

# AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

## FRIDAY, MARCH 23

Atlanta playwrights:  
Robert Earl Price and  
Jim Grimsley  
*Presser Hall*

Joyce Carol Oates,  
fiction writer  
*Presser Hall*

Reception and booksigning,  
immediately following the reading.  
*Rebekah Scott Hall*

## SATURDAY, MARCH 24

Li-Young Lee, poet  
*Dana Fine Arts Building*

THE FESTIVAL IS FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC,  
BUT THERE IS A DONATION FOR TICKETS FOR  
JOYCE CAROL OATES  
(404) 471-6430

FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL:  
404-471-5090

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ALSO AVAILABLE AT  
AGNES SCOTT WEB SITE:  
[www.agnesscott.edu](http://www.agnesscott.edu)

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:  
TO: [camest@agnesscott.edu](mailto:camest@agnesscott.edu)

# AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE WRITERS' FESTIVAL 2000

March 23 - 24, 2000



*Robert Frost and  
Joyce Carol Oates*

**JOYCE CAROL OATES**



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE  
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

141 East College Avenue  
Atlanta/Decatur, GA 30030-3797

## AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL SPEAKERS

JOYCE CAROL OATES is best known for her many novels and short story collections, but she has also published several volumes of poetry, plays and literary criticism, as well as the book-length essay, *On Boxing*. Oates has won the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in short fiction, the O. Henry prize for Continued Achievement in the Short Story, and the National Book Award (for *Them*). James Atlas called her novel *You Must Remember This* "an American Masterpiece, the definitive history of an era." Her most recent novels include *Black Water*, *Man Crazy*, *Zombie*, and *My Heart Laid Bare*. Oates's latest book is *Broke Heart Blues: A Novel*, a depiction of a charismatic "bad boy" and his effect on a small town. Critics have called it a "stunning novel," "a sharp, funny look at how memories can warp reality." Oates is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University.



ROBERT EARL PRICE has published poems in a variety of journals and collections, including his latest book, *Blues Blood*. His poetry has been honored with the Broadside Press Poetry Prize, the Bronze Jubilee Award for Literature, and a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1996, the City of Atlanta awarded him the Mayor's Fellowship for Literature. Price attended the American Film Institute on a William Wyler Fellowship and has also worked as a fiction writer, screenwriter, and playwright. Price has had seven original plays produced, including *Blue Monk* which was produced as part of the Cultural Olympiad during the 1996 games in Atlanta. Price describes his style as a combination of jazz, magical realism, and literary anarchy. He is currently Playwright-in-Residence at Seven Stages Theatre in Atlanta.



LI-YOUNG LEE made a distinctive impression on the American literary scene with his first collection of poems, *Rose* (1986). Maxine Hong Kingston called Lee "a miracle of a poet. He knows how to love, and how to write that feeling and other feelings and conditions so that his poetry exalts the reader." *Rose* received the New York University Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award. His subsequent collection, *The City in Which I Love You*, was the Academy of American Poets' Lamont Library Selection for 1990. Lee's autobiographical work, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, provides an extraordinary account of his family's journey from China, through Indonesia and Hong Kong, to America. Garret Hongo called it "the finest book I've read that testifies



JIM GRIMSLEY won the 1995 Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction with *Winter Birds*, which also received a special citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation. *Dream Boy* won the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Book Award. His most recent novels are *My Drowning* (1997) and *Comfort and Joy* (1999). Jim Grimsley calls himself a novelist first, but he has had considerable success in writing for the stage. *Mr. Universe* won him the George Oppenheimer/Newsday Award for Best New American Playwright in 1987. The published collection, *Mr. Universe and Other Plays*, has been described as "award-winning drama that peers into the nature of human conflict with wit, risk, and a sense of adventure." In 1997, Grimsley won the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest

## FESTIVAL HISTORY

For twenty-eight years, Agnes Scott College has sponsored a Writers' Festival, featuring nationally known guest writers and a contest in creative writing open to all college students in Georgia. The best submissions are published in the Writers' Festival Magazine, and the student writers join our distinguished guest writers on campus for readings and master classes. Often characterized by personal anecdote and humor, the lively readings and panel discussions help remind us that writers are living, breathing complex beings, not just figures reflected distantly in the pages of books.

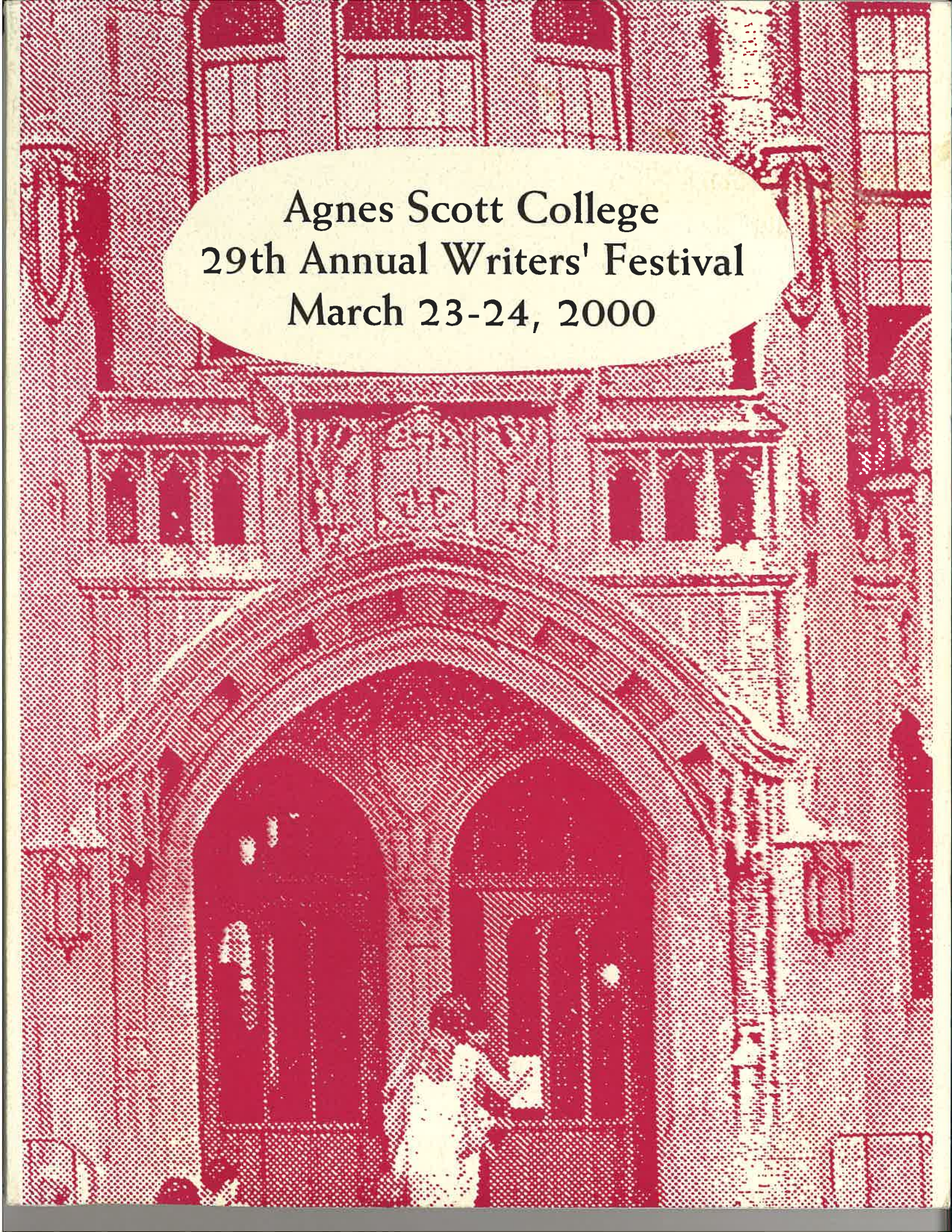
The connection between Agnes Scott and great writers precedes our formal festival; indeed it runs through the College's history. Harriet Monroe, editor of the influential modernist journal *Poetry*, visited the College in 1921; Vachel Lindsay followed the next year. Thornton Wilder, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Carl Sandburg all read their work on campus in the thirties. In the years following, eminent writers including Pearl Buck, Randall Jarrell, Katherine Anne Porter, Archibald MacLeish, and Flannery O'Connor spoke to students and faculty at Agnes Scott.

By far the most famous literary connection of the College has been Robert Frost's twenty-year association with the institution. Frost was a frequent presence at Agnes Scott, and the archives hold some of his correspondence, many signed volumes of his work, and other mementos of his visits.

The Writers' Festival as it is currently constituted dates back to 1972, when the visiting artists were May Sarton, Marion Montgomery, and Michael Mott. The current format ensures an annual gathering with public readings and a good deal of student involvement. Guests have included fiction writers Gloria Naylor, Peter Carey, Tim O'Brien, Margaret Atwood, Eudora Welty, and Tillie Olsen; poets Richard Wilbur, James Dickey, Sharon Olds, Michael Harper, and Eavan Boland; and essayists Phillip Lopate, Melissa Faye Greene, and John Stone. Playwright Alfred Uhry appeared shortly after winning an academy award for

## 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  
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price



Agnes Scott College  
29th Annual Writers' Festival  
March 23-24, 2000

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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 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, and Robert Earl Price.

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 Sheehey, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support.

March, 2000

Editor  
Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Poetry: Waqas Khwaja and Julia De Pree

Short Fiction: Bo Ball and Chris Ames

Personal Essay: Phillip Gardner

One-Act Play: Dudley Sanders and Linda Hubert

Cover Photograph  
Agnes Scott College

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## Poems by Jennifer Brooks

### Smell of Mother

Four times I tried to launch the raft,  
Without success. I leaned along the side  
And touched the cold, cold foam around me,  
Breathing in. My mother's dog,  
Her body old and tired, pacing  
Blind and deaf along the riverbank.  
She was alone. Sinking into  
Wetness, she lost balance, sense,  
Forgetting how my mother smelled. I  
Pushed again, and this time left the bank.  
The river pulled away. The dog did  
not remember who I was. I came upon  
Her full of fear and trembling cold; she  
Would not ride the raft. Instead she  
Paddled slowly back across, with frozen paw  
And distant memory of warm house,  
Sweet candles burning, Mozart and smell  
Of soft woman, my mother.

## On Sunday Evening

I can tell the rain is coming  
 By the feeling I get in my fingers and knees  
 And by the stillness of everything  
 When I look out my kitchen window  
 Chopping garlic for  
 Beans and rice  
 And flavor in everything.  
 My mother stood here, as did my grandmother  
 Preparing pot roasts for Sunday dinners  
 With carrots and potatoes.  
 I will never know how to make one.  
 They spit and polished  
 Until their houses gleamed  
 While their faces remained expressionless  
 Through Sunday dinners, church meetings,  
 And childbirth.  
 My grandmother gave birth to five  
 When she was alive.  
 All that's left of her now lives in my mother's eyes  
 At certain times, on certain days.  
 My mother calls once a week from Virginia  
 Where she moved to escape her loneliness  
 To a town where she knows no one.  
 It followed her there  
 Riding in the passenger seat  
 Among old lamps and photos of a family  
 That does not exist.  
 I wash garlic from my knife and cutting board  
 Searching for something in my mind  
 That I cannot find  
 Scrubbing the blade  
 Careful not to cut my finger.  
 The smell and taste  
 Will not leave.  
 They remain forever.

## Approaching Hyannisport

Who will ever know whether she felt fear,  
 Climbing inside a plane that windy evening  
 Outside the city? From a distance there was only  
 Her chaplet of smooth blond hair,  
 The elegance of her nose, her long delicate  
 Hands and small white wrists.

Was she protected in the small winged room,  
 Made of glass and sleek chrome, as she  
 Sat beside Jackie's son? He was the  
 Same small boy who saluted  
 His dead father in black and white.  
 He was graceful, even beside her.

Was there some foreshadowing of what waited,  
 In the darkening sky and bottomless ocean?  
 From a distance,  
 Only a tiny light flickered out  
 Among billions of flickering stars.  
 Each one marked the end of an era.  
 And the ocean inhaled and exhaled, passing  
 Waves along the shore over rattling pebbles.

Or did they know, as they sailed  
 Away from the new millennium,  
 Checking out just in time, before some  
 Even greater explosion?  
 A mess of glass and light,  
 Blurring the lines of what is  
 Air, what is  
 Water, and what is  
 Oblivion.



## Poems by Cati Brown

### Mannah

Brazen, you gave me that counter ding bell,  
that waker of sleep.  
I laughed that early morning  
until my corners ached of your scrawled spirals.

We made words unmade:  
'to pillow' was 'to go without,'  
'desk' was a lazy worker,  
and Scrabble became a lesson  
in 18<sup>th</sup> century *écriture*.  
I knew you were crazy.

On the way to Tybee,  
again crisping the wee crinkles  
of the morning with our wakeful presence,  
we swapped all but underwear  
at eighty miles per hour,  
without cruise control,  
your pants flying helplessly  
out the open window.  
This fabric was a sign,  
a nautical navigation.

What dream was a cold lack of sun at 6 AM over the sea?  
What ruthlessness was your fixed attention?  
What desperate crime is nostalgia?

### Watching Pigeons

Indifferent peckers,  
the old men swarm  
dark in their jeans,  
perched on benches and  
chattering the day away.  
This one has a bad leg.  
This one is missing an eye.  
The fat one holds court,  
ruffling his cavernous coats,  
ranting his monarchy.

Are you a happy drunk?  
Are you a beautiful transvestite?  
Are your bones hollow whistlers?  
Are your wings for flying?

And am I allowed to ask,  
eating a bagel  
on the grass,  
the sun warming my back,  
how you took  
such a liking to benches,  
to booze,  
to camouflage jackets and  
baseball caps-  
you bright pigeons,  
hungry grubbers,  
mighty dark-winged warriors.

## Queen Anne

Queen Anne, protestant, Queen of England,  
daughter of James  
wife of German protestant  
ruler of the world  
engenderer of the nation  
who produced Aphra Behn,  
Benny Hill, The Longpigs Band,  
Jill Fulkes, *Hello Magazine*.

*I have them like appetizers now  
not too many to make me ill  
(on the whole)  
'Spoil not your appetite'  
and I try not to rush.  
Remember: Beauty in baking  
need not overrule  
weight and taste.*

Queen Anne fertilized  
the continent with English blood:  
the war of Spanish Succession  
the question of heir  
the plumbing of resources  
the birth of a nation,  
rejecting the pope,  
that sterile senator of religion.

*I attempt them: their stench is  
overripe oranges and  
the evergreen tree, laden with needles.  
Sugar and Grime.  
Life is my goal, and I pray,  
even by the Virgin  
and the smell of Christmas afterbirth:  
paper strewn, orange peels,  
sap stains, walnut crumbs  
all become that part of life stuck  
in-between the event and the end  
when the odour of the spill  
rests hazily  
caressing what will never be again.*

Queen Anne grew  
expectant a total of  
eighteen times:  
thirteen stillbirths,  
five live births,  
zero children,  
protestant, queen of the brimming world.

## Poems by Gardner Linn

### Miniature

You do not look as you should, Ganesha.  
Your sextuple limbs are as scrawny as a child's;  
Your trunk hangs limply over your  
Distended belly. Miniature bronze elephant,  
God of Scribes, I have waited  
For you to remove the obstacles in my path.  
In another guise, did you not teach us  
To oxidize litharge, producing that seductive  
Pigment? Did you not guide the patient  
Hands of the Northumbrian monks,  
Creating life from the letters *Chi* and *Rho*?  
Perhaps you are now but a scratchy pachyderm,  
Afraid of the mice hidden amid the leaves.  
You are small now, in a world of small things.

## A Dictionary

### I

The road to Bagamoyo from Dar es Salaam  
Was dust and sun and craters. A cow  
Stood off the road, watching us. It stood

As a cow stands, as if nothing matters  
More than what is in its mouth. "N'gombe!"  
I shouted from the window, naming her. A cow

Myself, I lowed in the sweaty bus.

### II

I sat inside the gauzy world of the mosquito  
Net and wrote to you, postcards  
With pictures of savanna and kopje,

Elephant and lion. "I wish you were here,"  
I wrote. That was a year ago. The second  
Person, the antecedent, has changed,

But the "you"-these strange southern  
Constellations, this poison  
Water-remains inviolate.

### III

In this neighborhood the high concrete  
Walls are crowned with the opalescent,  
Thigh-shredding fragments of beer

Bottles. I define my words: Hatari--  
I will die. N'gombe--the named thing,  
Black against the studded sky. You--I steal

Dust from the ground and carry it home  
In my pocket, a gift. I dream of a Maasai  
Boy passing into manhood as his spear

Pierces a lion's smoother golden hide.

## Home

When the bats found a way  
into the house, I could no longer enjoy  
the pressing warmth of home.  
This violation ruined me, this  
encroachment of tooth and wing.  
When the first two bats found the hole

In the attic door, one dove  
for carpet, stricken slow by unexpected  
light. The other folded its wings against  
a wall, a groggy beast in terrible miniature.  
We trapped the bats in boxes and released  
them into the yard. They woke to night and departed.

Now every creak of the house is a beating wing, an echoing cry.  
I search the ceiling for their bodies, hanging like dead leaves.

## Poems by Sharie McCune

## Meditation

*The rose flowers . . . because it flowers.*

On prints as pale as parchment,  
quick with life as the clean grass of the prairie,  
light was the artist, haloing the rim.  
She unraveled even clouds and sun  
with fingers straddling her chest, her heart,  
and proclaimed the body good with her neck,  
the shanks of her skin—that everything connects  
with the angled interlocking mysteries  
of shoulder, collarbone, and chin.

On black palladio, all time stood still,  
as her cloudy skin evoked the raven-face of morning.  
Dew-splayed, petaled to her chest,  
her hands, held circumspect against creation,  
were at sea in waves of satin.

But in gauze and cotton, pure white linen,  
A core mysterious and fragile, spread to muscle,  
polishing the hollows of her bones,  
her pregnant shape beneath a hat and cape,  
hidden wholeness, the unseen roots of being.

In dappled light, pale rose against uneven wood,  
her brows were a smudge of mountains  
and although in time her forehead weathered in the sun,  
her eyes grew deep, had steely clarity,  
burnt to a stillpoint, vortex of sheen and texture,  
painting on and off the page,  
escaping boundaries.

## Tea Ceremony

Jukō, the poet-priest, shakes wet branches,  
so that autumn leaves seem scattered on the ground,  
zigzags across each well-scrubbed stone,  
before removing both his shoes, bowing, and entering.  
On a simple scroll, above a three-tiered shelf,  
a mountain, seen from a bird's eye,  
dissolves in rippled shallows, a brook  
forcing its way between stones,  
while dripping wintersweet, leans  
from a jar, blossoming.  
The smells of hay and autumn linger  
in utensils of bamboo. There is incense burning—  
pine and sandalwood and the kettle sings  
sounds through which the light flows.

In silence, he observes the bowl,  
its crooked mouth, its ash-glazed clay,  
hears the swish of cloth, before a woman pours  
a powdercloud of tea into its steam,  
whisking sound from tender buds and leaves,  
stirs the sun from terraced hills,  
hands him mountains that endure the sea.  
Lifting, he inhales and drinks, brings  
the earth to his veins, the breath of Buddha.  
Finally, reaching to his waist, he removes a box,  
unrolling brush and paper.  
Wetting the ink with his tongue,  
the brush with his lips,  
he writes a song of doves and peaches.

## Windstone

*What we must understand is the reason why the  
soul's wings fall from it, and are lost.*  
Plato

Water carved into the earth, penetrating faultlines,  
fracturing below the soil of Chaco Canyon.  
Living earth and bedrock traced an ancient sea,  
were maps of its journey. The blue stone  
was buried deep in ashes,  
meant to blend into the bones of men—  
who sang in sorrow for the birds they slew  
and saw in trances through the eyes of antelope and otter.  
Our mouths have lost the sounds  
of all their names, of those who left behind  
the words for spirit, soul, and breath.

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

Their shaman told them: *Bones are seeds,  
but years are stones that give a measured  
shape to time*. Artists carved amulets and totems,  
inlaid knives, made elaborate mosaics. They trapped  
the interwoven net of sky and rain in *sea-foam*,  
*spider-web and sleeping-beauty's* flawless hue.  
Once, priests drew pictures of the gods on canyon walls,  
*and the sky came down to earth and entered stone*.  
When hard winds blew across the land,  
the Pueblos said the angry wind  
was searching the desert for turquoise.

In the Mountains of Ortiz, above Cerrillos,  
some still eat peyote, celebrate the stone,  
watch its colors change, freeing patterns.  
Women dream they are dancing, men dream

of the sky on white pillars, tell stories  
of Spider Woman weaving the Path of Souls.  
The sky was her loom and her spindle whorls  
were made of turquoise. The elders say:  
*Out of rock we were born, before Turquoise Boy  
carried the sun, or warriors vanished in the stars,  
abandoning their souls for claws and wings.*  
So, it has always been . . . to ward off evil,  
whole pueblos paint their doors an azure blue.

## Poems by Alina Opreanu

## Telega

*a series**i.*

Mornings in the summerhouse would  
 tiptoe beside me, breathing a simmer  
 of dog-bark and fresh grass aloud  
 with windows wide. The yellowed  
 curtains, like embroidered fields,  
 were drawn back as we gathered  
 around homemade *gem de piersici*,  
*telenei*, tomatoes, slices of bread;  
 my laden cupful of Braserio blend  
 anticipating milky froth - a forgetful  
 shade: brown swirling toward beige.

*ii. Poarta Raiului (Heaven's Gate)*

I couldn't fathom the silence  
 within me so I felt those hills

instead. The field we found lay  
 beyond a wooden fence; our way

treacherous with dried mud  
 and passing cows. Marina said,

*"proxabil ca asa este in noi,"*  
 and I believed her. If butterfly

wings are absent from heaven  
 and this sun-drenched afternoon

were to disappear, I had seen it  
 still. The blue-grey farthest sight

of mountains, my leaning shadow,  
 beneath it, wildflowers narrow.

*iii. Noapte (Night)*

The water stopped running early on.  
 I finally bathed standing, in a corner

bathroom, pouring heated water  
 over my head - legs like earthen

trails beneath the soapy avalanche.  
 Soothed by the willowy fall of water

from arm to hair to breasts to back -  
 warmth lulled me into evening. A storm

broke later, unburdening the sky of thunder,  
 lightning, hail, sheets of rain not so warm

as my washing. Morning, I knew, would  
 soon settle on us - a residue of clouds.

*iv. Marina's dream*

After she died, I dreamt her high  
 on a pedestal. Stepping forward, I

felt the lap of waves at my feet -  
 an ocean shuddering in retreat.

### *La Revedere*

The encounter in that airport haunted  
even then my slight frame. Nearly seven,

I left the fragrant myth my life had been  
in downpour and darkness - only to

find now a lacuna - where a new  
face grows in that abandoned place.

Childhood falls into phantom existence  
as presence tangles with my past

visiting me in this heavy instant, this last  
moment of my return - my departure -

Outlined in the window, a puncture  
in dawn's light, she touches my furrowing

brow with weightless caresses wondering  
- is *this* what time and distance wanted?

### *After The Pillow Book*

I.

Our mirth before our silence.  
Tea tones in conversation.

II.

Language uttered in darkness  
Behind the clothbound forest.

III.

*a lover's screen -*

IV.

Moistened paper feel of skin,  
Lips to breasts in birdsoft pecks.

V.

Desirous still, the space  
Around you rakes me in.

VI.

I listen for the pressure:  
Your tongue alights a hot place -

Words tremble, falter when I -

## Poems by Sara Pirkle

## Pulling the Tide

The moon hangs  
 pale as  
 a nervous  
 mother  
 calm as  
 a sleeping  
 child  
 full as  
 your hips  
 and belly  
 when you  
 dance with  
 bangles and mis-  
 matched chords  
 and  
 fickle as  
 my sister's  
 heart--  
 given to  
 change  
 shining  
 all the same.

## The Unfolding

He dreams of evolution,  
 Of monkeys the size of his palm  
 And pet squids that fill rooms;  
 He screams at his hollow sister  
 Then cries about his browbeating father  
 Who pressures him to win;  
 He fails one exam  
 And finds solace in the snow  
 That doesn't come;  
 He has a drink every night  
 "To feel older," he says,  
 While we think another reason lives there;  
 He laughs at everything  
 I say to show that he's okay;  
 At the end of the day  
 he hides in his room  
 And writes poetry about  
 lighthouses and moons and Sweden.



## The Music of the Spheres

They say you cannot hear God's universe rounding about,  
 the pulsating planets, the splendid orbs rotating and sliding and dancing,  
 their synchronized masses in perfect harmony;  
 The music dies before it reaches me, and I am left  
 to decompose, I suppose, while the heavens  
 tease and taunt the aging creatures that we are.  
 We are too small, the ancient ones claim, too distant to see or hear  
 Vibrations from the outer realm,  
 Yet  
 I feel Earth's cosmic dance when you twist and turn  
 your mighty hips, I rock and roll down your liquid skin,  
 I ride the waves of your strong thighs and starry eyes  
 to the milky euphoria of uncharted regions  
 I soar through dazzling space and feel you underneath me  
 Thrusting against my stationary body,  
 succumbing to the vast cosmos of yearning between us.  
 Still  
 I'm waiting for God to crush me.

## Fiction by Hillary Burns

### An Immaculate Conception

*"To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood..." — Rev. 1: 5*

Father John turned 70 in 2000. His congregation organized in secret and met in the social hall of the church to set up cookies, punch, and a huge, white sheet cake with the words "Happy Birthday, Father John!" scrawled in red. All this they laid on large tables, as carefully as if they were dressing an altar.

While they waited for the guest of honor to arrive, the men assembled into small circles and chatted without aim, and the mothers swatted their attentive boys from the inch-thick icing of the cake. Denis Neilen and Will Fogarty tugged at their neckties and talked about their jobs and wondered how a city that could put a million cops on the street couldn't find enough cash to fix the potholes. Then Denis lowered his voice and put his head closer to Will's and said, "Hell, if the city wanted cash they could just hold up that Doherty bastard," and Will ran a hand over his red face and chuckled deep from his stomach. Joe Neely was engaged in talk about property taxes, but he heard Denis and went over: "Yeah. What was it? About a million he snatched from us? Makes me sick—a Cardinal, for Christ's sakes. All I can say is, the Church better fix it so it can't happen again. And better let us know about it."

Denis added, "The city has already lost—I think they said—about 15,000 parishioners, and more going. I know I think twice about putting *my* envelope in the collection plate." And, as an afterthought, "Doherty's a bastard."

Denis's wife Mary came over to the men and listened for a minute before telling her husband that she didn't think Father John's birthday was the right place to be talking about the scandal. Joe and Will shot Denis a look that was both teasing and sympathetic. Mary went on: "That Cardinal has embezzled funds from a lot of good, honest people, but to talk about Father John and that awful Doherty scandal in the same breath is just wrong."

Joe, Will, and Denis grew red-faced, and they all nodded with affection for Father John. They didn't speak of the scandal anymore—not on Father John's birthday.

When the knob of the social hall door rattled, all the gathered hushed. The door swung on its hinges and in walked Father John—short, grinning, bare-head and blunt Irish features, with the last beams of the setting sun trailing at his heels. All the gathered yelled, "Happy Birthday!" and Father John grinned wider and went out into the crowd with extended arms, hugging them all, gathering even the largest man among them to his chest, as though he were going to comfort them to sleep. Someone put on a tape of traditional Irish songs, and Father John clapped his hands and attempted an Irish jig, much to the merriment of the congregation. The ladies served him the first piece of cake, but Father John insisted the children be given the first slices.

When the party ended and he had seen the parishioners off, Father John went to his office, sat, and from his pocket drew out the medical instructions he'd received earlier in the day. He knew he could easily avoid the listed foods, but he wondered how he would stay out of bright sunlight—he had a lot of homebound parishioners to visit, and he walked the city to get to them. And then there was the issue of how he would tell the congregation that his headaches weren't a result of that bug that was going around, and even if the good-hearted ladies of the church visited him with a *thousand* pots of chicken soup, it wouldn't eat away what was—the doctor had quietly told him—the tumor in his brain. Father John got out his worn Bible and nursed himself on its words, comforting himself into a fitful sleep.

*"I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God..." — Rev. 3: 12*

Sunday's mass sat soundless as Father John concluded his carefully worded announcement. A confused

silence, and then the ladies began a muffled mewling, and though their sounds had run into a sort of communal lament, Father John recognized their individual voices and could identify them. The men were desperately stone-faced, but the longer Father John was silent, the more the men's lips began to twitch and strain downward. They rubbed their hands over their red faces. Father John's eyes brimmed at the spectacle. He told them to believe and to pray. He cited miracles. He pulled them to his chest.

On Monday, Father John arrived early at the office of the Archbishop. A copy of the *Times* rested on an end table at his right. The headline read: "Cardinal Francis Doherty Indicted for Misappropriation of Funds— Scandal Rocks Church." He didn't read the article; he instead let his eyes go to the Crucifix upon the far wall, and there his eyes rested. The Archbishop arrived, and Father John stood to greet him. He explained the location of the tumor, explained the treatment necessary. Over the Archbishop's desk, he spread his doctor's printouts, displacing a newspaper clipping that read, "City-Wide Attendance Down Sharply in Wake of Funds Scandal— What Can Church Do to Win Back Parishioners?" The Archbishop mumbled a parting prayer, spread a hand over Father John's crown as the old priest passed through the door frame, and watched him walk down the hall to the exit. The sun was shining brightly through the broad window at the end of the hall— so brightly that it illuminated Father John's form, causing the Archbishop to squint and giving the priest—the old, weak, powerless priest, whose insides were eating his insides—a divine radiance, god-like. The Archbishop returned to his office and studied the article over which Father John had laid his medical report. He mused on how interesting it was that, cast in a certain light, Father John looked like God.

*"Then I fell to his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!'— Rev. 19: 10*

When Father John received his doctor's proposed schedule for radiation treatments, he carefully wove them around his parish duties, so no times would conflict. He then sent notice to the Archbishop that he would be beginning his therapy. The same day, the notice returned to Father John with a request for an immediate appointment at the Archbishop's office. The word "Denied" was written across the radiation schedule in the Archbishop's own hand.

In the office, Father John sat opposite the Archbishop, who braided his fingers and thoughtfully propped on them his chin. He said: "I can't permit your radiation. It may harm what is growing in your head, and I can't permit that."

Father John's brows knitted together: "My tumor? I need the therapy— or the tumor will swell."

"Who can say that it's a tumor?"

Father John was still.

The Archbishop continued: "God has seen fit that this...thing grow within you, within your head. It may be a gift. A blessing. You will not kill it."

Father John, his old, bald head leaning to one side in confusion, looked earnestly at the Archbishop and said: "Without treatment, I'll die surely."

The Archbishop's eyebrows shot up in dramatic flourish: "I would think that you would be willing— honored— to die as a vessel so that a greater thing can be born from you! Was our Blessed Mother malicious toward what God saw fit to have grow within her?"

Father John was suddenly standing, his chair tipped over behind him, bowing at his feet, his head scalding as the tumor worked and aged unchecked in his brain: "You blaspheme."

The Archbishop said, "I've told you, you're looking at this situation in a morbid light, when it could be a blessing, John, something glorious—"

Father John snatched from the end table the old copy of the *Times*. He slapped it onto the Archbishop's desk with such unexpected force, the Archbishop recoiled and was silent.

The Archbishop glanced at the *Times'* damning headline. He focused on the priest, and then said with something like sympathy: "Oh God, John, we all fell once. Now, we've fallen again." And narrowing his eyes, "Who's going to atone this time?"

*"And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.'— Rev. 4: 8*

Sunlight moved through the stained-glass windows and fractured onto the face of the Archbishop, making his face marble, stained red. With him in the cathedral were the bishop and the archdeacon of the diocese. None of the men sat near one another nor even turned their faces on their fellows as they spoke. They sat in various pews and faced ahead, as though they were talking to the altar.

The bishop said, "You don't honestly believe all this."

Replied the Archbishop: "I believe in miracles. I believe that Christ will come again, as He promised."

The archdeacon said with a brow raised, "In the head of a priest?"

"Yes."

They sat in a long silence in the darkened cathedral, staring straight ahead.

The bishop turned around in his pew to face the Archbishop and said, "And what if we deny him medical treatment and it is indeed a cancer? What if everyone comes to believe and worship the old man, and it turns out to be a cancer?"

"Then he dies for the Church."

They were silent again and looked nervously back and forth.

The Archbishop, exasperated with their frailty, said: "Then he dies for us all. It's a sacrament of the Church. Choose Christ, kill Christ, eat Christ— communion."

*"Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions on earth...."— Rev. 9: 3*

Father John was sitting in his rectory, his head bowed in prayer, when four large men entered. Following the men were the Archbishop, the archdeacon, and the bishop. The Archbishop spoke in a soothingly fluid and quiet voice: "John, we've come to take care of you, John. We want to move you to a more comfortable place. We want you to come with us, John."

Father John leapt for the door, but a meaty hand closed around his belly. He struggled against the steely arm; he kicked and grabbed at the air as more arms descended on him, and he cried for mercy to the three holy men watching him silently.

One of the besiegers shoved a hand into the priest's mouth, stifling his outcry, and Father John was shoved and dragged from his rectory and deposited in front of a waiting van. "Mind his forehead," said the Archbishop, as the men lifted Father John and slowly drove him down onto the seat with their shoulders.

They took him to the great Cathedral of Mary Mother of God. They prodded and coaxed, drove him through the doors with gentle coos. The stained glass caught the raw light and sent it through in muted tones.

Father John's neck curved gracefully downward and his eyelids sagged. The Archbishop, finding the old man now yielding, took him by the elbow and led him easily. When their movement stopped, Father John's eyes opened.

The altar was gone. The holy relics removed, there stood rising out of the darkness a cage, under the mounted Crucifix. The cage was wrought iron, and it extended twenty feet in each direction. Inside was a large bed, fixed with purple linens.

The Archbishop swung open the door of the cage and stepped aside. The four large men gathered around a stained glass window. The bishop and archdeacon stood in the shadows, averting their eyes. Father John turned to the cage. The tumor pulsed and throbbed and washed over him in waves of nausea. The Archbishop remained by the cage's opened door, expectant. Father John's eyes rolled back in his head, and he sank unconscious. He awoke swathed in purple linens.

*"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..." — Rev. 7: 9*

He saw only the holy men who attended to his needs—bathing him, feeding him, and supplying mild painkillers for his steady headaches. He was denied newspapers and television, for, as the Archbishop explained, distressing, worldly news could be physically ruinous to one in such a condition. He had neither clock nor calendar, and in the darkened cathedral, he found it sometimes hard to determine night from day. His sleeping grew erratic. He occupied his time by studying his Bible and by walking about his cage.

One morning, he sat ticking off days on his fingers, trying to figure whether the month had turned. The cathedral doors opened, startling him. The Archbishop appeared, ushering inside a timid procession, which cautiously followed him up the aisle like sheep. Ten feet from the cage, the Archbishop halted them. Then to the first person in the line—an older woman—he mumbled something, and while the rest of the line stood their place, she approached the cage. Father John moved against the bars. Did she wish to say something to him? She stopped, stood before him, stared, closed her eyes in silent prayer, crossed herself, and left, retreating with clasped hands and a bowed head up the aisle and out the cathedral doors.

A second person in the line—a man—took up the woman's place and mimicked her actions. He removed an envelope from his jacket and handed it to the Archbishop, who was standing to the right of Father John's cage. The nearness permitted Father John a look at the envelope, across which was written: "For the support of the Mother."

And every day following, the cathedral was opened and the lines moved silently past the cage, and every day more people fell down before Father John in devotion and more envelopes were exchanged, all of them reading "For the support of the Mother."

*"Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." — Rev. 22: 15*

Reporters were given a line separate from the general public, and it was more limited. The Archbishop admitted only seven a day, so as not to distress the Mother nor overexpose the nativity. The reporters were close to the cage, and Father John could hear them refer to the site as "the new nativity," and he heard them speak of the city as "the latter-day Bethlehem." He found the camera crews offensive—their lights, particularly—and he shielded his eyes anytime one loomed toward him.

