Iron Lung Girl And other stories

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The University of Montana

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The Iron Lung Girl

and other stories

by

Mary B. Park

B.A. Princeton University, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana

1995

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

May 8, 1995

Date
The Iron Lung Girl

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Frannie bruised easily. Angry purple flowers blossomed up and down her white body. Half the time she didn't know where they came from, didn't know what doorframe or table edge or stairstep she'd knocked up against, or even if she had. Bruises on her arms, her legs, her pale bony buttocks, her ankles where the straps of her shoes rubbed against her—and not only purple, these bruises, but green, and ocher, and black. They were like a light shining out from under her skin, Frannie thought, and when she saw a dark spot on the surface of her skin she pressed it and made it bloom, you could almost see shapes there, she had been—what was the word?—illumined.

Frannie was clumsy; she was the sort of girl whose body seemed to expect itself smaller than it was. "Frannie!" her mother would yelp, seeing her crash into chairs. "Can't you watch what you're doing?" Her voice was pained, as it nearly always was when she watched her daughter in motion, as it nearly always was period. Every morning, she straightened Frannie's collar and pulled up her cabled kneesocks while Frannie wordlessly squirmed.

Frannie herself thought of her bruises as only one facet of her rich inner life; that's what she called it, her Rich Inner Life. She carried herself through her day as if protected by an invisible buffer, nothing in this world could touch her, no, only her body, banging up against things before the rest of her could catch up, her bruises the purest form of announcement.

"What happened to you?"
Frannie was changing her clothes after gym class, and found herself cornered by Louellen Thompson, the biggest, meanest, best-developed girl in the sixth grade. Louellen's voice sounded like she'd just heard a joke, but Frannie knew better; she'd seen Louellen pull a whole fistful of hair from another girl's head on the playground, once. She had had the same half-smile on her lips then too. Even the teachers were slightly afraid of Louellen.

Frannie could feel the other girls' eyes upon her, their gaze hard and appraising, up and down. She crossed her arms over her chest. Ordinarily, she would lie--Frannie liked to lie very much. Lacking anything more meaningful to say, she told the truth.

"I ran into a door," she said.

"You ran into a door," Louellen repeated. She turned toward the waiting girls. "She ran into a door!" she announced, as if they had not heard Frannie in the first place. The other girls laughed.

Louellen shook her head. She was a big, red-faced girl in a grimy brassiere fastened in the front with a safety pin. She went out with boys from the junior high and sometimes her father lived with the family and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes a different man did. Earlier in the year Peggy Rice passed Frannie a note saying Louellen's father had gone to jail. Nobody knew what he did. But he was going to be there for a while, was what the note said.

Nonetheless lately Louellen had become a kind of authority with the other girls--feared, but sought out. Something had changed among them, and because Frannie didn't have any other words for it, she called it sex.

Frannie had always liked gym class. Until Cy Evans hit his growth
spurt, she had been the fastest runner in her whole grade. She liked balls and hoops and nets and goals. She liked rules. But what was going on lately in the locker room had nothing to do with the clean, pure logic of games. This was some kind of competition from which she was shut out. The things said were not the things that were meant; there were subtle hierarchies at work which she could not possibly decipher.

"Where'd that shirt come from?" they'd ask her, and when she said, "Shillito's," they nodded knowingly, and Frannie nodded too, not understanding what her answer meant to them. It was just a store, she thought; her grandmother shopped there. The girls looked at her; they looked at everybody. Without her knowing exactly when this change had taken place, she had entered some kind of public domain, where her body was less and less a place she lived in and more and more like the waiting room of an office.

"A door," Louellen said. She put one hand on Frannie's shoulder and brought her face down to look in Frannie's eyes. "That is the worst," she said, "those doors. I hate 'em."

Then Louellen bent down and whispered into Frannie's ear.

"What? What?" Frannie said, pulling back, but she'd already heard. "No, he doesn't!" she yelled, shocked. She felt her face getting hot. "My father loves me! He lives in Nashville and has a baby and swimming pool and I'm going to go live there with him before too long!"

Louellen stretched, and Frannie could see the coarse, curly hair growing under her arms. She yawned, pinching her nostrils. "Uh-huh," she said, patting Frannie's shoulder in a bored sort of way. "You just keep telling
them you ran into a door."

But she wasn't like Louellen, Frannie thought. Not a bit. Frannie was small and neat and not common like that. And she had something Louellen didn't--the bruises, she thought. The bruises set her apart. She carried them around with her like a secret underneath her clothes. Frannie was not a Catholic, but she believed she would make a good martyr. Frannie was in fact a Disciple of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ were a gyp, in Frannie's opinion. She'd been to a Catholic Mass once and she'd been thrilled to the core of her being--that's how she put it to herself, "thrilled to the core of her being"--by the candles and velvet and wine. In such a place, she thought, on such a scale, it did in fact seem possible that somewhere up there, looking down, there was God. Her own church had managed to boil its worship down to a utilitarian essence, equal parts Kum Ba Ya, Bible comic books, and making God's eyes out of yarn. For Communion the Disciples drank grape juice. Grape juice! The Disciples' Heaven, Frannie decided, would be exactly like their pastor's sermons, long and earnest and killingly dull.

In English class later that week Frannie sat poking at a bruise instead of diagraming sentences. She pressed it at its bluish heart, hard. Nothing. It wasn't even sore. It was a miracle, she thought, this wound without the pain to go with it. She pictured a second skin inside herself, unmarked, smooth as the skin of a baby. The bruises on her body only went as far as the first skin. Inside she was untouched, pink and perfect just the same as the day she was born. Her father had a baby now and in the pictures he sent her the baby was smiling and peach-colored, dressed in white. It made her throat ache to look at the pictures. She felt she must be ugly. When her school pictures came
Frannie had thrown away the proofs and said she lost them; she was meant for bigger things.

Frannie came home from school to find her mother seated at the kitchen table with the mail spread around her. She was reading a letter and didn't look up.

"You're home early," Frannie said. "What aren't you at work?"

Frannie's mother cleared her throat. "I had a doctor's appointment," she said slowly, and kept reading. She was eating a cracker with cream cheese on it and she turned it around in a circle, eating little nibbles in from the edge. People said Frannie and her mother looked alike, because of the red hair, but Frannie didn't think so. Frannie was all neat lines and planes. Frannie's mother looked like somebody who'd been caught moving when the camera flashed—blurred around the edges by painkillers and Gallo chablis. Some days she seemed genuinely surprised to see Frannie.

"Oh," she'd say. "It's you," making an effort to remember: "And how was your day? How was...school?"

When her mother got sick Frannie wasn't supposed to know. Her grandmother came up from Richmond to stay, and she had Frannie going to bed before ten o'clock even on weekends, and the whole time everyone pretended like Frannie knew nothing about it. They all truly thought she was stupid.

Now Frannie's mother was doing creative visualizations to make the cancer cells stop spreading. Frannie stole the book off her mother's dressing table and so she knew all about it. The way it worked was you picked a place
to think about. It didn't matter what place it was so long as thinking about it relaxed you. The book mentioned fields, and blowing wheat, and waves breaking on rocks; Frannie herself would pick moors, not that she knew how they looked but she liked the sound of the word. But that didn't matter. There was the safe place, and the wind blowing, and maybe the wheat. Then came the darkness. It ate away at one corner, trying to swallow your place. Then you were supposed to make the darkness go back: to will it right out of the picture by just saying you could.

The cancer, that was the darkness. Or at least that's how Frannie understood the point of the exercise. But sometimes she wasn't so sure. Those times Frannie found her mother sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, not doing anything, just staring into the distance—staring at that field of wheat. Her eyes were wide open but she didn't see Frannie at all, it was if Frannie wasn't even there. There was something new in the way that she stared. It was intense, and expectant, and it had nothing to do with Frannie at all. It occurred to Frannie that perhaps her mother wasn't seeing darkness creeping in from the corners, but something entirely different. Frannie couldn't get it out of her mind. It seemed like Frannie's mother had that stare more and more, these days, as if she were somewhere she actually wanted to be.

Frannie's mother looked up. She held the letter she'd been reading. "This is from the school, Frances," she said.

"Oh," said Frannie. She picked a paper clip off the table and started playing with it.

"We're supposed to come in next week," Frannie's mother said. "First
me, then you. To see the social worker person."

"Oh," Frannie said.

"Well?" Frannie's mother laid down the letter, and one hand went up to her face, worrying at the bangs of her wig. It was a good wig, Frannie thought, it looked just like her real hair only thicker.

"Well?" she said again. "Do you have any idea what this is about, Frances?"

"Sure don't," Frannie said. She wound the paper clip straight and began poking herself with it, making little white circles in the flesh of her forearm.

"Are you in trouble? Is that it?"

"Don't see how I could be," Frannie said, neutrally. Poke, poke, poke.

"Stop that." Her mother pulled Frannie's hand away from her arm. But Frannie wouldn't let go of the paper clip. She let her mother clutch at her hand instead.

"Look, Frannie, I know this is hard," she said, "It's hard, and it's not fair for you. But you're not helping and I need your help, can you understand that? It's a hard thing to have to ask a little girl to do, but I have to ask you to help me."

Just then, Frannie knocked the sugar bowl over with her elbow. She looked up at her mother and made a round, childish O with her mouth.

"Whoops," she said, and pulled her hand away.

Something went slack in her mother's face. She closed her eyes, and her hand stayed vaguely curved, holding nothing. "I don't understand you!" she said. Frannie stared at the table. Her leg kicked against the rungs of her
chair.

After a moment, Frannie's mother opened her eyes. There were little pillows of flesh bunched around them.

"You act like you don't have any more sense than a four-year-old, but I know that you do," she said quietly. "If your father was here, you wouldn't be talking to me like this. He'd set you straight. He would."

"Maybe he would," Frannie said, and ran up the stairs.

Frannie went up to her room, intending to read.

Frannie read books like she supposed other girls binged on candy, with the same desperate slyness, the same feeling of shame. She fell into her books as if down a well, in which she was and was not Frannie, was and was not twelve years old; and when she was finished and laid the book down, her own life crowded back in on her, but mixed up with the book, herself and all the other people she knew somehow new and strange and much more interesting than they were before.

Until recently she had preferred books with magic and adventures in them: Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and the slightly prissy English schoolchildren of E. Nesbit. But lately these books left her feeling vaguely dissatisfied. She read them until her head ached and her limbs felt heavy and leaden, and went to the school library to search out different kinds. The librarian recommended *Watership Down*. Frannie took out that one and several others, selected at random: *Jane Eyre*. A book about Alaska, told from the point of view of a sled dog. A luridly illustrated biography of the saints.
The book about saints was the only one she could even stand reading. The men were boring. Monks, mostly, and all they ever did was protect crops and bring rain. The martyrs were better, and St. Francis had a certain appeal, she had to admit. But it was the women saints Frannie loved. Catherine, who starved and whipped herself and wandered in the forest. Bona, who slept in a crib filled with straw just like baby Jesus did. Not even women, these, but girls--girls Frannie's age, in fact, who left their mothers and fathers and endured hunger and torture to follow God.

Frannie was no Catholic but these stories appealed to her. Something in them spoke to the part of her that was bruised. After all, she thought, weren't her bruises a mystery? Didn't they mark her, didn't they set her apart?

Poke, poke. Frannie ground her fist against the side of her leg, where a bruise had already begun to form. Tomorrow, she knew, she would have bright colors to show for her effort. Mortification of the flesh, the book called it; Frannie thought, illustration.

Frannie began a letter to her father.

"Dear Dad," she wrote, with some effort. She was trying to make the loops of her script neat and preternaturally round. She had picked up somewhere the idea that this was how girls should write.

"So much has happened since the last time I wrote! My project on the migration patterns of swallows won the first prize at last month's science fair, and the teachers tell me I should take it to state. What do you think? I don't know. It would be fun, but I don't know if I'll have time, what with the piano recital and my lead role in the school play and all."
And as she wrote these things, it was as if they were perfectly true. Frannie could see herself bowing after the play, could hear the applause. How graceful! she could hear the audience saying. Such a talent at such a young age!

"Also, I have a new friend. Her name is Louellen Thompson and she is president of the Student Council and one of the most popular girls in the whole school. She takes me riding on her parent's Thoroughbred horse farm in Versailles. How is Joelle? How is the baby? Please give him a kiss for me, and tell him his older sister can't wait to come visit and bring him a present!!"

She chewed fiercely on the end of her pencil.

"Mom's fine," she wrote, after a time. "She says I am her great help. She says she doesn't know what she'd do without me. We are both fine."

Frannie ripped this page from her pad and looked at it for a moment. Then she started a new sheet. Her pencil made a hurried scratching noise on the paper, like a dog walking on a tile floor.

"Dear Daddy," she wrote. "I didn't want to tell you this earlier, because I didn't want you to worry, but I am not well. I still have those bruises. Mom's been taking me to the doctor who has run some tests. He says he doesn't know what is wrong, but that it might be some kind of thing with my blood. Mommy is very worried about me. I thought you should know."

She paused. "Frannie!" came her mother's voice from the bathroom down the hall. "Frannie, sweetheart, come bring me a towel from the hall closet, please, I'm in the tub."

Frannie got up. She stood in front of the linen closet with her hands
stuck in between the piles of towels and sheets. "Coming!" she yelled, her forehead propped against the top shelf. "Just a sec!" she yelled. She squeezed her eyes shut, worked her hands in the stack of towels, and breathed in the smell of clean laundry.

"Frannie!"

She stopped at the open door to the bathroom and looked down at the sill.

