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Flirting with Rosie

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FLIRTING WITH ROSIE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Kathleen M. Evans

December 2004

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ABSTRACT

FLIRTING WITH ROSIE

by Kathleen M. Evans

In this collection of seventeen short stories, characters explore the boundaries of sexuality. A mother literally walks in the shoes of her lesbian daughter. A lesbian who is planning to have a baby with her longtime partner finds herself attracted to a male co-worker. A young woman begins a relationship with a bisexual older woman. A research scientist desires his neighbor, who may be suffering from the very disease he's studying. A husband and wife recall past same-sex experiences while they grapple with their sexually-ambiguous son's desire to join the military in the face of eminent war. These stories foster fresh thinking about how people experience sexuality, identity, relationships—indeed, life.

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The following stories have been published:

“City of Water” in *Santa Monica Review*.

“The Development” in *Powhatan Review*.

“Flirting with Rosie” is *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*.

“Red Hots” in *Happy*.

for Annie

and for my parents

Flirting with Rosie

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Red Hots

June and Alice sat on the toilet, squishing their butts together on the seat, their pee tinkling into the blue water. Alice told June she used to take baths with her brother until one time a floating log of poop appeared, bobbing in the tub. Alice jumped off the toilet seat, looked into the mirror, and stuck out her tongue. She asked June to touch tongues just to see what it would feel like. Alice leaned her face toward June. June thought Alice's tongue felt like a cat's.

In her room, Alice showed June how to breastfeed a baby doll. Alice lifted her green tee-shirt and pressed the doll's plastic lips to her chest. Alice said if they tried hard enough, milk would come out. June raised her shirt under her chin and thought she saw a little bit of white at the edge of her flat pink nipple.

Explaining how grownup ladies bleed, Alice put a piece of toilet paper in Barbie's underwear. She propped Barbie on the bed and rubbed Ken on Midge under the night stand. "That's what people do to have babies," she said. June felt a tingle in her stomach.

"Now she has to have a baby," Alice announced, making a bulge in Midge's dress with the purple-haired troll. Alice groaned and moaned, twisting her face, as she slowly pulled the troll out from between Midge's legs. June watched, silent.

Alice took June to the basement, a wet-smelling place filled with shadows of sagging boxes. In the black at the bottom of the steps, Alice pulled some Lifesavers from her pocket. She crunched them, making sparks fly, her mouth lighting up like a jack-o-lantern's.

Alice told June to wait at the bottom of the stair as she crawled underneath the wooden stairwell. Alone in the dark, June's heart bumped in her chest. The boxes looked like people hiding. Alice reappeared, a glow-in-the-dark superball in her hand. She flung it against the wall. Trails of glimmering green sprayed through the dark, like fireworks. When the ball bobbed to the floor, June said she wanted to go upstairs.

Alice took June back to her room. After they gave all the stuffed animals Red Hots, Naked Mean Queen Barbie terrorized the bedroom, forcing all the animals to give up their candy. Alice and June counted the candies, dividing them evenly. Then they showed each other their red-stained teeth.

Where There's Smoke

I've been alone for six months. The cat clock still ticks time with its tail. Pillows litter the bed, and the closet is stuffed with clothes my daughter, Mar, left behind. A pair of chunky black boots lies on the floor like disembodied feet. I drag on my menthol cigarette and eye her room. The menthol tastes terrible. I'm buying cigarettes I hate so I'll smoke fewer and eventually quit altogether.

I've left Mar's room unchanged. Her corkboard is crowded with papers and photos. In one picture, she and Tracy stand together on the beach holding hands. The shot was probably taken last fall since the sun is low and bright, and the pier behind them is not wrecked from last year's storm. Tracy, with her glossy spiked hair, pierced nose, and large brown eyes looks more like a teenager than a 34-year-old woman. A silver dog tag hangs on a chain between her large breasts. My daughter, at seventeen, has an old woman's look in her eyes. Her green hair is tucked behind her ears, which are ringed with tiny silver hoops.

The cigarette assaults my taste buds as I drag deeply. In the photo, on the pier in the distance, I see a red speck. Could it be the woman in the fluttering red scarf that I see most days as I walk the beach? I'm sure she's bald beneath that scarf. Her face white as fog, she walks leaning forward as though her heart is magnetized to the sand. She has

that ancient look of the very sick, as if her skin is evaporating. I can't tell if she has breasts beneath the enormous sweatshirt she always wears, the very thought of which makes the lump in my own breast throb.

Maybe the red speck is just a trick of light, a red dot of mystery behind these two women holding hands. Beneath the teal sky, Mar and Tracy's oddly-placed jewelry sparkles like the water. Their long shadows seep out to the photo's edge.

* * *

Six months ago, I met Tracy when she came over to help Mar move out of my house and into hers. When Tracy and I first eyed each other there was a glimmer of recognition. We soon realized that when I was a senior, she was a freshman at Roosevelt High. Mar didn't say much about this—or much about anything as she and Tracy loaded her suitcases and a few boxes into Tracy's car.

Afterward, in the early evening, the three of us stood on the porch. Tracy ran her fingers up and down Mar's back.

"Hey Mom, look, it's Pogo." Mar pointed out the neighbor's orange cat stalking something around the hydrangeas across the street. Her own cat sat patiently in a carrier, waiting to be taken away.

"I want to go say goodbye," she said. She squeezed Tracy's hand then went across the street. She sat cross-legged on the neighbor's lawn, and the cat walked to her.

Tracy offered me a cigarette, and we smoked together in the salt air. In the growing dusk, we talked about all the ways we've tried to quit smoking over the years.

"The problem is there are as many good reasons to keep smoking as there are to quit," Tracy said.

"Hunger control," I offered.

"Pretending you're Rita Hayworth or any of those other old screen stars," she countered.

"Illuminating your face with a match in the dark," I said.

She looked at me. Then she looked out across the yard where Mar sat stroking the cat, growing dim in the dusk.

"And what do people do after sex if they don't smoke?" she asked.

I flushed. The dog tags hanging on a chain between her breasts flashed silver, reflecting the streetlight.

"Maybe they hold each other," I said.

She smiled then deeply dragged on her cigarette so that the tip lit like a pulsing red star.

We smoked a while longer in silence. In the twilight I could barely make out Mar's silhouette. That feeling I get swept over me then, that ghostly sense that I never did grow a child in me and raise her here in this house for seventeen years. It's as though my memories are dreams, fabrications woven together from real life images. Mar, the figment of my imagination: the pierced tongue and green hair of a rock star, the shower

singing of my sister, the temper of her father. That means he's still in my life, as hard as I try to forget his anger toward me, and toward the cancer that took him ten years ago.

This anger, this estrangement, lives in Mar. Even when Mar talks to me, I feel I could pass my hand through her like she's a cloud. For years now, I've watched her like a stranger.

* * *

Sitting on the edge of Mar's bed, I drag my horrible-tasting cigarette down to its stub and watch the white smoke ascend. My eyes move from Mar and Tracy's picture to a neon pink flier tacked to the corkboard. It's an ad for a club called Maxi's, decorated with a cartoon of two women in mini skirts and big black boots. I look down to my sand-encrusted beach shoes. The lump feels like it's glowing in my breast. I try not to think about it ever since I found it last month. But it makes itself known, a little planet inside me.

I take off my shoes and shove my feet into Mar's stiff boots.

At Maxi's, dance music and rays of pink light blast from the back room into the front bar. Pungent with alcohol and sweat, the club has sticky floors, and the railings are piled with overflowing ashtrays. In these boots that make me feel like an astronaut, I squeeze up to the bar. I take a stool next to a tall, thin woman in a low-cut black dress whose long, remarkable legs are crossed at the knee. The bartender, with orange hair and two gold nose hoops, wears a silver bra and low jeans that display her belly button ring.

I order a beer, and the woman with the long legs says, “You need to fix those eyebrows, honey.”

I’m not sure if she’s speaking to me. Her low voice makes me wonder if I’m sitting next to a woman or a man.

“Give her a break, Louise,” says the bartender.

“Just power to the truth,” Louise says.

Louise’s green eyeshadowed eyes and glossy maroon lips shimmer. She looks both playful and serious. My lump pulses, like it’s my heart askew.

I don’t know what to say, so I offer Louise a half smile, and light a cigarette. I take a deep drag, shuddering at the menthol blast. The music from the back room thuds against the wall.

“How about a dance?” Louise asks, holding out her manicured hand to me. I look at the size of her hand, which offers no clues.

When I let her pull me from my seat, I imagine Mar watching me walk onto the crowded, booming dance floor, escorted by a drag queen. Or holding the hand of a woman. In either case, my face flushes at the thought of my daughter’s gaze.

Synthesized dance music and chaotic lights wash over me. Louise gyrates as though the music belongs to her. I do my awkward little dance I haven’t used in years. The twisting disco ball throws shards of light on our bodies. Every few minutes a strobe light flashes, making everything look like something else. Behind Louise a clean-shaven man in a cowboy hat dances with a gaunt person with bleached hair and deep blue eye

shadow. Two women to my right lightly hold each other's fingers as they sway, their faces glinting with silver glitter.

"You are yummy!" Louise screams over the music. Then she leans forward and touches her lips to my neck, a gesture that washes clean through me. My bones feel porous, as though I could warmly dissolve. Louise continues to luxuriate in the music.

"Carol! Is that you?" I hear my name shouted from somewhere.

I turn around and see Tracy, whose spiky hair shines with gel, just like in the photo on Mar's bedroom wall. I have a strange sensation that my thoughts have materialized, the thoughts that my daughter might see me here. What the hell am I doing in a teenager's boots dancing with someone in a slinky black dress under a whirling disco ball? I glance around for Mar but see only Tracy, who is motioning at me to follow her.

"Where you going, honey?" I hear Louise shout as I trudge behind Tracy toward the bar. As we walk, I keep scanning the room for my daughter's green hair. I've known for years she has a fake I.D., but I feel like the one breaking the law.

"Where's Mar?" I ask, still looking around as I sit. The table tilts as I place my elbows on its sticky surface. The stiff globe in my breast presses against the inside of my arm.

"She's with the cat, who's pretty sick," Tracy says, patting the side pockets of her leather jacket. "I don't know how Mar has such patience with dying. The vet wants to put the cat down, but Mar just wants to hold him." She pulls a pack of Marlboros and matches from her pocket. "She's been sitting there for hours in front of the TV, her hands on his wheezing little back. I just couldn't take it any more."

Tracy holds out the red pack to me with full-handed male ease. I take one, my skin electric with sweat. She lights my cigarette then sits back, crossing her legs and draping an arm around the back of the booth. Her nose ring flashes.

“Thanks,” I say. I picture Mar in a strange living room, her face ghost white. She’s sitting on a couch I’ve never seen, cradling a fading cat, the muted room glowing in the TV’s indigo light.

“So who was that you were dancing with?”

“Louise,” I say. My answer feels insubstantial.

“Some legs,” Tracy says, smiling.

We sit and smoke silently. The good-tasting cigarette shoots a thin euphoria into my veins.

“So,” says Tracy, propping her cigarette on the ashtray. She leans forward, her breasts cradled by the table. She reaches out and lightly circles her thumb on the back of my hand. My breath tightens in my chest, and my whole hand throbs. Her thumb circles and circles, feather light. I feel like I’m watching the touching hands of two people I don’t know.

“I think I need to go,” I say. I don’t move my hand away, just watch her thumb continue to circle on my skin.

Tracy smashes her cigarette into the overflowing ashtray and slips the red pack into her pocket.

“Yeah? Okay, I’ll walk you out.”

She stands, quietly slipping her hand around mine. As she leads me out, my feet feel monstrous in the heavy boots. The door swishes shut behind me, muting the frenzied music and voices. Cold air rushes into me and seems to go deep somehow, deeper than under my skin. It's a chill I pretend could freeze cells, freeze time.

The hushed night is illuminated by a curved, gold moon. In the black sky, a flashing red light intermingles with the stars, a satellite or an airplane connecting the dots. At my car, Tracy leans in and finds my lips. I am astonished by the softness of her face. Her cushion of breasts presses into me like protection.

