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Hunting at Night & other stories

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Hunting At Night
& other stories

By
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*

Hunting At Night & Other Stories" is dedicated to Scott and to the "Two Joes" in my life; my Uncle Joe and my son, Josef.
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Angelfire

I was in junior high when we moved from the orchards and silicon plants of California's Santa Clara Valley to the strangest place: the outskirts of Omaha. It wasn't me who minded the move so much; but my mother did. I was young enough to find our new location exotic. I liked the brick roads that dead-ended at the edges of the cornfields. I liked being in a different place.

But, my mother hated it. To my father, I think, the move represented just another job opportunity. And, he got to travel around the countryside. So he seemed satisfied, while my mother never did. While she was bemoaning the fact that she hadn't met anyone to talk to, the nearest Catholic church being at least fifteen miles away, I found friends whom I liked better than the ones I had left behind. They were more interesting. Out of them all, Jamie was the one I was most impressed with; the one whom I most wanted to impress. While my mother's company depressed me, I craved Jamie's. I began spending more and more time away from home.

I was at the age when, if I didn't like a person, I thought it was my fault. Jamie, though, didn't like most people. And, she was always talking someone down. My mother met her once and decided she was tacky. But I stayed out long past my curfew, leaning forward like someone about to confess, to hear the truth about other people from Jamie.
I didn't like worrying all the time about people not liking me. I didn't like hurting my mother's feelings by staying out so late, and sometimes, I even felt a little guilty for enjoying Jamie's gossip so much. I couldn't help feeling there was a place in between that was the best to be at. I thought that, but I worried all the time that people wouldn't like me.

Jamie was different. She didn't seem to care whether people liked her or not; and, she wasn't ever scared of being wrong. Jamie'd had a hard life, but she didn't know that I knew about it. It was a secret. Sometimes, I worried that I might let on that I knew, and then Jamie wouldn't like me. I thought that her disapproval and avoidance would have hurt beyond belief; that if she ever turned against me, I wouldn't have had anything or anyone interesting to flesh out my life.

*

Most days, Jamie, and Wanda, and I sat in the back of the bus, throwing things. We would take out our cigarettes so everyone could see them and then put them back quickly, so the driver wouldn't. Jamie would take out her wallet and show me the picture of her father. He wore a green plaid suit and his ears stuck out. But he was dead, so I didn't say anything bad. Jamie showed me his picture almost every day.

Once, when we were alone, Wanda told me why Jamie carried the picture of her father with her. He was dead because Jamie's mother
had shot him. Jamie's mother was in prison, somewhere near Lincoln, and Jamie saw her a couple times a year. It was, Wanda said, a long bus ride, on a bus that stopped everywhere between here and there. I thought of Jamie riding with people who cried the whole way, women with chipped fingernail polish; people who smelled like their paper bag lunches. Sometimes, when I got tired of listening to Jamie, I just stared at her in the same way I looked at the picture of her father. I tried to picture her in the room while her mother was shooting him. And, after Wanda told me that about Jamie, I liked to look at Jamie's picture of her father.

But, Jamie didn't know I knew anything. She had told me she lived with her aunt and her uncle and that she didn't like them much at all. Wanda told me they were really Jamie's foster parents. She said they could treat Jamie any way they wanted, and Jamie still had to stay with them.

*

Some days when we get off the bus from school, we went to the tracks. Once I came back home with grease on my pants.

"You slob," said my mother, eyeing me. She sat on the floor with her legs folded under her, piecing together an afghan.

I hated standing there, watching her and feeling how the afternoon sun came like a wave through the curtains
"You're not at the library enough," she went on, "I hate to think what will become of you." Her hands still busy, she held the side of her face to me.

I bent down and kissed her, offered her a 7-Up, and then said I was going to my room to study. She smiled, and I felt she was waiting for the same thing I was--for my father to come home, so that evening could start and get over with.

*

The next day, Wanda said Jamie's foster father knew the grease on our pants was there because we were letting some boys do it. He was halfway right. We had walked on the ties, smoking, and the boys had come for us along the sides of the tracks, through the weeds and corn.

There was a fort, a deep hole in the ground, covered and boarded with old ties. That's where the grease came from; from sliding down into it.

We had smoked for awhile. Then he had kissed me. His tongue had pushed into my mouth. I had tried to put mine in his. After a while we had stopped and watched the others kissing. It was really nothing.

*

We went again later in the week.
"You smell like the stockyards," my mother said, when I came home that time. Then she laughed. She was drinking a glass of wine, sitting at the dining-room table, which was set with plates, silverware, tumblers, napkins, flowers and fruit arrangements; everything.

"You're going to church this Sunday," she said, "and don't make me ask your father to tell you too."

But whenever I was late, that was what she said. I felt that my life was like a houseplant, incredibly boring. And, staring at my mother, I felt incredibly gloomy.

My mother went on to say she wondered whatever happened to that nice Vivian Cardelli I used to play with when we had first moved.

"Or that nice Laura. Laura?" she snapped her fingers.

"Meyers," I said.

"That's right, well just the same, she was nice," and she stood to start the finishing touches for supper.

I am suffocating, I thought, wishing for a moment that they kept me periodically chained in an attic; that I was pale and sickly and wasting away. I wanted some drama in my life to match the guilt. I told myself that the boredom of my life, which was in direct contrast to what I wanted to know and see and feel, was unfair beyond measure.

But, that wasn't true. Because, the easiness of my life, that boredom I feared dying from, that boredom which I considered my biggest danger, was really nothing. And I knew that.
What was dramatic about my life was what I heard about other people: Almost every night, Wanda had told me, Jamie's foster father came in her bed. One time, Wanda said, Jamie had lost the hair over one ear from him. She had to part her hair differently for awhile. Wanda said that once, to get away from him, Jamie went down to the stockyards to sleep in a truck.

*

When her father was promoted, Wanda and her family moved away, across the river to Council Bluffs.

Now, I thought, Jamie will tell me everything. Like she told Wanda. But, even though Jamie supposedly didn't like many people, she always had a lot of friends. I tried to get her alone, hoping then she would tell me about her dead father and her mother and her foster family. Like she had told Wanda.

Sometimes, I tried to think of my father coming after me, but it was such a funny thought that it almost made me laugh. My father was a small man and he was hardly ever home. I couldn't think of him leaving the green bedroom where he and my mother slept to open my bedroom door, sit on the edge of my canopy bed, and then get under the covers with me. I'd never even seen him in his underwear.

I remembered how my brother and I used to hide from him, in the pantry, on a ledge behind all the cans of corn and beans. We would laugh so hard, trying not to be heard, I would feel the skin of
my face shaking, almost tearing away from the bones. And then that wonderful moment of real terror when we heard our father's hand turning the doorknob. My brother and he would race to the string, see who could be the first to pull it, exposing us all in light. A couple of months after we had moved, my brother joined the army.

*

Before she moved away, we used to go to Wanda's house after school. We painted our nails, put on purple eyeshadow, and smoked and talked. I would strain my eyes until they felt wide and empty, listening to everything Jamie and Wanda knew about everyone. Wanda's mother worked, but she didn't mind us being there when she came home.

I liked to listen to her and Wanda tease each other. And I'd try to make myself invisible, so I could study her make-up; the way her blush was like two wings flying up the sides of her face. But, I hated it when she spoke to me.

"Look at the way your hair's growing," she'd say, "how about a perm, how about it?" Or, "Look at the strange way you put on make-up--is that white powder around your eyes?"

My mother wouldn't let me have a permanent and I felt ridiculous explaining that all the time. And, except for the purple eye-shadow I wore at Wanda's house, I didn't wear make-up. What Wanda's mother thought was make-up, was really my face going blotchy
with embarrassment. Mortified, I would imagine Jamie's disdain for me floating in the smoke rings coming out of her mouth.

And, "How's Therese?" she'd ask me, after my mother.

After awhile, I'd go home. Sometimes Jamie left with me, and sometimes I saw her walking down to the tracks, away from the direction of her house. Other times, she would go home. We never walked together; she lived in a different part of the neighborhood. But, before running home myself, I would watch where she went, as if I could find out something more about her from the direction she chose to take that day.

*

After Wanda moved, Jamie and I went down to the tracks almost every day. There wasn't any other place to go after school. We walked nearer and nearer to the overpass and tunnel.

One time, Jamie started a small fire with a cigarette butt. We watched it burn for awhile, and when it started to grow too big, racing like a snake through the weeds, I tried to put it out.

A train roared by and the engineer put his head out the window and I saw how his mouth opened like he was yelling. Jamie just laughed at the train and then watched me beating the grass and kicking through the corn. Since that time, I began to notice her throwing down burning matches and cigarettes all the time. And, when I stamped on them, she just laughed at me.
But, she still didn't tell me about her mother killing her father. She didn't tell me anything about her foster father either. All she ever said was how much she hated her uncle. And one day, she came to school with a black eye.

"How'd you get that?" I stared at her. "And your make-up looks like Wanda's mom's. Maybe you should try a new color?"

"Why don't you wear eye-make-up?" she threw back. "You're pale as ice cream, as a fence post."

I was too embarrassed to say another word. Out of the corner of my eye, I still stared at the side of her face.

It was raining so hard that day, we didn't go down to the tracks after school, but to the Quick-Mart instead. We walked down all the aisles, the soles of our shoes sticking and making sounds like tape at every step. Jamie put a box of Mystic Mint cookies in her pack.

I started to put some corn chips in mine, but the clerk looked up at the crackelly sound. So I walked up to the front and bought a pop and cigarettes from him.

We walked out and were eating the cookies when Jamie suddenly dropped the whole box and then grabbed my arm.

She pulled me in front of her and tried to hide in some bushes. Raindrops showered down on us and a car skidded on the wet pavement and then stopped near us at the side of the road. A very tall man jumped out. Jamie shook herself as if she were a wet dog.
I stared at the man. He was good looking and he smelled sweet, like cigars.

"What are you doing?" he asked Jamie. "Do you want a ride home?"

Jamie scowled at him with dark cookie crumbs foaming around her mouth.

I decided he had to be her foster father. His looks were dark and convincing; like someone from a book.

"No," Jamie answered, "I don't want a ride home. We're going somewhere."

Then, she pulled me away by my arm. I could hear her breathing and I didn't like her dragging me by my arm. I pulled away.

"Who was that?" I asked. "Boy, is he good looking."

We sat down on a wet bench and while we smoked, Jamie said that she thought I was crazy, and that she never should have thought I was cool enough, or smart enough to understand anything at all. The rain came down hard then, in a silver curtain, and I watched her walk away.

I have lost all my chances, I told myself. Then I sat there, getting wet.

After awhile, I went home and ate supper with my parents. I sat at the table wearing my bathrobe, listening to the falling and dropping of the silverware. I could hear myself chewing. I have lost all my chances, I told myself again.

But, Jamie called me on the phone that night, and she asked me to come over. Her voice was funny. She was kind of laughing.
I went into my bedroom and locked the door. Months ago, I'd looked up Jamie's address in the telephone book. One Sunday, I had even walked by. But, even Wanda had never been inside.

As I dressed myself in jeans and a windbreaker, I tried to imagine something dramatic enough to expect from the situation. But all I could think of were the conversations I had with my mother after school, or driving to the donut store with my father after Sunday Mass, discussing what kinds of donuts we wanted. I opened my window and then crawled out and jumped to the grass.

For some reason I felt like running. So, I was sweating even though it was cold. When I was a block away, I slowed down and lit a cigarette. I wanted to be cool when Jamie saw me, so she wouldn't be mad at me anymore.

The house was dark and Jamie was waiting for me at the front door. She pulled me inside. The house was quiet, cold and huge with empty spaces. The front door slammed closed.

Jamie pulled me through the rooms and when I asked her if anyone else was home, she didn't say anything. All the rooms were dark. The windows were high and narrow, with dark red curtains drawn closed but moving in and out with the drafts.

"Where's your aunt?" I asked. We were at the end of a hallway. There was a door with light showing from underneath it.

"Out with her boyfriends. Come on." Jamie pulled me inside.

Stretched out on the sofa was the man from earlier that afternoon. His feet hung over the edge. He was still wearing his shoes and a
newspaper was folded across his stomach. It said something about pork prices and Jamie threw it on the floor. She smiled.

"He's like this every night," she said, and then laughed.

His eyes were closed and his pants were undone. One of his hands was on the elastic band of his underwear and there was a patch of black hairs coming out of his pants, up his stomach and then going under his shirt.

She grabbed a bottle of "Jack Daniels" from the floor and said, "Let's finish what he started." Holding the bottle to her mouth, she leaned her head back to drink.

Then, she held the bottle over the man and sprinkled drops of it on him, as if it were holy water. He didn't even move. I tried to remember what his voice had sounded like earlier that afternoon.

Jamie handed the bottle to me. I took a big swallow. As it went down burning my throat, I heard Jamie saying that if there was a fire she'd never drag this man from the house.

"Never," she repeated, and grabbed the bottle from me.

The way she said "him" scared me. And then, I didn't want to know anything about her, or her mother killing her father, or what it was like for her to visit her mother in the penitentiary. I didn't want to know about her foster father coming to bed and hitting her either. Jamie dropped the bottle on the man's stomach. It rolled off and knocked against her leg, splashing everywhere.

I didn't care what she said; what really scared me was how her face hardly moved when she talked. I ran to the door. I heard my hand rattling the knob before it opened. I ran from the house, but a
block away I still heard her whisper "drink up," and I imagined them both helpless in flames.

At the next corner I stopped running. I was on a brick road near the fields and I looked up from the ground at the corn. Some stalks were bent and beaten down from the rain.

I remembered how Jamie would smile at her father's picture before she showed it to me. And then, she would smile at his face again before she closed her wallet.

That was suddenly, terribly sad to me. I tilted my head back so my face got wet. I was almost halfway home and the moon came out from behind the clouds. The air smelled like corn and dirt and rain.

I started running; I didn't want the door of our house to be locked when I got there. I wanted to get in without waking my mother, so I could sleep in my brother's old room. I'd lie there covered by the clean, tightly tucked-in sheets that she changed weekly. It would rain all night, there wouldn't be any fires, and I would figure out a way to still be friends with Jamie. In the morning, my mother would wake me.
I come from a secretive family. We are a great bunch for secrets, not for ferretting them out, rather for hiding them in greater and deeper layers. We are Catholics, in a manner of speaking, and some of us still go to Confession every week. In this story it might mean something that I have never gone to Confession. Then again, it might mean nothing.

That was a family secret: the reason I had never been confirmed and gone to Confession. But one day my mother judged me ready to know and so imparted the secret.

"Every night you dreamed you were burning in Hell. You used to scream us all awake, and then you wouldn't let me touch you."

"Hell?" I remembered nothing of those dreams, or of waking from them. I asked the rest of my family.

"It's true, it's true," said my brother and sister.

"Don't you remember?" my father asked.

I was seven years old when I had those dreams--what had I done that made me send myself to Hell every night? And as if I had really been guilty of something, this secret was kept from me until I asked my mother why I had never been "confirmed." Sometimes I knew there was no one in my family I trusted; there was no one who would confess my crime to me.
Versions of family secrets flicker in and out of my memory like dust caught in sunlight. My need to know and explain them scattered me, like seed, away from the rest of my family.

I kept secrets in diaries, "top secret" behind lock and key, and then, as I grew older, in journals, written in a kind of confessional, rambling, personal code. A personal code, in my case a methodology of self-referential symbols, is necessary when "top secret," "keep out" means nothing to family investigators. In this code I wrote my secrets and family secrets. I stole events from the past, from out present lives, and I made them into anecdotes, poems, and stories. Sometimes I exaggerated; in general, the code made it possible for me to tell everything.

But, there were things I never wrote about, hadn't found the code for yet. When I had the first abortion all I cared about was that no one in my family would ever find out. Oh, I told the boyfriend involved, praying his would be the response I wanted: neutrality. I needed him to help me; the best way he could help would be to help me erase the whole business.

His guilt made him pay for it. I walked myself to and from the hospital, which was located on campus, conveniently close to my classes. I felt no oppression of guilt, because no one found out, "operation complete." As for my family, that was easy. I had kept secrets from them for years.
My second abortion was even easier: it involved no trip to the hospital, no guilty boyfriend either. Several years had passed since that first one and I was still in college, suffering from the discovery that I was disastrously far behind in a math class. I had to do something. I approached the T. A.

"I need to speak to you privately." I made my voice desperate.

We went into the hallway. I looked down at the floor, put a hand on my stomach, and the other hand went to the wall, as if for support. I took a deep breath; it brought tears to my eyes.

"I have a serious health problem, and that's why I haven't been in class. I was wondering if I could have an 'incomplete' for the course."

"Well, what is it?" he wanted to know. "They warned me about you, said you were a great one for last-minute excuses."

"The truth is," I said, "that I had an abortion. I haven't been able to get back into the swing of things. I got anaemic and I'm too tired and depressed to study. I've fallen behind in all my classes."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, "and I'll be glad to give you an 'incomplete,' if you bring me an excuse from the hospital."

"They don't give excuses," I told him.

"Well, that's true, they won't give you an excuse saying why you missed school. That information is confidential. But they can give you something that says you came in for treatment."

I remembered the slip of paper I had gotten before. It had been pink and it had a hospital administrator's signature stamped on it. I could show it to my professors, show them I had been in the
hospital, and they would never know why, not from that piece of paper. But I didn't show it to anyone; I crumpled it up and threw it from four stories down the garbage chute.

"I need to see at least something like that," he went on. "Then we'll evaluate your situation. But like I said, it doesn't look good. I know you've done this before."

I had once earned an "incomplete" in a math class. That was because a boyfriend had broken up with me, leaving me too demoralized to figure out trigonometry, leaving me wondering what the hell I was doing in college anyway. But that had been several quarters ago.

I started to explain that it was the same boyfriend from before who had gotten me into this current mess. I saw the T.A.'s eyes glaze over and I realized I was sounding more and more like a masochist. Besides, this second abortion had never happened and I hadn't heard from that ex-boyfriend in months and months. I had to remind myself of these facts.

"Okay," I said, "I'll bring you an excuse from the hospital, tomorrow."

I certainly had all the symptoms of an aborted pregnancy: puffy skin, physical weakness, emotional depression, lack of motivation. But I knew it then and I'll say it now: The truth was these were more likely symptoms of "math malaise" than anything else. Meanwhile, since the abortion had never taken place, a written excuse from the hospital was beyond my expectations. I handled
the situation with the only kind of flair I possessed: I went into hiding.

* *

In my family, secrets were sacred. When secrets were confessed, they were believed. When I confessed my secret to that T.A., I expected belief.

In the hallway, outside that math class, when I lied, I remember how I cupped my abdomen at one point. Was it my body language that gave me away? He didn't believe me; I don't think he came close to believing me.

Actually, our family secrets weren't that stubborn; often they could be had for the asking. One night in Geneva, we were drinking and talking. It was my mother, my stepfather, and me.

"What is something you've done that you're ashamed of?" asked my stepfather.

My stepfather asked these kinds of questions all the time; it is one of the things that made me love him--I learned about my mother from his questions. How fitting, too, that we were in Geneva, city of tact and neutrality, I thought. I had another glass of wine and I told them about my abortion, just the first one, the real one.

"I knew it," said my stepfather.

Later that night, I asked my mother why it was she had stopped going to Confession and Mass. Have you ever heard a Catholic, one who has turned against the Church, on the subject of the Church?
Bitterness is a mild word to describe my mother's perspective on her former haven.

"The Pope says no birth control, here I am ready to pop out a kid a year, at least my body's ready to," explained my mother. "So what do I do? I start using birth control. Then in Confession when I confess my sins, I'm supposed to say I'm sorry. So here I was in Confession, saying I take birth control pills and I'm sorry I do. I wasn't sorry. I had to stop going."

The way I see it, my mother could never catch up; when could she confess she was lying when she said she was sorry if the apology and its need for penance are the last word? She didn't like making up apologies and fabricating shame where she felt none.

*

Are secrets tied to shame, or do they only await the right audience? Did I make up the story of the second abortion because I had to feel guilty, somehow, however convoluted and unrelated, for the first one? I am more ashamed of the second abortion, the one that never happened, the secret I made up, than I am of the real one. Many people share the secret of abortion. That second one though, that was more my personal shame, and it made me wonder, what is the relationship between shame and penance? Is it a secret?
In my family, some of us have that aura of being haunted by life, because of our brushes with death. Deaths and the deceased are open catalogues; it is in the lives of those left behind that the secrets lodge. In my family, some of us look and act as though we have lived, and lived hard. Sometimes some of us act as though the others around us were already dead.

In my family there are many widows. The widows know both secrets and death. They are the ones who go to Confession every week.

