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These are stories to be taken as the truth or as lies. They are akin to oracles, like those uttered by the priestess of ancient Delphi. Stories do reflect the truth or the lies about our lives, our relationships with each other, and our hidden dreams. Therefore, stories can do many things to us: mock us, comfort us, lead us, destroy us. It is the task and the responsibility of the storyteller, or the writer, to tell these oracles, to interpret these dreams, and finally to share what knowledge may be found.

The people in these seven stories struggle with truth and lies. They are comforted or mocked by truth; they are led or destroyed by lies. Honesty and clear-sightedness are the fruits of such struggles: the only knowledge to be found and shared.

In three of these stories, children are of central importance. They are symbols of purity and straightness in the dissidence of war and family. The other four stories are concerned with adults on two levels: youth and age, love and hate. Family relationships are prime targets for both children and adults, for man is never alone for a moment in his Eden. And the serpent or tiger, crocodile or dog that brings new wisdom is to be valued. In all the stories, there is a tension, like the tension of dance or sculpture, which captures for a moment the swift essence of life, whether that life be the truth or a lie.

In conclusion, it must be found that all stories should be designed, written and told in such a manner as to capture bits of life. And these bits, when read or heard, should then make their readers or listeners value life more than before.

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DELPHI: A COLLECTION OF STORIES

by

Heather Ross Miller

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APPROVAL SHEET

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DELPHI

It told her things. It called her nice names like "Darling" and "Sweetheart," bringing a red glow to her face and making her feel warmed-up all over and giving her a headache if she sat by it too long listening. Most of all it backed her up and made her still proud. The wavering air that came from it seeped through the emerald plush of her armchair. The chair had wooden feet carved like an eagle's claws. She sat richly but modestly, wallowing in the wavering emerald warmth. She inhaled and exhaled with it, then broke her trance to speak.

"I heard over the register this morning that my son Donald, Junior, was going to write me a letter. And what I want to know is what have you done with it?" The old woman settled snugly into the plush and glared at her tired daughter.

"The mail hasn't come yet, Mama. It comes at one-thirty, after dinner. You know that well as I do." The tired daughter, whose name was Linda, scraped at fresh corn. The white kernels fell into a large pan in the sink. A slop bucket stood by her on the floor and it was stuffed full of cobs. The sounds of a lawn mower came through the kitchen screen. It was July and the temperature rose to ninety-two at noon.

The old woman snorted and rearranged herself. "I don't know how come you fixing all that corn for. The freezer's done full of it. And I can't eat corn with these new teeth. Look at'em! So long I can't keep my mouth held shut!" She drew back her lips exposing the plates.

Linda nodded without looking. "Yeh, Mama, I know," she replied.

"I told that fool I didn't have buck teeth before! But he didn't listen. Just shoved'em on in my mouth, saying 'Yesum, Mrs. Ricks, Yesum, Yesum!'"

Linda turned on the cold water and rinsed her knife. Sun flashed along the blade. It flashed in the old woman's spectacles. She sat silently for a few minutes watching her daughter work the corn. Then she burst open again, her long porcelain teeth clicking over the furious words, "Well, where's Sue? Has she been put away again? I ain't seen her in over a week. I reckon she's been put away again like I said."

"Oh, Mama," Linda looked highly annoyed and scraped over a new cob vehemently, her lips pooched out. "Sue's at the beach this week. At the ocean-beach. I told you."

"You say that. I know better! Sue's mean. You say that 'cause you favored her over your other little younguns. I seen you many a time come in the house with a package of chewing gums and give it all to Sue and not a stick left over for Wayne or Randy. Now she's been put away. Again! You made her so mean. I know. I heard over the register that she's been put away." Mrs. Ricks pounded the armchair triumphantly. The chair was covered in starched white antimacassars. She had made them herself with a hook and thread. Crocheted them herself. To keep Donald, Senior's greasy arms and head from soiling the plush.

Now she watched Linda to see if her accusations had struck a soft place. She sat still as a mouse, only her eyes moved, shining, watching Linda. Linda went on with her work, scraping the white corn and washing the knife and dropping the bare cobs into the bucket with a clunk.

She got up. "Well, I don't care what you said. I'm going out to see

if the mail's came. I know it already has." She got out of the arm-chair quick as a bird. She was a small creature, her bones like sticks, kite-sticks, and her head like a peeled and bleached peachstone. Her hair grew thick and seemed the wrong sort of hair, old lady's hair, for her to have. It was cut short and severe, clipped close to the skin of her head. She went outside.

A boy pushed a mower down the long slope of Mrs. Ricks' lawn. The temperature of July hung over the lawn and the house and seemed to buffet the boy along his path through the grass. She stood a moment recollecting exactly what she had come out there for, then a grimace of irritation clamped on her face and she began to signal furiously at the boy. "Boy! Boy! You come here to me!"

He turned, not hearing her, but following his cut through the heavy grass. He started back up the long green slope. The sun weltered all over him making a nimbus, a halo, a big bright spot. When he saw Mrs. Ricks, he stopped and switched off the mower.

He stood watching her. There were bits of cut grass sticking on his legs and his hard sunburnt shoulders and along the bone of his chin. The terrible sunlight made his hair the color of new wheat stubble. He waited, his hands straight down each side of him.

"Who you been talking to, boy?"

"I ain't been talking to nobody."

"Don't you lie to me! You been talking to somebody. I heard you."

She put up her hands to shade her eyes from the piercing sun. The boy kept on looking at her. He never seemed to blink. His eyes soaked up the sun and aimed it back out like a ray-gun. He was peeved with himself for

taking on this tough lawn in the middle of the day. He was peeved with the old woman who stood so impertinently on the porch's edge and accused him of lying. She wavered on the edge, cupping her hands around her eyes as though she were peering out to sea from the bow of a ship. With one bare hand, he could snatch out her esophagus and stomp it into the ground at his feet. He pondered for a minute, then he let out his breath and relented, "Yeh, you right, I been talking."

"Well, now you listen to me. I got a family of poor colored folks living under my house and I'm getting ready to go take'em some milk and cookies. I'll be gone over half an hour and I don't want you to talk to nobody until I get back here. You got that straight?"

"Yesum, I won't say a word to nobody." He bent over the mower and wrapped the cord around it with grim precision. Then he gave a hard quick jerk and the motor erupted with a deafening growl and blue smoke appeared. He pushed over the green spaces again, gritting his teeth in disgust.

The old woman watched him go, noting well the swift hard movement, the swift hard power that sat upon him, his youth, his impertinent manhood. She took down her hands and her eyes watered in the blinding light. "The green crocodiles! The green crocodiles of Egypt! How they will devour the old ones, murder and devour us all, in the very middle of the day!"

She made a sign unto herself, a sort of benediction.

.

The house settled and shifted things deep inside itself, things dark, things hidden a long time ago, webbed over now with dust, irritated by the scuttlings of the silverfish. Mrs. Ricks sat by the register, basking in the waves of warm air that undulated from its louvered face. The touch of the air was thrilling to her, like the smoothing-down caress of her lover, the long lean stroking of a well-fed cat. She purred to herself, closing her eyelids to no more than glowing slits.

The huge furnace beneath the floor vibrated. It comforted her with its rumblings. She was starkly ignorant about the furnace. The ductwork that spread in an elaborate nervous system throughout the house was unbeknown to her. She did not know that the electrical connections to the furnace had been cut off at the beginning of the summer by her son-in-law, the plain, quiet mate of tired Linda. It hardly mattered. For Mrs. Ricks, cosily entrenched in her plush tripod, the register functioned all year. And all year she sat giving it her attentive and willingly-believing ear. It spoke the truth to her.

When night came, she went to bed and slept vigorously, snoring with her mouth open, the Bugs Bunny teeth in a glass on the night-table beside her. In the morning, her daughter came again, as regular as the sun, and the wavering, hot day was begun all over.

This morning Linda looked disapprovingly at the breakfast: a saucer of Jello, cherry-flavored, a cup of strong Luzianne, an inch of sugar undissolved in the bottom. "Mama," she scolded, "that isn't any kind of way to eat breakfast. You need to gain, Mama. You need to eat better than that."

The old woman hopped about the kitchen. She was much elated and her eyes, wide-open and yellow as a cat's, sparkled. "Listen," she interrupted,

"I ain't studying about no breakfast. Listen to what I dreamed last night." She hopped to the sink and stared into her daughter's face. It looked back at her tired and disinterested. Linda was rinsing the breakfast dishes. "Look at that sugar left in your cup, Mama. Almost a half a cup just wasted, washed down the drain."

"Listen, I said I ain't interested in no breakfast, no wasted sugar. Listen!" She drew in her breath and gazed dramatically out the window. The new hot morning sun glimmered over the cut grass and brought a drying smell out of it. Insects bumped against the screen. "I dreamed Donald was alive again. And I went to him at the store and I told him the President had been shot. I was thinking in my mind that it was Roosevelt, but it wasn't him that got shot. But it was all the same, all just alike, in my dream. 'Donald,' I said, 'the President is dead.' 'Really?' he says, 'Is he really?' And then I told him, 'Donald, it was the Lord's Will that Kennedy get shot. I heard it over the register two days before it happened. I thought about doing something. Then I said, no, it was the Lord's Will and none of my business.' 'Really?' he says again and went on trying on a pair of shoes on this person's feet in the store in my dream. I smelled them shoes so strong in my dream. Leather strong. Hard and smooth, the kind that squeaks and smells like a shoe oughter smell. I thought I was going to take them shoes and cram'em up my Donald's butt if he didn't listen no more than that to me." She stopped short, realization flooding her face. "I tell you who it was that was buying the shoes! It was Tom MacKeever, that mean youngun you had out mowing our grass yesterday!"

Mrs. Ricks swelled with triumph, her kite-stick arms folded over her breast, and beamed a terrible smile, full of savage wisdom, straight into

the dull dead face of Linda. She waited to hear what Linda would say.

Linda dried the dishes. "Yeh, Mama. That's real nice. Why don't you go sew on something, Mama?" She sought to distract her mama the way someone seeks to distract a tiresome child that has too much sense, gently, with a cunning and fearful kindness, a killing kindness. "I got things to do, Mama."

.

At the end of the day, Mrs. Ricks went back to the emerald plush and the register. The furnace came on with a whir and soon the whole house was vibrating cosily. The antimacassars were stuck on with little pieces of starch, sharp and white, white and sharp as little crocodile teeth. She sat for awhile studying the pattern in the crochet.

"Get rid of them," the register whispered. "Take them off, darling, and throw them away."

Obediently, she pulled at the antimacassars and then threw them in crumpled white balls to the floor.

"You got to wean them," the register said loudly in her ear. "Too long they been suckling at you. Wean them. Shuck them off and trample on them in the dust, the husband and the babes of your bosom! It's the Lord's Will!"

It shouted right into her ear and hurt her on purpose. She recoiled from its unaccustomed rudeness. She got down out of the warm plush chair and bent over the louvers of the register. The louvers were opened, like blinds, like stiff steel lips, and she peered intently into them. The

smell of oil and dust came out. She carefully lifted the rim off the register in order to see better. She saw a safety pin caught there, tarnished, cluttered with lint, and an old brown toothpick, and some dead flies, turned crisp as autumn leaves.

"What you mean hollering at me like that?" she demanded, her voice as hoarse and rude as the one that had shouted at her. "Huh?" she demanded again.

The register said nothing.

Down inside the bowel of the house, she heard something click off with a dreadful, positive, and definite CLICK. The cosy vibrations stopped.

She got up from the floor, nimble as a girl, and stood scowling at the reflection of herself in a pierglass that hung on the opposite wall of the room. A nimbus of dust particles floated up from behind her and hung, glittering in the light of the setting sun, around her thick short hair. She narrowed her cat-yellow eyes and thought she saw, right behind her reflection, another reflection, tottering like a drunk man. Donald? Linda? That mean youngun? She couldn't exactly make out who it was behind her.

The smell of cut and drying grass came through the windows and sidled up her nose. A dog barked in response to another dog, lifted his leg against a tree in her yard, peed on it, scratched and sniffed and trotted off proud as a race horse. She kept scowling at the pierglass, soaking up its crazy reflections and aiming them back out again. Finally she made up her mind to move, to attack.

"Now," she said, slowly turning around to face them, "what you all done with it now?"

A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

Gus was wearing the same clothes all day yesterday. Now he looks like he has slept in them all last night. Lusha sees this right away. She is coming into the kitchen with her mind set on fixing the coffee and there is Gus, fully clothed and wrinkled like a sheet. He has taken off one shoe and stands there holding it in his hand. A cigarette is stuck in the corner of his mouth. It is his habit to stick cigarettes in the corners of his mouth and then forget about them. The cigarettes burn away until there is a long grey stem of ashes. Gus turns his head, the stem pops in two and ashes sprinkle down on his jacket.

The sight of the ashes annoys Lusha and she opens her mouth to scold Gus. But before she can say a word, Gus comes out with his announcement.

"Justyn, your son, he is married!"

"What are you saying to me? It is a bad time for you to make jokes, too early in the morning. I don't have the mind to laugh at you now." Lusha blinks small black eyes at him. Her eyes are black and shiny like the marbles in games. She is busy shifting her thoughts around in her mind behind the black marble eyes. She frowns at Gus.

"No. I am telling you the truth. It is so. Justyn, your son, he is married. He has brought you a wife."

"I do not believe it." Lusha is impatient. She goes to brush away the ashes from his clothes. "It is too early in the morning. It is still yesterday, I think, maybe? Look, you are wearing the clothes you had on yesterday when you went to visit the dentist."

"But look upstairs. They are there. You will see it is the truth I have said to you." Gus points his shoe at the ceiling and smiles at Lusha.

"Upstairs?" Lusha repeats his gesture. Her finger is short and it trembles as she points it the way Gus is pointing his big black shoe.

"You will see!"

Gus follows her to the stairs, one shoe still off, his stocking-feet slapping against the dark waxed floor. He watches her go up the stairs and he smiles and calls cheerfully after her, "It is a cause for a celebration, do you agree?"

Lusha does not reply, but goes to the door of Justyn's room and begins to knock. Three times, Lusha knocks. She makes slow, careful knocks, waiting for a good space between each one.

Someone says to come in and Lusha opens the door and looks. A big beautiful blond head lifts up from the bed. Lusha sees big blue eyes, long straight hair, and a face that is plump and pink.

"Hello," says this face to Lusha and smiles big with a lot of beautiful teeth.

"Hello," says Lusha with no big smile on her face. No frown either. And no teeth showing. But the quick, blinking, black eyes move like swivel rollers in her eyesockets.

From Justyn, her son, there is no sound to be heard. There is his big naked suntanned arm hanging off the side of the bed.

Lusha stands blinking her eyes and she cannot make up her mind what she ought to do now. It is her house they are sleeping within. She was the one who washed the sheets on their bed. She was the one who waxed the

dark floor. But she can only stand and blink and listen to her crazy thoughts humming around inside her head, flashing off and on in rainbow-colored neon tubes.

"Well," she says at last, "I have to go now. I will see you later, okay?"

"Okay," the big beautiful blond head drops back on the pillow and Justyn moves his big brown arm up toward it.

