INCIDENTAL ILLUMINATION

by

RONDER THOMAS YOUNG

(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

Incidental Illumination is a collection of fourteen short stories. The author introduces the collection with an apologia, which explores her process, material, and influences.

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DEDICATION

For Glenn, whose equilibrium, constancy and humor allow me to embrace my essential demons.

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Process

I empty, cull and reconfigure the right front quadrant of the garage and reduce the accumulated artifacts by half. I dump three loaded trunks and save only two ragged yellow pages ripped from an 8 ½ x 14 legal pad in 1976.

My old rounder, slower letters fill the pages: *Pursuit of the Past . . .* c*omparative government teacher said, "Ronder is the most logical female student I have ever taught . . . my palm says I am very diplomatic . . . dream of the certainty of Greek heroines . . of a release . . . insanity . . . going somewhere and not returning . . . Ain't no man worth it.*

I remember the circumstances of the pages. I was a sophomore in English 428, Dr. Marin's *Modern American Literature* class. The class was, I believe, divided into five thematic units, or pursuits, as Marin called them. I remember this particular pursuit, of the past, and another one, of the real. The others elude me. The plan was for us to personally pursue these concepts in a short essay, and then Marin would glean clues from our revelations about which writers we should read. He scrawled on the bottom of the page: *Excellent, a really interesting account, developed in a striking and original manner. Read Mailer and Lewis (?). Also Pound*. *See me*. I caught him in his office late in the afternoon. Pound, I asked him. Why? He opened up his hands. Shook his head. Glanced through the open door into the empty hallway. Seemed appropriate, he said.

I sit down on one of the empty trunks and read more slowly. I remember the people and places. High school, Hojo's, Tom, Vietnam. I remember disregarding Marin's choices, circumventing his Mailer, Lewis, Pound triad and settling instead into Nabokov. I remember *hearing* that high school teacher say the words *Ronder is the most logical female student I have ever taught*. What I do not remember is *writing* the words back then.

This should not surprise me, because so many years have passed, but it does surprise me, because so many years did pass before I revisited and revised the phrase: *You think like a man*. Last line of the first paragraph and thematic center of a story called "Edge," which I wrote almost twenty years later. The *I can see your point, but . . .my palm says I am very diplomatic* in the essay I write for Marin becomes *It was the 'yes, but' state of mind that allowed me to live* in the story. The youthful *dream of a release, or insanity, and of finally going somewhere and not returning* is reprised as o*ver the edge . . . But not nearly enough* in my forties. Still, as a nineteen year-old, I explore what characteristics of the young woman inspire the man's observation. In "Edge" the exploration shifts to the revelation of the young woman's response. She's not sure what the words mean, but she automatically knows *thinking like a man* is the preferred method. She *smiled into third period*. Similar sentiments, separated by decades of memory and experience, expose a slightly different, tributary revelation in apposition.

Later in the week, I take the pages along when I go to make copies of some other documents, and I inadvertently leave the brittle original behind in the machine. The larval remains of memory have flown off into fiction, and in my garage there are three empty trunks and a clear path from one door to the next.

For me, writing is a process of emptying, culling, and reconfiguring the persistent fragments, images and phrases that I carry in my cluttered consciousness and my sensual memory, that I pack and unpack in cardboard boxes delineated by system or decade: *Childhood*, *Seventies Stuff*, *College*, *Saudi Arabia*. I write not so much to communicate the import of these fragments, as to discover it. And, oddly, it's after I've felt that I've captured the high essence of one of these personal artifacts that I feel as if I can release my grip on it. Like those brittle, yellow original pages left behind in the copy machine, primal remnants often fly off into fiction, leaving their larval husks behind. Others, like those documents and letters from the two years I lived in Saudi Arabia in the eighties, are particularly precious, because I've not yet been able to distill that experience into more than two consecutive lines.

Incidental Illumination is a collection of short stories, in which both individually and cumulatively, past and present collide and oblique patterns emerge. The stories "Resurrection" and "Rhythm of the House" both feature the character Cassandra Hamilton. In "Rhythm of the House," Cassie as a child sits on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night and listens to her drunken father and angry mother argue. In "Resurrection," Cassandra, now in her early twenties, listens to her married lover's hammering shower for a few minutes before slipping away without saying good-bye. It was not while I was writing the stories, but afterwards, when I was reading them, that I recognized the irony of the listening from, and later listening to, the bathroom, as Cassandra plans her escape from both situations. The stories were conceived separately, with no intention of reciprocal settings, so I was surprised and pleased to see the

connecting elements of narrative emerge. As I'm writing, that is what I'm looking for: the surprise.

This emergent process also allows me to introduce characters while I still explore them, to use them as narrative devices without using them up. Danny Fontana, who is killed in the Vietnam War, is a primary obsession of the narrator in "Picture Yourself," but he also makes cameo appearances in "Side Street" and "The Very End." Quiet connections like these serve, I believe, to subtly and almost subliminally create a geographical and chronological nexus when the stories are read collectively rather than individually. At the same time, however, as a reader and a writer, I can observe how characters I find difficult to delineate comprehensively emerge from the observations of characters I know better. Hannah Venus in the short short story "Hannah Venus is Dead" is an example of another character whom I approach slowly and deliberately, whom I know will appear again and again, in stories in which she speaks for herself before, and perhaps even after, her death. Pamela Tucker, the protagonist of another of these very short stories, "Aurora," is, in fact a character from my first novel, *Learning by Heart*. In the novel she is a secondary character, thirteen years old when the novel ends, whom the reader never sees alone. I both adore her and fear her and have imagined her as three years old, thirty-eight years old, with a long vista of scenarios in between.

Territory

Several years ago I receive a postcard from a novelist who is about to publish her first novel. We have never met, but I know her creative writing professor at the University of South Carolina, so I call to congratulate him on the success of one of his

students. While we are talking, she comes into the office, so he gives the phone to her, and we chat as well. The postcard comes the next week. *I must tell you how exciting it was to find out that you were the one who wrote the story about Charlene (New Year's Day?), which is a really great short story and I couldn't begin to tell you what an influence it had on me. I didn't think I had anything to write about, but then I figured if someone could make a waitress sound that good then I could do the same for some old beautician . . . I think I owe you a beer!*

She knows the story because I had written it years earlier in a workshop with this same professor, and I am surprised to learn that he has kept it and still reads it to students from time to time. On my copy of the manuscript, I retain this bit of his original commentary: *Your characters work for a living!* This strikes me as a trivial distinction at the time, although I do gain a reputation as the writer of the "waitress stories."

As in the case of recurrent characters such as Danny Fontana, Pamela Tucker, and Cassandra Hamilton, Charlene—although I have eventually renamed her Sharla—has subsequently figured in more stories. In this collection, she reappears as one of the ensemble in "Exit 19-A." In this same story, Dick, the director, echoes similar sentiments to those I've often heard about my choice of protagonists: "If you could write a cool story like that about a waitress, you'd probably like a shot at some really cool characters like us." Perhaps, but that would merely be the result of a territorial, rather than a thematic, shift. Indeed, in "Exit 19-A," the key revelation for Claire, the narrator, is that the social order she's navigated during her years in the restaurant is familiarly mimicked in the larger world. At first Dick intimidates her, but then she sees him as *the*

cook and realizes that her knowledge of where she's been may be just enough to get her where she's going.

Not all of my narratives are set overtly in workplaces, but many of the protagonists are like Spider," who "pounds metal into jewelry, cuts and carves bamboo into bongs," who is always quite literally singing for his supper. They hustle, scavenge, and, I believe, transform what could be denigrated as mere survival into the purest essence of life. Even in a story such as "Resurrection," in which scenes from an illicit affair and sometimes violent childhood rage in Cassandra Hamilton's head while she externally engages in insipid social chatter, economic concerns nag in the subtext. In the first paragraph, she thinks "New job. New dress. I belong here" and carries on the sterile conversation, which belies her internal drama, with her employer and her employer's colleague. Her apparent silence is a barter of sorts, and if she does indeed obey her father's directive to yell, it will likely cost her.

The reduction of a human life to an absolute sum of an economic equation taints as well as diminishes the individual, yet a sort of constant commerce may also, paradoxically, infuse energy into one's social reciprocity. Although economic status and accountancy is not always the theme of, nor does it always supply the narrative impetus for, my stories, they do always seem to emerge from that delicate balance that holds this paradox. Artistically, the paradox manifests itself as a simultaneous recognition of the definitive Marxist struggle and the celebration of capitalistic triumph. Although it may not be her conscious intention, Rhea, in the story "Incidental Illumination," attempts to redefine her role and usurp any power her married lover may possess by her denial of the desires attributed to her. In "Edge," the young girl may love Mr. Cordovan, but he is an

adult, her teacher, unequivocally the dominator. Even though she outlives him, she continues to be driven by his "odd instructions." Marxism regards history as a series of conflicts between the dominated majority and the dominating minority; as a writer, I regard an accumulation of short, interrelated narratives as history.

The accounts are always running. The novelist who sends me the postcard has never bought me that beer. She does, however, give me a jolt when I opened up her novel for the first time and read "Ronder was taking a cigarette break, drinking coffee, thinking about Buck." The bitch has stolen my name—a name I have spent years explaining, a name for which there is no explanation—and she had withheld the information in her previous panegyric.

To *Is it a family name*? I respond *It is now*. To *What is its origin*? I respond *A typo.* At the observation *I've never heard that name before,* I merely smile and walk away thinking *And you never will*. Over the years, I come to appreciate the growl of my name's double-*r* symmetry, to translate its oddity as uniqueness, and possess it as a commodity.

I complain to our mutual professor. "I thought she had told you," he says.

"No." I don't believe him.

"Have you read the book?"

"Not yet."

"Ronder is a wise, strong, triumphant character."

"Sounds boring," I say.

"And she's nothing like you."

"Which would make me stupid and weak and defeated?"

"This Ronder works in a beauty shop."

This fact holds some slight appeal. "She should have told me."

"I think she might have been afraid of you."

I nod. This possibility holds even more appeal. I do read the book, but I'm only appeased when I read one of her reviews. In one line the reviewer delineates the southern setting as an "eccentric" one, in which the characters have "strange names like Ronder." *Strange names like Ronder*. One phrase distills the anecdote, and I am satisfied.

Influences

I have been living out of the country, raising two young sons, who were born only eighteen months apart, and working as a freelance writer from my home, so this is my first job interview in seven years. I immediately sense that the ritual is different in the eighties than it had been in the seventies. Rather than chat with a person in his office, I sit for interrogation before a committee of seven in a conference room. Straightforward Q & A assessments about qualifications and expectations have given way to comprehensive psychological probes, designed to lull, then to trap, to test the mental and emotional reflexes. I cross my ankles and settle back into one long, run-on Rorschach.

Well into the first hour, one of the women asks, "What are you reading right now?"

I note I am not asked about my favorite books, influential books, even what I've read recently. She wants to know about *right now*.

I had been reading aloud to my sons right up until the time I got into the car to drive to this interview. "*Ramona the Brave*," I tell her. "By Beverly Cleary."

Across the table, another, much younger woman squeals. "Oh, I love Ramona," she says. "I read all the Ramona books."

I love Ramona, too. I love her clarity of vision and voice. I love that she names her doll Chevrolet. It seems to me the questioner is still waiting for my answer. I recall how Ramona "did not enjoy spending the whole day in a room with someone who did not like her, especially when that person was in charge."

I tell her I'm reading a lot of short stories. "Not collections," I say, "so much as individually."

The man at the end of the table, for whom I will ostensibly be working, straightens up. "Such as?"

"I was rereading 'Hills Like White Elephants' earlier this week," I say.

"Why?" he asks.

"For point of view."

"How so?" he asks.

The scene suddenly strikes me as surreal, even for a job interview, and the direction odd, even for me. Despite the key interviewer's apparent interest, I try to agilely move in and out and on. What I had actually reread was the line "They were all waiting reasonably for the train." When I had first read that word *reasonably* I had seen it as an intriguing momentary dip into the male character's consciousness, but suddenly I saw that word as the quintessence of the entire story. Hemingway has masterfully constructed this purely objective scene—with the exception of one adverbial lapse—and subsequently, with this single word, subverted the possibility of pure objectivity.

Although I believe I effectively conceal it in the interrogation room, one word calling so many elements into question thrills me.

In an interview in 1956, Pablo Picasso disparaged "people who speak about the beautiful." Instead of the "beautiful," he insisted, "one must speak of problems in painting." To speak of the problems of artistic construction is not a reduction of the work, but rather recognition that vision and method, process and product, are ultimately inseparable. An artist who has successfully solved a problem of narration, of character, of point-of-view, who defines and constructs a particular world, excites and inspires me; one like Nabokov, who in *Pale Fire* simultaneously subverts his labyrinthine construction, thrills me.

In this novel, Charles Kinbote retrieves a 999 line poem by the late John Shade from a "batch of eighty index cards held by a rubber band," as well another set of twelve cards, "which bears some additional couplets running their brief and sometimes smudgy course among a chaos of first drafts." From Kinbote's annotation of the poem emerges a narrative, or rather a stratified set of narratives, delivered by one deluded and deranged narrator, or perhaps *Pale Fire* is "a batch" of narratives by multiple narrators. It is impossible to determine, only because Nabokov so meticulously constructs the narrative dissonance.

Alice Munro is another writer who thrills me. Superficially, her short stories seem to be structured much more traditionally, yet she is preeminent in her integration of disparate storylines, from which emerge, in apposition, more expansive themes than they carry singly. In "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage," as in so many of Munro's stories, the material is so rich that any one of the narrative threads—Johanna

Parry, Ken Boudreau, the McCauleys, Sabitha and Edith--could have been singly and linearly followed into a much longer work of fiction. Yet Munro's vision of incidental fate and consequence hangs on the existence of the infant Omar, who is never seen, but only mentioned in Mr. McCauley's obituary notice. Edith is no longer close to her friend Sabitha—"in the church she had taken the precaution of not speaking to Sabitha first, before Sabitha could not speak to her"—but the consequence of their time together, during which they flippantly play a cruel joke on Johanna, has been the creation of life in the form of Omar.

Janet Burroway describes Munro's narrative construction as a "duality of process in which seeking order remains both mysterious and a struggle." Munro's process often seems to be simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of narrative. According to Burroway, Munro has said that for her writing a story means she must "make a certain kind of structure," yet the structure "seems to be already there." She may find it, she says, in "a shop window or a bit of conversation." Munro is frequently my inspiration, when I feel I am trying to convey connections too far-flung, to remain diligent, to keep looking, to believe in what I suspect is already there and in my ability to find it.

My influences fly in most often as fragments, from the literary and quotidian, from the stupid and sublime, from the incidental. From the masterful narratives of writers like Nabokov and Munro, who are able to construct and deconstruct simultaneously, to both reveal and maintain the mystery at the heart of story. From random lines from songs: "Been trying to get married since they stole a wedding dress" from Elvis Costello or "Loosening up that old Bible Belt" from Gram Parsons. From Bob Dylan's brief foray into Christianity. From a toddler who smacks down on

chocolate pudding for the first time, looks up and declares, "This taste like purple." From a student's question that I am unable to answer. The most profound of these influences can only rarely be tangibly traced to a specific work. For me, as a writer, what counts as an influence is anything that nags at me to understand life's infinite number of possibilities and limitations.

This job interview is actually a set of three interviews, scheduled for three different afternoons, consisting of more questions, writing samples, reenactments—*If you were to receive a letter like this, how would you respond?*—and a gradual expansion of the committee. "We know this is tiresome," says one of the women, "but it is such a delicate balance."

She's right. At the end of the first interview, I'm intrigued. The second, amused. The third, very, very tired of them all. When she calls to offer me the job, I decline. She wants to know why. I receive a letter from the man who sat at the end of the table. He would like for me to come by and discuss my reasons for refusal. *Perhaps we can convince you to reconsider*. What I consider is instead is his likely response to a similar letter from me, if he had not offered me the job—a call to security, perhaps? That discussion of point-of-view no longer seems quite so askew.

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Picture Yourself

Luther. Twenty-eight, vegetarian, Vietnam vet. Tall, thin, reddish-blond. I watch. I listen. I calculate classroom commentary.

Luther's method is more direct. "How old are you?"

"Almost twenty." I shake my head and laugh. "Nineteen."

"Oh. I thought more like twenty-two." He studies and reconfigures me. "Twenty-three."

I shrug.

"The weight," he says. "You have a weight that suggests someone older."

"Weight?"

"I mean"—he smiles—"on your soul. In your eyes. On your metaphorical shoulders."

"Okay."

The class, *Popular Culture of the Third Reich*, is atypically large for a German class. We wait for everyone else to move out.

"A lot of people take this class for the movies," Luther says. "At least half the papers will be on Reifenstahl." He laughs. "I know mine will."

Mine, I tell him, is mainstream fiction. "You know," I say. "Stories in popular magazines at the time." We shuffle into the hall and down the stairs.

"Let me buy you coffee," Luther says. "And you can tell me one."

"One of the stories?" I ask.

He nods.

In the first floor coffee shop I sit at a wobbly table and cull the dozens I've read. I spend every night in the stacks.

Luther brings over our coffees and sits down. "Well?"

Not one of the stories will coalesce, discretely and wholly, for me now. "What strikes me," I say, "is how most all of them have to do with chocolate bars or fresh fruit or—"

"Socks?" Luther asks. "Dry socks?"

"Yeah." I nod. "Socks." In one of his letters from Vietnam, Danny Fontana had written about pizza. *I want to be in the back booth at The Villa with you right now. How bout you? How bout some hot tomato cheese down your throat?* Early in our correspondence Danny insisted that packages only come when and contain what he instructed. *Don't surprise me*, he wrote. *For God's sake, don't send me cookies*. I sent one package, according to his instructions. Twenty-four pairs of extra-long tube socks and six Polaroids I took of myself in my bathroom mirror.