When I was pregnant, I never put a hand on my stomach, never felt for the soft fat that foreboded changes. I think I am glad that the "secret" I made up was not believed. I think secrets are sacred; secrets should be the truth. A secret shame should not be lied about and fashioned into an alibi; rather, it should be confessed in connection with penance. In my family, the widows are the confessors and for the rest of us, penance is not always "Three Hail Mary's"; but it has to do with an internal recognition, apology and new resolve.
The Moving Year

The day I saw our neighbor hopping onto the back of a certain motorcycle, it was parked in front of the trendy retro-hip clothing store where she worked. The store was dark, locked up for the night. She walked to the curb from out of the shadows, slung her leg over that motorcycle as if it were a horse. Her skirt, gauzey, beige, splashed with scarlet flowers, travelled up her legs. She was on, rump adjusted, her hands on the driver's shoulders.

The driver wore sunglasses under his helmet, but I recognized him. About a year-and-a-half-ago, Norman had been my lover. It was right after John had proposed, but before he had given me a ring. Typical, right? Kind of easy, almost forgotten. Until I saw him there with my neighbor and my heart started beating like a bat in a closed-off room. I thought of my neighbor's dress uplifted, her white exposed thigh. The look of the skin of her leg; the easy way she had straddled the bike, waiting for the start of the engine.

As soon as I saw them together, I realized I had been recognizing my ex-lover's laughter for weeks. And, my neighbor's voice was an echo of what I must have sounded like with him.
Once it was all in the past, I knew I should have told John about Norman, but the time was never right. He might have called off the wedding.

As the wedding date had approached, I began putting on weight, as if I were trying to weigh myself to John's side; to anchor my fate to his. And John went out, stag, every night with friends, as if it were for the last time.

Banners reading "John and Willie"; "Forever, Evergreen" in curlicues had been strung around the reception hall. They played "Evergreen" for our first dance and John whirled me around the dance floor as best he could. I had a feeling of profound relief. I told myself my fling had been my one last gasp.

Now my ex-lover was next door. I was a matron, with a husband; a "confidante." And every time I came close to confessing, the memories of how lonely I had felt while John was out partying with friends and the distracted look in his eyes when he found me home alone with a book and ice cream, made me change my mind.

Night after night, I promised God that I didn't care what happened for the rest of my life; as long as John didn't find out. Ever, I stipulated. Not ever.
Maybe God had nothing to do with it: Moscow was a small town. But, was it small enough to account for coincidences of such magnitude? I thought not. But I couldn't see Norman trying to insinuate himself back into my life. I thought that our affair had ended as suddenly and mutually as it had begun.

No, it wasn't God's fault. Rather, it all was that she had so many men over, that one of them, one day, was bound to be him. Praying was all I could do. The entire situation next door was too explosive for confession.

There was a storm the night after I saw Norman and the neighbor together on the motorcycle. Outside, snow piled up, covering our car, carpeting the streets, and glistening on the trees. John had gone to bed, hours ago. I didn't think I would ever sleep again. Wide-awake, I sat on the sofa. It was against the wall dividing our apartments. Laughter, starting and stopping, bursting and exploding, came through that wall.

There would be other men, I told myself. I'd ride it out.

* *

But their relationship went on, for three months, every night longer than any she had ever had before, and I began sleeping less.

I lay in bed next to John, listening to his breathing, his snoring and the sighing of his occasional farts. I pulled the sheet under my
chin. It was late. Their hot water heater crackled and popped on, loud as a door slamming. I imagined them in the bathroom parallel to ours taking a bath together. Candles perched on the toilet stand, on top of the linen cabinet.

Their wet, bare bodies were facing one another. Water rose and fell in little waves as they touched. Candlelight and shadows played across their faces, their bodies.

"John." I pushed his shoulder.

"John, wake up." I rolled against him.

"What is it?" His voice was whiney as a child's. He wouldn't remember any of this in the morning.

"Don't you hear that?" I listened to the water rushing through pipes, the temperamental fits and starts of their hot water heater.

"Listen to the hot water heater--it sounds like it's going to explode."

Softer, from further away, I could make out the sounds of giggling; water splashing. John didn't even open his eyes.

"Go to sleep, Willie."

"It woke me up." I put my hand on his stomach, moved it lower, tried to massage him.

"Let me go to sleep." He was irritated. Besides, he had to go into work earlier than I did.

"Fine," I said, rolling away.

"Fine," I repeated.

However, I lay stiff as a rock beside him.

He had already fallen back to sleep.
The weather turned.
"Let's barbecue," John said. In the background, Dire Straits sang
"Making Movies."
"Fine," I said. "Let's do it."
He danced into our bedroom, came out a changed man. Pink and
green and blue neon shorts.
"Where'd you get those?" Waiting for his answer, I looked over his
shoulder for an onion.
John turned in a circle, danced, shimmied, rubbed against me.
Then, he did "the bump," knocking into me at the hips.
"Where'd you get those?" I repeated.
"You know that weird store downtown." He cocked his head in the
direction of the neighbor's apartment.
"Her store?" I said, rolling my eyes.
"Only studs wear these kind of shorts," he said.
"You're blocking my way," I said, then reached around him and
grabbed the onion.
I rolled up my sleeves and washed my hands at the sink. I was
wrist-deep in ground chuck, onions, shallots, Worcestershire, salt and
pepper, trying to scratch my nose with my shoulder, when John
came back in.
"Matches," he said and rummaged through the cabinets and drawers, and pulled bottles from the shelves. "Can't find any," he said.

I reached up and scratched my nose. A wad of hamburger clung to the end of it. I shook my head, trying to get it off, and began rolling the hamburger mixture into evenly-sized balls.

"I'll go ask the neighbors," said John.

"No, I'll go," I said. I pulled my hands out of the bowl of meat.

"Why don't you sit down and relax, John."

But, he was already out our door. Mealy-sized chunks of red meat and onions clung to my skin. I wiped my nose on the dishtowel and I plunged my hands back into the mixture and I began patting the balls into pancakes.

I knew the neighbors were home. I'd been keeping track of her sounds. Weekend sounds that hadn't started till after noon. Norman's motorcycle was still in the driveway. Hard-pounding music had been pummelling our walls for hours.

Walking into all this, intruding, would be my football player-sized husband, standing on their porch, asking the slut for matches. Or maybe asking him.

I smashed a perfect hamburger pattie. Dear God, I hoped Norman would not answer the door. But if there was one thing I remembered from that brief affair, it was Norman's imperiousness; the way he didn't hesitate to take over certain aspects of my life: answering my telephone; my door, all without asking. In retrospect, that was the most dangerous thing about him.
I reformed the hamburger and stacked the patties on a plate. I prayed Norman had not answered the door for John.

John came back, waving the matches over his head. "Fire," he said, and then grabbed the plate of hamburger patties from me.

"Well?" I asked. "What are they like? What did you think of them?"

"They seemed nice enough." He shrugged.

"I think she's a slut," I muttered.

John opened cupboards, pulled out the drawers of the refrigerator. "Don't we have anything else?" he asked, opening cupboards, and then pulling out the refrigerator drawers. He said, "Oh--I told the neighbors they could put some stuff on too."

"Well that's just great." I raced around the kitchen, drawing the shades. It was a ridiculous gesture: like closing the barn door, after the horse is out.

"What is it with you?" asked John. "Huh?"

"I hate living my life on display." A shade snapped up. I jumped. John stared at me. I jumped again: It was Norman's voice, more startling than a car backfiring, right outside the window.

"Willie," said John.

"I need privacy," I said.

*

The apartment had been John's idea, entirely. He liked the floor plan. He'd said it would save us money. Then he'd said it was close
to the restaurant. It was; the restaurant was just down the hill. So, in the end, I had accepted it on that point.

John and I met five years ago, at the WSU Hotel and Restaurant school. We had opened our restaurant right after we got married. And it was doing wonderfully; some nights there was a line out the door, and in this area, the Palouse it had become the place to go.

Well, our food was wonderful. We used fresh locally grown organic produce and spices. Local ranchers supplied us with meat. We used fish fresh from Seattle that was flown into Spokane. One of my jobs was to drive there and pick it up. John worried constantly about "making it," "breaking even," but where that was concerned, I had a secret.

When I turned thirty, which was right around the corner, I would come into quite a large trust fund; a nest egg that would comfortably keep us and our restaurant for the rest of our days. The money had been in a trust set aside for my college education; but throughout college, I had worked in restaurants, earning both experience and money, and so I hadn't needed to use my trust fund. Now, I had big plans for it. The restaurant, despite John's worries, was doing fine. I wanted to use my money to escape.

*

One day when I came home from work, John wasn't home. I sat on the sofa and elevated my feet on the table. It was a restaurant person's trick, and very soothing. I had just closed my eyes, when
John's laugh came rumbling through the walls. He was next door with the neighbors! I jumped up and ran into the bathroom.

I came out when I heard John walk in the front door.

"He says he knows you," said John.

"He does? From where?"

"He didn't say." John shrugged.

"I don't remember him," I said. "I can't think of where I'd know him from."

"I like him," said John.

"Did he say where we'd met?"

John shook his head.

"He thinks if we had more help we could take advantage of our downtown location."

"Hmm," I said. "What does he know about it?"

"He used to be a waiter. And he said we'd make more money if we opened for lunch, catered to the business crowd."

Norman and I had met while working at the same restaurant. He had been a waiter there, but even discounting our past, there were reasons I wouldn't ever hire him.

As "pastry chef," I had worked alone in the back. Norman had virtually ignored the needs of the customers to watch me work and to get acquainted. One day, he came back to tell me I had a telephone call. Then, with a wet cloth, he bathed my arms of the flour and bread dough. I had melted. What was worse, I had felt no guilt: not when I finally got to the phone to find that the caller had hung up; and not later, when John told me it had been him waiting
on the line. Norman, without apology, had finally returned to his hungry, waiting customers, handling them in his joking, pushy, yet effective way.

"He's got plenty of ideas," I said.

"I offered him a job," John said.

"A job! Where?"

"At the restaurant."


"Why don't we just knock down the walls?" I went on. "Why not invite them to live with us?" I ran back into the bathroom and slammed the door behind me.

"The restaurant needs you to cook," I yelled at him from inside. "We don't need any more help."

I slammed down the toilet lid and sat down.

What kind of a wise-ass was Norman; trying to insinuate his way back into my life? And what about the slut? While Norman was trying so hard to worm his way into our lives, I wouldn't have put it past her making a play for John.

And maybe, because she knew everything about Norman and me, she just assumed that John did too.

"John!" I yelled. "Come in here. Please!"

He opened the door and stuck his head in, as if he had been right outside.
"What?" His tone was both quiet and peevish.

"I have something to tell you." I patted the edge of the bathtub.

"Sit down, it's important."

He waited, perched on the edge of the tub.

"I've been keeping a secret from you," I said, grabbing his hands. Then, I told him about my trust fund: how much it was, and that I would get it as soon as I turned thirty.

"See?" I said. "We don't need to open the restaurant for lunch. We can serve dinners, just like we've been doing. And, we can keep doing it all ourselves."

I squeezed his hands.

"We don't need to hire anyone else," I said. "Okay?"

*

Finally, it was my birthday.

We drove to Spokane where we ate at a restaurant as fancy as ours--but it was far enough away so that we didn't have to consider them our competition.

"Happy Thirtieth, Willie," said John, lifting his wine glass. We toasted me.

What are birthdays for? Well, we toasted me all night and I drank too much. I slept all the way home, woke up drooling, ready to transfer myself fully-clothed to bed, and to melt into a drunken sleep till morning. Ready to "sleep it off."

But John wanted me.
And his groans became an ocean, echoing and growing to match the neighbors' sounds. Yes, the wheezing and groaning of two men combined with that woman's high giggles. I listened in horror. Bedposts knocked against the wall.

And I saw our four bodies together on a wide, wide bed. I was still barely moving. But John was right next to the neighbor, moving his body with hers. All three of them were tangled and writhing together. I watched the neighbor's movements, then John's and Norman's. I saw Norman's face changing expression, and John reaching for me, at the same time he was touching them.

Then, I don't know, it must have been the wine, but soon I was grunting back at John, at them. Matching my sounds to his. To theirs. The walls might have been moving with our sounds, shifting with our pleasure. Yes! Our voices rose higher and higher until I didn't recognize any one voice. It was one triumphant noise.

"Oh Willie," whispered John, "that was the best."

I nodded. I curled myself into his body.

"Happy Birthday," I said.

*

I woke in the morning full of regrets. A lake of regrets. John was already out of bed. I heard him humming in the kitchen. I heard the rattle of silverware and smelled breakfast cooking. I sat up in alarm. John never cooked--he got enough of that at the restaurant.
But, I smelled breakfast. Bacon, omelets, blueberry muffins, potatoes.

My heart stopped. John was so innocent and naive, pressing forward. He thought we would go on after last night, maybe even repeat it. I pressed my hands to my face.

I couldn't stand it. I'd do anything, I told myself, to stop this momentum. God, I had to tell him.

"Hi," he said. "Hey, watch the eggs a minute will you?"

"Where are you going?" He was dressed in his robe.

"I'm going to invite the neighbors."

"John," I said, "this can't go on. I've got something to tell you."

"What?" He was standing near the door.

"I want to move," I said.

"But I like it here," he said.

I looked around. Newspaper recipes stuck with vegetable-shaped magnets to our olive green refrigerator, formica table in the corner, window shades like a roadside diner's.

"I want a real house," I said. "I want furniture made from trees. I want a kitchen I can breathe in. I want to hang the copper utensils and cookware we got for wedding presents. I want privacy!"

"I like our neighbors," said John.

I shuddered. I reminded him about the trust fund. Then, I described the thing I had done. I started with how everyday, in between picking up restaurant supplies and preparing for the dinner shift, I'd been driving around the countryside with a realtor;
I told him how I'd finally found a farmhouse to put money down on.

"It's faraway from the roads. Enough land to spread out on; to look out for miles on," I said.

"Sounds isolated to me," he said.

"Oh but it's not," I said, "not really."

I smiled.

"We can remodel the kitchen. Knock down the walls, make the kitchen huge. Think of it!"

"I don't want to move," he said. "At least not so faraway. We'd have to drive all that way after the restaurant closed."

"John, I'm sorry I went behind your back, and that the farmhouse is so faraway, but I want my own house."

"We should have our own house," said John, standing with his back to the stove, and staring out the window.

His robe hung open and the morning sun shone on his face. Most mornings he was like this, cheerful and vulnerable.

"Okay," I said. "And what if we look for someplace right in town."

We embraced.

*

We looked for months, but couldn't find a single house we liked, not in Moscow, in Pullman, or in Troy. There was something wrong with all of them. The original farmhouse was looking, to me, like the best deal after all.
I couldn't resist bringing it up as an option.
"But it's still too faraway," John said, shaking his head.
"At least look at it, before you say 'no,'" I pleaded.
He looked at me with a tired expression on his face.
"I'll drive," I offered.
"Okay," he finally agreed and went and sat in the car while I called the realtor to make arrangements for viewing it immediately.
As I had hoped, she told me that the farmhouse was still available; that, in fact, no one else had looked at it since I had; and that, while should could tell me where to find the key, wasn't available to meet us out there.
It was a silent car ride out there. At the same time I began to get more excited as we approached it, I imagined John watching the clock, timing the distance.
Finally, we pulled into the driveway. Afraid of reading a negative verdict on John's face, without looking at him, I simply hopped out of the car, took the key from under the mat and led the way inside.
Nervously, I pointed out the features.
"Look," I said, showing him the fireplace. Part of it faced the kitchen. The other part was in the main living room. "That's where I'll fall asleep at night."
John gave me a dark look. Almost jumping in place, I pleaded with him.
"Or you can," I said, "oh John, can't you just imagine it." I smiled then and began singing. "'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire . . . ."
He shook his head.
"Sure," he said. "When we're old."

"Why wait?" I said, and kept on singing.

If he didn't like the kitchen, I think he was pleasantly surprised by the rest of the house. I saw him running his hand over the doorway of the bedroom, as if measuring the grain of the wood in the same way he had clocked the distance from town to the farmhouse.

From all the upstairs rooms was a breathtaking view of the hilly, sunlit fields. I stood at the bedroom window and breathed deeply in appreciation. The very landscape seemed to slope, dip and settle around the house.

"Isn't that beautiful!" I said, pointing.

I turned and looked around the room. I saw the wall our bed would be pushed against and the fireplace that would warm our feet. And outside the windows would be the fields, stretching and weathering; constant. Here, I thought, lovemaking would be private, sometimes noisy as animals, other times as quiet as those fields.

John moved to another window. "Is that a barn?" he asked.

I nodded. "The realtor says it's in excellent condition, dry, sturdy, no leaks."

"So it would be ours?" he asked in an excited voice. He stared out the window. "Let's take this place!" he said.

On the way back to town, he drove and talked about that barn. He had plans for building a weight room area inside it; he said that the barn would be good for parties; and he wondered if we should keep horses. At one point, he asked me if I thought we should paint it or
leave it weatherbeaten. "Yes," he said, without waiting for my answer, "a new coat of paint, for protection."

As for me, I felt triumphant that I had finally escaped the danger of Norman and the neighbor. John would certainly never find out now about my past. I couldn't wait to get home and call the realtor. At one point I considered asking John to pull over, so I could telephone her immediately.

*

One month later we were out of that insufferable apartment. Harvest dust swam in the air, made us cough. The fields were brown, bare and ugly. Nothing could slow me down.

Not for long! Not for long! I sang to myself.

The moving van had already left with our meager belongings. The apartment was empty. I shivered with excitement.

"Come on John, come on," I called.

He had finished drawing the shades and he stood in the doorway. His eyes were red from the dust.

"I'll drive," I said, and slid behind the wheel.

"Good-bye newlywed pad." I even waved at the neighbors. They were standing under the sunflowers. Norman's hand was on the neighbor's shoulder. They stared at me without moving. I didn't even recognize him as someone from my past. I was cured.

"Thank heavens," I said, and backed the car out of the driveway.
We drove out of town and my foot tapped the gas pedal as if in time to music.

"By the way," said John, as we drove past bare wheatfields, deeper into farm country, "when's our housewarming party?"

My heart started beating faster. What was I doing, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs?

"I don't know, why?" I tried to think as quickly as the car was moving.

"I told the neighbors I'd let them know, so we could invite them," he said.

My hands gripped the steering wheel. I steered us sharply left, into the ghostly country hills. My foot pressed the gas.

"Oh John," I said, "our housewarming party won't be for a long time! We have to remodel everything first." I smiled at him. "You know how long that takes."

"Oh," he said, "just a lifetime," and looked out the window.

My hands were sweating. John and I were public people: We owned a restaurant for God's sake. Even Norman and his girlfriend were our public; and they were allowed to eat anywhere. I imagined them coming in for a candlelight dinner. John was in the kitchen cooking, and I was alone in the dining room, serving them. I saw the way Norman winked at me; I saw how she looked at me and then at John. After eating, they'd want to go back and give their compliments to the chef. Even Spokane wouldn't be far enough away. My foot pressed the gas pedal. There was no escape.

"John," I said, "I've got something to tell you."
The Escort

The caller was where he had said he would be, in the dimly-lit area next to the saber-tooth tiger statue. Working alone was against the rules and, for a moment, Angela felt nervous and foolish. But she was relieved to see that he was sitting in a wheelchair. And then, as she got closer, the awkward curve of his thin body revealed that the wheelchair was not a prop; that he really needed it.

"Escort service," she said.

"Hello," she said more loudly, arcing the flashlight over the statue.

"You sure you don't want me to spend the night here?" He smiled up at her, from between hunched shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she said, "my replacement was late."

"Don't you normally travel in pairs?" he demanded.

"I'm off-duty, on my way home." Angela looped her backpack over both shoulders, leaving her hands free.

"I can't get down that hill by myself." He shook his head in jerky motions towards the path that led down the hill.

"How do you get down--I mean if you didn't call us?" She looked at his wheelchair, the socks tied around the arms rests, the buttons.

"Someone picks me up. But he's sick tonight."

"Just push you?" His pants, longer than his legs, drooped over his shoes. The shoes looked new and the shoelaces were double-knotted. Angela put the flashlight in her pocket.
"Don't go fast," he said.

She stood behind him and began pushing. The hill was steep and framed by a dark curtain of oak trees, manzanita and spruce. Slowly, she walked behind the wheelchair, guiding it down the hill. She hadn't pushed a wheelchair since she had volunteered at the convalescent home. She'd hated that place: the uniform, the perfume and urine smells of the women, the way the men's robes always seemed to just fall open, exposing penises. The rooms reeked of disinfectant and urine.

"Slower," he said, loudly. "Please."

Angela felt her thigh muscles straining. He and his wheelchair were surprisingly heavy. If she let gravity take her down the hill, his body would lean too far forward, maybe topple out. His hands would reach out, fingers spreading to break the fall. The metal bar of the wheelchair was cold on her hands and she pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her fingers. Under the lights, the man's hair was dark-blonde with baby-fine curls.

