Mice in the garden| A collection of short-short (and short) stories

Josie Aaronson-Gelb

The University of Montana

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MICE IN THE GARDEN

A COLLECTION OF SHORT-SHORT
(AND SHORT) STORIES

BY JOSIE AARONSON-GELB

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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Approved by:

Debra Magpie Earling, Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
FOR MOLLY, MY FAVORITE SHORTY

♦ ♦ ♦
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MICE IN THE GARDEN

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SHORTIES
1. A GIFT—

Our son has been catching squirrels in rat traps. That's what I told my husband when he came home from the LoveDove Sales Strategy Meeting.

"How do you know that's what he's doing, catching squirrels?" asked Doug and took a handful of Japanese rice crackers from the silver bowl on the table.

"I saw him," I said. "I saw him set the trap and later he was in the yard and there was a dead squirrel in the grass."

"He's just trying to get your attention," said Doug. "And I don't approve of whispering behind Jakey's back. He's growing up. He should know what we have to say."

He took a squashed LoveDove from out of his briefcase and tossed it to me. It was soft, velvet white and the beak was so true to life it didn't even feel plastic.

"Is this for me?" I asked, stroking it.

"It's defective," said Doug. "It's supposed to light up. Glow when you touch it."

We sat down to dinner. I set a nice table, everyone says. The other husbands punch Doug on the shoulder and tell him he got
lucky, me being a formally trained restaurateur and all. Really I
can’t cook better than anyone else, I just have a passion for it
and like any artist, passion makes all the difference.

That night along with sage stuffed chicken we had a nice
prosciutto risotto, spinach salad, and a little talk with Jakey.
He’s almost twelve now and looking more like a man every day.

“You know, son,” said Doug forking a clump of creamy rice
into his mouth, “there are other ways to rile your mother’s
concern then by playing with wild animals.”

Jakey didn’t say anything, just flattened the spinach leaves
out with his fork, pressing them until a dark green imprint
bruised up. I worried he wasn’t eating enough. In the past month
his cheeks had sunk and his chin had lost its dimple, become bony
along the point.

“You look at me when I’m talking to you son,” Doug raised his
voice and my heart went out to both of them. Jakey because his
father is never around and when he is can be a little red faced
and scary. And Doug for almost the same thing. It’s hard on any
man, being away from his family. Those LoveDoves are getting the
best of all of us.

“Now Jakey, listen to Daddy,” I said, and scooped another
chicken breast on his plate, hoping that a larger portion might
encourage him to eat more.

“Daddy,” said Doug and smacked his palm onto the smooth wood
of the table, “Damn it. Don’t baby him like that. It’s Dad. I’m
nobody’s ‘Daddy’.”
Jakey hung his head and I wanted to pull him close. I reached out to my son, his fragile hairless arm, and he let me put my hand on him, but when he lifted his eyes the look he gave, such dark yellow hate, hit me full force like I’d been caught. He turned to his father.

"Then I’m not Jakey," he said.

“What’d you say son?” asked Doug. He leaned so far forward, his tie dragged in a pool of brown butter sauce.

“I’m not Jakey,” Jakey said and thrust his knife into the table so hard it stuck and vibrated there.

We all sat very still then, watching the knife until Doug pulled it out, wiped it off and handed it to our son. I was thankful I had bought the big tub of wood varnish which would slip right into that crack.

“LoveDoves are a brilliant business idea,” I told Doug that right then and there. “All you have to do is touch one and it glows.”

2. DIANE–

They intended me to leave just for the weekend. They told me as I was lying in bed far too late on a Saturday morning. They told me with a pink envelope crammed with $500 in travelers’ checks and a round trip train ticket.
"We thought you deserved a vacation," said Doug, beaming. It was the first time I'd seen him smile in a long while. Business had taken a tumble and he had been sullen for weeks.

"That’s sweet, Doug," I said, thinking how glad I was to see Jakey standing firm shouldered next to him. Lately our boy hardly said two words and spent all his free time in the tree house out back. We were not allowed in to see what he did there. I worried it was something violent. He had hit a younger girl at school and although we weren’t asked to, I thought it best if we pulled him out and found a tutor.

Doug blew me a kiss and Jakey ran to me. When he flopped on the bed he held on tight and I could smell the apple clean of his shampoo. He hadn’t touched me in so long, there was nothing you could have given me at that moment to get out of bed and into vacation.

"You smell delicious," I told him and that’s when he handed me the pink envelope. When I opened it up and saw what was inside, he pushed off and strolled back to his father.

"Was that good, Dad?" he asked and dusted his arms as if there were mites on the skin. Doug nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. I could feel them staring as I flipped through the checks and then the ticket, again and again. Don’t ask why I thought there would be one for each of us.

My train was scheduled to leave that afternoon. I pushed the covers aside and packed.
Doug drove me to the Amtrak and after he and Jakey watched me board, I watched them drive away. The car sped fast and I kept looking for Jakey to stick his head out the window and wave. I was smiling so hard my cheeks ached.

When we finally left the station, I turned to the man sitting next to me and introduced myself as Diane, which is not my real name and doesn't even sound like it.

3. BREAKFAST

I look through the papers regularly and check the internet too. It is unreasonable but I believe Jakey's name will be there. A mug shot, a profile blaming maternal abandonment and me unable to deny it. I try not to think about it. For all I know, Jakey is designing kites and has invented a secret handshake, formed a club and populated it with friends. But he never had friends. It was rumored among the other mothers that his sense of play was rough.

About my job: I start at five a.m., hunting for eggs. We have chickens because we cater to a clientele that appreciates free range birds. We also grow fresh greens and I have been known to beat both thyme and arugula into my omelets. Because I am talented, I am given great freedom in the kitchen. This has gained us quite a culinary reputation and I admit that my pride is tied up in that.
If it wasn't for my pride, I would never have gone into that little boy's room. I was disappointed when his mother told me he was sleeping late and would miss the meal. I told her not to worry, I would fix a plate for later. She gave a stiff smile. "Don't put yourself out," she said. "He isn't often hungry in the morning."

But I did put myself out. I poured buttermilk pancake batter into Mickey Mouse shapes and studded the faces with chocolate chips. I pureed fresh strawberries from the garden and added one cup of yogurt for health. I scrambled two eggs, plain, no pepper, and piled them on white toast. I brought it all to the boy's room and when no one answered, used my housekeeper's key to open the door. He wasn't there and I won't say that didn't upset me.

What was there was a desk full of cereal boxes. The little ones. The kinds that come eight in a variety pack, each one packed with sugar and Yellow #5. I wasn't offended, that wasn't it exactly. But the ache that rushed through me then, a boy indulging—well, it left my veins feeling scraped and exposed. I wondered what Jakey ate for breakfast. I wondered if he had hit his father yet, stood up to the man and pounded him like I knew he always wanted to. Not that he said that, not that he gave any inclination, but a mother knows when a son has anger. A mother knows when he hurts.

I wondered what this little boy's mother would have said if she caught him in the yard, standing over the dead body of a squirrel and not crying. Would she explain death to him? Would
she explain that this, son, is the first of many and you will die too one day. Your body, yes, but more important things as well. Or would she think her son, not crying over the body of that squirrel, was indecent. Cold. Would she be scared? Would she use that as an excuse to start the process of leaving? Would she leave? Would any mother leave? Would any good, decent mother be the one to do the leaving?

But it would have happened anyway I reminded myself, gathering up the cereal boxes and leaving the breakfast tray. All my life, men had come into my my body and then just fell away from it. Maybe all that was just preparation for childbirth. Having someone inside and then letting them disappear.
Patricia’s girls ate at six o’clock in the kitchen. Patricia ate at eight thirty in the dining room with Elliott. One Thursday Elliot called to say he would eat dinner with co-workers. This worried Patricia. She worried that Elliott was in trouble at the job and then that he might be fired. She did not worry that he was seeing a woman. She was very careful never to worry about that.

She set a third place for herself at her daughters’ table.

“Who’s that for?” asked her younger daughter.

“For me,” said Patricia.

“For real?” asked her daughter.

Patricia was annoyed. “Really,” she said. “Say, really.”

“Really truly?” said the younger daughter.

Patricia’s elder daughter walked into the kitchen with her hair in perfect braids. She smoothed down the front of her yellow skirt. Patricia thought she looked springy and fresh and told her so.

“Mom’s eating with us,” said the younger to the elder, and scraped her chair closer to Patricia’s plate.
“Really?” asked the elder. “What’s the occasion?” Her voice hummed with a meanness that surprised Patricia.

“I’ve been missing my girls,” said Patricia which was true but which she had not intended to say.

The elder daughter examined her nails.

“Maybe I won’t then,” said Patricia and remembered with violence how she had once left the vermouth out of her husband’s martini early on in their marriage and how he hadn’t noticed and how lonely she had felt after. She removed her empty water glass from the table.

The younger daughter wrapped her arm around Patricia’s legs. “You said,” she told her mother, “you said you would eat with us.”

They ate cold gazpacho and Patricia’s elder daughter dabbed her mouth with an embroidered napkin and announced that she would never marry someone who had more money than she did.

“Well lucky you,” said Patricia and put down her spoon, “because thanks to me, you will never have to.”

“Lucky me,” said her daughter, “lucky, lucky me.”

Patricia watched her child lift her spoon to her mouth and close her lips without slurping. It felt then that she and her daughter were exactly the same. This ought to have made her proud and it did, but, she realized later, in an entirely depressed and unsettling way.
Eleanor was happy to escort her friend to the Mall's weekend Wedding Depot but she was not happy that Jess was getting married. When they arrived, there was white tulle strung up over storefront doorways and "Here comes the bride," looping through the loud speakers. At Hats, Scarfs, and More, Eleanor steered her friend to the veils, but Jess shook her off and beelined for the tiara display.

"I just really think that communes are the future," said Eleanor as Jess tried on crowns of rhinestone lace. "If we saved for a couple years and then joined forces, we could pool our money and buy a farm, grow our own vegetables."

"Like hippies?" asked Jess.

"But more knowledgeable," said Eleanor. "With the right people, we could be completely self sufficient. Do you know any doctors or plant biologists or anything?"

"My friend Michelle's a dental hygienist," said Jess, frowning into the mirror.

"You should talk to her," said Eleanor. "Then we wouldn't have to pay for teeth cleaning. And if there were enough of us, we wouldn't even have to do that many chores. Just take turns cooking in a central hut."
Jess picked up a tiara curved like a cathedral spire.

"There'll be a kettle over the fire for hot water," continued Eleanor, "we'll keep it boiling all the time, like an eternal light."

"And also for Cup of Noodles," said Jess, picking an eyelash from the corner of her eye. "Now that's a good idea."

"Around the cooking hut, we'll build sleeping huts," said Eleanor, "like African tribal villages."

"And we'll raise the kids all together," said Jess, facing her friend. "Forget the public school system."

"Fuck the public school system," said Eleanor.

"I'll teach them math, and you do English," Jess said. "We'll get Christopher to put together a history curriculum."

Eleanor had forgotten that Christopher was a permanent fixture in we. "As long as its not white man history," she said to Jess.

Jess thrust her fist into the air in a show of solidarity. The tiara she wore was so tall, it wobbled. "We'll revert completely to the old ways," she said, and pulled the price tag over her bangs so that she could see it. Eleanor looked too. The original cost was crossed out several times and $130, was written in red and framed in exclamation marks.

"If you like that," said Eleanor, "you should buy it, it's a good deal."

"Yeah," said Jess, "but I feel kind of weird getting anything for my wedding on sale."
The man in her bed had real arm muscles, bulbous and knock hardable. His hands were under her rear and she was into it. Sweat ran down his forehead and fell on hers. Usually that would have been bad, but she didn't mind. She liked this man, liked him so much that she was almost able to ignore what he had done in the bathroom.

The toothbrush, her toothbrush, was not hanging in the right hole. It was lying next to the sink, bristle side down in a puddle of cloudy soap scum drippings. She had seen it through the open door, the sound of his flush resonating as he walked out. What had he been doing with her toothbrush? It was only their fourth date.

"You're hot, little mama," he said and bit her nose. She ground into him, kept her eyes open, focused. At least he hadn't disrupted the towels. She hated it when the guest towels bunched over themselves. But there was still the toothbrush. Red handle, white bristles. She pushed at his shoulders. If he moved, she could remedy the situation.

"You wanna play like that?" he asked and kissed with renewed vigor. He was good on the smooches. She needed a good smoocher.
Over dinner he had asked her about her last boyfriend and she had pretended one had been recent and real. She locked her mouth on his ear lobe.

"Suck it like a butterscotch!" he cried.

She did.

It didn’t seem fair really. She was smart. Employed. Cat-free. She was sure if a man stuck around long enough to import his own toothbrush, she could morph into a successful couple. But there she and her toothbrush were: wet, alone, and surrounded by muck. She gagged and pulled back.

"I have to pee," she said.

His arms loosened. "Now?" he was disappointed.

In the bathroom she shut the door and blinked in the fluorescent. She held the toothbrush under very hot water, ran a finger through the bristles, dried the handle, and put it back in its holder. Cracking her knuckles she waited for peace to settle. But it didn’t. There on the toilet seat was an off color splotch. She took a piece of toilet paper, spit on it, and rubbed until the spot faded. Something itched on the back of her neck. She looked around. Behind the contact lens solution there was another puddle. She bent down to sniff: witch hazel. Now the entire counter top would have to be cleaned.

She crept into the kitchen.

"Hot mama?" He was standing in the doorway, the trail of hair down his belly soggy with sweat.
She wanted to run over and wipe it off. But the witch hazel was waiting. There were too many things to clean. She opened the cupboard under the sink.

"Mama, I want to lick you like a flavored Crayola," he thrust his tongue from his mouth like a thirsty lizard. She held the 409 out like a weapon.

"Stay away," she said.

He stepped forward. "Say that again," he said. He was grinning, teeth minty and wide.

"You made a mess," she said backing away, "I need to clean it."

"I've been bad," he said and reached for her. "Oh mama, I've been bad."

She pulled the trigger and the cleaning solution sprayed out hard. She held the bottle tightly, unsure now what he would do. He moaned and wiped the mist up and down his hairy chest.

"Clean," he said. "You cleaned me."

"I did," she said, emboldened by his sharp new smell. "And now I'm going to clean the bathroom," she was appalled at her nerve.

"Can I come?" he pulled a dish towel from the rack and held it out.

