In the Night

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IN THE NIGHT

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B.A., Denison University, 1988

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THE PARENTS

This is my child, the father thought. His lips, his hair, the swollen white folds of his eyelids: I made him. He will follow me first and last and look to the shape of my life in order to structure his own.

The father was a large man whose arms reminded one of choice cuts of meat, so beautiful was the marbled effect of his veins.

But of course there was a mother, too. Her body was generous. Her hair was a mixture of colors, each coarse strand a particular shade of red, and this mixture and this coarseness gave her head the look of an animal’s patterned pelt. She held the child in her arms, at her breast, near her heart. I hold you, she thought, looking down at the infant, and yet I do not feel your weight in my arms. You are my arms. Your mouth has become the end of my breast. I taste milk even as you drink, and when you are tired, I will sleep.

The father, seeing the heaviness of sleep in his wife’s eyes, reached out to relieve her of the child’s weight.

The mother, sensing an uncertain but painful lightness in the crook of her arms, woke up and began to cry.
AT PLAY

“Touch me, Kim,” she said. “You have to touch me somewhere.”

Kim knelt carefully beside where Marlee lay in the grass and touched her on the forehead.

Marlee watched her. She looked at Kim’s white face, at her scared dull eyes and reaching hand. It was a small hand, and when it touched Marlee’s forehead, it was moist with sweat. The tips of Kim’s fingers curled into Marlee’s brown hair, just brushing it, fluttering into its roots like the wings of some passing insect. Marlee shivered, playing that it was real.

Then Kim stood up. She held her palm tightly against her own bare leg as if her hand were dirty or burned. Her hair was red and awful and bright. They were playing in the big empty front yard on a summer day, and the houses looked tall as city buildings rising from the treeless ground. Marlee was still lying on her back in the burned out grass. Her arms were stiff at her sides. Kim looked down at her and began to scream.

“Marlee! Marlee, wake up!” Kim screamed. “Please, Marlee! Please!”
Marlee was straining to keep her eyes open, to look dead into the sun, to hold her legs and arms as if they were made of wood, just so it would seem real, but Kim wouldn't know that. "Friend," was all Kim could think, or "sick," or "dead," or "asleep." But that was all. Marlee hated her

"Marlee!" Kim screamed again. Her voice came out scared. It was a heavy rasping sound, an unused sound.

"There, now I won't die. You saved me," Marlee said calmly, and she let her whole body relax against the hard summer ground, heels and calves and the back of her neck touching down. The grass was as sharp as a bed of fingernails. Marlee looked up at Kim's smooth face and then let her thin spine touch the ground, closing the gap against the earth beneath it, rounding her shoulders away from the hardness that was like concrete. She watched Kim's face all the while because she knew that "sick" and "dead" would be falling, slipping, washed from Kim's mind. She knew how to make Kim stop screaming, how to make her start, how to die and be saved and die again. They were friends. They were playing in Kim's front yard, in the wide open dead summer grass, and they were friends.

Once Marlee had held small rocks in her hand, the tiny colored
pebbles from the bottom of a fish tank. She told Kim they were jewels. "Take one, Kim," she had said. "Take one and put it someplace safe." And when Kim had asked "What is safe?" Marlee said, "Your stomach," and watched her friend's careful eager swallowing.

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog, wanting to be let in, began to cry with a steady, high-pitched, disappointed sound.

"There, Kim, see?" I'm all right. You saved my life." Marlee stood up then, to show her. She was taller than Kim, thinner. If they stood close together, she could rest her chin on Kim's quiet warm head, put her hands on Kim's shoulders. She could say, "Stand here and let me rest," and Kim would let Marlee dig her sharp chin into the red hair, let her push hard with her fingers against Kim's thick collarbone, because that was resting.

"It's all right," Marlee said, a little impatiently this time, a little tired of the sad white face.

But Kim began to shake her heavy head from side to side. Her strange red hair caught the sun and shook orange and then copper, brushing her face with each turn. Her lashes where the odd light color of dust. "No, no, no!" she said, her voice rising, more and more
afraid. "No!" Kim said again, but she didn't move away. Only her head swung, side to side, heavy with hair, like a trapped animal weaving in its stall. Then she suddenly stopped, and her face was very serious. "Now I will die, Marlee! Now I've got it! Now you help me!" Kim said. She held her hand up to Marlee's face, close, showing her. She lifted it with her other hand, wrapping her fingers around the wrist, as if that hand were just something at the end of her arm and not part of her body anymore. She held it up to Marlee like a bad gift.

"It's in my hand now, Marlee! I touched you, so now it's in my hand!" Kim said. Her flat grey eyes filled up with water because she believed that it was true.

The dog down the street barked on and on with a sound that was like air being eaten.

"Kim! I said we were all done playing that game!" Marlee yelled. Her voice was low, strong, like a mother's voice. Her voice filled the yard. "I can send you home if I want to. I can make you lie down in a ditch."

But still Kim held her small hand into the air, looking away from it, looking down. Her arm, where she gripped it, began to show
red in a circle, as if a careful and deliberate burn was emerging.

"It's in my hand, it's in my hand," Kim said softly, starting to cry.
Her voice was like the voice of a person left all alone.

"No, Kim, that isn't what we're playing anymore!" Marlee clenched her teeth tightly together, and her voice came out through them, and she wished that she could hit something. She was tired of Kim now, tired of the way Kim's stomach pushed out her tight blue shorts. It made a bulge there, full and round and hard, like a water balloon. "I hate you now, Kim," Marlee said, because she did. She bent down and put her face next to Kim's. "I hate you because you are so dumb."

But still Kim held her arms up into the air, squeezing the wrist, keeping the hand away. Her head hung down between her upraised arms, and she cried and held her hand away as if she thought she might be cut and bleeding and didn't want to see.

"Dumb," Marlee said again. "Dumb dumb dumbo, stupid stupid dumbo," she said, making it into a little song, singing it so gently that anybody listening might not have understood the words. She might have been comforting a little girl, a girl smaller than herself. "Kim is a dumbo, a stupid stupid dumbo," Marlee sang, and then she
stopped. "I can hit you if I want to, Kim," she said, speaking slowly. Her muscles tensed with the possibility of this hitting. She let the feeling run all the way through her. She let it give her goosebumps, and then she let it drop away.

"I just don't know what to do with you, Kim," Marlee said, and her voice was a mother's again, and it travelled out across the bare yard, tall and disappointed.

Kim was still crying quietly with her arms above her head. Her small dense body jerked forward and then backward every few moments with the effort of holding the arms up. Pieces of her red hair fell in her face. She might have been a doll, abandoned, with her stiff arms held and arranged and her coarse red hair cut very badly. She might have been a doll except for her soft white skin.

"I hate you, Kim," Marlee said again. "I hate you most because you don't even know how stupid you are." And then Marlee grabbed Kim's hand from the air and pulled it close to her own face.

"Now I kiss it and make it better!" she yelled, her voice wild. She grabbed Kim's hand to her mouth and held it there for a second, pressed it to her lips, pressed it so hard that it wasn't a kiss at all. She would have moved the same way to bite it. The Marlee flung the
"Now it's really over, Kim. It's all better. Your stupid fat hand is all better," Marlee said. She could still feel the impression that her own teeth had made on the inside of her upper lip. She hit Kim in the arm because of it, shoving Kim's body a little, feeling her fingers push and sink into Kim's skin as if into uncooked dough.

Kim looked down at her hand and smiled.

Then Kim's face changed. It got scared and anxious. She took a step back, away from Marlee, rolling on the balls of her feet. Her smooth, bare, baby-like ankles looked swollen in their tennis shoes. She looked down at her hand, and then she looked at Marlee's face, and then she lifted her hand, curling the fingers into a fist. She pointed her finger at Marlee.

"But now it's in your mouth, Marlee!" Kim said, and she stood there, a few steps away from her friend, chanting, "your mouth, your mouth, your mouth," with her hand still in the air.

Marlee began to shove her, pressing down on Kim's heavy soft shoulders, pushing slowly, methodically, until Kim lost her balance and fell, backwards, to the ground. It was a calm slow movement, like wet sand falling in on itself.
But still Kim wouldn't stop. She sat on the ground with her hands spread into the sharp brown grass, whispering, "your mouth, your mouth, your mouth," as she squinted up at Marlee. Her voice was like a fly, trapped, heavy with air, hitting the wall, and then the screen, and then the glass, and then starting all over again.

Marlee looked down at Kim with her hands on her hips and her legs spread apart. "You're not my friend, Kim," she said.

Kim stopped whispering for a moment. She looked over Marlee's shoulder, at some point beyond her. Then she began again with different words. "My friend, my friend, my friend," she said, moving her eyes now to stare up at the sharp sloped angle of Marlee's stomach.

Marlee looked up at the sun, feeling its afternoon heat on her scalp. She looked over at the bare white house behind them. And then she put her finger all the way into her own mouth, shoving it a little, closing her lips around it, as if it were not Kim but her mouth that she was angry with. The finger came out wet, shining with spit. Marlee knelt and wiped it hard into the grass.

"All right, Kim, look. It's all gone now. It's in that piece of grass now," Marlee said. Her voice was angry, loud. She crouched
there for a moment with her damp finger touching the ground, and then she stood back up.

Kim stopped whispering. She looked at Marlee. She looked slowly around the yard, as if she were studying its emptiness for the first time, and smiled.

Marlee watched her. She saw Kim's smile, and her soft round arms, and her bright awful hair, and just for that moment Marlee wanted to go home. She wanted to set the table, and pet the dog, and get into her own bed. But then it passed, and she didn't want to go home at all.

“You have to cry, Kim. Next time you cry when I push you over, or I won't play anymore,” Marlee said.

Kim began to get up off the ground. She lifted herself eagerly, brushing the hair from her face, ready.
Her hair was soft as cotton, tightly curled to her head and yellow under his hand. He cut it at each visit, clipping it short against her scalp, this rough-soft wool of his daughter, because he liked to see the graceful shape of her head. She was their beautiful child. She clung now to his crossed leg, riding the bend of his ankle, with her nightgown hiked up and her arms wrapped around his calf.

"Daddy, I have to go out on the beach," she said, and he looked at her.

"There's nothing to see on the beach anymore, baby--it's getting too dark. The sun is going down. We'll go out again tomorrow. I promise." He uncrossed his leg gently and went back to his book. He didn't like her to get so excited. She could be difficult--wouldn't listen, was wild. But she was their beautiful child, and when he watched her dance he sometimes thought it would be all right again. She would spin around and around, making the nylon ruffle twirl about her ankles, and her arms would reach out from her sides. Sometimes she danced more slowly, sliding her hands through the air like soft lazy wings. Her legs would stretch at the cloth of
her gown. Her fingers would be curled.