"Are you Jewish?" Luther stretches and straightens his legs, encompassing mine. He's thin, but not in a delicate, boyish way. "Is that it?" he says.

I wrap my fingers around my mug. "No." I roll my eyes. "I'm not Jewish." Wiry would be the word for Luther, I suppose. Tough and chewy. "What do you mean, *it*?"

"The weight."

"Oh right. The weight." I look at his forearm resting on the table and picture myself leaning down and taking a bite out of it. Anticipate the relentless mastication before eventually just spitting him out. "Jewish?" I say. "Jesus."

"Jesus." He smiles. "I guess not."

He makes me dinner at his house on Friday night. Steams a mélange of broccoli, carrots, green beans and zucchini. Reheats a cabbage casserole from the co-op down the street. Sets out a plate of heavy, honey-sweetened cookies.

A prodigious plant hangs between us. Red veined leaves tremble in the cross breeze. I brush one with my finger and ask, "What is this?"

"An out-of-control begonia." Luther pushes at the tendrils and slides his chair closer to me. "Do you grow things?

"No."

"Too much trouble?"

I hesitate. "I like plants. I have a couple. I take care of them. But that's not *growing* things."

Luther watches. Waits.

"What I mean," I say, "is I buy an established plant . . . Swedish ivy, something like that. Clip it, water it, remember to open up the blinds before I leave the house in the morning. That's not growing, that's maintenance. There's no seed sowing. No . . ." I pause, but he says nothing, so I go on. "I'm not comfortable with the coming and going, living and dying, and flowers . . . things that bloom unnerve me, so . . . No."

He nods. "Have you ever been raped?"

Picture yourself with your jaws wired shut. I'd gleaned that useful piece of advice from some magazine, but Luther's still, pale blue eyes compel me to answer. Not a spooky pale, but sad pale, which softens him up just enough. "What do you mean?" I ask. "Have I ever felt regret? Have I ever been . . . misled or—"

"Have you ever," Luther asks, "said no and been ignored?"

The copious hanging plants create a sort of curtain between the two of us and the night, but still all of the windows in the room are bare. I remember how one night I stood on a stepladder in front of a naked window, helping my mother hang curtains. How my father forgot his house key and instead of ringing the doorbell or knocking, he just walked around to that window and stood there until I saw him. A sort of joke, I guess. Or a test. Everything's a fucking test. I screamed, fell off the ladder and damn near broke my toe. Every time I look through glass into the blackness outside I see that same sudden threat of a man's face. That same other-world glare of a man's white shirt.

"No." I shake my head. "I haven't." I wiggle my big toe. It took months for it to heal properly.

"Are you on the pill?"

I shake my head. "Not any more."

"Problems?"

"Listen," I say, "I've had one real boyfriend. We were together for a couple of years, but we broke up three months ago. Last month I ended up in bed with this law student I met at a William Blake lecture . . ." I laugh. "He told me he was only there because he thought it would be a good place to meet girls."

"And so it was."

"Listen"—I lean forward—"I know sex and love are not the same thing. Nonetheless—"

"There should at least be the potential for love?"

"Yes." The word rolls at me, like a ball. "Potential." I straighten up. "So anyway I stopped taking the pill the very next day, right in the middle of my cycle, because I don't want to be careless, because I think there ought to be consequences." I shake my head. "I know that doesn't make sense, but—"

Luther folds his arms and wrinkles his brow. "Some sense, I suppose."

"No." I've not said enough. "I have no interest in getting pregnant. That's not what I mean by consequences. I need to deal with the moment in the moment, not abstractly, not in the morning, not alone, not in sunlight, not with orange juice."

The tea we're drinking smells like just mowed grass. Luther's narrative ends years ago. In high school in Newark. Fast cars, heavy drinking, petty theft. "A girl like you," he says, "would have had nothing to do with a punk like me."

"That's a long time ago," I say.

"For me," Luther says. He stands up, leans down, kisses me. I follow him upstairs to a new tangle of plants and a mattress on the floor.

"How long were you over there?" I ask him. Luther lights a joint. Inhales hard and passes it to me.

I breathe in the sweet smoke, smile, shake my head. "In Vietnam?" I ask.

He exhales. "Long enough."

Danny Fontana was there nine months. A couple of weeks before he left, a bunch of us huddled together in the diner and wailed for him to "Go to Canada."

Danny looked at us like the puppies we were. "Canada?" He laughed. "Sounds like a bigger bitch than the jungle." At the end of the night though, he pulled me aside. "I need to get away," he whispered. "Come on. Let's go to the mountains."

"Right now?"

His hand flowed down my back. "Right now."

"I can't," I said. "Not tonight." I was sixteen years old. My mom was already standing at the front window, peeking through the drapes, waiting for me to come home. I ran off and jumped into someone else's car. I had no choice. But still, *Forgive me*, I wrote in that first letter to him.

No, Danny responded. *Can't forgive you. Too late. Or won't. Doesn't matter. Sorry*. But he must have, really, because he went on for eight more pages. All of Danny's letters were long and usually lapsed into meanness, which he'd always start out apologizing for in his next one. The last one, the one about the little girl's skull smashed on a rock, was the worst.

Does this make you cry? Danny wrote. *Not me, baby. I pick up the little bits of her brain and know I'm safe. From this one. For now. I look at her sweet little face, and I see you. Wish You Were Here!*

No apology for that one. Too late. I sat in a back pew at Danny's funeral and fingered that last letter in my pocket like a rosary. I closed my eyes and listened to the people talk over the box they called Danny. Finally, I watched eight big guys hoist that shiny silver-gray icon to their shoulders and parade down the aisle. I worried so much about crying that I'd not worn any mascara, but in fact it was hard not to laugh. I knew Danny wasn't in there. I knew the damn thing was empty.

Foliage brushes my knees. Catches and breaks off in my fingers. *Wish you were here!* Luther's room whispers and conjures all night, until sunlight finally cuts through the glass. We retreat downstairs, toast bread and spread it with apple butter. His spoon clinks, clinks, clinks in a cup of that stinky tea. I close my eyes and chew.

Aurora

Pamela Tucker is seven years old when she falls in love with her cousin Clayton. She's never taken particular notice of him before, but when her daddy holds her up over the open casket, there's not much choice. Blond lashes curl out of his delicate eyelids. Pamela's own eyes fill up with tears. Not because he's dead, but because he's so beautiful.

Clayton is seventeen years old when he drowns in the pond behind Aunt Helena's house. He slices silently through Pamela's watery dreams.

Five years later Pamela sees John Lennon on the Ed Sullivan Show. Funny. Sad. And—just a little bit—mean. She closes her eyes, plays piano and sings a full octave lower than she can really get her voice to go. Her song is so wicked, hard and dead-on that John just cannot believe it. Pamela can never recapture the words in the morning, but she knows she's got the wicked, hard, dead-on feelings to make it happen.

Ed from work. Red hair. Flaming beard. White, white teeth. Radiates bright hot like the sun. Pamela stands with the other waitresses and watches two repo guys commandeer Ed's lime-green car out of the parking lot. Ed strolls out of the kitchen. Kisses the top of Pamela's head. Takes off his apron. Walks. Down the hill. Along the highway. Keeps walking. Never even picks up his last check.

Pamela is seventeen years old. Same as Clayton.

Resurrection

Eyes converge. Laughter ricochets in this crowded room. New job. New dress. I belong here. Anne touches my elbow, and I swing around with an open-mouth smile.

"Cassandra," she says. "This is Ellen Hardy. She's down from Boston."

Ellen Hardy. I see a glimmer in the green eyes. *Yes*. Berkshire Conference. Jack Mason's hotel room. He glared through the peephole—*What the hell's she doing here?*—and opened up the door. I see the high heel of her black pump puncture the blue carpet and rosy illusion. I remember her tightly-tailored red suit

Anne's hand slides to my shoulder. "This is the kid"—she winks at me—"I was telling you about."

Kid. My throat contracts. As if my father's big, smoky hands are back around my neck.

Ellen clasps my hand. Gold bangles clatter around her wrist. "So nice," she says, "to meet you, Cassandra." She's done up softer today. Green dress—wool, I think. The neckline slopes into a *V*.

Cassandra. Jack leaned in and listened in a back booth. *Come with me*, he said. *I'll introduce you as my colleague, Cassandra Hamilton*. *Or how about Mrs. Mason*?

I hear that position's taken. I laughed when I said that. Later I would spend days trying to remember why. Remembering only that he never properly introduced me as anything at all. Ellen Hardy didn't ask. She sat in the desk chair and talked about her

itinerary. Jack sat beside me on the bed and jumped right in with his *Cassie this* and *Cassie that*. As common and familiar as the telephone.

I push out a "Nice to meet you, Ms. Hardy."

"Ellen," she says.

My father only went for my neck the one time. He was drunk. I was pissed. I said some things. He responded. And so did I. Jabbed my right knee up into his balls. Hell, he's the one told me how to handle the situation. *Knee the bastard*, he always said. *Let out a yell*.

"I was telling Ellen about the new series," Anne says.

I cough. Breathe. "It's very exciting," I say.

Ellen Hardy chuckles. "Indeed," she says. "Sounds daunting." She arches an eyebrow at Anne. "You'll need this young blood to get it off the ground."

Son of a bitch! I yelled and sent my daddy sprawling. The easy part. The morning after, though, when it's nothing more than another dead drunk dream, when he says he's sorry, even though he doesn't remember it and doesn't really believe it, I've got nothing. Memory eats at me like a cancer, but not that lucky bastard. *Kids,* I heard him tell my mother. *Blow things all out of proportion*.

It's over, my mother told me. *Let it pass*.

Ellen Hardy's lined lips wrap around her words. "So he finally came right out and asked her, 'Don't you work for *The New Yorker*?'" She nods at me. "And she said, 'Yes.'"

Yes? Seemed as if her story was going another way. "She really did?" I say.

Ellen Hardy opens up her arms. I follow the length of the right one all the way to the squared-off, slightly tinted nails. "Not the magazine," she says.

My own fingers roll into fists.

She brings her hands together. "The hotel!"

"Poor bastard," Anne says.

Jack stood up. Said he needed to shower before the banquet. Ellen Hardy stood up. Wrangled a promise for a drink afterwards. *Nice to meet you, Cassie*, she said. Jack's shower hammered. Steam rolled out through the open bathroom door. I gathered my remnants. Considered changing back into my traveling clothes. Decided to stick with my dress.

Ellen Hardy's eyes and mouth shrink to a more serious size. "Do you remember that art director from Framingham?" she asks Anne.

Do you remember my dress, Ellen? I hope not. The pure gray subtlety was chosen to neither offend nor linger.

Anne leans in and whispers to Ellen. They seem to be talking about some guy at the bar. Ellen nods and scans the room. "You need to ask George," she says. "He'll know."

I can't breathe, I told Jack and closed the bathroom door. I crammed my jeans, T-shirt and sandals into my little leather bag and went downstairs. *You travel light*, Jack had said. *I like that*

Bus station? the desk clerk said. *About two blocks*. He pointed me in the right direction. Ten long hours home. Jack Mason finally stopped leaving messages. Time to

time, out and about, I see him. He puts his arm around me. Calls me *Kiddo* and *Baby Doll.* I figure I deserve it.

I press my nails into the fleshy mounds below my thumbs. Imagine a quick, hard jab to her nose. See a drizzle of blood in those fine, white hairs above her lip. Hear her resurrect me. *Of course*, she would say. *You're that young slut sitting on the edge of a bed in the hotel room of the famous Jack Mason, a man married some twenty years to someone else.*

Yes, I'd say. *Indeed*.

Let it lie. My mother's palliative drip, drip, dripping in my brain. *Let it pass*. He goes for my throat and wakes me up. *Yell*.

Incidental Illumination

Can't say as I know why

The sonorous words roll out of Kurt's office, into the tape library at the end of the quiet hallway. Rhea stretches. Her heels lift out of her shoes. The hem of her black dress slides several more inches up her thigh. She jams the tape onto the shelf above her head.

Again.

Can't say as I know why

She pushes the cart into the corner. Runs her finger across the master calendar on the wall. *Thursday*. And down. *8 pm*. *Kurt/Edit/Southern Journal*.

Rhea looks up into the flat fluorescence of the ceiling and listens.

Can't say as I ever much worried about why

Kurt hunches in front of the monitor. Pulls and smoothes his hair into a ponytail. Snaps an elastic band around it. Fast forward.

Honey—Evelyn Winder's face floods the screen—*I been farming this same land since I was twenty years old, raised up ten children*—expands into a smile of gold and gaps—*carried six of them myself*.

Rhea taps on the door. "How's it going?" She drops onto the chair next to the door.

Kurt stops on a wide shot. A panorama of color—red, yellow, blue, green—rises up and around Evelyn Winder. The barn behind her is painted with brilliant giant figures who appear to grow out of the tangle of tall weeds and rusted metal. Arms twist and twine over their heads, up to the sky, roll into a tight shot of a female figure—hip swung hard to the right, fingers poised in a snap.

"I need a damn cutaway," Kurt says.

"I saw her place before it was even written up in the newspapers or the guidebooks or anything." Rhea leans forward. "I was driving over to Wilmington, and all of a sudden, there they were." She laughs. "Dancing on the side of a barn. Out in the middle of nowhere. Scared the hell out of me."

Kurt taps his pencil on the pad. "I need a shot of her actually doing it." He shakes his head. "She was all smiles, didn't give a damn about us tramping all over her place, but I ask for one simple shot—her holding a brush—and Miss Evelyn Winder gives me a flat out no."

Rhea smiles. "No," she whispers.

"Hold up a brush." He balls his hand into a fist and flicks. "All I asked for."

"Make it good." Rhea looks at her watch. Seven-fifty-five. "This piece could save her from the DOT."

"That was the plan, I guess, but the lady totally screwed that angle." He swivels around. "She wants them to all just go away."

Rhea opens her mouth. Kurt holds up his hand. "The noisy art lovers, Rhea. Not the Department of Transportation. DOT deal strikes Evelyn Winder as square." He

opens up his arms. "Honey, she's been farming that same land since she was twenty years old, so she's looking forward to a little condo living in town."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean she wants her . . . her artistic legacy plowed down, just so some stupid road can—"

"Trust me. She doesn't give a damn. She said flat-out, 'Honey, I'm done with this." He thumps the pencil along the desk's edge, across the monitor. "She did seem to care about what music I'd use."

"Yeah?"

"Crickets." He ejects the tape. "Evelyn Winder thought I ought to go with the cricket music." Stacks it on the others. Checks his watch.

"Perfect."

"When she says it, yeah." Kurt looks at Rhea. "A cricket got behind my water heater the other night, damn near drove me crazy."

Rhea stands up. "It's eight," she says. "You better get in the studio."

"Yep." Kurt swivels around. "Why the hell are you still here anyway?" He stands up. Scans his desk. Pats his pockets. "Go home."

Honey, I'm done with this

Rhea sits at her desk, fumbles around in the bottom drawer, shuffles and slides some papers into a folder. She looks up at the sound of the metal door clanging, slips her purse onto her shoulder, and juggles the profligate arrangement of daisies, daffodils, tulips and lilies onto her hip.

She walks through the row of empty spaces to her car, opens the door on the passenger side and slides in the vase of flowers. "Honey," she whispers, "I'm done with this." And slams the door.

Spring always comes, with love and love, Dan

Rhea pulls the card out of her pocket and reads it. "Always?" She drops into the wicker rocker beside her bed. "Dan the weatherman?"

Headlights rush up and over the hill outside her window. The flowers fill the top of the mahogany dresser, almost obscuring the round mirror that hangs on the wall behind it. Rhea pushes back with her feet, catches her face in the mirror, and smiles at her reflection. "I lay in my bed at night, watching the cars"—she mimics Evelyn Winder's drawl—"and I know when it's him, just by the headlights." She licks her lips. "I don't know, Kurt." Shrugs. "Might be the angle or the brightness. Might be the distance between them, I just can't say." She pushes up out of the rocker, shoves shirts around in her closet. Finds the red one and stretches into it. Shuffles around on her desk for a pad, scribbles out her message, slaps it on the door on her way out.

Something came up at work. Back shortly.

Grey BMW slides in under the oak. The woman looks up, over her tortoiseshell glasses, through the downstairs window. A tall man dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt steps out. Dan looks down the street, up at the dark second-floor window, then catches her gaze. She smiles. He raises his right hand to her, reaches with his left into the back seat for his jacket. He pauses in the foyer to look at the mailboxes—no names, all the

slots are blank. At the top of the stairs, he peels the note off the door. Fumbles around in his wallet for the key, then unlocks the door. He flips the switch, lights a cigarette. "Work?" He inhales and listens to the faint ringing of a telephone.

Hello

The woman downstairs picks up. "Yeah, I'm almost done. I'll be there." She slides the manuscript into a portfolio. "He's back." She lowers her voice. "The man in black." Laughs. "You know who he looks like? John Lennon."

"No." She shakes her head. "No. I mean if he hadn't died. What Lennon would look like today."

"Oh, at least thirty years older than she is." She looks around the room. "Yeah. You're right. I should have a talk with her. Turn her around." Walks back into the bedroom. "Hell, I don't even know her name. We have more of a relationship—"

She kneels down beside the bed and lifts up the spread. "Me and the man in black. He waved at me." Reaches under and pulls out one brown shoe. Stretches and continues to grope around. "Remember that professor I went out with sophomore year?" She laughs. "If we were to go out today—me being the age I am right now, him the age he was back then—by God, I'd still be dating an older man." She pulls out the second shoe. "It's true. At least for another year."