Lusha shuts the door loudly and waits for a moment, still holding the doorknob in her hand. She hears gigglings, murmurings, then silence coming strong through the dark wood of the door. She says to herself, "This is a dream. It cannot be happening for real in my house, in Justyn's room."

But when Lusha gets back down the stairs and into her kitchen and begins to make the coffee, she realizes it is not a dream at all. It is as real as the thumping of the coffee in the percolater. Thump, thump, laugh, giggle, heavy silence. Thump, thump, laugh, giggle, heavier silence.

She sits down at the table with a dazzled look on her face. Gus comes in again and now he is dressed in his pajamas. He takes a cup of coffee and sits across the table from Lusha. Lusha watches him light another cigarette and stick it in the corner of his mouth. She waits for him to draw on it once, twice, then she says, "Is this any way to meet a daughter-in-law?"

The ashes spill on Gus's pajamas, but Lusha goes on talking, "No, this is no way to meet a daughter-in-law. This is too crazy!" She gestures at the ceiling.

"What are you shouting about?" inquires Gus in an amiable voice. "Tell me, why are you looking so unhappy now? Justyn, your son, is married. He is upstairs in bed with his bride. Why are you this way?"

I do not understand you, Lusha. You want to undo it?"

Lusha tightens herself up and leans over the table and says to him in a thick whisper, in a kind of voice used for telling secrets, "Let me tell you what happened up there. It is a long story, now you listen. I go upstairs. I knock on the door. Nobody says anything. I wait. I knock some more. Then somebody says to come in. I open the door. I see a head rise up and it is all round and pink and like a doughnut. She is so sweet, that one! 'Hello,' she says. 'Hello,' I say. And Justyn, your son, he says nothing, not a word. Could he not speak up and say, 'Mama, this is so-and-so, my wife I brought home to you last night'?"

Lusha exhales between her teeth and brings her cup down with a smack to the saucer. She waits for Gus to say something back to her, but he only yawns quietly in her face.

"I am going to bed," he reports and begins to get up from his chair. "I am so tired. I was awake all night, getting ready for this day, Saturday. I was going to do something big and wonderful, create a marvel of sculpture in the barn. But now I am so tired I can only sleep."

"And why are you up all the night? Were you ill from the visit to the dentist?"

Gus yawns again. He considers a speck on the opposite wall for a moment, then he declares to Lusha, "I am an artist, a sculptor. You know this. Last night I was in a vision, all night long, a magnificent vision, for marble, or for bronze!" Gus's eyes are gleaming as the glory of his vision rises up before him in marble, in bronze; already in his mind he is mixing the plastellina; he is pressing the clay upon the armature. But Lusha interrupts.

"Well, great artist, why don't you go create us something, something we can eat, something we can sleep on, a gift for the bride, maybe? Go chisel her a Madonna, a Hercules, no, an altarpiece! Chisel all of us an altarpiece for we need to say many prayers."

Gus pauses in the doorway of the kitchen and he looks sad and proud, tender and absurd in his blue-striped pajamas. They are very wrinkled and the cigarette ashes are scattered all across the front. Everything about Gus is wrinkles: his face, his white hair, his clothes, his shoes, everything except his hands. His hands are full of scars and callouses, but no wrinkles. Gus is sixty years old, but his hands are as young and strong as Justyn's.

Gus thinks to himself, Lusha is such a child this morning. Then he smiles at her and says in a mild, half-scolding tone, "Now, why do you say a thing like that to me: 'Go chisel us an altarpiece!' and you make it so loud that almost I find myself looking around for my mother-in-law, your mama? You remember how she used to shout at me in Poznan? Pound on the table and say 'Well, Gustaf, well, fine gentleman, and what have you done useful this day!' You remember that, Lusha?"

Gus looks at Lusha and his eyes are kind, also there is a spark of merriment behind the kindness. But as Lusha says nothing, he returns to the table and pulls a chair up close beside her and peers into her black eyes. There are tears in Lusha's eyes and they shine like small hard diamonds. There is still much beauty in Lusha's face, even though, like Gus, she is sixty years old. Her cheekbones are high and her nose delicate and her hair is swept around and around over her head like the coronet of a princess. But Lusha was not born to be a princess. She

was born to hard work and danger, to love and hate, to embrace and strike in the same moment. She is trembling all over and Gus sees this and he feels his love welling up inside him.

"Listen," he says to her, "last night Justyn came home and I was in my vision and you were fast asleep in your bed. My vision was so strong, so beautiful. I had the clay in my hands. I could feel its form already. And Justyn, your son, he comes in and he says to me 'Papa, this is Beejy, we are married.' And there she is behind Justyn, looking around his shoulder at me like she is frightened. And I say to her 'It is okay, Beejy.' And she comes out from behind Justyn and smiles at me and puts her hands in my hands.

My hands were cold from the clay and from the excitement of my vision. You know how I get cold hands when I have a vision, Lusha? But, listen, darling, Beejy's hands were warm. And they made my cold hands warm, too."

Gus finishes his story for Lusha and he feels a dull pain where the edge of the table is pressing into his chest. He has been leaning against it heavily without noticing. Now it takes his breath away.

Lusha is still trembling and the tears glitter in her eyes. She smokes a cigarette and the smoke curls around her coronet of hair. After awhile she says, as though she has not heard one word of what Gus has been saying to her, "Gustaf, you come into my kitchen, you go out of my kitchen, you come back into my kitchen. You are like a bad one-act play on the television. You torment me!"

"Well," he replies, pushing himself back from the table again, "that is all I have to say, so, I will not torment you anymore." Gus smiles up

at the ceiling as he goes out and he adds over his shoulder to Lusha,
"I will make an altarpiece, maybe, for them. You will see. It is like
the truth which must be told."

.

Gustaf is a man who has lost everything. In Poznan he was wealthy and lived in a villa built of pink stones. He was an artist who made figures for the cathedrals. He did not care how long it took him to finish a piece of sculpture, six weeks, a whole year; the time did not matter to him. He had studied at the best schools in Europe. He was an artist who knew the right and careful way to do exactly what he wanted.

But a war had torn up his careful plans. It had put an ocean between Gustaf and the cathedrals and the villas of Poznan. Now, in America, he works in an aircraft factory making molds for the engines of big planes. Gustaf is a man who has lost everything, except one thing: strong hands. He comes home from the factory and he works in his barn behind the house. And there, among the dust and kittens and spiders, the piles of rock, the pulleys, the buckets of clay, Gus is again an artist, a young man with his visions and lots of time.

And now Gus says to himself like a prayer as he lies down in his bed and prepares for sleep, "I will carve a great altarpiece for my son Justyn and for his bride Beejy. She has such warm hands. Lusha's hands will be warmed, too."

And while Gus is sleeping enveloped in his warm vision, Lusha moves fiercely through the lower part of the house. She is dusting and sweeping

and plumping up the pillows on the sofa. She attacks every corner in the house. She scours every spot of sunlight. And when she is finished with this, she smokes herself a lot of cigarettes.

The morning passes away and it is bright noon with the insects screeching in the grass outside and dogs running down the street and children crying and the smell of cooking drifting through every window in Lusha's clean house.

At last Justyn comes downstairs with his bride. He holds her hand and presents her to Lusha, "Mama, this is Beejy."

Oh, Lusha is thinking rapidly, totaling up everything she sees like numbers on a cash register: She is so round and fat and pink. Her face like a sweet doughnut. Her eyes blue like an angel's, so blond and soft, she is a cherub to be painted by Michelangelo.

Oh, Beejy is thinking in little thoughts that break like soap bubbles: She is so sharp and bony. Her eyes like tacks sticking right straight through me. If I poked her with my finger she would break. She is too small, too brittle. I should put her inside of a china closet and keep her shiny.

Lusha drops her eyes and says, "Okay. I have been wondering what you really looked like. You are hungry now? You will eat with us now?"

They sit down and eat together. They wake Gus with their talking and he comes to the kitchen, still dressed in his wrinkled pajamas, and he eats something with them. Lusha brings wine glasses from the cabinet and Gus pours for everyone a little port. They drink many toasts and then Gus begins to tell them about his wonderful vision, his altarpiece. "You think you will like that?" he asks the bride, arching his eyebrows at her so

that he resembles an old elf.

"An altarpiece?" she questions in a high-up little-girl voice. She looks at Justyn. She blushes and looks at Lusha and then back at Gus.

"An altarpiece?" she repeats.

"I know, I know what you are thinking," Gus sighs and looks glumly down at the table. Then he brightens his face and looks around at everyone and lifts his glass and reaffirms his faith in all of them by saying, "But I will make it anyhow!"

When Gus goes out to his barn, the girl blushes some more and sits waiting for Lusha and Justyn to explain it to her. She is a very poor and ignorant girl and she thinks herself so fortunate to get married. Justyn, her husband, is handsome and very strong, a good worker with his mind on sensible things. Beejy does not understand about altarpieces or Poznan or even the port in her glass. She is quite confused and helpless.

Lusha feels pity and says to Beejy, "It does not matter about your new papa, Gustaf. He was a great artist, a sculptor, in Poznan. In this country he is nothing, but he still has many visions. You will get used to it, okay?"

Beejy gives a sort of shiver like she is cold or feels something crawling over her back. Lusha smiles and pats Beejy's hands.

When they are gone, Lusha sits in the kitchen and thinks it all over again, the whole crazy day, her whole crazy life. Look, she says to herself: When it begins you are a child in Poland working hard all the time in the fields, going to school with a piece of bread spread with lard and fried onions. You are in love with Gustaf even then, that early, and then later, when you have grown into a woman, you marry him, the crazy Gustaf

who is spoiled and rich and whose papa has sent him to the art schools in all of Europe. The papa does not really like you, Lusha, because he wants Gustaf to marry a rich girl. But when he is confronted with the both of you dressed up in your wedding clothes, he gives his blessing. In time you become the favorite daughter-in-law and you live with Gustaf and his papa in the villa built of pink stones. Gustaf carves beautiful figures, beautiful fountains. You have a son, Justyn. It seems to you that the cup is so full it will never run dry.

Then one terrible morning you wake up and the cup is broken because a war has come to Poland and all of Europe. Gustaf has disappeared. Justyn is lost. The pink villa is overrun with soldiers and you, Lusha, are in prison. You are in prison and you long for bright things - bright air, bright stars at night; the brightness is like a torment to you. So one day, while you are hoeing and you see the guard's back is turned - he is lighting a cigarette and he is like a fat toad on a lily pad, he is so sure, so confident that his long tongue will catch all the flies - you throw down your hoe and roll over the embankment into the high weeds. You get up and run into the forest, deep into the trees until it is black and green and smells of rain and the rotting leaves. You run and run until you hit your head on something hard and you pass out thinking you have died.

But when you wake up, you find that you are in the arms of the Underground and you cannot truly believe you could be so lucky. You spend a long time in searching, living in the refugee camps, taking many pains, talking German, talking Polish, talking Russian and Czechoslovakian. You find your husband, Gustaf, and together you look for a boy. And when you at last find a boy, you look at him and you want to weep because you do not

know, you are not sure he is the right one and you want him to be the right one.

One day, after many days have gone by, he says something that makes you sure he remembers the old times - the toy clown that crawled up and down a string, the trees outside the villa, the gargoyle's head in the fountain - and you are weak inside with your joy in this child, Justyn.

Lusha thinks these long and complicated things to herself for quite a while. Shadows are falling and it grows cooler outside. The sun splatters itself like red paint over the sky and Lusha's cheeks glow red like the sun. She looks around at her warm shabby kitchen and she feels a mixture of sadness and pride.

Gus appears at the door, his face flushed and his hands dusty. He has been mixing plastellina. "Come in," Lusha says to him. "You scared our girl away with your talk of altarpieces."

"I know," Gus sits across from her. "I could not help it."

They sit together in silence, in the red shadows, then Gus says, "She cannot help it either, if she does not understand altarpieces. I forgive her."

Lusha shrugs her shoulders. "We do not know where he found her. What is she?"

"She is a lady. What more do you want from her?" Gus pulls a cigarette package from his shirt and after examining all of them, selects one to smoke. Lusha watches him. "When you die, Gustaf my love, I will come to find where you have fallen and I will find you with a cigarette in the corner of your mouth."

"It is okay with me. It is okay. I will let you find me." Gus

smiles and smokes in silence, thinking of his altarpiece again. It rises in tiers of glory, embellished with cherubim, flickering with thousands of candles, perfumed by thick incense. "It will be so beautiful. It will take years and years to carve it! Years, Lusha!"

"You had not better waste your time. They will not give you years." Lusha's words cut sharp and cold through the red sunlight.

"What do you mean?" Gus's hands are suspended in the air like the hands of puppets.

"I mean," explains Lusha, "that they, your son Justyn, and Beejy, will not give you years and years to carve an altarpiece. I know this already. I see it plain as the nose on your poor face. I do not need a vision in the night to see it, Gustaf. He will not love her long. And she does not truly love him even now, this very day."

Gus cannot say anything. A new vision opens before him. He sits and listens and flinches as every stone in his altarpiece begins to crumble and fall down on him.

"Do you know how old she is, Gustaf? She is seventeen years old. And that is not old enough to love a man. She told me that Justyn sat in a swing with her on the porch of her mama's house and he said 'let's get married, Beejy' and she said 'okay.' Do you think that is any kind of love, Gustaf? At seventeen, a girl does not know how to love a man."

"But Justyn is older, a grown man who has been in the Army, who works hard, a man who should know his own mind!"

"I do not know about Justyn," Lusha throws up her hands with exasperation. Her feelings of sadness and pride are gone. The red sun slides over the kitchen walls and she grows uneasy, angry. "I thought I knew something

about my son. But just as I was thinking I knew something, now I find out I don't know anything. Children are born in pain. But it is worse pain when you see that you don't know them, that it's like you have been taking care of a ghost all your life."

Lusha pauses a moment, remembering the ghost of Justyn, but she soon crushes it out of her mind. "I don't know," she says sourly, "maybe Justyn thought he was making love to a real woman, maybe he was making love to that porch swing."

"You are a crazy woman!" exclaims Gus. The ashes spill from his cigarette in a soft grey shower. "You talk of Justyn as though he were dead, a ghost you said. I cannot talk with you anymore, Lusha. I don't know how anymore." Gus mumbles to himself as he leaves the kitchen, his white hair stands up all over his head like a ripe cotton boll bursting its pod.

The red sun flutters like a torn rag on the linoleum floor and Lusha, trembling again and with tears in her black eyes, murmurs, "It is a pity, Gustaf, such a pity."

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In the night as Lusha lies asleep in her bed, Gus creeps up to her and shakes her awake and says to her, "You must talk to Beejy like she was your own child, your own daughter born. This is what I want you to do. Okay?"

Lusha blinks her black eyes. She wiggles from under Gus's hands and sits up and stares at him, puzzled, then her brain focuses clearly and she

says, "But, Gustaf, I cannot do this! If I had a daughter, I would tell her everything. We would draw the same breath all the time. But this Beejy, no, I cannot do it, Gustaf, impossible."