"But Daddy, there is something big on the beach."

She would dance in front of anyone: neighbors, friends, strangers. She had never been shy. But mostly it was for him, her little dance before bedtime, in her favorite old nightgown that was so thin he could see the whole smallness of her abdomen and the way it curved like the edge of a moon into her legs. If he put his hand flat against the small of her back, above the tailbone, his fingers would curve outward, back at him, in the shape of a canoe's bottom.

"Nothing is on the beach, Sarah. Nothing but birds. You're seeing birds, a lot of birds all standing close. They huddle together to keep warm at night."

He hadn't looked out the window, but he didn't want her going out there. It was cold and nearly dark, and the storm had washed things up. It was cold the way summer water was always cold there at night. He went back to his book. Sarah moved away from his legs.

"Don't," he started to say when he heard the screen door slam. "Don't go out on that beach alone." He realized then that he should have told her trash or filth or garbage washed to shore, something she wouldn't want to see. Not birds. Of course she would want to
see birds. He was careful to mark the page in his book before he followed.

He looked down at the shallow prints of her feet in the sand as he walked. She ran ahead, bright in the sunset. She had been right—there was something on the beach, just at the edge of the shore. She was running towards it now. He came more slowly, studying the dark shape. As he got closer, it blurred, divided, became more than one thing. Not birds, he thought. He began to walk faster. The shapes—he could see now that there were five—were big and dark. They were curved, solid looking, rolling with the froth of the tide. And Sarah was running toward them. Her gown’s wet hem dragged behind her, heavy with sand.

"Don't!" he yelled out, "don't," but the wind took his voice down the beach. The water and the early night air were too cool for a little girl. The shapes were getting clearer, larger, losing the blackness of silhouette. "Don't run, Sarah!" he yelled, because he didn't know what they were.

She didn't hear, or she didn't listen. It was getting harder each visit. She would never be still for him now except to let him cut her hair. Then, she would sit as if paralyzed with her eyes wide open
while he clipped up the base of her neck, pulling the curls free with
his other hand and feeling the cupped softness, there, at the base of
her skull.

He watched her run down the beach, away from him.

"Daddy, look!" Her voice drifted back in the wind, breathless.
"They're sick, Daddy, hurry!"

And he did hurry now to save his little girl from the big sick
rolling shapes. She was running from one to another, touching at
them, bare feet in the cold water Her gown was wet up the front
side too, with a darkness like a stain reaching for her breastbone.

Looking at her, he felt the weight of his legs and his arms, their pull
on his body. He ran faster, wishing she would be still. And then he
saw what they were: dolphins. This does not happen, he thought,
dolphins do not wash to the shore. He could see his daughter, up
ahead, dancing between them.

"Baby, don’t get hurt," he said. But then he realized that he had
only whispered. He stopped running—dolphins were there on the
shore, and his daughter was with them, and he stood now outside of
the circle they made, watching. Baby, don’t move, I’ll get you, he
thought to himself, but he only stood very still looking at their tight
blue-grey skins and the holes opened for air. They were bigger than he imagined, the length of a man at least, and they lay at the edge of this water gently rolling with its movement. They are graceful, he thought, even here in the sand.

"Daddy, look, look!"

She was getting wild, shivering as she moved between the animals, letting her hands slide down their smooth sides. The tide rushed up at their feet. He saw what looked like fever in her eyes and wanted to hold her, pull her to his chest, but he knew she would run away. She didn't like to be held anymore. He turned his eyes again to the dolphins.

Five of them lay on their stomachs rocking gently with each rush of ocean water that soaked his feet and pants. He could only think that they were sick. Every few moments a sound passed between them, a noise like a tongue clicking in the well of a throat.

Sarah dashed from one to another, skipping her hands along their flanks, touching their sloping foreheads, her breath as shallow and quick as a hummingbird's. Her gown was soaking. "Oh, they're so blue," she said.

He wished again that he could hold her to his chest until she
fell asleep or until her breathing slowed to his.

"Touch one," she said. Her lips were dark against the white of her face. "Come touch one," she said, shivering.

She should at least have a sweater on, he thought. He stood to the side of the dolphins feeling the water hit his ankles and pull away. He looked at his little girl's face. One of the dolphin's made its noise. He stepped into the arc they made and pulled his daughter up from where she had been crouched, whispering into the dolphin's black eye. He held her tightly and from behind with her thin wet back digging into his chest and her arms crossed over her own body. He dug his chin into her yellow hair. He pressed down hard with the point of it, holding her, and he could feel a heat rise at her scalp. He would take her home; he would give her a bath, and when he got her to bed, the sheets would be cool against her skin. He began to carry her away from the dolphins.

But she didn't want to be held. She screamed and twisted in his arms. She bent her head and snapped it back to hit him in the mouth. He had to struggle to hold her. His legs ached from where her heels had hit. He gritted down now, angry at her, as he felt the sharp points of her teeth lock into his skin.
Then, for one moment, there was a peace. She had to catch her breath. Her teeth let go, and she hung there, limp, over his arms. It was in this quick silence that they heard it: the dolphins' screaming.

It was a high whistling noise down the beach—he had not carried her far. All of them screamed, all at once, and it was a strange noise for animals, he thought, a noise like children. He wished that someone else would hear it, hear it and save the dolphins, because he could not. He had to put his daughter to bed. She was not struggling now, but she tensed in his arms, listening, and he could feel it again, that sick-like fever in her skin. We shouldn't be out here, he thought, and dolphins shouldn't wash to the shore. His arms felt heavy and weak.

"Sarah, baby, we can't help them, it's too late, they're out of the water." But even as he said this he was gently putting her down, setting her feet into the cold sand, as if they had just come to the tender end of something. As if, he thought, we have just said goodbye, and it is the end of our visit. He wished she would take his hand.

When she was small, he would cradle the heavy child ball of her head in his palm, laying her body down the length of his arm, and
she would sleep. But she didn't like to be held anymore.

She was gone. She had run away, back to the dolphins. He had not moved. He looked around: it was full night now, and there was a moon, and the water was a dark shining thing. I am calm, he thought, but he didn't know why. He stood very still, thinking. No one else was on the beach, only them, and no one would come. If it had been different, he would have promised her something, and she would have taken his hand and followed him home. If it had been different, he would have promised to put her in a show, and she would have believed him. "I will let you ride a dolphin's back. A dolphin in a show. I will let you wear sequins and ribbons." He whispered it to himself. "I promise." He could almost see himself at the safe edge of a tank, watching. She would clutch its rubber fin; he would yell out to hold on tight. But he was here, in the dark of this beach, and his daughter was touching at these dolphins again. Then he heard them go suddenly quiet, like horses calmed.

I must do something, he thought, and he turned then, back towards the house. He started to run, stumbling a little as he looked back at his daughter
“They won’t hurt you,” the person on the phone said to him. He stood with the cord stretched tightly, looking out the window at his daughter still on the beach. She was only a white blur from there. “But you have to keep them wet or they’ll die.” He thought he saw her move as he listened; the white gown drifted sideways like a cloud. “Keep them wet until we get there.” He hung up, forgetting to thank them, and headed quickly out the door. “Where did you put your buckets, Sarah?” he asked, as if she were right there with him.

When he came back to them, he was out of breath. He held two pails in his hands, plastic children’s toys. The dolphins seemed to have moved—the waves pushed at them on the sand. He looked for Sarah as his eyes adjusted to the dark beach. And then he saw her. She was on top of one. She lay, singing very quietly, across the blue-grey back of the dolphin furthest up the shore. Her arms were wide open around it, and her yellow hair brushed at its skin where she pressed her cheek down. He told himself again, they will not hurt her, and he listened to her song that was like a lullaby. He whispered it to himself, “They will not hurt her,” and then he walked calmly into the circle of dolphins.

All at once he saw the turned edges of their mouths and the
smooth blue-black length of each body, and he heard their voices whistling and cracking as he passed. He put his hand to one and was surprised at the softness. It gave to his hand like wax just cooled. He bent down as his daughter had and looked into its blacker eye and saw what he thought was sadness. He had been afraid that they would move or lash out or roll into his little girl, but they were beyond that, and as he looked into the eye he felt the quiet of their dying. We are in a garden, he thought, a sad quiet animal garden. He looked over at where Sarah lay raised up in the air as if on the rise of some mound of earth. She was brushing her hand on what he knew now was just soft animal skin, and the bottom of her gown fell like a dirty veil over the dolphin’s side.

“Sarah, baby, you’ll have to slide down soon.” His voice was very calm as he filled his pails. She didn’t slide down, though. He took the cold ocean water and slowly poured it across one dolphin’s back. The skin was satin then, dark shining blue, and the animal opened its mouth to show him delicate white teeth. He refilled his pails and went to the next one, wetting its skin too. He said it again, “Sarah, you’ll have to get down from there.” He heard her talking to her dolphin in a breathy child’s voice, and he heard the
dolphin answer with its noise. He had wet them all now, all the
other dolphins, all but hers. They are beautiful really, he thought,
and he wished she would get down, but she didn't.

Maybe, he thought, she will fall asleep. He could lift her in his
arms then and carry her home. He listened for her voice to stop. She
did seem to slow a little, or maybe her dolphin was just louder now,
its sounds overpowering her song. Its breathing was laboured. Its
breathing sounded like a sick child's. He crouched in the froth of the
water to fill his pails again.

The ocean seemed colder than before. He listened to all the
dolphins breathing, and then he thought of it: her dolphin might die
beneath her. It might die beneath her, and what could he promise her
then? The dolphins he had wet sang louder; they clicked in their
throats as he moved to each one, pouring the water, making them
shine blue and black.

He went to Sarah. “Baby, you have to get down,” he said again,
but she didn't move. She was singing still, low and soft. He went
back to his dolphins and wet them all once more. Their teeth, as
they opened their mouths, looked very white in the moonlight. “They
told me I have to keep them wet,” he whispered to himself as he
looked at his daughter. She seemed so still she might have been asleep. He walked over to her. “They told me to keep them wet, baby.” She didn’t look up, and he went back to the other dolphins to pour the buckets again.

Her dolphin was definitely louder now. Its breathing was hard. He could hear it above the clicking of the others, and he looked over at them, at his daughter and the animal, and he saw that its skin was grey beneath her. He filled his buckets, and then he walked to where they were.

