If my mother only knew| A collection of works

Elizabeth Conway
The University of Montana

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IF MY MOTHER ONLY KNEW:
A COLLECTION OF WORKS

by

Elizabeth Conway

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

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Two Harbors
novel excerpt

Prologue

Lynnie was born on the shore of Lake Superior, a half mile outside of the town of Two Harbors. Barefoot and pregnant her mother followed her swollen belly in the dark night to the water’s edge.

She was terrified.

But not until she looked out across the water and couldn’t find the sky. Nothing but a cold black hole stretched out in front of her and above. She stood at the edge, her stomach heavy and full and felt alone – empty. The pain took her to her knees. She swung her head back and forth against the grainy sand. It coated her hair, plugged her ears so the sounds of her breathing – sharp moans from her throat – echoed in her head. Fistfuls of sand cut the softest parts of her palms and clogged her fingernails. The air, while cool, carried with it the smell of dead fish and she leaned her head to the side to vomit. She was terrified, but didn’t panic until she ran her sandy hands across her face, filling her eyes so she was blinded. The baby might die, she thought. I don’t care, I’m blind, I can’t breathe – they can find us here together as one or two, I don’t care. She tried to roll herself closer to the water and let the tide carry her out, but there was no tide. The water was still; its only waver coming from the woman who lay suspended on its
shore. Almost immediately she began to push. It was silent except for the crickets, orchestras of black shiny bugs around her as she held her breath and tucked her chest, then a wind of noise as she gasped for air. She reached around her stomach and felt the top of the baby’s head, shoulders, legs – she felt for fingers, felt the number of toes. A girl, with a head of matted hair. She placed the baby into her chest, leaned toward the Lake, put her face into the water and opened her eyes.

Lynnie was born yellow. Her mother had no idea, even after she washed herself and her baby in the icy landscape of the North Shore, their bodies floured in sand. Even after she carried her to the road, a twenty-minute walk into town. Not until she placed the baby on the bathroom floor and lit up the room with the flip of a switch did she look at her and say, “My dear God, she’s yellow!” After the neighbor was phoned and Dr. Zook called, they found out baby Lynnie had jaundice. She spent a week under the ultraviolet lamp, alone, her mother coming only for short visits. She would not stay long; the light made her nauseous.
The Tuesday morning I went to visit my mother in the hospital the front page of the newspaper reported the kidnapping of two young girls. I browsed the headline, the story:

Who: Maria and Shelly Samuelson, nine and eleven years old
What: kidnapped
Where: last seen at Hoover Park behind the school
When: missing since 1:00pm Sunday afternoon
Why: naïve young girls
How: blue Chevy truck seen in the area shortly before the girls were noticed missing

I imagined the perpetrator, a stocky man with too much facial hair and not enough face giving him the look of a famed gift-bearing saint. I imagined him drawing them in with the promise of a puppy. Shelly, old enough to identify such lures (she studied hard
at school, raising her hand for every answer, the tallest, the straightest arm in the class; sexual education, evolution, and stranger safety had recently been added to the curriculum) called the man on his puppy scam and grabbed her sister by the arm, stopping her as she headed toward the car. Shelly was praised for her safety skills by the man who said he was only testing the girls — called himself Officer Warren — asked the smart girls if they wouldn’t mind taking a look at a couple of photographs of a thief he was searching for in the area. “I could really use the help of such smart girls.” This bait they took.

I made my way to door 419, the private room where my mother was recovering. Along with the newspaper, I carried a paper bag filled with her requests clutched into the palm of my hand. She had called that morning.


I was asleep on a pile of fresh laundry that after thirteen hours of wine-induced sleep was not so fresh. I drank too much, I ate too little. I answered my mother’s phone call, rolling myself toward the ring. “Where are you?” I said.

“At the hospital,” she told me like I was some sort of fool, and like a fool I asked why. They call it Tubal Ligation, she said, or as she preferred to put it, “I’m just tying up all loose ends.” With the receiver balanced between my shoulder and ear, I shook my head and rolled my eyes. It was a gesture I perfected years earlier in dealing with my mother. I guess I was expecting something like pneumonia, something like cancer, something.
It was the first time in four years, I had been to my mother’s house, the house where I grew up. It was an easy return visit; I had a purpose, in and out. I went straight to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom just off my mother’s room. The deodorant was on the second shelf next to the bottle of stale pink lotion – half-empty as it had been since I was a child – her toothbrush in a Kern canning jar at the edge of the sink. Everything was where I remembered it.

It was almost ten o’clock when I reached the hospital. I had not lived in Two Harbors with my mother since I was eighteen, when I moved to Duluth with grand ideas of college. It took me three semesters of an indecisive mix of classes and fifteen thousand dollars in student loans before I decided academia was not for me.

My mother had always been like a statue: beautiful and frozen. I could watch her from a distance and admire the structure of her features, the craftsmanship that went into her design. I could even touch her, run my fingers along her cheek bone, in the dip of her upper lip; I could climb onto her back, pull at her arms, ride on her legs, but she remained solid and unyielding, completely unaffected by my presence.

When I entered the hospital room I was so painfully pleased by her appearance. I had knocked on the door, but she hadn’t answered. Behind it she lay quietly in the stark room looking small in the hospital bed. Someone had brought her flowers. I tiptoed toward her to get a better look. The dark curls of her hair matted against cheeks that were hallowed and gray under her eyes; her fingernails peeled and yellow. In the hospital, with its smells that attempted to cover up themselves, she looked dirty and shadowed. She had broke.
“Mom?” I said and crinkled the paper bag full of her things. I thought it might be easier if the bag woke her rather than me. “Mom?” I tried again.

She groaned as she rolled toward me, bringing the blood flow back into her joints, and opened her eyes. “Lynnie, tell me what time it is.” It was not the voice I had spoken to earlier on the phone. This voice would have been unrecognizable – the words were raspy and slow to come; dry and at the back of her throat – had it not been for her characteristic demands.

“It’s nearly ten,” I said.

“Those nurses were supposed to check my vitals almost an hour ago.” Grabbing her water bottle from a nearby tray, she tried to sit up in bed. She drank it like a child: noisy, messy. “Water,” she said. “Thirsty.” She put her water down. “What did you bring me?” I gave her the bag. Looking inside, she nodded. “Good.”

The more she talked the more the gray drained from her cheeks. This was how I remembered her; she had not changed at all.

“Nice flowers,” I said.

“It’s nothing. A disgusting glowing new mom dropped them off on her way home. ‘Too many,’ she said. That girl had some nerve. I took them anyway. Can you believe I am on the same floor as the newborns, the new moms? Ha!” My mother waved the flowers away and changed the subject. “So, how do I look?”

“Fine, Mom. How are you feeling?”

“Hmm,” she shrugged her shoulders. “Thought I might feel like a virgin again or something, but I guess I can’t complain.”
But she did. She complained about the noise, the babies. It was a small hospital, but the closest one for a number of miles. Although Two Harbors had a population no larger than five thousand, it greatly outnumbered the surrounding towns whose communities, in some cases, were nothing more than an extended family with an old red barn.

"It's not just the babies," she said. "God knows that would be enough. It's everything that goes with them, the balloons, the parents. I know the nurses have something better to do than coddle." My mother gestured to her food tray, done and dismissed at the side of her bed. The powdered potatoes were little more than picked at, the potatoes and nothing else. "Can you believe they brought me coffee? God, that smell. It's worse than those damn babies!"

As if on cue, a camera crew of family passed by the open door flashing pictures at their newest crying member. The baby was red and appeared as irritated as my mother.

"You see? You see? For God's sake close it."

My mother had started using God's name as frequently as possible. She wrote it in my monthly letters, left on my phone messages: Answer the God damned phone, Lynnie. I know you're there. She was never religious, but always believed she had a special relationship with God. Whether or not her name-calling was in vain, she believed it was helping their association. It kept Him involved.

"I just can't stand to be surrounded by all this life." She shook her empty water bottle at me. "You don't mind do you?"

"Don't they have nurses for that?"
"I knew it. I knew it. I've been telling people for years that I raised a lazy girl. No fault of my own, I tell them, something she got from her father. God knows I had greater plans for her than to fetch my water, but we've got to start with the little things. Got to start small. It would have been best to start at the beginning - I know, I know - but by birth it was too late. I obviously was doing all the work."

She was still carrying on when I left the room with her bottle in hand; she called out "ice" before I was out of ear length.

I found a nurse behind her counter who chewed gum as though she was gnawing at her cheek. I waited for her to stop, waited for a break so I could get a word in, but her chewing continued. I interrupted.

"Excuse me."

She looked up.

"Could you point me to a spot where I could get some ice water?"

"There's a drinking fountain around the corner." Her finger pointed to its direction.

"She wanted ice."

The nurse sighed and took the bottle from my hands. She disappeared into a door behind the computer desk.

The hallway was lined with photographs of babies dressed as flowers and insects, watercolors of women in white night gowns who smiled as they peered over the cribs of their babies. My mother was right, she did not belong here.

Turning the corner, I almost ran into a skinny boy who was wearing a baseball cap two sizes too large. He looked up at me and it tipped into his eyes. Behind him were
a coffee machine and a man who sat beside it. The man was crying in almost complete silence. I had never seen someone cry so publicly before, even though most of him remained hidden behind the humming machine. He did not appear sad, but tired, as though his eyes had just given up, too exhausted to hold tears any longer. I dug in my pocket for some change. With forty-five cents I bought a coffee: sweet. As I was reaching for it out of the machine, the nurse appeared with my mother’s water. I left the coffee there. I liked to think that the man drank it, that he liked his coffee sweet. 

When I returned, my mother was sitting at a hospital bed-angle and reading the newspaper I had brought with me. She held out her arm, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on her reading until the water was in her hand.

“So, when are they going to let you go home?” I said.

She immediately shushed me with a hissing sound from her lips. My mother had never been a good listener. For example, when I was nine I almost drowned.

Behind the small Mom and Pop store I found a nest of baby mice. Most of them were dead, their mother long abandoning her small gray children. The one that made the most noise and movement, I scooped into a jar, its lid full of nail-punch holes. I broke off a part of the nest and placed it next to the mouse and wandered to the edge of the dock in the back of the store. I had bought two day-old donuts to feed the geese. It was early spring and they swarmed the lake. Everything came in swarms to the lake: geese in spring, deerflies in summer, ice houses in winter, romantics in the fall.

I carried my donuts in one hand and my jarred companion in the other. At the edge of the dock I sat with the soles of my shoes just grazing the water while I licked the glazed icing from the palm of my hand. I tore the donuts in tiny pieces and threw them to
the large birds. On a final toss I stood up from the dock and kicked the jar with my foot. It fell into the water. It bobbed there for a moment until lake found its way through the holes in the lid. It started to sink and I leaned in toward it, my hipbones digging into the dock. I leaned too far and joined the jar, the mouse, in the water. I was choked as my lungs hit the icy lake. Immersed in the quiet of Lake Superior I couldn’t hold my breath, I couldn’t let it out. A paralyzing fear shocked my body, and as I broke the surface, I gasped for air before my frozen lungs relaxed and let in a screeching breath. I wiped the water from my eyes in a rush, maybe a knee-jerk reaction, maybe out of habit – I had no control over my limbs. The geese ignored me, and continued to search the lake for the floating bit of bread. Below, my toes kicked the sinking jar. I dove to save the baby mouse I had rescued and now sent to its death. The lake was much deeper than it appeared from the surface, and the further I swam toward the darkness the heavier my clothing became. Finally we hit bottom, but it was too late. I had nothing left as I tried to swim to the surface with the jar in my hand.

It’s okay. You can give up, I thought and I did, only to find that when I stopped trying I floated to the surface, my child-sized lungs carrying my child-sized body. I knocked my head on the leg of the dock and it brought me back angry, waking me from the calm sleep I had fallen into. Spitting words teacher had warned me about, I found my way to the shore and spread out across its rocky surface. The jar had made it with me, its soft gray capture now floating motionless against the lid.

I walked the half-mile along the shoulder of the highway back to our house where my mother was drinking a dark tea at the kitchen table and staring out the window.
“Mom,” I said. Water dripping from my sodden clothes puddled around my feet. “Mom, I almost drowned.”

Without a glance in my direction she grunted an ummm almost like she was choking down a bitter vitamin, than acknowledging me at all.

Upstairs, I hung my shirt and pants over the bathtub to dry.

It took me years to learn how to use her listening skills, or lack there of, to my advantage.

My mother finished reading the newspaper and rested it on her knees. I watched her in silence as she sipped the water out of the bending straw. The left side of her cheek was flushed from the sun that shone brightly through the window; it looked out toward the flourmill that lay dormant, out of business for the last thirty years. I walked over to close the shades and break the silence. My mom spoke.

“Where’s Mr. Gabioud?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Was he at the house?”

Mr. Gabioud moved in with mother almost immediately after I moved out. He rented out the basement. He was French-Canadian and the shortest man I had ever met. At five foot four, he came up to my hairline, our shoulders at the same height, which made me believe that my neck was either disproportionately long, or his, short. He had owned the ferries in town that transported people from the mainland to the largest of the Apostle Islands, Madeline, until the business was sold – like so many in Two Harbors – to a more profitable and convenient transportation harbor. I never called him by his first
name, Jeffrey, nor did my mother, accept on two occasions. The second time was when I was twelve and he showed up at our house in the middle of the night after disappearing for two weeks.

Mr. Gabioud was in love with my mother, even she knew that. The only one he seemed to try and keep it from was himself.

“I didn’t look for him at the house,” I said to my mother, both of her cheeks now flushed.

She stared at me as though she had never seen me before. It was true; I had changed since she last saw me. My hair was short now; I had cut away the curls that I’d inherited from my mother. And I was too thin, something I tried to hide under grossly baggy sweatshirts. We had ignored the fact our last visit was almost two years earlier when she came to Duluth for the winter festival; letter and phone calls seemed to be more than enough. We drank lukewarm hot chocolate on the corner of Main Street as a frozen parade passed by. We kept hidden behind winter scarves. After the festival I took her to a deli that I had never been to before, or since, and we ordered sandwiches and soups. We found things to do that kept our mouths busy from conversation: hot chocolate, scarves, food. Now we locked eyes in her hospital room, but just for a moment before I turned away.

“You know those girls,” she said as if I did. “Those girls should have known better.”

“They were taken from the park behind the school yard.”

“Two girls could never be taken. What – are they going to be carried away under an arm? They aren’t babies. Those girls went with him. Should have known better.”
I nodded, knowing she wasn’t listening anyway.

