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Exposing the soul

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EXPOSING THE SOUL

by
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Wash N Dry

Katie was holding a pair of white cotton panties when her madman walked into the laundromat. For a while, that was how she thought of him. As her madman.

She recognized him immediately. He was long and thin, with dull black flyaway hair that parted around a pale, featureless face. Even in a ponytail, his hair was messy. His limp blue windbreaker she had learned to spot from blocks away.

He came into the laundry through the double glass doors facing the street. Katie was at the last of three folding tables that ran the length of the room. As soon as he came in, she looked down at the panties in her hand, placed them on her pile, and took up another pair. Her last load was finishing the drying cycle. She’d be out of here in another five minutes.

The madman began pacing in small circles by the doors.

"Pigs, pigs, pigs. Pigs got it. Pigs got it." He was speaking to himself in crazy echoes, which made her realize she’d never heard him speak. Not even that first time when he had stopped her on the street. Slow to understanding then, still new to
the city, she had stopped to look into his face, and in that first moment, like she knew he had black hair, she had known he was crazy.

It was his eyes that gave him away. They were pale blue, almost opalescent, and eerie in that unmistakable way, like something was lit inside his head but the light wasn’t focused on anything in front of him.

"He told, that old man, told, that old man. Told!"

Katie heard the distinct thump of foot against metal. He had kicked a machine, one swift blow with one sneakered foot and then he was back to his pacing.

She kept her hands moving in the warm pile of clothing. Even after midnight on a Friday night, she wasn’t alone. There were others with her, others who preferred the quiet of an off-night to wash and dry their accumulations, their socks and towels and undies. Across the aisle from her, a college kid was draped across two machines, a favorite trick of hers on these Friday night laundry sessions. She could sit on the warm humming washers like she did at home as a child and not worry that anyone would tell her she couldn’t. Best of all she had her pick of dryers, no waiting. Number fourteen was a good dryer. So was three and eight.

In the middle aisle of washers, an older fellow, the only other occupant of the room, folded up the paper he’d been reading. Each flip of the page sounded loud in the cocooning drone of the laundry. She wondered he wasn’t afraid of drawing the madman’s attention.

"It’s cold, man, cold man, old man, old man. Damn fucker. Damn fucker."

It was probably a risky thing, washing her clothes after midnight. But there
was something about this laundromat at night. The streets outside being so close to campus were always busy, but inside, with the windows black from the night, reflecting like mirrors, inside nothing existed except the clean warmth of the room.

She heard the sound of phantom coins rolling around inside the dryer behind her. That sound was often there when she dried her clothes, and yet when she searched inside the metal drum there would be no hot shiny dime. No change at all. Still she would look. A free dime felt like luck. As a kid, she found a quarter in the return slot of a payphone. She still checked them today, if there was a payphone at hand and she felt so moved to try.

"Old man. That bag, my bag, my bag, my bag, man, my bag man. It’s cold," he said and slapped his palm flat down on a folding table.

Katie’s muscles tightened in her thighs. She felt her spine straighten. The college kid was engrossed in some thick book. The older guy, a slight smile on his face as he folded his shirts with military neatness, seemed to be listening to the madman.

Katie turned to her dryer. By the clock, she still had a couple minutes to go, but she opened it anyway, stuck in a hand and aimed for a tumbling pair of jeans. The heat stung her eyes, but the warmth of the big metal drum felt so good she leaned in further until her upper body was entirely inside and all she could see was the smooth rust-colored sides of the dryer. She felt the thick fiber of the jeans. It was burning hot and still damp.

And that’s when he passed behind her. She could feel him now, behind her,
on the other side of the folding table. He was claiming more of the laundromat. He
had moved from the glass doors towards the video games at her end of the room. On
the return trip he veered down an aisle of washers and she thought he meant to go out
the west doors, into the parking lot, into the night, but he came back, still muttering,
his circle widening.

"Spit on him. That old man. Spit on him and pigs, my bag. My bag. The
pigs."

Katie remembered now the last time she'd had seen him. A week or so ago.
Outside the laundromat, on the corner near the doughnut shop. The cops had had him
between them. Even then he had moved constantly. His hands and feet, his whole
body moved in a constant mindless way. She had pitied him, for the hassling cops,
for having to beg, for having to sleep outside. For having such a life. But she didn’t
know what to do so she passed them by and she didn’t look back. Within a couple of
steps her eyes were dry again.

They were part of this city, like the mountains and the saguaros. When winter
was coming on in the rest of the country, men like this madman flocked to the desert,
like migratory birds, only in Katie’s gut they felt like predators, cunning and wary as
wolves cutting out sheep. Most didn’t beg. They took, took what they could. They
took away her change and her peace of mind. They left her confused. Ashamed.
They were not the harmless, grizzled old men she saw occasionally hanging around
the Gospel Mission back home.

And this man was somehow worse than the others. Different because he
affected her most, and until now, she had never thought about why. Sometimes she
was caught by the others, but she made sure it was never him again, not after that first
time. She became more alert, learned to scout ahead and cross the street, and after
each near miss with any of them, but particularly with him, she felt her heart beating
and she knew she had escaped by the narrowest of margins.

"It wasn’t. I wasn’t. Run the pigs. I wasn’t, wasn’t."

Katie heard the scrape and thump of metal. She pulled back from the warm
mouth of her dryer to find him digging through the tall garbage can near the entrance,
at the first folding table. There were three of them lined up the length of the room.
A garbage can for each folding table. She looked into her trash can curiously. It was
empty except for a plastic cup and a detergent box and a mixture of liquid and dirty
lint pooled at the bottom.

She turned back to the dryer and, after a second’s hesitation, she gathered its
warm contents toward her and piled them on her table.

The madman had a scrap of cloth in his hands, someone’s discarded dishrag.
As he turned it in hands, she understood. He was looking for something to use as a
cover. Somehow without trying, she had understood his rambling talk: the cops or
some old man had his bag, his sleeping bag.

Once she had come upon someone sleeping in a bag on a bench. With its
drawstring pulled up tight at the top, the sleeper had been completely anonymous, and
yet she remembered wondering how anyone could sleep so exposed.

Her madman needed something more than a windbreaker. The desert was cold
in November. The cops shouldn’t have taken the bedroll, if they weren’t able to catch him as well. He should have let himself be caught. If he had, at least he’d now be someplace with food and running water and a bed.

Katie studied the pile of clothes before her, the towels and shirts and jeans. She touched the sleeve of a hooded gray sweatshirt. One frayed cuff clung to the front of her skirt. As she pulled at it, the material crackled with static electricity, and she thought, just for an instant, of tossing the sweatshirt into the garbage can. The impulse surprised her, for the sweatshirt had belonged to an old boyfriend. A gift she had taken back when he had moved out. Having the sweatshirt back had seemed important at the time. She wasn’t sure why, except that it had something to do with power.

The older man was leaving. He had picked up his basket and his newspaper. As she watched, he slipped out of the laundromat, past the madman, and was gone. Katie caught the college kid’s eyes descending back to his book. His eyes gave her nothing, and that made her mad, his indifference. Life didn’t touch frat boys. Not the kind that owned the shiny red mopeds she saw zooming through the streets. For them, this crazy man was just part of the scenery.

In the second garbage can, the madman found a tan-colored shirt. He held it up to the light, used both hands to test it. He pulled at the thin material. The shirt had great circles of sweat under each sleeve. He grinned.

Katie knew her table was next. She grasped the material of her skirt and felt the hard knot of quarters in her left pocket. Nearly two dollars. But she couldn’t
think what to do. To step forward now, to draw attention to herself, she couldn’t do it. She knew herself, and distant Sunday teachings didn’t apply when her heart was beating this fast.

In three strides, the man was up against her table, bending to look into the tall cylinder just to the right and front of her. As he bent to look, his upper body moved forward and he put his hand on the folding table and the tips of two pale fingers just touched a pair of her clean, folded underwear. The nails on the end of each finger were ragged, bitten to the quick. His fingers just brushed her clothes and then he had straightened and turned away.

"Run the pigs," he said, wrapping the stained shirt around his shoulders. "Run the pigs."

He disappeared through the doors he came in through. He walked straight towards them, and just before he opened them, his reflection appeared in the black surface of the glass, a blurred blue and black and white image, and then it was gone. And it was just the washers and the fluorescent lights beaming back.

A funny vibration began in Katie’s leg, just above the kneecap. She leaned back against the dryer and thought of his hand, his fingers grimy and innocent as a school boy’s, just touching her panties. She didn’t know what to do about that. Her mind refused to accept any thoughts, to grasp what she needed to know. She couldn’t throw the underwear away. They were a good pair, unsoiled and barely worn. She had to take them home, to do anything else would be overdramatic. And shameful. She knew that. She stepped back to the table, picked up a towel and folded it. She’d
take them home and put them in her drawer and forget about it. Chances were when she rummaged for underwear in a day or two she wouldn't even notice. There'd be nothing to remember. She had several pair of underwear in this color. She only bought one kind.

She folded each piece of clothing, piled the socks on the underwear and placed them all in the bottom of her wicker basket. The jeans went next. They were heaviest. Then the towels and her tee-shirts and lastly the thin cotton skirts. Lightest always on top. So nothing would wrinkle. When the basket was full, she tucked the detergent box into a crevice along side the fabric softener. Then she looked at the sweatshirt still neatly folded on the table. She wanted to wad it up and throw it in the garbage. Something in her wanted to break free, just to do that. But it meant something to her and she might need it this winter. The desert could be a cold place in November.

################
Snowpack

The snow began falling the day after we moved into the old farmhouse just outside of Deary in the Idaho mountains. This made sense to me. Our first month in Elk River, it had rained. Hard, wet rain that trapped us all indoors. On the back porch, we played records, created musicals, and the spring rains on the roof sounded as good as applause. But the snow that started falling that day on our hillside was soft and white and silent. It fell so soft that the ground became a delicate net that footprints destroyed. The snow fell until six feet lay on the ground around the house, on the fields, and hills, and clumps of trees. Our nearest neighbor became just a light in the night.

Along about January we would stand on the narrow curve of road 20 yards below the house waiting for the school bus. To pass the time we’d skate on the ice-coated road in our slick-bottomed boots. Some days the bus driver never came, and so we’d have days of freedom, bundled warm against the cold, making trails from house to barn to forest.

"The bus isn’t coming today, I told you!" We’d been waiting for longer than
usual. I knew at least this.

"Big deal," said my older brother, Jake. "I'm going skiing." He clambered up the jagged hill of snow at the side of the road.

"How?" asked my 10-year old sister, Cyndi.

"I found a pair of wooden skis in the barn, that's how."

"What about us?" I said, kicking a clod of mud-colored snow into the ditch along the roadway.

"We can take turns," he said, his voice cracking on the last word. He stood on his hill and looked down at us.

"The snow's too deep. You'll just sink."

"I won't," he said and jumped towards us. He landed on a patch of packed snow and only caught himself by waving his arms frantically. He laughed. "Come on. Mom's still sleeping. It'll be a blast."

I followed him up the driveway, but stayed at the edge to make my own trail in the new layer of snow. The deep icy ruts gouged into the road by my father's four-wheel drive truck reminded me of him. My father was a big silent man. Some nights I would hear his truck whine and roar as he made the run up the drive. Some nights he didn't try and parked on the road near the mailbox.

The house inside was dim, and quiet except for Jake clattering up the narrow wooden stairs to his room. I walked up the stairs slowly, still enjoying the novelty of living in a two-story house, one with enough rooms to allow me my own bedroom. I took each step one at a time, running my hand along the railing, pausing on the
landing where the stairs veered sharply to the left, imagining myself dressed for a party, imagining the kitchen, as I looked down, crowded with people. But I couldn’t see it. Instead, I saw my mother. Her eyes, frightened and angry beneath my father’s hand.

"Move out the way, Amy." My sister brushed past me.

At the top I turned. My room faced the front of the house. Through the only window I could see the yard, the road, and the edge of the ditch, which had once, just before Christmas, when the sun had shone for a week and the temperatures rose into the 40’s, carried away melting snow in a trickling stream. We had played near the ditch, tossing paper boats into the gurgling water and watching them float for a few seconds and then sink. The current wasn’t swift enough to take our flimsy boats very far, especially when Jake taped bugs to them insisting we needed passengers.