"Yes. You must. I insist on it." Gus clamps his mouth in a hard line. His hands, strong and young with power, close around Lusha's arm again so tightly he can feel her pulse jumping against his fingers.

"Okay," she relents, "maybe I will try it for a little bit." She slides down in her bed and pulls the cover up so that she will not have to look at Gus anymore. She listens to his footsteps going away. The stairs begin to squeak. There is a space of quietness when everything is still and heavy and waiting for something to start.

Then through the house and through the piece of cover that she is holding over her head, Lusha hears the sounds of hammering, the patient, sure, careful pounding of the mallet upon the stone. She is thinking she sees, in the dim rainy alcove of her mind, the little pieces begin to dislodge and fall away.

WAR GAMES

There is a boy and his name is Daniel. His father is dead, shot in the war over the sea, in the North African campaign. He was an aviator, a man who flew in the sky with the birds and the exploding disappearing sun. So the boy wears an old aviator's helmet made of brown leather, quite worn and thin, with straps hanging down under his chin.

When Daniel is alone in his room, he builds toy airplanes from pieces of balsa. He glues them together lovingly and watches over them while they dry. He fingers the frailties of the planes, the frailty of wings, struts, the hollow fuselages, the incredibly delicate prop blades.

Daniel fingers them lovingly. Then his face changes. He balls his fist over the balsa planes and brings his fist down hard, as though he intended to smash them to ruins. It is a test of willpower. For he stays his hand. He does not allow it to smash the planes.

It is natural that Daniel thinks of his dead father. But his memories are not of a man who lived, but of another man with whom Daniel plays a game. They play it again and again until they both have it memorized. It is the game of killing whatever is in front of you.

Duck, duck, I'm going to shoot! In his hands, Daniel's hands, the long gun gleams like a magician's wand. It is rubbed smooth, well-oiled and clean, a pet thing. Do you think you can hide from me? You are hiding, okay, you go on hiding. You try to drop out of sight. But you cannot hide. There is no safe place. I will hunt you down and shoot you with my gun. Already I have you in my sights. I have the best gun

in the whole world, and the best aim. My aim is as fine as a hair.

Already, before you can think about it, there is my bullet in the middle of your brain. You lie down dead. Okay. Hooray for me. I win.

As a reward, a hundred golden chariots draw Daniel into his city where he is crowned Imperial Lord, the favorite, the sweetest. Hooray for the boy.

But now the game changes. It changes too fast to keep things straight. It turns very ugly and is no more like a game. The father rises from the ground and says, "This is manslaughter."

"But I didn't mean to do it," cries the boy.

"What did you do it for, then?" asks the father.

And all the brothers and sisters and aunts and cousins and dogs and cats begin to holler and cry. A great lamentation goes up to the sun. Somebody goes to get the sheriff. "Why ain't somebody here seeing after these children?"

"I work all the time," says the mama. "I can't look after all these children the way they're supposed to be looked after! It ain't my fault, anyhow!" She flares her eyes toward the crowd of lamenting people.

"But I didn't mean it!" screams Daniel. His fingers curl around the smooth clean gunbarrel and tighten until the knuckles snap white.

"I don't care. This here is manslaughter."

Okay. You can get up now. We ain't playing now. The game is over.

This is the game Daniel plays when he thinks of his dead aviator-father. I guess you are thinking it's a crazy game. But games are not supposed to make a whole lot of sense. It is for amusement that you play the game and it gets you either a reward or a punishment, but you cannot

have both.

Now my story about Daniel goes on. In the morning he saw a carnival come to town with lions and tigers and screaming nervous black monkeys in cages. The carnival came in yellow-painted wagons with wheels that were red and broken, very useless wagons, with gypsies quarreling, their earrings flashing in the bright sun. The carnival also came roaring into town in steel trucks with smells of gasoline and black grease. There was the sound of backfiring, shifting, groaning, all kinds of moving sounds mixed up with sounds of the animals and the quarreling women.

Daniel thought about these things all day and now these sounds and colors are passing through his mind, making a long caravan. He sits in a big old house full of his cousins and aunts and babies that wake up and cry. Outside is blackness. The October trees scratch at the empty sky and there are dry leaves crackling like paper in the gutters. It is not bitter cold. The air is still soft and the patient blackness abounds.

The children huddle together in the middle of the floor, listening to the rats scampering in the attic above. Their feet and claws rasp across the rafters. It sounds exactly like they are running a race.

Daniel, who has the greatest imagination of all the children, describes how they must look up there in the dark. Such terrible rats, big and thick as a soldier's boot, with tremble-noses and shiny eyes and long skinny tails, grey-colored, like little snakes. The rats, all lined up, are impatient, while one rat stands off to the side and counts. He says GO! and the rats scramble away, squeaking and showing their teeth, scratching the rafters to splinters. There is the sound, a thud, of many animals' bodies falling together, falling over one another in their haste to get

somewhere first.

Daniel listens. "Hear those?" he asks.

"Yeah," they nod, shifting their stiff legs, yawning in the darkness. It has made them sleepy. The blackout is lasting for a long time. Lights are forbidden. But there is a baby in the house and the mother feels she must have a light. So she has hung heavy quilts over the windows. The quilts hold back the one candle she keeps lit on the kitchen table. Daniel looks around at the quilts. The pieces and colors swim together in his tired eyes and make him think again of the pieces and colors of the carnival, the roaring animals, the dark women.

Suddenly he is feeling safe and cosy, even with the rats running over his head and the blackout going on outside and the enemy planes somewhere searching. Daniel narrows his eyes to slits and says in a low wise voice, "Tomorrow, you know, I am going to take the gun and shoot the rats to pieces."

The mother dozes in a corner of the kitchen. She holds the sleeping baby close to her. In his infantile dreaming, he throws out his arms and pushes his legs against her stomach and startles her awake. She blinks at the dark room, the small pool of yellow blurred light around the candle. There is the smell of melting wax. She sees catsup stains on the tablecloth, blood-red, blotted dry. The pile of children on the floor breathe as though from one soft black lung.

"Younguns can sleep anywhere," she thinks to herself. Even on the hard cold linoleum floor, even in their school clothes and laced-up shoes, the children are sleeping vigorously. They are not embarrassed to sleep. "I wish I could."

She is not comfortable in the kitchen chair. Her arms are tired from holding the baby. He is a big baby, his head lolling against her neck, his breath making little wet snorts. She has a brother at sea. She thinks of him now, then dreams, dreams down deep into the blue water, rolling with the surge of the waves, propelled by the puffing squid-fish.

Daniel dreams of lions and tigers, the tents full of dark women who quarrel loudly, and of a single empty swinging trapeze. He wants to go to this carnival real bad. And he is sitting here in his dream on the side of the street, squenching his eyes against the hot sun, peering down the long empty street. He is thinking he might have to get up and pee when he thinks he can see the banners of the caravan coming, swaying with the gait of the horses, wopsided, fluttering all kinds of colors in the thin white sky.

All at once he stiffens. He feels his mama behind him. He feels how she is unhappy with him again. He feels how she is tired and washed-out and faded from the sun.

"Don't you know you'll ruin yourself sitting out here in this hot sun? You know I have always hated freckles worse than sin. And you go on sitting out here in this sun. Where's your hat again?"

Daniel waits. His mama waits, then adds "Honey?" to what she has just been saying. Daniel does not turn around in his sleep. The dream does not have the slightest bit of sass in it, does not put a single hateful word in his mouth. All this quietness is moving the mama to relent. Daniel sees this, but he does not feel truly pleased. She stoops down beside him on the streetcurb. His shoulders are awfully thin and when she takes hold of his arm, she can feel his bone inside.

"Daniel, honey, you got the prettiest little skin and I hate to see it get all ruind. Why don't you wear your hat?"

For the first time in his dream, he is allowed to say something.

"Baxter Ray throwed it up a tree. Baxter Ray always throws it up a tree. Everything we go out on the playfield."

She draws back. Daniel sees that it disturbs her to know the straw hat has caused him some trouble at school. It is an awful straw hat, big and floppy; the children call him "Farmer Dan-in-the-Dell." Baxter Ray jerks it off and throws it up a tree. Daniel hates it.

"Didn't you tell the teacher?" His mama is asking a stupid thing and so he turns to stare at her. The directness of his eyes makes her more uncomfortable and in this he can rejoice. The freckles across his small nose stand out and make his eyes appear positively and icily blue. "Mama," he says with a little pity in him, "you don't know nothing, do you?"

The child blinks his eyes as a cloud suddenly goes across the sun and momentarily blots out his mama and the caravan that is journeying down the street. He remembers with alarm that he has been neglectful and he turns toward the street. But he sees only sunlight coming back, sunlight charging into his eyes through the window and he wakes up feeling dopey and cheated.

Now there is a new day. Daniel eats breakfast with the others and goes to school wearing his thin leather aviator's helmet. He does not have to wear a straw hat. He does not own a straw hat. He only dreamed that. But there is Baxter Ray and Baxter Ray is jealous of the helmet. It has a pair of plastic goggles that can be slipped down over Daniel's eyes. Something pleases Daniel when he looks through the goggles; some-

thing gives him a new dimension on the world. They are dim and yellowed because the plastic is cheap, turning cloudy, cracked with lines as fine as a spiderweb. Daniel wears the helmet, thinking of his father dead in North Africa, decaying, crumbling into sand. But he does not feel like his father or like an aviator of an American plane. He feels more like a Jap, more like a Nazi.

Before he left the house, he paid close attention to his mama's face and he saw that she was not very pretty. She was about as plain a mama as he could think of. He liked her best when she was truly happy because then she could smile. The smile would go all over her face and she could not hold it back as it grew larger and larger until her teeth flashed and her eyes glowed dark blue. It was then that he caught on to her smile and held tightly until they both were caught laughing and giddy as two pups.

But those times when his mama was truly happy, unembarrassed, were few. He was eight years old. Maybe twice in the time that Daniel could recall had she been truly happy. Both times had been when his father was there. When his father was there, his mama had almost looked pretty.

Daniel had thought over this while watching his mama walk from the stove to the kitchen table, carrying the baby on her hip, dishing out breakfast. All that time was finished and done with. His father was shot down in the American plane, burned up and smashed, his mama had a baby to carry around, and they had moved out of the other house that was theirs into this house with the aunts and cousins and strange dogs and cats. Okay, I said we ain't playing now. I said it ain't my fault.

In school, the teacher lets them draw pictures and she is making some nice little clean suggestions. "Draw a Halloween picture," she

says, handing out big pieces of stiff paper.

"I want to draw a plane with bombs dropping down on fire," replies Daniel. He is enthusiastic and he reaches out his hands for his big piece of stiff paper.

"No," the teacher says to him. "Draw a Halloween picture. A jack-a-lantern? Maybe an old witch flying on a broomstick, okay?"

"But I want to draw a plane with bombs dropping down on fire!" Daniel is insisting. His blue eyes flicker with the prospect. His fingers itch for an orange crayon, a thick black one. He sees moving across the school-room wall bright planes releasing swarms of projectiles, hurling hot lava; he hears the noise; he feels the concussion.

The teacher stops at his desk and frowns. She is young and pretty, prettier than his mama, with long fluffy hair curled by a machine, and cherry-sweet lipstick on her mouth. She thinks Daniel is a dopey obstinate child and she feels it is necessary to have her way with him. "But that isn't a Halloween picture! That's a war picture. Wait, I know what!" She smiles and slaps a big piece of stiff paper across his desk. "I know what! You can draw a parade! Draw a band and soldiers marching and the flag! A parade, a military parade, okay?"

She is moving on, convinced she has conquered him, feeling sure she has erased the war with the parade, wiped off the bombs and the planes with flags and bright uniforms and brass horns. Daniel sits looking at the fresh white sheet in front of him. He runs his fingers over its slick stiff surface. Duck, duck, I'm going to shoot! You see this here gun? Huh, shoots real bullets! Kills real people! Duck, duck! You just better duck down! He rejoices as he reaches for the orange crayon. The flames

are beginning to spurt from his hands.

When school is out in the afternoon, everyone talks about the carnival that has moved into town. Baxter Ray says he is going to the carnival every night this week, school or no school. He jostles up against Daniel and yanks off the leather helmet. "Hey, you!" yells Daniel and chases Baxter Ray down the street. Baxter Ray runs and runs and laughs hysterically as he runs, swinging the helmet like a lasso. Baxter Ray is chubby and he cannot run for long. He runs up under a big tree and throws the helmet up high. It does not catch on a limb, but falls back to the ground. And before Baxter Ray can grab it and throw it again, Daniel is on him, throwing him down, pounding and kicking. Daniel slaps Baxter Ray in the face with the straps of the helmet. The leather stings and Baxter Ray cries, begs, "Stop! Stop! No fair! I ain't playing!" Okay, you can get up now.

The fight is over. Daniel has disarmed the enemy. He sits and looks at poor fat Baxter Ray; he sits astride Baxter Ray and looks down into his red face, holding his fist over Baxter Ray. He feels satisfied with his victory and gets off. Baxter Ray walks away beaten, sniffing a little bit, wiping at his nose, hoping it might bleed honorably.

Daniel puts the helmet back on his head and goes downtown to pick up his papers. Each evening he delivers a rolled-up paper to each door. Daniel does not think much about the papers. A carnival has come into town. His father is dead in North Africa. And there are healthy rats running foot-races in the attic at night. These are the facts of life.

He carries the papers in a canvas bag slung over his shoulder and he leans as he walks, leans under the weight of the rolled-up papers.

It is a simple town he walks through, put together with simple bricks and stones, artless and easy, insignificant. He goes by trimmed hedges that never sprout beyond a certain invisible boundary in the air above. He goes past dried-up brown flowerbeds and in one yard there is a fishpool where the fish have grown monstrously large and ugly and stick their narrow heads out of the water, gasping.

Daniel walks along in this simple familiar place, full of his victory over Baxter Ray, remembering his beautiful picture full of planes and bursting bombs, and he does not notice the tiger behind him. The tiger, absurd and awful, is like a figure from a bad dream, colored yellow and orange and black, stalking Daniel through the plain homely streets.

Daniel walks up the steps to a lady's house. This house belongs to Mrs. Womble who is peculiar and stingy. She wants her paper delivered to the door, rolled-up nice and neat, nothing protruding or spilling out, nothing smudged or torn. Mrs. Womble does not like her paper thrown on the steps or in the yard. Daniel is now accomodating her as he accomodates her every evening. He walks up the steps with the paper in his hands. And for the first time, he feels the animal behind him, quiet and deadly.

The life-fluid inside his body freezes. Daniel looks around at the tiger and the tiger looks back, twitching his long thick tail, and waiting, his ears laid back tight on his terrible head. He knows the boy cannot run away from him.

But Daniel tries. He runs to the front door of Mrs. Womble's house and he begins pounding on it with both hands and the neatly rolled-up paper. He yanks at the doorbell. The silvery music of the bell floats through the house and he hears it again outside. But Mrs. Womble, who

hears it, too, has seen the tiger through her white lace curtains and will not open the door.

Daniel pounds with all his might. He screams and cries. His heart dives and rises inside him and his brain shrieks outloud: Open the door! Open the door! Why won't you open the door and let me in? Don't you see me out here? Oh, God, please, God, this is just me in the aviator's brown leather helmet! The one with the real plastic goggles!