"Thought you'd gotten lost," her mother said, and Frannie heard water slosh against the sides of the tub as she sat up. Her voice was kindly, like she wanted to make up for yelling before, Frannie thought. "Bring that over here, sweetie, before I turn into a raisin."

Frannie leaned over on tiptoe and held out the towel, and her mother smiled uncertainly up from the bath. We're friends again, aren't we? this smile seemed to ask. Water streamed from her outstretched arm. Where her right breast had been, there was simply—nothing. On the left, a pendulous thing, the great red-tipped circle of the nipple like an eye pointing downward. But on the right: a blank, an empty, empty space. Even the scar tissue had faded and smoothed. Where the breast had been there could have been anything, or nothing at all.

Something caught in Frannie's throat then, her breath came around it like she'd swallowed a stone, and she turned and left the room without saying a word. From down the hall she could hear her mother's voice, weakly calling, "Fran? Fran?" but not moving, not doing anything to stop anything. I hate her, Frannie thought, I do, I hate her, and the thought of her mother's soft, sloppy body filled her with rage. She lay on her bed, buried her
head in the pillow, and stuffed her entire fist into her mouth. Her teeth cut into her hand and hurt her.

If she could live with her father, things would be different. She knew they would. If she could only live with her father then this house and everything in it would disappear, and Frannie would be the person she wrote about in her letters, the sweet, popular girl with the science project and the best friend named Louellen. She was that girl, she thought, hugging her arms to herself fiercely, she was, she was! And all Frannie had to do was find the right place, and in that place she would finally step into the other girl's life and become her.

Frannie had an idea.

Frannie picked up a pencil and wrote: "Dear Daddy. My mother beats me. Can I come live with you. I won't be much trouble and I'll work very hard. Please please please write me back and let me know as soon as possible when I can come. Your daughter, Frances."

When she'd finished the letter, Frannie sat staring at the hangnail on her left index finger. When she began to pull at it, the hangnail tore and tore, the string of skin widening as it pulled away, leaving a sore pink strip of raw flesh behind it. Frannie sucked on her finger. Then she stopped, and began to tear at the hangnail again.

The office was hot, and Frannie was wearing shorts. Her legs stuck to the vinyl chair whenever she tried to move. Frannie could hear some kids fighting over a game of kickball outside. "She was out," they yelled, the
sound carrying clearly through the open window. "She was out, I saw!"

The social worker was a lady named Randi Bright, which sounded to Frannie like a Strawberry Shortcake-type mass-produced doll. Randi Bright wore wire-rimmed glasses. She had a jowly, excitable face with gold earrings bobbing next to it.

"I understand your mother's sick," she said to Frannie.

Frannie shifted uncomfortably and studied the room. In one corner there was a dollhouse. Another corner held a play stove with play pots and pans, a toy grocery cart, and a box full of action figures and Barbies.

"She's sick all right," Frannie said, and slid down in her chair. She had a particularly spectacular bruise just then, a blue-green splotch that covered one knee and crept up her thigh. She turned her leg so the social worker would be sure to see it.

"That must be very difficult for you."

Frannie didn't respond.

Randi Bright cleared her throat. "Actually, I spoke with your mother earlier today," she said, "but I guess you know that already, don't you. She seems very worried about you, you know. About how you're coping."

Frannie didn't much like the idea of being discussed by the two of them. "Worried," she said. She slid down further in her chair. "Well, my mother," she said, "has a few problems of her own." She bit her lower lip very slightly, and frowned. Her bangs fell in her face and instead of brushing them away she looked up between the strands at Randi Bright. Wistful, Frannie thought. Melancholy. Frannie Harper, Grown Up Too Soon.

"How so," Randi Bright said. Her expression was perfectly neutral.
Not a muscle in her face moved. "Why do you say that, Frannie?"

"I don't know," Frannie said, picking at the frayed place on her jeans.

"Come on," Randi Bright said. "You're a very smart little girl. You must have some feelings you can share with me."

At the word "share," Frannie scowled.

To her astonishment, then, Randi Bright scowled back, her face pulling down at its edges, eyes narrowing, in a perfect parody of Frannie's own expression. Frannie's mouth went slack with surprise, and then Randi Bright smiled abruptly. She got up from her desk, and began to tidy up the room, pushing the Cricket magazines into neat piles on the cofeeetable, throwing stray Barbies into the box.

"Some people are just not considerate," she said. "Some people just throw things around and then don't pick them up."

She stopped by the window and looked out. Hands behind her back, she said, "Frannie, no-one's beating you up. That's an established fact here."

She had a different tone now. It was as if she was talking to herself, or to someone both older and more polite than Frannie. "I want you to tell me, now, how you get those bruises, and why they don't go away. There could be a medical reason, but your mother doesn't seem to think so, and frankly, neither do I."

"Then what do you think?" Frannie blurted, and was immediately sorry. Her voice sounded bratty, and that was not how she meant to sound, not at all.

Randi Bright turned around. She gave Frannie a piercing look. "Let's not talk about what I think," she said. "Let's talk about what you think."
Frannie rolled her eyes at the ceiling. The paint was patterned in little chicken's feet, like the topographic map of some snowy, mountainous, and infinitely dull planet. Frannie shifted in her chair. All of a sudden, the room with its Barbies and toys and Cricket magazines seemed very stifling and hot. This was a room for other people to be in, not her, Frannie decided. There was nothing for her here.

She stood up. "Can I go now?" she said. "Or is there some kind of rule about that?"

"No, there's no rule," Randy Bright said. "You can go whenever you want."

"Great," Frannie said. "I want to go now."

And she did.

In the hall outside Randi Bright's office, Louellen was slumped against the wall, chewing her nails, waiting—for her, Frannie thought, but then she realized; Louellen was waiting for Randi Bright.

"Hiya," Louellen said, using a high, theatrical voice. She squinched up her eyes in a way Frannie decided was mocking. "How's the dad? How is the precious baby brother in Nashville?"

"Fine," Frannie said, defensively.

"Oh, that's goo-ood," Louellen said. "Well, now, y'all be sure and tell us when you get ready to move down to Nash-ville to be with your Dad."

Louellen laughed, but the laugh didn't sound right. Her face was pale, and she wiped her palms on her jeans.

"Well I will," Frannie said.

"Well I will," Louellen jeered. She combed her dishwater-blond hair
over her face with her fingers. Then she shook it back, and took up a baby voice: "I's gonna go live with my daddy! I's gonna have a sportscar and swim in my own pool with all the other rich brats!"

Frannie stepped back. She felt her face go hot again, and she clenched her fists. "Just because your dad's in prison..." she said, and Louellen leaped for her, swinging not like how people fight on TV but just anyhow, yelling, "Liar! Liar! You lying bitch whore!"

Frannie was down on the ground, her hands shielding her face. Up and down the hall, doors opened, and Frannie heard voices and footsteps running towards them. "Liar!" Louellen screamed, pulling Frannie's head off the ground by her hair, and it was then that Frannie saw it, the bruise, blue and ocher and green, how it lit up the whole underside of Louellen's jaw.

This time it was her grandmother sitting at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette and laying out a slow game of solitaire. At her elbow there was a juice glass full of bourbon and a pack of Salems in a stamped leather case. "Why hello, sweetheart," she said. Her voice was raspy from smoking, and she had the swallowed, gravelly vowels of western Kentucky.

Then she saw Frannie's eye.

"What the hell is that, Frances?"

"Hi," Frannie said. "Where's Mom?"

Her grandmother tilted Frannie's head back with her hand. "Hold still," she said. She ran one callused thumb over the bruise. Already Frannie's eye was swollen nearly shut. "Lord God," the grandmother said,
"Let's get you some ice."

"I suppose you fell down playing soccer or at least that's what you'll tell me," her grandmother said, cracking the ice tray.

"The school didn't call?"

"Not while I was here."

"Well, then, yeah. Playing soccer."

"Huh." Her grandmother snorted. "I'd expect that kind of lying from boys," she said, "but a girl?" She wrapped the ice in a dishtowel and gave it to Frannie. "You might as well sit down," she said. "Whatever you have to tell me, it'll keep. There are more important things for you to be worrying about. Get you something to eat if you want. There's a tuna casserole in the oven."

Frannie pressed the dishcloth to her eye. She sat down, warily, and looked at her grandmother. The woman was rarely sweet for no reason.

"Your mother's at Good Sam," her grandmother said, as if reading Frannie's mind.

"Oh," Frannie said. There was a silence. "Does that mean you're staying with me?"

"For a while." The grandmother tapped her Salem on the ashtray, which was brass and shaped like a shell. The gesture had a sort of practiced elegance that Frannie admired, in spite of herself. "Frannie, honey, your mama's real sick."

"I know that," Frannie said.

"Is that so. Well, Frances, what I'm saying is maybe you should come back to Richmond with me. Go stay with your Aunt Joan and your Uncle Frank a while. You'd like that, wouldn't you? You could go to school with
Frank Jr. and Stacey, there'd be lots of kids your age around for you to play with. They're getting a pool put in this summer, Frannie, now how about that?"

Frannie looked down at the table, and thought about living with Frank and Stacey. Her cousin Stacey had distinctive hair. The bangs frothed from her head in stiff, shellacked curls but the back was straight and fine, cut with a razor. When she didn't make cheerleader Stacey became something called a Little Sister instead. This meant she baked a junior high football player cookies before every game. Frank Jr. was in high school, and on weekends he and his buddies cruised the Walmart parking lot for kicks. Back and forth, back and forth, all night long.

"I'd rather croak," Frannie said, squaring her shoulders and looking her grandmother in the eye. "I would. Send me to a foster home first, I swear to God."

Her grandmother's eyes narrowed. She leaned over at Frannie. "Don't you take the Lord's name in vain in front of me, child," she said. "You're so smart, aren't you. Well, I'm not nearly as old and stupid as you think I am. You haven't been making life any easier for your mother and I know it, and I don't have a bit of patience for any of your foolishness. Now if you have a better plan I would sure like to hear it."

"I want to go live with my father," Frannie said in a small voice.

"You ever stop to consider how that might not be an option?" Her grandmother's face was hard. "He has himself a new baby. A new life. Maybe he doesn't want you down there with him. You ever stop to consider that?"

"I'm going upstairs now," Frannie said, putting her fingers in her ears.
"Think you could even ask how your mother is feeling?"

"I'm going! I can't hear you!" Frannie began humming, her fingers jammed in her ears, her feet beating a staccato as she rain up the stairs.

"The world doesn't revolve around you, young lady!" the grandmother called after her.

Upstairs, in her room, Frannie took out her pad of paper. She picked up her pencil, and wrote, Dear Daddy, but for some reason nothing came to her. She stared at the page. Dear Daddy, she wrote, and then again, Dear Daddy. It was like when she said one word over and over--wheat wheat wheat wheat--until that word lost what it meant before and became just an interesting sound in her mouth. Frannie looked down at what she'd written until it was just rounded and straight shapes cluttered up together on the page.

Frannie put down the pencil, and took off all of her clothes. She stood on her bed and peered into the mirror over her chest of drawers. Underneath the bruises there was something new. A sloppiness, she thought. She was puffy up top; her nipples looked as if they'd been bitten. Sloppy, Frannie thought, sloppy. She had been wrong, to think of that second skin inside her. There was no unmarked skin. There was only Frannie with her old skin turned inside out, her rusty, stained blood on the outside for anyone who wanted to see.

On top of the dresser lay a coiled Ace bandage, from the time Frannie twisted her ankle playing volleyball. Frannie picked up the bandage and
weighed it in in her hand, considering. Then she began wrapping the bandage around her chest, pulling and tugging, stretching the fabric tight as it would go. When she was done she turned this way and that in front of the mirror, admiring her new silhouette. It looked good. Like armor, Frannie thought. She struck a pose, legs spread wide, one hand on her hip, and thought she looked valiant—ready for battle. Frannie Harper, Girl Warrior.

Frannie got up and went to the window. She pulled the shade down sharply and released it so that it flew up and wrapped around itself. She stood nearly naked in a lighted window but she didn't care; she opened the window and stepped out onto the narrow sill, fingers clutching at the brick on either side. Around her the evening was drawing to a close. On her street it was the same as it always was. Supper was finished, and people were sitting on their front porches, just starting to call their children inside for the night. One by one they looked up. Up and down the street startled, frozen faces were turned up towards Frannie in rows; one little boy pointed, covered his mouth and laughed. The sun had set nearly an hour ago and the sky was a deep purplish blue. Frannie felt calm and emptied out, waiting, her arms spread to either side. Soon enough it would be dark. But Frannie knew she was illuminated from behind, like stained glass, blazing, her skin charged through with light.
It was not a nice neighborhood, and the house was not a nice house. The people who lived there before us had left their stale, cooked meat smell in our rooms, and the kitchen linoleum bore scars of dirt that I couldn't scrub out. The neighborhood was loud and dirty, full of barking dogs on chains and people who yelled at their kids. The body shop across the alley pumped paint fumes into the air with an industrial fan. Even on a clear day, you could hardly see the mountains at all.

I'd been raised for different, even if Drew hadn't, and I could see that the neighborhood was a place people got caught in while they were hoping for more. But what could we do? Rent was cheap, and it was a house, after all, four walls of our own to surround us.

I was back in school at the time, also working, but two days a week I'd left my afternoons free for my studies. Every Tuesday and Thursday I'd pull my reading chair up by the window, textbooks a comforting weight in my lap, thinking to myself: I am only visiting here, we won't stay. And the books seemed to prove it. But then instead of reading I watched my neighbors come and go from their trailer. These were rough people and I did not understand how they lived. Eight of them in that single-wide trailer; it seemed impossible, like one of those tiny cars at the circus with a clown stuffed inside. How did they fit? Three girls, the oldest no more than ten or eleven; a little boy and a baby. A grandmother, a morose, bearded father, and a mother whose slim hips and blond cheerleader looks for some reason surprised me.