I hated those bugs—hideous insects with flat red and black shells in the shape of sunflower seeds. They populated the house, no matter how my mother tried to control them. Every day I found one or two in my room, in the corners, on the windowsill. Once I found two connected together on the wall above my bed. The thought of those hairy-legged creatures crawling on me at night made me push my bed into the center of the room and tuck in all the blankets. Some nights I couldn’t fall asleep right away thinking of the bugs in my room; some nights I wished I still shared a room with Cyndi. On nights like last night I could listen to her voice instead of my father’s. His voice made me cower under the covers, wishing my family was different, wishing it were morning.
I zipped up my jeans and ran down the stairs in my socks. My parent's room was just off the kitchen. I peeked in. My mother was a still lump on the far side of the bed.

"Mom," I whispered. No answer. I didn't wait. I closed the door softly, somewhat relieved she was still sleeping. I tugged on boots, a pair of wool mittens and a hat, and was out of doors in time to see Cyndi just disappearing into the faded red barn up the hill from the house. I ran up the trail, the packed snow squeaking and crunching underfoot.

The barn was a mysterious and exciting place to us, even after two months of exploration. Crammed amid the old farm tools, a broken bed and ripped mattress, chairs, buckets, steel drums and empty gunny sacks, my brother had found the skis tucked into the rafters on the second level which was covered with dirty frozen straw. The cats slept up there. We had inherited three of them. One for each of us. The one Jake claimed had a litter soon after we moved in, so now there were six, seven if you counted the gray-striped tomcat who wouldn't let anyone near him, even me. I though I had a particular affinity with animals.

At the far end of the barn, in the light of a hay door, Jake sat on the tilted bed rubbing a piece of candle along the bottom of a long narrow board. "You've got to wax the skis before you use them," he was telling Cyndi who sat beside him holding the other ski.

"Mom's going to kill you for stealing one of her candles," I said as I came up beside them.
"She will not, unless you tell. And if you do, I won't let you ski."

"It's not going to work anyway. Those things are homemade. They're way too long. They're taller than you." I took the wooden ski from Cyndi. One end was curved up and rounded almost to a point. The other end was squared off flat. Brown leather straps were nailed to the middle of the thing.

"These are ridiculous."

"They'll work." Jake worked grimly until he finished the first ski and set it against the barn wall. I handed him the other.

"I've already tried them on," he said. "Those straps keep my feet on the boards. The wax will make them slippery on the bottoms."

"Don't you need poles or something to push you?" Cyndi asked. Her nose was red and on the verge of running.

"Wipe your nose," I said.

"But don't you," she said, using the sleeve of her jacket.

"Some people do. I don't," Jake said. "I've got it planned." He rubbed the last of the candle into the wooden ski. "I'll be the fastest skier you've ever seen."

Jake carried the skis up past the barn to the top of the pasture. Cyndi and I trailed along. Halfway up I stopped to look back. Looking down on the barn and the house and the road, squinting my eyes against the snow's glare, I felt my spirits rise. The memory of last night seemed faded as the puff of white vapor that warmed the tip of my nose each time I breathed. My muscles were tense with excitement when I caught up. Jake was strapping on the skis. He tested the fit. Jumped up and down,
pulled his feet and skis closer together, bent his knees and grinned.

"Okay, give me a push," he said to me.

I came around behind him, put my hands on his lower back and shoved. My feet sank in and held. He moved only inches, the skis plowing snow on either side.

"Cyndi, you help too," he said. Together we pushed him a couple of feet. After the first few inches he began whooping like an Indian. "Look out, here I go."

We let him go, but he slid only a foot before the tips of the skis without our momentum buried themselves in the snow. Cyndi and I looked at each other, but I didn’t dare laugh.

"The snow’s too deep," he said. "We need to pack it down a bit." He began unbuckling the ski straps and avoiding my "I told you so" stare. I didn’t say it out loud because I was beginning to think that this skiing business might work if we did as he said. I couldn’t wait for my turn. I was sure that I could sail down the hill, graceful and free.

We began tramping out a trail. It was slow work since we kept sinking to our knees in the deep drift of snow. My toes were becoming numb.

"I got an idea," Jake said. He ran off toward the barn and came back dragging his toboggan. The red plastic was bright against the snow. "We’ll use this to make our ski trail."

Jake met my look as he pulled up beside me. His eyes were clear, but I knew mine had darkened. The instant I saw the toboggan, I remembered last night and the fight and I didn’t feel like skiing anymore. I didn’t feel like doing anything. The
excitement trickled out of me, as cold as the snow melting in my shoes. I wasn’t sure how we could act as though nothing had happened when we both knew that something terrible had. I heard again the awful thud of my mother’s head on the kitchen floor, saw again the flash of her eyes, when Jake had called out "Dad, stop it!," and she had turned her face towards the stairs. In that moment, she had the same look as that wild cat in the barn, the first time we had came upon him, his yellow eyes flashing, wild and something else.

"Go back to bed, Jake," she had moaned, pushing at my father’s face until he released the grip on her hair and stood up.

"Get the fuck back to bed," he screamed. He lunged forward to cuff Jake along side the head. I cowered in the shadow of the stairs. "Don’t you ever interfere with me and your mother. This is none of your business."

Jake grabbed for the railing as he fell backwards. My mother was screaming and crying from the floor to leave Jake alone. He pulled himself back up and yelled, "I’m the one who left the sled in the driveway. Leave her alone! I hate you for hurting my mother," and he ran past me up the stairs. I was terrified my father would follow him and find me instead. But my father’s face changed. The staring blue spark of his eyes changed. I saw him come back to himself a bit and he turned away. As soon as he did I slid backwards up the stairs on my behind and crawled to my room, crying now. Below me all was silent. The silence terrified me. I wanted to see them, to see my mother. I prayed, my fingers tight around each other, "God, stop this. Please make my family happy. Please. That’s all I want. Please."
None of that terror was in Jake’s face now. He had erased the memory, or put it away where it didn’t bother him. But last night hadn’t been one of their normal arguments. We were used to those and I prayed through everyone. Make us happy, I prayed. Now I wanted to say something to Jake, to connect with him, to use words to somehow ease the pain I felt when I breathed, but he had glanced away. He was urging Cyndi to get into the sled.

"Do it," he said. "Don’t be a baby."

Cyndi settled in with a squeal. Jake got in behind her and pushed off. With a good start on packed snow, they bounced and yelled all the way down the slope. We took turns sledding down the hill. In an hour we had a packed trail nearly four feet wide.

Then Cyndi said, "I’m hungry. Let’s go in."

"Just wait a few more minutes, Cyn. I need you both to help me get started." Jake was strapping the skis back on his feet.

"Jake, let’s eat lunch first," I said.

"Go on if you want, you babies. I’m staying here."

"Suit yourself."

"Amy, not yet. Just help me this once, then you can go."

Cyndi and I got behind him, planted our palms in his back and pushed. This time it worked. He slid halfway down the slope. Wobbly, but moving, he finally lost his balance and tumbled sideways, burying his head and shoulders in the snow. We raced down to him.
"You did it! You did it!" Cyndi screamed, jumping into the snow beside his head.

"It’s my turn," I said. I tugged at the straps on the nearest ski.

"No, I want to go all the way down once," he said.

"That will take too long. How are you going to get back up?"

"Same as sledding."

"It’ll take too long. I’m hungry," Cyndi said. "Let Amy try, Jake. And then me. When we go in you can do it all you want."

"Oh, okay," he said, letting me pull the ski from his foot. "But I’ll carry them up."

When I at last stood on the edge of the run, the heavy boards strapped as tight to my feet as Jake could make them, my heart was beating so fast I thought I wouldn’t have the strength to keep upright when they pushed me off. "Wait a minute, I’m not ready," I screamed when I felt Jake’s hands on my back.

"Don’t be a chicken. It’s easy. Keep your knees bent, feet together, and chin up. Ready?" he said. "Let’s go!"

In the instant I felt the skis start to slide my fear vanished. I could do this. I would go farther and faster than Jake did. I knew it would happen that way. I could see myself speeding down the mountain, light as air, and when I got to the bottom of the hill I would keep on going, up the next hill and down that one too. I would fly. I could do it. Nothing would be the same once I had conquered the snow that had limited us to trails for months and trapped my mother inside the house, the snow that
tormented my father each day when he made his pre-dawn, 50-mile journey to work.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready."

They shoved, I slid free, and the skis immediately pulled at my legs, pulled my legs apart, I couldn't bend my knees, I was falling. I screamed as one ski buried itself in the left bank of the trail. The other twisted to the right. I fell backwards, the fall knocking the breath from my body.

"Amy, are you all right?" Jake was grinning from ear to ear, but he was helping me up. "You should have seen yourself," he said. "You did a wishbone."

"That hurt," I said and threw snow in his face. Cyndi was looking doubtful.

"I don't want to do it," she said.

When Cyndi and I clomped into the house, Mom still wasn't awake. I called her name, but there was no answer, so I made us peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches and we went back outside. Cyndi stayed in the barn and played with the kittens. I watched Jake make a few more runs, watched how he moved, but the skis weren't working as well any more. He said the wax had worn off.

We were watching television, drying our mittens and socks on the oil stove when mom finally came out of her bedroom. I heard her door open and then the sounds of her making dinner in the kitchen, but I couldn't get out of my chair. My heart was pumping so hard, yet my arms and legs felt so strange, I didn't think I could stand, but I wanted to talk to her. But I was afraid talking would make last night real, and important, and already the image of her, on the floor, was blurred, like a dream. I
didn’t want to be in the kitchen when my father arrived. The thought of him coming into the house, of seeing him again and knowing he’d look the same, that moment made my life seem fragile, like I was a piece of glass on the verge of shattering. I wondered what my mother was thinking out there alone in the kitchen.

"Amy, could you set the table for me?" She stood in the frontroom looking at me. Her face was smooth and round and tired looking. She looked like a waxen replica of herself after every argument.

"Sure, mom." It wasn’t my turn to set the table, but I wasn’t going to remind her. I scurried into the kitchen. "Dinner smells great. I’m hungry enough to eat a horse." I got out the silverware. As I passed behind her, I said lightly, "We went skiing today."

"How’d you do that?" She kept turning the chicken.

Jake bounded in from the frontroom. "Let me tell her," he said. "I’m the one that found ’em."

We were all in the kitchen, relaying every detail about our afternoon on skis, when I heard the growl of my father’s truck coming up the hill. Cyndi never stopped talking, but Jake and I did as we looked at each other and then at mom who continued to stir the gravy as though everything were normal.

Dad came through the kitchen door, stomping his boots clear of snow. "Jake," he said, "get my thermos. It’s on the front seat." He hung his coat on the rack and set down in a kitchen chair to pull off his boots. His face and hands were red and white from the cold.
"Dinner will be ready in five minutes, John, if you want to wash up," my mother said to him. They looked at each other on the way to doing something else.

The dinner conversation was limited to Cyndi. She told dad about the skiing, about how she wasn’t afraid, that she’d try it tomorrow for sure. Maybe dad could make her some skis just her own size. My father listened and chewed his food slowly. My mother kept getting up from the table, handing out the bread and milk, the salt that was forgotten. I kept waiting for something to happen, someone to say something. They all acted like last night never happened, as though Dad hadn’t gone into another rage and threatened to leave the family, as though he hadn’t put that look in my mother’s eyes when she saw Jake on the stairs. I played with my potatoes trying to figure what it all meant, how she could love a man who hurt her.

Jake nudged my knee with his. He was smiling and nodding his head to the back door. I looked at the door and saw my cat, Tabby, hanging on the screen, peering in at our meal as though she wanted to join us. I smiled at Jake and nudged my mother so she could share the joke. This time of year all the cats wanted indoors. Sometimes I snuck Tabby into my room because she found the hideous bugs and played with them until they were dead, then she ate them.

"Amy, get that cat off the screen before she tears it," my mother said.

Dad looked over at the door, then at my mother and then at me. I jumped up from the table and he resumed eating, without saying a word. I was beginning to feel less fragile. Energy was surging through me. Somehow, everything was okay.