At home an hour later, I drag a stack of cardboard boxes into Mar's room. When I open the windows, cold salty air seeps in. The night fog blankets the moon and stars. I unlace the black boots and drop them with a thud into one of the boxes. In the closet, I find six more pairs of black boots and toss them in the box, too. I remove several music posters from the wall, rolling them up. They flop open when I drop them to the floor. I take down the cat clock and wrap it in newspaper, muting its ticking. Smoking one Marlboro after another, I fill the boxes.

Flirting with Rosie

Julia Roberts is perfect for three main reasons: her name, her teeth, and her weight. Those are the areas I've been working on so I can be an actress, or "actor" as people now call women in the acting field. It's hard for me to use "actor," though, because I see a man in my mind when I say that, and you can't be an androgynous actress, that's for sure. That word "androgynous" comes from "andro" meaning "man" and "gyn" meaning "woman," so you get man/woman in one. That's how I add new words to my vocabulary, by studying the meanings of the parts. Ms. Carol Washington taught that to me three years ago when I was a sophomore at Yuston High School, one of the few useful things I actually learned at that place.

Big words make you sound credible when, as an actress, you're on Jay Leno or Oprah or Rosie. I've seen some actors, male and female, who were huge disappointments on talk shows as it became clear that any big words that came out of their mouths in movies were put there by a writer. As Mr. Bud, my drama teacher says, an actor is supposed to make you forget there's a writer, and my belief is that should be the case both on and off screen. Otherwise, you are a big disappointment to your fans.

That's another reason Julia Roberts is so great. She is exactly the same on screen and off. Whenever I hear her talk on T.V. or read an article about her, she is just as funny

and real and nice as she is in the movies. She throws in some big words, not too many, just enough to show she's got brains and is independent.

But it's really those three specific things that make her great. First, the name. "Julia Roberts" is the perfect combination of exotic and down-to-earth. "Julia" is the exotic part, and Roberts is the last name of the girl-next-door. It just rolls off your tongue. Then there's my name, Rebecca Wasselehoffs, which sounds like the name of the ugly girl (which I'm really not). You can't go over two syllables on the last name, or people will never see you as the beautiful yet approachable girl next door, which is the ticket to stardom.

I've gone back and forth, consulting name books, and I've pretty much settled on Reba Osmond. "Reba" is perfect because it's exotic, but it's also easy to spell and pronounce. And because of Reba McEntire, who is classy and admired, the name has a certain cachet. The "Osmond" part is good because it brings to mind the wholesome Osmond family, a tangential, positive connection. (Tangential comes from tangent, which makes sense if you know your geometry.)

Now for the teeth. I've been saving every penny for the \$350 it's going to cost to get Dr. Yee to whiten my teeth. I tried one of those kits that I bought from a commercial; it was only \$45, but it burned my gums, and tissue peeled off for weeks. Dr. Yee said she'll make a casting of my actual teeth so there will be no danger to my gums.

The hardest of the three biggies is weight. I should have listened to Mario the year we were together. He was always on me to lose weight, and I guess I rebelled against him. During the last months we were together I'd go through the drive-through

after work and buy a double cheeseburger, two large fries, and a chocolate shake. I ate as I drove and then threw the bag of garbage, the evidence, out the window. I'd have to pull over to a convenience store and buy gum to conceal my fast-food breath. And even then sometimes, along with the gum I'd buy a package of brownies or glazed mini-donuts (never powdered, even though I love those, because they'd leave evidence on my shirt and in the car). And I'd scarf those down with one hand on the wheel, flip the empty package out the window, and get some of that gum into my mouth as I'd pull out of the driveway. That was when we were living with his mother.

Just thinking about those donuts now makes my mouth water, but those are bygone days. Actresses cannot be fat or anything close to pudgy, unless they've put on weight for a role, which shows total commitment to one's craft, if you ask me, because losing weight is the hardest thing on earth, and if you gain weight for a role you risk not getting it off fast enough for your next gig. And the screen puts on more like twenty pounds than ten. Those actresses that look normal on screen are all bones in real life—size zero or two, most of them, and if you get above a size four, it's a real problem.

So I'm hungry a lot of the time and am trying to get used to staying that way. But I have a hard time sticking to a diet when Mimi bakes cookies or makes spaghetti with melted cheese. She says I don't have to eat the food she makes, but why should she have to suffer for my career when I'm just leaving her anyway when I take off to Hollywood.

An escape route. That's how I first thought about Mimi's. I had heard from Nancy Albert, who waitresses with me at the Daily Diner, that a friend of hers named

Mimi wanted to rent out a room. I'd been wanting to leave Mario, but I didn't know where I could go. I certainly wasn't going back to my parents.

When I walked into Mimi's house for the first time, I wondered how a big living room could smell like dog based on this one little yappy thing that was dancing around my feet. It had scraggly fur and tiny ears that poked straight up.

"This is Esther. I hope you like dogs," Mimi said.

"Sure," I said, stretching the truth since I'm not a big dog fan. I tripped over a gnawed-on plastic bone that was almost as big as the dog itself.

"Here would be your room," Mimi said. The room had a double bed in it, to my relief, since I don't own any furniture. When my parents kicked me out, Mario's mom said I could come live there as long as I brought nothing with me because, as she put it, she didn't have room for "one more stick of furniture." That was an understatement. Betty's house was packed to the gills with big old pieces of furniture that belonged in some mansion, not a two-bedroom track house. And she had stacks of magazines piled floor to ceiling in the dining room, which she called her "big closet." The "small closet" was the one in her bedroom that looked like a child's game of pickup sticks: dare to pull one book or Japanese doll or banjo handle from the stack, and it'd all come tumbling down.

In comparison, Mimi's house seemed like a place I could breathe, in spite of the dog smell. In addition to the bed, the bedroom had a dresser and a poster of sunflowers neatly tacked on the wall. I was glad to see there was plenty of room for my California

map with the highlighted line from Yuston to L.A. And it was nice to see a tree with big green leaves out the window.

Back in the living room, I thought I could probably get used to the dog smell. A stationary bike stood next to the couch, which got me thinking how great it would be to exercise while watching T.V. Mimi looked like she used the bike since she was thin. In fact, she looked really nice with her long brown shiny hair and her fancy slacks that I may have bagged myself at the dry cleaner since I worked there twice a week, and a white blouse that was barely see-through with a hint of white bra. I wondered why a woman who looked like this and was her age wasn't married with kids, but I didn't know her well enough to ask her.

"Are you interested in moving in?" she asked. I was shocked that she automatically wanted me above all the other applicants. But maybe there weren't other applicants. Mimi looked awfully neat. Would she yell at me if I left flossing flecks on the bathroom mirror? Deep down, I felt it was best to take the chance.

The next day Mario and I had a scene. He yelled at me as I packed up my stuff in three grocery bags and tossed them into my blue Ford Fiesta and slid in through the passenger door since the driver-side door doesn't open. You'd think that Mario, the fix-it king, would have repaired it, but he never did, and I didn't care because it was second nature for me to get in that way. And I knew I'd be getting rid of the car anyway because I figured it wouldn't make it all the way to L.A., so I'd be taking the bus.

I didn't have a clue about Mimi at first. I'd been living with her for a month, and I was doing really well with my eating. I was happy with the name "Reba Osmond," and even Mimi thought it was good. When I came home late on Fridays, she'd be up with Esther on her lap, watching a movie. We'd have popcorn and talk until 4 a.m. or later, sometimes until the sun came up. She told me lots of things, mostly about her family and what Yuston used to be like before there was even a McDonald's.

I got so comfortable with Mimi that I told her something I never told anyone, not even Mario. I told her about the time I was home alone for two days when I was six years old. My mom had gone to visit her sister in Florida, and my dad had a conference. Each one thought the other was going to be there for me. It must have been a weekend because I didn't have school—or maybe I missed it, I'm not sure. I remember sitting there on my little rocking chair in the living room, thinking if I held my breath one of my parents would walk in the room. But I kept running out of air and had to take another breath. I got hungry and ate some animal crackers from a drawer under the oven. I fell asleep on the kitchen floor that night. The next night I slept in the same spot. I don't remember my parents coming home, but obviously they did at some point. I just remember being alone and wondering where they were.

As I told Mimi this, I got all flushed, like what had happened was my fault somehow. Maybe that's why I never told anyone before. Mimi just kept petting Esther and listening. Then she said it must be hard to realize I was forgotten. I hadn't quite thought about it like that before.

One Saturday night when I wasn't working, Mimi asked me if I wanted to go with her and Nancy to a bar in Hainesville. I said, "Why all the way over there, when we could just go to the 49'er or the Drop On Inn here?"

That's when she told me she and Nancy wanted to go to a women's bar in Hainesville.

"A woman's bar?" I asked, and as soon as the words spilled out of my mouth, I realized what an idiot I was. I blushed as it all fell together.

"Oh god, I thought you knew," she said. I got a chill up my spine with the realization that I was living with a lesbian. But she had never come on to me or anything, so I guessed there was nothing wrong with that. But what was Nancy thinking, sending me to live with Mimi? Did they think I was a lesbian? I was confused because I liked Mimi a lot. All of our late nights eating popcorn were kind of like a slumber party. And Nancy seemed nice, too. I thought it couldn't do any harm to hang out with them. As Mr. Bud says, when you're an actor, you've got to build up many different life experiences.

"At this bar," I asked, "do they let anyone in?" I had a fake ID, but it didn't specify my sexual preference.

"Sure," she said. I noticed her cute half-smile and wondered if the way it made me warm could implicate me somehow.

The bar surprised me. It was just like a regular bar, but with all women. It had tables with those netted red glass candle holders that flickered a little light in the dark

corners. It also had a dance floor with pulsing lights, and pool tables in the back room. Some of the women looked like Nancy, with short hair and not much makeup. Some were more like Mimi, with long hair and girly clothes. But most were in-between, like me. It was shocking, really, that there were so many women there, and that you'd never know when they're out walking around in the world that they were lesbians unless they kissed a girl in front of you.

The music was loud. Girls were dancing together, which embarrassed me a little. But as Nancy, Mimi, and I sat at our table with our beers, I got more and more used to it.

"Shit, Shelly's here," said Nancy, crossing her legs and slouching down into her chair.

"Should I invite her to our table?" Mimi seemed to be teasing Nancy, but I wasn't sure about what.

"Very funny," Nancy said, shielding her eyes with her hand.

"Who's Shelly?" I asked.

"Nancy's girlfriend," Mimi said, taking a swig of her beer.

"Very funny," Nancy said, shooting a killer look in Mimi's direction. I didn't get what was going on.

Mimi smiled her half-smile at me and said, "Okay, one of Nancy's conquests. But she should think before she conquers because these things come back to haunt her."

"You said it, sweetheart." Nancy slouched more deeply into her chair.

It felt funny that they were talking this way in front of me about Nancy sleeping with girls. But I found myself wanting to hear more.

“What’s wrong with Shelly?” I asked.

They both burst out laughing. I felt like I was on Mars and that they had a whole world of knowledge that I couldn’t access.

“Well, hon,” Nancy said, and I felt a weird tingling in my stomach at being called “hon” by her. “Let me put it this way. There’s nothing wrong with Shelly, per se. It’s just that when I sleep with someone for the first time, and after sex she drops right off and snores so loud it peels the paint off the walls, and then gulps down Jack Daniels in the morning in lieu of scrambled eggs, well, that’s just a turn off to me.”

Mimi sat there with a big smile on her face as I tried to take in this information.

“She sounds like a man,” I said, and they both cracked up. I laughed, too, until I realized it may have sounded like I was putting down men, not something I wanted to do in a lesbian bar.

“I didn’t mean – ” I started, but Nancy whispered, “Oh holy shit, here she comes.”

Standing over our table was a tall, thin woman with a long blond ponytail and glitter on her face. Her black silky blouse was buttoned so low that a bit of lacy bra stuck out, and there was glitter all the way down her cleavage.

