

RAHOCHIK, ELLIE JUNE, M.F.A. Plastic Heart Neighborhood. (2007)
Michael Parker. 84 pp.

This thesis includes the body of my work produced while in the MFA program. I have chosen to submit six short stories that have been extensively revised with peers and advisors. It is the work I consider to be the best possible representative of my effort and improvement as a writer.

PLASTIC HEART NEIGHBORHOOD

by

Ellie June Rahochik

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2007

Approved by

Michael Parker
Committee Chair

©2007 by Ellie June Rahochik

APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair Michael Parker

Committee Members Craig Nova

Jim Clark

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Bull Dog Men | 1 |
| How to be a Widow | 15 |
| Just Act Normal | 31 |
| Pink and Shiny | 44 |
| Sharing Talents | 60 |
| You've Never Had This Before | 72 |

Bull Dog Men

I tried to say no when Dorie asked for ice cream, but I'm the Uncle Martin who's always given her all the sweets she could ever ask for. When I said no, she didn't believe me, she thought I was joking, or playing a game. We passed five Dairy Queens before I agreed to stop. I knew this because Dorie had been counting them out loud, and keeping track of how many minutes until the next one. The signs said, "Five minutes ahead!" as if they knew I had an anxious sugar-fiending-five-year-old in the car. I thought I was doing alright at keeping Dorie happy that day, and I didn't think she knew I kidnapped her to get her away from her mother.

Dorie is my five year old niece and the way she counted out loud reminded me of our mother, the way everything she said sounded musical. Dorie drew out each number as her voice went from a low to a high pitch. I didn't tell Melissa I took Dorie and I wasn't sure if I was going to. I thought I might just keep Dorie all weekend and show her other things, and maybe when Melissa woke up and realized her little girl was gone she'd realize she really messed up. I'd give her plenty of time to think about what Dorie meant to her before I came back. Sometimes I feel like Dorie is Melissa, and that day I was just going on a road trip with my little sister.

The Dairy Queen was the kind attached to a gas station attached to a fast food drive-thru. I remembered when I was a teenager some buds and I used to go around town rearranging the letters on the Dairy Queen's marquis. We once turned "Peanut Buster Parfait" to "Nut Buster Fart." But the marquis on this one was way up high where the

sign is, glowing bright even in the daytime, intending to reach the eyes of children kept in back seats. Dorie was getting fidgety from the sugar and I felt a little restless and swollen, like my sides had expanded. My belly was starting to hang over my belt in some places. I drove with one hand on the wheel and tugged at my love handles with the other. I tried to think of things to keep Dorie occupied.

“So if you could be any color, what would it be?” I asked her. Melissa once told me that if I didn’t know what to say to a woman, to just keep asking questions.

“I can’t be a color.” She broke into a laugh and her face went to wrinkles.

I wondered what Melissa would say to this.

“Well just imagine you could be a color. Like, what is the color of Dori?”

She looked perplexed.

“Ok,” I said. “Well, if I were a color, I’d be green. Like trees, the kind that stay green all year. Evergreens.”

“I don’t know Evergreens,” she said.

“Look out your window. They’re out there.”

She looked out her right window. Then left, then up, then down, then started shaking her head back and forth. I was surprised at how upbeat she was. When she called me yesterday she sounded so scared. *Uncle Martin please come get me. Mommy is asleep again and won’t get up. She’s always sleeping and the house is dark.*

Melissa is twenty four years old and Dorie is her oldest of three children. Her boyfriend, Jeff, has been in and out of jail for the past six years, and every time he gets out, Melissa gets pregnant. Then he’s back again and the kids are living in her dark

smoky apartment down in Morris, Pa. I knew Melissa's kids would get to the age where they would need more than fed and changed, and they wouldn't get it. Melissa has found ways to trade Ashley and baby Mike out to other relatives, and has Dad running his own sort of daycare, but now that Dorie is older and more independent she is practically left on her own, as if she were eighteen. Melissa is clueless about having kids, even though they're all she's got besides a rented apartment.

Our family history is full of holes, and when Melissa got pregnant I knew there would be leaks. Our mother suffered from bipolar disorder and Dad suffered anger about her being crazy and disappearing. When she was home she either slept all the time, or walked around like a movie star. She had a blonde beehive and sang Patsy Cline songs. She called us her little hummingbirds and played games with us. She got down on her knees, made a towel on the floor into a boat, and pointed out pirates on the horizon. Dad was more reliable but his presence was like an approaching thunder head, and the air turned cool and electric when he came around. He provided more than Mom could, but there was a mean edge to his caring. He put Mom into halfway homes, and rehab centers, and paid for everything, but then she would disappear. Her image just kept fading, and to this day I can't imagine what she might look like. I only see her the day dad pulled her from the house, her big yellow hair a mess, and myself standing at her feet, naked, except for the little suede vest that had an eagle on the back and fringes around the bottom. When dad took her I stood in the front yard watching and he kept telling me to go inside. My feet were cold on the front patio, and I stepped into the sun to feel it warm my skin. Dad kept saying *Get her in the house*, and I wondered why he was saying that about

Mom when he was pushing her into the truck. I looked back and saw Melissa standing behind me crying. Dad never remarried.

I left Pittsburgh that morning around 5am. I'd been living there for a few months working in a steel factory. I was working around Morris since I graduated high school, working on cars mostly, but eventually had the town tapped out because the jobs and the money it seemed were fading away from Morris. The closest place was Pittsburgh or somewhere in Ohio. I would've ended up in Akron probably, which is farther away than the two hours that already kept me from Dorie. She was the only reason to stay in Morris, and in a few years I'd have two more reasons to feel guilty and want to come back. Ashley and baby Mike were growing up and Melissa was down, and staying down. More kids wouldn't make her a better mother, and them getting older will only turn her lazier, and meaner, and make me feel guiltier. When Melissa had Dorie I promised myself I'd be as good an uncle as I could be, and started spoiling her right away. Melissa thought it was funny how much Dorie asked about me and remembered me, and I know it's probably because I always brought her toys and candy and it was probably those things she really liked more than me, but that was ok.

We passed a sign, 86 miles to Easton, home of the Crayola Crayon factory.

"When are we gonna be there?" Dorie was shouting. "When when when when!"

"Soon. Hey, Dorie, what do you want to see the most at the factory?"

"I want to see a giant crayon, as big as this car!"

"I do too." I said.

We pulled off at quick stop so Dorie could use the bathroom, and I said a word of thanks that she's old enough to use it on her own. I've never had kids because I've never married. Like Dad, I've heard the voice of a beautiful woman but I know there's more to them than just sweet sounding songs. I followed Dorie into the store and stood by the bathroom waiting for her. I bought beef jerky, bottles of juice, taffy, corn nuts, and some scratch-off lottery tickets. Dorie spotted a giant cupcake at the counter when I was paying and started jumping around and yelling and I couldn't get her to stop so I bought the thing. It was almost the size of her head, chocolate cake with about an inch of pink icing on top. I thought I'd just buy it, hide it later and she'd forget about it. Out of sight out of mind, I'd hoped.

Several pay phones were lined up out front and I tugged at Dorie's little arm to get past them. If I called Melissa then a whole argument would start and I didn't want Dorie to hear it. I knew I'd get angry at Melissa, I was already angry at her. She was lazy and selfish and made the same decisions over and over, or just let things happen to her. I wondered how I could say these things to her. Or maybe I wouldn't say anything, just calmly say that I had Dorie for the weekend, that we were going off to see things and have some fun. But Melissa wouldn't get it, she never did. She would remain a sleepwalker, and not even a lucky one at that, but the kind that would bump into the same wall over and over and never wake up.

As we piled our snacks onto the front seat I saw Dorie looking at something in the parking lot. It was a mother with two kids and she was yelling at one of them and spanking them.

“Mommy says that to me sometimes.” She said.

“Says what?”

“Says things really loud.”

“Does she spank you?”

“No. She holds my hand like this.”

She grabbed my hand and squeezed, but she couldn’t get her little fingers around my knuckles, so she grabbed my pinky, and squeezed it as hard as she could. She was gritting her teeth and I told her to stop.

“Does it hurt your hand when she does that?”

“Yes, and then I go shhh!” She put a finger to her lips.

I reached over to shut the door and some change came out of my pocket. It was like a sign that I was supposed to call Melissa, but I wasn’t having it. She didn’t deserve to know where Dorie was and who took her away or why. She didn’t deserve to know these things just like no one ever gave Dorie any answers about why her mom sleeps all day, and why she never goes to the park or an aquarium, or why her hand hurts and what trees stay green all year. I looked at her as she tried to open her bag of taffy, how she tried and tried without asking for my help. I opened the bag and let the pieces come tumbling out.

I wasn’t sure if Dorie was good at reading yet, so just for practice I sounded out the names of the towns as we passed thought them; Bethlehem, Union, Rush. The names made Dorie giggle, and she liked the car ride. She ate her candy, we listened to the radio, and I gave her a quarter to try one of our lottery tickets. She won a dollar on the Poker

Party ticket and wanted to cash in for more sweets, but I warned her she couldn't have too much sugar. She'd already worked her way through a few taffies and half the giant cupcake. As we rode on I was relieved that she started to quiet down and appeared less concerned about getting more candy. An old Hank Williams song came on the radio, Honky Tonkin', and I sang the words lightly and gently hoping she would settle into a mid-morning nap. "*When you are sad and lonely and have no place to go, come and see me baby and bring along some dough and we'll go honky tonkin' honey baby.*" I was little amused by Hank and how he made things like all night benders sound cute. I knew what he meant by honky tonkin' because central Pa is not lacking in taverns, or the bull dog men that visit them. I'd been to these places just as much as the next guy but a man gets to an age where he has to make a decision, where he sees himself set apart from the other guys—the ones that can't admit they might care about something or someone, for fear it may make them look weak, when they are all full of a weakness that becomes a kind of strength over them. Maybe that's what Hank was singing about, that he was just another man falling under the weight of his own weakness, that he knew better but kept falling into the same traps, and could not cry about it, so he sang instead. I did feel awkward, though, like uncles weren't supposed to care this much about their nieces, that they do what most men do and leave it to the women because they almost always do it better than a man can. I was beginning to feel like that was just a cop-out though, that men were just too scared to care for children in ways that involved more than just making them laugh, and making themselves look like heroes before they disappeared.

Dorie looked pale and distant and I asked if she was ok. She didn't say much but hiccuped once before spitting up in her hands. I cringed at the color of it, all yellow and pink, and swung the car into the next gas station. It was in her hair and she was crying, and I tried to speak real soft and sing song as I got napkins from the glove box and cleaned her up. We had to take her little sweatshirt off and I wrapped her up in one of my insulated flannel jackets. I combed her hair with her doll's play brush, and bought some water for her to drink.

"No more sugar," I said, and threw her candy and half eaten cupcake away. She didn't look concerned, just tired and miserable, and lay down in the front seat. I sat next to her for a while wondering what else I could get to make her feel better. I rolled my window down and let the cool air in. The gas station we stopped at had a small cabin looking country store. Dorie fell asleep. More phones were out front. I gently shut my door and walked over to one of them to call Melissa. I kept my eye on Dorie while I dug through my pockets. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I decided I wasn't going to think about it until she answered. As I was dialing a white pick up truck pulled in next to my Buick. I was calm while it rang, ready to just tell her what I'd done, that Dorie was ok, because she was. It rang and rang, and I waited for a machine. A man had gotten out of the white truck and began pissing next to it with the door hanging open. The phone kept ringing and ringing and that man kept pissing. No machine, no damn answering machine.

"Hey man, why don't you do that inside," I said. If Dorie woke up she'd see him standing there facing the road.

He zipped up and looked at me, holding his truck door to steady himself.

“Who are you talking to?” He was slurring and reeling.

“I said take it inside. I’ve got a little girl in the car there and she doesn’t need to see that.”

He was a short skinny old guy with a smashed up face and had a head full of shiny silky white hair with probably nothing but liquor in his veins, another zombie sleep walker. He turned his head to look into my car and looked back at me.

“Go fuck yourself.” He said, and spit on the ground.

I walked right up to him and grabbed his shoulders which felt like softballs in my hands, and I knew I could break him with a punch. I took him to the ground, put him on his back and got up in his face. I’m not sure what I said to him, or if I said anything because I lost control of what I was saying because I knew Dorie was right there in the car and she might wake up and see me and I knew she’d be scared. I held onto him and stared at him breathing hard, wanting to tell him what a piece of shit he was but I didn’t say anything, I just looked at him, his shirt in my fists.

