

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, Thylas Moss, Sherman Yellen  
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Curtis Tucker

The Agnes Scott College

# Writers' Festival

March 25-26, 1999

**The Agnes Scott College**

**Writers' Festival**

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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 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, and Agnes Scott alumna Memye Curtis Tucker.

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 Ed Sheehy, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support.

**March, 1999**

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Steve Guthrie

*Selection Committee*

*Poetry:* Waqas Khwaja and Steve Guthrie

*Short Fiction:* Bo Ball and Willie Tolliver

*Personal Essay:* Christine Cozzens and Jeff Bradley

*One-Act Play:* Dudley Sanders and David Thompson

*Cover Art*  
Laura Brandon

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## Poems by Maudelle Driskell

## The Orchard

From the valley of dreaming pears,  
the Bartlett, the Anjou,  
ripeness calls to him,  
sings him to harvest,  
to take from it the heavy fruit  
conceived of sun and weather,  
to lie full in his hands,  
flushed in his basket,  
sweet at his table.

The orchard, mauled by a panting summer,  
blushes with fruit, bends and breaks beneath them,  
must rest this year, sleep, and feed upon itself,  
upon the dropped pears half-rising  
from the leaves, their freckled skins  
like the backs of lovers.

How he longs to take  
his callused hands from the jerking wheel,  
to climb from the tractor and palm  
the fullness, feel the sweet fleshiness  
part between his teeth.

But he must drive,  
feed the orchard itself,  
turn fruit into soil black with juice,  
juice of fallen pears, their skin  
parting on the fingers of the harrow  
as he combs their flesh back into the soil.

## Talismans

At the flea market across from the Commerce Speedway  
you can buy Elvis relics in zip-lock bags  
with masking tape labels—the napkin smeared with peanut butter  
and banana grease, the pocket comb with a single strand  
of black hair twined in its teeth, rhinestones  
dandruffed from the white Las Vegas jumpsuit. All point  
with the insignificance of dogs that have already treed the coon  
toward the masterpiece of that collection—Elvis's wart.

Showcased under the glass of an overturned jelly jar,  
impaled on a bright-yellow balled stickpin stuck in a cork,  
the wart, looking for all the world like an albino raisin,  
seems to hover, bound only by that ball end.

"That's the last vestige of the King. Only \$500.  
You know, each cell has everything you need  
to make a whole person. You could clone Elvis from that wart."  
A crowd gathers in awe, imagining  
the billion tiny possibilities risen before their eyes.

Something simple happens—devotions, beliefs,  
strong through some accident of conductivity—  
too much salt, too little salt, in the cell spaces of the neuroconductors,  
some brief spell of ball lightning rolling through our brains—  
quickenning an interest in the local auto mechanic,  
sending us on crusades, giving us the idea for Velcro,  
telling us to kill our wives, leading us forward  
in blind faith, making us hear The Word  
and hope that, unlike steak, we move on to Glory,  
seeing, for the first time, the glistening strings of dew  
in moonlight, strung all along the spider's tender lines,  
leaving us shaken in the divine smell of strawberries.

## The Propaganda of Memory

You stand in the picture, all khaki and gleam,  
where the sun found you grinning  
around the stump of a cigar, holding  
a wooden friar ransacked  
from a French churchyard.  
In the field of smoke-banked light behind you,  
in the rubble of gas masks and shell casings,  
helmets sparkle, and the leftovers of battle  
bend to the impossible will of forgetfulness.  
The breeze lifting your hair has lost  
the stale smell stolen from the mouths  
of dead men, and this *you*,  
drawn together by light, silver  
particles suspended in emulsion,  
is freed from the thickness of the scene, frozen  
in the twitch of a photographer's finger,  
leaving you remembering this moment  
the same way glass remembers sand.

## Poems by Sharie McCune

## Saint and Seraph

*God has given me . . . a kind of sleep;  
when I see things . . . .*  
Saint Theresa of Avila

After the rapture, all was changed,  
her prayers grew quiet  
as her cloud-draped body rose on filaments of light.  
So it was in ecstasy Bernini staged her:  
sculpted pale Carrara, above the stipled greens  
of sea grass and brown marble,  
shaped her swooning, almost breathing,  
mouth moist and open,  
her heart bared to the seraph.  
Light was his metaphor  
for the soul and body, indivisible,  
so he framed her face below a window  
until sunlight, soaking her surfaces,  
fracturing in shades of shadow,  
seemed to transform stone to flesh.

Over time, the colors in the transept changes,  
slowly grimed with candle smoke and city dust.  
They changed again with every eye  
that roamed upon the onyx pilasters,  
rising up red marbled walls,  
whose coral veins grew paler still,  
through fading shades of mottled-jasper,  
straining to a vault of wings.  
Far below, the woman, lost  
in her dreaming, is surrounded  
by the stir of all things sinuous and rhythmic,  
from the limp suggested flutter of her lids  
to the angel's fiery light  
that falls like rain to endless rivers.  
Then, all is water, rapture and suspension,  
as if a fan of multi-colored waves  
contains her, as if rising,  
high enough above the earth, she sees  
just once, a glory, a perfect rainbow,  
one iridescent ring.

## Memories of Water

When I was almost five, my father  
took me to the shrine at Miyajima,  
walked me through the giant torii  
rising from the sea. I remember  
water cleansing the mouths and hands  
of worshippers, the mizu, the character  
for water, painted as a charm  
beneath the temple roofs, hopping  
on one foot, a whirling dancer.

We wandered through the gardens,  
watched the speckled backs of koi  
glide like clouds beneath each bridge.  
He showed me waterfalls, described  
as cloth and thread. This was midsummer,  
on the feast of O-Bon, when for three days,  
the unnamed dead rejoin the living.  
We watched as families finally set afloat  
their loved-ones' souls, white, fragile candles  
set in paper lanterns, swaying down  
the length of rivers, bound for open sea.

He told me of the painter Hokusai,  
obsessed with the shapes of waves.  
How with the barest curve he painted  
lines so true, that when you closed  
your eyes, you heard the secret sounds of water,  
hidden in the lullabying swoosh of wavelets,  
the deeper smash of growling sand,  
pulling everything away but sea-stained froth  
and cool-lipped whispers, hidden later  
in the shells my father held against my ear.

Then, at last, he led by the hand to a Zen garden,  
created centuries ago by outcasts, thought unclean,  
who raked sand in formal patterns,  
so essential in their stillness  
that each solitary stone began to purl and flow.  
As the spreading shadows stretched and grew  
each perfect curve, each perfect line began to fade  
from view. And in that final lowering to night,  
earth, and sea, and sky were one.  
Colored lanterns flickered through the pines, dipped  
and swayed, and we, who had been gone too long,  
tiptoed carefully across a pond on pillared stones  
level with the surface. We were like turtles  
on leaf pads, whose paths grow luminous,  
whose necks reach upward to the stars,  
even as their steps dissolve in tiny ripples  
ceding to the water, our going washed with it.

## The Body

*Image summons the body into a poem.*  
Jane Hirshfield

This summer, for the first time,  
I've noticed stretch-marks on the bark,  
the swell of growth on lower limbs  
and trunks, before this thickened skin  
tans grayish-brown, flakes and dries.  
Eye to eye with these changes,  
spiders glide over lichen,  
chrysanthemum white at the edges,  
ripening to green. Streaks of charcoal,  
seared by lightning, form a fresh scar  
on the pine. Years ago, her roots  
burrowed down, anchored in granite.  
I've heard her creak and groan, rock  
the frightened ground through heavy storm.

Sick with damp, the oak leaves wither,  
mushrooms pepper the grass,  
criss-cross the lawn, while moss,  
stretching out like shadows,  
thrives under blue hydrangeas.  
The Chinese maple, darkening redder, leans  
to the hum of bees beyond the trellises.  
This year's berries, the best in years,  
finds raspberry jelly stacked on shelves,  
cartons put by in the freezer. And the air  
fragrant still . . . the empty vines  
heady with a scent like wine.

## Poems by Delisa Mulkey

### Peacock by Moonlight

She sits before the open window looking  
out into a dark thin and metaled  
as the barn's roof. Behind her, the man  
turns over in the bed, pushes  
her pillow between his legs and moans.  
*Sounds like he's dreaming of Jane Russell.*  
Spit hangs thick and long from her lips,  
slides down the whetstone in her lap.  
She thinks of the man's dry hands  
and rocks steadily, honing the hatchet edge  
in rhythm with the creaking chair.  
When he brought the peacock home  
he'd said *It's high time the farm  
had a little something pretty.*  
The bird screeches. Only her eyes  
turn, squint through light, gray as her hair,  
toward the great oak. It perches there  
every night sitting on her impatiens,  
its silhouette like a Persian vowel  
etched into the silver skin of the moon.  
It attacked her the first morning,  
when she went out to milk the cows, flew down  
from the oak, landed square on her shoulders  
and clawed in like a Las Vegas headdress.  
The man poured alcohol onto her gashes,  
her ripped ear. He said *Make friends*  
and threw the day's bread, still warm  
as her thigh, out into the yard. Said  
*Everything pretty must hate you.*  
But she knows light only shines in the dark,  
and understands purity when she lifts  
the hatchet through the glazed air:  
Her blue dress on the clothesline, spread out  
like a butterfly, fluttering against the sky.

### The Failed Salvation of Belief

*Breaths come in pairs except twice in our lives—  
the beginning and the end.*

Diane Ackerman, *A History of the Senses*

No one knows why a cat purrs, what makes her unfurl  
in the sun, bathing like the girl next door in the pink bikini,  
waves of freckles rolling across her breast, like the rumble  
that wakes over the cat's hot fur in rhythmic shudders.

No one knows why, but if you asked the girl next door,  
greasy from sweat and coconut oil, her muscles warm  
and loose, she'd roll her eyes and say *Because she's happy*  
then bounce back into her house and shower away the grit.

No one knows why a cat purrs, but if you watched the girl, fresh  
from the shower, run her fingers along the cat's back as it rises  
to meet her stroke and tries to rub its cheek on the long damp hair  
dangling all around, you might agree: *Yes, because she's happy.*

But no one is sure. She will purr long and deep as she dies.  
She will lie on cold concrete after the fan belt splays her,  
eyes half-closed as if hair were falling about, white paws  
curled under her open mouth, thrilling sweetly with each breath.

You must tell the girl no one knows why a cat purrs, or why pilots  
reaching the G-force see a bright light and loved ones who have died,  
or why the same sense of peace descends when our heart cramps,  
when bullets tear through us, when some virus devours us,

and why, if we come back, we say *I never wanted to leave there.*  
When the girl begins to look strangely at the cat, when she begins  
to avoid touching it, you should pull her into your lap and smooth  
her long hair until she breathes gently in and gently out.

### On Hearing the Call of the Sirens

*What is a poet? An unhappy man who in his heart harbors a deep anguish,  
but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over  
them are transformed into ravishing music.*

Soren Kierkegaard

None of us saw it happen, but we all heard the howl  
and came running out of houses, from behind televisions,  
and into the street. The car had already disappeared,  
but the dog was still there, alive, in the middle of the road.  
The women wouldn't go near and pushed us back,  
warning us it would bite, telling us to wait  
for the men to get home from work.

But I snuck back outside, down the road toward the dog—  
Jimmy Hyde's bloodhound. He was still and, I thought, dead.  
So I crept closer; the wheel had rolled over his rear,  
crushing hair into the heat-softened asphalt like a fossil fern.  
He heard me and pulled his body up on forelegs,  
wailing, trying to drag himself out of the wreckage of his hips  
But his belly opened  
so I ran—ran into the field and hid behind a pear tree  
and listened to the plaintive bay.

The beauty was what struck me, when I looked away,  
the dreadful music of his cry, borne of suffering,  
splintered bones; calling, singing for deliverance.  
I stayed there all afternoon as he slipped  
in and out of consciousness, and when Jimmy  
finally came to put him out of his misery,  
I watched and I heard—under that tree  
with the worms and sweet smell of rotting pears.



## Poems by Michelle Newcome

### August in Wildwood Canyon

A hawk riding the hot wind passes by us  
as we sit eating burritos at the kitchen table.

We do not speak. At sixteen and thirteen we know  
only soap operas, suntans, and rivalry. Our silence

is filled with the whine and roar of the discer  
stalking the brittle grass on the canyon floor.

I am the first to draw breath at the acrid scent.  
Fire. We race to the edge of the deck.

The hillside drops a hundred feet until  
orderly iceplant gives way to sage and grass.

Flames race up the power poles. Lines snap  
and fly like arrows. The abandoned tractor roves

in circles around the live oaks. Now talking  
nonstop, moving quickly, we heap left-overs and jars

onto the kitchen floor and packing photographs  
and films into the refrigerator, we preserve

our childhood, but cannot agree on what goes  
in the car. China is too fragile, silver can be replaced.

We race back and forth from house to car,  
throw in quilts, yellowed wedding dresses, a box

containing a fall made from our great-grandmother's  
loosely braided hair, our grandfather's college yearbook,

my box of notes from my best friend, my sister's softball  
glove and uniform because she has a game tomorrow.

All but our mother's last canvas fits into the trunk.  
Planes are filling the air with loads of water and the white

walls of mother's room flicker pink as we grab her jewelry box  
and join the line of cars leaving the canyon.

Chunks of ash drift onto mailboxes and fences,  
settle in small piles. I need headlights to see my way out.

On a safe plateau we huddle together, watch flames  
line the ridges, the smoke shift from white to grey.

At dusk we are allowed back. The wind is changing.  
The fire is trapped on a ridge high above the canyon.

My sister and I are quiet again. She refuses to ride

with our mother and sits stubbornly in my car.

The line of cars, longer now that parents are home,  
winds back through the naked and smoking hillsides

and around curving roads of charred front yards  
and back decks burned black. One home is lost.

Not ours. We ride the hot wind back to nothing  
that will ever again safely belong to us.

### The Guildmaster's Son

As a boy, I ached for the animals in the zoo,  
 knew, given a chance, I'd keep them well.  
 I loved even the creatures who stalked and slinked  
 through my dreams. My father,  
 though, plumbed, not for true lines,  
 or in praise of straightness,  
 but to stir water; spur it out of the ground  
 to come in, serve, and leave,  
 wasted. Summers my mother  
 tired of my pleading for National Geographic  
 and desert habitat books (with pictures  
 of the parched and cracked Badlands).  
 The walls of my room slithered with sidewinders,  
 iguanas, Komodo dragons and lizards.  
 I would go with my father  
 to make my place with the men  
 by unloading long links of pipe  
 from the work truck. But when the torch lit up  
 he banished me over fear my young eyes  
 would scar at the blue arc hissing where copper  
 met copper. Wandering, I'd find my father's pail,  
 dump out the fittings and arrange  
 them radiating around me — I was a sundial  
 with enough creatures for a snake house  
 slithering away like points.  
 I swore I would never step in my father's light,  
 the charmed ring of the lion tamer  
 commanding nature through hoops.  
 But I turned teenaged and along came  
 a girl. Then, a child. So now  
 I also tame the water, make it flow up  
 hills, through narrow pipes and past  
 gardens. Sometimes, when I fit a joint  
 and roll the pipe dope through my fingers,  
 I make the shape of serpents; long, gray  
 creatures to guard the caged water.

### Preparing for Your Arrival

After scraping and painting two stories  
 of ninety-eight-year-old siding  
 we start keeping track of caulk,  
 a symbol of the labor  
 we couldn't have anticipated.  
 As we begin your room  
 with its lovely never-before-painted  
 fluted casing and raw pine rosettes,  
 we open the twenty-fifth case.  
 How many tubes of caulk  
 to fill gaps and cracks  
 where air might seep  
 to chill your small bones?

My mother was an escape artist.  
 She passed through any window, melted around doors.  
 She once left on a borrowed horse  
 and galloped across manicured golf course greens.  
 The next morning's paper  
 carried the headline "Vandals Destroy Calimesa Country Club"  
 so she kept her nocturnal wanderings to a minimum,  
 for a while. But not my sister, who snuck past my father  
 sleeping on the floor in front of her door,  
 or wrapped herself in layers of sweaters  
 to climb through the pyracantha  
 planted under her window.

Below your window is a bed of mint.  
 When you inevitably make yourself disappear  
 only its crisp pungency might alert me.  
 The porch roof is an invitation gently  
 sloping away from your room.

## Poems by Cynde Snider

**Drinking Zubrowka On the Occasion of Wet Snow**

*The bison became a talisman of survival. For as long  
as the beast and its succoring forest habitat endured,  
it was implied, so would the nation's martial vigor.*

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

The train window frames a forest closing in on us  
like a winter scene through a stereopticon.  
Thick-branched fir trees glisten  
against a dun-colored sky  
then fuse to darkness—  
this is the home of the Snow Queen.

Later, at Birkenau, there are no trees,  
only brick barracks and blackened rubble  
breaking through fresh snow.  
We are alone here, making new tracks  
that march through latrines, past the execution wall,  
to the single set of rails that end there.

Back in Krakow the snow has stopped.  
In our red velvet room in the Hotel Saski  
we pour glasses of herbal vodka stained green  
from blades of bison grass,  
and in the silence, we listen  
for the muffled screams of trains.

**Shell Gatherers**

Penny-colored spots, like freckles on creamy skin,  
draw me toward the carapace of a purse crab  
smoothed by spring tides on Cumberland Island.  
Below the wrack line, tide pools brim with conch.  
Tonight, horseshoe crabs end their annual migration,  
rising from muck beneath sixty feet of water  
to crawl onto this beach under a full moon,  
females dragging males across pockets of sand  
filled with thousands of eggs waiting for sperm.

The moon has lured us to this island with them,  
to the edge of this sea with sanderlings and dunlins,  
to run with a dragon kite across the sand,  
track wild horses under live oaks, over dunes,  
collecting shells abandoned.

When the crabs return to the sea, we'll go back  
to the city, our mother-of-pearl eyes, luminous,  
knowing, sand wearing blisters between our toes,  
shells turning to dust in our pockets.

## Van Gogh Postlude

People called him *fada*,  
said he was touched by fairies,  
watched him from behind mullioned windows  
as he lit candles in the brim of his hat,  
laughing when hot daubs of wax  
dripped onto his beard.

He kept bright skeins of yarn in a lacquer box,  
seizing first a strand of yellow,  
then orange, red—twisting them  
into fields of wheat, and sunflowers  
burning on razored stems.

He longed to paint lullabies  
but his voices hissed discordant melodies:  
peasants with dusty potato skin,  
self-portraits layered in pain,  
shades of green in an all-night café.

His eyes could hear:  
deepest blues haunting the night sky  
like the crescendo of a bass viol,  
lighter hues in soft arpeggios

until he turned the music off.

## Short Story by Kelly Daniels

### Experience Whore—Love Junky

Caleb passed through the gauntlet of homeless on his way to the diner. Most of them recognized him, but a few mumbled half-hearted pleas for money. To these he gave the smile and slow shake of the head that meant that he was not worth the effort—he was local. They drew their dirty hands back into their rags and ignored him. He thought back to when living in the city had been exciting, had been enough. Now it seemed that nothing was.

He stepped into the diner. Mario glanced over his shoulder at him from the exposed kitchen. "What's happening, ese?"

"Nada." A new girl stuffed napkins into a holder on one of the tables. She was cute, in that tiny, pixie, barrette-wearing way. "Que pasa con la muchacha?"

"No se. Ella empezó a trabajar ayer. No platicamos todavía." Mario gently flipped a pan full of sautéing mushrooms and turned back to Caleb. "Me parece que ella tiene la cara de la bruja."

"A mí, me parece que ella tiene las nalgas buenas."

"Es cierto."

The girl stood up from the table. "What did you guys say about me?"

"You white girls always think that if someone is speaking Spanish they're talking about you." Mario shook his head.

The three of them worked together through the 10:00 theater rush, Mario cooking and the girl and Caleb waiting the tables. At 12:00 the diner was empty and would basically stay that way until 2:00, when the insane would start to arrive. Mario talked in hushed Spanish tones on the telephone. Caleb lit a cigarette and offered one to the girl, who took it. They leaned back on the counter.

"So who are you?" He passed her a match.

"Shannon."

"No, I mean who are you, in the big sense."

"I arrived recently from New Orleans."

"What brought you?"

"Love."

He nodded. "So what about love, are you for it or against it?"

"For it."

"You followed someone here?"

"No, I left someone and he followed me and I'm trying to hide from him."

"I don't understand—"

"I'm working the shit shift here because I'm new. What's your excuse?"

The sound of the bell attached to the front door cut off Caleb's reply. A stooped, dirty man walked in carrying a cup. "Who's she?" He handed the cup to Caleb.

"She's new." He filled the cup with water and gave it to the man.

"Tell her the score," he said, and left.

"The score? What is this, a sport?" Shannon asked.

"We change Clyde's coins in for him and give him all the water he can drink. He also uses the bathroom. In return he keeps the other homeless out of here, mostly."

"How much does he make?"

"Almost as much as we do. If you want to know what kind of shift you're going to have, just ask how Clyde is doing."

"God, he makes almost as much as us just begging? I'm in the wrong business."

"I have a feeling it's not as great a job as it first seems."

Shannon put her cigarette out and walked to the door and looked out. "So you didn't tell me why you're working graveyard."

"Because of the people who come in between three and five."

"The freaks."

"Yeah, they're a sad lot, but they have something special about them. They're . . . not as predictable as most of us."

Mario hung up the phone. "Damn. I don't know who loves me more, my ex-wife or my girlfriend."

"Who do you love?" asked Shannon.

"I love them all."

Caleb led Shannon through a narrow alley lined with trash cans and fire escape ladders. He liked taking out-of-towners, especially women, on what he thought of as anti tours. Although he could no longer get personal pleasure from the things he'd done and seen, it gave him a vicarious and philanthropic thrill to expose the uninitiated to a little taste of the other side of life. It was a gift he could bestow, if they were willing to see, but it was also a curse, because once they'd opened their eyes to the world behind the scenes, they could never be satisfied with the surface again. And he, Caleb, was the prime example of the tragedy of that vision, for eventually, inevitably, one was bound to run out of depths, to plunge, masks to unveil, lands to discover, experiences to be had.

They emerged onto a street exploding with lights and banners. "No one ever comes here," explained Caleb, "except the Russian Jews and the Koreans who live here." They moved down the sidewalk past bagel shops and Korean barbecue restaurants and non-English bookstores. They took in the aroma outside a goulash house and walked through the noise emanating from a second floor disco. Further down the road, Caleb touched Shannon's elbow before a nondescript door. "Let's go in here for a drink."

The lounge was decorated in a Polynesian motif, but had an unfinished quality to it. Remnants of what it had been before showed through in spaces left uncovered by the lava rock and bamboo. Caleb pointed out a small room containing a tiny pool table. One man leaned into a corner while another squeezed around the table, looking for a shot. He held his cue straight up over the felt and brought it sharply down on the cue ball. "Is this some new game or is that table meant for midgets?" asked Shannon.

"I think it's a toy. It's strange what people do when they don't have anything else to do."

They sat at a booth partially enclosed by a wicker screen and lit by a flickering candle. They ordered drinks and faced each other across the table. "So," said Shannon, "a date huh? I somehow didn't think you were the kind of guy who went on many dates."

"And I figured you were the type of lady who went on plenty."

"Touché."

Caleb sipped his drink and peeled the cellophane from his pack of cigarettes. She was right, he didn't go on dates, as such. The only reason he considered this a date, in fact, was because Shannon had insisted on calling it a date; otherwise he would not have thought of it in those, or any, terms. She sipped her drink from a straw and looked around the place. Her fingers were long and thin, and she wore silver rings on both pinkies and her right thumb. She drummed the table and then patted down a cowlick. She was girlfriend caliber, he decided, and he could use a girlfriend, at least for the few months it took him to save enough money for his next trip. He liked to have a girlfriend when he was saving money. It got old, eventually, but by that time he was usually about to leave the country. Caleb's last breakup had been decisive. "Sorry, baby, but my flight into Salvador leaves tomorrow."

Shannon finished her drink and signaled the waitress to bring two more. "How many drinks do you think it will take for us to say what we really mean?"

"My guess is four, if we have that much patience and endurance."

"All right, let's talk about trivial things until we've finished our fourth drinks, then we'll be honest."

Caleb agreed. They spoke of city life and of work and how it feels to move to a new place. They spoke of how unsatisfying college had been. Instead of telling their life stories, they decided, for now, to tell what they'd been doing since high school.

Shannon bit at a nail. "Well, after school I did the usual things, college, work, going out with my friends, getting high, going out with guys, all that, but it all seemed so pointless, you know."

"Yes, I know pointlessness."

"Then I met someone, an older guy who showed me that love is the only important thing in this world. Nothing else matters."

"And then he showed you about getting dumped I take it."

"It wasn't his fault. He couldn't help the way he felt, and he taught me so much. I'll always be grateful. I mean, it was so amazing. Imagine being blind for the first twenty years of your life and then suddenly seeing." She looked over Caleb's head and into the past, then came back to him. "Anyway, ever since then I've dedicated my life to love."

"A simple but worthy purpose." It sounded like a crock of shit to Caleb, but hey, if it gave her life a sense of meaning, who was he to judge?

It was Caleb's turn and he told of the pattern he'd established. Waiting tables for a year and traveling for a year. He told of his last trip, about the Zapatistas in Chiapas and how he'd pretended to be a journalist to be invited to their camp.

"Why don't you really become a journalist?"

"I'm not really interested in telling the world what's going on. I don't want to affect things; I just want to see and feel. I want to be there when things happen."

She swirled her drink with her straw. "Why do you even bother to come back?"

He looked into her wide, brown eyes. She was as cute as a Japanese cartoon character. "Honestly. It's never as good as it's supposed to be. You read the stories of guerrillas in the jungle and insurrections and all that, and you go when there's a travel advisory and you think it's going to be some big thing, but it's not. I get to Chiapas and they're selling hooded Zapatista dolls and tee shirts that say, 'viva la revolución' to all the tourists. So I figure I've got to dig deeper, so I pretend to be a journalist and hook up with this photographer. We go for six hours into the jungle to hear a restricted press conference, and there's Subcomandante Marcos, all dressed up in fatigues and a black hood. And do you know what he has to say? They want the government to supply clean water, schools, and paved roads. I go all the way to southern Mexico and then go six hours into the jungle to hear a fucking town hall meeting." He shook his head. "And then I find out that Marcos was a college professor in Mexico City. Some revolution."

"And Guatemala, it's just a bunch of drunken guerreros shooting indio peasants. Depressing, but not that interesting after a while. Salvador and Nicaragua would have been good in the eighties, but ever since the States stopped giving their governments money, they all ran out of bullets, and suddenly, surprise, everyone wants peace." He put his cigarette out. "Anyway, it's all pretty disappointing."

"So you think your next trip will be better?"

"Probably not, but hey, I got to try. Figure I'll go to the Philippines and try to check out the NPA."

"What's that?"

"New People's Army, No Permanent Address, whichever you like."

They ordered their fourth drinks. "You know what I think? I think you do all this running around because you don't know how to be in love."

"I've been in love."

"I don't believe you. What was it like? Was it like heroin, but lasted for months? Could you eat or sleep? Was the sun brighter and the trees greener and the air thicker? Did you think about her every moment? Did you have fantasy conversations with her when she wasn't with you?" She raised an eyebrow. "That's what love is all about, and I'll bet it's more exciting than running around the jungle with Zapatistas."

"I don't know, sounds a little too happy for my tastes."

"Oh it's happy all right. Until you start worrying about when it will end. Or if she loves you back. It's happy for a while, but then it gets . . . insane, I guess you could say."

"Okay, for argument's sake let's say that everything you've described is true and I've never experienced it. How does one go about falling in love?"

She put her drink to her mouth, but didn't sip. "I could show you, but it would take dedication, and I don't think you'd follow the rules. You're a chickenshit, running around the world, getting your jollies off of things that have nothing to do with you. You're like most people."

"Bullshit. I could do it. If it's really so great, I could do it. I just have a hard time believing you. I mean, I've had a lot of girlfriends, and—"

She stood. "I'm going to the bathroom. While I'm gone, think about this question. Do you want to fall in love with me?"

He wondered if his answer would really be significant. She was drunk. It was probably all a bunch of shit, but still . . . he felt nervous, and a little excited. He would do it, and he would pretend, even to himself, that it was completely true. He had played roles before. The dull truth always came around again, but acting made things interesting for a while. When she returned he asked her how to do it, how to fall in love. She nodded gravely. "When we're together, look at me a lot and try to memorize me, so you can bring me to your mind when I'm not around. That's important, you've got to think of me as much as possible. Call me every day. We shouldn't see each other every day, but we should talk. Don't get too impatient for sex. You should wait for it if you want to fall in love."

"How long are we talking about?"

"I'm sorry, but each time is different. I can't tell you how long, but we'll both know. We'll wait until we can't wait any longer. And no other women. Don't date them and don't consider dating them. Look and admire, but don't be tempted."

"I don't go out with more than one woman at a time. It's just how I am."

"Another thing. Don't bullshit me. Don't hand me the same tired lines you tell every woman that you've been out with. Think of fresh material. You've got to work for this." They sat in silence. Caleb thought he should laugh or make a joke, but he didn't even feel like smiling.

They paid the check and he led her out the back door. He took her to a chain link fence and ducked through a hole. They scrambled down an embankment to some rail tracks and entered a subway tunnel.

"Is this safe?"

"Yeah, this line doesn't run after midnight."

The well-lit tunnel was a gallery for graffiti artists. One after another, on both sides, at twenty-foot intervals, works of art covered the walls. Angled and glimmering letters advertised the artist "Q-Bert"; a row of solemn-faced extraterrestrials stared down at Shannon and Caleb; a music box pumped plump and bouncing musical notes from its speakers, while the DJ loomed in the background. Caleb took her hand as they continued through the still, stale air. She leaned against him.

