

AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

Sharon Olds
Anjail Rashida Ahmad
poets
Dana Fine Arts Building

John Updike
fiction writer
Presser Hall

Reception and book signing,
immediately following the reading.
Rebekah Scott Hall

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Marsha Norman
playwright
Dana Fine Arts Building

ADMISSION IS FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC,
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JOHN UPDIKE.
(404) 471-6430

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AGNES SCOTT WEB SITE:
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AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL 2001

March 22 - 23, 2001



JOHN UPDIKE
MARSHA NORMAN
SHARON OLDS
ANJAIL RASHIDA AHMAD



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

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

AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL SPEAKERS

JOHN UPDIKE is arguably America's foremost man of letters. Though best known for his prose fiction, he has published six volumes of poetry, five children's books, a play, memoirs, and numerous reviews and articles. Updike's fiction has chronicled American life for half a century. His most recent publication, *Licks of Love* (2000), includes the novella, *Rabbit Remembered*, a final glimpse at his memorable character Rabbit Angstrom. The Rabbit novels have mapped the last four decades, beginning with *Rabbit, Run* (1960), which was followed by *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).



While Updike's most characteristic work has focused on realistic depiction of middle-class America, his work has also included a novel set in the future, an historical chronicle of Hollywood, and treatments of witches, computer science, and the imagined lives of Claudius and Gertrude from *Hamlet*.

He has won the National Book Award and twice won Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Critics Circle Awards.

MARSHA NORMAN, an alumna of Agnes Scott College, is well known for a wide range of powerful dramatic work. In 1983, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Night, Mother*, which has subsequently been translated into 23 languages and turned into a motion picture, scripted by Norman, starring Anne Bancroft and Sissy Spacek.



Norman's Broadway musical, *The Secret Garden*, won her a Tony and a Drama Desk Award. She has also written the book and lyrics for *The Red Shoes*, with music by Jule Styne. Recently, her play *Trudy Blue* was staged off-Broadway.

Norman has published a novel, *The Fortune Teller*, and written extensively for television. Her television credits include the Emmy Award-winning *Face of a Stranger* (starring Gena Rowlands and Tyne Daly) and the Emmy-nominated *Cooler Climate* (starring Sally Field and Judy Davis).

Norman served as playwright in residence at the Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Since 1993, she has co-chaired the Playwriting Department at the Julliard School.

SHARON OLDS writes intensely personal poems that connect with widely shared human experiences and emotions. A mixture of power and craft has characterized her work from her first volume, *Satan Says* (1980), to her most recent, *Blood, Tin, Straw* (2000). Her subject matter focuses on family relationships, sexuality, and death, as she discovers a language for presenting bodily experiences in words.



Her frequently anthologized verse has been published in seven volumes over the last twenty years and has appeared in journals such as *The New Yorker*, *Nation*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *American Poetry Review*. Her poetry has won the Lamont Poetry Selection and the National Book Critics Circle Award.



ANJAIL RASHIDA AHMAD received her BA from Agnes Scott College in 1992 and her MA from NYU in 1994. A collection of her poems entitled *necessary kindling* is forthcoming from Louisiana State University Press.

Ahmad's poetry has been published in a variety of journals including *Ikona*, *Midlands*, *All that Jazz*, and *The African-American Review*. She has received numerous honors including the Margaret Walker Alexander Award for Poetry, the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival Award for Poetry, and The Academy of American Poets Prize. She is the recipient of a Thurgood Marshall fellowship and awards for academic excellence from the Missouri Council for the Blind and the National Federation for the Blind.

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, Li-Young Lee, 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 *Driving Miss Daisy*; Rita Dove appeared shortly before being named Poet Laureate of the

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL 2001

MAGAZINE



JOHN UPDIKE
MARSHA NORMAN
SHARON OLDS
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Agnes Scott College

30th Annual Writers' Festival

March 22-23, 2001

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 John Updike, Sharon Olds, Marsha Norman, and distinguished alumna guest Anjail Rashida Ahmad.

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

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

March, 2001

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Short Fiction: Jerry Gentry and Mary Hood
Personal Essay: Susan Percy
One-Act Play: Jim Peskin and Robert Earl Price

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Poems by Wende Crow

February 15, 1934 — August 9, 2000

Perhaps the meaning in that mark is this:
my father's nails, that nightly burrowed rows
of crescent moons across the backs of his hands.
Or maybe it is more like this: his eyes,
in narrow slits, devouring words of saints.
Or better still: his life, a cautious thing,
devout and steady, preparing for death.
Or: just a line in stone, precisely carved
to run straight, from here to there, run thin.

My Ear to the Ground at My Father's Grave

I could think of nothing for days
 but Sarah Bernhardt rising out of bed
 each morning and lying right back down
 in her coffin, blinking in the blackness,
 imagining the din of hammers pounding nails
 and eternity in a box. Maybe it was
 an obsession, but now I prefer to think of it
 this way: walking alone through forests
 of dead trees when it first begins to snow,
 when there is no moon and a hundred clouds,
 and each fleck of frozen whiteness
 muffles the world deeper into silence.

Some Moments

All of this is true:
 Julie Blanks slid herself
 into a white cotton dress,
 dressed her windows
 in white curtains,
 draped her bed
 with white linens,
 and spread her body
 in all that white.
 Seeing all was ready,
 she tipped up her
 gallon-bottle of bleach
 and chugged.

No one can know
 what she was thinking,
 but I myself pondered
 her death one night,
 sitting in my car
 by the river
 with no one in particular.
 A lover, perhaps.
 We didn't speak.
 There were no stars.
 We could see nothing.
 Who knows how long
 we sat there, quiet,
 before whoever sat
 next to me said:
 "I think I should drive
 this car into the river."
 There was nothing left to do
 but laugh at ourselves,
 light each other's cigarettes,
 and watch the orange glow
 in all that nothing.

Poems by Holly Feldman

While Walking to the Orphanage at Shirokoloka, Bulgaria

I stepped right over it:
flattened against the cracked
asphalt amid splotches
of garbage and grease,
the spread wings of a butterfly,
the most beautiful butterfly I'd ever seen,
luminous, opalescent white
swirled with rings of color—
oranges, reds, blues—
impossibly bright.

Later that day, the children
swam about in the sunlight
up on the balcony,
blinking their frail lashes
against the unbearable brightness,
fluttering their tiny limbs
like unformed wings
pleading to be lifted up,
to settle in my arms.

Insomnia

A girl by the shore,
I watched the scene dispassionately:
a cow trapped by the tide,
dumb enough to drag her helpless bulk to bathe,
to wander out too far, to turn back too late.
If only she could forget herself—
but she poises, legs quivering,
on the last dry bit of rock,
moaning against the pitch of the waves.
And just as I did then as a child,
you stood and stared as you left,
your eyes never flinching in their finality—
not even for one small moment of pity—
and you knew I couldn't swim.

Space

My aunt can see the future in the stars:
 she described in detail the scene of her husband's death
 long before he was struck by the car in Guadalajara.
 She told me that you and I are lovers from a past life,
 bound forever, irrevocably, a promise firmer than death.

But all of this we know.

What we still do not know, and what fascinates me,
 is what the light passes through
 as it moves for decades toward our eyes,
 what happens in the distance between the vision and the future,
 that moment in my uncle's mind as he lost his breath
 and his eyes rolled slowly upward.
 And what happens between the words *I* and
love—
 do your lips pause, shiver in the silence?

Poems by Scott Hughes

Nightfishing

The dock of my grandpa's pond hangs in blackness,
 still water blends seamless with sky. Nothing
 below us. My grandpa turns on a docklight.
 Insects appear, fluttering in spirals at insane
 speeds. I push a blob of chicken liver onto my hook,
 like piercing cold lips with a needle. We sit
 in green plastic chairs. Three bull bats swirl
 and soar into and out of our vision. Armored
 spiders crawl on wooden beams spinning
 their webs, descending and zipping on strands.
 Some even dare to venture onto our poles.
 Grandma calls the fish to her hook. A catfish
 swallows the bait. Grandpa rips the hook
 from the fish's stomach. It bleeds on the dock,
 gargling and barking. Grandma celebrates
 each catch with a Kent 100, blowing the smoke
 in clouds of twirling nicotine ghosts.
 Two distant blood hounds track a raccoon through
 dark woods. *They've got 'im treed*, says grandpa.
 The hounds bellow at their catch, fast and deep.

My Father's Lips

I remember my father's plump lips, round
and soft like blankets. Briefly my dad pressed
them to my forehead and without a sound
checked for a fever, his palm on my chest.
His warm breath smelled of aged copper, my nose
scratched and tickled by stubble on his chin.
Heat passed from my head to his mouth— he chose
to take it from me, like lifting a sin
from my shoulders. His face became God's face.
I cannot do the same for him now.
Silence hums in this cold room as I trace
his dying hand with my forefinger. How
I want to reach my dad. I long to hold
my lips to his scalp, clean and slightly cold.

Plums

At dusk grandpa picked plums
from the peeling tree in his yard.
Fireflies lit his way. One time he forgot.
The plums turned orange with rot.

I counted the ones he brought into the house.
I sat on the screen porch watching
for deer in the garden, eating plums.

A doe found her way into the tomatoes,
nuzzled, ever-watchful of her surroundings.
A gunshot cracked far off. She bolted.

Grandpa smoked and remained quiet.
I asked why people shot deer.
His brow curled, deep in thought,
pipe in one hand, plum in the other.

He said we kill deer to keep down
the population. *They would run
through the streets of Monticello
if people refused to hunt.*

*We kill them for food as well. Many meals
can come from a single buck. They make
the best spaghetti sauce you ever had.*

Grandpa relit his pipe, it smelled of burned
chocolate. He asked if I planned to bring down
my first deer this season when winter came.

I remembered hiding in an abandoned house,
rifle pointed through a window, staring
through my scope into a doe's slate eyes.

Grandpa saw this memory on my face.
*The first one's the hardest. Hope
for a fatal shot. Wounded deer cries
will turn your stomach.*

I took a plum from the bowl and thought
of another reason people hunt deer— for sport,
just for the thrill of erasing a life.
*The best thing to do is not look at its eyes.
Aim for the temple or the heart on a buck,*

you can mount its head or antlers.

Grandpa said he'd rub the blood
of my first deer on my face like warpaint.
I almost didn't notice the rotten plum in my hand.

Poems by Josephine Pallos

Lessons

I point to the geometry of light
where the curtains refuse to meet,
the south and south of two magnets.
You wrestle the stubborn fabric back,
inviting the orange interrogation
of the streetlamp to begin.
Call those slick fingers to reach
through the blinds, towards my feet
under the quilt, like midnight Tropicana
spilling on the armchair, the dresser,
pooling in the half-open sock drawer
where a rosary lies collapsed,
rose petals pressed into small fists.
Voices rise from the parking lot,
two women arguing in Spanish,
as quick and uncatchable as auctioneers.
Last night you taught me the words for arm and leg.
Tonight I want mouth, bed, kiss,
and again the word for the back of the hand.

Provisions

Impressionable young tomatoes ride in the child seat
next to a pineapple and enough onion bagels
to last the hard winter of weekdays.

Dry-roasted, dusty peanuts follow loose green tea
into the cart, then a hard knot of German cake
and a jar of honey with its comb suspended
inside like a shrunken head.

Choosing globes of cauliflower and broccoli, potatoes
as solid as the baked clay of burial mounds,
I come to the fancy okra and medium yellow squash.
I turn a gourd in my hand,
searching the peninsula of stem,
the waxy, midday curve of skin,
the dark patch where it lay against the ground
and caught the contagious texture of dirt.

Then I select a fistful of okra
because, for the life of me, I can't remember
how my mother chose squash.

Garden Hills

The pool is the last place they cling to me,
arms like the masking-tape tails of possums
curled around my shoulders,
toes bruising my thighs.

Oliver spies something on the bottom of the pool.
"Come with me."
We hold hands and plunge towards the shadow.
It is a jet of pulsing water.
Our fingers meet in the flow and separate,
pushed apart like magnets.
We hover, pilgrims above a holy spring.

A mother buys a double grape popsicle
at the concession stand.
She pulls it apart like a wishbone,
it breaks unevenly, and her girls
fall into the discord of late afternoon,
their wet ponytails slapping like fish.

Oliver is bundled in a towel like a new god.
I am the manger and he is laid against me,
his head against my hair turned to hay by the chlorine.

The others wave to us from the deep end.
They bend like mermaids, salmon, something impossible,
the water glittering around them into scales.

Poems by Sara Pirkle

Michigan Fog

In your Detroit I dream of planes that crash
so real I wake up sweating, shouting out
your name. Crossing the room in plain panties
and gown, I stare beyond the streaked window
at patches of melting snow on the side-

walk. Somewhere over Kentucky you sulk
on flight fifteen heading South, leaving me
behind with winter slush piled high in cold
ditches along our street. I press my hands
against the frosty glass. Blue veins conquer

my wrists, mapping out the hidden backroads
of Northern Georgia. Home. I watch the clock's
relentless minute hand pace slowly in
a circle, listen to my breathing wisp
the air around my mouth. Inhale silence.

Exhale its dust. Your city mourns its loss
with shrieks of car horns. Morning buses sigh
beneath the weight of sleepy children dressed
in heavy coats. Our next door neighbor stoops
to lift the limp newspaper from its nest

of snow, then shuffles briskly back to warmth,
back to his wife. A blooming knot tightens
in both my throat and chest. Stifled, I pace
the room, then lie face down and close my eyes.
Losing myself in the dense fog between

ill consciousness and sleep, I see your jet
explode. The heat from the wreckage scorches
my face. You stand in front of me burning
alive and holding a bouquet of flames,
a smile itching at your fiery lips.

Kiyoko

*To Grandmama, my obasan—
an island bordered by silence.*

I. hi

Father burned our hut
when I said goodbye. The same
hands that built our home

destroyed it, sheet by
paper sheet. Rage spread dark red
on his sallow cheeks.

Against empty breasts
my half-gaijin baby screamed.
Ashes choked the night.

II. umi

I left my home torn.
Thomas-san's baby held tight
to my arms. We sailed.

He said *Don't look back.*
I did, watched Japan's mountains
sink into black ground.

America allowed
me no freedom. Strangers whipped
my back with their tongues.

Rite of Passage

The same year I learned about death,
 I stopped searching for roley poleys
 beneath our climbing tree. Summer
 mornings among the knotty branches,
 I watched a fat lady in blue shorts
 heave by with eight dog leashes
 wrapped around her large hands.
 Gasping, she fussed at the black labs
 and golden retrievers for nipping her
 thick ankles. One day she didn't come.
 Taking lunch in the den that noon
 I sent my Cabbage Patch Kid
 soaring to her death off the cliff
 of the coffee table. From behind his
 newspaper, Daddy mentioned to Mama
 that the "dog-woman" had died the night
 before. *Heart-attack*, I overheard
 and the words pulsed through me.
 Speechless, I stumbled into the kitchen
 where my parents nestled calmly in their chairs,
 fragile bombs ticking inside their chests.

Poems by D. Kyle Taylor

Searching for Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi

Just across the Tennessee Tombigbee
 driving west towards Elvis' hometown
 I find myself searching for Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi,
 hoping it would stop me on my way to western Shelby County,
 where Houston Levee used to dead end into Macon Road
 before they cut the trees and through-wayed the roads,
 just outside of Fisherville, Tennessee, unincorporated,
 where Grandmother's old house rests on a hill
 threatened by urban sprawl.

The graffiti on the overpasses, faded enough
 to look olive green against concrete gray at 65 mph,
 keeps me amused with statements and questions:
 "We Hate You Beth" and two miles later "Why Me?"
 They make me wonder what was happening on those nights
 full of lookouts for the state patrol
 just what Beth did to piss everybody off

I pass city limit signs of towns
 whose names sound right only if
 spoken with a drawl
 Mantachie, Saltillo, Itawamba, Tishomingo,
 and I think of how no one's bitched about
 or boycotted
 the Southern Cross here this year.

I dwell upon these points and hope to find
 Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi,
 knowing it won't change why I'm driving to Memphis
 or that I'll be saying goodbye to her one last time.

Cutting Corners

It's not a depth-perception problem,
I swear.
I just like to cut my corners close,
tight turns, barely edging the door frames
and wall divisions.

For the psycho-analysts in the room
go ahead and attribute my habit
to the childhood desire to be a
race car driver or a jet fighter pilot.

All I know is that the shortest distance
between two points is a straight line
and skimming corners is the attempt
to straighten my path.

But walls and doors and furniture and school desks
reach out when I pass them.
The bruises on my shins and shoulders would
make Hemingway proud.
And I take my pain like a man
with a manly,
"Damn that hurt" or a grunt and
sharply inhaled breath.

Still I don't know why I
cut my corners close
(I asked for a CAT scan for Christmas)
or why I walk as silently as I can
or sit in dark rooms
playing guitar late at night
nursing sore shoulders and
striking the daily crop of impacts
off the "Things I Haven't Run Into Yet" list.

Mallory and Irvine

I went searching for
Mallory and Irvine
in front of my television
beer in my hand.

Among the scattered leftovers,
the spent blue and green speckled oxygen bottles,
used foil food packets,
abandoned tent poles and frozen clothes
of long past Chinese explorers,
I saw something unnaturally
ghost white in the wind
among the pixels of light.

In the excitement
of theories and hearsay
between commercial breaks
I thought it was Irvine
face down in the rocks.

The wind torn tweed coat
and ragged cotton canvas shirt,
once thought enough to
protect a man from 29,035 feet
of snow covered sharp rocks
marking the thin air border
of Nepal and Tibet
that owns the lives of over 160
climbers who thought they could win,
revealed petrified skin
and the last remnants
of the carcass's collar
read a single name:

G. Mallory

I return from the final commercial break
to see Mallory buried in the rocks
instead of being extracted.
Tatters and fragments of his
clothes, hemp rope, notebook, letters and
a wristwatch, unwound and undamaged,
in perfect working order as he left it in 1924,
are laid out for my perusal

and that of the other quarter-million viewers.

It's the late half of the hour
no more air or expedition time
paid for to find Irvine.

I turn off the set
sit in darkness with my third beer
and wish I were as tough
as Mallory and Irvine must have been
even to dream of standing
atop the world.

Fiction by Anton DiSclafani

Tightness

"It's not the size," she says. "I would never want you to think it was the size. It's about me, it's about how I feel." She's chopping a tomato as she tells me this. "Are you listening?"

"Yes." The chopping sound is becoming louder and louder.

"So what do you think?"

"I think I'm just here to help with dinner." The chopping sound stops. She hands the cutting board to me and I lift the lid off the pot on the stove. The steam rises toward my face.

"You know," she says, "a lot of women do it. It's a confidence issue. Your father and I both agree it's a confidence issue." She folds a napkin and lays it on the placemat. "You're too young to know this, but breasts are very important. In some ways, they define a woman. Of course, women with small breasts can still be happy, but I don't think they're so well defined. As women, I mean. After all, why would so many women be getting breast implants if it wasn't an issue?" She looks at me, and I shake my head.

"I don't know." But I do know. I feel ill.

"That's what I mean." She turns around and opens the door to the family room. "Dinner's ready."

By the time my mother and I take our seats my father and brother have already sat down. It was my turn to help with dinner tonight. We're an equal opportunity family—tomorrow, it'll be my brother's turn. My father says the blessing, the blessing he's always said. I don't even listen to the words anymore. It's something about Mary, and grace.

"Eurissa, would you please pass the tomatoes?" My father's a big eater. My mother's not. That's okay with him, though, because she looks good in leather pants.

"Here you go."

"How was your day at school," he continues, after he spoons the plump redness onto his plate. They don't even look like tomatoes anymore. "Classes? Grades?" My parents don't care about grades. They like seeing my name in print.

"They're fine." They're not, but the thought of an explanation tires me. And he wouldn't understand anyway.

"Slow down, slow down. There's more where that came from." I'm just eating, eating like I always do. He often says this to me. I've never seen the place where more comes from, and I don't expect he'll be the one to show me. I eat at the same pace, and he looks at me for a minute before turning to my brother.

"And Thor, your grades?" My mother took a class on Greek mythology in college. It really affected me, she said. So my brother and I got the mangled names of gods. I've never asked her why she didn't just use their real names. I could be Athena, he could be Zeus. But I figure she had her reasons; I figure some things are better left unasked.

"They suck." Thor's not as subtle. It's my hypothesis that he has a complex about his name. I would. Nobody's ever going to take him seriously. Me neither, but I'm a girl. It's not the same thing. My parents turn attentively at this, waiting for him to complete his thought. He doesn't.

"Well, why do they suck?" I hate it when my dad talks like this, when he takes our words and turns them around.

"Yes, why do they suck?" My mother reminds me of an African Grey parrot I had in fifth

grade. Named Zulu, after nothing. I was outside cleaning her cage one day when she flew away. She had had her wings clipped; she wasn't supposed to be able to fly. But she did, over the power lines until I never saw her again.

"I'll make them better," Thorl says. My mom and dad resume eating. Good for them, I think. They've been like this for as long as I can remember. When I wasn't doing well at my junior gymnastics meets my dad would give me lectures about getting ahead in life the night before each competition, until one night I told him I was trying a new technique, a technique that was supposed to make me win with my mind and then my body. Not another word about winning life. As long as you give them something to grab onto, they'll leave you alone.

It's a couple hours after dinner when my friend Kylee calls. She wants me to go out with her, with everyone else. Okay, I'll come. I'll go with them. I'm always going out, out of the house to somewhere else. Where? It doesn't matter. Another house, a parking lot, a restaurant. Tonight, though, it's a club. I change clothes and slide a twenty into my bra. Walking down the stairs, I skip the eleventh one. It creaks.

"Going out?" He's sitting in the living room. My friends are outside, honking the horn. My parents mostly ignore my friends.

"Yes."

"In that?"

"Yes."

"Those are a little tight, if you know what I mean."

I want to say that I know precisely what he means, that the question really is if *he* knows what he means. Your wife's doing the same thing—we both want to be tighter. But I don't say anything. I'm a smart girl. Why upset myself?

"You might want to consider changing."

"I'll change in the car." And I'm out of the door, feeling the way the nylon clenches my thighs and liking it.

We stop at a fast-food joint first. I'm ravenous. I eat everything. Now I want to get drunk. *I need liquor in order to have fun*, I always tell my friends. *I sound like an alcoholic, don't I?* They get a big kick out of that. I'm funny, always have been. I'm not an alcoholic, but I feel like clubs are upscale meat markets. I need something to blur my vision, make me feel like I'm somewhere else. I go because my friends go; I'm not sure why they go. Probably because everyone else does. Probably because sometimes it can be fun, dancing with people you'll never see again, slightly drunk, feeling like yesterday and today and anything in between can't matter.

We wait outside for twenty minutes. When we enter I want to turn around. I can see the smoke, I can feel it wafting into my pores. I'm a little tipsy, though, so after a minute I adjust. We worm our way onto the dance floor. They're playing some song about a guy who's going to get some and then give some.

A guy's behind me, his hands on my thighs. I edge forward, sobering up a bit. He's a little too handsy, and I'm as drunk as I want to be. I turn around and back up. Better to face the enemy, that's what they always say in old war movies. He's not as brave now that he can see my eyes, now that I'm looking at him.

"What's your name?" My name, my name, my name. Guys in clubs always want to know my name.

"Jenn-i-fer," I elaborately mouth.

"Oh, Jennifer. I like that. Jenn-i-fer. It rolls down my tongue." He looks at me purposefully, as if there's great weight in his words.

"You sound like you're in a foreign language class, learning English." He can't hear me, but

I wish he could. The music's too loud. I can read his lips, though. I used to watch old movies but with the volume off, because I was supposed to be in bed. I've never slept well. "You know what?"

"Yes." Now I'm sure he can't hear me.

"I have too much insight." He nods and smiles, keeps dancing away. He's a good dancer, at least. Maybe he'll marry an equally good dancer and they'll be happy. "I know why I do things, and I know why other people do things." It feels nice to yell this in front of so many people. "I'm doing this right now because nobody's listening. I would never say this to anyone who could listen because I'm too private and I don't trust anyone."

"Really?" He edges in closer, and puts his hand on my back. I let him, because I like saying all the things I'm saying. I like having a person to say them to.

"Really. You're dancing with me because you don't care anything about me. Because you're drunk. You probably get drunk a lot because you like doing exactly this, hitting on a lot of girls and maybe getting lucky. And you hit on me because I'm a warm body and because I have a fairly nice ass," leaning into him, I say "I've seen a million guys like you."

"And I've seen a million girls like you." He heard the last part, but he doesn't care. He's just talking because I am.

"I'm graduating in May and I'm scared to death." His head is on my shoulder, and I can't pretend I'm talking to him when I can't see him.

"Hey," I say, my mouth brushing his ear, "ask me what I'm scared of."

"What are you scared of, baby?" Too many clichés, too many threadbare phrases. Baby, hon, sexy.

"I'm scared I'll end up like my parents, I'm scared I'll fall in love with a guy like my dad, I'm scared I'll have children like me, I'm scared I'll never fall in love, I'm scared this is it for me." My fears tumble out like ice from an ice machine. "See where insight gets you? I know too much about myself. I'd be happier if I didn't know so much."

"What'd you say?" I'm backing away, backing into more people, backing into smoke and sweat and tightness.

"I said bye. Bye."

Outside, the air is cool but I drink it up because it's Florida and it's never this cool. It's winter to me. All the people are waiting in line. They look like sprinkles on a gigantic birthday cake, shiny-suited sprinkles and tube-topped sprinkles and wild-haired sprinkles. A birthday cake celebrating nothing. On the street, I don't know which way I should turn. Or not turn. Right, left, backwards, forwards. I've ditched my friends. They'll get over it. The word fate used to bother me, I used to mouth it over and over, tooth to tongue, f to t. A wrong turn, a left turn, a right turn and you could be in a million places. I used to think this laying on my back with one hand under my head, the other by my side, flat on the sheets. Body distorting the flowers on my bedspread, used to think about fate and all its implications. If Juliet had had her back turned to Romeo. If my parents hadn't seen each other at that bar, if my father hadn't been showing off to his friends, *hey, watch this, you just watch this*, then where would they be?

I decide on straight. Straight across the street into a 24-hour drugstore. They all smell the same, all the 24-hour drugstores across America. Minty, like someone crushed a bag of the red-and-white discs under their heel and walked away. And medicinal, like someone left the huge clear plastic barrels of pills open too long. There are hundreds of drinks in the cooler. A very impressive selection: iced teas, lemonades, powerades, beer, waters, sodas, and fruit juices. I take a lemonade, one that promises me a sweet and pulpy sensation I don't think I'll ever come across in life, and head to the register.

"That all?" This is, quite possibly, the most hair I've ever seen on one person's head. A

coiled brown engine, shooting and sputtering in all directions, deciding which way to go.

"That's all," I say, reaching into my bra for money. I can't take my eyes off her hair, even as I put my hand down my shirt. I hand her a five, left over from the fifteen dollar cover charge, and place it in her hand.

"That'll be a dollar sixty-nine," she says, even though I've already handed her the money. If she doesn't like touching money that came out of my bra she doesn't say so.

"It's beautiful," I say, "your hair." And it is beautiful.

"Yeah, everyone says that." She's not as impressed as I would be if somebody told me my hair was beautiful.

"No," I say, "I don't say that a lot." I don't say something's beautiful unless it really is. Sunsets aren't beautiful to me, mountains and male models aren't beautiful to me. It's suddenly important that she understands how beautiful her hair is.

"Oh yeah?" She smiles. "And what's beautiful to you besides my hair?" She's humoring me.

"I don't know." I try to think of things, and I run through lists in my head but nothing stops me. "I don't know what's beautiful besides your hair."

"There's gotta be something." Her look says come on, come on. It's been a long time since somebody looked at me like that.

"I think my mom's boobs are beautiful but know she's going to blow them up," I say. It's one of those things that spews from your mouth without you even thinking about it. "Sorry, I'm weird sometimes."

The lady just stands there, looking at me and nodding. She reaches her hand to me, and I think, I hope maybe she's going to tell me something, something somebody needs to tell me that I need to know. But when her hand is over mine it opens and I can feel the coolness of the coins clink in my palm.

I leave the store and walk into a telephone booth. I need to call my mom. I don't know what I'm going to say but I need to talk to her. It's too much, all this. It's too much for me. I drop a coin into the slot and listen to it slide down the insides of the phone. 432-0077.

"Hello." She answers the phone. It's by her side of the bed. She sounds wide awake, even though it's past two am, even though she should be asleep.

I listen to her breathe, and then I hang up the phone before I can hear anything else.

When I get home I walk upstairs to my room. I'm tired. I'm not quiet on the way up, clomping my shoes on stairs that have always creaked. When I was a little girl, I'd tiptoe when I knew my parents were asleep. I'd pretend I was invisible. Did they ever love me? On the eleventh stair, the stair that makes the most noise, I stop. I rock back and forth, feeling the wood bend with my weight. At the top of the stairs, to the diagonal left, is my parents' room. Wraparound, behind where Zulu's cage used to be, and you're at my room. My brother's room is halfway between mine and my parents. We were babies in these same rooms. Sometimes he would come in my room and sleep with me, bury his head under the covers and into my knee. I sway back and forth on the stairs, until I feel the weight of someone else on the stairs behind me.

"Eurissa?" She always put the accent on the is of my name. Everyone else puts it on the Eu.

"Mom."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing." I don't turn around.

"Well, good night then. Get some sleep." I feel her robe against my arm. I watch her climb

the stairs, one foot after the other, in the same place on each stair.

"Mom?"

"Yes." She stops.

"Mom. I wanted to talk to you." I can't see her face.

"About what?"

"I wanted to talk to you about..." I can't just tell her what I want to talk about, because I don't know how to tell her that I think what she's doing is wrong. That she shouldn't get a boob job because it means something else. Does she see that, that it means something else? Can I tell her that?

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" She's halfway turned to me now. I can see her profile, her bumpy nose. It's a beautiful bump, though, regal. I wish I had a nose like her. And I look at the rise under her robe.

"I know it's late, but I have to tell you something." She doesn't say anything. I mesh my fingers together and invert my arms. I stretch, and I can almost touch the terrycloth of her robe. But I can't because she's too high, too far above me. "I just wanted to tell you something. I just wanted to tell you that I don't think you should do it."

"Do what." There's no question in her voice. Drop it Eurissa, drop it.

"Get a boob job. You shouldn't do it, you—" I drop my arms to my side. "Eurissa, I'll talk about this with you tomorrow." Her voice sounds like an echo.

"No, because there'll just be more and more tomorrows and this is just too much. You know what Dad told me tonight, you know what he told me?"

"Eurissa, I thought we understood each other. This doesn't really have anything to do with your father. This is about how I feel." She turns around again and I know she's about to leave.

"He told me my pants were too tight. And they were tight but what does he think about tightness? He knows all about tightness but he doesn't know me. He doesn't—" I wrap my hand around the stair rail and grip it as tight as I can. She's turns around and faces me. I can't read her expression.

"Eurissa, your father has a lot on his plate. He works too hard and I don't know what you're upset about. Sometimes you're just impossible. And why are you crying? This is nothing to cry about."

"Mom, my boobs aren't big, you know? But sometimes I think I could be happy. Sometimes for no reason at all I'll just think that I could be happy." I keep gripping the stair rail and looking at her

"Eurissa, stop this."

"There's no sense in stopping this because it just keeps going. You'll have scars, you know? Maybe you won't see them but you'll always be able to feel them. You'll have scars."

"Eurissa, what are you trying to say, because I don't think I'm understanding you. You're talking about things that have nothing to do with each other."

"I'm trying to say that there are other things besides dad and boobs. There are so many other things but we don't have any of them."

"You're making this into such an issue, Eurissa. Why create problems?"

"Maybe I'm just tired." She doesn't get it. And even if she does, why would I want to know. "I'm just overtired. I'm just tired."

"Well, get some sleep." She turns around and walks up the stairs. I watch her and grip the stair rail. I unclench my hand and walk to my room. I open the door. I don't turn on the light. She's turned back the covers. I sit down and feel the comforter sink beneath my thighs. Maybe I don't have that much insight. Maybe I should be happy with what I have, a family who eats dinner together every night. Maybe I should marry that guy I danced with, have children that help me

make dinner and get a boob job when I start to sag. There's a picture of my family and me on my bedside table. A skiing picture, the brightness of the clothes against the whiteness of the snow. The photographer took the picture at the edge of the mountain. I was scared that I was going to fall off, but my father held my pole with his hand and told me not to look down. You can see his hand on my pole in the picture. I was eight. My mother's beside him, hand on Thorval's jacket. I pick up the frame and hold the coolness of the glass against my cheek. I can't see anything, because it's in front of my eyes. I wish I were eight again without insight. Then I wouldn't see all the things I see. I wouldn't see the curve beneath my mother's robe, the fullness of my thighs in black pants. He used to tuck me in every night until I started pretending I was asleep when he came in. I could feel him looking at me through my eyelids. If someone asked me what happened, what made me stop looking I don't know what I'd tell them. But the glass is even colder against my cheek and I know what I'd tell them. I'd tell them that when my father held my pole in his hand he let go for a second, and that I could feel myself sliding backwards into the chill without him. Him letting go didn't cause all this, I know. But I can't help think he wouldn't have let go if things were different, if we were a different family. I slide under the covers, frame still against my face, and close my eyes. We're just sliding backwards, my whole family, into coldness and tightness— with our eyes closed.

Fiction by Gregg Johnson

The Bird (A Country Story)

At parties that spring, their friends told Randall he had adjusted remarkably well to his wife's embarrassing change. But he sensed an expectant curiosity in Jerry and Corrine, his neighbors, who seemed to circle him at times like their demented Labrador retriever, Boo, dragging the long chain he broke once a month, circled his back-yard, as if they hoped to stumble across the widening flaw in his marriage.

Corrine and Jerry had moved into their house during the first exodus from town, a year before Randall and Lauren found theirs. Jerry was an accountant for a software company two graduate students from the college had formed. Corrine worked for an interior design firm in town. Randall had once thought two women lived next door with Jerry. The Corrine he saw in the mornings, dressed in a satiny suit or dress, seemed an entirely different person from the blue-jeaned woman in a panama hat who spent her weekends hoeing her garden. She had decorated most of the houses their new friends bought. Randall worried she would make inroads into his living room with the same determination she applied to her garden. She had good taste--she never tried to make the old houses look new--but he liked his house the way it was. He was glad Lauren had agreed to keep the wood stove in the living room and herself suggested they keep the old refrigerator and oak table in the kitchen, where she spent most of her mornings washing the cabbages or tomatoes Corrine brought them from her garden.

He had become careful around Lauren. She was a delicate, intense woman whom he worshiped. Looking at her face while she slept or nibbled a waffle at breakfast, her hair pulled into a ponytail for the night, he felt the same as when he proposed to her at the Cafe du Monde in New Orleans ten years earlier. He never had the heart to tell her it cost them more to buy cords of wood for the stove than to pay for electric heat, or about the traps he set for the family of mice that lived beneath the refrigerator until she caught him one morning on his hands and knees, dragging out a trap with the bar sprung over its little red and gray gore.

"I wish I hadn't seen that," she said, washing a tomato in the sink. "Do you have to kill them?" She was crying.

He approached her problem the way he had for twenty years led his senior History seminar at the college, each morning repeating the same questions. But now, driving to the college or sitting up late for the last Screwdriver of the night, he could not find the answers. Should he have spoken to Lauren after Corrine saw her wade shoulder-deep into the lake their back yards shared? Made an effort to appear compassionate? (She hardly seemed to want sympathy.) Pretended not to notice the feathers that each night surged across her throat? He began these sessions with a mental recitation of the facts: Lauren was changing into a large white bird.

