Leaving raildaughter & other stories

Kristine A. Kramer

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LEAVING RAILDAUGHTER & OTHER STORIES

By

Kristine A. Kramer

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Raildaughter, Montana was a tourist town, and the locals locked their back doors and garages during the summer months with mild resignation. Transients, harmless renegades mostly, rode into town on their turned-out thumbs and slept near the bushes in the parks along the river. On a Friday a man and a short-haired dog entered town, walking on the raised sidewalk of the only bridge that spanned the river. Their walks were identical, their steps locked in unison. The canvas-like material of the rocking backpack was dirty and strong, not of black plastic that lasted a week. The man was draped and tucked from head to toe in soft, quiet camouflage.

His black-and-rust calico dog panted, carrying his wide head low, then looked up at his master to ask if the man hadn't lost his senses. Had the passersby on Main Street looked in their rearview mirror, had they seen the man's dark skin pitted with campfire smoke, the sight of him and his beast would have sent shivers up their spines.

"Chowder," said the woman behind the counter in the video store
when the man walked in. They hugged each another, Chowder fixing in his mind the shape of her body against him so he could recall it later. He knew her as Eve, a more amorous name than her given one. They had grown up together in this town, played with each other as children, made love before others their age had learned about being lovers.

"How about a movie, lady?"

"I've got one you'd love. Tonight?" Eve said calmly, smiling broadly. Her reddish hair was curled, and most of it dangled from a wayward barrette.

"God, you look good, Eve," Chowder said, running his fingers through his dark, waxy hair.

"Go on over to the house, clean up. I'll be home in a while with a pizza and a movie."

"Key in the same place?" he said, his hand reaching for the door. Eve nodded. Outside on the sidewalk his dog, Felony, raised his eyes askance--why town and for how long?

That evening Felony ate leftover pizza and fell asleep on the couch. Upstairs in the bedroom, Eve played Teddy Pendergrass whose whispery, black voice had wafted in and out of "Choose Me," a movie in which Lesley Ann Warren asks Genevieve Bujold if her last name really is Love. Chowder woke each time Eve flipped the tape, a half dozen times during the night.

Eve rose early, then left just before ten to check in the drop-offs at her video shop. After she was gone, he dressed, drank some coffee, found a cache of twenties in her dresser, fingered five or six and slipped out the back door, quiet as a thief. He knew Eve would be angry when she discovered the missing bills; still, she knew him well
enough to consider the theft a loan.

Chowder could borrow six green bills easier than he could borrow a dog in heat. If puppies were born, Chowder would sell them and pay her back.

The pet shop had dogs that were too young. The shop attendant, a young girl, looked at Chowder as if he wanted to eat a puppy for lunch and said, "You probably want the pound, sir."

"Probably," said Chowder. "I wanted a breed though."

At the pound Chowder wished Felony could have helped him select the bitch, but the smell of the kennel had Felony so nervous he'd disappeared. A Doberman-blue healer cross caught Chowder's eye. She cost $25--a donation, the pound keeper called it as he handed Chowder a certificate for getting her spayed.

In the parking lot she didn't pull at the blue nylon choker around her neck. Felony came out of the bushes, then stood his ground. The bitch crept up to him, the epitome of female submission. "What will you call her, Fella? She's all yours." He wished Felony would call her Little Dipper.

Over the weekend Chowder, Felony and Little Dipper lived in the riverside park. For two days Chowder felt Felony watching his every move. How could he make his buddy understand she was a gift? By now it didn't matter that there would be puppies. He had just thought he would not abandon the bitch, if Felony happened to breed her. The three of them would return to the woods. Chowder could return to town later to find homes for the pups, the bitch too if Felony had had enough.

But Chowder's plan wasn't working. Late on Sunday when the RV campers were leaving one by one, Chowder was in the river bathing and
indulging himself in the wombbed, underwater silence. Town was beginning to wear on him. Why was he staying?

Felony sat at the edge of the boat ramp and watched Chowder hobble toward him on slippery rocks. The bitch was content on a dock, tied to a boat mooring. Despite Chowder’s extra attention toward him, Felony was watching, waiting, probably doubting the motive that had interrupted their perfect existence in their home with a pine needle floor. When Chowder teased Felony with a stick his tail usually sprang into an erect question mark. Now it drooped, paralleled and mimicked the short waves. Chowder gave up on the stick and went over to untie the blue leash.

A red pickup hid him when he spotted Eve standing out at the end of the city dock. He crouched low and watched her. She shaded her brow and looked back toward land, scanning the park. Then she walked back to her Volkswagen Bug and drove off. Chowder realized he had loosened his grip on Little Dipper’s leash and she was gone. Chowder followed Felony’s torpid stare and found the bitch lapping up water at the river’s edge.

That night Chowder slept under the bridge where the mosquitoes weren’t so bad. But the huge red ants and the dogs’ jaws snapping at them kept him awake. Chowder dreamt of a list he wrote for Eve: $1.75 laundry, $9.95 protein drink, $1.20 milk, $4.49 dog food. Just before dawn Chowder rolled over onto his stomach and by matchlight counted the rest of Eve’s money. He wrote her an IOU for $42.39. Then he untied the bitch’s leash and walked her to the far end of the park where the river shore became unused, private land. Felony followed at a safe distance.

Chowder heard cattle groaning in their sleep in the dark, nearby.
He reached down and slipped the choker off Little Dipper. She trotted away with purpose, her nose to the ground. Chowder could hardly see Felony in the new, dim light. The bushes echoed the pattern on his back. Chowder saw Felony’s low head grow wider—with clarity, Chowder thought, for many nights ahead Felony would sleep on Eve’s couch.

“Let’s go wake her up,” Chowder said, knowing now she was the reason they had crossed the bridge in the first place.
Cora's name plate, its adhesive dried and useless, had fallen off the front of her desk but now leaned against the smoky plastic case holding her computer disks. Cora assumed it was still there; she hadn't actually noticed it since the day she'd picked it up off the floor, cleaned it with a tissue and placed it where a person looking for help could read it: Cora Webber, Reference Librarian.

"Cora Becker, is that you?" an old neighbor would ask. "Where've you been all this time?" Cora hadn't been anywhere, except to college in Bozeman. Webber was her married name, not a name known around town. Her husband was from east of the continental divide, north of Billings. When Cora married Arnold in 1953, the same year Kristine Jorgenson had had the first sex-change operation, he hadn't lived in Raildaughter long. Cora took his name, moved into a comfortably small house with her new husband, then disappeared into wifehood. People forgot about her. Small towns were like this.

Cora sat composed, stoop-shouldered before her keyboard, her
fingers clicking wildly in spurts. The monitor cast a warm, flattering amber light on her face. She was a study in contrasts—old age and high tech—which delighted her. Sometimes unaware of herself she'd pause in thought and feel a coarse hair on her chin. When she discovered her probing finger she would blush, but this afternoon her attention drifted back to the screen, the habit unchecked.

"How do you spell Pinocchio?" a schoolgirl asked. Most of Cora's searches were for school teachers: an illustrated Beowulf? A few were for college students home on break: Some of the first reviews on Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea? That was a lovely book, thought Cora, but there were no reviews from the Twenties in this library. Go back to your invaluable college, she would have liked to tell them but never could.

Between the questions she screened and cataloged dozens of donated books, most of them outdated and not worth the bother. She had just placed a newly donated book on the shelf, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, an old copy with threads at its swollen corners and a shakily written signature inside the cover. It had been a while since she'd read it, so she set the book atop the papers on her desk. It was only a few minutes before she could tidy up and go home book in hand.

"Could you help me find a book? It's called The Gentle Art of Osculation." He pronounced it 'os-sculation', with two s's. Cora looked up and found Maurice standing in a navy wool shirt before her desk. She laughed, thinking Maurice's girlfriend, Ruby, had taught him that word, and a sharp pain stabbed her in the chest. She held up one finger to tell Maurice to hold on. Logging off her computer she stole shallow breaths, sitting up very straight until the cramp or whatever it was went away.
“Dr. Ruger, Cora,” Maurice sang, not falling for her act. “I don’t want to lose my two favorite people in the same year.” The other person Maurice was referring to was Arnold. Arnold had been his best friend until he, Arnold, had left.

The only person Cora had told about these attacks was Maurice and only for the reason that she’d had to. The two of them had been rototilling her garden last summer when the wind left her so quickly she grunted as if she had been socked in the stomach. As soon as she could talk, she described the pain to Maurice who stopped, sweaty and slightly bent over in the churned earth as if he’d had a pain himself. When the first one had hit her, Cora thought she was having a heart attack. Then she discovered that if she shrugged and lay her shoulders back, something softly clicked to the left of her sternum; hence, the pain went away. The stabbing cramp was a positional thing and age, she’d self-diagnosed.

“It’s my posture,” Cora said, noticing how straight he stood now before her desk. “An insufferable posture,” she added, smiling at the truth in that.

“I see.” Maurice let the matter slide, coddling her as usual.

“Okay. What’s up Maury?” She had trimmed her own bangs too severely this time, so that now pressing her hand against her forehead they felt like an oval frame around a portrait.

“How’d you know?”

“I know that you don’t read much.”

“Oh,” he said, leaving his lips round and small. “Got a note from Arnold. Do you want to hear?”

Last spring Arnold came home one day from his job at the post office, as usual about dinner time. Instead of loosening his tie and
sitting down to scoff at the six o’clock news, his two-tone blue uniform slipping deep into his recliner, he went upstairs and changed clothes. Cora had heard the closet doors. He came down wearing a red flannel shirt and khaki pants, clothes she’d never before seen. He put on the coat he wore to church—a nice blue tweed sports jacket with suede elbow patches—and walked out the back door, never saying a word. Two weeks later Maurice apologized and handed Cora a piece of paper on which Arnold had scribbled the date and time she should appear in court for their divorce.

"Hm-m. No," Cora said in the new darkness that followed the click of light switches in the lobby. Ruth, the circulation clerk, peered around the corner at the two of them. Cora shook her head so Ruth left the last light on. Cora turned off her computer.

"Okay. It’s not bad though," Maurice said.

Maurice had driven Cora, dressed in black, to the courthouse for the divorce. Afterwards, climbing into the pickup truck where Maurice waited for her, she’d said, ‘Who was that man in there?’ Arnold had sold this pickup to Maurice, and Lep, Arnold’s old shepherd, went with the truck. Lep was in the bed of the truck staring at her through the window. ‘That was like a funeral,’ she said, worrying about the dog and the loyalty that ran strong in his breed. ‘As good as, by me,’ was all Maurice said.

"Why, I ask myself," Cora said, watching Ruth search the aisles between the shelves of books for stragglers who might not know the library had closed, “should I care to know anything when I can’t take it."

Recently she was beginning to feel as if she was coming out of shock, six months of a superficial numbness accompanied by an
undercurrent of vivid and bizarre dreams. Anger had become a side affect of this paralysis; then lately, she suffered angrily the nightly intrusion of the dreams. "Thanks, but no thanks," she told Maurice.

"Sorry then. Need anything done at the house?"

"Well, as long as you’re asking..." Cora told him another maple had died. There had been three lovely maples in her yard, in the strip of grass between the sidewalk and street. Since she had gone back to work full time during the busy summer season, she hadn’t thought to water the trees as much. This was the third dry year in a row: The first maple had come down last year, and now the second one appeared to be going. She had read that when the damage was visible it was too late to correct, which made her sad before the tree had even died.

Sighing, Maurice walked with Cora to the door where she flipped over the closed sign. Cora knew he felt obligated to help her out. He felt bad about Arnold, as if he, Maurice, had been an accomplice to Arnold’s strange departure. She knew too that Maurice’s guilt was not the reason why he helped her, as much as it might seem that way. He was not as moody or defiant as Arnold, was sensitive and had probably tied himself in knots debating whether or not to tell her about the letter. Still, he had pulled off the question casually. All he would have told her was that Arnold had written from Alaska where he was preparing a salmon boat for the coming season; also, there had never been another woman.

Saturday morning after she awoke, Cora continued to lie in the warm bed and let her mind wander. Since Arnold had left, sleeping in—laying in really—on weekends was one her favorite things to do. Today, not only was the sky overcast but the clouds were thick and dark and promised
rain. But there wasn’t a chance in heaven—almost sixty years beneath them, Cora knew Montana skies. The thought of Maurice coming to fall her dead maple made her throw back the comforter and get up.

Last night, right after she’d placed Jane Eyre on the nightstand, Cora heard Maurice drive by on his way home from Ruby’s house. What she heard actually was Lep howling softly, yelping in constrained delight, so much did he love riding in that pickup. She had missed his bursts of joy. At first she smiled, then she wept. She had no problem with memories. The interim was what pained and confused her—connecting the new Lep with the old Lep.

And yet Cora easily wore Arnold’s old shirts with a certain puzzling detachment. She selected his faded green chamois for the yard work to come. The bare wood stairs creaked underfoot, a sound her house made that was as much hers as her own heartbeat. She poached two eggs instead of her usual one. She would invite Maurice in for split pea soup and a grilled-cheese sandwich at noon.

Maurice had already pulled up and was waiting for Cora out in the front yard, throwing a stick for Lep who then paraded the stick until Maurice lunged for it, unsuccessfully. Cora couldn’t find her work gloves but went out the back door anyway. Lep ran and jumped into the bed of the pickup when he saw her walking around the house. He wagged his tail as if to apologize for thinking she was going to steal him away from the truck.

"Morning, lady," Maurice said. He reaffixed his cap, setting it way back on his head then pulling the bill to his eyebrows. His dark hair stuck straight out of the half-moon hole in back.

"Morning, Maury. I just want you to fall it, remember. I want to buck it up."
“Yeah, yeah.”

Together in her garage they filled the chain saw. Maurice unscrewed the caps; Cora poured the gas mix and oil. Maurice carried the saw around to the front yard, to where he had parked close to the tree.

“Howdy, Lep,” Cora hugged the dog still in his truck and lifted his muzzle so that he was forced to look at her. “Two nights ago, Lep, there were owls in this tree. You would have loved it,” she said so that Maurice could hear. Sometimes she wished she had asked for and kept Lep. “Yup, a dozen of ‘em.”

The owls had drawn her to the edge of consciousness with their calls. She had incorporated them into a dream where Indians were surrounding her, signaling to each other with their owl calls. Who who WHO, whoo whoo. The Indians didn’t want her though, they’d wanted the endearment of the sneak. They darted from tree to bush, and their paths knit together in a secret pattern. Puzzled and lured by the design, Cora was on the verge of figuring out the mystery when she awoke and realized they were real owls. They called to each other: Who who WHO, whoo whoo. One was in her maple, one in the cottonwood across the street. Two were down the block in front of the school, others by the morgue. They were always moving so that she was unable to pinpoint the culprit calling Who who WHO, whoo whoo. The calls diminished with distance, leaving an audible trail as if their sounds were embers in the dark. Lep would have whined at hearing them, wanting to go with them.