When I stood up I saw her looking at me through the car window and I knew it was already too late. I saw myself in the reflection of the window, a string of droll rolling off my bottom lip. She wouldn’t understand what was happening and that what I was doing was good, that I was trying to protect her. She didn’t need to see that, didn’t need to know how ugly people really were and that they were in all sorts of places, that all you have to do is move around a bit in the world and you’ll bump into them and they won’t care who you are and how hard you try or if you’re a child or trying to save one.

“Hey, sleeping beauty is awake. How are you beautiful? Feeling better?”

Dorie just looked at me sleepily. I let go of the man and walked around and got into the car.

“Were you wrestling that man?”

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, started the car, and pulled out kicking up dust. The guy was getting up slowly and had a leaf in his hair.

“Kind of.” I said.

Dorie didn’t seem phased by the skirmish, she relaxed into her seat and looked out the window singing softly to herself and babbling a little. I was irritated as hell because that man at the gas station was making me think of Dorie’s father, Jeff. I’d met him only once, years ago when Dorie had just turned one and we were having a party for her. Back then Melissa looked beautiful and motherhood was still sort of fresh and new to her, the answer to the big questions she shrunk under, what to do, and who with. Jeff wasn’t real friendly or mature, I know he sold drugs and hung out with a bunch of assholes, and you could tell these things just by looking at him. He was short and wore baggy clothes and acted like he was uninvolved with Melissa and Dorie and everything else around him that was real. But when it came to slinging drugs, making cash, and starting fights, he was totally involved and talked enough smack to make himself look like a pro. When Melissa introduced him to me he said “What’s up dude,” and I didn’t like him at all. I told Melissa when I meet people they start out with a clean slate, low on the chart, and if they build themselves up to be respectable then I’ll show them some respect. I could’ve given Jeff the benefit of the doubt, but I didn’t. I couldn’t not judge

him by the way he looked and talked, and it turned out he was exactly who I thought he was and now after all these years, worse than I thought he was, so why put people at the top of the charts? Especially people who are messing up my family.

But it also occurred to me that it was my own family that was messing up my family. Maybe it wasn't easy for Melissa because she was alone and Jeff was such a screw-up, and we didn't have anyone else to help her wake up, to get out of bed, and have some hope. Maybe Mom is responsible for why Melissa is so passive, because Mom surrendered to all of her difficulties so quickly, so willingly, and forgot all about us. Forgot about her hummingbirds and let them go to the pirates. And now its like Melissa couldn't even remember how it all happened, how Mom got away from us, and how she is doing the same thing to her own children. Melissa would be upset if she ever lost her children, but if she never did, she would still go on the same way—deaf and blind to them and their dreams.

It was almost twelve o'clock and Dorie and I needed a break from the car so we stopped at a rest area. There were a fair amount of older people filing off a tour bus and people with dogs were walking around the picnic areas. The vending machines were humming outside the brick building, and it seemed people were crawling all over the place. I asked Dorie if she'd be comfortable going in alone. She said yes and I stood guard out front of the women's room, watching ladies go in and out, some giving me dirty looks. I didn't bother smiling at any of them, I figured that would make me look like a real weirdo. I told Dorie to go play under a tree while I made a phone call.

I pushed the quarters in and punched the numbers watching Dorie pet someone's poodle.

"Melissa"

"Martin, hi."

I didn't say anything.

"Gosh I haven't talked to you in a while. How's life in Pittsburgh?"

"It's fine. Is little Doreen there?"

She sniffled once and the phone sounded like it was being moved around on her shoulder.

"Uh, she's not here."

"Where is she?"

"Dad has her today. I think they were supposed to go to see a movie." I could hear her light a cigarette, and I could see the smoke rising up in her dark apartment, light trying to get in through the drawn shades.

"No, no."

"What?"

"You're wrong."

"What?"

"What were you doing, Melissa?"

"When?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"Martin, what is up with you?"

“Don’t ask me that. You’re the one who doesn’t know where your own daughter is.”

“What the hell are you up to? You have her don’t you?”

“Yes I do have her, and she’s having the greatest damn day of her life.”

“By greatest day of her life you mean you’ve bought her everything she laid her eyes on and fed her a pound of sugar and spoiled her rotten for me to deal with?”

“She is playing outside, right now. How often do you take her outside? When’s the last time you took her anywhere?”

I looked around to see a few people nearby were looking at me, but quickly looked past them for Dorie. She wasn’t with the poodle under the tree. She wasn’t at the vending machines looking for sugar. She wasn’t sitting on the benches by the map of Pennsylvania. Everything seemed to be getting brighter, a little bit whiter. My neck was itching with sweat and I stood there scratching it hard.

“You don’t know what you’re doing Martin. Bring her back or I’m calling the cops.”

The phone was out of my hands as I wandered through the crowds of older people gathered in little circles looking at the flowers, their maps, speculating about the weather. I tried to look calm, a stiff smile on my face. Children were playing in the grassy areas, parents had their coolers out, there were sandwiches in baggies, little piles of vegetables and fresh fruit, thermoses and jugs of water. These were the kind of families that never kidnapped one another, never had to take one another away just to save them and the rest of the family from suffering, even though there’s no one you can save when it’s too late

to save yourself. I felt nauseated and flushed out, like my guts were in my throat. I walked behind the brick building and there was a hill there leading down to a creek. Dorie, please come back. Please come back to me. I can take care of you.

How to Be a Widow

Traffic snarled at the intersection while Lydia stood in the hot sun struggling to press the flat buttons on a stranger's cell phone, a stranger who didn't attempt to politely turn away or look at the passing traffic, but just stared at her while she fiddled awkwardly with his phone. She tried dialing but the operator came on telling her to redial using the area code. A seventy-five year-old woman often caused impatience, she knew, but this man was old too. His hair was solid grey, silvery in the sun; he wore large wire rimmed glasses, and had perfect teeth, a dead ringer for dentures.

"Are you getting a signal?" he asked.

"It's not ringing," she said.

He took the phone from her and asked her for the number.

"I'll dial it up for you," he said.

The people waiting at the stoplight of Route 440 and 337 had no patience for a fender bender, or a flat tire, especially during the 4:30 rush. While standing on the shoulder, Lydia noticed a turtle shell that was cracked and mashed into the pavement, the blood mimicking the red painted pattern of the shell. Her presence invoked the same impatience and intolerance from people as the turtle's. No matter how quickly she moved people would always see her as slow, because of her age. The Big Rig truck stop, located next to the large intersection of Route 440 and 337, was a major hub for tractor trailers, and made for an unsavory mixture of eighteen and four wheelers. It was not only

the most likely place to have an accident, but the worst place to be a woman involved in a fender bender. In this case, it was neither a fender bender, nor an accident.

The phone rang and she waited as if she really expected someone to answer, she was calling her apartment and she lived alone. The tow truck had come for her Buick, she answered all the questions the policeman asked, and was left standing there not sure what to do. Officer Shriver had seen the older man with Lydia, assumed he was her husband, and left without offering her a ride.

Although he'd been eager to get involved after he witnessed the accident, Lydia figured she'd worn out her luck with the man and the cell phone. As a widow, she often depended on men like this. For jump starts, tire changes, and help with her groceries, she always seemed to be following around strange men. He offered her a ride to the garage. She asked if he could just take her home please.

They walked down the shoulder of the road, the afternoon traffic grinding and smelly in the warm June air. Drivers looked at them as if they'd been misplaced. His car was curvy and looked almost like a truck, but faster. The polished chrome accents flashed in the sun like the frames of his glasses.

“Do you live around here?”

She looked out the window at the traffic and the trucks. She was glad she didn't live close to there.

“I live in South West.”

The intersection was pounded with vehicles day and night. She noticed how the weight of the traffic had pressed down into the weak spots of the asphalt, and how those

weak spots were run over day and night, making the pavement look rippled, much like the tops of her hands where the skin had sunk around her veins.

“That’s a nice end of town down there. What do you do?”

“I’m a volunteer, and a widow.” The widow part may have been unnecessary. She didn’t want him to think that was his cue to take pity on her. She appreciated empathy, not pity.

“I was coming back from a job interview up at Grace Elementary.”

She told him about the flyer in her church’s bulletin announcing a call for reading tutors for fourth and fifth graders. For nine dollars an hour she could work from one to four hours a few days a week. A young lady named Ms. Kent had interviewed her, even though interviews, Lydia was told, weren’t standard procedure. Standard procedure was to evaluate the resumes of all applicants, and then call the ones they chose to hire. Since Lydia had no application, and was already there, Ms. Kent interviewed her anyway, even though that wasn’t how things normally worked.

Ms. Kent looked nice, but she hurried through the interview. Lydia had no problem with her questions, and proudly mentioned her participation at her church’s Sunday school and daycare.

“So you do have experience?” she said, positioning the pearls around her neck.

“Ma’am, I never said I didn’t. I also have two daughters which I think is plenty of experience. I taught them the alphabet long before any teacher did.”

“Well, that is good parenting.”

“Do you have any children?”

“No,” Mrs. Kent said. “None of my own, but I have a few hundred here at Grace Elementary.”

At that Lydia laughed. She always enjoyed laughing with her eyes closed. When she opened her eyes Ms. Kent was standing up to shake her hand and show her out.

“So did you get the job?” he asked.

“I hope not,” she said.

“Why’s that?”

“I want to work with children, not argue with the administration.”

“Where do you live?”

“Off Beckley Pike. You’ll have to turn around.”

“My name’s Charles,” he said. “Yourself?”

“Lydia.”

“Are you a rebel Lydia? Giving the administration trouble?”

They laughed together.

“What I really want to know is if you’re going to sue that man for what he pulled back there.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I trust the police will charge him appropriately.”

“Well, you ought to sue. I can act as a witness if you need one,” he said.

“I’ll let the police handle it, Charles.”

“Well now, you’ve got to be prepared for these things. How are you going to get around until your car is fixed? And is your car fixable? There’s a chance he damaged

the alignment and totaled your car. You know a car can look ok on the outside while the infrastructure is demolished.”

As he spoke she was reminded of her daughter, Marcy. This type of precautionary drama was the staple of her conversations with Marcy. Yet as concerned as Marcy sounded, she was still hundreds of miles away and never did much except cast warnings to Lydia. It was exhausting to her that her relationship with her daughter was made up of instructions and warnings.

“Lydia, I know you’re probably overwhelmed from this incident, but you’ve got to focus. Think about a plan of action.” Cold air was blowing out of the vents. So few times had she enjoyed a cool car ride in the summer. She noticed how it caused Charles’s finely sculpted hair to waver. She felt her muscles relax for the first time in hours. It was turning out to be such a nice car ride, she wished he would relax.

“Charles,” she said, almost objecting. “I’m tired. Do you like steak? Stop there at Western Sizzlin’. Have a steak with me.”

It was the vanity plate on the Jeep that had taken her attention from the traffic. She often enjoyed trying to decode the messages of vowel-less abbreviated words mixed with numbers. This one had the message H8XWIF, and as she was sounding out the last letter, that trucker knocked into the back right corner of her bumper. But he didn’t stop there. He pushed her, in a way that was appallingly gently, until she sat at an angle, her headlights poking into the left lane and her crushed bumper in the right lane. The trucker then glided into the entrance of the Big Rig truck stop, to blend in with the other trucks as

if nothing had happened. Charles was the last car in a long line waiting for the light to change. The truck was coming from the opposite direction, and had to cut through the line of opposing traffic to get to the truck stop. The only thing stopping him was the long body of Lydia's 1976 pea green Buick Electra. This car was a spawn of some of the largest vehicles ever made, with a body length of 233.3 inches. After the trucker had gone and the light turned green, the traffic dissipated with flustered speed and left Lydia and Charles in their exhaust.

“Do you realize that he could've gone around you?”

Lydia drifted beside him in line for the buffet. She supposed Charles wanted her to feel like a victim, and get angry for what had happened. But right now she only felt relief, because she was so hungry and about to eat.

“There was room between your bumper and mine. I had actually put my car into reverse, ready to back up, when he just pushed through. And, he could've pushed the front of my car. If he had this would be a different story, I tell you what.”

Her favorite part of the meal was walking past the warm bright selection, choosing nothing, just inspecting. The food was laid out in large rectangular tubs, illuminated by the buffet lights. Charles dug in right away, scooping large spoonfuls of potatoes and corn onto his plate, taking bites of rolls while he looked for more food. He ate eagerly, like a growing teenager.

“I'm a little worried. That guy is going to embellish the situation to make it sound like it was your fault. Do you want that to happen?”

She watched him whisk his gravy and mashed potatoes together until they were runny and brown.

“Someone needs to help you because people like Officer Shriver aren’t going to do it.”

