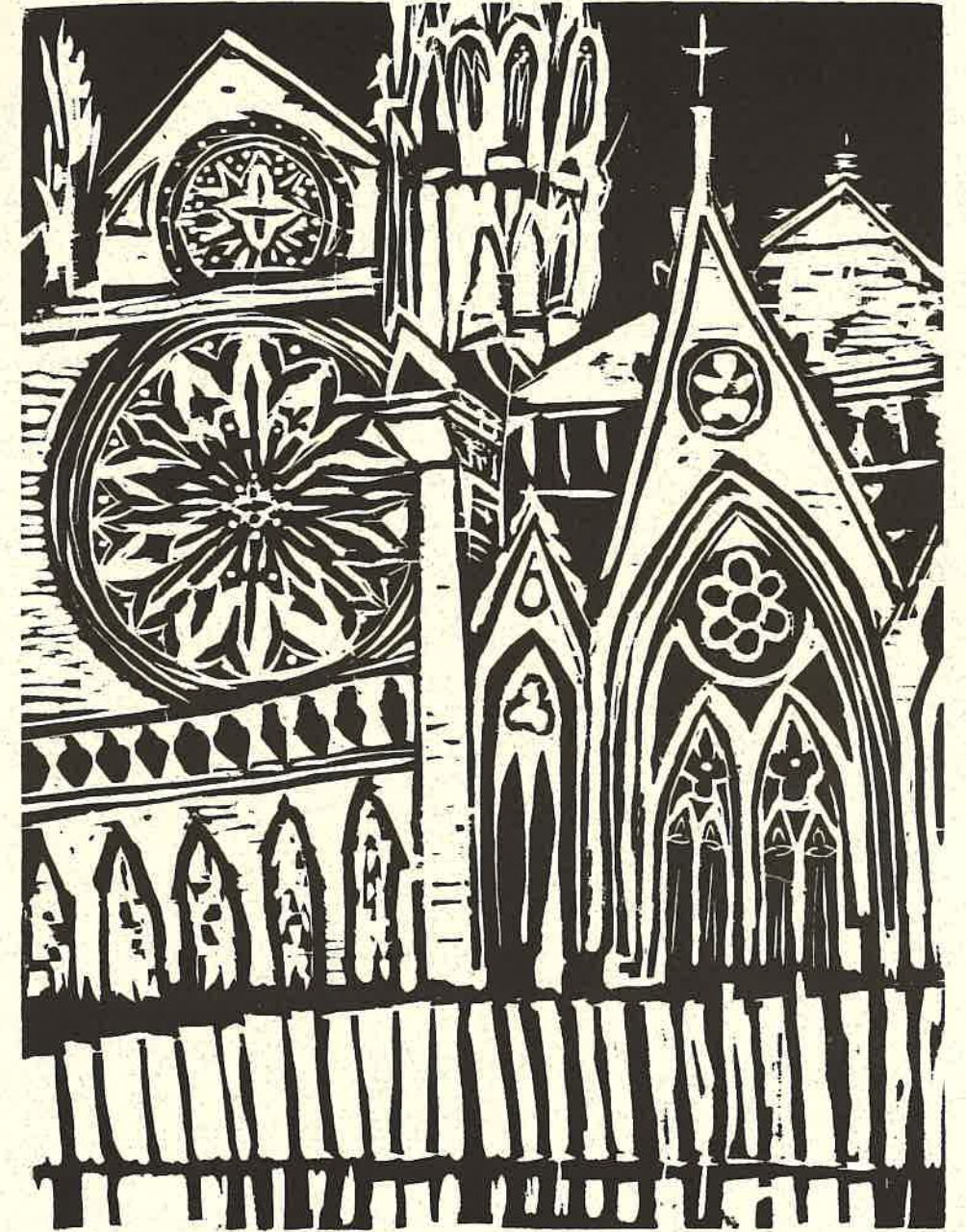


Writers' Festival Guests

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garret
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne Rivers Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, A. Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylias Moss, Sherman Yellen

Agnes Scott College

WRITERS' FESTIVAL



March 26-27, 1998

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL

MARCH 26-27, 1998

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Jamaica Kincaid, Thylia Moss, Sherman Yellen, and Agnes Scott alumna Jalaine Halsall.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. Kirk and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Mary Brown Bullock, Dean of the College Sarah Blanshei, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support.

March, 1998

Editor
Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Poetry: Waqas Khwaja and Steve Guthrie
Short Fiction: Bo Ball and Willie Tolliver
Personal Essay: Peggy Thompson and Christopher Ames
One-Act Play: Dudley Sanders and Linda Hubert

Cover Art
Laura Brandon

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of their authors and may be submitted for publication elsewhere. The Writers' Festival Magazine is printed by The Printing Store, 240 DeKalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30030.

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Poem by Treaah Caldwell

the rains came - the grey skies rolled
i ran aroud in in my jeans and t-shirt and made sure our ears were
bolted
down - down - down - down
mine had to be safe, i worried
Tamika and her dad had big rollers over theirs, their glass
wouldn't be blown out in the wind -
i ran to band, my clothes were soaked -
i was wet - i was late to band
Would Mr. A be mad?
My shirt was wet - could see through it -
my fat rolls jiggle as i ran and i could
see my bra - could others see it? -
those people in my head!
- i was so scared changing, by myself -
the storm was coming !!! the grey skies rolled
i wanted to go out to lunch with you - you left me
i called out to you, YOU were in MY car, and you
drove off middle fringer raised peeling out
. . . but my friends were in the car and not me. . .
Oh you beautiful boy - don't tell your parents you like boys.
Shhh . . .
Your blond hair blue eyes penetrate my soul!
i've always loved you, what do you mean -
- the airplanes whiz by my head. it scares me,
why are they making that noise?
There's ms. Cassell and ms. Vaughn . . . no, i won't mess it up,
your stupid jewerly isn't hurt - i didn't mess it up!
But, i have to find a seat and now i'm late and i have to
get a seat behind the white coloum and i can't see and i'm
frustrated.
You evil looking scarry are sitting in from of me. Your arms
are around those two whorey looking women, in church, in the pews,
your eyes
look like fire. Don't touch my foot
but the dreams i have.

Poem by Maudelle Driskell

The Mist Net

i

All But the Gloves

Tagging Project List: Five-gallon buckets, snubbed dykes, mist net, gloves, notebook, pencil, 200 aluminum tagging collars.

Hired boys drove the bush parrots
down the clearing,
spooked feather-tailed meteors
toward the net that gauzed the view,
softening trees and sky
the way the vaselined filters
used to shoot aging starlets
blend lines and makeup
to pastels and smooth memories.

He had in wait with him
everything but the gloves
as the first bodies thwacked
into the net above his hiding place,
snaring themselves in the gossamer,
throbbing like dark points, caught
flies, in a spider's web, hanging
between tree tops and earth.

He picked through methodically,
with no protection, untangling
with his thick, cracked fingers
the panting ones with dry tongues
slick as licorice, the still ones
with scaled eyelids, the broken
beaks and wings bent
at the wrong right angle until
they all were either tagged and released
or thrown into 5-gallon buckets
with an oyster shucker's wrist flick.

The creases of his fingers darkened
with the blood sawed out of him
while his hands, palms up
and exhausted as love, fluttered.

ii

In the Notebook, While Waiting

When the temperature changes, it
comes back, beading up
on the fogged glass pane
beside the door handle, that echo
of your breath, where you scrawled
"Bye Sam" with a single squeaking
finger on your way out for the last time,
late morning of last April 23rd —

finger oils on dirty glass
with the same mixture of innocence
and menace as four-toed baby feet
fisted into existence by school girls
on the fogged windows of Chevelles—

until the "Bye Sam" tags me,
pulls me off kilter, staggers
me, stops my climb,
and reminds me not to trust a sky
that may be hung with a mist net,
invisible as a gun-powder wish.

Poem by Sharie McCune

Colors of the Wind

An herb that lies sprouting,
it was gathered from the earth, pried
from hidden mines, the finest turquoise
buried like a common vein, a single thread,
set deep in darkness. Rich in feldspar
and phosphates, the elements of feathers,
hay and seaweed, its pigment changes
blue to green, as the sun evaporates its water.
The old ones called them *windstones,*
fire of the universe, the smoke of comets.
To charm the gods, it was worn for luck.
Beads were placed in the mouths of storytellers
to ensure their power of speech in the next life.

Their shaman told them: *Bones are seeds,*
but years are stones that give a measured
shape to time. From rocky matrix, artists
carved amulets and totems, inlaid knives,
made elaborate mosaics. They trapped
the interwoven net of sky and rain in *sea-foam,*
spider-web and *sleeping-beauty's* flawless hue.
Traders traveled through a bleak expanse
of rock and sand where wild datura bloomed
near pale pink flowers called Apaches' tears.
When hard winds blew across the land,
the Pueblos said the angry wind
was searching the desert for turquoise.

In the Mountains of Ortiz, above Cerrillos,
some still eat peyote, celebrate the stone,
watch its colors change, freeing patterns.
Women dream they are dancing, men
dream of the sky on white pillars, tell stories
of Spider Woman weaving the Path of Sould.
The sky was her loom and her spindle whorls
were made of turquoise. The elders tell of a boy
who carried the sun, of men who gave away
their souls for claws and wings. To ward off evil,
whole pueblos paint their doors and windows blue.

Poem by Delisa Mulkey

How the Monk Seal Betrayed Herself

*. . . it is well known that hidden in the dark pools of the eyes of certain seals are
spirits that call out to men. Once in a while such a seal will save the life of a
drowning sailor and will then be released from its beastly bindings.*

The Year of the Seal
Victor Schaffer

When the full moon floats through the dark
like a Portuguese Man O' War,
I cannot sleep. I lie in bed
wearing its luminescence like a pelt,
remembering the sea as another kind of night-
a night gnashing against the coral sands,
full of bubbled screams rising from behind,
from below, from the periphery where sharks
slide just outside vision as razors over taut skin,
where blood can never be absorbed, only dilate,
calling hunger to itself. How I longed to escape,
live in the dry air that has no thirst for light,
see the strong, hard earth holding my children . . .

There were stories of split-tailed creatures
who skimmed above the tide
but sometimes fell among us
and fought the dark-
hands clawed and teeth bared
they tried to eat the night.
If we stole one, lifted it,
runneled it to shore,
it would take us as a mate, deliver us
of the sea. I believed;
soon found a school of them . . .

Only my eyes remain the same. I stare
at them in the mirror when he sleeps.
They are tilled soil, my sloe-colored starburst
of land rich and damp. They are the only thing
left me. The thing I never knew I had. I am tired
of this constant breathing, the sun burning my skin,
my white feet always cold. The constant mating:
I am tired of his shifting eyes, those eyes ranging
green to blue, surging over me, crashing waves
as he foams in and out and in and out of me.

There is nothing left to do but dream
of rolling over him, rending muscle
from bone, of lying placidly in the sand,
my back green with algae, the sea foaming
around my muzzle. Nothing left to do
but dream of slapping him against the surface
until he cracks like a spiny lobster, of flying
through the thick salty sea fat and soft.
I have not escaped the night:
I have parted legs and let it crawl inside me.

Poem by Michelle Newcome

Canción

I.

We eat fallen lemons in secret. Savor the sour. See who can smack lips the loudest.
My nephew asks me, "Is God in the lemon tree Auntie Shell?" I am tempted to reply,

"Go ask your mother," as my father did when I asked him if he believed in God.
Instead, I shrug.

II.

Three of my father's friends take him to Tijuana when the radiation kicks in and his hair begins
to fall out.

He returns with a tattoo of Our Lady of Guadalupe on his arm and a tiny gold cross
in his ear.

My sister and I take turns holding the hands of all the men who come bearing stories
and leave wearing sunglasses.

III.

On his birthday we take the last quarter of ashes to Rosarito Beach. We want the wind to
carry them over the ocean, but they catch on rocks, turn to lumps, cling to our bare feet.

Please. Just one question.

But no wave comes — until a snatch of music from a balcony rolls in with the water.

Poem by Valerie Park

The curve of the earth

You can never
go home
again.

Climbing the ladder of the map thru
the mittened hand and the flying fish
to foothills that pass for mountains;

marking stories of chemical love
in the towns of promise:
Climax. Paradise. Hell.

An '87 Yugo flips from the bridge
and disappears just on the Huron side.
One passenger lost.

An underwared woman jumps from the Ambassador span.
She can't swim.
Her leg is hacked off by a rotating motor blade. She drowns.

The call girls eye the weary virgins
with contempt and envy
in the only hotel that will have them.

The sandy mama bear makes it across the lake, to rest.
Her cubs drown in the azure,
forever just within her sight;

The longshoremen with the strongarm union
buckle down container ships
from seasonal toss.

Prickly militia truants camping out at Heath Beach
shooting shit up,
reloading, reloading;

Shots fired at the 10-story
rubber and steel all-season Goodrich radial.
Terrorists are not implicated.

Waterlogged. Landlocked.
Furtrapped. Cherrypicked.

You can never leave home again.

Poem by Brook Partner

by immersion

she's deep, dark, pretty blue
wading down the stairs
water lap up her legs
soak her pretty blue
soak her, her pretty blue

rachel follows after
and naomi
three pretty blue ones
yellow haired ones
up to their waists
up to their armpits
big girls in the little tile pool

slowly, lower, backwards
cradled bottomward
headed for the warm water
hand at a neck
hand at the arcing belly
face unnatural
upside down in water

trust in the elder
the bald man
the soaker of girls
faith in the elder, the speaker, the breaker of bread
the pourer of wine won't hold you too long
the pourer of wine won't hold you too long.

Poem by Jill Russell

Offering

The night after my friend died,
my father watches me from his place at the table
as I decide the fate of the meal.

With every swallow his eyes go deeper,
hoping the food will stay with me.
He lets himself relax
when I have eaten most of the potato,
is pleased that I stretch my arm out for butter,
the plastic carton of sour cream.
He can offer me food.

He forks a heavy steak onto my plate,
a glass filled with ice and the open Coke can,
waits on me like a sick child.

He takes pride in his steaks, only now
after two years can he watch my stepbrother
drown the meat in A-1 without flinching,
without saying he is destroying the flavor
of his steak, ruining what makes it
my father's creation. My brother and I,

as children, never dared to ask for steak sauce,
knew the slabs carefully salted and basted, turned over the fire,
were his contribution, like the grilled cheese sandwiches
and scrambled eggs. He could make them
into miracles. Now, he offers me his miracle,
simple as garlic and salt,
and I let it melt inside me to give back
to him from my grief, to show I have taken
what is given.

Poem by Hannah Slagle

Self Portrait

"I Don't Know What I Want"
As photographed by her lover.
Featuring a young woman in t-shirt and panties.
In a seated pose with birthday cake.
With mediocre icing. With a smudge on her shirt.
Looks like chocolate icing but this is black and white film.
And a bikini strap translates as esoteric lime gray.

They chose a standard backdrop. Deliberately generic
For well angled thighs. Starring: Her Navel.
Because her expression is blocked by tassels of drying hair.
Because she's leaning back on two sticky palms
To study that cake mark on her shirt.

Poem by Stacie Patrice Stermole

Oatmeal

For Mom

In winter,
if I woke at 5:00 am
to the faint strains of motion,
I would be allowed to watch
my mother dress for work
and to join her for a hot breakfast
with the icy morning frost
glaring with envy through the dark window panes.

I would listen intently for the footsteps
on the creaking floorboards,
and, hearing my cue, descend
from the top bunk, careful to avoid
stepping on my brother's unsuspecting face
and careful to keep from
bumping the baby's crib
on the way through the dark
to the slot of light beneath the door.

All these are shades of brown:
the instant shock of bare feet on the floor;
my mother's eyelashes and curls;
the stained formica table;
the stately hutch that held the golden
glass bowls saved for Thanksgiving,
visitors, and my cherished oatmeal mornings;
and a snapshot of me in my pink nightgown
smiling without my two front teeth.

And these were always the longest
ten minutes of my life,
ending as she pushed back my bangs
and kissed my forehead,
sending me back to my bed. But instead
I would crawl into the empty space she'd left
under the chocolate blanket,
drifting drift back to sleep
to the sound of the station wagon
retreating between the snowdrifts,
my stomach as full as my heart.

Fiction by Kelly Daniels

Flatmates

The words on the page entered Eli's mind to the quick groove of the sound of Robert playing video football. When he first started the book he had assumed that the words would mean something by the end of the sentence, and then he figured that the sentences would make sense by the time they became paragraphs. Later, Eli hoped that the paragraphs would cohere into chapters. Now, after 231 pages, Eli read on with blind trust, charging through incomprehension toward that final chapter, final paragraph, final sentence and final word that would reveal the hidden meanings like flicking a light switch.

He tapped his foot on the coffee table and glanced at the television, which beeped and buzzed and played video game synthesizer songs while Robert, sitting Indian-style a foot from the television, added a steady random stream of "harsh" and "excellent" as the game progressed well or poorly for him. Eli adjusted his glasses and turned the page of his book. "Harsh." The word came out Germanic and guttural and was immediately followed by "Excellent," mellifluous and smooth, the "e" high-pitched and stressed and the "xc" sustained, blending into the last two syllables and fading to the not-quite-articulated "t."

Joanne clopped down the hall carrying an acoustic guitar by the neck. She stepped over the back of the love seat and sat. Eli clenched his jaw. Something about her had been bothering him lately. Maybe it was her hairdo, too blow dried and fluffy; or maybe it was that her eyes were a little too close together and her nose a bit too long. Still, his gaze lingered around her exposed belly button and moved up her halter-top where her nipples pushed the stretchy material. Eli lifted the book, positioning it between his face and the figure of Joanne.

She strummed the guitar and started singing a song.

"You might want to consider tuning that guitar." Eli didn't look up from his book.

"It's in tune."

"Harsh."

"Either the high E is sharp or the rest of the strings are flat."

Robert, Eli, and Joanne had met three weeks before.

"Harsh."

"Excellent."

Joanne turned the high E tuning peg. She strummed, then sang. Eli looked at her over his book and shook his head slightly. "Excellent." She finished the song. "I think Bob Dylan's songs sound better when women sing them." "Excellent." "Excellent." Joanne put the guitar down. "What are you reading?"

Eli didn't look up from his book. "*Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon."

"What's it about?" "Harsh."

Eli didn't respond for a moment, then he closed the book, keeping the page with his index finger. He took his feet off of the coffee table and sat up. He slipped a card into the book (queen of diamonds) and placed the book on the table. "It's hard to say."

Joanne blinked, then blinked again.

"It seems to be about a lot of things."

Robert tapped the controls of his game frantically. "Ex-ex-ex-excell—harsh!"

Joanne rubbed her belly and swirled her index finger around her belly button. "I don't really read books. I don't see the point." She sat up straight and adjusted her spandex top. "I just read the backs. I'm just interested in the *point* of the book, you see?"

Eli looked her in the eyes for the first time since the conversation had begun. "You know

what I hate about you? You stand for everything I despise in this world." He closed his eyes and gestured, stuttering. "The food that you leave rotting in the sink, the stupid fights you have with John, your cats that shit all over the place, I hate how you're always running late for work, your sloppiness, your banality, your obviousness . . ." Robert looked over his shoulder.

The three of them had decided, upon meeting at the roommate referral office, that they might as well get an apartment together rather than take their chances moving in with perfect strangers. Who knows what kind of weirdoes they could have ended up with? Besides, they already had something in common. They all liked music.

"Eli, you are a *trip*." Joanne started laughing.

Eli stood up and took two steps, came back for his book, and went into his room. Before he closed the door he heard Robert say, "excellent," but quieter than before.

*

Eli woke to the sound of loud words. Without opening his eyes he hit the snooze button on his alarm clock. The voices continued. He hated when the alarm went off between songs on the radio. He hit the snooze again before he realized that the voices were coming from the kitchen. He opened his eyes. It was ten o' clock. He worked nights and never set his alarm before two.

He sighed, got up, and watched the spectacle from his doorway.

"What are you talking about?" John wore a bathrobe. He lived with them now. Every time Eli saw him he had the impression of seeing him for the first time. He had the type of face that people either don't notice or forget immediately. If anything made him look different from all the other nameless in the world it was that he was an inch or two over the average height, that and how his jaw muscles always seemed to be pulsing.

Joanne, dressed in her blue and tan Discount Travel uniform, slid a plate smeared with broken egg and toast bits into the stack of dirty plates in the sink as smoothly as a magician doing a card trick. "You know what I'm talking about John so shut up."

"How can I know what you're talking about if you don't even know what you're talking about?"

"Shit John, I'm already fifteen minutes late, now get out of my way."

"Not until you talk to me."

She tried to push by him but he grabbed her arm and held. She found a half a grapefruit on the counter and mashed it against his face. The grapefruit dropped to the linoleum, leaving him staring at her, still holding her arm, a piece of the sticky fruit stuck to the end of his nose. He picked up the coffeepot and upended it over her head. They stood staring at one another for a moment. The coffee had been there since yesterday. "You . . . idiot."

He put the pot down. "I'm sorry."

She turned and headed for the bathroom saying, "shit, shit, shit, shit . . ."

John followed behind her. "I'm sorry Jo. Really . . ."

*

Eli came home to find Robert playing guitar on the stoop. When Robert saw him he stopped playing and opened the steel gate before Eli could get his keys out. They sat on the steps together. "What's going on?"

"Just grooving, watching the people walk by."

Eli lit a cigarette while Robert picked up the guitar. "Maybe we should get Joanne an electronic tuner for Christmas," said Eli.

"That's a good idea, man."

Two homeless men sat down with their backs against the gate. Eli flicked his cigarette at them. It bounced off one of the men's shoulders and landed next to him. "Hey, check it out." He picked up the burning cigarette. "Buttes are falling from heaven."

"Right on man, give me a drag." The men sat shoulder to shoulder, smoking. Thick slow smoke rings rose like sensuous halos over their heads and twisted away into nothing against the flashing neon sign background.

"Tell me something Robert. How can you stand her?"

He twisted a tuning peg. "Let's go inside. I'll show you." Eli read the list of concert dates and places on the back of Robert's Grateful Dead tee shirt as he was led to Robert's bedroom. Two out of the four walls were covered in tapes and CDs. The other walls contained all the primary colors and most of the colors in between. "Here's my secret." He took a wooden box out of the closet. Inside were a pan, a pot, silverware, a cup, a plate, a bowl, a sponge, and a bottle of dish soap. "I do my dishes in the bathroom. You see, the kitchen sink is a negative place, and I choose not to deal with negativity."

*

Eli came out of the bathroom wearing a towel. He paused as he passed Joanne and John's room. No one else was home. He looked up and down the hall and pushed the door. The floor was covered in clothes, candy bar wrappers, fast food bags, soda cans, and other debris. A cat licked a plate on the bed. He stepped in. There were some Polaroids of Joanne and John tacked to the wall. A dresser drawer was open. He ran his hand through the lacy contents. The closet was open. Eli poked around, wondering what he was doing, what he was looking for. Behind a jacket he found a stack of videotapes. Eli went through the pornographic titles but selected a black tape with no writing on it. He left the room and quietly closed the door. In the living room he looked out the windows and made sure the door was locked, then put the tape in the VCR. Before the screen brightened the sound of flesh slapping flesh came through the speaker. The screen slowly revealed John moving ridiculously fast behind Joanne. John stood on the floor and Joanne was on hands and knees on the bed; the camera had been set up to get a side shot of the action. For each thrust, a wave of flesh reared up in the ocean of Joanne's left bun and crashed on the thin sandy beach of her waist. John bit his lip and wore an expression that would suggest that he, not Joanne, was being penetrated.

Eli watched until he felt his penis thicken in his pants. He ejected the tape thinking, I will not be turned on by these people. He returned the tape exactly where he had found it, between *Tea Baggers* and *Double Fucked by Two Black Studs*. He covered the tapes with the jacket.

*

Eli pulled a wrinkle out of his bedspread and stretched out on his belly. He opened his address book and flipped through the pages; many of the names and numbers had been crossed out or changed. At the K's he put his finger under Katie. He dialed the long distance number and rolled over. "May I speak to Katie?"

"Who?"

"Katie."

"She doesn't live here man."

"Hmm, you don't know how to get a hold of her?"

"Naw, she moved out when I moved in six months ago. She's long gone. I heard she went of Alaska or some shit."

"All right, thanks."

"You know there are ten men to every woman in Alaska? Can you imagine how much she's getting laid?"

Eli hung up. He continued to turn the pages of his book, but didn't dial any more numbers.

He joined Joanne in the living room where she watched television. The lights were off. Her face was lit up occasionally with the pale blues of television light. "So what's going on with you?" He asked her.

*

Eli walked quickly, head down, from the bathroom to his bedroom. John and Joanne sat on the couch in the living room. "You come in here without a shirt, your lipstick smeared; what the fuck have you been doing?"

"I kicked you out last night, so I don't want to hear a thing."

He closed his door and lay down on the bed. In a loud voice John said, "I'll kill him."