A faint sound overtook them from behind. A single light moved almost imperceptibly forward. "Shit, let's go," Caleb said, and they ran to one of the 2x2 foot alcoves that appeared every fifty feet or so throughout the tunnel. He put his arms around her and they pressed into the small, concrete space and waited as the train grew louder and louder. "Are we in far enough?" asked Shannon.

"Yes, we'll survive."

She squeezed him. "I trust you."

Soon they could feel the tunnel vibrate; a breeze had started. The train rushed by, inches from their faces. Noise, wind, and vibration sent a thrill of sensation through Caleb. He felt giddy and wanted to shout, but held it in. Car after car went by, and Caleb had a mad urge to reach out and touch the blur before him. Finally it passed and they were left with a retreating rhythmic clicking. Caleb looked Shannon in the eye and started trying to memorize her face. She had a light trail of freckles over the bridge of her nose. He bent to kiss her, his heart pumping. "Not yet," she said, but he kissed her anyway, and she kissed him back. Although the kiss sent a warm cheer through his body, he couldn't help sneaking a look at his watch over her shoulder, wondering what that train was doing here at this time of night.

Caleb followed the rules as well as he could. He had never taken this approach with a woman before. Usually, he took his girlfriends on rollercoaster rides of new experiences: five-day hikes into the wilderness, beyond where the other hikers would venture; hitchhike journeys to unexplored cities; forays into the night. . . . And when it came time for him to leave the country, and they wanted to go with him, he would always tell them the same thing. "It's time for you to find your own journey, and I've got to get back to mine." And then he would be gone before it got too ugly.

But this time he would do it Shannon's way, at least for a while. Who knows, he thought, it might be interesting.

They spoke every night. Sometimes she would answer the phone and sometimes he would leave a message and she would call him back. When she didn't call him back right away, he would get an odd nervous feeling in his gut, wondering where she was and if she would really call on that night. But she always did.

On the two nights a week that they worked together he was not sure how to act. They were a couple on some nights and on others they were coworkers and on still others they seemed like mere friends. It was starting to get confusing. He figured he should stop this game and take control, but he decided he would play along a little longer, to see what would happen. Maybe after they slept together things would become clearer.

He spent the night at her house one night, but she wasn't ready to make love. That was okay by him. He enjoyed the kissing and holding and rolling around, although he didn't ever quite get to sleep. After that, she stayed at his house and the kissing and rolling around increased in intensity, until the final stitches of clothing fell away. As they made love, he felt such a warm contentment that he thought he might be experiencing what she'd told him about. In fact, he had a strong urge to tell her so. He couldn't, however, bring himself to utter the word "love." Instead he whispered "Te quiero" into her ear.

"That means 'I love you' in Spanish, doesn't it." She smiled, and he was happy to be on the right track.

Caleb stopped checking air travel fares, and he no longer went out drinking at night, at least not without Shannon. They both changed to day shifts at the diner. He liked walking to work rather than taking the subway. The newness of the world startled and delighted him. It was summer and the city was beautiful under blue skies and fluffy, white clouds; all this time he had spent, all this life he had lived and he had never seen what he saw now. A yellow flower growing out of a crack in the sidewalk was a revelation, a profound metaphor for something he had no words for. Previously he would have scoffed at such sentimentality, but now it all made sense.

There were so many things he hadn't done, hadn't seen right here in the city. They drank wine and ate cheese and baguette while rowing around the little lake in Golden Gate Park. They visited the buffalo and walked slowly through the botanical gardens. They kissed under a bridge in the Japanese Tea Garden. It was all so corny, yet he'd never been happier. Maybe being corny was the key, suspending sarcasm and cynicism, and ignoring that part of him that warned him, that part of him that had kept him safe, that part of him that limited the possible experiences to be had in this world. He wondered how far it would go. When she suggested they ride the cable car to Fisherman's Wharf and visit Alcatraz, he was shocked to hear himself agree without a pause or an ironic quip.

He walked through the chilly halls of the prison and listened to the tape of the ex-convict telling stories. He looked around for Shannon, but she was at another part of the tour. The tape directed him into the solitary confinement cell. "It was pitch dark," said the convict on the tape. "After days and days, weeks, sometimes months without any light at all, you start seeing whatever is in your mind like it's real. You learn how to control it after a while and it's like watching a movie. But you had to be careful, because sometimes it wasn't a movie that you wanted to see." A different voice came on. "I had this button that I pulled from my shirt. I would toss it in the air and then start looking for it in the dark. I would do this over and over again until it was time to eat or sleep. I spent months this way. You had to do something or you'd go crazy alone with yourself in the dark there." A chill went down Caleb's spine and he hurried out of the cell. He had had no idea how alone he was before he met Shannon, and now, he realized, being alone would never be the same for the rest of his life. The hair at the back of his neck stood on end, even when he got out to the sunshine.

They were now considered a couple by the outside world and spent three or four nights a week at one another's house. It was just as she said it would be. He thought of her all the time, and from the moment he woke to the time he dropped off to sleep a lovely feeling filled him such as he had never imagined before. It was like being on a drug, but you never came down, he thought.

But then the doubts started. One day he told her he loved her and she didn't answer, she just hugged him. She had always told him she loved him back before. Why didn't she this time? It was probably nothing, but a small cold spot appeared in his warm mood, and it wouldn't go away. Was it his imagination, or did she seem less enthusiastic in bed than she had before? He took to asking her if everything was all right, if she was happy, to which she always replied yes, she was happy, everything was all right. Until one day she told him to quit asking her that. And then they started spending less time together.

Something was wrong. Caleb had to get back to who he was before. What had happened to the him he

knew before? The old him seemed like a swaggering character from a movie, someone to admire but too alone to really exist. That was who she loved, not this new him. He went out by himself to one of his old haunts, but he couldn't bear the thought of missing her phone call, so he came home early. He was stuck, trapped, in big trouble and he knew it.

Then one day she didn't return his call. He tried her house again. She was not home at midnight. She had never failed to return his call before. He tried her house throughout the night, but there was no answer. At 6 AM, still awake, he took a shower and got ready for work. It was Sunday, the day they worked together, so he would at least see her there.

He arrived early and drank coffee. "You look like shit, ese," said Mario.

"I'm all right."

"No lo creo, cabrón."

Finally Shannon arrived, but by that time so had some customers. Sundays were busy. She called them "big dollar days." They settled into their stations and the owner, Mr. Kim, arrived and sat dourly behind the cash register.

"So how are you?" Caleb asked her when they came together at the counter.

"Fine thank you."

He didn't want to say it, but it came out. "Where were you last night?"

She snapped her ticket onto the wheel and spun it to Mario. "Let's not get into it right now."

The diner filled. Caleb had a hard time focusing on food and drink. He found himself lingering over the question of where Shannon had spent the night. That she hadn't been able to tell him was practically proof that she'd stayed at some guy's place. Who could he be? Caleb realized that he'd circumnavigated the diner twice with a tray of drinks and he couldn't remember even taking the order.

He and Shannon went to the counter to pick up food at the same time. Caleb couldn't take it. "Tell me who you spent the night with."

She picked up her food and turned away. He left his food and followed her. "Hey, ese, these are your pinches platos," yelled Mario. Caleb followed Shannon to her table.

"Come on, just tell me what's going on."

"I'm sorry, who had the corned beef hash?"

"I'm not going to leave you alone until you talk to me."

She passed the food to the customers, who kept their eyes down. She walked toward the drink station and he followed. "You're driving me crazy." She yanked on fistfuls of her hair, leaving two clumps poking up like bear ears.

"How do you think I feel? You did this to me. I just need you to tell me what's happening."

She took a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator and started filling glasses. She set the jug down.

"Are you really ready to hear this?"

Suddenly he was not so sure, but he nodded anyway.

"I don't love you."

He felt like someone had dumped a barrel of ice water over his head.

"What did I do to make you stop loving me?"

"Nothing. I never loved you."

His knees grew weak. He steadied himself against the refrigerator.

"It's not your fault. It was easy for you to fall in love; it's your first time, but it gets harder each time. The truth is that I've never fallen in love since that first time. He left me and I thought I was going to die. But I didn't." She laughed. "And now, I can't even remember what the feeling was. You'll see. It's weird. I yearn for it and remember that it was so important, but the actual feeling is gone, erased like it was never there at all. I can't even imagine the pain anymore." She looked him in the eye. "I'm really sorry I didn't fall in love with you. I wanted to. You'll see how it is."

"But you said you loved me."

"I thought you wanted to experience love. I told you I'd help you fall in love. I never promised that I would love you back. I'm sorry I lied, but I felt you should go through this. You must admit it was wonderful, for a while. I could tell you were in the middle of it." Her eyes flashed as she said this. "It must have been great." Then she was off delivering orange juice.

Caleb's food was getting cold on the counter and many of his customers were signaling him. Mr. Kim was coming over too. "What's the matter with you? Take care of your customers."

Caleb took off his apron and slowly headed toward the door. He watched Shannon work into the chaos and mess that he'd left. Her day was going to suck, but not as bad as his.

He pushed through the door and joined the throng of surging tourists. A dirty, open hand pushed up to him. "Hey man, I need one dollar for bus fare so I can get to a job interview." The owner of the hand was Clyde, who apparently didn't recognize him. Caleb gave him a dollar. Then other hands and voices reached out to him. The homeless surrounded him, and he couldn't remember what he used to do to make them leave him alone. He pushed through them, but they seemed to be everywhere, closing in on him. He started running through the crowd, looking for an open space. A cloud covered the sun and everything changed.

## Short Story by Gregg Johnson

## Chasing the Eclipse

*These are the days of miracle and wonder  
This is a long distance call  
The way the camera follows us in slow mo  
The way we look to a distant constellation  
The way we look to us all  
These are the days of miracle and wonder  
Don't cry baby, don't cry, don't cry  
Paul Simon*

My wife left me for the sake of her soul. These were not her words, but how, over five years, I stumbled onto a way to explain the summer Sally joined Spiritual Nation to leave me and New York behind for California and the chance to live near the ashram built by the Reverend Frank Doy. She was toiling on the spiritual ladder, and had reached her First Pinnacle in less than two years. Soon she would send me a letter in her perfect, minute handwriting to calmly explain how she had completed her studies for her Second Pinnacle, and would soon qualify to wear the long blue robes she had coveted for over a year. She would also soon qualify to move into the ashram and donate thirty percent of her income to the good Reverend Doy.

There are things I have given up on trying to understand. I wish I could say Sally's determination to destroy her life and mine was one of them. It would not have surprised me if she had carried through on her plans to take me to the Methodist church one of her cousins attended, or if she had agreed to attend the Unitarian services we discussed. My schedule writing travel articles, my sudden departures for Boston, for Anchorage, for New Brunswick, had always prevented us from following through on these plans, however, and distracted me to the point that I paid no attention to the brochures I saw on our coffee table or stuffed into the drawer of the table beside our bed. A joke, I thought, a curiosity she had collected like the peacock's feathers she once found in Central Park, the Elvis Presley playing cards someone had left on the subway seat.

Early on, life with Sally seemed simple. When we first met, I thought she was leading me towards an evolutionary leap. She was beautiful, anyone catching a glimpse at her on the sidewalk would have said, but the way her hair swung in the sunlight, her slender waist, the way her general presence sometimes made you stop to be sure you had seen what you thought you had seen, was almost beside the point. She was so unlike any woman I had ever known that each day seemed a complete surprise. It was good to meet a woman who seemed glad to see me each time she saw me, a woman whose mind was directed to whatever stood immediately before her. The small warnings that should have alerted me, the way she loved to window shop, her fascination with the catalogs that appeared in our mailbox every week, I saw as qualities I should try to understand.

Yes, she seemed simple, just as the way she stood beside me or sat across from me seemed simple, her eyes wide, her face open, free of all irony. She seemed guileless, as if she were a particularly mature child. Her intelligence, however, was the kind that absorbed everything she encountered. She was not intellectual. She read what interested her at each moment—old horticulture books she found at the Strand (when we first met, she kept a flower garden on her patio), *Smithsonian Magazine* articles about recent discoveries of Mayan sculpture (although she had no interest in travelling and no formal training in anthropology). Her memory was intimidatingly precise. A brown leaf on one of her gladioli and she knew its exact cause without having to go to her bookshelf. A glance at a mask or obelisk at the Metropolitan and she could explain—accurately, for all I knew—the ceremony for which it was used.

Once while we lay in bed I asked her to tell me about the other men in her life. She shook her head and pressed her fingers against my lips.

"There's no past worth remembering, as far as I'm concerned. There's just us, just what happens between us. Our past doesn't exist."

Startled, I didn't know what to say. Sometimes I imagined she was espousing a complex metaphysical position. Later I came to understand she was only worried that we might harm each other if we began to dwell on the past. But her words stayed in my mind. I could almost hear them on the nights she came to my apartment. I suppose I only mean that I felt I began to live when I was with her, but like most clichéd feelings, it did not feel like a cliché when we stood beside my bed and I unbuttoned her dress.

She was tall and a little too thin, with full breasts. She was from West Virginia, originally, but as a teenager had lived briefly with her sister in California. She spoke with the slightest hint of a drawl, her voice all the more beautiful because it turned liquid at unexpected times, letting me glimpse an interior fluidity of mind that seemed to reflect the liquidity of her long body.

Before we married, I knew she enjoyed the clothing and furniture catalogs that appeared in our mailbox, but only later did I understand how much they meant to her. She never threw them away. Soon they accumulated on the shelves of our closets, in our kitchen drawers, in odd corners of our bedroom. When we had filled every drawer and bookshelf, catalogs began to appear in neat, waist-high stacks in the pantry, in bundles tied with kite string and stashed beneath our bed. My assumption was that they served as a sleek, glossy antidote to life in our cramped apartment. Or, it occurred to me as I turned their pages, as an antidote to our life. It was no wonder Sally wanted to inhabit the pages. The gentle women models who lounged in silk slips and camisoles across overpriced sofas, the brown young men who shared cappuccino in sun streaked living-rooms—they lived in an eternal Sunday afternoon in these beautiful rooms. Free of worry or haste, the models spoke among themselves in delicate voices cast at a volume ever so slightly below what we could hear.

Sally began to buy small pieces of furniture and ornaments. Sometimes she ordered them from catalogs, sometimes she found them at Macys or a small shop in the Village. She made no attempt to duplicate any single room in the catalogs, but the thin Shaker bookcase that one day appeared in our bedroom resembled a bookcase in a catalog beneath our bed, a bookcase that in the catalog supported candles remarkably similar to those now on our coffee table, itself a near duplicate of another catalog's foot-rest for a blonde woman in a terrycloth robe. I feared Sally would slowly fill our apartment with such items, make our home uninhabitable through the sheer density of thick stacks of glowing catalogs and the furniture and decorations that seemed to grow out of them while I slept.

But she stopped. Looking back on that time now, I believe it was the turning point in our relationship. Our problem was partly financial, but the strain we felt had more to do with our sense that whatever idealized image of life that we had constructed over the past few months was in serious trouble. For three months, no-one needed any of my articles. Sally, unable to find a job related to her marine biology degree, had taken a job as a bank teller. It hit her hardest. I think she began to see we were not the handsome couple in hand-stitched sweaters who sat in enormous country living rooms filled with carefully aged furniture and tastefully primitive bowls. That we would not become the young couple in matching white shirts and shorts who lounged in their beige sunroom and tossed the orange across the radiant page suffused with summer light.

She stopped buying new furniture, and lost interest in what she had already bought. The Shaker bookcase and other furniture she gave to friends. The candles she tossed into the kitchen trash basket. The coffee table she let stay, but it too seemed changed—no longer did it hold artifacts scavenged from last month's catalog. Sally instead seemed happy to drop her latest finds there, letting postcards and playing cards pile up beside electric bills and letters rejecting my articles. It was as part of the general clutter of those days that I saw the brochures from Reverend Doy, as part of our littered apartment, the muddle of my own thoughts, the letters and bills.

*We have plunged into an ocean of sin* each brochure began. The drawings on the front of the brochures varied. On one brochure, a line of sinners headed over what resembled the cliffs of Dover; on others, a police car sped down a littered street where short-skirted women waved at cars from the sidewalk and men sat on curbs smoking stubby pipes. Behind the wheel of the patrol car sat a man with a beard and long hair flowing out around a hooded robe, a man I assumed was Reverend Doy.

Suddenly she was attending Tuesday night meetings. I began to hear the name of Reverend Doy men-



tioned while we did the dishes, while we made our bed. One night she took my hand in bed and pressed it close to her cheek.

"You have the light of God in your eyes some nights," she told me. Then she rolled over and went to sleep.

I had to go to New Orleans the next morning. When I woke up, I let Sally sleep. I took a long look at her before I left to catch my flight. She looked like the same woman I had known a month ago, the same woman I had married three years earlier. Solid middle-class, Southern stock, raised to attend the Methodist church of her choice. A Marine Biology major with 1300 SAT scores. Whatever was going on inside her, whatever anxieties the solitude of my long absences and her own search for a better job had aroused in her, seemed temporary. The demons would pass. . .

The demons did not pass, but I made the mistake of keeping quiet, and continued to think they would, despite the evidence of brochures she left on our coffee table, despite the addition of Wednesdays to the evenings she spent at her meetings. I was able to think of Reverend Doy as only another illustration of how desperate the country had become. At the time it seemed understandable that as all the country began to look more and more alike, as identical fast food franchises surrounded identical malls, people should begin to seek shelter, to need whatever beliefs provided comfort from the heatless neon and styrofoam. Only later, years after she had left me, did it occur to me how much the two movements resembled one another, how much the latest cult's promises resembled what you could buy at our malls or was playing at multiplexes that squatted in parking lots beside them. The religions cropping up around the Pacific Rim, the philosophies of *The Lion King*, they all seemed to offer the same philosophical depth as the breezy short dresses from the mall stores.

One shadowless afternoon so humid even the grimmest New York pigeons had deserted the sidewalks, I came out of a meeting in SoHo and decided to wander over to Astor Place before splurging on a cab uptown. I almost stumbled over the woman dressed in a brown shawl and a black dress so long its hem brushed the sidewalk. She was trying to hand leaflets to people who passed her on the sidewalk, to people who avoided looking at her leaflets and stepped quickly out of her reach. She saw me and stepped off the curb, but I took her arm before she could slip away.

"My God, Sally, have you lost your mind?"

She stood limply beneath the hot black dress, her face moist with perspiration. "I knew you'd disprove."

A man dressed in an identical robe but lacking Sally's brown shawl stepped between us. In his robe and heavy leather sandals he looked like an extra in a Cecil B. De Mille extravaganza, a camel merchant laboring up treeless hills in *The Ten Commandments*, a beggar wandering dusty streets in *Cleopatra*.

"Are you interested in reaching the First Pinnacle?" he asked me.

"I'm trying to talk to my wife." While I looked at Sally shaking her head at me the way she once did when I tried to explain to her mother the difference between Soviet and Chinese Communism, the man in the robe spoke to a couple walking past us.

"The Reverend Doy says we have no wives or husbands on this earth."

The couple brushed past and did a credible job of not breaking into a full gallop for the corner. I took Sally's hand and pulled. It was like pulling on a corpse, a weight attached to the earth. I repeated my earlier subtle question about her having lost her mind. She raised her hand to her mouth and looked at me as if I had said something so horrible, so unbelievably cruel that she could not speak.

"Those are not the words of a spiritual man," the man in the robe said, and to this day I don't know why I didn't knock him down. He tugged the sleeve of my wife's robe and they sauntered inside a coffee shop.

I followed them inside, but was asked to leave after I grabbed their stack of literature and threw it and an aluminum napkin holder onto the floor, scattering napkins and leaflets across the dirty linoleum and out onto the sidewalk. It was all of the rage I was allowed, as well as everything within reach that I could throw. I waited outside, but Sally and her new friend must have called for reinforcements, for soon another five devotees showed up to hunker around their table. The heat pressing up from the sidewalk seemed to grow thicker as I tried to stay calm and consider what to do. A call to a police station didn't seem productive—Sally walked into the restaurant of her own free will. Calling her mother and father in

West Virginia would lead to conversations I wanted to avoid. I had already kidnapped her, ruined her by luring her away to evil Manhattan. Had she stayed in West Virginia, she would have been married to a nice man now, and a grandson or granddaughter would be tottering around our suburban house. I had no desire to add my inability to keep her out of a cult to their list of complaints. Finally, drenched in sweat, in anger, disgusted with myself, with Sally, with the men and women in the long robes, I gave up and hailed a cab.

That night, Sally did not come home. She telephoned to say she was staying with friends. I asked who they were. She told me that they were good people, better people than she had ever known before. Then she said she was going to hang up. I told her she couldn't do that. She hung up.

thing happens these days they can get a script ready in about ten seconds, and the production assistant wanted to get my input on the movie. Nobody ever asks for my input on anything, so I'm kind of looking forward to this, though I think it's kind of ironic that they're going to make a movie about someone that nobody ever paid the least bit of attention to in real life. Maybe I'll even get to play myself, though I'm not gonna hold my breath for that. They'll probably get someone better looking to play me. 12:15. These Hollywood people are probably always late.

#### iv. My Experiences with My Father's Get Rich Quick Schemes

I've got these coins in my pocket. They're my Dad's latest invention. He calls them the Surging Towards the Millennium collection. They're regular silver coins with famous events of the twentieth century commemorated on them. Positive stuff like Neil Armstrong walking on the moon and the Marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima. No mushroom clouds or pictures of that Vietnamese guy getting his head blown off in the middle of the street. He's already gone bankrupt twice, my Dad. Once he had a company that made Big Ten plastic footballs, and then he had the Class Notes Print Shop on University Avenue. Now he's trying to sell these Surging Towards the Millennium coins on the internet. I asked him if I could have a used car for my birthday and he sent me a bunch of coins with Ghandi on them instead. He's probably surging towards bankruptcy number three.

#### v. My Experiences with the My Experiences Essays

When it happened the school was closed down for the week. Dr. Schenck took over the guidance counselor's office, and after the memorial service we were all handed a packet of papers that we had to return to the community center. They were all evaluated by the special grief-management people, and then some of us were called in to see Dr. Schenck. The packet consisted of a cover page where we listed our name, age, and grade, and the attached pages were blank sheet of paper that were headed for us to write down our experiences with the students who were killed. These were mine:

##### My Experiences with Heather Craddock

I did not know Heather Craddock.

##### My Experiences with Pru Orr

I did not know Pru Orr.

##### My Experiences with Sarah Oglivie

I did not know Sarah Oglivie.

##### My Experiences with Arthur Klima

I did not know Arthur Klima, but his locker was five down from mine. I figured that out when I saw his picture on TV.

##### My Experiences with Bobbie Ann Robinson

I did not know Bobbie Ann Robinson. I heard about her swimming records at school. One afternoon two summers ago me and Reiderman were out at Bruin Theater and I was waiting to get popcorn. We were seeing some Schwarzenegger movie. Bobbie Ann Robinson was behind me. There was only one batch of popcorn left in the bin, so I said she could have it. She was nice about it. She said I was first and I could have it, but I gave it to her anyway. When I went back to my seat Reiderman said, "Where's the fucking popcorn?" I said they were out. That was my only experience with Bobbie Ann Robinson.

#### My Experiences with Reed Reiderman

Reiderman's mother lives in my neighborhood. He and I used to hang out at his house. Sometimes we'd go to the mall in Westwood or see a movie, but mostly we hung out at his house. I haven't seen him since summer. We stopped hanging out.

#### vi. My Experiences in the Office of the Special Grief Management Counselor

I was surprised when I got called in to see Dr. Schenck. The grief management people were supposed to help people who were really close with the kids who got shot, so I didn't know why he wanted to see me, seeing as how I didn't know any of them. My mother dropped me off at the school and told me not to talk to any reporters. There was yellow crime-scene tape everywhere and a security guard had to take me into the office. There were three or four kids sitting there that I didn't know, but when I walked in Dr. Schenck's secretary told me to go right into his office and sit down. It was the first time that I had been in that office since last year, when our guidance counselor, Mrs. McAndrew, told me that freshman year was the perfect time to start thinking about college and other life decisions.

On top of Mrs. McAndrew's/Dr. Schenck's desk was an enormous pile of essays. Maybe three or four hundred of them. All of them were My Experiences with Bobbie Ann Robinson essays. She was on the U.S. Junior National Swim Team and held U.S. records in the 100 and 200 meter free style. She held California state records in just about every category you can name. She was a shoe-in for the U.S. Olympic team in 2000 and was expected to be a gold medalist. Everyone knew her. The only other thing on the desk besides for the Bobbie Ann Robinson essays was one sheet of mine: My Experiences with Reed Reiderman. Next to the desk was a green recycling bin filled with a mound of papers that had been tossed in. They were all discarded essays. I pulled this one out:

##### My Experiences with Arthur Klima

(By Judy Gambier)

Arthur was the best friend I ever had. He moved here from New Hampshire. He missed it. He never liked California much. He missed playing hockey and he especially missed the snow. He used to tell me how the snow plows would come out during the night, and that if he heard them after a certain time then he knew it would be too late to clear the roads and that school would be canceled. He said school is only canceled here if something bad happens. It makes me sad to think about him saying that. I ate lunch with him every day. On Monday I had to go to the orthodontist. I think about being at the orthodontist when everyone was shot. I was lucky. I wish Arthur had been with me. They should cremate him and put his ashes on Mount Washington. When he wasn't talking about snow or hockey he was talking about Mount Washington. He said he'd go hiking up Mount Washington at night with his uncle Bill, and that they'd roll out sleeping bags at the top of the mountain in the summertime. He said that the top of Mount Washington is the very first place the sun shines in the country to start the day.

Dr. Schenck walked in as I was reading the essay, so I jammed it in my pocket. He's a friendly guy, Dr. Schenck. White hair. White suit. He looks like Mark Twain and Walt Whitman and Albert Einstein and Colonel Sanders and every other famous guy with white hair and a white suit. He asked me about Reiderman. About why I stopped hanging out with Reiderman. He said that he was the only one who had seen my essay, and that if I would share what I knew with him then we could talk, just the two of us, and he wouldn't bring Sheriff Waldron in to the discussion. Waldron had opened his mouth about a possible accomplice and was taking a lot of questioning about that statement from the media, so the last thing I wanted was to be questioned by him. Schenck seemed like a better guy to talk to. So I told him what I

knew, mostly about:

### vii. My Experiences on the Last Day I Hung Out with Reiderman

I met Reiderman when we moved to California. We car pooled to Little League together when we were eleven, but we both sucked so we quit baseball. He lived in this enormous house with a swimming pool and a tennis court and a furnished basement with a Mortal Kombat machine. His father was a producer who made action movies in Hong Kong. The summer that I moved there was the summer his Dad dumped Reiderman's mother and married some babe in the Far East. I think she was an actress or an exotic dancer or something along those lines. Reiderman called her Yoko. He never talked about her, though, just like I never talked about my father and the print shop girl.

In the summertime Reiderman's house was always empty, so we hung out there pretty much every day. The house had about three dozen rooms, and when you walked down the hallway there was this echo that always gave me the creeps. I don't think Reiderman liked it, either, because he almost always slept downstairs on the pullout in the basement. His mother was always calling him and saying she had something important to do and had to stay overnight in the city. It was always for a benefit or an art opening or something like that. She didn't have to work since she got half of everything from Reiderman's father, but she was one of those ladies that belonged to about sixty organizations that nobody every heard of. She was never around, but Reiderman didn't seem to care since she always left cash for dinner. There was this porcelain jar in the kitchen that was always filled with money. We'd order pizzas with that.

Most of the time we'd get high in Reiderman's basement and then sit by the pool all day. It might have been pretty killer if we had a lot of friends and knew a bunch of chicks or whatever, but we didn't. I never made any friends after moving from Ann Arbor, and Reiderman had no friends whatsoever on account of the fact that his face was all scarred from acne and also because he was a pretty miserable guy who never said much of anything. When everything happened a bunch of people who were in his home-room couldn't even recall what he looked like, and there wasn't one teacher of his who was able to say anything about him. They couldn't remember what he looked like, either. He didn't have a yearbook picture, and it wasn't until two days after the shootings that CNN dug up a picture of him from our Little League team four years ago. When they arrested him at the motel in Barstow it was the first time anyone really got a good look at him.

He's tall and spindly and he never wore a shirt at home even though his bones were always sticking out every which way. He had a crew cut and bad acne, like I said, and when he got out of a chair it looked like someone popping open a switchblade. He smoked about three or four packs of cigarettes a day and probably went through a half-ounce of dope a week I'd have to say. He also popped Ephedrine constantly. Those are little over-the-counter pills that give you a rush like speed. I think they're supposed to be for asthmatics. They look like little white crosses. That's what we called them anyway—White Crosses.

He never saw his dad, though he was always sending Reiderman shitloads of money in these corny greeting cards. He'd send a card that had some little cartoon kid swinging a baseball bat on the outside, and on the inside it would say something corny like "You're a hit!" You could tell someone else had picked them out. In between that and the dinner money his Mom left Reiderman pretty much had enough bread to buy whatever he wanted. He spent most of it on the grass he bought from this guy named Kent who had a Charger and always hung out in the mall parking lot showing people his engine.

So all we ever did was sit down in his basement, do bong hits, pop White Crosses, and play Mortal Kombat. We couldn't really think of anything else to do. On occasion we'd hang out with this guy Lee at his news stand, but that got old since all of his magazines sucked and no one ever came in except for an old man with a voice box named Petersen. He was a Korean War veteran who told the same joke every single day. Lee always had free coffee for his customers, so every day Petersen would come in and croak "Coffee's on me today boys." He cracked himself up. Reiderman hated him. Said he wished he had bought it in the war. Lee wasn't much better. He spent the better part of every day reading Asian porno mags. Reiderman hated him, too.

