max DeVore, my partner. We admire your house very much, Mrs. Reed. You say it was your grandfather's?"

"I'm not Mrs. Reed," she says. She is aware that she was shrieking, that she was Mrs. Reed, a moment ago. She puts Rosy down but the dog jumps and begs until she picks her up again.

"Then--it is not your grandfather's house?" Everett Bloom asks in a kind voice.

"I suppose Colin warned you I was up here."

"No, he didn't. But I'm not surprised to find you." He clears his throat. "It seems every old house hereabouts has its madwoman in the attic. Only I don't believe you're mad. Did Mr. Reed really evict you?"

"No."

"But he's selling the house out from under you?" Everett Bloom says. Mr. DeVore tsksks from behind. "Is it that the relationship is breaking up, to your distress?"

"No," she whispers. It's all she can get out.

They wait.

When she looks up both sets of eyes are fixed on her with an endless, calm concern. "We're just moving on, that's
all," she says. "You must think me a fool. I guess, underneath, I've never quite grown up."

"None of us have, my dear," the elderly Mr. DeVore says.

He is kind, she thinks. None of us have grown up. But some of us won't. Which ones? She, herself? or Colin? Perhaps, if they stay together, neither.

"I understand Mr. Reed restored this place," Everett Bloom says.

"Yes."

"Quite a business these days, house restoration. Has he been dragging you from house to house like this for long?"

"No. Not long. Anyway, it's his life. It's how he likes to live. Always a new project. His own boss." Her voice quavers to a halt. She has no reason to defend him.

"Ah, but it's never too late to change," Mr. DeVore says. The younger man turns to look at him and they smile at each other. "And one must. One must."

The house--she remembers they are hoping to buy the house. For them it is pure, new, a prospect of happiness. For her its mass is shrinking: it is old and dirty, a painful memory.

There's a tap at the door and Colin sticks his head in. He doesn't look at her.

"If I could just have a word with you?" he asks the men.
It is impossible to tell if he’s been listening. She walks to the window and looks out.

Colin says, very distinctly as if it’s costing him some effort, "Forgive me for having got you all the way up here. But I’ve decided not to sell."

Bernadette stands frozen.

After a silence, Everett Bloom says, "I’m very sorry to hear that. Sorry indeed. I think Max and I would have agreed to offer your asking price. And we would have paid cash, providing the sale of our London flat goes through as we expect."

Everett Bloom will buy the house. If she expected him to sacrifice it in order to save her, she hoped for too much. Always, it seems, she has looked to other people, and hoped for too much. The flaw is hers.

"But, I understand," Mr. Bloom adds, clapping Colin on the shoulder.

Turning from the window, Bernadette tries to pick out Colin’s face. The room is an unlit cave to her light-filled eyes. Colin is an outline; her heart is a blank. All her yearning has wilted into sadness.

It is too late. The problem is not the house; nor is it stability, nor forced compromise. It’s her. She has given in to disappointment. She has fallen out of love.
"No," she says quietly. "It is for sale. Colin can take you to the lawyer now and draw up the papers. I’ll come too. I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes." In her mind she is already packing, picturing the things in various places she must not forget.

Colin grabs her arm as she passes him. "Bernie," he whispers. Now she can see his eyes and they are full of pain.

She says, quickly, "Can I leave Rosy with you? I’ll pick her up in a couple of weeks."

"Bernie. Don’t do it like this." His voice is sad too, and tolerant. She wants to hit him. She also wants to hug him, tight.

"I’m sorry. I have to," she says. This is the only way it will ever happen.

She is still clutching Rosy to her chest. She holds the dog out to him, the hot belly against her hands. Colin cradles the heavy bundle. The place Rosy had warmed all down her front goes cold and wet again.

Bernadette sits by the window on the train to Tunbridge Wells, one suitcase on the rack above her, one wedged beneath her feet, watching the hedgerows and fields fly past, unbearably green. She feels the growing fullness of the
countryside, and inside herself, the emptiness of thirty-four years of lost connections.

She wonders what she will do to keep herself from thinking of Colin, from writing to apologize for how she hurt him. It will take extreme discipline and a kind of enforced indecision that she is good at. She can already picture the letter she will not send: the paper, the ink, the easy flow of her hand as she lists the reasons for their incompatibility and blames herself for not noticing them sooner.