A wash of warmth swam over her legs, up her arms and into her face. She imagined bleached walls, comet dust, toothbrushes lined up neat like little soldiers. He scuffed a bare foot on the linoleum floor. She wanted to touch him but hesitated, shy now in the face of this man.
It was moonless dark and December. The temperature had dropped to ten below and the roads were slick with black puddles of ice. Ahead there was a rock in the road. A literal, 3D bigger than a breadbox, rock. Annie’s boyfriend ran right over it in Annie’s car. The oil pan tore open like wet paper and brown liquid flushed out. It ribboned round and round splashing the pavement while Annie squatted alongside the passenger door watching. Wind blew off the North Fork River. Toes would be the first to blacken when frostbite set in, fingers next. She stuck her hands in the butt pockets of her jeans and listened to her boyfriend swear like a cartoon villain: Geez, and Man Oh Man.

It was 180 miles to the closest repair shop and so a tow truck was called. The driver wore a Grizzlies baseball cap with a flat brim. He confided that his wife was not the same woman he had married. “If I believed in divorce, I’d get one,” he said. “But matrimony is the only way for man and woman to win God’s blessing.” He eyed Annie’s naked hands and she stuffed them in her lap.
It was decided that Annie's boyfriend didn't believe in divorce either but there were some things he could not tolerate: obesity; paralysis.

"My wife's not either of those, but she's got arm wattles," said the driver. "When she gets worked up, they shake."

"No girl I marry is going to go the way of your wife," said Annie's boyfriend and punched the driver in the shoulder. Annie held her breath but the driver laughed, deep, gasping. Cold from the floorboard seeped into her shoes. She wondered what would have happened if they had swerved instead of going over the rock. They could have crashed into the cliff wall, sailed into the river.

When they got to the repair shop it was closed. "Guess I could drop your car here and you two at a hotel," said the driver, tightening his lips. "But I want you to know, I don't think its right. No offense, fella."

"You can't offend me," said Annie's boyfriend. "Watch out for my woman though."

"A sensitive one," said the driver. "Bet you always have to tell her her butt's not big."

Standing there in the dead repair lot, Annie considered what would happen if she raised her hand and slapped the driver. He would spin in slow motion. A talk bubble would appear above his head outlined in curved black edges, Gadzooks! She had been a good sport till then. She had not yelled. She had even smiled
when her boyfriend told her he thought the rock was a puddle. Ha, ha, he had said. Puddle. Isn’t that a funny word?

The old fashioned street lamp hanging overhead illuminated dented, ripped apart cars. Annie let her breath out slowly.

“Don’t think I couldn’t hurt you,” she said to her boyfriend. “Don’t think I couldn’t destroy every last piece of you.” She walked to the street.

“Annie,” he said, “Hey, Annie,” and ran towards her.

His apology would come hard and fast once she explained his errors. She contemplated what he might give her to make amends. A puppy would do it, or a ring. Yes, she decided back straight, blood rushing-- a ring. There were plenty of ways a man could be destroyed.
Nina did not think of herself as a recluse. She simply preferred telecommuting; enjoyed cooking all her own meals and exercising on the treadmill tucked into a corner of her bedroom. It was her house after all, paid for with her mother's life insurance and because it was, she felt entitled to having everything just as she liked it. Aaron, her new roommate, had at first seemed to understand this. He was conscientious about inviting her to parties, even if they both knew she would never go. He took the time to sit down and talk whenever he found her in the kitchen or living room. He never brought people over.

She was therefore bewildered when she found he had eaten all of the canned goods in the cupboard. She relied on those cans. As long as she was stocked, she didn’t have to go grocery shopping, didn’t have to take a single step outside her front door. She wasn’t sure why or even how Aaron had eaten them. He usually ate out, and although she knew it was neurotic, she kept the can opener in her room just in case.

He was due home any minute and she waited in her chair by the window, listening for his car. The spongy cushions hugged her
thighs and she wrote her name over and over with her finger in the grain of blue velvet. She adored velvet and all the furniture, even the high stools in the kitchen were upholstered in it. Aaron, when he first came to check out the place had run his hand along the plush seats, smoothing the grain in an inward curling spiral. At the time she had surprised herself by wanting him to do the same to her.

A car door closed gently in the carport.

"Did you see how I ploughed down all the dandelions in the grass?" said Aaron when he opened the door.

"I haven't looked outside yet," said Nina and found herself smiling too eagerly. Perhaps he hadn't understood how important those cans were to her lifestyle.

He sat down on the deep green couch across from her. "I had lunch with your sister today," he said. Nina's stomach clenched and fell. But no, jealousy wasn't fair. Her sister was the one who had introduced Nina to Aaron. She had said, *this one will be a good roommate to you sweetie, this one will stick around.* Because all Nina's roommate's left her, and she would by lying if she said that didn't hurt.

"She said you used to play golf," said Aaron.

"Used to," she said and thought about the green, the way it rolled upwards and dipped down, each individual course predictable in its own way.

"Golf doesn't sound like you," said Aaron, "I always imagined you engaged in something darker. Like spelunking." His hair was
perfect, combed through in gel-stiff stripes. "We should go to the driving range some time," he said.

Her palms stuck to the velvet. She wondered how that would feel, being outside the house with him.

"It would be a good opportunity for you to meet my girlfriend. I think you two would really get along. She just got back from Cambodia and said the only thing she missed during her three months there was golf. Not me, mind you, golf."

Nina felt dizzy.

"Well okay then," he said when she didn't answer his invitation. "Driving range, the three of us, you just let me know." He opened the door to his room. He would now check his messages of which, Nina knew, there were three. She rubbed the arm of the couch so that her name in the blue velvet disappeared.

"Wait, Aaron," she said. "There's a problem with the food." He turned around and his teeth which were slightly bucked, poked out above his bottom lip.

"What kind of problem?" he leaned against the door jam.

Canned tomatoes for beef stew, salsa verde for enchiladas, canned clams for paella, garbanzos for chili. And the cans not even washed out, the counter top a mess. As if he had woken in the night and devoured the first thing he saw.

"You're eating my food," she said it loud, too loud, and clenched her hands to keep them from shaking.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.
“I may be strange, but I’m not an idiot. I’m not a complete moron.”

“Nina, calm down,” he said. “Do you want me to call your sister?”

Nina’s blood steamed under her skin. “I chose you,” she said. “I chose you to live here because I trusted you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“I haven’t lied.”

“You’re doing it now,” she said. “You’ve been lying all month. Making me think we were friends.”

“We are friends.”

“And then you eat all my food,” she felt as if the blood vessels in her neck might burst and propel her head to the ceiling.

“I’m calling your sister,” said Aaron and went into his room.

She followed him. The light on his answering machine fluttered eagerly. “You are not calling anyone, you are moving out,” she said.

He held the phone to his ear and his fingers paused above the phone pad. “What?” he said, as if she was making a joke.

Her insides felt as if they were sliding into each other. “Out,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

“I’m going to give you some space,” he said gently and hung up the phone. “I understand you’re going through a hard time. Everyone reacts differently to a parent’s death.” He gathered his coat and quietly left the house.
"This has nothing to do with her," said Nina to the front door as it closed behind him.

In the kitchen, the recycling bin was where it always was, under the sink. She'd saved them all, each can, each one that he consumed. She imagined how his hands felt, moving over them, opening. He would have removed the lid all the way. He would have wrapped it in a piece of paper so that the sharp edges wouldn't slice through the garbage bag. He would have used a fork and eaten quickly without stopping, eyes to the door. He would have drunk the thick murky liquid at the bottom of the garbanzo beans, sucked mite-sized clam particles through his teeth. He had left the cans with a film still clinging and when Nina found them, her face had flushed at the desperation of the feast.
Lucy hated it when her friends stopped remembering she was single. Sara was the worst and when the phone rang at two in the morning, Lucy knew it was her.

"I just had the best orgasm of my life," said Sara.

"You sound like it," Lucy said. She studied the unfamiliar jaw line of the man lying next to her and wished he were a bowl of garlic spaghetti.

"I'm so lucky to have Evan," said Sara. "He's making us kool-aid downstairs. We're so in love."

"Good for you," said Lucy and felt bad then, because what did Sara know, really. She prepared to ask her friend bright interested questions. But there was a voice in the background and Sara said, "He's coming back, Luce."

Lucy lay back on the bed holding the dead receiver away from her ear.

"Fuck you," she said out loud. "Fuck you fuck you fuck you.

The man next to her rolled over.

"Fuck you too," he said.
It was no surprise that a mouse would give birth in his laundry hamper. Three nights a week, midnight to mid morning he rolled dough, pumped cream into popovers, beat sugar into egg and flipped truffles in cocoa. Alone in the bakery, he unlocked and locked up in silence. Returning home, again silence. His clothes dusted in flour, streaked in chocolate and always, somehow, smelling like garlic, went into the hamper.

He only did laundry when his socks had been used, turned inside out, and used again. Pouring detergent in the basement machine he hoped to bump into Lucy. She had brown braids and freckles and he could hear her talking on the phone through her floorboards, his ceiling, nightly. He upended the laundry without sorting. He turned the wash cycle to hot. Later he would dream the way that might have felt, bubbles of hot soap reaching into eyes, singeing skin.

Their spines were curled when he found them. Four of them, little pink claws stretched out, fur patchy, each the size of a thumb. They rested heavy over the holes in the bottom of the machine. He plucked them by their tails and tossed them in the
lint garbage. He put the clothes in the dryer. When they were still damp he pulled on jeans and a t-shirt and walked to work.

Coming home he found dusty white paw prints circling in abstract loops through the closet. He hung his jeans flat through a hanger and checked the floor for mouse holes. Lucy's door opened above him. He listened to her run water in the bathroom. He lay on his mattress watching the hanging flaps of paint on the ceiling. From the closet, claws tapped.

He disentangled from the sheets and went to buy a trap. Not a brutal, killing trap. A Mouse House. He would lure and release. Mama would forget her children in the treasures of the city: trash bursting with cheese and other grown up mice.

In the bakery that night, watching out the high windows as the sky changed from dark to light, he pictured the Mouse House sitting square in the center of the closet. He imagined a body, reclining inside. When the last batch of scones nested in the cooling racks, he left. There was fog in the air and he could feel it thick in his nose. Inside his apartment, he was eager.
Lucy sat uncomfortably straight on the sofa while Jane poured her a Pimms & Gingerale and dished about Matt from Sales. Alice chimed in occasionally with details and added extra cherries to her drink. Jane's interest in Matt surprised Lucy. She didn't know either very well, but had thought from office gossip that Matt lived with a woman named Phoebe who worked in Finance. When she brought this up, Jane mixed more drinks in a large glass pitcher.

"Phoebe and Matt are old news," said Alice. "Don't you pay attention to anything but ad lay outs?" Alice was short, round, and terribly honest.

"What do you think of Phoebe?" asked Jane, who was slyer.

"I don't really know her," Lucy said. She was hungry and hoped they would get dinner soon.

"You don't need to be polite around us," said Alice.

"I guess she's a little distant," admitted Lucy.

"Snobby," said Jane.

"A total bitch," said Alice.

" Didn't you used to be friends with her?" asked Lucy.

"We hung out," said Alice, "I wouldn't say we were friends."
“Work colleagues,” said Jane.

“What’s the difference between a colleague and a friend?” asked Lucy. She had never understood girls in groups and had few female friends.

“You’re so sweet to ask that,” said Jane.

“I’m not being sweet,” said Lucy, “I’m just curious.”

“That’s what I like about you,” said Jane, “your innocent curiosity.”

“I’ve never heard you say a single nasty thing,” added Alice. “You’re the Sandra Dee of Marketing Consultants.”

Lucy wondered if they thought she was boring. “I’ve never thought of myself like that,” she said and tried to smile.

“I don’t mean that in a mean way,” said Alice. “In fact, that’s why I wanted to hang out with you. I like how polite you are.”

“You could teach Alice a thing or too, I’ll tell you that,” said Jane. Alice laughed.

They did not go to dinner, but to a bar that was down the street and up a flight of stairs. It had good natural light and was well populated. Lucy recognized her downstairs neighbor sitting hunched in a corner. He was wearing a chef jacket and drinking from a pitcher of beer. The night before, she had heard him banging the walls of his apartment. The noise was so loud the floorboards vibrated.

Now she wondered if he was waiting for someone and then if she should go over and introduce herself. Before she could make up
her mind, a tall man wearing a blue button down and pressed khaki's approached their table.

"Mike, you showed," said Jane and removed her purse from the seat next to Lucy. Introductions were made and when Lucy shook his hand she found it firm but oddly damp.

"So this is the famous Lucy," he said.

"I’m famous?" said Lucy.

"Jane has been plotting to introduce you two forever," said Alice. "Mike has the best manners of anyone we know."

"That sounds awful when you put it that way," said Jane and shook her head. Lucy wished she had a friendship like Jane and Alice's.

"Awful but true," said Mike. "My mother ran a ladies finishing school. I’m quite proficient at discussing the weather." Alice and Jane laughed but Lucy didn’t find this funny. She enjoyed discussing the weather.

"Mike, you’re a gas," said Jane.

Mike sat with his back too straight and preached about the importance of shopping organic. When Lucy said that was a lot to ask considering how expensive organic chicken was, he lectured her about carnivorous eating habits. She nodded as if she was taking his opinion into account but fantasized about a thick cut steak topped with gorgonzola cheese. Finally she excused herself to the bathroom. Alice followed.

"You’re going to give him your number, aren’t you?" said Alice when Lucy shut the door to her stall.
"I don’t think so," said Lucy. She didn’t like how close Alice was standing.

"You two are perfect together," said Alice.

"He seemed a little judgmental," said Lucy.

"That’s just an act, he’s quite nice," said Alice. Lucy could just imagine her and Jane huddling together, plotting this match. She hated that they thought she was as dull as Mike was.

"You know what I think," Alice whispered as if she was telling a secret. "I think nice plus nice has great potential for naughty."

Lucy wondered if Jane and Alice would dismiss her if she didn’t play along with them. She did not understand the rules that governed their friendship and hated that she probably never would. She flushed and pushed the door open harder than necessary. It hit Alice as she exited the stall.

"I’m not really that nice," she said, and left the bathroom without washing her hands. Back in the bar she went straight to her neighbor at the table in the corner.

"I live above you," she said when he looked up. "I’m Lucy. You’re Patrick, right?"

"I saw you come in," he said. "I didn’t know you recognized me." He clenched his fists tight and she could see he was embarrassed to have said that.

"You don’t want to get some dinner do you?" she asked.

"What about your friends?" he asked and looked to where Alice and Jane were conferring.
"Those people aren’t friends,” said Lucy, “I just work with them."

“I guess that’s a confusing line to differentiate between,” said Patrick as they walked out the door.