“Check on Mr. Gabioud. He’ll be wanting to know where I am.” She paused and took a long drawn out drink of water. “And heat up that Tupperwared spaghetti in the freezer for him.”

“Mom, I think Mr. Gabioud can feed himself.”

“Of course he can’t. Not proper, anyway.”

I sighed by mistake.

“See? Lazy. And don’t argue with me. I’ve hardly enough spit to pronounce my t’s.” She took another drink, stopped to say something, then thought about it, and swallowed another. “And tell him his rent’s due.”

As I left, she tossed the newspaper on the floor; it scattered around her bed. “Poor girls. Really,” she said. “But we all have problems.”
Mr. Gabioud hung himself in the basement on an exposed beam above the place where he kept his bed. He had pushed the bed aside to make room for his feet to dangle, for his full weight. The ceilings were low, even for him. The headboard remained in its original position. It was never attached to the queen-sized mattress that was too large for its frame. The displaced bed exposed a neat array of boxes Mr. Gabioud had stored. Dust bunnies nested on top, between the narrow gaps of the cardboard boxes. They were taped closed, a few of them labeled, one holding postcards and newspaper clippings and magazine pictures that reminded him of his home in Montreal.

He was released from jail the morning before; they had nothing to hold him on. The eyewitness account placing Mr. Gabioud’s truck at the scene of the kidnapping was less than circumstantial. He called. Mom was hiding behind the new project she had given herself. She decided that her bedroom needed re-wallpapering. When the phone rang I answered it knowing my mother wouldn’t even bother.

We played cards that night, Mr. Gabioud and I, at the kitchen table while he watched me drink warm beer. Mom remained in her bedroom all day; she still had not
shown herself by the time I picked up the queen of hearts off the deck and slipped it secretly into my hand.

“You cheat, I know,” he said.

“Only with you.”

“You don’t cheat, I’ll let you win.”

“The results will be the same. I’ll still beat you.” I finished the beer suds at the bottom of its bottle.

“Will be different. You’ll see.”

Two hands later I had won.

“Do you want to play again?” I said.

“No, no. I’m tired.”

We got up together and I walked him to the top of the basement stairs.

“Go to sleep,” he told me. “Be quiet not to wake your mother.” And he waved me goodnight. It was just after midnight.

I wondered if he thought about it awhile, after I had closed the basement door behind me. Maybe he fixed a small sandwich, tomato and turkey, throwing the crusts into the garbage, then washing the plate clean in the sink, drying it and put it neatly on the shelf. He could have read for an hour, trying to fall asleep, trying not to think about the rafter above him and the yards of rope in the corner closet.

Or maybe he did it right away, just walked to his bed and pushed it aside before climbing the wobbly step latter. Maybe the rope had been there all afternoon, maybe for days before he decided it was time to use it while my mother and I slept soundly above.
A blue light streamed from the storm windows across the basement. I could make out little more than Mr. Gabioud’s silhouette, making him almost indistinguishable from his shadow on the wall. As a child, my mother removed the night light from my room. The shadows it cast from the disregarded piles of clothing and the well-used stuffed toys made for frequent calls to my mother – the only time I completely relied on her position – to come and save me from the creatures in my bedroom. Her solution was to eliminate the problem with complete darkness. Mr. Gabioud’s shadow, Mr. Gabioud, hung in the room like those nighttime beasts of my youth. They were monstrous.

I called my mother into the basement. She was slow to respond, as though she already knew she would find him motionless and not breathing; maybe a bottle of little white pills, maybe dusky pink water in the bathtub. She trudged down the stairs like a disgruntled child sent to bed early without any supper. She was wearing overalls that were covered in a thin layer of wallpaper glue that collected small scraps of paper and dust as she walked down the stairs.

My mother did not stop, did not take a moment to react and stall at my side, but went straight to Mr. Gabioud and stood next to him, her head just reaching the tips of his fingers. The laces on one of his tennis shoes were undone and she tied them carefully, knotting twice. She stood up and let his fingers brush across her unruly hair. She rolled to her toes so she could feel him on her cheek, then took a step toward me.

“Lynnie,” she whispered. “Did you do this?”

“No, Mom. You did.”
I could not sleep. My room was not dark enough. I pulled the drapes; I took my socks off, my sweat pants, and plugged the bottom of the door. At first it worked. I sat comfortable in the dark. But soon my eyes adjusted to the blackness, drawing out the dimmest of light that sneaked in through relentless cracks.

Earlier that day, Mom had called the ambulance to come and take Mr. Gabioud away. I stayed in my room and looked out onto the scene below. I peered through the blinds. It was similar to the way I used to watch horror movies as a girl. My hands to my face, I would only watch through the broken view between my fingers. My mother followed the paramedics outside and stood at the back of the ambulance until they asked her to move so the doors could be shut. They drove away, and she watched the vehicle’s wheels kick up dust down the road as she paced back and forth on the front of the lawn, as though kept in some invisible cage running along the property line.

I opened the door of my room. There were more than just monsters, there were ghosts now. I kept my eyes closed tightly to keep them in the dark and felt my way through the house. It was suddenly unfamiliar to me. I felt light switches along the wall that had never been there before. I tripped over a chair I thought was on the other side of the room, and nearly fell when I missed a bottom step, positive there was twelve, not thirteen. And suddenly, I found myself at the top of the basement stairs.

I almost expected Mr. Gabioud to still be in our basement, spread in a deep sleep across his bed, loud breaths as he snored through his nose. Or maybe defrosting his tiny freezer, chopping away at the ice with a butter knife and swearing in his thick French
"Look like rain," I said standing by his side.

"Rain? Ha, my girl. Going to be a full snow, you watch," Mr. Gabioud said.

It was. It came down so quickly, so heavy in its flakes that the lake could barely keep up. The snow settled on the surface for a quick moment until sinking into the waves. Mr. Gabioud had to keep the ferries in the harbor longer than usual, and I helped him shovel off the snow that built into drifts along the inner sides of the large boat. At times he would appear on the upper bridge with his hands waving wildly in the air shouting, "Snow, my dear girl! Snow!" And I watched him dancing so alive in the white flakes while the rest of Two Harbors covered in snow, fell asleep under its weight.

The people in town wrote Mr. Gabioud’s suicide off as a confession, as though he had signed his name at the X. It was a reassurance that they had found the right man.

Then they found the truck.

On Friday morning, two days after Mr. Gabioud ended his life in our basement, Bob Lindgren and his tow truck showed up at the granite quarry. Two high school boys, Sam and Jean Paul, who cooled off in its water after a long run, had found the girls the night before. Fifteen feet below the surface, the two boys had taken turns running their hands across the hood, across the windshield, peering in through the cracked window to
see the mousy brown hair that was almost mistakable as the water’s thin grasses, but not quite. Standing then on a large piece of pink granite, the boys looked down into the quarry, the shape of the truck now perfectly clear to them. They walked home quickly as the water evaporated off their skin.

Bob Lindgren was alone at the quarry edge a good twenty minutes before the sheriff, two deputies – one from the county, one from the state – and four divers arrived. I wondered what Bob thought staring into the glass surface of the water. I went to school with Bob – Bobbie until he reached fourteen, the age when he wanted girls to find him desirable, not cute, Bob not Bobbie; when he wanted them to be his girls, not his friends. When he was Bobbie, a group of bored pre-teens told their parents on a late December night they were going sledding. Instead they stole forgotten brown booze from the liquor cabinets and walked out onto the frozen lake. I went with them. We passed around our parents’ drinks, making at least five rounds before a boy who was not wearing mittens brought out a can of gasoline. He gave it to Bobbie who dowsed a nearby icehouse. He lit it with a pack of matches from his pocket. The other kids scattered in muffled screams of laughter as it was immediately consumed in the fire. I stood next to Bobbie in the warmth of the flame. He spoke, as though he knew I was growing nervous.

“Don’t worry, it’s my dad’s,” he said.

He gathered a packed handful of snow into a ball and threw it to the flames. It melted into the air.

He had children now. And was married. Maybe he thought of them as he stood along the edge of the quarry.
Things were quiet until lunchtime. By then the boys’ story had spread through town – Sam’s father was the Protestant minister in Two Harbors and it would be widely argued whether his son’s shared discovery was an act of the man upstairs or down – and the local fishermen who had come to catch some forsaken fish from the quarry that morning redefined their position in town as the local gossips. School children stood in circles on the play ground, their four square and games of freeze-tag forgotten as a friend of a brother told about the truck and the girls. Bank tellers stalled transactions as they spoke with acquaintances at the drive-through, their ears leaning closely to the speakers.

The quarry filled with citizens of Two Harbors and communities reaching as far north as Lake of the Woods. Some Canadians showed up, even after their chastising, their national connection with Mr. Gabioud. I showed up with the crowds, but remained separate from them trying to blend in with the skinny silver birches that lined the western ridge. It was not long before I was told to move by a stout plain-clothes policeman who was in charge of securing the scene. He never looked me in the eyes.

I had never seen the girls’ parents before, but recognized them immediately. They stood as stone-faced as the quarry walls, but clutched each other at the waist. When they walked, they walked together; when they nodded, they nodded together. One movement caused the other to move: his right leg bent, her left leg followed; their chins turned into their chests together. It was hard to tell who was leading. It looked as though they’d been attached that way for some time.

The heavy chain from the tow truck began to move and we all watched as the front of the truck – gate, headlights, hood – started to emerge from the water. A man in the crowd carried his daughter on his shoulders. She kept her mouth wrapped around a
flat sucker while her father pointed to the truck as it birthed from the water. This was what we had all come to see. The divers appeared along its doors, one behind who tried to open the back and drain the water from the truck’s bed. Its blue paint was covered with two weeks of underwater silt and plant life. And although we tried, we could not see the bodies of Maria and Shelly Samuelson, now heavy and swollen in the front of the cab – the windshield masked in water grasses.

The truck had Michigan plates. It belonged to a man by the name of Francis Berber who was wanted in his state for multiple counts of sexual abuse, including two rape charges. The states would argue who would get him first. The story ran in the newspaper with a high school picture of Berber and the photos of the girls that ran when the kidnapping first occurred, making Berber appear little more than a few years older than his victims. The report stated they caught him in a bar in southern Wisconsin. There was no mention of Mr. Gabioud.

I dreamed of drowning. At first I was the one whose lungs choked for air, then it was my mother. She would drown in a rainstorm, watering a garden, drinking a glass of water; taking little sips she’d start coughing up mouthfuls which she would breath back in making her turn blue and pale. But it was when she would drown in the bath that my nights would become long, my sleep short. She’d wave to me beneath the crack at the bottom of the bathroom door as I peered at her, and step into the tub, disappearing behind its porcelain wall.

But I dreamed most about the two girls, their weightless bodies floating in the cab of the truck. It was as though they came from my past, like a story I knew from my
youth. It changed each time it was told from the mouths of my childhood friends now
grown and gone: how the girls were tied to the seats of the truck and driven into the
quarry, or how Sister Elizabeth was related to the kidnapper, or how the girls and the
truck had never been recovered. I dreamt my twelve-year-old self, Lynnie-girl, taking
my bike to the quarry at the edge of town. My dreams became so persistent, so alive, I
started to question whether the truck had ever been pulled from the water, whether the
girls still waited beneath the surface with their lungs puffed and full.

In sleep, I followed Lynnie-girl as she went alone to the granite cliff. Of course
there were other kids at the quarry, there were always kids. Lynnie-girl would hear them
as she hitched up her socks and walked the faint path lined with yellow grass and birch
trees, the children’s voices stuck in the summer air. Kids littered the water as she broke
from the path and dove, a dive with purpose, down and deep.

Lynnie-girl kept her eyes open and arms straight. She blinked at the stinging
water and looked left and right but could see nothing. No blue truck, no girls. She was
deep, surrounded by inky water. A thin green light came from above and she looked
toward it, but turned back into the darkness. She could go deeper, stretching arms out in
front, grabbing the water as it passed through fingers, holding hands. *Just relax,* Lynnie-
girl told herself, told me, *you know where you are, just go a bit deeper.* But her lungs
became hungry for air. She turned her body toward the light and slowly swam the sky
into view.

I spent hours in sleep trying to get Lynnie-girl to swim deep enough to touch the
roof of the truck. During the day I prepared myself for this dream, practicing holding my
breath in the bathtub, timing myself with my watch until it fell in the water and died.
Then I counted slowly in my head, *one Mississippi, two Mississippi*... And I would close my eyes, imagining the palms of Lynnie-girl's hands on the truck, flaking off bits of rusted blue paint that she'd carry to the surface.

Once I brought a cocoon to school, showing everyone what I had found. "I did," I said, "I found it." Sister Elizabeth thought it was dead so she pinned it to the bulletin board. Then it hatched. The butterfly flew around the school hallways. Even the boys who burned ants with magnify glasses could not help but notice the black and yellow colored wings against the gray lockers.

I would stay in the bathtub with my butterflies and Lynnie-girl's paint flakes until I heard my mother knock sharply on the door.

"Lynnie, you alive in there?"

"Yes Mom."

"Well come on out and prove it."

In my dreams, Lynnie-girl followed the same man; a monstrously tall man who wore sunglasses that covered half his face. She followed him in his blue truck, riding her bicycle close behind. That could be done in the summer. Kids on bikes were everywhere, everywhere until they became invisible, all just part of the scenery. Sometimes she would bike past the truck and stretch out an arm, running her fingers across the paint. But there were lots of blue trucks in my dreams. The one we wanted was rusted; seats green with algae; fish swimming through cracks in the windshield.

I started going to bed early. I waited for Lynnie-girl to appear as I closed my eyes, for her to submerge herself under the water's surface again. I would get angry at her with each failed attempt. She was becoming too distracted in my dreams, finding
other things to do like playing a board game with the boy down the street, and painting her toe nails in different shades of pink.

But one night, it happened. I closed my eyes and Lynnie-girl slipped from her bedroom window. Her heart was beating slowly, following the tempo of the crickets as they played a summer tune. Carefully, she took off the screen and slid her body out. Her shirt caught on the window knob and held tight, leaving her toes dangling a foot from the ground. She heard a light rip, and fell, landing on her feet then stumbling backwards. Her stomach stung — she lifted up her shirt and saw the soft line running about seven inches across, pouting from her skin. She touched it. The crickets grew silent.

Her bike was leaning next to the side of the garage, between the canoe and the woodpile. She tucked a flashlight into the seat of her pants and hopped on the bike. Our mother’s window was opened as she rode through the grass.