The little boy had an old man's face, skin stretched tight over bone.
Even his freckles looked somehow resigned. You could see what things were going to be like for him, I thought. On our first day in the new house he hit his father. The father was out front with some of his buddies, drinking, and called to his son: "Jay! Come show us what you're made of and box with your father!" But they didn't box. The father clenched his stomach tight and simply let the boy hit him, laughing, the friends watching and laughing too, the little boy's face grim, hitting away but completely powerless to hurt anyone.

They lived in a constant din of slammed doors and shouts, cars peeling out on the gravel. Every so often a police car stopped by the door and a uniformed officer went in. One time it was an ambulance and they put the grandmother on a stretcher. I was there at the picture window, drinking my coffee and pushing back one end of the blind to see: two police cars, one fire truck, one ambulance. I counted. Everybody was just standing around; not even the paramedics seemed in any particular hurry. The ambulance pulled out slowly, without turning on the lights or the siren.

I assume it was the grandmother, even though it was difficult to tell underneath all those blankets. Anyway, I never saw her again.

"She croaked," I told Drew when he got home.

"Who?"

"Oh, Grandma," I said.

Drew knew who I meant and disapproved--not of them but of me. He didn't like the way I talked about our neighbors and said I acted like a snob. And in some ways I was. I'd never bothered myself much about neighbors before. But I hated our new house so much, he didn't know, it was making
something inside me go wrong. Maybe it was the children. I'd lived in bad neighborhoods most of my adult life, but they'd always been bad young neighborhoods, full of kids my age doing the same things I was doing. But here it was different, and because I felt older, and the badness was not the kind of badness I was used to, the children made me feel hopeless and sad.

"You're sick," Drew said, without much energy. I saw by the way he was holding his head that his neck was bothering him. "How can you make fun of somebody dying?"

"I'm not making fun," I said, "really I'm not. If I sound like I am it's just that they depress me. They don't have to act so much like white trash if they don't want to. They could at least try. I mean, they could maybe sell four of those junkers and have enough to buy one decent car. As a start."

"I don't see how choice comes into it," Drew said. "They're just trying to get by. Just like the rest of us, with less money and more children."

I looked out the window. Next door one of the neighbor children was methodically opening a car door and then slamming it shut—open, shut, open, shut. Wind blew old candy wrappers in spirals up and down the alley.

"No one held a gun to their heads and made them have five children," I said.

"They're allowed to have as many kids as they want," Drew said. "This is supposed to be a free country, last I heard."

Drew's famous notions of freedom! His dream was self-sufficiency: a cabin somewhere in the mountains, with cows and chickens and vegetables we would can ourselves. To this end he was starting a business and would, he said, make enough money to enable us never to owe anyone anything
again.

As if that were possible.

Drew was a rock climber and he was good with his hands—a quality that attracted me, then, because I felt there wasn't much I myself knew how to do. Drew, on the other hand, understood things. He kept his eyes on the mountains when we were driving, and could tell you not only what kind of rock you were seeing, but how it was formed, and even how old it was. This last year he'd bought a sewing machine on credit and set up a shop in the garage, stitching backpacks and climbing harnesses and other things made out of Cordura and webbing. For more immediate purposes, like rent and food, he washed dishes.

Like me, he'd never stayed in one place very long. We met in a bar in Laramie, Wyoming, a place where neither one of us lived. At the time Drew was still married—another one of those things I'd said I'd never do in my life and then gone on and done.

We were getting our lives together. Things were going to be different from now on, we told each other, and the move was part of that, part of starting from scratch. We wouldn't make the same mistakes again, we said. Whatever had been wrong between us came from the way that we lived, was all. I was twenty-seven, Drew was thirty, and we were both ready, as my father would say, to start acting like the grownups we were.

"Don't go messing things up for no reason," Drew warned me whenever I started to complain.

And after all, he was right. Once I'd gotten all of our stuff inside and spread it around, it was nothing more or less than a house. A place you could
live in. I made some cinderblock shelves and unpacked our books, hung
tapestries and Klimt prints on the walls. I took down the curtains entirely
do we care? What is there to hide?" In the end, it was our house, just like the
one before this, and it struck me how silly it was to care so much about
houses. Shells, I thought: that's all they are really. The real life, that's
something different, that's what's inside.

"If we ignore them maybe they'll go away," I said. Drew and I were
sitting in the middle of the living room floor, barely speaking to one another.
Drew had been teaching me how to climb after years of my refusing to learn.
He'd taken me down to Kootenai Canyon, where I cried with terror and clung
to the rock. "Use that fear! Use it!" he had yelled, and if I'd had a gun I
would have shot him right there.

Now the girls from next door were outside peering in—I mean peering
in literally, lined up underneath our picture window like stairsteps, hands
cupped around their eyes and pressed to the glass.

"Hey," I said, nudging Drew. "Pretend you don't see them." He was
staring open-mouthed out the window, his face slack with fatigue.

"What?" Drew said, his eyes focusing. "Why?"

I sighed. "It's just that they won't ever leave," I said. "I know how this
goes. You're nice to them once and they won't go away."

Outside, the girls stopped talking; they seemed to have reached a
decision. The biggest one knocked. I groaned. "You'll see," I said.
"Can I come in?" the girl said. I had myself wedged in the crack of the
door, between the living room and her.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, and opened the door. I always opened the door.

From that moment the girl did not stop talking. She wandered around
the room, picking things up and putting them down, asking questions
without waiting for us to reply. Her name was Amber, she told us, she was
nine years old and in third grade and we had nicer stuff than the people who
lived here before. She had a small, heart-shaped face, dirty elbows, skinned
knees. Around her wrist was a bracelet made out of string.

"You guys sure have a lot of stuff," she said.

"What's this?" she asked, holding up a small wooden box with
splotches of red and green paint on the lid. Before I could answer, she pried it
apart. She spilled the Guatemalan worry dolls out on the carpet and her
whole face lit up. "They're so little!" she said.

There was a tentative knock on the door. Two small faces stood on
tiptoe to peer through the glass. Amber turned to us. "Those are my sisters,"
she said matter-of-factly, and went outside. The three girls had a whispered
conference on the front stoop, and then Amber knocked again. She had one
hand on the doorknob. "They want to know if they can come inside too," she
said.

I looked at Drew. He raised his shoulders and shrugged. "Well," I
said. "I guess."

The middle girl had a speech impediment; she swallowed her words
when she said them, like her own breath was choking her. She tried to tell
me her name.
"What?" I said. "What?"

"That's Alison," Amber said. Alison had a snub-faced yellow puppy clutched in her arms. She set him down on the carpet and slapped at his nose. "Grrr," she said. The puppy obliged her by growling. He bit playfully at her hands.

"Hey," Drew said, bending down. "Take it easy on young Rover there."

"His name is Jack," Amber said, putting her hands around the puppy's neck. "I'm teaching him how to bite."

Crystal sat in the swivel chair at the kitchen table and twirled around and around. There was a rusty old scab on the bridge of her nose. "This is for babies," she said, squeezing the honey bear. "It's a bottle for babies."

"Kathleen?" said Amber. She tugged on my sleeve. She was holding up one of the worry dolls, a small, shapeless creature made from yarn. "Can I have this to keep?"

"Um, no," I said. "Crystal, put that honey bear down. Amber, in most circles it's not considered polite to ask for people to give you things. It's better to wait. Maybe they'll give it to you without you having to ask!"

Drew was grinning. Laughing at me, actually, his arms crossed on his chest. The puppy had found Drew's hiking boots in the corner. He was chewing on them. "Listen, kids," I said. "Drew and I have some stuff to do. Maybe you could go play outside?"

"Maybe you could go play in the street?" I said when they'd left. "Ha, ha."

Drew laughed. "You know what? You said that about people giving things and she shut right up. I bet you she's still waiting for those dolls. I bet
she comes back tomorrow and asks you again."

"Well, that's tough," I said. "My sister gave me those and frankly I need them."

Drew cocked his head to the side and looked at me.

"What!" I said.

"Oh, nothing."

"You are thinking about something, Drew Shaw."

"OK, I was thinking," Drew said. "Seeing you with those kids. You'd make a great mother, you know that?"

I pushed him away. "Oh, funny man," I said, scowling. "I'd make a lousy mother. Are you kidding? I'd be the mother all the other kids were afraid of."

"No," Drew said. "I can see it in you. It's one of the reasons I love you."

Oh my, I thought. Talk like this made me nervous. Nervous, but if I was honest with myself, also secretly pleased. There was an agitation inside me, a dangerous lack of weight, and I was shocked whenever I managed to conceal it.

"If there's anything that redeems Western so-called civilization," I said, "it's birth control."

Drew gave me a funny look. "Somehow," he said, "that strikes me as a very cold thing to say, considering."

"Let's not fight."

"Who's fighting?" Drew said. "Were we having a fight?"

"Not in the new house," I said. "Not yet. Let's pretend we're nice
people for a little while longer."

A few weeks after we moved in, we had some friends over. People brought food. Bernadette gave me a jade plant. We ate and drank a pony keg of beer and smoked cigarettes outside, pretending it was warmer than it was. It wasn’t much of a party, really. Nothing got broken. No-one cheated on anybody. We ended up getting stoned and things broke up early. "You guys," Bernadette said, standing on our front stoop, teary-eyed and a little bit drunk. "You guys are the nicest people I know. I mean it. You’re great, you really are. I wish I could find what you guys have."

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. "Get out of the house much, Bernadette?" I said. "No really, I’m just kidding. I appreciate that. I do."

Afterwards I stood in the center of the living room, beer cans all around, and sang along to Emmylou Harris at the top of my lungs. Just then all our friends seemed like particularly sad, aimless people, and I was glad to have the house back to ourselves. "I’m fifteen hundred miles from all the people I know," I sang, because at that moment it seemed true. Drew grinned.

"Redneck," he said.

"Yo-de-lay-HE-whoo," I said. I grabbed him by the waist and two-stepped him around the room, bumping into the furniture. "Quit leading," he said.

We went to bed.

The next day Amber came over. Her eyes wide, she proceeded to give us a run-down of our own party. "The cars were blocking the alley," she said.
"They were not," I said. My hands were trembling a little bit, and I had a shot of Jim Beam in my coffee. "I made sure they weren't," I said.

"And then everybody was outside and people were drinking and throwing bottles around and the music was so loud my mom said she would call the police because the baby couldn't sleep."

"That's not true," I said, shocked. "We were very quiet. It was a boring party."

"My mom was talking to the lady who lives in the trailer next door and she said she was going to call the cops too."

"Look," I said. "Amber." I knelt down next to her, so I could look in her eyes. "You tell your mama and daddy that the next time they have a problem with us they should tell us. They shouldn't go through you. They should call or come over so we won't have any problems."

This was the first sign that perhaps they watched me too.

And why not? Why shouldn't they have their own ideas about us? As Drew would say, this is a free country. Only I hated the thought that the girls might be turned against me.

I was sitting outside with my shoes off, digging my toes around in the grass. It was early in spring; the sky and the tops of the mountains looked scrubbed with snow, and the ground gave a little under my feet, like a sponge. I had my psychology book out on my lap, pretending to study. I had it in my mind that I was going to be a social worker, which idea amused Drew greatly.

"I've known a number of social workers in my time," he told me, "and
every one of them needed a social worker themselves.”

Ha, ha, ha.

What he really meant was, how will you find social work in the woods? I knew this, and he knew I knew it, but we both played like we didn’t. We acted like we could go on doing what we were doing forever, working, saving, studying, and we didn’t talk about where these things were leading us. Except a few days earlier, Drew’d lost his job. Now he was around the house all day long, finding more and more small ways to fill up his time, the way people who don’t have jobs do. At the moment he was inside, with dirty breakfast dishes and clock radio parts spread around him. He was trying to get the alarm to work again. For this I picked up and moved? I thought.

The three little girls were playing in the vacant lot next door. They came over. They had the baby with them, and a Barbie whose head was twisted around at an unnatural angle.

"Can we play here?" Amber said. Without waiting for an answer, she set the baby in the grass beside me and commenced to fighting with Crystal over the Barbie. The baby stared up at me with a dull expression. He had a fat, W.C. Fields kind of face. He looked like he would not be surprised by much of anything.

"Well," I said, and got down on the grass beside him. He was propped up like a doll, his back against my chair for support and his legs splayed out in front. I grabbed one tiny, barely formed toe. "This little piggy," I said. The baby ignored me politely.

Their mother appeared in the door of the trailer. "Amber!" she hollered. "You kids get in the house right this minute!" She stood there a
moment, a dark shape poised between the bright sun outside and the lit-up inside of the trailer, one hand over her eyes, the other trailing a cigarette. Then she came over.

"Hi," I said.

She gave me a fierce look, and leaning down, she snatched the baby up in her arms. I was close enough to her that I could see the fine spiderweb of laugh lines by her eyes. To me, she said not a word. She just glared, hugged the child to her, and went back inside.

I was mortally offended. "As if," I told Drew. "As if it was ME who was dangerous here."

"She doesn't know you," he said. "Mothers get protective and stuff."

"It's funny," I said. "When I was a little kid I always used to want to live in a neighborhood, instead of out in the country. I thought it was all kickball and other people's mothers baking you cookies and that sort of thing. You know. That's the way you grow up thinking things are when you don't have them."