Mostly we'd just float in Reiderman's pool during the afternoons, although the last time I hung out with him there wasn't any water in it on account of Reiderman fucking it up by putting dye into it one night. He put in all of these different colors of dye and then he tossed in a bunch of his t-shirts. His mother freaked when she saw it and had to have the pool drained. It was a complete mess. At night it looked like blood. To punish him she refused to have it refilled, so on the last day I hung out with Reiderman he was sitting in the bottom of the empty pool on a floaty and I was sitting on his deck, high as hell and staring at the faded patterns on the cement. It was all washed-out blues and reds and yellows on the side walls and the bottom of the pool. Reiderman had tossed a bunch of china plates down the slide one night when he didn't have anything better to do, and sometimes the sun would reflect off certain colored pieces and make these kaleidoscope patterns in front of your eyes. You could look at that shit for hours, believe me.

It was hot that day. Hotter than usual. Hotter than it had ever gotten in Michigan. We were drinking beer that tasted like piss. We had bought it out of Kent's trunk at the mall and I think that it might have been skunked. Reiderman got sick of sitting in the bottom of the pool on his floaty and climbed out. I remember he burned his left hand on the aluminum ladder, which was hotter than hell on account of there being no water in the pool. Reiderman insisted on climbing in the pool every day even though it was empty—I think he thought he was making some kind of a statement. He said that he didn't really care whether there was water in it or not. I cared, though. There being a functional swimming pool was part of what made hanging out at Reiderman's tolerable. If you took away the pool and then there was only the Mortal Kombat and the dope and the White Crosses and Reiderman's company, which was a pretty grim proposition. It was a pretty grim proposition anyway, but if you got high enough and sat in the water then you didn't really care one way or another. That day, we had to go down into the basement to escape the heat because we had no water to dive into. The basement had wood paneling and a bar and AC and was completely furnished, and that's where we hung out when it got too hot or it rained or whatever.

Reiderman had broken his bong the day before so all we had was a one-hitter. He'd bought it at this guy Marco's pawn shop. You could buy anything from Marco provided you had the cash. Take that hunting knife that they found, for example. The Grizzly Lock-Back. He got that from Marco. He also bought these disgusting videos from him. Chicks doing it with horses and dogs and stuff. Some were even worse than that.

Reiderman couldn't get a decent pull off the one-hitter because it was clogged with resin, so he dumped a bag of dope on the coffee table and pulled out some papers. He twisted up a few joints and we smoked a couple and then we put on the tube. We liked to watch game shows and root for people to fuck up or embarrass themselves. Reiderman would just sit there and pick at his acne and get annoyed whenever anybody won anything. One time this fat nurse from Albuquerque won \$1000 spinning that wheel on "The Price Is Right" and Reiderman got furious. I thought he was going to put his foot through the TV. A little while later she barely overbid on the Showcase Showdown and he was pretty satisfied when he saw how broken up she looked when she found out she didn't win a vacation or a boat or a dinette set. He was like, "Good, the fat bitch lost."

On the last day I hung out with Reiderman some dork who was in the National Guard won a jet ski and a trip to Barbados, and Reiderman got disgusted and said he was going to go do some yard work. I thought that was pretty funny seeing as how Reiderman was about the laziest sonofabitch I ever met. So I stayed down in the cool basement and watched the rest of "The Price Is Right" and then "One Life To Live" and every once in a while I'd see Reiderman walking by this little window dragging one landscaping tool or another. He seemed to be doing some kind of digging, but I was high and sick of him and I was glad to have the basement to myself.

At one point in the afternoon he came in sweating and carrying a package that the UPS guy had dropped off. It was from his father. He was in Malaysia or Curacao or somewhere like that and he sent Reiderman a package. He opened it and it had another card with money in it. There was a panda bear or something ridiculous like that on the front and a bunch of hundreds on the inside. There was a t-shirt from some new movie called "Death in Tai Pei" and also a nice silver watch in the envelope. Reiderman told me I could have it and tossed it over to me on the couch and then he went back outside. I snapped the watch on. It was pretty nice. I ought to just throw it in the garbage on account of what happened, but

I kind of like it because it tells you the time in all of these other places that aren't here.

I was asleep when I heard the riding mower crank up. I tried to peek out the little basement window but I couldn't see anything, so I walked upstairs and down the main hallway. I could hear the hum of the mower as I walked down past all of the vases and portraits. I walked out the front door and sat on the stoop in front of Reiderman's huge front lawn. There was a shovel and a hoe and some rope tossed on the walkway. Out in the yard Reiderman was on the riding mower with his shirt off. He was driving around in a big circle. There was something in the middle of the lawn but I couldn't tell what it was because my eyes were having a hard time adjusting to the light after sitting in the basement all afternoon. After a minute I focused in and saw what was out there. It was Chesborough.

Chesborough was Victoria Chestnutt's cat. He was a big orange Tabby that was always roaming around the neighborhood and rubbing himself against your leg or flopping on his back in your driveway. He was a pretty decent cat as far as cats go. Reiderman had dug a hole and buried Chesborough up to his neck in it and was riding the mower around him in a circle. I pulled a roach out of my pocket, lit it, hit what was left and looked out into the yard. Normally I wouldn't have smoked right there on the front porch like that, but there didn't seem to be a soul alive in the neighborhood. It was still and the sun was sliding away. I watched the paper burn orange at the end of the roach and then I flicked it away before it burned my fingertips.

I could make out the cat's head and see its mouth open and close and open. It was screaming but you couldn't hear it over the sound of the mower. Reiderman kept closing the circle tighter and tighter until he was about five feet away from the cat. He went slowly around and around until the sun was gone and the light dimmed and dulled. He was sitting high up in the seat, and he had a huge grin on his face. It was the first time I had ever seen Reiderman smile. I could see the cat's head jerking back and its mouth stretching and its eyes widening. Reiderman drove away from it and stopped the mower. He smiled and walked over to Chesborough and leaned down to pet its head. The cat jerked its mouth and snapped at Reiderman, and then Reiderman reared back and punched the cat in the head. He marched back to the mower, climbed on, made a big loop, and drove straight at Chesborough. He drove the mower right over the spot where he was. A series of brutal thuds broke the steady rhythm of the mower's hum. Then he cut the engine. Reiderman sat there smiling broadly in the silence, and I got up off the stoop and walked down the driveway without looking back.

I walked on through the half light, past the manicured lawns and palm trees and freshly paved streets. House lights on timers blinked on but I didn't see a soul anywhere. The only sounds I could hear were the static flicker of electric bug zappers and the distant click and jerk of garage door openers. The palm trees looked like they had knives for leaves. I cut through a cul-de-sac and stopped at the Little League field where we used to play. I sat on the wooden bleachers and looked out at the empty diamond. I could feel the open spaces widen and drift. I sat there until night dropped down and thunderclouds rolled in. They sounded like rifle shots in the night sky.

Victoria Chestnutt hung a bunch of flyers on telephone poles. One time she even asked me if I had seen Chesborough. I didn't answer her, because she had passed me dozens of times before and never said a word to me. I never told anybody what had happened. I just stopped hanging out with Reiderman.

#### viii. My Experiences in the Office of Special Grief Mgmt. Counselor, Pt. II

Dr. Schenck took a lot of notes when I told him about the last time I hung out with Reiderman. He asked me if I knew where Reiderman got his guns. I said no. He asked me if I knew that Reiderman was going to do what he did. I said no. He asked me if I thought I should have told somebody about Victoria Chestnutt's cat. I said, Who? He asked me if I felt guilty about what happened. I said I don't know. Sort of. Yes. It's like, I never thought he'd go off like that. I didn't. I thought he was a sicko for running over Chesborough, but I didn't know who to tell. My mother and Steve were in Lyon then, and there was nobody to say anything to. That's not true. I could have said something to any one of a number of people. I didn't think about it much until I saw him on TV yesterday, looking straight into the camera and smiling. It was the same smile he had on his face that afternoon. That's when I knew I made a mistake. That's when I felt like Sheriff Waldron was right about him having an accomplice.

Dr. Schenck asked me if there were any feelings I had that I didn't share with anyone. Any dreams. I told him that my mother, Steve, and I drove up Mulholland Drive one night when they first started seeing each other. He wanted to make a good impression so he invited me along for the drive. We got out of the car and looked at the lights of the city below. It was really beautiful. Since then I've often dreamed about taking a running start down Mulholland Drive and taking off, flying over Hollywood, with all the lights below me and a warm wind at my back. I told him that I've dreamed about flying all the way back to Michigan, stupid as that probably sounds. When I looked up at him I noticed he wasn't writing anything else down. He wasn't listening. People don't want to listen to those things.

He gave me a card. It said: Melissa Morrison, Production Assistant, Morning Star Pictures Inc. He told me that they were making a movie about what happened at the school, and that he would see fit not to tell Sheriff Waldron about our meeting if I would see fit to arrange a meeting with Melissa Morrison. I said he had a deal.

#### ix. My Experiences Today Right Up to This Very Moment

Melissa Morrison and I are sitting at Ruffalos on Hollywood Boulevard, waiting on a pizza. She met me in front of Mann's and then we walked over here. She's beautiful. No kidding. Red hair and green eyes and white teeth. She could be one of those girls who does soap commercials and rides horses. We've been talking about the movie, and about Reiderman getting taken in in Barstow. I'm nervous because I don't know that many girls and don't know what to say to them. I don't usually know what to say to anybody, but with girls it's worse than normal. She started talking about how they wanted to make a fair movie, one that was sympathetic to everyone, even Reiderman, but after a while she stopped talking about that and started talking about TV instead. She said she likes the movie business OK but would rather break into television reporting. It's pretty obvious that she doesn't really want my input on the movie. What she wants is for me to get her an interview with Reiderman. She hasn't come out and said that but I can tell it's what she's driving at. Nobody talks to you unless they want something from you. She probably figures that if she gets an interview with Reiderman then she can get a job anywhere. I don't guess I really mind. At least she has something that she wants to be. Me, I can't imagine myself ever being anything other than a witness.

People are rushing in from the cold and packing in here. I know they're looking over at our table and wondering what we're doing together, me and Melissa Morrison and her green eyes. Maybe some of them think she's my girlfriend, crazy as that sounds. Maybe they think we've been out Christmas shopping and decided to stop in for a slice before we go home. Some people do that. Some people manage to live like that.

There's a crowd gathering around the window. Everyone is getting out of their seats. It's actually snowing. People are going out on to the street and looking up and jumping up and down. A bunch of adults and they're jumping up and down for a handful of snow flakes. They'd laugh in Ann Arbor if they could see this. Cars are stopping. There's a photographer snapping pictures out there--tomorrow that will be the big story. *White Christmas*. *Snow Falls in Hollywood*. Melissa Morrison is out of her seat and looking out the window, too. While she's up I look at the folder she's had in front of her since we got here. The script is in there. The title page reads; "Death of An Olympic Hopeful: The Bobbie Ann Robinson Story." So that's the movie. The Bobbie Ann Robinson Story. It figures. I won't have any part to play in a movie like that. Not that I thought I'd ever really get a part. Things like that don't happen. Just like things like flying over Mulholland Drive and going home never happen. They're just useless things to think about sometimes.

People are looking to the sky in wonder out there. No one ever thought it was possible to see snow falling on Hollywood Boulevard. It hardly even looks like snow to me. It looks like ash. Like they're all standing in the ashes. An old cook with a scar running down beneath his eye like a tear has taken his apron off behind the counter and is shouting in broken English, "It's a miracle! It's a miracle." I sit here and watch it all. And in my mind I'm trying to think about Arthur Klima waking up in his sleeping bag on Mount Washington, with the first light of day shining on him. I can't hold that picture, though, because his sleeping bag keeps turning into Reiderman's, and then all I can see is Reiderman, and the way

he smiled when they broke into the motel room and pulled him out yesterday. He didn't cover his face or put a jacket over his head like you see people do sometimes. He looked square into the camera and smiled, and when a reporter shouted to him and asked if he'd been hiding in Barstow all along Reiderman laughed and said, "Nobody's been hiding. I'm here. I've been right here all along."

## Short Story by Anthony Tambakis

### See Rock City

You figured it was probably going to be bad news, and when you see her sitting out on the patio you know it for sure. You're almost a half an hour late, but when she sees you walking through the crowd her mouth doesn't purse in annoyance and she doesn't make a big show out of looking at her watch. Instead she just sits there with her thin shoulders turned down and tries to offer you a weak smile. This isn't good. A frozen margarita sits in front of her, the salt sliding down the glass. This isn't good either. She never drinks at lunch.

You work your way toward the table and pull up a chair across from her. You feel like you're about to sit down with a very dissatisfied customer. You think of addressing the issue right off the bat, but instead you decide to act as if it's just an ordinary day. Everything about her suggests that it's *not* just an ordinary day, but you try to ignore that.

"Junior says 'Five minutes, just five more minutes.' His five minutes is like somebody else's I don't know what."

"It's O.K.," she says.

"How long have you been here?"

"A half hour. Thirty-five minutes."

"Treinte-cinco minutos," you say. You and Abby have been planning a trip to Spain for months now and you've been working on your Spanish. You always meet at el Torrito for lunch because you like to practice with the waiters and waitresses.

"Es muy caliente," you say.

"What?"

"Caliente. Hot. It's hot. Or maybe that's *calor*. I think they both mean hot. I'm running out of time to get this stuff down. You should start listening to those tapes I got you. We don't want to be the ugly Americans. Plus, if we get split up, like if I'm called in to be a last-minute substitute in a bullfight or something, then you've got to be able to communicate in Spanish. Or at least be able to say, 'Look how wonderful my boyfriend looks in those tight pants.'"

"I guess so." She's looking past you, out beyond the patio where the side street runs off into the hills. You wonder why you always respond to being nervous by horsing around.

"It is hot, doncha think? I mean, for this time of year and everything."

"You could take your jacket off."

"Mi chaqueta. Si. Gracias. . . anyway, that Junior's an asshole. He says 'Five minutes, five minutes.' Ninety goddamn hours later. . ."

"It's not--it's OK. I was just sitting here thinking anyway."

"I don't know how you can think in this heat. It's gotta be 700 degrees out here."

"We could go somewhere else," she says. She's still looking towards the hills and you know it's bad news but you keep ignoring it.

"No time," you say. "Junior and I have got to go smooth things over with that old windbag Bingham before we lose him and end up getting the royal shaft. Junior drops the ball and then he's like, 'We've got to go talk to Bingham.' *We*. I'm like, 'Jesus Christ, Junior, what the hell happened?' I didn't--that's what I should have said, because he completely dropped the ball and everything, but there's no sense in pointing fingers now, right? I mean, why bother? So the long and the short of it is that we've got to go see the old bastard this afternoon."

"It'll be alright."

"We'll see. You never know. We lose Bingham and that's all she wrote. We'll beat shot to hell. Christ it's hot."

"You're so keyed up today." She's looking at you and she's annoyed. You're not handling this right. It won't go away because you want it to."

"Am I?"

"Uh huh."

"I think I've had like eight Cokes today. Seriously. I drank three in the meeting before nine o'clock. In Spain we'd be taking a siesta right now. It gets too hot to work so everybody takes a nap. There they say people work in order to live, right? And that in America we live in order to work. Right now we'd be plopping ourselves under a tree in say, Sevilla, and sleeping the afternoon away."

"Sevilla."

"Or someplace like that."

An airplane buzzes overhead with a banner trailing behind it. She looks up at it and follows it for almost a minute until it has disappeared over the horizon.

"So I went this morning."

"Yeah." *Here it comes*, you think.

"It was like we thought."

"That's what I kind of. . . yeah."

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what we had figured." There it is. You knew that was it and now here it is and god-damn it. Goddamn it all. You look at her and she looks small and you feel something like sympathy and maybe pity and certainly fear. And then the sympathy and the pity burn off in the sun and the fear is what's left. Later you'd remember that and wonder why the good instincts burned off in the sun and the weaker things remained. Later you'd think a good deal about that.

"It's different when you hear it," she says. "Even if you're thinking, it's different when you hear it."

She fiddles with the straw in her drink but she doesn't touch it. You find yourself staring at the girlish freckles on the bridge of her nose. The airplane swings back over the treetops and glides overhead again. The banner says "Congratulations Marty."

"So it's different when you hear it?"

"It is."

"I can see where that might be true." Neither one of you says anything for a minute, and then the waiter comes over and asks you if you'd like a drink. He's a thin Mexican boy with a wisp of a mustache.

"Como se dice Rum and Coke?" you ask.

"Rum y Coke," he answers.

"Bueno. Rum y Coke, por favor."

The plane disappears again and Abby follows it away. You haven't the faintest idea what to say, and you seem to be losing her in some vague way.

"Remember when we went to Newport for the Fourth that year. With York and all them? Remember being on the boat when the fireworks were going and how much you liked that? They say that they do that all the time during the festival season in Spain. They constantly shoot rockets over the town squares. Over these beautiful old cathedrals and what not. Can you imagine? We're on our hotel balcony and it's two a.m. and we're wearing white cotton shirts and pants and drinking wine from wicker casks and all over Barcelona square they're shooting red and white rockets? Doesn't that sound like something else?"

"Yeah."

"In San Fermín it's even crazier, with the parades all night and all."

"Parades."

"Yeah, and the local women will sell you amazing leather handbags for next to nothing. Handmade and everything. You can get as many as you want."

She nods and goes back to playing with her straw. The waiter appears, sets down your drink and asks you if you're ready to order. Abby says she's not hungry.

"La señorita no está--"

"I can understand English fine," the waiter snaps.

"I'm not saying you can't. It's just that we're planning a trip to Spain and I'm trying to brush up on my Spanish. Anyway, we're not ready. *Listo*, right? Ready? *Listo*?"

"Listo. Very good, *Señor*. I'll come back."

You look at Abby.

"Was he being a dick to me?"

"He probably thought you were patronizing him?"

"If there's one thing I hate it's a touchy waiter," you say, and then you take a pull on your drink. It's strong and you have to choke down the first mouthful. When she begins speaking again her voice sounds like it's coming from a distant radio.

"I saw him and then I waited and then said, 'Yes, that's what it is. That's exactly what it is.'"

"Oh."

"It had been a long time and all," she says.

"That's what you said, yeah. That it had been a long time."

"It's never that long."

"Uh huh."

"It *can* be. Sometimes it can be that long. But it wasn't."

"Definitely not, huh?" Right away you want to take that back.

"No."

"Well, that's what we had figured anyway."

You sit there for a minute. The patio is packed and everyone seems happy and normal beneath their striped umbrellas. The sun is shining, people are having lunch. A cheer goes up when the plane passes over for a third time. You wonder what Marty did and look around to see if you can spot him. You envy a stranger having a big day. Abby keeps her eyes fixed on the hills and her silence makes you uneasy. You wish she'd say something, and finally she does.

"I felt like such an idiot in there." She looks right at you now.

"You shouldn't feel like that. It's not--you're not an idiot. It's one of those things is all. Bad luck. You just had some crummy luck is all."

"Crummy luck."

"Crummy luck. You bet. We'll just--we'll just deal with things. All we can do is deal with things and hope we do what's right, OK buddy?"

"OK."

"I mean, what else can we do, right?"

"I felt like a child," she says. You're trying to understand. You're trying to see it through her eyes. You're failing and she sees you failing.

"It's not your fault."

"I was thinking all of these things in there. Things that I had never thought of before. I saw my life. Like, my future. What it might be like and everything. Then it went away. I lost it. It was important and I lost it. Then all I could think of was Laramie."

"Why?"

"Because I grew up there."

"I know you grew up there. I just don't see the--"

"We had so many horses. Dozens and dozens of horses. I haven't ridden a horse in I don't know how long."

"I promise we'll ride horses in Spain."

"They call Montana 'Big Sky Country' but it's not like Laramie. In Laramie you can't even imagine the sky. You feel tiny."

"Like in New York?" She frowns at you.

"Different than in New York. New York's. . . I don't know. In Laramie it's a good small. You feel like God's watching you there."

"He ought to be watching New York. There's a crime committed every eight seconds there." She frowns at you again.

"Anyway, I was thinking about Laramie. Maybe taking a trip there sometime and going to see the ranch. I don't guess the new people would mind me coming by. Whoever they might be."

"I don't guess so." You don't really want to go to Wyoming. Of course she didn't say anything about you going.

"So here we are," she says.

"Yeah. It's crummy. I don't know. The timing and all." You drain your drink and try not to look at

your watch. You feel like a thief somehow.

"I know. I know what you mean."

"I mean, it's just that--"

"I know, Michael."

"I'm just saying."

"I know what you're saying."

"Are you saying different?"

"I was. . . no. It's just that you start thinking about all of these different things and it gets you confused."

"I understand."

"I was crying in there. I don't even know why. I was just sitting there talking to him and then I told him about the horses we used to have and then I started crying."

"Sometimes things just hit you." You're of no help. You don't know why she's talking about Laramie. She hasn't been there since she was seven, and in the pictures you've seen it certainly doesn't look like much of a ranch. You've never seen anything like a horse in any of the pictures, and she's never talked about having horses before. You wonder if you've always been this inept with her.

"What if everything changes? Everything will change."

"Nothing's going to change," you say. "Everything will be just like it's always been."

"What if it isn't?"

"It will be. It'll be just like before."

"I'm afraid it will change, Michael."

"Abby, it won't. It won't. Everything will be alright and we'll take our trip. We'll get you a gazillion horses to ride. You can switch to a new horse every 15 minutes. I'll teach you how to catch trout and then we'll haul them in and share our catch with the villagers. We'll drink wine with them and everyone will rave about the enormous fish the beautiful American girl caught."

"I can't fish."

"You'll be a champ. You'll be the trout queen of Spain. You'll wade into streams on one of your beautiful horses and you'll haul in the fish and the locals will speak of your exploits long after you've gone."

"Michael." She has tears in her eyes.

"It'll be fine. We're always fine."

"It'll be different."

"It won't be different. Don't you worry about any of it, OK? I don't want you worrying about any of it. We'll talk later when I get home. We can eat at my place for a change. I mean, if the building's still standing and all. Hell, we can go home now if you want. Start practicing our siestas. I can call Junior and tell him I got in a whatchamacallit. An accident. You want to do that?"

"No. You go to your meeting."

"We can--"

"Go to your meeting, Michael."

"We'll talk later then."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," she says. Her eyes are past you again and this time they're gone for good, over the hills and far away.

"Why don't we--"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. Please. Promise me this isn't something we're going to talk about anymore. Promise me that."

"I--"

"Promise me."

"OK. I promise," you say.

"That'll be the end of it then."

The alarm goes off at 6:30 a.m. It's Saturday morning and the rain is tumbling down outside. The bed is warm and it's exactly the kind of morning where you could stay under the covers and listen to the rain

deep into the afternoon. Abby rolls over and puts her head on your chest like she always does. You turn off the alarm and get in the shower. Outside the thunder rumbles and the rain on the roof mingles with the sound of the water on tile. You're too tired to think and you wash your hair twice. You towel off and then you pass her in the hallway. She's barefoot and sleepy-eyed and wearing the hunter green terry cloth robe you got her for Christmas two years ago. You notice that when she goes in the bathroom she doesn't turn the radio on like she usually does.

You pull on some jeans that are on the floor and grab a sweatshirt out of the chest of drawers her grandmother gave you and then you go out and sit in the den and do not turn the TV on. It's almost dark outside the window and the rain falls cold and hard. Your eyes are itching from lack of sleep, and by the time Abby comes out you've nodded off on the couch. She shakes your shoulder, and when you look up she's standing over you wearing the powder blue sweat suit she bought when she started taking tennis lessons last fall. Her hair is in a ponytail and she isn't wearing any make-up. She looks very young.

You drive to the appointment on empty streets. Puddles are forming on the roadside and the wipers are moving furiously. You can barely see through the windshield, and you concentrate on the road while she closes her eyes in the passenger seat. A man is on the radio giving advice about mortgages and saving for the future, and you snap it off and continue on in the soaked dim light. You think about turning around and going home. You think about what would happen if you just turned around and got back in bed and listened to the rain and followed things through somehow. You keep driving, though, and before you know it you're wet and standing in an empty reception area. The room is clean and cold and the magazines are laid out on white tables, covered in heavy plastic. You hold hands with her across the arm rests of the black vinyl chairs and again you think about going home. About saying something. But then they call her name and you kiss her on the cheek and then she walks off through the door.

You pick up a nature magazine and fidget around in your seat. The woman behind the sliding glass window tells you that there is paperwork and other things to be done and that it would be a while if you cared to step out. So you take the elevator downstairs and walk out into the parking lot in the downpour. You run to the car and then you drive over to the mall but the parking lot is empty. You don't think of malls as being places that open and close. You want to buy her a present desperately, but nothing is open. The florist shop says "Closed for Vacation--Back on the 7th." You drive back towards the office building. At a light you see a soggy sign for a garage sale, and you follow the road around a bend until you see another sign draped across a mailbox. Through the windshield you can see someone sitting in a carport around some folding tables.

You park and then you walk up the drive. A tired, nervous woman in an oversized wool sweater greets you and offers you a cup of coffee from a pitcher set up on a TV tray stand. Her hair is swept up on top of her head and held down with what appears to be a chopstick. Behind her are two small girls. They eye you shyly and when you try and smile at them they look away. The woman tells you to look around, and you walk around the tables and pick up a variety of objects. The girls, used to your presence now, continue a conversation about the origin of gasoline rainbows. You tell yourself that there are some things that Abby can use for her apartment, and you begin picking up just about everything. You feel the need to purchase gifts for her. In the end you pile three large cardboard boxes into the backseat. Among the used items are a waffle iron with a broken handle; an unopened set of carving knives; a set of salt-n-pepper shakers in the shape of chickens; an old vinyl copy of Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," a painting of Madonna and child in a brushed gold frame, and a birdfeeder with "See Rock City" stenciled across the roof. When you ask the woman what that means she wearily explains that it was the first place she ever went with her ex-husband. She offers no more information than that, other than to say you can have the birdfeeder for free.

You drive back to the office building with the backseat filled with boxes of other people's things. The items look ridiculous in the rearview mirror, and you curse the fact that the mall was closed as you pull into the parking lot. In the office, you sit down and pick up a copy of *Cosmopolitan* and begin taking the relationship test on page 109. After a while the woman slides the window and calls you over and you write her a check. Abby comes out through the door five minutes later, and you ride down the elevator. You ask if she's OK and she nods and you can see that she's carrying a prescription for painkillers. You pull the car around front and get out with an umbrella and walk her to the car. She gets in and you drive to

the drugstore and then to her apartment. You're holding her hand but it's cold and lifeless, and you keep your eyes on the road and go easy over bumps and rough spots. When you show her the boxes from the tag sale she grins weakly but doesn't look inside of them. You tell her it's just a few things you figured she could use around the house.

At home you tuck her into bed and she takes a pill. You pull up a chair and watch her sleep and again you think how young she looks and it makes you remember many things. You remember the time in Highlands when you went camping for the first time, and she was so cold she curled up next to old Ben all night and slept with her head lodged into the crook between his chest and his snout. A night in Bethesda when she fell into the pool at a drunken barbecue and you were dizzy with fear. Afternoons in the park by the orchestra shell and mornings tossing the Arts section back and forth and so many moments and memories that you can barely remember a time when she wasn't around. You climb into bed but her back is to you and she doesn't turn towards you and she doesn't rest her head on your chest. You tell yourself the painkillers are having an effect on her. You lie there and stare at the rain outside the window. The folding shutters over the window are open and all you can see is darkness and rain falling through the trees. In the den the phone rings and you can hear a distant message being left on the answering machine. Something about a surprise party. You watch her for a long time, and when she wakes you are still in the chair by the bed.

"How you doin', buddy?" you say.

"Fine."

"Can I get you something?"

"I'm OK."

"Something to eat? Crackers or soup?"

"I'm fine."

"Ice cream?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I just want to rest. You don't have to stay."

"Of course I'll stay," you say.

"I can take care of myself." She sounds a little groggy but there's something else in her voice that you don't recognize.

"Well I'm right here if you need anything."

"I can take care of myself, Michael."

"I know you can."

"A person should know how to take care of themselves." She turns away and pulls an old stuffed bear towards her chest.

"You want me to leave you be?"

"I just want to rest."

"O.K. Well I'll just be in the other room if you need anything, O.K.?"

"Alright," she mumbles.

"You're sure you're O.K.? Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine. I want to sleep. I can take care of myself."

"I'll be in the other room then."

You go into the den and stand by the window. You can't remember when the rain started and you can't imagine it ever ending. You listen to it and you swear you can hear it falling all over the world. You see your reflection in the streaky window and you begin to understand. You tell yourself it's just the painkillers but you don't believe it. In the reflection you can see the cardboard boxes lying foolishly in the corner behind you. The birdfeeder sticks out sideways. See Rock City. You can see the travel brochures sitting on the coffee table. You sit down and open a brochure. You look at all the colorful pictures. Of the people in the street at the outdoor markets, holding up burgundy shawls. Of a couple dancing in the shadows. An ancient cathedral you'll never see arches skyward in the sun.

## Personal Essay by Angelina McCormick

### Notes on My Mother

My mother lives in the exact middle of the Mississippi Delta. She moved there after marrying my father in 1971 to teach at a local high school and to get her master's degree. She left her mother, her father, two sisters, and two baby brothers and accepted my father's mother, his father and his sister in their place.

She tells me the haunted stories of her childhood, of moments when she saw the anger flash wildly in her father's eyes and trembled in his presence. Whenever she thinks back to those moments, whenever we find ourselves breaking from the exhausting rhythms of life, when we sit quietly together on her patio and watch the water of the creek lap at the low shore and the turtles plop like heavy stones into the murky water, she tells me her stories.