“Hey Nancy,” she said, bending down to kiss Nancy on both cheeks like a French person, leaving a dusting of sparkles on Nancy’s face. When she bent over our table, her blouse slid open so that even more of that bra spilled out. It couldn’t come together in my head that this person who looked like a classy circus acrobat snored like a dog and drank like a fish.

“Hi,” she added, acknowledging Mimi and me with a nod of her head.

“So what’s up?” Nancy said, leaning back in her chair and swigging her beer. I saw Shelly’s face droop a bit, as though she suddenly realized that Nancy wasn’t excited to see her. I recognized that look of dejection and was surprised that girls feel it with other girls.

“Not much,” Shelly said. “Just thought I’d come over and say hi.” She took a step back from the table.

“Thanks,” Nancy said. “Good to see you.” But you could tell Nancy didn’t mean it, and Shelly wasn’t stupid. She just said, “Okay, see you,” and turned around with her back really straight, her ponytail sprouting out of a sparkling scrunchy. I felt really bad for her, and I was surprised that Nancy, plain old Nancy with her short brown hair and mole right above her lip, could have that kind of power over someone who was almost a beauty queen.

“Are you sure she snored and gulped whiskey?” I asked.

Mimi and Nancy laughed.

“Damn sure,” Nancy said. “Why, doesn’t she look the type?”

That cracked them up again.

“She’s gorgeous,” I said. I felt myself blushing from my chest up through the top of my scalp.

“Yeah, well that’s what you get when you judge a book by its cover,” said Mimi.

“Ah, yes, beautiful books,” Nancy said, leaning back in her chair. She glanced over at the bar then held up her beer bottle. “I need another. Anyone want one? I’m going to the bar. These cocktail waitresses are way too busy.”

“Sure, I’ll have one,” Mimi said. “And no need to hurry back too quickly, because I’m sure you’ll want to have a conversation with that hot bartender.”

Nancy grinned. Wow, who would have thought that Nancy Albert was a ladies’ man, I mean woman.

“Okay, just one more,” I said, thinking that the next day I’d better cut back on my food more to make up for these extra calories.

When Nancy left the table, Mimi asked me, “Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah, what do you mean?”

“Well, this is a different world for you. The first time I went to a woman’s bar, I was a bit disoriented.”

“When was that?” I asked, surprised at Mimi’s admission that at one time the lesbian world seemed strange to her.

“Twenty years ago.”

I let “twenty years” sink in.

“It was a relief, though, too,” she said. “To see so many other women around me who felt the way I did. I thought I was the only one in Yuston.” She bent her elbow on the table and dropped her chin into her hand. Her brown eyes looked at me, seeming to search my face for what I was thinking.

“How did you know you felt that way?” I asked.

“I guess sleeping with my best friend behind my husband’s back was a clue!”

She sat up and laughed, a piece of her long brown hair clinging to her lip.

“You were married?” I’m sure my mouth was hanging open at this point.

“Yeah. He was a nice guy. I really loved him. I might have been able to make it work if I hadn’t been so young when we got married.”

“What do you mean, if you hadn’t been so young? I thought you found out you liked girls.”

“I liked my best friend, that’s for sure. But I also liked Stan. I just didn’t know how to be monogamous then.”

I was confused. She didn’t sound like a true lesbian, but I didn’t know how to say that without sounding offensive.

“Do you want to be monogamous now?” I asked, rehearsing in my head that “mono” means “one” and “gamy” means bringing together, or marriage. One marriage.

“Yes, I do, actually, with the right person. I like the idea of making a home with someone. For a long time I just wanted to play around, like Nancy does.” We both glanced over at the bar, where Nancy was sipping a beer and chatting with the bartender, a woman with dark skin, short black hair, and a bunch of sparkling gold hoop earrings in one ear.

“Maybe it’s just my age,” Mimi said. “I’m just at the place in my life where I like to cook and hang out at home. I never used to be like that. So I hope to find the right woman or man—one who loves dogs.”

“Woman or man?” I almost shouted. Fortunately, the music was so loud that I wasn’t embarrassed by my own big mouth.

“I can see advantages of either one, depending on the person,” she said in a very matter-of-fact way. The feeling of being on Mars came back to me, just when I thought I

was getting familiar with this new world. Mimi was having this conversation with me as though she had it every day, which I doubted, because to be honest, most people in Yuston would probably not be up for it.

Nancy appeared at our table and placed beers in front of us.

“Wanna dance, Meems?” She grabbed Mimi by the hand.

“Be right back!” Mimi shouted as Nancy pulled her away. On the dance floor, they held hands and swayed back and forth. I watched Mimi’s hips move. Her long brown hair, kind of like Julia Roberts’, swayed across her back, strands of it clinging to her blue blouse. I felt a pang deep inside, like what Mr. Bud calls nostalgia. It made me want to take the California map with the highlighted line from Yuston to L.A. off the wall of my bedroom and fold it up for good. Nostalgia is like homesickness. It comes from the Greek, meaning “to return.”

That night when Nancy dropped us off, Mimi asked me if I wanted some tea. I said yes, even though I don’t like tea that much. But I was glad that Mimi wanted to stay up instead of going right to bed. As I walked to the couch, Esther yipped and yapped, dancing around my ankles. The minute I sat down, she raced off into the kitchen, her little nails clicking. She came back out again in a minute, following Mimi, who carried two steaming mugs.

I felt the couch sink slightly as she sat, handing a mug of tea to me. Esther jumped up onto her lap, and Mimi scratched the dog’s neck.

“I had a fun night, thanks for inviting me,” I said, horrified for a minute that it sounded like the end of a date.

“Sure, anytime. What was it like for you being there?” She placed her mug on the table and leaned back on the couch pillows, tucking her hair behind her ear. The movement of her hand past her neck and up to her ear, gently tucking her hair back, was like the opening of a door. What kept creeping up on me all night at the bar finally slapped me in the face: I wanted to kiss her.

I set my mug on the coffee table, and put my cheek right next to hers. It was so soft, velvet on velvet.

“Rebecca,” she said, “Are you —” I interrupted her by putting my lips on hers. It felt odd, being the one to initiate the first kiss. I felt a surge, a strange sense of power.

She never did finish that sentence.

When I woke up the next morning, there she was, asleep next to me, her hair tangled all over the place. I remembered something she’d said to me the night before: “You have a great body.” The warmth of that comment, and of her touch, flooded through me like the sunlight coming through the window. I suddenly felt really hungry. I fantasized about pancakes, or waffles, eating them in bed together and getting syrup all over. But then I realized that no, I don’t have a great body, because I’ve got more weight to lose. My mind wandered to my room, to the map on the wall, and the fleeting feeling I’d had the night before of wanting to take it down.

“Good morning,” Mimi mumbled from under that mass of hair.

“Good morning to you,” I said. She moved her hair away with her hands and scooted close to me, laying her head on my shoulder. At first it felt awkward because I’d never been in the position before to hold a lover in bed. I was always the one to be held. But I wrapped my arm around her, and as she snuggled up in the crook of my arm it felt just right.

Mimi and I have never had a fight in our four months together, although last week we came close. She was home from work, sick on the couch with a cold. I was riding the exercise bike, and we were watching T.V. I was particularly excited because Julia Roberts was going to be a guest on Rosie O’Donnell’s show.

“Look, Rosie O’Donnell’s famous and on T.V. and in the movies, and she’s not skinny,” Mimi said right before sneezing into her pillow. She had a blanket over her and a glass of orange juice on the coffee table. Esther was curled up at her feet on the couch like a cat.

“She’s an exception,” I said. “Come on, you know that.”

“I think that makes her unique. Who knows? Maybe she gets more roles because of it.”

“What kind of roles, though?” I felt irritated. “Think about it. She’s always the ‘best friend,’ never the lead. Fat and desirable just don’t go together in Hollywood.”

“That’s so screwed up,” she said. “I like meat on a person.” I felt a stab when she said that.

“That’s easy for you to say, Miss Naturally Skinny.” I pedaled harder.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ll shut up now because I know how much this means to you. It’s just hard for me to see you putting yourself through this because of society’s bullshit.” She blew her nose into a tissue.

That’s Mimi. She’s honest. But even though I knew she had my best interests at heart, I was still a little bothered. I took a gulp of water from my plastic bottle and asked her how she was feeling. She said she felt like her fever was going down. Then I asked her something I didn’t really want to ask, but it slipped out.

“Will you still love me when I’m skinny?” I remembered our first night of making love and how she said I have a good body.

“Of course.”

“Will you miss the old me?”

“Maybe. But you’ll still be you inside, right?” She sat up a little and reached over to scratch Esther’s head.

“Of course,” I said, even though I wasn’t so sure about that. I felt like so many things had changed inside me lately. A year long ago, I thought I’d die if I couldn’t marry Mario. It had never crossed my mind that I’d turn my back on him and go my own way in life. And it certainly never crossed my mind that I’d want to put my face up to the soft face of another woman. So the thought of always being the same inside worried me.

Julia Roberts was walking onto Rosie’s stage to the applause of the audience. Her long brown hair was shiny and soft-looking. She wore hip-hugger jeans, a white peasant blouse, and turquoise jewelry. She and Rosie kissed each other’s cheeks like circus-girl Shelly kissed Nancy months ago.

Julia is a great combination of willowy and sturdy. Her tall, slender body and her huge smile are her trademarks, although in her first movie, *Mystic Pizza*, she wasn't as skinny as she is now. She was more voluptuous then. I thought that "voluptuous" might be related to "volume," but it's not. It comes from the Latin for "pleasure." But Julia didn't get pleasure from her *Mystic Pizza* body, as I read in an article. She admits she weighed twenty pounds more then than she does now, and she was very unhappy. In *America's Sweethearts* she plays a woman who used to be fat, which makes me wonder if she drew on her own experiences to play the emotional parts of that character, as Mr. Bud suggests.

Julia sat at the chair next to Rosie's desk and gave Rosie a present, a banana bread she baked herself. I once read that one of her favorite things to do is to hang out in jeans and a sweater at her getaway ranch in New Mexico. She rides her horses and bakes and watches *Days of Our Lives*.

Rosie took a bite of the banana bread and swore up and down about how delicious it was. Julia smiled that huge smile and laid her hand on Rosie's arm. As they went to commercial break, Julia squeezed Rosie's hand and whispered in her ear. It seemed like Julia was flirting with Rosie. Could that be true? I once read that Julia said she would love to meet Katharine Hepburn. When asked what she would want to talk about with Hepburn, Julia said she would just want to roll around on her. I took that as a funny way to express how much she admires Katherine Hepburn and wants that greatness to rub off on her. But maybe it meant something more.

The thought of that sent a rush right through me, and I felt an echo of the night before, of Mimi's body on mine. And I wondered what Mimi would tell her lover, whoever she or he might be, as they sat in their living room watching me get interviewed by Rosie. Or as they sat in a dark theater holding hands, as I lit up on the big screen.

City of Water

The first time Yuka and I sleep together, lying drowsily on my bed, I do something stupid. I begin talking about Rose.

Rose has come to mind because on the TV that hangs from the ceiling, I see a newsreel of protestors. The Japanese-speaking news anchor seems to be saying something about America's latest military actions.

"Rose is very involved in the anti-war resurgence," I say, perplexed at the words coming out of my mouth.

"Who is Rose?" Yuka nudges her hip tightly next to mine and runs her fingers up and down my arm. I'm tempted to lie, but I don't.

"My girlfriend in California."

Yuka keeps gliding her fingers up and down my arm.

"Maxine, you are not very loyal."

Obviously Yuka is right. But it's hard to be loyal to someone who doesn't seem to care if I am or not.

"In some ways I am," I say, feeling silly and uptight. A beer would relax me, but I can't get to the refrigerator without folding the bed back into the wall. I wait for Yuka to say something, but she just keeps touching my arm, her eyes on the TV.

The news anchor is saying something about—I catch a few words—something nuclear, with a tape of the American president rolling.