"I always wanted to live on a farm," Drew said.

"There you go," I said. "You see what I mean."

Next door, the father was outside yelling at his kids: "Jay! You little asshole! Get off the car!" By now, I could recognize his drinking voice, and it gave me a small shivery feeling; it was the kind of voice that gets drawn down into your teeth and the bones of your skull and stays there.

"They're horrible people," I said, with a fierceness that surprised me. "Horrible."
The little girls started to bring their arguments to me.

"I don't care," I'd say, looking from one face to another. "You have to ask your mom about that. That's none of my business, who hit who first."

But as much as I hated to admit it, I liked them. They were good-hearted kids when not squabbling; if they had candy, they offered me some, and if they asked for something I owned, it was only because they didn't know any better, I thought. After a while, I began to think maybe I was a good influence on them--that maybe being in our house was a relief for them, because it got them away from their dad and the constant yelling and fighting and cars revving up. Who knows, I thought, arrogant as I was, maybe I can make some kind of difference in their lives.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked Amber.

She grinned and looked at the floor. "A nurse," Alison volunteered for her. I could understand her perfectly by this time. All it took was listening hard.

"A nurse," I repeated. "That's great. Well, you know how you get to be a nurse, don't you?" I said.

"No."

"You study," I said. "You have to get an education before you can be one. That's how it works."

"Oh," said Amber, not paying attention. She could recognize a lecture when she heard it.

Crystal was playing with our stereo. She had a cassette in the tape deck. She would play part of one song, stop it, rewind or fast forward, then play part
of another. Alison began to fight with her over the controls. Someone's hand slipped on the volume knob and the speakers shrieked with sound. I put my hands over my ears and the girls laughed.

"OK," I said, when they turned the volume back down. My head was pounding. "That's enough now. I have homework to do. Why don't you kids go home."

The three of them froze and looked at one another. "We don't want to," Crystal said. "We want to stay here."

"Sorry," I said. "That's not one of your options."

Crystal sat down. Amber crossed her arms over her chest. They looked at me like they were willing to stay there all night.

"We'll be quiet," Amber said. "I promise."

"Nope," I said. "Goodbye. See you all later. Don't let the door hit your butt on the way out."

I laughed, but they didn't.

"OK," I said. "We can do this different. I'll give you to ten to get out. One. Two."

Not one of them moved.

"Three," I said. "I'm beginning to get angry. Four."

Amber got up. "Come on," she said to Alison. "It's dinnertime anyway."

"Five," I said. "I'm definitely angry. I'm not kidding around. Six."

Amber and Alison left. Alison hung on the doorknob from outside, looking in, but Crystal stayed. I stood over her, looking down, and kept counting.
"Seven," I said, my voice rising. "Eight." She just looked up at me without saying anything, her small face fixed and obstinate, and suddenly I was really and truly angry, not faking at all. I lost my head a little. I grabbed her underneath both her arms and jerked her up. She scrambled, getting her feet underneath her, and put her fingers in her mouth. She looked at me, eyes wide.

"Nine," I said.

And then Crystal finally said something back.

"Are you going to hit me?" she said.

It was as if she had struck me a blow. I sucked in my breath. "Lord, no," I said. "Crystal, honey, I wouldn't do that." My eyes stung. I knelt down beside her and pushed her bangs off her forehead. "Never ever," I said, rocking back and forth on my heels. "Not ever. You hear?"

Crystal stared. "OK," she said. She reached out and touched one of my earrings, holding it up so the beads caught the light. "Kathleen?" she said. "Can I try on some of your makeup?" She put her hand on the side of my face. Her palm felt cool and elastic, a small living thing next to my cheek. I closed my eyes and felt something in my chest expand and loosen, folding outward.

"Sure, honey," I said. But I didn't get up to move. We just stayed there on my knees, my eyes closed, her hand pressed against my cheek.

There is a certain kind of sadness about valley towns. You can look up at the mountains and it's like you're hemmed in. That spring, the snow on
top of the mountains practically glowed when the spring sun hit it; it looked clean, clean, clean up there, and here I was down below, in the rank air and mud.

Drew and I had been fighting. This in itself was not new. But we were careful; there were certain lines we didn't want to cross, because they'd been crossed before, and we'd left all that behind at the old house. But he didn't seem to want to find a new job. I'd come home from school to find him still working on some project or other, or out in the shop making gear we now knew would never sell. At night, he collapsed into bed, complaining how tired he was. Me, I was floundering at school, just barely getting by, but I didn't tell him. I let him think my life was proceeding on course.

Love, according to Drew, was two people holding their breath and jumping off a cliff, hands clasped.

"Oh, that's beautiful," I told him. "That makes things sound so cheerful." I was sitting at the kitchen table, adding up the bills. Very pointedly, I wrote out checks for just half. The radio was on: a Russian immigrant had just shot a cop.

"You don't trust me," Drew said, going pale, "you're just waiting for me to prove why you don't. And when that happens you'll be the one who's been wronged."

He's taken his own children hostage, the radio said; barricaded himself in his home.

"You don't care about me," Drew said. I stared down at my checkbook, trying to make the numbers come out to something different. "You just want to be the one who is right!"
I had an uncle back in Kentucky who left his wife and children for a woman who promptly gained fifty pounds and began running around on him with bikers from the Bide-a-Wile bar. My uncle was a gentle, soft-spoken man. It wasn't like him to complain or run off. But one day he lay down in the middle of the road and wouldn't get up. Nothing could make him. Traffic backed up for miles: road crews and coal trucks and the cars of our neighbors, and still my uncle laid in the road. When anybody asked him why he was there, he said, "I'm just resting my eyes," and turned over on his side like he was asleep. When my new aunt showed up on the scene, she nudged him like a piece of garbage, with the tip of her foot. I still remember how tiny and dainty that foot seemed on the end of her great, swollen legs.

I suppose to some this would seem heroic: an act of great, theatrical despair over love. But I think he was just tired, really. I think my uncle was so tired he gave up. He'd made his bed and now he lay down.

Drew gave up his first wife for me. Oh, he'd mostly left her a long time before our paths crossed. But for years he kept coming back—a season climbing, a season working, another living with Clara. That all ended with me.

Clara was a beekeeper in the Bitterroot Valley, and, Drew told me, a singularly unbalanced woman. The stories he told me made her out a snarling, wild-haired shrew, waving smoke, forearms covered with bees. It was a long time before I learned to question the things lovers told me about the women who came before me. At the time it made perfect sense to me; flushed and proud, in love, I was happy to see myself as his savior. I never stopped to ask, if she was so awful, why was he with her? Why was he with
me now?

The first time he'd hit me, I understood completely. I was awful sometimes myself. I worried and worried at him and wouldn't let up. Sometimes I even hit him. And as my high school counselor once said to me, it's not as if anybody is getting beaten up at your house. And I wasn't, not really. No marks. No black eyes, no bruises. When my father struck me, when he took off his belt and whupped my behind at an age when I was manifestly too old for such business, he was not trying to physically hurt me. No more was Drew. They were oddly alike in some ways, though they despised one another. Their expressions at such times were helpless and sad, so that in the middle of my screaming back at them, I actually felt sorry. I could see they didn't know what to do. I could see it was all mostly symbolic anyways.

This hurts me more than it does you! my father would say.

Oh God, I'm so sorry! Drew would say afterwards.

And I believed both of them. They were both, in their own ways, telling the truth.

"He let the older ones go," I told Drew. "What do you make of that, huh? What kind of sicko would keep his two youngest children barricaded in with him?"

The Russian immigrant lived only two blocks over, as it turned out. He shot a cop and then held police at bay for several days. The police surrounded his house and closed the street off to traffic. Our street was filled
with traffic at all hours; there are always people who like to drive by and look
at the place where such a thing could happen.

It was the most excitement in months.

Our neighborhood was all over TV. You could see all the sad little
details of our neighbors' lives: the washing strung up behind the houses, the
yards full of junk that might someday come in useful. I could see how sordid
the place would seem, on TV like that, out of context, and this hurt me.

"Fucking Missoula cops," Drew said. He shut off the set.

Things had gotten much worse between us. We had been living
together like brother and sister. Each night, I laid by Drew's sleeping body and
wondered how it came to be in the same bed as mine. The whole thing
seemed like a story we'd made up and told ourselves over and over until we
believed it was true.

"He did pull a gun on them," I said to Drew. "I mean, he did shoot a
cop."

"That's bullshit," he said. "Here's a man who's just trying to get by
with his family and the police have to pull this macho thing and come in
with their guns. This is a non-event. This was manufactured for television.
The saddest part is, someone's going to get hurt."

"Drew," I said. "I'm not sure why you're defending this man."

"It's like Waco," he said, "only more pathetic."

I snorted. "Waco," I said mockingly. I looked at him and I shook my
head. "The whole world is stacked up against you, right? Just doesn't want to
give guys like you a chance," I said. "Right?"

Drew looked at the floor. "Don't start, Kathleen," he said.
"Let me just set you straight on one thing," I said. "Just this one thing and then I won't start. The world doesn't care! No, really! The world doesn't give a rat's ass whether you live or you die!"

"Including you," Drew said.

"What?"

"I said that includes you, doesn't it?"

"You said it," I said. "Not me."

He slapped me. I slipped backwards, my tooth jamming into my lip, my hands flying up to my face. The couch kept me from falling. I pushed myself to my feet and stood looking at the blood on my hand.

"Well, that's that," I said, crying in the least obvious way that I could, "isn't it."

Drew seemed to agree. He looked down at his hand wonderingly, and opened and closed it. "I wish to God somebody would tell me what we think we're doing," he said.

That night the noise from the police loudspeakers drew us out of the house. They had an interpreter speaking Russian, trying to talk him out safely. We stood out in front of our house and listened. The language had a strange, guttural sound; it made me think of white, blinding distances, of snow, and emptiness, and a kind of life that was not like my own.

Drew stubbed out a cigarette in last summer's dead grass and laid his arm across my shoulders, where it felt oddly heavy and inert. I couldn't interpret this arm. It could mean everything was going to be all right for us,
finally, or that we were so far gone this sort of gesture was all that was left us—
the kind of gesture one stranger might make to another, in times of war or
disaster or national stress.

The family from next door was outside too, listening. They nodded to
us; it was a neighborly sort of nod. The scene had the feel of a party. All up
and down our street, people were sitting on the front steps of their trailers
with their kids and their dogs, talking quietly among themselves. Some had
brought their supper out with them, and this seemed fitting. It was all very
relaxed: as if we had all been given a reprieve, I thought. That's how it felt.

Alison set her father's baseball cap on Jack's head. "You give that back
right this minute!" she said, giggling. Jack stood, miserable, the hat slipping
over one eye. She lost interest. "Hello," she said to us. "Hello hello hello."

"Hi," Drew said.

She took my hand and twisted my rings, pinching my fingers. "Ow," I
said. Alison smiled, flirting. She clutched my side and leaned back so that I
had to catch her. "Watch," she said, and stared both eyes at her nose. "That's
a good trick," I told her, "mind they don't get stuck."

Alison laughed and let her legs flop loose underneath her. I hauled
her upright by her armpits.

"Are you married?" she said.

"No," I said, letting go of her hands.

"My mama and daddy are married. They have rings."

"These are a different kind of ring," I said. "You wear them on a
different hand."

"My daddy says boys and girls oughtn't to live together unless they get
"He might have a point," said Drew. He turned away from us and stared at the police lights down the road.

"What else does your daddy tell you, Alison?" I said. I felt strangely angry. I knelt down and grasped her shoulders with either hand, squeezing those small bony knobs. "Seems like you keep awful busy over there. What else do you guys say about us, huh?

Alison just looked at me. "That you're mean," she said.

At the same moment the loudspeaker fell silent. Alison's voice carried clearly in the sudden quiet. You're mean. Mean, mean. Our neighbors looked up. We all looked up.

And in that moment the future laid down before me and it was as if I could see straight into everything that would happen: the new house, the new neighbors, the beginning again and then ending. Worst of all, the beginning again, and again, and again.

There is a kind of love that cracks open the word, that makes all its other meanings irrelevant: love as a sort of brute endurance, a willingness to go on. Drew and I had this love between us, and the other kind had slipped away when I wasn't paying attention. In a way, I hardly missed it. But what was it that kept me from laying down in that road? What kept me here, what kept the neighbors there, what kept any of us from flying off into the emptiness beyond all our houses?

"Dad," Amber said, "Dad. I want something to happen."
At many restaurants, the staff is accustomed to "picking" at food while it is prepared. This is a disgusting habit and will not be tolerated at Harry's. If you wish to eat, you may clock out (business permitting) and enjoy your snack in the break room. Remember, always wash your hands before returning to work!

Zack is well into his second year of cooking at Harry's Health Hut when he begins to get this thing about meat.

"Aw, man," Dwight, the muscly, profane second cook says, up to his elbows in ground beef. He stops abruptly, brings his bandannaed head briefly down to his hand, and whistles. "Shoo-ee," he says, "that is some nasty, slimy, stinky shit."

"Ah, the rough poetry of the vernacular," Zack says.

"No, man, feel it," Dwight insists, holding out the tub full of meat, which has a thin, gray, gelatinous sheen to it. He rubs his meat-smeared fingers together, and shivers. "That used to be a living creature," he says solemnly. "Once that cow was up and running around eating grass and doing cow stuff. And now what is it? It's a bunch of garbage, man. Garbage! I tell you, it makes a guy think."

"Not this guy," Zack says. He takes the bucket away from Dwight and begins dumping it into the trash. The smell is so strong Zack's mouth waters, and the back of his throat closes up. So he double-bags it, flipping the bags sealed with a quick, skillful turn of his wrist, and puts it out of his mind. That easy
Except, for the rest of the day, Zack can’t look at meat.

