More truly and more strange [Short stories]

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More Truly and More Strange

by

Elizabeth Urschel

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
I was myself the compass of that sea:
I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

*Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*, Wallace Stevens
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First Love

I.

Linda waited on the sidewalk so that Cathy wouldn't see the inside of her apartment, which so far had no furniture in it yet, just her suitcases and an old tape player sitting on a blue, plastic crate. Outside the sun came through bits of cloud in the sky and fell on Linda's head. There weren't any mirrors in her apartment, and Linda felt thin, almost pretty, for the first time in years. She felt reckless and full of possibilities.

Cathy was picking up Linda for a weekend fishing trip to a cabin four hours north on an enormous blue lake. Cathy planned the trip with a group of friends she had gone to college with and who still went on vacations together and had a girls' night out once a week at the local bar. The other girls backed out, but Cathy still wanted to go because she had paid for the cabin. Linda had only been invited along the day before, out of a combination of desperation and pity Linda thought, because Linda was new to town and didn't know anyone and also because Cathy seemed like the type of girl to pick up on other people's loneliness and do something about it. A fishing trip seemed, in Linda's mind, to mark the end of a dark and lonely time. She didn't tell Cathy that she hated fish.

Linda sat down on the curb and felt the hot concrete against her jeans. It felt good to wait, like worrying a tooth, that kind of simple, delicious pain. She
imagined that exciting things might happen to them on the fishing trip, and this excitement felt like a positive change in Linda’s life. Usually Linda was a black hole of anxiety and avoided social gatherings because it always seemed like her anxiety showed on her face, and people avoided her. That’s why she had left home in the first place. She thought that a new environment would make it easier to be a new person.

Cathy was a cheerful waitress at the restaurant where Linda ate breakfast every morning, and Linda baby-sat her niece and nephew, two boring children who spent most of their time playing Connect 4, or hunched a few inches from their large television set. But Linda was tired of baby-sitting. As a teenager she loved hanging out in other people’s living rooms, pretending that these were her children, her pillows, her frozen pizzas. And she had always felt more comfortable around kids, who were simpler and more direct about what they wanted. But she’d given up on all that. Now all she wanted were meaningful experiences and real friends to share them with. She imagined what it would be like to be a part of Cathy’s circle of friends. She thought that would feel nice. She could develop the fun-loving, daring side of her personality that until now had remained hidden.

Cathy’s old wagon came around the corner and they both waved. The car was rusty and a dent stretched from the right front wheel to the back wheel, with white paint scratched deep into the dent.

“Hey girlfriend,” Cathy shouted out the window.
Linda wanted to play along, but she didn't know the appropriate response. Cathy reached over and unlocked the door.

"Don't put anything on the floor of my car," Cathy said. "Diseases incubate all over the place in here." The car was mildewy and a coffee cup floated in a shallow puddle at Linda's feet. The windshield was broken in places with deep cracks and rock holes. Linda liked these imperfections, enjoyed getting glimpses of other people's sore spots. It made them seem more human. As Cathy drove Linda closed her eyes in the sun that was beaming sharply through the windows. She saw blue and green spots and bright, white stars so that when she opened her eyes Cathy seemed to sit in a kind of radiance. It was exciting to be in the car with Cathy going somewhere unknown, tinged as it was with pain and apprehension, and she felt anything was possible if she could only let their conversation happen naturally and not force anything.

"You like fishing," Cathy said.

"Sure. I mean, I've done it before and when I did I liked it. But I'm not an expert or anything." This was a lie. Linda had never gone fishing, and if it had been any other time in her life she would have cringed at the idea.

As Cathy shifted gears Linda felt she was witnessing an intimate act, a motion suggesting power and sensuality. She wondered if Cathy was still a virgin, and if she wasn't she wondered if she'd had sex with many men or only one or two, a high school sweetheart, someone she thought she might marry someday. It was hard to tell sometimes, just by looking at someone. And Cathy
had that mixture of confidence and vulnerability, that look of clean brightness about her, that made it even harder to tell.

“I can’t believe it’s my vacation and my boyfriend’s out of town for the summer,” Cathy said suddenly.

Linda shrugged, but she was glad that she had Cathy all to herself, that they had the entire summer to get to know each other, to bond. And it was uncanny that Cathy had brought up the intimate subject of boyfriends. It seemed to prove a connection between them that was profound and instinctual, maybe even telepathic.

“Sorry,” Linda said.

“That’s all right,” Cathy went on. “If you have a boyfriend you know how easy it is to forget them.”

“I don’t actually have a boyfriend at the moment, to be honest.”

“That’s a good thing,” Cathy smiled, but Linda could tell she was embarrassed. Cathy suddenly looked young, at least a few years younger than Linda. Her neck was smooth and she didn’t have crow’s feet around her eyes. This was comforting to Linda, who thought that being older gave you more options. She thought that older people took liberties that younger people couldn’t get away with. She pulled her feet out of her boots and without asking permission propped them up on the dashboard. She liked the burning heat of vinyl that eased up through her socks.

“We’ll have fun,” Linda said. There were deep green hills and brown grass and small trees scattered everywhere in view. This wasn’t scenery she
was used to, the way hills melted into hills, the way colors became almost violent, and then feel deeply into shadow.

The cabin was in a small clearing surrounded by tall trees. There was a skinny dock that stretched out into the water. They brought their bags inside and then Cathy lit a bug candle and set it on a weathered picnic table. All at once she seemed angry. “I forgot the booze,” she whined.

Suddenly it was hard for Linda not to worry that coming with Cathy had been a mistake. The dark reflections that the trees threw on the water looked ominous. She sat quietly, not wanting Cathy to feel she had to entertain her, wanting to prove her independence.

“How about I drive and get supplies?” Linda suggested.

“No, I should go.”

“Don’t go to any trouble,” Linda said. “Especially not on my account.”

“But I’m a waitress,” Cathy said. “I get into trouble for a living. Tell me what you want?”

“I don’t want a thing.”

“Beer? Wine Coolers? Cigarettes? Come on!” Cathy bent over the back seat looking for old bills and change that had fallen between the seats. Her car was old and weathered and in places the springs came up through the fabric of the seat. She collected about ten dollars.

Linda couldn’t decide on anything good. She was afraid to ask for the items she really did want, because she didn’t think Cathy would want them too.
Linda craved Hostess chocolate cupcakes, malt liquor, and clove cigarettes. She also wanted those teeny hot-dogs in the can.

“I like anything,” Linda said instead.

It was getting dark, and Cathy didn’t know if she would recognize the turn off in the dark. “Forget it,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Linda patted Cathy’s shoulder. “I don’t drink, so it doesn’t matter to me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cathy said, but the way she said it and the way she looked at Linda made it feel like Linda’s fault. She knew her indecision annoyed Cathy but she couldn’t help it. She watched her walk along the edge of the water throwing rocks and heard them clink the lake’s placid surface.

*  

Later, Linda slept on the fold-out couch. She was tired and relieved to sleep alone, but there were blood marks on the sheets when she turned down the covers. She wondered what had happened on the sheets to make them that way. It could have been someone’s period, or maybe the aftermath of rough sex. It occurred to Linda that Cathy was very trusting to bring her here. Linda could be anyone, a freak or a murderer for all Cathy knew. But here they were together. Alone. She lay on top of the blankets, shivering.

When she heard Cathy waking up in the next room, she climbed under the sheets so that Cathy wouldn’t know she was squeamish, that she hated blood, especially someone else’s. It was hot and humid, but the lake water was
ice cold and there were flocks of mosquitoes that left trails of blood and black smudges when they swatted them. Linda couldn’t believe how cold the water was, how different from the pond near her parents’ house, how icy and clean. Her hands turned red and then white if she pushed them for too long under the surface of the water.

They leapt into the lake, rushing out when they couldn’t stand the cold any longer. There was a small rowboat which they used to get over to the good fishing spot Cathy knew of, farther out on another bank.

Linda didn’t catch a thing, but she didn’t really want to. She fumbled with the mess of hooks and bait, constantly apologizing. “I guess I’m out of practice,” she said guiltily, grimacing after cutting herself on the hook while she unsuccessfully wriggled a slippery worm onto its end. “Remind me how you throw it out there?”

When she threw the hook by hand, instead of casting properly, Cathy stared at her strangely and touched her arm. “Don’t worry so much,” she said. “It doesn’t mean anything. A lot of people don’t catch anything at first, when they’re first learning how.”

“And maybe that’s not the point, anyway,” Linda added. But Cathy grew silent and Linda feared she’d said the wrong thing, that that was indeed the point. And now Cathy had probably figured it out, that she’d never been fishing, that she’d lied about it just to be included. But Cathy was nice about it, she didn’t tease her, she just seemed disappointed. Linda thought that Cathy must feel sorry for her, and it made her sad to think about.
That evening Cathy fried her fish in a pan on the stove that looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a long time, its bottom rusty and caked with grease. It didn’t seem to bother Cathy so it didn’t bother Linda. Linda didn’t want the fish but she ate it anyway, just to be nice. It actually tasted all right, fleshy but light and a little mushromy.

While it was still light, they challenged each other to see who could stay under the freezing lake water longest.

Underneath the surface everything grew quiet. Linda opened her eyes. She saw Cathy hanging in front of her with her dark hair floating in ribbons around her face. Her body was slender and beautiful, dark blue from the light shining through the thick lake water. Her skin looked like it would be soft but slimey to touch. And she looked like a dead body, suspended, her fet bobbing off the rocks below as she gently pushed off to float up to the surface.

It occurred to Linda that they weren’t safe, far away from anyone who would hear them if they called for help, and there wasn’t a phone in the cabin. She felt chilled, even frightened. Cathy could hold her down by her shoulders in the freezing water and when her kicking was over she could simply walk away. No one would know. And Linda could drown Cathy, leave town, be a stranger again. When Linda burst up out of the water, panting, Cathy clapped. “You must have enormous lungs!” she said. “I’m really impressed.”

“Don’t be,” Linda said, ashamed that she’d had such morbid, unpleasant thoughts.

*
Before bed, Cathy talked a lot about her boyfriend, a tall, skinny musician who was also a mailman by day. Cathy suggested that she set Linda up with someone she knew in town who was good-looking and cool, “since you’re not seeing anyone,” she said. But it embarrassed Linda that she might seem lonely, or even worse, desperate. Cathy held loosely to the necks of root beer bottles as they talked. She was the kind of beautiful that you had to look at sideways.

The next day they left. Linda enjoyed their pleasant chit-chat on the ride home. And for some reason, she felt like telling Cathy secrets, as if the weekend had bonded them together and now they were intimate, maybe even best friends.

She told Cathy about a boy named Duncan who she used to date in high school but was married now, how they had done things together. She felt she’d missed her chance with Duncan, and now she was always going to be a virgin, but that was all right because she had plenty of good things she wanted to do in her life. She wanted to water ski, maybe earn a law degree. She had even thought about working with autistic children.

*  

It was late when they got back to town. Cathy’s apartment was clean and comfortable, furnished with thick, cozy chairs and lots of plants placed all around a wide, sunny window. It smelled like oven-cooked food, like good house.

Cathy said she might as well stay there for the night, and in the morning she would drive Linda home on the way to the restaurant.
“This is where I make my boyfriend sleep when he’s mean to me.” Cathy winked at Linda as she pulled out the fold-out bed in the center of the room. Linda wasn’t exactly sure why she had winked, wasn’t sure if she was joking.

“In that case I’d love to be your boyfriend,” Linda said. She only meant that the fold out looked so good that she would be happy to sleep there all the time. But it came out wrong and Linda blushed. Cathy pulled off the cushions and made up the bed with Linda’s help. They were both quiet for awhile.

“Are you homesick ever?” Cathy asked her, tossing a pillow at the end of the bed. “I’ve never left Montana, never even been more than four hours from my family. I’m not sure I could do it.”

“Well, Montana and Texas are a lot alike. You’d be surprised.” Linda sat down and the bedsprings squeaked. “Besides, I don’t know anyone there anymore. All my friends are married.” Linda tried to say this casually, as if it didn’t matter.

“But you don’t really know anyone here, either,” Cathy said gently, hardly looking up from where she stood.

“That’s true. But in a new place it’s okay not to know anyone. It feels less scary.”

“I guess it could give you a fresh outlook on things,” Cathy said.

“Something like that,” Linda said.

Leaves rustled outside the window as Linda lay under Cathy’s thick wool blankets. They smelled rosy, like old woman perfume, and she pulled them over her chin and breathed deeply. Even in the dark the tree leaves seemed big and
green. Linda would have liked to share this apartment with Cathy, to wake up every morning and make them both coffee and then in the afternoons after work discuss their day casually, over snacks of celery and cheese crackers and bright, tall glasses of white wine.

II.

Linda watched Cathy’s car disappear down the road. She knew there was no real reason to think that Cathy didn’t like her. After all, Cathy had invited Linda on the weekend in the first place. But she was embarrassed that she’d told her about Duncan. A girl like Cathy would have had a lot of Duncans. There were embarrassing things about herself and the way she thought about things that she wished no one would know about. It was almost always easier to care less, to pretend it didn’t matter what other people thought of you.

She looked around her apartment as if she were seeing it for the first time. It was stark and dismal. Despite herself she wished she were back at Cathy’s apartment. She also wished she were as fun as Cathy could be in moments, wished she talked louder and found things funnier than she usually did. Not being remarkable looking was a difficult thing to overcome sometimes.

She decided to buy a broom and dustpan and orange juice and whole milk and wheat bread, products that usually cheered her up and might make her apartment more welcoming. She felt even more hopeful once she stepped outside the dim apartment. Sunshine like that leaks inside you.
But when she tried to turn her truck on it wouldn't start. This was her father's old truck. She loved its dark red rust. It filled her with nostalgia for a relationship she had never really had with her father, one that was comforting and complete. She turned the ignition and pumped the gas but the car didn't start, it wouldn't even turn over. The truck had worked just fine only a few days before. She popped the hood and poked around inside, but she couldn't tell where anything was. It was a jumble of tubes and wires, brightly colored clamps and oily sticky bolts and nails that looked corroded. Her father hadn't bothered to teach her about engines, or he'd been too sick to think of it, or he thought she wouldn't ever need to know because she would have a man around who could help her. The thought of that struck her as so sad that she had to sit down for a minute in the grass and think. All she wanted to do was consider love for awhile. Being with Cathy made her think of love.

The only thing she could think to do was set out to walk the half mile or so to the auto shop. She enjoyed walking anyway, and it seemed easier than trying to figure out how to get her truck towed, and less expensive.

The road was uphill. As she walked, cars and trucks drove by and honked. And she began to wish she had just called someone once she realized that the auto shop was much farther away than she had thought. Every time she went around a curve she expected to see its sign sticking out from a building, but instead every curve led to another curve at a distance ahead of her. There were things about the road that she had never seen until now, strange little bushes and fences and houses with big, barking dogs.
Instead of turning back, she stuck her thumb out the way she had seen people do. But she felt silly, so she just waved at the next car as if she knew the driver. The car promptly pulled onto the shoulder. It was a new little brown Honda with big, shiny bumpers.

Inside was a teenage boy with wire glasses and a tense look.

“Hey, did you wave at me?” he shouted.

“I don’t know you. I just need a ride, to that auto shop.” The boy had bright, red pimples on his chin that he had tried to cover up with a Band-Aid. She laughed to herself. It seemed like something she might have done at his age.

“That’s on the way,” he said. “You might as well get in the back because the front seat is full of books.”

She climbed in. He was telling the truth, the front seat was piled high with books of all shapes and sizes, and there were even some on the floor and the dash.

“You must be a really good student,” she said.

“No, I just forget to return them to the library. They sort of stack up after awhile.”

“Thanks a lot for helping me out,” she said.

“Car trouble sucks,” he said.

Linda felt relieved and hopeful.

In just a few minutes they were outside the garage.
"Thanks so much," she told him again. For some reason she wanted to flirt with him.

"See you around," he said.

The inside of the garage was air conditioned and smelled strongly of rubber. She waited in line. The Indian woman behind the counter said that Linda would have to get the car towed and even then she couldn't guarantee it would be fixed. She pointed behind her at the rows of cars waiting for attention by the two mechanics who were busy working.

"What should I do?" Linda asked.

"Get your car towed," the woman answered flatly.

"Can you tow it?" Linda asked.

"No, you have to call someone else to get it towed, someone with a tow truck, like a towing company," the woman said, waving her off.

"Isn't there anyone here who can help me?" Linda said, trying to hold the woman's attention. Linda suddenly felt tired, and this woman seemed to dislike her. It seemed like she could help if she wanted to, but for some reason had decided she didn't like Linda. It annoyed her.

Another customer edged closer to her along the counter.

"What's wrong with your car?" he asked. He might have been forty, with strong, well tanned arms. He held something in his hands that looked like a pack of different colored fuses. His fingers were dusty, and he was small and unassuming.
"I think it's the battery," she said. "But I don't know anything about engines."

"A battery?" he asked. He pulled out a money clip that was full of crisp bills and gave the woman across the counter a few of them. He wore brown work pants, a thick leather belt with a silver, rusting buckle that hung low at his waist.

"I think so," she said.

"These people can't help you?" he asked, motioning to the men in the garage and the Indian woman.

"They say I have to tow it in and then they might," she said. She felt like she might start crying.

"Tow it? For a dead battery? Sounds crazy, if you ask me."

"Well," Linda said.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"A few miles that way," and she pointed one direction and then changed her mind and pointed the other direction.

"I'm heading that way," he said. "If you want me to, I'll come take a look."

She couldn't see where his eyes were looking because he wore big reflective sunglasses, like the kind pilots wear, she thought. Above them his hair was receding but well tended, dirty blond and combed in place.

"I can give you a ride," he said. He took the bag with the fuses and walked quickly towards the door. "Come on." When he walked outside he
stopped suddenly and looked in both directions before he crossed the parking lot and waved at her to follow.

She felt guilty for feeling nervous. He was helping her, like the teenager in the little brown car had done. It made her feel better that Cathy would be home from work soon, just in case she needed to call.

He drove a yellow truck with a covered bed. She could see through the back window, it was full of ladders and boxes and machinery of some kind. It seemed like a good sign. He took awhile getting in on his side of the truck. She waited for him to unlock the door, and when he did she climbed inside. His windshield was marked with cracks and a few holes. He seemed small in the seat beside her, and neither of them bothered to buckle their seat belts.

It took him a few tries to start the truck. Looking at his profile, she tried to decide if he was attractive, but there was some quality around his chin that she didn’t like.

"Thanks a lot," she managed to say while he cranked the key and the engine chugged on.

"You don't have a friend? Someone you could call up to help you out?" He looked carefully in his rearview mirror before backing up.

"No. I'm sort of new here. Everyone I know is at work. And my boyfriend's at work. He's going to meet me later." She added that last part. She was feeling nervous because he was driving so fast. There were large potholes that cracked open the road, and they were bouncing right through them.

"Where's a man when you need him?" he chuckled.
“Fast driver?” she said, and he slowed down.

“I'm always driving from place to place, I'm used to it. I guess I can't figure out how to just slow down and enjoy myself.” He seemed sorry to have scared her.

Outside the window she recognized all the things she had seen as she walked, but now they seemed smaller and less forbidding from the window of the truck.

The man put his arm up and rested it across the bench seat behind her.

“I'm Joey,” he said. He didn't reach out his hand to shake hers, just kept it across the back of the seat. People sit like that all the time, she thought. They can be close without it having to mean anything.

She turned to him. “I'm Linda. It sure is nice to meet you. Sure is nice of you to help me out.”

He didn't answer her, just looked at her and moaned low in his throat. He tapped his finger against the back of the seat to a rock 'n roll tune playing on the radio. The moan startled her.

“Turn left at the next street,” she said, but he turned right instead and drove over someone's yard to get back on the road. The truck bumped and bounced. She held onto the door.

“Well, anything with tits and wheels is going to give you trouble,” he said, turning to her and smiling. He leaned his face close to hers and for a moment she was frightened, but then he pointed to the ring on his left ring finger.
meaningfully. “My wife loves that joke.” Linda imagined his wife at home, baking something casserole-like that smelled good.

She showed him the alley where her truck was parked. He was driving too fast again even though the alley was narrow and littered with rocks and people’s empty trash cans that had fallen from the wind. She bounced around in the cab beside him. He pushed down on her shoulder to steady her, and when he did an intense heat went from his hand to her skin that made her sit perfectly still even after the car had pulled to a stop in the back of her apartment.

He got out and kicked her license plate with the tip of his boot. “Texas, huh?” he said, more like an accusation than a question.

“Yes sir,” she answered.

“Don’t call me sir. I’m not your father.” He laughed and she wasn’t sure exactly why he was laughing except that maybe he was younger than he seemed. He walked around the front of her truck and asked her nicely to pop it open which she did right away. He poked around in there and she thought it might be rude to watch so she stayed in the driver’s seat and watched through the crack of the hood instead. He fiddled with a few tubes and lifted up a casing.

