Houses of mystery

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HOUSES
OF MYSTERY

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Anne-Marie gave me my first reflexology session—a treatment, she calls it—last year in Montoya. It was March 13, the anniversary of the fire. I hadn't realized the date until that morning, when Anne-Marie lit a stick of incense in Regina's memory, making sure to snuff it out before we went to breakfast. I hate incense, it smells like cooked deodorant, but Anne-Marie inherited her mother's love of ritual, and out of respect for the dead I held my tongue. I guess that's why I finally succumbed to Anne-Marie's suggestion, because I began to realize she and her two sisters were all I had left. Then again, perhaps the incense combined with the tropical heat and humidity to cause temporary insanity. Certainly I never believed Anne-Marie's claim: that foot massage could heal ailments not connected anatomically to the foot.

We walked a quarter mile or so along the beach, Anne-Marie throwing an occasional cartwheel in the sand. The heat didn't seem to bother her at all. We went past the tents and the topless sunbathers and when we passed a homemade sign advertising House of Mystery Massage, with an arrow pointing into the trees, Anne-Marie said, "Now there's somebody who's got the right idea. Move to paradise and forget about the rest of the world. Maybe that's what I should do."

Why? I said. Are you sick of me already? Of course not, she said, then added, with a grin, Wait 'til later in the week.

We were looking for privacy—I'd told her that was the only way I'd agree to the reflexology—and after a few minutes we didn't see anyone except an old man driving his oxen into town with an empty cart. There was nothing extraordinary about the man, but his cart was a real piece of work, painted like a Ukrainian
Easter egg, and his oxen were gussied up in a fancy leather harness, as if he was going to a parade. Adiós, the man said as we approached him, tipping his Panama hat. Adiós, Anne-Marie called back to him.

Why does he want us to leave? I asked her. We're not bothering him. And she said, It's a Tico greeting, Pop. Hello and goodbye all in one.

That doesn't make any sense, I said. You're either coming or going. And she said, You never believe anything else I say. Why should you believe me now?

I wondered: How come she knows all this? She'd never been in Costa Rica before. But it ate at me: how she seemed completely at home.

We chose a shady clearing about 25 yards from the ocean. Howler monkeys scampered through the canopy of trees above us. Just tiny, fragile things. Most of the time, you couldn't even see them hidden in the brush. But their ferocious roars made quite a racket.

"Anne-Marie," I told her, as she propped my left foot on her bare thigh and brushed off the sand, "You shouldn't be wasting your time with old men's feet."

"Relax," she said. "And don't forget to breathe."

"Anne-Marie," I reminded her, "I've been breathing now for seventy-one years. I'm not broken, so stop trying to fix me."

"We're all broken, to one degree or another," she said. "Anyways," she made a fist and began kneading the bottom of my foot with her knuckles, "I like feet. They tell something about a person."

I thought my feet were ugly. I had corns and callouses and a bone spur on my left foot and my toes curled up tight, like a bird's clinging to a perch. Naturally I didn't want her examining them.

"What do my feet say?" I teased. "That I'm worn out, eh? Old? Used up?" I leaned back onto my elbows, lifted my right foot and wiggled my toes in front of
her face. The way I figured, a foot was a foot, and I refused to pretend otherwise. Her mother was far more tolerant of Anne-Marie's New Age gospel. "Don't be too hard on her, Norman," Regina said. "It's only a sign of love. After all, even Jesus preached. And he was our savior."

Anne-Marie sighed. "They'd tell me you'd better start taking care of yourself. When we get home we'll fix you up with a sea-salt and olive-oil soak, and scrub away all this dead skin." She unbent my big toe and twisted, as if removing a lid to a jar. The toe cracked reluctantly, which she interpreted as a sign of a stiff neck and an excuse to insist again that I sign up for yoga classes.


"You don't have anything to lose," she said, quietly. "Now tell me when I hit a sore spot, okay?" Much of what she did was, in fact, extremely painful, but I believed this a test of wills. Determined not to let her get the better of me, I remained impassive while she prodded and pulled at my feet. From an examination of my toes she deduced that my eyes and ears and brain were fine, and that my pituitary and pineal glands checked out, too.

"Phew," I said. "What a relief. I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I've spent worrying about those glands."

"Breathe," instructed Anne-Marie. "And tell me how you're feeling."

"Rather foolish," I said.

But all of a sudden she hit a tender spot at the top of my arch, and I flinched. "Digestive trouble lately? she asked me, one thick eyebrow raised in a knowing arch. "Diarrhea? Constipation?"

"For God's sakes, Anne-Marie, how in the world can you diagnose an ailment here?"--I grabbed a roll of flesh slipping over the waistband of my Bermudas, the skin bloated and stretched tight as a drum from indigestion--"If you're
examining down there? Quack, quack, quack," I honked, tucking my hands under my armpits and flapping. My baseball cap slipped forward, and I had to tilt my head way back so that I could still see her moss-green eyes from under the bill. You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out my irregularities: after all, we’d been sharing a room since we left Canada two days before.

"Give me a chance," Anne-Marie said. "Mum swore my hands were better medicine than anything the doctors prescribed." Her voice was pleading, but her hands defiant as she gripped the sides of my foot and dug in with both thumbs, as if crushing a beer can.

"When a person’s desperate enough," I said, trying hard not to grimace, "They’ll believe in anything."

"You don’t want to admit that medical school might not have given you all the answers," she said, pinching my Achilles tendon between her thumb and forefinger, and working up and down the length of it.

"I never claimed to have all the answers," I told her, although I used to think that someone did. "But I’d hate to have grown up in a world without medical science."

Then she asked, Honestly, what good has it done you? And I cupped one hand around my ear and pretended I couldn’t hear her above the relentless roar of the monkeys.

It didn’t get you anywhere, she said, more sad than angry, and I said, Anywhere like Nirvana? Pardon me, but I was raising a family. I didn’t have time to rub people’s smelly old feet.

I was only 47 when I had my heart attack and my cardiologist recommended I quit practicing medicine. I simply couldn’t handle the pressure. I’d lie in bed at night, mentally listing all the things that might go wrong. It drove Regina crazy.
You can't be responsible for everything, she'd say, stroking my hair. Those people made their choices, now God's will be done.

The only will you can be sure of is your own, I said then, and I'd say it again if she were still alive. But I liked the mellifluous tones of her voice (she'd never lost her Irish lilt), and the light touch of her hand on the back of my neck, so I listened.

I wound up an assistant administrator to the Canadian Minister of Health. I hated rubber-stamping claims, predictable as newspaper horoscopes, but I never told my family how I felt. My work was my business. They knew only that I quit practicing medicine to stay alive. They did not know the sacrifice almost killed me.

"So, Dr. Anne-Marie," I said, "What's the prognosis? Am I going to live?"

Anne-Marie set my foot gently on the ground and patted the top of it. "You know, Pop," she said, "You have a very strong heart," which I took as further proof she didn't know what she was talking about. "But what a fat head! You wouldn't know a helping hand if it slapped you across the face! I surrender," Anne-Marie said, kicking off her sandals. I looked away as she slipped off her t-shirt and stepped out of her shorts. She had on a skimpy floral bikini underneath, and even if she didn't have any modesty I still did.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her remove the gold band from her toe and set it carefully in the heel of the sandal. Nothing fancy: just a simple band with Regina's and my initials and wedding date inscribed inside, a combination engagement and wedding ring because I was only starting out and couldn't afford more. By all rights, it should have been destroyed in the fire like everything else, but years of illness had stripped Regina of extra flesh. The night of the fire the ring was at the jeweler's for resizing.
"At first I put the ring on my foot because I didn't want to call attention to my hands," Anne-Marie had explained, when I'd objected. She suffered from eczema, which sometimes blistered so badly she was forced to wear gloves in public. "But now I've decided I prefer it this way. My feet are prettier than my hands. And this way the ring is closer to my heart."

When I asked what in God's name she was talking about, she said the heart was located just below the big toe. The last I checked, I said, that part of the foot was called the metatarsal, and she said I knew what she was talking about, and I said yes, unfortunately I did.

Anne-Marie trotted down to the water, a topknot of hair spurting from her head like a fountain of black ink. Don't get carried out to sea, I called after her. I'd read about the riptides that dragged off unsuspecting tourists. Either she didn't hear me, or chose not to acknowledge my warning, because she plunged right in, ducking underneath the swells as the waves washed over her. I watched her swim straight out from shore. I imagined her swimming farther and farther, never coming back. I resolved to be nicer to her.

When I tired of squinting I watched an electric-blue butterfly weave among the brush. It was huge, big as a sparrow, and the outside of its wings were a mottled brown, so that when it rested on a branch or a rock and folded them up you couldn't even tell it was there. Wouldn't it be wonderful, I thought, to do that, just fold on up into yourself and disappear.

After several minutes, I moved my towel a few feet feet into the sun-warmed sand, figuring it would act as a heating pad and soothe my stomach. I considered whether I should take off my sport shirt. I only had two shirts with me and didn't want to sweat in this one. But I was reluctant to expose my scar. I had
never actually seen it, but I imagined it sometimes, mushrooming outwards, white as a baby's behind. A raw mark of faintheartedness I carried about on my back like my own grotesque scarlet letter. Seeing no one, I decided I would bare myself for a few minutes, but a few minutes only, while I was alone and before the sun could damage me further. I lay down and closed my eyes, wondering whether Regina would have liked this place. She always wanted to go to a resort where you sat under striped umbrellas and waiters served you brightly colored cocktails with fancy swizzle sticks. When we finally had the time and money to go, she was too sick to travel. Now Regina was dead, and even if I had believed in heaven I don't think you could have convinced me that they serve fruity cocktails there.

Regina was supposed to die of emphysema. She'd been sick for years, sitting in bed stringing rosaries for Third World countries. I tried to arrange for visitors but she didn't want anyone seeing her in that condition, weak and pathetic as a stray cat. Anne-Marie came home from Toronto every couple of weeks, and sent New Age pamphlets and books the way her two married sisters sent cards and flowers from Vancouver. In the evenings, I'd bring up a tray of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and try to cheer my wife. "Why did Jesus get taken out of the hockey game?" I'd ask Regina. "Because he kept getting nailed to the boards," and she'd smile wanly. She had learned to suppress laughter, which caught in her throat and made her retch.

But nothing ever goes like you plan, and neither did Regina's death. I was downstairs, asleep in front of the television, when the whine of the smoke alarm woke me. Goddamnit! Regina, I remember thinking. How many times did I beg you not to smoke in bed? I tried, like any loyal husband, to save her. But the smoke upstairs was too thick for me and my weak heart, pushed me out of her
room with the surprising force of a wave bound for shore. I crawled in a second
time, the smoke clogging my eyes and ears and lungs, filtering into my nostrils.
Then the flames grabbed hold of the tail of my pajamas, and there was a
horrible sickly sweet odor, like burnt sugar, of melting fabric and flesh--hers and
my own. When I came to I was in the ICU, she was dead, and a grainy black and
white newspaper photograph was all that remained of the country home we'd
built outside Ottawa. Several people actually had the nerve to suggest it was a
blessing, to spare Regina from further suffering. I was rendered speechless: a
rare occurrence, indeed.

"Señor?" I raised myself onto my elbows to find a frail girl standing to one side.
A Hard Rock Cafe t-shirt hung down to her knobby knees, and she wore the
same expression people have when they're watching a horror movie, when
they do and don't want to see the gory parts. Realizing that she had been
staring at my scar I rolled over and sat bolt upright.

"What do you want?" I said.

She showed me her blue plastic pail filled with bags of cashews, and as a way
of avoiding her pity I held up one finger, then spread out on the ground all the
change I could find in my pockets. The girl kneeled and counted out the correct
amount, raking the coins through the sand toward her, then deposited the
money into a cloth coin purse she kept strapped around her neck. As she stood
to leave, she pointed to the trees overhead. "Mira!" she said. There, tail wound
like a snake around a flimsy branch, sat a howler monkey. When our eyes met
he opened his mouth, and out came a deep rumbling bellyache of a roar, not at
all like you'd expect from such an innocent-looking creature. Delighted, the girl
laughed and covered her ears. "Fuerte! Fuerte!" she cried, and I nodded and
said, "Sí fuerte," which now accounted for two thirds of all the Spanish I knew.
Then she picked up her bucket and continued down the beach, swinging it back and forth in a carefree motion. "Adios!" I called, using the other third of my Spanish, not sure if that was the right thing to say.

I did not want to face that girl again when she came back toward town, so I set the bag of cashews on my towel and pulled on my Nikes to collect Anne-Marie. I must have stood up too quickly, because I nearly fell over. The heat made me nauseous, and the beach faded to black for a few seconds. I had to sit back down, give myself time to recover, then I stood again, swaying slightly, and jogged to the water's edge.

"Why the hurry? We're on vacation, remember?" Anne-Marie asked, as we made our way toward our towels, but we had never talked about the fire and I wasn't going to start then. When we reached our towels the bag of cashews was gone, and a trail of nuts led like a series of flesh-colored crescent moons to the nearest tree, where the monkey feasted.

Anne-Marie oohed and aahed over that monkey as if it were her own child. But I didn't see the humor, especially not after the little thief peed on me as I bent over to gather the remaining nuts. Anne-Marie toweled me off and tried to convince me to rest for a few minutes while she dampened my towel in the ocean, to cool me down. But by that time my guts had started to grumble about the huevos rancheros I'd had for breakfast. "Let's go." I said again, shoving the last of the cashews in my pocket, "I need a bathroom." From where she sat on the ground, putting the ring back onto her toe, she tilted her head to one side, green eyes twinkling, and said, "See? The treatment is working already."

You can't unspill milk. But you can pour yourself a fresh glass. That's what I told Anne-Marie when I invited her on holiday.
I'd moved out of the hotel where I'd been staying, into my own studio apartment in downtown Ottawa, and I was bored silly. Maybe it sounds crazy, but I liked caring for Regina; it made me feel useful. Between her and maintaining the house there was always something to do. Now there was neither. One morning about 6:30 I was reading the paper, and the weather list from around the world caught my eye. I thought to myself: Why the hell not? I hadn't been abroad since I flew in the war, and that was hardly vacation. I would have asked my old co-pilot Thomas to join me, except he was dead, too, of cancer three years ago. Anne-Marie's answering machine came on—I don't understand how she can sleep the day away—and I left a message. "Peace be with you, too, Anne-Marie." I said. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

Anne-Marie didn't return my call until that evening and she didn't want to go at first. Handed me some mumbo jumbo about her busy schedule, which I knew wasn't true because she only works managing the wait staff at a comedy club, supplementing her income with a few foot rubs. How hard can it be to get someone to take a shift or two? It's not like she's a brain surgeon. She called me back the next day, said she'd changed her mind. She'd been worried that we wouldn't travel well together, but then she'd had her chart done and her astrologist had predicted the trip would be a healing experience.

I wanted to go to a beach, maybe Florida or the Bahamas, where I could watch the sun set over the ocean and drink the foofey cocktails Regina dreamed of, but some friend of Anne-Marie's had been raving about these rare birds that live in the Costa Rican rainforest. He said it'll change our lives, Anne-Marie told me. And I said, Haven't we had enough changes? Besides, I said, I don't speak Spanish. And she said, That's okay, I'll interpret for you. It'll give me a chance to
use my Spanish, she said, which she'd learned when she lived in Oaxaca with a Mexican guy.

I want to go to a nice beach, I said. A place I can relax. But you don't swim, she said, and I said, Well, you don't fly, either. So we wound up compromising: I'd go with her to see the birds, if she'd accompany me first to a beach.

