Hunters and gatherers

Caroline Patterson

The University of Montana

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HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

by

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B.A., Amherst College, 1978

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Part I

HUNTERS

For whom is a story enough? For the wanderers who will tell it--it's where they must find their strange felicity."

--Eudora Welty, "Circe," The Collected Stories
Laura sat on a chair criss-crossed by duct tape and faced the two men across the green linoleum table. She was answering an ad in the Anchorage Daily and she was here for her roommate interview. "Laura MacElwain" she said and shook their hands.

The thick-limbed, pimply man hopped up to get her a beer. The other was a mountain man type with chest hair that crawled up toward a beard that crawled up toward his eyebrows. He rapped his knuckles on the table in a slow, irregular beat.

They looked at her.

"Name's Vince," the pimply man finally said. "Babes call me in-Vince-ible."

"Dale," the mountain man said, as if he were crossing a great distance. He jerked his thumb toward Vince. "And Vince is full of shit."

"He's jealous 'cause I got a way with chicks."

"Rules here are simple," the mountain man said and watched Vince circle the room. "Rooms are sixty bucks. Everybody leaves everybody alone. And we all ignore Vince."

"Why?" Laura asked, thinking sixty bucks. She hadn't seen anything under $300.
"He's a pain in the ass," Dale said.

A door opened, steam rolled into the room and a tall woman walked up to Laura as if they were alone, offered her her hand and said, "Diane." She sat at the table, her hair draping the chair, and began to paint the longest fingernails Laura had ever seen. "The guys won't bother you, and the price is right." She admired a torch-like thumbnail. "I live my own life."

Vince slapped a sandwich together, held it in front of his mouth, then turned to Laura. "Single we hope?"

"Engaged," Laura lied. "I've got a job possibility at a museum, and two month's rent."

"She's okay by me," Dale said. He wandered off down the hall, where Laura heard the opening music to "Magnum PI."

"Gloria," Vince whined as he fed strips of bologna to a scraggly bird blinking in a cage near the table. "She's not single."

Diane lit a cigarette and looked at Laura. "This ain't paradise," she said slowly, "but it's good for a layover."

If people asked her, why Alaska? she would say adventure, but what she meant was escape. Escape from that morning in March when she lay on her back, her hair spilling across the Indian bedspread, watching Peter at the window, willing him to come to her, hungry. He turned and said, "I'm
scared." She sat up, pulled her robe tight. This had happened before in the two years she'd known him, and she would stroke his back until the flesh rose up under her fingertips and he'd sigh and once more they had lives together. "Relax," she said. "It'll pass."

"This is different," he said, looking out at the bowl of blue sky. "This is not working out."

Shock tripped down her backbone. She noticed his bookcase was out of order: Dostoyevsky filed before Chekhov. As she dressed, Peter came toward her, mouthing words, and she had a wild urge to laugh at the tear dangling from his nose like snot. "Bastard," she whispered and slammed the door.

March she trudged the numb streets past couples flinging frisbees on the common. April she read for her orals until the texts about !Kung hunters and gatherers and Nuer "ghost marriages" swam before her. May she was sick of it. She leapt out of bed, singing "Compared to What" at the top of her lungs. She cut her hair short and read books about Robert Marshall, who wrote studies of Eskimo life from his cabin in Koyukuk and played Schubert's Unfinished Symphony as he drifted to sleep. He was someone who found a blank space on a map, and went there.

When they graduated in June, her classmates got married, went to graduate school or Europe. She flew to Alaska. She wanted to work as an anthropologist, observing
rituals, family relationships and tribal customs; by January, she had worked in Kodiak as a salmon egg packer, a motel maid and a waitress. She'd seen some customs all right. But Anchorage, she told herself, Anchorage would be different.

When she arrived, she bought a used car the salesman called an "ugly duckling." As she drove out of the lot, she looked at the skyscrapers hunched over Knik Arm, the Chugach Mountains hovering over the broad plain of houses and streets that stretched south to the waters of Turnagain Arms. This is it, she told herself. This is where I start over, like those old novels about girls from the country who have their hearts broken, then rush off to the city to conquer the world.

Laura drove to the Anchorage Museum and filled out a job application. Under "Job Desired," she hesitated. She knew she should probably write secretary, but as she looked around the hushed reception area, decorated with scrimshaw and baleen, she could picture herself a young Margaret Mead, rushing off to the Arctic, her oversized parka bulging with notebooks. She'd work among the Eskimos--watching village dances, touching the round, dimpled faces of the children--and at night, she'd diagram family relationships, the male and female symbols dancing across a page washed by lantern
"We're not hiring anthropologists today," the receptionist said, curving her lips into a smile. "Come back tomorrow?"

Instead she hired on as a temporary secretary in a movie distributor's office. The job involved sending endless telexes from Anchorage to Seattle, "Yes Avalanche. Check sent January 15. No, Atomic Cafe." Laura was so broke she ate concession samples for lunch—licorice, jujubes—then she wandered downtown to watch people eating in restaurants. She wrote little poems about hunger.

A week later, she got foodstamps. At first she bought meek portions of beans and rice and she dreamt her father stood in line, mouthing the words, "scum of the earth." Then she got more daring. Tomatoes at a $1.50 a pound. Nectarines. Huge, glistening steaks. As she pulled out her coupon books, she glared back at the clerks and silently dared people in line to whisper.

It was the ugly time of winter, when the snow was mealy and layered with dirt and gravel. After work, Laura drove the wide streets home, past neighborhoods of trailers and clapboard houses, temporary and decaying, past ragged Sitka spruce rising out of the muskeg like specters. She tried to picture those laughing Eskimo children. The tires ahead of
her sprayed slush through the five o'clock dark.

Vince was bustling about the kitchen, readying himself for a date. He opened his arms to Laura. "What'd ya think?" His hair was slicked back off his face, and he was dressed in shiny pants and a shirt printed with vintage Cadillacs.

"She'll never know what hit her," Laura said.

"We're going to dinner, we're going to the movies, and then..." he lowered his voice, "she'll meet the real Mr. Vince."

"Whoa," Laura said as he walked out the door. "I hope she's ready for that."

It was nighttime, the time of day she dreaded, when her life seemed to loom before her, formless and empty. It's so unfair, she thought, for twenty years everyone gives you elaborate directions—stop, yield, S-curve ahead—like one giant game of Chutes and Ladders, then suddenly they hand you your life back with little graduation cards that say, "Welcome to the Rat Race—Ha! Ha!"

She thought about writing Peter a "fuck you" letter but it seemed pointless. She thought about reading the book her mother sent, How to Get What You Want Without Really Trying. She imagined dancing at a topless bar, her breasts brushing men's mouths, and the way they looked hungry, and the way they looked vacant.

Instead she wrote home: "Mother, my roommates are great—Diane was head of her class at Vanderbilt—and we go
to movies, take long walks. The museum’s hiring in spring and I’ve got a great-paying job at a lawyer’s office overlooking Turnagain Arm, where Captain Cook turned around when he realized there wasn’t a Northwest Passage.”

Laura propped her elbows up on the bar separating the kitchen and the living room and watched Diane’s fingers work the pasta dough. It was Friday night and Diane was back from the Brooks Range where she spent two weeks with a fox trapper she met at the Monkey House, a bar featuring a cage of sad-faced rhesus monkeys.

"What was it like up there?" Laura said as the dough softened in Diane’s hands.

"Cold as a witches’ tit. We landed on the river, and had to shovel into the cabin." Diane rocked gently back and forth as she kneaded. "Kneading’s important, Laura, you got to work the dough till it starts to get stiff."

Laura watched as the dough split, flattened, became round again. "But what’d you do every day?"

"Oh, checked the trap lines, fed the fire, cooked, and went to bed early to save wood." Diane took a hit off her cigarette, her flour-whitened hand holding it away from her face. She looked down at Laura. "It’s hard work."

"But I mean wasn’t it weird with a guy you really
didn't know? A guy you met at a bar?"

"I had a feeling about him. I never go with a guy unless I have a feeling," Diane said.

Laura tried to remember if she had a feeling about Peter. She sure as hell had one now.

"Of course I probably won't see him again," Diane said. "I rarely do."

"But doesn't that make you angry?" Laura said. "Doesn't it make you feel used?"

"Of course not." Diane poised the knife and began to cut the dough in slow, neat strips. "I think of it all as temporary. As a body to keep me warm in winter."

She sat at the kitchen table trying to compose a letter to Peter. "Dear Peter," she wrote. "You stupid fool." She crumpled up the paper, took out a new sheet. She wrote "Peter," then she couldn't think of what to say. "Was broke. Got job. Was hungry. Got foodstamps?" Or "I have taken a lover"--as if a lover were something delicious and disposable you could pluck off a grocery store shelf?

Vince walked in. She blushed and ripped up the paper.

"I gotta go to this dinner," he said, fingering a shred of paper. "Wanna come? Please?"

She knew she shouldn't, but the alternative--another night alone day-dreaming about some Arctic village--wasn't
much. And there was a plaintive quality in his voice she'd never heard before. "What the hell," she said. "I've got to eat."

She knew she'd made a mistake when Vince returned to the kitchen in a peacock blue jumpsuit. "Hey!" he said in a cloud of mouthwash. "Ready for the high life?"

As she stood in the doorway of the Holiday Inn ballroom, she felt like she'd been in a long hibernation, but she didn't know what she'd awakened to. Men in bursting suits and their wives with swooping hair and blue eye shadow wandered around a room decorated with orange flags and signs that said, "Price Slashed!" "Screaming Deal!" The ugly duckling salesman downed a martini and looked quickly away from her.

As she sampled bear roast, pickled whale and mountain goat stew from the "Anchorage You're Fair Game!" buffet, Vince introduced her to people farther and farther down the table and she saw them look at her smooth hair and high-necked dress, and their eyes said, outsider.

When they presented the "Top Salesman of Anchorage 1979" award, Vince wasn't even close. On the chart ranking all the dealerships by sales, Vince Spiker at The Lemon Orchard came in seventh to last. Disappointment flashed across his face. She touched his hand and said, "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Oh well," he said, digging into a third
helping of caribou ragout. "I guess I need work on my closure."

Later that night, a voice in the kitchen woke her from a deep sleep. A chair scraped the floor, birdfood pelted into a dish and a voice said, "So that's the deal take it or leave it."

The bird chirped.

Laura pulled the covers over her head to muffle his voice.

"The deal is Gloria loves me. Don't ya? Gloria?"

There, scattered across the kitchen table with a flyer for a moonboots sale, was the letter. She stared at the neat curves of his handwriting, and the return address: Virginia (so he'd gone home), and the postmark dated February 5. Dale walked into the kitchen, saw her, and tiptoed out. She shook her head, picked up the letter, and carried it back to her room. Her limbs seemed to move in slow jerks.

"I'm probably the last person in the world you want to hear from, and I don't blame you for that. I was awful, Laura, and everyday I look down at the faces of my students (I'm teaching at the Williamsburg Boy's Academy) and I know it again. I hope you'll someday be able to forgive me. We were doing something on ballads, I was doing that Robert
Service, "Northern Lights have seen queer sights," etc., (a silly thing, isn't it? But kind of charming, too), and it made me miss you. Not that you're a queer sight. Far from it. But you're really up there doing it."

She waited a good two weeks before she answered. When she finally sat down to write, she couldn't decide what to say. That she'd been in the Brooks Range with a fox trapper, where temperatures dropped to 40 below? She wrote (and hoped it sounded "dashed off") a card saying she was working for a movie company in downtown Anchorage, where Eskimos lined the streets, where planes flew in daily from the interior, where temperatures dropped to 50 below, and daylight was as long as a 3-martini lunch.

Each morning, she walked from the city parking lot through streets full of plastic cups and sprawling drunks. Past Woolworth's where she could now afford to buy chicken legs for lunch, past the Booby Trap with its stained neon sign of a big-breasted woman in a martini glass.

It was Monday and a week of this lay before her, a week of coming and going in the dark, the cars puffing out exhaust like old men, the drivers barely visible behind frosted windows. A week of walking into the office and seeing Debbie, the office manager open the safe, turn on the telex machine, start the coffee, and Laura envied how she
knew the exact dimensions of her world, and moved comfortably, almost sensually within them.

Debbie raked back her white-blonde hair and checked her watch when Laura came in. She swished over to set some typing in Laura’s in-box. "Mr. Mulroney wants this out this morning." She looked at Laura’s coat as if it were in their way.

Laura sat at her desk and looked at the basket full of telexes to be sent, letters to be typed. The telex machine rumbled in the distance. She felt very tiny.

As she typed, "Dear Mr. Vardis," Mr. Mulroney was yelling at the phone. "For Christ’s sake, we want adventure up here, got that, a-d-v-e-n-t-u-r-e, not this touchy-feely crap. What do you think this is, California?"

She had four telexes to send, and even though pushing the send button to Seattle, Los Angeles, sometimes even New York gave her a certain pleasure--she liked to imagine a mail clerk somewhere saying, "It’s from Alaska"--she was thinking about Peter teaching or her friends getting advanced degrees, their lives moving right foot, left foot, and here she was, small as a dot, punching out messages like "Yes, Conan the Barbarian" or "No, Magic of Lassie."

That night as she lay on her bed and blew smoke rings at the ceiling, she thought it was okay packing salmon eggs, slinging hash--somehow it was all an adventure, but it was February now, and the world seemed to sink around her.
Everything seemed remote, impossible. Where was the part where someone stepped in and said, here's the way. This is how to get what you want. And what is it you want?

A perfect circle of smoke touched the ceiling. She stubbed out the cigarette, and fell asleep with her clothes on. She dreamt she was in an Eskimo fish camp with Robert Marshall. They were watching the red-bellied silvers swim into the honeycombed fish traps. She reached in and touched the slippery back of a fish caught in the trap and felt its powerful thrashing. She wrote that down. "Powerful thrashing." Then Robert touched her hands, her face, her hair with his rough fingers. "They get caught in a web of sticks," he told her, his eyes very blue. "The Eskimos thank the fish who give them their lives." He kissed her first on the neck, and shivers ran down her back like minnows. Then, as he lay on top of her, the hood of his anorak flapping over his head like a halo, Robert Marshall whispered, "Check sent December 20."

"Good Morning Anchorage!" the radio chirped. "It's a balmy fifteen degrees and we're taking bets on breakup. When do you think the mighty Yukon will flow again?"

Laura turned it off, and dressed quickly in the dark. Before she left the house, Vince called to her, "You make me coffee?"

"Fuck you, Vince," she said and shut the door.
At work, Debbie leaned over the telex machine, and watched Laura type. She talked about her husband, home from the Slope, as the lines of type inched out of the machine. "Watch your dollar signs Laura, Mr. Mulroney gets hopped if they’re missing."

Debbie reached over and punched in an "n" that was missing from Pinocchio. She looked behind her to see if Mr. Mulroney was still in his office. She got to the point. Her husband’s brother, Barry, needed a date.

Which is how Laura found herself sitting next to a large, ruddy-faced man at the Alaska Rendezvous. A crowd jammed the rickety bleachers. A family in matching parkas sat in front of her. A few rows down, some Eskimo men laughed in a slow, lilting way, and huddled toward one another. Next to her, Debbie kept whispering, "The guys are so drunk!"

Barry had an easy confidence about him that said he was no stranger to women, but there was something frank about the way he looked at her. "Lucky you," he said, extending his hand. "I’m your blind date. A roughneck."

She laughed, and said, "Well, you ain’t got yourself such a prize either, pal. Laura Cantype from Small World Telex."

He laughed and looked at her as if she were the only person in the bleachers. "Well I bet you’re damn good, Miss Cantype."
She downed her coffee, and the whisky spun pleasantly through her head.

They were in time for the dog pulls. Last year’s winner, Animal, was hitched to the sled of 200-pound weights. When the timekeeper’s arm came down, the part-boxer, part-husky leaned against the weight of the sled, his forelegs bunched with strain, and the crowd jumped up and started yelling, "Animal! Animal!" their faces blazing as if Animal was all that stood between them and spring.

The sled shuddered and inched forward.

"Who do you favor?" Barry said, looking at his program. "Animal? Or Brutus, the part pitbull who’s later?"

"Animal," she said, and smiled. "Girls always like animals."

"Is that right?" He cocked his head.

"Well, let’s say they’re better in the harness."

He toasted her with his thermos cup.

They heard the swish of runners on snow, and a sled pulled into the middle of the arena, then arced slowly around the field, the dogs barking and pulling with sheer joy, the musher leaning back on the sled, and as they glided past, the dogs’ coats rippled like water.

When the sled pulled up to the podium, the musher threw back the fur-lined hood, and her blonde braid tumbled down her back. She turned her strong-jawed, pink face to the crowd and waved.
Laura stood up for a better look.

Barry stood up next to her. She could feel the heat of his body and his fingers caught hers.

As the announcer droned, "Winner of the Alaska Ididarod folks! This little gal braved 40 below weather, drifts tall as a Kodiak," Barry held up a steaming pretzel. She leaned over and bit into it. He smoothed her hair back off her forehead with his hand. "You have salt on your face," he said. She laughed and brushed off the grains. He held up the pretzel again.

"Wait a minute." Laura put her hand on his arm and turned to watch the woman as she moved from dog to dog, quieting them, her movements swift and sure as she checked the lines and harnesses, her hands moving across them like Braille.

Barry sat heavily on the side of her bed. He seemed to fill up the entire room. She sat next to him, and his hands ran up her back, and Laura helped him unsnap her bra. She wished his lips weren't so loose, but she liked the long, ropey muscles up his spine. The phrase "taking a lover" drifted through her mind, and a part of her felt deeply thrilled, as if she had crossed into some new territory. This place where you talked until you got into bed. You didn't analyze or discuss or pull apart all that happened,
you just did what you did and you left. No past, no future. Get in, get out.

Barry came quickly, his eyes rolling up to the ceiling, then collapsed on top of her with a groan. He rolled to the side, but she could still feel his skin burning hers. "Dear God," he said. "You have beautiful tits."

Beautiful tits, she thought.

He opened an eye and asked, "Are you awake?"

"February," she said. "It's February in the world."

As she lay there, tangled in blankets, flushed and musky, Laura told him about Vince and his canary, Mr. Mulroney and the telexes south, and what it was like those nights driving home through the slush and grey, and as she talked she felt as if something were coming loose, melting, like those icicles that drop from the roof in a thaw. She turned over and looked at him. He was softly snoring. As she drifted off, she heard the muted bells of "Jeopardy"


"One two three."

Barry sat up, "What the hell?"

"Beats me," Laura said. "I've never heard this before."

A G-chord was struck, an amplifier whined and someone started to sing, "White Birrrrd!"

She could hear a door open, and Dale's angry voice.

"Jesus H. Christ, Vince!"
Gloria squawked.

"Well," Barry said, putting his clothes on. "I'd better get going."

As they walked by the living room, she glared at Vince. He didn't see her. He was singing something about a golden cage, his face close to the microphone, his eyes half shut, and he seemed to suck each word like candy.

At the door, Barry said, "This is a weird scene." He said good-bye and walked down the driveway. A melancholy snow drifted down. A car started, and Vince's voice rose in a crescendo, "On a winter's day, alll-alone..."

Laura pulled the covers up over her head.

What is happening to me? she thought. She used to consider herself a careful person. A person of intellect. Jesus, she thought, the most intellectual thing I do now is decide what to eat for breakfast. She remembered working on her thesis, the dusty stacks of government reports, trappers' diaries and missionaries' letters she read for news of the Shoshone Indians, and, every night when she clicked on the light, the tidy pleasure of it all, the notecards, the note file, and finally the writing. What happened to that person? Who was this person who got drunk, slept with strange men, typed, "Yes to Creepshow, No to Humongous?"
It was Saturday morning, and she was waiting for Vince to leave the house. She heard him whistling in the kitchen, then he asked Diane if she'd made him coffee. "Eat shit," Diane said.

Laura stared at the ceiling. What she needed, she thought, was order.

She took out the journal her mother had given her for graduation, cracked the spine, and wrote, February 27 on the blank first page. She began to diagram their household. A hunting and gathering society. Two males, two females, all unrelated. Lived in same household; earned separate incomes. No sexual relationships could be determined except one man wanted to make it with both women. Food sources: packaged macaroni and cheese, bologna sandwiches, pizza, Diet Coke, beer. Religion: undetermined, possibly TV.

Laura tore up the diagram, and went into the kitchen. Diane was standing at the table, holding a piece of paper.

"You lucky thang," she said, laughing.

Laura, the note said, let me out of my golden cage.

"All I can say Laura is this," Peter wrote, "when I got your letter, I knew I wanted to try again. I don't know why I think you'd consider this, or what you think about me, but would you? You don't know how many times that awful morning in March has come back to me to haunt me, and I pray to God I could undo it all, unwind it and start again. I think I've
conquered those old fears, which had more to do with faith than you, and I wonder if you'd think about it. The woman who teaches history and anthropology is leaving, and I took the liberty to suggest....All I can say is think about it."

Part of her wanted to get on the plane, tonight. And she could see him as she walked down the off-ramp, standing with his hands in the pockets of his tweedy coat, and the way he look at her, discerning, passionate, and the way he really knew her. And a job, a real job, bringing Leakey and Skinner to fresh-faced boys. But she couldn't see that part. Somehow the vision stopped after she got off the plane.

Laura jerked the car into second and stomped on the gas as she drove home from work the next day. Debbie told her she was too slow on the telexes. Mr. Mulroney yelled for hours on the phone, "Wooden Clogs! You've got to be kidding me. Who the hell's gonna watch a movie about wooden clogs! Why not high heels? Sneakers? Who's buying this shit, some fairy?" He slammed down the phone, called her into his office, and told her she'd better start getting there on time. She nearly gave notice. Then the flowers came. Six blue carnations with a note signed, White Bird.

She was going home to set this straight. She drove through the dusk, saying, "Listen Vince, we're roommates."
Period. No notes. No flowers. And for God's sake, no songs."

She drove out of the downtown where the lights were coming on, and the sidewalks flashed red under the neon naked ladies. Men wandered down the slush-banked streets, dipping into bars, coming out again, dipping into others. Sometimes when a door opened wide enough, she could see a girl on the runway baring her ass to the crowd. She drove down the strip past the car dealers and mobile home sales to the Mountain View exit. She edged into the intersection and was starting to turn, when the car quit.

She turned the key again. Pumped the gas pedal. Nothing. The cars behind her honked, then slowly began to pass her. She sat there, then put her head on the steering wheel.

This was it. She was going to get on the plane tonight, and just give up. Forget it. Fuck Alaska. She was sick of winter, sick of trying. She'd call Peter from Chicago, and say, "guess what?"

Finally a man hitched her car to his, and towed her to a gas station. The mechanics said they'd try to fix it. They looked under the hood of her car and laughed. One of them asked her if she knew what a dead horse was.

She called the house for a ride.

Vince answered.

She watched with relief and dread as the mud-splashed
Camaro with the coat hanger aerial drove up.

"You must be sooo tired," he cooed as she got in the car.

"I'm okay, Vince," she said flatly. "Thanks for the ride."

"Can I buy you a drink? Something to soothe our ruffled feathers?"

Suddenly Laura was very tired. "Look," she started, but she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Don't try to talk," Vince said. "It's been a big day." He gave her a sidelong, goopy look. Laura thought Vince in love was one of the most awful sights she'd ever seen.

"Vince can we go home?" Laura said finally.

He brought her instead to the Lemon Orchard. "I thought you might want to see the place I work," he said.

"Sure, Vince." She looked dully out the window.