“Bet it’s your battery,” he called. “Bet you’re right. Looks like this truck hasn’t run in a long time. Looks old.”

“It was running just last week,” she said.

He went to his truck and she followed. “I don’t have jumper cables. If you want me to I’ll take out your battery and we can drive it back there to the shop
and they might be able to charge it for you.” He spoke gently, but in a way that wasn’t pleasant.

“Don’t go to any trouble,” she said. “I could just go inside and call someone. My boyfriend’s probably home by now.”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m not in any rush. I like this sort of thing.”

He opened the back and began digging through the ladders that were stacked inside. “Just got to find my tools,” he said. She thought she saw cables, thought she knew what they looked like, but he went right past them and pulled out his toolbox. She stood there quietly.

But he must have saw her looking because he said, “Those might look like cables, but they don’t work. And if they don’t work they might as well not be.”

“That’s true,” she said and tried to laugh. It was getting colder. She reached inside her truck and found a sweater balled up.

He walked back to the engine and very quickly removed her battery. She realized that her father had probably been the last person to touch it. She didn’t want it dead. It seemed like a part of him. “You’re sure it’s dead?” she asked.

He stopped walking and held it up. “It’s a corpse, honey.” Linda didn’t answer. “But I could put it back in your truck and leave you here and you could call someone and get your car towed, if you’d rather me do that. Course it’s after five o’clock and I can’t imagine who’d come at this hour, but it’s up to you. Doesn’t matter to me, of course.”

Linda was confused, but she was also worried that she’d offended him. He was helping her more than she had hoped, for free. “I’m sure you’re right.
And I sure appreciate your helping me like this. I know you've got better things to do."

"Well then," he said. He went around to the back of his truck and threw the battery. It landed among the ladders and tools with a loud crash. It seemed like a careless thing to do.

He opened the car door for her and waved her in with a flourish.

* 

As soon as they were both inside and he started to drive away he began talking more slowly, like he was thinking out loud. "You know if they won't help you up at the auto shop I have a friend who has a great big battery charger." He held up both hands a great distance apart to show her, steering with his knees. "He doesn't live far, just some miles out of town. He'd charge your battery for free, it's no trouble at all for him because he owns the machine. Then I could drive you back to town and we could put your battery back in your truck. Because I'm not so sure they'll be able to do it there at the auto shop."

Linda couldn't think of anything to say, but she didn't think it would be a good idea to ride with him to his friend's house. And she didn't know why the auto shop wouldn't be able to charge her battery. "Isn't that what they do?" she asked.

She thought of calling Cathy once they got to the auto shop and ask her to pick her up and drive her home. She wanted to deal with all of this in the morning when it was light.
“As I said, my friend has a great big battery charger. The thing is powerful and it would do it much faster than anything they have there at the auto shop. I’d have you home lickety split.”

“Hm,” she said. “Well maybe I ought to see what they say at the auto shop. I mean, it might not even be a problem with my battery, it might be something else. And then I would have taken up your whole night.”

“Now you’re talking just like my wife. Always feeling guilty! But don’t worry about it. Like I told you, I love this sort of thing, I really do.” He slapped her leg and pinched her knee between his fingers. He was stronger than he looked, the way men are, and she flinched and tried to pull her knee away but he wouldn’t let go of his grip. When he laughed he sounded like a woodpecker, jittery and high pitched.

She did not want to appear rude or ungrateful, she felt like she owed him something for helping her, but at the same time it was a strange thing he was doing.

Finally he let go. She was relieved. “Don’t you worry about a thing, sweetheart. We’ll get your battery charged in no time.” She guessed he was trying to avoid the potholes but it made his driving crazy because there were very few places that didn’t have potholes on the road.

She tried to decide if she ought to leap out of the car.

“You know, maybe you could just let me off at the auto shop,” Linda said. “I’m sure my girlfriend Cathy is back home from work by now. She’d be happy to pick me up. That way you could get back to whatever you were doing.”
“Excuse me for saying so, but I used to know a hooker named Cathy,” he said.

“Not the same girl,” Linda said quickly. She should’ve said she’d call her boyfriend but she’d forgotten her own lie. She regretted using Cathy’s name.

“Don’t be squirrly! I’m just joking around. But seriously, I don’t mind driving you. Like I said, I don’t have plans at home. My wife is a very understanding woman. She makes loads of food and helps poor people, she’s that sort of woman.” He pointed to his wedding ring again.

The truck kept making revving noises and he shifted gears in a jerky manner so that she had to hold herself in place with the dashboard to keep steady.

“So I take it you’re not from around here,” he said. He seemed to have forgotten that they’d already gone over this.

“No sir,” she said.

“I said, don’t call me sir,” he yelled and then laughed, maybe to make her feel better. “How old are you?” He touched her knee again and she pulled away, sliding further towards the door.

“Thirty,” she said. She wanted him to think she was older than she was.

“Nah, you’re not thirty. No way are you thirty. My wife is thirty and you’re a hell of a lot sweeter than she is. That I can say with confidence.”
Suddenly she realized that they had been driving too long, and then she realized that it wasn't the same road. He must have turned a while back and she hadn't noticed in the dark because of all the swerving.

“We almost there?” she asked. She was looking out the window, planning to leap out at the next big bush. His hand clamped down on her arm and suddenly her hand was in his lap. His penis was hard underneath his jeans and he rubbed her hand along it. He kept swerving and she couldn't pull her hand off of him because she couldn't steady herself in the seat beside him. She thought if she could just get her hand away from his grip she could unlatch the door, maybe jump out and run into the trees and hide. She thought he wouldn't be able to find her if she could get to the trees and bushes along the side of the road.

“I am thirty,” she said. She slipped her hand out of his but he scrambled for it again and his grip became tighter, pushing her hand against his penis again.

“Don't be like that. I am helping you, right?”

She wondered if she should go along with it. If she went along with it, he might be happier when it was over and drop her off at the auto shop. She had heard of that kind of thing before.

She couldn't see where they were driving because it was so dark and he was still all over the road. “Looks can be deceiving,” she said. Her mouth was so dry she had a hard time speaking.
He was laughing now and she was shocked to discover that she couldn't get any words out, it was as if her mouth was cemented shut. Her arms felt hollow. But it didn't matter anyway because he had a knife.

He pulled her out his side of the car and she struggled and kicked and she felt his skin in her hands but none of this seemed to hurt him. “Help me,” she called, but it might as well have been a whisper, and besides, no one else was on the road.

“I am helping you,” he said.

He pulled her along the side of the road by her arms and she fought him but he was stronger. He opened the back of the truck and shoved her inside among the ladders. He locked it behind her and she heard his boots run on the pavement. It was completely dark now and there were eleven more hours before daylight. Something was broken, her ankle. The truck stopped on gravel. She lay down with his tools, covered her face with her hands, hoping to block out the light from his flashlight. She noticed that her fingers smelled like roses.
The Clearing

Near my old house there is a long field leading to a clearing cut in two by curvy trees and a creek and a pathed walkway that had been forgotten by my neighbors and was rarely visited by anyone anymore. Creatures might live there under gnarled berry trees but it is not a place for beasts or wild men and I never thought it was, but Bridget would not go there with me after dark. I was always disappointed in her. I didn't realize she was just trying to keep me safe, I didn't realize how real is fear. At dusk I went there alone, creeping through the undergrowth like a crooked Nome-child. I did that until the last week I lived in that town, when I met Jason Trombone.

Jason wasn't anyone I knew, he got better grades than I did and he was better looking than any of my friends who were serious about video games and relished walking around at night flashing cars. Bridget and I traded copies of Daredevil or The Dark Knight and Ironman during our lunch hour, bringing sandwiches from home only to throw them away for the most part uneaten. We always felt too sick to eat them. There wasn't anything cool about it. Bridget and I and the others had no idea how to begin to feel confidant or comfortable, who didn't even like each other all that much. We dressed badly. We cared, but it was hopeless. We hadn't the money or the know-how for any of it. Jason, on the other hand, wore baggy pants and long shirts and drove a truck and smiled with girls who carried designer purses and I think he played soccer or football or
something equally appropriate and uninteresting to me. One day I dropped a stack of books in the hall and they happened to land near him. They were books I had been hoarding since junior high that I promised myself to return to the library before I moved away for good the following week, and I was embarrassed to see my own changing and random obsessions, right there like a catalogue of my soul. *In Cold Blood. Owls, Creatures of the Night.* The entire *Flowers in the Attic* series. Note the interest in darkness and incest and fear.

Looking at those books and standing so near to Jason Trombone, it was obvious to me how little my classmates knew me and that I had never done anything remarkable. There had been no courageous act that I could be proud of, there was no one thing to set me apart even though I was apart, felt intensely apart. I felt very different, very curious. But that was all. It was one thing to feel different and another thing altogether to act different. Most people I knew at that time disappeared, faceless, drifting through the halls of our school because of this distinction. Anyway, the books slid across the waxy brown linoleum floor. Because it was halfway through 1st period, we were the only ones in the hall. He looked at me and then at the roof like I had fallen from the rafters.

I mumbled something about not bothering to pick them up, I could just leave them there and eventually the librarian would figure it out.

"But then she would hunt you down and kill you," he said. He was already kneeling, forming two neat and even piles. "See, your name is all over
them," he opened one of the covers. "How many Ferns do you think there are at this school?"

It sounded like someone else's name on his lips. I knew he hadn't know my name before he saw it on the library card, and I was angry that he felt he could just say it without ever having met me. It seemed like a presumption someone would make who has always been loved. His shirt was neatly pressed around the collar.

"Forget it," I said. I stood on *Wuthering Heights* and then glided it down the hall with a quick shove. I had kept it for so long that I couldn't imagine it existing without me, but there it was at the end of the corridor, existing.

He didn't notice my reaction. He just continued to stack the books, taking time to look at the titles printed on each spine. When the bell rang I was relieved, the halls filling with too many people for us to be noticed. He was waving bodies away from his spot in the hall, trying to protect the short stacks he'd made. He was focused, I realized, and wanted to help me. I slipped away without thanking him. He was too much something.

That night I sat for a long time listening to animals rustling in the bushes in our backyard which was full of old sinks and fig trees. Here were the houses I had known all my life, I could see their rooftops and fence edges uneven and odd, like a Chagal painting. I wondered how it would look to me later. Would it smell the same? Would I ever see that sidewalk or the yard or the bushes that surrounded it in a messy loop? These people would forget me.
I was thinking all of this because I was going to meet my mother in Idaho where she had gone a few weeks before to find a place for us to live. She was a travel agent and had been transferred to her company's mountain office: more money, vacation packages, and so on. I didn't expect to like Idaho. While she was away I packed us up into boxes, but I had thrown out a whole bunch of our things. Possessions she would have wanted me to keep, worn photographs and ragged letters she kept wrapped with ribbons saved from faded romances and from relatives we hardly saw anymore and from people who had died. I threw away my baby books and a miniature rocking chair and all of my posters. It felt cold blooded and good and I was willing to be punished. There was always the way she made me hold her hand in public, how awfully fat she was.

She sent me an envelope filled with post-it notes stuck together out of order in a scrawling cursive I could only read because I had grown accustomed to it. She wrote about one yellow room and one green room and wall to wall carpeting, she wrote how it would be a better life. I threw those sweet notes away. I didn't want to think about her.

When Jason Trombone called I wasn't even sure he had the right person and it seemed ridiculous to pretend I was worth his trouble or that any of this was normal in the slightest bit. But I liked deception. You have to deceive yourself to get anything done in this world. There was a date set for Friday evening. He wanted to know where I liked to go, wanted me to pick it. I chose the clearing.
He offered to pick me up and I refused. I didn’t know what to do with him in the car. What would I say. What music would he listen to? I didn’t want to dislike anything about him.

Lately on Fridays Bridget and I had been renting the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. We would dress up goulishly and then afterwards share her sister’s bed, curving into perfect half moon’s of breasts and hands and breath. Was that love. Was that enough.

There was something unspeakable and unclear. And it wasn’t at all about growing up and discovering men or any of that. I wasn’t afraid to be with her or afraid to touch her. It was more about teaching myself something. It was about my body, that it could mean as little as I wanted it to. But the point is that I was going against something. I was being given Jason Trombone or Bridget Lancaster. Something I’ve noticed is that loyalty is convenient and usually selfish. I’m not sure what it means anymore, or who it’s helping.

* 

Friday night, November ? At the end of the sidewalk I bent down in a bush at the edge of the field and held smoke in my lungs from a packed metal pipe for the second or third time that evening, holding it in and letting myself cough the way my father taught me to do. My father used to lip-grip a pipe until his face puffed up and then choked the smoke out his nose. He gave me that pipe. I still have it. I was afraid someone had heard me cough when I stood up again but there was no one around. Families in my neighborhood stay indoors and watch television, their houses lit up with thick blue light that drifted down
into the street or out towards the rocky field. The blue light made the field seemed covered with fog, and from where I stood against the fence the field seem sinister and emphasized the fact that I was alone.

I crossed the fence and entered the field. I wore flats and nylons with black seams up the back. The rest of my outfit wasn't important. When I stepped in the overgrown, wet grass at the edge of the field it immediately wettened me to the shins. I hadn't thought of this. Tonight was different and I suppose I wanted to look fantastic, wanted to look like other girls Jason knew and seemed to like. But my feet sloshed around in their wet, slick flats and my toes felt like shivering worms trapped inside. I thought about going home but it didn't seem worth it. Every step I took it seemed like my shoes might fly off my feet or that I would slip and fall. It was a feeling I always remember.

But it's difficult not to think about your mother. As I walked I tried to imitate her voice. Blah, blah. I couldn't. I sounded too loud. I tried singing but could only think of a few lines from a Pretender's song: *Gonna use my arms, gonna use my legs, gonna use my fingers, gonna use my, my, my imagination...* I thought I might like to be empty, to be less and less until I was nothing. The rocks and the field and the fear and the wet and meeting a boy I hardly knew alone in the dark. It was better because it was new and the end of something, although I hardly realized it then. Was I losing or gaining? I almost know.

I thought someone was behind me. I leaned over, pretending to inspect a rock on the ground, peering over my shoulder to check the night. Because I was
alone I wouldn't let myself think about the possibilities out there. I thought I could hear hissing snakes coming from the bushes. An owl hooed.

I reached the middle of the field where the trees were lower to the ground and gnarled like old men with too many arms and where the ground was drier. I picked my way through bushes and rocky places. I wished I had on other shoes.

All week Bridget had been calling me but I couldn't make myself answer the phone. I wondered what I would do with Jason. It would make her feel awful to know that I was doing this without her even knowing it or knowing him, she would be scared for me or scared of him or scared of me. If she saw me now she would laugh at my outfit. She would tell me to put my jeans on and go to the store for cigarettes and settle down in front of the television. Remembering that hardened me. I thought she had no business keeping me so close.

I couldn't possibly explain what was happening to me. I decided to leave for Idaho without saying good-bye to her. Good-bye was final and this wasn't, this was fading. I could handle fading. Fading had possibilities. Or maybe it was something else.

Then suddenly the shells and cheese I made for dinner turned over in my stomach and I burped a few times in a row. What are you doing in there? I leaned over and rubbed my stomach and asked it a few more questions. The noises emanating from inside me sounded like balloons bursting. It felt like fluid was pouring out of them. I stopped in my tracks and vomited as much as I could with my finger down my throat, then wiped the edges of my mouth with a dewy leaf and cleaned off splatters from my flats and stockings. I will never eat that
again, I promised. But it wasn't the food that made me sick. It was something else and it was all of it, it was how it felt to be at the mercy of everything and everyone. I hate a sixteen year old girl. Send her out into the woods when she's fourteen and don't let her come back until she's grown. Let her die if she's going to. Stop putting shadows on her.

He was there already in the clearing beside the creek, his truck that I had seen in the parking lot at school pulled between a few tall trees. I guessed he had brought it in along the dirt road that veers in from the right. All of this surprised me. Everything about him was a mystery.

A door was open and the dome light on. I could see him lying across the front seat, his legs dangling out the driver's side. I couldn't decide how to approach him. I decided to scare him. I tiptoed around to the passenger door and stood for a moment looking at him. He couldn't see me, his arm was over his face and it was very dark. I banged on the window with my fist and knocked the door with my knee. Everything I did hurt more than I expected it to. He leaned up and rolled down the window. I felt stupid, suddenly. I don't know why I tried to scare him. This was actually a scary place, I realized. And he was a man, not a boy. But he looked up and waved through the glass. He seemed glad to see me.

He shuffled through a pile of trash on the floorboard and picked up a small bottle, a six-pack of beer and a pack of cigarettes and got out on the other side. I went around.
“You do those things?” I asked, pointing.

“No, not really. I thought you might want them.”

“You thought I was an addict. Believe me, I am.”

“I didn’t say that. I just want you to have what you want.”

Why was everyone so nice to me? Why couldn’t I believe them? I held out my palm and he put a cigarette across it. He leaned against the side of the truck and lit mine and then his. The door was still open and the light lit up his hair. It was hard to be myself.

When I pulled out my pipe it fell clanking against the pebbles and rocks near his front tire. He bent to pick it up before I even had a chance. Standing next to him I realized I only came up to him mid chest and felt wonderful knowing he didn’t want to squash me.

Ever since my mother left I burned candles in our house, lots of them until they illuminated every room with thick, sweet light. His headlights in the clearing had the same effect, they made the grass seem fuzzy and dreamlike, like a light from heaven shining down and surprising us. But it didn’t seem right, I didn’t want to see anything that clearly right now and I didn’t want him to see my face, the pimples around my mouth that were red and picked at. All through the fields as I walked here I had been crying. I knew my face was stained and distorted. Bridget wouldn’t have cared about my pimples. She would have touched each one or offered to squeeze them for me.

“On or off,” he asked.

“Off.”
Suddenly, we disappeared.

"I wish I had on other shoes," I told him. I had never heard his laugh before. It sounded friendly in the dark.

During the day Bridget and I often came to the clearing, hiding from our regular lives. We wrote our names with chalk rocks across boulders and on tree stumps. She stole berry wine coolers or Southern Comfort from her parent's stash and I brought my metal pipe and we would hang out and miss school, pretend to nap, our hands reaching towards each other. This was the kind of pleasure you deny yourself most of the time, a lot like NOT reading the last three or four pages of a novel you have loved. You let the book sit there in your lap and try to think of other things. When you can't stand it any longer, you open it and look.

I tried to find one of our stumps to show Jason or maybe just to know it was there but it was too dark to see what we were looking at and so I gave up. And the tree bark reminded me of the skin on my mother's heels, it made my jaw tighten, I could almost smell her salty, dry feet. I rinsed off my hands in the creek and wiped them off on the grass. We wandered blindly and kicked at rocks just to be moving. Neither of us had any sort of plan. The grass along the sides of the creek was wet and flattened, the air smelled green from the muddy, grassy water. The wet dirt around us made everything smell rich and musty, like unsweetened chocolate or ivory soap or blood. We found a circle of rocks after a time of this feeling and stumbling. His laugh kept startling me awake. It made me want to touch him. I was suddenly very aware of what he was hiding there in his
pants. Was he hiding it? Was he ashamed of it. It seemed unlikely. And it seemed so strange to me that he had something that moved between his legs, like an arm that's just been sewn on and doesn't work quite right, that I had to focus on his head which was large and tilted back, looking at the sky.

“Bridget would never come here with me after dark,” I said.

“She’s not you.”

I wasn't sure what this meant. I sipped my beer slowly. It was lukewarm and bitter. It was too dark for him to see what I was doing clearly.

“Do you know what I mean?” His voice was tender. “You’re different. I mean that in a good way. You just seem much better than she is, much more unique a person, that’s all. Like you’ve been through something.”

He kept surprising me. I didn’t know whether to feel protective or flattered.

“You don’t know either of us,” I said.

“True words.”

“My mother doesn’t even know this place exists,” I said, trying to stop thinking about Bridget alone at her house. She was probably trying to call me, wondering where I was. “To her it probably looks like a wood of junk trees and a messy ditch full of water.”

“My parents would never see this either, how great this is.” He waved the air all around him. He reached for the pipe and I gave it to him. I thought it might be good to kiss him. I was waiting for a sign, something to tell me what he wanted, why we were even there. I didn’t realize then that I could just reach out and take what I wanted. I wonder if it’s good to realize such a thing.
He moved closer. I thought I knew what was coming. This was something. His chin was pointy and rough. Even his lips were verging on solid, like sausages. Our mouths opened, mine less than his. His mouth seemed to wrap around my skull.

We stopped kissing to open two more beers. His tongue had been on mine only seconds before. I washed his spit down my throat and hoped it would get me pregnant. I loved him through pangs of guilt and fear.