Sarah did not look up. Kneeling, he looked again into the round black eye, and then he straightened over them. He took one bucket by its edge and began to pour the water, in a silent cold stream across his daughter’s back.

She screamed, “Oh, Daddy, it’s so cold!” and then she began to cry, but she would not let go of the animal’s back.

He watched the water soak her nightgown, her skin, and slip to the dolphin beneath her. “They told me, baby,” he whispered like an apology. “They told me I have to keep them wet.”

He poured again with the other bucket, and this time her crying was smaller and down in her throat. She clenched at the dolphin’s
sides with her hands. He thought how soft her nails must be now, as soft as after a bath when they are filled with water. He took more water to the other dolphins. An incredible sadness filled him as he poured. He listened to their sounds, for they were both crying now, his daughter and the dolphin. If she would just slide off, he thought, I could take her home. He would lay her in her bed and watch her short hair soak into its pillow. She would go to sleep then, and she might want to see the place where the dolphins had been in the morning, and he would promise her that. But she held on.

The wet nightgown looked clear against her back. It rose and fell with her breathing and followed the small hard ridges of her spine like another skin. This was how she had looked, he thought as he lifted her, cold and crying, into his arms. She didn't struggle against him now. This was how she had looked, he thought again, when she was born, sliding away from her mother, slick and wet and draped in this other skin, their beautiful child sliding into his arms.
I'M WHAT YOU WANT

It was standing in the backyard, crouching there, lying low like it didn't know it was big. The girl watched it lower its animal-head—so huge and majestic it might have been a lion's. She saw the cross of darker fur rise in a crest at its neck, saw that it would move. She held her breath. Fear kept her there where she was on the porch step. Fear made her watch the animal. She saw what it could hold and tear in the hinges of its jaw. But it was beautiful too, so the girl held her breath and kept her hands quiet on the door's frame and waited. Then she saw what it wanted: the frying pan she'd just laid on the grass because it was too hot to keep in the kitchen, because the stove was full, because it burned her, the hot grease cracking and singing every time her hands passed over it. This animal, (she saw now the ready skeleton under its fur, and she was no longer afraid), would move to the pan of grease, was moving toward it now, stealing slow and hunger-driven, the wind of movement swaying its fur front to back like field grass.

The girl's brother, watching them both, spoke from inside the house.
"It's just a damn dog, Theresa. She'll lick the fucking pan and burn her fucking tongue out and run away. She'll run back to whoever's been starving her all along. Don't get any ideas--we can't keep a dog."

But the girl stayed on the cement step, sliding her back carefully down the door's frame, keeping her weight in her heels. She was just one step outside. Her brother could see whatever she did, but it was okay. It was still okay now. "I don't want to come inside," the girl said softly, so he wouldn't hear.

The houses were close together in this neighborhood. She could see her brother's thin reflection, and the woman's too, on the flat sliding glass of the neighbor's side window. Without leaving the step, the girl reached for the pan, wrapping its handle with the bottom of her shirt, and slid it away from her on the grass, closer to the hungry dog. Even in this heat the pan had cooled. The dog could eat the grease now if it would only come to her. She began to whisper, "It's cooler, it's cooler". She imagined her hand on the dog, the fine hard bones of its head, and the tongue still warm with oil touching into her palm. She imagined that she could see beneath the rug of dulled fur: muscles twisting in slippery folds like massive
braid. She waited.

The girl wasn't afraid of her brother. He was all of her family. He was everything she'd ever known. She knew his hands as well as she knew her own because they were the same—thin-boned and delicate—smooth fans of flesh. They were the same, but his hands were stronger, and sometimes afterwards he would give her money. Sometimes afterwards he would press his thin warm hands against her head, smoothing her hair flat to the sides of her face, and she could look at him then and think that he was like a father.

Inside, the woman was laughing, sitting by her brother deep in the couch and laughing with a quiet drunk sound. The girl stayed on the porch step. She felt the shadow of the door's frame falling across her back, and she rested her head now in her own warm hands. She watched the woman's reflection, saw the way her head fell forward when she laughed so that the dark hair became a curtain. She didn't look at her brother. The woman was mumbling; she could hear her. "don't go, baby, don't get up," and then the woman's head fell forward again with the laugh, and the girl stopped watching.

He had gotten up to stand directly behind her—she saw it in the window—and he stood close, his arms pushing at either side of
the door frame, so close that she could feel the heat of his bare legs brush at her back. She felt hot and sick for that moment that her brother stood behind her, and she wished hard that the dog would run toward them. She wished for just a moment that the dog would attack. And then her brother had gone back to the couch.

The dog moved slowly with its head hung watchful and low, its body stiff. A Shepherd, the girl thought. It will be a Shepherd when it has eaten and drunk. Its coat will be a heavy black-brown. It could open a man at the throat if it wanted to. The girl spoke to it, coaxing, “Here girl, here pretty girl, I'm what you want.” Fur matted flat to the dog’s neck where a collar had been. She knew that people kept dogs that way, collared and roped and chained. They ran away if you didn’t. But her own dog wouldn’t need to be chained, would stay unleashed, would come to her with a single uttered command. Her dog would sleep at her feet, huge and quiet and protecting.

The girl’s thin shoulders jerked when she heard the woman speak from inside the house, slurring words. She didn’t know the woman. She didn’t want to.

“Little sister, the man is right. Big dogs are nothing but trouble. Even skinny ones. Especially skinny ones. And a bitch-dog,
she's always mean. She protects no one but herself and her own."

"You aren't my sister." The girl said this softly but still loud enough to be heard. She wasn't afraid of her brother.

The woman laughed, making a sound like crows in the air, and the dog skittered sideways in the yard, away from the loud noise, pressing its tail neatly into its legs. The girl didn't know this woman, didn't know any of the women he brought home, to her house. She didn't want to. They were loud women. They tried to talk to her, but they didn't know what he wanted, her brother, and so she wouldn't answer--she wouldn't like them. She was just a girl, and she knew. She could feel her narrow ribs with her own hand; she could put that hand to her side and feel them like the teeth of a comb, and still she knew what he wanted. She would never answer these women. They shouldn't come home with him.

"That's good, that's so good--you aren't my sister. Neither is that dog, baby." Then the woman's curtain fell again.

The dog was a statue far back in the yard now, head lifted high like a deer's and tail in a stiff arc away from its body, revealing the sudden pinkness of skin beneath. It began to trot back and forth, body sunk low, head to the ground, moving side to side, as if there
were a line it could not cross. It began to pant in the heat. It was farther away from the pan than when it had started. The girl held out her hand to the dog, cupped gently as if there might be something good hidden within.

In the window she saw her brother lift his hand toward her with the middle finger raised, but she wouldn't turn around. That was what he wanted—for her to turn around, for her to see him on the couch with the woman. She heard him say to the woman, “She needs her fucking mouth cleaned out, doesn't she?” The woman didn't answer. She was nothing but a curtain of hair. The girl watched her brother's image as he pulled the bottle from the clench of his thighs and put it to that woman's lips. She saw that the woman didn't open her mouth, didn't really want to drink—was too drunk already. Then she saw her brother pull the woman's body close so that he could cradle her head against his chest as he worked the bottle gently between her lips. Back and forth, open, give, open, and then she did. She let him. She drank. He could be beautiful, the girl thought, the way that a knife could be beautiful.

The woman would not wake up now. He was combing his fingers through the sleek wings of his own hair, then drumming them
on his knee.

"Pretty girl, here pretty girl, come to me pretty girl." The girl sang louder now, making her voice sweet and strong, but her legs ached from crouching. She couldn't run away. There would be no running away now. She had to imagine hard for a minute before she could feel the fur of the dog pulling through her fingers, but she could do that if she needed to, imagine so hard that she wasn't even there: she could be somewhere else. She could be running her fingers through fur, she could be sleeping, she could be outside. "I don't want to inside," the girl said softly.

There was no need to watch in the window anymore. She knew that the woman was drunk, that she was stretched across the couch, across her brother, with the heat of a sleeping cat. If she turned from her post on the step, gave in to him, she knew she would see him trailing his finger down the openness of the woman's neck. She didn't have to turn around. She had seen it in the way he held the bottle to the woman's mouth: working the glass into her her lips, back and forth, almost the way that a mother would. He had cradled the woman's head with his arm and worked the bottle into her lips, and she had not had a choice in the same way that a baby has no
choice. The girl began to hate this dog that shivered and crept so slowly before her for not feeling the strength of its own tightly wrapped muscles, for not knowing what it could do. She hated this dog for not being her own, and she hated that her brother would be moving faster now, tracing into the hard flesh blanket of that woman's spine while the woman laughed low and soft because she didn't know. She hated that he would put the bottle on the floor and find some other place on this woman to put his free hand. The girl began to murmur sing-song to the dog: "Talk to me, come talk to me." Her brother's hands were as intricate as the skeletons of birds.

"Dogs are nothing if they won't protect you." This was what she thought now. Without wanting to, she was thinking. The heavy mane of fur, the oiled tongue--if they don't know their size or the sharp fit of their own jaws, then they were worth nothing. And this dog was only hungry. Her outstretched arm, her legs ached, but the dog moved closer now, and there was no time to run away, so she kept it there, the pale length of her arm. She shook her empty hand, even though she knew now that the dog was a coward. She dreamed of her own dog: a sleek mass, fur and teeth that could close on a man's throat if she wanted it to. The room behind her was so quiet...
now that if it had been okay she might have thought that the woman
and her brother only slept. He would call her soon. He would not
find what he wanted inside the woman, and he would call her, and
even in this heat she would be cold.

He would say it just once, his command, and she would go
because she knew her brother. She would hear it soon, "Theresa,
come here." and she would go, and thinking of that, she changed her
song. It came from her easily; it came like tears, "You coward, you
bitch-dog, you traitor," and the dog, trusting her tone, came close to
moisten her hand with caress.
STORMS

She loved her baby boy—she would love him forever, but now was the best time. His head was the heaviest part of his body, and she could cup it in her curving palm and imagine the white of the bone underneath. "David," she called.

He turned his face to hers. The sun shone through his hair.

"Baby," she whispered, "you haven't even been here two years. Not even two." And then she looked at the deep painful blue of the lake.

"David, let's go swim," she said. She picked his small body up from the blanket she had spread beneath the tree. David wore a white t-shirt because of the sun, and it had clean smell like a man before he is dressed in the morning. All around them mothers and children swam. They splashed and played at the shore of the lake, making a great noise. David was quiet as they walked across the stony beach. He looked down and watched her careful slow-moving feet.