Maurice was unfamiliar with Arnold’s saw. The pull cord rewound less with each pull, leaving Maurice with more and more slack in his hand. Cora tried, but she was too slow at flicking off the choke.
Maurice tried again, pulled the cord, flipped the choke off in one heave-ho. He gunned the saw until no other sound could be heard. Then he switched it off and said, "I'd better find those ear plugs, or I won't be able to hear Ruby woo me for a week." He headed for the garage.

Cora waited by the tree and looked around at her neighbors' houses. The house across the street was old too, a bit less rundown than hers. She coveted its big front porch and the squeaky, screen door. It was a family house, built for lots of kids--something Arnold never wanted--a loud household with a barky dog, a teenager's hot rod, a young daughter always yelling for a youngest boy to come home. A week ago, Cora had clearly heard a boy come flying out the door and holler to his friend at the end of the block. "Wait!" he yelled, "What about me!" The screen door slammed behind him. Each one of his footsteps could be heard as he ran toward and then away from Cora's window and on down the street. It was a hot summer day sound. But it wasn't summer; it was autumn. And it hadn't been daytime; it had been midnight and pitch dark under a waxing moon. When Cora fell asleep she dreamed of a colored bronze statue, a boy running so hard that one heel touched the back pocket of his jeans. In her dream she took this statue down off its shelf and held it up toward Arnold, as if it was an FBI badge and Arnold a criminal who had crossed the state line. Then she handed the boy to Arnold and sent him on his furtive way.

Cora found her hands were kneading Lep's loose skin and fur, seeking its warmth and pulling him to her. She released him and headed for her back door, suddenly remembering her gloves were downstairs on the dryer.

From the basement she heard the saw start up again. She heard its
hum deepen as Maurice touched it to the hardwood trunk. The saw seemed to free up, then it strained again. Her gloves had dried in the exact shape of her hands—half open, half shut. She slowly climbed the stairs. The slam of her screen door was lost in the crash of the brittle branches of the dead maple.

Naturally Maurice could not simply fall the tree so he began limbing it. Cora stared in disbelief. She walked up to Maurice and tapped him on the shoulder. He shrugged and killed the saw.

"That’s the wrong tree," she said.

"What?" His shoulders fell and he adjusted his cap.

"This one was still alive. That’s the dead one," she said and pointed a thumb to the tree behind her, the tree closest to Lep and the pickup.

No matter what she said to make him believe it was okay, that the mistake didn’t bother her or that, suddenly, cutting down a live maple was any worse than letting one die of drought as she had, she knew he didn’t believe her. She knew he would expect her to say it was okay but inside be sorry that he had even offered his help. She had grown tired of her stoic disguise; therefore, she would not act tough or indifferent now. All she could do to convince him was laugh, and she laughed without her chest freezing up, an amazing relief. "I’m cured," she said, thumping her chest with a fist.

Maurice stood there biting the tip of his tongue as if he had forgotten what he was going to say.

When Cora began sawing up the secondary trunks and limbs, Lep jumped out of the truck and selected sticks for Maurice to throw. Instead of bringing the stick back, he’d prop it up between his front paws and chew it like a bone until he spotted a better stick next to
Maurice’s foot. Cora loved how he was always coming up with new games. If he could talk, no one would know what he would say next.

After lunch Maurice fell the dead tree and they took turns sawing limbs until the narrowsness wasn’t worth sawing anymore. They filled and emptied the wheelbarrow with heavy chunks of maple and built a stack of wood by the garage. Finally, with Lep guarding a space for himself, they dragged the leftover branches into the bed of the pickup so that Maurice could take them to the dump.

After Maurice left, Cora looked at where the three maples had stood side by side as comrades, sharing the same rectangle of earth, competing for the same moisture. One had survived by having the longest roots which grew under the lowest spot in the sidewalk where a large puddle always lingered after a rain. She counted three stumps, hating her green thumb’s ignorance.

The sky was burning on the horizon to the west as it had every sunset during this warm week of the summer solstice. Cora had turned off the television after the news and was looking out her front window at the three young honey locust trees she had planted that afternoon. She heard the cry of a lone goose and searched the sky until she saw it through the leaves of the trees in the next block.

She had planted each new tree between the former maples whose stumps for two years now had reminded her of huge coins lying in her lawn. The tips of the new branches were beginning to droop, but they would be erect by morning. She had left the hose ends in the newly churned earth and the water at a trickle. The phone rang.

"Hello, Cora?"

"Yes, and who is this?" It was easily eleven o’clock, she
thought.

"Arnold. I’m in Raildaughter."

"Arnold? I thought you died." Her watch read ten forty three.

"Very funny, Cora. I just thought I’d--"

"No. You don’t understand. Arnold’s dead."

"Cora. Come on. Don’t be like this."

"Okay," she said cheerfully and hung up, thankful she had not yet
gone upstairs and that the caller had not made her get out of bed.

She checked the doors to be sure they were locked, which was part
of her nighttime ritual that Arnold used to tease her about. He said
there was no need in Raildaughter for deadbolted doors and laughed
every time she pulled on the front or back door to assure herself the
latch had caught. She went upstairs thinking that not even a small dog
could sneak up to the bedroom without waking her, the risers and treads
creaked so loudly and lovely.

As she did every night Cora pulled the shades before she
undressed. The shower felt heavenly; it had been a warm and humid day
for June. In her coolest nightshirt she brushed her teeth, humming to
herself through the foam around her mouth. She would not read tonight,
so she climbed into bed and turned off the light.

This did not mean sleep. Her bed as usual was warm as a womb,
large as a ballroom. Still she felt sticky with a light sweat, so she
folded the light bedspread at her feet. When she’d heated a spot on
the sheets she moved her arm or leg to a cool place. Soon she lay
spread across the entire mattress, feeling the nighttime breeze cover
her as it drifted in through the screen above her head. Then she heard
it, a violin and its diaphanous melody drifting in through her open
window, a sound she had never heard before.
Like a milkweed seed lofting in a thermal over a sun-baked shake roof, the violin's melody meandered steadily over the same small range of notes. It was hypnotizing. Soon Cora's thoughts were as delicate and ethereal as the music. Arnold was in town? So what. She was aware that she had hung up on him. Would he call back? Too bad—she'd do it again. The violin's notes mimicked the random turnings of her thoughts. What did he want? It didn't matter. She began the descent into the unconscious where time became senseless and content dominated with its own language and euphony. She did not want to succumb to sleep, lose this incredible lucidity or miss a note.

When the nimbused full moon was highest in its path across the cloudy sky, a letter, one she had been composing unknowingly for two years, started leaking out of her brain, oozing and flowing like lava over her pillow. Pages and pages, she wrote and made additions to in her mind while she slept, but she was not so deep asleep that she couldn't relish the resounding phrases in hopes of remembering them exactly, when the dream released her. Of course, they might be gibberish then.

Sometimes it was not the actual words but purely their meaning that tempted her to raise her eyelids like she did when she was a child to stir herself from a nightmare. But she was not escaping a nightmare now. On the contrary, she wished to bring her dream with her like a mother escorting a hand-held child to safety.

She'd left off the 'Dear' and begun the letter with 'Arnold.' She wrote elaborately with a quill that she dipped into an inkwell and signed what had become a different letter 'Cora Becker,' a signature that looked like a monogram. A great relief alighted when she finished the composition.
Cora flipped her pillow over, punched it and reflected on her dream. She knew that when she was in dreamland she just knew, she intuited truths, then when she was awake those insights seemed senseless. In this letter, void of pen and paper and words, what had attracted her and what she had succeeded in bringing with her to consciousness was: there would be light in morning. Maybe it was life in the morning. Either way it was inane. Feeling at last disinterested rather than disappointed, she fell into the sleep of a woman laden with grief.

The knocking on the back door downstairs was far away at first and then so urgent sounding that she grabbed the closest piece of clothing and donned it to cover her nightshirt. She hobbled down the steps fumbling for the large buttons.

Maurice stood directly under her porch light. Arnold stood off at the edge of its shadow in wet grass. Cora pulled the brass chain to the light over her breakfast table then unlocked the deadbolt with a small but solid click. The door opened and both men came into her kitchen.

The wrinkles on Maurice's face appeared to be lined with dirt. He shrugged and said, "Cora, I'm sorry. He insisted."

"On what?" The cuffs on Cora's sleeves hung almost to her fingertips. She had grabbed one of Arnold's shirt, a red striped cotton one she had worn as a smock for planting the trees.

"Coming here," Arnold said. Arnold was staring at the shirt she wore. He was posed on crutches, leaning heavily on one leg, casted from his toes to his hip on the other.

"Did you come for your things?" she asked, noticing his shirt—the red flannel from the strange day he left. He wore jeans, one leg
split, and a large belt buckle with a hooked and fighting fish on it. His face looked weathered. He was bareheaded but his hair, more gray, was shaped from a hat.

"No," Arnold said, shaking his head as if dismissing the absurd question and insisting he not be misunderstood. "Dammit. I left you everything, and I don't expect to renege now."

"What happened to your leg?" Cora had rolled up her cuffs and leaned on a hand she'd placed flat on the table for balance.

"I slipped and caught it between two boats. A while back now."

"I see."

"Needed a couple of surgeries; got five pins in the knee."

"An accident, huh?" she said.

"What'd you think, I'd do this on purpose?"

"Could have been heroic or something."

"Well, it was, sort of, I was trying to save the fish. The net was slipping over the side, and--."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, knowing that she would have if she'd read his letters to Maurice. Maurice tossed up his hands and sank onto a chair at the table.

"Well, what are you doing in Raildaughter?" she said, honestly asking and expecting anything.

Both men looked at her as if they were trying to figure out her ruse. No ruse, she was simply starting over, more polite this time. By the streetlight outside she could see that it had rained. She also saw the tips of Lep's ears in the back of Maurice's truck.

"I'll have to take a desk job for a while, because of my accident," Arnold said. "Thought I'd enjoy the summer here. Look around for another pickup. Prices are real high in Alaska, you know."
"Alaska? Is that where you are now?"

"Yeah. It's beautiful. Lep will love it when the season starts up."

"Season?"

"Salmon."

"Lep?"

"Yeah. Jesus, Cora. You know, Lep, my dog?"

"No," Cora said. "He's Maurice's dog. Mourning you was one thing, but take him away from Maurice--well, that might kill him."

There was a silence that usually came in wintertime when arctic air moved down from Alaska and plunged thermometers well below the zero mark, when townspeople usually felt a little afraid and anticipated the worst.

"Well, that about says it," Maurice said, meeting Cora's gaze. He fixed his cap in his habitual way. Standing up then, he said, "Let's go, Arnie."

Arnold turned on his crutches and inched toward the door; he seemed hesitant, unwilling to leave the dry kitchen for the rain.

Cora watched their taillights leave long zigzag trails on the wet pavement. She could no longer see Lep's waving tail but could still hear him yelping softly, as if he knew it was still too early to let loose and wake the neighborhood up. Cora turned and pulled the chain to cut the light, unaware of the time of day but not the freedom in grief.
When the truth is told so many times, it becomes a story. No one has to ask to hear it, the story just begins when it feels the slightest need to be heard. Then it looks for a voice. Deneas did not want to tell the courtroom story again. He had repeated it to himself so many times that it was beginning to bore him; and yet, it challenged him to withdraw it again from his memory as if it were a burdock buried hopelessly in a horse’s mane.

Deneas was finished with his work—sweeping and dusting and washing the blackboards—and had fifteen minutes left to go on his shift. As he sat and leaned back in a professor’s chair, the story teased him again. It was taking advantage of the time of day when most people would be sipping their first cup of coffee. College students would soon arrive for their classes. His tired mind was an easy voice to inhabit. The story began itself.

Jack Big Arm and Deneas sat on sticky courtroom benches lined up like church pews. Deneas’s brother Joshua sat facing them, on the
right of and three steps lower than the seated judge. The room was hot. The air sat on the window ledges. Big Arm stood out as the largest man there. Beads of sweat flattened the stray grey hairs at his temples, and a halo of humidity hung above his shiny, black head. Deneas secured himself in Big Arm's shadow. It was August, the month when the forever long days made Deneas believe summers never ended.

A chubby county prosecutor stood up and stretched. He threw back both arms and his back cracked. The jury on Deneas's left watched the stout man walk around a long table. Deneas too watched him tug at the back of his suit coat to remove the bulge, walk up and stand squarely in front of Joshua. The trial continued now that Joshua was sworn in.

"Concerning the knife in question," the prosecutor began, "wasn't its sheath found in your possession when you were pulled over by the two deputies on Tuesday, August first, of this year?"

"Yeah, on my belt," answered Joshua. The twelve people on the jury looked questionably at each other. Lucille Cougar Woman, a tribal elder, sat in the second row.

"Where did you get this knife sheath?"

"A friend gave it to me, for money he owed me."

"Who? What friend?"

"Quequeseh, I call him." Deneas did not know Quequeseh well.

"But your mother just testified that she saw your friend, Quequeseh, as you call him, give you the money." Their mother had also answered the questions truthfully, not to avoid the sin of lying but because she had been told she had to tell the truth while sitting in that chair.

"Not all of it."

"I see. Where did your friend get the knife sheath?"
"I don’t know....The same place he got the knife probably." The jury—all except Cougar Woman—shook their heads and some swallowed their laughter.

"Don’t get smart. Just answer my questions. Did you ever see the knife that belonged in this sheath?"

"Yes."

"Well? When? Where did you last see the knife?"

"Under the seat of my car before I was picked up.

Joshua’s truthfulness stunned the prosecutor and caused breaths of laughter to erupt from the jury. Joshua smiled, too. The questioning continued and disclosed that the knife was still in his car under the seat. A deputy was sent out to retrieve it; then, soon it appeared tagged on the evidence table. It was a fine buck knife with an elk antler handle. The blade was serrated on back for sawing through bones.

Apparently, Quequeseh had given it to Joshua, and someone had given it to Quequeseh. The trial was for the original thief, the first one who had stolen the buck knife out of Steve Richard’s garage and scratched out the "SGR" engraved at the butt of the blade. Rightfully Joshua should have the knife, despite who had lost or gained it. He had come by it as payment for a debt. The original debt to Steve Richard would be paid some other way, by chance good fortune or by his own doing.

"Joshua should have the knife," Deneas said to Big Arm.

"Hardly. Ownership is different here. Steve Richard will get it," Big Arm said.

"But the knife went through many hands since his. Anyway, Joshua is not guilty of what they say."

"It would be just, if Joshua was--," Big Arm began, but he was
interrupted by the screech of the prosecutor’s chair gliding backward over the parqueted floor as the chubby man suddenly stood. "If he knew, it would be one thing. But since he doesn’t understand the men wearing the suits in this room, he will be shamed."

The story seemed to end here for Deneas. He could hear doors closing and the students shuffling toward their classrooms so he withdrew his feet from the desk top. He put the brooms away, clocked out, drove home and collapsed on his bed for sleep. The story would not rest though.

"Did you steal the knife from Steve Richard?" the prosecutor asked.

"No," said Joshua, staring him down. The jury members shifted in their chairs, crossed or uncrossed their legs. A few of the women fanned their faces with more determination. Then not even Cougar Woman looked at Joshua. Deneas saw her downcast eyes leaked their tears, while he recoiled from a bead of sweat that ran from his underarm to his waist.