“It’s pretty straightforward if you’re a crappy person,” said Lucy.

“I doubt you’re a crappy person,” said Patrick.

“You think I’m nice?” asked Lucy.

“I doubt that too,” said Patrick.
They lay in perfect commas, watching each other out of one eye open. He told her about the time he held a pile of pills in his palm and wondered if they would jump into his mouth on their own. They strained up from his hand and seemed as if they would. She moved closer and traced his shoulder in slow circles.

"Lucy," Patrick said, "I really like you."

She kissed him on the mouth and tasted garlic on his tongue.
Uncle Sammy’s stomach began acting up the moment he got on the bus in Wisconsin. He spent the long trip clearing his throat to disguise the noises it was making and sneaking looks at the woman in the window seat next to him. She was nicely shaped and close to his age. When the bus arrived at docking gate #2, he jumped out of his seat to let her pass. She moved quickly and stood on tip toe, straining to reach her suitcase. He wondered where her husband was. It angered him to see a woman like her all alone. He looked around the bus to see if anyone else noticed but it was a selfish, self absorbed world they lived in, these bus people. The young man in the row behind Uncle Sammy was just standing there, craning his neck towards the door.

“Hey buddy.” said Uncle Sammy.

The young man didn’t move.

Uncle Sammy snapped twice, “Buddy, you. You in the pink shirt.”

“Me?” said the young man and pointed to his chest.

“Yeah, you. There’s a lady here, trying to reach her bag.”
The young man flushed and reached up to help Uncle Sammy’s seat mate down with her bag. It was a square bag, one of the ones with wheels and an adjustable hand grip. The young man set it on the ground.

“Aren’t you going to set that up for her?” asked Uncle Sammy.

The young man pulled out the hand grip.

“Good,” said Uncle Sammy. “That’s good.” He put an elbow up on the back of the seat. Uncle Sammy had kept all his hair and he had one dimple. It made him look jaunty and young and surely the woman would see this. She might give him her number. Uncle Sammy’s niece Ramona was the manager of the local theater. He could take the woman to see one of her shows. They would get VIP seats. But the woman didn’t look at him. Instead, she smiled at the young man behind Uncle Sammy.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

Uncle Sammy cleared his throat.

The line of people started to move and the woman rolled her bag down the aisle without a word to Uncle Sammy.

The station outside was smaller than the past three Uncle Sammy had traveled to on Ramona’s behalf. Outside the wide front windows there was black asphalt and panel after panel of dry grass. The air was hot and when the glass door banged open he did not see a lake. This did not seem right. There were 10,000 lakes in Minnesota. It did not make sense that with 10,000 there could be a dry town. Uncle Sammy was appalled by the city planners. Imbeciles, all of them. He hailed a cab and read
Ramona’s address aloud, carefully pronouncing the street name from the phonetic spelling his sister had given him.

Standing outside Ramona’s house, Uncle Sammy was sure the cab had brought him to the wrong place. The exterior was a mess, gray with loose siding. One of the front steps was missing a board. In the lot next door there was a factory releasing a sweet, smoky smell. Uncle Sammy stepped into the tomato plants curling along the broken steps and peered inside. He cupped his palms around his eyes to see better and the window glass cooled the sides of his hands. He did not hear Ramona pull up behind him until the car door slammed.

“Pumpkin!” said Uncle Sammy, turning around and squinting against the sun.

“Oh God,” said Ramona. She kicked a tire. “I knew it. I knew it. I knew I shouldn’t have called mom.”

Uncle Sammy moved to hug her and saw that her face was saggy along the chin line. Her hair was still a frightening shade of tarry black and he wondered if maybe sneaking a little bleach in her shampoo bottle might help with that. Her shoulder blades pressed together when he squeezed them.

“I had the most wonderful trip,” said Uncle Sammy. “I counted fifteen lakes on the way here, but I couldn’t find yours.”
“Sammy,” said Ramona, backing away from him, “I don’t know what she told you, but she was wrong. Mom was wrong Sammy. I’m fine.”

“Of course you are, sweet pea.”

“No. Listen. You’ve got to listen.”

“I’m listening duck.”

“I like this boyfriend. I want to keep him.” She bit her lip. “He’s got potential, Sammy. We’re good together. I can feel it. Look, he’s cast me in his play. I’m acting now. I’m not in the box office anymore. He’s given me a chance and it’s not just that. He’s really sweet to me. He cooks me dinner.”

She had backed so far away from Uncle Sammy that she was pressed up against the rear tires. “Please don’t scare him Sammy. OK?”

“Is that really your car?” asked Uncle Sammy walking around it. Both headlights were cracked and the upholstery inside had long slashes down the cushions.

“He’s a fabulous actor, director too. I’m sure that’s what mom doesn’t like about him. It’s got to be. But you should see him. He steals the show, I mean of course he does, he’s the lead. But really. He’s got something great. He’s talented. He’s good. I swear.”

“Your mother wouldn’t want to see you in that car,” Uncle Sammy knocked on the hood. “When’s the last time you checked the oil.”

“Oh God. Sammy, forget what I just said. You can’t tell mom that I’m acting. She’ll be so mad. Please don’t say anything.”
"Your mother loves you."

"I know. I know she does. And I know she sent you out here because she’s worried. But I’m happy Sam. No matter what she told you, no matter what she thinks is wrong, I’m happy."

Uncle Sammy put down his suitcase. It was small and held only three pairs of boxers, some fresh socks, his return bus ticket and a check from his sister that would cover Ramona’s travel costs home.

"Your mom said he won’t marry you," he said.

This had made Uncle Sammy furious. A nothing man, an actor man, not wanting to marry his Ramona. It was unthinkable. It was absurd. It had happened before. In the past five years, Uncle Sammy had traveled to Queens, Syracuse and Rochester to wreck Ramona’s relationships with Steve, Tyler, and Mouse respectively. Children never understood what was best for them. But she would come around. She always did. It was a mistake, Uncle Sammy thought, to underestimate the power of family.

"I knew it!" Ramona jumped forward and pointed a finger at Uncle Sammy. "She twists everything around. I told her I didn’t know if I believed in marriage. It was an abstract conversation, Sam. It wasn’t tied to anything. But even if I did believe in it, I’ve only been dating the guy for three months. No one gets married after three months." Ramona walked to her front door. "I am taking this relationship slow," she said.

"Well there’s nothing wrong with slow as long as his intentions are good." Uncle Sammy followed her and watched her
hands shake finding the right key. He hated that these men she dated made her so nervous.

"I don’t want you to meet him," said Ramona and opened the door. "You’ll scare him off. Talking about marriage and kids. Shoot, you’ll scare me too."

"Life goes by fast, young lady. You just don’t understand that yet."

"I am a grown woman, Sam."

"I know you are pumpkin. That’s why I’m here. To see my grown-up girl."

"OK, but you’re not meeting him."

The inside of the house was not as bad as the out. It had nice wooden furniture and patterned throw rugs on the floor.

"I should call Mom and chew her out for this," said Ramona, taking Uncle Sammy’s suitcase.

He sat down on a carved rocker. He didn’t feel bad exactly. Just a little sick.

"Oh Sam, I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. It’s good to see you, really." She ran over and hugged him from behind, pressing her cheek to his. She smelled like cucumber.

"I don’t mean to be trouble," he said.

"I know. I just really like this guy. Really really. And I’m getting up there. All my friends are having kids.” Uncle Sammy wanted to say that this was his point exactly. That she was missing the train. That she didn’t want to end up the lonely one at every family meal.
“Honey,” he said, “He’s out there. I know it. You just maybe haven’t bumped horses yet.”

Ramona sat down across from him and ran a fingernail through the gap in her front teeth. “I have to work tonight,” she said. “I can’t stay here with you. Are you going to be alright on your own?”

Uncle Sammy’s stomach clenched uncomfortably. “Where’s the bathroom?” he asked.

Ramona made Uncle Sammy a late lunch of macaroni and cheese. While she cooked, he looked at the mish mash of photographs on the refrigerator. In each one Ramona was smiling too hard. There was one with her and a man. He had a hard chin and blonde hair receding far back on his scalp.

“Is that him?” asked Uncle Sammy, pointing to the receding hairline.

“No,” said Ramona, not looking up.

“That’s not him?”

“That’s a friend, Sam.”

“But not a boyfriend?”

“No.” Ramona put a bowl of powdery orange pasta in front of him.

“There’s no picture of me up there,” said Uncle Sammy.

“I have pictures of you in other parts of the house.”
In his wallet Uncle Sammy had a picture of Ramona. She was six years old, and Uncle Sammy was holding her by the arm and leg and swinging her. The shot was blurry with red and orange sun stripes, but looking at it could bring him right back to that day. To the way Ramona felt in his hands, bones so thin and her mother calling from the porch, careful with her Sam.

His stomach seized and he knew he shouldn’t eat the pasta, but he picked up his spoon anyway. He didn’t want to hurt Ramona’s feelings.

Ramona had to get to the theater early to get in costume but she showed Uncle Sammy how to work the television and where to call for pizza delivery if he got hungry. When she left he went exploring. In her bedroom he scouted the picture frames by the bed. They were of scenery: lakes and a mountain he did not recognize. He opened her bureau drawers and sorted through the clothes. On her bookcase he pulled out paper volumes of plays, some marked with folded pages, and hunted behind them. He searched the videotapes and CDs.

The bathroom was his last bet. The thought that Ramona had lied, that she had no picture of him, that she did not think of him as often as she could, made him run to it holding his stomach. Across from the pot, there was an unframed photograph taped to the wall. It was of a man launching off a diving board,
head angled down. For a heart leaping moment, Uncle Sammy thought it was himself. When he was young he had been a champion diver. But when he stood up for a closer look, he saw that the man in the picture had a very pink head, and that the hairline receded far back on it. It was the same man from the fridge.

Uncle Sammy considered calling Ramona, letting her know he was on to her, that he knew she had lied about the pictures. But she had not left him a number where she was. He zipped, flushed and left the bathroom. Standing in the middle of her room, books and CDs and clothes spread around him, he got angry. Who did she think raised her anyway? Her parents, sure, but wasn’t Uncle Sammy always there? Always keeping her from trouble? It seemed impossible that she could even function without him. He began to worry. Maybe he should not have let her go to town alone. He imagined her lying by the side of the highway. The image was vivid, blood crawling out of her mouth, an arm bent crooked over her head. Sometimes Uncle Sammy thought he and Ramona were psychically linked. Most times when he called her, she would say she had just been thinking of him. And sometimes, when she called him, he had just looked up her phone number to do the same.

There was a bike in the hallway. He wheeled it out of the house and pedaled down a gravel path. The way to town was well marked and ten miles away. He stopped frequently to check the ditches in the side of the road. He held his breath each time.

In town he asked a young woman on the street for directions to the theater.
The play was almost over, the usher said, but Uncle Sammy
could watch from the television in the lobby. There, on the
screen was Ramona, dangling on a wire above the stage. He clapped
his hands, “there she is!” he told the usher, who put a finger to
her lips and shook her head. Uncle Sammy went back to the TV
screen and watched Ramona swinging lazily over the stage. There
was a cigarette in her hand. She looked old, smoking. Underneath
her was a woman dressed as a mime and a man with hunched
shoulders. The man looked familiar. Uncle Sammy looked closer.
His head was pink. His blonde hair was sparse.

Uncle Sammy left the lobby. He waited outside the theater and
hid behind a thick clump of bushes. The audience and then Ramona
passed him, hurrying so quickly to their cars that he didn’t even
have to duck. He leaned against the wall. The theater doors
opened again and the man with the pink head stepped out. He
walked down the street and Uncle Sammy followed, keeping well
behind.

They turned into an alley. The man went down a few short steps
and through a door that had no windows. Uncle Sammy did too.
Inside there were rectangular beer lights hanging above pool
Tables and a series of battle axes mounted on the walls. Uncle
Sammy took a blue velvet seat at the far end of the bar top and
ordered a coke from a woman with sprayed blonde bangs and heavy
lipstick. There were two pool games going on and Pink Head took
over the third table. Uncle Sammy spun his seat around and
watched Pink Head sink ball after ball into the corner pocket.
He drained his coke and the bartender poured him a new one. His stomach hurt. He thought about what he might say to Pink Head. The first time talking was the hardest. He chewed a piece of ice and then Pink Head was next to him.

"Hey guy," he said, "you interested in a game?"

Uncle Sammy did not usually go to bars. He did not usually play pool. His left eye was lacking in all depth perception, but he took a deep breath and stood up.

"I’m not so good," he said.

"It’s all in fun, man. It gets lonely shooting them in by myself." Pink Head’s name was Aaron. He asked what Uncle Sammy was drinking and soon Uncle Sammy was sipping something that tasted like maraschino cherries and whisky and wasn’t coke at all.

The younger man was loose and loud and clapped Uncle Sammy on the back when Uncle Sammy made a shot. He didn’t make many. Aaron asked him where he was from.

"Out East," he said. He did not say that he lived with his sister. Around strangers he felt funny about that.

Aaron talked easily. Almost as if Uncle Sammy was an old friend. That night, he said, the performance had gone badly.

"It was the 2nd act," said Aaron. "The conceptual presence of the hanging fool just wasn’t there. Have you seen the play?"

Uncle Sammy confessed nothing.

"Well better you didn’t tonight. The woman I had filling in is not an actor. She muffed it. No expression. Nothing."
Uncle Sammy stayed quiet. Ramona had looked okay to him.

"We need to find a better solution for tomorrow. She is going to kill me when I tell her, though." Aaron twisted his ring on his finger and bit his lip. "Great girl, great. But not an actor."

Uncle Sammy contemplated how to introduce the subject of marriage into the conversation. Straightforward, he decided, was best.

"My niece is in love," he said. "She wants to get married." He spoke loudly and the power of his own voice impressed him. "She’s a beauty, my niece. But the man she’s with, he doesn’t realize what he’s got. That man needs to get down on his knees. Women deserve to be worshipped. They deserve to be safe. Have their own house. A nice one, in New Rochelle. And kids. Women need to be taken care of. And when that happens they will take care of you. It’s true. It’s proven. Look at June Cleaver. Look at Lucy."

"Those women were repressed, man," said Aaron. "And Lucy didn’t take care of anything. She was always messing up."

"Liar!" shouted Uncle Sammy, pointing a finger at Aaron. "Un-appreciator." For Ramona, Uncle Sammy would fight. But Aaron was looking around the bar, watching the people watching Uncle Sammy.

"Now that’s stage presence, my friend," he said, clapping Uncle Sammy on the shoulder. "That’s natural fuckin’ eyes on the
prize ability. What are you doing tomorrow? You want an acting
gig?"