He drove up to a little yellow shack in the middle of an ocean of cars. "This is my office. This is where the deals are made." He got out, unlocked the office door and reemerged with a huge ring of keys. "I can get you a Chevy, a Mercury, a Cadillac Seville--"

"Vince," Laura said each word slowly. "Please. I'm hungry. My feet are cold."

Vince headed out toward a Chevy pickup. "I can see you
in a pickup," he said. "Cowboy boots, tight jeans, hair in a ponytail. Those cowboys'd line up to buck your bales.

"Or maybe an Audi--" He said, sailing on toward a yellow car with a missing right fender and a window sticker that said "Price Slashed!"

"Goddamnit Vince!" she yelled, skating across the icy lot after him. The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them. "No cowboy's gonna buck my bales! And I'm not thinking about a Chevy or an Audi or for that matter a sleazy-ass car salesman!"

"Why not a Cadillac? Drive what you strive for, I always say." He was putting the key in the door when she caught up with him. She stopped suddenly and slid into him, her face inches from his. He looked down as if he had been expecting this. "Here we are," he said.

"Vince," she hissed as she slowly backed away. "We are not 'here' as you put it. We are not anywhere. We are standing in a carlot on a Wednesday night in freezing weather because you will not take me home. I do not want a car. I do not want to get to know you."

"Leather interior," Vince said. He opened the door and got in.

She stood looking over the shiny tops of cars in the lot, then she sighed and got in. "Look, I'm sorry I said that about you being sleazy, okay? I've just had a terrible day and I just want to go home."
"This is where I go when I'm down," Vince said, fiddling with the radio. A staticky rendition of "Muskrats in Love" came over the air. "I think, here I am in this big old Cadillac. I'm pulling out of my 5-bathroom house to go off and put some more money in the bank. Or maybe I'll buy something else--what?--another boat? A bank? Or take my glamor-puss to a supper club where we'll have three lobsters with caviar on top." He turned the wheel back and forth, switched on the wipers. "I don't even like caviar."

She touched Peter's letter in her pocket and took a shuddery breath. She could go tonight. She'd step off the plane, and there would be Peter with his wavy hair and tweedy overcoat, and he'd kiss her and ask her for stories about the north country. She'd settle in a little apartment near the school, and wear nylons under her jeans, and wind her hair in a bun, and the boys would look up at her as she talked about New Guinea or Africa, places she had never been. Her life would march quietly on: grad school, a job in a junior college, the tasteful wedding (string quartet please!), the children in crew-necked sweaters chirping in the backseat of a Volkswagen. She'd tell stories about dog sleds and Eskimos, mountains and caribou, and as she talked, she would look across the table into Peter's eyes and see the temperature dropping.

And here? What would happen here? She didn't know. Her nose began to run. She sniffed.
Vince plunked his arm around her. She hiccuped, then relaxed into the warmth. They stared out at the cars receding into the red-hued darkness.

The wipers swung right, left, sweeping off a dusting of snow as taillights rocketed past on Spenard, the round red lights signalling turns and stops, then dissolving into watery streaks that shot on into the dark like comets. She thought for a minute she was going to turn her face to his and kiss him, just for the hell of it, when he turned and whispered, "We could do it in the back seat."

They did not do it in the back seat. Vince drove her home, and when they arrived, dishes were left on the table and the back door was open as if someone had left in a great hurry. Dale’s TV was on, his bedroom door was open. She and Vince walked out the back to see what was happening.

Laura could tell by the catch in her chest that it was below zero and falling. Dale and Diane were standing out in the yard looking up in the sky, Diane hugging her sweater around herself. Laura could see Dale looking at Vince and her, taking this in.

"My car died," she said. "Vince picked me up at the garage." Diane pointed and said, "Look."

Laura stepped across the yard in Dale’s footprints carved in the crusted snow, and looked up. Above the city,
the strip, the car lights, and the Chugach Mountains, great streaks of color spread across the sky.

"Fucking beautiful," Dale said.

"It's like a floor show," Diane shivered.

"A gas puddle," Vince said.

Aurora Borealis, Laura whispered to herself. As she watched the colors pulsing above her, she wondered, And here? What would happen here? Maybe she would go to that Arctic village. Or fall in love with a kelp fisherman. Or write about some frontier city where neon naked ladies blinked on and off under the towering stillness of mountains, then go to sleep each night listening to Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. She didn't know, but that was the adventure: not knowing.

She inhaled a stinging gulp of air, and looked up through the clouds of her breath. It was clear now. The full moon was low, and the stars were bright and heavy. All around her, tiny, charged particles rose up to strike the gases of the earth's formless atmosphere. She watched a patch of white spread from the mountains to the pail of the Big Dipper. Around it, red and green clouds shimmered. The lights weren't the bold, clear colors she'd imagined, but muted, as though she were seeing them through a veil. A blue streak slashed across the sky, then disappeared. She looked for the blue. It reappeared over the North Star, and began to gallop the sky.
BACKFIRES

Don’t come looking for me 'cause I’m not there. I left Bridger, the slurry bombers buzzing, the sharp smell of purpose in that sleepy, stupid town. The papers called it a tragedy. I knew better. I knew they loved it. They brought their lawnchairs and binoculars and lined up by the hundreds on the banks of the Salmon to watch the flames run up the mountainside, to hear the crackling thunder of trees. They cooked hot dogs, drank beer, and some even left to cut fire line. They talked in low voices. Someone, they whispered, someone started this fire. The next day, businessmen wagged their heads over coffee, women kept their children close, and I caught the 9:15 freight to Pasco.

I’m one of the grey men: the men who fix things, sell things, break things and you never notice. We move in and out of your towns, drink at your bars, sleep at your motels, eat your food, fuck your women, and you never see us. We live at the edges of things, but close enough so you can’t see our faces real clear.
I worked at some job, fixing small engines, and I kept to myself. It was a medium shop, twenty men, and they were always organizing picnics, softball teams, football pools. I went to one or two so they wouldn’t notice I wasn’t at the rest.

I met her at the picnic up Wildhorse Canyon. I was standing near a group of people at the bonfire. They were roasting hot dogs, and the kids were burning up marshmallows on willow sticks, and sticking the goo in their mouths. I was watching the fire -- I believe in fire -- when I looked over and saw her, a blonde woman about up to my shoulders, her hair curling away from her face, and even though it was July she was more pink than brown in her blue striped shorts. Everyone was telling dirty jokes and laughing in a beer-soaked way, but she didn’t. She didn’t say anything. She just stood by that ass Tom Dobbins, and picked the meat off a chicken breast, strip by strip.

Now you’ll think, here’s this guy staring like a baboon, but you’re playing me cheap. For as soon as I saw her, I had her memorized, and the rest I discovered as I stood there, sipping my beer, just watching the fire. If you listen, you can discover a lot.

Now I don’t usually have much to do with women. Not real women. Women are fire. Yes. Men are their kindling. I
know this. I look at men, men I work with, men on the streets, and I can tell which ones have been consumed. I look at them from far away, nothing but charred trunks with legs, and I feel sorry. Wives burn husbands, mothers burn sons, sisters burn brothers.

So I tried to stay away from the girl.

But one night, as I was driving to the quick mart for beer, I saw her. She was driving a blue mustang with a dent in the back, and she drove by me, plain as day, her windows down, her hair blowing back, yellow, shiny. This time she had glasses on, and I didn’t like that, but in the husky night she looked cool. I pulled a U-turn and followed her. I followed her to the mall, always keeping, you mind, a good distance, and I followed her home.

Imagine my surprise as I crept up to the window and watched her stand before a closet and reach for a hangar, the golden hairs crawling up her pink legs, the calf muscles round and straining, when who comes in that room but that shaking wall of flesh, Tom Dobbins. He pressed his face into hers. Don’t go, he said. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Pretty, he said. Pretty as a princess.

The sound of his voice—whiny as a bad starter motor—shook me to my senses and I got out of there fast.
I started imagining her--coming out of the shower, her skin glowing and beads of water on her bush. Her and me walking down the street, never touching, and I’d say something to her and she’d laugh, toss her hair, and smooth down the front of her yellow dress. Once, I imagined I touched her skin and it was cool, cool as night.

I decided to follow her.

I bought a 39-cent blue notebook. Number one, I wrote, Dobbins’ address. A drive on the north side took care of that: 145 Phillips. That was enough work for one night. I popped open a beer, and watched "Night of the Grizzly."

That movie was fateful, because I remembered something so important I said it out loud: Stealth, Robert.

Now I didn’t do anything silly like buying dark glasses because I knew I was my best disguise. The next night I waited near Dobbins’ house till I saw her car. I studied an Idaho map as she walked from the car to his house, her dress blowing around her legs to break your heart. I read every word on that map. I read about dogwood. I read potatoes. I smoked two packs of cigarettes, then I followed her home.

She lived in a housing development, a place where little rows of houses were scattered like toys on the lee side of Rattlesnake Mountain. It was built for the young and playful, with a postage stamp of a swimming pool, which made me bit suspicious. But I didn’t think about fire that night. I watched her lock the door to her Mustang, and
slowly walk to her house.

I got home past two, and I didn't get much sleep, but I walked into work the next day with a light heart because I had a jewel: El Dor West #13 and all that it meant.

Now you have to understand something. I didn't want to fuck her, I didn't even want to touch her. People don't always understand people like me, they think I want to break in and force myself on girls to call myself a man. They don't understand I just wanted her in front of me. I just wanted her near.

But I know people, how they grab hold of something in you, something they don't understand, and they twist and turn it and and you have to leave town. So a month after I started following her, when my landlady says to me, cocking her head so I can see the corner of her false teeth, why Robert Michaels I b'lieve you have a girlfriend, want to tell Miss Childers? I cough and say, with all due respects ma'am I'm here to pay rent, and I give her the money and move out the next day. And into the Montague Apartments--one of those dim apartment buildings where every once in a while you pass people in the halls and you're not sure if you saw them yesterday or twenty years ago. You're not even sure anyone else lives there, except once in a while you'll hear bedsprings creak or beer bottles break, but least of all you
hear voices.

It took me forty-five mintues to move in my TV, a box of clothes, and a Contreau bottle lamp I made in shop class as a boy. I'm more sentimental about that lamp than about my whole childhood.

Then I sat at a table I'd hauled up from the dump and opened my notebook. I looked at the things I'd accomplished--addresses mostly--little scribbles on lined paper, little scribbles that are my nights, my days, my dreams, my everything and I asked myself, What are you doing Robert Michaels? You who have seen how women take their men and slowly, like spiders, suck the life out of them, what are you doing? I put the little blue notebook in the trashcan. Then I took a knife and drew the blade up my arm and watched a thin line of blood appear.

Then some other part of me took over, and I saw her, real as day, reclining on my couch in her blue-striped shorts, and I talked dirty to her, and she just look at me cool and picked the petals off a daisy. Robert, she said, I'm feeling warm, Robert.

I walked the tracks that night, past the tennis club that looked like a giant balloon losing its air, past the bushes where the bums were drinking in their camps. While I walked, I talked. I was giving myself a lecture. Remember Robert, I said. What women do to men. They trap them in perfume and breasts and then, limb by limb, they burn them
alive. I crossed the railroad trestle, walked into an abandoned camp, and decided to teach myself a lesson.

I gathered sticks, and laid them on top of a newspaper. I laid them in a pattern, small ones, then larger and larger—I like my fires neat—then I held my lighter up and lit the paper. As soon as the flame was steady, I said OK pal, and stepped in the middle of it.

Now you’re thinking, here’s this wreck of a man in the middle of God knows where standing in a campfire. But I have some sense. I didn’t stay long enough to get real burned, although the corners of my shoes melted down so they tapped in a funny way at work the next day. No, I just stayed there long enough to feel the heat. This, I said to myself, is what women do. Then I kicked in the fire and walked back to my car.

It didn’t work. If anything, it was like the fire released a flood of thoughts like those tree seeds that grow when they’re burned. I thought of her constantly. I saw her in the mirror behind me as I shaved, I saw her in the streets, and I saw her in the back of the shop as I fixed the floats on a carburetor saying, Robertrobertrobert.

At least, I told myself, she will never know you.
I stared at the blue notebook I'd fished out of the garbage, and I smoothed out its pages and I saw her lips rounding around my name. I wanted to reach her. I wanted her mine. I went walking along the river past the old Milwaukee station restaurant where the well-fed got more well-fed, through a tunnel of bushes between the ditch and the river, to the Orange Street Bridge where Willy Williams shot a man and tried to claw the bullet out with a hammer, when it hit me: she needed a name.

It took me a long time to find one. I walked down up and down each side of the Salmon and nothing came. I walked around the downtown, up the zigzag path on the mountain, and tramped the wide, green-lawned section of town where the rich people live. I watched their fat petunias waving, their cow-like children pedalling furiously down the sidewalks, and I thought: Rosie, Sarah, Miranda, Desiree. I walked through the campus drowsy in sun and considered Bettina. In Rattlesnake Park, among the bobbing joggers, I was stuck on Maria. I walked everywhere, but it wasn't till I walked up the tracks on the north side of the river, the tracks they still use, that it came upon me in a fury: Lovely. Lovely, I rehearsed, it's time for your bath. Lovely could you get the door? Lovely, wake up, you're dreaming.
Oh, what busy happy days those were.

Every morning I’d get up at 6:00, drive over to her house, climb high in the birch by her back bedroom window and watch her wake up. This was my favorite part of the day. I looked down at the rumple of blonde hair, pink limbs, blue covers, and felt light enough to fly. Lovely, I’d say to her from my perch, good morning, Lovely. When the DJ said 6:25, her legs finally came out from under the covers, until there she was, wet with sleep, in her shortie gown. I watched her as she rubbed her eyes, pulled her hair from her face, and yawned and once I was so frozen with joy I lost my grip and nearly fell out the tree. I watched her as she walked in this tilted, sleepy way to take in the milk, plug in her hair curlers and make coffee. When she left for work, I shimmied down out of the tree, always keeping, you mind, an eye out for snoops.

Evenings Tom Dobbins was there, sprawled out on her couch and bellowing. I considered at one point killing him but decided it would attract too much attention. So the nights he was there, I just looked at Lovely, then snuck off and drank. Every once in a while I got lucky and she’d be there alone, stretched out on the couch like Cleopatra, reading or painting her nails. I liked pink best.

In my way, I went with her to the library, to the bowling alley, to the grocery store, to the mall for her pretty dresses.
I had to be careful. It was late August, dog days, a time you don’t want to be too happy. The air had that tight feeling of something about to break, and one noon, a fight even broke out at the shop between a forty-year-old mechanic and a kid who beat him at armwrestling. I worked hard to keep invisible. I even developed a little song in my head, it’s just me I’m Mr. Grey, that I’d sing in my head in the backshop among the ignition motors and solenoids until even my song made me happy. Then I practiced just keeping blank.

At lunchtime I’d walk by the State Farm insurance office, where she worked, to see if I could see my Lovely. Once I even went in, but when I stepped into the carpeted office, the air-conditioning blew a prickle up my skin and the receptionist looked up at me strange, like what was I doing there, and a voice in my head said Whoaa, Robert. Lovely wasn’t there thank God and I beat it.

August 25 Lovely and her slob took a raft trip on the Salmon. The night before I hid in some bushes underneath her window and got details from that old fool Dobbins who was sitting on the bed, his stomach lapping over his underwear, and shouting at a map.

A highway followed the river, so I decided to join them. In my own little way of course.
The day of the trip, I went to the supermarket to stock up on beer, me, Mr. Grey, and as I was walking down the aisles, among the fat women with their carts loaded down like small barges, their children crying with animal faces, I was thinking of Lovely cool in glacier water, all wet and yellow and beautiful and I hoped she didn’t get too much sun—when a grocery cart smacked into my side and almost knocked me over.

Shit, I said and looked up—oh God why didn’t I run?—and there she was. My eyes locked right onto hers, and it was like looking eye to eye with a rose. There she was, pink skin and all. She didn’t say something dirty and look at me cool and pluck petals from a daisy or unbutton her top slowly or toss her hair and say in a low pearly voice Robert, Robert. She hurried around her cart and over to me, saying, Oh! I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

Something turned over in my gut, and I turned to head down cereals. She followed me, saying Did I hurt you? What’s your name? I’m so sorry! and then she reached out and put her hand on my arm and that’s when I felt the heat of her palm shoot through me like liquid, like lightning, like wisdom, and my heart squeezed up through my mouth, and I turned to face her and I shouted "Stop!" She looked at me and that’s when I saw it. I tried to look away but her face was painted with the look the look that said you poor, poor man, life has knocked you down and left you in the gutter so
you drink the filth like milk. The look that said Robert Michaels you are a sad little man. The look that said you are a fool. I started to run.

I drove up the Salmon to Hanging Rock Canyon, and I tried to pretend it hadn't happened. As I waited for Lovely and Dobbins' raft to float by, I laid out on the ground in the sagebrush and knapweed and tried to fill my mind with those early pink mornings, just the two of us and the birds singing. I watched them float by and I still saw her cool, her rosy skin and blonde hair, and Dobbins who looked like a beached whale. Lovely, my chilled maiden, I said to myself, Lovely.

But driving down the canyon, it came back to me -- her long fingers on my arm -- the soft hand, palm, her woman's fire. And, over and over again, that look, you poor sad man.

At the campground at Rainbow Bend, I was struggling. I wanted to keep it the way it was, my perfect mornings, my noontime visits, my evenings, my Lovely. But it was all brewing inside, twisting my guts. Then I saw them swirling down the river, coming towards me with the current, the water roaring YOU POOR POOR MAN, the sound thundering against the canyon and gut-punching me till my wind was gone, and I knew in the deepest part of my heart I'd been tricked, burnt by this woman's fire like the bastards I'd laughed at, those charred-up men that lay themselves like
kindling on women, they were my brothers.

My heart ripped open. I knelt down and cried until the sound of my voice carried up the river, until I was exhausted, until I lay in the dirt like a washed up worm, and slept the sleep of the dead.

I never went back to the shop after that—I couldn’t bear the sight of the men who’d given themselves to women and smiled, and the ignition motors where I’d sung my little songs. I lay in my iron bed and drank. I drank as the cars rattled in the streets and the dogs barked and the people on TV opened and shut their mouths like fish. I drank as the day was born and I drank as it wilted. I drank until the ceiling became the floor and the mud-colored tile heaved up and swallowed me, and the night ghosts thickened up the room and I cried out Lovely, Lovely and she’d be there, pink and yellow, saying with the cruel cool, saying Robert, my sweet Robert, and then I’d seen the points of her teeth flickering in her mouth like flames and I knew again I’d been tricked. I yelled at her, threw bottles at her, and sometimes I just plain burned.

I’d feel that touch on my arm, that burning, scouring touch, and I’d split open.

The morning I heard the sweet patter of rain, and the musky smell of wet dirt rose up from the streets and into my
grey apartment, and I knew something. I knew she had taken something from me that kept me blind so I could go on living, and I knew what had to be done.

I was very calm. I had many things to take care of.

I drove by the State Farm Insurance Company that night, 3 AM to be exact. I got out of my car with a bucket and paintbrush and walked to the glass door. No one saw me do it—"I am a careful man"—but as the traffic lights flashed yellow, I made up a pail of the thickest, blackest mud you've ever seen and I painted an X right across the door.

Then I drove to her house, balancing the pail of mud between my knees. As the paintbrush was stiffening, I crept to the backdoor so quiet the dogs couldn't hear me. The first thing I did was to mark her door with an huge X so's people would see.

The next thing I'm a little embarrassed about, but it had to be done. I went to the darkest part of Lovely's yard. Walking past the birch pinched my heart—where every morning I saw Lovely wake up, her long legs coming out of the covers—and I would have fallen apart but I remembered how she tricked me, how her eyes said you poor, poor man, and I stood in the corner by the lilac bushes, thick with leaves, and I unzipped my pants and held myself. Bitch, whore, cunt, I stroked myself, and I thought of her painted
with red cheeks and black eyes, and I thought of her
 glowing, molten insides and the men moaning and writhing inside and I thought of her trying to swallow me—her latest victim—and I came over her marigolds and roses.

I hiked up Snowdrop Mountain and looked carefully for the right place to begin, and I found it, like you find most things as I was coming home. I passed an old camp along the Milwaukee tracks that, judging from trampled-down bushes and the bottles of Thunderbird, had been recently used.

The rest was like going back on a long path you’ve made and undoing it. I moved out from the Montague Apartments as soon as I’d made my plan, and I took my cardboard box of clothes and my Contreau lamp to the dump and watched them crash into the stinking pile of broken refrigerators, chairs without legs, and rusted out car bodies. I whispered goodbye to the crows that dotted the hillside. I’ve always like crows.

I got gasoline and matches, and I planned where I’d off my car. I marked September 8 with an X on a little calendar in my car. I chose that day because the frog-face newscaster said it would be hot. I am a careful man.

A man gets the jitters before something big in his
life, and I was so nervous I spent the whole day driving out every exit from town, running down the plans in my head. The only thing that calmed me was thinking of Lovely, defeated. Ha, ha, I laughed to myself. Outdone.

September 8 dawned just as it should. The sun burned over Snowdrop Mountain and the air hung heavy. Children whined, flowers drooped, and the town had that cornered feeling of too much heat and a winter ahead. It was perfect.

At 3:00 p.m. I parked my car in the lot of a grocery store, and I slowly walked over the bridge to my site. I wanted to remember everything right before—the faces of the people at the little picnic park by the river, the tapping sounds of the football players in a distant field, and most of all the face of the mountain that would defeat Lovely. There it was, with its little rock ledge halfway up, covered by spruce, tamarack and willow, the dried-up spring, my Snowdrop Mountain.

I waited in some bushes until it was dark, then I walked to my site like I was walking up the aisle in a church. I had thoughts about Lovely in the early morning with her rumpled-up hair and her round pink arms, and then I remembered the look, the touch, my knowledge. Women destroy, I whispered.

At the hobo camp, I put kindling on top of the Idaho map that was my first night with Lovely, and I lit the whole
pile with a wooden match and put a couple of hot dogs on top for effect. The fire sputtered a bit, so I dragged over a branch and set it on top. The branch lit up like Vegas strip, and in minutes the bushes caught. I left when the trees at the bottom of the mountain started smoking, and walked back to the car, exhausted. I drove out a nearby freeway exit to relax.

When I drove back to Bridger along the old highway, you can imagine my pride when I looked over and saw that bank of orange-red flame along the river, the huge sparks that flew up the hill lighting tree after tree like sparklers, and I smelled that tart wood burning and knew it was going to work. It was my grandest moment, my hand on the wheel of the old Ford Pinto, looking straight into the mouth of my finest creation, my fight against the woman fury Lovely.

I went to my hiding place, I won't tell you where, and I watched the wind push the flames uphill, lighting tree after tree like birthday candles. As the clouds of smoke billowed down the mountain, I watched the firetrucks come and the little black-jacketed men scurry out with their hoses. I watched the policecars rush up with their sirens blaring and the policemen burst out of the doors, put their hands on their hips, and look up. I watched people scamper off to call other people, and I watched the slurry bombers buzz closer and closer with their singing whine and they spread their red dust and I watched it fail.
They came in droves that day, the cars, the bicyclists, the motorcycles, the trucks, and they pulled up with the river between them and the burning mountain and they set up their camps and they stayed all night to watch my creation, these people who ignored me and colored me grey, they came and they watched.