The sign at the edge of the quarry reading “Keep Out” welcomed Lynnie-girl in. Once on the trail, she used the flashlight. The trees accompanied her, although the gaunt giants seemed a little less friendly — she didn’t know them at night. Shadows added extra branches and height. They looked bent in the dark, resting.

She came to the water and raised her hands to shield her eyes. The moon mirrored off the granite walls and lit up the quarry like it was day. She walked to the edge and rolled back and forth from heels to toes. Leaving her clothes near the water, she climbed to the top of the highest boulder, standing above the water naked. Pink skin: shoulders, hips, thighs in the moonlight, displaying the earth behind her like a worm dug up from the soil.
Lynnie-girl could see the entire quarry, the black pool sprinkled with stars that lay on the surface. She spread her arms. “Are you ready?” I shouted at her and she jumped. The water split open and she entered, but didn’t stay there. She quickly swam to the edge and pulled herself out. “Again,” I shouted. “Again, Lynnie-girl.” She jumped and spread her body on the wet bed and looked up at the moon as the water filled her ears.

We could hear our mother. “No, no, honey,” (she said things like honey in my dreams). “That’s just a story. We had one like it when I was your age, but our involved a boy and a cellar.” A boy whose parents locked him in the cellar for breaking a lamp, she said. They moved away and forgot him there to live off canned pickles and jams. “But that’s just a story,” she said.

Lynnie-girl closed her eyes, buried in the water, thick and rich, and it carried her deeper until her toes touched smooth tin. The truck was so easy to find. She could see it clearly – bright and blue, no rust, almost gloating with shine. She opened the door, the handle cool. The girls turned toward Lynnie-girl both wearing yellow dresses, one with a sweater, one with glasses. They nodded politely to one another.

“You can stay if you like,” the girl who wore glasses said. They kept slipping from her nose and she pushed them up with the back of her hand. “There’s plenty of room.”

“I just came to see,” Lynnie-girl said.

“Well we’re glad you did. It’s been awhile since anyone has been here.” The girl in the sweater started to braid the other’s hair. The car smelt like strawberries.

“My mom says you’re just a story.”

“A story about what?”
"A story like the boy in the cellar."

"Oh, we’ve heard that one, it’s a good one.” The girl then pushed up her glasses. "I heard that at night when the crickets are quiet you can hear him asking if he can come out."

"Do you think he could really survive in the cellar eating jars of jam?” Lynnie-girl said.

"Of course.” The two girls in yellow smiled. “You can stay if you like.”

"I know.”

But she did not. She pulled herself to the surface instead.
When I first read Lolita I was twelve-years-old. The paperback stood sandwiched between my father’s medical books and my mother’s romances high on the shelves that scaled the walls of the living room in our house on Cherrywood Ave. The book had always been a sort of forbidden wonder for me. Maybe it was that height, the way I had to tilt my head up and slightly toward the left, or the balancing act performed as I climbed with skinny arms and skinny legs up the fireplace mantle, just so I could reach that top shelf and tease the binding of the book with the tips of my fingers. Either way... It was a Tuesday morning I finally took Lolita down from its shelf and held the used paperback. It blossomed in my open hands and I devoured every word of Mr. Humbert Humbert like the juicy fruit from a flower – it was that romantic to me at the time, the blossoming, the juice, the devouring. And it was not long until the jealous adolescent in me came to find Lolita – Lo Lee Ta – my competitor. I was convinced she was too gangly, her black hair lacking the luster of my own. Her scabby knees, although Humbert Humbert found enduring, would scar. I dissected Lolita, limbs, knees, scars, the sassy way she carried herself, the bite in her tongue. Who is this girl, this Lolita who should get so much
attention? I had her boyish arms and legs, although not long and stringy; I was shorter than the average girl in my class – a good two inches, according to the charted list of names on a locker room poster. Petite, I suppose, with tiny hands and feet that I adored. I embellished my beloveds with layers of pink polishes and cheap charmed bracelets and rings, worn so long left circles of green tarnish from soap scum and sweat. I also favored my hair, a calming brown with an easy curl, just like my mother’s. It hung nicely on my shoulders. I found my belly button a bit faulty. It was sort of an outy-inny; I blamed my parents who must have tugged on the umbilical cord. It limited my swimsuit choices.

Recently I’d taken the risk of dropping my bath towel in front of the full-length mirror. A risk, because it was the first time I really decided to look. And the more I looked, the more I became convinced that with one glimpse of me, Humbert Humbert would forget his loved-proclaimed nymphet, and desire me. Convinced, confident, optimistic, wishful. Okay, wishful – I longed for such affection.

Wait. I have to start over.

I remember Lolita and I remember that Tuesday I first took the book from the shelf, because it was the first day my father, Dennis LaQuay, came home early from work. He walked through the front door on that Tuesday, slowly undoing the buttons of his coat; he revealed his suit beneath. He wore a suit to work six days a week, varying shades of gray that did not match his character – my father loved life, he loved work. I looked up at him from the living room floor where, with haste, I had tucked my forbidden book between the plush carpet and my chest. His slow moves frightened me. They were precise and calculated. He stared straight ahead, working on one wooden button at a
time, top to bottom. He was thinking. The buttons were only a distraction. He turned his
gaze toward me.

“Daddy,” I said with crimson cheeks as I flattened Lolita further into the carpet.

“Hello.”

He draped his coat over his arm and walked toward me with a steady march. I pushed the book toward my stomach and placed both elbows on the corners of the front and back cover. He knows, I thought, He must. Toes nearly touching my arm, he stopped and sat down on the ottoman. Its legs sunk into the carpet, and I watched as the rising cuffs of his pants exposed my father’s thin ankles, covered in black socks. With one elbow rested on his knee he ran his hand across his face. I could see the red stubble of his five o’clock shadow that lit like gold against his head-full of black hair. He was forty-two and looked like a boy.

“Miss Mary Mae,” he said with a touch of my head. “Where’s your mother?”

“She’s shopping with Aunt Kathy,” I said.

“Is she upset?”

“Upset about what?”

He said nothing, and left the room.

My family talks. They tell our history like Greek tragedies. No one is forgotten. There are stories of uncles, and cousins five times removed. They are detailed and exquisite, even when spat from the emotional mouth of a drunken relative. It is a contest: who remembers the most; what is your connection, your source, a mother, a sister, a letter. And they have visuals: the dining room table that came over on the ship, one chair
lost off the wagon when tackling a flooded road on the way to Michigan; a photograph of Great Aunt Elizabeth and her four-year-old boy, the only child left after a breeze of scarlet fever blew through the house and took the three other children. And I listen.

While I was climbing the shelves to Lolita, while my mother bought expensive shampoos with my aunt, Grandma Nellie died. My grandfather found her on the kitchen floor. He was used to waking up to smells of Midwestern breakfasts cooking in the kitchen. That morning was no different. Bacon was done, set in crisp rows on a paper towel to soak up the extra grease. There were eggs calmly boiling in a large pot. A light knocking sound came from the pot as the bubbling water tossed the eggs around. A cigarette was slowly burning in an ashtray on the middle of the kitchen table, and on the floor was my grandmother. She was on her stomach. She had collapsed between the doorway that led out to the garage – maybe she was taking out the garbage. Her upper body in the kitchen, legs spread on the three steps in the garage. Her hips held the door ajar. In her left hand, a teacup, broken on the floor, its handle still ringed around three fingers. The pieces would be swept up and thrown in the garbage with the breakfast by my mother the next day.

My father was the first one notified because he was the easiest to reach. He was always reachable, my father; he was always at work. I heard the phone ring that afternoon as I lay on my stomach, arched over Lolita on the living room floor, but did not answer. It could have been anyone.

I was sad. There is no real other way to describe that feeling. I was never angry. After all, she was old. Dozens of my schoolmates had lost grandparents, stories of which they confessed in English classes through personal essays assigned by the teacher. They
read their stories out loud. Standing in front of the class, hands at two and ten, reading
their essays entitled things like, "Dear Grandpa, We Miss You," "When Grandpa Died
This Summer," and "She's Still in my Heart." I can only imagine the comments our poor
Mrs. Hayman had to write in the margins:

So sorry about your grandfather. Remember to watch those fragments — "verb
and noun makes a sentence tidy and sound." B+

It is strange what remains of a person. I recall very little interaction with my
grandmother. But I can recite the stories about her: she smoked a pack or two a day since
the start of the second world war; in her younger years she was a nurse, a great one, I
suppose; she survived two infections of tuberculosis. What I remember is this: A
summer day in her kitchen when an inventive game of human bowling had developed out
of a set of empty cans of creamed corn, a pair of feet in clean cotton socks, a tiled kitchen
floor, and a rainy afternoon. It didn't take long for the innocent looking game to become
bloody as I slipped in my clean socks and landed nose first on the tile, inches from my
canned target. Grandma scooped me up off the floor and walked me to the bathroom,
both her hands cupped beneath my nose.

"This way," she said.

I pinched the bridge as she had shown me and followed her hands, puddled red.
In the bathroom she took off my shirt and lay me in the tub with towel-wrapped ice.

"You stay right there, girl," she said leaving the bathroom. Minutes later she
returned with a cup of tea licked with rum.

"Drink this. Then to bed." She placed her hands on her hips. Below them, on the
skirt of her dress, were smears of blood where she had wiped her covered hands.
“Serves you right.” She smiled.

That’s what I remember. Her smile, my blood.

I could not sleep the night she died. It had been a horribly hot summer; the heat stuck to skin and held tight. The sheet on my bed made me claustrophobic. I pushed them and my pillows onto the floor, and spread out across my bed. I lay there, a giant X, and watched the ceiling fan that spun in a solid circle, creating a large brown hole through the roof. And I listened to my mother cry. I had only seen her cry once before, at a wedding when I was four. She had smiled down at me through the dim yellow lights of the civic center. “Look, Mary Mae, they love one another.” But these were not wedding tears. I thought of Lolita, which I had nudged under my mattress. I had lingering thoughts of the fairy tale, The Princess and the Pea, as I lay restless on my bed. If only it were that simple. The green light from my radio read 4:37am. I had enough, and got up.

There are two rules to eavesdropping. The first is to always carry something, like a book or a toothbrush. That way if someone catches you you have an excuse. The second is to always go barefoot. Socks are too dangerous especially on hardwood floors. And shoes are out of the question, they are too noisy, and the key to eavesdropping is being quiet. Bare feet are not always foolproof, however. Like in the summer toes can stick to the floor, making a tic tic sound, tiptoeing across the surface. I was not eavesdropping as I passed my mother’s door – I knew why she was crying, there was no mystery in the moment. But I did want to be quiet. I had nothing to say to her, no words.
She was not my mother. A stranger or acquaintance would be easier to console. But I could not ignore her, and knocked on the bedroom door.

"Mom?" All I had to offer were questions.

She took a tight breath in the dark. I could not see her. "Yes, honey?"

"It's hot in my room."

A car drove by the front of the house and cast a broken beam of light through the blinds. My mother remained in the dark.

"Go back to bed, Mary Mae. It's been a long day."

"It's too hot." I turned on the hall light, and I looked at my dimly lit mother.

Sometimes I could feel myself as my mother.

It is not in our coloring, the shapes of our eyes or mouths. But I react like her, our expressions are the same. Although what we are reacting to might be different - we hate and love differently. I watched my mother on her bed that night, her knees tucked into her chest, resting her head on her fist. And I saw myself. As a twelve-year-old girl, I invested very little time or energy to reflect on this discovery - I saw myself in her. No, I saw her in myself. That was enough for me at the time. But now it is an exhausting essence, a puzzle I can never fully let rest. I knew exactly the way it felt when she rested her hand on her cheek; exactly the way her lip was crushed into her palm, pressure on her front teeth. The connection startles me, and I wonder if I will ever have an expression of my own. I wonder at night mostly, where exactly she ends and I begin. And I wonder if she thought this about her own mother. I think of her peering into the open coffin, looking at her mother dressed in the velvet blue suit she was married in, buried in. I do not know if my mother saw Grandma dead, before the funeral director and his machines
and needles and dyes got to her. But it terrifies me that she would have looked into her
mother’s death face and imagined her own.

I left my mother in her room and gently closed the door.

Downstairs at the refrigerator I took a drink of orange juice. It was starting to go,
and its bitter taste stung the back of my throat. The house was hot and silent in the dark.
I listened to my feet as they stuck to the kitchen tile that felt cool on my toes. I went to
the living room, looking for the television – I was looking for something to listen to,
noise. On the couch I covered my bear legs with a flannel throw and flipped through the
channels. I landed on one that was playing a late-late-early, showing of The Shining. I
watched Jack Nicholson swing an axe, “Here’s Johnny,” he said.

“I always thought that line was a little too ridiculous.” The voice came from a
large blue Lazy-boy in the corner of the room. It was my father.

“Dad,” I gasped his name, “you scared me.”

“Sorry,” he said. He smiled.

“Did I wake you?” I said.

“No.”

Although he was smiling my Dad remained close-lipped. His eyes locked with
the movie and the glowing flicker of the television made him appear rippled, like he was
swaying, a calm ghostly tremble. When he suddenly turned his head toward me, I
couldn’t keep from flinching.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” he said.

I nodded.
We sat there in silence for a time, watching the snow pile around Steven King’s haunted Colorado resort.

“Mom’s crying,” I said.

“I know, I think we should let her. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. This heat’s bothering me.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“It’s hot, Dad, that’s all.”

“Yeah, it bothers me too.” He leaned over and turned on a table lamp. “Go to sleep, Mary Mae.” He ordered me to bed – sitting there staring at the wall – and I obeyed.

I had never dealt with death before, and I found the entire process a bit all too dramatic. That was it – too performed – a whole production with the star in an expensively garnished wooden box at the center stage. People were ushered to their seats by the funeral director who had perfected his somber role over the years and deaths. I may have been a lot less cynical if my family was not involved. The setting is easy: McKee’s funeral home, an old Victorian that looked very similar to what it must have in its hay-days. The poolroom emptied and turned into the viewing room. A large fireplace occupied an entire wall of the expansive room, its mantle decorated with McKee family photographs, all of which were oversized and in expensive frames. A leaded glass chandelier, once hanging over the pool table, now hung low in the center of the room, its green and red glow adding to the atmosphere.