In all of Zack’s extensive work history at Harry’s, he has never, ever, once mentioned anything to Harry about serving meat, which is more than he can say for some of the granola types Harry hires. Harry may dispense detailed, paternal, slightly nagging nutrition advice—"Harry’s Health Hut: Where Your Health Is Our Concern", goes the slogan—but he also serves meat, by God, and to anyone who might see a contradiction here Harry has, quote, nothing to say. Harry himself is a bowhunter and giant elk heads festoon the walls, antlers erect, glassy eyes fixed in a permanent panicky stare.

"We may serve health food," Harry said, when he hired Zack, "but we are not, I repeat not, a radical kind of place."

That’s OK by Zack. Zack’s not a radical kind of guy. But he sees Harry’s point. If he was a radical kind of guy, he might, just maybe, find it much more difficult to put up with Harry.

Not to mention the people who actually like Harry’s food. Harry’s has a core clientele of bulimics, weightlifters, and aging vegetarians who look askance at the elk. Zack used to work out front by the register, in the area of operations Harry calls, optimistically, "customer fulfillment." But he found that his disgust for these people—for their freckles, their moles, their pale hairy legs—was actually making him physically ill. His skin broke out in patches. He slept badly, and dreamed of antioxidants, beta-blockers, and pale, angry carrots.

To be honest, Zack’s much happier back in the kitchen, where the food becomes, once it’s left his little domain, something out of his hands. It lays no claim, that’s how Zack feels about his job. It demands from him only the
tiniest portion of his brain—an area the size and approximate consistency of a
tumor, is how Zack pictures it—which is about all Zack feels capable of turning
over to anyone, just now. And so he cooks, then at the end of his shift he
goes home, then the next day he cooks again, and in this manner he waits, for
what he's not sure. For something to happen. For another way of life to
announce itself, shining, to him.

Zack is an orphan. First his father, that famously self-made man,
unmade himself in his soon-to-be-repossessed Porsche. At roughly the same
period time Zack's mother ran her hand over her breast and found there a fat
knot of poison. Nine months later, the exact amount of time Zack spent
inside her womb, she too was dead.

For a while, then, Zack was too busy to feel. His composure was
unsettling. It threw people off. Who knew what to say to such a person?
Neighbors and family friends crammed the icebox with food, then drifted
away.

Then one day, as he hacked the last frozen tuna casserole into single-
serving-sized chunks, as he watched the lonely plate rotate slightly off center
inside the carousel microwave, he stopped, pressed his fingertips to his
forehead, and felt profoundly his own absence of grief. Where the grief
should have been, there was a monstrous, wide-open space. He thought to
himself: I am an orphan.

An orphan.

The picture this summoned up was so Dickensian, so thoroughly pre-
modern, that he could not begin to see how it applied to him. It occurred to
him that there was nothing to bind him to any place in this world; that he
could come and go pretty much as he pleased.

He'd seen a movie about Montana once. It seemed like a big place. With the last of his father's money, he bought himself a van, and moved himself to the mountains, where not a soul knew him. For two years now he has cooked and learned just how large states can be.

Several avocado stacks later, Zack reaches down to scoop out a baseball-sized chunk of ground turkey for burgers, hand dripping flesh down his soiled white apronfront, fingers dug down a quarter of an inch into the slime that appears on the turkey as it thaws, and for no reason, or at least no reason he can think of, he stops dead. Looks at his hand, at the blood on his fingers.

The blood is a brilliant pink. It shows up clearly on Zack's pale, white-boy hand.

Zack shakes his head. He squeezes the meat in the palm of his right hand, trying to flatten it out, to begin the burger, and as he does so his stomach unequivocally lurches up into his throat.

This is crazy, he thinks: I eat meat all the time. Burgers and stuff. Pepperoni. Hell, he thinks, I love meat.

"Yo, Shakespeare," Dwight says. "Would you like to cook the burger or write a poem about it?"

"I don't know," Zack says, in surprise.

"What's the matter?" Dwight grabs at the meat, alfalfa sprouts from the sandwich adhering to the partially red, partially gray viscous surface, tiny gobbets of flesh dripping down onto the floor. "This stuff gone bad too?" He
brings the handful of meat up to his nose, sniffs, shrugs, slaps it onto the grill and presses down, his palm right up next to the heat.

"Who's the tough guy," Zack says, mechanically jeering. But his stomach roils and bubbles inside him. He watches the burger cook. Then, pulling back, he watches himself watch the burger cook, and asks himself: am I thinking about the little turkeys in the barnyard, scratching for corn? No. Zack has no feeling for turkeys at all. They're stupid birds—so stupid they'll tilt their head toward the sky in a rainstorm and drown.

No, this is primarily a problem of aesthetics, Zack decides. He peers down at the bubbling gray matter around the edges of his turkey burger. The stuff simply looks, well, unappealing. After a day or two in the kitchen, it doesn't smell so hot either.

Yellow order slips mount up on the caddy. Laura, the waitress, pokes her head around the corner. "Zack," she says, "hey, Bernadette on the phone. Listen, make it quick, all right? It's getting pretty weird out there."

She takes one look at the dining room, where people are seating themselves at un-bussed booths, piling dirty dishes at the tables' furthest edges, sweeping crumbs off the Formica. She groans, and slumps back against the wall.

"All these people waiting to be fed," she says. "Where do they come from? What is it they want?"

II

Employees are NOT to receive personal phone calls at work. To-Go orders are a vital part of our business, and each moment the line is tied up means cash down the drain!!
"Bemadette," Zack says.

"Hey." Hers is the least discernible accent of anyone that he knows; she has the speech of cornfields and newscasters, the heartland's flat vowels. "I was thinking about you."

"And?" Zack says.

"And, so, I called."

"That's it?" In front of Zack, by the register, a thin-faced man is waving his ticket, his lips compressed with annoyance. A line starts to form behind him.

"That's it?" he says. "You called to tell me you were thinking about me? Here I am, in the worst of the dinner rush, taking time to answer the phone to hear that I'm on your mind?"

Bernadette sighs.

"That," she says, "and to ask you to bring home a movie on your way home from work. If it's not too much bother," she says, with emphasis, and hangs up.

He'd met Bernadette last fall in the coffeeshop where she worked. Something about her thinness attracted him. She was a slight, serious, not particularly friendly person; in her leotard and men's Levis, her black hair slicked into two little-girl braids, she looked nonetheless emphatically not like a child. Filigree crescent moons trembled from her ears. She wore granny glasses without lenses. The hollows behind each clavicle were shadowed and deep, the bones brittle and sharp-looking, like incipient wings.

Zack stared. She stared back.
"Yeah, what?" she said. "I mean, can I help you?"

Zack found himself with a sudden case of cottonmouth, tongue darting out to touch his dry lips. "Um," he said, stricken. He fumbled in his pocket for change, swiveled his neck to look at the line forming behind him, and throat closing, he laughed—a hideous sound, he thought, like someone preparing to cough: Uh-huck!

"Women don't usually have this effect on me," he said.

"I'm glad," she said, but then, amazing thing, she smiled at him, and when he came back at closing she leaned at him over the counter and said, "You again," in a way that made his heart leap up in his chest. That's how he pictured it, to himself: this pulsing piece of his insides leaping up to meet her. He knew this image was silly and sentimental and he didn't care. In some ways Zack was cynical and in other, less obvious ways, he was not. Oh, cliché, he thought, gratefully, feeling his pulse speed up in such a very predictable way, oh great good cliché of the heart.

Zack started coming into the coffeeshop every day, some days twice. He drank so much coffee he felt punched in the kidneys. He pretended to develop a great enthusiasm for the coffeeshop's overpriced sandwiches, for their mock-ethnic soups. It was like dipping her feet little by little in very cold water, he reasoned—getting her used to him. He learned what hours she worked; he learned her favorite bands, her favorite books, what time she got off. She was a potter, she said. She'd come to Missoula to get a fine arts degree, but they wanted her to sculpt art objects, when she all she wanted to do was throw pots. She lived alone, she said; she threw pots.

And then one day when he went home to his Murphy-bed studio,
Bernadette went there with him.

She seemed expectant. She picked up each of his belongings one by one, and then set them down without speaking. This did not take very long. Zack did not believe in having more possessions than could fit in the back of his car. By the time she got to his albums, Zack was wildly excited, sweating profusely, talking as usual too much.

"Hey, that's a great band!" he said, as she turned an old Easybeats record around in her hands. "No, I mean it! Great stuff! Highly underrated!"

She looked at him, smiled from one side of her face and mouthed a single word: Relax.

"Bernadette," he began, and before he knew it, she was slipping under his arm, folding her body against his. He put two fingers on the cool, dry hollow over her collarbone and felt her pulse beat up through the skin. A small, embarrassing groan escaped him. "Bernadette," he said, the name newly learned, an amazing thing, this tiny, repeatable blessing.

"Bernadette," he whispered, "my God, you have beautiful bones."

All that was months and months ago.

Something in what has happened between them troubles Zack. He lays awake in the dark after they make love, feeling like a man who has just crawled many miles on his hands and knees. He studies Bernadette from inches away. Bernadette's face, sleeping, is like no other on earth. The lines of her bones are so raw and exposed he wants, protectively, to cover them up. There in the semi-darkness, he feels something churning over inside him. He is filled with a purely unreasonable happiness, and he is afraid.
The movie is not a success. He's picked Doctor Strangelove, a movie he remembers as hilarious, but somehow, in the screen's late-night glow, it seems much more terrifying than funny. Slim Pickens strikes him as a figure of particular menace. Bernadette falls asleep halfway through.

In bed afterwards, he turns over and reaches for Bernadette, stroking the thin rope of muscle that stretches up the back of her calves, the larger one that begins behind the knees. His hand rises. Between her legs he feels first dryness, then... string.

String?

"I have my period," Bernadette says.

"So I noticed."

Bernadette pulls away from him and stands by the bed, one hand reaching down to him, flipping the hair back from his eyes. "Hold that thought," she says, and Zack lies there listening to the water run in the bathroom and tries to keep his mind on sex. It doesn't work all that well. Between spoiled meat and Slim Pickens, he doesn't feel all that sexy just now.

Bernadette returns bearing a towel. "Scoot," she says, and lays the towel underneath them.

Zack poises above Bernadette, weight balanced on his elbows and forearms, and as he moves inside her a funny thing happens. He can see his penis, engorged, covered with blood, moving in and out, and this picture seems somehow disconnected with everything going on in his brain; in the foreground there is all this movement, the animal straining, heavy breathing, and so forth. But in the background there is only Zack, driving
into what seems the great distance between them. He looks up at the clock and sees that the time is only five minutes later than when he first touched her, and in that moment a truly disturbing vision comes into his head, a connection he doesn't want to be making. Meat, he thinks, meat, and his mind goes lurching away from the act.

"Oop," Bernadette says, and ceases working herself against him. Zack rolls off of her. He looks down at himself, covered with gore, and winces.

"I think," he says, "I think I'm getting more squeamish with age."

Bernadette crosses her arms behind her head and stares up at the ceiling. Her small breasts rise and fall. "It happens to LOTS of guys," she says, giggling. "It doesn't mean there's anything WRONG with you."

Zack wipes himself with the towel.

Later in the night he reaches over to Bernadette's sleeping body and shakes her awake. She makes a small, whining sound as if he'd hurt her.

"I was just laying here wondering something," he says.

Bernadette throws one arm over her face.

"Why is it you like me, Bernadette? I mean, why me? Out of all the possible combinations of people in the world, why us?"

Bernadette removes her arm and studies him, her eyes small and grainy with sleep. "You could be asking me why I like you," she says, clearing her throat. "Or you could be asking yourself why you like me. That's what a person could think, hearing that question."

"No, no, you're perfect," he tells her, as he has told her before. "You're everything that I want," he says, and as he says it a strange feeling comes over
him. It's like he suddenly doesn't believe a word that he's saying—as if he were an actor in a play, repeating his lines.

"You know what I can't help feeling when you say that?" Bernadette says. "It makes me feel like something you ordered. From a catalog. Do you mind? Can we go to sleep now?"

And she does; Bernadette likes her sleep. But Zack lies awake.

III

It has come to my attention that due to the unseasonably warm weather, we are suffering a higher than average spoilage rate for meat and fish. For this reason, we are currently keeping no backups for meat in the cook's fridge. Be sure to sniff/touch test all animal products before cooking--this includes meat, fish, cheese, etc. Ask the management before you throw anything out!

"Think about it, dude," Dwight says at work. "You eat; then you shit. I mean, there's this whole...process. It takes forever, and in the end there's only this incredibly, incredibly microscopic fraction that your body can use. The rest--I mean," he stops, and makes a rude noise with his lips and tongue. Laura, passing, grimaces.

"OK, Dwight, we get it," Zack says. He shivers, and finds that his Harry's T-shirt is plastered against his chest, soaked through with sweat. He stops, clutching a handful of sprouts, and breathes hard through his mouth.

There's no way around it; Zack is losing his appetite. He works around food all day. He grills it, fries it, garnishes it with pickles and toothpicks. He scrapes its picked-at remains off dirty plates, and he scrubs out the toilet when
one of the bulimics has paid Harry's a visit, until finally the whole thing just seems silly. He can't even eat without picturing the food's long, useless journey, the sheer waste involved, for Christ's sake.