“What’s he saying?”

“That your president want to send a bill to your congress for it to be okay for America to make tiny nuclear bomb.”

“A tiny one? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

A picture of a panda now shares the screen with the news anchor. Yuka rolls onto her back, her black hair fanning out, the six pierces in her left ear gleaming blue in the TV light.

“Anti-war not resurgence, really,” she says, her eyes on the ceiling. “Some place never stop anti-war—”

The phone interrupts Yuka’s words, and the machine picks up.

“Max, Max, are you there?” Rose’s deep voice fills the air. “God, I’m apoplectic! Our fucking government is going to start the next arms race! In today’s paper I read that they want to make what they’re calling mini-nukes. I just can’t believe this! I’m just so fucking livid! What do they think, a little nuke is cute and less harmful, like a baby brother to Little Boy? I’m arranging a demonstration at Lawrence Livermore and the Federal Building. I miss you. Check your email then call me.”

It’s as though my girlfriend has magically intruded into the room and joined the conversation. As though my guilty conscience has manifested itself. Dumb luck.

“That was Rose,” I say.

“Yes,” Yuka says. “She sound strong.”

“She is.” Too strong. It seems like she could live without me. When I first told Rose about my six-month Tokyo fellowship to write articles about Japanese trends, Rose was nothing but encouraging. When I asked, *But what about us?* Rose said, *I’ll wait.* She never assumed that waiting would be hard for me.

“They just remind on the TV that tomorrow is Bean-throwing Ceremony Day,” Yuka says.

“What’s that?”

“I take you tomorrow,” she says.

She leaves at midnight to catch the last train. I fold the bed into the wall, get a beer, and fold it back down. While I sip the beer, I flip through the channels and take notes.

Leonardo DiCaprio hawking credit cards.

Harrison Ford—beer.

Bruce Willis—cigars.

Jodie Foster—cars.

And the President, walking on the beach and through a wheat field, plugging Japanese tourism.

Between commercials: people eat live bugs to the screaming laughter of a studio audience.

The email from Rose reads:

“With the world this crazy, I’m thinking about our plans to one day have a baby. Don’t you think bringing a baby into this insane world is, I don’t know—insane? Do we even have a future? Are we really on the brink of global nuclear war? I’m going to call you. Then I’m going to get started on these petitions. My god, I have to feel like I can do something.”

Rose is good friends with the apocalypse. I type:

“People are having kids left and right. Not everyone suffers over the thought of it. They just do it. I want to go to doctor and say, *get us pregnant*. I want to close the blinds and raise our baby, to relish the baby’s first word, first step, to work in the preschool co-op, to block out the bullshit we can’t control that spews out of the radio, T.V., newspaper. I don’t care how many petitions someone signs or how many peace marches we attend. We have no control over what world leaders decide to do. The end eventually comes for us all, anyway. We might as well live.”

This line of argument, I know, makes Rose go ballistic. She’s been known to throw a shoe or a book at me. She says I’m inert. Which was why she was happy to see me actually do something—meaning, come to Japan. It wasn’t enough for me to do the dishes, weed the garden, write freelance articles, go to the gym, eat dinner out with friends, play Scrabble, and read novels. Life has to have a bigger purpose.

I hit delete.

Hachiko: a statue of a dog in the Shibuya section of downtown Tokyo. The chic meeting place of those in their 20's and 30's. At one time, the dog probably towered over everything from its pedestal. But now high rises dwarf it. Not far from the Hard Rock Cafe and Club Vertigo, with its 20-foot gold lizard clinging to the ceiling, and all the trendy Indian restaurants.

Massive billboards: beer, fast food, fashion. A huge TV screen with a colossal head of shiny blue-black hair and glossy lips looming over the square. A feminine consumerist Godzilla. Overlooking the ant colony of people like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg. 1,000 are said to cross with every light change.

I put my notebook in the pocket of my black leather jacket. Almost everyone around me wears black, all the Japanese and Koreans and Europeans and Canadians and Americans and Middle Easterners and South Americans and Australians and Mexicans. A few young Japanese women and men with blue hair pass around a pack of cigarettes. A girl wearing a skirt that looks like a lampshade wrapped in its original plastic talks rapidly in a high voice. I catch a few words: "devil" (or "evil"?), "luck." I'm hoping immersion will work like magic, that soon I'll miraculously understand everything I hear.

"Konnichi wa. Hello, Maxine."

Yuka is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and holding a shopping bag. Her short hair is pulled back into a sprout of a ponytail, and she's wearing those six earrings in one ear. She wears them only on weekends because they're not approved bank teller

attire. That's how we met; standing beneath the "No Crimes Allowed" sign, she helped me muck my way through securing a bank account.

"Happy Bean-throwing Ceremony Day," I say. "Do people really say it that way to each other?"

"That's okay."

"I mean, how do people usually greet each other on this holiday?"

"Hello."

Yuka smiles at her joke and I shout out a laugh, abruptly self-conscious about being the loud American. Funny that I'd feel that way when that old song from Queen, "I'm in Love with My Car," blasts from the subway station, and the mammoth TV screen emits a booming monotone of a female voice, and the traffic growls like a pack of dogs.

Curry chicken cutlet sandwich on a seaweed bun. Curry rice bowl with fries. A dance mix of John Lennon's "Imagine" playing over the loudspeaker.

At McDonald's, I ask Yuka, "What will happen at the shrine? What's the ceremony like?"

"You will see," Yuka says, biting into her Big Mac.

"Did you celebrate this with your family when you were growing up?"

"We threw *fuku-mame* at my father. That's tradition. The shrine is same but different."

"You threw soybeans at your father? Did you enjoy it?"

“Yes, very much.” She smiles.

“But what if you hit him in the eye?”

“Oh, he wore *oni*, devil mask. And *montusuki hakama*.”

“Which is?”

“Man kimono.” She sips on her coke through the straw. “Here, see.” She pulls from her shopping bag two cardboard masks, strange faces with fangs, horns, and thick eyebrows.

“Are we supposed to wear those?”

She smiles and put the masks back in her bag. “Do you throw thing at your father?”

“I never knew my father,” I say, struck by how irreverent it seems to throw beans at your dad. “He left my mother when I was a baby. If I could find him, I’m sure I’d enjoy throwing something at him.”

As we eat, I wonder if Yuka will go on a trip with me. A national holiday is coming in two weeks. We could take the shinkansen somewhere. I want to ride the bullet train, move fast through the countryside, get away from the noisy city that’s crowding in on me. I need some quiet. Maybe Rose is right that starting a family when the President is spawning baby nukes is insane.

Yuka and I shoulder through the devil mask-wearing crowd toward the front of shrine platform where four sumo wrestlers stand. Yuka dons her mask and hands one to me. I peer out through pinhole eyes at Yuka’s devil face.

“Try to catch for good luck,” Yuka says. I’m about to ask her what she means when the sumo wrestlers, their flesh bulging over their loincloths, begin to yell:

“Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi! Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!”

Yuka leans over: “Mean, ‘Out with demon! In with good luck!’” she shouts. “Now good luck, catch!”

And the wrestlers throw dried soybeans and rice cakes into the crowd. People jump to catch.

Yuka catches a rice cake then throws off her mask, beaming. I keep jumping to try to catch some luck of my own. I don’t.

On the train, Yuka says that the Setsubun probably wasn’t even accurate since it’s unlikely that the sumo wrestlers threw in the lucky direction. The lucky direction is toward the god of the year. This year is the year of the serpent, so the beans technically should have been thrown in a south-easterly direction.

“It’s all for fun,” she says.

“Is that how people feel about that dog, Hachiko?” I ask. “Is that statue just for fun, or is it serious?”

“It’s for loyalty.”

I wonder if that’s a personal dig or a historical comment. The train is almost to our stop, but I have a minute to take a few notes on the details she offers.

Hachiko used to accompany his master, a professor, to the train station every day. The professor would go to work at the university and return every day at 3 o’clock, where

the dog would be waiting for him. One day the professor didn't return. The dog continued to return to the station every day at 3 p.m. He was held up as a shining example of loyalty. Gently touching the dog's head was known to bring good luck. Nearly ten years after last seeing the Professor, the 12-year-old Hachiko was found dead on the same spot outside the station where he had spent so many years waiting for his master.

"I want to take the shinkansen, travel outside of Tokyo, see some of the countryside," I say, as we drink lattes in Starbucks.

"Yes, that is nice."

"But I can't do it by myself, travel by myself, try to get around alone. Would you come with me? Would you help me plan the trip?"

"Okay, I know perfect place. You learn much about Japan."

"Really? Where?"

"I take you. Surprise. We go during holiday."

"Your parents won't care?"

"My parents know I am twenty-nine-year-old woman."

I love Yuka's confidence. And I'm glad she wants to plan a surprise for me. Rose isn't into such things. She pushes too much independence on me. *Go ahead without me*, is one of her mantras. Another is, *Go for it*.

“I think it’s great that you’re venturing out of the city,” Rose says a bit stiffly, her tone belying her message. I worry that she has an intuition that I’m sleeping with someone else. Guilt creeps up, burning my neck.

“You should go to Hiroshima, see the A-bomb dome and the other peace exhibits,” she adds. The phone line crackles.

“Yes, maybe I should,” I say, not meaning it, suppressing a sigh that could set her off. The A-bomb dome and peace exhibits? Yuka wouldn’t take me there, would she? I imagine that she’s planning to take me to Kinkaku-ji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, the paragon of beauty. To see cherry blossoms reflecting in mirrored ponds. I want to experience beauty. Order. I want to write about bento box lunches, their neat little compartments, the design of sushi. Or funny surprises like curry at McDonald’s.

“Max, did you know that Einstein called nuclear weapons his regret?”

The line is silent, as though we’re haunted by the splitting of atoms.

“What did you think of my email?” Rose finally asks.

“Well, it got me thinking.” Rose likes me to think. But in truth, at this moment, my mind is a mushy whiplashed mess of culture, sex, and relationship shock.

“And?”

“And—I want to have babies with you,” I say, cringing at how insipid that must sound to Rose. For a moment, I feel like I’ve lost my breath, like I’ve been punched in the gut. I love Rose. Her pigheadedness, her strength, the way she can be so deeply committed. We balance each other out. A yin-yang of her strength and my flexibility. Her steadfastness, my fickleness.

“Yes, I understand,” Rose says. I don’t know what she means, but her tone is calm, almost sweet.

“Rose, we’ve been together six years. We’ll be great parents, you know?”

“But there’s more to it than that.” A tender quality to Rose’s voice makes me ache for her, for her coarse red hair and cantankerous laugh and the focus on her face as she makes homemade matzo ball soup.

I want her to say: *Hang up the phone, baby, get on the next plane, and dive into my arms.*

But what she says is this: “Go to Hiroshima. Just go.”

“Rose wants me to go to Hiroshima.” Once again, in bed with Yuka, I bring up Rose. But Yuka doesn’t seem to mind.

“And do you want?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I know what happened. The suffering is just too much. Have you ever been?”

Yuka pulls the covers up over her shoulders. The traffic outside pulses by, engines droning, bike bells ringing.

“Yes.”

“What’s it like?”

“Like beautiful city. With people and nature. Many flower, garden, waterfall. Many river, nickname City of Water.”

“Sounds like you know it well.”

“Yes. I have family live nearby prefecture.”

I reach over and nestle my head into Yuka’s neck. She touches my hair. I wonder if Yuka had relatives there when the bomb was dropped. I’m too afraid to ask.

“And you visit your family?”

“Yes, sometime.”

Out the window, on the street, a motorcycle blasts by so loudly that it momentarily cleanses me of thought. I close my eyes, feeling a deep sleepiness take over. Yuka’s voice penetrates my fuzzy awareness before sleep.

“Rose smart. She know my surprise. We go to Hiroshima.”

The shinkansen glides through a dark tunnel. The tunnel walls are illustrated with animated figures, so the movement of the train tricks everyone’s eyes into seeing a moving cartoon of a man flying an airplane over a flowery field.