“Charles you don’t have to tell me all this. The difference between you and me is that things like this don’t matter as much to me as they do to you. I’ve already forgiven him anyway.”

“Forgiven him? Why? At least wait until your car is fixed and he’s paid for it. It’s not even worth it to forgive him so soon.” Lydia spread some butter onto a biscuit and rolled her eyes.

“What difference would it really make if I forgave him now, or later?” she asked. Charles held each utensil in a fist, the tops pointed at the ceiling.

“Because you should be angry, now! That bastard practically ran you off the road today and you’re ok with it. You can’t let people treat you that way. And, how can your car not matter? I’m assuming you live alone.”

As she aged she rarely slept a full night, but was always tired. On warm evenings she found herself out cruising among the teenagers. And though the old Buick served her well and matched her pace, it was more than just a car, it was a haunt. Each time she stepped into it she had to relive the times when Gary would tune the radio to a ball game, and two little girls would sing and giggle in the back seat. It was the same car Gary drove to work everyday, that took countless times to get cigarettes and bottles of expensive whiskey, small bottles that would fill small glasses, (he took all his drinks

neat), that he always claimed were the difference between a man of class and a drunk, the same car he drove into the driveway on a June evening while the girls waited at the front window, put into park, then clung to himself, lurched, and drooled, while his heart stopped. As she got older it wasn't as painful as it was burdensome to face her memories. Photographs, keepsakes, and home movies couldn't trigger a memory the same way.

Charles had settled down and was cutting everything on his plate into small pieces.

"How long has your husband been dead?"

"Fifteen years."

Charles made a face then, as if he'd bitten down onto a bone in his steak. He kept frowning and chewing, looking down at his plate.

"I lost my wife five years ago. In a car accident."

"We're you with her?"

"No. They say she died on the way to the hospital. Yours?"

"Heart attack. Though not unexpected because the doctors warned him to high heaven. Oh, it's like they knew it was coming. But he didn't listen. He kept up with all his bad habits and left me alone with two daughters."

"I bet they're a pretty bunch. Where are they now?"

"Florida. They are so busy, I hardly hear from them. They both have serious careers."

"I have one son, who is also busy." He laughed, and looked off for a moment. "I wish I saw him more. It seems though, like he's not as busy as he thinks he is." Lydia

looked down at her plate, which was still strewn with food. She wasn't hungry anymore; her hunger had faded unexpectedly.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Seventy-one."

"Do you sleep at night?"

"Not a blink."

When he dropped her off at Orchard Avenue apartments, Charles insisted they trade phone numbers.

"And I can answer almost anytime, remember?" he said, holding up his cell phone. The sight of it embarrassed her.

Her phone rang more in the next two days than it had in a year. The mechanic from the garage called several times to tell her about the damages to her car, Officer Shriver called with 'further questions,' and her older daughter Marcy called to check on her. She did this every month, and they usually spoke on Sunday mornings when Marcy's kids and husband were preoccupied with breakfast. Any other time she could not talk to Marcy without her stopping to praise or scold a child, or to shout out orders to her husband. Lydia wouldn't mind this if Marcy would let her kids come on and talk to their Grandmother. Instead Marcy tried to hush and shoo them, until she grew flustered and insisted she had to go.

"What do you mean he pushed you? Was it just an exaggerated bump?"

"My car was almost sideways when he was finished with it," Lydia said.

“Well did you try to drift forward in traffic, to give him some room?” Marcy asked.

“Are you defending him?”

“When you taught me how to drive you said you shouldn’t ride so close to someone so that you can’t see all of their back tires. But be reasonable, in rush hour traffic, you drive that close to people. Everyone does.”

“First of all, I was as far forward as I could’ve been. Second, I don’t care what other people do.”

“I know that,” Marcy said. She sounded muffled for a moment. Lydia imagined she was distracted with something and this would be the end of the conversation. “So how did you get home?”

“A nice man helped me.”

“The police officer?”

“No, a witness, so to say. His name is Charles and he’s my age.”

“Mom, you know you can’t trust men that just show up at the scene of an accident. And you can’t trust strangers in general. It’s just not smart.”

“This man is very considerate. He’s concerned about the situation. He’s my friend.”

The phone sounded like it was swimming in Marcy’s hair now, and then there was a small cry.

“Is my sweet Andrea there?” Lydia asked.

“Mom, listen to me,” Marcy was back loud and clear. “What are you going to do about Dad’s car?”

She hung up and called Charles, eager to hear more of his rowdy opinions on a plan of action.

“Get a new car Lydia. That thing looks like a Carnival Cruise ship. I expect to see retirees playing a game of shuffleboard on the back of it!”

Lydia laughed. When she stopped, Charles was still laughing.

“A car is a big purchase,” she said. “And I don’t know what to get anyway.”

Lydia wasn’t poor, but she didn’t want or need much. Gary’s company had established a very comfortable pension, and she saw no reason in blowing it. There were times when she had to count pennies, both as a child, and as a mother of two. She still counted the coins because she couldn’t unlearn the habit, just like she couldn’t unlearn how to be a widow. Gary had been gone for fifteen years, and when he died she traded one role for another. It was like God had told her not to think about it anymore, and she had listened, at first bitterly, and then, complacently. She thought of herself for so long as a bird, flying around unseen, taking so little for the anonymous existence she led. She hardly made a mark on the earth, and this both comforted and disturbed her.

“Miss Lydia you never asked me what I do for a living.”

“You’re a hero, aren’t you?”

“Almost. I’m a car salesman.”

She let the silence grow, unsure of what to say next. She was appalled. She felt exposed and preyed upon. She'd never sensed anything like this about him, no hint of ill intent, no flashy attitude or ridiculous sweet-talk.

"You've been so friendly Charles," she said.

Lydia was extremely vigilant of people who tried to sell her things. She would protect herself from an excited salesman in an empty store more than she would against a strange man strong enough to help her change a tire on a dark road at night. That was the difference between her and Marcy. Marcy threw her money to whoever was willing to catch it, and for whatever convenience they offered, so long as it would make her life easier. Lydia did not pay anyone to do anything she could not do for herself.

But when Lydia thought about getting back into the Buick, she realized it was like getting into Gary's grave with him. She was tired of the car, how it never lost his smell, the lingering cigarette smoke that he would never give up, how it constantly echoed with little girl laughter, how it was a direct indicator of her age, and made people rush around her in traffic, and push her out their way.

"Maybe you could show me what you have," she said.

The new cars had fluorescent numbers painted on their windshields with multiple exclamation points scattered across the glass. The cars themselves seemed not to care, as if they knew they would all be taken, eventually. The used cars sat in the back rows looking clean and well kept, but that couldn't hide their familiarity. They were cars she'd seen a hundred times over, and none of them were shiny.

The lot was all gravel, and sloped up on one side where the new cars were parked out front on the grass, so they would be closer to the passing traffic. A white Jaguar sat at the crest of that hill like an angel overlooking a small kingdom. Lydia made her way toward it while Charles sat in his car watching her, as if she were the arrow in a compass that would eventually stop in the right direction. The bank was a little muddy where the grass had been driven over several times, and she almost slipped. Her body lurched forward and when her hand reached out to grasp air, it landed on the Jaguar's chrome handle.

The interior was a beautiful cove of gleaming white leather and gold accents. The seats were contoured as if they were meant to provide therapeutic support. The body was sophisticated, yet plain, conservative, not flashy. It had four head lamps and an oval grille, subtle details that would distinguish it from all the other four doors, something that would refuse to be pushed around by impatient truckers.

Charles came up and put his hand on the hood.

"The 1996 XJS. Want to try it out?"

"Will I be able to drive it off the lot today?" she asked. Charles laughed.

"Maybe you should try it first, to see how it drives."

"I'm assuming it drives the way it looks," she said. Charles smiled at her. He took her by surprise when he put his arm around her and swung her around to face the car.

"I knew you'd pick this one." he said.

"No, you didn't. You *hoped* I'd pick this one. Let's try it out." Charles didn't object, he just sat back quietly in the passenger's seat, more silent

than she'd ever seen him. Lydia took the long way around town, her memory failing her several times, until she found the old Mill Road, which led them out of town and past farms and churches. It had been a while since she'd been there, and as she was enjoying the way the Jaguar handled, how slippery it felt. She was also praying that God forgive her for not having gone out there in so long.

"I've never been on this end of town," Charles said, looking out the windows.

"There's not much out here," Lydia said. "Except this one thing.

There were houses out there that had stories of murders and hauntings she remembered hearing since she was a kid. It was a place that had never changed, and she imagined the stories never changed, either. The small stone church had been out of use for a long time. Lydia remembered the lack of air conditioning in the summer, and how when they sang hymns, the sound of their voices never held as much volume as they did heat. A section had been added to the cemetery, and the fencing was extended around the left side of it.

Gary's grave was enough to make her feel ashamed. The last flower arrangement had been rained on and only a few fake roses remained. Yet she didn't feel shamed at all. It had been fifteen years, and no one could blame her for moving on. She picked up the dirty fake roses.

"This is my husband's grave," she said. She couldn't take her eyes off the grass beside Gary's grave.

"I suppose I'll be joining him soon. Right there."

Charles put his hand on her shoulder.

“How much longer do you think we’ll live?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter to me anymore. I’m going to keep going like this until my engine cuts out.” They stood there while the birds rustled in the trees. A field ran behind the church, and it was assumed that one day it would be filled with caskets and topped with stones.

“I’m not normally dramatic,” she said. “I didn’t bring you here for your pity. I know you have a stone somewhere in town that you visit, too. I brought you here to make you an honest man,” she said. “I want to know, were you planning to take advantage of me all along?”

Charles stood with his hands in his nylon jacket, looking at her. The setting sun was creating a glare on his large glasses, which now looked like goggles of color.

“I couldn’t give you an answer simple enough to swear on,” he said. “Sometimes what we do doesn’t look right or good, but we do what we know how to do. I like you Lydia.”

The day was going dark and the sky accepted the sunset as a diffused array of purples. It wasn’t a spring evening that felt charged or full of possibilities; instead the world felt tired as if the idea of longer days was unfair.

“I’m sorry Charles,” she said.

“No apology needed.”

She had someone on her side for a change, even if it was a car salesman; someone who was still mostly a stranger. When she turned and saw the white Jaguar waiting for

her, she felt another wave of gratitude for him. Suspicion was strange to her, like everyday objects, that could change a person, could make them feel beautiful, or braver.

She opened the passenger door and looked inside the car. Images of Gary did not haunt her, the sound of young girls did not come to mind. It was stunningly blank.

“Can you drive me home?” she asked.

Just Act Normal

She tapped the chain link fence with her car, pushed it open, and coasted into the driveway. That's how I knew she was home, by the metal-on-metal sound of her bumper pushing the fence open. I gated the driveway after our dog Boo started running away. For two years he's enjoyed running up and down our fenced back yard, which is long and large, but recently he's been eager to leave and reluctant to come home. She can tap the fence open with her car because we never use the latch to shut it. Boo doesn't push on it or try to jump over it; all he needs is the illusion of confinement. I don't think he's ever been that interested in running away. He just couldn't stand to see an opening and not explore it. She's been doing the same thing lately, going out every time she gets a chance, keeping different company in new places and coming back late, early, or not at all.

When anyone comes through the back door Boo gets so excited he curls himself into a half circle and sort of walks around that way. I could hear him doing this downstairs while Paige greeted him. I got off the bed and looked for something to do. I try to look busy when Paige is around, so I grabbed my guitar and start tuning it. Her movements were always the same. Mail and purse were tossed onto the dining room table, shoes were kicked off underneath, cupboard doors slapped open and shut, and then, singing. There used to be singing, and her voice could carry from anywhere within the house.

Everyday in December, I was alone at home watching the sun go down, witnessing its slow decline without the TV or lights on. The tones change slightly like

the descending notes on a chromatic scale, and I try to hear the notes of this scale, how they bleed into one another, and then drop off into silence. Then, up and down the block the Christmas lights start popping on and get brighter and lighter until I have to shut the curtains. I hadn't bothered putting any lights up. Our Christmas tree still lay on the back porch where I put it a few days ago.

"I'm home," Paige called from the kitchen. "And I'm turning the heat up." Her voice was flat and emotionless. I twisted the E string a little tighter.

This was the first time she'd been home in a week. I knew she was staying with some girl named Crystal at night, and seeing a guy named Blair who Paige insisted she only watched movies with and "talked" to. Blair was an old friend from high school. It was the thought that came to me at night and woke me up in the morning, that she thinks I'm that stupid.