One evening, as the two lines moved past him, Father John saw a child peeking out at him from behind her parents; all were members of Father John's parish and had not yet two months prior danced and laughed with him on the first evening of his seventieth year. He beamed at the thrill of recognizing them. Father John beckoned that the family come closer. They came near enough to touch. Father John smiled and extended a hand through the bars and called to them by their first names. The man and woman stared at Father John's forehead. When his hand came from out the bars to receive them, they knelt and asked that the Mother bless their family, but they did not touch him and they did not call him by his name. The girl twined herself about her parents' ankles and wondered aloud: "Will the Child's birthday be on Christmas?"

The parents hushed her, but the whole of the line cooed and the Archbishop grinned broadly. Father John's face exhausted its color, and he turned ashen. A flashbulb from the journalists' line popped. The sudden stab of light was as violent as a knife, and Father John crumpled to the floor. Startled, the family sprang backwards. Father John rolled on iron, blindly clutching at his head, moans peeling from his throat.

The line of worshippers collapsed. They crossed themselves, they raised their hands to the cage. "The pangs of motherhood! How gloriously he suffers!" they cried. The Archbishop greedily pushed back the reporters, but they deftly leaned around him; and more flashbulbs discharged their horrible and blinding light; and Father John wailed so piteously they all cringed.

That evening, the archdeacon attended Father John. The cathedral was darkened, and the archdeacon—tender to Father John's sensitivity to brightness—lit a soft candle, which emitted only enough light to dimly reveal the priest's face.

The archdeacon sat gently at his place near Father John, who was near sleep. "I wonder," said Father

John, "how it is that the newspapermen are chosen?"

"I beg your pardon, John?"

"The Archbishop limits the number. I've seen. One he'll catch and send away, and the next he'll admit.

This one is turned away, this one is spared."

"I can't say that I know....size of their paper, strength of their writing? Merit, I would think."

"I believed that, but I've seen the best turned away."

After a time, the archdeacon said, "Arbitrary, then?"

But the old priest had fallen into a sleep. The archdeacon snuffed out the candle and felt his way toward the doors. He looked back in parting. The Crucifix over the cage was rigged with a dim bulb, eternally illuminated. The dying Christ, hung on the cross, watched over John in pity.

*"They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them." — Rev. 9: 5-6*

In the seventh month of the pregnancy, Father John's head—which was bald and of a pale, milky smoothness—bruised and swelled. The Child inside aged and fed and greatened. The protrusion began with an odd mottling; one morning, Father John awoke with purple-red stains over his right eye—blood vessels had torn beneath the skin. The days passed, and the broken vessels ran together to form what looked like a portwine birthmark. Father John rubbed at the spot on his forehead, as though he were going to sprout from it horns. The days passed, and the bruise widened and deepened in its color, and it rose.

The worshippers thrilled at the sight. The Child had swollen fat with an unseeable but obvious health, pushing Himself about in the tiny, allotted space of His womb, stretching taut the aged bone and skin that contained Him. They marveled at the brave Mother, whose burden disfigured his teeming forehead, which over the right eye, pursed and spread outward, the swell of it burrowing up and over the temple, tunneling under and forcing down his brow in constant molestation of the right eye, and snaking by degrees toward the crown.

The collection coffers bloated with money, ran over. The number of those desirous of seeing the fruitful womb of the Mother grew so tremendous, the cathedral could no longer admit them. An elevated platform was erected on the church's exterior, and the Mother was there brought out daily and presented for the brimming legions coiled around the church and the far-reaching streets beyond.

They cried, "The brave, blessed Mother!"—his Child gaining daily in weight and readiness, swelling fat as He took and broke and devoured the Mother piecemeal; the Mother's own constitution thin now, his belly gone, eaten as his forehead's womb bulged and fattened—"Oh! blessed among women is he!"

To the cathedral flocked elders of every conceivable religion, forming an idyllic brotherhood banded in allegiant devotion to the coming messiah. Priests clasped hands in crossbred prayers with Baptist ministers, and rabbis added the impending Christmas to their canon. Father John was dimly aware of their continual passing as they looked at him and his forehead, but he could feel very little beyond the compounding pressure of the growth mashing his brains, straining at his skull, and eating his organs and tissues. One morning, he felt a blockage somewhere in his digestive track, and he found he could no longer pass his food. He began vomiting up what could not go through his intestines.

At the closing of the seventh month, Father John requested the Archbishop, who came dutifully to the cage. Father John clung to the bars to support himself as he stood, clad still in black with his collar at his throat, although it hung limply now from his wasted neck.

He said, "I'm not much longer."

The Archbishop waited what seemed a decent interval and said: "Blessed among women, John."

"Please. What do you intend to do with me after?"

"You'll be as revered and worshipped as She. Your image will be replicated forever—the Blessed Birth. And the Child will be—"

"It's my pirated flesh, and when I'm gone...when it withers..."

"Rest, John." Smooth voice purring, round with breath. "Nothing will come."

The Archbishop excused himself and left Father John alone, his grip on the bars slackening. He slid to the floor as the filth clawed up his stomach. It erupted into the lining of his mouth, hot, searing the flesh, and though his body racked and tried to gag, Father John did not turn to let the bile onto the floor. He called up a silent prayer, and held it in his mouth and began to breathe it in—the prayer and the bile together. His body lurched, and his throat convulsed and gurgled. He could smell and taste nothing but his filth, he could hear only his own choking, he could feel nothing beyond his pain, but he could still see, and the iron ceiling in front of him blurred, and then dulled, and then there was blackness.

*"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" — Rev. 22: 20*

The holy men discovered the loss directly. Silence first, and then—aged though he was—the archdeacon knelt and reached through the bars to touch Father John. The Archbishop unlatched and flung open the door, which rammed into the shoulder of the kneeling archdeacon. Two visiting Baptists hurried inside, hoisting the body and clumsily fixing its torso between them. A rabbi hinged its knees over his shoulders. The Archbishop disappeared into a side door and resurfaced with towels and a black bag. He hurried the men outside and directed them to lay the body on the platform. He announced to the crowd below: "God has seen fit to relieve our Blessed Mother. The task is delivered now to us that the Child be born."

The crowd cried, genuflected, rose their voices in a chaotic swell of a shared rapture—the coming of the Messiah! the blessed birth!

From his bag, the Archbishop brought out a thin knife. He tilted the womb's forehead back and sank the knife into the neck just above the cleric's collar. The flesh yielded well until the knife hit bone. The Archbishop increased his pressure and sawed further, the knife grinding hard but doing little.

The crowd mewled at the Archbishop's hesitation. They craned their necks and stared, breathless. How long could the Child survive in the dead Mother's body? The Archbishop abandoned the thin knife for a great carving knife. From the crowd, a man ran to the platform, identified himself as a doctor, and offered to assist in the delivery, but the Archbishop sent him back to the taut and silent crowd, with a gentle reminder that the scene must be consecrated, the birth attended by holy men.

The Archbishop put his hand over the chin of the womb and gingerly tilted it back, so that the gash at the neck opened wide like a screaming mouth. Blood ran, staining the clerical collar. The womb's eyes were open in a fixed and glassy gaze heavenward. The Archbishop blessed the carving knife and held it up for the crowd. He then drew it farther backwards, set his feet, steadied himself, and brought down the knife with all the force in his body. The womb was severed clean from its moorings. It would have rolled off the platform, had the Archbishop not grasped it firmly by its mouth. He raised it and caressed it to his chest.

The arteries of the abandoned Mother spewed blood at the neck. The crowd held up their hands to receive the blood. They danced under the shower. They opened their mouths to it. The Archbishop called for silence and the crowd hushed, awful as the blood dried.

The Archbishop spread his hand over the face, his middle finger up the ear canal, his thumb under the jaw, his little finger digging into the eye. He passed his thin knife through the scalp, running it down the crown of the head in an even seam. He worked his fingers under and parted the flesh, peeling it back and revealing the skull. He took up a white handkerchief adorned with the image of a dove, which was the sort of cloth the Church generally used to dry holy water from the heads of baptized infants. He cleared the blood from the bone.

The skull was grossly misshapen from the immense pressure of the pregnancy. It was fused normally until it reached the area above the right eye, at which spot the bone raised and swelled and splintered, and from the tiny split, a beige liquid boiled and seeped out, frothing. With the bloodied dove, the Archbishop wiped away the liquid and leaned in again. He saw the Child, peeking out, straining blindly through His tiny birth canal.

One of the ministers fell to his knees and another screamed to the crowd: "We see Him! He is here!" And the crowd answered in a thunder so deep and deafening that the platform rumbled.

The Archbishop took hold of each side of the skull at its fissure and pulled the sides apart, releasing the grip and the pressure to wipe the sweat from his hands. First, the halves clung, but under the Archbishop's sustained tension, the fissure began to grow. The skull cracked, and a jagged line snaked through the bone.

The Archbishop repositioned himself and set his feet. He tightened his grasp, and with one definitive yank of each of his hands, he split the womb's skull open, shards of bone ascending and falling, rotten and whitish blood purging in a rivulet onto the platform.

The crowd craned to see. The archdeacon, at the farthest end of the platform, stood with the palm of his right hand over his colorless lips and mouthed a prayer for the soul of Father John.

The Archbishop set his hands on the gray surrounding the Child. Into the gelatinous folds he sank his fingers, twining them around the slippery tissue. He worked the Child loose from His moorings, plucking away stray pieces of the Mother's slick brain and letting them fall onto the platform and soak among the spilled blood.

The Archbishop slipped his fingers through the last of the fibers that bonded the Child to the spent Mother, severing the final strand of brain as a common umbilical cord. Below the platform, the crowd trampled and bogged down on itself, the people wading through each other to see. They cried with jubilation as they smothered and were crushed under the swell of humanity.

The Archbishop held the Child high. He was smallish, and He was cupped in one palm of the Archbishop and held steady with the other. He had not the strained purple hue of newborns, but was, instead, beautiful alabaster. He was not a moving and fussing tangle of confused limbs—He was still and perfectly spherical.

The crowd screamed: "So beautiful! He is so beautiful!" He had no features, no cumbersome parts. His body was fused into one orb with no extensions, contained and perfect within Himself. He shifted a bit on the Archbishop's hand, but the Archbishop held Him tenderly. And He did not cry—not even as His alabaster began to turn gray.

## Fiction by Kelly DeLong

## We Are Good

I can imagine what they're saying about me up the street, and I'd be lying if I said it's something I can easily let slide off my back. I'm trying but I'm finding I'm not as callous as I need to be. I know they are angry at me and that's why they're saying such terrible things, but maybe what they fail to see is that their hatred is the result of a confusion about what is best for Mildred that they don't really want to clear up, or are unable to. I don't know which. I wish they could see that their hatred is mistakenly placed on my weak hands so gently resting upon Mildred's shoulders. If they understood, I'm sure they wouldn't want their hatred there. If they would let themselves see then they wouldn't hate the person who leans down to Mildred and whispers so reassuringly in her ear, Hello, dear, I'm home now. It's all right now, I'm here. Everything is fine. You've been waiting for me to come home, and here I am. You don't have to worry about anything anymore. We are good.

Did you watch your stories today? Were they good stories? Did you like them today? No? You don't remember? That's too bad. That's a shame. Maybe tomorrow you will. And how's your tummy today? Feel better? Yes? Oh, that's good. I'm so glad to hear it. That makes me glad. Yes, you're so right. I'm sure it is difficult getting old. No, I won't. I promise to stay this age forever. No, I won't get any older. Oh, you're so right. So right. Do you remember if anyone called today? No? You sure? Anyone at the door? No? Good. Remember what to do if anyone calls? No? You don't? Can you try to remember? No? That's okay, don't worry. Just remember not to answer the phone. Just let it ring. Right. And the door? Remember what to do if someone rings the bell or knocks? Yes? That's right. See, you don't forget everything. Right, Right. Just don't answer it and they'll go away. That's right. It's best not to have anyone confusing you, mixing you up. Everyone is out to take advantage of people like you these days . . .

You're right. Exactly. I don't blame you. Who wants to be confused? Yes, I agree. The world has become a terrible place. A deceitful place. What's that? Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. I think you're nice yourself. And you know what? I think you're pretty smart too. You just don't give yourself enough credit sometimes. That's all it is.

She sits so small at the kitchen table, like a child, her head so close to the surface, her breath nearly fogging it. I like to look at her because she's a picture of old womanly perfection—her thin-skinned, veiny hands rest so peacefully upon the table, one on top of the other, her wonderfully abrupt arms seemingly jutting out of her hunched back—that imperfect yet perfectly deformed spine of hers, her long thin neck craning over the table, her head beginning to tilt down, her eyes looking ahead, making it appear as though she is perpetually, desperately, trying to hear what has just been said in the far corner of the room.

If wrinkles are ever lovely, they are lovely on Mildred, giving the area around her eyes and mouth a look of patient anxiety when she looks into you, as she is looking into me as I stand at the counter cutting up her steak into tiny pieces so she can chew it more easily. She so loves steak but it's hard on her teeth and jaw. And as I chop up this meat into half-inch pieces, I am reminded of doing this very same thing for my Joey when he was getting his teeth. Only I did it for him so he wouldn't choke. So often, in his enthusiasm to eat, he'd swallow pieces of meat whole, forgetting to chew. As a mother, I found myself most vigilant when he ate, making sure he chewed, swallowed, ate his vegetables, drank his milk, didn't throw his food. He was always a good eater and I always thought he'd grow up so well for me.

Maybe for someone else this kitchen would feel cramped, a box in which two people would be a crowd, but it's bigger than any kitchen I've ever had and I find it as comfortable as any room I've ever been in, with the old gas range not more than four feet across from the sink and the faded white metal cabinets, the dim, saucer-shaped light hanging over the tiny two-person-formica-topped table, squeezed tightly into the corner where the square window looks out onto the back porch, onto the neat square lawn plot and Mildred's cinder

block garage, out, up the street, to the bare acre lot where during the day the neighbors can be seen walking their dogs.

Mildred smiles at me. I make a mean apple pie and Mildred enjoys it thoroughly along with her coffee. As we sip our hot coffee we look through the day's mail, which is mostly bills. Mildred opens an envelope, unfolds the paper inside, then looks at me, confused. Don't understand something? I say. No, she doesn't. Don't worry, I say, holding out my hand for the piece of paper. I'll take care of it. I'll put it upstairs later, on the desk, and take care of it as usual.

Mail is all a jumble to Mildred. Sometimes she can't distinguish an advertisement from a bill. She's told me that her husband George had always taken care of the mail. I tell her not to worry about any of it, that it's all mine to take care of, but it's mail, it's everyday, and though it usually doesn't bring any big surprises for her, it has that potential, and I guess that's why she likes to look at it before handing it over to me. Who can blame her?

Electric bill, I tell her, cable bill, pizza coupons—we'll hang on to those for some night when I don't feel like cooking—credit card bill, dry cleaning flyers— Huh? Credit card? What's that? Oh, you know. Those little plastic cards people use sometimes to pay for things. No? You've never seen one? You don't think George had one? He never told you about them? Well, don't worry about it. It's nothing. Okay. . . let's see. . . another flyer, current resident . . . and this. Looks like a letter. Let me take a look at it here.

Dear Mildred,

How are you doing? How's your back? Still hurt? I spoke to Nana the other night and she tells me that someone is living with you. Nana seems troubled by this. She got pretty worked up on the phone and said she doesn't get to see you any more. Is that true? I don't know what to make of it. I've tried to call you a few times but the person who answered hung up. Why won't she let me talk to you? Nana says you stopped playing Bingo. Is it because of the woman living with you? That was always your favorite thing to do. You should let Nana and Pop see you so they can let me know you're all right. I wish I could come home and see you myself, but I've been so busy at work and now with the baby. Some nights she just doesn't want to sleep and she makes Sharon and me so tired. I wish you could see the baby. You'd love her. I really wish we had time to come home, but we just don't. Next month will be three years since I last saw you. I can't believe it. I really hope you are well and that things aren't as bad as Nana says they are. I miss you very much.

Love,  
Eddie, Sharon, Cassy

P.S. This letter is for Mildred only. If you are not Mildred, you should not be reading this.

It's from somebody named Victoria. Ring a bell? No? Victoria Johnson? Not sure? You don't remember anyone by that name? That's okay. Don't worry about it. It's nothing important. She just wants to know how you're doing. Still can't remember, hah? I'll tell you what—I'll write a letter back and tell her you're just fine. How's that? Okay? I reach out for her hand and clasp it. It's nothing, I tell her and give her a hopeful smile. Will you be all right? Yes? You sure? Okay.

Her memory comes and goes. She often forgets the names of neighbors one day only to remember them the next. That reminds me, it's time for her medication.

When Mildred seems better, I glance out the window and see two figures with canes slowly passing under the light up the street up near the vacant lot. There are still small mounds of ice and snow on the sidewalk from the snowfall last week, and for a split second I think that I would like to see those two bodies slip and fall. I wouldn't even have to imagine the damage that a fall would do to them. It would be considerable.

Mildred, let me take you upstairs. Why? Because there's going to be pounding on the door soon and I don't want you to get scared and worried. Yes, that's right. People are coming over to bang on the door. Men in suits. The kind that push you around, tells you what to do. Yes, I know how they upset you. Yes, they are terrible people. Here, take my hand. You're very welcome. It's no problem at all. Here . . . that's right. I'll help you through here . . . and now the stairs. Right. Yes, you're right—once you get going you're

not so slow at all. Yes, yes, I can imagine that stairs are hard for someone with two fake hips. You've told me. And a fake knee? You never mentioned that before. Oh, you just remembered. Yes, yes. You're doing fine. One step now at a time. Just like always. I have your elbow. You're doing great. Good, good, that's right. That's right . . .

Every time I help Mildred up the stairs the image of Joey's bedtime trek down the hall to his room passes through my mind. At night he insisted on carrying his blanket, his Pooh Bear, his Teddy Bear, and his Mickey Mouse to bed by himself, both arms pressing the dolls against his chest, the blanket draped over his forearm. He was sleepy, and so wobbly with both hands occupied. I'd follow two steps behind making sure he was always within my reach . . .

That's great, I tell Mildred. You've made it. Now go to your room . . . That's right. Close your door and don't worry about any noises you hear. That's right, close your door. Don't worry now. I'll take care of everything.

I stand at the top of the stairs taking deep, deeper breaths. My heart is beginning to pound. My hands tremble, slightly, only slightly, and I tuck them under my armpits and fold my arms. Okay, I'll be all right. I'm fine, I'm getting my heart under control. I flinch when the door bell rings. I take more deep breaths as I descend the stairs, thinking about how I need to do this.

They have begun to pound on the door by the time I reach the kitchen. It's not a door shaking pound since I'm sure they are incapable of that, but, nevertheless, it's disturbing. Yet I briskly sweep myself into the kitchen as if I hear nothing, sit down and finish my tea and pie. I know what I have to do--the difficult part.

The sound of an old woman's screeching voice cuts through the door. "I know you're in there!" it says. "Open up!" The bell rings again. And again, and is followed by more pounding. "Let us in! Let us in!"

An old man's sad face is looking in the window at me. He knocks against the glass with the handle of his cane. I've purposely let the shade up for their sakes. They must learn that I will not acknowledge their presence as long as they have unreasonable demands.

Instead, I sip my tea, and with great precision, I use my fork to cut out a moon-shaped wedge of an apple slice from my pie. "She's over here," I hear the man say.

Without looking I can feel both sets of eyes on me, boring holes through the glass. "We can see you," screeches the old woman. "Let us in-- We know you got Mildred in there. Let us in-- We got a key . . . you know. We'll use it." Pause. "Okay . . . here we come. We're coming in."

There's a fumbling at the door, the knob rattles. Soon the rattling stops and I can feel their eyes upon me again. "You changed the locks! You bitch!" says the old woman. I've finished my tea and pie and get up to wash my plate and mug in the sink. I am unable to not listen to the voice. It says, "What have you done to my sister? You've turned her against me! You're not going to get away with it. Not with my sister! Where is she? Where's Mildred! I want to talk to . . ." I've dried the dishes and put them away. The voice fades as I move through the dining room. The last thing I hear is, "Hey! you . . ."

As I walk up the stairs I hear no more yelling or pounding. The door bell too is silent. Maybe they realized they are in the wrong and have stopped.

I turn the knob of Mildred's door and find her sitting neatly at the end of the bed, her knees touching, her hands on her lap, fingers interlocked. She looks like someone waiting for bad news, for that something that will change everything . . .

I sit beside her, lightly place my arm on her shoulders, pat her hands with my free hand. How are you? Yes, I know. I'm sorry there was all that door bell ringing. And the knocking? You heard that too? I was hoping you wouldn't. That's why I had you close your door. I'm sorry you heard it. Did it bother you too much? I hope not. You think? You think you'll be all right? Yes? Oh, yes, I know how much those good-for-nothing salesmen bother you. They know a person like you can't say no to anything. I understand. Yes, I agree. People should leave you alone. No, I don't think most people know what it's like to be your age. Yes, you're right. But you're all right now? Yes? You sure? Good. I promise no one else will bother you tonight. We'll go downstairs and watch TV and no one else will ring the bell or knock on the door. All right? Won't that be fine? Yes? Good. I kiss her on the forehead and she smiles as we rise . . .

I can see through the living room window that the house lights along the block have been turned off, no TVs flickering through curtains or out bedroom windows. The street is so quiet that I swear if I concentrated

hard enough I could hear the hum of the street lights as they do their best to remind us of day. I have put Mildred to bed, and I sit in the corner chair, the lamp beside me on dim, her worn old photo album across my thighs.

I am working on memorizing these yellowed-bordered moments so that they will eventually become part of my memory. I hope by this process I will be able to conjure up in my mind Mildred as a straight-banged little school girl, or a narrow-waisted young woman, or a plump middle-aged woman and place those images alongside my memories of a hunched, loosed-skinned, old lady standing beside me, our arms around each other, a look of love for each other in our eyes. In this way our lives will merge together as beautifully as I believe they were meant to.

I know from Mildred that her husband's name was George Allen Packer and that he worked for the roofer's union. From looking at these pictures I can tell that he was not a pleasant man. He couldn't smile, and when he attempts one, as in their wedding picture, he smirks like someone who knows that all the world expects him to show his happiness at this moment, but all he feels is resentment over the expectations. In the last pictures, the ones where he's a shriveled old man sitting on the back porch, he is openly scowling, as if letting the world know how much he hates it and everything in it. Husbands.

The faces rarely change from page to page, year to year--they simply age. Winters are a squinting George wrapped in a parka, a snow shovel at his side, as he stands on the cleared walkway, mounds of piled snow on either side. Summers are Mildred and George sharing a backyard picnic bench with Mildred's sister Hortense and her husband Russ--the two who introduced themselves to me that first week by asking me over and over, "Who are you? Who are you?" In the background, behind Hortense and Russ, are usually a young couple, arms around each other, the man resembling Russ around the mouth. And sometimes on the man's shoulders or on Russ's lap is a young blond boy. Eddie? Other faces pose here and there, on a beach, in front of a lake, their momentary giddiness suggested, then by the next page they are gone, passing away into photograph obscurity, only their distant image left behind for me to ponder and to wonder . . .

I have searched this album for the baby pictures with which parents usually stuff photo albums, and although I know people didn't take as many pictures when Mildred was young as they do today, still, I've expected to find one here, one there, at first spaced out at monthly intervals, then as the child passes the first birthday, yearly gaps. There aren't any. Though I've wanted to ask--because it's what I assume--why Mildred didn't have any children, I know better. I know much better. I know what it's like for someone who hasn't known you all along to ask that question, how that person immediately knows she made a mistake when she watches your eyes cast downward, the tears well in them . . .

I have never asked Mildred, and she has never asked me. I love her for that. I love her for many things. I couldn't tell you how many nights I'd wandered the streets, exhausted, lonely, searching for him, following the sounds of children, letting them take me from here to there till I couldn't walk anymore. Then I found Mildred. She's been a godsend. Before I found Mildred I didn't know where I was anymore. Everything had been taken away from me, everything. I went about dazed, thinking of Joey, stopping only to pull out of my pocket the creased picture of him in his Superman Halloween costume. Before I found Mildred I'd lost my voice and stared dumbly at anyone who tried to communicate with me, who asked my name, where I lived, what had happened, what was wrong with me . . .

Mildred asked no questions that day I collapsed onto her back porch, my legs too weak to move my body forward any longer. Mildred gave me food and drink and talked to me as honestly as I've ever been spoken to. She told me about her loneliness, how she often sat out on the porch without having anyone to utter a word to, how after waiting until it was good and dark, she would go inside and watch TV until she fell asleep in her chair. There she'd stay till morning when she'd begin the whole miserable day over again.

We were like that on the back porch that night--Mildred talking, me listening, regaining my strength--until late when Mildred ceased talking, and I grabbed onto the porch railing and pulled myself up. Mildred rose, and I put my arms around her and broke down. When I had got it out of me, I let Mildred take me into her house . . .

On the last page of the album Joey looks at me. He's Superman again, tucked away in the last slot. All the lives, all the years, end with him.

Mildred likes her coffee black, her toast plain, her one egg sunny side up. We sip coffee together and

look out the window, through the bright sunlight pouring in. The sun is melting what's left of the snow and black birds are pecking the drenched lawn. It looks as if today will be a warm late winter's day.

You slept well then? No problems? That's so good to hear. I'm glad. Is the coffee too strong? No? I was afraid I'd made it too strong. It's a different brand too so I wasn't sure what it would be like, but I had a coupon for it and I wanted to give it a try. You like it then? Good. Well, then, I guess I'll buy it from now on. I think it's pretty good myself.

Ah, it looks so nice outside, doesn't it? Yes, looks warm. But sunny. Too sunny for you. You know what the sun does to you. That's right. It's *not* good for your eyes. Right, you remember that I told you that that doctor said too much sun is bad for your eyes. Yes, maybe that is where you got your cataract. Wouldn't surprise me in the least. So stay inside then. Doors locked.

I shouldn't be too long today. Just going to the mall. You've seen my clothes so you know how badly I need some new ones. Anything I can get for you? A nice blouse or something? A new house coat? Yeah? Perfect. I can see you in a light blue one with maybe some pink flowers. What do you think? Wouldn't that look good on you? Oh, yeah. It would bring out your eyes more. You have such pretty hazel eyes. Anyone ever tell you that? No? That's a shame. Well, I'm going to show you how good you can look.

How's your knee today? Still hurts a little bit? Well, then, the best place for you is in your chair watching your stories. I promise I won't be as long as I was yesterday. And don't forget when I come back I'm going to make you the prettiest girl on the block.

She laughs as I kiss her on the forehead.

I drive home much faster than I should, especially in a new car I'm not very familiar with. I roll through stop signs and test the lengths of yellow lights worrying about Mildred all alone. I've been gone much longer than I thought I would be. And I was enjoying myself again. I really was. But I know it's wrong when Mildred's at home, maybe sighing, maybe beginning to feel that old way again, the way she felt before I entered her life. Those first four months with her I rarely left the house and we got used to that and now that Mildred has given me strength to face people again I'm taking it too far. I have to make it up her. I step harder on the accelerator.

I pull into the alley behind the house to park in Mildred's garage but stop when I see a mud-spattered pickup truck blocking my way into the garage. I've never seen it before and can't imagine who would park there like that since everyone knows not to. I'm forced now to waste precious time driving to the front and looking for a parking spot.

The door to the house is unlocked and that greatly worries me since Mildred knows to keep it locked at all times when she's alone. I'm certain I locked it when I left this morning. I quietly close it, place the packages on the table, and stand there inside the kitchen listening, looking for signs of something out of the ordinary. I see and hear nothing that suggests anything is different, so I move cautiously through the dining room and living room and stand at the bottom of the stairs, my head cocked with an ear facing the stairs. I hear a man's voice, deep, powerful, perturbed:

"... take you to a lawyer? What? How can you not remember? Did she drive you somewhere where you signed some papers? Maybe? What do you mean maybe? Either you did or you didn't. Hah? All right, all right. I'll try not to get angry. Do you know where the checkbook is? How about the papers George kept in this drawer? How can you not know? Where is everything!"

My body is pushed backwards by the strength of his voice, by the anger it hurls down at me. I try as hard as I can to stand firmly as I close my eyes and suck in my breath, mustering all the courage I can collect for the moment I was so afraid would inevitably come. My legs are shaky as I mount the stairs; they seem to betray me at every step, but I know I can't stop and run away no matter how much my instincts tell me to. I must do this. I must do this for everything Mildred and I have built together, or it could all be lost.

At the top of the stairs I say in a weak, squeaky voice, "Mildred, who's here? Mildred?" I hold myself up, my hand gripping the bannister railing as I wait for the response to my presence. It takes no time at all before he springs out into the hall, saying in his booming voice, "Her nephew, Larry!"

He has a fiery face outlined by a thin red beard, gray creeping along the edges. I recognize his eyes as the ones I've seen staring out at me from a younger man in Mildred's photo albums. He's not big by any means but his coat is bulky and he stands big in the middle of the hall, taking the posture of a boxer, his left

shoulder pointing at me, his right tucked behind.

I let out a deep breath. He hates me.

"So, this is what a swindler looks like," he says, shifting his feet, losing his boxer's stance. "Where are your horns? Are they hidden in your hair?"

"Mildred," I say, as she sneaks out of the middle room and stands exactly between us, her back against the wall. "Mildred," I say again, this time with affection because I can see she's scared. She looks like a child torn between fighting parents. "Is this your nephew?" I strengthen my grip on the bannister, making sure I'm firmly held in place.

"Forget the innocence game," he says.

"I've never seen you before," I say. "You don't come around here very often."

"And who are you?" he says. "I don't know you. No one around here knows who you are. You're the mystery woman no one knows anything about. You just show up one day and stake your claim. You're just someone who thinks she's found a live one. You stumble across this senile old woman with some money and think you can walk in and take it. Isn't that right?"

"How come I haven't seen you before? How do I know you are who you say you are? You could be anybody."

"Is that the best you can do? Where's Mildred's checkbook? Where are the papers that were in that bottom drawer? Where's the copy of the will?"

I look over at Mildred. Her hands are shaking. She clutches the left with the right and holds them up against her chest.

"Why don't you just leave us alone?" I say to him. "We didn't ask for you to come here. Look what you're doing to Mildred. You're upsetting her."

"I'm upsetting Mildred? Oh that's good. If she understood half of what you're probably up to—" He turns to Mildred. "Listen to me. Listen to what I'm saying. All the important papers that George kept in that drawer are gone. She took them and has probably had them changed. Any of this make sense to you?" He holds his hands in front of him as if he's about to strangle someone.

I jump in to save her from Larry's interrogation. "Mildred, you don't have to say anything to him. He never comes around to look in on you or to do anything for you. He doesn't care about your well being at all. You don't owe him anything. He just wants you to rot down here. Look at him, the only time he comes is when he's worried about your money. That's all you are to him—a pile of money."

"That's rich coming from you," he says, looking me up and down as if seeing me for the first time, then settling on my face. "At least I'm family. No one knows who you are. You come out of nowhere and split apart a family. I've known Mildred and George all my life. We're *family*. I'm no scam artist like you sniffing the streets for money."

"Mildred and I are happy together. We don't need you down here pushing us around. We're *better* than family. I've never seen a person so terribly treated by her *family* than Mildred. You and your parents—her *family*—left her all alone, only took her shopping once in a great while and called that caring for a person who needs special attention. All she gets from you and your parents is neglect. *I'm* here for her. I'm her new family." I go to Mildred's side and place my arm around her shoulders. "Mildred loves me," I say.

Mildred slips out from under my arm and goes into the middle room, and I can't blame her with the way Larry is.

"Looks like you lost your loved one," he says snidely. He comes so close to me that I can hear him perfectly through his gritted teeth. I smell beer on his breath. "What you're taking is mine," he says. "I've waited a long time, and if you think that just because I live five hundred miles away I'll let you get away with this, you're deluding yourself."

His eyes are inches from mine. I stare just as hard as he does. "I deserve it all," he whispers.

I whisper right back, "No, you don't." Out of the corner of my eye I see a flash of skin and feel the force of it—his fist—smashing into my ribs. I double over, trying so hard to suppress a yell of surprise and pain that only a whimper escapes me.

"Maybe you'll think twice about taking what is someone else's," Larry calmly says.

I lean back against the wall in order to prevent myself from falling onto the floor. I straighten up the best I can to look him in the eyes but I'm too late. He's leaving, casually trotting down the stairs, then

through the living room and out the back door.

I wince. My knees almost buckle, but I hold myself up with the knowledge I have and he doesn't. Mildred and I are beautiful, we're gorgeous. Larry is someone to feel sorry for.

I'm fine, I call out. I don't hear Mildred in the room. I can't imagine what she's doing in there, but I need a minute or two before I go see. I ask what she would like for supper. She doesn't answer. Would soup be okay? We got some of that good clam chowder you like so much. All right? Mildred? You there? Mildred? Are you all right? I'm coming now. I'm coming for you.

Mildred is quiet while we eat, has said nothing, doesn't even mention her stories when I ask her about them, doesn't say anything when I show her her new housecoat. Something's not right, she's not herself. I feel it. I know her that well.

Something wrong, dear? Is there? You're so quiet tonight, just sitting there eating your soup and not saying anything to me. Is there something wrong? Something I can help you with? You know I'm here for you. Always.

Her bowl empty, she cuts a path with her frail, blood-shot eyes on the table from her to me, up my chest, throat, face, to my own surprised eyes. She holds them there, steady, unwavering, her jaw tight, lips firm. I don't know this look on Mildred at all. Not on her. A look of complete disappointment. I push my chair back, glance out the window at nothing, then down into the bottom of my bowl where my spoon rests, licked clean and somehow hostile in its emptiness.

Mildred, why are you looking at me like that? What is it? What's wrong? Tell me, I don't like this. Not at all. What's wrong? Tell me or you're gonna make me cry. Please, Mildred, please stop. Tell me what's wrong. Oh, just. Tell me. See, you're making me cry. See. Oh . . .

What? What did you say? Larry? Oh, yes, you remember that terrible scene he put on for you. Yes . . . What? What do you mean? He said what? He said--that I'm taking advantage of you because you're old. Oh, Mil-- Mildred. How could-- What? Is it true? Is it *true*?

Oh, now I'm really gonna cry . . . Oh, . . . Mildred. I can't--oh--you're making me cry all over again. How could you say such a thing to *me*? To me. I can't-- I just can't believe . . . When--oh--Mildred . . . I can't believe you would ask me that--when, when, all you have to do is-- We've been through so much together and that's what hurts. It hurts so bad. Mildred. Mildred, when all you have to do is ask yourself, yes, that's right, all you have to do is ask yourself--do you *feel* taken advantage of?

What do you mean you don't know? How can you not know? You know I love you, right? Right? And you love me, right? You love me. Of course you do. You can say it. Go ahead, say it. Say you love me. Say it, Mildred. Say you love me. Now *say* it.

At night, in bed, I keep the curtains partially open letting the street light into my room, allowing it to cast its glow upon my bed for the times when I open my eyes to escape a troubling dream and need to remember where I am. So many nights I've woken, sweating, the pillows clutched in my arms, the image so clear of him I shared my bed with hovering before me in the kitchen of our apartment telling me *they* are taking my son. Who? I yell. Who? And I run out to the living room to see this stranger, this unknown woman, holding Joey's hand. *We're taking everything*, the voice I'd known for four long years whispers behind my ear, *everything*. *You'll never find us . . .*

Tonight, though, I know exactly where I am. I have lain here on my back, above the covers, my eyes staring but not seeing, for two hours, hearing an occasional car pass on the street, the heat hiss in the radiator, my heart so loud in my ears.

What am I doing? What have I done?

My side, where Larry hit me, is sore, my ribs tender. I'm afraid to pull up my night gown and look for fear my side is purple and in need of attention. I'm afraid. I'm afraid I might be broken . . .

Faintly I hear Mildred call my name, once, then twice, her frail night-time voice weakly traveling down the hall and through my door; yet it is enough to propel me up and out of bed, out of my room and to her. I flick on the light switch and see Mildred lost in a tangle of sheets and covers, her head just barely sticking out, a terrified look in her eyes.

What's wrong? What? You can't get out? Here . . . let me help you . . . Wow, you really got yourself all

twisted up here, didn't you?