“That’s beautiful,” I say.

“Ad for laxative,” she says, smiling at me.

I laugh. “Are you joking?”

“No.” She smiles.

I laugh again. We’ve laughed together a lot in the last week. It makes me realize how little I laugh with Rose. Serious Rose. And yet Yuka has a certain steadiness like Rose. She has spent five out of the last six evenings with me, always extracting herself

from the bed at exactly midnight so she can catch the train back to Ueno, where she lives with her parents.

“Do you like living with your parents?” I ask.

“They are old, need care. I help. Some cook, some clean.”

“But they don’t mind when you stay out until after midnight, like you’ve been lately?”

“They do not talk that. We almost watch TV.”

“But they don’t try to control you?”

“Control?”

“Tell you what to do? They don’t try to tell you what to do?”

“Sometime advice. They like I work for bank. They like I vacation, like now.

They have neighbor come over when vacation.”

“Your parents sound nice and understanding.”

“Yes.”

Yuka leans her head back and closes her eyes.

A woman sitting in the seat on the other side of the aisle wears a mini-skirt and those fashionable boots: Shiny. Stiff. Black. Thigh-high. They make her look like Gregor Samsa in transition to a cockroach.

Lunch on the shinkansen: hot dog buns stuffed with spaghetti and corn.

The train moves past skeletons of buildings. I can't tell if the buildings are going up or coming down. Cranes that look like metal dinosaurs pierce the gray sky.

While Yuka sleeps, an ache creeps into my bones. I want to be home, cutting lilies from the garden to bring inside the house, working at my computer all afternoon, reading a novel in bed. I don't want to be sitting on the fastest-moving train rushing toward a city my country once annihilated.

I feel a surge of resentment toward Rose. Rose all but forced me to come to Japan. I held out hope, even as she was saying goodbye to me at the airport, that she would say, *Don't go. Stay. Let's make a baby.*

Rose wants me to be angry with the world. But I'm not. The world feels like a big, messy mound of clay that's impossible to shape. I feel merely incompetent, not angry.

I look at Yuka's sleeping face. Yuka seems happy with minimalism. Working at the bank, taking care of her parents, and exiting and entering my life on a schedule. For Yuka, life seems like a cup of tea, warming her hands. She can read the tea leaves at the bottom, patterns of understanding that continually evade me.

The cab driver, a middle-aged guy with a worry line between his eyes, navigates the car through the narrow streets that are crammed with bicycles, buses, and cars. We cross a bridge spanning a shining river.

We wind our way down the streets passing house after tiny house. Then through streets lined with rice shops, beer and wine shops, and open-air vegetable markets. In the distance, green hills glow against the striking blue sky.

All this beauty, and we're in Hiroshima. I try to shake away the overlay of an inconceivable blast, people, the buildings, the land in flames.

"America-jin desu ka?" The driver glances at me in the review mirror.

"Hai," I say, grateful to be pulled away from my thoughts yet self-conscious, not sure if *hai* is the politest way to say "yes, I'm American."

He says something else, quickly in Japanese.

"Welcome to Hiroshima, international city of peace and culture," Yuka translates.

"Domo arigato."

The driver's eyes shift to Yuka as he speaks more.

"He want to know are you going to Peace Memorial and A-bomb Dome and Child Peace Monument."

"Are we?"

"You want?"

"Do you?"

"I see before."

As always, Yuka seems centered in her response, and I feel very unsettled, dizzy. Maybe I'm car sick. The taxi is moving fast.

"Tell him maybe."

Yuka has an exchange with the driver while we're stopped at a light. In the car next to us, a little girl in the back seat playfully smashes her face into her window. I smash mine. She smashes hers again. The light changes and we lose each other.

"He want to know if your president is man of peace, in his heart. He worry about world. He say your president need to come, to see arch of Child Peace Monument, to know that war mean killing child and woman."

I roll down the window to get some air.

"He say air condition in taxi, window up, please."

The cab stops in front of Miyajima Mansion, an apartment building surrounded by orange flowering plants and trees sagging with pink blossoms.

A door swings open, and a little girl runs out, shouting, "*Oka-san!*"

That's one word I know. *Mother.*

Yuka holds the girl, who looks to be three or four years old. They chat excitedly back and forth, faces close.

Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe the child used some familiar version of "aunt" or "cousin."

"This is Reina," Yuka says. The girl looks at me. "Reina, this is Maxine. Say hello, Reina. And this," she points behind me, "Yoshio."

I turn to see a man standing in the doorway. He looks very neat, dressed in pressed slacks and a button-down shirt.

“Oh, hello,” I say, stepping toward him, my hand outstretched. “Maxine, Yuka’s friend.”

“Yoshio,” he responds, taking my hand. “Yuka’s husband.”

The air is thick, the sun scorching my neck. Yoshio smiles as though he knows he’s a surprise.

“May I please have a drink of water?”

“Yes, certainly. Come in.”

I almost forget to remove my shoes. I stumble out of them and onto the hardwood floor of the airy apartment. Yuka’s the one to get me water, and it’s clear she’s familiar with the house, the exact cabinet to open for a glass. So this is the simple, bank-teller, parent-caretaking Yuka.

Reina sits on a pillow next to me and hands me a cloth clown doll.

“*Domo*,” I say, accepting the doll.

“Ronald McDonald,” says Reina, unsmiling, her black page-boy hair framing her face.

“Yes,” Yuka says, handing me the water and smiling. I look into Yuka’s eyes, hoping for some recognition, some clue about how she’s feeling or how she’s expecting me to feel. She smiles at me then sits next to Reina.

So this is Yuka’s family. A husband and daughter. In Hiroshima, City of Water. I watch the water sparkle in the glass, trying not to stare at Reina and Yoshio. An irrational thought seizes me: Did the water come from the river we crossed over to get here? Is it safe?

“Let’s have beer,” says Yoshio.

Yuka holds Reina’s hand, saying some words softly in Japanese. I can’t help it—I think of the bomb again, of children Reina’s age sitting on their mothers’ laps—of radiation in the glass of water—

“Is this your first time to Hiroshima?” asks Yoshio, handing me a glass of beer. I set down the water.

“Thank you. Yes.”

“And where are you from?”

“California, the Bay Area.”

“I went to Stanford,” he says, sipping his beer.

Reina stands up behind Yuka and begins touching her earrings, one by one, as though counting them up and down, down and up.

“Yes, he major in Business and music,” says Yuka. I’m struck by how she looks and sounds exactly the same here as she did last night when we lay in bed. “He play the flute in the Hiroshima Symphony. And the shakuhachi.”

“What’s that?” I’m glad I have a question to ask, a focus to take. I feel like I’m not quite inside my skin.

“It’s an ancient flute,” he says “Would you like to hear?”

“Yes, please.”

When he’s in the other room fetching the flute, all I can say is: “Yuka?”

Reina is now trying to braid Yuka’s short hair.

“My parent old, need me,” she says as though answering an unasked question. “I come back here one day. But for now, okay.”

“But—your daughter?”

“Hiroshima safest city for child,” she says. “No bomb here second time.”

Yoshio puts the instrument to his lips and closes his eyes. A plaintive wave of sound fills the room. I immediately recognize the sound, one that I think of as ancient and beautiful yet very, very sad. As he plays, Reina braids and unbraids her mother’s hair. I wonder if Rose would come here, to raise children with me in the safest city in the world.

The Canyon

The dispute about damming the river has been flaring up off and on for forty years. It was in and around this river, and up into the hills, that a hundred and fifty years ago, thousands of men (and a few women) descended to pan, dredge, slurry, and hydraulically mine for gold. They left behind them towns that dot the Sierra Nevada foothills. In one of those towns, Oakville, there's a movement to dam the river and fill the canyon, to drown its red soil in an expanse of blue for boating.

Surveyors have shown that the proposed dam location lies on a fault. Other surveyors have shown that perhaps the fault's not active. No matter, new voices raise every so often in hopes of transforming the town into a lakeside resort. All the new houses, with their broad white faces, look like they're sitting there waiting for a lake. The residents, as they hook up their boats to their two-ton trucks, think about the fact that they have to drive forty-five minutes to Lake Fellows. If the dam were built, in minutes they could be boating and swimming and fishing and jet skiing. And most of the houses in the new Whispering Winds development would become lake-view property.

Whispering Winds was just a field when Meg was growing up here. A field of rolling hills crowded with blue oaks, manzanita, and poison oak. Bordered by a few

small houses, some of them abandoned, the field was the perfect place to get lost as a kid, or to party as a teenager.

Meg can't come back here without thinking about things like that. Fragments of memories jar her even before she exits the freeway on her motorcycle. This exit, for instance, is where her father's car overheated as she drove it alone for the first time the week after she got her license. She'd accepted a ride back into town from an old man driving a new Cadillac. Afterward she took auto shop and learned how to change the oil and check the fluids.

Meg passes that exit and guns it up the hill, passing a semi. Checking her mirror, she slows to take the Old Town exit. It's a crystalline fall day, with cobalt sky. She passes the massive cement forty-niner who kneels over the sidewalk with a gold pan in his hands. Like the tourists, she and her friends used to climb into the pan and take each other's pictures with a snapshot camera someone got for Christmas. She passes the Japanese grocery with its wooden floors where, at age thirteen, she was able to buy cigarettes with a fake note saying they were for her father.

Used to be you'd drive up the hill out of Old Town onto Nevada Street, which sprouted off willy-nilly in several directions. One would take you to the 49'er Fairgrounds, toward downtown and the high school. Another led into an undeveloped area that sprouted wild flowers, oak trees, and golden weeds with tenacious stickers. A third led toward neighborhoods with two- and three-bedroom houses, mostly ranch style, and an apartment building or two. Now Nevada Street has four stoplights. Little fashionable signs direct you to downtown and elsewhere. But what's most visible are the

mammoth placards announcing new family homes for sale in the developments, Oak Point and Whispering Winds and Gold Nugget Estates. Planted near the banners, little colorful flags on sticks, like at car dealerships, snap in the breeze.

Meg follows the sign toward the fairgrounds and leans her bike to the right, taking the curve around and up through her old neighborhood. It looks cleaner somehow. Didn't the sidewalks used to buckle? And it seems as though someone's been cleaning up the chestnuts that used to litter the street. She approaches her old house and sees a lath and plaster skeleton: no roof, and only one wall, one of her old bedroom walls. The house looks like it can't decide whether it's coming up or going down.

Two white, heavy-duty trucks are parked out front and two men in tee-shirts and jeans, both wearing tool belts, gesticulate at each other in what used to be the living room. The living room where her father slept on the couch—or often stayed up half the night, smoking. As a child she thought he was there to guard the house at night, the red spark of his cigarette a warning light to robbers. But later she realized that most parents don't sleep in the living room. Most fathers don't stay up half the night. And most fathers don't keep your mother's ashes in a box in a sideboard near the couch.

The men with tool belts look like they're in for a long conversation. Meg stops to watch them for a moment, idling the Harley and dropping her booted feet to the ground to hold steady. She reaches back and absentmindedly touches her satchel. A brown squirrel darts across the street and up the trunk of a chestnut tree. It perches on a limb and chatters. Squirrels used to do the same thing on the oak right out her bedroom window.

Once in a while, at dusk, an owl would alight there too. She sees that the oak still stands in the side yard. Plastic orange tape is tied around its wooly trunk.

She revs up her bike and takes off, aware that she has caused the two men to look her direction. She knows that with her black helmet, gloves, boots, and jeans, it's not easy to tell if she's a man or a woman. Sometimes she likes that, sometimes she doesn't. But she loves her bike, that maneuvering it requires some muscle.

She's always been strong, but her father never seemed to notice until the last time she saw him. That was a year ago, after he sold the house to move into an assisted-living home. She helped him load the couch (which he wanted to take instead of a bed) into his truck. He was insisting upon driving himself to Sacramento. As he lifted a side of the couch, he wheezed. She pushed the couch up onto the truck bed, and he sat on a lawn chair while she loaded a few small pieces of furniture and taped closed the tops of cardboard boxes.