At the bottom of the hill, she pushed more quickly, past people waiting for a shuttle bus outside the library, then down the slope of the curb, across Bancroft Avenue and off campus.

"Where exactly did you want to go?" she asked, leaning forward, her mouth close to his ear.

"To Freddy's. Is that too far?" His voice was louder, as if in challenge.

"Not at all." From there, Angela would only have to walk several blocks to her apartment.
"You don't need to push me anymore."
She stopped.
"Just walk next to me."

We'll take up the whole sidewalk, she thought. She looked at the man out of the corner of her eye. He was watching the crowd of people leaving a bar. His hands rested on the wheels as if to turn them, but they were surrounded by people. They waited, both of them, in the middle of the sidewalk, for the people to walk around them.

The crowd pushed her closer to the wheelchair. She could see the white pinpoints of scalp where his hair fell away and parted. His hair is clean, she thought, imagining a mountain of soap bubbling in his hair, running down the sides of his neck, someone's fingers moving in circles over his head. The back of his neck was pale as a tombstone.

"He's been getting sick a lot."

"Who?" She leaned forward. Her knee banged against the metal frame of his wheelchair.

"My helper." His hand reached out, as if to touch her.

"Let's go," she said. The sidewalk had cleared. She walked, swinging her backpack in front of her legs.

"Fools," the man muttered, taking over, rolling his wheelchair down the sloped embankment, and into the crosswalk, where a man and a woman, blocking the handicapped access, separated to let him through.
She remembered now that she had seen him before, riding across the street while the light changed against him. He had moved slowly, deliberately, as if there were something wrong with his wheelchair. When a car honked, he had shaken his fist.

"I used to work there," she said, pointing to the fire-charred ruins of a restaurant. "It's closed for good--the owner didn't have insurance."

"And I bet your name's Nelly and you smile at all the customers."

"I hated it," she said, and realized she was trying to tell him that her life was not perfect.

At the corner, they stopped, waiting for the light to change. The man smiled at her, showing even rows of very white teeth. "Let's go in and get a beer." He pointed at a market.

She stayed where she was, watching him wheel expertly into the market.

Suddenly, she imagined him out of his wheelchair, pressed close to her body, maneuvering her up all the stairs to her apartment. He didn't look very heavy, but she felt his arms loop around her neck as she fought for balance around the turn halfway up. Had he ever had a girlfriend? Had he ever been with a woman?

"What's your name?" asked the man, rolling his wheelchair back beside her.

She looked away. "Angela," she said.

What she had really disliked about the convalescent home was her feeling of being trapped inside; trapped into listening to the patients and ministering to them forever. Because clearly, Angela
had seen, they had no family or friends willing to do so. She had only felt herself free to leave when the patients themselves had dismissed her.

"Well Angela, I bought you one too," he said. "I bet you need it." With a flourish, he handed her a can of beer wrapped in a paper bag. His eyes moved along the length of her legs.

"Okay. Thanks." His eyes were small and dark as seeds.

"I opened it for you." And as she leaned her head back to drink, his hand reached out, touched the side of her knee. Angela swallowed. The hand was moving up and down her leg, quickly and lightly as a spider.

"Angela." His voice was loud. "I want your legs."

"What?" She stepped back, felt her eyes widen with shock; the inside of her mouth fill with a dryness she could not talk around.

"I like to shake people up." He stuck his tongue between his teeth and shook his head like an idiot. "I like that."

"Hell!" said Angela. She threw the beer on the ground. Beer shot out of the can, hit her in the face. She took a deep breath. She leaned over, picked up the can and emptied it. He could have put something in it. Anything.

She made for the corner, stopping at the crosswalk, waiting for the cars to pass. She took a deep breath. Staring straight ahead, she pressed a hand to her chest, felt the smooth structure of bones. Her jeans were wet from the splash of beer.

"Hey!" The man was rolling after her. "That wasn't very nice."
Angela jumped. "Sorry," she said. She still held the beer can, but superstitiously, away from her body.

"You move pretty fast in that," she said.

He tilted his head back, drinking beer. A thin stream of liquid drizzled from his mouth down his chin. She stepped off the curb, crossing the street.

"Angela--" He was maneuvering his wheelchair behind her, crossing the street. "Angela, you haven't asked for my name."

She stared down the street. Teenagers on skateboards wove through the cars, shouting to each other in triumph.

"I'm sorry--I was thinking about my boyfriend." She emphasized the word "boyfriend," then looked at the man. Her knee was itching, where he had touched her.

"I think we're breaking up," she lied. Angela felt the expression on her face transform to one of appeal, Hope for understanding. "I was doing this as a favor. I didn't even log you in." She folded her arms over her chest, felt the metal beer can press against her ribcage.

"This was a favor."

"You said no problem. Angela," he said.

Down the street, the skateboarders raced each other on the empty sidewalks. She watched the man lean his head back, swallow. Turning the can upside down, he shook out the last drops. Like fog, they were light and cold on her ankles.

"Where do you live Angela?"

She pointed down the avenue in answer.
"You think I'm going to come after you?" One foot jerked up from where it was resting, as if he were trying to kick her.

"Just don't follow me."

He laughed, then leaned over, his torso hunched, reaching for the beer can.

"Come closer, please," he said. "I need help."

But she could see him following her down a dark street, the sounds of his wheelchair louder and louder, like crickets, like waves. Her flashlight dimming, going out, his teeth and eyes shining in the streetlight on the skeletal frame of his wheelchair, the wheels turning faster and faster.

He threw his beer can on the ground.

Angela bent over, grabbed it and then moved back, several paces from him, to a garbage container. She pushed it into the middle of a stew of garbage; overflowing papers, bottles, food. Wiping her hand on her pants, she thought of the way the man's arm had stretched away from his body, the wing-like flourish of his fingers presenting her the beer. He had almost bowed, before looking up at her, quickly, as if to catch her at something.

She hadn't even asked him his name. She looked at him. His body looked sunken and trapped, and she remembered that his helper was sick.

She looked at her watch.

"I'll still walk you to Freddy's if you want," she said.

"If you want to," he said, and put his hands on the wheels.

They started down the street.
"Hey," he said, grabbing his wheels, slowing down. "Let's stop somewhere, get a beer. Inside, where we can talk."
Blue Mother

That small boy in the saffron robes was about to step right into the flowers. Angela didn't see any other Hare Krishnas or anyone else who might be responsible for him. He was very young and all alone, trampling through the marigolds, poppies, and daffodils. But it was a beautiful sight: the golden-orange tones of the flowers and his robe; the sun striking his hair yellow. Through the fruit trees, she could see San Francisco, faraway, across the Bay, with its edges rising from the fog.

Angela was pregnant. During the week, she tired herself out, working at her proofreading job in the City, then cleaning every room in the house over and over, scrubbing obscure surfaces with a toothbrush, sewing curtains, and putting colored stickers and pictures on the walls of the nursery. But at night, thinking about her childhood, she couldn't sleep.

She ran a knife through the pastry box strings; and muffins, croissants and brioche, two of each, tumbled onto the plate. She put her hand on the swell of her stomach. Even her baby would grow old enough to know about how the people you loved, and who loved you, could hurt you. The constant rush of cars on Telegraph Avenue sounded like an ocean and there went that little Krishna boy, running down the street, and then he was out of her sight. Where was he off to, in such a hurry? Angela began brushing the crumbs off the table and into the pink pastry box.
"You scared me," she said, when her mother walked into the kitchen.

"The front door was unlocked." Marie leaned toward her, kissed her cheek, and then rested her hand firmly over Angela's stomach.

"Angela, you're big as a queen," she said. The skin around Marie's pale blue eyes wrinkled when she smiled. "I'm so excited for you," she said.

"Let me go put the water on," Angela said.

"Oh--it kicked me, the darling! I bet it recognizes my voice. Hold still, Angela, that lump there is probably its head. I always forget how hard a baby can kick. Was that its foot or little hand that hit me so hard?"

"I'm feeling a little sick, Mom."

"Still?" said Marie.

Angela nodded and moved to the other side of the room. She filled the kettle and put it on the stove. The gas came on with a little hiss and settled into a circle of blue flame. Angela reached into the cupboard, opened a box of soda crackers and took a handful. "I hate these," she said, "but they work."

Marie sat down and leaned to look out the window. "I don't like those people," she said.

"Who?"

"Those Krishnas. I can't stand cults, and the way they flap around at the airport and disturb people."

Angela stood across the table from her mother and looked out the window. A chanting procession walked across the lawn in front of
her house. Through the fish-like flashings of leaves, she watched
the parade of bald heads, touched with a shadow of dark stubble,
bobbing single dangling threads of braided hair.

"They don't do anything bad, they just live here," she said.

On nice days, they walked to campus. She liked that--she heard
their bells and singing and she knew the fog had probably lifted.
Sometimes, she saw ordinary people dancing with them. It was a
matter of tolerance, she supposed.

Angela poured water for coffee and sat across the table from her
mother. She put her hands on her stomach. It felt good to sit down.

"I didn't tell you yet, I volunteered to be a 'Big Sister,'" Marie said.
"Right now, they're checking my references," she widened her eyes
and smiled, "making sure I don't have a criminal record."

"That's great, Mom. What a great idea."

"They'll match me up with someone soon--she could be anywhere
from nine to fourteen years old."

"You'll be good at it, really." Angela heard her voice straining to
sound reassuring. She shook her head and stared at the plates,
mugs and creamer. They were almost out of milk.

But, two times in the last several weeks, she had gone to the
market and seen the same little girl screaming and crying
wretchedly as the mother pushed her in the cart down the aisles. It
was awful, she had said, telling her mother how she had been
avoiding the store ever since. That poor mother, Marie had said.

"Don't worry--I'll still have time for my first grandchild--this is
just two or three hours a week," Marie said.
"Oh, but I'm glad you're doing it," Angela said, staring at her stomach, at its amazing roundness pressed against the edge of the table. Yesterday, Angela had squeezed one of her breasts and watched drops of bright yellow milk come from her nipple. Leaning back in her chair, she watched as a patch of sunlight streamed across her stomach, the table, and her mother's hair.

Marie pointed at the calico cat sitting in the doorway. "Do you think that cat's all right? You've heard how they smother sleeping babies--don't laugh Angela, it's true."

The cat sat, its feet sedately close together, slowly opening and closing its eyes. Its fur was fluffy and disturbed from sleeping.

"I worry too about those Krishna people," Marie said. "What about all those weapons they had?"

Eight months ago, an impressive cache of arsenal, machine guns and ammunition, had been discovered in the Hare Krishnas' living quarters and temple. Even in their vans, which was strange, since Angela never saw any of them driving.

"I told you. That was just one guy who did that."

He had shot out the window of a liquor store on University Avenue. That had been the reason for the police search. The Krishnas had said that he wasn't connected with them anymore.

"He was kicked out," explained Angela.

"The prodigal son," said Marie. "What about those Krishnas who said they needed those weapons to protect themselves from all the people who hate them?"

"What about them?"
"I'm only trying to help," said Marie. "Your father's mother came and helped me after you were born, and for Paul too. She actually wasn't much of a help, but she did help me to make things safe for a baby."

"My baby will be fine," Angela said, and as she looked at her mother, felt her hands begin to sweat and then the beating of her heart. She moved her hands lower on her stomach, where she felt the baby's head must be.

"Believe me," she said, "I plan to protect it well."

Marie shook her head and then began to knock on the window. "Get away, get away," she said, raising her voice.

"What is it?" Angela stood up.

"He was picking all your flowers. I saw him. Look--all of them." Angela looked out the window. There was no one there. "Who was?" she asked.

"Some little Krishna boy! wearing one of those orange sacks." Marie knocked on the windowpane. "You have to be glad you didn't grow up like that," she said.

"Mom, there's no one out there. Stop it," Angela said.

"I was looking for Mark," said Marie. "I wish he'd waited for me. That playpen I brought for you is heavy."

Angela shivered. "I'm getting 'cold feet,'" she said.

"I've brought you such nice stuff. Cute little toys and clothes." Marie smiled.

"But no one gets lessons on raising kids," Angela said.

She rubbed her stomach, felt the baby kick her hand.
"Maybe it's from being pregnant," she said, "but I've been thinking about my childhood."

She looked at her mother.

"You still want me to come and help, don't you?" asked Marie.

"Mark and I both want it," Angela said and put her hand over her nose. With that extra-strong sense of smell she had gotten since her pregnancy, she could smell not only the dirt-like odors of coffee grounds and banana peels in the garbage bag, but the eucalyptus trees in front of her neighbor's house.

She looked out the window, stared at the wall of trees.

One day, from a vantage point high in the Berkeley Hills, Mark showed her how eucalyptus trees released a greenish-blue mist from their leaves, a sort of natural defense system. The mountains had been smoky with that color.

"It must have been hard on you," she said, still staring out the window, "raising me and Paul, alone."

"I had so much fun with you kids." Marie smiled.

"I'm glad that's what you remember now." Angela rubbed her hands across her stomach. Inside, there were tiny, quivering movements. Her baby had the hiccups. She moved her hands back and forth over it.

Angela looked at her mother and felt a quiver of fear that settled near her stomach. In the next month, the baby would be born.

"I'm sure I'm going to do things I regret too," she said. "And you were even younger than I am now."
"It wasn't that bad," Marie smiled. "We did what we had to do. That's all."

Angela pressed her hands on the globe of her stomach; pressing where she felt the baby's heartbeat; then pressing where she pictured its crinkled nickel-sized ears.

"Still, it must have been hard disciplining us," she said, "especially after you married Sam."

"Sam loved you kids."

"I bet sometimes you were so tired and frustrated, you didn't know what you were doing."

Marie squinted and shook her head. "As far as I'm concerned, things only got better after Sam. You just don't remember."

Angela raised her eyebrows. "I've told Mark I don't believe in spanking," she said.

"Admirable," said Marie. She lifted the coffee mug to her mouth, but instead of bringing it to her lips, set it on the table. "But just you wait," she said.

"I am trying to get a feeling for what it's going to be like. Some of my friends who have children talk about how hard it is sometimes not to just explode and hit them."

She looked at her mother.

"And they love their children," she said.

"Most parents do, Angela." Marie unfolded a napkin and wiped her mouth.

"My friends say it's especially hard after being alone with their children for awhile. I guess Sam's presence was a help then."
But one night, close to bedtime, Paul and she had been playing. He had thrown a toy at her that had cut her lip. Her mother and Sam had been talking in the hallway, and Angela had shown them the cut. But, Paul said she had done something to him first. He wouldn't say what it was.

Angela dug her fingernails into her palms.

She saw how the hallway light had hung over Sam and her mother's heads. They hadn't believed her.

She leaned forward in her chair and raised her voice. "Children are so helpless and they don't know better--they don't know anything."

The edge of the table pressed against her stomach. Maybe, before she had walked out there, Sam and her mother had been having a serious argument. She could still see them sitting in the hallway, her mother in the middle of the floor with her legs folded under her, Sam against the wall. They hadn't even changed their positions. Her pants had been pulled down and they had traded her back and forth. She had kept saying she hadn't done anything.

"I hope that if Mark and I are arguing, and our children are bothering us, we can stay calm."

Her hands were shaking. She looked out the window, past the branches of the tree. The streets were empty.

They had held her on her stomach over their knees. She was screaming and their hands were cracking and slapping down on her. There were so many things she couldn't remember, like what her mother's and Sam's had looked like; they all might have been
different people that night. And what had happened later? Had they carried her to bed? And the next morning--had her mother cooked her eggs, as usual, the next morning? She shook her head.

"I am not going to hit my children," Angela said.

"You were fed and clothed and I was always there for you. You don't know what I did for you," said Marie, her eyes wide and alarmed.

"I don't want anything to hurt my baby, ever. I want my baby to have a perfect life. I can't stand thinking about my baby ever being hurt," Angela said.

"You're just a baby yourself," Marie said. "Every time I hold my hand on your stomach and feel that baby kick--oh God, something happens to my heart. Your stomach is so big and warm, to me it's like the molten stuff at the heart of the world."

The baby's sudden movement was a large wave, rippling down her stomach, followed by a strange cramping pain. Angela moved her hands over it; she looked at her mother in surprise.

"But we are not going to spank our children," she said. "Not even once."

"Okay," Marie said. "But you'll do something." She stood up and then gathered her purse and keys from the counter.

"Mom," said Angela.

"I'm going," said Marie.

Angela watched her mother standing at the door. Maybe, she thought, it was those things in childhood that were so different from the ordinary stream of days that became the major memories.
"You and Sam were the people I loved more than anyone in the world," she said. "Before I fell asleep at night, I cried with my head under the pillow when I thought of how you would both have to die. And I envisioned scenarios where I was giving up my life for yours."

A small sound came from Marie's throat and she raised her blouse and then put her hands across the bare skin of her stomach. A crisscrossing of red lines and dots formed a red banded circle where the elastic of her pants had rested.

Angela stared. The rest of her mother's stomach was pink and silvery white, rippled like an accordion, where the skin was stretched and broken from carrying two babies in two-and-a-half years.

Marie put her blouse back down and smoothed her hands over the fabric.

Angela looked away. She felt a sense of relief that was as tangible as if it were a body sitting, drenched in sunlight, beside her at the table. "Oh, Mom," she said.

"You call me if you need help," said Marie. And she left, closing the door softly behind her, and doing it so slowly, the cat had time to wrap itself around her legs.

Angela rested her head in her hands and found herself praying, helplessly, to a God she didn't trust; to a God who had sacrificed His own Son. She prayed for the golden future and absolute safety of her baby, forever. Presumably, her mother had done the same thing.
The sun broke through the window and a sun-drenched pattern of water drops wavered against the grain of the table. She had her own life to go back to: At night she would sit in the living room, reading, and Mark would call to her from the dark bedroom, "You look so beautiful, why don't you come in here with me, and get comfortable." (But no one had ever called her beautiful before him; had ever made her want to run her hands over the bones of her wide face, even when she was alone.) And she would close her book, let the cat out, brush her teeth, cream her face and stomach, using small circular motions, let the cat back in, and then turn off all the lights. Mark, dozing, would pull her to him, and as she closed her eyes to sleep, he would waken, put his hands tightly around her breasts, and then circle her stomach, and she would feel his ribs where the points of her elbows rested.

Another strange, cramping pain rippled down her stomach. She thought, This is how the pain starts and held the edge of the table, waiting for it to pass. She looked out the window and for a moment, could hardly breathe, imagining a playpen set up on the grass, in the center of the lawn. The playpen was lined with a colorful blanket and patched with sunlight and her mother had put it there; had leaned over and opened it up, running her hands along the netting.

Angela saw waves of sunlight ripple across the grass, blazing a tunnel of light through the netting of the playpen's sides and illuminating the blanket that was spread and tucked around the corners, and then the playpen disappeared. Spreading like a tree,
the sun reached across the street and she heard the Krishnas and other voices coming from down the block. In her stomach, the baby kicked and tumbled. Angela reached under her shirt and pulled the black stretch pants away from herself. In the open air, her skin began itching.
"Look at them deer," he said, pointing out the window. "Would you just look at them all."

He put his hand on her knee.

"How many do you think there are?" he asked.

Jhonna's arms felt heavy. She thought of lifting her hand and placing it over his, but didn't. When she looked at Matthew's hand, her eyes were held by the blue veins under his pale skin.

He took his hand off her knee and put it back on the steering wheel. Jhonna was listening so hard the night seemed to tremble around them and she cracked her window, wondering why she was so tired.

Last year she had been pregnant for five months before she lost the baby. The entire time, and for months after her miscarriage, she had felt this tired. Jhonna thought of the flesh-colored diaphragm she had used only once since then. Now it was kept in the cedar chest, pink and folded like an ear. Jhonna's hope that she was pregnant made her feel withdrawn from every other kind of hoping; and at times made her feel isolated from Matthew and all the ordinary events of their lives.

Matthew slowed down some, then took his eyes off the road.

They looked into the field. Below the horizon, between the night blackened trees and the starry sky, were deer, feeding on grass.
Their large ears were twitching and twisting distant from their bodies.

"An' just think a' all the fawns," he said.

She didn't say anything, just looked out the window.

"Jhonna."

"Mmm?"

"Think we'll see any bucks tonight?"

"Matthew, there ain't any little baby fawns out there in the field," she said, without having heard him ask about the bucks. "It's too late in the year for them."

Jhonna spoke slowly and carefully. Often she called her husband "Matt," especially when he did not please her. When she said "Matt," her voice became lower; her tongue inflected as it curled around the word.

The wind pattered in through the slitted window. Jhonna raised her arm, ran her hand through her hair. Her fingers caught on new tangles.

He slowed down.