*

Eli steamed a pitcher of milk with his back turned to the customers. He filled a shooter with ground espresso and jerked it into the machine. The phone rang above the buzz of the customers. He answered while moving the pitcher under the steamer. "Muddy Waters Café."

"Eli? It's Joanne. I don't have time to talk. John knows it's you, but I'm denying it. I told him that I spent the night with some Brazilian guy from the party. He could handle that, but I don't know what he'll do if he ever really knows that it was me in your room this morning."

The milk boiled over and burned Eli's hand. "Shit."

"Shit is right. Come up with some plan. You've got to be able to tell him who was in your bed. She's got to have black hair. He noticed the black hair."

"All right."

"I've got to go. Whatever you do, don't admit anything."

Eli turned around and faced the customers.

*

He opened the door slowly and crept to his room in the dark. He sat on his bed and looked around at the clothes strewn across the floor. The door opened. Robert stuck his head into the room and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

"Hey man, I just want to warn you John is freaking out. He knows about you and Joanne."

"How do you know about it?"

"Well, I guess everybody knows about it."

Eli lay back. "Shit, shit, shit."

"I just wanted to tell you that maybe you shouldn't sleep here tonight. John is sending some serious vibes."

"I'm too tired for this. I don't have anywhere else to stay."

"Take a sleeping bag and stay in the park." Robert looked up and far away. "I used to do it all the time. The stars and the moon, and Dewlap and I in the sleeping bag. We were hitching across the US, sleeping mostly at rest stops. One time we woke up in the morning with all these people around, a bunch of kids were on some field trip or something. We were so in tune with things that we made love right in front of everyone. It was a really free feeling."

"Stop, you're making me want to cry."

Robert came back to the room. "It might do you some good. Give you some time to think."

The kitchen light went on. Eli and Robert froze. They both stared at the wall as if watching a movie. Sounds of pots clanking and water running filtered in through the wall. The light went off and they could hear John retreat down the hall. A sudden screech caused them to jump. Experimental jazz poured loud and chunky out of Eli's radio alarm. A lone saxophone honked to a rhythm not meant for dancing.

"Well, later." Robert took his leave. John walked into the room.

"I'd like to talk to you."

Eli started gathering clothes off of the floor. "Oh yea, about what?"

"About who was in your bed this morning."

The piano, sax, and guitar didn't seem to be listening to each other, but somehow the bass and drums reached out and touched each, keeping them connected. Eli had two ways to play it,

he figured in that cacophonous moment; his first guilty instinct was to be the concerned buddy, wondering why John would ask such a question, but he realized that would be fatal. Instead, Eli created a past in which he had never fucked John's girlfriend, and in this new reality as well as the old reality he didn't like John, resented his moving in uninvited and at this point had had enough of him.

He tossed an armload of clothes in the closet. "Who the fuck's business is it who I slept with last night?"

"Well, I thought—"

"Maybe you'd better stop thinking about me and start thinking about yourself. You've really got to get your shit together."

"Hey, just calm down" He backed toward the door. "I was just asking."

"Well, if you're so curious, it was an old girlfriend I ran into at a party in the Mission."

John hesitated at the door. "All right," he said, and left.

Eli sat down at his desk and breathed out. "Wow," he said to himself. A shrill trumpet note felt like a nail driven into his temple. He climbed onto the bed to and reached for the clock. The door burst open and John stood before him with a baseball bat in his hands.

He stepped toward Eli and raised the bat. "You lie. Joanne went to a party in the Mission too." The bat came down on the radio. The music played on, but now the trumpet scales mixed with static as the station went out of tune. John smashed it again, and now the radio only emitted a loud fuzz.

Eli rolled off the bed and crawled toward the door. John swung the bat at a shelf full of trinkets. Eli watched his glow-in-the-dark statuette of the Virgin of Guadalupe fly into shards against the wall.

*

The noise in his room came soft and muffled to the chilly street. Eli watched his breath blossom out into white clouds and rise away. Up in the room, John's silhouette continued to smash Eli's shadow belongings. A window opened and the clock radio flew through the night and clattered across the street, dragging the cord behind it like a broken tail. Books started flapping down like sick birds, followed by the wooden bookshelf, which cracked on the sidewalk but stayed upright though oddly angled. My furniture is becoming surreal, thought Eli. He heard laughter from the entryway of the recently-closed-by-the Department of Health, Pork Store Café. A small orange glow hovered like a firefly in the darkness.

"Your old lady kicking your shit right on out."

Eli watched the glowing dot dance back and forth and flare up, exposing shining eyes. Nothing had fallen for a little while. John pushed Eli's futon mattress against the window frame, but it wouldn't fit. Eli picked up a jacket off of the street and then found a blanket. He lit a cigarette and walked over to the glowing point.

"Hey brother, I was just telling Curly about when my old lady threw all my stuff out the window thirty years ago."

"What did you do?"

"What did I do? What could I do? I sat myself down and thought about it for awhile."

"Oh yea," said Curly, "what did you come up with after all that thinking?"

The other man flicked a lighter and sucked the flame into a joint. He held his breath and blew a white cloud into the city-choked sky. "I can't tell you. I haven't stopped thinking about it yet." He held the joint between his thumb and forefinger up to Eli, who sat on the concrete and accepted it. He inhaled deeply and tasted pot and a strong chemical flavor. Eli leaned back against the former door of the Pork Store. The talking stopped as the joint circled around again.

Eli swallowed and couldn't feel his throat. His mouth and tongue had also gone numb. He

"Nothing. John and I got in a fight. I threw him out. He probably won't be back until after the weekend."

"I'm sure you'll work it out."

"Yea, but I wonder where he goes when he disappears. I really think he's crazy, not wild and crazy like everyone around here, but crazy crazy." She pointed to her head.

"Seems like most of the truly insane look like Republicans."

"Exactly. Did I ever tell you how we got together?"

Eli shook his head in the flickering light.

"I was temping for one of the big law firms and he was just one of those young suit-guys. I mean these guys turn me on about as much as . . . well, not very much. Any way, John asks me out for a drink after work, so I figure, hey, free drink, and so we have a couple and he's about what I expected but I'm getting a little buzzed so it wasn't so bad. After a while he says 'let's take a walk,' so we do, and before long we're in this porno shop and looking at all these dildos and cock rings and nipple clamps and I'm totally surprised this guy is taking me here. Then, out of the blue he says 'you want to rent a video camera and buy some stuff and go to a hotel room and make a movie?' and I'm just blown away."

"You went with him?"

"Well, if he was like a cool guy I might not have, but since he was such a nerd I felt embarrassed to say no. It was like a challenge to see if I was really as wild as I acted. So we did it." She lit a cigarette and tossed the lighter to Eli. "And it's been like that ever since. Most of the time he's that boring suit, but sometimes he goes crazy." She took a drag and blew it out. The smoke settled around the room like a fog bank. I think that's why I mess with him all the time. I'm always waiting to see what the crazy side will do next."

The program ended.

"So what are you doing tonight?" she asked.

"I've got nothing going on."

"Well, John and I were going to go to this party. A bunch of Brazilians are throwing it in the Inner Mission. Want to go?"

*

The flat was getting crowded. The music was too loud for talking, if it could be called music. Actually it was just a big, heavy beat, vibrating through everyone and everything. Everybody danced. Eli held a bottle of wine and swayed with the music. He had lost his jacket and hat. People rubbed up against him on all sides. He could see Joanne dancing in the middle of it all. One man moved in front of her and another behind. A woman with hair down past her waist danced up against Eli. She spread her legs to either side of him and slid herself up and down his body. A new group of people pushed into the room, carrying odd shaped drums and stringed instruments. The music stopped. A space was cleared for the newcomers. Eli recognized them as the band from the Turkish café down the street.

The music started slowly and sensuously. A belly dancer with finger cymbals moved in a snakelike rhythm. The partygoers followed along. Articles of clothing started dropping from sweating bodies. Eli and Joanne met in front of the band. Eli, Joanne and the belly dancer locked eyes, and formed an exclusive triangle. Joanne wore only jeans and a bra. Eli had also lost his shirt. Joanne turned her back to him and pressed against him. The tempo increased. The partygoers started clapping together, faster and faster. Eli put his hands on Joanne's belly, then moved them up to her breasts. The belly dancer rang her cymbals on either side of their heads. Joanne turned around and bit Eli's lower lip and pulled him to her. He grabbed her by the hair and jerked her neck back, then put his teeth to her neck and bit softly. She grabbed his ear and pulled it down to her mouth. "Let's go." She stuck her tongue into his ear.

*

In the silent and still atmosphere of the car Joanne said, "What if John is home?"

"If he's home none of this ever happened."

"And if he's not," she looked over at him, "we fuck."

John was not home.

*

She took her pants off and stood before him in panties and bra. "I like your room. It's so clean; it's like a hotel room."

Eli pulled her bra off over her head without unclasping it, kneeled and pushed her panties down to her ankles. He buried his face in her thick black hair, sinking his fingers into her ass cheeks and smashing her to him.

She stepped out of the panties and fell face first onto the bed. She lifted her ass into the air. He undressed and climbed onto the bed over her. He guided himself into her and pulled out, then pressed himself against the other hole. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed into her while pulling her onto him. The muscles in his arms stood out with the strain.

"Yes," she mumbled into the pillow.

*

Eli dreamt that John walked into the room with the midday sun coming in through the windows. "Eli, have you seen Joanne?" Eli's mouth wouldn't work right to answer. Clothes, including a black pair of panties, were strewn all over the floor. An unraveled condom perched on the bookcase. Joanne lay face down with her hair spread across the pillow, covered up to her mid-back with a blanket. Eli looked down at himself spread-eagle and uncovered with one leg over Joanne. "Oh, sorry." John turned and left.

*

"I can't believe John was in here." Joanne whispered to Eli.

Eli sat up. "What do you mean?"

"He walked in here, in the room. He's in the house right now."

Eli looked around and fell back to the bed. He put his hands to his face.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Okay, we need to think. We need a plan."

"Yea we do. He could kill us. He really could."

"You need to get out of this room."

Joanne got out of bed and started putting on her clothes. "Shit, I left my blouse at the party."

"Here's what we'll do. I'll go and talk to him, and if you hear that he isn't in the living room or the kitchen go outside and pretend to come home."

"What about my shirt?"

"Look for it in your car." Eli got up, stumbled, and righted himself against the wall. He took some deep breaths, slipped on a robe and left the room. He found John cleaning their bedroom. Eli leaned against the doorjamb. "Hey, what's up?"

John looked up. "Oh, just straightening up a bit. You haven't seen Joanne have you?"

Eli seemed to think for a moment. "I saw her last night. She was going to a party. Why, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing. We just had a fight. We both said things we didn't mean and she threw me out. I saw her car outside but she's not here. I'm just a little worried about her. Did you notice if anyone picked her up or not?"

"No, I wasn't paying attention." Eli pushed himself away from the doorjamb. "Well, I'm off to the shower. See ya."

Eli locked the door behind him and turned the water on hot.

breathed in and out deeply and swallowed, trying to feel something of his insides, but he was hollow. Pieces of clothing floated down silently and settled on the street before him like snowflakes.

Fiction by Gregg Johnson

The Girl with Perfect Skin

Through the ragged weave of elbows and purses, Claudia catches glimpses of them leaning on the balcony rail. Her husband grips the rail with both hands as if holding on during a storm, while the girl leans on her folded arms. If Claudia had remembered her Smithsonian guidebook, she could pretend to read. If she hadn't packed the boys off to her mother's house, she could busy herself explaining the pendulum, pointing from the waxy floor below the balcony to the ceiling where the steel cable is anchored. She is left with nothing to do but stare down at the brass ball like all the other tourists, watching it swing across the marble floor to the far end of the room below them and rock back to the wall somewhere beneath the balcony. A shoulder moves and she sees Ben settle his hand on Linda's shoulder and point down at the brass ball. Linda's head falls back and she laughs, displaying her small white teeth. shiny

The guard at the front door had smiled at them. A family, he must have thought. Claudia shook her head, wanting to explain that Linda wasn't her daughter, that she had met her only five minutes earlier on the museum steps, and already regretted it. When a man beside her snaps a photograph with a flash attachment, the light explodes around her, silver triangles darting at her eyes.

Her mistake: she has promised to spend an entire Saturday strolling through the Smithsonian. The night before, it had seemed like a good idea. Ben said that Linda and two men from the company wanted to tag along, but the men overslept, and now it looks as though the three of them are stuck with one another for the day.

She shouldn't have boarded the plane. Ben had been right; she had been on enough business trips to last a life-time. This was the first time in over two years that she had tagged along, and she felt spoiled now, too slow to laugh at the jokes of the people he introduced, too easily tired to want to stay out drinking with the salesmen he joked about back at the hotel. She should be in Charlottesville with her sons and her mother, who had left a message at the hotel. Claudia's father is in the hospital with pneumonia. Just a touch. The doctors say he'll be out in a day. Claudia hasn't seen her parents in almost a year and knows her mother wants her there. But the boys are eight and nine, old enough not to cause much trouble, and her mother would tell her if the pneumonia grew serious. She explained it would be hard to get away and her mother didn't press.

Along the balcony rail, there is no sign of Ben and Linda. Shouldering her way through the crowd, she finally she spots them over by the narrow entrance to an exhibit room. Linda is his vice-president of marketing. About twenty-five, she looks. Claudia hadn't expected her to dress so well, but doesn't regret her own blue jeans. No reason to worry if someone else is silly enough to overdress. The plaid skirt, the nice blue sweater, a button-up with tiny round pearls for buttons, it's all too much for a day at the museum. When Claudia reaches them, Linda takes off the sweater and the creamy blouse beneath it looks like real wool. Linda won't look at her. The girl pushes a long blond strand of hair away from her eyes. Claudia looks at the girl's hands, hoping for a ring, for rings, nail polish the color of blood, but the small hands are sleek, uncomplicated. A pretty girl, really. Her blouse, though, has one too many buttons undone, exposing the thin gold chain on her throat. Claudia stops herself before she reaches up to touch her own throat.

Ben's thin arm slides around her and she squeezes her arms close to her side. Soon he'll ask if she's flying out to see her parents tonight. He'll say he needs to know-- they need to change

their plans for the concert tonight. He likes to play the thoughtful husband.

"Don't," she says.

Ben drops his hands, exaggerates his shrug like a fifteen-year old. Outside, the April sunlight would be nice. Along the mall, cherry trees and dogwoods are in bloom, some of the fleshy white flowers already fallen and lying limp on the close-cropped grass.

"Should we buy a map?" Claudia asks.

"Better to just walk around," Ben says.

Linda pushes her hair out of her eyes again. "That's what I think,"

Out-numbered, Claudia follows them into the exhibit room. She hasn't been to the Smithsonian since she turned nine years old. She likes the large rooms, the high ceilings, wants to stand in the powdery spring light falling from the tall windows, but her feet already hurt. A big room would be nice, a big empty room where she could sit down. They step into a narrow exhibit room, almost a hall, a dark hall lined with bright glass cases.

"Gloomy," Ben says, and he's right. In the glass cases, tall mannequins in white powdered wigs wear heavy eighteenth-century dresses. Thick cotton, yellowing lace. Linda stops to look at one dress and Ben and Claudia stop behind her.

"I like this one," Linda says. "Pretty."

Ben says it's pretty, too. "And either of you would look pretty in it. I'll walk on ahead and you can catch up with me later."

"But you know," he says to Claudia, "You need to make up your mind about flying out tonight. The concert, remember?"

He strolls off into the shadows between the bright glass cases. In the cab he had talked about an airplane he wants to see. Lindbergh's plane, he thinks, but he wants to be sure. He'll wander the halls, going in and out of buildings along the mall until he finds it.

"Funny," Linda says. "He flies all over the country to sales meetings, and now he wants to look at airplanes."

Claudia feels the girl's bright eyes move across her and makes her face immobile. She concentrates on the dress behind the glass. She can imagine the feel of the stiff material against her skin, the weight of heavy cotton across her shoulders and arms. Something presses on her arm. Linda leans close, conspiratorial. She has a perfect complexion. Peaches and cream. Claudia noticed it first thing, hoped it was Clinique. Now, even in the florescent light from the display cases, she can see there's little make-up.

"You know, Ben's wrong," Linda whispers. The girl increases the weight on Claudia's arm. "It has that black trim around the hems and collar. I'm too fair for it. Bet it would look good on you, though."

Claudia looks at Linda's face reflected in the glass case.

"You use an exfoliant."

The girl leaves her little hand on Claudia's arm.

"No, not really."

"Then you have perfect skin."

She shrugs her shoulders. "Lucky, I guess."

Her eyes on the heavy dress behind the thick glass, Claudia slips to one side so the girl's hand slides off her arm. Claudia hoped the girl wouldn't be like this. She taps the glass at the next case. "This one's pretty, too."

"I don't look at clothes much. Not that important to me."

"That blouse you're wearing looks awfully nice."

"I stole it from the museum."

"Ben likes clothes," Claudia says quickly, not wanting to smile. She can feel the girl look at

her but she looks at the heavy dress behind the glass. "He appreciates a girl who dresses right."

Before the girl can answer, Claudia turns beside one of the glass cases, darts past a young couple kissing in the dark, and almost runs into a display case filled with weapons. An ax, muskets with chipped barrels, and a pike so tall that the tip of its triangular blade touches the top of the glass case. She turns and finds herself at the entrance to a large gallery, its walls lined with dark oil paintings. In one corner a tour group surrounds a tall young guide in a blue blazer. Claudia keeps to the opposite corner and strolls past the paintings. Portraits, mostly. The gray faces are stodgy or cruel, but having the time to herself with the dull paintings reminds her of how she always managed to find time to be alone when she traveled with Ben.

Did she come just to prove to herself that she was still up to it? Her marriage had made her into a professional tourist. Sometimes with her sons, sometimes alone, she has visited almost every attraction created for the purpose of extracting funds from those with nothing better to do than drive or fly to an unknown city. She has visited three civil war museums, marched across eight battlefields and two Indian burial mounds, toured art museums endowed by robber barons and ships anchored at port by profit-minded city councils. She has perched on miniature trains in New Jersey, on ski lifts in Georgia, and huddled in a glass bottomed boat in a dark cave in North Carolina. She has seen Williamsburg, Chattanooga, Memphis, and Seattle. She has played a set of tennis in January in Boca Raton. She has slept in good hotels in New York, Boston, Newbury Port, and New Orleans, and eaten at the worst oyster bar in Richmond. She has no desire to experience it all again, but she does not particularly regret that she has experienced any of it, except the oysters in Richmond, where she locked herself in the bathroom of their hotel suite and vomited all night into an antique porcelain sink with a gold faucet fashioned in the shape of a swan.

On her last trip two years ago--they had flown to Hartford--she realized it was time to stop. While Ben listened to an afternoon sales presentation, she took a cab to Mark Twain's house and spent the day in the garden he shared with Harriett Beecher-Stowe. Sitting on a stone bench in the garden, surrounded by flowers, she watched young couples trail groggily behind their screaming children through the rows of swaying tulips and orchids, and she had felt their tiredness, the weariness she knew from travelling with her two sons. The feeling had followed her home and lingered there the next two years.

She didn't know what to make of the telephone call after Thanksgiving. The boys lay on the floor in the den, watching a tape of the Macy's parade, when the telephone rang. Showers of white confetti, spirals of arching ticker-tape draped the fat balloon of Bullwinkle and a bloated Donald Duck. She knew the woman who called. Betty Anniston, a big woman married to one of the accountants with the firm. Claudia had met her at the company Christmas party and sometimes saw her when one of the other wives had them over for dinner. Claudia couldn't recall her face, but she remembered the cotton dress the woman had worn to one party, the white dress covered with enormous yellow flowers. On the telephone, the woman asked about the boys, about their Thanksgiving, and invited her over for dinner. Claudia had managed to beg off, telling her that Ben always worked late now. Claudia wasn't sure the woman actually said what it sounded like she said before hanging up. If she said it, she said it beneath her breath, in a murmur. "I don't think you have much to worry about there," Claudia thought she heard the woman say. "They just go out to lunch."

Claudia remembered the cheap dress with the big flowers and remembered the enamel earrings, big white daisies that shook and clattered when the woman talked. Over the next few months, the first feeling fell away, the sliding sensation like the sensation she feels when she stands up too quickly. Now, some other sensation seems near--she can sometimes glimpse it--but it retreats if she tries to find it, as if she's being followed by someone who hides when she stops

and turns to look behind her.

Through an open door she can see into the main lobby. Ben strides out the door into the bright April sunlight, determined in his quest for the Lindbergh plane. Seeing him, watching his square back descend from view as he walks down the steps, the same back she has watched move away from her every morning, she knows it is ridiculous, her entire mood, all her bad feelings. In another day they will be back in Atlanta and everything will be fine. Her father will be back on his feet. Ben will be at the office again, and the boys will be back at home, out of school for summer, soon, watching Real Monsters and reruns of Hermann Munster. She can stay home to watch the boys and drive them to softball practice. Iced tea in the afternoons, and when Ben gets home from the office, screwdrivers beside the pool.

Her foot lands on something soft. It is the foot of a woman with silver hair. Stooped, she leans on a cane. Beside her, another woman whose hair is also silver leans towards Claudia

"Sorry," Claudia says.

Their blue eyes stare at her coolly. The women seem to want to say something, and Claudia doesn't want to hear whatever it might be. Behind them she glimpses a little room, a sanctuary from their stares, from Linda, from the entire mistake of agreeing to stay here all afternoon, and she slips around the women and steps inside. More gloom, but the air inside seems cool, as if she has just stepped into a cave lined with the glass cases that rise all the way to the low ceiling. Lights in the tops of the cases spray into small pools, as if each glass cabinet held a tiered fountain of light. In the center of each pool of light sits a small silver box. She forces herself to slow down, to take her time wandering from case to case, examining each box. She doesn't care for old things, has never collected old boxes or silver, but some of these are wonderful, their lids bright and intricate.

Snuff boxes. During the trip to Hartford she had spent an hour in Harriett Beecher-Stowe's parlor looking at the silver boxes. Nothing like the rows and rows in these cases, but a good collection. Snuff boxes, the labels had said, but mixed in were a few squarish blue bottles that looked too plain for perfume vials. She asked a guide about them. Arsenic, he explained. Small doses kept the complexion creamy, so you didn't look as if you spent time in the sun. He had opened the case and turned around one bottle. Claudia slid her finger over the little skull and cross-bones embossed on the thick blue glass.

No bottles here, only rows and rows of polished boxes. One box seems perfect. Engraved on the lid is a woman leaning on the hand-rail of a short bridge. She holds a parasol and looks out past a tree at the edge of the silver lid. Others around it are more elaborate. Cherubs and lace. Harps and robins. All this for snuff. She tries to remember what she knows about it. You take a pinch, she knows, and it's a stimulant. You leave it there, in one cheek, it seems, or on the tongue. It dissolves, and then you dip for more. She looks on the index cards beneath the boxes for more information, but they only list dates and the names of silversmiths.

Her mother had taken the time three years ago to mention her father's wandering. Claudia was never sure just how far this wandering went. Her mother never named the woman involved, and whenever Claudia thought of her father groping about in the dark with a stranger she wanted to laugh. Her father, seventy-three last summer, spent most of his time at home reading the Wall Street Journal in the living room, his glasses pushed low on his nose. If sex had ever entered his mind, it was clearly as an unlikable means of propagating Claudia and her brother, and had long since dried up. Her mother sometimes exaggerated, and when Claudia thought of the conversation, she always assumed that her father had taken a long lunch with a client from his law office and her mother had assumed the worst.

Her mother brought up the subject again a few months ago. When Claudia asked why she stayed married if there was any question of wandering, a practiced look had fallen across her

mother's face. Claudia didn't know where it came from, a soap opera, a movie, her mother's mother, but her mother's expression had a kind of strained nobility about it that made Claudia want to take her by the shoulders and shake her.

"We have to endure all kinds of things, Claudia."

The only thing Claudia plans to endure is another three hours of wandering around among old dresses and paintings. She searches in her purse for the concert tickets. Ben always gives her their tickets. Through long experience they know he will lose them. Now, pushing aside Kleenex and lipstick tubes and an address book that has fallen behind the torn lining of the purse, she thinks she's lost them, but finally she sees them wedged between her Visa card and her drivers license. Charles Rosen. A Brahms piano piece she doesn't recognize. Even if they eat dinner first they can leave the museum by three to change clothes at the hotel and catch a cab back downtown. Another three hours of snuff boxes. She drops the tickets back into her purse.

Something brushes her, a bird, a shaft of light from one of the silver boxes, and she can feel the heat of someone beside her.

"You like silver," Linda says.

"A little."

Linda bends down to look at the bright boxes, her nose close to the glass, the light from the case reflecting off her perfect skin. "It's pretty clear you don't like me."

Claudia fixes her eyes on the silver woman with the parasol. "I like you fine."

"You're too nice."

Linda opens her purse and extracts a bag of potato chips. "You're too nice, I said. Polite. Sorry for the food--I get hungry."

Linda's nails are too long to grip the cellophane. Claudia can't help smiling as she watches her grapple to tear open the little bag.