Since the three years we'd been married it was the first time we'd been apart. At first I resisted the idea of her staying somewhere else, but then I bent and said if that's what she needed, to go do it. With her gone lately I figured I'd just concentrate on practicing, but I was slow moving to do anything. I hadn't called anyone, purchased anything, or gotten on the highway in the week she was away. It was just the same cycle every day of staying in the house, teaching some lessons, and taking Boo to the woods. She once accused me of using the guitar to avoid conversation.

"It's a crutch," she said. "You play so you don't have to talk to me or anyone else you don't want to talk to."

I started the “Academy” two years ago, a small series of rooms in my basement where I teach people to play. Paige and I used to laugh at calling it the Academy, because the word implies grand old buildings and wise and seasoned professors, not the basement of an overgrown teenager who gets his kicks exposing ten year olds to Hendrix. “Well, you’re just wrong about that.” I’d said. “I play to make you love me more.”

Boo was eating, and I could hear him dropping pieces of dog food onto the floor. He ate mouthfuls that were too big and the food often got lodged in between his gums and his jowls. In order to get them out he would move his upper lip around until the pieces rolled out onto the floor. There was always a pile there waiting for one of us to slip on, like the incidental and threatening pile of marbles seen in cartoons.

Paige used to volunteer at the local SPCA, and that’s how we got Boo. For years she faithfully cleaned out their cages and loved them for their stray abandoned lives. I thought that when she said she needed her space, that she’d be spending more time with the dogs, and maybe see a psychiatrist. The phone rang. It was fourteen-year-old Rich Powell, one of my students.

“You want to get together this week?” Rich asked. “I can come over tonight if you’re not busy.”

“I’m not teaching this week,” I said. “It’s the week before Christmas.”

Rich usually came over once a week for a lesson and we played a lot of funk tunes together. That was Rich’s thing. I admired him because he wasn’t sent to me on assignment by his parents. He was a kid who heard something one day and wanted more of it. So he found me, (and I admit my price for lessons is low), and demanded, or

begged his parents for an instrument and lessons. Most of my students were either young boys or older men. The young boys sent in by their parents to expand their interests, and the older men came desperate for revival.

“I know, but I was hoping to get a half hour with you. I don’t want to slack off just because it’s Christmas and all.”

He didn’t want to slack off. Yet I was blowing him off to do just that. I hadn’t taught a class to anyone except Rich in two weeks, and for the past week I hadn’t taught a soul.

“Hey, maybe later,” I said. I sort of panicked then, realizing I might be in the house with Paige for the night. “Come over and we’ll try something different tonight.”

Rich sounded satisfied, even a little excited. I hung up, not totally choked by guilt.

“Did you make dinner?” she asked, her voice rising up through the floor ducts along with the smell of heat. I had made dinner, but completely forgotten about it. Ham and sweet potatoes in the crock pot, my latest solution to feeding myself and learning how to cook at the same time. I went downstairs and she was in a jumpsuit with her hair up in a ponytail, holding the lid to the crock pot.

“I think it needs to be stirred,” she said, looking into the pot.

The mixture of meat and potatoes was bubbling and foaming, forming a brown froth around the edges. We stood over the pot peering in and I realized it was the closest we’d been in weeks.

“How was work?” I asked softly.

“The same as always,” she said. Standing that close I could see she wasn’t wearing much makeup. Her skin was clear and a little pale, and even in the winter freckles were scattered across her cheeks and nose. It reminded me of the year she was Pippi Longstocking for Halloween. It was such a good costume that ever since I’d sort of looked at her as Pippi dressed up as a woman, trying to hide her girlishness.

“They’re cutting back on our insurance plans. The coverage is getting pathetic.” Paige worked as a supervisor at a huge corporate printing company. She’d worked there ever since I knew her, and since then the company had only gotten larger, and greedier.

“I could help you set something up.”

“Maybe,” she said. “How have your lessons been?”

“Ok. Slowing down a little because of Christmas. Do you want some of this?” I asked, pointing to the crock pot.

“Sure,” she said, and turned to get out two plates and a spoon. She scooped out the meat and potatoes, giving me a larger portion. I got silverware and napkins, and set the table. Suddenly we were something like who we used to be, months ago, eating together like normal people.

She prepared our drinks, I used the placemats. Boo came to the table side and begged like he always did. I shooed him away gently. This might have been a good time to ask her where she’d been, how she was feeling, what she wanted to do. But I was relieved for once, and unwilling to give it up so quickly for the truth.

Boo continued to sit by the table, closest to Paige, drooling and whimpering. He was ridiculous at dinner; I had almost managed to forget.

“Here sweetie,” Paige said, lifting a piece of ham off her plate. Before she could get it to his face, Boo jumped up to grab it. I scolded him and told him to go lay down.

“You shouldn’t feed him off the table,” I said.

“It was just a piece of ham. I haven’t seen him in a while,” she said.

“You can see him anytime you want,” I said.

The doorbell rang. Just in time, saving me from saying things that were certain to ruin our dinner and any chances at getting along.

“Who in the world would that be?” Paige said. I could see through our front door window that it was Rich.

“Is that one of your students?” she asked. It occurred to me that Paige probably knew, by way of our joint checking account, that I hadn’t made much money lately, and that I wasn’t motivated to either.

“Yeah,” I said casually. “It’s Rich.”

“Hey man,” Rich said. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking a little unsure of himself. “Am I too early? I hopped on my bike right after we got off the phone.”

I saw his bike parked by our front walk. He lived a good ten miles across town. I’d never been so happy to see him.

He stepped into the house and caught a glimpse of Paige at the table, our two plates, and Boo, right back at her side with a strand of drool dangling from her mouth.

“If you’re busy, that’s cool,” he said.

“No I’m not busy at all,” I said.

We walked through the dining room where Paige was eating and looking at a magazine.

“Hey,” Rich said. Paige smiled at him, trying her best to look sweet.

We got settled in the basement, in studio A where I had most of my good equipment. I had a few amps and guitars, acoustic and electric, a mixer and a few mikes. I’d even decorated. There was a poster of Eric Clapton, a painting of a tropical sunset, and an old lantern. Somehow I’d made my studio look like the Goodwill.

“What did you find to play?”

“I just have my James Brown book.”

“We’ve played everything in that.”

“I know. I just didn’t know what to look for.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to branch out,” I suggested. “Try a whole new genre all together. What do you think about some singer song writer stuff.”

“Folk music?” Rich asked. He had on jeans that were worn thin around the fronts, and frayed at the bottom. He could be a folkie, I thought, he was still malleable.

“I don’t know much about it, except that people make fun of it.”

“Stop thinking of it in terms of what you’ve heard about it, and actually listen for yourself. No boundaries,” I said. “In fact, your homework is to pick 5 cd’s over there that you think you hate, and listen to them repeatedly.”

“Ok, but I’m not going to get criticized if I still don’t like this stuff am I?”

“You’ll get criticized no matter what,” I said.

Rich was looking around the room, occasionally scratching his shaggy brown hair.

He fidgeted in his seat, an old bar stool, and looked eager to explain something.

“This is going to make my parents even more suspicious,” he said, and sputtered out another laugh. “They’ll think I’m losing my ‘focus.’”

“Now’s not the time for a huge amount of focusing, just keep listening.”

I played him some Bob Dylan, and a few others, plucked a few cd’s off the shelf, and just to indulge him we played some funk tunes, and played them loud. As he was packing up his guitar, I heard something upstairs. It took my ears a few moments to even recognize what it was, that for the first time in months Paige was singing. Her voice carried around the rooms above us like a low hanging fog, and it was just as chilling, just as haunting, to hear her sounding so beautiful. She must have realized we weren’t going to play anymore, and stopped. She was shy about her voice.

“Is that Paige?” Rich said, looking bewildered. I just nodded.

“She sounds good,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

Rich went home and I was left in my house, with my wife. She had disappeared upstairs and I told myself not to follow her up there.

I picked up the stray pieces of Boo’s dog food and tossed them into his bowl. Paige had taken her old duffle bag upstairs and I thought maybe she was unpacking her things, but when she came down with it over her shoulder, her long hair caught under the strap, I knew she was just reloading.

I didn’t speak to her. If she had sat down next to me right then, and put her hand on mine I would’ve taken her anywhere. In my arms and off to bed, because there’s no

one else's hair I want to be tangled in, and no other skin I want against my lips. I had been waiting all this time for something of the sort, a hand on mine, and maybe some songs. We didn't have to talk.

I have always loved Christmas. It's a holiday that, when I was younger, caused almost as much anxiety, even fear, as it did excitement. I loved it so much I always worried it would be taken away from me by some kind of unknown evil. I still have the old albums my parents used to play around the holidays: Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, and Dean Martin. The songs were like lullabies, and every year I played them until Paige just about went nuts from the repetition.

The next day after Paige left I thought about putting them on and enjoying a glass of good Brandy, but it was early, about 2:00, too early for a party-of-one to begin. Drinking never did much for me anyway; it usually just confused me about what was really going on. I always felt a little clumsy and forgetful when sober, and alcohol only amplified those characteristics. I would get myself into conversations I couldn't talk my way out of, would fall in with the wrong people, and inevitably made bad decisions. It was almost too dangerous to be considered fun. Besides, I didn't feel like mulling over the night before with a head full of Brandy. Paige had tried to say goodbye and I'd gone downstairs and locked myself in Studio A, refusing to give her a proper goodbye. She seemed concerned, but didn't hang around long before she called me childish, and left. So instead of getting the Brandy out, I put on a pair of leather work gloves and took Boo outside. The tree was a beautiful Douglas Fir, the kind you could fall into without feeling a prick. I took it to the very back of the yard, retrieved a spare can of gas from our

garage, and a box of matches. I'm not a handy man, but my garage used to belong to one. This man left behind an array of tools and equipment, all of it used, most of it broken.

The saw I used to cut our tree was from the garage. I'd discovered it back in November and that's when I got the idea that we should go to a Christmas tree farm and cut our own tree. It was a small chainsaw, just enough to zip through a tree trunk in a few seconds. Boo doesn't like loud machinery, but that doesn't keep him from running full speed to come see, smell, and inspect it. The chainsaw started up when he was off alone. I bent over the saw, pulled the cord, and carefully lifted it up and heard Paige cry out. Boo's large head was bumping against my shoulder as he jumped up against me. The saw almost sliced into the taut muscles on his back. I grabbed my dog and punched him across the muzzle, yelling at him to get away. The saw was on the ground, still running, slicing a narrow groove into the ground. The whole way home Paige kept her red scarf twisted tight around her mouth, over her hair.

The tree went up quickly, making the sound of flames greedily sucking on oxygen. I stood by with a garden hose watching it burn, enjoying the symbolism. Boo trotted around the yard, thankfully uninterested in the fire.

The land behind our house seems to belong to no one. Our fence opened up into woods and once you got back there about a thousand feet you'd wander into a wheat field. It belonged to someone; it was trim most of the time. I knew some guys had tree stands back there.

Boo can run. He can practically fly. His long legs are flexible, and when he gets going into stride, all four of them extend fully. For a brief moment during each step he

becomes a straight line slicing into the air, a moving dash among the horizontal lines of the trees. Sometimes he runs away if he smells a deer, or sees a ground hog, but he eventually comes back, and so far it's been worth it to see him run like that. Once I knew he could fly I knew I had to let him. When I see him go, I feel like I'm going too.

It was a warm day and gave me another reason to pout around the woods. A proper Christmas had snow, but this year Christmas was being cancelled. It was the one I feared every year when I was young, the one that was taken from me by a force I couldn't control. I clung to the luster it used to hold, to a feeling that was gone forever, so that every year my sentimentality came closer to sadness.

Boo was screaming, and his head was in a hole. I could see him in the distance shaking his head around. I started running. Ground hog, snake, rabid raccoon; I was ready to grab a wild animal by its neck and fling it hard into the field. But there was no hole, and no animal. Boo was biting at his right arm where a steel hunting trap had closed on his foot. Blood was all over his paws, legs, and mouth. I pried at the mouth of the trap trying to manually release it before realizing the latch was at the base of the trap. Two levers released the jaws immediately, and Boo shuffled back, limping and licking his paw. I tried to use the corner of my jacket to dab the blood off, but Boo wouldn't let me near it.

I picked him up and started toward the house. Sometimes I had to stop and let him lick the blood that seeped from his paw. I didn't feel angry at Boo. I wasn't sad for him or nervous about his leg. I was worried, but calm. Most of all I was wishing Paige

was there to see me march into my yard carrying my bloody dog, to see how calm and strong, and able to do the necessary I was.

She came straight from work after I called, and met me at the vet.

“How the hell could you let this happen?” she said. We stood outside the veterinarian office in the parking lot. “You were with him the whole time, I don’t get it. Wasn’t he on his leash?” On his leash?