Daniel sees that it is no use for him to beat on Mrs. Womble's door. Oh, the bitch, the fat snotface! He drops to the porch in a limp little ball and tries to lie as still as he can. The tiger bounds to him. Daniel feels the tiger all over him, snuffling and pawing. The tiger has no teeth. The carnival people have pulled out the tiger's old teeth. Thank God for his hard toothless gums that come clamping down on Daniel, slobbering, making hard bites on the back of his helmet. Duck, duck! Do you think you can hide from me? Do you really think I can't find one little bitty chicken-shit boy like you, if I want to?

But the tiger has real claws and he tears into Daniel's clothes. He pierces Daniel's armor everywhere. Daniel bleeds from long scratches the tiger is making upon his body, marking his body, wounding him, playing, playing, and playing again. Daniel lies perfectly limp, patient and dopey as a saint.

At last he is rescued and the hunt is finished. A patrol car screeches to the curb and a man jumps out and fires a gun at the tiger. People exude from houses all along the street, shouting together and pointing. The tiger falls beside of Daniel and Daniel hears something untamed growling and fading away deep inside the animal's guts. They lie there together on

the porch like two lovers, limp and spent.

People are hollering and quarreling and blaming one another. "Who let this here tiger get loose?" shouts the sheriff, still pointing his gun toward the porch.

"It ain't my fault," hollers the carnival man, "it's them niggers who don't pay no attention when they go to feed and lock up. You can't blame me!"

A man runs up the steps and grabs hold of Daniel. "You can get up now, honey, it's all over now. You okay, honey? Huh? You okay?"

Mrs. Womble opens her front door. "I saw it all," she shrieks to the assembly in the street. A drop of saliva forms on her lip because she is so greedy to tell them. "I saw it all. He was brave as any man, I tell you. He laid out here and let that beast maul him over and he never flinched!"

The man scoops up Daniel and carries him inside Mrs. Womble's house. And the sheriff, still holding his gun, and the carnival man and all the noisy people crowd in behind. The man carries Daniel into Mrs. Womble's clean white bathroom and props him on the john. Mrs. Womble, protesting about all the people in her house, takes down a bottle of orange merthiolate and together she and the man swab all the scratches the tiger made upon Daniel's body. The merthiolate burns and stings and Daniel jerks away from the swabbing and the bottle falls on the tile, shattering, making one big orange mess, full of tiny glass shards.

Now Mrs. Womble hollers about the broken glass and hollers at all the noisy people to get out and the sheriff tells her to shut up. And in the uproar, someone grabs up Daniel again and carries him out, at the same

time pulling the tight leather helmet off his head. They carry him home to his mama who cries and cries and says, "He's ruint! He's ruint!"

And on the other side of town, people are beginning to drift toward the carnival tents, elated, their curiosity stirred by the flapping banners, the wild animals in cages, the dark women.

DON'T CRY

A peculiar green glow settled like a nimbus behind the sharp eaves of the barracks. There were fourteen empty rooms to the barracks, but light shone in the L-shaped kitchen at one end. A narrow plank porch edged the side and at the place where the kitchen door opened, there was a small stoop with a peeled log railing.

All this stood in a clearing surrounded by thick forest. And the cold sky spread over it like a pavilion spread over greenish-grey water, spread out and fastened tightly against the winter and the coming dark.

In the kitchen the forester and his bride were sitting to their supper. She was a pale girl with long red hair brushed out straight and severe. And except for small gold buttons in her ears, she wore no decorations. On her wedding finger was a wide band of Florentine design, but this was no decoration. Her name was Anne.

Anne's eyes had an uneasiness in them. She looked up a lot, as though she expected something, was waiting for something, as though she imagined something, but had no real proof of it. It was only when her gaze fell on the forester that this uneasiness, this uncertainty, went away.

Paul, Paul; she said his name over to herself a dozen times a day, convincing herself of the fact of him. Paul, so lonely, so kind. Paul, who appreciated all the absurd things she did for him.

Now she looked at the gas cooking-stove which she did not entirely trust because the gas came on so furtively and made such an awful smell. She got up and brought the heavy coffeepot to the table and filled the

cups. The coffee was full of chicory. In the beginning Anne had not liked either the coffee or Paul.

Anne put several spoonfuls of sugar in her coffee and stirred with great concentration. She wanted every grain to be dissolved before she drank any of it. This had become an obsession with her. If she drank her coffee to the bottom and found a sediment of undissolved sugar, it annoyed and distressed her, made her feel wasteful, disobedient. She had no reason for feeling this way. She could have put a ton of sugar in her cup and Paul would have thought nothing of it.

The table they sat at was too small, an old cardtable with collapsible legs. The top was painted with hearts and spades, clubs, disappearing, scratched into the same dim color of grey. The hard metal chairs were cold and made ridges in her legs. Paul folded a blanket for her to sit on and laughed when she said, "You really know how to fix a person up."

The forester's life was a refreshing poverty. Everyday Anne woke hungry for it and it filled her up by evening. Everyday brought a new thing, snowdrops blooming in a patch of dirty slush. They delighted Anne with their drooping flowers like white bells, sweet and delicate, brave to bloom so early in the face of the bitter weather. She broke off the bells and held them to her nose. Then she noticed the peculiar green glow in the forest, the gigantic pines rising up from the slushy soaked earth, and she felt an ache in her bones. She stared all around her at the trees, feeling the coldness that lay over everything, and she listened with dread to the trees creaking in the wind. The bones of the trees ached as hers.

Anne stared for a long time without moving, as though framing it in

her mind, as though she were adjusting the lens of a camera and taking a careful time-exposure.

"You are very thoughtful tonight," Paul said. She nodded and remained in her place on the folded blanket, admiring him, his face, the way he ate his food, his hands. She was memorizing him.

"You think so much you can't eat," Paul said again.

She did not move, or eat.

"I am going to drink your coffee so I will know what you are thinking so hard." He reached across the table for her cup.

She put a hand out to stop him. "No, Paul."

He laughed.

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It was an accident that Anne came to be sitting in the forester's kitchen as his bride. A very absurd accident. Her father, a rural mail carrier, was stricken with an illness. It was in the summer and Anne, home from college, was available to take over his route.

All through early summer and into the final heaviness of a dry yellowing August, she drove up the mountain and into the forest preserve to stop at the forester's mailbox. He received a vivid assortment of mail: official reports from the State in stiff grey envelopes embossed with thick seals, shiny colored postcards from California, New Mexico, Connecticut, racing magazines with fantastic automobiles on the covers, and heavy boxes of York barbells.

Anne could not lift those boxes out of the car. She drove to the

small cedar-shingled shack that served him as an office and honked the horn irritably until he came out.

"You have a box or two out here, too heavy for me," she said. She slid out and held the door open while he took them out. It irked Anne that he took them out so easily and lifted them to his shoulder. The muscles in his back and his arms worked obediently, perfectly. And his voice, when he thanked her for her trouble, was pleasant. He looked at her out of eyes that were blue and cloudless. He demanded nothing. And she stood there blinking and envying, feeling her whole existence threatened. This man made her feel less than a person.

All Anne's life had been a threat, imagined or otherwise. From her earliest years she felt herself plotted against, whispered about, locked out, locked in. Her family was a thorn in her flesh. They were plain and faded, bent double searching for food and dignity. They bowed to any kind of authority, to Church and to School. Her father carried the mail as a part-time occupation. His full-time occupation was farming. All his life had been spent chained to the earth, plowing it open, seeding it, giving it the things it needed. Her mother stayed at home and cooked food and wrote letters to Anne, their only living child, away at School. "When you get your degree, you can get a good job and make money. You won't have to put up with what I've put up with." Her mother thought Anne was taking a course that would turn her into a schoolteacher, plain and safe.

But at college Anne had chosen drama, not because she wanted to act upon the stage or to write plays, but because drama students were considered wild and different and therefore let alone. Under the protection of the drama, Anne could retaliate against the plain safe world that threat-

ened to erase her. She could let her red hair grow long and wear it flying carelessly down her back. She could have her ears pierced, wear her skirts six inches above the knee, and she could, if she wanted to, wear heavy stage makeup on the public street.

The mother at home had no inkling of her child's true nature. But the pierced ears were evil signs. She stared at Anne fearfully and declared, "I wouldn't have plugged my ears if I were you. It makes you the same as niggers and gypsies!"

Anne shrugged and made no reply. At home in the summer she kept her hair long and straight, hanging off her head in a terrible bright flood. But she stopped wearing the stage make-up and her face was like a white pious blob in the midst of all that fire. "Now, you could wear a drop of lipstick," suggested her mother, "'cause you look so washed-up, so peaked."

Anne persisted in her bizarre and selfish fight, harsh, insistent, throwing up a great wall between herself and the rest of the world. She scrubbed her body and beat at her hair with the brush as though she wanted to inflict a cruel punishment upon it.

And when Anne was washed clean, with her hair brushed until it burned on her scalp, she dressed herself in short tunics, striped like a Navajo blanket or plain as a sack, and got into the car and, barefooted, pumped the hard rubber pedals furiously.

Thus she drove through the dusty mail route each day and returned home to spend the rest of her time moping, alternately languishing and storming, to the great confusion of her parents.

"I think maybe Anne is cussing," whispered her father, sick abed, to her mother as she brought in his tray of medicine. "I think maybe I heard

her saying 'hellfire!'" He lay back on his pillow and rolled his eyes.

"Yes," replied the mother. She clinked spoons against glasses. "I think maybe I heard her saying it, too!"

But hellfire was not the word to describe it. The forester had gotten on Anne's nerves, infected her. Both of them were outcasts of a sort, isolated, existing with curtains pulled down between them and the rest of the world. But his life, quiet and simple, triumphed over hers, pulled her down. She thought about him all the time, in between every change of the gears in the car, at every tin flag on every mailbox, over and over through the hot nights, through her storming and her languishing. It annoyed her terribly.

Then one morning he came out to the mailbox and invited her to stop for a cup of coffee. She greedily accepted. The chicory tasted awful, but Anne drank it in gulps. Later she reproached herself for such greed. But she could not hold back the relief that spread through her.

The easiness of love shocked her. The brightness of it cut her through like a piece of glass. A man with arms as strong as Paul's did not waste himself in fighting.

"Good gosh, I wouldn't go out with him if I were you," warned Anne's mother over and over, "I bet he's slept with a hundred women down in that woods! And you don't know what he might try to do to you!"

"On the contrary, mama," replied Anne, "I do know, and I hope he does."

"Well!" replied the mother, drawing herself up into a self-righteous pose, "I'd like to think you wouldn't do nothing you would be ashamed to do in front of me. But you're a grown woman. And you ought to remember that if you make your bed, you're going to have to lie in it!"

"That's right, mama," agreed Anne, "that's exactly right!"

At the end of the summer, Anne's father recovered from his illness and took over the mail route again. Anne went back to college and when Paul visited her there, he filled up the formal little parlor of the dormitory with his wide-shouldered power. He brought the smell of the forest in with him, a smell of leaves and wet earth, a smell of wilderness. He made all the college boys look exactly like boys, ridiculous and weak-kneed, with their baby bones still soft and their pimply faces lopsided.

Paul never noticed the boys or the girls peering at him, wrinkling up their faces, forming opinions inside their small skulls. He noticed only Anne, her wild red hair, her pale and fierce beauty. And he spoke to her in a distressing manner. "Anne. Anne, I don't know what is happening. I have never been homesick. Now I am homesick for you." He took her outside in the darkness and held her up against the phony Grecian column of the dormitory and kissed her.

When Paul was gone, Anne felt a great loneliness loom up in the place where he had stood before her, a high wide column of dark air, harsh and cold and without pity. She looked around at the dormitories with their lighted windows and she listened to the sounds of the girls chattering and the awkward laughter of the boys and she marveled to herself, "Why am I in this place? Why?"

Days went by, consumed. She went to class and she came back from class. She went to play rehearsals and watched the motions of the players who flopped about like wooden puppets on strings. "Why am I here?"

At the end of the quarter, she married Paul and soon afterward found herself to be pregnant. Anne asked him, "Paul, what would you like, a

boy or a girl?" Her question was tossed like a painted ball into the air between them.

He caught the painted ball and turned it slowly in his hands, marveling over every inch of it, impressed by its terrible speed and magnitude. Finally he said, "It does not matter. It is foolish to make a choice. But I have been alone so much," he folded his empty hands, "that I believe I would like not a boy, but a girl."

Anne's parents came to visit. They sat on the hard cold grey metal chairs. The mother looked at the kitchen and at the rack of barbells on the wall and she behaved as though she were in a foreign country trying to speak a foreign tongue. The father was subdued. He accepted a cup of coffee, took one timid taste, then left the rest to get stone-cold. When they prepared to leave, the mother said to her daughter, "You ought to make him get you all an apartment in town. Living down here in this barracks is awful. How can you stand it?" She glanced off at the thick line of pines surrounding the clearing. "I tell you I could not stand it for one minute!"

Anne should have rejoiced. But this time, she gritted her teeth and wished she were an orphan. She was ashamed that she could be hurt in such a common way, in being misunderstood. She washed out the cup of cold black coffee, rinsing and rinsing it and then rinsing it again under the thick stream of hot water.

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An accident had brought her here to this place, Paul's place. She sat

at the old weak-legged cardtable and watched Paul drinking her cup of coffee. He looked at her with an amused expression. "Come on," he said, getting up, "we must go lock the gate."

Outside the green glow had gone and the dark January air made Anne's face sting. "The wind is coming off ice somewhere," Paul remarked. He slid the bolt into the latch. The forest was secure for a night. "We will have more snow, no doubt about it." He put his arm around her, kissed her stinging face. And Anne, burying her hands deep inside her pockets, felt the flesh of the child move under her own.

It was a long and cold night, buried in cold, buried in dark. A pack of wild dogs, hungry, excited, ran through the cold forest, their eyes glittering like the snow. They ran furiously, scenting something, something only half-perceived but agonizing. They charged through the clearing, upsetting the garbage can. The snarling and banging exploded in Anne's sleep. She sat up, shaking, listening to the noises of the wild things, the dogs. Paul sat up, too, surprised, but not afraid.

"Anne?" he touched her. The ends of her hair brushed against his fingers. The ends of her hair were crisp as paper; they seemed they might be highly inflammable, resinous as pine wood. "Anne?" he said again.

She did not answer. She sat feeling how strong and lonely he was and had been and always would be, all his whole life long. The dreadful strong loneliness of Paul's life opened out in front of her like a long telescope focusing from a little boy to a young man to an old man dying. She did nothing but sit and stare at the gleaming frost-covered windows.

Paul got out of bed and went to the porch and shouted at the dogs. They ran away, but the sounds of their snarling and howling lingered in

the dark kitchen, fierce, threatening. When he returned, Anne was lying down, her face on her arm. She asked, "What do you suppose they are saying about me?"

"Who?" he inquired.

"Mama, my mama. Your friends. People."