My mother starts each story, each memory, the same way: "My daddy," she whispers to me but not really to me. She looks past me, even when our eyes meet, as if she whispers to the universe at large, or to the ghost of her father that often sits heavily on her right shoulder. "My daddy could get angrier than anybody else I've ever known. My daddy had to have absolute quiet when he slept during the day. We couldn't make a sound or we'd be dead. My daddy had a leather belt. My daddy. My daddy. My daddy." The words echo and roll over and over in my mind.

*My mother tells me a story of her youth, a memory she recalls with a haunted look in her eyes. She tells me she felt dirty that day as she rode home in the back of the car, her mother whispering and cooing soft words at her husband, trying desperately to unclench his jagged jaw and relieve the tension building in the taut muscles of his neck. My mother tells me she was only thirteen, just a kid accused of adult actions and motives she did not yet understand. She tells me that her insides quivered on that long car ride home.*

*She had spent the day, a wonderful day she recalls, with her best friend, Leanne Leopold. They bathed themselves in the tepid water of the country club's private swimming pool. They ate in the main dining room and enjoyed bottles of cold Coca-Cola under the shade of a tree she forgets the name of now. They tried different shades of light pink and coral lipsticks, sauntered around and winked at the boys playing tennis or practicing diving techniques at the pool. That morning, her mother had dropped her off at Leanne's house after two bus rides, a trolley car, and a short walk in the already hot morning sun. It had been a perfect day. Her father was coming to pick her up that afternoon. My mother was excited, she felt like a real family.*

My mother is the middle child of the first wave of children in her family. The middle of three sisters, never the novelty, never the baby, caught stranded between the beginning and the end. Her father was gone when the first daughter was born, gone to fight a distant war with heavy black guns and coarse green fabric that his wife could only experience in the safety of plush red velvet seats in darkened movie theaters. He returned afterward with scars deeply carved into his mind and heart. A sergeant in the war, he returned to become a poker-playing coffee salesman and a father in the in-between moments.

She was the second child to all the others that surrounded their family. She was a blessing, but not the desired boy and nothing really special. But, to her father, she was his first child and even as his fierce anger continued to keep everyone away, she remained closer to him than all the rest.

*My mother catches a silvery glimpse of the chrome of her father's car in the setting sun. She smiles as first her father and then her mother file out of the car and approach the house, her father taking long strides and her mother consuming the distance in small, careful steps. The pair enters the house and starts the routine and expected chatting of parents with nothing in common but their children. My mother loves that her father has pulled up in his shiny new car to pick her up. She loves that he has made time in his cramped and harassed daily routine to be with her. She feels special.*

*They stride out of the house and down the steep front steps of Leanne Leopold's world and cross the narrow green yard toward the car. My mother remembers that she walked with a contented bounce and swayed her hips. That's when the memory falls away.*



She smokes thin, elongated cigarettes, the "lady's cigarette" her brothers jokingly call it as they puff on their Marlboros and Camels. My mother smokes these "lady cigarettes," letting their white smoke curl gracefully around her as she sits with her legs tucked underneath her in the wrought iron chair on the patio. As my mother smokes she flicks the ashes into a miniature ornate cut-glass serving dish that she washes in the dishwasher and stores in the cabinet with the mixed-matched glasses that she has collected over the years.

*She remembers walking in front of her father. She remembers the beginning of her father's quiet, yet menacing, rumble in the background. Her shorts are too short, too tight, her lipstick too pink, too bright. My mother pulls out of the memory to look me in the eyes and laugh. They were Bermuda shorts, she tells me. They were long, she whispers.*

*He reaches the car first, the door closes tightly behind him. She feels her legs give out as she slowly approaches the car where he now sits with the window open, his elbow propped rigidly on the car door. He watches her approach from the corner of his eye, drumming the fingers of his right hand hard into the dash of the car. My grandmother silently squirms in her seat. By the time my mother wraps her hand on the door handle of the car, the blood has drained from her father's face and his eyes flash with his disapproval and anger.*

My mother feeds her cat shrimp, defrosted in warm water from a bag she keeps in the freezer. She never wanted pets; she had pets when she lived with my father. Complained of the pet hair and the upkeep, and never would have introduced this high-strung, high-maintenance male cat into her home if he had not introduced himself first. The cat arrived, to stay, on the day I headed back to my junior year in college after Christmas break. He has not left. They compliment each other's awkwardness in relationships. At first, she called him my cat, allowed him to stay because of my urgings, but now he belongs with her—not to her, but with her. She belongs with him and that is the way it is on warm days as she cuts the grassy incline leading down to the creek bank and he struts casually behind her, stopping occasionally to pounce on a bug.

*My mother remembers the silence. She remembers the way the late afternoon sunlight streamed in the car, making her squint to see the road before her. She pushes herself against the back of the front seat, leaning close to her father, her usual position. She wants to be close to him. She wants to show him how much she loves him with the bright eyes and naive innocence of a child. It is quiet and then the rumble grows deafeningly loud. The booming of his voice makes her ears ache and ring. She shoots away from the front seat and falls against the soft foam of the back. She falls into the bright sun.*

*He calls her a tramp, a slut, a whore-in-training, wagging her tail like that in public for anyone and everyone to see. He screams the entire way home, his knuckles turning ghostly white as he grips the steering wheel. Her mother sandwiches herself between the door and the front dash of the car. My mother sits alone in the back seat, her legs folded beneath her, her eyes open, staring into the bright sun. Shaking her head, she tells me they were just shorts and she was just a girl.*

My mother never sang to me as a child. She has always been insecure with her singing voice. To hear her speak, you would expect her to sing quite beautifully with the slight lilt in her voice, the sound of laughter coloring the edges of her words, the pauses in her speech as she waits for the silent music to build to a deafening crescendo. But, my mother hardly ever sings, only perhaps occasionally in church for Christmas or Easter. Even on these occasions, she mostly hums to herself and listens to me as I sing out loud, confidant in my singing voice.

*He pulls the car into their narrow driveway and slams on the brakes, jerking the car to a stop. Her mother quietly opens the door of the car and retreats inside. My mother follows. Her father remains outside.*

*It isn't until the day gives way to night, that my mother sees her father again. She is in the bathroom, she remembers. The doors flies open and her father stands in the doorway, one of his leather belts dangling loosely from his right hand like a child's jump rope. My mother sits frozen on the toilet. This night there are no limits and he strikes hard at my mother pinned between the bathroom wall and the toilet, her*

*only exit blocked by a towering giant swinging a belt. He tears into her with the belt and there is nothing anyone can do. The rest of the night blurs into the sound of shallow breathing and the burning sensation of salty tears.*

My mother hums and sways and moves to the music inside her head like an old black woman with a bright pink hat in a small church buried deep within the secrets of the south. She moves to the rhythm, feeling it in every fiber of her being, but she never sings out loud. I can tell when she feels the music, when she would sing in a sweet melody if she could. She bites down lightly on her lower lip, closes her eyes, her movements slowly punctuated by the rhythm. Back and forth she moves as if caught in the rapturous hysteria of a sweltering revival tent. She feels what she cannot voice, what she is unable or uncomfortable in voicing through song. She moves. She dances and expresses through movement what she cannot express through melody. I find it oddly funny that thoughts of my mother, on my mother, conjure images of sweltering southern church revivals in makeshift tents with hard wooden benches. My mother, after all, is Roman Catholic. And never has a Roman Catholic sweat inside a makeshift tent in public.

*She inhales deeply on her cigarette. The next day, she remembers being pleased with the visible burgundy welts and the deep purple bruises on her legs. She dresses in shorts and goes in search of her father. She wants to taunt him with his actions. To remind him of his failings. She walks outside and stands on the porch, proudly wearing the badges of his anger. She stands in front of her father as he tries not to look at the bruises he has made or meet her eyes, as he pretends to see only the tools and dismembered oily parts of the car that he struggles with on Sunday afternoons. Her mother, fearful of another confrontation, catches her by the arm and makes her dress in heavy corduroy pants that hot summer day.*

*Memory fades like a bruise from skin, dark and intense in the beginning, diminishing in its color till nothing remains but a light yellowing of the damaged skin. My mother lives with the light yellowing of the damaged skin of her childhood.*

She still lives there in the exact middle of the Mississippi Delta, where she moved at age twenty-six to build a life and family. Although, in her twenty-five years since, the image of the family has split and transformed, cutting my father from her house and life. Location has been the only constant of my mother's adult life. The rest is an unrecognizable image cast in a darkened mirror.

## Personal Essay by L. Warren Rolle

### The Modern Day Slave Trade: My Courtroom Epiphany

*"Men! Look at all these niggas in here. Looks like one of those jungle movies. Now all they need is the monkey."*

And there sure are a lot of brothers in here. Entering this room is like entering the cargo hole of a slave ship. How my mind conjured a relationship between this experience and a phenomenon that I obviously never experienced is beyond me. Yet the feeling is real-- the connection is powerful.

As I enter a tangible stench greets me, a cocktail of unpleasant odors; everything from stale perspiration to bad breath to foot odor to all other forms of body odor. This is the kind of odor that constantly reminds you of its presence, no matter how long you are in the room. Even after the judge enters the courtroom and everyone stands in respect to his honor, inmates included, this stench reperfumes the room with a sobering affect. We sit at the judge's cue, and still the odor lingers like a heavy cloud.

A boat load of inmates await arraignment this Monday-- many of whom had been arrested the preceding weekend though some had spent days or even weeks waiting to be arraigned. The courtroom has two rows of benches separated by a center isle. High ceilings, bright lights, a certain ambiance and stillness in the open space above our heads make the courtroom seem like a large room, but with a discerning glance, it becomes apparent that this room is no larger than a lecture hall with a raised platform reserved for the judge.

Inmates completely fill up one side of this courtroom, at least ten rows deep. On the other side sit the concerned, teary-eyed, humiliated families, friends and supporters. Not quite as many as the inmates themselves, but a considerable number. Without direction, I find my place among these spectators, pressing my hip abnormally tight against the corner of the bench farthest away from the side of the accused. After a few moments of silent pontification, I notice how much we are outnumbered by the blue prison uniforms across the room. It invokes a sudden awareness that many of these inmates must stand alone at this arraignment, without the support of family or friends.

I try to casually hide my feelings and the demoralizing connection with the close friend that I have come to see arraigned. My eyes make contact with his the second I enter, and with almost the same quickness, I look away. I suppose what I feel in this instant is something that I am not willing nor ready to share with him. Consequently, I deny him that telepathic glance into my sorrowful soul.

I sit here. My thigh and shoulder press hard against a corner of the bench that I occupy all by myself. I try in vain to find some emotional warmth amidst the chilling environment of this courtroom. One arm is folded across my abdomen; supporting the other arm with its clenched fist holding up my chin. This rigid posture braces me through most of the arraignment. I allow my eyes to wander, canvassing the section of the court reserved for the accused. I stare at each face, trying hard to examine each expression, sometimes trying to guess what they are charged with or what numbered offense it is. Some of them I stare at a little longer, trying to figure out exactly what thoughts are shuffling through their minds, or if they even know themselves what is going through their minds or if they are as confused as they look.

In the far corner sits a brother with tears in his eyes, but with a composed smile on his face. Are his feelings as fickle as the expressions on his face? On the second row sits a young boyish looking inmate with a smile that is more confident, though I'm not sure it is successful in hiding the underlying shame. In the front row rests a brother who looks like he is recovering from a weekend's worth of physical abuse. He glances over his shoulder at the doors to the courtroom each time they open, staring at the outside world like he has not enjoyed it in ages. As the doors close, he returns to his sorrowful bow with a heavy exhale, perhaps disappointed with the unfamiliarity of the incoming faces. Now the one seated next to him has the most carefree and complacent look of all, as though he's lived through all this before and just knows that he will survive, or perhaps he doesn't care whether he survives or not. He gazes up at the judge's bench with a "been-there-done-that" look on his face and then casually retreats into his own private world.

I find myself counting each one with the rotation of my eyes alone, every other inch of me motionless. Forty seven inmates to be arraigned. In shuffles another one, make that forty eight. And yet another one, make that forty nine. Forty-nine shackled souls. Forty-four men and five women.

As the last two inmates shuffle in escorted by bailiffs, I can hear the chains that connect their ankles, and allow them to make just tiny steps at a time, giving everyone in the court room a real good look at them. These chains will remain throughout the arraignment, so there will be another slow shuffle back up to his honor's bench. Another exhibition of sorts.

The blue prison uniforms that they all wear do little to negate the diversity of the inmates. One gentleman about in his seventies, a boy that looked no more than fifteen, a young lady who could easily pass for retarded just from her appearance alone, even a young lady confined to a wheel chair awaiting the fate that summoned her to the judge's bench. I wrestle with my emotions, vacillating over whether it is funny or disturbing that this wheelchair bound inmate still has chains and cuffs around her ankles. I just don't know if I could produce a smile. Not here--not now. Nevertheless, I keep my posture and my composure and continue to scan the inmates. And of all that has caught my attention, no element is quite as sobering as the ethnic imbalance--the lone two White faces that stick out like shiny ripe pimples on a smooth black face.

My sense of connection with each inmate is surprising even to me, and the connection grows more profound as each inmate approaches the bench. Vicariously, I feel myself standing there facing the judge. I try in vain not to look his honor directly in his face, yet I know full well that at this moment, I owe him all my respect, reverence and attention--all my humanness. At this moment, he is to me as big man is to lil' boy, as master is to slave.

This is a strange feeling, especially since I have never faced a judge before, in any setting. This feeling, though quite strange, is quite familiar. It is a feeling that draws me out of my secure little world of pseudo-freedom--making me realize that I am only as free as these brothers with whom I feel such a profound connection. I find myself answering each charge to the judge. Some charges I apologize for, others I try to explain how it really happened or why I had to do it, and others, still, I categorically deny. I try reasoning with the court, or the prosecutor, or with my accuser, or anyone who will listen to me. Most of all, I try to reason with the judge.

A strange sensation informs us both, and it is understood that he's the man. So I stand there transformed in self-emasculatation. Because this same strange sense is telling me that if I am able to render to him all the reverence that he is seeking, perhaps he will extend a penchant of pity my way. So I assume a slight bow and hold it. Even when a negative response requires me to shake my head from side to side, I do it with a slight bow to his honor, showing him an appreciated level of respect with each response:

"No sir, your honor sir. Yes sir, your honor sir." "Please your honor, I have a family at home, I had to feed them." "Well, your honor, I can pay one hundred now and try to pay the rest when I get a job."

When humility fails, small sediments of frustration escape with my responses: "With all due respect your honor, if I had twelve hundred dollars to pay a fine, I wouldn't be stealing a box of pampers from the corner store."

But this is all in a day's work for the judge. I swear he reads those sentences with the speed and fluidity of someone who has made a career calling a county auction. "Twelve months or twelve hundred dollars fine; two years probation; one hundred and eighty hours of community service; license revoked for a period of three months, six months, one year; you are not allowed to see her, call her, have any kind of contact with her except through the courts; you are not allowed to enter the premises of this establishment for the period of six months, twelve months, eighteen months, effective in twenty four months upon your release; bail is set at three thousand dollars, four thousand dollars, five thousand dollars, bail is denied; you are hereby remanded--next!" And each time he slams the gavel, I again usurp this strange connection between me and a place and time totally foreign to my experiences. With each sound of the gavel, I can hear the slave auctioneer saying "sold." Each time he calls a new case and the court appointed lawyer and prosecutor negotiate my sentence, I again stand atop an action box in some Southern town, clothed in nothing but shame, with my legs shackled and listening to slave owners bid for my dignity and my manhood.

Beyond vicariously living the experiences of all these inmates standing before this judge, in another

corner of my mind I still find the space to ruminate on all that is going on here--though this pensive rumination amounts to no more than rhetorical questions. Is this the typical Monday? Is the judge always this numb and heartless to a brother standing in front of his bench? Do White people commit crimes? I mean are they ever arrested for shoplifting and driving while intoxicated or for spousal abuse? And what about those victimless crimes that so many of these brothers and sisters are being charged with? driving without a valid driver's license, having an open container of alcohol in a city park, or resisting arrest. Is it even prudent to accept the picture of misconception that is being painted in this courtroom? Should I surmise that this entire precinct can only come across two White guys breaking the law in this predominantly White city, or that 96% of all the crimes presented to this judge on this Monday are committed by Blacks.

I believe it was Fred Sanford who made that comment about the jungle movie and all those niggas. He would certainly say the same thing if he walked into this courtroom. And though I have seen many jungle movies and can now see the similarities that Fred Sanford draws, my metaphor would have to be considerably more profound. You see, these brothers aren't putting on a show, neither is the judge nor the prosecutors. This is real life. Those cuffs and shackles around their wrists and ankles are as real as the painful expressions half hidden beneath their fake smiles and teary eyes.

No! I don't see a jungle movie at all. Strangely, I am returned to a slave ship where I have never been. I conjured a strange and frightening connection between a Black mass locked up in the bowels of a slave ship and a Black mass locked up in a dark, odor filled holding cell at a downtown Law Enforcement Center. A profoundly frightening connection between being allowed to feel the fresh ocean air of the Atlantic after being locked in a dark, cargo hole for many days, and being allowed to sit in this immaculate, air conditioned courtroom after being locked away in a confined holding cell all weekend. I can easily imagine that the atmosphere, the collective sense of shame and demoralization, the stench of the holding cell draws a striking parallel to that in the hole of a slave ship. These brothers sitting here in this courtroom, shackled, uniformly attired, and neatly stacked into these church-like pews are little different from those slaves that were shackled and stacked like sardines crossing the middle passage.

The dried, wave-washed wood of my imagination has been replaced by polished mahogany and carpeted floors. Rather than laying their naked flesh against cold, vomit-filmed boards, they now sit uniformly clothed on cushioned benches. The nauseating motion of an angry ocean is replaced by the stillness of solid ground. Still, emotionally, this scene is no less emasculating. Inasmuch as the chains and cuffs remain snugly around the inmates' waists, wrists, and ankles, so remains the yoke of enslavement around their souls.

As these inmates stand in front of his honor's bench, their fate is being determined by this modern day ship captain. How can we differentiate between their plight--the fact that slaves were the victims of a well orchestrated and lucrative slave trade while these brothers are the victims of an even more well-quilted and indelible, still lucrative plot that further darkens the social tribulation of Black men?

Considering the plight of today's Black men and the role that the judicial system plays in it, I sadly surmise that we are really not far removed from the slave trade. The parallel is not far fetched. Consider first the privatization of prisons, an enterprise that generates more than 40 billion dollars annually. This is big business. The investment portfolio includes reputable companies such as Prudential Insurance Companies of America, Goldman Sachs and Company, Smith Barney Shearson, Inc., and Merrill Lynch & Company, Inc. These companies recognize the investment potential- the fact that there are millions of mouths to feed three squares per day, millions of backs to clothe, clothes to clean, medicine to provide, guards on duty 24 hours per day, electrical bills to pay, phone bills and water bills. This is bigger than the hotel industry. Therefore if these prisons are filled a handsome profit is generated.

Because full occupancy makes the prison system a lucrative business investment, we see a barrage of social and judicial policies designed to keep these prisons filled. And due to a well established legacy of misconception about Blacks in this country, particularly young Black men, they become easy prey. Proponents of slavery employed the fallacious argument that Blacks were less civilized, less intelligent, and more violent than other ethnicities in order to keep the slave ships filled and to perpetuate the evil institution of slavery. Centuries later, that same fallacious thought is being employed to keep the prisons filled with young Black men. Few marvel about the ethnic disparity in this courtroom, the fact that in this sea of accused, more that 90% are Black men, though Black men make up fewer than 7% of the population. Few

are astonished at the fact that Blacks make up approximately half of the prison population in the United states, yet Blacks make up far below 15% of the population as a whole. Few are startled by the fact, or even care enough to take notice, that while the prison population among non-Blacks in the US has increased 90% in the last decade, it has increased 130% among Blacks.

In our complacency, many of us ignore those social, legal, and legislative antics that are designed to keep Blacks incarcerated in larger numbers and for longer periods, for example the three strikes laws, the heavier sentences for crack cocaine as opposed to powdered cocaine, the introduction and steady supply of cocaine in Black communities, the well documented tendency for officers to stop and search Black motorists twice as often as they do non-Blacks. For many of us, our outrage is softened by the normalcy and perpetual nature of it all, both then and now. The voices are all so strangely similar. "It's okay to hold these people as slaves. Just look at where they come from. They are barbaric and uncivilized and violent, inferior among races: It's okay to keep these Black men locked up. Just watch the evening news. They are more violent and more unlawful and more dangerous than other races."

After about five hours waiting and an enormous amount of paperwork, we leave the courtroom. The sweet taste of the fresh air beyond these courtroom walls is a testament to the bitterness of the passing ordeal, to us both. There is an uncomfortable silence accompanying us as we walk, since neither of us is sure of what to say, or if there is anything to be said. We are both mortified, he by the emasculating ordeal he faced over the last twenty-four hours, and me by the experience of watching it all and vicariously living through it. I am even more mortified by watching tears cascade from the eyes of a grown man. As though detached from reality as we walk, I put my arm around him and pull him closer to me, giving sound to the sorrow that I am trying hard to swallow. "You'll be a'right. We all know you're innocent."

Guilt or innocence, though, is not the question. And I cannot fool myself by thinking for one moment that I am any less a victim than he is. As I fight to swallow my own tears, I am cognizant that we both occupy an identical niche; we are both suffering an identical quandary. He is as innocent as I am. I am as much a victim as he is. His fault was that he wandered too near the shore and was captured. I could easily be in the next boat.

Yeah Fred, there sure are a whole lot of brothers in here. But they aren't making any jungle movies. This here, my brother, is the modern day slave trade.

## Personal Essay by Jill Russell

### Dysfunctional Family of God

You cannot drive through my hometown without being bombarded by yellow and red signs bearing Bible verses. The people of my town stick with the Gospels, verses of salvation and repentance, sometimes a little Revelation to light fires under the asses of the spiritually lazy passers through. We are strictly a New Testament kind of place. The unofficial credo of these roadside warriors seems to be the original statement: *Jesus is coming soon. Are you prepared?* A scientifically-minded friend says, *What the hell does that mean? Soon could be ten million years from now if you're looking at the whole scheme of things.* A sarcastic friend says that the signs make Jesus sound like a hurricane. For that insight, the signmakers would probably thank her for her observation and look upon it as a divinely inspired metaphor.

Recently, in the interest of a little healthy competition, a neighboring community began manufacturing their own signs in white and green. Their message is much the same, but at least the world now knows that the people of Cane Creek are every bit as holy as their neighbors up the road in Warrior.

The Church of God on Main Street changes its sign messages weekly. They keep them short but to the point. *Don't curse the darkness if you're too lazy to light a candle. Call on God; you'll never get a busy signal.* Fundraising season brings *Car wash today, soul wash tomorrow.* During an August heat wave, the sign reads, *Think this is hot? It's a lot hotter in hell.*

I was saved when I was eight years old. I had been considering the walk down the aisle for quite some time, and for several Sundays before had almost conquered the first step from my pew into the watchful gaze of the preacher and congregation. I felt behind. Chris Cochran had already been saved, along with Brooke Bennett, and Heather Baker, though it seemed Heather had been saved the day she learned to walk. And there I was, my salvation halted by the distance from the pew to the pulpit. The length down the aisle of Warrior First Baptist when I was eight was near unmanageable, stretching into a mile of flat blue carpet. I imagined the view from the pulpit as a sea of people waiting to squash me like a tremulous insect.

You were supposed to wait until you felt God. So I had waited, to make sure that the strange sensation actually was him. God felt a lot like being nervous, but after all, he was supposed to be in my heart. He was kind of in my stomach too, but he had calmed down by the time I made it, shaking and self-conscious, down to where Brother David stood with his arms outstretched. The congregation sang through all the verses of "Just As I Am" as he huddled down to me. I wanted to be saved, I told him. I wanted to accept the Lord as my personal savior. When the music stopped, he turned me around to face the congregation. *Little Jill Russell has felt the Lord in her heart this morning, he announced. She has come forward to be saved, and will be baptized the next Baptism Sunday. We welcome her into our family.* My smile stretched my face out of shape, and I could feel my cheeks burning. My family smiled at me from their spot in the pews. Brother David's hand rested on my shoulder. The congregation joined hands, and we sang "The Family of God:" *I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God. Washed in the spirit, cleansed by his blood. Join hands with Jesus as we travel this far. For I'm part of the family, the family of God.*

Like most families, we didn't become dysfunctional overnight. In the beginning I loved it all, took nothing for granted, prayed on a regular and even obsessive basis. God and I were on good terms, me trying to understand where he was coming from, and I hoped, vice versa. And somewhere, it fell apart. This strange intimacy was somewhat embarrassing all of a sudden, for a reason I couldn't quite put my finger on.

They say that Catholics are always Catholics, and I have no trouble believing it, though I'd wager to say that Catholics aren't the only ones. It gets in you somehow. Personally, I can't shake the songs; if I was Catholic, I'd have Hail Marys dancing through my brain all day. But I'm not, so it's "Just As I Am,"

"What A Friend I Have in Jesus," "Softly and Tenderly," even a little "Holy, Holy, Holy." For five gold stars I could probably tell you the books of the New Testament.

It's somewhat misleading for me to call the events leading to my absence of faith a rebellion. It has been more of an avoidance than anything else, dragged on so long I have to force myself to remember what it is I am avoiding. Now, I can think about my religion only in terms of what I have kept and what I have lost, what has stamped itself indelibly in me and what I have managed to shed. It was not just something I believed in; I was possessed by it, and would have to earn my right to be let go.

For a while as a child I thought everyone was going to hell. I certainly was. There was no doubt of that. My mother was not, and Heather was not. My grandparents would be spared. Out of the rest of the world, I was hard pressed to name a handful who would escape those terrible fires. Billy Graham, Sandi Patti, select members of Stryper, a few other superstars of the Christian world. Everyone else, fire and brimstone unto eternity.

This was around the same time that I became convinced that if I did not sleep on my back staring straight up with my arms at my sides, then Satan would come during the night and take me down to hell. The threat of being taken to hell was an active part of my religious convictions, and everyone knew Satan didn't just show up in broad daylight. My friends were scared of monsters, Freddie Krueger, E.T. I was scared of Satan.

Fear lay behind and within every belief I held, and there was not one person whose soul's future I did not question and worry for. The summer I was nine, one of the guest preachers at the church camp I attended closed his sermon with a story about a group of teenagers on a road trip to Florida. On the way, their car collided with an eighteen-wheeler. They were all killed. Policemen walked the sides of the interstate collecting body parts and putting them into bags. Part of a boy's face was in the grate of the truck, and the preacher described his facial expression in detail. They had to put body parts in the caskets and bury them that way, he told us.

The point of his story, I suppose, was that the boys had not been saved, and instead of worshipping God and Jesus Christ, had been on their way to enjoy the pleasures of the world in Florida. They were now in hell. If we did not commit our lives to the Lord right then, we would suffer the same fate as those teenaged boys. We'd better get right with God, in case an eighteen-wheeler was waiting outside to run us down.

After the service, an unusually large number of children came forward. Outside, a little boy stood clutching his Bible and sobbing in fear. I did not tell anyone about that service. Even now, I can barely think about that sunburned, middle-aged preacher without my blood going hot with anger. He reminds me of what I am avoiding. He was one I would remember, an artifact I would pull out later to say I have kept this, even though I would rather have shed it along the way. This is what I could not find a way to lose.

On the front lawn of Warrior First Baptist, the same year I was saved, I beat up Michael Morton and sent him crying to his mother. He had called me, among other things, a stupid four-eyed wench. I had warned him, but being the cocky boy he was, he continued to taunt me, until he dared me to meet him in front of the church after the evening service. Heather and Brooke wrote notes questioning my seriousness. They stared at me in awe and pity. Was I really going to fight him? Surely I knew I would be humiliated for everyone to see. He was despicable even then, as I hear he still is today, with nostrils near big enough to fit crabapples in and a mean fleshy mouth. On the lawn, my adrenalin raced as I repeated his words to myself: *stupid wench, stupid four-eyed wench.* Michael charged me, and I surprised myself by grabbing his shirt and swinging him in circles. The fabric ripped, and he went hurtling into the ground. He began wailing as soon as he hit the grass. I was instantly afraid of what my mother would say when she discovered what I had done. She made me apologize, but even then I could feel her obligation to Michael's mother, who, after all, bore the shame of a son who was sobbing because a smaller girl had thrown him to the ground. Later, when I told my mother why I had fought him, she smiled. At home, she kept up the pretense of anger, but I did not get a whipping, which I would have gotten had I

actually done something wrong.

I haven't had many moments of pure triumph in my life. But those few seconds when Michael was flying through the air, before he touched down and the realization of my own actions set in, that was one of them. Nowhere in my Sunday School lessons was I told to beat up people who hurt or insulted me. But turning the other cheek was not in the cards that day. Saving myself, in the only way my eight year old brain could figure it, was.

That would not have been Heather's way, even at eight years old. Heather would have defeated Michael with serenity. She was more comfortable in worship than anyone I knew. Lying in the bed at my house, I would question her, trying to find the explanations no one else would give me. *If a woman dies while she's pregnant and the baby dies too and the woman isn't saved, does the baby go to hell or will God let the baby go to heaven?* These questions went on for a while--the details of death and heaven and the specifications of sin. Heather was at least young enough to take things like this seriously; our Sunday School teachers and even the preacher fought against rolling their eyes when these questions made an appearance. Our discussions always ended the same way. *How could she tell me that all these other people were wrong, people who had believed what they believed their entire lives, why would they go to hell and not us?* Heather never grew frustrated with me, or tired of explaining to me the way that she felt it must be, though she could never answer to my satisfaction. Her vision was of a fair God; mine, even then, was an ultimately unfair one.

Heather's mom was sick. The doctors had told her she would be dead by 35. Now, fifteen years past her thirty-fifth birthday, she is still alive. I always thought that Heather's mother's illness had something to do with Heather's clean faith. Every day she lived was a miracle; every day was proof of God. I only needed something to make me believe.