Sending it would be the same kind of maudlin gesture as she made in leaving one of her skirts behind for him: the pretense that there is still some hope, that she is really blameless and that if he will just keep being in love with her she might someday reappear, finally capable of loving back. The kind of love one person expects from another: demanding, tolerant, imperfect.

Already he is fading. Yet, he comes back so easily. She pictures him in front of the sink in her skirt, the worn blue-flowered cotton one he used to put on when he was playing housekeeper. He wears her low-heeled pumps and has pinned his hair in a cascade on top of his head. He smiles, bats his long eyelashes and runs in circles around the mop. He is so vivid, so funny. She laughs out loud. The other
passengers stare at her but she can't stop laughing. As she 
puts her hand over her mouth she feels herself dissolve. It 
is not him who is fading. It is not him she doesn't believe 
in.

She has to get out her tissues and turn toward the 
window to hide her slipping face. Already the pleasant 
amnesia is setting in. Already she is thinking of her time 
with Colin as the one period of her life when she was happy.
The Happy End Nursing Home is not a euphemism. Men go there to die. Between the Ansonia Apartments and the Sixth Street Diner, just nine floors down from my own Ansonia balconette, the Happy End squats. It is clean, dim and not well-staffed. The common room has a yellow-keyed piano and refectory-type tables. From the Happy End’s front porch, the view of MacArthur Park serves the residents like a drama serial on t.v.

When my natural time comes, I hope to die in such a place—one for women, of course—surrounded by people who don’t pretend to understand each other, fed, clothed and exercised, happy. It will be a compromise between extremes: better than the stiflement of family; better than a jump from the ninth floor without anyone to find the note, entirely alone.

I work at the Happy End. I can hardly fathom the significance of this fact. I come to Los Angeles to make
myself a star, and I end up holding old men under the armpits so they can pee with some dignity. Oh, Powers that Be, what does it all mean? If anything?

I will tell you the truth: I was not in the most aware state of mind when I was hailed to my present calling. In the recent past I had lost the band I had come all the way to Los Angeles to find—and most of my supposed friends along with it—and was suffering the disappearance of Isabella, my dog and only ally.

The band—we called ourselves the Gooney Birds. The story was a case of apparent misunderstanding turned reality. Unknown to me, my trial period with the group was up and my singing ability was in question—not for any fault of itself, but because Blotto, the lead guitar, had a new girl. She was the skinny black-and-white-faced kind, with ambitions and a shrill voice.

Kyle and Flathead were pulling for me, trying to get me to change my style so I could outdo her. Kyle kept spearing me with the spikes of his rainbow mohawk and crooning, "You're so tender, can't you shriek?" He could be kind, but something was bubbling a little too hot inside his brain. Flathead asked me over and over in his monotone voice, "You never had a siren come after you?" Like I'd really missed out. "Shriek!" Just the way they talked made my ears ring.
One night when we were scheduled to open at the Anti-Club for my friend’s band, Heather Haley and the Zealots, I just didn’t show up. With the kind of feelings my colleagues were giving me about myself, it made sense not to show. I was nobody and nobody would miss me. It appears, though, that that one night I would’ve been their best friend if I’d been there. After that I really was nobody.

As for Isabella. I believed she had been stolen from me by the landlord, Mr. Blatchford—Blotchface I call him. He’s got the mean smile and crooked teeth of a doznapper. I searched every animal shelter in a six-mile radius and they all claimed they’d never seen Isabella or the bastard landlord. I thought Blotchface must have buried her somewhere, or dumped her down in the concrete ditch they misname “river.” I even looked there. I followed Sixth Street all the way past downtown to the bridge one day and descended into the pee-smelling tunnel under the sign that reads “Enter at Your Own Risk.” I saw plenty of rats scuttling in the tall weeds, bodies lying under grimy blankets—thank God one of them snored—but I never saw a hair of Isabella.

I had reason to suspect the landlord. He lost all control when he found out I had a dog, and that I’d had one all along right under his nose. He tried to evict me. Of
course, I refused to leave. Then one day I came home and Isabella was just gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn’t even know Blotchface had the key. After that I didn’t bother to lock my door. She was the only valuable possession I had.

Losing Isabella was the worst thing, worse than losing my band and my delusions of being hailed the husky-voiced diva from bluegrass country. Realizing this has changed me. The truth was, Isabella was the only one of everyone I knew I freely chose to associate with.