Montoya sat on the southeastern point of a cone-shaped peninsula, connected to the rest of the world by a rutted gravel road that switchbacked from an arid plateau down a steep brushy hill. The guide book called it paradise, but Montoya was just a little pimple of a town on the Pacific, with maybe a dozen rickety wooden guest houses and bars, and a lot of hippie types dressed in gauze. When a breeze kicked up they looked like they were wearing curtains. Anne-Marie might have fit in fashion-wise, but she's a big girl, all legs, and stands out wherever she goes. From me she got her large hands and straight teeth, but she inherited her mother's good looks: fair skin and thick dark hair and lashes so long she's been accused of wearing fake ones. If she ever figures out she's good-looking, we used to say, she'll be dangerous.

Once back at the Casa Blanca, and I'd relieved myself, Anne-Marie insisted I leave her along in our room; she wanted to meditate or levitate or some damn thing. To control her eczema, she said.

I asked her if she'd tried the corticosteroid cream I'd sent her.

"Thanks anyways," she responded from the bathroom, where she was earnestly scrubbing the sink with baking soda and a sponge she'd brought with her. She was fanatic about cleanliness, another trait she inherited from her mother. "But my naturopath prescribed a diet and meditation program. She blames stress."
"I thought you'd transcended stress."

"Well, you're wrong," she said, standing in the bathroom doorway, slapping her yellow plastic gloves against one forearm. "I just happen to think there's a better way to deal with my shit, besides flushing it down the toilet."

I didn't think it was fair of her to kick me out, considering I was paying for half the room, and I told her so. Then she said, "Why don't we get separate rooms? It's only ten bucks a night." And I said that was ridiculous.

"We're not millionaires," I said, "What's the point of paying double? We've both got our own beds. What more do we need?"

"Please Dad, not that frugal business again, we're not in a Depression anymore," she said, emerging from the bathroom. "And while we're on the subject could you please remove these strings of dental floss from the dresser?"

"I'm letting them dry," I explained, "so I can use them again tomorrow."

And she said, "Well, if you're going to be so gross could you please put them in an envelope or something?"

"Then they'll mildew. But tell you what," I said. "You promise not to light anymore incense—it reeks in here-- and I'll take care of my dental paraphernalia."

"Speaking of reek, Dad," Anne-Marie said, nodding toward the bathroom. "Do you think you could open the window when you do your business?"

"I'll try to remember," I said. "And back to the room," I said, "We are related."

What I didn't say was, I guess I'm not used to sleeping alone yet.

I rinsed off the cashews and stuck them back in my shorts pocket, thinking I might be hungry later, then, making sure to turn my back away from Anne-Marie, changed into my other shirt, since the one I was wearing stunk of monkey piss. If
Anne-Marie spotted the scar she'd insist on performing some touchy-feely hoodoo-voodoo.

All the hammocks on the covered porch had been commandeered by a group of young people, so I set out down the gravel road, barely avoiding being run over by a few bicyclists—more tourists—who didn't even bother to apologize. I stopped at a three-sided kiosk at the bottom of the hill; taped and tacked to one side were scraps of paper advertising items for sale: tents, bicycles, airplane tickets, a hanglider, a windsurfer, hackey-sacks, Guatemalan fabric, crystals, various books, mostly self-help, and acreage. On another side were personal messages. I read through a few of them, including one addressed simply to Norman. I knew it was a different Norman—who would leave me a note?—but I read it anyways.

Norman, the note said, in a loopy, female script. *I got sick of waiting. Met up with some friends and split for Belize. I'll be on Cay Caulkner if you're still interested. Ciao--Angela.* For a brief moment I entertained the idea of showing up in Belize and finding Angela, whoever that was. Here I am, I'd say. I got your message and here I am. Or maybe, I thought, I should leave a second note for Norman. *Norman,* I'd advise him, *Forget about Angela. She's a flake and not worth it. Get on with your life.*

There was also an entire section devoted to what the board labelled, "healing arts," which included every kind of quick fix known to man. I saw signs for Swedish massage, deep-tissue massage, energy balancing, hypnosis, rebirthing, past-life regression, Feldenkrais movement awareness, Buddhist meditation, sacro-cranial work and hatha yoga. Plus several signs for reflexology. I always figured that Anne-Marie was an anamoly, a freak in a world populated by rational human beings, but now I was discovering that there were
dozens, hundreds like her. And they were all gathered here in this little blip of a
town in Costa Rica.

I sat on the veranda of a small hotel on the beach, on a hard wooden chair
with an upright back, and when the waitress came I pointed at a pineapple
sitting on the bar and made a drinking motion. That stretch of beach was empty
and the horizon unbroken, and the pineapple juice sweet and thick with pulp. It
would have been perfect except when the wind shifted it carried a stench of
sewage from an exposed pipe in a shallow pit.

Then zig-zagging down the hill comes the old man in the Panama hat, except
this time his cart was filled with gravel, and he stopped behind the veranda and
started to unload the gravel into the pit. I watched him work for a while, pitching
shovelful after shovelful, his oxen snorting and restless, and him grunting and
sweating, and I started feeling sorry for him. I leaned over the railing and offered
him my glass of juice. He didn't understand at first, but I kept pointing at the
glass and holding it out to him, and finally he came over and took a big gulp.
When he reached for the glass I saw he had liver spots on his hands, and when
he smiled I could see his skin was leathery and that he was missing most of his
teeth. "Gracias," he said, "Muchas gracias," and offered me a cigarette from the
pack of Marlboro's he pulled out of his breast pocket, but I tried to tell him that I
don't smoke anymore. Still enjoy the rough smell of them, though. I used to
follow my wife around like a puppy just to catch a whiff. She said her time was
going to come anyhow, so she might as well allow herself a few pleasures. It's
not logical, I know, to associate cigarettes with Regina's life and not her death,
because it was a cigarette--one single, solitary cigarette--that killed her in the
end. But that's the way it is. The mind doesn't always make logical connections.
Of course, I couldn't explain all that to the man with the cart. I didn't even know how to say, "You're welcome."

He went back to work and finished emptying the load, and then he came over to me and took off his hat, revealing a bald scalp the color of wet sand, and pointed to my Blue Jays cap. He thrust his hat at me and said something in Spanish. I took off my cap and he smiled, a funny thing to see with no teeth, like looking into a well, and then he set his hat on my head. It was a tad too big, and my cap was a smidgeon too small for him, but I showed him how to adjust the plastic notches in the back. He tipped his new cap to me and led the oxen away down the beach, lumbering along right next to the water, the waves erasing the tracks as they went. Where are you going? I wanted to ask him. Are you going to come back and finish filling in the pit? Do you want some help?

Then Anne-Marie snuck up on me from behind and covered my eyes with her cool, firm hands like a bandage. "Guess who?" she said, trying to disguise her already deep voice by lowering it, and I pretended I didn't know, like I used to when she was a little girl. She bent over me and removed her hands and stared into my eyes. If either of us had blinked her lashes would almost have fluttered against mine in what her mother used to call butterfly kisses. Her face was upside down, though, and from that perspective I might not have recognized her.

"Hey!" I said. "You're crushing my new hat."

She straightened and apologized, then asked where I'd gotten it.

"Glad to hear you're making friends," she said, after I told her the story.

"Us old folks have to stick together," I said.

Come on Dad, she said, You're only as old as you feel. And I said, That's exactly what I mean.
She helped herself to a sip of my juice, then plunked down across from me and opened her guide book to a description of those birds, the whole reason we were in Costa Rica to begin with. "Listen to this," she said excitedly. "Quetzals," she read, "are a small bird with vivid, iridescent-green plumage and a ruby-red breast. Their tails can reach up to three feet long. The Aztec and Mayan indians worshipped the quetzal, which was believed to protect warriors as they went into battle." She displayed the book so I could see the glossy photo.

"Pretty," I said, "But where are the Mayans and Aztecs now?" Using my knife, I made a slicing gesture at my throat.

Anne-Marie shut the book. "Why won't you let yourself believe in anything?"

"At my age," I said, taking the last swallow of pineapple juice, "I believe in surviving." Now, I said. Do your old man a favor, and order me something from the menu.

How can you possibly eat? It's so hot, she said. Besides, she said. It's four-thirty. Aren't we planning on dinner together?

And I said not to worry. I'd be hungry again. Since Regina died I'd developed a voracious appetite. Funny thing, though: I hadn't gained any weight. I was either completely stoved up or the food passed right through me, as if my gut was a wide-meshed sieve.

I insisted Anne-Marie order me fried fish with a side of french fries. When the waitress set the plate down, though, I noticed all the fish was grilled and there were no fries. I said: What did you tell the waitress? Anne-Marie mumbled something about her Spanish not being that good. Anne-Marie, I said, I'm your father and I can decide what I want to eat.

Fried food will clog your arteries, she said, turning to face the ocean.

Listen, I said, grabbing her hand to make her pay attention. I'm 71 years old.
And I'm 34 years old, she replied, squeezing my hand with unexpected strength, and fixing me with a steely stare. And I'd like to have a father around when I'm 35. Okay? She leaned over the table and kissed me on the cheek. Anyways, she said, reaching for the paper menu under the ashtray, you could have ordered it yourself. And she flipped over the menu to reveal the English translation on the other side.

Touché, I said. Now sit with me, have some fish and watch the sunset.

No thanks, she said. I'm on a fruit fast. And Dad, she said gently, it's too early for sunset, we're almost at the equator, and you can't see it from here anyway.

What do you mean? I said. That's the Pacific, right?

Yes, she said, but Montoya faces east, don't you remember? From her purse she retrieved a map and spread it open on the table, using a fork to pinpoint our location on the east side of the peninsula.

Well, wouldn't you know it? I said. I've come all this way and can't even see the sun set.

But you can watch it rise, Anne-Marie said, folding up the map and replacing it in her purse, a leather pouch the size of a watermelon.

Sunsets are prettier, I said. More colorful. What are you doing for protein? Have some fish.

It's okay, Dad, I can do without protein for a few days, she said. She watched me shovel in my food and frowned. Take it easy. No wonder your stomach's acting up.

I looked at the brittle bones of the fish nearly picked clean, the wedge of lime squeezed dry, a smear of ketchup staining the plate. I felt sick.

I stood up and leaned against the railing. You sure that's east? I said.

I'm sure, she said.
God, I said. I'm all turned around.

It was that hat that got me into trouble, that hat and Brittany's dimples. I'm a sucker for dimples. We had dinner at Sano Burrito, the resident vegetarian restaurant and meet market, and we stayed to watch a video on the restaurant's outdoor big-screen TV. Tourists, tan and smug, drifted about the patio like dragonflies in a mating dance. But I didn't let them bother me. I was feeling almost happy: my burritos were tasty, the night air comforting as a warm blanket, and when I looked at my reflection in the restroom I saw my new hat made me look jaunty. That was the word that came to mind: jaunty. Maybe this will work out, I thought, maybe it'll be a good week after all.

Partway through the film Anne-Marie went to order us another fruit smoothie, and came back with Brittany, a friend she'd met years ago at massage school. That's where the dimples came in. You could have stuck buttons in the two that Brittany had. I didn't even ask Anne-Marie about the smoothies.

Brittany had been in Montoya a month. I decided I couldn't face another pair of pantyhose, she told us, explaining why she'd quit her job as a nurse in Chicago to set up the House of Mystery massage parlor in Costa Rica. Pantyhose became like a symbol of how constricted my life felt, she said, sitting herself.

Hey Brittany, I said. What did the Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor?

Oh God, Anne-Marie groaned, clasping her hand to her head. Not again.

And I said, Repetition is the key to comedy. You should know that. You work at a comedy club.

Brittany said, Well, I've never heard it. What? grinning in anticipation, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed underneath her red bikini top.
Make me one with everything, I said, chuckling as I delivered the punch line. You have to do that sometimes, lead your audience.

Brittany laughed, and her dimples made two soft shadows in her cheeks. I like a man with a sense of humor, she said. And a great hat, she added.

It is a great hat, Anne-Marie said.

There was a few more minutes of conversation—Brittany and Anne-Marie catching up on their flaky friends: Roger was in Katmandu, Brittany had almost gone there but heard it was inundated by bodyworkers. Sue had gotten rich off a yoga video and Judy was in Hollywood, working on movie sets—she'd actually given a massage to Warren Beatty, and he had invited her to a party where she'd gotten to talk to Shirley MacLaine. Most shocking of all: Greg had cut his dreadlocks, gone to business school and gotten married. When they'd exhausted the news, Brittany invited us to see her studio, as she referred to it. I declined. I said I wanted to watch the rest of the video.

Dad, Anne-Marie said, you've seen Butch Cassidy three times already.

But I like this part, I said. Where they jump into the river.

But as I said, I'm a sucker for dimples, and besides, I remembered my vow to be nicer to Anne-Marie. So I went along, sandwiched between them like a prisoner, the full moon lighting our way like a spotlight.

Brittany's House of Mystery was a 10 foot by 10 foot square of sand where she'd planted her massage table, which doubled as her bed, a cassette player, a small basket full of bottles containing lotions and oils and a large basket piled with sheets. She lit a kerosene lamp, and gave us the tour. Her backpack lay in one corner, a stack of books sat on a chair next to it. She'd strung white sheets all around for privacy, and even stretched one across the top—"protection from the critters," she explained. Anne-Marie nodded and told her that we knew all
about the monkeys. Little devils, Brittany said, pulling an orange from her backpack and biting into it to strip the peel from the flesh. They take some getting used to. Of course, she added, it's just a temporary set-up, until I build a real healing arts center.

I hoisted myself onto the massage table, my legs dangling over the edge. I swung my legs a little underneath the platform and said, Are you going to check my reflexes? That's what we used to do to patients, I said. Tap them right here on the patellar tendon.

I've seen that in films, Brittany said.

I used to have great reflexes, I said. I was a pilot in the war. Can't be a pilot without good reflexes.

Anne-Marie said, Dad, she doesn't need to hear your war stories.

All fathers tell war stories, Brittany said, handing us each a section of orange, which I took even though I felt the beginnings of a canker sore in my mouth, that happens if I eat too much citrus. Dads are pretty much the same the world over, she said, except mine would never think of quitting the golf course to come to Costa Rica.

I took off my hat and held it in my lap. Not everyone's an adventurer, I said. Someone's got to stay home and mind the store.

Brittany said, Well, I think Anne-Marie is lucky to have a Dad like you.

Hear that? I said to Anne-Marie. She was on her knees, rummaging through the basket of lotions.

I heard, Anne-Marie said. Mind if I use some of this Gardenia? she said. My hands feel really dry. Help yourself, Brittany said. That one's really soothing.

To Brittany I said, Tell me what you do here again? And she said, she didn't do anything to anyone, she worked on people. I start with the back of the neck, she
said, that's where most people carry a lot of tension, and go on from there. I trust my instincts.

And you like it? I asked, and she said she liked it a lot, she found it very rewarding. Much better than nursing, she said. Much more...—she hesitated meaningfully—Intimate. My clients tell me they have revelations when I'm working on them.

Like what? I said. What kind of revelations? Do they see God, or something? She shrugged. I suppose you could call it that, she said.

Is that why you named it House of Mystery? Anne-Marie asked. It's such a cool name.

I named it that because I think massage is mysterious, Brittany said. Some people explain its success with science, others with magic. Myself, all I know is it works.

She was just like everyone else, she supposed, she liked doing what she was good at. And I said, If you're like everyone else then I'm the King of England. And she laughed and curtsied so low her breasts almost touched her knees and said, At your service. Your highness. She suggested I come back in the morning and she'd give me a massage. Anne-Marie said, Don't even bother, I tried that already. He's not interested.

I looked at Brittany, her thumbs tucked through the belt loops of her jean cut-offs, her navel like an extra dimple in her belly, pale under the lamplight and the moon filtering through the sheets, and I turned my hat around in my lap a couple of times and said, How do you know? Maybe I am. You only live once.