It happened so fast that Uncle Sammy barely had time to use
the rest room before he and Aaron were walking through the night.
They passed underneath old fashioned street lamps and then they
were in front of the theater. Aaron unlocked the door and soon
Uncle Sammy was dangling over the stage. The harness was tight
over his crotch and he realized with a jolt that he was going to
have an accident in his pants if he didn't get down soon.

Beneath him, Aaron was shouting up directions, "It's a rhyme,"
he said. "You have to rhyme the line. Get the beat right."

The theater was dark except for two dim back stage lights.
Uncle Sammy spun round and round on the wire. He tried to read
the paper in his hand, but the words didn't make sense. He
kicked his feet. They touched nothing.

"I need to get down," he said.

"No," said Aaron, "annunciate."

"Down," he said. "Now."

"Just once more. Try again."

"Please," said Uncle Sammy, afraid now of how far he was off
the ground. How badly he had to get to the bathroom.

"Once more," said Aaron.

And then it happened. Uncle Sammy's stomach contracted and he
lost it. The warm blast soaked through his pants. He felt it drip
down his leg. Aaron was still calling the line from below. And
then there was silence.

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Uncle Sammy’s eyes were wide open. He swayed slowly above.

“Get me down from here,” he said.

Aaron stood below, and wiped his face with his hand.

“Get me down now!” said Sammy.

Aaron scrambled to the rope and released it too fast. Uncle Sammy slammed to the floor. He had to wait for Aaron to unhook him from the wire. As soon as he was free he stumbled forward wet and stinking.

“You don’t want to get married?” he said. The world was tilting and Aaron kept leaning to the side, righting himself, and then leaning to the side again. Uncle Sammy tried again. “You don’t want kids?”

The spinning Aaron took a step back.

“Are you OK, man?” he asked. He gagged.

Uncle Sammy looked at the ground. It heaved gently. “I want kids,” he said. “I always wanted kids.” His eyes were loose. Something wet was gathering in them.

“OK bud,” said Aaron, “It’s cool. It’s okay. We should get you out of here.”

Uncle Sammy felt the thickness in his pants slide further down his leg. He was losing Ramona. She would find out about this. She would look at him differently.

“Can you take off the harness?” asked Aaron.

“Take care of them and they’ll take care of you,” said Uncle Sammy. “That’s how it works.”
"I can help you man, but if you can do it yourself..." Aaron trailed off and Uncle Sammy lunged at him, punched him once, hard on the cheek. Aaron lifted his arm to defend himself and Uncle Sammy hit him again. And then he was pounding, feeling the wham wham of solid smacks connecting him to Aaron. He felt like he hadn't touched anyone in years. When Aaron hit him back Uncle Sammy fell over on to the stage. Aaron crawled away. Uncle Sammy didn't move.

"Crap." Aaron looked down at his clothes.

Uncle Sammy concentrated on keeping still. When he looked up at Aaron's thick body it was tense, crouched down, thigh muscles inside thin canvas shorts. Uncle Sammy's eye was beginning to swell.

"Man," said Aaron. "Oh man."

When they left the stage, they walked stiffly, not looking at each other. They separated at the brick wall. "Good to meet you man," said Aaron and extended his hand halfway before taking it back and running it across his head. Uncle Sammy biked home slowly, aware that he had no light and no helmet.

When Uncle Sammy got back to Ramona's, all the lights were on and there was a police car in the driveway.

"Oh God," said Ramona when she saw Uncle Sammy. She hugged him, arms wrapped tight around his thick middle. Uncle Sammy held himself stiff. "Someone tore up the house and then you were gone.
I didn’t know where you were.” She hugged him again. “This is
him,” said Ramona to a chubby policewoman who was on the phone,
“this is my Uncle Sammy.” Then she took a step back and covered
her nose with her hands.

The policewoman hung up the phone. “Are you OK sir?” she asked
and stared at his pants.

Ramona reached out to touch Uncle Sammy’s swollen eye. She
walked him to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. Uncle
Sammy looked at the policewoman and at Ramona. They were leaning
close to him, so close he could smell the stale coffee breath of
the one and the sweet cucumber skin of the other.

Ramona shook him. “Uncle Sammy, who did this? What happened?”

Uncle Sammy looked at the refrigerator door. There was no
picture of him. Why wasn’t there a photograph? Ramona squeezed
his shoulders, kneading the muscles. “Shh,” she said, “shh. It’s
okay. I’m here. It’s okay.” She was standing too close to him and
he tried to stand up.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he said.

“You can call me tomorrow if that’s easier,” said the
policewoman and put away her notepad.

“That would be good,” said Ramona. The door closed and there
was quiet. She moved across the room and filled the tea kettle.
“Come on, Uncle Sammy,” she said, and led him to the bathroom.
She turned on the water and helped him take off his clothes.

At first he was shy, trying to push her away. But then it was
just her, Ramona. His Ramona, and he let her. Let her unzip and
unbutton and peel away. Ramona held his arm while he climbed into
the tub and when he was clean she put a blanket around his
shoulders and cinched it tight even though the heat of the night
was inside the house, was nestled in between the floorboards,
clotting up the corners in the ceiling. She took the kettle of
water from the stovetop and tore the edge off a package of tea.
Uncle Sammy watched the hot water pour out. When she was done the
cup sat steaming in front of him.

"I can't," he said.

Ramona kissed him on the cheek. "Sure you can," she said and
lifted the cup to his mouth. "That's it. Drink it down."

And Uncle Sammy did. He drank and drank and when the cup was
empty he pressed it to his cheek, and shut his eyes. "I tried to
save you," he said.
I didn't approach the short groomsman. I'm far too timid for that, but once he came over and said hello, I felt myself get itchy. As if I either needed to scream obscenities at the blushing bride or screw the violet out of his cummerbund.

There is something thrilling about being pressed up against a toilet paper dispenser, $300 dress crinkled at the waist. And it's not like I was thinking of John at the moment. But I admit, at one point I did wonder if he was thinking of me.

When I was back looking proper in the reception hall, the short groomsman asked for my number. His palms were clammy and he breathed hard when he kissed so I was about to say no. But then I looked around and saw that John was watching me, so I gave it. I wanted him to see I was wanted. When I crossed the room, heels cliquing around dancing couples, John stood to greet me.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"I was just making friends," I said and my toe stuck on the raised carpet so that I had to hold on to his arm to catch myself.
"If you did what I think you did, that was disgusting," said John pulling me into a corner of the room by a potted palm.

"What did I just do?"

"Don't make me say it," he said and turned away. "Janesse, I thought I was doing you a favor coming here. Why'd you go off with that sketch ball?"

John and I were just friends so it was strange that he was getting riled about me and another man. Flattering though. And surprising. I wondered if the two of us could make something work. It wasn't a bad idea.

"Just because you care about me doesn't mean that man doesn't," I said to John.

He wiped one large hand down his face. "You're okay here then, if I leave?" he asked.

"But there's still the cake," I said as he put on his coat. "Don't you want cake?"

John was clipped at the office that next week, I sent him a bouquet of multi-colored gel pens in apology and then we were alright. I was glad too, because I wasn't exactly world's most popular at work. My official title was Consumer Consultant but what that really meant was I vetoed concepts that other people spent weeks developing. When the Fabrizio's Italian Palace mascots fell in love, the original romance took place in a Casino in Vegas and the chickens were dressed in black leather. No one
in the office was happy when I made them change the premise to a G-rated scene: feathers floating in a Ritz Carlton bubble bath and no beak action at all. The idea behind my job was to preserve the integrity of our target audience, but try explaining that to a coffee room full of pouting Creative Development Executives.

Co-worker discontent aside, I was exceptionally good at my job. Not that I deserved all the credit. I owed my corporate success in part to the prudish sensibilities of my sister, Mrs. Suburbia USA. I talked with her long distance, daily for advice. She had a good grip on mainstream America.

John was pretty much the only other person who I had social contact with nine to five. He was a member of the Creative Team but had enough perspective not to take my job too seriously. Plus, we had a lot in common. He watched his gut the same way I did. We had a regular date every Tuesday and Thursday to hit MoMo’s, this phenomenal salad bar a two mile walk away. That’s how I came to ask him to be my wedding escort. Nothing sexual of course. John’s just John and I have never in my life been able to make something romantic work with a friend. Actually, I’d never been able to make anything romantic work, period. I’m thirty years old and my biggest relationship was one-year long distance in college with a man I saw a total of nine times.

I try not to get worked up about it, but it was wedding season and I had three events lined up in three weeks. When you’re my age you can’t just go to a wedding single. Thank God for John. The one we had already attended was for a childhood friend, the
next for an old roommate, and the third for someone who I can’t place yet but who spelled my name right on the invitation.

"I think the man with the yellow tie felt my butt when we danced," I told John at the second wedding. The theme was Shangri La and the celebration was at the top of San Francisco’s most phallic building with a 360-degree view from the wrap around deck where we were sitting.

"There are a dozen men wearing yellow ties in there," said John and shielded his curved wooden tobacco pipe from the wind as he tried to light it one handed.

"The blonde one," I said. "The little guy."

"You like short men," said John. "Why is that?" His pipe wouldn’t light.

"They’re the only ones who like me," I said. "Short men like short women. We are un-intimidating."

"You’re not un-intimidating, you’re easy," said John. He threw the matches down on the ground and I leaned to pick them up, not entirely unconscious of the fact that I was flashing the top of my cleavage as I did.

"Don’t be jealous," I told him and lit his pipe. "You’re my favorite friend."

"I’m you’re only friend," said John. "That’s why you don’t talk to anyone but me at these weddings." He put down his pipe and removed his handkerchief from his breast pocket. It was
maroon and embroidered with his initials. According to John, all "proper" handkerchiefs were embroidered with someone's initials.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I'm just shy. I feel insecure around everyone but you, John. That's why I am how I am."

"Why are you kissing my butt so much, Janesse? Can't you just be a normal, mellow, friend?" John smoothed his handkerchief over his lap and refolded it carefully along the creases. "You're always telling me what a good person I am, it's weird." He tucked the handkerchief back in his pocket.

I felt as if a bird had just shat on my head. "But that's how I feel," I said. "John, you're my best friend."

"Look," said John. "I don't want to be cruel because I do like you and I'm flattered that you think so highly of me. But we're not best friends. We're colleagues. I enjoy working with you. The company was dull until you started there."

"Colleagues?" I said. The San Francisco horizon, shrouded in fog, tilted lazily out the corner of my eye. If I had tried to stand up then, I would have fallen.

"Let's just finish up this wedding and then maybe it's best if I don't go to any others. I think that will get us back on track, okay?" He lifted his drink, a Manhattan with three cherries, and sipped with his eyes cast down. "I'm just not interested, Janesse."

I stared at him for awhile and he put his hand on my knee and squeezed. I remembered with embarrassment how hard I had held his arm as we paid our respects to the bride.
"If you think I'm so awful, then why are you here?" I said and turned away so he wouldn't see how he had hurt me.

"I like you," he said gently, "And you asked me to come."

"Well thank you for the favor. You're quite the gentleman."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

He took out the handkerchief again and dabbed his mouth.

"That handkerchief makes you look stupid," I said.

He stood and kissed me on the cheek. "I think I've been quite well behaved today, don't you?" he said, and then he left.

I sat alone on the deck until the groomsman in the yellow tie approached to ask for matches. I gave him John's and then screwed him, but not in any true, heartfelt way.

The rest of the weekend I holed up in my sweatpants, the wedding makeup still on my face. Every time I caught myself in the mirror, there were blurred mascara streaks under my eyes. The effect fit my mood.

I called in sick to work and let my answering machine handle matters. An automated voice asking for my credit card number gave me a confirmation code for a free trip to Disney world. My sister called to say her daughter wanted a purple purse not a pink one for her birthday and asked if I had the gift receipt so she could do an exchange. I ordered three containers of sweet and sour chicken and ate every hour, on the hour not worrying about calories.
After missing one day of work, I should have gone in to face John. But I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to see him, but because I was afraid of how other people in the office would look at me. I called his cell phone instead. When he didn't answer after the fourth ring I wondered who he was eating lunch with and whether they had gone to MoMo's. That evening I called five more times without leaving a message. I knew he would know it was me. There are no mysteries now that cell phones have display screens. Just to make sure he wasn't screening my calls in particular, I also dialed twice from a pay phone. I was relieved when he didn't pick up then either. There is something paralyzing about knowing you are being purposefully avoided. That it was just a busy day for him gave me hope.

After a few hours of picking up my phone to check for a dial tone, I called my sister. While she put together a pan of macaroni and cheese for her happy little family, I told her how John had escorted me to two weddings before he went AWOL and how at the first one he had worn a suit to match my shoe color.

"What color?" she asked.

"Blue," I said, "Powder blue. He looked like Elvis."

"Please tell me he doesn't have sideburns," she said and her Cuisenaire whirred in the background. I raised my voice so she could hear me.

"Not ugly ones. He's stylish, he's got taste."

"So why isn't he calling?" She asked.
"I think maybe because I flirted with this other guy," I said. My sister was uptight when it came to sex.

"And how do you think that made him feel?" She took psychology classes at the community college and favored accusatory questions as a way of encouraging me to explore my feelings.

"He shouldn’t feel anything. We’re not even dating," I said.

"So why are you upset with him?" My sister had always had an easy time of romance. Her first boyfriend knocked her up and married her at twenty.

"He’s not returning my calls," I said, "I miss him."

"You’ve never even talked about him before."

"Of course I have. He’s one of my closest friends."

"You haven’t. Say it with me Janesse, I have never spoken about this guy before."

"Not to you maybe," I said.

"Okay," said my sister. "So you like him. What do you want from him?"

"I don’t know, for him not to be mad at me?"

"Could you write him a letter?" she suggested, "apologize or something?"

"But for what?" I asked.

"Write something general. Just smooth things over. Tell him what he wants to hear."

"How do I know what that is?"
"You’re the one in marketing," she said. "I’m a mere housewife." I heard a delighted scream in the background, and imagined my niece hurtling down the stairs. "Sounds like Al’s home," said my sister, "I’ve got to make sure he walks the dog before he gets into his sweats. That man is getting harder to control in his old age."

"He’s twenty-eight," I said.

"He’s losing his hair. I’ve got to go."

"So I should go after him?" I said, desperate for her not to hang up.

"Just apologize," she said. "Be nice about it. Don’t get psycho."