"Was that okay?" he asked, meaning the kiss, but seemed confident that it was and I answered yes, not because it was entirely okay but because it was the only response that didn’t require getting into a discussion.

"I'm just asking, because I haven't seen you go out with anyone."

I was blushing so badly that I ran to the creek and put water on my face. It was cold, it stung my eyes.

"Please don't be offended. I just mean that I want you to want to kiss me and not just kiss me because I'm kissing you. I want you to want this, that's all."

It was hard to believe that he was nervous about anything.

"It disturbs me to think that to you I seem like the kind of person who doesn't know what she wants, or even worse who does things she doesn't want to do."

"No," he said.

"Because I'm not."

"Okay."
There was silence I had to fill. I thought of games Bridget and I played with each other but none of them seemed right. They usually contained the words, “what if.” He might not like them.

“And I’m changing schools, by the way. I’m moving to Idaho next week.”

“That’s okay. Idaho’s okay.”

“So that’s it?”

“No, nothing’s ever it. I don’t know what that means.” He was picking at my nails. His hands were soft. I liked it when he was insecure, it made him seem more like a girl to me, I could ignore what he was keeping there in his pants. Some time passed.

“Do you like it here?” he asked me.

“No,” I said. “I mean yes, I like the clearing. But I don’t particularly like my life.”

“That seems like a hasty judgment,” he said. We were rubbing our hands together, palm to palm. We were both a little drunk.

“Well, then what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” I asked him.

“I’d have to think on it.” He was quiet for awhile and then shook his head. “You tell me.”

“No,” I said. I knew what I was doing.

“That’s not fair, is it. Those aren’t the rules.”

“There aren’t rules,” I said.

“Yes there are.”
I was quiet. I thought that this confession could decide something between us. He might find me stupid, or even worse discover that I was uninteresting and ordinary, that my mother was a travel agent, my father a drug dealer, that they were very unhappily divorced. That my stomach was flabby. That I was failing Algebra II.

But then just the truth seemed to matter. I wanted him to know me, to know exactly what sort of person was sitting beside him. He could leave if he wanted to. But there was a chance he would remember me.

I took a sip from my bottle. “Okay. In the fourth grade I got invited to Betsy Hilburt’s birthday party.”

“Whose?”

“Just a popular girl, excuse the expression.”

“I wouldn’t know who was popular and who wasn’t,” he said.

“That’s because you don’t have to.” It was a mean thing to say, I guess.

But it was true. Not that any of this matters. It can’t matter. It all happened a long time ago.

Now he was quiet. Echoing against the rocks or the water or the dark I heard myself. I sounded like somebody’s girlfriend. His hand was on my knee, his fingers rubbing my knee cap. But all of this was going to disappear.

“There were seven or eight of us. We slept out in Betsy’s parent’s Winnebego because Betsy thought it would be more of an adventure that way. We took candy and soda and cookies out there and all sorts of other disgusting sugary things. Her mother made spaghetti. And trees kept brushing up against
the camper so we screamed and spilled coke, etc. Bridget was there. She fell asleep before everyone else, curled up in the corner bunk.

It was getting cooler. I wondered what time it was. I wondered if he would have to go home soon. I couldn't believe how I was talking to him, like we were friends.

“She was fat,” I said. “No one liked her. Betsy only invited her because she was my best friend.”

“Fern.” He touched the back of my neck. “It’s cool that you’re so loyal to her. You shouldn’t feel guilty about that.”

I kept talking as if I hadn't noticed. “Bridget fell asleep and farted and it didn’t even smell but Betsy pretended it did. She made choking sounds. And then the rest of us did. Betsy picked up a long plastic tube, I think it was a curtain rod. She poked at Bridget.” I kept talking, even more quickly. I didn’t want him to interrupt. “And Betsy kept poking her, even when Bridget was rubbing her eyes and trying to understand what was happening to her, what we were all doing to her.”

I felt myself starting to choke. In that moment I wanted to run home, wanted to climb under the blankets with my phone and tell Bridget I’d been to the store to buy cake mix and tampons, lie to her. I could see the profile of Jason’s face clearly. He didn’t seem to react in the way I expected him to.

“But Betty kept poking at her and someone pulled down her underwear and Betsy poked at her stomach and then poked at her, at her parts. Her butt and
her parts and the rod was touching her a little inside, and then it was between her legs and more inside. We thought it was a game, it was all just happening."

He looked up. I had his attention.

"It didn't go in very far, it couldn't. But it was touching her. I didn't do anything. I watched. I think I laughed." It was so quiet and so dark that for a second it seemed like I was only a voice, like my body was the illusion. My voice was tinny. "Once she was awake, Bridget pulled down her nightshirt and started screaming and was crying in this really unnatural way I had never heard before. I don't know if she even realized what we were doing. We were surrounding her, it was hard for her to find the door."

He didn't say anything, but he looked down. I noticed everything.

"She ran home and on Monday at school we pretended like it hadn't happened. She gave me her homework to copy. We talked about other things."

I took a cigarette out of his stiff shirt pocket, fumbled with the lighter.

"Kids can be shits. It's not so bad."

"You don't understand, I did that." My legs were shaking. The damp made everything feel cold.

I have to make a great effort now to remember what Jason Trombone looked like. Everything else is vivid but his face. And I am sure he doesn't remember me. And of course Bridget eventually stopped calling. We were such children.
He hugged me, and it was awkward because we were outside, sitting on rocks. It was beautiful and ridiculous all at once. But even in that moment, we were fading.

It rained some.

It was time to go, I guessed.

Then there wasn’t much to say. He pulled over at the end of my street. I was in tears again. He lay me down across the seat which was brown and blue woven, synthetic wool that itched me, but that also reminded me of something very dim and comforting. Everything was pulled down, everything came off. It amazed me how easy it was. My head bumped against the door handle when he got up inside me, thump, thump. I didn’t expect it to be warm. Truck metal creaked at the joints. I laughed but he didn’t seem to hear me. “You’re pushing waves inside me,” I said. Soon he grabbed a Styrofoam cup off the floor and emptied his semen into that, so I wouldn’t get pregnant, so it wouldn’t stain the seat. It came out spurting. It didn’t taste like white icing. I think there was at least one kiss. I recognized the cup. It was a cafeteria cup. But don’t be fooled. Jason was astonishing.

He wrote down his phone number and address on a crumpled flyer and gave it to me. He asked if he could pick me up tomorrow and take me somewhere.

* 

When I walked back to my house there were creaking sounds that scared me at first until I realized it was only the oak trees that sprawl along the sides of
my street. They never fall but they moan. Someone has rigged wires on one of them to keep its heavy limbs from touching the ground or cracking under their own weight. Leaves above my head rustled loudly when wet drops fell through them and for a few seconds I stopped to hear it. Everything was vivid and loud in my ears. A few cold drops fell on my hair and down the neck of my blouse but I wasn’t sorry about it. This was clean. There was the smacking of my shoe heels and the street lamps hissing because the cold from the rain and the heat of that night had joined on top of them, but it wasn’t raining anymore. I love the smell of wet sidewalk. I stopped again and again to breathe it into my face and because I wanted my heart to stop bursting and thundering in my chest. I wondered how my mother was and pictured her going to the movies in one of her ugly, bright patterned sweaters. I was still young enough not to worry about loneliness. I thought I heard bugs and invisible things in the air. Jason Trombone and I might have just had something, something great. The source? Essentialness? I wasn’t sure. I was not completely happy. Life just didn’t seem possible. There was pain on the other side of every step. I wanted back in. I didn’t know how.

How miserable girls are. All those girls I knew once, who felt dead unless they could find someone to save them from the muck. Girls will bear nearly anything for that. And then there’s the weight of those others pushing them back in. And why don’t they do something about it? You said it: love them and kill them.
Case Study, More or Less

I. Retreat

II. Brambles

III. Tickle Wars
Retreat

There was an argument that Spring about Lucy’s thirteenth birthday. Mom and Alan wanted an outdoor party with a piñata and ribboned May Pole, but Lucy’s Dad had planned on the Magic Time Machine, a restaurant where waiters and waitresses dress up like super heroes and serve enormous hamburgers. It was Lucy’s favorite place. And she wasn’t sure she wanted the party anyway, she didn’t know who to invite. The other girls in the eighth grade were always asking questions. Which one was her Dad? they wanted to know. Why was Ben held back a year in school? They pointed out differences that Lucy hadn’t noticed, and it made Lucy nervous around them.

Alan was angry that Mom’s party might not go off.

“I’m going to guard us,” he explained, showing them the gun he bought from a suburban hunting store. “I fired plenty of guns before, in the Navy.” He stroked the barrel gently, as if it were someone’s neck.

“Well then maybe we shouldn’t have a party,” Mom said. “Lucy, what do you think? How about we just stick around the house and watch old movies?”

Lucy was relieved, but she didn’t say so. She didn’t want to hurt Mom’s feelings.

“Put the gun away, Alan,” Mom said, pushing the gun away with a few of her delicate fingers. Ben watched it go, disappointed that he couldn’t practice shooting it off.
Then it was her birthday, and Lucy was thirteen, full of a strange energy. Alan sat in his favorite cushy chair, dragged into the front hall.

The house seemed darker and more dangerous than usual. Lucy’s nerves were all sensitive and tingly while she sat on the stairs, listening. Ben watched cartoons, mopey. He was mad that there wasn’t going to be any cake, even though Lucy didn’t care. Mom skitted around the house in her cotton socks, rubbing Alan’s shoulders and refilling his glass with icy beer.

When Dad arrived, he knocked as usual. Alan opened the door against the chain, told him to go home, and showed the gun through the door crack. Dad spoke calmy, Lucy couldn’t hear what he said, but Alan wouldn’t open up. Alan thought most people, especially men, were full of tricks. He slept in the arm chair, just in case Dad returned. Suddenly things were different and things became much harder to predict, as if their lives were all broken up into parts.

Weekend visits with Dad came to a halt. Lucy and Ben treated it like a holiday, or a snow day when school is miraculously called off. Dad only saw them if he picked them up from school before Mom got there, but that meant he had to leave work early. He would bark at them, “Get in the car. I mean it.” Once they got in the car, he jabbed them with his small, pointy fists, making bruises that he called kitty bites. “Don’t be so mean to me,” he said. “I’m about to lose my job over you two.” He told them to sneak past Alan next weekend, told them Alan was keeping them hostage and to watch out for Mom.
That summer was full of lawyers. Mom told Lucy that Dad was taking them to his apartment when he wasn’t supposed to, that he was breaking the law.

“You’ve got to take care of Bennie,” she said. “Because, well... your father. He’s full of strange ideas about things.”

“Right,” Lucy said. Dad was full of strange ideas. But Mom was strange since she’d married Alan, changed in ways that Lucy didn’t like. She stayed in bed a long time in the mornings and walked around the house in a new silky bathrobe wearing an absent look on her face. Lucy couldn’t hang out in her underwear on the weekends, like she used to. She felt shy around Alan, embarassed of her tiny lumped breasts, and hid her bloody maxipads under piles of toilet paper in the trashcan in her own bedroom, ashamed. Ben felt it, too. He was quiet and sullen, crying over the slightest little problem. When Ben cried Alan made a low growling noise from his gut and went outside, staring at the swingset and smoking. But Mom didn’t seem to notice, just smiled and floated like she couldn’t be happier.

This summer was boiling. Lucy planned an escape to Mississippi where her best friend Rochelle went every summer. Rochelle’s grandmother had a pool. She imagined swinging from streams of Kudzu and falling gracefully into ice blue chloriney water. She imagined Rochelle’s smooth, tan stomach, the hollow where Lucy could rest her head and listen to it growl.

It was Dad’s weekend.
Mom and Alan bustled out of the house early on Friday to meet with Mr. Tutt, their lawyer. Dad called while they were out. "No funny business," he warned. "Look honey, just think about us for a minute."

"Yes," Lucy said.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours. I thought we'd go swimming."

Swimming at the public pool. She thought of him in his flowery orange trunks, his hairy legs sticking out the bottoms. He had fleshy knees and a broad stomach that he sucked in when they were in public. He would bring a bikini for her, maybe a new one this time. She hated those bikinis.

Just thinking about Dad made Lucy's cheeks fill up with tingly fluid, and she woke up on the couch or the toilet, and she couldn't remember how she'd gotten there.

"Is Dad actually coming?" Lucy asked casually when Mom and Alan got home. Ben sat on the hall bench, brooding.

"I wish you would call me Dad," Alan said, touching her shoulder.

Lucy blushed, but she couldn't make her mouth say it.

Mom threw down her handbag and plopped on the bench next to Ben. "I am so sorry, you two. It looks like your father's going to get his way, because that's all he wants, is his way. He really ought to hate himself." She scooped both kids into her arms and squeezed. These stifling embraces, the smell of bananas from her mother's body lotion, the sound of the air conditioner blasting on through metal vents.
Alan was suddenly invigorated. He let out a great yell and dug out his gun from the hall closet where he stored it in a locked chest. "I won't be scared away by white trash, thank God."

Ben slunk off. He searched out a new place to hide, and Lucy wondered where it would be this time: under the piano bench (covering it over with a sheet), in one of their very large, wooden drawers used for linens, in their mother's closet piled over with her leather shoes and loose hangers.

Mom went to the kitchen table for a game of cards. Between games she scribbled out notes out for the kids that she slipped into their overnight bags. They always reminded Lucy of fortune cookies: "You'll feel better if you're rested," and "Good things come to those who wait." Mom said how playing cards helped keep her mind off of things, how therapeutic it was. She was also very good. She had recently earned the all state record for Texas Amateurs in three divisions: Solitaire, Spite & Malice, and Four Up Three Down. Lucy was proud of her victories, which seemed to prove an unorthodox, interesting intelligence. It was one thing she hadn't given up since Alan.

Lucy heard cards slap against the kitchen table. "All I need is another seven, Lucy!" Mom had an important tournament the following week in Blanco. She was planning a camp-out with her partner at one of the picturesque rest stops nearby.

Lucy hoped Dad might not come at all, or at least that things might turn out some other, better way. She missed him sometimes, or the idea of him. There was always the smell of his cigarettes, the snake leather of his cowboy
boots, some quality about him that made him hers. But she was also disgusted with him. He was fat, poor and full of self pity, but being Dad gave him rights. The right to drag, to yell, and to keep.

Ben collected magazines from the coffee table and disappeared somewhere. She moved to the window seat in the living room. From there she had a good view of the yard and the door and the living room behind her. The bushes outside looked soggy, like they were weighed down.

When Dad came to the door Lucy tried to warn him. She banged on the window and shouted, “We don’t want you anymore. Go away!” She waved her hands. Alan was at the door with the gun.

“They’re my children,” Dad shouted through the door.

“Eat me!” Alan shouted back, waving his gun so that Dad could see it through the square window in the door.

“You can’t do this!” Dad yelled. Lucy saw the way his jeans hugged his hips tightly, their thick yellow stitching and wide pockets, his short stubby legs as he turned in circles in front of their door. The last time she saw him he had made her wear those very jeans, and one of his old, ripped tank tops while they watched TV. He just liked to see her in big clothing, he said.

“You can’t make these kinds of decisions for my kids, for christsakes!” He made fists and shook all over.
"Oh yes I can," Alan shouted. "And get the hell off of my property!" Alan stomped his feet a few times, and because he was a big man his stomps were loud and intimidating.

Everyone else in the house was still, waiting to see what would happen next. She wondered why he hated Dad. It was difficult to know what was what.

"It's like talking to a moron, you moronic fuck!" Dad shouted at Alan from the other side of the door. "I divorced Gwyn, it was maybe the wrong thing to do. But these things happen, and damnit it doesn't make me Satan."

"It definitely makes you Satan," Alan shouted, tapping the gun barrel against the small window in the door. "Think of the children, it's like you're not even thinking of the children!"

Suddenly, Dad kicked the door hard. Those cowboy boots. Lucy thought the sound would make Alan jump, but he just tightened the sash on his navy bathrobe and laughed.

"You used to be my best friend, you remember that? And now you're threatening me with a gun in front of my kids!" Dad sounded younger when he was frustrated. His voice was high pitched and trembling with anger. "You're brainwashing them, you realize."

The kicking stopped. Lucy couldn't see Dad anywhere. "Bastard!" Alan stamped his foot. He ran down the hall, through the kitchen, and waited by the back door.
Lucy heard the clanging of pans. When she walked in the kitchen to see what was going on, she saw Ben in an open cupboard under the counter, sitting inside an enormous metal bowl. He was crying.

The pounding had started up on the back door. Dad was trying to sneak in through the back door.

“Come on, Ben.” Lucy put her hand down for him to grab. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“No way,” he said, burrowing deeper into cookie sheets and stained, old Tupperware.

“Ben, It’s okay. It’s really fine. We’re all fine.”

He didn’t answer. She found another mixing bowl and put it over his light blond hair.

“See, you have a helmet now like one of your macho-power-army boys.” Lucy could hardly disguise her trembling. “Come on, Ben. We’re a team, right?”

“Shut it,” he cried, kicking at her.

“Don’t be such a pussy head!” She wanted to feel anger, but all she felt was deep, profound fear. And on the other side of the fear was a giggle. It was almost funny, if she just looked at it in the right way.

At the kitchen table Mom shuffled a new deck. It made a rigged slapping sound. “One more set and then I’m all yours,” she told Lucy as she lay the stacks for Four Up & Three Down. “Your father and Alan won’t need us for awhile yet.”
“Dad’s going to find you in there,” Lucy told Ben. “You’re a sitting duck. This is all really useless, you know.” She pushed the cupboard door closed and walked back to her place at the front window. Her knees felt liquidy. She wanted to sit down. Alan jogged awkwardly past her, holding his gun out in front of him. His robe had come loose and his belly flopped over his boxer shorts as he moved. “I think I’ve got the little bastard,” he told her, slapping her shoulder as he passed by.

“Open the goddamn door!” Dad was shouting, pounding on the front door again. “This is ridiculous, do you realize that? You’re making yourself ridiculous?”

“Like how!” Alan sounded angry, but he was smiling. He cocked the gun. There was the sound of metal clicking into place.


Outside, Lucy watched Dad sweat. There were circles at his armpits and around his neck through his striped shirt.

Dad used to work at a bank. Then he was a stock broker. Then he ran for office and lost. But he had lost all his jobs for some reason or another, usually related to inconsistent work habits and skipping work days and hassling female co-workers to go out on dates. Lucy met some of them, young women who dressed in suits and drank coffee, but they never lasted. Lucy told Mom.

“Typical,” she said, “of a man with no human decency. He is just a very hideous person.”
Watching him sweat through his shirt outside, Lucy felt almost sorry for him. He should have a good job. He should have children that loved him and maybe a girlfriend. Everyone deserved those things. She sat in the window seat and took off her socks. She was sweating as much as Dad was.

Sweating made her think of swimming with Dad, which made her feel sick. Dad made her wear skimpy string bikinis that were always too large and slid down off her chest. If she complained, he locked her and Ben in his weight room, tying them up with a length of silky rope. He said whoever got loose first could come out and watch *The Cosby Show*. He was always cheerful and excited in those moments. She was glad that he was sweating as much as he was, that he was the one locked out, the one who seemed nervous.

Then Dad walked out in the front yard waving his arms at a white bronco that was easing slowly down the road toward her house. There was a police emblem painted on the door in deep blue.

Dad had sent the police before, instead of coming himself. It was sort of a trick he played. The policeman said Dad would get them from the station. It was all sort of real, like suddenly there were real consequences to things. But then Lucy and Ben waited at the station all night for Dad to pick them up, eating brownies with policemen who organized stacks of papers and talked pleasantly. The whole place smelled like dusty curtains and wet metal. Lucy napped on a deep leather couch, and a tall policewoman made a bed for Ben with gray, scratchy blankets. In the morning Dad shook them awake. “I’ve got movie tickets!” He had seemed excited and refreshed, somehow. When Lucy stood up,
she thought she'd wet her pants, until she remembered her period. The whole way to Dad's apartment she tried to muster up the courage to tell him what she needed.

This policeman was done up in stiff blue, metal buttons glinting in the sun. Lucy watched him walk slowly up the walk kicking at some pecans that had fallen from the tree onto their front walk. He was younger than the last policeman had been. He shoved his hands into his armpits and looked at the sidewalk or up at the sky as he walked. Dad seemed calmer, he wandered over to the window where Lucy sat and waved.

“Mr. Lippin?” the young policeman called through the door.

Alan danced a quick jig and then wagged his finger at Dad through the window as a sort of reprimand before returning to his place at the front door. Dad didn't move, he visibly stiffened. Lucy laughed. There was this thick piece of glass between her and Dad. Maybe this was how he felt when he locked them up in the weight room, sort of light and hopeful, even optimistic.

“Mr. Lippin!” the policeman said, knocking this time. Lucy thought he had a nice face with dark eyebrows and full lips. He looked sort of like Ralph Machio.