Anne-Marie said, You're kidding.
Partly I think I wanted to prove something to Anne-Marie, but partly I genuinely wanted that massage. It had been a long time since anyone touched the back of my neck.

Brittany said, How's tomorrow at ten?

And I said, That would be fine. What do I have to do? I said. And she said, Nothing. Just show up here, strip, cover yourself with a sheet and be prepared to listen to your body.

Strip? I repeated. You mean I have to be naked for this procedure?

She said that I could keep my underwear on if I preferred. Even in that dim light my face must have betrayed me because she added, Don't worry. I've seen lots of bodies before. You've got nothing to be embarrassed about.

And I thought, Lots of bodies but none with scars like mine. Norman, you old fool, I thought. You've done it this time. The orange taste bubbled back up into my throat, sour now, and my stomach tightened like a wrench.

I hardly slept at all. Naked! It never occurred to me that you had to be naked for a massage. All night I was tortured by images of myself lying face down on the table, like a side of beef waiting for the butcher. I'm sorry, Brittany would say, her face contorted in disgust, You don't really expect me to touch this.

I was blowing things out of proportion, I told myself. As a family physician, it was my job to examine people, to touch their chests and backs and ears. I couldn't remember being repulsed by a patient, except the really obese woman with the tattoos. But that didn't mean I wanted anyone seeing me naked, especially not some lithe young woman who thought wearing pantyhose qualified as suffering.
My stomach had so much gas in it that I experienced referred pain all the way up to my sternum. I lay on my back, then on my side, then on my stomach and then the other side, rolling myself over and over like a log, but nothing helped. It was my own fault. I shouldn't have eaten all those bean burritos, I thought.

Rock and roll music blared from the bars all night, it drifted in even through the closed windows, and the screech of the electric guitars and loud, loud drumbeats set me on edge. I wondered how that old man was getting on. Did the music keep him up nights, too? I could tell he was an early riser. He had that look about him, the look of a man who'd rather get up in the morning to face another day, no matter what it might hold, than sleep his life away.

The music quit about four, but I still couldn't sleep. I was suffocating on the smell of stale incense and Gardenia-scented hand lotion. I glanced at my watch: 5:30. Anne-Marie and I had talked about how we were going to get to the rainforest, to see the quetzals, so I knew that there was an early morning bus to the ferry, departing at seven-thirty. That left two hours. I know, I thought, I'll hike up the hill to see the sun rise, and maybe, if I'm lucky, I'll get to say goodbye to my friend with the cart. I stuffed my few things—I didn't have much, in accordance with Anne-Marie's instructions: only that smelly sportshirt, four pairs of underwear and socks, a pair of long pants and my toiletries--into the little backpack she'd loaned me. She didn't even stir. From the doorway, I blew her a kiss.

It was still dark, the moon had dipped beneath the hill to the west, and very, very quiet, even the monkeys weren't awake yet, when I set out. The road was steeper than it looked from below, and I had to stop every now and again to catch my breath. When I sat down to rest I tried to locate the North star, because it was the only star I can recognize and because I knew Canada lay in that
direction. By tomorrow, I thought, I'll be back there. But my night vision isn't very good, and the stars were fading anyhow as the sky lightened.

When I finally crested the hill I was sweating and breathing hard, blind from the effort, so I didn't see the man immediately. Then I heard a snort, and off to the side of the road, there he was, filling his cart with gravel from a pile of rubble. It looked like at one time there had been a structure there, and that he was clearing out the remains. "Hello!" I called, approaching him. When he saw me he laughed and tipped his cap and offered me a Marlboro. I started to decline, then changed my mind. He gave me his to light it with, and I touched the two ends of the cigarettes and inhaled until the tip of mine glowed, then gave his back. I coughed a couple of times, but then my lungs relaxed, and I could drink in that smoke like good scotch.

Dawn was beginning to break with a thin strip of light that stretched over the gulf, and from our vantage point on the hill we could see the ramshackle collection of buildings that made up Montezuma, the long, lonely stretches of beach and the black of the ocean beyond. After a while I said, "My wife smoked. Her name was Regina." I fished out my wallet and flipped to her picture. "That's her," I said. "That's my wife."

He gazed at it politely. "Linda," he said.

"No," I said, tapping the photo. "Regina." Only later did Anne-Marie tell me that he was trying to say she was pretty.

He tapped the photo again. "Regina Linda." Then he inhaled from his cigarette and looked at me, appraising. His face was deeply lined, and his eyes were a dark, dark brown, almost black, and I thought, There's a man who's seen some things.

"Jorge," he said after he exhaled, switching the cigarette to his left hand and
extending his right one. I shook it. "Glad to know you, Jorge. Norman," I said, jabbing a finger at my chest, and he nodded and repeated my name, emphasizing the second syllable. "Nor-MAN."

We finished our cigarettes in silence, then ground the butts into the road, me with my leather Nike, he with his red flip-flop. How different our lives are, I thought. Yet here we were, together like old friends.

He had two shovels, almost as if he’d been expecting me. At first he tried to wave me away, but I made determined shoveling motions in the air. "I want to help," I said a couple of times, and finally he stepped back and said, "Gracias," rolled up his sleeves, picked up his own shovel and dug in. He was small and wiry, very, very strong, and could pitch in two shovelsful to my one. The action of shoveling and the continuous rhythmic clinking and grating of the shovels got me going, and I found myself talking without thinking. I told him about Regina and the fire, about me and Anne-Marie. Then I asked: "Do you believe there’s a reason for everything, Jorge? A grand plan?" At the mention of his name Jorge looked at me, waiting to see if I wanted something from him. Maybe he didn’t understand every word I said, but that old man knew exactly what I was trying to say.

"I say horsefeathers. See this?" I turned my back to Jorge, bent over slightly and pulled up my shirt.

I heard Jorge set his shovel against the wagon, and take a few steps toward me. I waved Jorge closer, and I heard his flip-flops crunching on the road a few more paces, then stop an arm’s length away. "Ayy," he said quietly. I waved him closer again, and he took another hesitant step, and I could smell the familiar cigarette smoke, and I was reminded of Regina. Then he put two calloused fingers on my back, just above my left shoulder blade. "Ayyy," he said again, as
if he were the one in pain. I flinched, but I made myself stand there while he
drew a deformed circle on my back. He was tracing the outline of the scar, I
realized, and in my mind's eye, I saw it for the first time: not an amorphous
monster at all, but a blank and innocent face. Nothing better or worse than the
features you'd choose to paint inside it.

“Yep,” I said finally, and my speaking split the quiet, and Jorge pulled away his
hand and returned to his shovel. I pivoted to face him, smoothing down my shirt.
“Everyone carries a monkey on their backs, don't they?” Then I chuckled a little,
pleased with the metaphor, and Jorge smiled at me.

I picked up my shovel again and began working. “The newspaper called me a
hero, and the local fire department awarded me a medal. But don't heroes win
the girl? Hell, if surviving were heroic, we'd all be heroes,” I said.

I stopped and looked at Jorge, feeling the blood pounding in my ears and
neck and the backs of my knees. “Getting old ain't for sissies, but it's better than
the alternative. They don't give out medals for getting up in the morning, but
maybe they should. That's all a man's got, is his future, eh?”

We tossed in the last of the gravel and threw the shovels on top. My stomach
growled so loud that Jorge noticed and smiled that funny toothless grin of his. I
remembered the cashews in my pocket, and I dug out a handful and offered
some to Jorge. He and I leaned back against the wagon and ate them, watching
the sun rise over the gulf, illuminating the ocean. All at once, as if on cue, the
monkeys started up again. Jorge and I stood rigid for a moment, listening to
them. “Fuerte,” Jorge said admiringly, and thumped heavily on his chest. “Tiene
un corazon muy fuerte. M'entiende?”

I clapped my hands over my ears and nodded. “Very loud,” I said.
"No, no," he said kindly, and hit his chest again, and then reached sideways and thumped mine three times softly with the back of his hand. "M'entiende?" he said again. And I said, "SI," though it would be several days until I understood.

Anne-Marie and I were following a muddy trail back through the rainforest, debating whether we'd really come across a quetzal a few minutes earlier. Take my word for it, she said. It was way up there, but I saw the crested head, and that amazingly long tail, half my height, like the book talked about, and then just a hint of scarlet red before I lost it.

My eyes aren't what they used to be, so I'm not sure if that was a bird I saw or merely a shifting of light and shadow, and by the time Anne-Marie had handed me the binoculars the bird was definitely gone. But I told her I'd believe her, just this once, and we could tell everyone we knew that we'd seen a quetzal. We'd been getting along much better, I think she was pleased I'd accepted Brittany's massage (it turned out Brittany used to work in a burn unit of a hospital), and I was equally pleased that she'd offered to put her mother's ring on a chain around her neck, though I told her she should do whatever made her happy.

I wouldn't say that bird changed my life, but I suppose you could say the search for it did, because after we had or hadn't found the quetzal, depending on whom you believed, I realized what was absent from the rainforest: the monkeys. I started thinking about how I missed their roars, and that prompted me to tell Anne-Marie the story of me and Jorge. When she'd heard the tale, Anne-Marie stopped and smiled and grabbed my hands, drew them to her lips and kissed them. It was drizzling, and her face was covered with a fine coat of rain, her green eyes shining like lily pads in a pond. "He wasn't talking about the monkeys, Pop," she said. "He only told you what I've been saying: That you have a strong heart."
"Are you sure?" I said. "Doesn't fuerte mean loud?"

"Strong," Anne-Marie said. "It means strong. You can use it to mean strong noise. But that's not what he was saying. Why else would he bang on your chest?"

Who knows if she's right? Maybe I didn't even remember the words he used. But I try to let myself believe it. Because what you believe may be as important as the truth. Possibly more so. Maybe what you believe determines the truth.

That morning with Jorge, it was enough to believe that creatures so small could roar so loud. "Siéntase," Jorge said, and gestured to me to get into the wagon. He gave me a leg up and I crawled into the center of the gravel, and then he began leading the oxen back into town. The natural rocking of my body with the cart wore out a scoop in the gravel, and I rode into Montoya that way, like a king on a litter, tipping my Panama hat at every person we passed.

"Adiós," I said to each of them. "Adiós."
Swing Time

Joe fell in love with my house before he fell in love with me. For this I could not blame him. The house was a real beauty, a two-story standout in a neighborhood of characterless rectangular structures built at the turn of the century for Missoula's railroad workers, and sometimes the neighborhood's peace was still shattered by the booming of trains from the nearby switching yards. In part I chose a working-class neighborhood because it was all I could afford with the modest inheritance my grandfather left me. But in part, I did it deliberately. I was searching for some kind of integrity, I suppose, and in that I was no different from most people who come out west.

It was early June, the irises were in bloom and the mint that grew on the side of the house was creeping into the lawn when I called Joe. I needed him to replace my house's rotten drip edges. I was 29 and still single, and I had purchased the house—my first—two months earlier in a blissful state of infatuation and ignorance. I couldn't resist its high ceilings, crown molding and hardwood floors, nor the elk antlers attached like a flag to the top of the garage. But I wouldn't have known it even had drip edges except the painters I'd hired refused to start work until I addressed the problem. They wrote down Joe's name and phone number. They said he was hard-working and reliable.

Joe was both, nearly to a fault. So I would have said, had I been his wife, or even known of her. He took extra time to put a 10-degree slope on the drip edges, which are the thigh-high, inch-thick boards that wrap around a house like a ribbon to prevent water from collecting at the base. He was especially proud of the finished job, because he managed to blend the new drip edges
with the old ones. "It's just a fuzz off," he said when he showed me, standing at
arm's length, then stroking his hand back and forth along the narrow rim. "But
once it's painted no one'll know the difference. A good carpenter always hides
his mistakes."

I assumed he'd be on his way then, but he stood on my front porch and flicked
chips of paint off the bottom rail of one living room storm window, revealing
more rotting wood. "That's the way it is with these old houses. High
maintenance," he said, and the thought seemed to cheer him. "Lucky for you,"
he said, "I'm a sucker for a good croissant. Just you keep me stocked in these"—
he picked up a fat, half-eaten chocolate one from his plate on the porch railing,
"and I'll give you a good deal on a set of wood storms." He took a large bite out
of the croissant, the crumbs raining down onto his t-shirt. I wouldn't have
recognized a bad deal from a good one. But I noticed that he pronounced
croissant with a soft r. "Kwa-sont."

"You're not from Montana, either, are you?" I said, and he looked up, surprised,
and said no, he'd been raised in the suburbs of Chicago, and even though he'd
lived in Montana for 20 years he still didn't fit in. "Well, you fit in fine here," I said,
and he took off his Cubs cap for the first time since I'd met him, ran one hand
through his thick head of curly auburn hair, and excused himself to go to the
bathroom.

I lent Joe a key to the house, so he could get started before my swingshift at
the bakery ended, and because secretly I enjoyed the idea of finding him there
when I arrived.

Joe claimed he could fix anything with his "tools of ignorance," as he referred
to them, and seeing what he did around my house, I believed him. When my
dryer went on the fritz, he took it apart and put a new belt around the drum. He
dug up sod for my garden, and brought over bricks to line the borders, carrying
them in two five-gallon soy sauce buckets he'd gotten from the Chinese
restaurant next door to his shop. Drawn to the moist salty smell, a neighbor cat
tipped over the empty buckets and licked the insides clean and smooth as
eggshells. Without asking, he built a shelf above my stove and matched the
cornmeal-yellow paint to the flowers on the wallpaper. He gave me a dozen
glass Ball jars—opaque blue ones—to keep on top. As I stood at the sink filling
them with brown rice, bulghur and spiral pasta, I realized that his eyes were the
same blue, pale as possibility.

One morning I dropped my contact lens down the drain, and he lay on his
back on the bathroom floor and removed the elbow joint. I seated myself on the
toilet to watch. I loved watching Joe work, the way he could concentrate on one
simple task, talking without ever glancing up, as if that job was the most
important thing he could do at that moment. As if his life depended on it. I
admired, too, the way his sleeves hugged his biceps, and the pale flat plain of
his belly, which I glimpsed as his shirt rode up to his navel. And those hands,
so sure of themselves. Joe had the biggest and most confident hands I'd ever
seen, with strong veins and sturdy fingers, smooth and straight as rolling pins,
except for his left pinky, which he'd broken in a softball game. All were notably
bare. I put a lot of stock in people's hands and not just because of what they
might tell you about someone's matrimonial status. You can't beat shoes for
revealing economic background (Joe wore Redwing workboots), but I consider
hands a window to the soul. Even if you didn't, though, you couldn't miss Joe's
hands. He was always using them somehow, if not working then pounding out a
soundless tune on a countertop or table. He was a pianist, he told me, and used to play in a band called the Bitter Cowboys. I often wondered if he was any good.

He wrenched off the elbow joint and fished out the lens, pinching it delicately between his enormous thumb and forefinger. He was about to drop it into my cupped palm when something caught his eye. He doubled over.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He frowned. "This Linoleum is bubbling badly," he said, testing the worn flooring with the hand not holding the lens. "See? Some moron left a leak too long," he said, with obvious disapproval. "I can replace it for you. That is, if you want."

He straightened and rubbed the lens into my palm, then seated himself at my former place on the toilet, and watched me clean the contact and insert it into my eye.

I blinked fiercely into the mirror, my eye tearing, wondering if he found me attractive. Or maybe, I thought, he just feels sorry for me, a single woman, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of a house. "How come you know so much?" I said. "How come you always know what to do? Where did you learn that?"