Closed

Rhea looks up at the blue and red neon. *Open 24 Hours*. She looks at the hand-written sign on the door. *Closed*. Tugs the handle. Looks up at the night sky. "Closed?" she says.

Inside, the red-headed waitress turns the key and cracks the door. "Where's the boyfriend?"

Rhea hesitates, smiles. "I ditched him."

The woman pushes the door open. "Come on in then," she says. "I've got coffee. Doughnuts, pie. Nothing off the grill."

Rhea steps inside. Looks over her shoulder.

The woman wipes her hands on her apron. "Back there." She nods at the little booth beside the counter.

"Are you being robbed?" Rhea whispers.

The woman frowns. "If I was, I don't reckon I'd be pulling you into the middle of it."

"If they had a gun—"

"Honey, there's somebody back there holding a gun, I get that door open, I run." She points to the rack of cups. "Help yourself." She opens up a refrigeration unit, pulls out two salads, holds one out to Rhea.

Rhea shakes her head and pours the coffee. "How come you closing?"

"Nobody to cover the shift." She pulls off the plastic wrap, dumps the browning lettuce and sliced tomatoes in the plastic garbage can, tosses the faux –wood bowls into the bus pan. "Ditch him for good?"

Rhea takes a long sip and sets the cup on the counter. She glances at the woman's chest, moves her eyes up to the woman's face. "What's your name?" she says.

Who are you?

Dan pokes at the pink-veined petal of one of the lilies. Behind the flowers, pushed back against the wall, is a small wooden pedestal, which supports a plate painted with the portrait of a young woman. He lifts it out and looks at it. The sound of a car engine draws him to the window; it's the woman from downstairs, leaving. He watches the little red car pull out of the driveway, move past his car, turn left and disappear over the hill. He sits on the bed, holding the plate, and studies the girl's dark eyes, the luminous turban. He looks up and around the room. "Who are you?" he says.

You Know George?

"You know George?" Carol tests the burner with her finger, then sets the clean coffee pot on it.

Rhea shakes her head.

"The owner."

"No."

Carol wipes down the steel counter again. "You've seen him." She drops the wet rag in the trashcan. "He was back here the other night when you came in. Big beefy fellow."

"Not the black guy?" Rhea says.

"No." Carol grins. "That was Raymond." She takes off her apron and stuffs it in her purse. "Raymond's gone. Finally graduated from the university and got himself a good job at the telephone company."

"What was that song he was always singing?"

A man knocks at the front door. Carol waves him away without looking up. She cuts her eyes at Rhea. "*Me and Mrs. Jones*?"

"Yeah," Rhea says. "That was it."

"He told George he was leaving, but he's been here for so long—I reckon it took him five, maybe six years to graduate—George treated it like a big surprise. He was having to cover the place from twelve to four, until he could get somebody in here." Headlights glare out front. Carol looks out, but the car just turns around. "You didn't know George?"

Rhea shrugs. "Not really, I—"

Another set of headlights. Carol straightens up and squints. "That's my ride, honey." She waves to the car. "Here." She shoves a bag at Rhea. "Help me out. Take these with you."

Rhea holds Carol's purse while she fumbles with the loaded key ring. "Thing is, I get this call from George's brother couple of hours ago, telling me that George had been shot—"

"Oh my God."

"Well"—Carol slides the key in the lock—"turns out he shot himself."

"Jesus."

"Crazy bastard thought I'd work straight through, just to keep the place open." She pockets the keys. "George blows his brains out, and this guy's big concern is me locking up for four hours?" She pulls at the door handle. "Crazy bastard. I got a life. I got a kid."

Carol takes her purse, gets in the car and gives the bearded man behind the wheel a quick kiss on the cheek. "Hey," Carol calls after Rhea. "Watch the TV. Ten-to-one old George makes the news."

I'll kill you

Rhea sits cross-legged on the bed. Dan reclines beside her. He reaches into the white paper bag sitting between them, pulls out a doughnut and breaks off a piece. "So you didn't have to work?"

She shrugs. "I was mad at you."

He chews and swallows. "For sending you flowers."

"For sending me flowers to the office. It was awful. I had to grab the card, jam it in my pocket, listen to all those bitches go on about my 'secret admirer.'" She pokes him in the chest. "What were you trying to pull?"

"I don't know," he says. "You told me how that Sheila jumped around the other day when she got flowers, and I was just thinking how it wasn't fair—"

She pushes up and climbs over him. Her knee goes down on the plate.

"Watch out." Dan takes it and lays it on the nightstand.

Rhea leans over him. Her hair drapes his face. "The point of that story," she says, "is that Sheila is an idiot." She straightens up, settles down on his abdomen and reaches over for the plate. "What were you doing with this?"

"Just looking."

"It was my grandmother's," she says. "Some saint."

"It's Beatrice Cenci."

"All I know is it's not worth a damn thing." She lays it on his chest. "Otherwise, it would be in my Aunt Sophie's house."

"Beatrice Cenci was publicly executed in Rome in 1599." He pushes up against the headboard. "Decapitation, I believe."

"So she *was* a saint?"

"She had her father murdered." He flips the plate up and stares into the eyes again. "There was talk of incest"—he looks at Rhea—"but that seemed to be an eleventh hour legal maneuver."

Rhea takes the plate and studies the portrait. "She's just a little girl."

"Twenty-two," Dan says. "Turned out she was pregnant by one of the guards who killed her father."

"I wonder if Gramma knew all that?"

"But then of course it's not Beatrice Cenci, only the portrait of some unknown girl by some unknown artist"—he takes the plate from her and returns it to the nightstand—"incidentally illuminated by some parasitic mythology."

Rhea comes down hard on his abdomen. "Dan"—leans forward, grabs his wrists, pins his arms down—"you do something stupid like tell your wife about us, and I swear to God, I'll kill you."

He straightens his arms, she collapses on his chest, he kisses her cheek. "I have to go," he whispers.

Evelyn Winder's knotty brown fingers peel Rhea from the bed, pull her through the window, press her elongated form onto the brick wall outside. To her feet, Evelyn attaches the strappy blue shoes with five inch heels, the ones Rhea bought over a year ago, on sale, the ones waiting in the original box, for the right time. To her hand, one of the pink-veined lilies. Headlights rush over the hill, blind her, illuminate her.

And again.

Rhythm of the House

Cassie opens her eyes. A line of light cuts through the dark hallway. When her father's drunk, she sees his voice more than hears it. It's three-dimensional, rigid, a sort of transparent Styrofoam that hangs over her bed, that looks the way her foot feels when it's asleep.

The low beating pulse of her mother's voice pulls Cassie out of bed. Her father's words slip and fall away from the edges. She tugs on a pair of shorts and roots around under the bed for her sneakers. Slithers out one door, through another. Settles onto the cool tiles in the bathroom and leans into the rhythm of the house.

If it rises, her mother will call a cab to take them away. The same driver always comes. He turns around to them in the backseat, and Cassie sees that hole in his throat. He sticks a tube all the way into it and grinds out words, like a robot. Cancer, her mother tells her. Cassie doesn't care what his excuse is. She'd rather sleep on the porch.

And, after all, tonight could merely dissolve and fade away. Her father bump, bump, bumping down the hallway into darkness. Her mother sliding in beside her under the Pocahontas sheets. Cassie rolling into the smoothness of her mother's nylon slip, sleeping long enough to wake into the smell of simmering potato soup, mingled with that thick pine scent from the toilet.

Side Street

Thanks for the ride, she says.

You squeeze the steering wheel. Watch the middle knuckle push up so high and hard that you think it might break right through the skin. Sure, you say.

And she starts up again about how if you'll just stick with the guys, how something big is going to happen, about how they're all great, but with your voice, well, it's just so bluesy and raw—

You laugh.

Jesus, she says. Even when you laugh. She shifts to face you. That green skirt hikes a little higher up her thigh.

You release your grip and nuzzle against the car door. Stretch one arm over the back of the seat, rest the other on the steering wheel. You've never seen her wear a skirt before.

She rakes her long fingers through a short, short halo of auburn hair. It'll kill Eric if you bail, she says.

Up until this very minute, you would have said that the longer a girl's hair, the better, but now you're not so sure. You don't know what to make of this girl. You sing? you asked her that first night.

Hell, she said. I'm no musician.

She sits off in the corner and reads Eric's *Playboy*s while the guys practice. If the phone rings, she answers it. You notice the way she laughs and talks to Eric's mother before handing the phone over.

What's her story? you asked Johansen.

That's Patricia, man, Johansen said, as if that's an answer. Like he'd say that's my mother or that's a Stratocaster.

The street light streams down across her face. Her plump lips shine like they're wet. You shift your own face into shadow and ask, So will it kill you, if it kills Eric?

Before you even gave a damn, that first night, you asked Eric straight out, Patricia your girlfriend? New people, new space. You needed to map the scene, create a key.

Know what I see—Eric answered your question with a question, which was typical—when you say Patricia?

Legs? You poked at your chest. Up to here?

The overhead light in my bedroom, Eric said. He rubbed at his spiky blond hair. He's so thin, you think he might break in two. I lay on my bed every night and talk to her on the telephone, he told you, and stare up into the brutal glare until I can hear, by a slight little drop in her voice, how truly tiresome I am. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, pointed it at you.

You declined and asked again, She your girlfriend or what?

Eric lit up. Patricia's the proxy, he said, for my own personal inquisition. Eric inhaled. Looked at you. Exhaled. You know, he said, she gives good phone.

Well, yeah, Patricia says. Eric's a pain in the ass when things don't go his way.

You haven't known Eric long. You were hanging in Chelsea, the head shop down on Clayton, when Eric came in and picked up one of the bamboo bongs Danny sells for you on consignment. Man, Eric said, this isn't drug apparatus. This is fucking art.

Danny nodded in your direction. There's your artist, Danny said. Damn good vocalist, too. Somehow Danny always knows what people are really shopping for. Danny's a master at hooking people up.

What it'll kill, Patricia says, is the band.

You laugh. Sweetheart, we're just a bunch of guys who meet in a basement on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You look past her, through the window, at the house she's pointed out to you. The white one, she said, with the green shutters. An actual band would be nice, you say. With your welding job, the bong money and a band, you could do it. You could move into your own place. Your eyes follow the little army of marigolds to the end of the porch.

Still, she says. Touches your hand.

That one, she'd said, but you'd driven right past the driveway, turned onto the dark side street and parked. Didn't mean anything by it. Habit.

The porch light shimmers out past the flowers and the shrubberies, out onto the grass. That's where you always pictured them, the fidgety men who slowed beside the curb, who beckoned you out of the alley, into their cars—back at their houses, on green grass lawns, mowing and trimming and raking up. Sometimes they made you sneeze.

You straighten up. I got to go, you tell her.

I'm not just saying it, she says. You guys are really good. She opens the door. I'm not just a stupid girl. Sweetheart, she hisses out into the night.

You laugh.

She laughs. Looks back over her shoulder. Bye, she says. You see her eyes are brown. Like your mother's.

Your intention is to walk her to the door—especially since you've parked way over here—but she jumps right out and makes it suddenly seem a stupid idea. You settle back and watch her move into the light. She unlocks the door, turns to look at you, and you get a flash of how that first night, when Johansen walked in the door, you'd watched her pull her lips into a slow, soft *O* and throw him a kiss. To you, she holds up her hand and wiggles her fingers. You nod. You've learned that people are careful only when they care. The door closes. The porch goes dark. The green grass, all the little flowers, disappear. You drive away.

You've been shuffled through a couple of real houses over the years, but mostly you've lived in units, like this number 32, overlooking parking lots. Money to be made down there, but the drug thing always struck you as way too complicated. Some people might see the other, the chicken game, as worse, but at least with that you didn't get too tangled up with anyone. At least not when you're a kid, small enough to slip in and out, fast enough to run away. Slam the car doors—or better yet, jump out onto the street through an open window—and leave it all behind. And when your mother finally decided to give up on Detroit and give your father another chance, you did leave it behind. You mapped out the situation just right, then did what you had to do. And then it was over. Like one of those dreams you make yourself wake out of.

You stretch out on the bed. Point the remote, click on the television, mute the sound. You like the shaky shimmer of the screen in the dark—most nights you sleep with it on—but you cannot tolerate the sound of the words coming out of their mouths.

She knocks on the wall outside your bedroom. Looks in the door. Packed? your mother asks. We roll at eight in the morning.

You fold your arms. Look up the ceiling. I told you, Ma, you say. I'm not going.

Just come help us get settled, she says. Then you can go off, do whatever—

I'm not going, you say. I'm graduating this year, Ma. I'm not running off and starting over in another school.

What you ought to do, she says, is stop screwing around, get your GED and get into college out there.

I shake my head. I'm in a band now.

Lord, honey! She laughs. Music? We're talking Texas here.

Right, you think. This time Houston is Oz. You roll over and stare at her face. You remember how up in Detroit you hold out that roll of twenties, and all she has to say is Thank you, Jesus. No questions. You were eleven years old, for Christ's sake.

So you plan on staying here with him? she asks.

The eyes, you see, aren't the same at all. Patricia's are a deep brown, still and straight ahead. Your mother's are paler, flecked with gold. They catch the light. Flit.

You think he's even your real father?

You laugh. She's dragged you down that road one time too many. She'll say anything, cut as deep as she has to, to keep things moving. You're not blind. If he's not

your father, then his separated-at-birth identical twin is. Best of luck, Ma, you say and close your eyes.

What about Connie? she asks. What kind of example will this be for her?

You open your eyes. Look your mother up and down. Wonder if you reached and touched her, would she even be there. Wonder if her words make any damn sense in the world she lives in. The example of getting on with my life, you say. Still, you do worry about your sister. She's fourteen. Doesn't listen to a damn word you say.

Eight o' clock, your mother says. She hovers a moment or two before leaving. You look at the television. This dork leans into a blonde. She sputters and wiggles around. You sit up. You imagine that Patricia on the screen, try to see where those fingers would go, how those wet lips would move if you unloaded the Detroit business on her. All you know is if Patricia flashed on the screen, you'd push up the volume.

Your mother's right about school. It means nothing. Whenever you get the opportunity, you cut for extra hours at the shop. You've been screwing around since Detroit, since you got held back. Four schools in three states in one year. You didn't know if you were coming or going. You drop out, get your GED, go full-time at the shop, maybe you can make it. And maybe Patricia is right. Maybe this is an actual band. Maybe it's time.

You stuff some clothes, a few books and some toiletries into the old green canvas bag. It won't be so easy to say no to her in the morning. The bag belonged to your old man before he passed it on to you. You wish you hadn't gone after him quite so hard, that you'd noticed how your mother was always slipping in that door right before he was

chasing her out of it, that you hadn't been so stupid for so long. Still, you couldn't let him hit her. He's a man. He ought to understand that.

You drive back to that white house with the green shutters, pull up on the side street. All the windows but one are dark. You try to picture Patricia stretched out in that light, talking to Eric on the telephone, but all you see is your damn little sister, talking trash, going on and on about how if she was to have a baby, she would settle down and love it, and it would love her, and she wouldn't be dragging it all over creation.

Hell, what can you say? You go on and on about what it means to be stupid, but Connie's your sister. Her own boss.

You turn the key in the ignition and slide off into the night. Out on Pine Cone Trail, where Eric's parents live, the houses get bigger and farther apart. You turn in beside their house, coast down the driveway with your lights off, park around back and tap at the basement door. Eric swings it open. He holds the phone to his ear and glances down at the green bag in your left hand. He's here, he says into the phone. He hangs up and steps aside.

Hey, you tell him. I might take you up on one of those cigarettes now.

Edge

Mr. Cordovan talked, from one bell to the next, sure and shimmering, with dancing fingers. He did not write with chalk.

Mr. Cordovan never returned our papers; we took them from his desk on our way out the door. "Nice work," he said to me. "You think like a man."

I smiled into third period.

"World too much for you?" He found me crouched in the supply room.

I claimed the close spaces. Closets and corners. "Not nearly enough," I said.

He smiled a new smile, smug and surprised at the same time, with the left side of his mouth up, the right side down. I gave him my hand. He gave me sanctuary. Everyone was at the pep rally, so the halls were empty. We did it on his desk. "You are a logical girl," Mr. Cordovan told me.

One night, when he let me out of his car at the bus stop two corners from my house, he said, "You're too beautiful to be so accommodating." He laughed.

In the summer, Mr. Cordovan died by hanging, leaving me, no matter how hard I tried, more skeptical than sad.

That August I went far north for college. I tunneled with Nicky, he moved back through me, and it may have been love. Winters were long enough for reinvention. Springs were explosive and distinct. He strayed. He panicked. He wrapped his arms around my legs. He cried. I promised. I looked down on his voluptuous curly hair and touched it, surprised, as always, by its softness.

I dropped down to him. "It's okay," I said. "I forgive you." Nicky's eyes, more than sorry—scared, I thought—pushed away jealousy and hurt and anger, but an uglier thought whispered in my ear. *I really have you now*.

And I did. And at the same time, I had a reason to leave when I was ready. If it was love, it was not enough.

Mr. Cordovan was a wonderful teacher. "How best to achieve power?" He folded his arms. "To seize it?" He paused a beat; the class looked around for a cue. "Or to have it given to you?" He raked his hair back off his forehead and sat down with a book. I don't remember what it was, but I do remember that it was a serious and important title.

We waited.

He would not look up for the next fifty minutes. He did say, "One thousand words. By tomorrow. Get started." This was inappropriate procedure for the high-school classroom, but Mr. Cordovan taught electives, not requirements, and we were all there because he impressed the hell out of us. He could get away with it.