"You shouldn't eat in the museum. There are signs."

Linda tears the top off with her teeth and a potato chip falls to the carpet. She pulls out another chip, nibbles at its edge.

Claudia reaches into the bag and extracts a chip for herself. "For my complexion," she says. She hesitates before biting into it. A guard could hear, someone might complain. You could conceivably be asked to leave the Smithsonian for eating a potato chip in an exhibit room. She lets the chip lie moistly on her tongue, like snuff.

"I wonder why you don't like me," Linda asks.

"I like you fine."

The girl reaches into the bag again, pulls out another chip, and looks at it. "I'm not too crazy about you either."

Into the room hobble the two women with silver hair. The woman with the cane glares at Claudia and stops, not sure she should be in the same room with someone so clearly dangerous.

"Here's the one I like," the other one says. She points at a box behind Linda.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Claudia asks.

The woman with the cane looks at her and then at Linda.

"Yes," the woman says loudly, as if wanting to remove any ambiguity on the subject. She has a round spot of rouge on both cheeks. "It's really very nice."

She eyes Linda's bag of potato chips, and glares at Claudia. Linda strides past them, grinding the fallen potato chip into the carpet, and slips out into the gallery. Claudia counts to ten and follows her.

The girl is nowhere in sight. The square room is empty. In the corner where the tour group had stood looking at landscapes, Claudia sits on a mahogany bench facing a long gray painting. Hudson River School, apparently. Low sloping mountains. Mist and gray water.

She needs time to consider her response. What were you to do when someone like Linda tried to get Ben in her clutches? Claudia thought of the pikes and muskets, the bows and axes in the display case. A musket would make a nice sound, but it seemed to offer little pleasure, since it would require distance, and Linda's face would be something you would want to watch at close range when the musket ball entered her chest. Besides, Claudia had always been an awful shot. Her father and brother had let her shoot a .22 caliber rifle in the woods behind their house when she was a teenager, but had finally given her up as hopeless. She aim was better with a bow and arrow, but she hadn't seen any in the display cases. In any event, you stood a better chance with a stationary target, and somehow she imagined Linda as the type who would turn and run when she saw Claudia draw back the steel-tipped arrow. There would be some fun to it, though, hiding behind the glass cases, waiting until Linda, doe-like, stepped innocently into the path. Claudia could send arrows after her as she darted away, wool skirt and sweater flying, silver haired women falling to the floor as the arrows flew around them.

It would be difficult to choose between the ax and the pike. Both offered a solution in a single, satisfying stroke. Clearly, the ax had the advantage of providing a trophy. Linda's head might look good as a centerpiece for the dining room table, although you would have to cut her hair. Her head, on the other hand, might make an appropriate statement in the front yard if mounted on a stake. Or she could send it to Betty Anniston in a hat box, with a little note thanking her for her concern.

The pike, on the other hand, had a certain indefinable appeal. One could control the exact speed with which the long blade eased into Linda's flat little tummy, and watch the initial surprise on Linda's face turn to something like respect.

"*Why, you put a pike into me, didn't you?*" Linda might chirp, as if a sorority sister had just bettered her at decorating her room.

"*Yes, I did, honey, and I'm afraid you got a little blood on your nice sweater.*"

Claudia slips out of her shoes, stretches her legs out towards the painting.

"Hiding?"

Linda is eating from the bag of potato chips, holding one chip up to her mouth, nibbling. Claudia, suddenly too tired to say anything, rubs her legs. Maybe the girl will go away.

The girl doesn't go away. She slides the entire potato chip into her mouth and chews. She's not quite finished chewing when she speaks.

"You know, don't you?"

"I wasn't hiding."

"And you came. You know, and you came anyway."

In the painting, the dull flat water and high clouds seem close. The girl from the silver box lives there, hidden by one of the trees in the foreground, looking out on the water. Holding her parasol, only looking.

Linda is looking at the potato chip, turning it over as if it's a perfect specimen. She drops it in the bag. "You make me sick."

Claudia tries to focus on the dirty gray water in the painting. She lifts her legs and points her toes. The girl is stupid, a stupid child.

Something touches her shoulder, the girl's hand, something smaller. She looks at the girl again and sees the potato chip on the floor. The girl is taking another chip out of the bag.

"You know, and you still came."

She tosses the potato chip before Claudia can raise her hand. Claudia can feel it in her hair. She shakes her head, brushes the chip from her hair with her hand. She can sense the girl come closer and feels her breath against her cheek. "I'd have that much self-respect."

The girl's breath retreats and there is no sound. Claudia sits, listening. When she looks up

she is alone with the gray mountains and gray water in the gold frames. Standing, she must lean against the wall. Not dizziness, exactly. A lightness, as if the floor has dropped away and she stands suspended in a brightly lighted room. When her head clears she can see the gallery again, the wooden benches squatting below the dull paintings. She picks up the potato chips, dropping them in the trashcan beside the door.

A strong hand grips her wrist. Claudia sees the roots of a tree clutching her arm before she looks up to see the old woman, whose other hand rests on her cane.

"You look as if you're not feeling well. Shouldn't you sit down?" The woman pats Claudia's wrist and leaves her hand there.

"I'm fine." Claudia slips past her and heads for the lobby.

Outside, a crisp wind tumbles dogwood and cherry blossoms across the grass. White clouds hang from the sky as if part of an exhibit: a beautiful day. Behind the spray of white blooms that the earth pulls down from the immense April sky, tourists with cameras and shouting children are somehow anchored to the ground. A girl strolls through them down the sidewalk. It might be Linda, but she is too far away for Claudia to be sure, and a troop of boy-scouts in olive uniforms engulfs the girl. Somewhere beyond them, in one of the brick buildings along the mall, Ben stands beneath the Lindbergh plane, gazing up into the open cockpit. Claudia will stand beside him soon and tell him she will stay. The concert will be good tonight, and tomorrow they can fly home.

Fiction by Cheryl Reid

My Banishment

The day my husband died, my father called on the telephone and said I'd better get over there, he needed to make me an offer. Before he hung up, he said something in Lebanese, and all I could make out was son-of-a bitch. I knew from his voice that he meant something serious. Frank's family was already looking at me cross-eyed in my own house. All them Namies hovered in my house, just took it over. My children were there, Theresa with her pregnant belly and Frank crying and tiny Celia not knowing right where to put herself. Grown children sitting around stupefied at their father's death, at the buzz in the kitchen, the business in the living room where Frank was. Theresa kept saying, "There's such a thing as a funeral home, you know."

All I could tell her was, "It's no longer in my hands. Talk to your grandma." Frank's old mother, the old bird, had landed and wouldn't have nothing to do with it. They wanted a wake and wouldn't let me, his own wife, wash his body. I figured I should have at least that after all that old man put me through.

So I just left the house, angry at them and at my father for acting so crazy. I drove all the way to the old man's house cussing him. What kind of offer was he talking about? But I drove over there, and I remember how hot that day was, even for Alabama in August. I had all the windows in that old Plymouth rolled down and the wind that blew in seemed hotter than the still air. The heat and humidity clung to me in that black dress until I felt completely wet. The stockings soaked with sweat stuck to my legs. So hot, I pulled over at our store, the one Frank and his brother ran.

The store was locked up, had never been opened that day on account I found Frank stiff and dead early that morning in his bedroom. I opened the front door with my key and went to the cooler and took out a cold bottle of Coca-Cola and reached behind the counter for a pack of cigarettes and some matches. I had not smoked since high school on account that Frank hated his wife smoking. The one time I lit up in front of him, he slapped my face and knocked the cigarette out.

In the open doorway of Frank's store, I smoked about two cigarettes and drank that Coke where anybody passing by could see. The air there was cooler than in the car. From the store came the slightest draft causing me to have a chill because the dress I wore clung to me wet.

A couple of farm trucks drove by slowly on the road in front. They slowed down enough that the dirt road barely stirred. The men's faces looked shocked as they turned their head for a second glance to see me in all my boldness drinking a Coke and smoking on the front porch of my dead husband's store, the same day he died. One woman in a cheap house dress with her dirty-faced boy walked by as if they had planned to pay their respects there, that day, at that moment in front of the store with me smoking and drinking a Coca-Cola.

"Mrs. Namie, real sorry to hear about your husband." She spoke in a long drawn out country voice and stood and waited, waited for my acceptance of her sympathy, but when I said nothing she finally walked on. With my cigarettes in hand, I turned and locked the door. My hands were shaking trying to get the key in the hole. I didn't want to leave that place where it was mostly quiet. I dreaded going home, to my daddy's house or my dead husband's.

*

That morning, I knew he was dead when I walked by the room and looked in and he was still lying flat on his back. He usually woke me up well before the sunrise to cook him breakfast, and that morning I woke up with a sweaty neck. The room felt warmed by the morning sun, near

about nine. The room he lay in held a silence that I was afraid to break, so I tiptoed in my own house with only me and him in it. I was afraid to make any sound in that house, afraid somebody was listening, watching me. Even when I walked real slow, hardly picking up my own feet, the floor boards cracked and sounded. I couldn't stop the noise of my breathing, when I stood over him and his long white, fishy face. Looking at his face made my skin crawl, and even with him dead, I am reminded now when I look at my own children.

Standing there in that room filled with his smell, I felt no remorse, nothing. I can recall to memory a small inventory of things around his dead body. A quilt I made lay crumpled at his feet. His long hands on his stomach. The light blue pajamas I had washed and hung to dry many times over the years covered his cold, dead skin. His clothes from the day before were laid on a chair for me to gather and his brown work shoes kicked off with worn socks thrown nearby. The crucifix hung crooked on the wall and the Christ seemed to be looking over his dead body. The black hair looked darker against his pale skin, made more pale in death. At that moment, I wanted to bury everything that was his and that he touched. He seemed so quiet now, restful, and my relief floated in the heavy, man-odored air. I reached down to make sure he was dead and drew my hand back fast when I touched the clam of his forehead. We had been married for twenty-four years, and I felt no loss.

I walked out the same way I came in without turning my back to him and trying not to make much noise, as if somebody could hear me. All the years I had been associated with Frank taught me that somebody was always watching me. If it wasn't him, it was his mama or my children. If it wasn't them, then it was somebody else. I questioned everything I did and the people around me. Frank had done that to me.

I called my daughter Theresa and it wasn't fifteen minutes before my house was filled up with his family and my grown children. Theresa, my oldest, got there first. Her new husband drove her over, and she got out of the car slow since she was seven months pregnant with her third child. He drove away and she barreled through the front door and went straight up to see for herself. A few minutes later without a knock or a hello that old lady, the old vulture that was Frank's mother, came in my house and called me a heifer, said I killed her baby. Theresa came down the stairs and was met by her grandmother who she loved more than me. Theresa would never see the way her grandma was with me, or if she did, she would pretend not to. They hugged and cried and I stood back watching these two women begin to take over in my house. Old lady Namie took Theresa by the hand and they walked through the house stopping every clock and covering every mirror. I wanted to tell it was too damned late for that nonsense, but that would have pushed Theresa too hard. They climbed the stairs together, old lady and young lady, to go cry over his body. The others came soon after, my son Frank Jr. and Celia my youngest. When the priest came, they gathered in his room and prayed the Rosary. I stood watching in outside the doorway. The last thing I wanted to do was help his soul, though I was sure my God was clear with the facts. That was about the time my Papa called.

*

When I parked the car by the side of my father's house, he was standing by the fig tree waiting for me. Soon as I got out, he turned inside and I followed him to his office. I had been in that room before, whenever he had business with me, like the day Mama died and he told me my new responsibilities or the day I turned seventeen and he told me to marry Frank.

That room in the back of the old house was nothing but darkness. He kept heavy red curtains pulled over the windows so nobody could see where he hid his money. Kept the door locked, so nobody could poke around. The room stank, as it always did, with old cigar smoke smells and tobacco spit cans and mildew from human sweat. He sat me down in an old cracked leather chair and propped himself against his large wood desk. A faint red glow came from

behind the curtains that gave the room a somber mood. The walls closed in like a cage and I wanted to open a window for the slightest bit of fresh air. The way he propped himself, his large belly wasn't two inches from me.

"Anna, I'm telling you something now that better not leave this room." His hands folded across his fat woman-like breasts.

"What you telling me, Papa?"

"I'm giving you some advice." He leaned forward. "You been acting like a damned fool, and now the wrong damn people know about you."

"Biya," I said; it was "papa" in Lebanese. "Biya, what the hell you talking about? I got a dead husband in my house, and I don't have time for this game." He did things to play with me, probably because he only knew how to do things like in the old country.

"No game, Anna." He reached his hand in his shirt pocket and took out a check. "You listen to your Biya."

I watched him turn his fat, old body to the desk and write out the check.

"You been courting your mailman, girl?" He laughed at me. "You been inviting that ibi mailman inside your husband's house, girl?"

"Papa, I'm not staying, here listening to your craziness right now." I stood to leave the dark room, the house, to go back to my own home and send everybody away, including Frank's body.

"You sit back down and listen." His voice sounded loud and forced me back in the chair. "Frank's brother was over here this morning."

"What did that son of a bitch want?"

"Wanted to let me know that your husband had been following you around lately and had not liked what he saw happening in his own damned house."

"Frank's been watching me and following me since before we married." My head grew dizzy with smells. Papa knew about Roland, and I didn't think it was his or anybody's business. "He's been angry and jealous and raising hell ever since the day he married me."

"You better take what I'm about to give you."

"I don't need your damn money."

"Take it and don't ask for nothing else." He held the check close to my face. "You are out, Anna." He dropped the check made out to me in my lap. It was for ten thousand dollars.

"Frank's brother bought your part of the store and gave me the money to divide to your kids."

A fly buzzed around the room, and I felt dizzy. "You got no right, Papa--"

"Take that, what I give you." He stood and moved around his desk. He fell back, his massive body, into his creaking chair.

I wanted to know then, what else Frank's brother said to him.

"You're my daughter, always be my daughter," he said. His skin was fishy white too and his eyes cold green. "But don't ask me for nothing else. That's what you have from me. The Namies want you out of the house after the funeral."

I felt like a stone sitting in the chair across from my father. "What have I done?"

"That's between you and God." Behind his bald head, the light behind the curtains radiated, seemed brighter, hot. "You better make plans to leave, maybe go up North. They don't want you here now."

The check lay across my thigh. The paper was stiff like the old man's handwriting. I folded it and tucked it in my blouse beneath my bra strap. "I don't understand, Biya."

"The Namies want you to leave town. Move states. Frank's brother said you should be gone in a week. He said if you come back, they gonna exhume Frank's body."

My body was numb; all I could feel were my lungs trapped in my chest.

"They seem to think you poisoned Frank."

"What?"

"They think you killed Frank so you could be with your black mailman boy." He leaned back and his fat belly lifted. The chair creaked to the point I thought it would break under his weight. "If you don't leave, they're going to bring their suspicions in front of a judge. And who you think the judge is going to believe, a white woman fucking a ibi mailman behind her dead husband's back or a respected businessman whose brother died in good health?" He never raised his voice.

I do not remember where I found the strength to move away from him or the cold gaze of his eyes. I remember a thought of mama and the picture of her and me and I knew I wanted it. I ran through the house in my high-heeled black pumps, and I remember the sound they made on the wood floor, and the echo of claps and thuds they made through the old house, and how my feet kept tripping over cracked floorboards. His voice was loud enough to carry through the house, loud enough for me to hear him say, "Leave my house." He walked slow and methodical behind my path while I stumbled from room to room searching for the picture. I opened every drawer, scratching through clothes, and jewelry, and cigar boxes of coins and bills, drawers full of letters and documents. From room to room I pillaged while his slow, heavy steps came closer to me. I knew if he found me, he would try to beat me. He was old, but he wasn't weak. I could not find the picture of my young mother and me as a child. It had been taken in Lebanon when I was two years old, five years before she died, before John was born, right before we crossed over.

I scrambled around looking for it, searching, knowing in that moment, I would never have another chance to have it. He caught me in my childhood room, the room I lived in until the day he made me marry Frank. His belt he had been wearing was folded up in his right hand.

"Get out of my house."

I continued opening drawers, pulling out my old high school papers and dropping them on the floor. Everything was frenzy and the papers and photographs were falling through my hands. I just wanted the one of her and me. The metal of the buckle snapped on my spine, and my hands grew clumsy grappling through the mess. His voice seemed disembodied and partnered with the slice of the belt on my flesh, all I knew was finding the photo. Loosened from its hiding place, it appeared on the floor and her image and mine were looking up at me with hope. The belt flew in the air repeatedly only stopped by my body. When I reached down for it, the belt stopped and he stepped on my hand. I looked up and his hand was drawn back with the butt of the belt ready to slap my face.

"Damn you to hell." He stood over me like that for many minutes. His eyes were fixed on the photo I held in my hand.

"It's mama," I said.

He saw it was my mother, and at that moment, his arm dropped to his side and he removed his foot. The only noise was his heavy, tired breathing. I stood with the photo in my hand and moved to leave. He stepped in front of the door to block my passing. I tried stepping around him, but he anticipated my movements and shuffled to block me, his belly touching me. The back and forth of the old man in front of me, his face leering, his hands brushed my inner arm barely touching my breasts.

"Don't come back, girl." He moved out of the doorway.

In the car, I took the check from my bra, and laid it and the photo on the seat next to me. The teller at the bank took a long time getting the money. She looked at me stupid-like saying they didn't want to give it to me all at once, something about policy. I told her she had better damn well give it to me.

I walked out of the bank with ten thousand dollars cash in a canvas bag carrying it close to me in my arms like a baby. All that money out in the broad day light on Bank Street made me nervous. I didn't know who saw me or what they were saying, all I knew was I had been seen by somebody, and all of them old bitties had something new they could flap their jaws about.

I showed up at my brother's house on the front stoop holding the bag of money. He was gone, but his wife Lila was there with their girl. She let me in, said I could stay there until the funeral.

Essay by Angelina McCormick

Watching the Ants

I was twelve, the big fish in the small pond of my elementary school. With my carefully curled pageboy, I had friends. I had a place. I was happy. I belonged. From my perch atop the monkey bars or my usual swing, the left corner one, I saw each and every recess period someone who wasn't happy, who didn't have a place and didn't belong to anything or anyone. Taking a break from the various versions of kissing games the girls endlessly orchestrated to get kissed by the boys, I watched him walk up the length of the playground and then back again. Always the same pattern, always with his head glued to his chest. Never looking up, always moving up and down his perfectly straight isolated path with the utmost precision and care. I'd watch him for a second or two and then return to the kissing games. After all, I wanted to be kissed. But he never joined our games. He never looked up and he never stopped walking. His name was Jerry Dalriva.

Jerry Dalriva . . . Most of the kids made fun of his name, changing it to "Jerry Diarrhea." The sixth grade boys would surround him while he waited in line for lunch or waited for his turn at the water fountain. They would laugh and call out their substituted name. Those who didn't participate merely watched at a safe distant, not wanting to get involved, not wanting the attention to turn their way, safely allocated to the shadows. At first, Jerry Diarrhea just stood there as if he didn't understand the language the taunting boys spoke. Jerry Diarrhea, who was about two times larger than the taunting boys, never moved, never reacted. He could stop them, I remember thinking one day. "He could stop them," said my best friend Laurie. He could stop them, we all thought silently, but he never did. He just walked on his straight path and tried to avoid those who would surround him and persecute him as well as those who would stand and watch.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . He was a gigantic pear-shaped boy made of pale Jell-O. He never walked. He lumbered, meandered, wandered, drifted, rambled, roamed, strayed, but never walked. Everything about him was wrong. His dark brown hair his mother kept perpetually slicked back in an early sixties type hairstyle. His speech, slow and with a heavy stutter. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. He was always near to failing if not already failing all of his subjects. His teeth were overly big, misshapen and protruding, the two front teeth slightly leaning toward each other like hands clapping together. His parents were twenty years older than his classmates' parents. He was adopted. His aunt was Mrs. Shipman, the mean, snarled and wrinkled woman in charge of the lunch room who for years kept her hair dyed jet black and fastened tightly back with a hair net. He was on financial aid from the school. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Everything about him was wrong in the eyes of the sixth grade class that watched him carefully like an alien insect underneath a microscope. Everything about him was wrong and he knew it and walked on.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . About halfway through our sixth grade year, Jerry Dalriva's father died and no one said a word about it. My father and I weeded through the rack of sympathy cards we stocked at our family bookstore until I found the perfect one, stark white with a raised border. Inside, drawn in a mixture of heavy and light charcoal lines was the picture of a single, thorny rose. I signed the card with my name only and no message. I would give it to Jerry Dalriva at recess the next day. But I never did. I chickened out. I got scared. Scared of what my fellow sixth graders would say if they saw a girl give Jerry Diarrhea a note. The signed sympathy card stayed at the bottom of my blue backpack until the end of the school year.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . About a month after his father died it was forgotten. Things returned to

normal. The boys returned to their game of surrounding him while he forever stood immobile like a hunted bear bound tightly to a tree. One day, recess ended and we ran inside our classroom, with the air-conditioning running and the windows open in a desperate attempt to alleviate the stench of thirty sweating sixth graders. Mr. O'Connor, a young imported Irish teacher with pale blotchy skin and constant dark black stubble, jumped to the front of the room for our daily math lesson, decimals. Mr. O'Connor had a habit of jumping. He jumped when he taught. He jumped to sit down. He jumped while in line in the cafeteria. He jumped in your face to ask a question. He jumped when nervous. He simply jumped. As he began his decimal lesson, he jumped back and forth from the left to the right side of the room. It was during this very math lesson that it happened. It came from the back corner of the classroom. I remember the sound. A low whimpering followed by several loud hiccuping gulps for air. I instinctively turned in my wooden desk toward the sound. It was Jerry Diarrhea.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . He was crying, his face crimson and swollen. He was crying because his new glasses had been broken during recess. With twenty-nine young faces watching, he was crying because his father had died. Because he was adopted. Because his last name sounded like diarrhea. Because he needed financial assistance. Because his aunt was Mrs. Shipman. Because . . . Because he was Jerry Diarrhea and no one else liked him so why should he like himself.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . He sat there in the corner and cried and we sat there surrounding him and watched. Mr. O'Connor jumped to the door, dropping his teacher's edition math book, and going in search of Mrs. Jones for help. The teacher's edition math book seemed to hang in the air for a second, held up by the cries of a misfit and then plummeted to the ground landing in a resounding "thud." No one moved. No one spoke. No one laughed. Everyone listened to the low whimpering followed by the hiccuping gulps for air. I thought of the sympathy card that I had picked out for him. I thought of the way my father smiled with pride because I was thinking of others. I thought of the way I crumbled it up and left it in the bottom of my backpack. I thought and listened to the whimpering, the gulping and the pain from behind me in the corner of the classroom.

Jerry Diarrhea . . . Jerry Diarrhea didn't come to school the next day or the day after that. He came back on Monday morning with taped wrapped tightly at the center of his broken glasses. He walked with his head tucked even further than before. Perhaps he was embarrassed for being the sixth grade boy who cried during math class. Maybe he was upset because after two days plus the weekend, we were still all the same and he was still Jerry Diarrhea. From my spot on the swings, I watched him as he slowly meandered from the farthest point of the soccer field to the tree at the edge of the playground. He stood there a long time with one hand resting on the trunk of the tree, his feet braced slightly apart and his head slumped down on his shoulder.

I knew what I should do. I knew what my father would have wanted me to do, would have expected me to do. I knew what my friends would do. And I knew what I didn't want to happen. For some reason, I didn't want Jerry Dalriva to tuck his head under that day. The girls leaning against the metal swings were elated when I vacated my spot. It was a short walk past the heavy green seesaws and concrete benches to the tree where Jerry Dalriva still stood. He looked up and then back down again when he saw me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Watching the ants." He said.

"I've never watched the ants before."

"You should." He said and then smiled.

Jerry Dalriva . . . So we sat and watched the ants together and we both looked down, not because we were sad or embarrassed, but because that's where the bugs were.

Essay by Margaret Nunnelley

A Modern Mystique

Sliding my finger gingerly under the corner of the envelope, I begin to tear at the adhesive. I have waited the length from the mailbox to my door, from my door to my favorite chair, until I can be comfortably nestled against one arm. The envelope is ominously thick. I know it's not going to be a good month. Here goes perhaps one hundred dollars of my money...was it worth it? I break the seal.

It's as bad as I thought, maybe worse. As I glance at that figure, I wonder how I can have amassed such a fortune in phone calls. There must be some mistake, right? I study the itemized list of calls.

9/16/97 08:15P 617-623-3730 BOSTON MA EVE 17min 2.86

"Meg, I've gotten to the end of my scarf, and I don't know how to cast off...help!" A desperate cry as I sat in front of my computer on September 16, at 8:15 at night. I was returning a phone call to a friend in Boston, who graduated before we could finish our knitting lessons. I am religious about returning phone calls. When I hear that staggered tone through the receiver, I find it nigh impossible to focus on anything before I have at least checked my messages. On September 16th, an unfinished paper faced me as I sat dialing at my desk.