There'd been a smell when I'd entered the room, a bad one. It's worse now, and as I unwrap Mildred from her cocoon of covers I see what it is. What happened? I ask. Looks like you had an accident. Oh! No, no, don't get upset. Don't worry about it. No, no, it's completely understandable. Oh, I know how you feel. No, no, don't be embarrassed. Don't. Like I said, it's completely understandable. You had to go bad but somehow got all tangled up and couldn't help it. It's okay. Nothing wrong. Don't worry about it. I know, I know, but don't be embarrassed. No, no, don't worry about the smell.

I help her out of bed and get a clean pair of underwear and a night gown from her bureau. She's unwilling to move but I coax her down the hall, run the water and undress her.

Slip your arm out here, I tell her. Now the other one. We'll take it over your--ooh! No, no, I'm all right. Ah, I'm fine, just a little pain in my side. Okay . . . now we can take off your underwear.

I drop her underwear in the sink and guide Mildred into the tub. That's right, I say, just stand there. I wipe between her legs; the wash cloth quickly becomes soiled and I must reach for another one behind me on the towel rack. Mildred's legs are very thin, and as I rub them up and down with the wash cloth, I can feel her slack muscles give as muscles shouldn't give. There is no firmness, no resistance to the pressure I apply. She is so weak. Her smell has filled the bathroom, overpowering the potpourri air freshener on the sink counter. But I do not mind in the least. This is something I cannot mind. I lovingly breathe Mildred in, again and again.

You're embarrassed? Just don't think about it. It could've happened to anyone. Yes. Just don't think about it, okay? I think I got it all now. No, no, I told you it's not a disgrace. So just forget about it, all right? It's just one of those things. Right? Right. Okay, then, let's dry you off here . . . I guide her out of the tub and dress her. Then we walk down the hall to her room.

Now you're all set. I'll just change your bed and you can get right back to sleep. Okay? Huh? What? No, no, I told you it's all right. It's all right. It's all right. It's no big deal. It happens to the best of us. No, don't cry. Mildred. Don't cry. You're fine. You're good. I said, Don't cry. Don't. There, there, now, don't worry, don't worry. I'm sorry I said it like that. That's right now. That's better. Everything will be fine now.

We'll get right back to sleep and in the morning you'll have forgotten it ever happened. It will be like a dream that's here and then it's gone. Right? That's the way it will be, right? Huh? Oh, okay, I know you're sorry about tonight. It's okay. I've forgotten about it. Just go to sleep now, that's right, that's right . . .

I turn out the light and close the door when Mildred says something very softly. What was that? What did you say? I turn the light on again. She's on her back, just as I'd tucked her in, with her head turned in my direction. I lean down over her, my ear just above her mouth. She whispers something. What? Love? Did you say you love me?

Oh, oh, Mildred! That's what I wanted so much to hear. That's so wonderful! You have no idea how much I needed to hear that. I'm going to cry, that's how happy you've made me. I kiss her on the forehead. I am crying. That's how happy . . . And you know that I love you and that everything will be fine for us. We were meant to be.

Mildred is neatly tucked in bed once again. This time she will last the night, I'm sure. And this time I lie under the covers, my eyes closed, my heart calm, thinking . . . , thinking about what has happened, about what I've done for Mildred, what she's done for me . . . , thinking how being loved is the one feeling I never want to lose again. Never. How I'll do anything to keep that feeling, anything. How I know that now. How easy it is to fall asleep to thoughts like these . . .

Spring has arrived early this year, like an unasked for blessing that promises the sun on our backs for as long as we need. And we need. Supper has been eaten, and Mildred and I sit out on the back porch breathing in long dormant sounds, those sounds that mark the season--the boom! boom! of a passing car full of teenagers with the windows down, the laughter of neighbors from behind hedges several back yards away, the flutter of a pigeon's wings as it takes off from the bird bath, my own pleased sighs of contentment.

Mildred is smiling.

Did you like dinner tonight? Yes? The chicken was good, then, you think? Yes? Good. I'm glad you liked it. It's a new recipe. You never know how new recipes will turn out. The picture in the cookbook



always looks so good but you can never tell. But I'm glad this one turned out so well. Would you like me to make it again sometime? Yes? Good. I'm so glad you liked it.

This is lovely out here today, isn't it? Yes. You're right, it is very beautiful. I think spring will be perfect this year, don't you? Yes, yes. You're so right—days like these do make a person glad to be alive. Right. You're exactly right—what more *could* a person want? I can't imagine. You've never been happier, have you? No. I didn't think so.

There's an envelope on the desk upstairs. It's from a lawyer. I won't open it. Mildred and I will have nothing to do with it. We're too good for that. We're far above the ugliness of jealousy and money. Good people who see us together will conclude that and know why we need to be together.

Those who can't are the unfortunate ones. They're the ones who don't understand people like Mildred and me. They've never taken any time to look beyond themselves, beyond what they are so sure they know. It's a classic problem and about as basic as human inabilities come. They are strangers to the way life can turn against you, the way it can knock you down flat on your back and keep you pinned to the ground. They don't know what it's like to be fed upon by loneliness, how it nibbles at you, then, how the hungrier it gets, the bigger it bites till you feel so weak and wasted and defeated and how you'll do anything for someone to piece you back together to where you feel that living is not such a wretched thing. They don't know these things because they each have someone. Hortense has Russ and Russ has Hortense and Larry has his wife. His son. But just wait until they have that someone ripped away from them, that one person. Just wait until they learn what it's like to have pieces taken out of you, until they learn what it's like to walk the streets endlessly in a fog, or to sit alone for hours weeping, knowing that terrible things happen, that no one is immune.

And wait till they do learn. Then, maybe, just maybe, they'll realize what it was like for Mildred, and they will think about how they abused her. They'll realize what a good thing it was that I was here for her in her last days, to feed her, talk to her, comfort her. They'll realize then that what we all need when misfortune strikes is that something out there that can make us whole again. I found mine, and they will find theirs. They'll just need to look.

That's when, lonely themselves, weary from carrying the weight of despair around, they'll think of me down here sitting on the back porch alone. It might be Russ, or Hortense, or even Larry, who will need me, who will have a great desire to make amends. And that person, that now very lonely relative of Mildred, will wander down here with a bowed head and slumped shoulders, step up onto the porch and drop his burdens onto the vacant chair beside me . . .

## Fiction by Gregg Johnson

### What You Can

Laura and I were having a good time, like the old times before the mall burned, but we'd had some trouble with thieves. Someone took out our front door-knob while we were at work, strolled in and stole our television.

"Will they be back?" Laura asked. She sat beside me on the couch, cradling her empty coffee mug. I had the knob out on the coffee table, the brass polished up, and we'd started a load of wash. We were putting our life together, celebrating with the fifth of Jim Beam that Laura's friend, Jean, the good-looking one, left us the night she told us her ex-husband planned to move to Chicago. In Jean, I think, Laura saw a hope that lay outside our life. We could never live her life, never walk as lightly through our troubles as she walked through her divorce, scarcely a hair out of place. I imagine Laura rang up diapers and aspirin at the drugstore and thought of Jean much as I thought of her while I made my guard rounds at the warehouse, shining my flashlight down the alleys of pallets and cardboard boxes. "Nothing for us to worry about," I told Laura. "We're fine, now."

Laura had filled her coffee cup with the Beam once too much for a Tuesday night, but I let it go. Laura doesn't get much fun in her life, so I let her fill us another mug. "Beam me up, Scotty," she said, and stuffed more clothes in the washer. That night a dress Jean had given Laura was in the dryer, tossing around, so I leaned back across the couch every few minutes and looked inside. I did not have the heart to tell Laura that I wished she would hide the dress in our dresser. Seeing Laura in the same dress Jean had worn gave me a strange feeling. The dress clung to Laura's legs and reminded me how they had thickened over the past five years. And it was too long for Laura. The hem that touched Jean above the knee gripped Laura's calves so she could only walk by taking tiny steps, like the time she tried on Jean's high-heeled shoes.

I remember I noticed the buttons on the dress had stopped making their scraping noise. I don't remember exactly when it stopped because three men who knocked on our front door. I say three knocked, and of course only one man actually knocked, but all three stood there when I switched on the porch light. Behind them in the yard sat a red Ford pickup.

Laura came up behind me and asked if it was Jean, since Jean usually came by about this time. And about this time one of them, the short one with the long hair, the one that looked like a midget, said "Let's go," and pushed me back and sauntered right into the living room. Laura was behind me and she got pushed against the couch. She sat down.

"You know these people?" she said.

I said I didn't. I took a step toward them, but the short one wasn't having any of it and stood his ground. The other two kept behind him. One looked seventeen and had his orange hair spiked. The other was forty if he was a day, a big one who looked as if he liked his beer. The short one, the one who looked like a midget, had a ring of keys on his belt that knocked against his blue-jeans when he took a step into me. I should have hit him right then, but I had no way of knowing what it was all about.

"You better sit down," he said. For a second I thought he had bad news for us, since that's what people say in those circumstances. We had heard our share of bad news lately, and I thought it might just be in the way of things that we were in for more. But when I sat down the little one stepped in another step and stood there all smug doing his Edward G. Robinson imitation.

His friend with the hair went into the kitchen and I thought about the .38 I kept in the bedroom closet under the electric blanket. The one with the hair put his head back in, said it looked like no one else was around. He went back into the kitchen and I heard the refrigerator door open.

I tried to stand up but Edward G. Robinson stepped in close now and his friend with the beer problem was right behind him. The midget didn't really look like Edgar G. Robinson, now that I got a good look at him. His hair was too long and he did not look like a celebrity.

He picked up the brass door knob I was working on and turned it over in his little square hands, looking at it like he had never seen one before.

"It's a door knob," I said.

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me as if he had known me all my life and over the years had come to dislike me. He just nodded, though, and when he asked me what I was doing with it his voice was level.

I told him I was repairing it.

"Looks like you're doing a real good job."

I could hear the sarcasm in his voice, but I kept quiet. The refrigerator door slammed and the one with the hair came in carrying the lemon pie Jean had made us. He put it down on the coffee table with some saucers. He had brought saucers and napkins and a steak knife we bought at Kroger the day after the mall burned. He laid them out and sat down cross-legged in front of the coffee table.

"You mind telling us what this is about?" I asked Edward G. Robinson.

He stepped back, but I had already measured my chances and they didn't look good. I could push him into his friend with the beer problem and make it to the closet and the .38 without any trouble, but not without leaving Laura alone, and I knew what I might face when I came back. The one with the hair cut them all a slice of lemon pie with the steak knife and handed them out on the saucers. He did not cut Laura and me a slice.

The midget was peering at the dryer. Laura's dress was still getting tossed around and I guess it attracted his attention.

"What's in there?" he asked.

I told him it was a dress and he said it made a lot of noise. This made Laura mad and under her breath she said he was a son of a bitch.

"What's that you said?" Edward G. Robinson asked.

"You heard me," Laura said. Laura won't take much.

He let it ride, and that worried me. It made me think that whatever they had planned was bad, that they already knew it would make up for her calling him a son of a bitch, or that they would think up something worse, and she had just given him an excuse for it. I worried about Jean, too. She liked to come by about this time when she worked late, and Laura had told me she worked late today.

"I guess you fellows are going to steal things from us," I said.

They ate their pie and Laura put her hand on my knee. She must have sensed that I was losing my patience. I'd been held up before. One night in Atlanta a fellow pulled a nickel-plated .45 on me in a parking lot at Perimeter Mall. I can't say I liked him for it, but after I gave him my wallet, he thanked me and was gone. Did his business and got out of there. These men were enjoying themselves too much for my taste.

"Why's there only one dress in there?" the midget asked.

"She only needed that one." I saw no reason to explain that Laura said Jean's dress smelled like smoke, that with the dress in the house she felt something was on fire.

The one with hair was looking at me now and the one with the beer problem shuffled up beside the midget, leaning over me. "What's so special about this one?" he bellowed.

It happened the night the mall caught fire. Laura had put on the dress before we drove to the mall and sat in the parking lot with other couples to watch the flames jump from Penny's to Blockbuster. We heard the glass explode over the food court. I imagined glass showering down on the tables where Laura and I sat on Friday nights, the shards jingling across the tiled fountain where we tossed our pennies and dimes. For a time the flames died and we thought it was over. Then smoke drifted up from the roof of Macys at the other end of the mall, and we knew it would last through the night.

Driving home on Highway 9, we could smell smoke for miles. I felt tired and let Laura drive. We pulled off at a rest stop and sat in the car, our doors open to let the wind though, my head on her lap beneath the steering wheel so I could look up through the windshield at the trees and the moonlight streaming through the leaves. Over the trees we could still see smoke rising from the mall. When we got home, Laura claimed her dress smelled like the fire. She washed it three times, but she said it made our closet smell like ashes.

"I don't know," I told Edward G. Robinson.

Two lights cut across the wall. The big one walked over to the window and looked out. I heard Jean slam her car door.

"A girl," the big one said, as if someone had just given birth. I half expected them to hide behind the door, but they just stood and ate their pie off our saucers.

Jean opened the door and walked right in. She knows she doesn't have to knock. Our visitors made room for her. She said hi to the big one and walked up to us sitting there on the couch. She had on her green dress, and her green pumps, and as always she looked good. She had a job downtown as a receptionist at a lawyer's office, so we usually saw her dressed up, but tonight she had just had her hair lightened, and she looked good enough to bother me. Streaks the color of moonlight ran through her hair like lightening.

"He said yes," Jean said.

The midget looked at her over a piece of lemon pie speared on his fork. The other two fellows pretended they were only interested in their slices of pie, but they glanced up when they put a sliver in their mouths so they could get a good look at her.

"He knew that's what I wanted to ask him, and he came right out with it."

She was talking about her raise. She had wanted to ask for a raise since the night her ex-husband left town.

"That's great," Laura said. She slid to the edge of the couch and I knew she wanted to hop up and hug her. They did that sometimes.

"How much they give you?" the midget asked. He popped the fork-full of pie into his mouth.

Jean clapped her hands together and moved back so she was in the middle of the room. Some women doing that would have looked like too much or tripped up over their pumps, but Jean could do it right.

"Another fifty dollars a month," Jean said. "It's not much, but it's fifty dollars."

She bent at the knees and she and Laura wadded their fists up tight and brought them up level with their shoulders and quivered with the victory. They did that sometimes, too.

"You should have asked for more," the midget said. He was pushing the rest of his pie around on his plate.

Laura shook her head at Jean, but Jean had no way of knowing.

"I know it," Jean said, "but sometimes you just have to take what you can."

The midget liked that and laughed. The other gentlemen laughed, too. They wouldn't look at Jean now, but they looked at the midget and ate their lemon pie and laughed.

"I must be getting funny," Jean said. "Today somebody at the office laughed at everything I said and now your friends think I'm funny, too."

Nobody said anything, and then Laura said it.

"We don't know these people," she said.

Now Jean thought that was funny, and she laughed, and the gentlemen all laughed, and then Jean saw that Laura and I were not laughing. We were sitting on the couch shaking our heads at her.

"What's going on?" Jean asked.

"We're just having some pie," said the midget.

"I made that pie," Jean said.

"It's real good," the big one said. He was a real polite one.

"You like to bake?" the midget asked.

"People say I'm good at it," Jean said. "Now what's this all about?"

The midget didn't say anything and walked around to the dryer. That was when I noticed Jean's dress had stopped slapping the sides.

The one with the hair wiped his chin with his napkin and put his plate on the coffee table. "She's probably good at a lot of things."

Jean pushed the pie plate off into the lap of the one with hair. Jean can have a temper. "You don't talk to me that way," she said.

He wiped the pie off himself with a napkin. "Bitch."

He wouldn't look at Jean though. He would only look at the midget. The .38 in the closet crossed my mind again, but my chances looked worse with Jean there.

Edward G. Robinson changed the subject. "Let's get going," he said. The big one and the one with the hair acted glad to have something to do. The big one got down on his hands and knees and unplugged the washer and dryer.

I got up but the midget was fast. He had the brass door-knob in his little hand. He hit me hard, caught me right above the belt. I couldn't breath and I went down hard on the floor. The midget opened our front door and the other two picked up the washer and carried it outside. I was on the floor, but through the window I could see them set it on the tail-gate of the Ford and slide it in towards the cabin.

"That washer and dryer's paid for," Laura said.

They came back in and picked up the dryer and carried it out to the pickup. I was still on the floor. He had hit me hard, but I could see them talking outside. I was afraid they were talking about Jean. The one with the hair came back inside and looked at her. I didn't like the look, one of those looks you see in people who have had a problem for a long time, and you see them see the answer to the problem, see their face go clear and distant, and you see it is not an answer you will like.

Jean told Laura she was going to call the police, and reached for the telephone. The one with the hair caught her by one wrist, but he didn't need to turn her around. She spun around and slapped him across the face. She caught him by surprise and it was a good clean slap. Water was in his eyes when he grabbed her wrists. He bent down over her and I couldn't see, but I guess he tried to kiss her. Jean was tossing back and forth and her head caught him on the chin. He rocked back on his heels, and I thought he was going to hit her, but he just let go her wrists and pulled the telephone cord out of the wall. He didn't tear it out like you see on television. He bent down and pushed in the little plastic nub and pulled the cord out right.

The big one laughed, and the one with the hair looked at him as if he were the one who had slapped him. Edward G. Robinson laughed too. "You see anything else we could use?"

The one with the hair wiped his hand across his mouth. "Not really." He was looking at Jean.

Up against the wall we had a roll-top desk that had belonged to Jean's father. Edward G. Robinson walked over to it and pulled out the middle drawer. He took out the manila envelope, saw the money inside, and tucked the envelope into his pants pocket.

The one with the hair grabbed Jean's arm. She kicked at him but the one with the beer problem came up behind her and caught her around the waist. She couldn't do much. I was up on my elbows when I saw the midget's foot. I tried to turn away but I saw his leg go back and heard the keys on his belt jangle against his blue jeans. His boot caught me hard on the ear, and I went down and could only see out of one eye.

When they carried Jean into the kitchen, Laura ran after them. The midget grabbed at her but missed. The big one came out holding Laura around the waist, pushed her onto the couch hard and shut the kitchen door. I heard Jean shout my name and then I heard a sound like the sound of the slap she had given the one with the hair, but louder, and she didn't say anything after that, although I heard noises and a long crying sound that could not have come from Jean, a wailing like an animal will make, and then I guess I went out, because the next thing I remember was the three fellows coming out of the kitchen in a hurry. I managed to get to my feet and catch the big one by the arm, but he swung away from me and knocked me onto the couch. They were out of the house and into their Ford before I could stand up.

Laura was on the couch, crying, but she got up and was kneeling beside Jean when I got there. Jean was on the kitchen floor. Laura had covered her with her green dress. They had not killed her, but she couldn't open her eyes. The swelling had already started by the time we drove her to the hospital.

Her bruises didn't show until the next morning. That night her face was just red and puffed up, like she had just cried, and I remember thinking she looked worse the night she told us she and her husband were getting a divorce. At the hospital the next day she wanted to know if the police had found the men. I avoided looking at the long bruises across her shoulders and cheek and had to tell her that by the time we took her to the hospital and the police arrived, an hour had passed. I was afraid it gave them time to get away. Laura thought I didn't know what I was talking about, and at first I felt she might be right, that the police would surely catch them, for an hour was not much time, and three men in a truck carrying a stolen washer and dryer would be conspicuous. Laura was wrong, though, and when I called the police the next day, the officer who answered the telephone told me what he has told me for the past the three months, that they had not been able to find the three men, and that they will call Jean once they turn them up.

I did what I could. For two weeks I drove around town at night with the .38 beside me on the car seat, hoping to find a red pickup truck. Now I keep the gun beneath the couch, in case more trouble comes to find us.

In March, the Gulf Stream pushed in warm air and we felt a change was near. Work had started on the new mall, and Laura was off the Beam for a month. In the afternoons we sat in the car in the mall parking lot. The remains of the old mall, the steel beams and ashes and shattered plate glass, had been bulldozed to one corner of the lot. Cranes were setting orange girders into the freshly poured foundation. Each day we could see a change, and after a month, men in blue overalls were laying bricks around the entrance.

Jean had to quit her job downtown, but she still came to see us. For a month we worried she would leave. She had written her ex-husband about going to Chicago to be with him, but he wrote back saying he thought it was a bad idea. One night after we came home from watching the construction, Jean brought us a chocolate cake. We sat and had cake and coffee and talked about how she was going on an interview every day until she found something else to do.

"I'm excited," she said. She had gone for an interview at a bank and she thought she had a good chance at the job. She was standing in the middle of the room and Laura and I were on the couch.

"You'll be fine," Laura told her.

"I guess so," Jean said. She looked good. She was wearing yellow sandals and a yellow sun dress. We hadn't seen the dress before and she turned around in the middle of the room, spun in a circle so the dress fluttered out above her knees.

Sometimes I think you're put through things, not as a test like people say, but just put through troubles to show you that you've hit bottom, and all you can do is pick up your life and continue. That was where we were, and I guess there are people who would say we're still close, but when we sat there eating our cake, Jean in her yellow dress and looking almost like herself again, I could hope things were about to take a turn for the better.

Jean hoped so, too. She turned around and around in the center of the room, just lovely, a little shaky on her feet still, but the dress spreading out around her and lifting over our knees as we sat on the couch, the new yellow dress filling the room like light.

"I'm going to get this job," she said. "This is going to be good."

Laura bunched her hands up into fists and brought them up level with her shoulders. Jean bunched her hands into fists, too, and bent over laughing, almost steady, her yellow dress swinging around her so it filled the room, and they quivered with the victory.

## Fiction by Anthony Tambakis

### Greetings from the Mall of America

*Monday a.m. (Day One)*

If you've got to do some time in rehab, they say this is the place to be. It was featured in *People* magazine a few months back after a couple of those young Hollywood actors checked themselves in, so it's pretty chic to get sent here now. My father and his faithful attorney Ira Schnaugh must have seen the article and figured some time here would help my case. Schnaugh says that judges are more lenient when someone goes before them who has already taken the initiative to get their shit together. So here I sit in the boondocks of Minnesota. Allegedly getting my shit together.

Today is the beginning of Phase II of the big program. Phase I was life in the detox wing, where they keep you until your body is rid of all traces of insidious narcotics and all desire to get your hands on more. In detox you basically lie in bed all day and watch whatever you can find on the tube, so it wasn't all that different from what I'd been doing in my regular life for most of this year, disregarding the five or six Nembutal a day that I was taking, of course.

This morning I was deemed healthy in body, so I've been sent over here so they can firm up my spirit. I had my own room in the detox wing, but over here they've got everyone in what looks like a big gymnasium, with bunk beds for the guys on one side of the room and ones for the girls on the other. There's not even any TVs. This journal I'm writing in now was in the bottom of a care package that was sitting on my bed when I got walked over here at the crack of dawn. It's about the only useful thing in the box. The rest was crap. A pocket-sized 12-step manual; some miniature soaps and shampoos; an AT&T calling card, a ball of caramel popcorn wrapped in blue cellophane. A whole lot of nothing. This can't be the same box they gave the people from Hollywood. I mean, there's no way Robert Downey Jr. got a ball of fucking caramel popcorn.

Right now there's a woman marching through the room wielding one of those electric bullhorns police use to disperse rioters. She's wearing a t-shirt that says THINK POSITIVE in big black letters, and is shouting that today is the first day of the rest of our lives. I hate her guts already.

*Monday p.m. (Day One)*

The woman turned out to be Souli, winner of the Liza Minnelli look-alike contest and one of the three or four most annoying women in the United States. Apparently she's some kind of drug-free guru who's in charge of the lame group I've got to be a part of for the next few weeks. After she roused everyone out of bed this morning with that goddamn bullhorn she corralled us out into the hallway, where we got herded to the cafeteria and then on to a meeting room they call the Red Room. There were about 15 or 16 white vinyl chairs set up in a big circle, and since I'm the new guy I had to sit next to Souli. She yammered on for a while, saying ridiculous things like we all needed to look at ourselves in the mirror and say "I'm excellent!" to start every day. Up-with-people crap like that. At one point she turned to me and was like, "You can introduce yourself to the Peer Group if you'd like, Eliot." I looked away and rolled my eyes, so she took the liberty of announcing my presence herself.

"Everyone, this is Eliot Pendleton. Eliot's originally from Connecticut, but goes to school in Massachusetts. Graduate school, is that right Eliot? It's his first day, so he's going to listen in and see what the Peer Group is all about. He can speak up whenever he's ready to share."

That's the \$64,000 word around here—share. Souli only uses it about forty-five times a minute. She's always clasping her hands together and leaning on her bony knees and telling everyone, "Share with us. Share with the group." Right. Like I'm actually going to talk about my life with a bunch of goddamn strangers. I spent most of the day looking out the window at the lake, half-listening to everyone's complaints about how they're not responsible for this, that and the other thing. The gist of it was that Lance is screwed up because his father's a distant, uninvolved bastard, and Sara's a wreck because her mother is a self-pitying boozehound, and Tanya never had a fucking pony, so her life is ruined. It was a total joke. Nobody wants to take

responsibility for themselves. Nobody can admit to anything without blaming somebody else. Me, I have no interest in the kind of *sharing* that goes on around here, because I have no problem admitting I'm a fuck-up. Ally may be a deceitful bitch who screwed me over, but the real reason I got in trouble and ended up being shipped out here to Minnesota is because I screwed up. No one suggested that I drop my life like I did. No one force fed me a bottle of Nembutal a week. No one dragged me into Manhattan to propose to Ally. And no one made me go down to Washington Square Park to score, either. I did all of those things on my own, and I admit to that, so I don't see how I'm supposed to benefit from any of this Peer Group crap. But I'm stuck here anyway. Trapped in Share City.

*Monday p.m. (Day One)*

I should mention that I made up the thing about the pony. Nobody said anything about not having a pony.

*Tuesday p.m. (Day Two)*

We had fruitcups and cereal in the cafeteria at 7:30 this morning and then I went back to the Red Room for a talk with Souli called "Envisioning Success." She wanted everyone to talk about where they saw themselves ten years from now. Most of the people in the group can't see ten seconds down the road, much less ten years, but Souli said it's important to train your mind to see things positively. Since it's only my second day I didn't have to join in the discussion, but my new guy status worked against me later in the afternoon when we went outside and gathered by this big, pretty lake they've got on the grounds here.

Souli announced that it was a beautiful Spring day, and a perfect time to initiate me into the group. I was like, "What if I don't *want* to be initiated into the group?" She said that it was part of the program, and that everyone else had done it, and that I wasn't going to be able to really share with my Peer Group if I didn't learn to trust them. I looked around at the other members of the group, roughly 15 or 16 people between the ages of 18-35. They all had been-there, done-that looks on their faces, and nobody said much of anything as we walked around the lake and then down this dirt trail into the woods. We walked in maybe a hundred yards to this clearing, and in the middle of the clearing was a tree stump with a bunch of initials carved all over it. It was three or four feet high, I guess. High enough to where there was a little piece of wood nailed into the side for you to step on and climb up.

"O.K. Eliot, time for you to partake in the Fall of Trust," Souli said. "Climb up there, turn your back, and on the count of three let yourself go."

I climbed up on the stump, feeling like the biggest asshole in North America, and then they all went "One! Two! Three!" and I let myself fall backwards, where they caught me and then set me down. Souli gave me a big hug like I had just accomplished something worthwhile. Like I had just saved someone from drowning or something important. She gave me this pen knife and I had to carve E.P. into the stump before we were allowed to go back to the hall for free time. We walked back through the woods in the last light of the day, and Souli asked me if it felt good to be an official member of the group. I just shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to tell her that it was a stupid exercise. I wanted to ask her, "What the hell were they supposed to do, let me fall and crack my fucking skull open?" I wanted to say that maybe that should have been the exercise instead. I mean, if she wanted to teach everyone something about living in the real world then she would have instructed the group to let me fall. Just let me crash down and have everyone share a good laugh about me being stupid enough to trust a bunch of total strangers. Stupid enough to trust anybody at all.

*Tuesday p.m. (Day Two)*

Some notes on my "peers":

**LANCE PELTIER:** Lives in Hollywood Hills. Hates both his self-obsessed parents, particularly his father, some Silicon Valley computer hotshot. Set fire to his old man's antique car collection last Christmas Eve. Likes speedballing coke and heroin.

**SHERRY LYNN LOVE:** The pride of Boca Raton, Florida. Detests her beautiful, smart sister Hollis. Hocked her grandmother's jewels to buy various pharmaceuticals. Carries around a suitcase

filled with make-up. Rumor has it there's a face buried somewhere beneath the rouge.

**OLIVER WENDELSTADT:** Grandfather was former Mayor of some town in Rhode Island. Hates all 300-odd pounds of himself. Weighed 135 in high school. Smoked grass and ate himself into a frenzy until he was given a choice between the Marine Corps and rehab. Judging by the looks of him, he should have taken Parris Island over Minnesota.

**SIMON SCHMIDT:** Thrown out of the University of Washington. Hates his father, a state senator. Got coked up at school and called *The Seattle Times*, giving an interview to a reporter where he called his father "A murderer of the human spirit and one of the worst human beings in the Pacific Northwest."

*Friday a.m. (Day Five)*

After two-days of closed door meetings and general panic, I finally got my pen and journal returned to me. They confiscated all of our personal belongings on Wednesday after a guy in the over-40 group started sawing at his wrists with his AT&T card after getting some kind of bad news over the phone. The card worked so well that if he had managed to continue uninterrupted for another 10-12 weeks then he might have actually been able to draw enough blood to finish the job. The administrators freaked, though, and we all got called in to take some psychological tests. In the meantime, they took all of our stuff away as a precautionary measure, even Sherry Lynn Love's suitcase full of make-up, which was enough to keep that vain, Scarlett O'Hara wanna-be in bed and under the covers for 48 hours. She literally carries that case with her wherever she goes. She takes it to group. To the cafeteria. You name it.

The administrators are probably worried about getting sued by someone like my father and Ira Schnaugh and never making it into *People* magazine again. That's probably their biggest concern. The crisis is over, though. The AT&T guy got sent to a hospital for people with real problems, and Souli came through with her bullhorn and announced that the group will start meeting again today. I'm glad to get my journal back, and God knows Sherry Lynn is thrilled to get her meathooks back on that make-up case. Hopefully no one will try and bludgeon themselves with a caramel corn ball or hang themselves with a rubber band or anything else really dangerous, because this journal is just about the only thing keeping me from losing my mind from sheer boredom. Outside a handful of board games and a few stacks of you-can-accomplish-anything paperbacks, there's not shit to do around here except think.

I'll say this much: I don't see for a second what's so special about this place. Why anyone from Hollywood would choose to come here is completely beyond me.

*Saturday a.m. (Day Six)*

Got a new bunkmate today, so it looks like I'm no longer the new guy. I don't know his name, but he's a frail-looking kid with a crew cut and some nasty scars on his wrists. He threw his bag down and then the administrators sent for him, so I'm not sure what his deal is. We don't have group on Sunday, so if the poor kid's lucky he'll be tied up with paperwork all day and won't have to fall of that fucking stump until Monday.

*Saturday p.m. (Day Six)*

The new guy showed up for the afternoon meeting at the lake. His name is Mincy, oddly enough. From Van Nuys, California. His father's some kind of high-ranking Air Force officer. Mincy's a damaged little kid that you can't help liking for some reason. He did more talking in one afternoon that I have in my whole first week. Souli introduced him and he had no problem telling everyone how glad he was to be there, and how he hoped to make some friends, and how it was O.K. to look at his wrists since they were carved up pretty good. He's only 17, but he ran away from home when he was 15 because he's gay and his Dad hates queers something fierce. He made his way up to North Beach in San Francisco and lived on the street for a while until he met this guy named Giorgio. They were boyfriends until Mincy came home one night and found Giorgio on the couch with someone else. Giorgio was like, "This is Ramon, now pack your shit and get out." That night Mincy cut up his wrists with the lid of a rusty Campbell's can, but somebody found him the next morning and took him to the hospital. His parents came and got him and took him back to Van Nuys, but Giorgio kept calling him and begging him to come back, so he ran away again. Of course the guy screwed him over again, and when his parents found him this time he was strung out pretty good, sleeping on the

rocks in the park across from Alcatraz.

He told the story in a shy kind of way, and he didn't blame anybody, which I appreciated. Still, I couldn't believe how much he revealed. I was thinking the whole time how I could never do that. I could never tell those people about my life like that. I could never go into what happened with my mother, or how I started becoming a burnout when she died, or how I straightened up when I met Ally. I could never tell them how Ally made me feel like I had a place in the world, or how alone I felt after she fucked me over like she did. I could never say that I started using again after that, and dropped out and became an invisible person. Mincy poured out everything, though, and later, when we took him out to the woods, he made everyone catch him five times off that stupid tree stump. It was late afternoon and we were freezing, but the kid was having a party. He said he loved the way it felt, falling into everyone's arms and being put gently down. It was the craziest thing.

*Sunday a.m. (Day Seven)*

Visitor's Day. More like Visitor-less Day. Everyone's laying around doing nothing. Mincy is trying to organize a backgammon tournament, but no one seems interested. My father phoned this morning, but I didn't take the call. He's called three or four times this week, but I haven't talked to him. What's the point? He said "Ira thinks you should go to this clinic," and so I came to the clinic. What the hell does he want from me?

*Sunday p.m. (Day Seven)*

It's past midnight and I can't sleep. Mincy couldn't get anyone to play in the backgammon tournament so just the two of us played. Six hours of backgammon, and he was dying to play more. He talked some more about Giorgio, his old boyfriend, and about his parents. Mostly we talked about drugs. Everyone in her obviously used in order to avoid reality in one way or another, but there's two different groups beyond that. There's the people who took shit to make them feel more alive, and the people who took shit to make them feel more dead. Most of the people here fall into the first category. They're the ones always looking to get jacked up. Speeds and powders and pulling all nighters until they couldn't keep it together anymore. The second category is for people like Mincy and me. People who were looking to make themselves numb to the world.

When Ally left me for the broker I was crazy for a while. Desperate. It's like I felt everything so intensely that I could barely breathe. I hated her and I hated myself. I put cigarettes out on my hands to punish myself for whatever it was I had done to lose her. I wanted to get out of my life, to not feel anything anymore. Nembutal did that for me. It's like that old Clash song says: "Nembutal...numbs it all." I was numb to everything. I had no desire to answer the phone or go to class or to see anyone. All I did was sleep for eighteen hours a day and sit on the couch with my brain disconnected. Mincy said that when he got zoned like that all he could think about were those Vietnam movies where the soldier who's been all shot to hell lies on the ground, screaming in agony, before one of his sympathetic buddies shoots him up with Morphine. After the needle goes in this look of peace settles on the dying man's face, and all he can see is the white light in the sky, the sun on fire, and then the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of the chopper blades taking him away. From above, the villages look peaceful and perfect. That's what it feels like to be unplugged. To be zoned. You're removed from the pain of feeling. Nothing matters to you.

Mincy said he always closed his eyes until he heard the chopper blades, but for me it was the sound of a small-engine airplane that took me away. For the five years that I was with Ally, we would spend every Thanksgiving at her house in Keene. Her entire family would come to New Hampshire to celebrate, and I was in charge of picking up all the McFarlands when they'd arrive at various airports. Dr. McFarland's brother Frank was an amateur pilot and flew his family in a single-engine Cessna that he piloted in from Long Island. He'd arrive at the airfield in Keene a day or two before Thanksgiving, and I'd take Ally's Mom's mini-van to pick him and the others up. Sometimes I'd sit along the road by the airfield and watch the small planes that would come gliding over the tops of the white pines, all of them steady and soundless and free. When it got close enough I could recognize the distinct hum of Frank's plane, and then I'd start the van up and drive over to meet him. He was a real Irishman, friendly as hell, always talking politics and drinking Bailey's and comparing the attributes of the McFarland's four hunting dogs. His daughters and wife always gave me big

hugs and treated me like one of the family. It made me feel good to be the first one to see them before the holiday festivities began. Made me feel like I was a part of something important. Part of a real family.