And then there were the performers.
An aunt and uncle arrived with my three cousins. The oldest, Matthew, did not come. His absence was frowned upon and left his parents embarrassed and ashamed. They had many explanations for his lack of attendance. I think he was just sad. Soon to follow were Uncle James, his wife and children (five). Then more names and faces – young, old, aunts, brothers, nieces, cousins first removed – found in family photo albums. It was frequently noted that unlike the rest of the three siblings, my mother had only borne one child, me, and approaching forty, showed no signs of having another. I do not know if she ever wanted more children. I have not asked, because I do not know what answer I am looking for.

There was something about the McKee’s, something about the way waves of people – some smiles, some understanding nods, others choked tears – that made me uncomfortable. I wandered throughout the parlor, through the oversized couch and the plastic plants. I made my way to the kitchen, through the trays of store-bought sugar cookies. I found my way to the rows of folding chairs, trying to find my place, my seat: first up front, but I had never been comfortable at the head of anything, then the end seat some ten rows back; one in the center. Finally I came to a stationary location, an empty wall next to a table topped with magazines – *Newsweek, Parenting* – and a box of tissues. Here I watched.

A man in his forties came in carrying a picture. He clutched it to his chest, his blue tie hanging over the front. He spotted my mother and walked toward her. They exchanged smiles as they viewed the photograph. She laughed. The coffee was set on the floor. She pointed to the picture, then to the man; she tapped her fingernail on her front tooth. They enjoyed the picture, it’s black frame facing me. I followed the man,
the frame, as he took it to the table designated for such things. The photo looked like this: a pair of toddlers, no older than four, were sitting bareback on a mule. The child in front was wearing a straw hat, frayed – left in the care of young children. The child was pointing at the ground – a gray gravel road, its dust had gathered around the feet of the mule. Standing, manning the mule, a boy, maybe a brother, maybe a cousin, looked where the finger pointed. They stared together. And a girl, smiling, rode behind the straw-hat boy. Her eyes on the photographer. The little girl’s hands seemed to be in mid-clap, a possible wave, blurred into a gray ball just under her chin. I had never seen this photograph before. At the edge of the table, I was joined by my father.

“Looks like your mother.” He picked up the photo and wiped the frame clean with his sleeve.

“Her hair is different,” I said.

I looked at the other faces displayed on the table – young, old – as my mother appeared behind me. She took the framed photo of the toddlers and the mule from Dad.

“Who is that?” It was a question I wanted to address to the whole room. There were people all around me; the funeral home was filling up. Occasionally they would pass by my father, mother, and I and clutch their hands or give me a wink. It wasn’t only the photographs, wasn’t only the toddlers on the mule, there was a roomful of strangers. Mourners whom I had never seen cried for my grandmother, laughed in quiet stories. I felt very alone at the table filled with pictures of my grandmother’s life, of the people she loved, a life I didn’t know at all.

As the minutes passed, I made my way back to the aisles of chairs. I saw the photograph man and sat quietly beside him with my ankles neatly crossed.

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“I like that picture,” I said to the man who made my mom smile. My shoulder was touching his sleeve.

“Which one?”

“The one you brought.”

He thanked me. He smelt so sweet – soap and sugar and almond. I let a ring slip off my finger and as I rose, picking it off the floor, I sat down closer to the man so our thighs touched. I took long, deep breaths and closed my eyes as I exhaled.

He asked my name.

“Mary,” I said.

“Mary... Oh, you’re Mora’s daughter, Mary Mae.”

I nodded into my chest.

“Well that makes us cousins.”

I asked him if he needed anything to drink and pointed him toward the kitchen, then immediately kicked myself for doing so – I did not want him to leave my side. He said he wasn’t thirsty, I was grateful. I would have followed him like stray pup.

I looked down at our feet. I wore sandals and reached my toes toward his shiny black shoe. They touched.

The man stood, causing his own sweet breeze. If I had been more ridiculous I would have swooned.

“Nice to meet you, Mary Mae.” He brushed his palms on his pants and walked away. It was enough that he left me with his smell.

I soon felt a tap on my shoulder and turned, hoping to see the man again, but instead it was my father, now separate from Mom. He handed me a glass of water and he
pointed me toward a woman who had scorched her mouth on the cheap bitter coffee. I walked to her and handed her the glass. She smiled to my father, than down at me mouthing a thank you. Four months later my father would marry this woman who nursed her burnt tongue on the cold water, who I would call Barbara. A year later, as a rainy summer came to an end, I would have sex with her son, my stepbrother, Peter.

I noticed Peter – that day – between the sea of family, the old ladies who crossed themselves in the room corners, the men who stood jingling change in their pockets. He wore a white collared shirt with no tie and a pair of sloppily pleated navy pants. I spoke to him as he came out of the bathroom.

“How do you know Grandma Nellie?” I said.

“I don’t,” he said.

“Me either.”

Later, at home, I made myself a sandwich of turkey mustard, and drank the ends of forgotten wineglasses that adults left spotted throughout the house. I did not see Peter or his mother, but they might have been there. I did not look. Instead, I tucked into my room and consumed *Lolita*. I read the story of my rival, the words of her bobby socks and apple knees hitting my head like a splash of rum. And I sat lightheaded over the voices of my family that leaked up through the rafters, the warm air of their breath filling my room, sweat beading on my upper lip, I imaged myself as Lolita. Not she herself, but, me, the girl with Humbert Humbert – I could not wait. I read eagerly, to the scene where the two lay side by side in the hotel bed, waiting for that sex, then only to find it anything
but climatic, leaving them with the perpetual feeling of being let down. It was years later until I realized that this was the point exactly.
The television was always on so we could listen to something other than ourselves. It was across from the couch, the brown and orange couch; a reject from the living room that was cast into the basement where the lighting was bad anyway. A used couch, you could sink into it. Especially with an eighteen-year-old hockey player on top of you – getting ready to score again after his four-goal game on Friday.

“Mount Saint Helen…” the television was saying. That night it was the news, though all programs looked the same with your eyes shut – a blue *flick* *flick* *flicker*.

*Mount*, I thought, and ran through the definition in my head.

A. Mount – a mountain  
B. Mount – sex slang  
C. Mount – to display  

I circled B.

But it was when I heard “the eruption,” that I opened my eyes. No not yet, I thought, not even for him. And then I laughed.

“What’s so funny,” the hockey player said.

“Oh, that just tickled,” I said.

“Tickled.” He closed his eyes. I turned my head toward the television and watched.

The top of the mountain was gone, they said. Floating in the sky like a black cloud. It snowed ash and dust over houses. The camera panned across men in goggles
and facemasks trying to dig out their cars, and a woman brushing off lilac bushes with a broom.

What they didn’t show were the crazies running out of their homes grabbing the dusty powder in their hands shouting, “See I told you Cocky Locky!”

And the children, adding just a bit of water to make paste, to make clay. They made ashmen on the lawns with small heads and large bodies. Sometimes the children would wave to their fathers who shoveled the dust into drifts along the driveway, while their mothers shouted from the doorways, “Just wait until it stops. Shoveling won’t do any good until the dust stops.”

Then the children would take a handful from one ashman – from the hip or thighs to make another. Playing God. What did they care, school was cancelled for the day.

“Oh God, my God,” I said.

“Not so loud,” the hockey player smiled. “My parents might hear.”

But I was talking about the state of Washington, suffocating on the television.
Santino and Dead Marta

Twenty years ago, when Santino walked the path behind his home, one hand in his pocket the other with a fistful of sunflower seeds, he would imagine the death of his wife, Marta. Sometimes she would choke on a thick mound of peanut butter. Alone in the house with no one to help her she would push her abdomen against the sharp corner of the kitchen island – just as they had shown her in elementary school, You can do it yourself, Mrs. McKinney said, Just use as much force as you can. Crack a rib if you need to; anything’s better than death – but the peanut butter would stay stuck and she would die cursing herself for taking such a big bite. With a mouthful of sunflower seeds Santino would imagine an electrical fire. Accidentally wrapping her hand around a shredded vacuum cord. The electrical shock taking care of her long before the fire had its chance. She would never die of old age in his imagination, never become sick. Marta was much too shy for cancer, much too young to imagine with gray skin and an old heart.

Her mortality started almost immediately after they were married. Two days into their honeymoon, Santino lay on his back, watching the ceiling fan as it spun a large hole into the roof of their cheap, but cozy, cabin in Northern Minnesota with his new wife beside him. The heat was unbearable, and limited their love making, too sticky to do anything more then spread out on top of the sheets. Santino thought of Marta, imagining her putting away her wedding gown, borrowed from her mother. Climbing the attic stairs, she would forget about the loose one on the top, even though Santino had warned her a number of times, had covered it in bright red tape, had shown it to her the first night
they moved into their new home after he discovered it while putting away boxes of old year books, had shown her how to avoid it, Marta would step on the top step, breaking it and her neck as she tumbled to the floor.

"Santino," Marta said laying next to her husband as he thought of her death.

"Santino.

"Hmn?"

“What are you thinking about?”

He turned to look at his new wife, her dark hair spread in a large nest on her pillow, wisps sticking to her cheeks and in the corners on her mouth. It would have been easy to tell her. She would have laughed it off, maybe even wishing he would disclose some of the gory details. But instead, Santino said he wasn’t thinking about anything.

“It’s this heat,” he said. “Makes me simple.”

A year later they had talked about children. Death by childbirth, thought Santino, but that daydream was quickly subdued when Marta flinched at the idea of a child.

“Children will come when they are needed,” she said.

Santino thought she was right, he liked her casual approach. That was part of the problem – he liked his wife, he just liked the idea of her death as well.

One year of dead Marta turned into ten, turned into twenty. Now, at forty-three, they had no children, they had a dog, Argus, and were starting to talk about the weather. Santino had made it a habit of walking after breakfast behind their house. Once railroad tracks, the path had been paved and landscaped. It ran for miles, in and out of the city. Weeks earlier, before he had officially decided to stop showing up to work, Santino followed the path for miles until it came to a highway heading north. The path leads
forever, Santino thought looking at the highway, an extension of the path, *It can take me anywhere I want to go.* He didn’t return home until dusk.

“How was your day?” Marta had asked.

“You know,” he said, and she nodded as though she did.

Leaning against the tall oak in their backyard, just off of the path, forty-three-year-old Santino could see his wife through the living room window. Inside their small two bedroom home – yellow shutters, yellow carpet – Marta did not see her husband as she ironed a blue blouse. Standing tiptoed in bare feet, she made her way between small buttons. Straightening the sleeves, she burnt the three tall fingers on her left hand, melting the edges of her brightly painted nails, leaving a charred black line on their tips. Santino watched as Marta swore silently to herself and brought her burnt fingers to her mouth. She then pulled them out and blew – cool on the touchy and wet tips – looking as though she were sending a kiss to her husband. Santino, alone in their backyard, returned the gesture, but Marta turned back to her ironing, her minor injury already forgotten.

Dinner that night was pork chops and sauerkraut. It had marinated for hours in the crock-pot, along with a few thinly sliced apples on top. They sat across from one another at the dining room table.

“Cold today,” Marta said.

“Yes, I thought this was supposed to be summer.” He laughed at his own attempt at humor. Politely, Marta did the same.
At night Marta spread her body across her husband’s stomach while he traced figure 8’s with his finger on her back. It was quiet, with only the light click of the fan and the rhythm of Marta’s breath carrying on any conversation. He laid there, underneath his wife, stomach to stomach, skin to skin, making an X with their bodies, or a T – depending on the view.

“I love you, Santino,” Marta said interrupting.

“I love you too,” he answered. It was the expected answer and necessary response, like Marco Polo – the game couldn’t be played without it.

Santino left Marta in bed, breaking the T or X into I’s.

“I’m going for a walk,” Santino said.

“I’m staying here,” Marta said.

On the path Santino imagined Marta suffocating in the bathtub.

Santino hid from Marta. He heard their truck before he saw it coming down the highway, the truck they had bought years ago. Santino had thought about the truck and Marta as well, the two of them tumbling over a bridge or stalling on the middle of a train track. Santino had been walking along the highway for awhile. Maybe twenty minutes, maybe forty minutes, it didn’t really matter, he had no where to be. The right side of his face was hot and pink from the sun. He could have fallen asleep, he was tired, and it was quiet.

But instead he kept walking, moving like an old man, frozen knees and elbows, and backed behind a bush; its needle hands holding crushed fall leaves. He bent slowly at the waist and rested his hands on his knees. As Marta and the truck came closer,
Santino started to smile a bit, lowering his body some more, turning it into a game. His heart beat faster as Marta approached. *She might see you,* he thought, *then what? What would Marta say if she saw you hiding from her?* He thought he could tell her he had a business trip today he forgot to mention, and pulled along the road after a flat tire. But the absent car was a problem. He might be able to distract her with a story of a rabbit family he saw down the road – she had a thing for soft animals. “A rabbit?” he could hear her say, and maybe she would ask him what color it was. Later that night they could talk about the rabbit: the size, maybe the breed. “Do rabbits have breeds?” They could talk about that too. There’d be no mention of children though: they had already discussed a child.

And maybe they would rent that movie, the one with the talking animals, but it would be too childish, but they wouldn’t be able to decide on another so they’d watch T.V. until the late night show, and the couch would be two-bodies-full, and they’d fall asleep there.

But she drove by instead and Santino was relieved. He stood and leaned in toward the bush letting the leaves prick through his pants, lightly nipping at his thighs, and watched the dirty white truck climb the road, their dog, Argus’s head poking out the window.

Santino sat on a stool at Polly’s Bar. He had been coming there for weeks. The bar was different at night, noisy. People were happy and chatty at night bars. Welcoming the darkness and the company of strangers, they laughed and danced at one another. During the day, no one spoke. Instead gray men in matching suits and
struggling farmers sipped the light-grained afternoon special and over-tipped the bartender. These afternoon men had little to say to one another, and Santino like it that way, it was what he looked for in his visits to the bar: cheap beer and loneliness.

On his regular perch, a corner stool, Santino folded his cardboard coaster into an airplane. He took aim at the bartender, whose back was turned as he fixed bottles against the wall, but suddenly turned and threw his paper toy toward the door. It sailed straight and slid to a graceful stop on the floor mat whose letters read "Welcome" when entering and "See You Soon," leaving. The door opened. Christmas bells that should have been removed months ago, jingled on the handle. The airplane was carried out with a breeze and a thin elfish girl entered the bar. Santino looked at her long enough to decide that she could not be much older than twenty-one and then dismissed her, turning back to his drink. As he brought the drink down, raising it a bit too high, causing the beer to kiss his nose, the elfish girl sat next to him.