For years I expected something to change, for Heather to submit to the forces of doubt that had overtaken me, or for me to believe. I waited for a revelation, anything that would remove the veil clouding God and allow me to see what was before me and know, once and for all, what I thought of it. Neither happened. Her belief remained and mine never appeared, or not in the way that I imagined it should. I wanted to believe in the reasons, in the why's and how's. The question was never, not then at least, whether God existed. I knew he was there; I just didn't know if he was very nice.

Our neighbor, Bryan Fuller, when he was ten, was discovered to have a tumor the size of a grapefruit on his liver. Doctors located the tumor on x-rays and mashed in his belly with their little probing fingertips. They planned to operate immediately. The town leapt behind the search for a miracle; prayer meetings were held at the church, and the school told us to pray that he might have a safe recovery. We all prayed for the tumor to be benign, for little Bryan to feel the Lord's saving powers.

When doctors cut into him that day, the tumor was gone. There was no sight of it anywhere, nothing that could have been mistaken for it on the x-rays. His little body was clean, his liver pink and healthy. The Lord had given us a miracle. This wasn't snake handling; we didn't often declare miracles. But one could be recognized when set down in plain sight. If we did not recognize it, that would be to deny God's power, and that would be sin. I was glad that Bryan Fuller would not die, but I could not see what God had to do with that. The church, and the town, could; the lord had heard our prayers, and he had answered.

Maybe because it seemed he never answered me, I had difficulty with this assumption. People were always talking about asking the Lord what to do, and him telling them. *I went to the Lord with it*, they would say, or *I took it to the Lord, and I said, Lord, just show me what you want me to do*. The Lord never showed me what to do. It began to seem that everyone had an ongoing dialogue with God, and I just hadn't figured out how to get in touch with him. God and I, it would turn out, just didn't know how to talk to each other, and would decide it was best if we didn't talk at all.

Most people do turn away from the salvation of their childhoods; a lot of them go back. My problem now becomes whether I have a new salvation to turn toward, or whether I want one. I don't know how to believe in nothing. I believe in something. What I want is to believe in something without being afraid

of it. I still pray out of desperation, in moments of pure fear. I catch myself, *please God, please God*, like everyone else I suppose, in an airplane or in the car during a bad storm, when someone is sick or hurt, the moments when I can't do anything. I was never one to ask God to help me pass a test, or for a boy to talk to me. But I can't ask God to make me believe. I cannot ask God to make me like Heather, my childhood friend who did not have to question.

Sometimes you can only see something after you get as far away from it as you possibly can. And then, if you do come back, you are both different, and sometimes, it works. I've almost gone far enough to see what I left. I can almost put it back together again. Until then, I have the songs to keep me company. *Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling oh sinner, come home.*

## One-Act Play by Jacqueline Pardue

### Homecoming

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

**BETTY (Bets) STRINGER:** Homemaker, mother, sister of Samantha Atkinson. She is in her early to mid-thirties. She dresses comfortably. Betty is attempting to keep the peace during the stress filled Christmas holiday season.

**SAMANTHA (Sam) ATKINSON:** Lawyer, single, sister of Betty Stringer. Early to mid-thirties. She dresses in business attire and in khakis for social occasions. Samantha is tense and restless.

**SCENE:** Front porch of Betty's house.

**TIME:** Christmas Eve and early morning

**SETTING:** The wooden porch of a middle class home with no distinctive details. There is a rocking chair and a few outdoor toddler's toys neatly stacked in the corner. The door leading from the porch into the house is closed.

**AT RISE:** It's Christmas eve, after dark. The sounds of a Christmas party streams from the house. Samantha (Sam) is sitting on the porch, legs dangling over the edge, smoking in low light. Sam smokes for the duration of the play.

**BETTY (from inside):** It's almost time for presents.

*(BETTY enters from door behind SAMANTHA, pulling her sweater tight around her.)*

**BETTY:** Please come in. . .at least put on something warm.

**SAMANTHA:** I added my name to your and Ned's gift for Aunt Lisa's friend.

**BETTY:** Don't worry. You can buy a case of Girl Scout cookies from Nora next spring.

*(She pauses.)*

It was a buy one get one free sale at Liz Claiborne's so I hope they don't mind matching.

**SAMANTHA:** You're always right.

**BETTY (uneasy):** Thanks. You're not drenched

in Christmas regalia.

*(SAM begins unwrapping a previously unnoticed bandage on her wrist. BETTY attempts to joke.)*

Better hope Santa's color blind or else he'll leave you a lump of coal.

**SAMANTHA (holding up red healing scars and several old scars on slashed wrists):** 'Tis the season.

*(BETTY adverts eyes.)*

**BETTY ( coldly):** You're not wearing a coat. You should come in.

*(She speaks enticingly.)*

We are putting the kids to bed and unleashing the egg nog.

*(She begins to exit.)*

We're not going to wait.

*(She calls into house.)*

Ned, please get Nora to brush her teeth.

**SAMANTHA:** Do I need to send a check for him?

**BETTY:** What?

**SAMANTHA:** For the home, should I write a check to you or to the--

**BETTY (incredulous):** Check?

*(She speaks louder.)*

Money! That's your entire concern for Dad?

*(She realizes her volume and lowers her voice, strained.)*

How long were you here? What time did you spend with him? When are you returning? Two days, one afternoon, no time soon. You didn't even bother to sit and have Christmas dinner with him. What's wrong? It was free. You've never rejected something you didn't earn. You couldn't stand the feeding. His feeding. Someone has to feed him. There are no more cookout food fights on the Fourth of July or birthday parties with--

*(BETTY pauses to calm herself)*

He can't hold a fork or spoon. You couldn't stand to see him being fed or, God forbid, have to feed him yourself like I have been doing for three years. Your care for Dad extends to six color postcards a year 'Wish you were here!' on the front and 'Love Ya!' scribbled on the back.

They are not even signed. Postage necessary, no stamp, please pick up your mail at counter A. How. . .how are you even connected to this family, and blood doesn't count. Stepfamilies' love supercedes any bullshit of bloodlines. Blood is just the result of paper cuts or bad sex. **SAMANTHA:** But we are not a stepfamily- **BETTY:** At least they have the power of choice not the luck of biochemistry.

*(She pauses.)*

Dad used to say that you'd be back in two years, then three, then four, and now he doesn't remember who you are half the time so it doesn't really matter. When he does remember you-- **SAMANTHA (whispering):** Dad? **BETTY:** --it's as a kid, or to remind me to buy Fruit Loops because that's all you'll eat for breakfast.

**SAMANTHA:** Dad thought I was going to fail.

**BETTY:** Dad doesn't think anything much anymore.

**SAMANTHA:** But he thought I'd be home, humbled, ready to do what?

**BETTY:** Teach. Or manage a business. With Mike at the furniture outlet. It doesn't matter. You'd be back in your yellow room, sleeping in your chestnut sleigh bed, and slurping Fruit Loops for breakfast.

**SAMANTHA (bewildered):** I don't eat Fruit Loops anymore.

*(She pauses.)*

So I'm the selfish bitch.

*(She turns to look at BETTY.)*

Did you think I'd--

*(BETTY moves to leave.)*

Yelling on the run, huh? So you can be ready for the annual guilt service?

*(BETTY stops. Her shoulders sag.)*

The primary reason Christmas is the number one service attended--

**BETTY (back to audience):** Holiday spirit.

*(BETTY turns and SAM shakes her head "no.")*

Renewal?

**SAMANTHA:** Un, unh. Rite of passage. A collective pre-penitence for tomorrow's excesses. Like collecting jellybeans before Halloween

*(She whispers.)*

Just in case.

**BETTY (sighing, asking out of obligation):** Are you going or not?

*(SAM takes bills from her pocket and hands to BETTY. BETTY looks confused.)*

**SAMANTHA:** For the offering. When Mom died I stole from the collection plate. Cosmic child support. God has Mom so why shouldn't He compensate? It's the cornerstone of our thriving legal community--fair remuneration, or the fiscal revenge syndrome. I burned hundreds of dollars in checks. However, this reparation didn't produce the appropriate psychological antidote.

*(She pauses, motions to money.)*

Back payments.

*(BETTY pockets money. SAMANTHA speaks softly.)*

Thanks.

**BETTY:** You should be there.

*(She pauses, waiting for a response.)*

I'll let Nora donate it. She likes filling out the donation envelopes.

*(“Grandma got run over by a reindeer” sounds from inside. BETTY turns back to the door.)*

**SAMANTHA (loudly):** Why does Grandma being killed strengthen their belief in Santa Claus? He doesn't revive her or even hang her with the stockings Christmas Eve.

**BETTY:** It's a seasonal carol.

**SAMANTHA:** No, it's not. It says, you murdered her so I grant you legitimacy. It's a gangland mantra.

**BETTY:** That's ridiculous. It's a children's tune about returning belief to those who lose direction during the year.

**SAMANTHA:** If that is a kid's song then read them Mario fucking Puzo, and it's not about the resurgence of some lost hope or youth or innocence. That's a bullshit reading to comfort censors. A woman was hit by a reindeer which may not have even been flying. Therefore, Grandma's death only confirms the existence of reindeer and not of some mysterious white man who tosses gifts down the chimney of the good and coal to the bad who are barely making rent much less giving away meaningless shit. Purchase the services of a woman earning a buck by her body, get arrested. Hallmark peddles some fat white guy, we hoist plastic trees.

**BETTY:** Fine. We'll delete Grandma from all Christmas albums, strike her chords from radio waves, and empty shopping mall music of all homicidal lyrics. Will you come in now?

*(There is no response from SAMANTHA. BETTY begins to leave again. BETTY calls into house)*

Nora, honey, get Randy off the coffee table. Ned, please.

*(She points to offstage kids.)*

To bed.

**SAMANTHA:** Let's hope Santa delivers Prozac.

**BETTY:** Didn't you give pills up for Lent?

**SAMANTHA:** For the kids. Birth is the difficult part, huh?

*(BETTY gives Sam an inquiring look.)*

3D Animaniacs on antidepressants.

*(BETTY sits next to SAMANTHA.)*

**BETTY:** Anyone special cause you to think about children.

**SAMANTHA:** Yeah, Burt here. Say hi Burt.

*(She points to empty air next to her.)*

Burt's great. Just promoted over the Cookie Monster and the Count promises a holiday bonus real soon. His sperm count's a little low, but Ernie will share the--

**BETTY:** Fine. You were always like Mom.

**SAMANTHA:** Ammunition's a little low tonight. I've heard that one. No sad eyes or scornful looks? But I did hear you clicking your tongue as my car pulled up. Receive comforting sympathy from the neighbors at the party tonight?

*(Her accent changes.)*

Everyone has a cross to bear, Betty. Some of them are just heavier than others.

*(BETTY stands up.)*

**BETTY:** I'm not playing tonight. It's cold and you're psychotic and it's Christmas goddamnit and I have a dozen guests who want to be here.

*(BETTY pauses and moves to leave.)*

How did we--? Why--?

**SAMANTHA:** You invited me.

**BETTY:** You invited yourself.

*(BETTY enters house.)*

**SAMANTHA** *(calling to BETTY):* Why in-fucking-deed! Be proud. You raised me.

*(SAMANTHA pulls her knees to her chin and embraces them. She answers herself.)*

Because there were dates and cars and R-rated movies. Because the room shrunk. Because the school bus dropped us at the wrong stop and we never made it home.

*(Lights dim. SAMANTHA props herself against the porch's railing, eyes closed, and*

*pulls a previously hidden jacket over her.*

*Overhead light on porch flicks on and*

*BETTY enters, tipsy from the egg nog.)*

**BETTY** *(lightly kicking Sam):* Get up, shoe fly, it's time for school.

**SAMANTHA** *(eyes closed):* I'm sick. Tell the teacher to go fuck herself.

**BETTY:** Come inside to bed.

**SAMANTHA:** What? And dirty your good sheets?

**BETTY:** I have plastic liners. Besides, it is better than the headline of the Christmas day paper reading: Samantha Atkinson froze to death on sister's porch after a meaningless altercation.

*(She pauses.)*

Which her sister won. That would be unpleasant for the children, not to mention embarrassing for Ned.

**SAMANTHA:** And you.

**BETTY:** Na. I'm use to you. Get your butt off my freshly bleached porch and come to bed.

**SAMANTHA:** Get my what?

**BETTY:** Your butt.

**SAMANTHA:** My what?

**BETTY:** Your butt.

**SAMANTHA:** My--

**BETTY:** Your lazy brain dead ass off my porch.

**SAMANTHA:** The egg nog's finally done you some good. There's something freeing about Christmas Eve cusssss--

*(She stands as if to go inside)*

Fuck.

*(She can't stand. Legs are asleep. Rubs legs.)*

Give me a second.

**BETTY:** Remember when we went out Christmas Eve and cut down a tree too tall for the car. Mom insisted that if we cut the tree in half we could reassemble it at home like our old plastic ones. Uncle Eric spent all night bolting the tree together when we got home. It was colder then, I think.

**SAMANTHA:** But the coldest was Mom's religion through pinecone angels when we were twelve.

**BETTY:** No, the Frankenstein tree escapade massacred my circulation.

**SAMANTHA:** Salvation through crafts. Who would have guessed? Remember adding glitter and cardboard. They were the most pitiful creatures. Looked like birds of prey trying to escape.

**BETTY:** Only because we left them on window

ledges. Otherwise they would have looked like regular birds ready to attack.

**SAMANTHA:** Was it cold when you found her?

**BETTY:** This isn't the Christmas story I was planning on telling tonight.

**SAMANTHA:** This wasn't the life I was planning. Maybe I'll be reincarnated as a man.

**SAMANTHA** and **BETTY:** Nah.

**BETTY** *(concerned but also diversion from previous subject):* I thought you were happy at the firm.

**SAMANTHA:** They say I'm a natural to specialize in divorce law. My lack of compassion is phenomenally matched to my career choice. Those are the words Stan used, "phenomenally matched." Comforting, isn't it?

**BETTY:** You don't lack compassion, you're just very practical. Extremely practical. On the furthest end of the practicality spectrum. Besides, Stan's your boss. What does he know?

*(SAM gives BETTY a sly look.)*

**BETTY:** What does he know?

**SAMANTHA:** Nothing beyond a very superficial physically needy unfortunately co-dependent level.

*(She pauses.)*

He's not Ned. He's barely above the Playgirl calendar and my index finger. Some nights, he's below the Playgirl calendar.

*(BETTY sits down next to SAMANTHA.)*

**BETTY** *(playfully):* One request. If you become the crazy cat lady would you not move here because I really think that once Mrs. Newman dies I could win Homeroom Mother of the Year and I think you'll really throw my odds. Leg still asleep?

**SAMANTHA:** It's improving.

*(She pulls blanket around her shoulders, pauses.)*

Was it this fucking cold when you found her?

**BETTY:** She was not thinking clearly at the time.

**SAMANTHA:** Her mind was clear enough to count pills and lay on the bed in the clothes she wanted to be buried in. She didn't leave a note but she was goddamned sure enough to accessorize. I hear she ran out of coral lipstick and that's why she wasn't wearing any at the funeral. She was always right or nobody was, huh?

**BETTY** *(delicately):* Sam--

**SAMANTHA:** Isn't it true? I can't believe she

didn't just run out to Walgreen's and buy more lipstick.

*(Her accent changes, obviously imitating their Mother.)*

"Perfection is an insatiable experience, ladies."

**BETTY** *(defensive):* You were away pumping your ego with what I am sure was a superb closing argument.

*(She pauses, speaks softer.)*

You shouldn't talk about her, Sam. While you are brilliant, you are not omniscient.

*(She speaks in a tone of admission.)*

I found her and cleaned her and dressed her because I knew she wouldn't want to be found with her head in the toilet, naked, trying to vomit the pills she swallowed. But she couldn't. And nobody was here. You didn't find her Sam.

**SAMANTHA:** She was in the bathroom?

*(BETTY nods. Tears come, on and off, from both sisters throughout the next section.)*

**SAMANTHA** *(whispering):* In the goddamned bathroom. Everything was always kept so neat. Just so. She said you could eat grits...

**BETTY** and **SAMANTHA:** Off her floor.

**SAMANTHA:** In my daydreams I saw her spooning grits on the floor when we were at school just to test it. At the funeral. . . ?

*(SAMANTHA stands with her back to BETTY.)*

There was a case with an old man who kept his wife after she died in their bed one night. He clothed her each day and left the TV turned to her favorite stations. He set two places for dinner, brought her flowers. The neighbors called the Police due to the stench which he claimed never to notice. During questioning I asked him why he did it and he replied that he wasn't ready to let her go. After he was released he asked to have her body returned to their home. Her eyes were open and he said that he knew what she needed because of them. She didn't have to speak, or even breath.

*(She pauses.)*

Were her eyes closed in the bathroom?

**BETTY** *(comforting):* Mom would have loved her funeral.

**SAMANTHA:** One funeral for the dead and another for the living.

**BETTY:** It was described in her will as "a small bit of sadness and a big party so everyone can get drunk and forget why they were sad." We held up the funeral four days because she

wanted a warm funeral. She didn't want to be buried in the cold.

**SAMANTHA:** The winter we were fourteen she wouldn't leave the house. And we learned to grocery shop.

**BETTY** (*imitating mother*): Two types of pastas do not a sauce make.

**SAMANTHA:** Accidentally bought canned vegetables. She made us return them because they wouldn't cook right. You know I missed Mom, too. I wasn't home but...

(*BETTY touches SAMANTHA's wrist.*)

**BETTY:** I know. It's not me, honey, and it never was you.

(*She pauses.*)

It was cold the day she died.

**SAMANTHA:** Dad left for the home--

**BETTY:** A year and a half later. But we visit him and he's getting to know his grandchildren in some limited capacity.

(*They are linked, arm in arm, walking through the door with their backs to the audience.*)

**BETTY:** The most important question to ask at Christmas--

**SAMANTHA:** What if the Christians were just really impatient?

**BETTY** (*pausing and whispering*): Never mind. (*BETTY kisses SAMANTHA on the cheek.*)

I love you.

**SAMANTHA** (*whispering*): I love you too.

(*They enter the house.*)

Hey Ned! Have some egg nog for me?

(*Lights begin to fade.*)

**BETTY:** Honey, assemble the bicycle before drinking another glass.

(*Lights fade.*)

THE END

## One-Act Play by Jill Russell

### The One She's Been Saving

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

**RHODIE:** A young woman in her early twenties.

**BARBARA:** Rhodie's mother, in her late fifties.

**POP:** Rhodie's maternal grandfather. In his early eighties, in the early stages of dementia.

**SUE:** Rhodie's older sister, in her late thirties.

**SCENE:** A worn out living room in a small Alabama town.

**TIME:** The present.

#### SCENE ONE.

**SETTING:** A worn out living room in a small town in Alabama. The room is furnished with a couch and an old loveseat. On a coffee table in front of the couch are a couple of newspapers, a few coin collecting books, and some medicine bottles. A doorway stage right leads to bedrooms, and a doorway stage left leads to the kitchen. The front door is in the living room, behind the couch and loveseat. There are a few knick-knacks (candy dish, photographs, an Afghan over the loveseat, etc.) in the room, but it is sparsely decorated overall. The house seems lonely.

**AT RISE:** BARBARA is sitting in the living room alone, hunched over a crossword puzzle. She is in her late fifties, her hair gone half gray and without a specific style. She is repeating the crossword clues to herself quietly.

**BARBARA:** Thirty-six down. Five letters for voice disapproval. Five letters. Scold? No, that doesn't work.

(*RHODIE comes in quietly. She has obviously just gotten out of bed, and is wearing some old sweatpants and a t-shirt. She passes behind BARBARA, who is still absorbed in her crossword puzzle, and walks into the kitchen.*)

**BARBARA:** Four letters for pointless prattling. Talk? Oh, blab. Blab, yeah, that'll work.

(*RHODIE walks back into the room.*)

**BARBARA:** Now, five letters, voice disapproval.

**RHODIE:** Chide.

**BARBARA:** Lord, girl, you scared me half to death! You ought not wander around like that, not even let me know you're there.

(*She is smiling now.*)

What'd you say it was?

**RHODIE:** Chide, I bet.

(*Barbara writes the answer down.*)

**BARBARA:** Yeah, I guess so. That'll fit with cozy. What time did you get in last night?

**RHODIE:** Late.

**BARBARA:** Too late to carry your bags all the way in, I see. Who's King Arthur's sister? Four letters.

**RHODIE:** Anne, I think. I'll carry them back in a few minutes. Where's Pop?

**BARBARA:** Taking a nap. He didn't sleep too good again. I heard him wandering around half the night.

**RHODIE:** How is he?

**BARBARA:** Oh, fine. He had a doctor's appointment Tuesday.

**RHODIE:** What'd they say? Did you ask about him not sleeping? What about those pills that were making him sick?

**BARBARA:** They said the same stuff, mostly.

**RHODIE:** Well, did you take the questions we wrote down?

**BARBARA:** Yes, Rhodie. They gave us some new pills to try, said his sleeping schedule may get out of whack. I told them everything that's been going on.

**RHODIE:** Was he pretty calm?

**BARBARA:** At the doctor's?

**RHODIE:** No, Mama, while I was gone.

**BARBARA:** He had a few spells, but Sue was over a little bit to help, got him calmed down.

**RHODIE** (*sarcastically*): I'm sure Sue was a lot of help.

**BARBARA:** Well, since you weren't here, yes, she was a lot of help, young lady. Don't talk about your sister when she's not here to defend



herself. You know she's had a hard time lately.

**RHODIE:** More than usual, you mean?

*(BARBARA gives RHODIE a look.)*

**RHODIE:** Sorry.

**BARBARA:** You'd better be. What's four letters for deal with?

**RHODIE:** Cope.

**BARBARA:** Cope. Well, how's Frank Jr.?

**RHODIE:** Oh, Frank's fine. Working a lot.

**BARBARA:** Too much, I'd imagine.

*(She speaks to herself this time.)*

Fork-tailed flier, four letters.

**RHODIE:** Tern. He got that promotion he was wanting though.

*(Barbara scowls at RHODIE a little, then recovers and laughs.)*

**BARBARA:** Now, I could have gotten that one if you'd given me two seconds to guess it.

*(Rhodie leans over BARBARA's shoulder and looks at the crossword.)*

**RHODIE:** He said to tell you he's going to try and come visit soon.

**BARBARA:** I'd like to see your brother's face walk through that door. He's been saying that for two years, I haven't seen him here yet.

**RHODIE (pointing):** Evade.

**BARBARA (tossing the crossword aside):** If I wanted you to do it for me, I'd just hand it to you and save myself the trouble, Rhodie.

**RHODIE (timidly):** Mama, you know Frank's got his reasons. Besides, he's busy.

**BARBARA (passing over RHODIE's comment):** Well, what'd you do? Did you see the sights?

**RHODIE (walking into the kitchen):** There aren't a lot of sights to see in Cincinnati, Mama. I brought you some postcards, though. Look in my backpack. It's on the couch.

*(BARBARA walks over to the backpack and begins to ruffle through it. She pulls out the postcards and a piece of paper falls onto the floor. She picks it up.)*

**BARBARA:** What's this?

**RHODIE (from the kitchen):** Probably the Ohio River. There's about a dozen different pictures of that. It might be the Kroger mansion though. I thought you might get a kick out of that. You can show everybody at work.

*(RHODIE walks back in with a cup of coffee to see BARBARA holding the paper in her hand with a confused look on her face.)*

**BARBARA:** What is this letter? What is it

talking about, you've been accepted?

**RHODIE (pausing):** I applied to graduate school.

**BARBARA:** What? When?

**RHODIE:** The normal time, Mama.

**BARBARA:** Well, forgive me, Rhodie. I don't know when that is. Now when did you apply?

**RHODIE:** A long time ago. I didn't say anything because I wasn't even sure I'd get in anywhere. I only applied a couple of places.

**BARBARA:** But Rhodie, this letter is almost two months old.

**RHODIE (pausing):** I know. I hadn't quite figured out how to tell you yet.

**BARBARA:** Tell me what, what does that mean?

**RHODIE:** I want to go, Mama. I sent in a deposit. I told them I'm coming.

**BARBARA (pausing):** But, Rhodie, why would you do that without even talking to anybody about it? And this says University of Michigan. You're going to Michigan?

**RHODIE:** Yes. And I talked to Frank about it.

**BARBARA:** That doesn't count. And why didn't you apply to the University of Alabama? It's a good school, was good enough for your brother.

**RHODIE:** Because I didn't want to go there.

**BARBARA:** But Michigan? Do you have any idea how cold it gets in Michigan? The wind chill there is sixty degrees below zero, that's what Mrs. Morgan at the store told me. She had a nephew go up there and near freeze to death, had to come back home before winter was even over.

**RHODIE (sullenly):** I'll get some sweaters.

**BARBARA:** Don't use that tone with me. You need to think about this, Rhodie. You can't just up and decide to go halfway across the world. If your Daddy were alive he would wear you out, he wouldn't even care that you're too old for that now.

**RHODIE:** I have thought about this, Mama. And Daddy's not alive.

**BARBARA:** Rhodie!

**RHODIE:** I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't mean that the way it came out.

**BARBARA (wounded):** How long do you have to really decide? When does it start?

**RHODIE (knowing BARBARA will be angry):** I have to be there in two weeks.

*(BARBARA turns away from RHODIE and*

*walks over to the couch, where she sits down again to resume her crossword puzzle. The postcards are left lying on the coffee table.)*

**RHODIE:** Mama, don't do that. I don't want you to be mad at me. Can't you at least look at me?

*(BARBARA ignores her.)*

**RHODIE:** I want you to be happy for me.

**BARBARA:** Maybe you should have thought about that a month and a half ago.

*(POP walks in from the bedroom. His clothes do not match, and are not entirely logical, an effect more pathetic than comical. He is humming the tune to "Aunt Rhody" as he comes in.)*

**RHODIE:** Who is this handsome man coming my way?

*(POP smiles at her sheepishly but does not speak. He continues to hum. RHODIE takes his hand and begins to dance.)*

**RHODIE:** I hear my song, Pop.

**POP:** This is my Rhodie, isn't it? Have I shown you my coins? I showed you yesterday, didn't I?

**RHODIE (sitting down with POP on the couch):** No, Pop, I didn't see them yesterday. I've been gone. I'd like to see them again though. You know I love your coins.

**POP:** Where have you been, my little Rhodie? We've missed you here.

**RHODIE (for BARBARA's benefit):** Oh, really, I couldn't tell. I missed you too, Pop.

**POP:** What time is it? Is it time for lunch yet?

**RHODIE:** No, Pop, not quite. Where's your watch we got you? That way you can tell when it's time to eat.

**POP (becoming flustered):** I had it, I had it the other day, but I don't know where I put it.

**RHODIE:** That's okay. We'll find it. Do you want to show me your coins?

**POP:** Not right now, sweetheart. It's better to show them at night.

**BARBARA:** You've got to start trying to sleep at night, Daddy. You need your rest. I heard you up all last night.

**POP:** Rest, rest, rest. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Who is that? I'll get plenty of rest soon enough.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, you know who it is. And you ought not talk like that. God might listen.

**POP:** Hasn't listened much before.

**BARBARA:** I don't like this new phase you're in, Daddy.

*(POP throws his hand in the air, a sort of "who cares" gesture. RHODIE picks the postcards up from where BARBARA dropped them)*

**RHODIE:** You know what, Pop? I brought some pictures of where I was. You want to see them? I bet you might like the pictures of the river. It would be a good place to fish.

*(POP begins to look at the postcards with interest. RHODIE goes to zip up her backpack, which is sitting beside BARBARA.)*

**BARBARA:** You know, there are plenty of jobs in town for a smart girl like you, Rhodie. Places around here can't find good people. The Alabama Power office in town is hiring, I know.

**RHODIE:** Yeah.

**BARBARA:** Well, you could go down and put in an application--

**RHODIE:** Do we have to talk about this now?

**BARBARA:** I'm just saying you could make good money there, Rhodie.

**RHODIE:** I'm sure I could.

*(RHODIE walks back over to POP and sits down with him. He is still looking at the postcards.)*

**BARBARA (trying to joke):** You don't have to live here, you know, if that's the problem. I did let Sue move out.

**RHODIE:** You made Sue move out when she was twenty-five, Mama. And besides, Sue lives three streets over.

**BARBARA:** What does that have to do with anything?

**RHODIE (ignoring the question, but pleasantly):** Mama, I can't do that. That's not what I want to do.

**BARBARA (shaking her head):** What you want to do. Well, all right then, what do you want to do?

**RHODIE:** What? What do you mean?

**BARBARA:** I mean if you're so sure that's not what you want to do, then what do you want to do?

**RHODIE:** I want, I mean, I don't know, Mama, but not that.

**BARBARA:** So you want to do what you want, but you don't know what you want to do.

**RHODIE:** It's not that simple.

**BARBARA:** Okay, then let's find something that is. How are you going to pay for this? You know I don't have the money for anything else, what with Pop at the doctor's all the time, and

Sue over here every day asking for something.

**RHODIE:** They have loans, Mama. I'm not expecting you to pay for anything.

**BARBARA:** You're taking out loans?

**RHODIE:** I've got to pay for it somehow. And I wasn't going to ask you.

**BARBARA:** You've always been too proud for your own good.

**RHODIE:** It's not pride, Mama.

**BARBARA:** I know you better than you think, Rhodie.

**POP:** This is a good picture you took.

**RHODIE:** No, Pop, I didn't take it. See, it's a postcard, I bought them in Cincinnati when I went to visit Frank.

**POP:** Who?

**BARBARA:** You know Frank, Daddy. He's your grandson, Rhodie's brother.

You just haven't seen him in a while.