Around midnight each night, weeks before her problem became common knowledge, Lauren sat up in bed, swung her feet to the floor, and left the bedroom a woman still, her nightgown flowing behind her in only a faint suggestion of wings. He did not know when her transformation was complete. From the bedroom window he watched her walk down their sloping back yard toward the brackish lake. Only after she crossed the bright triangle from Corrine's bedroom lamp did he put on his clothes and follow her down the hill. As she descended into the lake, he imagined, she

rested her palms flat on the lapping water. By the time the water reached her throat, her gown had billowed around her into feathers and she glided between the rushes. But he crept down the hill only after he knew her arms had grown to wings, her neck folded to her breast, eyes shrunk to black pebbles sunk in a mask of black feathers. He was able to draw a breath only when she returned to bed, again human.

Should he stop spying on her at night? One night, while he lay on his stomach in weeds to watch, clammy water seeping across his chest, Lauren lifted her wings and sailed across the lake, her black legs dragging long skeins of water. It had never occurred to him she could fly. When she landed near the middle of the lake, beside the flickering reflection of the moon, and let her wings settle, he had to struggle to keep from standing up and shouting her name. She might have flown to the center of the lake because she wanted to hide, embarrassed. He knew none of her friends turned into birds, for the lake was otherwise empty. She would not know how to explain this sudden turn of events. But what would he do if she again rose into the air and flew over the weeping willows on the far bank, vanishing towards the lakes north of their house? He would run to the car and follow. If he lost sight of her, he would drive up past the county seat into the hills and descend into the plains to circle Lake Mattawan and Lake Mead until he found her floating coolly on the water.

His heart lifted when she turned his way and paddled towards his hiding place in the weeds. He crawled out to the bank and sprinted through the trees to his house, careful to stay in the shadows. Upstairs, he showered quickly to wash off the dank smell of the shallow water and lay quietly in bed when she came up the steps to their bedroom. If she wanted him to know her secret, she would tell him. He kept his eyes closed, his body humming with joy when she lifted the covers. Her nightgown brushed his arm with the softness that was so recently feathers.

Though the tall weeds around his hiding place kept him from getting a clear view, he believed she was changing into a swan. This thought brought some consolation. If Lauren was determined to change into a large bird, he could at least be grateful she had chosen a type generally believed to be attractive. She had not embarrassed him by condescending to become an aggressive heron, or other gangly bird. How could his students respect a man married to a pelican, with the awkward baggage of its large bill? If word reached Leonard Wells at the college that a faculty member was married to a large goose, or duck, he might try to dismiss him. But having a swan as a wife would surely be blameless.

Wells, though, was already a problem. When Randall had told him he was moving out of town, where all the faculty lived, Wells had thrust his hand up into his beard and scratched his throat with great deliberation, sensing some vague betrayal, an attempt to gain distance from the college. Randall understood. When he had first spotted the red For Sale sign in front of the house he thought had driven for hours, but now the forty miles to the school seemed ideal for reviewing what he needed to tell his seminar students. But he was a better instructor, now, he believed, than last year. Before he and Lauren had moved out of town, when he had come home to find Lauren in tears, he had begun to drink more than he liked, stopping at a bar near campus for two or three Screwdrivers, sometimes sitting up in his living room past midnight even when he had to teach at nine the next morning. He knew he was taking a stupid risk—it was a small college with only three thousand students. Spies lurked under the holly bushes along the concrete walks. From the oak trees, gray squirrels leapt to hop across the grass and chatter gossip. Any stray comment could return to haunt him, like his remark in class about how the lilies in front of the Student Center needed pruning. It was true—they were planted so close together that they would soon choke and die. When he went to get his mail later that day, the student assistant for the department, not looking up from spreading White-Out over a typo, told him the Dean of Students thought the lilies in front of the

Student Center were beautiful. And too often, after arriving late to class, he had killed time talking about his search for a house. The students had never complained, but he wondered what they thought of his comments about Lauren. He had once told them she needed a change, and that when she was unhappy he was unhappy. Another time, a tall student in blue jeans asked him from the back of the classroom if he had found a house. Without thinking, Randall had said they would find one soon if his wife would stop being so neurotic. The boy had laughed, but the rest of the class had refused to look at him for the rest of the morning. It was another week before they seemed easy around him.

Luckily, the story hadn't reached Wells, who would have taken too much pleasure in writing the note asking Randall to stop by for a chat. Randall had sat through one of these chats before when he gave all his students the C's he still thought they deserved, and could too easily imagine the scene: Wells in his sunlit office with the huge window that looked out on the campus, his hands fumbling under his beard as if searching for his script, or folded on his desk (twice the size of any of the other faculty desks), peering at Randall's tie as if reading his questions off it. Was he having problems with the students? A problem at home? Everyone who suffered through these chats heard the same questions, the same lecture at the end—Wells rising to stand at the window and watch the students leave the brick classroom buildings (Randall wondered if he scheduled these meetings only at times that let him use the students as props), his hands behind his back, his chest thrown out to lend dignity to his opening remarks about how everything the faculty did was for them. Next came a bit about how he had seen more than twenty autumns through this window (without publishing a single article) and how seeing the students pass the window made him sad. It reminded him of how they passed through the college, only to be replaced with other students who would also pass by the window. "If you understand my metaphor." Then came the final movement, which even Randall had to admire, delivered in a compassionate voice that conveyed the regret and near mourning of a man so humane that it pained him to offer a suggestion to someone so clearly in need of such a suggestion. And yet he would: "What I do is think of the future, Randall. I think we build the future, here." An abrupt turn to glance at the listener, who responded with a nod of the head. "That's where they are going when they pass this window. To their future and ours. And as a fellow historian, I don't have to remind you the future is largely a product of the past. What we do in the classroom affects all of our futures. You might say our careers." He then nodded himself, either agreeing with his own wisdom or acknowledging that he had recalled his lines correctly. Then it would be over. A few words about the need to check attendance each day and Randall would be through the door, down the hall, and out onto the concrete walk that led him past Wells' window.

But Randall told himself it had been months since his mistake, and he no longer mentioned Lauren to his students. He was safe. And Lauren was a different woman, now. Driving home from campus in the days after she began to change, he thought his misery was over.

Swans, he learned at the small brick library at the county seat, can fly hundreds of miles, but stay in one lake until winter convinces them to migrate. Cold air alone does not make them flee—their down is five centimeters thick. They flee to seek food. Winter slows the growth of the tubers and green grass along the edges of their lake. It was March. He had months to decide what he should do. But on the way home from the library, he stopped at a nursery and bought potted marigolds, flowers Lauren had always liked so much she preferred them to roses on their anniversary. He dug up the holly bushes along the back of their house and planted the marigolds in their beds so she would never have to look elsewhere for food.

When Lauren saw them, she seemed pleased. She clapped her hands together.

"Now I can smell them every day."

He looked down their back yard at the weedy lake when she clapped her hands. He imagined

he heard the flapping of heavy wings.

Discreetly, he learned from her mother and father that there was no history of unusual medical conditions. He had never been close to her family. Her father, Leo, was a silver-haired, unshakably good-looking ophthalmologist. Gretchen, her mother, was a pediatrician. A handsome couple, Leo in his dark suits and Gretchen in low cut sun dresses that made men stare at her longer than was wise, given Leo's quick temper and two-hundred pounds. Leo and Gretchen had always regarded Randall from a distance, as if unsure why their daughter, whose good looks so clearly reflected their elegant gene-pool, had chosen to marry a man nine years older and bald since his mid-twenties. He had to work up considerable courage to speak with them at all, and only managed to work swans into a conversation by inventing a pond beside the courthouse in Mattox, the county seat. He watched their faces for the slightest twinge, listening for a change in their voices.

"There's no pond in Mattox, Randall," Gretchen said, putting her usual question mark at the end of his name, as if unsure she had recalled it correctly. "And swans are nasty animals. I had a case once when a five-year old girl had half her finger bitten off."

"Nasty birds," Leo muttered, patting her hand.

What would they have said a week later, when, after he crept up from the lake one night, Lauren took so long to reach their bedroom that he lay watching the clock? After half an hour he went to the window and looked out at their back yard and the lake. The lawn was empty. At the base of the hill he could see nothing but the water shining blackly around the bowl of moonlight scooped from the center. Then he heard her padding up the steps and threw himself back in bed. He had hardly laid his head on his pillow when she opened the bedroom door. He kept his eyes shut, but she seemed to move slowly and he heard a rustling when she sat on the bed and slid under the sheets. He kept still until she had settled and her breathing slowed, then rolled over quietly to face her. Above the sheet, the moonlight falling across their bed illuminated a beautiful white wing.

When he lifted the sheet, he could see beneath her nightgown that her body was that of the slender woman he loved. Propping himself up on his elbow, he saw the wing grew directly from her shoulder, just below the strap of her gown, as naturally as if it were her arm, which it had entirely replaced. She was otherwise the woman he had married, her hair pulled into a ponytail for the night.

When he woke the next morning, a Saturday, she was already in the shower. He lay in bed and wondered what his dreams meant. The few dreams he remembered usually confirmed his belief that he was rational. His nightmare last year, in which he thought he woke up to find the bedroom on fire, flames climbing the white curtains, was understandable in someone who had just purchased an old house thirty miles from any town or fire department. His dream of last week disturbed him more: It was night and he and Lauren huddled together in their back yard beside a fire. Circling them, Corrine and Jerry held hands with Leonard Wells from the college. Beside them was Leonard's tall, pale wife and Gretchen, gyrating her hips at Leo, who wore a tuxedo, a white carnation pinned to his lapel. People from Mattox were also in the circle--the man at the nursery where he bought marigolds, the librarian who stamped books while he read about Lauren. Their laughter made Randall think they were about to break into a jig. But there was no music, only a rumbling sound, as if more people were gathering behind the circle of linked hands. He needed to put the dream out of his mind. One day while grading papers or driving to Mattox for groceries, he would understand it, just as he would one day understand why he thought Lauren had retained a wing. Patience, he had learned, was a virtue when considering his own mind.

But when Lauren opened the bathroom and sat on the bed, she was drying her hair with her uplifted wing.

He did not know if he should call attention to her misfortune or pretend not to notice the

long white appendage she was raking through her hair. Once he had complained about an expensive silk suit that made her look boyish, and she had sulked for days, so now he was careful not to look at her. But over breakfast, after he brought her cup of rose hip tea, he could not constrain himself, and blurted out words he knew he would regret.

"You've grown a wing."

She draped her wing across her lap like a linen napkin. "Yes, dear," she said in the matter-of-fact voice she used when they spoke of their need to polish the wooden floors in their living room. "I think that's what you would call it."

He considered calling their doctor. She seemed healthy, though, her high cheekbones giving off their usual morning glow, the feathers on her beaming wing lifting gently in the breeze from the kitchen window. Marriage, he knew, required understanding. He would have to accept her as she changed and grew. Only a small-minded man would probe her feelings or suggest she was making a mistake.

Yet he was glad they had no plans that day. He had no idea what people might do if she walked through the supermarket or the nursery. Fortunately, she seemed content to sit in the back yard between their fat forsythia bushes. He did not know what his neighbors Jerry and Corrine might think. He rarely spoke to Jerry, except when they saw each other mowing their lawns or at parties Corrine arranged. Corrine, who spoke with Lauren every day, always seemed annoyingly visible, or on the verge of being visible. When she wasn't digging up cabbages or dragging out a hose to spray her okra, she was jogging around their block. In the afternoons, she leaned a target stuffed with straw on a wooden easel and practiced shooting arrows until the dusk thickened and she could not find her arrows in the grass. "She's just outgoing," Lauren would say when he commented, and he was forced to keep silent. Now he could imagine Corrine glancing out her window and catching a glimpse of the new Lauren. Within minutes, she would be on the telephone to tell all their friends, and soon his own telephone would be ringing. It was only a matter of time before people found out their secret, but there was no need to make a spectacle of his marriage.

He doubted the locals thought highly of the new couples who had bought the houses around the lake north of town, let alone a history professor who knew so little about the county. The locals kept to themselves, except for the teenagers who knocked over mailboxes and tossed the beer cans he and Jerry collected from their front yards Saturday mornings. Randall made his one furtive, humiliating attempt to cross the line the day after Lauren retained her wing. He stopped at a bar across from the post office on the main square in Mattox, where he was picking up the mail after the local boys had dealt a particularly efficient blow to their mailbox, knocking it almost to the front door.

He had no intention of telling anyone Lauren's problem. The bar simply reminded him of a place he had liked as a graduate student. Red vinyl booths and bar stools. A team of plastic Clydesdales dragging a Budweiser wagon around a revolving bubble above the cash register. After a few glances from the men at the bar, he introduced himself to the bartender, who pretended not to hear and leaned on the counter to joke with his friends in baseball caps about people who paid four times what a house sold for last year, which had made Randall feel like the fool he decided, driving home, he probably was.

But the small college town, he had come to realize last year, was bad for Lauren. She had never been outgoing, but living in a place where she met all her neighbors in a week and knew all of the streets in town after one walk was too much for her. She wrote the college for information about a Masters program in Art History, her undergraduate degree, but put the brochures that came in the mail in their bedside table. One day he came home to find her crying at the kitchen table. He looked on the table, expecting to find unexpected bills or a letter, but all he could see was her empty tea mug.

"Aren't you going to ask why I'm crying?"

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't know. I just cry sometimes. I've been able to hide it from you until now, but sometimes I just feel tired and I sit down and have tea. You know how much I love it when you make me tea, but sometimes I make it myself and sit at the kitchen table and then suddenly I'm crying."

"People don't just cry. There must be some reason."

"I try to keep myself busy. Sometimes I think I'm just tired. Do you think I'm just tired?"

To avoid stopping at the bar near campus, he had begun to take long drives after class. Each day he drove farther out into the country, past the subdivisions on the north side of town, and wound through the flat pastures, turning onto roads that took him past horses and cows that turned to gaze at him as if they rarely saw cars, letting himself get lost so it would take him longer to reach their house when it was time to go home. He found landmarks that told him how far he had gone each day, and left the campus eager to explore what lay beyond the point at which the road narrowed to two lanes, past the rusted railroad tracks, the barn that hadn't seen paint since Truman was president. One afternoon, a train forced him to stop. Watching the box cars lumber by, he knew he should turn back. He couldn't trust himself on these trips. Each day he found it harder to turn the car around. Soon he might start thinking about not turning back at all. When the caboose clanked past he drove over the tracks and looked for a place to turn around. He had pulled into the driveway of the old house before noticing the For Sale sign beside a sycamore tree. In another hour, the woman who owned the house had told him the price, shown him the lake and the inside of the house, and produced the business card of the real estate agent in town who was handling the sale. He stopped at the agent's office the next morning and was given a pamphlet with a photograph of the house.

Moving to the country was not what Lauren had in mind, but she had liked the idea of owning two acres and living beside a lake. When he took her to see the house, he was afraid she would bolt at the sight of the wood floors shedding orange paint, the black outline behind the wood stove squatting in the living room. But she surprised him. "I like it," she had said. "I don't think it's as wonderful as you said, but we can make it work."

They finished the paperwork and made the down payment on the first day of cool weather. Leaves had begun to burn red and yellow, and the sycamore in the front yard erupted into a yellow as bright as the forsythia bushes in their new back yard. He had sworn when they rented the house near the college that he would never again move furniture, but in a week he had carried everything they owned to their house.

"You're lighthearted," Lauren said the day they turned in the keys to their old landlord and drove to the house. "Me too."

Then came winter and days dusk fell at six o'clock. By seven, far from the town's streetlights, the sky was pitch black. During those short days he liked the ritual of making her rose hip tea, loving the hot sweetness rising from her cup when he splashed boiling water over the tea bag, her smile when he bowed to her, presenting his gift, the way she lifted the cup off the tray and pursed her lips to blow across the steaming rim. For the first few weeks, they entertained themselves by working on the house, but finally the walls were painted, the knotted pine gleaming as brightly as their earlier hopes for the house. They were too far away from town to get cable service for the enormous television Lauren's parents had given them, but they settled on the couch to watch old black and white films. Lauren enjoyed musical comedies, and they were lucky that despite the hazy, doubled images, they could make out Fred Astaire blithely gliding across the screen on the public station.

"He's so beautiful," Lauren would say.

But as the days grew shorter, she spent more time in the kitchen and rarely had time to sit with Randall at night. He sometimes saw the college brochures on the kitchen table, and worried about how they could make their mortgage payments and still pay for tuition. He did not want her to work—any job she could get in town with a degree in Art History would have bored her more than staying at home.

One day he came home from the college and found her crying. She sat with her elbows on the kitchen table, a box of tissues beside okra and tomatoes from Corrine's garden. He remembered the first time he had seen her crying and remembered he had not been able to say anything to help her.

"Are you tired, Lauren?" he had asked.

* * * * *

From the house, the lake still looked much as it had in the realtor's photographs: an advertisement for the contemplative country life, cattails bowing in the breeze, the lake shimmering. But forty years of city life had spoiled him. Shortly after they moved into the house, he had given up on sickling the weeds and cattails in the shallows. The lake won, its mosquitoes driving him up to the house, his shoes and socks soaked with mud the luminous green of pistachios. From a lawn chair beside the house, he once watched a blacksnake sun itself near the green water.

Even before her change, Lauren had worshiped the lake. The mosquitoes that found his flesh so appetizing never landed on her skin, although she wore only a swimsuit when she lay on a blanket beside the rushes and cattails, and only fled to the house on the days Boo snapped his chain. He had a ludicrous affection for her, and would leap onto her stomach to lick her face. Her screams did no good, and he was always at her heels when she ran to the house to escape him.

But the day after she acquired her wing, Boo changed his mind. Randall was grading papers at the kitchen table when he heard the barking and Lauren's scream. By the time he reached them, Lauren had already fallen. Boo had bitten her shoulder near the wing. She was bleeding, trying to stagger to her feet. When Randall shouted, Boo backed away, but his barks were so loud that Randall had trouble thinking clearly. Instead of carrying Lauren to the house, he made her lie on the grass while he examined her wing. It did not seem to be broken, but a large gash had exposed cartilage near her shoulder.

When he heard a door behind him slam and heard Corrine call Boo, it was too late to shield Lauren. Corrine caught sight of her as soon as she took Boo by his collar.

"Lauren?" She passed Boo to Randall, who had to grip the collar with both hands to keep Boo from lunging.

He was sure Lauren would lift her wing to cover her face, but she only lolled her head to one side so she could face Corrine. "I'm fine, really. We need to talk, though."

Corrine was already kneeling in the grass, stoking Lauren's injured wing. "You should have told me."

He had only himself to blame. Before Lauren's change, he now saw, her looks had always made him uncomfortable. In her quiet way, she was beautiful, and her beauty bothered him. It removed her from his presence, although she was not aloof. She spoke to him as much as he could expect, and was considerate when he caught a cold or was tired from grading papers. When he was near her, however, she removed him from *her* presence, as if he was relegated to a separate existence, or existed to a smaller degree. All their friends doted on Lauren. When his mother visited, she spent most of the time with Lauren, and when she looked at their photographs, she complimented Lauren, whose dress shown so brightly beside his gray suit, Lauren whose hair and face glowed with what his

mother called self-possession.

Even after they moved to the country, he lived each day within her beauty, as if in a room he could never escape. It was the context in which they existed, to which she referred all her momentary shortcomings. A mention that her perfume was expensive, the bill for her hairdresser unexpected, she no longer met with the startled look she gave him in the early days of their marriage. She shrugged her shoulders, now, as if dismissing his momentary lack of perception. She never referred to her appearance. Implicit in this context, one of the finely woven threads of its weave, was the understanding that no such reference was needed. Had it been, she would have been diminished, the fabric shriveled. To mention the fineness of her hair, the precision of the lines in her taut, immobile face, would be to call attention to what had long ago, before he met her, ascended into a realm where analysis would have been a form of debasement.

So he had begun to insult her. Despite himself, his attacks were calculated and precise. His difficulty was that massive physical suggestions were impossible. To suggest she appeared older would have been as absurd as hinting she should diet. The evidence was absent. He was forced to rely on the only flaw she permitted, and even then he knew he was taking a step he might regret, for he had never dared suggest the slightest defect. He tried to reason with himself, and managed for weeks to suppress his need to hurt her, but one morning over a breakfast of waffles and scrambled eggs, the words came out before he knew what he would say.

"I hope," he said, "Corrine is feeling better."

She spread butter on a waffle. "I didn't know she was sick."

"She looks bad. But that's usually true when I see you with her."

For the first time, he watched her struggle. Her hand shook as she set her knife on the table. "I hadn't noticed anything wrong."

He made no further attempt until that night. She seemed quieter than usual at dinner, as if waiting for him to explain what he had said at breakfast.

"It's only" he said, "that you reduce them."

Her eyes shifted to the window in their dining room, and he hated himself for making her self-conscious.

That was the first night he felt her slide out of bed after midnight. He suspected nothing until he heard their back door slam. He looked out the window and as soon as he saw her walking down the hill to the lake he pulled on his robe and went down to get her. He had never seen her sleepwalk, and could not imagine why she would walk outside in the middle of the night, barefoot in the dew, the moonlight pulling at her gown.

By the time he stepped outside, she was gone. He called her name quietly at first, not wanting to wake Corrine or Jerry next door, but more loudly as he walked down the hill. Only when he reached the lake did he see her through the rushes, her wings raised off the black water, her head balanced on the curve of throat as if thrown back to regard this new world with a shocked, objectivity, suspended in the black air as if to invite contemplation of her perfection. He crouched, shaking.

Over the next month, she became a swan. Shortly after she retained her second wing, feathers spread across her shoulders, her neck slowly narrowed and lengthened. Yet she did not seem to change. She had always been a quiet woman. He had in fact liked her quietness, so he could not object that she had become uncommunicative. He assumed her change would force them to make a few adjustments to their life. He asked her if he should remove the doorknobs, since he doubted her wing tips could turn them, but she only demonstrated how easily she used her black beak. He bought a single step and set it on her side of the bed, but she said it was nonsense and with a single thrust of her wings lifted herself onto the sheets.

"Is this difficult for you?" she asked one night, pressing a wing against his forehead. Her voice had grown lower and he sometimes had trouble understanding her. Her voice seemed to come from the base of her throat, and at first he was frightened when he saw her beak did not move when she spoke, as if her words were carried directly into his mind. "I could see how it might be," she said. "When we married, you had no idea I would turn out this way."

"I like it," he said, and as he drifted off to sleep, her wing caressing his head, he could find no objection in his light heart.

Any resentment he had once felt towards her looks fell away. Lauren, he began to see, had always been self-conscious about her appearance, and now he feared her progression from woman to swan would make her look awkward. One of her arms would remain human, while the other shortened into a rubbery leg dangling ridiculously from her shoulder, its webbed foot wobbling. But her change was elegant. The delicate skin between her toes gradually thickened, the soft skin no different from the soft webbing at the base of his own fingers. Because her long dresses skimmed the floor when she walked, much as her feet skimmed the lake when she flew, he knew she was not worried. He was most aware of the change when they were in bed, and his leg accidentally brushed her feet. They did not feel like the cold rubber he expected, but warm flesh, their texture softer than human skin, and before he drifted off to sleep he often nestled his own feet between them.

Her head and face altered so gradually he could not be sure when her hair began to grow lighter, when the strands thickened and the white filaments erupted from their sides. The soft hair spreading over her neck was an appealing down. It was hair, and then later feathers covering her head, but as in everything she did, Lauren accomplished the transformation with such good taste no one could accuse her of abruptness or scheming for attention. She even shed her clothes as only Lauren could, wearing loose white dresses that soon became superfluous.

Gretchen and Leo seemed entirely unconcerned. When they came to dinner, they took no more notice of Lauren's condition than they took of Randall. Doubtless Lauren had explained her situation over the telephone. They were taking it well. Yet he had hoped for some slight acknowledgement of the situation from Leo after dinner, while they sat alone in the living room finishing their wine. When Leo only sat nursing his glass of Chablis, Randall had to take the initiative.

"She seems to be holding up."

Leo only stared at the wall a few inches above Randall's head, as if trying to accept that a man like Randall would naturally venture into a subject most people would leave unmentioned.

"Our daughter is an extraordinary woman," he said. The same words Leo had offered Randall when Lauren introduced him, the only words Leo had spoken to him at their wedding reception.

Randall had known the right answer.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, she is."

Everyone agreed. Randall's mother took Lauren's change well, though she had not actually seen the new Lauren. He thought she might have misunderstood him when he explained.

"Marriages have lives of their own," she told him over the telephone, clearly feeling he should be old enough to handle his own marriage by now. "If Lauren is behaving oddly, you just act as though you don't notice. Are you sure it isn't you?"

He was relieved when their friends immediately accepted Lauren's change. Women admired the brightness of her feathers and tried to imitate her. For weeks, they wore close-fitting caps and bought loose dresses whose folds faintly resembled wings, but near Lauren, the hopelessness of their imitation soon apparent, they gave up. When Julie Hudson, a local attorney, wore a feather boa to a party, the other women gave her such withering looks she quickly stored it away beside the sweaters

and coats in the bedroom. Corrine, particularly, seemed more intrigued than surprised. She liked to stroke one of Lauren's wings while she told her how much she admired her courage. Jerry gazed at Lauren's elegant throat.

"You seem to be taking it well," Corrine told him at one of her monthly parties, where she and Jerry had cornered him in the kitchen.

Jerry knocked back his drink and chewed the ice. "Some men might be a little taken aback."

"Lauren's an extraordinary woman," Randall said.

"Told you so," said Jerry. He nudged his wife and wandered out towards the living room.

Corrine sidled closer. "You said that to me last week," Corrine said. "Is that what you really think?"

"She is."

"I guess this is none of my business. But I worry about you when I see you buying her flowers. Sometimes I think you need a friend, Randall. Just looking at you, I sometimes wonder if you really tell me everything you think."

He was glad that Jerry came back into the kitchen then for another drink.

As far as he was concerned, a great simplicity had entered his marriage. Before Lauren became a swan, they had rarely argued, but their life sometimes reminded him of the child's game in which you poured a canister of brightly colored sticks onto a table and tried to withdraw one at a time without disturbing the others. For years, he had arranged his plans to avoid any conflict with their invitations to parties and been careful to avoid the house the afternoons Lauren had her friends over for tea. Lauren had redecorated their house in town each spring, and he was careful to budget his money to allow her this one extravagance. Now these worries seemed as far away as the lakes north of the house. He stopped driving to the college on weekends to do research in the library. He rushed to get through with yard work. He found more pleasure in helping Lauren bathe, lifting her into their bathtub, and sponging her long muscular back. He loved to lift her wings (he caught a scent of the marigold bushes behind their house) and slide the sponge along her sleek ribs. She seemed to take a deeper pleasure in him now, too. When he rinsed off the soap, pouring warm water from a plastic pail over her back, she lifted her head and shivered, letting out a sob of contentment.

But one afternoon, a month after she became a swan, he ventured down to the lake. His foot slipped into the marshy water skewered with cattails. The green water was warm and he shoved through the weeds. The smell of moist clay and the sweet odor of the high grass drew him forward, as if the lake wanted him near its center. The day had been so bright he had worn sunglasses before noon, but now the sun was behind the willows on the far bank. The light was dying, the sky streaked with a red that made him think of the filaments that lifted in Lauren's cup when he poured boiling water onto her bags of rose hip tea. The tepid lake lapped against his legs and hands. His mind felt light, buoyed on the water, and he could hardly feel his feet sink and slip in the mud. Out near the middle of the lake, fish were darting to the surface to feed, pocking the bottle-green water as though a light rain fell. When he closed his eyes Lauren flickered in his mind. The further he waded into the humming water, the more her wings shimmered, as if her feathers were white flames. The water seemed to brush a surface less substantial than human flesh, a material so delicate it wanted to rise to the surface of the lake, as if he would soon bob on the lapping water until it seemed too heavy to contain him. He would spread what had been his arms and lift himself, beating, into the twilight. But his mind were suddenly wrong. Lauren would not stay in his thoughts. She did not want to stay in his mind. It was as though he needed to take some other step, not towards the center of the lake, but in some direction only Lauren knew, but would not reveal to him. Clammy water struck his chest and he opened his eyes. His hands were spread out beside him, the same hands he had opened

his eyes to see every morning, and looking down he saw only his soaked shirt and chest. Trudging back to shore, he plunged to his knees in the sucking mud.

A swan, if angered, can beat a grown man to death with its wings. This only happened, Randall was glad to read, when a nest was attacked. They had agreed before their marriage that they did not want children. Besides, Lauren had never shown the least aggression.

But a change had come over her.

She had always been good-natured about the new attention she attracted. When Corrine or Julie asked how she made her feathers gleam, she patiently explained the thin oil she secreted into the shafts of her feathers and out the barbs. She complimented the women when they wore swan earrings and promised she would swim with them when summer came. When the husbands sat on the sofa at Corrine's parties and fed her celery stalks, she nibbled politely and never mentioned how the strands came apart in her throat and were difficult to swallow. She even bore the pats on the head Julie's husband gave her, and pretended not to notice how his hand lingered on her back, and when Jerry, after a few Screwdrivers, stroked her neck with his thick fingers, she only fluttered away to the hors d'oeuvres table to talk with Corrine.

But she had become unpredictable. In the mornings, she was already downstairs when Randall woke up. She sat on the sofa with the blurred television tuned to shows about men who caught alligators with their bare hands or the migration patterns of flamingos. On the couch beside her, he sat and worried about her silence. Did she have trouble sleeping? Was there something he had done? He could not tell if she needed privacy or did not understand his words.

"We need to talk," Corrine told him the next week, hands on her hips. She wore the red gym shorts and gray tee shirt she wore on her morning jogs. She and Julie Hudson had found him this Saturday morning at the nursery where he had stopped to buy flowers for dinner. Corrine and Julie had come up on him while he tried to decide between the potted chrysanthemums he had pulled to the edge of the shelf and some gladioli wrapped in green foil.

"It's Lauren," Julie piped in. "She seem different to you lately?"

Corrine shoved the mums back into place. "It's my garden— she's been at the cabbages again. Last night when I looked out the window, Lauren was hopping through the okra. It's not the garden, you understand. I'm only concerned for her."

He should have known it was coming. Corrine's anger had grown over the past month. Nothing she did could prevent Lauren from raiding the garden every night, pulling up cabbage heads and tearing leaves off okra bushes. She ignored the scarecrow Corrine made by stuffing one of Jerry's old suits, just as she ignored Corrine's talk during the day about the need to respect one another's properties, the need to eat a large dinner before going to bed. Only last weekend he had followed her again to the lake and watched helplessly as she lifted her wings and flew to the other side, where she floated near the opposite bank nibbling tall weeds. He crept around the lake, careful not to startle her, but she lifted herself out of the water and flew adamantly over his head. He searched through the weeds, stepping in pools of water and soaking his shoes and pants.

Finally he had slipped behind Jerry's house and edged between the tall rows of okra and corn. Near the redwood fence at the far corner of the garden, he stooped to pick up a single white feather. Suddenly a light came on in Jerry and Corrine's bedroom. He crouched and waited in the tall stalks, which swayed now in a breeze coming off the lake that rustled the crisp leaves and tipped the seed-heavy heads. A window scraped open. Through the stalks, he could see Jerry silhouetted by the light from Corrine's bedroom.

"Lauren?" Jerry said numbly. Corrine leaned out beside him.

"Go to back to bed, Lauren," she said. "We know this must be difficult for you."

Corrine pulled Jerry into the bedroom and closed the window.

He had waited until he was sure they had gone back to bed before creeping through the stalks towards his yard, careful to avoid Corrine's strawberries and clawing bushes of okra. When he reached the bedroom, Lauren was already been asleep in bed. He had not had the heart to wake her.

"I'll speak with her," he said to Corrine. In an encyclopedia, he had seen pictures of men who caught swans around the neck with long wooden hooks and dragged them to shore.

"And she's different on the telephone," Julie put in. "Sometimes she just sets the receiver down and walks away while I'm still talking."

"I'll speak with her." He grabbed the pot of mums and swung past the two women to the checkout counter.

He later felt ashamed for not speaking with her as soon as he got back home, but he had found her sitting innocently at the kitchen table reading the newspaper, a mug of rose-hip tea nestled between her wings. From her chest came the low, throaty noise that hummed through the house when she was content, mixing in his mind with the sweet, dark smell of the tea, and he had not found the courage to speak. That night he tried to broach the subject.

"Are you feeling well?"

She sat on the sofa and pecked at a cushion, dragging out the cotton stuffing and scattering it on the floor.

He was late following her to the lake that night. His trips down the hill the past six months had left him sore and bruised from wading in the dank water and stumbling up the hill through the woods. He lay in bed and prepared his offer to Corrine. Tomorrow he would buy cabbages himself, dig up the marigolds Lauren now neglected, and plant the cabbages in their beds so she would not stray into Corrine's garden at night. A reasonable solution. He was drifting into a warm sleep when he heard Boo's sharp bark and the clinking rattle that meant he had broken his chain.

Later he could not recall getting dressed and running outside. His first clear memory was of a single sharp growl while he ran into the garden, where Corrine already stood, a little unsteady, in a flannel night-coat, shining a flashlight down the rows of cabbage. He took the flashlight from her and waded deeper into the garden. When he came to the redwood fence, he stopped and clicked off the light. Boo lay where Corrine had apparently stopped weeding for the day. He had fallen across a row of cabbages beside a canvas glove and a spade, his head hidden by a wide cabbage leaf. His body looked like a sack that had been flung against the fence.

When Randall heard footsteps in the dirt behind him he was able to turn in time to stand between Boo's body and Corrine.

"Where's Jerry?" he asked.

"Probably having a beer." Corrine put her hand in Randall's hand and squeezed. When she pressed herself against his chest, he was shocked that he felt no prick of feathers trying to pierce his skin. "You wouldn't do that would you? Make me tramp alone out here in the dark?"

He was glad to see Jerry rolling towards them between the cabbages in red pajamas, though Corrine had been right about the beer, which he tried to sip while bumping over the dirt clods. Jerry's head seemed to clear when Randall showed him Bo. They got Corrine back into the house. In the basement, Jerry found a shovel and an empty dog food sack they pulled most of Bo into.

Jerry sobered up fast digging a hole beside the sack and Boo's protruding tail and hind legs. "Not a word to Corrine."

Randall did not bother to point out that the grave was in plain sight. He watched the white feathers that blew around the base of the fence. Jerry must have seen them, but he kept digging. When the dirt was piled to their knees, he pushed the shovel into the ground and together they dragged the sack over and rolled it into the hole. Boo was too big. After they shoveled the dirt into

the hole, a hind leg still protruded from the dirt. Jerry brought the flat side of the shovel down hard on the exposed paw, but it sprang back from the soil like a shoot of grass. He used the blade of the shovel to break the leg and then covered it with dirt.

"Don't be too hard on Lauren," Jerry said.

"If she's alive," Randall said, though he was sure she was in bed by now.

"I don't mean to tell you what to say. She's your wife. But remember she probably had to defend herself. Boo wasn't the brightest animal to ever walk the earth. Too bad he wasn't a cat." He looked at the grave and rubbed his palms on his pants leg. "We could have grabbed him by his tail and swung him out into the lake."

Heading for the house, Randall could think of nothing to say to Lauren. He was almost to the door when he thought to look back to the lake. Suddenly he could not breath. The moonlight had drawn all of the oxygen out of the air.