Paul was confused that she could ask such a question. He could not form a quick reply the way he wanted to, making something warm and comforting, something as placid and reassuring as milk for a baby. He could see in the dark how bright her hair was, how burnished, polished, saturated. He dizzied himself on it, then murmured, "They are saying my wife has hair as red as a fox."

The next morning there was snow, new, as Paul had predicted, white and silent, distributed for miles in all directions, bleaching out everything clean. The trees bent over with it. The patches full of dirty slush, the bell-flowers, had vanished. And the sharp eaves of the barracks were blurred and softened.

Anne woke alone. The stove was not lit. She crept across the cold floor and, opening the door no more than a sliver, looked out.

Paul stood on the porch naked. His body showed up brown and freckled against the dazzling new snow. He was peeing in the whiteness, melting the crispness that rose up as high as the porch stoop. Suddenly he looked toward the door. Paul grinned; he threw back his head and he laughed. The sounds of high strong laughing broke the glassy air and shattered it against the trees. "Good-morning, Anne," he shouted.

There was no evil, none that she could see with her eyes, smell with her nose, or feel with her hands. He was a creature at one with the snow

and the forest, the wild snarling dogs, the placid January sky. He was the complete master of his dominion. And she, a girl, pregnant, barefooted on the cold floor, was held in bondage.

Anne crawled back into bed and pulled the blankets up to her chin. She lay staring at the ceiling that was made of square white tiles, some of them stained dark brown where the rain had leaked through. She felt very warm and cosy lying there. She felt a big load had been taken off her shoulders and given to somebody else to carry awhile.

Paul came inside and lit the gas stove and filled the coffeepot. He came over to her bed and said, "You are being thoughtful again."

Anne pointed to the ceiling. "Last night something was bothering me before I went to sleep. Before the dogs came and woke me up, I was dreaming about it, I think. But when the dogs woke me up, I couldn't remember what it was. Now I remember. It was up there. It was the ceiling."

He looked where she pointed. "Why does the ceiling bother you?"

She dropped her arm. "When I was little and went to my grandmother's, they often put me to sleep in a room with a ceiling sort of like this one. Only it was not tile. It was wood, long slats of wood painted white. I didn't want to sleep by myself in that room. I wanted to sleep with my mama and my daddy."

Her eyes cast about over the ceiling tiles. "I would lie there and stare at the ceiling and count the pieces of wood. And I would say to myself 'Don't cry, Anne. Don't cry, Anne!'" She stopped talking and glared at Paul with an old fierce suspicion that was suddenly cut loose to come rushing to the top again. "They never came to an end!" she declared. "And that was the trick in it. That's what made me fall asleep and never

know!"

Paul studied her face. "Do you want things to come to an end somewhere?" he asked. He sat down. His eyes, blue and clear as ice, searched her.

"It doesn't matter, Paul," she replied, subsiding, getting soft and blurred. "It's okay, Paul."

After breakfast Paul waded out in the white snow and Anne was alone again. She scattered crumbs for birds. The sky was grey, dingy. The peculiar green glow of last evening had gone from the forest for good. Anne wanted to bleach the sky out white to match the white snow. She wanted the sky and the whole world to be of no color at all.

When she came into the kitchen again, she lay down on her bed, fully dressed, her feet in boots with the snow caked on the bottoms. They reminded her of the sugar left over in the bottoms of coffee cups.

Outside the new snow pressed down everywhere, on the eaves, on the branches of the pines that creaked in the wind, and the vastness of it tightened like a white tourniquet around the pulse of the world. Anne looked up at the ceiling which was also white, except for the ugly brown places. She rubbed her hands in the air to erase the brown places, but they kept on reappearing.

Then she began to count. One, two, three. They went on and on and on and on. No doubt about it, no doubt. Paul, Paul, Paul. "Don't cry," she told herself sternly, "don't cry, Anne."

A SPIRITUAL DIVORCE

Rosalind's mother was the oldest woman in the world. Jason looked at her and marveled, holding his pink mouth open and round as pink candy Life-Saver. She was so very, very old. There she sat in a wrinkled sprung-bottom chair and she never moved a piece of her, never batted her eyes. Her hair was covered by a white cloth and she looked out at the world through half-closed eyes. Jason could not tell if she had real eyes in her head or not. And all eyelashes, eyebrows, lids, everything seemed to have melted into the bronze threads of her face. She was eternal.

Jason's mama would have scolded him for staring like that. But his mama was not here. This was a place she did not know. This was a queer specialized place that belonged to him and to Rosalind and to Rosalind's mother. He could stare at her as much and as long as he liked because it didn't make a speck of difference to her. She hardly noticed him. He was no more to her than a little white beetle that had crawled out from under a rock somewhere sometime.

Occasionally there was a plate of scrambled eggs on the table at the old woman's elbow. At other times there might be a slice of cake or a few biscuits with molasses in a dark circle around them. Jason never saw her eat a mouthful. He had the uneasy conviction that she didn't really need to eat. She would go on living in the sprung-bottom chair forever and always. While he, stuffing his guts on pancakes or marshmallows, would eventually swell up and die.

Rosalind, detouring from some errand in town, would jerk him in and

then back out of her house. Often she stopped to leave the slops for her hogs. Jason preferred an expedition of slops because it gave him something to do. He pulled the slops in his wagon from his kitchen to Rosalind's back stoop and tried to be careful not to hit any bumps or rocky places that would make the bucket spill. Rosalind walked in front of him, holding a newspaper over her face to shade out the sun. Every few yards, she turned and warned him, "Lookout now, Jason, don't hit that rut yonder. Lookout, I said, if you got a mind."

It was tough work for a boy only five years old, but he thought he did it rather well. At the back stoop, Rosalind lifted the bucket out of the wagon and set it down with a loud thud. Then she would hurry him into the house that smelled of mentholated salves and kerosene lanterns. She bustled about breathless, chattering, "We can't stay. We can't stay. Naw siree no! Got to hurry, hurry!" She threw excuses over her shoulder like seeds.

Sometimes, though, she did stay a bit, talking rapidly at her mother who responded by saying "Uhm, uhm," but never moving or opening her lips. And when Jason was tired of standing beside of Rosalind and tired of staring at her ancient mother, he slipped back outside and settled down beside the bucket of slops. He stared at them as intently as he had stared at the old woman. He pondered every ingredient in the bucket. Shriveled yellow cobs, the tops of carrots, turnips, green frills of celery, and the long irregular peelings of potatoes floated in a white greasy lagoon.

The potato peelings floated with their brown rough sides showing above the milky water, then turned suddenly and showed their white slick undersides. Jason was always startled anew when they did this and he would say to himself, "Wrongside out! Wrongside out!" And taking a twig, he flipped

them back so the brown was on top again. It seemed logical to Jason to keep the white covered up. The true meaning of the word naked was, to his mind, something like the potato peelings turning over and showing their white.

The hot high sun drew out the smell of the slops. It was a faintly rotten, but comforting and reassuring smell. He leaned closer and inhaled it like smoke from a cigarette and then let it creep slowly back out again, the smell of slops and milk and dishwater and black coffeeground. Jason's mama had a garbage disposal installed in the sink. It was so powerful it would chew up a whole Coca-Cola bottle. Its steel blades gleamed and the sound of its hidden motor was ferocious. But Rosalind never used it. She scraped all the plates and emptied all the pots into her rusty bucket. It was a way of life, a chain of events that held together and made sense, an ethic that worked and proved itself true over and over. Jason pulled the bucket in his wagon all the way from his house to Rosalind's stoop. Tomorrow Rosalind would bring it back with her, empty, all its mysterious nourishment devoured by her hogs. She would come into the kitchen and hang up her hat and take a drink of ice water and start cooking everybody's breakfast. And the hogs would grunt and root and sleep all day in the pen that was shaded by wild plum trees. And Rosalind's mother would sit inside the house in her sprung-bottom chair and be Old Queen, Eve. Jason's mama did not know the difference. She never suspected the slops and the hogs and the old bronze Queen. Sometimes, however, Rosalind put a steak bone in the garbage disposal, just to keep the blades sharp.

Rosalind had a boyfriend, name of Monrow. Monrow had been married

before, two or three times, and even had a bunch of children. But all that did not bother Rosalind. She explained that Monrow was divorced now. She went on to say that he had gotten a "spiritual divorce" and wasn't beholden to any of his former spouses or responsible for any of his children.

When Jason's mama was alone with Jason's daddy, they laughed about it. "Imagine," she exclaimed, "a spiritual divorce!"

"But that's the only kind to have," said the daddy. "Real divorces cost money. Just like real marriages." And he smiled like Mephistoles and added, "I say more spiritual everythings for everybody!"

Jason's mama sniffed. She was youngish and pretty. She wore very short skirts and bangle bracelets and thong sandals. Everybody said she looked like a little girl with her short hair that fell in bangs over her eyes. It pleased her to the soul when salesmen at the front door asked her for her mama.

Jason's daddy was youngish, too, and played a lot of tennis and could do beautiful high dives off the board at the Country Club. Together they zipped about the countryside in a little foreign car slung low to the ground, bright red, fast as lightning, with the sound of a jet engine behind it. One afternoon when Monrow was there doing some painting, Jason's mama offered to take Rosalind home early in the little red car. But Rosalind refused and looked embarrassed and said she had some more to do yet before she could leave. Jason heard her say to Monrow as the little car zoomed off down the road, "I ain't going to knock my tit off getting in that thing."

Monrow grinned. He was a thin stoop-shouldered man and he wore

white coveralls spattered in a hundred different colors of paint. "I ain't blaming you a bit," he sympathized. "I don't like them little compact cars. When I drive, I drives me a big car!"

He drew the brush across the boards with a touch of real authority. Monrow talked like a Yankee because he spent half his time up north. This impressed Rosalind tremendously and he knew it. "Yeh, I get in my car and I split Manhattan wide open. Don't nothing get in my way!"

"That's alright," admired Rosalind from the porch where she was stringing beans. Jason sat in the grass listening to them. Monrow painted on in silence for awhile, smiling to himself, driving in his mind all over Manhattan Island, all over Detroit, in and out of Washington, D.C. Presently he stopped and noticed the child below him. He gestured with the paintbrush. "How come he don't never talk? I ain't never heard him say a word in this world yet."

Rosalind did not reply, merely went on stringing the beans. She did not even look at Jason in the grass or at Monrow high up on the ladder. Monrow surveyed them both and dipped the brush back in the can. Then he said slyly, "I know why he can't talk. He ain't got no tongue!"

He peeped at Jason out of the side of his eye. The boy's tongue, pink and quivering, barely perceptible at first, then triumphantly obvious, emerged from between his lips. Jason did not lift his eyes to look at Monrow. He sat there in the grass like a small stubborn Buddha, his tongue sticking out over his chin.

Monrow burst out laughing. Paint drops shook on the shrubbery below his ladder. Some of it spattered on the brick steps and that annoyed Rosalind. "Quit picking at Jason," she scolded and she gathered up all

her beans and she flounced off to the kitchen. The screen door slammed hard behind her.

But Monrow kept on laughing. It was glorious laughing that bubbled out of Monrow, splashing like a fountain, colored bright yellow and blooming with healthy sunflowers. Jason sat, still sticking out his pink tongue, absorbing Monrow's laughter, marveling at himself and his tongue and Monrow. He did not care if Monrow laughed at him all day and all night. He did not care that Monrow had tricked him. He did not care. He liked it, welcomed it, the trick, the dazzling laughter. His mama and daddy moved him and patted him on his head, gave him birthday parties, Halloween parties, and loaded him down with toys at Christmas. But they seemed unreal to Jason. They talked in a language he did not understand, acted out a pretty drama that did not include him in its pretty personae. They all lived in the same house, a big house, a comfortable house with all the modern conveniences, and that all had the same name. Yet Jason knew in his unsophisticated five-year-old little boy's mind that his mama and his daddy and their house were expendable and insignificant. They and their possessions and their little red car all put together could not equal one particle of Rosalind's eternal Queen Mother sitting in her sprung-bottom chair. Could not match the economy of the slops in the rusty bucket and the hogs in the plum-shaded pen. Could never burst out laughing in golden fountains and sunflowers. Could never trick a white boy into sticking out his tongue.

So Jason sat like a pale white lizard in the grass, soaking up Monrow's powerful laughter the way a lizard soaks up heat from the sun.

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Jason's mama and daddy went out for an evening and left him at home with Rosalind. Monrow stayed to supper and they all three ate around the shiny oval-shaped kitchen table with chrome legs. Rosalind said it was a "shackly" table and banged on it to prove her point. The shiny table trembled under her strong hand. Jason tapped his small fingers across the table. It had blue and yellow flecks in its plastic surface. The plastic was translucent, white, and the blue and yellow flecks were dribbled carelessly across the white. He tried scratching at them. He felt he needed a better, closer look. But the plastic prevented his getting a clearer view, so he gave it up and began watching Rosalind arrange their food.

Rosalind and Monrow did not eat a mouthful of vegetables. They ate meat, meat, meat, and more meat. It seemed peculiar to Jason that Rosalind worked with vegetables all day and then would not eat any of them.

At the end of their meal, Jason reached out and took hold of Rosalind's hands. He turned them over and over, then laid his own two hands beside hers on the plastic table, palms open. "Your hands are pink. Look!" He spread Rosalind's fingers apart. Then he turned them over and the brown skin on the backs of her hands showed smooth and soft. Her knuckles stood up like polished knobs. Jason studied them hard. He opened his own hands again and spread them on the table. "My hands aren't pink like yours," he complained. He looked at them glumly. They were white, yellowish, with little calluses from sinfully swinging on tree limbs. He condemned them.

Rosalind said to Monrow, "Jason got me figured out, ain't he?"

Monrow snorted and leaned back in his chair that was shiny and plastic

and covered in blue and yellow flecks like the table. "I could bust right now," he declared and gave a loud belch.

"Honey," said Rosalind, "it ain't you that's in danger of busting." And when she stood up and thumped herself in front, Jason noticed that she did look rather fat. But he did not pay any more attention to it and asked Rosalind if he could have a glass jar with a lid so he could catch lightening bugs in the yard.

Later he fell asleep, sweaty and breathless, sitting between Rosalind and Monrow on the dark porch, and his brain swam with their voices. Monrow, speaking about Manhattan and big cars and bridges that broke apart and swung up straight in the air, made bright gold-growing splotches in Jason's dreams. And Rosalind, gurgling her approval, was dark as molasses circling languidly in a china plate. The jar of captive lightening bugs, flickering weakly, floated like a defective neon tube around them.

Rosalind got fatter as the summer progressed. Jason's daddy said to Jason's mama, "Well, I guess she's got a spiritual marriage." And Jason's mama giggled, shaking her sleek little-girl head. Then she frowned and said, "It worries me. You know it does."

When Jason heard this, he became worried himself and one morning, soon as Rosalind got there, he went up to her, laid his hand timidly on her fatness and asked, "What's that?"

She stared down at him for a moment while a complexity of emotions went across her face and then faded off, flickering like the captive lightening bugs that had long since perished and been thrown out. Then she brushed off his hand and said, "Nothing. Ain't nothing, 'cept a baby."