I chased Tabby for much of the way to the barn, just glad to be outside,
breathing hard, enjoying the cold air freezing in my nose and lungs. There was a full moon high in the sky and the mantel of snow sparkled like someone had thrown diamonds across its frozen endless surface. I stood on the path and stared at the house and didn’t want to go back inside, but the skin of my face was beginning to stiffen and my dinner was waiting, and there was ice cream for dessert.

We had as much vanilla ice cream as we wanted that night. The freezer had stopped working and the two-gallon tub of Sparkle ice cream was melting into mush. My father even ate with us. He ate several helpings and he didn’t fuss about the freezer. He just boxed up the frozen meat and vegetables and set them in a snowdrift by the house.

Later, when Jake and Cyndi and I trudged off to bed, tired and sick of ice cream, my mom and dad were lying together on the couch, his hand tucked into the front of her shirt. When my mother looked up to say goodnight she had another look in her eyes, one I couldn’t interpret then, but she was smiling.

I never did get to see the snow melt off of the hills into the ditch. Before the spring thaw, we moved to another place, to another job. I always imagined that all that snow would have made a terrific river, a torrent of water that would have smashed any twigs or paper boats that tried to ride it or interrupt its terrible flow to the ocean.

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Changing Seasons

Drifting on the rim of consciousness, Ruth was awake before she opened her eyes. She liked that fuzzy time, when her mind was tranquil, empty of thought, and she was warm in a cocoon of bedclothes and the room was filling with light. Like most mornings, when she did open her lashes, she was being watched by her calico cat.

"Hey, cat," Ruth said.

The cat, one ear black, the other brown, sat beside her on the bed, paws perfectly positioned, one beside the other, one white, one brown. As still as a sphinx, O’Mara’s milky-gold eyes were round and unblinking. She could have been sitting there for a minute or for an hour.

Ruth stared back at the cat. She fixed her eyes on the black-diamond centers of the animal’s eyes, and after a spell of this locked gaze, found herself wondering if there wasn’t some communication going on. A level of understanding must exist. They lived together. The cat had watched her eat an entire box of chocolates in one sitting, had watched her pour a second glass of wine. And sometimes, just when she needed the touch, O’Mara would curl up next to her, knocking aside a book or settling down on a magazine, if need be, and Ruth would rest with her there long after it was
comfortable, just to sustain the contact, to maintain the warmth.

"But you're a cat. You don't care," she said. "That's the beauty of it. You don't need my approval and I don't need yours."

O'Mara narrowed her eyes and meowed. Out of habit, Ruth meowed back, copied the exact sound, the three sharp notes of rising complaint. She pulled out a hand from the bedclothes. Stroked the cat. O'Mara responded with immediate voice. She was a talker by nature, but touch always set her off, in a jumpy way, as though Ruth's fingers carried a jolt of static electricity. Touch the cat and she meowed, in startlement or complaint. Maybe it was both. O'Mara had spent her early days in the hulk of an abandoned car. Those times must have been wild and startling.

The cat talked with a series of deep-throated meows. She was protesting that Ruth's hand had stalled on her haunches. Pet me, she said. Pet me now.

O'Mara's fur was thick and silky. Ruth enjoyed the feel of it under her hand. She stroked the cat a few times more, then finished with a vigorous rub to her head and a scratch under the chin.

"There, that's enough," she said and pushed back the blankets to emerge into the vague chill of her bedroom. Oleanders were in bloom all around the house and the east window in her bedroom was filled with red petals and desert blue sky. She stood in the middle of the room brushing out her hair and gazing out the window. On the last stroke, she checked the brush for signs of silver, for signs of the Corona family curse. They were there, a few strands trapped in the mat of dark hair. She wondered whether her mother, if she had lived, whether she would have been counting gray
hairs at the ripe age of 36.

When Ruth was a child, her father used to pick up a strand of her hair and study it and say in a deliberate way, "Your mother's hair would have been beautiful, like spun silver, like a virgin's halo."

Ruth tugged on a lone strand that jutted free of the brush. She could collect them, braid the silver strands, wear it like the colorful cloth bracelets she saw people wearing in the waiting room on the afternoons that she worked.

Ruth closed the bathroom door behind her. She showered for 15 minutes and when she was drying herself off, she opened it just a crack, enough to let the steamy air circulate. She was rubbing a thick cream into her neck and the deep line between her brows when O'Mara pushed open the door and came in.

"Make yourself at home," Ruth said, closing it against the wave of cold air.

O'Mara jumped up on the lip of the tub and looked at Ruth. She meowed. It was an odd sound, but one Ruth was coming to know.

"What do you want, Mara?" she said. "What is it?"

The cat jumped down. She insinuated herself between Ruth's legs. She began to meow, insistently, one sharp cry after the other. The tone tightened the muscles in Ruth's face.

"What!" she said. "You have water. You have food. I don't know what you want. Tell me what you want."

The cat followed her into the bedroom and paced at Ruth's feet as she stood in the closet, trying to decide what to wear. In the dark the animal's cries seemed
magnified. Ruth pushed O'Mara away with her foot, but the cat came back and rubbed up against her. Ruth clenched her jaw and pushed through the hangars more quickly. The closet smelled like her father’s aftershave. His suits had hung in here, in two neat rows, for nearly thirty years so it was natural that the scent would linger in the adobe-colored walls. Still, she hadn’t noticed it before, not in the month since she’d begun using the room.

O’Mara flopped down on Ruth’s foot and began flicking her tail from side to side.

Saturday mornings began after a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee on the patio. By 8:00 am the sun was up, but it was still cool under the patio, shaded as it was by the Oleanders grown tall like bushes. This morning there were pigeons in the yard, picking at the seeds under the palm tree. Rush hour traffic roared just behind the thick hedge of Oleanders, blooming like a yellow wall here in the back.

Ruth’s first chore was sweeping, something she enjoyed. In the North, with room-to-room carpeting, she had forgotten the sensation of sweeping hardwood floors. Now that she was back, she realized she’d missed the fullout movement, the satisfaction of finding dirt where none seemed to exist. When she began taking over the household, her father never said a word. The years had silenced him. He pretty much stayed in his room. When she began sweeping on Saturday mornings, she closed the door to his room.

She fetched the broom from the utility closet and carried it into the front
bedroom, her room now. This was where she began to sweep. She started at the front, swept through the house, from room to room, until she finished in the backroom. Painted yellow, it still looked like the patio it had once been. Using brick and glass the summer she turned 12, her father had enclosed the room, intending it for a study, but then her mother died and the room began collecting junk.

After her father passed, a week after to be exact, in the pale of a February morning, Ruth had gutted the room of its junk. She took the piles of newspapers and Christian magazines and the other odds and ends—the most odd being a box of men’s saddle shoes and a seamstress dummy--out to the storage shed. She couldn’t remember her mother sewing, but she eventually brought the felt-covered pink torso back into the house and sat it up in a corner of the room, among the plants. Cascading and crawling leaves filled every corner of the room.

She was shifting the loveseat back into place, the broom set aside for the moment, when O’Mara raced through the frontroom. The cat leapt from sofa to loveseat to endtable, then skittered into the hallway, scattering a path through Ruth’s collection of fine sand and dustballs. When the cat came through again, Ruth was waiting for her. This time when O’Mara launched herself off the last piece of furniture, she was in the hallway, blocking the door and brandishing the broom.

The cat stopped. She meowed, with the repetitive sharp tones that Ruth couldn’t understand, and settled into an awkward crouch. Each time she meowed, her eyes narrowed in a way that felt like threat. The cat watched Ruth with unblinking intent.
In the silence of their standoff, there was a knock at the door. The sound startled Ruth. She hadn’t looked up many old friends since she’d been back, and only Dora had been in the habit of dropping by. But Dora would never come calling so early.

The knock came again.

"Come here, O’Mara," she whispered. She set the broom against the wall and bent to hold out a hand. O’Mara stretched forward, sniffing for incentive, but shied away when she found nothing of interest. The cat moved off to rub herself against the leg of the coffeetable.

This time the doorbell rang. Twice.

"Come here, O’Mara. Damn it." Ruth hissed the last two words and lunged at the cat, catching her by the scruff of the neck. She understood this method didn’t hurt.

When she opened the door, she had two red welts across the back of her hand and a cat squirming in her arms.

"Hello. Mrs. Thompson?"

"MISS Thompson," she said.

The man on her doorstep had the look of someone newly reformed. Though his blond hair was long, it and his full dark beard were combed and tidy. He wore clean levis and a green T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had a clipboard in his hand.
"I'm Dave Broden from Him Maintenance." He introduced himself through the screen door. "I'm here for your yard."

O'Mara meowed. Her claws found flesh. Ruth turned and pitched the cat into the room behind her. Opening the screen, she stepped out onto the porch.

"It's barely nine o'clock. Weren't you coming at twelve?" she said.

"I wanted an early start."

"Yes. Well, you're here now." She stepped off the porch. The sky was more white than blue.

"Forecast said it'll break the century mark again today," he said, coming up beside her. "Can you believe it? The third day in a row and it's barely May."

She studied the tips of her shoes, unable to look at him directly. She had talked to a woman when she called last week and she hadn't given any thought as to who the charity group would send. She'd called Him Maintenance not because they helped the homeless, but because they charged a reasonable fee, and because she liked their flier. She liked the idea of someone taking the time to spend a day or two putting fliers under windshields so others would notice. A bit of glass glittered in the dirt. Ruth picked it up and tossed it on the nearest pile of weeds and Oleander branches that dotted the yard. In front, the hedge was low, and except for a gap at the corner of the yard, it still survived as something green. Clipping it back into a tidy hedge, trimming the Oleander trees, and raking the dead yard had taken nearly a week. She had worked muscles she hadn't felt in years and the reward was a yard that looked spare, but cared for.
"There’s stuff out back too," she said.

The maintenance man followed her around to the sidegate and as she stopped to re-fasten the latch, he kept going, around the side of the house and into the back yard. He walked in a loose, lean-hipped way that made her think of long muscles hanging close to the bone.

"There," she said, catching up to him. He had stopped at the clothesline. "That wood pile. Can you get it all?" "I’ll need to drive along the back, between the street and your yard" he said. "Is that okay?"

She let a hand drift up to shade her eyes. "It’s fine," she said.

She felt thin as air in the heat, as though a hand could pass right through her stomach. In another month’s time, the heat would trap her indoors until after supper. Last summer, in the evenings after her father slept, she would wait for a breeze on the patio, thinking she could hear his breathing in the rhythmic sound of the cicadas.

Some nights she couldn’t sit still in the thick heat, and she would follow the strip of silvered sidewalk to where it ended in a curve of oleander hedge. In the shadow and moonlight she would study the house, and think about the nights she had wanted out of it as a teenager, and some nights she would think about the night she had snuck Dora’s brother onto the patio. She didn’t like the memory, but after all these years it seemed palatable, funny even, how she had bled on a boy, if indeed she really had. There’d only been a smear on her skirt to tell. But when she found it later, she had burned with understanding, and she didn’t tell a soul, not her father, who too often any more stood across the room, lecturing and livid and confident of all
that he was saying.

"If you need anything," she said, suddenly missing the weight of her father, his implacable brooding presence in the house behind her. "If you need anything, I'll be in the house."

She planned to leave the maintenance man in the yard, but he came with her, was there in front of her, walking and looking back at her, a flop of hair in his eyes.

"Most likely, I'll be done by this afternoon," he said.

She nodded and turned toward the backdoor. She went through it, straight to the frontroom, where she came up against the couch to find him coming around the house, his hair yellow in the sun. The back of his faded levis had a patch on the curve of his right cheek. A round oval of material. Had he patched it himself?

She watched him cross the road and climb into the cab of a white pick-up truck. He got out minus the clipboard. He pulled on a cap and she backed away from the window. After a while she could hear the faint thud and snap of his labors in the front yard.