"Hi," she said.

Santino smiled, but quickly wiped it away, along with the wetness on his nose.

The bartender approached and asked for some I.D. The girl dug in her back pocket and proudly pulled out her license.

"Just turned twenty-one yesterday." She tucked her short choppy hair behind her ears, more out of habit, possibly reminiscent of her long-hair days.

"Shouldn't you have a hangover today?" the bartender joked.

"Don't worry, I will."

He handed her back her license and she turned toward Santino. The girl said nothing, but sat and smiled as though waiting for him to say something. So he did.
“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. What are you drinking?”

Santino finished the rest of his drink. “Nothing, just on my way out.” He opened his wallet and laid a five on the bar. He wanted to avoid this conversation and hoped St. Johnny’s down the block would be open and a little less social.

“Stay awhile. You’re not going to make me drink alone on my birthday, are you?” The strap of her tank top kept sliding down her shoulder. She pushed it up with her thumb.

“Your birthday was yesterday.”

“Come on, Man. I’ll buy. Anything you want.”

Santino stopped. He checked his watch: 2:37. He thought he had heard that St. Johnny’s didn’t open until four anyway. Seeing he was staying, the girl motioned the bartender over again.

“Give him whatever he wants. I’m buying.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

Santino motioned to his empty glass. “Another,” he said.

“Bring me one too,” the girl said.

When the drinks arrived, the girl insisted on making a toast. She raised her glass in the air.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Santino.”

“Want to know mine?”

He shrugged.
“Santino, Man, you got to get into this a little bit. What’s better than a free drink and a cute girl buying it for you?” She smiled at this and Santino returned it with his own weak version.

“All right. So what is your name?” he said.

“Carla. So, to Santino and Carla – may they get drunk and be happy.”

Santino tipped his glass toward hers. She took five hard swallows as he only tasted his own.

Carla ordered a basket of greasy fries and covered them in a layer of salt and catsup. She got to talking about her boyfriend, a boy named Joe, who worked up in Duluth as a sports broadcaster for the local television station. He is going to go far, she said, thought he was cut out for stardom. Carla’s parents thought he was no good, something about drug dealing in high school.

“The charges were dropped anyway. My parents are such hypocrites. My best friend’s mom’s sister’s friend said my parents used to grow weed in the basement when they were first married.”

Santino watched as she talked, drank, ate a fry, and talked. He wondered if she could chew her food without talking or if motion of any kind from her mouth made it impossible for her to prevent words from coming out. She finished her fries and three beers before Santino had finished his drink. He was exhausted by her energy, by the way she confessed things to total strangers. Although, he was sure she would argue they were no longer strangers. “No way,” he could hear her say. “No way. You’re my Man, Santino.” Maybe strangers were easier. As she took a break in her story to swallow, Santino took a chance.
“My wife’s dead,” he said.

“Your wife?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, Santino, Man, I’m sorry.” She put her empty drink down and made a quick motion for another.

“Yeah, car accident. It was dark and rainy, you know, that whole kind of thing.”

“Was she hit?” Carla had leaned in a lot closer to Santino. She now put her hand on his shoulder and one over her mouth. Her eyes were wide.

“No, just lost control and went over a cliff.”

“A cliff? Where’d she go over a cliff?”

“In Montana. She was going to visit our daughter at college over the Thanksgiving break. Suddenly, that was all over, over a cliff.”

“You’ve got a daughter?”

“Three of them. Youngest is just starting third grade.” Santino check his watch again: 4:19. “In fact, I need to be getting home here and start dinner. Sitter drops her off around 5:00.”

Santino stood and Carla’s hand slid down his arm and held on to his hand. He let it stand there and she ran her fingers over his knuckles. He looked into her eyes, now cloudy with beer.

“5:00?” she said. “There’s still some time then.”

“Time?”

“I’m going that way anyhow.”

“What way?”
"Your way."

"Just like that, dead wife, and you'll come home with me?"

"Just like that."

Santino left the girl at the bar. As he went out the door – jingle bells – he heard her laughing with the bartender. The bar was starting to pick up, the day turning into night – he knew she wouldn’t be alone for long.

He drove home with the windows down – the eighty-degree wind warm on his lips – and the radio on. He turned the volume as loud as it would go until individual songs were no longer recognizable, blending the base and lead into one giant noise. At the two lights he stopped at, annoyed drivers gave him sour looks. Santino returned their looks with a calm smile. This confused the driver, unsure of their own mannerisms – not knowing whether to politely smile back or return to their angry condition – they turned their heads forward and waited impatiently for the light to change.

Pulling into the driveway, Santino flipped off the radio, flipped off his smile. The house was empty. In the kitchen he found a coffee mug placed on the opened newspaper, the crossword puzzle started: clues Marta had recently been there. Santino ran his finger on the top of the mug, one side stained with red lipstick. It was still warm. He sat in the chair where Marta had, drinking her coffee and reading the newspaper. Santino looked at the crossword. Twenty-one across: HELENA. Eleven down: TACKY. Fifty-seven across: MARTIN. In thirty down Marta had written ECHOED. Santino picked up the pen to his right and sketched over the word with PARROT, retracing each letter heavier and darker into the newsprint.
Santino got up and brought the coffee mug to the sink. He poured its dark and sugared contents (that’s how she took her coffee, a lot of sugar) down the drain. He rinsed the mug, a quick one-two with cold water, and placed it next to the coffee maker, its home for the past twenty years. In a drawer, Santino dug through old batteries – maybe still of some use, a little life in them yet – paper clips, calling cards, birthday candles and loose change, and pulled out a pad of paper and a pencil. He wrote with care, capitalizing each letter like those in the crossword: I HAVEN’T BEEN TO WORK IN THREE WEEKS. Replacing the coffee mug, Santino left the note on the table.

A knock at the door.

Santino made his way to the front door where someone was knocking and trying to turn the locked knob. The doorbell was pressed impatiently, its electronic bells cutting each other off in their ring. Santino walked slowly to the door. Through the peephole he could see her, his wife, Marta. She had locked herself out. Santino glanced at the keys that hung from the pastel poodle and pepper spray key chain that sat comfortably on a small table next to the door. There was little more than two feet between the keys and their owner on the other side of the door. Santino watched as Argus paced nervously around Marta’s legs, matching his agitation to hers. Through the small hole, the large dog appeared to be the size of a Yorkshire, a mere squirrel at the feet of this giant woman whose body was disproportioned: colossal head and shoulders, infant-like legs and feet. Marta’s furrow consumed her face as she searched through her purse, giving it another chance to turn over her keys. Santino could see his car behind her, tiny as a Matchbox, like the ones he collected as a kid, the ones that were sold to a surely eight-year-old boy with a juice-stained mouth at a garage sale years earlier. His car told Marta he was home.
She rang the doorbell two more times before leaning against the door – her dark curls blackening Santino’s view. Marta slid her body down and sat against the foot of the door. He could only see her legs now, covered in faded blue jeans. Argus scratched his ear with his hind leg and spread across Marta. Closing one eye, then holding it shut with his hand when his face began to tire, Santino watched them, his dog, his wife. Twenty minutes passed as Marta’s legs sat quiet in the summer sun. Argus had closed his eyes and fallen asleep. And Santino waited, one hand on his eye, one rounding the doorknob, for the dog to wake.
And Here's the Worst of It

I had to ask my younger sister how to give a blowjob – and I remember it was not too long before this that she asked my advice on whether or not to try pot. She was fourteen and willowy and I said, Don’t you think you’re a little young? I’m sure I even patted her shoulder. And now I had to look her in the eyes with all seriousness and ask her about tension and pressure when I couldn’t even get myself to say the actual words. Instead I mumbled some Catholic girl nonsense – which we both were and should have been a justification rather than an excuse – about going down on a guy, You know, a BJ. This came out in a cupped whisper as I shifted my eyes toward the door disguising my embarrassment as fear that our dad might be listening on the other side.

The object of my blowjob desire was the foreign exchange student from Spain, or Italy, somewhere like that where the men are dark and thin. It wasn’t so much that he was foreign to me, but that I was to him. He allowed me to ignore the fact that like every girl who walked the halls of St. Benedict’s High School I wore a solid navy jumper and a white button shirt, and smelt of toothpaste and detergent. But it wasn’t just that, it was what I heard from behind the open door of my locker, the flimsy dented piece of metal that was between me and those words that came from the foreign exchange student’s mouth as he leaned casually on his elbow next to a tow-headed boy who was in my English class, one hand in his pocket and said, “Well ya, she gives great head.” Well ya, she gives great head, he said them so slowly that I almost mouthed the words along with him - thick words that stuck to his tongue – drawn out and so enunciated I was self-
conscious of his accent. Than I heard a knock on my locker. Two long knocks, *great head*. I shut the door and looked at the foreign exchange student. He smiled. The tow-headed boy giggled.

He had obscenely thick eyebrows that cupped and shaped his eyes. I wondered how he would make expressions without such black beasts. My grandfather had a stroke when he was sixty. I remember visiting him when I was five. He gathered me to his side while my mother made juice from a can in the kitchen. *Mary had a little lamb, Who she took to bed to sleep, It turns out it was a ram, And now she's full of sheep.* What do you think of that, my own little Miss Mary, he said. Then he laughed out of the right side of his mouth, without showing any teeth and fell asleep before my mother returned with the juice. She poured him a glass and left it on the coffee table. I watched my grandfather sleep and tipped over the glass – the juice disappeared into the shag carpet. *I loved* those eyebrows.

For weeks I would walk by the foreign exchange student in the school hallways, my thighs warm and sticky, and smile into the books that I clutched to my chest, *he thinks I give great head*. But I didn’t, although I had once kissed a boy on the stomach just above the waist of his underwear – small little pecks in a line, connecting the button of his belly and his pants. But who knows what I would do if the occasion ever rose? That is why I sat with my sister on the edge of her bed, behind closed doors, and practiced my technique in the mirror while my sister instructed – two hands, one hand, no hands.
Then there were the pebbles on the window. I woke to their tick tick. My sister and I shared bunk beds and I climbed down from the top, over her and opened the window to the night air. It was him. “Oh, Mary,” he said in his thick beautiful words, “I was looking for Grace.” My sister appeared from behind me and nodded down to the boy on our lawn with a handful of pebbles. She gathered her slippers and ran from our bedroom, quiet as the breeze on the hardwood floors.

I looked back out the window – he smiled and waved.

I climbed onto my bed. An off-centered ceiling fan, three feet from where I slept wobbled slightly making a quiet tick tick. I watched it, spinning into a blurred brown circle, a hole in the top of the house. I closed my eyes and felt the warm outside wind. I could hear them, my sister, the foreign exchange student. The tick tick, great head. I could do better, I thought. With an arms reach I stopped the blades of the fan, leaving a bracelet of purple bruises on my wrist.
Aggie would not have entered the small lingerie shop had she not dropped her keys. They fell at the foot of a tall man in a gray suit as he opened the door on his way out of the store. He picked the keys up and stretched out his hand to Aggie – the bells of the lingerie door still ringing in her ears – she took hold of them between her thumb and middle finger. She smiled a thank you as he left. In front of her, the door was open. With little thought, a little coaxing from the giant black and white photos of women’s torsos in expensive fitting underwear, Aggie walked in the store.

Inside the glowing pinks and hot purples made her dizzy, or maybe it was the messy combination of scented candles and colorful lotions that customers sampled on the back of their hands. The store was foreign to her: silky, lacy, tiny, all things that were absent from her wardrobe.

She waded through the sales rack, touching only the item’s hangers, afraid that contact with the fabric would force her to commit to an article. With her right hand she held up a polk-a-dot pair of underwear, flipped it back and forth, checked its price, and put it back. In her left hand was a plastic bag, carrying a smartly wrapped pack of stationary with a large embossed G on the envelops, that she had bought hours earlier. The G stood for Glenda, her co-worker, her co-worker who was having a birthday party tonight, and Aggie was going.

They worked at Willington’s, a low-end locally owned department store with two other regional branches. Aggie had worked in the shoe department for the past six years.
where she felt responsible for finding the customers’ perfect size of the red boot with a
three-inch heel, a suede men’s slipper to replace the well-loved older pair, the running
shoe with green stripes on the side and toe — I won’t race without my lucky color — in the
back where only the employees, the shoe department employees, were allowed to go.
Glenda worked across the aisle in Professional Women. She had bleach-striped hair that
ran to the middle of her back and was immediately popular on her arrival at Willington’s.
Aggie would watch Glenda as she gossiped with other co-workers in the first hours of the
morning when the department store was especially quiet. She watched as she weaved in
and out of the rows of suits and Oxford shirts, waiting to catch Glenda’s eye so she could
smile and wave. Her birthday party was posted in the employee lunchroom; an open
invitation to all.

Aggie tapped her bagged present at her side. She was not very excited about her
gift, although she read somewhere that stationary was a personal and proper party item to
give. But still, she was disappointed about giving Glenda nothing more than some fancy
paper.

The store seemed completely empty and Aggie began to worry that it was closed
— the tall gray-suited man maybe the last customer, or owner just forgetting to lock-up for
the night; she blamed her keys — and she walked in accidentally after hours. Then out of
an arched doorway, leading to a room that played muted Gospel, appeared a short stout
woman dressed entirely in black. She marched toward Aggie, almost a goosestep. Aggie
was amazed and frightened by the limber walk, confined only by the length and tight fit
of her skirt. She could hear the seam start to rip with every short-legged step.
“Welcome, welcome,” the woman said stretching out her arms. Aggie thought she was initiating a hug and in politeness, out of habit, started to spread her arms to match the woman’s. To cover up her greeting mistake, Aggie awkwardly ran her hands through her hair then straightened out the bottom of her shirt.

The woman told Aggie her name. Aggie told her she thought they were closed and she was leaving.

“Not closed. Just out back smoking. Shhh.” The woman put her finger to her lips. Pulling it away, the kiss of her lipstick circled her plump knuckle. “What can I do you for?”

“Just sort of looking.”

“Speak up, dear, we’re not schoolgirls here are we. You are as quiet as a British fart.”

“A what?”

“Oh, you know England.” The woman waved away her comment.

“I’m only looking.”

“Well, look over here.”

“I’m just on my way out.”

“Not without one of these.” The woman picked up a mild pink slip. It was silk and lace. She held it straight-armed out to Aggie who looked around the store, paranoid anyone else might have entered unnoticed. “Go try it on.”