"But how," he wanted to ask, "how did it get in there?" But he did not ask Rosalind anything else. He went out and lay in the grass and stared at the blue sky. He wished Monrow would come and paint the house some more and burst the air with his beautiful laughing. But Monrow was through painting.

And Rosalind was through coming to their house. Jason pulled the hog slops for her one last time and she was very slow going down the road, picking her way over the ruts and the bumps, stopping to rest against the fences or under a big shady tree. And she talked a lot to herself. She said short, complaining things that were not like Rosalind at all. "God, what a misery!" she said, fanning her neck and pulling open the front of her dress to get cooler. "Too hot for humans." She stood staring down the road where the heat wavered in layers making transparent ribbons to dance above its dust. She stared and stared, lost somewhere down the road, ignoring Jason who stood waiting with his hard little white hands on the wagon-handle. Rosalind complained to the road, to the tree, to the fence, to herself. She complained about her fat flopping belly and then chastized herself by saying, "You might as well shut up and let it grow."

At the back stoop, when Rosalind took the bucket out of the wagon, something happened to make her spill the slops and half of them were lost on the ground. Jason looked at the potato peelings, the celery strings, the coffeeground, the greasy white water, all of it disappearing in the hot dust of Rosalind's yard. Rosalind's chickens ran up and pecked at the slops. Her dog ran up and sniffed them. Rosalind herself sank wearily on the stoop and said to him, "Go home, Jason, quick as you can."

And that was the last time he saw Rosalind, though he did not know

it would be. One day in September, when it was still hot enough to be summer, Jason's mama took him to ride in the little red foreign car and they drove down the road toward Rosalind's house. The house sat baking in the bright sun and its tin roof shimmered. Jason's mama drove into the yard and stopped and honked her horn. Jason felt ashamed. He hated the sound of the horn honking at Rosalind's house. No one appeared. There was not even a flutter at the curtains. Jason's mama said to him, "Honey, you go see if you can rouse somebody. I'll wait right here."

Jason got out of the little car and he knew his mama was a coward, even though she was youngish and pretty and talked sweet to him, never hollering. He walked around the house to the back stoop and entered softly. "Rosalind? Rosalind?" he called and his voice had a question in it as it pierced the gloom around him. It was so hot in there. He felt he might get sick and puke on the floor. "Rosalind?"

There came at that moment, in the hot sickening gloom, a voice in answer to his, a voice stale and dry as paper or a piece of crackling cellophane, "She ain't here."

As he ran out the back door, a breeze blowing from the hot fields swept over the hog pens and threw a putrid odor into Jason's face. He had never smelled such an awful smell in his whole life and he ran with all his power to escape it. He ran around Rosalind's house, on past his sweet pretty little mama sitting perplexed behind a pair of dark glasses in the little red car, and on up the awkward road.

"Jason! Jason, honey!" shouted his mama, but he didn't listen or care. He ran on away from her, on and on, toward the dancing heat ribbons. He thought he heard the car motor start up, but he kept on running,

climbed over the fence, and ran until he was back at his own house. There he stopped a moment, collecting himself, preparing himself.

The house was smooth and white as new snow. Monrow had done a good job. Jason gritted his teeth. He pulled open the screen door of the kitchen and walked, breathing hoarsely from his long agonizing run, to the cabinets under the sink. He dropped to his knees and opened the cabinets and crawled in. There he sat, cramped among the cans of cleanser and empty glass jars and the long steel shiny snake-loop of the drain pipe. He sat breathing hard and listening, his white hands clamped tight around the rusty bucket, waiting to grow lion feet to match the roar of his throat, the cutting edge of his claws.

FAMILY CIRCLE

She went to the barn, maybe the shed, to get rope. She picked apart the rope until she had long fine strands, like long pale flaxen hairs. And with these she made the hair of the doll. The doll's head was hard and small with a hard white nose and faded eyes and brows, and its lips were hardest of all, pale, pinkish, the color of a baby's fingernail.

It was all she had to start with: the head. She held it tightly in one hand and with the other, she daubed glue over the skull. "Like a bird, like a bird," she said, almost singing to herself. The glue stuck to her fingers and she wiped them absently upon her blouse.

"My name's Merina Wilkerson, Wilkerson, Wilkerson."

The hairs stuck to the skull and she smoothed them over and over, caressing the doll's head, singing, "A bird, Merina Wilkerson."

When the hairs were all in place and no spot of white remained, Merina stuck the head on the end of a finger and sat looking at what she had done. She turned the finger slowly around. The stiff, faded expression of the doll turned with her finger, right, then left, obedient, uncomplaining.

The hard white skull was clothed and secure. The straw-colored fibers caught, for a moment, the bit of light coming in from the kitchen window. The dying light rallied, then went out. It seemed to make a difference and Merina was pleased, a little.

Then rough wind rattled the window glass and Merina, looking up, was caught herself in the light of tossing and bending trees, while thousands

of hard little acorns beat upon the roof.

Later, the hair dried hard upon the doll's head, Merina braided it swiftly in two tight braids, fastening each end with a thread. There was the sound of a wagon pulling up to the yard outside, the sound of chain and harness, the creak of wheels as the wagon rolled on to the barn. Then a glad shout, her name hailed loudly, followed by the barks of a dog.

"Harley's coming," said Merina and she put the doll's head into a large red matchbox and hid the box in a cupboard. The barks of the dog grew more intense and joyful, then quieted as Harley approached the house and commanded the dog to behave. He opened the door and a gust of air came into the kitchen, rattling the window again. "Merina?"

"That's my name, ain't it?" She stood by the heavy stove, one hand in her apron pocket, her lips pale, with no smile.

"Merina," he repeated; his hands on the door were working, honest hands, big and red from the cold wind, and they held the door open with the assurance of a man whose house is his.

Hands, oh, my lord, how am I going to make a hand? Merina asked herself in irritable silence and, taking her own hand from out her pocket, gazed at it in wonder.

The shepherd dog stuck his head around the kitchen door, near to the man's boots. He whined, wagging his thick tail against the door, thump, thump, and stretched forth a paw. Merina glanced up sharply and said, "I don't want that dog in here now. I can't stand that dog."

Harley shut the dog out. He stood, still by the door, inside now all the way, his red hands hanging down empty, with nothing to do now. "I'm going to get rid of that dog, if that's what you want, Merina Wilkerson.

I'm going to go kill him right now."

"No." Merina frowned. "I ain't asking you to kill him." Still frowning, she walked to the man. "Harley." She took his hands in hers. His hands were not so hard on the inside, worn and used and red from his work, but not so hard as the upperside. She smiled.

Supper was potatoes. On two opposite sides of the stout kitchen table: one white plate for Merina, one white plate for Harley, a glass of milk, a glass of cold water, some jam. "I wanted to make some bread. I wanted to fry up some meat," she apologized.

"It don't matter," replied Harley. "When I'm hungry, I eat and I don't pay much attention."

"I would favor some real meat, though," said Merina. She mashed a lump of potato upon her plate and inspected the steaming particles. Then she laughed and leaned across the plate toward Harley and said, "Aunt Mae never would eat a speck of fresh meat. For breakfast she might eat two boiled eggs and butter, but for the rest of the day, she wanted to live off of kraut dumplings and blackberry cake!"

She laughed louder. "But that one, will you? No matter what part of the house you happened to be in, you could smell kraut dumplings and blackberry cake!"

Harley laughed with her. "Yes, the first time that ever I came to supper with you, as soon as I stepped in the front door, I knew exactly what we were going to have." He shook his head and rapped on the table for emphasis, his black moustache trembling.

The answering laughter died away and Merina, settling back, said soberly, "I would favor some fresh meat along about now."

Harley finished and stood up. She remained at the table, pushing around the steaming potatoes on her plate, but not eating. Then she asked him, "Are you getting ready to butcher?"

"Yes," he replied, "I'm going to butcher real soon."

"Tomorrow?"

"No, soon."

He went outside and stood on the porch, listening. The sharp air sparkled with stars. Behind his barn rose low black mountains spined with trees, long bristly humps of mountains. Black cedars marked the boundary of his pastures and fields. They sprouted up so carelessly, the cedars, yet kept obediently to the edges, like dark fish coaxed to leap through the surface.

Harley felt his own spine as prickly as a thread of thorns reply to the tingling darkness. He was not a tall man and his heavy black moustache, shaped in an oxbow, made him look even shorter. His eyes, large and calm, reminded his wife Merina of an ox sometimes. He stood on the porch of his house and he was steady, willing to wait for whatever it was that he wanted. He had worked for the barn full of hay, the dark land spreading out to the low rim of mountains, the animals that stood and slept out there, the cold, enduring animals. He had waited for the girl Merina to grow into his wife.

He picked her out early from the rest of the girls at Cedar Grove, the giggling benchful of girls that sat Sundays in church, kicking each other's ankles and biting their white handkerchiefs. Merina kicked and giggled like the others. Harley Wilkerson was a man already grown and he watched the child doing foolish ordinary child's things. But there was

something proud in her, he thought, something hard, something he felt would bear watching.

So he picked her out and watched her grow, a proud orphan, tied to her aunt's commands. Many times he shuddered when he stood with the men under the trees in the churchyard and he watched Merina Hall drive up with her Aunt Mae, tie the reins securely to the post, and pass by him, up the steps and through the narrow door. She went with her back straight as an arrow. Merina Hall, walking under the Christian grace of her aunt's good name, came out of nowhere. Nobody knew where Merina came from. Nobody knew if Hall was her rightful name.

Straight as an arrow shot from a bow, she went past the eyes of Harley Wilkerson and he shuddered and thought to himself, almost applauding her, "Ah, Merina, but you held your chin awful high right now for some reason."

The shiver ran through him and he felt doubtful for an instant. But the big shepherd dog at his feet sighed and rolled over, flexing its body in the warmth of the day. Men spoke to Harley, he nodded and replied. The doubt dissolved.

The girls dropped away from the church bench like bright petals from a flower. Merina grew taller, then stopped growing. Harley thought it was time, a ready time, so one Sunday morning he moved in and sat beside her on the bench. As she felt the weight of his body next to hers, Merina Hall turned toward Harley. The look she gave him was straight and clear and perfectly aimed. He shuddered deep and received her eyes in the midst of his own steady gaze. Merina smiled to herself and turned her eyes away, but she did not move from the closeness of Harley's body.

He let her gaze sink into him and not long afterward, Harley met

Merina Hall again. He was repairing posts in the pasture late in the day, a March day, when he heard a commotion. And looking up, he saw two creatures coming toward him, both in a hurry, both in a determined track, a white-and-brown cow followed by a girl. Harley straightened up, shading his eyes to see better who it was.

"That's Merina," he pronounced with pleasure, "Merina Hall."

The runaway cow stopped by him and began cropping the new grass around his pasture posts. The girl hurried up, her face flushed and dirty. She, too, stopped by Harley, but she ignored him and began scolding the cow.

"Janey, Janey!" Merina grabbed for the halter rope. The cow moved away, sidestepping in a half-clumsy, half-dainty fashion, slinging her full udder so that drops of milk scattered in a fine spray over Merina's face and neck.

"Oh, Janey! You old hussy!"

The cow loped farther away, always beyond Merina's reach, the halter rope dragging feebly in the grass. The cow stopped again and, flexing her hide, tore off some more of Harley Wilkerson's grass and then bellowed threateningly back at Merina.

"You want me to help hem up that cow, Miss?" inquired Harley, smiling broadly under his moustache.

"I ain't asked your help," she said primly, looking not at Harley, but always at the rebellious cow.

Still smiling, Harley approached the cow, steady and quiet, and, wasting no movement, no word, swiftly caught up the halter rope. The cow followed him, the full udder swinging with each step. He handed the rope to Merina.

"I ain't asked your help," she repeated. Her eyes were fierce and clear as stars, blue-lit, the black pupils reduced to pinpoints.

"I ain't give it to you," he said. Then, putting one arm around Merina Hall, he pulled her in to him and kissed her, warm and dirty as she was, smelling of sweat and milk.

That was his exultation. The rest held no comparison to it. He had picked her out early and marked her off from the rest. Nothing could stand in the way.

"Merina ain't interested in no man," affirmed her aunt when he asked for the girl to marry. Aunt Mae Hall sat in her chair and glared at him. It was raining outside, a bleak spring rain, and he had come into her house with muddy boots, had tracked red mud across the floor in one straight path to the fireside.

"Call her down," he suggested. "Ask her."

That night, alone in his own house, Harley lay listening to the same bleak rain pounding over the roof and leaping from the eaves and he congratulated himself on the battle won, the full possession of the field. And later, when Merina Wilkerson lay in his bed with him, her knees caught against his body, pressed apart, willing and flooded with his power, he felt again the triumph slipping away, quick as the rain running off the house.

And every day that followed, from the moment he left his house and went into the white mist that rose from the wet fields and hung over the cedars, as he went through the labor of his land and his animals, through all this time and until the time that he returned home in the sinking red evening, Harley felt something was slipping away from him. He did not know

exactly what it was. It slipped away with such a softness, like the pattering of barefeet across a polished floor, and then it turned a corner and was gone.

Sometimes Harley thought he could almost catch hold of it, of this fading thing. He thought he saw it in the cold starry darkness, in the bucket spilling over with water, knocking against the sides of the well-hole, in Merina's one long lock of hair hanging down her naked back.

He gave a quick convulsive shiver as he stood listening in the dark. And for a few moments, he did not realize that he was listening to something. Then the dog sprang up from under the porch steps and growled and burst into a terrific barking.

"Shut up! I said hush!"

The dog ran to Harley, quivering with bewilderment and fear. The wail came again through the cold air, like the angry squawl of a baby, then like the screaming of a woman.

His eyes played over the dark mountains. The wail rose again and the dog was unable to obey any longer. He burst into barking, his hair raised in hackles along his back and neck.

The door opened behind Harley, and Merina came out. "What is it?" she asked. Her arms were wrapped around her to keep out the cold. She shivered. "I asked you, Harley, what is it?"

"Shh," he held up a hand. "Listen, now."

Again the angry cry floated through the air. It came strained and thin at first, then doubled on itself and ended in a full discordant caterwaul.

Harley turned to look at Merina. She was still as a stone, her face

white and hard in the starlight, her fists balled shut over her breast. He stepped back to put an arm around her. She spoke not a word, but shivered violently.

Next morning, Harley went off carrying the shotgun. Merina took out the red matchbox and sat with it in her lap for awhile, thinking aloud. Sunlight made patterns across her hands and knees, watery, floating circles of golden air. It was very cold outside; such a strong sun seemed inconsistent. But it was there, drying up the white mist, lighting up the trees and the house and Merina Wilkerson, piercing through her body, warming her innards.

"Harley's afraid," said Merina to the circling light. Then she frowned. "No, that ain't right. Harley ain't afraid." And she opened the box, wallowing her hands in a golden bath.

By the end of the morning, Merina had made the rest of the doll. She made a limp rag body with no hands, no feet, just a thin, limp, and narrow body. This body she clothed with a little white gown and on the head, she tied a cap. She wrapped everything in a white handkerchief, one that was worked with lace, one that resembled an infant's shawl. The finished doll lay for a moment on Merina's lap. The sun had moved now and stood directly over the house and the golden circles were gone. Then, without so much as a word of exultation, Merina stuffed the doll back into the matchbox and the matchbox back into the cupboard.