Anne moved to Boston with her boyfriend after graduating, much to my mother's dismay ("*I just think she's selling herself short, Meg*"), and we had continued our lessons over the phone since then. The long-awaited completion of the scarf was upon us, and I had to talk her through the final stage. I could imagine her sitting on her futon (once her bed, now their sofa), forcing her needle through fraying stitches.

I always imagine Anne in some familiar position when I talk to her on the phone: cross-legged on blue carpet, cigarette in hand, or barefoot, pacing the floor, pulling a tangled cord and an unwilling telephone receiver behind her, or perhaps leaning over a steaming pot of spaghetti on the stove.

I can hear Travis (the infamous boyfriend) in the background. He's forever talking at Anne when he thinks she's been on the phone too long. The added commentary makes our conversations slightly schizophrenic - I'm never certain she's talking to me.

"OK, knit two stitches...wait, are you on a knit row...ok, knit two stitches...ok, now take the first stitch that you knit and pull it over the second, and off the end of the needle...then knit another stitch and pull the other first stitch over it and off the end of the needle...got it?"

"I see it, Travis - I'll come over there when I'm off the phone...Ok, now do what - wait, hang on... *WHAT* Travis?"

I have never resented the intrusion of mates into friendships - I'm usually the one providing the intruder - so the feeling is new to me. Travis interrupts any attempt I make to speak to Anne when he can't hear what I'm saying (phone calls are hopeless). Perhaps he thinks I'll talk some sense into her. For whatever reason, my talks with Anne seem to mysteriously transform themselves into chats with Travis; they usually end with Travis on the phone and Anne yelling goodbye from across their apartment. When Anne "had to go" ten minutes into our lesson, her scarf wasn't much advanced, but we had drastically improved the syntax of one sentence in Travis' philosophy paper.

10/15/97 09:53P 205-879-7237 BIRMINGHAM AL EVE 37min 7.69

That forbidding message on voice mail: "Meg, your father and I were thinking of coming to Atlanta this weekend. Give me a call when you get in." I braced myself for what I knew was

going to be a rough conversation. How exactly to approach that phrase, "Mother, I've already made plans to go see Bruce (the infamous boyfriend) this weekend..."

"No, mother, it's not that I don't want to see you. I've just already made plans to go to Savannah...I do have a life...I can't just cancel all plans because you whimsically decide to visit Atlanta for the weekend...I'm taking my work with me...I will get it done there...Just because he's there doesn't mean I'm incapable of accomplishing something. Oh, and your presence in Atlanta wouldn't be as distracting as me being with him in Savannah?"

Work is a primary concern for my mother, who spends a majority of her time as managing editor of a newspaper. She usually calls from the office—a cube filled with stacks of paper varying in height and several prints from New Orleans that my father had framed. She requires a work report before approving any proposed plans for the weekend.

If I have a question for my father, a frequent occurrence after a conversation with my mother, I have to call him at the house, where he sits dozing in front of a baseball game, waiting up for her. After 31 years of practice, he's got the doze down to an art. Our conversations are awkwardly affectionate, as if we've never quite become accustomed to the fact that we like one another. He usually asks me about Bruce, and knowingly laughs, "Got any plans for the weekend, Meg?" I often wonder if his year of traveling to Kentucky to see my mother in graduate school has affected his view of long distance relationships. "If you decide to go," he says easily, "just call us when you get there."

10/15/97 11:05P 912-232-8426 SAVANNAH GA NGT 26min 4.63

Well, of course, I had to explain to Bruce why I couldn't come to Savannah for the weekend. Calling him is always an ordeal, and usually requires a few of those sixteen cent calls before a successful five dollar plus conversation.

"I'm not sure when I'll be able to get down there again. I have to go somewhere with my parents that weekend, since I came down there the last time they were here...I don't want to have to explain why I'd rather go to Savannah for Halloween than see *Chicago* with them. I know I came for Halloween last year...I just feel like I should say yes to them sometimes..."

Bruce and I have been fumbling through three years of long distance relating. Our conversations have that practiced feel, a rarely-broken rhythm of stories and small life details (when it does break, we usually have a fight). I've often wondered why we thought it was worth committing two months before I left for college in Boston, and he returned to Savannah. My friend Elizabeth says its because we were destined to be together...I've dreaded her disillusionment each time we've broken up, but so far she's been reillusioned fairly quickly.

"I'll bring my Halloween costume down with me when I come in two weeks, and you can see it then, ok? I'm going to be a princess...what about you?"

"My boss."

Bruce works in the photo supply lab at the Savannah College of Art and Design. His boss is the buzz-cut heart-throb of the photo department, and Bruce has shaved his head to complete the costume. He comforts me that most of that hair will probably have grown back by the time I see him.

*

There are at least thirty of these calls on the reverse side of my bill: \$.42, \$9.56, \$19.42, \$.96. Crouched against the vinyl backing of my chosen seat, I survey the damage. The large bill is no longer a mystery. If every month is this busy, I suppose that explains why all my cash disappears each time I receive an envelope marked AT&T in the mail. Funny, I hadn't remembered talking to Anne about her scarf, or arguing with my mother over her trip to Atlanta, or even explaining to Bruce why I couldn't come and see him that weekend.

This bill, like its predecessors safely stowed in the filing cabinet, reads like a guide to my

free time over the past month. What did I do, instead of my work, on Tuesday, September 16? I taught Anne how to finish her scarf. This act of friendship is recorded in minutes on a computer somewhere, and then sent through the mail, a journal kept for me by the phone company. And since I don't keep a journal for myself, the phone company is performing an indispensable service. I no longer have to suffer through those many well-intentioned wilted phrases, "Today I got a call from Kathleen. We talked about that argument she's having with Emily about borrowing her shirts without permission, and I think Emily's just wrong....," and on and on and on.

After all, why do I save these bills every month, stuffed wrinkled, with fading postmarks, in a bulging file folder. Is it really because I think I'll need them in some obscure legal scenario... *Where were you on the evening of February 10th, 1996, at roughly 8:06 PM, Ms. Nunnolley? Well, Mr. Prosecutor, she said, batting her eyelashes, I was on the phone to Birmingham for fifteen minutes with my mother at that exact moment. I couldn't have robbed that convenience store.*

No. Perhaps I save them because they validate my existence over the past two years, because they can tell me what I did a year ago today (I made a 4 minute phone call at 7:17 PM to Savannah, Georgia); because I know, through these bills, that I have intimate, long-term connections to people.

I have often regretted the fact that I'm no good at writing letters. I stumble along with phrases like "what's up with you?" and "Not much going on here..." But clearly I am expert at talking on the phone. I was practiced by age twelve, when a five hour phone call to Adrienne was a nightly ritual. Why does that sound like such a questionable achievement? Because telephone conversations are not accorded the same sincerity with which letters and face-to-face conversations are imbued. Images of Skipper on a pink bedspread with a neon phone in her hand squealing, "really, he said that..." fill my head. Phone conversations seem somehow insignificant when compared with sentiments recorded on paper or vocalized in person.

And yet, are they? Was it any less effective to tell Anne over the phone that I was lonely for her while I was watching *ER* than to write it on a slip of paper, place it in an envelope, and post it? Do feelings somehow improve with ink and time? Are letters like aged wine, developing nuances of phrase and flavor as they accumulate the fingerprints of various postal employees? Or like colonial mansions, increasing in value as they languish in post office limbo?

Not hardly. With friends in places from Boston to Chicago to Savannah time is a key player. No matter the detail laboriously penned onto the pages of the most extensive letter, the facts arrive at their destination dated by their postal journey. A phone call permits the frustrated recipient of a \$195 speeding citation to present her defense in all its initial passion (1/30/96, 7:15 PM, \$5.86) - *but I had just looked at the speedometer and I was only going seventy-seven...He can't have clocked me right...*

How many of us, sitting exhausted and dejected at work, have received that timely phone call from the friend to whom we most wanted to talk? Although the image brings to mind an MCI ad, how refreshing to hear that familiar voice laughing "Very official..." on the other end of the line when I answer, "Atlanta Preservation Center, Meg Nunnolley speaking."

There exists a certain intimacy in vocal communication which cannot be captured with the pen: the softness or intensity of tone, the imitation of a Southern accent so dear in friends from Boston incapable of reproducing it - *Haay Maayg, how ya'll doin' down thar?* When I catch myself reading passages of letters I receive aloud, desperately trying to recapture the humor in that oft-repeated joke written on the page, I realize the vocal familiarity enabled by telephone technology. My instant reaction: "I need to call her."

And so, to return to that original question, was that 109 minute call to Savannah at midnight

on October 10 worth \$19.42? Was this whole month of daily friendly communication worth \$101.73? Yes, it certainly was. The fact that telephone calls are commonplace does not lessen their intimacy. Sentiments expressed into a plastic receiver bear no less weight than those written with a plastic pen. The expression of these sentiments, not the conditions under which they are expressed, creates intimacy. Their sincerity is perhaps best captured when the word accompanies the thought, rather than following it by a few days.

We find it easy to respect the taste of dusty Bordeaux, and to admire the dilapidated ruin of a monastery in England, not because they are necessarily magnificent, but because their age imbues them with certain legendary associations. Letters have this same mystique. Historically they have been a way to communicate with one another, to convey feelings and news. Telephone calls have no such history. While we can buy copies of Simone de Beauvoir's letters to Jean Paul Sartre, or those the Brownings' penned to one another, I have yet to see an audio copy of Katherine Hepburn's phone conversations with Spencer Tracy. Perhaps because we have not established the same romantic history for the telephone, we feel telephone conversations are somehow weightless.

Yet, telephones enable intimacy. In a spread-out world, communication is guaranteed by the existence of telephone lines which stretch state to state, and even to Paris, France at 5:35 PM for that ninety minute "*Paris just isn't a city to be alone in.*" I suppose this explains my obsession with my own phone bills. These rather lengthy itemizations provide me with a storybook of the conversations I've had. Perhaps looking at them opens that same mystical window people are searching for when they read old letters; a window to the place where I have formed my attachments, a window to my love of sound and the power of voice, but more still, a window to the stories I have told of myself, stories that shape the winding tale of my history.

Essay by Brook Partner

November

1984

It is so early that it is still dark. In the bench seat of our red V.W. bus my older sister, Darby, and I lie half-asleep, toes to noses. Almost all of our bedclothes, flannel sheets, wool blankets, comforters, pillows and favorite stuffed animals, have been transferred into the car. I gaze out the side window and watch the naked trees stream by, the moon slowly meandering from left to right as we drive more westerly or more easterly, but always following. Between the front seats the squat kerosene heater hisses and flares blue and orange beneath its grate. Pulling the blankets up off the floor and closer to me, I squirm against the seat belt twisted around my waist and secretly unbuckle it. I cannot sleep with the fear of the heater tipping onto the floor and spilling its fuel, with the fear of driving unbuckled, though I know my older sister is snoring soundly without hers.

This driving off into the middle of the night is an escape, a gypsy-like elopement into the unknown. Though I know in my brain we are headed North on the Mass Pike, I experience the journey as if we are driving not through dingy soot and slush covered New England towns but through tree tops and night skies. When I do sit up and gaze out the window I imagine that I am running through those trees, leaping over the streams in single bounds. I run, chasing my best friend, as we flee some unknown tormentor to become wild women of the woods, living off berries and nuts, clothed in leaves and animal skins. On long car trips at twenty-one, I still dream those same dreams born of our annual thanksgiving treks, of chasing moon and wild woman. They have become myths, ritual fantasies making the blind journeys with unknown destinations I usually take into well-known, three day excursions to Maine, with my familiar and neatly made bed awaiting me at home.

1985

The Judsons live in a ranch house in a forest of young pine trees that rise straight and narrow up to the sky. We park in their sloping driveway and tumble out of the van smelling that smell unique to a family cooped up together for eight hours, that smell of sleep and kerosene and bickering. Dad, shaking hands with the other Dad, Mom with Promise, a pudgy three, Darby on the verge of a violent puberty, and me, nine, still in long blonde braids. Laura, Daniel Jr., me, my sister, and various other kids are bundled identically in snowsuits, mittens, boots and hats pulled down low over our ears and turned out into the back yard. It's too bitterly cold to snow, so instead of snowball fighting, we slip through the tall marsh reeds frozen in place and slide out onto the slick short grasses. We break the cattails out of the ice and whack each other over the heads until the fluff flies out in slow drifting clouds.

Our parents don't call us. We only retreat inside when our mittens are crusted in ice and our feet are too numb to chase any more. Then the nose-wrinkling odor of damp drying wool and synthetic boot liners obscures the wood smoke fragrance as mothers line our outer garments to dry along the stovepipe, the radiator, the oven door. We all swerve disrespectfully around Nana grumpily rocking in the corner of the living room and courteously around the toys on the floor. G. I. Joes litter the carpet, their posable limbs left in aching bone-twisting postures. Daniel Jr. doesn't allow me to touch the Millennium Falcon, somehow, in its gray intricacies, a shrine to manly courage.

1986

This year when we arrive, Mr. Judson puts out his callused hard hand to shake with me. He

is a diesel mechanic. "How're you doing, Brook?" He has a thin face with a dark short beard and constantly bantering blue eyes. "Good." "Good for what?" His mouth still does not smile and I pause, thinking fiercely to come up with some answer. I give up. "Nothing," I say, knowing the trap I've put myself into. He laughs. This is my first flirtation. When I am fifteen in a well-pleated cheerleading skirt, I answer similar questions from tall basketball boys. I relive the same helpless feeling of seeing the trap and extending myself nevertheless, because the bait, a pair of strong hands and a pair of smiling eyes, is irresistible. Years pass before I learn how to be the trap and not the prey.

1987

The snowplow has piled the snow round the house in mounds as tall as I am. The snow is freshly fallen too, light and still pure, unsullied by stamping feet and slush thrown off of cars' underbellies. Laura and Daniel Jr. and I dive in (Darby has disappeared with some book into the depths of the house.) We dig long into the afternoon making a tunnel under the hills of snow with entrances and exits, skylights, windows, close caverns of sparkling white. The snow is perfect, just the right amount of moisture to pack and push and shape. Our creation holds and as the sun is setting we get out the hose and with frost-nibbled fingers spray the ultimate snow fort. It will keep 'til spring.

1988

In the morning I come downstairs and brush my hair. Laura and her mother Patty are in the kitchen and they both give me that look. The look that says you're in somebody else's house and you're acting that rude? "Don't brush your hair at the table, Brook." I get up and go into the downstairs bathroom and sullenly finish. When Laura is nineteen she leaves her family and joins the Rainbow Tribe: a strange, communal, drug-induced cult. She lets her hair grow into dreadlocks. I do not feel compassion when my mom tells about Patty sitting for days at the kitchen table patiently combing out the complex knot of Laura's hair.

For breakfast I have Almond Delight. At home there are no sugared cereals, no doughnuts, no bags of leftover Halloween candy. My mom stocks our cabinets with whole wheat bread, lots of bananas and carob. But my delight with the sugary cereal is squelched. Laura, who has perfect teeth (without braces) and long glossy black curls, leans over the table and whispers, "You chew like a horse. Don't you know to keep your mouth closed when you eat?" I close my mouth.

1989

Olives in a little blue dish. I pop one in my mouth as I hesitate in front of the dining room table deciding the perfect placement. Cranberry sauce, two kinds; one sliding with a squelch from the can and cut neatly, two ridges to a slice; one bubbling on the stove, cups of sugar added at regular intervals. Green beans, broccoli, and corn all with a gloss of melting butter. Rolls, the refrigerated white bread kind piled in a basket and covered with a turkey printed towel. Yams, mashed. Potatoes, mashed. Acorn squash baked with brown sugar. Pickles, bread and butter sliced in irregular rounds, and dill cut into wedges. Left to my own devices, I rearrange the dishes of food so that the things I like the best are nearest me, and so things are reasonably symmetrical. I'm already full from all my nibbling by the time we sit down at the table and Laura's dad, Dan, defers the blessing to my dad, Daniel, who accepts, pretending reluctance.

The interval after dinner seems like years, during which I help clear the table, not because I want to but because if I help it might take less time. Years for the table cloth to be revealed as empty and white with a few splashes of cranberries or stuffing here and there. We, the women, scrape and pile decimated platters and ravaged plates beside the sink, package the remains in plastic wrap and Tupperware, and put on the tea kettle and a pot of coffee. We eat more: blueberry pie, apple pie, gingerbread, pumpkin bread, ice cream, whipped cream, and cream

cheese. The Judsons drink coffee, the Partners drink herbal tea. I sip peppermint with honey and listen in my twelve-year-old sagacity to the conversation about divine grace.

1997

We eventually stopped going to the Judson's for Thanksgiving, maybe because of inter-adult relational problems that I as a self-absorbed thirteen year old didn't understand, maybe because we moved to Connecticut and the succession of cars we owned simply wouldn't make it that many miles in a row. But the tradition doesn't die with our red V.W. bus. And doesn't end when I leave home for college. In the blue tiled kitchen of a professor's borrowed house three friends and I make a vegetarian Thanksgiving dinner. I bake my mom's brown sugared acorn squash. It's a guessing game, the temperature, the time, but they turn out delicious, soft and golden and filled with melted butter. Afterwards we eat apple betty, a la mode, the recipe from the Good Housekeeping cookbook that my mom used. And we still follow the same tradition of clearing the table and cleaning the dishes before dessert. Later, I make a pot of peppermint tea. We have a long conversation on welfare, capitalism and feminists. Even my friend with her pint of Captain Morgan's recognizes herbal tea as an essential ingredient for an after dinner argument. Having been virtually evicted from my dorm room for the week, I can't say that I don't miss home, that I don't miss the ease of letting adults make the complex decisions about when to stop cooking the artichokes. But the rituals of companionship and table call up the comfort of childhood.

*

We always travel at night, somehow kept in Maine by important conversations and lost social studies workbooks. In the dark, in our new used 88 Volkswagen bus, pale blue, with plush instead of vinyl seats and a working heater, I sit upright in the back seat. My younger sister, Promise, lies stretched out, her head in my lap. Repeatedly, I smooth Promise's dark hair away from her face and over her ear and down her shoulder. I doze, interrupted by my parents whispering together. The car slows down as we leave the highway, but I still pretend to slumber, loving knowing even with my eyes closed, now we are turning onto Main Street, now we are passing St. John's, now we are pausing at the flashing yellow light, and now this is the long straight stretch of Maple Ave, now this is the bump onto our gravel lane, now this is the gentle stop in front of our house.

One-Act Play by Shannon Allen

The Bride

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

MARY LOVELACE: A twenty-one year old college junior. The bride who does not want to get married.

HELEN FORBRIGHT-LOVELACE: The forty-six year old mother of Mary.

BRANDY LOVELACE: An eighteen year old college freshman. The sister of Mary.

FRANK LOVELACE: A forty-eight year old wealthy business owner. The father of Mary.

VICTOR ROD HIGHTOWER: A twenty-five year old account executive for a big firm. The groom who is late for his wedding.

MARK WRIGHTMAN: A twenty-three year old college senior. The bartender and ex-boyfriend of Mary.

SCENE: The bridal room of a church.

TIME: Late twentieth century. Late Saturday afternoon.

SETTING: The bridal room of a church somewhere in the South. The room has one door opening on a corridor leading to the rest of the church. There is a bridal platform and a large mirror in the room.

AT RISE: On the platform stands MARY in a gorgeous wedding gown. HELEN and BRANDY are helping MARY with her dress. BRANDY is doing something with the train and HELEN is working on the body of the dress. MARY is obviously not excited. She keeps turning to look at herself in the mirror and frown. HELEN struggles to zip the back of the dress. HELEN is standing behind MARY, so she can't see MARY's expressions.

HELEN (exasperated): Mary!

MARY (annoyed): Mother!

BRANDY (clueless): What?

HELEN and MARY (together): I wasn't talkin' to you!

BRANDY: Fine!

MARY: I'm sorry, Brandy.

HELEN: Brandy, darlin', I think everyone's a tad anxious about your sista's weddin'.

BRANDY: I understand, Mamma. It's okay.

MARY (slightly sarcastic and under her breath): In your case, Mother, a tad anxious is an understatement.

HELEN: What was that, Mary?

MARY: Nothin', Mother. I was just sayin' in case you didn't know the best man is anxious to make his statement for the toast at the reception.

HELEN (not believing her): I see.

MARY: Mother, I swear I didn't say anything!

HELEN: I unda'stand you're tense, Mary.

MARY: You have no idea.

HELEN: I have been in your shoes before.

MARY (rolling her eyes; to herself): Here we go.

HELEN: It wasn't long ago when your mamma was the nervous bride.

MARY: Uh-huh.

HELEN: Your daddy was the most handsome, sought after man.

MARY: I'm sure he was, Mother.

HELEN: Just like your Rod.

(She pauses.)

You are very lucky to have caught such a fine young man. Very lucky.

MARY: That's what they call me, "Lucky Mary."

HELEN: Rod reminds me so much of your daddy when he was young.

(She pauses.)

Aren't you glad you got rid of that bartender boy?

MARY: Mother, let's not talk about Mark, okay?

HELEN: Oh yes, Mark. I had forgotten his name.

(She pauses.)

Dear, God, can you imagine? You and Mark? He couldn't possibly support you in the lifestyle you're accustomed to.

MARY: I said I don't want to talk about him, Mother.

HELEN: We're certainly lucky the family never found out about your little. . . "thing" with a--

MARY: It was not a "little thing", Mother. He was my boyfriend! And I don't want to talk about it!

BRANDY (trying to change the subject): Mamma?

HELEN (ignoring BRANDY): I was just tryin' to tell you how lucky we both are for marryin' such wonderful men.

MARY: Fine. We're lucky, Mother. We're both lucky.

BRANDY: Mamma?

HELEN (still ignoring BRANDY): Anyway, just like you, I was the envy of every girl.

BRANDY (still trying to change the subject): Mary?

MARY: Yes.

BRANDY: Why don't we go over the list of things you're supposed to have?

MARY: What?

BRANDY: You know the old, the new, the borrowed, blue stuff.

MARY: Oh shit!

HELEN: Mary!

MARY (rolling her eyes): I completely forgot about that. What am I gonna do?

HELEN: Fortunately for you, my dear Mary, your mamma has been in a weddin' before. Your weddin' dress is new, your garter is blue, your ring is old. It's an antique, very expensive. It was my grandma's. And . . .

(She pauses.)

My my, what have I forgotten?

BRANDY: Somethin' borrowed.

HELEN: Oh yes. Somethin' borrowed. Have you borrowed anythin' that you're wearin', Mary?

MARY: I don't think so.

HELEN: The shoes, are they borrowed?

(MARY shakes her head no.)

HELEN: Those earrings, did you borrow them?

(MARY shakes her head no.)

HELEN: What about the veil, do you have to return it?

MARY: No, Mother, I told you I have nothing borrowed.

HELEN: Well, I'll be right back.

BRANDY: What are you goin' to get?

HELEN: I don't know yet. I'll think of somethin'. Brandy, see if you can help Mary with the back of that dress.

BRANDY: Okay, Mamma. Hurry back.

MARY (under her breath): Take your time.

HELEN: What was that, Mary?

MARY: I said have a good time.

HELEN (not believing her): I see.

(She addresses BRANDY.)

Now remember, Mary is not to leave this room till it's time to march down that aisle. You hear? It's bad luck if anyone sees her.

BRANDY: Okay, Mamma, but I thought it was only bad luck if the groom sees her.

HELEN: Yes, well. I don't want to spoil anythin' for anyone. I want all our special guests to be flabbergasted when they see her comin' down that aisle. Now I'll be right back.

(HELEN exits.)

MARY: Okay.

(BRANDY begins helping with the back of the dress.)

BRANDY: I didn't realize Mamma gave you Great Grandma's wedding ring.

MARY: Yeah, well, she says it's one of the privileges of being the oldest and getting married first.

BRANDY: Do you know how valuable that ring is?

MARY: Yeah.

BRANDY: Who's got it?

MARY: I think Daddy is holding onto it until Rod gets here.

(She speaks under her breath.)

If the bastard ever shows up.

BRANDY *(not hearing MARY's last remark):* Oh.

MARY: I'm sorry, kiddo. If I could, I'd let you have it whether you got married or not.

BRANDY: It's okay. I'm glad that you get it.

(She pauses.)

I am so happy for you, Mary.

(She pauses.)

You look so beautiful.

MARY: Thanks.

BRANDY: No, I mean it. You deserve all of this. A big beautiful wedding, a handsome successful groom, a family heirloom as a wedding ring, the most beautiful wedding dress in the state.

MARY: That's enough, Brandy.

BRANDY: I have never been a part of such a romantic occasion. In fact, this is the most romantic, you know, the perfect story book type romantic thing I have ever been involved in. And I just want you to know how happy I am for you.

MARY: Well thank you, Brandy, for being so happy for me, but I--

(HELEN barges in.)

HELEN: My God, girls, he's not here!

MARY: What?

HELEN: He's not here yet! Bless my soul!

BRANDY: Who, Mamma?

MARY: Rod?