She chose me too. Isabella Queen of Spain I named her, instead of Pal which is what the pound said she was called. I think she’d had a hard life, been mistreated by her former owners. She only had hair on her head, paws and tail, none on her body, and to compensate, her skin had gotten thick and black and warty, for protection. But her body had a nice shape, not all obscured by fur. Her front legs turned out pretty-as-you-please. She had a pearly-furred cocker spaniel-type face. I never saw anything so humble and still so hopeful since I came to L.A.

The pound-keeper told me she was a Chinese Hairless. They must have thought I was feeble-minded. "This dog is malformed," I said. "But I don’t want a normal dog anyway." Five times I went back to take her out for walks. I tried to
like some of the other dogs, but there was something about her strange, sad, eager face that made me want Isabella. The day I went to bring her home she jumped right into my lap, her tail batting a thousand.

Isabella did get to feeling cooped up in my little vintage 1940s slum apartment, so I took her out a lot. I had not experienced walking a dog on a leash before, and had not felt that kind of wandering calm since coming to Los Angeles. Isabella made her nosy way down the broken concrete alleys, from weed patch to weed patch, from car tire to building corner. All these locations became intimates of hers and she greeted them every day with a happy familiarity. If she missed one stop in her itinerary she'd be sure to backtrack and give it some attention before going on. In this way we meandered the less-travelled by-ways above Sixth Street.

While Isabella wandered at the far end of the leash, I often allowed my mind to roam back over my life down home. It certainly was a puzzle. From what I can tell, I never was a happy child, though I don't remember what kind of childhood I did have. In all the pictures I am very serious. As if I never got told that life was supposed to be fun.

I studied hard and made good for my parents until, along about high school, I suddenly realized I was not just an extra appendage of somebody else's body. Things changed a
lot then. I changed a lot. Of course I noticed even though I was determined not to pay attention that my folks weren’t too pleased about these alterations—the chopped-off hair, the tight jeans, but especially me trading in piano for singing. There were a lot of other things they didn’t know about. The sex, of course, and the depression.

I tried to loosen the ties with my parents some more when I moved out here, for the reason that I could not make it independently if all the time I was expected to report back on my lifestyle and had to listen to what I was doing wrong and what I should be doing instead. My mother still dreamed that I would become a famous pianist, due to her generosity in providing me with lessons for so long. "Why do you want to become some kind of torch singer when you were raised on the classics?" she said.

My father’s hope is that I will learn the truth about life, come home, get married and settle down to having some grandkids for him.

I tried to prepare them by saying I wouldn’t be calling them for a while, maybe several months. I would write postcards regularly and they were not to worry.

Within three days of me getting my phone put in, my mother had found out my number from Los Angeles information. For the whole year I’ve been here she has called me once a
week. The burden of being an only child seems tremendous to me.

My physical escape from home was a blessing, anyway. I know a lot of my classmates are still living in Paris, Kentucky. There is something to be said for adolescent rebellion: the ones who were allowed to have theirs got over it and waltzed back into the fold. My own rebellion was suppressed. Our little family seemed to have an unbreakable aura of love and caring and when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen I had no choice but to believe it. Any thought of rebellion turned back on me, searing me with guilt.

I can now see this difference—why my classmates are there and I am here—why my later teenage years are proving so dangerous, and my future still is uncertain. It’s like getting the chicken pox as an adult—it might be fatal. I may never see my parents again. That’s the way it has to be.

On the bus out here I met Heather, who was on her way back from getting professional advice in Nashville. I took to her like a dust fleck to wet tar. She was born somewhere in Canada and has big lips painted red and sparkling eyes painted green, and dyes her long, thick hair a fierce color of orange. She sat right down next to me in the way-back of the Greyhound and lit up a Lucky Strike.

"Going to the big city?" she asked.
She could tell just by looking I was a greenhorn. "Sure am," I said. "City of the Angels. And I’m planning to take whatever those angels want to bring me."

"You remind me of me," she said. "Before the fall."

I always remember that.

Talk poured out of her for three days straight and I sucked it up. She gabbed about people I only knew from magazines. My eyes must’ve been as big around as dollar pancakes. We bought a bottle of Southern Comfort because she wanted to drink what the natives drank. Crossing the wide, dusty desolation between Dallas and Phoenix we sat in the back of our Greyhound chariot and did shots from that bottle. I had met a compatriot. I was headed for my fall. I knew I’d made the right decision.