“No,” I said.

“Why not? You were just letting him run off the trail, where those guys hunt?”

“It was a steel trap, who uses those anymore?”

Paige threw her hands up and turned around to face the traffic on Edwards Road. Our house was within walking distance. Boo had gotten in to see the doctor right away.

“I’m surprised you’re even here. You’re gone all the time and then show up when something bad happens and act concerned. Just leave. Go back to wherever you’ve been.”

I turned around and went back inside.

There was no damage to Boo’s bones, not even a laceration. He had cuts around his right front paw, but they would heal in a few days. His paw was wrapped, and he limped around the reception area while I paid the bill. Paige was standing in the parking lot alone, and when I came out with Boo, limping and bandaged beside me, she sounded like she was choking back a sob.

Later that afternoon I sat with Boo on the couch while he slept. The sun went down slowly and the Christmas lights persisted. The holiday would always persist, from

now on as an anniversary for my divorce. Paige would unpack and pack her duffle bag for a few more weeks before I presented the papers. She could have her time and her space, and I would have the music, and the dog that survived a steel trap. She would always have her voice. One thing would not change for a long time, that when I sat in silence for too long, I'd hear her singing. I'd get confused about what year it was, what month it was, and what house I was in, before I realized, I'd heard nothing at all.

Pink and Shiny

The line cooks were ignoring me again, even though me and my customers had already waited twenty five minutes for the Cajun pork entrée, medium well, with a side of spinach and pine nuts, hold the pine nuts, and zucchini strata with extra marinara. I was the new girl, new older woman at the restaurant, and I got ignored pretty often. Plus, I was still trying to learn everyone's names because my memory isn't as good as it was, or as good as it should have been to wait tables. Sometimes I forgot what people asked for and I had to go back and politely ask again, what it was they wanted me to get them.

I stood there watching them cook; I could feel my face sweating from the heat lamps. I knew this one man's name, because he always gave me and everyone else a hard time.

"You got my pork Alvin?" I finally asked.

Alvin looked up at me, the whites of his eyes striking against his black skin.

"I see you staring," he said. "It's coming." Alvin was short and stocky with a round head and big lips. While the sous chef next to him moved quickly, almost dancing, Alvin stood still. He didn't appear to be in a hurry, even though it was Friday night at 7:30, the "bewitching hour" for all restaurants. Yellow tickets were hung along the expo line like a defective Tibetan peace flag. He turned to the man working next to him.

"The old lady thinks she's big shit." he said.

The restaurant was shaped like a giant circle, and when I needed to look busy, I would orbit it. I did one lap around, walking quickly because I know what customers like.

They like to see us run. My section was full of people, most of whom looked satisfied except for the man in the corner waiting on his pork, looking nervous, a little too uptight, my daughter's old boyfriend, Sean. He was out with his new girlfriend (who was in the bathroom).

Sean played with his straw paper nervously. He had on a nice black polo shirt. I was wearing black from head to toe.

"So what's her name?" I asked.

"Shannon," he said, and leaned back in his chair as if he had already eaten and was full and relaxed.

"You didn't introduce us," I said. "But that's ok."

He laughed a little, and shook his head, but didn't say anything. It reminded me of my daughter Courtney, how she used to handle awkward situations. She could laugh anything off, just by gently shake her head, letting any sign of embarrassment fall from her long hair.

"Thanks for doing this, Dina."

I thought about the last time we were both wearing black like that. I was thirsty, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"It's my job." I said, and headed to the kitchen to stare down Alvin.

Three years ago Courtney was killed in a car accident. She was eighteen years old, the only child between Rob and I, and her death left us with nothing to say to each other. It made no sense for us to go on together. The only thing to do besides go crazy trying to act normal, was to split up and start over. I took so much blame, from Rob, and

myself, for not being there, that I'd lived like a murderer in secret. But I don't think I ever totally bought into the idea that I was a bad mother, though maybe there are things I should have done differently. I wonder, if someone broke my chest apart what they'd see, if my heart would be pink and shiny like Courtney once said it was.

When I walked back into the kitchen, a wall of heat hit my face. The plates burned my fingers when I reached for them.

"Serviette!" The head chef yelled. I neatly folded a dinner napkin in half long ways twice, then inward twice, forming a neat layered rectangle that opened and closed like a mouth. I checked the spinach to make sure there were no pine nuts, and got an extra ramekin of marinara for the strata. I delicately slid a steak knife under the pork, and picked up the plate so the meat portion would face the customer, Sean. The lasagna was laid in an oval shaped plate, drenched in a tomato ricotta cream sauce, sort of plump and happy with itself as is. It reminded me of what a real human heart looks like, meaty, and sloppy.

Around the time Courtney entered high school, she and I became friends, or as my husband Rob saw it, like a team, and I think he felt defeated by us. He was away for work driving his truck, a member of the Teamsters. He supported us and worked hard, he drove constantly, but when he got back home and saw us sharing a joke, he felt like an outsider to our club. He couldn't relax, be himself, and a father. I loved Rob for a while, but his absence only brought Courtney and I closer.

My efforts to reach out to him backfired. He would get angry when I showed that I cared, and ask questions like, *Why do you need me around anyway? You girls enjoy*

yourselves, forget about me, and just live it up. He tried to sound kind like this was a funny family situation, the mother and daughter always outsmarting Dad. He didn't realize he was ruining us. *Just live it up.*

"Oh wow, look at all this food!" Shannon exclaimed. I served her first.

"Thank you." Sean said, glowing at the sight of his Cajun pork. It was his favorite, and he really did look happy.

It can't be said who the loss is harder on: Rob, Sean, or me. I feel like I lost the greatest friend I ever had, Rob lost the only friend he ever hoped to have, and Sean lost his potential first love. He was a spectacular kid and I think my love for Courtney was pushed, by the inertia of the accident, into Sean. He was with her in the car, and in the ambulance, and I keep in touch with him—if nothing else—to stay close to where I should have been.

That restaurant, among many, was my way of starting over. I was brand new, and for a while I could be whoever I want to be; the nice girl, the guy's girl, the quiet girl. The girl who lets her hair down at the end of the night while everyone cheers. Because that's what it feels like when you're surrounded by chattering twenty-something's, like you're one among many, and this job is just a temporary gig until you really get started on life. It's easy for them to laugh and spend their tips because just as much as they believe this won't last, there will always be more tables, and more tips, and they all seem to carry the false comfort of that idea.

After the dinner rush ended, after all the customers were gone, the classical music came wafting back into the room and mixed oddly with the profanity of the help. Servers

stood around the bar under clouds of cigarette smoke. They asked me to come out for drinks, but I just made jokes about myself, about how I'm too old.

A waitress named Ashley came over and sat down next to me. Some of the others called her Trashley. She has a daughter about a year old and does landscaping during the days, but she is mostly seen at the bars around town. Few people even know she has a daughter.

"So which one of your boyfriends are you taking out tonight?" Ashley looked at me with smiling eyes.

"I'll probably just cuddle up with my body pillow," I said.

"That's what I like about you," she said, chewing her gum. "You know better."

The first time I met her she told us stories about a landscaping job she'd done, and the yard she transformed, how it looked like a jungle when they got started. She described herself beating on her chest, swinging from vines, but by the end of the day it was like fucking paradise, she said.

"Dina, would you mind doing me a life-saving favor?" she asked. "Say no if you're uncomfortable with this, but I'm only asking because I trust you."

I wondered about this overwhelming trust, since I had only been working with her a few weeks, though she was one of my favorite personalities there. She was loud and drank too much, but she was a happy person and would fall defending a friend.

She asked if I would watch her daughter tomorrow while she worked during lunch, and said she would come relieve me in time for me to work the dinner shift. I think she asked me because she knows I have a daughter. What she doesn't know is that I had a

daughter. We were standing over the soup wells one day, scooping hot water out with little plastic cups. The steam was rising into our faces. She told me she went shopping earlier that day and bought her daughter an expensive outfit, something that was too cute to resist. She made a joke about never taking the thing off her daughter until she started to grow out of it. I told her I'd made a few outfits for my own daughter when she was younger, and how now it seemed old fashioned to make clothes. This was the only time I talked about Courtney and I think Ashley just assumes my daughter's still alive.

According to some, she would be if it weren't for me.

I told Ashley I would do it. She said I should come over around 10:30 so I could meet Celia and play with her for a bit before Ashley went to work. She said Celia adapts well to new people and there wasn't much to be done except to play a while, feed her, and put her down for an afternoon nap. There was also a dog at the house, and she made sure I was ok with that. That's fine, I said, I love dogs.

I wondered what kind of child Ashley would have, and how strange it would be to see her with a child in her hands instead of a tray, or a drink. I thought about having to keep Courtney alive in Ashley's eyes for my sake, so I wouldn't have to tell the story. Yet there were stories I wanted to tell about Courtney and what an amazing woman she was going to be, to resurrect in light of what I think she might be doing, if she were still alive. I fell asleep as I did most nights, doing a crossword puzzle with my feet up. I was trying to think of a four letter word for "impair."

Ashley had on her green landscaping polo shirt and khaki shorts when I arrived. Her hair was wet from a shower but already forming permed spirals. Celia was on her

hip as Ashley loudly greeted me. She swung the door opened and hugged me, and when she did the baby's round head brushed against my shoulder. I was scared then, deathly frightened of the child. I could tell her weight just by looking at her, I could smell her baby smell, a powdery scent mixed with dirty diapers, I could see her tiny fingers that were fat at the bottom and tapered out at the tips, and the thin papery finger nails.

"Dina, what in the world is wrong?" Ashley was staring at me with a can of formula in her hand. I tried to relax my face and look natural.

"I, I've never used formula." I said.

"Good God you must've breast fed your daughter until she was 10 years old. I won't let that happen to me, I've got a life!"

Her townhouse was in a development on Locust Street. Her dog Henry was an ugly combination of beagle and shepherd. Cigarette smoke lingered in the room, floated lazily in the few pieces of light that came in through closed blinds. I noticed there were no framed photos on the barren furniture, not even a few on the fridge or on top of the TV. Ashley explained the formula, food, diapers, nap, and stroller routine.

Celia seemed to like me but I couldn't say the same for her. I was still dealing with my reaction to her, and luckily Ashley left her in the play pen instead of handing her off to me. When Ashley said goodbye and Celia heard the door shut, she was in tears. I danced around the play pen trying to distract her with toys and gentle songs, but it was clear she needed to be held. She felt like a wrapped bundle of clean linens, the kind we get from the cleaners once a week at the restaurant. She was warm and a little droopy,

her upper body wavering. I felt like my old self again, not like an old lady server, but like the real mother I used to be. That was my life once, that carrying of extra weight.

The house was quiet and as Celia sat on the floor playing with toys, I began to sing. I could never remember entire songs, only parts. I sang parts of old folky tunes and let my voice whine and yip. I repeated verses over and over. Celia watched me and smiled, went back to her toys, then turned back to me. I picked her up and carried her around the room as I sang, watching her watch me. Her eyelids became heavy before she began to waver and put her head on my shoulder. Pretty soon her weight was dead on me, and the top of her head was resting on my chin, just under my lips.

Sometimes Sean called me at home for what felt like regular check-ups. I usually asked him a slew of similar questions. His health had been back to normal for some time, and he was growing into an alarmingly handsome man. A man who knows French.

He usually called late. I spent my evenings with those crosswords, trying to exercise my mind. I remember the time when I would've spent my evenings waiting for Courtney to get home, and although I know she isn't coming home, I've still got the feeling of waiting. Now I think I'm just waiting for Sean to call.

"Clouds, en Franoise. Six Letters. Can you answer that one, Frenchie?"

"Nuages," he said, and his voice sounded deep and confident. I filled in the boxes feeling giddy.

Ashley was asking me to come over every week. I was becoming affectionate toward Celia, and annoyed with Ashley's sloppy habits. She left cigarette trays on the coffee table where Celia could easily reach them. The carpet was never clean because the

vacuum was broken, and Henry's fur gathered in tufts which Celia picked up. The place started to stink so badly I began lugging my vacuum over there once a week to clean. Maybe I should've gotten frustrated, and made excuses not to go, but I continued to help out with a stupid sense of satisfaction, and always went back for Celia's extra weight.

One day a can opener lay on the floor next to Celia's play pen.

"This was on the floor," I said, holding it in front of Ashley's face. She was on the phone, holding a cigarette in one hand, her lighter in the other. She uttered uh huh, to me or the person on the phone and then hung up.

"I had to open dog food and Celia was going nuts in her play pen," she said defensively. "That's been there five damn minutes."

It was useless to confront her; she was always on the defense. I stopped trying to show her how to be a better mother. I stopped paying attention to Ashley, and paid more attention to Celia.