"Seize it," I wrote, "but make them think they gave it to you." It was all drivel after that, but it was enough for Mr. Cordovan. "You think like a man," he said.

Now I see that, no, it was a woman's thought. A *this-but-on-the-other-hand-that* statement. It was the language, the bluntness, the directness, that confused him. It was the *yes, but* state of mind that allowed me to live. Mr. Cordovan died by hanging when he was twenty-seven years old. Too soon.

I remember his long fingers unzipping his pants. He watched them, then looked up at me, sitting, amazed and ready, on his teacher's desk. "On school grounds," he said. "You really have me now."

I considered Harriet my best friend in high school. I told her about how I wet the bed when I was nine years old on a sleepover, and how I elaborately corrected my mistake. I admitted my knees were too fat and my toes too long and that I liked her hair better than mine. I did not admit to Mr. Cordovan, because I didn't understand what I was doing well enough to phrase it, because I was embarrassed by the secret sounds I made and odd instructions I followed.

I was only delaying my confession. I wanted Harriet for my best friend. But then Mr. Cordovan died by hanging, and I was trapped, on the other side.

When I was thirteen I had been hit by some vague adolescent guilt, some nagging seasonal depression. "A fine idea," my father said, the first Christmas Eve he drove me to the Searchlight Mission to serve meals. The next year he was less certain. "I suppose you feel," he asked, "a commitment?" The third year I went on Thanksgiving Day as well; that annoyed him. A week before Christmas a man died in a knife fight at the mission, and my father didn't want me to go at all. "You need to get this out of your system," he said. Still, he and his friends raised their glasses to me. "My daughter," he announced, "the angel of mercy."

Harriet went with me once. "They smell. They don't smile," she said. "How do you do it?"

"It's a habit," I said.

"It's a high, isn't it?" Mr. Cordovan said, when I told him. "The spit of the depraved, right in your face."

Mr. Cordovan knew.

Harriet said if she were patient, like me, she'd still be with Jeff. I studied Harriet and Jeff. The screaming on the phone. The slamming of car doors. Perhaps, I thought, noise meant love, but in the end it was as ugly as it sounded.

I couldn't tell Harriet about on the desk, in the car, crushed against the wall, in the last stall of the boys' toilet on the second floor, because she would have expected me to save Mr. Cordovan.

Good. Logical. Patient and serene. "You're an angel," Nicky said, pushing my head down. "A wonderful girl," my father's friends murmured, lifting their eggnog to me. Words, shimmering and sure, over and over, rose up and around me.

"Your hair shines," Nicky said, "like a halo."

"Your skin," Harriet said, "is so clear and white, I bet it would glow in the dark."

The third year I was in college I went home for Christmas and stayed too late in Harriet's basement apartment, drinking wine and dreaming, to drive home. I slept with my feet on her coffee-table box, back pressed into the sofa end, arms open, in the conversation posture, all night. The next morning I drank tea while Harriet heated her mother's Christmas dinner leftovers on the stove. "I woke up early," she said. "I was still tired, you know, but awake." Harriet had slumped all night in the corduroy armchair. "And I watched you." She looked down and pressed her finger into a piece of quiche. Warm enough, she decided, and pushed it over to me. She sat down. "And for just this

moment, I felt—“ She raked back her hair; I saw Mr. Cordovan. “I was in love with you.”

I chewed. I wondered exactly what mix of cheese her mother had used.

“It passed, you understand. I just thought I should tell you. It was so distinctly weird.”

I looked around the little apartment with my cheeks still full, consciously, to lighten the moment. “You need better lighting in this place,” I said. And I patted her hand across the table. Once, and quickly, but I did it.

Harriet told others I was her all-time favorite person because I was so serene, because I transcended her raving. Or, I asked, am I only so distant? So alien? So of another place?

“Don’t you think,” Harriet would ask people, “that her skin glows in the dark?”

Ten years after the spring of Mr. Cordovan I ride from the city on a Friday afternoon, swaddled in a big scarf, pushed far into the corner of Ben’s convertible.

I know Ben from work. Perhaps it’s too soon to be here, but he has set me up and arranged me. He has passed my desk and played me well with words and smiles, and wicked dark charm. Perhaps I’ve grown impatient and taken my place too soon, but still, it is my place.

Long fingers of one hand move up and down, with the radio music, on the steering wheel. Another hand lingers in my hair, on my shoulder. Slithers down. “Angel hair,” he says.

The knife is small. I have used it twice to clean plastic from the necks of wine bottles. I stick his lavender shirt and resistant flesh—low, right above the waist. He

strikes instinctively, as if at an insect. Red plastic dangles in the cotton. There's not much blood.

"Jesus Christ!" Ben's certainty surprises me. He slows to the curb, reaches over to open the door, and pushes me out.

Sidewalk strangers rush me. I look up to send the spit of the depraved right into their faces, but they tilt their heads. Offer their hands. They know—they can see—what has happened. Ben is out of his car. Reduced to confusion.

Mr. Cordovan pulled the buttons on my white shirt, one by one, back through their holes. "Over the edge," he said, moving the long fingers up, then down the two sides of my face, his skewed smile shimmering. "But not nearly enough."

The Very End

I run into Chris, the girl who works in the music store, that afternoon in Woolworth's. "Look what I bought off Spider." She smoothes back a thicket of black hair. Sun medallions drop from her ears. "He's a freaking artist." She dips her head. "Look," she says "I had him sign them on the back."

A single black line flows from the initial *S* to the final *r*, which curves up and out, like a little whip of a tongue. *Spider*. The memory of his ink soaked brush slithers like a phantom across my abdomen. *Spider*. "I inscribe things," he tells me. "Sometimes it takes."

Chris looks past me, into the mirror that hangs behind the lunch counter. "You think they're too big?" She taps one of the disks. "He brought in a smaller pair, but—"

"They look good," I tell her.

She cuts her eyes at me. "Yeah."

I know she doesn't care what I think. Just because she works in the music store, selling them their picks and strings and reeds, Chris believes that makes her one of them, better them me. Last week I walk in to meet Spider, she's hunched over the counter talking to Tony, who plays with *ScorpioZ*.

"Customer," Tony says.

Chris glances at me, shakes her head. "Girlfriend," she says. Doesn't even speak to me until Spider strolls through the door.

Not that I care. And I don't care that night out at Broadway Lake, when Spider rummages around in his backpack, pulls out a dangly pair of copper earrings, and holds them up my ears. "I knew it," he whispers. "They're perfect with your red hair."

I don't care that those earrings are Carol's rejects, that Spider only just that moment decides they are perfect. I do care that whenever I talk about Spider, I can never make people understand, that my appreciation is always translated as indictment.

People always reduce the equation of us to his wild, curly hair, his supernatural blue eyes, the wiry readiness of his frame, his long, beautiful fingers.

My manager at work, he sees us out eating at Parker House, and the next day he says, "I saw that boyfriend of yours," and it's not an observation, it's a come-on.

I slide the star studs out of my ears, wiggle in the wires of the new ones.

Sure, there's all that, but I love the way Spider can think of a thing and act on it, all in the same moment. Spider pounds metal into jewelry, cuts and carves bamboo into bongs, sings in a band. Deals are always going down. We take the money Carol had paid him for the earrings and drop it all at the Dragon Den, on hot and sour soup and basil rolls and Hunan beef and crispy duck and fried bananas.

Sure, there's no future in Spider, but he always covers the moment.

Spider follows me upstairs and sits on my bed. He stares at the Navajo loom that dominates the room. "Damn," he says. He begins to calculate how with his bongs and jewelry, with my rugs and baggy, Greek-style purses, we could really make a go of it. He could quit the welding job, go full-time with the band.

He moves his hands up and down the sides of the loom, presses the tense warp. "Did you have to order this or what?"

"I built it," I tell him.

"Oh sweet Jesus," he says.

"No big deal," I tell him. "Just some 3x6's, some plumber's pipe."

"Baby," he says. "We are set. We are a fucking team."

I am ten when my mother dies; nine when she gets sick. I stay by her bed, even toward the end when she is too tired to talk, even at the very end when her words shoot out strange and mean. I stay by her bed, head down, weaving rag loops over and under and over on a wood and nail loom. Three red, three white, one red. Again. Three green, three red, three white, one green. The yellows or blacks, I always assume, are bad luck.

Spider thinks we are the same, but his hands connect him to the world, mine spin cocoons. A small belt loom hangs on my wall. He strokes the loose strands of yarn at the bottom. "Self-portrait?" he asks.

I step back and look. At the top, I have pulled the wool so tight that it curves into two tense billows. I see them as sails. "It's nothing," I say. "Just a thing to hang on the wall." Sails, wind-filled and kinetic.

"Finish it up," he says.

"This is pretty much it," I say. "I just want to add some beads."

Spider comes back the next afternoon and takes the hanging over to the head shop on Clayton Street, where Danny sells his bongs on consignment. "Danny loved the whole female thing," he tells me.

"What?"

"The breasts," Spider says. "The whole round thing."

Two days later I stand on the sidewalk, stare through the shop window, catch Danny's gaze. Behind him, on the wall, I see my billows be earth-bound bulges, see the mass of beads separate into two long, loose strands. Danny winks. Tilts his head to beckon me inside. I see myself, spread-legged, naked, on display. I turn and run across the street.

I'd seen them as sails.

Everyone gives me a dozen good reasons for leaving Spider. Hell, I can give them twenty. At the very end, though, I bolt, not because of any of the thousands of things he did wrong, but because he scares me to death when he is so right.

Lucky Day

I dream often about babies. I cuddle the butter soft bundles, but they detach and accuse me with the dead, different eyes of Doris Cane.

Seventeen years ago I ran from the playground after recess, and Doris Cane clipped me from the side. One of the oblong, wooden buttons on my coat sleeve caught in her drooping blue sweater. "Oh." I stopped to untangle us. "I'm sorry."

She stared at me out of that sallow face and said in a flat voice, "You're always sorry."

Tears sprang to my eyes. Same as when that little fat girl from the first grade fell all the way from the top of the monkey bars to the hard dirt below. Same as when that crazy Sunday school teacher, Miss Koone, kept poking at the palm of her hand with her red fingernail. "Feel that pain," she said. "Feel that pain of being nailed to a cross. Hanging there until the last bit of life drains from your body."

I remember how Tony Strickland poked me hard in the back. "Hey, crybaby," he whispered. "Relax. He's coming back in a couple of days. Good as new."

I remember how Doris whacked my hand and jerked away and snapped the thread that connected us. Our teacher called out, and I broke into an automatic, obedient gallop. I remember how Doris took her own sweet time dragging up to the end of the line. *You're always sorry*. Those words still crack up against my skull. She was right. I was always sorry. It never made any difference.

And then when I was fourteen, sitting in the library during study hall, huddled with Becky Compton, whispering. Doris Cane sat smack in the middle of the room, doing absolutely nothing in the most deliberate way I'd ever seen. I watched the boys watch Doris. Her face still flat and mean, but her breasts early and big.

"Doris Cane," the principal said, too loud for the library. She nodded toward the corner conference room. The boys' giggles trailed after Doris, and Becky let out a little whoop, but I could see this wasn't regular trouble. We watched through the wide-open glass windows of the conference room. We watched Miss Hoover—we could not believe it—go down on her knees. Watched her lips move. She put her hands on Doris' shoulders. Doris Cane turned blank eyes to all our unaverted faces, pointed those breasts like gun barrels and flipped us a bird.

Turned out Doris Cane's mother and father had been killed in a car wreck. Both of them. At the same time. I couldn't stop myself. I saw her leaving the building with some lady before fifth period, and I ran after her. "I'm so sorry," I said.

"What for?" she said. "This is my lucky day."

I don't remember seeing Doris Cane in school after that. She faded from the surface, but stared at me out of dreams with eyes that saw something different than everyone else. The truth.

Last night was different. The baby cuddled close and made happy sounds, but then morning snatched it away. Blood gurgles out between my legs and stains the bright, white brand new cotton panties. I step out of them and run cold water through the stain. Watch the water fade the red to pink and circle down into the drain.

I twist the showerhead to the hardest pulse and let it beat me for a long, long time. The vision of my mother, stark and wrong in the long light of another bathroom, sears my clenched eyelids. Red, like ribbons, down her legs, collected in a puddle under the toilet. Her face an empty white. She wailed past me, knowing no name but my father's.

Finally he woke up and put me back to bed. I heard Mrs. Kent from next door in the living room. Heard my parents pull out of the garage and drive off into the night. Morning came, same as always, but they had promised me a sister.

On my sixteenth birthday, the temperature rose to seventy-four degrees, and I wore a tank top to school. Three days later, though, on the first day of spring break, it snowed. Some winters we don't get any snow down here—two inches will shut this city down—but there it was snowing, from the morning into the night, on March twenty-third. My mother said snow had come that late in the season before, but I didn't believe her. That night I slipped out the side door and paced through the flurries. Wind sliced through my sweater and promised the end of the world. I prayed for forgiveness.

That same night Doris Cane climbed out of her aunt's back bedroom window. The next morning they found her, dusted in white, clutching an infant, at the end of a long trail of blood. The baby—it was a girl—was dead. Doris lived long enough to make her final statement: "It's not mine."

I cut the small article out of the second page of the newspaper—the weather took up the whole front page. Closed my eyes to see hers, set hard and mean against me. *It's not mine*. I believed her.

The water finally goes cold. I shut off the shower, wrap myself in a towel and lay on the bed. Punch the number into the phone. My mother answers on the fourth ring.

"Are you busy?" I can hear the agenda in her hello. She needs to be somewhere else. The bank? The salon? A lunch?

"What's wrong with you?" my mother asks. "You sound a little ragged."

"Just my period." What did they do with my sister, I want to know. Shouldn't there be a grave, some sort of marker, something more than a puddle on a bathroom floor? She never told me anything. *When you're older*, she promised, but by then too much time had passed.

"Get back in bed," my mother says. "With some warm compresses."

"People don't do that anymore."

"Well, then." By then my mother was divorced, preferred not to look back.

"Blood," I tell her, "betrays me."

She laughs. "Join the club."

I nestle the phone between the pillow and my ear. Poke at the palm of my left hand with my finger. Agree to dinner tomorrow night at Wang's. Stare at the white wall with dry eyes.

Weather is Large

Delores scrapes her chair away from the table. Smacks down a piece of toast. She makes the most God awful noises. I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. "Coffee's on the counter," I tell her.

She screws up her nose. "Got any juice?" Pulls her leg, straight and long, up past her face, holding her heel in her hand. "I need juice." Bends it at the knee. Watches it flow back up. Delores is always twisting and contorting. Always dressed for it.

"Well"—I flip through a couple of pages of ads in the newspaper—"I got coffee. Take it or leave it."

She brings down the leg and leans forward in that long, loose Delores way. "I was awake all night thinking about you."

"Uh huh."

"I swear, Ronnie, she's just not pretty enough for you."

I look up. "Delores." I set down my cup. Point my finger. "Don't ever say that again."

"What makes you think you have to settle?"

"Delores."

She hunches and tightens. "Okay." Pulls up out of the chair. Stretches her arms up over her head. "I need to use your phone."

I nod. She doesn't mean anything. Delores just can't understand someone like Sylvia, someone who works so hard to put her life together. Delores wakes up whenever.

Wherever. Shakes out those curls. Wiggles that ass. Juts those tits. Good to go. And I guess that'll work as long as it works. And, hell, she's my sister. Hope it works a long, long time.

Sylvia knows things. How to write a letter to the insurance company. Set up a resume. Line up flowered wallpaper. Match furniture with the right lamps and rugs and whatnot. Those little things add up. Same with her looks. She's small, short and thin—what my mom calls petite—but she pays attention to every little part of her. Takes exercise classes. Gets her hair done what seems like every week. Keeps her fingernails squared off and buffed. A couple of weeks ago she had some kind of acid treatment on her skin. She said I couldn't see her for four days, and I didn't argue. I don't even like to think about something like that, and I'll be damned if I ever let Delores get wind of it.

"I could take her apart, one, two, three, just like that," Delores said after the first time she met Sylvia. "And it would scare the hell out of you." I let that pass. Delores was drunk. "Lego girl," she called her. I couldn't help laughing. Delores is a card, but I really do have to stop encouraging her, at least when it comes to Sylvia. That girl's known a lot of sadness in her life. Father's dead. Mother's a drunk. Brother's nothing but a bum. She has to be tough.

I've tried to keep them separated after that. "I don't think your sister likes me," Sylvia said as soon as Delores drove off.

"Sure she does."

"She thinks I'm not good enough for you."

"Yeah." I laughed. I figured she was leading me into something. Like I'm good for nothing. Something like that.

"I think she wants to marry you herself."

I laughed. I got to tell you, it turned me on, a sweet little thing like Sylvia saying something so twisted. Of course, she's not the first one to suggest it. All that bouncing on my lap. Kissing. Pulling my hair back into a ponytail. Delores only does that for effect. What people don't understand is, she doesn't even touch me—barely looks at me—when we're alone. Just stretches and studies her ownself.

Time to time, it's bothered me. First dude who said, "You sleeping with your brother or what?" I punched flat on his back on my mother's living room floor. Delores' tinkly, silver laugh made both of us, me and the dude, stupid. I figure it's just a little test for the guys. Are they hip enough to ask her point blank? Can they take a fucking joke? Are they up for a challenge?

Even though I treat Sylvia like she's crazy for saying it, I know that if she's as smart as she tries to be, she'll take a good look at Delores, a good look at me, and run like hell. Blood is blood.

A few weeks ago I was over at Frank's Grill, shooting pool with Marvin Tillis and some guys, when Marvin says, "Ever notice how Ronnie here doesn't get drunk?" He waved his cue around and knocked of couple out of the rack on the wall. "Rest of you losers, knock back a six pack, and you're fucking morons." Another sweep of the room. We ducked. He banged his cue into the light fixture and set it swinging.