**POP:** Little Frankie, he's a good boy, but he's got to learn how to do his homework if we want to get ahead. You can't get away with doing things half-assed. You've got to work if you want to get anywhere.

**RHODIE:** No, Pop, Frank's grown up now. He's got a job there working on computers for a big company. You remember, he sent a picture of him and his girlfriend at Christmas.

**POP:** He's a smart boy. Just like his mama, isn't that right, Barbara?

**BARBARA:** Yes, Daddy. Just like his mama.

**POP:** If you want to make it in the world, you've got to have an education. You need to learn as much as you can in school and then work hard and people will notice you. I should've gotten more education. It held me back in life.

**RHODIE:** I know, Pop. Don't worry. Do you like the postcards though? Look at that river--that's something isn't it?

**POP:** I've seen a river this big one time. When I was in the army we rode a train across the country and we went over the Mississippi River. I remember that water stretched out wider than any river I'd ever seen. I didn't know rivers could get so big. We don't have water like that around here. When I saw it I'd never even seen the ocean, wouldn't see one but a few times later, and that river might as well have been the ocean. We went up to Kentucky, no, Indiana.

*(He becomes flustered.)*

It was a short name, the state, it might have been

Ohio.

**RHODIE:** It's okay, Pop. Go on.

**POP:** It was before we got shipped out, and we'd have baseball games. We didn't have but one baseball. When it got hit we'd have to go after it no matter how far it went, we didn't have another one. And there was this one fellow, we had to stop letting him bat because every time he came up we'd have to go chasing near a mile away to get that fool ball. What was his name?

*(He becomes frustrated because he cannot remember the story.)*

We called him... he was a little guy, all thick and stocky--

**RHODIE:** It's okay, Pop. That was a long time ago. We all forget people's names. Go on with the story.

**BARBARA (quietly):** This is what would happen while you were gone, trying to tell a story and can't remember.

**POP:** Don't talk about me like I'm not here. I'm not a child.

**BARBARA:** I'm not, Daddy, I'm just trying to tell Rhodie what's been going on.

**POP (standing up):** No, you're not. You're trying to tell her I'm crazy, I'm losing my mind.

**RHODIE:** Pop, we don't think you're crazy. We just want to help.

**POP:** I don't want your help.

**BARBARA:** All right, fine.

**POP:** I didn't work my whole life and support my family to have my own daughter act like I'm crazy. Everybody's always ganging up on me.

**RHODIE:** Pop, nobody's ganging up on you.

**POP:** Where's my Elizabeth? What have you done with her?

**BARBARA:** Mother's gone. You know that.

**POP (to BARBARA):** I know you did something with her. You were always hateful, didn't want anyone to get more love than you.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, calm down, don't say that, you know I didn't do anything to Mother.

**RHODIE:** Pop, calm down. It's okay. Come on and sit down.

**POP:** No. Where's my wife? I want to know where she is.

*(He speaks to BARBARA.)*

You killed her, didn't you? Just like you're going to do with me.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, don't say that, you've got to calm down, please just calm down.

**POP (throwing the postcards on the floor and**

*starting to cry*): You don't know what I've been through.

*(RHODIE takes POP by the arm and sits him down on the couch.)*

**RHODIE:** It's all okay, Pop. It's Rhodie. I'm right here.

**POP (muttering):** Where's Elizabeth? Elizabeth's coming back.

**RHODIE (picking up the coin books):** Come on, Pop, let's look at your coins. You haven't told me about these.

**POP:** Is that Elizabeth?

**RHODIE:** No, Pop, it's me, Rhodie. You know me.

*(She begins to sing quietly.)*

Go tell Aunt Rhody;

Go tell Aunt Rhody;

Go tell Aunt Rhody;

The old grey goose is dead.

*(The song seems to return POP to the world. He nods along with RHODIE's singing and begins to calm down.)*

**POP:** We built our house ourselves, Elizabeth and I, after the war so we could raise a family. We have a nice fireplace, and a window in the bedroom so the sun comes in every morning just as warm as can be on the bed. You should come and visit, we'll make up your mama's old room and you can stay with your grandma and me.

**RHODIE:** Okay, Pop. That sounds real nice.

**POP:** Elizabeth always wanted a lot of children, wanted enough to fill the house, but after Barbara and Dorothy, the Lord didn't bless us with any more. When Dorothy died, well, little Barbara Allen was all we had.

*(He pauses.)*

You're a good girl, Rhodie. You're going to be something, don't you worry. You've got it in you.

*(POP starts humming "Aunt Rhody" again. BARBARA stands just in the background.)*

**RHODIE:** Sing it with me, Pop.

*(POP begins to sing quietly. He stumbles over the words occasionally, and RHODIE's voice is heard most clearly in the last two verses. As they are singing, they rise and begin to dance slowly.)*

**POP and RHODIE:**

The one she's been savin';

The one she's been savin';

The one she's been savin';

To make a feather bed.

Old gander's weeping;  
Old gander's weeping;  
Old gander's weeping;  
Because his wife is dead.

The goslings are mourning;  
The goslings are mourning;  
The goslings are mourning;  
Because their mother's dead.

*(POP and RHODIE take a pretend bow.)*

**RHODIE:** Come on, Pop, let's get you some lunch. I think Mama's got some stuff out on the counter.

*(RHODIE walks with POP into the kitchen. BARBARA picks up the coin books from the couch and puts them back on the coffee table, then walks around the room straightening things. She picks the postcards up from where they are lying on the floor. Looking through them, she begins to cry, and is weeping quietly with her head down when RHODIE walks back into the living room.)*

**RHODIE:** Mama, what are you doing? Why are you crying?

*(BARBARA is startled. She wipes her eyes and attempts to collect herself.)*

**BARBARA:** Nothing. I'm fine, Rhodie. I'm just getting a little emotional, that's all.

*(RHODIE sits down and awkwardly puts her arm around BARBARA.)*

**RHODIE:** He's okay now.

*(BARBARA nods.)*

**RHODIE:** He doesn't mean all those things he says. He gets confused, I think, and scared. It scares him when he can't remember stuff, and then it just gets worse and worse.

**BARBARA:** I know. It's just hard when he talks about Mother like that, and then to hear him change so quickly again, but he still doesn't know where he is, when it is, talking about Dorothy dying and you coming to stay with him and Mother.

**RHODIE:** I know.

*(She pauses.)*

Was he talking about the old house, before Grandma died?

**BARBARA:** No, I don't know what he's talking about. We didn't have a fireplace in that house. I think he's remembering the house they lived in before I was born. I've seen pictures of it, but that was years ago.

*(She pauses.)*

He's not going to get any better, Rhodie. He

thought Sue was you half the time she was here, thought he was back in the army thinking about Mother from miles away. He keeps thinking Mother's alive and you kids are still little, no time passed at all.

*(RHODIE is silent but listening.)*

**BARBARA** *(gently, without anger)*: You've got a way with him, Rhodie. You know that.

**RHODIE** *(shrugging)*: It's just because I'm the granddaughter.

**BARBARA**: He doesn't calm down with Sue like he does with you. And he doesn't get hateful with you like with everyone else. He always seems to know you.

**RHODIE**: I don't know what it is, Mama. I think he just feels comfortable with me.

**BARBARA**: I can't keep taking care of him by myself, Rhodie. He's getting worse, and the medicine's not doing much. Once he gets to where he can't feed himself, or go to the bathroom by himself, well, it's a full-time job. I'm just not sure I can do it. I barely get any sleep as it is. I can't quit my job, not and support us too.

**RHODIE**: What are you saying, Mama?

**BARBARA**: We're going to have to put him in a home--

**RHODIE**: What?

**BARBARA**: I thought that with you here, we could try to handle it ourselves, but if you're leaving--

**RHODIE**: That's not fair.

**BARBARA**: What's not fair? For me to tell you the truth? That what you do affects other people? I don't like it any more than you do, but that's the way it is, fair or not.

**RHODIE**: It's not like your job takes that much. Why would you have to put him in a home?

**BARBARA**: It takes time, Rhodie. And it takes effort, however hard it is for you to believe that.

**RHODIE**: What about Sue?

**BARBARA**: Sue doesn't do much. She's always going to be running back here for help, not the other way around. You're the one that relates to him. You're the one that knows how to help.

**RHODIE**: Don't you understand? I can't stay here, Mama. I'm not like Sue--

**BARBARA**: You don't think I know that? You don't think I watched you from the time you were born and knew you were different, that no matter what I did you'd end up trying your damndest to get away from here, get away from me?

**RHODIE** *(half-heartedly)*: I'm not trying to get away from you.

**BARBARA**: Oh, you're not, are you? Don't worry, Rhodie, I'm not so self-centered as to think I'd be the only thing to drive you away.

**RHODIE**: And besides, I do know that what I do affects other people.

**BARBARA**: I'm sure you do.

**RHODIE**: It's not like I'll never be home again, Mama.

**BARBARA**: Um-hmm.

**RHODIE**: Can we not fight anymore for a little while? Come on, what are you doing today?

**BARBARA**: I have to work. Your sister needs to use the car, so she's supposed to be coming over soon to take me.

**RHODIE**: What's wrong with her car?

**BARBARA**: She hasn't had enough money to get it fixed from when Tom wrecked it.

**RHODIE**: Well, why doesn't she get Tom to pay for it?

**BARBARA**: It's not that easy, Rhodie. He's not just going to hand it over to be nice.

**RHODIE**: That's what she gets for letting the deadbeat use her car.

**BARBARA**: Well, the deadbeat was also her husband, who she trusted. It's not your life. Keep your mouth shut.

**RHODIE**: It just seems like after all the other ones, she would have learned the warning signs. I mean, come on, Mama. Before Tom there was Randy, and Robert and Chris, and before him it was Jeff, and Johnny-- since I was five years old, all of them coming over trying to play with me. Lord, I could tell they were losers, and I was in kindergarten.

**BARBARA**: Well, maybe you should give her some lessons, since you know so much about it. Besides, it's not like she married them all. She married Tom. He just turned out to be a little different that we thought.

*(She pauses.)*

I'm not talking about this right now. Do you think you can stay around for a while and keep an eye on Pop? I hope that doesn't put too much of a crimp in your plans.

**RHODIE**: Of course, I can.

**BARBARA**: Okay, good.

*(She is trying very hard to have a normal conversation.)*

So, you never told me what you and Frank did.  
**RHODIE**: Oh, well, during the day I read a lot,

and I walked around and saw the university and looked through some of the shops. We went out a few times at night, and then we cooked at his house a few nights, and stayed in and watched movies.

**BARBARA**: You had time to talk though?

**RHODIE**: Yeah, some, I guess.

**BARBARA**: You obviously had some if you had time to tell him about this Michigan plan.

**RHODIE**: Mama.

**BARBARA**: Sorry, I forgot, we're not fighting now. We'll save that for later, right?

*(SUE's voice is heard from the kitchen.)*

**SUE**: Hey Pop, what you eating? Why do you have on a tie with your robe? Where's everybody at?

**BARBARA**: We're in here, Sue.

**SUE** *(from kitchen)*: Mind if I get something to drink?

**BARBARA**: Sure.

*(She speaks to RHODIE.)*

Watch yourself.

*(RHODIE turns to make herself busy ruffling through her backpack as SUE walks in.)*

**SUE** *(holding out the watch)*: Hey Mama. Why was there a watch in the freezer?

**RHODIE**: There it is. He said he didn't know where he'd put it.

**SUE**: Well, hey, Rhodie.

**RHODIE**: Hi, Sue.

**SUE** *(to BARBARA)*: You about ready?

**BARBARA**: Will be in just a minute.

**SUE** *(to RHODIE)*: How was your trip? How's that little brother of mine?

**RHODIE**: Frank's fine. Same as always. He said to tell you hello.

**SUE**: Could call me and tell me himself, but I guess that's better than nothing.

**BARBARA**: I said the same thing.

**RHODIE** *(under her breath, but audible)*:

That's the reason he never calls--he gets questioned and attacked half to death.

**BARBARA** *(suddenly upset)*: I'm sorry if I want to hear from my children every now and again, Rhodie. I don't attack anyone, and I only question when I haven't gotten the answers I deserve. I don't have to apologize to you.

*(She pauses.)*

Sue, I have to finish getting dressed. I'll be done in just a second.

*(BARBARA walks into the bedroom.)*

**RHODIE**: Mama, wait, please.

**SUE**: What's wrong with her?

*(RHODIE shrugs but does not answer.)*

**SUE**: Rhodie, what's wrong with Mama? Why is she so irritable?

**RHODIE**: It's nothing. Don't worry about it.

**SUE**: What do you mean it's nothing? Mama doesn't act like that if it's nothing. What's going on?

**RHODIE**: Sue, just leave it alone, please.

**SUE**: No. Tell me what's wrong.

**RHODIE**: She's not very happy with me right now.

**SUE**: Mama mad at you? I'll believe that when I see it.

**RHODIE**: What?

**SUE**: Nothing, Rhodie. I don't need to repeat it. What have you done?

**RHODIE** *(pausing)*: I just told her that I'm going to Michigan and she's not too happy about it. That's all. Now please leave it alone.

**SUE**: Michigan? What's in Michigan?

**RHODIE**: Graduate school.

**SUE**: Since when are you going to graduate school?

**RHODIE**: Since I am. I've known for a couple of months. I hadn't figured out how to tell her.

**SUE**: So you just didn't? Did you tell her at all or did she find out something for herself?

*(RHODIE does not answer.)*

**SUE**: That's good, Rhodie.

**RHODIE**: Don't use that voice, Sue.

**SUE**: What voice?

**RHODIE**: That big sister voice you use when you want to make me feel like shit. I hate that voice. Especially when I didn't ask you for your opinion on any of it.

**SUE**: This is my business, Rhodie, as much as you hate it. She's my mother too.

*(She sees she is getting no response from RHODIE.)*

I don't know why she even needs to worry about it. She has me.

**RHODIE**: That's going to do her a lot of good.

**SUE**: How dare you. If you're going to run off, then yes, I will do some good. I've done good at plenty of things, Rhodie.

**RHODIE**: Well.

**SUE**: What?

**RHODIE**: You've done well. Not good.

**SUE**: Go to hell. Don't talk to me like I'm too stupid to understand you. I'm not dumb, Rhodie.

**RHODIE:** I didn't say you were, Sue.

**SUE:** But you think it. You don't try to hide it. You never have. You've always looked at me like I was beneath you, even when you were eight years old. You never listened to me, or respected me.

**RHODIE:** I didn't think I was better than you. I just knew I wasn't like you.

**SUE:** I'm sure that was it. And maybe some of the stuff I've done you wouldn't have even known how to try.

**RHODIE:** Like what, Sue? Working at the grocery store instead of going to college? Beauty school just so you could work at Final Cuts and quit because you got tired of it? Or you must be talking about your string of meaningful, but short-lived relationships. What kills you is that anything you've done, I haven't done because I didn't want to.

**SUE:** I don't like you very much, Rhodie. You should know that by now. You've said too many things, rolled your eyes too many times. So you're not about to make me cry just because you're not proud of me.

**RHODIE:** What is this really about, Sue? Me thinking I'm better than you? Or is it the "everybody likes Rhodie the best" war?

**SUE:** Maybe it is. Maybe I used to hate the fact that you're the favorite. But I've gotten used to that now. At least I can do what I want without begging for everybody's say-so, 'cause I'm not the one they brag about anyway. Being the favorite has its disadvantages too, huh, sweetie?

**RHODIE:** I'm not begging for anyone's say-so.

**SUE:** You might as well be. You want to leave, but you want to feel good about it. You don't want anyone to be angry or hurt or upset with you for doing it. God forbid you think about the fact that your leaving might hurt Pop.

**RHODIE:** I don't want to talk to you about Pop. You don't know shit about that.

**SUE:** He's losing his mind, Rhodie. Has that occurred to you? Has it occurred to you that when you come back, if you come back, he's not even going to know who you are? You won't be anything but a mixed-up memory. But apparently that doesn't bother you too much.

**RHODIE:** Go to hell, Sue. You should know better than to act like I don't care about him.

**SUE:** That must be why you're running off to Michigan.

*(She pauses.)*

Just go ahead and leave. You can't stay here-- this town is too small and stupid and backwards for you, right, little sister? You can't talk to me, I'm too slow and country to understand who you are. You can't stay here and help Mama, that would just be dragging you down. So don't talk to me about you not thinking you're better than me, better than all of us. Go on back to school with all the other smart people that are never going to do a damn thing but sit around and talk.

*(She pauses.)*

Let me ask you something. If you were going to leave, then why didn't you just tell Mama two months ago that you were going and get it over with? If you're so brave, then why are you acting like you're ashamed of something now?

*(RHODIE sits down on the couch and is silent. SUE shakes her head and turns toward the bedrooms.)*

**SUE:** Mama? You about ready? We need to get going.

*(BARBARA walks back into the living room dressed for work. SUE turns to leave, and RHODIE remains on the couch, still silent.)*

**BARBARA:** I won't be back until late. Can you get Pop some dinner?

**RHODIE:** Yeah, I can handle it.

**BARBARA:** Daddy? You done with lunch? I'm about to have to go.

*(POP comes walking back into the living room, a napkin still tucked into his shirt.)*

**BARBARA:** All right, Daddy. I'm going to work. Rhodie's going to stay with you tonight.

*(BARBARA starts to speak to RHODIE again but stops. SUE walks out of the room, and BARBARA slowly follows her.)*

**RHODIE:** What do you want to do, Pop? Do you want to read, or watch TV? Are you tired? We could take a nap.

**POP:** No, no, get enough naps. Don't need to sleep.

**RHODIE:** Oh, okay, you don't have to sleep. How about I take a nap and you watch the house?

*(POP smiles and begins to hum again. RHODIE begins to laugh gently.)*

**RHODIE:** You can't want to sing that song again, Pop. You're going to get sick of it, singing it all the time like that.

**POP:** Do you know this song too?

**RHODIE (a little confused):** Um, of course I

do, Pop.

**POP:** This was my little granddaughter's favorite song to sing. Her name is Rhodie, but not after the song.

**RHODIE:** Pop, it's me, Rhodie.

**POP:** It was my mother's. It's an old name. Her mother had it before her, but my wife never liked it, wouldn't name our little girls that. We named one Barbara and one Dorothy.

**RHODIE (finally understanding, but bewildered):** Those are pretty names.

**POP:** Barbara, our older girl, she had Rhodie. This little girl, she came out breathing fire, she's got so much in her. A pretty thing, with big brown eyes and wild hair. Looked just like her mama when she was young.

*(He pauses.)*

Oh, children are something, they are. But the grandchildren, that's when you learn what proud is. This girl is so smart and so brave, she wouldn't know how to be afraid, I don't think. Her first day of school, her mama called us crying because Rhodie wouldn't let her walk inside with her. Told her mama to go home, she could make it from there.

**RHODIE (to herself):** She sounds a little too brave.

**POP:** And there, poor Barbara didn't know what to do, had her five years and already losing hold. Some of them, they come out and you know from the start that they're weak. You love them all the same, sometimes more, just trying to protect them, but you can see the helplessness in them. And some of the others, they're mean-spirited. You can fight it off, but sometimes what they are will win out. This little girl, she's so strong, nothing could beat it out of her.

*(He pauses.)*

My girl was like that too, Barbara was. You want them to need you, and then sometimes when they don't, it makes you so mad and hurt you don't know what to do. You have to be careful with the ones that want to be so independent, that they won't push everyone else out of the way. I remember when Barbara was little she would pretend she couldn't do something so that her big sister could show her how. I knew as well as she did that she could do it better than her sister could half the time. But she didn't show it.

*(RHODIE is listening in a kind of daze.)*

**POP:** She was only seven when her daddy died.

She didn't cry a tear at that funeral. She was solemn. Her mama didn't know what to do with her. She didn't know how to help her.

*(He pauses.)*

Barbara's always been scared of losing her. She's always known she was right on the edge of it. Some parents would pray they wouldn't have one like that. It's so hard to let go anyway, sometimes it's easier to have one that isn't desperate to be let go of. Hard child to raise, I'd guess.

**RHODIE:** Pop, don't you recognize me? Come on, Pop, you know me, you have to know me.

**POP:** You're a sweet girl. What's your name?

**RHODIE:** My name's Rhodie, Pop. I'm Rhodie.

*(The lights fade to black.)*

## SCENE TWO.

**SETTING:** The same. Three days later.

**AT RISE:** BARBARA sits in the living room, doing a crossword. She is humming "My Only Sunshine." RHODIE walks in from the kitchen, fully dressed, and stops in the doorway behind BARBARA.

**BARBARA:** Five letters, reject, as in convention. What?

*(She begins to sing to herself.)*

The other night dear, as I lay sleeping,  
I dreamt I held you in my arms.  
But when I woke up, I was mistaken,  
And I hung my head and I cried.

*(She returns to the crossword.)*

Five letters, reject--

**RHODIE:** Flout.

*(BARBARA looks up to see RHODIE standing just behind her. She looks at the crossword and tosses it onto the coffee table without writing in the answer.)*

**BARBARA:** I don't know why I do these damn things anyway.

**RHODIE:** You're turning into Pop in here, singing like that.

**BARBARA:** I woke up with that song in my head. That used to happen to me all the time, it was like I'd wake up humming, but it hasn't happened in years.

*(She pauses.)*

I used to sing that song to you when you were

little. It was the only thing I could do to make you fall asleep when you didn't want to, which was about every night. I've never much liked the song myself. Too sad.

*(She shakes it off.)*

You're up early. Where have you been?

**RHODIE:** Woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep, so I went for a walk around the neighborhood. Saw Mrs. Baylor and talked to her for a minute, and I ran into Mr. Collier from the store.

**BARBARA:** You're not going to know what to do when you can't walk out of the house and see everybody you've known your whole life.

**RHODIE:** Probably not. It would be weird.

**BARBARA:** Well, if you're going to run off to the big city--

**RHODIE:** It's Michigan, Mama. Just because it's cold and far away doesn't mean it's the big city.

**BARBARA:** I suppose not. I wouldn't know. Besides, the point's the same.

**RHODIE** *(pausing)*: Mama, can I ask you something?

**BARBARA:** What?

**RHODIE:** Pop told me that when Daddy died, I didn't cry. Do you remember that?

**BARBARA** *(slowly, as if remembering)*: Yes, I remember. Your poor brother, it near broke him. Sue was 23 or so, I guess, and Frank was around eighteen. And then you, all of seven years old, standing stiff and strong beside me, holding my hand to try and comfort me. We were afraid something was wrong with you at first, that you were in shock or you didn't understand. But you understood, even then.

*(She pauses.)*

After he died, after the funeral and everything, I would hear you crying at night in your room, when you thought no one could hear you. If I left you alone, you'd cry yourself to sleep. But if I went in, you'd freeze up, pretend you were asleep until I left. It went on for months. I didn't know what to do.

**RHODIE:** I don't remember that, not really. I mean, I remember the funeral, but just weird things. What Sue was wearing, what the car smelled like. I remember a lot of people patting me on the head. I remember crying at night, but I don't really remember what I was thinking.

**BARBARA:** I can't believe Daddy would remember that. When did he tell you that?

**RHODIE:** The other day after Sue took you to work.

**BARBARA:** What else did he tell you?

**RHODIE:** My first day of school.

**BARBARA** *(laughing)*: What, you telling me I could just stay outside, you didn't need me to walk with you? I can still hear you. I'm all right, Mama. Just go home.

**RHODIE:** I don't remember that either.

**BARBARA:** You were always like that.

Thought you were grown up by the time you were five. Didn't want me to walk with you anywhere, wouldn't let me order for you in restaurants, you wouldn't even hold my hand in public unless there was a real reason. Sue, she wanted me with her everywhere she went. She's always called me every time anything happened. Lord, the things I had to do to make her go to school. She needed my help too much, I guess.

**RHODIE:** And I didn't need it enough.

**BARBARA:** You don't know what it's like, Rhodie.

*(She pauses.)*

I remember Sue would try to help you with homework and stuff and you wouldn't let her. Y'all never did get along too well. You'd let Frank help you sometimes, even if you didn't need it, but you didn't want a thing from Sue. When she would babysit you, I would come home and she'd be about crazy because you wouldn't do anything she said.

**RHODIE** *(laughing gently)*: Where it all began.

**BARBARA:** No one ever had to tell me you and Sue were as different as they come. And you both knew it.

**RHODIE:** It was kind of hard not to, Mama.

**BARBARA:** You don't give her enough credit for what she's done, Rhodie.

**RHODIE:** What am I supposed to be giving her credit for?

**BARBARA:** That's not what I mean. Even now, you won't let anything go. You've got to pick everything she does apart. Sue's made some mistakes, yes. But so have you. So has everyone. She's not ashamed of who she is, and you think she should be, and you act like you're ashamed and embarrassed for her. And that, Rhodie, that is not your place. Sue is who she is, and it's too late for her to change even if she wanted to.

**RHODIE:** I don't expect her to change.

**BARBARA:** Maybe not. But you want her to

respect you, when you've never done the same for her.

*(RHODIE is silent.)*

**BARBARA:** It's hard. Sue has always thought you were my favorite. She's been mad about that since the day you were born. And then you look at her the way you do--

**RHODIE:** What way? How do I look at her?

**BARBARA:** Like you're better than her, Rhodie. I know you say that's not true, but you ought to try being on the other side of those eyes some day.

**RHODIE:** You should try writing country songs, Mama. You've about got a winner there.

**BARBARA:** Don't make it into a joke.

**RHODIE:** I don't know what else to do with it. I'm so much younger than her, Mama. Why did it matter what I did when I was a kid? Why did she care? I mean, God, when I was eight, she was 24. Whatever Sue's got against me, she's had a long time, and I'm not going to apologize to her for not liking her more when I was a little kid.

*(BARBARA shakes her head.)*

**RHODIE:** What? What are you shaking your head at?

**BARBARA:** You always have to be right. Have to make it into something where you didn't do anything wrong. You could never stand the thought that you had done anything bad. Even when you were a kid, you would admit you had done something, but you wouldn't admit that it was wrong, or bad, or that you shouldn't have done it.

**RHODIE:** That's not true.

**BARBARA:** Sixth grade. You got a D in math, so you changed your report card. And you got caught. You didn't cry. You didn't get scared of what I was going to do to you. You just looked at me and told me that the grade wasn't an accurate representation of your abilities. In those words.

**RHODIE:** Well, it wasn't. That woman never liked me.

**BARBARA:** That's what I thought.

**RHODIE:** What does this have to do with Sue, Mama?

**BARBARA:** This has to do with the fact that Sue feels like she's always deserved more from you than you would give her. She wanted you to look up to her, and you never would. And you did everything she never did as a kid. You al-

ways had lots of friends, you did well in school unless you decided not to, and you were never scared--not of punishment or teachers or other kids. Nothing. I think she was jealous. You were trying to be more independent at five than she was at twenty.

**RHODIE:** I can't help that I wasn't scared of everything.

**BARBARA** *(exasperated)*: And she can't help it that she was.

*(She pauses.)*

Even now, you don't think about her life, Rhodie. You don't give anything in her life credit for being important. When Tom left, it was like she was just upset over a high school boyfriend. When she finished school, it was like nothing had happened.

**RHODIE:** I went to her graduation.

**BARBARA:** Because I made you. And the whole time, you were set to look down on the whole thing because what, it was only beauty school? She was just cutting people's hair.

**RHODIE:** Well, it's not like she's saving the world.

**BARBARA** *(turning on RHODIE)*: Get out of my sight. I don't want to have raised a daughter that thinks that way about people. What about me, Rhodie? I just work at Kroger. That makes me almost important enough for you to spend about thirty seconds talking to in the elevator on your way to something better. What about your daddy? He was just a repairman.

**RHODIE:** Mama, that wasn't what I meant.

**BARBARA:** Oh, I think it was, Rhodie.

You've never thought about it, but that's definitely what you meant.

**RHODIE:** Mama.

**BARBARA:** Rhodie, you need to leave. You need to go to your room, or go for a walk. You need to get away from me for a few minutes.

**RHODIE:** All right.

*(She turns to leave.)*

I'm sorry, Mama.

*(BARBARA ignores RHODIE and continues to stare straight ahead. RHODIE walks to the bedrooms. BARBARA picks up the crossword and stares at it for a moment, before tossing it back onto the coffee table in frustration.)*

**BARBARA:** Damn that girl.

*(POP comes in from the bedrooms. He looks sleepy and is carrying his coin books. He*

walks to the couch and sits down beside  
BARBARA.)

**BARBARA:** Morning, Daddy. You get any sleep last night?

**POP:** Sleep, sleep. All anybody ever talks about anymore.

**BARBARA:** Why are you wearing the same thing you were wearing yesterday?

**POP:** Not dirty. Didn't do anything to get them dirty.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, you still have to change clothes, even if you didn't go anywhere. Your clothes will start to smell if you don't change them.

*(She pats him on the cheek.)*

I don't know what I'm going to do with you.

*(She pauses.)*

You know, Daddy, I always told myself that once Rhodie got old enough to take care of herself, the hard part would be over. I could relax.

*(POP chuckles and shakes his head.)*

**BARBARA:** That was dumb of me, wasn't it?  
*(She pauses.)*

I knew that raising kids wasn't easy. But nobody ever told me there would be times when I really didn't like them. I didn't raise her to look down on people. I don't want to make her give up her whole life to this place, but I wish she would understand that what she wants can't always be most important.

**POP:** You were so brave when you were little, braver than your sister ever was. But you were stubborn. If we wanted you to do something, that was just about a guarantee that you wouldn't have anything to do with it. Drove your mother crazy. She's more like you than you know, Barbara.

**BARBARA:** What happened to me?

**POP:** I used to tell you that you shouldn't ever be scared to go after what you want in life. It's not going to come to you, Barbara, so you have to come to it. You were my girl. You were the strong one.