He shrugged. "Most people are smart in their heads. Not me. My knowledge has always been right here—in my hands." Joe turned his calloused palms toward me, as if they contained the text for a how-to book. "They know when to *unh*"—he jerked a quick, half-twisting counterclockwise motion with his wrist—"and when to *unnnnnnnnh*"—this time he pantomimed a long, slow quarter twist. "I can tell whether a screw is sucking, or how rotten siding is, and I can pound a
nail into plaster without it cracking on me. Maybe that doesn't sound like much to an educated woman like you," he said, "But at the end of a day I know I did good work. That's important to me."

I suppose Joe would not have been considered handsome in a photograph. His head was too square, his ears too big and his body not particularly muscular, except for his arms, but when he worked he was taut and focused, with the untapped energy of a diver about to launch from the end of a board. Sometimes, when he set his coffee cup in the sink, or put away his tools in his truck's lockboxes, Joe's face took on an unfathomably sad expression, but he was never unhappy when he was working. I wanted to have the same effect on him, the same desperate way I want to make a baby smile, or a dog wag its tail. He deserved to be happy. And that was something I could do.

Each morning I'd bring Joe a treat: a raspberry or lemon-poppy croissant, a maple danish or a cinnamon twist. After a few days on the job, Joe started phoning the bakery before I left to tell me what kind of pastry he was in the mood for. This, I reasoned, indicated two encouraging facts about his condition: one, he felt comfortable enough to call; and two, no one else was feeding him breakfast.

Once home, I'd brew a strong pot of coffee and heat the pastries and bring out a bowl of the first cherries of summer, and we'd sway on the porch swing in the chill morning air. Joe showed me his tools—the Sawzall was his favorite—and explained what they were used for. His father had been a lawyer, but he'd collected tools, just because he liked the way they looked, and Joe had taught himself how to use them. By the time he finished high school he'd taken apart most of the appliances in their house and put them back together. "What my
father didn’t know," he said, laughing, "was that I usually had two or three parts left over from each project. I kept the spare parts in my top desk drawer. It didn’t seem to matter; everything went on working fine anyways. They must put a few extra parts in just for people like me."

"My family is mechanically dysfunctional," I said. "I remember when I was little, my father ordered a Heathkit radio. It took him literally years to assemble, and even then the reception was all staticky. I must have been about eight when I decided I would fix it. That’s the only time I ever remember my Dad spanking me. I guess I can’t blame him. But I got the message all right. Girls didn’t mess with mechanics. What you do," I said, turning to Joe, and offering him a cherry, "It’s like magic."

"My pleasure," he said, grabbing a handful. "Trust me."

The truth was, Joe fell in love not with the house itself but with all the things wrong with it. Because he was so sure he could make them right.

My name is Hannah, and I come from an East Coast suburban family, unhandy people, the kind who hire lawn services and foreign live-in housekeepers. (Never maids. Other people had maids, but my father was a stickler for semantics, and we had housekeepers.) I became a social worker in the Hartford school system, but I felt increasingly like a fraud. The students shuffled into my office, resentful and angry, and were not fooled by my attempts at empathy. What could I offer them? I had never faced much adversity, beyond the occasional angst about grades or boys or a piano recital. They seemed to sense that I was every bit as overwhelmed by the ugliness of their lives as they were, and we all felt cheated. When social-services cuts eliminated my job, I
shed no tears. I felt sure no one would miss me.

I considered joining the Peace Corps, but when I interviewed I found they only wanted volunteers with skills, and social work did not qualify. No, I did not know how to design a bridge. No, I was not familiar with agricultural practices. No, I did not speak any foreign languages fluently, unless Latin counted, and that had been in high school, and it's not a spoken language anyway, though, as I pointed out to the interviewer, we sometimes read our translations aloud. She did not find this amusing.

I bought a road atlas and, ignoring my family's jibes—"Ms. Kerouac," my sister called me—drove west, thinking I'd check out the San Juan Islands, which, not counting Alaska, was as far west as you could get in a car. But my alternator went out in Missoula, and while the mechanic was replacing it I took a walk by the river. I wound up at a downtown bakery, and almost immediately, the smell transported me back to my childhood. Matilda, our Danish housekeeper, used to bake marvelous marzipan-filled coffee cakes; one of my happiest memories is standing on a chair and punching down the dough. When the coffee cake was hot from the oven she'd cut us each a thick slice and spread a slab of butter on it. Then we'd go to her tiny room off the kitchen to watch Dark Shadows, her favorite soap opera, and I'd sit crosslegged underneath the ironing board while she starched my father's shirts. The house filled with the smells of damp cloth and yeast, and during the really scary parts, when the vampire was about to sink his teeth into a victim, Matilda would reach down and squeeze my shoulder.

I stood eating my almond croissant and thinking of Matilda, who had been killed in a plane accident when I was 10, and on a lark I asked if the bakery
needed any help. As a matter of fact, the woman said, the night baker had given notice yesterday.

After a few weeks of training, I could handle things on my own. I didn't mind working solo; there was plenty to do and the time passed quickly. My shift started at eleven, and right off I'd mix the sponge—the eggs, oil, salt, yeast and a little bit of flour—for the whole wheat loaves. While the yeast activated, I peeled and shredded the carrots for the carrot-raisin muffins, mixed the batter and set the molds in the oven. Then I slid the stainless-steel bowl with the sponge down the counter to the mixmaster, where, under the steady prodding of the bread hooks, the mass metamorphosed into shiny, elastic dough, the color of caramel taffy. I separated this dough into one-pound sections, kneaded each one into a ball and put them through the rollsheeter. Then I covered each loaf with a damp towel to let them rise. By then the muffins were done, I set them on racks to cool so the bottoms didn't come out mushy. Then I rolled, cut and filled the croissant dough that had been left in the fridge for me. Put the whole wheat loaves in the oven. Drew the bakery's signature sheaf of wheat design onto the top of each round sourdough loaf I'd made before I inserted them into a separate oven. Lastly, about 5:30, as the day person arrived, I made scones.

Quite unexpectedly, I found the job fulfilling. At the end of each shift, you could inventory your work, counting your loaves and muffins and scones like toy soldiers. Also, the job played into my vanity: I'd always been tall with extraordinarily long, thin arms, but all that lifting and kneading had developed my biceps and broadened my shoulders. For the first time in my life, I wore sleeveless shirts.

Whatever its rewards, however, the bakery job didn't pay much. I began to
wonder how long I could afford Joe. For a week and a half, I had scrupulously avoided talking about money, which, along with love, was rarely discussed during my New England upbringing. These things, we were lead to believe, simply appeared, like the glass bottles of milk on the back porch.

"So tell me," I said, during one of our coffee breaks, scuffing my feet along the porch floor to set the swing in motion, "How much is all this expertise going to cost?"

Joe moistened the tip of his third finger and dabbed the croissant crumbs from his plate and from the worn legs of his Carharts.

"To fix it all? Sweetheart, more than you can afford," he said smugly, draining his coffee from his mug, then standing up and handing me his dishes. "You need a full-time handyman, that's what you need." He grinned and broke into an Alberta Hunter blues song he'd been singing lately. Something about her handyman tending the front yard. Then he gave a James Brown kind of yip—"Owhhh!"—bent over and played along on the top of the porch wall.

I stood on the first of the concrete porch steps peering up at his face. "I've got a better idea," I said, with a sudden impulse to shock. "Why don't we just get married? Then you'll do the work for free."

Joe paused, smiled a lopsided half-smile, as if he knew a secret, then dodged me and descended the stairs. He didn't look at all shocked. He looked, in fact, as if he might be considering the idea. "Didn't anyone ever tell you? There ain't no free lunch," he said, as he disappeared around the side of the house.

"That works both ways," I called after him, but I don't know if he heard me, because when he stuck his head back around the corner he only grabbed at the bush that grew there, shook it and said: "This juniper needs pruning. I'll bring
my shears tomorrow."

I sought refuge in the kitchen, where I made an extra-garlicky batch of hummus, spooned it thickly on whole wheat and covered it with sprouts. At noon I brought the sandwich to the garage, where Joe was on the roof, spreading new asphalt. He ate the sandwich gratefully, washing it down with a carton of chocolate milk he took from his cooler. "Beats bologna and chips," he said, and asked for a second, and then a third sandwich, and between them we settled on a budget he would not exceed.

After Joe left about six-thirty, I went upstairs and tried to sleep. But my bedroom window faced west, and the early evening sun poured in through the branches of the apple tree. Just as I drifted off, I heard the crashing from the switching yard. To my still untrained ear, it could sound like thunder. Unnerved, I sat up to check for rain, only to find there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Missoula lay at the western edge of the time zone, and oh!—the days were achingly long.

Joe didn't work at my house full-time, but I noticed with some satisfaction that he never left without having begun another project. That way he'd have to return. But by the end of the second week, he'd finished the small jobs, and I hadn't yet given him the go-ahead on the larger projects: his plan to screen in the back porch; or the kitchen and bathroom remodels he'd suggested. It was late afternoon on summer solstice, and we were sitting in our usual spot on the swing, listening to country and western tapes he'd brought over. I was chewing on a sprig of mint, he on a toothpick. The music was frequently drowned out by the neighbors across the street, as they revved up their stock car, and by the screech and chatter of the police scanner next door, where the retired fireman
lived. We didn't care. In the distance the tips of the Rockies were greening up, and the swing was shady and comfortable.

"Ever think about moving to New England?" he said. "Connecticutt or something?"

"Joe," I reminded him, "I just came from there."

"Oh," he said. "Oh yeah." He began to clean his fingernails with one end of the toothpick. "I heard there's a lot of work out there. A lot of people with money and taste."

"I'm sure there'd be plenty of work for someone as talented as you," I said. "You're a real craftsman."

"Thanks," he said, and then stared for a moment at my face. "You've got something—a leaf or something—in your hair," he said, and just as I reached up to brush it away he did it for me, and our fingers touched briefly before he retracted his hand.

"Where?" I said.

"Oh sorry," he said. "Maybe it was just the light."

We continued to swing in silence, and then the neighbors came to the rescue, punching the accelerator so that the vibrations shook the porch foundation. The engine backfired, then quieted, and Joe took a deep breath, exhaled, and clapped his hands.

"Listen," he said. "Did you know summer officially starts tomorrow? How'd you like to spend the weekend floating with me? Welcome the season with a raft trip."

"It's about time," I replied, in mock indignation. "A girl could remodel her entire house waiting for a date with you. I've never been rafting. It'll be fun."
Fleetingly, he looked pleased, and then his face clouded over with that sad expression and he revealed the reason for it. "You know I'm married, don't you?"

I didn't know it. What's more, I didn't believe it. "No, you're not," I replied confidently, as if he'd suggested one plus one equalled three. "No ring," I pointed out. "And you're always hungry in the morning. Besides," I said, "in two weeks you've never ever used the pronoun 'we.' It's always 'I' this and 'I' that. That's not how married people talk. You get to a certain age, you watch for these signs," I said.

"Will you look at what they teach in college these days?" said Joe. He cocked his head slightly to one side and chuckled. "I bet you graduated summa cum laude, or whatever they call it. But I don't wear a ring because it's dangerous for a carpenter--too easy to get caught up and lose a finger, even a whole hand. And I'm hungry in the morning because my wife doesn't bother to make me breakfast and I'm too lazy or incompetent--take your pick--to feed myself. As for the pronoun, I guess we just don't do much together. For years she's insisted I hate women, but now that I've met you I've realized I don't hate women at all. I like women. I just don't like my wife."

"You don't have any kids, do you?" I said, nervously.

"Nope. Tried for a while," he said, "but we came up empty. She can't. Not that it's any of your business," he added, "But I don't have a problem in that area. I know how to use my tools," he said. "If you know what I mean."

I ignored the sophomoric humor. "So you're not happily married?" I said after a pause, trying to keep the hopeful note out of my voice.

"No," he said, shaking his head feebly. He looked me right in the eyes and
said, "No, I am definitely not happily married. And that is one thing I don't know how to fix."

But I do, I thought.

We watched the neighbors tinker with their car, and then Joe apologized. "I want you to know I've never been unfaithful. Never. Once between sets a woman offered to tie my shoe, but I got flustered and said I could do it myself, and she went home with the bass guitarist. Scout's honor." He held up the three-fingered signal. In that moment I could picture exactly how he looked when he was a big-eared, eager Scout, his uniform dwarfing his awkward frame.

My God, I thought. He's telling the truth. I rejoiced: Married or no, I'd found an honest man.

"I believe in marriage," I said weakly.

"Does that mean you won't go?"

His face looked pinched, and he grabbed for the back of the swing, like a man about to fall off a roof. His sudden gesture tipped the swing towards him, and I dumped the bowl of cherries from my lap. They scattered over the porch, red and smooth as marbles. I watched a few roll down the steps and nestle into the lush green lawn.

Joe returned 45 minutes later with the rafting equipment piled in the bed of his truck, the wooden frame lashed to the top. He let the screen door slam, and paced around the living room, his hands clenched in two tight fists behind his back. "Maybe we shouldn't go," I said, sitting on the window seat zipping up my duffel. "It's not too late. We could still cancel. I won't tell anyone."
"Yes it is, it is too late," Joe said angrily, swinging my bag over his shoulder. "It's a done deal. We're outta here." He practically ran out the back door, clearly afraid to lose his momentum.

At first he drove in silence, gripping the steering wheel fiercely, as if he were afraid to let go or the truck might turn around of its own accord. Every once in a while he'd remove one hand from the wheel and open and close it to keep the circulation flowing. To my relief, he had not asked me to duck down, though I noticed he wound over to the freeway entrance on small side streets. I thought we'd stick around Missoula somewhere, maybe go up the Blackfoot, but Joe wanted to go much further, down to the Bighole River in southwest Montana. He said that was the only part of the state that hadn't been ruined with little houses all made of ticky-tacky. He said he wanted to go to the real Montana.

"What are you telling me?" I said. "That I've moved to the fake Montana?"

"Hell, who knows what's real anymore?" he said, and shrugged.

About 20 miles outside of the city limits Joe put on his favorite Ian Tyson tape, melodic heart-breaking songs that could make anyone feel like a westerner. He finally sat back and seemed to breathe for the first time since we'd gotten in the truck. "God, that's pretty," he said, and played along on the steering wheel.

"What did you tell your wife—about this weekend?" I asked.

"Left her a note. Told her I was going fishing," he said. "I do that a lot."

"Doesn't she fish?"

"My wife?" He smiled at the thought. "She's from Eastern Montana but she doesn't like the outdoors much. Afraid of bears."

"Are there bears where we're going?"

"Naaah," he said, dismissing the notion with a wave of his hand. "But for
God's sake," he said, turning to me, "Don't tell her that." And we both laughed at the thought of me talking to his wife about anything at all.

He had met Ruth in a church group he'd joined when he came to Montana searching for something to do besides drugs, he said, and she began bringing batches of homemade oatmeal cookies out to his job sites. He had married her almost immediately because it seemed safe and easy.

"We bought a house right after we got married, I use the term loosely, it was just a shabby little cabin, and I gutted the entire thing and rebuilt it. Weekends, nights, for years, that's all I did. God, it was endless. Drywall. Wiring. Plumbing. Roofing. Then on to the finish work. Doors. Kitchen cabinets. I even pickled the spindles on the bannister. We lived with a table saw in our living room for four years," he said, proudly. "And you know what? It's perfect," he declared, slapping the dash with the ends of his fingers. "The house is frigging perfect. But our marriage looks like someone took a wrecking ball to it. Now that the house is finished, she doesn't have any reason to be nice to me anymore."

"No more cookies?" I asked.

"No more nothing," he said, and sighed meaningfully.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was leaning against the door, my legs outstretched on the vinyl seat, and I picked them up to unstick them, which made a funny sucking noise. I asked: "Why'd you stay married?"

"Honestly? I think neither of us wants to move out of that house."

"Maybe you shouldn't have done such a good job."