By twelve, she had finished the last of her chores, except for the laundry, and was in the backroom potting. She kneeled on old newspaper, dark soil spilling around her. The backroom got the best light in the house. The long wall was mostly made up of three southern-facing windows. The east wall held age-warped French doors, only one of which would open. In the evenings, Ruth had taken to stretching out on the patio floor so she could gaze out into the night sky through the narrow windows of
the old doors and think of nothing in particular. One night last week, when she lay down, a black cat with moon yellow eyes had startled her. He was sitting outside the French doors. When he saw her, he melted into the Oleanders, but for the longest time she thought he was still there, outside those sidedoors.

O'Mara wasn’t allowed in the room, because, for a cat just leaving kittenhood, Ruth’s plants were perfect stalking ground. She'd bat the broad leaves into submission and once had chewed a spider plant down to a nubbin. Lately, the cat had begun peeing in her biggest planter. Its leaves were dying. The soil was sometimes wet when she hadn’t watered and the cat like to linger near the plant. So Ruth kept the doors to her backroom closed.

Ruth picked up a Golden Pathos, turned it upside down and with one efficient movement transferred its web of soil and roots from one pot to another. She added more soil, some water, tamped it all down, and set the pot aside.

She heard the washing machine kick itself off. As she listened to be sure, she dusted off her hands. When she heard no sounds from the utility room, she found herself listening to the yard, which was silent as well. The maintenance man must have left with a load. It was her chance to hang the laundry without company, but she’d have to hurry.

When she unbolted the back door, O’Mara padded into the small hall between the utility and back rooms. The harsh sounds of the door used to frighten the cat, but now O’Mara was interested in what lay beyond the rattling door. As Ruth tugged it open, the cat moved fast. On instinct, Ruth dropped the laundry basket to block the
cat's escape. O'Mara backed off a few feet and growled a meow.

"What's wrong with you?" Ruth scooped up the cat, stared into her face. O'Mara flicked back her ears and meowed again, a soft, one-syllable sound. She was purring, loud and steady.

"You'll get squished outside, little girl. Runover. Flat. Dead. Is that what you want?" She brought the cat's checkered face close to her own, kissed the silky head and hugged her hard. O'Mara whined in protest.

"Sorry," Ruth said, but squeezed the cat again because it felt so good.

The cat was her sole companion. Without her, Ruth was alone. Her parents were dead. She had no siblings, and only a few scattered cousins. Marriage was out. Not again. And she hadn't tried dating since Christmas when she brought a co-worker home for dinner and they had ended the evening with an awkward tussle on the couch. He had called her frigid, flinging the word at her as she straightened her skirt, and since he didn't know that her father, still alive then, was in the next room, oblivious if not sleeping, she thought maybe he didn't know what he was talking about. She wasn't frigid, just out of practice, and maybe disinclined. She would have told him so if he'd asked, but the man had left angry, without even tasting her apple pie.

She tossed O'Mara into the laundry room, hauled the laundry basket up to her hip, tugged open the back door and went out into the yard. The sun pricked her skin, but felt good. She was cool from the house. The clothes line was hidden by Oleanders, so she didn't see the maintenance man leaning against the young Chinaberry tree, his shirt discarded, a sandwich halfway to his mouth.
"Come to do laundry, Miss Thompson?" He stood up.

"I can wait," she said. His chest was thin but hairy and the hair was the color of his beard. "The clothes will only get dirty again if you’re not finished."

"Just that pile left," he said, and nodded to the wood scraps stacked near the storage shed. "That won’t kick up much dust. Besides, I’m on a lunch break."

Ruth hesitated.

"I like to see a woman doing something as feminine as hanging out the laundry," he said. "Or does that offend you? Lot’sa women I know would be pissed by the idea, if you’ll excuse my French."

He sat back in the nook of the tree and took a bite from his sandwich. Ruth found her eyes skimming his flat stomach. The muscles tightened in her thighs.

"No offense," she said, feeling her attraction to him, to this stranger. He didn’t look so religious now and she liked the shape of his butt, which surprised her. She never looked at men in that way, never eyed the front of their pants. She thought it silly, and never pretended otherwise. Yet this man moved her, with his boneless grace of a cat, and his tight, brown and, no doubt, salty skin. Last week at the supermarket the boxboy had made her feel this way.

She moved toward the clothesline, willing her thoughts to still themselves, and set down her basket. In that instant of bending, focused on nothing, she willed everything that was her to come in, inside her head. She wanted all expression gone from her face, until she was just a blank. She began visualizing the new growth she had found that morning on her plants. Seeing a new leaf, pale and shiny as wax,
pulling itself from the stem, thrilled her like finding a good stone on a desert trek.

This ability to empty herself had been her weapon as a teenager, when her father was lecturing her about the evils of masturbation and the intentions of boys. She thought she couldn’t hear anything when she was in this state, but deep in the part of her that recognized she was plain and quiet and too intelligent, she had listened.

When Ruth knew her face was empty, she pulled a sheet from the basket, straightened, and pegged it to the clothesline. The eggshell blue material rippled wetly in a gust of warm air.

The maintenance man wadded up his lunch bag. Ruth looked up. He had risen to his feet, was tugging on leather gloves. His forearm bulged with the movement. She bent and grabbed for a wad of towels, untangled them. She pegged them carefully as he steadily began loading wood into the back of his truck.

When she hung the last item, several pairs of panties and a bra still lay at the bottom of her basket. She gathered the sturdy cream underwear into a ball and tucked it under one arm.

"Miss Thompson."

She tightened her arm on the bundle and turned her head.

"I’ll be finished here in a jif. They said you’d pay with cash," he said.

"I’ll need a receipt." She found herself smiling at him. It was a soft one, just barely touching her lips, but she saw he’d seen it. "Come to the door when you’re done, Mr. Broden," she said.

She kicked the backdoor open with her foot and tossed the underwear into the
laundry room. At the kitchen sink, she washed her face with shaking hands and let
the cool water run on the insides of her wrists. Somewhere in the house O’Mara was
crying, her nerve-wracking, unending wail.

"Goddamn it. You’re driving me crazy, cat," she muttered. "Shut up!" she
yelled.

The fridge was full and dark, the bulb burnt out long ago and not important
enough to replace. She found the pitcher of ice tea and poured herself a glass, drank
it down and poured another. In the backroom, she put away her potting tools. She
was placing the newly potted Pathos in a nook in the kitchen when O’Mara came in
and meowed twice. Ruth ignored her. The cat settled by the back door, haunches
raised, its tail held up and away so that Ruth could see the pink of her anus. There
was something faintly disgusting about the position, but before Ruth could do anything
about it, the maintenance man was knocking at the backdoor. She could see him
through the window and he evidently took her silent stare as invitation. The cat
greeted him with a prolonged meow.

"Hey critter," he said as he closed the door. He squatted down and held out
the fingers of one hand for the cat’s inspection. "What’s her name?"

O’Mara went to him immediately. Rubbed her head and the length of her body
up against his extended fingers. She was purring loud and steady and starting to settle
into that ass-up-ended crouch that Ruth didn’t like.

"O’Mara!" she said, and he laughed.

"Nice name," he said. "You going to breed her this time?"
"This time?" she said.

He stood up, bringing the cat with him. He was scratching between her ears with one finger. O’Mara moved her head so that he included her neck, then her jaw.

"Well, she’s in heat, isn’t she?"

"In heat?"

"In season. You know," he said. "For everything there is a season."

"No, I didn’t know," she said. "Can I have her back please? She’s not always good with strangers. Sometimes she scratches."

She took the cat back from him, shifting her until the animal was cradled in her arms like a baby. The cat hated this position, would protest with a slanty-eyed meow, but Ruth used it naturally, when she wanted to see O’Mara’s face. She stared into the hooded eyes and could see no difference. O’Mara still had the face of a kitten.

"I’ve finished the job," he said. "So, I’ll be on my way, if you don’t need anything else."

Back on the floor, O’Mara took a playful swipe at Ruth’s foot, moved into the middle of the room, and then, as though the wanton soul of another cat was taking over her body, O’Mara began to hunker down. The shoulder bones rose through her fur like she was starving and her haunches tilted up in an inviting but ugly way. O’Mara was splaying herself on the floor and Ruth could do nothing to prevent it. When the cat began to meow, the animal barely opened its mouth.

"Excuse me," she said. "My purse is in the other room."
When she returned from her bedroom, the maintenance man had squatted again and was scratching O’Mara’s back. The cat swayed like a rocking horse, back arched so her head and tail were elevated. She continued to meow, but to Ruth’s ears, her cries seemed less insistent.

"Your money," she said.

He took the bills, counted them quickly and tucked them into the front pocket of his jeans. Ruth followed his hand as his knuckles tightened the material below his belt. She met his gaze and held it.

"Your receipt," he said.

She took the paper from him, put it in the pocket of her skirt.

"Thank you," she said, moving toward the backdoor. O’Mara had resumed her fuck-me stance in the middle of the room. Ruth walked carefully around her. She had a strong urge to kick the animal. There’d be some satisfaction in that.

"My truck’s out front," he said, not moving.

She stopped, and turned, and as she passed by him her shoulder touched his. She couldn’t avoid the contact.

"If you ever need help again," he said in her ear as she passed.

"I’ll call," she said.

"Thank you." She closed the frontdoor and waited until she heard his truck rumble and pull away. Then she went in search of O’Mara.

She found the animal in the backroom, peeing in one of her biggest potted plants. The cat froze the moment she saw Ruth, but it took Ruth a moment to
understand what she was seeing. When she did, she felt rage come up into her throat.

"Goddamn it, cat," she screeched. The cat moved, was down from the planter in a flash, scurrying for cover. O'Mara understood, exactly, why Ruth was screeching.

The cat ran first at the far door, thinking it could escape into the center bedroom and through to the hall, but the door was closed, so it turned back toward Ruth, hoping to dart around her, but she was ready, having grabbed a long-handled broom, so it darted into a familiar niche, the gap behind the bookshelf. O'Mara could run the length of the wall but then she was trapped. They both knew it.

Ruth blocked the open end. She jabbed the broom handle into the gap, but she couldn't reach the back, where the cat sat blinking as though she knew she couldn't be touched. Ruth moved closer and tried again. She poked wildly, caught up in an emotion that pulsed through her body. She wanted to punish. With no where to go, and the broom handle getting closer, O'Mara finally bolted. As she came out the open end, Ruth grabbed her up and shook her.

"God-damn-it, O'Mara," she said. The cat nearly slipped out of her hands, so she got a better hold, and shook some more. When she finished the triangular face hung suspended from her fist. Ruth stared furiously into the animal's eyes.

"God-damn-it," she said. "I've told you and told you. Don't," she shook the cat, "pee," she shook it some more, "in my plants!"

Ruth threw O'Mara from her. The animal hit the ground running and Ruth sank down onto the floor, head in her hands, heart pounding, horrified that she'd lost all control and had abused her cat. She wanted to blame it on O'Mara, for the
mindless way she was killing Ruth's plants. But it wasn't O'Mara. It was the thing itself that tortured Ruth, the bold invitation of it. That wanton crouch. The unrelenting way nature could twist her pet into an animal that wanted the thrust of a male so badly, the impulse was a maddening pain.

Ruth got up and went into the kitchen, began rummaging in the second drawer down, the junk drawer. At the back she found the collar she had bought at Dora's insistence, once Dora learned Ruth had adopted a stray. When she pulled the collar free from the other junk, it glittered blue. The collar was lined with blue rhinestones.

O'Mara was in the frontroom, dragging her haunches around the circular rug in a vain attempt to end her misery. Now that Ruth understood what her cries meant, the sound was maddening. When O'Mara slithered over to the wall and began climbing the curtains, the sound of ripping material made Ruth act. She pulled the cat free from the curtains, sick inside, and fit the collar around the animal's neck, which seemed to take the animal's attention, for when she set O'Mara back on the floor the cat began rubbing against the coffeetable, as though she could rub off the collar.