Through Heather I got to know the clubs and the music scene, met all my other friends and got plugged into this band. It was some kind of miracle, I thought, still dazzled by the size of it all, the streets upon streets lined up and down with palm trees, neighborhoods after neighborhoods where all the clubs were. I got into a crowd. And none of those people seemed to have any parents or families. They were self-made orphans: not needy or poverty-stricken, just free agents. That kind of freedom made me shiver with excitement. I had to have it.
All these things, I thought of as Isabella walked me through our neighborhood. I was so taken up with myself I didn’t notice all the signs of inner-city decay that later depressed me so. I was only looking for happy signs then.

One of the good things I found was my neighbor, the Happy End Nursing Home. From morning ‘til noon, sometimes later into the afternoon, a line-up of old men sat on the front porch on aqua-colored chipped plastic schoolroom chairs, watching the action over in the park. It is a peculiar and typical paradox of this city that people deteriorating from age and illness can spend their final and even happiest hours facing people degenerating from poverty, drug use, or pure youthful stupidity.

I took Isabella by the rest home every day. The men loved her. They reached out their shaking hands to pet her. They grinned, toothless, oblivious or incoherent, complimenting her on her wiry energy and her long-haired scalp. And whereas someone would always stop me in the park and say, "What happened to that dog? It sure is ugly," the old men never remarked on Isabella’s surface blemish.

But as soon as Isabella jumped down from their patio wall, or a police car rode into the park, or something else caught their attention, the old guys forgot she was alive. I
went to them a few days after Isabella disappeared and they didn’t recognize me, and didn’t know what I was talking about. "A dog? There’s plenty of strays in the park if you want a dog," they said. Their amnesia obliterated an entire portion of my life. It was then I gave up looking for Isabella.

After that I was all alone in my one-room park-view tenement. I stared out my window. Frantic graffiti covered every concrete surface. Police cars roared over the patchy, litter-clogged grass at regular intervals with lights flashing and sirens screaming. Poor mothers walked their babies near the mouths of the tunnels that led under Wilshire Boulevard, where gangs hung out. And all of it was lit up a horrible yellow by those unearthly inverted-L streetlights.

Every morning at ten the fire department training school marched its recruits out into the middle of the grass and worked them through a bunch of clownish exercises that included group yells and grunts. The August smog turned the air gray. It was unhealthful to breathe and crazy to exercise. Maybe part of firefighter training is to pre-pollute the lungs. So that when the lung-cells are repeatedly clogged with smoke, they will not remember with regret that once they were clean. It is not such an extraordinary idea. My own education was similar: a
preparation for the worst that life could be.

I loathed those men and their slavish obedience, reminding me of how I used to be. They seemed so deluded. But I was deluded too. I saw no value in the ability to pretend to discipline and order, in the very center of chaos.

For three weeks I sat up there, seeing no one, doing nothing, not even reading the newspaper, not even taking a bath. I let the chaos of life swallow me. Looking back on it I see that in the darkest part of my mind a reckoning was going on. I was adding up everything I had been and done, everything I was, and I was letting it come to zero.

The loss of my career and my dog left me in bad straits, but it was a tiny incident, not more than sixty seconds long, that nearly pushed me over that proverbial and literal edge: a phone call from my mother.

The night had turned bad even before the call came. I'd sat myself on the floor by the window to get some light from the neon and the stars and whatever. They had already shut off the electricity and the gas in retaliation for me not paying my bills. The only utility left for my use (besides water since the slumlord pays everyone’s at once and is not able to discriminate against me there) was the phone. No matter how long I ignored the red notices Pacific Bell would not cut off that phone. In hindsight I can see it as faulty
record-keeping, or perhaps charity. At the time, checking every five minutes to find that the dial tone had not yet gone dead, I thought it was telephone torture, and that they had chosen their punishment carefully.

It was a Friday night, the third Friday night in a row alone. I sat there by the window, sewing of all things. Me, who nearly failed home ec in the seventh grade, won the "Least Likely Ever To Succeed as a Female" award of Paris Junior High School, and swore I would never replace a button again, sewing not one but eight, all of them off my fire-engine-red fake-silk punk-cut blouse. I bought that blouse to spite the little yellow-livered voice always twittering "what will they think?" in my head.