"That'll teach me," he said, and snorted. "If only I wasn't such a conscientious craftsman."

Soon we left behind the traffic on I-90 and were heading south on Highway 1,
the sun warming my back, my hair flapping out the open window. Joe accelerated. "Want to know my favorite thing about Montana?" he said. "A daytime speeding ticket'll cost you five bucks. And it doesn't even go on your record. Sometimes," he said, "Sometimes, if I've got nothing else to do, I just get on the freeway and floor it. I'm not a reckless guy," he said, "I wear my seatbelt and everything. But sometimes I like that—driving as fast as I can. You know? Not that this truck'll do much more than eighty."

"I get a lot of thinking done in my car," I said. "No one can bother you there. It's just your own little world."

"That's it," Joe said. "That's exactly right."

After a while he said, "I sure wish you could see my house."

"I'm sure it's lovely," I said.

"Pass me a beer," Joe said. "Would you?"

I opened the cooler between us and pulled out a can of Schmidt. I hadn't realized how hot it was in the cab until I put my hand on the ice in the cooler. I touched the can to my forehead, then popped it open and let the foam fly out the window. I undid my seatbelt, put the cooler on the floor and scootched over next to Joe. When I gave him the beer he put his arm around me. I kissed him on the cheek. He smelled of yeast and damp sawdust.

He took a long, greedy drink of beer, letting some dribble down his chin without wiping it away. "Ever been to San Francisco?" he said. "Let's drive to San Francisco."

"Joe," I said. "I just came to Montana. I haven't been here long enough to want to leave."

"Well, I have," he said. "I sure have."
By the time we descended into Anaconda we'd had two beers apiece and listened to the Ian Tyson tape three times through, so that I'd learned some of the lyrics, and I was shamelessly belting them out off-key. The valley stretched out wide, and the shadows of the mountains in the distance cut long, deep swaths across the fields.

Anaconda was a dirty workingman's town with little to distinguish it except the smelter stack that rose in the distance, a towering, somewhat phallic reminder of better days. It used to be the largest smelter stack in the world, Joe told me, until they built a bigger one in South America. "Five hundred and eighty-six feet," he said, and when I looked at him sideways he added, "Measurements are important to a carpenter." Normally, you'd drive straight through Anaconda and never even think about it afterward. But then we came across the Club Moderne, its neon sign winking in the hazy light of dusk, its rounded chrome corners a welcome contrast to the boarded-up buildings and abandoned streets. "What the hell?" Joe said, and whipped off his sunglasses. He swerved into a parking space behind an old black Falcon with a vanity plate that read, "HAVFUN."

"See?" I teased, pointing to the plate. "You were religious. Can't you recognize a message from God?"

We got out of the truck and peered through the circular window in the door, like a portal on a ship. A few men in baseball caps and suspenders that hugged their swollen bellies leaned from their chrome stools onto the counter. A balding bartender rested against an enormous back bar. He wore a full-length white apron and tie, his thick arms crossed stoically in front of him. Three women with
white vinyl handbags and sleeveless floral print blouses played cards at a
formica table. They all looked the same washed out sixty-ish, like wax figurines.
There wasn't a smile to be found in the place.

"Modern according to who?" I asked Joe. "And where are the cowboys? I
thought we were going to the real west."

"Life is full of false promises," Joe said, and held the door open for me.
Everyone in the bar turned to stare, and I felt transparent, as if I'd landed in one
of those disturbing dreams where I suddenly realize I'm naked. Briefly, I thought,
"They know," and I felt myself blush hot. Then I realized that they were staring
not because they could read minds, but because we were strangers, and
because Joe was dressed in a shirt that declared "Citizens for a Poodle-Free
Montana," baggy Levi's and the only pair of cowboy boots in the place, and I
had on Guatemalan shorts and bangles and Birkenstocks.

We ordered the drink of the house and dutifully tossed back our shots of Early
Times and gulped down a Hamm's back. Joe let out a long, raspy burp, and
smiled. Behind us, the women reshuffled the deck. Joe caressed the elaborate
wooden inlays on the bar, tracing the grooves with his index finger, and let out a

"Right you are," said the bartender, warming to the flattery. His uncle had built
the place sixty years ago, he said, but hardly anyone appreciated its aesthetics
anymore. "But what the hell? It's a good living. Go on--have a look around," he
said, making a sweeping gesture with his arm.

We walked the perimeter of the room. Joe reached up and fingered the
collection of old beer bottles that lined the shelves, and then we drifted into a
musty and dimly lit back lounge, where naugahyde-lined booths took up one
whole wall, a bad landscape mural another. We tried to punch in a Hank Williams, Jr., song on one of the individual mini-jukeboxes hanging beside each booth, but they weren't working. That's when Joe spotted the piano, an old upright at the edge of the Linoleum floor. He pulled out the bench, tucked in his shirt and began to play country-western songs, sweet old-timey ones: Home on the Range, and Red River Valley and Your Cheating Heart.

And he answered my question: Was he any good?

Oh, yes. With those enormous hands he could reach an easy tenth, whereas most people have trouble stretching an octave. Later he told me he could not read music but played by ear, improvising as he went along, but at the time it seemed like everything was planned. He was not much of a showman, he held his torso rigid and his face was as intense as when he worked. But his fingers were nimble and precise as they trotted over the keys. As he gained confidence, he began to play louder. The sun dipped to the level of the window and the slats of the wooden blinds behind him divided up the saffron light. I could see dust motes floating through the air. The keys of the piano and Joe's white t-shirt took on a pinkish translucent glow, and Joe looked pale and angelic.

Hearing the music, the men in suspenders and the card-playing women meandered back to the lounge, and several of them brought glasses of beer for us until we had a line of them on the piano like small offerings. Joe stopped for a moment to ask for a glass of milk, and the innocence of the request made me love him (for in that moment I did love him) all the more. The milk was delivered to him by a woman in a lime-green pantsuit.

"I'll be damned," she said. "I haven't heard anyone play that thing for 30 years, not since the night I met my husband. Who'd have thought it would make
any noise at all? That your sweetheart?" she asked, gesturing toward Joe with her head, which supported an absurdly large, marigold-yellow bouffant. "My, he surely can play," she said, shaking her head in admiration. "Mmmm, mmm."

"Yes," I agreed, "He surely can." For an instant I believed her, I believed Joe was my sweetheart, and that when we left the bar we would float lazily downriver and maybe catch a fish or two, and that on the way home we would stop and scribble a couple of postcards to friends and relatives back east. Hell, I would have sworn Joe could walk on water, if anyone had asked. In the smokey sanctuary of the Club Moderne, all things were possible.

The woman pursed her lips. "Honey," she said, clasping my hands, "You hang onto a man like that." Her fingers were thin and fragile as twigs, her fingernails too pink and too long to believe, but they looked good on her, I thought.

Then a man in a wide collar and suspenders took her hand and escorted her onto the dance floor, where they performed a graceful two-step. Someday, I hoped to find a man who could partner me like that. I wanted to tell them the truth, that Joe was married to someone else, but she didn’t love him, and didn’t he deserve better than that? Look at him now, I wanted to say. He’s happy. I’ve made him happy.

The bartender offered Joe a steady gig on the way out. Joe said he’d think about it, and from the smile on his face and the glint in his eye I believe for a minute he did. I caught a final glimpse of myself in an art deco mirror; I looked wild, my hair tangled, my face flushed. I looked, I thought, like I’d just had sex.

When we walked outside the sun had set and the black Falcon was gone. To the east, it was dark, but gradations of blue melted from the zenith into the white of the western horizon. On the outskirts of Anaconda the wind gusted waves of
pungent sage through the open truck windows. We were intoxicated--partly from alcohol but mostly from our delight at cruising in and out of a place without explanation or accountability. I took off my shoes, stuck my feet out the window and wiggled my toes while Joe sang along to an old tape of The Byrds. I'd brought a loaf of rosemary-grape bread, a bakery experiment, and I dug out some of the grapes and fed them to Joe one by one.

"Did you see their faces?" I said. "You're a hero."

"Thank you," he said, licking the tips of my fingers.

"You're welcome," I said, and fed him the last grape.

We didn't bother to find a campground. We drove until it seemed like we were far from anything familiar, turned onto a gravel road and found a clearing to sleep in. To hell with the tent, we decided. We pushed the sage to one side and Joe unzipped our sleeping bags and spread them out like blankets. We sat on them and held hands and watched the full moon rise, the sage shimmering like water. Joe grabbed a fistful of leaves and held them to his nose, inhaling deeply, then held them to mine. I had never been in sage country before, and I thought of the stuffing my family ate at Thanksgiving. My stomach growled, and we both giggled.

"Well," Joe said finally, with a forced laugh, "We made our bed. Let's lie in it."

He kissed me then, and I closed my eyes so I could concentrate on how it felt, the wind blowing in the little space between us, lifting up my t-shirt and rippling across my skin. Then we lay down, his hands cushioning my back and mine under his t-shirt, feeling his damp heat on my palms and my body and the cool fragrant air on my face. I remember thinking: "Why is he so hot to the touch?"
When I woke the next morning the prickles of sage were jutting into my bare back. The wind had died, and I had a nagging headache. My breath tasted sour, and I hadn't brought a toothbrush. I took a handful of melted ice from the cooler, rinsed out my mouth and spit. I looked at Joe, curled up like a child and still sleeping, and thought, "I'm not guilty." Technically we weren't, because, as he insisted later, we hadn't actually had sex. He couldn't, and in the moment's letdown he'd rolled over onto his back, put his hands underneath his head and acknowledged, "Maybe I'm feeling more guilty than I thought."

We had planned to spend the day floating, but in our rush to get out of Missoula we hadn't brought life preservers. I was ready to go anyway, but Joe said it was illegal to float without them. Besides, he admitted sheepishly, he couldn't swim. And he'd forgotten a bicycle so one of us could ride back to the truck from the takeout. We sat on the riverbank, underneath a stand of cottonwoods, saw two blue herons and an osprey swooping low over the water looking for fish. I was surprised to find the landscape so dry. When Joe looked at me I noticed he had a piece of grape skin stuck in his teeth; it was the deep black-red of dried blood.

On the way home we kept the tape player low. The sun's glare aggravated my headache so finally we shut off the music completely. Was it my imagination or was the sun hanging lower in the sky? The days seemed shorter already. Joe steered with one hand, and the other I held loosely until we filled up with gas in Philipsburg, and when he got back in the truck after that we didn't touch at all. He detoured into town and he showed me the county jail where he'd installed some vents. Then we returned to the highway and drove the speed limit. When we got back to my house that afternoon I sat on the living room floor--I still
hadn't purchased any furniture—and wrote Joe a check for the money I owed him.

"Whatever you do," he said, as I filled out the check, "Don't paint over this woodwork. It's perfect just the way it is."

"I won't," I said, ripping the check out and handing it to him. "Promise."

"I wish you could see my house," he said.

"Joe," I said, with the same firm insistence I used with someone who'd had too much to drink, "Go on home."

He stopped at the back door. "I made a mistake," he said.

"I know," I said. "We both did."

"No," he said. "Not you. I mean, my marriage was a mistake."

"Yeah, well, remember, good carpenters cover their mistakes," I said, determined to put an end to this. "Take care, okay?"

When his truck disappeared down the street I pruned the juniper with the shears Joe mistakenly had left behind. I began cautiously, but little by little I grew bolder. I liked the feel of the shears in my hands, liked the sharp snap! the branches made as I cut through them. I did not stop until there was nothing left but a few scraggly green shoots, and old dead limbs that the shears wouldn't cut through. I hadn't realized how easy it was to get carried away. Then I went inside, stood at the kitchen counter and ate the last of the previous day's hummus, scraping the dried and caked bits off the sides of the bowl. The counters, I realized, were too low, and the porcelain sink was stained. Shit, I thought, I should have had Joe remodel while I had the chance.

Joe called the next day and left a message on my machine: a long piano rendition of Home on the Range. I sat on the window seat and cried until I
hiccuped.

Overnight, it seemed, the weather shifted, and I had my first taste of Montana's blisterly hot, dry summers. My hair went limp. I didn't drink enough water during my bakery shifts, and my hands began to crack and itch. If I scratched them, they bled. Several nights in a row, I ruined the batch of whole wheat bread because I forgot to put salt in the sponge, and the loaves didn't rise. My back ached from standing on the bakery's concrete floor, and I tried not to think about Joe's hands massaging my sore muscles.

At home, I pulled down the shades to keep the house cool. I even tacked up a blanket over my bedroom window so I could sleep, but it kept falling down. When I looked out the windows, I saw the mountains turning an unappetizing dun color.

I all but quit eating, subsisting on Cornflakes and Honeynut Cheerios I'd eat dry out of the box. Cooking for one wasn't interesting, and everything from the bakery seemed too rich and overly sweet. My co-workers had warned me I'd get sick of the food, and I finally had.

I played Joe's message over and over, but I did not call him back. What would I say if his wife answered? What could I possibly say to her?

What I said was: "Jalapeño or plain?"

A week had passed. I was covering a dayshift when I saw Joe's truck pull up. Oh shit. What's he doing here? I thought. But out of the truck emerged a big-boned, plain-looking woman, wearing a long jeans skirt and a faux-western blouse. She's come to get me, I thought. She's going to pull out a hunting rifle from the bed of the truck and shoot me dead, and somehow there seemed
justice in that.

But when Ruth came in, she carried only an African sisal handbag. She asked for half a dozen dinner rolls. As I put them in a sack, a second customer entered, and greeted Ruth by name, confirming her identity. As I bent down to gather the rolls from the pastry case I heard their polite conversation. How are you doing? And how's Joe? the woman asked, and Ruth said, Oh fine, fine. "Liar," I thought, "Phony," and felt ashamed, not for what I'd done, which I did not regret, but for the secrets in my possession. Peering through the glass case at her plump midsection was like looking through a one-way mirror at an unsuspecting subject. Beyond the shame was fear, for, now that I'd seen her, I could not honestly say she looked particularly villainous. Everytime I pass your house I admire it, the woman was saying. You've done such a lovely job. Thank you, Ruth said, we love it, too. She had the brittle, pasted-on mask of a woman no longer loved or loving, but try as I might, I could not hate her for that. To make myself feel better, I stuck three extra rolls in the bag, and didn't charge her for them.

Joe spent half that night driving aimlessly around Missoula but when the wind picked up sometime after midnight he came to my house, blown there like a piece of paper. He let himself in—I'd forgotten to get the key back—and woke me from a deep dreamless sleep by singing the last line of the Alberta Hunter song: "Oh, my handyman ain't handy no more, no more." By the moonlight that shone through the window I could see the silver duct tape he'd used to bandage his hand. While I held it he sat on the edge of the bed and told me the story of his confession.

"You know me," he said, "I'm not a good liar." When he stopped pacing to
lean on the counter he'd built her, she stabbed him with a carving fork. The two prongs struck just below the knuckle, straddled the tendon that connected his index and third fingers and stood erect like an upside-down tuning fork, until he recovered from his shock and pulled it out.

"I guess in some way I wanted her to throw me out," he said. "I told her I was in love with you."

"Oh, God," I groaned. I dragged myself out of bed and slipped on a robe. "Are you?" As we made our way downstairs Joe said, "You need a new bannister," shaking it to illustrate how it wiggled.

"I'll put it on the list," I said.

We stood on the porch for a moment. A flash of sheet lightning lit up the mountains. There was a distant rumble that might have been thunder, might have been the trains.

"Smells like rain," said Joe.

"We could use it," I said.

As we settled back on the porch swing, it creaked, like thin ice about to break. Reflexively, we stood up. In the dark, he examined the swing with the fingers of his good hand. "No problem. Only a bottom slat," he said. "It'll just take me a minute."

"Joe," I said, gently, grabbing at his duct-taped hand. "You can't fix everything."