"You're strong," he'd said, watching her work. The comment made her feel funny, a bit proud and a bit ashamed. (She knew he'd always wanted a son. At least that's what she'd heard him declare, his face almost purple with drink, at her mother's wake when she was five.)

Her father sat at the edge of the lawn chair as though he'd be getting up any minute, but he needed to catch his breath. He didn't light a cigarette, but a pack bulged out of the pocket of his shirt. She figured he didn't light one for her benefit but probably would the minute he pulled away in his truck.

When his breathing eased, he gestured toward a cardboard box on the porch and said, “Meg, open that one up.”

She immediately recognized the rectangular container inside the box as the one that held her mother’s ashes. She lifted it out, feeling its familiar bulk. She carried it to him.

“No. Take it,” he said.

“No. I can’t.”

“Please. I want you to.”

He had never really asked anything of her before. So she accepted the gift.

The bike carries Meg past her old neighborhood through downtown. The old Sprouse Reitz five-and-dime is long gone, replaced by a cafe that grinds specialty coffees while you wait. A women’s clothing boutique and a bookstore flank the cafe.

She follows the road toward the old field. An arch over the road announces she is entering Whispering Winds. Colossal gray and white houses, each a fortress with a similar floor plan and a yawning two- or three-car garage, loom over flawlessly landscaped yards. As she passes one house, automatic sprinklers burst on, startling her. Nothing, not even an echo, suggests this used to be the field where she and her friends would tromp around until they were covered in mosquito bites. Or the field where she smoked her first joint before going to the fair at the fairgrounds to ride the Zipper stoned. The life of this place seems divided, a striking before-and-after like a clean part down the middle of Meg’s hair.

She negotiates her motorcycle over the deep black asphalt and up a hill. She's glad to see that the development has not cut off the back road that leads down the hill and onto the canyon road. She loosens her body and sharpens her mind to prepare for the switchbacks.

When Meg was eight, her father drove her down this canyon road and across the old bridge, winding up into the historical gold mining area. He took the curves slowly yet casually, his hands light on the steering wheel. On the way, she noticed how the massive oaks and shrubs adorned the ridges, the green so stunning against the red clay. The notable exception was one gray, bare section, a massive cut in the side of the canyon. It had been blasted away when, at one point, plans to make the dam were underway before a court injunction to stop.

Winding her motorcycle down the road, Meg again sees that wound. It will never heal. She remembers that on that car trip with her father it occurred to her that building a dam meant flooding the meandering river and filling up the canyon.

"What would happen to the animals?" she asked her father. She pictured raccoons and deer and mountain lions scurrying up the sides of the canyon, losing their footing, and dropping into the rising waters (an image that recurred for years in bad dreams). At least birds could fly out.

"That's the problem," her father said. "The animals wouldn't have anywhere to go. It's their home."

Those who want to dam the river and make this town into a lakeside resort don't mention the animals. Oddly enough, neither do the opponents of the dam. They mention the economy and traffic and quality of life. But what about the animals? Who will welcome more raccoons in their storm drains, and skunks under their decks, and mountain lions on the jogging paths where one killed a woman a few months back? Since then, in the developments blanketing this foothill town, people feel vaguely unsafe. They even worry about all the possums and rabbits, those pests that can gnaw through cables and wires, causing T.V. outages and maybe even house fires. The deer, while beautiful, give some people the chills because they know that the presence of deer means the presence of mountain lions. They honk their horns at dazed fawns who wobble on the sides of the freeways and frontage roads at dusk.

Meg pulls her motorcycle off the twisting road next to the dirt berm where she and her friends used to park when they'd come to hang out at the river on summer days. A bird that floats over the whipping river. In the distance, way up high, the canyon edges are connected by a cantilever bridge, the largest bridge north of San Francisco. The bridge would serve as the dam head if the dam were ever built.

As a teenager, Meg stood up there one night with a few friends and dropped a stolen bowling ball over the edge, hoping it would explode. It did. Then they crawled down the hillside, past the "Do Not Enter" and "Danger" signs to the steel girders beneath the bridge. There they balanced, high on altitude, danger, and beer. They found

a sleeping bag bunched up under the girders in the darkness and carried it back up to the bridge. They dropped it, watching it parachute down over the bowling ball shards.

When she got home that night, her father was sitting in the dark, smoking a cigarette and drinking a vodka tonic. She wanted to tell him about the bowling ball, but she never did.

The canyon echoes, not from voices but from memories like this. Meg dismounts from her motorcycle and unties her satchel, carrying it with her as she negotiates the path down to the beach. She stumbles in her thick books and hitches the satchel up over her back several times. Her face prickles with warm sweat. When she makes it to the bottom, she sits on a wide rock, breathing in the thick river smells. The bridge, although tiny in the distance, feels like it towers over her in some way. The road at her back is silent on a Monday afternoon. On the weekends, lines of SUVs negotiate the road down into the picturesque canyon then push over the other side. There people have lunch in Fallon or Mitchellton. They wander around the old slurry and the replica miners' cabins. They take a ride on a stagecoach and pan for gold flakes and fake gold nuggets in plastic barrels.

Meg did all those things once, that afternoon that her father drove down into the canyon and up the other side. Meg climbed around the old slurry at the historical miner's camp. She loved peering through the window bars into the replica miner's cabin. Old boots lay near the cot. On top of the wood burning stove sat a rusty old pot. It looked lonely, yet cozy, inside. She wanted to wear those boots, to hear herself clunk across

wooden floors, to throw her leg over a muscular horse and take a sturdy ride across acorn-scattered meadows. Her father took her to the Gold Standard Hotel Restaurant, where she had a hot chocolate and he drank something called a Gold Cadillac, a strong-smelling drink served in a canning jar.

On the river's edge, Meg watches the clear water cold as the sky. Flakes of fools gold shimmer up from the bottom, where a few tiny black fish shoot around. She pulls off her gloves and unbuckles the satchel. She removes the rectangular box and another one, too. For a moment she sits with her hand on each one, looking out at the roiling water. Slowly, she lifts the lids of both boxes. Holding one in each hand, she pours them together into the river. The ashes swirl together as they fall toward the water. They are carried down the river.

The Contest

The Chamber of Commerce was worried. The freeway ran right through Oakville, but travelers weren't stopping. Travelers should know that walking through Old Town shot you back to 1849, your shoes clomping along the plank sidewalks, the Japanese grocer selling rice paper candy and sodas, the Jumping Frog bar offering drinks reminiscent of the gold rush, like Sluice Juice and Hangman's High. People should see the old firehouse, its row of photos depicting the burnings and rebuildings of Oakville in the exuberant mining days. People should take a ride in the mining car, into the replica mine. People should buy things from Oakville merchants.

Not even the businesses most visible from the freeway got much out-of-town business, the 7-11, Foothill Family Pizza, or Nugget Gas and Auto. Most people had already eaten and filled their gas tanks in Sacramento, and from there it was just two hours up in to the Sierra, so they just whizzed right through Oakville like it didn't even exist, their minds on Reno slot machines.

The one exception was Chow Chi's Restaurant, Cocktail Lounge & Dress & Gift Shop. Its huge "We're Air Conditioned!" banner flapped out front. Chow Chi's was the one place where, when filled to capacity, locals might not know a soul. Strangers gravitated to the place, and Old Chow and Young Chow raked in the dough. Perhaps the

“restaurant, cocktail lounge, and dress & gift shop” amalgamation of a tag line had great appeal. Or perhaps its success had to do with Chow’s long lease on the best freeway billboard, the one that towered over Exit 2.

Mayor Gerald Tibbs was worried. At a Chamber of Commerce meeting he said:

“People driving through our town might be under the impression that they can get Chop Suey but not all-you-can eat ribs.”

The Chambers’ mouth watered at the thought, and they adjourned early to the Claim Jump. At least that’s what Myrna Jones said, because she was eating fried calamari with Millie Winterson, who had a thing for Mayor Tibbs. Millie just about choked on her margarita when Mayor Tibbs entered with the chamber group.

“What an honor!” cried Myrna, elbowing Millie. “Why don’t you all just have a seat right here, next to us.”

And Gerald and the rest of the chamber did. Millie licked at the salt on the rim of her glass, all aflame from alcohol and desire. Myrna got a kick out of that, watching these two sitting so close together, both in heat like teenagers, even though both were married to other people. For more than twenty years, mind you, said Myrna, who wasn’t one to censor herself.

But the mayor didn’t behave as Millie hoped. He didn’t turn to her and ask her about her bridge games or how her Avon business was coming along. Instead, he was still on fire about Chow’s monopolizing of freeway business. Into his second beer, he ordered some ribs all around, and when they came, he flailed barbecue sauce about as he

ranted about the superiority of American beef over egg foo young.

Perhaps Mayor Tibbs didn't know it, but the past was speaking through him, like a megaphone sticking out of a grave. Maynard Tibbs, the mayor's great-great uncle, had been a lawyer whose political work was instrumental in prohibiting Chinese ownership of property, voting and, ultimately, immigrating. The Chinese had been brought to the area to build the railroad. Soon, many Chinese began to prosper in other industries. The Chinese languages, opium use, Chinese business success—all were affected in some way by official and unofficial harassment of the Chinese by people like Maynard Tibbs.

Gerald didn't know these details of his great-great-uncle's life. He just inherited Maynard Tibbs' ninety acres, farmhouse, and deep-seated belief that the Chinese didn't have the right to live and thrive in Oakville.

Of course Gerald didn't say so. He didn't even consciously know it. He just kept shouting about Chop Suey versus ribs, Tsing Tao beer versus Budweiser. Watching him rant with bits of meat in his teeth and barbecue sauce all over his fingers, Millie was so turned off that her marriage was saved.

Later, the Chamber of Commerce and the city council jointly decided to sponsor a contest: The best idea for how to draw in tourists from the freeway.

Selina Jones, a high school junior and daughter of Myrna, had heard her mother on the phone with Aunt Turtle, talking about the mayor's dislike of all things Chinese. Selina told her best friend, Nancy Chow, daughter of Young Chow. They organized the Three Nancys and Elizabeth Williams. The next full moon, they toilet papered the

mayor's house. They did a beautiful job throwing the rolls up high into the oak trees, strands of toilet paper fluttering in the moonlight. Using water guns, they sprayed the mayor's car before toilet papering so it would dry overnight and be all but impossible to remove without ruining the paint job.

Soon, fliers for the "Pride in Oakville" contest were plastered all over town and distributed in the schools. Teachers scrapped their art projects and planned lessons for the contest: What is the best thing about Oakville? The kids, many of whom were generally bored to tears in the town, were whipped into a jingoistic fervor. They loved Placer Park's multi-level slide! Watching the synchronized swimming team perform to Yankee Doodle Dandy on the fourth of July! Foot-long hotdogs and Slurpees at 7-11!

No, no, no, said the teachers. What do you love about Oakville's *history*? When people come here to visit, what could they learn?

Old time miners with no teeth becoming millionaires overnight! Hanging bad guys on Hangtown tree, the tree we now light up for Christmas! Indians smashing acorns for food!

That's better, said the teachers. Let's draw.

The Chamber and the city council spent hours poring through the entries, making persuasive speeches about their favorites. The best ones, they decided, appealed to gamblers driving through with lots of money in their pockets. Oakville as a mythic place of riches, a history of good luck.

Supervisor Bobby Hanover advocated for Harry Maxwell's idea. Harry, a fourth

grader, suggested placing a huge boulder next to the first Oakville exit. Painted gold, the boulder would suggest a massive gold nugget, “Welcome to Historical Oakville” painted across it in green.

Ultimately, though, the men decided on the suggestion submitted by Dr. Bylo, one of the town’s most prestigious residents. It was rumored that Dr. Bylo graduated from dental school at age nineteen. A genius, he was also an artist. His oil paintings of clowns and the sun setting over the mountains won blue ribbons every year at the county fair. In front of his dental practice, one of his sculptures, a concrete mermaid fountain, spouted water. Dr. Bylo’s plan was a statue of the man reputed to have discovered gold in Oakville.