Dwight finds Zack cowering in the walk-in, a tray of thawing ground turkey clutched to his chest. "You're getting weird, man," Dwight tells him. "You disappear all the time and nobody knows where you are. You don't even pay attention to your cooking. Your grilled fish looks like shit, you know that? You cook it until it falls apart and then you just cover the whole thing up with bread crumbs, man. It's a mess, Zack. It's a problem."

When he gets home, Bernadette's stuff is everywhere in his apartment and for some reason this makes him feel sicker. It reminds him of how male cats mark territory, this stuff--hair thingies and dirty underwear on the floor. It all sits there, smelling of her, saying smugly: this man is taken.

She's gaining weight, Zack thinks. Her jawline has softened and her upper arms are losing their tone. He finds himself watching her as she dresses in the morning, seeing her thighs dimple against the bedsheets as she turns her body this way and that. He watches and watches her until she can't pretend to ignore him any longer. "What!" she says, pulling one of his old sweatshirts over her head. "Speak!"

"Nothing," he says. "It's just, you know, I was wondering if maybe you were putting on some weight."

"You think?" Bernadette says, pinching the fold of flesh at her waist. "I don't know," she says. She squinches her eyes at her belly. "You really think so?"

She doesn't seem unduly concerned, it seems to Zack.
They go for breakfast, and Zack drinks coffee and follows the progress of Bernadette's fork to her mouth. She wipes her toast in the pools of congealing bacon fat and egg yolk. She bends closer to the plate, shoveling fried egg into her mouth. There's a sheen of grease on her upper lip. Zack is hypnotized.

After fifteen minutes of this Bernadette lays down her fork. "Do you mind telling me what's going on?"

Zack blinks, then shrugs. "We're having breakfast," he says.

"No," Bernadette says, "I'm having breakfast. You're staring at me."

"Well, geez, Bernadette." Zack looks with disgust at her plate. "I didn't want to say anything, but God, you eat like a pig. You do! Do you even know what's in this stuff?" He picks a limp piece of bacon off her plate and waves it at her. "I'm telling you, you don't want to know. That nitrate stuff is sheer poison. It accumulates in your bloodstream over, like, your whole life. Not to mention the fat." He shakes his head. "Jesus," he says. "The fat."

Bernadette fiddles with the napkin in her lap. "Nitrites," she says, very softly.

"What?"

"They're called nitrites!"

To his amazement, she is crying. She digs at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

"Hey, hey, sweetheart," Zack hears himself saying, "I didn't mean anything by it, really I didn't. I was just, you know, thinking of you."

"Of me!" Bernadette snorts, then wipes her nose with a napkin. Zack takes her hand. "Let's just forget about it," he says. "Let's just forget I
said anything. If I upset you, I'm sorry, OK? I apologize. There."

He smiles at her, the loopy, gum-baring grin Bernadette calls "The Big Doofus."

"All right?"

Bernadette narrows her eyes at him, then shakes her head. She doesn't laugh. "All right," she says, sourly, and they go on with their day.

First a long, puddly walk by the river. It's been raining in a noncommittal sort of way; the hillsides above town are wan, the color of toast. Discouraged, they sit through a matinee, drink coffee, wait at a newsstand for the Sunday New York Times to arrive. For dinner, they get take-out Chinese and bring it back to Bernadette's. Zack watches while Bernadette unpacks cartons from the grease-stained paper bags. She coos: "Sesame noodles! Little spareribs! Look, honey--Four Flavor Pork!"

Zack nods automatically, his mind busy adding it up. Happy Family take-out for two, he thinks; before that, one chocolate chip cookie, double mocha with foam; one fructose-flavored sparkling drink; large popcorn with butter; also, gum.

My God, he thinks. Enough to feed a Third World family for weeks. He looks with distaste at the meal spread before them.

"When my father was little," he tells, "he used to trap and eat possum. Have you ever seen a possum, Bernadette? They're ugly. They have bald heads and little spiny rat tails. They don't even look like they taste good."

"So why'd they eat them then?"

"Because if they didn't," Zack says, "they would've gone hungry."

"Oh, I get it," Bernadette says, through a mouthful of four flavor pork.
She swallows. "This is one of those dad things. As in, when I was your age, I walked five miles to school every day in the snow and ate cold Spam for lunch, right?"

"To be honest," Zack says, "I have no idea if it's true or not."

"Why don't you ask your dad?"

"Ask him?" Zack says. "Bernadette, my dad's dead."

Bernadette's eyes widen. She sets down the carton.

"What?" she says.

"What."

"You never told me about your dad."

"I've told you about my dad lots of times."

"But you never said he was dead!"

"My dad," Zack holds out his fingers, and begins counting them off.

"My grandmother and grandfather on my dad's side, my grandfather on my mother's. My mother. My grandfather on my mother's side too, but that was before I was born, so that doesn't count."

Bernadette looks as if he had slapped her. There are tiny spots of red high on her cheeks.

"You're telling me your whole family is dead," she says slowly, "and it didn't seem important enough to tell me?"

"It never came up."

"It never came up! Jesus, Zack, what's wrong with you? You look like you're talking about baseball scores or something. How can you just sit there like that?"

Zack reaches for a spring roll. The spareribs poke out from their paper
wrapping, scrawny little half-gnawed bones with tatters of flesh. Slowly, methodically, in an act of great concentration, he chews.

Bernadette shudders. She gets up and paces the room.

"I can't even describe to you how I feel right now," she says. "It's like waking up in the morning and on the pillow next to you there's an alien, the aliens have stolen your boyfriend and climbed into bed!"

Zack sets the spring roll down.

"Gee. I don't know how I made it through without your emotional support," he says.

"Don't you be sarcastic with me, Zack! I want to know what's going on inside of that head of yours before I decide that I've been sleeping with an alien all this time. Zack?"

Zack stares at the floor. Sweat beads his lip. His bowels stir inside him.

"Um, I think I'll be going now," he says.

"What an utterly fantastic idea."

Outside her apartment, Zack tries to make up. He goes to touch Bernadette, feeling something close enough to sorry to pass off as the real thing, and is shocked when she recoils. She puts her arms over her face and turns away.

Zack, sweating, watches cars passing by and tries to look casual. What does this look like, he wonders. Does this look like a fight? Does he look the abusive boyfriend glowering over his girl? Bad Guy! he thinks, picturing a little lit-up sign over the top of his head, and strangely enough, the thought puts him at ease—at a sudden, expansive, surprising ease.

Less is being expected of him all the time.
This is a small kitchen. During a "rush," you may find yourself getting in one another's way. The following chain of command should simplify this problem: the server will assist the first and second cooks as needed. The first cook has final say in all matters. I repeat: THE COOK IS IN CHARGE.

Zack mingles with the crowd at the farmer's market. He stands in the circle of people surrounding the second-rate jugglers, blending right in, but he is thinking murderous thoughts. Bernadette hasn't returned his calls for a week. He doesn't know what to think. He'd like to kill her; he feels relieved. He hangs around in front of the coffee shop, and when she comes out he ducks into Kinko's. He is breaking out in large, blotchy patches all over his face.

Zack doesn't buy any vegetables at the farmer's market. He stalks the booths, watches Hmong ladies mist their crisp, lovely lettuce, and nurses the rage that threatens to swallow up lettuce, jugglers, Hmong ladies, and the rows of parked mountain bikes stacked like produce at the edge of his vision. When he sees someone he knows, he pretends to be tying his shoes.

But walking down Higgins he hears a commotion coming from several blocks away, a discordant racket of whistles and drums and bells, people's voices, clapping. He works his way down Higgins, shoulders hunched, one hand shielding his face in case Bernadette is around. Nonetheless, one of the women turning the corner from Broadway onto Higgins recognizes him, waves, and pulls him into the crowd. It's the gay rights parade, he'd
forgotten, and the woman is Laura, from work.

Laura kisses him on both cheeks and stands on Teva-ed tiptoe to place a pink whistle around his neck. The lines of her face have gone smooth with goodwill, and she is radiantly smiling. At him. At Zack Henderson, of all people,.

"Zack!" she says, and puts her arms around him. To hug her he is forced to lean over, hunching himself stiffly down to her. She is talking; the march flows around them. Zack reads his whistle: Pride is nothing to be quiet about.

"Come march with us!" she says.

"I don't have to chant, do I?" he says back. "I can't help it, chanting makes me feel like I'm back at my high school pep rally. All that team spirit. It makes me nervous."

He wipes sweat from his forehead.

One woman has a Vietnamese potbelly pig snuggled up in a wheelbarrow; her sign reads, Just another swine for gay rights. The pig lady smiles at him. Everyone around him is smiling. It's all so friendly, so nice. Zack doesn't trust it.

"Where are all the hecklers?" Zack says. "Where are the religious right with their signs?"

The procession makes its unwieldy way down the center of town. A man with a shaved head and two hoop earrings beams at Zack, and Zack despite himself cannot help but wonder: does he think I'm gay? Do I look gay, skinny white guy that I am, marching through town with a pink plastic whistle around my neck?
The thought depresses him. Zack doesn't like the idea of being beamed at under false pretenses. He smiles back, and thinks, Fraud!

"You look pale," Laura says, touching his shoulder.

"I always look pale."

"Well, you're sweating."

"It's hot, Laura. It's summer."

"Okay, okay! Geez," Laura says, "touchy."

That night, Zack finds himself in Roy's, an old cowboy-themed bar that's been lately discovered by the stocking cap and nose ring crowd, who think it's camp. They shoot pool and trade phone numbers under oversized posters of Gene Autry, Ronald Reagan, and Trigger.

"I remember this place," Zack tells the bartender, "before this place was cool."

"Uh-huh," the bartender says. He flips his rag at a fly, and in a bored sort of way, ogles the blond girl in overalls at the end of the bar. Zack follows his glance.

"Hey, you know what the Buddhist monks do when they feel physical desire for a woman?" Zack says.

The bartender just looks at him. His broad, square-jawed face, chewing on a toothpick, is completely impassive.

"They picture how the woman will look as a corpse." Zack pulls on his beer. He tries to see the girl at the end of the bar as a skull with a blond Dutch boy bob. He squints, then shakes his head.
"Actually, she's got great bone structure," he says. "Frankly, as a corpse, she'd look OK."

The bartender checks out Zack's whistle.

"Can I get you anything?" he says.

Zack orders some whisky. Then he orders some more. The night passes. Where are the hecklers? he thinks. Where are the religious right with their signs? Zack sits at the bar having a conversation with himself. No-one notices.

Somewhere near closing he has enough sense to throw one leg over his bicycle and point its head home. Motion. Empty, rain-washed streets; the fine mist of water spit up by the bicycle's back wheel; stars, curbs, streetlamps, hills and strata of hills that reach straight up into the sky. Zack does not so much fall as elide.

He wakes to a soft, cool hand pressing his, to another hand pulling back his top eyelid. A thin beam of light is directed into his pupils.

"What's your name," a voice asks.

Zack's whole body slams back against the sheet.

"Hey, man," he says, "What the fuck."

The light switches off. Zack blinks, and while his eyes adjust, a large black man dressed in white draws into focus. He is peering down at Zack, chuckling, pressing Zack's hand. His nametag reads 'Stanley.'

"That's great," he says. "That's really good. That is one hell of a response!"
"Do you mind?" Zack asks. He snatches his hand from the man's and tries to push himself up onto his elbows. Then he drops back onto the examining table, defeated. The fluorescent light seems very, very bright indeed.

Stanley picks up a clipboard. "Now then," he says. "Our first priority is to check on what in technical terms might be called your powers of recall. What's your name, buddy?"

"Where am I? Who the hell are you?"

"OK," Stanley says patiently. "You'll ask a question, I'll ask a question. It'll all work out even. You fell on your head, buddy. You went over your handlebars and knocked yourself silly. Now, my turn. What's your name?"


Stanley whistles. "Nice," he says, showing his teeth. "Someone was feeling biblical at your house. Your turn."

Zack turns his face to the wall.

"OK," Stanley says again. "That's fine too. How old are you, Mr. Henderson? What is your phone number? What is your address?"

"25," Zack says, talking to the wall. "721-4506. 1410 West 39th."

"Magnificent," Stanley says, making little checks on his clipboard. "You're as lucid as anyone can hope to be after a night of hard drinking followed by a minor concussion."

Zack groans.

"How do you feel?"

"I have a headache," Zack says, and this admission appears to delight Stanley. He chortles, the extra flesh on his chin rippling with glee, and says:
"Yeah. Well. That sounds about right. That would be, like, your brain swelling up."

Stanley brings him a mirror. Zack peers at himself with a perverse sort of fascination, ogling the spectacular bruise on his jawline, the soft, pulpy lump over his right ear. His head has the look of an overripe melon. "Geez," he says, with a sort of respect.

"Mmm-hmm," Stanley agrees. He takes a cotton swab from a decanter jar, dips it in some orangeish liquid, and stands poised over Zack. "Turn your head to the side," he says. "You cut your ear pretty bad and I want to get it cleaned up before you go. I should warn you, that ear will be sore. Don't be frightened. I won't hurt you."

But Stanley's touch is astonishingly gentle, the huge pudgy-fingered hands cradling Zack's ear. Zack begins to relax in spite of himself, giving himself over to this feeling of being cared for. Then from the corner of his eye he sees Stanley eyeing his whistle and a sudden thought comes to him. He pulls back, away from Stan's hand. "I'm not gay," he says.

Stanley pauses, lifts one eyebrow.

"That's nice," he says back.

Zack is confused. "It's just that..." he says, "I saw you looking at this." He lifts the whistle off his neck and dangles it in front of Stan's face.