Then I drove to her house, left the note, rang the bell and hid in the bushes. She walked out, and opened the envelope, her long pink fingernails slicing the top flap, and started to read the note. I had the feeling a man gets when he knows this is the moment that is beyond his control, and I took a drink of vodka and held my breath. She looked up at the mountain for a long time, so I couldn’t see her face, and I thought I would burst until she finally turned and I saw the look of pure horror, then the pink dimming into grey, and then came defeat that was almost exquisite, and I knew I had won, and I had to leave town. She looked down at the note and then she slammed the door.

The fire’s for you, I wrote, who fooled a poor man once.

And that’s when I left. As I crouched in the boxcar waiting for the yard bulls to pass, I took a long sweet breath and looked at the tiny people, poor poor people, huddled on the banks of the Salmon, the sad charred men and the women who ruined them. I looked at Snowdrop Mountain,
the orange, red and purple tongues of fire, the blackened trees standing like corpses, and I thought about all the things a grey man can do.
"You are entering Resurrection Bay," the speaker booms as the ferry swings from open sea into the mountain-lined sound, and Abby Fischer sees a tiny town hunkered down near the edge of the water, smoke rising from a hundred chimneys, the broken tongues of docks jutting from shore, and the narrow road that heads north through town and over Moose Pass to Anchorage. Winter is two months away and the mountains are dark against the blue sky. Next to her Charles is in a reverie. He nuzzles her neck with his beard, whispers, welcome to Seward. They turn to watch the eagles feeding at the dock, the people waiting in pickups, the police cruiser that stops them as they drive off the ferry. Hey pal, the cop says to Charles, you’re comin’ with me.

Abby drives down Main street, and looks at the cluster of buildings. The people hurry along the sidewalk, their collars turned up against the wet wind. I have no history here, she thinks. She sits in the Seward Coffee Shop to wait for Charles. A guy across the counter stares at her face, then at her chest. If there’s one thing she doesn’t
like about Alaska, it's men staring at her chest. She wants to get a pin that says, So what. I got jugs." She orders a bowl of oatmeal and starts to make a list titled Getting Settled in Seward. One, she writes, and circles it. Get an apartment. Two, a job. The guy stands up. He's wearing boots stamped "Property of Whitney Fidalgo," the name of a cannery. He walks up, tells her her boyfriend is in the clink. Just like that. She looks at her list. Three, she thinks, bail out Charles.

The cops want to question Charles about Rod, the guy stowed away in the camper. Rod was stinking drunk when they loaded at the ferry terminal in Kodiak. Don't do it, Abby told Charles. Ah hell, Charles said in his compassionate voice, the guy doesn't have any dough. When the ferry crew found Rod passed out in the lounge, six hours later, he tried to give them two hundred dollars. They wanted to prosecute anyway.

The officer is nice enough, Abby thinks, but who isn't when they're accepting money? She wonders if he thinks she's an adventurer. Or a tree hugger. She wonders if he thinks she's white trash. Whatever he thinks, he says, you're girlfriend's set you free, pal. He turns to Charles and smiles, welcome to Seward. Abby notices his back teeth are missing. Charles, who has a full set of white teeth,
gives the officer his best all-purpose smile. Thanks, he says. Really, Abby thinks, it's all quite civilized.

Charles takes Marine Diesel class at the Alaska Skills Center. He makes fifty bucks a week for this, and every two weeks the big green checks that say, "Government and Youth-- hand in hand" arrive in the mail. We'll get a set net site, Charles tells her, then we'll fish all summer and travel all winter. It sounds good to Abby. Sometimes she has a vision of the two of them walking some kind of cosmic path, alighting and taking off, over and over again. Abby never moved as a child, and now, with Charles, she can go anywhere.

She takes carpentry class. They're framing a dorm. She crawls to the attic space and lays on the sweet-smelling boards. Mountains of clouds roll by. She thinks of Greece. France. the Trans-Siberian Express. She thinks of someone, say Mrs. Boulieau, stopping her mother in the aisle of the grocery store, and asking what is Abby doing now? And her mother saying quickly, she's graduated from college, and then, shaking her head and smiling apologetically, now she's in trade school in Seward. Abby likes to picture Mrs. Boulieau's face as she says, Seward where?

The instructor asks her if she's done much carpentry. Actually, Abby says, I was a voice major. Tra-la-la, he
says. He thinks she’ll be better on smaller projects. She spends six weeks building a podium. She glues the plywood inside out. She can’t miter corners. Once she pounds a bent nail right into the wood. Every day the class clown walks by and says, you still working on that thin? When she is done, the podium is too short, so she adds a border of two by fours. It takes two men to life it. She transfers to auto mechanics.

Willy is her partner in auto mechanics. He ran a shop in Kotzebue until he drank himself out of a job, and he’s here for rehab. He’s twenty years older than most of the student. He watches Abby trying to wrench a carburetor out of a dinged-up Chevy, her braids hanging close to the fan. The corners of his eyes crinkle up, and he laughs.

Abby, he says, right tighty, lefty loosy. Abby likes the way the words roll from the back of his throat. An Eskimo phrase maybe that means what you force will not come to you. She jerks the wrench and smiles. The bolt will not budge. Righty tighty, lefty loosy. She thinks of her last recital, the ocean of audience, the way the notes rose from her diaphragm, thick and rich. The dark green of her plants, leafing and budding in their Eugene apartment. Things she can do. Righty tighty, lefty loosy. Maybe he is saying she is a very stupid girl.
Abby walks to town from their low-income housing, past the junk shop where Cas Witherby makes sculpture out of rusty pipes. Past the Breeze Inn, boarded for winter. Past the docks where a month ago groups of men watched a huge crane lift the boats form the water like dripping toys. Past a dry-docked halibut boat where a light flickers in the portal.

In the grocery store, she waits to feel the familiar rush of warmth for these women bundled against the cold and buying pock-marked bananas. The florescent lights starkly illuminate the two aisles of the store. There is one other customer and Abby smiles at her as they pass near the cereals. The woman simply looks at her. Abby feels small suddenly, and she looks at the withered tomato in her hand. She realizes that she is losing her sense of humor. This time she doesn’t try to humor the clerk she and Charles nicknamed the Great Stone Face.

It is October 12, and Abby can barely make out the ghostly white of snow on the tops of the mountains. Charles’ buddies from Marine Diesel are over again. They come over a lot, sometimes even at nine on Saturday mornings. If Charles is gone, they just look at their feet and leave.

Abby brings them cold beers from the refrigerator. Everyone is talking about their cars. Abby gets right in
there, talks about the Chevy she’s working on. The conversation changes, when she talks, from loosy, goosy to formal call and response. Charles acts as if nothing has changed. Finally no one says much of anything and she goes to bed. She falls asleep to the ripple of their talk.

Cherried out. Cyclone headers. Holly high rise.

She wakes up when Charles gets into bed. Hey, he runs a finger down her cheek, I hope you’re not mad. She puts her arms around his back, feels the thick muscles along the spine. She could never leave him. Charles cups her breasts in his hands. Nice jugs, he says in his greaseball voice. She laughs, and kisses him and remember the first morning they made love, her flannel nightgown bunched up, Charles holding her, the flashes of rainbow on the wall as a crystal turned in the window, and the yellow light. The light.

By the end of October, Abby wants to move back to Eugene. Charles reminds her of their plan. Only six more months, then a set net site. We’ll haul ‘em in, make big money, he says. We’ll travel all winter. Abby misses things. Bookstores, movies, conversations, most of all voice lessons. They aren’t far from Anchorage but the roads are bad the truck doesn’t work well. There is a movie house in Seward. They’ve seen "Pinnochio," "The Bad News Bears Ride Again," and "Coma," which has been playing for three
straight weeks. Abby feels her mind is rotting away. She gets stoned and goes to the Homemaker's Fall Bazaar, and the crocheted potholders make her want to cry.

Charles gets a job at night in the nursing home for crazy people. Sometimes, when he is on shift, he brings them by the apartment and they slurp tea and crow with delight at the brightly-colored hot pads.

After work one night, Charles takes her on a picnic to cheer her up. He makes her shut her eyes until they get to Old Woman's Point. She hears him unzip the pack. She hears the clink of glass, the soft whap of fabric being shaken, the hiss of a lighted match. Okay, Abby, Charles says as he stands behind her and holds her around the waist, surprise. He has arranged a blanket, two candles, two pears and a bottle of wine on the sand. He tells her, Buck up Lucky. Lucky is his nickname for her. Pretty soon, he says, we'll be playing in the big time.

Thursday the auto mechanics class has Industrial First Aid. They watch movies of people being burned. Men with severed arteries, broken limbs, seizures. At three in the afternoon, they learn CPR. They practice in pairs on a Ressuci-Andy, a five-foot plastic doll with a mouth shaped in an O. Again and again, one guy breathes into its mouth, while another mashes the plastic chest with his hands. Two
breaths. Five pumps of the chest. Abby and Willy are next. She cups her hand behind the neck to clear the trachea. She bends over and Willy kneels next to her. Someone yells, Smoke 'em Abby. She smiles, takes a deep breath, puts her mouth over the plastic mouth of the Ressuci-Andy and exhales. She expels so much air, her lungs hurt. The Ressuci-Andy shudders then gives a long, squeaky sigh. Everyone explodes with laughter. She laughs so hard, she cries. You got what it takes, Willy says. He is pumping the doll’s chest for all he is worth.

There is a month of rain before the snow creeps down the mountain and hits the town. If Eskimos have thirteen words for snow, Abby wonders how many they have for rain. Rain that drives against the plate glass window. Rain that covers her face like dew. Rain that pockmarks sand. She watches the clouds, the way they glide into the bay then gather force, growing larger and blacker. Sometimes she can tell what kind of rain it will be by the clouds.

It is the wind that scares her. Not the warm, sweet wind off the Japanese current, but the piercing Arctic wind. Sometimes, when she is alone on the beach and the Arctic wind blows in, she imagines she will be sucked out to sea and wrapped in stinking kelp. When she tells this to Charles, he guys her a warmer coat. He encourages her to make some friends, not to get too isolated. Charles, Abby
They show movies once a week at the old folks home. Movies about animals. If there were anything else to do, Abby would not watch these movies. The home smells like antiseptic, floor wax, and urine. From down the hall, a woman yells, Mama, Mama. Abby sees Charles at the nursing station. He is talking to a woman behind the desk. She looks about Abby’s age. She is laughing, running her hands through her dark, curly hair. She looks warm, happy, Abby thinks, and this thought makes her go numb. For a moment it feels like everything is stripped to the bone.

The movie is about caribou. An Eskimo woman named Sally dances in front of the projector. The caribou migrate south underneath the shadow of her undulating arms. An old man wanders behind the screen, trying to open the doors. Let me out, he says in a flat voice, let me out. The caribou are mating. A woman slaps herself over and over. The caribou run south across the tundra, and their racks makes a dry, clacking sound.

Ruby and Evan, their upstairs neighbors, are driving down south. Abby and Charles help them carry out boxes of shot glasses, a moose rack. Ruby turns to Abby, we’re going
to be gypsies, she says, sixty-year-old flower children. Maybe you should wait until spring, says Charles. Oh no, buster, she says, when you gotta go, you gotta go. Isn’t that right, Evan? Evan looks at her and nods. Evan, she laughs, don’t say much.

Evan’s nice, Abby ventures when she and Ruby are alone. Evan’s a baby, Ruby says. I’m tired of men who want mothers. She takes a long drag on her cigarette and the smoke billows out of her nose. What I really want, she say, is a father.

Charles and Abby waves as the white van pulls onto the road. I hope they make it over the pass, Charles says, it’s supposed to snow. The van gets smaller and smaller, and the puff of black smoke and the blur of tires finally disappear as the car rounds the bend that heads over Moose Pass to Anchorage.

Charles and Abby go inside and sit at the kitchen table they found at the dump. It’s 4:30 in the afternoon and the sun is setting. When it begins to snow on the tops of the mountains, Abby feels a chill clear to her bones. She turns up the heat. Charles has take off his sweater and he’s wearing a t-shirt. The clouds gather over the mountains, and the radio says, it’s going to be a big one. Praise the Lord. The radio plays three hours of hymns out of the nine hours it is on the air. Abby is starting to hum them. The clouds are moving down the mountains. Big clouds, dark and
heavy with snow. The windows rattle. The radio plays, "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Charles watches the storm move in. Abby, he says, this is really something. Abby puts on two sweaters and crawls into bed. Underneath the covers, she can hear the wind howl. She wonders how long it takes to get cabin fever. It is only November.

Abby presses on the on switch, and the slide tray clicks into place, and the lesson about starts begins. A cartoon drawing comes into focus. A woman dressed in a frilly apron waves good-bye to her husband in the model A waits curbside.

In the next frame, the man holds the starter crank in his hand. In slide three, he begins to turn the crank, a herculean effort, Abby can tell, by the sweat standing out from his forehead like a halo. The wife clasps her hands at her breast. The announcer asks: How can a twelve-volt battery produce twenty thousand volts? Abby knows the answer. She has seen this slide show three times. It's the power of the almighty starter!

Abby thinks about last night when she tried to explain to Charles the reasons she wants to leave. The fact she has not made any friends. The fact that there is nothing to do. The fact that she has no opportunity to sing. Charles
suggests that she try taking walks. Abby is incredulous. Walks? Well running, maybe, he says, it'll clear your head.

Abby picked up the ashtray with the two salmon leaping over the falls that Ruby gave her. She three it at Charles. Okay, she yelled, I’ll go for a walk, and she slammed the apartment door behind her.

She walked down Main Street. Past the Seward Coffee Shop, the plate glass iridescent, chairs turned up on the tables, catsups filled and waiting. Past the grocery store with its wilted lettuce and rotten tomatoes and the silent clerk. She wanted to stay out all night but it was too cold. She crossed the street and walked home past the handicraft store the Homemakers opened for Christmas. Past the window filled with Pyrex bottle bird feeders, crocheted caps made of Budweiser cans, homemade dolls whose stitched smiles are savage in the moonlight.

It's nearly Thanksgiving, and Abby writes in her journal that she's going to make an effort. She and Charles are riding to school in the dark. The sun doesn't rise until 9:30. She looks at the pink-tipped sky before she walks into the auto mechanics building. Okay, she thinks, it's okay.

She has been assigned a new partner, Mike. He has straight blonde hair and wears beaded moccasins up to his knees. He ignores Abby except when he needs money.
coffee break, she goes outside to see the sun, and someone tells her Willy is in the hospital spitting up blood. He's drinking again. Can you blame him, Abby thinks, then wipes the thought from her mind.

As part of her self-improvement plan, Abby walks over to the Methodist Church after work. She tried to sing once in their apartment and in the middle of her scales, the new upstairs neighbors pounded on the ceiling. She has been singing into a towel in the bathroom, but she is afraid that she is ruining her voice. The minister told her she could sing at the church, but, he winked, you might have to sing for your supper.

The church is empty. She sits for a while in a pew and listens to the wind rattle the windows. She imagines the congregation: the stone-faced store clerk, the loud waitress at the coffee shop, the postman who repeats her last name whenever he hands her the mail.

Finally she unfolds her xeroxed music, sets it on the piano, and begins her scales. Under the benevolent gaze of Jesus, she feels shy. Her voice is thin. The piano keys are stripped over ivory, and some of them don't work. It's okay, she tells herself, okay. She launches into arpeggios, and begins to forget.

When she feels alone, really alone, she starts to sing "Chil il bel Sogno di Dorretta" and her voice gets strong and she likes the way it echoes through the church. The way
it fill the empty room. The way the wind sighs back. "Chil il bel sogno di Dorretta?" and the snow taps on the windows. She wonders if Charles is home yet, "Il suo mister come mai, come mai fini?" A door opens somewhere, and in the middle of her reach for the high A, she stops. If it's Charles, she doesn't want to look concerned. She takes a breath and goes back three measures to the part where Dorretta says once love matures, the young passion dies with understanding.

Someone coughs. Abby looks up from the music. A woman is standing in the shadows at the back of the church. Her parka is silver fur, the muff thick around her delicate face. The woman says, I heard you singing.

Her name is Nina Ruskovitch. She is thirty, living with a real estate bigwig in town. They have a little house with door-to-door carpeting, a stereo, a blender: things Abby has forgotten about. It always smells sweet because Nina burns incense to feel dreamy. Her eyes are deep-set and she has a soft, high voice. She doesn't always listen to Abby. That okay, Abby thinks, I don't always listen to her.

Nina's planning her marriage to the bigwig. A glass chapel somewhere in California. A satin dress with a high collar or a sculpted neckline. She can't decide, and she shows Abby magazine after magazine of bridal dresses. Just
pick what you like, Abby says. No, Nina says, as she flips through the latest *Bride* magazine, it has to be right.

When she gets home, the apartment is silent. Charles is working longer and longer hours. We needs the money, he says, and she can’t argue. But tonight, she has things to tell him, and there’s only the empty room, the moonlit bay, the click of the furnace as the temperature drops down to zero.

Charles gets back around midnight. She is lying in bed, her hands flat against her sides. He pulls her braid. Hey, he says, there’s dogs around the moon. When he crawls into bed, he wraps his arms around. Sally, he murmurs, ran away again. He had beef stroganoff. Old nurse what’s-her-name bawled us out again. Are you asleep Lucky? Are you asleep? He turns over and falls into a heavy sleep, and in the bedroom window, Abby see the moon faintly rimmed with red, blue, and yellow clouds.

Nina is teaching her belly dancing. Abby comes over after school, takes off her coveralls and puts on a leotard of Nina’s. They stand in front of mirrors in two different rooms and Nina yells. Isolate, she says, feel your rib cage lift out of your stomach. Nina wears a sequinned bra. Watch me, Nina says. Abby watches the way her glittery chest moves up and away from her stomach, the languid ripple
of muscles. Nina used to dance at the bobby Trap in Anchorage, and she told Abby she had all the sex she wanted. Sometimes, she says, she misses it.

They practice isolations. Belly ripples. The Camel Walk. Abby likes the shimmery music they dance to, the sounds of some place far away, some place hot, some place completely different than Seward.

What are you doing here, Nina asks her when they're sitting around the kitchen table. Abby tells her about auto mechanics class, the set net site, the trips they'll take. Nina begins to flip through a magazine. Abby tells her that she and Charles are kind of like cosmic warriors. Nina looks up when she says cosmic, and offers Abby what she calls her caveman diet, nuts and coconut. Nina says Charles should provide for her. She says her man buys her pretty things. They have matching bathrobes. A girl needs pretty things, she says, there is strength in pretty.

It is three weeks before Christmas when Charles and Abby go walking on the beach. Charles has just told her they will have to stay in Seward for Christmas. But I can't stand it here, she says. It's so beautiful, Charles says and sweeps his arm out to indicate the mountains, the rolling sea, the broken dock. I'll show you a grand Christmas, Lucky. This nickname is beginning to get on
Abby's nerves. There is nothing in the town, she thinks, on the scale of grand.

Abby sees a patch of snow piled in the center of a tall rock. She runs over to scoop up and snowball, and screams. She has laid her hand on a dead seal. A baby seal with freckled, grey fur. Charles runs up and begins to examine it. Abby, he says, it's a fresh kill. Who cares, she says, let's go. No, Charles holds her arm, let's take it back. He grabs the baby seal by the tail and sling it over his shoulder. What in the hell are you doing? she yells. We'll tan it, he says, looking very happy with himself. It doesn't belong to us, she says and begins to cry, leave it here.

She sobs at Charles' back as they walk up the beach, and she hates his square shoulders, and the way he keeps walking. Finally she's just tired. The Klingits says Kooshdecah, the land otter, walks the beach at night like a man. The stars look icy, and, under the faint yellow disc of the moon, rocks and logs take shape as walrus and seals.

From the bedroom, she can hear the quiet puncture as Charles slits the seal's belly. He is whistling. She tries to read, but it's hard to concentrate with all the carnage going on in the bathroom. Abby, Charles says, this really isn't bad. She hears the soft tearing of the hide, the
When she reaches the door of the bathroom, Charles is holding his hand. Abby concentrates on his cut to block out the shiny guts spilled across the bathtub. The porcelain smeared with seal blood. The little whiskered nose. Charles looks up at her, then hold out his finger. It’s okay, he says, but I need your help. Please, he says, help me.

It’s all she can do to touch the slick little body. And as she tries to turn it so Charles can cut off the rest of the hide, it slips out of her hands, and she leaps up as if it’s alive. Then after a while, it’s not so bad, she gets used to the mess. And as the raw smell of seal oil thickens in the bathroom, she and Charles kneel, side by side, scraping the fat from the hide. Charles kisses her neck, suggests she chew the fat from the hide like the Eskimo women. She makes a face and sticks a piece of blubber down his shirt.

At midnight, the hide is clean and stretched. They put the naked little seal body in a red plastic bag, start up the truck, and take it to the dump.

The colored light bulbs sway up and down over Main Street, so small against the Arctic wind, the snow-covered
mountains, the darkness, they bring tears to Abby's eyes. Or maybe it was the Sunday schooler's nativity scene. Of maybe it was the practiced merriment of the minister as he herded them through the rehearsal. Whatever it was, she needs a drink.

The Northern is dim and warm and she walks up the narrow path between the bar and tables, looking for Charles. She can feel the eyes of the men at the bar, and it reminds her of those X-ray glasses advertised at the back of comic books. She orders a drink, and looks at her watch. Tinsel glitters over the bar, and the moose head has on a Santa Claus Hat. She wonders where Charles is.

Nina and the real estate bigwig walk in the front door. Abby waves them down. Charles will be here soon, Abby says, let's order a round. Nina is unusually quiet, and Abby and the bigwig talk over "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," which is playing for the third time. He tells her about the '63 earthquake, how the docks washed out and the ground split open and the mud shot up as high as the trees. How land was cheap when everyone moved to Anchorage.

When it seems they have exhausted their store of conversation, the real estate bigwig starts watching whatever Nina is watching at the bar. Something about Nina's nonchalance reminds Abby of all those afternoons she talked to Nina as Nina flipped through the pages of magazines. This nonchalance makes Abby want to hurt her.
Abby stirs her fourth drink, then leans over the table. I want to tell you guys a secret, she whispers, because you’re my friends. Nina and the real estate bigwig look at her in mild surprise. Charles and I are going to be married, she says. She is drunk, but she can’t believe she is doing this. Nina looks startled, and the real estate bigwig seems happy to have something to drink to. They drink toast after toast to happiness. In the blur, Abby remembers Charles, and her insides feel like hamburger.

Abby finally weaves home and when she opens the apartment the stench of seal oil nearly make her throw up. God damn seal skin, she thinks, and goes to the kitchen where the spotted pelt is strung over the oven door. It’s still damp in places, and some fat still clings to the hide. The Christmas I tanned, she says to herself, the Christmas I fucking tanned. She walk from the kitchen to the bedroom. The blanket are pulled up. The furnace clicks on. The outside thermometer reads five below zero and falling.

It’s Christmas eve and the pre-schoolers toddle up the aisle to put paper stars on the spindly pine tree. The Sunday schoolers come whispering, dressed in sheets, and a boy about ten stand at the back of the church and says, behold. In the front pew, Abby is waiting to sing. She turns her head, and sees Charles in the pew behind her. He
gives her a big smile and a thumbs up. The minister says a prayer for the Christmas season, and out of the corner of her eye she sees the grocery clerk, which for some reason sets off a flutter of nervousness. Finally, the prayer is over, the congregation looks up, and it is her turn to walk up the aisle. Her face is frozen, her hands are icy, and the piano hits the opening chords of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

It's all wrong. The piano is out of tune and she is having a hard time finding the key. Her breathing is off, and her voice is thin when she finally sings about the "hopes and fears." She can see her carpentry teacher, the auto mechanics instructor, Nina and the real estate bigwig, the way they look glassy-eyed, like she was some kind of background music. Even Charles looks worried.