So this is how the massive concrete statue of Jules Petavin came to pass. Perched on a hill over Old Town, the statue overlooks the freeway like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg. All white concrete, he leans forward on one knee as though tipping his massive gold pan into a stream. Sure enough, most days tourists can be seen snapping photos of each other perched in the gold pan.

Business revenues began rising, perhaps due to an upswing in the economy, but the Chamber thanked Dr. Bylo. Mayor Tibbs was particularly proud that an American statue could trump a Chinaman’s billboard.

He was mistaken, though.

As the historical landmark plaque (sponsored by the Claim Jump Restaurant) points out, Jules Petavin was not American but French. He came to California on a

whaling ship, abandoned in the San Francisco bay by the whole crew due to gold fever. And, contrary to the plaque's claims, he wasn't the first miner to discover gold in Oakville, just the most successful. He made so much money that he planted acres and acres of grapes for his dream to make wine. He built a huge vintner's citadel next to his own palatial chateaux. All was lost, though, when a series of mud slides buried his arbors and invaded his house like The Blob, the result of hydraulic mining. Hydraulic mining involved washing away whole mountainsides with high-force water when digging did not yield enough gold. Jules died penniless. But now he is immortalized, gazing over the freeway, drawing consumers to Oakville.

Not long after the success of the miner statue, Dr. Bylo began another project, a massive statue right outside his practice, next to the mermaid. It soon became evident that he was erecting a twenty-foot topless Amazon holding a bow and arrow. While the fountain mermaid's flowing locks tastefully draped over her breasts, the Amazon's breasts ballooned out, her nipples the size of dinner plates. The city council had to face a group of red-faced citizens at its March meeting, and letters to the editor appeared in the *Oakville Sentinel*, decrying obscenity. One of the more level-headed objections asked: "Is Oakville a place for such art? Wouldn't a museum be more appropriate?" All some people knew was they'd never go get a filling from Dr. Bylo again.

Dr. Bylo never spoke up in his defense. A few letters on his behalf appeared in the paper, decrying censorship of what was clearly influenced by "the great masters of antiquity." Another letter supported Dr. Bylo as a devout Christian and priceless

contributor to the community, but urged him to carve some coverage on the statue's breasts because even Eve had fig leaves.

The Chamber, who felt it couldn't back down from the profuse honoring it had paid him at the contest awards ceremony and dinner, kept mum, hoping the hullabaloo would soon die down. It did. Besides, Mayor Tibbs pointed out that the sculpture was, afterall, on the man's private property and those who didn't want to look at massive bazooms (he got a laugh from the city council for that one) could take the Maple Street route downtown.

Dr. Bylo really pushed it, though, with his next project, an Adonis with six-pack abs, holding a rusty chain in his grip, as though attempting to rip it in half. Unlike the Amazon, the Adonis did not wear a strip of sandstone cloth to hide his nether region. His penis, modestly in proportion to the rest of his massive body, hung down unabashedly.

The first week after the statue's unveiling, the penis disappeared. Someone had chiseled it off. Rumor had it that the perpetrator had thrown the concrete penis into the American River, off the overlook bridge. Or that the penis sat erect, so to speak, on someone's mantel. That act of vandalism may have provided vicarious satisfaction to critics, who did not barrage the newspapers to the same degree they had with the Amazon fiasco.

A few weeks after the penis disappeared, another reappeared. This began a cycle of penis-stealing and penis-reattachment. Everyone imagined Dr. Bylo, like a crazy scientist in his lab, sculpting a whole series of penises, stocking up.

After a while, the controversy faded away, and Dr. Bylo's naked statues began to seem as much a part of Oakville as the Jules Petavin statue or the all-you-can-eat ribs at the Claim Jump.

And Dr. Bylo seemed satisfied enough with his two nude statues that he turned his attentions back to oil painting—although at the next county fair, his images of clowns and sunsets had given way to large-breasted women with their blouses sliding off a shoulder, and men with muscles bulging out of their short-sleeved shirts.

Art Making

Michelle has never lied to her lover, Lil, before, and for a moment she reconsiders. She stops on the lawn and turns to look back at the house. Glacier-like, the new house exudes a frosty aloofness, a blank-faced enormity. Lil, smiling, peers out the upstairs window at Michelle. She holds their terrier, Ragamuffin, up to the window, waving his paw in her hand as though they're both saying *see you later*. Their breath frosts the window. The room glows, lamplight shedding gold on Lil and their dog—a small speck of warmth engulfed by the vast white house.

Michelle feels a rush of cold fall air. Perhaps she should just go back in the house and carry in the three pumpkins that slouch against the porch. They could make jack-o-lanterns this afternoon. Or Michelle could help Lil stencil pink and blue terrier silhouettes on the walls of the nursery while they watch the game. Instead, she turns and walks, her throat tightening, her body moving away from the house. Her lie to Lil creeps into her bones, the lie that she is merely taking an afternoon walk.

As she steps to the sidewalk that is lined with the sentinels of slim, straight-backed trees, Michelle pulls her long, red hair from under the neck of her coat to let it sweep across her back. Tulle fog clings to the crew-cut grass that fans out from each house's colossal white portico. The cold air smells full, like rain is on the way.

Michelle's heart thrums as she walks, her body charged. A fat, striped spider clings to a glossy web on the cement cherub that the Friendlys installed just last week. The statue is surrounded with regulation redwood bark.

Michelle knows the Friendlys aren't happy with her and Lil since they've delayed their landscaping. In the three months she and Lil have lived in the house, the lawn has been installed but not the plants and retaining walls. Things are tight since they're spending so much money and time with the fertility specialist. They didn't tell this to Georgia and John Friendly, though, who apparently have no such problem since three little girls with all their pink accoutrements fill their vast house. And if Lil is right, Georgia looks to be gaining some weight. So perhaps another Friendly is on the way.

Michelle was inseminated yesterday, for the eleventh time. The first few times the sperm arrived at their old one-bedroom house on Grant Street in its cryogenic capsule. Lil, wearing garden gloves and ski goggles, removed it carefully, defrosted it in its clear tube in a pan of bubbling water over the stove. Michelle fitted herself with the cervical cap and tube, lying back on their sagging burgundy couch, nestled against her grandmother's needlepoint pillow for luck. Lil and Michelle had giggled off and on for hours after the first insemination at the image of Lil, with her frizzy brown hair, wearing goggles and hunched over the stove like a crazy scientist. They giggled at the thought of a stranger's sperm wriggling up into Michelle's body, her body wondering what the hell this foreign substance was. Lil lit a few lemon candles then lay next to Michelle, pressing into her.

They took a break from the successive inseminations the month they moved into the new house in Whispering Winds development. Michelle didn't want to move; she wanted to remodel the Grant Street house and stay in the neighborhood with bungalows, buckled sidewalks, and full-grown willows. Lil, though, wanted a new house, a new neighborhood. They were building a family; why not go for it all in an unsullied space? Now that they had the money in equity, why not sell and move? A clean, new place for a fresh start. A clean, new place with no electrical problems (what if a spark lit a fire, did they want to put a baby at such risk?), no plumbing problems (gritty stuff came out of the old pipes; was that safe to drink, much less wash baby bottles in?). Lil was sure there was mold in the walls, radon in the attic, rot in the foundation.

Michelle said all of that could be fixed in a full remodel. But what about working on the baby, countered Lil? How could they work on a baby and undertake a remodel at the same time? It was more sensible to buy in this new development, where everything was already set, in its place, ready to go. Now they were settled in the new house and settled in with Dr. Ray, who was inseminating Michelle in her antiseptic office each month.

Michelle watches her feet walk along the perfect sidewalk squares. She knows that all this spanking newness makes Lil happy. Lil emits an aura of satisfaction as she crochets blankets while watching the Sports Channel on the new big screen T.V. Lil is content, set for the introduction of a pink-skinned infant who will have her own freshly stenciled room in their unpolluted four-bedroom house.

Michelle rubs her hands together in the cold then shoves them in her pockets, her fingers touching her cell phone. Spread across a neighbor's front door is a cotton spider web housing a huge plastic spider that wears a pointed witch hat. She feels an ache in her gut—the ping of ovulation?—and a warm gush in her groin. For a moment she panics, thinking she can't remember his phone number. Then it comes to her.

It's so cold that she's sure no one will be at the mini-park at the end of the block, which would be a good place to make the call. The cement walkway to the park is lined with skinny trees tied to sticks. The play equipment—a plastic motorcycle on a spring, two bucket baby swings, and a twisted insect of a slide—is mounted over a springy, rubber surface.

If rubber surfaces had been in parks years ago, maybe Michelle would not have broken her arm when she was eight at the old park across town, the one with sloping slides, and swings that shot high, and round cement tubes where she would echo her name, over and over. The massive shade trees were almost better than the equipment: Michelle climbed as high as she dared, converting people on the ground into toys or ants. She fell when she was trying to hang upside down by one leg. She'd been testing her strength. Later, when Michelle gingerly approached the park equipment with her puckered, white arm recently released from the cast, her grandmother had scolded her. "Don't be so timid," she'd said. "Get back on that horse."

Michelle's grandmother died just two months ago, shortly after Michelle and Lil moved to Whispering Winds. In the hospital bed, she still had her muscular bearing even though the stroke had left her silent.

Michelle feels like she's losing her breath so she shakes away the image of her dying grandmother.

She guessed right. The park is empty. The nearby gray houses have their white blinds shut, and the tulle fog is gathering even more thickly in the cold. Michelle sits on a cement bench, frosty damp permeating her jeans to the backs of her thighs.

Roland answers the phone on the first ring.

"Hi," he says.

"I'm at the park."

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"I'll be right over to get you if you want."

"Okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Her heart picks up its pace again. The low fog swirls and a raindrop stains the knee of her jeans. Roland has hung up, and she realizes she still has the phone to her ear. She clicks the phone shut and drops it back in her jacket pocket.

On the cul-de-sac across the way, just past the slide, a man in a black coat walks a white dog. If Michelle squints, the dog almost disappears in the pallid atmosphere, the leash leading to nowhere. Michelle does something she hasn't done since she was a kid—closes her eyes and pretends she's invisible. But she knows her long red hair is aflame in the white air.

A month ago, Roland began his comments to her about her hair. “Hey Red,” he said. She was taken aback for a moment because it was as though her grandmother’s voice was coming from his mouth—playful, deep, gravelly. But after Roland brushed by her a few times while he was shelving books or passing her on his way to the bookstore’s rear cash register, she realized he meant the nickname not only playfully. He meant it as a man to a woman. She was used to comments from men over the years—sometimes they stirred her a little, but usually they left her cold. There was something different about Roland, though. His soft brown skin, his chocolate eyes, the way one front tooth overlapped another.

During one of the many conversations they had during breaks, he told her his mother was second generation from India and his father French. Something about those teeth, and the way he moved his hands, reminded her of her best friend in tenth grade, the one who had sent shockwaves through her body during surreptitious stroking in the middle of the night as they slept in sleeping bags zipped together on the floor of her bedroom.

Michelle and Roland began stretching their conversations beyond the ten minutes allotted for breaks. Michelle never asked Roland how old he was, but she figured he was in his mid-twenties, at least ten years younger than she. An art major at the local state university, he talked about slender-necked Modiglianis and puddle-eyed Lempickas in a way that made her crave . . . something. What? She wasn’t sure.

“Look,” he’d once said, pulling a book from his backpack and opening it on the table between them. A thick-thighed nude with a body like golden hills barely contained the space of the frame.

“Lempicka’s excesses are magnificent,” he said, pausing to sip his tea. “Even cars look like flesh in her paintings. You can just feel the overflow. A hallmark of Bohemia.”

“I feel like I could reach out and touch her. It’s like you want to be in that world,” Michelle said, feeling awkward at her attempt to talk about art.

“That’s both the artist’s passion and technique. She’s a master of shadow.”