Near the moon's reflection sat Lauren, her wings folded. Beside her floated another swam, twice her size. His enormous black bill nipped the back of Lauren's neck. Lauren floated serenely ahead. Randall stumbled towards the lake when the large swan twined his head behind Lauren and grazed the feathers along her neck with his throat. Lauren slowed, and the enormous swan raised his wing and let it settle across her back.

Randall raised his arms, a shout trying to rise from deep in his chest. The big swan saw him and rose out of the shallow water, lifting himself once on his legs and then lifting his huge wings and flying away over the trees on the far bank. Lauren turned to watch him fly away, and Randall, his heart racing, suddenly did not want her to know he had seen. He ran up the hill and into the house.

He did not pretend sleep when she came up the steps, but she took no notice of him and fluttered up to bed, shouldered her way down under the sheets, and pulled up the blanket with her beak. He fought to put the image of the big swan out of his mind, but he imagined even now he was lifting his enormous black-tipped wings in the lake. Randall did not know what to say to Lauren, or how much she was to blame. He knew he could not expect her to behave like a person to whom nothing had happened. As he felt himself drift off to sleep, he knew he should try to discuss it with her in the morning. Later in the week, they would be at a party and see Corrine and Julie, who would surely speak with her, too. Lauren would not be able to withstand the onslaught.

The next morning, he was glad he had no time to think. Her old wound had reopened. He told himself it was not fear that made him tremble while he stripped the sheets off the bed and sponged blood off her shoulder. He made his mind go blank while he wrapped her shoulder with gauze and shaped a splint from a wire coat hanger so she could not do herself more damage. Then he drove to the hardware store in Mattox. After he pulled back into his driveway, he left the bag of bolts and combination locks on the car seat.

That night, she would not go to bed. She read the newspaper twice and pecked the television remote for an hour.

"Go on to bed without me," she said. "I'll be up soon."

"I'm not tired." He took the newspaper from her and settled down to wait.

When she finally climbed the stairs to bed, morosely, he thought, he got the bag out of his car and carried it into the kitchen, where he dumped the metal plates and bolts onto the counter beside the door and took his drill and screwdriver from beneath the sink. In ten minutes he had finished the kitchen door and the combination lock was in place. In another hour he had drilled the holes, attached the bolts and latches, and hung the locks on all the other doors. It was after midnight when he climbed into bed beside her. He tried to stay awake but drifted off listening to her deep breaths and watching her wings lift the sheets.

Shattering glass woke him. Lauren was not in bed. He found her downstairs in the kitchen.

The overhead light was off, but in a triangle of light from the stove, he could see her at the door. She had knocked a glass off the kitchen counter and now was leaping at the new combination lock, smashing it against the door with her beak.

When she turned to look at him, her eyes were so narrow he could only see her black pupils. She swung away and threw herself against the small window in the door. The glass held.

"You'll cut yourself."

She backed away to take a run at the glass. He managed to get in front of her. The blow knocked him into the door and he had to steady himself on the kitchen counter. When Lauren flailed out of the kitchen he followed her into the living room, where she lifted her wings and flung herself at the draperies on the picture window. Fortunately, her feet got tangled and she tumbled backwards, her head barely missing the iron stove. She settled on her stomach, exhausted. Through the feathers on her chest, he could see her heart beating. She hissed.

He fell to his knees. "You have to stop, Lauren."

He backed away just in time when she lifted her wings and her head shot towards him as if she were a cobra.

He kept still and waited.

"Lauren?" Her name seemed to calm her, so he repeated it as if he was stroking her feathers.

When she raised herself and waddled towards him, he opened his arms, but she swept past him and flew up the steps. When he reached the bedroom, she was at the window. He only glanced out as he wrapped his arms around her. He did not want to see clearly enough to tell if the dark shape near the center of the lake was the big swan.

In the bathroom, he turned on the tap in the shower with his foot, still holding Lauren wrapped in his arms. She fought. She was stronger than he expected, pushing her head against his chin with all of the strength of her long neck, and battering the side of her beak against his chest until he wrapped her in a towel and forced her under the warm tap water in the bathtub. He rested his head against her wide chest and listened to her heart try to rupture the flesh. He was exhausted, but he kept his arms around her until her heart slowed and she rested her head against his shoulder, her feathers pricking his cheek.

Summer struck without warning, and all of their friends left for vacations or hid themselves in the cool of their houses. Randall was glad the sun made Lauren seek the shade. She rarely ventured outside before twilight, and even then she made Randall use the garden hose to spray her with water while she lifted her wings and fluttered between the stunned forsythia bushes.

He had not mentioned the big swan or Boo's death. He doubted she remembered that night, which he thought of in the same way he thought about the night last year, when they had gone dancing at a club downtown and a big man with a mustache danced with Lauren. The man could not take his eyes off her, and watched her all evening. She did nothing to encourage the man, but had clearly been flattered by the attention, blushing when she came back to the table to sit with Randall.

Boo was the bigger problem. Corrine weeded the garden now without a raising her head to acknowledge them. The morning after Boo's death, Randall had walked over to the garden and tried to speak with her. She had been hoeing between the rows of okra bushes. Over her shoulder, he could see the grave Jerry had dug was empty. Beside it was piled fresh dirt. "I'm sorry," he said.

Corrine lifted the hoe and drove the blade into the dirt between them. Randall retreated to his yard.

By the time he gained enough courage to try again, it was late August. She was kneeling in a cabbage bed, turning up soil with a spade.

"I just wanted to say again that I'm sorry," he told her. "But not as sorry as Lauren," he added, although Lauren had said nothing about Boo.

Corrine sat up on her knees. "We had Boo cremated, in case you're wondering."

"We thought about offering to find you a new dog, of course."

She laid her spade on his foot and he remembered the pressure of her hand on his arm.

"I still worry about you, Randall. You're the only reason I didn't call the police. You saw what she did to him. His leg--she must have been out of her mind."

It was another month before they heard from Corrine. It was the fall, and she no longer weeded or watered the garden. Corn stalks fell across the cabbages, which shriveled into brittle husks. The scarecrow she had made from Jerry's suit collapsed and his coat blew into the okra bushes near the empty grave. She still jogged in the mornings, but she now took a new route that let her avoid running past their house. Jerry was more forgiving. He waved when Randall saw him in the yard and once loaned him kerosene to pour on a wasp's nest Randall had found under the eaves of the roof. One cold afternoon he made Rum and Cokes that they drank while they raked leaves and looked at the lake, which had risen several feet into their yards. Finally, Jerry told him Corrine wanted to see them again. She had lost track of everyone she knew, he said, and wanted to get the old crowd together again. "We have to get over this thing."

During the week before the party, Lauren seemed better. One night he awoke to see her staring out the window, and she once fluttered downstairs before sunrise, but she spent her days in the sun-struck back yard after he unlocked the doors. But at Corrine's party, she seemed preoccupied, and spoke to no one. He stood by the dining room table and watched her nestle on the sofa, staring at the coffee table, letting Jerry fill her wine glass with Chablis she bent to sip without bothering to thank him. When he stroked her neck, she did not search the room for Corrine. Randall remembered the enormous swan, the caress he gave Lauren with his black-tipped wing. Only when Jerry's hand lingered did she flutter away to the dining room table and drink from the glass in Randall's hand.

"You'll make yourself ill," Randall said. He could feel Julie and Corrine watching them. "You didn't eat before we left the house."

Corrine slipped her hand through his arm and watched Lauren drink. "Things will be better soon," she said. "Any day now, it will be warm enough to set up the target in our back yard and get out the bows and arrows." She went to her husband, who sat on the sofa, finishing Lauren's wine.

Lauren clipped an olive off a plate and spun it into the air, lifting her head and opening her beak to let the olive fall directly down her throat. When she filched a sesame cracker, she dragged a glass platter off the table, spilling crackers and cheese across the carpet.

Across the room, Corrine only shook her head at Randall. "Let her be," she mouthed.

But when Lauren hopped into the center of the table to peck the nuts from a cheese ball, Julie smiled at the other women and patted Lauren's head. "Tell us again about the oil in your feathers," she said, and hid her mouth in her fist, struggling not to laugh. The other women turned away, even Corrine, her shoulders buckling despite her attempt to control herself. "I can see why you're still enamored with her," Julie told Randall, patting his arm. "You must save a fortune in clothes. And of course," she added, now that everyone was laughing, "she eats like a bird."

Watching the women laugh, their heads thrown back, their shoulders heaving with pleasure, he could not suppress the force that sprang from his lungs and he was hardly able to stand. It was a silly joke, but the walls seemed to quake with the force of their laughter, the floor rocked towards the ceiling. As his laughter died Julie caught her breath and exploded into a long throaty shriek. He could only stop himself when he saw Lauren looking at him, her eyes as black as the lake would be later that night.

As soon as they reached their bedroom Lauren leapt to the chair beside their window.

"You should come to bed, now," he said, while he stroked her long back. In the reflection in the window, they looked much as they had in the photographs his mother admired. Lauren hovering in the foreground. Behind her the faithful husband, his hand on her back, silent, silenced. He thought about saying he would give her a divorce. The lawyer who had reviewed their contract for the house could recommend a good divorce attorney. Or Julie Hudson would handle it. He would not fight. She could have the house. She would need to be near the lake. He could move back into town, where he would at least be closer to the college. When she turned to face him, she seemed to want to say something, her head tucked against her chest and her eyes searching his as if she was embarrassed by her situation and everything they had gone through in the past year.

"Won't you come to bed?" He would talk to her about the divorce in the morning. She nodded, but when he undressed and lay beneath the sheets she did not move. He could imagine her thoughts, and hoped she knew how terrible he felt. He had apologized on the way home for bolting the doors, explaining it was for both their good. After ten years of marriage, they had come to this moment when they both understood each other's regrets over every ill word they had ever exchanged, over every argument. She had lost control of her life. He was doing the best he could. He looked at her on the chair and remembered stroking her neck and sponging her long back. He could almost feel the force of her heart against his hand. He knew he could not divorce her.

"Lauren?" he said. When she looked at him, he was careful to drain his eyes of every trace of anger over the party, careful to let her see how much he understood, hoping she would remember how he held her in the shower, how before the changes in their life they had lived simply, and if at times he had neglected her or taken for granted that she would always be with him, they could both try now to be together. Their marriage could again be good. She bowed her head, her eyes on the floor as if she were silently accepting his thoughts, and forgetting, he hoped, his laughter. When he patted her pillow, she hopped off the chair and fluttered to bed, nestling her head against his shoulder.

She was at the window when he woke, her beak almost touching the glass.

"Lauren," he said, but she would not turn to face him. She lifted her head and from her throat came a long moan. He lay and coaxed her, reminded her of their times together before they married, their trips to the beach, the vacation they took to New Orleans, where he proposed to her. She raised her wings and seemed to shiver as she bowed towards the lake.

He got out of bed, pulled on his robe, and went downstairs. He turned on the kitchen light and walked to the door, shutting his mind to all thought, determined to let no memory or emotion enter. Even as he turned the combination lock, he could hear Lauren pad up behind him. His hand shook when the lock sprang open and he lifted it from the bolt, pulled back the latch, and opened the door. Below him, Lauren, her wings lifted in anticipation, thrust her head out into the dark. Her wings flashed and she was gone.

Upstairs, he left off the lamp and stood at the window. Lauren stood on the grass, hesitant, he assumed, uncertain she was ready for the consequences of her decision, missing him. He turned away from the window and stepped back into the safety of their bedroom, suddenly afraid she would turn her head and look up at him. He wanted no memory of her eyes.

He switched on the lamp beside their bed only after he saw the lights from Corrine and Jerry's yard reflected on his window. When he pulled on his robe and reached the kitchen, he heard Jerry's shout, a loud bark. He stepped out into his back yard barefoot, half stumbling towards the garden where Jerry was waving his arms at Lauren and the big swan, trying to shoo them out of the garden.

Corrine, near her back door, notched an arrow and raised her bow. The big swan took to the

air, his feet grazing the tops of the okra bushes. Lauren, at the far edge of the garden, flailed her wings, trying to gain the air, but her legs were tangled in the jacket that had fallen from the scarecrow. She beat the ground with her feet, battering the jacket into the soil. Before Randall could move, she had twisted her neck and ripped the jacket away with her beak. She raised her wings, and, beating against the dirt, lifted herself into the air. She had almost cleared the bent stalks of corn and okra behind Boo's empty grave when Corrine shot.

The arrow struck Lauren in the chest. Her wings made another downward thrust and she rose clear of the garden. Then she lurched and fell into the dirt on her bad wing.

Corrine dropped her bow in the grass.

When he reached the garden, Lauren lay on her back, her black eyes staring towards the lake. He sat in the grass and lifted her onto his lap. The arrow had entered her chest near the heart, but splintered when she fell. The shaft dangled to the ground. Around her on the grass lay stiff feathers. He picked up as many as he could and pressed them against her chest, as if stopping the flow of blood could do any good. The big swan had already settled on the lake, near the bank, and was cleaning himself, darting his beak beneath his flickering wings. Laying his head on Lauren's chest, Randall could hear no heartbeat. His own pulse was so loud he could barely hear Corrine when she stood over him.

"She wasn't one of us any more," she said. "You can see that."

Through the feathers of Lauren's wing, he could see Corrine's eyes were horrible, straining through tears to make him understand. Behind her in the garden, Jerry sat between two rows of cabbages, his hands over his face. Randall had to turn away from them. At the bottom of the hill, the big swan lifted out of the water and flew out low across the lake and over the trees on the far bank. Randall ran his hand along the feathers on Lauren's good wing, his cheek against her chest, and remembered the beat of her heart against her breastbone.

"Yes," he said. It was after all true.

Fiction by Caroline Murnane

Bright Flashes

When Jordan Riley died, the mothers wished to be mother of the best friend of the deceased. For themselves and for their daughters.

"Deborah shopped for homecoming dance dresses with Jordan," said Mrs. Taylor. "She picked out that beautiful green dress that Jordan wore when she was crowned homecoming queen. Deborah really knows her colors."

"She and Sally Ann were cheerleaders together," said another. "Jordan had trouble with one of the cheers, and Sally Ann stayed after practice for a good *hour* helping her with it."

"Maura and Jordan walked home from school together when they were young."

"Jordan came to our lake cottage twice last year."

"Julia knew her like no one else. She's taking it really hard."

Jordan's voice had been soft but strong, a little raspy, a little Marilyn Monroe. The voice smiled, even when the mouth didn't. It purred and cooed and knew exactly what it said, always. Her smile extinguished all other brightness in the room and drew that inferior brightness into its own light, strengthened it into a cool and intense gleam. Sixteen-year-old girls didn't smile like that, didn't speak that way. The voice and the smile and the body and the walk and the demeanor seemed grafted from some place very, very far away. When I think of her now, I am not sure she ever really existed.

Jordan's mother was in Europe on a two-month tour—business related—and had left no contact information. There was no choice but to bury her. What else could they do? Julia's mother, Mrs. Baker, took charge of all arrangements because she was the first to learn the news from her next-door neighbor, the surgeon who tried to undo Jordan's massive internal injuries after the accident. Mrs. Baker refused the other mothers' pleadings to assist her. She patted Jordan's father's arm and said that she would properly show the world the Jordan she, herself, knew and loved. "I give credit where credit is due," she said, and wiped a tear. Jordan's father was a quadriplegic, hit hard by a wave at a Florida beach. He was not yet used to it after five years. As if he ever would be. His son was also paralyzed, numb with devastation, and they both skipped the funeral parlor viewing. Only one relative was there, the uncle who had walked Jordan down the field at halftime when she was homecoming queen. He drove in from Detroit in a black Mustang just like Jordan's. He'd recommended it to her father as a sixteenth birthday present.

I could not tell you how anyone else dressed in high school, including myself; yet I can easily visualize Jordan in \$70 designer jeans with a leather label on the back, plain tucked-in t-shirts, brown oxfords or soccer shoes. She always wore a belt. Her ears were not pierced. She used flowery shampoo on the soft sunny strands that she constantly flipped over one shoulder and then the other. She had braces when I met her, but smiled with all her teeth. The teeth were hot gossip for two weeks when her braces came off. She grinned more than ever, dazzling boys, girls and teachers with straight white rows. Big teeth in a big smile. She wouldn't wear her retainers, said no one would notice the change if she did.

Mrs. Baker set up the viewing. "I intend to celebrate Jordan's life," she told the visitors. "Julia told me that Jordan loved music, loved to dance. And she was homecoming queen, so it's a

kind of this-is-your-life theme." Jordan's newspaper obituary read: "Visiting hours, 5-8 p.m. at Astor Funeral Home. Semi-formal dress. Admission: one canned food item for the Mathey Homeless Shelter."

"I would have made it formal," said Mrs. Baker, "but we don't want anyone tripping on those long dresses. The parlor isn't very big."

At the last minute, the undertakers convinced Mrs. Baker to leave the casket closed. Jordan's head and neck were severely scarred, and the turtleneck they'd dressed her in didn't quite hide the evidence. Mrs. Baker tied green and gold balloons to the casket handles and draped Jordan's green and gold East River High School varsity letter jacket over the top, so the embroidered cheerleading and tennis logos showed. Behind the casket she placed a framed portrait of Jordan in her green homecoming dress. Mrs. Baker had gained access to all the Riley family photo albums as well as to Jordan's bedroom and closet, because Jordan's father and brother were too tired to resist her. Tennis trophies and stuffed animals decorated the parlor tables, and the pictures and invitations from Jordan's dressing table mirror were carefully realigned around the mirror above the guest book. Her schoolbooks were piled beside a tray of refreshments: punch and cookies and mini sausages. Her hairspray and bobby pins and her homecoming queen crown lay atop another table. A hairbrush still held soft blond strands.

I met Jordan on the first day of eighth grade. Homeroom. New school, new neighborhood, new city. New kid. I tried hard to appear cool, pretended I had been cool at my old school, had a ticket to automatically fit. There were only two other girls in the class who appeared to be cool. Maybe they were faking it too, but I sat at their table formed from four desks pushed together. Then Jordan walked in and sat next to me and I knew, for once, that I had sat at the right table, that I had made the right move.

We walked home from school together that first day. Her house was only two blocks from mine. When the bell rang after seventh period, all the boys gathered in the parking lot to encircle their eighth-grade goddess. Her smile was big enough for all of them, though they were thirteen and goofy and she had a soccer-playing boyfriend at a private school. They followed her on their bikes to the front door of her brown-shuttered house and watched her walk up the driveway. Watched the front door close behind her.

"You see," Mrs. Baker told the guests. "It's homecoming night. The excitement of getting ready, and the dance itself." She pointed to the formal dresses draped over chair backs and the paper streamers taped to the wall. Masking tape on the rug formed a dance floor in the middle of the parlor. A teenage boy selected songs from Jordan's CD collection. Mostly dance music—this was to be a celebration.

Mounted photographs and collages of Jordan, at all ages, with all people, covered every inch of floor space outside the taped-off dance floor. Those white teeth, straighter in the later photos, flashed bright and strong. Jordan wearing a bikini and eating ice cream at the beach. Jordan's fourth-grade soccer team, the Max's Pizza Rockets. Jordan doing the splits, cheering for her team at the homecoming game. Jordan playing with Barbie dolls. Jordan posing on a park bench, lying across the laps of her brother and his friends. Jordan in the winter, wearing a ski hat and a long scarf.

A double-sided bulletin board displayed the index cards that Mrs. Baker handed visitors at the parlor door. "Memory cards," she called them. The comments were mostly about Jordan's hair, her teeth, her smile, her friendliness. Few people described specific incidents, and few signed their names.

"Jordan always waved to me in the hall."

"She smelled like flowers."

"She made everyone feel like they belonged."

"Jordan was so comfortable with herself."

Jordan invited me to a party, my first party with boys. I was so nervous that I changed my clothes four times and even attempted mascara. I mentally listed the ones I wanted to talk to and recombed my hair, retucked my shirt, retied my shoelaces. Ten minutes before my father was supposed to drive me to her house Jordan called, said she was sorry but she had to cancel the party. She said something about fathers, how they get mad about things. She seemed embarrassed, slightly. I was crushed, sure that she had decided at the last minute that I simply was not cool enough. I would have ruined her party. I dreaded going to school on Monday, berated myself for the thing that I must have done wrong to be crossed off her list. I had no chance of fitting in now; I wasn't cool.

But on Monday Jordan flashed her teeth at everyone, apologized, and promised to have another party. She'd really cancelled it.

Kate told Laura and me: "Her mother didn't come home for the weekend and she was going to have this big party. Her mom is never home because she works in Boston during the week and flies home on the weekend. And Jordan has to take care of her dad pretty much by herself since he's in the wheelchair and her brother is in college."

And Kate said, "Oh, I'm sure it's just so hard being Jordan Riley."

"Dance!" said Mrs. Baker. "Celebrate!" Dozens of teenagers, in dark jackets and ties and short sequined dresses, stood frozen. They spilled into the halls. Some sat on the floor. "Dance!" The stereo pounded. The teachers, the high school principal, the mothers of Jordan's classmates—all looked as clueless and blank as the students. A foreign exchange student whose name no one knew stood close to the casket, as if a sixteen-year-old girl needed the protection after death that she had needed in life. Mrs. Baker pulled her daughter from the crowd. "Come on, Julie! To Jordan!" She turned to one of the other mothers. "She must set the example. Jordan was her best friend." Julia started to refuse, but her mother scowled and held up a threatening finger. "She's studied both jazz and ballet for eleven years," Mrs. Baker said, loudly.

"Mom, my god," said Julia. But she began to dance anyway, careful not to bump into the ice sculpture behind her. It was shaped like a river rat, the East River High School mascot. Others paired off. Some held wadded tissues for tear-streaked faces. The pink gels that Mrs. Baker had taped over the track lighting on the ceiling cast a sick, unhealthy pall over them all. There were too many bodies in one room, packed tight like crayons in a box. They inhaled one another's minty breath, moved their hands and legs in and out, swallowed pink air to keep their bodies warm, swallowed pink punch to keep them cool.

Julia took the hand of a boy in a navy suit when a slower song began. "This is lame," she whispered, "but do you want to go out afterward?" He leaned into her and sniffed her hair. They danced together, close. Another girl pushed herself too hard against her partner, and he stumbled backward into the wall of canned food donations that Mrs. Baker planned to take to the homeless shelter on Saturday. Dancers flowed in and out of the crowded parlor. Some were pushed behind the casket. They shifted and swung, trancelike.

After a few songs Mrs. Baker pulled two gold paper crowns from behind the mountain of canned food, tapped Julia and her partner on their shoulders, and placed the crowns on their heads.

"What's this?" said the boy. He took off the crown and examined it.

"You're the homecoming king and queen," said Mrs. Baker.

Jordan pitched on my softball team. The league was fast-pitch, but she pitched slow, one underhanded swoop. She was terrible, the worst pitcher in the league, and she rarely came to practice. But the coach always put her in the game, always started her. The neighborhood boys and the parents in the stands cheered her on: "Hey, hey, J.R.!" She waved and winked at some boyfriend or other and smiled at the crowd when she walked four batters in a row. Fearless Jordan. She wiped the ball on her navy shorts and swung her arm to the sky.

Julia Baker drank her punch and whispered to Deborah behind the bulletin board of index cards: "Everyone is like oh, blah, blah, I can't believe she's gone." She pointed to an ink-soaked index card. "Like this: 'Jordan was the most beautiful girl in school. She was also the nicest. She had a smile for everyone.' Okay, whatever. She wasn't that nice. She wasn't, like, this good girl that everyone is pretending she was."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, remember the time she got so drunk and Doug had to carry her home and he left her on the front porch?"

"Everyone gets drunk at those parties, Julie. Everyone at that party was completely drunk."

"What about when she took my spot in the cheerleading pyramid and told Coach that I was going to miss the game even though I told her not to?"

"The homecoming game? Are you kidding? She told Coach that you were sick so you wouldn't get in trouble. She helped you throw up behind the bleachers!"

"She wanted to be on top of the damn pyramid," said Julia. "And, she was such a tramp. She always had a new boyfriend."

Deborah looked at the casket. She shrugged. "Boys liked her."

Jordan called me on a snowy Sunday to see if I wanted to go sledding in the arboretum on the corner. Laura and Kate lived down the street so I called them to come along. They both said, "Jordan called you?" I didn't know you were friends with her." The four of us trekked over to the slippery hills where college students slid around on garbage pail lids. We had two sleds and doubled up. I watched Jordan and Kate shoot down a ravine to a patch of clean, untouched snow. Jordan sat on the back of the sled, and her blond hair floated behind her. They reached the bottom and flipped over. Breathless, cheeks red, Jordan flung herself on the ground, laughed and rolled from side to side, clumps of snow in her hair. She made a snow angel, extended her arms to forever.

Darkness fell and we dragged our sleds to Laura's house, where her parents fed us spaghetti and chocolate cake. The dishes were cleared, and Kate and Laura and I went into the den to watch TV, but Jordan stayed in the kitchen and talked with Laura's mother. When I went back to the kitchen for a soda, Laura's mother had her arm around Jordan's thin shoulders and was patting her hand. They sat there until 10:00, when my father picked me up with the car and offered Jordan a ride. She looked small as she walked up the driveway to her big house. All the windows were dark.

Thursday's headline read: "East River High School Class President Killed in Crash." Mrs. Baker had taped the article to the fireplace mantel in the funeral parlor. A large color photo showed three medics lifting a covered stretcher onto a helicopter. A brown oxford stuck out from under the sheet at one end, a strand of blond hair at the other. The remains of a black Mustang lay behind the medics. The article said that she was in the last three-mile stretch of a six hour drive, presumably fell asleep at the wheel, crossed the highway median, and collided with an oncoming pickup truck whose driver was instantly killed. She was still alive when she reached the hospital.

I first heard the story from Kate on Thursday morning. "She skipped school to visit her

boyfriend at college, and the drive was six hours each way. He wouldn't come for homecoming weekend and another guy asked her, a senior. She wanted to go, but she wanted to tell her boyfriend to his face so she wouldn't hurt his feelings. She asked Julia to go with her so they could split the driving, but Julia said she had a test or something. And then Jordan asked like five more people and none of them would go either. Maura and Deborah and all these other people."

Someone pulled a balloon from the casket and batted it into the crowd. It floated over the dancing heads, bobbed back and forth, up and down. The parlor noise escalated and matched the music pounding on the stereo.

"Here, here!"

"Over here!"

"Hit me!"

Mrs. Baker and the other mothers moved their discussion into the back hallway, at the top of the stairs that led to the morgue.

"Linda was going to go with her that day, but wasn't feeling well."

"Deborah really wanted to go with her but she had a Key Club meeting after school."

"Jennie *never* misses class. If she had just cut school this once..."

Julia Baker, hesitant to dance before, pounded her feet on the floor. "Come on, you guys!" She adjusted her gold paper crown and grabbed the boy in the dark suit. "Don't stop!" Only classmates remained in the parlor now, save the mothers in the hall and Jordan's uncle, who sat on a chair with his head in his hands. Julia danced, and others followed. Under the hot pink lights they were frantic, boys with sweaty collars and neckties loosened, girls tripping on high heels, upswep hair fallen to their shoulders. The balloon flew, propelled by elbows and fingertips. The bulletin board easel toppled over, the river rat lost its tail, and a tennis trophy dropped from the fireplace mantel onto the baseball captain's head. Punch splashed a framed photograph of Jordan opening a birthday gift. Deborah grabbed Jordan's hairbrush and sang into it like a microphone. Masking tape from the dance floor stuck to shoes. Mrs. Baker's displays, askew. Broken heels. Torn pants cuffs. In, out, around, a wild, panicked dance.

The song ended. A loud wail replaced it. A short boy buried his face in the green and gold letter jacket atop the casket. His hands grasped the handles. Tears soaked his cheeks as he sobbed in the silent parlor. The others were motionless; some with hands frozen at their sides, others with arms uplifted, still ready to dance. Julia's hand quickly reached up and took off her paper crown.

Mrs. Baker ran into the parlor, half a dozen mothers behind her. The crowd parted, but she stopped in the doorway when she saw the boy.

"Who is that?" whispered a mother.

"He's some foreign exchange student," said Mrs. Baker. She shrugged and turned around. "What a little weirdo. He probably didn't even know her." The other mothers followed her back into the hall.

I stopped speaking to Jordan shortly after the day we went sledding. I was terrified that she would suddenly dump me for a cooler friend, so I panicked and dumped her. In June she wrote in my yearbook: "I will miss you so much next year if we don't see each other. You might not want to, but please call me over the summer (if you want to). Love always." I didn't call her. I had a party in July, on her birthday, and didn't invite her. My mother said I should, and I said she would not come anyway. I liked her so much, and I wanted her to think that I hated her.

The last time we talked was the homecoming dance, our sophomore year of high school. Under the flashing lights in the hot gym she temporarily forgot my cold brush-offs of the past two years, and I forgot to brush her off. Maybe she'd known that my coldness was only a disguise for

missing her.

Her date had temporarily disappeared, and she walked out of the crowd, a bright figure in a green dress, alone. The flashing lights illuminated her blond hair and white, white teeth. She walked right up to me, took my arm and said, "Come on!" Pulled me, then another girl, another boy, two more of each, into the fast-moving crowd of partnerless dancers, and spun in circles. She moved fast and moved well, wove herself through the crowd, slid by but never quite brushed the dancers' jerking shoulders and knees. Then the song ended and her date approached. She waved to me as he pulled her into a dark corner.

I cheered for her from the floor later that night, when she stood on the stage in the gym and the principal placed the crown on her head. Her date led her back to the dance floor. She took his hand, and his shoulder, and pressed the green dress to his dark suit. The music started, slow and even, and we all watched her dance again.

Fiction by Claire Willeford

El Reloj

She is sitting before the mirror, staring blankly at the distressing image of herself: dark eyes looking shocked and empty, black hair tumbling crazily about her face. Her temples throb with migraine and fatigue; her eyes sting, although she has not been crying. Her dry lips have begun to crack since the cold weather started. In the tranquil silver of its own reflection her face is lost, blurring into meaningless shapes that make her head spin. She is tired.

Her fingertips move in absent circles on the smooth, polished surface of the vanity. She has become so nervous lately – each little sound gives her a start, and she finds herself looking constantly over her shoulder as though she were expecting to see someone behind her. She knows that Juan's cousins have noticed this. They are worried about her. All day long her thoughts jerk by like railroad cars, unable to move smoothly; they rattle and grate against each other like steel grinding glass, and she can no longer force the powers of her concentration. The chilly black nights, full of evil dreams, have been devouring her sleep since Christmas.

Shadows from the window curtains move languidly on the walls, displacing small sections of the shrill winter light. The trees outside are bare and forlorn, and a cruel cold wind gusts through their branches, producing a sound halfway between a shriek and a moan. The sky is relentlessly clear. The small winter sun, bleak and pale, seems too far away to be real, and she wonders if time will ever move again.

A door slams shut in the apartment down the hall, startling María. She shudders, her reverie shattered, consciousness prickling as though her name has been called. She is no longer alone – the ghosts have broken once again through the fragile barriers on her mind, and they clamor restlessly about her: a soft, sad chorus of reproaches and regrets. Her skin crawls with helpless dread; with murmurs, echoes of everything she has done wrong and everything she is powerless to repair. She can feel the panic rising in her throat. Time is so cruel – the days slip by like water and there is never enough of it, no matter how hard she tries; no time to fix her mistakes or to make sure her decisions are right. The hours streak by in a blur, an intimidating merry-go-round of events that leaves her paralyzed and tongue-tied, frozen in her own apprehension. She knows she has been cheated but she doesn't know what to say.

It has been three years since María left Guerrero and her parents, following a man she didn't even know – she had met Juan only two months before. They were poor and it wasn't difficult to convince María that she wanted to go. Juan said that the jobs were good and everything was cheap; she could have a nice place all her own, and he would take care of her. There is nothing wrong with the apartment, but María is lonely for her sisters, and sometimes afraid of getting lost in the vast gray that surrounds her. This city is so big.

When she first learned of Juan's deception, she could not speak for three days: she was scared that all she knew and all the torment that she felt would come pouring out in an unquenchable stream and drown her. Since then she has wrapped herself in silence, though not quite as completely. The house is almost always empty, since Juan has taken to leaving early and coming home when he thinks she is asleep. She sits all day at her vanity and looks at nothing, not knowing what to think or feel, and the shadows collect in her mind; she listens to the noises of the barrio without hearing them, and the boredom of those slow afternoons never touches her. Sometimes if she looks out the window, she sees the Rodríguez girl walking down to the bodega, smiling and

humming a tune, moving with the easy swing and rhythmic grace of a happy woman, and her insides knot together. She cannot give names to the feelings that consume her. María has no words, she has no voice, and that is why she is lost; that is why nobody ever notices her and why she is alone.

She slowly braids her hair as the daylight begins to fade, wishing that her mother were here. She knows that she should have stayed in Mexico and finished school; she accepts this now, realizing that she can do nothing to change it, but with an odd pang of loss and self-blame. What are you doing, María Carmen Torres de Roblero? What have you done already? She knows suddenly how young she is and it makes her sad. She feels as though she has lived a thousand years.

She thought for a long time that she loved Juan, but now she knows that what she feels cannot be called love. She has grown to resent him, almost to hate him, for all the crosses he has laid upon her back without gratitude: the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, the making sure that he is always cared for, and most recently the neglect. They hardly ever speak now. She has always been hardworking but he doesn't notice anymore, too engrossed in work, in the bar, in the Rodríguez girl. The nights are long. They still share the same bed but exist in it separately, Juan turned to the wall and snoring, María lying on her back, eyes wide open in the dark, straight and tense as though in her coffin.

The wind rattles the windowpanes like a shrill, meddlesome old woman, startling María. She remembers herself at fifteen years old, inflamed by the fever of young love, dreaming of babies and a white church wedding, looking into Juan's eyes and seeing the whole world reflected there. It seems so long ago. The marriage was nothing special, a hurried ceremony in the judge's office, and nothing to celebrate afterwards; she doesn't think that she is ever going to have children, since the awkward gropings in the narrow bed have been going on almost three years now without result. Until recently Juan did still use her for sex occasionally, if he'd had a fight with the Rodríguez girl or if he'd been drinking, but there has been no intimacy for a long time, no affection. She doesn't feel like she knows him any more. He doesn't beat her often, but he is so mean: he calls her gorda and lazy, although she is neither one; asks her accusingly why she doesn't talk; threatens to leave, although he never does. María used to cry, but it has been too long and she has wasted too many tears on him. The well of her emotions is running dry.

She thinks longingly of Mexico, closing her eyes and breathing the bustling plazas and hot days like morning air. Life was hard there, that is true, but how could she have known that this country would be so different? She writes letters to her mother and each month the paragraphs are shorter, more painfully bare of things to say. Maybe soon she will stop writing altogether. She is so ashamed of herself and of everything her life encloses.

María learned all about boys from her cousin Fidelia, who came to the farm for a visit the summer María was thirteen. María wasn't old enough then to really understand, but she paid enraptured attention to every word and movement – she was in love with Fidelia and her shiny green eyes, her smooth scented skin and burnt-sugar mouth, three years older than herself. It seemed to her that Fidelia knew everything and that everyone else must love that beautiful cousin just as much as she, María, loved her . . . Fidelia so kind and cute, her laugh like somebody's glass wind chimes and her smile so flirtatious and inviting. Fidelia danced cumbias and salsas and went to the discotecas in Monterrey with her boyfriend Julio. (María's mother could never believe the things Fidelia's parents let her do, and said rosaries for the girl's soul by candlelight.) She showed María how to make up her face, and promised her that when María came to Monterrey, she would teach her how to dance. That was what seemed important. Nobody ever explained to María the significance of her own career, or of being independent (who knows, maybe those things were just taken for granted and so overlooked,) but that mightn't have helped anyway . . . two years later María was determined to believe that Juan was everything she wanted and that going to the United States with him was the best choice she could make.