"Maybe that's because you have a pink plastic whistle around your neck," Stanley says, amused, and resumes cleaning Zack's ear, his touch as tender as before, his hands darting in and out of the inner rim of Zack's ear, and suddenly Zack is really liking this, really liking the way Stan touches his ear, the swab like an extension of Stanley's own finger, the cup of Zack's ear
full of a comforting warm fluid, it could be blood or iodine or something entirely different for all that Zack knows. . . He pushes his head up against Stan's bracing hand like a cat. He can't remember anyone touching him in quite this same way before.

"Stanley," he mutters, covering Stanley's hand with his own, so that Stanley is forced to stop cleaning, to rest. "Stanley, why on earth are you being so nice to me?"

Stanley pulls back, surprised. "Hey," he says. "Nothing personal. This is what they pay me to do, you know? It's called my job."

Zack makes his way through downtown, lurching from streetlamp to telephone pole and then stopping to rest. Candy wrappers and flyers blow up and down the street. The streetlamps give off a strange, unearthly glow.

It takes him a very long time to reach Bernadette's apartment. When he does, he lets himself in and sits on her bed, on top of the batik quilt she sewed herself. It's very quiet and still in her building this time of night. The only thing he can hear is the sound of Bernadette breathing. He takes her hand.

"I could have died," he says.

Bernadette jerks awake and comes up swinging. Then she realizes who he is and heaves herself back against the pillows, breathing hard.

"You. . . " She is furious. "You, creep!" she says finally. "I was sleeping! You know how important sleeping is to me!"

"Bernadette," he says softly, patting her hand, "I almost died."
He tells her his story.
He could have died, he tells her. That's how these things go, just—boom. You're gone. Maybe they'll mourn for you, maybe they won't. There's no way to know.

"Well," she says, when he's finished. She picks at the quilt with her fingers. Her voice is quiet and sad. "I'm very sorry. About your concussion and all."

"That's it?"
She drops her head.

"So what now?" she says.

"What now?" Zack repeats. He hasn't eaten since—when? This morning? Last night?

"How about some breakfast?" Zack says.

Bernadette shakes her head; she starts to say something, then stops. Something like pity shines in her eyes.

"Oh, sweetie," she says.

During the night she wakes him every two hours. She holds one clay-chapped hand to the side of his face, as if she were feeling for fever, and she asks him questions.

Who are you?
Where are you?
Who am I?

Zack, he says, Bernadette. Home.

"Fuck!" Dwight yells, wiping his eyes. Water drips from the ceiling onto his spiky blond crewcut. "Doesn't anybody ever do any maintenance around here?"

The restaurant has sprung a truly impressive number of leaks in this rain. Dirty gray water drips into grease buckets on the kitchen counters and floors. Water collects in a pool on top of the heating system. In the dining room, rain plunks down onto the heads of dead elk. Rain is falling into empty buckets everywhere, all over Harry's.

Zack's doing OK. Colors look a little brighter than normal; things sound further away. But by and large, he feels all right, even good, and the sound of rain falling in buckets strikes him as pleasant and musical. He chops. Onion slices push themselves one after another from the edge of his knife. In the corner, Dwight is preparing for tomorrow's weekly session of baking, and as he does he sings riffed-upon lines from an old Pat Benatar song: I'm a...(he punches the dough down with his fist) heartbreaker! (punch) Fame maker! Love faker don't you mess around with me! he sings sadly, covering the bowl with a cloth.

For some reason, the rain has put everyone in the mood for meat.

And after all, is this such a terrible thing? Turkey burgers,
Harryburgers, grilled flounder, what the menu calls Krab with a K: the customer wants to eat meat, and if the customer is not always right, he is never quite wrong either, Zack thinks. He squeezes raw meat between his fingers. It's true, it's death that they're eating: another life has ended in order for theirs—for his—to go on.

But death feeds on him too. His mother nourished poison for nine months inside her—her last and most faithful child, the one who stayed with her. He wouldn't have stayed. He knows that. Who knows what kind of a child he might have been for her, or for his father? That chance is past. He will never be anyone's child again. He thinks of the empty space inside him where the grief ought to be, and it seems to him this space might be death itself, gnawing away, opening up a place where it can stay.

I'm a bread baker! salt shaker! nap taker don't you mess around!

Dwight sings. No no no!

As Zack slaps the ground turkey down on the grill, he sees again Stanley's big, scrupulously tender, fat-fingered hands, and he begins to understand his mistake--his mistake with Bernadette. Why, I ought to feed that girl! he thinks, I ought to feed her and feed her! Steam rises. Zack turns his face from side to side, letting the steam warm it. He is doing his job. He is doing what he is paid to do, which is only to feed, no more and no less: a simple, an honest thing. The steam gathers and swirls, and in that moment a vision appears to Zack.

Rising up out of the warm vapor he sees a turkey, a sad, small turkey with his head tilted toward the sky, toward the rain which will drown him. Zack gapes. He blinks, and the turkey's eye swivels toward him. The eye is
full of a perfect compassion. It sees him, this eye, and it does not find him lacking.

And then smack dab in the center of this vision intrudes what else but Zack's own hand. Flipping the burger. Through the air rises the smell of cooking meat, of animal flesh transformed into food, and as the blood begins to run clear Zack grabs handfuls of meat, pats them down one after the other. He fills the grill, covering every inch of its surface with burgers, and then stands back from his work, transfixed. There is a perfectly idiotic grin on his face, as Zack is well aware, and when Dwight turns around and sees him, crying, "Zack, Zack, what the fuck are you doing?", Zack grins even wider, waves his spatula back and forth in the air like a flag, and says, "I am cooking."
In the same year that I turned seventeen and moved from my parents' farm into town, I was stricken with a deep, incurable, slightly sick-making lust for my best friend, Sheryl Kelly. It was nothing personal, I told myself. Sheryl and I, we went way back. Two years or so at the least—ever since I left Catholic school for Tates Creek. We were deeply and bitterly sarcastic together, the way only teenagers can be. She was like a sister to me, as they say, like that's supposed to mean anything. But when I lay in my bed at night none of this counted; the worst kind of foolishness played itself out in my head. The scenarios I imagined always began with Sheryl in trouble, needing for some reason me and no-one else to help her, and no matter what happened from then on they always ended the same way, with Sheryl's white, naked body splayed out before me—a picture that stopped, I'm embarrassed to admit, somewhere near the top of Sheryl's neck.

Sheryl had a bad reputation. Sheryl was wild. She had six brothers, all older, all troublemakers, and on the first day of class, the teachers always looked at her last name on their roll and said, "Not another one." It was as if, from the beginning, everyone had expected her to turn out some kind of tramp, and Sheryl knew it and played their part perfectly—so perfectly it came off like parody.
It was a time when everyone we knew seemed to be nursing a grudge, when it seemed possible to be attracted to someone by virtue of their real or imagined unhappiness. In Kentucky, during those first few years of Reagan, events from the outside world took a long time to reach us. The first time I ever saw a Mohawk or a pair of Doc Martens, these things had already passed into the realm of the quaint. We knew this. We knew all the cool stuff had already been done. We were all afflicted by the sense that there was nothing in front of us but our parents' lives, or something like them, and the prospect horrified each of us for our own reasons.

Sheryl wore black nailpolish and long black dresses with boots, also black, and muddy red lipstick that made her mouth look soiled in an alluring sort of way. Her hair color changed with her whims, from streaky bleached blonde to a dark, faintly metallic maroon. At parties, Sheryl had a habit of drinking too much and disappearing in back rooms with boys. Sooner or later Sheryl could be counted on to stand in the middle of the room, swaying slightly, and then begin to dance by herself. She whirled, circled, her arms inscribing a small, protective space in which she could move. Sheryl, dancing, drew people's eyes like a magnet. She wasn't just wild. She was, simply, beautiful—so beautiful she didn't have to hang around with people like me if she didn't want.

I was Sheryl's confidante. She told me her dates. "Billy Blumberg,"

she said, "is a brute. The things he wants me to do! It's disgusting."

"Like?"

Sheryl pursed her lips. "I wouldn't presume to corrupt you," she said. "Sweet Gatewood!"

I wasn't sure how I felt about hearing these kinds of things. In a way, it was flattering, having her confide in me like that, but it seemed to me that there was something humiliating in it too. Whose shoes was I supposed to be imagining myself into, when Sheryl told me her stories?

And so I had my two Sheryls. There was Sheryl who talked to me in this way—Sheryl to whom I was a being so small and harmless that she could say whatever she liked around me and it didn't matter. And then there was the Sheryl I had to myself, at night, who was utterly pliant, sweet-smelling, and faceless.

Sheryl liked to tell stories. One of her favorites went like this: one afternoon, she would say, I was minding my own business out in the parking lot. Getting ready to go home, when...To hear her tell it, there were four or five of them, mean, burly farm boys with mouths full of chew.

"Fag hag," they said.

The fact was, Sheryl did hang around with the only openly gay kid in our school, brave, fey Brad with his forelock of hair and his eyeliner. Brad caught plenty of grief, it was true, but not near as much as you'd think. And
sometimes I thought Sheryl enjoyed her role as Brad's defender—being privy, as it were, to his troubles, which were so much more public and identifiable than hers.

"Hey! Fag hag," the boys said.

"And they said fag hag, and I said," here in the story Sheryl would pause, jutting one hip, her head bobbing sideways like a pigeon's, "I said, Red. . .Neck!"

And whoever was listening would—what else?--laugh.

But I knew: there weren't four or five boys, just scrawny Lee Fletcher who sat in Sheryl's homeroom and had been in love with Sheryl since the first day of sophomore year. In his own sad, unwashed way, Lee was probably trying to flirt.

And the other part she left out was, it was me who was with her that day in the parking lot. Not Brad. Me.

As far as I was concerned, that changed the story.

That year my friendship with Sheryl had taken a new sort of turn. For the first time, it approached what I thought of in my tentative way as "romantic," or something like it. Meaning we talked about things I could only conceive of people talking about with their girlfriends--things like death, and love, and the true meaning of lyrics. We talked on the phone far into the
night, sometimes, infuriating my stepfather who liked to pretend that he had enough business to be getting business calls at night. He'd never met Sheryl. Neither had my mother. And my father—my father was dead.

Over breakfast one day, my mother said, "Who's your friend?"

My stepfather shook the newspaper out, so it covered his face.

"What friend?" I said.

"You know," she said. "Your—friend. The one who calls here."

"Nobody," I said, miserably.

"So how come we haven't seen her?" She reached for the butter and smiled at me. My mother had lately acquired the most pained, mirthless sort of smile one could imagine. The tendons stood out in her neck from the effort. Not until much later in my life would I recognize this as the face of one who is suffering. At the time it never occurred to me to think about my mother as someone who suffered.

"Richard and I," she said, "we would surely love to meet all your friends."

"Mom," I said, twisting around in my seat. "She's just a friend from my math class. She calls me up. We talk about trig. It's no big deal."

"I know why," she announced, holding her fork upright in her hand. "She's in an iron lung. Your friend."

"A what?"
"You know. Iron lung." She tapped on the front of my stepfather's paper with the fork. "Remember, Dick? The kids who had polio? That's why we haven't seen this friend of Gatewood's yet. Because she's stuck in an iron lung trying to breathe. Poor girl, she can only call you up on the phone."

"This is supposed to be funny," I said, pushing back from the table.

"Well of course it is," my mother said, arching one pale, penciled eyebrow. She scraped the last remnants of her fried eggs onto my stepfather's plate. My stepfather looked first at her, then me, then at the eggs.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" he wanted to know.

Since my father's death the soul had gone out of our house. The hallways grew gray balls of fur. My mother watched television in her bedroom, with its new bed, new sheets, new paint job, new husband. From time to time I met my older brother in the bathroom we shared, and he, drunk on Latin and physics and the certain outward trajectory of his life, he granted me a small, mannerly smile, and appeared not to know me.

Somehow I knew without anybody telling me that there were no other houses like mine; that my family did not live like other people, and perhaps never had. Outside my house I could walk around and talk and dress and act like other people and it was as if I had been given a new head to stick over my own. Sheryl was a part of that. Sheryl was maybe even the reason.

But what can I say about Sheryl?
Sheryl was the first one to give me something like taste. There were things that were OK, and then there were things that were below even our scorn. The below-scorn list was longer: television. Bono. The kind of kids who called people 'posers' or who talked about 'society'—"As in, 'I won't do all the things that society tells me to,'" said Sheryl, her lips pushed out in a sneer. Girls who cried and made scenes at parties. Our principal, an ex-coach with a dim, startled expression, who pronounced his 's'es with a small but definite whistle.

Sheryl was superstitious; if she woke up and the first thing she heard was a dog barking, for instance, it meant that it was a dangerous day and she had to be careful about things like cars running her down in the crosswalk. If, however, she woke up on her right side, and her right foot was the first one she put on the floor, and she put her right arm into her sweater before her left, that meant it would be a good day—a lucky day. And Sheryl on one of her lucky days—so convinced that everyone who met her eyes would, had to, smile at her, so certain of the universal love and approval around her—who could not agree? Who could not approve, not love, not think her lucky?

Sheryl didn't like girls. I, on the other hand, liked girls very much. "In movies and stuff," Sheryl said, "girls always have these other girls they can talk about everything with. They have lunch together and just talk. I couldn't do that. I can never do that! With girls I always feel like there's this.
. . . motive for everything that they're saying, like if they tell me their boyfriend's a jerk they're just rubbing it in that they have a boyfriend, or they're telling me they gained five pounds so I'll tell them they're thin."

"Guys do that," I said. "It's different, but in the end it's the same thing."