"There you stay," she declared, "safe and pretty."

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The cries of the cat interrupted the night. The dog growled under the porch. "Harley," said Merina, "when are you going to butcher?"

"Tomorrow," he replied.

Both of them lay awake for awhile, staring into the dark, staring at the dim unpainted ceiling; then both fell asleep. The dog crouched under the porch, growling and whining in his sleep. Frost formed thick white patterns on the dead grass and fallen leaves. In the dark mountains, the cat moved from tree to tree, trailing his angry wail behind.

Aunt Mae Hall came to help with the butchering. Harley shot the hogs and hung them from a tree and let them bleed into tubs. It was hard steady work, beginning before dawn when the air was crisp as paper and the frozen ground crunched underfoot. All three of them worked without ceasing and, as they worked, the crying of the cat in the mountains was like a background, an embroidered tapestry against which they moved.

When the meat was hung in the smokehouse, Harley made ready to leave. "I asked Mae to stay the night with you. I have to go away for only one night." He led the mule out of the barn and began hitching up the wagon.

"Harley!" Merina looked frightened. "Harley, that cat's been hollering at us all day. Ain't you heard it, Harley? I think he's getting up closer. He's after meat." She stamped her foot. "And you going off and leave me here with nothing but Aunt Mae, not a man on the place, nothing?"

"Stay in the house, Merina Wilkerson, and you'll be safe." Harley hesitated. She stood before him with her shoulders trembling, the long lock of hair fairly bouncing. The apron she had pulled up high on her body was ripped in one place and sewn back up in tiny red cross-stitches. "Merina." He embraced her and the uneasy feeling of something valuable

and elusive reflected through them both for a moment, trailing off in the chill of the air.

As the afternoon sank to evening, Aunt Mae Hall amused herself with the talk of morbid births and deaths, specifically those of her own infants. Merina listened without much comment.

"I had one child dead and another on the way by the time I saw eighteen. They all made light of me, Walter, all of'em, all them Halls. Said I was nervous. Gave me tonic all the time." Aunt Mae scrooched up her eyes and laced her thick fingers over her bosom. "Tonic won't no good. I told'em it won't no good. But you never could tell no Hall nothing. You drinking tonic?"

"No," said Merina.

"That's good. Though I ain't sure but what it might help you some. Anyhow, they killed that baby, too, just like the other'un. Broke its neck and like to have killed me, too. Blood, blood, oh, Jesus, I ain't never seen blood like that. Do you bleed easy?"

"No," said Merina. She sat with her back to the wall of the kitchen, feeling drowsy, the dim room wavering hot around her feet, melting.

"That's good. It wouldn't have been right, no way, if it had of lived, that child. Though I still affirm them Halls killed it, so hasty was they to get it away from me and into their hands." Aunt Mae stopped and unlaced her fingers. She smiled. "You should have seen him when they washed him and laid him out. He was all clean and gold-looking, with little gold-like eyebrows and little fingernails. I thought he looked real good, reminded me of a little dead doll or something." She sighed, the smile disappeared. "And then there come Walter hollering and praying

and kissing. Dead hisself within a year."

Aunt Mae got up to poke the fire. Looking sideways at Merina Wilkerson, she poked furiously at the coals and then threw on a new slab. "You sure you don't bleed easy? That child's bound to split you wide open. Biggern a barrel now, all pooched up high." She sat back down. "Carry high, you carry a boy. Carry low, you got a girl. That's what them Halls used to say."

Merina dozed against the wall. She felt her body relaxing, drifting and then carrying her off from the clatter of Aunt Mae's stories. The picture of Harley swam into her mind. Harley Wilkerson plodding through the heavy cold, sitting on the plank-seat of the wagon. The mule's feet fall upon the road and his dull hooves leave no mark on the frozen earth. Oh, Harley. Humped up, his chin almost to his knees, wrapped up against the wind in an old quilt. And the cry of the mountain cat circling the black fields. And the gun -

The picture broke and showered into fiery sparks as Merina jerked open her eyes. The gun stood propped in a dim corner of the kitchen. Harley Wilkerson's own shotgun there in his kitchen and Harley no where.

Before she had time to ponder the frightfulness of this, the awful scream of the mountain cat pitched itself through the air outside, very close, and at the same time, the dog burst into wild barking, scrambling from under the porch in a flurry of icy leaves and flying stones.

"God," whispered Aunt Mae, sitting erect, "you hear that?"

Merina nodded. And never moving her head or averting her eyes, she went slowly to the gun in the corner and picked it up. She looked straight at the wall before and said in a quiet, enduring voice, "I ain't never fired

no gun in my life."

More wails discharged from the barnyard, vicious caterwauling and growling, the sound of a strong body thudding or jumping against the smoke-house door. There was no more any sound of the dog.

Merina approached the door of the kitchen. She listened absently, as though she expected a call or a hail or a bark from the dog. Then she concluded, "That dog's dead or gone, one."

Aunt Mae, wretched with fear, crept up behind her, her eyes full. "God, listen to that hollering! God, he's going to eat us alive!"

"No," said Merina Wilkerson and she threw open the door. The night air was so cold it seemed to freeze her nostrils, stuff her breath back down into her lungs, and strike her blind. She waited again, as though listening, expecting some signal. She held the shotgun into the bitter dark, toward the squawling creature that she could not see, and she fired at once.

The shells flew straight in the black air, and sank home.

STASIA AND MAREK

Marek

Stasia wanted a mama. So I said, "I will make you a mama." And I drew on the wall the picture of a naked woman. I put two round circles and in the middle of each round circle, I put one black dot. When I finished, I stood back and let Stasia behold her mama.

"That's good," said Stasia, my sister. The naked woman I drew on the wall of her room was the only mama she ever saw that she could remember. The house belonged to *babcia*, our grandmother, and it was in America. We made a long journey to get to high ground, to get to this house, but Stasia did not know very much about that.

Stasia only knew what I told her. She did not know who she was or where she had come from. *Babcia* knew. *Babcia* told me first. But I did not tell Stasia everything. She was pleased with the naked mama and she slept next to it every night and she sought after it and put her naked feet out from the bedclothes to touch the smooth cold wall. I felt her growing feet kicking out, brushing the old wall, skittering along the surface. I thought to myself, Stasia is fishing the wall, fishing with her naked feet like hooks, twitching the surface of the wall, the cold smooth surface of the greying water.

Here in this house, I thought, two children sleep in one bed, one bed meant for only one. Stasia's legs kick out, turning me aside, embracing the wall that is ice-cold. "Sing, sing," she begs the wall. But Stasia's mama does not sing one word to her.

In the morning, I got up and wrote with a broken pencil under the feet of Stasia's naked mama.

Dear Mama I love you very much it's a nice day

lets go for a walk

if you feel like it Love Stasia

Stasia sat up in bed behind me and watched. I heard her yawning, but I did not turn to look. I knew what Stasia looked like in the early morning, just waking up, a damp warm lump in a blue shirt (my own shirt, outgrown and cast away), sitting with her legs curled under her, yawning, her hair foamy with light, her eyes with no judgement in them at first, then the sense slowly creeping awake. She soon interrupted me with, "You did not put a face on my mama." And she pointed to the wall through my back. I could feel Stasia's finger pointing.

Stasia was right. I considered it for awhile. I peeled away the thin red skin of my pencil. The flakes stuck to my fingers and I smelled the cedar wood and the graphite. I lifted the pencil to my lips and exhaled on it, scattering the paint flakes. Stasia kept pointing, waiting for me to say something. The naked woman had only a head, a longish melon body, arms, legs, and the two round circles with the two black dots.

"It is no matter," I pronounced, "no matter at all. She's a lady. What more do you want from her?" And with that I left Stasia alone to look at her mama.

"Marek," she cried from the bed, "Marek, come back and read to me. Read to me what you wrote under the feet of my mama! Marek, please."

I drew all over the house, on all the walls, with my broken pencils, pieces of chalk, stubs of crayons. Babcia said it made the old house look

better. At first, I asked babcia for paper to draw on. But babcia said, "I cannot buy you any paper, Marek. Draw there, on the walls. Okay?"

Such a terrible house, babcia's house, old and grey, with high ceilings and black fireholes; and in the kitchen, in one corner, a cheerless sink, white as an eyeball, with dull-colored spigots and rusty puddles made by the dripping bitter mineral water.

An electric bulb hung from the ceiling on a black cord and when babcia knocked it on occasion, it would swing in slow circles, spilling its light over us like the slow spilling hands of a god.

We did not know how babcia got this house. It appeared, sprouted big as a mushroom, at the end of our journey. Tall trees grew around the house and these trees were festooned in grey ropes of moss. Stasia thought the trees had long beards and she called them "grandfathers, my ja-ja trees."

Stasia needed grandfathers, jajas with long beards, and naked mamas to love her every day of her life in that house in America. So I made more naked women to be Stasia's mamas, many, many mamas, and she was happier because I did this for her. She was happier because she believed in the walls of the old American house and in the naked women and in all the many mamas without faces. She believed because she needed them. And she believed, also, because I, Marek, was there to draw for her.

But one day it came to an end. Stasia had nothing to do with it. Babcia was calling me, "Marek! What are you doing now, darling?"

"Drawing, now," I answered. My chalk scratched on the outside boards of the house. I was drawing one picture with white chalk and one picture with deep rich blue chalk. Babcia could not give me paper to draw on, but

she gave me pieces of chalk to draw with. I did not know where she got them, but she did and they worked for me and I drew my pictures.

"But I need you, Marek, to do something for me."

"I am drawing here. Look. It is the Swamp by Day, for you, babcia. And here, look, it is the Swamp by Night, also for you. Are you not pleased, babcia?"

Babcia looked at my Swamp by Day. She saw water and leaves floating together, a dead tree in a bog. One bird sat on top of the dead tree with a straw in his beak. Near by, a crocodile watched the bird, his snout snuffling up the white water, his white jaws, his armored skin and white webbed feet all washing in the chalky ripples of my Swamp by Day.

Next to this was the second drawing, the swamp again, dark blue now, with the rich cruel eyes of the crocodile still watching the bird. And the dead blue leaves floating on the dark water were shaped like tears. The bird was not at rest in my Swamp by Night. He remained upright, stiff, with the straw still in his beak. And he watched the blue crocodile beneath him.

I felt such a pleasure in my two drawings, I almost began to cry. Babcia noticed me. She smiled and said, "Does the blue crocodile, or the white crocodile, weep over those he devours, Marek?"

I stared at her, then back at the drawings, now turned silly to my eyes. "No! No, if they did, they would not be any real crocodiles and I would strike them both out of my picture!"

I turned the two crocodiles to smudges, blue and white. Later that day, a quick and heavy summer rain washed away the smudges, the cautious birds, and my two Swamps from the outside of babcia's house. The boards

then glistened with rain and the bouncing clear drops beat through the grey beards of the trees. Upstairs I heard Stasia still begging her naked mama, "Sing, sing to me."

Stasia

I did not know where the train was going, where I was going on it. Nothing. It rocked on its wheels. The rails flew under me and the windows were so dim, I could not see outside. Marek sat with me in the coach and across from us, on the opposite seat, sat an old woman. I kept looking at her veils. I had never seen a woman dressed in veils. It seemed to me that this face, through the grey veils, was as dim as the windows of the train. I tried looking out to see the lands we were passing through and I tried looking in to see the old lady in front of me. I thought she was smiling at me, perhaps, though, only at Marek, my brother.

My brother. Marek said we were supposed to be Germans on this train. If someone speaks to you, said Marek, you must say Meine mutter ist gestorben. Meine mutter ist gestorben. Meine mutter ist gestorben. Then they will shut up, said Marek, shut up and leave you in peace.

I sat in the rocking coach, my head pressed against the dim glass, my legs swinging with the swing of the wheels and the rails, and Marek's words beat in my brain. My mother is dead.

I fell asleep, and when I woke up again, we were in a station and there was lots of noise, and there was shouting in German, and I knew that Marek had left me alone. I screamed out in the wrong language, Marek, come to me, help me!

There was then a sharp crack against the back of my head and when I turned to strike back, I was swallowed up in the grey veils that smelled of damp air. They brushed coldly against my face and I thought of spiders and webs.

The old lady fluttered down around me. "You must be quiet, little fool," she whispered. "Marek, your brother, has left the train for only a moment. He will come back. We are at a rest stop. Do not talk at all. Look, now, look here!"

She pulled me closer to her and thrust a little paper into my hand. It was wrinkled and the letters printed on it were all in German and hard for me to read. The tears blurred my eyes and I wanted to strike at the old woman, I wanted to tear off her veils. My head hurt me and even as I told her, she kept insisting that I look only at the paper.

Then I became aware of what was happening outside the train, right at my window, and I could not help but look. The window was not so dim anymore that I could not see three soldiers beating up an old man. He was on his knees and his winter coat puddled around him in a thick brown bog. The clumsy sleeves drooped over his hands. Only the tips of his fingers showed that he had any hands at all.

And the soldiers kept beating him relentlessly. His cries came into my ears, stronger and hotter than the hissing steam, worse and more strident than the shrieking wheels. The people in the station watched. And I watched. The old man's blood ran down his face, trickled around each nostril, filled up his ears. His blood was the brightest thing in all that station.

"Look here!" insisted the old lady. She pinched my arm until I turn-

ed in hatred from the dirty window and fastened on the little paper in my hand. I stared at it and the German letters floated together and made words which I began to read, all the time gritting my teeth, feeling my warm tears run down and trickle around my nose and fill up my clean pink ears. Gott! Gott! said the paper. And I stared at God until God shut out the old man and the beating he suffered right outside my window, shut out the fists and the clubs, the fingertips, the brown winter coat that he had put on to protect himself against the worst blasts of the cold.

Through a century of beatings and gods, ice and hard rocks and blasting wind, the old woman held me to the little wrinkled paper, her grey webs whispering and fluttering around my ears. She was my comfort, my distraction, my sincerest hate and love.

I did not look up when Marek entered the coach and sat across from us. He sat where the old woman had sat before. She nodded to him. I felt the train move again, heard the wheels shriek. But I did not take my eyes from the paper. I had grown roots to it, had sprouted and sent out long green vines, struggling to dislodge rocks and grains of sand out of my pure straight path.

The train picked up more speed and left the station like a flash. We rattled around a sudden curve and I was free again. I lifted my eyes to Marek. I was crying. Marek's face was dry.

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Once I visited an ancient graveyard with my babcia. A tremendous tree had sprouted and flourished in the middle of a grave, had taken the

gravestone up with it in its growth. The stone stuck from the tree trunk like a crazy old grey tooth.

"That is what it means to die," said babcia. I did not know what she was talking about at that time in my life. I was very young, maybe five years old, maybe ten. What difference did it make? And I had only recently come to live with babcia in America. I had come from a long hard journey and I did not entirely trust anybody, except Marek, my brother.