“Is that you, dear?” Alan said. He smiled at Lucy. Alan and Lucy were always getting each other's jokes. This was one of the things she liked about him. Like her mother often said, he's his own person. He could make them laugh, which was worth something.

“Mr. Lippin, please open the door,” the policeman said.
"You’re working for a really crazy asshole, you know," said Alan.

"Look. I’m only hear to see the children off safely."

"But what I’m trying to tell you is that they don’t want to go," Alan said.

"You don’t know what they want!" Dad shouted.

"Look who’s talking, shit for brains!" said Alan.

"Whoa there, cowboys," the policeman said. "It’s called visitation rights. There’s an agreement you made in front of a judge." He seemed confused and out of his element.

Alan waved Lucy over and made room for her in the narrow hallway. She pushed her face against the crack between the wall and the front door. She thought she could smell Dad standing on the other side of the door, the tobacco on his fingers, and his leather boots that always smelled strong, like a musky animal, when they sat in the heat.

She hesitated, thinking about what she could say. She wanted to say something like, "I don’t want my Dad. He’s crap. My brother feels exactly the same way." Instead, she said, "Hi dad."

Suddenly, Lucy’s mother came out of the kitchen in tears. Standing in the hallway and doubling over, she screamed “Don’t take my babies!” as loud as she could. Lucy leaned with her back against the door and slid down until her eyes were level with Alan’s feet. They were bare. She had painted his toes the night before a few of her favorite shades: purring purple passion, devil, and gold dust. Then, Ben appeared at the foot of the stairs sobbing, a backpack messily
packed and dripping clothes out the sides. Lucy couldn’t look at him for long. Her cheeks had already started tingling.

Mom sat on the twin bed in Lucy’s room with Lucy between her knees. There were lots of knots that kept pulling Lucy’s head back as Mom brushed.

“Take deep breaths,” her mother said.

“I don’t know how.” Lucy’s cheeks were tingling even more. She didn’t know how she had climbed the stairs, or if Mom had carried her.

“Come on!” Dad yelled from downstairs. “We’re waiting god damnit!” Dad was downstairs in their living room now.

“I mean it, Gwyn!” Dad yelled a second time.

Mom leapt off the bed and sent Lucy flying to the floor. “I’m so sorry honey.” She opened a few dresser drawers and shoved some clothes into a small canvas bag. “How about a bathing suit? And your new clear jellies?”

“Sounds great,” Lucy said.

“I wish I could do something. I wish I had never laid eyes on that crazy asshole.”

Lucy nodded. She was starting to squeeze herself into the cool space under the bed when Dad came through the door and pulled her out by the leg. Her head smacked against the metal bed frame. He was always stronger than her, stockier than she remembered.

Mom screamed. “Get your ass down those stairs like a decent fucking human being and wait your turn!” She threw clothes at him.
“They’re my children too, you know! This is fucking ridiculous!”

Mom sent Lucy’s dresser trinkets flying through the air at Dad. He ducked, red and puffy and confused.

“I don’t even know how to think about this anymore! What the hell is going on around here, Gwyn? I mean, Jesus!” He seemed to forget Lucy was there, so she went into the bathroom and sat in the tub, the flowery shower curtain pulled closed. The tile was cold against her forehead. When she licked it, the tile tasted faintly of soap. She thought about taking a nap. Dad did bad things, sure, but they hadn’t even told anyone, not even Rochelle. That wasn’t child abuse, or at least not the kind she heard about on television, where sad-looking kids show up at shelters with shadowy, malnourished eyes or internal bleeding. There was gray area. She couldn’t think about it exactly right.

Hiding in the shower seemed dumb. But she thought it was better to feel like you were doing something. It helped to feel a little bit in control of yourself.

“Lucy?” It was Ben. He was in the linen closet.

“What?” They were both whispering. Lucy wasn’t sure why, especially since everyone else was shouting.

“What should we do?” he asked. They were quiet. The house seemed to be exploding and crumbling. Dad and Mom reached some sort of stasis because Lucy’s room grew silent. They seemed to be at the center of a hurricane, Lucy thought. The place where it’s quiet, but it doesn’t stay quiet.

“Lucy?”

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.
“What?” He sounded trembly.

She opened the curtain and stepped out of the tub, pulling Ben up off the floor of the linen closet by the armpits. He was warm and sweaty.

“Ouch! Get off of me,” he hollered.

“Sorry.”

When they looked down the stairs, the policeman was standing in the doorway, worrying his change. Through the open door they saw Dad lying in the yard. His legs were crossed Indian style.

Alan was on the living room couch, flipping through a magazine. There didn’t seem to be a way to get past them. If they ran for it, they wouldn’t get any farther than the grocery or at best the fudge shop before someone caught them.

“Hey there, honey,” Alan waved at Lucy.

The policeman looked up, surprised to see them. “I guess it’s time to go, then,” he said.

“I guess not,” Lucy said.

“I guess so,” he said. His reactions made him seem younger.

“Oh, come on!” Alan sipped from a green glass. His gun was gone. He leaned back against the couch cushions, shaking his head and laughing quietly in a way that worried Lucy. Mom walked down the hall from the kitchen. She climbed up the steps and put her arms around Lucy and Ben. She was smiling, which also struck Lucy as odd.

She leaned against Lucy’s ear. “Why don’t you run for it,” she hissed.

“Call us and we’ll come get you.” Banana lotion.
"We’re going to pack, now!" Lucy said to the policeman and went back up the stairs, rushing Ben beside her. When they reached the landing, Lucy stopped to listen, peeking around a wall down the steps at the others below. Mom was sitting on a step, halfway down the staircase. She fanned herself with a folded magazine. She looked at the policeman and smiled for a long time, holding his eyes in a kind of gaze.

"I thought your mother was helping you?" the policeman called to Lucy and Ben.

Mom mocked him.

"This isn’t a game, you know. That man is counting on me," he pointed out the door at Dad, out on the lawn.

"That man doesn’t know what he wants. He’s spoiled, inconsiderate, and foolish."

"Here, here!" Alan chimed in from the couch. Mom laughed.

"Do you want a beer?" Mom asked the policeman, her voice low and syrupy.

They went to Lucy’s room and looked out the window. Dad was still outside on the lawn, but now he was curled up on his side and appeared to be sleeping.

Lucy opened the window and crawled out onto the roof.

"Don’t do that," Ben said, putting on one of Lucy’s cotton sweaters. It was cooler upstairs, even though in other houses heat usually rises.
Lucy sat on her heels at the highest point of the roof’s slant, her feet burning against hot tar. She put some leaves under her feet to cool them.

“Dad,” she whispered. Her voice was weak, lost in the hot wind currents that swept over her. She tried again, this time she was louder and more cheerful. “Hi Dad!”

He sat up and looked around, leaning back on his hands in the spiky grass. She waved at him. He put his hand up but hardly moved it. He looked defeated. Lucy almost felt sorry for him again. From the roof he looked tiny.

“What are you doing down there?” she called, as quietly as she could manage and have him hear her. She didn’t want the policeman to come outside and see what she was doing. She didn’t want Mom to see what she was doing.

“Sitting. How about you?”

Lucy put a finger up to her lips, signaling at him to be quiet. Dad stood up and brushed dirt from his trousers. He walked over, closer to the low roof where she sat, on his toes across the grass. Lucy laughed. Dad never tip-toed. The air was thick.

When he was closer she could see he was still sweating, and he seemed more and less like himself. And it seemed like there was something attainable between them, something like love.

“If I jump down,” Lucy asked. “Could you catch me?”

“I think I could, considering that you’re a pip squeak with no meat on your bones at all, whatsoever.”

“What if I threw Ben down first?”
“Sure. Sounds good. It'll be a trial run.” He slapped each arm, as if to get blood flowing through them. He seemed excited. He looked over his shoulder to the front door. “Go on, go ahead. No one's looking.”

“But what's going to happen? What are we going to do... after?” Lucy's lips were shaking. She saw it was a long way down. She saw the yellow of Dad's VW parked in shadow. She could hear Mom inside, talking in that voice. She even thought she heard Alan's ponderous snores from the living room.

The sun was quiet behind a thick layer of clouds, but there were still shadows and wild heat all over the yard. It was a lot like a dream, when you aren't sure what's real anymore, what's actually happening and what you only think is happening and when you wake up you're different.

“We'll pick up Chinese food in those cardboard boxes that look like houses,” her Dad said. “We'll go to my apartment and watch television and make magic plates in the oven.” When he smiled his face crowded with folds. “You can even pluck the hairs off my back if you want to.”

“What about Ben?”

“Of course, Ben too. Is that him crying?”

“What if I said we didn't want to. What then?”

“I'm your Dad.” He wiped his hands on his jeans and held them up. “I wish you would try harder to get to know me.”

Lucy fought the impulse to climb back inside. She could hear Ben sniffling behind her. She didn't know what to do. If she went back inside, she could prove she hated him. Mom would coo, brush her hair back from her face,
maybe even cry. She'd say how sorry she was that her Dad was... that he was at all.

"It's turned into a nice afternoon," he said from below. He reached his arms up again and widened his stance. "Jump and I'll catch you. It'll be a lot like swimming in the absence of water." He seemed worried and confident, both feelings at the same time. Lucy studied the angles. She was surprised that this part of the roof wasn't actually that far from the ground, that jumping seemed more than possible: it seemed necessary somehow. A soft voice in her mind told her to do it.

"Hey Ben," she turned and looked inside. She couldn't see him in the dark, groping until her hand bumped against his forehead. "What do you think," she asked him. "Do you want to swim off the roof? Do you want to see Dad? What?"

"No way," he said, sobbing.

"Don't be that way, Ben. It's not what you think. We're all right. Mom and Alan, they're the crazy ones. Not us."

He took Lucy's hand and fiddled with her arm hair, making patterns against her skin.

"I can't sit here all day," Lucy said.

"I'm not a pussy head," Ben said angrily, wiping his eyes.

"Are you not coming with me?" Her eyes were adjusting. She could see him on her bed now more clearly. Wrapped in her pink cotton sweater, he looked a lot like a younger version of Lucy.
"Are we splitting up, is that it? Are we not a team anymore?"

Ben stood up and walked towards the bathroom.

"You better stay," Lucy said, "now that I think about it." She was bubbling over, fierce, determined. She stood up on the roof, wobbling and edging her way towards the gutter. "See Ben! See how much not a pussy head I am?"

"Honey?" Dad called softly. He was standing beneath her. Lucy closed her eyes, then looked up at tall, spindly branches scattered with leaves.

She let herself fall, she didn’t exactly jump.

She took Dad down in a rush of limbs and weight. The wind knocked her, the ground solid.

"That was like being struck down by God," Dad said, kneeling on all fours.

She thought of the last time she was so close to him. He always smelled like salty wood cleaner. She rolled and panted on her back. Her hands were red and there were a few little cuts on her arms from smashing prickers in the grass. No one inside seemed to notice the fall. Lucy felt like walking back inside and telling them what she had done.

But then Ben appeared at the window. "Bye," he waved.

"See you," she waved at him. "Love you." Her voice was weaker from the ground. She felt like a dwarf. Not a child, but an actual dwarf.

Dad picked her up and squeezed her. He seemed happier. She didn’t want to touch him.
“Ben?” he called up. When Ben didn’t answer, he tossed Lucy lightly into the passenger’s seat of his VW. The roof was down. The pecan tree was huge and dark over them. Pecan shells littered the floor of Dad’s car.

“We can’t leave him,” Lucy said. She was crying. She thought she felt her heart breaking apart her chest. Everything seemed wrong, suddenly very wrong. She had just swum through the air. What happened to gravity? To injury? To death?

“Don’t be that way,” Dad croaked, cranking the engine and pushed the gear shift until it held in place. There were white, puffy circles under his eyes and his face was raw and unshaven. He reversed slowly, then honked and waved. The policeman and Lucy’s mother appeared in the doorway. They wore a look of complete shock. Soon, Ben appeared beside them, wandering out the door and slowly down the walk.

Lucy slid down in the passenger seat. She was ashamed of herself. It felt a lot like she had betrayed someone, but she wasn’t sure who that person was. Sitting in that yellow car wasn’t something she could explain away. Even so, it felt better to have made a choice. Even if she was still very, very nervous. They drove off.
Brambles

As they walked through the wild areas near Diane's cabin they found the deserted, dusty road at the edge of the trees and followed it for a long time. Diane, Candy, and Jocelyn were ahead and the boys followed behind with the fishing poles and a small cooler, occasionally throwing pebbles at Diane's heels. Lucy lingered at the rear collecting blue berries that had fallen from the trees, staining rocks and road with purple juice. She wanted to clean off the red dust from the few, small adobe houses that she saw, wrinkled and peeling in the dry sun.

David pointed out strange looking birds, and rocks that were shaped like old men. Pink cliffs made sharp designs that stabbed the dry air. The cliffs reminded Lucy of howling, vengeful faces of the Gods that she read about in a class she was taking. She loved her Greek philosophy professor, Kay Stranton, in the same howling, vengeful way. Kay Stranton knew five languages (including Sanskrit and Arabic) and spoke with soft, round vowels that drew attention to her lips and the muscles of her long, pale neck. 'Hoot' was Kay Stranton's favorite disavowal. She was a New Yorker who loved E.B. White passionately.

Jack made fun of Kay Stranton whenever her name was mentioned. Lucy had forgotten his dislike, mentioning her in connection to one of the rocks that looked a lot like Leda and the Swan, and Jack began to storm automatically.
“Don’t you think she’s boring as hell?” he said, chucking rocks at withered cactus.

“I like that class. What’s not to like?”

“Kay Stranton is an aristocrat, she only likes rich girls. You should see how she sneers at me, it isn’t fair, not at all. And it’s because I’m a boy and I’m from New Jersey.” When he said that he nudged David and winked at Lucy, as if this was supposed to mean something to Lucy in particular, as if it were some kind of warning. Only it just made her hope Jack was right. The idea that Kay Stranton might prefer her over a boy like Jack was oddly dangerous in exactly the right kind of way, but this made her even more self conscious. She also felt self conscious around Jack because she knew he loved Diane and would have probably liked it better if the two of them had come to her cabin alone, without the rest of them hanging around.

“I hadn’t noticed,” she said.

“It does look a lot like a swan,” David said, “at least the neck part does.”

“My shoelace is loose again!” Lucy dropped down and fiddled with the white laces, hoping they would walk ahead and leave her alone.

Lucy was a rich girl, only she wasn’t an aristocrat, she just had enough money to make money not matter. She didn’t give a hoot about being aristocratic. But she had begun to judge everyone by whether or not Kay Stranton would approve of them, and concluded that if Kay Stranton didn’t like Jack, it didn’t matter what he thought, especially what he thought about Lucy. Even so, it bothered Lucy that the boys didn’t seem to like her any more than
they liked Kay Stranton, and she didn’t know why except that she wasn’t as pretty as the other girls, although she was prettier than most. This was an argument, she knew, for hanging around ugly people, it made you look better. But knowing that the boys didn’t matter a hoot to her, especially Jack, made it all a little less awful. She believed strongly that any sort of self awareness meant there was a conscious choice involved, no matter how undesirable the choice appeared. There were ways that she chose to be different. For instance, right now she wanted to turn into liquid and evaporate. She didn’t imagine that Candy or Jocelyn wanted to evaporate. Diane would never want to evaporate. Just look at her. If Jack couldn’t see how wonderful Kay Stranton was, than her suspicions about Jack’s stupidity could only be confirmed. She realized that this was a circular kind of logic, but this was how her thoughts had gone lately, around and around and around until they collapsed in on themselves or until she forgot them by thinking of something else. It was as if her mind was full of brambles, and she was always running the risk of falling on them and bleeding to death.

David looked back at her where she crouched. Lucy acted like she didn’t see him. She stood up and peered down the embankment off to the right, squishing the berries she had collected in her fists. It could be a good thing, the right thing to throw herself off the steep embankment and go tumbling down among the pointy red rocks. She would be like Oedipus, dragging himself and dying alone outside the city of Thebes, and in doing so she could purify an
entire culture. The rest of them walked together as a group a ways ahead on the
dusty road. David walked backwards, still watching her. He gave a quick wave.

She ran to catch up. It was hard to run uphill, she was winded and thirsty
quickly. The sun was higher. Diane still walked ahead, but Jocelyn and Candy
hung back and walked with David and Jack. Jocelyn had shoved a short, pointy
stick through her black hair, the stick held it in a loose bun, and Candy poured
some water from a bottle she carried over her shoulders, which made her tank
top cling and showed her bra straps underneath the wet fabric. Lucy thought
Jocelyn and Candy looked like fake people, with fake skin and hair and fake
mouths. And the voices that came out of those mouths were piped in voices, like
the ones at the supermarket that seem to come from no where, voices that
sound like machines trying to sound like human beings. They have plenty of
human inflections, of course, like wow! and Howdy! and would you believe! but
they were just pasted on for effect. Underneath the soft, sick sweetness of their
piped in voices, they were just a series of ones and zeros.

"Show Jocelyn the worms," Candy was saying to David, "the ones you
use for fishing."

"Leave the worms where they are," said Jocelyn. "I know what a worm
looks like!" Jocelyn was always shy and just, but she liked David and Candy
knew it and was embarrassing her.

When they reached the top of a rise in the road they discovered that the
river was beneath them, off to the right. They could see the river bottom because
the sun was at that perfect middle in the sky.
“Let’s go down,” said Jack. “That’s what I call perfect.” He smacked his lips, like he had just eaten heavy syrup.

“I bet you’ll catch loads of fish David, with all those worms. Right Jocelyn?” Candy said laughing.

They made their way through low trees and rocks that burned their hands when they touched them. It was quiet except for a sound off in the distance like an owl crying and the knock of their shoes and ankles and fishing gear and cooler against the large boulders. Every so often, pebbles crumbled to the ground when birds landed or pecked tiny creatures Lucy couldn't see up in the rocks.

Once they got down to the river she sat against a large, flat rock near the other girls, but not so close that she seemed needy. The boys arranged their fishing gear. They told jokes and punched each other, glancing over at the girls to see if they were watching. Diane seemed not to be paying them any attention, but Jocelyn and Candy smiled and threw a few, bright cactus flowers in their direction. Every girl tucked her shirt up into her bra, exposing bellies to the sun. The air against Lucy's stomach was unfamiliar and welcome. She tapped on the side of her head, but it was quiet, for now. No voices, no cutting brambles from inside. She closed her eyes and tried to remember a recent lecture Kay Stranton had given on nature and the sublime. Or was it on the nature of the sublime? Everything was just the sound of the river and the cooler air that blew up the dry, hot rocks.
She couldn't concentrate on the lecture because the other girls were whispering to each other, things that made them laugh but that Lucy couldn't quite hear. She tried laughing anyway, but it seemed ridiculous to laugh at something you couldn't hear. What would that mean about someone who did that? It would mean they were ridiculous, maybe even retarded. Diane had a way of laughing in a secret, devious manner that seemed to attract other people to her. Lucy thought Diane was much less interesting now that she had that laugh. She was much less rewarding to know. Much less a friend. Lucy closed her eyes against the sun that pecked her lids and skin. She liked the sensation of hearing people moving on the other side of hazy black.

When she woke up she was sweaty and she saw the other girls picking their way back up the rocks toward the road. She wasn't interested in following them. Besides, they didn't seem to want to be followed. That was fine. It was always better to be the one left behind than the one leaving. It gave you a sense of purpose. Your purpose was to make yourself useful.

She was getting a sunburn. The red was creeping up from under her skin. Skin was a lot like a window when you were stuck outside in the rain. The window was locked and you couldn't even look inside because it was painted over with bumpy, rough paint.

“Lucy,” David called. He held up a hunk of soppy mud with slimy grass hanging off from it. “Look what I caught.”

“Good, that's very good,” she said. “Did you use a worm?” He leaned down to the worm can.
"This time I'll try an even fatter one. One with some blood." He held it up and wiggled it at her. And then all of a sudden it felt like she was the worm.

David was something to look at. His skin gleamed honey brown in the sun. There were downy hairs on his arms and legs that shone. She pretended to count the birds that passed by.

When she rubbed her arm against a rock, it scratched. She had that skin again. But how thick was it? And how much scraping would she have to do to make it bleed?

She closed her eyes again. She didn’t want the boys to see her thinking. People were strange and worried about you when they thought you were sitting by yourself, thinking.

Things had become a mess of thinking.

Babyhood, childhood, daddies and mommy, seventeen, college, men, and thinking: life was just a series of what ifs.

This was the way her mind worked. One thing always lead to another. There was no shutting it off.