“I can’t,” she said.
“Sure you can. And here,” the woman grabbed two modestly cut cotton bras off the rack and handed them to Aggie. “Take these back with you if that will make you more comfortable. A-cup right?”

Aggie did as she was told and took her three items behind a draped fitting room. The woman left her there with her reflection saying she would give her a minute or two. Aggie tried on the bras. As she was putting on the second one, the woman Aggie had already forgotten the name of, poked her head in.

“You still in those bras? Come on, girl, get to the good stuff.”

She was self-conscious about showing skin, whether it was her own or someone else’s. Occasionally, this affected her work when a customer asked for a sandal or a snug fit pump requiring her to find a sheer hose to replace their sock. Aggie waited for the woman to leave. They stood in silence for two steady beats until the woman enthusiastically made her request again.

“Need help?” she said.

“No, thank you.”

“Okay, just let me know when you’re done.”

As soon as the woman left, Aggie quickly changed into the lacy slip, wanting to finish before she came back. She loosened the straps to lengthen the hemline so it covered her knees, but tightened them again when it started to show the shadows of her chest. She wrapped her arms around her.

“That is wonderful.” The saleswoman’s floating head said pushing through the drape on her return. She pulled the rest of the door back sending a chilling breeze
through the dressing room. “You see this? You see? The solid color, its long length?
This really shortens your long torso. Come out here and look.”

She took Aggie’s hand, the lipstick still on her finger, and led her to a large three-way mirror. As a girl, Aggie towered nearly a foot over her schoolmates until around the age of thirteen when the rest of the girls started to catch up. Now in her early thirties, she still walked with her shoulders hunched and her head dragged toward her toes.

“Stand up. Get your shoulders back.”

Trying to fix years of bad posture, she forced her chest out. She turned in the mirror – slightly – trying to take a look at herself without the other woman noticing. The slip was very soft.

“I know you like it. There isn’t anything fancier than that silk. What woman wouldn’t want this?”

“I’m in retail too.”

“You are? Well, then you know.”

“Actually,” Aggie ran her hands along her forearms. “I’m in shoes.”

“Shoes?” she shook her head. “You lucky girl.”

Aggie left the stationary at the lingerie store in the dressing room under a small chair. She bought the slip in a small for herself, and another for Glenda – medium. “Get it for her. Get it. She’ll love it! She will love it,” the saleswoman said as Aggie described the party, described Glenda. The two slips were neatly laid out on her bed as she stepped into the shower to get ready for the night. She usually cleaned her house on Fridays, but the day’s activities, and the night’s, replaced that chore. She ran a sudsy
washcloth along the fixtures and the shower door to loosen some of the soap scum; a quick cleaning solution. Aggie lived alone in her one-bedroom, two-bath, yellow stucco. And although she was surrounded by neighbors it had a huge lawn, hedges running along the property line, that made the house seem distant and separate from the rest of the neighborhood. Aggie bought it for that lawn with grand ideas of a fantastic vegetable garden in the back, or some creative curbside appeal in the front: she had thought birch trees, magnolia, and a stone wall. But the vastness of the lawn became overwhelming. The garden forgotten, tall grasses quickly grew around the trunks of the yard’s maples, and dandelions overran the grass.

Inside were the furnishings Aggie had grown up with. The painted light-blue flowered dishes had more cracks now than when she was a girl, a few missing from the original set: a butter dish Aggie shattered when she was ten; a serving platter, hot from that night’s dinner, split in two when she ran it under cold water. The walls in the family room were decorated with paintings her mother found at a garage sale before her daughter was born. Three pirates, the middle one Aggie could never decide whether it was a man or woman because of its feminine characteristics: long gold hair, hooped earrings, and lips a little too pink. In her dreams the three were men. All were inherited — dishes, pirate paintings — from her mother when she died. Breast cancer.

“It’s genetic, Aggie,” her mother had said while pointing at her daughter’s chest. “Even the small ones get it. You think you are safe with those? You’re not.”

The shampoo and water rinsed down her face, eyes tight. She had purchased a pair of contact lenses — nothing fancy, tint-free and disposable — two weeks earlier, replacing the heavy glasses that constantly slipped from the bridge of her nose. The
contacts, which made her eyes dry, were Glenda's idea, or rather, because of her. It was that half-hour drama in the lunchroom about a month ago when Glenda lost one of her contact lenses while building a ham and cheese sandwich, folding her slices orderly and even on the bread, as calculated as she folded rows of disheveled sweaters. A large handful of Willington's workers crawled on their hands and knees searching for the missing lens. Even a mechanic named Allen, whom people rarely saw unless there was an emergency with the escalator or a burnt out light somewhere in the corner of the store, pitched in. They searched like children on a playful and competitive treasure hunt, the lucky winner collecting their enthusiastic prize: an indebted hug, and a squealed gleeful thank you from the grateful owner.

Aggie rubbed her eyes in the shower, and picked at a mole above her belly button until the water ran cold.

Glenda's home was six blocks away from Aggie's yellow stucco. She walked, trying not to rub her dry eyes. At the foot of Glenda's driveway she stopped, wrapped a rubber band into her limp hair (it was frizzy in the winter), and wet her eyes with some over-the-counter drops, a few too many which teared onto her collar.

Aggie pressed the doorbell with her thumb. A redheaded woman, who Aggie had never seen before, answered the door. Behind her a hum rose as people passed with colorful drinks in their hands.

"Is this Glenda's?" Aggie asked.

"Of course," the woman answered. "You coming in?"

Aggie stepped into the house.
She was late. She missed the Happy Birthday song; they had already gotten to the cake, its icing a photo of Glenda, the same head shot that hung on the *Get to Know Your Co-Worker* bulletin board at Willington's. Pieces of her right shoulder were missing. Opened presents piled on a table next to the cake. Aggie sifted through them, lifting a bag of soaps and sea salts, a gift certificate for two to the local golf course—*I didn’t know she golfed*—a hand knitted scarf, a DVD set of the collected works of Meg Ryan.

Aggie looked at her present. She had wrapped it twice. First the corners were creased too many times as she attempted to make the perfect fold. She started over when a piece of stray tape caught to the top of the package and ripped a small hole in the paper when Aggie tried to remove it. She carried it around the room like an accessory, looking for Glenda. There were a couple other co-workers throughout the room, she politely waved or nodded in their direction. She spotted Glenda standing in a circle of people, a few other familiar faces acknowledged Aggie as she looked for an opening. Glenda wore a yellow cocktail dress that matched the stripes in her hair. She took tiny sips of her drink while talking about the ride home from last night's date.

“And he pretended to run over the dog. Can you believe that asshole?”

Aggie waited until the story was over to speak. “Happy birthday,” she said.

Glenda’s attention was on the redhead woman now standing at her left. Something was funny, and they fell toward each other when they laughed.

“Happy birthday, Glenda.” She tried again. This time she was heard.

“Thank you. Is that for me?”

Aggie held her present out to Glenda who handed her drink to her laughing friend.

“Forgive me...Sara?”
“It’s Aggie.”

“Right, of course. You work in shoes. Lucky girl.” Glenda shook her present.

“May I?”

She slowly untied the bow before ripping into the careful wrapping. Aggie immediately knew she had made a mistake. Glenda held up the slip in front of her, letting the box and its bright wrapping fall to the floor.

“Is that lingerie?” the redheaded woman said.

“It’s a slip,” Aggie said.

“A slip?” Glenda was still holding it in front of her, dangling it into the middle of the circle.

“I have one just like it. See?” Aggie undid one of the buttons from her shirt and exposed a strap.

Glenda eyed the lacy top, she eyed Aggie.

“The saleswoman said...It looks great on, trust me.”

Glenda gave her a quick smile, a quick thank you. She causally excused herself from the group, the redhead girl closely behind, followed by the rest of the circle. Aggie watched as Glenda passed the table of presents and tossed the slip onto the pile. It fell to the floor, unnoticed by the birthday girl.

She took a large piece of cake, Glenda’s left ear, to the empty patio. Aggie held it with a napkin, finishing it in three bites. It was just over a half-hour since she had arrived, and she felt obligated to stick around a while, even if it was outside, alone, in the dark. Glenda’s home was part of the new addition that butted into the old one where Aggie
resided. Her backyard was empty of any real growth, one or two barren saplings just like the surrounding yards, their property lines blending together. A few neighbors were still awake, glowing windows giving away their positions in the house. She was counting the lit squares – twenty-seven: thirteen on the second levels, four in the attics – when a voice came out of the dark.

“Hey, the lingerie girl.”

Aggie turned as a thin man walked toward her.

“They have a two-for-one deal or something?”

“No.” She turned away.

“I’m just teasing you.” He touched her shoulder and she relaxed.

“What did you get her?” Aggie asked.

“A bottle of wine.”

“Did she like it?”

“She drank it.” He slid a hand down his light-colored tie with dark diamonds.

The glow from the house made him appear rippled, like he was swaying, a calm ghostly tremble. “Don’t worry about Glenda. Her smile is as fake as her boobs.”

“Her boobs are fake?” Aggie licked a bit of leftover frosting from her fingers.

The man laughed as though it were a joke. “Mind if I smoke?” He took a pack from his back pocket and offered one to Aggie.

She took it.

He took out his lighter. His face lit up in the dark from the small yellow flame. It was the first time she really saw his face. The deep wrinkles along his eyes lengthened them and Aggie wondered if he didn’t have some East Asian in his blood. When he
smiled his eyes disappeared into those crows feet until they were nothing more than two
dark lines beneath his eyebrows.

Aggie took a deep puff and coughed. “I don’t usually smoke,” she admitted.

“I’m a bad influence,” he said.

“No, no. I want to.” She wrestled with her cigarette, trying to match the balanced
hold her new nicotine partner had mastered. The man flicked his ash. Aggie followed,
but flicked too hard and dropped her cigarette. “Oops.” She picked it off a patio brick,
bending at the hips.

The man laughed again. “You’re a funny girl, Aggie.”

“Sorry. I’m clumsy.”

“Take it as a compliment.”

“Yeah?” She fit the fallen cigarette between her lips.

“See you around,” he said.

When, she asked him, fixing her hair behind her ears. He said, later, and put out
his butt on the way into the lit house, joining the other partygoers. The strap of Aggie’s
slip fell from her shoulder.

She was light-headed and a little high walking home from Glenda’s. Her shoes
hung loosely on her fingertips, her nylons wet as she dragged her toes through the spring
grass on the side of the road. The neighborhood stretched out around here. It was not
long ago when the plots of land were empty tall-grass fields that rolled in the Midwestern
winds. She imagined her mother’s pirates, as alive as they were in her dreams, sailing in
on those rolling fields coming to pillage the homes in the new addition. They would be
quiet as people slept securely under their electric blankets (the spring nights could still carry a chill). The pirates would leave the homes barren, down to the last can of tuna. They would sell the items on ebay where a young boy would pay top dollar to own Mr. Bauer’s (his was the third house the pirates entered on the corner of DeSoto and 7th Street) boyhood stamp collection.

The pirates would enter Glenda’s home, paralyzing the owner and her guests. They would wince into the corners and hold their hands in the air as the pirates searched jacket pockets and purses for cash and credit cards. They would pick through the presents, the feminine one picking the slip off the floor to be worn under a brass button coat.

The thin man who thought Aggie was funny would be safe, avoiding the siege as he stepped outside to abide his nicotine craving. Aggie might see him later, she thought, maybe tomorrow. On the side of the road, four blocks from her house, she remembered the way the man’s breath smelt as he spoke to her, a sour citrus masked by smoke. She was suddenly desperate for a cigarette.

It was a short detour through a couple backyards to the convenience store. A small dog yipped at her from behind a fence as she crossed the road. Aggie fixed her hair in the reflection of the door. Before entering the store she slipped into her shoes, obeying the posted sign: No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service. It was a little after midnight and the store was empty except for the cashier. Hi my name is Chaz; a pin on his T-shirt told Aggie. He had moderate acne, patched along his jaw line. He closed the Algebra book he was reading as she approached.

“I’ll take a pack of cigarettes,” she said.
“What kind?”

“Um, how about those red ones.” She pointed them out behind the counter.

He tossed them toward her. “Anything else?”

Aggie stalled and tapped her fingernail on her tooth. “You a smoker, Chaz?”

“Sometimes.”

She leaned her elbows on the counter; her shoulders arched up to touch the bottom of her earrings. She tugged on her lip displaying her bottom teeth. Her necklace clicked on the glass case above the Snicker bars where it came to rest under the shadow of her chin. She looked up to see the boy watching her.

“It’s quiet in here. Like as quiet as the farting British,” she said.

The boy smiled.

“Do you think I’m funny?”

“Sure.”

Aggie leaned in further onto the counter, the toes dangling off the dull linoleum floor. She pushed her shoulder blades closer together to give a more defined illusion of cleavage. Dropping her head she could see the pink slip showing – showing it to the boy.

“Must get kind of lonely working in here all by yourself.”

“It’s not too bad.”

“I work in retail with lots of people, lots of friends. Can’t be alone if I want to.”

Aggie unwrapped her pack of cigarettes and put one in her mouth. “Got a light?”

“You can’t smoke in here.”

“I can’t?”

The boy pointed to the security camera in the corner of the store.
“Join me outside?”

He pointed again to the camera.

“Maybe some other time?”

“Sure,” he said. “I’m in here almost every night.”

“Maybe tomorrow then.” Aggie stood to leave. She waved and smiled at the camera on her way out.

She could hear the boys before they came into view. They made whispered giggles, commands, compliments, back and forth to one another. Aggie could hear them run through the tall grasses in her lawn. As she got closer to her home she saw there were three of them, dressed in colors of the darkness. Her large maples were covered in long drapes of cheap white toilet paper, making the branches appear drooped as though the boys were disguising them as weeping willows. Two were assigned to the trees, while another boy finished spraying the shaving cream message on her driveway; F U C was clearly written. Later, Aggie would discover the forks in her lawn, easily hidden in the grass. It would be a year until she found the last one, her lawnmower breaking its blade on the overlooked three-pronged utensil. She wondered, where did the forks come from? Did the boys’ mothers miss them?

Aggie hid herself in the shadow of a large pine. Its needles stuck to her hair. The eggs splattered against her home reflected the light of the moon. They seemed to move as she shifted her weight between her legs – back and forth, light and dark, open close, like a blink.
The boys finished their decorating. The two she saw work on her trees, gathered their writing friend and made their way toward Aggie. Her breaths grew shorter and shorter until she stopped breathing altogether. When the boys stopped and turned to admire their work she opened her mouth and let in some air. As a final gesture, the writer gave her mailbox two sharp kicks so the post balanced at a thirty-degree angle. The other two insisted he finish it off. A final kick brought it to the ground. The boys skipped out of view, muscles twitched into knots by the excitement of their destruction.