**BARBARA:** I don't remember that, Daddy. It's been a long time since I thought like that.

**POP:** Your song, your song was "Barbara Allen." You hated it.

**BARBARA:** I don't remember that.

**POP:** It's about a beautiful young girl, and all the men for towns around are in love with her beauty. And in one town, a young man is dying and calls for her. But Barbara denies him. So

he dies, and Barbara Allen is so crushed by guilt that she dies too, filled with regret.

**BARBARA** *(shaking her head)*: Sing a little bit.  
*(POP begins to hum a little, and sings the first verse.)*

**POP:** In Scarlet town, where I was born, there was a fair maid dwellin'.

Made every youth cry, well-a-day!

Her name was Barbara Allen.

**BARBARA** *(nodding emphatically)*: Oh, yes, I remember now. I hated that song.

**POP** *(laughing)*: When you were little, you liked it. But then, one day, all of a sudden, you couldn't stand the sound of it.

**BARBARA:** I don't remember why I started hating it.

**POP:** Something about it. Couldn't ever find another song you liked, so I'd just tease you with it sometimes.

*(He pauses.)*

You always felt guilty about everything, Barbara. That was the only thing that held you back.

*(BARBARA is silent, thinking about this.)*

**BARBARA** *(shaking herself out of a trance)*: Do you want something to eat? I made some pancakes. There's a few left, I think. It's time for your medicine too.

*(BARBARA and POP get up and go into the kitchen. RHODIE walks into the living room from the bedrooms. When BARBARA walks back into the room, RHODIE is studying a photograph. BARBARA does not acknowledge RHODIE.)*

**RHODIE:** I've never really looked at this picture. It's so strange. It looks like you, but it doesn't.

**BARBARA:** What is that, our wedding picture?

**RHODIE:** Yeah, the one of Daddy trying to smear cake on your face.

**BARBARA:** That was a long time ago.

*(She walks to where RHODIE stands beside the pictures.)*

We were so young then. It scares me to death to think about what a child I was, taking on all those responsibilities, getting married and then having Sue, all so young. I was married with Sue two years old by the time I was your age.

**RHODIE:** I can't even imagine that.

**BARBARA:** That's probably a good thing.

**RHODIE:** I can't help it that I don't want what you want, Mama.

**BARBARA:** How would you know, Rhodie? You never knew what I wanted. All I am is what you see right now. You think I wanted to stay here and raise three children and watch my mother and husband die and my daddy lose his mind? You think I'm here because that was what I always wanted?

**RHODIE:** Well, you've never told me what you wanted, Mama. That's not the kind of thing I know how to ask. That doesn't mean I don't want to know.

**BARBARA:** You know what scares me? I can't even remember. I remember I wanted to be in charge of something. I wanted to do something, go somewhere. There was a time I wanted to do something wild, just because everything in my life had always been so far from that. When I was really little, I wanted to be a singer.

**RHODIE:** What kind?

**BARBARA:** Country, I guess, or maybe gospel. Daddy was the choir director up at the church then, so he'd bring me up to sing for services. That's funny--that was wild to me, to be a gospel singer. Back then it was, I guess. Then stage fright set in, Daddy called me up for a solo and I just froze up. When I was older, I guess I didn't think that far ahead. I at least wanted to finish school.

**RHODIE:** Why didn't you go back? You went for a year, right? Before you married Daddy? Why didn't you go back after Sue was born, or even after Frank?

**BARBARA:** It's funny. I didn't want children. You wouldn't know that to look at me now, would you? The other girls did, and Mother expected me to have them, because that was what girls were supposed to do, especially with Dorothy dying when she was fifteen. I was the only one who could. But I never wanted it. I remember thinking that one day it would kick in, that feeling all the other girls seemed to have, talking about how they couldn't wait to have babies, start a family. I waited for that urge to start up in me. But I just stayed empty, even when Sue came along. We'd been stupid, neither one of us old enough to have a baby, but we didn't have much choice. So I decided I'd wait until she got a little older and start back at college again. I could do it. Frank would be making enough to pay the bills, and if I was working part time, we could do it, I was sure. A couple of years passed, and then I was pregnant again--

Frank Jr. But I still thought maybe I'd be able to go back, get a good job, show everybody what I could do. And then something happened along the way, and it was ten years later all of a sudden. I'd been working as a receptionist down at the doctor's office for twelve years, Frank was tired all the time, hated his job, didn't like me too much most of the time, it seemed. And then you came along, surprise of all surprises. It got too late real quick. Mother died, Daddy had a heart attack and stayed sick for a long while, and then Frank got sick. It never stopped after that.

*(RHODIE is quiet, but listening.)*

**BARBARA:** You probably don't remember your daddy being sick. He was sleeping most of the time once we brought him home, and you didn't get to go the hospital much. I thought you were too young, you shouldn't see him like that. I told myself you'd see him plenty once he got well again. I wouldn't listen to the doctors, not that any of them would come out and tell me what was going on anyway. I don't know if that was right of me or not, I don't know if I should have let you see him. I just couldn't let myself think that was the end.

**RHODIE:** It's all right, Mama. You did the best you could.

**BARBARA:** Don't console me, Rhodie. That's not what I'm after right now.

*(She pauses.)*

I didn't know my mother had ever wanted anything other than what she had in life until she was dying, when she was delirious with pain and didn't know what she was saying. It had never occurred to me until then that she might have had dreams, that the world had once been open to her, everything free for the taking. She was my mother. She was supposed to be happy with her life, I didn't know how to think about it any other way. And now I'm the same way to you.

**RHODIE:** No, Mama--

**BARBARA:** Daddy was always foolish, that's what Mother called him. She said he always had his head in the clouds, talking about dreams, and life, and things that had nothing to do with feeding the family and paying the bills. In Mother's eyes that wasn't a good way to be. It was stupid to talk about it like that. Everybody had things they wanted out of life, but they sure didn't expect to get them. And you know what? I told myself, I can remember, I told myself that I'd never be like her, no matter what, I wouldn't

forget what I wanted. And now, it's so far away I couldn't reach it if I tried.

**RHODIE:** I didn't know all that.

**BARBARA:** Of course, you didn't. I can't expect it of you. I couldn't even do it myself as a grown woman.

*(She pauses.)*

Maybe I wouldn't have ever been much, but I would have liked to try. I don't want you to give up everything I had to give up, Rhodie. And sometimes you don't realize you're giving anything up until it's gone and too late for you to do anything about it.

**RHODIE:** What am I supposed to do with that? You don't want me to leave, but you don't want me to give anything up. So what do I do? Either way I'm giving something up. If I leave or if I stay.

**BARBARA:** Nobody ever said it was easy.

**RHODIE:** You're going to put Pop in a home, aren't you?

**BARBARA:** I don't know for sure, but yes, there's a chance, Rhodie. I'm afraid it's going to come to that.

**RHODIE:** I can't just say okay to that, Mama. Don't you understand?

**BARBARA:** Okay, what would you like me to do? Since you object to this, what is your plan no one's thought of?

**RHODIE:** Can't you just wait? I'll be home on vacations, and I'll come back after school and help, that'll just be two years, two and a half--

**BARBARA:** It doesn't work like that.

**RHODIE:** Well, I can't just drop everything.

**BARBARA:** For God's sake, Rhodie, not everything is about you.

**RHODIE:** Apparently it's not about Pop either.

**BARBARA:** Oh, and with you it is? Do you think about anything before you say it? What would be about Pop, for me to keep him here and not have the time or energy or sanity to take care of him the way he needs to be taken care of? For me to quit my job and not have enough money to provide for us? I am not doing this to punish you. Are you really that selfish, that you think I would put Pop into a home just to make you feel guilty?

**RHODIE:** It's not that I think that. But why do I have to decide between school and, and Pop?

**BARBARA:** Because you do. You can't leave and come back and everything be the same. You want to freeze time and you go do your

thing and then come back and everyone have waited on you, not changed at all. That's not going to happen, Rhodie. I'm going to change, and so is Sue, and so is Pop, probably for the worse. Either you stay and change with things, or you leave, and hope that when you come back, you can find a place for yourself. I'm not telling you you can't come back, even though I know you probably won't, or not for good. Once you leave, you're gone, Rhodie, whether you know it or not. But you need to think about the fact that when you go, you're giving something up. That's your choice. And you have to make it.

**RHODIE:** I understand I have to do it, Mama. I just don't like it.

**BARBARA:** We all have to do things we don't like.

**RHODIE:** Like you? Is that what you mean? You had to do it so I should too? You say Pop needs me, just like everybody needed you. Tell me that's not the same thing, Mama, as you not ever going back to school, staying here your whole life taking care of everybody, without anybody ever asking you what you wanted to do.

**BARBARA:** Okay, Rhodie, you're being a little dramatic now. And a little ridiculous.

**RHODIE:** That's beside the point. Even if I didn't leave now, it's never going to be enough. If I stayed a year or two or ten, it wouldn't be enough. There would always be something else that was my responsibility.

**BARBARA:** This isn't about you serving your time.

**RHODIE:** You're angry at me because of the way I am, the way I think and talk and look at things. Maybe you're right to be. But listen to me for a second. If I don't leave, I'll resent everything about this place, and then it will be too late. I have to leave before that happens, before I hate this town and Sue and Kroger and this house and you and Pop and everything I've seen my whole life because that is everything I've seen my whole life. Maybe what I want isn't that important. I'm not going to change the world either. But it's important to me. School is important to me, and going somewhere that doesn't look like Alabama.

*(BARBARA is silent but listening.)*

**RHODIE:** This doesn't mean that Pop's not important. He's the closest thing to a father I've had most of my life. I know how important that

is, how much he's done for me.

**BARBARA:** What do you need to say to me, Rhodie?

**RHODIE:** I can't stand you being disappointed in me, Mama. That's so much worse than you being mad. But I can't help but think that if I stayed here, you'd end up being more disappointed in me than you are now, for doing just what you told me not to. I'm not meant to stay here. I can't do what you did. I can't sacrifice that much. I almost wish I could. I just can't be that brave.

*(BARBARA looks up, startled.)*

**RHODIE** *(turning to leave):* I'm going to go take a nap.

*(She pauses.)*

I'm not perfect, Mama. But I'm trying to be better. I promise you I am. I'll be worth being proud of one day.

*(RHODIE exits to the bedrooms. BARBARA picks up the crossword and stares at it blankly before putting it down again. POP walks in from the kitchen with his hands full of change. He begins to put the change into piles on the coffee table, seemingly oblivious to BARBARA.)*

**BARBARA:** Daddy, did you take all your medicine?

*(She pauses.)*

What are you doing with all that change?

*(POP grunts an indecipherable answer.)*

**BARBARA:** Daddy, did all that come from your coin books? Why did you take them out of the case? Daddy?

**POP:** Somebody has to do it.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, what are you talking about? Somebody has to do what?

**POP:** I am paying bills right now, if you would leave me be. Somebody has to take care of things around here. We all can't afford to laze around.

**BARBARA:** All right, Daddy. Come on, let's put them back in their books before some of them get lost.

*(BARBARA reaches to take some of the coins from the table and POP jerks away.)*

**POP:** Stop. You want to come in here and tell me how to live my life, how to do everything like I don't know myself. I know how to eat. I know how to sleep. I won't be turned into an invalid, damn you, I won't have it.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, nobody's trying to turn

you into an invalid. There's no reason to get all excited. Let's just put the coins away.

*(BARBARA reaches towards POP again, and he throws a handful of coins across the room and begins to cry.)*

**POP:** Damn it, I told you I won't be treated like an invalid! Just leave me alone. I'm going home. I'm going back home.

**BARBARA** *(moving towards him):* Daddy, this is your home. You live here now.

**POP** *(brushing past her):* I know where I live, and it's not here. Get away from me. I'm going home.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, calm down. Please sit down. You live here now. I promise I'm not trying to turn you into an invalid.

*(RHODIE starts to walk back into the living room as if she has forgotten something and stops at the doorway, seeing what is happening.)*

**POP:** You don't love me. You don't care about me. You're just waiting for me to die.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, that's not true. I love you. I would do anything for you, you know that.

**POP:** I just want to go home. That's all I want. I want to see my Elizabeth. I want to see my little girls again.

**BARBARA:** Daddy, it's me, Barbara. Mother's not here. You are at home. You've lived here for three years.

**POP:** What happened to my house? What happened to my family?

**BARBARA** *(sitting down on the couch):* We're all here. Things have just changed a little, that's all. I'm right here, Daddy.

**POP** *(standing beside BARBARA):* It's all passed so quickly. I don't even know what's happened. I don't know when I got old.

**BARBARA:** It's okay, Daddy. You're a good man. You've been a good father and a good grandfather. This is your home now, because I love you, and I'm going to take care of you as best I can. And I'm going to need you to take care of me sometimes.

**POP:** Where's my sweet little girl?

**BARBARA:** Who you talking about, Daddy? Rhodie?

**POP:** Where's little Rhodie?

**BARBARA:** Rhodie's going to have to go away for a while. She has some things she needs to take care of. But she loves you, Daddy. She's going to miss you very much.

*(She pauses.)*  
 It's just going to be me and you from now on.  
 You think we can handle it on our own?  
**POP** *(sitting down beside BARBARA)*: Just me  
 and you, huh?  
**BARBARA**: Yep, Daddy. We're going to have  
 some getting used to to do. You're going to  
 have to do your singing and dancing with me  
 now, if you can stand the disappointment.  
**POP**: Disappointment? You know what Eliza-

beth used to say? She said that being disap-  
 pointed was a waste of time.

**BARBARA**: Yes, she did, Daddy. And we  
 don't have time to waste, do we?

*(BARBARA takes POP's hand and begins to  
 hum "My Only Sunshine." RHODIE stands  
 in the doorway watching. At the close of the  
 verse, the lights fade to black.)*

THE END

## One-Act Play by Elizabeth Wilson

### Misconceptions of Bliss

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

**KRISTEN**: Abby's partner, mid-twenties, law-  
 yer

**ABBY**: Kristen's partner, mid-twenties, ele-  
 mentary school teacher

**LILY**: Kristen's closest friend, mid-twenties,  
 college athletic director

**KAYLA**: Abby's closest friend, mid-twenties,  
 graduate school student

*SCENE: Abby and Kristen's home, in the dining  
 room, in Nashville.*

*TIME: An evening in the summer, current time.*

*SETTING: ABBY and KRISTEN's home in  
 Nashville, in the living room. The walls are  
 covered with paintings of women. The table is  
 perfectly set with modern looking dishes. There  
 is a door stage right leading to the kitchen and  
 bathroom. There is a door stage left leading to  
 the front door and living room.*

*AT RISE: KRISTEN and ABBY are hurriedly  
 perfecting the table settings in anticipation of  
 their two dinner guests.*

**KRISTEN**: Abby, this place is a wreck, how  
 are we ever going to get the table perfect before  
 Kayla and Lily arrive?

**ABBY**: Hon, they have both been to our house  
 before, they think you are a fabulous chef and  
 hostess. What are you so worried about?

*(ABBY runs her fingers through KRISTEN's  
 hair and gives her an appeasing smile.)*

**KRISTEN**: *(staring at the kitchen door)*: Did  
 you get the vegetable lasagna out of the oven?  
 You know how I hate it overcooked. Last week  
 you made that quiche, but you left it in just a  
 hair too long. It just ruined the whole flavor.

**ABBY**: Yes, I took it out five minutes ago.  
 Hon, are you going to answer my question?  
 Why don't you sit down and relax. They should  
 be here any minute. Don't get your hopes up  
 about them yet, okay? They haven't met yet.

**KRISTEN**: I'm not worried about anything.

This night is just very important to me.

*(ABBY sighs as KRISTEN straightens the sil-  
 verware again.)*

**ABBY**: I thought the table was set the way you  
 wanted, what are you doing?

**KRISTEN**: I know, I know, I can't help it.  
 These two will be absolutely wonderful together.  
 I think next weekend the four of us should go to  
 see "The Incredibly True Adventures of Two  
 Girls in Love" at Crazy Ladies bookstore to-  
 gether. Don't you think that would be a perfect  
 second date for them?

**ABBY**: Well, yes, that does sound like an en-  
 joyable evening, but Kris, they haven't even met  
 yet. Maybe we should see if they like each other  
 first.

**KRISTEN** *(moving centerpiece three times)*:  
 Well of course, Abby. Do you think the center-  
 piece looks good here? Maybe I should get the  
 one with one flowers from the kitchen. You  
 know, Kayla and Lily both love flowers. Maybe  
 we could all go to the botanical gardens on  
 Thursday, I heard they were having a special ex-  
 hibit of tropical plants from Brazil. I wish Kayla  
 was more of a nature girl because I know Lily is  
 going to want to go hiking when the leaves turn  
 in the fall.

**ABBY**: Yes dear, that sounds like a problem.  
 I've known Kayla ten years now and I definitely  
 can't imagine her in the woods. She doesn't  
 even like to get drizzled on, let alone entertain  
 the possibility of sleeping in a tent in the pouring  
 rain. But dear, they haven't met yet, remember?  
**KRISTEN** *(adjusting the paintings on the wall)*:  
 Yeah... But knowing Lily, she'll get Kayla out  
 there. I bet I can predict exactly how she'll do  
 it. I have taught her some of the best lines to  
 make a girl melt. I'll have to make sure I re-  
 mind her of the most appropriate ones for this  
 situation. Sometimes she gets a little flighty, but  
 I'll take care of it.

*(The front doorbell rings.)*

**ABBY** *(laughing)*: I'm sure you will. Did you  
 hear the doorbell?

**KRISTEN**: Oh, I did.

**ABBY**: I'll get it.

**KRISTEN**: Hon, just stay here. I'll get it. Will



you fix the napkins while I'm gone?

*(KRISTEN exits stage right to meet their guest while ABBY looks at the napkins, sighs, and sits down waiting.)*

**KRISTEN** *(shouting as she walks back to the dining room)*: Abby, it's Kayla. She brought dessert and of course she's early.

*(KRISTEN and KAYLA enter.)*

**ABBY** *(standing up and embracing KAYLA)*: Hi, Kayla! Thanks for the dessert, you know pies are not my forte. God, we haven't seen each other since, what, last week?! Girl, you need to get a social life beyond this old married couple.

**KAYLA**: Hey, girls, there isn't anything wrong with this single dyke hanging out with her two best friends in the world. Okay, so I haven't been on a date for three months, but who needs dates when I have perfect lesbian bliss here.

**KRISTEN**: Yes, we do have bliss here, but the last I checked Abby was my woman and you were sleeping on the floor.

**KAYLA**: Oh the pains of the single lesbian. Maybe I'll go answer that classified ad I saw. I'm sure that would be real productive.

**ABBY**: After that you could go to the bar and pick up women.

*(She laughs.)*

Oh Abby, the things we did to find girlfriends. That blind date was pretty cute though, wasn't she, Kayla?

**KAYLA**: Girlfriend, you should not be making fun of me. After all, didn't you and Kristen meet at Bretz?

*(The doorbell rings and KRISTEN quickly exits stage right to answer it without saying a word.)*

**ABBY**: So how was the drive over? I heard traffic was horrendous, some accident on the expressway--

**KAYLA** *(looking at the table)*: Abby Zake Hollander, who did you invite over here? I see there are four place settings on this table. Is she cute at least? This better have been one of Kristen's schemes or you and I will have to have a talk.

**ABBY**: Just meet her. I'm going to put this dessert in the fridge. It looks absolutely wonderful.

**KAYLA**: But Abby, I didn't dress to meet a girl, why didn't you tell me?

**ABBY**: Well...

*(ABBY smiles and goes into the kitchen and*

*KRISTEN and the other dinner guest can be heard coming down the hall.)*

**KRISTEN** *(offstage)*: Okay, you're telling me ETSU just fired the athletic director because she was a dyke?! God, she's been there since before us and we all knew she was big lesbian. It's that new president of the college, isn't it?

**LILY** *(offstage)*: That's what the rumor is. Hey, Abby, what's cooking? It smells fabulous!

*(LILY, carrying a salad and KRISTEN enter the dining room and see KAYLA.)*

**KRISTEN**: Lily, this is Kayla, Abby's closest friend from college. Hope you don't mind her crashing our dyke bonding party.

*(LILY, red-faced turns to KAYLA and gives her a feeble handshake and is met with a beaming smile.)*

**LILY** *(turning her back to KAYLA and staring directly at KRISTEN)*: Of course, I don't mind. I've been getting tired of the perfectly domestic couple. So where is Abby anyway?

*(ABBY enters from the kitchen.)*

**ABBY**: I'm right here, darlin', come give me a hug.

*(LILY and ABBY embrace.)*

**ABBY**: So what you have you been up to girl? Are you done doing your traveling with the teams? You and Kristen have been having your little bonding weekends on the road with the team without me. If I didn't know better I'd be jealous. Come sit down.

*(ABBY takes the salad from LILY and places it on the table.)*

**LILY**: Well the summer league is over but the grind continues with the fall season approaching. It is a never-ending cycle. I swear I should just live on the bus. And I have enjoyed Kristen's company.

**KRISTEN** *(as the four take their seats)*: Oh, baby, you know that Lily is my secret lover, we have our little trysts when you're off at school and on those field trips.

**ABBY**: Kris, baby, cut it out. Our poor dinner guests may not want to hear all the details of our sordid affairs. Remember they think we're the picture of marital bliss. Lily, will you pass the salad, it looks wonderful. Where did you get it?

**LILY** *(passing the salad)*: Oh, I'm hurt. Don't you think I'm capable of this kind of mastery in the culinary arts? Well, you're right, I'm not.

**ABBY**: Girl, you know I didn't mean it that way. And, well, I have seen you make soup and

you looked a bit stressed. So where did you get it?

**LILY**: At the grocery store on Alabama and First Street.

**ABBY**: You mean Fountain of Life, the health food store in Nashville. So who was that guy I saw you talking to yesterday in there? I couldn't get your attention.

**LILY**: It must've just been a stock boy, I can never find anything. So, Ab, are you ready to head back for your second year of teaching?

**ABBY**: Yes, third graders seem much more endearing now that I haven't had to teach them for two months. I think--

**KRISTEN**: Abby, don't you think we should introduce our guests to each other a little more? After all, they've never met and they have so much in common.

*(She turns to LILY.)*

Did you know that Kayla is a graduate student at East Tennessee State University? She's attempting to become one of those Political Science professors that we loved so much in our college days.

**LILY** *(facing ABBY)*: That's good. Kris is right, I hated Political Science.

**KAYLA**: Oh it's those damn survey classes they make you take. There is a lot of interesting stuff out there.

**LILY**: Oh really. I guess I just didn't get that far. So Ab, do you think this year is going to be better than last? Kristen mentioned that you have a new grade chair, maybe this year you'll actually get all your textbooks on the first day.

**ABBY**: I hope so. Last year was so hard. If I hadn't signed the two year contract I might have not came back. But then I would have been the housewife, which you'd have loved, Kristen, right?

**KRISTEN**: I told you there was no reason you have to work. The law firm raised my yearly bonus this year, so I think we're going to North Hampton this fall. Lily, Kayla used to live there.

**LILY**: That's great. Maybe I'll visit you all there.

**KAYLA**: It's beautiful in the fall--

**LILY**: Abby, this food is amazing. Damn, I wish I could cook like you do. Next--

**KRISTEN** *(raising her voice)*: Hey, Kayla, so what was it like to live in the dyke nation. I know that Lily has always wanted to visit.

Maybe someday we could all make a trip up there and you could show us around.

**KAYLA** *(turning to LILY)*: Well Lily, it was a great place to live. All those women's colleges and those budding lesbians. I admit I robbed the cradle a few times. They were just so damn cute.

**KRISTEN**: Oh, we've all been guilty of those indiscretions. I heard you've been assisting the Women's Studies classes this semester. How is that?

**KAYLA**: It's been going well. The same departmental bureaucracy, the professors are definitely more lesbian but also definitely inaccessible. They wouldn't even talk to me at the bar.

**LILY** *(looking up from her plate)*: So, you go to the bar here. I try to stay away. It's gone downhill since it became exclusively lesbian. A little separatist for my blood. Don't you think, Abby?

**ABBY**: Well actually, since Kristen and I have been together we don't go there anymore. Kris never liked the owner so we try to stay away.

**KRISTEN**: It's not really that bad of a place. I like a little woman space every once in a while. That's what you all Women's Studies girls call it right, Kayla? Lily, maybe you should go to the bar with Kayla sometime, I'm sure there is a side to it you're not seeing.

**LILY**: No offense, Kayla, but I'd rather die than go to a place like that.

**KRISTEN** *(standing up)*: Let me get some more wine for everyone. I think some people need to loosen up a bit.

*(KRISTEN pours wine in KAYLA and LILY's glasses but leaves hers and ABBY's alone, while giving ABBY a silencing look.)*

**ABBY**: Lily, so what are you going to do with all your free time since the season is over?

**LILY**: Nothing really. Just work in the office and shop at Fountain, I guess.

**KRISTEN**: Oh, come on, girl, you are holding out on me. Is there some hottie there? You've been using those come-on lines on the cashiers again, haven't you?! Kayla, this girl is a master, I taught her everything she knows.

**LILY** *(embarrassed)*: No, I haven't, Ms. Kristen Jenkins. What could I have learned from you anyway? I don't see you out there playing the field. At least I'm being social. No offense, Abby.

**ABBY:** None taken. Kris needs to be razzed a bit from time to time. God knows she won't take it from me.

**KRISTEN** (*sarcastic*): Kayla, we haven't heard from you. Do you have your eyes on anyone at Fountain of Life?

**ABBY:** Now Kristen, be nice. Lily doesn't have to tell you every detail of her life, does she? Kayla, I think we should let these old friends have a moment to exchange some nicer words. Will you help me grab the bread and some more wine?

**KAYLA:** That sounds great.

(*KAYLA and ABBY exit to the kitchen.*)

What is it with you, girl? Poor Kayla, she doesn't know anything about how you are with your friends. I remember when we first met I thought you were a little intimidating. I guess I got over that. You know Abby's going to be mad later.

**KRISTEN:** I know. But, girlfriend you haven't talked to me about your love life in a long time. Here Abby and I are trying to fix you up with this beautiful woman and you are being a complete bitch to her.

**LILY** (looking at the table): I didn't ask you to set me up.

(*KAYLA and ABBY enter the dining room carrying bread and a new bottle of wine.*)

**ABBY:** So did you girls make up? I would like to make it through dinner without any more bickering. We're all friends here.

**KRISTEN** (*sarcastic*): Yes, everything's fine. Just everyone sit down and we can continue our pleasant little dinner.

**LILY:** Just ignore her, Kayla, she's having her tantrum of the day.

**KAYLA** (*turning to LILY*): Okay then. Well, Lily, since we have established you aren't hitting on the cashiers, why are you there so often?

**LILY** (*fidgiting with her silverware*): I guess there just aren't many good places to talk to people, unless you count the bar, which we know I don't particularly like. Well, umm... Where do you go anyway? I've never seen you around.

**KAYLA:** Truthfully, most of my time is occupied by my doctoral dissertation.

**KRISTEN:** What's your topic? Something completely dry and political, right?

**KAYLA:** Kristen, you underestimate me. I'm focusing on the effects of open lesbians on the

political system in the United States. Some of it's dry, but I'm sure even you would be captivated.

**KRISTEN:** Well maybe, but that sounds more like something Lily could get into. She's the more intellectual of the two of us. Lily, doesn't that sound interesting?

**LILY:** Yes, it does. But I'm done with college reading, that's why I graduated, remember?

**KRISTEN:** But there's something to say about furthering your education. Maybe you and Kayla can get together and talk education stuff.

**LILY:** Kristen, I can think for myself. I'm really busy right now anyway.

**KRISTEN:** Lily, what is up with you? All you do is coach a few teams and hang out at the health food store. There is more to life than that. You haven't gone on a date in months.

**LILY:** Well, thanks for sharing my personal life with everyone. I am happy doing my own thing right now. It's my own woman space.

**KRISTEN:** Well, since when haven't you been excited about a cute dyke?

**LILY:** It's not that. It's--

**KRISTEN:** It's what?! I know you aren't telling me something and I'm about to make a scene in front of my guest. You know I can't handle it when you keep things from me.

**ABBY:** Calm down, Kris. What has gotten into you?

(*She turns to KAYLA.*)

She doesn't normally get so worked up. I'm sorry you have to see this.

(*She turns to LILY.*)

You know she doesn't mean anything by this.

**LILY:** It's okay.

**KRISTEN:** Both of you be quiet. Lily, I'm still waiting for an answer.

(*A long pause ensues and all eyes turn to LILY.*)

**LILY** (*red-faced and speaking rapidly*): Actually a couple weeks ago I met this fabulous person.

**ABBY** (sending apologetic looks to KAYLA): Oh, that's great, Lily. I knew there had to be a reason for your secrecy.

(*KAYLA sighs and smiles politely.*)

**KRISTEN:** Okay, girl, so where did you meet her?

**ABBY:** Hon, let Lily have time to breathe before you pounce on her, okay?

**LILY:** I met the person at Fountain actually.

**KRISTEN:** Oh great! So have I seen her before? Tell me what she looks like. Why haven't you told me about her till now? I just talked to you yesterday on the phone and you definitely didn't mention anything about a hot new girl.

**LILY:** Well, yesterday I had to get to work. Anyway it doesn't matter. The person is definitely hot to me, but I don't know if you'll think so.

**KRISTEN:** come on, Lily, we have the same taste in women.

(*She turns to ABBY and KAYLA.*)

This girl is so predictable. I am sure this new fling is tall, blond hair and eyes to die for. I know Lily better than she knows herself. She is so predictable. I could probably tell you what color underwear she has on.

(*LILY smiles at KAYLA and ABBY and laughs nervously.*)

**KRISTEN:** So which girl is she? I know everyone at Fountain.

(*Another long pause occurs and everyone has completely puzzled looks on their faces.*)

**LILY:** (taking a deep breath and closing her eyes) Ummm... His name is Mohammed and I met him at Fountain where he works and he's a pre-med student at Vanderbilt and he volunteers at the children's home down the street.