She sits down while the minister discusses the meaning of Christmas. The room becomes distant, and she can barely hear what the minister is saying, angels, inns, someone was born, righty tight, we call our savior, lefty lossy.

She walks up the aisle again to sing "Silent Night." Her voice is warming up. The congregation joins her on the last chorus and everyone looks dreamy and the church glows as the children file out of the door carrying tiny white candles. Everything's drawing to a close. Charles is buttoning up his flannel jacket. People are starting to shift in their seat, a baby cries from the back of the
church. They will go home now, happy, and become families.

Abby, however, is not finished. Something about the grocery clerk, the way his lips moved in and out as he slept, the way the light flashed off his glasses makes something crack inside her. She wants to exact something.

She stares at him from the front of the church when the lights go up, and announces she has a Christmas surprise for them all. The minister looks miffed. She doesn't care. Give me an F major chord, she asks the startled pianist. She hears her note and the in full voice begins to sing "Chil il bel sogno di Doretta." The room is stunned quiet, except for a wall of sound, her sound, non babies are crying, and the grocery clerk shakes himself out of sleep. This beautiful dream, she sings and she can feel the air fill her back, her lungs, her throat, where are you now? She sings about love's mystery, and the kiss of passion that dies as soon as its born. People are looking at her and then at each other, and Abby thinks to hell with you all. To hell with your little faces, your windy churches, your x-ray bars. She sees Charles looking up at her, his face flushed with triumph. To hell with you Charles, she sings, with your marine diesel and your stinking seal skin and your set net sights, fini. Then his face gets dimmer, winking out, and she can't think. It is only ah! mio sogno!, the high C, and the suck and rush and the promise of air.
Part II

GATHERERS

"Your descendants shall gather your fruits"

--Virgil, *Ecologues* IX
MEMORIAL DAY

They were buried beside the railroad tracks, these MacLeods and Biggerstaffs and Charbonos who in 1860 rounded the weary bend of what the Indians called the River of Awe. They built a town they called Bridger, then they rested, forever. They rested under skies that purpled with dusk or oncoming storms and chattering cottonwoods that shook down leaves in a graveyard so big it had streets named Yew and Hope and Eternal Glory. They slept and played pinochle, and at night they listened to the rasp of crickets and the coupling and recoupling of trains, except for the restless ones who gathered their bones and hopped slow-moving freights headed west.

The McGuires lay there too. Fierce Scotch-Irish, they came west from Chicago for the sake of their boy who'd sickened in the stench of the stockyards. There was Edward, his gentle wife Corrie and three children: the daughter who married well and ran countless committees, the son nicknamed "Dandy," and the baby who died at delivery because the doctor was drunk. They rested easy in lives well-lived, except for Corrie's sister, Sarah, who claimed that the
shift and crash of the trains kept her from God-given sleep and her brother, Simon, who drifted south to Boise.

Today there were no games--no last minute bets or retreats or card-slamming victories. Today everyone waited: husbands for wives, sisters for brothers, babies for mothers. Even those who had been here for decades waited for a prayer sent earthward, even a plastic flower. The air was tense with listening.

No one said anything about the tapping of a small girl's shoes as they ran across the McGuire's flat marble gravestones. ("Who wants to spend a fortune on a monument to death?" Poppa McGuire always said, and all the family agreed except Dandy, who insisted on a weeping angel for his wife.) For most, the patter of footsteps was like the sound of a welcome rain.

No one complained except Sarah, who winced at each footfall and said, "It's going to be awful." "Of course not," said Corrie. "It will be lovely." "Lovely?," Dandy cried, "It will be lovely?" "Lovely," Corrie said and her voice was firm.

There was a rustling above them. "Lilacs," Corrie whispered. "Oh, that perfume!" "You don't know what it's like Corrie!" Sarah cried. "Let's not start up," Edward said, scowling. "Can't we make this nice for once?" But Sarah went on anyway. "They always say kind things about you, Corrie, and some years they squeeze out a tear, but not
for old Sarah. They just flop down a tulip, and and laugh—and I nearly went blind embroidering those runners for Jimmy! Remember the cornflowers in five shades of blue?"
"Of course dear," Corrie said. "Jimmy’s wife put them out every summer for company." "Maybe I wasn’t easy," Sarah said. "But once, just once, I wish someone would say, 'Now Sarah--there was a fine woman.'" Just then the baby woke up and her mouth opened and shut in a soundless cry. Corrie held her, and hummed, rock-a-bye baby.

The footsteps stopped. There was only the rumble of an idling switch engine, then a murmur rippled down through the ground. Corrie lifted her head. "Jimmy?" Edward said. Corrie nodded, and said in a rush, "Look at his face, Edward--how sad it is, how heavy with the world. If I could just..." "Let him be," Edward said. "He’s a man now." "Just warm his cheek in the palm of my hand," she continued. "Well you can’t, Mother," Dandy said. "'Cause you’re dead. Gone. Forgotten." "Keep to yourself," Edward said. "Just because your heart’s locked tight, doesn’t give you license to break your mother’s!"

There was a banging of cans, the thudding of more feet, and someone calling "Rrrrruhee," though it was hard to hear clearly through the earth. Corrie clutched Edward’s arm. "Don’t worry," Edward said. "She’ll come." "She’s got so much to remember--" Corrie said. "Do you honestly think she’ll forget you for The Lady Pioneers of Erudition and
Charity?" Edward said. "Who cares if they come?" Dandy said. "It's the same every year—they stand above you, say your name, and someone dredges up some idiotic story, but honestly, do we have to go through this forever? Do you really think things can change now? Better to extinguish hope, Mother. Face facts. May's never going to get on her knees and ask for your help." "When has May ever forsaken your mother?" Edward cried. Corrie began to shake. "You bled me dry, Dandy McGuire," she said and looked at him but her tears were long gone. "Those years I took care of you, May just went on, and something grew up between us and when we entered the same room, things just broke into two like a plate with a hidden crack. You're right Edward, she never forgets me—not a birthday or a Christmas or an Easter, but don't you see? I'm just another item on the list, next to flowers for the church coffee, and paper napkins for bridge." "Corrie!" Edward slapped his hand on the earth. "May was devoted to you." "No dear," Corrie said and her voice was hushed. "She was lost to me."

Something slammed shut with a chunk.

Sarah trembled.

Dandy said, "May's here."

"May?" Corrie said.

"May," Edward said, and settled in for the duration.

The pattering continued, on out over the McLeods and the Biggerstaffs and the unmarked graves of some early horse
thieves, then west to the unpeopled territories of earthworms and bitterroots.

From the darkest part of the yard, Rudy could see her mother and Auntie May on the patio talking. They were talking about flowers, their voices low and echoey. You won’t have anything left, her mother said. I don’t have a choice, Auntie May said, family comes first. She began ticking off a litany of family names on her fingers, Mama, Poppa, Dandy, Sarah.

Rudy hung her hair on the lilacs, and whispered, help.

Her mother called.

She shook the branch. Violet blossoms floated to the earth. She looked down and imagined they were princes crying, Rapunzel, Rapunzel....

Rudy, where are you? her mother called.

Rudy watched her. Her mother stood up in the garden by Auntie May’s kitchen, and looked out toward the darkening yard. Patches of yellow light outlined her bare white arms. In one hand, she held a trumpeting daffodil. In the other, clippers. At her feet, Daniel pushed his truck around a can filled with dripping flowers, saying rnmnnnnn.

Rudy answered. She shook the branch again, but this time she just watched the lilacs fall. She was tired of
Rapunzel. Her hair wasn't long or ropey—it wasn't even the color of gold. She took her hair off the branch and sat down.

The night was watery and sweet, and the grass was damp. She looked at her knees, tensed them, and the folds of skin seemed to smile back at her. She scooped up some petals, and watched them flutter through the greying air to the ground. She tossed handful after handful. She loved to watch them falling.

Her mother came toward her carrying a coffee can, and in the dimming light her movements seemed liquid and slow. When she reached the lilac, she began snipping off clumps of flowers and putting them into the can. Rudy watched the leg planted in front of her. Her mother's calf looked white and cool as stone. Rudy touched it. It was warm. She could feel the muscles bunch as her mother stood on her toes. Her mother said, go find your brother.

She ran to the front where her aunt was bent over the flowerbeds. At the edge of the yard was a doorway cut in the hedge. Through it, Rudy could see the street outside, where lamplight spilled across the cars and puddles and a cat that strolled down the sidewalk. She went into the sweet-smelling doorway. It was dark, and the ground was scattered with needles that looked soft, soft enough for a small girl lost in a forest....

Daniel, she called. She had to find Daniel.
She found him in the backyard where it sloped up and turned wild, where a bear once came down from the mountain to eat apples off the tree. Daniel was sitting on the grass next to a flowerbed, and beyond him stretched a tangle of bushes and saplings too thick and prickly to walk through.

She stood over him, and said, If you stay here they'll find you.

He stared up at her. Who?
They come out of the trees at night....
Stop it, he said. He waved his arms at her. Stop it.
They were quiet.

She watched him tear up the grass between his legs and listened to the metallic whisper of clippers, Auntie May’s voice calling from somewhere, We’ve got to hurry. We’re losing our light. Her mother answering, I know, I know.

She looked down at Daniel, and said, We’re going to see dead people.

Daniel waited for her to go on.

She didn’t know what else to say. Finally, she clutched her throat, choking, and fell to the ground.

Daniel patted her head and got up. He wandered off. When he came back, he stood over her holding an armful of leaves.

Timber, he shouted.

She shouted, No.

And the leaves came tumbling. They were slightly damp
and smelled like earth. She didn’t brush them off. She liked their weight, their rustly skins. She lay flat on her back and looked up at the stars. They looked bright and heavy.

Daniel covered her with leaves till only her face showed. Then he dropped leaves over her face, calling, Bye, bye Rudy! Bye!

It was black. She held absolutely still. She heard Daniel breathing, a door slam. She wondered if her mother would notice she was gone. If she’d crawl up the hillside crying, my baby, my baby! like she’d seen a woman do once in a movie. Or if she’d start up the car and pull out of the drive and go home as if nothing had happened, while Rudy lay there listening to the engine whirring off down the dark streets.

Rudy where are you? her mother called.

She shot up and stood next to Daniel. They waited.

Her mother was on the patio. She lined up cans of flowers, took off her gardening gloves, pinned back her hair, and opened the screen door. Come in now, she said, this is your last call.

Rudy ran after Daniel, and they streaked down the slope toward the light, where their shadows grew long and thin.

In the kitchen, Auntie May pulled down a cookie tin decorated with Indians sitting around a campfire. Their faces glowed with reddish light. The trees beyond were black and pointed. Auntie May held the tin to her chest.
First, she said, dirty little children must wash their hands.

Their mittens, Rudy said.

Mittens then, her mother said. She wiped Daniel’s nose with a cloth and said to Auntie May, Sometimes it just goes on and on.

On and on, Auntie May said.

Rudy tugged Auntie May’s thick red housecoat. She asked to see the dancer.

Dancer, Daniel shouted and twirled, tipping over into her mother.

Auntie May opened the china cabinet. She took out a bottle with a long neck. It was the color of amber. She wound a small knob at its base, and as the tinny music played, a tiny ballerina began to pirouette. Rudy watched her spin, her porcelain legs stretching out as she dipped and turned. Did she ever get tired? she wondered. Did she ever unhook herself from the pin she spun on to run up the bottle and rattle the top, shouting till the crystal rang?

They drove home through the dark, cans clanking and sloshing, lilacs bobbing. As if she knows what it’s like to have children, her mother said to the windshield. Pow pow, Daniel said. He and Rudy looked out the rear window. Carlights swung toward them. They began to hum. The engine vibrated through them and wobbled their voices.
The morning was grey. They drove across the bridge, over a river boiling with snow melt. Past store windows of flowery dresses, houses with sagging porches, humped sidewalks, weed-choked lots, and a graveyard. The wrong one, her father said, Catholic. They drove on down a road, where the fields grew wider and tepee burners breathed black horsetails of smoke, to the shaded graveyard where Rudy's father pulled up the brake. He turned back at them.

Quiet, he said. We must be very quiet.

What was he afraid of? Rudy wondered. She pulled her foot up and tried to see herself in her shoe, but her face just clouded the patent leather.

Children must be good, her mother said. If they are good, they get ice cream.

Daniel started to clap.

Her father put a finger to his lips. Hush, he said.

The back door swung open and her mother stood next to them. She took her gloves off, and ran her hand wearily through her hair. Help me, she said.

Rudy carried lilacs. She walked slowly behind her father, the can sloshing water on the arms of her coat, and with each step she got wetter. She could not see her feet. When they reached some flat gravestones, her father stopped and looked down.
This is your family, Rudy, he said. Edward, Corrie...They are part of you.

His voice was soft and sad, and it made the back of her neck tingle. She remembered the picture on their dining room wall, the wide, wrinkled face of her great-grandmother in its haze of white hair. Something about the way the face peered out from the darkening photograph made her shiver.

Give Corrie your flowers, her father said. Corrie loved lilacs.

Rudy set down the lilacs.

A door opened behind her. She turned to see Auntie May stepping out of her long-nosed car, and Rudy ran to put her arms around her, her hair flying out. Auntie May was warm and smelled like cinnamon. They walked back across the grass to stand next to her father.

Suffer the little Children, her aunt read. She let go of Rudy’s hand, and set lilies on the grave. She said, the baby died because the doctor dropped her.

Rudy touched the cupid carved in the stone and said to herself, the baby died because the doctor dropped her.

Rudy’s mother took her hand. Hers were wet and red. She led her and Daniel to a large block of granite, and sat them down. Don’t move, she said. It’s time for quiet.

Daniel put his thumb in his mouth.

They sat there, watching. Auntie May and her father bent their heads low and talked. Rudy heard Auntie May say,
Remember Sarah ringing that bell for mother?, her father say, Died at the tender age of eighty? Their talk ran together and burbled like the sound of water. She turned to Daniel.

Let’s dance, she said.

Daniel wriggled in place.

No, she whispered. Dance wild. She stood up and twisted, her hair whipping across her face.

Daniel held his arms out. She looked around. Her mother carried forget-me-nots to the faucet. Her father and Auntie May walked down an avenue of trees. She helped Daniel down, and they began to dance.

I’m warning you, her mother called.

They sat down and kicked at the grass.

What’s dead? Daniel said.

When they put you under the ground, and you go up to heaven, Rudy said. Like Carmel, our dog.

Daniel slid down and began scratching the ground. I want to see, he said.

She stared out at the trees drooping over the grass. The branches bent down like doorways. Through her coat, she could feel the chilled granite on her bottom, and she brushed herself off and sat down again. She could see her father’s back getting smaller as he walked down the road. Her mother wasn’t anywhere. Trees rustled. Cold climbed her limbs, and spread through her. She got up. Wait, Daniel
called. She kept on walking.

She walked back to the family graves. Grey lumps of rock. They are part of you, her father had said. They were heavy and silent, and something made her want to hit them with sticks. She stood on one. Stamped her foot. Then she ran over them, one stone, two stone, three stones, four, her shoes sliding on the marble and sounding like wind.

Her father and Auntie May walked toward her, waving their arms.

She turned away from them, and crossed a dirt road. She began to leap from stone to stone, over Biggerstaffs and McLeods and Charbonos, her mother's voice floating out behind her, Rudy! Honey, Rudy's gone! She wanted to move away from them, from their voices and flowers, and she nearly lost her footing on the red-veined marble where "the mouths of angels" stared up at her foot. Her mother shouted. The panicky sound of her voice made Rudy move faster. She ran to the fence. Trees reached down and brushed the top of her head, and she ran to the corner where morning glories blossomed and climbed the barbed wire, and she slid under it to the other side.

She stood still. She could hear a whistling and a rush of wind above her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a bird startle and fly, its large wings beating the air. Her family looked far away, the size of dolls.

She lay down on her back. The earth was damp, and wet
her legs. She thought she heard a noise, a hollow thumping. In the movies, she remembered, Indians could hear faraway horses by listening to the ground.

Grass tickled her nose.

There was a blowing sound.

A cloud floated across the sun.

It was as if she rose above herself while a great hand pressed down on her body. Her legs tingled. Her heart was getting bigger, as if it were filling with gusts of warm air and someone somewhere were stroking her hair and singing her a lullaby in a voice that was soft and slightly off-key, and she could hear their breath going in and out of their chest and she whispered yes and a great calm flooded her.

It was a lovely, weightless feeling like floating on her back at the lake. From up above, she saw herself curled in the grass in her red coat and black shoes, her hair fanning out. She could lie here forever. Watch people move in and out of trees, cars prowl down dirt roads, trains rattle slowly down the tracks. Hear the airplane, buzzing. The trees whisper her name.

Her mother was running toward her. Even up here, Rudy could feel the rumble of her footsteps, but the harder her mother ran, the farther away she seemed.

Her mother stood over her. Enormous, panting. She said, I told you not to run.

Rudy looked up at her. She told herself, get up, but
she could not lift her arm from the grass. Move, she told herself, but her legs would not listen. She was too far away to cry.

Her mother knelt down, helped Rudy sit, and put her arms around her. Through a layer of wool, Rudy felt the warmth of her mother’s stomach. She put her head in her lap and held on.

Her mother said, I’m here.

Rudy held on, and after a long while she was back inside herself. Then she pushed away her mother’s arms and picked herself up.

Let’s run back, her mother said. I’ll chase you.

No, Rudy said. I want to walk.

Her mother held apart the strands of barbed wire. Rudy stepped through the fence to the tightly bunched trees where the brambles were thick. She shivered. Then she walked slowly across the wide lawn. It was green with new grass and pungent with the smell of wet earth.

There was just one set of footsteps now. The faucet squeaked, then went silent.


"Yes, another year," Dandy said. "Another year to pin on some dim hope that things might change, and another year to be deceived."
"A tulip," Sarah said. "A wilted, lousy tulip."

"They're going," Corrie whispered. "They're going away."

A car started and rolled down the road, whining off into the distance. There was the jetting sound of the sprinklers, a meadowlark's ringing arpeggio, the rising chorus of cicadas, and a rumbling, like thunder, from the direction of town. It was almost time for the 5:40 to Pasco, and they knew it would be passing overhead soon, and then moving on.
Netty rested her glasses in her lap, but she didn't put them on. She liked waiting to bring her world into focus, she liked to be damn good and ready. It was startling, that moment of sudden clarity, when the black mailbox and the oak tree and the Dainty Bess tea roses emerged from a blur of color. It stunned and saddened her.

While she waited, her past visited her: Her husband, Thomas, who always bowed to the ladies, his waist like a hinge, and held out his pinky finger when he drank tea. Who respected her and bored her and died quietly at fifty. The hairdresser, Mavis, who permed her hair orange once. The neighbor woman, Marla, who came to the back door, holding out the red-streaked palms her husband pressed on the stove when his supper was burnt.

There was Olivia. The petunias made Netty think of Olivia: the sweet, peppery smell of the wide-faced flowers that spilled over the window boxes and onto the porch where Netty would see her today for the first time in fifty years.

Olivia putting petunias into red clay pots, tamping down the dirt while she trilled, "I-i-i-t's summertime!"

Olivia pulling her yellow hair into a bun as she flitted around the two-room schoolhouse where they had
shared a teaching post, scattering hair pins in her wake, calling, "Netty have you seen my papers?"

Netty, whose papers were in the satchel at her side, waited in their only armchair. She had sighed and said, "Your papers are where you left them last night."

"But I’ve looked everywhere!" Olivia cried, circling the room, faster and faster, slipping on her dress, damping down the stove, hopping on one foot then another as she put on her shoes.

Netty thought about letting her get a notch more frantic, but they didn’t have time: they had bullied children to comfort, lesson plans to review. She walked across the room, picked up Olivia’s papers and handed them to her.

"You really have a gift for finding things," Olivia said. "You really have a knack. Can you button my dress?"

The most unfair part was, when they arrived at the schoolhouse, Olivia looked cool and lovely as if she’d just bloomed. Her pupils all loved her. Netty, they feared.

She pushed her feet to get the porch swing going again, and remembered the morning she decided to see Olivia. At the kitchen table, she’d a vision of her life splitting apart, like great chunks of ice shearing off a glacier and bobbing out to sea. Olivia was on one of them saying, "I like delicious colors. Yellows and reds."

Fifty years, she told Marilee, her daughter, in the
middle of breakfast. Fifty years is long enough. Long enough for what? Marilee said. Long enough to hold a grudge, Netty answered. Didn't someone say if you forgive people you belong to them? I guess, Marilee said and handed her the toast.

The station wagon sailed into the drive and minutes later, Marilee came out on the porch, saying about the children's swimming or was it tennis, something about good weather and luck.

Netty didn't say anything. She no longer answered things that didn't need answering. Age boiled all things down to basics, and she couldn't say she minded--she'd always thought life was a bit too embroidered at Marilee's, with the endless lessons and meetings.

Marilee squared her shoulders. "I thought you might want your cross-stitch."

Netty took it, but she had plans for it. She was going to leave off "home," which would bother Marilee almost to tears. "Mother!" she'd whine, "God bless our humble?"

"Put on your glasses." Marilee thumped the black leather case on the ice cream table. "You need your glasses, Mother. You can't see anything."
Netty put her hand on her daughter's. "That is the point."

Marilee started as if she'd been shocked. "You must be excited," she said, then she hurried across the porch with small quick steps, almost a jog, the boards sighing under her feet.

Excited, Netty thought and she felt a longing burn through her like smoke.

As she settled her glasses on the bridge of her nose, and the muscles in her eyes sprang alive and anchored her in the present again, the moment returned and arced through her heart. The moment Olivia stood at the door of the hospital room, her hand fluttering to the hair at the nape of her neck, and she whispered, "Frankie and I are going to be married."

September 27, 1928. The wipers whispered, on-ward, on-ward, the hymn Netty's mother practiced each week for church, the chords echoing around the upstairs rooms, thin and mean-spirited. Netty loathed it but she couldn't get it out of her mind.

She shifted on the cracked leather seat to look outside. It was an early storm. Snow swept from the green,
unmown fields to the base of the Bitterroots. The mountains were shrouded in black-bellied clouds, but every once in a while a peak appeared, sharp and pointed as a tooth.

Olivia wanted to take the bus together, to make an entrance—Olivia liked entrances—but Netty insisted on travelling alone. She liked to mark big passages of her life alone. She graduated from college and now she was going to support herself and her mother by teaching in Elk, Montana with her best friend Olivia. When Frank finished law school, they'd marry and settle in Bridger.

She thought of Frank, of the wind rippling his taffy-colored hair last July, when they rode horses at his ranch up Ninemile. She had never ridden. He gave her a lead-footed sorrel that hung its head and shuffled the path after Frank's restless bay. When they came to a meadow, Frank stopped and turned around in his saddle. "Are you sore, Netty?" he asked as she plodded up beside him. "Do you want to stop?"

Netty looked at him. His eyes glinted back at her from behind his rimless glasses. There was a quickening inside her, a pleasurable dropping down, and she shivered and banged her heels in the stirrups. She kicked again, and the horse's legs began churning through the oat grass until the black-eyed susans blurred into streaks of yellow. She kept galloping toward the dark line of forest.

"Netty!" Frank said when he caught up with her.
"What's got into you?"

She nudged the horse on.

Frank's laughter floated out behind her. "I don't know if Bones is ready for you!"