"What is it?" Her voice sounded different to herself; something in her throat felt like nothing was going right.

He stopped the car and as the engine idled, they rolled to the side of the road. The engine made a sound like taking a breath, then he turned it off.

Matthew twisted his body; one hand stayed on the steering wheel. He put his other arm around Jhonna and pointed with that hand. She thought of his hands cupping a face. She thought of this
suddenly; it was in her mind like the full moon shining over the
trees and fields. The moon was bright and stayed behind her eyes
even when she closed them.

She looked where he was pointing. Blinded by their headlights, a
possum weaved off the road onto the shoulder. Matthew turned off
the lights. While her eyes adjusted, Jhonna bent over, out from
under his arm, and tied the laces of her shoes, then stepped out
onto the road's gravelly surface.

"Got the blanket?"

"Yeah," she answered. "Let's try down near the crick."

They walked down the grassy slope. The moon was rising and
they had no trouble seeing. Their shoulders and backs were warm.
A wetness brushed their shins and ankles.

Jhonna wished the possum crossing the road had been a
porcupine.

She watched her feet kicking through the dirt like they were eating
up the ground. The moon's light shadowed her steps into triangles;
aligning her body and the earth. Jhonna felt her heart thudding;
new blood circulating through her body. She lifted her hand and
put her fingers on the quill earrings she'd made last week: They
were dangling loops with dark blue and murky red beads setting
off the egg shell-like sheen of the white and black quills.

"Last time I was down here me an' Ted seen a huge one," said
Matthew.

Jhonna didn't say anything; her finger pulled the circle of her
earring.
Matthew wanted her to go to the clinic this week in Colville, and set their minds at peace. He'd been teasing her, saying that he would drive her down there and that all she had to do was pee in a cup. He was right, Jhonna knew; they wouldn't have to wait long: The clinic could tell them the results almost right away.

They separated under the trees, ponderosas, white pines and larches. Even under the trees they had no trouble seeing. They walked around a ponderosa whose trunk was bare of branches until the top where its branches and needles fanned out against the sky. Jhonna put her hand on the bark as she circled around the tree.

Matthew and Jhonna walked up an incline. At the top were railroad tracks, shining under the moon like a silver spine stretched over the ground. On the other side, was Pierre Creek, a tiny stream flowing from the north into the Columbia above the Grand Coulee Dam.

They stopped in the middle of the tracks and stood on the ties. "Look how the moon lights up the rails," said Matthew. Jhonna nodded her head and started walking up the tracks. "It lights 'em up for miles. Look how far away," he said. He put his hand on the back of his neck and rubbed, pressing down hard. It bothered him the light was most evident in patterns on the tracks. He looked down to the darker ground where they were going.

The track wound through the trees, snaking to the left, then disappearing as it curved to the right. He heard something, like an
animal stirring, and he was still for a moment, watching the tracks. He turned and walked along the ties. Ahead of him, Jhonna stopped.

"Oooh look," she said, holding herself, her arms crossed over her stomach below her ribs.

On the tracks was the body of a large deer, a buck halved at the stomach. The night air congealed its blood. It was the worst thing she had seen in a long time.

Matthew wrinkled his nose. There was an odd smell in the air: The sterile odors of iron and blood mixed with the cooler scents of the grasses and trees. The engineer wouldn't have tried to brake, even if he had seen the deer and had had enough time. No train could have stopped in time, he thought.

"Musta' been the eight-o-nine through Island Rock," he said and tapped the dead animal with the toe of his shoe.

"Guess so," she said. She handed the blanket to him and stretched her arms wide over her head. It felt good.

They looked at one another and started walking down to the water, on the trail that cut through the underbrush.

Jhonna followed Matthew down the slope and into the trees. She noticed his waist was thicker. She remembered what her Gran had said, leaning forward in the lumpy chair, He'll be good to you, I can tell. But you cook him lotsa' green beans, he's the kind a' man that runs to fat 'soon as he gets older.

Matthew was a big man. He was still towheaded, like a toddler. Jhonna liked his large forearms and the way he didn't always swing
his arms when he walked, as if sometimes he just forgot. Then she
heard the river and there was the cool faint scent of water in the
early morning hours.

"Here it is," she said.

"It's a bit lower," Matthew said, looking down.

They decided to cross. The small rocks made clacking sounds
when they stepped and lifted off them, then sucking sounds as they
settled back into the mud.

Matthew and Jhonna turned right, walking upstream, and came
upon a moose. Jhonna's heart beat faster at the sudden presence of
the animal. The moose's face was lit by the moon and she saw the
whites of its eyes before it turned away through the forest. She
could hear its feet crushing the thicket after she could no longer see
the moose, or tell where it had gone.

The moose reminded her of a fishing trip with her father. They
had left home hours before sunrise and whenever she woke they
were still driving. They had driven for almost a full day before
reaching the Grand Ronde, a tributary of the Snake River, in the
southeastern corner of the state.

Jhonna helped her father set up camp and then, as the sun
lowered, her father fished upriver, moving further and further
away from her. Cries of birds echoed across the sheer walls of the
canyon. The water was dark blue and on the other side, a cougar
with two cubs was staring at her from the trail cut into the canyon
canyon wall.
Jhonna and the cat had watched each other until at last the cougar nosed her cubs and moved away. Staring at the cats and the gradually darkening water she had felt as if, because they were alive at the same time, and breathing the same air, there was something mysterious and special connecting them. She had never forgotten that moment, not even when her father had come back and yelled at her for staying in the open after dark.


She breathed deeply and stepped over some rocks, remembering how the cougar had looked, standing over her cubs, protecting them.

Matthew unfolded the blanket so it would be easier to throw. She put her hand out to touch his wrist, but he moved away. There was some vaguely formed question she wanted to ask him, but she remembered not to say anything aloud just then. She started walking faster.

Matthew's hand snapped the air between them; his fingers pulled her sleeve.

"Hey, hold up." He said this softly and they peered through the trees. First they saw beady eyes and then a porcupine moved into the small open circle formed by the trees.

Matthew grabbed Jhonna's hand and she felt a tremor start below her stomach and travel up and down her body to her chest and knees. She felt warmed, as if stars from the sky had entered her body. Watching the porcupine slowly walking closer, she held Matthew's hand tighter for a moment and almost closed her eyes.
Then, as the porcupine turned to run away, Matthew threw the blanket over it.

"Quick now," he said, and she saw the animal's feet beginning to push past the blanket edges.

Kneeling on the ground she tried to push it under the blanket. A foot kicked wildly against her palm and for a moment she felt its nails.

"Oh no," she said and pushed harder.

Her face felt hot. We need him, she thought, don't let him get away.

"Careful," Matthew said.

"You got it," she said, and grabbed part of the blanket from him. Their hands touched and he smiled at her. The porcupine made dry, scurrying sounds as it tried to escape.

Matthew and Jhonna held the blanket edges pressed against the dirt. Jhonna held down a corner that was fraying; she could feel pine needles on the ground. Watching the movements from beneath the blanket, she listened to the furious sounds of the porcupine and held her breath.

"We'll let you out," she said softly.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. I just don't want those quills broken."

The blanket was stretched tightly over the animal and Matthew and Jhonna looked at each other and in one movement stepped back. They squatted on the ground next to one another, several feet from the animal.
She watched as Matthew put his hand on a tree to balance himself and for a moment she felt that anything, not just the day-to-day events and plans of their lives, was possible. She smiled at him. She didn't feel as tired anymore. The porcupine had stopped its furious struggling.

"Let's just wait," Matthew said, and nudged her.

She fell against him and he gently pinched the fat on her waist.

"Ow." Laughing, she pushed him to the ground.

She is bigger, he thought, and pulled her down with him. His hope that she was pregnant ached in his chest as if he had been holding his breath for a long time. The feeling gradually slipped away through the dark spaces of the trees, like dew, expanding to fill the air. What he wanted was to take such hoping for granted. He tightened his arms around Jhonna. She was laughing and trying to get away.

"Got you," he said and bit her nose. "I know how much you like that."

"No," she said, "what I like's breakfast in bed."

"That'll get you fat," he said and leaned closer.

"Hope so. You should hope that too.

"Hey look," he said.

They watched as the porcupine shook off the blanket.

"All right," Matthew was grinning. "A big one."

She never looked at the porcupine after the blanket came off and before it ran away. What would it look like after it threw so many quills? She couldn't think of exactly why she never wanted to look.
"You gather up the blanket."

She said this to him as she collected quills from the ground. As she squatted she twisted her back, to the left, to the right. The moon was almost straight overhead, still she threw a shadow on the ground. Jhonna wanted to see; she didn't want to miss a single quill.

Brushing off her hands, when she thought she had them all, she sat down cross-legged beside Matthew. He was gathering the quills in the blanket, piling them together in the same direction. She put her quills with his.

"This is a good-sized bundle," she said.

Picking out some stray quills, she settled them on top. Jhonna touched the quills lightly, avoiding the sharp ends.

"The most ever from just one," he said.

"Bess is gonna' give us a good price," she said, brushing off her hands again, then wiping them along her pants.

"She will, she will," he laughed. "Last time I was over there her perfume turned my stomach."

"She's a nice lady, Matt."

Bess lived on the reservation, near the Okanogan county line. She made jewelry out of the quills: earrings like Jhonna's, and sold them to tourists at pow-wows and to Indian traders. Jhonna thought Bess did pretty well for herself.

Jhonna leaned back on her heels in the soft dirt. Last week, Matthew had told that story again, to a hitchhiker. It was one of Matthew's favorite stories to tell.
She watched him as he carefully lined up the quills; as he gently blew the dust from them, and separated them from pine needles. She shook her head, remembering.

One summer, when Matthew and his brothers and cousins had been hunting, they had come upon a cougar caught in a trap, weak, but still alive. They had brought the animal home, then put it into an old suitcase. Then, they had left that suitcase at the side of the road. They had settled down to watch it, waiting in the roadside ditch.

Matthew had explained to the hitchhiker that they had been trying to prove it was the Indians from the reservation who were stealing from them, and that they had wanted revenge. Before long, a car had pulled up.

Matthew always said that the suitcase was picked up by some of those Indians. He said that they were drunk and that they hardly stopped long enough to brake. The car roared away and took the next turn and it was right about then, Matthew said, that the Indians must have opened the suitcase. He had heard the Indians yell, the mountain lion's high roar like a scream, and the tires squeal, all at once. That was the part Jhonna never believed.

But, whenever Matthew told that story he laughed. Sometimes he started laughing before he told about closing the cat into the suitcase. Jhonna didn't remember laughing at the story when she had first overheard Matthew tell it.

The hitchhiker had laughed with Matthew, but not before Jhonna saw a look on his face: like he smelled something terrible. The
hitchhiker had made a joke about the statute of limitations and then he had laughed at that too. They had dropped him off soon after.

Jhonna thought of how that man's face had looked in that instant, and it made her feel different, funny, about Matthew. Matthew told people he was a "pacifist," and he was. He had signed special papers about it, years ago. He hunted to keep food on their table, but if there was a new war, he would not go and fight in it.

Somehow, thinking about that story and how Matthew had laughed about it and himself made her feel as if she had lost something. She thought about the stranger's reaction. That story, she thought, was from when Matthew had been younger, and wilder. He hadn't thought as much about the world, she told herself. But she was still uneasy. It was as if Matthew had lost something too and he didn't seem to know it.

"Matt," she said, "some people from Chewelah called 'n' said they saw our ad for firewood, and that we deliver anywhere."

"Well, we got time to drive it down. And drop off the quills too," he said. "Hey, things are fallin' in place."

Jhonna looked at him. Matthew's not a cruel person, she said to herself, I've never seen him mean to a soul. It was just a story. Everybody exaggerated for other people to hear. Jhonna breathed out, hard, through her mouth, and brushed stray hairs off her forehead. Maybe he was right; maybe things were falling in place for them.
"I guess they are," she answered. "Ever since we got them chickens."

Matthew had helped some people tow their car from a roadside ditch, and in return, they had given him several hens and a rooster. He had made a gift of them to Jhonna, surprising her.

"Yeah," he said, "they're our good luck."

She smiled at him and thought of lying in bed and listening to the chickens scratching, clawing and climbing their way up the screen window, right outside their trailer. And the fence they had broken.

"Matthew you think we should fix that fence? Maybe I should try to build another one."

"I thought we decided to just forget it."

"Yeah, but I don't think it's that dog that's been eating the calf's food. I think it's them chickens."

"You shouldn't be doing any extra work now," he said.

He looked at her.

"Just in case," he said.

Her heart started beating faster, harder, against her stomach. She leaned over, picking up more quills, so he wouldn't see her face.

They finished gathering the quills and lining them together in the blanket. Matthew smiled, thinking that things were starting to pay off. Maybe they would make it on their own; it would be nice to buy the hot water heater without having to take one hundred and some dollars from his paycheck.

He did construction, in season, the kind of work that paid well, when there was work. Most days of this summer he had been
driving over to Idaho, about six hours each way, to work on the construction of I-90 through Wallace. But he hoped someday their small farm would support them and their children, whose eventual presence he mostly took for granted. What he wanted was to be independent, self-reliant--he wanted no part of a society he thought was too violent. Matthew thought Jhonna understood, that basically she agreed with him. They were building their house and he was worried. It was already late summer and they didn't have the plumbing finished. He wanted to get as much done on the outside while the weather held.

Jhonna was walking slightly ahead of him and he smiled when he saw how tightly she held the bag of quills. He imagined their children--how they'd run through the rooms of the house to go outside.

Matthew and Jhonna walked to the creek and recrossed it. Matthew thought of driving with the vents in the cab open and the whoosh of foxtails spitting through, sucked in from the night. The cab would smell fresh and sharp, like the smells of gasoline and grass. He lifted his arm and shaded his eyes from the moon's glare.

Jhonna shifted her bundle and grabbed his arm. Flaring through the trees, somewhere along the tracks, was an odd and flickering light. She whispered. He didn't hear, but walked faster. The trees swayed in forms flat and black against a fire.

"Oh Matthew, someone just left a fire here, out in the middle of nowhere." Jhonna shook her head.
"This fire could go running wild," he said. Really hurting things, he thought.

Jhonna pictured the fire struggling through the forest, bringing down trees, its orange light showing grey boulders, huddling large flames.

They approached slowly. The air was stiffer near the fire and for the first time the night felt cold to them. Waving her hands over it, Jhonna glanced toward where she had put down her bag of quills. Tiny sparks flew up, lit up the ground and sizzled on the dampness. Matthew brushed one from his pants.

They poured dirt on the fire, enough to put it out. Jhonna's eyes watered from the smoke as the dirt funneled through her fingers. She wiped the powdery stuff from her wedding band.

Picking up the bag of quills, she rearranged it in her arms. Then, they walked up the railroad embankment and recrossed the tracks. Matthew looked up and down the silvery rails, looking at their beauty in the moonlight.

Walking down, Jhonna thought of the dead buck.

"Where was that deer, the dead buck?" She shook her head. "I didn't see it on the tracks."

"Someone must have got it," Matthew answered.

The moon was higher and the air felt wet with cold and dark spaces. Jhonna thought of the buck's legs tied together to make it easier for carrying. Who would have taken it, she wondered, and she felt like crying. She thought of Matthew then, and of her lost baby. There were certain things which shouldn't be taken away.
Then, she remembered the hitchhiker, the way his voice had sounded and the color of his face in the shadows of the truck's cab. "Let's get out to the road," she said.

She wanted to get home, be home; even sitting in the truck would be nice, she felt. She stopped walking.

"You okay?" he asked.

In the dark, Matthew's eyes were deep blue, almost black. As Jhonna stared at them, she thought of the colored beads lined up in plastic trays on Bess's shelves: when the sun came through the windows of her small house, each plastic section looked like it held a glowing ball of colored fire. It was a beautiful sight. Jhonna almost smiled. Tomorrow she would look at the beads and decide which ones were right to make more earrings from.

"I was just thinking," she answered. Maybe tomorrow, she would open the door to the baby room, run her hand over the yellow walls. Her hands tightened on the bundle of porcupine quills, then slowly relaxed.

Yes, she would move her hands along the walls in the way she was scared to, but still wanted to anyway, hold them over her stomach, pressing and hoping. Jhonna started to walk and then stopped, turning to Matthew.

"Matt, I don't want you to tell that story so much anymore. It makes you sound mean."

"What story? That one about the Indians?"

"Yes," she said.
Suddenly the bundle of quills was unbearably heavy. She handed them to him.

"With the cougar?" he said. "It's just a story."

"Not anymore, and it makes you sound mean." She was silent for a minute, then went on, "When we have children, I don't want them to hear that story. It just don't sound like you. And I want them to learn to be good to people."

I do too, thought Matthew, but he didn't say anything.

"Put yourself in Bess's place--what's she think of that story?"

Jhonna started walking then, as quickly as she could.

Matthew watched her plodding through the grasses. He thought, It was supposed to be funny, but it got bigger and bigger in places.

He wondered how angry Jhonna was, or if it was that she was tired. His throat was dry and he hoped there was a can of soda in the cab. And what about all the people who had laughed at his story? Behind him the power lines were humming and he turned and saw them extending across the sky, lit by the moon.

He saw Jhonna stop at a fence. Against the wires she looked dark and vaguely formed. The barbed wire fence separated the field and the road. He caught up to her and they parted the strands for each other. She twanged the wires together after he hunched through.

Matthew straightened and they looked to the right, where their truck was parked further ahead, off the road. The moon was out, but the road looked dark.

This night keeps stretching out, Matthew thought.
"I guess that story's getting kinda' old," he said. He tried to laugh.
"We are too."
"It just don't sound like you," she said. "It never did.
"This was a night for us," she said then.
She sounded tired. He looked at her face, but didn't say anything.
He remembered that day with his cousins and brothers, how he had followed them, that hot afternoon, through the brush, hoping they would want to go home soon. Then they had found the half-dead cat. He couldn't remember for certain anymore what those screams had sounded like--maybe it had been only the tires. His arms and neck felt cool. He stopped walking and looked up at the sky. At the center the moon still burned and only occasional stars could be seen. The edges of the horizon were beginning to lighten.
She was right. And, it was the cougar he had felt badly for, though he hadn't let his brothers know. Luckily, nothing bad had happened to the people in the car. The trapped cat though--he hadn't been able to figure out anything good ever coming to it.
He looked at the side of Jhonna's face. The moonlight was making a pattern of her expression: showing her face as shadowy, then light again, depending on her movements.
"By the time we reach home, dawn'll be starting," he said. "And look at the full moon. It's so nice and full."
She stopped walking.
"How do you feel? Do you feel pregnant?"
"I should be," she shook her head. "I hope so much I just can't tell anymore."
"I know," he said.

He put his hand on one of her shoulders and rubbed it gently. Then he scratched the back of his neck.

"I must be though." She shook her head. She was having trouble breathing.

"Look," he said, "tomorrow we'll find out for sure. We'll stop by that clinic."

"Yes," she said, "on the way to Bess's we can do that. We can tell her our news."

They walked along the road, in the direction of the truck, in the direction of home. Jhonna put her hand on her stomach; it felt warm and alive. There was a tiny pinpoint of light, just there, she could really feel it this time. She reached for Matthew's hand.

Her stomach was rounder, she told herself; it was growing and getting rounder everyday. They were almost at the truck and Matthew squeezed her hand. She saw him looking back to where the edges of the trees were starting to lighten. She moved his hand to her stomach and, almost holding her breath, held it there.
The Ride Home

Her bare legs were tucked under the steering wheel and the hazard lights intermittently lit the car's interior with flashes of red. Grace was cold. She had been waiting for a long time, and now, she would have to get out and try to flag someone down.

She slid across the seat, opened the passenger door and stepped out. Her bare ankles brushed against wet grass. She had managed to drive the stalling car off the road; it rested about a foot away from the slope of the shoulder. She looked at her watch. It was after midnight.

Suddenly, a doe and a fawn, shadows in the moonlight, walked up the slope and stood in front of her car. Grace stood motionless, watching. The doe bent her head and nibbled at the grass, as her fawn moved behind her, starting and stopping. Moonlight lit the doe's wide eyes and feathered her ears as they turned and twisted to the night sounds. She stepped onto the road, then stopped, looking back to search the stretch of fields bordering the road. Turning back the way she had come, she nudged the fawn down the slope and into the fields.

Leaning against the passenger door, Grace watched them moving slowly across the fields. Areas of the fields had been harvested and the moonlight showed ridges of dirt repeating in patterns of lines and circles over the sloping hills.
A car approached and the deer disappeared. Turning to the road, she watched as a large pick-up truck made a U-turn and pulled up, facing her car. Its headlights were low on the road and diffused by the brightness of the moon.

"Having car trouble?" A man jumped out and stacked logs fell like dominoes in the truck bed, rolling and knocking against one another. There was another sound too, like the squawking of birds. Then nothing.