Sometimes, back in Amherst, I'd see traces of those times at Ally's house, even through the Nembutal. I'd see hazy outlines of the McFarlands seated around the pine table on their screened-in patio. I'd see all the cousins and grandchildren and dogs running around. I'd see the brown fields and white pines, and when I'd close my eyes the sound of the small plane approaching would hum in my ears. When the pills kicked in, I'd hear that humming every time.

*Monday p.m. (Day Eight)*

Week two. Today was WHO DO YOU LOVE? Day. Everyone had to name at least one person they loved. I said my mother even though she's dead, but Souli said that I had to name someone living. I told her I'd have to get back to her on it. Souli's trying to get us all into positive thinking over negative thinking. She thinks that if people focused on the things they love in the world and not what they hate then everyone could live more productive lives. We spent the better part of the morning listening to the sob story of the oldest guy in our group, this architect named Pierce Pettite whose wife left him high and dry in Bay St. Louis. She took off with a guy who valet parked cars at the Grand Casino and never even left a note. All he got were the divorce paper. He doesn't even know where she took off to. I felt sorry for him for a while, but then I didn't after he kept saying that all he wanted to know was *why*. Over and over he asked that. Why? Why? He said that if he had an explanation from her then he could bet a sense of closure. He must have said that 60 times. That's one of those words that people are always tossing around these days. Closure. What the hell is it? What the hell is closure? Everything that happens to you, you carry it with you your whole life. Some things you think about more than other things. That's it. There's no *closure*.

Don't tell that to Pierce Pettite, though. He's convinced that if his snake of a wife had only given him an explanation then he never would have developed a five-hundred-dollar-a-day coke habit, and never would have spent every waking moment doing blow off the stomachs of every stripper on the Gulf Coast. After he told his story we had a question and answer session. Souli was like, "Eliot, do you have anything you'd like to ask Pierce?" I said no. I wanted to say yes. I wanted him to tell me how it was possible that he could be thirty-four years old and not know that there is *no explanation* for the things that people do to one another, other than the simple fact that people go along together until one of them finds a better deal, something that they decide they simply must have, and then they take it and that's it. It's like with Ally and Banker Boy. She decided she wanted him, went for it, and it was "So long Eliot" after that. There's no great explanation for it—just the same things people have been telling each other since the beginning of time. "I never meant for it to happen," they say. "I never wanted to hurt you." That's all Pierce Pettite's wife would have said. It's the world's oldest story. I swear, I bet if you looked at some of those ancient cave drawings, that's what some of them say.

"Dear Thor, I didn't mean for it to happen. I never wanted to hurt you."

Mincy's made friends with Sherry Lynn Love, of all people. She sat with us at breakfast this morning. They had their arms around each other like old chums, which was kind of annoying. I mean, they don't even know each other. I was trying to eat my grapefruit in peace, but they sat there and talked the whole time about actors who were cute and how the world will never be the same without Lady Di. Crap like that. Sherry Lynn drives me crazy because she's one of those one-uppers. You say you've got a fever, she says she's got cancer. That kind of thing. Mincy was talking about how he met River Phoenix's brother Jonquin in San Francisco not a week before River Phoenix OD'd in front of the Viper Room in L.A., and so Sherry Lynn had to say that she knew that River Phoenix was scheduled to check in here the weekend he died but no one knew about it. I was like, "How the fuck do *you* know about it then?" She said, "I have my sources. And you don't have to be so nasty all the time." I felt like saying, "You don't have to be such a whiny bitch all the time," but I didn't. It would have upset Mincy.

*Tuesday p.m. (Day Nine)*

Running out of excuses to use when my father calls. There's only so many times you can say you're in the bathroom. God forbid he just take the goddamn hint.

*Wednesday a.m. (Day Ten)*

I got a postcard from the old man this morning. He's over in Minneapolis, meeting with some big wigs at 3M. He says he's going to drive over in a week and a half and see me since I haven't been coming to the phone when he's called. You think that would tell him something, that I don't want to see him, for example, but once the old man says he's going to do something it's already a done deal. He's a mule like that.

The postcard he sent has a picture of an enormous indoor ferris wheel on the front, with *GREETINGS FROM THE MALL OF AMERICA!* Written in script across it. It's so tacky I think I'll go get some scotch tape and put it in the journal.

Eliot,

How's it going over there, champ? I've tried calling you without much success. I'm in Minneapolis doing some work with the president of 3M. I'll be here for a couple of weeks, and will be coming out to see you on Sunday the 23<sup>rd</sup>. We'll get an early start. Maybe take a drive to the Mall of America and then go over to Dryersville, Iowa to see the Field of Dreams. I brought your old mitt in case you feel like tossing a ball around there. Hope you're feeling well. See you the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Dad

The old man must have spent hours coming up with that itinerary. *Days*, maybe. Probably bought a book called "Worst Day Trips in the Continental U.S., Volume I." I can't think of anything I'd rather do less than go eat a gyro in the world's largest food court with my old man. If there's anything worse than that it's gotta be tossing a baseball in a fucking cornfield with him. He must have really brainstormed to come up with that one. He must have been like, "Hmm, let's see...Kevin Costner played catch with his father in 'Field of Dreams' and they bonded, so Eliot and I will play catch and we'll bond, too. What a splendid idea!" What a stupid idea is more like it. I can just see him reaching into the trunk of some rental car and pulling out my old mitt and tossing it to me. And then he'll stand there in some casual clothes he just bought off the rack and we'll toss a ball back and forth like a couple of idiots. He'll probably say that I was a good ballplayer when I was younger, and that maybe I shouldn't have quit after Mom died. I'll shrug and say it doesn't matter. That it's all in the past. Over and done with.

He and I have never been able to communicate. After my Mom got sent back to St. Stephen's in the fall before she died, my father put up a big nylon golf net in the backyard. It was strung between two oak trees, and you could see the lights of St. Stephen's over the lake and the hillside beyond it. He used to whack old range balls into that net at all hours of the night, and I'd often stand in my window and watch him, and look out at the lights of the hospital. I'd want to go down there and talk to him, to ask him what was wrong with my mother. I wanted to tell him that I knew she wasn't on "vacation" like he always said, that I knew the gifts I got in the mail were sent by him and not her, like he claimed. I wanted to tell him that the kids at McKinley said that St. Stephen's was a nut house. Sometimes he'd turn around and look at me in the window. If he would have waved only once I could have gone down into the yard and talked to him. If he would have done anything but frown and shoo me back to bed I could have gone down. But I never did, because my father never spoke. That she was on "vacation" was the story he always told. He never budged from that, even when he must have known that I understood the truth. It was one of the lies he told.

After she died, we spoke even less. We never talked about my mother. What happened to her, her drowning in the lake behind the house, was referred to as "the accident" when it was mentioned at all. When I started hanging out with the skateboard punks and coming home at all hours, he didn't say anything. He just had a ramp built in the driveway so we'd skate there and not somewhere else. That's how he's always done things. It's like the time he found a half ounce of dope in my room. He didn't say a word about it. Instead he made me sit down with him one night after our first Christmas without Mom and watch a video he had gotten from the public library. It was one of those ABC After School Specials they used to show all the time.

I'll never forget it. A bunch of California surfer dudes were hanging out in a van by the ocean, getting high all day and pressuring their cheerleader girlfriends into using, though what a bunch of cheerleaders were doing hanging out in a van with a bunch of stoners is anyone's guess. One of the surfers, one of those Van Patten kids who all look alike, talked his girlfriend into doing PCP at school. Told her she was a square and needed to be cool and loosen up and what not. So she took the angel dust and then totally freaked out—hurled herself right through the third floor science lab window. A bunch of dorks wearing protective goggles were standing in front of their Bunsen burners and were like, "Holy shit, that cheerleader jumped out the window." The girl was lying in the parking lot bleeding like a fiend, and then my old man popped out the tape and said, "Well, did you learn anything from that?"

I said, "Yeah, only take PCP on the ground floor of a building.?"

That's our relationship in a nutshell.

*Wednesday p.m. (Day Ten)*

Souli is having everyone take turns describing what happened to them before they got sent her. In other words, provide a walking tour of rock bottom. She said she was inspired by Mincy and Pierce Pettite, and thinks the group will bond more if we all share our stories. I don't see the point. I mean, there's a hole, right? Everybody's got one. Some people try to fill it by analyzing flow charts and organizing neighborhood watch groups and reading Dean Coontz thrillers like my old man. Other people try to fill it by bungee jumping into canyons, or getting up at 4:30 in the morning and running the streets for 25 miles, or by going door to door getting people to sign petitions to do away with the penny. Some people take drugs. That's pretty much the entire thing right there. There's a hole. The rest is just the specifics of the hole. The who, what, why, where, when, and how of it. Whatever people's story is.

*Friday p.m. (Day Twelve)*

It's about 4 a.m. Sleeping's been impossible since I got here. When I was gobbling the Nembutal I could sleep for 18, 20 hours at a time no problem. Most of the time I didn't even know what day it was. Now I sleep here and there. Maybe three or four hours a night. Usually I just lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, listening to everyone breathing in the dark. Most of the time I think about the way things were when Ally and I were together. Memories just kind of float on by. Goofing around on the ski lift up in Burlington. Hiking in the rain along the Appalachian Trail. Playing Scrabble in the Pinkham Notch lodge. Small things we did together before she met the broker and put our life out on the curb like a sack of trash.

Tonight I was restless and didn't want to lie around thinking about Ally. Mincy went to sleep early because he's not feeling well, so I got up and walked around. Norton, the world's most inept guard, was asleep in the security office for a change, so I strolled around while everyone slept. I walked along the wall facing the lake and noticed that one of the windows was half open. I poked my head through and saw someone sitting on one of the stone benches they have around the lake here. I climbed through the window and walked down, and when I got close enough I could see that it was Sherry Lynn. I barely recognized her at all. She had no make-up on and her face was clean, and she was wearing eye glasses that I had never seen before. She had her knees pulled up to her chin, with a big Duke sweatshirt pulled over them. Her make-up case sat on the ground by her feet, and when she saw me she looked startled, and reached down to grab the case.

"Whatcha doing?" I said.

"Nothing. Just looking at the stars. I come out here a lot."

"Good thing Norton's such a crackerjack security man."

"He's usually asleep by eleven o'clock," she said. "I come out after that. I have a hard time sleeping here."

"Me too. I have a hard time sleeping here too."

"This part of the country has the greatest stars. Just look at what you can see up there."

I told her that I didn't know very much about stars and constellations and that sort of thing. She said her sister Hollis had taught her about them when she was little and that for some reason she had never forgotten them. She had forgotten a lot of other things, she said, but not that. As hard as it was to recognize her without her make-up on, it was even harder to match her voice to the girl I knew in the group. Tonight she

was talking in this low, calm voice, this nice voice. A voice totally unlike the shrill, whiny voice she always had in group, when she sat there with the case in her lap and gobs of pink crap on her face and whined about her sister until you wanted to scream. Tonight, though, sitting there with her clean face and glasses, it was nice just to sit and listen to her for a while. She pointed out different constellations, and told me exactly how bright the Northern Lights really were, and how there are a group of seekers in the west who follow the lights all over the country waiting to meet up with something divine in the night.

"We should wake Mincy up," I said. "He'd like to hear about this constellation business."

"He said he wasn't feeling well. It's too cold out here for him."

"You're right," I said. "It is chilly."

"If I could sit closer to you that would be better," she said.

She inched closer to me on the bench and I put my arm around her shoulder, and we sat like that for a long while, not saying anything. It felt nice to touch somebody again, to be close to someone, even though I didn't have any desire to kiss her anything like that. She sat there and looked up, following something across the night sky, and I looked at the lake and thought about my mother. I thought about how her beret felt in my hands when I picked it up off the end of the dock on the afternoon she went into the lake, and how the divers shined their flashlights beneath the water that night, and looked as if they belonged to another world.

Later, we climbed back through the window, and she gave me a hug before heading off to the girl's bunks.

"I'm glad you don't hate me," she said. I said of course I didn't hate her, and that I thought she looked nice without any make-up on. I meant it, too. How can you really hate someone you don't even know? Especially someone who likes to sneak out windows and knows all about astronomy and wears glasses you didn't even know she had? It's impossible to hate someone like that, whining in group and one-upping all the time or not. It's that way with most people, I guess. Once you get to know them there's almost always one thing about them that makes them O.K. Like big Oliver, who looks so fat and pathetic in group but will always offer you half a Reese's, or Simon Schmidt, who never takes off his prep school blazer but likes to tell stories about his uncle and some jockeys he used to pal around with. When I can't sleep, and it's late, that's when I usually remember the decent stuff about people. During the day I can think of about 50 good reasons why I think someone's an asshole, but at night all I can remember is how I saw them in front of the post office one afternoon, leaning over to pet a dog that was tied to a bike rack. I'll tell you, you can be hard as hell when it's light out, but in the dark, forget it.

It's like that stuff with Ally I was talking about earlier. Like playing Scrabble in the lodge at Pinkham Notch. All of that comes to me when I can't sleep. It's so easy to hate her during the day, when I see her as treacherous and deceitful and 38 kinds of awful, but late at night all that bleeds away, and all I can seem to remember are things like how the freckles used to bunch up on her chest when she got a lot of sun, or how she always handed me a thick, clean towel the second I turned off the water in the shower. Those are the things that flicker across my mind at night. I don't see her screwing that goddamn broker. I don't see the annoyed look on her face when I showed up at her apartment in the Village to propose. All I see is the girl who sat up with me all night in Thoreau Hall and rubbed cream on my shoulders while I finished a paper. The girl who slept in the green chair at the hospital every night when my mother was sick.

People always like to say "I know so and so," but they don't. Nobody really knows anybody. The minute you think one thing, people go ahead and do the other. It's just the way it is.

*Saturday a.m. (Day Thirteen)*

Mincy's a little down. I passed him on the way to Souli's office before and said, "Greetings from the hall of America!" just to make him laugh, but it didn't do the trick. He says he isn't feeling well, but I think the shower situation is what's bothering him.

We've got these communal showers, and it seems like every time Mincy walks in everyone else sashays out. Me, I'm a quick shower taker by nature, but you can tell some of the guys are thinking, "Uh oh, here comes the fag," and then they all hurry up and get out of there as quick as possible. Mincy can see them hurrying, and I know that's got to make him feel crummy. I know it might not sound like a big deal, but I think those are the kinds of things that can really get you in life. The small stuff like telling everyone you're gay and then watching them scurry out of the shower. Everyone always assumes that it's the really big things

that fuck you up, but that's not always the case. Sometimes it's just the accumulation of things in your daily life. The slow erosion from all those lousy little moments.

*Saturday p.m. (Day Thirteen)*

Souli called me into her office after group. She's got every self-help book known to man in there. So many that the ones that don't fit on the bookshelves are stacked against the walls. I sat down and figured I was going to get a lecture for not contributing to group. She pointed to a sign on the wall that said "People feel alone because they build walls instead of bridges."

"What do you think that means?" she said.

"I know what it means."

"When you roll your eyes and don't share with the group, you're putting up walls. You see that, don't you?"

Earlier in the afternoon we had been listening to crazy Bernard tell us about how he was insecure with girls and liked to smoke crack with the bums beneath this overpass in downtown Baltimore. Souli grabbed his knee and said, "Remember what Hui-Neng said: Look within! The secret is inside you! Find love!" Bernard was like, "Uh, O.K.," and I rolled my eyes and she shot me one of her looks and said, "Doubt is an unavoidable companion of spiritual seeking, Eliot." Later she told me to meet her in her office, and I knew I was in for a talking to.

"You can't just sit there and stare at the lake, Eliot. You need to share your story with the group. Sharing your story will make you feel less alone, and if you don't feel alone in the world you won't feel afraid in it."

I told her that I knew she probably meant well, but I didn't see what good it would do, rehashing how I got sent to the clinic. It was all a matter of holes. If everyone's got them, then what's the point of talking about how they got there? What's the point in telling everyone what happened right before I got arrested? How can it matter that they know how Ally dumped me, or how I tried to propose to her, or how I got busted for heroin possession in Washington Square Park? What good does it do to talk about these things?

"It's important to understand the hows and whys of your life so you can move on." That's what she said. But move on to where? Where the hell is there to move on to?

*Sunday a.m. (Day Fourteen)*

Visitor-less Day again. Today I stayed in the shower longer so Mincy wouldn't have to be in there alone. I think it made him feel better. He ducked behind this partition where I couldn't see him and then called out "Greetings from the wall of America!" He knocked himself right out with that one, and when he went to eat lunch in the cafeteria he was in a good mood. He likes to do his routine where he talks about moving the clinic over to the Mall of America and putting it next to the Gap. He says we could all work as sales people. Sherry Lynn and I will walk up to table and he'll say, "Oh, that denial fits you very well, sir. Would you like some blame to go with that, ma'am?"

Sherry Lynn was teasing me about next week. Souli is expecting me to share in group on Tuesday, and next Sunday is the day my father is coming. I've been here two weeks, but it feels like a lot longer. I can't even remember what my apartment looks like anymore. I'm glad Mincy is feeling better. Of course everyone probably thinks I'm gay now, too. That's another one of the main problems with this stupid world. Everytime you try and do something decent people think there's something wrong with you.

*Sunday p.m.*

Three a.m. Sherry Lynn, Mincy, and I snuck out the window and sat by the lake and talked about Mincy's father and Sherry Lynn's sister. I told them a little about Ally but not much. Sherry Lynn said that it might not mean much, but she thought that Giorgio and Ally were crazy for giving up guys like me and Mincy. It was one of those forgivable lies people tell, like when you get a lousy haircut and someone says it looks nice. Sometimes I think that stuff is phony and useless, but people take little bits of air out of you all the time, and to blow a bit back in is not such a bad thing. It was strange to hear someone say Ally's name, and after a while, when we stopped talking, it seemed to me that it was the name of a dead person. I had no hope that we'd ever go back to the way we once lived. It was dead and gone. And I thought it was strange how I didn't know that all along. How I couldn't see how plain that was.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and stared at the lake. Ally was as dead as my mother. It's amazing all the ways there are to leave the world. And all the ways there are to stay in the world, too. It's not fair, what goes on in your head. In your memory. I mean, if people leave you, if they do that, then it's not fair for them to hang around like they do. Popping up in your dreams, in your thoughts, anytime and anywhere they please.

Before we went in, I walked down to the lake and thought of the divers again. Of how they looked, and how we must have looked to them that night, standing on the water's edge, waiting for them to find what we didn't want them to find. Waiting for them to fail, and knowing they wouldn't.

*Tuesday a.m. (Day Sixteen)*

Share or be killed day.

*Tuesday p.m. (Day Sixteen)*

We got in group and Souli asked if I was ready to share. "Tell us what happened before you came here," she said. "Talk to us about the last year of your life." I looked down at the ground and figured I might as well get it over with. I told them this:

I met Ally in Film 101 during the fall of my freshman year in Amherst. I sat next to her during "The Bicycle Thief" and she remarked that I looked like Lamberto Magiorani, the star of the movie. I walked her back to the Towers, where she lived, and soon after that she became my entire life.

Before then, I never had a girlfriend or even a best friend. I was a loner. My Dad and I lived alone in our house in New Canaan, and had no relatives to speak of after my mother died. My father's parents were dead, and my grandparents on my mother's side were so grief stricken when she died that they pretty much disappeared from our life. I had messed around with a couple girls in high school, metal chicks who would let you feel them up in the school parking lot if you gave them enough beer and pot, but I had never even really had sex with anybody until Ally.

We never left each other's side for the four years we were in Amherst. When people talked about us they used one name. Ally and Eliot. We spent every holiday with her family in Keene, and the minute I'd walk in the door her mother would rush up to me, rub my face and say, "How's my favorite son-in-law today?" We talked all the time about getting married, and maybe buying a house down the street from her parents. I had gone from a horrible student in high school, one whose father had to pull strings just to get him into a state school, to a Dean's List regular. Ally encouraged me to stay in Amherst to get my MBA, and though I didn't want to be without her we both figured it would be best for our future if I stayed on at school and she took a job in Manhattan working for Ralph Lauren. At first we visited each other every weekend, but soon she was working a lot of overtime and going out of town to buyer's conventions, and it wasn't uncommon for me to call her at midnight and get her answering machine. She had bought a mountain bike, which I thought was odd, but she said her friend Leslie liked to ride in Central Park, and she was always kind of outdoorsy, so I didn't think too much about it. Looking back, I guess I should have known something was up, but I didn't. I never suspected her of anything. You always think that kind of thing happens to other people.

She broke the news to me over Christmas. She had been seeing this banker in New York the entire fall. "I never meant for it to happen," she said. "I never wanted to hurt you." She said that she wanted to keep seeing him, and couldn't live two lives any more. To say I didn't take it well would be a colossal understatement. I pleaded with her to reconsider. Threatened to hurt the guy. Threatened to hurt myself. It didn't matter. She wasn't any different than anybody else. When people are done with you, they're done. Nothing you can say or do will change that. At first they pity you. Then they're just disgusted by you. They don't remember things like you remember things. I found that out. I called her constantly, but she wouldn't talk to me. "There's nothing left to discuss," she would say. "We have to move on with our lives." I sat outside her apartment on New Year's Eve, a night she never came home, and did a lot of other sorry things that are almost too embarrassing to mention. I put cigarettes out on my hands and punched myself in the head until my knuckles swelled and knots rose all over my forehead and skull. I had no one to talk to. No friends to speak of. Ally was my connection to everything.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, my birthday, I got a card in the mail from Ally's mother. It said "Take good care of yourself, Eliot. We're all going to miss you very much." I understood then that was it. That was how things worked. That was how you lost things. It was her family after all, not mine. They were gone with her. I put



the card down and walked downstairs to Luis Capos' apartment. Luis handled green cards and medicine for most of the Mexican illegals in town, and when I asked him what he had to help a guy's nerves he opened a tool box filled with pills of all kinds. He gave me two bottles of Nembutal, and I went back to my apartment, put the card away, and took a pill. All the aloneness, all the fear, all the hurt drifted away. I never went back to class. I never went out. I never went anywhere at all except down to Luis' for more Nembutal. For two months I sat around in my underwear, watching Spanish soap operas and listening to the hum of Frank's airplane in my head. Voices floated out over my answering machine—my father, mostly, a couple of professors, some minor acquaintances, but I never responded and no one really bothered me. I had succeeded in becoming invisible.

One day in April my father and Ira Schnaugh came knocking on my door. I peeked out through the blinds, saw it was them, and snuck out the back, hiding in Campos' utility closet until they went away. That night, the old man called Ally to see what was going on. He didn't know that we weren't Ally and Eliot anymore. Later that evening, as I watched *El Mundo*, I heard the phone ring. Ally's voice rose out of the machine. I thought it was a dream. I picked up the phone, and it was really her. I must have sounded strange to her, because she started crying and telling me she was worried about me. She was speaking in her old, tender voice, in the language that we had formed over the years. She said that she missed me. That she loved me. That she still cared about me. She said other things that night, but I don't remember what they were. At times like that, you hear what you want to hear. I mean, that's the way it usually toes even in normal times.

In the morning I took all 3800 dollars out of my savings account and bought her a Marquis cut diamond ring. One that looked like the ones she used to point out when we'd go shopping and talk about the future. I took a train to New York, thinking to myself that I was lucky to be getting a second chance. I figured it was all my fault, what she had done, just like I had always figured it was somehow my fault that my mother went into the lake that day.

I arrived at Grand Central in the early afternoon, bought a bouquet of flowers, and took a cab to her apartment. It was Saturday afternoon and everyone was out. I rode in the cab and held the ring box in my hand. I was thinking of how surprised she'd be. I was thinking that maybe we could get that house down the street from her parents after all. Maybe get a Labrador, take dance lessons like we always said, and perhaps go to Brussels for our honeymoon. Shop in the Gran Sablon and all that. I hit the buzzer to her apartment and peered through the glass door. Two mountain bikes were inside the foyer. Her voice came out through the intercom, and when I told her it was me, and that I had something important to ask her about us, she said, "Us? There's no us, Eliot. Remember how we talked about that?" I tried to get her to come outside and see me, but she only poked her head out the apartment door and looked at me like I was crazy. She told me to go back to Amherst. Whatever sweetness was in her voice the night before was gone. I could hear a man talking in the background. He was saying, "Let the poor guy in, Al." *Al*. Like he had known her forever.

I dropped the flowers on the stoop and ran away. There was nothing else to do. I walked down to Washington Square Park and sat on a bench, and after a while a kid no more than thirteen sat next to me and asked if I wanted some Horse. Some heroin. I had never done it before, but it seemed like a good time. I took the ring box out of my pocket and handed it to him.

"I don't have much cash," I said. "But you can have this."

He looked at it closely, and then waved his arm, and four or five black kids his age gathered around the bench to inspect the ring.

"That shit's real, yo," one of them said, squinting at the ring. "This cat's one crazy motherfucker."

The boy took the ring, gave me a handful of small bags out of his pocket, and took it off. I snorted some, floated clean away, and a couple hours later I was in custody. A couple days after that, I arrived here.

So that, in a nutshell, is the story. When I looked up, Mincy was crying. He was holding hands with Sherry Lynn Love, who was crying, too. I looked at Souli and said, "Kinda boring, huh?" and she gave me a pat on the head like Ally's mother used to, a pat that wasn't condescending or stupid or showy. She ran her hand down my face, and I looked at Mincy and Sherry Lynn, and then I lost it. I just lost it. I started crying and couldn't stop. Not for anything. I just sat there and cried and kept saying "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry" over and over again. Souli kept saying "You've got nothing to be sorry about. You've got nothing to be sorry about." But I do, you know, I do. I'm sorry for all the things I've failed at in my life. For all the things I've fallen short of. For the few people I loved who wouldn't stay.

*Wednesday a.m. (Day Seventeen)*

Souli called me into her office this morning and asked how I was doing. She said she noticed that I kept a journal.

"I used to keep a diary when I was a kid," I said. "Before my mother died. I haven't kept one since. I'm just keeping one now 'cause there's not squat to do in here."

"I wanted to ask you about your mother, since you mentioned her briefly yesterday. Your file says that she had an accident when you were 14."

I looked outside the window of her office and out past the bunks, out to where I could see the lake in the distance. Mincy and Sherry Lynn were out there horsing around.

"My mother killed herself when I was 14," I said. "There was nothing accidental about it."

*Wednesday p.m. (Day Seventeen)*

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, 1990, I came home from school at 3:30. Every door and window in the house was open. The curtains blew around wildly from the breeze that came in from everywhere. I shut everything and then looked to see if my mother's car was in the garage. It was. I went up to her room, all around the upstairs, but there was no sign of her. Downstairs, the door to my father's study was open, and papers were scattered everywhere. The small safe he kept his rare coins in was open, and small, cardboard coin holders were torn and lying in a pile on his desk. I went out to the back porch and looked around. It was a brilliantly sunny day. Unseasonably warm. I noticed a trail of silver light that ran all the way through the yard and down to the lake, a bright line that shimmered all the way to the water's edge. When I went into the yard to get a closer look, I could see that the sunlight was reflecting off of my father's rare coins. I followed the trail to the lakeside and down to the end of the dock, where three Indian-head nickels lay on the last plank next to my mother's red wool beret. She had filled her coat with coins and stones and walked into the lake. The divers found her at the bottom later that night.

She drowned. That was another one of the lies my father told. In my family, we never said anything. We never spoke. We held the truth tightly in our mouths and then we swallowed it, where it settled down hard in our chests, right next to our hearts. That's how we've always been. That's our story.

*Thursday p.m. (Day Eighteen)*

Mincy, Sherry Lynn, and I got caught out by the lake last night by Cornelius, the day guard. I guess he had switched shifts with Norton. Now there's a bed check. No walking around after lights out for anybody. I tried to crash with the others, but I feel good tonight for some reason, and I'm glad I can't sleep. The night feels big to me. Elastic. There seems to be room enough in it for just about everything, and nothing seems impossible right now. I'm down to the last page or two in this journal, and figure I'll go out on a high note. Write some things down while I'm feeling like this.

I got another postcard from my old man this morning, confirming the big day trip on Sunday. He says he's looking forward to seeing me. He also said that he never got the chance to say that he was sorry about Ally. He said he had liked her a lot. It was true, too. He had liked her an awful lot. Everyone did. One Christmas, he had even given her this sapphire necklace that belonged to my mother. She wore it everywhere.

Ally had one thing in common with my old man, now that I think about it. They both constructed their lies with care. Ally went to great lengths to conceal the banker from me, just like my old man had gone to great lengths to conceal my Mom's sickness. With Ally, it was a matter of deceit plain and simple, but with my father it must have been more. He must have seen the maps I put up on the wall when I was a boy, maps that I'd circle with a red pen, marking the places my mother was supposedly off on "vacation" to. He knew she was over the hill at St. Stephen's then, but took the time to send what seemed like authentic gifts from her in the mail. Sometimes I think that was a shitty thing to do, to invent such a story, but other times, like now, it seems less easy to judge. I can't help but wonder what he was thinking about in those times, like now, when he'd pack a box with an Indian headdress and take it to the post office and put my name on the label. What kind of a man does a thing like that, I wonder? A man who never learned how to communicate? A man who was hoping for a miracle? I don't know.

It's late as hell now. Everyone's asleep, even Pierce Petite, who's an insomniac. There's a full moon

tonight, and the bunks are washed in light. It's funny how everyone looks younger when they're asleep. Ally comes creeping back into my head now, probably because watching her sleep was always one of my favorite things. There were countless nights when she'd fall asleep in our apartment in Amherst, and I'd pull up a chair and watch her for hours on end. Watch her breathe. Watch how a sliver of light would slant across her beautiful face through the blinds. I remember feeling very sure about the future then, like everything that could go wrong already had.

I'm not sure anymore. I don't feel like I know what's going to happen down the road. All I really know is that my old man is coming on Sunday, and that we're going to the stupid Mall of America, and then down to Iowa for a game of catch. But maybe I'll like that stuff, crazy as it sounds. Maybe I'll like tossing a ball in a cornfield with the old man. Maybe I'll look over at his dusty rental car and realize that he came a long way, and that he's trying the best he knows how. Maybe I'll be able to see him as a guy who knows something about losing things, too. Maybe I'll ask him about sending those packages, or see if he remembers how the coins used to shine here and there in the yard long after she was gone.

## Personal Essay by Rochelle Beckstine

### Notes of a Displaced Daughter

I know parts of my father well. He skipped stones and attended boy scout meetings along the coastal waters of the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the North China Sea before returning to the town of his heritage. He feels that all children and dogs should be spanked when they wet the bed. He worships at the "Church of What's Happening Now" though, when he was ill, he often attended the First Baptist. He questions his daughters, but rarely ever his son. He loves from one moment to the next convincing Lady Lucky that she is his one and only while the cigarette smoke from Lady Lucy's Virginia Slims is still fresh on his clothes. He makes no excuses. He teaches his children not to trust, not to believe, not to respect.

On the 15th of March, in the year 1955, my father was born in the city of Memphis with little fanfare and no strife. He was born into many firsts that would each in their way take their toll. The first Reese to be born outside of the city limits of Ranger—a town shaped by my great-grandfather and his father before him, my father felt deprived of the ancient roots his ancestors had laid and he would spend his life trying to capture the feeling of family and belonging. As the first born child of my grandfather, a young private in the United States navy, it was expected that my father would succeed in all he undertook. But, the greatest toll was the one placed on him as the first male great-grandchild of my hierarchical Big Daddy. At his birth, my father was inaugurated into the ancient order of Reeses. It was his obligation to carry on the line and the mandates of the male social order—Never defend, Never excuse, Never show emotion. Big Daddy embodied these elements and decades before he had rocked the country gentry by taking up with a sharecropper's daughter and asking my great-grandmother to pack her clothes and leave. After sixteen years of marriage, she was allowed only her clothes and her daughters. My Big Daddy wanted his three boys left behind; after all, the girls wouldn't amount to anything. His prophesy would come true, though not in the way he originally meant. On the night that he threw them out my great-grandmother and two great-aunts drove under a tractor trailer and were instantly killed. Though all of this happened before the time of my childhood or that of my father's, but it began a legacy that crippled children.

A navy brat, my father traveled the world. Every two years without fail the papers came listing a new exotic destination: Newfoundland, Taiwan, San Francisco, Honolulu. My grandfather spent his twenties and thirties along the worldwide ports of call and sent colorful postcards to his son. Annually, my father traveled to small town,

Georgia where he spent the greater part of his summer with his grandfather, his Big Daddy. Big Daddy taught him how to birth cows, ride horses, pick beans, and promised him the world. My father looked forward to the day when he would own all that he looked upon, but he didn't understand that the world hinged upon the birth of a first-born son. Upon my birth, he was practically disinherited.

My father met my mother at the University of Georgia during one of his longer stints at a particular college. He had made a college career out of transferring whenever the Dean became too upset at his latest fiasco be it streaking, drinking, or parking in the president's spot. He immediately moved into her all girls' dorm, showering after hours and peeing in a beer bottle. They married shortly thereafter. My father never finished school; the demands of rent, utilities, and children became too much to fit between classes.

My father was dedicated to his children. He banished a loved pet when it scratched his oldest. He tossed balls in the backyard with his youngest. He helped all three build snowmen out of three inches of snow and a felt hat. He made a habit of learning the names of Looney Tunes and sitting down with popcorn to the tune of Fraggle Rock. The news of Big Daddy's death reached us after my brother's birth in 1983. My father rebelled against the man who had denied him all. He started his own company and became President and Owner of Summa Fabrics, Salesman, and Professional Installer instead of father. He wanted to prove to everyone that self-made men do exist. You could get ahead without borrowing from family influence. His ability to sell ten gallons of city water to a dirt poor family sitting on a well ensured his quick success, and

money flowed freely. A large mortgage and new cars compelled him to work longer, and he misplaced his purpose. The drinking went from occasional, to daily, to hourly. Three children, a dog, a cat, a hamster, and a wife were too easy to tuck into suburbia and other women were more exciting. My mother sold herself at first to this new man, her husband. She joined him in the drinking and all night binges. They bailed each other out of jail. They left their children at home with a cocaine addict gone absent nanny. Eventually, it got violent. My father's work notes came home in a woman's handwriting. He was seen with another woman by my uncle. The hardwood floors my mother had insisted upon would be littered with glass fragments the next morning as I made my lunch for school and rushed my brother to the bus stop. The sound of screeching tires and police sirens tolled my pre-pubescent years and my sister, brother, and I spent nights hiding under blankets, holding on to one another, and listening to the cops ask if there was anyone else in the house—"No," my father would say. He vanished into the night five days after the start of my sixth grade year, leaving my mother bleeding in my arms

and the police swarming around our house. For three years, we saw him only a handful of holidays.

In the summer before my entry into high school, my father picked the three of us up and took us to White Water. My father did not go with us into the park. He waited in the car and muttered something about his ankles bothering him. When we had played ourselves out we found him asleep with his seat reclined, his bare feet resting on the dash in front of the passenger seat, and Panama Jack sunglasses shading his eyes. On the trip home he pulled into the Speedway gas station a mile from the house we lived in with our mother. Staring fixedly at the people going in and out of the automatic door, he told us. He had a blood disorder that had no cure. He had had it for years, ever since he was

seventeen or so. He tried to make a joke about the food vendors in Taiwan. The doctors said nine months, give or take. I learned later that the years of alcohol and drugs had aggravated the disease and weakened him further. His vitality and sharpness of thought faded until he was finally caged into the sterile gowns and silent passageways of hospitals, surrounded by the old and dying. I mourned a father lost, a handsome man, yet declined his sick bed and incoherent murmurings. The ruination of my father had been played out in my mind with his desertion of my mother. I didn't want to bear witness to the final demise of the man who had told me one night in the shadowed kitchen of the first home I can remember that I was his favorite. When he fell ill he had been separated from my mother for three years. In those years I had become aware of the power of loss—my mother's loss and her inability to cope without my father. The weight of the world fell on me long before the separation was complete. And I declined the late night vigils beside his comatose body.

His illness was not beyond hope of healing. Dead organs can be replaced. The merciful hand of a God he had neglected and the death of some hapless soul in South Georgia saved him. He became my father new born—different, yet the same man who had told me I was his favorite on that long ago night in a dusky kitchen. A man thankful and repentant to his children, but not his wife. But, we are now adults, childhood and innocence have been lost in the struggle. We speak not as father-daughter but as people who share a connection not too distant. He calls and we talk. He tells me about his friends and my grandparents. Sometimes he tells me about his girlfriends. We discuss politics, philosophy, and religion in a way I can do with no one else; there are no hurt feelings or dastardly repercussions. Often he needs for me to scold my brother about his latest test grade or his failure to do the dishes. Or else he wants me to call my sister at college and tell her to study harder. He loves me. He apologizes for the past and wishes it could have been different.