(*LILY opens her eyes and is met with wide eyes and open mouths. KRISTEN is obviously furious.*)

**ABBY** (*quickly standing up*): Well, umm... I'm going to get dessert from the kitchen. Everyone just sit still.

**KAYLA** (*paralyzed, surveying everyone's faces*): That sounds good, Abby. Remember to bring forks for everyone.

(*ABBY exits to the kitchen.*)

**KRISTEN:** Lily, this is your idea of a joke, right? I'm sure it is because the last time I checked you were a dyke!

**LILY** (*quietly*): No, this isn't a joke and yes, I am a dyke, as you so eloquently put it.

**KRISTEN:** Oh! Don't even call yourself a dyke if you are dating a boy.

**LILY:** He's not a boy.

**KRISTEN:** Don't give me that crap. So how did this happen? And how can you even think of calling yourself a lesbian?

**LILY:** It's not that simple.

**KRISTEN:** Well, then explain it to me. God, girl, remember those times we sat around and

bitched and laughed about the "lesbians until graduation." The last time I checked, you thought they gave dykes a bad name.

**LILY:** We were young and completely sure we were right. Hell, I even thought I was right. This isn't easy, okay? Remember what it felt like when we were trying to come out?

**KRISTEN:** Yeah, it was hard, but exactly, we came out.

**LILY:** Well, think about that confusion times three. I thought I had come out. I'm the big dyke, after all. The last thing I ever thought could happen was me being attracted to a guy. It freaks me out more than it does you.

**KRISTEN** (*looking at the ceiling*): I'm sure.

(*She pauses.*)

Was it Karen? I know your breakup was hard. Was I not supportive enough? You seemed fine, but I was going through those issues with Abby. Maybe you should start coming over more often. I think you need more guidance or something.

**KAYLA** (*standing up*): Well, I think Abby might need help in the kitchen. I'll be right back.

(*KAYLA exits to the kitchen quickly.*)

**LILY:** I've been expecting this from you. That is why I haven't mentioned it till now. The last thing I wanted to do was get you up in arms over nothing. But I think I really like this guy.

**KRISTEN:** Do you think that I would just blow you off or something? We've been friends a very damn long time. I don't feel like you're putting any value in our friendship.

**LILY:** That is not true.

**KRISTEN:** Well, that's what I see. After all, we worked so hard after our breakup to get to this level. It took almost three years before we could talk like this. I have never kept anything from you. Were you willing to throw it all away for a boy? That's what I--

**LILY** (*standing up, slamming her fists on the table*): Kristen, shut the hell up! This has nothing to do with Karen or any college part-time lesbians. And most of all it has nothing to do with you!

(*KRISTEN sits in silence, not looking at LILY. ABBY enters with KAYLA carrying dessert.*)

**ABBY** (*quietly*): So why are you dating a man? This is somewhat of a shock, after all.

**LILY:** I met him at Fountain as I said before; God knows I spend enough time there. I'd hit on

all the women, thanks to Kristen, and Mohamed and I always joked about my lack of success. Eventually we started talking about other things and started seeing each other outside of the store.

**ABBY:** So he knows you're a les--umm--bisexual and doesn't care?

**LILY:** What, you too Abby? I kiss one boy and I am no longer a lesbian. I don't think he was looking to score a date or convert me, no. I was just proud I had found a friend outside our little circle. After all, you all had been telling me I needed to branch out.

**KRISTEN** (*bitingly sarcastic*): This wasn't what I had in mind.

**LILY:** Shut up, Kristen, you know it's not what I had in mind either.

**KAYLA:** Kristen, pour us some more wine. Pardon my forwardness, but hell, this should be an interesting story and I think we could all use something to calm us down.

**ABBY:** That sounds like a great idea. Kris, pour some wine for our guests.

*(KRISTEN pours wine in everyone's glasses. They all get comfortable in their chairs and relax for a moment.)*

**LILY:** Anyway, one night Mo and I went out for drinks after I had been rejected once again by the blond cashier you keep talking about Kris. Mo and I talked and I realized I felt differently about him than I thought.

**KRISTEN:** It was probably the alcohol. You could never handle your liquor.

**LILY:** I told you to shut up, Kristen. Mo and I went back to my apartment and before I realized it we were kissing.

**KRISTEN:** So you probably fucked him right then.

**LILY:** For your information I did no such thing. Actually I freaked out and sent him home. I avoided Fountain for like two weeks. I didn't return his calls. And I slept with the blonde cashier.

**KAYLA:** Well isn't that interesting. Guess she did exactly what you wanted, Kristen. Didn't help, did it though?!

**KRISTEN:** Kayla, stay out of this. So how am I supposed to process this?

**LILY:** Can you stop being so concerned about yourself for a damn minute. Let's remember that it's me having a sexual identity crisis, not you.

**KRISTEN:** Well, are you still talking to the boy?

**LILY:** I don't know if I want to go any further with this, with you. But, oh well, yes, I am still talking to the man. Last night I decided to face him. I needed to know if there was something there.

**ABBY:** What happened?

**LILY:** We talked for awhile. I definitely had some explaining to do. He was wonderfully patient. And then we kissed. It wasn't bad. Part of me was freaking out, but part of me enjoyed it. I think we're going to see each other tomorrow.

**KRISTEN:** (*standing up, loudly*): So does this mean you're straight now???

*(LILY bursts into tears.)*

**LILY** (*sobbing*): Does it matter?

**KRISTEN:** Hell, yes, it matters. You can't go around calling yourself a lesbian and be fucking a man on the side. The way I see it you're bisexual at least. Maybe you never were gay.

**LILY:** You know that's not true. I have never been attracted to a man before. It's like this attraction transcends gender.

**KRISTEN:** Who have you been hanging around lately? Sounds like Kayla's Women's Studies crap. Either you're a dyke or you're not.

**LILY:** Damn it, I don't need you to judge me.

**KRISTEN:** What am I going to tell our friends? You know they're not going to talk to you anymore?!

**LILY:** What are we, in the fucking third grade? Such great friends you've surrounded yourself with. Hell, such great friends I've surrounded myself with. I didn't know our entire lives revolved around my sexuality.

**KRISTEN:** The community has an image to maintain, and people like you make it impossible for us to gain any ground in the eyes of straight people.

**LILY:** People like me?! When did I become the hated one? What is the use of arguing for sexual freedom when it only applies to the community's definition of sexual freedom?

**KRISTEN:** There you go again with that Women's Studies crap. You and Kayla would have been great together. That is, if you hadn't decided to date a fucking boy.

**LILY** (*turning to KAYLA*): I'm sorry, Kayla. I'm sure you're a nice person. I know I treated you rudely earlier. As you can see I've been a

little stressed.

**KAYLA:** Yeah, you did, but I understand now. I didn't know anything about this setup, really.

**KRISTEN:** Sure, Lily, now you talk to Kayla. Now you all can be great friends.

**LILY:** You wanted us to be friends in the first place, remember?

**KRISTEN:** Actually I didn't care if you all were ever friends. I was just trying to get you a good lay. But now it seems you prefer men.

**LILY:** Come on, Kristen, we are friends. Talking to me like that isn't going to help things.

**KRISTEN:** We're friends all right, but before that we were lovers. Don't you know what this kind of revelation means to me?

**LILY:** What do you mean? We were together a long time ago. This has nothing to do with our former romantic relationship.

**KRISTEN:** That is not true. If you can keep something like this from me now, who knows what you didn't tell me then.

**LILY:** We were completely honest with each other. That was the only thing we could do right. Why are you doing this now?

**KRISTEN:** Come to think of it, your relationship with my friend John always seemed a little too close for friendship.

**LILY:** Kristen! First off I had no feelings for John whatsoever. We were in love, remember?! Secondly, John was gay. You're not even making sense.

**KRISTEN:** Yeah, sure, we were in love. And what about our sex life? Did you think of men when you were with me?

**LILY:** Oh my god! Kristen, I think you have gone off the fucking deep end. Are you even listening to me?

**KRISTEN:** Yes, I'm listening to you and that's why I'm saying these things. I think you have gone off the deep end. Kissing boys, who knows if you've already slept with him.

**LILY:** It shouldn't matter what I've done with him. It shouldn't matter who I'm doing it with.

**KRISTEN:** Girl, I made you a dyke. This is a complete reflection on me.

**LILY:** What??

**KRISTEN:** When I found you in college, you were nothing. Without me you'd still be lusting after your lesbian high school teacher. You were always all talk, no action. I guess except for with men.

**LILY:** I am grateful for what you did for me.

Coming out was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But you're getting crude now. And you know very well I wasn't thinking of boys when we were having sex. Just calm down.

**KAYLA** (*standing up*): Well, I think my purpose here is over. Abby, you can give me my dessert plate later.

**ABBY** (*nervously*): Oh Kayla! Don't go yet. These two crazy old friends are calming down a bit. Please stay a bit longer. We were going to watch a video. Come on, it's "Bar Girls," your favorite.

**KAYLA** (*sitting down*): Oh, not that trashy thing. Well, maybe a bit longer. You know how I love to dissect the stereotypes in that movie.

*(KAYLA, ABBY, and LILY stand up and head offstage to the living room when KRISTEN stops them.)*

**KRISTEN:** Everyone sit back down. I have not finished with Lily yet.

*(ABBY obediently sits down but KAYLA looks at KRISTEN incredulously.)*

**KAYLA:** What the hell are you doing, Kristen? We are not your subjects. I think you've subjected poor Lily here to enough of your interrogation. This is not going to be solved now. And Abby, what has gotten into you? Since when do you just obey every single word this woman says?

**ABBY** (*looking down, talking quietly*): I'm not obeying her. I wanted--

**KRISTEN** (*turning to KAYLA*): Damn right she's not obeying me, she would've never suggested that dumb video idea. She knows I'm not done talking to Lily. Your best friend can be rather insolent at times. That's why she sat down, she knew she was wrong.

**KAYLA:** My God, apparently no one here is listening to what is coming out of Kristen's mouth.

*(KAYLA continues to stand disgusted.)*

**ABBY:** Kayla, please just sit down. Don't make things worse than they already are.

**KAYLA:** I don't understand why you are saying this, Abby, but I'll wait for a little while.

**LILY** (*turning to KRISTEN*): Since I apparently can't leave until I satisfy your needs, what else do you want to know?

*(Everyone sits back down at the table.)*

**KRISTEN:** First off, you're going to tell me when you are going to end this insane thing with the boy. We both know it's some strange cry for

attention. Well, you got my attention.

**LILY:** I have no intention of ending this anytime soon. I will admit that I have wanted your attention, but now I wonder why. But my dating Mohammed is not in any way related to that. You have been so wrapped up in planning my life you have forgotten to talk to me. But don't worry, you don't have to talk anymore. You've done enough of that for months.

**KAYLA:** I agree.

**KRISTEN:** Okay, Kayla, you can quit with the sassy attitude anytime. You come into my house, bitch at me, boss my woman around, and now you're taking sides with the enemy.

**LILY:** Oh, so I'm the enemy again.

**KAYLA:** Exactly. I am doing every damn one of those things and I'm not done. I came into your house, to be set up by you, unbeknownst to me. And you have treated me like crap ever since your friend didn't follow your prearranged plan. Suck it up, baby, you don't control the world.

**KRISTEN:** Abby, how could you bring this bitch into my house? I knew I should have never let you be friends with her. I thought she would be a nice diversion for you, but apparently I was wrong.

**KAYLA:** You let me be friends with her?! I didn't think dykes like you really existed. You're as bad as a man.

*(KRISTEN looks startled at first and then picks up her glass of wine and throws it on KAYLA.)*

**ABBY:** Kristen! Have you lost your mind?  
*(She turns to KAYLA.)*

Kayla, I am so sorry. Let me take you to the bathroom and maybe we can get that out before it sets in. Kristen, don't you go anywhere.

*(ABBY and KAYLA exit to the bathroom.)*

**LILY:** You have really lost it, girl. She calls you a man and then you throw wine on her. What is it with you and men? We've always been slightly separatist but not to this degree. Given my behavior, what are you going to do with me?

**KRISTEN:** She had no right to call me a man. I am a dyke, tried and true.

**LILY (sarcastic):** Actually, I think she said you were like a man. Maybe it's the way you control the whole damn room that makes her think you have a dick.

*(KAYLA and ABBY come back in.)*

**ABBY (turning to KRISTEN):** I want you to apologize to Kayla. She may have said some things that were slightly out of line but that is no excuse for your behavior, hon.

**KAYLA:** I said things slightly out of line? Were you not listening to your girlfriend?

**KRISTEN (turning to ABBY):** Look at her, she's not remorseful for a damn word she said. The last thing I am going to do is apologize to her.

**ABBY:** Just do it please.

**KAYLA:** Hello?! I am still in the room. You all are fucking bizarre. Abby, you were never like this in college. Does no one see what Kristen is doing here?

**LILY:** Kristen, you need to apologize to her, and then after that, to me. And third, you need to get over this whole man thing.

**KRISTEN:** What is this? Everyone is bossing me around in my home. I will do whatever I damn well please. And that includes absolutely nothing of what you said, Lily.

**KAYLA (sarcastically):** Well, at least you're admitting you have a problem with the whole man thing.

**KRISTEN:** I don't have a problem with men or anything else. The male gender is perfectly hospitable. But the last time I checked, I was in a room full of people who didn't like dick. Oh, I forgot, except our newly formed heterosexual, Lily.

**LILY:** My God, Kristen, can we get off the whole heterosexual thing. I am not straight. I am a lesbian who happens to be attracted to one man in the entire universe. Why is this so threatening to everyone?!

**ABBY:** Well, Lily, I admit I don't know quite what to think of this. Are you sure you never liked a guy before?

**LILY:** Come on, Abby, you know I haven't. What you all aren't understanding is that I don't think it should be something we are psychoanalyzing. I don't think who I sleep with has anything to do with anything.

**KAYLA:** I agree. I know you all have read Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." It's practically a prerequisite to being a dyke. Did you all miss the lesbian continuum part?

**KRISTEN:** Kayla, could you just shut up with all the lesbian Women's Studies crap? For me there is black or white. Either you are a woman-

loving dyke or you're not. Lily can be bisexual if she wants, but she sure as hell can't call herself a dyke after this unspeakable incident. I'm just going to have to tell our friends she had a "heterosexual incident" in her youth that she didn't tell me about. I mean, after all, I have an image to maintain.

**LILY:** You can tell them whatever the fuck you want, but I can't believe you still want to hang out with them. If they're going to ostracize me, why do you want to be a part of that?

**ABBY:** Well, Lily, they've been our friends for a long time. You can't just expect Kristen to cut off complete contact with them. It's you who has the problem with them.

**KAYLA:** Abby, I can't believe you would say that. Has Kristen completely warped every cell in your brain?

**KRISTEN:** Now Kayla, I am going to ask this last time that you don't talk to me or my wife that way, or I'm going to kick your ass out of here.

**KAYLA:** Well, I've been trying to get out of here for about an hour now, but I can't leave Abby in this hell hole until there's some kind of resolution. I need to undo some of the brainwashing you've been doing on these people.  
**KRISTEN (continuing as if she didn't hear KAYLA):** Abby is right, Lily, how can you expect me to abandon those people? They have stood by me through a lot of problems.

**LILY:** And I haven't? What about our enduring relationship?

**KRISTEN:** Yes, you and I have been friends for a long time, but the others don't want to date men, like you do. How can I expect you to understand my problems now that you like boys?

**LILY:** What, have I somehow lost the ability to reason and function? I feel like you're saying just because I want to date this one man, I no longer can understand anything lesbian related. The last time I checked there wasn't a secret lesbian code.

**KRISTEN:** Don't be smart-ass to me. I don't appreciate your condescension. Of course there's no lesbian secret code, that's ridiculous, but I just don't think I can come to you with problems about women anymore.

**LILY (turning to ABBY):** Abby, do you agree with her? You've been a basically normal person tonight, come on and help me, please.

**ABBY:** Well, Lily, I can see Kristen's point.

Relationships with men are different than relationships with women. I just don't think you can relate the two.

**LILY:** Abby! Not you too?! The last time I checked we were all human beings. Does no one see this basic fact?

**KAYLA:** Lily, I've given up on them. Apparently they've sunk into the lesbian separatist underworld. Why are you still talking to them?

**LILY:** Kayla, I agree, but Kristen's my friend.

**KRISTEN:** Thank you, Lily. Kayla, nobody here is going to listen to you. They have more common sense than that.

**KAYLA (muttering):** No, they're more obedient than dogs.

**KRISTEN (turning to KAYLA and slamming her fists down):** Okay, okay, okay. First, you cut me up in front of my wife and my best friend. Then, you try to tell me I am brainwashing the people I love. Now, you don't even have the decency to speak your mind to my face. Can you be any more insolent? What is stopping me from throwing you out of this house?

**KAYLA:** I don't know, girl. I sure have been waiting. You treat these people you supposedly love like dogs and you treat your guests even worse. I have no idea why anyone even wants to spend two seconds around you. But most of all I have been very patient with you and listening to you badger Lily, like your word is God's. How can you talk with such authority?

**KRISTEN:** I can talk with whatever authority I want. I am a dyke, tried and true, unlike little missy over there.

**KAYLA:** You're a dyke tried and true, huh? Maybe you should say you are a dyke one more time just to make sure we really know. How can you all listen to this crap over and over again?

**KRISTEN:** They aren't listening to any crap, except what's coming out of your mouth.

**ABBY:** Kristen, don't be so harsh. Really, Kayla, this is unusual for her.

**LILY:** She's not always like this, Kayla, Abby's right. Well sometimes, but she always has a good reason. At least I think so...

**KAYLA:** Don't you all ever look at what she's doing to your lives? And for what? Why does she have such power?

**LILY:** She has done so much for me. I can admit that.

**ABBY:** Kayla, she doesn't have power over me. She's just perfect for me. I've told you that be-

fore.

**KAYLA:** Apparently, Abby, you haven't looked at your life recently. And she's far from perfect.

**KRISTEN:** Shut up Kayla, you have no idea what you are talking about. My wife can think on her own.

**KAYLA:** What, Kris, did you let the leash off her brain for a minute? Of all people to attack, you'd think you'd choose better.

**LILY:** What are you talking about?

**KRISTEN:** She's being a bitch again that's all.

**KAYLA:** What, Kris, do I make you nervous? Did you think you could abuse me all night? Don't you think I've figured out they don't know?!

**ABBY:** Don't know what?

**KRISTEN** (*turning nervously to LILY and ABBY*): She's just talking shit. Look at what she's trying to do. She has been against me all night.

**KAYLA:** I never thought you were particularly smart, but I didn't think you were that dumb either.

**LILY:** So what's the big secret?

**KAYLA:** Girls, you favorite, perfect friend Kristen, has been lying all night, unless she didn't ever remember...

*(LILY and ABBY turn to Kristen with bewildered looks on their faces.)*

**KAYLA:** I haven't been perfectly honest with you all. I didn't want to step on anyone's toes. I know you love her, Abby, that's why I have bit my tongue until now.

**KRISTEN** (*visibly upset and disturbed*): I think you can leave know Kayla. I don't need you filling my wife and my best friend full of your lies.

**KAYLA:** Hey girl, it's your own fault. You should have been nicer.

**KRISTEN:** Why should I be nice to you?

**LILY:** Could someone explain what the hell you all are talking about?

**KAYLA:** A couple months ago I saw Kristen at the bar. You know the separatist one you hate so much, Lily. Anyway, she was hammered. We all played pool for awhile, but as the people dwindled I got a little concerned because I didn't want her driving home drunk.

**ABBY:** Kris, that doesn't sound like you. What was wrong?

**KRISTEN:** Nothing was wrong, hon, it was just a bad night. Wasn't Kayla nice to make sure I

got home safely? Anyway, what are you dribbling on about, Kayla? So I got a little drunk one night.

**KAYLA:** You don't remember do you?

*(She turns to ABBY and LILY.)*

Well girls, Miss Kristen here became rather talkative eventually. More like delusional since she wasn't really talking to anyone in particular. Just shouting all over the bar about what a good lay she is. I thought she was joking at first but then I realized she had had more to drink than I had realized.

**LILY:** It's not the first time, Kayla, so was she rambling on about sexual conquests? That's her favorite topic when we get drunk.

**KAYLA:** Well, umm... Yeah, she did. But somehow I don't think she mentioned all of them when you all partied

**LILY:** What do you mean?

**KAYLA:** Well she went down the list, "Janice, Carly, Andrea, Sue, Lily, Jake, Leigh Ann and finally Abby."

**LILY:** Can we back up a minute? Did I hear you right, cause I'm sure I didn't. You said Jake??

**KAYLA:** That's kind of what my reaction was so I kind of got nosy. I asked her about him and not only did I get a story, but she bought me another drink.

**ABBY:** What was the story?

**KAYLA:** Apparently back in her college days she had been friends with this guy, Jake and eventually things got romantic. She called it her "heterosexual incident" and kind of laughed it off.

**LILY:** That's not possible. Kristen and I dated the entire time we were in college. We met during freshman orientation. You must be mistaken.

**KAYLA:** I wish I was. In her drunken walk to the car, Kristen talked about it as though it was a big secret. She said no one knew and if her best friend found out she'd kill her. That didn't quite make sense to me but I just blew it off as the alcohol.

**LILY** (*angrily*): So Kristen, I'd kill you huh?! I wonder why. So when did it happen? Jake was a part of our lives for three years. Was it that whole time? Forget it. I don't want to know. Your parents fucking loved him. God I was dumb!

**KRISTEN:** No, well, just listen Lily, it wasn't

like that. He was just a friend, I swear.

**LILY:** You expect me to believe that? Kayla has nothing to gain by lying and you have everything. You can't control this situation. How can you even talk to me? We had been together--

**KRISTEN** (*reaching to touch LILY*): I know, it was a long time ago--

**LILY** (*slapping KRISTEN's hand away*): Don't even come near me, you fucking bitch. We had been together for two years by then. You have been preaching at me all night long about honesty. I am dumber than I thought.

**KRISTEN:** I was honest with you. It was just a momentary lapse of judgment. It wasn't anything. I swear--

**LILY:** It wasn't anything! It was the entire foundation of our relationship. You're telling me that is nothing?! I can't believe I have ever even listened to a God damn word out your mouth. I'm sure you didn't tell Abby about our little slip-up last June did you? You said you did, but I'm sure you covered your butt, given this little revelation.

*(ABBY begins to sob and KAYLA rushes over to comfort her.)*

**LILY:** God damn! I'm so sorry, Abby. I thought she had told you. I didn't mean to hurt you. It was one night a year ago. We were both drunk. It was just sex; it didn't mean anything. I am so sorry.

*(She turns to KRISTEN.)*

Look at you, bitch. You have your wife crying, Kayla, your guest, hates you and I'm not far behind. To top it all off you have been bitching me out for forever now about dating a boy. I was even starting to listen to you. I can't believe I have been so dumb for so long. Don't you even have anything to say?

**KRISTEN:** What the hell do you want me to say? It was five years ago and a stupid mistake that would have remained forgotten had it not been for this--

*(She gestures to KAYLA.)*

--damn meddling bitch.

**LILY:** It's all about somebody else. You see, even if I could just look over that little indiscretion all those years ago, that doesn't change the fact you have been badgering and berating me for something you did yourself. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

**ABBY** (*standing up and walking over to*

**KRISTEN**): Not to be rude or anything, but were you planning on addressing the whole fucking infidelity issue? I mean, it was brought up five minutes ago and I haven't heard even a fucking apology yet. Maybe I should just take a number. It seems you have a few things to deal with first. Maybe I'll go pack my things while I'm waiting.

*(ABBY exits through the kitchen door.)*

**KRISTEN:** Wait, Abby--

**KAYLA:** Oh, just shut up, Kristen, you don't really care anyway. She's right, I haven't heard an apology yet. I think you care more that Lily has found out your past and it ruins your leverage with her. You don't give a damn about anyone in this room, except maybe yourself.

**KRISTEN:** That is not true. I care about all of these people and that's why I have done what I have done.

**LILY:** Bull-fucking-shit. You care about covering your ass and keeping your control. I don't know why it has taken me so long to see that. You're a true dyke. Ha, ha, ha. What a load of crap. You're a true asshole is what you are.

**KAYLA:** Very eloquently put, Lily.

**KRISTEN:** Why don't you just leave, Kayla, haven't you had your fun already? You've fucked with my life sufficiently for the night, I think.

**KAYLA:** Oh don't worry, I'll be leaving soon. There's just one more thing that needs to be taken care of.

**KRISTEN:** What the Hell could that be?

There's nothing left for you to mess.

*(ABBY re-enters the dining room, suitcases in hand. KRISTEN looks shocked, as though she has forgotten ABBY ever left.)*

**KRISTEN:** Abby, come on girl, what you doing? I think you're being a little drastic. It's probably been the wine. You know how alcohol does crazy things to you. Just sit down, sweetheart. We'll talk after they leave. It's really just a misunderstanding. I swear to you. Lily's just talking crazy because she's upset with me. Just sit down.

**ABBY:** You expect me to believe one word of the dribble coming out of your mouth?

**KRISTEN:** Baby, I'm telling you the truth. Kayla's been putting crazy ideas in your head.

**ABBY** (*turning to KAYLA*): Don't worry, I believe everything that's been said tonight. I haven't lost all my brain cells as you seem to think I have.

*(She turns to LILY.)*

And at least I won't be you in five years finding out she slept with a man while we were together. That's got to really suck.

**LILY:** Abby, we're friends, remember? It was just one night. It didn't mean anything.

**ABBY:** Hmm. . . to quote you, "It didn't mean anything?" It was the entire foundation of our relationship." Of all people, I think you should understand why I hate you, and Kristen, and this whole damn situation.

**LILY:** I understand, but--

**ABBY:** Shut up, Lily. I need to deal with Kristen over here so I can leave.

**KRISTEN:** Whoa, girl, who said anything about leaving?

**ABBY:** As a matter of fact, I think I did. I think I will be getting the hell out of here permanently.

**KRISTEN:** You can't do that. Just sit down, honey, and we'll discuss this.

**ABBY:** The hell I can't leave. And don't you dare tell me to sit down one more time or I will strap you to the chair.

**KRISTEN:** Can you just wait till our guests make their exit? I know I'm done with both of them. Aren't you?

**ABBY:** No, actually I'm not. Anyway, anything I have to say can be said in front of them.

**KRISTEN:** Really, hon, I think this would be better settled with just you and I.

**ABBY:** What are you afraid of, some more of your secrets just flying out into the open. I think I've learned more about you in the last ten minutes than in the entire time we've been together.

**KRISTEN:** Okay, I deserve that, but really, let's wait until our guests are gone. I'm sure they don't want to hear our little problems.

**ABBY:** Little problems?! What drugs have you been taking? Not only are you ruder than any woman I've ever met, but you cheated on me, you cheated on Lily. Hell, you've probably cheated on every girl you've ever been with. You're worse than a man.

**LILY:** Can I help you with your stuff? I really want to make things right between us.

**ABBY:** Go to hell. Now I think it's you who's lost all her brain cells. Get out of my house.

**KRISTEN:** Wait a minute. So you aren't leaving?

**ABBY:** No, I'm leaving. I just want to exercise a little power before I leave. God knows I've

never done it before.

**LILY:** She's got you there, Kristen.

**KRISTEN:** Shut up, Lily. I don't have time to deal with your crap. If you hadn't noticed, my wife is leaving me.

**ABBY:** Next, I would like you to pack all my stuff by tomorrow. I'll be sending my sister and Kayla for it. Don't bother to call. You know my sister hates you more than the fact that I'm gay.

**KRISTEN:** Don't I have any say in this?

**KAYLA, ABBY, and LILY:** No!

**ABBY:** Kris, hope you have a great night, a great life.

**KAYLA** *(turning to LILY):* Sorry we didn't meet under better circumstances. Maybe we can get together some time without the crazy bitch.

*(She smiles, handing LILY a piece of paper.)*  
Here's my number. Call me sometime. I think we have a lot we can talk about. And if nothing else, you can tell me all about Mo.

**LILY** *(taking the piece of paper):* Thanks, I will. Abby, sorry about tonight, about everything. Maybe I'll see you around. Really, you can talk to me if you need to. It looks like we have more in common than I first thought.

**KRISTEN:** Get out of here, the both of you. I am tired of all this. Abby, hon, just call me in the morning. You're just tired. This will all make more sense tomorrow.

**ABBY:** God, girl, you really don't get it. I am leaving. There is no call in the morning. Whatever.

*(KAYLA and ABBY, carrying suitcases exit stage left to the front door.)*

**KRISTEN:** Wait!

**LILY:** Girl, you're pathetic. I can't decide if you're even worth five seconds of my breath. I don't think you are.

**KRISTEN:** Wait, you can't leave too.

**LILY:** Umm. Yes, I can. I'm now remembering that I am extremely upset with you and wish you would drop off the face of the earth.

*(She stands up.)*

Oh yeah, and you can mail me my salad bowl.

*(LILY walks toward the door. KRISTEN stands powerless.)*

**KRISTEN:** Fine, bitch, just fucking leave me. I've been asking you to leave for awhile now. I know you all will be back tomorrow anyway. You all don't know how to exist without me.

**LILY:** Yep, girl. You go on thinking that. I'm out of here.

*(LILY exits stage left to the front door.)*

**KRISTEN:** They'll be back. They don't know how to exist without me.

*(She stands up and walking towards the kitchen door.)*

I should take the cordless phone to my room. I know Ab will call in the morning.

*(Her voice trails off.)*

And Kayla, well she is hot, maybe it won't be so bad tomorrow. . .

*(KRISTEN exits through the kitchen door.)*  
*(Blackout.)*

THE END