"Jesus." Frank rushed out from behind the bar, reached up and settled the lamp. "You fucking moron."

"Hell, yeah." Marvin pointed at me. "But Ronnie here, he just gets"—he opened up his arms, waved the cue around like he was conducting an orchestra—"large."

Now Delores, she's large. Never has a bad day. She has days when her life is over and done for and ruined, but never just a bad day. That's why she goes through all those guys. She just beats the life out of them with her drama. And even if they do recover, it's too late. She's moved on. She's over it.

I remember one time when I was ten or so, I found a nest of baby mice in the woods and slipped one onto Delores' shoulder. She threw it hard, right smack up against a tree, then broke into this God awful wail. "It was a baby!" I remember all the blood draining out of me. Dogs barking. Pulling her up off her knees and dragging her back to the house.

I went up to her room after supper. "Let's go bury it," I said.

Delores screwed up her nose. "Yuck." She shook her head. "No." I love my sister, but this is the truth: if any man ever ends up settling down and putting up with her for the duration, I don't see how I could have much respect for him.

But then Delores is just a drama queen. What's truly large in this world is weather. I keep the radio in my truck set to the weather band, which seems to bug Sylvia. She always asks, "Why do you listen to this?" and punches in her classic rock. "Don't you ever listen to music?"

"All the time." I don't mind. She can change it. Whatever makes her happy.

But she just won't ever let go. "Half the time they're talking about weather up in . . . in Minnesota or some such place." She rolls down her window. "Sunny and warm, Ronnie. I can tell you that."

"It's all connected, Sylvia. What's up in Minnesota, India and right here in Columbia." I smile, just thinking about old Marvin swinging that cue around. "Weather," I tell Sylvia, "is large." Connected to every damn thing.

Sylvia shakes her head. The girl's always got an answer. Her uncle told her about some hail-proof roofing. Sandbags. Storm windows and whatnot. Be prepared. That's her motto. When I was a kid my mom put me in the Boy Scouts. I listened to their sermon for as long as I could before cutting out. About a ninety seconds, I think it was. But when Sylvia gets going all sensible, I just settle into the low, golden tone of her voice and try not to get so caught up in the words.

Delores notices it, how easy I get when Sylvia talks. "Jesus," she says, "I want to slap that stupid thumb-sucking look off your face."

Some things I do mind. Like when Sylvia and me are sitting around, Sunday afternoons, watching Mom's big screen TV, the way Sylvia starts picking me over like a damn cat. Lays down my collar. Wipes at my face. Looks at my ears. Jesus. I can't help but jerk away.

And then there's the way Mom goes on to Aunt Evelyn about how "she's the best thing that ever happened to him" and how "she's really settled him down." Aunt Evelyn always takes it up a notch. "She's saved his life, is what she's done." Jesus. But then I can't rightly hold it against Sylvia if it's not actually coming out of her mouth.

I guess I know Sylvia doesn't like boats. I guess I've picked up on that one. But swear to God, when Marvin asks us out on his boat, I say yes as much for Sylvia's sake as for my own. She goes to that health spa three or four times a week and swims in the

pool. Says she feels sick if she doesn't finish off her workout with twenty laps. So that's what goes through my head when Marvin says, "I'm taking the boat out tomorrow. You and that girl come on out." That Sylvia likes swimming.

"Oh, Ronnie, do we have to?" Sylvia goes white when I tell her.

"You don't have to ski." We're cuddled up in my bed when I tell her we've got an early day tomorrow. "We'll just cruise around, pull up in a cove and swim." I smooth my knuckles up and down her spine. "You love to swim."

"Not in the lake."

"Water's water, baby."

She shakes her head. "You can't see the bottom of the lake."

I laugh. "Water's water." I figure one way or the other, most of us will die in the water, but I reckon now's not the time to get into that.

Sylvia stiffens into her pouty posture and hangs onto it until after I fall off to sleep. Next morning, though, she's okay. All my life I've heard you've got to get things straight with a woman before you fall asleep, but, hell, maybe there's nothing to it. I drive her over to her place, and she runs inside, digs out her black and white checked bathing suit.

Now this bathing suit dead kills me. Not one of those shiny up-the-ass things Delores wears. More a Beach Blanket Bingo Annette Funicello affair. Sylvia drops onto her knees and roots around in the cabinet under her bathroom sink for some sunscreen.

"Forget about it," I say.

Sylvia looks up at me. Mouth open. You'd think I'd offered up a tab of acid or something. "The sun," she says, "will kill you."

"Marvin probably has something in the boat."

Sylvia looks up at me with narrowed eyes. "Yeah," she says. "Right." She doesn't care for Marvin. He falls right in the middle of that "bad influence, company I keep" category. Not that I've ever heard those exact words come out of her mouth, but I see how she listens and nods when my mom carries on. She finds the bottle of lotion, sets it on the counter and stands up. "You need a towel?"

I shrug.

She puts an extra one in her bag. "Should I make sandwiches?"

"Sandwiches?"

"For lunch."

"We usually just pull in at Docksider's."

She shakes her head. "I don't want to be dripping into any restaurant, and—"

"Make the sandwiches," I say. "I don't care."

"Who all will be there?"

"Screw 'em."

I watch her tear off little sandwich bits of lettuce, pour up the remainder of a bag of chips into a Ziploc bag. She grabs a few diet sodas and a big bag of chocolate chip cookies. Lunch. Hell, I never even thought about thinking about lunch in my life. I get hungry. I eat. End of story. I put my hands on her shoulders.

She turns and smiles at me. "We better go." She rubs my ass. Pats it. She thinks I want to pull her down on the floor. Hell, no. It just then hits me that I'm going to marry this girl. If I didn't know that Marvin would leave us, I would have blurted it out right then and there.

Marvin wants to ski, but I'm just fine. Boat's idle, except for the wave rocking. Sun's beating down, but Sylvia's got me slathered. Eating lunch. Those ham sandwiches, they're damn good. I picture myself driving home from the plant everyday at lunchtime and finding one of these laid out on the table. Chips. Pickles. Good to go.

Alicia, who's with Marvin today, eats our chocolate chip cookies and drinks beer. Blond, flat-chested, baby-faced, she rocks back and forth and blinks. Something other than beer's going on with Alicia.

Sylvia's positioned herself between me and the cooler, which I figure is deliberate. "Pass me over one of those beers, sweetie," I say.

"Don't overdo it." Sylvia leans over and whispers. "Not if you'll be driving."

Marvin nods. "Ed got stopped in his boat. Last Saturday."

"They take him in?"

"Hell, yeah."

"But—" Alicia jerks to life. "That don't do anything to your car license."

We all look at her.

Alicia holds up two shaky fingers. "Two more points . . . two more points, and I lose mine." She giggles. "Again."

Marvin picks up half of my sandwich. I nod approval. "This is good." He looks at Alicia. "How come you didn't bring anything like this?"

Alicia's eyes widen. "Was I supposed to?" Her rocking stops short. "I could." She blinks. "I could bring something."

"Just hand me one of those sodas then," I say to Sylvia. She beams. Over her shoulder I catch sight of this big, hairy dude staggering out of the redwood house overlooking the cove. He slides onto his Jet Ski and revs it like a maniac, spewing fumes. Those rich guys think they own the lake.

"Start her up," I say.

"What?" Marvin's got the last bit of my sandwich in one hand and a beer in the other. He looks up, sets down his beer and slides in behind the wheel. Chokes the damn thing.

The dude arches back on his machine, opens up like a mouth, like the mouth of something large and wild out of the jungle, roaring right at us.

Alicia rocks. Sylvia jumps up, loses her balance and falls back into the water. I can't comprehend the words, not even the ones coming out of my mouth. We're hit.

First thing I see—I don't think I'm looking, I think it just happens—is Sylvia, treading water. Marvin and me, we hang onto the boat.

"Shit," Marvin says.

The downed Jet Ski floats on its side.

No Alicia. No dude. I drop under the boat. Nothing. Come up on the other side, face-to-face with Sylvia, stripped-down and terrified.

A boat rushes into the cove, and I instinctively brace for another hit. It slows and chugs up to us. A guy jumps in the water and grabs Sylvia from behind. She fights him. "Ma'am." He struggles. Sputters. Pushes back.

"Sylvia," I say.

She looks at me. The guy wraps his arm under her tits. Pulls her to the boat. She's limp and translucent, like that little naked mouse.

They have to pry Marvin off the boat. He doesn't want to leave it. "The divers'll secure it," the young guy says.

The older guy, the one with the red hair, nods at the Jet Ski. "That fellow with you?"

I shake my head and point to the house. "Came from over there."

He nods. Indicates the life vests. I slip one on. The young guy glances at me, then helps Sylvia. We roar back to the shore. A car's waiting.

These guys couldn't be any nicer. Pull up chairs. Serve up coffee and little sugar cookies. Sylvia's taken up Alicia's rocking. Marvin doesn't seem able to talk, so it's up to me to try and explain what happened.

"We know him," the young guy says. "James Eddy." He puts his hand on Sylvia's shoulder. "Would you like to call someone, ma'am."

Sylvia shakes her head. The kid—I think he told me to call him Sam—glances at me again. Like he expects me to do something. It hits me that if I weren't already here, Sylvia would be calling me. There really isn't anybody else. "I'll get her home," I tell him. "My truck's over at Dudley Landing."

"We'll take you over."

"No." I stand up. "Let me call my sister."

They nod. Sam motions me over to a desk. "The other girl . . ." He cuts his eyes at Marvin. "Should I . . .?"

I shake my head. "Let me talk to him." I get Delores' machine. "Pick up," I say. "It's me."

I could kill Delores for bringing Mom. She's shaking and crying. Kissing me. Hugging Sylvia. Even brings herself to pat Marvin on the shoulder. Marvin says he'll just wait for them to bring his boat back, thank you very much. Sam looks at me.

"Marvin." I pull him over. "Alicia's dead."

"Shit," he says.

Sam puts his hand on Marvin's shoulder and leads him out the door.

Mom doesn't want to listen to me. She has to hear the whole thing from the lake patrol. "I've heard," she tells them, "that Eddy boy was wild."

I look at Delores. "Get me out of here."

Delores hugs Sylvia. Smoothes down her hair. I look away and get a flash of holding that mouse by the end of its little pink tail, looking the other way, dropping it into the hole I'd dug, kicking the dirt in over it with my foot.

"Mom," Delores says. "Why don't you just drop us off at the truck, then take Sylvia on home?"

Mom takes Sylvia's arm and leads her to the car. Delores opens the front door and helps Sylvia in, then pulls me into the back with her. An odd arrangement only because it doesn't feel at all odd. When Mom pulls up beside my truck, Delores jumps out with me. "I'll make sure he gets home in one piece, Ma."

I don't look at Sylvia. Don't even say good-bye.

Delores drives. I tune in the radio. That line of thundershowers has moved on to the east, off the coast. They've named the tropical storm Connie.

"That a boy Connie," Delores asks, "or a girl Connie?"

I shrug. "You know Alicia's folks?"

"Sort of." She looks in the rearview and rubs at her lip. "Her mother works in the drugstore."

"They didn't even give us breathalyzers."

"Well, lay low until it blows over."

"No," I tell her, "I would've have passed it."

"Then you should have demanded it. Give us something to talk about." She laughs. "Hey, Ma, remember that time I wasn't drunk."

I reach over and turn off the radio. Lean my head against the window.

"Doesn't matter anyway." Delores turns the radio back on and tunes in some ZZ Topp. "That James Eddy was a psycho. I heard he almost hit Tom Case the other night, zipping around without any lights."

I lean back and close my eyes.

"The guy has plenty of money, though. Or at least he did. He's going through this really ugly divorce—"

I hold up my hand. "I don't give a damn about James Eddy," I say. "Not right now." Delores can just walk away. That little mouse. One minute it was the most horrible thing she's ever seen, next minute she's on the phone laughing about it. Me, I work it over in my mind for days, trying to make it Delores' fault.

Exit 19-A

I had tried the mall first. It was brand new, obvious and easy. J.C. Penney hired me—and every other girl in town who could write her name. They allotted me five or six minimum-wage hours a week and mandated that I wear church clothes—hose and pumps. They bounced me between sheets and shoes, from percale to patent leather and back. They bounced us all—there was no sense to it. They were watching us, I imagine, and waiting for an order to emerge, for the keepers to identify themselves. The mall was cold and uncertain, and I didn't like it. My job there lasted less than a month.

So I drove a little further down the highway, away from town, out towards the interstate. There a lone restaurant stood out, lashed by bold, geometric colors to the steep hill that rose above Exit 19-A.

The manager sat with me in the dining room. He crossed and uncrossed his thin legs, leaned in, leaned out, went left, went right. Snapped his fingers. Tapped his coffee cup. Over his shoulder I could see a tall woman, made taller by an entwined, twisted, braided confection of a hairdo. She rolled her eyes and winked at me, then came over with the coffee pot. "Can I get you anything else, Mister?"

Shook his head. "No, baby." He didn't even look at her.

She turned my cup over and poured me coffee without even asking. "Thank you," I said. Her nametag said *Norma*. I hated coffee, but I drank it.

Mister—no one called him Mr. Morris—gave me two uniforms. He told me not to waste my time hemming them more than two inches above the knee, to always wear a

bra because he could always tell, and to come in after school the next day at four-thirty. In 1971 they hadn't yet gone to the thick polyester pastels. The uniform was drab hounds tooth, nipped at the waist, and just loose enough over the hips. No zippers. Pure cotton with snaps down the front. Into it in five seconds. Out in two. I loved it.

I was there the next day at four-thirty. I didn't wear a bra.

*****

I was seventeen years old then. My father, who was on what turned out to be his last great binge, had said, "I'll pay you not to get a job." I was the oldest of five children and wanted to break away. Two private colleges had offered me academic scholarships—partial scholarships—but I did the math.

At that point I was convinced that my life demanded the ease of snap-on uniforms and the practicality of a daily pocketful of tips. Only later did I come to realize how much I needed the strict social order of the restaurant. It didn't even have to be a good order. What I needed was not the security but the creative resistance.

I liked driving just past the edge of town each day on my way to work. Customers—so often from New Jersey, almost always on their way to Florida—would ask, "Where do you people come from?" They stared out the windows at all the green sameness of Exit 19-A and looked almost frightened. I think they thought that we were beamed down specifically to pour their coffee and butter their toast. Sometimes I believed it myself, even though the center of my town, with contained around 40,000 people, was only about fifteen minutes away.

"We don't get many locals," Mister had told me. "Except maybe on Sundays." That was fine. I'd had my fill of locals.

"What did you decide about college?" The high school guidance counselor had shuffled through the papers in my file.

"I'm taking a year off," I said. "To work."

She adjusted her glasses and looked at me. "To work?"

I nodded. "At the restaurant out on Exit 19-A."

She shook her head. "It's very difficult to get back on track"—her mouth twisted into a tight little smile—"once you're off."

"Just for a year," I said. "I need the money."

She said some bland something, but her real response was in her eyes. Forget this one, they said. That was that. A long line of seniors waited outside her door; we were required to see her at least once before we graduated.

What she didn't know was that Exit 19-A was an essential part of the order. I watched the ramp through the big window. Ran my eyes down the steep hill. Traffic hummed on and off. The restaurant was the wood between the worlds. The traffic hummed to me: *Remember*.

There was a hierarchy at the restaurant, and I was content to start out at the bottom. Part-time. Second-shift. We were expendable. I'd call us vassals, except that we were so transitory. The first shift people were the nobles, those granted more privilege and respect, but at the same time burdened with more responsibilities. Keys changed hands on the first shift. The second shift came through unlocked doors, into a world the first shift had set into motion.

Mister was the king. The parade of assistant managers—well, if they stayed more than a month, they were the fools. If they were better than that, they moved on. The cooks, first and second, were the true powers behind the throne.

Leo was the second-shift cook, and he was happy there. He came in early, every other Monday, to help unload the truck, but otherwise he spent his mornings sleeping and his nights reading. He passed pantheistic platitudes from Spinoza and nihilistic warnings from Nietzsche along with the hamburger plates through the window. I grabbed them all. He bought one of my high school poems for the little magazine he published out of his trailer. "It's reminiscent of Nemerov," he said. The poem was eighteen lines long; his going rate ten cents a line. "How about," Leo said, "I pay you with a half a pizza?"

I shook my head: "Just pay me." He wrote me a check for $1.80. I was a waitress *and* a professional writer.

Leo was shorter than I was but his Samson hair was large, a beautiful, black, shiny mass, even when pulled back in the hygienic ponytail. Leo was always brilliant and always horny. Either one without the other would have been tiresome; together they formed a lingering charm.

He left that night, after he'd bought my poem, with Deenie. She was a new girl with a very cool, very short haircut. She wasn't too bright—and would, in fact, quit in less than a month—but then most nights that seemed exactly what Leo was looking for. I never asked for an explanation, but he offered one anyway. "Conversation," Leo told me, "complicates the urge." I watched them drive away and wished that it was me instead of Deenie, but I feared mixing poetry with the pizza would diminish them both to nothing.

Second shift brimmed with the anticipation of what would come next. A tall, bored, blond man filled out an application and sat with Mister in the dining room. I eavesdropped.

"I only want to work three days a week," the guy said. "I'm a writer."

"Yeah?" Mister leaned forward.

I was wiping down the table behind them. Mister grabbed my arm. "Claire here, she's a writer, and"—he let me go and tilted his head toward the kitchen—"Andy, the bus boy, plays sax in a band"—he jerked his thumb back at the kitchen—"and Leo there puts out his own magazine." He tapped the table three times and made that clicking sound with his tongue. "Might want to check with him."