I watched her when she napped from the recliner in her room, and slept a little myself before she cried us both awake. Then she would sit up on my lap, rub her eyes and bury her head in my chest for a few moments. She sat up and then collapsed like that for a while.

After naps we took a walk with her in the stroller around the townhouses. People sat outside all. Children too, were out everyday, even the ones that were old enough to be in school. A few of them usually tried to bum cigarettes from me. What bothered me most were the adults who hung around the playground without any children. They sat on the benches around the jungle gym, and the stairs that led up to the slide and the rope

bridge, as if they were the stoops to their own front porches. They smoked, cussed, complained, and got sunburned, day after day.

One day I was with Celia in the stroller, walking laps around the development when a girl, about five years old, raced by on a plastic tricycle. She had matted brown hair and looked at me with a hard face and held my gaze before lifting her left hand up and raising a stiff middle finger.

Things got to be routine enough that when I heard Ashley was leaving the restaurant I was taken off guard. She was moving to work in landscaping full time, with her boyfriend thirty minutes out of town. We would talk about keeping in touch but she would fade away with time, as everyone does. Our faces always tell one another it's going to be fine, but after the last night of work we never see one another again. Someone can come back and visit, sit at the tables and talk to us, but they aren't running with us, and somehow the friendship becomes questionable. Then the occasional visits and calls end. The work is the only thing that binds us.

On her last night the girls wanted to take Ashley out after work, and the names of local clubs flew from their mouths like vulgarities.

"Club Wet, or Bid Daddie's?" They negotiated as if it mattered, as if there was a difference between one and the next. I heard Ashley talking about full mug night, body shots, beer bongs, and pole dancing. After sweeping the kitchen I sat down to a steaming plate of filet.

"Fuck that place, the guys there are all old!" She was at the bar drinking a Long Island iced tea.

“And poor! I want to be surrounded by people who at least pretend to have some class,” she was laughing loudly.

“Besides, Jack is out of town tonight and I’m sick of him.”

Jack is her boyfriend, and I know she stays with him for the same reason she befriended me, to use us a babysitters. She and her mom stopped talking when she had Celia and from what I know she has no other family.

“Hey Dina, isn’t your daughter eighteen? She could come to teen night at Midnight Lounge.”

“She wouldn’t want to be seen out with me,” I said.

“But you’re such the cool mom, Dina, you could help her find a boyfriend.”

I thought about Sean and wanted to tell them they had no idea.

The cooks came out then and the attention turned to them as the girls shrieked and giggled as they surrounded the men who sat down to smoke and drink and look haggard like always. The dishwashers came from their steamy dish hole, the managers counted money with cigarettes hanging heavily from their creased faces. Girls stood around in groups, alliances within alliances. It was like some sort of sad casino.

It occurred to me that Ashley had no one to watch Celia that night. I knew her possibilities; and I knew she had few. Ashley’s friends, the ones at work that made her feel popular, were all somewhere around 21, and asking them to help care for her child would be like speaking to them in a different language.

When I saw Ashley turn from the bar to go the bathroom I followed her around the corner.

“Hey,” I said, and she turned to face me.

“Did you find someone to watch Celia tonight, or do you need my help?”

“No, don’t worry about it Dina.”

“Well did you find someone, someone you’re comfortable with, who...”

“Don’t worry about it. Alright?”

She turned and walked away. My face burned. She was lying to me.

As I walked to my car I was yelled at twice by cars passing by full of bass and shadowy forms of people inside, voices mixing with music. I couldn’t tell what any of them said, or how they expected me to react. Their voices were always like fading howls, just a way to be heard before disappearing on their way to nowhere. When I approached my car with keys ready, another car pulled up next to me.

“Dinamite!” It was Sean.

“More like Dinosaur,” I said, turning to his bright face. He was in his beige Toyota Camry, a regular car he hated with an unusual passion.

“Where you headed? Want to go to West Winds?”

“No sir. I’ve had enough young people trying to seduce me into the night tonight. All I want is my pillow, my feet up, and my,”

“Crosswords.” he interrupted. “They’re you’re way of hiding from the real world.”

“They are the real world, which I happen to be familiar with, thanks.”

“They’re abbreviated questions and answers, and you are too smart for that. C’mon. Mashed potatoes with yellow gravy, and coffee, on me.”

I turned around trying not to smile too hard.

“Ok,” I said, waving my arms and rattling my keys. “But I may ask you for a favor in return, ok?”

At the diner, the song “Lola” piped from the juke box . It was Sean’s joke to play this song every time he went there. Sean didn’t know it, but Courtney told me once when she was talking about them, and the things they used to do.

Our waitress was a woman named Barbara, who was nice in the way that made you sure she had a terrible past, and she thought if she could smile hard enough through the rest of her future, it might help with the things only she knew she had done. I recognized this in myself and always wanted to tell her to relax a little. That the world would forgive her, and that she was going to be ok.

A few punk rockers ate in the corner. They never caused any trouble, except they were a bit loud, but it was always from laughter. These were people that knew they were ok, that maybe had too much confidence and that same confidence would get them into trouble one day. They were so sure of themselves that they chose appearances that made them a spectacle, though I wondered what was behind it all. Some of them will probably end up like Barbara or me, waiting tables and smiling too hard.

“So how have you been?” Sean asked, as he peeled open a pack of sugar.

“Fine,” I said. I looked at Sean and it hit me, as it sometimes does, that he was next to Courtney the whole time, while they were hurt, while they were waiting, while she was dying. This brought so much wreckage into my heart, but Sean always insisted

he didn't remember anything, just driving, then the hospital. He hit his head hard and said it couldn't have worked out better for him.

"Would you come with me somewhere?" I asked. "I think my friend left her baby alone tonight so she could go get drunk."

"You want to go get the baby?"

"I just need to know. She's not really a friend I don't think, it's just that I could be there to watch the baby but she didn't even ask me and I don't know why because I've done it so many times before and now I think there's something I did wrong, but I can't think of what."

"Dina," Sean said. "I'll go, it's fine."

"It's not fair," I said.

"We'll go over there and see."

When we pulled up to the townhouse it looked dark, one of many huddled together. It was almost midnight and no cars were out front. I told Sean to drive around to the playground that ran behind Ashley's back patio. From behind there was one light on upstairs, a dim light in Ashley's bedroom window. Celia's light was off.

"Do you think her baby, the baby. What's its name?"

"Celia."

"Maybe Celia is with someone else, at another person's house. Maybe she's not even here."

It just occurred to me that her boyfriend might have Celia out of town. I stopped to consider it. Although the thought was somewhat realistic it wasn't satisfying to me.

“No I don’t think so.”

“Well what do you know? Isn’t that possible? Could she? Dina?”

I was out of the car then, walking down over a small culvert up to their back patio where I pried at the sliding glass doors. Henry came to the window and looked at me but didn’t bark. He just put his nose against the window and wagged his tail.

I walked back to the front as Sean circled the car around. I tried the front door and looked in the windows. There was a key I knew about, hidden under a rock in the shrubs. I had to get on my hands and knees to reach under the dense branches, but my hands couldn’t find it. I knew Ashley would be moving in a few weeks, but I didn’t understand why she’d remove it so soon. I dug around with my hands, thinking she might have hidden it somewhere else. Sean turned his headlights on and I dug around in the bright lights. I looked in the front window again. The house was dark, but I sensed a life inside.

“Hit the horn,” I yelled to Sean, but he just sat at the steering wheel in the dark. I walked to the front of his car.

“Hit the horn!”

He shook his head, and I saw him throw up his hands in frustration before he lethargically tapped it a few times.

I walked over to him, opened his car door and laid on the horn.

“They’ll think it’s a cab, alright?” I looked at him and knew he’d seen too much of this. But he had no idea, no idea how hard I could work.

“Dina, stop.”

“Stop what? Stop trying to help her?”

I walked back to the front door and pressed my ear against it. I couldn't hear anything, but felt a vibration coming from inside. I closed my eyes and listened closer. Why wasn't she there so I could save her? I kept listening for the sound of crying but couldn't hear anything over the sound of my own, though I thought if I just stayed and listened longer, she would somehow know how much I tried.

Sharing Talents

Sandy's sister Janis was coming in to have her hair cut, because she needed a trim on what she called her "divorce cut." Janis once had long hair that slid around her elbows, but now wore a shorter style that required an automatic razor to trim up her neck. Janis was undeniably beautiful. She was flighty, clumsy, ignorant and unaware in just the right ways to make her irresistibly charming. Sandy had once told her that almost every man that ever met her has fallen in love with her in some way. She often found herself fearing that her own husband Hugh had always loved Janis too, and now that she was divorced, Sandy found herself unable to stop considering the thought.

Sandy was alone in the salon with Mrs. France, a woman who liked her hair short, curly, and as white as the cement patio of her retirement home. But as Sandy was lifting the foils from Mrs. France's large and slightly balding scalp she could tell she had let her sit too long under the heat, and a tinge of purple was starting to appear. She had to interrupt Mrs. France's story about her son's blind date to show her over to the wash tubs and give her a shampoo where she held her breath waiting for the results under the spray nozzle. Mrs. France was not one of her usual clients. When the owner of the salon, Margaret, had taken a week's vacation, Sandy took her customers as they were willing, and did not mention that she was still an apprentice. She needed the extra experience, she and Margaret had agreed. As she ran her fingers through Mrs. France's short hair she feared it may come off in gobs in her hands, after which she could kiss her hairstyling career goodbye. She tightened her mouth and chewed on the inside of her lip, knowing

she had other options. She didn't technically need the job. With a man like Hugh she knew she'd always be cared for.

Janis's marriage, on the other hand, ended in her husband's adultery after only two years, and Sandy was not surprised. Don was too much for himself, Sandy had always thought, he was almost as pretty and charming as Janis, knew he could get anything he wanted, and never knew when to stop. Janis was beautiful, a prize to be won by any man, especially the enterprising type who can only hope to have a woman as attractive as their mutual funds. Sandy was almost glad to see them split, because seeing them together was almost more painful than seeing them apart. Together they were like two aspiring actors trying to out perform each another. And always over-dressed, she thought.

Sandy had worked hard for her styling job, and landed the only existing position alongside Margaret, whose salon had a reputation for being the best in town. She was well known among the richest or aspiring-to-be-richest women in town, which attracted a generally older clientele. Sandy admired Margaret's talents but also recognized a certain formula to her work: each woman came out looking almost the same, with hair that was too sculpted, and that made the women look older than they already were. But the business was good, and the women came and went consistently, so the salon operated like a smooth running factory that produced snow-capped heads on the town's wealthiest women.

As she took Mrs. France back to the chair to set her hair in curlers, she rambled on about her son Simon and his dilemma of being twice divorced at age forty, how she

didn't understand how it happened or how he would find a woman his age. She went on philosophizing about marriages in the modern age and asked Sandy about her own.

"Hugh is a good man." Sandy said, because "good" was the only word that came to mind.

"I mean, I think many women would dream of having a husband so helpful," she said. "When anyone needs help he is always willing to lend a hand, and he's good at so many things. He's always rescuing someone."

She thought about the day Janis called her in tears after trying to start her lawn mower. She had pulled on the starter cord about twenty times and worked up a bunch of sweat and frustration until she accidentally let it snap back and hit her foot before running into the house in tears to call Sandy. When she asked Janis how she had managed before she said it was a service Don had set up through a friend, and she never knew who cut the grass or how, just that it was always cut on time. Sandy sent Hugh over to help her, his riding mower in tow. She didn't blame Janis for not being able to start the old push mower, yet couldn't imagine her being able to finish such a job even if she did get it started. Janis was determined in many ways, initially, but what always got the job done, whatever it was, depended on who she called in tears at the last minute. Sandy often offered Hugh's help, to maintain the house, and mow the grass, though sometimes she suspected she had offered too much.

Mrs. France's hair was platinum silver under the fluorescent lights, and Sandy felt relieved as she combed the hair out under the blow dryer. She looked into the mirror and

saw Mrs. France's lips moving in the mirror, trying to tell her something. She switched off the dryer.

"Some women need a hero," Mrs. France said. "I'd like to think we all end up with whoever we need." Sandy watched as her eyes scanned the top of her hair and she reached up to grab a strand.

"I don't think I need a hero, it just helps to marry a man that has a good sense of consideration for others. I mean I've always been independent, and Hugh knows that if anyone does. He knows he can help to a degree but when it comes to me and my career it's my responsibility and there's nothing he can..."