She reined the horse to a stop. "And are you?"

At the picnic later, he pulled her down on the checkered cloth. Ants swarmed over the chicken bones, the plates smeared with potato salad. He ran his hand up her leg. She kissed him and pushed it up further.

At the station in Elk, a hardware store with benches out front and a red metal passenger flag, a man threw her trunk in the back of his cart. He gave her some blankets and slapped the seat next to him. "Model A's broke," he muttered as they clattered off down the road. The snow thickened, swirling through the apple orchards, whitening the horse's rump, and she was half-frozen when they arrived at the schoolhouse.

She opened the door.

About a dozen children stared back at her. They were dressed in overalls or thin grey dresses and holding buckets, dirty and lusterless as their eyes.

"I thought school started tomorrow?" Netty said to
Olivia, who was bobbing up and down, working the pump.

Olivia laughed and stood up. "Welcome!" she said and held her arms out. "We've got the only indoor pump in town."

Netty took over, while Olivia stoked the fire. As she gave them their water, they gave her their names—May, Clinton, Bessie, Thomas Satchel McLeod—till their buckets were filled and they put on their overcoats and stood by the door.

"Do they need help home?" Netty looked at the children. "Do you need help home?"

The children stared back at her.

"I guess not," Olivia said. "They come back every night."

When the children left, Olivia filled a basin of hot water at the stove, and walked to Netty's chair. She knelt down and unbuckled her galoshes.

Netty held her feet up. "Oh no."

"Put them down."

"They stink, Olivia. They're what you might call ripe. I can do this myself."

"Don't be silly." Olivia put her hand on Netty's leg. "I want to."

"You don't have to."

"Of course I don't," Olivia said as she squeezed the excess water from the washcloth.
Netty looked down at Olivia. Her face grew moist and her hair caught the light from the lamp and flicked gold into the room. She wrapped the cloth around Netty’s feet, first one, then the other, and Netty felt the heat as it pulsed and stung and travelled up her legs to her heart.

She wanted to be standing when Olivia arrived, these things were important. She waited in the swing until 3:00, when Olivia was due, then she waited some more. Olivia was always late. Twenty minutes later, she stood up slowly, her legs burning, and shook out the blue-checked cloth and watched it float slowly over the table.

She was setting out the tea things when the Thunderbird rolled to a stop in front of the house. The brakes wheezed. A harried-looking man in sunglasses slammed the driver’s door, checked his watch, then rushed around the car to help the passenger to her feet.

Gravity, Netty thought. It keeps working against us.

The old woman inched her walker up the sidewalk, her white hair, light as cotton, swaying with each step. As she talked to the man at her side, she didn’t seem to see the way he kept measuring the distance to the porch, and scowling.
Netty clenched the tablecloth as a sour taste rose up from her heart and scalded her throat. She took a breath, set down the sugar bowl. "Olivia!" she cried, "You haven't aged a minute!"

Olivia stopped at the bottom of the porch steps and looked up. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice wobbly. "My promptness, I'm afraid, hasn't improved with age. Just ask my son Larry here."

As she said this, Olivia looked a little to the left of her. Cataracts, Netty thought, and graciously held out her hand.

"The world," she said to the third graders, "is made up of large bodies of water and land." She rolled down the overhead map, and held her pointer on the blue expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. In the thin January light, dust motes spun to the wooden floor and for some reason this made her sad.

May stared out a fogged window. Clinton drew something he shaded with his forearm, the thick red pencil angling out from his hand. Bessie Fitzhugh looked up dutifully, her eyes coated with boredom and heat and the fact that none of this would matter in a future of children, cooking, and cattle.
"Continents," she said. "Can you say continents?"

As the ragged sounds of their voices filled the room, the children's faces seemed to dim and recede from her. She was saying, "The seven continents are..." when the rushing sound started in her ears and she asked them to keep quiet.

Something was wrong. They paid attention. Why was that interesting? She couldn't read children, that much was clear. Speak with a deep, commanding timbre, her education professor had said. Clap! Move! Startle them!

She clapped her hands. "We are continents!"

Stars floated across the periphery of her vision. There was a banging noise and she was sure the wood heater had exploded and she remembered telling Thomas, the oldest, to check it.

The next thing she knew Olivia was standing over her, wringing her hands, and saying "Netty, what happened?"

Netty lifted her head and said, "North America, South America, Australia, Africa, Antarctica, Asia, and Europe." Then she shut her eyes and didn't wake up till they carried her across the schoolyard.

That night, Frank sat at the edge of the mohair sofa and said, "Don't go." He had driven down from Bridger to join Netty for the Elk Primary School Cake Walk and Dance. He put his hand on her forehead. "You're feverish."

Netty pulled herself up into a sitting position. "I
decorated the schoolroom. I baked a cake. I got the orchestra and by God, I’m going to enjoy myself."

"Damn it, Netty," he said. "You always push things."

He opened the wood heater door, and jabbed a poker at the fire.

The logs shifted.

She said, "You don’t understand."

"What do you mean?"

"They’ll turn on me."

"For being sick?"

"They’ve fired teachers for less," Netty said. "And I can’t afford to lose this job. Tell me, how would I survive? What would my mother do? What would we do?"

"We’d get by."

"I feel just fine."

"You’re too damn stubborn." Frank stared at the fire, his eyes glassy. "You get stuck in things."

"I do not," she whispered. "I’m not like that at all."

He looked over at her, the poker dangling from his hand. "If I ordered you to stay home, as my future wife, would you?"

"No," Netty said.

"What about ’love, honor, and obey’?"

"I’d obey you if you were right," Netty answered.

"I’ll keep that in mind," Frank said quietly.

A log sparked. He turned it over, and the coals flared
and dulled in the cold air.

The pineboard room was bright with crepe paper garlands. Rows of desks had been unbolted from the floor and stacked in a corner and on makeshift tables of boards and sawhorses, there were nearly a dozen cakes—layer and sheet cakes of vanilla, lemon, chocolate and spice.

By the door, Davey Doe’s 5-piece orchestra tuned up. The drummer juggled his drumsticks. The violinist, the man who met Netty at the station, pulled his bow across the strings and a chord rasped out over the room. Men talked about falling apple prices. Women clustered in the center of the room, pulling at evening dresses of velvet or crepe. One woman traced a box step, and when she was done, she looked up and laughed.

Nearby, Olivia was taking dimes for the cakewalk and when she saw Netty, she waved.

In the wake of a thin hush, Netty crossed the room with Frank at her elbow. She held herself very erect, nodding at the children and their parents. When they passed Clinton, a red stain spread from his cheeks to his ears and he giggled and looked away, and she knew it was a good thing she’d come.
They walked to Olivia, who was standing in front of a large chalked circle, sliced up like a pie and numbered. "Are you sure you should be here?" Olivia whispered. Netty glared back at her.

Olivia gave Netty a look, then she turned to face the room and said, "Shall the cakewalk begin?" No one looked at her. Netty shouted, "Attention!" and her children looked back at her with a familiar mixture of boredom and dull hatred.

As the noise grew around them, she nudged Olivia. "Go ahead," Netty said. "Win me a two-layer chocolate cake with 7-minute frosting. She turned to Frank. "That goes for you too."

"Are you sure?" Olivia said.

"Of course, I’m sure."

The players took up their positions. Netty looked at the conductor and as she brought down her arm, the orchestra played, "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile." People began moving slowly around the circle.

Netty watched as the fiddler’s arm sawed up and down, and the coronet player arc his back and tilted his horn into the air, thinking how old she felt. She drew a number from a bread bowl. "Four!" she called. The music stopped and a farmer’s wife threw her meaty hands up and walked away, laughing.

As the crowd walked the circle again, Frank winked at
her. She looked at his lips. They made her want to kiss him, to do things for him, but there was a look in his eyes she hadn’t noticed before. Something cool, distant. "Ten!" she called, and a bow-legged cowboy shook his head, and went outside to spit.

One after one, she called a number, until only Olivia, Clinton, and Frank followed each other around the bleary circle. Between the two adults, Clinton walked the circle with great concentration, never taking his eyes from his feet.

"Well at least the caller’s my fiancee," Frank said.

"But she’s my best friend!" Olivia cried.

Frank laughed. "No, I’m quite sure she’s on my side."

"Well you’re not married yet, Mr. McClure!" Olivia flipped her hair over her shoulders and squared her back.

The crowd hooted.

Frank looked at Olivia, and something in his gaze stabbed Netty. She wanted to net that look and make it come to her. The room grew unbearably hot.

Later, she remembered things in this order. She called out "Six!" Olivia cried, "Oh no!" There was a scraping noise, then a scuffling of feet as Davey Doe and the Pioneer Club Orchestra played "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile" for the tenth time that night.
It was walking pneumonia.

They took her to Bridger Community Hospital, to a dun-colored room with high ceilings and rattly windows. She was in an oxygen tent while doctors came in and out of her room and shook their grey heads at her. Olivia took over her classes. Frank came when he could, and brought her a hothouse orchid stuck in a bottle of Great Falls Select. He brought Olivia up on weekends, and the two of them snuck in sandwiches and beer.

Netty’s mother stationed herself at her bedside, triumphantly refilling her water pitcher and smoothing the sheets as if she’d gotten proof of something she’d known all along. "You’re just too proud, dear," she said at one point. "You’ve been struck down."

Three weeks later, her lungs had cleared, and Dr. Babin had taken to patting her leg and telling her she could go home, when her fever shot up to 103. Olivia was visiting and she stayed by Netty’s bedside, putting cool washcloths on her forehead until Netty told her to stop it, she felt like a sponge.

Olivia folded her hands and was silent. "The children miss you," she said finally.

"I bet," Netty said. The mention of the children panicked her. She lifted her head from the pillow. "What
"I nearly forgot!" Olivia drew a large paper valentine out of her satchel and handed it to Netty. It was a red heart pasted on a doily and filled with stick-like handwriting. "This was the children’s idea."

"I know whose idea it was." Netty fingered the papery lace. "Thank you, Olivia. But tell me, do I still have a job?"

"You’re wrong. The valentine was Clinton’s idea."

Chills racked her body before Netty could find out that Olivia was right, the valentine was Clinton’s idea, and before Netty could find out that the Bitterroot County School Board had voted to replace her for fear of infection.

Olivia smoothed the bedclothes, kept saying, "Give me something to do. I feel so helpless." She looked out the window at the lights, then she clapped her hands. "I know. I’ll read you a story. We’re doing fairy tales now in second."

Netty was too far away with fever to answer. Olivia burrowed down in the chair and as she began to read, Netty turned her face toward the comfort of her voice.

"And the enchanted bear bore their play in good temper." Olivia spoke in a sing-song. "And only when they hit too hard did he cry, ‘Snowy-White, Rosy Red! Leave me my life! Will you beat your lover dead?’"

Several days later, Olivia stood in the doorway of the
hospital room, her fingers working loose hairs back into the braids circling her head.

Netty turned to look at her. "Come in," she said. "I won't bite, you know."

Olivia looked across the room at her.

Netty had a thin needle taped in her arm, her brown hair haloed her head, and over the bed, there was a sampler that said "Healing Begins in the Heart."

Then Netty saw Olivia's open hands and bent waist and the way she strained forward as if she were trying to give something and take something away at the same time.

Olivia's hands dropped to her sides, and hung there. Then she levelled her gaze at Netty and said, "Frankie and I are going to be married."

Netty pulled out the IV. She walked across the room to the window, a single streak of blood coursing the white of her arm and as she looked out at the town, she remembered thinking how bright it was, how the buildings and trees and people were etched so sharply against the snow, they made her wince.

"Get out," she whispered.

The memory was like a crystal, and as Netty examined it over the years, its changing planes and colors revealed new
infuriating angles.

For the first several years, she was furious about Frank. How he deserted her, how he took away what she had with him, like that moment where she’d galloped across the meadow, Frank calling behind her, and she kept riding until the sound of his voice trickled away like water, and then she rode further. She had thought about writing him, blackmailing him, killing him. Then she got married.

She saw him only once, in the Bridger Mercantile. It was her husband’s birthday, and she was buying him sock garters when she looked up and there was Frank. He paled, threw down the boxer shorts he was holding, and walked quickly away, the floor creaking under his feet, through Men’s Everyday and Evening, on to Hardwares and out the door.

Later on, it was their timing that galled her. The fact that Olivia told her while she was flat on her back, terribly ill. "On my death bed!" she’d whisper with grim happiness. "Fever of 103!"

But from the day Olivia had stood in the hospital doorway until the time her own legs began their steady arthritic burning and her child had gone grey, Netty knew it was Olivia’s treachery that she minded the most.

She’d remember the night she and Olivia lay in their beds, the fire popping and hissing in the stove, talking about how they’d decorate their houses. Olivia described
everything from the canopied beds to the pansy-covered shelf lining, when she stopped suddenly. "Can I tell you something?"

Netty sighed, she was nearly asleep.

Olivia walked across the room, her gown billowing white into the dark room. She crawled in beside Netty, her hair fanning across the pillow. "I hit a boy," she whispered.

"That's okay. You didn't mean it," Netty said.

"But I did. He was smarting off, and he wouldn't stop, and I walked up to him and--instinct took over." She turned on her side to face Netty. "The worst thing is, I don't feel sorry. I don't feel sorry at all." She started to cry. Netty put her arm around her. "You're sorry," she said and Olivia looked at her, her face shining.

It was this face—Olivia's delicate, sweet face with her eyes turned down at the corners—that haunted Netty. How could you? she'd wanted to ask that face, when it rose up before her night after night, and the smile turned into a leer and the face laughed, easy.

At first, the pain came in stabbing waves and she'd leap out of bed and burn things: Olivia's handkerchiefs, pictures, lockets of hair. Later, the very syllables of Olivia's name seemed to pierce her heart, in and out, like stitching, till the pain gave way in her later years to a sharp, peculiar feeling of pleasure.
A year after she married Frank, Olivia wrote her a long letter in her flowery script. She went on and on. "We just didn't expect it," she said. "We just didn't have any idea. Having hurt you is my cross to bear, and I beg the Lord every day for your forgiveness. Please, Netty. Please." She underlined the second "please" four times.

After she read it, Netty folded up the letter with and put it in her undergarments drawer. After she closed it, she looked up in the mirror a long time, watching her face go in and out of focus, then she slowly turned the key in the lock.

Each year, she added another Christmas card, first from North Dakota, then Iowa. There were black and white pictures of Olivia and Frank dressed in old-fashioned costumes or Santa Claus outfits, then holding one baby after another. There was the grainy color photograph of the six of them, Frank and Olivia, grey and slightly stooped, the children looking apologetic and embarrassed. Each year, Olivia looked more bird-like, and Frank became pale and bloated, as if, he needed more and more flesh to anchor him there. Then the pictures stopped, and there were only cheap cards of holly or reindeer and Olivia's lone signature.

Netty had tried to forgive her.
After her husband Thomas died, she went into her dressing room, sat down at her writing table, laid out a fresh sheet of stationary with "Mrs. Thomas Fullerton" on top, and touched the nib of her fountain pen to the paper. She watched the ink puddle. She took out a new sheet. This time she wrote "Dear Olivia," and stopped. She stared at the paper. She wrote "I," then a thin line of ink trailed off down the page.

Over the years, the memory hardened and settled inside her, settled between her and Marilee, who had tried her entire life to shake something loose in her----from the time she was a child and she used to stand on her head to try to make her laugh until these later years, when she chirped about weather and luck. Every time Netty looked at her daughter, it was a challenge: go ahead, show me why I should let go.

It seemed to Netty that Olivia had been going on for hours about her granddaughter, the little actress, Olivia clasping her hands to her breast, reciting "'See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!'" Netty had had enough. She stopped talking, and enjoyed Olivia's fumbling conversation
and Marilee's bright answers and glowering looks at her.

Then they were silent.

Marilee looked desperately around the table, pounced on
the cake cover, and as she lifted it up, the metal rang out
dully. "Lemon cake anyone?" she said looking from Olivia to
Netty, holding the cake knife in her fist like a gavel.

They handed around the plates, the air was filled with
the clatter of knives and forks, when the phone rang and
Marilee leapt up to answer it.

As Netty pressed the cake onto her fork, she listened
to the distant watery sounds of children playing.

"Netty?" Olivia finally said.

"Yes?" Netty answered.

"Why..." Olivia looked down at her lap, and then back
at Netty. "Why don't you tell me about your grandchildren?"

"Let's see," Netty put down her fork. "Thomas is in
third grade, he doesn't do very well, he's fat, he can't run
an entire block, and he likes to kill birds. Katherine is in
fifth, she's got bucked teeth, a sour disposition, quick
wits which she employs to..." Netty looked at Olivia, "to
make her friends unhappy."

The sound of passing cars slid between them.
Netty unfolded the Scrabble board on the table, and lined up her letters on the wooden easel. She looked politely across the table at her opponent.

Olivia bent over her purse, and, to Netty's satisfaction, drew out a large magnifying glass. As Netty might have expected, Olivia started out with words like "ox" and "fan."

Olivia started describing the rest home her son kept her in, the best in Butte (Butte!—Netty thought--the best in Butte!) where they played bridge on Mondays, rummy on Tuesdays and mah jong on Wednesdays. "Mah jong," Olivia said absently, "was Frank's favorite—I think he liked the sound of those tiles."

The taste again. The bilious, sour taste that carved the edges of every day and laced the nights and nursed that other pain, that of seeing what you didn't want to be and then becoming it. Just say you're sorry, she told herself, but words seemed to sprout, unbidden on her lips. "How'd Frank go?"

Olivia paled.

"Well?" Netty blurted.

"Heart." Olivia's finger traced slow circles around the board. She shrugged and laughed. "I always told him, too many steaks and butter pats!"

"Were you there?" Netty said before she could stop.

Olivia looked at her as if she hadn't heard her
correctly. Finally, she said, softly, "I used to wash your feet, Netty."

"So you did," Netty said, and her tea cup chinked as she replaced it in the saucer.

This time they did not talk. Marilee swung in and out of the house, watering the flowers, bringing pictures of the children to show Olivia.

Olivia laid out her tiles. "Ever hear anything about Professor Murray?" she said finally. "Remember Teaching Methods II? 'When the attention drops, get out the props!"

"No," Netty said. She laid out "orts."

"Netty..." Olivia started, but she was interrupted by Marilee asking for iced tea orders.

When she left, Olivia said gently, "That was a long time ago Netty."

"Then tell me what happened." This is the time, Netty told herself. She will tell you what happened, then you will take her hand and say, forgive me.

"Lord, I don’t want to dredge up all that stuff. What good will it do us now? It’s so far behind us." Olivia fussed with her tiles, finally laying out "hay."

"Far behind some of us," Netty said.
"Can't we just bury--" Olivia looked at Netty. "All right, I'll tell you. One night we were coming back from seeing you Netty, and we stopped to let some cattle cross the road. We were just waiting, talking about you Netty, I swear it, when Frank kissed me." A blush crept over her face. She paused. "And I kissed him back."

Netty looked at Olivia. She imagined her mouth forming the words, and she waited for something to well up in her heart, but she felt instead a terrible panic of things giving out, like some essential starch had washed out. She wanted to scream Do you know what you've done? Do you have any idea? and then she wanted Olivia to do something—touch her, say a word—that would release her, restore her. Instead, she laid out "vortex."

"Please--" Olivia looked at her and stopped.

There was a slight tapping noise as they set tile after tile on the board. Netty was keeping score. She was winning, but not by as much as she'd hoped. Filling in her letters after a turn, she lined up the tiles on the easel, the word popped out, plain as day. No, she told herself. Move on.

Then Olivia gave her a milky smile, and Netty looked at her and laid out the word "betray."

She put her hands in her lap, and waited. She watched as Olivia rose up to hold her magnifying glass over the board, and the letters grew large and ripply in the glass.
Olivia looked at the board a long time. She sat down heavily and sighed. "You should forgive me now, Netty."

"Eleven points?" Netty said. Her hand drew a shaky eleven in the column of numbers under her name.

"You're being childish." Olivia's voice was quiet.

"Your turn," Netty said.

Olivia rose up out of her chair, and gripped Netty's wrist. "Give it up."

Netty stared back at her, surprised by the strength of her grip. She could hear the swing creaking, and the sound of a bicycle screeching in the dirt, then she said in a small voice, "I can't."

"Be like that," Olivia said. Her eyes burned, and she snapped down her tiles, one by one, until she spelled "cake." Then she smiled sweetly. "Triple score."

Still, as she watched Olivia go down the steps, she wanted to stop her and say, "Remember when they went through our trash?"

One night in Elk, they woke up to the sound of footsteps outside, and they looked out the window to see two men in overalls and low-slung hats, going through their garbage, tossing bottles and cartons onto the snow "They're looking for beer bottles," Netty said. "Going to see if
we’re nipping firewater?” Olivia said. They had collapsed, snickering, on the floor. Then Olivia sat up and whispered, "I’m scared."

Netty pushed to get the swing going again. From the house, she could hear water running and dishes knocking against one another, Marilee saying to her husband, "I wouldn’t call it a disaster, but you know Mother..." In a while, Marilee would come out to see if she’d like to watch a little TV before bed. She’d refuse. Marilee would think she was mad at her, but Netty would be too tired to care.

She plucked a dead blossom from a petunia and crushed it in her hand. On the sidewalk, she could see Olivia’s back receding, growing small and dim and white, then she stepped into the mouth of the car and her face turned back once to look at her. The face seemed to hang there for a moment in the dark, bright as a moon, then it was gone.

The sun was setting, and the sky had turned a deep electric blue. The street was quiet, except for the sounds of women’s voices calling their children in. She swung her head blindly toward the rumble of the motor, toward the rise and fall of Marilee’s voice, and she whispered, "Forgive me."
Johnny takes Myra to Moose McGoos for the $2 all-you-can-eat chicken special. Toy trains circle the room, and a waiter dressed like Robin Hood takes their orders. Then Johnny looks at Myra and tells her he got fired because the classrooms were dirty.

"Did you clean them?" she asks.

"Of course," he says. Could he help it if classrooms weren't swept when he'd spent hours polishing the gym so he could watch himself, night after night, shoot baskets?

"I bet," she says. Her knuckles whiten.

He decides to change the subject. "I shoveled our walks."

She doesn't look impressed. "You never face things, Johnny," she says. Two red spots appear on her cheeks and begin to darken. "You never ask yourself maybe I didn't sweep the floors or clean the toilets soon enough." She cracks a wing apart at the joint.

"Ah, Myra--" he says. He knows she's upset. He knows they'll never get by on what she makes as a motor parts clerk. In the silence between them, he hears a glass clunk on the table, a fork scrape the plate.
He touches her hand. He wants to say it’ll be okay. Myra, there’s always spring, another job, then maybe we’ll tie the knot, but there’s no margin for this kind of talk. A clock shaped like a cat swings its tail and blinks its eyes at him.

He looks at her. Her eyes are clear—the black-rimmed irises have startling, light grey centers. Sometimes her eyes are so sharp, they cut things inside him.

"I’ve taken a hard look at things, Johnny," Myra says. "Wanna know what they look like?"

"Not really," he whispers.

The restaurant windows sweat, and next to them a man and woman sit dazed as their children color the table and throw food at each other. "Stop it," the mother says weakly. "Stop it, be quiet as a mouse."

Everyone is so tired, Johnny thinks. So very tired.

"Things look like shit," Myra says.

"Things’ll work out," he says. "We’ll go home and we’ll wake up tomorrow and things will look different."