He stood on the edge of the road, between her and the other side of her car. He was tall, lanky and long-boned. His curly blonde hair formed a wedge over his forehead and shadowed his eyes.

She shook her head, "I think it needs a recharge."

"We can do that for you."

Grace looked at the truck and saw the silhouette of another person sitting inside. She said, "My husband just walked down the road. He went for help."

"Which way?"

"Toward Spokane," she answered.

"You see anyone out there walkin' along the road?" He shouted in the direction of the truck.

"No," answered a woman, "would'a stopped for 'em if we did."

"We didn't see anyone," he said, and moved toward her car."I don't know much about this kind of car, but you better let me take a look." He opened the car hood and bent over, looking in.

Grace leaned against her car door, watching him. She turned to look when the truck door slammed closed and watched the woman,
dressed like the man, in overalls, a plaid shirt and logging boots, approach. She was slightly taller than he and her hair was black and flyaway. Colorful earrings dangled to her jawbone. She smiled, chewed her gum.

"All I need is a jump," Grace said to her.

"He's always helping people like this," said the woman. "You hear the chickens? He got those for pulling someone's car out of a ditch."

In the back of the truck was a large wire cage, lit by moonlight. Grace saw the white and red hens bobbing against one another, and scratching the wire sides of their enclosure. Their clucking was strangely guttural, up and down, like notes of a scale, and they pecked each other's feet or threw their heads back in the moonlight. She could see the flash of their eyes and their jiggling red wattles.

In the rear window of the truck, was the silhouette of an empty gun rack. She watched the man bent over her car, the woman staring toward the chickens. Normally, they were the kind of people she'd circle around from a distance and be able to tell just what they were about. She watched the man. Maybe, she thought, he was disconnecting even more wires from her car. She put her hands on her hips and asked, "Why aren't there any other cars on the road?"

The woman shrugged and stared ahead, into the fields that stretched beyond the road. She pointed to the truck. "You know anyone who needs wood for the winter?" she asked and pointed to the truck. "We're selling it now, and we deliver anywhere."

"No," said Grace, watching the man.
He was bent over her car, holding something in his hand. His face showed over the car hood, "I can't tell what's wrong. But we can try to jump it."

"I don't have any cables."

"We do." He walked to the back of the truck and before reaching in, looked back at Grace, "You can turn off your hazards and save your battery."

He reached into the truck bed, moved the chicken cage. "You all want a pop?"

"I'm Helen, and he's Rick," the woman said.

Rick nodded and handed each of them a cold can.

"Okay, thanks." Grace opened it. "I'm Grace," she said. Why couldn't they simply help her get back on the road?

"Helen," said Rick, holding jumper cables, pointing to the car.

They walked around her car, connecting the cables. Their shadows were tall as trees. Grace set the can of soda on the ground.

"You can get in your car," said Rick. "I'll start mine. After I connect the cables, I'll wave. Then you try to start it."

Grace nodded and got in. Her hands on the steering wheel, she waited for his signal. Please start, she thought. It would be so easy to thank these people from the driver's seat. And, as soon as the cables were disconnected, she'd speed away, not stopping until she was at home.

Helen walked over, stood by Grace's window. "Roll down," she said, and held out Grace's can of pop.
Ignoring Helen, Grace waited for his signal and when it came, she turned the ignition key, her foot ready to pump the gas pedal. There was a tiny click and all the instrument lights came on, but the engine was silent. Grace pumped the gas pedal. She turned the key again—nothing.

Helen knocked on her window. "Oh, well," she said, "come on out." Slowly, Grace took the keys out of the ignition. She opened the car door and got out.

Rick came to stand with Helen at the side of the car. "Where were you heading to?" he asked.

"Spokane."

"We drive this road all the time late at night. There's never anybody else on it. You have a long wait 'til morning."

Grace looked at her watch. It was one o'clock.

"What we could do, we got us a long trailer bed rig, for hauling. It's back at our house. I say we drive there and pick it up, roll your car onto it and then we drive you to Spokane."

Helen was nodding her head as he spoke. "He's always helping people like this," she said. "He was late for our wedding, 'cause he was helping some people who broke down near Wallace."

"Where do you live?"

"North of Chewelah," said Helen. "Another time, he saved a drowning boy. The story was in the paper."

"Where's Chewelah?"

"North of here," said Rick.
"All the way to Chewelah, back here, and then to Spokane? You don't have to do that. I'll be okay," said Grace. But, she was tired. And she could wait right here in the car for them, or for morning, whichever came first. And it wouldn't be so bad--she could lock the doors and sleep on the back seat. "You would have to let me pay you," she said.

"We don't want money," said Helen. She crumpled her empty soda can and threw it in the truck bed. The chickens' cacophony grew louder. "Hush," said Helen, "Hush, hush." She looked at Grace. "They drive me crazy."

"You don't worry 'bout money," said Rick, standing with his arms folded across his chest. "Let's just get on the road."

Both their faces were shadowed. Helen's hands were deep in her pockets.

Grace shrugged and said, "Okay. And I'll be waiting right here for you."

"But you're coming with us," said Rick.

Grace saw Helen, on her way to the truck, stop and look over her shoulder at them.

Rick shook his head, brushed his hair out of his eyes. His face was lit in a flash of moonlight, and his dark brown eyes contrasted oddly with his curly hair. "We can't be driving all the way home and then back here," he said. "What if we do that, and you're not here when we get back? Come on, that rig'll haul your car easy."

"I'll wait here," said Grace, "Really. And I'll pay you."
"You don't have to pay us," said Helen as she got into the truck and moved to the middle of the seat.

"You can give us gas money in Spokane if you want to," he said. "Or figure out your own way of paying us."

Spokane, thought Grace, and she didn't care anymore that there was something she didn't like about these people. She would be lucky, even with their help, to get home by sunrise.

"Couldn't you tow my car to Spokane?" She pointed at the pick-up truck. It looked powerful enough.

"We don't have anything to tow with. Only rope," Rick answered.

"You could drop me in Spokane--"

"Nothing would be open this late at night. And tomorrow's Sunday. Your car wouldn't be towed for a couple days."

"You shouldn't stay out here alone," said Helen, leaning over the steering wheel.

Grace considered saying that she couldn't leave her husband; that she would be waiting here for him. She looked down the road, as if she were watching for the sudden appearance of someone. But Helen was right. She didn't want to sit out here alone until morning: getting colder as the night wore on, wondering what kind of people might be next to stop and offer to help.

"Rick," said Helen, leaning out the window, "you bring us some of that food inside here, okay? And you, come on Grace."

Grace looked at her car. It was dark blue and the full moon reflected on the roof. The car looked cold, just another part of the night. There's another woman, she told herself, Nothing will happen.
They're married. "Let me leave a note," she said, walking to her car and getting in.

But there was nothing to write with, only a map to write on. What crazy thing could she put down anyway? 'Gone to Chewelah with two people who live near there.'? She looked out the window at the front of the truck. There was no license plate.

"Do you have something to write with?" she called, and when they said, without looking, that they did not, she turned off her car's hazard lights and got in the truck with them.

The cab was large and now she could see that there were tiny antlers mounted over the gun rack. They had only two points, more like stubs than prongs. Why were they so tiny? Grace crossed her arms below her ribs, and stared straight ahead as Rick turned the ignition key.

"Here--food," said Helen holding out a brown paper bag. Grace shook her head. Rick was looking at her.

"That all the clothes you got?" he asked, pointing to her skirt.

"I'm fine," she answered. Her legs pressed closely together and she pulled the long sleeves of her sweatshirt over her hands.

"Rick, get her a blanket," said Helen. She turned to Grace. "We got everything back there."

Grace heard him rummaging in the back. The chickens started their clucking again.
"They're like babies," said Helen. "They hush down once we start moving." She shook her head. "What they really need is a rooster."

Rick got back in and slammed the door. "Here y'go," he said, and leaning over Helen, spread a blanket over Grace's legs.

"Thank you," said Grace, and pulled at the fabric, trying to make it rest more lightly against her bare skin. It smelled terrible, as if it had been near the chicken cage in all kinds of weather. The part resting on her knee was crusty. But the blanket warmed her legs and her shoulder was warmed by the touch of the other woman.

Helen chewed a carrot and there was a package of cookies opened on her lap. "These late nights," she said, shaking her head, "I gotta' keep goin' somehow." She looked at Grace. "You sure you don't want nothin' to eat?"

Grace shook her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Helen's face lit by moonlight; her heavy eyelashes and eyebrows, the moles on her cheek. "How long's it take to get to Chewelah?" she asked.

"From here? Least 'bout an hour--and then some. Our place is a ways out from there--it's a rough road to it, but this truck'll take anything." Rick leaned over Helen as he spoke. "You warmer?" he asked.

Grace nodded. "Yes, thanks."

"Watch the road Rick." Helen bit into a cookie.

Grace turned her head as if she were looking out the window. She closed her eyes, opening them when she felt the truck slowing down.
Rick was leaning forward, his arms resting on top of the steering wheel. "I know this road like the back of my hand," he said, and then turned off the headlights.

"I hate it when you do this," said Helen.

Grace pressed her hands together until he turned the lights back on.

"But look," he said, pointing to an animal on the side of the road, its eyes lit by the headlights.

Rick turned to Grace. He said, "What are you doing on the road?"

"Looking for a good spot to take pictures, figuring out the lighting and stuff."

"You a photographer? What for?" he asked.

"To take pictures of things I like," Grace answered. "Animals, things for the newspaper."

"Are you a reporter?" Helen asked.

Grace nodded "Part-time," she said. For hardly any pay, she thought, remembering the articles she had written for the local paper; and the wildlife photos she had been donating to the ecology newsletter. Once her car was back home, she probably couldn't afford to get it fixed.

"I could see that about you," Rick said.

"Rick's in the paper for saving people." Helen's voice sounded proud. Moonlight and shadows moved across her face.

"I knew you didn't have any husband out there walking along the road for help," said Rick. He laughed.
"Well, you were right," said Grace. She wanted to close her eyes again, let the motion of the truck rock her to sleep. "What were you doing out on the road?" she asked.

"A little hunting," he said.

"But not enough," said Helen.

"That's right," he said, "we're not through."

"We sell firewood too," Helen said.

"That's right," said Rick. "We were chopping wood."

Helen looked in the back of the truck as he said this, as if to check the wood.

"Haven't really gone hunting yet," said Rick. He pointed, over his shoulder, to the empty gun rack. "It's not actually hunting season."

"We did see a deer," said Helen, "but we missed it." She leaned forward and put her hand on the dashboard.

"I saw some deer," said Grace, "right after my car broke down."

She turned and looked out the window. The full moon was lighting the fields, but the road was dark. She imagined Helen and Rick living in a farmhouse set in a large, grassy clearing framed by a row of pine trees. There were farm animals: cows, sheep, goats, poultry, a pig. There was a pond with geese. A collie. Flowers. She felt relieved.

The humming and movement of the truck was soothing and she rested her head on the back of the seat. In that position, she could see the gun rack hooks. She closed her eyes. Her body rocked back and forth with the motion of the truck.
"She asleep?" she heard him ask, and she felt the woman beside her shrug.

"I wish it had been a deer," said Helen, "I'm tired. I don't know if I can go on."

"I'm tired too," he said.

Grace felt a small draft on her neck. She realized he had cracked a window and she kept her eyes closed.

"We should just pull over right here, sleep for a bit." he said.

"Go faster," Helen said, moving forward, "I think I saw something."

Grace felt the truck speed up.

"Damn," said Rick.

"It was already almost off the road by the time we saw it," said Helen.

Grace opened her eyes and yawned. "What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Helen.

"We almost hit a deer," he said.

Grace looked down and saw white sugary crumbs scattered over Helen's legs and the blanket. Clenching her hands, she turned to look out the window. The countryside was dark and thick with trees. There were no more open wheatfields, just rolling hills with the dark trees and only occasional field breaks, barely lit by the moon. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Chewelah, and we need gas," said Rick, turning into a dark empty lot.

Grace saw the moonlit outline of a gasoline pump, the single light hanging in front of the darkened building.
"They know us here," said Helen, as Rick jumped out of the truck. "If you have to go to the bathroom," said Helen, pointing to the building in the darkened area behind the pumps, "now is the time."

"I'm fine," said Grace.

"We don't have plumbing at our place." Helen leaned back in the seat, arms folded across her chest.

Grace stared out the window at the darkened building. The smell of gasoline filled the cab. "This is Chewelah?" she asked.

"Yep," said Rick, jumping in again, slamming the door. He started the truck and pulled out of the dirt lot.

The window was still cracked and a blast of night air followed Rick into the truck. Grace closed her eyes, trying to imagine living here, the chores; the country; and the isolation. She shivered.

"What else," she asked, "do you do besides selling wood?" And hunting, she wondered.

"We have animals and a garden," said Helen.

"Mainly, we hunt," said Rick.

"And do some fishing," said Helen.

"What do you hunt?" asked Grace, thinking of the deer they had missed hitting.

"Oh, everything," he said. He shrugged. "Anything. You see those antlers?"

Grace nodded. "Yeah."

"They were from our deer we raised from a fawn. We hit his mother and we got out to see and there was this fawn being born out of her dead body." His eyes were wide, staring at Grace.
The moon shone through the window and Grace looked away from him, down at her hands, at the blanket. "What did you do with him?" she asked.

"We took him home, gave him a corner near the stove, put down hay, fed him goat's milk from a bottle."

"That's when we had a goat," said Helen.

"We never penned him," said Rick. "He roamed our land. One day he just up and melted into the woods."

"He'd still come and eat out of my hand," said Helen, "I swear it."

"Later, almost a year later, we shot him."

"No, you shot him," said Helen.

"The whole thing was like a miracle, really," said Rick.

"Oh," said Grace. "Well, I'm still looking forward to seeing your place."

"We're almost there," said Helen, as Rick steered the truck onto a dirt road. The road was bumpy, hilly, and twisted around. Suddenly the truck was pointing down a steep hill framed by a dark wall of trees.

Rick braked the truck. "Here we are," he said, as it rolled to a stop. He opened his door and jumped to the ground.

"This where you live?"

"C'mon," said Helen getting out.

She followed as they walked down the road. The land was hilly and uneven. Against another border of trees, was the outline of a small, white trailer.

"No plumbing," Rick called over his shoulder.
"She knows," said Helen and pointed to a dark fringe of bushes. "Just in case. And watch where you walk---our animals wander everywhere. To your right's the garden."

Grace walked slowly, carefully. She couldn’t see a garden. The only animal was a small cow, standing awkwardly against slope of the land. The ground was damp underneath her feet. Grace slapped insects off her arm.

Ahead, Helen stood in the doorway of the trailer. A large black dog fawned against her legs, before running off through the trees. Slowly, Grace walked toward the trailer.

Helen closed the trailer door and pointed up the hill. "Come on," she said.

"What do you think, Grace," asked Rick, as they approached, "you think we should let the chickens out of the truck?"

"No," answered Helen. "We're waiting till we're here to keep an eye on things. They'll wander off and someone might shoot them. Rick."

"Okay." he shrugged. "You see our calf?" he asked Grace.

Nodding, Grace rubbed the bottoms of her sandals in the grass. There was the rig, large enough to carry her car. "Can I help?" she asked.

They shook their heads and Grace watched, shivering, the slow process of them hooking the rig to the truck and then, the truck and the towed rig's slow journey up the steepest part of the hill.

"Come on," they called to her from the top of the hill.
She ran uphill and got in the truck with them. As they drove away, Grace heard the bumping of the rig and felt its weight behind them. She closed her eyes. But, she was resolved to talk to them any time they showed any signs of wanting to pull over and sleep. The rig made tremendous sounds behind them and slowed their speed.

But Grace had a sense of having drowsed, before she heard them talking again.
"Falling star," Helen said.
"What?" asked Rick.
"You heard me--that's for luck."
"If you say so," he said.
"I do--slow down. I bet we see one crossing here."
Grace felt the truck slowing down. "What is it?" she asked. "Is something wrong?" She looked out the rear window and, through the crisscrossing shadows of the antlers and gun rack, saw the rig.
"There's a full moon--we have to do this tonight," Helen said.
"You'll like it," Rick said. "Help us look, okay."
"What for?"
Rick turned the brights on and slowed the truck to a crawl.
"Deer," said Helen.
Grace looked out the window at the dark trees and field breaks.
"Out there?"
"No, look for them crossing the road," said Rick.
He was staring straight ahead with a watchful expression. So was Helen.

"There," said Helen pointing.

Grace looked and saw a deer crossing the road; a buck, its body lit by the truck's headlights.

Rick slammed his hand down on the steering wheel. "All right," he said, "a big one."

"This time, don't miss," said Helen. She put her arm across the dashboard in front of Grace. "Watch yourself."

"Okay?" said Rick, "Here we go." He aimed the truck toward the buck. The animal had stopped, as if mesmerised by the headlights.

"You're going to hit it! What are you doing?"

He drove, slowly and deliberately, in its direction. Grace felt the weight of the rig behind them. Suddenly, Rick revved the engine. There was a loud, abrupt thud against the truck.

Grace cried out and reached for the dashboard. She couldn't see over the hood, but knew the buck had been hit, and that it was still down. Rick braked completely, opened his door and jumped out.

Helen reached behind the seat and grabbed a coiled rope. "Come on," she said to Grace, and then jumped out.

Grace followed her. There was the buck twisting and jerking on the ground, its eyes wild, and its side bloody and collapsed. Rick stood, his arms folded across his chest, watching.

"Well, we hit him," Helen said. "So he's ours. No one would say otherwise."
"He's gonna' be a tough one," Rick said and shook his head. "You stand clear," he said to Grace. "Make sure she does," he said to Helen.

The buck pulled itself to its feet.

"Oh, God," Grace said, seeing its bloody, battered body.

"Go on," said Rick, "follow it. I'll get the gun." He ran to the back of the truck. "I'll catch up," he said.

"Come on, Grace," said Helen.

Grace's hands were shaking. She didn't want to stay here alone. Were they going to finish killing the buck? She had to see.

"Here," said Rick, "take this." He handed her a rolled-up blanket. Helen, carrying the rope, was already running into the field.

"Let's go." He carried a rifle.

"It's going down near the the crick," yelled Helen.

He ran to catch up. "Just follow us," he yelled.

Grace walked into the field, behind them.

"Come on, Grace," he yelled.

Grace felt sick. She tried to take longer steps, but her skirt was too tight. She watched them running ahead of her. Rick had left the keys in the ignition. She imagined herself retracing those steps through the grass in her sandals, and then seated in the truck, fumbling to turn the key, praying for the engine to turn over. Her hands began to sweat. Rick and Helen would reach for her through the window, yelling, cursing.

"Hurry up," said Helen, pointing to a creek. "He's on the other side."
"This won't take long," said Rick, "he's hurt bad."

She followed them across. Mud and water oozed into her sandals. The water was cold and she jumped as if a fish had made its way inside, between her arch and the leather. Momentarily, she wished she had waited in the truck. But she reminded herself that she had to see this through; that she wanted to know about the buck.

"Over here," Rick whispered.

Grace's feet slipped on the rocks and mud. Breathing deeply, she stepped over the rocks to the other side. She stared into the dark curtain of foliage until, gradually, her eyes adjusted to the moonlight and she could see trees, rocks, the buck in the small, open circle formed by the trees. As they approached, it tried to run, then fell on its side.

"Now," said Helen.

Rick raised the rifle on his shoulder and fired. The buck's body arched and a small hole near the top of its head turned dark with blood. "Got him," said Rick.

"We got to tie it," said Helen, "you help us." She handed Grace the other end of the rope.

Squatting beside them, Grace reached to touch the animal, to run her hand over its muscular body. But a hoof kicked against her leg and she pulled back. She shivered and let go of the rope, imagining the animal kicking free of the ropes; of herself running directionless through the trees. "I don't want it hurt," she said.
Rick laughed. He held the animal's legs up and then looped the rope around its hooves. Pulling the the rope tighter, he tied the buck's legs together. "This don't hurt it," he said.

"It's already dead," said Helen. "You can let go now," she said to Grace.

Grace's hand was pressed on the buck's neck; she could feel fur and bones, smooth muscle. She lifted her hand and wiped it on her skirt.

Rick was grinning. "It's a nice big one," he said.

"We'll eat off him for a long time," Helen said. She looked at Grace. "You can give me that blanket," she said.

"Oh yeah," said Grace. She picked it up off the ground, brushed it off.

"Can't forget to hide this," said Rick, tapping the animal with the toe of his shoe.

The animal's legs were tied together. They rolled the buck onto the blanket and then covered it. Rick stood and took one end of the bundle; Helen took the other.

"Come on," said Helen.

Grace followed as they recrossed the creek. "Where are we?" she asked.