"Cold, David," she said, pointing to the water with her chin. He lifted his head up to look. She had an innertube clutched in the bend
of her free arm, and a small square piece of wood in her hand. “Too
cold for you to get wet,” she said. “But I’ll give you a ride. Look,
David, can you see Manny under the tree?” She turned him away from
the water, back toward the land.

He pointed at nothing. She knew he wanted to make her happy,
even this young he wanted to make her happy.

Then David really did see the dog. His finger was a curve of
white in the sunlight. The dog was old and brown and tied to the
tree.

“Puppy,” David said, and he smiled.

She loved him always, but right then, in his smiling, she loved
him with a clean strong new love, a love strong enough to carry them
both away.

David let his arm down slowly. It rested at his side with all
the fingers still curled back from the fat pad of his hand as if they
were caught in the very end of waving.

When the water was over her knees, she set the innertube
down and laid the square of wood across its middle, covering the
hole. Then she put David on the wood.
"Cold!" he said, pointing all around him at the dark water

"Cold, cold, cold!" His eyes were big, and his body was stiff with a quiet sort of excitement.

She pushed the rubber tube further out, out to where it wuld be smooth. She leaned down to use both her arms.

"It's a boat, David," she said, and she watched for him to smile again because this was better than a bathtub.

David made trilling noises, boat sounds. She pushed him along and felt the innertube heat beneath her hands like the thick black skin of a snake.

The noise of the mothers seemed muffled to her now.

When she was a little girl, she used to swim in the ocean. It was cold, much colder than this. But she stayed in to feel the swaying and the touch of seaweed and the float of her own narrow body. If she stayed in more than an hour, her legs would start to bleed, just a little, as if each pore had been opened with a pin, and the blood would look like tiny swirls of smoke curling into the water.

She was up to her waist in the lake. David balanced carefully
on the board, holding his arms away from his body. They quivered, the hands almost ready to clap or grab or pull. She knew that he was excited. She knew she had to be careful. Sometimes he reached for her hair, wound it into his tiny warm fist. Sometimes he hurt her, but she didn’t yell. “I won’t drop you, baby, never,” she would tell him.

She felt the sun like sleep on her body. She looked at David, and he let his arms down again to his sides. He began to hum. His baby fingers played at the edge of the board.

When she was older but still a girl, she used to sleep with a man at a lake. But it wasn’t this lake, and David wasn’t there. It was during the night, when everyone had gone. They didn’t speak, and he was heavy and white in the darkness. He undressed them both. She would watch his solid white stomach emerge, and then she would lie down in the long grass to wait, and then he would undress her. He leaned over her in the darkness, not speaking, never speaking, and he tugged her jeans off by the cuffs as if she were just a little girl gone to sleep in her clothes.

Once, when they were finished, she had cupped his heavy breast in her hand and stroked it with the tips of her fingers and
laid her face down on its softness and cried. And that was the last
time they met. He left her there in the grass with her clothes in a
soft damp pile at her side.

But she wasn’t little anymore. She was a mother. She didn’t
cry now, even when David pulled her hair, or scratched at her cheek
with the sharp snagging corners of her baby fingernails.

The dog barked, waking her up even though she had not been
asleep.

"Listen, David. Manny’s calling us. We’d better head in." She
turned back to the shore. She looked at the barking dog. Manny was
sitting up, facing the lake, and each time he made a noise his whole
body shook.

David clapped.

"Puppy!" he screamed.

Sometimes David was rough with the dog. Sometimes he hit
when he meant to pet. He got too excited over the touch of the
coarse brown fur, its tight curls. He pulled with his fingers, and
Manny ran, looking for places the baby could not go.

She held David whenever this happened. She would smooth her
hand down the length of his arm, shoulder to palm, feeling the incredible heat and give of his baby skin. "We do not hurt, David," she would say. "We do not hurt."

A breeze blew on her naked legs as she walked in toward the shore. She was glad she had not let David swim. She was glad she had not splashed him with the cold lake water just to see surprise on his face.

When Manny knew they were coming, he stopped barking. She saw the dog's body shiver. She saw his excitement. His tail brushed back and forth across the blanket. He lifted first one paw and then the other, as if the ground burned slightly beneath them. She saw that every muscle in him wanted to run to where they were.

"Look, David," she said. "Look at how much Manny loves us. He'd chew off his own leg if the thought that would get him any closer."

"Puppy," David said.

She walked across the stones of the beach carrying her child and the rubber tube and the board. The dog waited for them. She thought she saw some of the other mothers smile from their bright chairs, smile at her baby and her dog. The sun made her shoulders
feel as tight and hard and shiny as the smooth baked crust of new bread.

And then suddenly she felt love again, love for the smiling women, love for the sun, love for the way her child held on as she walked. It was so strong it almost made her stumble.

She packed their things into the trunk of the car. She strapped David into his seat in the back. Once he was settled, she turned to pet the dog, to ready him, to tell him she was sorry it hurt so much to jump now. Sometimes she had to lift him into the car, heaving his furry body onto the back seat. His hips swayed like a woman’s when he walked. Now if he ran a hundred yards he was sorry. Now if he ran a hundred yards, he laid down at the end and would not get up. She rubbed his ears, feeling their tough warm skin and hair.

Then she said, “Come on, jump Manny! Jump in!” and he did. He laid down next to David in the car and put his chin down against his paws.

Once she had been alone for so long she was unsure of the sound of her own voice, and she slept with a man she didn’t know. She found him in a bar. She told him she loved him, meaning that she could or she might. He didn’t answer, but still he followed her.
home. He walked slowly behind her. He curled his fingers into the loops for her belt, tugging if she walked too fast. He let her undress herself. When it was over, she did not cry or touch him or try to hold him there in the small warmth of her bed. She just watched him button his shirt, smooth it into his pants, and leave. And she didn't use the word love again until David came, until she had touched the swollen white folds of his baby eyelids and knew for sure what the single word meant.

Standing in the parking lot now, she leaned in to pat the dog. She ran her hand over the curve of David's head too, smoothing his warm hair forward. The skin of his head was supple. It almost moved beneath her fingers, young and clean and strange feeling after the dog's dead fur. She handed David a plastic toy.

When she straightened back up, she saw that a storm was coming.

She sang as she started the car, thinking that maybe they would drive through this, slip out from under the dark clouds before the water let down. She sang a lullaby as she drove. She sang a song that she always sang to David, but right now it was for the dog.

David was making noises, patting the front of his car seat,
touching his face, his own cheeks. He would be asleep soon if they
got out of the storm. But Manny was sitting up. He panted and
looked out the window, and his shoulders stiffened as he tried to
anticipate each move of the car. He hated storms. He would begin to
shiver soon.

"Lie down, Manny," she said. "It's all right, I won't let it get
you." She didn't think it was the water he minded. She had held him
through other storms, hugging her arms tight around the big
struggling mass of bone and fur, calming him with her voice. It was
the noise of a storm she felt rolling through his body, the thunder
making him shake and quiver. When thunder came, he struggled to
get loose, to run, to hide, but if the let him go he ran from corner to
corner, hitting against the walls, hurting himself.

"It must be like guns to you, Manny," she said. "It must be like
the worst sound in the world to you."

After a few moments, David fell asleep. She could see him in
the rearview mirror. She could see his head pressed against the
padded seat. His toy had fallen, and his hand lay at a strange angle,
stretching forward, as if he had gone to sleep at just the same
moment that he reached for the toy.
Early drops of the storm hit hard against the windshield, huge and far apart. The car smelled suddenly like food and diapers and heat. She turned on the headlights and sang louder, losing the tune, watching the dog in the rearview mirror.

And then she didn't have time to sing or to listen for David's cry or to watch the dog lie down and sit up and then push himself hard against the car door, because the storm had hit. She could only hold the wheel and lean forward, almost into the glass, trying to see. The water fell harder and harder. It was like driving through the bottom of a river, pushing through it, being beaten by it. She was glad she knew the road.

David woke up screaming, slapping his hands against the padded bar of his seat.

She could only look back once. The wind pushed at the car. The rain held them in a tunnel of darkness. The air in the car was suddenly cool. She imagined wetness closing in on her like an unfriendly skin, but still she kept driving. She strained to see, hoping that soon they would come to the edge of the storm. David cried. The dog was quiet.

"Baby, this is your first bad storm," she said, but she didn't say
it very loudly, and she didn't look back at David's red, open, frightened face.

In a while the storm did let up, lessening into a soft summer rain. She could see then that she'd been driving through an incredible sea of frogs. They had all come out in the water, leaping, wet and shining, gray-green in the street. They jumped into the black road, so many that she could not keep from hitting them, so many that she could see them, like hundreds of small green rocks on the road that stretched before her. She felt the tightness of her shoulders and hands on the wheel. She watched the frogs jump into her tires, killing themselves.

David had finally cried himself back to sleep, tired from the effort of so much swallowing.

She could see the dog stretched across the seat, quiet. Everything was peaceful now. Outside the ground looked torn, awakened by the rain.

When she got home, she opened the back door of the car. "Come on, Manny. Jump out, we're home," she said. David was still asleep. Dry white tears ran in tracks down his face, following the curve of his cheeks, touching at the corners of his mouth. "Come on, Manny,"
she said, but the dog didn't get up. The dog did not move or look at her. She put her hand gently against his brown fur and stroked his sharp ribs. She ran her hand down the length of his leg, feeling the fine bones the the dry gray pads of his feet. Nothing moved. His eyes were wide open. And then she saw that his mouth was open too, open but dry on the inside from the constant air of the car.

She looked at her baby boy. She saw the perfect arc of his lashes. She saw that his breath moved in and out of a shining wetness on his lower lip.

"You did this, didn't you?" she said softly, even though she knew it was not true.

Rain fell lightly on her shoulders as she shut the door of the car, leaving them both there. She heard a soft slap, slap, slap and knew that David was awake now, hitting at the thick glass of the window with his beautiful curving baby fingers. She touched at her face and cried. She walked away, toward the house. She felt the weight of the dog in her empty arms, and then the weight of a little boy, and then the weight of nothing.
MORNING

The air in the car was warm with their breathing, and Heather would have fallen asleep if her sister hadn't been there, close, pressed against her leg. The little girl was playing with the radio knob, making the sound go off and on, off and on, blaring snapping, then gone again. Heather thought of her sister breaking the radio, of their mother coming back to the car, finding them with the silver radio dial rolling loose in their hands like a broken toy. And she could see their mother dumping the promised cups of coffee out onto the pavement, even the cup that was her own, forgetting, because she was angry. Heather weighed it all in her head and decided. If it broke, if the radio broke, then she would be the one who had done it, not her little sister. That was all their mother would know.