Outside, Ruth walked to the clothesline. The ground was raked smooth where the debris had been piled. She could hear a cicada buzzing like an electrical wire and followed the sound to the Chinaberry tree. The black-shelled insect clung to a limb like a wound. Despite the ugly reality, she still thought of the cicada as romantic. The idea was part of her childhood, when she read hundred's of dime store romance novels, all in secret.
Her hands were trembling when she unpegged the sun-dried clothes. She folded each article and placed it carefully in the basket. When she finished, she bent her head until her forehead rested against the clothesline. She closed her eyes and let the man come into her head. She visualized the clear gray eyes, his shiny soft hair and dark beard, the way he reclined in the sun with a fine layer of sweat gleaming on his collar bone, the long legs in worn jeans and the slender fingers as he stroked O’Mara, and after she had examined every invasive image, she pressed both her hands to her face and pushed her finger tips against her eyes. She pressed until all she could see was a swirl of orange and black and red. She concentrated on a spark of yellow until it grew and moved, and her father was switching on the light and the boy was adjusting himself, and later he would find blood on his fingers, like the blood on her skirt, the stain of brown, and orange and swirls of red. Ruth pressed at her eyes until the red changed back to a yellow haze and became a square of white noise, like a television set after the station has signed off. She peered into the square of light and pressed harder until the pain in her head cleared her mind.

She dropped her hands from her face and opened her eyes. Her yard, screened by the towering Oleander bushes, bathed in hot sunlight, came into focus. She picked up the laundry basket and went back into the house.

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The Fence

I found my mother in the back pasture, by the barn, working. This was familiar and it had the same effect on me as the Concord grapes. I was back in my childhood in an instant, coming home from school on some grape-scented Autumn day to find my mother out back, weeding or moving irrigation or sweeping out the tackroom. This familiarity, smelling my childhood in the heavy scent of purple grapes, had softened my mood, but I was still irritated enough to be mean when I got out of the car. Looking back, I’m sure it was growing pains, but all I knew then was that I was up too early on Saturday morning to help my mother with a project that rightly belonged to my father.

She had parked by the dilapidated barn, so I followed her tracks through a gap in the arena fence. When I got out I turned to look back at the house of my childhood. It had grown small under the cottonwoods in the years since I’d seen it. My parents rented it out now, and since the renters weren’t usually interested in the two acres of pasture land behind it, the fenceline had sagged in many places.

"So you’ve come to help your poor old mother?" I turned to find her coming towards me, smiling and rubbing her hands on her pantlegs.
"Hi, mom." I said. The grass under my feet was tough and lush where it grew up through the hardpack and sawdust of the old arena floor. I liked the sound of it grinding beneath my feet.

"How you doing," I said. We hugged for a good moment--she smelled of dirt and was warm and solid. I eased away from her and saw nothing of myself in her face, except for maybe the cheekbones, and the eyes. We both had high cheekbones and brown eyes. Her face was blotchy from exertion.

I walked a few feet and kicked at the fence post she'd been working on. "This is a stupid idea, mom. I don't know why you're breaking your back."

"Dad won't be in until Tuesday. It'll be done by then. He'll say it's half-assed, but it'll be done."

"It'll be just another thing for him to bitch about."

"What else is new?" She smiled at me.

"Tell him to go to hell," I said, knowing even as I said it that I was telling her to do something I found difficult myself. Last time he called, at the crack of dawn to tell me about the horse, I had wanted to tell him to go to hell.

"Come on over," he had said. "I'm making breakfast."

"My stomach isn't awake yet," I said. I felt like saying, You're making a mess for mom is what you're doing and you've woken me up. Thanks a lot, dad.

"I've got something to show you," he said.

Jeez, dad. It's five-thirty in the fucking morning. "I have to work today, you know."
"What would it take you, fifteen minutes? Come on over." He was in a jovial mood and because of this his orders came out much softer, but they were orders none-the-less.

So I called in late to work, but I took my time. Actually did go back to sleep. At eight, I drove across the river to find my parents in the yard, with a horse. As soon as I saw my father’s rig on the road, taking up the whole front of the house, I knew something was up. He’d bought a horse on a whim at the Walla Walla auction. My mother was pleased, but flustered.

"Where you going to put her, Art?"

"Just shutup and ride her," dad had growled. His moment of glory was in the buying. He had no head for the small things.

I looked past my mother, already back at the work of digging out the rotting fence post, and said, "So, what have you done with this horse of dad’s?"

"She’s out by the windbreak." She put a hand to her forehead to shade her eyes. "I tied her to an old tire. She doesn’t seem to mind."

"After being cooped up in eight by twelve stall for two weeks," I said, "she must think she’s in heaven."

"There she is. Do you see her?"

I followed the direction of my mother’s finger and spotted the horse against the treeline at the very back of the pasture. She was a goodlooking horse, a gentle roan, a little wide in the middle, but still young and rideable, so I understood my mother’s
dilemma. She wanted to keep the horse, but she knew my father could sell just as
suddenly as he bought and until he did, the horse was added to her responsibilities.

"Are you keeping her?" I said, wanting her to understand that she did have a
choice.

She looked at me. "Do you know what a ton of hay costs? Nearly a hundred
dollars." She scooped up more dirt from the hole.

"Keep her," I said. "If you want her, keep her, mom. Dad'll just spend that
money on something else if you don't. Jeez, mom, you never spend money on
yourself."

She wore underthings until they were rags, and I hated that frugality in her
when my father indulged every whim.

"I don't know what your father's decided to do. But we can't keep her in the
barn anymore," she said. "I wanted to pasture her with that lady down Livingston. He
wouldn't even let me look up the number."

"Do it anyway!" You've got a will of your own, mother, for petes-sake.

"Look. Why don't we take a break, mom," I said. "I've got some icewater in the
car."

"Go ahead, hon."

"Come on. Let's talk to your horse for a minute."

My mother tested the post with her weight. The stump shifted and settled back
with a dry suck of earth.

"Here." I put my shoulder next to my mother's. For some minutes we
wrestled with the post, pushing it one way, then the next, until it came free and dropped with a dusty thud. On the ground, gnawed as it was by horses and the wind, it didn’t look so tough, but I was winded. My "poor old" mother had pulled a half-dozen on her own.

"Come on, mom, take a break." I checked the skin of one pink palm and heard the bite of shovel into earth. Once focused, my mother didn’t know when to quit. I didn’t want to start. She was wasting her time. Dad would sell the horse and I’d be the one to hear about her disappointment. It was one of the reasons we didn’t speak on the phone as often. At one time, we talked nearly every day, sometimes twice a day, about everything, often about dad. He was always a meaty topic. Lately I had been putting off those calls to my mother. Partly it was because I was keeping secrets, but mostly I was tired of my parent’s lives.

"I’m not going to do this without gloves," I said.

The moment the words were out of my mouth I knew I was wearing Robins’s face. My sister would use just that tone. That shade of anger and heavy impatience. This bothered me, the way I’d catch myself saying something--or I’d have a certain expression, a dead sag to the lips, and I would recognize my father. The worry line I was developing between my eyes came from my mother.

"There’s a pair of gloves in my car," she said. "Try the floor on the passenger side."

I fetched the gloves and the icewater. I gave the jug to my mother and watched her drink most of it down.
"How long have you been out here?"

"I came out about six," she said. Her eyes smiled at me.

"Looking pretty good, huh, sis?" She surveyed her work, hands on her hips.

For the past two days, she'd been replacing the weather-rotted posts with odds and ends from the barn. The skeleton of her new fence stretched from the back of the barn almost to the road. The fence line at the back and far side were still good, but I knew my mother well enough to know that her day—which meant my day—would not end until the stretch along Walkerway was replaced.

"You should be wearing gloves," I said. "And a hat."

The morning breeze was already turning warm.

She handed me the water jug and I swallowed a big mouthful, hoping to swallow the hard edge in my voice. She didn’t deserve my anger, but I had no place to put it when I knew that all her hard work would come to naught.

"I’m going to check out the horse. I wish you’d come along."

"In a minute, babe."

So I left her there. The horse lifted its head and nickered when I came up. I approached slowly, hand out.

"Hey girl," I said.

In the patches of dry grass I could track where the horse had dragged her leash of a tire. Looking at the pasture, no one could tell that my family had spent years moving irrigation pipe up and down the long strip of land. We would start early in the morning, my mother and sisters and I, when the grass was wet and the pipes were
cold and awkward. We’d move each section in increments while the horses slept in the back corner. Many a morning I would be sleepy and cold and resentful that the whole of Walkerway slept while I moved water.

The horse stood sedate in front of me, so on impulse I pulled myself up onto her. I had to pull hard to bring myself upright. As I settled myself onto the horse, felt the pull in my thigh muscles, I thought of Jeff. I closed my eyes and listened to the trees and the swish of the horse’s tail, felt the sun on me and the subtle shift of the warm horse under me. I was happy. I thought about leaving this place and the thought went skittering into feelings I couldn’t name. I wanted to go, wanted to join Jeff in the Southwest. But it was hard. In the past couple of weeks, I had started visiting the places of my youth. I’d spent an entire afternoon in the park beneath the Snake River bridge, until the sun went down, because I wanted to remember the exact colors of the sunset.

The horse shifted her weight and I opened my eyes. A white and blue sedan had turned off Road 48 and was crawling up the short length of Walker Way, spewing dust into the air. The car pulled into the drive of a tiny, well-kept house with yellow trim. I didn’t recognize the old lady who got out. She came down to her mailbox and stood near it for several minutes. Across from her, my mother was a hunched and moving figure. I slid off the horse and started back across the pasture.

"You work too hard," I said.

My mother sat on a fence post pulling nails with a hammer. I picked up the long-handled posthole digger that lay in the dirt at her feet. Its wooden handles were
cracked and bleached. I tested the wood and felt the sharp stab of splinters in my palm. Examining the soft skin with a finger, I realized I'd made a childhood wish come true. I hadn't had a callous in years.

"Go ahead and use them gloves," she said.

I picked up the gloves and pulled them on. Sometimes I wondered what my mother thought of her oldest daughter. I knew she loved me. I loved her.

Now ready for business, I studied again her fence line. It weaved from the barn to the point where we stood. I wanted the fence from my childhood. Those wide sturdy beams, thick as railroad ties, that had ringed the whole property. I had gentled my white mare, another of my father's auction horses, within the stronghold of the arena. I rode her round and round while he stood to the side, directing my efforts.

For a while, I dug the post holes and my mother came behind and filled them in. I was getting good at it. I created holes that were square for a perfect fit, and until I felt the blisters forming under the heavy leather of my gloves, I was getting a good workout. Then my back began to ache. My shoes were ridiculous. Everytime I jumped on the hole digger, the flat edge of the blades seemed to dig more into the sole of my tennies than they pierced into the ground. Then my sides began aching.

I stopped for a breather. "God, this is hard work," I said. My mother dropped a fence post into my pitiful hole.

"Just another couple to go and we're done, honey." She meant done with the stretch of fence to the road. Replacing the length down Walkerway would take another day at least. I was ready to give up. She must have seen it in my look.
"Tell you what," she said, wanting to please, "I'll spring for lunch. How about McDonalds?"

"Not McDonalds," I said, disgusted. I bent down beside her and used both hands to scoop dirt back into the hole. "How come we never have enough dirt. Even with a friggin post in this hole, there isn't enough dirt to put back."

"Pick any place that you want," my mother said. "I'll give you the money."

"Mother, I've got money." She was treating me like a child. I wanted to hug her, and I wanted to scream, and my own irritability made me even more irritable. Not for the first time, I felt what my father must have felt, on those days when he'd be watching television and she'd be picking fruit, planning to can, and he'd call her in from the yard. He'd call her in so he didn't have to feel guilty. But her mind never seemed to leave the garden, for as soon as he'd fallen asleep on the couch, she'd get up and go back to her work. She called it her therapy.

Once she had pointed out to me a neighbor of hers. He was one of those rickety, ancient-looking men. Age had hunched him over, but he still produced orderly rows of corn from a field that was edged with tulips.

"He's out there every night," my mother said as we drove past and the old man was in his field. I wondered if she ever thought of my father when she saw that old man. I wondered how that weighed out in her mind.

I put my chin against the top of the posthole digger. Until my mother had called this morning I had resisted helping her with this project. I knew from the sibling grapevine that she was building a fence, but even this morning she hadn't
asked me to help. Instead, she'd started the conversation out with "Robin tells me you're sick. Are you feeling better?" After that, I had no choice.

"Mom," I said. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About anything. About why you work so hard."