María no longer knows what she would do if she were not bound to Juan. That one choice was what ate up all the others and she has understood that for a long time, until now without feeling or regret. In the midst of a sudden gleam of the spirited child she used to be, María abruptly asks herself the one question that she cannot take back, cannot pretend she did not think.

A spinning begins in her mind and mounts until all the oceans of the earth are roaring in her ears; the world is tumbling down around her head. Her hands begin to shake and she quickly replaces the comb she has picked up from the smooth tabletop. In the breadth of a split second María is desperately afraid, groping in the slippery iciness of a blackness through which she is falling, a terrible darkness that she knows could be her tomb. How has she passed these three years without the knowledge that she was losing herself, without seeing that the close of each day took another piece of who she was? In her self-denial and blind acceptance of Juan's control María the woman has fragmented, the little pieces of her washing slowly away like a sand castle dissolving silently under the waves of a rising tide.

Desperately she tries to take inventory, to locate her losses, to figure out how much is left. She picks up the comb again and toys with it nervously, feeling sickeningly disoriented. How is it possible that her identity has been whittled away so rapidly? María feels trapped in a nightmare.

As she sits before the vanity an odd sensation stirs unexpectedly in her breast, forcing her back straighter and her jaw tight: anger. Anger towards Juan, toward her family, towards herself and everyone else who never tried to stop her; it comes in a wave, blurring her vision, tightening her throat, making her want to weep and to smash all the dishes and lamps in the house. She wants to kill Juan. She wants to kill herself, because she knows that it is all her fault; she wants to kill her father because he never cared enough and didn't even pretend to try. She wants to choke them with her own hands, rip their throats open and bash in their heads for everything they have made her suffer, and then to turn her knife upon herself.

This passes quickly and the blue settles around María once more, light and sad and confining. But this time she knows what she has to do. She doesn't know how, but she knows why: not just for herself but for her mother, for her little sisters, for Fidelia and for everyone else who is enslaved, snared in the web of her own conflicting desires and in the expectations of a society that wants too much from its women. Every day when María goes out to do the shopping she sees the American girls in their shorts and halter tops and jeans out walking too, laughing and talking loudly among themselves like men, uninhibited and tied only to strings that they have bound by choice. (María doesn't trust the gabachas and is glad she isn't them, but still, she admits that she is jealous of their freedom.) She knows that many of them live alone. They work; they go to school. She guesses that she was the only binding force of her own knots as well, but she was raised to tie those cords – her fingers bound them automatically without a second thought.

María thinks about those gringas and she knows that she can do it, that she will survive. Even if she dies still trying to get it right she believes that anything will be better than the life she has now, existence in this hell of her own invention. She is not scared any longer.

María stands up and firmly sets the comb back upon the vanity with a loud and final *plink*. She looks at herself in the mirror again, not raising her eyes reproachfully but straight in the face without fear. *Andale, mensa*. Since when are you too scared to walk away from something you don't like? It was certainly easy enough three years ago, when she was leaving her own family. She had not shed a single tear at the time of her departure. *Aunque ahora, todo es diferente . . . ya no tengo adónde ir. The only people I know here are Juan's friends. Ay, Juan, te odio con todas mis fuerzas, eres un pendejo y me has lastimado tanto . . . ¿cómo es que te necesito? ¿Qué voy a hacer sin ti? How did my whole life come to depend upon one man?*

She doesn't want to ponder that anymore – she knows it will do no good. She has to act, before she can think more and so put in jeopardy the whole of this new world opening before her.

She moves to the dresser and pulls out the shoulder bag she hasn't used in three years, the one she used to carry her books in when she went to school in Chilpancingo. Slowly and carefully she begins to fill it: a clean blouse, a blue skirt, the comb from the vanity, a pair of underwear. Something rattles as she closes a drawer and she opens it again, putting her hand down between the folds of cloth. At the very back, beneath all the shirts, her hand closes around a small hard object, smooth and cool in her hot, trembling fingers.

Holding it up, she breathes a sigh of surprise. It is the little china doll that Fidelia gave her the last time she came to the rancho. María doesn't remember having seen it since she slipped it into her bag on her last night in Mexico. The doll is old-fashioned, dressed in long skirts and a tight bodice, with blond hair and blankly amiable blue eyes: a tiny gringa shepherdess.

As María reaches for her bag to put it in, the doll slips through her hand and smashes on the hard wooden floor. Tears fill her eyes and she thinks instantly of Fidelia, full of sadness and fear and wistfulness all at once. She glances down and in the broken china sees vaguely the pieces of her beautiful cousins' life. *Ay Fidelia, your dances and your makeup and your big green eyes, where did they get you? Prima, ¿dónde estás en este momento? You can't be any better off than me.*

María rubs her eyes wearily and continues to fill her bag, not bothering to sweep up the pieces of the doll, partly because it makes her sad to look at it and partly because she has already made her last contribution to the order and upkeep of Juan's house. She thinks of Tía Lupita, her favorite of Juan's relatives; she is a sweet, sympathetic woman who reminds María of her own mother and who can probably keep a secret. She knows how to get to Tía's apartment on foot, and from there she can plan her next move. Maybe somebody can even help her get back to Mexico. She wonders if Juan will care that she has left and if he will try to find her.

A few bobby pins in the bag, and María is finished, except for one thing. She moves into the little kitchen – stealthily, as though she could be seen or heard – and reaches for the jar on top of the refrigerator. This is where the savings and the money for household expenses are kept. She has never before taken even five dollars without consulting Juan, but now she unscrews the lid and pulls out the whole roll of bills; she doesn't feel she has time to count it, but it must be almost five hundred dollars. This goes into the bag too and María takes down her worn black winter coat from the hall closet.

She stands in the open door and looks around the apartment. It is hard to imagine a reality separate from this one. Most of her things are still here – she has only taken the items she really needs – and the rooms are still full of María. It was she who decorated them, labored over their cleanliness, cooked and served the food, made them what they are. This is her place.

But it isn't, and she knows that, because it is Juan's place; and whatever is Juan's can never be hers again. She casts her last glance around the little apartment and, without joy or sorrow or regret, closes the door.

Her footsteps echo in the narrow hall and then in the stairwell as she descends. Her bag bumps softly against her leg. She realizes with a little surprise that she is breathing normally, her hands are steady, her skin feels warm. She had not anticipated this calmness, nor this feeling of freedom. Her nerves are still jangling because she doesn't know what she is going to do, but at least she knows now that it is right, that she should have done it long ago.

María pushes open the front door to the apartment building and finds herself on the sidewalk of the street she knows so well. This barrio so familiar, and yet so many of its people strange to her, because she was never one to go out alone except for her necessary errands. She realizes for the first time that there must be many women on this block just like her, their husbands even worse than Juan. Maybe she is not as special as she thought. *What do I think I am escaping from?*

She gazes down the street, nearly empty in the fading light, and as she begins to reconsider she feels Juan's stinging slap across her cheek, hears him calling her a slut. She feels the silence of

his absence in the cold, empty apartment and his bored eyes drifting away from her when she protests that he is gone too much and that she loves him. She feels him grabbing her angrily when the floor is not clean or his shorts not ironed, and she sees him turning his back to her in bed without a single word. She hears him saying she is stupid but she no longer believes it, and all doubts disappear instantly from her mind, like ghosts when the lights come on. The hour of truth has arrived.

María rounds the corner of the building and the wind strikes her cruelly, its icy breath cutting through her existence as though it would like to carry her away. She feels gutted – she is the black, crumbling skeleton of a house ravaged by fire. Her heart is breaking into jagged pieces. She senses the death of something vital within her, but it makes no difference now . . . her sad determination will not allow her to turn back. She buttons the collar of the black jacket and turns toward the wind. The flat diluted sun, now sinking quickly in the sky, shines halfheartedly down upon her as she walks away; the second hand jerks on some unseen clock, and time begins to move again.

Personal Essay by Kelly Daniels

In Honor of Gerrik Thunstrom, Now That He's Dead

When we got the news that my uncle Gerrik had been arrested for molesting his eight-year-old step-daughter, my cousin Nils and I were shocked, of course, but not totally surprised. We'd been hearing stories about Gerrik since Nils' mom, Annie, divorced him five years earlier. He was weird back when we grew up with him— not that Nils and I knew the difference between weird and normal back then. But since the divorce he'd gone from eccentric hippie, to paranoid, isolationist, cultist, alcoholic, drug addict, and now finally child molester. Nils and I shared a sad, confused look. Had we really grown up with this man?

Coming face to face with Gerrik outside the courtroom was a shocker. I hadn't seen him since the divorce. He'd grown a long, red beard to go with the bristly mustache he'd always worn, and his hair was now long and stringy. His face was still red, but now it was all puffed out from years of heavy drink. His eyes and smile were exactly the same though, cruel, blue eyes, and a smile that said his eyes were just joking. He looked like a Norse god, a combination of two gods actually, Loki and Thor, part smartass, part warrior, mischief backed by thunder.

I'd come to hate him over the years, not so much for smacking us kids around, which he had of course, but for the humiliation. He liked to belittle us when we showed any sign of weakness, such as crying when we fell out of trees. Once he took us on an all day hike up a mountain. Because there was a spring at the top, we only brought enough water for the hike up. Two hours into the trip I asked for a sip, and when I drank I reflexively spit the first mouthful out on the ground. For some reason— pure meanness?— Gerrik mixed the water with apple cider vinegar and hadn't told us. I couldn't understand why he'd want to make the water taste so nasty and told him so. "Okay," he said. "If you don't like it you don't have to drink any more."

"Fine," I said.

"Fine," he said, mocking my voice by making it sound babyish.

I was parched by the time we got to the top of the mountain to find the spring dry. The vinegar water was gone. We kids started whining about how thirsty we were while Gerrik only laughed. He had a six pack of Coors tall cans in his pack.

The rest of the day he sang what came to be known as "The Water Song." "Water, water," he sang in a soft, low voice, "cool, clean water." Halfway down he offered a chug of beer to any of us who would kiss his toes. He took off his boots and rested his feet on a rock to show us the price for one drink of beer. My cousins only hesitated a moment, but I wouldn't do it. At ten, I was the oldest and had more of a problem with pride, which made Gerrik constantly test me of course. He'd humiliated me before, but his time I'd have rather died. In fact, I sort of wanted to die, just to show him. "Are you sure?" he asked in a sweet voice, wiggling his toes, while the other boys stood in a circle passing a can of what I was told was still-cool beer around and burping. I turned around and continued down the hill. I remembered the way from the trip up. Years later I heard that Gerrik had been proud of me and often told my mother, with admiration, about my stand against him that day. When I found this out it angered me how good it felt to have Gerrik's approval.

I'd come to his trial with Nils and Annie— partially to see my two cousins, Ivan and Odin, who'd been unlucky enough to have gone with him after the divorce— but also to watch Gerrik's downfall. I wanted revenge on the asshole. But face to face with him I lost any advantage I imagined I might have had.

He looked me up and down with those light-blue, pissed-off eyes, taking in my long, wavy

hair, tight jeans, and loose, flowing shirt. I was sixteen years old and glam heavy metal was popular. I knew what he was thinking. I looked like a fruit. "You didn't turn out crazy like your father," he said with obvious disappointment. I winced. My father had skipped bail on a murder charge four years back and was still at large. Neither I, nor anyone else I knew, ever talked about him, at least in my presence. Caught off guard, I found myself falling back into our old relationship, where he teased and challenged me to be more the way he thought I should be and I tried to live up to his expectations. "I'm in a band," I said, as if that somehow made me "crazy," the way he meant it. He nodded slowly and raised his eyebrows, mock-impressed. I thought to tell him that I'd been arrested a couple of months back for possession of marijuana, which would have pleased him, but he turned away and walked into the court room, leaving me standing alone with my mouth open, like a moron. How could he still do this to me after all these years?

He was convicted of the charge and taken to jail that afternoon. Ivan and Odin came home with us. They were both puny with malnutrition, and had the shifty eyes of trapped animals. Eventually, though, they got used to Nils and I, and after a while we all got to feeling like we did when we were kids together. Over the months, many stories came out about how they'd lived with Gerrik on his "compound" out in the middle of the desert. The overall picture was grim, of course, but some of what went down there was just plain twisted. For example, Gerrik had formed a church, a cult really, with himself as head guru. Before one of the weekly services, he enlisted Ivan and Odin to dig a hole in which to bury their three-year-old stepsister alive. Gerrik placed her in a box with a tube for air and had his sons fill the hole back up. During the service, the dozen or so hillbillies standing around heard her cries coming from the air tube even over Gerrik's rant. When he got to a part in his sermon about life after death, he instructed Ivan and Odin to dig the girl up. He pulled the terrified girl out of the box and held her overhead to show his congregation, yelling, "Resurrection!" The next week only three of the hillbillies returned to Gerrik's church, and after that Gerrik quit holding the services, probably more convinced of his superiority than ever, now that even his followers didn't agree with him.

No one on my mother or Annie's side of the family, including Gerrik's sons, was particularly sad when Gerrik died just a couple of years ago. We were interested though. Enough time had gone by for most of our family that Gerrik had become a myth, too terrible to be taken seriously, but fascinating just the same. His death didn't disappoint. He went out in grand style, blowing himself up trying to repair one of the many propane tanks he kept around his property for heating and cooking in the various trailers and shacks he maintained on his property. Apparently he'd been dead drunk when his tinkering caused one of the tanks to explode in his face, sending a jet of fire directly at him for several minutes. "Imagine he'd been attacked with a flame thrower," a doctor told Nils. He lived for several days in the county hospital, covered in bandages except for the big toe on his left foot, his chest moving up and down to the rhythm of the machine keeping him alive. Only Nils and Odin came to see him. Odin, a mechanic, talked to the doctors, technicians, and nurses on duty about the equipment plugged into Gerrik and hardly looked at his father at all, while Nils held onto the one exposed toe and said goodbye. Ivan, who had been the runt growing up and had taken the brunt of Gerrik's attacks, said only one word when Annie told him his father was going to die. "Good."

Nils later told me that Gerrik was as ready to go as he was going to be. He'd mentioned to his sons on various occasions that he wouldn't leave the world until they could prove themselves ready to handle life alone by kicking his ass. He would say this before attacking. He was a dirty fighter, not too proud to pull hair, gouge eyes, pinch, twist ears, bite, but the booze and drugs had taken toll; Odin beat him down on many occasions, and even gentle Nils was harassed enough once to knock Gerrik silly. Ivan wouldn't fight though. By the time he became an adult, old enough to understand the magnitude of what had been done to him, he needed a year of therapy just to get rid

of the constant fantasies of murdering his father. If Ivan had ever started beating Gerrik, he wouldn't have stopped.

There was some speculation that Gerrik's common-law wife—a nasty alcoholic who sometimes attacked him with kitchen knives, moving him to beat her unconscious just to get her out of his hair—had something to do with his death. But in the end, no one really cared if he'd died accidentally or not. We were just relieved not to have to consider what he might be doing out there in the desert, with those step kids.

It turned out though, that Gerrik wasn't entirely dead, at least for Nils and me. A couple of weeks after the funeral, which on our side of the family only Nils attended, he and I sat together on a snowy mountain, sharing a 40ounce bottle of malt liquor and enjoying the view of the valley before us. We had hiked up with the intention of snowboarding down the virgin run. Nils was a ski patroller in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and in spite of a string of D.U.I.s, was one of the most popular people in town. Someone suggested he think about running for mayor when he got a little older, and Nils liked the idea. He married well, to a woman who kept him from getting D.U.I.s or losing his job, but allowed him enough freedom to blow off steam now and then. He was as stable as any of us boys ever had been. Of course, it wasn't always like that. He and I had both ended up with pretty colorful lives up to that point, and when we got together spent much time waxing nostalgic. "Remember that time we hitchhiked to the beach on Christmas?" Nils asked, laughing.

"Yeah, and the pervert picked us up and made a pass at me while you were snoring in the back seat. Thanks a lot, by the way. Have I thanked you for that lately?"

We laughed and relived some of the highlights of that trip, how it had taken until dark to reach our grandparents' house, and when we finally did our families were so angry with us for missing our ride in the first place that they offered us only grief in place of Christmas dinner. It had been a grueling trip, but throughout we'd kept a sense of humor about us. This is why we got along so well, I think, that neither of us let our problems bring us down for long. We both ended up with a bigger portion of perseverance than most people, which about made up for our flakiness.

We lingered on the side of the mountain with the bottle of beer shoved into the snow between us. Nils pulled out a pack and passed me a cigarette. "Sorry about your dad and everything," I said, not just meaning his death. Nils nodded. We sat there in silence for a minute longer, watching the cigarette smoke bloom out before us in the chilly air. We must have been inspired to kindness by the beauty of the setting or the anticipation of the ride down, or something, because we both, at that moment, started remembering stories that we hadn't thought of in years. The Gerrik of our youth came back to us, not the smartass god of thunder everyone else knew, but the man who presided throughout our childhood during each and every moment of magic that our memories could resurrect.

Nils told me the story of the time he was eleven and Gerrik wanted to teach him yet another lesson about being a man. He drove Nils several miles away from where we lived at the time and left him there with some water and primitive camping gear. "Be back in a couple of days, I guess," he said, before driving off. That night Nils built a fire and stayed awake, huddled in his sleeping bag, jumping at every sound, haunted by the coyote song. Nils wouldn't find out until years later that Gerrik had sneaked back and set up his own camp on a hill overlooking Nils' site to keep an eye on him, probably chuckling to himself and drinking tall cans of Coors while Nils glanced around like a frightened rabbit.

We told story after story, and now, after all this time, they warmed us and made us proud to have survived Gerrik's challenges. In his own way, he'd loved us. No other adult spent as much time with us as he did, which meant something. Our stories went back in time until I came to not only my earliest memory, but the earliest memory of all of us, which was my privilege to own as the first

born.

On my third birthday I lived with my parents in a converted UPS van, painted forest green and outfitted with bunk beds and cabinets. We were parked at a campground in Santa Barbara, California and had recently been joined by Gerrik and Annie, who were living in a bright orange school bus version of our step van. My father had just returned from Orange County with a load of birthday presents from my grandparents. According to my mother, I was in the middle of my cowboy phase, so many of my presents consisted of vests, chaps, holster, six-guns and probably a hat. I don't remember any of this though; my memory starts with the bike. It was metal-flecked green, with gold and white streamers attached to the white plastic handgrips. Brand new. To this day, I associate the smell of fresh rubber tires with luxury. The bike leaned to one side, resting on a training wheel on the packed dirt beside our van. I'd seen other kids around the campground riding bikes along the trail and had always felt awe for them. Riding seemed like magic to me, and I'd never even fantasized that I too could be capable of the trick, until now.

I touched the streamers, a nature boy marveling at the perfection of machine-cut plastic. The bike shined in the gray afternoon. I ran one finger along a handgrip, finding the ridge of extra plastic where the mold came together. Before I could wrap my whole hand around the grip, Gerrik squatted beside me. "Wow, what an excellent bike!" I watched him warily. My family had just returned to California from a commune on the island of Kauai a couple of weeks before, so I didn't know Gerrik well. "We got to get rid of these sissy things, don't you think?" He pulled the streamers out, one then the other, and threw them toward the trash bin. "And you don't want to ride training wheels, do you?" He smiled at me. He'd said "training wheels" in a girl's voice. At three, I wasn't entirely clear about the differences between boys and girls. I hadn't known any girls really. So far, I'd hardly had the chance to be around any kids my age, in fact. But listening to Gerrik I was sure I didn't want to act like a girl. On the other hand, I didn't want him taking anything off my new bike; I almost didn't even want to ride the bike for fear of wearing out the newness.

He was looking into my face, scrutinizing me in a way no one else had before. I could see the pores in his nose and smell the beer on his breath. I could only meet his hot blue gaze for a moment, but as soon as I looked away I felt drawn back to his eyes. They were light blue and deep set under an outcrop of creased brow, rimmed by blond-red eyebrows, barely visible over the red skin. While his mouth smiled, his eyes frowned, not with anger, but with concentration. He waited for my reaction. No one had ever taken me that seriously, and I found I didn't like it. I looked beyond him, trying to get some sort of direction from my mom, but she only smiled. Without meeting his gaze again, I nodded.

"Alright," he said, popping up. He went into his bus and returned with a socket set and a fresh can of beer. A minute later he stood holding my bike, inviting me to climb on, the training wheels discarded in the dirt along with the wrapping paper and packaging from my other gifts. I felt a loss, but was hopeful, imagining myself riding around the campground. I put a foot on a pedal and swung the other leg over. "Okay, ready?" he asked. I balanced myself and nodded. "Push down on that pedal when I move you forward," he pointed with his chin. "When I let go, keep pedaling." Holding my bike by one handle and the seat, he pushed, picked up some speed and shoved me forward. The moment he let go I fell to the side in the dirt. "Ha ha," he said. "Dang, you didn't get far that time. Alright, up again."

I smiled and dusted myself off. Pulling the bike up, I brushed away a chunk of dirt stuck to the pedal. "Don't worry about that," said Gerrik, taking the bike from me. "A little dirt doesn't hurt anything." I climbed on, thinking, okay, this time I'll get it. But I didn't. Nor would I on the next, or the next, or the next try. He pushed me forward, and I fell. By the third fall I realized riding a bike wasn't so important to me after all and told Gerrik so. "You say that now," he said. I looked back for help. We'd gone a good fifty feet down the campground path. Our green van and Gerrik's or-

ange bus stood out among the tan white RVs like wrapped presents amidst cardboard boxes, but my parents weren't in sight. No one was, in fact. It was late November, around Thanksgiving. The sky was gray. And I was alone with a man who scared me.

He stood there, holding the bike. I climbed on, he pushed, I fell. I wasn't even trying anymore. "Okay," he said, sighing. "Let's do it again." Tears streamed from my eyes by this time, tears of rage mainly, and also frustration with myself for not being able to ride. Gerrik's attitude was that it should be easy, and that he was showing the utmost patience in even bothering with such an inept pupil as I was turning out to be. I rebelled in various ways. Instead of trying to stay up I immediately jerked the handlebar to the side when he let go, throwing myself down. "That's not going to get you far," he said, picking up the bike. Later, I discovered the brake and locked it as he pushed. This made him angry. He pushed anyway and shoved me forward. I fell again, of course, but not harder than any of the other times. Gerrik jerked the bike off the ground. "Alright, get off your ass," he said. I dusted myself off, satisfied that I'd made him lose his cool, but also a little frightened. His face was getting redder. I got back on the bike.

Eventually he broke me down. My rage and frustration became an unfocused, abject sobbing. It was cold, my wounds hurt, the new was scratched off my bike, and I was convinced that I would never ride. Moreover, I didn't want to. The bike was a hateful thing now, and as soon as I got away from Gerrik I would never look at it again if I could help it. But just as I knew I would never learn to ride, I also understood that Gerrik would never, never give up until I did. So I'd be there forever, I imagined, spending eternity falling off a bike. All my swirling emotions simplified into hatred directed at Gerrik. He'd come out of nowhere to ruin my life, and I was powerless to do anything about it. But this hatred didn't manifest itself in my actions. I was too tired. He told me to pedal and I did. I stopped trying to thwart him, but I also stopped trying to stay up. I became blank and robotic, just a vessel for my hateful thoughts. As I pedaled and fell, I plotted to kill him in various ways. I could do it with a knife while he slept, or with a gun out in the open, if I could get a hold of one. I found myself in a fantasy in which my toy six-shooter was the real thing. I shot Gerrik in the knee, just to get things started. He fell to the ground and started whimpering in pain. I walked up. Now, my cowboy dream-self said, why don't *you* get on the damn bike.

Then one of those moments of everyday magic occurred. He pushed me, and I rode. A second ago I couldn't do it for the life of me, now I could. I didn't even know what had changed. Over two hours had gone by and I'd fallen probably fifty times, and not once had I even come close to staying up, but now it was so simple I couldn't understand the trouble I'd had. There wasn't even a moment of wobbling and finding my balance. Gerrik let me go and I simply rode forward like I'd been doing it for years. "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" screamed Gerrik, jumping up and down. "Yeah! You're doing it." I rode down the path, triumphant, my hate turning to pride even as my tears dried and my scrapes started scabbing over. I tried to hang onto the anger and hate, but I was too happy. Riding a bike was everything I had imagined. I was free and going faster than I ever had simply running, and with so little effort. I followed the path, which was a loop around the entire campground, and eventually came back to our campsite. Gerrik stood with Annie and my parents, all of them cheering me on. I smiled until I thought my face would crack in two.

I rode around and around and wouldn't stop, even when the air grew colder and the sky dark. By this time everyone had gone back inside, except Gerrik. He sat on a lawn chair, a shadowy figure alone in the twilight, raising his can of beer to salute me every time I rode by.

Personal Essay by Katie Elkins

Playing Hide and Seek

Having spotted the rainbow sticker on the left hand side of the warehouse-induced dive with the eyesight of a nocturnal hunting cat, I said to my best friend, *Hey, Rike, why don't we check this place out tonight? I've actually never been to a gay bar before.* It was the last night I'd be spending in Colorado Springs before I had to hit the road again and take the quickest route back to Alabama. Facing the prospect of spending almost an entire day traveling from the west side of Kansas to the east side of Kansas with only flat corn fields, factories, and, alas, a big sign bawling "Home of Bob Dole," I felt the need to out myself for one night. *Hell, I'm game if you are,* Rike said when she saw my subtly anxious look.

The front of the establishment was a tad misleading when I had seen it earlier in the afternoon as we drove to the nearest Dunkin Donuts. *It looks kinda sketchy, but safe,* Rike mumbled as she crammed a chocolate glazed donut into her mouth. The facade was inviting, a bit run-down, but homey with its pale blue exterior and large wooden doors. As we finally pulled into the dark, drizzly parking lot in the back of the bar, it was around ten p.m. I thought twice about my initial impression when I immediately sensed the seedy texture in the air. All we could see through the storm, which had kindly decided to grace us with its presence the moment before we were to sweep ourselves into the car, was a pink neon sign zapping "Hide and Seek."

The name was appropriate for the occasion. We were both shamelessly seeking unyielding fun just as much as we were curious about what kind of Friday night adventure was yet hidden from us as we stood in the parking lot, feeling out our task at hand. Rike always claimed that one day we'd be eighty and sitting on the front porch of some commonly-shared house, swaying back and forth in the rocking chairs, crotchety and pissed off that we hadn't gotten laid in thirty years. I tried to muffle my laughter at the thought of the two of us still codependent on one another, with cats in our laps, sipping Lactaid milk on the porch of some cabin in the county of nowhere. We would die before we would live in one of those Florida retirement homes. We'd be riding Harleys, decked out in leather at eighty. *Come on, It'll be a story to tell. Maybe you can find a guy to take home to mommy,* she beamed, joking.

Having parked the Mazda, and not the Harley, we approached the front door, retrieving our driver's licenses from our back pockets and peeking around the corner to see all the cute gay boys. Noting the guy in Wranglers talking with the man in the suit, *Check it out, it looks like the Village People threw up,* Rike quipped, actually quite intrigued with the diverse spectrum of men inside. Rike was 21 now, recently initiated into that realm of buying legal Jack and Coke at legal bars with a legal I.D. I, on the other hand, was still twenty. Preparing to have the joy of partying once I reached Rike's home in Colorado, I had snatched my sister's old Alabama license that said she was 24 years old. It had expired seven years ago, but I deliberately covered the expiration date with my right index finger and I flashed the card at the doorguy and flashed a genuine *I so belong here and I am such a pro* smile and said in as thick of a respectable Alabama accent I could possibly muster, *How's it goin'?* He didn't answer, but he looked at my I.D., looked at me, looked at my I.D., looked at me and drawled with the Colorado accent only Coloradans don't think they have and said, *Damn, girl, you're old.* I smirked, said I often am mistaken for a teenager, and quickly slipped through the peeling bronze-color door that separated me from the adventure inside. Rike trailed behind as the doorguy had walked away and was replaced with a rather ominous, dykey woman with an almost comical scowl. Bertha here didn't seem to much appreciate that Rike had an out-of-state license and started to make a scene about how the license had

to be a fake. *Got an I.D.? Where's this from anyways? What are you trying to pull?,* Big Bertha grumbled with liquored breath. I poked my head back around the corner, grimaced at Bertha and went to the rescue of my friend. *She's twenty-one. Trust me,* I said with the sweetest lesbian batting of the eyes I could conjure up to soothe this obviously drunk and irritable monster of a woman. *I promise,* Rike said a bit annoyed, *it is not a fake. I lived in Alabama. I now live in Colorado. Do you wanna call my parents?* Bertha didn't find this very funny, but luckily, we were saved by the former doorman who simply rolled his eyes at the drunken woman and waved both of us back into the club. *That's irony for you. You're the lawbreaker with the seven-year out of date I.D. And they hassle me!*, Rike growled with a look of annoyance and proceeded not to talk to me for a solid fifteen minutes.

On the way to the bar, we were confronted by a six-foot-five inch Cher wannabe who admired my blonde, glitter-soaked hair and drooled over the size of Rike's breasts. *Oh honey, I'm gonna have to get me some of those,* pointing at the way Rike's boobs made her waist seem even smaller and her smile ever bigger. It was the first time a man had said such a thing to her without receiving a stinging slap and a few notable words. *Thanks, but you look better in a dress than I ever will,* she chuckled, a bit surprised at the drag queen's intended compliment, knowing that he meant he actually wanted a pair of those for his own, not for his own pleasure.

We ordered a couple of Coronas. I hated beer, but I needed something in my hand and because I didn't smoke, it had to be a bottle of some kind— I had to look the part. Finally settled into two metal chairs in the corner of the large bar area, we scanned the place for any sign of other double X-chromosomes. We were the only women in this supposed gay and lesbian bar. Without dwelling on whether or not we appeared too out-of-place, we just watched the cute queens dance with their boyfriends as a Ricky Martin song pumped incessantly on the loud speaker. Rike reveled in this, appeasing her heterosexual eyes with the cute boys as I mocked, *How does it feel? This is the only time you can't wag your tongue and get men lined up around the block for you.*

After a few drinks, getting into the spirit of the evening, we wandered onto the dance floor. The floor glowed with the reflected orbs of the disco ball and men in tight jeans and tighter asses engulfed us as the beat bounced off the walls. Feeling like we were trapped in a never-ending game of Pong, we scoped out the safest corner to drop our inhibitions and dance. The decision as to which one of us was going to lead proved to be a bit more of a challenge, but we refused to be daunted by the new atmosphere. We took each other's hands and let the world slip away into black light highs and fantasy lands of rhythm. We bumped and grinded with the best of them, watching all the men watching us as our hips moved in a fashion that could only be motherly described as *unbecoming to young ladies*—twirling each other in swing-meets-hip-hop moves around the spherical playground of music and hardly stopped long enough to catch our breath. We noted later that night how men are still men whether gay or straight. Rike stated confidently unabashed, *Doesn't seem to matter which team they play for, dear, they all watched the two sexy girls dance with each other.*

Rike was stolen from me in the middle of a dance when another drag queen told her she had *delicious legs* and invited her to do the tango. Entranced by the awkward joining of the thin short frame of Rike and the stocky Victor/Victoria body of the drag queen, I grew dizzy watching the two of them tango in little circles around me— Rike all the while avoiding the size eleven pumps and sparing her feet in the process. And when the drag queen relinquished my best friend back to me, with those delicious legs she danced until three a.m. and I followed in her drunkenness. The last song, "Joking" by the Indigo Girls, filled the speakers and spilled out into the night: *We were girls in bars, boys on the town, bumping like a pinball off the careless crowd, you said good friends are hard to come by, I laughed, bought you a beer, it's too corny to cry.*

We went home that night with damp I.D.s in our back pockets and tears of sweat, alcohol, and laughter rolling down our cheeks. As we pulled out of the parking lot, three men with pink triangles plastered on the back of their jeep honked at us and whistled. Boys will be boys.

Personal Essay by Ruth Hartness

Cambridge

My foot was broken courtesy of William Shakespeare, just three days before my scheduled flight to England. The Renaissance Poetry course at the University of Cambridge included *Venus and Adonis*, and I was reading from my massive, unabridged, annotated volume of his Complete Works. I dropped it, spine side down, at the precise angle needed to cause a hairline fracture. "Now you appreciate the weight of his words," the doctor joked, and said not to walk on the grossly swollen contusion for several weeks. This would prove impossible, for Cambridge is a medieval town with narrow, curly lanes that can barely accommodate motor vehicles, including taxis. In fact, throughout much of Cambridge, cars are simply prohibited. Broken foot or no, I would be walking. A lot.

Thankfully, Cambridge is quite small, retaining the essence of her twelfth century origins. No destination is more than ten or fifteen minutes away, no matter where you're going. Although my normal gait was slowed by my limping, my new pace matched perfectly the slower way of life in a town where little has changed in the past five hundred years. The early riser, taking a morning walk before the church bells start to chime, will see nearly the same village as someone living in 1550. The main thoroughfare, King's Parade, cuts a broad swath in between gothic buildings all the way down to the river Cam, and tapering lanes jut off from this road like curlicues wrapping around even more pinched lanes. The wind-swept stone structures lining the passages blend seamlessly into the misty grey sky. Grey, grey everywhere with a winter chill that calls for flannel nightgowns and blankets in late July. Cambridge doesn't give a pig's eye what month it is. Truth be told, Cambridge pays little regard to what century it is.

Cambridge proudly shuns modern day intrusions, like cars. She also shuns modern day conveniences and amusements. I didn't see a television set anywhere in Cambridge during my entire stay. Neither did I see a computer. Hard as it is to believe, considering the place Cambridge holds in the esteem of academia, students still type, and sometimes even hand-write their papers. Bill Gates recently gave Cambridge tens of millions of dollars to build a computer school. The reaction from the Cambridge community has not been entirely positive to his munificence. They suspect a hidden agenda.

Other changes send more shudders through the collective bodies of students and professors alike. The ancient tradition of private tutorials, heavily subsidized since the days of Henry VII, has run afoul of the new Labor Party. Tutorials — three or four students guided closely by a professor — are an expensive privilege not enjoyed by other, less elite universities in England, and the Labor Party wants to replace them with the kind of large classes and professorial lectures that American students attend. "Tutorials are the essence of Cambridge," my Renaissance professor told me, and admitted he loses sleep worrying over the Labor Party's impact on the University. The Labor Party doesn't particularly care for Cambridge's hallowed traditions. Their agenda is jobs for the unemployed — jobs that call for computer skills, and an efficient, classless modernity that is anathema to Cambridge.

One tradition that even the Labor Party won't disrupt is that of pubs, complete with two or three bartenders, pool table, and jukebox in every college. St. Catharine's pub was near the college library, and the library suffered for the proximity. I never saw as many people in the library as I did in the pub, which teemed with students and professors alike. Even the college chaplain enjoyed his pint at the end of the day. But far better treasures awaited the intrepid soul who ventured away

from the laughter of the pub into the absolute silence of the library, with its long wooden tables, massive bookshelves, and oak floors hewed long ago. The comforting odor of the old books, mixed with the gleaming wood and crisp air seeping through slightly ajar windows (air-conditioning Cambridge-style) was a musty, heady incense.