She looks at him. For a minute he thinks she’ll cry, but she puts on her jacket, fumbles for the zipper, and when the tab is between her fingers, she zips it quickly as if she were sealing up something forever.

When Myra stands up, Johnny feels the entire restaurant turn to look at him. No one is talking, and from far away, the TV says, "Traveller’s advisory for Lookout Pass, travel
only with chains."

Myra pulls a napkin from the dispenser, and writes on it. She hands it to him, and walks out the door. He watches the cold air fog and sink to the ground.

The room turns dream-like. He picks up his chicken and begins to eat, carefully dabbing his face between bites. When he finishes, he stacks the bones on the side of his plate, and picks up the napkin. In small, neat letters, it says WAKE UP.

When he thinks about his childhood, Johnny Deschamps thinks of two things.

When he was six, he came home one winter afternoon to find the lights on and the door open. He shut it behind him, and called his parents from cellar to attic, but they were nowhere to be found. He pulled the shades, made a sandwich, cried, and slept. Three days later, his mother returned to find him watching Bonanza and eating sugar by the fistful. His father never came back. She did not explain.

The second was the division basketball tournament, March 29, 1960. In a packed gymnasium in Helena, Montana, a spring storm rattling the windows and sending in gusts of snow when the doors opened, Johnny Deschamps scored 56 of 63 points in an upset of the Butte Bulldogs. He still pores over the details of that night--what he wore, what he ate--
to figure out what charmed him. Over and over again, something seemed to drive him, floating, over the floor to the basket, and he'd jump and shoot and sink one, and the scorekeeper would say Deschamps, and he thought the people in the bleachers whispered, "Who?"

"Who?" Sometimes he can hear it in his dreams.

He walks on the tracks out of town, taking the ties two at a time. The sky is pasty, the sun a flat blur. At Hellgate Canyon, he stops and looks back across the white humped mountains, the town, and finally, the Blackfoot River. The Salish called it the river of surprise. Usually the river calms him, the small erosions guarantee things will pass, but today the river is frozen solid. He bends down and puts a penny on the rail for luck.

Luck.

If only it weren't February, if only Myra hadn't gone, saying "I give up, Johnny." Didn't he buy her a car? A brown Honda, and the doors didn't match, but wasn't it a car all the same? Didn't he spend fifty dollars for the vanity plate, "MARSBAR"?

To make matters worse, when he turns around, there is his mother. Her wide face lights up in a smile, and she says, "Why hello dear!" which irritates him because she's been dead for ten years.
"For God’s sake," he shouts. "What are you doing here?"

She smiles at him, and pulls down the branch of a mountain ash. "I’ve been thinking how lovely these red berries look against the white snow," she says and lets the branch snap back into place.

"Yeah, Ma," he says. "But what are you doing here?"

"You’re worried about something," she says. She gives him that understanding look he hates. "Tell me. Tell me everything."

"Jesus," he sighs. "You’re a ghost."

"My wonderful boy," she says, and puts her hand on her heart. "You can go to the moon if you want to."

Myra calls from Seattle. She has opened up a nail care shop called Myra’s Marvelous Manicures. She tells him things--"You’re a bum, Johnny. A first-class ticket to nowhere." He doesn’t get angry. He knows she says these things to feel right about leaving. She has said them before. He tells her he’s fine. The car’s got gas, and he’s got options. He asks her to come back. She says, "Not on your life."

While she does polishes and pedicures, he walks the streets of Bridger trying to get a job. His unemployment lasts one more month and he’s running scared. He asks for
work in the auto parts store, the gas station, a chain saw
shop. The proprietors look at him like he’s some kind of
awful joke. "Sorry," they say and shut the door behind him
and he imagines them holding the doorknob and shaking their
heads. "Poor bastard," they say. "Looking for work in
February."

At the unemployment office, the job counsellor twists
his mustache and says, "Retail, huh?" He is a young man
Johnny has never seen before. He looks down at Johnny’s job-
seeking record. "It seems to be taking us a long time to
find something. Are we putting our heart and soul into
this, Mr. Deschamps?"

Johnny says yes. He has never had a job counsellor like
this. They are usually men with lined faces who drink
coffee and count the days till retirement—men who have seen
your kind and like you for it.

"Have we considered all our options?" The job
counsellor looks over Johnny’s clothes, his flannel shirt,
his snowpack boots. He looks at Johnny like he is a
cupboard he can open and close.

All our options? Johnny thinks. Like bank robbery?
Suicide? He asks, instead, "Can you tell me who’s hiring?"

"Now let’s ask ourselves a few questions." The
counsellor knits his fingers together, and leans across the
desk toward him. "What do you like, John Deschamps? What
do you consider your life’s work?"
"Anything," Johnny says.

He finds himself walking the tracks to the base of Bitterroot Mountain. Sure enough, she's there. Standing by a frozen waterfall, in her red wool shawl.

He turns his collar up, walks toward her.

She puts her hand on the milky green ice. "Those blues against those greens! Stunning," she says, and grasps his arm, and he feels her touch go through him. She scratches the ice. "Do you think it freezes drop by drop or in one big chunk?"

"Is it that you just don't like the place?" he says gently. "Don't they have flowers and berries and stuff? Didn't I bury you right?"

"It was a lovely funeral, wasn't it?" she says, and her eyes get dreamy. "Gladiolus, Nat Herbert singing the Lord's Prayer, and that nice ham afterwards."

"Then why are you here?" he says.

She puts her hands on her hips and cocks her head. "I think it freezes slowly, drop by drop."

"Ma, you're just not facing things," he says, and stalks down the path toward the railroad trestle.

She hurries after him, and he notices for the first time that her feet make a slight whirring sound, like wind in grass.
"Look," she says. "It’s always the same old story. Unfinished business. We go away, but if something’s not done—bingo!—we pop back. Like those candles you can’t blow out."

"Unfinished business?" he says, ignoring her joke.
She will not answer him. "Enough of that," she says. "Let’s talk about you."

He scuffs his shoe on the snow-dusted path. He doesn’t want to tell her about Myra leaving. She never liked Myra anyway. He tells her he got fired.

"An outrage," she says and stamps the ground.
"I deserved it, Ma." He throws a pebble toward the river and it skitters across the ice. "I made a mess of things."

When he turns for her answer, she skips out onto the river, lies down in the snow, and starts flapping her arms and legs.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he yells.

"Making snow angels, dear." She stands up, and looks at her winged impression in the snow. "They’re quite pretty, you know."

"How is it you can pack down snow but your hand goes right through my arm?"

"I’m quite sure I don’t know."

"There seems to be a lot you don’t know," he says. And he looks up to see two young women scurrying back down the
path to town. "Look," he whispers. "Can't you see you're turning me into a freak?"

"You worry too much, Johnny." She waves her hand. "Life's too short. Besides, no Deschamps's ever out of work long! Your father Harry Deschamps was out of work in the Depression, when people said he'd never work again, but he got a job as foreman, foreman! on the Daly St. Bridge. You can't underestimate a Deschamps," she says, and tilts her chin to an invisible challenger.

"Look Ma that's all very nice but I got people calling saying 'where's the money pal'?"

"Of course, your father wasn't the tiger he was cracked up to be," she says to no one in particular.

"So this is about my father?" he asks.

"Oh him," she says. "I always meant to tell you about the jerk. He went off with a barrel racing champion, to live like a prince in the suburbs of Portland. Huh! He got what he deserved. A hounddog wife in spongy pink rollers, who wouldn't let him sleep in the house. No," she said, "This isn't about him. This is about you, Johnny. You know, one day that old principal will beg to lick your boots."

"Give me a break!" he says. "That bastard was on the phone before I left his office."

She pulls her shawl tighter around her. When he was little, he used to suck the corner of it. She tosses her head, pinches her lips.
"Ah Ma," he says after a while. "Don't be mad."

She looks at his face and her words are measured, "John Deschamps, you can conquer the world if you want to."

He turns his back to her and watches a short red sunset burn the edges of the sky. Oh god, he thinks. Not the conquest speech. But when he spins around to say that isn't the way things are, she is gone.

The house is silent when he comes home. These are the times he misses Myra the most, these times he comes home and he thinks he'll walk in the door and find her at the sink or soaking in the tub, and things will be okay again, like they've always been, and instead there's only the shadowy living room, tight with cold.

His goldfish, Tiger and Crank, swim to the surface as he crosses the room. He bought them when Myra left because someone told him goldfish are tranquil. As he stands over them, he wonders what they see: the face that opens and closes in great bursts of sound, the hands like small continents that come down, closer and closer, to the water with their daily offerings of Banquet of the Sea.

He sits down next to the tank, and pours some food into a small net. He lowers it until it is barely above the water. As The fish swim faster and faster, circling the point where the net will enter the water. When its bottom
wettens, and they open their tiny jaws, he snatches it out of the water.

They startle and swim in frantic circles, and he says, "Training boys," and wonders if a memory of the taste of seaweed lingers sharp and sour in the their mouths.

He does this several more times. When the fish no longer swim toward the net, he lowers it into the water and says, "Iiiiits chowtime!" as the food floats out and clouds the water.

It is odd, he thinks, how his mother only appears to him down at the tracks, not in the house she painted yellow or on the bridge where a tired wind rattles the signs or in the unemployment office where the lights seem to burn holes in people's clothes, turn their faces white as bone. Sometimes, when the temperature drops below zero, he sits in the basement where the heat lamps shine on the pipes and the spiders weave their cobwebs, and he thinks he hears her sigh when the house contracts or a pipe bangs, but when he calls "Ma? Ma?" he hears only his dull echo.

The snow whips against Myra's legs as she steps off the Greyhound with a little black suitcase and her jaw set. "I've come back to settle things," she says.
He takes her to Brownie's Big Bun. As they sit in the
parking lot, looking out on the 93 Strip, she tells him how
good her new life is. Her customers love her and her roses
bloom all winter. He thinks of telling her about his
mother, but he can already hear her response, "Ross, hasn't
she fooled you long enough?"

Myra sleeps in the living room on the scratchy green
sofa. Things are not looking good.

In the middle of the night, he wakes up, thinks he
hears something. Then he remembers Myra is home and he
props himself up on his elbows, listening. He wants her.
He wants her to come into the bedroom and lie with him so
her breasts brush his back, and her soft arms curl around
him. He hears her padding around the living room, then out
to the kitchen. The faucet runs, the refrigerator opens. She
walks back to the couch and things get quiet.

He looks across the bed to the dressing-table mirror.
In the glow of the night light he can see his face, the
hollowed-out eyes, the mouth. He wants to get up, but a
great weight presses down on him and keeps him from moving,
so he lies still and listens to the house. There is no
sound, except for the creak of his bed, the tick of the
furnace. He goes back to sleep, and wakes up with a start.

Myra is standing at the doorway.

"You sleep like you were run over," she says. "I never
knew you slept like that."
"You cold?" he says. He wants to ask her to get into bed but he's afraid to.

"You don't talk, snore, or anything." She wraps the arms of her oversized men's pajamas around her, trying to keep warm, but he can still see the long line of her throat curving down to her breasts.

"You need another blanket?" He says and gets up to find one, but when he gets to the doorway where she's standing, he just stares at her.

Her eyes, cat-like in the dim light, answer him and he takes her hand and leads her to bed. For a minute he feels a shadowy sadness drop through him, but he does not pay attention to it. He is declaring a moratorium on sadness. He is tired of sadness. Tired of tired. He slides his hands around her waist and touches her, and they burrow down as the larch tree outside taps against the house.

She leaves anyway.

The next morning, Tiger and Crank are dead. He nets their rubbery bodies and he is carrying them to the trash, when the phone rings.

"And how are we this fine morning Mr. Deschamps?"

"Who is this?" he says, and pins the phone under his chin and tries to reach the garbage can but the cord isn't long enough. He stands still and looks at his white-bellied
"It's Chuck from Professional Recovery Systems, and I'm calling you to find out when you're sending the balance of the truck payment, Mr. Deschamps. Tomorrow perhaps?"

"Right." Johnny says. "And the next day I'll fly to the moon."

"Look, pal, we're doing our best to be agreeable and I think we've been more than patient, but you've been tardy with your payments Mr. Deschamps--remiss, negligent, derelict--you get my point? Perhaps we've forgotten our obligations?"

"How could we," Johnny says and hangs up.

Johnny looks out the window. It is a thaw. The sun sparkles off the snow, and the icicles drip and across the street he can see a small boy throwing a stick to a dog. He wants to feel sad, but he's made resolutions.

"Yo-hoo! What are we thinking, Mr. Deschamps?"

Johnny hangs up the phone and it rings again.

"Listen, pal, we can slap a lien on your truck before you can say Jack Robinson, and besides--" his voice coos, "Avoiding our problems won't solve them! Not like a check!"

"Listen, my friend," Johnny says. "Call me again and I report you."

"Oh Mr. Deschamps--"

He slams the phone down, and dumps the fish in the toilet, flushes, and as they circle the bowl, the phone
rings again.

"I said I’ll turn your fat little ass in." Johnny says.

"John Deschamps? This a wrong number?"

It’s the job counsellor. "Sorry," Johnny mumbles.

"Thought you were someone else."

"Troubles, Deschamps? Something you’d like to discuss?"

He says, "It doesn’t concern you."

"Right there, Deschamps! Bingo!" the job counsellor says. "Now look, I got an orderly job, St. Nicolas, $5.25 an hour. But a hint between you and me—you need work on your phone technique."

He lies in bed and stares up at the ceiling. Myra’s words keep echoing through his head, "It’s not that you think you’re a loser, Johnny," she said right before she’d stepped into the dim bus. "Your problem is that you lie down and accept it." He watches a spider swing on its lead from the ceiling to the window. Lie down, he thinks. Accept it.

He goes to the Trail’s End and sits with the other stags at the bar. He orders a beer. The man next to him asks if he knows of anyone who needs some help.
"If I did," Johnny says, "I'd call him."

"Looking for work?" the guy says, fingering a dollar bill.


"Hell of a place to look for work," the man says.

Johnny buys a six-pack and leaves. He takes off up Six-Mile Canyon, past all the new houses perched on the hill like pigeons, and drives until the road turns to gravel and empty fields of snow stretch out on either side of him. At the top of the hill, he turns the truck around, pulls up the emergency brake, switches off the engine, and gets out.

The town is spread out below him, the lights winking up at him as if there is a secret between them. Even in the dark, he can pick out his high school, his house, Myra's old apartment, the grade school where he'd been fired, and he wonders if all the dots were connected, what kind of picture it would form.

Suddenly he picks up a beer bottle from the side of the road and throws it with all his might at the lights, first one bottle, then another, the glass crashing and singing against the rocks, echoing across the fields, and each time he throws it harder.

He finds his mother standing among the alders. She is
in her best blue dress, corseted, her bosom round as bread, and the skin on her ankles swelling slightly over stiff blue shoes. A droopy bouquet of cloth flowers is pinned on her chest.

"You look nice," he says. "What's the occasion?"

"Just nice?" she says.

"Okay." he sighs. "Like a million bucks."

He smiles, and remembers the lunchtimes she would greet him at the door dressed in a variety of outfits—evening gowns, bathing suits, clown suits—to make him laugh.

"Did you bring me sherry? A chocolate or two?"

"Since when do you drink sherry?" he looks at her.

"There's a lot about me you don't understand." She looks at him that all-knowing way that gives him the creeps.

"Oh well," she waves this off. "How's my boy?"

"Peachy," he says. For once he is not going to get mad. Instead, he realizes that he has to tell her something, that there is something he has wanted to tell her for a long time and he is about to talk when she climbs up a nearby pine tree and starts swaying in the branches above him.

"This is great Johnny! I can see the Roxy Theatre, the Kirby bank building, that monstrous Civic Center."

"Can you please come down here?" he says. He is going to explain everything to her quietly, firmly. "I need to
tell you something. No climbing up trees or snow angels, for God’s sake, Mother."

She climbs down, holding her back very straight. When she stands in front of him, she says, "Well what is it? What are you in such a hurry to tell me?"

"You got to realize something about me," he says slowly.

"I know everything about you. You’re a lovely boy. Always well-behaved. I could take you to meetings, to picnics, even to church, and everyone’d say that Johnny Deschamps, he’s the best behaved boy in town."

She keeps talking as she drifts along the tracks, and he has to hurry to keep up with her as she veers off on a path through the low alders. He crashes along behind her.

When they reach the riverbank, they are silent a minute, watching a man across on the other side shovel snow off the roof of a shed.

"Listen to me," he says.

She holds her head high, "The Deschamps made their mark on this town, Johnny. Did you know the Daly Street Bridge—"

"You know what?" he says. "I don’t care. From now on, I just want things to be the god damn way they are. That bridge is just a bridge. The house is just a house. You know something else? The Johnny Deschamps standing here before you is not going to the moon, or conquering the world. He’s lost his job and his girlfriend, and the only
thing he can do is crawl down the tracks to babble with his mother. Who is, in fact, dead." He tries to shake her arm but his hand keeps going through it. "I am a bum, Ma. Face it."

"No!" she stamps her feet.

She holds her ears, shakes her head from one side to the other and bobby pins fly out and scatter on the snow.

"Just repeat after me," he says. "Johnny, you are a bindle stiff."

"Oh no, then I’ll have to, oh Johnny--," she whispers and looks at him and her eyes are sad, faraway, as if everything is changing.

He continues. "You could say it like this 'My grandson John Deschamps is a nice bum, a quiet bum, but a bum just the same who can’t keep a job or a woman. And he cannot, will not, go to the moon.'" He shoves his hands deep in his pockets and stares at the round rocks he is standing on and wonders, fleetingly, how long they tossed in the river before their edges were ground down, and when he looks back up, she is gone.

That night, he drives to the school, and waits in the car, rubbing his hands together to keep warm, until the new guy leaves. Then he walks quickly down the sidewalk (not shoveled yet he notes) and uses his keys to let himself in
the gym door. His tennis shoes squeak and catch as he feels his way along the walls for the lights. In the sudden brightness, he sees himself in the scuffed floor, a foreshortened jumble of arms and legs, and he quickly looks away.

He gets the flashlight in the janitor’s room, and goes to look at the school.

Toilet bowls gleam up at him. Chalkboards mock him with clean black faces. Cloakrooms glint. He checks corners, passageways, closets, and everywhere order and shine sting him, but he feels suddenly light as if someone has just cut his guy wires.

In the bright gym, he gets the basketball out of the equipment closet, and stands for a long time in front of the basket, just holding the ball in his hands, smelling the sweet smells of old sweat, rubber, defeat.

He takes a jump shot for Myra, and sinks it.

Dribbles in a wide circle and makes a right-hand dunk for his mother.

A slam-dunk for Chuck of Professional Recovery Systems.
A half-court throw for his father.

He dribbles and shoots, basket after basket for all of them, sweating, and the four of them are winning 24-13, when the coach brings him in in the third period, and he starts out a little rocky, misses the free throw, fouls their center, but slowly, by God, he begins to get the better of
them, he's got them up against the wall and he's wasting them, putting them down, that screamin' demon Deschamps.

Who?

His footsteps thunder back, Deschamps, Deschamps.

He sees the sirens flash red and blue on the opaque window, and he has time to flip off the lights and climb up the fire escape to the rafters where he sits as a policeman shines his flashlight at the stage, the folded-up bleachers.

The door from the school swings open, and another policeman says, "School's okay."

"Don't see anything here either."

"Kids probably. Or ghosts."

"Booga, booga, Zylinski. For Christ's sake."

He never sees her again, except once, years later when he stops at the graveyard. Myra waits in the truck, smoking, the engine running, as he puts anemones and snapdragons on the grave. A breeze kicks up and an owl swoops down in the dark, so near he can feel the rush of air from its wings, and he can almost hear her saying, "You can go to the moon if you want to," when the cicadas chime in and begin to chant, "Bum. Bum."
GOOD BONES

Emily studied her plate, and wondered how long it would be until she was hungry again. Fifteen minutes? A whole hour? It made her sad to eat now. It was all so temporary. She slid her knife under the chicken skin, carefully lifted it to the side of her plate, and cut the meat from the bone. She diced it into small pieces, and began to eat, chewing twenty times before she swallowed.

"Are you going to eat that chicken or dissect it?" her father said.

"Emily eats like a scientist!" Billy cried.

"You could use some willpower yourself Ted," Emily’s mother said. "Look at your plate!"

"Yeah Dad," Emily looked across the lazy susan Billy was spinning to her father’s plate loaded with chicken, potatoes, and twice-buttered bread. "Do you really need that bread?"

"No," he said. Then he deliberately lifted the slice to his mouth, bit, and looked at her, repentant.

Emily felt a hook of disgust.

"If you cut off the chicken skin, you cut out 100 calories," Emily said.

"Yes Ted," her mother said as she stopped mid-kitchen,
holding a skillet of chicken grease. "You could just start there."

"Look," Her father said, petulant. "I'm not going to cut the god damn chicken skin off my chicken. Or stop buttering my bread. I work all day and I'm tired and now you want to take my food away!"

"Please! Please! Don't take my chicken!" Billy cried in a high falsetto and held his arms around his plate.

Emily's parents laughed.

When her family had finished dinner and left the kitchen, Emily cleared the table. She brought the plates over to the counter and shut the kitchen door. She listened for voices. It was quiet. Then she hunched over the counter and began to devour what was left on the plates, picking at the tiny scraps of meat still clinging to the bone, and crunching the gristle between her teeth.

The diet started mid-June, after a family vacation in Vancouver. Her family travelled with the Dalys, who liked to travel and liked to cook. She remembered the Butchart gardens, the Empress Hotel, the green ribbons of Canadian highways through a kind of thick, sickening haze of food. Chocolate-covered pretzels. Cookies. Gum she and Sally Daly blew into wobbly pink bubbles for one another, laughing until they got lost in the laughing and when they finished, Emily felt
exhausted and sad. She looked down at her thighs spreading and sticking on the plastic car seat, and longed to feel hungry again. At night, as her mother and Mrs. Daly pulled wet packages of hamburger and carrot-raisin salad from the van refrigerators, Emily watched her brother Billy walk off to the ocean's edge, and wished it were she walking away from the talk and heat to the cool whirl of the surf.

When they got home, Emily ran for the bathroom as soon as the Volkswagen rolled to a stop in the drive, her mother calling behind her, "You've got to help carry things in."

She locked the door and stripped off her clothes. She grabbed the roll of fat at her waist, and pinched it until there were angry red marks. "This will be gone," she said. She steeled herself, excited even, for the bad news, and stepped on the scale.

She had gained ten pounds.

Afterwards, she carried in more than her own load, running the suitcases up and down the stairs a couple times for the exercise, running clothes to the washer, running sacks to the bedrooms. She made herself move like she was being chased, until her mother brushed her bangs from her moist forehead and said, "You excited to be home?"

"You make me tired just watching you," her father said, as he sorted two weeks' of mail at the kitchen table.

One hundred and twenty-seven pounds. Emily could feel all of it. She looked in the hall mirror to see the thighs
widening out like hams. She wanted to take small knives to cut the extra fat from the stomach. "Lard," she said out loud, feeling the waxy ugliness of the word, the way it coated the tongue, and she could feel something harden inside her.

The next day Emily ate a fried egg and toast, her last regular meal, and walked ceremoniously downtown to the cool dark of Woolworths to buy a diet book. She passed up the lunch counter, empty except for a few early shoppers clutching rattling sacks and drinking coffee, past the candy counter, piled with dry-looking fudge. She lingered at the eyeshadows for a while, then shook herself back to her purpose, laid out a quarter for a Dell diet book, A New and Thinner You, and went home, resolute.