"I think my grandparents had the right idea. You never met my grandmother, but she never rested a minute of her life. She was a real hard worker. Of course, nobody in those days had a lot of time left to themselves. I suppose that kept us from getting so confused. I don't know."

"Were you confused when you married dad?"

"What a question. I married your dad 'cause I loved him."

"You thought he was cocky." I knew the story. They met on a blind date and she hadn't liked him. Too cocky, she had told the girlfriend who set her up. In pictures of the two of them just starting out, my mother was a willowy girl and my dad a handsome boy. They were people from a life I never knew.

"Would you do it again?"

"If I hadn't married your dad, I wouldn't have had you or your sisters."

"That isn't really an answer, mom."

"I can't change him."

"You can't change yourself." The words came out uneven, losing their force near the end, so the tone was somewhat wry. Still it was mean to say. Even if I'd said worse to her before, it had never been something so personal or something I
meant more.

She kept working, ignoring my words. I dragged the posthole digger a few yards away and positioned it for a new attack.

"What would you have me do?" she said. She rested with her hands in her lap, palms up. The skin at her wrists was blotchy and scratched.

"You're getting sunburned," I said.

I jumped on the flat pegs of the digger and felt the blades sink into the ground.

"You deserve better, mom," I said.

I had finished the hole and was considering starting another when my mother spoke again. "You're planning to move to New Mexico, aren't you?"

The question stopped me, but she kept working. I stared at the tip of my shoes and considered whether to lie to her.

"What makes you think I'm moving to New Mexico?"

"He's asked you." She sounded sure, but in the undertone I read her question. I also detected something like encouragement, something I hadn't expected.

"I don't like big cities. Too many people. Tuesday's too hot," I said, bending down to pick up a clod of dirt.

"Does he want to marry you?"

"Do I want to marry him?" I waited for her answer to that one.

"Just don't live with him," she said. "I know it sounds old-fashioned, but..."

"...why buy the cow." I crushed the clod in my fingers and let the sand trickle back into the hole. "I'm not a cow, mom."
"Of course not. But I don’t understand. Don’t you want marriage? The security of it?" She looked across at me. I wanted to smooth away the deep line between her eyes. I touched my own instead.

"Maybe you should pray about it," she said. "Read your bible. That’s what I do, whenever I have a question. I sit on the toilet and read. I’ve read the Bible twice that way now."

I laughed. When we were kids, my mother never got any peace in the bathroom. Even today I would catch myself following her into the bathroom, continuing to talk. I’d just follow her in.

"Excuse me, but what do you think you’re doing over there?"

The question came from across the road. The old woman from the yellow house had come out. She stood at the edge of her yard wearing bedroom slippers, smoking a cigarette.

"We’re building a fence." My mother straightened from her work. She wore an old pair of blue polyester pants and a sleeveless loose top. When I looked at her I was reminded that the women in our family tended toward fat. As she walked the few steps to the edge of the road, happy to talk to a neighbor, I tried to see her through the old woman’s eyes. She didn’t look tough enough.

"A fence! Who said you could do that?" The tone of the old woman raised the hair on my neck. Even from this distance, I didn’t like the look of her. Too many old women looked like her. Those tight little mouths. Lips painted and wrinkled and puckered, as though each of life’s crimes and failures had been drawn up tight around
their little mouths. That I would end up with such a mouth was my deepest fear.

"This land belongs to me and my family," my mother said, coming to a stop at the end of the road.

"Well, you’re building that fence out past your property."

"No, all of this land, here out to the road is ours."

I saw what the old lady was complaining of. The new fence line ran much closer to the road, in line with what remained of the arena fence. I couldn’t see the sense of this either. Symmetry like that only meant another few feet of work, another post hole and post. Why make more work for yourself, I had said. But she wanted to correct the line.

"You’ll have to tear it down." The woman glared at my mother. "This strip of land is easement for the road," she said. "The county’ll will tell you to tear it down."

"No, I don’t think so." My mother had stopped smiling.

I stepped forward. "Listen, lady," I said.

"Wait a minute." My mother motioned me back. It was a sharp irritable gesture. "Just a minute," she said to the old lady, "this is my land. The county has nothing to say about this. I do."

My mother motioned to a pile of brush and grass clippings a yard or so away on the edge of our property. Further down was an upended wheelbarrow and a flatbed trailer rusting on its axles. Both sat directly across from the old woman’s house.

"I’ve been wanting to talk to you about that mess of yours," she said. "My husband wouldn’t like it, knowing you’ve been using our land for a dump. But I
guess he’ll see it for himself soon enough."

"Never you mind," the old woman said, not even looking at the pile of clippings. "My son will take care of that."

"I don’t care what your son does. This isn’t the public dump."

I didn’t know whether to laugh or applaud. Not only had my mother recognized the thrust of an enemy, she had countered it to good effect. I’d never seen such talent used before with my father.

"I’m still calling the County." The old woman puffed hard on her cigarette for a moment. "This ain’t right," she said.

"Right?" I said, unable to stay out of it any longer. But already the moment was passing. I had nothing to contribute.

"Never mind, sis," my mother said to me. "Come on. She can call who she likes. It’s our land." This last was said over her shoulder with some force, but whatever energy had propelled her a moment ago was gone, and she was looking doubtful.

"You handled that well, mom," I said. I put an arm around her shoulders.

She looked at me. "I can use that strip of land. The Walkers built the fence in like that because they planned a windbreak. Why on earth would she be so nasty to me?"

"Forget her," I said, but I knew she wouldn’t, so I directed her back toward the tack shed and the woodpile. Amidst the two by fours and plywood there were pieces sturdy and long enough to become part of our fence.
"How about this one for the corner post?" I kicked a thick piece of wood, splintered from weather.

My mother stood staring off into nothing, rubbing her breast bone with the flat of her thumb. It was a familiar habit of hers, worrying the fine skin at her neck. I thought of the freckles on her knee that were really a patch of imbedded cinders gleaned from a fall on a Michigan driveway. I wondered why no one had ever removed those tiny chunks of rock.

"How about this one, mom?" I said again, patient now.

It took a second, but she looked about her. "No," she said, getting down on her knees to sight down the length of the wood. "It's warped. Get me my hammer out of the barn, will you?" And with that my mother was back again with me, her strong hands shifting amongst the wood. "It's by the door, on the shelf."

Her words guided me into the darkness of the barn. In my memories, it had been a vast, mysterious place. Inside sunlight and sky slipped through the walls and the ceiling to reveal a space no bigger than my front room. I could see the hammer where my mother said it would be, but I stepped further into the barn and peered down toward the stalls. Dust motes were visible in the streams of light. The corridor too was tighter than I remembered, the three stalls closer together. I stopped at the last stall, peered over the gate. The stall smelled strongly of horse and manure.

I moved back through the corridor to the open part of the barn and stopped at the workshelf. A large knothole, bigger than a man's fist, caught my eye. I stooped, rested my hands on either side of it and looked through. I had learned about
knotholes the summer I was ten, when the talk around my parent’s pinochle table one afternoon had turned to breeding. It was my uncle’s idea. His stud with my father’s old piebald mare. My mother shooed me from the table as soon as she saw I was interested in this new conversation. The men didn’t even notice, but they were the ones to send us away from the barns the afternoon the horses were put together.

I don’t remember seeing anything through a knothole that day. I don’t think I even tried. Instead what remains of that mysterious afternoon was the horses. The way they went into the barn so easy, the sound of the big doors closing behind them. I couldn’t imagine what was to happen in there, though I’d seen two cows doing it in a pasture one time. I didn’t think the walls could take it. They were were too thin. Yet the old barn still stood, looking much like the shacks that dotted Nevada and Montana and Wyoming and other long stretches of open land. They leaned in on themselves, but they didn’t fold and I couldn’t imagine the west without them.

"Hey, sis, bring me that sack of nails, when you come." My mother’s voice came through the walls clear as the thunks of wood landing where she threw them.

I looked through the knothole again and in an instant my mother came into focus. I could see all of her and the tackroom and a bit of the sky. She was in perfect proportion.

It occurred to me then that my mother’s fence was coming from my father’s dreamhouse. The woodpile on this land had once been a home. The first time I saw it, it sat condemned between two bigger buildings on a large concrete lot. My father
had contracted to tear it down, so for three days we removed all the brick and glass, the cabinets and doors, their frames and their knobs, even the plumbing, from the condemned house, and when we were finished my father was paid to bulldoze the skeleton. Full of good intentions, he planned to build his dreamhouse in the back pasture, out by the trees, a place where he could retire.

Now the house was becoming a fence, because my mother saw the need, even if no one else did. She was stubborn like that sometimes. My sadness came from knowing that she wouldn’t fight to keep the horse. It was a battle she could win, but it wasn’t one she wanted to fight. I had to accept that.

I picked up the hammer and nails, took them out to her.

"Mom," I said, after we had dragged the fresh posts over to our worksite. "After you married dad, and left, did you feel close to your mother when you went back?"

"What would be different? Mothers love their children." She was quiet for a bit. "It’s like anything in life, I expect. You have to work at it."

A couple hours later, she touched me on the shoulder. "It’s three o’clock. You must be starving," she said.

I pulled off my gloves. We had maybe four post holes left to dig and then there was the job of nailing the planks to the posts, but then the job would be done. From where I stood now, I figured this odd-looking fence would do. It would hold my mother’s horse for as long as it remained with her. I thought of the tulips that
lined the farmer's field. Come winter they would die and disappear, but the stalks of corn would remain, and my mother understood that.
My sister’s eyes are big. Painfully, big. I hurt when I look at her. And I wonder: if eyes are windows to the soul, what does it mean when they are bulging out of your head?

I first found myself thinking about that old saying one morning this summer while looking at my younger sister, Traci. The eyes are all anyone notices about her anymore, including me. And I know better.

Standing with her in my frontroom with the July sun streaming through the picture window, I noticed that the tiny fine scars on the outside corner of her eyes had faded, but the half-inch scars on either side of her nose were red and puckered and ugly. One scar was jagged, as though the surgeon’s first incision wasn’t long enough and he extended it like he was cutting through clay and not the face of a 27-year old woman whose single wish now in life was to marry and have children. The scar pulled at the left eye, created a strip of slanted lid where the other had none.

The steroids had puffed up her face, rounded her jaw and thickened her neck. Her front teeth were discolored. Was it from the drugs or smoking?
"What are you looking at now?" she said.

I met her eyes and my own widened. I could feel my eyes swelling, the lids receding. I had the urge to look in a mirror, something I had done often since she came to visit; I had to check that my irises weren't swimming in a bulbous sea of milky white.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Was I staring?"

"What is it? What were you looking at?" She was looking down her nose at me, her head tilted back and slightly to one side. She held her head that way so she could focus, because of her crooked left eye. The doctors tell her she needs at least one other operation to correct the weakened muscle of that eye.

"I was looking at your teeth," I finally answered. "You should quit smoking, you know. It ages the face."

She didn't say anything. I felt like a shit. Was I making her self-conscious? I guess I was, but I couldn't help myself. I felt so sorry for her, wanted to change anything I could, to make her feel better about herself. She had stopped going out in public, she who hated being alone, who loved dancing and bars and crowds. The only place she went now was church. Last time I was home, the weekend before her second surgery, I accompanied her and my mother.

The image of her, on her knees before the pastor, head bowed, surrounded by women, the hands on her back—that moment swept over me. I remembered my mother, tears streaming down her face, eyes closed, hands pressed tight. The continuous murmur of prayers. The tears that filled my eyes.
I felt it again, that feeling of helplessness, the deep, freezing feeling I couldn’t name.

"Let me put some makeup on you," I said, and a split second later thought, have I offended her? But she seemed pleased with the idea.

"Okay. If you want," she said, her pale round cheeks creasing with her smile. "I stopped wearing makeup ages ago. My eyes water too much now."

I collected my makeup from the bathroom and when I closed the cabinet I looked at myself in the mirror. My face was naked. My eyes looked normal, but I opened them as wide as I could just to be sure. Then I just stared into my own eyes, trying to read myself. I do that sometimes, but my eyes aren’t giving anything away these days, if they ever did. I study the eyes in photos--family, friends, advertisements, whatever--to judge what they are thinking, feeling. To judge who they are.