I wish I had the power to hand him a do-over and become eight again with Barbies and Care Bears. His love and sorrow is almost enough to make the ache go away—the bitter ache of adulthood and lost opportunity, of pain that went without comfort.

## Personal Essay by Jamey Fisher

### Learning to Sew

For ten years I had resisted the urge to break out a needle and thread and sew. I tried to suppress it ever since I was eight, but occasionally the urge would get the best of me; early Saturday mornings I'd sneak into my mother's sewing box and confiscate a needle, some thread she wouldn't notice missing (fuscia or lime green, most often), and furtively sew small bags or pouches under my blankets. The space under my bed was littered with small scraps of white cotton broadcloth, purple velvet from the Christmas stockings my mother had made, and yellow chiffon from an old ballet skirt. The stitches were labored and often uneven, sometimes missing the fabric altogether, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I resisted those ten long years, but my eighteenth summer I broke. I could no longer contain my urge. I made a blue shirt, then a green one, and then a lavender one. Three, all in one summer, all on the sewing machine, in the broad daylight of afternoon.

Now I'm not sure how it happened. My mother and I were at the fabric store getting supplies for my sister's white formal dress. I turned and saw it - blue, with yellow stars and sparkly starbursts. It would make a perfect shirt, and it was calling my name. I walked toward it, let my hand drift over its never-washed softness. The stars had a different texture than the blue background, rougher. I draped it over my arm, feeling its weight, knowing it was meant for me.

Inside I was screaming: "No! No! Don't do it! Must...resist...fabric!"

"Mom?" I asked, unable to restrain myself, "Do you think I could make a shirt out of this?"

We bought the fabric, 2 and a half yards of it, and blue thread to match. It was too late to back out now. I had a vision for the fabric. While it spun in the washer, I examined a plaid shirt I owned, plotting how to transform the fabric from its current state into something wearable. Once the fabric was dry, I brought out the scissors and started hacking away. Slowly a front and back emerged, and four long strips for shoulder straps, and a lining with the leftover fabric.

The sewing machine hummed and clicked and laughed, telling the whole house that Jamey the Feminist was committing some cardinal sin. The thought of a friend calling, forcing me to confess what I was up to, was terrifying. Somehow I got the lining stitched in the front, and a shoulder strap to that. Slowly pieced together, the shirt suffered both sides taken apart and reinstalled more than a few times. My days of surreptitiously watching my mother sew, my nose hidden behind a book, were paying off. I knew how to work the sewing machine well enough from spying on her to keep my fingers out of the needle's path. Three hours later, after many straight pins in the fingers and trips to the bathroom to examine lengths of straps, I had a mostly finished piece of clothing that could be put on and pinned shut. Buttons being too much for me to tackle that day, I let the new shirt rest and marveled in my new discovery. The "problem with no name" hadn't descended upon me just because I figured out how to sew.

The denial of my sewing attraction had started young. I looked up "feminist" in my Macmillan's Children's Dictionary when I was 7 years old, the same day that I looked up all the words in the Pledge of Allegiance. I was the kind of child who liked to make sure what I was doing was correct, and saying words that I didn't completely understand bothered me. After I looked through the dictionary that day, I ceased to repeat the pledge because a girl in my first grade class (Andrea Jennings, a blonde, curly-haired, blue-eyed perky thing) broke all my crayons and didn't get in trouble for it. That wasn't "justice for all" and I knew it. But at the same time, I happened across the word "feminist" and decided that "someone who works for equality for women and all people" sounded like something worth checking out. I started reading all I could get my hands on about feminism and equality. Discovering my first copy of Ms. Magazine at the public library when I was 9 helped me to become aware of feminist backlash, but not being mature enough to understand it, I adopted the notion that to participate in feminism, I couldn't show any signs of domesticity. Children and housework should be my primary annoyances, and my cooking or sewing would be putting women back 50 years. I quickly became the Anti-domestic. I bristled whenever my grandfather suggested that I take home

economics, sure he was picturing me in some oppressive Alice-in-Wonderland pinafore or white girl-of-the-1950's gloves. "I hate to sew," I would always tell him, "I'm not like that."

So for ten years I sneaked my sewing in. I could never make anything big that way, nothing that could be too harmful. I'm sure my parents thought I was sneaking something dangerous or rebellious; while many middle-schoolers were hiding drugs in their rooms, I hid fabric. I would only let myself sew a little here and there, just to get the creative urge out.

But this summer, my eighteenth summer, it was all over. After that first shirt, I just couldn't stop. A few days after that, I went back to the fabric store again, all alone this time. I bought four yards of fabric, two of green seersucker, bumpy and soft, and two of lavender calico. For these I even bought a package of elastic, 5/8", in plastic blister wrap. After surviving the fabric store alone, I safely retreated to my liberal-bumper-sticker-laden car to survey the damages - if I was ever selling out this was it; twelve whole dollars gone to the patriarchal oppressiveness of sewing.

As I cut and snipped at the fabric, making uneven fronts and backs, my guilt for sewing subsided. The realization hit me that my sewing could be subversiveness, not "selling out". All those articles in *Ms.* about feminist backlash and raising children came flooding back to me with a new relevance. I could do something stereotypically "feminine" and still work for equality and justice for all people. By not sewing, I was letting the patriarchy stop me from something I wanted to do, and buying into their image of what a "feminist" is. I had been living my life just as the people I considered my oppressors had taught me to! But no more! I had learned to sew, and there was no stopping me.

Being without a sewing machine this year, I have turned to crocheting. After making three scarves and discovering new stitches, I even take the crocheting in public and admit to the construction of scarves. No one has accused me of letting down the spirit of feminism and sisterhood. Instead, after people get over the shock that the only other person they've met besides me who crochets is their grandmother, they ask me to show them how to crochet subversively too. We are reclaiming our domesticity that has been taken from us, and infiltrating the domestic sphere with our radical liberal ideas. Myself and several friends have joked about forming a sub-group of our school's gay-straight alliance - the "Domestic Dykes of ASC." I accept this title proudly. Recently we sat around a campfire, drinking beer and crocheting, waiting to protest the existence of the School of the Americas. While other groups sang folk songs, we discussed stitches and yarn styles. I know that my learning to sew will contribute to forming a new generation of anarchistic or socialist liberal radicals who allow themselves to be revolutionary domestics. Someday the cry will echo from the punk nightclubs, the gothic enclaves, the dyke bars and hippie protests: "Knitting for Peace!"

## Personal Essay by Amanda Shopa

### Thirty-Three Glasses

It started innocently enough, with a soda glass.

"Mark, do you think that waiter's gay?" *Clink, cluck.* I swirled the ice in my soda glass with my straw and glanced at our waiter. He moved theatrically and laughed and smiled at everything; his laugh filled his small frame as he flirted with the manager, who we later found out was a lesbian.

It was two a.m. and after talking on the phone for several hours Mark and I were sitting in Perkin's Family Restaurant eating appetizers and catching up on the past few months. We hadn't talked in some time, and asking Mark about our possibly gay waiter seemed as good a way as any to "feel him out" so I could tell him that I was dating a girl. In retrospect, I don't know why telling Mark felt so difficult. After all, I'd already told our friend Tracy, and she'd met Girlfriend and adored her. Even though my parents didn't officially know, they knew in the way that parents do. Even my brother knew about my dating a girl. So what was the big deal about telling Mark? Quite simply, Mark had been my best friend for four years, and I didn't want to hide anything from him. At that time, I was so openly pro-gay and bursting with joy from being in love that people were beginning to ask if I was gay. I wasn't entirely in the closet, but I hadn't thrown open the doors all the way either. I wanted to tell Mark; I didn't want him to hear it from someone else. If Mark couldn't accept me, it would be as if I had to start life over again. A four-year friendship might not sound like much, but when you're sixteen that's a quarter of your life!

Mark also glanced at our waiter and said, "Yeah, I think he's gay."

I looked at Mark suspiciously and said, "How do you know?" After all, only gay people are supposed to have gay-dar, right? How could Mark pick up on the waiter's non-heterosexuality?

"They just . . . give off a vibe."

I laughed sarcastically and nervously, decided that this was the time to tell him, and leaned across the table space between us. I stared at the Formica tabletop as I quietly asked, "So. Am I vibing you?"

Mark responded, even more nervous sounding than I had been, "Am I vibing you?" He was not simply repeating what I had asked to verify that he had heard me correctly. He was asking me.

I looked up from the tabletop to see Mark staring at me. He looked sick. His brow was furrowed, he had a half smile on his face and he was biting his lip to keep from crying. He was fidgeting with his hands, I remember. He looked scared. "You're shitting me, Mark," I solemnly said. I thought he may have been joking, but the scared-sick look in his eyes told me he wasn't joking. He was scared to say the words.

Looking even sicker he shook his head miserably. "You're gay." I sat in shock. He nodded again. "Well, so am I," I said, finally aware of what was happening. "When did you know?"

Mark sat up and said, "I dunno. Since seventh, eighth grade, I guess."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No," Mark sighed, "well, if you count people online I guess people know. And a few months ago my dad somehow found some emails I'd saved on the computer . . . He sat me down and told me I could 'beat this thing.'"

"But I thought you're dad was a computer idiot!"

Mark smiled slightly and said "yeah, he is. That's why I think he very accidentally stumbled upon them."

"So then what happened?"

"He just hugged me, said he loved me and left the room." Mark shrugged. "So when did you know?" I leaned back into the booth, took a sip of my soda and started telling him the story of how I met Girlfriend . . . That night, we each took home a soda glass. We were bold. We simply walked out of Perkin's with soda glasses in our hands, sipping away.

During the remainder of that summer, Mark and I spent all of our time together. For the first few months after our mutual coming out, Mark and I traipsed around Minneapolis to every gay place we could

find. I'd sleep over at his place and we'd watch *Beautiful Thing* or *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* and discuss all things political. Once we'd both devoured as much "gay culture" as possible, we moved on to other things. Over the next few years, Mark and I volunteered, worked and studied (or would that be procrastinated?) together. In our free time we spent too much time at various cafés and bookstores and driving around the lakes late at night listening to 80's night on the radio and screaming out *Tainted Love*.

Mark and I stormed the city in Mark's little red Plymouth Horizon. Oddly, wherever we went other cars moved out of the way. It was almost as if Mark's car was parting the Red Sea of the highways. It's possible that this was due to the car's constant ability to and affinity for backfiring, but we wanted to think that there was some more mysterious aura to the car. It was thusly dubbed the "FagMobile." When stuck on metered ramps Mark and I would crank the radio and rock the FagMobile back and forth, screaming out whatever happened to be on the radio (usually Indigo Girls' *Shame on You*) and laugh watching the cars around us slowly move as far away as possible in such a small space. Every time we rocked the car back and forth, glasses in our backpacks would clink happily in the back seats. Late at night, always at Perkin's, while caffeinating ourselves we concocted crazy plans of driving around the country, covering the FagMobile with holographic stickers, and taking over the world. We always failed to follow through with our plans, blaming it on lack of money—or the classes that had tests in them that we just couldn't miss. Stealing more glasses was the only crazy thing we really did.

During last spring's finals week we studied at Minnehaha Park—no TV, no phone, no Internet—just us, junk food like chips, cake and candy for me and healthy food like asparagus, cucumbers and bread for him, our books and notes. Due to our mastery of the art of procrastination, we were reading fourteen chapters of *Televised Nutrition* and trying to cram everything in our heads for the last test. This was not a new occurrence for Nutrition! After hours of studying the sun started to set, the mosquitoes came out and the conversation turned from finals-related "why didn't we watch those stupid televised nutrition videos before; why didn't we study?" to non-finals related "hey Mark, look at my shoulders from weight training class. Can you see the muscles?" to the entirely non-school related "God, I'm so happy we're gay Amanda, aren't you?" line of discussion. Still, we both got A's in Nutrition.

When Mark lost his virginity I baked him a cake—self-frosting German chocolate cake—and smiled knowingly when Mark's father asked "whatcha baking?" We were inducted into the honor society Phi Theta Kappa together and we spoke Spanish to annoy the people around us. Mark went to an incredibly boring credit union meeting just to see me given an award—I didn't even ask him to come, he just did. When invited to an exclusive banquet with my "parents, friend, girlfriend, whomever you wish to invite," Mark became my "brother," just as my mother had always called him. By this time, the glasses had overrun my dresser and Mark and I had to slow down our lifting of them.

Perhaps the incident most proving the strength of our friendship occurred June tenth. I was at the airport with my mom, step-dad and Girlfriend waiting in line for tickets to be taken and bags to be checked. I was leaving Minneapolis and Mark; I was moving to Atlanta. Suddenly a very bleary-eyed Mark stood in front of me and bitchily said "you know I love you, Amanda, because I woke up at 5.30 just to see you and Girlfriend off at the airport." Mark gave me a hug and whispered "things are going to be all right." In my bag two small water glasses clinked in a high pitch each time I moved.

It's been six months since I've seen Mark; he's visiting in a month and I need to see if I can find the two small water glasses I brought with me. I think that they're wrapped up and packed in a suitcase. I call Mark to ask about numbers, and we determine that we managed to steal four small plates, thirty-three full size glasses, two water glasses, a malt glass, various flatware, and two menus from Perkin's.

Wherever we went in Minneapolis, we considered stealing glasses, but nothing could compare to actually stealing glasses from Perkin's. Maybe it was because something had changed at Perkin's that hot July night. Our lives both changed in an instant. We shed our old identities for new ones, shed old friends for better ones, and shed our old friendship for something even greater. We also shed our morals regarding stealing—of course, at the time I couldn't pinpoint the reason for this. But I think I know now. Being sixteen is crazy, being sixteen and closeted is dangerous. One is constantly in limbo, between being scared that someone will find out and being ready to explode. When Mark and I came out to each other, that danger disappeared. We needed to fill that void with something, so we did something we thought was equally as dangerous. Even if I were in Minneapolis now, I don't think we would steal anything from Perkin's. I don't think we *could*. The

fear is gone, we're finally free of the danger. And yet, peering into my now-Perkin's-glass-free cupboards I almost miss the giddiness of walking out of that restaurant with five or six or seven glasses in each of our backpacks . . . almost.

## Personal Essay by Hannah Slagle

### Girl in a Warehouse

At the entrance to the Montreal Drive Commercial Park a crudely painted piece of plywood has been nailed to the stop sign. It says "AFS" above an arrow. At night it's easier to see where the arrow points. In a long column of blank facades, AFS, or Asphalt Flight School, is the only warehouse with loud music spewing out of its truck bays after dark. The humming light of a few industrial florescents turns golden by the time it spills from the 25 foot ceilings over a maze of plywood ramps and outdoors onto parked cars. A few guys will be standing in it, smoke drifting up from their conversations, appraising each others' equipment and performance. Every night of the week BMX bikers, rollerbladers, and skateboarders gather to ride the well-grafted ramps and talk shop.

These places are hard to find because they never stay in business very long. That's why we come two or three times a week. I carry Mug's kneepads and buy him a coke while he pulls his bike out of the trunk. I'll be the only girl there, so I grip my homework and retreat to the spec seats, a row of teal movie theatre chairs in the loft I named "the princess perch." The boys crowd below for their turns to dive in the halfpipe while I read literature. I lean over the two-by-fours to watch my boyfriend ride, but Nick is my favorite distraction.

Nick wears his thick black glasses when he rides the ramps. I've never seen him hide his melon in a helmet. His closely-shaved head looks to be painted in the fine matte color of his forearms, like an eggshell requiring more than those horn-rims as a means of protection. After watching Nick ride a few times, it occurs to me that he never changes clothes. Or at least he never strays from an oversized pair of army fatigues lashed to his waist by a shoestring, and a grimy white T-shirt, also sized for optimum bikebreeze flappage. That T-shirt comes in handy for mopping the sweat fog off his glasses while he catches his breath at the top of the ledge.

Sometime during my first week as a sheet metal worker, Richie asked me what kind of music I listened to. I took him seriously, appreciating his effort to get acquainted with his new assistant, and gave my most thoughtful and concentrated response: "Everything. Except country." "Good deal. You like rock and roll?" he replied, turning to the gutted boombox. With my approval, he chose 96Rock, Atlanta's classic rock, power guitar, Home of the He-Man, FM radio station. We heard Metallica, Pearl Jam, Jimi Hendrix, and ACDC almost every hour of my time in that warehouse and by god, we liked it.

Hours passed with only the radio talking. Richie would use his bare hands to twist and force steel sheets into cylinders and corners, all the while clenching a cigarette with his lips. In full protective regalia, I would follow closely, tacking the metal with a torch. I labored on each little weld, trying to find an accurate position, pausing to put on my gloves and hood, finally welding tentatively, stopping to peek at my progress, and starting over again. On the other hand, Richie could handle the welder with one hand, turn his face away, and shield himself from sparks with the other hand. He could simply listen to the buzz and zap of electricity to gauge the cooked steel.

After my first week in the shop, Dad told me, "You have to remember that metal is organic. With enough heat and pressure, you can make it take any shape." Right on, Dad. Then I met Richie, a true believer. To say he was confident with his craft would be an understatement. His natural habitat was a sheet metal shop. Only through the greenblack glass of his safety goggles could I watch him build without risking blindness.

Nick's stubby BMX is a scuffed patina green with duct tape accents and fat black wheels. If he isn't riding his bike, he's storming over to it, recovering from a bail, or it's poised upside-down on its handlebars, wheels whirring in front of those horn-rims, with the surgeon somewhere between cussing and kung-fu. Unlike most bmxers, his bike is unadorned by stickers advertising his favorite punk bands, bike manufacturers, or crass slogans. Apparently, he's picked the bike clean of any brand identifiers, so only a true old-schooler

could recognize his ride as a Standard or a Huffy. I am not one of those people, so I guess the institutional green supplies the same kind of anti-aesthetic as his white t-shirts.

Driving home, I ask Mug what makes that bike so special. "Believe it or not, baby, that's an Eastern, you just can't tell. You couldn't find a bike like that in a store. He's built it up out of the thickest, sturdiest shit from all over the place. He's got those hardcore pegs that're about an inch and a half longer than mine, that redneck— his gooseneck's called a redneck because its red obviously, and so tough and all— those chrome rims and thickass tires. It's like the perfect example of appearance following function. And it just happens that utility green came on the sturdiest fuckin' frame he could find."

He explains all this as delicately as his enthusiasm will allow, which means I get lost after two minutes and wish I never asked. I stick to my original idea: Nick is a purist.

I learned to anticipate basic steps in the fabrication. Richie patiently smoked while I learned; while I tried the same welds three or four different ways. I apologized constantly for being slow and sloppy, for burning holes right through the steel, holes bigger than I knew how to patch. He would shrug or scratch his black scruff, (we were always ahead of schedule, the two of us) and calmly instruct me, in a minimum of words, on heat and voltage levels, on the crucial distance between my copper wire and the grounded subject. In my frustration, Richie would either glance over my cruddy seams and say "beautiful," or he gave me a suggestion to make it so.

It was my goal to control the zapping, to not flinch at the tiny burning specks that landed on my scalp and down my shirt, but my hands ached just from squeezing the torch. "That ol' nasty galvanized" sent up thin plumes of white smoke that actually froze into cobwebs on the surface of the cool metal, and on the insides of my unventilated mask. Our hoods slipped down our sweaty foreheads. Sparks slipped in the sides of my overalls. 96Rock fit in nicely between the static buzz of the torches.

While crawling and welding along the inside of a steel pipe with Richie and the smoke and sparks, my hands finally made me whimper. "I'm sorry. I need a minute," I stated, dropping my hood and gloves on the concrete floor. Richie halted as well. Some guitar noise emanated from the wall. We planted ourselves in front of the fan.

"I honestly don't even want hands that are strong enough to do this."

"You mean you don't want hands that look like this?" He joked, stretching his thick fingers out against mine. In some attempt at a manicure, I had painted my nails purple the night before. His fingernails seemed permanently stained black, his paws were burnt the color of warm leather. "Shoot, if I saw a lady with hands like this, you know I'd be running," he offered with a greasy chuckle.

I continued to massage the meat of my palms and wonder what I had gotten myself into while he inspected the interior of the pipe. Sensing my doubt, his voice echoed out one end of the tube.

"Naw, women are good welders. I've known some gud women welders. Now, ol' Wayne, I've been tryin to learn him how to weld, for I don't know how long, and he cain't weld a straight line worth a shit!"

Richie emerged from the other end of the pipe to catch Wayne's reaction, but there was none. A few feet away, Wayne was occupied with a handheld grinder and a stack of steel disks. Once again, he had borrowed my safety-red earmuffs, the thoughtful gift from my dad, and had secluded himself in a fine spray of sparks and noise.

With warcries and no helmet, Nick lurches off the ten-foot platform and speeds into an improvised trick routine: front tire stall into peg grind on the opposite lip, back tire stall, manual over the transition, breakneck pedaling, a nervous 4 feet of air on the vert. His grinding contact with the ground is nothing less than assault on the ramps, on his bike, and on his body. Mug, the expert, points out "the first thing you notice that's essential about Nick's bike is that he rides brakeless. No handle brakes or coaster brakes or anything. A lot of the newer, more aggressive riders take pride in that shit." I hadn't noticed it, the brakes or the pride, but aggression framed his face with a corrugated glare.

I don't think Nick has a name for The Bike, but he ranks it beyond all other possessions. I've heard him confess to Mug that his house could burn to the ground and it wouldn't matter. "Man, without my bike," his eyes get glassy with the thought, "I don't know what I'd do." There's something unexpected about this frailty, not that it's for an inanimate object, but that a 17-year old kid is compelled to express it at all.

At least I think he's 17. He yells about hating school, complains about the whole fucking place and his fucking teachers. He's too skinny and clean to be in college, too intense about riding to be younger than high school. Without his bike, he could pass for juvenile delinquent or starving artist. "He's chosen to dress a certain way and just devote himself to riding like it was never even a question," Mug's remarks are sentimental, almost reverent. "Nick has made that his priority at a time when most people his age are trying to fit in; he's basically like, 'fuck all that,' but it comes so naturally to him he seems unconscious of it. He's older than he really is by being so innocent."

One morning, Richie swaggered into the shop slurping a styrofoam cup of coffee. Instead of his usual black coveralls, he was wearing a black T-shirt with a cartoon gravestone on it. The carving read "GIVE ME HEAD 'TIL I'M DEAD."

"Nice shirt," I said with a grin, my not-easily-offended grin. He came to a halt and looked at his own chest to see if he had spilt breakfast there, then sheepishly, back at me. "I musta got dressed in the dark this morning. If I'da thought of you Sweetpea, I wouldn't have worn it at all."

Yes, he called me Sweetpea often. And Baby, Babydoll, Miss Hannah, and Little J, in honor of Jesse, my father and his boss. But most of the time it was "Sweetpea," and as long as it was Richie, that was fine. I came into the metal shop every day that summer with my guard up. I was prepared with gloves and boots, a ballcap to keep my hair from igniting, and sunscreen for my forearms. Richie, a pleasant little grease monkey, was probably raised in a metal shop, but I had to remember all these defenses. He was teaching me how to weld, and actually getting a kick out of the process. I would answer to him and smile.

Nick appears to be an employee of the park, but I doubt he gets paid to hang out for 30 hours a week. He pries open the lovingly vandalized Coke machine when it won't take quarters anymore and occasionally collects fees from the riders.

"You guys should come see the rail," his voice cracks. We are alone in the AFS "office" and his bike lies by his side, naturally. He stumbles over it, frayed pantlegs tangled in the spokes, to show me the hand-drawn map taped to the wall. "TO THE RAIL," it reads, and beneath that appears a detailed diagram of a path over railroad tracks and across parking lots. I wonder how many times his teachers have confiscated this sketch. "Everyone hangs out at the Rail," he explains, "I'm just telling you it's the sickest and you should definitely go." He mashes his grubby hands across his head in a gesture that might otherwise be described as running one's fingers through their hair.

"Right, and I'll be the only chick there I guess."

"No way!" his tiny eyes dart from me to the map without landing on either, "Lots of girls. Lots of girls are there. All the time." Nick rummages his way back to the security of his bike. "All kinds of people actually. Actually I'm the first one who got everyone started going there in the first place. So it's kinda mine. And you should check it out."

Then Mug and his bike nose into the small air-conditioned room.

"And you too," swears Nick proudly, "You both oughtta check it out."

Oblivious, Mug passes him a sweaty blue rental helmet. "How much do I owe you man?"

Nick, eyeing the tiny TV set in the corner where four other boys-in-big-pants are congregating, barks, "Hey shut that door, we got air conditioning in here!"

"Hey man, I rode an hour and a half, how much are you gonna charge me?"

Nick clears off the register and ejects the cash drawer with a satisfying ching. "Five bucks dude." To make it official, he thumbs his horn-rims up his nose and glances at Mug gravely.

"Hold up, hold up, you're gonna make me pay five bucks for what? First of all, I've been dodging inconsiderate ten year-old rollerbladers since I got here." Without releasing eye contact, Nick snaps one cash clip down on the register drawer. "And?" is all he says.

"Number two, I spent at least twenty minutes re-wiring the speakers so I could play their goddamn Limp Bizkit because whoever was spinning last night totally dismantled the stereo." Nick knocks down another clip.

"Then, I had to haul those little box-jumps out of the way because someone tried to cover up a beer

puddle with them. Man, when one of those rollerbladers eats it cuz he slipped on a fucking beer puddle, don't expect their lawyer dads to be real gracious." Two more clips came down.

"Not to mention the fact that I had to sweep off the halfpipe before I could even ride it."

Nick pushes in the drawer with a scowl and concludes, "Looks like I owe you about fifty cents."

By this time, the kids around the television are engrossed another BMX highlights video. They take turns wandering in from the storage closet, each time slightly more sedated. As the video background music shifts from the usual punk-ska ensemble to an old hip-hop tune, my boyfriend pipes, "Hey alright, turn that shit up."

Not one butt budes from their beanbags. Backwards Cap pulls his eyes from the screen and answers with slow disdain, "Man you like rap? You must be a faggot or something." His companions titter.

I can only watch, but Nick is already subduing his version of a giggle. We both know Mug's tolerance level for stoners. Mug doesn't hesitate to drop his shorts in order to brandish his genitalia three inches from the offender's face singing, "Oh who's the faggot? Who's a faggot now?"

For a stunned moment the youngsters could only gaze expectantly from Mug to Backwards Cap to me and back to Mug again, until Nick scrambles over the counter shrieking, "Man, you just gonna sit there or what? Dude just put a dick in your face and you're just gonna sit there! O fuck it, dude you are insane. O shit." Nick's honking laughter fills the room while my boyfriend readjusts his pants and wheels out of the warehouse.

"Momin' Sweetpea."

"Momin' Richie. You have a nice weekend?" Mondays always began with cleaning up after the field crews. I cleared some wooden blocks off my table.

"Yeah boy. I was fishing. How bout you?"

"It was too short." Same exchange every Monday.

"I hear that." He offered one snort of a laugh and gnawed a bite off some bright red nub in his fist.

"What is that—your breakfast?" I asked, climbing up on the steel worktable to sweep off the metal shavings.

"Red link." He turned it over in his palm, as a matter of fact. Breakfast was a raw hot dog with curiously red skin. "You want one?"

I declined, squinching my nose and sweeping.

"You ever go hiking up at Taloolah Gorge?" he asked, jamming his arms into a welding jacket.

"Nope," I said, hopping across to the other table to sweep. "Driven across it a lot of times. You think it's deeper than Cloudland Canyon?"

"Well it is deep. But I ain't been to Cloudland. I know the fishing up at Taloolah is beautiful." Richie rooted around in his toolbox for some vicegrips. I jumped down from the table to switch on an industrial fan. Someone started slicing metal on the brake and the machine's motor seemed to fill up the warehouse.

"Do you catch bass up there?" I shouted.

He stepped behind the exhaust fan to light a Camel and shook his head. "Ah, you don't really catch much of anything up there. Surround yourself with a place like that, and the fishing pole is just an excuse." He flipped his black hat backwards and placed his welding hood over it.

That was probably the official end of conversation, but I couldn't help myself. "Have you ever seen that movie *Deliverance*?"

Of course he had, many times, and of course he took off his hood and re-enacted that "squeal like a pig" line for me.

"You know," I started, "The guy who wrote it is from Georgia, and the movie was filmed at Taloolah Gorge."

"Is that right?"

"Yep. They shot the whole thing in North Georgia. You probably made the same canoe trip."

Now I tested my helmet to make sure it snapped down with a nod. Richie just stood there with a torch in his hand, looking slightly above and beyond my head. "How did you know that?" he started to ask, but trailed off mid-sentence to lay his smoldering cigarette on the table.

The walls and ramps of the skatepark are crawling with an ongoing graffiti experiment. I never actually see the tag artists in action, but every night, the murals have been changed, old tags enhanced or effaced by new colors. Bikers from all over the Southeast, professionals and Dunwoody babies, hardcore bands and guest DJ's, the occasional curious photographer and a few patient girlfriends all flush in and out of the warehouse, but Nick is a constant there. I've never witnessed Nick arriving or leaving; he never appears to eat or sleep or smoke.

Sometimes I catch him driving golf balls into the truck bays from the other end of the parking lot or chucking peanut shells into sunroofs of parked cars. He systematically tests the weak spots in the ramps by dropping his bike on them. Maybe it's the glasses, but he manages to do all these things with the same serious expression on his face, the same look of combat. He was stomping in a cafeteria-style metal chair when I noticed his bleeding elbows.

"Is that all road rash, Nick?"

He stopped demolishing the chair long enough to twist one elbow around into view.

"What? Oh yeah, but it's old, from riding street. I wup it off just a second ago but it keeps bleeding."

"You what?"

"I wupped it, whatever. Keep trying to get the blood off. You know."

I shouldn't have started laughing at a boy violating a piece of furniture for fun. "Is that a word, man? You wiped it, right?" I held out a five dollar bill. He kicked the metal remnants into the wall and shrugged.

"What's this for? The coke machine's empty."

"It's for an hour of riding." The tinny chord of his sneakers whacking metal. "I get a dollar back."

He stopped to fish a grimy bill from his pocket and proceeded to punt the flattened chair down the hall, looking miffed for having been interrupted from this business.

"I'm gonna write a paper about you, ok?"

"Long as I don't have to read it."

A few days after another welder was hired (a thin old guy who smoked menthols that Richie called "Pops"), the boombox was changed to "Today's Hot Country Hits." Hoping it was just for the day, I kept my mouth shut. No one can hear music over the MIGs anyways. After a week of generic pop tunes in faux-Texas accents, I had to ask Richie what had gone wrong.

"Gotta respect ol' Pops. That rock n' roll was a little too much for him," he explained confidentially.

I looked the old man over. He looked mighty fit for a smoking senior citizen. Masked under his scuffed gray hood, he looked thirty. Fit enough for Metallica anyways. His shoulders sheltered the small ball of flame he coaxed along the seam of a pipe. Under the metal table, his boot twitched quietly to the country music.

"To tell you the truth," confided Richie, "I wish they'd put you back over here. Ol' Pops can't hardly see the metal. I'm gonna hafta patch up all that pipe he done burnt up. Tell your dad to put you back over on the TIG and let Pops do that ol' galvanized."

When Pops started doing most of the shop welding, Richie couldn't bear to see me just sweeping or dragging scrap metal down to the recycling bins. I preferred welding too, but I think Dad saw the burns on my arms and lost some of that initial enthusiasm that his daughter would follow in his career footsteps. Meanwhile, Richie insisted that I learn to drive the forklifts, use the acetylene torch, rewire the busted tools, operate different shears, punchers, presses and welders. He had me engaged on all sorts of tasks that sound completely foreign now. Richie seemed not to notice any hesitation or weakness on my part; he expected nothing less than his own level of loyalty. And I vowed not to let him down, only occasionally asking myself why the hell I wasn't waiting tables.

One day he handed me the keys to a flatbed semi and asked me to back it into the loading dock. The tough girl took the keys, scuffed out to the dock, took one look at the truck, and let out a deep breath. There was no way.

"Uh, Richie, could you maybe move the truck? I'm not really, uh, comfortable," I began.

He stopped me calmly, "I know you don't. That's why I asked you."

I must not have looked convinced. He said, "Fix them mirrors so you can see and go extra slow. We ain't in no hurry." And he turned around and walked back into the warehouse.

I tuned the truck radio to 96Rock, and took my time.

From my perch in the spec seats, I expect to see Nick attacking those ramps on his moldy-green beloved, in the same horn-rims and shoestring every time. My boyfriend told me once, "It seems like if Nick laid down on the ramps, his sweat and those faded army pants and the wood surface of the ramp would all have the same texture. Like it's all part of the same thing that's happening out there." And I scribble this down right away because maybe that's the thing I'm so fascinated with; why I keep poking at this hornets' nest full of boys.

The last night, as I gathered up my books and Mug's gear, Nick stuck his head over the platform and shouted hoarsely, "Hey, is Mug your brother or your husband?"

Both choices struck me as goofy. "Neither," I grinned.

"I just mean you hang out with him a lot that's all. I can't see why. And why you'd wanna hang out in this place."

"Because I'm a writer."

"I've never seen you ride."

"Nevermind," I shouted back. It was a good question.

He returned to the action on the ramps, leaning his red elbows on his handlebars, gripping the forks between his knees, and slowly wagging his bike behind him like a tail.



## One-Act Play by Dorothy Lee Hayes

### Because We are Many

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

**BETHANY:** *A devoutly religious thirteen-year old girl. Her religious nature does not mean that she is not human; she is not a saint and should not be played as one.*

**MICAH:** *Bethany's seven-year old brother. Epileptic. A very lively and humorous child, but very aware of how his illness limits him.*

**JANICE:** *Bethany and Micah's mother, in her early thirties. Bitter, sarcastic, and abusive. Life has been hard for her, and her appearance shows it.*

**SCENE:** *The hay-loft above a barn in rural Mississippi.*

**TIME:** *Nighttime in early spring.*

**SETTING:** *An old hay-loft in poor condition on a farm in rural southern Mississippi.*

**AT RISE:** *BETHANY and MICAH are walking in darkness toward the hay-loft. Both of them are carrying flashlights, and BETHANY is also holding a small suitcase. Both characters are dressed in secondhand pajamas and old boots. None of their clothes fit just right.*

**MICAH:** What are we doin', Bethany?

**BETHANY:** Shhh...I'll tell you when we get there.

**MICAH:** It's so dark! I can't see the ladder.  
*(He pauses.)*

I can't see you, either.

**BETHANY:** Can you feel your way up? I'm right behind you, I won't let you fall.

*(BETHANY and MICAH reach the hay-loft.*

*BETHANY stumbles on a bale of hay while*

*BETHANY lights some candles she has brought with her.)*

**MICAH:** Phew! It stinks up here.

**BETHANY:** That's the hay. It smells like that when it's old. When Daddy first brought it up here, it smelled real sweet. I slept here one night.

**MICAH:** I don't remember that.

**BETHANY:** You were real young. Maybe three years old.

**MICAH** *(yawning):* Oh. So why'd you bring me up here?

**BETHANY** *(lighting candles):* I'll tell you in a minute. Micah, sit down so you won't bump into nothin'.

**MICAH:** What time is it?

**BETHANY:** I dunno. I don't got a watch.

**MICAH:** I bet it's later than twelve o'clock.

**BETHANY:** Probably.

**MICAH:** I bet it's three. I never stayed up after twelve. Have you been awake this late?

**BETHANY:** Maybe once or twice.

**MICAH:** Why isn't Mama home?

**BETHANY:** She's over at Tom's house, so she prob'ly won't come back home 'til morning.

*(She pauses.)*

I don't care, either.

**MICAH:** Yeah, me neither. Tom smells bad, an' his ears are too big for his head. Mama can go over there if she wants, but I'm stayin' away from Dumbo-head.