My favorite spot in the library was near a window looking down on St. Catharine's courtyard, a grassy expanse surrounded on three sides by the college's buildings. All the other colleges in Cambridge have four walls surrounding their courtyards, ensuring a protective, green-hedged privacy from the curious eyes of sightseers. The story goes that the builders of St. Catharine's ran out of money in 1473 so they had to install an iron gate fronting King's Parade. This leaves the courtyard exposed to the street, much to the tourist's delight. It is the only college in Cambridge that allows a glimpse of students lolling about on the wooden benches, reading, smoking, sleeping, surrounded by a panoply of flowers blooming everywhere — yellow and pink roses on the ground, bell-shaped red ornamentals suspended in hanging planters, purple ageratum cascading in royal ripples down grey terra cotta pots. The iron gate at St. Catharine's is one of the most popular photo-stops in Cambridge.

Unlike the magnificent courtyard, my tiny room at St. Catharine's wouldn't warrant a second glance. Drab, with threadbare, rough carpeting and beige wall dotted with nail holes from previous, misguided attempts at beautification, the dreary room could spiral even the most cheerful soul into depression, except for its one redeeming virtue: a private bathroom, complete with tub just right for soaking an injured, overtaxed foot. I was given this room by accident (I arrived in Cambridge two days early, and the befuddled clerk at the Porter's Lodge didn't know what to do with me,) and was informed by a note pinned to my door within hours that a much nicer room awaited me on the other side of the courtyard. I begged to stay, preferring drabness with a private tub over antiquated charm with a communal shower.

My room was perched high overlooking Queens' Lane, a narrow cobblestoned path in between St. Catharine's and Queens' College. Standing at the window, I could see into the rooms of the students at Queens', just across the way. Most of them had their desks pulled up to the windows, where they could survey the human parade that passed below. Many of these pedestrians were tourists who never glanced up to see the hundreds of scholars' eyes silently watching them as they passed. Eager to see Cambridge, the tourists never realized they were the ones on view.

The sounds of Queens' Lane floated into my room nearly without ceasing. Drifts of conversations, various languages, church bells chiming the hour all breezed into my room during the day. At night, as the pubs closed, drinking songs ricocheted off the stone walls lining the ancient passage. Occasionally the last callers would stop and serenade a window. Once a girl threw down her underwear, causing a commotion that woke up both colleges. At dawn, kitchen workers would trudge down the same path, reporting for the breakfast shift. They liked to sing, too, just as loud, if not more in tune. At times, Cambridge seemed a surreal musical.

Personal Essay by Scott Hughes

In the Middle of Nowhere in the Middle of Nowhere

The needle on my Japanese host-father's speedometer crept past 100 m.p.h. I had no idea where he was taking Chase and me. We had only been in Japan for about a week, and this time was spent with the group of about thirty other Americans from Fitzgerald, Georgia. Now it was the second day Chase and I had been alone with our host family, the Satos, and we were being sped away from Myogi-town, our one piece of familiarity.

The Japanese countryside was blurring by us. I could hardly focus on the dark hills covered with dense trees that looked like giant banzai or the shallow rice patties waded through by farmers in large hats. It was dizzying. I turned to talk to Chase, but he was asleep, drooling on the car door. A few minutes ago, he was as frightened as I was that we were being taken from Myogi-town by people we barely knew. I guess he scared himself to sleep. He was curled into a fetal ball in the seat; this wasn't hard for him because he was only about four and a half feet tall. This was extremely short considering we had both just finished the 8th grade (I was about six feet tall at this time).

After an hour of riding it began to look as if we were in inner-city Tokyo, or inside some other Japanese city at least. The host-dad pulled into the parking lot of what seemed to me to be a large Japanese bath house/hotel. I woke Chase up.

"We're here," I said. He rubbed his eyes.

"Where?"

"I don't know."

The Satos checked into the hotel and showed Chase and me to our own room. We had just enough time to take our suitcases to the room before the host-dad took us to one of the meeting rooms in the hotel. A huge T-shaped table sat low to the floor in the middle of the room. No one was there except for the host-family and us. They motioned for us to sit at the table, and they did the same.

After a few minutes a couple of waitresses entered the room and sat a glass of water, a small green bottle, and a covered dish in front of everyone. The family began to eat and drink not their water but the contents of the green bottle. I lifted the cap of the bottle and sniffed. It smelled like rubbing alcohol, and it burned my nose. I could feel the fumes spreading inside my nostrils and into my brain like tentacles. I already felt drunk. My host-dad saw this and turned to me.

"Hot sake," he said in horrible English. He smiled, poured some of the sake onto a small saucer, and slurped it off of the plate. He held out the saucer to me and then brought it back to his mouth, pretending to drink. *Now it's your turn*, this gesture said. I shook my head and smiled as I politely told him I couldn't. I looked around and noticed the rest of the family was drinking as well. Even the short and chunky ten-year-old son was downing sake like Kool Aid. I turned to Chase.

"What do we do?" he asked as if I knew the answer.

"We can't be rude," I replied (words I dread saying). I guess this was a good enough answer for the both of us. We each poured ourselves a saucer of steaming sake and downed them with a toss of our heads. A freezing heat shot down my throat and into my stomach, lungs, arms, legs, and head. My eyes watered. I couldn't stop coughing.

After my ears stopped ringing I could hear the host-dad laughing. He came and sat down between Chase and me. His eyes were bloodshot and glassy. He told us of the ancient Japanese warriors called samurai. Before going into battle they would drink hot sake from small saucers just as we were doing. The samurai would scream their battle-cry as they charged into war. He downed

another saucer full.

The family's oldest son interrupted this story by pulling Chase to a standing position. He pointed to a small stage on one side of the room.

"Sing, sing," he said. On the front of the stage sat a karaoke machine. The son pushed Chase towards the stage, saying only, "Sing, sing." I chuckled to myself; after two or three shots of hot sake Chase was going to have to sing in front of our host family! I was yanked to my feet in a split second.

"Sing, sing." Before I could tell them that Chase would be glad to sing for them first, I looked closer at the karaoke machine-- two microphones. Chase and I shook our heads and politely said, "No thanks," as we had before with the sake. The entire time the son was pushing us to the stage saying, "Sing, sing." By this time the entire family had joined in, "Sing, sing. Sing, sing." We continued to resist.

"SING!" The room was silent. Chase and I looked at the host-dad; he sat on the floor, the bottle of sake in one hand and the saucer in the other. He pointed with his saucer-hand towards the stage.

Without thinking we bolted to the stage and grabbed the microphones. I hit the play button and on the screen flashed "Heartbreak Hotel: Elvis Presley." I flipped up the collar of my shirt and curled the corner of my lip in my best Elvis impersonation. Chase followed suit as the music started.

*Since my baby left me,
I found a new place to dwell.
It's down at the end of Lonely Street,
The Heartbreak Hotel...*

The Satos applauded. We returned to our seats and finished our supper as different members of the family murdered American Pop songs. The chunky son sang "I Want To Hold Your Hand," the oldest son and the daughter who was nearly my age did a horrible duet rendition of "Mrs. Robinson," and even the grandmother got on the stage to perform her version of "Billy Jean."

In the midst of the festivities, Chase and I realized that the next day we were supposed to meet with our American group for a shopping trip in Tokyo. It looked as though our host-family was intending to keep us at the hotel overnight. We tried talking to every member of the family to tell them about our planned trip tomorrow with our group, but Chase and I knew very little Japanese and they knew almost no English at all. After about ten minutes of difficult explanation and re-explanation, our host-parents thought we wanted them to take us shopping in Tokyo the next day, so they agreed.

Chase and I were frustrated so without explaining to the family we left the meeting room and went to our own hotel room. A few minutes later we heard a banging on our door. I opened it and the host-dad was staggering in the hallway. He pointed and screamed obscenities at us in Japanese, his eyes flaring a deep red. He still held the sake bottle and saucer in his hands, and he was shaking them violently above his head as he screamed. I tried to say I didn't understand what he was saying, but before I could he slammed the door in my face.

Needless to say, we got scared. We wanted to call the leader of the American group we had traveled with from our school, Butch Frye, but we couldn't find our phone list in our suitcases. Chase had the idea to call his mom back in the states and get the number from her because he thought she had a phone list too. He tried using the phone in our room but couldn't figure out how to dial internationally.

We snuck down to the lobby and the desk clerk directed us to a pay phone in the lobby.

Chase dialed his home number, and as soon as his mom answered he tried frantically to tell her all the details of our ordeal. Soon he was just blubbering, and he started to sob hysterically. In the middle of his panic attack he blurted out, "Mom, we don't know where the fuck we are!" He handed me the phone and I had to tell his mom about our situation. She didn't have the phone list, but she decided she would call someone who did and then call Butch Frye herself. I had serious doubts about this plan but agreed and hung up the phone. Chase was still crying.

As we turned to go back to our room we saw our host-dad and his chunky son kicking a soccer ball around in the lobby. Apparently they had been doing this the entire time we were on the phone. They were weirdly graceful and balanced considering the amount of sake they had both consumed. The father and son bounced the ball back and forth using their feet and shins and heads.

Chase thought the dad was going to abuse us so he started screaming and trying to hide behind the lobby desk.

"He's trying to hurt us! He's drunk and trying to hurt us!"

This really made the host-father angry and he stormed off, his son trailing behind with the soccer ball. I pulled Chase out from behind the desk and dragged him whimpering back to our room. I was just as scared as he was, but I was having to take control of the situation. I had to be the strong one.

We locked our door and tried to watch some television to take our minds off of our situation. All that was on was *Friday the 13th Part III*. That didn't help. Chase had been right-- we didn't know where the fuck we were. Only a week before we had been taken out of our homeland and dropped into a completely new culture with thirty other Americans. That was an experience in itself. Not only did I have to deal with this, but I was forced to become completely immersed in the culture. I was taken away from the comfort zone I had formed with my group in Myogi-town, the family I had away from home. I felt twice as alone as I had when I was with the other Americans. I was in the middle of nowhere in the middle of nowhere. I didn't just want to be home, I wanted my culture. I wanted to wrap it around me like a blanket.

After an hour the phone in our room rang. It was Mr. Frye. He had spoken with the mayors of Myogi-town, and they had contacted our host-father at the hotel. The host-dad had agreed to drive us back to town so we could meet with our group the next day. I begged him not to make us ride back with him because he was drunk (I intentionally left out the part about Chase and me drinking sake), but that didn't seem to matter much to Mr. Frye. He thought we were simply two homesick teenagers, and we were blowing the situation way out of proportion. He casually told us he'd see us the next day and hung up.

On the way back to Myogi-town our host-father drove over 100 m.p.h. again. Chase, his eyes red from crying, fell asleep in the car, curled in fetal position the same as before. No one said anything in Japanese or English. I looked out the window at the night landscape rushing by. The starless sky covered the rounded Japanese mountains. In the solemn rice patties I could see the moon's foreign reflection.

One-Act Play by Katie Elkins

Let's Chant

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

RAMEY: *An idealistic, but cynical feminist. White, early 20s. She is unconventionally attractive and rather impetuous. Both anti-establishment and anti-religion. Lonely and frustrated with the reality of life.*

STARK: *Young Hare Krishna man. He has a kind, handsome face despite the overbearing, traditional Krishna regalia. White, early 20s.*

THE BENCH-FILLERS: *Three men and one woman who occupy two of the three benches in the train station. One of the men sits on the end of the closest bench next to Ramey.*

SCENE: *A ratty but not ominous Amtrak train station in Colorado Springs, Colorado.*

TIME: *The present. One a.m.*

SETTING: *A basic ratty, bubble-gum-sticking-to-the-floor Amtrak station in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Though a bit dirty, it is not ominous. In the background, there are two newspaper stands, one with a local paper and one with the Wall Street Journal. Three wooden benches are lined up with ample space between them, facing the audience. On the back wall hangs a Virginia Slims poster with a half-naked woman smoking in her bathtub and a poster with all the train destinations listed. A lost dog sign is half-torn down on the back wall. A clock also hangs behind the benches.*

AT RISE: *Three wooden benches are facing the audience. The middle bench is empty. The two outside benches are filled with three MEN and one WOMAN waiting for the train. Beside each person is their luggage propped up against the benches. The WOMAN is reading People, one of the MEN is reading a paperback book, and the other two MEN have their heads hidden behind their copies of the Wall Street Journals. STARK, dressed in the pale orange Krishna robe, toting the religious book, Bhagavad-Gita and holding a flower, is trying to talk to the WOMAN at the far end of the benches.*

STARK: Excuse me, ma'am, would you like a flower?

WOMAN (*looking up from her magazine, irritated*): No, thank you.

STARK: Have you ever truly noticed the beauty in a single flower, ma'am? When we place ourselves in harmony with the world, as with this flower, and we place ourselves in harmony with Krishna and Krishna's energy, we find ourselves returning to our natural, pure state of consciousness. This is inside us, ma'am. All of us. Have you ever experienced a pure state of mind?

WOMAN (*still staring at her magazine, trying to ignore STARK*): I'd much rather biblically experience George Clooney, thank you.

STARK (*undeterred*): Illusions after all, ma'am, are the very things we work to free ourselves from.

(*RAMEY walks in from the opposite side of the stage. She is carrying a single, stuffed over-the-shoulder backpack plastered with political buttons. What once resembled a cigarette hangs from her mouth. She sees the empty bench in the middle but does not notice STARK. STARK notices her as she plops down on the empty bench and places her backpack next to her to fill up the entire bench. She puts out her already snuffed out cigarette on the bench's arm and checks her watch.*)

WOMAN (*to STARK*): I've tried to be polite, kid, but why don't you go bother someone else? I'm really quite happy in my world of attending church only on holidays.

(*WOMAN goes back to reading her magazine.*)
RAMEY (*leaning towards the man in the bench next to her*): Hey man. Hey, excuse me, man. You got a watch? Did I miss the train?

MAN (*looking out from behind his Wall Street Journal*): No, honey. The train's late. It's a little past one o'clock now.

RAMEY: Thanks, baby. And my name's not honey.

(RAMEY settles back into the bench, puts her backpack in her lap and fiddles inside the front pocket for her cigarettes. She finds her Marlboros, lights one and blows the smoke up, leaning her head back and closing her eyes.)

STARK *(now standing directly in front of RAMEY):* Child, those things can kill you.

RAMEY *(with her eyes still closed):* And what are you, some kinda expert on God's will? Like I haven't--

(looking up and seeing STARK in all his Hare Krishna glory, somewhat taken back)

--heard that one before.

STARK: You might say I'm an expert of sorts.

RAMEY: Jesus. Stunning. Just classic. The night I decide to get away from everything opinionated and dogmatic and I run into Krishna himself in a late night train station. Jesus. And why did you call me "child," aren't you basically my age?

STARK: Can I offer you a flower?

RAMEY: You didn't answer my question.

STARK: Not every question has an answer.

RAMEY *(sarcastically):* No, but this one does.

STARK: I'm twenty-four.

RAMEY: I thought you looked about my age. So what's your name, Krishna guy? Can I be blessed with such personal information without accepting the flower?

STARK: It's Stark.

RAMEY: Cool name. But I thought you guys all had Indian names or something?

STARK: Only those who accept fully the second birth into higher spiritual knowledge are given new names by their spiritual master.

RAMEY *(cynically amused):* And you haven't been reborn?

STARK: They say I am still too connected with the bodily conception of life.

RAMEY: Still horny, huh?

STARK *(awkwardly returning to his real purpose):* Okay, so, I'm offering you this flower as a sign of the freedom Lord Krishna, the source of immortal wisdom, can offer you.

RAMEY: Thanks, but no thanks, Stark.

Next thing you'll have me reading that BS book of yours.

STARK *(playfully ironic):* Ah, so you've heard of it? It's called the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It contains all our teachings. It will help lead you to Rama, the highest eternal pleasure.

RAMEY *(taking a long drag off her cigarette):* Right.

STARK: Child, open your mind, it might help with that chip on your shoulder.

RAMEY *(irritated again):* I thought we covered this "child" bit. So what are you, Mother Superior? Cause if you are, the look doesn't suit you.

(RAMEY gestures mockingly at the ridiculousness of STARK's robe and beads.)

STARK *(feeling his bald head with a hint of regret on his face):* I don't think men can be nuns.

RAMEY: And I didn't think women could be Hare Krishnas.

STARK *(fidgeting with his book):* That's not all together true. A few are.

(Awkward silence falls between the two. RAMEY looks at her watch and for the first time, glances at her surroundings haphazardly. STARK starts to walk away.)

RAMEY *(starting off as a hum and becoming a full-fledged, bordering on patronizing chant):* Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Krishna Krishna Krishna hana hana hana hana.

(stopping STARK before he gets too far away)

Hey, Stark, don't y'all carry bongos or something to Hare-Hare-Krishna-Krishna with?

STARK: Bongos? No.

RAMEY: Maracas?

STARK: Nope. No maracas.

RAMEY: Wax on, wax off things like in *The Karate Kid*? Y'all have got to have those!

STARK *(amused):* Are you from the Springs originally?

RAMEY *(a bit defensively):* Why do you ask?

STARK: When you loosen up, that southern accent creeps in.

RAMEY: That's what I get for growing up swinging in magnolia trees, flying junebugs on a string, and singing in the First Baptist choir. The preachers will have you twanging before you know it.

(pretending to pick up her backpack)

Matter of fact, think I've got one of those junebugs squashed in my travel Bible book-marked by a magnolia leaf somewhere in here.

STARK *(smiling, but somewhat aside):* Can't say I've seen a Bible in a while.

RAMEY: You mean you haven't always been a funny looking dude with no hair and an affinity for beads?

STARK *(sitting down next to RAMEY on the bench):* I grew up Baptist.

(STARK places his book on his lap and his flower on the arm of the bench.)

RAMEY: You're a Baptist too?

STARK: Yep.

RAMEY: How does a former Baptist manage to become a Hare Krishna?

STARK: Luck.

RAMEY: Lesser of two evils it seems to me.

STARK: I don't know. I think it's all one and the same. I think we're all searching for a sense of spiritual belonging and some find it in a Christian God and some don't. Yet somehow you don't strike me as a practicing Baptist.

RAMEY: Nope. Definitely not--
(imitating him)

--"a practicing Baptist." I have little patience for preaching.

STARK: Can't say I've ever been accused of being preachy.

RAMEY *(ignoring STARK):* Not to mention the fact that my parents are active members of the Sunday and Wednesday Baptist church cult. Living and breathing specimens of morality. It's enough to make you wanna get the hell outta Dodge.

STARK: So your parents are the reason you are in this train station alone so late at night?

RAMEY: Makes me sound like an after-school special, doesn't it?

(RAMEY looks at her watch again. She also turns around and looks at the clock on the back wall.)

RAMEY: I thought the train was due at one.

STARK *(also looking at the clock):* Well, looks like 1:35 now, so it must be late.

RAMEY *(getting a bit frantic):* Do you think I've missed it? Mr. Dude here--

(pointing at the man next to her)

--said it was late.

STARK: I've been here since around midnight and I didn't see it arrive. Looks like it's just late.

RAMEY *(amused):* Great.

STARK *(smiling and beginning to flip through the pages of his book):* Gives me more time to enlighten you on the ways of Krishna.

RAMEY: You mean it gives you more time to try to warp my mind. News flash for ya, Stark, I'm too opinionated and dogmatic myself. I don't warp easily.

STARK: As Hare Krishnas, we might not be allowed to partake in the self-serving act of gambling, but we are always up for a challenge. You--

RAMEY: Me what?

STARK: I was about to say that you appear to be a challenge when I realized that you know my name, but I don't know yours.

RAMEY: Ramey.

STARK: Pretty name.

RAMEY: It was my grandmother's name. My mom wanted to keep it in the family.

STARK: Did you know your grandmother?

RAMEY: Nah, she died soon after my mom got married. Although my mom says I remind her of her mother all the time. Supposedly she was as stubborn as I am. I bet we would have gotten along a lot better than my mother and I.

STARK: Is your mom just as stubborn?

RAMEY *(obviously ignoring the question):* So you were here when I got here? Do all religious zealots hang out in late night train stations waiting for girls, alone and in a hurry, that they can approach?

STARK: I tend to talk to anyone I think might have an open mind. I was talking to the lady over there busy reading *People*, but she was more interested in the lives of the rich and famous than the way of Rama.

RAMEY: Out of curiosity, do you ever get sick of constant rejection? Hell, I just wanted you to leave me alone. I'm debating whether I still do.

STARK: A feeling of rejection is a pride is-

sue and pride is ego and we don't believe in ego. If I get one out of one hundred people to listen to what I have to say about enlightenment by way of Krishna, I've succeeded.

RAMEY: And have you succeeded with anybody here tonight?

STARK: You're my last hope.

RAMEY: Sounds familiar.

(RAMEY reaches for another cigarette and lights it.)

STARK: What?

RAMEY: Huh?

STARK: What sounds familiar?

RAMEY: That I'm your last hope.

STARK: Care to elaborate?

RAMEY: Not really.

(A strange silence falls upon them again. Neither one seems to want to say anything. STARK simply twiddles his thumbs, if you will, and half-heartedly watches RAMEY smoke.)

STARK: Well Ramey, you're perhaps the longest conversation I've had today, and definitely the most congenial. But I can see that you're not in the mood to get into a discussion of the deep meanings in the way we live our lives. Our gathering place is on East Monroe and Delmont Street. Every Sunday at five we have an open to the public vegetarian feast. I'd love it if you'd join us one Sunday.

(STARK lingers a minute as RAMEY seems to make eye contact. She appears to be about to say something when she simply takes another drag. STARK starts to walk away.)

RAMEY: Wait. Do you wanna know why I'm here so late?

STARK: I've told you why I am.

RAMEY: Have you?

STARK *(sitting back down next to RAMEY)*:

Yeah, I'm here to do that pesky preaching you can't stand.

(RAMEY smiles, catching the joke.)

RAMEY: Did you enjoy being Baptist?

STARK: I think so.

RAMEY: Then why aren't you a Christian still?

STARK: You might say I also got sick of preaching.

RAMEY: Come again.

STARK: I got sick of being preached at.

RAMEY *(dumbfounded)*: So now you're the preacher instead of the preachee?

STARK: Looks like it.

RAMEY: Hadn't thought about it like that, huh?

STARK: Not in those terms exactly, no. I try not to equate my past to my present.

RAMEY: So, you just had a thing against ministers.

STARK: And parents.

RAMEY: And parents?

STARK: My parents were very demanding and strict. It was their way or no way. And their way was the Baptist way.

RAMEY *(gesturing at the way STARK is dressed)*: What do they think about your being a, um, non-Baptist?

STARK: They don't.

RAMEY: They don't think or they don't know?

STARK *(for the first time, obviously bothered, perhaps even irritated)*: Neither.

RAMEY: Do they live here in the Springs?

STARK: No.

RAMEY: Where?

STARK: Do you feel that you don't need a higher power in your life?

RAMEY: I have a higher power--my parents. And I think you're changing the subject.

STARK: No, I'm not. And I meant a higher power like God or the Absolute or Rama.

RAMEY: Yes you are changing the subject and no, I don't need a God or a Rama.

STARK *(angrily)*: What makes you think you don't need God? That's ridiculous. Everyone

needs God. It's the only way you find meaning in this world. It's the only way you deal with your ego and your pride and your issues, your anger, your parents...

RAMEY: It's also the best way to deny and repress.

STARK: How in the world is God a means of repression?

RAMEY: You put all your faith in God, right? And you believe that everything happens for a reason. You repress the things that

piss you off or you claim God's love as a means to justify pissing other people off. What a crock of bullshit.

STARK: You're repression free, I suppose?

RAMEY: Hell no. Repression is my favorite drug. I'm just saying that I'm sick of people using God and God's love to justify unloving and cruel acts.

STARK: Are we talking about your parents here?

RAMEY: In a roundabout way.

STARK: They must use God as an excuse.

RAMEY *(sarcastically)*: Yes, and by the way you succumbed to your ego and your anger there a few seconds ago, it looks like our parents might share some common traits.

(STARK remains quite for a few minutes, staring at his sandals.)

STARK *(thoughtfully)*: What was your favorite moment growing up?

RAMEY: That's a hard question to answer.

STARK: Okay, well since you grew up Baptist—

(thinking about an easier question to ask)

--when did you say you quit going to church?

RAMEY: When I was sixteen. About five years ago.

STARK: Okay, so to narrow it a bit, what was your favorite moment growing up that happened in church?

RAMEY: Oh please. I don't think I have any favorite moments.

STARK: Think. I do have a point here.

RAMEY: Um, I guess it would be singing in the choir. Oh yeah!

It would have to be when I got the role of the Little Drummer Boy in the Christmas pageant and got the longest solo in the bunch.

STARK: Would you believe I played the Little Drummer Boy too?

RAMEY *(surprised, but obviously believing him)*: No.

STARK: Swear.

RAMEY *(mockingly)*: To God?

STARK *(equally as mocking)*: To Rama.

RAMEY: Did you have to wear glitter on your face?

STARK: That I didn't have to do.

RAMEY: I guess in the little boy's outfit, they must have been trying to make me more feminine.

STARK: I can't imagine the little drummer boy traveling all the way to Jesus's manger and checking his makeup beforehand.

RAMEY *(laughing)*: Only if God were a man and the little drummer boy was--

(spotting the Virginia Slim poster with the half-naked woman in the bathtub)

--a half-naked chick in a bathtub longing for a smooth smoke. Barf.

STARK *(blushing)*: I kinda like that poster.

RAMEY *(astounded)*: God, even the most spiritual men just want to get laid.

STARK: I didn't say anything about—

(shyly imitating her)

--"getting laid."

RAMEY *(pointing at the poster and saying in a mock French accent)*: No, but you like, no?

STARK: I'm still a man.

RAMEY: Yes, but a man who is not supposed to remember that he has a penis and that it wants to be used.

STARK *(clumsily and quickly changing the subject)*:

So my point about the favorite moment in church is to help you remember something about a religious experience that makes you feel good about yourself.

RAMEY: I get the idea, but I don't equate my singing "Pa-Rum-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pum" with a highly religious experience.

STARK: Did you at any moment in your singing the song for the congregation feel any sense of God's spirit in the church? In your voice?

RAMEY: I felt genuine stage fright.

STARK *(sighing)*: Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best example.

RAMEY: Maybe not.

STARK: The point was to show you that good things do come out of having a spiritual foundation when facing the ups and downs of the world.

RAMEY: Look, I stopped going to church for a reason and I've experimented with other religions, but I'm just not interested in the idea of searching—

(waving her arms in an exaggerated motion of circles)

--"out there somewhere" for some magical moment when everything in my life reaches perpetual harmony with the universe.

STARK: I can't deny that part of the beauty in my religion is the idea that we as human beings can obtain a sense of harmony and oneness with the higher spiritual level, but that takes lots of practice.

RAMEY: So tell me, what have you gained from reaching the higher spiritual level?

STARK *a bit ashamed*): I haven't. Yet.

RAMEY: So then what's the point? God has never answered my prayers and it's hard to start believing in any benevolent power when you are constantly let down.

STARK: Things happen for a reason. That doesn't mean a higher power isn't there.

(RAMEY lets out an irritated huff and gets up and walks towards the sign on the wall containing all of the train destinations and times. STARK remains seated and watches her from the bench.)

RAMEY *(loudly)*: When the fuck is this train going to get here?

(searching the poster for the information)

One o'clock! One o'clock! Jesus. This is worse than waiting at a doctor's office. At least there you have something to read.

STARK *(trying to lighten the mood)*: I have a book here you can borrow.

(STARK holds up the Bhagavad-gita.)

RAMEY *(looking back in his direction)*: Okay, you, now, you I'm sick of. Enough with the desire to save me. I just want out of here and by the looks of the non-existent train, that's not gonna happen.

STARK: I'm not trying to save you. There is a distinct difference between Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses.

RAMEY: Yeah, if you were a Jehovah's Witness, at least I could slam the door in your face.

STARK *(angry at RAMEY's cynicism)*: What makes you so special? What makes your problems so much worse than anyone else's?

RAMEY: I never said my problems were worse!

STARK: Oh no, no, your parents just suck and your life just sucks and you're alone in the wee hours of the morning talking to a total stranger in a train station! Oh no, no, you haven't been bitchy since I first approached you!

RAMEY *(walking back towards the bench)*: Aha! So he isn't all serenity and peace?

STARK *(flustered and puzzled by his own behavior)*: Has anyone ever told you you have this way of getting under a person's skin?

(RAMEY sits back down on the bench and stares at STARK.)

RAMEY: Once or twice.

STARK: Well add my name to that list.

RAMEY: Duly noted.

STARK: Sorry about that.

RAMEY: About letting me have it?

STARK: Anger is not healthy for me. Nor is jealousy.

RAMEY: What could you possibly be jealous of?

STARK *(rubbing one of his hands over his cleanly shaven head)*: Your freedom.

RAMEY: I would hardly call myself free.

I'm hiding out in an Amtrak station desperately waiting for a train to take me out of this town.

STARK: I figured you were running away.

RAMEY: Well, I'm too old to really be running away. Let's just say I'm moving on.

STARK: Still. I'm jealous of your ability to just pack up and leave. Becoming a Hare Krishna was the most impetuous thing I ever did. Before that, I hadn't even left my hometown.

RAMEY: Becoming part of a cult seems pretty impetuous to me. I'd hardly rank that in the same category as getting a tattoo, or dying your hair purple, or running away from home at the spur of the moment. You completely changed yourself.

STARK: Did I?

RAMEY: By the looks of it.

STARK: But isn't everything just appearance anyway? If I took off this robe and put down this book, would I still have a place carved out for myself in this world? Would I be free?

RAMEY: I don't know. I guess if I were to say I find spirituality in anything it would be the idea of having the freedom to find a place to carve out for yourself. The ability to constantly evolve and mold ourselves into who we truly are on the--

(searching for the world and mockingly stating)

--"soul-level," is spiritual. A part of me knows we are here to learn and part of learning is trial-and-error, figuring out who or what we want to be.

STARK: You seem pretty sure of that.

RAMEY: Or maybe I'm just blowing hot air.

STARK: Have you figured out who you are?

RAMEY: I have my moments and right now my moment is telling me that I've got to run away--

(correcting herself)

--um, move on.

STARK: Is this the first time you've wanted to leave home?

RAMEY: Not really. When I was a kid, I'd put a few Fig Newtons in a bandanna and tie it to the end of my baseball bat, grab my stuffed unicorn and run away. I'd only make it to the end of the street before I got scared. I'd sit there on the curb, waiting for my parents to notice that I was gone. I was always too proud to go home without their knowing I was missing.

STARK: You feel like that now?

RAMEY: Like what?

STARK: Like a little kid waiting for her parents to see that she's missing?

RAMEY: I'm not a kid anymore.

STARK *(looking at RAMEY with a kind of pity)*: No. No, you're not.

RAMEY: What about you?

STARK: Nope, I'm not a kid anymore either.

RAMEY: No, I mean, did you ever run away from home when you were a kid?

STARK: Many times.

RAMEY: And did it ever succeed?

STARK: Not really. My family lived on this cul-de-sac bordered by a small forest of trees. I'd always sneak out the back door and hurry to my favorite tree, climb to this place where two huge branches came together and set up

camp. But I never made it past dark. I was always afraid of bears or snakes or something that I was sure would climb up the tree and devour me. To this day, I still don't think my parents knew I ever even left.

RAMEY: When did you leave home for good?

STARK: A year ago.

RAMEY: When you became a Hare Krishna?

STARK: Yeah, my parents and I had gotten into another fight about what I was planning on doing with my life, so I up and left the next morning and here I am.

RAMEY: So you moved on.

STARK: I ran away.

RAMEY: Do you talk to your parents now?

STARK: We don't have phones at our gathering place. Besides, I am more open to the spirit of Rama when I don't have the burdening thoughts of my parents hindering my ability to reach spiritual calmness.

RAMEY: Sounds like a cop-out to me.

STARK: Does it now? Well, I don't see you staying in town to duke out your problems. Looks like you have little room to talk.

RAMEY: Touché.

STARK: So, what's the verdict? What happened between you and your folks?

RAMEY: You first.

STARK: Fine. I was in my junior year in college and I was majoring in music. Of course, that alone made my parents worry. After all, what can you do with an undergrad music degree?

RAMEY *(ignoring the rhetoric of the question)*: Work at Burger King.

STARK *(laughing)*: Basically. So anyway, my father expected me to be a minister. I know it sounds cliché, but he's a devout Christian and if a son could be groomed to be a future minister, I was the kid. I know the Bible backwards and forwards.

RAMEY *(playfully)*: Does it sound Satanic when you read it backwards?

STARK: Oh, the blasphemy! Actually, it all just starts jumbling up in your head when you have every verse memorized and every psalm

encoded in your brain.

RAMEY: Didn't knowing the Bible so well make your father happy?

STARK: Not really, because although I believed in God, I didn't live my life by the literal do's and don'ts of a Baptist schoolboy.

RAMEY: So, you rebelled?

STARK: Yeah, I did everything I could to be as anti-Christian as possible. In high school I dressed all in black, tried the Goth scene, scared my teachers with dark lipstick and darker poems. Then I tried the alternative stuff. I did the flannel and I listened to Nirvana and wanted to move to Seattle. I bought books on magic and pseudo-Indian religions. My dad was sure I was on the path to the devil.

RAMEY: So you read a book about Hare Krishna and decided it called to you?

STARK: Actually, during my first year in college I was on campus one day reading off by myself when some guy approached me with this book--

(tapping the Bhagavad-Gita on his lap)

--and gave it to me and just walked away.

RAMEY: So you weren't harassed like me by some strange robed man?

STARK: Funny. But, no, he just gave me the book, smiled, and walked away. He seemed so calm. So in tune. So I started to read it.

RAMEY: And here you are now?

STARK: Here I am now.

RAMEY: Do you ever think that this was just another form of rebelling against what your father wanted? I mean, I think Hare Krishna and Baptist are about as far from each other as you can get.

STARK: I don't know. I like to think I did this because I believed in what I read.

RAMEY: And you're happy?

STARK: I usually don't find time to question whether I'm happy or not. When I mediate, I'm fulfilled. What about you, Ramey? You never told me what happened that led you here, besides the cryptic "I had a fight with my parents."

RAMEY: Well, I had a fight with my paents.

STARK: What about?

RAMEY: First it was because I wanted to take some time off from school and that just freaked them out. Then I realized I wasn't happy with my major, so I changed it to Women's Studies.

STARK: So, you would be working at Burger King with me if you graduated?

RAMEY: Exactly. But my parents freaked about that too. My mom is convinced that any girl who majors in Women's Studies has got to be a lesbian. Poor Mom.

STARK: Aren't most of them lesbians?

RAMEY: I hate generalizations. As far as I'm concerned, it's rather irrelevant.

STARK: But your mom obviously doesn't think so.

RAMEY: Hell, at this point, anything I do becomes a comment on some hidden sexuality. I think she just fears I am one of--

(imitating her mother)

--"them homosexual gals." My mom thinks she can sniff out immorality a mile away. She's like a lioness stalking her kill. Lately I seem to be her prey.

STARK: Well, does she have any reason to be suspicious?

RAMEY: Nah, unless you count the Indigo Girls posters in my room, the "Xena for President" bumpersticker on my car, and, oh don't let me forget, the picture of me and my girlfriend hiking at Pikes Peak.

STARK *(a bit taken aback)*: Oh how dare she assume anything based on that.

RAMEY: Frankly, I don't think it's anything to worry about, period. If I become a drug addict or a prostitute or a mass murderer, maybe then she'll have cause to worry.