HELEN: They said he hasn't arrived yet and nobody's heard from him. Land sakes!

MARY: Mother, who said he hasn't arrived?

HELEN: The groomsmen said Rod is not here yet and they don't know where in Sam Hill he could be.

MARY: Really?!

BRANDY: That's awful!

MARY: I'm not surprised.

HELEN: What was that, Mary?

MARY: Nothing.

HELEN: I see.

BRANDY: Who did you talk to, Mamma?

HELEN: I ran into Aunt Kat and then I went to check on the groomsmen and they told me. The groomsmen said they hadn't seen him and didn't know where he was.

BRANDY: Where all did you check, Mamma? Maybe he's here and they just haven't seen him yet.

HELEN: I looked all over, child. Right now I've got your daddy searchin' every room in this church.

MARY: What if he doesn't show, Mother?

HELEN *(surprised):* We'll have no such talk, Mary.

(She takes a deep breath.)

Now, you girls just keep gettin' ready.

MARY: Ready for what?

HELEN: For your weddin', dear. Here's somethin' borrowed. A necklace from Aunt Kat.

MARY *(not happy about being ignored):* Mother?!

BRANDY: It doesn't really match.

HELEN: Well you can't see it if she wears it unda her weddin' dress.

BRANDY: That's perfect, Mamma.

MARY: Mother, what if he doesn't show?

HELEN: Nonsense. He'll show.

MARY: But what if he doesn't? We can't get married if--

HELEN: Stop that talk. He'll show and I'll give him what for when he does, for bein' late on his weddin' day.

MARY: But, Mother, what if--

HELEN *(confused by MARY's questioning):* But nothin', Mary! We will have no more talk of "what if." He'll show, I tell ya. Victor Rod Hightower will be present for his weddin' to marry the eldest Lovelace girl. He'll show. If he knows what's good for him. He'll--

MARY: A wedding cannot happen without a groom.

HELEN: I am aware of that, child. I have, your daddy and I have spent too much money on this weddin' to let anythin' mess it up. This weddin' is the event of the year.

The entire Hightower family is out there. Aunt Kat came all the way from New Jersey. The mayor and his family, for God's sake, are here. And they are all out there waitin' for this weddin'. Now the groom will be here, late or not. And there will be a weddin' when he gets here. You hear me?

MARY: I hear you.

HELEN: Mary, I don't know what you're implyin', but there will be a bride waitin' to marry Rod Hightower when he gets here. Is that clear?

MARY *(under her breath):* Clear as the bells that are ringing in my ear.

HELEN: What was that, Mary?

MARY: It's clear, Mother. You've made yourself perfectly clear.

HELEN: I see. Well. I betta go and see if I can help your daddy find Rod.

(HELEN exits.)

BRANDY: Mary?

MARY: She's your mother.

BRANDY: I'm sorry.

MARY: Me too.

BRANDY: Do you want to be alone for a few minutes?

MARY: Do you mind?

BRANDY: I'll be back.

MARY: You better.

(BRANDY exits. MARY grabs a bouquet of flowers and throws them on the floor. Then she takes off her veil, holds it over her head and starts to throw it down when FRANK enters.)

MARY: Daddy.

(MARY places the veil down gently.

MARY and FRANK hug.)

FRANK: Hello, Mary. I suppose that good-for-nothin' boy ain't in here.

MARY: Nope.

FRANK: Your mother sent me on a wild goose chase.

MARY: I heard.

FRANK: She been in here yet?

MARY: Oh yeah.

FRANK: Damn, she's a pistol sometimes.

MARY: I was just wondering what if we can't find Rod.

FRANK: Don't you worry, princess, I'll find that good-for-nothin' groom of yours.

MARY: I'm not worried.

FRANK: Seems to me you should be, cupcake. I sure as hell am. If something happens and he's not here today, we've gotta do this god forsaken thing all over again.

MARY: We do?!

FRANK: I'm not happy about it either, baby. But I've looked all over this damn church and I don't know where the hell he is.

MARY: I might have an idea but--

FRANK: God, that boy is pissin' me off.

MARY: Daddy, did you hear me? I think I know where--

FRANK: Do you have any idea what a pain in the ass this whole weddin' business has been for your Mother and I?

MARY: Daddy?

FRANK: I'm sorry, hon, I didn't mean the actual weddin'. Just the plannin' and expenses, that's all.

MARY *(pointing to her ears):* Daddy!

FRANK *(messing with his hearing aid):* I'm sorry, princess. I didn't mean that. I mean, I want you to be happy. Whatever it takes. No matter how much it costs.

MARY: But, Daddy, I never asked for--

FRANK *(still playing with his hearing aid):* Sweetheart, the money doesn't mean that much to me. It means more to your mother than to me. Hell, I told her if the girl wants a weddin', let's give her a weddin' to remember. Where is your mother anyway?

MARY: Can you hear me now?

FRANK: Of course. I heard you.

MARY: She went to help you look for Rod. But, I might know--

FRANK *(kissing MARY on the forehead):* Well sweetie, I gotta go. I'd like to quit my search and stay and chat some more.

(He shrugs his shoulders.)

But, your mother has spoken. And you know how good she is at makin' life hell for those who don't do what they're told.

MARY: Yeah.

FRANK (*pointing to his hearing aid and laughing*): I usually just turn her off.

(*HELEN enters.*)

HELEN: Daddy.

FRANK: Hello, Mother.

HELEN: I thought I sent you to find Rod.

FRANK (*extremely sweet*): You did, dumplin'. You sent me to search every friggin' room in the church. And this is one of the rooms in the damn church. So, puddin', I'm checkin' in here if that's all right with you?

HELEN: Of course, Daddy.

FRANK: Thank you, Mother.

HELEN: Well, how is your search goin'?' Did you check the rooms down the back hall yet? Did you check in the basement or the attic? How 'bout the pastor's study?

FRANK: Not yet, dear. But I'm not finished. I'll let you know if I find him.

(*FRANK squeezes HELEN'S shoulders, kisses her on the cheek then turns to MARY.*)

FRANK: Wish me luck, princess.

(*FRANK hugs MARY.*)

MARY: You too. I mean, bye.

(*FRANK exits.*)

HELEN: What was that all about?

MARY: Nothing.

HELEN: Nothin'. I see.

MARY: Nothing! Daddy just came in here to wish me luck, that's all.

(*HELEN begins to assist MARY again with the back of the dress.*)

HELEN: Luck? What do you need luck for? Especially when you have parents who take care of everythin' for you.

MARY: Exactly.

HELEN: There is no such thing as luck. It's all in plannin' and decision-makin'.

MARY: Yes, Mother. Decision-making. I know.

(*She pauses, speaks under her breath.*)

I guess ol' Rod made a poor decision last night.

HELEN: What was that, Mary?

MARY: Nothing, Mother. I really don't want to get into it with you.

HELEN: No, but you'll share everythin' with Daddy.

(*She pauses.*)

Do you know somethin' about Rod's whereabouts that you're not tellin' us?

MARY: Not exactly.

HELEN: Exactly what then?

MARY: You were talking about decisions. . .

HELEN: And.

MARY: And I was just saying that Rod might have made a poor decision last night.

HELEN: What makes you say that?

MARY: I don't want to talk about it.

HELEN: Because he's late?

MARY: Yes.

HELEN: Yes? You don't know that some decision he made last night is the cause of him bein' late today.

MARY: I don't want to talk about it, Mother.

HELEN: You weren't with him last night, so how would you know?

MARY: I really don't want to get into this.

HELEN: Well I'm just sayin' that you couldn't possibly know what decisions he made last night, cause you weren't with him. That's all.

MARY: Well, Mother, I do know what decisions he made last night because we had a fight about what he was going to do last night, two days ago.

HELEN: You fought with that nice young man?

MARY: Yes, Mother.

(*She speaks under her breath.*)

It wasn't the first time.

HELEN: I hope you weren't rude to him.

MARY: What?!

HELEN: You haven't forgotten what family he's from, have you?

MARY: Jesus, Mother! Now you're monitoring my fights with other people.

HELEN: No. Just with him.

MARY: Well, Mother, last night Rod was going to spend lots of money to look at and fondle completely naked girls.

HELEN: Mary!

MARY: Hello, Mother! That's what they do!

HELEN: Yes, well, maybe, but we don't talk about it.

MARY: "We"-- you, maybe, but not me. I do talk about it. I did talk about it. That's what Rod and I fight about. And that's what we fought about two days ago.

HELEN: As a man, he can do what he likes the night before his weddin'. So you two should never have been arguin' to start with.

MARY: A man can do what he likes, anytime he likes, just because he's a man?! Even the night before his wedding?!

HELEN: You heard me.

MARY: And what about the woman? Does she have the right to do anything she wants--

HELEN: Well, of course not. The bride is different.

MARY: Because she's a girl?!

HELEN: Yes, because she's a girl.

MARY: I've told Rod that it is unacceptable for him to pay to look at and fondle naked girls! Especially the night before his wedding.

HELEN: You didn't?!

MARY: I most certainly did, Mother. And he told me that it was different the night before his wedding. It was tradition. It didn't mean anything and he intended to do whatever the guys wanted to do for his bachelor party.

HELEN: So.

MARY: So?! I cannot believe that men can do sinful things with naked women, the night before their wedding, and it's perfectly okay for them to show their faces in a church, before God and everyone, to partake in Holy Matrimony, the very next day. I told Rod that I was sick of it and if he decided to do anything with naked women the night before our wedding it would be wise for him not to show his face at the church cause he would not be marrying me today.

HELEN: You didn't!

MARY: , I did.

HELEN: If you have done somethin' to

cause that Hightower boy not to attend this weddin' I will never forgive you.

MARY: Don't you see it's not me, it's him?

HELEN: I'm tellin' you, if he doesn't show, and I find out it's because of them foolish words you said to him two days ago--

MARY: But, don't you see, Mother? It's Rod. This whole thing got started talking about decisions. And if he wanted to marry me, then he would stop going to see those women. If he loved me he would not have gone out last night and he would not be late today. It's him, not me.

HELEN: Well, I don't care--

(*BRANDY barges in.*)

BRANDY: Mamma, you better come get Daddy!

HELEN: Why? What's wrong?

BRANDY: He's in with the groomsmen and he's startin' a fight.

HELEN: Good Lord, girls.

(*HELEN exits.*)

MARY: How's Daddy?

(*BRANDY starts helping with the dress again.*)

BRANDY: He's fine.

(*There is a long pause.*)

Mark's here.

MARY: What?!

BRANDY: I saw him in the reception room?

MARY: Shit! Shit! Shit! Make it stop!

(*She pauses.*)

Oh, God, Brandy?!

BRANDY: Yeah?

MARY: Don't ever do it.

BRANDY: Do what?

MARY: Get stuck.

BRANDY: Mary, this wedding is every woman's dream.

MARY: Not every woman's.

(*There is a knock at the door.*)

MARY: Who is it?

(*MARK cracks the door a little and peeks through.*)

MARK: It's me, Mark.

BRANDY: Oh Mark? Come in.
MARK: Hi, Brandy. Thanks.
MARY: What the hell are you doing here?!
MARK: Hello, Mary.
MARY: I didn't invite you here.
MARK: Brandy just said come in.
MARY: To my wedding! What the hell are you doing here at my wedding?! I did not invite you!
BRANDY: I'll just be right outside.
(BRANDY exits.)
MARK: Well, technically I was invited to this wedding.
MARY: What the hell are you talking about?! You were not invited! And why the hell are you in a tuxedo?!
MARK: I'm bartending for the reception.
MARY: Bullshit.
MARK: For real. Your parents hired the company I work for to cater the reception.
MARY: Did they not remember what company you worked for so that this little meeting would be prevented?
MARK: I guess not.
MARY: God, my parents are stupid.
MARK: Well, I just came to wish you the best and see if maybe we could keep in touch after you're married.
MARY: Wish me the best?! You just popped in to wish me the best! You jerk!
MARK: What?
MARY: You asshole!
MARK: Why? I just--
MARY: You creep!
MARK: Mary, you know I--
MARY: I know I wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for you.
MARK: What are you talking about?
MARY: I'm talking about you and me and what happened.
MARK: What do you mean?
MARY: What do you mean, what do I mean? Do you honestly think I want to marry Rod?
MARK: Mary, I assumed--
MARY: Don't assume, Mark! Assuming makes an ass out of you and me.
MARK: What was I supposed to think?

MARY: You weren't supposed to think. You were supposed to never leave me.
MARK: But you broke up with me.
MARY: And you let me!
MARK: I thought that's what you wanted.
MARY: There you go thinkin' again.
MARK: You told me that your parents didn't like our relationship and that it would never last because of them. So, you wanted to end it sooner rather than later.
MARY: And you said okay! Just like that!
MARK: It made sense and I thought that's what you wanted. You said that this way it wouldn't hurt as much.
MARY: But it still hurt, didn't it?
(MARK looks down.)
MARY: What's worse is you never called me again. Not even once!
MARK: You asked me not to call you. You said it would be easier and faster to get over if we didn't talk anymore.
MARY: I can't believe you listened to my fucked-up logic.
MARK: Mary, I didn't want to break up. You knew that.
MARY: I didn't know that.
MARK: But I wanted you to be happy.
MARY: Do I look happy?
MARK: And if me not being in your life meant that you would be happier at home--
MARY: You not being in my life is what makes me the most unhappy.
MARK (overlapping): --then I was willing to do that. That's what you asked me to do--
MARY: Do you always do what you're told?
MARK (overlapping): --and I did it.
MARY: Jesus, Mark, you have the worst timing of any man I have ever known.
(The door opens a little and we hear BRANDY and HELEN struggle offstage.)
BRANDY (voice offstage): Mamma! You can't go in there!
HELEN (voice off stage): What is wrong with you?
(HELEN barges in with BRANDY still pulling at her. HELEN looks at MARK.)

HELEN: I see.
BRANDY (to MARY): Sorry, I tried.
HELEN: Well, Mary, you planned this little escapade quite nicely.
MARY: Actually, Mother, it seems that you planned this little escapade.
MARK: Hello, Mrs. Lovelace.
HELEN: Excuse me?
MARK: I just said hello.
HELEN: Not you! I heard you! Hello!
MARY: Yes, Mother, it was you who planned this whole thing. And quite nicely I must say.
HELEN: I would never have wanted the two of you--
MARK: Ladies, I've got to get back to work.
(He glances at HELEN behind her back.)
 Good luck, Mary.
(He addresses BRANDY.)
 See ya, kiddo.
(MARK exits.)
MARY: And I personally would like to thank you for arranging to have my ex-boyfriend show up to wish me well.
HELEN: Well, I never--
MARY: Yeah, well this just proves to me that you guys really don't listen. Had you been paying attention you would have known what company Mark works for and would not have hired them to cater the reception for my wedding.
HELEN: Yes, well he's gone now. And I'm sure that he'll do a fine job at the reception. In the mean time I've managed to calm your Daddy down some. I sent him to a place the groomsmen said Rod might be. And just in case Rod shows up before your Daddy gets back I brought you the ring. I want you to hold onto it till the weddin' starts. I'll be back for it when we need it.
MARY: I cannot believe your ability to completely ignore people. Not to mention your overwhelming need to pretend things don't happen.
HELEN: I don't know what you're talkin' about.
MARY: I don't know why I continue to let

you surprise me.
HELEN: Oh, I'm so glad you said something. I have a big surprise.
MARY: Bigger than inviting Mark to my wedding?
BRANDY: What's the surprise, Mamma?
HELEN: You'll see.
(HELEN exits.)
MARY: Can you believe her?
BRANDY: She's always been like that. Even Daddy doesn't hear stuff anymore.
MARY: He's going deaf.
BRANDY: He is?
MARY: Brandy, he wears a hearing aid.
BRANDY: He does?
(BRANDY is trying to zip up the back of the dress.)
MARY: She saw Mark. She spoke to him. And still she is able to completely block it out.
(She pauses.)
 What am I gonna do?
BRANDY: About Mamma?
MARY: My God, Brandy, I just spoke to Mark. I'm supposed to get married in a matter of hours and he was just here. In the same room with me. I didn't touch him, but I could feel him.
(She pauses.)
 I didn't realize how much I missed him.
BRANDY: Mary?
MARY: What?
BRANDY: If-- Never mind.
MARY: If what?
BRANDY: If you decide-- I mean if Rod doesn't-- I mean, even if Rod shows--
(She pauses.)
MARY: Yeah?
BRANDY: Do you-- I mean, are you-- I mean, will you--
MARY: What, Brandy, marry him? After seeing Mark? Will I still marry Rod when and if he shows up?
BRANDY: Yes, Mary. Will you still marry Rod?
MARY: The man who probably spent all night with a room full of naked girls and

who is late for my wedding? Will I still be his wife and have his children especially when I'm still in love with--

BRANDY: Yes, Mary. Will you still marry Rod and be his wife and have his children?

MARY: Jesus, Brandy. Please tell me that at least you pay attention.

BRANDY: I pay attention, Mary. I saw that Mark paid you a little visit. And I heard you yelling all the way down the hallway, so I know how happy you were to see him.

MARY: Did you hear what I said?

BRANDY: No, I just heard you yelling. And that's all I needed to hear.

MARY: But, Brandy--

BRANDY: Then Mamma came down the hall and I know how she feels about Mark. And I knew that she would think something was going on, so I tried to stop her from barging in on you two.

MARY: I thought, because you're my sister, you knew me better.

BRANDY: I do. I do know you.

MARY: No you don't.

BRANDY: I know that you were dating Mark and I think Mamma and Daddy did you a favor when they pressured you to break up with him.

MARY: How could you, Brandy!

BRANDY: Mary, I like Mark, but think about it. Could you really see yourself with Mark? Mamma and Daddy would disown you. You could never take him to the country club. And think about your children.

MARY: Brandy?!

BRANDY: I know you better than you think.

MARY: No, you really don't, Brandy.

BRANDY: I do.

MARY: Not at all.

BRANDY: I know shortly after you broke up with Mark you were dating Rod Hightower, the most handsome, eligible guy in the south. And I know you were loving it. The scene, the parties, the lifestyle...I know you loved it all.

(MARY looks away.)

BRANDY: I know after only dating a few months he asked you to marry him. And I know you were only too anxious to tell Mamma and then brag to me.

MARY: I didn't brag.

BRANDY: How could you not brag, Mary. You are living the dream.

MARY: And I did not tell Mother the way you think. I went to her cause I thought Rod was moving too fast. I told her that Rod asked me to marry him and she said yes.

Mother said yes for me, not me. And--

BRANDY: That's not what I thought--

MARY: Surely you remember when I came to you and told you that I was not happy?

BRANDY: I don't remember.

MARY: Brandy, I came to you and told you that I was scared and that it was all too fast and that Mother wanted me to marry him.

BRANDY: I don't remember you saying any of that.

MARY: Brandy, don't you remember I was crying?

BRANDY: Yes, I remember you were crying. I was crying too.

MARY: Yes, I thought you understood that I was afraid.

BRANDY: I thought you were crying because you were so happy.

MARY: No.

BRANDY: I was crying cause I was so sad. I was sad that you had it all. You have everything I want, the best guy, the biggest wedding, the approval of our parents, Great Grandma's ring, everything! You have everything!

MARY: Oh, Brandy.

BRANDY: I cannot believe that you have it all and that you are still not satisfied.

MARY: Brandy?!

BRANDY: I am jealous of you, but more than that I am angry.

MARY: Brandy, you don't understand. I--

BRANDY: You have the nerve to have it all and still have second thoughts!

MARY: But, Brandy--

BRANDY: So what he's late! So what! So

I'm sure he has a good reason to be late, and I'm sure he'll be here any minute now.

(MARY starts to speak.)

BRANDY: And I'm sure that you will be the good daughter that you are and you'll be waiting. And if you have doubts now, they will all disappear as soon as he walks through that door.

(MARK enters.)

MARK (to BRANDY): May I speak to Mary alone please?

BRANDY: I'm busy talking to my sister.

MARY: Brandy, do you mind?

(BRANDY exits in a huff.)

MARY: What do you want?

MARK: I felt like our conversation was cut off before and I wanted to make sure that we were both clear on our intentions.

MARY: Our intentions?

MARK: Yes, my intentions to wish you the best.

MARY: And my intentions to marry Rod?

MARK: Yes.

MARY: Oh.

MARK: Well I guess that's clear.

MARY: I guess so.

MARK: I guess I better go then.

MARY: I guess so.

(MARK turns to leave.)

MARY: Unless--

(MARK turns back around.)

MARK: Yes?

MARY: Oh, nothing. You better go.

MARK: Okay.

(MARK turns to go.)

MARY: That's it?

(MARK turns back around.)

MARY: I was going to say, unless you have more to say.

MARK: Okay.

MARY: I mean, if you have more to say then you wouldn't have to go.

MARK: Right.

MARY: So, do you have more to say?

MARK: Not really.

MARY: Oh.

MARK: I just wanted to make sure that we were both clear on our intentions.

MARY: Right, you mentioned that.

MARK: And since we both seem pretty clear on what we both intend, then I guess that clears things up.

MARY: Clear as mud.

MARK: Precisely.

MARY: I was wondering what you thought my intentions were.

MARK: Meaning?

MARY: You know, before they were clear. What did you think I intended to do?

MARK: Oh. Before I found out you were mad at me for letting you break up with me I thought you intended to marry Rod.

MARY: And now?

MARK: And now, I think that you intend to marry Rod.

MARY: So, why the need for clarity?

MARK: What did you think my intentions were when I came to wish you well?

MARY: I didn't know that you were going to be here.

MARK: Right, I surprised you.

MARY: To say the least.

MARK: Yeah, I pissed you off too, I think.

MARY: No, your surprise didn't piss me off. I was mad because you--because I-- I figured when you said you came to wish me well that your intention was to wish me well.

MARK: Yes.

MARY: And you said something about being friends after I got married or keeping in touch.

MARK: You heard that?

MARY: I don't think that's a good idea.

MARK: You're probably right.

(He pauses.)

I better go.

(MARK turns to leave.)

MARY: Why did you come back?

(MARK turns back around.)

MARK: What do you mean "back"?

MARY: Why did you come back into my life?

MARK: Your parents called my company and--

MARY: Don't give me that shit. You

knew whose wedding it was. Why did you come back into this room to see me for the second time?

MARK: I don't know what you mean. I told you--

MARY: You told me your intentions the first time. Why are you here again?

MARK: Mary, I--

MARY: Don't say it!

MARK: Don't say what?

MARY: What you were going to say.

MARK: I was just going to say that I--

MARY: Mark!

MARK: Mary?!

MARY: I can't believe that you are going to let me do it again.

MARK: Do what again?

(MARK starts moving slowly toward MARY.)

MARY: You're going to let me kick you out of my life again.

MARK: Mary, I will not force myself on you. Nor will I make up your mind for you.

(MARK continues to move toward MARY.)

MARY (almost pouting): I don't know what you're talking about.

(MARY backs away from MARK ever so slightly. MARK continues to move slowly toward MARY.)

MARK: If you ask me to go, I'll go. If you ask me to stay, I'll stay. But the decision is yours, not mine. You know how I feel--

MARY: Do you love me?

(MARK stops.)

MARK: What?

MARY: You heard me. Do you love me?

(MARY stands up straight and begins to move toward MARK.)

MARK: Would I be here if I didn't?

MARY: That doesn't answer my question. Do you love me?

MARK: Do you love me?

MARY: I'm asking you! Do you love me?

(MARY moves closer to MARK.)

MARK: I never wanted us to break up.

(MARK puts his arms around MARY.)

MARY: I didn't ask that. Answer my

question, Mark. Do you love me?

(MARK begins kissing MARY.)

MARY: Is that a yes?

MARK: I'm sorry, what was the question again?

(MARY playfully hits MARK.)

MARY: Mark--

(MARK continues to kiss MARY.)

MARY: Mark, do you love me?

MARK: I never stopped.

(MARK continues to kiss MARY.)

MARY: You have to say it.

(MARY pushes him away a little.)

MARK: Mary, I love you.

(MARY and MARK begin kissing.)

MARK: Hey, what about you?

(MARK pushes MARY away a little.)

MARY: What about me what?

(MARY continues to kiss MARK.)

MARK: You have to say it too.

MARY: I have to say what too.

(MARY is still trying to kiss MARK.)

MARK: That you love me.

MARY (kissing MARK): I always have.

MARK: You made me say it.

MARY: Mark, I love you.

(MARY and MARK begin kissing again.)

(ROD pokes his head around the door.)

ROD (clearing his throat): Oh, I'm sorry.

I--I must be at the wrong wedding.

(MARY and MARK stop kissing and look at ROD.)

ROD: Mary?!

MARY: Rod?!

ROD: What's going on here?

MARY: You're late! Where the hell were you?!

ROD: I'm thirty minutes late, and you found another groom already?

MARY: No! You weren't here and he showed up and--

ROD: What is this, a first come, first served wedding?

MARY: No! We're not getting married--

ROD: Jesus, Mary! And he's-- I mean what will your parents think?

MARY: Rod, we are not getting married!

ROD: Oh, thank god.