I wore it to my first gig. Kyle and Flathead gave me the thumbs up. As for Blotto (even though I'm not his type, I'm too chunky for him. I'd crush his bones if I lay on him), sex gets first billing in his brain and his body acts out whatever crosses that screen. He stood in front of me, running his hands up and down my slippery back. Then he grabbed my left breast hard. I nailed his balls with my knee. He doubled up and fell on the floor but he was laughing. I laughed too. I didn't really care what he did as long as I could keep in step.

That night we were a screaming success. I was sorry I'd
had to leave Isabella at home, but she would've been scared. Kyle beat on everything in sight, the walls, the amps, he piled up chairs and drummed on the lampshades. Blotto held the chords with his nose and sawed on his strings with a dinner knife. And Flathead was Flathead, frozen to his chair, his base down at his ankles, looking bored as hell, his fingers plucking the deep notes, barely.

My voice shook when I sang and my body went stiff with first-time nerves. But the crowd screamed and slammed, and loved me for my shirt. After that I wore it every time. My carefully chosen stage name, Lise Lamour, went down the tubes because of that red shirt. They called me "Red Rosa" after the famous anarchist. But I wasn't an anarchist, I was just me, and like most things I do to score points, it turned against me. The shirt fell to pieces.

That piece of red fake-silk cost me thirty dollars, but it was worthless compared to Isabella. I would have wiped her butt with it. I would have let her play tug-o-war with it and rip it to shreds. As a penance, I sat there sewing it. Back in the seventh grade when I vowed never to perform such a menial task again: that was before my identity disintegrated, before I suspected I could never be more than nobody.

The day after I didn't show up at the Anti-Club, Blotto
called and told me not to bother coming any more. The shirt sat in my dresser for two weeks. Maybe, like me, it weakened with the settling dust. But earlier on the night of the phone call, I had plucked a scrap of defiance out of my depression. I had grabbed the shirt out of the drawer, put it on, and left the house.

I was hungry. I was sitting at the counter in the Sixth Street Diner. I was eating my fried chicken and french fries that I get there because the food is cheaper and a little more real than what you get at MacDonald’s or Pollo Loco around the corner. And what do you know, the buttons popped off. Well, one did, third from the top.

In my funk I wasn’t bothering about most things, including a brassiere. The button burst loose in front of all the sleazy men who grab their coffee in the Sixth Street Diner, dealers, down-and-outers, skid row types like no one ever saw back in Kentucky. City-crazed. You can see it in their eyes.

That button flew off into the pile of ketchup I had poured out to dip my fries in. Then I was looking down into my grand canyon and so was everybody else, waiting to see what I was going to do. As calmly as I could with the sweat pouring down my sides I tucked a napkin in my neckline and continued with my dinner. No one said a word, just smiles
all round, eyebrows raised. Like they thought that made me one of them. A lot of times they don’t have zips on their pants and you can see their short and curlies, and you know their thing is coiled up inside there ready to spring. It’s not the same at all.

I choked down the drumstick meat and walked the block home in the buzzing streetlight glare with the napkin in my collar. It was a hot, dirty night. I felt a ripping in my body, an unlatching. It was my self slithering inside my skin, trapped and furious. "Bitch!" I gasped. "Dirty, useless slut!" Riding up the old elevator, slamming my door open, "What have I done to myself? What have I done?" I ripped off my shirt and threw it in the corner where Isabella’s dishes used to be, where the floor was still crusty with sour milk and meat-flavored by-products, and I screamed at it.

"You useless piece of shit!" I yelled. "I can’t even trust my own clothes to stand by me!" Then breaking down again: "And why? Why should they?"

I looked down and noticed my half-naked body. My oversized and unseemly breasts were turning colors. The big neon sign on top of my building had just been restored: "The Ansonia" it thundered, in blood red and ice blue against the darkness, and the colors swept right in through my window. I
looked around at the cheap sleaziness that submerged me. Apparently, I had chosen it for myself—as my mother would say, by not learning to type and getting a decent job like normal people.

I gave the three-inch pad I used for sleeping on a good hard kick. Pieces of disintegrating foam floated up into the colored air, lazy, careless. I watched. My anger sapped away. I thought, if I can just make a start, if I sew the button back on my shirt and learn patience with myself, maybe little by little I will be able to put it all back together.