The guy blinked. He lasted a couple of days. As a rule, waiters didn't work out there.

Beatrice was the first-shift cook. She had high, hard, black hair and no sense of humor. Orders came up quickly and logically. We did not question her. Even a tentative "Is my burger coming?" would garner an acid expression, profane muttering and suspicious sabotage for the rest of the shift. On break, though, or after work, Beatrice would complain about her leaky refrigerator, unreliable car, stupid husband, and worthless children.

"Rita's got a good heart," she told me. "I don't know what possessed her to bring that knife into school." Rita was Beatrice's youngest daughter. She went to my high school.

"You know," I said, "maybe she didn't intend to use it. Maybe just having it made her feel more secure." I took a thoughtful draw from my king-sized Salem.

Beatrice looked at me and nodded. "You know, Rita talks big, but you're right. Deep down, I think she's just a scared little girl."

I could believe it, sitting back in the banquet room. But as long ago as junior high school—and even after the conversation with Beatrice—if I opened the bathroom door and saw Rita and her girls rising out of their cloud of smoke, I closed it. I simply held it until next period. I never mentioned that I knew Rita from school, and Beatrice never asked.

I had only recently taken up smoking cigarettes. We were allotted a half-hour break each shift, but someone was always glancing at the clock, peeking into the banquet room, asking me how much longer I had. Eating a muffin or a grilled cheese could never be drawn out longer than ten minutes. If I tried to read, I'd get a confused look: "What you doing back here? Reading a book?" At first I was intimidated back onto the floor after only twenty minutes. Then I learned that if any one of them looked in and saw me taking a long, strong draw off a Salem, she backed off. I was smoking. I was busy.

My concessions, however, were not without some complementary innovations. I requested to fill in as dishwasher on one of my days off. If Leo was unloading the truck or Beatrice got caught up with one of her kids' altercations, I jumped at the chance to stand behind the grill.

"What do you want to do that for?" Norma slid her dirty plates at me. "It sure can't be the money." She narrowed her eyes at me. "What's he give you? Minimum wage?"

I watched over Leo's shoulder. "Can I do that?" I asked. He shook his head and laughed at me, but he'd let me put together a Salisbury steak dinner.

I wasn't the first waitress to take on the headache of closing down at night, but I was apparently the first to do the books without also doing Mister.

"He said, 'I think I could,'" Leo said. " 'I think I could have her.'"

"What did you say?"

"I said he didn't have a chance in hell."

"Thanks," I said. I was grateful, but still that night I dreamed about Mister. We were back in his office. He insulted me, and I insulted him, face to face, but the whole thing got very confusing and embarrassing toward morning.

Norma was right. I didn't come in on my day off to wash dishes and take inventory or stay late to do the books for the money. I needed to flip the perspective. To wear a different uniform—jeans, T-shirt, no makeup—and stand in a different place. I didn't want to be there forever, but I sure wanted to know where I'd been.

Summer spilled over with people. School was out. Families were free. My pockets jingle-jangled every day. At night I sat on my bed and pushed the change into coin rolls. One day in late August, Mister motioned to me as soon as I walked in the door. "I need you in the back, baby."

Norma, Sharla, and Eileen—the core of the first shift, the big-hair icons—looked at me. I knew what they were thinking.

Mister leaned back in his swivel chair. Pointed at the stool beside his desk. I sat down. "Leo tells me you're not going to college in the fall."

"I'm just staying out a year," I said. "To save some money."

Mister nodded. Leaned up to sip his coffee. "Okay." Leaned back. Rubbed his chin. Frowned. Mister never had a shadow. He kept an electric razor in his drawer

which he ran around his face at least twice a day. One night, after I'd done the books and was going out after work, I'd used it on my legs. "How'd you like to go on first?" he said.

Norma knocked on the door. Gave her tickets to Mister. Winked at me. "You got a couple on four," she said to me.

"Get one of the other girls to take it, baby."

She raised her eyebrows. "Okay." She turned. Let out that breathy little laugh of hers.

"And close the door." Mister leaned back. Crossed his legs. Smiled. "They think we're having an affair."

I shrugged.

"This is the situation," he said. "Richard's leaving next week—"

Richard was our latest assistant manager. He was from New Jersey or maybe it was Pennsylvania. Up North anyway—he put sugar on grits. He had an ugly wife and a sick little baby, and we felt some guilt for running all over him the way we did. "He make manager somewhere?"

Mister shut his eyes and shook his head. "Eileen wants to give it a try as assistant manager on second shift."

Eileen wore patches on all her uniforms that read "Assistant Relief Manager." She kept the keys most of the time and was in charge when Mister had to run out for one reason or another. She felt she ought to have something to show for that, so Mister had the patches made up for her. We giggled about it behind her back. She told everyone she'd slipped backstage two years ago and ended up spending the night with Conway

Twitty. I believed her. Up under the bright fountain lights, Eileen looked downright old, but I figured with a softer glow and a healthy dose of alcohol, she had enough blond, buxom attitude to make anything happen.

"Yes sir," I said. "I want to go on first." Two rushes: Breakfast *and* lunch. I'd watched Norma and Sharla count their tips. Big money.

Mister held up his hands. "Think about it now," he said. "Those girls will as soon stab you in the back as breathe." Shook his head. "You might be too goddamned nice for first."

I laughed.

"I'm not joking," he said.

He was right. In the mornings, intrigue was thick and sinister, silly but still dangerous. I smiled a lot. Kept my mouth shut. Played dumb. Never, ever volunteered how much I made in tips; if they forced me, I lowballed. But the main reason they warmed up to me, I think, was because I was a B cup—something altogether different.

Leo hated the first-shift women and could not believe mere money would lure me into their company. Norma was loud, Sharla was coarse, Eileen was slutty and Beatrice was downright scary. They'd worked together for years, but their loyalty to one another seemed about as deep as earshot. Still, Norma would talk of the babies she could never carry to term, and Beatrice of the daughters who cut her like a knife every minute of the day. Sharla always separated her tips and placed five or six bills in the left side of her bra. She'd pat it. "This is for me," she'd whisper. And Eileen would recount for the hundredth time one of her three backstage encounters.

Their lives were as fragile as glass. "If you listened to their stories," I told Leo, "you couldn't hate them."

"I don't have time for that," he said. Whenever I'd complained to him about how Richard had screwed up the scheduling, the ordering, and pretty much everything else he was supposed to do, Leo had just shrugged. "Wait it out," he'd said. He'd been through a long line of clowns. "After a while, they're either pushed out or pushed up." Easy for him to say. They all deferred to Leo. They knew that much.

Leo didn't wait out Eileen, though. He busted her—told Mister it was him or her. The second shift had hated Eileen. Apparently she spent most of her working hours in the banquet room behind closed doors, and more often than not there was a highway patrolman back there with her. Which wouldn't have been so bad except for how high and mighty she acted whenever she did choose to put in an appearance out front.

Leo had come into the banquet room one afternoon while Sharla and I were sorting the day's tickets. "If Mister wants to pay us *all* to do the dance back here"—he leered at me--"then I'm *all* for it, but--"

Sharla pulled a rubber band over her stack of tickets. "From what I hear," she said, "he'd owe your assistant manager a fair amount of back pay."

"It's not very professional," I said. It seemed to me that everyone was enjoying Eileen's failure a little too much, but it *was* disgusting. I looked around at the booths. Down at the floor. I wouldn't even let myself think about the tables.

Leo grinned. "I suppose that depends on what profession you're talking about."

I folded my bills, pushed them down into my pocket and sighed. For the six weeks I'd been on first, I'd averaged ten dollars more a day in tips.

The next morning Mister rushed through the front door, tapped his fingers on the counter, and simply said, "Eileen'll be back tomorrow."

Beatrice curled her face into one of her rare, wicked smiles. Norma winked at me.

"So I'm back on second?" I asked.

Sharla's hands popped onto her hips. "That's not right."

He shook his head at me. "No." Held up his hand to warn Sharla. "I don't want to hear another word about it." Gave Norma a long look. "Understand?" That was that.

On second, my waitress number had been *1x*; when I went to first Mister had told me to just drop the *x*. So I was number *1*. Eileen came back on a Sunday, and right in the middle of the breakfast rush, jerked one of my tickets off the wheel and screamed, "Who's using my number?"

"It's Claire's number now," Norma said.

"I'm number one!" Eileen's nose was red and ugly. For the first time I could see why Leo called her a witch. "I've been number one for eight years!"

Sharla rolled her eyes.

I took my ticket out of her hand. "Okay." I scratched out the one. "I'll be number *8*."

Eileen switched on her big smile. I swear, those women broke my heart.

Winter clamped down. Cut the profits—and cut to the bone as well, if you made the mistake of sitting in the first booths, too near the door.

"Do you want to make love?" Leo asked me in the cold, bright middle of an afternoon—the end of my work day, the beginning of his. "You want to get together

tonight?"

I looked up from wiping down my last table. "What?"

He stood there, on the other side of the table, with his arms folded. "I thought I'd just ask. Didn't seem right to try to kiss . . . to just, you know, make a move. I figure you're above all that." Raised his eyebrows. "I can get out of here by eleven-thirty."

I shook my head. "I don't think so." I don't know who was more disappointed—Leo for miscalculating or me for being a plain, ordinary girl who needed to be kissed. When I went outside to my car that day, Exit 19-A hummed to me: *Remember*. That afternoon I rifled though the papers in my top dresser drawer, came up with the envelope that contained an application for the state university, and finished filling it out. I was already gone.

Almost. I came back for spring breaks, summers, and Christmas holidays to refill my college fund piecemeal, quarters at a time. The place was never exactly the same again. The town sprawled out, devoured the green hillsides, robbed the restaurant of its eerie and profitable isolation. There was a Hardee's right across the highway.

I was one of the seasonal college girls now, but still aligned with the lifers. A proper scoop of ice cream had a lip. Without a lettuce cup, the cole slaw ran into the French fries. When was the last time that oil had been changed? I could tell when it had been more than two days. Some nights the second shift didn't even pour up and clean the ketchup bottles. Too many people and too little time, it seemed, for anyone to care anymore. I was a fogy before my time. Worse than Norma.

I kept coming back for the same reason I had landed there in the first place. Even with the changes, I could still see the right and the wrong. I knew why, when, and how to complain. It was hard on the feet, but easy on the principles.

Eventually, though, I felt I had to move on. I had graduated from college and constructed a resume: 1971-1976, Waitress. That left a lot of white space. For the first time it hit me that I might have been smarter to go a different way during those college breaks.

The interview for an administrative assistant job at the public television station was my fifth since graduation. "Any internships?" the lady in personnel had asked me.

Oh yeah, every year I'd pulled some sort of application off of a bulletin board, made copies, answered questions, tracked down references and filled in the blanks. Once I'd even gone through the ritual for that very television station. "No," I told her. "No internships." I'd settled back in the chair and waited for her next question. Nothing makes you sound like a bigger loser than to tell people what you might have done. I knew that much. I had never mailed in any of the applications. For me, internships were the same little joke as a partial scholarship to a private college. You won, and then what? What about rent? Food? Internships were for other people.

The lady in personnel straightened the scarf on her shoulder and studied my white space. "Well." She tapped her fingers on the desk. "Did you bring along a writing sample."

I wanted to say no, but the manila folder on my lap was too obvious. "Yes." I laid my Sharla story on her desk. It was stupid, it wasn't what they meant, but it was all I

had. She'd surprised me by asking for it. The job description hadn't mentioned writing; if it had, I probably wouldn't have bothered to apply.

"We'll call you." The lady escorted me back down the hallway, past the machines stacked and spinning behind the glass window, and saw me through the lobby, all the way to the front door. Even if I had been the larcenous sort, I wouldn't have known what to do with any of their equipment—and I figured she knew that. She was just following rules.

Why did I have to move on anyway? Just because I'd read enough Chaucer and Milton, written enough Byron and Keats papers to get myself a certificate of authenticity? Up until this point I had come back and come back and come back to the sure clean lines and hard edges of the restaurant. Why stop now? Just because everyone assumed I would?

I spent the day after that interview smoking cigarettes for a new and different reason—no one was after me to get back to work. Then I spent the whole night typing up a professor's manuscript, another one of the activities that had subsidized my college education. I could go back to the restaurant. I could say *I* was writing a book. That made sense. That fit.

When the producer called me the next morning, I was still asleep. Her name was Elaine—Elaine Kennedy—and she wanted me to come by her office that afternoon to talk about the job. The same lady from personnel met me in the lobby, but this time she smiled at me all the way—with her eyes as well as her lips. We came to a turn in the hallway; she touched my back gently to move me down the hall to Suite 188. I nodded. Eight was my lucky number.

Elaine Kennedy sat behind her desk and beckoned me inside with her finger. The lady disappeared down the hall. Ms. Kennedy tilted her head toward the long guy slouched in a chair beside her desk. "This is our director," she said. "Dick."

He pointed at me. Straightened up. Nodded at the chair in front of their desk. "I liked your story," he said.

"Thank you." I sat down and ran back over the job description. Good communication skills—they all said that—but I still didn't remember anything in it about writing.

Elaine rambled on about funding, philosophy, and demographics. She recommended I read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Dick punctuated with hard facts about CRE's, TRE's, ENG—something like that. He spoke some sort of triple-digit technical code. It was a strange interview. I was pretty much left out of it. They were more interested in disputing each other than finding out anything about me.

"Is there a lot of writing in this job?" I decided to jump right in with them, for some token self-respect, before I got out once and for all. I didn't belong there.

Elaine shook her head. "No." She shrugged. "Press releases, proposals, correspondence, the usual."

Dick leaned in. "She's wondering about the writing sample." He straightened back up and shook his head at me. "It's just our little way of making a quick study of you people." Threw out his arm. "If you don't bring anything, that tells us something." Shrugged. "We had his one guy"—he laughed—"he brought in a sentence"—looked at Elaine—"what was it, 'quick brown fox' . . . that thing." Shook his head. "He thought

we wanted to, you know, glean some clues about his personality from the way he looped his y's, dotted his—"

Elaine closed her eyes. "That's not so odd." Sighed. "That's common practice in Europe, and I've heard—"

"Well, I'm an American." Dick looked at me. "How about you?"

I nodded. "I'm an American." I tapped my fingers together. "So, what did you learn about me?"

Dick shrugged. "That if you could write a really cool story like that about a waitress, you'd probably like a shot at some really cool characters like us."

I blinked. I saw Sharla pushing those bills down into her bra, and I heard her whisper: *This is for me*.

"It's just a matter of communication." Elaine leaned toward me, away from Dick. Her elbows came down hard on the desk. Something in the back-and-forth flitting of her eyes reminded me of Eileen. I saw her wave her ticket: *I'm number one!*

I relaxed and settled back in my chair.

Elaine rolled her hands one over the other and explained how someone in my position would be the hub. "Sort of Communication Central"—she pulled at imaginary lines with her hands—"between pre-production, production, post-production."

"So," Dick said. "You want the job?"

Two minutes earlier I was ready to give him a flat-out *no*, but in that short span, all of Dick's confusing techno talk and Elaine's earnest video vision fell away. Just like that they were offering me the job—I didn't even have to take another typing test. The

room felt silly and dangerous--very familiar. I knew who they were. I knew where I was.

Dick was the cook. It didn't matter whether I liked him or not—I could trust him. He knew what was what and had nothing to lose by saying so.

Elaine opened out her arms. "Well?" She was a little more complex. Her mouth held the same firm authority of Mister, and her body language accelerated to near his speed, but I looked into her skittish eyes and still saw Eileen.

It all forced the same quick response. "Yes," I said. "I do."

Elaine pointed me back down the hall towards personnel. "Left, left, right." She pointed to nowhere in particular. "All the way down."

Left. Past the wall of machines and their spectral keepers, silenced by the glass. Left again. I stopped at the third turn and looked left. Bright sun pierced a back exit. The security guard's glance caught me. I turned right. I had no idea where I was going, but I did know where I'd been. And there was no way of knowing how long, or how far, that alone would carry me.

Touch Me Here

Green

Barbara's pale lashes flutter. "Touch me here." She opens her blouse, wiggles her index finger at the dip in the middle of her bra.

Zachary rolls his eyes, but he does it. Presses his dirt-lined, ragged nail against her skin.

Barbara's blue eyes snap wide. "Zachary!" She grabs his stubby finger—"slowly"—and demonstrates. "Soft." She lets go with a jerk. "Like a guy who means it, okay?"

Zachary follows her instructions.

She nods slightly. Exhales a little puff of air. "All right." She pulls back, bites her lip. "Do this." She takes his hand. "Curve your fingers." She tries cupping his hand over her breast. "The whole thing," she says.

"I am," Zachary says.

Barbara pushes him away. "Never mind," she says. "Your hand's too little anyway."

"Is not."

Barbara stands up. "You're not supposed to like it, you little perv." She goes into the kitchen and plops down at the table. "I can do it, Ma."

Zachary can still remember his mother's bright hot eyes. "Yes." She nods.

"I'm going to get married, and I'm going to be a virgin."

Their mother spreads her fingers over the cold toaster. "Wear"—his mother's voice pitches low—"green."

"I don't have anything green, Ma," Barbara says. "I don't like green."

Zachary looks at his mother. She is always watching. *Green*. He never sees what she sees, but he believes it's there.

When Grandma Kate calls from Colorado to wish Barbara a happy fifteenth birthday, Barbara puts Zachary on the phone. "Tell her about Ma," she whispers. "She likes you."

"She's just depressed, honey," Grandma Kate says. "She's been through a lot. Women get depressed."

"Screw this," Barbara says and begins making plans.