STARK: So you just can't see where she's coming from?

RAMEY: Actually I do know where she's coming from. I am her only daughter and her only hope for grandchildren and blah-blah-blah. It gets old after a while.

STARK: Your mother is a Baptist woman. Of course she's going to fear for your soul if you're gay.

RAMEY: Fear for my soul? That's a good one. I think her problem isn't whether or not

I'm going to hell, it's whether or not I'm going to embarrass her.

STARK: I can understand that.

RAMEY: Can you now? You're so obviously a gay woman.

STARK: I didn't mean it that way. I mean that your mother is probably just terrified that someone will find out about you and that it will be a reflection on her. You're such a cute girl, maybe your mom wonders why you insist on being gay when you could probably get any guy you wanted.

RAMEY: I don't want any guy and how attractive or unattractive I am has nothing to do with it. That seems as absurd as my mom worrying that my sexuality would be some twisted reflection on herself or the church or God or whatever.

STARK: Well, then, have you talked to your mom about how you feel?

RAMEY: I wouldn't talk to my mom about my sex life even if I were heterosexual. Sex and parents just don't mesh.

STARK: You don't have to talk about sex. Just talk about who you are. Not who you sleep with.

RAMEY: I'll give it some thought. So, what would the ol' Hare Krishna book say about my lifestyle? Am I damned to eternal spiritual ineptitude?

STARK: It's definitely frowned upon.

RAMEY: Frowned upon, huh?

STARK: Our belief is that sex should be in the context of marriage and most importantly, in the context of having children.

RAMEY: Wow. I'm screwed on both of those.

STARK: But your being gay doesn't preclude your joining our group for supper or spiritual study. Perhaps you might discover something about yourself that might change your mind about homosexuality.

RAMEY: You are kidding, right? Stark, my dear boy, I think I'm pretty damn sure I'm gay. No more discovery needed. Besides, I'm happy the way I am.

STARK: Are you?

RAMEY: Are you?

STARK: I thought we went over this.

RAMEY: Exactly. We did. But you didn't ever say you were happy. You said that you didn't find much time to analyze whether or not you are in a state of happiness.

STARK: Exactly.

RAMEY: Shit, Stark, if you have to analyze whether or not you're happy, then you're obviously not happy.

STARK: No, what I was saying was that happiness is relative--

RAMEY: Bullshit. Happiness is happiness. Here, let me demonstrate. Parents, bad. Gay, good. Me and parents, not happy. Me and girlfriend, happy.

STARK: Fine. My turn. Your running away, bad. Your staying and talking to parents, good.

RAMEY: Why in the world would I want to do that?

STARK *(frustrated)*: Because you want to stay here with your girlfriend? Because you're so big on being happy?

RAMEY: My girlfriend wants me to tell my parents. She's putting major pressure on me to tell them and I don't need that on top of everything else.

STARK: But I thought you said you and your girlfriend was the happy part of being here.

RAMEY: It is. But she wants me to do something I'm not ready for.

I don't think I'm ready to be out with my parents. Unlike you, they aren't strangers.

STARK *(a bit hurt)*: So is that what is making you so unhappy? The situation with your parents? If you just run away, you'll never know how they would have reacted if they'd just known the real you, the honest you, the lesbian you, if you will.

RAMEY: You're pipe-dreaming, man. My mother would freak. My dad...

STARK: But who cares? Isn't part of freedom being true to yourself? And can you be true to yourself if you're not true to others, especially your parents?

RAMEY: I know that. It's just difficult. Besides, your parents don't even know you're a

Hare Krishna.

STARK: Of course not, they'd freak.

RAMEY: God, you're such a hypocrite! You just preached that the most important gateway to freedom is to be true to yourself and others. Do you not want your parents to know you?

STARK: I don't think my parents care.

RAMEY: What makes you think that?

STARK: They were perpetually disappointed with me. Just like when I was a kid running away, they probably don't even know I'm gone.

RAMEY: It's not like you've been gone for a few hours. You've been gone for--

STARK: Almost a year.

RAMEY: Without a single phone call?

STARK (*sternly*): We don't have phones at our gathering place.

RAMEY (*cynically*): Oh, right.

STARK: Now who is pitying who?

RAMEY: Maybe we should be pitying each other.

STARK: Maybe. But pity is self-indulgent.

RAMEY: Who cares. Is that one of your group's no-no's?

STARK: Something like that.

RAMEY: And you agree with that?

STARK: I don't really have much of a choice.

RAMEY: You always have a choice. Hell, even Adam and Eve had a choice. Free will, my friend.

(*RAMEY lights another cigarette and STARK remains quiet. RAMEY is obviously concentrating as she puffs away.*)

RAMEY: Free will. You know, I think there's some spirituality in that. In free will. To tell my parents or not. To be here or not. To talk to you or not.

STARK (*cynically*): How profound.

RAMEY (*irked*): Yes sir, I think it is actually.

STARK: So you have free will. I agree. But how are you exercising it? By running away?

RAMEY: It's like a vicious circle. I feel like saying the same thing to you. Maybe your religion does dictate what you can and can't do. Every religion I know of has their own

set of rules and regulations, so to speak.

That's an inherent part of organization. But I don't think it's an inherent part of spirituality. Free will is.

STARK: Okay, so I agree.

RAMEY: Then why be a part of a group that tells you what to do?

(*STARK snatches RAMEY's cigarette from her hand and takes a long drag. RAMEY smiles and lights another for herself.*)

STARK (*deliberately*): You want honesty?

RAMEY (*sweetly*): I wouldn't expect anything less.

STARK: I don't really have anywhere else to go. And I'm not sure I want to leave. There really are some great people there and I really believed in it for a long time.

RAMEY: But you don't now?

STARK: I do. Sort of. Actually, I've been thinking about it for a while. It's kinda like Christianity for me. In the end, I take snippets from it and form my own spirituality. But I miss being able to make my own decisions about what I think is moral or immoral or right or wrong. Things like that.

RAMEY: So what are you going to do about it?

STARK: Go sneak a hamburger and watch a porno.

RAMEY (*laughing*): I don't think that'd get you very far.

STARK: Perhaps not, but I miss temporary fixes.

RAMEY: So why don't you go back home?

STARK: To my parents?

RAMEY: Yeah, to your parents.

STARK: I don't know if I'd be welcome.

RAMEY: Is that the only reason you've never considered going back?

STARK: It's the biggest reason.

RAMEY: You're their son, Stark. I find it hard to believe that they wouldn't open their arms again to you. If nothing else, they are Baptist and Baptists are supposed to forgive.

STARK: Says you. Why don't you go home? The same goes for your parents.

RAMEY: I don't know. I wonder if I'm welcome after pulling a stunt like this.

STARK: Which stunt? Being gay or running away?

RAMEY: Both. Hell, maybe I should just bring you home. You're a man. Albeit a man in a skirt, but a man nonetheless. My parents would probably beg me to convert to Hare Krishna as long as you could give them grandchildren.

STARK: Not much of a choice for the old folks, huh? I don't know though. I think I'm scared of what might happen if I go back home myself.

RAMEY: Me too.

STARK (*playing out the situation*): Hi Mom and Dad. I was a Hare Krishna for a year. What's for dinner?

RAMEY: I've got one better than that.

(*RAMEY stands up and acts out the meeting with her parents with an air of the exaggerated and the absurd.*)

RAMEY: Howdy Mom and Dad. I've been a lesbian since I was in grade school. What's on the tube?

STARK (*laughing*): Looks like we're both in trouble.

RAMEY: Look at it this way, I suppose if we don't survive confronting our parents, you can always become the lesbian and I can always become the Hare Krishna.

STARK (*looking down at his robe*): I'm not sure I'd look good in pants.

ANNOUNCER (*on loudspeaker, offstage*): Attention ladies and gentlemen. The one o'clock train, number nineteen, will be arriving momentarily. We apologize for the delay and hope you will chose Amtrak for any future travel.

RAMEY: Looks like this is finally my train. So what are you going to do?

STARK (*rather solemnly*): I guess I'm going to head back and get some sleep. This is the latest I've been out recruiting before. They're going to expect me to have a whole flock of people shouting praises to Krishna.

RAMEY: Do me a favor, Stark?

STARK: Absolutely.

RAMEY: Give your parents a call.

STARK: Yeah...

RAMEY: I just realized that you never told me where your parents lived.

STARK: Atlanta.

RAMEY (*surprised*): Georgia! Now I understand. Southern Baptists, eh?

STARK: As southern as can be.

(*RAMEY picks up her backpack and starts looking for something inside. She finds her train ticket as STARK is getting up to leave.*)

RAMEY: Do me one more favor, Stark.

STARK (*half-sitting, half-standing*): What?

RAMEY: Go home.

(*RAMEY hands him her train ticket. STARK is perplexed. He sits back down and looks at the ticket.*)

RAMEY: You never asked me where I was running away to.

STARK (*surprised*): Atlanta?

RAMEY: Atlanta.

STARK (*still looking at the ticket*): But I can't--

RAMEY: But you will.

STARK: What about you?

RAMEY: I realize that there's something to what you reminded me of. I do feel like a little kid just running away again. Maybe I am just being stubborn. I can't leave wondering what would have happened if I had just... I need to go home and I need to talk to my parents. There's some stuff that needs to be sorted out. If nothing else, one can never have too much parental absurdity.

(*A train whistle blows loudly off stage.*)

STARK: I don't know, Ramey. I can't just...

RAMEY: Yes you can. Just go.

STARK (*picking up the wilted flower he had placed on the arm of the bench*): Can I offer you a flower, ma'am, in the name of Hare Krishna?

RAMEY (*smiling and taking the flower from STARK's hand*): It'd be an honor.

(*STARK and RAMEY knowingly stare at each other for a brief moment. STARK looks down at the ticket he is holding and smiles. RAMEY looks at the flower she is holding and smiles.*)

CURTAIN

One-Act Play by Caroline Murnane

The Old Ballgame

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

KATHLEEN: A woman in her late forties.

JOAN: Kathleen's sister and in her early forties. She is in a wheelchair and has a cast on her leg.

KEVIN: Kathleen and Joan's brother. In his mid-forties.

SCENE: A small, slightly unkempt living room with a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table. There is a door to the kitchen at one end and a door leading outside at the other.

TIME: The present.

SETTING: A small, slightly unkempt living room with a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table. There is a door to the kitchen at one end and a door to outside at the other.

AT RISE: JOAN and her sister KATHLEEN sit in the living room. JOAN is in her early forties. She is in a wheelchair and has a cast on her leg. KATHLEEN is in her late forties. They each hold a glass. A bottle of vodka is on the coffee table. They drink and refill their glasses periodically.

KATHLEEN: It's so quiet here. Andy and the kids are always yapping and bugging me at home.

JOAN: There's certainly no chance that anyone will bother us here. The phone doesn't even ring. Your call was the first one I've had in three weeks.

KATHLEEN (surprised): Haven't you talked to your kids?

JOAN: They don't call me anymore.
(She laughs.)

JOAN (sarcastically): I'm all alone in the world!

KATHLEEN: Don't be ridiculous.

JOAN: But, nice of you to honor me with your visit. Don't think you're fooling me, though. I know you only do these periodic check-ins because I always have Oreos.

(KATHLEEN glares at JOAN and there is a pause while they sip their drinks.)

KATHLEEN: Uh... do you have any Oreos?

JOAN: No. I knew in advance that you were coming so I was able to eat them all first. Why are you here on a weeknight anyway? Don't you always have papers to grade or something?

KATHLEEN: This was a good night for Kevin. Did I tell you he found some more old pictures to put in this scrapbook for Dad? We should be able to finish it all tonight.

JOAN: Do you really think Dad wants a scrapbook for his birthday? No doubt looking at pictures of us as kids will remind him of how badly we've turned out. But, hey. I have nothing else to do.

KATHLEEN (ignoring her and looking at her watch): Kevin should be here soon. I guess you haven't seen him in awhile, either.

JOAN: I see him sometimes.

KATHLEEN: When? A lot?

JOAN: A couple times a month, maybe. Since I shattered my leg he comes more often. Sometimes one of his kids comes with him.

They were here on Monday.

KATHLEEN: Well.

JOAN: What; are you surprised?

KATHLEEN: He's always too busy to have dinner with me.

JOAN: Have you ever invited him to dinner?

KATHLEEN: No.

JOAN: Well, there you go.

(They silently sip their drinks.)

KATHLEEN: So, you're lying. Someone has called you on the phone.

JOAN: Oh, Kevin doesn't count. He's so dependable that I almost forget he exists.

(The doorbell rings.)

JOAN: See, there he is. I'll get it.

(She starts to move her wheelchair. KATHLEEN

umps up and goes to the door.)

KATHLEEN: No, stay there.

(She opens the door and admits KEVIN. He is in his mid-forties and wears a suit and tie. He carries a briefcase and a shopping bag.)

KEVIN: Hello, Kathleen.

KATHLEEN (in a hushed voice): You're late!

KEVIN: I'm sorry. The traffic around here is worse every day. Hi, Joan. How's the leg?

JOAN: Broken.

KEVIN: Ah.

(sitting down and opening the shopping bag)

I brought the stuff for Dad's present.

(He takes out a scrapbook and a pile of photographs, then notices the pitcher on the table.)

KEVIN (surprised): Kathleen, are you drinking vodka?

KATHLEEN: Joan put it out.

KEVIN: And you're drinking it?

JOAN: What's the problem? I offered Kathleen a drink and she took it. Have you not heard of hospitality?

KEVIN: Kathleen!

KATHLEEN: What? I didn't want to seem weird!

JOAN: What?

KEVIN (quickly): You know how Kathleen has that chip about never fitting in in high school. Peer pressure, being one of the group, taking a drink to seem cool—

KATHLEEN: What?

KEVIN: Joan, do you have a soda or something around here?

KATHLEEN: Don't move, Joan. I'll get it.

(KATHLEEN exits through the door to the kitchen.)

KEVIN: So, how are you feeling?

JOAN: I'm my usual fun and upbeat self.

Why's Kathleen so weird?

KEVIN: Today, or in general?

JOAN: Why are you so weird?

KEVIN (obviously changing the subject): I saw Dad today.

JOAN: How delightful that must have been. Isn't he dead yet?

KEVIN: He's the same; pretty awful. He's weak, but they take good care of people at this

new place. You know, it's run by nuns.

JOAN: You're kidding. Do nuns still slap your hands when you're his age?

KEVIN: I've met a few of them and they're all very nice and very experienced. I think Dad likes it there.

JOAN: He'd like any place that served fried fish. Do they have fried fish?

KEVIN: Every Friday.

JOAN: He probably goes to confession every day. His record will be clear when he finally goes.

(KATHLEEN enters the room holding a glass of soda. She sets it on the table in front of KEVIN.)

JOAN: Kevin saw Dad today, Kathleen.

KATHLEEN (glancing at KEVIN): Oh, I saw him today too.

(KATHLEEN gulps her drink.)

KATHLEEN: He looks fabulous! So healthy. All the nuns love him.

JOAN: Kevin says he looks terrible.

KATHLEEN: No! Not terrible! Fabulous. Healthy.

(KEVIN rolls his eyes.)

JOAN: You both saw Dad today? Together?

KATHLEEN (quickly): Yes! I mean, no!

JOAN: So why did you or did you not see Dad together? Did he die already? Are you carrying his ashes in your little shopping bag?

KEVIN: Please.

(clearing his throat)

We went to talk to him about you. Or, rather, he wanted to talk to us about you.

JOAN (laughing sarcastically): To ask why I never visit him?

KEVIN: No. I don't think he cares about that anymore.

JOAN: Did Michael go with you, too?

KEVIN: No, he's still not speaking to us after the Christmas party. I didn't want to tell Dad that, so I just said that he couldn't make it to see Dad with us today because he had to have lunch with the president of his company.

JOAN: There's a president now? Did he change jobs?

KEVIN: I don't think so. But Dad doesn't know about the online high school term paper business so I didn't want to worry him.

JOAN: I'm so glad to see little brother salesman putting our old schoolwork to good use.

KEVIN: Last time we talked he'd sold 500 copies of that thing you did on the 1942 Nebraskan white slave trade.

JOAN: Yeah, eleventh grade. It was completely made up. Fake information, fake endnotes. I got an A.

KATHLEEN: Does he use any of my papers?

JOAN: Did you ever write any?

KEVIN: Uh... why don't we get back to the subject at hand. Kathleen, we need to stick to the game plan.

JOAN: Yes, I'm curious to hear about the hand and the plan. I thought we were going to work on this scrapbook. Enlighten this tired, wheelchair-bound soul. Or, soulless, if you like.

KEVIN (*frustrated*): Joan, how did you break your leg?

JOAN: I fell down the stairs.

KEVIN: There are no stairs in your apartment.

JOAN: Why do they have to be in my apartment?

KEVIN: Dad said that you rode your bicycle into a fence.

KATHLEEN: He did? How would he know? Joan doesn't even talk to Dad.

KEVIN: He read it in the Police Beat. She knocked part of a fence down. That family's dog escaped and never came back.

KATHLEEN: You ride a bicycle?

KEVIN: Why didn't you tell us your driver's license was suspended?

KATHLEEN: It was?

KEVIN: Yes.

JOAN: No.

KEVIN: Yes! I know it was! It definitely was! Your license was absolutely suspended! It was!

(*JOAN laughs.*)

JOAN: Say it again. I'm not sure you've made your point yet.

KEVIN: Why do you have to do this?

JOAN (*innocently*): Do what, Kevin?

KEVIN: This thing! This thing you always do!

KATHLEEN: Kevin, I don't think we're doing this the way Dad told us to.

KEVIN: Shit! The list! I got distracted when we started talking about Michael.

(*pointing to JOAN*)

Why can't you just be quiet and act like a normal person for one minute? We want to help you!

JOAN: Oh, please do explain.

KEVIN (*opening his briefcase and taking out a sheaf of papers*): Dad gave me a list of what he wants us to do with you.

JOAN: Do with me?

KEVIN (*ignoring her*): He gave it to me when we saw him today but I haven't actually read it yet.

KATHLEEN (*reading over his shoulder*): "Intervention tips?" Dad didn't tell me about this!

KEVIN: He said they're all in order.

JOAN: Are you sure this is an intervention? Kathleen's had three drinks already, and I'm almost positive that the interveners are supposed to be sober.

KEVIN: Yes, yes. This is an intervention. Dad is concerned.

JOAN: So, you're doing this for Dad? Because he asked you to? Wake up, Kevin.

You're never going to make Dad happy.

KEVIN: This isn't about me making Dad happy. This is about you.

JOAN: But it is. I'm sure there's something in this that has to do with you.

KATHLEEN: Kevin has a clause.

KEVIN: It's not a clause. And it's not the reason I'm doing this.

JOAN: Really.

KEVIN: It's a minor thing, and it doesn't have to do with your situation. Dad has this old catcher's mitt that he used when he was a kid. It's signed by Ted Williams, and he was our favorite player. Dad's and mine.

JOAN: How sweet.

KEVIN: I've always wanted that glove. He said he would give it to me when I was in high

school but he decided not to when I failed a math test my senior year.

JOAN: You're doing this for a glove?

KEVIN: It's a very important glove.

KATHLEEN (*to JOAN*): I don't understand, either. It's not worth anything.

KEVIN: It's signed by Ted Williams! Of course it's worth something! But I don't want to sell it; I want it for myself. Dad said that he'll give it to me if I carry everything out with this intervention. And it's important to me.

JOAN: You—

KEVIN (*emphatically*): I don't care if it sounds stupid. I don't care what you think about it. It's very important.

JOAN: Whatever you say.

(*They pause.*)

KEVIN: Shit! I've fucked the whole thing up already! Why did I just tell you about that? You always provoke me!

JOAN: It's my honest face. It brings out everyone's deepest secrets.

KEVIN: Damn it! Joan, I'm here to help you. I want to help you because I love you. I want to do this right. Every time I come over here for dinner I start to say something, but I never know how to start. I was really glad Dad gave me this list because I thought it would kind of put me on the right track. I'm sure he knows the best way to do this.

KATHLEEN: And you've managed to screw it up before we begin!

KEVIN: Oh, shut up.

JOAN: Come on, Kevin. Don't get discouraged yet! Give it your best shot.

KATHLEEN: Kevin, I told you she would do this. Why don't we just forget it?

JOAN: You know, it's not polite to refer to someone as "she" when she's in the same room. You must set a terrible example for your kids.

KATHLEEN: You're drunk.

JOAN (*laughing*): And so are you! Come on, Kevin. Why don't you join us?

KEVIN: Don't be ridiculous.

JOAN: Come on! It will make this easier.

KEVIN: Kathleen, you're right. Let's go home.

JOAN: Kevin, I thought you really wanted to help me.

KEVIN: I do. But you're not listening, as usual.

JOAN: If you have a drink, I promise I'll listen.

KEVIN: Are you insane?

JOAN: Probably. Come on. You said that you already started things off wrong. Do you think this is going to make a difference? Kathleen's tanked already. If we're all drunk, it'll be equivalent to us all being sober.

(*KEVIN hesitates.*)

KATHLEEN: Oh, come on, Kevin.

JOAN: Really. I'll be very good and very open to all of your-slash-Dad's suggestions. It's just a way of making me feel more comfortable. This whole thing is for me, right? And don't you want your glove?

KEVIN: You'll really listen? You'll really think about what I'm saying? No more bullshit?

JOAN: I'm a great listener when I put half my brain into it.

KEVIN (*reluctantly*): All right. If that's really what you want. I can't say that I wouldn't welcome a drink right now.

JOAN: What do you want? Do you think you're ready to take the step from diet Coke to regular?

KEVIN: Pour me a glass from that bottle.

KATHLEEN (*jumping up*): It's empty. We only started with half a bottle. I'll go get some more.

(*KATHLEEN exits through the kitchen door.*)

JOAN: Ten bucks says she brings out some cookies.

KEVIN: If there are any left. We can start with the list when she gets back.

JOAN: So, Kevin. Does Dad think that Michael is here with you?

KEVIN: Probably.

JOAN: Funny that he's still not talking to you.

KEVIN: Not really funny, Joan. Do you even remember why he's not?

JOAN: I don't remember much of anything anymore. It's great!

KEVIN: You got so sick at Michael's Christmas party that you threw up in his girlfriend's fish tank. By the time I found you, a couple of the fish were already dead. Stomach acid, I guess. I took you into the bathroom and held your head for awhile, and then you got up and spouted some nonsense at Michael and his girlfriend in front of everyone. She started to cry and ran into her bedroom and locked the door. Then Michael yelled at me and said that you were never going to change, and I was never going to stop helping you.

JOAN: He's probably right.

KEVIN: About which part, Joan? About which part?

JOAN (pausing): But why is he angry at Kathleen? She wasn't an accessory to the crime.

KEVIN: Oh, I think it's because she ate all the appetizers before the other guests arrived.

(KATHLEEN returns carrying a full glass, a new bottle, and a plate of cookies. She sets the cookies on the table and hands KEVIN his drink. He gulps it quickly, pours himself another drink, and gulps that one, too. KATHLEEN and JOAN also refill their glasses and gulp their drinks.)

KEVIN: Now, how about that list?

JOAN: Kevin, I know that we've already pointed out your mistakes so far, but I just thought I'd tell you one other thing; you do realize that I'm probably not supposed to see the list, right?

KEVIN: At this point, who cares? If we were going to be clever and sneaky, Kathleen would have been left out of the entire plan.

KATHLEEN (nods, then catches herself): I can be clever and sneaky!

JOAN: About as well as you can leave a plate of cookies unfinished.

(She points to the plate. KATHLEEN, who holds two cookies in her hand, sets one back on the plate.)

KATHLEEN: You have a nerve. What if I said things about your drinking all the time?

JOAN: You do.

KATHLEEN: Yes, I guess you're right.

(She picks up the cookie again and takes a bite,

following this with a large swing of her drink.

KATHLEEN, KEVIN, and JOAN continue to refill their glasses as needed.)

KEVIN: Why don't I read Dad's instructions, and we'll just go through and do them one by one, top to bottom, beginning to end. We'll just blast through these babies.

JOAN: Don't you think that you can skip the things you've already done? You know: act concerned, tell boring stories, say that you love me?

KEVIN (hurt): But I do love you. What's wrong with that?

JOAN: I didn't say that anything's wrong with that. I'm saying you can skip it since you already said it. It's just not efficient.

KEVIN: First you criticize me for not being concerned enough. Then you criticize me for being too concerned. Then you insult my time management skills.

KATHLEEN: Maybe that's not even on the list. The love part.

JOAN: Wouldn't you love that?

KATHLEEN (gulping her drink): Love what?
(standing and heading for the kitchen)

I'll be right back. I want some water.

KEVIN: Bring me some too, will you? My throat is burning.

KATHLEEN (giggling): I'll bring us two two!
(KATHLEEN exits.)

KEVIN: I'll start reading. She might be in there for hours if you went grocery shopping recently.

JOAN: I hid the potato chips under my bed before she got here.

KEVIN (reading): "Number One: Before entering the house, assume a non-threatening pose to ease tension. You're there to put your sister at ease, not have her scared."

Hmmm... I think Dad has his tenses all mixed up.

JOAN (looking): Yes, and his handwriting is terrible!

(yelling)

Way to go, Dad!

KEVIN: Hey, settle down. He is dying, you know.

(JOAN bows her head and JOAN mockingly

makes the sign of the cross. KEVIN takes another drink.)

KEVIN: Okay. "Number Two: Be sure to take off your shoes so as not to dirty the carpet."

JOAN: You didn't do that one. You know what Dad always says about bringing outside dirt into another person's house.

KEVIN: You're right.

(He takes off his shoes.)

KEVIN: Now you.

(giggling)

Wait, you're in a wheelchair!

(laughing)

And you're not even wearing shoes!

JOAN: Those instructions aren't for me, anyway.

KEVIN: Yes, but the floor really does stay clean longer if you don't wear shoes in the house. Alice started making us leave our shoes on the porch when we come home, and now she only vacuums twice a day instead of three times.

JOAN: Then what happens?

KEVIN (thinking for a second): Well, sometimes my shoes are really cold when I go outside to put them on in the morning.

JOAN: I meant with the list.

KEVIN: Right. "Number Three: Offer Joan a friendly hello."

JOAN: He really has this down to a science. Are these actual tips from a book, or did he make them up himself?

KEVIN: Books don't usually misspell this many words.

(KATHLEEN enters carrying a large bag of potato chips and two glasses of water. She sets the pitcher on the table and sits down with the chips in her lap.)

KATHLEEN: Here we are!

KEVIN: Kathleen, turn around. There's some dust on your back.

(brushing it off)

Why don't you pour me another drink, Kathleen.

KATHLEEN: Well! Take off your shoes and make yourself comfortable!

KEVIN: That reminds me.

(He shows KATHLEEN the list.)

It's step number two. We have to do it.

KATHLEEN: I'm not really comfortable taking off my shoes.

JOAN: Why not? Did you hide the rest of my cookies in there?

KATHLEEN: I'm just more of a shoe person than a sock person.

KEVIN: Kathleen, you have to do it. It's in the instructions.

KATHLEEN: I would have asked Dad to change the instructions if I had known about them. Why didn't he show them to me when we visited him?

JOAN: Because you can't read.

KEVIN: I'm sure there wasn't any reason. Just do what it says so we can carry this out properly.

(suddenly loud)

I'm can do this!

KATHLEEN: Okay, but don't look.

(She takes off her shoes.)

KEVIN: "Number Four..." Oh, he has this part written like dialogue in a play.

(scanning the page)

Kathleen, you don't really have any lines.

KATHLEEN (indignant): I'm a great actress! I did theater in high school!

JOAN: You were a really great usher.

KEVIN: Here's the first line then: "Joan, we are all here to help you."

KATHLEEN: So, you say that.

KEVIN: No, Michael says it.

KATHLEEN: But he isn't even here!

KEVIN: Yes, but Dad didn't know he wasn't going to come.

KATHLEEN: Michael almost got a Ph.D. I could have been a Ph.D. I just didn't want to be. And Dad has never forgiven me!

JOAN (rhyming): It's okay—you got your teaching degree.

KATHLEEN: What else is on the list? Are you sure I don't have any lines?

KEVIN: No, you don't have any.

(scanning the list and flipping through a few pages)

Wait a minute... I don't have any either!

JOAN: Why don't you just read Michael's lines?

KEVIN: No, no! That's not what Dad wanted. He wanted Michael to say those lines!

KATHLEEN: Maybe you shouldn't have told him that Michael was coming. Who's feeling stupid now?

KEVIN: Shit!

(He thinks for a moment.)

KEVIN: I'm going to call Michael. I'll make him talk to me. We're going to settle this.

(picking up the phone)

Do either of you know his number?

KATHLEEN: He changes it all the time so he can't be easily traced. I think one of the people who bought one of those term papers figured out that he was doing something illegal.

KEVIN *(sarcastically)*: You're kidding.

(KEVIN pours himself another drink from the pitcher.)

KEVIN: We've got to find him somehow.

KATHLEEN: Or we could just give up.

KEVIN *(loudly)*: No! Bam, bam, bam! Down the line! Step one through—

(KEVIN flips through the pages.)

KEVIN: Nineteen!

KATHLEEN: Oh, Jesus. We'll be here all night.

JOAN: Kathleen, for once you are absolutely right.

KEVIN: That's it—we're doing it.

KATHLEEN: You're never going to reach Michael. I bet he'll hang up on you.

KEVIN *(determinedly)*: It's all in the attitude.

(KEVIN picks up the phone and dials.)

KEVIN *(speaking into the phone)*: Yes, information? Do you have any numbers listed for a Mr. Michael Sullivan? Yes, I'll hold...

(to JOAN and KATHLEEN)

I'm sure it will be easy to find him.

JOAN: That's wishful thinking if I ever heard it.

KATHLEEN: Even if you do find him, do you really want him to come over here?

JOAN: He might try to send us all to rehab.

KATHLEEN: What if he wants the glove?

KEVIN: Dad promised it to me.

JOAN *(picking up a picture from the pile on the*

table and showing it to KEVIN): Dad promised a lot of things that he didn't give us. Remember Butchie?

KEVIN: He let me keep Butchie.

JOAN: But he had to sleep in the garage his entire life. He promised you a house pet.

KEVIN: That's not the same thing.

KATHLEEN: He promised me that I'd marry a handsome man who would take good care of me.

(thinking)

That didn't happen at all.

JOAN: Mom promised me her Irish linen and her crystal before she died, but Michael ended up with it somehow. Life is good when you're the favorite child. You get a pat on the back from Dad and a house full of old Irish crap.

KATHLEEN: Why didn't Dad just keep those things? Mom probably had no say about who got them, anyway.

KEVIN: I don't think he wanted them. He only uses paper napkins and plastic glasses. Michael always ends up with everything, and we end up with broken promises.

(thinking)

He's going to take my glove and sell it, like he sold the linen! He's going to fucking sell it!

(into the phone)

Oh, yes?... Oh, no. Okay, but are you sure? Could you check again? Or, do you have a number for a company called Mike's Doughnuts? No, I don't know because it's not listed in the restaurant section. No, it's not really a doughnut place... never mind. All right, yes, fine.

(KEVIN slams down the phone.)

KEVIN: They can't find him.

JOAN: I guess it's back to square one. Why don't we just skip to the parts that don't involve Michael, and maybe by the time we get through them we'll actually be able to find him. You know, at the Christmas party next year. Maybe he'll want to talk to you by then.

KEVIN *(growing visibly agitated)*: God damn it!

JOAN: Not to point out your weaknesses again in the way you carry out this plan, but I still think you're more concerned about your

own interests than you are about mine. The glove has come up more times than I have.

KEVIN: You're not listening to me. You said you would listen, but you're not.

JOAN: You care about Dad, his unfulfilled fantasies, and his raggedy glove, but not about my miserable life or my unfulfilled fantasies. You care about baseball and male bonding and pleasing Dad.

KEVIN: I—

KATHLEEN: You never told me you had unfulfilled fantasies. You have unfulfilled fantasies?

JOAN: Oh, yes. You must have just assumed that someone as full of life as I am had already lived out all her wildest dreams. And what about you? Do you have an ulterior motive?

KATHLEEN: No. I had nothing to do tonight and I thought it might be fun.

KEVIN: Ah, that's not true. You're—

KATHLEEN: It is! I'm never busy in the evenings.

JOAN: Wait, don't tell me anyway. If we have to go through with this game, we might as well retain some element of surprise. I'm disappointed already that I don't actually get to see Michael. What's next on the list?

(scanning the page)

Michael, Michael, Michael... Okay, here's something.

(reading)

"Sit Joan down, allow her to make herself comfortable, and pour her a drink."

(noticing)

Wait a minute!

JOAN: Why are you surprised? We've all been drinking since you got here. Maybe you're doing better than you thought.

KEVIN *(stunned)*: Yes, but I didn't know it was on the list. Wait, here's a footnote. God, it's hard to read his writing.

(reading)

"It is probably not the rule of thumb to offer a drink to the subject of an intervention, but since Joan should be as calm as possible when she learns she is an alcoholic, drink is in this case necessary. Do not, however, drink any

alcohol yourselves. When she realizes that she is the only one drinking, she will feel stupid and more inclined to accept your help. P.S. I wrote this before Joan's accident, so you can skip over the part about sitting and making herself comfortable. She should, of course, be as comfortable as possible in the wheelchair."

(looking up)

I guess we really botched that step. God damn.

JOAN: Nothing we can do now.

(picking up the bottle)

Shall we?

KEVIN: I guess so.

KATHLEEN: I'll pour.

(She fills their glasses again. They all drink throughout the following, refilling as necessary.)

KEVIN: I'll continue.

(KEVIN reads to himself for a moment.)

KEVIN: Another Michael line... et cetera... I guess I'll just read what Michael was supposed to say so we all know what's going on.

(reading)

"Joan, we're here to help you."

(looking up)

Right.

(reading)

"We know that you've been going through a very difficult time, but it's not your fault that you've ruined your life and hurt your father deeply."

KATHLEEN: I hope he's not implying that it's my fault. I wouldn't know how to handle that.

KEVIN *(reading)*: "You are your father's youngest born child, and—"

JOAN: I'm the second youngest.

KEVIN *(continuing)*: "And while you have made many errors of judgment, and made your father's life nearly unbearable, your father still loves you. That is why I, Michael, am here today."

(to KATHLEEN)

Oh, I was wrong. We do have some lines.

KATHLEEN *(eagerly)*:

What? What are they?

KEVIN: You say, "That is why I am here as

well." Then I say, "I, too, am here for the same reasons."

KATHLEEN: I, too, am here as well.

KEVIN: Close enough. Then it says:

(reading)

"Please put down that drink and listen to me for a minute. Your problem is shameful, yes, but not uncommon. Perhaps if you had attended church daily, as your father did, or even weekly, as I do, you would not have succumbed to the temptations of the bottle. However, it is not too late to ask God's forgiveness, and to ask for your father's forgiveness. I am fairly sure that he, meaning your father, will forgive you if you ask him to. You may have to ask several times, but he is a kind and loving man, and will likely be happy to let you, the Joan you used to be, back into his life. On the other hand, I cannot speak for your other father, of course meaning God. As you should remember, God forgives those who forgive themselves, or so we are taught. Were I God, I might find your actions unforgivable even if you could forgive yourself. Addiction is quite disgusting. Nevertheless, it is always worth trying to do the right thing. Please consider what I am telling you, and accept the help that I offer you. Your father would be so happy to see you well again, even though you may always be only a shadow of your former self. He is a good father, and he raised you to be better than this. It is not his fault that you turned out the way you did."