The members of the jury had taken twenty minutes to decide Joshua was guilty. Judge K. C. McBeamer, whose face was round and pale like a harvest moon, decided the sentence, committing Joshua to three years in the Deer Lodge State Prison. Deneas knew men who had served time and who had been branded with hatred.

The highway rounded a large bay on the west shore of Flathead Lake. The water in the bay was not yet frozen. There were geese on the upper shore of the bay, children playing on the lower shore. Deneas turned off the highway onto a dirt road heading away from the water. For the same amount of money that he’d spent on this ‘65 Ford pickup truck, he
could have bought himself a high-mileage horse, one to use to give rides to his nieces and nephews or even pack out an elk. But the truck got him to work and allowed him to see his family scattered around the county. He knew who had arrived already by the cars parked in front of his sister Amra’s house. A light burned in every room.

Amra had gone into labor at dinner time. With the help of their mother and Cougar Woman, she had a healthy boy about nine o’clock, when the large snowflakes had begun to fall.

Deneas’s father, his blood brothers, his brothers-in-law, plus their parents and siblings clustered around the kitchen table and the fireplace in the living room. Every so often Amra in her bathrobe braved the stairs to show off her new son. One of these times, she said to her closest brother, “I’ll name him after you. Deneas.”

“Call him Jack,” said Deneas, “Name him Jack, after our friend, your doctor, Jack Big Arm.” The rest of the night he and Amra playfully argued over the infant’s name, there being no hurry to name him.

The night was loud with talk but muted by the soft snow piling up quickly on the window ledges. They all laughed at the retelling of stories by the older parents. They drank and ate the moose meat his brother-in-law’s mother had wrapped in foil and baked in the coals in the living-room hearth. The house was wonderfully warm. When Deneas left to go to work at three in the morning, he was damp with smokey sweat. He had to scrape four inches of snow off his windshield.

As he headed back to the highway, Deneas wondered if there was enough time for a shower and a change of clothes before he punched in at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo—SKC, as was stitched on the
baseball cap he wore not only on his four to eight am shift but other times as well. If he hurried, he could afford the shower.

On the highway, a car rode his tail. It wouldn’t pass when it could, but maybe the driver couldn’t see well with the snow Deneas was stirring up. Deneas drifted all over the road, keeping constant watch on the car in his rearview mirror. Under the single streetlight in Dayton, he saw it was a deputy sheriff’s car. Suddenly, red and blue lights began spinning. He had accelerated because the overhead light offered visibility, and now with the flashing right behind him, he couldn’t slow down. Misjudging the curve coming down a hill, he skidded sideways on the snow frozen on the bridge. The wooden guardrail and four-by-fours gave way to his truck’s fender. His right front tire broke over the edge first. Deneas was airborne in a cattail and snow blizzard for a long time, it seemed to him, before landing with a soft splash.

Water and ice rose over the truck’s hood. Deneas rolled down his window, perched on the seat, clung to the window ledge, then leaped from his sinking pickup. He landed on his hands and knees on a surface hard as ice.

He knew he would have to swim, if he broke through; therefore, he began waving his arms and kicking his legs so he would not drop into the water and be sucked under the ice by the river’s current. Pausing to take in his surroundings, he felt a warm and bright glow on his back from the direction of the bridge. It was a spotlight.

There was no river, only cattails and thin and fragile ice that had become suspended when the water underneath had evaporated. In the third dry year in a row the river had become a slough, then in the fall dry marsh. He started laughing.
The cops stood on the shore on the other side of the cattails, slightly bent with their hands on their hips. Each cop wore a straight and curious face under his hat. As Deneas looked at them and they at him, he felt a pain in his ribs. He stopped laughing and again felt the heat from the spotlight.

Not until Deneas sat handcuffed in the back seat of the deputy car did the two cops start talking to each other. Half way back to the jail in Raildaughter, Deneas heard the driver say, "Like a fish. Did you see him?"

"Doing the belly crawl," the other one whispered. They coughed and tried to act professional. The small river had always carried run-off from Lake Mary Ronan into Flathead Lake. Deneas had felt the current pulling him toward the lake, where—if he had made it—he could have floated away home free.

Bits of grass and snow thawed inside his shirt as he rode in the warm back seat. If he had worn his bandanna headband he could have wiped the cold and wet away. Except for the handcuffs, it was as if he hadn't yet bought his truck and the men in the front had picked him up hitchhiking. Maybe when they warmed up, they would begin talking. He wished they would take him back to his sister's house.

"Got a new nephew tonight," Deneas said.

"Shut up," the driver said.

Deneas closed his eyes and thought of his sister persisting the most in their argument and naming her boy Deneas. Suffocating, he tried to take a worthy breath, flaring his nostrils in the damp warmth. His chest hurt like a son of a bitch.

He felt the pads of two fingertips on the inside of his wrist, but he
could not feel his own heartbeat. He opened his eyes slightly and saw
the nurse who applied the pressure. She was watching the back of her
other hand, her watch, its second hand. Deneas's black braids lay
across the hospital gown on his chest, straight out, just as his arms
lay on top of the blanket bed. He closed his eyes again before she
noticed he was awake. He could not help himself and started laughing
softly. Perhaps she would think he was crying, the way his shoulders
shook. He let go of the scene in his mind, grew serious again and
pretended to be asleep until he soon was.

A growing tightness above his elbow woke him again. He heard a
pumping sound, then a small release of air. He remembered the nurse
from earlier in the morning so did not bother to open his eyes. The
silliness entered him again. He could not help but laugh, this time
louder than before. The nurse left quickly.

Deneas did not hurt anywhere, and he could remember no further
than leaping from the truck he thought was sinking, then paddling for
shore like a duckling. Now instead of night scenes, he recalled a
voice, Big Arm's. When a white-haired doctor fired questions at him,
he had answered a few by nodding yes. When the doctor had poked him
several times in his stomach, Deneas jerked away as if in pain. This
was why he occupied one of the dozen beds in the Raildaughter hospital.

Big Arm had told him what to do if he was ever picked up. "Lie
like a sick coyote. Anything to stay out of jail," Big Arm had said,
"then call me." This way he would find himself in a hospital and not a
jail, and it had worked. A warm bed instead of orange overalls--yes,
but had they called Big Arm? Possibly he had some broken ribs and
internal bruises from the steering wheel. Someone had mentioned a
punctured lung. Deneas almost believed his own lies, feeling an ice-
cold burning in his chest.

"Jack Big Arm," Deneas said when the nurse came in to check his pulse and blood pressure again. "My doctor is Dr. Big Arm."

"Dr. Big Arm is in Ronan. You're in Raildaughter. In St. Joe's, not St. Luke's," she said.

"Get the ambulance then," Deneas said, looking around the room as if he recognized it was the wrong one. "Take me to Ronan."

Outside the door, he saw the slippery, brown and tan uniform, fat with flesh and hanging over the edge of a teetering metal chair. "Hey," Deneas said loud enough to stir the cop. The chair tipped forward so that all four of its legs rested on the linoleum. The tall cop stood and yawned.

The nurse left when he came in. His gold name tag shone: James Nelson.

"Nelson," Deneas began, wanting to appeal to him as a man, not a deputy, "My doctor is Jack Big Arm in Ronan. He knows me well and doctors my family."

"Well, he's not the doctor here. You'll have to take what you can get," said Dennison, turning toward the door.

"I refuse to let anyone else touch me," Deneas said, staring at the ceiling.

"Well, somebody already did, but I'll check with K. C. anyway," Dennison said and left to call the judge.

At the recognition of the initials K. C., as in K. C. McBeamer, Deneas's chest froze up. It felt as if a knife had been inserted into his left collarbone; namely, he could not breathe. He peeled off old thoughts of Joshua among the crazies in an insanely quiet cell at Deer Lodge. He realized that trying to swim in the dried-up river would
not make him laugh like it had before. After his plunge, the rest of
the night seemed faultlessly hushed. Now this silent memory made him
flush with shame. To protect himself he forced his mind elsewhere.

Right about now he would be ready to punch out, wearing his SKC
cap that fit as tight as a head band. He would be leaning way back in
some desk chair, trying to read another book borrowed from Big Arm.

Last summer, Big Arm had given him a book and had said, "Little wars
are good, my friend." When Deneas opened the book, he was forced to
admit that he hardly knew how to read. But he was determined to learn
the words.

He came to understand parts of familiar stories: slivers of facts
about the Crows, about horse thieves and feathers marking brave men,
enemy coup-sticks and war clubs with men who would die for their
friends, about hunting parties that rode and hunted for entire
summers. He managed to read about warriors who called themselves Crazy-
dogs and who rode into a Flathead camp on horses, backwards. If he had
understood right, the Flatheads feared Crazy-dogs. Deneas opened his
eyes to yellow rubber curtains surrounding his bed.

He peeled the tape from his arm and withdrew the IV needle, sat up
and hung his feet over the side of the bed to test himself. On the
floor beside his bed, he found some slippers and put his feet into
them. He felt nauseous but otherwise okay as he gained strength from
his own adrenaline. His braids, almost as long as Big Arm’s, darted
over his nipples.

Deneas looked down and saw the gown they had dressed him in. It
was white and covered with blue snowflakes. The ties at the back of
his neck fell apart easily. He slipped the gown off and put it on like
a shirt so that the opening was in front. On the chair next to the bed
lay a folded robe. He put it on and pulled the ties at his waist at first snug then less tight for the pain.

The hallway was clear. There was no other choice than to turn away from Nelson's voice at the nurses' station. At the end of the hall was a window and the stairs to the ground floor. At the bottom of the stairs, Deneas simply ran out the metal door, a fire door. The alarm sounded as soon as he pushed the wide handle spanning the door that opened to a cold brightness.

Across the street he ran into an alley where he lost his right slipper in the broken ice on a frozen puddle. A padlock on a garage door hung invitingly loose. He ducked inside. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he squatted underneath a long workbench on one wall. His breathing could not be quieted. He could only exhale in loud grunts.

If the small garage door had suddenly been kicked open by a black boot, Deneas would not have been surprised. It was easy to imagine the self-righteous cop who might be pursuing him. This cop would be applauded by other deputies and the judge, while Deneas was merely holding his own in an empty garage, quiet except for the low hum of the freezer in the corner.

On a shelf next to him lay painter's overalls and a paper painting cap that said Dutch Boy across the bill. Deneas pulled up his braids and slipped on the hat to hold his tethered hair out of sight. He closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing slower, deeper, soundlessly and listening for a plan to come to him.

On the garage floor next to the painter's clothes was a mouse in a trap. It had been there a long time, for it was dry and weightless in his hand. He slid the sprung trap under a shelf. The mouse he put in his pocket, though at once wondered why he did that. Was he losing his
senses? He closed his eyes once more, aware that he had lost himself
in things he could touch—like the mouse and the tucked braids—which
was easy to do when he needed urgently to do something.

But now was not the time for a jerked mouse or a painter's cap.
He should be thinking of larger, more important things.

He had hidden the braids that usually reflected his mood. When he
and Big Arm wrestled, their braided strands flew about yet were
respected, never used in a hold or to maneuver the opponent. "You take
chances and if you are sly enough you are praised," Big Arm had grunted
into Deneas's ear one time as they tried to press each other into the
ground. "And if you are caught, you pay with honorable humility." The
words suddenly fit Deneas like a pair of worn moccasins.

Deneas could not crouch under the workbench anymore. He listened
to Big Arm in his mind, and from the sound of the huge man's voice he
was not to be quiet or still. The hospital ties snapped easy. He
stepped into the heavily stitched and button-covered overalls. A can
of white paint fell off the shelf and urged him to pry its lid off with
a screwdriver. The paint felt cool and creamy on his fingertips. He
splashed and sprinkled the white onto his hands, his forearms, then on
the overalls and even on the one hospital slipper still on his foot.
He stuffed the hospital gown and robe inside the overalls at his
stomach and became a fat, sloppy painter. Now he moved like a burdened
white man.

Outside, he found the other slipper for his bare foot and began
walking south on the sidewalk. He resisted the urge to bolt. Deneas
knew he was going down; why not go down like a Crazy-dog?

The running was over. He would walk all the way to Ronan. First
he would have to go through small backyards, then snow-spotted horse
pastures, then seemingly sparse, golden hay fields where he would stir up a pheasant or two. He would toss the mouse into a patch of snow, so that tomorrow's sun on the snow would make it soft again, a teasing tidbit for a hungry hawk. Already he walked three blocks and was beginning to feel innocuous, like a deer in its own thicket.

Maybe he would make Pablo Reservoir by sunset and be able to take a drink of water, lying spread-eagle on his stomach at the edge of the silver ice. In another season, he might see pelicans among the geese and blue herons. Only a crow might fly over today, its caw and then its popping sound echoing off the cold hills, reminding Deneas how small he stood beneath the sky. He loved watching the shifting rudder of a crow's tail.

As he walked along, the story unfolded as if it was already repeating itself instead of being created. At the edge of town, the sidewalks gave way to rail and then barbed-wire fences. The cold revived him; he grew stronger. He had made it this far, fair and square--maybe he was good flesh after all. In Pablo, five miles short of Ronan, he would find a phone and call Big Arm. He would tell Big Arm the story and then ask him to call his family. They could come and help him--all except Amra, or maybe her and the new boy, too. Then he would walk the rest of the way home to Ronan and would see Big Arm in person, ask him if his lung was really punctured. More important, he would ask Big Arm what to do about his trail from enemy camp.
Dirk Wermsmeier had become confined to a wheelchair; then, due to the three plywood steps to the dirt or mud he’d become confined to the trailer. He was an ugly man and looked at least ten years older than his age of sixty. A man of riddling principles, he was like a drink called Moose Milk: half whiskey for lack of scruples, half milk to repair the ulcer, on the rocks. Anger oozed from him like sweat condensed on a glass. Sip the drink, hang around long enough, eventually a droplet slides down the side of the glass. Likewise Dirk would explode; his fits were unpredictable, arbitrary. Rita Mae ignored him; most people avoided him.

He’d call over to the bar and ask his wife Lizzie to bring him a fifth when she came home. "More slosh? What do you think I am, Lizzie? A fish?" he’d say, hugging her when she walked in their door carrying her purse and a long brown bag. He called scotch ‘slosh’. When Lizzie forgot or refused to bring him a bottle—sealed across the cap with a strip of paper tape printed like money—he would yell, "Now
you’re gonna kill me with the D.T.’s! I’ll get you for this!” He
would chase her around their trailer, trying to smother her with his
nicotine kisses. Anyone knew: he mixed up drinking and drying out.

In the last ten years Dirk had worn Lizzie down, starting when
he’d sold the ranch, which he did because he was losing it to the
bank. An expressionless expression required a lot of effort and was
therefore short-lived. But the face Lizzie had come to wear appeared
to be effortless; it never changed and was pale. Equanimity had become
her specialty.

Her face said, “Don’t tell me I’ve won the lottery; I don’t buy
the tickets.”