"Make it go faster, Katie," Heather said. Katie's small hand twisted sharply at the silver knob. For a few moments she turned it so quickly that the blare on and off was like a new voice. It screamed and faded, taking all the instruments from the song into itself, and then letting them back out like the crying, swallowing, crying of a healthy baby
“Listen, Katie, it sounds like your JoJo doll,” Heather said.

Katie smiled with the attention. She tried to make the radio go even faster, her hand curling into a tight fist around the dial, her body leaning forward, excited, straining across Heather’s lap to get closer.

Heather put her own hand on her sister’s smaller one, stopping it. “Let’s sleep till Mom gets back,” she said. Katie didn’t fight as Heather pulled her balled fist away. Then Heather pressed Katie’s small body against her own, and her shape was warm and solid beneath the curve of Heather’s arm.

“Sleep, Katie,” Heather said. She ran her hand lightly down Katie’s face, forehead to chin, palm inward, touching at the silk-like thinness of her eyelids. “Like closing a doll’s eyes,” Heather said to her, and Katie laughed, opening her eyes even wider. Heather leaned her own head back against the tough vinyl seat. “Sleep, Katie,” she said again.

“Hey, wake up.” It was their mother, opening the station wagon door on the passenger side, their side. She spoke in a whisper, but still the sound was sharp, bringing them back into the early morning. “Hey, wake up girls,” she whispered again, because they were both
sliding away, not really waking up at all. It's Mom, Heather thought, checking in on us, pulling up the blankets, touching our foreheads with her hand. It's nighttime, she thought. And then she did wake up, and they were in a parking lot, warm and sleepy and pressed softly into each other. Heather could smell her little sister's breath in the air, a smell like water left overnight in a glass.

"It's six in the morning," Heather said out loud, to no one, to her mother.

Katie had her arms wrapped around her own thin chest, as if to protect herself from something in a dream. She was still asleep.

"I know what time it is, Heather. I don't need you to tell me what time it is," her mother said, and Heather looked away and didn't ask yet where they were going.

Their mother left the door open and stood up to set the three styrofoam cups on the car's long hood. As she pulled their lids off, steam curled out, rose in the cool morning air, and disappeared. "It's freezing in here now," Heather said, but her mother ignored her, reaching into her sweater pocket for packets of sugar and cream. She ripped open every one, filling each cup with the sugar and then with all the cream. She tore a tiny hole in each lid and leaned into
the car. She handed one cup to Heather. Then she woke Katie, shaking her gently by the shoulder, and handed her a cup too.

"It's sweet," she said as she got in on the driver's side. "Wait till you get to the bottom." Her hair was heavy against her face this morning, a longish dulled blond, falling unbrushed to her shoulders.

Heather looked at her mother, at the swollen white skin of her eyes and the thinness of her mouth, and thought that it must be one of her tired mornings.

"Why did we have to leave so early? Where are we going?" Heather asked. She looked out at the parking lot that spread as wet and smooth as a lake all around them. "Won't Dad miss us?" she said.

Their mother looked out too, and for a moment before she answered, it seemed that they were all alone, floating, the only people alive, closed into the muffled warm space of their car.

"We're going to a friend's, Heather. Don't ask me any more about it." Her voice wasn't angry, just sad and tired and hurt, so Heather kept on.

"Is it the same as last time?" she asked, very carefully, but when Heather looked over she saw that her mother was shaking, holding the steering wheel tightly with both hands, looking out at
the empty parking lot. She saw that her mother’s whole back was rounded like an animal’s back is rounded when it is being sick. She didn’t ask again.

No one moved for awhile. Then Katie began to swing her legs. She kicked lightly at the dashboard, making a scuffing noise of shoe and plastic.

Heather took her mother’s hand from the wheel and put it on the keys. “There,” she said to her mother. “They’re already in the ignition.” Heather spoke quietly so that their mother would stop shaking, would start the car, would take them away from there.

Their car nosed onto the road, big, swinging wide, and no one spoke until Heather said, “Don’t drink it yet, Katie—-it’s too hot.”

Katie had both of her hands wrapped around her cup as if it were heavy and full, like a bowl of soup. She looked up at Heather and smiled.

Heather said, “It’s burning hot, Katie, hot enough to kill dragons and monsters and fish.”

Katie laughed now and pushed both feet against the dashboard. Then she slid her back carefully along the seat, slowly bending her knees, and when her face was almost hidden by the seat belt strap,
she said, “Not fish, Heather. Don’t let it kill fish.”

Heather laughed.

“You hold it then, Heather. I don’t ever want to kill fish,” Katie said, and she handed her cup to Heather. They both looked out the window at the fog. It swept over the car in great clouds of white, opening and closing like a mouth as they drove through it. The road was black and wet.

“We’re up in the sky, Katie; we’re flying through big soft clouds, and if we wanted to, we could stop and lie down and sleep right on top of them,” Heather said.

Katie smiled up at her and then turned and traced her with her finger against the window, making patterns. Her dress was too small, and she had pulled its jumper straps as far as they would go, letting the front sag down at her chest.

Heather looked at her sister’s bare legs beneath the skirt and saw that she’d forgotten her socks. She put her hand on the girl’s solid thigh. It was warm and covered lightly with gold-white hair.

“Katie, aren’t you cold without socks?” Heather asked her, and Katie smiled and whispered “No,” and pressed her mouth lightly against the window so that a circle of steam grew on the glass all around it.
Then their mother spoke, still watching the road, not looking at them. "Hey," she said. "Hey, Katie-girl, you can handle hot coffee, can’t you? You’re getting to be a big girl now." Something held onto her voice, something like anger, a strange misshapen noise.

"Mom, she’ll burn herself, won’t she?" Heather said, but their mother still looked only at the road.

"No. No, I don’t think she will. I think she’s all grown up now," their mother said.

Katie was smiling, leaning forward to watch them both, waiting to be let in on this, whatever it was. Her face was drawn into a shape like a small heart, and her hair fell away from her head in soft separated ropes of yellow. She began to swing her small legs again, excited.

"Yes," Katie said. "Yes, I can drink it now," and her voice was loud, as if she thought they’d forgotten all about her. She reached up proudly to take the cup from Heather’s hand.

"Both hands again, Katie," Heather said. "and blow into it before you drink."

Katie made blowing noises for a while, just holding the cup to her lips, afraid to drink.
"Mom, shouldn't you slow down?" Heather said, because she saw the railroad tracks up ahead, and their mother was driving fast, letting the big car barrel down the empty road.

Then they hit the tracks, and Katie spilled most of her coffee in her lap, and their mother didn't look over. She just drove on, shaking her thick hair out of her face with a little sigh.

Katie didn't make a noise. She looked down at the stain in her lap, a spreading circle of brown against the blue and white stripes, and she looked back up at Heather, and then her eyes spilled over with tears.

"Mom, she's burned herself," Heather said. "We'll have to stop. Her skirt's all soaked." She put her arm around her sister. "It's all right, Katie, you're all right."

Their mother didn't say anything.

"Mom, we have to stop. She needs to change." Heather was petting Katie's smooth hair, pushing it off her forehead, resting her hand on the damp skin.

Then their mother spoke.

"Katie's all grown up now, aren't you, Katie-girl?"
Katie put her hand to the wet spot in her lap, touching two fingers into it as if it were paint.

"Aren't you?" their mother said again, and Katie pulled her fingers quickly away and said "Yes." She smiled even though her mother wasn't looking at her.

Heather said "Here," and reached to take the almost empty cup away from her sister

"No."

Their mother's voice was loud in the small space of the car

"No," she said, more quietly this time. "Let Katie hold it--she's a big girl now."

Heather watched her little sister hold the styrofoam cup high, away from her body, as if she were scared of it.

She whispered to Heather "I can do it," she said. "It's all right." And then she smiled again, looking up quickly at Heather, then turning her eyes back to the cup, keeping watch on it.

"It's the same again, isn't it, Mom?" Heather looked over at her mother, at both of her hands on the wheel, and at the way her shoulders curled forward, inward, and rounded her back away from them. "It's the same, I know it is, I know it," Heather said to
herself, answering her own question.

Their mother was holding the steering wheel tightly and then loosening her fingers from its plastic, milking it with her hands, watching only the road. “Ask Katie,” she said. “It’s not the same at all, is it Katie?”

Heather looked over at her sister. Katie was holding the cup bravely now, both hands tight around it, and a proud smile was on her face as if she were holding a baton.

“Mom, Katie is just a little girl.” Heather spoke softly, trying not to upset anything else, looking down at her hands in her lap as if she’d just broken them.

Then Heather began to cry a little bit, small scared cries, and Katie leaned over and whispered, “It’s all right, Heather, I won’t spill anymore.”

Their mother spoke again, still looking out at the road and the fog and the thick trees going by. “Katie, you’re all grown up now, aren’t you?” she said, and her voice was angry and strange.

Katie didn’t answer; she just held the cup a little further away from her chest.

“Aren’t you, Katie?” their mother said again, and Katie
answered “No?” like a question, feeling this time for the right thing to say.

Their mother heard it, the question in Katie’s voice. She turned to look at them both. She’s not angry anymore, Heather thought, only sad. Heather wished then that she were big enough to put her arms around her mother.

“Do you want to change, Katie?” Their mother’s voice was soft now, and quiet and very gentle.

Katie nodded, looking at the wetness in her lap.

The car slowed and stopped on the side of the road. “Here, Katie,” their mother said. “Jump out here and change. No one will see.” She handed Katie some clothes from the back seat. Then she ran the backs of her fingers lightly down the girl’s warm curved cheek.

Katie swung the heavy door open and set the cup down in the gravel. She was careful with it, gentle, handling the styrofoam as if it were the shell of an egg. She stepped almost shyly out of the car. Then she stood back to give herself room and turned her body away from them. She hunched over to hide from the wind that hit her bare knees.
Their mother looked away as Katie fumbled with the hooks of her dress.

She was pulling on the clean pants, tugging them up over her shoes, when she fell. Her face was down, forward, in the gravel by the open car door, but she didn't make a noise. There was only the small sound of her hands scraping, moving, lifting her body up.