Aggie walked up to her house, her nylons snagging on the poorly landscaped pine hedges. She found the perfect rock in a pile of perfect rocks. It took a couple of tries to break the front window. The first throw did little more than bounce off – the second making an impressive spider-web crack. But the third rock, a piece of pink granite mined from a nearby quarry, easily shattered the glass around her feet. Aggie stepped away from the window, a piece of glass slicing her right heel. She buttoned the top of her shirt. Red footprints trailed out to the toppled mailbox, where its owner stood and smoked four cigarettes down to the filter, their small circular light glowing – a single firefly in the dark.
Walnut

It was an autumn of mourning for Joan and Sam Reiner. Their Yorkshire was struck by a black walnut that fell from their tree in the backyard and died. It was sad, and would have been tragic if not for the sound, a light knock, *plink*, followed by a soft, *flump*, when Josephine, the Yorkshire, fell to the ground and lay there as Joan laughed lightly and scolded Josephine, “Oh, you silly dog,” before she saw the stiff gaze of the Yorkshire’s eyes and ran into the house screaming for Sam, “A walnut! A walnut! Call the vet!”

Instead the children were called immediately by their mother, of course; Cara at the University of Minnesota, Franny married to a pilot. Joan greeted them with a broken hello, choked by tears, then turned the phone over to the girls’ father, while she sobbed loudly in the kitchen, blowing her nose with forceful affect. Sam mumbled into the phone, “Yes, yes, the dog,” and “No, no, a black walnut.” Then he motioned the phone back to his wife who waved it away, but took it quickly from his hands as he started to hang up saying, “Your mother can’t talk now.” And Joan, phone clutched in both hands, then talked to her daughters in a series of nods and *um-hmm*’s until she finally said, “Do you think you could come home?”

Both of the Reiners were closet smokers. Breath mints and matches lined the pockets of every jacket in the house. They both had a calm way of excusing themselves from the room. Late at night, for Sam, and early in the morning – Joan. Joan usually
waited until her husband left for work, turning the coffeepot off while opening her recipe box, grabbing her hidden box of cigarettes. She would stand outside the garage door. One hand in the pocket of her robe, the other, gloved, with a cigarette between her fingers, Joan would watch carefully for any neighbors, letting her hand drop to her side, hiding her secret, if a car drove by.

Sam preferred a casual comment after supper, or during the evening news, “I think I’ll get some air.”

It shaped their shower schedule. A quick smoke, a quick jump in the shower to wash it down the drain. It shaped their relationship, maybe even accidentally and innocently. Kissing became a nervous test of toothpaste and mouthwash. A tick at the mouth then pulling away looking at their spouse in wonder. Hugging turned into waves at the doorway, turned into nights seated on other sides of the living room, Joan in a chair, Sam on the couch, an intrusive but sheltering rhythm of gum chewing keeping the beat.

Sex was soon nothing more than a defined, expected part of married life that was shaded by anxiety and wonder of each other’s guilt. It was a test, sometimes of strength: an arm braced against the headboard, balancing the body, the smell of smoke, as far from the other’s as possible. And it ended anyway with the addiction. Inching themselves to the far ends of the queen bed, craving the smoke in their body – filling the chest, leaving a taste in the mouth that lingered in the back of the throat, always there, always reliable.

So they would leave each other with acceptable excuses:

“Oh damn, I left something at the office.”

“I need to get something at the store.”
“Terry wanted me to stop by tonight.”

“I forgot to walk the dog.”

Answers: “Ok.”

The night after Josephine, the Yorkshire, died, Joan and Sam did not have sex, but they did have dinner. They sat at opposite ends of the table, keeping their distance. Joan insisted she couldn’t eat an ounce of food, but took her place at the dinner table.

“So what happened?” Sam had said.

“What do you mean.”

“The dog. What happened with the dog?”

Joan picked at her food, arranging the spaghetti noodles into different piles on her plate. She took a small bite. The dining room held a stagnant smell of garlic and burnt meat. Joan got up and went to the window.

“Joan?”

She opened the curtains and drew up the blinds. A thin air of dust made her cough. She unlocked the window and opened it as far as it would go. The autumn breeze was still, so Joan pressed her face against the screen and took a deep breath. She closed the window and locked it.

“Joan, what happened with the dog?”

“Just what I told you. A walnut fell on her head.” She took her seat and reached for a piece of garlic bread.

“A walnut?” Sam said.

“Please, can we not talk about it?” Joan wiped her mouth with her napkin.
Sam looked away from his wife and focused on his dinner. Joan finished her plate of spaghetti and her husband pushed his chair away from the table and stood up saying, “I think, I too, will get some air.”

Joan and Sam had last sat down to dinner a couple of weeks ago when their daughters had come for a visit. The girls knew about the smoking – at least about their mother. Both were conveniently close to the Reiner house in south central Minnesota. No more than a two hour drive for either of the girls. They came for the weekend. Cara, the student, was studying botany and had recently moved in with her boyfriend, a jobless man in his early thirties. He had aspirations and ideas that Cara found fantastic although somewhat impossible. It didn’t matter, she was in love and he was still paying his share of the rent. She did not share this new part of her life with her parents, but instead talked about a streaker at the homecoming game while unloading bundles of laundry. Franny, the married one, sat with one elbow on the dinner table, the other in her lap, fidgeting with her napkin. She gave looks to her sister, who sat across from her, as their mother said, “So Franny, still smoking?”

“Yes, Mother, I’m still smoking.”

“You know it’s such a nasty habit,” her father said.

“Yes it is. Don’t you think so Cara?” Franny looked at her sister. Cara looked at her mom.

“Yes I do,” Cara said.

“What does Frank say about you smoking?” Joan took a drink of milk.

“He doesn’t say.” Franny dropped her other hand into her lap.

“Where is Frank tonight, anyway?” Sam said to his daughter.
“He had a flight.”

“Well, your father and I really think you should quit.”

Cara sneezed loudly. Someone said God bless you.

“I’ll quit when I have kids.”

Joan went on to say she didn’t think Franny was ready for children. They would take up too much of her time. Traveling would be hard. You couldn’t just pack up and come for a quick visit. There were feeding schedules to take into account, and diapers and toys and strollers to address, and in-laws. Frank’s mother would constantly be calling, wanting to come over, wanting you to come over with the baby. “Wait,” Joan told her daughter, “Wait, there’s no rush.” Franny didn’t want to tell her mother she thought she might already be pregnant. She didn’t want to agree she wasn’t ready for children.

The girls left early that Sunday morning, waving to their parents, one at the end of the driveway the other in the doorway.

Now, Joan hoped they would come home again soon. Now that Josephine, the Yorkshire, had died. They couldn’t leave their mother alone. They would have to come home, at least for a while to make sure their mother was okay.

But they didn’t come. They sent emails, virtual greeting cards. Joan called. She got Franny’s answering machine, but Cara picked up her phone.

“Are you coming home?”

“I can’t make it, Mom.”

“Busy with school?”

“Yes.”
“Well, the funeral’s going to be tomorrow. Just thought you should know – in case you were coming.”

“What’s this one’s name again?”

“What do you mean?”

“The dog. What was the dog’s name?” Cara said.

“Josephine.”

“The yellow lab, right?”

“No, no. She was a Yorkshire.”

“Oh yeah. Well, look Mom, I have to run.”

Joan hung up the phone and went into the kitchen. Sam was reading the newspaper. He took a bite of dry toast and set in on the table next to its plate.

“The girls aren’t coming,” Joan said.

Her husband nodded.

Joan picked up his toast and took a bite. She wondered a lot, what her life would be like without her husband – actually, she wondered what her life would be like if he died. She would imagine him choking on a piece of tough steak. Maybe out to lunch or having a company dinner. She would get the call from one of Sam’s employees who would tearful and sympathetic, saying, we did all we could do. Or a doctor, calling from the hospital, that Sam had had a heart attack and that he was gone. Joan would whisper, “we just lost a dog,” then scream to the stranger in disbelief and let herself sink to the floor.

But what Joan really imagined was that her husband died in a freak fire, or in a car accident. Not as a victim, that is, not as a driver who swerved out of control – too
many drinks, too late at night into an on-coming car. No, rather, as a man who came
across a fire, or came across an accident. A dark night, a quiet road – maybe 169 that he
drove home between St. Peter and Mankato. Late at the office the highway was close to
empty and calm except for a maroon Subaru station wagon on the side of the road tipped
upside down into the ditch. A young mother, frantic on the shoulder, caught in the beams
of Sam’s car waving one hand in the air and the other clutching a bloody gash on her
forehead. Sam would pull off the road and get out of his car. The young mother would
grab him by both shoulders, leaving a red handprint on the left, “My baby! My baby!”

He’d hurry to the station wagon, engine still running. The baby, crying, upside
down in the back seat of the car. Still secure in her car seat the baby’s arms would
dangled above her head. Joan’s husband, taking his green wool sweater and wrapping it
around his fist, would punched through the window. Maybe a piece of glass nicked his
cheek, leaving a small cut below his eye, but he would brush it away and reach in to the
baby unlocking her seatbelt and carefully gathering her from the car seat. Lying on his
stomach – arms in the car, legs lying in the snow – Joan’s husband would hand the baby
to her mother who was pawing at his back saying, “Give her to me!”

And he would. And the mother would cry and thank God and thank Sam, and the
car, unsteady in the snow, would begin to slip, rolling once again down the ditch, taking
Joan’s husband with it.

Joan would imagine her children, her girls. They would be sad, they would cry.
But she would tell them how heroically their father died. How heroically her husband
and rescued that baby from the car. Her girls would come home and stay with their
mother. Franny might move in. They might sit up late together, talking to Cara on the
phone as she told them of her latest exam, smoking a cigarette at the kitchen table before going to bed.

Sam didn’t go to Josephine’s funeral either. He had something important to attend to at work, he explained to his wife as he hurried out the door that morning. Joan went later in the day, after the dog was in the ground; its tiny box covered in dirt. She stood at the grave briefly. She kicked at the ground with her toe. She looked around the pet cemetery to see if anyone was watching her. It was empty. Joan got into her car and drove away.

She had lunch first, at a small deli on the onset of the old part of downtown – a chicken sandwich with cheddar cheese and a light smear of mayonnaise – before she turned her car into the parking lot of the Humane Society. Joan went to the main entrance and opened the door. A jingle bell announced her presence. A girl of about seventeen looked up from her book from behind the front desk. Joan smiled as she walked toward her. The girl folded the page in her book and closed it. She ran her tongue over the small piercing on her bottom lip.

“Hello,” Joan smiled. “I’m interesting in adopting a dog.”

“Yes, hello, Mrs. Reiner. How have you been?” The girl tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Oh, not too well. We lost sweet Josephine, recently. You remember the little Yorkshire we adopted last month?”

“Really.”
"Yes, and the girls couldn’t make it home for the funeral. They really wanted to but they were both just too busy. They sent some very nice cards."

"I’m sorry to hear about Josephine."

"Yes, very sad. But we really need to move on. Can I come back and see the dogs please?"

The girl stood up from the stool. It rocked back and forth and she steadied it.

"I’ll be right back." She grabbed her book and went through a swinging door leaving Mrs. Reiner standing behind the counter.

Joan turned her head to look around the room. A woman was sitting in a large blue chair with a cage on her lap. A white cat looked out from inside. The woman poked her fingers in the cage trying to reach the cat. She looked up at Joan. "I think it’s a stray," she said. Joan smiled.

The girl returned with a large man in a flannel shirt. A shapeless beard covered his face and his hair hung shaggy in his eyes. He was breathing hard, as though he had just run up a flight of stairs. He puffed in Joan’s face. He smelt of tuna. The man laid his hands on the counter, large paws like a bear, and arched his body forward. Joan took a step back from the counter. She knew him. His name was Carl.

"What happened to the dog?" Carl said.

"She passed away." Joan was still smiling.

"Passed away – how?"

"It’s sort of a funny story. Well, not funny, but you know what I mean."

Carl ran a hand through his hair.

"A walnut fell on her. It fell on her head."
Carl looked at the girl who was standing behind the counter with him.

“We have a black walnut tree in our backyard. They fall all the time. Even I’ve been hit once or twice.”

“We can’t give you another dog,” Carl said.

Joan let out an airy laugh. Carl said nothing.

“What do you mean I can’t have another dog?” she said.

“Mrs. Reiner, within the past year you have adopted four dogs from us.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any of those dogs now?”

“No – you know they’ve died.” Joan looked to the woman with the cat. She had let it out of the cage and it had made its way under the chair. The woman was on her hands and knees trying to coax it out. She called to it in a sharp whisper, _kitty kitty kitty kitty_. Joan felt her chicken sandwich heavy in her stomach.

“Mrs. Reiner?”

Joan turned back toward the man and the girl behind the counter. “Yes?”

“How did the last dog die, the yellow lab?”

“You mean Roxy? She just got sick. I’ve told you all this already.”

“And the one before that?”

“She got sick too.” Joan took out her checkbook and a pen. She placed them on the counter and set her purse at her feet. The cat, escaping the chair and the woman, ran between Joan’s legs. She tried to kick it away and knocked over her purse. “Damn it,” she said and bent down to gather the split contents. A lipstick rolled and she grabbed it.
She looked up to the counter. Carl and the girl leaned over the edge and peered down at Mrs. Reiner. Their hair fell, outlining and shadowing the faces.

“Look. How much do you want?” Joan shoved the lipstick in her purse and stood up, straightening her skirt.

“We don’t have any dogs for you,” the girl said, surprising herself. She took a small step back behind Carl.

Joan ignored her and started to write in her checkbook. “To the Humane Society… two hundred dollars — no — two hundred fifty dollars.” Joan ripped out the check and held it up to Carl. “Here.”

“I think you should leave.”

“That’s two hundred and fifty dollars for one of your free dogs.” She pushed the check closer to Carl. He put his hands in his pockets.

“You just give them away anyhow.” Joan looked at Carl. She looked at the girl. They were both silent.

“Give me one!”

And she left. Carl and the girl didn’t say anything to her as she mumbled about calling the police, as she blamed the death of the dogs on the Humane Society, as she started to cry and plead that she’d keep better care of the next one if they’d just give her another dog.

“I need another chance!” she said. “You can’t deny me this!”