"No," he said, "I can't. But I can fix this swing. At least let me fix this swing."

"Okay," I said, "Okay." And I let go his hand.

I heard the clanging of metal as he rooted around in his truck for the right tools, and then there was another flash of lightning, and more clanging as he
slammed the lockbox shut. He came back whistling, a flashlight, clamp, caulking gun and Wonder bar in his arms. I sat on the porch wall behind him, holding the flashlight, and watched him kneel by the swing and pry off the cracked slat with his Wonder bar. "See," he said, aiming his caulking gun at the offending board. "I'll just squeeze a little construction adhesive in there, clamp it overnight and in the morning, it'll be stronger than the wood itself. That's what they claim, anyways," he said.

"Great," I said. He steadied the clamp with his injured hand, deftly tightening it with his good one.

"Yeah," he said, "Good thing she caught me in my left hand. Or you'd be out of luck."

"Yeah," I said. "Good thing."

There was another flash of lightning. Joe gave a last turn to the clamp, and stood to face me. As the thunder boomed closer—it was unmistakably thunder this time—I picked up his bandaged hand and kissed it, running my tongue over the rough threads and tasting the bitter adhesive. The temperature dropped suddenly, and a cool breeze gusted across the porch, bringing with it fat raindrops that splattered on the concrete walkway. I felt goosebumps rise, and I shivered with hope and fear and called it love.
The night before my father had heart surgery, he dictated his obituary to me. "You're the writer in the family," he said, not seeing the irony. Nobody tells real writers what to say.

A clear plastic oxygen tube snaked from my father's bedside and disappeared into his prominent nose ("When God was passing out noses I thought he said roses and asked for a big one," went his oft-told joke), but otherwise my father still looked handsome, a Jewish Spencer Tracy. He had a full head of gray hair, smooth skin that stretched taut over high cheekbones and a voice that said, Don't argue. He passed me a yellow steno pad and told me to take some notes.

"Jack Witkowsky, 78," he began. The mistake startled me.

"Seventy-six," I corrected gently. My father was so loathe to acknowledge growing old he refused a badly-needed hearing aid. How could he have aged himself two years during a 14-day stay in the hospital?

"Seventy-six," he repeated after me. "Born in Chicago, the grandson of David Witkowsky, who emigrated to the city from Prussia in the 1840s, among the first few thousand Jews to come here."

He ticked off his achievements in a random chronology, referring to himself in the third person, like the doctors had been doing, as if he were already dead. Witkowsky, he said, had worked for nearly five decades as a real estate analyst, during which time he'd been consulted on the city's urban renewal projects and the Sears Tower, the world's tallest building. Served on both the Chicago Board of Education and as chair of Illinois' first State Board of Education, where he championed school desegregation. Made Army Major during World War II.
While he talked he set his hands on his stomach, wove his thumbs and slender fingers, then slid them out of the clasp over and over again in his customary fidget. If it weren't for the oxygen tube tying him to the bed, I knew, he would have been pacing.

I'd written plenty about dead people. After college, I worked for a wire service called City News Bureau of Chicago, which based its reputation on no-nonsense, hard-news reporting. "Your mother says she loves you?" the motto went. "Check it out." Every morning at 6 a.m., a CNB reporter drove to the Cook County Morgue and picked up a list of all the county residents who'd died the previous day. The names were then divvied up among the reporters, who investigated each and every death. Foul play always warranted a story; but we also tried to spot the names of important personalities. Deaths that could not claim any news value were dubbed "cheap," and we reporters subsequently "cheaped them out," meaning we crossed them off our list. My father, I realized, wanted to make damn sure no one, most especially his family, ever labeled his life "cheap."

I could see him wondering: "Is this what it comes down to: a list?"

Several times I interrupted the catalogue of my father's civic and professional accomplishments. "Hey!" I'd exclaim. "I didn't know that." Finally he fixed his hooded, pale blue eyes on me and said: "There's lots of things you don't know. That's why you're writing this down."

He was right. The more he talked the more I realized how little I knew about my father outside of his relationship with me. I was 29, in the process of buying my own house 1,700 miles away, but I did not know the people I was leaving behind.
My father concluded with one line on his personal life: "Married to the former Iris Shiffman for 32 years, and father of daughter Anne, a policy analyst for the Secretary of Defense, and Kathryn, a writer in Missoula, Montana." His eyes welled with tears, his voice wavered then broke, and suddenly he seemed very old and vulnerable. I had spent most of my life trying to win my father's approval. It never occurred to me that he might need mine.

My father and I both looked away at the bland beige hospital room wall. I ripped off the pages of notes and put them in a zippered pocket of my purse. From the same pocket I pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I wrote this for you last week," I said, as I unfolded and passed it to him. "My first poem."

"No, it's not," he said. With the change of subject, he had regained his composure.

"Yes," I said, through a clenched jaw, "It is."

He ignored me. "Read it out loud," he requested.

"No," I said. "You need to read it to yourself."

"Hand me my glasses," he said. I did and then picked up The New York Times, sections of which were strewn around the room, evidence of lengthy visitations from my mother and sister. Long ago my father told me there were two keys to success. One was to read The New York Times every day. Number two baffles me still: write a daily diary. He was so convinced of the importance of the latter habit that when I was 10 he paid me $50 to keep a diary for a full year. I still have it: a smudged, cloth-covered five-year diary, turquoise blue with white polka dots. I picked the lock: the brief, four-line entries reveal a child obsessed with figure skating and fitting in.
My father had never kept a diary. Now he expected me to do it for him. But you can't write someone else's life, especially someone you know only as well and as little as your father.

The poem I'd written was about my father in the hospital and me far away, connected only by telephone and memories, about the days when he taught me how to tell time and ice skate. He'd take me to the frozen park lagoon and wriggle backwards, arms outstretched. "Come on, come on," he'd say, while I tripped over my toepicks trying to latch onto his hands. I became the figure skater who executed perfect figure eights, the poem noted, and now I was the one extending my arms.

When I looked up, I saw, for the first time, my father weep. I wondered whether he was crying from fear or love; for some reason I thought they were mutually exclusive, when in fact they're inextricably linked. I leaned over to kiss him on the cheek, breathing through my mouth in case he smelled of hospital antiseptic. "You're going to be fine," I whispered. "I love you lots." Trembling, he grabbed my hand and told me to put the poem in the top drawer of his dresser at home.

My father's pain and terror touched me. Dare I admit that I also felt gratified? As a fledgling writer, tears were the greatest flattery, tiny drops of hope falling into my own well of insecurity.

My father was hospitalized two days after I announced I'd found a house in Missoula I wanted to buy—with a modest family inheritance he'd set aside for me. My plan was to continue free-lancing magazine articles, and to attend the University of Montana's graduate creative writing program. Eventually, I hoped to write short stories and novels, though it terrified me to say so. Once I
declared a goal to my family, I felt compelled to reach it, lest they lose faith in me, and therefore, in themselves. In this way, I often tricked myself into achieving things I would have thought impossible. Gabriel Garcia Marquez once said he wrote to make people love him more, and I think that in large part that's what drove me, too. Some people are pulled forward by a desire to succeed; I was running from a fear of failure that howled relentlessly at my back like a pack of mad dogs.

I'd achieved modest success with magazine free-lancing, but it was an imitative art. If I got an assignment from a specific publication, I'd read and reread back issues, so I could internalize its style: straightforward and businesslike for Horizon Air; literary for American Airlines; playful for Washington magazine; punchy and confident for Outside. I'd let these voices swirl inside my head while I swam laps or took long walks, and then I'd rush to my computer and spit out a good facsimile. I called it "vomit writing." Looking back, I see there was a certain skill to it, but it felt like cheating, regurgitating someone else's ideas of how an article ought to read.

Mindful of my father's exhortations to modesty ("Never underestimate a woman who overestimates herself," he'd say, if I dared reveal a particularly ambitious goal), I described myself as a writer with a lower-case "W," a whisper of a writer, what's referred to as a shadow artist. I did not have any stories to tell, so I wrote other people's and put my byline on them. But I wanted, someday, to be a writer with a capital "W." A real writer, telling my own stories in my own distinct voice.

I had been out west for five years before I moved to Missoula. I'd come first for a reporting job at the Spokane newspaper, described by one friend as the "velvet coffin," because the lack of competition and high pay lulls the staff into
complacency. But I am not good at keeping my head down, as one editor advised me, and it was admittedly difficult to feign respect for my immediate supervisor, who, when distracted, picked his nose and ate his meager findings in full view of the newsroom. By my second year, I was plotting my escape, and my departure was hastened by my breakup with my boyfriend, a special-effects producer for a video company. Restructuring our relationship, he called it, forever wanting to put a nice gloss on things. As a reporter, though, I'd been taught to simplify. In other words, I said, you're dumping me. He nodded. I was devastated by his betrayal--I blamed myself for not seeing it coming--and my work suffered. As punishment, or perhaps simply as an oversight, I was assigned to a suburban beat—a severe blow to a reporter trained on the streets of Chicago. Not long after, I moved to Seattle to try free-lancing. I kept waiting to wake up and love Seattle--my sister had lived there years before and raved about it, and magazines frequently touted Seattle as the nation's most livable city. But by the time I arrived in the Emerald City, it had lost much of its luster. Traffic was heavy, rents high, and the weather justified suicide. I arrived in November, just in time for the relentless winter rains, which made me want to step outside and shout: "Stop it! Stop it right now!" I rented a daylight basement apartment, held a series of waitressing and bartending jobs and cried a lot as the rain streamed from the gutters onto my concrete walkway. After six months, I moved to an enormous house on Capitol Hill, where I had two airy rooms to myself. But the owner, who designed silk flower arrangements for "Bellevue cunts," as she so delicately called them, refused to allow real plants into her shared space. She had a pit bull named Daisy who slept with her under the covers and an alcoholic boyfriend who watched slasher movies all day as he guzzled whiskey, then consumed pots of coffee at night. When he could not
sleep he insisted he had contracted Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. The man who lived upstairs, a kind but strange and morose homosexual who believed himself a witch, died of AIDS within a few months of moving in; the alcoholic who replaced him woke me regularly as he stumbled up the stairs after the bars closed. I worked as a bartender at a family restaurant that was going broke; the owner, a former professional baseball player, was so bitter and hard up that I was not allowed to cut off serve drunks, even Roger, the surly son of a bitch who cursed me when I wouldn't invest in his hydroponic agricultural schemes.

A friend said: This is the universe's way of telling you you should not live in Seattle.

Yet still I persisted. Everyone, I believe, must endure at least one full-blown episode of self-flagellation; this was mine. I could have found another job; I could have moved; I could have gone to law school. Instead I made a rule I had to live day to day on tip money only. I stretched a pot of lentils into half a week's meals. For a treat, I'd take myself to Julia's cafe for coffee, and wait for the mountains to "come out," as they say, for inspiration, an all too rare event. I was terribly lonely, and dated a series of eccentric men I never would have introduced to my family (always the acid test in my mind): Dante, an anorexic dentist-turned-stand-up-comedian who, like Cher, went by his first name only; Kevin, a 35-year-old sailing instructor with no ambitions other than to keep his job at ShopKo; on a trip to Mexico, I drove across the Sierra Madre with Enrique, a Mexican I had just met. Now I think: I must have been out of my mind. What was I trying to prove? That I could make up for all the risks no one else in my family took?

Slowly and miraculously, I managed to build up a solid free-lancing base. The tenacity and independence that had made me such a rogue in the Spokane
newsroom were the same qualities that made me a good free-lancer: I liked being left alone, and my editors liked the fact that they could trust me to deliver the goods. In the spring of 1991, I decided to move to Missoula and try to live off free-lancing alone. If, after four months, I was floundering, I'd change careers.

I'd known I wanted to live in Missoula since the previous summer, when I'd been there researching an article about its cultural attractions. I'd been struck by its sense of community, so desperately lacking in Seattle, and also its blessedly dry climate. There were, of course, many practical reasons to choose Missoula: it's a great place to live, and the university has a strong writing program. But also there was the psychological effect that Missoula's isolation had on me. In my mind's eye, the heft of the mountains functioned as a barrier protecting the integrity of my work. I was sure that the critical voices that dogged me would never scale the mountain passes that surrounded the Missoula Valley. In April, I took out an ad in the paper seeking a roommate; I arrived at her house May 1, U-haul in tow. When I pulled up to my new home the odometer on my Dodge Colt turned over to 100,000 miles; a good sign, I thought. I was tired of abusing myself. This was a chance to start from scratch.

Six months later, I felt so sure about Missoula that I began to house hunt. I knew exactly what I wanted: three bedrooms, high ceilings, wood floors, a porch, a yard, a basement. A house with character. I looked at two places--five minutes and I was shaking my head, no way--before I found mine.

"It makes perfect sense," said my friend Bette, a poet, when I told her the situation, how my father's hospitalization coincided with my bid for a house. "His daughter is leaving for good and he's literally heart sick. But don't worry, he won't die," she predicted. "He just needs you to come home."
From a purely medical standpoint, Bette's explanation was ridiculous. My father had inherited a congenitally defective heart, which over time had deteriorated. In addition, he suffered from weak lungs, scarred by a long-ago battle with tuberculosis and five decades of chain smoking, a habit he'd finally beaten in his mid-sixties.

But in a metaphorical sense, Bette was dead on. Traditionally, families have let go of their daughters during marriage ceremonies, as the father "gave away" his daughter to her husband. In that moment, the daughter passed from one safe home to the next. But what happens—as in my case—when a still single woman decides to purchase her own home? How do we know when it's safe to let go?

It took me 10 minutes to decide I wanted the house at 1533 Phillips. True, the outside was a hideous pink, and the interior revealed a similar lack of taste: a stiff plaid mat covered the hardwood floor in the living room; a rainbow-colored carpet graced the dining room. The kitchen's fluorescent light did not flatter the egg-yolk yellow cabinets. The bathroom was a sickly aqua; the wood floors upstairs had been painted sky blue. And the tan hall runner had been worn until it looked like mange on an old dog. But at heart, the house was solid, a 1922 two-story Craftsman-style bungalow with high ceilings, plenty of light, and wood trim all around. It had a soul, a past, ghosts, and plenty of built-ins. If anything, it was too perfect. "I'm not ready to buy yet," I protested to my realtor, Karen, even as I admired the original chandelier light fixtures and brass door handles. "I'm just in the looking stage."

But we both knew I needed to move quickly, or, in Missoula's highly competitive market, I'd lose the house. "Shit," I said to Karen, "Do it," though I
made her turn around after we’d driven a few blocks so I could look a second time. She drafted my bid a half-hour later.

At my suggestion, the offer stipulated that my father’s approval was required. I faxed him all the paperwork: the loan figures, closing costs, a blueprint of the house. My mother picked up the information at my father’s downtown office, and delivered it to the hospital, where he was undergoing tests and evaluations.

The house gave my father and I something to talk about. Generally, our phone conversations went like this: I called and then my father told me to hang up so he could call back. This usually took a minute or two, because he hadn’t memorized my phone number nor mastered the speed dialer. My mother listened in on another extension, but she didn’t talk until he and I were through, because he got mad if our conversation was interrupted. He’d ask, How’s your work going? And I’d tell him fine, and maybe a little about what I’d been doing. Then he’d say, What else is going on? and I’d give a short rundown, and maybe we’d talk about a lecture I’d seen, or a piece in *The New Yorker* we’d both read. Then he’d say, How’s your car running? even though it had never given me any trouble. Then it was my mother’s turn. "How are you?” she’d say, and if I said fine she’d say, “No, I mean how are you really?” And if I started telling something of any emotional depth—if I’d been dating anyone, for instance—my father excused himself. "That’s your mother’s department," he’d say, and hang up.