(He pauses.)

Then why were you kissing him?

MARY: No, Rod! You and I are not getting married! I am not going to marry you!

(HELEN barges in.)

HELEN: Who is not going to marry who, Mary?

MARY (hesitant at first): Mother, I--I am not going to marry Rod.

HELEN: You most certainly are. He's here now and--

(She addresses MARK.)

You are dismissed!

(MARK looks at MARY and then turns to leave.)

MARY: Wait, Mark!

(MARK stops.)

MARY (to herself): Jesus, he really does always do what he's told.

(She addresses HELEN, firmly.)

Mother, I love Mark. Mark, come here.

(MARK moves toward MARY. HELEN starts to speak. MARY grabs MARK and begins kissing him. BRANDY barges in. HELEN starts to faint.)

HELEN: Oh! Dear God! My child has--
(ROD catches HELEN. FRANK enters.)

FRANK (as he enters): Where the hell is that Hightower boy?!

(FRANK surveys the room. MARY and MARK are still kissing. It looks like ROD and HELEN are hugging.)

FRANK (to ROD): Get your goddamn hands off my wife!

BRANDY: Daddy, Rod was just trying to help Mamma.

FRANK: She doesn't need that kind of help.

(FRANK forces Rod out of the way and holds HELEN.)

HELEN (half conscious): Oh, Frank...

(HELEN faints again.)

MARY: Really, Daddy, she fainted and he caught her before she fell.

BRANDY (to MARY): How dare you defend Rod after what you've done to him?!

MARY: I was just telling the truth.

HELEN (delirious): Mary...

(HELEN faints again.)

BRANDY: To tell you the truth I cannot believe that you would embarrass Rod like this in front of our family.

ROD: Yeah, what she said. Thank you, Brandy.

BRANDY: My pleasure.

HELEN (mumbling): Rod is here. He's here.

(HELEN faints again. FRANK is struggling to hold HELEN up.)

FRANK: What the hell is going on here?!

MARY (overlapping): I love Mark and I'm not going to marry Rod--

ROD (overlapping): I just came in and Mary was here kissing that guy--

BRANDY (overlapping): Rod is here now and Mary doesn't want to marry him--

MARK (overlapping): Mrs. Lovelace began to faint when Mary started kissing me--

MARY: Enough!

(There is silence.)

HELEN (moaning): Frank, our little girl...she's...

(HELEN faints again. MARY hands BRANDY their Great Grandma's ring.)

MARY: Here you go. It's yours.

(MARY motions to ROD)

You can have him, too, if you want.

(MARY grabs MARK by the arm and exits.)

FRANK (to MARY): Get the hell back in here, young lady!!

HELEN: Oh, Frank, Mary's gone. I've lost her. Ohhh!

(HELEN faints again. FRANK turns his attention to HELEN. BRANDY turns to receive the intense gaze of ROD.)

(BRANDY looks shy and flirty at ROD. ROD looks interested in BRANDY.)

ROD: You were beautiful. The way you stuck up for me.

BRANDY (shyly): Thank you

ROD: It's a nice day for a wedding, don't you think?

(BRANDY holds up the ring. ROD steps

over HELEN. ROD and BRANDY, with the ring between them embrace.)

THE END

One-Act Play by Pat Turner Josey

The Pecan Tree

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

- MARGUERITE:** Middle sister, early forties, Black American, judgmental, angry, vulnerable.
- J.C.:** Youngest sister, mother's favorite, wants to keep memory of her mother untarnished, religious, rigid in her beliefs.
- LISA:** Oldest sister, artist, painter, lost soul, sensitive, wants to face her past.
- MR. DAVIS:** Old next door neighbor, seventyish, known the women since they were girls.
- WORKMAN:** A man sent in to chop down the tree.

SCENE: A backyard with a pecan tree, a tent, flowers in a plastic tray waiting to be transplanted into a flower bed.

TIME: The present.

SETTING: The backyard of the Calvert house. Majestic pecan tree, a tent, flower bed, and a bench.

AT RISE: There is a WORKMAN walking on with chainsaw, ax, and measuring tape. He starts to measure the tree for cutting. MR. DAVIS enters in a talkative mood.

MR. DAVIS: She's been around a long time.

WORKMAN: Yeah, she is a beauty, these old ones are more of a challenge.

MR. DAVIS: A shame to cut her --

WORKMAN: Everything gets cut down, sooner, later. Can't just cut her any ol' way. Lot goes into the cut, gotta get the angle just right so she falls where you want her. Lay her down nice and sweet like a lady, not as easy as it looks.

MR. DAVIS: Somethin' living don't take dying easy.

WORKMAN: Kinda strange cutting on Mrs. C's funeral day.

MR. DAVIS: Mrs. Calvert wanted it that way. All the girls are here.

WORKMAN: Her daughters, Marguerite and Lisa. I met Miss J.C. She hired me. She's a woman that would have a man doing right. What's the tent for?

MR. DAVIS: Lisa still likes to sleep outside. Couldn't keep Lisa and her twin under a roof when they were little. Even in the rain they wanted to sleep outside.

WORKMAN: Four daughters, that's nice.

MR. DAVIS: No three. The other girl died a long time back. She was just ten years old.

WORKMAN (eager for gossip): What happened?

MR. DAVIS (seeming to digress): Billie Holiday used to sing a song about strange fruit. There's nothing stranger than finding it in your own backyard.

WORKMAN (baffled, continuing his work): Oh.

MR. DAVIS: Never understand as long as I've lived why it takes a funeral or a wedding to get some folks together. Most of the time it's just a funeral that'll make folk come together. These days people have more faith in the dead than the living. In my day people stayed married till one buried the other. That's the way it should be --

WORKMAN: Did you go to the gravesite?

MR. DAVIS: No, I told her I'd be joining her soon enough, and a body don't need to stare into the future. Wink at the future, today has enough sorrow. I gotta get back to the house. The mourners are coming to supper.

WORKMAN: Why is it at your place and not in this fine house?

MR. DAVIS: Cause the past won't die. Folks holding on to the past always make it the future. A lot of things need to get buried real deep. Come over and get you a plate.

WORKMAN: I'll do that.

(MR. DAVIS exits. WORKMAN marks tree. LISA enters.)

LISA: Who are you? And what are you doing?

WORKMAN: Miss J.C. gave me a work order to cut her down.

LISA: It's canceled.

(J.C. and MARGUERITE enter.)

J.C.: Lisa, what do you think you're doing? Continue what you started, cut that tree down.

(LISA steps between them and the tree.)

LISA: This tree is not being cut down. What kind of insanity is this? You know how much this tree means to me.

MARGUERITE (to WORKMAN): Why don't you take a dinner break while we straighten things out.

(WORKMAN exits.)

J.C.: Mama told me to have this tree cut down on the day of her funeral. It is going to be cut down.

LISA: Why?

J.C.: She didn't tell me why.

LISA: And I suppose you didn't ask.

J.C.: No, I didn't.

LISA (quietly): This tree means a great deal to me.

MARGUERITE: Evidently more than us since you've come back only to visit it. Don't think we didn't notice the flowers you'd leave after your visits.

LISA: Leave the tree alone.

J.C.: Mama wants this tree cut down and I plan on carrying out her last wishes.

LISA: You can't.

J.C.: Watch me.

MARGUERITE: This isn't accomplishing anything. We have business to discuss--

LISA: I don't care.

J.C.: That's your problem. You still have tent set up even now to flaunt your disrespect at her. You haven't set foot in that house

since you were sixteen. You barely spoke to Mama in all those years. How do you think she felt? You are so selfish. Your pain is the only pain that matters. What makes you so special? She was our mother. She did the best she could, and you just walked away.

MARGUERITE: Yeah, why wasn't that good enough for you? Then you come back and set up your little tent for all the world to see. What are people gonna think? A child won't set foot in her mother's house even when the poor woman's dead.

LISA: I don't hate her. I don't know how to stop keeping my distance. We stopped talking because we ran out of words.

J.C.: You broke her heart.

LISA: Her heart was broken long before you or I got here.

(She walks offstage, taking the chainsaw with her.)

J.C.: Yeah, that's it, walk away. The thing you do best.

MARGUERITE: Very diplomatic, J.C.

J.C.: I didn't see you holding back.

MARGUERITE: What are we going to do now? We have to get this house business settled. I need a drink.

J.C.: Don't go south on me now, Marguerite. I mean it. Don't check out.

MARGUERITE: Keep your commandments to yourself.

J.C.: I'm just trying to honor Mama's wishes.

MARGUERITE: I just want to sell this place as soon as possible, pay some bills, and maybe take a vacation by an ocean somewhere.

J.C.: That's all this place means to you.

MARGUERITE: What does anything mean? I just want a little pleasure.

J.C.: This is our history. You want to sell it off for "thirty pieces of silver" so you can buy a little pleasure.

MARGUERITE: That's one thing God and I have in common. We both know a about betrayal. If you're going to start talking about "Jesus loves me" and "God

has a plan," I am going to have a drink. If God's planning this mess we'd better fire his ass for mismanagement.

J.C.: So you can blaspheme, and I can't praise.

MARGUERITE: O.K., praise away, just don't expect me to join the chorus.

J.C.: I miss Mom, but I know her sufferings are over and she's gone to a sweeter place.

MARGUERITE: Maybe she just moved to a lower rung on the food chain-- fertilizer. Maybe the so-called crown of God's glory, human beings, end up on the cosmic

compost heap. That at least has value. A service to the next cycle of life. If that's all there is then why don't they just admit it.

Religion puts us through so many changes--

J.C.: I don't want to hear any more of this foolishness.

MARGUERITE: What I hate is the nagging feeling none of this has any point. Or it has a punchline, but only God gets the joke.

J.C.: You got to have faith. Faith put the stars in the heavens. God believed in his word and the word became flesh. Who else but Jesus would take on flesh to touch us, know us, be one of us.

MARGUERITE: Even if the story is true, he knew he was God. He remembered glory like it was yesterday. I don't remember. How could he be one of us if he didn't know what the darkness feels like. He had his memory. He knew. We just scurry alone in the dark running over each other, debating about a light we've only caught a glimpse of, killing each other in our blindness.

J.C.: The light is within. We also love. God is. God is. God is love. You make it too complicated. Just believe. What other choice do you have? We just buried Mama. I have to believe she gets her chance at perfect peace. That she will be comforted, happy at last. I want to believe her heart will stop aching. I have to, I do believe it. The Lord wouldn't let his child down.

MARGUERITE: What if faith is just a knee jerk reaction to staring into the big

empty?

J.C.: The big empty?

MARGUERITE: Yes, the void, the horrible alone, the emptiness. What if everything Mama taught us was because her mama taught her and so on. If we could trace back our faith it wouldn't land on Jesus or Peter the Rock, that's for sure. What did our ancestors believe?

J.C.: Now you are just talking nonsense. I don't want to hear it. We buried Mama today and we still have to honor her last wishes.

MARGUERITE: Yes. "Let the dead bury the dead."

(LISA enters.)

LISA: People are asking for both of you. Nobody knows who I am, and I'm tired of introducing myself. It's been a while--

J.C.: Are you surprised? you got to know somebody to remember them. Are you really surprised?

LISA (sarcastically): Pleasantly so.

MARGUERITE: I'll go.

J.C.: No, I will go over. We still have to talk later.

LISA: I'm not going anywhere.

J.C. (walking off stage): Miracles do occur.

MARGUERITE: So now we can catch up. You tell me yours, I'll tell you mine.

LISA: You first.

MARGUERITE: Come on, Lisa.

LISA: What's to tell. I'm a struggling artist. I paint. I sell my paintings, I eat. I don't sell, life becomes interesting.

MARGUERITE: I saw you get out of a van a few blocks from here the other day.

LISA: So, I own a van.

MARGUERITE: I walked by.

LISA: Just happened to be strolling by.

MARGUERITE: Looks like it's pretty comfortable.

LISA: It meets my needs. I stay on the road a lot. Always looking for the perfect scene to paint or an interesting face.

MARGUERITE: Sounds like an exciting adventure or an incredibly lonely existence.

(MARGUERITE walks over to the flower

bed and starts to dig up a plant. She displays the roots.)

MARGUERITE: What gives you sustenance? Plants are easy.

(She replants it.)

Do you really enjoy drifting rootless around and around but never a part of anything? If you need--

LISA: What I need is for you to side with me about this tree. We can't let them cut it down.

MARGUERITE: Who's them?

LISA: J.C. and Mama.

MARGUERITE: Mama's dead.

LISA: You really think so? She's still holding on through J.C.

MARGUERITE: Who are you?

LISA: What are you talking about?

MARGUERITE: I mean you're my blood, my sister, but I don't know you. You turn up for Mama's funeral, which, by the way, how did you know?

LISA: Mr. Davis let me know.

MARGUERITE: So Mr. Davis knew how to reach you but we didn't.

LISA: He's not family.

MARGUERITE: So we're the enemy you're hiding from. When are you going to stop running.

LISA: I'm not hiding or running from anybody.

MARGUERITE: Now you're lyin' to yourself, and when you do that nobody can find you.

LISA: We just share some common blood. Blood doesn't make you family. It just means you're related by guilt. Yes, Lord, I'm guilty of being a blood relation. But it don't mean I want to spend my life in a DNA prison cell. Blood is nothing.

MARGUERITE: Wrong. Blood is everything. You're back here because no matter what's happened that woman shed blood to bring you into the world and after all is said and done blood ties us to each other.

LISA: Yes, the ties that bind like a strait jacket. Whether we like it or not.

MARGUERITE: Why did you come back?

LISA: What is this, confession on demand? Why did you stay?

MARGUERITE: Easy. It's all the same, people, places, things; so why go anywhere? You just end up here.

LISA: Too easy, Marguerite. You decided to stay in prison. I decided to leave.

MARGUERITE: Yeah, how far did you get? This tree been dragging you back here like a dog on a short chain. Every couple of years you make a pilgrimage.

LISA: That's none of your business.

MARGUERITE: So you think you can flit in and out. No price to pay if you don't touch the cell bars.

LISA: I've paid.

MARGUERITE: What do you want; applause, absolution, admiration, what?

LISA: I just wanted to see if there was anything here for me. I wanted to say good-bye and hello at the same time. I wanted to make sense of something, try to fit the pieces together.

MARGUERITE: Good luck! Don't you get it? None of this will ever make sense. If life were sensible we would all simply cease to exist because life being a sensible gal would put a bullet through her head and call it a day.

LISA: What do you care about Marguerite? Do you believe in anything? Because I do sometimes believe, maybe not in God, but I believe in love and second chances. I even believe in hope if you have breath left in your body after you survive yet another storm. Sure I tell God to go fuck himself sometimes when I'm curled into a ball on the floor and can't breathe cause breathing only magnifies the pain. I hate in those moments that I can't stop reaching out for God. Even when I don't believe, I need somebody, anybody, deity or human to know me—

MARGUERITE: A body got to have a body sometime.

LISA: Someone to care for me when I can't carry my cares any longer so like a coward

or saint I reach for the unseen hand--

MARGUERITE: Like Mama used to say "His hands have seen it all."

LISA: I don't know if I'm kidding myself. It doesn't matter. I don't know anything anyway. I'm just here asking the same questions asked since the beginning. Repeating the original question getting the original answer--"silence." No wonder God keeps silent; we're still asking the same old questions.

MARGUERITE: Maybe we haven't gotten any satisfactory answers. We're probably on our own anyway. God has left the building. What's the sane response to abandonment?

LISA: Madness.

MARGUERITE: Hell yes, we're mad.

(J.C. enters)

J.C.: Mad about what?

MARGUERITE: Abandonment.

J.C.: Yes, Lisa, you abandoned this family a long time ago--

MARGUERITE: Wait--

J.C.: You have no right to come back and demand any considerations. But you do have an obligation to honor Mama's last wish.

LISA: If I'm understanding you, I have no rights. But I do have obligations. It must be nice to be so sure, so certain, one way of seeing the world. Through the eyes of Mama or Jesus, what about your own eyes?

J.C.: What eyes?

LISA: I envy your certainty. God, if I could believe again like I did before I ate that cursed apple. The knowledge of good and evil is an acquired taste best left to the gods.

J.C.: What the-- What are you rambling about?

LISA: I'm talking about the "fall," the fall a few of us take when we start looking out of our own eyes and seeing--

J.C.: Seeing what?

MARGUERITE: Seeing the discrepancies, the shadows.

LISA: Seeing the lies. Keep your eyes

closed tight, J.C., and I bet you could walk through your whole life and stay within the lines.

J.C.: What lines?

LISA: The lines that form the picture in a kid's coloring book. Keep your colors nice and neat within the lines. Make a neat, pretty picture. Don't question anything, stay within the lines, the picture is drawn, everybody knows what it looks like, don't be a messy girl and go outside the lines.

J.C.: We need to discuss the terms of Mother's will.

LISA: What is her will and will it be done on earth as it is in heaven?

J.C.: Don't you blaspheme our mother's spirit.

LISA: I bless her holy spirit.

MARGUERITE: Tell her the terms, J.C.

J.C.: I'll be direct. The gist of the will is this. It states or requires that you spend one night in the house. In our family home. If you do the results are simple. The house is bequeathed to all of us to do with as we see fit.

LISA: And if I refuse?

J.C.: If you don't agree, the house will be left to the church.

LISA: The final gauntlet thrown from the grave. She always had to have the last word.

J.C.: Can't you give her this?

LISA: Did she leave a post script telling me it's for my own good?

J.C.: She's leaving us the house.

MARGUERITE: Let's digest this for a minute. Everybody breathe. We could just say you stayed, and be done with it.

J.C.: I know you're kidding. You can't be serious.

MARGUERITE: Loosen up, J.C.

J.C.: I think you know me better than to think I'd go along with that.

MARGUERITE: I want this dealt with. The sooner we put this place on the market, the better.

J.C.: We are not selling this house, if we get to keep it.

LISA: So even from the grave she's still right in the middle. We are still circling around her like she's the sun. Living by her every word, ready to go for each other's throats.

J.C.: Don't you ever speak about her that way.

MARGUERITE: It's raining gods from the dark skies.

J.C.: Shut up, Marguerite.

LISA: There are no gods, only little tyrants who insist on being obeyed.

(J.C. slaps LISA. There is a long pause.)

LISA: I'll be happy to turn the other cheek in the next life, sister dear. But for this one, don't make the same mistake again.

(J.C. turns her back to LISA, shaken.)

J.C.: You talk to her, Marguerite.

LISA: Yes, maybe we need an interpreter. We should talk to each other like strangers, the kind you meet on a train trip. I'll tell you my woes, you pretend to care for a few precious moments, then we part and never see each other again.

MARGUERITE: Nice and sterile, nobody gets hurt. Tell us a story stranger.

LISA: I was real sick last year about this time. Spent more time in the hospital than out. I didn't think I'd make it out.

MARGUERITE: What happened? Why were you there?

LISA: The details don't matter.

J.C.: Of course not.

LISA: What matters is it brought me to the end of myself. I don't know if I can explain it. I was lying in intensive care. I had shit on myself. I was so weak all I wanted was solid food. I told the nurse to feed me before she changed the sheets. I never been so hungry or felt so helpless. I stayed there for few days. I spent most of that time wide awake. I was way past scared. There's a place you go when you're life-or-death sick. I'm not talking about "the white light," only lights I saw were attached to monitors and the ceiling. But I went to a place that was beyond my mind. It was like my mind was frozen and some part of me broke off. I

prayed every prayer I knew. I don't-- I just felt emptiness and loneliness so vast it made my fear seem rational. I slipped in and out of the emptiness and the fear. All I knew was that I did not want to die. Also that my mind can only take me a very small part of the way--

MARGUERITE: What do you mean?

LISA: It's almost like the feeling you get if you ever drift too far out in the ocean and you can't see land anywhere. Or if you walk on the beach at night and there is no moon but you feel this dark, vast presence. All of a sudden you know--

J.C.: I can't listen to any more of this. We are here to decide about Mama's house, our home, where we all grew up. This yard where we all used to play, and help Mama plant flowers and vegetables each year. We had so much fun helping her plant her garden, our garden each year.

MARGUERITE: To this day I hate yard work.

J.C.: Lisa, can't you remember what was good about this place enough to want to keep it.

LISA: This tree is good.

J.C.: You care more about a damn tree where--

LISA: Stop right there.

J.C.: Where blasphemy was committed.

(MARGUERITE steps in between them.)

LISA: I'm warning you.

J.C.: Mama wouldn't cut that tree down before because she knew it was the only thing bringing you back here. You've been mourning the loss of your twin.

LISA: Shut up now!

MARGUERITE: Stop, J.C.

J.C.: Why shouldn't somebody say it? Mama wants that tree cut down. Maybe it's her last act of love toward you. She's trying to free you.

LISA: Free me. Free me. That's great. Let me decide the terms for my own freedom. Her kind of freedom hurts too much. It's overkill. I refuse the gift. I give up. I can't speak the language. Here's the

deal; leave the tree standing forever and I'll stay in the... I'll sleep on the back porch.

MARGUERITE: It's a deal and we'll discuss the disposition of the property later.

J.C.: No. She made me promise and I keep my promises. The tree goes. And Marguerite, we're not disposing of anything. If the property goes to the church, that's fine with me. I'm a long standing member of the board. They will listen to any recommendations I make. I wouldn't be a good Christian if I minded this becoming the Lord's little house.

(LISA sits against the tree and closes her eyes.)

LISA: So you just want to win.

J.C.: I'm doing what's right.

MARGUERITE: Suppose the board votes to sell God's little house? After all, you are only one vote.

J.C.: They wouldn't do that.

MARGUERITE: But what if they did?

After all, God's big house doesn't run on prayers alone.

J.C.: They wouldn't, but the Lord is

welcomed to all I have. I believe in supporting my faith.

MARGUERITE: So you put your money where your faith is.

J.C.: "Faith without works is dead."

MARGUERITE: You seem to have it all figured out.

J.C.: I want Mama to rest in peace.

LISA: I'm not a student of the law. I seem to remember possession is nine tenths of the law. I plan on sleeping in that house and after I do we all own this place equally, and if I have to get an injunction that would keep anyone from cutting down this tree I will.

J.C.: You can't.

LISA: Hell, yes, I can, little sister.

J.C.: What about Mother?

LISA: I don't give a damn what she wished. That's life. We don't get all our wishes, who does?

(J.C. is starting to pace, highly agitated.)

MARGUERITE: I think we have a shift in the wind.

LISA: Walk next door with me, Marguerite. Let's all step back and try this again later. O.K. J.C.?

(J.C. keeps pacing. She doesn't answer.)

LISA: Fine, come on.

(MARGUERITE and LISA leave. J.C. sees the ax lying by the tent. She picks it up. A long moment of decision. She raises the ax. She chops. LISA and MARGUERITE come on-stage, while J.C. is chopping the tree.)

MARGUERITE: J.C. J.C.

(J.C. leans exhausted on the ax. LISA touches the gashes on the tree. She is strangely calm.)

LISA (quietly): I tried not to come here again. I just thought Lela would be lonely if I didn't come to visit her, tell her stories of all the places I've been, people I've seen, all the things she dreamed about doing. This is sacred ground to me. Lela was the other half of my soul. This tree holds her soul. She left it here for me. This is her resting place, her burial ground. You had to touch it.

J.C.: She's not buried there. You are.

LISA: At last you're awake. All it took was a violent act. Still feel righteous? Got any more acts of God to show me?

J.C.: I don't feel anything.

(LISA grabs J.C.'s hand and makes her touch the tree.)

LISA: I came home that day. I found her hanging right there above the place you're standing now.

(J.C. jerks back from LISA and the tree.)

LISA: She looked like those paper doll Christmas ornaments Granny used to send us. They gave Mom the creeps. We couldn't hang them on the tree till right before Granny got there. The minute she left into the trash they'd go.

(She pauses.)

I couldn't move. I just looked at her, then my knees just bent and it was like I was praying to her or God. All I remember praying was "Fix her, she's broke" over and over. Then, waking up in bed, no memories,

those days I lived by the light shining in my window. The light touching me. My shadow friends on the wall. Nothing hurt.

MARGUERITE: You were deaf and mute for almost two years. You didn't leave that room. You drew on everything.

J.C.: Horrible pictures, Mama couldn't come in there.

MARGUERITE: Sad pictures, but you didn't seem to know that they were sad. You smiled at them. Hell, kid, you were a relief from Mama and Daddy fighting in whispers. Daddy started staying away longer and longer till finally he just stayed. Mr. Davis came over everyday and between the three of us you had what you needed.

J.C.: Mama always cooked. Made sure food was there. You didn't need anyone for company. You looked right through me. This tree is poison. It poisoned our lives. I hate it.

MARGUERITE: Lisa, do you really believe her soul lives on in this tree?

LISA: I know it does.

J.C.: How can you know?

LISA: My faith "the substance of things hoped for," or maybe it's my... I don't know, my hope. I just feel her here, I know.

J.C.: I know that cutting down that tree--

LISA: You've fallen asleep again.