Strange how only a few months ago there had been no Diane, no Jack, no David, no Kay Stranton. And now, she not only knew this world existed but she was stuck inside it. Lucy's first class had been psychology. She was supposed to make the rat want to push down a lever for a reward of little pieces of crunched up cereal. She told her professor that her rat had disappeared among the reptile cages (boo hoo!) and he excused her from the project, but actually she snuck it into her room and was keeping it as a pet.
Lucy felt herself turning in on herself, becoming snail like and passive. She was almost too much herself. She talked less and less, less than ever. Because in college everything had to be romantic. It was all about losing one’s virginity and/or finding a boyfriend. And all Lucy wanted to be with people without suspecting that they were actually fake people with piped in voices.

And she was suddenly tired of watching the boys fish. It seemed unfair, even wrong that they hadn’t acknowledged her or made any attempt to include her. It wasn’t a secret rite, it was fishing. She could fish.

“Let me try?” she asked. She knew they didn’t think she would catch anything. Jack said, “it takes practice, you know” offhandedly, but handed over a tall blue fishing pole that had a hook anyway. It was surprising to Lucy that there was no teasing. But teasing, Lucy thought, would mean she was worth his attention. He had the other girls on his mind. It was probably Diane on his mind. Diane was forever on their minds.

Lucy took the pole anyway.

“Don’t you like bait?” David asked.

“Right, of course I want bait. I love bait.” David took the hook at the end of her pole and put a half-dead worm on its spiky tip. Then he scooped a few more worms into a little baggy and handed it over.

“I love worms,” he said. “If you want to know the truth.”

“Right. Because they feel good?” Lucy asked, lightly turning their bodies in the baggy between her fingers.

“Because they don’t feel much at all.”
“Right. I guess it would be great to be a worm,” Lucy said.

“I’m not sure I would go that far.”

“Right. Neither would I, I wouldn’t really want to be a worm.” It was just a thing to say, and she wished he hadn’t contradicted her. But he turned back to his pole, as if nothing significant had just happened between them.

Lucy walked along the rocks to a bend in the river that formed a small cove. There were shadows from the large rocks that cooled her, and the water was still, a deep green-blue in the sun. She leaned the pole carefully against a red flowering cactus and crouched down on the rocks, dark and wettened by the deep rushing of the river. The colors made her ache and she wanted to show someone. She could see the rocks and sand-muddy bottom of the river. She put her hand in and swam it like a fish under the surface. She took her shoes off and slipped her feet in up to her calves, and threw rocks to hear them blurb into the water and watch their dark surfaces sink. She wanted to think up the perfect person in her mind. It would have to be the exact perfect person. Anyone else would ruin it.

There were always Diane’s long brown legs and stringy hair, the way she walked ahead of everyone and how she never seemed concerned or unhappy, how distant she was. But if Diane were sitting beside Lucy on the smooth, glistening rocks, she would wish she were somewhere else. It made sense to Lucy. Diane hosted late-night parties in her dorm room: loud music and cigarettes and Jack, although she didn’t seem to notice him. Lucy was not used to drinking more than sips of beer from her mother’s lipstick-rimmed glasses, but
one night Lucy drank from the bottle every time it was passed to her, and then when the other's left for a party she climbed into Diane's bed and fell asleep against the soft cotton of her pillow. Parties were empty holes. They were so noisy that Lucy felt like she was hearing the world through long, metal pipes that clanged, and like in nightmares when she spoke no sound came out. On Diane's night stand stood a portrait of her family sitting on a brick wall in front of a turquoise swimming pool. Your eye fell naturally on Diane. She had those smiles.

Lucy could hear the boys, they weren't far away. There was always Jack's voice, louder and more confidant than David's. It had a sarcastic, unkind ring to it. They were swimming on the other side of the rocks and their voices echoed ghostlike against the canyon. Jack howled, "that was my eyeball!" and David laughed heartily. They seemed tiny and distant. They seemed like a part of her mind that she was trying to forget existed. She watched a few fish dart into the cove, hiding.

She stood up and drooped the hook into the rushing water. Fish circled and darted. She saw the fish move the way the Gods must see her move. But Gods were jealous. They were always keen on destroying tranquility, just out of pettiness and spite.

A few minutes later there was a tug on the line and the pole arced. She wound the reel slowly. She settled the end of the pole at her hip and pulled, and then pulled diagonally as she wound. Once it was free of the water, it wasn't nearly so heavy.
"I caught one!" she called to them. Jack and David came running, soaking wet, around the rocks. David put his bare foot against the fish's flapping body.

"It's small," David said. His red hair curled around his face.

"Yes, it is," said Jack.

"But at least I caught one," Lucy pointed out.

Jack shrugged. "It's still early. Where's Diane, anyway?"

"They went somewhere else."

"Oh." He walked back around the rocks and jumped into the river with a "kebang!"

David bent down and started to worry the hook from the side of the fish's mouth where it was lodged. Lucy bent down and watched. His hands worked carefully. It almost seemed like he didn't want to hurt the fish.

"Do you think it's hurting him?" Lucy asked.

"Yes," David said. Finally the hook came out.

"Is he big enough to eat?" she asked. There was something about David that made her want to talk quietly.

"No, I don't think so." He held it up by the tail and measured its length against his forearm. She hadn't noticed until now how much red there was in his hair, or how curly his hair was, and tight against his scalp. He seemed disappointed.
“So I’ve killed him for nothing?” Lucy asked. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to eat the fish. But it was disappointing that the thing she had caught was a dead thing and not an edible thing after all.

David looked at her and then back at the fish. “We could cook it later. It might taste good.” He stroked its skin with his fingertips. Skin could be scaly and smooth like a fish.

“It looks like it would taste good, to me.” They were both still crouching. David lay the fish down again on the wet red rock.

“It’s good that you got one. We haven’t caught a single thing all day.” He stood up. “I’ll put it in our cooler for you, if you want.” He had a slim neck. His body was narrow and long.

“Thanks.”

He seemed uncomfortable. She noticed a lump in his shorts that was his penis. “All right then,” he said and went back to Jack around the corner and behind the rocks, his hands covering his midsection. What did his hair taste like.

Just then, the girls were calling. She poked her head around the rocks and saw them above on the road waving their tanned arms.

“Come on!” It was Diane’s voice, deep and sure.

Lucy grabbed the pole, put her shoes back on, and hopped across the rocks to where the boys were. David was pulling in a fish, smaller than Lucy’s had been, and he grinned at her. She set the pole down near his feet.

“Hey look! Better than mud, don’t you think?” The fish was splashing.

“That was quick,” she said.
“Hey Diane!” Jack called from the river where he floated in the current. He waved one long, skinny arm. “I’m naked!”

Diane shot him the finger, and Lucy trotted past. She felt a sudden burst of energy. What stupid games you could play with yourself. What stupid, awful, meaningless games! She looked up into the sun which was behind the girls now. They looked like bright angels, their long hair around them like seaweed calling her up towards heaven.

“We’ve got to show you something really amazing,” Candy said, reaching for Lucy’s hand as she scrambled up the rocks. Candy was always loud and excited and showing off too much skin. She had her shirt all the way off already. Her bra was lacy blue.

“You won’t believe what we found,” Jocelyn said. She had wrapped her hair into a new bun and held it with one hand while she looked at the ground for a good stick.

“No, you won’t believe it,” Diane said.

They started back up the road, in the opposite direction of Diane’s cabin. The road sloped higher up and switched back and forth up the hill.

“Hey, do you three realize that we’re walking up a small mountain right now?” Lucy said, amazed.

“Yes, dumbo. Have been all day. And you’re going to see what’s at the top,” Diane said.

“It’s amazing,” said Candy.
“But is it good amazing or bad amazing? Because have you seen that movie about the group of Victorian girls on a very hot day who wander up into these rocks in Australia?”

"Enlighten us," said Diane.

“They take off their stockings and petticoats up in the rocks and then disappear without a trace.” In Lucy’s opinion that could happen today, to them. The rocks looked just as spooky, just as haunted and Godlike, and the day was just as hot.

“Maybe we should leave a trail or something.” Lucy suggested.

“Oh stop it,” Diane said. She was already ahead of them, taking the hill in long strides.

The air was so clear and dry it made Lucy’s teeth ache. She had read that somewhere. Or she had thought it. This happened to her a lot. She could be absolutely certain that she had invented an idea, and then came across the very same idea in a book. It was almost as if people were all meant to have the same thoughts. And she could never be sure which ones were absolutely hers.

The dust that the girls kicked up with their shoes as they walked uphill formed dirt balls in Lucy’s nose. Candy picked at hers and flicked them on Jocelyn. Lucy thought that things done in public could be ugly, especially things that were perfectly natural. Everyone deposited solid waste from their anus, for instance, and when done alone it was perfectly fine. But in public, it was very disgusting. And in the desert, one felt more and more this way, like an animal.
Diane was ahead, she hadn’t broken her stride even though the hill had gotten steeper and the drop off even more pronounced. Diane had such long, beautiful runner’s legs that it chilled Lucy even in the heat, the way dangerous or thrilling sights often did.

Where the road made its sixth or seventh dramatic Z shape, Diane stopped walking and peered over the edge of the drop off which was now off to their left. There was something turquoise and shiny jutting up off the rock. The other girls ran to catch up.

Hanging off the side of the drop off was a rusting turquoise truck, broken nearly in two. Beyond, they saw stretches of desert roads and desert trees and tiny, toy houses in the distance, and the faintest glimmer of their river far below. Lucy stepped farther to the edge. There were more and more cars, red and blue and silver, stacked one on top of the other all the way down the cliffside. There must have been twenty or more, cracked and bashed and popped and in various angles and degrees all clumped together.

"See it," Candy said.

"You mean, see them," Jocelyn corrected.

"It would be hard to miss," said Diane.

“What happened to them, do you think?” Lucy asked. She felt reverent and hushed. It was almost beautiful, how the metal looked, glittering in the sun. It didn’t look the way metal usually looked, orderly and solid and real.

“They must have come careening down and then just fallen off!” Candy seemed to think it was funny. Diane picked up a rock and tossed it over. It
clanged and banged down the various twisted surfaces of metal. “I think there are things inside them,” she said.

“I think we ought to take a look,” she suggested.

“It’s a little steep, don’t you think?” Jocelyn said. “I mean, we’ll end up plummeting to the depths below, you know.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Diane said. She walked closer to the turquoise truck where it stuck in the air and rocked its back bumper with her foot. “They aren’t going anywhere. If the force of their weight hasn’t knocked them off the cliff, we certainly won’t.” She sounded very calm, very sure.

They all moved over to the truck and started rocking it. It was true, it didn’t budge.

“Let’s try it,” said Diane. “Let’s see what’s inside them. We’ll definitely find something great.”

“It’s too steep,” said Lucy.

“But the cars make a nice ladder,” Diane said. She looked thoughtful and serene. “I really want to see what’s in there.”

They held on to the truck and leaned over, trying to get a good look inside. Lucy actually didn’t mind heights, and the idea of self preservation wasn’t all that appealing. Death, ‘or plummeting to the depths below,’ ought to be reconsidered for its possible value, she thought. It really wasn’t the worst thought in the world by a long shot.

“Count me out,” Candy said walking off. “I feel like swimming.”
“Me too. Forget this, you two. We could get ourselves really hurt.” Jocelyn tugged on Diane’s arm and started to pull her up. Diane shook her off.

“Why don’t you two go ahead. Me and Lucy will just sit here for awhile and look.”

“Lucy?” Jocelyn asked hopefully.

“I don’t feel like swimming.” Lucy felt the most urgent need to see what would happen next. What she and Diane were capable of.

“Get out of here!” Diane swatted the air.

“All right.” Jocelyn said. “But if you aren’t back soon, we’ll send the authorities.”

Candy laughed, but Jocelyn still seemed worried. “Diane? Okay?”

“It all sounds great,” Diane said.

Lucy watched them go until she couldn’t see them anymore. She was scared, but it felt good to be focusing on something. This was something they could share with each other but that now they weren’t sharing with the others.

“What next?” she asked Diane.

“We climb. It’s not that steep, it just looks steep.” Diane started climbing down on the rocks. Lucy noticed there were some rocks jutting out that made nice footholds, and she followed more rapidly than she expected.

“No sweat,” said Diane.

“Right,” said Lucy. Still she was careful, testing each rock before she rested her weight. Everything was dusty and the air smelled faintly metallic.
Lucy looked up behind them. The road didn’t seem too far away, and Diane was right, the cliff wasn’t as steep as it had looked from above, just steep enough for a huge piece of metal that weighed tons and tons to slide out of control down its face.

After some maneuvering, they reached the driver’s side of the truck. The truck was really stuck, its windows completely shattered and full almost to eye level with pounds of dirt and branches. Diane poked her head inside and brushed some dirt away, reaching carefully through the door. “What are you doing?” asked Lucy.

“I just want to touch the dashboard. I want to see what it feels like.”

“They must have removed the bodies,” said Lucy.

They kept climbing down. The truck had stopped where it had because of a red station wagon wedged beneath it. It was the narrow stubby kind. It looked like it had been vintage even before it had slid down the cliff, however long ago that was. Its nose was crumbled into another car below it, the right side caved in by an enormous rock. It was angled towards the earth with its front heading straight down, like a swimmer diving into a pool of air. Diane reached it first and peered in, then looked up at Lucy. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I mean it’s not everyday I’m standing on a rock over the side of a cliff, but believe it or not I’m fantastic.” She was trying to keep on top of things, to keep it light.

“I’m serious. Are you dizzy at all?”
“No.” Lucy actually felt a heightened sense of awareness, as if she had been walking through a dense swampland and had finally reached a very clean, white bed.

“All right then. Come have a look.”

Lucy climbed down onto the large rock where Diane was standing. The station wagon’s windows were broken but not entirely knocked out, as they had been on the truck, so there weren’t mounds of dirt, just a fine layer of dust and grime. The nose of the wagon was completely smashed in, pushing the motor nearly into the back seat. It was sort of empty and disappointing.

“Look,” said Diane, pointing.

Pinned underneath a motor was what looked like a few long, unusual rocks.

“Do you know what it is?” Diane asked. And as soon as she asked it, Lucy knew exactly what it was.

“It’s someone’s skeleton,” Lucy said. It was pinned underneath the motor. Long bones and an empty place up top.

“There’s his head,” Diane pointed. A skull was lying on the floorboards of the back seat. It must have been knocked off by a sharp engine part, or by glass, or maybe it just fell off when its flesh decayed. Lucy knew nothing about skeletons, but this one seemed especially gruesome because it was severed, and because it’s lower jaw was open, as if it were yawning.

“Wow,” Lucy whispered. “We’re looking at someone’s death right now. That is what death looks like.”
They held hands, and Diane’s felt silky and moist. “We’re their funeral, Lucy. Do you understand that?”

Lucy nodded.

“Bow your head,” Diane ordered. “Please bless this sorry fuck who took a wrong turn and suffered the consequences.”

“Amen,” said Lucy.

They stared at the skull for a long time. Lucy couldn’t quite understand what she was looking at. This was someone’s head, the casing of the brain. Brains could think, but inside that empty skull, there wasn’t any thinking or crying or carrying on. It was empty and simple and picked clean of meat.

“We’re in a graveyard,” said Lucy.

Diane had already moved farther down the cliff, rock to rock, until she’d reached the next car, which was small and silver. “I found a couple!” she called. “And I think they’re screwing!”

The back end of the silver car was smashed in where the station wagon rested. Two skeletons were one on top of the other in the driver’s seat, crammed in front of the wheel, all tangled up so that Lucy couldn’t tell what was what.

“Have you done that with Jack?” she asked suddenly. She wasn’t sure exactly why she wanted to know, but it seemed important right now, to know definitively. Yes or no.

“Yes I’ve done that with Jack.”

“Did you like it?”

“Of course I liked it. People like sex. That’s what everyone likes to do.”
Lucy felt something like disappointment. But she also realized that the image forming in her head of Jack and Diane coiled together in the driver's seat of Jack's car made Diane even more appealing, but in a way that was shadowy and dark and slightly confusing, in a way that made it hard to tell what was what. She started back up the hill and Diane followed. Lucy could hear Diane's soft panting behind her, but now the panting was sexual and dark and foreboding.

When they got to the road they rested for a few minutes. Lucy threw more rocks down at the cars, and the stone clanked like voices. The road beneath them felt different somehow. It seemed like centuries away from the road they had walked up an hour ago. She was surprised to notice weeds and brambles growing in the spaces between the rocks.

"We're different people," Lucy said.

"We're perfect people," said Diane, holding Lucy's shoulders.

"We're Gods." They kissed, their mouths opening and closing like butterfly wings. But it wasn't romantic, it was just the sort of thing Gods would do. Even so, when they were through Lucy felt something giving way, like cutting silly putty as a child and feeling the pasty hunk getting sliced up into lots of small separate pieces.

When they walked back they found everyone else swimming naked in the river. The sun was much lower, and the water looked like solid glass. Lucy and Diane sat on the rocks and watched. Later, they tried to describe what they had seen.
Lucy didn’t allow herself to think of her childhood very often. The only reason she had indulged herself today was because she had a date with a guy who was in her adult dance class at the Y, and she knew all too well that when he rang the bell she would be unnaturally frightened. As she visited with her friend Diane she attributed the fear, for the most part, to inexperience. She hadn’t dated anyone exclusively in a long time, and this guy was very attractive. This was their fifth date. He had asked if he could come over to her apartment so many times she felt she had to let him. And, she realized, he would expect more than just light rubbing. She was fidgety during her and Diane’s Saturday afternoon trip to the mall, a ritual which usually relaxed her. In fact, she and Diane had stayed longer than their usual two hours to counteract Lucy’s anxiety about the date that evening. They sampled perfume and modeled faux fur coats and made fun of the pregnant teenagers who hung out by the fountain in the food court.

Now they were resting in Lucy’s apartment and had just eaten deviled eggs and sandwiches for lunch. Diane had been her best friend since college, although it was really more complicated than that. By now they felt closer than sisters. Diane was Lucy’s first kiss, and they continued to have sex with each other and support each other between (and through) other relationships. Diane
thought it was time for Lucy to sort out her problems, before they began to ruin her life.

Diane had a hard time understanding many of Lucy’s issues, and approached her in a cynical, sinister, motherly fashion. “Are you still frightened of the doorbell, for example?” she asked nonchalantly, scraping egg mess into the trash can.

“I feel like vomiting, right this very instant, just thinking about it.”

“But when I come to your door, is that alarming?”

“Yes, but not in the same way. I know why you’re here and what you want. Look, there’s no logic to it. And I’m not sure I want to be cured. It’s sort of exciting.”

“So you know that I am here to vanquish you. Sometimes I’m all about vanquishing, so it’s not a fear of intimacy.” Diane stroked Lucy’s back over her dress while Lucy washed dishes. She brushed the side of her breasts as she stroked her, pretending not to realize what her hands were doing. Each dish that Lucy washed rattled precariously in the green rack on the counter.

“Are you checking things off a list?” Lucy asked, slightly annoyed by the conversation. “Look, I don’t care if you vanquish me, or however you want to put it. It’s still different, I mean you’re different. You don’t control me the way guys always seem to want to do. Or at least not in the same way. You aren’t going to scream or yell, and if you do your voice doesn’t frighten me. You aren’t going to do anything to me that I don’t want you to do, or that I haven’t asked for.”
Lucy dropped a plate and it cracked neatly in two, right down its center. “Now, isn't that awful?” she asked Diane, staring blankly at the broken dish. “That was my mother’s plate.” “It's okay. Now it's two plates instead of one. It's happier that way.”

Diane rinsed the soap off of Lucy’s hands for her and led her to the white couch that filled up most of the tiny, rectangular living room. Lucy’s apartment was small. She liked it that way because she was able to see every room from the couch. And she liked being able to take in the whole spread when she came home alone after work. One flick of the light switch and the apartment was all hers again.

Diane patted the cushion next to her on the couch. “Sit down with me. You are the proverbial basket case. Would you like me to run you a bath or rub your shoulders or something?”

Lucy slumped down into the cushions, wagging her knees open and closed. “Not yet. I want to sit with you. I just want to sit here and listen to you talk.” “No offense, but how do you expect to have any success with this guy? I mean, how attractive is he?” “I just want to be alone with him. And yet somehow the thought of him coming here makes me want to invent a contagious illness for myself, something to keep him away for good.”
“Or why don’t you just meet at a restaurant? Or better yet, a bar. Why don’t you call him.” Diane acted like she might reach for the phone. Lucy stopped her.

“No.”

Lucy snuggled closer to Diane on the couch. Diane put her arm around her.

“So you want to go for it with this guy. You want to do the deed, lose the V, all that jazz. You want to be Beverly Cleaver.”

“Yes and no. But what I’m trying to remind you of is that I’m insane I think.”

“I don’t think so. But you’re going to be lonely. You need to get it together.”

“I think it’s just a basic problem with my intelligence level. I mean everyone had a rotten childhood. I must be missing some essential, protective layer of the mind.”