**BETHANY** *(laughing):* I always thought he looked like a cow 'cause he's got those big stupid eyes.

**MICAH** *(imitating a cow):* Moo...my name's Tom. I'm a stinky cow.

**BETHANY:** Don't let Mama hear you say that. She'd get real mad. We're supposed to respect him or somethin'.

*(MICAH wanders around the loft and peers out of a large window far upstage.)*

**MICAH:** It's so dark now. Look! You can't even see the house! If we didn't have our flashlights, I bet we'd get real lost. You want me to keep 'em so we can find 'em when we leave?

**BETHANY:** No, Micah. I got 'em right here. Please sit down now.

*(MICAH starts jumping from one hay bale to another.)*

**BETHANY:** Micah, you need to sit down.

**MICAH:** Why?

**BETHANY:** 'Cause I gotta talk to you. An' I don't want you to fall down or nothin'.

**MICAH:** You sit down then.

**BETHANY:** OK, fine.

*(BETHANY sits down. MICAH remains standing for a beat, to prove that he doesn't have to sit, then plops down on a nearby hay bale.)*

**BETHANY:** Lemme ask you somethin'. Do you know what hell's like, Micah?

**MICAH:** No.

**BETHANY:** I know what it's like. Really! 'Cause tonight I had a real bad dream that I went to hell.

**MICAH:** One time, I dreamed that Mama was drivin' the car, an' you was tryin' to jump out, but you just fell on the road an' somebody ran over you like what happened to that kitty that used to live in here.

**BETHANY:** That cat was sick when he came up to the house. He was gonna die anyway. But my dream wasn't like yours. It was scarier.

**MICAH:** I don't wanna hear a scary dream. I'm hungry.

**BETHANY:** OK, here's a cookie. Now sit down and listen, 'kay?

**MICAH** *(taking cookie and sitting on a hay-bale):* OK.

**BETHANY** *(assuming the role of story-teller):* I dreamed I was runnin' away and Mama was chasin' me. She chased me an' chased me down the driveway an' the road 'til we ran into hell and I couldn't go anywhere. Hell was a real dark closet that smelled like mothballs and cigarettes. But I couldn't reach the back wall, it just kept getting further an' further away, while the closet got darker an' darker. It was really hot, not hot like summer, but hot like hot water. Like the time Mama spilled the water from the stove on me. I couldn't hear anything 'cept the devil laughin' at me 'cause I was there. He sounded like a coyote. And Mama was laughin' at me too, 'cause she had chased me into hell.

**MICAH** *(near tears):* I don't like that dream.

**BETHANY** *(in a lighter tone):* Me, neither. That's why it woke me up in the middle of the night. But it was just a scary dream. You believe in God, right?

**MICAH:** Yeah.

**BETHANY** *(happily, trying to comfort MICAH):*

Then you don't hafta worry 'bout hell. Good people who believe in God go to heaven.

**MICAH:** Then I don't hafta go to hell!

**BETHANY:** No, of course not. An' I don't either. I'm gonna go to heaven with you! In heaven there's lots of angels an' gold. You can get anything you want in heaven.

**MICAH:** When I'm in heaven I'm gonna get a

bike. A red one, an' really fast.

*(BETHANY stands up, pulling MICAH to his feet as they really get into the fantasy.)*

**BETHANY:** I'm gonna have a brown horse named Lightning, an' you can ride on her with me.

**MICAH** *(shaking his head):* Uh-huh. My bike's gonna be faster than your stupid horse.

**BETHANY** *(laughing):* OK, I'll ride Lightning an' you'll ride your bike, an' we'll live in a big ol' house with lots of rooms an' a swimming pool. Does that sound good?

*(They laugh together, holding hands. MICAH stops laughing and grows slightly more serious.)*

**MICAH:** Is kitty gonna be in heaven?

**BETHANY:** I don't know. Don't worry 'bout it.

**MICAH:** Is daddy gonna go to heaven?

**BETHANY:** Yeah, Daddy's goin' to heaven, too.

**MICAH:** When I get to heaven he's gonna live in my big house with me, 'cause he don't wanna live with stupid girls.

**BETHANY** *(teasing him):* I thought you were gonna live in my house with the swimming pool! I don't wanna live all by myself in heaven!

**MICAH:** Mama can live with you. Y'all will have the girls' house, an' me an' Daddy will have the boys' house.

**BETHANY** *(adamantly):* I'm not living with Mama in heaven!

**MICAH:** Why not?

**BETHANY** *(defiantly):* 'Cause Mama's not gonna be in heaven.

**MICAH:** That's not fair...why can't Mama be in heaven with us? You don't hafta live with her.

Maybe she can have her own house or somethin'.

**BETHANY:** I already told you, you gotta believe in God and be a real good person to go to heaven.

Mama thinks God's just somethin' somebody made up. She says there's no such thing as God. So she'll hafta go to hell.

**MICAH:** But I don't want Mama to go to hell.

**BETHANY:** God doesn't really want her to go to hell either, but he's gotta send her there if she doesn't believe in him.

**MICAH** *(skeptically):* How do you know what God wants?

**BETHANY:** He told me.

**MICAH:** Does God sound real mean when he talks to you?

**BETHANY:** He don't talk like normal people, Micah. He talks to people in their dreams.

**MICAH:** I don't never hear him.

**BETHANY:** Well, he don't talk to everybody.

MICAH: Then why does he talk to you?

BETHANY: 'Cause I'm a good person.

MICAH: I'm a good person, too!

BETHANY: I know, but God only talks to specially good people. An' I guess I'm one of 'em.

MICAH (*muttering*): You're not that special.

(*He speaks determinedly.*)

He's gonna talk to me one of these days!

BETHANY: OK, Micah, he's gonna talk to you someday. But he talked to me tonight.

MICAH (*disbelieving*): He wasn't talkin' very loud 'cause I didn't hear him.

BETHANY: I told you, he doesn't talk like regular people. But he made me have that nightmare to show me how scary hell is. An' I think he means that he wants me to show Mama that he's real, and heaven and hell are real, too.

MICAH: Why doesn't he just talk to her himself?

BETHANY (*thinking this over*): Well, he only talks to real good Christians, an' so he couldn't talk to Mama in a dream. God wants me to prove how good I am.

MICAH (*losing interest*): You're not that good.

BETHANY: An' if I show Mama that God's real, she's gotta stop bein' so mean to me.

MICAH (*realizing what BETHANY means*): I wanna show her, too!

BETHANY: Good, 'cause I'm gonna need your help.

MICAH: I'm gonna dig up Kitty, an' make God bring it back alive, an'--

BETHANY: Micah--

MICAH: --an' make the kitty walk up to Mama, an' tell her--

BETHANY: Micah--

MICAH: --an' I'm gonna tell her

(*imitating a "God-like" voice*)

that God let me bring the kitty back alive to show her that God's real.

(*He goes back to his normal voice.*)

An' Mama's gonna stop bein' mean to me, too.

(*He turns to Bethany.*)

So there!

BETHANY: Micah, that's silly. You can't bring the dumb cat back from the dead.

MICAH (*standing up, with assurance*): Watch me!

BETHANY: You can't see to dig it up at night, dummy. Anyway, you gotta help me tonight.

MICAH: What're you gonna do? I bet it's not as good as making the kitty come alive.

BETHANY (*firmly, to end all argument*): I'm gonna stop you from shaking.

MICAH: You can't do that. Mama says that nobody can stop me shaking. She says I'm gonna do that all my life.

BETHANY: I know what she says. She won't buy your medicine 'cause you take it an' still have seizures. She thinks the doctors don't know what they're doin'. But after tonight you won't need any medicine or any doctors. When Mama sees I've cured you, she's gonna know God's real.

MICAH: Mama's not gonna believe you.

BETHANY: Yes, she is. She has to. An' when she believes in God everything's gonna be better.

MICAH: You're gonna get in trouble if you try to stop me from shakin'.

BETHANY: Mama's not gonna find out 'til I've already cured you, an' then she'll be so happy I won't get in trouble.

MICAH: Mama's not gonna believe you. She's just gonna get mad 'cause you woke me up an' made me come up here in the dark. I don't wanna be here an' get a spanking too.

BETHANY: Shut up! I'm not gonna get in trouble! Mama's gonna thank me for curing you,

and thank me for being good while she was gone, and tell me she's sorry for ever bein' mean.

MICAH: I'm goin' home. Mama's not gonna get mad at me 'cause I'm gonna be asleep. You can stay out here if you want.

(*MICAH walks toward the ladder, away from BETHANY. He has trouble getting down because it is so dark.*)

BETHANY (*trying to keep MICAH in the loft*):

You can't get home without a flashlight. You'd end up in the road 'cause you can't even see the house, 'an then what would happen to you?

(*BETHANY quickly opens her suitcase and pulls out candles, a Bible, some garlic, and a simple wooden cross. She does this quietly, with no show.*)

MICAH: Gimme a flashlight.

BETHANY: Come back an' get it.

MICAH: Where is it?

BETHANY: Over by my suitcase. Come get it.

(*MICAH scrambles across the loft to find the flashlight. He sees BETHANY's props, and becomes more interested in them.*)

MICAH: What is this stuff?

(*He smells the garlic.*)

Phew! That stinks worse than the hay! What is it?

BETHANY: Just some things I might need to use.

MICAH: What are you gonna do with it?

BETHANY: You don't need to know. Go 'head

an' get the flashlight. It's right over there. Good night, I'll see you in the morning.

MICAH: I'm not leavin' 'til you tell me what that junk is.

BETHANY: Oh, don't worry 'bout it, it's not that important.

MICAH: Tell me tell me tell me tell me!

BETHANY (*teasing him*): Do you really want to know?

MICAH (*impatient, reaching for the cross*): Yes!

BETHANY: It's how I'm gonna cure you.

MICAH: That don't look like medicine.

BETHANY: That's 'cause medicine won't fix what's wrong with you.

MICAH: I know, medicine can't stop me shaking.

BETHANY: That's 'cause the doctors don't know why you got seizures.

MICAH: Do you know?

BETHANY (*nodding*): Mm-hmm. Will you stay up here for a little while, just to find out?

(*MICAH sits down by BETHANY.*)

MICAH: Yeah, I won't go home yet.

(*BETHANY hands the Bible to MICAH.*)

BETHANY: Here. Turn to Mark 9.

(*MICAH flips through the pages for a few moments. It is obvious that he doesn't know what he is doing.*)

BETHANY: Give it here. I'll find it for you.

(*BETHANY finds the place in the Bible, then sits beside Micah so they can both see the book.*)

MICAH: I'll read it.

(*He reads painfully slowly and awkwardly.*)

"A man in the crowd said, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is po-pos"-what's that word?"

BETHANY: Possessed. Here, lemme read it.

(*BETHANY grabs the Bible out of his hands and carefully lays it on her lap.*)

BETHANY (*in the tone of a Sunday School teacher*):

"A man in the crowd said, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it

throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid."

Doesn't that sound like you, Micah?

MICAH: When I start shaking? I dunno.

BETHANY: That's what happens to you. I

know 'cause I've seen you.

(*She reads again.*)

"When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. The boy's father said,

"If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus said, "If you can? Everything is possible

for him who believes. You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently, and came out."

MICAH: That doesn't make any sense. I don't like that story. Read the one 'bout the giant.

BETHANY: Don't you get it?! That's what's wrong with you. There's nothin' wrong with your brain. It's just demons.

MICAH: What's demons?

BETHANY: It's like a little devil, with claws and wings, and some of 'em breathe fire like dragons.

I bet you got a hundred of 'em, crawlin' around in you like ants on a anthill.

MICAH: No, I don't! I don't got any demons in me!

BETHANY: Sure you do. That's why you got seizures.

MICAH: You're just makin' that up. I don't have any demons.

BETHANY: Then how come you have seizures? It's not normal.

MICAH: Mama says nobody knows why I got seizures. And don't make fun of them 'cause I can't help it.

BETHANY: I'm not makin' fun of you. I'm tryin' to help you. Mama knows you can't help it, but she can't fix you. But I know about the demons, so all I hafta do is exorcise them.

MICAH: What's that mean?

BETHANY: It just means to make the demons run away an' stop botherin' you.

MICAH: Where are they gonna go?

BETHANY: I don't know. It doesn't say. I guess they go back to hell.

MICAH: If they're from hell, how'd they get in me?

BETHANY: I don't really know. Maybe they were just flying around and popped into you. Or maybe they were in Mama, and they got into you before you were born.

MICAH: Demons just fly around all the time?

BETHANY: Sure. They're probably some flying up here right now.

MICAH (*scared*): I don't see any.

BETHANY: Of course you don't. You can't see 'em 'cause they're invisible.

(*MICAH screams.*)

MICAH: Gimme that flashlight! I'm not gonna stay up here with you an' all the demons!

(*MICAH grabs the flashlight and runs toward the ladder.*)

BETHANY (*calmly*): If you go home now, the demons are just gonna stay in you 'cause I won't be able to exorcise 'em. An' Mama's not gonna believe in God, an' you're still gonna have seizures, an' she's gonna get mad at you every time it happens.

(*She pauses.*)

But go on home if you want to.

MICAH (*almost crying*): I don't want demons in me.

BETHANY: Of course you don't. That's why I'm gonna get 'em out of you. It's gonna be all right. You're gonna get better.

MICAH: Is it gonna hurt?

BETHANY: No, I don't think so. Maybe a little, when they come out, but just think—you'll never have another seizure.

MICAH: I'm kinda scared.

BETHANY: It's OK. Just remember that if you believe in God, nothin' bad's gonna happen to you.

MICAH: Promise?

BETHANY: Yeah, I promise.

MICAH: How are you gonna chase the demons out of me?

BETHANY: All Jesus did was tell 'em to come out, but I saw somebody do it on TV and they had all kinds of stuff to help.

(*BETHANY turns to her props again and begins organizing them, stringing up garlic and placing the cross upright against a hay bale. MICAH picks each item up and looks at it with fear and curiosity.*)

MICAH: Tell me what that stinky stuff is.

BETHANY (*handing him the garlic*): It's garlic. I saw this on TV, too. You gotta have it 'cause demons like it and they'll come outta you to eat it.

(*She speaks uncertainly.*)

Or maybe it's 'cause they hate it, so they'll run away instead of botherin' us.

MICAH: Dumb ol' demons.

BETHANY (*arranging the candles in a circle*): An' you hafta have lots of candles to chase 'em out.

MICAH: Why?

BETHANY: I think it's 'cause demons hate light.

MICAH: An' that's why we gotta do this at night, huh? SO we can trick 'em into thinkin' they're safe, but then...pow! We send 'em back to hell!

(*MICAH acts out fighting the demons like some kind of super-hero. He punches and kicks the air, ad-libbing "take that!", etc.*)

BETHANY: I don't think it's gonna be like that.

You can't really hit 'em or anything.

MICAH (*calming down and sitting beside BETHANY*): You sure know lots of things 'bout demons. Did Mama teach you?

BETHANY (*laughing*): Mama wouldn't teach me about demons! She doesn't even think demons are real.

MICAH: Then how do you know that's what's wrong with me?

BETHANY: Daddy used to read me Bible stories before I went to bed at night.

MICAH: Daddy told you I had demons?

BETHANY: No, I had to figure that out by myself. But he said that I had to stay with you an' Mama an' show y'all how to be good Christians, so I started reading Bible stories to myself.

MICAH (*almost to himself*): I wish he wouldn't have gone.

BETHANY (*sadly*): Me, too.

(*She reassures herself.*)

But Daddy said that God told him to go somewhere else an' tell other people about God.

MICAH: Bethany, if those other people ever start believin' in God, do you think God will let Daddy come home?

BETHANY: Yeah! 'Cause God wouldn't make Daddy leave us forever.

MICAH: Daddy better hurry up and come home. 'Cause Mama says he's gone for good.

BETHANY: Mama didn't understand why God made Daddy leave. He told me that she wouldn't believe him, so he had to keep the real reason he left a secret. But I can trust you, right?

MICAH: I promise I won't tell Mama.

BETHANY: Good. But you hafta tell her about the demons so she'll believe in God.

MICAH: I know. I'm gonna tell Mama when she gets home that the demons in me are what's makin' me shake.

BETHANY: They won't be inside you anymore when she gets home. They're all gonna be back in hell, and you won't ever shake again.

MICAH: Then I'm gonna tell Mama 'bout that.  
(*BETHANY and MICAH hear a loud clatter off stage. MICAH screams.*)

MICAH: It's a big demon!

(*He turns to hide behind a hay bale, but BETHANY pulls him back and offers him a cookie.*)

BETHANY: Shh, Micah, it's not a demon.

MICAH (*still terrified*): How do you know?

BETHANY (*making something up to calm him down*):

'Cause demons don't make noise.

MICAH: Then maybe it's a bad guy gonna come up and kill us.

BETHANY: I don't think so. It's probably just some ol' dog runnin' around.

(*They hear another crash, this time closer and louder.*)

MICAH: I still think it's a demon.

JANICE (*offstage*): Bethany! Micah! If you don't come out on the count of three—

BETHANY: Micah, be real quiet. Mama's gonna kill us if she finds us up here.

(*BETHANY scrambles around the loft, gathering her props and blowing out candles. JANICE enters, smoking a cigarette, and watches BETHANY's frantic movements for a moment.*)

MICAH: Mama!

(*BETHANY drops all her belongings.*)

JANICE: You got one minute to pick that shit up, get your little brother, and get your ass back to the house before I beat the living shit outta you.

BETHANY: But I was just trying to help Micah...I mean, I had a dream and...we weren't out here long...I was takin' care of Micah—

JANICE: I don't give a damn why you're up here. But you got 'bout thirty seconds to leave.

BETHANY: I'm sorry, Mama.

MICAH (*eagerly*): Can I tell her 'bout the demons, Bethany?

JANICE: What?

MICAH: Mama! There are demons inside me! Like little dragons with claws and wings and—

JANICE: What in the hell are you talking about?

(*She speaks to BETHANY.*)

What the hell is he talkin' about?

BETHANY: Mama, I just tried to explain to Micah the reason he has seizures is 'cause of demons.

MICAH: The mean ol' demons in me are what's makin' me shake, Bethany told me so!

JANICE: Jesus Christ, Bethany! What did you tell him?

BETHANY: The truth.

JANICE: I'm not kidding. What did you tell him?

BETHANY (*very rapidly*): I just told him that I figured out what was making him have seizures an' I asked him did he want to know an' he said yes so I told him that what was makin' him shake was a bunch of demons inside him just like in the Bible an' I was gonna hafta chase 'em out and—

(*She pauses, noticing JANICE doesn't believe her, then trying her last resort.*)

--Micah said he believed me!

JANICE: You really believe that, Micah?

MICAH (*scared*): Kinda. Yeah, I think so. Bethany told me 'bout the demons.

JANICE: Bethany's full of shit.

BETHANY: Am not! It's true!

MICAH: It's true, Mama.

JANICE: That's the stupidest thing I've heard.

MICAH: I'm not stupid, Mama.

BETHANY (*at the same time as MICAH*): Don't call Micah stupid, Mama. You'll hurt his feelings.

JANICE (*sarcastically*): Jesus Christ! I'm sorry.

He's not stupid. He's real smart, he just can't control his own body. Can't even fucking stand up sometimes.

BETHANY: He can't help it. It's the demons that make him sick, and he can't stop them.

JANICE: Would you stop that nonsense! You're sounding as stupid as Micah!

MICAH: I read it in the Bible, Mama. I know it's true 'bout the demons.

(*BETHANY picks up the Bible and walks over to JANICE. JANICE knocks the Bible out of BETHANY's hands.*)

JANICE: I'm sure that's a real nice story, but it doesn't have nothin' to do with Micah, or you, or me! Didn't I tell you to get your ass in bed?

BETHANY: You shouldn't say that it's just a story, Mama. It really happened.

MICAH: Mama, say the story's real. If you don't you're gonna go to hell.

JANICE: What did you say to me?

MICAH (*quietly, realizing he's done something wrong*): I said you hafta go to hell if you don't believe in God.

(*He pauses.*)

Bethany said so.

JANICE (*mocking*): Bethany said so.

(*She speaks to BETHANY.*)

I bet she did, didn't she? That sounds just like something Bethany would say. Wouldn't you like me in hell, Bethany? Wouldn't it be a lot better for you if I was dead?

BETHANY: I wasn't really talking about you, I just said that anybody—

JANICE: Fuck anybody! What did you say about me?

BETHANY (*quickly*): I said that if you kept on thinking that God isn't real, then you would go to hell when you die.

JANICE (*not angrily, but almost amused*): You ungrateful children take any money I might have,

ruin my life, and chase off my husband, but that's not enough, is it? You gotta send me to hell, too.

**BETHANY:** I'm not the one sending you to hell!

**JANICE:** But you wish you could, don't you?

**MICAH:** No, Mama! We want you to go to heaven with us!

**JANICE:** I was talking to Bethany. Admit it, you'd love it if I was in hell right now.

**BETHANY:** I really don't want you to go to hell, Mama. But it's not up to me.

**JANICE:** Then why'd you tell Micah that's where I was going?

**BETHANY:** 'Cause I had this dream 'bout hell an' I think it was God tryin' to make me save you from it.

**JANICE:** Save me from it? Save me! What makes you think you can save me from anything?

**MICAH:** She can, Mama.

**JANICE (sarcastically):** Really?

**BETHANY:** I can't save you by myself. But I can prove that God's real.

**JANICE (her motherly patience wearing thin):** I'm sure you can, but right now I'm tired and sick of hearing this religious crap. I'm not in the mood for a church service.

*(JANICE walks toward the exit, grabbing*

*MICAH's hand as she goes by. BETHANY begins gathering her things again.)*

**BETHANY:** It's not funny, Mama. I'll leave now, but you'll see that God's real, you'll see that he's gonna let me show you how powerful he is.

*(JANICE walks toward BETHANY.)*

**JANICE (sternly):** Let me show you something. Right now, we're not in heaven with your God showin' off by sendin' me to hell. We're in this barn, and there ain't nobody around for miles, an' I promise you that I'm the only powerful person out here. Do you understand me?

**BETHANY:** Yes, ma'am.

**JANICE:** Now get out of my sight!

*(BETHANY stands still, mustering all her courage to face her mother.)*

**BETHANY:** No.

**MICAH (whispering loudly):** You'd better do what she says.

**JANICE (to MICAH):** You don't hafta worry about that. Bethany always does what I tell her, right Bethany? 'Cause if she don't, she knows that no amount of prayin' is gonna help her.

*(She speaks to BETHANY.)*

Right?

**BETHANY:** Yes, ma'am.

*(BETHANY pauses, and JANICE looks at her with a smug smile. When JANICE turns away again, BETHANY speaks.)*

**BETHANY:** I mean-

*(She speaks loudly.)*

--no! You're wrong!

**JANICE:** I'm what?

**BETHANY:** Wrong. About God. You're wrong if you think he doesn't exist, and you're wrong if you think he's not gonna protect me. 'Cause God knows everything that happens, and he can see everything that you do. An' if you don't hurry up an' believe in him, you are goin' to hell.

**JANICE:** What if I told you I'd rather be in hell, just to get away from obnoxious brats like you.

**BETHANY (earnestly):** Mama, please listen to me. You just don't understand. If you believe in God, he'll make your life so much better. He's gonna cure Micah, an' bring Daddy back home, an' help me to be so good that I can go to heaven.

**MICAH:** He's gonna bring Kitty back, too.

**BETHANY:** Micah, be quiet.

**JANICE (incredulously):** You really believe that?

**BETHANY (nodding):** Uh-huh.

**MICAH (tentatively):** Me, too.

**JANICE:** So some God you never seen is gonna come down from some heaven you never seen, and is gonna fix everything that's wrong with your shitty little life.

**BETHANY:** The Bible says everything's gonna work out for good.

**JANICE:** There ain't nothin' good about my life. Or yours.

**BETHANY:** There will be when God decides--

**JANICE:** Well, I'll tell you I'm not waitin' around 'til God's good and ready to fix everything. 'Cause so far he's decided that he wants us poor an' wants your dad to run off an' leave us.

**MICAH:** Daddy didn't run away from us. He-

**BETHANY (cutting MICAH off):** It doesn't matter what happened. God says everything's gonna work out for good.

**JANICE:** You think it's good that your father ran off with another woman?

**BETHANY:** He didn't do that! He went away to make other people believe in God, an' he's gonna be back as soon as he finishes.

**JANICE:** How do you make up all this shit?

**BETHANY (more subdued, realizing the secret she has just revealed):** I didn't make it up, he told me. An'

he made me promise not to tell you, 'cause he knew you wouldn't understand.

**JANICE:** Look, you get this straight. Your father didn't go off to be some missionary. He ran away, scared, 'cause he couldn't handle a little brat like you and a retard like Micah. He wasn't no saint, he was a fucking weak bastard.

**MICAH:** Don't say that, I didn't make him leave!

**JANICE (to MICAH):** Be quiet, you don't know nothin' about it.

*(She speaks to BETHANY.)*

So I don't care what that man told you, he was lying. Just a lying son of a bitch who--

**BETHANY:** I shouldn't have told you. He knew you wouldn't believe it, that's why I had to promise to keep it a secret.

**JANICE:** --who walked out on his wife an' kids just 'cause he was too chicken shit to be a real man.

**BETHANY:** You'll see, when he comes back home.

**JANICE:** He's not coming back, no matter what you think your precious God's gonna do. God doesn't give a damn 'bout us, so he's not gonna change anything. Tomorrow's gonna be just like today, an' things aren't gonna get better while you're on your knees talkin' to the sky.

**BETHANY:** Just 'cause me an' Micah believe in God doesn't mean we're stupid.

**MICAH:** I'm not stupid, I know how to read, an' I know my multiplication tables.

*(MICAH jumps on the hay bales and sings.)*

**MICAH:** Two times one is two; two times two is four; two times three is...um...six --

*(MICAH continues singing to himself while*

*BETHANY and JANICE speak.)*

**JANICE (sarcastically, to BETHANY):** So sitting around talkin' to the sky don't make you crazy or stupid?

**BETHANY:** Believin' in God is not just talkin' to the sky!

**JANICE:** You're right, it's not. For you it's wakin' your brother up in the middle of the damn night to tell him he's got demons in him an' that his bastard of a father's gonna come home. The kid has enough problems without you fillin' his crazy head with shit like that.

**MICAH (stopping singing):** I do, Mama. I do got demons inside me.

**BETHANY:** I know you do, Micah.

*(She speaks pointedly to JANICE)*

An' I'm gonna make the demons come out of you.

**JANICE:** What are you gonna do?

*(MICAH picks up a clove of garlic and runs it over to JANICE.)*

**MICAH:** She's gonna chase out the demons with this stuff. See, the demons like it a lot--right Bethany?--an' are gonna leave me to eat it.

*(He gets excited.)*

An' that's when we're gonna kick 'em an' punch 'em out an'--

**JANICE (exploding):** That's it! This is fucking insane. You're both fucking insane. Get your shit together and go to bed.

**BETHANY (pleading):** I can't, Mama, I've got to cure Micah.

**JANICE:** You've got to come home. This second.

**MICAH:** It's OK, Bethany. You can cure me some other time.

**BETHANY (screaming):** It's not OK!

*(She speaks to JANICE.)*

I could've already made him better, you know. But you had to come up and ruin everything. I'm doing this for you. I'm trying to show you that God's real. I just wanted to--

**JANICE (challenging):** Show me then! If God's so great and powerful, an' can see all the evil things I do, then let him show me. Right now.

**BETHANY (quietly, shocked):**

I'll prove to you that's he's real. I'll make Micah better.

**JANICE:** Sure you will. An' when you lose your voice from prayin' all night, you'll get up, walk back to the house, and never breathe another word of this nonsense.

**BETHANY:** What do you mean?

**JANICE:** I mean this is it, your only chance to show me how powerful God is. An' if--when--nothin' happens, I don't wanna hear the word "God" in my house again.

**BETHANY:** It's not gonna happen like that, Mama. You'll see. Micah's gonna get better an' you're gonna believe in God.

**MICAH:** You gotta let me get better, Mama!

**JANICE (mocking):** That's up to God, now. Right, Bethany?

**BETHANY:** You'll see.

*(JANICE sits down and lights a cigarette while*

*BETHANY rearranges her props from earlier.*

*When she is finished, she leads MICAH over to the place she has established with candles, etc. MICAH is frightened, but follows his sister.)*

**MICAH:** Are you gonna chase out the demons

now, Bethany?

BETHANY: Yes.

JANICE (*simultaneously*): No.

BETHANY (*looking pointedly at JANICE*): Yes, Micah, I'm gonna make you better now.

(*BETHANY kneels beside MICAH and holds his hand.*)

BETHANY (*praying*): Dear God--

JANICE (*overlapping, muttering*): Jesus Christ!

BETHANY: --thank you for making me understand what I need to do to cure Micah.

JANICE (*overlapping*): You're not gonna be able to do this.

BETHANY: And thank you for bringing Mama home so she can see Micah get better and will know that you cured him through me.

Please help me to exorcise the demons in Micah so he won't be sick anymore.

JANICE: How the hell did you think of doing this?

BETHANY: Oh, and keep Daddy safe so he can come back home real soon.

(*She speaks louder, directed at JANICE*)

And please make Mama believe in you so she won't hafta go to hell. Amen.

JANICE (*mocking*): Amen, sweet Jesus!

MICAH: Amen. Are the demons gone yet, Bethany?

BETHANY: Not yet.

JANICE: 'Cause they weren't there in the first place.

MICAH: They are real, Mama. I can feel 'em gettin' mad 'cause I prayed with Bethany. They feel like a bunch of bugs crawlin' around in my head. Right, Bethany?

BETHANY (*uncertainly*): I guess so.

(*She regains confidence.*)

Yeah, they're just real mad right now, 'cause they don't wanna hafta go back to hell.

MICAH: Bethany knows what she's talking 'bout, Mama. The demons are all up in my head now, but they're gonna come out soon.

JANICE: They'd better. Hurry up, Bethany.

(*She speaks sarcastically.*)

I can't wait to see the demons come out of Micah.

(*BETHANY, who has lost her train of thought, tries to find the perfect place to stand beside MICAH.*)

JANICE: Christ! How long is this going to take?

BETHANY: I gotta make sure everything's just right.

(*She hands a cross to Micah.*)

Here, hold this.

MICAH: Will it help make the demons come out?

BETHANY: Yeah, 'cause it shows 'em that you believe in God, an' he's gonna keep the demons from hurting you.

(*JANICE laughs.*)

MICAH: Oh, I think they don't like the cross. I can feel 'em crawlin' in my head. I think I got lots of 'em.

JANICE: This is stupid.

(*She speaks to MICAH.*)

You're makin' that shit up about demons in your head, and-

(*She speaks to BETHANY.*)

--you don't know what the hell you're doing.

BETHANY: Yes. I. Do.

JANICE: The only thing I seen you do is talk. I thought you were gonna amaze me with your godly powers.

BETHANY (*determined*): I will!

(*BETHANY pushes MICAH so that he is lying down. She kneels beside him and grabs his hand.*)

MICAH: Ow, you're hurting my hand.

BETHANY (*ignoring him*): In the name of God I command you to come out!

(*After one beat, she speaks louder.*)

I command the demons to leave Micah!

(*After another beat, she speaks even louder.*)

Demons come out of Micah in the name of Jesus!

(*After another beat, she shrieks.*)

Leave my little brother and go back to hell! Go to hell, demons! I command you!

MICAH (*whimpering*): Mama-

BETHANY (*very, very loudly*): Get out of Micah and go back to hell!

(*JANICE pulls BETHANY away from*

*MICAH and pushes her onto a box bale. She slaps BETHANY's face. Hard.*)

JANICE: Are you fucking insane? What do you think you're doing?

BETHANY: I was chasing the demons out of Micah.

JANICE: You weren't getting rid of no demons, you were-

BETHANY: You didn't let me finish. Leave me alone so I can finish chasing away the demons.

(*JANICE slaps BETHANY again.*)

JANICE: There. Are. No. Such. Things. As. Demons.

BETHANY: But they're real!

(*JANICE raises her arm threateningly.*)

BETHANY (*protesting*): There are-

(*BETHANY spots MICAH, who has started convulsing, and stops speaking.*)

BETHANY: Mama, look! Look!

(*JANICE turns and sees MICAH.*)

JANICE: Get those candles away from him so he doesn't burn himself.

(*JANICE starts to move the candles away from*

*MICAH. BETHANY rushes over to him, grabs the cross he was holding, and kneels beside him.*)

BETHANY (*softly and quickly*): Dear God, please make the demons come out of Micah. Make them get away from Micah and go away. Make Micah better so he stops having seizures. Make Mama believe that you are taking away the demons.

(*BETHANY continues this for a few seconds, until MICAH stops convulsing after approximately thirty seconds. BETHANY then stands up and backs away.*)

BETHANY (*laughing*): I did it! I did it! I made the demons go away!

(*JANICE sits beside MICAH, holding him.*)

JANICE (*quietly, stunned*): No, you didn't. The seizures always stop by themselves.

(*She speaks to MICAH.*)

You OK?

(*MICAH nods sleepily.*)

BETHANY: No, Mama, not this time. This time it's 'cause of me.

JANICE: You're wrong. It was just a seizure.

BETHANY (*frantically, excitedly*): I brought Micah up here. I called out the demons. He had the seizure 'cause the demons were fighting to get out.

He stopped shaking 'cause I came back over here and prayed. I called out the demons!

MICAH: Don't yell, my head hurts.

JANICE: Yeah, Bethany, shut up.

BETHANY: Don't you believe me, Mama?

JANICE: No. I'm going to bed.

BETHANY: Wait! You can't go! You gotta believe in God now! Didn't you see what just happened?

JANICE: Nothin' happened but Micah had a seizure an' now he needs to go to bed.

(*JANICE turns to leave. BETHANY desperately stumbles after her, trying to get them to stay.*)

BETHANY: Wait, Mama! I chased out the demons. Micah's not gonna have any seizures anymore. I showed you...I showed you-

JANICE (*violently*): Goddammit, Bethany! Shut up!

MICAH: Mama, I'm tired.

JANICE: I know. We're going home.

BETHANY: But you do believe in God now, right Mama? You're just leavin' 'cause Micah's real tired, right?

JANICE: No, I'm leavin' 'cause you're crazy.

BETHANY: I'm not crazy! God helped me get rid of the demons. Micah's not gonna have seizures anymore, doesn't that make you happy?

JANICE (*putting down MICAH*): Why can't you understand?! There's no such thing as God, or hell, or heaven, or demons, and the only thing you did was yell at your little brother until he had a seizure. That's all you did.

BETHANY: But you saw me! You saw me chase the demons out!

MICAH: Are the demons gone now?

BETHANY (*fiercely*): Yes!

JANICE (*at the same time as BETHANY, and just as fiercely*): No!

(*She reaches for BETHANY's arm to pull her away.*)

Bethany, there were no demons. Now come to bed.

BETHANY: There were too demons! And I chased them away! I stopped Micah from shaking!

(*She speaks firmly.*)

Micah, tell Mama what happened.

MICAH (*scared*): I...I don't know. I can't remember.

BETHANY (*shouting at him*): You said you could feel the demons before you had a seizure. Now what do you feel? They're gone, aren't they? Aren't they?

JANICE: Leave him alone! Forget about it and go to bed.

MICAH: I'm sorry I can't remember, Bethany. I think I'm better.

BETHANY: I know you're better. 'Cause I made you better. You know how? 'Cause I believe in God, and "everything is possible for him who believes." I can do anything, Mama, an' God will let me do it.

JANICE: Bethany, we're leaving now, you can stay up here in the dark by yourself if you want.

(*JANICE and MICAH turn away. BETHANY stays where she is, but shouts the next lines after them.*)

BETHANY: Fine! Leave, I don't care! You'll see, you'll see everything I can do. An' you believe in God, too, but you don't wanna say that I'm right. I don't care what I hafta do, I'll show you that God's real.

(*JANICE moves toward BETHANY, trying to calm her down.*)

**JANICE** (*soothingly*): You know what? I got no reason to believe that Micah's not gonna have another seizure. So come on home, an' in a few days, if he's OK, I'll believe you.

**MICAH**: I won't have another seizure, Bethany. You cured me.

**BETHANY**: I don't need either of you to tell me that Micah's better. I already know that. An' when I get to heaven, I'll have a big crown. An' God's gonna thank me for chasing away the demons. But you've made him real mad 'cause you don't believe in him. I'd be real scared if I was you.