J.C.: All I know is Lela died, Daddy left, Mama changed, you went--

LISA: Say it. I went crazy, I had a breakdown. Yes, all the pieces were broken and nobody could find them or make it better. It must have been terrifying for you both.

MARGUERITE: And one day almost two years later you just talked. You came out of your room, walked up to the table, took a piece of cornbread off my plate, and said, "She's O.K. The shadow friends are with her."

LISA: I don't remember--

J.C.: Mama just got up and walked outside.

MARGUERITE: Yeah, one of her liquid refreshment walks.

J.C.: She never left us.

MARGUERITE: I told her you'd be fine.

LISA: Yes, I was just fine.

J.C.: Nothing was ever the same. Daddy sent everything but himself. Mama stopped going to church, but I wouldn't stop going. She never tried to stop me. I think that she left the house to the church to atone for--

MARGUERITE: She had nothing to atone for. She was broken just like Lela. She couldn't pretend she loved the one who broke her. Besides, she left this place to us, her flesh, her images, her only begotten daughters. Adrift on the sea of sorrows, maybe she wanted to throw us an anchor.

J.C.: Nothing was the same.

MARGUERITE: We got along fine.

LISA: Oh sure. We were just fine.

J.C.: Why did she do it?

LISA: She was my twin, my soulmate and I still don't know. We shared everything. We talked about everything. Yet there was a part of her I didn't know. To this day I don't believe you can really know anyone. I've seen parts of myself I didn't know were there. Circumstance brought them out. I've done things since I left here that I never dreamed I'd do. Nobody knows anybody. We don't even know ourselves.

J.C.: I don't believe that.

LISA: What about this tree? You mutilated something defenseless?

J.C.: That tree is evil. I had every right to honor Mama's wish. Mama was never the same.

MARGUERITE: All the note said was "I got to go now." Hell, she wrote it in soap on the bathroom mirror. I found it, wrote it on paper and washed the mirror. I threw away the bar of soap. I couldn't look in that mirror for a long time. I kept seeing those words across my face. "I got to go now."

LISA: Why couldn't she go later?

J.C.: That tree--

LISA: J.C., forgive her. Put your hands in her wounds--

(She touches the gashes in the tree)
--like Thomas to Jesus and forgive her. She was a child, she didn't know.

J.C.: That's blasphemous.

MARGUERITE: Don't you believe she and Mama are together? She and Mama have made peace.

J.C.: What about you and Mama, Lisa

LISA: I remember waking up hungry in the middle of the night, ravenous, but I'd eaten my fill like everybody else. It took me years to figure out they were withdrawal pains because she rarely touched me after Lela died. I don't know when I stopped trying to be close. One day I realized it hurt her even to look at me. She didn't mean any more harm, she just couldn't hide her fear.

J.C.: What do you mean? Her fear of what?

LISA: She watched me all the time. Waiting, just waiting.

MARGUERITE: Waiting for what?

LISA: In her mind, I think--

J.C.: How can you say what was in her mind?

LISA: Fine, I thought she was waiting for me to turn out like Lela. I don't think she even really saw me again. She saw Lela all the time. She'd even call me Lela sometimes. You don't know what it was like to have to be so careful, always scrutinized. I grew to hate my own face in the mirror. I used to cut myself.

MARGUERITE: What? Why?

LISA: I'm not sure. I never told anyone till now. I just wanted to escape. There was so much pressure. I felt trapped. I drew nightmarish drawings that I kept in my school locker. I couldn't bring them home. Nothing was private from her--

J.C.: That's not true.

MARGUERITE: Be quiet, J.C. Let her finish.

LISA: I didn't know what to do with the feelings. I couldn't breathe. Remember those little bottles of red paint I used to paint with all the time? One of them was blood mixed with paint.

J.C.: No wonder she watched you. You were sick.

MARGUERITE: And you fucked

everything that paid attention to you till you got religion and you've been the "Blessed Virgin" ever since. So watch the stones you throw. They do bounce back to hit you with a vengeance.

J.C.: And you--

MARGUERITE: What, J.C., what I have always been is exactly what you see-- a depraved, lost soul and proud of it!

LISA: Please stop it. I was so lost it seemed like all of you were carrying on with normal lives, business as usual.

MARGUERITE: I threw myself into school. I didn't know anything else. I hated coming home to her.

J.C.: To Mama.

MARGUERITE: Who else? She was a damn drunk.

J.C.: She never was. Never say that again.

MARGUERITE: J.C., where were you living? Were you so busy cleaning up behind her, fetching her medicine you couldn't see?

J.C.: Stop it, Marguerite. She'd been through enough. If she could find comfort and rest I didn't begrudge her that. Take what you said back.

MARGUERITE: Maybe you're right. Keep that picture. I just know when I look into the mirror these days I see more of her comfort loving side in me than I ever wanted. You can't escape the mold.

LISA: What do you mean?

MARGUERITE: "In the image of God He created them male and female. He created and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" Guess what? We are just divine knock-offs. God's little Xerox copies to the nth degree. Mom's little cookie cutter designs with, of course, Dad's secret ingredients. If we are made in God's image, I'd hate to see the original.

J.C.: God doesn't make junk or mistakes.

LISA: Yes, God sits absolved of all mistakes on high.

MARGUERITE: So easy to be above it all.

J.C.: But you see, that's not right. He is with us. If we fail, He fails. He's not a

bystander. He feels what we feel, knows us intimately. Hurts every hurt we hurt. We are loved, sea-deep to the end of time and space and beyond. He cares about every tear we shed. Carries us through our darkest hour. How do you think I survived? He saved me, forgave me, made me His bride. He is my lover, my life, my friend. My faith makes life worth living. He makes life worth living.

LISA: Now you know how I feel about this tree. To me it is a holy place. I can't believe like you. I need to touch the hallowed ground. I'm glad you feel that way about God. I wish I could be that certain. The only thing I'm certain about is I need to touch this place once in a while to remind me, we continue.

J.C.: It's like a graven image, a substitute for God. You can't worship a tree in place of God.

(LISA leans against the tree and closes her eyes.)

MARGUERITE: J.C., what if you, through some quirk of fate, became the proud owner of the actual tree used to crucify Jesus on. The tree that the Lord was sacrificed on. Imagine it--the cross or a piece of it. How would you feel? What would you do?

J.C.: That's not going to happen.

MARGUERITE: What if?

J.C.: I don't know.

MARGUERITE: Come on

J.C.: Jesus didn't commit suicide.

MARGUERITE: Oh really? Let's see. He knew He was the Son of God. He came with what purpose?

J.C.: To atone for our sins.

MARGUERITE: How?

J.C.: By His, by dying on a cross, but you've twisted it. You have a filthy mind that could make an act of the greatest love; you twisted it.

MARGUERITE: I'm not saying it wasn't the greatest act of love. I'm saying He knew He came here to die according to the story, as I've heard it. And He willingly laid down

His life. A voluntary act of God.

J.C.: He allowed His life to be taken. He didn't take His own life.

MARGUERITE: But He could have prevented it. He was God, yet He didn't defend Himself. He knew His fate. I say it was a choice. Some might say a suicidal choice. Now what would you do with the cross of Jesus, that bloody tree, where God chose to die. Would you take an ax to it, or would you cherish it? Would you come outside, visit it, touch it, place flowers around it? What would you do?

J.C.: Her death was meaningless, senseless, a waste.

LISA: How the hell do you know that? Are you God? Do you know all?

J.C.: I'm standing in the gap for all of us.

LISA: What gap?

J.C.: The gap between salvation and the damnation of your souls. I'm praying for you, trying to show you "the way, the truth and the life." I'm doing the best I can for all of us.

LISA: Damn it. That's it. Stop doing for us. Just be one of us. Lay down your cross and join us down here on the heap. It's messy, but it's real. We'll find our way together. Stop trying to lead us, when you don't even have a map. It's all right not to have it all figured out.

MARGUERITE: Give up on the concept of an orderly universe. It's a mess, sister, and you can't clean it up.

J.C.: The Bible is my map. I know who I am and I know my God. Can you say the same?

LISA: It wouldn't matter if I got an injunction. You'd still cut this tree down.

J.C.: Yes.

LISA: You'd be breaking the law.

J.C.: I'd be obeying God's commandment, "Honor thy mother."

MARGUERITE: I need a drink.

(They ignore her.)

LISA: Mama's obsession with me didn't leave a lot of time for you, did it? And she wasn't a drunk while I was here.

MARGUERITE: After you left she let go of all pretense of holding it together.

J.C.: That's enough.

MARGUERITE: I lasted about a year, then I took a new job across town.

I bought a house about forty-five minutes away, married the first and last man I'd marry. Divorced him, but I never could make the trip back over here more than once a month. It was too depressing. I wanted to put her in a nursing home.

J.C.: Angel of mercy that you are.

LISA: I never tried to see her when I came back to leave flowers here. I just assumed she didn't want to see me.

J.C.: You were right.

LISA: Haven't we done enough to each other? Can't we find common ground, a way back to each other?

J.C.: I think you'd say anything to keep me from cutting down your precious tree. You don't love us. You never came back, really. You left me with all the responsibility. You were my big sister. I loved you. You escaped and never came back for me.

LISA: I barely had enough life left to start my own. I had no strength. If I had not found a woman who befriended me, I don't think I would have made it. It took years to rebuild, salvage, excavate my soul, my life. It was not about abandoning you. There was no me, so how could there be a you? I do love you. I don't know you. So maybe I should say I love the girl I remember. I care for you both.

J.C.: Pretty words.

MARGUERITE: What the hell do you want? She doesn't owe you or us anything. She's a survivor, just like us. One more burn victim, trying to regrow some protective covering.

(There is a pause)

LISA: I think you need this tree more than I do. A sacrifice, an offering, an olive branch. Cut it down.

J.C.: Tomorrow morning.

LISA: O.K.

J.C.: The house.

LISA: Let the church have her atonement.

J.C.: Fine.

MARGUERITE: Why don't we just turn the whole thing into a burnt offering?

J.C.: I'll see you in the morning.

LISA: No, do it in the afternoon. I leave in the morning. I want a chance to say good-bye to this place, to everything.

J.C.: You're leaving?

LISA: Did you really expect me to stay and watch? You can't have it both ways J.C.

J.C.: I can't stop being who I am.

MARGUERITE: But you can stop doing hurtful things.

J.C.: It felt good to cut that tree. I've hated it for so long. I just wanted it to feel a little of the pain it caused us. I never eat the pecans from it. I have a boy sweep them up and put them in a dumpster down the street. Every year I watch and make sure he doesn't eat any.

LISA: I hope you find some peace after it's gone.

J.C.: I have the peace of God in my heart, but it sure will be a comfort to have it gone.

LISA: Good-bye J.C.

(J. C. is still holding the ax. She is using the ax like a cane.)

J.C.: Bye Lisa. I'll keep you in my prayers.
(J.C. exits.)

LISA (quietly to herself): And I'll hold a good thought for you J.C.

(MARGUERITE puts her arm around LISA's shoulder.)

MARGUERITE: I've got some vacation time I haven't used. Why don't you show me something in an ocean view.

LISA: I could use an ocean view right now. Why don't you step into my travel office.

(She holds open the tent flap)

If you mean it, the van for all points south leaves in the morning. Pack light!

(Lights fade as MARGUERITE and LISA enter the tent.)

THE END

One-Act Play by Angelina McCormick

Searching for Sebastian

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

MAGGIE: A woman in her mid-thirties. She is in therapy trying to deal with her painful relationship with her mother.

MOTHER: A woman in her late sixties. She is dying in the hospital with lung cancer. She blames her daughter for the disappearance of her infant son.

MAGGIE AS CHILD: A girl of twelve. She is lonely and feels abandoned by her mother. She is small and fragile looking. She appears only in Maggie's flashbacks.

SCENE: A psychiatrist's office during Maggie's therapy session.

TIME: Present Day.

PRODUCTION NOTE: The stage is divided into two areas. Characters move back and forth between these two areas. This should be a fluid movement, using lighting to denote where the action will take place. There should be no pauses between the scenes--only the dimming and blacking out of one half and the lighting of the other.

SETTING: Present Day; A Psychiatrist's Office; placed far right on stage; there is a couch, coffee table, end table, and an ashtray. On the coffee table is a stack of books, a few magazines and some knickknacks, such as decorative paperweights, etc

AT RISE: A Single spotlight illuminates **MAGGIE**. **MAGGIE** is in her mid-thirties. She is professional looking and attractive, yet tired. She is tall, thin and dressed in a black business suit. Her hair is pulled loosely back. She wears little make-up except bright red lipstick, which draws

attention to her mouth. Her whole appearance should convey a sense of recklessness and carelessness. **MAGGIE** lights a cigarette as soon as the lights come up. **MAGGIE** addresses the audience as the **PSYCHIATRIST**. She offers a cigarette to the **PSYCHIATRIST**. She deeply inhales and exhales, watching the smoke curl around her.

MAGGIE: Would you like a cigarette, Doc?

(She laughs.)

I know. I know. You don't smoke. You're so good--so above the whole oral fixation thing, huh Doc?

(MAGGIE sits on the couch and takes her jacket off and untucks her blouse.)

MAGGIE: Do you mind? It's been a completely hellish day from the start this morning. Don't worry, I'll let you know if anything else is going to come off.

(She kicks off her high heels.)

These were invented by a man, did you know that? Probably some sick way to pay women back for that whole Adam and Eve-Apple thing.

(She laughs.)

I'll tell you the truth about what really happened. Eve was pissed at Adam, angrier than she'd ever been before and she snaps one day, right? She sees the Apple and knows what will happen, but she's willing to pay the price. Think about it. If Eve had wanted to try the apple, do you think she would've just handed it over to Adam? Hell no, she would've taken a bite out of it right there, but she didn't. No, she deliberately took the apple to him--deliberately gave it to him--deliberately brought about God's wrath, and deliberately brought the fall of man--all just to get revenge. I think she knew exactly what she was doing--Just like

a man knew exactly what he was doing when he designed these goddamn atrocities for women to wear. It's all about payback. Well, I guess that's just my take on the story, right?

(MAGGIE extinguishes a cigarette and lights another. She repeats the next line as if repeating a question asked by the PSYCHIATRIST.)

MAGGIE: Have I had any more dreams? Have I had any more dreams.

(MAGGIE moves nervously and fidgets on the couch. She then moves from the couch to edge of the stage, as if she is looking through a window. She takes several long drags on the cigarette.)

MAGGIE: Yeah, I've had another dream, or nightmare I guess I should call it. It's like the ones before, but it lasted longer and was so much more intense. I . . . umm. I'm standing in a room filled with all these people. They're laughing and drinking and smoking. There's so much smoke.

(She smiles.)

I start to walk around the room. I'm having a really great time. Then it happens, with absolutely no warning. It's like I'm falling, but I'm not falling--like the floor just drops out from under me. I can feel the undertow--pulling me down. I'm screaming for help, but nobody hears me or if they do they just don't care.

(Her voice rises.)

I'm screaming in this room full of people, but they just keep smiling and laughing. Nobody hears me. Nobody helps me. I know this now, but I can't stop screaming. I keep hoping somebody will reach out to me--grab hold of me and take care of me. But nobody does and then I'm gone, but everybody else is still there and nobody knows, and I've vanished--been forgotten.

(There is a long pause--as if she's trying to come out of a trance. When she does, she moves back to the couch and extinguishes her cigarette. She picks up her cigarettes and plays with the box.)

MAGGIE: Did you know, Doc that in this

building's garage there's a parking attendant who keeps hitting on me?

(She laughs and smiles.)

You better do something about it before I decide to take him up on his offer.

(MAGGIE's smile fades into a frown--this next section takes place as if a conversation, pausing for the PSYCHIATRIST.)

MAGGIE: Damn it. Why do you always insist on going back to the dreams? I mean it's basically the same as all the others. So why do you make me talk about it over and over?

(She screams.)

I am taking deeps breaths, don't tell me how to fucking breathe. I've been doing it for thirty-five years, haven't I? No, I won't calm down this time. Because you're just going to ask me the same questions and sit back in your chair writing things in that God-Damn notebook of yours--taking the full hour to do it and then you'll announce, like it's some fucking revelation, that it all has to do with my mother. And then I get the bill for a hundred and fifty dollars, which I pay for--not insurance--and everything's supposed to be okay. Well, I don't want to do it that way this time.

(She calms slowly.)

I want this session to go my way for a change.

(She pauses.)

Okay. So, let's just forget about the fucking dream.

(She tries to laugh it off.)

Isn't there anything else in my life other than my mother?

(She is angry again.)

I know I have a lot of anger towards her, you don't have to remind me. I was the one who came to you, remember. I told you--
(She mimics PSYCHIATRIST.)

--"I had anger" towards my mother.

(MAGGIE rubs her temples and tries to calm down.)

Don't you think there will come a time when we won't be talking about my mother? I

mean, what if she was dead. Would we still have to talk about her then? I mean, can you have anger towards a dead person? What's the fucking point?

(She lights a cigarette and rearranges herself on the couch.)

You want to talk about dreams, Doc? Well, I daydream a lot, well, I used to. I would fantasize about "mommie's" death--about how I would wear black and everyone would be so nice to me--to me. You know, she's always hated me just as much as I hate her. She never could forgive me--never could past it. I hardly even knew him. He was so tiny, so little. God, it was so long ago.

(She looks at PSYCHIATRIST.)

Remember last week, Doc? You asked me to talk more about Sebastian. I didn't understand then why you pressed me so hard to talk about my brother. I thought that it was just one single incident in my life. I didn't realize why it was so important. But now . . . Now, Doc, I see. I really see. This is what everything is fucking about. Funny how something so little, so soft could make so much trouble for everyone else. I was--well, I had just turned twelve when he was born--the kid of this guy my mom let live with us for about two months before she threw him out. I kinda liked him. I don't know what ever happened to him. She kept in touch with him for awhile, but after . . . after Sebastian disappeared she didn't write him any more.

(She extinguishes a cigarette.)

Sometimes I don't blame her for hating me. I was the one who was supposed to be watching him when she was out. But, he was just crying so damn much. I tried everything. I rocked him. I changed him--over and over. I even sang to him--you know, that lullaby . . . oh, how does it go? "Hush little baby don't say a word." Nothing calmed him down. And then I snapped. I couldn't take it anymore. I was twelve. I was a kid. It was Saturday and all my friends were outside playing--just across

the street--I could see them from the window. I could hear them laughing. Where was Sebastian going to go? Where could a little baby go? So, I left him and went outside. It was just that he was making so much noise. My head ached so badly. I wanted him to be quiet, I begged him to be quiet, but he wouldn't. So, I left. By the time Momma got home Sebastian was gone. Nobody ever knew what really happened. Some lady down the street later said she had seen a strange looking man walking through our neighborhood that day. The police looked everywhere, but nothing came out of it. Momma kept searching for him though.

She'd go out with some of the neighbors to look. Everyone felt so sorry for her. Even when they stopped looking, she kept on day after day. They all thought she was such a good mother. Stupid neighbors. I never liked them much anyway.

(MAGGIE jumps up and lunges toward the PSYCHIATRIST--screaming and begging.)

MAGGIE: Say something! Tell me what to do! It's so damn frustrating. You just listen all the time while I spill my guts out to you every single session. This is a hell of an expensive way to solve my own problems!

(MAGGIE flings herself back on the couch. She then stretches out on the couch.)

MAGGIE: I mean, I haven't got a clue. What am I supposed to do?

(She sighs heavily.)

I did that exercise we talked about the last time I was here. You know the one--to visualize myself as I am now meeting and talking to the twelve-year-old child I was right before Sebastian vanished. Well, I did it. Do you want me to tell you about it? Okay. I am walking down the street where our house was. We lived at 1243 Cherrywood Lane. There are all these tiny little houses all down the street. Ours is the only yellow one--a pale yellow. I see myself sitting on the front steps of our house. I look like an old stray alley cat.

(The lights dim on the PSYCHIATRIST's office. Lights rise on the concrete steps. MAGGIE AS CHILD is sitting on the steps. CHILD is twelve; tall and skinny, with long, scraggly hair that is wild. Her appearance is a visible sign that she has been forgotten since the baby arrived.)

CHILD (uninterested): If you're here to see my Momma, she's sleeping. You'll have to come back later.

MAGGIE (sitting down on steps): Actually I came to see you, if that's all right? May I talk with you for awhile?

CHILD (looking skeptically at MAGGIE): I guess so.

MAGGIE: Why are you sitting here all alone? I saw some kids playing a few houses down . . .

CHILD: . . . I want to play with my friends, but Momma's asleep again and I have to stay around in case the baby wakes up. I have to make sure he doesn't bother Momma anymore today. He cried all last night and she was really mad.

MAGGIE: And you don't want to--

CHILD: No I don't want to. He bothers me. He cries all the time and he's no fun to play with. Momma used to play with me, but she doesn't anymore because of him. He never stops crying and Momma doesn't want to deal with him anymore. She told me that. She wants him to be quiet so she can get some sleep. I have to make sure he stays quiet for Momma.

(A baby's cry is heard from behind them.)

MAGGIE turns to see where the sound came from. CHILD jumps up and rushes inside. MAGGIE hears her singing "Hush little baby don't say a word". The lights begin to dim and MAGGIE stands up, slowly moving away from the steps. She begins her dialogue with the PSYCHIATRIST as she moves back into the office area. She grabs her pack of cigarettes and paces in the office.)

MAGGIE (wiping tears away--vulnerable): So, what do you think, Doc? Did I do the exercise right? Did it tell you what you

wanted? What you expected?

(She takes a deep breath and then lights a cigarette. She becomes angry again. She is no longer vulnerable.)

MAGGIE: What do you want me to say--that I was a lonely child--that I hated my mother because she left me alone--and then when I wasn't alone I was always watching that damn baby? Is that what you want me to say?

(She quiets.)

When I was twelve, I didn't hate my mother for having Sebastian. I hated Sebastian for being Sebastian, but I never hated my mother. I loved my mother--I missed my mother. I hated Sebastian and then my mother hated me for hating him so damn much. That's what I remember about being a kid. I guess I've just gotten used to it by now--it's been almost twenty years.

(MAGGIE pauses. She sits down on couch and quiets. She rolls her cigarette in her fingers and watches it intently.)

MAGGIE: I was invisible and I just wanted her to see me. I was lost. All I wanted was for her to find me. I've always been locked in the corners--trapped in the shadows and nobody has seen me there. She hated me for losing Sebastian and it was something that I could never wish away. All of a sudden I had my mother back--all to myself--but she couldn't even look at me.

(MAGGIE laughs. Her voice changes in tone--from vulnerable to self-confident again.)

MAGGIE: I guess, Doc, the moral of the story is you gotta be careful what you wish for. Isn't that the most pathetically ironic story. I wanted my mother to myself and I got her only she couldn't stand to be around me anymore. Overnight I changed and I wasn't her daughter. Fucking ironic, isn't it?

(She pauses.)

So, yes, Doctor, you're right. I am "angry" with my mother, just like you said. And I'll even admit that I hate my mother today--this very day. But, I'll have you know that she

hated me first and I was just keeping up with her all these years.

(MAGGIE jumps back up from the couch and walks around the office. She picks up certain things in the office, such as paperweights and books, etc. She moves to the PSYCHIATRIST and begins to flirt with him.)

MAGGIE: Doctor, I know what my story is. But, why don't you tell me your story for awhile. You know, what makes you tick, what makes you angry, what turns you on. Do I turn you on, Doctor? It's just you and me for the whole hour, so, why don't we do this thing a little bit differently this time? What do you say, Doc?

(MAGGIE shrugs and moves away from the edge of the stage. She returns to the couch and lights a cigarette.)

MAGGIE: Well it's your loss, Doc. And don't feed me any of that crap about being happily married. That's a fallacy and you know it. Nobody's happily married. To be happily married, you'd have to be happy and nobody's ever truly happy. Life isn't meant to be a happy experience. It's meant to be survived the best we can. Does all this talk make you uncomfortable?

(She pauses.)

Good, I want it to. I want you to know how I feel when all you want to talk about are my dreams and my mother. Now, you're married, I know that. By the way, I don't have reservations about fucking a married man--just thought you might want to know that.

(She laughs.)

Children?

(She pauses.)

Children, Doc? I asked if you had any children?

(She pauses.)

Oh, one. That's good. One is very good--that way they can't end up like me. Girl or boy?

(She pauses.)

Because I want to know these things. I want to know something about you--the person I

tell my deepest, darkest secrets to. I've been seeing you for a year now and I barely know a thing about you. Isn't that funny, "I've been seeing you." Sounds like we're dating, doesn't it? But that would involve sex and you already said you're not interested.

(She laughs.)

Doc, you know you're my longest relationship so far. My record is about two months--three tops. Maybe sex screws everything up. Maybe that's why you and I have such a wonderful relationship, but then again I'm paying you--kind of like I'd pay a prostitute. I pay you a hundred and fifty dollars an hour and you let me say and do basically anything I want. Don't feel bad. In a way, I guess we're all selling ourselves for something or another.

(She pauses.)