"The color is different this time." Mrs. France frowned and didn't seem like she heard anything Sandy was saying. Sandy stood clutching her hair dryer and staring at the mirror trying to think of the right thing to say. She could say it's the new style, that more women were experimenting with an edgier color, highlights for the upcoming summer, late summer season.

"Margaret's never used this color on me before." Mrs. France said. "It's fun."

On the way out Mrs. France pressed an extra ten dollar bill into Sandy's hand, and told her to let her know if she knew anyone interested, that Simon was available. As she stepped out of the salon the bells on the door rang her into the afternoon sun and Sandy noticed there was an undeniable purple tint to her hair.

Janis opened the garage from the kitchen and stepped into it, then into her Chrysler LeBaron convertible. She backed out of the garage, and hit the switch to automatically put the top down. She wore large sunglasses. She never wanted these things when the word divorce was being discussed. It wasn't her way of winning Don's things, though he had always been generous to her. When the affair was revealed she took everything Don was willing to give her. He felt guilty about his betrayal, and Janis silently accepted every last possession, to sell, for pleasure, or throw off the back balcony on lonely intoxicated nights.

People seemed to offer her all sorts of things. Janis found it harder to say no than to say yes and accepted all the favors and even some of the pity offered by friends and family. It seemed like that was what she was supposed to do, like it would be offensive if she didn't. She was especially surprised when Sandy had been so understanding, or at least acted that way. Sandy was always a bit superior about her marriage and their money, how everything was secure and strong like the foundations that Hugh built for all the new houses around town. Sandy recognized her own faults in trivial cutesy ways, but she always triumphed where Janis failed.

As Janis pulled out she noticed her lawn was growing long again and imagined snakes coming to breed in her large yard. This is what brought Hugh to her first. He was glad to help, and once a week dutifully rode his riding mower into and out of the shadow of her three story miniature mansion. Then she needed some furniture moved in, some moved out, and wanted to repaint every room in the house after Don was gone. Don

liked minimal designs and Japanese artwork; white or red walls with inky brush paintings of plants. Janis had always wanted to hang pieces she had collected from her job at the local art gallery. She began to redecorate, and often enthusiastically explained her design concepts to Hugh who always stood there nodding with his hands on hips and said things like, 'That's really something.' He didn't know much about art or interior design, Janis knew, but he always listened so well. He never stopped her ideas short.

At the salon Sandy was alone sweeping the floor, listening to talk radio. Janis stood at the door, took her sun glasses off, and hung her shoulders.

"Sister, fix me," Janis said letting her face drop into a pout.

"If by fix, you mean trim up that unsightly neck hair of yours, I can certainly do just that. Take a seat, gorgeous."

Janis sat down and looked at Sandy in the mirror. She always enjoyed this part of getting her hair done the most, being able to see the reflection of them so close together, unpoised and unaware, talking and gesturing in ways that were so ghostly reminiscent of the other. Everything about Sandy was larger than Janis, yet not in ways that seemed sizably important. Sandy had bigger hands and fingers, a bigger nose and face, and was taller and thicker all over. She was built. Hugh liked to build. He had a built woman. She was strong and practical, just like something he would build. Janis was small and thin, her face like a doll's, delicate, she thought, as if she could be chipped.

"Sandy, have you ever thought about places like India?"

"I never gave it much thought, no."

"I like the sound of it, and I think I'm going to go there."

“With who, and do what exactly?”

“Buy some art, bring it to my gallery, and make millions.”

“Well, it’s not your gallery, is it?”

“No, but it will be. See I haven’t had a chance to tell you about my new plan to take over.”

“You want to take over and then just leave town?”

“I thought it might be nice to get out of town for a bit, and become almost forgotten before I come back.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll be gone long enough so that people like you will say things like, ‘Janis has been gone a long time, hasn’t she?’ And then a week or so later I’ll return, tan as ever and carrying armfuls of art. I may even meet a man.”

“What do you want done?”

“Well, I don’t think I ever thought of it that way. I guess I don’t expect anything to be done really....”

“Your hair, silly. Just a trim? Any color? And are you going to grow this out at all or just keep trimming it back?”

Janis looked at herself and considered the length, how one night she had finished off Don’s bottle of bourbon and taken an expensive pair of shears up to the third floor guest bedroom. At first she cut too close to her scalp, then tried to make bangs in the front and layers in the back. But she had gotten sick midway through and found herself

laying next to the toilet in her locks, crying. She wore a pink turban to Sandy's salon the next day, hung over, and asked her to fix it.

"Color it darker. It's time for something more dramatic," she said. "Hey, how is Hugh doing? I haven't seen him in a while."

"He should've been by to mow the other day."

"I didn't see him."

"Maybe he came by while you were at work."

"That's true I guess."

"Maybe the grass just didn't need cutting this week. Besides, it's been cooler lately, don't you think?"

"I have some old paintings I need taken out of the upstairs guest rooms, I was hoping he could carry down for me. They're Don's old pieces. Hideous things."

"Hugh's been really busy with his business lately."

"Oh? Are they building another Sears Tower here in town?"

Hugh was on the phone trying to hear over the sound of a nail compressor, trying to soothe the homeowner into believing the house was on schedule. The truth was, things were a mess and problems were reappearing like swarming termites. Hugh kept trying to figure out how things had gotten so behind, how the weeks slipped by and less work was

getting done. He considered the idea that he might not have hired enough contractors, that his work force was weak in some places. Maybe not enough roofing guys. But the roof wasn't being built yet. He couldn't find anywhere for an answer to fit, and blamed himself. He was still new at managing these projects, at pushing production, and trying to finish homes in under a month. He didn't believe there was any reason to hurry. A good house would take time to build. Materials were piled around the house unused, making it look like a fortress with men crawling all over it inside and out. A bunch of ants trying to build a hill.

"Ma'am. It's all my fault. Yes, that's what I said. I'm your blame guy. But also know I'm going to have this place shaping up from here on out." He wiped sweat off his forehead.

"No I won't fire anyone. It's my fault and I'm going to fix it."

He hung up and looked back at the house. Some of the guys were cussing about the big oak tree out front getting in their way as they were hauling wood across the yard.

He shook his head at them and smiled to himself. He had to fight against them and everyone else to keep that tree when they cleared and leveled the lot. He called over to them that he was leaving for lunch and told them to do the same. He would ride over to see Sandy at work, but also wondered if Janis needed any help. He realized if he drove out to her house it could take longer than an average lunch break, and he didn't want his absence from the site to provoke any more slacking. He got into his truck and drove aimlessly around town meditating on how to speed up the progress at work, absently heading towards Margaret's salon. He drove down near the river where men were fishing.

Some stood up and watched their lines, tentatively waiting, while others had chairs and coolers and little radios, and sat expecting nothing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd just sat still and done nothing. Just stared at the water, and let it hypnotize him while the sun made him warm and sleepy. He needed more time. He would call the homeowners back and tell them, three more weeks. He noticed Margaret's car wasn't there, and that the only cars in the lot were Sandy and Janis's. He pulled into the parking lot, abruptly, forcing the driver behind him to swerve into the other lane to avoid hitting his fender.

He sat in the parking lot for a moment unsure of why he had suddenly decided to go there. He looked over at Janis's LeBaron, parked next to the building with its top down, the white leather interior almost blinding in the sun. He got out and walked past it looking in, thinking it funny how cars reveal people's habits. Stuffed between the gear shift and the passenger's seat was a silky piece of pink and orange fabric. Hugh found himself fixed on the colors as he leaned closer to look, wondering what it could be and how it hadn't flown out while she was driving. He knew she speeded. It was a scarf, and when he touched it, realized how dirty his hands were, and dropped it back onto the seat, gingerly tucking it back into the crevice. Strange thing to have in the car, he thought.

Inside the salon Sandy was washing Janis's hair in the sink. Hugh waved and lingered by the door, shifting his weight and looking around.

"Hey there, husband." Sandy said. She helped Janis sit up and wrapped a towel around her head. "Slow day today?"

“Not at all. We’re as busy and behind as ever,” he said. Sandy led Janis to the chair, and then began massaging her head with the towel still on. Janis caught Hugh’s eye in the mirror and gave him a celebrity smile.

“Well then you probably shouldn’t be hanging out with two girls in a salon during your lunch break, should you?”

“I was driving by and saw your car,” he said, and shrugged. “Just thought I’d pop in.” He stood by the door watching her work, not ready to let himself in yet.

“It’s a messy project down there. The whole thing is becoming a pest.”

“It’s sure not a pest to our bank account,” Sandy said. “It’s a good business for you. Just remember that.”

He’d heard this before from Sandy, and tried to think of ways to change the subject. He did a mental check list of topics that usually needed to be covered: medical type appointments, house repairs, errands, taxes, bank deposits, visits from family members, movies, sales, requests for dinner. There was always this list arranged in his mind just so. It had accumulated after years of marriage and was the only way to keep him straight. But it didn’t matter that he was there doing his checklist, because Janis had started chattering about traveling and celebrities while Sandy nodded vigorously, catching every word. Sandy dried her hair, which was darker now, almost black, and it made her skin look paler, even more flawless. Janis loved it, and Hugh watched as she reached up and touched her head in neck in various places, gently and sparingly.

“What do you think Hugh? Do you like it?”

“Looks great. But it looked great before.”

“Oh, no. This is much better. Maybe I will let it grow longer, just enough to bounce around my face.”

Sandy looked at her and imagined her hair hanging around her chin in soft black curls. She sensed another disaster. There would be tears, once again mixing with hair, a problem needing fixing. And with that always a fear that she would and wouldn't be called on to help. She was always poised to catch the problems Janis threw into her safety net of a life. Otherwise, it would be a man with irresistible expertise that would catch her falling. At the bank, or the airport, the man who appraises her ring, or does her yard work. She looked at Hugh, who was looking at Janis, who was looking in the mirror.

You've Never Had This Before

A terrible smell filled the house as Barry tried to concentrate in his study. He was looking at real estate on line, browsing the market for a new investment. His wife Linda was downstairs cooking dinner for the family. He went to the hall where the smell was stronger. He could hear Linda's high heels clicking around in the kitchen. She never used to wear high heels while cooking, and recently the recipes, Barry had noticed, came from fancy cookbooks—healthy entrees with more ingredients and expensive spices. But sometimes he missed meatloaf with the cereal topping, and the mayonnaise based salads with fruit and marshmallows. This was to be expected when a man becomes a millionaire. Things change. He just never imagined the cooking would become so terrible.

“Carl! Helen! Get down here and tell me what you want to drink!” Linda yelled. Barry wandered into the kitchen and put his hands on his hips.

Linda was struggling to open a small jar of nutmeg.

“It's for the roasted figs, which are for dessert, but they need to be seasoned now before they go into the oven,” she said, and handed him the jar. “Also, stir the sauce on the stove.” She squeezed her fingers with her left hand.

“Quickly, before it congeals!”

Barry was pretty sure nothing she used to cook ever had the problem of congealing.

Linda had on a white silk blouse, and black slacks that came up high on her waist secured with a black belt. She was dressed up, but the towel on her shoulder reminded him of when their kids were babies.

“What are you making?” he asked. His strong hands popped the jar open. Linda was rooting around in the fridge and muttered something that sounded like, *you’ll see*. She had been making Barry wait and see so much lately that he’d been tip-toeing around her every mood. He dusted the figs while she filled four large glasses with ice from the dispenser and then lined them up on the countertop.

“What time is it?” Linda asked. “I feel like I’m running behind.”

“Are we having appetizers?” Barry asked.

“No, I don’t want to keep them too long.”

“Where are the kids?” Barry asked.

“Upstairs,” Linda said. “They’re on their computers. Carl is playing that Sims game again.”

“And Helen?”

“Helen, Helen,” she said, smiling as she leaned on the counter.

“She’s looking for antiques, or, poetry or something. That’s her new thing, you know.” She turned around to check on the sauce. Barry walked behind her and stood close to her. He swept her black curly hair to the side, and kissed the back of her neck.

“You don’t have to do all this,” he said.

“Make dinner? Who else is going to do it?”

“Just tell me one thing. Where are you hiding the Sloppy Joes?” he asked. She shook her head, and shook him off.

“I’m serious,” he said, as he pulled a brown paper bag from the cupboard and began to pinch some brown sugar out and sprinkle it onto the figs.

“No, don’t add any sugar to those. I’m following the low-calorie recipe,” she said.

“You’d think these people could sit through a nice dinner their neighbors prepared for them without thinking about calories.”

“I’m not trying to teach anyone how to be polite, and I don’t want to stuff them, Southern style. Robin must weigh 80 pounds!”

“We’re from Pennsylvania. We’re not Southern.” Barry said.

“They must think we are.” Linda replied.