Sheryl scratched her leg. I watched; the nails made long pink trails up her newly shaved calf. "I don't know," she said. "Everybody says guys are so selfish. I don't know. I think maybe they're just straight up, you know? There are things that they want, and they go get them. If that's selfish, I feel like I ought to try it."

To me, this didn't make much sense. I was a guy, and I didn't always get what I wanted--and as far as I could tell, guys like Billy Blumberg mostly got what they wanted when what they wanted was Sheryl. I couldn't understand what she saw in Billy, or any of them. I couldn't understand what made Sheryl like that, or, truthfully, like that with people other than me.

Sheryl hated math.

"When I was little," she began one day, in front of the cafeteria, "I couldn't understand numbers at all. I couldn't seem to get them to mean anything. You know? They were so . . . so dead, I thought."

"Little squiggles, man," Rabbit said.
Rabbit was so called for his soft white-blond hair and a certain twitchiness he had to his nose. The name fit him. Winter or summer, that nose really was pink; his eyes were a watery blue; his long, gangly limbs moved in stutters and jerks. Rabbit, then. "But it makes me sound like a hippie!" he wailed, and for a while he tried to get people to call him "Rabid" instead. It wasn't such a very big change, he insisted, but the name never took.

"Absolutely," Sheryl said, tapping out a contraband Merit. "So I made up this game," she continued. Her thin silver bracelets clinked together as she smoked. "I pretended the numbers were people. I gave them all of them their own little stories, and that's how I learned them. Like, 5 was this little boy, right? With freckles? He was always getting into trouble--but he wasn't really a bad kid, more like the boy with his hat turned around sideways in my Fisher Price set, you know?"

"Oh," Rabbit said, "that guy."

Sheryl ignored him. "6 was an older sister number," she said. "She was always making her brothers and sisters stop fighting, stuff like that. I mean, I had them all. Up to about twenty or so, that is. Then they just got squiggly again."

She paused, stubbed out her cigarette on the pavement, and said, "So you see my problem with trig."
"Your problem with trig is you don't ever study," I said, prudishly.

Sheryl smiled her brilliant, squinty-eyed smile. "My problem with
trig," she said, "is, like, a problem with society. Man."

The farm was having its troubles. The fields around us grew suburbs. Even in the best of times, my mother never cared much for the farm, and after my father's death the place fell apart. In that region of white-painted fences and pastures the color of lawns, our property looked like a dump. The barbed wire sagged to the ground. The old tobacco barn lost shingles whenever a good wind blew up from the north.

One day my parents announced their decision to move into town. We could get a good price for the land, they said. In a few years, when Man O' War Boulevard's six lanes reached our side of town, we'd have no choice but to sell.

"What?" I said.

"Sell," my stepfather said. "Move." He was—is—a large, stolid man with flecks of gray in his mustache, a man of few words, a doer, as he puts it, not a talker.

"You can't do that."

"I can't, huh. Well, buddy, you'd be surprised." He folded his arms across his chest and stared me balefully down.
"I'd have to switch schools," I told them. "It's my junior year, I can't move. Next year I graduate, for Christ's sake."

"Language, please," said my mother.

My stepfather stroked his mustache.

And that was that. I packed up the only room I'd ever lived in for all of my life. Drawer by drawer, shelf by shelf I packed it: my jeans and ragg sweaters, my steel-toed boots. From the closet I boxed up stuff I hadn't seen in years—the broken science kits and the limbless GI Joes of my boyhood. I put my albums all back in their sleeves and packed those. I packed my collection of buttons—"Rude Boy," "Meat is Murder," "Drinking Problem? I Drink, I Fall Down, No Problem." My yearbooks, my collections of old letters and notes, my father's picture, my stack of alternative zines. I took the pictures of John Lennon and Sid Vicious off of the wall, and I rolled them together in a cardboard tube. And then I was done.

I sat in my room for a long time after that. The boxes were all in the truck; the house was quiet in the way only a really empty house can ever be. The sun was setting outside and for a minute it blazed up in the window, turning the whole room orange and gold, and in that minute the same room I had known all my life looked like somewhere entirely different.

I had an idea.

"Listen, Sheryl," I whispered in trig class. We were divided up into
groups, wrestling with differential equations. From over the chalkboard, foot-high construction-paper letters glowered down: MATH IS FUN. "I'm going to have a party," I said.

Sheryl glanced over at Ms. Wood, who was bending over Trish Evans' paper and not looking our way. "Yeah?" she said. "Where?"

"My old house," I said. "It's empty. There aren't any neighbors. I still have a key."

"You're brilliant!" she cried, as Ms. Wood began to rise from her seat. "Hey, I was kidding!" I protested. But it was too late. I could see the wheels turning.

The news traveled quickly. The next morning in homeroom two girls I hardly knew stopped by my desk.

"I like your jacket," one said. Her name was Rachel, and she'd never spoken to me in my life. I was wearing one of my brother's handmedown denim jackets I'd cut the sleeves off of and drawn on.

"This old thing?" I said.

Rachel cleared her throat. "Hear you're having a party this weekend," she said.

"Bring your own furniture," I said. I drew them a map. Then I drew one for Geezer, who sat next to me in German class and was so grateful from a semester of cheating off of me that he volunteered his older brother to go
buy the keg. Then I drew one for Tami Mattingly, who had written her English term paper on U2 lyrics, then one for some guys she knew, and then for Rabbit, and Sheela, and Brad, and all of Rabbit's skateboarding buddies, and then for the guys in Geezer's band, who didn't even go to our school.

The night of the party, Sheryl came over to help. Together we set up her mom's lawn furniture in a rough circle on the living room floor, and putting on a Specials tape, we sat down to wait. The trombone sounded strange and small with all the empty space around it. A wind blew up from the east and moaned in under the doorframe.

"This is my favorite part," Sheryl said. "Before anyone gets here. Before anything happens to spoil it." She was moving around the room, lighting black, half-burnt-down candles she'd brought from home. Dis towown, is coming like a ghost town, the tape sang. My eyes followed Sheryl's rear end as it moved across the room.

"Mine too," I said.

There was something very domestic about waiting with Sheryl inside a stripped house. In a way, I could see the appeal--the way a house could begin to be more than the place you sneaked out of. I smiled at her. "Gatewood," she said. And then the front window lit up with headlights, and the moment was gone.

"We brought you a present," Rabbit said, his long, lanky frame filling
the door. He had a twelve-pack under one arm and someone's mailbox under
the other.

"How thoughtful," Sheryl said, and took the mailbox from him.

"Honey," she turned to me, "Should I put the mailboxes in the bedroom?"

The last one to arrive was old Wild Billy Blumberg himself, new
girlfriend in tow. Her blond hair stiffened out from her forehead like a big
potato chip, the ridged kind. Sheryl gave me a winky little frown as if to say,
Poor Me!

The rest of the evening took its predictable plunge into hormones and
drunkenness, mayhem and purposeless talk. There were, I remember, a lot of
oddly sexual goings-on. Sheryl kissed Rabbit, who looked surprised but kissed
back. Sheela kissed Geezer, and then Sheryl kissed her. I found myself in a
corner, kissing Tami Mattingly with my eyes closed and imagining it was
Sheryl's puffy, soiled lips under mine. We wrestled against each other, I
pressed her up against a wall, clumsy and ardent, ardently clumsy, and when
we came up for air, Tami put one hand on my face and gave me a long,
steady, unaccountably tender look. She'd recently gotten a haircut. Her bangs
were too short, and the effect was not flattering; she looked like a doll made
out of bread dough. I remember thinking, well, this is it. This is what I get--
the Tami Mattinglys of this world are my portion.

And for a moment, the thought wasn't so bad. Truly.
Then Sheryl grabbed my hand and squeezed her body between Tami's and mine. "Selfish!" she said, poking me in the side, and she kissed me full on the lips. The living room had filled up with people and the things the people had brought to sit on--broken lawn chairs and milk crates and cheap Mexican blankets. I lifted my head up from my best friend's face, my heart thrumming inside my chest, and what I saw pleased me more than I can express. For the first time that I could remember, my house looked to me like the kind of place a person could live in.

Later, much later--all the other girls had gone for their curfews, and Sheryl was the only one left--we started messing around in the wasteland of old engine parts by the barn. Billy Blumberg passed a small joint, the seeds sparking when we inhaled. Laughing together in a fierce and private way, Sheryl and Rabbit climbed up in the old Ford pickup that had stood there as long as I could even remember. Billy and his pals took running leaps at the truck and made it bounce with their big hoodlum feet. Inside, Sheryl and Rabbit whooped with laughter. I turned away, and fingered a buckeye I had stuck in my pocket. I was sick at heart and the ground whirled. Whatever had been going on in my living room, I decided, it had had as usual nothing to do with me.

Then, suddenly, the landscape in front of me lit up: the cattle chute, the north pasture, the rolling drop to the creek. Behind me, Rabbit poked his
head out the truck window and said, mildly, "Gate, by the way, the headlights are on and we can't seem to get them turned off."

We each took turns climbing up into the cab of the old Ford. The dash looked like the controls of a spaceship: smooth, streamlined in a fifties sort of way, and completely unintelligible. There were all these little metal knobs and nothing to say what they did. "What'd you pull, Sheryl?" I said, my knee leaping with panic.

"I... don't... know!" she said, and laughed semi-hysterically. It seemed to all of us like a matter of the greatest urgency to get those lights turned off before someone saw them, no matter that there were twenty acres at least between us and the road or between us and the nearest neighbor. There was a time of some confusion—laughing, yelling, milling about. Finally Rabbit picked up a dead branch, and whirling it once round his head, he laid into the lights.

"Rabbit, take it easy, man," I said, too late.

Glass shattered all over the gravel, someone, somewhere, cheered—and without warning my party became something different. From basically well-mannered drunks they'd become a bunch of hollering fiends walloping on what could have been, for all they knew, a perfectly serviceable truck. They grabbed sticks, rocks, pieces of metal, anything that'd been left lying around. They dented the door metal in; they shattered the windows; they beat a tattoo
on the roof. Howling, Geezer broke the nearly-empty bottle of Turkey over the hood.

In the middle of this, Sheryl opened the passenger door and tipped her feet out onto the gravel, her boots hitting the ground with a thunk. "Hey!" she said, looking around. "You-all! What about. . . me!" she said, and slid from the car seat to the ground. She was, we all realized, very drunk. Her legs stuck out at stiff angles, like a doll's; the crimson lipstick had smeared onto her teeth.

"Aw, sweetheart, c'mere," Wild Billy Blumberg said, putting his arm around Sheryl and lifting her up. His date, we all knew, was home safe in her bed. He bent over Sheryl and started mashing their lips together. One hand cupped her butt, and he ground her hips ostentatiously against his. I felt ill. I also felt oddly aroused. Sheryl's hands were dangling at her sides, waving a little. Billy grinned up at us, his audience, and I felt a queasy thrill of recognition. In this thuggish and pointlessly cruel grin there was something I knew from my mirror. Sheryl was limp in his arms. "Watch this," he said. To me? Probably not. But Billy grinned, as I thought at me, and I watched as he let her drop to the ground. Sheryl stood up, unsteadily, and brushed herself off. A piece of glass had lodged in her long Goodwill coat. She lurched from one foot to another, and dragged the back of her hand across her mouth. None of us made a sound.
What happened next was an event so sudden and so unlike any of my fantasies that I could only stand and gape while it happened. Sheryl took off all her clothes. She pulled down her skirt, unhooked her bra, thumbed her panties across her hips and let them slide to the ground. And there she stood, naked girl surrounded by broken glass: no striptease, no bump-and-grind—nothing. Just her body, unadorned, so white it almost hurt to even look at it. A breeze blew; her nipples puckered; the white flesh rose up and goosepimpled, and Sheryl stood.

Some of the guys started off hooting; then they stopped. There was something in Sheryl's look that stopped them. Her eyes had traveled back in on themselves. She looked unearthly standing there naked. Strange to say, she looked, well, too naked. It wasn't sexy at all.

Rabbit was the first one out of all of us to move. "Hey," he said, and in a quick, nervous movement, his tongue darted out and wetted his lips. He touched her shoulder. "Hey," he said. "Sheryl." And it was like all of us came back to ourselves with this small piece of kindness, and I took off my jacket and covered her up. A couple of us walked her out on the back porch. She stood there, swaying, her shoulders hunched up against the chill, and she blinked. Her face was fierce.

"I don't need a one of you," she said. "I don't care what you think. About me or anything. You don't know anything about me. You can all just
go home, is what you can do. Hear, now: nasty girl says go home."

Overhead, the stars winked in and out of the clouds. Sheryl took a deep breath and let it out as a laugh. She shuddered.

"If you could've seen your faces!" she said. She dropped her jaw and let her tongue hang out like a dog's. Then her eyes rolled back up in her head, and she barked. It was a deeply ugly face, so ugly it must have been meant to hurt us.

As she moved the jacket slipped off one of her shoulders and I went to pull it back up. I wasn't thinking anything by it, it was just instinct, like catching a ball someone throws at your face: but Sheryl flinched and shrank back. One arm flew up, shielding her face. "Go home!" she yelled.

And, like a dummy, all I could think was I didn't know where she meant. Do I now? Did I ever? It would be years before I found anything like a place I could live in, years and years of my life's long, fatherless hallways with their combings of fur. All the things that seemed so important to me then have fallen away. Only Sheryl stays with me, neither mine nor fully hers, this pale and too-naked body bared in reproach.

What if I was to take my clothes off right now, in front of all you nice people? I bet you'd laugh. You'd even feel good about not being me. Some of you might give your own jacket just to cover me up. Yes yes, but what would you see?