Another time, we went to the art gallery in the city. We came to a painting of a girl with her eyes closed, sitting in a stiff chair, her hands folded in her lap. I liked that girl. She had long brown hair and I thought maybe she had never combed it because it looked free and loose and she looked satisfied under the weight of it and also under the weight of her closed eyes.

The people around talked loudly and rudely. They looked at the painting and laughed. There she was, hanging up there on the wall, all naked in such a hard chair, asleep. Asleep and naked for everyone in the gallery to stare upon. The people laughed and moved away. I was left with the girl, the loose brown hair and the closed eyes and the folded hands, the naked breasts, the stiff chair. I looked and looked at the shut eyes and I tried to think what she might be dreaming under them. She is dreaming, I thought, of ripe fields and the sun and the spilling rain. She is running and running and running. She is dreaming of bare arms embracing her. She is dreaming of me, of Stasia.

When I came out of the gallery with my babcia, a dog was smelling the piss of other dogs on the white tires of a new American automobile. It was a moral for me, I think. But I couldn't understand it. Marek was not

there with us. And as I have said before, I did not entirely trust anyone else. I did not even trust my babcia, though I adored her and begged her more and more for stories, songs, kisses.

Babcia and I had much hard work to do, ironing shirts, folding, packing laundry into baskets so that it would not wrinkle. I hated work. Babcia said, "Okay, I hate it as much as you, but we have to do it." She pulled a damp shirt from the bundle and began smoothing it over her board.

"Well, I will always hate it. But I will do it, if you tell me a story."

Babcia laughed. "What do you want to hear, now?"

"I don't care. It doesn't matter." I was willing to settle for only the sound of her voice telling me a story, the story itself was not important. "Go on, please," I urged her.

Babcia picked up a hot iron. She pressed it to the shirt-sleeve and steam hissed. "Stasia," she said, "I will tell you the story of the red yo-yo."

"What! That is crazy." Now, all of a sudden, it did matter to me what the story was. I wanted babcia to tell me the truth, a true story. "What do you know about a yo-yo? Americans buy a yo-yo in the dime store. You never bought one."

"Be quiet and listen, you devil," said babcia, "here is the story."

The Red Yo-Yo

The gods who lived on the mountain had an idiot-child and his name was Blitzi. For his birthday, they gave him a red yo-yo on a string. I

lived inside the yo-yo. ("You are a mad woman!" I shouted at her. "Shut up," replied babcia, "shut up and listen.")

The snow was still on the mountain at the time of Blitzi's birthday and he went out wearing his boots. The boots were stiff and new and came up to his fat knees. He soon fell down, as he always did, and cut his chin on a stone and began to shriek. The gods gathered around Blitzi anxiously. He was an idiot-child, as I have said, but he was the gods' idiot-child, and that made a great difference.

("Do you understand that, Stasia?" asked babcia, peering at me over her steaming iron. "No," I replied, "it is too crazy." "Well, then," said babcia, tossing out one hand, "I am sorry for you." "Go on with the story, mad woman," I demanded.)

Blitzi's blood dripped in the white mountain snow. So pure and clean that snow was. And Blitzi's blood, red-warm, was the brightest thing in all that place. His blood was redder and warmer and brighter than my yo-yo, such an awful warm red. I watched it running down his chin and then clot in the white snow. The tears began to harden in Blitzi's eyes and glisten like bits of broken glass. I closed my eyes in order not to see it anymore and I covered up my ears in order not to hear Blitzi's awful shrieks.

Well, the snow melted in its time and a warm season came to the mountain. Blitzi pumped and churned the red yo-yo. He was a relentless idiot. The smell of grass and sun came to me as I hovered inside the yo-yo. I was afraid to look out very often, and a miserable grief, that I could not understand, fell over me.

The gods went about their god-business and were eternally amused at

their fat Blitzi. They chucked him under his chin and admired how smoothly it had healed, without a trace of a scar. When he was in need of bathing, they washed him, scoured out his ears, trimmed off his nails. The idiot in him howled and became indignant. "Things are crawling on my skin!" he shrieked at them, "Things are crawling under my skin! Things are crawling through my bones!" They only smiled with great affection.

("How much longer are you going to go on with this?" I asked. "Oh, much, much longer," said babcia. "Am I to sit here for years and years and years, day after day after day, until I die?" I asked. "Yes," said babcia. She pulled the shirt away from the board. It was stiff with starch and could have stood alone upon the floor. "Men do not have skin on their necks," said babcia, folding up the shirt. "They have only pride." "This can go on forever," I remarked. "It will," remarked my babcia.)

And it would have gone on forever with me pinned between the red lips of the yo-yo, except for two important things: for one, I was growing bigger, my toes gouged off the paint on one side of the yo-yo and my head began to hurt from the terrible enclosure. For the other thing, sweet fat Blitzi cut the string. He took a notion to cut the string one beautiful late summer evening. He took a pair of sharp scissors from the gods' own kitchen and whiz! we were severed honestly and the red yo-yo rolled away down the mountain.

Blitzi had not counted on losing the red yo-yo. He uttered a dreadful cry and ran after us, making clumsy snatches with his fat fingers. I clung to the sides of the yo-yo and then became unconscious, rolling, whirling, jolting across the stones and soaring over the cracks of the

mountain.

At last, the red yo-yo must have struck a big sharp rock and burst into two pieces like an apple. But unconscious and vulnerable though I surely was, Blitzi did not see me lying in the grass. He had never seen me. There was no good reason why he should see me now. It would only have confused him.

("I dare say," I sneered. "Shut up," replied babcia.)

I woke up and saw it was now dark and there were white stars in the big sky. The stars looked pure and cold as snow. I, too, felt pure and cold, able now to stretch out my legs and arms and turn my head from side to side. Blitzi sat crying in the dark with the broken red yo-yo upon his knees and the starlight spilling over his untidy hair.

Babcia stopped. She began sprinkling water across another shirt. I waited for more of her ridiculous story. When she did not make anymore of it, I prodded her with, "Well, babcia, why was he crying, that fat dumb Blitzi?"

She took off her glasses and wiped them. "Because, you devil, he had never before been to the bottom of a mountain."

"Oh," I shrieked, and started to make another joke about it. But then I saw babcia's face was sad.

Marek

Babcia sent me to an American school. They asked so many questions there:

mother's name

father's name

how much educated

where born

what God

My answers to the American questions:

My name is Marek. My mother, my father, their names? A swift river in the sun. A honeycomb. My pride. No names for mother and father. They were like gods, gods in a house of pink stones, outside there was a fountain throwing water in the sunlight. And my mother sat in a chair and her hair was foamy with the sunlight, like Stasia's hair in the morning. Her eyes were wide-opened and blue, the color of the air when it has been washed by the rain. It was harder for me to remember my father, except that he wore a uniform with a dark leather strap across the front and his eyes were narrow, his chin very hard.

I did not do as he wished. He had a business. He wanted me to see the business, to see the uniform with the brown strap, the hard chin, to smell boots and wax and men. I ran away to look at the figures of stone. The rim of the fountain was carved with figures, very small and fat, lumpy. I ran away to look at the figures in the church. My parents missed me and came looking for me. "Marek! Marek, what are you doing, now?"

They found me looking at the figures. "Who did that?" I asked them. "Look!" I peered up at the stone people. I climbed on them, looking down and around, pressing my fingers into the folds of their garments, into the cold nostrils and hollow eyeplaces.

"Oh, Marek, you devil! Come down from there. Come home!"

Once I ran away to look at the figures and found myself in the town. I was very much alone there and very small. I walked down the street and

I could see no person that belonged to me, or that would even trouble to claim me. I walked along, and then I heard close to me some tapping sounds, the sounds a heavy-jeweled ring makes against glass.

I looked to one side and saw a store window. The window was empty, nothing was displayed, only a dark curtain. The curtain was parted a little and there I saw a woman's hand, long brown fingers, tapping a ring against the glass. I went to the shop window and gazed upwards for a long time at the tapping, luring ring. Then I became aware of a dim brown face behind the parted curtain. She beckoned and I went to the door of the shop and it was opened for me.

Inside the shop, everything was dark and I could not truly see anyone. But I felt them all around me, lots of people, all women. I felt their hands feeling over my body, feeling my arms and my legs, feeling even the hairs on my head. I knew I was being passed through the shop as through a long dark tunnel. They kept up a constant murmuring in low female tones. The scent of them was strong on me, full of veils, fluttering and settling, smothering me. Their fingers were everywhere pressing and pulling along, their fingers crawled over me like insects.

At last, the journey came to an end. I was ushered out into the light of day, turned out, set free.

For a long time after that, I dreamed at night of the fluttering, whispering women, the fingers of the dark unseen people pulling me through their tunnel. I was afraid in these dreams and I would shriek. My mother came in, always, to comfort me. She opened the windows and let in the pure cold night air. The moon glimmered on her white hands and face and I saw she, too, wore a ring.

Stasia was born. They allowed me to see her in a cradle. I was not pleased. Stasia looked strange and bad to me, not at all like a truly living thing, not at all like a true sister to me. I was puzzled why my parents wanted Stasia when they already had me, and I was beautiful and strong and a boy. Stasia was innocent and dumb and she howled in her cradle.

Soon everything changed again. Stasia grew to a child with fat knees and clear blue eyes. I found I truly liked Stasia and it was lucky for her that I did. The war came now and my father was sent to a military camp. I can tell you a story about the military camp. I have imagined exactly how it was there for my father. They are very nice to you there. You get to sleep on the ground and they give you one piece of bread a day. And my father is there, proud on the wet ground, sleeping stacked with the others, stacked like logs in the rain and wind, the dark leather strap across his chest bursting and splitting from the harsh weather.

My father, my pride, he wakes with the others and huddles to the wire fence. The bread comes. My father wants a cigarette and he sees the guard has cigarettes. He asks. The guard says, "Give me your piece of bread." My father gives him back the bread and gets in return the one cigarette. He puts it in his mouth eagerly and the first breath makes him dizzy, sick. He begins to vomit. The cigarette has brought him no pleasure and he looks to where, behind the wire fence, the guard is slowly eating his one piece of bread.

I have only thought this up. I have only guessed. I never saw my father again wearing his uniform, the strap buckled tightly across his chest, his narrow rich eyes and hard chin: he has become a photograph in

my mind.

But I kept looking for him then, after he was taken away. Stasia and I were alone in the house with one other person, a woman. She was an aunt, I think, but she insisted to us everyday that she was our mama. Our mama had been taken away, too, but not to a military camp. That is the most puzzling part of my story. Now when I try hard to remember her, all I can get is a sensation of hands, long fingers in the moonlight, and a heavy ring knocking against glass.

Every morning the woman, our aunt, would set a plate of food in front of us. "Stasia. Marek," she said, leaning across the table. The light from the window straggled across her face and throat. It was winter light, pale and dry, tired winter light. "Listen to me, I am your mama. Remember it!"

She said this to us a thousand times each day. I knew she was not my mother. Stasia did not know. Stasia was confused and cried in the winter light. But after a few plates of food, Stasia was willing to call anybody her mother. It made me feel very disobedient and lonely to see my sister eating her food and saying to the aunt, "Mama. Beautiful, beautiful mama."

I was hungry, too. I reached out my hand to take some food, but the woman pulled it back. "What is my name, Marek?" she said. Her mouth was very tight across her face and her face was neither young nor old. Her face was a round blank circle. I saw she intended to starve me.

So I got up and ran out of the house and down the streets of the town. After walking for a time, I saw a man coming toward me at the end of the street. He looked like he was wearing a uniform and I shrieked to

him, "Father! Father!" But the man stopped. He listened. I began running toward him shrieking louder, "Father!" Now the man turned and ran from me. He disappeared around the corner. I kept running and running until I came to the end of the street. People passed around me, wrapped in heavy brown winter coats, their breath freezing in clouds, their faces swollen red with the cold. I turned the corner and ran straight into a big clumsy soldier. He grabbed me, listening, and lifted me off my feet with one thick hard hand. He held me there like a limp rabbit, my legs dangling useless, his fingers pinching into the skin of my neck.

"Where are you going, little beggar?" he roared.

And so I was caught there in his hand like an innocent dumb animal. My cold naked legs hung out from my short trousers and my socks drooped around my ankles. The soldier would not release me. He shook me again and roared again, "Tell me, I command you! Where are you going?"

I had no weapons, only arms and legs. So I rared up my weapons and rallied and kicked him with all my power. The sharp toe of my boot struck perfect aim and with a terrible howl, the soldier dropped me. I scrambled up from the street and ran home as fast as the wind.

I raced up to my room and slammed shut the door. I was breathing hard and I felt my face was on fire, but I was no longer afraid. And no longer was I feeling disobedient or lonely. My heart beat like a great red secret toy deep inside my hard body.

At the end of the day, Stasia and I were again at the table. And again the aunt set plates of food before us. "Marek," she said, "it is for your own good that you must do what I ask. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mama," I replied.

"Very well." She poured some honey in a little dish and gave it to me.

Stasia and Marek, Together

These were very pretty American children. Will was wearing his Sunday suit and his hair was brushed. Laural sat on the sofa. We were especially interested in watching Laural. Her skirt stuck out over a stiff petticoat and she had a white band in her hair. Will's Sunday suit was blue, very dark and rich-looking stuff. Their mama was proud of them. Their papa was proud of them, too, and stood against the wall smoking himself a long white cigarette, filter-tip, with a cork and gold rim and a plug of charcoal grains. Everyone in the room was listening to Laural tell a story.

She sat with her hands crossed in her lap and her hair hung down very heavy and straight and brown. She did not make gestures. This puzzled us, because had we been telling the same story, we would have made many gestures, very big and circling. Laural sat perfectly still, as stiff as the sofa she sat upon.

The story took a long time and Laural stumbled over it in places, brushing it off, correcting its smudges, going back to the same place and starting anew. Will got tired and he interrupted her. His mind was itching to tell the story. It was plain to see that he could probably tell it better than she. He became more and more impatient with Laural and bounced on the edge of the sofa cushions. Laural continued all the while, paying no mind to him at all.

Then Will, in agony, snatched a flower from the glass on the table before the sofa and began beating Laural in her face. It was a red flower and smelled strong, a kind of obvious and redundant sweetness.

Laural sat there, never unfolding her hands, never hesitating in her laborious tale, only batting her eyes rapidly against Will's attack, and then closing her eyes altogether, so that she looked asleep, but talking. Red petals trickled down on Laural's shoulders. Some stuck in her hair, on the end of her nose.

Babcia would not allow this in her house. She reached out and took hold of Will's hand. The flower drooped, its long stem was nearly broken into two pieces.

"Ah, Will," babcia exclaimed, "you hit Laural?"

Will, still hysterical, focused his big eyes upon her. Laural had stopped her story and was looking at babcia, also.

"Ah, Will, you hit Laural. But it was the flower that suffered."

Babcia dropped Will's hand. He continued blaring his eyes at her, like an idiot-child, for a moment. He looked at babcia, down at the red flower wilting in his grasp, then back up at babcia with defiance.

"You, ninny!" he howled, "flowers don't have feelings!"

Everyone laughed. And that is the end of all stories, of all long journeys. We do not entirely trust anyone, but we are still living. Surely, that is a kind of a moral, a kind of good sign.