When Lizzie decided to take a job she told Rita Mae that she would
welcome the more tangible responsibility. She dyed her hair coal black
the night before her first day on the job. She painted her lips red,
as usual—she’d started wearing lipstick when she was fourteen, growing
up in a family of red lips, her mother’s and her two sisters’. The
black hair, the red lips and never-seen-the-sun skin gave Lizzie a
western look. All she lacked were severely penciled eyebrows and
perfect little ovals of orange on her hollow cheeks. She probably
would have turned down the Beta Sigma Phi’s, had a spokeswoman invited
her to join.

Rita Mae, a natural redhead hailing from Georgia, didn’t care how
Lizzie looked just as long as she wasn’t offensive or rude and could
tend Rita Mae’s bar, the Waterin’ Hole, one of two bars in
Raildaughter. At forty-five Rita Mae was a confident woman, a
vivacious and energetic presence at ease in her still curvy and well-
proportioned figure. Every couple of months she drove eighty miles to
Missoula for thirty-five dollar acrylic fingernails, sometimes a new
oufit or a body-toning massage. She called these indulgences her 'rewards' and thought, besides, a good looking bar owner was a drawing card.

The Waterin' Hole was a bar where if a stranger came in and ordered a frilly drink, Rita Mae told them to try the other establishment down the street. Irish coffee was okay, or a margarita; but she would never serve a Pink Squirrel or a Between the Sheets. The bar was an east-to-west narrow building with a front door on Main and a back door opposite the street, at the end of a dark hall and past two bathrooms. The men's room door did not close the last inch, not since 1979 when a sudden wind tore away a half dozen shingles and a storm dumped several inches of rain. After that, the men's room door jam was permanently warped and the floor clean as it had ever been. Rita Mae thought that was how things happened to people: for no reason--other than the sky was blue--something happened, then you lived the rest of your life paying the consequences. People tried to make sense of events but this was useless. Rita Mae made no arrangements to have the door fixed.

Out the back door and across the alley from the bar was a twelve-by-sixty Marlette mobile home, the trailer where Lizzie and Dirk had lived now for eight years. Dirk had bought the trailer from Rita Mae after she bought and moved into a ranch house a couple miles away from the bar.

It was a Monday. Dirk was home babysitting a football game on TV. Lizzie had been at work since three in the afternoon. It wasn't quite ten bar time; still, the Waterin' Hole was empty. Lizzie told Rita Mae that she was going home. She'd lost twenty dollars video gambling, in the Montana Poker machine. That was ten dollars more than
her usual. Rita Mae, standing in front of the huge bevelled mirror wiping water droplets from glasses, thought her friend was taking her loss pretty hard.

Rita Mae had had an intercom installed. One speaker was in Lizzie’s bedroom in the trailer, the other on the back counter at the bookkeeping end of the bar. With the intercom, Rita Mae could rescue Lizzie if Dirk got out of hand. She expected more than harshly spoken words from him. He yelled and carried on, though Lizzie would stand there paralyzed, seemingly unable to defend herself or else immune to his words they were so familiar. For Rita Mae it was hard to know when to interfere, when to walk across the alley and knock on the glass slats in the aluminum door. The few occasions she had rescued Lizzie, Dirk simply yelled at both of them until the veins on his forehead popped out, veins that disappeared just before he fainted. When he came to he continued to berate both women in a voice no louder than the breaths of an unmedicated asthmatic.

Tonight over the intercom Rita Mae heard the familiar hollow door scrape open and close. In the hushed static she was thankful Dirk had fallen asleep or passed out. She heard Lizzie walk into the bedroom, but instead of the closet doors she heard porcelain scrape on Formica. Standing before the built-in dresser, Lizzie rearranged her dog figurines. Rita Mae was intimate with these dogs and knew each heroic pose. Lizzie was talking to herself.

About the time Rita Mae was ready to reach over and turn off the volume, assured the Wermsmeier household was quiet for the night, she heard: "Rita Mae, come help me. D’you hear me? It’s Dirk. Help."

Careful not to draw anyone’s attention Rita Mae turned off the intercom, walked over to her friend, Barb, who was drinking the last of
her celeryless Bloody Mary and said, "Fix yourself a fresh drink. And while you’re there, watch the till." Then she slipped out the back door.

Dirk had fallen in the narrow hallway to the bathroom. He was unconscious. Rita Mae knew he was near death by his flat grey color. Lizzie patted his cheek. Dirk came to and asked for a shot of scotch, the good stuff. Like he deserved it, thought Rita Mae as she poured a shot from the bottle on his bedside table. She handed the glass to Lizzie who held it to her husband’s lips. Rita Mae had to hold herself back from stepping over Lizzie to strangle Dirk and hasten his death along.

Dirk’s face twitched and he worked his hands like a dog dream-fighting. Still he managed to sip all of the scotch from the shot glass held to his lips. He sighed. Then he exhaled his last, rattling breath that smelled like an explosion of humus and sprayed Lizzie with sweet, sticky droplets.

Lizzie looked up at Rita Mae. The tendons in her neck were taut. Rita Mae placed her hands on Lizzie’s shoulders, not knowing what she would find in Lizzie’s eyes--horror or sorrow. Lizzie stood up, slipped past Rita Mae, went into the living room and began picking at an impossible fold of cellophane on a pack of cigarettes. Rita Mae had to hold the dead man’s eyelids shut. They were as obstinate as the man and kept creeping up.

Rita Mae took Lizzie back to the bar, held and patted her hand and called Austin, the sheriff. Austin said he’d call Cy, the mortician. Then for lack of anyone else Rita Mae called Lizzie’s mother. On this last call Lizzie shook her head as if to say, "Don’t bother; don’t bother." Finally Rita Mae sat Lizzie down on her bookkeeping stool.
"Don't you move until Austin gets here. Everything is okay now, Dear."

Rita Mae went back to tending the bar and her customers. She listened to their stories and jokes and looked them straight in the eye feeling like a pickpocket. She kept glancing over to make sure Lizzie looked okay. Lizzie sucked on a cigarette, caught in a daze as she stared past Rita Mae and past the neon Rainier sign in the window. She looked like she always did--white scalp, thin jet-black hair, red lips, no expression--only she was sitting down for a change. Maybe an eyebrow drooped a little.

What stuck in Rita Mae's mind were their high voices. She had asked Lizzie, "Do you have any kids, Hon?" and the question seemed like a single choppy word, remembering it ten years later. Lizzie said, "No," paused, then added, "Tried once though." In her memory she and Lizzie were small, like miniatures of what they were today. In her tight, little voice Rita Mae said, "Good. You're hired. You start Monday, ten o'clock."

Sheriff Austin still hadn't arrived. Lizzie lit another cigarette. Rita Mae had started to serve another round on the house to occupy everyone for a while.

Lizzie's 'tried once though' was the first understatement that Rita Mae took for a joke. She had laughed till she realized Lizzie was serious. Talk was a casual thing, never that serious at nine thirty in the morning in the bar. With time Rita Mae eeked out the story:

Lizzie and Dirk had had a child; and when the midwife called Dirk into the bedroom, he came in with his fingers slipped into his back pockets, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He said, "That's okay,
Lizzie. Next time it'll be a boy." Two weeks later the baby stopped breathing in its crib.

You owned a bar, you heard sob stories. Rita Mae had heard an infinite number. Sniveling drunks, wet or dry, told the worst stories. They tried to justify nonsense. The incongruity of owning a bar was the more you plied your trade or the more you served, the more your clients lost their grip on self-pity. Self-pity was not within Lizzie, or if it was she did something else with it. Maybe she fed it to her favorite poker machine, doled it out like she doled out quarters.

Lizzie was restrained when she talked. She never used names, just him and her or they: namely, half the time Rita Mae didn't know who she was talking about. Rita Mae pried the stories from Lizzie and they came out flat, void of feeling and the usual indulgences. Lizzie's contortions were absurd: toughness to cover up fear, bitterness to disguise sorrow, anger to conceal her needs. Lizzie couldn't conceal everything though: if her red lips became spasmodic or a single eyebrow changed its bearing on her face, Rita Mae knew Lizzie was choking on a morsel of will.

She was a person that made Rita Mae believe in bad luck. It had been back luck the child died, bad luck when a perfect summer in '59 allowed her father to harvest three crops of hay and Lizzie to meet the hired man, Dirk Wermsmeier, while she was home on her first and last college break. An inadequate luck prevailed when Lizzie returned from a walk to the lakeside honeymoon cabin and found her husband merely unconscious in odorless fumes from a leaky gas stove. What would be her luck now that Dirk had died? Could she bottom out on a cold, scotch-soaked body? Could things turn around for her, this late?
Rita Mae glimpsed over at Lizzie, longing for a clue in her face. If she didn't know Lizzie didn't drink, she'd swear she was drunk. The face seemed to have fallen one more notch, from a look of equanimity to lethargy. Rita Mae became obsessed with a desire for Lizzie's survival. Don't waste time with explaining or repair, Rita Mae would have liked to tell her, adjust and go on, go on, go on. Good riddance and all that.

Sheriff Austin walked in the alley door, nodded at the ranch hands playing pool and sat on the stool next to Lizzie.

"Awful sorry, Lizzie," Austin said, his head dropping low. He looked like a vulture with prominent shoulders and flattened greasy hair.

"Thanks, Austin," Lizzie said, exhaling and snuffing out her cigarette in the black ashtray that Rita Mae anchored on the bar as if she held a piece of paper and Lizzie single-handedly doodled.

"Is Cy coming?" Rita Mae tipped the ashtray into a large garbage can behind the bar.

"Can't find Cy. Left a message though. Where is the ol' coot?" he said referring to Dirk.

Lizzie pointed over her shoulder with a thumb. "In the trailer. Just a knot in the hallway."

"Here now, Lizzie," Rita Mae said but not to confer sympathy. She said it like she would say "Quit now" to a horse who pawed the ground peeved at being tied.

"Well, while we're waiting on Cy, I'll have to get some information from you, Lizzie."

"Okay," she said, nodding in assurance to Rita Mae.

Rita Mae walked half way down the bar and stood across from Barb.
Barb said something about things being for the better, but Rita Mae didn’t catch it. Rita Mae was focused on Lizzie: “Elizabeth… Rose…Branston—B, R, A,….”

The sheriff said he knew how to spell it.

No one knew the name Elizabeth Rose, the name of the surviving spouse that they would read in the obituary. The name Elizabeth Rose Branston seemed to fit a person with dignity and certainly not their own Lizzie; although, she was dignified as could be, having had a handicap like Dirk. The name fit the pink innocence of a newborn, but there was never a child to fit the name, according to Lizzie’s mother’s story: In the first half hour of life, Lizzie scratched her face with her tiny razor-sharp fingernails and had to wear socks then on her hands. Rita Mae had added the part about the socks stifling Lizzie’s first attempts at feeling, at self discovery.

"Rita Mae…," Barb said sternly.

"What?"

"I said, how bad d’he rough her up?"

"Who?"

"Dirk. Lizzie."

"Well, I don’t know. What do you think I am, her mother? Christ, no, not her mother. Lizzie had a life, you know. Hang on, Barb."

Someone wanted quarters for the pool table. Rita Mae traded the young cowboy eight coins for two singles, then watched him place two quarters under the felt cushion to challenge the table. Any other night she would have to police the table, watch to make sure a fight was not brewing. With Austin there, regardless of his business, she didn’t have to bother. She went back to Barb.

"Dirk only yelled at her," Rita Mae said, looking over at Austin
and Lizzie. "Anyway, with skin like that Lizzie can just bump herself, and a bruise shows up like a full moon on a clear night."

"You believe that? I don't believe that," Barb said.

"Let me tell you about Lizzie," Rita Mae said, turning to face Barb. "Remember Madeline Parker?"

"Yeah."

"She had a porcelain dog collection. Madeline died and no one in her family wanted the dogs, so they sold them to Meg who used to run the trading post five, six years back, while you and that thing you called a husband were in Great Falls--"

"I know when Meg had it," Barb said. Her eyes were two slits.

"I gave Lizzie her first paycheck," Rita Mae said, remembering when she paid her hourly wages and not the set figure she gave her now every week. "Does she pay their utility bill? Does she buy groceries? No. She buys a dalmation."

"A dalmation," said Barb.

"Oh, it's a nice piece. And Lizzie was going to invest in the whole antique collection, one by one," Rita Mae said, gesturing quotation marks in the air. Glued on the dog's back was a black and silver label: Hagen-Renaker Copyright 1954. Underneath the clear gloss was a road map of an endless city, the roads being cracks of age. It was posed like the RCA dalmation, yet its ears hung submissively lower.

"Dirk could not understand. See, he came in for a beer, and it was too late to hide the dog. Lizzie had to show it to him, and he grabbed her by the shoulders and set her on that stool there. Then he says slowly, 'Explain this to me, Lizzie. I want to understand the dog.' Lizzie opened her mouth but nothing came out. She gulped for
air but she could only inhale. Finally, she says, 'I thought we needed something like this, Dirk. Some finery in our house, to spruce things up.' Dirk stared at the dalmation, held it this way and that in his big hand. Then he slammed it down right here, knocked the stool over—getting up from the bar—and went home."

"It’s okay," Rita Mae had said to Lizzie, searching for a chip or crack then tapping the dog on the bar. It sounded hollow but hadn’t broken.

Lizzie said, "I don’t know. I don’t know why I had to have it. It just looks so real."

Rita Mae remembered the damn thing was truly admirable. "Go see it sometime, Barb. Lizzie still has it. It’s got this expression that’s—well, it makes you want to cry. Like the dog wants you to take her for a walk, but if you didn’t she wouldn’t hate you. You can just about see its ears tremble."

Barb said, "Rita Mae, don’t get weird on me. It’s just a dog. A china dog."

"You’re right. Turn it a quarter inch and it is just a cold piece of porcelain, might as well be a vase. That’s exactly it."

The pool table challenger was racking up the balls. The winner chalked his pool stick by holding the blue cube on the tip and running the fat end along the ground with the arch of his foot.

"I tell you, Barb," Rita Mae said, "we all expected Dirk to be worse to Lizzie than he was, but she knocked the wind right out of him."

Austin left Lizzie and walked over to the pool player, said something to him then walked out the back door. The cowboy followed probably to help Austin with Dirk, Dirk being such a big dead weight.
Rita Mae went over to Lizzie.

Lizzie lit up. "Did I ever tell you about the time his father died?" she said.

"Dirk's? No, Hon. You never did."

"Some men gentle up when their fathers die. Not him. A few months after we moved on the ranch when his dad still ran it, he went out to feed the stallion one morning. There's his old man tipped head over in the water trough. He'd been there a couple hours. There was ax and a pile of hay next to him."

The stallion was in the opposite corner of the corral, his brown eyes reflecting Dirk's agitated look. The water had siphoned up and over in Dirk's father's overalls and made a puddle at his boots.

"Well, isn't that a curious death," Rita Mae said, wishing Lizzie would go on; she had so much bottled up in her.

"I saw him," Lizzie said, "when he pulled him out. He had a perfect horseshoe print under one eye. Couldn't of branded him better. I fed the stallion after that birthday."

"Birthday. What birthday?" There it was again, that casual visitor and demon, bad luck.

"My birthday. The old man died on my birthday," she said rolling her eyes.