Traci was by now sitting on the floor and I knelt down in front of her, my back to the window, makeup in my lap. She tilted her face toward me and closed her eyes, the lids tight and red and puffy over the mound of her eyeballs. I started with the cover stick. I passed the tube of light beige makeup across the purplish skin below her eyes, two fingers at the side of her head to keep her from moving.

"I can’t feel that," she said. She put her hand to her face and probed at the skin around her nose, out to the faint curve of cheekbone and down to her mouth. "I can’t feel anything from here to here. They tell me the feeling will come back."

The first operation did that. They peeled back the skin from the outer corner
of my sister's eyes and chipped away at the bone below each eye. When that surgery
didn't relieve the pressure on her eyes, when her vision was still blacking out, they cut
away at the bone above her eyes. That time they removed her sinuses, and when she
phoned me next she asked if the pitch of her voice had changed.

I couldn't be with her for either operation, but I felt her pain, knew the horror
she must be feeling at the idea of someone cutting at her eyes. I kept thinking, it
could have been me, why hadn't it been me, thank god it wasn't me.

My hand hovered over the scars along her nose. "Tell me if I hurt you, okay?"
I pushed the tip of the makeup stick down the length of one scar, then the other, and
across the wrinkle thin scars at the outer edges of her eyes. I covered the creases
between nose and mouth, the dimple in her chin, and one or two blemishes across her
nose and cheeks, and then I stopped. Now I had to rub the makeup in. I had to touch
her flesh, touch the scars, and while I hesitated she kept her face tilted up, eyes
closed, waiting like a child, trusting me and what I was doing.

What was I doing? Trying to change her, to fix her. Acting on some deep-
rooted feeling that stemmed from my own bout with this disease, Graves disease, a
disease that made me drop my head when I was fifteen and hurry down the halls of
high school hoping no one would stop me, hoping the black girls that hung together
wouldn't see me and call out, "Hey, what's the matter with your eyes, girl? You look
like a squashed frog."

I was afraid to touch her, but I couldn't stop now. I grasped the back of her
head, her fine blonde hair soft beneath my hand, and I rested the back of my thumb
on the bridge of her nose. The flesh was warm and soft and giving as I rubbed down along the first scar, but every muscle in my body tightened, my flesh crawled, much as it did the one and only time I cut up a whole chicken. I remember how the meat of the chicken moved under the knife. It wasn’t like cutting fat off of porkchops or pounding hamburger into patties. The flesh of a chicken was too real. What I was doing was too real, but I didn’t stop. I made a pass at the other scar, the jagged one, but the makeup stayed on the ridges. The crevice was still pink. I had to work the makeup down into her scar.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. It kinda feels good."

I probed the crevice with the tip of the cover stick, coated it until the pink was disguised.

"Here, you put this on." She opened her eyes and I handed her the bottle of liquid makeup. "Just rub it around your face. Use upward strokes. And don’t forget your neck. That’s part of your face too, you know. Good. That’s it."

Her fingers passed over her scars, and I wondered if she touched them often, if she’d ever forget they were there. When she finished the scars were softened, and in the right light would be nearly invisible. Already she looked better, healthier. I began brushing color along her jawbone. "I think my blush may be to orange for you. You need more of a pink, but I think it will do."

As I worked, I talked, sharing secrets I had learned from those shadowy years of studying magazines filled with glossy, perfect women. Do this to create
cheekbones, I told her. Do this and this and this. Occasionally, she would open her
eyes and study me as I painted and smoothed the skin of her face.

When I closed the compact and capped the highlighter, she said, "Let me see a
mirror."

"No, not yet. Not until I'm done."

She looked at me for a moment, intent. Then she said, "Let me feel your
eyes." And without waiting for an answer she put her hand up to my face. I closed
my eyes and she gently touched me, pressed her fingers in little pats across my eye,
from one corner to the other. When she was done, I too felt my eye, the bulge that
began where my brow bone ended.

And I remembered the moment I first discovered that my eyes were changing.
I was in Arizona, standing in my aunt's bathroom. I was fourteen years old. I
remember I said something to my mother about the skin between my eyebrow and lid
being puffy, but neither one of us thought anything about it. And then sometime later,
back home, sitting in the kitchen, my grandmother said, "There's something wrong
with her eyes."

My mother looked at me.

"No there isn't," I said. Butt out, Grandma, is what I thought. You don't
know anything. But I headed for the bathroom mirror, frightened by her words.

"It's just the eye makeup she's begun using," I heard my mother say. "I've
told her she doesn't need to wear makeup. That mascara is too dark for her...."

The mascara wasn't the problem, and I think I knew it even before I started
putting on weight and feeling sluggish, before my mother took me to our family doctor. An over-active thyroid was the diagnosis. Graves Disease. The name hints of death, of reincarnation, of surfacing into some ugly darkness.

And Traci was making me remember it all. Every time I looked at her the forgotten, hidden feelings returned. The feeling of ugliness and shame. I remember Marvin Haug and the moment in 8th grade Algebra when he asked me, "why are you always staring, like this," and he opened his eyes wide, unblinking. I liked Marvin, thought he liked me, but after that I started avoiding him. I didn’t know what to say. Not like I do now.

I know I make Traci uncomfortable sometimes. I rush in to explain the way she looks, before anyone can ask, so she can feel at ease. So I can feel at ease. Do I worry that people will think she’s ugly? After her first operation, she told me, people don’t look at me like I’m a freak anymore; they look at me like I’m handicapped. And on some level I understood the truth of what she was saying because I knew what it felt like to be looked at like a freak.

The memory of standing in the lunchline at Steven’s Junior High is a physical feeling. The line was always long and I had to stand there alone, knowing that the other kids were looking at me. I don’t remember having friends. At one time I used to seek out a girl named Elaine. I felt comfortable with her. But then those girls who tortured me with their questions asked if we were sisters and I started avoiding her, too. Elaine had protuberant blue eyes and straw-blonde hair and I thought she was homely, ugly even. And those girls thought she looked like me. I suppose we did,
especially from the side. Her profile was as blunt as mine. I kept my hair combed
forward around my face so the people in the cafeteria couldn't see my profile, the way
my eyes bulged out past the bridge of my nose. I felt exposed standing in that line. Like
something that should be hidden inside me was hanging out for public view.

Today my reflection will startle me sometimes. Hey, I'm attractive, I'll think,
in that first moment of recognition, before I look at my crooked front tooth or the
lines in my face. And I recall drunken aunt Feneta, my uncle's stepmother, sitting on
the back of the boat, a hat hiding her face, a beer in her wrinkled scrawny hand,
saying, "You're going to be beautiful someday." I don't know what possessed her to
say it. Even at the tender, awkward age of seventeen I had written her off, discounted
her, but that opinion I kept in my head. I realize now that I held on to her words for
years, as a promise.

And I've promised Traci that she'll be beautiful again. After her visit this
summer she called, depressed and needing reassurance, and I told her that one day she
would look normal again. "You'll never look like you did," I said, thinking of how
soft and pretty she looked in her high school graduation picture, "but you'll be
beautiful again. I know it." And my words made her cry, because she wanted to
look like that picture again. She wanted back her sense of self.

I touched her chin. "Close your eyes," I said, and when she did, I began work
on her eyes. I smoothed a rusty brown across her lids, a swollen red even beneath a
layer of creamy foundation. I use dark colors because they make eyes appear smaller,
deeper. I learned this trick years ago, when the girls in the lunchline were wearing
soft blues and greens. But I could tell even before I finished with the first eye that it wasn’t working. Her eyes were too swollen. She doesn’t have lids and the brown colors only exaggerated the size of her eyes. Her face was too pale. I used a cotton ball to blend away most of the makeup. I started again, using lighter, pinker shades.

I hesitated over mascara. Her eyes water constantly and I was afraid of poking her in the eye. She said she’d do it herself. I handed her a small mirror.

At times I think Traci sees her illness as punishment. She was the rebellious one in the family, moving out at seventeen before she even graduated high school because she couldn’t live under our father’s rule anymore. She was the wild one, drinking hard, chasing men, loving and hurting and going her own way. And then this disease came upon her, brought her down, lower than she ever thought it could, and that’s when she found God and opened herself up to his will. Once she said she felt so much pressure in her head, like her brains were coming out of her eyes. I wonder now if she thinks it was her soul pushing out of her, opening her up, changing her.

I again see her prostrate in prayer. I don’t know how long she was down on her knees, but people kept flocking to her, getting down on their knees, touching her. I remember my mom, after she opened her eyes from her own murmured prayers, seeing Traci and running up to the front of the church and going down beside her and all those people, strangers who looked on my sister with love and not morbid curiosity, like those travelers who slow down and stare whenever there’s an accident. I remember those people touching her, her arm, her back, her hair, and they made me cry.
They aren’t afraid of Traci, not like I am. Her illness has cast its shadow on me again. I recognize now that deep, freezing feeling is really fear, fear that someday I’ll wake up and I’ll feel my eyes staring and when I look in the mirror it will be happening again. And I worry that I’m still holding on to Aunt Feneta’s promise, that I can’t let go of that security.

Traci’s eyes are turning toward God. Looking back, knowing as a child at least that God was a given, I think I turned my eyes toward myself, as all teenagers do, but I was trying to hide, not enhance. I needed a veneer, some protection from the world, from the judgement of myself. And though I’ve never been obsessed—some days I wear no makeup at all—I worry that my eyes are still turned toward myself, that the outside counts more than what is behind the eyes.

As I watched Traci carefully applying mascara, stopping every so often to dab at her eyes with a kleenex, I remember thinking that in time her scars will fade, but I know there are scars inside of her. She’s made me recognize the scars within me. She’s made me touch them, touch the part of me that still doesn’t feel whole, like some essence, a bit of foundation, is missing. Graves Disease is a robber, a robber who steals and leaves something insidious that time apparently cannot exhume. My attempt that day to make her beautiful again was my way of repairing her, of soothing those internal, eternal scars. After three years, it was time she started feeling good about the way she looked.

Today she might say God doesn’t care what she looks like, but I think she does. Like me, she wants no record of her disease. Long ago I destroyed the photos
of me; she allows very few to be taken, and then her eyes are camouflaged, by the fall of her hair, the brim of a hat, a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. I find myself thinking of those aborigines who believe that a picture can capture the soul, as though that entity is something that can be seen. I don't know. I think most eyes keep their secrets, but neither Traci nor I are taking chances. We don't want reminders in the family album. We are more than our eyes.

When I finished Traci's makeup that day, I spritzed and styled and fluffed her hair, and then I made her put on my most outrageous earrings and my favorite skirt and blouse and then I led her to a full-length mirror. I wanted her to again see my beautiful sister. She stared at her reflection and then she smiled, a big hearty grin.

"Let's go to the mall," I said. And though neither one of us likes shopping or malls, we went.
Bending Minds With Spoons

They were lined up in front of the market as though waiting to go in. I recognized a few of them from Monty’s descriptions. He worked in the market and said some smelled to high heaven. Once he wrote about a tattooed man with heavy silver rings and a blue face. I wanted to see this man, see his inky, dyed face, but I didn’t want him to see me. As we approached the market, I reached for Monty, but let my hand fall without touching his. He didn’t like it, I remembered. No touching in public.

I passed the men looking the other way, breath caught between my shoulder blades. I had learned, in just a few sunny days of exploration, that if I met their eyes, as was natural for me to do, they would have me. Last year, Monty told me later, the cops chased them off, away from the funky neighborhood market where the street fair began each spring.

On Fourth Avenue the people were thick and clean and talking in a babble of voices.

"Oh, those are dear," I said. The first of the booths that divided the street for four blocks held tie-dyed baby clothes. "Angie’d love these."
"Get 'em for her," Monty said.

I thought of my sister, big and round when I last saw her. So close to delivering. I’ll come back, I had promised her, as I got into my loaded car. I had promised myself I’d be back, regardless, in six months if he didn’t marry me.

I put down a jewel-bright diaper of green and blue swirls. "I’ll think about it," I said, turning to Monty.