"I grew up near here," said Rick. He stopped walking and turned to look at her. "I bet you're thinking about those antlers from our fawn."

Grace shrugged, her eyes on the blanketted body of the buck.
"I know they're from him. I can show you when we get back to
the car--there's a tip missing in this certain place."

"Okay," said Helen, "Quit your stopping and starting. This thing's
heavy."

"Come on Helen," said Rick. He started walking again. "She's
stronger than me," he said, and laughed.

Ahead, Grace could see the road, but not the truck and rig.
"Where's the truck?" she asked.

"You're all turned around," said Rick,"it's down that other way."

She saw they were in a different place. There was a fence here,
separating the field and the road. Helen and Rick stopped and
slowly maneuvered the dead buck through the barbed wire. Then,
they parted the strands for each other.

"Come on through," said Helen, holding the wires for Grace.

Grace hunched through, then straightened and looked to the
right, up the road. Further ahead, the truck was parked just off the
road. She could see the skeletal frame of the rig shining in the
moonlight. Should she have said anything about what they had
done to the buck? Deliberately, she hadn't offered to help them
carry it. Now she was annoyed. She imagined telling friends what
had happened; how not only had she done nothing, but, what was
worse, Rick and Helen probably thought that she had helped them.

"Come on," called Rick.

She wasn't tired anymore; more than annoyance at herself, she
was filled with that sorrow for the deer. Grace stepped onto the
road. Ahead of her, Rick and Helen were maneuvering its blanket-
covered body into the back of the truck. Moonlight shone on the faces and shoulders, depending on their movements.

As she watched, Rick put his hand on Helen's shoulder. Stretching her body against his, Helen circled him with her arms, then shook her black hair and laughed, looking into his face as if it were the sun. In their matching clothes, they looked like halves, brothers, becoming whole. For a moment, Grace felt a strange power, as if she had surprised an enemy alone in a forest clearing and near to tears. But when they kissed, she looked back to the fields, as if she had forgotten something.

"Grace," called Helen, opening the truck door.

Okay, she thought, it's all right. At least they were going to eat it. She remembered Helen's clothes; how they looked as if they had belonged to Rick first. And, they had said they needed that buck. She started walking faster, toward them and the truck.

Rick and Helen were already inside, sitting next to one another, arms entwined. With her free hand, Helen patted the empty seat.

"Why didn't you just shoot it?" asked Grace. "Don't you have enough money for ammo, or bullets?" She stared at them.

"It's not hunting season," said Rick. "But if we hit a deer with our truck, it's road kill. It's ours."

"You shot it."

"That's why we hid it." His hand moved back and forth along Helen's leg, stopping each time at the hole near her knee.

"She doesn't get it," said Helen, patting his arm.
"Yes, I do," said Grace. "That's how you eat." She got in the truck and sat beside Helen. "But I don't want this touching me," she said. From the floor of the truck, she picked up the blanket that had rested on her legs and warmed them.

She waited until Rick maneuvered the truck and rig onto the road. When he accelerated, Grace opened her door and threw the blanket as far as she could. She looked back to see. She felt she had thrown it so hard it would still be flying, parachute-fashion, about to land in the fields. But, there it was, like a dark stain, resting on the road.

"Why'd you do that?" asked Helen.

"I'll pay you back," said Grace.

"But it was ours," said Rick, braking the truck. Then he jumped out, ran down the road and picked up the blanket. He put it in the back of the truck, got back in and accelerated.

Grace leaned her body against the truck door, her arms folded across her chest. "Sorry," she said, grudgingly.

"Doesn't hurt us," said Helen, moving closer to Rick. "You're the one who's going to be cold the rest of the ride."

Grace felt the truck and rig speeding along the road. The sound of the engine blended with the murmur of Rick's and Helen's voices. Maybe, thought Grace, she could offer them breakfast. You must be hungry, she would say.

But, silently she turned and looked out the window. She was cold, not hungry.
Unkind Treatment

I was in Mabel's Salon of Beauty when I got the news. All I'd wanted was a manicure, but as soon as I sat down, Mabel started talking me into getting a permanent wave too. She stood with her hands pressed to the sides of my face and said she considered it a shame that I never changed my hair-do. We looked into the mirror. Then, she said Ron would like it. I said, okay, I want one. And Mabel said she had time that very afternoon for me. So there she was rolling my hair, tightly, in dripping sausage curls, asking me questions she knew the answers to.

"How long you and Ron been wed?"

"Almost twenty years, all happy ones," I answered.

"He's always been a ladies' man," said Mabel. "'Course, he's a good sheriff too."

The cheek of that woman, I thought.

The other customers sat with their heads tucked under the dryers. I supposed no one had heard anything.

I looked in the mirror, made a face at Mabel's back, then smiled at myself.

"How long's this gonna' take?"

"Well, your hair's got to sit and curl awhile--" Mabel patted my shoulder. "A permanent wave's like a man, you got to keep checking up on 'em both." She laughed. Then, she capped off the
whole affair that was nesting on my head with a plastic cap. Next, she pulled the hot dryer over my head and turned it on.

"You just sit there," she yelled, "nice and still. I'll be checking on you."

But she didn't take the trouble to bring me a magazine. Oh well, I told myself, it would be worthwhile when Ron saw me so newly done up. I held my "Cinnamon Stick" polished nails in front of my face, searching for flaws.

Above my head, the hair dryer hummed. I smoothed my dress and watched countless flies hit the windows and buzz around the beauty supplies. Mixed in with the various aromas from Mabel's was the sweetish, lingering smell of Silverwealth, all truck exhaust and pancake houses.

I fanned my face and remembered being a teenager, driving with all the windows rolled down, out to Pyramid Lake. There was that pyramid rock rising from the salt water, all golden and special. The boys would wear themselves out, trying to swim the distance to it. Oh, that was years ago.

We used to stay out there till all hours, until the whole sky was covered with twinkling patches of stars. There'd be crowds of couples kissing, for hours, as if we were telling our whole life stories with our kissing lips. I sat there, thinking of how sweet and coolly pleasant those nights were, when I was snapped back to reality. Mabel slapped a towel on the sink counter, killing a fly. There was sweat on her forehead.
It was hot, hot the way it gets in the desert, hotter than anywhere else on earth. The air conditioner was broken and a fan blew the air, like smoke in our faces, through the room. It didn't seem possible the beauty solutions could stay fresh under such conditions. I shifted around in my chair just in time to see my son, Mike, come running in. He left the screen door open and I saw it swing wide before it stopped short of closing. There wasn't a hope of a breeze to blow it closed and the afternoon heat seemed to follow my son like a dog.

"Shut that door," I said, dipping my head out from under the dryer.

"Is it any wonder he's pale?" I asked Mabel.

"Running around on a day like this!" she said.

Next, Mike collapsed down on the floor and put his head in my towel and smock dress. He was crying.

Mike was nine years old, and sensitive. Too sensitive, some said. And I did worry about him whenever I couldn't stop myself. Even when he was a baby, I used to worry about his future pains. I used to cry so hard as he nursed, I'd forget to watch for when his eyes turned bright and skittish, the way they got before he nipped me.

He was crying terribly hard. I put my hand on his head.

"It's Aunt Donna Eunice," he choked out, "at our house."

"Well now," said Mabel, "that don't sound like much."

Then she looked at me.
Donna Eunice was my older sister. She and I hadn't been on proper speaking terms for years. Twenty years ago, she had eloped with Charlie Storm. That had been the surprise of my life.

I had thought I was the one for Charlie. And, that had been good enough for me at the time. For years after, I had kept the score in my gut and I could hardly stand to listen to gossip about Donna Eunice. Lately, with Ron working so much, I'd been feeling like I should feel, or at least show, forgiveness, but no chance ever came.

"Gramma an' Gramma died!" wailed Mike. "In a accident!"

I yelled "I got to get home!" and then I pushed people out of my way and ran out the shop, into the street. The plastic bag was still on my head and the white salon smock made flapping sounds, fanning a breeze around me. I didn't feel the heat anymore.

When I got to my doorstep, there was Donna Eunice, sipping a cool drink. I could hear the ice clinking and practically saw the air around her mouth breathing in a cool steam, like the white air that puffed out when I opened my Frigidaire. There was a hanky on her lap.

I ran past her up the stairs to my bedroom. I heard the siren of Ronny's patrol car shut off outside our house. He banged the door as he came in.

"Brenda!" he called, and I ran downstairs to him.

"What is that thing you have on your head?" he asked.

He hugged me for a second and then I ran from him.
Upstairs, I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. The plastic bag was still snug on my head. My face felt tight and the wet stuff Mabel had put in my hair had dried.

"Oh Mother, oh Dad," I wailed, and then I tore that plastic cap off my head.

Most of my hair came with it. I had seen such things on "Oprah," but I could barely believe it. My head was stinging. I looked in the mirror.

Just a couple of frizzy clumps were left. Mabel's colored rollers scattered across the floor, rolling away with pieces of my hair still wrapped around them. Little hairs still fell from my head.

"Brenda? Brenda!"

It was Donna Eunice, knocking on the door.

My eyes were bright and alarmed-looking, like a stranger's. I didn't want a soul to see me like this! I turned on the bathtub water. We didn't have that much pressure in our pipes. But I pretended that I couldn't hear the din of her pounding.

I held my hand under the tepid water that was filling the tub. Dear God, I prayed, don't let my my mother and dad really be dead. I stood in the tub and put a careful hand on my head.

It was true, I was almost as bald as a bowling ball. I eased underwater, tender scalp and all. I lay there with my head submerged, listening to the waterfall pour from the pipes.

And when I got out of the water, I still didn't want to leave the bathroom. I wondered where Ron was. I wanted him to tell me my parents were okay.
It felt strange to wrap a towel in a turban over my baldness. I went to the window and rested my cheek against the cool steamy glass, hoping to calm myself. I brushed away some of the wetness and looked outside. Donna Eunice's unruly children and grandchildren were in the front yard, screaming on the tire swing. I didn't see Mike.

Then, Donna Eunice walked down the porch steps. I should have been thinking about how we might be orphans. Instead I saw she had lost her figure, that Mabel was right.

* 

Donna Eunice left my house before I could force myself out of the bathroom. And Ron was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, ready to give me the account of my parents' accident.

He grabbed my hands and didn't say a word about the towel wrapped on my head.

"They were on their way back from Vegas," he said. He squeezed my hands.

"Your father was driving. Near as we can tell, he took a wrong turn, drove into that abandoned building at the cross-roads. Didn't have time to stop."

"Oh God," I moaned.

"They died instantly," he assured me. "They barely got a scratch."

We sat down on the chesterfield and he cradled me in his lap. We rocked back and forth.
"Where's Mike?" I jumped up, screaming. "Mike! Mikey honey!"

"Delissa May's watching him, Brenda. While you were up there," he cocked his head in the direction of the stairs, "she called and said she heard a prowler."

He held out his hand to me, pulled me down onto his lap. He started rocking me again.

"Naturally," he went on, "I went over to check things out. I got there and found Mike hiding in the back of the car. I left him there for comforting."

He rocked me harder.

Well, I supposed I didn't feel too happy hearing that. A small boy should get comfort from his mother. What I really couldn't shake was the picture of Mike, riding in the back seat, behind the wire bars they kept dangerous criminals behind.

"You go get him and bring him home," I said. "Don't dilly-dally."

I couldn't tell you exactly how long it took--of course I was grieving too much to notice the time, but eventually they did both come home.

*

The service was tasteful, very solemn and sad.

On a wall was a banner with the names "Orville" and "Nancy" looping through hearts and angels. All manner of flowers was arranged around the caskets; I had seen to that. It was everything a funeral should be, peaceful with mournful music and the soft
sounds of crying and feet shuffling forward as everyone paid their last respects. I had done my parents as proud as I knew how.

At the front, Donna Eunice turned her tear-stained face toward me. I imagine mine looked the same. Nevertheless, it was an unsettling sight. I went my chair at the front of the gathering and sat down.

My original anger and shame had faded to a deep and grievous indignation where Donna Eunice was concerned. Sometimes, I'd try to remember how I'd felt after her and Charlie's betrayal. I'd think of them together, everyone in town talking about the sad and glorious and entertaining (to them!) affairs of my heart, and even my father, who I had overheard saying, "Brenda is about half as pretty as she thinks she is." At such times, my insides would once again get loose and slippery, and I would feel naked and exposed as an eyeball quivering under the desert sun.

*

It was after the last clumps of dirt had been thrown on the graves, that I began to see Mother's ghost. She was thin and silvery and she floated right above my head, at about Ron's height. She kept opening her mouth as if she had something she had to tell me. Once, her finger moved like a telescope over the crowd and then settled on a circle of women.

I stared closely. Their clothes were black of course, but they were all younger than me. I watched them talking away. They reminded
me of crows. There was Ron, patting the shoulders of one of them. Then, he started walking in my direction. Mother's ghost disappeared.

"Mommy! Mommy!" squealed Mike, coming from behind to tug my dress. "Can I play?"

"Not here, Mikey," I answered. "Later, at the reception."

The reception was held at our house. And people were very kind. The men would come up to me and put an arm around my shoulders. They'd kind of nudge one of my shoulders under their armpit and massage the other one with the tips of their fingers. It was really soothing. The women brought casseroles and such and we all cried on and off.

I was feeling better; in fact, I smiled at the silvery shadowy Mother I saw. But, she shook her finger and looked at me as stern as she ever has. Then, she flitted off over the heads of the crowd like a bird.

To have lost her again! I felt I was any minute going to start crying shamelessly loud.

But, there she was again. She was flying over Ron. He had his arm around Delissa May, as if he were comforting her. There was Mike, running in a circle around them.

I nodded at my mother and called Mike.

"You come eat some supper, honey," I called.

Ron came with him and didn't leave my side for the rest of the time.
I had been getting by wearing color-coordinated scarves wrapped in turbans around my head. But underneath, I was still bald as a bowling ball. So, I went back to Mabel. I figured that even if she couldn't help my hair out, I could at least get a nice manicure.

Mabel was very gentle with me that day. She painted my nails "Summer Moonglow." Then, as the second-coat was drying, she partially unwrapped my turban, all the while softly cluck-clucking like a hen. She examined my scalp, sighing and smiling. But the news was good.

"Brenda, I'll think of something to help you with your coiffure problem," she said.

Mabel could be quite delicate.

And, several days later, I went back to Mabel's Salon of Beauty. Mabel said she had developed a special potion for me.

But it was the smelliest of potions: worse than the original permanent solution. It smelled like rotten eggs, nail polish, old turtle meat, Lord, I couldn't figure it out.

But, there I sat with that stinky milky stuff running down the sides of my face. Little streams of it would reach my eyebrows, and then run off to the sides. Gradually I felt sticky and wet on my neck, and the stuff dripped down my spine. I swear, it was one indignity after another.
And Mabel was in a talkative mood. She commented on how sophisticated she had found me to look at the funeral and the reception following.

"Brenda, that black velvet turban was so special on you. I told Delissa May all you needed was a long cigarette and you'd be the picture of a movie star."

I felt surprised at the mention of Delissa May. I felt I barely knew her. Then, I became suspicious: Delissa May hadn't said anything to me, not even about my parents.

"But, she didn't offer me any condolences," I said.

"Maybe not to you," said Mabel, dabbing more solution onto my head.

"Yep, honey," Mabel went on, "that 'Summer Moonglow' fingerpolish sure is special on you. It kinda' sparks up your looks some."

She put the paintbrush she had been using on my head into a glass on her table.

I guessed she was through. And I was feeling almost good and getting really optimistic about the effects of the special hair potion. Of course Ron hadn't seen my bald head and if I had my way, he never would: I saw a new glamor woman walking out of Mabel's shop and down Main Street and into his thrilled arms. The way I saw it, we both dropped ten years, and went dancing in the evenings.

"You know, Brenda," said Mabel, with her hands on my shoulders, "I think I've told you before that I never have cared too strongly
for Delissa May. Even when she was married, you know she acted like a free woman."

Mabel shook her head, then covered my head with a plastic cap. I stared at our reflections.

"Now that she's a widow," Mabel shrugged. "Well, I expect that's a tad painful subject for you, honey."

Mabel stepped back and looked at me. She closed one of her eyes and tilted her head off to the side.

"You got enough on your mind lately," she said, leaning toward me and readjusting the elastic on the plastic cap, snapping it even tighter. "What a boring town this is," she said.

I jumped. There was Mother again, hovering over my shoulder, reflected in the mirror! I turned around, but she was gone.

"Sit still!" said Mabel.

She moved me back in the chair and situated me under the hair dryer, lowering it down over my head.

But I wasn't having any of that. I remembered Mother's frown. I opened my mouth to ask Mabel what exactly she was talking about, but she switched the dryer on loud.

Next, she dropped a "True Confession" magazine into my lap.

I sat there for about five minutes, but the magazine just couldn't hold my mind. I stood up and banged my head on that blasted dryer. But, nothing stopped my progress and I told Mabel I wanted a word with her, I wanted to know just what she had to say about Delissa May.
Mabel sighed and smiled at the same time. Then, she told me that ever since Delissa May had become a widow-"after marrying a man forty years her senior," she pointed out--her and Ron'd ride out to the abandoned mines in his patrol car. She had definite reports of it, she said, and also that Ron "investigated" for Delissa May on a regular basis.

I could hardly believe what I was hearing; it wasn't to be believed. It had to be among the most God-awful truths I had ever been told. My face was hot with shame and my entire neck was drenched with beauty solution. In the background I could hear the sounds of cicadas, starting and stopping their mating songs in the trees. I slapped Mabel then, right across her mouth.

For the second time in as many weeks, I was running down Main Street, out the door of Mabel's Salon of Beauty, wearing a white smock with "Mabel's Salon of Beauty: embroidered in curlicues on it, and with a stinky plastic doodad on my head.

I ran home and then up all the stairs to the bedroom. I opened the drawer of the nightstand, but Ron had taken the revolver. I rolled around in tears on the bed, till the bedspread became rough on my face, till it was sopped from crying and beauty solution. I listened for the sound of gears shifting on the street below that would signify Ron in his slimy patrol car coming up the driveway. I thought of methods for purging that car, and locking Ron out.
Wouldn't you know Donna Eunice found me on the floor, writhing in tears. She had brought me gardenias, and her hair looked recently hennaed.

I thought how most folks who care anything about me know I can't stand gardenias. To me, gardenias are funeral flowers. They reminded me of Mother and Dad. The funeral of my parents was something that helped me a little to cope with their deaths.

But this wasn't any funeral, this was betrayal. Death was something in life I knew I had to face. But betrayal was like an unburied death, and there is no ritual for it. That was probably why I had been so quick to think of the revolver.

I didn't want to lie around on my face, crying in front of Donna Eunice all afternoon. So, I got up and went to the bureau, then threw my jewelry box on the bed. Necklaces and earrings and bracelets and silver dollars and such fell out.

"What are you doing?" asked Donna Eunice. "Brenda?"

She put her hand on my arm.

But her voice seemed to be coming from another room and I shrugged her away.

There was the gold locket Ron had given me after Mike was born. On occasion, I even wore it to bed, only smiling as it got tighter as the night wore on. There was the Black Hills gold pin, the silver charm bracelet and some amethyst earrings I'd all but forgotten.
about. Sunlight came through the window, startling me as it reflected off the metal.

I set that jewelry aside in a pile and continued my search. In the closet was the black beaded purse he'd given me after his mother had died. It was antique and had tiny opera glass inside. The glasses were beautiful: white mother-of-pearl with fancy gold trimming. I dumped everything he'd ever on top of those glasses and into that bag.

I found that cameo pin Donna Eunice had given me for my "Sweet Sixteenth" buried near the bottom of my handkerchief drawer. There it went with a little clang all its own into that bag too. When I got my wedding ring set off, I threw them in next. They landed on top without a sound.

"Don't go to Vegas," Ron had said. "Stay here and marry me."

Ha! I imagined my rings falling in the dark to the bottom of that bag.

"I don't know what to do with you," said Donna Eunice. "I'll go brew us some tea."

Then I heard her going down the stairs. I rubbed my hands along the purse. I was tired of trying to live by the rules of good conduct, when everyone around me showed me and my efforts no respect.

Yes, tired, I told the ghost of Mother, who'd started to hover near me again. But she disappeared the harder I cried and planned.

What I wanted was to throw Ron's shoddy souvenirs of faithless love out our window--let them waste away in the desert. But, too many people had metal detectors, and the desert itself had a way of
preserving things, turning even a colored glass bottle into mysterious treasure.