I hunched into an old house-coat. I got out the little flowered-cardboard sewing kit my mother had forced on me when I left home.

When I picked up the red shirt all the buttons were gone and I had to crawl around in that disgusting caked-on mess—I had never dealt with it, for mourning Isabella and to spite the landlord—looking for those buttons. By the time I knotted the thread, my resolve was weakened. My fingers trembled with the needle so it took me five tries to thread it. After I finally got it threaded, the phone rang.

It was the first ring in as long as I could remember. I felt my heartbeat speed up. In my fragile condition it was like a wolf pounding on the paper door of a paper house. I was thinking, the animal shelter? the band? Heather? I
didn’t consider the possibility of my mother.

I had actually dismissed her from my mind. I had written her a letter and told her I needed her to stop calling me for a while, until I could get myself on my feet, and it was nothing she could help me with, I had to do it by myself for once. I knew she got the letter because the last two Saturdays she hadn’t phoned and I had nearly managed not to think of her.

The answering machine picked up the call. I held my breath, my needle just threaded but in danger of slipping loose again. The mystery person waited through the silence on the machine, the silence I left instead of a message. I’d been working on becoming as anonymous as possible. I never checked to see if anyone left messages any more. Only if I was in I’d get them but I was in and there never were any.

The beep of the phone machine sounded after the silence.

"Is it you, Bethy?" My mother’s voice—my mother calling. I remembered then that though I was 2500 miles away, I was barely beyond her reach, just outside her visual range. I felt trapped. I hunched lower on the floor, pains of fury shooting through my stomach.

The voice went on, trying to be smooth and coaxing, but trembling all the same. "You did ask me not to call you but I’m so worried. I just want to know if you’re all right."
You don’t have to talk to me, just dial home and let it ring two times. I promise I won’t answer. Please, Beth honey. I love you." There was a long pause then the click of her hanging up.

I sat on my bed, paralyzed. My mother knew I didn’t go by Beth any more. Beth was that stubby-fingered junior high school failure with fat braids and glasses and clothes from another era, a nerd in a family of small-town nerds, training in classical piano and mathematics. My mother chose to forget that I’d become Lise, another legitimate form of the name Elizabeth: Lise of the tight jeans and low necklines, contact lenses and eyeliner. She ignored the fact that I was pursuing a musical career other than the one she chose for me, in Los Angeles, California. Was.

After she hung up, I thought about how the world was a terrible place, how life would always be a chaos of unidentifiable emotions and one very clear one, pain. I looked down at the needle in my hand and I jabbed it five times into my left palm, yelling, "Lise, Lise, Lise, Lise, LISE."

Now I was trapped. If I called her back, she would know I was still at the same number, still available to her imagination and her stifling care. If I didn’t call, my mother would keep hounding me until I cut my phone line with a pair of scissors. But I couldn’t take that action myself,
actually do the deed that would mean giving up all hope of getting back to normal--getting back with the band, my friends, my habits. My dog.

Tiny red welts bubbled up on the thin skin of my palm. My mother had won again. I picked up the phone, dialed, let it ring twice, and hung up. I went out on the balcony.

I stood there, the receiver gone dead in my hand. The heat pounded in my head. The other restored neon signs around the perimeter of the park vibrated against the flat black sky: the Rialto Theater, the Alexandria, the Wilshire Hotel. They screamed like some kind of primary-colored old-fashioned triumph over the modern age. Night held onto the park between the streetlights, down where young kids bought drugs and knives flashed.

I held my shirt out over the balcony with the needle still attached to it. I let go. It floated like a small parachute, needle-first, unbelievably light without its buttons, without me in it. I looked nine floors down to the cool, dull grey concrete. The sweat gathered around my body and I knew even that would turn cool. I wondered what it would be like to float free, beyond control. I thought about what I would like to think about while I floated down. I could relax. I could recreate myself. I didn’t want to plan it. I wanted to see what I came up with. Even though I
would never have a chance to remember it.

I didn't jump. I am surprised I considered it. Let myself be seen smashed, dumb-faced, twisted into unnatural positions, by anyone who happened to stroll by? I was raised a self-conscious person. Most southern girls are, and I am the epitome of the rule. If every cell of my body is focused outward it is due to my mother and her constantly repeated "What if they see? What will they think?"