“Look, you’re nearly thirty. It’s not stupid, but it’s something you’d be better off getting over. I’m in total favor of your losing the V. I vote a resounding yes.”

“I’m sure I’ve lost it by now, don’t you think?” Lucy was on the verge of laughing. It seemed ridiculous to her to be having this conversation. She was, after all, nearly thirty, and she had had sex with plenty of women. It seemed like that should count for something.
"You've lost your hymen, I know that for a fact. But," Diane went on, "you can't lose the V unless you actually confront a real, live penis. It's psychological, not technical." Diane wore a loose red T-shirt that read: SHE DEVIL. Lucy was slightly afraid of her, and this feeling was always followed by desire. The two were connected, fear and desire, and she thought they probably always would be.

Diane moved behind Lucy on the couch and began rubbing her shoulders. "But how about this for an idea. I'll make you come. Then you won't care if the tango dancer vanquishes you or not." Suddenly, her voice was light and happy. She began kissing Lucy's neck softly, and then licking it with the tip of her tongue. Her hands moved up and down Lucy's arms, as if to warm her up.

"All right," Lucy sighed. "But please do it quickly. I only have a few hours before he's supposed to show up." She laughed sadly and grasped Diane's ankles. They turned towards each other on the couch and embraced side by side, sinking deeper into the thick white cushions. Diane kissed Lucy with everything she had, with her tongue and teeth and lips, grasping at her earnestly with her lips and breath. Lucy squeezed Diane, pulling one of her legs up around her waist and straddling the other. She gripped her tightly around the neck. She ran her hand underneath Diane's short, plaid skirt. They were both shaking.

"I love this," Diane said. "I really do."
Diane poured them two glasses of wine. She sat on the toilet in one of Lucy's kimonos and sipped from her glass, setting the other one on the edge of the tub. Lucy was submerged in the bathtub, her face barely floating above water. Only her nose and her lips were exposed to the air. Steam condensed into clouds on the mirror over the door.

"I don't know how to be a human being," Lucy said, as if she had decided something while Diane was in the other room. She sat up, letting the water rush down to her waist, and took a sip of wine.

"Being with someone just doesn't seem possible, most of the time," she went on. "How do you manage Jack? How is it that you're married to someone?"

"It's easy. We both work. We have a routine." She paused. "And I have you." She said it as if she were embarrassed.

"You think I'm feeling sorry for myself, don't you." Lucy was faintly aware that she was changing the subject, but she didn't know how to react when Diane said things like that, when she spoke as if they had each other, as if this was more than what it was.

"You have good reasons, Lucy. Stop worrying so much. It doesn't help anything or anybody to worry all the time." She propped up foot on the side of the tub, her legs opened wide and carelessly. She looks like a very slender, beautiful dike, Lucy thought.

"Do you think Pattie Smith worries?" Lucy asked. "She's probably too wonderful to worry. But what about Martha Stewart? I'm sure she had a horrible
childhood. And she inflicts her horrible childhood on everybody else. And how about President Clinton? He's got reasons. He's a hideous person."

"And yet he still goes about his business of running the country." Diane poured some lavender bath salts into the water from a squat, glass jar. She noticed that Lucy was crying.

"Look, I don't understand what you're getting at. It's a lot simpler than all that. You worry too much. And you have reasons to worry. But it's not going to help you or anybody else."

"What kind of repressive crap are you feeding me?"

"Think about Ben, he's doing all right. He's happy with Peggy."

"My brother's gay, Diane. He has a trillion VD's. And if you call his wife Peggy a source of happiness for anyone I'm going to have to reexamine our friendship."

Lucy stood up and let the water pour off of her in streams.

"Your skin is steaming your highness," Diane said.

"That's nothing compared to what you've done to my vagina." There was no irony in her voice. She meant it, her vagina stung.

"How about a towel," Diane threw a large baby blue one in her direction, and one corner fell into the soapy water.

Lucy dropped her voice to keep from whining. "You think I'm just trying to get sympathy for my nasty childhood by being a neurotic, helpless adult? You think this is just my ingenious way of getting attention?"
“What’s wrong with you. Besides, I don’t mind. You’re worth the trauma of having to deal with you.” Lucy wrapped the blue towel under her arms, and another around her head.

“I’m beginning to feel anger welling up at you.”

“Don’t be absurd. Look how you’re talking to.”

“I’m ready, all right? Let’s get this show on the road. I don’t want to be ridiculous anymore. Let’s do this thing. If you please, remind me how to seduce a man. Leopard underwear? High heels? Hey, what is it?” Diane was slouching.

“Maybe you should just call and cancel.”

“If I can get past the initial shock of his physical presence in my apartment, I think I’ll be all right.” Lucy tried to sound hopeful. “He’s different, or wonderful or something.”

Diane finished off her glass. The large swallow made her cough and gag slightly. A stream of wine escaped from the corner of her mouth and ran down her chin. “The point is, this tango sex master, he’s just an ordinary person. Who may or may not want to fuck you. Get that through your head.” Diane stood up and squeezed Lucy’s temples between her hands, as if she could erase what lay between her palms with enough squeezing.

“You know, sometimes you really offend me,” Lucy said. She was in tears.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Diane said.

*
When Lewis arrived, he brought pre-made sautéed green beans and flank steak and a rose in his teeth. She led him in, shaking happily. Her nervousness had reached a fever pitch. She was excited that she had nearly lost control of her bladder and told him so. Over dinner they discussed ballroom dancing, midwifery, the presidential race, and when she dropped a green bean on her lap, he picked it off with his teeth and ate it. It seemed inappropriate to her, but she liked him.

After they ate, Lewis sat on her living room couch and sipped red wine from a water pitcher, massaging her ankles and toes. Lucy didn’t say very much. It felt awkward to her, sitting there, both of them thinking about what the other person might like in bed. Or maybe only she was thinking of it, which was even worse. Finally, he asked her about her family life. There didn’t seem to be anything left to talk about.

Lucy hesitated. But since there was nothing else to do, she told him all about a few of her father’s visits. She told him as if they were stories, bad things that had happened to someone else. She didn’t know if this was the right thing to do, given the situation. Why would he care about this? About her? She wished she could find some excuse to call Diane and ask her what she thought. Instead, she simply continued, keeping her descriptions emotionally detached and simple.

She explained that jumping off the roof, and then driving away on that particular Saturday with her father, like newlyweds in his yellow convertible, was what had screwed Ben up with women. That day she had been angry and
sick of everyone, she said, and had acted rashly and without regard to her
brother's feelings.

"I'm not trying to justify my actions. I acted impulsively and I realize that."

Because Lewis didn't respond, just kept rubbing her toes, she went on.
She said that usually when they visited her father she protected Ben, she put
her energy into making sure he was okay. But that weekend when she left and
he wasn't with her, she realized that things with her father really were hideous.
Her father took her to his apartment and locked her in a room that had no
windows, where he stored his exercise bike and weight set, to teach her a
lesson, something about self control and behaving with dignity befitting a pre-
teen. She lifted weights to pass the time and received a grand portion of
spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. The next day, when he released her, they
ordered Chinese food and made magic plates in the oven like he had promised,
when she was sitting on the roof. But he made her eat the Vegetable Lomaine
and Mu Shu Pork tied up (he fed her with chopsticks), and cook the magic
plates in a Hawaiian print bikini that was at least four sizes too large for her.
Lucy finally called her mother, walked out his front door while he watched The
Cosby Show, and went home.

Lewis was more baffled than shocked. "What kind of person does that, to
his own kid. It's unimaginable." He shook his head. But his reaction made Lucy
uncomfortable.

"What do you mean, what kind of person does that. My father does that,
that's who. Don't be an idiot."
“Look, do you want an ice cream sandwich? I can go down to the corner and get you one.” He turned the corners of his mouth down: empathetic pouting.

“You really are an idiot, aren’t you,” she said, not entirely displeased with his suggestion. “But I insist on finishing up. You’ve got to know what you’re getting yourself into,” she said. Lewis had gorgeous dark, curly hair that was a little greasy. He really was very attractive, Lucy thought, it wasn’t just his dancing. She wondered if Diane would be proud of her, or disappointed.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” He took another deep sip from the pitcher of wine. His teeth and lips were staining purple. He rubbed his hands roughly against her heels, loofah-like. “I can take it. I can take you, you wacky bitch.” Being called a bitch sent her a jolt, but it wasn’t unpleasant. She’d been waiting for someone to be honest with her for a long time, someone to call her on things. He’s really sort of interesting, she thought.

She said there wasn’t much more to tell, actually, now that she thought about it. After a few more visits from do-good policemen, after a few more times watching Ben warm up Chinese food in her father’s old swimming trunks, she got sick of it and testified. And even though she believed it was best for everyone, she felt sorry for her father.

“He lost his self respect. And he lost his hope, and I don’t think that anyone really deserves that.”

“No one deserves what, exactly?”
“That. The humiliation of that. Jesus.” She held her throat. She was annoyed to discover that she felt like crying. Maybe he was forcing her to cry, maybe that’s what he wanted all along.

He moved closer to her on the couch. He blew on her ear. It sounded like a storm. It wasn’t sexy, it was funny, and he smiled, seemingly aware of his silliness. “He brought it on himself, didn’t he? I mean, you were just a kid, am I right?”

Suddenly, she felt intensely frustrated. He seemed too confident sitting there, like he had all the answers. “Guess what,” she told him, “my life isn’t exactly great without him. I can only get aroused when I’m frightened and I hate answering the door.”

“I think we can safely say that you’re better off without being tied up and made to eat Chinese Food in a string bikini.”

“Not a string bikini, a Hawaiian bikini.”

He began massaging her bare calf. It hurt some, she could feel the muscle pushing up against her shin-bone. She could feel her chest turning red, could feel herself blushing.

“Well, the point is.” She said. “The points is that I’m a Virgin.”

She studied his reaction. He didn’t seem surprised. “Glad to hear it?” he tried. He smiled at her. He tickled the backs of her knees.

“Did you hear what I said, Lewis? I’m intact, still hymenized, haven’t managed to lose the V. Get it? I’m 28 years old for crying out loud.”
She felt guilty telling him all of this. Somehow the conversation had taken a bad turn, and while it was titillating for her, she thought Lewis must be bored. Or completely freaked out. Why had she revealed so much about herself? Five dates didn't make him any less a stranger. And she wasn't even sure how much of her story was true anymore. She was probably just trying to get attention, like Diane always seemed to suggest.

“How do you feel,” he asked. He seemed genuinely concerned, he seemed to like her, and he wasn't an idiot, she realized. He was attractive and he didn't seem obsessive or unnaturally intrigued by her dramatic childhood, which was refreshing. He seemed to be what she needed. She let the question hang in the air. She wanted to be sure.

“To rephrase the question, how are you feeling?” He tried again.

“Sexy.” She said it without irony. She felt like she meant it.
The day we left the fair I knew I couldn’t love her in the way you loved a man. I had tried everything, and when you try everything and you still can’t make someone smile you begin to think it’s something you can’t fix, that it’s hidden between you, that it’s you or her or both of you. But maybe I just wanted to believe I had tried everything. The truth is I was done with it. Done with cheating, done with Jane. I thought I might want to get married someday. Be a happy wife to a regular guy, have a few kids and celebrate Easter wearing a great big Easter hat or something. I could see it.

We drove by it on our way back from Target, the sign big and neon, off the highway on the right. The sign said AUSTIN TOWN FAIR and I knew it was for us. She had black eyelashes I liked to touch with the tips of my fingers, and while she drove I stared at their edges in the light.

“I’d like to sweep the floor with those lashes,” I said, teasing her. She didn’t think I was as funny as I did, she only smiled to make me feel better. Her hair was dark and her hands were soft and hairless. I couldn’t help reaching out to feel the softness of the skin of her hand, but she pulled away, fiddled with the radio. The tips of her fingers felt and looked like glass marbles, smooth and shiny and round, her nails bitten down as far as she could get them.

When I saw her for the first time she was sitting quietly at my favorite bar, drinking cokes and knotting cherry stems. As she knotted them she lined them
up along the bar. I saw the bartender refresh her bowl of cherries. She seemed pleased with things, but not exactly happy. There were yelling men and cheesy, made-up women falling over drunk against their bar stools and around her at the bar but she didn’t seem to notice them. She wore plain clothes that hung loose on her. She must have had her doubts about me because she didn’t seem that shocked when I asked to buy her a drink.

I was always overcome with desire for her, even in the car, or especially in the car. It made me want to do something crazy. She drove slowly on the highway while I stuck my feet out the passenger window, the air whipping through my toes and up my bare legs, pushing hard against my skin like hands do.

"Your feet will get chopped off," she said.

"You're not my mother," I said, and then immediately wished I hadn't.

"Sorry," she said. She looked like she meant it. I stuck my legs out further and let my skirt ride up so she could see my underwear, it somehow seemed like the proper response to an awkward silence. I knew she wouldn't touch me even when saw me like this, at least not now in the car as we drove. She only rarely touched me. When we first knew each other I thought it was sweet and that she would grow out of it once she felt comfortable and understood how much I longed for her to do just that. I also liked that she seemed not to notice me in the way most men did. But now I was tired of the resistance, frustrated that my body and her body became things we both tried to control and manipulate, that at this game she would always win.
My favorite bar where we met had a pole in the center of the dance floor that people liked to grind against. The DJ usually played a mixture of show tunes and new wave and anything gay-friendly, songs I thought for the most part were good to listen to while I was alone. But I liked this bar because it wasn’t the same old thing all the time between men and women and it felt nice going there without my boyfriend. I wasn’t gay, but sometimes in the rest room mirror I shocked myself looking as I did so much like a boy. When I looked like that I put on more lipgloss. I have always been very much like a woman, and I have always had a lot of boyfriends.

When I saw the sign for the fair I yelled, “pull over!” and grabbed her arm. Jane was always nervous when she drove, and my sudden scream did nothing for her. She jerked the wheel and we skidded over the edge of the road, bumping along the shoulder until she finally got the car to stop. She was breathing hard, looking into the rearview mirror, her fingers scrambling for the hazard lights. We were under a billboard for *The Magic Time Machine*. Then she looked at me like she hated me, like I was forcing her to feel something towards me she didn’t want to feel.

“I loved that restaurant when I was a kid,” I said.

“What is wrong with you?” she said, a yell at the edge of her voice. It was like a motor revving up in neutral, there was a hum to her anger. Her eyes were wide and her pale skin flushed from fear and the violence I was sure she wanted to commit against me. She had been getting mad more easily now, but she got sad a lot too, the kind of sadness caused by heartache. I liked her anger
better. When she was angry at me I couldn't help loving her. I realized that there might be something wrong with this, how I had to make her nearly hate me before I could see how beautiful she was, but there it was, and that was me. I was only twenty two. She was twenty one. The year seemed to matter.

"Let's go to the fair," I said. "Right there." I pointed out the window behind us, ready to explain exactly why it would be such fun, but she answered before I had a chance.

"Okay," she said, which surprised me. For a moment she looked excited. The night I bought her a beer at the bar she said okay just like that, just like she did whenever there was something I wanted that she was afraid to do. Just that simple, okay. I remember at the bar she looked up from that nice, neat row of stems, her eyes squinted at me like she had trouble seeing. I thought I could tell that she hadn't been through very much trouble but she'd been through enough to know this (whatever this was) probably wouldn't turn out well. She sort of smiled but she kept fiddling with the stems. I sat on the stool beside her. We waited without talking for the bartender.

While we waited I had a strange premonition. I saw in a flash the two of us as older married people waiting in silence for fancy cocktails, that silence that develops between people who know what the other person is thinking just from their body proximity. But my premonition was wrong, I had forgotten what I was and what she was.

In the car her excitement for the fair turned quickly into resignation. She liked to reign in her excitement. She said she was less likely to be disappointed
that way, if she always expected the worst. And she knew me well enough to know that I usually got what I wanted, that it was best to give in.

“Really okay?” I asked.

She turned the car back on. Space Oddity came on the radio. We both started singing.

* 

The day of the fair Jane and I had gone to the mall for a new shower because my boyfriend wouldn’t go with me. These are the things Jane and I did together, the errands and chores he was too busy for. At least this is what it had turned into. And usually when we were through we rushed to her place, collapsing in a heap on her couch and snuggling together, keeping our eyes closed. When we lay back-to-back I liked to rest my head between her shoulder blades while she made circles with her finger on my hip bones pressed up against her. We went on from there most of the time, but sometimes we would just lie there together not speaking. The feeling of our bodies pressed into each other was too much for me to bear, it made me feel so contented. Then I would notice the pressure of her and run my hand up her T-shirt. Her bras were always baggy and old, silky from age. Being a girl who also wore a bra made it so much easier to unhook hers. I could do it easily through her shirt, but often I left it on and rubbed through it. I liked feeling her nipples rise up underneath the material. It was pleasant. I was pleased that she was giving in to the feeling and to me. When I did that she made a faint noise and I could tell through her back
that she was breathing more, I could feel it in her ribs under my arm, the breath filling all of her little bones.

My boyfriend studied law at the University of Texas. He was average smart at life but very smart at school and he told me so all the time. He had broad shoulders and thick bones and muscles that squashed down on me when we had sex. He took the wind out of me, I couldn’t breathe, and it wasn’t pleasant, it wasn’t what I call sexy. I tried to climb on top, but he didn’t like it that way. I took him from behind, I didn’t mind that because there was less weight. Lately, I climbed in bed early while he stayed up to study, so that we could avoid the bumbling awkwardness of our bodies.

I hated doing that to him, he was only human and he had needs. But I was satisfied from Jane and didn’t like to need anyone. I actually hated the physical feeling of need. As I drifted off to sleep I could hear him shuffling through papers, and it did hurt me. It was sad that I was holding out on him and deceiving him all at once. It seemed wrong. And also because he never would have believed me being with a woman in that way, he would laughed. So I couldn’t possibly tell him.

But Jane was never jealous. I think she enjoyed that there was something I couldn’t fully explain away, something dark about myself that nobody would approve of. But she saw the darkness differently than I did. I thought it was the fact that I couldn’t decide if I hated her because I loved her, or the reverse. She thought it was my family. We didn’t discuss these things, but they were there anyway. All she wanted was for me to be nice to her, but that
weakness was more than I could handle in a person, especially someone I
fucked. She was ugly when she needed me.

It turned out that she was serious and ambitious and I wasn’t. She was a
graduate student of the philosophy of gender. Her classes all met at night so we
had most days together because. I didn’t work. I had to deal with incredible
surges of wanting her, but she knew the rules of being gay. I didn’t quite
understand which one of us had it right.

When she had enough energy I met her at the bar while my boyfriend did
his homework. Lately she grew tired of the bar. She hated chit-chat. Those were
guilty nights although I think I seemed not to care and at times I forgot
completely what there was to care about. But then it was time to go home and
then I would be home, eating dinner as if nothing had changed although things
were changing because they had to. Sometimes I couldn’t believe myself what
was happening, what I was doing. I wondered if I would wake up one morning
and find that the desire for her was all used up, I kept expecting that to happen. I
think I actually hoped for that and the more time passed the more I worried.

The fair was a small and unprofessional business, but it suited me and
my mood. There was a tilt-o-whirl and a ship, which in my mind marked this as
fun. I could see other rides too, mostly ones that spun you around to make you
sick. I was already worried she wouldn’t ride them with me. She had a very
tender constitution that I found intensely frustrating. She was always sick, or
feeling nauseous, or about to get sick.
"So you actually like rides?" I said. I lit a cigarette, knowing she hated smelling smoke. I don’t know why I did things like that. I was always doing them.

"I love the ship," she said.

"The ship is pretty scary, I’m surprised you like that."

"I like it," she said, driving us under the big banner that separated the fairgrounds from the road.

"Just checking," I said, and then made fake retching noises into her lap. This kind of thing used to make her laugh, but she was getting tired of my jokes and shoved me off of her. She was trying to drive straight and I was making it impossible. The parking lot was full of cars, it was difficult for her to maneuver through the aisles but finally she spotted a tiny spot between two pick-ups and squeezed us in. She slammed on the brakes and put it in park, more forcefully than she had done anything in weeks.

"I’m not afraid, let’s go." She stared at me like a dare. But it was strange, she knew better. She knew I would never chicken out first. Not even if I was afraid, which I wasn’t.

"Come on then, toughie," I said. I called her toughie to be mean, because she was the furthest thing from tough. I don’t know why I enjoyed being mean to her, but I did. I have to be honest about it, I enjoyed it. I have never been able to be mean to anyone but her and she liked me despite the meanness. It was exciting.

When I was mean to my boyfriend he laughed. He thought it was funny. I’ve known him since high school. When my mother died he waited for me to
walk out of the church leaning against his White Volkswagen Thing, and drove me around for awhile while I cried and stared and cried. He didn’t say anything. When I looked at him he was crying too. There wasn’t anything to say. Then he took me to his parent’s house and hugged me between his legs on his bed, his legs wrapped around me and every part of him holding me. He had a pint of bourbon under his mattress and gave me some.