*

Soon as I look in the mirror, Mother smiles, waves, then disappears. I apply bright red lipstick, retie my turban. It's sunset and I'm boarding a non-stop bus to Las Vegas. Blowing a kiss to Mike, I promise to come back and save him too. The bus roars away, everyone is quiet like shadows. We race across the desert, follow fading colors of the sun. And there's Las Vegas, a twinkling blanket of lights in the distance, then a great lantern we're driving into. The bus disappears and I'm at a pawnshop, selling that bag of jewels. The shopkeeper weighs the jewelry, handles the opera glasses. I'd never looked through them in all the years, and I almost reach to do so, when he makes his offer. "Fifteen dollars for the lot of it." His cigar smoke bellows around my face and some cats run around the door. I'm too proud to quibble with such a man. I nod my head. I don't tell him there's something else in the bag: my wedding rings, probably stuck to the beaded fabric. I step outside. Out of the glaring sun a taxi appears. "To The Sands, madam?" asks the driver. He looks like the football star from high school who'd been sweet on me, enough to write me a poem about it. Then, I'm inside, standing at the roulette wheel. My heart is going up and down over and over, like a swallow bird. With all my might I try to lose that pawnshop money. I place odd and extravagant bets, betting it all on numbers and colors I despise. Still, I'm winning incredible sums of money. The floor manager walks by, smiles at me. Manhattans are handed to me first by cocktail waitresses, then by him personally. The festive flavor of countless maraschino cherries squirts the roof of my mouth. Lights whirl about and cigarette smoke races to the ceiling. Girls are dancing on revolving stages, but the crowd is watching me, smiling and clapping as my
numbers keep coming up. Still I feel alone, until I notice who else is playing the wheel with me. He looks like the taxi driver and the football hero and he's wearing a spectacular turban—it has a large diamond in the center, all surrounded by rubies. I immediately realize he's some sort of prince, and Lord, what a life he must have: stables of black and white horses, palaces with indoor gardens and pools. He places his bet on the red. My heart is racing and the wheel spins and spins. I'm feeling dizzy when he reaches across the board for my hand and says, "I can see you are a good and honorable woman." His eyes are brown like the heart of soil, good soil where things grow, not like the desert alkali. "You make my heart happy to see you." The wheel stops. "What will you do with all your winnings?" he asks. His eyes are a cradle for all my dreams and then he pulls me across the table and kisses me. The entire casino bursts into applause. "I will not live without you," he whispers, "or your son." Then, I hear a sound of hoofbeats, coming to take us away.

* 

But it was only Donna Eunice, back in my room, and there was that gardenia smell too. Tea cups rattled on the saucers and she set them on the bureau.

Next thing, Donna Eunice was sitting down on the floor, her hand on my arm. She was speaking to me, really speaking! I didn't consider we had really spoken in almost twenty years and I didn't hear the first part of what she said, I was still crying and still so mad at everything, Ron and Delissa May, Charlie and Donna Eunice, the disappearing prince, I couldn't stand to listen to anything. I couldn't even stand myself.
But, gradually I started to notice the other things around me. The way I was lying on the floor, I could see I was losing my figure as surely as Donna Eunice was losing hers. Several dust balls were plump and obvious as could be under the bed and I watched a spider making a web in a corner of the window. I was amazed at these odd things not thinking twice one way or another about making themselves at home in my home. Then, I felt that the plastic bag had all unravelled from my head, and finally I heard what she was saying as I put my hands up to my head that was sticky and still bald.

"Oh, Brenda, they're gone, and we're so alone!" She heaved her way into my arms.

I held myself stiff against her, considering whether to tell her about Mother's ghost, when she said, "Oh, that nasty Ron! I heard all about it.

"But Brenda," she went on, "just think of all those crazy pranks we played."

I was sitting there cold as a stone at night, feeling her tears warm and then cold against me and something happened in the very core of my body. My heart was beating fast. I thought of the time, years and years ago, when we let loose old Farmer's chickens into Lippy Lady's garden. That had been next door to Charlie's house. But the way those chickens had gone through the peas and corn! And all those white feathers floating through the air--that's how my heart felt then, floating and free and something came loose in me, like a kink undone in a necklace chain, and I could talk again.
"What am I going to do?"

Donna Eunice stared back at me, shaking her head.

The black beaded opera bag pressed against my thighs. I heard footsteps on the stairs and knew it was Ron. I guessed he thought he was home for his supper. But I was in the right, and heaven help me if I was sticking around to hear any of his excuses.

Still holding the beaded opera bag, I started scooting as softly as I could across the floor.

"Where you going?" asked Donna Eunice.

I pointed to the closet. "I'll only be a minute."

And then, there I was in the closet.

I reached above my head and though it was dark as night in there, my hands located what I determined to be a suitable dress. I pulled it off its hanger and wrapped and tied it around my head.

Just in time! The closet floor was vibrating, there were footsteps right outside. I pulled the door open. Then I sat, blinking like an idiot, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light.

Donna Eunice stood near the window. And there was Ron, sitting on the bed, drinking out of one of the teacups.

Soon as I saw his guilty face, I knew what my mother had been trying to tell me. I patted my head, made sure the dress was still in place.

"Excuse me," I said to my sister, "I'm sorry you have to see this."

Then, using all my strength, I hit Ron with the opera bag.

"Mommy! Mommy!" called Mike.

He was running up the stairs.
"Mike," I said, and held out my arms.
He ran into them and gave me a big hug.
Over his head I glared at Ron. He was wincing and holding the side of his face.
I didn't feel guilty for a minute; he wasn't exactly a prince. Maybe by the time my hair grew back I'd be ready to forgive him. Maybe not.
I looked at him, then I leaned over and kissed the top of Mike's head.
"We'll talk later Buster," I said to Ron, "after the swelling goes down."
I kissed Mike again.
"After we don't hurt as much," I went on.
In the background, I saw Donna Eunice nodding her head.
Kissers and Kissed

I was raised, quite firmly, to be polite. But sometime in college, living as I pleased, everything my parents had tried to teach me within the parameters of politeness and niceties, disappeared. I reverted to the barbarian they had tried to reform and erase. I ate meals hunched over a book, gobbling the food into the yawning doorway of my mouth, or letting it dribble onto my chin. In company, I spoke with my mouth full--sometimes full to the brim. And all my mother's more specific fears for me, for my future, my life, my very existence, came true: I was in college, but flunking; I thought I was pregnant, but I knew I didn't want an abortion; and I spent the last of my money flying out to Connecticut so the father, Nick, could break up with me. As if she sensed impending tragedy, my mother's presence haunted me like a ghost.

Maybe she remembered how strongly I had once felt and suffered for Carla, my favorite babysitter. Carla hadn't been my favorite because she watched me so vigilantly, but because I watched her, endlessly. She was very pretty, very dark, with gold-black skin and hair and chains and chains of silver jewelry. And, she had a pet monkey. She claimed he was a terrible pet; that he bit her for no apparent reason; that he screamed in the night; and that he stole and made rags of her favorite clothes: I would have traded my soul for such a pet.
And it was just that sort of susceptibility to covet the exotic that was a rightful source of worry. I was only halfway through college when I met Nick.

"I'm an artist," he said, "I do everything for effect."

My heart started beating faster. Under his fingernails, you could sometimes see a tiny streak of color close down to where the nail rooted to the pink skin. My mother was not impressed, but I stopped going to classes so I wouldn't miss his telephone calls, or, better yet, his surprise visits. I'll never be able to explain the source of that passion I had for him: it was like a dog chained too many summers at a post. And for him, I dropped everything, ultimately dropping enough out of my life to fly to Connecticut to see him.

My mother should have seen me in Connecticut with Nick. Nick had countless, concrete reasons for his move east. He had relocated to be closer to the galleries in New York City. He was living rent-free on his brother Jerry's estate, where there was studio space and peace. And Jerry had connections to the "art-world." Snooty, snooty, I commented to myself. Nick's career-move relocation was the reason for our separation.

So, there I was in Connecticut. Trees grew thickly over the low hills, like an ocean, and I didn't like not being able to tell where north, south, east and west were. From inside the house, I watched as everyone else, Jerry, his wife Lola, Nick and the rest of his brothers, Tom, Howard and Dave, slowly turned their bodies in the
sun. Sometimes their skin was wet and dappled with water and at other times it was sweaty and twitching under the sun.

There was a big splash and shouts of encouragement as Nick jumped into the water, then nothing as he resurfaced. I watched him towel himself off, wishing he would turn and see me watching from the window. Oblivious, he laughed and flicked his towel across his back, rubbing back and forth, back and forth. Then, he sat down and continued to talk to Jerry.

My mother would have been proud at my restraint later that night, when I tried to tell him that I wasn't having a good time; that I felt uncomfortable; and that I wanted to know how things stood between us.

"You always let things affect you so much," he said. "Relax."

I put my arm around him. Everyone else had drifted off: sleeping, smoking pot, walking in the forest. We were lying on the leather sofa. Art work and bookshelves loomed behind us.

I leaned back into his arms and remembered our first night together, how he had let his fingers trace themselves around my mouth as we kissed, and how they felt like wings, clouds, moths, and how they became a cobweb that moved as if a wind had come up. That pattern of his fingers pursed around my lips had felt so good, better than his lips. His mouth had barely opened and he'd made small sucking sounds. I was tangled in his arms. Later he'd been wilder, biting me everywhere, crushing his weight against me. Afterward I had closed my eyes to fall asleep and his words and the things he had done to me repeated themselves, like the breath
going in and out of my lungs. I had liked such dark moments in bed after he fell asleep -- I liked how everything would slow as I got sleepier. There were nights heaped upon nights of this: would my mother have expected me to fight that?

Carole King came on the stereo singing "you're so faraway, baby..." and I started singing with her.

Nick put his hand over my mouth.

"I hate it when you sing like that," he said, "you sound so upset."

"You don't like my singing?!" I made my voice sound upset. I tried to joke; I pretended to cry. "Nicky doesn't like my voice," I wailed.

He stood up. "Come on, I'm tired of this, let's go out with the others."

I followed him outside.

It was night and everyone else was out at the pool. The lights were on and hid the stars. The din of the insects was overpowering.

Lola was still in her bikini and she posed for a moment on the lawn as if she were pointing out a far corner of the foliage. I didn't like the way Nick looked at her.

It reminded me of the picture he used to have on his wall. It was the face of a woman from a fashion magazine. She had short, short hair on an incredibly beautiful face. When I asked him to take it down and he did, I said "chalk one up for me," to the ghost of my mother. But she wasn't impressed. "No, no," she said, "that's winning the battle, but losing the war!"
So, I didn't say anything while Nick watched his sister-in-law. After all, the next day was Monday. Everyone but Nick and me had to go back to the city for work. We would finally be alone.

I figured this would be the time to tell him I was becoming certain I was pregnant.

But, I wasn't the only one with a strategy.

Even though we were alone, each of his brothers called every day, checking in on him. From what I gathered, they were making sure he was doing his job and getting rid of me. They had some idea that he had been trying to leave me for months. Nick probably hadn't said anything about the fact that I thought I was pregnant to any of them.

I supposed I had only myself to blame. My parents had tried to pass down the notion of sexual restraint. I knew that from an early age. My mother had always worried about what she politely called my "sexual curiosity." I supposed that curiosity had sprouted at an early age; I couldn't recall a time when I didn't have it and my mother didn't worry about it.

Countless times she had caught me in my bedroom when I was reading "smutty" novels. "You want to end up a certain way?" she'd ask in a dark voice. I have to admit that with Nick I was promiscuous as could be. But, that promiscuity never equalled what I had imagined from reading that forbidden "smut" in the house of my parents.

Nick was tall and lean, with nondescript coloring, kind of the dark blonde hazel-eyed variety, like me. His penis always struck me as
relatively small on the rest of his frame, compared to how I always imagined it; and it tilted off to one side, hard or not.

And, I don't know how I'd admit it to my mother, but sometimes it was the most boring sex in the world. I'd trade him between my hands and my mouth, thinking, "just fucking come, please, please, C-O-M-E, so we can let it rest and die." I'd see herd of lions and bears and elephants moving majestically and laboriously over golden plains: I'd see fights to the death, mating rituals, the birth of their wet and bloody young dropped to the ground, the light, the cold; mothers chasing bachelor males away; the males intent on the death of a litter; on making females fertile again. Yes, there I'd be, making love with my lover and seeing the whole world in terms of how my mother thought it should be: She often pointed out that in the animal world, and in many so-called primitive societies, the sexes are largely segregated--except for eating and mating.

I could try to justify my appetite for Nick. It wasn't as if it were easy: Sex with him was work. Even at first, it required the utmost concentration. I had to diligently picture that one spot in my body, in the heart of my crotch, no bigger than the end of a banana, and then, furiously concentrating, driving out all sounds: of music, breathing and skin, I would feel at last what I craved to feel with him--but it was tiny and beating furiously, like the heartbeat of some small captured thing.

Work or no, I was still interested. But, as it turned out, our first night alone in Connecticut was not all I had hoped for.
"I've tried and I've tried," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "and I can't think of how we could work out."

"I could move out here," I said.

"What about school; you have to finish and get your degree, you'd be wasting your life," he said.

"But I'd be with you, I could apply and go to school here--we could try it," I said.

"Look, you don't even know that you're pregnant, I want to see a doctor's report," he said.

I thought of his brothers: his supporters, as I called them, and how they were helping him leave me. The moon shone in the window, settled on the rim of his wine glass, got lost in the wine's muddy redness. Okay, I thought, he had his brothers; I had my mother. I had been negotiating with her for my life, all my life. Surely that was practice enough for a showdown with him.

"I've been pregnant before, so I can tell. I feel heavier, I've lost my taste for certain foods, I feel ill if I don't constantly eat. Can't you tell I'm heavier?" And, I said this while eating Spaghetti. Imagine my mother's reaction: a little worm of it dribbled down my chin and splashed red sauce on my hand.

"I still don't think you should move out here," he said.

"Is there someone else?" I asked, wiping my chin.

"I just don't think we'd work out --why drag this on, why disrupt your life?" he said.

"What are you talking about, how do you think my life is now? It was 'disrupted' as soon as I met you," I said.
"Don't get angry about things. I feel bad enough," he said.

"How? why?" I asked.

"I feel bad that you're going to be all alone," he said.

"You asshole," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders, one of his gestures. "You can just leave if you're going to start calling me names," he said.

"What, go where? out in the woods? I want to stay with you. We can still talk about things," I said

I started to reach toward him, but he turned to the side. The house was warm and airtight, like the inside of a volcano, and I might as well have been one of the waiting villagers, unable to leave my house: take what? nothing; everything? I was rooted to the spot, preparing myself to lose it all.

"There's not much more to talk about. Let's not drag this on and make things harder, please--I don't want a relationship right now," he said.

"You mean you don't want one with me? or with anybody?" I said.

"Not with anybody right now, not with you, not with anybody," he said.

"Why?"

"Why? I can't say 'why'--I just need to be going on with my life. This isn't easy for me either."

"But why did you get together with me in the beginning?" I asked.

"I thought I might like to have a serious relationship with you," he said.

"And what made you change your little mind?" I asked.
"For one thing, I'm not prepared to raise a child with you, okay—and—I don't even know that you are pregnant," he said.

"Look how fat I am!"

"I don't want to fight, if you're going to yell at me, I'm going upstairs," he said.

He was calm. "Isn't your flight in the morning?" he asked.

"You don't want to talk to me, after how many weeks when you acted as though you couldn't do without me—I can't believe you," I said.

My mother had worried I was weak-willed? Next, I threw the pillows at the wine glasses and they fell over and I was crying and then yelling.

He walked up the stairs and locked the door to his room.

I have to confess that, in fulfillment of my mother's worries about my morals, I did at that point wish Nick painfully dead.

Two days later, Nick walked me onto the airplane, helped me into my seat and put my bags overhead. He fastened my seat belt and kissed me. My stomach was concave, I hadn't eaten: I didn't feel pregnant. The final details weren't pretty either.

When I transferred in Philadelphia, I called him.

"I'm okay, you don't need to worry about me. And that other woman you have waiting for you, good luck to her, the sorry bitch," I said.

He hung up. I had two hours and forty minutes to catch my connection and as I dialed his number again, the voice of my
mother shouted: "Call anybody else! Call the operator! Call me! Have some pride!"

"Just tell me this, is it me, do you not want me, or do you think you would get sick, eventually, of any woman?" I asked when Nick answered.

"Tanya, it's us, we just didn't work out," he said.

"On your end maybe, but for me, it was fine, I was ready to stay with you," I said.

"We were together for one year, it was great, you're a good person, but now we live on two ends of the country," he said.

"I offered to move," I said.

"And I didn't let you because that would have put so much pressure on our relationship. That kind of thing never works out. We would have broken up in such a way we would never be friends again. Tanya, think of how you would have resented me then," he said. He was always a reasonable person.

"Why didn't your brothers like me? What did you tell them about me? Did you tell them I was pregnant?" I asked.

Passersby turned to stare. Eventually, he hung up on me.

What about the rest of the trip? I almost missed my connection in Philadelphia. I threw up as the plane circled over the San Francisco Bay.

Then, I walked around the terminal thinking and planning. Yes, I'd had an abortion before. But I didn't want another one.
Finally, I used a pay phone to call my mother. Many people in trouble dissolve into tears at the sounds of their mother's voice. I did. And I told her everything.

As usual, she gave me mixed messages: she told me to come home, that she would care for me; she told me I had reaped what I had sowed; she told me I could count on her in my darkest hour; she called me a slut; she said nothing was irrevocable; she said I would never make anything of myself; she said I could catch up in my classes; she said I would never get out a debt; she said, "oh honey I love you"; she said, "I hoped you learned your lesson"; finally she said, "Tanya, do you need a ride? I'll be right there to pick you up."

I told her I'd go wait out front, but first I had to go to the bathroom.

In the bathroom, the first thing I saw was blood spidering out between my legs.

I should have felt like someone who has just escaped death might be supposed to feel; as if I could laugh like a fool at anything: cars splashing through mud puddles, zippers breaking, people smiling. I should have found that red, red blood a miracle.

"Shit!" I said, thinking about how I had confessed everything to my mother for nothing.

"Watch your language," said a woman in the next stall, "this is a bathroom, not a latrine."

Her voice sounded just like my mother's.
The Nocturnal Prize

*It is always Summer here and sometimes it is that same Summer. My drink is amber liquid funnelling about clear ice cubes in a glass cold on my stomach. Sometimes I raise it to my mouth, draw a sliding wetness to my tongue. The glass sends a shadow off my chin. Nostalgia is the strongest ghost and this night looking in from the window subsumes all light that drifts up from a city settled in the smog.*

The weather was off, and everybody said so. There were faraway thunderclaps, lightning over the eastern ranges, air swelling with humidity, but never rain. All the rivers dried up and the fish had nowhere to live. They bleached against the momentary mud, petrified to the wavy river patterns. Their sodden smells filled the air, hung over the town. People said it was a drought year of epic proportions. The weather was something everyone had an opinion on, except me.

I was staying with my grandmother in her town. When I wasn't out hunting new specimens for my butterfly collection, I was remounting old ones. I was waiting too, everyday more urgently, for my father to come back for me. His return would fulfill the hopes I held in my mind: we would go back to our farm; I would be picked up by the schoolbus, with my butterfly collection, and delivered to victory in the Science Fair. Sometimes I worried my collection would turn to dust before the Science Fair.
I try to tell it and I become a painter pulled into his painting. A Dorian Gray with a voice scarred and tugged at by the wind in the mirror that is my past. Except when I tell it, then, I am there. You see? I see I am only a man, unfit to tell legends. I try again to tell it and I am my own painter. I am blown in a windy vortex, the vacuum unspeakably loud in the eye of the storm, exiled from all tenses, and yet, still speaking. Even as I speak: A prophecy: to learn the past, or repeat it.

In the morning before the sun reached my room, I heard my grandmother coming down the stairs. Her footsteps sounded slippery, like she levelled her hip on the wall for balance. The door hissed open along the wooden floorboards. My grandmother raised the blinds and I saw the juniper branches hanging in crimped shapes, like hands holding nettles and longing to let go. "Rise and shine, Sonny boy," my grandmother cooed.

I drank too much yesterday, far too much, and as the pain in my head swims into my eyes, I reach to begin drinking again. And tomorrow I begin again. My story is my history is my past is me is a legend is my story is my fiction is my truth is me. In the darkest corner a spider's web of respun prey tapping the glass.

Dawn was filled with all the heat that happened in the night. In my grandmother's kitchen the corners were shadowed, but not cool. Bands of light splayed needle-thin across the tablecloth's plastic sheen. The telephone was propped between her shoulder and earlobe as my grandmother toasted bread and scrambled eggs for me. My hands brushed the crumbs from breakfast into small
mountains and I prayed my father would telephone for me between my grandmother's calls.

I thought my grandmother used the telephone so my father would be unable to reach me. I watched her perform her kitchen chores as if that telephone and its long cord were natural appendages. In my mind I constructed a glassy cage decorated with green panelling and cigarette advertisements. I put my father in this lonesome booth. His fingers dialed endlessly and his ears heard only the busy signal. I had to understand why he didn't telephone.