My father thought that the rooms seemed small, and he was concerned that the house didn’t include a full lot. His comments gave me pause, and I went back for several more looks. I loved the house more each time. "It doesn’t feel small," I explained. "It sits on a corner, with no sidewalk, and the inside floor plan is so open: a swinging door leads from the kitchen to the living room,
French doors connect the living room to the dining room. Besides," I said, "I don't want to take care of a big house or a yard. I'm just one person."

From the hospital, he phoned an appraiser in Missoula, a fellow member of the Appraisal Institute, and asked him for an opinion. The appraiser reported back that the house seemed fine though the location was iffy: the house was surrounded by a lot of tiny, clapboard homes built earlier in the century for railroad workers, and there was a trailer park a few blocks away. The appraiser warned that I was buying the best house on the block, when you want to buy the worst. That way, the neighbors enhance your property value, instead of dragging it down. I asked my father what was considered a successful investment. "To make money," he said, "Your house should double in value every five years. But," he added, "You're not buying an investment. You're buying the privilege of living in your own home."

"Then 1533 Phillips is the place," I said. "It's the place I can write." And he signed off on the deal.

* * *

By the time I flew to Chicago a week and a half later, the sale of 1533 Phillips had hit a major glitch. The real estate company had mistakenly sold the house to me, then to another party. I'd hired a lawyer. The other party had hired a lawyer. (In truth, much as I loved the house, I wasn't prepared to rack up thousands of dollars in court fees, but I couldn't let the other buyers know that. In law, as in life, posturing is everything.) My father promised that it would all work out. I'd find another house if need be. But I didn't think so. "Not like that one," I said. "That one has my name on it."

It did, too: or the first letter of my last name, anyways. I was showing a friend the house when he noticed that the front screen door bore a metal "M," for
Martel, the name of the owners. He turned the letter upside down. "See!" he said, stepping back, delighted. "Now it's a capital W. For Witkowsky."

But in my family, we were taught to count on nothing. As children, my sister and I were strictly forbidden to tell friends of family vacation plans until the day before we left. Ostensibly, this was because my father wanted to teach us sensitivity toward less fortunate schoolmates; fair enough, but we attended a private school, and most of our classmates had far more exotic itineraries than we did. We were not allowed to talk about our upcoming vacation because talking about things jinxed them. And if the vacation fell through, we'd be not only disappointed but humiliated as well. But anticipation is one of life's great joys, so I did not always heed my father's instructions. I managed to hold out until the countdown hit a week, and then I'd spirit my best friend into the bathroom. Swearing her to secrecy, I'd whisper our plans to her, as if perhaps my father had bugged the school walls.

In the intervening years, I'd suffered my share of disappointments, but I never did learn to hedge my bets. I preferred weathering defeats over never fantasizing victories. So while I knew the house wasn't a sure thing, I broke my father's rules. I told my friends about the house. I took them by to peek in the windows. And on the flight home, I allowed myself to imagine writing passionately, effortlessly (now there's a fantasy!) in the upstairs bedroom.

My sister picked me up at O'Hare. It was raining a plodding and oppressive rain, the kind of nebulous, do-nothing weather I hate.

We hugged, and I commented on how much weight she'd lost since she started working for the Pentagon. We are the same height, five foot seven, both big-boned and sturdy, with broad shoulders and hips, much bigger than anyone on either my father's or my mother's side of the family. "Mooses," we called
ourselves, as in, "This outfit makes me look moosey." But Anne was not moosey anymore. She said her job made her too nervous to eat, and her drab, windowless office would dampen even the heartiest of appetites. However else the federal government wasted taxpayer dollars, she assured me, it wasn't on interior design.

"How is he?" I asked then.

"Okay," she said. "But don't try to talk about the surgery. He doesn't want to discuss it."

"What should we talk about?"

"Talk about your new house. That's safe."

"How's Mom holding up?"

"She's exhausted. We're both exhausted. Entertaining Dad for two weeks while he sits around mulling over a lifetime of trivial regrets hasn't exactly been a fucking picnic." She'd been in Chicago for a weekend visit when my father entered the hospital, and had stayed to see him through the surgery.

"Like what?" I said. "What regrets?"

"You know, like how we should have bought a sailboat, taken a year off school and sailed around the world?"

"But none of us knows how to sail," I pointed out. "Besides, can you imagine our family stuck together on a boat? Mass murder on the high seas."

"Exactly," she said. "But don't try to tell him that."

My sister's choice of career as an arms control expert made perfect sense. Growing up, she arbitrated an uneasy truce between my parents and me. She drank and took drugs and made out with boys, but she kept these rebellions to herself, if you can call them rebellions at all (for what is the sense in rebelling if the act goes unnoticed?) She always kept sight of her agenda. I, on the other
hand, blatantly courted confrontation, not, as my parents believed, to upset them (though this certainly was one result), but simply because I was unable or unwilling to keep my head down. I broke curfew, brought boyfriends to the farm, arrived drunk at my senior class party. As a result, my sister carried all the credibility, and I carried none. My father was always telling me I had bad judgment. Like most adolescents, I probably did, though it hurt to hear him say so.

It infuriated me, in fact, because, like my sister, I earned top grades, held an afterschool job, and edited the school newspaper. Compared to Anne, the paragon of virtue, however, I was a troublemaker, a bad egg. I might have hated her, except that she was far too nice, and always stuck by me, even when I got us both in trouble. And she did have good judgment. I often relied on her advice, though I noticed she rarely asked for mine.

On the drive to the hospital I learned that Anne was going back to Vienna for some more arms talks and, coincidentally, the ball season. She'd bought a gown, beaded black velvet with a full-length white satin skirt. Imagine! I thought. My sister waltzing with generals. My family's geographical distribution struck me as inordinately appropriate. Me in the west, restless and intense; Anne, the politic overachiever in the east; my parents the midwestern fulcrum on which we teetered.

I watched Anne's long slender fingers flutter around the steering wheel as she talked, and recognized my own mannerisms. Physically, we don't look much alike, but people always know we're sisters because of our wild gesticulations and similar speech patterns, with long pauses between phrases.

I told Anne about my new house, describing it with the obsessive fervor of a first-time homeowner: the crown molding, the built-in dressers, about the
mountains in the Rattlesnake Wilderness that rise from my northern horizon. "I'll kill that stupid realtor if I don't get it," I said.

She wasn't paying much attention, and I knew that. She's always had the ability to tuck her thoughts away and zip herself up, a quality I sometimes resented and often envied. I kept talking anyway.

She parked the car in a lot across the street from Northwestern Hospital. She reached into the back seat for an umbrella and got out. "Aren't you coming?" she demanded, peering through from the driver's side door.

"I hate this," I replied.

"Kathy, c'mon," she said, in a refrain so oft-repeated when I was younger that it became a family joke. I was "Kathycomon."

She slammed her door shut. "I hate this," I repeated to myself. But I followed her

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The surgery took place on Halloween: All Hallow's Eve, the day before All Soul's Day. Exactly a year before, I'd been on assignment in the Mexican highland city of Patzcuaro, researching an article about the Day of the Dead. I had rented a musty basement room in the home of Doña Raphaelita, a sparrow of an old woman who sold fragrant homemade chocolate out of her colonial home. She'd taken pity on me when I explained that all the hotels were booked. During the day, I wandered round the plaza with the other tourists, buying humorous clay figurines of skeletons: one in the bathtub, others seated at a table, drinking from Pepsi bottles. In the evening, I joined the throngs ferrying to Isla de Janitzio, then tromped up the stone streets to the cemetery. Dozens of Indian families gathered round the graves of their loved ones, doing their best to ignore the blinding camera flashes. Wrapped in colorful wool blankets, the
Indians knelt patiently in front of candles and offerings of fruit and round loaves of sweet bread inscribed, "Por mi padre," or "Por mi tia." At midnight, the story went, the souls of the dead would return to taste once more the fragile proof of human love.

My father didn't buy it. "You get one chance only," he'd said when I'd asked if he believed in afterlife. "When it's over, they stick you in a hole in the ground. You gain your only immortality through your offspring." I began to see how a non-religious man like my father could remain so bound to his ethics. His actions were not only a matter of personal pride, but of family obligation, a kind of religion in itself. I liked the idea that I could honor my ancestors with my deeds. But the reverse held true as well: one wrong move, and I could shame us all.

The hospital was decorated with pumpkin cutouts and paper ghosts that dangled from the light fixtures. My period and its attendant cramps started mid-morning, and I sat in the waiting room with my family trying not to vomit. There was a game show on the wall-mounted television, and occasionally our heavy silence was interrupted by frenzied, high-pitched shrieks and bursts of applause. An enormous Polish family, all obese, all wearing hats, scurried in and out making frantic phone calls. Our threesome seemed inadequately few.

My mother noticed me slumped in my chair and suggested I go home and lie down. "There's nothing you can do here, honey. Go on. Get some sleep, Dolly Pie," she said, addressing me with one of the affectionate motherly terms she had coined for me when I was very young. (Others included Lamb Chop and Pumpkin). Out of anyone else's mouth these nicknames would sound phony, offensive, but my mother means them sincerely. Her sincerity and enthusiasm are probably her greatest assets, and that's why she's such a good tour guide--
she gives architectural and general tours of Chicago--and so sought after by volunteer organizations. She's a beautiful woman, with deepset dark brown eyes, a model's nose and salt-and-pepper colored hair that sweeps back off her high forehead. That's always what people say about her, how pretty and how charming she is. Neither my sister nor I are as pretty as my mother, which seems to bother her more than us. Looks are important to her, which is both a function of her vanity and her generation. That's all women had, their looks and their families.

Obviously, my mother has more to offer than her looks. She can survive for days with four hours of sleep, and still be flushed with energy, but that morning she looked bloodless, her perfect, pale complexion offset by the bright red lipstick she reapplied every half hour. I left. It was still raining, but I decided I'd rather walk the two miles than take the bus. I passed the boutiques and department stores on Michigan Avenue, the skyscrapers of the Gold Coast, and cut through the park, listening to the bleats coming from the Farm in the Zoo. God, it was flat. I yearned for Montana.

From the 16th-floor apartment where I grew up, you can see most of Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan beyond. I looked out: the lake was in a rage. I went into my bedroom. It's been nearly untouched since I left home for college 11 years ago. Stuffed animals, skating trophies and high school literature books line up like snapshots out of someone else's life. After my sister and I moved away, my parents talked vaguely of buying a smaller apartment. But they never did. They always said they wanted my sister and I to have a place to come home to.

I took off my clothes, slid into the cool sheets and slept, but not before I traced a line down my breastbone where the surgeon had said he would cut my father open.
I returned to the hospital that afternoon to good news. The surgery was nearly over and everything had gone according to plan. They replaced my father's mitral valve, which had been leaking so that half the blood his heart pumped out flooded back into it again, depriving his body of oxygenated blood. The surgeon showed us a sample of the plastic gadget he had embedded in my father's heart: it was about the size and shape of a poker chip. The surgeon clicked it open and closed like false teeth.

When we finally saw my father later that day he was in intensive care, hooked to a respirator with a clear shield covering his nose and mouth. He was so pale he looked nearly translucent, but the heart monitor beside him drew reassuring green mountains on the screen. I put my hand in his, and he squeezed.

The week passed in a haze of hospital visits and cafeteria meals. I drowned my anxieties every day in two miles of laps at the Northwestern University pool. It was off-limits to anyone but students and staff but I'd memorized the locker-room combination when my high-school boyfriend lifeguarded there, and had been sneaking in ever since. If you looked like you belonged, I'd found, no one questioned your presence. ("You have more chutzpah than anyone I know," my father would say, in what sometimes sounded like criticism, other times like admiration.)

We went shopping on Michigan Avenue. My sister bought a purple suit with brass buttons at Neiman Marcus, and modeled it for the family in my Dad's hospital room. "Very professional," my father told her approvingly. "Doesn't she look svelte!" my mother exclaimed, and the rest of us agreed. My mother took me to Water Tower Place and bought me a pair of purple pants. I accompanied her to Joseph boutique, where she considered buying a mauve hat. I looked at
the price tag—one hundred and fifty dollars—and made a mock gasp. She replaced it on the hat rack, turned to me and said, in a low controlled voice. "You know, none of this is important. I'm just killing time."

I used to think I was the only one in my family harboring a deep-seeded fear that I was being vastly underestimated. Now I saw this same fear in my mother. I wanted to reassure her: I don't think you're shallow, Mom. Instead I simply nodded.

* * *

I told my mother and sister the story of the purchasing mixup. The house was the childhood home of two middle-aged sisters, Jewel and Esther, who still owned it but had long since fled Montana for warmer climes. Each of them signed separate copies of the buy-sell agreement. My realtor had received one copy; their realtor had received the other. Each realtor thought we were still waiting for the other signature, because that's how they referred to it: as "the missing sister's signature," instead of by name. In the meantime, Paulette—that was Jewel's and Esther's realtor—continued to send the sisters other offers, without explanation. They logically assumed my bid had been withdrawn, so they signed another one, from a man buying a temporary residence for his college-age son.

"I'm going to make it a home," I wailed, "And this kid's going to be throwing toga parties and puking on my hardwood floors."

"But the really horrible part," I told my mother and sister, "is that even though my offer was signed first, my attorney says the sisters can choose which contract to break. And the other offer was $2,000 higher."

"What an idiot," my sister said, referring to the realtor.
"Be sure to line the drawers," my mother said. "Get yourself a couple rolls of nice shelf paper. And do it before you move in, because you won't want to take all your clothes and dishes out once you've arranged them."

"Okay, Mom," I said. "If I get the house, I'll line the drawers."

At night the message machine unleashed a barrage of good wishes from friends and relatives, and the phone jangled through the evenings. Who could let it ring? Every few days I'd call Karen, my realtor, for any news. The sisters had indicated they were going to come through for me, she said, but we still had nothing definite yet. Anne and I surfed through an endless series of channels on TV, watching bits and pieces of whatever movies we could find to hold our attention. My mother ate more than I'd ever seen her, bagels and cream cheese and enormous bowls of soft frozen yogurt from the hospital cafeteria during the day; at night, hamburgers, takeout ribs and ice cream she'd inhale at the breakfast table. "I don't know why I'm eating this," she'd say helplessly, swallowing another handful of Dorito's. My mother's not fat, but she's not thin, either, and I knew that later she'd mentally whip herself for gorging, and possibly even force herself to return to Weight Watchers, which she despised. But I also knew there was no point in trying to stop her now.

One night she approached me wanting to borrow a tampon. "What's going on?" I asked. My mother was 62, and had stopped menstruating a decade earlier. "I'm nothing," she assured me. "It's just an estrogen imbalance."

"How nice. We're all bleeding together," I replied, but I was worried. When it comes to everyone else's health, my mother has advice and sympathy to spare, but she rarely allows herself the same kind of nurturing. I never remember my mother being sick when I was growing up. She must have been, sometimes, but
she never acknowledged it, and neither did anyone else in the family. It was a law of nature: Mothers didn't get sick. Or if they did, they kept it very, very quiet.

"I just haven't gotten a chance to see the gynecologist yet," my mother said. When I shot her a disapproving look she added, "Next week. I promise."

My father was recuperating "beautifully," the doctors said. "Easy for them to say," he told us. "I feel like I've been run over by a truck." He became even more demanding than usual. He wanted us in the room with him, but not all of us at once, and he'd get mad if we talked too much. "I can't take all the noise," he'd say, face scrunched in displeasure, waving us away.

"Welcome to Witkowsky Hell," my mother whispered to me as we gathered our belongings one afternoon. He'd ordered us out, accusing us of rustling the newspaper too loudly.

"I think when they operated on his heart they fixed his hearing, too," I told her when we stepped into the hall, and she laughed.