She calculated lists of numbers—calories used, calories needed, calories she would from now on consume. She found these additions and subtractions comforting, clean, like a blueprint for a giant machine. She did not cheat on portions, she was as mean to herself as possible, which gave her a stinging kind of satisfaction. Soon she had great lists of numbers. A sample menu. And then it was time for lunch, and she resolutely faced 245 calories of applesauce and cottage cheese.

She lost six pounds by the end of June. She felt sleek and strong. She had taken herself in hand. She was hungry
all the time.

Emily didn’t like tennis, and swimming turned her hair green, so she settled on running, and exercises: thirty situps, pushups, side-kicks, jumping jacks, and her favorite, humiliating leg lifts called fire-hydrants. The routine did not vary for five months. Each night she put on her tennis shoes, checked her watch and ran for twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes, pushing herself until it hurt, and beyond, pushing herself until she imagined she could feel a bonfire of calories raging in her stomach, lighting her ribs, her body fooled and turning on itself for food.

Emily started to bake. Not to eat sweets, but to offer them. She enjoyed mixing the thick doughs, the wheezing sounds of the mixer, and the rich, buttery smells wafting out from the oven. She started with cookies, simple cakes, but now she was getting fancier, fashioning tarts, and layered apple strudels. She had never eaten one crumb. She was hungry all the time.

For her father’s 45th birthday party, she followed a recipe of her grandmother’s that her father talked about for as long as Emily could remember. Her mother had never made the cake. It was a white cake dribbled with bittersweet chocolate that her grandmother made especially for her father,
especially for his birthday. Handwritten on a recipe card in dainty, looping strokes, it was even called "Teddy’s Cake."

"It’s my cake!" her father explained, as she walked slowly toward him in the darkened room lit only by the flickering birthday candles. He looked at her mother. "You made my cake!"

She shook her head. "Emily made it."

Emily wasn’t sure but his face fell a bit, then he turned to her and said, "You remembered honey! You remembered your old daddy’s favorite cake."

She set the cake down, and he blew the candles out and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. When she served the pieces, she noted how the three layers held together on the plate, how dramatic the dark chocolate looked against the white frosting, and she was happy until her mother noticed she wasn’t having any. This was the part of every meal Emily hated.

Her mother looked at her, her fork poised above her cake. "Can’t you have just a little?"

The way she said it, all sweet and warm, made Emily want to cut a big slice right down the middle and eat it all at once, just to please her, but she didn’t. She couldn’t.

"Really Em," her father said. "Can’t you have just a bite?"

Emily hated this. When she refused, as she always did, her parents got angry, and visitors thought she was strange. She said it was because she was on a diet. She said it was
because she didn't like sweets. "But you're so thin," they'd say and she hated the way they'd look at their plates and back at her as if she could absolve them. She wanted everyone in the world to eat, to eat for her, and she was angry when they passed up dessert.

Emily pointed to herself with the cake server, "So sorry. I apologize to you all." She looked at all of their faces looking up at her. "Cannot do." Then she took a big, stagey bow, and her mom laughed, and Emily knew she was off the hook for one more night.

Her friend Sally wrote from Hawaii. She had been to a luau, eaten coconut (at least a 1000 calories a slice Emily thought), and she had a boyfriend Desmond who made Sally feel "like a real woman."

On a warm evening in July, Emily walked around the house listening to the sounds, the rustle of paper she always associated with her father, the rise and fall of her mother's voice who was in the kitchen playing "Sorry!" with Billy. Over the swinging half-door to the kitchen, Emily could see the top of her head. She heard the rattle of dice and her mother said something she couldn't hear. Billy laughed. A stab of envy shot through her at his easy way around her mother, the way he charmed her and she let him alone.

Emily stopped at the hall mirror and looked at herself.
Up close, things looked encouraging, a little more flatness along the belly. From far away, a discouraging bulk. She imagined cutting herself out of herself, like a giant paper doll, taking scissors and snipping off the bulge at the thighs, the stomach. She wanted to carve this excess from herself. By August, she willed it gone.

Emily was down to 115, a breakthrough, the morning her mother cut off the top of her soft-boiled egg and said to her, "Guess what Emmy? I've decided to make you my summer project—I've decided to make you a dress."

"Great," Emily said. She hoped her voice didn't betray her. Their family had a basement full of her mother's projects: curtain panels; an unfinished, pink-checked dress for Emily; a half-upholstered armchair. Emily associated her mother's projects with mouths full of pins, the late night pounding of the sewing machine, cold suppers, and her mother running around the house exclaiming, "Don't these colors look delicious together?"

Nevertheless, Emily was measured, and whisked off to the fabric store. Her mother hovered about her, trying to interest her in pleated skirts or jumpers. "You'll like them," her mother said fiercely. "They're classics." Emily fought for the empire-waist mini. To her surprise, she won.

Home, lunch somehow made it to the table in the breakfast
nook, jumbled with cookbooks, school ribbons, and bills stacked in a corner, and Emily ate to the cool sound of her mother's scissors slicing the strawberry-dotted fabric.

"You look good now Emily." Emily's mother said. "You must be about done with your dieting."

"Just ten more pounds," Emily said.

"Five," her mother said.

"Ten," Emily said to herself and looked down at her plate, painted with a snow-covered bridge and decorated with a few curds of cottage cheese. She wondered where this bridge was, and how old it was. She wondered if any of the boards were rotted, and if anyone had ever fallen through it into the ice-blue river below.

Emily's father had taken to kneading the bones in her shoulders and saying, "I just want to get you down and force feed you like a goose." He'd pantomime stuffing great wads of bread down her throat. Then he'd tousle her hair and smile, "but you're too damn stubborn, Em. Too much Sullivan."

Sally wrote from Hawaii. "What we have to do Em is decide on our personalities. When you go to high school, you have to have a personality. I have decided I will be loud and adventurous. Ha ha ha, laughing all the time. I'll wear pink lipstick and I plan to do a lot of riding around in cars. How
'bout you Em? What will you be?" "I'll be," Emily started to write her back, "I'll be," but she couldn't go farther.

It was the first week of August, Emily had no tan, and she had reached a plateau at 113 pounds. She was lying out in the backyard, trying to get sun. She had been here fifteen minutes and it seemed like two hours. The smell of the grass was suffocating. Hard, pinkish apples hung from the tree. She looked down her at her stomach. It was flatter, and she could see the soft points of her hips. Beautiful, soft points. She wanted hollows.

She was reading "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" which made Emily wish she were married, where there were answers for things. She would be good at it. She was good at organizing things, cupboards and cooking, better at it than her mother who was always piling up bowls that didn't fit together, and letting the bottoms of her cupboards get sticky with honey, and never clearing out her household products, so Emily had found old oils and liniments that her grandmother had used.

The neighbor, a single thirtyish woman named Grace Childs, came out her back door with a lawn chair in her hand and iced tea in the other. She had on a blue striped bathing suit with a red sash she described as "gay" and Emily could see broken veins in her legs like small shooting stars.

"Mind if I join you?" Grace asked as she settled herself
in the lawn chair and started to rub her legs with oil.

They were silent a minute and Emily could hear the grasshoppers buzzing and the distant whine of a lawn mower.

Grace slapped a mosquito on her leg. "You’re really svelte these days Emily. Do you know that?"

"Thanks," Emily said. She wouldn’t have dreamed of asking Grace what svelte meant.

"I probably ought to cut down myself," Grace slapped the side of her thighs.

Emily silently agreed, and said, "It’s hard."

"Of course men like a little something to hold on to" Grace said looked down the top of her thick dacron suit. "Don’t tell your mother that. She doesn’t remember what it’s like out there." She shifted in her chair. "They’re always after one thing and one thing only. You have to watch out Emily. You’ve got good bones."

It was the nicest thing Grace had ever said to her.

"Unfortunately, you’ve also inherited the Sullivan legs, just calves to feet." Grace sighed as if this pained her. "Like He left out the ankles as a joke."

One evening when everyone had gone to the band concert, Emily put on a mini-skirt and a tight-fitting top, and she went into her parent’s room and looked at herself in front of the full-length mirror. She weighed 110 pounds, and she
wondered what she would look like ten pounds thinner. She put on a long strand of pearls of her mother's, rouge, and some dangly earrings. She held the necklace out from her body, and watched herself in the mirror as she danced slowly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, the way she'd seen Twiggy dance once on the TV. She put her head back and made herself laugh, as if a man had just whispered something in her ear. She pursed her lips, and sucked in her cheeks. She liked her face in the dim light.

"Boo!"

She started, and looked up to see her brother watching her in the doorway.

"I thought you were at the park," she said. She felt stupid.

"It was boring," he said, "So I came home. Why do you have all that stuff on?"

"None of your business."

"You'll look just right on Halloween. We can set you on the front porch with the pumpkin." He mimicked a dangling skeleton. Then he cocked his head and looked at her sharply, "How come you're so skinny?"

"I'm reducing," Emily said carefully. "I was overweight, now I'm reducing."

"No," her brother said. "You're bony--Maroney!" He ran out of the room and she could hear him all the way down the hall to his room, repeating in a sing-song, "Bony Maroney,
Emily stretched her legs out in the claw-footed tub, and watched the bubbles rise up, and felt the warmth course through her body. She liked the way her flesh curved and hugged her limbs. Five more pounds and she'd look like a model.

Someone knocked on the door, and Emily's mother walked in and stopped.

"Emily Sullivan, my God!" she gasped.
"What?" Emily looked up at the ceiling for spiders.
"I can count all your ribs."
"So?"
"What do you weigh?"
"A hundred and twelve." Close enough, Emily thought.
"You don't weigh a hundred and twelve. Get on the scale."

"Mom!" Emily slid down into the water, hoping the bubbles would cover her. "I'm in the bathtub."

"Now!" Her mother said, and gripped her wrist. The bathwater sloshed as she stood up and she got on the scale without drying herself. She could feel her mother's breath on her back.

"My God!" her mother gasped. "Oh Emily!"

"Five more pounds," Emily said, wrapping a towel around
herself.

"No!" her mother said. She stood looking at her, then she unzipped her pants. She looked down at her bare stomach, sucked in her breath, and pressed her hands against the sagging flesh. Then she sat on the toilet and looked up at Emily, sighed, and said, "Why are you doing this?"

Billy was making gagging sounds.

Emily looked at her own mound of corned beef and thought he had a point. It was disgusting-looking. And 400 calories a cup.

"Oh come on, kids," Emily's mother said. "Your father loves corned beef hash."

"Goody for him," Billy said and smiled at her mother so she didn't get mad. He plunged fork into his fried eggs and broke the yolks. "Dam is breaking!" he said to Emily like he'd said a hundred times before. It was their old joke.

"Dam's breaking!" she yelled at him as she cut into her own eggs, and as the yolk broke and ran, a huge sadness swooped down over her.

"Ted do you know how much your daughter weighs?" her mother said as she walked to the stove for his coffee.

"About like a cement truck," her father winked at Emily.

"Ted, I'm serious," her mother said.

"What now?" he sighed.
"She weighs a 106 pounds. A 106 pounds! She looks like a death camp victim!" She shook her potholder at him. "We've got to do something Ted. This is serious."

"Oh Mary Susan," he said, pressing the last of the hash onto his fork. "It's just a phase."

Emily took advantage of this little conversation to take her plate to the sink. She'd slip around the corner, feed the hash to the dog, and then wash off her plate and load it in the dishwasher.

"You eat every last bite of that young lady," her mother called.

Emily looked to her father.

"Obey your mother."

"It tastes like dog barf!" Billy cried as he forked some into his mouth.

"Eat!" her mother said.

Emily looked at her and started to eat the mound of corned beef hash mince by mince, separating out the little white pieces that looked like fat. Her mother cleared the table. Everyone went off into the house. She sat at the table eating until the sun went down, until the neighbors put out the lights, until the crickets started to sing and her father came into the room, and threw what was left away. "You're something, Emily," he said, and shook his head. He did not smile.
She began having nightmares. They came like great waves just as she was drifting to sleep, rolls of sensation that pinned her to the bed and threatened to engulf her, to swallow her up. She was too small to resist. She would tell her arm, "Move arm," and the arm could not move. She would tell her leg "Move leg," and the leg was lifeless as stone. She dreamt about rooms of giant furniture, where she was tiny underfoot. Sometimes she even called her mother to her bed, crying. She was scared enough not to feel silly. Her mother would sit at the side of her bed as Emily lay down again under the light summer blankets, and her mother smoothed the hair away from her forehead and said, "What are you worried about Em? What’s running around the old noggin?" and Emily sometimes felt it was the first time her mother had talked to her in months. She wanted to tell her about the dreams, about this great tide of fear that washed over her and she was drowning in it like an animal washed into a century it was not meant to survive. She felt so lost at times, it was hard for her to speak. Her mother would leave when she fell asleep, and she’d wake up late in the morning, exhausted and sweating.

"Desmond had deep brown eyes, and he let me feel his thing," Sally said and she sunk her teeth into an ear of corn.
"You felt his thing!" Emily said. She and Sally were finishing the picnic she'd planned. Only 350 calories, she'd counted every one of them.

"We did more than feel it."

"You did more than feel it!" A ball of fear wadded up in Emily's stomach.

"Emily," Sally's dangled her corn from her hand, "I told you he made me feel like a woman."

"Well what's that supposed to mean?"

"Do I have to explain?" Sally had been talking like this ever since she'd gotten back from Hawaii. She finished her corn, and looked at Emily. "I'm still hungry."

"You want more?" Emily said, and she looked at Sally's empty plate. So Sally was tan and she had a boyfriend and she'd had sex too. She also had thighs.

The garage door creaked open and Emily's mother walked across the yard carrying more hamburgers, corn, and the petit fours Emily had spent four hours on that morning.

Sally looked relieved. "Thank you Mrs. Sullivan," she said, and reached for a hamburger. She took an enthusiastic bite and a little meat juice dribbled down her chin, and she said to Emily, "Maybe I'll go on a diet now I'm back."

"Just cut out butter," Emily said. "People butter everything."

"Yeah I know," Sally said. "But it tastes good."

"But people put butter on their bread, on their meat, on
their vegetables. It's such a waste!" Emily was getting heated.

Emily picked up the pan of zucchini. "You take a perfectly low-calorie vegetable, like this zucchini here, put butter on it and you've wasted calories! One hundred calories! Things taste good without butter. Vegetables are just fine without butter. Butter is fat! Butter is grease! Butter disguises!"

"Emily," Sally said and looked at her sideways, "it's just butter."

About the end of August, about the time her grandmother Ruth was due to arrive from California, Emily noticed when she turned sideways in the hall tree mirror, she narrowed into a straight line. The bones in her elbows were bigger than her upper arms. She had cheekbones now too. And, naked, she could see hollow shadows of her hipbones. Sometimes, if she looked at herself in a dusky, forgiving light, she was almost beautiful.

Emily was walking downtown to the library, to Woolworth's to check out the make-up, and then to the department store to try on clothes. It was her new sport. She loved the way the lined wool skirts slid easily up and over her hips, the satin linings whispering, the way Flora the saleswoman at Bridger
Mercantile clucked her tongue and said, "What are you now dear? A size 5?" She liked to imagine herself in these new clothes on her first day of high school, her golden plaid skirt brushing her legs, her perfectly matched sweater just nipping her waist as she strolled down the hall to her homeroom, laughing.

She came blinking back into the sunlight, empty-handed, and when she saw her eighth grade teacher across the street, she ran after her, excited to show Mrs. Delaney her new self. Emily touched her on the shoulder, when she turned around she looked confused, and then she put the palm of her hand on Emily’s cheek and said, "My lord, girl, have you been sick?"

Emily’s mother came to her door and told Emily to move into the sewing room. Just like that. Her mother said she wanted to repaper Emily’s room. "Well what if I like the old paper?" Emily said, her hand on her hip. "It’s just for a while," her mother replied. "But it’s my room," Emily said. "It’s my house," her mother said.

Emily carried armloads of clothes sullenly through the halls, and gave her mother dark looks.

"C’mon Em, you’ll love it." her mother said. "It’s got little white flowers on pink, your favorite color! It’s very feminine."

"Gross!" Emily thought to herself and she could feel it rising, the old blind rage, but she didn’t do that now, she
had stopped fighting with her mother. Emily looked at her mother and thought, "I hate flowers." Then she went into the sewing room, and shut the door. Hard.

Her mother redecorating her room, with her Beatles posters and her mirror painted with a nail polish peace symbol. While she was stuck in the sewing room with lots of pins, old patterns, and a dressmaker’s form.

She threw her clothes on the floor and stamped all over them. "You’ll love it," she whispered. "It’s got little white flowers." She sat on the bed and stared at the molded form of a woman’s torso. She hated it too. Something about the way it was just there, no excuses, its thick waist widening out to blunt, shelf-like hips, the breasts stuck out as if to say "obey me." She jabbed a pin in the stomach. A breast. She smiled to herself. Then she stuck pins in the y-shaped depression at the top of the legs.

By the end of August, she stopped laughing. She couldn’t figure it out. It was like a great cloud of seriousness had settled on her. Her father would be telling jokes at dinner, or Billy would stick cold spaghetti down her back, even the Laurel and Hardy movies they’d show on the family projector wouldn’t do it. Sometimes they even had the opposite effect—she’d cry at these sad attempts, fraught with love and misunderstanding, that always failed. She started reading old
novels about Southern families, separated by the war, that ended with big, tearful reunions, and she'd cry herself to sleep. She couldn't figure out why she felt so bad when she was beginning to look so good.

The morning she stepped on the scale and weighed 96 pounds, she was filled with a vague disappointment. She couldn't say why.

Labor Day weekend the family went up to Lost Lake for what Emily's mother called the "last hurrah." Emily's father had been planning the menu for three days, and when he showed it to her, printed in his tiny pinched handwriting on the long legal paper, Emily felt tired, as if she had to start figuring out how to avoid all this food on the spot.

He looked into her face and said, "We'll have corn on the cob, we'll have chicken, and, if you help pick the berries, we'll have your favorite huckleberry pie."

She wanted him to stop pleading with her like a big dog. "Looks kind of fattening Dad," she said.

"You used to love huckleberry pie. You used to eat three pieces at a time. Em," he said softly, "Can't you let up?"

She went upstairs to pack. When she got to the landing she turned and looked back at the kitchen, and she wanted to whisper, "I hate huckleberry pie" but when she started to say it, her throat lumped up and the words wouldn't come.
Later, up at the cabin, Emily and her mother and father were sitting out on the deck watching the camp robbers eat the last of the morning's pancakes, when they heard a shout from the lake and Emily's dad started up from his chair, and they looked out and saw Billy out in the rowboat, holding up a great big cutthroat trout.

Her mother and father clapped and shouted congratulations that echoed across the lake: "Billy-boy! Hoop-hoop hurray!"

Emily watched him row to shore, and he walked up the path holding the fish by its gills.

"Let's get the camera!" Emily's mother said when he reached the deck. "I think it's the biggest fish I've ever seen out of Lost Lake." She got up from the chair and the screen door banged shut behind her.

"Nice catch Billy!" Her father looked into Billy's face to be sure he had his attention. "This is a cutthroat trout, *Salmo clarki."

Billy looked at them all and clasped his hands over his head like a champion. Then he picked up his fish and said, looking levelly at all of them, "I'll go gut my fish now."

Emily's father looked after him as the screen banged shut behind him.

"We could cook it tonight," her father said. "You know roll it up in cornmeal and fry it."

Her mother picked up a broom and started to sweep the steps.
Emily went into the front room where a distant song crackled over the short-wave radio, then to the kitchen where Billy was repeating the names of the organs as he gutted his fish.

"Mr. Trout had a fly for lunch. Wanna see?" he said, walking towards her with a long string of pale, slimy guts.

"No!" she said, "That's disgusting."

"Wanna wanna?" he said. He started to chase her, holding up the guts. "Pretty, lovely fish guts."

"Billy! Get those gross things away from me," she said.

"Wanna?" he said and put them close to her face.

"Stop that!" she said and she slammed the screen door, and walked down the path, carpeted with tamarack needles, to the lake. She stood for a minute by the rowboat, looking out to the glistening lake. She was breathing fast, and she felt like she was going to cry. Because Billy held some fish guts to her face? She dragged the rowboat back into the water, the paddle banging against the side, and she stepped in and pushed herself out into the water.

The lake was quiet, and she didn't care if they thought she was copying Billy. She was just tired of the noise. She could still hear their voices, she could hear them over and over as they echoed across the lake, and she could hear her mother say "Where's Emily?" and father answer, "In the outhouse I think." She rowed quickly out of sight. "Te-ed," her mother called, "Where'd Emily go?" and her voice bounced
from one shore to another, "go go?," then their voices rose up together rippled over the water and into the cattails, "go, go?" and Emily watched her dad put his hand up to shade his eyes as he looked from the dock out over the lake and he pointed and said, "There! Mary Susan, she's rowing," which to Emily in the boat sounded like "owing, owing."
FRUIT IN GOOD SEASON

It's true, all I wanted was to wander the hills around Hope, but Aunt Dot raised me to tea parties and ladies clubs until the morning a ranch hand showed up on our porch with a handful of phlox and said, "A prayer is a whisper from the heart." He touched my cheek so tenderly, my blood rose up against years of rooms where clocks ticked loudly and my aunt crossed her legs with a wheeze and forbid me my woods for house dresses. I threw over those mild men, the clerk and the lawyer, with their shiny suits and dime-store bouquets. "You're trading yourself a good name, Edie," my aunt shook her red face at me, "for a hayseed and a bible."

Weeks later, Howie and I walked down the aisle of a rough wooden church. My aunt cried. The organist made a hash of the recessional. We stepped out into the world.

My story really began the night Howie rolled over in bed, pressed his flat body against mine and whispered, "Thou shalt propagate."

"Oh, Howie," I said and pulled my nightgown closer around me for my breasts were sore with nursing and exhaustion
flooded me.

"Fruit in good season," he said.

"Daniel didn’t sleep," I murmured. "I’m the walking dead."

"The leaf shall not wither," he said. He moved against me, his body still sinewy from the years on the ranch, one long line of tight-bound muscle, except the tiny red teeth marks where the barbed wire raked him.

"Do you know what it’s like?" I said, jerking the covers up. "All these hands at you? Grabbing your arms? Your hair?" All the while Howie is pulling my gown up over my head until I’m naked, my breasts lit by a thin June moon and tight with cold. I pulled my hair around me for warmth. "What it’s like to walk streets where the neighbors watch me, where phones rattle before I get home, Howie Deschene’s wife, did you see she wore pants on the street?

"Rage, rage," he whispered. There was a hoarseness in his voice I’d never heard those long nights he pulled me under the covers and the world bloomed up from our bed.

"Howie," I whispered.

His eyes went flat. He pulled my hair across my face, pressed me into the mattress.

I tightened my legs, pushed against him, and said, "Stop."

He drove against me, reciting Psalms 2, verses 1 through 9. I began to float up from myself. I hovered on the ceiling
above us, looking down at my hair sheeting the bed, Howie’s spine bobbing over me, white as a ghost’s. I thought, Howie until the pain between my legs stopped, until each letter rose up before me like the skyline of some nameless city. Pines scratched the windows, and as my limbs turned from wood to ice, I heard the lilting call of a wolf and from farther away, an answer.

The next morning he turned to me, a cold light stealing around the room, the narrow angles of his face hollowed with hunger and a look that said help me. He took my hands. I looked away. He got up and jerked open the window shade, and as it went flapping up, dread rose up in me, then drifted away like smoke.

I got up and started the stove.