I was the first one out of the car. The grass was yellow already because it was August and there hadn’t been rain for a long time. I felt like leaving her behind in the car, felt like telling her to go to hell and go home, at least that way I could enjoy myself. I suddenly remembered that my boyfriend had just proposed, that the ring was wrapped in a sock in my top drawer even though I had said yes.

But then I saw the way she walked, like she knew exactly who she was and where she was going. Who she was: beautiful. Where she was going: the fair with her girlfriend. I loved this. All it took for me to love her was to see her moving away from me.

I had to touch her, so I held her elbow as we walked and pushed her into bushes and made her accidentally bump into people who were standing in lines for tickets. She had to apologize to a tall man in a tank top and frayed-edged shorts because of me.

“Stop it!” she said to me, but she was laughing. She let me do it.

The tickets were $10 for a pack of nine. I checked with her to make sure she would ride all nine rides. But she threw down a bill and we grabbed our
tickets and ran for the ship, past the hot-dog stands and kiddie rides. I felt so foolishly happy at that moment, like she really was the person for me and it didn’t matter that she was a girl and so was I. And it felt like we were both happy, that was the most wonderful feeling. We pushed past some kids heading towards the line so that we could be first to choose our seats. I held onto her hand close between us, but when it looked like someone could see I let go. Even in a cool place people got in trouble for that kind of thing.

At least that’s what I told myself. But the truth was that I was afraid, more afraid than she was. I had a boyfriend at home and I was cheating on him. And I wasn’t gay. And she was.

The attendant had a lot of tattoos, and while we stood and watched him operate the lever manipulating the ship’s speed I realized there was no science to this. He was just going with his gut, deciding in the moment when it was time to speed up and slow down. Children’s screams didn’t seem to affect him. Speed was arbitrary. It set me off and I began to feel anxious, even though I knew that a regular amusement park probably isn’t any safer. I whispered to Jane about what I wanted to do to her once we got home. I was touching her ass when I could, beneath her jeans. She shifted around to keep my hands away from her. I tried not to look at the attendant because I didn’t want to feel so nervous.

We slid into the seats towards the back, not the scariest ones even because some teenagers had taken those, girls and boys desperately trying to impress each other. Once I sat down I stared at the attendant. I wanted to
determine whether or not I could trust him. I thought maybe we should have a talk. The fear was ripping through my limbs. I told myself I'd been through a lot worse, which I had. But that didn't seem to matter at this moment.

“So, you scared?” I asked. My voice didn't sound like my voice.

“No,” she said. “I told you I like the ship.”

“So do I!” I said, I was indignant. I went on and on: “Why do you think I don’t like the ship? I told you it’s my favorite ride next to the tilt-o-whirl, didn’t I? I find it relaxing!”

She was quietly staring straight ahead of her, wouldn’t hold my hand or look at me.

I lay my head against the back of the bench and gazed up at the sky. It was a special kind of Texas blue that makes me happy and depressed at the same time. It’s too much like home, too familiar. I think it’s holding the ghost of my mother, and she’s looking down on me from the sky and she’s ashamed that I’m touching another girl like I am all the time now. She can’t believe it. When it looks like that in the sky the blue feels like it hits the ground and the sun is bright yellow. The yellow in crayon boxes, that bright. The air smelled like chaos, too much dust and popcorn and corn dogs and caramel and exhaust from the machines cranking all day. And sweat. It smelled like my sweat.

We started swinging. I tensed up and realized I was going to have to hide my head in her shoulder. It was embarrassing, but I was very much afraid.

“Try to relax,” she said and put her arm around me.
I wanted the ride to stop, but instead it went higher and higher. As we fell I left my stomach way behind me and I wanted it back. Every time we went backwards my stomach came and left and I suddenly didn't like that feeling. I screamed into her chest and felt my butt lift off the seat every time we swung and fell.

"My god!" I think she was saying.

I kept screaming, but I could still hear her talking in my ear.

"It feels like sex feels," she said. She was talking fast: "If you tense up your stomach muscles you'll feel it like an orgasm," she said as we swang up. She talked in the rhythm of the ride, a sentence as we swung up, and one as we swung down. We climbed higher. Then the breath got bumped out of her.

Still whimpering high in my throat, I peeked out from under her arm. The people at the other side of the ride facing us sat so still and calm and even the teenagers behind us in the scariest seats were chatting about their weekend plans. We kept going higher and higher and I was ashamed to be the only one afraid.

"What's wrong with these people?" I said at one point.

"Please make him stop," I also said. I meant the attendant and I meant it to my mother but Jane looked at me funny. The attendant began to look like the devil, as I saw him whizzing by. I held onto Jane like I was going to fall out of the ship if I didn't. I was so grateful in that moment that she wasn't scared, that she was actually enjoying it, and that she kept her arm wrapped around me tightly.
Then the ride began to slow down. I didn’t know how I felt anymore. This was my moment, to smile at Jane and to laugh, but nothing seemed funny anymore.

As soon as the ride stopped she said she was nauseous. I was still reeling but beginning to feel elated that the ride was over and we were still alive. We were going to walk off this rickety platform and be just fine. My nose was running. I think I had been crying.

“You’re not getting sick,” I said.

“Yes I am.”

“But you loved that ride.”

“Help me down the stairs,” she said. “I mean it.”

I took her elbow but my legs were shaking so much I had to let go and hold onto the railing. There were lines of sweat running down her temples and she was very pasty looking.

I wanted to ride another ride. I had tickets in my pocket that I had paid for. I wasn’t working at the time or going to school, having collected my mother’s inheritance once I graduated college. I could be stingy. I worried the money wouldn’t last long enough, that it would run out before I had decided what to do with myself. It was a precious gift that I wasted on stupid rides at amusement parks and bottles of vodka.

I graduated from Trinity with a degree in education but still could not bear the thought of teaching, of being around children even. I couldn’t take their sweetness. They made me so sad all the time, like I wanted to be their mother
but couldn't be, wasn't ready to be. I went to school hungover, my fingers
painted different colors. I didn't last the year because I was late to class so often
that finally one of the girls broke her arm in my homeroom falling off a desk
during an early morning brawl.

When I was fired I believe I disappointed my father, but he was so quiet I
never knew how he felt about anything. For instance I never knew that he was
with another woman throughout my mother's illness. Not that he should have
told me, or her, but still it upset me and made me want to kill him. The woman
was our neighbor, he must have come home early from work just to see her. I
hate that he did that, even though I understand how lonely he must have felt all
of those years while she was sick. I hated it also because his actions seemed to
point to my own, confirmed suspicions I now held about myself. Maybe the
cheating gene is hereditary, that I have it inside me and now I'll have problems
that other people overcome. But I know now that there are ways to explain
anything away, to ignore the fact that we all have control in whatever small ways
we choose. Now when I feel like I don't have control I worry.

My mother was a clothing designer and made a lot of money doing it.
She didn't grow up with much money but she had an eye for beauty. She was
determined and strict and the only vices I remember her having were overeating
and a tendency towards violence. When she died she left me everything,
including the house where my boyfriend and I now live together. My father
moved to Abilene with his girlfriend. I see him every once in a while and we are
polite, like strangers meeting for the first time.
I looked at Jane once we found a clear spot to stand on the grass and hated what I saw in her. At times like this, when she felt sick, she looked skinny and drawn, like someone dying. But there was nothing wrong with Jane and it made me sick to see her feeling sorry for herself as she did now. I didn't believe she was nauseous because she was always nauseous and I knew people couldn't feel that way all the time if they were healthy. I felt mean.

There were game stands everywhere around us. Nearest was a man throwing a baseball hard at a row of ceramic plates in order to break them. Jane's back was bent over, like she was protecting something.

"It's loud," she said.

"Would a corn dog help?" I asked. Jane was a vegetarian, which I knew.

"I'm going to have one," I said, and walked away from her. She glared at me, I could feel her eyes on me as I walked away and left her near some benches. In that moment I felt like going home and pulling the Absolute out of the freezer. I felt like mixing it with juice I knew I had, and sitting on the couch with the remote. I felt like waiting for my boyfriend to come home, and when he did I was going to run to him in a way I hadn't done in a long time. I'd take the ring out of the sock and put it on my finger.

I walked back with my corn dog, mustard and ketchup from the tip and edge of the corn dog sliding onto my hand as I ate sloppily. I stopped walking a distance away and she caught sight of me.

She walked towards me from the bench where she had been sitting. She pulled her skirt down in an obsessive way, to hide something, and she looked at
me as if she were staring from a great distance, and I was the only one in the world who could save her. She stopped suddenly and waited for me to come to her, as if she had made a decision. Her legs were as scrawny as a boy's and they bowed slightly, but you only really noticed it when she stood with her feet together like this, awkwardly like a child, her hands tangled behind her back. It annoyed me when she stood this way and I told her so often. I liked her best when she was strong and absent and beautiful. But you can't control how others see you, especially when you feel weak. I honestly think I hate anyone I have ever pitied.

She looked away and I saw her profile and her black lashes. I was suddenly overcome with remorse.

“Do you want cotton candy?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “And the smell of that corn dog is making me sick. Can you eat it somewhere else?” She was whining.

“No,” I said. I tacked on “bitch” at the end loud enough for her to hear it. She made me so angry that I wiped the mess on my jeans and smeared her clean arm with some of the mustard. She had been crying, I could tell because tiny, thin veins in her cheeks and on her forehead shone through her skin.

I thought that cotton candy and corn dogs should always make for fun and happiness. These were simple, honest pleasures. It made me mad.

I threw my stick away and we found places on the bench. Sitting there we must have seemed like good friends on an outing together, maybe wives having girl time. We sat and watched the tilt-o-whirl and a kiddie ride that involved tiny
airplanes. I wondered how we looked to other people. I wanted desperately to stop thinking for awhile.

A woman walked by with two pretty little girls. They had on dresses to look like vegetables, one eggplant and one tomato. The dresses looked homemade, and they wore them over their shorts and they hung down some around their shoulders.

It's always a choice of goods and bads, everyone has them both and I had them all in spades. Both my boyfriend and this girl beside me could have made me happy. But then I wondered if either of them could, if anyone could and I didn't know the answer to that. The answer should have been yes, but all things considered it was no. Your thoughts have to tell you something or you're lost.

The problem was that it didn’t feel over, not at all. When people get together there are just too many things that have to match up perfectly it seems. I had the suspicion that if I could just think about all of this in a different light, everything would be better.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

"Do you?" She was acting like a girl who wants to be agreeable but can't be.

"This is no longer fun," I said. "You feel like puking."

"I'm sorry." She was obviously offended.

"Why do you have to ruin every fun thing? And make it un-fun?" I asked.

"I said I was sorry," she said.
"I'm sorry too. Let's just go."

"Okay," she said, but when I started to get up she pulled me down again.

"First tell me something," she said. "Tell me what you want."

"What are you talking about," I said, yelling some. There were these undercurrents all the time between us, ways we pushed each other without seeming to.

"What do you want, what would make you happy do you think." This was hard for her, but her voice was even and her meaning direct.

"I don't know what I want," I said. Suddenly she was so beautiful again that it made me crazy to look at her. I turned away and watched something else, there was plenty else to look at.

"Just right now," she said. "What do you want, right now."

She tugged on my shirt but I wouldn't look at her anymore, I physically could not turn my head. I had the feeling that if I looked at her we could forgive each other but I could not make my head turn to look at her like she wanted me so much to do.

"Cathy?" she said. "What are you doing?"

She wanted me to say something. Maybe she was in love.

I did not have the heart to answer her question. I knew the answer, but I didn't have the heart to tell her. We ended up going back to her place and I left her there staring at me from the sidewalk as I drove away and went home and got drunk and when my boyfriend came home we had the first sex we had had
in months. I did not enjoy it, but it was nice anyway to be near someone in that way. Jane and I did not speak to each other ever again.
Leftovers

Chris and her mother left their quiet shrub-lined suburb in Dallas on a late Sunday afternoon in June, taking with them as many of their things as could fit in the silver-gray Honda they had bought from a used car dealer, just for the occasion. Their plan was to move out of their one-story brick house, where they had lived for five years, without Chris’s daddy knowing until it was too late and they were gone. The house was a step up from the two bedroom condo they rented before in an apartment complex without parking or laundry facilities. There Lynn had to do all their clothes in the sink, clothes lines dangling shirts and underwear like a bower over their heads when they watched TV and waited for Harry to come home. Even so, they were tired of the brick, it was dark and cold and not pretty. They dreamed of garden parties instead of barbecues, bigger trees, a pool, a nicer person to call daddy and husband.

So they abandoned Lynn’s bright red Suburban in the parking lot at the H.E.B. next to the shopping cart return, leaving scraps of paper with phony names and numbers to confuse the detective they assumed Harry would send after them. Also, in the back seat they put a brand new extra large container of laundry detergent and a slew of party favors which, they thought, might indicate an intention to return. They left no word. Chris was free of middle school for the summer, Lynn was self employed (arts & crafts), and neither of them had any friends who might seek them out or cause trouble.
“This will be our first real adventure,” Lynn suggested, winking as she passed Chris black Jackie ‘O Nassus sunglasses and slid on a pair of cat eyes with rhinestones on the edges. It occurred to Chris that this was her mother’s way, always making fun of any situation in order to make it easier to take. Leaving Dallas had been weird, more like a carnival than a separation. They wore wigs to buy the Honda, bought tapes of Heart, Dolly Parton and Donna Summer, and took time to buy glitter bracelets and matching hair bands at the dollar store for the car ride down.

Lynn slipped in the tape, it clinked inside. That's a sexy noise, Chris thought. Come on Girl, he said with a smile...it was Heart. Lynn sang along, and Chris joined in, even though she wasn’t entirely fooled, and this wasn’t entirely fun. With her sunglasses she stared at the glare from the metal of the Honda until her eyes burned. She liked playing that sort of game with herself.

Lynn peered at Chris and raised her eyebrows, one then the other. “Don’t worry, he’s not tracking us,” she said that in a husky, criminal way, mimicking cop shows they often watched on TV. “Unless he’s an old woman in a yellow station wagon.” She weaved through traffic, moving the car to the fast lane of the four lane highway. “Hope you don’t mind if I step on it, anyway. I want you to see the city from higher up, in the country, and I want to make it by sunset.”

She cracked open a Diet Coke, sipping the soda out of the rim before inserting her straw. “Remember I was trained to be a race car driver.” She plugged in the radar detector. “I’m excellently skilled.”
"That’s OK,” Chris answered, producing a few fake tears, her bottom lip turned down in an affected pout. The car was nearing 90 miles an hour and Chris felt her seat shake. She took a Kleenex from the box between them and dabbed at her eyes from underneath her sunglasses. Secretly she thought this was a great idea, divorce. It was like getting out of prison: you get to eat anything you want, see your relatives without being embarrassed about your daddy’s drinking and his dirty mouth, sit around in your underwear. It felt almost like a holiday, with just the two of them on the road eating what they wanted and playing the radio. There was the fear but the fear was less and less as they drove further away from their home. It was kind of like an onion -- the center made you cry, but the outer layers were all right, just kind of sweet and earthy.

It seemed right to Chris that her daddy was behind them, alone with their old life. This included Chris’s white Persian cat Prince Charming, a Christmas present from her daddy. She hated it. Matty poops hung down off his bottom until Chris yanked them off with a paper towel. Her daddy had once thrown the cat by its tail down the hall until it hit the closet doors and scrambled to its feet, a demonstration of cat agility which he was intent on proving, even though Chris had asked him not to, and had never doubted him in the first place. Now he was stuck with it, an angry cat who walked along the edges of rooms. *I walked like that,* Chris thought. Well then that’s what he gets, bad luck, Chris decided. She pressed her hand against her chest, between her ribs, and it felt swollen. She stared at the white lines ahead of them and concentrated on not getting sick. She shoved away the bag of caramel corn.
“You had enough?” Lynn asked. She slapped Chris on the thigh and squeezed the fat that was there, that up until a few months ago Chris had never noticed.

“Yes, and don’t.”

“You don’t be so sensitive. It’s womanly, honey. All women have that.”

Lynn switched gears a lot, coming up fast against cars and then trading lanes and speeding up. Chris didn’t even know her mother could drive a stick shift. Her mother never acted like other kids’ mothers who attended sporting events and wore school colors and organized fancy parties. Lynn had only once attended one of Chris’s soccer games. She stood away from the other parents underneath an umbrella, to protect her skin from the sun. After the game she drove Chris to Michael’s art supply and bought her a set of colored pencils.

“This is my favorite color of all time,” she told Chris. “Burnt Sienna.”

When Lynn received notices from school notifying her of Chris’s frequent absences or failing grades she ripped them up and left them in a pile on the dining room table. Lynn couldn’t hold down a job; she was always late or sick, and she often stole small items from the various shops that did employ her, not because she needed them, but because she was forgetful and paying for them slipped her mind. At least that’s how she explained it to Chris. Harry made enough at real estate and Lynn hoarded money she earned and checks from her sister that came at holidays. Lately she liked making wreaths with glued-on painted birds and berries. Chris thought they were ugly, but she pretended not to. It wasn’t that Lynn was totally out there, it’s that her moods were always
changing. And when her moods changed her life changed. It was all difficult to predict. Chris had learned to take care of them when she had to: answering the door, fielding phone calls, making tea and toast and liverwurst sandwiches for dinner.

"Don't you dare break down and call him," her mother said, meaning Harry. She squeezed Chris's knee with her long, muscular fingers and Chris squirmed down onto the floorboards of the front seat.

"I told you I wouldn't."

"All right, then sit on the seat like a regular person."

But Chris stayed down there awhile. She liked the coolness of the floorboards, the smell of rubber and people's leather shoes, the car humming underneath her. It was like being part of the car, rather than simply riding in it as a passenger. Also, it kept her from being sad about things as they moved further and further away from their old life. It was comforting and close and for awhile she slept with her head against the seat, her knees at her chest, her Anne Murray T-shirt pulled over them like a tent. She wanted her life to make the kind of rational sense that's easy to explain to other people.

Chris and Lynn were moving in to Chris's dead grandparent's house with Aunt Betty. Aunt Betty had lived there since she was divorced five or six years ago. Their town was only about five hours south, but Lynn insisted they take a round-about way to get there so they couldn't be followed.

"Tell me why we're going there again? I mean, as opposed to somewhere else?" Chris asked, disconcerted she could forget this information
when she knew her mother had told her a million times. She forgot things a lot lately. Her mother said it was because she wasn't concentrating, she was just letting things go in one ear and out the other. But Chris thought it was something else. She was focusing on the way things happened more than how they turned out. It made changes excruciatingly uncomfortable, like when her daddy took her to a baseball game. There was so much stuff involved. Did he have the tickets? Had she gone to the bathroom, we sure as hell aren't stoppin'. Where were the binoculars, god damnit? By the time they arrived she forgot why they were there, exhausted and near tears, always surprised to see the bright green baseball diamond and to remember they were supposed to be having fun together. He smiled a lot when they got there, but it was too late. That's the way it was when she was with her daddy, nothing was simple or nice.

"We're going to convalesce with your Aunt Betty." Her mother pronounced *convalesce* in syllables to help Chris remember the word. And actually Chris thought they needed some, noticing for the first time her mother's rumpled dress and matted hair and the way her face stared blankly at the road. They needed Aunt Betty, a clean house, some decent food. In fact, they needed a lot of things.

Her mother had been driving for 3 hours, the caramel corn (which Chris had most of), a bag of cheetos (Lynn ate most of those) and diet coke (which they shared) their only sustenance since morning. They'd been too distracted to think about a decent meal. Last night they slept in the car at an otherwise empty rest stop at the top of a hill with a view of the Dallas city lights stretched out in a
white glowy haze. “Now, aren’t you glad we stopped here tonight?” her mother said.

But Chris’s back hurt and her legs were sticky from spilt coke and there were crumbs around the gear shift and in her lap. She felt cranky. “It looks nice,” she said, trying to focus on the view.

“And look how our seats angle all the way back.” Lynn grabbed two light, cotton blankets from the trunk and spread one over Chris. “Now go to sleep.”

Even though it was a pretty spot, Chris had a hard time falling asleep. The car rocked all night in the thick, hot wind. She kept starting awake, fearing that the Honda had rolled off the hill, dreaming twisted metal, smoke, fire, her daddy standing in the rubble.

While her mother slept, snoring lightly, Chris called her daddy from a pay-phone attached to wooden walls of the women’s restroom, made to look like a rustic country barn. She produced a quarter from a hidden pocket of her nightie and held her hand over the mouthpiece. He answered the phone without speaking, just picked it up and breathed into the receiver. Chris stood for a minute like that, the phone in her hand, not saying anything.

Then she said, “Dad?” as though she were angry, her own strong-sounding voice a surprise to her.