(There is a pause.)

JOAN: See, I never would have believed Michael made those things up anyway. He never thought Dad was a good father, and he hasn't set foot in a church since that priest caught him selling communion wafers to kids in the alley after Mass.

KEVIN: You've got to hand it to him. Ticket-to-heaven wafers were a hot commodity for a while there.

KATHLEEN: So what do we do now? Is that the end of the list?

(KEVIN flips through the pages.)

KEVIN: No, and God only knows what the rest of this thing says.

(to JOAN)

Did you hear anything in there that would maybe make you want to. . . Oh my God. Who am I kidding?

JOAN: I must say, I haven't felt this close to Dad in awhile. Good job on the voice, Kevin. He could be right here with us!

KEVIN: I was supposed to sound like Michael.

KATHLEEN: You sounded like Dad.

KEVIN (exasperated): Well I think he put himself into Michael's lines just a bit! Wouldn't you say?

JOAN: But it doesn't matter, does it? It only matters whether I say yes or no, right?

Whether I give my hands to the two fathers, the brother and the sister? That's a lot of people to give myself to. One of you would have to hold onto my cast.

KEVIN (disgusted): Yeah, keep joking, Joan. I still don't see you well.

JOAN: And, no glove.

KEVIN (to JOAN): You're right! And I wanted it! I want it! I have nothing of his. I share nothing with him! And I did want to help you, Joan! Of course I wanted to, want to, help you! But you don't want help. You want to sit here and laugh at me as I make a fool of myself and try to please Dad. Kathleen wants to help you, too, even though it's mostly because it takes attention away from all of her problems—

KATHLEEN: I beg your pardon, Kevin. I beg your pardon!

KEVIN: Oh, be quiet. This is nonsense, utter nonsense. Nothing like an intervention to bring a family together. Look at me! I'm drunk, you're drunk, you're drunk, and Michael's not even here!

JOAN: He's the smart one.

KEVIN: You're right, Joan, you're right. You're right as usual.

JOAN: And you're right too, Kevin! Drinking at an intervention? Real smart idea!

KEVIN: What! What!

(stunned)

Just forget it. Just forget all of it!

KATHLEEN: Why don't we just read the

rest of what Dad wrote?

KEVIN (glaring at her):

Why? So I can look like even more of a fool?

KATHLEEN: Maybe it's your turn. I've gotten my share of fat and stupid jokes for one night. I'm just curious as to how this is supposed to end.

JOAN (mockingly bright): I'll bet you anything that it's something Michael says!

KEVIN: Okay, Joan. Since you still think this is a game, and since Kathleen wants to hear it, I'll read it. Then you can both do whatever the hell you want.

(skimming the pages)

And I've changed my mind. We don't need to read all of it anymore. I'm drunk and I'm tired. This is all just a lot of crap having to do with when we were kids, and all the things that Dad did for us, and more about church and his forgiving nature. Blah, blah... etc., etc. . . Okay, here it is. Michael says "Joan, we accept your decision, whatever it is. But please know that your father will have nothing to do with you anymore if you do not get help. He has worked too hard to receive this treatment, and has no problem cutting you off financially and emotionally. Since I think you will probably not accept help, since you are weak-willed, I will be truly sorry to see you break up the family this way. If you do accept, you have finally made a good decision."

KATHLEEN: That seems very harsh.

JOAN (sarcastically): And I didn't think you were on my side.

KEVIN: This isn't the dialogue anymore. This is for us.

(reading)

"Leave the house if Joan does not agree to get help. If she does agree to get help, Kevin should immediately take away her drink and take her home with him. Be sure that any alcohol in Kevin's house is hidden before Joan arrives. Be sure that any snack foods are hidden should Kathleen decide to go with you for any reason."

KATHLEEN (sadly): Ah, Dad.

KEVIN (looking at the paper): Then there's more about the actual rehab, sleeping ar-

rangements, diet, exercise, things like that. Church also figures quite heavily into the whole process.

(hesitantly)

He wants you to stay at my house for six months.

JOAN: Don't worry that I'll say yes. I wouldn't last a day, anyway. All that vacuuming your wife does.

(KEVIN continues to read the paper.)

KATHLEEN: Six months is a long time.

JOAN: Oh, not really. An hour can be a long time. This day can be a long time.

KATHLEEN: Dad dying is a long time. I thought it would have happened by now.

JOAN: I wish it had happened by now.

KEVIN (pointing to the paper): Oh my God. Do you want to know how this ends?

JOAN: With me happily entering rehab.

KATHLEEN: With me forced to take care of her for six months.

KEVIN: God, I should have known.

JOAN: Is there another clause?

KEVIN: No, no. Listen. This is the end.

It's a note to me. "Kevin, by now you're probably standing on Joan's porch wondering what you did wrong."

KATHLEEN: He never said to go out on the porch.

KEVIN: Oh, he did. I just skipped it.

(growing more agitated as he reads)

"Joan, of course, did not agree to enter rehab. But you, Kevin—you have tried to help Joan. You have tried to bring the family together, and have tried to carry out my dying wishes. I know how hard you try to be a good son."

(looking up):

How did I do anything? All the lines were Michael's!

(after a pause)

He knew Michael wasn't going to come. He knew! This is all bullshit!

KATHLEEN: So... so—

JOAN: So what?

KATHLEEN: Does this mean Dad's really going to die soon?

JOAN: Wouldn't it be just like him to never die at all? Prone to excess in more ways than

we imagined.

KEVIN: Joan, I don't think you should hear the rest of this.

JOAN: Please. You really think I'll be surprised?

KEVIN (*sighing*): All right.

(*reading*)

"Joan will never get help. She has no desire to take responsibility for her actions, and she never will. She will simply continue to manipulate and enrage everyone close to her. I knew this a long time ago, and, for a while, it broke my heart. But we must not let others trample our spirits. You must forgive, Kevin, but you must also forget. You must move on."

(*KEVIN looks up angrily.*)

KEVIN: Why? Why did he do this then?

KATHLEEN: Oh, I'm glad you don't know, either. I thought it was just over my head.

(*JOAN takes the paper from KEVIN.*)

JOAN (*reading*): "I'm trying to show you that, as I've told you before, Joan won't change. Your good intentions can't make her a success, can't make her like or love you, and can't make her want to be a functioning human being. You see now that I'm right. Give up, Kevin."

KEVIN: But I can't give up on her! I can't give up on you, Joan!

JOAN (*quietly*): Why not?

KEVIN (*sadly*): I should have never let you see that paper, Joan. I thought it would be simple.

JOAN: It is simple, Kevin. You know Dad's right.

KEVIN: You're saying what he's saying!

KATHLEEN: We're all saying all the things he says.

JOAN: Kathleen even shares his ridiculous eating habits.

KEVIN (*disgusted*): You can't just be normal. You can't just say something normal. Something decent.

JOAN: I don't care anymore. I don't care.

KEVIN: You must care a little.

JOAN: No, Kevin.

KEVIN: Kathleen, don't you have anything to say about this? Don't you have an opinion about it? You must. Don't you... don't you want to say anything?

KATHLEEN: I... I—

(*She thinks for a moment.*)

KATHLEEN: I'm going to let you both do what you want to do. I don't know the right thing to do. I don't want to make anything worse. I was never as into it as you were, Kevin. I didn't think it would work either.

JOAN: She had the evening free, remember?

KEVIN (*shaking his head in disbelief*): Yeah.

Yeah. Right. I remember. So you just want me to go home?

KATHLEEN (*remembering*): What about your glove?

JOAN: Maybe you get it as a consolation prize just for playing the game.

KEVIN: You're despicable.

JOAN: I know. So why do you still try?

(*JOAN takes the paper out of KEVIN'S hand.*)

JOAN: Yes, here we go.

(*reading*)

"Kevin, don't forget to come by and pick up that old glove you wanted. I trust that you've gone through the entire list and that you will take my final words of advice."

KEVIN: Which are?

JOAN (*reading*): "Let Joan do what she will do. Go home, Kevin."

KEVIN (*looking hard at JOAN*): I would have done this anyway. Without the stupid glove. The glove! It's easy for you to believe someone could be that shallow. I would have helped you any way I could.

JOAN: You probably still will.

KEVIN: I don't think I can.

JOAN: Kevin! Letting Dad tell you what you can and can't do again. It's a shame.

KATHLEEN: It will be a shame when he doesn't visit you anymore, Joan.

JOAN: She speaks!

KEVIN: Kathleen, do you need a ride home?

KATHLEEN: No, I've got my car.

(*KEVIN opens the front door.*)

KEVIN (*to KATHLEEN*): Shall we?

JOAN: And he's off.

(*KATHLEEN gathers her things.*)

JOAN: And you, Kathleen. I'll eagerly anticipate your next biannual visit.

KATHLEEN: Goodbye, Joan. I'll talk to you soon.

(*KATHLEEN exits through the front door as KEVIN holds it open. KEVIN starts to exit, then suddenly, leaving the door open, rushes toward JOAN and hugs her tightly, as well as he can with her in the wheelchair. JOAN does not move or respond to the hug. KEVIN tries to lift her arms and put them around him, but she presses them tightly to her sides. They stay in this position for a few moments.*)

KATHLEEN (*from offstage*): Kevin, are you coming?

(*KEVIN lets go of JOAN and stares at her for a moment. He exits through the front door and closes it behind him. JOAN straightens her clothing where KEVIN has rumbled it. She pauses for a moment, then pours herself a drink from the bottle. She raises her glass.*)

JOAN: Cheers!

CURTAIN

One-Act Play by Alexandra Pajak

Nuclear Meltdown

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

MOTHER: A typical working mother of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century.

FATHER: A typical working father of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century.

CINDY: An adolescent female.

ERIC: An adolescent male.

MILTON: A man of any age.

SCENE: A house in the late twentieth century or early twenty-first century.

TIME: Late twentieth or early twenty-first century.

SETTING: A typical middle-class American home in the late twentieth century or early twenty-first century.

AT RISE: There is a kitchen SR with a table in the center. There are four chairs around the table. The kitchen opens into the living room, which is SL. The living room is decorated like a typical 1990's living room, with one exception: there is no television (except, of course, when MILTON enters, since he is the television). The living room contains a sofa and two chairs. Above the fireplace mantel is an aged portrait, which hangs crookedly on the wall. Lights rise on stage. FATHER, MOTHER, CINDY and ERIC are seated around the table, chatting and bantering. They appear happy and convivial. Stage lit for seven seconds. Lights down. Blackout for five seconds. Lights up for seven seconds. FATHER, MOTHER, CINDY, and ERIC are silent, expressionless, and frozen, staring at MILTON, who squats SL with his hands over his eyes. Lights down. Blackout for five seconds. Lights up for seven seconds. FATHER, MOTHER, CINDY, and ERIC are silent and frozen. FATHER looks into the audience, with a helpless demeanor. MOTHER looks up with a discouraged demeanor. CINDY looks under the table with an inquisitive demeanor. ERIC looks straight ahead with a thoughtful demeanor. MILTON stands USL with pomposity. Lights down. Lights up. Only ERIC and CINDY are onstage, in the living room. CINDY sits on the floor in the middle of a pile of magazines and newspapers. She is

holding a newspaper. MILTON continues to stand USL as he watches the action. The other characters take no notice of him until he enters.

CINDY: Hey, Eric!

ERIC: Yeah?

CINDY: How come you're so quiet?

ERIC: I don't know. Bored, I guess.

(pause)

I miss Milton.

CINDY: Yeah, me too. But you know what Mom said.

ERIC: When's he coming back?

CINDY: I don't know. They took him away. Dad said something about Milton's brain not being wired right. Besides, he's a pretty sketchy character.

ERIC: Oh. Sketchy . . . sketchy . . .

CINDY: Hey, what time is it?

ERIC: Around 5:30, I guess.

CINDY: Really? It feels a lot later.

(FATHER enters SR. He wears a coat and carries a loaf of bread. He places both on the table. ERIC and CINDY are unaware of his presence. FATHER remains in the kitchen.)

FATHER (to audience): You know, when I was young, I had one wish for when I grew up. You know what it was? An ant farm. All the little ants running all over the place, digging little tunnels here and there. I wanted to feed them. I wanted to watch them grow and lay eggs and watch little ones hatch. But I never got my ant farm.

(pause)

I want my ant farm!

ERIC (to CINDY): Hey, wanna hear what I learned in school today?

CINDY: Not really.

ERIC: C'mon.

CINDY (thinking it over): No.

ERIC: You're not supposed to say that.

CINDY: Why not?

ERIC: Because you're the older sibling and you're supposed to be setting a good example.

CINDY: OK, then, shoot.

ERIC: My teacher covered a lesson, about manatees, and in the middle of her lecture, Katie McKormick accidentally sat on a pair of scissors and started to bleed, but she didn't say anything, and so the teacher didn't know and kept on talking.

CINDY: In other words, there was a subliminal undertone.

ERIC: Precisely.

FATHER: Where is my ant farm, oh where is my ant farm? It's not in my pants, it's not under my arm. I just wanted an ant farm to build and make. But then they began to give it a shake.

(FATHER mimes the furious shaking of an ant farm. He suddenly stops. The stage is silent. He looks at ERIC and CINDY, who are quietly absorbed in their own activities. FATHER enters the living room, reaches under the couch pillow and removes a cookbook. He reads silently. MOTHER enters. She carries a ruler, briefcase, pencil, and other things an architect may carry into her house. She puts all the items on the table. Speaks to audience.)

MOTHER: I'll never forget my first T-square. It was wonderful. I've been using it for twenty years. I love being an architect. But you know, sometimes I wonder, why do T-squares measure corners? Why can't they make T-squares that measure curves? Sometimes a client wants me to design a round rotunda, or a fishpond, or a running track. But I can't make them circular. They have to have sharp corners. Why is that?

ERIC (seeing FATHER): Dad, what are you doing?

FATHER: I'm reading the cookbook.

ERIC: Oh.

(Both resume their activities.)

MOTHER (to audience): I'm not crazy. Sometimes I think I am, but I'm not. Did you know that I'm among America's most wanted?

CINDY (looking up from the newspaper): Dad, how does the nucleus of an atom function?

FATHER: What?

CINDY: How do the neutrons stick together like that?

FATHER: I have no idea what you're talking about.

CINDY: Neither do I. But Martha Stewart says she finds neutrons to be really stimulating.

ERIC: Hydrogen, Helium, Lithium . . .

CINDY: But I know what Chernobyl is.

FATHER: What?

ERIC: It's always nice to follow alkaline metals with a cigarette. But the noble gases were always my personal favorite.

CINDY: The newspaper is talking about Chernobyl. I know about that.

(ERIC walks to FATHER and puts a hand on FATHER's shoulder. He speaks gently and earnestly.)

ERIC: Dad, what's Chernobyl?

FATHER (uninterested): It's a beautiful day, son. Why don't you go play outside?

ERIC (loudly and monotonously): I have mail! (ERIC sits down and stares blankly above audience members' heads.)

FATHER: This cookbook it written in German! My grandfather spoke German. How do they expect me to be able to understand Hebrew? I don't speak Hebrew! And then what do I do? Turn it upside down? It still doesn't make any sense!

(FATHER throws the book behind him. The phone rings. MOTHER answers.)

MOTHER: Hello? No, I'm sorry. No! Stop calling here!

(MOTHER slams phone.)

CINDY: Who was that?

MOTHER: That pizza delivery boy.

FATHER: Again?

MOTHER: What is it going to take for him to realize that we are not going to deliver pizzas to his house anymore?

CINDY: I don't remember delivering pizzas to anybody.

MOTHER: That's exactly my point!

FATHER: Honey, unplug the phone.

That's the best way. Just unplug the phone.

MOTHER: Unplug the phone?

(FATHER and MOTHER wrestle with the phone in the kitchen. FATHER hits MOTHER with the phone. MOTHER punches FATHER. FATHER falls down.)

CINDY (profoundly, to the audience): I once lost myself in an oblivion of self-deprecation and teen angst. It was then that I realized I would never date any man who delivered pizzas. Men are like pizzas.

ERIC: What?

CINDY: They all look about the same. Most are round and gross. Some are covered with meat and flavor. Others are just pepperoni.

ERIC (happily and excitedly): And the cheese ones are bald!

CINDY: That's right! Most recently, as I have seen less and less with many toppings, I have become convinced that chastity is something to be treasured.

ERIC (still happy): I'm not bald.

CINDY (rudely): I didn't say you were bald. (FATHER walks to kitchen and sits in a chair at the kitchen table.)

FATHER: You know what we're going to do? We're going to sit down and eat a nice family dinner together.

(MOTHER, CINDY, and ERIC hear FATHER's comment, but ignore it. FATHER begins to eat a piece of bread. MOTHER sits in a chair midway between the kitchen and living room. MOTHER studies blueprints. She appears to have difficulty deciding which side is up and which side is down.)

ERIC: But one day I might be bald.

CINDY: That would be weird. Man, you'd look funny bald.

ERIC (fearfully): I hope I don't get bald. (A crash of glass. MILTON steps into the living room.)

ERIC: It's Milton!

CINDY: Milton!

(Both run to MILTON, hug him, then sit at his feet.)

MOTHER (without emotion): Hello, Milton.

FATHER (without emotion): Hello, Milton.

MILTON (with exaggerated enthusiasm): Hey, hey, hey kids! How was your day? Want to

hear about how deer licks are made?

ERIC: Tell us about the trip down the line!

CINDY: The line!

ERIC: The line!

CINDY: The straight, straight line!

ERIC (giggles to CINDY): But no curving lines!

CINDY (aghast): You crossed the line?!

ERIC: No, assembly!

CINDY: Assembly!

FATHER: This bread is getting stale.

MILTON: Assemblies. I like assemblies.

But you know what I like better than assemblies? Deer licks!

ERIC (philosophically): Explain.

MILTON: How should I word this? Deer licks are like bad checks. And umbrellas with metal tops. And like Sisyphus. He's the guy that invented rock and roll. But everybody knows him better as Elvis.

CINDY (ecstatically): Elvis?!

MILTON: Yes, Elvis.

(Still ecstatic, CINDY pushes everything off the kitchen table and lies on top. She speaks to the audience.)

CINDY: I love my jailhouse. I want to wear blue suede shoes! My mother wanted a bucket of white paint, but I want a latex factory! I want to make latex, latex! Latex gloves for surgeons! Latex gloves for housewives! Latex suits and latex hats. Latex dogs and latex cats. Latex books and latex glasses. Latex sombreros and latex molasses.

(MOTHER picks up a newspaper from CINDY's pile.)

MOTHER: Goodness! There was an earthquake in Turkey! Oh, thousands dead! You know, in some parts of the world, when there's an earthquake, the houses and buildings fall and crumble because they're constructed from stacked bricks. But in California new technology allows them to remain erect.

FATHER: Yeah, but everything inside is all shaken around. Even though the building is standing, everything else is ruined!

MILTON: Now, Eric. What did they teach you in school?

ERIC (recites monotonously):

"Children, you are very little,
And your bones are very brittle;
If you would grow great and stately,
You must try to walk sedately."

MILTON: And what did I teach you?

ERIC (recites darkly):

"nieces their and nephews their By
increases age their as Hatred
gabies, and geese as up grow All
babies, crying children, Cruel."

MILTON: Very good! You get the grand prize!

ERIC (ERIC looks at his fingertips in horror.):
Mom! Mom! Look at my hands! Look at my hands!

MOTHER: What is it?

ERIC: It? It! You mean them. Them! I have calluses on my hands! Look! Pop, I have calluses on my hands! Ahhh!

(He drops weakly onto the floor)

Ahhh, the calluses! The calluses! Ahhh!
(ERIC sees that he has evoked no response from his parents. He rises casually and returns to MILTON's feet. He speaks harshly to MILTON.)

ERIC: You're interfering with my spatial skills!

MILTON: What?

ERIC: You heard me!

MILTON: Oh, and what are you going to do about it? Call me a square?

ERIC: Yeah, an ugly T-square! And then you know what I'm going to do?

MILTON: What?

ERIC: I'm going to stand up and I'm going to reach under the couch.

(ERIC reaches under the couch. He removes a board game box.)

And I'm going to say I hate board games! I hate board games!

(ERIC hurls the box to the ground and stomps on it.)

Loud enough for the whole world to hear. And they'll never forget me. I'll go down in history because I was the one kid who told my parents in my house that I hate board games. Even when I DID like board games, Cindy

over there never let me be the blue piece. Why can't I have the blue game-piece! All I wanted was a blue game-piece. Does it really matter? Blue, green, red? Yes, of course it matters! You know why?

MILTON (with a fake smile): Andre Agassi says that appearance is everything.

ERIC: And then I'm going to take the T-square off the kitchen table.

(ERIC suddenly becomes very quiet. He enters the kitchen and picks up the T-square. He strokes it gently.)

ERIC: That's a good T-square. I love you, T-square.

(ERIC's previous outburst returns.)

ERIC: And then I'm going to kill everybody! I'm going to hack everybody alive with the T-square!

(ERIC attacks CINDY.)

ERIC: How do you like that, huh? You like the T-square? You wanna taste the T-square?

CINDY: Cut it out, Eric! I'm on your side.

ERIC: Yeah, you and your offspring.

CINDY (shocked): How did you know?

ERIC: Milton told me you were--

MILTON (whispers and laughs to audience): --with child!

CINDY (stands, speaks to MILTON): You made me do it! You starved me! It was the only way I could reach self-actualization.

MILTON: Does the pizza delivery boy know about this?

CINDY: It wasn't him!

MILTON: If you were hungry and didn't want pizza, you could have eaten the bread!

CINDY: What bread?

MILTON: The bread supplied by viewers like you.

CINDY: All I wanted was my daily bread.

MILTON: And a lover.

CINDY: And a future.

MILTON: And a latex factory.

CINDY: And a--no! I don't want to be in the assembly!

MILTON: But it's your constitutional right to assemble!

CINDY: But nobody's assembling!

MILTON: You assembled.

CINDY: No I didn't.

MILTON: That's not what your boyfriend says!

ERIC (*sings*):

I love Escher

Yes, I do

I love Escher

So should you.

(*Lights down on parents. MILTON stands proudly on the table. ERIC and CINDY stand in front of kitchen table, with MOTHER and FATHER's expressionless.*)

MILTON, CINDY and ERIC (*sing together*):

His sketches are
so wonderfully bizarre,
you never know
quite where you are.

THE END

Note: in the play, Eric recites two stanzas of Robert Louis Stevenson's "Good and Bad Children," quoted from William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

One-Act Play by Sarah Worden

Double Feature

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

SARA: A woman in her late twenties or early thirties.

SAM: A man, late twenties/early thirties.

PAIGE: A teenage girl.

SCENE: A small but largely unfrequented movie theater in New York City.

TIME: About eight o'clock in the evening.

SETTING: The Theatre Occidentale, a small, slightly run-down old movie theater in New York City. There are two strips of connected movie-theater seats downstage and slightly to the audience's right. In front of them is a railing. To the audience's left, there is one seat set slightly further back which indicates the presence of seats on the other side of the aisle. Rear center, there's an "EXIT" sign over a door.

AT RISE: The stage is dark, except for the red glow of the sign and a faint blue flickering (which will gradually brighten as the action begins) that plays over the figure of SARA, a neat, pretty woman in her late twenties, dressed for dinner and sitting in the first row on the aisle, with the railing in front of her. She is raptly looking out over the audience and eating popcorn out of a huge bucket. There are two other figures on stage at rise. Behind SARA and slightly to stage left is PAIGE, who is gangly and dressed in a school uniform. Far to stage right sits TODD, pale and intense-looking with a formidable Adam's apple and a ratty t-shirt. The door at rear opens, silhouetting SAM in bright artificial light. He too is in his late twenties, with unruly hair and a leather jacket. Just as he appears in the open door, a snippet of dialogue from the ongoing movie is heard. Gunslinger: "He expect trouble?" Cowboy: "Maybe." SARA turns her head to see SAM walking down the aisle. Panic crosses her face. She scooches down in her seat, covers behind the popcorn bucket, glances frantically at the seats beside her as though they might be a viable escape route. As he approaches, however, she finally composes herself, sitting up very straight, smoothing her clothes, etc. Her only nod to her continued desire to go

unnoticed is to point her upturned face firmly away from the aisle. SAM sees her, though, and stops. It is not clear whether he was looking for her or merely for a seat. When he addresses SARA it is in tones that remain hushed for most of the scene.

SAM: Sara!

SARA (*eyes pointedly remaining forward*): H'lo, Sam.

SAM: The incomparable Sara Cole. You're looking well.

SARA (*after a pause*): Well, thank you loads, Sam. You too.

(*SAM stands close to SARA, expecting to be let into the row. SARA refuses to move her legs to allow SAM by.*)

SAM: I'm standing in the aisle. People must be getting miffed, don't you think?

SARA: I expect so. You should really sit down.

SAM: Lovely. We're in perfect harmony just like always. Scoot over.

SARA: Somewhere else.

SAM: But this is the best seat in the house.

SARA (*engaging in a little unacknowledged knee skirmish with SAM*): I... Sam, I really don't... I'm... I'm meeting someone here.

SAM: Well, that's all right. Looks like he's running a little late.

(*TODD clears his throat, an outraged look on his face. Without physically pushing her, SAM forces her over into the next seat. She looks at him irritably, then turns back to the screen with determination.*)

SAM (*reaching into the bucket of popcorn*): Jeez, Sara. Look at this. It's huge. It gapes. Who are you waiting on, the Texas Rangers?

SARA: What are you doing here anyway? You don't like Westerns.

SAM: Sure I do.

SARA: No, Sam, you don't.

SAM: I do too! I took you to see *High Noon*

on our first date.

SARA: You took me to see that Muppet movie on our first date. *High Noon* was our third and you went because you thought I'd close the deal. Which I did.

SAM: Are you sure? No, I'm sure that's not—

SARA: You told me cowboys had inadequate dental hygiene. You asked if that was really my ideal of manhood... toothless, dirty, syphilis-ridden, commitment-anxious half-wits. I remember it very clearly, Sam. I'm pretty sure we weren't talking about Kermit the Frog.

SAM: Did I have anything to say about Kermit the Frog?

SARA: Don't you have something to say about everything?

SAM: I don't remember ever—

SARA: You said that Kermit represented a satirical—

SAM: Commentary on the state of the modern proletariat. I remember. What can I have been thinking?

SARA: I can't imagine.

SAM: Jim Henson as a social revolutionary. Maybe I should dust off that thesis. Reevaluate.

SARA: I think it's dead and buried, Sam. Well-thought out it wasn't.

SAM: *High Noon*. Our third date, huh?

SARA: Third. After that restaurant you picked out that got shut down by the health department halfway through the appetizers.

SAM: So according to you, I sullied a sacrosanct American myth, garbled social revolutionary theory, and almost poisoned you. Sounds like I was oh for three. But you let me come upstairs... did you have too much popcorn for one?

SARA: Well, I like the Muppets. The hors d'oeuvres were good. And you said...

(SARA pauses. In the silence, a line from the movie comes through faintly: "... Give her a kiss every now and then and she'll love you for life.")

SARA: You said you'd stop brushing your teeth if I wanted you to.

SAM: Yeah, I always was the ladies' man.

Nothing like gingivitis to make 'em start unbuttoning.

TODD: Shhhhhhhh!

SAM *(with sudden strange anger)*: You know, you never used to have such a good memory. Always had that planner. I was always shocked you could learn your phone numbers by heart. Is that it? Do you have all that, Kermit and Gary Cooper and hors d'oeuvres and me, written up and filed somewhere? It used to drive me nuts, that planner, you know that? And always the journal beside the bed.

SARA *(rummaging through her purse and coming up with a bulging leather-bound planner)*: Nothing's different, Sam. I'm not different. You're not different. You're still pushy, rude, loud, and over-opinionated, you still dress like you're about to be called any minute to a kegger, and you still hog the damn popcorn. Just shut up, Sam.

(pause)
And... and... you always hummed under your breath while you read.

SAM: You always took calls at dinner.

SARA: You rolled me out of bed.

SAM: You drooled.

SARA: I did not!

SAM: It was like sleeping with the Rio Grande. And while we're comparing notes, you weren't fooling me. I know you called on purpose when you knew I wasn't home so you could talk to the machine instead of me.

SARA: Ha! You called on purpose when I was in a meeting so you could talk to my secretary instead of me.

SAM: That is not true.

SARA: Fine. Then explain why she sent you a postcard from Tucson when she was there. She never sent me a card.

SAM: That was, what, the one vacation you gave her?

SARA: She took off three times that year!

SAM: Sara, her parents died!

SARA: How do you know that?

SAM: She was very distraught.

SARA: Just because I was her employer, doesn't mean she couldn't talk to me. Confide in me.

SAM: Sara, you never failed to forget her name.

SARA: I never did! Her name...

SAM: You don't know it. You didn't then and you don't now.

SARA: Is Grace.

SAM: It's Gail. And she lives in Tucson now. She has twins and her MBA.

SARA: You're making that up.

SAM: And a beagle. Her living room's professionally decorated, I'd say. She sends out very expensive Christmas cards in any case.

SARA: It was sad, her parents dying so close together. Well, not geographically. Nice, having a parent in Key West and one in Cancun.

SAM: Sara! Did you ask her which funeral home was more convenient to the beach? No wonder she didn't send you a card.

TODD *(unable to bear it any longer)*: Sssshhhh!

SARA *(quieter, but urgently)*: I felt terrible, Sam.

SAM: I'm sure you did.

(Long pause.)

Aren't you worried?

SARA: What do you want? What should I be worried about now? Did I miss your latest fifty-dollar manifesto in the Voice? Oppressed Nicaraguans? Corruption in Sri Lanka? Or is my ex-secretary's schnauzer on his last legs? Fine, yes. I'm worried. My nails are bitten to the quick.

SAM: Well, I was just gonna say your Wall Street johnny seems to be missing in action.

SARA: Who?

SAM: Maybe he's in the toilet... he's probably been sloshed since noon.

SARA: Leave me alone. Just be quiet.

SAM: I apologize.

SARA: Sam!

SAM: I didn't mean to fight is all. I didn't mean to be mean.

SARA: Good, thanks. Apology accepted and all that.

(Pause. A snippet of dialogue from the movie is heard: "Somebody's gonna get his head clipped off!")

SARA: How's the redhead, Sam?

SAM: Who?

SARA: The redhead.

SAM: Kate?

SARA: Huh.

SAM: Kate has brown hair.

SARA: Well, she acts like a redhead.

SAM: Well, she's fine.

SARA: Just fine?

SAM: What do you mean?

SARA: Not... miraculous? The light o' your life? On the fast track to success as a boy-cotter?

SAM: You're being childish.

SARA: Are you having trouble?

SAM: Not that it's any of your business—

SARA: Lover's quarrels or knock-down drag-out—

SAM: Sara! I—

SARA: You broke up.

SAM *(louder than necessary)*: Yes, all right, we did.

TODD: Shhhhhhhh!

SARA *(to SAM)*: Shhhhhhhh!

(pause)

Are you on bad terms?

SAM: No, of course not. I don't believe in parting on bad terms. I don't like to end things badly.

(From the theater's speakers comes a thunder of hoofbeats.)

SAM: Under usual circumstances.

SARA: If things weren't bad, they wouldn't end.

SAM: Things can be... not good... without being bad.

SARA: What was not good with... this Kate?

SAM: Oh, her. She acted like a redhead.

SARA: I'm trying to be serious.

SAM: I know. It's hard, isn't it?

SARA: Fine.

SAM: I don't know what wasn't right. It's all subjective. Anything you think, is only what you think. And what you feel is what you feel.

SARA: No, Sam, that's not right!

TODD: Shhhhhhhh!

SAM: That's not right?

SARA: No. There has to be a reason.

There's always a reason. What you feel happens, because of what happens... like, look, look at them—

(gesturing at the screen)

-Action and reaction. Circumstance.

SAM: Then we broke up because she wore her watch on the wrong wrist.

SARA: What? That's not a reason.

SAM: Exactly. There's no reason.

SARA: Did she cheat?

SAM: No.

SARA: Did you?

SAM: No! Sara, it just is the way it is. Either you work together, or you don't. That's all there is. There can be just one tiny thing that, you know, bothers you a little, but you don't really need the person. Not enough to put in the time, to stay and bang your head against the problem. Or there can be a hundred troubles... or a thousand... and they drive you crazy, but you won't leave, not until the person tells you to.

SARA: You don't make sense. You leave... people leave... nobody tells you to leave.

Either they get sick and leave or you do. And there's always a reason, Sam, always. Sometimes you don't know it... they don't know it... but something's happened, things have changed, and then you're gone. Don't tell me the fairy tale. Who do you think I am?

SAM: I know who you are.

SARA: You don't know anything.

SAM: I know you.

SARA: You make your living... if that what's you want to call it... acting sagacious and self-righteous and ranting at anyone who'll read the trash you write for. I'm not one of those people.

SAM: It's not all about rent and tax deductions. That's not all there is.

TODD: Shhhhhhh!

SARA: No.

(pause)

SARA: It's hard to find things that are... real. The way they are supposed to be.

(Onscreen, a couple call to each other: "Ben!" "Marie!")

SAM: Maybe you need to change the way you look at reality.

SARA: Maybe I can't.

SAM: Maybe not.

SARA: Why are we doing this? Sitting here fighting?

SAM: Are we fighting? I thought we were discussing.

SARA: There's no need. Maybe you should go.

SAM: I'm watching the movie, Sara. Be civil.

SARA: I'm always civil.

SAM: I know you are. Sweetheart.

SARA: Don't be an ass.

SAM: I'm always an ass.

SARA: I know you are.

(pause)

Maybe you don't know quite so much. I mean, maybe you shouldn't think you do. You shouldn't. You don't. If you know so much—

SAM: And I do—

SARA: Well... why can't you keep a job?

(PAIGE, interested more than ever, sneaks a seat or two closer to SARA and SAM.)

SAM: What? Is it going to be this again?

The Sara Cole success index? We've been through it, haven't we?

SARA: Everyone can, but you. Everyone does, but you. You have to be fly-by-night, you have to be the seat-of-your-pants philosopher. You tell me and everybody else you'll never be a lowly nine-to-five... but here's this. You sold your soul to *Seventeen*. You can't even succeed as a failure. Just hope I don't take out a billiard in the Village. You'll be reviled.

SAM: Sara, Sara, Sara.

SARA: What? I hate it when you do that.

SAM: You haven't seen my ad in the subway.

SARA *(shocked)*: No... Your ad? You wrote an ad? Like the copy? For who?

SAM: A very prestigious firm.

SARA: Which one? Lennox? Did they finally call you? Oh, Sam, I told you that would pan out!

SAM: No, no, they're independent. No intermediaries. Directly from the source. All the best talent.

SARA: Sam, tell me who!

SAM: Wait, I want you to have the image. Picture yourself, on the A train.

SARA: Why would I—

SAM: You look across the subway car and you see them, my words, black and white, clear as day, up for all the commuters— and you—to see. It's a very simple concept, you know the kind, with just the stark text even the drunks can read through the blur. Even the Wall Street boys, coked up, on their way back from the sell-outs' last supper can read the words I wrote, the genius I lent to the burned-out scribes of Madison Ave—

SARA: Sam, stop playing games. What does it say?

SAM: It says, "Fuck you!"

(Behind them, PAIGE gasps as SAM gets up abruptly and walks out of the theater.)

TODD: Uh! Thank God!