"Well, happy birthday and damn the stallion. Lizzie, Hon. How would you like to go for a drive tomorrow, pack a lunch, get the hell out of Raildaughter for a day?"

Before she had hurried over and found Lizzie on her knees and Dirk collapsed on the floor, Rita Mae heard Lizzie in her bedroom. The dog sound was familiar: a short scrape of rough-bottomed paws on fake-wood
Formica. Even when Lizzie talked to herself her voice was airy. It reminded Rita Mae of lighting the wood stove in the bar. One match was not adequate to catch the paper on fire so Rita Mae had to pump the bellows at the weak licks of flames till a draft set up in the chimney.

Lizzie had said, "Hey, little poodle. Hello there, dalmatian. You too, setter. Schnauzer, you're so dusty." Rita Mae imagined Lizzie as she picked up each dog and smothered it in her favorite red sweater, caressing each captured expression and frozen figurine clean. A poodle curl would have caught and pulled a yarn on the sweater, enlarging the raggedness below the last button. When she finished, Rita Mae imagined, she went in to see why Dirk had not called her into his bedroom for some silly thing and found him unconscious on the floor.

As far as Rita Mae knew, Dirk's sixty-three year old body still lay askew in the hallway. She kept an eye on Lizzie, who remained sitting at the end of the bar, and mixed another Bloody Mary for Barb. Even though Rita Mae could have predicted Dirk's death, it amazed her that he had gone so suddenly. He was like a monstrous lake trout who hit her line after she'd spent a good day in a rowboat jerking a jig up and down.

Rita Mae figured that Lizzie was in shock. Lizzie was probably spinning inside; accordingly, when she slowed and stopped Rita Mae wanted to be there. At least she could point her in the right direction. But really the right direction would be no direction at all. She needed to be turned inside out. Tomorrow Rita Mae would close the bar and take Lizzie out to her mother's place. They would pack a picnic basket and have lunch in the hay field that had yielded three cuttings in one summer. She believed that Lizzie had a lot of
love left in her and maybe going back to where her life had been hopeful would bring some of it out. Dirk hadn't burned up Lizzie's entire heart; he never finished anything he started.

"That bastard wanted to be cremated and have his ashes spread over the ranch," Rita Mae whispered to Barb through tight lips. Rita Mae had turned her back to Lizzie for a minute. "Now where in the hell is she gonna find someone to take her up in a plane so she can throw his ashes overboard?"

Barb squinted toward Lizzie as if the sight of her would help her with an answer. Lizzie was freshening up her lipstick without a mirror. "How about Knutson? He still hires out for spraying leafy spurge, doesn't he?"

"Sure. For a hundred bucks."

"Maybe he'd just take the ashes and scatter them on one of his jobs. Not charge her." Barb was trying, Rita Mae thought, missing the point but trying.

Lizzie got up, walked over to the till and with her thumb pried open the stiff black book where she originally had kept track of her time. Both women watched her. She put a pencil slash through the last figure on the page, a ten. She took a roll of quarters from the till, a roll she had counted and wrapped herself. With the back of the hand that still held the pencil she wiped the corner of her mouth and smeared her red lipstick in the usual fashion. Then she put the quarters back and took out two five-dollar bills.

Jokers Wild swallowed both fives. Lizzie played her own hands for once and threw away some of the cards that the machine flashed as hold cards. Sheriff Austin came back in the bar this time with Cy in tow. Rita Mae gave them the needed information, signed some of Austin's
papers. Austin drank a Coke then followed some loud ranch hands out the door, leaving behind Lizzie's chorus of electronic hallelujahs.

Lizzie's eyes were glued to the screen. She was not blinking. Instead, her eyes pulsed open, wide and intense, as if she saw cards that didn't exist. A queen of lips, smiling. A king of fifths, first glaring, then in tears. A jack of coins; a ten of dogs. A Joker, the wild card. Another straight, thought Rita Mae, hearing yet another chorus. Hallelujah. Lizzie's luck had changed.

Yes, Lizzie was the survivor. Dirk had been the drunk, the sorrowfully angry one. Lizzie was the one playing poker, Dirk the person soon to be buried. Maybe this feeling would come to haunt her in a few weeks or in few months or years, but Rita Mae was elated.

She couldn't wait for Barb and everyone else to leave so she could close the bar, go home to bed, wake up and call Lizzie to tell her what time she'd be by to pick her up for their picnic. Rita Mae started laughing. Barb looked at her like she had when Rita Mae was talking about the dalmation, when Barb told her not to get weird.

"She's mourning his death, you know. She's mourning that bastard's God-sent death," Rita Mae said to Barb to set the record straight.

Lizzie quit the machine when she ran out of cigarettes. It was the first time she'd beat it. She tore off her winnings ticket and slipped it under an ashtray on the bar. "I'll collect in the morning, Rita Mae. I'm going home, can't wait anymore."

"He's gone, Dear. They came and took him," Rita Mae said, walking with her arm around Lizzie toward the back door. "G'night, Lizzie. I'll call you in the morning."

"This was a lucky night, Rita Mae. Jokers Wild was generous."
"It rewarded you, Hon," Rita Mae said. "You stuck it out and she paid off."

When the back door closed Rita Mae took her place behind the bar. She picked up Lizzie's ticket and found she had won ninety-four dollars. Ninety-four hallelujah dollars.

Rita Mae knew she'd been stingy when at first the relief in Dirk's death had hit home. It was more than relief; it was pure joy. For a moment it seemed like a crisp breakthrough to be able to feel that self-righteous, to have the gall to be elated over God's removal of a malevolent man, especially from her best friend's life.

But she could not get that feeling back now. The last of her customers were leaving. Barb said, "It's been another enjoyable one, Rita Mae," and teetered out the door.

Maybe the stallion had been asleep. What if the old man had taken the ax to break the ice in the water trough? Maybe the whack had startled the stallion so that he flinched and fled for his own safety, a stray hoof catching the old man bent over from the weight of the ax. Lizzie went on to feed the old stud; indeed, he hadn't killed her. Lizzie had such a soft touch, an inoffensive yet firm, peaceable, resolved....

Rita Mae knew a dog barked when it was afraid. More than once she had seen Dirk come to yelling. Over the years she had watched Lizzie assume a seen-it-all look. Alone now, she caught a glimpse of herself in the yellow mirror. The redhead looked smug. So, her own guise was styled conceit, unerring grandiosity.
There was Rita Mae with her shiny copper hair in front of the cash register, leaning over the bar and reaching toward me. She was tossing light brown bundles the size of cigar stubs onto the soiled linoleum beneath the bar stools. I watched her from the Jokers Wild poker machine where I was losing money as fast as I dug it out of my pocketbook. What was she tossing? Ten-dollar rolls of quarters maybe? It was easy to imagine myself as I lunged for them, caught them before they hit the floor like heavy little bombs. What if she was pitching snuffed cigars, cigar butts still soggy with saliva? I would be left belly down on the floor, staring at the cold, wet ashes and yellow nicotine in my cupped hands. Imagine: me lunging for quarters.

Then I heard Rita Mae’s horn. I had fallen asleep in your chair waiting for her to pick me up. Before I was turned loose from the dream I thought the quarters were not worth the skinned elbows and knees. I must have been still asleep, for if I dove like that my back would break—the hell with elbows or knees.
You know, Dirk, how far you sank in when you sat in your dark red chair, so far that your knees looked level with your chest and maybe your butt rested on the floor. I reached for the wide arm rests to pull myself out of the chair’s grip. The velour under my hands had been worn thin by your fingers that yesterday cradling a smoldering pipe looked huge and swollen, inhuman. Sometimes I couldn’t help but stare at your hands when I knew you weren’t looking. Last night put an end to the burns and scotch stains on the maroon.

Rita Mae’s horn sounded again. She’d pulled up this morning in her white convertible, her ‘75 Chevy Caprice Classic, the top up still. Idling in the alley in front of our trailer and behind her bar, I could tell she was eager to drive, drive anywhere, up some road.

When I went out the door and into the morning sun the tears began flowing. Your Sunday suit was draped over my arm. The springtime sun was weak but compared with the living room, lit only when the TV was on, its brightness blinded me.

"Don’t worry, Rita Mae. I’m not crying. It’s the sun."

"Don’t you have any sunglasses, Lizzie?" Rita Mae said as I lay the suit in the back seat.

"Sorry. Let me look around." I turned back toward the trailer.

"For what?"

"Glasses," I said, reaching for the trailer door.

"No, what are you sorry for?"

"Hold on, Rita Mae," I sang from the living room where I discovered my eyes had lost their ability to see.

When I came out the second time I walked down the three plywood steps wearing some dusty, mirrored sunglasses I’d found on the narrow shelf by the phone. I held my chin high so the glasses would not fall
off, feeling like a queen in disguise.

A queen would not have noticed that Rita Mae had parked in a dry puddle or that her front right tire looked low. The puddle made the tire appear to be flat, just like your damn trailer and your binges tried to deflate me. A queen would not be weak-kneed, would not have shouldered the reflection. Sometimes it felt as if I had no choice—whether or not I let you get to me.

"These must be Dirk’s glasses," I said. The glasses slid down my nose and dropped to my lap as I fumbled with the seat belt.

"I never saw Dirk wear sunglasses," she said.

"Well, they’re not mine."

"Oh yes," she said, "they are too yours, especially now."

Even with something as small as this Rita Mae was always trying to pump me up, set me straight, give me credit whether or not it was due.

She put on her own lavender sunglasses and stepped on the gas. Dirt and gravel flew from her back tires and hit the back door of the Waterin’ Hole, Rita Mae’s tavern that she had closed for the first time since I’ve known her—maybe for the first time in the history of Raildaughter—to take me on a picnic.

We dropped off your suit for Cy at the funeral home and headed out of town. The local news was on the radio. Even though I know there’s no radio obituary I half expected to hear Randy Kerr announce your death, but instead there was a story about some DUI Indian that had simply gotten up and walked out of his intensive-care hospital room.

Rita Mae drove on quietly, keeping her eyes on the narrow roads while I looked everywhere but ahead. Cattle and horses had wintered well. The February-born calves were nursing or curiously tasting
grass. In harvested fields the wheat or hay was gone, eaten up or flattened into the ground by the mostly melted snow. The land was bare, crisscrossed with fences darkened with clumps of tumble weed.

Weatherwise, it was a pleasant day. If your sorrowful ghost wasn’t sitting between us, had Rita Mae pulled down the arm rest displacing you from your seat, we would have carried on like cackling hens turned loose in the spring’s first sun. I was supposed to feel like a grieving widow, but for once I took your advice against believing a person should do this or that, be this way or another. I wasn’t going to grieve just because it was expected.

What made me feel like a widow was the fragrance I caught when I turned my head one way or the other. When I fell asleep earlier in your chair and lay my head back, your tonic must have found a home in my hair, thin and feather fine from all the dye jobs. Remember when you told me that the black set off my white scalp? If you suddenly appeared and said “You’ll miss me,” I’d brush off your words like you used to sweep the dandruff from your shirt which held it fast like flypaper.

Rita Mae was thoughtfully quiet and smart as we continued on toward mother’s, north on the cut-off road by the museum that’s never open. Any other woman would have resorted to small talk.

She took Highway 28, driving past the old ranch which sped by the car window like someone else’s home movie. I saw your family’s graveyard where you would be buried regardless of your wish to be cremated. I had visited the cemetery, once. Maybe you didn’t know. I saw the shallow graves of those who died in winter. I knew the surviving grandchildren, adults now, who inherited the laziness and also would not tend a fire long enough to send its thaw deep into the
ground. Spring was close at hand so we could bury you deep and quick, not out of your own consideration but God's maybe.

Suddenly there was mother standing under the huge cottonwood on freshly mowed lawn, the first mowed grass I'd seen this season. She greeted us with her Nancy Reagan wave as we parked in her turn around.

Her first words were, "Lizzie, I'm so sorry." Then she clicked her tongue and said "You look awful." As usual with Rita Mae, mother fought the impulse to look her up and down, get an eyeful of Rita Mae's purple pantsuit and the lavender glasses and silk-smooth blouse. I stood before her in my favorite sweater, the red one that hangs straight and loose like a jacket. "Really," Mother said as she pinched my collar, "Didn't you have something more appropriate? Oh, do come in. I've biscuits in the oven."

I hadn't visited mother in years, but then she herself stopped by less and less. She served us--perhaps the only two childless women to sit in her living room--tea and Bisquick biscuits that tasted as bland as they did when I was little and smothered them with butter and plum jam. She asked Rita Mae what was new in the bar, asked me the details of Dirk's death. Mother crossed her legs when she was out of questions, then turned to me. "Lizzie, you're so pale. Don't you want to go freshen up?" which meant "Go put on some lipstick, girl."

In the bathroom I found next to the sink the lipstick holder with three tubes of red lipstick that were still there from when my two sisters and I lived at home. When I was a girl in second grade our teacher assigned homework: I was supposed to draw a picture of my blood relations. On the paper I drew mother quite large, colored my father in browns and rusts and squeezed my green sisters and myself into the corners. I used mother's lipstick for the blood and drew
lines connecting all of us: mother, father, my two sisters and myself. To me it looked like assorted spiders caught in a thick, red web. My mother saw only the lines of red; consequently, I caught hell for taking the perfect curve off the tip of her lipstick.

The tube that had been mine was still there. I pulled it out, removed its cap, rotated the bottom and touched the emerged red finger to my mouth. In the mirror I watched my lips form silent and exaggerated M's. It was not the red I had come to wear. Someday I would have to forgive her.

Rita Mae and mother were standing in the living room when I returned. Mother was silent, Rita Mae smiling.

Then mother—she loved to worry—said, "Now you girls be careful. A prisoner escaped this morning."

"We will," Rita Mae said.

When she walked us to the car mother was quiet again, leaving me to wonder what Rita Mae said to her to end this visit so well. Mother turned to me and said, "I'll tell my head man you're on a picnic so he doesn't chase you off the hayfield." To Rita Mae she said, "I love that red hair." My mother was as subtle as the queen on a chessboard.

She waved her pageantry wave again as Rita Mae drove slowly out of her drive. Once out of sight Rita Mae donned her lavender glasses.

"Sorry for my mother," I said, "She can be...," and in the search for the right words I shook my head and tried to let go of the thought.

"A mother, all right," Rita Mae said, apparently amused by the whole thing.

"A bitch," escaped from my pursed lips. A rattle and cough erupted from my lungs. I laughed and cried.

"I'll tell you what I told her, Lizzie. I told her, 'A mother
always becomes a bitch at some point in her daughter's life. And vice versa. I told her not to fight it, that it passes. And I'll suggest the same to you." Rita Mae smiled over the steering wheel at the expanse of mother's hay fields.

"I feel like a dog. And you're a top hat. And mother's land here, this is a huge Monopoly board," I said, catching my breath and wiping the makeup from below my eyes. "I sure am crying a lot today--for the wrong reasons maybe. But what the hell, they're tears."

"Let's go over to Austin's place and have our picnic there." Austin was the sheriff and a rancher whose land butted up to federal land.

The day was warming up. Still, it was sweater weather. The ground seemed to be too recently exposed to have stored much of the sun's warmth. We drove on gravel roads.