Carl and the girl didn’t say anything when she left — crumpling the check into a small ball and throwing it across the counter, saying they could keep it and keep their grubby dogs — opening the door wide, letting the cat run out.
At home, later that night, she sat calmly in the living room with her feet propped on the ottoman. She had a cigarette in one hand. Her arms casually hanging over the edged of her chair where on one side a small pile of ash was growing. Sam walked into the house and took a deep breath. Thinking it was him, he smelt his coat and his hat for smoke until he saw his wife, sloppy in the living room chair, blowing smoke toward the ceiling.

"Joan, my God. What the hell are you doing?"

"Smoking." She took another drag and closed one eye.

"When did this start?"

"Today." She coughed.

"Well," he stood there and looked around the room. "I don't know what to say."

"I called the girls earlier."

"Did you tell them you were smoking."

"No. They weren't home. How was your drive home?"

Sam told her it was fine.

"I think I'll give the girls another call." Joan got up from the chair and walked into the kitchen. She dropped her cigarette into the sink and let the water run. She dialed Franny first. It rang. The machine picked up. Joan said she was sorry Franny couldn't make it for the funeral today and explained how she tried to get a new dog but wasn't able to. "They didn't even seem to care that I had just lost Josephine," she said than told her oldest daughter to call her back. Sam came into the kitchen and got a clean glass from the dishwasher. He went over to the sink and filled it with water and pushed the cigarette butt down the drain with his finger. "It's really a nasty habit," he said. Joan
went to the window and let out a long breath through kiss-shaped lips. The window covered in a white fog; Joan traced a spiral with her finger.
In Morning

I remember the mornings. Barefoot sisters sliding through the screen door, out the back porch to the field. We’d hike our nightshirts to our waists and let the thorned bushes scratch our calves as we climbed the slope to where the sun was touching. Suzanna, laying down the gray blanket where we’d sit with our knees tucked to our chins. We felt lucky if a rabbit came by, or even a low flying bird – blue and white feathers.

“It’s quiet,” she would say.

And I’d think, Funny, that’s what I was thinking, and nod.

If it wasn’t so quiet we might have said things like, Dad’s still in the war, Uncle Harry died in the war.

It was the house – white, small, a clothesline made of braided rope that sat on the bottom of the hill. We would watch it, waiting for our dad to come home. He’d left before. Weeks might pass as we’d listen to our mother cry through dishes and chickens with potatoes and sheets and ironed shirts. But he always came home. Like the morning after Halloween, he pulled his blue truck in the driveway and walked through the front door as Suzanna and I licked the sweets from the corners of our mouths, tasting candy bars and licorice from the night before. We looked down on him from the hill, a cat and a clown, Halloween paint smeared by sleep into the faces of children; we could hear our mother crying through an open window.

This is what we knew. We didn’t know about war, we knew he would come home, we knew he made our mother cry.
So when grasshoppers would land on our arms we’d shake our shoulders gently, or sweep them away lightly, watching them disappear into the field – watching the brush bend in the wind, and pray, thanking God for war.
Small Birds

The three boys had ridden their bikes single file down the two-lane county road, each kicking up pebbles at the one behind. They had kept a lookout for a car that never came, ready to turn and avoid it, into the dusty shoulder. The bikes lay there now, tipped softly into the tall grasses that made their way to the road. Hollis Harte owned the field and its grasses; a one-bulb light that flickered in the distance like a fallen star marked the farmer’s home and barn. Hollis would get a knock at his door the next morning, just after 7:00, but he would not answer, already working in his field. The glow of the city five miles away didn’t touch the evening’s spring moon. In the field, two zigzagging paths cut toward a wooded state game refuge. It was the only suggestion that something had gone wrong, something that caused two broken paths when there should have been a third.

Peter ran with a brassy taste in his mouth. Beside him was his friend, Andrew, who was also a friend of his brother, Joe. Peter’s muscles were twitched and tight. He leaped through the field, through the woods, his heart pumping in his ears. His teeth clicked the words that were chasing the two boys close behind, Stop running and I’ll shoot you. Peter and Andrew had left Joe along the side of the road with the man who shouted those words, tapping a gun at his side. It’s okay, it’s okay, thought Peter, Joe will come too. He’ll come too, just keep running like the man said. The man’s words called out behind the boys, pushing them further into the woods, starting to grow faint.
with every tumble through the dark and unfamiliar landscape, so they were now almost nothing more than a ringing in their ears. As he tripped over stones, low branches cutting along his cheeks – one leaving a large gash under his right eye – Peter could nearly believe it had only been the wind.

It was after a late supper when the three decided to ride to the convenience store just a few miles down the road from their home. The brothers stopped by Andrew’s home who was practicing his piano lessons, dispassionately drilling along his scales while his mother sipped decaffeinated coffee in the kitchen. They convinced her to let her son take a break and ride his bike along with them. The three were laughing when the man with the gun appeared out of the brush.

Making his way through the maze of skinny trees, Peter imagined the babysitter at home, the one the boys insisted was unnecessary, the one their parents insisted upon. She might be painting her toenails a deep blue, or flipping through the television to a late showing of a B horror movie about a killer with a chainsaw, keeping an eye on the door, ready to turn the channel when the boys arrived home.

At first she might dismiss their story – a man with a gun, a ski mask, a high-pitched voice that cut its Ts short, Joe – thinking it was nothing more than a cruel joke, something like the one they played before, involving a dead mouse and her shoe. It would take some convincing.

“Come on guys, this isn’t funny.”

“No, Missy Ann, listen.”

“Where is your brother? This is enough.”

“Gone.”
Only after she searched the property for the absent bikes, not finding them hidden with the missing boy behind the doghouse, or inside the shed next to the lawnmower, would she call for help.

Peter turned toward his friend. Eleven feet away their silhouettes ran together – boy arms, boy legs – a reflection of each other. Months later, they would see each other at school and pass through the hallways exchanging little more then a glanced smile. The students would take to wearing buttons with Joe’s face on them that read, *We Have Faith*. Mothers would organize button-making parties where they served bitter coffee and orange punch that left upper lips stained the same color as the drink. The buttons would be passed out at the mall and in the school cafeterias, until a handful disgruntle parents, upset at the word “faith,” argued about the separation of church and state, so instead the buttons would be changed to read *We Hope*. Neither Peter nor Andrew would wear such a button. They would exchange no more then five words to each other for the next fifteen years, until Peter’s wedding. But now, watching him stumble over broken tree limbs, there was nothing Peter wouldn’t do for this boy.

They had stolen a pack of cigarettes from the convenience store; Joe distracting the clerk, telling him the bathroom toilet was clogged. They also bought a handful of candy, Peter a bag of chips which were left in the brown paper sack along with their sugared treats next to the bikes. The cigarettes were zipped tightly in Peter’s jacket pocket with a book of matches. He tapped his pocket to remind him they were still there. Another pack with five missing cigarettes was hidden in the back of the brothers’ closet in a shoebox at home, a small bottle of vodka stored with it. Joe took the vodka from his mother’s grocery bag while she carried the rest of the food into the house. After she
discovered it missing she drove to the liquor store with receipt in hand thinking it was left behind accidentally. Hours passed and no luck in finding the missing bottle, it was forgotten.

Weeks before his mother would fold Joe’s clothes into boxes, Peter threw the shoebox out. And he searched for other forms of Joe kept hidden from their parents. In his school bag was a math test: C -. Rolled up in the sleeve of a plaid shirt hanging in the closet was a 1991 September copy of Glamour, the corners folded at pages 42 and 17 where women showed their breasts in advertisements for perfume and a gold watch. And inside Joe’s pillowcase, a letter written on pale blue paper, Don’t tell anyone, but I love you. They would all go in the trash, along with Peter’s secrets: four brass bullets, his own naked girl picture (this one from a pack of cards that had been distributed among the boys at school – Peter’s a curvy brunette holding a peacock feather on the back of the jack of diamonds) and a notebook filled with stories and poems he had written behind closed doors.

Peter stopped running. His chest was hot and took in gasping breaths of air, that wheezed in through the back of his throat; they couldn’t fill his lungs fast enough. Resting his hands on his knees, he steadied himself until this breaths slowed, and looked around the woods. He could not see the other boy, or hear him. It was silent; not even a breeze disturbed the thinnest of branches. He had lost a shoe somewhere at the edge of the field before the tree line, his exposed foot now cracked and swollen. The ground was still frozen from the long winter. In the summer, the land was soft and wet, a large bog expanding for miles across the upper Midwest. It could swallow boys up to their knees,
their legs paralyzed in the rich and alive peat. But now it held them steady on the surface.

The brothers played war games on the land surrounding the bog. Peter remembered a Sunday morning they carried their wooden pistols in their hands, a carved Christmas present from Uncle Jack two years earlier, to an open field along the railroad tracks.

The grasshoppers were thick and landed on the brothers' shoulders, on their backs, as they snaked along the dry ground pointing their wooden pistols and trying to hide from one another. Peter was careful not to blink, not to sneeze; if he looked away from his brother for a moment, he would disappear into the landscape. Only Joe's breathing, a quick twitch of his leg that moved the tips of the tall grasses where he hid, brought him back to Peter.

He felt the train as he lay on the ground, a soft tickle on his belly, left bare as his shirt crept up into his armpits. Joe noticed it too and stood, calling a truce to watch as it appeared in the distance. The train bent around a large abandoned Birdseye Corn Mill. It blew its whistle at the boy in the middle of the track. Peter watched his brother stare down the black engine; he believed Joe could hold out his hand and stop it in its tracks, (the cars building up behind his brother's strong restraint would squeal to a stop and derail) tipping boxcars of coal and wheat to the ground.

But Joe leaped off the track long before it was even near their war zone. Peter stood on one side of the tracks, his brother on the other as the train approached and rolled between them. Through the breaks in the cars, he watched Joe smile, tap this wooden
pistol on his thigh and point to his brother. If Peter blinked fast enough, his brother’s broken-up image came together, each blink a passing boxcar. Joe spoke to him, silently mouthing the words, or shouting them only to have them drown in the roar of the train. Then he suddenly put his pistol to his head and in two blinks was on the ground. Peter watched his brother lie motionless in the grass, waiting for the train to cross. He skipped over the tracks to his brother.

“You surrender, I win,” Peter said.

Joe said nothing but kept still, his arms sprawled across the ground.

“Joe?” Peter kicked his brother’s shoe. It wobbled his foot back and forth. Peter leaned in closer to Joe who had his eyes closed and mouth open. “Come on,” he said.

“Enough. You lose.” No response again, Peter touched Joe’s shoulder.

“Ha!” Joe sharply swung his toy gun off the ground and placed it at his brother’s temple. They stared at each other; eyes fixed and dry in the afternoon heat. Peter became light-headed and blinked.

“Bang!” Joe said. “Should have left me for dead, Peter. I win.”

They fought over who won the game the whole walk home, each believing the other was dead.

Even though the man had jumped out onto the middle of the road, almost on top of the boys, Peter caught very little look at him. He was as nondescript as a shadow, only the shape of a person – the broad shoulders and broad stance, giving away the sex.

The boys followed the man’s instructions, practiced through years of experience in obeying an authority figure: teacher, parent, coach, priest, any adult or older boy who
stood a foot taller than them. The instructions were simple, step-by-step: 1) Get off your bikes 2) Don’t look at me 3) Lay down on the ground – no, on your stomachs 4) Don’t look at me 5) Shut up 6) You two get up 7) Don’t look at me 8) Run – stop running and I’ll shoot you. They did as they were told. The two boys ran, Joe stayed flat on the ground, his cheek in the dirt.

Peter waited in the woods for his next order, needing his next order. What now?, he thought. He touched the cut on his cheek, the salt from his fingering sending a sting through the wound. He pulled his fingers away and looked at their tips, wet with blood that lost all its color in the darkness. It would leave a pink scar, pouting out from under his eye that his children would later paint bright green, along with the rest of his face as a Frankenstein costume for Halloween; his wife would not kiss it until seven years into their marriage.

There could have been a falling out, maybe a irreconcilable dispute about their parents’ will, or an affair with Joe’s serious girlfriend from college, the one he said he loved, said it easily and loudly to anyone who would listen – the coffee shop girl, Two double Americanos, one for me and one for the woman I love; the man at the bus station who was reading a worn copy of Lolita – the one who said she was being smothered and turned to the older brother on a cool fall evening when Joe was held up at the library working late on this US history thesis. She said she needed a way out.

But instead, Peter stood in the dark leaning against a knotted tree, its spring moss black and wet against his back, and listened to the whispered yells of the other boy.
calling out from the thick pines. Peter looked up at the sky as a plane flew overhead and remembered his brother.

He remembered when they had made their way to a shed just on the edge of the property line. When the weather was wet and warm its walls would soften with moss. The brothers would press their palms into the thick sodden walls, water running down their wrist, puddling in the cuffs of shirts.

The shed stood as it always had, leaning slightly toward the East. But Peter heard something. There was a hum. As he and his brother circled the shed Peter noticed a family of birds flying in and out of split holes in the roof. He listened near the outer wall of the shed and stepped back, grabbing a handful of gumball sized rocks off the ground. Peter threw one against the shed. The hum grew louder. He threw two more rocks against the shed that hit in sharp knocks.

The morning his brother was born, Peter wandered from their house and walked barefoot down the gravel drive. The front door opened easily for the three-year-old boy. He walked on the gravel road, occasionally looking over his shoulder toward the house, watching it grow smaller while he walked. It disappeared as Peter’s rocky path took him on a sharp turn. Tired, he slumped into the side of the road, his nightshirt flowered around him. Then came the buzzing. It grew, and Peter watched as muddy men on muddy motorcycles came from the forest of trees. He tucked his knees into his chest. The bikers rode past the small boy on the ground, kicking up clouds of dirt which remained long after their company was gone. This was the same buzz Peter felt as he and Joe stood along the side of the shed, as the hundreds of sparrows flew from the glassless window, spilling past the two brothers in a gray-brown wave.
Peter could smell the dust on their wings. He tumbled away from his brother and found shelter behind a small raspberry shrub, barren of its berries. As the flood of birds started to calm, Peter ran to the shed and peered over the window’s edge. Three of them flew calmly through the rafters of the hollow shed. And behind him, Joe stood circled in the rest of the small birds. They weaved between his limbs, around his head, passing inches from his body as though protected by an invisible shield. Joe was smiling; his eyes teared in the bird’s winged breeze, the gray wave, ready to fly him into the clouds whenever he desired.