In the front room, tight and dark with the curtains shut, I took Daniel to my breast while Howie shoved one book after another in his satchel, the pages opening and shutting like mouths. "Today we cross-pollinate tomatoes," he said, looking away because nursing embarrassed him. He grazed my cheek, closed the door, and frosted air fell to the floor and crept the baseboards.

I opened the curtains, and Daniel and I rocked and looked out at Redbow. Clouds chased down the valley, Mrs. Larsen shook out a mop on her porch, and old Mr. Peterson walked his
Scotty dogs down the sun-slicked street. Age had frozen his back straight up and his arms straight out and everyday at 9:00, he took mincing steps down the bumpy road, never looking at his feet.

"Well, Danny boy." I lifted him to my other breast. "There goes Mr. Perpendicular."

Daniel reached up for my mouth and grabbed fistfuls of housecoat instead. A sliver of bologna fluttered to the floor. There was a tingling in my cheek and a stone in my heart, and I could feel myself slipping below the surface of things.

I set Daniel in his crib, and walked to the mirror to repin my hair. There was the doughy face of a peasant and mud-colored eyes, but as I pulled the hairpins, my hair fell heavy across my breasts and shoulders, and I brushed it until my scalp stung, until it haloed my head, and lit the room like slow-burning fire.

I turned to Daniel. "Look."

He lifted his arms to me.

The sun stole over Teacup Mountain and burned the feathery tops of the Ponderosa.

I took scalloped to Mrs. Larsen that afternoon, but when I handed them to her, she smiled in a way that let me know I was never to come back. A day later, I tried the Merry Mixers. They played canasta, and as they shrieked and howled and plunked down straights and flushes, they looked over at
me sorrowfully and said, "You're so serious, Edie, don't you ever laugh?" Watch this. I curved my lips in a smile and forced a laugh that sliced through me like glass.

Three days later, Mrs. Delano invited me to the Pioneer Women's Philanthropic and Cultural Society. As her Buick prowled the rain-drenched streets, she patted my gloved hand and told me how much I would like the gals. They're a hoot, she said, just the tonic for a grey spring in Redbow, Montana.

We went to the home of Mrs. Whitely, whose husband owned the Redbow Beacon. The women my age eyed me suspiciously, while the older ones directed things, pouring coffee, staring the group into their chairs. When everyone was seated, I stood up, brushed the skirt of my princess-style cotton piquet, and stared at the windows until the light hurt my eyes. I said, "I am Edie, wife of the science teacher."

"Science," the ladies said.

"I have a little boy, Daniel," I said and I wanted to add and a stone in my heart.

They started discussing a bake sale to raise money for a home for the blind in Billings. A woman across the room was upset because two people had offered to bring yellow cakes, when what was needed was variety. Another woman pulled her skirt over her knees and said quietly that she would bring snickerdoodles, but everyone ignored her. Mrs. Whitely looked at the two women, and said that there was room for two yellow cakes, but she was sure Mrs. Fitzhugh would see it in her
heart to make a chocolate instead.

I stared at the rug, at the red birds that flew nowhere and blue flowers that bloomed forever, listening to the chatter, to the tick and clink of cups and saucers. Mrs. Delano whispered, "Aren't they a bunch?"

"Yes," I said. A word or a phrase seemed to burn inside me. I wanted to say I will make kiss-me-cake. I wanted to speak their language, to have them turn and smile at me and look at each other approvingly. My aunt raised me to say the words—coffeecake, meat loaf, black jet for evening— but she had never taught me how to speak in the spaces beneath them. How there always dust means lonely, how I burnt the chops is fury. My hands and legs seemed to grow larger and larger. My stocking wheezed as I crossed my legs, and when I dropped the cookies, they went wheeling across the floor. The ladies paused, and in that silence, something was decided.

"So nice to have you," Phyllis Whitely said, as we left in a whirl of bobbing hats. She did not say come back.

On the way home, Mrs. Delano said, "I'm glad you gave us a try, Edie."

"Thank you for bringing me," I said and watched her pink gloves crank the steering wheel. "Can I ask you something Mrs. Delano?"

"Call me Carol."

"Carol, do you ever--" I couldn't find the words. What are the words? I watched her check the rear view mirror, "Do
you ever--take care of diaper rash?"

"Good gracious for a minute there..." she said, her body relaxed into the seat. "Of course. A couple dabs of petroleum jelly and presto!" she snapped her fingers.

The car rolled to a stop at the curb. I put my hand on the door handle, but I didn’t move. The blinkers clinked on and off between us. "What do you..."

She unbuttoned her coat, and looked out at the greying street.

I peeled off my gloves, twisted my wedding ring around and around. Suddenly I looked at her and blurted, "What do you do when your husband...?"

"Oh that." Mrs. Delano laughed, but her face looked like I’d caught her naked. "It’s his due, honey. We women don’t always like it but..." she turned around suddenly and grabbed my arm. "You know what I do?" Her eyes were heated, and the cloth violets pinned to her coat shook. "I just lie there still as a mouse and I think about crazy cakes. I wonder how one would taste with chocolate sprinkles or butter cream frosting. And I wonder if the vinegar is what makes the cake sweet."

Eight months later, I was sitting in church among the pinched faces of Redbow, hugely pregnant in my red wool coat. The preacher finished his words of hellfire and torment, then
stepped from the pulpit to gather the collection plates.

Howie patted my knee, said, "Shall we?" Every Sunday morning of the four years he'd taught Science to loggers' children in Redbow, we went down to the clammy basement of the Faith Missionary Baptist Church where we held plastic cups of watery tea and talked about Armageddon with the townspeople: Gertrude Larsen with her pursed lips, Phyllis Whitely with her sugary put-downs.

This time I didn't move. I'd heard something in the words of the sermon, sword of the Lord and darkness upon the earth, that I'd never heard before. Instead of the fire that had stirred my blood, I heard cold, sharp words thrown like a mumbletypeg into the circle between fear and infinity. I sat there until the pew cleared, until even Mr. Schmidt, his radar ears quivering, walked to the back of the church.

Howie turned to me, a question furrowing his face.

"You go ahead. I've can't do it anymore. I'm not up for my weekly going over by Phyllis Whitely." I buttoned my coat.

He swallowed, touched my hand and said, "We won't stay."

"No," I said. "You go. They smile at you and talk to you, and then they see big Edie, poor thing, she's just, well, odd."

"Look." He grabbed my arm, his fingers digging into my wrist. "I don't ask much. I ask less and less, a lot less than some, but I'm on the Worship Committee. I have obligations, Edith, and they watch. They keep track."
My face went stiff. I pried his fingers off, one by one, and stood up. He looked straight ahead, erect with God, his face blazing.

"I'll get Daniel." I said. I turned down the aisle where sunlight sent down bolts of color that blurred on the polished floor into the rough shape of a cross, and I walked through it.

Daniel squirmed as I carried him from the nursery out into the street, too startled to cry. I kept on walking past the market, the hardware store, the slant-roofed houses, a chinook at my back as I dragged up Snowshoe Hill. I walked until my breath was ragged, until snow slopped over my galoshes and my feet burned with cold. At the crest of the hill, I looked back at Redbow, crisscrossed with rivers and houses and the road that led north to wider valleys, and I began to scream.

Howie watched me come in, fry his pork chop, nurse Daniel to sleep. Then he picked up a coffeepot and banged it down on the counter.

"Take a good look, Edie," he said, sweeping his hand across him to indicate the sink piled with dishes and the crumb-coated floor. "Look at your life." He looked at me from a great distance.

"Well, you're a fine one, banging coffeepots, and
bellowing like a bull," I said. "But I guess it's what you
do best."

He flushed. "You should talk Miss Runaway," he said.
"Where am I going to find you tomorrow? Libby? Think you'll
hop a freight to Drummond? Why confine it to Montana? Why
don't you head off to Tacoma for a few days—just for a
break?"

"Who told you I ran away? Miss Phyllis Knows-Everyone's-
Business, or Mr. Schmidt Hears-Everyone's-Business? Does
anyone in this town have anything better to do than meddle?"

"These people are nice people, Edie. You don't give them
a chance. You don't talk to them, get to know them. You just
give up. You gave up on this town from the day we came."

"That's not true," I said. "And can I help it if they
don't like me? Can I help it if they don't invite me back?"

"Even if they did," Howie said, and he put his hand on
his hip and smiled. "You wouldn't go."

He was absolutely right, which infuriated me. I headed
for the door. He got there first.

"Kneel down," he said, looking into my eyes. "Kneel down
and ask forgiveness."

"I'm not ready for begging. Or forgiveness."

"Get ready," Howie said, for his was not a religion of
compromise.

He led me into the bedroom. We knelt on the cold
linoleum, and he pressed my hands together, called, "Punish
us Lord for Satan has entered our hearts!" His voice lashed
the dim air, his eyes burned, and I knew, as far as he was
concerned, the fight was over.

I vowed the next morning to do better: no running away,
no teetering piles of dishes in the sink, no roving dust
balls. Moving quickly in spite of my bulk, I tore down
curtains and washed them, beat rugs, dusted shelves, scrubbed
walls, moving like a dervish through the rooms, while Daniel
stared at me through the slats of the crib, squealing and
waving his arms when I walked toward him. The first night,
when Howie walked in the door, he kissed me, and sent up
thanks. But after I painted each room, after four days of
moving drop clothes to eat, and sleeping in cold rooms, he got
impatient.

"Don’t you think you’ve done enough? he said. "Can’t you
stop now? He leaned over Daniel and wiped his nose with great
ceremony. "This is making him sick. We’d better finish now."

But the truth was I couldn’t stop, and each time I neared
the end of a task, a small panic would grow in me until
another arose to take its place. When I thought it would
alarm him if I painted again, I got it in my head to build a
fruit room.

I pictured looking at my shelves, groaning with
huckleberry and raspberry jams, chokecherry syrup, butter
beans, dried venison, and the hulking crocks of sauerkraut. Instead of the individual jars, instead of berries we'd picked up Lost Creek or the deer Howie shot in the Cabinets, I thought that the collage of purples and reds and greens would tell me there is a design. And if I didn't like the pattern, I could rearrange it.

In the root cellar, I nailed up shelves, hammering one sweet-smelling board after the other, stopping only to touch my stomach and wipe my forehead. Daniel clapped his hands at the ring of metal on metal, reached toward spiders crawling up lacy webs, toward mice scurrying off to dark corners.

A day later, Howie came flying home with a hardware store bill in his hand. "Edie, you've spent $54 on supplies. $54! Do you know how much money that is? That's half my wages. We'll barely make the house payment!"

"Let me use up what I have," I said quickly, figuring I had enough to finish the shelves.

"No," he said. "Stop." He looked up at me sideways. "Promise me?"

I looked at him across the room, and said in a small voice, "Okay,"

"Put it here." Howie held out his Bible.

I placed my hand on its grainy cover and said, "I promise," and hoped that I meant it.

The night he came home from Prayer Circle, I was lining up cans of tomatoes and green beans next to my preserves, on
shelves that smelled sharp and clean as sawdust. I lined them up neatly in rows, the green beans after the peas, the Spam next to the sardines, and in the silvered moonlight, the cans glowed like bullets. The room was thick with the smells of dirt and tin, and I held my belly, singing, "Jimmy crack corn, and I don’t care." I kept singing until I could feel him behind me, until I could smell the tang of his soap, feel his breath warm my neck.

He whirled me around and said, "You have broken your promise."

I looked at him as I knelt down on the cold dirt floor, knowing it would never help. He looked back at me and touched my cheek. "Edie," he said, his eyes shining, "what’s wrong?"

Something was coming over me, a kind of heaviness in my bones. It’s the housecleaning, I told myself, it’s the baby dropping down, pinning you close to the earth so you won’t go off. I took to my rocker and asked myself questions about Howie.

I wondered about his religion. I used to believe in its torments for the ungodly, its gifts and trials--it drove Howie’s backbone straight up in those early years. There was something bracing about it, something definite. Black and white. No milky forgive and forget, like my aunt’s faith. Now all I heard behind the words was rattling.

I remembered those early mornings in Bozemen, when
Howie'd go to school, and I'd watch him lope the street in his red plaid jacket, a ranch boy taking the world straight on. I watched him till he disappeared, then I slipped our wedding 45s out of their dust jackets, lifted the arm of the record player and set them in place. I closed the curtains and fixed myself a foamy bath, and as I floated, I listened to the scratchy recording over and over again. As Pastor Salmonsen rumbled, ...this mystical union, I slipped underwater. My cheeks filled with breath, my hair swirled around breasts Howie touched, and I came up gasping when he said, covenant.

I went over everything: Howie's first job in Malta teaching rancher's children, then Redbow. The day he'd gotten the job, he came home holding the letter over his head and said, "The Lord has spoken." "What did he say?" I said. "Redbow, Edie. He's calling us back to the mountains," he said. The prairie made him nervous with its openness and constant wind.

Truth was, the longer I tried to think of what was wrong between Howie and me, the mushier my mind became. Too much meanness, I'd think, then answer, the day he climbed Teacup Mountain to pick a handful of black-eyed susans. Too much silence, then camping in the Swans where we talked by a moon, Howie stroking my hair, saying, dream, dream. Neglect, I'd say, but I had answers for that too.

But when I thought of him coming home, coming home in two years, ten years, his flattop greying, his back slightly bent,
his face setting, growing stern, and this new child, another child to dress and feed and love and betray, a leaden feeling coursed down my legs and I thought I would die.

I packed Daniel and the belongings I could carry, and I walked up over Snowshoe Mountain. I picked my way slowly, past wet bushes and larches looming dark and shadowless, to the Oxtail River where the deer were fawning and chickadees were nesting. In a large meadow, I staked the tent, built a fire. The spring sky was pale and cool but cloudless, and I nursed Daniel and put him to sleep.

For three days, I stayed there, watching a shy sun whisk across the grasses, the moon still owned the sky. Darkness will come upon the earth. I listened to the river murmur go back, go back, and once I got as far as packing up again, when I thought of Howie's hands. Big, rough, patient hands unlocking the door, cutting his meat, pouring the water for tomatoes, pressing together in prayer, folding back the covers on the bed. How in spite of his religion and its fiery visions, the hands took each thing and weighed it and measured it to some exact dimension that was Howie's own.

Red-tailed hawks wound the sky. The deer floated down to the river at dusk.

He walked up through the wide-spaced larch, and I watched his face change, as relief replaced worry and anger replaced relief. He peered in the tent where Daniel held his toes,
gurgling. He walked toward me, the weeds rattling. I was perched on a stump, at the edge of the river. He stood over me, and said, his voice tight and low, "What are you doing?"

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t tell him about his hands, or about the visions I’d had of watching Mr. Perpendicular walk his dogs to his death, of rocking into an old woman in that front room in Redbow, greying into stone. I said, "I had to."

"You had to?" he said. "You take my son and run off in the hills and get half the town worked up and make me sick with worry and all you can say is you had to?"

"Yes," I said.

He slapped me.

I pushed myself up. I was so big now it was difficult to move, and I went to stand in an apron of tree shade.

He came toward me.

"Get away from me," I spit. "Don’t come near me."

"I’m sorry," he said. He started to cry. "I’m sorry."

"Ssssss," I hissed.

"What have I done Edie? I work all day and I come home tired and find the front door wide open, and you’re gone."

I just stared at him.

"Please Edie," he said coming closer. "I forgive you. God forgives you."

"No."

"We’ll work it out. We’ll get a different house. Go to
a different town. How about that, Edie? We’ll go someplace you like better. Someplace where people are nicer. Where the country is open like you like it. And we’ll have a new baby, Edie. Think of it. A new little baby to love and take care of.”

I began to cry. "But--"

"Don’t you love me Edie?" he said, fixing me with his eyes. "Well? Don’t you? Tell me, I want to know."

I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t say anything. My hands fingered the wide-plated bark, and I wondered if it ever dropped off in a fierce cold.

"Well then, what is it?"

"Everything’s got trampled down, Howie," I whispered. Suddenly I felt limp, as if his words had pierced something and vital fluid had leaked out.

"Let’s go home now, Edie," Howie said gently. "Take my hand. That’s a girl."

His hand was inches from me now, palm up, and his long, rough fingers were curved and trembling.

I gulped, hung my head, and took it.

Aunt Dot brushed my hair as I sat in bed. Howie had called her when I’d run away, and she’d come to stay until the baby was born.

"You have beautiful hair," she said, smoothing it down my back. "The color of chestnuts."
"I want to leave him," I said. "I didn’t know that before, Dot, but I know it now."

"Hush, hush," she said, pulling the brush through great fans of hair that crackled and fell back down my back. "It’s just baby-jitters, Edie. You had them last time."

"No, Dot," I said. "This is different. It’s Howie."

"Shh!" Dot said. "Your beautiful baby will hear."

"No, Dot," I said. "I want a divorce."

"That’s enough." She threw the brush on the bed and wheeled around to look into my face. "Do you know what it’s like to raise a child alone? Someday I’ll tell you all about it. I tried to talk to you about Howie before you got married, but you’d have none of it. ‘I know what I’m doing,’ you said. ‘I know perfectly well.’ You chose your bed, dear, and now you’ve got to make the best of it."

"I’ll do it alone."

"And how, I’d like to know? With a high school degree? You don’t even have beauty college, Edie. How do you plan to raise and feed two children and pay the rent? Tell me that? I had Daddy’s money. You don’t have anything."

"I’ll waitress."

"Don’t be a fool. What would you do with your children? Sit them in a booth in the corner to draw? Howie’s put a good roof over your head, Edie, he’s a good father. Maybe he’s not what you bargained for, you’re no great shakes either, kid, not speaking to the neighbors, running off all over the
"I brook no more of this, Edie Deschene. Get off the bed, wipe your son’s nose and make Howie supper, and don’t say anything again."

"Please, Dot?"

"I said no more." She drew her fingers across my mouth like a zipper. "Keep it here," she said, tapping my heart. "This is your own."

The days stretched on between us. Rising each morning, Dot fixed the breakfast, I fed Daniel, Howie sighed and left out the front door and came back each evening to a dinner served up with Dot’s chatter. I spent my days in the rocker, watching the sunlight move down and up the mountain, whispering to Daniel, "We are going somewhere green. Warm. Somewhere there’s big, white horses."

Howie grew quiet. His face became flushed and tight as if he were always keeping something back, and some nights after dinner, he’d walk down the basement, where he’d sit next to my rows of preserves and read his bible. Other nights, he went to the church, to prayer circles and foundation boards, coming home long after I’d gone to bed to kneel on the cracked linoleum of the bedroom and whisper his angry prayers.

"Enough!" I shouted one night, and threw the milk across
the kitchen and watched it shatter across the floor. "I can’t stand this."

Daniel began to cry.

Howie looked up at me, sprung. "What is it?" he said. "This infernal silence," I said. "Say something."

"Please clean up the milk," he said.

I knelt on the floor and mopped up the milk. Dot picked up Daniel and rocked him, saying something about Mrs. Hansen across the street, about what a lovely woman she was despite her rude children.

I sat down and put my hands on the table and stared at him. "Tell me. Tell me what you hate in me."

"The things we hate are often the things we love the most," he said and cut the meat from the bone of his pork chop.

"Don’t be so God damn wise," I said. "You hate something. I can feel it."

Dot excused herself, saying something about how the green beans needed watering. Howie watched her walk from the kitchen and out the back door. Then he whipped his head around. His face was bright red.

"Have you had enough? Are you trying to get me to give you the punishment you have coming from other quarters?" He calmly rose up from the table and looked down at me. "This is in your hands, Edie. I can punish you but you know it’s up to you."
"What's in my hands?" I shrieked. "What?"

"You know," he said. He went slowly around the kitchen, shutting the windows. He raised his hand. "You know."

Dot brought me dinner in bed and brushed my hair out and told me I looked like a princess and he came early to bed that night. I stared out at the moonlit garden, barren except for the bean stalks dried around their stakes, and knew I'd pack the suitcase and leave when the house was asleep. I knew I'd steal across the back lots and up Teacup Mountain and walk west. I'd keep walking until I reached some farmhouse where a kind, wide-faced woman in a red apron would open her door, and take me in. She would take me to a back room with high, sloped ceilings and she would let me sleep there, sleep for ages, with only the sounds of the wind in the larch and the far away laughter of birds. I would find this place. I knew it. I touched Howie's back and he turned to me in sleep, and I cradled his head against my stomach, stroked the long line of his jaw till he turned.

My water broke long before the sun rose, and the contractions came fast and hard. Howie packed me off to the 2-room hospital, and when the door was open, I could see him, outside my room, reading his Bible and moving his lips as if he were dreaming.
I was groaning. I didn’t let them give me ether, and the nurse thought I was odd, but I believed this baptism of pain would bind my baby and I. That was before things come unhinged. Before the doctor leaned in close and pain cornered and played with me like a cat.

To keep things in focus, I looked at the picture across the room. It was of a young girl opening french windows to cherubs gathered outside. In the wash of grey, she reached out to fat, curly-headed babies as if they would take her away. I watched that picture for hours as the doctor swung in and out of my room, the nurse mopped my forehead, murmured push, push. Pain blanketed me. The lower half of my body looked like some distant mountain.

"Let us help the pain," the nurse kept saying, her round freckled hands fluttering around me like birds.

The girl in the picture said no.

The doctor came in, checked my pulse, said, "Time to knock you out."

I kept saying no. He didn’t seem to hear me.

The girl in the picture said something. Tears trickled down her cheek. I tried to get up to hear her, when the nurse pressed a button and people rushed in to hold me down, and the nurse said, "Slug it out, Mrs. Deschene."

The girl was moving her lips, but I couldn’t hear her above clanking noise swelling up around me. I shouted, "Quiet." The girl cried harder, and I heard the cherubs
singing something so sad and beautiful it made my skin crawl, and when the clanking stopped, and the thin, sweet voices, delicate as lace, sang "Heigh Ho, Nobody’s Home."

Something sharp stung my arm, and the room went black.

The nurse came in after I woke, a big smile on her face. "Look what I have Mrs. Deschene," she said, slinging a tightly bound bundle under my chin. "A beautiful baby girl."

I looked into the screwed-up, purple face, the blue eyes that didn’t yet focus and I put the covers over my head.

"Mrs. Deschene," nurse said and her voice turned cold, "Sit up and take your baby girl."

"Take her and leave," I said.

"Yes Mrs. Deschene," she answered, and I knew it would be all over town.

I lay panting in bed until she closed the door. I took a deep breath, rang the aide, and sent her for scissors. I struggled out of bed, my groin was numb and huge, hanging like an udder.

I waddled to the mirror. My face was grey as putty, but as I undid the clasp, my hair rumpled down, caught the light from the window and shone copper down my back. As the nurse’s aide chattered about babies, their tiny toes and how even their poop smells sweet, and I cut my off my beautiful hair, hunks at a time, until it tufted my head like straw. Then I laid back in bed and called the nurse.

She walked in and gasped.
"Now," I said. "Give me my baby."

She returned, holding my little girl as if she already hated her, and right behind her came Howie, his eyes widening.

"Howie," I told him. "We’ll call the baby Grace."

I steal out of the house to speak my story to the dirt. Thick with thistles and crabgrass, it is warm in my hands. I yank weeds till the bed is clean, till my hands bleed, but the noise inside of me continues. I plant daffodils, tulips, snowdrops and crocus, and think of their small uplifted heads, their slender voiceless throats. How after five years, they will go blind and stop sending up blossoms. I slice an earthworm, and the two halves wriggle away, two round tubes of flesh, each with six hearts move off to start separate lives, and a voice sings, our daily bread.