“I knew you’d call,” he said. His voice was dry, like he’d been up late and was tired and maybe a little drunk. His voice was sad.

Then she hung up.
There was a cat that had come out of the bushes while she was on the phone. It was rubbing up against her legs, like cats do. She could feel its damp fur through the thin cotton against her legs. She bent down to look, it was a boy cat. It was wild and mangy and she didn’t want it touching her nightgown. She touched its head until it purred and then broke a branch off of one of the Juniper trees and stuck it in the cat’s face until he ran away.

It occurred to her that her daddy might not have realized they were gone for good. It was within reason that he assumed she and her mother were just being irresponsible, had gone off on a weekend to the coast or left for an all day extravaganza to the discount shopping mall without sharing their plans with him or calling. They did that sometimes. He yelled at them all the time for what he called fucked-up behavior. Maybe he was worried, maybe he called the police, frightened by what could have happened, maybe he blamed himself, tapping a match against his knee like he did when he worried about work. When he was worried about work he also paced, Chris watched his cowboy boots slide along the carpeting. “Light it, daddy,” she’d ask him then. And he’d sit down beside her and strike a match against his metal zipper and then blow it out. Chris loved the smell of sulfur. She sniffed it in. But she hated the smell of his filterless camel cigarettes which he would light after a few seconds of letting her sniff. She hid in her room while he smoked.

“It’s just tobacco, honey. From Indians,” he’d say.

But she knew what he’d do if they came home now, he’d take her mother down on to the carpet, maybe hold her there by the neck. But she wondered if
he knew that they were done with him and with their life in Dallas, that he was the outsider even though he had loved Lynn longer than Chris was alive. His life wasn't ever going to be the same again, but he was still by the phone, waiting for them to come back home. Maybe that's why Lynn had her, why parents had kids. So there would always be at least one person in the world who loved you best.

She stood and waited by the phone to make sure the cat was really gone. She brushed her feet off, climbed back inside the car and held her hand in front of her mother's mouth, to make sure she was still breathing. She pulled the blanket up over her head to block out the light from the highway. It was late.

When Chris woke up the next morning, her eyes puffy and white, they were already moving, Lynn sucking down a sweaty Diet Coke from their mini-cooler in back. She jerked the seat up too quickly and saw stars from the shock of bright light on her eyes.

"We're almost there," Lynn said, smiling and happy looking. "Do you recognize it?"

"I don't know," Chris said. Then she realized that was a strange thing to say to a yes or no question. You couldn't be confused about something like recognition. You either did or you didn't. "I think so." Then they both laughed a long time because they were giddy from anticipation and fatigue and relief. Chris liked laughing. She liked the way her face felt when it smiled a lot. She liked her mother's laugh, too. Lynn had a really wide mouth and straight, white
teeth. Her cheeks became beautifully flushed when she laughed. When she smiled in a room it was hard not to smile, too. Everything seemed brighter.

All the houses here were immense multi-leveled mansions with fresh paint and picture windows, like houses on wedding cakes and in Hollywood movies. But her grandparent's house was flat, stone and sprawled at the end of a long driveway covered over by thick live oaks and vines. Even so there was a lot of light inside, the shrubbery there for privacy and then clear and grassy around the house perimeter. When they knocked Aunt Betty opened the carved, wooden door. Wafts of air-conditioned air hit Chris and her mother in the face. Chris could hear Aunt Betty's dog Lieutenant barking in the back yard, his voice croaky and old.

"Hey you two," she reached out and took the box Chris was carrying.

"Hi Betty," Lynn said.

They hesitated for a minute in the doorway, assessing each other sister to sister, woman to woman. Aunt Betty had thick blond hair and wore glasses. She had large breasts and big hips. At last Aunt Betty giggled, squeezing Lynn as a sign of good will and acceptance family-style. "You look exhausted," she said, pulling Lynn inside. Chris followed the two women into the house. Her mother was a younger, less padded version of Aunt Betty, but even from the back you could tell they were cut from the same mold.

Once their boxes and suitcases were in, the three of them slumped down on overstuffed couches, each looking a little stunned. They took off their sunglasses and let their eyes adjust. It was a dazed set of looks: what's
happened to us? Chris thought that the house had turned into a shelter where
damaged goods went to rest. Aunt Betty, old Lieutenant with hip dysphasia, and
now Chris and Lynn Cabble. On the coffee table there were unfinished
crosswords and needle point projects where her grandmother had left them
before she died. Chris couldn’t understand it. It was as if her family's belongings
took the status of relic, whereas most normal families just threw these things
away.

Chris’s mother's room was the same as she left it when she married her
daddy at 19, and that was the room Chris wanted. There was a twin bed with a
small canopy above it made of woven, oriental material. It was the only dark
room in the house, situated at the end of the hallway, nearest the oak trees that
provided the driveway's cover. The right window screen had a rip in it. Chris
pushed her finger through the hole and wiggled it.

“I used to think bats could fly through that hole, Chris.” Lynn said,
discovering her with her finger in the screen.

“This hole? It’s too small.”

“Not for Dracula.” Lynn sat on the out of date yellow, red and green
cushioned seat that stretched the length of the windows along one side of the
room. “When he's a bat, of course. Mommy always opened the windows, she
thought it was healthy for us to have night air. But I lay in my bed fixating on that
hole with a glow-in-the-dark cross clenched to my chest. I hoarded garlic under
the bed.” She laughed. “I reeked until I grew out of the fear.”
Lynn stood up and slid her finger through the rip next to Chris's, comparing length. "Mine's still longer." She kissed the top of Chris's head making an exaggerated smacking noise, a motherly gesture that made Chris feel small in the way that felt good, like a pecan nut inside its brown, hard shell. This kiss seemed to say that everything would be all right after all, that she would be taken care of. She felt greedy, hoping to keep her mother interested in the screen, the rip, in her.

Chris pulled her finger out of the screen, but ripped her skin near the knuckle in the process. She pushed the blood out more and held it up to the rip. "Here batty, batty," she called, laughing at her own joke. But Lynn had already walked to the doorway, staring curiously around her as though she were in a foreign place, uncertain of her next step.

"Isn't it time for bed?" Lynn asked suddenly, as if she were an eccentric baby sitter who had forgotten the established rules of the house.

"I don't know." But Chris put on her nightgown anyway and slipped in bed, waiting by custom for her mother to come tuck her in.

Aunt Betty poked her head in to blow Chris a kiss. "Good night girl. Glad you're here."

"Send mom to tuck me in," she said, slightly embarrassed by what felt like a childish request.

But Lynn wandered off, performing what would become a nightly ritual: walking around the house in bare feet after Betty and Chris were asleep, staring at pictures, having snacks, turning lights on and off as she moved from room to
room. Chris found her mother’s movement through the house comforting, safe. It reminded her of falling asleep on the couch in Dallas while her parents watched episodes of *M*A*S*H* and *The Carol Burnett Show*. She would hear them whispering, as if they were very far away at the end of a long, clean tunnel. Then her daddy would ease her off the couch and carry her to her room, her body limp and tired against his chest. But, she decided, it was still better without her daddy, no one to tell her mother who she had to be, no angry crying, just quiet.

It seemed strange to lie in a bed with so much history. Was this where her mother lost her virginity? she wondered. Did she smoke out the rip? She touched herself for awhile, as usual. She was tired, and the soft weight of her hand felt good between her legs. She slept so heavy and still that her arms fell asleep, she was face down, one hand between her legs, the other dangling off the side of the bed.

*The next morning Aunt Betty cornered Chris in the kitchen, patting her on the cheek. “This one's tough,” she said. “She'll make it.”

“Who are you talking to?” Chris asked. She looked around the empty kitchen at its blue Formica counters.

“Oh Chris, you're so literal.” Aunt Betty said. “Do you want cereal or eggs?”*
Chris took the cereal box and emptied it slowly in a glass bowl. Could these shapes spell letters? And could the letters spell words? She thought of words she had learned in school: Delphic sibyl, ancient augury, prophesies.

“What are you staring at, it’s time to eat.” Aside from a few flights of fancy, Aunt Betty was a pragmatist. “Eat.” Aunt Betty soft boiled herself an egg and then spent ten minutes or so trying to eat it.

“Is your mother still asleep?”

“I think so.”

“Well, let her.” She grabbed leftovers from the fridge and a cold Tab wrapped in tin foil and put these in a frog-prince lunch sack. She paused. “This one takes care of her mother,” she said, stroking Chris’s hair and looking at her wistfully. Chris glanced around the kitchen, but once again, the two of them were alone. Aunt Betty, it seemed, liked to speak about her in the abstract. Maybe this had something to do with being a nurse.

After Aunt Betty left for her job at the hospital, Chris and her mother were alone in the house, Lieutenant limping out back. She helped her mother unpack into the swelled, wooden dressers. Lately they did chores in stages, because since they arrived at Aunt Betty’s her mother had a hard time completing even small tasks. It was as if her strength had been totally depleted, the last of it oozing out during the car trip down. Every so often she would just stop in the middle of the room holding an item she had pulled from her suitcase.

Chris’s role in their new family seemed to be one of caretaker. Aunt Betty, as it turned out, was not a very picky eater and preferred to live off of diet soda,
PB&J's and frozen raviolis. So Chris spent the first week or so inspecting every item in the refrigerator, throwing out cans of beans and vegetables from the cupboard that had been around since the seventies, old food, ice cream with freezer burn. With what remained she concocted meals she hoped would appeal to her mother, who was refusing to eat anything but candy bars and gummy bears.

Chris conducted fashion shows dressed in her grandmother's ball gowns. She put Lieutenant in a pair of her shorts and a T-shirt, pretending he was her little son. But Lynn didn't seem to notice, maintaining her fixed position in front of the TV, only talking to Chris about the best sitcom or when she needed the fan turned to a higher speed. Chris thought she looked broken, tired, in pain, like patients on *Emergency* after they've had a lung removed. To cheer her up, Chris sat on the floor beside her and laughed at the stupid jokes on her mother's favorite shows. She gave her hand massages and rested her arm across her mother's stomach. "How about a game of gin?" she asked, trying to entice her mother with a deck of cards by wafting them under her nose like a magician or an animal trainer. She slapped cards down on the rug into various stacks, making up the rules of a game as she went along, refusing to ask her mother for help. She noticed she'd been angry lately.

That night Chris heard some banging around outside the front door, and then banging around inside. It sounded like a burglar, or something even worse, a rapist or a serial killer. She took a look down the hall, and then made her way to the living room, staying hidden in the dark and keeping to the wall. A
lamp went on. And then she saw her aunt pushed up against the couch and a man rubbing against her. He wore dark jeans and boots and a striped shirt that was tucked in. They were making stifled noises, Chris could just make out his low voice, trying to whisper. “I want you so bad,” he was saying over and over again. He sounded drunk. Her aunt was giggling, trying to keep her white nurse’s uniform down over her hips and hold his shoulders at the same time. He kneeled down in front of her and spread her legs, kissing the insides of her knees like there was something spread on them that tasted good. She shrieked some in that kind of teasing way and pulled him up to her again, grabbing at his hips and moving them against her very roughly. They sort of fell off the edge of the couch onto the floor and then she pulled him up and the two of them stumbled towards her room in back.

The next day, the man hung around the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper. He kept winking at Aunt Betty over the paper. Chris sat on the counter the other end of the room and let her heels bang rhythmically against the cupboards as she ate her cereal. Aunt Betty tried to act casual, soft boiling her egg as usual, but Chris could tell something was different because it took her three tries to keep the yoke from breaking in the boiling water.

Before she’d finished eating it he said, “I suppose it’s time to go.” He stood up and shook the paper until it folded and then he set it down on the counter. “I’ll call you soon,” he said. When he said that Aunt Betty seemed happy. Her cheeks were flushed and she wore her hair down and messy. She
let him out the back door. He patted her on the butt and when they hugged he moaned into her neck.

"Brian," she said to Chris after he'd left. "His name's Brian."

In summer there are a lot of hours in the day. Chris ransacked her grandfather's study when she was bored. There were shoe stretchers and empty tape dispensers. She read his books. On the same shelf with *Permanent Peace* and *Anna Karenina* was a book about a nineteen year old girl who traveled to Europe and became a prostitute. Chris read it part by part, nervous she would be discovered. It read: *My first lover was a German Shepherd*. She tried to imagine letting Lieutenant mount her like the dog did to the girl in the book. It was sexy in a really disgusting way. Chris wondered if Aunt Betty had ever let Lieutenant mount her. It was a strange thing to wonder about your aunt, she knew, but interesting. She wondered what it was like to have a man kneel in front of you, kissing your knees. Her own knees were large and wide. She couldn't imagine they were sexy, but maybe they would be someday. She kissed them herself, just to see. But then she was in the mood, as she called it. She pushed hard against the arm rest of her grandfather's couch and then lay back and pushed up against a pillow she held between her legs, imagining it was someone on top of her. She went and shut the door to the study, and then took off her shorts and underwear. She tried all kinds of positions. She found a mirror in the bathroom and squatted over it. She ended up collapsing on the floor, pushing and pushing and pushing.
Later she felt relieved, like she wouldn’t have to do that again for awhile. And she felt less angry.

That afternoon her mother asked from the couch, “Why do I do this to you? This is not something a good mother would do.” They were watching TV.


“There’s too much,” she waved her arms looking for the word. “There’s just too much around here, men and women trying to get along. I’m afraid you’ll get weird.”

“I’m already weird. Sorry. Too late. Send the weird ambulance away. There’s no saving her!” Chris collapsed against the carpet in a death roll. She did feel weird, like there was too much energy inside her again. She never used to tell jokes. Maybe she was in the mood again.

“How am I going to drive you to school everyday this Fall?”

“But it’s still summer,” Chris said.

“You’ll be embarrassed,” her mother said, as if she were telling Chris a secret in confidence.

“I’m never embarrassed,” but this was only partly true and they both knew it. “I’m not even enrolled.” Chris lay back on the carpet and stared out the windows at the denseness of the groupings of tall trees. It was comforting to see their dark green leaves through the gray lines of the screen quivering in the slightest breeze. She closed her eyes.

*
Lynn began receiving mail. Chris's first reaction was one of fear, because now the two of them would be very easily discovered. Receiving mail was like announcing your existence to the world over a loud speaker, a total forfeit of anonymity. The fact that this was done so effortlessly made Chris wonder about what was really going on. It seemed now that they weren't in any danger from Harry, weren't in danger from anyone.

“Aren't you worried, mom?” Chris finally blurted out, talking to her mother through the bathroom door. She slid down to the carpet and leaned against the wall. “Don't we have to be careful?”

“Of what?” her mother called from the toilet. Her voice was bright and tinkly, like wind chimes.

“Of him. That he'll find us.”

“If he hasn't found us yet, he's not looking.” The toilet flushed. “Get up.”

Lynn spent a few minutes every day sorting the mail into piles. Junk mail landed in heaps on the floor while the items she wished to keep were shoved underneath the cushion of the couch, under her behind where she could reach the stack comfortably. Sometimes she would close herself off in Chris’s grandfather's study, and then come out a few hours later with a sealed and stamped envelope. “Will you mail this for me?” Lynn asked, passing it to Aunt Betty, out of Chris’s reach.

“What is it?” Chris asked, attempting to sound casual and disinterested.

“Ours is not to wonder why”, her mother quoted, “and if I could only remember how that ends!” She stroked Chris’s shoulder. Just to see her mother
on her feet was strange. Chris hugged her belly and folded herself against her knees, concentrating instead on the pattern of the throw rug. She was sure that her mother was writing letters to Harry, planning behind her back. There would be a reconciliation. Then it would all happen again. She would have to hide again, in the closet or the shower. That used to be her favorite hiding spot, the shower.

Aunt Betty was watching Chris from across the table and Chris felt like she had to say something. “Is this a natural or an artificial dye?” she asked, pointing with a toe at a Burgundy square in the rug.

“Are you feverish dear?” Aunt Betty asked, holding Chris’s hand to feel her pulse. “Sit up, let the blood travel to your brain.”

“My head just feels heavy,” Chris said. The words sounded too young.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lynn asked, leaning down to touch the back of Chris’s neck.

“I don’t know.” This was a lie, she did know, but what was wrong was too long, too hard to explain. One problem would lead to a million other problems.

“I’m feeling nauseous.”

“Well if you sit that way much longer you’ll make yourself sick.” Lynn lifted Chris up by the arm. “How about ice cream.”

“That stuff will kill both of you,” Aunt Betty said, flipping through her health magazines. But she was also drinking her third Tab which even Chris knew wasn’t healthy. Chris noticed that about her mother and her aunt, they said things they didn’t mean all the time. And they tried for things they couldn’t get.
The phone rang, Aunt Betty answered. It was Brian, Chris could tell by her tone of voice.

Lynn shoved Chris down the hall. This was the first time in weeks that Lynn seemed in control, self assured, and it startled Chris. Maybe her role was shifting. Maybe there was something in the mail, a medication or a tonic.

They pulled all the tubs out of the freezer. Lynn scooped out large rounds of mint chocolate chip and pralines and cream into two bowls. Chris liked the feeling of the kitchen at night. Everything was clean and cool, the linoleum floor smooth on her bare feet. She danced over for spoons, letting her arms spin around and her feet slide on the slick wax finish.

“I think you'll always be thin,” Lynn said. “You have my mother’s shape.”

“She was two feet taller, at least.”

“But you have her look.” Lynn licked the ice cream scoop pensively.

“You're really smart, Chris. Really thoughtful.”

Chris stopped spinning and leaned on the kitchen counter. There was something sad about happiness. You notice it just as it fades. “So are you,” she said.

“No, no I'm not.” Lynn seemed certain, like this was something she had thought over and had reconciled.

Lynn took her ice cream and walked for the door. “Hurry up, or I'll turn the lights out on you.” They ran out of the kitchen bumping into each other along the dark hallway, the blue from the television set lighting their way.
“Try to understand, try to understand, try try try to understand... he’s a magic man...” they sang to Aunt Betty as they ran for the couch and the light.

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It was August 1st and Chris’ thirteenth birthday. Lynn promised leg shaving as a ritual to mark the occasion. She sat Chris down on the toilet and spread shave cream like cake frosting in clean smooth bars down Chris’s legs. Lynn used the razor and shaved them, one then the other. Chris held onto her mother’s shoulder, memorizing its freckles and texture. This was supposed to be a great moment in her life, but it didn’t feel like anything much. That’s what life does, Chris reasoned. You want and you want and you want, and by the time the world comes around and gives it to you, the desire is all used up and there isn’t anything left to get excited about.

Lieutenant had found his way in, sniffed the cream on her legs and pressed his nose against drops on the floor, and then settled uneasily down on the bathmat. Chris pulled her mother’s hair away from her face so it would be easier for her to see. She stared at the shower but it seemed nice and friendly, bright tiles and bottles and white soap that was soapy still from her last bath. She could hardly imagine hiding in it now, could barely see herself crouched and crying on the tiles, her daddy’s voice in the hallway shouting and her mother shouting back, trying to block the bathroom door and lead him away from where she hid.
Chris liked sitting on the toilet like this, with her heel in the soft palm of her mother's hand. She could hear Aunt Betty laughing with Brian in the next room. It was weird how things changed, how suddenly there was someone new in their life to care about. And how the person who used to be there, wasn't.

"So what is all that mail about?" Chris asked.

"Bills and junk. They never leave out the junk."

"Oh, I thought you were writing daddy."

"Honey, I'm just paying our bills." She explained that they were almost out of money and would have to get a job soon. There was a flower store down the road in a brick outdoor mall. She thought it might be fun to sell violets. She thought she'd be good at it. And she could work on her wreaths again.

"But it seemed like a secret," Chris said, "it seemed like you were hiding it."

When her mother finished, she put Chris in a clean white nightgown and helped her to bed, like she did every night in Dallas but hadn't done since. Suddenly things felt regular, easy.

"Love you," she said.

"Then go to sleep," Lynn said. She hesitated in the doorway, and then wandered off to the living room and turned on the television. *I Love Lucy* drifted down the hallway. She listened for her mother's wanderings, for the clicks of lamps, but Lynn was still. Things were so different now, so much happier and calmer, and she didn't understand why or when everything had changed. Her mother was maybe going to have a job. Her daddy wasn't beating them up and
couldn't now even if he wanted to. He was too far away, and they were safe. It seemed almost like fact. It made her feel nervous, not having anything left to be afraid of. At least with fear there were rules. You knew what to run from and who to run to.

For a few minutes Chris let her mind drift. Things were so up in the air in her life. She didn't even know what to hope for.

But then she forgot about Aunt Betty and Brian, about her mother and daddy, about everything that had happened since June. She forgot who she was, literally blanked out. For the first time the sensation she had sometimes when she was asleep and didn't dream, happened to her while she was awake and blinking and looking out at the world: she had nothing on her mind. This lasted the night.