That night I couldn’t sleep. I opened the last bottle of white wine from a case I’d bought the month before. It was warm and there was no ice. As I drank, I wandered around my apartment. All of my wall prints were left over from college. My furniture was put-it-together-yourself Target and none of my dishes matched. I wondered what was wrong with me that I was the only one in the world who didn’t have a wedding registry.

I took a piece of white paper and an array of colored pencils from my desk. Dear John, I wrote at the top of the page. And then I wasn’t sure what to write next. A normal approach wouldn’t sway him. He preferred the outlandish, the bizarre. He liked Crush soda, it was his favorite so I drew a picture of two Crush cans and then a heart bubble over the purple one’s head. Inside it I wrote, I’ve got a crush on you. Then, before I could second guess
myself, I sealed it in a shoebox with six cans of the grape flavor, stuck seven dollars worth of stamps on it and put it outside my door for the mailman.

When I woke up the next morning, I sat in bed for a long while analyzing what John's reaction to the package might be. He might not see that I was serious. Or he might be flattered but still uninterested. Or maybe he wouldn't even know it was from me. Maybe he would think it was from Mabel Lynn who he ate lunch with when he wasn't eating with me. The idea of John leaning in towards Mabel, taking her to weddings, getting down on one knee for their own, made my palms sweat.

The package wouldn't arrive for a few days, and I decided maybe I ought to just confront him myself. I showered and drove to his house. I was in my car for an hour, chewing the ends of my hair, screwing up the courage to knock before I realized it was only two o'clock and John wouldn't be back from work till five.

I put money in a parking meter and got myself a latte. There was a high school around the corner and at three, the kids trooped out. They moved in pairs, skinny girls with fast metabolisms taking bites of their boyfriend's pizza. When the ones with braces kissed, it struck me as a waste. Teeth that were still shifting had no right to be inside another person's mouth. All the good love karma was getting eaten up by kids too young to appreciate it.
I was painting pictures on my window with the dregs of my coffee when a policeman pulled up alongside me. He put his lights on, got out, and tapped the glass.

"You’ve been here nearly four hours now," he said.
I pointed to the meter. "I paid," I said.
"This is a school zone. There’s a two hour limit."
"Schools out though," I said.
"Are you listening to me?" he said.
I started the engine and the policeman followed me until I parked around the corner where I couldn’t see John’s door as well. By seven o’clock I was starving. I wondered if John had gone to play in the arcade after work with Mabel and if she was right now beating him at Restaurant Rowdies and laughing at his stupid food puns. What did the radicchio say to the arugula when the party ran out of booze? Why did the cheese go to the bad part of town?
I called my sister from my cell phone.
"This is ridiculous," she said. "You’re acting like a stalker. That’s not what I meant when I said apologize."
"He won’t return my calls."
"How many calls, Janesse?"
"Not many."
"I told you to write to him."
"He didn’t get my letter yet," I told her, "I just mailed it."
"Let me ask you," said my sister, "can you picture yourself dating this man?"
I closed my eyes and watched the vision form: John in a maroon smoking jacket, sitting in an overstuffed arm chair with the paper; me sketching his portrait from the couch across the room. Our children sipping from cans of Crush with handkerchiefs tucked in their pockets. Suit jackets to match my shoes hanging neatly in the closet.

"Yes," I said, "definitely."

"That’s fate then," said my sister. "It’s impossible for the human brain to forecast an image that isn’t destined to exist. If you dream it, you can do it. That’s straight from the mouth of Walt Disney."

"You’ve had a kid for too long," I said.

"Disney was a genius. Without him we would never have had a single successful family vacation."

"Okay," I said, "but what if John can’t dream it?"

"Doesn’t matter," she said. "You only need one dreamer. Besides, women have better instincts then men. If you can feel it now, John will feel it in a few months."

"How do I speed up the process?" I asked.

"Don’t," she said. "Just wait it out. Men like hard to get. Be hard to get, Janesse."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I’m sure. I envy you."

"Right," I said.

"I do. I would kill to be single again."

"You’re delusional."
"I don't expect you to understand. You won't realize how lucky you are until you're my age."

"I've already been your age," I said.

"It's best not to think of life in terms of years, too depressing," she said.

"You're not even thirty," I said.

"T-word, T-word," said my sister. "Hush up before someone hears you." Her daughter wailed in the background and then she hung up.

I almost listened to her, but how in touch with the dating world can you possibly be with an eight year old as your sole companion? I went to the nearest Safeway and bought a bouquet of blue daffodils. I put them on John's doorstep. When he still hadn't shown at nine o'clock, I went back to Safeway and bought a can of spam and a cupcake with a clown's face iced on top. I put all these on John's doorstep next to the flowers not because he would particularly like any of them but because they were all a little odd and I hoped he would see that and see that I was a little odd too. That I wasn't just some normal woman asking for his attention.

Anyway, he didn't come home that night. Or maybe he did but I was at the store or moving my car for that stupid cop. I spent the rest of the week in my sweatpants trying to figure out what had happened and drawing pictures of different scenarios. The first picture I drew was of John and Mabel wearing Mickey Mouse ears screwing in a Motel Six. Then I drew John in a hospital, the
powder blue suit he wore to the first wedding soaked through in blood. That made me feel a little better. Especially when he never called about the Crush and come Saturday I was stuck solo in a red flowered dress, matching shoes and no one to go with them.

At the third wedding, I found myself at a table with my childhood friend Mary. She had been the bride from Wedding #1 and was still glowing from matrimonial sex and her ceremony weight loss plan.

"Shouldn't you be on your honeymoon?" I asked.

"And miss this wedding? Not a chance. Can you believe how long it's been since us three girls have been in the same room?" she jerked a thumb at the bride.

"I can't believe she invited me," I said. "We haven't talked since we were twelve."

"Funny us all getting married at the same time," said Mary. I flagged down a waiter for a champagne refill.

"Not me," I said. "No rock here."

"Where's your fella?" asked Mary, pointing to the empty seat and John's name card beside me. "The one you brought to my wedding?"

"At a conference," I said. "It was last minute."

"Mine's always traveling too. It's nice to get some time in the house alone though, isn't it?"
"We don’t live together," I said.

"No? Is he fresh meat, or was he jaded by a past live in?"

I imagined John skinned, muscles gleaming. "I don’t know," I said.

"You don’t know if your boyfriend’s ever lived with someone before? How long have you been dating?"

"Six months." I was proud of how quickly I had answered and counted backwards in my head so I could figure out the month we would have met, in case she asked for the story.

"And you don’t know if he’s lived with someone? I’ve grilled Max on every last detail about his past relationships."

"I don’t see why it would matter," I said. "John’s with me now."

"That’s sweet," she said. "You two must be very comfortable together."

"We are," I said, and tried to think of some cozy, comfortable things we had done together. "We eat a lot of salad."

"Where is he from?" she asked. "Our area?"

I didn’t know where John was from. "No," I said. "We met in college."

"I thought you’ve only been dating six months."

"We’ve been friends forever," I said, "Don’t friendships make the best relationships? With a friend you can have a pimple and they won’t think you’re awful. You can fart all you want and they don’t care."

Mary looked around the room. "Well," she said.
I went into the hallway and called John.

"I'm sorry," I said into his voicemail. "John I just realized what kind of awful friend I was and I want to talk to you about it. Please call me back. I need to explain to you that I know what I did. How terrible I've been. I didn't mean to babble on so much about myself. I know how awful I must have sounded, probably sound now, and I want you to know that I'm going to find out about you. I'm going to do research and call other people and find out everything about you. You won't have to hide from me anymore; I'll be here for you. Not just now though, later too. I won't ever let you disappear like I let you disappear before. I'm sorry, John. Please call me. We need to start again."

I hung up feeling as if I was filled with helium. Back in the reception hall it was time for the bride to throw her bouquet. I stood underneath the stage, watching her with eight other girls. The bride turned her back on us and tossed. I had to elbow the girl next to me to get a good angle. The room cheered.

On the dance floor I twirled and whirled holding tight to my bouquet. Two men were clumped in a corner watching me and one looked familiar. I squinted to see. He was John's assistant. Maybe he would know something about why John hadn't called back. When the song ended, I went over.

The Assistant was gangly and pale. His friend was better looking, but with hunched shoulders and thinning hair.

"Aren't you the big winner," said the Assistant's friend, pointing to my bouquet. He offered me a bottle of champagne.
“What no glasses?” I asked, and turned my back to the dance floor so that I could swig without offending too many grandmothers.

“Just the hourglass before us,” said the Assistant’s friend, staring at my chest.

“Your friend must be drunk,” I said to the Assistant. “What’s his name?”

The Assistant looked down at the ground. “This is Marty,” he said.

“And I’m Janesse,” I stuck my hand out for a shake and the hand Marty gave me was flabby and weak.

“I’m going to hit the cake,” said the Assistant and turned away.

“Wait,” I said and put a hand on his arm, “what’s been going on, how’s work?”

“Good,” said the Assistant and pulled his arm away.

“Yeah? I’m desperate for news.”

“Or just desperate,” said the Assistant. “Come on,” he said to his friend, “cake.”

“Excuse me?” I leaned in closer. “I think I misheard you just then.”

“You didn’t,” said the Assistant. “I said desperate.”

“Please get some cake, Dude,” said Marty, stepping in between us. “You’re loaded. He’s loaded,” he said turning to me.

“Yeah Dude,” I said, “you’re committing career suicide. Get some cake.”
"You don't want to mess with her Marty," said the Assistant. "She's been harassing this guy from work. He's served her papers."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You said I could hit this," whispered Marty, as if I wasn't right there. "You're ruining it."

"What papers?" I asked.

"She's been following him around," said the Assistant, ignoring me. "Putting crap on his doorstep. Mailing him crazy letters. He's trying to get her canned but all they can do legally is issue a restraining order."

"I haven't been given a restraining order," I said.

"Well it's been issued," said the Assistant, turning to me. "John showed us the paperwork. It's definitely been issued."

"Then why'd you say I could get in there," said Marty, thumbing me.

I would have said 'hello,' in any other circumstance I would have said, 'hello boys, I'm right here.'

"You wanted something easy," said the Assistant.

"Thanks a lot," said Marty.

As they walked away the Assistant turned back and handed me the champagne bottle. "Sorry," he said. Then he pointed to my shoulder, hesitantly, as if he wasn't sure if he ought to. "Your strap is falling," he said.
I pulled the thin, silk ribbon up my shoulder blade and fingered the bright fabric which my sister had always said was my color.

When I got home I went straight for the phone
"You’re brilliant," I said when my sister picked up.
"It worked?" she asked. "He’s into it?"
"So into it," I said.
"What a fabulous story you two will have, you pursuing him. It’s a twist on the normal tale. It’s something you don’t often see."
"We’re already talking engagement," I said. "That’s what’s so wonderful about dating a best friend."
She was silent for a moment.
"Are you there?" I said, "I said we’re talking engagement."
"Wow," she said. "Wow, really?"
"You don’t believe me?"
"I believe you," she spoke slowly.
"I guess you think you’re the only one who can have a successful relationship. You’re the only one who can find someone, is that right?"
"No honey, that’s not what I meant."
"You think something’s wrong with me, don’t you. Well I’ve met someone now. We’re going to have a big wedding and kids and it’s going to be wonderful."
“Of course it is,” said my sister and I could hear her daughter far off, yelling.

“Now you have to go, right?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “No Janesse, I never have to go. I’m right here.”

“No one’s really here,” I said, and sat down heavily on the floor of my one bedroom apartment, framed watercolors on the wall, girly prints everywhere.

“I am,” she said. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m sorry that things are hard right now.”

“They’re not hard,” I said. “They’re beautiful. Everything is perfect and beautiful.”

I lay back on the floor then and my sister and I didn’t say anything else to each other, but I could hear her breathing in my ear.
DANCEING NAKED

Name brands were banned in Berkeley's snootiest health food store but Mimi didn't know this since she had never shopped there before. It was in an attempt to enrich her life that she went for the first time. Wandering through the fruit island, impressed by the organic colors and prices, she ran head long into Reuben. Well not headlong exactly, but close enough that she couldn't reverse her cart and turn around without being obvious. He was standing next to the strawberries holding a green plastic basket and sniffing it. She stared and he caught her.

"Mimi?" he said. "That's you, isn't it?"

It was too late to sneek away so she went full out the other extreme. When they hugged he pulled her into his chest hard. She could feel it in her tits.

"It's been jeez, how long?" she asked and pulled away, looking at him like she didn't know. Six years. Six years could do a lot. His hair was gone, shaved to hide balding but he still looked good. His arms were thick crossed over his chest.

"Long," he said. "You disappeared."

"I didn't. I went to New York," she said. "I wrote you a couple times. Don't you remember?"
"I guess I wasn't such a hot correspondent," he said.

"You wrote back," she was startled that he didn't remember. She had saved all his letters. They were tucked in between the pages of an old journal.

"I did?" He looked pleased with himself and leaned back against a pyramid of oranges. She saw then that it wasn't just his arms that had improved. It was his trim little waist and the thighs that ballooned out from under it. He was still short though, a whole head beneath her. She had always marveled how confidant he acted considering his height.

"So have you been in town long, or what?" He was loose and casual.

She looked for a ring, but his hands were tucked in his armpits. Only his wrists were visible, bones bizarrely small and delicate. She had once loved kissing the inner pulse of those wrists. The only vulnerable part of him.

She told him that she had just moved back. That she was engaged. She held out her left hand to prove it. Something lit up in him— just for a moment. Something that shot into Mimi and twisted around, an ugly feeling. Like she was about to get hurt.

"Is he good to you?" Reuben's eyes lingered on her chest. She had a large chest.

"Yeah," she said. "God, yeah." She leaned back against the citrus, mimicking Reuben's casual posture. She felt fat. As if the flesh beneath her chin was wobbling.

"He know about those shows you used to put on for us?"
Her elbow knocked a lemon and it hit the ground. She bent down to pick it up.

"Oh come on," he said, when she stood. "You remember." He leered forward and Mimi felt sick.

"That was a long time ago," she said and was immediately appalled at herself. She had turned into a prude. An old prude. A prune.

"God, you could dance back then," he said.

"Could I?" she didn’t meant to be, but she was flattered that he remembered. She peeled the label off the lemon, and when it wouldn’t stick back on without curling, put it in her cart. She tried to think of something sharp and sexy to say. "I should go," she said.

"It’s funny us meeting," he said. "I was just telling my wife about you last week."

A wave of nausea ran through her. She had never thought of him as the type to marry.

"I bet you and Nance would get along," he sounded as if he had just discovered a cure for something. "Why don’t you and your boyfriend come for dinner, we can get sauced and reconnect."