(SARA sits motionless for several seconds, then begins to rummage through her purse again. She comes up with the planner, looks at it for a moment, then throws it down on the seat where SAM sat and continues to fumble in her bag. She finally pulls out a cellular phone, sighs, goes to turn it on... then hesitates. She sits in silent, comical indecision for a while, going so far as to dial part of a number once or twice, then hanging up, glancing over her shoulder at the door and at PAIGE and TODD. At last she slaps the phone back into her bag. The planner follows. She grabs at the handles of the purse as if to take it and go, knocks it onto the floor, looks around again and sits still for a moment, then visibly tries to cool herself, picks up the bag and begins to get up, hunching a little the way people do when they're trying not to disturb or call attention. Just as she lifts her rump out of the seat, though, the door in the rear opens, and SAM re-enters, purposefully walking down the aisle. SARA slams herself back down, drops the purse like it's hot, and stares straight forward, chin high. SAM sits down beside her nonchalantly. She sneaks glances at him periodically and he occasionally comes close to catching her, but never quite does. He also comes close to smiling, and one finally sneaks out.)

SAM: Did you think I was gone forever?

(A pause, as SARA makes a great show of ignoring him.)

SAM: There's no suits in the john. I looked.

(pause)

Unless you're waiting on Reba the 7th Avenue queen.

(pause)

Come on, Sara, simmer down. You deserved it. Let it go. Or else yell at me. Holler. Come on. No one really likes the strong silent type. In real life, they're annoying as hell.

SARA: I do!

(quieter)

I do. Why are you back here?

SAM: Company.

SARA: Well, leave me alone! I meant what I said, I did, I... maybe it was out of line but you're so enamored of the truth.

SAM: For my own good.

SARA: What?

SAM: I see, you said it for my own good. To improve me. You're Jane Addams.

SARA: No. Yes. I...

SAM: I like *Seventeen*.

SARA: You what?

SAM: I just like it. *Seventeen* magazine. I competed with it in high school. I thought it was the reason girls knew so much more than I did. Do you know, my mother read it? You read it, didn't you?

SARA: What does that have to do with anything?

SAM: I didn't sell my soul. It's part of my soul. It's the American Dream.

SARA: You're crazy. Everything is a backwards justification with you.

SAM: I know, I know. How can I say "soul" in the same sentence as *Seventeen*? It's all an elaborate marketing ploy. Anorexic twelve-year-olds investing their allowances in high-concept mascara and baby tees. Out of curiosity, Sara, what did you do with your allowance when you were twelve? Open a stock portfolio?

SARA: None of your business.

SAM: Do you remember the name of the column I wrote?

SARA: "The Tighter The Sweater"?

SAM: Ha, ha. It was "Answer Boy."

SARA: Wow, you're right. That's more than a headline, it's a character insight. Do people

call you that?

SAM: Sometimes. You can.

SARA: Thanks.

SAM: Do you want to hear the point I'm making?

SARA: I'm on the edge of my seat.

SAM: Well, don't fall off. I want you to hear this. All those little girls, who don't like their parents...

(giving SARA a pointed look)

... and won't speak to them when they grow up, except on holidays—

SARA *(indignantly)*: I...

SAM: Sssshhh, listen. And birthdays, all right? They don't know what the hell is going on, and they don't know yet that grown-ups don't either. But they have to keep this face on, you know? You start keeping a face.

What they need isn't preaching. I'll grant they don't need the mascara ads either but... they take a leap writing those things in. I like them for that. It's brave. They need someone to be straightforward with them, give them meaning.

(Suddenly infuriated, SARA yanks her planner out of her bag, sending a cascade of lipstick, Kleenex, etc clattering to the floor. She flips hastily through it, digging through amazing layers of paper slips and rubber-banded bundles, and finally comes up with a long, roughly-cut clipping from a magazine.)

SARA: This? This, Sam?

(reading)

"In this month's Answer Boy, hunky NYC journalist Sam Grieco takes on readers' guy gripes and quirky questions?" "I kissed my best guy friend?" "I can tell he wants to kiss me, but I'm scared I won't know how?" "I love my history teacher but he's thirty-five and I'm sixteen?" What is this? This is meaning?

(SAM doesn't have an answer, although SARA's tirade clearly begs one of him. He stares, stricken, at the clipping in her hand, wrinkled from months in the oft-consulted planner. Behind them, PAIGE sighs melodramatically. Noting SAM's silence, and finally the direction of his gaze, SARA at last sheepishly folds the paper carefully, tucking it out of

sight.)

SARA: It just... I just... it doesn't mean anything is all.

(For the first time, SAM seems to be at a loss. He subsides back into his seat, staring at the movie as though he has just noticed that it is playing, and is riveted. SARA, befuddled, looks everywhere but. Finally, she puts her planner back into her purse and awkwardly bends to gather her things from the floor. As soon as she does, SAM's gaze shifts to her. When she comes back up, his eyes snap forward.)

SAM *(strangebly)*: What does mean something to you, in the end, Sara?

SARA: I don't want any more of your philosophy.

SAM: Whose philosophy do you want?

(gesturing at the screen)

Theirs?

(Both look at the screen as though they'd forgotten it was there, in time to hear a line of dialogue: "You might say it's the way some people see things— like looking through a piece of colored glass.")

SARA: Well, what would be wrong with that, Sam, really?

SAM: "Through a glass darkly", and "This— *(holding up one finger with mock sagacity)*

--is the secret of life"? That's what you want to believe in?

SARA: I believe in what I believe in. Maybe I know the glass is there and I just like looking through it. I have no obligation to you. Go ahead. Dislike me for it. Go away and leave me alone, even, if that's what you feel you need to do.

SAM: This is Paul Newman, not Socrates.

SARA: Well, if I were really looking for Socrates, I wouldn't have spent three years with the nineties knock-off.

TODD: Shhhhhhhh!

SAM: I assume you're referring to Kermit the Frog.

SARA: Naturally.

SAM: Sara?

SARA: What?

SAM: Why did you keep that article?

SARA: So I could say I knew you when.

And because I thought I might need a little

brush-up on kissing technique.

SAM: The kiss according to Sam?

SARA: Yeah.

SAM: It's like riding a bike.

SARA: Funny... I don't remember having too much trouble with gears and chains and what-not.

TODD: Shhhhhhh!

(The violent shushing seems to bring SARA back to herself. Her smile fades, and she slumps a little, returning her attention to the screen.)

SAM: I'm going to go have a talk with that guy.

SARA: We're the rude ones, Sam.

SAM: I know. I'm not going to deck him, for God's sake! I wouldn't even raise my voice. There's no need to be Neanderthal. He looks like an intelligent guy. A little high-strung maybe—

SARA: Have you ever decked anybody? Like a good old-fashioned—

(she makes a fist and punches the air)
-“unh!”

SAM: No!

SARA: Nobody ever made you that mad? Even people who, I don't know, ignore the crises in the Middle East? Even people who leave the water running while they brush their teeth.

SAM: I never decked you, so obviously not. Violence is artificial conflict resolution, and I don't subscribe.

SARA: Friends with the world, you.

SAM: That's me. Mr. Affability. I take great pains.

SARA: I know. It's not easy, being keen.

SAM: No need to get snippy.

SARA: Like I said. Not easy. Being as charming as you. I'll work on it— or maybe I won't. Probably not, actually.

SAM: Well, it wouldn't hurt you.

SARA: It might. You never know. Besides, Sammy boy, we don't all aspire to be just like you.

SAM: Why are you so angry?

SARA: I'm not angry.

TODD: Shhhhhhhhh!

SAM: That's right, I forgot. Aloof as the

Rockies. And about as cold.

SARA: It bothers you because you can't melt me. You don't know how, and it drives you crazy. All of your words, and all of your smiles, and your charm can't turn me into... the girls you date, and everyone you shake hands warmly with, and flash your teeth at. It doesn't work with me and for once you're not the smart one.

SAM: I know you feel something.

SARA: Not for you.

SAM: I've made you feel something.

SARA: Maybe. But I wouldn't give you the satisfaction. I never did, and I won't now.

SAM: Why not?

SARA: Because you haven't earned it! You were sweet to me, and you ran your fingers through your hair in that distracted way you have, and you made me laugh and you made me think... but it's no more than you did for anyone else, Sam. I was never more than one of your cast of thousands.

(pointing at the screen)

Look, see the way he looks at her? As if she were the only thing in the room... the only thing in the world... worth looking at.

SAM: Sara, that's not real!

SARA: But that's the way it's supposed to be!

SAM: Says who?

SARA: Says me! Me, not Kierkegaard, not Freud, not Woody damn Allen, Sam, just me. Why isn't that enough for you?

SAM: Because... because you never thought this was me!

(gesturing at the screen)

This was never me! And it was enough for you.

SARA: What's enough? You left. I regrouped. And kept waiting. We're all waiting for what we want.

TODD: Shhhhhhhhh!

SAM *(sarcastically, glancing at his watch)*: Yeah, where is Mr. Wonderful, anyway?

SARA: Probably back in his overpriced walk-up by now, I'd say. You want to know why I'm here tonight, Sam, all by myself with heels on, clenching my knees over Paul Newman? Because Mr. Right number 13 decided he pre-

ferred his ice melted. Just tonight. So I'm here to wait. For Paul to step out of the screen, I guess.

SAM: You just got dumped?

SARA: You could say that. If you wanted to be crude about it.

SAM: And you just sit there and stare at ten-foot-tall two-dimensional cretins.

SARA: What would you have me do?

SAM: Do you have any feelings, Sara?

Would you cry for anything, or are your tears frozen up inside you?

(SARA stares at him in horror for a moment, then up-ends the popcorn bucket on his head, seizes her bag, and pushes roughly past him on her way to the aisle and out the door. After sitting motionless for a moment, SAM starts up, running after her, not bothering to brush the popcorn out of his curly hair. He grabs her arm, yanking her back.)

SAM: What about when I left you? How'd you feel?

TODD: Oh, my God!

SARA: I didn't cry when you left, I'm certainly not going to for the flavor of the month.

SAM: Come on! Are you really that cold? How'd it feel?

(SARA struggles angrily and largely ineffectually throughout SAM's inquisition.)

SARA: Get off me. Get off.

SAM: Okay, multiple choice. Which of the following—

SARA: You asshole.

SAM: Angry? Relieved? How 'bout scared? Sorry? Sick? Murderous? Tired? Itchy?

SARA: Sam, please don't do this.

TODD: Sit down! Sit down!

SAM: Vulnerable? Empty? Thrilled?

SARA: Sam, why... We don't mean anything to each other any more. Just let me go. Let me leave.

SAM: At peace? Horny? Betrayed?

TODD: I'm getting the manager!

(TODD gets up and makes ineffectually for the door, as PAIGE watches SAM and SARA, transfixed.)

SAM: Used?

SARA: Sam, stop it!

SAM: Critical? Tight-lipped? Bloodless? Unfriendly?—

SARA *(explodes)*: -God damn you, Sam! I hated you for leaving me!

(There is a silence.)

SARA: So, I said it! It doesn't change anything, Sam. Don't mistake one of the ill-judged outbursts you're so fond of for a breakthrough or a revelation. It's just words. They don't justify things, or change their basic state of being, or even make them terribly significant.

SAM: Sit down. Stay here with me.

SARA: No.

SAM: Look. You can sit a seat away. No one will know we're together.

SARA: We're not together.

SAM: Well, that will be abundantly clear. Come on. Watch the rest of the movie.

SARA: Not as clear as it would be if I left. Or better yet, if you left. I was here first, you know.

TODD *(sticks his head in the door, manager-less)*: Would you please just... just leave? Or sit down?

(SARA looks over her shoulder antsy.)

SAM *(leans over to whisper theatrically)*: He seems a little deranged. No telling what he'll do if you don't park it.

(With comical indecision, SARA looks back and forth between SAM and TODD, standing at the door.)

SAM: Don't you want to know what's going to happen?

(SARA finally allows SAM to draw her down into a seat, but insists on sitting a seat away from him. When she sits, TODD buffs back out the door, returning to his managerial quest.)

SARA: I know what's going to happen. There's no question in my mind.

SAM: Have you seen it before?

SARA: I may as well have.

SAM: Is there a gunfight?

SARA: Yes. There always is at the end of these things. And then he rides off into the sunset. Look, Sam, I can't... I'm sorry. I have to go.

(She gets up to leave. PAIGE sees her intention

and scrambles out of her seat, hurrying down her row. Because SARA can't help looking back at him instead of where she's going, she has a full-on collision with PAIGE as she is about to enter the aisle.)

PAIGE: Oh, 'scuse me!

SARA: That's... that's fine. Pardon me.

(PAIGE remains exactly where she is, frankly studying SARA's face.)

SARA: If I could just... get by...

PAIGE: Sara, right? And you're Sam.

SARA: I... yes, but...

PAIGE: I'm Paige. Can I sit down? Oh-migod, I love this. You two are too cute.

Here, do you mind if I put my soda here?

You can have some if you want. But I have a cold. It got so cold out all of a sudden, didn't it?

SARA: Sam, do you... ?

PAIGE: Oh, no, you guys have no idea who I am. Don't even worry about it.

(to SARA)

You're not leaving, are you? I hope not. I was looking for a good place to break in is all. Don't leave. The good part is still coming.

SAM: And who are you, again?

PAIGE: Oh, I'm Paige. I come here all the time. I go to school right up the street, in that completely random brownstone? It's, like, a concept school. Classes don't start till noon, something about adolescent sleep patterns. Sleep patterns. Makes me feel like a rare bird or something. Anyways we get out right in time for the double feature most days. You meet the best people here. Have you been here before? You must've, you look real familiar. I mean besides that I've been watching you for practically hours. Well, ya know, not hours, really. But movies make time different somehow, dontcha think?

SAM: We used to come here a lot...

SARA: Sam!

TODD *(sticks his head in again and whimpers)*: This can't be happening!

(in the direction of the three)

I'm going to complain. This... this is unacceptable. This time I'm seriously going to find the manager. No matter what. I mean it.

I'm not fooling around.

(They ignore him completely. TODD gathers himself and with a baleful look at the other three stalks out of the theater again, muttering to himself.)

PAIGE: Every Thursday! Oh, I so remember. The Thursday couple, I don't believe it. I used to make up stories about you. I mean, I was only twelve or something. But... okay, so no wonder. Didn't you have popcorn a minute ago? Gosh, cause I'm starving.

(giggles)

Oh yeah!

(to SAM)

You didn't get all of it out of your hair, ya know. Just cause, I don't know, you probably don't want to go out like that. So, you guys aren't, you know, together anymore? That's so sad. My stories and all. Shattered. But you guys were seriously scrapping. Maybe it's for the best. Unless you do it all the time as like a cleansing process? I have friends like that. They're nuts but oh my god they're so in love! I love them. Love! It's super.

(whispers theatrically)

That guy is so mad, huh?

(in a more normal, but still hushed tone)

You wanna know what I think?

SARA: I'm guessing you're going to tell us.

SAM: Sara!

PAIGE: Hey, I know, don't I talk a lot? I have, like, a reverse oral fixation. Something always has to be coming out of my mouth! But anyways, you guys...

SARA: I don't know you!

PAIGE: Well, gosh, do you really want to? I mean, hello.

SARA: What?

PAIGE: It doesn't matter who I am. I'm not the one having all these crazy problems out in public. Here's what I think, kids.

(She pulls the candy she's been sucking out of her mouth with a sleeve-rolling manner.)

Sara, you have kind of an attitude problem. He's got ya there. Sam, man, everybody likes you already! Calm down. Naked insecurity, jeez. Hey, do you want a Sour Patch Kid? Either of you? God, these things are so good. After like five or ten, they feel like they're

taking the skin off the roof of your mouth. So that's when most people stop eating 'em. But you gotta keep going, and that's when it gets good. Right after most people stop. You know? I can't prove it to you though. I'm almost out. Did they have these when you guys were kids? Cause grownups lots of times give up on food that hurts for a while, like fireballs. You just gotta wait 'em out. It's, like, nirvana.

SARA: What are you talking about?

PAIGE (*gives SARA a strange look*): Nothing. Candy. Whatever.

(*pause, then, to SAM*)

Hey, so how freaked out are you that she saved that thing? The *Seventeen* thing.

(*to SARA*)

You know what that means. God, that was classic.

SAM: What are you?

SARA: The savvy New York teen from hell?

PAIGE: Actually, I'm from Michigan.

Homegrown and all that. I'm descended from pioneers. They thought it was heaven. They almost went to war with Ohio over a piece of it. Can you imagine? We had to write this thing about that. About what you'd go to war over. I don't know what I'd fight for. Not Blissfield, Michigan, that's for sure! What would you guys fight for? What do you want badly enough? It's crazy to think about, huh? Did you come to the World War II festival here? All those guys fighting for their sweethearts, and all the sweethearts waiting at home. You can't talk most people into fighting for anything these days. Money maybe, but not sweethearts. Or waiting for anything, either. Waiting isn't useless, like people think. Rosie the Riveter, you know that chick in the Tampax commercials? She's waiting like mad. She has, like, the opposite of ADD or something. And, you know, drilling and all too. Though you kind of get the impression she's waiting for, you know, a cute blond Red Cross-er with seamed stockings and red lipstick, not so much a soldier. But the principle's the same, don't you think?

SAM: The principle of waiting.

PAIGE: Yeah. Like if you go to your mailbox every day and you don't ever get anything, you shouldn't just stop going, cause eventually you might get a package, or win a sweepstakes, or inherit money, or get a note from a secret admirer or a magazine subscription! Wouldn't you just die if you missed it? Uh! Like if I missed that issue of *Seventeen*, the one with your thing in it. I read it, you know. A lot of people stop by the time they actually are seventeen, though. Isn't that ironical? How'd you know about it anyway, Sara? About Sam writing for it?

SAM: She has a niece.

SARA: Sam! I have a niece.

SAM: About the only member of her family she talks to.

SARA: I've had about enough...

PAIGE: I guess it'd be different, if your family left you alone. I don't mean, died, or anything like that. Just like, quit tugging at your sleeve or whatever. You always wish they would, but families usually don't. They're always getting on your case about something, but wouldn't it be totally weird if they weren't? Like, eerie quiet kind of. And it'd kind of suck, too. Like for Molly Ringwald in *Sixteen Candles*. It worked out okay for her, though. That guy was adorable... but he never was in anything else.

SARA: You don't know anything about my family.

SAM: I do.

SARA: Not as much as you think you do.

SAM: Ah, a little too much I'd have said.

Your Uncle Grady's a fine guy.

PAIGE: I have an Uncle Grady.

(*Simultaneously, SAM and SARA turn and give her a Look.*)

SARA (*to SAM*): My Uncle Grady is a red-faced misogynist.

SAM: He's a hell of a poker player, and he passes the Chivas like it's Fresca.

SARA: We have a values conflict. Can't we just leave it alone?

PAIGE: Wanna know what I think? Okay, actually? Forget I asked. Cause I'm gonna hit you with it. God, I swear, adults have no idea

what's going on a lot of the time. Listen.

You're inconsiderate, and you're inconsiderate. I know, rude huh?

(*to SAM*)

I think the redhead dumped you, and--

(*to SARA*)

--I think everyone you date is a lot like Sam.

Only not as nice.

(*to SAM*)

You think she's deluded because she thinks movies are real. All that about philosophy? Well, turns out you both think they're real. Plot twist for ya? You're mad cause she won't feel anything, she won't like weep and call your name when she thinks you're leaving like that girl up there.

(*to SARA*)

And you're mad because he's sweet to everybody, including you, and you'd rather he be mean than not differentiate at all. So you both just want the other one to be sweeter. I don't know. What's sweet? A kid in love with her teacher? A love poem? A smile kept just for you and no one else as he rides off into the sunset? Well, how about showing up at a theater to look for a person, or constantly looking for a duplicate of them? I don't know.

(*to SAM*)

Yeah, okay, I guess you're kinda cute but gosh, you're not really qualified even for *Seventeen*, are you?

(*to SARA*)

And you're like a big ad executive or whatever? Telling people how their lives should be and what fridge they should have? My lord. Maybe some people need your help, but not me. You guys don't have a clue, dude. Hey, I'm going to go get a soda, does anyone want anything? They're out of Raisinets though, I asked earlier.

(*PAIGE gets up and brushes by SARA to get into the aisle. As she makes her way back toward the door, she sneaks a smiley look back at SAM and SARA, still in their seats.*)

SARA: Well.

SAM: Yeah, I... that was... baffling.

SARA: It was...

SAM: I know.

SARA: You are awfully nice to everyone.

SAM: But not you.

SARA: Sometimes not.

SAM: You were about to walk out... so obviously not.

SARA: I didn't though, in the end. I'm still here.

SAM: Paigus ex machina.

SARA: I beg your pardon?

SAM: Nothing.

SARA: Did the redhead... did Kate really--

SAM: Yeah, she did.

SARA: So basically neither of us are fit to be with.

SAM: Apparently not.

(*Long pause. TODD slinks back into the theater, looking behind him as though the manager might pop up at any moment like a knight in shining armor. This obviously doesn't happen, so TODD visibly screws up his courage, Adam's apple bobbing.*)

TODD: Hey!

SARA: Now what?

TODD: Would you two please shut up?

SAM: What?

TODD: Well, you've been... you've been talking, and standing up, during the entire film. If the manager were here... I... I...

This is a classic! This is--

SAM (*being a tough guy*): Hey, man, you know what?

(*points at TODD with narrowed eyes*)

You shut up.

(*TODD, deflated, returns to his seat resentfully.*)

SARA (*laughing*): Sam!

SAM (*with a mock swagger*): Yes, darlin'?

SARA: Well. It's not that I like being... that we like being alone. I mean, do we?

SAM (*more serious*): We do not.

SARA: I can't cry for you every time you step away. But I whine a little... to other people.

SAM: You do?

SARA: Sometimes. Close friends... I don't--

SAM: Well I can't be gruff. I'm just naturally gregarious. I tip my hat to all the little ladies.

SARA: Sam, I--

SAM: But that doesn't mean I don't save something special back for you. You just have to take me as being me, not... I don't know, Billy the Kid.

SARA: Okay.

SAM: Sara, is this... are we going to do this again?

SARA: Well. I always liked having my teeth pulled.

SAM: So I can take you home?

SARA: I guess... yes.

(SAM takes her hand and they squeeze out of the aisle. He leads her up it by the hand. Halfway up he stops suddenly, patting his back pocket.)

SAM: Sara?

SARA: What? What's the matter?

SAM *(sighs)*: Can I take you home on the subway?

(SARA laughs as they leave arm in arm. As they go out the door, TODD eases down to their seats closer to the screen and sits, letting out a sigh. A snippet of dialogue: "When's the weddin'?"

TODD: Finally! My God.

(He sits there for a while, as stage lights again dim to the blue flickering of the film. After a few moments, PAIGE skips up to the row, does a double-

take, shrugs, and slides into the seat next to TODD.)

PAIGE: They left together, didn't they? Oh, I am so good! You could tell by the way they shared their popcorn. You can tell a lot from that. Little things say a lot about people don't you think? Like you can tell looking at you that you spend a lot of time here. Wow, a lot of time. You should probably get out more. That's what they say, and I am all for it! Do you have a girlfriend? I guess not, huh. Yeah. Me neither, a boyfriend I mean, but that's just because... Oh my God, look at that horse! Doesn't it look exactly like that guy... you know, that guy. From the movie about the invisible rabbit. Hey, do you want some of my pop? What's your name anyway? Do you come here a lot, cause I do... you meet the best people here.

CURTAIN.

THE END.

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, ANJAIL RASHIDA
AHMAD
1998 JAMAICA KINCAID, THYLIAS 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
2001 JOHN UPDIKE, MARSHA NORMAN, SHARON OLDS, ANJAIL
RASHIDA AHMAD

Addendum

A personal essay by Victoria Stopp entitled "May I Help You?" was chosen as a finalist entry in this year's competition but was inadvertently omitted from the typescript sent to the printer and in consequence was also omitted from the magazine's table of contents.

Ms. Stopp's essay is enclosed with this sheet. We deeply regret the omission.

Personal Essay by Victoria Stopp

May I Help You?

Customers rarely realize what they miss when they walk into Zartelli's Deli. Some are too preoccupied with their own problems, while others just don't take the time to pay attention. Occasionally a few observant patrons smell cigarette smoke in the kitchen of the non-smoking restaurant and offer quizzical looks while leaving without their dinner, or shrug their hungry shoulders and stay. Sometimes a watchful mother notes the explicit heavy metal blasting over the company muzac and leads her children away, but usually people naively order their food and likely consume a rancid concoction of warm meat and hard cheese.

Some of the more serious problems at the deli escape even the most observant customer. The rampant alcoholism among the help. A cook's fatherhood at the age of twelve. The manager's face hardened by years of heroin abuse. A joint being lit almost on the hour in the freezer. A subculture exists beneath the cheaply tiled floors and poorly replicated "authentic" metal James Dean posters—a whole life within the deli, a life that lives and breathes and hates cheese and meat and "how may I help you?"

Josh is a gem of a delinquent who, at 25, still lacks a high school diploma. His father is a fundamentalist Christian bartender who frequently provides him with sermons to sound out into the deli's microphone. Josh's face is covered in acne and he weighs in around 120. He shaved his hair into a mohawk to look tough and started smoking and abusing drugs to further his image. When not spreading mayo on the floor in a rage over a customer, he cuts cocaine on the bread counter. Josh is the cause of the drowned-out muzac.

"Pussy. P-u-u-ssy." Josh mocks a TV reporter's voice into the deli's microphone. It's Friday and the customers have already left after being ignored. "Penis. Penis. Suck my penis." I laugh nervously to keep him happy.

Napkin Man started out as a joke and quickly became a creepy omen of a bad night. His real name was Percival, and he would usually materialize from the woods behind the deli sometime in the early afternoon. He would methodically empty several of the deli's napkin dispensers, soak his money in iced tea, and then wrap the bills in napkins and stuff the whole package into his pockets. Once the routine started, he wouldn't touch anything without first wiping it with a napkin, then covering his hands with several napkins before picking up even his own fork. His money was always wet, and I dreaded the days when I was cashier and he wanted a sandwich. One day, in a frenzy, he started throwing full cups of tea across the deli and then falling to his knees to sop up the mess with a couple hundred napkins. Josh, high on cocaine, provided him with his very own dispenser and told him to get the hell out and never come back, which he agreed to after kicking over a chair and saying that he hadn't liked our napkins anyway.

July of '97 was my first summer working at Zartelli's. It was hot and dry and potential customers were either picnicking at a neighborhood pool or spending their cash at Baskin Robbins. The heat seemed to summon only lunatics to the deli. Josh and I learned this after working several consecutive nightshifts and encountering greasy patrons whose odd behavior put Napkin Man on a pedestal of normality. One evening, we'd been working for an hour or so when a crusty old couple, not quite elderly, entered our small restaurant. The man's Wranglers were stained and dirty, and his flannel shirt was dangerously near ripping at the elbows. His wife wore pink sweat pants—the kind with the banded ankles—and a nondescript T-shirt. Both had badly styled, oily hair, and the man was balding in a perfect circle on the back of his enormous head.

After ordering their dinner (large roast beef sandwich combos), they sat down in a huff near the counter, angry that the deli did not employ a wait staff. I emerged from the kitchen to snag a Cherry Coke, and immediately the woman shuffled her feet on the dusty floor and spat “sir? Sir! We want sum pa-tay-ta salad.” I ignored her, determined not to show my embarrassment nor answer to a male title. Their impatience grew as I drained the soda fountain, and suddenly the woman became very agitated and began swinging her arms up and down like a chimpanzee. “Unn! Sir! Unn! Paa— tayyy-ta salad!” I returned to the kitchen, grinning at Josh, trying to hide my fear of what our uncivilized couple would do next.

“We’re rednecks,” the man announced proudly. “And we want pa-tay-ta salad.” Josh, always quick with an attitude, simply stated “then get it.” The man snorted, wiped his nose on his sleeve, then beckoned his wife to the door. They left without their potato salad but managed to steal the slimy black plastic plate that had supported their dinner.

A few months after the rednecks, we suffered a shortage of fresh meat. Some sort of problem had occurred between management and the corporate office, and we were hurting for ingredients.

“Josh, the pork is green. We can’t serve this. People are going to die.” I shuddered at the thought of hundreds of customers vomiting away their last minutes.

“No way. They won’t notice. Put some of that nasty sauce all over it and they’ll inhale it.”

We served the rancid barbecue pork sandwiches for three weeks, and no one complained. We never figured out if anyone got sick and was simply too ashamed to admit that they consumed such a foul sourness without tasting the difference, or if, by the grace of God, the industrial cheese melter that all of our sandwiches passed through miraculously sanitized the aged pork. Either way, we sold every last ounce of the stuff.

One weekend I was working the morning shift, and I opted for a glass of water rather than a soda for breakfast. Much to my horror, green chunks plopped in my cup where the water should have been. I alerted Maddy, the manager, and she said not to worry, that it was a dirty pipe problem that should clear up in a few hours. None of the customers noticed.

One of the grossest offenses and one that actually planted in my mind the idea of quitting occurred one summer. Someone had left a batch of bread dough rotting behind a shelf for weeks, and somehow maggots got into the mix, which prompted a fly infestation. The adults were the big, intrusive, dive-bombing houseflies that feed on food and garbage and breed like rabbits. Management collectively decided that extermination was too expensive, so Maddy purchased several rolls of flypaper at the Dollar General. The sticky orange sheets with blue outlines of dead cartoon flies were placed throughout the kitchen, which led to some of the oversized menaces, coated in paste, to drip down from the paper and onto whatever surface lay below, be it food, counter, or container. We figured we lost at least 100 dead ones in the olive goo, a nauseating mixture of oil and diced black olives.

Truly problematic employees are unavoidable, and sometimes a regular will simply snap. People rarely get fired because we all know that Maddy had stand-up sex with her boyfriend in the freezer after hours, so she won’t discipline us in exchange for our silence. However, if someone exceeds the roomy boundaries of the deli Maddy would take action.

Maddy hired Rob, a guy in his late twenties, and on his second day he was fired. She knew he smoked a lot when she hired him, but was desperate for employees and decided to give his cooking ability a fair chance. Midway through his shift, he requested a cigarette break, and Rose instructed him to finish packaging a bucket of turkey before he smoked. Five minutes later, she saw him lighting up out front and became suspicious of his speedy skills with the meat. Suddenly, Josh rushed to the kitchen from the bathroom, screaming that the men’s toilet was overflowing and water was everywhere. Maddy, fearing the worst, checked the commode and found that not only was it

spurting water, but about eight pounds of turkey cold cuts were squishing out onto the floor. She paid Rob in cash and forbid him from ever entering the deli again.

Josh's snap happened a few weeks later. One Sunday afternoon, he decided he was sick of serving the church crowd and wanted them to leave. He quietly walked out of the front door, pressed himself against the massive glass wall of the deli, and began to fondle his exposed penis. As the mostly elderly customers rushed from the building, Josh calmly went back inside and began a shooting spree with the guacamole gun. He held it over his head and began spraying the walls of the kitchen, then ruined several pounds of chicken breasts by frisbeeing them into the office door. His grand finale was to drop kick a 15-pound bag of cheddar and watch the shredded cheese cascade to the floor. I sat on a nearby trashcan, eating potato chips and wondering if I'd fall victim to a spurt of green goo or a piece of flying frozen chicken. Maddy let him go the next morning, and we all commented that we hadn't realized how much we'd hated him until he left.

There never really were any separate Zartelli's employees. At work, we were one: one slow, resentful, homogenous worker who lived from paycheck to paycheck and spit in the face of authority (or in authority's food). Zartelli's was a vacuum. The bonds shared among people who took the daily abuse of customer comments such as "you're too old to work here," or "you should get a real job," or "what the fuck do you know? You're just a fast food loser" weighed heavily on our individual shoulders and created a monster full of defenses and back-talk. "You want extra mustard on that? Tough shit. Pickles. Sure, here they are. Shove 'em up your ass."

I knew better than to curse the kids and squirt "asshole" with mustard on people's sandwiches. But once I slipped into my red polyester apron and starched hat, the mistreatment and poor pay forced me to revert into a basic element of human misbehavior: defiance. If nothing else, I learned how to survive by observation.

When Maddy could look someone in the eye who told her she should have gone to college and tell them to get the hell out of her store, she soared above the sad reality of minimum wage employment. When I slung an impatient woman's sandwich into her bulbous abdomen, I answered her demands with an attitude that protected me from admitting how deeply she'd dug into my pride. Retaliating in packs was easier, because even if we hated each other, we shared the degradation of being "hey you."

Part of the problem that led to a good bit of the insanity was the constant fear of abuse, either verbal or physical. We never quite settled back into our carefree routines after we were robbed and Mike and Jessica, two high school students and employees, were forced to lie on the ground with guns to their head. Hours after the robbery, people were back, demanding extra onions or more olive goo.

Customers don't care if you've just been beaten and your life threatened: they want their food and they want it the way they choose. A power structure exists between customers and employees, even when the two are friends. It's human nature to react differently to someone in a subservient position, no matter who they are. "Hey! I haven't seen you in a while. Anyway, I asked for roast beef and got pastrami. Can you change that?" There's no tactful way to demand service, and it's easy for people to rationalize their treatment of workers by mumbling that the people are getting paid to serve them and shouldn't work there if they don't want to. But that doesn't change the effect on the older employees with aching feet and the student cook with a Latin exam in the morning. Our breaking point existed just below basic mistreatment, and we dealt with demoralizing, dehumanizing treatment by playing to the expectations of the people who abused us; we acted like animals.

The difference between myself and the other employees, and the ultimate reason for my leaving, was that I was able to step out of deli life and into a completely alternate reality. I could scoot back to my dorm and slip into a hot shower, change my clothes, and reinvent myself in half an

hour. No more bread. No more rats and flies and dripping toilet brushes. I could return to a world of beer and books and all-night conversations— to the world of the demanding customer.

Nobody else could do it. They developed a dependence on our collective personality and literally couldn't go home. Maddy would hang around for hours after her shift just to talk to the other employees. In-store dating spread like wildfire until I was the only person who hadn't slept with at least one other worker. The final wakeup call came to me at the '99 holiday party, when the owner paid hundreds of dollars to get us all wasted. The presents were extravagant and only added to the false sense of family that so many of them needed. I received a laptop computer and a set of crystal candelabras. Alcohol actually created a clearer picture for me and the group quickly turned into a bunch of losers who had no real lives. I suddenly became the customer again, snarling and criticizing and gnashing my hungry teeth.

By the time Maddy started kissing my ears and a daytime employee began humping a large cucumber, I was deep into the customer persona. Their behavior was more and more repulsive and frenzied as the night went on. I finally understood the customer mentality. These people weren't Maddy and the people I'd known for two years— they were that stupid old woman, that nasty guy, and those other idiots.

I haven't gone back in months now, although sometimes I feel like a I lost a huge piece of my life, albeit for the better. The sour ending didn't matter so much in itself; I figured my time at the deli wouldn't end painlessly. Zartelli's was a trap of loserdom and failure. The customers had been right all along, or at least I convinced myself of this as I tried to push back the realization that I wasn't any better than the assholes I'd served for two and a half years. My privilege was one of options; I could leave the deli because I was on my way to an education. I came from a family who valued law school, not sandwich making. I worked at the deli so I could go out with my friends and wear nice clothes— not because my children depended on my income to keep them healthy. I could become that asshole customer who demands olive goo and extra mayo while my former friends force themselves into food-stained clothes and trek back to Zartelli's for the next cycle of "may I help you?" to my scowling face on the other side of the counter.