**JANICE** (*trying to pull her away*): If God's mad at me, he'll punish me. It shouldn't have anything to do with you. Just drop it!

**BETHANY** (*ignoring JANICE*): I bet God's gonna make me an angel, an' I'll go around on earth chasing out demons an' makin' mean people like you believe in God.

**JANICE**: Alright! Fine! Do whatever the hell you want to when you get to heaven. But right now you're not an angel, you're just Bethany, an' you still got to do what I say.

**BETHANY**: No I don't! I don't even have to listen to you 'cause I'm so much better than you. I'm already real close to all the angels. I bet there were a bunch of 'em here when I was getting rid of Micah's demons.

**MICAH**: Are angels gonna get in me now the demons are gone?

**JANICE**: Hush, Micah.

**BETHANY**: No, Micah, angels don't go into people like demons do. Angels do good things. An' I'm gonna be one when I get to heaven!

**MICAH**: I though you was gonna get a horse an' live in a big house.

**BETHANY**: No, I'll be so special in heaven that I get to be an angel.

**JANICE** (*losing control*): Goddammit! You're not an angel, an' you're not in heaven. You're still living in my house, an' if you don't do what I say, you're still gonna get a whipping. Now crawl down this ladder an' go home. An' the next time I hear you talking about angels, you'll be wishing one of 'em would come down an' save you.

**BETHANY**: They would come down an' save me! "He'll command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they'll lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." You know what that means? You can't hurt me anymore!

**JANICE**: I'll do what I goddamned well please with you.

(*JANICE lunges toward BETHANY, but BETHANY moves out of the way.*)

**BETHANY**: I wouldn't do that since God's watching you, an' he could send you to hell right now.

**JANICE**: (*ignoring BETHANY, becoming angrier*): Get over here now.

(*BETHANY takes a few steps toward JANICE, then turns away suddenly and crawls to the highest hay bale in front of the window.*)

**MICAH**: Bethany, what are you doing?

**JANICE**: She's asking for a spanking.

(*JANICE steps toward BETHANY.*)

(*BETHANY opens the shutters and turns around to face JANICE and MICAH.*)

**MICAH** (*to BETHANY*): Come down from there, Bethany. Mama's not gonna do anything to you.

(*He speaks to JANICE.*)

Mama, you're not gonna hurt Bethany if she comes down right now, are you?

**JANICE**: She'll find out when she comes down.

**BETHANY**: Then I'm stayin' up here. Hey Micah!

**MICAH**: Yeah?

**BETHANY**: Lemme teach you a Bible verse. "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence."

**MICAH**: What's that mean?

**JANICE** (*urgently*): Bethany-

**BETHANY**: It means that I tried to show Mama that God was real, but she still doesn't believe. So now he's gonna show her how close I am to the angels.

(*BETHANY balances on the open window, holding on to the sides.*)

**JANICE**: Bethany, what are trying to do? Come down now and let's go home.

**BETHANY**: I will be goin' home, Mama.

(*BETHANY looks at MICAH, smiles, and steps backward out of the window, falling from the beam to the ground.*)

**JANICE** (*screaming*): Bethany!

**MICAH** (*crying*): Bethany, that's not funny! You're just hiding behind the hay, aren't you? Come back out, you're scaring me!

(*MICAH runs over to the window and looks out, seeing BETHANY's body.*)

**MICAH**: Mama!

(*MICAH sits on a hay bale and begins to cry.*)

**MICAH**: Mama, is Bethany all right? Why don't you go help her? Mama, Bethany needs you to help her.

(*JANICE walks slowly, mechanically over to the window. She stares out unflinchingly for a moment, then closes the shutters.*)

**JANICE**: No, I think she's all right.

**MICAH**: I don't believe you. I think she got hurt real bad.

(*MICAH stands up and walks toward the ladder.*)

(*JANICE pulls him back.*)

**JANICE** (*firmly, but not angrily*): Be quiet. I'm tired of hearin' you, I've got a headache. It's way past your bedtime now. Grab that flashlight and go home.

**MICAH** (*reaching for the flashlight*): Mama?

**JANICE** (*wearily*): What did I tell you? Be quiet.

**MICAH**: I gotta ask you somethin'. Tomorrow mornin', when it gets light outside, will you come with me to where we buried kitty? I have to show you somethin'.

**JANICE**: Whatever, Micah. Just go to bed now.

(*MICAH starts to climb down the ladder.*)

**MICAH**: Aren't you coming with me?

**JANICE**: I'll be there in a little bit.

**MICAH** (*trying to keep from crying*):

Good night, Mama.

**JANICE**: Sweet dreams.

(*MICAH climbs down the ladder. JANICE lights a cigarette, then blows out all the candles. She sits in near darkness. JANICE picks up the cross, holds it for a moment, then rests it on the highest hay bale. She puts out her cigarette and there is a blackout.*)

THE END

## One-Act Play by Jacqueline Pardue

### Deception of Eve

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

**LETITIA:** "Lettie" to Mrs. Rosen: Female, early 50s, overprotective, unable to let go of her "little" girls.

**EVE:** Female, mid-20s, grief stricken over dead fiancé, tired of being cared for, Eve is Sue and Rachel's sister.

**SUE:** Female, late-20s, Eve and Rachel's lesbian sister, quick-tempered, independent, wears a wedding band-type ring which matches Diane's.

**DIANE:** Early 30s, Sue's partner, patient, wears a wedding band-type ring which matches Sue's.

**RACHEL:** Female, late teens, teen with a problem her family is not aware of, sister of Eve and Sue.

**MRS. ESTHER ROSEN:** "Est," female, early 50s, Jewish, helpful neighbor, mom's friend.

**SCENE:** Letitia's kitchen and Rachel's bedroom.

**TIME:** The present.

#### SCENE ONE.

**SETTING:** Late afternoon in LETITIA's kitchen with a dining tablecenter stage, flowers in a vase on the table, and a kitchen counter behind the table. There are a few bowls on the table while bread, bowls, casserole dishes, and pots of soup cover the counter.

**AT RISE:** EVE sits at the table picking at a roll. LETITIA stands over a pot of the neighbors' food. ESTHER stands near the table with a large spoonful of soup. During this entire scene, ESTHER and LETITIA present EVE with bowls of food she does not eat. As a result, by the end of the scene, the table is full of bowls.

**ESTHER:**

Just a taste. It's not healthy for a girl your age not to eat this long while.

**LETITIA:** We've got chicken broth here.  
(LETITIA pokes through the soup.)

**LETITIA:** No actual chicken or vegetables--

**ESTHER:** One bite and you go back to picking bread crumbs, ok?

**LETITIA (tasting soup):** --and they forgot to add

the onions.

**EVE:** You put too many onions in everything, Momma.

**ESTHER:** What? This soup isn't good enough? You want some chicken soup? We can get you some--

**EVE:** I don't want any chicken soup. Momma just puts too many onions in everything.

**LETITIA (stirring soup):** Your father liked onions.

**ESTHER:** There are no onions in this soup, Eve. Just a bite. Then we'll put some more bread on the table, hmmm?

**LETITIA (shaking spoon at EVE):** Genetically, you should like onions.

**EVE:** Well, it's obviously a recessive gene, isn't it?

**ESTHER:** There will be no more bread until you have a spoonful. See, now it's cold. Are you content now? Do you want cold soup? I would have just sloshed it from the pan to the bowl if I knew you ate it cold. Parker Kelly never heats her soups right. That's why her children have perpetual colds. It is. I'm telling you.

**EVE:** I don't want the soup.

**ESTHER and LETITIA:** Which soup?

**EVE:** No soup. No soup at all. None! Not from your spoon or Momma's pot or the fucking President Kennedy's chinaware pattern!

**ESTHER:** Don't curse the Kennedys. They have curses enough.

**LETITIA:** No language like that, Eve. Not here. I don't care how grief-stricken you are. Your father always said, no bad words in the--

**EVE:** House! Well, I don't want to be in your house. I want to be back home.

**LETITIA:** Then run to your apartment! Go on, go. I want you here, but your father would never have allowed crude language. And it won't be uttered here now.

**EVE (deflated):** I can't go back.

**LETITIA (comforting):** You are home.

**EVE:** I know. But it was so, so. . .

**ESTHER:** Mechaieh, hmmm?

(She smiles as if remembering and whispers.)

A great pleasure.

**EVE:** Yes, a second perfect home of my own.  
(There is a pause in the kitchen. We hear words from off-stage getting louder.)

**RACHEL (off-stage):** Pastel blue, very long like the chick in "Shakespeare in Love" at the wedding--

**SUE (off-stage):** Lady Violet?

**RACHEL (off-stage):** --but it doesn't drag so much.

**DIANE (off-stage):** You mean it doesn't have a train.

**RACHEL (off-stage):** Whatever. I don't have time to have shoes dyed, though.

(RACHEL, SUE, and DIANE enter, stop talking, and hang up their coats.)

**LETITIA (to RACHEL, SUE, and DIANE):** Welcome back girls.

(She speaks to EVE.)

Ownership makes a difference, I suppose. Like the hideous French vase we got from my mother-in-law as a wedding gift. Remember when you were little? I put it on the living room shelf, you moved it to the fireplace mantle.

**EVE:** And it stays on the shelf.

**LETITIA:** And if it was yours, it would stay on the mantle.

**EVE:** And if you ever gave it to me Brad would let me put it wherever I wanted, if I wanted.

**ESTHER (appalled):** Your mother-in-law gave you that vase?

**LETITIA:** She hated me.

**RACHEL (to EVE):** Then maybe it's good that he took a 200 foot header off the bridge. You're spoiled.

**EVE:** You little--

(SUE breaks into EVE's response quickly.)

**SUE:** Sorry we're late for dinner. We ended up eating at Brad's mother's house.

(There is an awkward pause. SUE nudges DIANE.)

**DIANE:** Yes Eve, you should go visit. It's a lovely wake, a real celebration of his life. Telling stories, looking at photo albums, they even pulled out his high school baseball trophies. . .

**SUE:** And his mother has some pictures from the apartment that she promises to return.

(ESTHER has made her way over to RACHEL.)

**ESTHER:** Shhhh.

(She speaks quietly.)

Don't talk that way, my little mazik.

(RACHEL rolls her eyes and mimics prayer hands.)

**EVE:** I'm not living in the apartment anymore.

**RACHEL:** You have to pick up your stuff.

**ESTHER and LETITIA (simultaneously):** We'll--  
(ESTHER realizes she's usurped LETITIA's role and lets LETITIA finish independently.)

**LETITIA:** --pack for Eve.

**RACHEL:** But how will you know what to take? What she likes and what she was just waiting to ditch when he wasn't looking.

**SUE:** You can find old boxes at those bargain warehouses.

**DIANE (scowling at SUE):** We'll buy some new boxes for you, Eve. Maybe next week you can. . .

And of course your mother and Esther will help. **EVE:** We were going to paint the kitchen yellow.

Not Brad's favorite color, but since he let me do the other rooms in cream and light pastels. . . how are we going to match the kitchen without yellow? He was so sweet.

(She pauses.)

He had one room I could not enter. His "man-cave" I called it. Painted the worst shade of brown you could imagine, it was always full of papers, and books, and his college player of the year memorabilia. I threatened to burn the entire room if he couldn't get it to stop smelling like dead fish, which, of course, made the dining room outside of his office uninhabitable. I threatened, just right to the ground. Until we could push the ashes off into the parking lot and start anew. A nursery, maybe.

**RACHEL (rolling her eyes):** Oh, please.

(She looks at EVE.)

Webster's Dictionary responsibility antonym!

Didn't y'all's cat die last year?

(EVE glares at RACHEL.)

**RACHEL:** Of malnutrition?

**ESTHER:** Rachel!

**LETITIA:** Rachel, return this to Laura's mother. Right now, young lady.

(LETITIA hands RACHEL a pot and RACHEL begins to exit.)

**LETITIA:** Look both ways when you cross the street.

(RACHEL exits.)

**EVE (yelling):** Yeah! And make sure a car is coming!

**LETITIA:** Let's try another bowl of soup. This time I'll sprinkle saltines on it. Sounds yummie.

(EVE puts her head on her hands. There is an awkward pause. DIANE nudges SUE.)

**SUE:** Diane's interview is tomorrow. Afterwards she's having a mock lecture for a few select students and faculty.

*(There is still silence.)*

SUE: She bought a new navy suit.

*(She pause.s.)*

Taper leg pants and a white bl--

DIANE *(quietly)*: Not that.

*(She speaks in her regular voice.)*

Is there anything you need for your apartment, Eve? We can run over there for you.

EVE: No. I think Momma packed everything important while I was at the funeral home. I took his black suit with the dark striped tie. He didn't really like the tie but his mother gave it to him for his last birthday and I knew it would make her happy. They got powder on the collar of his suit. It needs to be dry-cleaned.

SUE: Don't worry. I'm sure they fixed it before they. . . They have a superb reputation. Didn't they do the head cheerleader when she died from alcohol poisoning in high school? You know. The chick who serviced more guys than AmTrack.

EVE: No. Bianca's was held at the one with the St. Thomas statue out front.

SUE: Are you sure? I thought it was--

*(LETITIA gives SUE the maternal "evil eye.")*

SUE: Yeah, I think you're right.

*(RACHEL enters.)*

RACHEL: Laura's mother said thank you for returning her pot. Oh, and call her if the grief squad needs anything.

*(She speaks with sarcasm.)*

Like a full body massage or royal procession or one of those mega vib--

DIANE: Thanks for letting us use your bathroom. Tomorrow morning I'll be in there early so don't be surprised if you hear some noise around six or so.

RACHEL: Fine. I'll use Mom and Eve's. If Eve doesn't soak all morning.

*(EVE begins to rise from her chair.)*

DIANE: Oh, no.

*(DIANE holds her hand out to stop both EVE and RACHEL.)*

DIANE: I'll be gone by seven. And I'm sure Sue can wait until after you use it.

RACHEL *(breazily)*: Whatever.

*(RACHEL turns to her mother.)*

RACHEL: Can I go dress shopping with Laura? I know what I want, but I need a second opinion.

LETITIA: You can go as long as Laura's going. I don't like you out after dark alone.

RACHEL: I know, Mom.

LETITIA: And take my car but only drive to the

mall and back. It needs an oil change and I don't want you to get stuck somewhere without a safe ride home.

*(RACHEL puts her coat on.)*

LETITIA: And pick up some--

EVE: You're going to let her go! How. . . why. . . What the fuck are you thinking?

ESTHER: Language.

EVE: We're dumping my soulmate, the man I pledged my life to, the man I planned my life with, in a dank fucking hole in the middle of a shitload of rotting crackers who have the best cemetery in town, and he is alone. And I am alone. And you are buying a prom dress. You weren't even asked to the prom. You're going with a group of girls who are so socially inept and qualifiably pathetic that the chess club wouldn't even ask them on dates. What? You going to fuck some guy in the bed of his daddy's truck. Holding onto the gun rack asking, "Honey, is this thing loaded?" Some guy who didn't ask you to the prom because he was too cheap to buy a corsage but came anyway hoping to get laid.

LETITIA: Enough. Rachel, go.

EVE: Better yet, you little slut, you can fuck all his friends, too. Just make a long line from the tailgate and start going at it.

RACHEL: Better than the psycho child molester you mourn!

LETITIA: Rachel, leave now. Eve, sit. Eat. Eve, sit.

*(RACHEL stomps out. EVE sits.)*

LETITIA: Est, will you please go into the family room and write thank you cards to those who sent flowers? And take Sue and Diane with you.

ESTHER: Yes.

*(She speaks to EVE.)*

Are you going to be okay?

LETITIA: She's fine.

*(ESTER, DIANE, and SUE exit. LETITIA stacks some dishes and then sits across from EVE at the table.)*

You'll apologize to your sister when she gets home.

EVE: But she--

LETITIA: I know. But she's younger so it's your responsibility to model behavior. I do not approve of what she said, and we will discuss her words at great length, but you're the oldest. You'll do right.

*(She pauses, looking at EVE until EVE raises her eyes and they are looking directly at each other. She*

*speaks quietly.)*

You're a widow now. Well, just about the same. There are many stages women hazard through. Est and I are crones, Rachel's a child, and you, Sue and Diane are of mothering age. There will be marriages and separations and, God forbid, divorces. Although I think Sue and Diane's marriage is only legal in a few states. But you are a sister and a daughter, almost a wife, now a widow, maybe soon a mother and a professional or a homemaker, and a lover. Your gifts extend beyond partnership. In school, you liked to draw and write. Maybe return to college and get a degree in advertising or art history. But you will have to change. Your niche is extinct. When your father had his heart attack and went to peace, I cried and refused food and about died but you girls were my light. Because I was still mother. Now you are still daughter, but you are not fiancée or lover or partner. And because I was older, and your father provided, we were safe. But you must grow. And it will hurt. Like stretching after a prolonged hibernation.

*(She pauses.)*

And if I don't get rid of this food soon and start some chores we might be under an inch or two of dust, but we will be here.

*(She pauses.)*

Now, eat something before Est and I have nervous breakdowns. Okay?

EVE: *(with tears in her eyes)*: Momma. . .

LETITIA: I know baby. I love you.

*(ESTHER is at the doorway.)*

ESTHER: You are my daughter in spirit, too.

And when it gets to be a mess here, come to me. You are always welcome in my home.

*(She pauses.)*

EVE: I know.

ESTHER: Good. Now eat.

EVE: I'm really not hungry.

ESTHER: Just one bowl.

LETITIA: What kind do you want?

ESTHER: You need your strength.

LETITIA: Please, Eve. Just a bit.

ESTHER: Open wide.

LETITIA: Chicken soup for the soul.

EVE: That's a crummy self-help book, Momma.

ESTHER: Remember when you were little--

LETITIA: --train or airplane. Chuga chuga chuga chuga choo choo--

EVE: Stop, please. I'm not hungry. Momma, I love you but. . . Please. Momma, please!

LETITIA: Just one--

EVE *(loudly)*: Just stop! I don't want trains or planes or little nutrition soldiers marching into my stomach! Please!

*(EVE wipes tears from her eyes and face.)*

EVE: I'm going to take a shower.

*(LETITIA opens her mouth to speak.)*

EVE: No, Momma. It's something I can do alone. Just for an hour. Alone, please.

*(EVE exits. LETITIA and ESTHER begin closing lids and putting plastic wrap over pots.)*

ESTHER: She'll be fine, Lettie. She's searching for her light. It's more difficult when they're young. When you're old, at least you've had a few times you've wished your husband dead for one thing or another and you can say "Ha!" when you return home and the toilet lid is still down or there are no new dirty dishes. She had expectations, and for what?

LETITIA: For the daily grind of married life.

ESTHER: For the nights when he snores all night long or kicks, hmmm? Good night, Lettie.

LETITIA: Good night, Est. See you in the morning.

ESTHER: Coffee?

LETITIA: It's my turn.

ESTHER: I know.

*(Lights go down.)*

## SCENE TWO.

*SETTING: That evening in "Rachel's Room" which is actually just a spot of light on the edge of the stage with a blanket on the floor and possibly a chair.*

*ATRISE: Rachel is speaking on the phone with her friend Laura.*

RACHEL *(on phone)*: No, not the beige one. It's pastel blue. Yeah. With the long train thing and the overlaid silver mesh. No, silver. Gold is so tacky. Yes, it is! It's too much! You would dye your jeans gold if Kate Moss did it.

*(DIANE enters and listens.)*

RACHEL: Did you find the hose you wanted? You've got to wear them. I don't care if they match! Your dress is, like, cut up to your butt. Yeah, bare legs, as long as you're not planning on moving. And if you sit you'll have a naked cun--

DIANE: Knock, knock.  
RACHEL: Got to go. Yeah, ten. Don't be late, your hair needs professional help. Clinique counter at four. I know it's early, but they're the



only two make-up appointments together.

*(She pauses.)*

No, Mom's still feeding baby Eve, probably with a bottle.

*(She pauses.)*

Sue's wife, yeah.

*(DIANE clears her throat.)*

RACHEL: Bye. Tomorrow morning. Did you set your alarm? Set it. No, set it now. You'll forget. Bye.

DIANE: Just checking in before bed.

RACHEL: Yeah, I know, I need my beauty sleep.

DIANE: No, you don't. But everyone needs restful sleep.

*(She pauses.)*

RACHEL: Yell and get it over with. I'm getting up early.

DIANE: I'm not your mother.

RACHEL *(mumbling)*: Thank God.

DIANE: But I understand her concern.

RACHEL: He wasn't some great man. A community light or national fucking pride or anything.

DIANE: We're not here for him. We're here for her.

RACHEL *(sarcastic)*: Sure.

DIANE: Ready for tomorrow?

RACHEL: Yeah. My heels don't match exactly, but since the dress is long it shouldn't matter.

DIANE: I'm sure you'll be radiant.

RACHEL: It's got a high neck and short sleeves, and the top half is covered in beadwork but the long skirt is plain.

DIANE: Sounds different from Laura's.

RACHEL: I love Laura, but sometimes she dresses like a prostitute.

DIANE: There's nothing wrong with being a little sexy at appropriate times. And girls tend to use the Prom as an excuse to be who they never could be in reality. A little escapism is healthy. Wanting to feel exotic and attractive is normal.

RACHEL *(irritated)*: You don't have to smile and pat me on the back and tell me I'm normal because I don't look like a model and don't want to dress like a whore. Laura and I and a couple of friends are going to the dance together alone, ok? It's just a dance.

DIANE: Going with friends will be fun. It's better than babysitting a guy who'll only sit in the corner and mope because he's not secure enough in his masculinity to dance. Besides, I like Laura.

A little wild, but she'll calm down. Seems like a good friendship to have.

RACHEL: *(annoyed)*: We're just friends.

*(RACHEL waits for DIANE to respond, and speaks when DIANE doesn't.)*

RACHEL: It's not like I'm attracted to her!

*(She mumbles.)*

God, your mind is always, like, there.

DIANE: I didn't say you were.

RACHEL: I don't like girls.

*(She pauses, then mumbles.)*

I don't like boys much either.

DIANE: So, instead of going to attract anyone you're going to hang with friends.

*(She tries too hard to be hip.)*

I'm cool with that. I'm down. I'm bitchin'. I'm groov-

*(RACHEL rolls her eyes.)*

DIANE *(serious)*: I understand. I'm here to support Sue and Eve.

*(She pauses and speaks, upbeat.)*

And for this stupid job interview. I'll be out of the bathroom before you even wake up. Night.

RACHEL: Night.

*(DIANE exits. RACHEL lies down on the blanket on the floor. Dream sequence begins with lighting change. Girl in RACHEL's prom dress enters wearing a mask and carrying a knife. Girl attacks RACHEL and they struggle. In the struggle, RACHEL pulls off the girl's mask to reveal EVE. EVE mouths words that we can not bear: bitch, whore, selfish brat. Dream EVE exits. RACHEL's eyes open and she is awake and terrified. DIANE appears in the doorway.)*

DIANE: Hey, what's happening? A nightmare?

*(There is a slight pause.)*

Are you ok?

RACHEL: No! Yes! I'm fine, just go away. Go away!

*(DIANE exits. RACHEL, still trembling, wraps herself in her blanket and the lights go down.)*

### SCENE THREE.

SETTING: Later that evening in the kitchen.

AT RISE: EVE with hair still wet from shower is sitting at a table, sipping her tea.

SUE *(off-stage)*: The iron is on the top shelf in the hallway closet, not the laundry room.

*(She pauses.)*

No, the one with all the towels and sheets.

*(She pauses.)*

Love you, too.

*(SUE enters.)*

SUE *(singing)*: "Good morning sunshine, the earth says hello. You twinkle above us, we twinkle below. Good morning--

*(During this song, SUE pours herself a cup of tea and EVE puts her head on the table and covers her ears.)*

EVE: It is star shine, not sunshine. Every morning for ten years, bouncing off the walls until I scream. Don't you ever get tired of it?

SUE *(grimacing)*: Nope. And technically, it is morning.

EVE: It's still dark.

SUE *(good naturedly)*: That whole AM/PM thing still confuses you doesn't it, Eve?

EVE: I may hack Mother into a thousand bloody pieces and feed her to the ducks at Miller's Pond.

SUE: Make sure you're in the will first.

EVE: How could I not be, I'm her little baby girl.

SUE *(in a baby voice)*: And you're so cute when you pout like that. Come here and let sister Sue pinch your cheeks.

EVE: It'd be funnier if it wasn't true.

SUE: Mother's help is, well, Mother's help.

*(She partly jokes.)*

It's a particularly horrendous torture disguised as a serious diet of politically correct untough love.

*(She pauses, serious.)*

To cope. She helps to cope, because she doesn't know what else to do. And she does try.

EVE: So now I'm a bad person?

SUE: No, you're her child. No matter how resentful you grow, she's going to help. So let her. It makes her happy.

EVE: But she's supposed to be making me happy. Look at these.

*(EVE gestures to bowls and pots of sealed soup on the table and counter.)*

EVE: These are supposed to cheer me up. Here, find happiness in sauce. Never mind that you're like me and no one will ever love you again, or even make love to you for that matter.

SUE: She feels a connection to—

*(EVE is so busy speaking that she spills tea on her robe and doesn't realize it.)*

EVE: I'm not her, and Brad was not dad, and I don't need help.

SUE: Says the hysterical woman with tea on her clean robe.

EVE: I don't care. I'm just not going to care.

Caring got me here in the first place and I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm going to see starving children at that help number and I'm not going to send a dime. I'm going to trip Jerry's Kids on the street and leave tampons in the toilet for janitors to fish out. I'm driving to the Salvation Army and donating stained sheets and unusable clothes.

SUE: Ah, ha! That's the way to cope. Mother cooks, you become a bitch. Which is the better choice, class?

EVE: In real time, between tragedies, you're never nearly this right.

SUE: I thrive on the element of surprise.

*(She pauses.)*

Do you remember the evening I came out to Momma?

EVE: A rainy day.

EVE and SUE: Tomato soup and grilled cheese.

SUE: I was so determined to do it "right" that I wore every gay pride article of clothing and jewelry I owned.

EVE: And she commented how all of the colors were--

*(She mocks her mother's voice.)*

--"bright dear, but a bit much. Celebrate God's promise to Noah but never clash."

SUE: And your face turned bright red.

EVE: And you almost lost your courage.

SUE: And we just held hands under the table and I shouted, "I'm gay." And then Momma said, "Well I'm glad you're happy, dear, please pass the soup."

EVE: You practically burst my ear drum, you were so proud.

SUE: I was nervous.

EVE: And then you had to explain homosexuality.

SUE: We still have vegetable stew in the freezer from that episode.

EVE: A child re-teaching a parent sex education. Classic.

SUE: And she cooked and cooked.

EVE: It was great for me!

SUE: And we're still a family.

EVE: But this isn't a philosophical difference. It's death.

SUE: And I lived here while she bemoaned my fate and my descent into hell. We just ate through our pain until love won out.

*(DIANE enters.)*

DIANE: Night, you two.

SUE: Did you get the ironing done?

DIANE: All ready for the morning.  
 EVE: Good luck.  
 DIANE: Thanks!  
*(She speaks to SUE.)*  
 You coming to bed?  
 SUE: We're going to talk for a while. Don't wait up, I want you fresh for tomorrow.  
 DIANE: Yes, Mom. Have you spoken with Rachel recently?  
*(EVE rolls her eyes.)*  
 SUE: No. No emergency, I hope.  
 DIANE: Nah. It'll wait. Love you both.  
*(DIANE exits.)*  
 EVE: She wants me to stay.  
 SUE: No rent. Plenty of food.  
 EVE: It's not funny!  
 SUE: It's not a joke. Besides, maybe... maybe it would be best if you stayed, rebuilt your strength.  
 EVE: From soup?  
 SUE: From soup, and from Momma, and from Esther. They've faced this before. And you'll need time to--  
 EVE: To heal? I can heal in the Bahamas.  
 SUE: When I met Diane, I thought I knew who I was. A proud, out lesbian woman. I knew who I was because I listened to myself sexually. But there is more to me than sexuality, and more to you than his death. And as you discover the infinite labyrinth of you, life will change. And you need to change with it.  
 EVE: Change as in move home? Evolution via regression? I expected more from my sister.  
 SUE: What? Like I'm going to fix your life, because you're too frightened to do it yourself?  
 EVE: I'm not a kid with bruised knees from falling off a bike.  
 SUE: And if Diane gets that job, we'll be nearby. You'll be able to see Rachel graduate. Your life will change--  
 EVE: Exactly, so I should explore.  
 SUE: So you should be in a safe place where you can explore.  
 EVE: Just stop taking care of me!  
 SUE: I'm trying to get you to take care of yourself!  
*(There is a silence.)*  
 EVE: Good night.  
 SUE: I'm going to finish my tea.  
 EVE: Fine.  
*(EVE exits. SUE sips her tea for a second then exits. Lights down.)*

## SCENE FOUR.

SETTING: *The next morning in the kitchen.*

ATRISE: *Empty stage. DIANE enters mid-sentence dressed in her new suit. SUE enters in the middle of her speech, sags against the doorframe, and tiredly sits at the table.*

DIANE: ...rarely do literary mothers exert the common behavioral triggers of control. Although we love our mothers, we are not our mothers. Nor our grandmothers, nor any race of women yet born upon this earth.  
 SUE *(head on table, still sleepy, raising her hands and clapping)*: Bravo!  
 DIANE: You really didn't have to get up yet, honey.  
 SUE *(head still on table)*: Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this morning--  
*(She yawns.)*  
 --for the world.  
 DIANE *(whispering)*: Love you too.  
 SUE: Bravo!  
 DIANE: You've done that.  
 SUE: Yeah, I know. It was for that second part.  
 DIANE: Oh, shit.  
*(She speaks to SUE.)*  
 Does your mother have a sewing kit?  
 SUE: I'm sure, somewhere. Why?  
*(DIANE holds up a button that has fallen off her suit.)*  
 SUE: It's brand new.  
 DIANE: I am aware of that.  
*(She mutters.)*  
 Shit shit shit shit.  
 SUE: Don't worry. Here we'll get a... We'll need a...  
*(She shouts.)*  
 Mom!  
 DIANE *(looking around frantically)*: Shhh, she's still asleep. I'll just, you know, just, uh--  
 ESTHER *(off-stage)*: Hello? Good morning?  
 SUE *(under her breath)*: Fuck.  
*(DIANE puts the button on the table.)*  
 DIANE *(to SUE)*: Shhhhhh.  
*(ESTHER enters with a plate of cinnamon rolls and a pitcher of orange juice.)*  
 ESTHER: You can't go to a big job interview on an empty stomach.  
*(She motions to DIANE.)*  
 Sit, eat. You too, Sue. Time for breakfast. How

is Eve?

SUE: In bed asleep.

DIANE *(slightly scolding)*: Like you should be.

SUE: Only up for you, babe.

*(DIANE kisses SUE lightly. ESTHER puts two plates with cinnamon rolls and two glasses of orange juice in front of the women.)*

ESTHER: I know it's not much, but it's a start.

*(ESTHER starts playing with DIANE's button that's laying on the table.)*

ESTHER: It's Lettie's turn to make the coffee, but she's probably not up yet. Caf or decaf?

SUE: Caf. Lots and lots of caf. Caf squared.

Double caf with extra caf. Caf in a--

DIANE: Maybe you really should go back to bed.

SUE: No, now I'm up. I'm alive! In that Frankenstein meets the good doctor way.

ESTHER: I'll make some--

*(She looks at the button she's been playing with)*

Well, whose is this?

DIANE: Mine.

ESTHER: Isn't that suit new?

DIANE: Yes. It is.

*(ESTHER looks horrified.)*

DIANE: Oh, I'm planning to re-sew it. When I learn to sew.

ESTHER: Doesn't Lettie keep her sewing kit in the back closet? I'll just be right back.

*(ESTHER exits.)*

DIANE: Maybe we should start the coffee.

*(SUE and DIANE stare at each other.)*

DIANE: It's way too early.

SUE: It's way too fucking early.

*(ESTHER returns.)*

ESTHER: Language now, Sue.

*(ESTHER lays a needle, thread, and scissors on the table. DIANE takes her jacket off and gives it to*

*ESTHER. SUE and DIANE begin eating.*

ESTHER: Brand new suit and here a button just falls right off. I don't know how anyone expects to make money selling such shabby wares. Now, all of Lester's suits were tailor made by that tailor shop down on Fifth Street that's now a Price Buster Video Club. Those were suits you could wash, iron, and wear a hundred times before anything like this happened. Walter, the tailor, would never allow this to happen. He would be ashamed. But see, there's no one here to be ashamed. They don't care because they aren't accountable. Lester would hold Walt accountable if this ever happened. Walt would hold himself...

*(She looks at DIANE.)*

You never met Lester, Diane. Sue did. He was a wonderful man.

*(SUE nods.)*

Gave the girls fifty cents for a soda pop just like they were his own, although we couldn't have any, may his soul rest in peace. We met at Betty's uncle's funeral. The one who died in the car wreck all burnt to cinders. Betty just lived across the street then, and she thought she was going to die herself from the pain of it. And the rented limousine broke down after the service, and Lester offered to drive us home. Who ever heard of a broken down limo? The most wonderful man. The last months of his life, after he couldn't work anymore, he would rock almost all day on the front porch. Too late to retire and move to Florida, the cancer got him too quick. He'd just rock and dream about Florida, and call into me and say, "I want you to go. It's nicer there, cleaner. Promise me you'll go." Then he was gone. His last words that count were, "I want you to go to Florida for me."

DIANE: At least he had the dream. Some people have lost the ability even to dream.

SUE: What do you mean, "his last words that count"?

ESTHER: Oh, afterwards he said something about adding more salt to his scrambled eggs. But those don't count. The doctor said his body was just shutting down. And you tell Eve that, too.  
 SUE *(slowly)*: That his body was shutting down?  
 ESTHER: That a day of mourning resulted in the best years of my life. The good follows the bad, the bad the good.

*(She holds up the jacket.)*

How is that?

DIANE *(standing up and putting the jacket on)*:

Perfect. Thank you.

*(DIANE hugs ESTHER.)*

ESTHER: Lazy Lettie's still in bed.

*(She speaks to SUE.)*

You get that from your mother. She still hates mornings.

*(She speaks to both women.)*

I shall return.

DIANE: We haven't made coffee yet.

ESTHER: No, no. I'll be back. You eat. I have more at home, so eat as many as you like. And make sure Eve eats something. Can't let laundry sit in the dryer too long, his shirts will be wrinkled.

DIANE: Thank you, again.

ESTHER: And remind her about Lester. We have no pleasure if we don't know pain.

DIANE: We will.

(ESTHER exits. SUE sighs and lays her head on the table.)

DIANE: She's only trying to help.

SUE: Mmmhmmm.

DIANE: I thought Lester died.

SUE: He did. She's dating the Arthur Murray ballroom dance instructor. She claims they're only friends, but she's doing his laundry awful early in the morning. Very early in the morning. Very, very early--

DIANE: Well, she's great with your mother.

SUE: They're great for each other.

(She speaks lovingly.)

The old coots.

DIANE (reaching over and stroking SUE's hair):

Play nice. That will be you and me one day. You know, minus the dance guy.

SUE: And it'll be your job to get up and make the coffee. Everyday.

(RACHEL enters in her prom dress.)

RACHEL: OK. Laugh and point now. I have other things to do today.

DIANE: You look great!

SUE (rolling her head so she can see RACHEL but not picking her head up off the table, unenthusiastically): A gem.

(EVE enters.)

RACHEL: The hemline's a bit uneven, but I'll never wear the dress again so--

EVE: So you can look like the Salvation Army brat for one night? The pain-in-the-ass rises. Is coffee ready yet?

RACHEL: You need your diaper changed?

Bang on your crib and cry like--

DIANE (to EVE): Not yet. Why don't you go ask your mother, caf or decaf?

EVE: Ah, a clever ruse but I'd rather stay here. With Rachel. And you two, too.

SUE (croaking): Somebody, please coffee.

RACHEL: I don't think babies are allowed to drink coffee.