Heather slid quickly out of the car to help her.

"It's all right, Katie, you're all right now," Heather said, getting down on her knees to look at the little girl's face. She brushed away a stone that had pressed into Katie's soft cheek. And then she noticed it, a thin line of red slipping like ink from Katie's nose.

"Oh, baby, you're bleeding," Heather said.

Katie touched her finger to it, and then held her hand away to see. She touched it again with two fingers.

"It's all right, Heather," Katie whispered. "I'm okay." And then she smiled and hugged Heather very close.

Heather laughed a little, quietly. They were both speaking in whispers now, as if this were some game that their mother could not play.
"Katie," Heather said. "I'm not the one who's hurt. I should hug you."

Then, feeling the tilt of the small girl's hips against her own, she began to loosen the tiny fierce hands from around her neck.
IN THE NIGHT

Without the chair, there would be only the floor for her, her hands tied to her feet behind her back. It was the baby that gave her this chair and the small sweet kindness of the looser rope, so she thanked it now, whispering down to her stomach. She hung her head, nodded a little, agreed with herself: this was better than it might have been. Her dry hair fell against her cheek, but she could not brush it away. Her husband was in another room, her little boy Joseph was asleep in his bed, and she was in the kitchen, tied to a chair.

"Hey," she yelled out to her husband. "Hey, I'm a little tired now." She could hear him rummaging through the drawers in their bedroom, looking for something. She smiled to herself, wondering how long it would be before he asked for her help.

He was like a little boy, younger sometimes than their own son. He would look for something, the salt shaker, the masking tape, his old yellow shirt, and if it wasn't where he had left it in his mind, he would stand in front of her, shaking-angry, almost crying, her little boy having a fit. "Where is it?" Sometimes he would scream.
That moment, the screaming moment, was awful, but then she could make him happy. She could find it and put it, whatever it was, in his shaking-angry hands, and he would be happy for a little while. He would look down at his cupped hands as if the thing were special, a bright-shelled egg. Sometimes she hid things just to be able to find them for him.

"Hey," she called out again. "Hey, I'm tired. The baby's tired."

"I'm busy," he said, and his voice was an even sound, not angry for now. She shook her head a little bit, and the bangs fell into her face. She blew at them and filled her eyes with her own sour breath.

Sometimes he left her tied for too long, forgetting, and when he came back and found her stiff, wet with herself, it was as if another person, not he, had done the tying.

The sound of his sorting from the other room made her call out to him, "Baby, what are you doing in there?"

The ache was a faucet dripping steadily down her arms to her white curled fingers, circling, resting for a moment at the twine around her wrists, then climbing back up her arms.

He did not answer, so she called a second time.
“I’m sleeping now,” he said. “I’m only sleeping.”

She could hear the bed, the soft noise of his getting on it and lying still. She understood that he had found what he was looking for and that he was resting.

She would have to be quiet.

A feeling like sleep settled over the house, and the kitchen light hummed, an electric rain above her head.

She was so tired now. Summer heat came into the kitchen; insects ran into the screens, hitting them over and over with the noise of their drunkenness. The light drove down on her. She could hear them breathing, her son and her husband in their separate rooms, sleeping, swallowing the night air. She hung her head and leaned forward against the ropes as a horse might lean into its harness to rest against the leather.

For one long moment she slept. Then her stomach became wild. It rolled and kicked and rippled from within. She hunched down over her belly and made soft noises to it, blowing kisses without her hands. She rocked a little, as far as the ropes would allow, and the thing inside her went back to sleep.
She could hear Joseph rolling in his bed. She knew by his breathing that he was asleep. She knew how both of them breathed: Joseph high and fast even when he slept, the nervous quick breath of a bird, and his father calmer than that, slower, as deep and careful as something that swayed on the ocean floor. When a day was bad, his breathing changed. His breathing was faster then, more like Joseph’s. His breathing was like the panting of a sick cat then, dry and fast and wrong.

She could not remember her own breathing, or else she had not ever known it.

The insects hit the screens less often now. They were waking up and leaving the light of the kitchen windows, ready for morning to come. She knew from other nights that birds would start up soon. She waited. She listened to the house noises, the refrigerator, the clock. The house creaked and groaned, its breathing irregular.

Sometimes after long nights, he woke their little boy up early and took him to the store. When they got back, the boy would be happy and smiling, shrieking with excitement.

“Where did Daddy take you, Joseph,” she would ask from her
chair, and the child could hardly answer, he would be so excited.

"To the store, to the store!" he would yell like a little song. Then Joseph and his father would get her soft hairbrush and brush her hair while she sat there, tied. Both of them would hold the brush, the boy's hand first and his father's helping, guiding. They would smooth the long hair away from her forehead, out of her eyes, down its heavy length along her tired back. She would close her eyes for this. She would smile at them. When the brushing was over, the child would pull it out of his pocket, the gift from the store, a bow or a barrette, and fasten it into her dry brown hair. And then they would untie her and she could get up. Her husband would help her, lifting her up, holding her arm, and Joseph would circle around them like a delighted dog.

Sometimes after long nights, her husband would shut the child in its room and come to cry with his head in her lap. She rocked him then. She leaned over him and sang him little songs, her hands tied behind her back.

She heard the birds begin their singing now. She listened to their loud, sharp music and hoped he would wake up early today. And
then, as if he could hear her wishing, he came into the kitchen, still heavy-eyed with sleep. She could see the shadowy outline of something hidden beneath his shirt. She waited for him to speak.

“I'm sorry about this. I'm sorry it has to be this way.”

She smiled and shook her head, looking at him through the long hair in her face.

“I'm sorry,” he said again. Then he left the kitchen and went into Joseph's room. She could hear Joseph crying a little, not wanting to wake up. She thought of the warm damp smell of the child's sleeping skin.

He came back with Joseph curled in his arms. The little boy slept on, his perfectly formed fingers touching at his mouth. “This is all we need,” her husband said. “This is a family.” He set their little boy down now with his feet on the floor, shaking him gently, enough to make him stand on his own.

She looked at her husband, at his hands that hung like dead soft birds at the ends of his arms. She watched Joseph swaying, catching himself, swaying again, still asleep. She looked down at her stomach. She listened to their breathing in the room. She began to forget when he took the morning's gift from beneath his shirt. She
began not to feel as he pried gently at her legs, pulling them apart as far as the ropes would allow. She sang inside her head. "This is a family, this is a family, this is a family."
THE PICNIC

It was a pond more than a lake, a pond full of snakes. Sometimes the snakes rippled across the surface in their liquid-ribbon way, but they were solitary things and not out for hurting. Carrie and her daughter Paige walked near the pond and caught the horse in the same way they always had, with a Coke, flat and warm from being in the car.

Carrie slipped a bridle over its head, and then she threw herself on, slapping the horse's shoulder with her own chest and flinging her leg across its old white back. The horse was like a very calm hurdle, or a balance beam, and usually it went into the water easily enough. Carrie rode into the brown pond, and Paige played on the shore, her soft frizzy hair bright as a clown's wig in the sun.

Soon the water was up to the horse's chest, lapping at it, and Carrie screamed and squeezed and kicked with all she had, and Paige clapped from the shore, and in that sort of racket the horse bound deep into the water. It leapt farther and farther, its back a rocking cradle. This was the wild part of it.

When they had gone in so far that the horse could not touch the
muddy bottom, Carrie pushed even harder, and then the horse began to swim. It lifted itself up and moved through the water. Carrie got off and floated alongside with her fingers deep in the white doll-like hair of the mane, and she whispered, "You're all right; you're all right," looking into the horse's rolled back eye. The horse curled its lip over the water and strained with its head. It pushed through the pond with each hoof. It did a graceful long-legged dog paddle. Carrie liked to imagine the taut curve of the horse's belly beneath the surface of the water. When they had gone out just far enough, she let the horse turn itself around.

She didn't know why she did this, swam this forgotten horse. She didn't know why she brought Paige to sit at the edge of the dirty pond, but it seemed like a very important thing for a daughter to watch.

"Don't be sad," Paige said when they came dripping back to the shore.

"I'm not sad at all," Carrie answered, even though she knew Paige was talking to the horse. The horse really was sad. It stood next to them, its ribs heaving, its furry white head hanging low. It was a tired old horse with a back that dipped down like a hammock.
and right now it was not even trying to get away. It really was their horse for the moment. “Here, Paige,” Carrie said, and she poured the leftover Coke into Paige’s small cupped hands, because Paige liked very much to feed animals.

Carrie knew Paige was a good girl. Sometimes when Carrie got out to the middle of the pond, she remembered to look back and worry, and Paige was there, on the shore, being good. She only let the water touch the white rubber edges of her shoes.

When the horse wandered away and Carrie had toweled herself dry, she and Paige set out to have their picnic. They got out their plaid blanket and the cheese that was marbled orange and white and some very cold 7 Up in a blue plaid thermos. The horse always drank the Coke. It was late spring, and every now and then it felt almost hot. Sometimes clouds blew across the sun, and then Carrie could remember winter very well.

“It’s working,” Paige said as they spread their blanket across the new grass.

“What’s working?” Carrie said.

Paige touched her own sleeve, fingering the dull shine of its cloth. Then she answered. “I can’t feel the wind at all.” Her eyes
were big. This was wonderful to her.

"That's exactly what a windbreaker is for," Carrie said, and she was glad that she had let her daughter pick out her own new coat. It was a red jacket, and it matched the red of Paige's small sneakers, and even though Carrie hated the color red on herself, she liked to see it on Paige. She thought it made Paige look cheerful and fierce, like a little girl who could win on the playground.

They ate their cheese in tiny bites to make it last. Then Carrie opened the thermos of 7 Up. She looked over for a moment at Paige. Paige's fingers were still at her lips, even though the cheese was gone. She was such a small girl. Her face was perfectly white, as white as if she had spent her life in the woods, even though Carrie made sure she played in the sun. Her t-shirts stayed tucked in--her shoes were never untied. Carrie worried that she didn't have any fun. Carrie screwed the lid back onto the thermos.

"Now we're really going to have a party," she said. She held the thermos out in front of Paige to get her attention. "This is champagne, Paige, and we're at a party, okay?"

Paige looked frightened. "I've never been to a party," she said quietly. Her body was still.
"Well, I'll tell you exactly what to do, so don't worry," Carrie said. She set the thermos down for a moment. "First, this is a grown up party, and we must be very very sexy, so unzip your windbreaker a little bit."