His mother doesn't seem depressed. Her eyes are always wide open, her elegant body always erect, always ready to go. Her appliances shoot directives, secrets that give her a mission.

Green. Zachary can never see what she sees, but he thinks sometimes he almost catches something in the air, some subliminal rattle, some swish or whisper.

Barbara's first date—Tommy, Timmy, Tony?—comes by to pick her up at seven-thirty. Zachary stands at the window watching the taillights of the car slide away from the house, thinking that surely this event will change their lives. Barbara has been talking about her first date for over a year, ever since she hangs up the phone on her fifteenth birthday.

The change is less explosive than he's hoped for, less than when his father disappeared three years earlier, but still Zachary enjoys the boys who begin to come in

and out of the house with his sister. He loves the way his mother pulls herself together for them, at least for a little while, at least long enough for him to fix a memory of how it used to be. Barbara marries Carl when Zachary is fourteen. He wears a black tuxedo with a red cummerbund and stands up with four other guys behind the groom. Barbara has married early, at twenty, and well, to a lawyer, and, she insists, as a virgin. Zachary is proud, not just of his sister, but of himself, for the small part he's played in making it happen.

Go

Women stream up the wooden steps to Zachary's one-room garage apartment, women like Lucy, a wan beauty with a birthmark shaped like a little guitar on her left shoulder. She shows up at his door after she sees his band play in Greenville. "I don't want to bother you," she says. "I just need a place to be." She settles in his one chair, a tall ladder-back he has smuggled out of his mother's whispering home.

His mother does not try to talk him out of moving into his own place. "Go," she tells him. "The house is hungry." Her maternal instinct intact.

"Think of me as furniture," Lucy says.

And so he does. Or at least he treats her as furniture, occasionally talking, but feeling no compulsion to speak. Mostly he goes about his business, paying bills, making phone calls, reading, trimming off little slivers of lemon rind to drop in his Scotch. He believes he remembers seeing his father do that. Zachary buys lemons for that reason only, and for that reason only they seem necessary.

When finally he stretches out on the bed and turns on the television, Zachary thinks of Lucy any damn way he pleases. Closes his eyes, twists her up, down, wraps her around. Opens his eyes only to turn and wink at her. "Lucy, honey," he says, "Go."

"I know." She stands up.

Zachary looks for that other little birthmark high up on the back of her thigh. A sort of crescent moon.

"Thank you," Lucy says.

When he hears her car back down the driveway, Zachary pumps himself to where he wants to be. When a girl is clearly crazy, this is the way he's learned to work it.

Punk Amy he doesn't identify right off. She's familiar enough, with her maroon hair, her spiked attitude. She shows up, they tangle, next morning he wakes up and finds his speakers missing. "I took them," Amy tells him. "You owe me, you son-of-a-bitch."

"You didn't have a good time?"

"Sure." She shrugs. "It was great."

Whenever the squirrels scurry across the gutters, he sits up and thinks, "Punk Amy."

Jeannine works at the phone company. She's short, not thin, but firm. Her hair is like his sister Barbara's—simple, even all around, bouncing. Like a metaphor for their time together. She bakes—cakes, banana and zucchini bread, cookies—and shows up to deliver her goods, leaves them at the door when he's not there. She's twenty-four, a year older than Zachary, and she is convinced that when he finally graduates with his degree in psychology this summer, his life will change completely. Jeannine scares him most of all.

Zachary talks frequently about his sister Barbara, with affection, bemusedly, but he has never told anyone about the plan, the kiss, the first date. Not until now, as he sits on the hood of his car, swaddled with Eva in the darkness.

"You were nine years old?"

Zachary watches the slow motion of her lips. He pushes the wide-brimmed straw hat off his forehead and nods. Eva is the first woman in long time who has waited for his invitation. He smiles at her, slides off the car, takes her hand.

It is the first time with Eva, but there is no hesitation, no awkwardness. She moves with dovetail perfection, rolls up in the sheet when it's over. "Eddie's not always so mean." She shakes her head. "He hasn't always been so mean."

Zachary lies back on the pillow. Reaches for his hat, covers his face with it. "Eddie," he mumbles. *Go*, he thinks.

Listen

Eddie lives in one room, too. Mattress on the floor, kitchenette in the corner. "Pretty much like my place." Zachary points to the wall. "Except for this whole tent thing you got going."

Eddie pulls a six-pack out of the refrigerator. "Parachute." He sits on the floor and leans back against an over-sized pillow embroidered with an orange and green dragon. "Soundproofs the place."

Zachary and his mother fight for what seems like a year when Barbara marries and moves away. She wants all doors open, all the time, so that she can *listen*. He stops

fighting when he realizes he is not the object of her listening. He fingers the silky parachute walls. "Don't you ever need to see a little sun?"

Eddie tilts his head to the adjacent wall. "I can pull it back over there, if I want." He holds up a beer.

Zachary takes it and lowers to the floor. "I like that," he says.

"What?"

"That pillow."

Eddie twists around and looks. "Eva made it."

"Wow."

Eddie settles back. "She did it from some kind of kit."

"Still."

" 'Preciate the ride, man." Eddie yawns. "I don't remember drinking all that much, but—" He closes his eyes, falls back on the pillow. His beer tips over.

Zachary sets the can up. Stands and looks around. Picks up a book from the kitchen counter. *Autobiography of a Yogi.* "Eva," he says. The phone rings. Zachary scans the floor and finds it over in the corner. Eddie rolls over. Snores. Zachary picks up.

"Eddie, it's Gloria. Remember me?"

"Mmmm."

"Were you asleep? You told me you stay up all night."

"No."

"Anyway, I'll be there."

"Where?"

"In Greenville. At Xanadu. Tomorrow night."

"Oh."

"You remember, right?"

"Sure." Zachary hangs up, takes another look around the room, goes out to his car and drives home.

One good reason why

Carl's boat is a puzzle inside, interlocking red vinyl, jigsaw efficiency, the sort of tight space that will make or break connections. Carl pries the cap off his beer, slides the opener across the table to Zachary.

"Barbara wants me to sell the boat," Carl says.

"Why?"

Carl shakes his head. "She says she gets sick." He shrugs. "We don't really have time to get out much anymore."

"It paid for?"

"Sure," Carl says.

"Cost a lot to keep it here?"

Carl tips the bottle to his mouth. "You worry too much about the cost of things, boy." He drinks, squints, sets the bottle down. "You need money?"

"I'm not worried." Zachary says. "I'm just aware of—"

"Money's not the issue. It's just that Barbara always has to—"

"Hear one good reason why?"

"Exactly." Carl settles his arm over the back of the booth. Pulls his knee up to his chest. "One good reason why."

"Yeah." Zachary stretches out, closes his eyes.

Carl rips into a bag of pretzels. "Your sister goes for the complete control."

Zachary's eyelids roll up. "Well," he says, "there *is* a good reason for that." He turns, levels his eyes with Carl's. "If she hadn't, I reckon I'd be one of those kids at the bottom of a well."

Carl raises his bottle. "Hey, man," he says. "I love her, too."

At their wedding reception, Zachary had toasted the new couple. "I was born into this mess." He had raised a glass of champagne. "What's your excuse, man?"

Carl had laughed. Slapped the table. Might have been a little drunk. Barbara leaned over and took the glass out of Zachary's hand.

"Oh." Zachary straightens up. "I get it." He points at Carl. "You want me to be the reason why." He leans in. "You want to go home, tell Barbara that the kid loves it, so you might as well keep the boat."

Carl nods. "Don't you love it?"

"Fucking A." Zachary holds out his hand.

Carl takes it. "So it's a deal."

Zachary pumps and nods. "Hell," he says. "I'm sleeping here tonight to seal the deal."

After Carl leaves, Zachary lays on the bunk in the dark. The water laps. The boat rocks, lulls him into a long, hard sleep.

I'll be there

That night they come together coincidentally out at Calvin's lake house. It is the first time Zachary has brought Jeannine around these people. When Eddie and Eva pull up, he regrets it.

Jeannine, like all the other girls, wears a skimpy bikini, a red one, with barely room for the single horizontal blue stripe on the top and bottom. Eva stands on the dock and pulls a little red dress over head. She wears a thin, black knit suit, zipped up the front, all the way to her neck. Long, odd, distinct. Eva.

He glides through the splashing and chatter, finds her, rubs a submerged knuckle in the curve of her back, right above her hips. "Turtle-neck swimsuit," he whispers. "Hippest thing I have ever seen."

Eva does not smile. She doesn't even look at him. Her eyes widen slightly. She watches Eddie, who floats by.

Zachary moves back to Jeannine, stays with her, pulls her around, picks her up, throws her in the water at least once, mimics the behavior expected of him. He watches Eddie press in on Eva. He recalls that feminine voice on the Eddie's telephone. *I'll be there.*

Eddie disappears into the darkness with Matt Mann, and Eva pulls up onto the dock and talks to Matt's girlfriend—Kathy, Katy, something with a *y*. Suddenly Eddie reappears, beserk. He pounds on the hood of his car. "Where the hell are my car keys?" he yells at Eva.

Eva runs into the commotion and rummages around in her bag. "You didn't give them to me," she says.

"Relax," Matt says. "I'll give you a ride in."

Eddie grabs Eva's bag and dumps the contents on the ground.

"Brilliant," Matt says.

Matt's girlfriend goes down on her knees to help Eva collect her stuff. She reaches up and pulls on Eddie's cut-offs. "You got a pocket in these things, Einstein?"

Eddie thrusts his hands into his pockets. Shuts up for a second. "Oh, hell—" He looks out at the water.

Zachary shakes his keys, points Jeannine to the passenger side. "Come on," he says. "I'll give you guys a ride."

Eva opens the door and climbs into the back seat. "Thanks." She slides over to make room for Eddie. Zachary watches them in the mirror. Eddie nuzzles, then sinks onto Eva.

"Okay," Zachary says, "where do you live, Eva?"

"My car's at Eddie's," she says. She straightens up, Eddie falls into her lap.

Zachary drops Jeannine off first. "He might get started again," he whispers.

Jeannine looks over her shoulder, cuts her eyes at Zachary. "I don't think so," she says.

"Still."

She nods, hesitates, opens the car door.

Zachary reaches over to pat her shoulder as she exits. "See you."

"Yeah," she says.

Zachary jacks up the radio and avoids the mirror. He pulls into the driveway behind Eva's old Falcon.

"Tell Jeannine we're sorry." Eva pushes Eddie up.

Eddie blinks. "Yeah," he says. "Thanks, man."

Eva walks with him, not holding, but with her arm out and ready. Zachary sits in the car. Watches a light go on, then go off. He gropes around for one of the receipts littering the floorboard. Writes *480 Waccamaw. In back. Tonight. Anytime*. Gets out and knocks on the door.

Eva opens the door. "He's okay," she whispers.

Zachary hears him banging around in the bathroom. "You okay?"

"Sure."

He slips the piece of paper into her hand. Her lips part. Eddie staggers out of the bathroom, gives a weak wave and falls on the mattress. Eva tightens her fist. Zachary drives home and sits in the car for forty minutes. Waiting.

Eva pulls in behind him. She swings out of her car, hops onto the hood of his and asks, "You ever feel like you're living someone else's life?"

Zachary rubs his chin, regrets the stubble. "Well," he says, "growing up, I reckon I always felt I was just a small part of my sister's plan."

"What plan?" Eva pushes back and rests against the windshield.

Thank you

A couple of weeks after Barbara spins into the house wearing her diamond engagement ring, Carl comes by to take Zachary out for a burger.

"Why didn't Barbara come with us?" Zachary asks.

Carl sighs. "Okay, kid," he says. "Do you know the truth or not?"

Zachary hesitates. "I know you and Barbara are getting married. I know she's moving out." He has had some hope that this is what this meeting is all about, that Carl and Barbara are going to take him with them.

"Yeah, yeah." Carl wipes him mouth with a napkin. "Don't worry about things. We're going to hire someone to help your mother." He stares at Zachary. "How old were you when your father . . . your father went away."

"Six, I guess. First grade. Why?"

"Listen, man, I'm just going to tell you, because this is insane, because"—Carl's voice picks up speed—"you should have known the truth a long time ago—"

"What?"

Carl keeps going. "The truth is your dad didn't run off, he hung himself in the basement, he killed himself, he's dead—"

Zachary blinks. He remembers how he's sent off to stay with his cousin, how he's never done that before or after, just that one time, all of a sudden, for days. And he remembers how his mother has maybe tried to tell him, how she looks up from the kitchen table and says in her new voice, "We are not dead, not all of us."

And then how Barbara barges with "Hell, no, we're not dead. We don't need the sorry son-of-a-bitch." How she envelopes her mother with her arms and kisses, how she, in effect, shuts her up.

Carl slumps with his head in his hands. "Why didn't Barbara tell me?" Zachary asks him.

Carl lifts his head. "Man, your sister recreated a sort of order in that house." Leans in, tries to level his eyes with Zachary's. "She was fucking terrified to screw with it."

Zachary stands up. "Thank you," he says. "I need to get back to the house."

In the car Carl prattles about the whole situation being insane, about how Zachary's better off for knowing, about how there wouldn't have been any point in drawing the process out. Zachary says nothing. Gets out of the car when it stops at his house. "Man"—Carl leans across the seat—"I had to tell you. Otherwise, she wouldn't marry me."

Zachary nods. "Okay." He looks into Carl's tired blue eyes. He likes Carl. He hopes Barbara doesn't make it too hard for him. "Thank you."

What's the plan?

He finds her number in the phone book. "It's me," he says. "480 Waccamaw."

Eva's laugh pitches warm and low. "Is that an invitation?"

Zachary looks around his room. "What kind of life is this?" Jeannine has asked him. "Nothing but a bed." Similarly, Barbara has said, "Welcome to Zach's Bed and Booze."

"Where are you?" he says. "I'll come to you."

"No, you don't want to do that." The laugh again. "I live with my parents."

Zachary's shoulders drop. "How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen." The voice cools down. "I'm legal."

He decides the boat will be safe. No one, no one that matters, will recognize them at the marina. Eva slides across from him, in the red vinyl booth. "I told Eddie."

He knows his face goes dead white. Eddie could—Eddie would—shoot them both. Even if they hear him coming, see him coming, there is no way out. He has trapped her.

She hooks her hair behind her ears. "I just told him I was seeing someone else. No details."

Zachary searches for his instincts. Is he the most likely suspect, the way he's been around, or the least?

Eva jumps. Her elbow slides off the table, brings him back. Zachary turns and sees Carl, not Eddie. His eyes flit from Zachary to Eva, back again. His smile, too wide, skews.

Eva wears jeans; one knee is drawn up under her chin. Zachary is suddenly aware of her nipples, pushing against her little red shirt.

Carl crowds into the booth beside her. "What's the plan, Zach?" He has an unclean look Zachary can't finger. The hair, maybe, falling more forward than usual.

Zachary shakes his head.

"Let's take her out." He winks at Eva. She looks at Zachary.

Zachary shakes his head. "It's too late," he says. "Eva has to get home."

"Ah," Carl leans back and looks at her. "School night?" So slow. So close. A sharp word, a quick grip—even a good-natured chuckle from Zachary—could have stopped it.

But instead he watches as Carl lifts, with one finger, from the bottom, the red shirt, to expose just the beginning of Eva's bare breasts. Zachary is amazed. Shocked. Paralyzed. He never quite figures out how she snakes up and over and out so quickly. And then the splash.

"Barbara and I had a fight," Carl says, as they watch and wait for Eva to resurface. "Look." Carl points. "She's up. She's swimming. She's okay." They see her shadowy figure shimmy up on the poles on the opposite dock. Carl puts his hand on Zachary's shoulder.

Zachary shakes it off. "Go to hell," he says. When he gets home he finds one of Jeannine's tins of cookies leaning against his door. He stuffs it in the trashcan, then thinks better of it. Nothing else in the place to eat.

She was right

At the end of the summer, Carl sells the boat and uses the money toward the down payment on a cabin in the mountains. "It's only about an hour away," he tells Zachary. "Barb and I can get away every weekend if we want to."

"Great."

Carl sighs. "She was right about the boat," he says. "It was trouble."

Zachary laughs.

"She was right," Carl says. "What if that crazy girl had drowned?" He runs his fingers through his hair. "They would have nailed us to the cross."

"Eva's not crazy."

"If you say so," Carl says. "You ought to know crazy, if anybody does."

Zachary goes to his mother's house at least three times a week. Sarah fixes them lunch—usually chicken salad and cantaloupe—and they sit in the nook and eat. His mother listens. "What will happen to it," she asks, "when I'm gone."

"What, Ma?"

"The house."

Zachary looks through the window, up into the sky, and sees Eva tumble from cloud to cloud. She lands in the backyard like a limber cat.

"Well, Ma," he says. "I would think you'd be a natural at haunting."

Eva's long legs seem to swing from the remnants of his old tree house. Even when he leaves, he's able to carry the hallucination for a while. Eva in shop windows, among the mannequins. Sitting on his bed, when he first unlocks his door.

He knows she's moved on to Columbia now, so in October he drives up, hoping for the best, hoping for something. She meets him. Knows exactly what he wants. She sits on the bench beside him and says, "I loved the note." She smiles. "*480 Waccamaw*. *Anytime*. I loved being able to read it, to think about it, to read it again, without some asshole breathing in my ear." She arches her back. "I loved the way you touched me"—she rubs her lower spine—"*here* that night out at the lake, under the water." She touches her hand. "I loved the way you waited for answers." She stands up. "It made the questions real."

"Let me just say one thing about that night on the boat."

"No." she shakes her head. "Those were just different questions. *What will he do*? *What will she do*?" Eva shrugs. "You got your answer." She turns and walks away.