Another time, after my mother had sat patiently with him for 12 hours, he turned on her. "Why'd you bother to come down here at all?" he spat. The doctors had warned us that the medication's side effects included hostile outbursts, but it didn't make my father's moods any easier to endure. We didn't need entertainment, but we craved appreciation.

The fourth day after surgery, my mother returned home about eight, after spending another full day at the hospital. She'd just walked in the door when he phoned. It was dark, he said. He couldn't get the light on and he was afraid. Yes, he'd called for the nurse but she hadn't come. He was trying to adjust the bed but he'd push the wrong button, so that his feet would raise up but his torso wouldn't, or vice versa. It was the sort of slapstick humor my father loved—in the movies. "Hang up, Jack, honey," I heard my mother tell him. "I'll call the nurse
myself," she said. She did, but my father called back again. Three times he called back, pleading for help.

I recognized his terror. As a child, I suffered excruciating bouts of homesickness each time I tried to spend the night at a friend's house. In the pitch darkness of early morning, crying softly, I'd nudge my friend and plead with her to wake her parents, so I could call mine to fetch me. "Their sheets smell funny," I'd tell my parents in the car. Once home, my mother would wrap me in a fuzzy afghan, place me on her lap and rock me in the rocking chair until I calmed enough to sleep.

Hearing of father's panic, glancing at my mother's blank face as she stared at the phone, waiting for it to ring again, I did the only thing I could: I had the doorman hail me a cab. It was midnight when I arrived in my father's room. He took my hand and kissed it, a gesture made these days only by a prince or an old man. His lips and fingers were dry as parchment.

"Thank you, thank you," he whispered.

"I'll be right here," I reassured him. "Get some sleep."

I spread out a thin white blanket on the tiled floor, covered myself with that same old afghan my mother used to comfort me, and curled up. I slept fitfully; the floor bruised my hip bones, and I woke with every flinch or cough or squeak of the hospital bed. "Dad?" I'd question softly. I didn't want him lying helpless on his back, staring at the ceiling, disoriented and anxious. Once an hour he'd wake and ask the time, and I'd tilt my wristwatch toward the hall light and squint to find out. The night dragged on and on. At four he announced that he needed to use the toilet. He started to pull himself up by the gate on the bedside, laboriously swinging his bony legs out over the floor.
“Dad, you can’t do that alone. You’ll fall. Don’t do that,” I said, alarmed, but as usual, he ignored me.

I went to summon the nurse from her station. My father was halfway to the bathroom by the time she caught him. I stayed in the hall. I knew my father wouldn’t want me to see him this way, in his flimsy baby-blue hospital gown that kept coming untied at the waist. This was a man who insisted on wearing a suitcoat to the dinner table. A man who was Mr. Witkowsky, not Jack, to anyone who hadn’t known him for years, and even some people, like his secretary, who had. I must, I knew, preserve my father’s dignity. It was all right for the nurse to see him weak, his shriveled buttocks exposed. But I had never seen my father naked, and I knew I should not. I, in fact, recoiled at the idea, for both of our sakes, and for the sake of the entire family structure, which relied on the notion of my father’s unquestioned authority.

“Are you okay?” I heard the nurse ask. “You look a little unsteady.”

“Fine, fine,” he insisted, in a wispy voice I wouldn’t have recognized.

She came into the hall while my father was urinating. “He seems wobbly. Is he usually?”

“No,” I hissed, surprised at the vehemence of my answer. What I wanted to say was: Wobbly? No, he wasn’t wobbly. Ridiculous. He’s not a wobbly man. Read his obituary, I thought, it’s in my purse. He’s my dad, I wanted to tell her, but she’d already gone in to help my father shuffle back to bed.

He slept through till six, when the doctors started making their rounds, and he awakened, relieved, to another day. Later he told me I’d saved his life.

Is that all it takes? I thought.

* * *
When I arrived home my sister was looking at a photo album we'd put together for my parents in honor of their 30th anniversary. They'd flown us to Puerto Escondido to celebrate. Anne and I had packed a collection of pictures, sat in our hotel room and culled the best of them, which we pasted in a blank sketchbook. Then we wrote limericks underneath each photo to make what we judged a clever family history. Now we read them out loud to each other.

There were about 20 photos in the album. First my parents before they met: my father, looking debonair, a cigarette cocked in one hand, leaning against his black Mercedes; my mother, a recent graduate of Northwestern University's theater school, smiling a toothy stage smile in a strip of four black and whites taken at a drugstore photo booth. One of them after their wedding, a hastily arranged justice-of-the-peace ceremony because my father told my mother the sooner they married the more time he could take for their European honeymoon. ("Can't make it next week?" he said, by way of a proposal. "Fine. We'll do it the week after. But then," he said, revealing his trump card, "We'll only have three weeks in Europe.") They made a handsome couple, my father gaunt, a tiny-toothed grin on his face; my mother in a veiled hat, her profile graceful, her large eyes luminous. He was 43, already a successful businessman; she was 29, a secretary at CBS because, as she said, she couldn't stand the heartbreak of theater auditions. (Later, like so many of her generation, she used her creative talents in her role as wife and mother, staging elaborate parties for my sister and I, with handmade Halloween costumes and treasure hunts with rhyming clues, or personalizing lyrics to popular songs, then performing them at my father's birthdays.) Neither had ever married, though my mother had turned down several proposals, including an
earlier one from my father. He persisted, he said, because he didn't want to live without her. She was the only woman he ever wanted to marry.

They almost killed each other in Paris, my mother said, they were both so nervous that their worst qualities came out in spades. My father was uptight and drank too much, which made him mean, my mother was shrill and bossy. Finally my father sat her down and said, "Look. We're here now. We might as well have a good time. We can always divorce when we get back." There were photos of them on their travels: Greece; Tibet; Papua New Guinea. Shots of the family on horseback at the farm my father had bought and named Anka, a combination of my sister's and my names; of my mother, a red bandana tied on her head, bent at the waist in the garden, flashing that toothy smile; and of my Dad next to another of his beloved sports cars, the only things—besides his feelings—that he refused to share with the rest of us.

After we'd read the last verse and closed the album, I turned to Anne. "Do you want to get married?" I asked her.

"If I meet someone I can live with," she replied.

"Do you want to have children?"

"If I meet someone I want to have children with," she answered, replacing the photo album in the bookcase.

"I have an idea!" I said, after a pause. "You can move into my new house. We'll be like Aunt Bertha and Aunt Florence," I said, referring to our spinster great aunts who lived together all their lives. My father used to drag us to their Hyde Park apartment for Sunday visits, even though we objected because they pinched our cheeks. ("Family is all you got, girls," my father used to tell us. "When the chips are down, your family has to be there. Don't you forget it.")
Bertha was pushy and had a beard, but everyone loved to do favors for Aunt Florence, and she let them.

My sister smiled and patted me on the shoulder. "Okay," she said. "But you have to be Aunt Bertha."

* * *

I was sitting in my father’s hospital room telling my mother about my house. "I decided," I said, "That a house will never betray you like a man will." The remark was off-handed, and probably untrue, but it hit a nerve.

"You sound so angry." My mother alternates between worrying that I’ll never get married and agonizing that I actually will, and that it will end in disaster. She sounded accusatory. "Are you angry with your father?"

"No, Mom, I’m not angry with my father." How could I be angry with him? He was lying a few feet away, an oxygen tube up his nose and a railing wrapped around his bed. His withered calves poked out from underneath the covers. No, this was not a man powerful enough to provoke anger. I sighed, and it sounded disturbingly like my mother.

"If I was a man," she persisted, "I’d be intimidated by your anger." Translation: Angry women don’t attract men.

We’d had variations on this conversation before, so I’d had plenty of time to rehearse my response. "I’m not afraid to display my feelings, Mom," I said. "If a man doesn’t like it, well, tough luck."

"Okay, okay," she said, her tone defensive and heavy with resignation. She picked up the features section of The Trib and paged through it. I reached for the front page. "Just tell me this," she said, crumpling the paper in her lap. "Why are you girls so reluctant to get married? Where did I go wrong?"
I turned to face her, genuinely offended. "Wrong?" I repeated, incredulous. "You raised two healthy, independent, reasonably happy daughters who are responsible members of society. My God! Why don't you ask yourself where you went right?"

"I didn't mean it like that," she said, shrinking back, and I could tell she felt bad. "Of course we're proud of you girls. I just meant, what kind of a bad example did we set? Did our marriage look so awful?"

And I realized that my mother sees every one of my actions as an implicit judgment on her life. If, in my bid to be a writer, I fail, then she has, too; but if I succeed, then I am living proof that hers could have been more fulfilling. "No," I said more gently, "No, that's not it at all. We're just taking our time. We don't want to make a mistake. We don't want to do something we'll regret later. To be honest, Mom, I have no interest in getting married now."

"Well, then," she said, replacing a few stray hairs and returning to the paper again. "It's a good thing you're not."

"Yes," I agreed. "It's a good thing."

* * *

A week after surgery I was set to leave. My father remained in the hospital, but he was scheduled to be released in a couple of days. My mother was still exhausted and still bleeding. She hadn't yet found the opportunity to set an appointment with the gynecologist, but she continued to insist that she was fine. Of course: there was no time for her to be otherwise.

"I'll feel better once you girls get back to your own lives," she said, her fingertips caressing the edge of her coffee mug in a circular motion. "I know you live far away for a reason. It's better that way. My mother clung to me, and I
promised myself I would not do that to my children. We miss you. But you'd suffocate here."

My sister had already left for Austria. I went to the hospital to bid goodbye to my father. He was distracted. Clients had been calling for quick consultations; work was piling up at the office; and on TV, the Bears battled for yardage.

I asked him if he wanted me to swing by early the next morning, before my flight.

"That's not necessary," he said. "You're coming home for Christmas, right?"

"I'll be back for Christmas," I assured him, careful to leave the word "home" out of it. Where was that, anyway? "I love you."

"I love you too," he said, and made some smacking kissy noises.

That night I walked into my mother's bathroom to find her on the toilet, her nightgown hiked up to her waist, exposing her thick calves laced with intricate spider veins, the most flawed part of her body. Paralyzed, she choked on her sobs, making no effort to reduce her vulnerability. I stood at the doorway, gripping the edge of the molding. "It's all right," I said softly, as she gasped for air. "All right."

Finally she stood, flushed the toilet and heaved into my arms. "It's all right," I repeated.

"I'm just so tired," she said, apologetically. As if she had failed me in some fundamental way.

"I know. It's hard." We were standing in front of the bathroom mirror. I noticed how much bigger I was than her. Not just taller, though I had several inches in height (she must be shrinking, I thought), but bigger, all around. My shoulders, torso, arms looked so substantial compared to hers. I thought of my father's thin
wrists and bony calves, of my sister's slim waist. "I am the biggest one in my family," I thought, and tried to get used to that idea.

My mother started flossing her teeth, even though she was still crying. I kept my arm around her. "Come tuck me in," she said to me when she was finished flossing.

I walked her to her bed, sat on the blue velvet chair next to it and, swiveling back and forth, talked with her until she was ready to sleep. We could have used a rocking chair, but she had long ago stored it in the basement.

I called my Dad a few days after signing the title. The sisters had come through; I'd even received a note from one of them declaring how pleased she was that I would be living in her childhood home. The toga-party host backed down and was never heard from again. My mother's gynecologist had balanced her hormones and she'd stopped bleeding.

"How's your house?" my father asked, in the confident voice I know as his own.

"Great," I said. "I should be finished with the floors and the painting and moved in by Thanksgiving. And tell Mom," I added, "That I lined the drawers like she told me."

"You know," he said. "A long time ago, before I met your mother, I had a chance to move out west. To Denver."

"Really?" I said. "Why didn't you?"

He paused to consider. "I never had the guts, I guess. It takes a lot of courage to do what you're doing."

"Thanks, Dad," I said. "I feel like I made the right choice."
Then he said something surprising. "Well," he said, "I trust your judgment. You have good instincts."

For Christmas that year, I bought my mother a blank journal, a hardback book with handmade paper and quotations from famous women heading every page. "Just for you. So you can write whatever you want," I said. But a few months later, she admitted she hadn't written even one entry. "Oh, Kathy, I love the sentiment," she said. "But I can't keep a diary. I never know what to say."

"What do you mean?" I said. "You're the tour leader. You always know what to say."

She laughed. "That's different," she said. "It's not writing."

"Mom," I said. "If you can talk, you can write. Just write down how you feel."

"You're much braver than I am," she said. "I'm afraid of what I might write. What if someone else reads it later?"

My mother would be the first to say she's had a good life. Then what is she so afraid of?

I know this: At 29, the same age I was when my father had surgery, she quit her secretarial job at CBS television, where she had just auditioned to fill in for the talk-show host, married my father and moved into his apartment. She never found out whether she had passed the audition. "That sounds really hard," I commented once. "To give up your name, your home and your job all at the same time."

She shrugged. "That's the way you did it," she said. "I know your generation dances to a different tune. But let me tell you this: You will be lucky if you find someone to love you the way your father loves me," she said, and her bottom lip started to quiver as she fought back tears. Of what? Gratitude? Love? Regret?
But I have, I thought. I have found someone to love me that way. He's my Dad. Then we both were crying.

Isn't it funny? My mother is afraid to write in case what she writes makes her unlovable. I am afraid not to write because I believe it's what redeems me.

Three years after my father's surgery, the floors have been refinished, the exterior of the house is beige with forest-green trim. I've repainted the inside, mostly a subtle white and wallpapered the kitchen. My mother has finally sent my books, which I arranged by subject matter on the built-ins in the downstairs bedroom. For the first time in my life, I feel settled enough to have a dog, an Australian Shepherd named Augie Doggie Witkowsky.

There are times when those wild dogs of despair and self-doubt bay at my door as loud as ever (they did track me over the mountains!), but I have pledged not to run. Instead, I crack the door. Shut up, I tell them, you are not welcome here. This is my home. I will not flee from you.

Mostly, but not always, my parents still insist I hang up so they can call me back. Sometimes my father, who is not well, calls me of his own accord if my mother has gone out and he is lonely. He inquires about my work, about my car, and about my house, garden and yard, generally in that order. When am I coming home? he wants to know. (It'll always be home. Futile to pretend otherwise.) Anytime is fine; he'll reimburse me for the plane ticket. He's always glad to see me. Then, if she's there, my mother gets on the line and asks the emotional stuff: What about this Pete fellow? Is he someone I might marry? I know it's selfish, she says, but I want grandchildren.

I tell her, I can't imagine anyone cluttering my house with all their stuff. That sounds selfish to her, I know: it's not the way women are supposed to feel. I
imagine she both envies and respects my independence; she must wonder, sometimes, what she would have done given the same choices. But I refuse to apologize for my ambitions. I am, after all, my father's daughter as much as my mother's. Someday, yes, I want to make a home with a partner, raise a family. But I know that would not be enough for me. I was lucky, born into the first generation of women allowed a voice, and I have an obligation to speak up. So for now, I weed my garden, walk my dog, make gazpacho soup with the tomatoes I harvest. I put fresh-cut zinnias in my office, light candles in the bathroom, bake zucchini bread for my friends. During the day I write, occasionally gazing out my office windows at the mountains to the north, marking the passing of the seasons with their changing colors. Some nights I spend with my boyfriend, and wake up with his warm body spooned against my back, his hand cupping one breast. But sometimes, late at night, if he's not there, I crank the volume on the stereo and all alone, dance until I'm dizzy. Then my dog jumps up and licks my face, and we go upstairs to bed, and sleep soundly until the sunlight filters through the branches of the apple tree.

In the morning, I write in my journal, trying to be as honest as possible. You'd think that would be easy, but as my mother knows, it's not. When someone else isn't dictating, it's hard to figure out exactly what to say.