Paige tugged carefully on the clean white zipper. She stopped when she reached her collarbone.

"Perfect," Carrie said. Then she unfastened one button on her own damp flannel shirt. "There, now we're ready for a drink." She lifted the thermos in her chapped hand and shook it hard, and when she opened it white foam burst out. She began to shout, and then she got up and danced with the thermos held out in front of her, and Paige, catching on, got up and began her own dance, never leaving the small square of the blanket.

"Drink, Paige, drink very fast," Carrie said, handing the thermos to her daughter. Paige held it to her mouth with both hands and swallowed again and again until it began to spill down on her jacket.

"Oh, my windbreaker!" Paige said when she noticed that she had spilled. She set the thermos down. "My new coat!"

Carrie saw that Paige might cry. "Oh, no, Paige, you've done
exactly the right thing! Drunk people always spill on themselves!"

She looked at the dark spots on her daughter's coat. They spread down its front in long oval drops, and they made its color deeper and richer. They might have been stains from a nosebleed. "They always spill, Paige," she said, making her voice sound serious. Then she grabbed the thermos and poured a little of the 7 Up onto herself. "There, now we are really and truly drunk," she said.

Paige looked up from her jacket. "What do we do now that we're drunk?" she asked.

"We act like idiots," Carrie said. "We act like we don't care. We chase the horse." She grabbed Paige's hand in her own and began to run, feeling the sugar of the drinks holding their palms together.

Chasing the horse made them very warm. They screamed at it, and threw handfuls of spring grass, and it was surprised that they wanted it to go away, so at first it wouldn't. Then Carrie picked Paige up and held her above her own head. They ran towards the horse like that, with Paige's arms waving and clapping high up in the air. As the horse ran, it arched its neck and made itself young again. Its hooves threw bits of bright green grass back in their direction.
It ran far down the field, as far away from them as it could get. Carrie set Paige back on the ground, and they watched the horse leave, a streak of white fur against the brilliant blue spring sky.

"Don't ever forget how beautiful this horse was, Paige," Carrie said. "I want to be able to call you up twenty years from now and talk about how beautiful that horse was."

Paige looked up at her mother then. "I won't forget," she said, and Carrie heard something bad in her voice, something sad and concentrated and lovely. Carrie wished she knew how to stop scaring her child. She picked Paige up and held her tightly. She put her hand to the back of Paige's head, sinking her fingers into the incredible frizzy hair.

"Don't cry, my little clown girl," Carrie said, and then she eased Paige's face down into her own neck. She liked to feel the heat of the little girl's breath. "Don't cry, Paige," she said.

Then they walked back to their blanket. They left the horse, who was very far away, grazing.

Now they sat on the plaid scratchy blanket with their legs stretched out in front of them. Carrie pulled up handfuls of grass to
pile on Paige's knees.

"Are we still drunk?" Paige asked.

"No, I don't think so," Carrie said. "I'd say that now we are hungover."

"What do hungover people do?" Paige said.

The grass was so new it almost slid out of the ground and into Carrie's fist. She held it high up in the air and let it flutter down, bright green ribbons on Paige's denim knees.

"Well, they sit very quietly and whisper to each other. Sometimes they even go to sleep," Carrie said. She let a handful of grass fall into Paige's hair. "You're a Christmas tree, Paige. Full of tinsel."

"I want to ask a question." Paige was whispering now. Her hair was bright and pretty in the sun, the slivers of grass lodged gently in it, swaying with the soft spring wind.

"Okay. We'll ask each other questions," Carrie whispered back. "We'll be quiet hungover people asking questions."

"Whose horse is that?" Paige whispered, and she looked like she might cry.

"Oh, honey, don't worry! It's nobody's horse. It's a horse
somebody forgot, so it’s ours. We bring it things to eat, and it likes us, so it’s ours.” She ran her finger down the small curve of Paige’s nose. “Next time we’ll bring it some peanut butter, okay?”

“Okay,” Paige whispered back.

“Now I get to ask a question,” Carrie said. She began to brush the grass off of Paige’s legs because she didn’t like they way they looked all covered in green. “Who do you love more, me or Daddy?” she whispered to her daughter.

“I don’t know,” Paige said. “I don’t know that,” she said again, and her eyes were frightened and filled with clear blue water not at all like the water in the pond.

“That’s okay, Clown Girl,” Carrie said quickly, and she knew that she had scared her daughter again, so she pulled Paige close to her side and ran her hand up and down the back of Paige’s noisy red windbreaker. She wished Paige wouldn’t ever cry.

“I’ve thought of a new game to play, Paige,” Carrie said, because she wanted to cheer her up. “I’ve thought of a very fun thing to do.” She stopped rubbing Paige’s back and let her arm rest on Paige’s narrow shoulders. “Let’s play horse. Let’s pretend that I’m the horse now and you are me.”
"Okay," Paige said, and she looked happy for a minute, and a few pieces of grass blew loose from her tightly curled hair and landed like leaves on the blanket.

Carrie knelt down on her hands and knees. She shook her hair in her face. Then she turned and put her mouth to one of Paige’s hands and pretended to eat an apple, licking the leftover sugar from Paige’s palm. Paige laughed. “Now you get on, Paige; this is when you get on,” Carrie whispered. Paige climbed onto her back, and Carrie stood up and held the little girl’s feet in her hands.

They trod around in the grass like that, Paige high up on Carrie’s back with her arms around Carrie’s neck. They laughed, and the sun felt its hottest, and they could see the real horse looking at them from far away in the field, its big head thrown up and wondering.

Carrie stopped for a moment to rest. “Now you have to swim me, Paige,” she said, catching her breath. “You have to ride me into the water.”

Paige didn’t say anything. Carrie could feel her daughter’s soft stomach pushing against her back. She thought for a moment about how much easier it was to carry Paige on the front of her body, on
the inside. She felt the little girl's breath on her neck. She knew Paige was thinking about the snakes that swam and the mud and the moment that the pond's slick bottom would leave her feet, and she knew that Paige was a good girl, that Paige would go with her mother anywhere, into this brown pond if she had to.

"Hold on, Paige," Carrie said, and she felt her daughter's arms tighten around her neck and her shoulders. She jogged toward the edge of the water.

Then Carrie galloped like the old horse, and Paige bounced along, just a small weight on her mother's back. Carrie thought for a moment about stopping, about letting Paige take her windbreaker off, but she didn't, and then she was swinging into the thick brown water, and she knew that this was something Paige would remember years from now when she called.
JENNY'S VEST

"What's your name?" he asked. New snow fell all around them, hissing as it hit the wet black pavement. He rubbed his head. He'd been out most of the day, but nobody seemed to want plastic roses anymore.

The woman looked at him briefly, and then she turned away. She turned from him as if she were going to run.

"No, no. Don't go, please," he said. "I see someone like you on the street, and I just want to know your name."

And he did want to know her name. He had always wanted to be friends with someone who had breasts like pillows that he could lean his small clean-cut head against.

"Well, it's Jenny then," she said. She had short grey hair and a vest like a caveman might wear made of soft synthetic fur. "Now go away."

He liked the way she spoke. He liked her mouth, the sagging white lips and the way the words came out of them, tumbling like clumsy dogs, a little garbled. He liked how, when she finished speaking, she turned away and stuck her tongue out to catch the new
falling snow.

"Would you like to go have hot chocolate?" he asked.

"With you? Go have hot chocolate with you, or just go have it?"

She seemed particular about words, and he liked that too. He wanted very much to take her home.

"Well, yes, both. I keep a lot of milk in my apartment."

She caught ten or twelve snowflakes with her tongue and then stroked the fake fur of her vest as if it might really have been an animal. She made him want to touch it too, to look for its ears and scratch behind them.

Finally she answered. "I'm depressed," she said. "But if you really want me to, I'll go with you."

He grabbed her hand to take her where they were going.

When they got to his apartment, he shut the door behind them. He leaned into her, and sensing that she didn't object, he pushed her gently against the doors' frame, put his hands on her breasts and began to look for ears, cupping their furry smoothness with both of his happy palms. They weren't like pillows at all! They were
smaller than pillows, and they gave in like water, like balloons. But just as he got a firm grip and prepared to put his face down in them, she began to slap. She slapped quite hard at his clean-cut head.

"What do you think I am, a prostitute?" she asked.

"It seemed worth a try," he said, and he rubbed at the spot above his ear where she had smacked him. "Would you care for some hot chocolate now?" he said.

"I ought to leave," she said. She crossed her arms over her chest. She marched back and forth across the floor, pounding hard against buckling linoleum. "I ought to just leave you here in your sorry little apartment."

But she didn't.

While he got out the pan and the milk, she played with the dog that lived in his apartment with him.

"What a sweet puppy," she said. She scratched behind the dog's black floppy ears. "I'll bet you never get depressed, do you, sweet puppy?"

"That's Teej," he said to the woman. "Actually, to tell you the truth, I think he does get depressed. Sometimes we have these fights, and..." He would have gone on, but Jenny didn't seem to be
listening anymore.

She was down on the floor, telling things to Teej. She was explaining sickness and pain to the dog, and he was listening with his ears cocked forward.

He was a little jealous. When he talked to Teej like that, Teej looked out the window, or leaned over to bite furiously at his own genitals. But there he was, listening to Jenny.

"Teej seems to like my jewelry," she said, finally.

Sure enough, when he turned away from the stove, he saw that Teej was sucking on her ring.

"Oh, God," he said. It embarassed him terribly, this thing that his dog did. "Oh, God, I'm sorry. It's a pewter ring, isn't it? Pewter or silver. He doesn't go for gold. Don't worry about your fingers. He won't snap. He just likes to suck on the things." He turned back to the stove and stirred hard at the milk. Teej always seemed to push a situation.

When she asked "How long will he keep this up?" a terrible thought occured to him. She might be married! It might be a silver wedding band! He was afraid to look back and see which hand Teej had in his big mouth.
“Jenny, may I ask you a personal question?” he said, without facing her.

“Maybe,” she said.

“Are you currently married?” He stirred the milk even more furiously.

Jenny began to laugh. She laughed harder and harder. He turned around and watched her shake with laughter.

“That’s the least of my problems,” she said.

She looked like a hip cavewoman with her short grey hair and her beast vest, like a liberated cavewoman with a black dog sucking at her fingers. She hadn’t really answered his question. He took this as a good sign.

They drank their hot chocolate while looking out the window at the nighttime and the snow. Jenny held her cup with one hand, not wanting to deprive Teej of her ring. Teej’s slobber dripped happily onto the floor.