"Eva." He stands up.

She turns back. “Don’t get me wrong. I like you.” She grins. “You inspired me to wait for my own answers to my own questions.” She nods. “And I do thank you for that.”

The Bus to Heaven

Annabel sits in her wicker rocker, in front of that god awful air conditioning unit that juts through her bedroom window. She taps at the *Cool* button with her index finger. Licks at the sweat collecting on her upper lip. Pulls the finger away. Leans back and listens.

Those young and careless girls across the hall in *A* have had theirs humming nonstop for a month. But then, Annabel reminds herself, for all her care she is, at forty-four, living in the same funky building as they are. And besides, it's a practical matter, not a moral one. If Annabel keeps hers off through June, she will reward herself with a massage. Through July, an entire day at the spa. Through August, three full days at the beach.

She pushes up, slides on her sandals and shuffles into the front room. Five o'clock. Only these late afternoon hours are unbearable. This working-at-home arrangement, she reminds herself, means not only that she's not tied to the office. She's not tied to home either. She can work at the coffee shop, the library, hell, even the bowling alley—anywhere with a steady commercial blast of cold air—for a couple of hours every day. Annabel slides her papers into her bag. She remembers one bill from last summer for a hundred and twenty-seven dollars. If she goes the whole summer, she promises, a full week at the beach.

The young woman above her—R.J. Townsend is the name on her mailbox—is inconsistent. Sometimes her air conditioner kicks on in the morning, sometimes in the

evening, but mostly, like today, it is quiet. She's lived upstairs for months, yet she and Annabel have not yet spoken, not once met in the foyer or passed in the driveway. Annabel sits at her desk and circles and slashes and suggests her way through these god-awful manuscripts and watches R.J. Townsend come and go. Sees that guy with the mesmerizing streak of gray in his lank black hair park his BMW on the street, slip up and down the stairs. Studies the sad, long boy who has been up there day and night for the past couple of weeks.

A bus—a full-size, silver and blue touring bus—wheezes to a stop at the curb. Low branches of the oaks slide and clatter on its roof. Annabel gathers the rest of her paraphernalia into her bag and goes outside.

"Hi," R.J. Townsend calls down from her metal porch.

Annabel shields her eyes with her hand. R.J. Townsend's auburn hair hangs in two braids to her waist. She glistens, as if she's just stepped out of the shower, but then Annabel feels how her own shirt sticks to her back. "Hello," she says.

"What's all this? Do you know?"

Annabel shakes her head. She stares at the bus. The windows are tinted, impervious. "Did people get off?"

She nods. "A few women with kids. The men were all dressed alike, in white shirts and black pants."

The bus is clean, polished, unmarked except for the destination window. *HEAVEN*.

"I'm Rhea." R.J. Townsend laughs. "Your neighbor."

"Annabel. Annabel Boyd."

"Nice to finally meet you," Rhea says.

"Likewise," Annabel says. "Sorry it took so long." For she really does feel it has once again been her fault, the distance, the silence. Apparently there are expectations. Brownies or banana bread, that sort of thing. Annabel thinks of her old friend, Kathy, and how all of her stories begin "I took some bread over" and then launches into what she's heard, what she's discovered, how she's attached herself.

Of course, it's not all Annabel. Beamer Man's tired eyes always seem to glance her window. He will raise his hand in recognition. Annabel will do the same.

Rhea points to the cluster of brick houses on the corner. "They went down there."

Annabel walks to the sidewalk and scans the street, the houses, corner to corner. Not a soul. She glances over her shoulder. Rhea has gone inside, but the boy watches through the screen door. As Annabel circumvents the bus and drives away, she realizes she's not seen the older man stride by her window in at least two weeks. It would seem the boy has supplanted him, except that she's not heard the infernal squeaking of bedsprings for at least as long.

Annabel stays away for almost three hours. Two hours of work at the coffee shop, then a sandwich at the Grill. When she returns, the bus to *Heaven* and the yellow scooter are gone. *A* is dark, as is *C*, which has been empty since the first of May. She thinks she hears the sound of someone playing the guitar upstairs, but she has to turn off the television and sit very still to hear it.

On Thursday Annabel arrives back from Hardwick Press at noon with a new manuscript. *Sun in the Morning*. They only get worse and worse. The *A* girls lounge in

the sun on sagging vinyl chaises. They say hello. They giggle. It is, Annabel knows, nothing personal. They are local girls. Biding their time. They giggle after everything.

Annabel smiles. She doesn't shake her head until she's inside at the mailboxes. The lawn behind the building is every bit as sunny, yet they sprawl out front, one of them even with her top unfastened. She is on her stomach, but her big breasts spread out on each side. As good as naked.

They advertise on their mailbox. Susan Coats/Kaye Gambrell. They are not as savvy as R.J. Townsend. Annabel has never gotten around to sliding a tag onto her box. Once she met the postman in the foyer, and he gave her the proper stack. Somehow he knows her, perhaps by elimination, so there's no need.

Not much today. Her *Utne*, her *Harper's*, a check. Not much mail, but good mail. Annabel slits the envelope, shakes out the check, endorses it and makes out a deposit slip.

The boy from upstairs crosses the street. Rhea's car rumbles into the yard. She and the boy look at each other and both raise their hands. It is not a good-bye, more the touch of a prisoner and his lover through guarded wire. Rhea runs up her steps. The boy shakes his hair back and stares down the street, toward the houses where the bus people disappeared.

The bus to *Heaven* has been gone for days now. It stopped right outside my window, Annabel thinks, and I missed it. There was a time she could have told Matthew about it, and he would have laughed. Annabel pencils her way through three pages of claptrap before she sees the BMW slide quietly under the trees.

The man always parks on the street. He sometimes drops Rhea at the curb, but never comes inside in the daytime. Until today. The springs squeak. Annabel had thought the boy had done something, that he's too sensitive to be so noisy, but the silence means something else.

Annabel watches Rhea hurry down the steps outside her window, sees that no one would ever say to her, the way they still say to Annabel, "You're so pretty." Men might throw the word beautiful at her in a steamed car—on a squeaky mattress—but the word for Rhea is handsome.

Annabel has always admired handsomeness in women, and she once imagined that she would grow into a stronger appearance. She knows now that handsome women are born that way and stay that way. Pretty women grow old. At least Annabel, like her mother, ages slowly.

She pours a glass of lemonade. She kisses two fingers and rubs the rosewood frame hanging over the table. "Mom," it says, in handwriting undistressed, underanged. "I know at least you will get it. This is enough. That's all."

She cups her breast with her hand. Closes her eyes and tries to recall the touch of the man to whom she had been married for twenty-one years. Instead she gets the wide shoulders and fluttering lashes of a boy with whom she'd slept with only seven times, whom she'd known only six weeks before she met Matthew. She abandoned him like an unmade bed. Annabel didn't tell him it was over, didn't even tell him she was moving out of her apartment and into Matthew's.

"To hell with the security deposit," Matthew had said and to this day Annabel is ashamed of the reckless irresponsibility of that week.

The boy—his name was Stephen—tracked her down, genuinely concerned with her genuine disappearance. "I'm in love," Annabel had said, in a cold tone that should never ever touch those words. She'd been infected with Matthew's arrogance for less than two weeks; if he'd only called her two or three days later, she would not have to be ashamed of that, too.

A search for the boy's name on the Internet yields 427 legitimate entries. He stuck with the music thing and has done very well with it.

Matthew visits this apartment only once. He flies through the door. Head down. Eyes scattered. Camelhair coat flapping. He holds out papers—"We need them in the office by ten tomorrow"—and looks around the room to avoid her face. He settles on the rosewood frame. Takes a couple of steps forward to be sure. "You bitch." His face contracts. He slams the door on his way out.

She meets him at his lawyer's office the next morning and signs the papers. The lake house. The final piece. Split those profits.

"What was it?" Matthew asks. "A bloody pact?"

There are many things she could say. Something like if she truly *got it*, she would have stepped out of a fifteen-story window long before their only son. Only then she begins musing about when and where such a fifteenth-floor might have presented itself in her day-to-day life. Was it really only a matter of opportunity?

Instead Annabel silently touches his shoulder. She can't help feeling badly for him. His checks have never been late, not even after his second divorce, when he too is forced to rent. Matthew's circumstance is a little different than Annabel's—she has no

swimming pools, no tennis courts, no weight room—but she knows it is more difficult for him to reconcile his plight, she knows he aches more.

The squeaking intensifies into pounding. Annabel holds the pillow tight over her head.

The note is not found right away. Matthew has already convinced himself that his son's death was some sort of insane accident when they come across the folded note on David's cluttered desk.

How many years had David kept them together before he so violently ripped them apart? Annabel believes Matthew hates her, but for the four years since the divorce, the checks have never been late.

And upstairs, just as suddenly, just as violently, it's over. Annabel pulls off the pillow, blows her nose and washes her face. Goes back to her desk and picks up her blue pencil. She watches the man cross the yard to his BMW. His hair is damp, but his loose shirt as unwrinkled as when he went up. Silk, Annabel deduces. Or maybe rayon, but silk wouldn't surprise her. The air conditioner hums upstairs. For the first time, Annabel sees the pattern. It comes on shortly before he arrives. Forty-five minutes later it goes off again, and Rhea, wearing a black dress and pumps, her hair loosely pulled up in back, carrying a small tan suitcase, leaves in a taxi.

Annabel first meets Matthew's family at the lake house. It is too soon, knows. They've only been together a couple of months. Neither of their parents knows about the new living arrangement.

"We have to go," Matthew says. "He's going to sell it if I don't hit him up with some sort of idea of nostalgia or legacy or—"

"So what?" Annabel says.

"He bought it when I was twelve or so, right on the raw edge of my adolescence." He laughs. "The perfect place to take a woman."

"A woman?" Annabel asks. "Just any woman?"

Matthew squeezes her. "Not anymore."

The lake house is yellow with blue shutters. Annabel had expected wood, rustic and upscale rather than small and quaint.

"I like you," Matthew's father tells Annabel. He doesn't sell the house. He bequeaths it.

Matthew takes the first one—the first one Annabel knows about—into the house, parks and waits and sees and slips away.

Her name is Helen Deacon. She is in advertising. A quick search yields fourteen entries.

David is out of town with his high school debate club.

"Just any woman?"

Matthew takes a bite of his pizza, chews and frowns at her. "What?"

"What was it like?" She will not let go. Clamps on his evasion like a dog and jerks it around.

"No"—she will never forget the steadiness of his gaze—"Fairly missionary, start to finish. Satisfied?"

She does not believe him. "No kneeling?" Follows him room to room. "No floor work." The next day she does not get out of bed.

Matthew's marriage to Helen last less than a year. The woman he's seeing now, all her name renders is her web page at the University. She's an instructor in the history department. Almost seven years, Annabel notices, and she's not yet defended her dissertation.

Of course, she's young. She thinks she has time.

Each quarter Annabel tries to pick up on one other continuing education class in addition to her yoga. Last session she'd gone for Life Drawing, this session she's in Ballet for Beginners. During ron de jambs the girl in front of Annabel drops her head and sinks to her knees. Her white hand clenches the bar.

"Sherry?" Patrice says. Her eyes are on the girl, but she keeps the class going with the movement of her head.

Sherry shakes her head.

Annabel relaxes her position, releases the bar. "I'll take her out." She pulls Sherry up gently by the arm and leads her into the hall. "Want some water?" She asks. "Here's the fountain."

Sherry takes a short drink. Leans against the wall. Slides down to the floor. "Thanks. I don't know. I just got woozy."

Sherry's hair, like Annabel's is a natural blond, long and thick, pulled back into a severe ponytail. Annabel's hair is still an asset, but she sees its age, its thinning, in the mirror, beside old photographs, beside this careless girl.

"I've been feeling weird about a week. Not so much sick as"—she laughs—"what my mama always calls a low-grade virus."

"Maybe some crackers," Annabel says. "There's a machine around the corner."

"No." Sherry straightens her arms. "I'm fine now."

"Could you be pregnant?"

The arms go limp. The mouth, the eyes, everything opens and falls apart. Annabel sees it is a new idea and yet the likely answer. "Oh my God." She looks up at Annabel. "Maybe."

"Well," Annabel says. "Maybe not."

"No." Sherry shakes her head. "God damn it." Pushes up. "That's it. I just know it."

Annabel follows her back into the classroom. They're doing floor work. Annabel spots, using Sherry's soft white, perfectly curved ponytail. Afterwards Sherry pulls on her leotard and whispers. "I should go to the doctor, I reckon?"

"Do a home test first," Annabel says.

Sherry nods, lingers a moment before walking away.

Annabel looks away from the invitation. She rolls her right hand into her left and squeezes. She wants that baby. "Only, of course, if you don't want it, if you're only going to kill it anyway." Annabel leans down and fills her mouth with water from the fountain, trying to drown the words. She lingers. Watches the jazz class line up. On the way to her car, her phone in her bag goes off.

She knows it's Kenneth, the art director over at the press, before she answers.

"How was class?" That's the one thing about him that puts her off, but it's enough. The way he's pieced together her schedule and always seems to know where she is. "Want to meet me for a drink?"

"No. I feel a little woozy," Annabel says, "some low-grade virus." She hangs up.

A year before she and Matthew get married, in June, right around this same time, Annabel realizes she's pregnant. In July she has the abortion. They are young, living in two rooms, Matthew is still in school. The next year they aren't much better off, but they are married, more committed—or blind or delirious, more something—and Annabel is pregnant again, and she believes—still believes—David is a smart and persistent little bugger who gives them another chance to get it right.

And here it is June again. Forty-four is not too old. Perhaps she should have had that drink with Kenneth.

When she pulls into the driveway at home, she sees a pickup truck behind the building, notes the headboard and chairs. She steps out of her car.

"Hey."

Annabel looks and sees the boy from Rhea's apartment sitting on the steps. He extends a long, wiry arm down to her. "Nathan," he says. Opens up his hand.

She reaches up to clasp it and smiles. "Annabel," she says.

He grips hard and doesn't let go. "Come on up," he says. "Wait with me."

She takes the cigarette he offers, the first one she's smoked since 1977. "What are you waiting for?"

He nods at the end of the street. "You know," he says. "The bus."

She sits. "I don't think it stops here anymore."

He touches her arm. "Don't say that." He inhales. Watches the smoke blow up and around them. "I know I lost my ticket, but, hell, there's got to be a way to get another one." He tells her how he's screwed up, how he got sick, piled up some debt, lost his job. "I'm staying with Rhea until I get back on my feet."

"Doesn't it get"—Annabel exhales—"a little crowded up here?"

Nathan laughs. "Dan?" He shakes his head. "No, it's not like that. For a while, way back when, Rhea and I were involved, but right now, she's just helping me out."

"That's really nice." Annabel looks over her shoulder. Two guys—one of them stands on the truck bed, another the ground—struggle with a loveseat. "I suppose they've finally rented *C*."

Nathan rolls his eyes. "Graduate students," he whispers. "Jesus Christ, if they would move as much as they talk—"

"Don't lift that!" the guy on the truck calls out.

The lone woman has a sweet face, short curly black hair. "Okay!" She lowers the trunk to the ground. "I'm not an invalid, you know."

"Rhea's nice," Nathan says, "but at least she gets the charity thing out of it."

"*She* does?"

"Yeah," he says. "I was sort of a jerk back then. At least she gets to see me on my ass before I get back on my feet." His hand moves onto her thigh. "I've got brownies and beer inside," he says.

Annabel stands up and calls down to the woman. "Moving into *C*?"

The young woman looks up. Her eyes widen, she smiles. "Yes."

Annabel nods. Glances at the slight paunch pushing against the woman's flimsy cotton dress. "Well," she says. "Welcome." This too thin woman is pregnant.

"Well?" Nathan stands. His breath brushes her face.

Annabel drops the cigarette and grinds it on the metal step. She hesitates. David is sending her another one of his messages. *Be patient*, he says.

Annabel sees the woman arch her back and grimace. She has dark circles under her eyes.

This is my mistake.

Annabel touches Nathan's arm. He is a lovely boy. "Perhaps."

The woman rubs her ripe belly. Annabel watches, gasps, fills up once more with salvation and reparation.

"Well?" His lashes are long enough to tangle, his brown eyes somnolent, careless.

My life.

Annabel pats the top of his head. "No," she whispers.

Hannah Venus Is Dead

Signoff. Disconnect. Hannah Venus is dead. For two years we've tracked the cancerous assault via e-mail reports of hair loss, remission, reconstruction, blood count, right up to those final fatal invasions into the bone and brain. We have mined the subterranean secrets of a fragile beauty—*was the father abusive? the mother useless?*—unfulfilled ambition—*didn't she come home to write? back in the eighties? did she write? what?*—opulent lifestyle—*marble floors, honest-to-god marble floors.*

Not one of us know Tom, none of us had made it down to Florida for the wedding—*his third, her first*—but she appears in some of our ritual photos—*she's not smiling, not ever.* All of us notice for the first time, concur.

Mona Lisa, one of us offers. *No,* the rest insist, *Hannah Venus is Hannah Venus is Hannah Venus.*

What's in a name?

There of those of us who know he asked for a divorce two weeks before the diagnosis, but he retracts, and we demur. From Hannah we learn the secret to her chicken salad—*almonds*—and how she's changed—*no longer reads fiction*.

Can it be that the woman cannot see, does not understand death? We debate. *Dignity or Delusion*? We conclude, *Hannah Venus*. The answer resonates surely and discretely with us all.

Most of us attend the memorial. Some of us cry in our cars, some heave communally in the chapel, and at least two of us, only after grappling—illicitly, mortally—in a motel room out on Highway 81. *Hannah Venus*, we explain, before we drive away, back to the places where we live.

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