EVE: I didn't think brats were allowed to dress like princesses. Maybe if you--

DIANE: Eve, please listen to my lecture. I've got the introduction down, but the segue between lecture and question-answer session is still shaky.

(DIANE sits EVE down at table to listen.)

DIANE: Although we love our mothers, we are not our mothers. Nor our grandmothers, nor any

race of women yet born upon this earth.

RACHEL: I know someone who's a momma's girl.

(RACHEL sucks her thumb and rubs her ear lobe.)

SUE: Lay off, Rach. It's too early.

EVE (with sarcasm and pain): No, tell me. Tell me why I'm wasting my time to mourn the loss of someone I love. Please. Enlighten me, oh great one of the large harem. Oh, that's right. I forgot. We couldn't even get a date for the prom, could we? Little Miss--

RACHEL: --And where's your lover boy now, huh Eve? Where is he? Let's call him. Oh, lover boy. Loover Booyo. Come out, come out where ever you are.

(She turns so that her back is to EVE and shouts louder.)

Come on, stud muffin, stallion boy.

(She imitates EVE during sex.)

Oh, oh, oh, oh, baby, baby, baby. Call me momma!

(She returns to her regular shouting voice.)

Let's have it! Lover boy!

(EVE picks up the scissors from the kitchen table and lunges at RACHEL. Grabbing the back of RACHEL's dress, EVE begins cutting. During the fight RACHEL's and EVE's voices sometimes overlap. DIANE and SUE work to separate the pair without getting cut.)

DIANE: Put those scissors down! Down!

SUE: Are you deranged? Stop! Somebody help! Stop it!

(DIANE and SUE continue improving these types of "Stop, don't do that" lines until RACHEL's last "Why?" so that the last line echoing on-stage is EVE's "Forever!")

EVE: You raving looney. Just because you can't find a date and I have a wonderful man who loves me because of me and not because I'm fat or thin or rich or poor--

RACHEL: Had him! Had! Had! Had! No great tragedy! Had! Had!

EVE: Because I was going to carry his children and he would get up nights and change diapers and teach them baseball and math and be promoted so we can fix up his room into a nursery.

RACHEL: Why him? Why? Why? No good son of a bitch! Why him? Why?

EVE: Forever!

(DIANE holds RACHEL and SUE holds EVE so they can't fight.)

SUE: Are you two mentally challenged?!?

RACHEL: He was no good, Eve. No good! You loved what he could be but not what he was! He didn't deserve you.

EVE: Then why, of all things, why make me miserable? Damning him when he's dead, in the cold goddamned ground with worms crawling through his eyes. Why do you hate me?

RACHEL: I hate him.

EVE: But it's me you're hurting. He's gone. My wonderful man is gone, and you're hurting me.

RACHEL: Stop. I just wanted all of this to stop. You beating yourself up for his death, mourning that bastard. Anytime we went shopping or when we wanted to go to the beach, just the girls, he was right behind. Panting in his pathetic voice, "But Eve, baby, can't I be one of the girls? Let me tag along. I'll be good and make sure you girls are safe. Make sure you girls are prepared. Make sure you girls are. . ." We were always little fucking girls to him.

EVE: So he was too good?

RACHEL: No. Remember when we tried to go to the early bird Penneys sale? He was half a step behind. You were his property and he was the security system.

(She imitates him.)

You're my sexy baby. Oh, yes you are.

(She returns to herself.)

I kept watching to see if he would pinch your cheeks and resort to baby talk.

EVE: I like someone there--

RACHEL: Liking someone there is different. He was extreme. Like when I suggested we visit Aunt Etta for Thanksgiving and he flipped.

EVE: He already made plans--

RACHEL: When you went to the bathroom, he grabbed me by my hair and twisted my arm and told me to "can it." Or when you were going to Sue's surprise birthday party and he ordered you to tell Diane no. You would be out of town for one day, two tops. I rolled my eyes and he knocked a chair over.

EVE: That chair was always unstable. I'm not discussing this with you! You're just upset over the dress. That's all it is. You're so proud of that K-mart special that you're lying through your rotten little teeth!

DIANE (whispering to EVE): Wait.

(She speaks to RACHEL.)

Is this why you don't like men?

(RACHEL pauses, refusing to answer.)

DIANE: Boys, Rachel.

(LETITIA enters unnoticed.)

RACHEL: Because they run your life, usually into the ground. Look, we had Dad who ran Mom down for so many years that she can only confront people by cooking for them. Then we have Laura who guys use for blow jobs then leave. Our final specimen being Eve who allowed her fiancé to surgically attach himself at the hip. Fuck it.

EVE: He never would have intentionally hurt you.

RACHEL: Yeah, pulling hair's always an accident. How about when you left us alone after the disagreement about Momma's new CD player and he decided to "play fight" and left finger bruises on my arms. Or the day he broke a dozen eggs because he thought that the bag boy was checking you out?

EVE: So it's my fault? It's not my fault.

Everyone has flaws and we were working them out. I made the right choice. He was the right man! We would have lived happily ever fucking after!

RACHEL: And if he wasn't?

EVE: So you think that I've wasted my life, my entire life! All the major landmarks, learning to drive at sixteen, adult at eighteen, drinking at twenty-one. He let me drive his dad's new Corvette before I even had my permit. And the frat parties where I'd secretly stay in his room until four AM, then we'd go get Krispy Kremes and he'd drive me the back way so I could sneak in my window. And Momma was never fooled. LETITIA: No, she wasn't.

DIANE: Maybe it's time for you to crawl back through that window.

EVE: So I can be treated like a child?

LETITIA: You can use the door now. Think of it as beginning a new phase in life, honey. Your adult one.

RACHEL: I'm sorry I had to tell you. As much as I hate him, I still love you. It was just hard to love you when he was around, and he was always around.

EVE: So I bury Brad and, what? Come home? And do what?

LETITIA: Well, you have four southern women, mouths as big as the delta, ready to tell ya'. I've always hated your father's old study. Nothings been touched in ten years. Maybe we can start redecorating, yes? It could be a great little office

for anyone who might choose to use it.

EVE (*sarcastically*): Great. Will you dress me too?

LETITIA: It will be alr--

EVE: You don't understand how I feel! He loved me more than Dad ever loved you!

(*She pauses.*)

I'm sorry.

(*Everyone is shocked into silence. LETITIA's feelings are so hurt that she changes the topic.*)

LETITIA: Well, now it's my morning to make coffee. What will we do? Est will be here soon, rattling at me that I'm not a morning person.

Now she knows that, so why does she come so blasted early!

EVE: I said, I'm sorry. It's just. . . How can I make more choices when I know that the last big one I made might have been wrong?

SUE: Esther's already been by, and left some rolls.

LETITIA: Well, then. Let's get something into Diane's stomach before that big interview. Are you ready?

DIANE: I think so. Just a bit of tweaking.

SUE: She's perfect.

(*ESTHER enters in a hurry.*)

ESTHER (*to LETITIA*): I thought I saw your bedroom light on.

LETITIA: Rachel, get me some plates.

(*RACHEL doesn't move.*)

EVE: I'm sorry. Momma? What can I say?

ESTHER (*whispering to SUE*): I missed

something, didn't I?

LETITIA: Rachel, plates.

SUE (*whispering to ESTHER*): Tell ya' later.

(*RACHEL gets plates, puts a roll on each plate, and hands them to DIANE who puts them on the table.*)

EVE: I said I was sorry. I know you want. . .

And I should want it to, but it's like failing, not just at something simple but at life. I'm not a failure. I'm not. I refuse to be.

DIANE: It's not failure unless you continue making the same mistakes.

ESTHER: Listen to her, Eve. She's a budding college professor.

(*She whispers to SUE.*)

Did I say the right thing?

(*SUE nods.*)

EVE: More than that. She's got a loving relationship with a pretty cool person. Someone without all that hostility.

ESTHER: So you'll stay.

EVE: For a little while. But you have to promise, I make my own decisions and--

LETTIE: I understand. You're grown-up. I'm a hands-off mother. Now, eat your roll.

EVE (*to RACHEL*): And you and I. We'll talk.

RACHEL (*holding out a tear in her dress*): While you sew?

EVE: While I sew.

(*Lights go down.*)

THE END

## One-Act Play by Dana Patterson

### A Killing in Brumbalow

#### LIST OF CHARACTERS:

DEPUTY CREFLO WATTS: A thin built man of thirty. Slightly over zealous with his duties as a Deputy Sheriff.

SHERIFF JT HOOLEY: Fifty year old Sheriff of the tiny town of Brumbalow Alabama. Spends most of his time pulling Deputy Watts back from the edge.

MILTON JAMES LICKBARROW: A stranger to Brumbalow. He is a shabby looking drunkard in his latefifties.

GOLDIE HOWENS: A local drunkard.

SCENE: An old jailhouse in the small one horse town of Brumbalow, Alabama. There is one holding cell, a desk and a file cabinet.

TIME: Mid 1930's.

SETTING: An old country jailhouse with one cell in the town of Brumbalow, Alabama.

AT RISE: Walking in the front door is DEPUTY CREFLO WATTS. WATTS is a thin thin man whose uniform appears to be too large for him. He looks around the jailhouse to find that he is alone.

WATTS: Sheriff? Anybody here?

(*WATTS moves to a file cabinet and pulls out a hand made sign that says "Watts for Sheriff". He stands it up by the desk and begins to speak.*)

Thank you, thank you all! I would like to thank you all for voting for a change uh, I mean voting for change and as your new Sheriff--.

(*SHERIFF JT HOOLEY enters dragging along MILTON LICKBARROW, a withered and raspy looking man whose clothes are tattered and dirty. The man has a left shoe tied to his wrist. WATTS quickly puts the sign behind the file cabinet.*)

Whatcha got there, Sheriff?

HOOLEY: This here's Milton James Lickbarrow. Some rail workers found him down by the rail yard passed out. Go ahead and process him in, will ya?

WATTS (*walking over pulling up his gun belt*): Well, well, well. Looks like we got us a bonafide criminal here huh? Is that blood on your hands there, buddy?

(*MILTON looks at his hands.*)

WATTS (*Digging into MILTON's pockets.*): Sheriff! Did he kill somebody?

HOOLEY: Well, we don't know that for sure, Watts we gotta let him sober up first. He's still three sheets to the wind.

(*WATTS pulls out a wallet and flips it open.*)

WATTS: Sheriff! Looky here! He's got Goldie Howens' wallet!

(*He turns to MILTON.*)

What did you do buddy, rob 'im?

MILTON (*groggy*): Huh?

WATTS: Got his wallet on you and ya got blood all over you. Something ain't right! Did you kill him and steal his wallet? How much did you get, huh? He must have spent it already.

(*He sniffs MILTON.*)

Whew! Yep, stole his wallet, killed him and drank it all up on booze!

(*He pulls out a small straight razor.*)

Ha! Well, would ya looky here!

(*SHERIFF HOOLEY walks over and takes the razor.*)

HOOLEY: Give me that, Watts. Now we can't just go assuming. The man's got a right to a fair trial. Ya know?

WATTS (*putting MILTON in the cell*): The evidence is a pilin' up against ya, Milton, do you want to go ahead and confess?

HOOLEY: Watts, can you question him properly while I'm gone?

WATTS: Sure I can, Sheriff and you can be sure Deputy-Get-to-the-Bottom-of-This-Watts will get a confession out of him.

HOOLEY: Just question him properly and give him some coffee.

(*SHERIFF HOOLEY exits.*)

WATTS: Well, Milton, it looks like you've gotten yourself into a pickle.

(*MILTON buries his head in his hands while*

WATTS *sits down at the Sheriff's desk with his feet up on the desk.*

WATTS: Let's see, we got us a murder weapon and we got us a suspect, covered in blood, holding a man's wallet that ain't his own and I'll bet that's Goldie Howens' shoe tied to your wrist.

*(He talks to himself.)*

But I ain't figured that part out yet.

*(He speaks louder.)*

That's all the evidence I need to know that someone's been murdered!

*(He jumps up.)*

There's been a killing in Brumbalow!

MILTON *(grogg)*: I didn't kill nobody!

WATTS: Ha! You say! Where did the blood come from?

MILTON: I, I don't know!

WATTS: Ha! Well how'd you get Goldie's wallet?

MILTON: I don't know that either!

WATTS: Well where's Goldie then?

MILTON: I don't know!

WATTS: Do you know what the punishment for killing is here in Alabama?

MILTON: No.

WATTS: It's death!

MILTON: Death?

WATTS: Yup, death.

MILTON *(scratching his head)*: But I don't remember killing nobody!

WATTS: I believe they call that selective memory. You don't want to remember the terrible things that you've done.

*(He pauses.)*

Are you one of them mass murderers?

MILTON: What's that?

WATTS: Mass murderer. It means you've killed more than one person at a time.

*(He pauses.)*

Have you ever killed more than one person at a time?

MILTON: Why no, I've never killed more than one person at a time--

WATTS: Ha! So you've never killed more than one at a time, huh? Always kill 'em spaced out?

MILTON: I didn't kill nobody!

*(He pauses.)*

All I remember is shaving somebody's head.

WATTS: Ha! You didn't shave nobody's head you killed him! Probably cut his head clean off!

Where'd you hide the body?

MILTON: Body?

WATTS *(grabbing a notepad and pencil)*: Yeah, where'd you hide Goldie's body?

MILTON: I didn't hide him anywhere!

WATTS *(writing down MILTON's words)*: Ha! You mean you just left him out in the open? Dead? With his head cut off?

MILTON: No! I mean, I don't remember cutting his head off!

WATTS: Ha! But you admit you did! You cut his head off!

MILTON: Oh no! I'm so confused! I can't believe that I killed Goldie.

WATTS: I can't either, Milton. I can't either. Well I'm going to need you to sign this here confession for me.

MILTON: Confession?

WATTS: Yup, I got it all written down right here,

*(He reads the paper.)*

Killed Goldie, cut his head off, left his body out in the open to rot under the Alabama sun.

MILTON *(lifting the boot on his wrist)*: But it can't be. There's got to be an explanation!

WATTS: Yup, I'll give you an explanation.

You're a killer! Killed poor old Goldie Howens. Sure he was a drunkard and not nearly a productive member of society but that ain't no reason to kill him!

MILTON: But I'm a drunkard too!

WATTS *(shaking his head)*: Drunkard on drunkard crime. That's a shame when you start killing your own.

MILTON: Yup, I mean no! I don't remember killing Goldie!

WATTS: I know. That's the sort of thing you want to put out of your mind. It's hard on a man after a killing spree.

MILTON: Killing spree? I ain't been on no killing spree!

WATTS: Oh, I heard of folks like you cold blooded killers! They say you can see it in their eyes.

*(MILTON looks up droopy eyed and obviously still hung over.)*

WATTS: There it is! The look of a killer! And I got him to confess! Why I'll be promoted to Head Deputy Sheriff!

MILTON *(looking puzzled)*: How many Deputies are there here in, uh, where're we again?

WATTS: Brumbalow, Alabama! Population 34 with 17 dogs and 2 or 3 cats. But the dogs' keep them hemmed up anyway, uh, what was your

question?

MILTON: Uh, oh, how many Deputies are there here in Brumbalow?

WATTS: Well, right now it's just me. But with all this crime a-picking up around here we're going to need some help. Hey! I can use this in my upcoming campaign for Sheriff!

*(He faces audience.)*

I brought justice back to Brumbalow! That's it! Getting a confession from a killer does wonders for an election campaign, you know?

MILTON: I can imagine.

WATTS: Yup, it's a shame you won't see it, Mr. Lickbarrow.

MILTON: I know. I got to get home. Let's see, where do I live?

WATTS: Oh, you'll be going home all right! The big ol' home in the sky!

MILTON: What?!

WATTS: You can't just walk around living when you killed somebody!

MILTON: But I told ya I didn't kill nobody!

WATTS: I know. It's a sad thing. Sad, sad. But you got to admit it just don't look good for you right now Milton.

MILTON: No, I can't say that it does. But I'm sure I didn't do it!

WATTS: Well it's unfortunate for you 'cause we already got us a confession on record.

*(He waves the paper.)*

You can't change the facts. You just can't.

*(The phone rings. WATTS picks up.)*

WATTS: Watts here. Unhuh, yeah.

*(He pauses.)*

Well that's good work, Sheriff.

*(WATTS hangs up the phone.)*

MILTON: Well, what did he say?

WATTS: Says they've got a witness. Seems that Ol' Lady Connors saw you and the deceased walking around in the back of the pool hall last night. She says she heard you two arguing about a bet that you had won. Says she heard you threaten to kill him if he didn't pay up.

*(He pauses.)*

Also says she heard some hollering down around the rail yard last night. Must have been when you were killing poor Goldie.

MILTON: Was she certain?

WATTS: Yup, says it happened right before the 12:05 pulled off to Tuscaloosa. Says that darn train wakes her up every night.

MILTON: I can't believe it. I can't believe I

killed Goldie!

WATTS: Sometimes murderin's just in ya. Like when I was a young'n. I wanted nothing more than to kill me a deer. I went out with my daddy's ol' rifle and sat up in a tree for eight hours just a-waitin' on a deer to come by. Then finally just after dusk I heard 'im. I raised my rifle until I had him set right in the middle of my sights.

*(He motions as if raising a rifle to aim.)*

And then blam! I let 'im have it!

*(WATTS stares off in to space. There is silence for a moment.)*

MILTON: Well what happened?

WATTS: Well, turns out Paw had come out with Scout, our family dog, to get me back home. I shot my darned ol' dog. Killed 'im dead! Paw took my gun and I never saw another one until I started workin' here. But I ain't never killed a human being. How's that feel?

MILTON *(dropping his head)*: Well it feels just awful. Goldie was a friend of mine.

WATTS: You say he was a friend? Well, what kinda man would kill his friend?

MILTON: Well he was a friend. Darn near relatives I reckon. He married my second cousin's half sister back in 22'. He would mostly come to Mississippi to visit me and see some of his kin but I just decided to visit him this time round.

WATTS: Well that's a sad way to end a trip.

Have you been plottin' this killin' the whole time?

MILTON: Why no! I'd never take a likin' to hurt a hair on his head!

WATTS: No, you just cut his head clean off!

MILTON: Awe! Goldie and I have been through a lot together! Why I was there when he met his third wife in Lafayette. Pearly May, she was the prettiest thing you ever saw. She had all her teeth and everything. You don't meet many women like that anymore.

WATTS: You don't say.

MILTON: Yup, pretty as a peach. Goldie was so proud of her. He'd take her all around town, buyin' her soda's and stuff. You know, the kinda stuff you do when you're in love.

*(He shakes his head.)*

It was a shame to see it end.

WATTS: Well what happened?

MILTON: Well, it turns out the she was Goldie's long lost sister Clara. When he took her home his momma took one look at her and started screamin'--

*(He pauses.)*

--and then when she found out that they'd been dating, well, she passed clean out.

WATTS: Well, that's a shame!

MILTON: Yeah, you know I remember this one time Goldie and I had found this ol' Model T Ford out in the back of Mr. Wesson's place.

Goldie decides that he'll turn the crank while I try to steer it just a little down a hill. Well, the next thing you know the darned ol' car ran Goldie smack over! It was the funniest thing!

WATTS: Ha! So there has been a history of violence against the victim!

MILTON: No! I mean. I didn't mean to run 'im over! He lived and all!

WATTS: You know it's a sad day when you go a-killin' a good friend. But I guess you know what the consequences are.

MILTON: What?

WATTS: Well, ya got to be put to death. That's the only honorable thing to do! An eye for an eye they say!

MILTON: But, don't they say somethin' for turnin' the other cheek?

WATTS: Well, if they do I ain't heard of it. Nope, you've got to be punished. Why I was punished for killin' that dog. Sure was. Couldn't go a huntin' no more and I lost my gun. Not to mention I killed my own dog. Never got another one either.

MILTON (*sighs loudly*): Do you really think I killed him?

WATTS: Yup, the evidence is all right there in your hands Milton. You got his wallet, his shoe, and you got blood all over you! What more evidence would you want?

MILTON: I guess you're right.

WATTS: Yup, I've seen it all before. Well actually you're the first murderer we've seen around here, but this will certainly put an ugly mark on our quiet town.

(*He pauses.*)

Would you be opposed having your dead body put on display?

MILTON: Well, what for?!

WATTS: I could use it in my campaign for Sheriff!

MILTON: I believe I would like a proper burial.

(*He pauses, sighs.*)

Will it hurt to die, Deputy Watts?

WATTS: Sure, I imagine it does. It probably feels like when your foot goes to sleep and you

feel all of those prickly things stickin' ya and you shake it real hard and it still hurts bad. It must be like that but all over.

(*He shakes his head.*)

Goldie must have suffered something awful. I can't imagine how it'd feel if your head went to sleep.

MILTON: Will they kill me when the Sheriff gets back?

WATTS: Uh, no. You see the Sheriff's what you call soft on crime.

MILTON: What do you mean?

WATTS: Well, we know you need to be put to death for your crime but Sheriff Hooley might not see it so clearly. He's been here a little too long, you know, but you mark my words he won't see it the same as two intelligent men such as us.

(*SHERIFF HOOLEY enters.*)

WATTS (*whispering*): Remember now, that's just between us, okay?

(*MILTON winks in agreement.*)

WATTS: Sheriff, get any more evidence against our criminal here?

HOOLEY: Well, it seems there's a fellow that heard a quarrel between the two of 'em. Did you question him properly?

WATTS: Yup! Got a confession! Says he did it! Says he cut his head clean off. Says he left the body out in the sun to rot!

HOOLEY: Did you say that?

MILTON: Um, well, not really.

WATTS: You did! I got it right here in your confession!

MILTON: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I guess I did.

HOOLEY: Well, why'd you kill him?

MILTON: Well, I guess he just got to me.

WATTS: Yup, a killer. Right there he is a cold-blooded killer.

HOOLEY: Well, they'll have a trial next week. Are you comfortable?

MILTON: Yeah. What do you think they'll do to me, Sheriff?

HOOLEY: I don't know. I reckon they'll put you away for a couple of years. Now tell me about this confession.

WATTS: Okay Sheriff, Milton here's had a long day full of questioning!

HOOLEY: Well, Watts, I was just going to make sure he wasn't coerced into making a statement or anything.

WATTS: Milton here has confessed and has accepted his role in the killin' death of Goldie

Howens.

HOOLEY (*turning to MILTON*): Have ya?

MILTON: Yeah, I guess I have.

HOOLEY: Well, all right. Watts, I'm headed out to talk to the fella by the rail yard.

WATTS: Alrighty, Sheriff!

(*SHERIFF HOOLEY exits.*)

WATTS: Well, what'd I tell ya? Hooley's got some weaknesses. Why he's gotten too soft I tell ya. Imagine that, asking a cold-blooded killer if he's comfortable. That's unjust!

MILTON: Yeah, I suppose you're right. I suppose.

WATTS: You don't really want to go to trial do ya?

MILTON: Well, I guess not. Why don't I?

WATTS: Well, for one the trial's gonna last forever!

(*He pauses.*)

There's all of the mud slingin'!

(*He pauses.*)

There's all those angry people that'll show up everyday just stare at you!

MILTON: Oh.

WATTS: There be all those men a-waitin' outside just to get a shot at ya!

MILTON: Waitin' to shoot me?

WATTS: Why, yes! And you know killers don't get treated well in the county jail. One fellow was darn near hanged in his own cell by his own shoelace!

(*He pauses.*)

Yup, so my best guess would be that you would want to avoid going to trial, don't you think?

MILTON: Yeah, but what can I do?

WATTS: Well, I got an idea. But I'm going to need your help.

MILTON: Sure! What is it?

WATTS: Mind you I'm looking out for your best interest here.

(*MILTON nods.*)

WATTS: Well, a while back a fellow told me about how those electric chairs work. I believe I could get one set up for ya and keep you from going through the humiliation of a trial.

MILTON: Really?

WATTS: Yup, I've been reading up on it and well it seems simple enough. You'll be dead in no time!

MILTON: Well, that's good, I suppose.

WATTS: It'll take you quick and painless, I promise.

MILTON: If you say so.

WATTS: Great! I'll need to get some things together. Let's see, I'll need a chair, some wires, and some electricity! I know it's a little scary but just think about all of those angry people spittin' at ya.

MILTON: Spittin'?!

WATTS: Yup, it ain't so scary then, is it?

MILTON: Well, I guess not.

WATTS: You see Milton, I'm not one for watching a man suffer. I want to do all I can to make sure your death is as quick and humane as possible. Oh shoot, I gotta remember what they said about your eyes a poppin' out.

MILTON: My eyes a poppin' out?!

WATTS: Well, only a little bit. It's all a part of dying. Your eyes pop out, your hair stands on end and I believe there's a lot of slobberin'.

MILTON: Well, that don't sound good at all. I'm not sure I want to go a slobberin' all over.

That's embarrassing!

WATTS: Well that's what they'll do to ya after a trial.

MILTON: Well, I suppose. Ain't there no other way to kill me?

WATTS: Nope.

MILTON: Humph. Well, all right.

WATTS: Alrighty, here's what we'll do. The Sheriff's probably going to ask me to stay in with you tonight so we'll give it a go later on after he goes home.

MILTON: Okay.

(*SHERIFF HOOLEY enters.*)

WATTS: Anything interesting, Sheriff?

HOOLEY: Well, it seems that Milton was heard a cussin' up a storm last night. Billy Ray says that he saw him and Goldie a tussling with each in the back of John Jaydon's place.

(*He walks over to MILTON.*)

Can you tell me about what happened last night?

MILTON: Well Sheriff, I can't say that I can.

HOOLEY: Watts, can you give me a minute alone with Milton?

WATTS: Sure Sheriff, I gotta to the hardware store anyway!

(*WATTS exits.*)

HOOLEY: Milton, did you tell the Deputy you killed Goldie Howens?

MILTON: Well, not exactly.

HOOLEY: Not exactly? Do you remember anything about last night?

MILTON: Sheriff, I'm gonna be honest with ya,

I drink a lot.

HOOLEY: Well, take your time. Did you have a dispute with Goldie?

MILTON: Why, no, I loved Goldie like a brother.

*(He pauses, sighing heavily.)*

I'm sure gonna miss him.

HOOLEY: My Deputy didn't force you to confess, did he?

MILTON: Why, no! Deputy Watts's been real nice to me.

HOOLEY: I just know he can get a little excited sometimes.

MILTON: Sheriff, I really wish I could remember what happened.

HOOLEY: Well maybe after a good night's sleep you'll remember something.

*(WATTS enters carrying a brown bag.)*

HOOLEY: Whatcha got there, Watts?

WATTS *(slightly nervous)*: Huh, oh this? Uh, just some things I needed for the house.

HOOLEY: Well, Milton, why don't you go ahead and get some rest.

MILTON: Alright Sheriff.

WATTS: Well Sheriff, did he tell you all about it?

HOOLEY: Not exactly. Now how did you say you got him to confess?

WATTS: Well, he just fessed right up. After all the circumstances tell the truth. Didn't you say that Billy Ray saw them struggling? There you go there's nothing like a witness to a murder!

HOOLEY: Billy Ray didn't say he saw him kill Goldie, he just saw a struggle. And Milton tell me anything that would make me believe he killed Goldie!

WATTS: Well, maybe he just didn't trust you Sheriff. You know you gotta build a rapport with 'em. You gotta spend some time getting' into their minds.

*(He pauses.)*

I've gotten into his mind Sheriff and I found a killer there.

HOOLEY: I see.

WATTS: You know Sheriff, after a while you just get a little rusty.

HOOLEY: Oh, hush Watts. I've been doin' this long enough to know how to do it right.

WATTS: All I'm sayin' Sheriff is that we got us a killer here. It's an obvious situation, maybe an accidental killin'. Whatever it is, the citizens of this town need to know that this sort of thing

won't go unaccounted for.

HOOLEY: What, that a drunkard is missing?

Watts, the last thing we need to do is jump to conclusions. Now why don't you head on out for the night. I'm gonna stay here with Milton.

*(WATTS turns around quickly.)*

WATTS: Oh, no that's okay Sheriff! I'll stay with 'im!

HOOLEY: No, you've had a hard day with all of this questioning and stuff. You need to get some rest.

WATTS: Now Sheriff, I won't take no for an answer!

HOOLEY: Well now, all of that aside I think it's best if I-

*(The phone rings. HOOLEY answers.)*

HOOLEY: Hello? Yes, dear. Well, okay. I'll be there shortly.

*(HOOLEY hangs up the phone.)*

HOOLEY: Well Watts, the Missus has invited the Mayor over for dinner. So I'll be headin' on home. Goodnight Milton.

MILTON: Goodnight, Sheriff. It was nice knowin' ya.

HOOLEY: Knowin' me?

*(HOOLEY looks at WATTS and then walks to the door.)*

WATTS: Goodnight Sheriff!

HOOLEY: Goodnight Watts.

*(HOOLEY exits.)*

WATTS: Well! I didn't think he was ever gonna get outta here.

MILTON: You know, I was thinking about what the Sheriff said--

WATTS: You know, I was just thinkin' about poor old Goldie, just a laying out there somewhere. You reckon he's cold?

MILTON: Oh, well, I don't know. I reckon.

*(He shakes his head.)*

Poor old Goldie!

WATTS: Well, guess we'd better get started.

MILTON: Yeah.

*(WATTS pulls various items from the brown paper bag: a metal colander, four leather belts, a pair of jumper cables, some copper wires and two small metal pipes.)*

WATTS: Oh, I almost forgot!

*(WATTS runs outside and runs back in with a car battery in his hands.)*

WATTS: Hope I don't have to go anywhere anytime soon!

MILTON: You need all of that to kill me?

WATTS: It's a complicated thing, Milton. It

takes a lot of scientific know-how.

*(He talks to himself.)*

I'm sure glad I stayed in school past the eighth grade!

MILTON: I see. Do you need some help?

WATTS: Yeah, I guess I could use a hand.

*(WATTS opens the cell door.)*

WATTS: Take two of those wires there and wrap them around those two pipes. One wire to each.

MILTON: Okay.

*(MILTON wraps the wires around the pipes while*

*WATTS connects the jumper cables to the colander.)*

WATTS: It won't take long with two of us workin' on it.

MILTON *(wrapping the second pipe)*: There, how's that?

WATTS: Why, this'll be as good as one of those professional jobs.

MILTON: You'd think there'd be more to it!

WATTS: Well that's why they're going to it, now hand me those. You know in the old days they'd just hang ya in the street!

*(WATTS takes MILTON's two pipes and runs the wire from the colander to the pipes.)*

WATTS: At least you won't have to go through that kind of torture.

MILTON: I appreciate that! You're a pretty good fella Deputy.

WATTS: Oh, I do my best. It's a shame you won't be here for the election. I do believe you might vote for me.

MILTON: Why sure I would! Are you almost finished?

WATTS: Yeah, it won't be long now. Say Milton, do you want to talk to a priest or something?

MILTON: No, I can't say I spent a lot of time in the church, you know.

WATTS: Well, did you want to call anybody? A family member maybe?

MILTON: The only one I would want to talk to would be my friend Goldie. But that won't happen today.

WATTS: That might happen sooner than you think!

MILTON: Do you think he'll forgive me?

WATTS: Who's that, Goldie?

MILTON: Yeah.

WATTS: I suppose. Look at it this way, at least you'll get a chance to apologize.

MILTON: Yeah, I reckon.

*(He gets edgy.)*

Oh let's get this over with. Are you ready?

WATTS: Okay, okay, hold on now.

*(WATTS puts the colander on MILTON's head.)*

WATTS: Yup, looks like a good fit. Okay, come on and have a seat.

*(WATTS straps MILTON's arms to the armrests of the chair.)*

MILTON: What's that for?

WATTS: So you don't go a movin' around. Now be still.

MILTON: Okay, just hurry. Oh, the pain.

*(WATTS takes one belt and straps MILTON's legs together.)*

WATTS: Well that ought to do it. Oh, I almost forgot.

*(WATTS takes a belt and wraps it around the colander and under MILTON's chin.)*

WATTS: There, we're all set!

MILTON *(looking at his feet and arms and then rolling his eyes upwards)*: Are you sure this is gonna work?

WATTS: Sure it is!

*(WATTS checks his wiring job.)*

WATTS: Everything looks good! Are you ready?

MILTON: Yeah, let's go!

WATTS *(handing the pipes to MILTON)*: Here hold these. Don't let 'em go what ever you do!

*(He pauses.)*

I reckon I should say a few words in your honor before your crossing over.

MILTON: Okay.

*(MILTON bows his head and the colander falls into his lap.)*

WATTS: Oh daggonit.

*(WATTS puts the colander back on MILTON's head.)*

WATTS *(bowing his head)*: Lord, we stand before you with a man who has done wrong. We ask that he be forgiven Lord and let into those bright pearly gates of heaven. We also ask that there be no repercussions against me for doin' the unenviable task of puttin' this wicked man to his death.

*(He pauses.)*

Amen

MILTON: Amen?

WATTS: Okay, Let's light her up!

MILTON: I want to thank you Deputy Watts. You're a good man.

WATTS *(picking up the cable ends)*: Why, thank you Milton.

MILTON: And don't let the fact your killin' me





and all alone. Hello? Ain't there supposed to be somebody here to greet me? Oh no, maybe I didn't go to heaven. Hello?

*(He pauses.)*

Boy this crossin' over takes a long time!

*(A man walks in the front door wearing one right shoe.)*

GOLDIE *(in a very deep voice)*: Hello?

MILTON *(turning towards the voice)*: Lord?

GOLDIE: Milton?

MILTON: Yes, Lord?

GOLDIE: Milton, what are you doing here?

MILTON: Well, wasn't I supposed to come here Lord?

GOLDIE: Lord? I'm not the Lord.

MILTON: You're not the Lord? Oh no, you mean I went the other way?

*(He shakes his head.)*

I knew I should've gone to church more often!

GOLDIE: Milton! It's me, Goldie!

MILTON: Goldie?

GOLDIE: Yeah, I've been looking all over for you!

MILTON: Goldie? You've come to help me cross over? Oh, Goldie I'm sorry for killin' ya!

GOLDIE: Killin' me?

*(GOLDIE walks over to MILTON and pulls off the blindfold.)*

GOLDIE: Milton!

MILTON *(obviously shaken)*: Goldie!

GOLDIE: I didn't think I'd see you again!

MILTON: What? Oh Goldie!

*(He looks around the jailhouse.)*

You know heaven looks a lot like jail!

GOLDIE: Heaven? Oh, Milton! You know I just got back from Tuscaloosa?

MILTON: Huh? Tuscaloosa?

GOLDIE *(chuckling)*: Yeah. I musta fell asleep in that ol' boxcar!

MILTON: Boxcar?

GOLDIE: Boy we sure tied one on last night didn't we?

MILTON: You mean--.

GOLDIE: It sure was funny seeing you shave

that chicken! You won that bet fair and square!

MILTON: You mean, you're not dead? I didn't kill you?

GOLDIE: Dead, why no! But I almost caught my death of cold without my shoe!

*(GOLDIE lifts his left foot.)*

MILTON: Why, I don't understand.

GOLDIE: That was the bet! Remember? You said you could shave a chicken with one hand tied behind your back! So we went down to old man Jaydon's place and got one of his chickens from the pen.

*(He shakes his head and smiles.)*

We must wrestled with that chicken for an hour! And well, I couldn't get the string out of my boot to tie ya up so I just used the whole thing!

MILTON *(obviously confused)*: Oh.

GOLDIE: Milton are you alright? What are you doing here anyway?

*(WATTS comes bursting out of the closet carrying his gun in one hand and a bullet in the other.)*

WATTS: Okay Milton let try this again!

*(WATTS jumps in shock at the sight of GOLDIE and MILTON.)*

WATTS *(dropping the gun and the bullet)*: Ooh!

MILTON: Well he said I killed you!

*(WATTS takes two steps backwards, falls over the metal colander, and hits his head on the floor. He is apparently unconscious. GOLDIE and MILTON watch WATTS' fall.)*

GOLDIE: Oh my!

*(GOLDIE moves to check WATTS' pulse.)*

MILTON: Is he dead?

GOLDIE: Nope! Should we call the Sheriff?

MILTON: I suppose.

*(He pauses, slings his arm around GOLDIE.)*

But let's get something to drink first!

*(Exit GOLDIE and MILTON.)*

CURTAIN.

THE END.