"Rita Mae?"

"Yeah, Hon."

"Do you think Dirk was honestly the most disgusting person on earth, or did I just knew him too well?"

"You know what I like about spring, Lizzie? Even after a god-damn lifetime of springs each one seems unique and brand new like the very first spring I ever noticed," she said, pounding the steering wheel for emphasis. "I get a silly feeling this time of year. Like I'm young and, ha, like I could even fall in love."

She rambled on and on about fresh starts while I watched distant hawks peruse the fields. Coveys of partridges picked seeds from the soil where the last drifts of snow had most recently disappeared. Rita Mae stopped the car just short of the cattleguard on federal land,
let me out, then pulled over on the steep shoulder. I carried my purse and the blankets. She carried a suitcase she had filled with food for our lunch. At the bottom of the burrow pit we had to step over a busy stream of clear water. The young shoots were greener than any natural green.

Over a little knoll in a hay field—close enough to hear a car, hidden enough to avoid being seen—we spread two blankets on top of each other on grass and alfalfa that stood only ankle high. The grass wasn’t as thick as it had looked from the road. The ground felt moist but not wet. Rita Mae spread the extra blanket over my legs, the cream-colored one she claimed came from a motel.

"You didn’t steal this," I said.

"I did, too. But don’t expect me to tell you who I was with, who tried to talk me out of it or who left the twenty spot on the night stand."

"You devil, Rita Mae," I said "I’m not hungry after that God-awful biscuit. I’m just going to watch the clouds roll over for a while." I laid back on the blanket. The toes of my shoes pointed at the corners of the empty sky. Silver stars twinkled, not really in the sky but in my eyes. I admired the cloudless, shadowless sky, then put on my glasses and pictured the blue sky’s reflection in the mirrors, imagined how—if there was one—a cloud might slide across the scroll-like lenses.

"You okay, Lizzie?"

"Better than expected." And that was true. "Of course, Dirk might as well be home fixing himself a sandwich." There would be crumbs on the floor, sticky jelly and peanut butter on the counter.

She dug around in her suitcase and found a thermos. "It’ll take a
while. You want some tea, Hon?"

"No thanks, Rita Mae." I snubbed out my smoke in the dirt. Fifteen minutes had to pass before I lit up again. I looked at my watch careful to see only the minutes because I did not want to think about the time of day or remind myself what I would be doing back in town. Then she lay down next to me and looked up into the sky. I pulled the blanket up over my shoulders and said, "So now what?"

"Whatever you want, Lizzie. The world’s yours."

"Ha." The sun felt warm, but if it was a notch warmer I would have been comfortable.

She put her hands together, matching her palms as if she were measuring them against each other. She blew into the slit between her thumbs where she held taut a blade of grass. A shrill whistle fell out of the sky. Before she tightened the blade between her thumbs for another toot, we heard the sound echo from the next knoll. That shaft of grass torn, she started feeling at her side for another. "It has to be just right," she said, examining blades of grass she pulled up blindly but with great care.

I pulled my sweater tighter around myself. The chill seemed to be spreading from my spine, so I rolled onto my side. Rita Mae moved closer and tucked her legs under part of the blanket, abandoning her search for the perfect blade. She looked into the sky. I studied her made-up eyes through the space behind the lavender sunglasses. We lay there as if we were at a slumber party that was winding down.

I rummaged around in my pockets, holding my glasses in place with one hand. I searched my purse, the folds of blankets and finally the suitcase for my cigarettes.

"I can’t find my cigarettes. I couldn’t have left them in the
car, I had one five minutes ago."

"I got them, Hon."

"Where?"

"Right here." She sat up and held my pack out on her open palm. When I went to take it, she snatched the pack away, behind her back. Left empty handed the morning dream returned to me, the one where I was diving to catch things she seemingly discarded.

"What are you doing, Rita?" I said, knowing she didn't like being called Rita.

"Good. Very good. Now tell me you want your smokes."

"Could I have my cigarettes?"

"That's a question. Tell me you want a smoke. Demand that I give you your pack. Come on Lizzie, practice."

"Practice what? What's got into you Rita Mae?"

"Lizzie. You can do what you want now. Do you understand what I'm saying, Hon, what that means? Do you?"

"Well, I haven't had time to think about things, make plans, if that's what you mean."

"No, that's not what I mean at all. Come on, the smokes, Hon."

"Well, I planned to wait fifteen minutes anyway..."

"Like hell. Did your mother teach you that? You wanted a smoke now. Say 'Give me my god-damn pack this minute.'"

"Why are you doing this Rita Mae?" I said, sounding as pathetic as I could which always worked with Dirk.

"For your own good, but excuse me for presuming that I know what's good for you. Come on now."

"Okay. Rita Mae: Give me my smokes please."

"Oh, ouch." And in a squeaking little voice she said, "Rita Ma-
"Quit it, Rita." I said finally, on to her game but still not understanding her. "And give me my God damn smokes!"

"Here." She flipped them onto the blanket, smiling triumphantly.

"Now I don’t want one," I said defiantly. Both of us laughed and rolled under the cool white sun and the cream blanket, giggling and pushing its soft folds at each other, insisting the other take the bulk of it. My glasses fell off. I saw her little peach jowls, jiggling with laughter.

I knew I couldn’t hold on to Rita Mae, because happiness arrived in fleeting moments. Like the hawk soaring just then over our heads—with its specks and patterns of color under her wings, her head turned to study us with one eye, her feet half tucked up, half relaxed—this good feeling would fly away. The hawk was beautiful and yet the sight of her filled me with an unbelievably heavy sadness. I was sick of crying and sick of the dark cloud on the prowl. Eventually, someone would hand me a bomb and I would have to blast that hawk right out of the sky.

"You are the ones who whistled," he said as he stood above Rita Mae and me suddenly frozen amid the settling blankets. He had not had to sneak up on us, this dark cloud of a man. He was an Indian with a pockmarked face. He wore painter’s overalls and hospital slippers. He had tucked his braids under his painter’s cap. He was the one who escaped from the hospital.

"Whistled you?" Rita Mae said. We both sat up. Rita Mae swung the suitcase around and set out Tupperware containers, napkins, clear plastic forks and knives.
“The grass whistle,” he said, kneeling down at the edge of our blanket and sitting on his heels. “I answered it. Didn’t you hear me?”

“Well? We did, come to think of it. Didn’t we, Lizzie?” Spread across the blanket was a feast of fried chicken, fruit, potato salad, pickles.

“Yes, there was an echo...,” I said.

“Dig in. You too,” she said to the Indian in her bar voice. “I’m Rita Mae. This is Lizzie.”

“Dennis,” he said, grabbing a piece of chicken then biting into it. I saw his hands were shaking. I wondered how he saw Rita Mae and me, especially when he came upon us wrestling under a blanket. My own hands started to shake.

As a girl, if either one of my sisters started to cry I made her stop by making her laugh. I’d say something silly and dumb, then my sister would start laughing despite the tears. I tried to think of something witty to say, but nothing came. Rita Mae poured iced tea into two plastic cups and the thermos lid.

A picnic didn’t seem like an occasion for a stabbing, a murder, other headlines that flashed before me. Looking at this Indian, Dennis, he didn’t seem capable of violence. I felt no more afraid of him than I did a butcher knife in my own hand.

We helped ourselves to Rita Mae’s offerings, chewing like our life depended on it, which was an excuse not to talk. If the silence grew too awkward, someone smacked their lips. The three of us sat in a perfect triangle on the rectangle of blankets, sipping tea and eating chicken from bones that our tongues soon would explore.

“Hey,” he said, holding up a chicken leg, “Thanks for this. I’m
headed to Pablo. I got a doctor friend there."

"You're walking to Pablo?" I said.

Rita Mae said, "You that hospital escapee?" She might as well have belched.

"That would explain the hospital slippers," I said.

"Yeah, but I didn't do anything," he said.

I lit a cigarette and offered him one which he took. Rita Mae looked content now that she had cleared the air.

"It's a late spring this year," he offered.

"How do you know?" I said, wondering what he knew and if he could tell by the fur on the deer or the assortment of migratory birds that he'd seen.

"Because it's April and we still have snow, and my pickup flew off the Dockton bridge last night, not even in a storm but just on the skiff of snow we had."

"I lose track of the months living in town," I said.

"My sister had a boy last night. She named him Dennis after me," he said, pronouncing his name strongly emphasizing the D. "I spent the night in the Raildaughter hospital, but my doctor is in Ronan. Say, could you give me lift there?"

"We aren't going to Pablo," Rita Mae said. "We're headed back to Raildaughter. Lizzie's got some business she has to take care of yet."

"I could do it later," I said. "Cy never really closes, you know."

"Well, I'd like to get there as soon as I could. Matter of fact, I should be going on now," he said, getting up to leave. He stood and looked far into the horizon he'd been walking toward. His eyes rolled back twitching, then he collapsed in a heap, in a dead faint. When he
fell, the ground reached up and punched the wind out of him.

Rita Mae and I straightened his legs out, placed his arms at his side and covered him with our cream blanket.

"Shouldn’t we give him a ride?" I said, "He’s pretty bad off, and I don’t want to go through another death scene."

"He wouldn’t have made it this far if he was going to die."

"Can’t we do something for him? This is awful."

She was caught up in a stare, unfocused on his cap on the ground.

"Sure," she said. "But first I have to pee. Then we’d better think about getting back, seeing how Cy’s coming with ol’ Dirk."

"Yeah, Dirk," I said, realizing suddenly that the suit we dropped off this morning would be huge on him since he had lost so much weight in the last couple years. Rita Mae said she had to find the ladies room and began to walk away, leaving me there with the sleeping Indian which, I thought, she was taking rather lightly.

I combed my hair, touched up my lipstick. I looked out over the land and pretended I was in an ocean. Waves from one storm collided with the waves of another, forming the swells of land. Sea gulls landed for minnows, not grasshoppers. The blanket was a raft. Rita Mae had swum away for help. Dennis bailed the water we had taken in. The ocean rocked me back and forth and soon everything felt to be in motion.

I heard a high-pitched hum which was how I knew Dennis had woken up, singing a one-note whine.

"My old man died last night," I said. "I’m supposed to be a grieving widow today."

"I’m sorry," he said. The humming stopped.

"But it’s odd. I don’t feel bad he died. I feel bad that I don’t
feel bad. I can’t stop thinking about him, but I’m not sad. I don’t think I’m making sense here.”

“No.”

“He killed himself, really, drinking all the time. There was less and less to love in him. I was like a dog to him.”

“A dog?”

“He was a horrible person. Other people pissed him off, but he was always kind to me. Nobody knew it. I was the only thing that wasn’t a threat to him. Like a dog.”

“Then we have much in common.”

“We do?”

“Yes. I’m supposed to be an Indian today. The escaped renegade,” He started to laugh, but that hurt him so he spoke his laughter instead. “In a way we both have been turned loose—me from a cop’s trap, you from a long entanglement. I am going home. Maybe you are too.”

“Now what though? I can not think what’s next.”

“Alone, you never can. If all is quiet, you will feel shame. Without my people I am helpless. Without your red-haired friend you are nothing.”

“Rita Mae.”

“Yes.”

“God, you’re a smart Indian,” I said, then regretted making him laugh. “You’re hurt pretty bad, aren’t you?

“You like my war moccasins?” he said, pointing to the slippers made of thin sponge. “My lung might be pierced by a rib,” he said. “I don’t think so, but I am really weak.”

“We’ll take you to Pablo,” I said. “It’s Rita Mae’s car but we’ll
"Thank you," he said and closed his eyes. The gratefulness left his face while he rested. His braids hung stock-still to his belt.

"I feel relieved," I said, unaware whether or not Dennis heard me. I put on my sunglasses and looked into the sky. Still clear as a bell.

"Well, I finally warmed up. I guess I just had to eat, get something inside of me." I was talking to myself but that was okay. My hands were warm in my lap. When I looked again at Dennis he was struggling with himself underneath twitching eyelids. I felt sorry for him, but no more than I felt sorry for myself.

I spotted the tip of Rita Mae's head as she headed back to the blanket.

"I had a mind to steal your car, Rita Mae." I said, mocking her with her own southern slang before she had reached my raft.

"Seriously, I want to take Dennis to his friend. He's bad off."

"I see," she said.

"He's got broken ribs. Punctured lung, maybe. I don't care how Cy dresses Dirk."

"Okay," she said. "Let's go." She stood with suitcase in hand, waiting for me to gather the blankets, way ahead of me all along.

We took Dennis to Pablo and left him at the doctor's house with the doctor's wife who assured us she would call her husband at his office. Rita Mae accepted his repeated thank you's but was puzzled when I thanked him.

We made it back to town by five and were assured by Cy that everything had been taken care of--the obituary, the service, the
flowers. Bless the bitch, my mother had been there. Dirk looked fine in the suit. "Dead and fine," Rita Mae said.

Rita Mae parked the car in her usual spot behind the bar. She leaned over and hugged me.

"Come on over or call if you start feeling down," she said and then went in to open up her bar. I had only to walk across the alley as usual to be home. I caught the top step with the toe of my shoe and imagined I looked like Dirk coming home, in his earlier days when he was a spry old fool.

I sat in his chair, so that again I saw his big hands. I didn’t hate him because I knew him so well, I loved him. He was like a cover of rain-swollen clouds, for in him there was a tiny, clear patch just above the horizon, a window reminding me of a blue sky beyond.

Dirk’s smoking stuff lay on the table. A word, on the package of pipe tobacco, caught my eye: ‘homogeneous,’ used to describe the blend of tobaccos. I loved the smell of the fresh tobacco. Dirk would pack it with his giant forefinger in his pipe, light up and draw and puff until he burned the tips of his fingers and then the maroon velour with spilled embers. The cold ashes he’d tip into the glass ashtray, and if he had a coughing fit the grey mountain of ash would disappear, too.

When I blew on the tiny ashes left in his ashtray, they chased each other round in circles; then poof, they were gone for good. In their smallness, they made me sad.
What moved in her house were only those things that Cora touched. This did not include the dust floating in the rays of sun streaming in her windows. Or the chiming clocks. Or the Ficus leaves, hanging over the register, that bobbed as the oil furnace worked harder against the more frequent frosts. It was comforting yet mildly disturbing to be fifty-nine and living alone in a what seemed to be a sun-lit still life. Everything would remain where and how it had been; though recently, this was not the case.

What made Cora think the culprit was Jesse was she saw him one day. He and Wes each stood on a stump in her front yard. Cora watched them through the blinds, from her living room. Jesse was four, a preschooler. Wes had started kindergarten a few weeks ago. Cora used to have three grand maples out front. The second one had died after a three-year drought; then last fall, in the process of cutting that one down, a friend dropped the wrong one. But it would have died too, by the dark streaks in the wood. The stumps reminded Cora that for three
summers she did not know that all the trees needed was a hose left running at their base at night. What a horrible way to go--
desiccation.