I suppose I am what they call pseudo-suicidal. Everyone thinks of death. Everyone considers giving the steering wheel a swift, oblivious jerk, or walking a little too close to the edge. Some people treat it as an option, some do not. I have several times thought that I was serious. But because of my genetically weak character, because of the invisible thread that links me mortally to two other human beings, my parents, I have never been able to do the deed.

As I stood on the balcony, an acute sense of failure warred with a dazed sense of possibility inside me. I knew I was powerless, even over this.

A feeble bleating interrupted my thoughts. Nine floors down an old hunchbacked man stood propped on a cane. The fluorescent lights made him white, white as a ghost or an angel. He held my red fake-silk shirt up in the air and waved it like a flag.
"Hey," he squeaked again. "This yours?" The old guy’s voice carried all the way up to me. I shook my head no.

I guess he could see my movement of denial against the bright red-blue Ansonia sign because he said, "I saw you drop it." I didn’t answer. "You don’t want it?"

I shook my head again. I didn’t. To hell with meekness and patience and sewing buttons back on. I was tired of tight, uncomfortable clothes. I was sick of always having to make an impression and of groveling for favors from people who didn’t even like me. I was sick of my own cowardice. That thought probably came the nearest to making me jump.

But I waited. I watched the old man shuffle over to the porch of the nursing home. I hadn’t noticed before because he had his head tipped up to yell, but he had a party hat on, a pointy silver one that glinted in the dark, the kind kept on by a string of elastic. I thought maybe he was just another lunatic. Then I saw the bunting around the porch-uprights and decided they were having a party. I couldn’t see onto the porch itself.

The old man arrived and some other hands put a small object up on the railing. It was squirming around. It had a pointy hat on too. The old man fumbled with my shirt and I saw he was trying to put it on the little animal and I shrieked, "Isabella!"
Isabella looked up. I could see her furry little face under the streetlight. She barked. It was a bark of recognition, of delight, of love, of pure devotion. The men looked up too but I didn't wait to see what they thought. I took the same way down. I ran the nine flights and showed up at the party in my housecoat. The men were delighted to see me even though they had no idea who I was. Isabella went wild yapping—it's a rare thing when she barks—and I hugged her tight to me saying over and over, "I can't believe you're here, sweetheart. I can't believe it."

"Tell her happy birthday!" they said. "We're celebrating this dog's birthday. We figure he's a hundred years old today."

I don't know how they figured that. They couldn't even see the dog had no thing and was a girl, but maybe such matters don't make a difference to a man any more at that age. A bell rang inside the building. "Bring him in," they said, all putting their hands on my shoulders to hustle me inside. All of them had hats on and all of them grinned, leering or innocent or incoherent.

A rectangular blue cake sat on a table in the center of the big room. Somebody was humoring the old guys. They all gathered around. A woman attendant nodded at me and lit a candle on the cake. In the corner I spied a dusty upright
piano and when somebody took Isabella from me to blow out her candle, I went over and sat down.

I looked at my fingers and wondered if they recalled much of anything. Then I remembered I wasn’t here to make an impression. In fact, it was already proved to me that that was an impossibility in this particular place. So I started right in on "Happy Birthday." Everybody sang. I went on to "For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow"—well, I sang she, they sang he. Then my hands took me over and I played and played, remembering Beethoven and Rodgers and Hammerstein, "The Summer Knows" and Queen’s "Bohemian Rhapsody." As each song vibrated on the air, I thought about when I learned it and who all I’d played it for. All these memories rolled back to me through my fingers on the keys and my foot on the sustaining pedal.

I forgot about my audience, I assumed they were carrying on with the party. But when I stopped, exhausted, tears in my mouth and dripping from my chin to my housecoat, when I turned around, they were all sitting there in a trance. One old man with glasses and a puzzled look started to clap. Others clapped too, the ones who were aware enough to know what was going on. Some didn’t, they just sat there, but I knew they were affected because I noticed they sat calm, with almost no fidgeting. I bowed. I never got this kind of
recognition for my singing, only screams and howls and more slam-dancing.

That night I went home with Isabella. I scrubbed the floor and cuddled her close and got a good night's sleep.

I work at the Happy End as an attendant. I've started to pay off my bills. It's not paradise but I like it here for now. Some of the men even know me by name: Lizzy they call me, which I don't mind. I wear whatever I want. I go wandering with Isabella on my breaks. And in the evenings when I play the piano, everybody gets soothed.