“I love dogs,” she said.

“And dogs love you,” he answered. He felt this was a very special moment. He felt as if loving his dog was just one step away
from loving him. He hopped around a little, spilling the warm brown milk down the front of his shirt. Jenny ignored him.

“Jenny, you’re a complete stranger, and yet I love you very much. I love you for loving my dog, and for not being married, and because you ignore me.”

She started to laugh again. God, he was embarrassed! He told a woman wearing fake fur that he loved her, and she laughed! A woman much older than he! He walked back into his kitchen with his head hanging low. He felt sick. He could not even finish his hot chocolate. “Jenny, please don’t laugh,” he eventually called out into the other room, because it sounded as if she might go on forever.

“Oh, all right,” she yelled back. Her voice was exasperated, but eventually the snickering stopped.

He felt strong enough then to come back and stand next to her. And it was a good thing he’d come back when he did. For some reason Jenny had opened the window and was leaning very far out of it, out into the night. He didn’t always like fresh air himself. He pulled her gently back inside and closed the window. Then he took her spit-slick hand very shyly into his own, and they both looked down at the snow falling brightly around the street lamp. It looked like the hazy
white ball of a dandelion gone to seed.

The next morning he woke up with his face pressed into a deep brown and gold and white plaid. For a moment he let himself think he had fallen asleep with his head in the lap of his father's plaid golf pants. He liked to think this sort of thing even if it had never happened in real life. Then he realized that it was the couch, and he remembered why he had slept on the couch, and he quickly swung his legs to the floor. He had a guest! There was a guest in his bed! He stood up and danced his little hopping dance, knocking magazines from the table to the floor, feeling crumbs of dirt and crusty old food beneath the soles of his bare feet, bobbing his way into a pool of Teej saliva. He was so very happy! He went in to wake Jenny up, and when he saw she had slept with her vest on, he did a quick handstand in the corner of the room. He loved her!

"Jenny, wake up," he whispered. He stroked his hand across her furry breast. He pretended Jenny's breast was nothing more than the lump of a cat's indifferent head. This time, she smacked him in the forehead, and then she rolled over to get some more sleep.

"Jenny, Jenny, Jenny," he crooned in her ear. Her short grey
hair looked stiff against the pillow. He thought of dead people.

"Wake up, my Jennifer Marie," he said, giving her a middle name out of the goodness of his heart.

She waved her hand in the air, trying to send him away, and then she sat straight up like a cadaver rising and looked him full in the face. "You're some kind of weirdo, aren't you," she said. Then she calmly licked a finger and smoothed her grey eyebrows back into place.

He was a little hurt by her statement. He preferred to think of himself as a gentleman: hardworking, honest and self-employed.

"You can be mean but I'm still going to love you," was what he answered.

She just sighed. It was as if she were tired of dealing with love and people in it. She sat on the edge of the bed and put her feet on the floor. "The only thing worthy of love is food," she said. "And you don't seem to have any." Then she screamed because Teej licked her foot from under the bed.

He couldn't expect her to know that Teej always slept under the bed, though, so he took advantage of her hysterical moment. "I love you! Dogs love you!" he shouted, and he leapt up onto the bed
beside her, put his arms around her and began stroking her breasts with both hands.

This time she knocked him all the way to the floor.

"Let's have breakfast now, Jenny," he said, rubbing the back of his head where it had met with a sharp corner. "And then I really must get to work."

They had coffee with whipped cream for breakfast. He wasn't much for solid foods. Teej sat at the edge of the table, not begging (he knew by now there were no solid foods!), just gazing longingly at the ring on Jenny's finger.

"Teej loves you as much as I do," he said, trying to be cheerful.

"He only wants my ring," Jenny answered. "Don't kid yourself. Dogs can't love. Dogs can't figure out when they're going to die. They never know if they're going to get kicked or be fed. They just exist, slobbering and puking and licking themselves. They have absolutely no control over their own lives, and I feel sorry for them."

"Goodness, she is cynical!" he thought. He was no longer that surprised by this aspect of her personality, but he did hope she wouldn't get to be a downer. "Jenny, you're not a morning person, are you?" he asked politely.
She grunted, and he wondered then how old she was. Forty, fifty, sixty? He’d never been able to tell. But he knew she was definitely older than he.

“Jenny, quick, tell me everything about being old before I go to work,” he said. He wanted a short answer. All he wanted really was to lay his head on the breasts of a woman with grey hair.

“Don’t ever go to the doctor.”

Don’t ever go to the doctor. That was her answer. That was everything she knew about being old. He thought she should have done better than that.

“All right,” he said. He was gathering his things, his fake roses in their individual vials, his money apron, his styrofoam wading alligators. He worked very hard selling trinkets on the street. It was the best job he’d ever had. “Jenny, please please please be here when I get back,” he said. “I’m only going out for a few hours. Remember that I love you,” he said, and with this he headed for the door. He gave Jenny one last longing glance.

All morning on the street he thought of his older woman. “My old lady,” he said to himself every now and then, testing the phrase.
Blue cars passed him, and he thought of her eyes. Her hair was in the dirt grey piles of snow. The yellow marks of dogs made him think of her skin. How he hoped she would stay! He headed back at noon for a quick cup of chocolate and noticed a new spring in his already springy step. He'd never been in love in the winter before.

"Jenny," he called out as he opened the door. No one answered. He called out for Teej, and he didn't answer either.

He started to cry, and then he remembered that she had another room. She could always be hiding in the bedroom! He giggled at his own forgetfulness, danced a little right there on the welcome mat, and shook some snow from the top of his clean-cut head.

"Jen my wren! Time to come out and play again!" he sang as he skipped into the back room. He hoped she would be in a good mood.

He stopped short when he saw her on the bed. She was clutching a bottle of his very finest in one of her beautiful yellow hands. Her eyes were sealed quite shut. Drool slipped from the corners of her lovely mouth. The blanket was draped loosely about her shoulders like the natty purple robe of a destitute king. Teej was on the other side of the bed sucking on her free hand, and drool slipped from his mouth as well. She had found his medicine cabinet.
“Oh, Jenny. Now you’ll sleep for a very long time. Now you’ll miss lunch and dinner and after dinner drinks!” He spoke to her quietly. He had never actually had after dinner drinks, but he liked to think that he could if he wanted to.

In his own way, he was very upset, and he wondered if he should try to find her husband, or call the police, or take any other sort of drastic action. He scratched for a moment at his forehead and thought. This was one of those big decisions. He patted Jenny’s lukewarm hand and smoothed her eyebrows with a bit of saliva from the corner of her own mouth.

In the end, he decided to keep her. After all, he did love her. First, he took off her vest. Then he picked her up and carried her out to his reclining chair, his very best chair. He set her down in it and pushed out the footrest to hold her feet. To keep her neck from getting stiff, he tied her head to the back of the headrest with the belt of his old blue bathrobe. After that, he put a pink plastic rose between her fingers like a cigarette. Last, he tugged her ring off and gave it to Teej, who looked mournfully at the old orange chair, then took his prize and buried it in some imaginary dirt in the corner.
The best part, the part he knew she would be the most proud of, was that he had not once touched her breasts when he had taken off her vest. He had done it carefully, lovingly, like a father undressing a sleeping child. When he finished making her comfortable in his very best chair, he went back into his room. He was going to take a nap! He was very tired! He was going to sleep alone with Jenny's vest, the softest thing he'd ever known. Jenny's vest was softer than Teej. It was softer than rabbit fur or cat fur. It was softer than a lamb or a newborn. He slipped his arms through its wide openings and laid his head against the pillow, and then he began to pet it. "I am just an animal," he thought. "An animal taking a nap." And then he fell sound asleep.
THE GLASS

They move with the steady painful sureness of turtles drawn by the moon. "God," he thinks, sitting in his canvas chair, watching. "God, they are huge." They lumber into the ocean without testing it, without looking back, and the foaming water closes neatly around their calves and thighs. They are so big, their legs are like the haunches of animals, but he doesn't mind. He watches them bob into each other, playing and rolling, and it occurs to him that now, in the eye-blue water, they are beautiful. They have become as suddenly and impossibly graceful as two dolphins. "You are very pretty," he says out loud, and the girls touch again, rubbing their swollen arms.

So he is old, but still he has his eyes. He takes a drink from his thermos of very cold water and then sets it back down. He feels the dry sand brush against his knuckles. He watches the big girls jump into the crests of waves, letting the water carry their bodies, coming back up for air in great laughing gulps. He listens to their laughter, and then he closes his eyes and sleeps what he thinks of as his day sleep. When he sleeps on the beach, the sun is black and red and so strong that he imagines his eyelids have almost burned away.
He loves to come to the beach.

He sees that the girls are still there when he wakes, just making their way out of the water. The ocean is calmer than before. The girls walk out of it looking tired and clumsy and heavy again. Their big legs are oiled, the skin stretched tightly.

He does not think of himself as a dirty old man, but for a moment he wishes he could be the water that slides from their legs in silky oiled rivers, rushing down thighs and into the soft recesses behind each knee. He shifts his weight in the canvas chair and watches as the girls arrange themselves on their towels. They take small mirrors from a bag and begin to comb out their ocean-roped hair, tugging hard at the knots, and then they put on lipstick, a bright creamy pink, taking it from a pot with their fingers. "You are pretty, but you are fat," he says out loud. Then he closes his eyes and thinks of his wife. He thinks of how she leaned in doorways with a small clear glass in her hand.

Without opening his eyes, he feels for his thermos and raises it up in a toast. "You were a beautiful woman," he says. He holds the cold silver rim to his mouth and swallows.

Sometimes, before he goes to bed, he puts his hand up to his
head, rubs his skull, and feels for the leftover heat of the sun. He is very warm and alive. He opens his eyes now to watch the girls. They are lying down on their towels, their backs broad and flat and wide.

The girls are playing at the edge of the water when he wakes up. He watches—pets the soft silver hair of his chest. Their ankles are thick. Their bathing suits shine with the strain of holding their large bodies in. He wishes they would go back into the water. "You have such pretty faces," he says. He pats harder at the fur on his chest. He twists the fur together in short silver curls. He wishes the girls would come talk to him, come stretch their towels near his canvas chair. "Oh, girls," he says, and reaches for the thermos. He hears ice, the way it sounds, clear and forbidding, dropping into a glass. He presses the thermos into his belly. He sees his wife standing in the doorway. He sees the glass. They are not there when he wakes up from another little sleep.

The water in the thermos is warm.