At first the two boys hopped around on their respective platforms, declaring their own newly discovered islands. Then Wes ran over to Jesse’s and Jesse back to Wes’s. They traded stumps like this several times. Like a tamarack sliver--at first a tick beneath the skin, then a pressure point and a pain and a festering eruption--the boys would prove themselves as boys, feeding off each other, then edging each other on toward some egregious behavior. She unfolded her arms and slipped her hands into her pockets. In case the boys discovered her watching, she did not want to provoke them with a scornful look or a disapproving stance.

Wes pulled his plastic laser sword from its sheath at his belt and ran at Jesse, who with a look of pure terror ran to Cora’s porch and grabbed the rake that leaned against the trellis. They assumed their positions on the stumps again, Jesse laughing loudly and involuntarily as if he were shaking spiders from his hands. They ran at each other like frenzied, dueling knights.

Across the street Jesse’s sister yelled, “Jes-se, din-ner.” Jesse froze, dropped the rake and skipped home vigorously without glancing for cars. For a while Wes fought with an imaginary knight. After this knight knocked him down twice, Wes went home, too.

The rake in the grass was obvious. And if Cora hadn’t witnessed the charade? What if she had gone out later for the mail and found her rake, prongs up no less, buoyed up by the grass and leaves. No, she would not have wondered if she’d forgotten to put it away in the corner of the porch where it was kept during the leaf season. A rake in the
gras was clearly noticeable. The small red light on her VCR was not. Nor was the lipstick-shaped bloom torn, perhaps, from her favorite potted vine. The rake was an example of how things moved on their own. They didn’t. Someone had to move them.

Whenever Jesse waited for Wes or his brother or sister to come home from school and looked across the street and discovered Cora kneeling in her flower bed, he ran over to ask her questions. "Hey," he would say to her as if he’d caught her doing something wrong. "What are you doing?" That was his favorite question.

On this clear and crisp day—a good one for mulching the tulip bed with crushed leaves—Jesse bragged about his new bike and tried to get Cora to guess what he was going to be for Halloween, pronouncing it ‘Hawoween’ because he could not yet pronounce l’s or r’s. His big brother drove a Willy Jeep that needed a muffler and, Cora figured, a volume knob on its stereo. When Jesse heard rumblings of electric guitars in the next block, he ran home to greet his brother.

Their father was the new mortician. He’d bought the house—across the street from Cora—on Fifth Street and the funeral home on Sixth Street. They were in the same block, across the alley from each other, and the back door of the funeral home faced the back door of his house. He had painted both the same color, a nondescript tan, then trimmed the windows in grey. Cora never saw him leave for work. She assumed he darted back and forth across the alley.

Despite its drab color, their home exuded life. Someone was always mowing the lawn. The long, grey flower box below their bay window still cradled hot-pink geraniums. Where a basket of ivy hung on Cora’s porch, a wind sock—a red and yellow flower with long green
streamers--hung from theirs.

They had seeded where clients of the previous owner, a beautician, wore a dirt path that cut across the lawn from the drive to the front steps. The brother put up a short stake-and-string fence. The sister strung pieces of rags that fluttered when someone walked by. Jesse proudly marched the few extra steps on the cement walkway to their porch. Everyone else hurried perfunctorily.

Their TV blared continuously. When Cora woke up in the night, she would hear an old movie on their TV. The slow, dramatic dialogue took her back ten years to a time of recurring insomnia, a time when her husband lay like a huge snoring rock in the lowest spot on the sagging mattress. Cora would turn on her side, on her sore shoulder to face uphill again and concentrate on falling back to sleep which she couldn’t do as long as the insomnia’s ember of anger grew inside her. Now the movies put her to sleep before she could even guess the actors.

To top it all off, their little rat-dog was a yapper and barked all the time, any hour of the day or night. He barked at air. Needless barking dogs peeved Cora. He never left his yard, increasing his chances of mishap, to which Cora at times wanted to contribute. Wes sometimes made the little rat-dog squeal when they played, and Cora wasn’t sure it was accidental.

Cora felt that Jesse was the only person over whom Wes had power. Wes rode Jesse’s new bike even though he didn’t need the training wheels. Jesse would wait patiently on his porch. Wes made Jesse pull him in a red wagon around the school yard. Cora expected, even wanted, Jesse to pout or throw a fit, but he never did, as far as she saw. If she were Jesse she would have hid when Wes came around. Hide the bike and wagon, at least.
In the early evening Jesse ran across the street to visit again. Cora was setting up a step ladder under a large limb of the spruce tree.

"He-ey," Jesse said, "What are you doing?"

"Hanging a ghost for Halloween," Cora said.

Jesse pretended to strangle himself, crossed his eyes, stuck his tongue out, made little choking sounds. Cora fidgeted with the strings on the ghost wind sock, recognizing the swivel hook as a fishing accoutrement and admiring the ingenuity, until Jesse lay seemingly dead in the dirt.

"Jesse!" she said, intending to sound dramatic but hoping Jesse would welcome even the pretend concern. "Jesse. Talk to me." She leaned over him, bending down as close to him as she comfortably could.

"Have you seen Wes?" he said, rolling over onto his stomach and pitching a pine cone at the tree trunk.

"About Wes," Cora began, left slightly hanging but glad he had brought the subject up. "I think you should make sure Wes pulls you in your wagon as long as you pull him."

Jesse ran onto the porch. Cora sat on a rung of the ladder.

"Don't let him boss you around. Don't let him ride your bike if you want it," she said, watching him dance stiff-legged around the half-barrel planter on her porch. The more she talked, the more agitated he grew. She thought maybe an iota of her advice had reached him and was responsible for his clumsy hopping and jerking around. She quit talking.

Cora took out her pruning shears and started to snip stray branches from the flaming spirea bush below her living room window. Jesse began to sing some nonsense song about a Mr. Sunshine, dancing
still on her porch. Cora knew her advice about Wes had driven him away from her. He was bouncing now, his legs a matched pair of springs. Could she say “Quit bouncing” nicely?

“What. Do you have to pee, Jesse?”

“No?” he said, tilting his face as if he wanted to mimic her, show her how absurd she was.

“You can go in and use my bathroom if you need to.”

“Don’t need to. Hey,” he said. “Where’s your husband? How come we never see him?”

“Because I don’t have one.”

“But where is he?” he insisted as he came to be still and peer at her through the lattice work. With Cora on her knees, fingers in the red-leafed bush, their eyes were the same level.

“There isn’t a he. I had one, but no more,” Cora said as if she were talking about something she had dwindled away or used up like a savings account. Maybe she was the first person Jesse knew who lived alone. “I like living by myself. It’s comfortable. I can do whatever I want, be as compulsively tidy or disorganized as I like,” but she knew this was nonsense to him. In her mind she worked on a more tangible explanation.

But Jesse’s lower lip began to quiver in consternation. He flashed her a sad face, turned and ran home. The rat-dog squeaked as Jesse ran up his sidewalk. The Benji-like dog who lived next to Cora started barking. That dog never barked. Jesse sat on his own front step and let his rat-dog lick his face.

“Shut up,” Cora fiercely whispered to the bark-infected dog. “Shut up, shut up.” She had forgotten about the ghost which was waiting for her, deflated and draped over the top step of the ladder.
Now the afternoon seemed undeserving of the ghost’s smiling face, a face that any breeze could toss and spin around.

Jesse had been in Cora’s house twice. She believed this much. The first time, last week, Cora had fallen asleep while reading. It seemed that she did nothing but garden and read, but this simply wasn’t true. She had cut back to part-time at the library, working now three days a week, and she was reading a new book for her review in the monthly newsletter. It was a warm fall day, and she was glad she hadn’t taken down the second-floor screens. The sun slanted onto her bed, not the most logical place to get comfortable and read. The school kids drifted by down below. Their silly banter rose up and into her window. As long as she was conscious of falling asleep, she couldn’t. Once when she was awake she thought how quickly autumn had arrived--no longer could she guess the time by the angle of the sun.

Much later, it seemed to her, a car door slammed and she lay awake again.

“Shit,” Cora heard Jesse’s sister say. “We’re locked out, Jesse.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t say that, Jesse.”

“How about the back door?” He was precocious at times.

“You wait here, I’ll go around back. If that’s locked, I’ll get a key from dad.”

In a while Cora heard their front screen door slam. “Jesse?” the sister said from their porch steps. Cora gave in to sleep again, assured that Jesse soon would be stretched out on his belly, feet in the air, in front of their TV. It was that time of day to start turning on lamps and lights.
"Jes-se!" Cora heard the sister yell in the dark. His name came out unabated as if she'd worked up a hefty anger. Naturally, he had gone down the street to Wes's house, if the sister would just think a minute. The stillness of the sunset was long gone. Fleeting gusts of crisp, evening air blew in Cora's window and caused her bedroom door to close the last foot or so in an unlikely steady fashion. Her wooden stairs popped and creaked—a bit more than usual as the nighttime coolness settled in. The kitchen door—earlier left open an inch or two—closed. The bolt clicked into place, and then her house was quiet.

"What were you doing over there? You're not supposed to cross the street," his sister scolded. Cora imagined the sister's grip, how if she gave him a good yank she might dislocate his arm. By Jesse's voice, he was on the verge of crying, trying to make repair. Their front door slammed, and again there was silence. Jesse, in her house? To use her bathroom or to see how she lived alone?

That evening things were amiss around the house. The radio had lost its station. Her garden gloves lay on the wrong shelf. An orange-red maple leaf lay crumpled in the living room, the pieces scattered on the forest green rug.

The second time Jesse was in her house was on Halloween night. Halloween was Cora's favorite night of the year. When and where else could she be so generous to a hundred creatures? Cats and dogs, human flies and Spidermen, clusters of nascent Draculas, ballerinas and clowns, Ninja turtles, a miscellany of chocolate-hungry unknowns, witches galore and once there appeared a baby angel escorted by a big sister Madonna—the singer, not the Italian lady. The kids' excitement infected her as she sat unseen on the steps and waited for another
knock. How generously she handed out the candy depended on whether the knock was timid or house-rattling.

Jesse was an astronaut, disguised in moon boots, white asbestos gloves and a clear bubble helmet that served him better as a candy container. He bounced in and out of her door totally beside himself, blushing radiantly in his peculiar one-boy act of candy gathering. His sister waited for him under the spruce, in the shadow at the edge of the porch light. This left Cora to wonder how the sister must regard her to stand back like that.

The doorbell rang less often. Cora placed the bowl of candy underneath her porch light and went to bed, thinking the goodies would be gone by morning. What if one of the dogs ate the chocolate? Chocolate was supposed to be poisonous to dogs.

A rattling woke her later in the night. Shadows of branches danced wildly on the wall opposite the bed. The sand-laden wind threatened to shatter glass. Cora got up and closed and locked all the upstairs windows except the one in the bathroom on the leeward side of the house.

In her robe she descended the stairs as quietly as she could. The porch light’s reflected glow filled her entrance hall. In the living room, she sat sideways on the couch and peered through a slit her fingers made in the blinds. She could see nothing but dim lamplight deep inside the houses across the street and silhouettes of her spruce limbs seemingly being wrenched from their sockets. She barely heard Jesse’s rat-dog barking during lulls in the wind, barking like he had all night at every trick or treater; then again, maybe what she heard was a reverberation of his earlier bark. Someone was lighting candles in Jesse’s house. A wall of wind hit her house and the porch light
went out. She thought about lighting candles but decided the dark was okay. Then her electricity came back on.

Twigs were hitting her window now. Thunder made her flinch and pull back from the blinds, feeling that if the storm detected her it might direct a lightning bolt down upon her house and turn its thunder into laughter. To quell her fear she forced her fingers between the blinds and focused on what she saw in the flashes of lightning even if it was the shiny street, a long black hole among the textured lawns.

Someone held a fluttering candle and watched the storm from behind Jesse’s screen door. There was a loud crack at the top of Cora’s spruce tree. A large and brittle mass crashed to the ground. Her porch light flickered and died again. Loud voices and car doors erupted down the block. An electric company truck drove by. Only the driver’s side of the windshield wipers worked, she saw in a flash of lightning. She felt helpless. There was nothing to do but hope that the storm had wrecked all that it would.

Her light came on again. The other houses’ windows were black or opaquely yellow with candlelight. Her die-hard porch light was absolutely unexplainable.

More trucks drove by. The worst was over and now it was time for assessing and repairing the damage. Since there was nothing more to worry for here, Cora stayed where she was, watching in her mind the eye of the storm as it now woke up and raised havoc with someone else.

Cora woke herself up saying his name to the ceiling in the dark. “Jesse?” When she smelled the cool rain and heard the hiss of a steady drizzle she knew the front had passed.

They were calling him again. His sister, his mother and father yelled for him, and even his brother called out, “Where’s my little
astronaut?" In the steady rain anger lingered in his sister's voice, worry in his mother's. Yet they stayed on their side of the street.

"Jesse," Cora said just in case he could hear her, "listen a minute." She could not tell where he was in her house, or if he was. "Your family is worried and looking for you. You should go home."

Moving stiffly, Cora sat up and peered again through the blinds. Her light was still the only one on. "I'm going to bed now. I'll be okay. Go home and be careful crossing the street," she told him, worrying that the utility truck drivers would not be watching for a boy at this time of night.

Why did he insist on coming into her house, and how did he know to walk around the glass coffee table? Cora did not hear him leave, but there was a brief scuffle in her spirea bush on the other side of the window. If his sister was at all on the ball, she might easily have spotted him on Cora's porch.

In the morning the Benji-dog next door woke her. Cora threw back the covers, ran heavy-footed to the bathroom window and knocked hard on the glass. "Shut up," she yelled, but the Benji-dog didn't shut up. She spoke to the glass pane inches from her face: "Quit it." Similarly, she used to say 'quit it' to her husband when they were in bed, when he tried teasing her into making love and she couldn't because she knew in his selfish mind he was removed from her, maybe in Alaska already. The bark was unreachable, an annoyance, a nagging noise that needed to become worthy or quit altogether.

The dog was barking at a tree; the top of her spruce had landed in its yard, upright by its trunk sunk deep in the rain-softened lawn. Cora yelled and knocked some more. Finally the dog stopped barking,
tilted its head and searched for the authoritative voice, never considering it would come from above.

During breakfast Cora looked out in the back yard and discovered a large branch of a honey locust tree hanging over the black phone line in the alley. On her walk to the library she watched cars drive around trees downed and lying in the streets.

The library was abuzz with talk of the storm. "The wind blew shingles off our roof," Ruth said, standing in front of Cora's desk. Ruth shelved returned books, but she was chatty and slow. Many times she clocked out promptly, leaving a cart with a dozen books that Cora shelved. For once Cora had more to talk about.

"It topped my blue spruce," Cora said. "The top fifteen feet fell in my neighbor's yard, but by the direction of the wind it should have landed on my porch. My porch is just covered with old bird nests--I counted thirteen! And my electricity never went out. Everyone else's did but...." She stopped for fear she was making too much of herself. She went back to her review. The others went on comparing their damages.

Cora walked home in more drizzle, via the video shop where she rented another movie. She wished she had taken more time to work on the book review. She had finished it, but in some vague way she was not satisfied with it. The story of her life, she mused.