"Oh!" Mimi lifted her hands and this time knocked over the top layer of lemons. Reuben bent to help her pick them up. Before putting the lemons back on the pile he juggled three of them. Mimi watched. He wrote down her number and waved goodbye.

"Next week," he said. "I’ll call."
On the car ride home, Mimi stopped at a red light and worried. She wasn’t someone Reuben would enjoy anymore. She blamed Dan for this transformation. He let her act like a complete idiot, renting movies like Babe the Pig and Disney cartoons. Thanks to him, her idea of the perfect weekend was staying home in sweatpants and nagging him about washing dinner dishes. She scraped her fingernails down her cheeks.

An evening with Reuben would be awful. Not going though, that would be worse. That would be admitting she was as dull as she feared.

"Let me get this straight," said Dan over dinner. "You want me to go to your ex-boyfriend’s house? Haven’t you always told me I would hate your ex-boyfriends?"

She had dated three Reuben-types before she met Dan. Men who thought she looked good in photographs and at parties. Dan was not like any of them. He was a small town East Coaster, oblivious to social pecking orders, the dramas of friendships, slights of popularity. He was not good looking either. Not in the traditional way. Patchy red hair, squashed nose, deep sunk eyes and a pudge that clung to his arms, legs and neck in a puffy layer.

"You won’t hate him," she said. "Anyway, I promised him already. I can’t say no now."
Dan pointed his fork at her. "You know what your problem is?
You can never say no. No one is going to curl up and die if you
tell them you can't go over for dinner. Jeez Mimi. Do you even
like this guy?"

"Yes," she said, but she wasn't sure.

"Fine," said Dan. "You want to go? We'll go. We'll go with
little bells hanging from our ear lobes. But I just want you to
know right up front that as soon as this dinner is over we're
going to work on getting you to say no. This isn't for me mind
you, so don't get huffy. I'm a cool cat, I can groove with
anyone."

"You're a nerd, Dan," she said.

"That's right, a nerd who can groove," he said.

"Please don't groove at Reuben's," said Mimi. "Reuben is not
the grooving type."

"Sounds like squaresville to me," said Dan, drawing an
awkward, disconnected box in the air with his fingers.

"Dan," said Mimi, "It's the 21st century. Let's try and talk
normally okay?"

"Squaresville," said Dan. "And if you are going to flirt with
that man, tell me now so I have advance warning. Because you
baby, are one hot tamale and I must prepare to cool my fire."

Mimi was annoyed. If Dan could be jealous just once, she would
at least have something to work through in the relationship.
Something that would add a little spice.

"Oh I'll warn you, don't you worry," she said.
Dan snarled at her, snapping his teeth as if the idea of her flirting with someone else turned him on. He got horny at the un-sexiest moments.

"Dan," said Mimi and held her silverware up in a cross against him. He pushed back his chair and prowled towards her. Mimi let him kiss her face and nuzzle at her neck. She closed her eyes and although she tried not to, all she could think of was Reuben, his bald head coming at her.

Reuben’s house was up in the hills and three stories tall.

"Holy crapola," said Dan, idling the car. In the front garden was a rock framed koi pond. Orange flowered trumpet vines wrapped themselves up a carved wooden pagoda. Dan curbed the wheels hard. They got out of the car and looked up at the windows.

"Is the whole thing made of glass?" asked Dan.

On the side of the house there was a wheelchair ramp camouflaged behind a mosaic tiled wall. It led to a side door.

"Do you think his wife’s in a wheelchair?" asked Mimi.

"Did Reuben say anything about that?" Dan looked surprised.

The night opened up in front of Mimi. She almost clapped. She imagined herself taking Nance for long walks in the park. The other woman would roll along side her and they would talk for hours. Mimi imagined that someone living life in a wheelchair would be excited to have a friend like Mimi take an interest.
They could see movies downtown. They would never have to worry about parking.

“This might not be so bad,” said Mimi.

They had brought a housewarming plant and wine. Dan held both and they walked together to a green door with an elaborate stained glass sunflower laid into the top half. Before Mimi could get a breath or knock, it swung open. Reuben stood, beaming in a red silk kimono. His chest hair flourished from the gap above the robe’s waist tie and he was wearing black silk bottoms not unlike Mimi’s own.

“Hey there lady,” he said and reached for Mimi’s hand. He clasped it and his palms were warm and dry. There was jazz playing in the background and no electric lights in the entry hall. Just the jump of candle shadow. “Sir,” said Reuben, and nodded to Dan without taking either the proffered plant or the wine. When he turned his back and flapped them in, Dan raised an eyebrow at Mimi.

“Shoes here, please,” said Reuben and pointed to a white whicker shoe rack. The floors in the entrance way were lined in slim bamboo mats and so was the living room when they came out into it. “Nance, hey Nance, guess who’s here!” shouted Reuben. There was no answer. Dan jabbed Mimi hard in the back with the wine bottle. Maybe Nance hated the way people looked at her—she could have been born handicapped. Mimi resolved not to react at all but looked at Reuben with new respect. Dan looked at him too.
"Nice robe, man," said Dan.

Mimi stepped down hard on his foot.

Reuben laughed. "This isn’t a robe, it’s a kimono. 100% silk. Spun from the asses of real worms. Nance had it flown out from Tai Pei. This is how we real west coasters dress, right Mimi? Hey Nance!"

"Please don’t rush me." The voice came from far down the hall.

"Give him the plant," said Mimi. Dan did.

"Well behaved, isn’t he?" asked Reuben.

Mimi felt her face heat up but Dan laughed.

"It’s a Hillary Kalancho flowering cactus," he said. "It’s hard to kill."

Reuben took the plant and sniffed it. "Good because I killed everything this woman gave me. Plants, sourdough starter, flower bouquets. Everything."

"You bought him flowers?" Dan shook out his hand like it was hot. "Damn baby, why don’t you bring me flowers?"

Mimi shifted nervously on her feet. She realized with a rush of panic how she would feel facing one of Dan’s ex-girlfriends and was appalled that she hadn’t considered this before.

"I couldn’t even maintain a turtle she gave me," said Reuben. "Rocky," said Mimi, and smiled nervously to show her fiancé that everything was fine.

"You killed a turtle?" asked Dan.

"I returned him to the pet store. He got a shell disease."
Sounds came from behind a white slatted door. Someone was moving back there. Rolling? Mimi steeled herself to act cool. The door banged open, hitting the wall. Standing on the other side of it was an unreasonably beautiful woman. Her hair was long, ruddy brown and blow-dry fresh. Her eyes were shallow lidded and slightly turned out, as if she was half something Asian. Thai maybe. Mimi was not someone who usually noticed lips, but with a pair as plump and smooth as Nance’s, it was impossible not to. Her body was no joke either. You could see all of it, clothed as it was in a tight red skirt and sheer black blouse that showcased a small set of perky breasts, bound together in the world’s skimpiest half bra.

“Meet my wife,” said Reuben.

“Wow,” said Dan.

Nance looked Dan up and down and gave a tight smile. “Wow?” she said.

“Sorry,” said Dan.

“Never apologize for being impressed by a woman,” Nance walked towards them. “Didn’t your wife teach you that?”

“Oh, we’re not married,” Mimi and Dan spoke together, and then looked at each other.

“Yet,” said Mimi, “we’re not married yet.” She felt inadequate, wet and lumpy like dough.

Nance held out one long brown arm and waited. Mimi stepped up to meet her and shook vigorously.
"That's quite a ring you've got," said Nance. She grabbed Mimi's hand and brought it to her face. "Think it will weigh you down too much or can you help me in the kitchen?" Mimi followed Nance's pert, stairmastered ass through the white door. In the kitchen, Nance bee-lined for a cupboard above the sink leaving Mimi alone by the stove. Removing a shiny gold box from a cupboard, Nance pulled a silver wrapped bottle out of it. When she turned around and smiled nothing but her mouth changed.

"You have a beautiful home," said Mimi.

"You've only seen the front of it." Nance peeled back the silver paper and it tore delicately.

"Oh, I know. I like it though," said Mimi.

"What's there to like?" Nance stared at her.

"I like your ramp," she said. "I thought you were a cripple." She flushed.

Nance raised an eyebrow.

Mimi took a breath. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess that sounded bad."

Nance pulled four low-ball glasses from the cupboard and filled each with ice. "Did it?"

Mimi laughed nervously. "Maybe not," she said. She did not like hard alcohol but she wanted that drink badly now.

"Relax," said Nance. The wrinkles up near her eyes folded together. Nance was older than Mimi. Sexy-older. Mimi crossed her arms and covered up her red and yellow arm bracelets. They had cost a quarter each.
Nance handed her a glass and the two women clinked. They stood sipping together. The sound in the kitchen was ice cubes and the pull of Nance’s bare feet on the ceramic tile.

“We’re not early are we?” asked Mimi.

Nance watched Mimi without blinking from above the rim of her glass. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” Mimi sipped hard. She didn’t know anything. Not what to say, not how to smile. She thought she might not even know how to breathe.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” asked Nance.

“Of course not,” said Mimi.

“It’s all right to be honest,” said Nance, “We are fond of honesty in this house.”

They stood together. Nance would not stop staring at her. Mimi considered asking her about her job but she wasn’t sure if she had one. Being wrong always embarrassed her. “We brought you a plant,” she said finally. “For housewarming.”

“Reuben kills plants,” said Nance.

“I know,” said Mimi, “I tried to train him out of that once.”

Nance took a slow sip and Mimi knew that she had just said something very, very wrong. She wondered if she should apologize but didn’t know what to say. She considered her options: I’m sorry I used to sleep with your husband. I’m sorry I’ve been obsessed with him for the past six years. I’m sorry I’m in your house.

“We’ll probably just trash it when you leave,” said Nance.
Mimi choked on her drink.

"Honesty," said Nance and refilled both their glasses. "Back to the men, shall we?"

In front of the kitchen door, Nance put her finger to her lips and leaned her ear against it. She motioned Mimi to do the same and the two women stood oddly close, listening to the voices on the other side.

"You're not serious," Dan's voice came through the door. He sounded like he was about to laugh.

"Look at my wife," said Rueben. "Don't tell me you don't want to get in there."

Dan did laugh. "Shut up," he said.

"They want to swap us," said Nance to Mimi.

"Swap us like swap us?"

Nance looked above Mimi's head. "Yes, Mimi. Swap us like swap us. Does that bother you?"

Mimi was not sure if she was supposed to answer seriously. "We don't do that," she said, and smiled just in case.

"Your fiancé is adorable," said Nance.

Mimi had to take a second look at her to see if she was making fun. She wasn't.

"And you've already screwed my husband," she added.

"I'm confused. I'm sorry," Mimi said. She realized then that Nance wasn't just annoyed at her, she was furious. And why wouldn't she be? Her husband's ex-lover in her house. Mimi turned red realizing the extent of the social missteps she had
made in accepting Reuben’s invitation. She wished there was a
way to claw through the walls as delicately as Nance had removed
the silver foil from the bottle of liquor.

Nance smiled but her eyes were cold, staring right at Mimi.
Mimi was inexplicably frightened. But she was a grown woman.
She didn’t have to do anything she didn’t want to do.

“I don’t want to sleep with your husband,” she said.

Nance threw back her head and laughed. When she looked at
Mimi again, her whole face was softer. She was like one of those
changing pictures Mimi got at the dentist office as a child.

Looked at one way, angry, shift with the light, pleased.

“Calm down,” said Nance. “You look like you’re about to cry.”

“I’m not,” said Mimi and swallowed.

“Well calm down anyway. Reuben’s not serious.”

Mimi took a deep breath.

“Shall we?” Nance put a slender palm on the door. Her nails
were painted in gold. Mimi thought they looked trashy and felt a
little better. She nodded. Nance pushed the door open.

“Guess what,” whispered Dan to Mimi when she sat down next to
him on the thick embroidered couch. “They’re swingers. Isn’t
that great? I’ve never met swingers before.”

“Shhh,” said Mimi. Nance perched on Reuben’s lap and nuzzled
his face.

“I can’t wait to tell my brother about this. Real live
swingers.” Dan was so excited he was bouncing.
“Shhh,” she said again. She felt safer sitting next to Dan. Looking at Reuben’s proposition from Dan’s eyes made the other couple seem silly.

“Shhh, what?” asked Nance.

“Nothing,” said Mimi. “Dan’s babbling.”

“Babbling?” said Dan.

“And what is he babbling about?” Nance’s eyes drooped lazily and she ran her fingers through Reuben’s chest hair.

Mimi decided she hated Nance. “He thinks you’re beautiful,” she said and looked hopefully at her fiancé, begging him not to say anything that would embarrass them.

“It’s true,” said Dan, “I do.” His mouth was set in a straight line.

Mimi’s stomach clenched.

“Well then,” said Reuben. “Mimi why don’t you come and sit over here by me and Nance can sit over there with her admirer.”

“I’m fine here,” said Mimi and put an arm around Dan.

“Nonsense,” said Nance. “Possessiveness is so unattractive. Let’s switch. Mix things up, shall we?” She got up and sat on Dan’s other side, right up close to him. Mimi did not move until Dan pushed her lightly. She stood for a moment and then went to Reuben.

“Now that’s better,” said Reuben. “Now we can talk properly. And not like anyone is on anyone else’s team.”

“Nice scotch,” said Dan. “Mimi won’t let me keep any in the house.”
"That’s not true," said Mimi.

"Mimi thinks I’m a potential lush," said Dan.

"Stop it," said Mimi. "I do not."

"Relax, babe," said Dan. She shouldn’t have said he was babbling to Nance and Reuben, but she had just been protecting him. And he was right about the alcohol, she did get nervous when he drank.

"Nothing wrong with a good alcoholic," said Nance and lifted her glass. Dan, Reuben and Nance all clinked. Mimi was caught in a sip and lifted her own glass too late to join in.

"So," said Nance. "Mimi, Reuben tells me you are quite a good dancer."

"I’m not," said Mimi, looking quickly from Reuben to Nance.

"It’s true, she’s not," said Dan. "No sense of beat."

"Thanks Dan," said Mimi and hoped the subject would change magically, without her aid.

"Not dance club dancing," said Reuben, "stripping."

"Stripping," agreed Nance. "I’ve heard Mimi’s a natural."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dan.

"Our little Mimi, taking it all off," said Reuben.

"A stripper huh?" Dan smiled large until Mimi could see his gums. It was a false smile and looked out of place on him.

"Not professional," she said, trying to explain.

"Just for me and my friends," said Reuben. "She was something else, I’ll tell you that."
Mimi wanted to run over and shake Reuben. But she stayed put, wondering whether if she fainted she could hit her head and get out of this situation via ambulance.