“Did they say that?” he asked. Linda just raised her eyebrows at him, as if to say, *compared to them we’re rednecks, and don’t act like you’ve never thought about it.* The look on her face reminded him of how she looked the day he told her they were moving, and how she looked recently. Disappointed. It wasn’t the expression he’d hoped to see, or imagined. Six months in their new house and Linda’s expression lost all signs of determined happiness.

“If we can’t fit into this place soon I want to move,” she’d said. “I feel like we’re living on an island. And look at the kids, they’re isolated.” She waved her arms around, the kitchen towel in her hand flying in the air like a white flag of surrender. “It’s not working, Barry.” He suggested that maybe the kids were getting too old to be running

around like they did in the old neighborhood, that now they could stand to meet some kids their own age.

“They may be getting older, but they’re not about to start crunching numbers with the investment bankers down the block.”

Barry remembered his hands, how they went to fists and twisted around in his pockets. “Let’s just try a little harder, ok?”

Attempting to make Linda feel like they were really settled, and the house was their home, he made himself useful all week, fixing things around the house, and tooling around in the backyard as if he still chopped wood and did all the landscaping, as if he hadn’t had to call Roy, their yard worker, and tell him not to come over that day, just for theatrics. He even tried to get Carl outside and help him, just like when he was young, but Carl only complained and kept asking why Roy couldn’t do it.

Helen appeared at the doorway of the kitchen, wearing a white dress, looking like a ghost and startling them. She always appeared and disappeared quietly, her presence soft, like the fabric of her dress.

“It smells odd in here,” she said.

“You’ve never had this before,” Linda said. “Get your drink and go sit down.” She handed her a tall glass of ice.

Helen opened the fridge and brought out a glass tube of Norweigan mineral water and disappeared into the dining room.

Someone’s car alarm went off in the distance. No one noticed, except Barry, who walked to the front of the house to look out the windows. Their new neighborhood was

dark. With no street lamps lining the sidewalks, and no lights glowing in windows, it was as dark as a forest at night. Their old neighborhood was the kind where mothers met on front porches, and men did their own yard work. It was a village of old four squares and simple craftsman bungalows and Barry had built almost every home in it. He gazed out the window imagining the sound of lawnmowers and barking dogs. He ran his fingers along the window panes, checking for cracks and inconsistencies. The house was under his constant inspection, because it was the only house they lived in that Barry hadn't built. He loved a good space like he loved the caverns above his wife's collar bones. He knew what made a house strong, and he'd built every house his family ever lived in, except this one, a two story Shingle Style built around 1910. Barry had fallen in love with it for its rebellious wandering floor plan. It was not an exceptionally large home, but it stood out among the frilly Queen Annes and Eastlake Victorians.

The car alarm finally stopped as Linda came into the family room.

"Barry, I'm taking a big risk tonight. I've never made this before." She was twisting the kitchen towel around in her hands. "I almost tried to start something new a half hour ago but I don't have enough ingredients to turn back now. What if no one likes this? What if our guests get the wrong impression? What if they walk away hungry?"

"Then we'll call up the neighborhood caterer. They deliver late and they have incredible duck." Linda didn't like the idea of that, though at one time the idea of ordering duck, *ordering* it, would have sent her flying high with excitement. Something was happening to Linda. She was adapting, and much quicker than she'd expected to. It

made her stomach turn sometimes to know that more and more meant less, and not even the time she spent in front of her stove was the same.

“But they’ll never know how good of a cook I am. I mean, I’m ok, I’m just not bad. I don’t want to be remembered as *bad*.”

“You are a fine cook,” Barry said.

Their twelve year old son Carl looked like an overweight electronics salesman as he plodded down the wooden steps to the kitchen. Tiny tv screens bulged from each of his pockets, headphones were cradled around his neck, and a Discman was clipped to his belt. He wore a white button down shirt.

“You’re looking at the new Mayor of Huskertonniville,” he announced to no one directly.

“I SAID, I’M THE DAMN MAYOR, PEOPLE!” Carl stood at the bottom of the stairs with his arms wide.

“Come get your drink, Carl,” Linda said.

“The Mayor of Huskertonniville does not get his own drinks. He is served by all!”

“Mayors serve their people,” Helen said from the dining room.

Carl stepped into the kitchen.

“What is Huskertonniville, honey?” Linda asked.

“It’s the town I created on Sims, a town where everyone has a pool and a Hummer, and all the women are hot hot hot.” He chuckled as he grabbed a can of Coke from the fridge.

“Water first, Carl,” said Linda in a low voice.

“Something else about Huskertonniville,” Carl said, pushing the can of Coke to the side. “Coke flows from the fountains.” He filled his glass at the sink and dragged his feet into the dining room.

Barry stepped away from the curtains, not wanting to be seen by their neighbors from across the street, Robin and Brad, who were coming for dinner. The family had lived there six months before they met their neighbors. Linda met Robin in the grocery store one night and introduced herself. Robin apologized for not saying hello, and explained that she often travels overseas for work, and that her husband is hardly home either. Linda offered to make dinner for the “worker bees” any time they were both able to visit.

As Linda set the table, the family wandered aimlessly from the dining room to the kitchen, watching. She retrieved a fondue pot and placed in the center of the table, and then laid a few mesh spoons around it. She knew that to do the recipe the traditional way, the *real* way, was to use an earthenware casserole dish called a *donabe*, but she thought it was rather efficient to use the fondue pot that was still in its box from their wedding day. The kids eventually got tired and sat down at the table. Carl played a hand held video game and Helen pulled a book from somewhere and read. Linda and Barry were left in the kitchen alone, waiting.

“Shouldn’t there be more pots on the stove?” Barry asked. “Is there a salad somewhere?”

“No.” Linda said. He seemed overly concerned with making a certain impression. He had been pining for information all week, about her meeting with Robin in the grocery store. He wanted to know everything about these people and Linda was starting to think it was ridiculous. But she couldn’t deny her own urge to make an impression, to prepare, for the first time, a traditional Japanese dish. Robin had been well spoken, polite, and formal yet, she wasn’t warm. Linda didn’t understand it.

Brad and Robin arrived with apologies, stories of traffic and late meetings, their long black coats swirling around them like capes.

“Robin thought we should at least bring something for an appetizer or dessert,” Brad said. “But I figured you guys are hosting, so we’ll let you cook!” Brad had a boyish face and a fraternity brother air about him. Robin was small and delicate, around five feet tall. Her sandy hair was pushed back into a tight pony tail.

Linda wailed in opposition, Barry offered a handshake, and the kids stood there watching quietly. Barry ordered them to take their guest’s coats, and hang them in the hall closet. Once everyone was seated Linda retrieved the trays, put out a trio of sauces, and filled the fondue pot with the mixture on the stove.

“Shabu Shabu,” she coolly announced.

“Oh yes,” Robin said quietly. “This is fine Linda.”

“What the,” Carl began.

“You take the raw vegetables and meat, place them into the pot, watch them cook, and retrieve the pieces with your spoon,” Robin explained. “I’ve had this in Japan. Do

you have eggs to poach in the broth?”

“I’ll have to check on that.” Linda said.

Raw vegetables were neatly chopped and arranged in rows, slices of beef and squares of tofu, and the ponzu, mojimi, and oshi sauces, all made from scratch.

“This is really fantastic,” Brad said. “But Linda, I would’ve been happy with fried chicken, really.”

“I haven’t made fried chicken in five years,” she said quietly.

“So we have to cook the food ourselves?” Barry asked.

“Well you don’t have to cook anything; you just have to wait while it cooks.”

Linda explained.

“How long do we have to wait?” Carl asked.

“She can make a wonderful shepherd’s pie.” Barry said.

“Linda, did you make the sauces yourself?” Robin asked, tweezing some carrots onto her plate.

“Of course!”

Brad was the first to submerge a piece of beef into the broth. The family half stood and half sat around the fondue pot, watching the beef float around and turn the water grey. He fished it out and declared it to be delicious. Everyone else began to add pieces, and waited eagerly for them to cook, crowding around the pot.

“Ugh, do we get any bread at least?” Carl was standing up looking into the pot.

“What is tofu exactly?” Barry asked.

“It’s the white chunks in there.” Linda said. “A meat substitute.”

“But there’s beef in there too. What’s the point of having tofu?” Carl asked.

“Tofu is made of soy,” Robin said to Carl.

“It’s what the recipe called for,” Linda said. “Maybe some people actually like the taste of tofu.”

“It’s not bad, Mom,” Helen said gently. She was sweeping the food around with her fork, and eating small bites. “It’s really simple, so there’s not much flavor.” Linda looked at her daughter, and thought about how Helen was always sympathetic to her, as if she were following a mother daughter defense code. She didn’t always say things in the nicest way, but she meant well every time, Linda knew that. She wondered if anyone else would grow to notice and love this about Helen.

“I first had this in Yokohama at a place right inside the train station. It was so fresh. Have you been to Japan, Linda?”

“Oh, no. It seems like a lot of travel.”

“Brad, what do you do?” Barry asked.

“I’ve been working for Longevity Trust Bank for almost ten years.” Brad snapped a carrot stick in half with his hands. “Man, you wouldn’t believe the money I’ve seen change hands,” His elbows were on the tables and he gestured his hands with the carrot, as if to demonstrate. “Nothing like the paychecks I get for working there.”

“I work for myself, and in a way, always have,” Barry replied. “This town is growing, and you have to look around and ask yourself, how am I going to benefit?”

“What I wonder about, is my commitment and how much it really pays off. If a man commits himself to a company for twenty-five years, will it really be worth it?”

“Brad doesn’t like to travel that much. He’s fond of the East Coast, and will venture elsewhere in the States, but it’s a struggle to get him overseas,” Robin explained this to Linda as if she had the same problem. “Over any sea, mind you.”

“I was always taught to stick with what you know, and to stick with the routine. That success comes from hard work and dedication, like brawn above brains,” Brad said.

“My father died a few years ago and since then we’ve also made a change. We live in the family’s old house now. What a mess it was when we moved in! Repairs and updates were needed in every room, inside and out,” Robin went on. “Oh, and don’t get me started on the kitschy décor. That was the worst!” Linda thought of her mother and father’s home. She knew what Robin meant by “kitschy”, but would never talk about it when they were gone. Something about it seemed wrong to her.

“It seems to me that Huskerton has become somewhat of a secret, and that locals are doing their best to make newcomers feel unwanted. They don’t see the expansion as a good thing.”

Linda brought out the roasted figs and they munched amiably. Carl continued to be unsatisfied. What remained was a pot of luke-warm grey water. Pieces of half cooked beef still floated in the murky waters. No one was full, yet no one was eager to eat. Linda almost apologized for her experimental meal, but stopped herself. She didn’t want to hear their fabricated objections. Barry told the kids to get ready for bed, and they politely said goodnight to Robin and Brad, who shortly after thanked their hosts for a lovely dinner and said they must be getting home. They wrapped themselves in their

heavy back coats; they promised they would get together and do it again soon. The back door let the night air in; it was cold and clashed with the smells of the warm kitchen.

Barry gathered the dishes and brought them from the dining room. Linda shined the granite tops, trying to imagine their future in the reflection. Would this be their new social life, a game of make believe that they had the same questions and problems about life that these other people did, or would they be loved by their neighbors for being the funny simpletons. She couldn't imagine which was worse.

"Brad's an alright guy," Barry said slowly. He put a stack of plates in the sink. "Very smart."

Linda nodded while she wiped. "Yes, Robin too. Educated, and experienced." She stopped wiping and looked up, thoughtfully.

"A little too smart," she said. "I made this dinner thinking it would blow everyone's socks off, but then Robin came in with her knowledge of customary Japanese party food. Did you hear her ask about poaching the egg?"

"I think she was impressed," he said. "And she's not a bad person."

"I'm sure she's a fine person," Linda said. She had stopped cleaning to look at the floor, and shift her weight back and forth. "Hey, remember the way the kitchen floor was slanted in our old house?"

"Yeah, my brother Bobby's fault."

"I know. I used to think it was so annoying. I used to lean the other way every time I walked into the room in order to make it seem straight. I'm still not used to this floor." She looked down at her feet.

“I could probably pay some guys to come in and make it crooked for you,” he said. “And while they’re at it they could make the faucet leak and remove the dishwasher. I can do whatever you want to make this room dysfunctional.”

Linda smiled at him, but a feeling of dissatisfaction tugged at her stomach.

“I’m going,” she said, “for a walk. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead,” Brad said. “I’ll clean up.”

She put on an old oversize jacket of Barry’s, an insulated flannel from Sears.

Barry grabbed her sleeve, then worked his fingers down to her hand and squeezed.

“Be careful out there,” he said. “It’s dark.”