Two school girls meandered ahead of her. One balanced on her bike that she peddled slowly in order to stay even with the girl walking. Cora stayed twenty paces behind them, then, thinking of the maple whirlybird seeds, pine needles and such stuck to her shoes, she cut across her yard and headed toward the doormat on her back step.

The girl on foot turned. "Um. I need to ask you a question?"
Cora stopped but was silent, not sure the girl was talking to her. “Could you take me home? I missed the school bus,” said the girl who looked wetter than the other.

“Where’s your mother? Can’t she come get you?” said Cora, expecting a quick answer to such an obvious question.

“She works at the post office. She doesn’t get off until five, five thirty.”

“Well?” Cora said, looking at her watch to see how far away that was. “Why don’t you wait? It’s only an hour.”

“I’m not supposed to go back there. She’s, like, really mad at me.”

“She lives a mile past the Bi-Way,” said the girl straddling the bike. The Bi-Way Cafe was a mile north of town.

“And I’m tired. I don’t think I can walk that far.”

“Two, two and a half miles,” the girl with the bike added.

Cora was silent, pinned there with slightly drooping shoulders. Why her? Last year it had been a boy with a bloody nose. He had pounded on her door so abruptly that her hands shook as she handed him paper towels and ice cubes. Justifiably, she did drive him home, not because he lived far but because he thought the bully was still out there, waiting to pummel him again. Plus there was a lot of tear and snot-diluted blood and a horribly swollen nose; however, facing the bathroom mirror the kid said his nose looked like it usually did.

Out of the corner of her eye Cora saw something fly through the air in the alley. A black and white cat had leaped from a honey locust tree to the limb draped over the phone line. The black line hissed and stretched then snapped loose from its pole. The cat dove off the wreckage of thorns, seed pods, broken branches and phone cable and
darted crookedly down the alley.

"Wow," one girl said.

"Wow," repeated Cora. The three of them stood there, watching and waiting for a breeze to give the branch another push. Cora sensed that she was sandwiched between the girls and the sprung cat, a cat she had never seen before.

"I'm so tired," Cora said. "I'm just getting home myself. Looking forward to changing my clothes and having dinner. Maybe you should try to work things out with your mother or not miss the bus next time."

They nearly had pulled Cora's strings, these two girls who now looked down at the sidewalk cracks as they began to shuffle along. Cora followed slowly in their direction, thinking that what she had said was open for dispute, in fact, expecting the girls to say more. But the two headed down the street, in the direction opposite the school, away from the post office and the unfairly cross mother. Work things out with your mother, had been Cora's message--how simple, how firm, how unlike her. She clenched her fists at her waist and pounded once on an imaginary drum. It was the same gesture a high school football player used when he caught a pass in the end zone. When she pictured the touchdown--even though, like the girls, the visiting team would suffer defeat--she bent her knees and did it again.

Across the street Jesse waited with the rat-dog on his porch. The colorful wind sock hung straight and still. "Hey," Jesse said in that accusatory voice of his and started down his walk toward Cora.

"You're not supposed to cross the street, Jesse. I've heard your sister say that," she said loud and clear enough for him to hear.

He stopped. His rat-dog started yapping at him to come back,
itself being afraid to leave the yard. Jesse balanced on the curb, on one foot, then the other. The dog continued to bark, for what reason Cora had no idea, but there was nothing she could do about it but try to ignore it. By now she was at her front door which she unlocked and opened. Once inside she flicked on the porch light even though it was more than an hour away from dark. For the first time in Raildaughter Cora locked the door behind her, not to keep a child like Jesse out but rather to keep things inside intact.

Cora sat at her kitchen table trying to figure out what she would like for dinner. A can of chili con carne sounded as good or awful as a thick slice of roast beef. Anyone would have taken the prime rib, but Cora was indifferent—it was so obvious that she had given up asking herself long ago. Perfectly indifferent, just like when she woke up some mornings not knowing where she was, quite as though she hadn’t lived in this house for thirty two years. Something familiar—the ceiling light, the blanket, her husband when he was still around—would snap her out of it and back into place. She used to prolong that feeling of nonexistence. If she told anyone that she loved it, they’d think she was crazy. Those few seconds were purely her own being—Cora Becker—immune to the day’s sights and sounds that awaited her.

"Help yourself," she said to no one as she reached for a packet of Sweetarts leftover from Halloween. She must have handed out all the chocolates and held back the Sweetarts. For once she asked herself if she did not like creamy chocolate or had she merely grown used to, then fond of, the painfully sour candies.
What Eve had said about him and his dog was like a swift kick in the groin. They had just exchanged Christmas presents: a whistling teal-colored tea kettle and incense for her, a red Pendleton shirt for him. She kissed him on the lips, thanked him, then collapsed next to him on her love seat. He thanked her back, then reached for Felony, his dog lying at his feet. He held the old mutt behind the ears and kneaded the folds of loose skin in his hands, looking him in the eyes and mumbling F-words in a low voice: "Felony, my fine fella and felon, Felony...."

What she said then was, "Has it occurred to you that you express all of your affection on Felony? I kiss you and you hug the dog." Chowder knew there was truth in what she’d said, more than he could understand at that moment.

But it was a harsh blow, especially in light of the exceptional sex they’d had lately. When they made love they looked deep into each other’s eyes, and something hot-cold like adrenaline surged inside
him. In those moments her eyes were expressionless yet receptive, and it would not bother him in the least if time would stop, leaving them rocking steadily, locked face to face. Forever would be nice.

From now on, he thought, he would try to give her a hug when he visited her in the shop like he had his first day back or take her hand, say, when they were watching a movie. Maybe that’s what she wanted: gestures. It was like going public for him, and he knew people would stare. He did not look like a man capable of such affection. Regardless, he’d start tonight.

Chowder sat on a collapsible kitchen chair. He reached down to Felony and patted his head. Felony laid his ears back and thumped his tail twice. It was early in the evening of New Year’s Eve. Chowder soon would have to take a shower and dress for a late dinner and celebration with Eve. He wished that it was summer and that he could take a swim in the lake instead. He wished too that he had a decent shirt.

He was waiting for his landlady to close her beauty shop downstairs. Every time she washed someone’s hair, the hot water disappeared. He wished he had taken the apartment above the bookstore. This one smelled like permanents, but it was cheap and she let him use her phone. Sometimes he smelled the permanent chemicals elsewhere, like in the post office. They stained the inside of his nostrils as the ammonia in old urine often did in the woods, not an unpleasant thing when he got used to it.

“You got a date tonight, Fella?” he said, feeling bad he would have to leave him at home. Normally Felony would come along in Eve’s car, but New Year’s Eve didn’t seem like a night for that. He started down the stairs to call Eve.
A runner of ribbed black plastic was glued to the narrow steps. A musty smell rose from town dirt that darkened the corners, reminding him of a basement from his school days. He found himself thinking back to the first time he had had sex, on New Year’s Eve when he was a sophomore at Raldaughter High School. Twenty years ago the only consequence to screwing around was pregnancy and even that seemed remote. He had taken Eve’s hand, walked her down the dark stairs in his parent’s house and lay down on top of her next to the furnace. He couldn’t remember if the basement floor was concrete or linoleum, if there were spider webs or if he had checked for black widows—details he would consider today. He had been drunk, so that a big gap darkened his memory. The next day she called, and by what she said and how she said it, they’d made love. Was that when he first called her Eve?

“The phone again?” he gestured to his landlady. He studied the posters of shiny lipstick semi-smiles under voluptuous hairdos and listened to Eve’s phone ring.

“Hey, Babe,” he said, regretting his choice of words. Eve had told him she didn’t like being called Babe. He started over. “Good evening, Eve. When would you like to eat? I’m making a reservation.”

“Good idea,” she said. “Late. How about nine, nine thirty?”

“Sounds good,” he said, wondering what her plan was—spend the entire evening with him or just a few hours near midnight. He hesitated asking what time he should come by, pick her up. “Moo shu pork on New Year’s Eve. With Eve. What could be better?”

“Sizzling rice shrimp.”

“Whatever.”

Chowder paused and gathered his thoughts, aware that his desire to have everything just right was making him a jerk. Relax, he told
himself. In a way he knew part of his problem was being cooped up in
town in the dead of winter, in a putrid apartment. He should have come
to town later in the year, in the fall. Then this winter would not
seem so endless. He’d been here for five months.

“I wonder what my camp looks like, if I could even find it,” he
said. “That would be the place to be at midnight. Warm fire, ten feet
of snow, zillions of stars, coyotes calling ridge to ridge.”

“Hang in there, Chowder. We’ll find it in the spring.”

“Yeah.”

“So what time? I’ll pull out a nice wine,” she said, so typical
of her to make it sound like she would descend into a spacious wine
cellar, peruse the wines, select a year appropriate for their private
celebration. They would drink what they drank for Thanksgiving and
Christmas, a Réne Junot that cost $3.99 at Safeway.

“You tell me,” he said.

“Eight.” They hung up without saying good-bye, their usual way.

She looked quite beautiful, answering her door in slender black pants
and a short, yellow sweater. The bright socks on her feet matched the
sweater. Chowder kissed her softly on her smile and handed her a
bottle of champagne which she put in the refrigerator.

“No Felony?”

“No Felon,” he said, twisting his wrist and the corkscrew as far
as it would go into a bottle of a red Réne Junot.

The wine was perfect. Eve had lit a stick of incense which took
him back in time. These holiday celebrations were becoming a
kaleidoscope containing snapshots of his past for the chips.

“Do you have any old Beatles?” he teased her.
"Remember when we got into yoga?" Eve said, collecting their two glasses and the bottle and heading out of the kitchen.

"Yeah. Breathe like there's a feather on your lip. What other stuff did we take for granted?" he said, sounding even to himself sentimental. Instead of her den they sat in her candlelit living room on love seats facing each other, resting their feet on each other's cushion.

"Were you ever in my bedroom in seventh grade?" she asked.

"I doubt it. I only knew who you were—we weren't really friends yet." Chowder massaged her feet. The yellow socks grew warm in his hands.

"Well, I had an eighty-gallon fish tank. And my mother let me put red burlap on the walls—quite a change from her yellow floral wallpaper. My bong replaced her dried flowers arrangement, and I took down a plaque that said 'Bless This Mess' to hang a Twiggy poster."

"Did we ever do mescaline together?" Chowder said, remembering his one out-of-body experience when one night he had elevated, hovered over his own body lying beneath him on the bed, not for very long but long enough to know. He had stayed up all night trying to repeat it. Then in the first light of the next day, each bird in the tree outside his window—there were hundreds of them—personally bade him good morning. From that day he knew there was a lot more to know, but it required the appropriate curiosity which he lacked. The talking birds were in part why he made the woods his home.

"No. I never did mescaline. It's a whole different life now, isn't it, Chowder?"

"Sort of," he said, regretting that Eve hadn't shared that morning with him.
More conversation seemed silly. They were content holding each other’s feet, letting go now and then to take a sip of wine.

Chowder drove the thirty miles to Wai Lee’s in Dockton, the Bug warming up finally halfway there. Eve was quiet for the most part. Three times she took his hand off the steering wheel to kiss his knuckles, and he was glad he had not worn his gloves. In the complacency of the drive, Chowder forgot about Felony, entirely.

The restaurant was noisy as a ski lodge. Kids ran around the tables, sporting stiff acid-washed jeans. The parents sipped hot saki, lounging about in their new Christmas clothes in oranges, pinks and yellows not found anywhere in nature. Eye pollution, Chowder called it, eliciting a laugh from Eve. He was the only one in the restaurant who smoked, and he could not understand anything their plump oriental waitress said.

Eve insisted that she drive home since she had not had saki. Chowder pressed his cheek against the window to see if there were stars. They were hard to see through the reflections and the pines. It was eleven thirty when they got home and popped the cork to the bottle of champagne.

They turned on the TV, spread pillows on the floor and settled in with the bottle of bubbly between them. Chowder wished he had brought Felony and had left him at Eve’s so that he could be there now with them.

He heard Eve’s slow breathing and knew she had fallen asleep. He didn’t know whether or not to wake her for the confetti and noisemakers on David Letterman. He forgot about the hoopla on the TV, lay on his side, propped his head on one hand and admired how far Eve traveled in her sleep. The distance was written on her face.
The prospect of being with Eve was like standing minuscule in the shadow of a dazzling, amorphous cloud. It was like viewing a solar eclipse through a pinhole in cardboard, with Eve as the sun and the sky. Any way he pictured Eve and himself, the image was absolutely irreducible. He carried her up to bed and went home to his cold apartment, the only warmth being the spot where Felony had been dozing, waiting.

Chowder began lacing up his logger boots. When Felony saw this he stretched with his rear high in the air, flicked his tongue over his nose, then stood by the door wagging his tail.

"It’s time for you and me to get the hell out of Raildaughter, Fella," Chowder said. Felony had gotten him this far, had filled that once tiny but powerful vacuum inside him. Chowder believed he overfilled Felony’s animalistic need. If Felony was the famine, Eve was the feast; there was no in-between.

He walked back to Eve’s house, through the dark town that was still dead asleep. By now he knew how to open and close Eve’s door soundlessly and where her floor creaked. Upstairs he stood by her bed.

"You up already?" she said smiling. "Did you fetch Felony?"

"Go back to sleep if you want. Felon’s here, and we’re having coffee," he said, resisting her floppy arm pulling him into bed.

Downstairs he lit a cigarette and filled his pack with hot dogs, pizza, packages of frozen vegetables and fish from her freezer: another loan of Eve’s goods to get him by. He didn’t feel well, figured his shakes were from last night’s saki. He poured Felony a bowl of dog kibbles and made him eat on the rug by the back door.

The cool sun spread its first light in the east horizon,
camouflaging any warmth in icy oranges and gelid pinks. Chowder and his dog, a duet of humanity in Chowder’s mind, walked stride for stride, two of Felony’s for Chowder’s one. The snow squeaked with each step of Chowder’s boots, but Felony progressed soundlessly.

As he made his way across the bridge over the open water in the river, he thought of the hot day he had walked in the opposite direction. He’d come to town for a bitch for Felony. He had wanted puppies. The prudish man at the city pound lectured him on the responsibility of owning a dog while Chowder walked down the aisles of cyclone fence and urine-stained cement floors. “You can’t divorce your parents or your pets, you know,” the man said at last to lighten things up, intending his shallow wisdom to reach its mark.

Felony looked up at him now as Chowder laughed aloud on the cold bridge, presently acknowledging the true irony of the simpleton’s statement. The man hadn’t known that Chowder’s soul mate was waiting in the bushes outside, that the bitch was for him, Felony.

If his hangover got the best of him, he’d heave over the railing into the river. Then, he remembered he’d left his cigarette burning in the ashtray in Eve’s kitchen. He thought it unlikely that it would fall off the glass edge, burn through the table cloth, char the table, maybe start a fire, burn her house down. Eve waking up to thick smoke flashed before him. But it was an unlikely scene, the cigarette too petty to return for. He checked the horizon behind him as he stepped off the bridge and started up the highway, watching for a car so he could put his thumb out. He also watched for smoke to know if he could return when he had asked himself the right questions and had talked himself out of Eve’s perfection. He made a promise to himself, shuddering at his own tragedy. Someday he would admire her less.