"So, let's see this famous show," said Nance and changed the CD. The jazz had a lot of horn. Mimi didn't recognize it. She was never good at music. She chewed an ice cube.

Reuben smacked his hands together once. "Deal us what you got," he said to Mimi, "if you still got it."

"Yeah," said Dan, "come on, sweetheart." He sat back against the couch and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Ha ha," said Mimi.

"She's scared," said Nance.

"Mimi, you're not scared," said Dan.

"Sure she is," said Nance. "She won't do it." The older woman stood. "Maestro," she said and Reuben lifted a remote and turned the music up. Nance tossed her head, sending the thick mass of her hair into the air where, as she twisted from side to side it flew up and around her face.

Dan whistled and Reuben laughed. Nance smiled and kept wiggling. Mimi looked down at her glass. She watched Nance's hips move side to side as she shimmied down low, to a squat. Dan was watching Nance too, chin in hand.

"Dan," said Mimi.

He didn't answer.

"Dan," she said again. She snapped her fingers once. He didn't look at her. Mimi held her breath. Watching Dan watch
someone else was like catching a parent having sex. Worse even, because she had never wondered how witnessing Dan want someone else would feel.

"Come on," said Reuben. "Why don't you dance with Nance?"

"I don't like this game," said Mimi.

"Mimi doesn't like this game," said Reuben.

"Then she doesn't have to play," said Dan and Mimi was torn between being grateful to him for not insisting and angry at him for not wanting to see what she could do. She went into the kitchen, poured herself another drink, slammed it, and went back to the living room. Nance had removed her sheer black top and was wiggling around in her bra. Except her breasts were so small, they weren't really wiggling at all.

Mimi watched Nance for a minute and then sucked in her stomach and unbuttoned her blouse. She left it on so that it flapped open revealing a pink lace bra. She was proud of that bra. It was her best one.

"It's true, I'm not good with beat," she said and Dan and Reuben looked at her.

"Look at you," said Reuben.

Dan's cheeks sagged and Mimi felt her confidence returning. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. She could play this game, she could play any game these people wanted.

"What are you doing?" asked Dan.

"Dancing," her power was coming back to her.
"Well you look sex-y," said Reuben.

"Thank you Reuben," she said and started to dance. At first she was stiff and awful, too aware of the flesh on her back near her waist, the way the creases bunched when she moved.

"Close your eyes," said Nance. "I'm closing mine, close them."

Mimi did, aware of the couch in front of her and concentrating on her feet, keeping them confined to small circular steps so she wouldn't stumble forward and trip. Her arms lifted from their sides as if filled with helium. They raised high above her head and she could feel each finger waving. She twirled and snaked spinning round and round. Her bones smoothed to liquid and wove away from her body. Each limb separated.

She imagined Reuben watching her. It was impressive, she thought smugly, how she could still move, and she wanted the song, the dancing, to go on forever, all attention on her. When the music stopped she opened her eyes readily, proud of her fluidity. The room spun when she did and it took a few moments to focus. Reuben had moved over to sit with Dan on the couch and they were leaning close together. Dan was telling Reuben a long joke, one of his favorites: a priest, a rabbi, a condom, a cow. Nance was gone. Mimi heard the hiss of water hit a hot pan in the sink.

"You guys ready?" Nance called from the kitchen.

"We are," said Dan. "I think the dancing queen is too."
Reuben laughed and Mimi wasn't sure what was funny. She was still glowing from her performance. She was smug that Nance had stopped before Mimi had. That Mimi had out danced her.

"That was good, Mimi," said Reuben, "crazy to see that sort of behavior in a grown woman."

Dan plucked her shirt from the floor and handed it to her, holding it in front of him and not meeting her eyes. Mimi put it on, confused.

"Dinner then!" said Nance and pushed open the flapping kitchen door with her rear. She was holding a platter with a whole roast chicken, neck gaping and surrounded by a court of baby red potatoes, filed carrots. Beets.

Sitting down next to Reuben, across from Nance and too far from Dan, Mimi had a hard time chewing. Dan wouldn't look at her. Conversation was slow to start up, as if everyone was embarrassed to speak. The men faced each other over the chicken carcass and Dan, smiling that huge false smile broke the silence, confessing he didn’t know many people in the area. The mood relaxed. Reuben encouraged Dan to join his private club in the white turreted Claremont hotel. Dan did not admit that he and Mimi had already looked into that gym and determined it too expensive. Instead he said he’d love a weightlifting partner.

"Dan never lifts weights," said Mimi to Nance. She couldn’t think of anything else to say. No one had said anything about her dancing. Goosebumps plummeted and spread in prickly hairs down
her body. Mimi pressed her fingers hard into her palms underneath the table. She was angry.

Nance refilled her own glass. "Sounds like he does now," she said and turned towards the men. "We could all three go," she said to them. "Get dinner afterward."

Mimi kicked Dan under the table. He reached under and squeezed her knee but his hands were stiff and didn't calm her down. She couldn't eat the chicken. The texture was grainy. Her stomach hurt but there was no reason she should feel sick, Reuben had asked her to dance, he had wanted to see her.

"Why did you tell that joke while I was dancing?" asked Mimi. The conversation stopped and they looked at her.

"It was a funny joke," said Dan, and helped himself to seconds on carrots.

"It was," agreed Reuben.

"I didn’t hear it," said Nance. She smiled like a queen. Mimi couldn't figure out what Nance was so pleased about. It was Mimi who had won the dancing, Mimi who was the victor. She watched Dan’s face and he was shaking his head, just a barely, but enough that she knew she ought to stop talking. What had gone wrong? Was she not supposed to have danced? Was that it?

Yes, she realized, as the conversation took off, steered by Dan in another direction. That was it exactly. She was not supposed to have taken off her shirt for an ex-boyfriend and his unbeatably beautiful wife. It was all horribly clear now.
The other three were discussing the origins of personality and they leaned close together to debate. Mimi sat still, food untouched. Her face flushed on and off and she wished she could erase herself.

"One tweak," said Reuben, "one tweak in the brain, one single spark, that's all we are. All our brains. Each one identical except for one solitary anomaly."

Mimi pictured her own brain. Inadaptable, foolish. She was one million tweaks different from everyone else.

"I don't know about that," she ventured, desperate to make it back into the circle, to void what she had done.

"You don't know about what?" Reuben's lips were stained with beet.

Mimi looked around nervously. "We only use 3% of the brain anyway," she said. "So that 3% has got to be totally unique. In each person, I mean." She felt that what she had said was rote. Flat.

"What exactly do you mean?" asked Nance.

Mimi felt desperate. She looked at Dan. "Just what I said," she said.

"I'm with Reuben on this," said Dan, "one anomaly."

"Why are you siding with him?" asked Mimi.

Reuben, Dan and Nance looked at her.

"Mimi," said Dan, "do you want to go outside with me for a second, get some air? It's hot in here," he explained to Reuben, "she gets panicky when it's too hot."
"I'm not panicky," said Mimi. Her voice was too loud, she could hear it.

"What is she yelling about?" asked Nance.

Mimi knew if she spoke again she would cry, but she couldn't stop herself. "Dan," she was begging now. "You have to stop siding against me. I can't handle it. I just can't."

"She's drunk," said Nance.

"I'm not drunk," said Mimi.

"She's drunk," said Reuben.

Mimi eyes hurt. Her stomach hurt. "I want to go home," she said.

Dan walked up behind her. He rubbed her shoulders, his fingers kneading in hard.

"You can lie down in the guest room," said Nance and leaned close.

Nance was smooth. People like Nance always were. And Reuben, dance Mimi, dance for us. Mimi felt as if she was standing on the cold side of a thick glass wall.

"Come lie down," said Nance. She stood up and waited for Mimi to do the same.

Mimi felt then, very very tired. She looked up at Dan leaning her head back so she could see him with upside down eyes. He was looking across at Reuben. Look at me, she thought, just look at me. She upended her wine glass on the ground and the red spread out over a beige and black carpet.

Dan stepped back, surprised. "Mimi," he said.
"I hate you," she said to Reuben. "You're nothing. You're absolutely nothing to me."

Reuben blinked. Then he smiled, a lazy smile, and lifted his hands together. He began to clap, a slow, mocking clap, palms smacking. Pausing apart. Smacking. Nance joined in. Mimi stared at them. Dan's fingers gripped her shoulders. His eyes lowered to hers and she didn't recognize what was there.

"Oh Mimi," he said sadly.

In the car home they didn't say anything. Mimi couldn't look at him. She twisted her ring round and round her finger. She wondered if she should take it off. They got home and Dan unlocked the door, held it open for her. Heavily, she sat down on a chair at the kitchen table. She put her head down on the smooth wood and closed her eyes. The refrigerator door opened with a clean pop and then a hum.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Dan. I'm sorry."

"Hey now," he said. "What's there to be sorry about?"

She opened her eyes and pressed her ear hard into the cold polish of the table. The wood sounded like waves. She watched him pull a plastic bag of tortillas and a block of cheddar cheese out of the refrigerator.

"I'm starving," he said. "That woman's a crappy cook," He took a knife from the dish drainer.

"Dan?" said Mimi
“Yeah?” he answered.

“I wanted him to want me.”

He unwrapped the cheese. “I know,” he said.

She felt like she was going to cry but there wasn’t anything left in her that could come out. “I lie, Dan. I’m a liar.”

“I know.” He sniffed the cheese.

She thought about how badly she had wanted him to be jealous of Reuben. She thought of how he had looked at Nance.

“You thought she was a crappy cook?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? The worst. Driest chicken ever.”

“Dan?” Mimi asked again.

“What?” He pulled out two tortillas and folded each in half. With the knife he cut thick slices off the cheese. She didn’t tell him he was making the slices too big. That they wouldn’t melt properly. She watched him cram both quesadillas in the toaster oven. They overlapped. They would take forever to be done.

“Do you hate me?” she asked.

He pulled out two plates from the cupboard and held them behind his ears. “Eh?” He said, like he couldn’t hear.

“Nothing,” she said.

“That’s what I thought,” said Dan and put a plate in front of her.
Naomi never expected a mouse to give birth in a laundry hamper, and it was only after she selected the hot cycle, watched it spin and end, that she found the babies. There were four of them, curled spines, little pink claws stretched out, fur patchy. Because it was Josh’s laundry, she did not wash it again. The clothes dried guilty and while they did, she took the mouse corpses and dropped them in the garden. Watching them all that day, lined up like little foot soldiers in the Petunias, she wondered what Josh would say when he saw them. But coming home from work, tired and impatient, he didn’t notice. It bothered her, this not noticing but she didn’t say anything, not then. The next day, alone like usual in the house, she called him at work and when she heard his voice, distracted, annoyed, decided not to mention her part in their death.

“So,” he said. “There are dead mice in the garden.”

“He put them there,” said Naomi, hoping to sound crazy, savoring the frantic way her voice soared, up and out.

“Who?” asked Josh.
"The man in the forest," she said the first thing that came to her, and as she did, was pleased with how creepy it sounded.

"What man in the forest?" Josh was tired. Even over the phone she could tell he wasn't processing what she had said. He had switched back to the day shift at the police station and his sleep schedule was still off.

"The shadow man," she said, imagining a dark shape and hoping she wouldn't have to explain further to get Josh to leave work and keep her company for a while. "He's sending us a warning."

"Right," said Josh, and she heard the muffled sound of his hand over the mouth piece and, his voice unintelligible, talking to someone in the office.

"Josh?" she said, "are you there?"

"I'm here," he said, and his voice came in clearly again, "stop worrying. They're just mice. It's a garden. It's nature."

"It's unnatural nature," said Naomi "I hate it here." The night before she had heard Mama mouse scratching through the dry wall, searching.

"Why don't you bury them?" Josh said, "You could have a little funeral." Naomi imagined him pulling on his ears, something he did when he was distracted.

"We could move back home," she said and thought of New York City, of the way you could stand in your apartment and look across at someone else's, see what was happening in all the windows.
"We’re home now, Naomi," said Josh.

"I don’t have anyone to talk to here," she said.

"You have me," his voice was losing its tolerance.

"You’re always gone," she said.

"I am not," said Josh. "And anyway you call me ten times a day."

"So now you don’t want me calling you?" Naomi moved the phone to her other ear.

"Stop acting like this," said Josh, "go take a nap."

"I just woke up, Josh. I don’t want to nap. Can you come home please?"

"Go to your studio and do something if you don’t want to nap," he said.

"I’m not inspired." The idea of working in her studio, of welding some stupid statue that no one in town would ever appreciate because no one in Petaluma understood art, did not appeal. She took the phone outside and sat on the steps.

"I’m going now," said Josh. "Try and leave the house today, OK?"

"I left the house," she said. "I’m in the garden." But Josh had already hung up. She sat for a while avoiding eye contact with the mice and wondered if she should make another sandwich. She was only nine weeks along but figured pregnant was pregnant and if she didn’t get to eat for two, what was the point.

When Josh came home from the station that evening he crouched next to Naomi’s stomach and said hello. His hair was perfectly
combed and still wet from the gel he had straightened through it that morning. When she first met him she had thought he was horribly unattractive with too-tight-together eyes. But things like that changed. He pinched her cheek.

"You look wonderful," he said.

"I'm bloated," she answered.

"You are beauty incarnate," he said.

To which, standing in the bright white kitchen with the farm friendly linoleum, she had to say, Ha. Not just because there was nothing beautiful about her, but because a useless person like Naomi, a person living in the middle of chicken-feed nowhere with the death of four baby mice on her hands— that kind of person was, in terms of incarnation, not even a candidate.

"One day I'm not going to be able to contain myself," said Josh. "I'm going to hug you so hard your eyeballs are going to pop right out." He cracked a soda and drank it all at once, watching her down the narrow slope of his nose.

She told him that normal people didn't think popping eyeballs were all that attractive.

She told him that between the two of them, their child would have an excessively high risk of mental instability.

She told him she was subscribing to a new self-help seminar for women who were regretting their pregnancy and he better not complain about the bill.

He said, "I support whatever phase you're in. Just give me a heads up when you're ready to snap out of it."
“Did you hear me?” said Naomi, talking to his back as he peered into the refrigerator, “I said I am regretting this pregnancy.”

“Look Naomi,” Josh turned around with an apple in his hand, “we talked about having this baby. You agreed that you could handle it. That’s why we moved here, remember?”

“We moved here because you couldn’t get promoted in New York,” said Naomi, “we got pregnant by accident, and you were the one who said I could handle it. Not me.”

“Pregnancy is a two person decision,” said Josh firmly, “and accidents are soldiers of fate.” He bit through the red skin of the apple and she wished it would bite back.