A woman with wide brown eyes smiled into my face. Monty had drifted off. I found him several booths down the avenue examining a pair of leather sandals.

"Hey, look at these," he said.

I came up beside him, let my body rest along the length of his.

"What," I said, digging my chin into his back.

"These are the genuine thing. And they’re a steal. Try 'em on."

I met his earnest look. He really did have beautiful eyes, puppy-dog wide and clear blue. I turned to the man behind the booth and smiled.

"I’d like to try them on. Can I?"

Once I felt the warm brown leather in my hands, I wanted them. Everyone wore sandals in the southwest. I’d noticed several women looking cool and comfortable in their well-worn pairs. I sped to the curb and sat down. A few yards away on the sidewalk a barbershop quartet of red-suited, white-haired men, trombones and trumpets flashing in the Tucson sun, started up a raucous rendition of "Oh When the Saints." I bared my toes and wriggled them in time to the music. Then I slipped on the sandals.
"Well?"

It was the salesman. Monty had disappeared again. Somewhat miffed, I stood up, looked at my wide and white feet, and sat back down. I didn't have the money to spend on such foolishness.

"I can't make up my mind," I said, tugging back on my hot socks and tennies over feet that had swelled from the momentary freedom.

"Think about it," he said.

I didn't look for Monty. Let him find me this time I thought, and began drifting down the avenue. After viewing a block of booths laden with jewelry and sunglasses and beachtowels, I began following the aroma of popcorn, curry and frying meat. At the second intersection, I found food trailers lining the blocks leading away from Fourth Avenue. I bought lemonade and an eggroll and watched the woman behind the counter. She was about my age, slender, with ebony hair and long brown fingers and she wore a gauzy, green cotton skirt. I liked the casual, sexy look of her, wanted that look for myself, but in the stores I could never find what I saw women wearing on the streets.

"There you are. Why'd you run off?" Monty came up beside me, his blue eyes squinting in the bright light. He shifted his packages to free a hand and reached for my lemonade.

"I didn't run off," I said. "You abandoned me."

"Please, I was gone for a minute." He handed me the now empty cup. "Come on, I'll buy you a beer."
"I don't want a beer," I said. "I want your attention for more than a few minutes. And for your information, by my watch, you wandered off more than an hour ago."

"I was buying you a present."

"So."

"So, let's get a beer and I'll show you what I got."

I couldn't help myself. I followed him down the line of trailers, remembering the sweet way he asked me to follow him and his job all those months ago. Come be with me, he had said, and because my life was going nowhere at the time, I agreed to join him. But now that I was here I couldn't unpack. My belongings were still a pile in his livingroom. Something about him no longer felt safe. Now that anxious feeling was back, and I asked myself how a man who said he loved you could leave you barefoot on a sidewalk.

I waited until he paid for the beer. "Please don't wander off again. I don't like it. I don't like being stranded."

"You knew where the car was."

"That's not the point." I took a swig of beer. "You just piss me off," I said.

"You piss me off." He glared at me. He had me just where he wanted me, without a job, with little money, dependent. I'd leave tomorrow. Then he put his arm around me. I wanted to stay stiff and angry, but, to be fair, he had found me again. He had looked for me, and I was never really lost. I relaxed against his body, pleased with his touch. Together we watched the street.
On the curb to the right of us a scrawny man wearing a shiny black suit and a tophat over long gray braids was beginning to draw a crowd. His hands moved with confident broad gestures.

"Hey, look, a magician," I said. "And we've got ringside seats."

The old man pulled out a set of keys. He selected the largest one and looking directly at me, moved his fingers in invitation.

"May I have your assistance, please," he said, his voice a gruff whisper.

I smiled and shook my head, reluctant to move out from Monty's arm into that empty space around the old man. The magician didn't press. His moved his gaze from face to face until he smiled and nodded at a rotund woman with a huge, basket-like purse.

The woman didn't hesitate. She stepped forward and the old man held up the silver ornate key he had chosen. He asked the woman to test its metal. She made a face as she tried to bend it between her hands.

"I can't," she said. She adjusted her shoulder bag and handed back the key. The magician took the key, held it up and away from him, closed his eyes. He opened his eyes and without looking at her, took the woman's hand and placed the key in her palm.

"Please cover it with your other hand," he said.

The woman stood for several seconds with her hands folded together, arms close to her chest, as though she were praying.

"I will now bend the key in this beautiful woman's hand with just the power of
would love to talk. I squeezed past a couple dangling a child from each arm. I stumbled on something and was carried a few steps forward into the path of two men. One was bare from the waist up and carried a dented, faded guitar across his back. The other carried a pack and had a dark mark on his jaw. I froze, thinking they would hit me up for money, but they passed on either side of me without even meeting my gaze and as they did, I smelled dust and smoke.

They stopped under the awning of a jewelry shop. The guitar man had straw-thick hair and a broad smooth chest. He wore tight rainbow-colored pants that ended at midcalf. The other man wore overalls that once must have been white. His hair was dark and pulled back from his gaunt face. His was a look I'd seen often on the street, a kind of christ-like angst. I wondered at the mark on his jaw.

As I watched, the magician's assistant forgotten, the wild one stripped the yellowed guitar from his back, positioned it and strummed a few chords. The thin man had dropped to the curb. He pulled a tambourine from his pack, and curious now, I walked closer. The thin man rattled his tambourine, a quick chatter of tin, and then the guitar joined the sound in a downbeat of rocking music. The quality of the music surprised me and arrested the people near us. The subject of the song surprised me more. I had thought they were panhandling, but this was something more. They sang of a president, dangerous and outdated, of bombs and farmers and wandering people. As they sang, they danced. The thin man was barefoot, his flat brown feet hitting the pavement hard. Oddly enough he looked even more Christ like, like a Jesus who had forgotten himself enough to join in with the merrymakers outside the
my mind," the old man intoned, whipping off his tophat. "At the same time, my
friends, I will make the coins in my tophat disappear, if you would all be so kind as to
throw a few in."

He passed the hat around and when the hat was returned to him the coins were
gone and the key, when he opened the women's hands and held it up for inspection,
was bent and twisted.

"Jeez, that's the oldest trick in the book," someone said behind me. "She's
obviously in on it."

I strained around to see who had spoken. I didn't know if that was the truth.
After all, the magician had called on me first. I wished now that I hadn't refused. I
wondered if the woman felt the key bending under the force of the old man's mind.
Or maybe she had bent it herself. Adrenaline could produce miracles and anyone
would want him to succeed, so that his success could be theirs. People were funny
that way. Aligning themselves with things they didn't believe in because it offered
them a moment of glory.

"Want another beer?" Monty's breath was warm on my cheek.

"No, you go ahead though. Just come back."

"You just stay here. Stay," he said, waving his hands like the magician.

My jaw tightened again, but I knew he was teasing, so I didn't say anything. I
turned my face from him in time to see the rotund lady rejoin the knot of people
around the magician. On impulse, I jumped up, intending to get close to her, maybe
ask her what she'd felt, what she thought. She looked like the kind of woman who
temple. His thin face was completely absorbed, alive, electric. I felt his energy. It started my toe tapping.

When the song ended, a good-sized crowd had gathered.

"Come closer," the thin man said. "Don’t be shy. We don’t bite."

The crowd shifted, but no one moved. He dropped again to the ground and this time pulled out a shoe-sized, felt-covered box from his pack. Inside the box was a set of wooden spoons, thick and crudely shaped, one curve resting with the other. He took them out and cocking his wrist, he tossed the box onto the pavement. It skidded to a stop, lid open, very near to the first ring of watchers. The man fitted the flat handle of the wooden spoons into his right palm. A second later that hand flashed down, the guitar sounded low, and he began beating out a rhythm on himself, bashing the spoons together across his knee for one sound, at his hip for another, across his palm, and then, smash, up side his cheek.

I flinched, recoiling from the blow. I couldn’t believe what he had done, that he hadn’t pulled in. The blow had landed solid. The mark on his face was a bruise, and as I watched, it grew angrier and glistened in the sweat on his skin. He bashed the spoons into his face throughout the song, just to the side of his mouth and above the jawbone. After that first couple blows, I began accepting what he was doing. The energy of him made me forget it. I was caught up in it, the music, the heat, the breath of the people around me. Then the song was finished, and the last thud of spoons on his body was absorbed by the crash of guitar strings. Without missing a beat, he clasped the spoons to his chest and stepped forward.
"Hello," he said. "Pleased to see you here today. Come closer. Let us know if you like what you hear."

A little girl in a pink dress scooted forward from the crowd. She looked back once, as though seeking reassurance, and then dropped three quarters into the case. They clanked once and settled into the shabby red fur. The man laughed, a deep soaring chuckle. "Yes. It ain't so hard. Please contribute what you wish. We don't mean to intimidate. We're not beggars."

The bulk of a lady with blue eyelids pushed past me, tossed in a coin. Her passing pushed me closer to the curb. My toes in their hot shoes pressed against the concrete. The sun was hot on my head.

"Come up onto the sidewalk so everyone can see," the thin man said as his partner began playing again. Within seconds, the music had pulled half a dozen people up onto the sidewalk. I stepped up too. The rhythm ran through me like adrenaline. It made my fingers tingle. I stashed my hands in the pockets of my shorts, clenched my fingers around the bills in one pocket, the coins in the other.

This time their song was whimsical, about the trials of living with a cat. I had left mine back in Richland with a neighbor. Suddenly I missed her, felt as though I had betrayed her.

When the music stopped, without conscious thought, I stepped forward and pulled my hand and a wad of dollars from my pocket. I dropped the bills into the case and when I straightened, I looked closely at the man. His eyes were blue-green, narrowed with pain or enjoyment, I wasn't sure which. He met my glance. In that
moment I felt touched by him, wanted to touch his bruise. I didn’t understand the impulse, but it was there, very real, and somehow frightening. Our eyes locked for only an instant, then he was looking away, smiling for another in the crowd, and I turned away. The music began again, but I could no longer tolerate the sound of the spoons on his flesh.

Monty stood at the far edge of the crowd. He stood a head above the others like an oak tree among willows. He looked familiar and good and I pushed through the crowd until I stood beside him.

"Did you see that," I said. "The way he smashed his face with the spoons."

"Pretty amazing, huh. I’ve seen these guys before, at Pike’s Market in Seattle, but they weren’t using the spoons then. People will do anything for money, I swear, it takes all kinds."

I didn’t like Monty’s explanation, but I wasn’t sure in my own mind why the thin man did it. Why he was beating his face. Whatever the reason, it was effective. I didn’t give money away easily.

"Let’s go," I said.

"Not yet. I want to finish my beer." I took the cup from him and drained almost all of it. The alcohol rushed to my head, made me dizzy and I leant against him, breathed in the clean scent of him, felt the smooth warmth of his arm against mine.

"It’s too hot," he said, and moved away.

I could no longer see the musicians. I stared at the anonymous backs of the
people in front of me and listened to the street, to the music, to the thud of spoons against flesh, until it was finished and the crowd's attention was caught by the drums of a reggae band just starting down the avenue.

Monty touched my shoulder. "Come on, let's talk to them."

He stood between me and the musicians. They were packing up their things and counting their change. I must have given them at least five bucks, but I didn't feel anything like regret. If I had to name what I felt it was grief. Nothing was sacred. The bruise on his face was just a receipt.

"No," I said. "Please, I'm ready to go. It's hot, I'm tired, I've had enough."

Monty continued to look toward the musicians. They were good, I thought, and they weren't what I expected. Their music was smart and it had drawn me close to something, about their lives, about my own, but now that the music was gone they were strangers again. The attraction had been like smoke and mirrors. It wasn't real. The pinch of my shoes was real. I wanted to take them off, but I knew the pavement would be burning hot.

When the men walked away, I felt bad that I had held Monty back, but he turned to me and smiled. "Glad you came," he said.

"Yes." I stepped off the curb, began threading my way back to the car.

"If you'll wait a minute," he said, "I'll give you your present."

"I want to go home," I said.

We stopped at a bar instead. After a shot of tequila, he gave me my present, a pair of sandals. My surprise was real. They weren't the pair I had tried on, and I
didn’t really like the design burned into the straps, but they were genuine leather. I put them on and wore them.