Yeah, Doc, you're right, I am too. Especially me. I'm willing to sell my very soul just for my mother to look into my eyes and really see me and love me. I think that's a little bit nobler than what you do. I pay you money to listen to me. So you listen. But in a sense, we're all whores.

(She laughs.)

Doctor, you're blushing. I would think by now you'd be used to me.

(She pauses.)

I seem different to you today? Maybe I am different today.

(MAGGIE picks up one of the magazines on the table--Vogue or Glamour--something with beautiful, glamorous women inside. She flips through it.)

MAGGIE: Do you think these women are beautiful?

(She pauses.)

Oh, come on now--don't be shy all of a sudden. I know you think these women are beautiful. You'd be crazy if you didn't . . . or gay. You're not gay are you?

(She pauses.)

Oh, I know you're married, but it's becoming fashionable these days to have a double life--kinda like being a spy. Are you a spy, Doc? Are you a James Bond kind of

guy?

(She laughs.)

I like it when I get a rise out of you.

(MAGGIE pauses in conversation. She continues to flip through the magazine. CHILD and MOTHER appear and stand behind MAGGIE, looking over her shoulders at the magazines.)

MAGGIE: When I was a little girl, Momma and I would spend hours looking at the pictures of the beautiful women in the magazines. We'd make up stories and pick which dress was our favorite. We'd spend hours in the middle of the living room with magazines covering the entire floor. And then, Momma would let me help her with her make-up before she'd go out. There was an army base about two miles from our house. She spent most of her nights at a bar halfway between the base and our house. We were so careful to make the lines of color just right on her face--careful to make her look like one of the models in the magazines--all glamour and lipstick. Mother was so beautiful. When we'd finish, she'd sit me down in front of her dressing table and she'd do make-up just like hers. I'd sit with my back as straight as I could and she'd brush my hair until it shined. We'd stare at our reflections in the mirror and just smile and laugh. We were so beautiful--the two of us. But, that all changed after Sebastian was born. There wasn't any time left for me with Momma. But that all changed with Sebastian. When Mother figured out that she was pregnant--when she couldn't fit in her tight dresses like the models wore anymore, she stopped going to the bar at night. And then that guy moved in. He was nice. He used to bring me candy in the afternoons. Momma wasn't happy though. We didn't sit in front of the dressing mirror like we used to. She stopped buying the magazines. Mostly she sat in this gray chair by the front window watching the world go by without her. After Sebastian was born it only got worse. Not long after that she kicked that guy out and

nobody brought me candy in the afternoons. **CHILD:** Momma don't you want to look through your magazines today?

MOTHER: Maggie, I don't really want to right now . . .

CHILD: Here Momma look. Oh, Momma I like the green one the best. Can I have a dress like that?

MOTHER: That one is really pretty, but . . . Was that Sebastian? I think that was Sebastian. Damn, I just put him down. I wish he'd learn to sleep.

(MOTHER turns away from the magazines and starts to move away. CHILD grabs her hand and pulls her back.)

CHILD: Please, Momma. Just a few minutes. Don't go upstairs yet.

MOTHER: Maggie, let go. Sebastian's crying again. Take the magazines into the other room and don't make any noise. I want to get him back to sleep. Be a good girl, Maggie.

CHILD: Momma, I'll be good. I'll be quiet. Momma?

(MOTHER and CHILD leave the stage from opposite sides. MAGGIE continues to flip through the magazine during this dialogue. She stops and closes the magazine.)

MAGGIE: After Sebastian arrived, I'd take Mother's magazines and sneak off somewhere far away from her and the baby. I wouldn't just look at the pictures--I would memorize every single detail about each one--the color of a sash, the arch of an eyebrow--everything. I looked at each image until it burned into my memory. Then I'd close my eyes and make up stories about them. They would get married, go shopping, and do really exciting things all over the world in really exotic places.

(She laughs.)

Just the dreams of a normal little girl. You see, I desperately wanted to be like them. Because in their world--the world that I had created--they were never alone. They were always happy. They could go out with their

friends. They could just take off in the middle of the night and fly off to Paris. And they could sleep a whole night through.

(MAGGIE lights a cigarette and then settles back into the couch.)

MAGGIE: You know, after Sebastian was born I never slept the whole night through. At least two or three times a night, he would start crying and I would wake up. It was this sound . . . I can't even begin to describe it. It wasn't something you could sleep through or fall back to sleep during, either. No, when he started crying, you were awake. And he never settled down quickly either. From my bed I could see Momma's shadow moving back and forth in his room sometimes for a couple of hours each time. She looked so tired. It wasn't just the not-sleeping part that I hated. No, it was the noise that I couldn't stand. I would shove my head underneath all my pillows, but sound of his crying still reached me. It was the noise I couldn't stand, you see. I don't know how Momma could tolerate being in the same room with it for hours each night. Could you have slept through it? I don't think so. I still can't. To this day, I hear Sebastian's crying every night. I can't stop the noise. Sometimes I hear it for hours. Nothing I do can stop the noise--my demons, I affectionately call it.

(She returns to magazine.)

Anyway, I would sneak off--somewhere I couldn't hear Sebastian's crying or Momma calling me back to the house. I loved these magazines when I was a little girl. They were my friends--my only escape. But now I look at these pictures and do you know what I think? I want to know if they're alone. If they go home every night and half expect to open the door and find somebody on the other side. Trick is, nobody's ever there. I want to know if they ever laugh or if the only time they smile is when they're paid to. I just want to know more now. I can't be satisfied with just making it up.

(She pauses and closes the magazine.)

Doctor, are you ever . . . do you ever feel

alone? Are you afraid of being alone?

(She speaks urgently.)

I'm not talking about being lonely. Loneliness is transitory--fading--it passes almost as quickly as it comes--no, I'm talking about being alone and knowing that no one is ever going to be on the other side of the door when you come home at night and nobody would even be bothered if you died right this very second.

(Her voice becomes quiet and sad.)

Alone and loneliness are two very different things--separated by oceans of distance. Do you know what it means--what it really means to be alone, Doc? I do. I know what it means.

(MAGGIE puts the magazine gently on the table.)

I just want to know there's someone else out there like me. Someone who thinks and feels the same as I do. It would be comforting--somehow to just know I wasn't really the only one.

(She laughs--jokingly.)

I don't even know what I think anymore.

(She gets up from the couch and moves around the office.)

Remember in my last session I told you I was thinking of going to the country for the weekend. I wasn't sure if I was going to go because of Mother.

(She pauses.)

Yes, she's still in the hospital. The doctors told me there wasn't really any point in taking her home. She's dying. They preferred to keep her there. They felt they could manage her pain better. They decided. . . . I just nodded whenever they told me anything. It really didn't matter one way or the other to me.

(She pauses.)

What do I think now? I think she's dying. I think she's a selfish bitch for dying. I think one minute I don't want her to die and the very next I can't think of one good reason for her to live. I think . . . I think it hurts to think so much.

(She pauses.)

I agree, let's go back to my decision about the weekend. Richard, the corporate exec from the building next door to mine. We met over lunch one day through people we work with--anyway, he really wanted me to go with him to the country. I told you all about him awhile ago. Do you remember? Did you write it all down in your little notebook? I bet you didn't. I bet you didn't think he was at all important--just a passing phase, right? Well, you were right again in your infinite, yet gratingly silent wisdom, Doc. I did go this weekend. Richard didn't have a clue that he was merely the flavor of the month, though.

(She pauses and laughs.)

The week? That's pretty good, Doc.

Sounds like I'm starting to rub off on you. Better watch it, Doc, my sarcasm is the least deadly of all my qualities.

(MAGGIE stops moving around the office and stands at the window again.)

Well, we went to Richard's house in the country early Saturday morning. It was pleasant. The whole day I kept waiting for a phone call from the hospital informing me of my mother's death, but nobody called. It was a quiet Saturday. We made love that night by the pool. The air was cool and it felt good against my skin. I don't remember much more of the night except the air and how quiet it was. At first I really liked the quiet, but by the next morning I only wanted to get back to the city and lose myself in the noise of the cars and the subway and construction. Richard hadn't planned to go back to the city until Monday morning. So I suffered, literally in silence. Anyway, over dinner last night he told me I was the most exciting woman he'd ever met. That I was alluring and sexy--oh and provocative--he used that word too. He had never been so excited by a woman before and he wanted me to move in with him as soon as we got back to the city. I took a sip of wine and then laughed right in his face. I told him I slept in cotton pajamas and that nobody who slept in cotton pajamas could be

provocative. You need silk to be provocative or better yet, you have to sleep naked to be provocative--but I don't. So, I'm not and I told him so right before I left for the city.

I don't think he understood what I meant. But you do, don't you. I can't sleep at all if I don't have something covering me up.

(She lights a cigarette.)

Would you have guessed about the cotton pajamas? No, I didn't think you would.

(MAGGIE moves away from the window and back to the couch.)

I wanted you to know about Richard because I knew you knew it wouldn't last. Hell, it never even existed--only Richard never knew that and I was kidding myself about it, but you--you knew the truth and it was all there in your little notebook, wasn't it. Oh, that's why I love you, Doc. You have all the answers.

(She laughs.)

But that's exactly the reason why I hate you too. You do have all the answers--only you refuse to let me in on the secrets.

(MAGGIE takes her hair down and brushes through it with her fingers.)

I have to be completely honest. I hated Richard for asking me to move in. It totally ruined everything--he wanted to get too close--to be with me every single minute. His face would be the first thing I'd see in the morning and the last thing at night. There wouldn't have been a single quiet moment for myself. After the way I left, I don't think I'll be hearing from him again.

(She pauses.)

How did I leave?

(She laughs.)

It was classic. I'll never forget Richard's face. The night before, Richard had hosted a small gathering of some of his weekend neighbors. One of them, his name was John . . . no, Kyle . . . it doesn't really matter. Anyway, whoever this guy was he kept hitting on me and Richard was absolutely livid. Well, on Sunday night after Richard proposed moving in together, I

called Kyle or John or whatever and asked him to take me back to the city. When the doorbell rang, Richard answered it and saw this guy standing there waiting for me. And this is the best part, then I simply breezed past Richard with my bag--without even looking at him and got in the car with what's-his-name. He talked the whole hour drive without stopping.

(MAGGIE reaches for another cigarette and finds the package empty. She opens her purse and fishes around for another pack.)

MAGGIE: Richard used to fuss at me for smoking so goddamn much. He'd say--

(She mimics Richard.)

"Don't you care about your health? Those fucking things will kill you if you don't quit."

(She laughs.)

I'd always laugh and tell him good. I hope these "things" hurry up and fucking kill me.

(MAGGIE fishes out a cigarette and examines it intently.)

But they don't hurry up and kill you, do they? It's slow and painful and from what I can tell it feels like you're being gradually suffocated by this enormous pressure. I'm pretty sure right now that I don't want to die, but maybe secretly I do. Maybe that's why I keep smoking. Maybe that's why my mother always smoked. My first cigarette came from her purse. She was out searching for Sebastian one morning and I was home with my magazines spread out all over the floor. Her purse was half-open and I could see the green and white packaging from where I sat. It was so tempting and it wasn't like anyone was there to tell me no. From the very first drag I was hooked. I loved the way it seemed to cool me from the inside out. I still do.

(MAGGIE puts the cigarette in her mouth and takes a long drag and really seems to enjoy it.)

MAGGIE: You really don't know what you're missing, Doc. Oh, you can lecture

me later, but I want to finish about Richard. I got home with that guy--I really should've paid more attention to his name. He asked if he could call me sometime. I laughed and told him just to come inside with me. It was late, about three a.m. by then. He went upstairs with me and then I fucked his brains out till morning. The sex was better than with Richard, but the greatest thing about it was when Richard called about six a.m. The guy answered the phone, I know it was Richard--I could tell by the way his breathing gets rapid when he's angry. He hung up the phone and I listened for a few seconds to the dial tone over the speakerphone. It made me laugh. I told that other guy to leave. I wanted to take a shower.

(She takes a long puff on the cigarette and then grinds it in the ashtray.)

Wasn't that great, Doc? I couldn't have planned my exit any better.

(She pauses.)

What did I do after? Well, I took a shower and then got dressed. I left my apartment and just started walking.

(She pauses.)

Where was I going? I don't think I had any idea when I left.

(She pauses.)

I ended up, much to my surprise, standing in front of St. Mary's Hospital. It took me about a hour before I could just walk through the entrance. I stayed in the lobby for I don't know how long before I went up to the fourth floor to room 423 where mother was.

(MAGGIE stands up, stretches, then walks slowly around the office. She pauses to look out the window.)

MAGGIE: The funny thing is--I can't tell you why I ended up at the hospital. Maybe I wanted to see my mother--make peace with her. Maybe I wanted to see if she'd died during the night. Maybe I just wanted to casually "bump" into the cute intern on the fourth floor. I don't know why I went there and that drives me absolutely crazy.

(She pauses as she gazes out the window.)

I think I've finally figured it all out--this is the truth, the absolute truth, Doc. Life isn't about answers. It's about questions--complex questions. Life is complexities. Now wait before you start preaching--hear me out, first.

(She moves away from the window.)

Complexities--all right--for instance, I tell you a story, right? You take it to be the truth--and in a way it is--but then again it isn't. I tell you one side--my side--but how many other sides are there?

(She pauses.)

Wait--I'll tell you. It's not just one or two or even fifteen or twenty--it's infinite. There are as many different truths as there are stars. There exists a whole galaxy of truths; you just have to pick which one you're willing to accept. But you see, Doc, there isn't one single truth--there are a thousand million separate, fragmented pieces of truth floating around each day, each second out there. You, Doc--you spend each day searching for the truth--so, what do you do--you try to piece it all together--how do you do that--you ask questions. Do you understand, Doc?

(She laughs.)

It's an endless cycle. You ask questions that have no answers. So, what do you do then? You ask more questions and then more questions. You just buy into the cycle completely.

(MAGGIE throws herself on the couch and tries to light a cigarette, but her lighter doesn't work.)

MAGGIE: Damn it!

(MAGGIE throws the lighter down. She digs through her purse as she speaks.)

MAGGIE: We don't live life, Doc. Life lives us--it just rolls over us like a tractor in a field of flowers--we offer no resistance. We just go and do what we're told like good little machines. Yes, sometimes we ask why--but do you know what the secret is?

(She pauses.)

The secret is that we ask, but we don't demand. We have to demand an answer. We don't demand anything, so we don't get anything. We just get flattened along the way.

(MAGGIE finds a lighter and pulls it out triumphantly.)

MAGGIE: Ah-ha! I knew I had another one in here somewhere.

(She lights a cigarette.)

So, maybe I went to the hospital to see my mother--to finally demand an answer--to demand that the truth--my truth be told. Maybe I'm braver than all the rest. Maybe I'm taking hold of life and squeezing all I can from it before it breaks me into tiny fragments and scatters me into the wind.

(She laughs.)

Or maybe I'm no better or any more prophetic than anyone else. Maybe I did just go to the hospital in hopes of seeing the cute intern.

(MAGGIE leans back into the couch, crossing her legs and casually smoking.)

I took the stairs to Mother's floor. I didn't want to speak to anyone. It's fair to say that I wasn't exactly in the best mood. I mean . . . recap the last few hours of my life--I had slept with two men--rejected one of them and probably would've rejected the other one if I had remembered his name.

(MAGGIE leans forward. She is vulnerable.)

Doc, I want you to understand something about me--something about my life. I'm not proud of my choices--but at least I'm trying to be honest--that should count for something, right? If I were happy with my life I wouldn't be here--you know that better than anyone else. Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm really living at all. I just go through the motions without anything having any real meaning. It feels so out of control. I feel so out of control. Maybe that's why I ended up at the hospital--maybe I was trying to find some sort of balance.

(MAGGIE grinds the cigarette in the

ashtray, sighs heavily and then stands up. The lights dim and MAGGIE moves out of the office area and into the second part of the stage. Her MOTHER is lying in a hospital bed. MOTHER is unconscious. MAGGIE says the following while walking around the room as if still talking to the PSYCHIATRIST.)

MAGGIE: She's dying of cancer--lung cancer. You know, from all the cigarettes in the pretty green and white packages. The doctors hooked her up to a respirator about a week ago. They had to, they said, or she'd die. It's not a question of her getting any better, only when she's going to die, now. I told her the very same things I just told you. I told her that I wasn't proud of the choices I'd made--that I wanted her to know that. I begged her for forgiveness, but she just lay there motionless.

(MAGGIE stops pacing at the foot of the bed. She leans against the bed and addresses MOTHER.)

MAGGIE: Momma? Momma, will you wake up? Please, Momma. I want you to wake up. Don't leave me. I'm so alone, Momma. I don't want to be alone. I want you to be here with me. Please, Momma. Please.

(As MAGGIE pleads, CHILD enters the hospital room. CHILD stands on the opposite side of the bed and pleads with MOTHER to wake up. The dialogue of CHILD and MAGGIE overlap and occurs very quickly, urgently.)

CHILD: Momma? Momma, wake up. I want to go play. I don't want to watch Sebastian. Please, Momma.

MAGGIE: I'm not ready for you to leave, yet. There's so much we need to say--that needs to be said.

CHILD: You promised I wouldn't have to stay here today. You promised I wouldn't have to watch Sebastian. Momma, you promised.

MAGGIE: Momma?

CHILD (angrily): Momma, you promised me! You're always tired. You're always

taking care of him. You don't care about me. I wish he'd just go away. I wish you'd go away too!

(MAGGIE shakes MOTHER violently.)

MAGGIE: Wake up! Wake up, damn it! You can't die quietly and leave me here all alone. I won't allow it! It's not fair. I can't allow it! Wake up! Damn it!

(MAGGIE pushes herself away from the bed. CHILD still stands near the bed.

MOTHER strains to say something. It is at first unclear. Gradually, it becomes clearer and louder--"Sebastian.")

MAGGIE: Momma?

(MOTHER keeps repeating the name.)

MAGGIE (disgusted): Momma, why are you saying that?

(MOTHER repeats the name. MAGGIE slowly moves closer to the bed.)

MAGGIE: Momma, I'm right here. It's Maggie. Momma, I'm right here. Momma. It's . . . It's Maggie.

(MOTHER keeps calling out "Sebastian" over and over. She gets louder and louder. MAGGIE moves back toward the bed. MAGGIE is hurt and rejected.)

MAGGIE: Momma, why can't you let it go? Please, let him go--just this once. I'm begging you, please let Sebastian go.

(MOTHER continues repeating Sebastian's name. MAGGIE buries her face in her hands. She is crying.)

MAGGIE: Shut up! Shut up! I can't take it anymore. Sebastian is gone--let him go, Momma!

(MAGGIE pauses. MOTHER still calls out his name. MAGGIE reaches for an extra pillow. MAGGIE covers her own head with it, trying to drown out the noise.)

MAGGIE: Please stop, Momma.

(She throws the pillow on the bed.)

Mother, he's dead. Is that what you want to hear--Sebastian's dead. He's not coming back, Mother. He'll never come back to you. Is that what you want to hear? Is that what I have to say?

(She is crying and breathing hard as she

talks.)

Mother, stop calling his name. Stop it! I didn't mean for anything to happen. I didn't want anything to happen. You have to believe me, Momma. Please, believe me. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. Stop calling his name!

(She grabs the pillow and smashes it over MOTHER's face, trying to drown out the sound.)

I can't stand the noise. I have to stop the noise. Stop it! Stop it! The noise--the GodDamn noise. Be quiet!

(MAGGIE is crying. She presses harder and harder with the pillow till the screaming stops.)

Please be quiet! I can't take it anymore.

(Every sound stops abruptly. MAGGIE quickly releases her grip on the pillow and backs away slowly. She looks around the room as if realizing what has happened. MAGGIE looks at the CHILD who has been watching the entire episode. MAGGIE then looks at the bed.)

MAGGIE: What have I done? Oh, God! What have I done?

(MAGGIE backs away from the bed to the center of the stage. She lets out a deep guttural moan and falls to the floor. MAGGIE rocks herself back and forth. The CHILD looks at MAGGIE and then at the bed. CHILD moves towards the bed. CHILD sings "Hush little Baby don't say a word." She removes the pillow from MOTHER's face and straightens the bed. She then walks over to MAGGIE, who has remained crouched on the floor.)

CHILD: You didn't mean to. It's not your fault. It's going to be all right.

(She pauses.)

Nobody's going to blame you. She forced you. She wouldn't be quiet. You asked her to be quiet, but she wouldn't. It's her fault. Just like before. No one will ever know what happened here. You won't tell anybody. And I won't tell anybody. And Mother won't tell anybody. We'll all be

quiet--just like before.

MAGGIE: I can't believe this. Oh, God. Oh, God. I'm so sorry, Momma.

(CHILD circles MAGGIE over and over like a predator circling its weak prey.)

CHILD: Stop this crying, Maggie. You did what you had to do. You begged her to be quiet--you pleaded with her, but she wouldn't listen. She didn't care. She didn't care a damn bit about you. We showed her, didn't we. There's a price to be paid for everything. And this was hers. You didn't mean for this to happen, like you didn't mean for it to happen with Sebastian. But, this is the best thing that could've happened. You need the quiet, Maggie--but they just kept screaming all the time. It was the noise. You had to stop the noise. You begged Mother to listen to you--to not make you stay with Sebastian. You just wanted to get away from the noise a while. You hadn't slept in days. Every time you'd fall asleep he'd start crying again, but Mother didn't care, did she? She made you stay with him. She wanted to escape from him--from the never-ending crying. So she left. But you Maggie, you could never get away from him. You were trapped with him. You couldn't make him stop crying. You rocked him--you fed him--you even sang to him, but nothing you did made him stop, except the pillow.

(CHILD is excited and breathing hard.)

You put the pillow over his head--it muffled the sound, didn't it--but you could still hear him. So, you pressed a little harder and he got a little quieter. So, you pressed a little harder and then a little more and then there was silence. Oh the blessed silence--that's all we ever wanted, wasn't it? The silence--the peacefulness.

(CHILD stops circling and then reverses the direction of the circle. MAGGIE is still on the floor.)

CHILD: Momma came home and she listened to you then, didn't she. What was she going to do, Maggie? Sacrifice you? That wouldn't bring Sebastian back, would

it? No, she couldn't give up both of her children. You were still hers and she had to protect us, didn't she? Momma really was smart and inventive, too. That story she told everyone about the kidnapping. That was brilliant. And the way everyone bought that story--and that old busybody woman at the corner saying that she'd seen a strange man walking in the neighborhood that day. That was pure brilliance--almost like we'd planned months in advance. Momma sent you out to play while she waited in the house with the baby. We came back and there was Momma talking with the police about the kidnapping, but no crying and no Sebastian. It was wonderful, wasn't it?

(CHILD stops moving in the circle.)

CHILD *(laughing)*: We never did know where she buried the body, did we?

MAGGIE: Shut up! I don't want to listen to you anymore.

(CHILD jumps in MAGGIE's face.)

CHILD: Shut up? You can't tell me to shut up. Who do you think takes care of you--has taken care of you all these years. You can't just tell me to shut up. I'm part of you. Or maybe you're part of me. It doesn't matter, does it. You can't silence me like you silenced Sebastian--like you silenced Mother. We have one voice. You silence me, you silence you. Now, enough of this. Get up. Don't just sit there whining like a baby. I said get up. You're not weak like all the rest. You're strong. You're a survivor. Now get up . . .

MAGGIE *(jumping up)*: Stop!

(CHILD quiets and then backs away from MAGGIE. The lights begin to dim slightly and CHILD moves into the shadows.)

MAGGIE *(quieting)*: Stop. Just stop already.

(MAGGIE moves back into the PSYCHIATRIST's office. She lights a cigarette and inhales deeply the first few times. This action calms her down. She regains her icy composure.)

MAGGIE: She was old, Doctor. The

doctors didn't expect her to live and they were right. I know it won't take them long to figure out what really happened, but you see, I don't give a damn anymore. I've been bad for so long, it's time I was taught a lesson, right?

(MAGGIE pauses and inhales her cigarette deeply.)

I bet you're really surprised I held out on this to the very end of the session, Doc. I wanted you to see that I'm in control of what goes on here. I wanted you to see that you only know the pieces of truths I want you to know.

(She laughs.)

This is the truth, right. Or, maybe it isn't. Maybe I made this--everything all up. Maybe my mother isn't dead. Maybe Sebastian isn't either. Or, better yet, maybe I've never even had a brother. But you don't know, do you? You'll never know. You only know the truths that I tell you. I like this therapy thing.

(She smiles and then walks to the window and looks outside.)

Oh, damn. It's raining again and I left my umbrella in the trunk of my car. Wouldn't you just know it? Oh well, that's just my luck, I guess.

(MAGGIE extinguishes the remainder of her cigarette in the ashtray, puts her jacket and shoes back on. She smiles at the doctor.)

MAGGIE: Well, I guess this is good-bye, Doc. I don't think I'll be needing your services anymore. Suddenly, everything's grown quiet again--my demons must be sleeping.

(She grabs her purse.)

Thanks for everything you've done, Doc. Hush Doctor, you'll ruin the moment.

LIGHTS OUT