“Accidents are soldiers of fate,” said Naomi, “that’s very right wing of you.”

Josh was not taking her seriously and she hated it. She wondered if she should subscribe to a self-help seminar, but knew it wouldn’t do a thing. The only thing that would help her was a quick DC operation and a two person ticket back to New York. She missed walking out of her front door and seeing actual people. She wanted to fall asleep listening to the zip of cars on the FDR. She wanted museums and theater and successful, child free couples for neighbors.

“When’s dinner?” asked Josh, and when Naomi answered, “now,” he went upstairs to change. She turned the heat off the stove and stood over it until he came back. She had been cooking all day, madly dicing and sautéing for dinner and baking two loaves
of bread just for fun. It was the only thing she could do to keep from thinking about the nothing in her backyard. Josh sensed danger in the city, but not in Petaluma where the bare farmlands threatened. He should understand the situation he was putting her in, leaving her miles from no one.

"I think we should set up an alarm system," she said and scooped tortilla soup out of a stock pot and into two bowls. Her stomach clenched. Her baby was digging its claws in, she imagined blood running out of its eyes and sharp pointy teeth.

Josh put spoons on top of folded cloth napkins, one across from the other on the Formica table. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm talking about security," she said. "Flashing lights, computerized wailing, something that will protect me when you're not here." She handed him his bowl and sat down with hers. "I'm alone every day. What if something from the woods decides to come by the house and kill me?"

"Like what?"

"A vagrant wanderer," she said. "Or wolves."

"First, there are no vagrant wanderers here," he said, "we're not in New York. And second, you can call me."

"I thought I was calling you too much." Naomi took a sip of water and weighed the glass in her hand. She could throw it at him. That would be grounds for abortion, alimony and a free ticket home. Except she loved Josh. She wanted him with her.
She put the glass back on the table. "And that doesn't address the issue of the wolves," she said.

"That's because there are no wolves," said Josh. "I think you need to find some other hobby besides hanging around the house. Or hey, here's an idea, you could get a job." He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Not fair," said Naomi, "you told me I didn't need to work if we moved out here. That was part of the deal."

"So you could have more time for your art," he said, "That was the deal." He walked over to her and even though she kept herself stiff, wrapped his arms all the way around and held. "I think you'd be happier if you got into that studio of yours and tried some creative emoting," he said. "If you're going to fantasize about unrealistic dangers, at least channel that imagination somewhere productive."

"There are mice running through the house," she said. "I can smell them."

"Are you acting crazy on purpose?" he asked, breathing into her ear.

"This is not crazy," said Naomi, "this is mice stinking up the dry wall."

"I know you're afraid of being a mom," said Josh.

"I'm not afraid," said Naomi, "I just don't want to do it and we only have a few more weeks before we're committed. It's growing organs, you know. And spikes, and a tail."
“Baby, I love you madly,” he dipped her and held her in a swoon over the linoleum floor, “and our child is going to be perfect, so stop obsessing.”

Naomi kicked her feet to stand up straight. “If you had been listening, you’d know I’m obsessing about mice, not babies,” she said.

“Mice, babies. It’s all linked in your head, that’s what the shrink at work says.”

“You’ve been talking to a psychiatrist?” asked Naomi, pleased and surprised.

“Not because of you,” he said, “I just told him the mouse thing as a side story. He thought it was funny.”

That afternoon and all that night it was hard to sleep. Mama mouse ran frantic, her footsteps tapping in the walls.

During the next few days, Naomi called Josh at work so often that Cara who answered the phone told him it might just save time if he drove by the house as part of his route, no offense.

“And Cara knows everything, is that it?” Naomi asked when Josh came home that night. She imagined him nuzzling Cara’s oily chicken neck and ran into the bathroom to vomit. Clutching the bare porcelain rim she kept her hands away from the stained off color droplets Josh always seemed to leave behind.

“I thought you’d be happy,” he said rubbing her back as she humped over the toilet. “We can have lunch together now.” His tone was patronizing and she hated it. She had been waking him up
at night, pressing his ear to the walls. But he never heard Mama mouse. He wouldn't try. She realized with horror that this was a newly developed trait.

"You're different," she said to him, taking the glass of water he offered.

"Who me?" he asked.

"What do I really know about you anymore?" she started to cry and as she did, noted quietly that this would never have happened to her in the city. That something inside her was not acting right.

"Breathe, doll," he said, "Tell me how I can help. Do you want to go away for the weekend? Do you want to go out to dinner?"

"Don't humor me," she said.

"You've been in those sweatpants all week," he helped her off the bathroom floor. "Do not interpret this the wrong way Naomi, because I do respect all the hormones you've got running around in there," he patted her stomach, "but I am getting a little tired of this. Why don't you lie down and rest. Pregnant women need 15 hours of sleep a day. Didn't we read that?" He helped her into bed and drew up the covers.

When he left the room she unplugged the alarm clock and threw it at the door. It hit against her oversized papier-mâché tiger and clunked to a stop. They were out of place. The tiger. Naomi. Out of place in the house in the country with its nine empty acres. She looked at herself in the mirror across from the
bed. She hadn’t been down to the studio in weeks. Had only welded two sculptures since the move from New York. At the gallery she had managed in the city, she had a back room for her own work and had used it always. Forget napping, she did need to get out of her sweatpants. Josh was at least right about that.

She went downstairs and opened the front door. Walking through the petunias, she was careful to step around the dead mice. Her studio was a converted garage with one full wall of windows to let in the light. The clear glass looked out onto empty farmlands where flat grass fields rolled by. Her blowtorch was neatly wrapped in its cord and she unraveled it slowly and turned it on. There was something wrong with her that she didn’t want a child. Something wrong that she had killed four baby mice, something sick and damaged that grew stronger the longer they stayed in Petaluma. The blowtorch burned, pointing out the window at nothing.

That night Mama mouse was at it again. The scraping was insistent now and located in the same place, inside the wall, behind the headboard. Naomi smacked her palm hard against the sound and Josh turned over next to her. The scraping grew louder, vampire nails, and she imagined long gouges being scraped out of the walls from the inside.

"Please stop," she whispered and pressed her mouth into the wall plaster, whispering over and over until she realized what she was doing and sat down hard on the floor to laugh, head pressed into her lap, tears running.
The next morning after Josh left, she went straight to work. She built a small Snow White out of scrap metal, one hand tucked into the rusted wrist of a hunter.

"He is after her heart," she told Josh when he came home.

"That's gruesome, Babe," he said, "I love it." But the way he looked at her let her know he was worried, and she was pleased by that.

In the next week she built Little Red Riding Hood, bent crooked over her hemline and not minding the wolf crouched low, hidden by the garden hose. Sleeping Beauty arrived horizontal on an old mattress with bike gears uncurled and braided around her shoulders.

"Fairy tales have a formula," she told Josh. "Mothers die. Princesses wait. There is happiness in the waiting—briars growing on stone walls. Glass coffins and all that."

Over dinner Josh suggested that she get out in the community. Do a show. He forked a mess of spinach into his mouth. "Maybe you could set up in the grocery store," he said.

"Now that's classy," said Naomi, "great idea." She was being sarcastic but he didn't notice.

"I can talk to Jane for you," he said. "You could do the window display. Clean up some of your stuff first though. There's rust leaking out of that one girl's eyes."

"That 'one girl' is Sleeping Beauty," said Naomi "and that rust is no accident. It's blood."
Josh shook his head tolerantly. He wasn’t listening, he had tuned her out. Outside the window Snow White’s mouth was wide open and screaming.

That night, Naomi heard tapping in the garden. She got out of bed and pushed back the curtains. The window was closed against the Petaluma damp but the air was still cold enough to make her shiver. The statues looked alive in the light of the half moon. A streak of blue fell onto the corpses of the mice and Little Red Riding Hood’s arm swung on its hinge. A small shape darted past. Mama, thought Naomi, or the wolves. She climbed back in bed, shaking.

The next evening, Josh’s mother came over for dinner in fluorescent sneakers and an otherwise well coordinated flowered outfit. Naomi didn’t like Lila. She didn’t understand the other woman’s round the clock pep. She suspected that the large gestures and enthusiastic head nods were an act, but had never been able to catch a crack in the façade.

“Josh! Naomi!” Lila kissed her son and then her daughter-in-law on both cheeks. “I brought a frittata,” she said and handed over a foil wrapped baking dish too large for any three-person meal.

“You didn’t need to do that,” said Naomi. “I made dinner.”

“I know,” Lila wrinkled her nose. “Josh told me you were making, what, schnitzel? But a good guest always brings something. You know that sweetheart.” She unpacked her canvas bag on to the telephone table, arranging an arsenal of cleaning
fluids. "Josh also says you haven’t been cleaning." Lila took up a spray bottle and spritzed it into the air to test. The droplets misted down to the floor.

"Is that what he said?" Naomi thrust the frittata at her husband.

"Babe, I’m going to set the table," he said and high tailed it out of the room.

Lila put a hand on Naomi’s sleeve. It was warm and heavy

"Tell me honestly sweetheart. What’s going on? I haven’t seen you in weeks. And I won’t say that Emma’s feelings weren’t hurt when you didn’t make it to her brunch last Sunday."

Naomi felt sick. "Nothing’s going on," she said.

"Josh says this is because you’re nervous about the baby," said Lila.

"I’m not nervous about the baby," Naomi backed away.

"You can talk to me," said Lila.

"I don’t need to talk, Lila," said Naomi.

"It just seems like you’re so lonely, sweetheart. Maybe that’s why you stay in bed all day. You’re too much in your own head. It’s not an attractive trait. And don’t look at me like that. Your own mother would tell you the same thing." Lila picked up the Windex and sprayed down the hallway mirror.

Naomi grabbed the bottle away from her.

"Well, now, you’re right," said Lila, "I shouldn’t be doing this. It is your house." The older woman smiled.
Naomi pulled the trigger and the Windex sprayed her mother-in-law’s face. Then she ran.

In the hall closet she ducked down underneath the coats. There they were, all of her New York heavies: the pea coat with the fuzzy hem, the fake pink fur, the thick fabrics she would never get to wear in the neutral gray of Petaluma. She wrapped her arms around her legs and put her head on her knees. There was pounding on the door.

"Naomi," Josh’s voice shook, “did you just spray my mother?" She didn’t answer.

“Come out of there right now," he demanded.

Now he wanted her, now he was watching. What was it he had said to her? Petaluma, it’s a perfect place to raise children. This had been his plan the whole time. Get her pregnant, refuse an abortion. And he had almost tricked her, gotten her to agree, gotten her to walk through town, stopping at every stroller, checking out every toddler on a leash: obeying without thinking.

“Naomi!" Josh pounded on the closet, “Don’t make me break this door down."

“You can’t cater to her all the time,” said Lila, “She acts like a child.” The pep was still in her voice but the tone was pitched lower. Angry.

“She does not," said Josh.

“She’s hiding in the closet,” said Lila.

The phone rang. Josh asked Lila to get it and Naomi held her breath until she could hear the clop clop of heels moving away.
"This is the worst thing you could do," Josh’s voice shook through the closet door.

"Your mother already hates me," said Naomi.

"You sprayed her in the eyes with Windex," Josh said.

"I was aiming for her mouth," said Naomi.

"You have to apologize, Naomi."

"The mice are still in the garden," she said.

"What are you talking about?" Josh’s voice drained into confusion.

"I didn’t bury them," she explained, "I couldn’t."

She heard his body slump down on the floor, his voice came in closer. She imagined him resting his mouth against the door.

"Naomi," he asked, "What’s wrong?"

"I can’t believe I agreed to have this baby," she said.

"This is silly," said Josh. "This baby is going to be fine. It’s mine and yours. It’s us. I love you."

She cooked. She gardened. She made fairy tales where the princess was trapped in the tower and the prince was just over the horizon with a white horse and a patronizing voice.

"I’m crazy Josh," she said, and wanted him to understand. "I really, really am."

"Why don’t you come out of there," he said, "we’ll have a nice quiet dinner. Mom will leave. It’ll just be us. We’ll talk."

"I don’t want to eat that frittata," said Naomi.

"We don’t have to," his voice was reassuring.

"Or the schnitzel," she said.
"We'll send them home with my mother," said Josh.

"OK," said Naomi, "but she has to leave before I come out."

Josh called for his mother and soon Lila's voice was coming through the keyhole, "Feel better sweetheart," she said. "I forgive you."

"Will you do something for me?" asked Josh when Naomi crawled out of the closet. "Will you make that tomato sauce you used to make? Just that nice, simple tomato sauce and some spaghetti. I need it. Blue Plate Naomi Special."

Maybe things would be all right. Maybe their child would be normal. Maybe Naomi would be able to take care of it. She pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Then after we eat can go for a walk?" she asked hopefully, "just me and you?"

"Maybe," said Josh, "or I was thinking we could go to sleep early. It's been a strange day."

"I don't need to sleep all the time," she said and watched the glasses of water sitting still on the table. She picked one up and poured it out onto the floor. Josh stared at her, arms folded in the doorway.

"You can make as much of a mess as you want," he said, "but I'm not going to watch you do it." He turned and left the room.

"Let me know when you're ready to be civil," he called from the stairway.

Tomato sauce. He wanted tomato sauce, Blue Plate style. Fine then. Naomi went into the garden. She picked up the dead mice by their tails. She set them on the cutting board belly up.
They were small, the length of her pinky finger. The paring knife was perfect and she sliced them neck to belly. Mouse insides were not as unsettling as one might think. The heart was a tiny perfect pea. The fat cells were more delicate than the yellowy film on chicken. She pulled out the intestines, a one foot long filmy string that uncurled all at once. Flipping the mice over she re-sharpened the knife and cut off the skin. There was only an ounce of meat on each one. Less than a chicken tenderloin, thick as a slice of bacon. She diced the meat into small square pieces. She was good at cutting. She was meticulous. She heated the pan and stirred the onions. When the meat went in, the edges curled up and let off a thick rancid odor. They had died so perfectly. She added a strip of bacon and the smell deepened into something comforting and familiar. In went the tomatoes and she watched them bubble. Wine. Vinegar. Chopped parsley. She added two candles to the table.

That night while Josh was throwing up she sat next to him in the bathroom and rubbed his back. He put his head on her lap. "You take such good care of me," he said. "I'm sorry I've been such a crapper."

She moved her hand in light circles.

"You're going to be the perfect mother, Naomi. You know that."

"Unflawed," she said.

"Perfect," he answered.

"Picture perfect," she said, "pretty picture perfect." She put her head into his back and curled her lips up up up.