I tried with all the strength behind my temples to E.S.P. my desperation to my grandmother, but she was deaf to the vibrations of my thoughts. Even when I squeezed my eyes so tight tears pressed out the edges, she kept the telephone creased against her ear. Strips of sunlight fell on the stone bird she kept on her windowsill and made it look as if it were fluttering its wings away from the panes.

_The first day of this summer cottony puffs from dandelion heads went swimming through the air. Wind dragged rainclouds from the ocean. They hung over the city. That same wind tore up the clouds before any rain fell. The wind rattled everything that was loose already; it whined in alleys and it preyed on nerves._

I listened to her lowered voice say she didn't know when my father was coming back, and if he was, and she wondered that Camille had married him. I pretended to be watching television and listening to its static. I heard layers of sound: her voice, the television, and the windy hum of the boiling kettle. When my
grandmother said, "and not even a letter," my heart skipped a beat and my face felt hotter than the fire in the sun. In a flash my grandmother changed the subject and I decided my father could not be near a post office.

*Often it is Summer when people leave me. In that time of leisured ripeness, always there is abandonment. It was one Summer when my mother died. Another Summer my father left me in one place and he never came back to it. One day this Summer my wife left me. And on the 26th of July, I forget what day of the week, I read her postcard about about negotiating a freer relationship. Open on a postcard. Words about compromising and discovering. Always there is abandonment. I would like to find that sometimes something, someone, moves back in.*

I changed the television channel to "Let's Make A Deal," my favorite show. I was uninterested in kitchen appliances, fur coats, and trips to tropical locales. The prizes that the audience groaned at were the prizes I wanted: camels wearing leis, donkeys under straw hats.

I craved these exotic pets. But, they weren't the reason I watched the show: I was interested in "the deal." I wondered how far I would go to get what I wanted; when I would know I had enough; how I would act if I chose unwisely; could I turn back if I felt disappointed; and would I be able to face the choices? These questions absorbed me and spawned questions of their own. I dissected possibilities, asking myself "what if?" and in the same
way I promised things to God, I told myself I would go all the way to the "Final Curtain."

I had told my wife, "I think I know you better than you know yourself." "You mean you hate me more than I hate myself," was what she answered. I have been knowing that hate ever since.

My grandmother hollered down the stairs "Get decent! Brush your teeth!" just as a woman chose a box containing a washing machine over a box hiding a baby elephant and fifty pounds of peanuts. The audience went wild. Monty Hall went wild and told us not to go away as they cut to a commercial for laundry detergent. I wanted to watch the show until its end to see if anyone did win the baby elephant. Instead I readied myself for our daily outing to the Senior Center. I equipped myself with my butterfly net and portable temporary in-transit mounting kit.

I waited for my grandmother outside the house, near the junipers and ivy. I couldn't look at the ivy without remembering the night I had looked out my window and seen a man sleeping, clenched as if he were cold, in the vines. He was wrapped in newspapers and his hand was in a fist in his face. That was the night I thought I heard the sounds of rain coming down. I fell back to sleep, thinking that the drought was over. The next morning my grandmother said no, it had not rained. She told me I must have been dreaming. I went outside and saw the man was gone. There was only a small piece of newspaper, curled as if from water, but already it was dry.

Yesterday a friend took me to a concert, taught me how to listen. She took my face between her hands, moving my head like eyes
across a page. She tilted my head and it was something light and precious between her hands. When only one of my ears faced the music she told me to cover my faraway ear. "Better, isn't that better," she said. It was better: there were clear tonal qualities: the music sounded stronger that way coming through me at only one of my ears. I stayed that way until my neck started throbbing with a cramp.

I felt the sun pressing me to the sidewalk. I could sense what I learned in Science class: the sun was burning itself out. The air glistened with a lace of haze, ghost clouds skimming across the sky. I squinted my eyes from the white glare. My grandmother opened her parasol over our heads as we walked.

The walk to the Senior Center was a short one. "Daniel, will you come in this time to the Center?" my grandmother asked. I pretended to consider her question and she said, "People there like to see you." I waved my net by way of excuse, and said, as usual, no thank you.

It was a day of textbook questions. My questions were not on the agenda. Something to do with missing my wife. They didn't like to see me alone and no one wanted to answer my pain. My pain had to decide for itself. It seemed easier previously. They only wanted my answers, no questions please.

The first visit had been enough to convince me that this Senior Center place was no place for me. It was a hive of old people, mostly old ladies with powdery smells, and they seemed uncomfortably impressed with me. They forgot my name and said I
reminded them of their grandchildren, all in the same breath. Vaguely, I worried that I was reminiscent of the girls as well as the boys. Their humid breath, that I was too polite and shy to pull away from, convinced me to avoid the place where my grandmother went for company.

Yet, there was one woman at the Senior Center who held a special interest for me. I even remembered her name: it was Selma. She had numbers, a prison tattoo I assumed, etched on her arm, and I could not take my eyes from it. She had white eyebrows and stubby lashes like a Labrador dog. She was hunched like a gnome, my own height. I didn't find her ugly or peculiar. On the contrary, I was intrigued with her and half in love with her strangeness. I lay in bed at night and felt an odd and innocent desire for her.

I conceived her as a heart-shape faced girl of my own age. In my dreams, we lived poorly but happily in an attic room and I even understood her native language, German. I saw us such young children all our scars were from falling and they were still pink and thick enough to compare. Selma lived in a round tower-like room in the apartments over the Senior Center. Several times she waved to me from her window that looked out over the field where I did my collecting.

A scientist explained (pointing at the tar pits, fishing out something, a rib?) that if I never remembered my parents I still carry them with me silent, breathing in the corners of my genes. Or something like that. A proselytizer offered (touching between phrases in the hymnbook something, the sweat of brows?) that God
is my Supreme Creator and that I need no other. And if I say I have no memory of God but what I have been told of Him, what I abruptly remember from being told of Him, (thus I discovered Him) then what have I really? And what would I be told to remember?

Somehow, the field's lack of dry weeds scratching in the drought didn't surprise me. The field was a narrow tongue of flood in drought, a thing as surprising as the windy rattle of germs of wheat scuttling across the sterile floor of famine. I took its greenness as a promise, proof for hope: it was there because the drought was an absence of rain and because I did not know where my father was or when he was coming for me. The field must have had a water source, maybe an underground spring. But I never looked for its mouth.

My visions are the dead past, dying present and mortal future. Sometimes these tenses overlap and that merging is my story. It wakes and sleeps in my life.

Hunting for butterflies, I acted out parts from Tarzan and The Jungle Book. I walked the field like an explorer and my feet crushing the grasses released a sour mustard smell. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the tangy aromas. Then I had a vision of my father doing a rain dance in a wilderness of desert. As he was filling the air with a song of my name, three mallards flew upstream and the river sides bulged with water. I felt the sun shivering in the grass and I imagined my father's hand on my shoulder.

She called from Sandpoint, Idaho, she was going east, "taking a northern route" to the coast. Through the wires her voice hushed
any questions. And there were no questions. She would still be going eastward. I couldn't get her face whole in my mind: flecks of blood around a bathed wound. Below her browline everything was fuzzy, spatially disconnected. We hung up and like a nested infant bird I had to keep opening my mouth. I wasn't hungry, there was pressure in my ears that had to be released. Periodically. Even now. On my side I try to fall asleep, oblivion, one ear is held to the night air, the other on cotton percale. I keep swallowing to open my ears.

When I opened my eyes, my hands were clenched so tightly around the pole of my net, they hurt. Shadows of lizards snaked through the grass and jays screamed over the chorus of other birds. I still felt dazed when I first saw it: the largest butterfly I had ever seen and wanted: it had wings lit by the sun. I jumped through the field, but the butterfly swam through the air higher than I could ever hope to grow, farther than my father's reach or height.

I chased that butterfly until I was dusty and sore and so thirsty my tongue felt like a pond of cotton soaking up water from even the blood in my veins. I was weak and sweaty. I heard my grandmother yelling "Daniel! Daniel!" and I had to give up the hunt. The butterfly landed and I saw its wings beating from green to silver and back again.

But, I had a touch of heatstroke and could hardly walk back to my grandmother's house. When I got to my room I felt my legs crash against each other and my grandmother helped me into bed. She brought a pitcher of iced tea for me to drink. Through the gurgling
wind of my drinking, I heard a small click as she took the phone off the hook.

*It is almost like sinning in the midst of Confession. What then is the priest’s role? The voices go on and on, returning, returning. Through the confidential velvet and the kneeling wood, a voice sinning and unsteady, another voice absolving. Father, will my hopes always translate to prayers?*

My grandmother had trouble sleeping, so she crippled the phone each night, smothering its protests in whatever was handy. She said surely any bad news could wait. She said she would be better prepared to handle anything after "a sound night." I saw again the obstacles my father would have to overcome to contact me. Besides I knew well enough she didn't sleep well. Many nights I heard the intonation of her voice poised in earnest prayer at her window a story above mine.

*The communication of opposites, sin and grace. The thoughts of no rain under a cloudy sky. I beg of the sky with a fist in my mouth.*

The moon was a warm lull in the twilit sky. I heard my grandmother’s solitary prayer, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen." I heard her snores tremble out her door and into my room; they rolled down the staircase and slid under my door.

*Do empty rooms echo tears? Last night the musicians played to a full house. The concert of all things was wonderful. The conductor was Chinese; the music was German and Russian; the leather was mostly Italian; infrequently it was Latin American. Later in the*
crowded bar the naugahyde was American. From no particular region. Fumes from the alcohol hissed a path to my retina. Our languages formed one voice and in its roar I tried to form a sentence from sporadic words.

I knew the words to the prayer she said; I had heard them at my mother's funeral. My mother died of something she was born with, at least that's how I saw it. They said it had something to do with "lymph nodes."

When I heard that, I had felt newly frightened. I thought of those knobs at the sides of Frankenstein's head and I kept thinking my mother had died from things like that, limp inside her flesh. And they wouldn't let me see her in the hospital before she died. I never saw her sick face, was never offered the chance.

I knew though that she had lost her hair because my grandmother had bought her a wig. This confirmed for me my theory regarding Frankenstein and more than the faint sadness, that sunk heavier through every year, I had a strange vision of my mother whenever I thought of her: the vision wavered between her high school graduation picture where her hair is so fair and curly it looks like it's bleeding electricity and a picture of Frankenstein leering through the forest.

At her funeral the casket was closed and the priest said that prayer over it. The "Amen" dropped like thunder in a windstorm and was final: when the last dirt was thrown at the gravesite, my father said those words too. My grandmother told me that my mother was in heaven and that we could be happy for her. I felt a
pang in my stomach that became a murmur in my pulses which was the bud and the blossom and the roots of the grief I carried for my mother.

_The vapors in my life cling to its reflection. With my eyes closed I have a dismembered feeling, a struggle for identity, like in Alexandria several years ago when I had had the sudden need, which I did not resist, to look for my face in my passport photo. My eyelids are not crippled. I open my eyes. Life vapors clinging in reflection. Cordelia's name is Cordelia and I shout 'Delia' in my head. I feel the sound welling somewhere in my throat._

I listened to my grandmother's factory of sleeping sounds and then I crept out of bed to my books. But I couldn't find a picture in any of my butterfly field guides of the butterfly I had chased that afternoon. I didn't know what to do, so I read my favorite book, _The Water Tribes_. The heatstroke must have been still with me because I couldn't read a page before the flashlight rolled from my hand and I fell asleep.

I woke from a dream I often had: finding turtles to present as gifts. This dream was different: I ran through the town, heavy-handed with my find, but the only person I could touch was my grandmother. In the hot silence my grandmother's snoring was an absent memory; in the stagnant air the words to her prayer faded; so did the story from _The Water Tribes_ and so did the memories of my parents. The reason I hadn't found a picture of that butterfly in any of my field guides hit me sudden inspiration. It was not a butterfly; it was a moth: and moths were nocturnal.
I wasn't tired anymore but I closed my eyes and lay there bathed by the tides that pulled tides, that washed the oceans on beaches and stripped sand dry. The sound of an indrawn breath grew from all sides of the room. I thought it was my grandmother shifting in sleep, or maybe the warning of a summer storm. Then I began to think it was the traces of moth wings beating against the nocturnal landscape of my imagination. It was called "Luna Moth." I said its name and moonlight streaming through the arid sky came to rest on my pillow.

I walked out of the house and down the slanted steps of the porch. Not a stair creaked and I had my butterfly net in one hand. The evening star threaded light low on the horizon. A steady heat fanned down on me, blew through my butterfly net. I walked down the street counting houses and at the corner I walked into the field as if I were never going back.

I stood in the tall grasses. My ears rang with the insects' hum. I had to have a luna moth: I wanted the moth as the centerpiece of my collection with the butterflies spiralled out in pattern. I tried to remember where I had first seen the moth, where I had started chasing it. Then I heard something that made me think my grandmother had followed me: it was the sound of praying. The warbling plunge and the wailing rise of it stopped me. I looked up and saw telephone wires crisscrossing the sky.

The heat from the overhead light burned into my eyes. It woke me from trying to sleep. Cordelia gathered her clothes. She struggled to get the suitcase closed. She told me, "I am leaving you
tonight." She stood under the door and was framed. A woman with long hair and long arms holding a suitcase. It even looked heavy for her. She screamed at me, "Don't you have anything to say? Not even about this? You never have anything to say!" She swung the door shut with the heel of her boot. The light was on all night. Sometimes I closed my eyes. It was on behind my lids too.

It was praying. But it was in a different language. I looked to its source: it was from the tower room of the Senior Center. The building was dark but for a murky light pulsing from Selma's room. Her voice sounded like she had tears grasping her cheeks, flooding the lines of her nose.

Her voice rose and fell and I closed my eyes and pictured her in robes high in a pulpit, her hands arched with the feelings behind her words. The sound of praying in words I did not know were sounds more strange than the song of the insects, and they made me think of fires and altars and purple mountains braced against angry sunsets then lit by the mournful falling sun. I pictured veiled figures hunched and pacing. In this tableau of despair was a sense of volcanoes in the background, deceitful in their appeasement. The human figures were mute, but there was a strangled bleating of goats. I couldn't discover if this picture was rooted in my dreams, my memories, or both.

There are things one wants to remember. I swallow and want to forget.

The inarticulate suffering I imagined was almost more than I could bear. Then the words stopped. I walked closer and stood
watching, hidden by darkness. Selma had her head out the window, but she wasn't looking at me. Her face was tight and puffy at the same time, like it was sore and tender; it looked angry as a flooding river, sad as the face imprisoned in the moon. I saw her stare focus on the dogs circling behind the cyclone fence across the street. A spotted dog whined and larger dogs growled sporadically, barking. I wished I were back in the country where someone could see what was wrong, could come right out and shoot the dogs, could put a stop to this full-throated barking.

Against the crystal, ice melting in slow whirlpool fashion. I want to dig beneath reasons, self, myself. I keep seeing Cordelia humming, her hands on the wheel steering east, easy.

The dogs had only their dark chorus of suffering. Selma had white rocks lined up on her windowsill. I saw their rows in a pale light and then the moon went behind a cloud. She was drawing back her arm and throwing the stones inaccurately at the dogs. I watched from under the darkness and the trees. Selma was silent; she kept throwing the stones and missing. I watched. She missed every time. The rocks barely made the middle of the street and then they skidded on the pavement; some rested near potholes; some added to the debris in the gutter. When I heard her snuffling sounds I walked closer and saw there were no more stones lined on her sill. She was wiping her eyes with the filmy curtain in the window.

Her hands hung in an empty gesture at the sky, then her fingers bent to the sill. The streetlight cut through the moonlight. In the dull glare Selma's arms glowed unlined and pure white; as if that
concentration camp number had never been cut and inked into her skin at all. I saw her eyes were like coals; they held the heat of night, of the Summer; they were opalescent in my gaze.

I felt I was seeing a mask removed. I didn't know if it was the mask or what I saw underneath that was so terrible. I thought of my parents' wedding.

At my parents' wedding, they wore masks. My mother's mask was clownish. Camille's husband-to-be wore a mask of oversized eyebrows, mustache and pointy glasses. He kept pulling a cigar from his breastpocket. It wasn't for smoking; it squirted water. Through the masks they laughed at each other and I didn't like it. I could only tell the woman was my mother because her curls stuck out of the mask like a golden unruly mane.

Tears stretched water over every plain of my face, just a silent insistent gush. A grainy trail of salt made my face feel tight and dry the rest of the day. The man marrying my mother that day was not my natural father. After the ceremony he told me my name meant I had the courage and the faith to stand up to lions. He said "courage" to me and he said nothing about the stain of teats still moist on my face. That was when I knew he felt he was my real father. The man who married my mother that day was the man I was waiting for, every day.

*The ocean rocks outside my window. Every wave I hear crashes through a drowned body, a choked litany of surf: lapping water on cliffs, pounding salt on beaches. Something is always already rusting.*
The sound of the insects was trapped in my ears. I saw, several feet in front of me, the grass blades moving. Then I saw a pale fluttering. I walked closer and saw a luna moth. Most of the shine from its wings had come off, a dull powder in the grass. The luna moth was dying. Maybe they lived only long enough to lay their eggs, I thought. Then I thought of the butterflies I had caught that Summer and the shine from their wings that never lasted. I put down my net and wished my father were right there to talk with. He had answered things for me I had wondered about without even knowing they were questions for everybody. I stood there until the luna moth stopped moving.

*When the telephone rings, I hope it is Cordelia, aka Delia, the small flown bird. The rings circle in rooms. This time I let it ring and ring. And ring itself out. All I have is my hope—my ears no longer hear the ring.*

Like a spark flown up from a fire, sizzling on the dampness, lighting up the dust, I knew something then about Selma's voice, like it was my father's voice saying "courage," and its slow sounds, its inflection and curl of words, could correct what was so wrong.

I heard, I thought, the first relief from drought, the wet rattling sound of water slapping the sides of a tin can. The sound of rain I imagined in my head was like the long-distance static on the telephone wires through which I would finally hear my father's voice. The rain when it came would be as good as the sound of my father's voice in my ear: and both things had to happen.
I hoped my grandmother would not wake to see me slipping back into our house to wait for the dawn. I knew my father was coming soon for me. This Summer, I told myself, I had lived in a den of lions. I had waited and I had believed and I would never stop. I just knew. I had lived up to my name and I wanted to tell this to my father.

*Ah, the best world would be like an egg: would hold reconciliation of the past: the yolk of perfect remembrance, the white of true forgiveness. If my branching stream of words drowns me it is just that the instrument confessing my past, which has been flooded over, is only my words. My past is my words and they are carried in the wind. Like the weather, something is always changing. And sometimes it is only the wind changing degree, direction, or scent.*

I heard Selma's window slide shut like a soft wind and an owl in the tree seemed to be hooting up a real rainstorm. I wanted to tell my father that though I would not capture it, my mind could nurture that moth, my night angel. Mostly I wanted to tell him that I learned to save the moth in the same way I would always have him as my father: I etched them both, like Selma's tattoo, in a special limb of my mind: I believed in these pictures and I looked at them when I needed to.
My Stranger

(novella in progress: The narrator of this piece is the same narrator of "The Moving Year," i.e., Willie.)

I woke in the morning with a strange shape huddled, as if at home, between my legs. It wasn't my husband's hand curled there in some state between sleep and desire. No, he was faraway on the other side of the mattress, staring at me in horror. I lie on my back with my legs spread apart, knees bent, and looked. There was something soft, pink, long and fleshy attached to me: It was a penis.
He refused to touch me.
"I don't see that a penis changes things," I said, though of course I did. "John, you promised to love and cherish."
"For God's sake, Willie, that's a penis."
"Till death do us part," I said.
In the other room, the baby started crying.
That sound reminded me: John hadn't exactly stayed the same either. In the beginning he had agreed with me that one child was enough. Lately he had been pressuring me to have another.
The baby wailed louder.
"Uh oh! Mama! Mama! Uh oh!"
It was John's turn to get up with him, but I felt too uncomfortable to relax in bed. I couldn't stand the way he was looking at me either.
"I'll go," I said. With my backside to John, I put on my robe.
"Hi darling," I said, walking into the nursery.

"Da-da! Da-da!" screamed Richard, "I want Da-da."

"He wants you," I yelled in the direction of the bedroom.

I fled to the bathroom to examine myself.

My face looked the same. And the robe covered that newest appendage. Richard, at crib-level, couldn't have actually spied it bulging through my pink chenille robe, could he have?

I examined my face more closely.

Actually the penis couldn't have picked a worse day to show up. It was the first day of our vacation; we were due to spend two weeks with my parents. They still lived in the same house I had grown up in; in Sunnyvale, a silicon valley suburb south of San Francisco.