Michelle wanted to show Roland her grandmother’s paintings. But she was apprehensive, not sure if they were good art and not wanting his opinion if they weren’t. Glistening apples, gold pocket watches, walnuts on purple silk that looked like it would be smooth to the touch. At least thirty of these paintings were stacked in a closet in the guest room. Lil kept saying to Michelle that they should hang them; the paintings had covered almost every inch of the walls in the old Grant Street house. But to hang her grandmother’s creations of glowing, old objects in the new house does not feel right to Michelle. The paintings would be undermined or contaminated, somehow, by the house’s sleek silver carpet and faux brass fixtures.

The pace of raindrops begins to pick up. Michelle pulls her coat hood over her head. When she sees Roland’s red truck approaching, she feels a pang, static shooting inside the cavern of her chest.

A blast of warm air greets her when she slides onto the bench seat. He smiles at her and turns on the windshield wipers. They don't say anything for a few minutes, just sit there staring straight ahead at the thud and squeak of the wipers. The truck pulls out of Whispering Winds and onto the slick main road, which is reflecting the stoplights. Roland turns on the radio to a whiskey-voiced woman singing about her lover standing under the moon. They pass three mini-malls crammed with quick marts and diet centers and video stores.

"I want you to see something," Roland says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he says as he turns and follows the signs to the freeway and heads north.

"I need to make a call," Michelle says.

Roland turns off the radio as Michelle dials. When Lil answers, Michelle can hear the game in the background. She feels an odd wash of nostalgia.

"Where are you? Aren't you soaked?" Lil says in a voice that suggests she has one eye on the game.

"I ran into Georgia," Michelle says, her heart thumping in her chest. "She asked me if I wanted to go hear some poetry reading thing, or something like that. It sounded like a good thing for my mood, just listening."

Michelle stops herself, concerned if she chatters on too long a false note will surface. She panics for a minute at the thought that Lil might ask to say hello to Georgia.

“Oh, yeah, hon, that sounds good. Hey, just don’t drink anything, you know, because who knows if those wrigglers hit their mark. Maybe our little daughter is growing in you as we speak.” Static crinkles over the line.

“I think we’re cutting out,” Michelle says, relieved for an excuse to hang up.

“Okay. Have fun.”

Michelle clicks off, a kind of gloomy dread sweeping over her. *Turn this truck around*, she almost says out loud. As the windshield begins to cloud, Roland reaches over and turns on the defroster. She catches his profile out of the corner of her eye, his high, arched nose, his minky eyelashes, his hands soft against the steering wheel. She settles back as he drives, the gloom settling and electricity sparking her veins once more as they move down the road.

“That’s my great-aunt,” says Roland.

He and Michelle are standing warm and dry in a gallery, raindrops sliding down their coats. In the oil painting, a woman is draped in sheer, brown material. Her body overflows—rounded stomach, full breasts with salmon colored nipples, lush scarlet lips. Her shoulders, forearms, and thighs are thick and long, seeming to seep beyond the edges of the canvas in smoky fullness. Yet there is an angular quality to her softness: her collarbones protrude, her nose and eyebrows arc, and her slicked-back hair is run through with a stern pencil-straight part.

“She was one of Tamara de Lempicka’s lovers,” Roland continues, “Or at least that’s the story. They knew each other in Paris in the 1920s. She was my father’s aunt.”

“Did you know her?”

“Only through this painting.”

They continue through the exhibition of Lempickas, body after body exuberantly ballooning toward them, each supple yet slightly metallic in the contrast of shadow to skin. In one painting, four nudes intertwine, sienna flesh with sienna flesh, so that it's not clear where one body starts and another stops. In another, a fleshy man and woman embrace, his potent arms curving around the woman's gravid stomach.

It's in front of this painting that Roland places his hand in the sway of Michelle's back. Michelle reaches over and touches his arm, the bridge from him to her.

Michelle lies on her back, her hands on her stomach. She listens to the end of the storm, a few scattered raindrops on the roof. White light from a streetlight ekes in. From her place on the futon mattress, Michelle can see canvasses looming like shadows in the corners of Roland's studio apartment. One leans against the easel in the corner. The room has a greasy, spicy pungency: Roland's smells, and the scent of art making.

Roland sleeps on his side, his breath warm against her neck. During sex, she had been surprised at the sandpaper feel of his face, and the way he kept his eyes open, staring at her as he entered her. His hipbones had nudged insistently against hers. And now her blood feels like it's smoothly flowing through her body, a kind of rested state she hasn't experienced in months. She feels ample and lush. Sated. If she were a painting, she'd be a Lempicka.

For a moment she entertains a fantasy of her grandmother as a young woman drinking wine in Paris with Roland's aunt and Tamara de Lempicka. They're in a studio cluttered with palettes for blending colors, an array of brushes and half-finished paintings and tubes of paint littering the warped wood floors and color-splattered tables. They talk about bodies, laugh about affairs, drink wine, and light each other's cigarettes. Atop silk-strewn blocks for models to pose, they disrobe.

Fool's Gold

My pajama bottoms have poodles on them, and Hannah's have polka dots. We also wear tee shirts and black Army boots. And today the principal of Oakville High, his disembodied voice blaring over the loud speaker, announces a ban on pajamas. This new fad, he says, is unprofessional dress. At least ten girls in Room 14 wear baggy pajama bottoms, men's large, the waistband rolled down to our hips.

During passing period, Hannah and I decide to cut History.

"Hey Hannah," calls out Jake Burbee, the school narc, as we walk toward Hannah's VW. He shoots her a braces smile. I notice that Hannah smiles back and touches Jake's shoulder as she moves around him to open the car door.

"We've got to get together one of these times," he says, poking his head through Hannah's window. He doesn't look at me. Behind his head, the light blue sky is mottled with clouds.

"Could be happening," Hannah says.

My stomach drops, as it always does when she flirts with other people. For months I've wanted to be her girlfriend, but she says she's not sure she likes me like that. She's had both girlfriends and boyfriends. I've only had girlfriends. I mean girlfriend,

singular. Last summer, the final week at camp. We promised to write letters but we never did.

At Quick Mart, Hannah puts two packages of donuts in her pajama pockets while I buy a 79-cent coffee from Haley Conner, who two years ago was the Oakville High mascot, the miner. With a tooth blacked out, wearing a short brown-fringed skirt, she'd do cartwheels and back flips across the gym floor.

Sipping on coffee and yanking open the package of donuts, Hannah negotiates the car with the help of her knees. We drive into the new subdivision, passing pink and cream-colored houses that look like castles.

"Do you think the people in these houses wear crowns?" Hannah asks.

I wish I had thoughts like that. I try to think of a story, funny or weird. But my mind is maddeningly blank.

"If I owned one of these houses, I'd paint it chartreuse," Hannah says.

"I don't think that's allowed."

"Yeah, well fuck allowed." Hannah grabs a donut and stuffs it in her mouth.

White powdered sugar sprays all over the dashboard as she chews open-mouthed. The car swerves, the tires bumping the curb.

We exit the back of the development and follow the river road. The canyon's red dirt and oaks spread out below. A few turkey vultures circle up high. Hannah jolts the car to a stop at edge of the trail beneath a blue oak. When she turns to look at me, my whole body flushes.

“You’ve got powdered sugar all over your lips,” I say.

“Maybe you should get it for me,” Hannah says, leaning toward me. Hannah’s black bangs point to her dark eyes. I can’t believe the moment is here. Is she really going to kiss me?

Reaching across the gearshift, she puts her hand on my neck. I like feeling roped in. We kiss. She tastes sweet from the powdered sugar.

Pulling away, she flings open her door and jumps out of the car, running zigzag through the weeds. I grab my backpack and follow her up to the grinding rock. My heart is racing. We jump over a little cord that’s strung between stakes to keep people off the rock, which has holes in it bigger than fists where, Hannah once told me, the Indians used to grind acorns.

I want to grab her hand, hold it, kiss her again, but she lays back on the rock and closes her eyes, her booted feet crossed at the ankle. I want to lie down on top of her, but instead I watch the river squirming. Light speckles down through the oak leaves.

Reaching into my backpack, I pull out my sketch pad. I draw a woman, crouched, her knees to her breasts, pressing a pestle into the rock. I feel her arms ache as I draw.

We make it back in time for English. Ms. Karen Halliburton is teaching us analogies for S.A.T. preparation.

Rare : Sporadic :: Friend : A) Foe, B) Ally, C) Antagonist, D) Enemy.

On the back of the handout, Hannah writes: “The principal is our ANTAGONIST. Express your RIGHT to wear what you want. Wear PJs to school

tomorrow!!!! Pass it on.” At the top of the paper, she draws a cartoon of people with mohawks and earrings wearing p.j.s

She smiles at me when she slips the paper onto my desk. I smile back, searching her eyes for some recognition, some connection. I can still taste the powdered sugar kiss. But her eyes don’t linger on mine; she looks back at the teacher.

I pass on the paper. It seems to make it around the whole class before the bell rings.

That night I show my dad the picture I drew of the Indian woman crushing acorns.

“You’re so talented,” he says. I knew he’d say that, which was why I showed him the picture.

We eat take-out hamburgers and fries while watching some old John Wayne movie on cable. I’m bothered by all the killing of the Indians, but my dad’s into it, so I just decide to watch and relax and keep the peace.

At midnight I climb into bed and call Hannah’s cell phone. She answers on the first ring saying, “Hey dahling.” She has caller I.D.

“Hey,” I say, my heart pumping faster at the sound of her voice.

“I looked for you online, wanted to send you an IM,” she says. “But you were apparently otherly disposed.”

“Watching a movie with Dad,” I say. “What did you want to IM me?”

“That you’re a good kisser.”

“You too,” I say, my face getting hot.

She doesn't say anything else about that, just starts talking about other things, like the pajama ban, and a party she's planning when her parents leave town for a week. We talk until 2:30, when I feel myself losing some of her words as I begin to drift off to sleep. She's the one, though, who says we'd better hang up. Is it my imagination, or does she say she can't wait to see me tomorrow?

What seems like a hundred people wear pajamas at school the next day. Some also wear bathrobes or slippers. A group of guys even has their hair in curlers. It looks like Pajama Day, the one day we're supposed to wear this stuff to school, but that's for Fall Homecoming and School Spirit and all that.

After the pledge of allegiance, the principal squawks over the P.A. that tomorrow anyone wearing pajamas will be sent home.

In history class Ms. Greta Ford talks about all the settlers that came to California in 1800's over the Sierra Nevada mountains. She says that tree stumps were used like anchors to slow the wagons that came down the steep river canyons. She also tells us how the miners were wild, with all their prostitution and gambling and stagecoach robberies. Seems like the gold was kind of driving everyone crazy.

Hannah's the one who's driving me crazy. I didn't find her at the usual spot near the gym before school. And when I came into History class, she was having a deep conversation with Amanda, their heads close together. Hannah didn't even look at me when I sat down.

Hannah raises her hand. “I heard it was legal to kill Indians in California back then,” she says, crossing her striped pajama legs. I love hearing her voice. She always sounds exactly like she knows what she’s talking about.

“Yes, unfortunately it was, for almost twenty years,” says Ms. Ford.

Before she can take a breath to tell us more, Dan Tilton and Ty Wilson whoop and give each other a high five. Like they would be overjoyed to be Indian killers, like killing an Indian is like dunking a basketball.

“Get the hell out of my classroom!” Greta yells.

Dan and Ty’s faces turn white. As they get up and walk out, everyone’s really quiet. Greta’s face is red, her eyes watery.

My heart is pounding, like it does whenever someone yells, even if it’s not at me. I glance over at Hannah. She’s eyeing me out of the corner of her eyes and gives me a thumbs up. I can’t believe that at she was looking at me, waiting for my reaction. She wants to know what I think. She cares what I feel. For the rest of the period, I’m floating. My eyes can’t focus on the chapter we’re supposed to be reading on the Gold Rush.

After school, I hang around the gym, and when I see Hannah coming toward me, I smile at her, trying to act casual. When she asks me if I want to take a drive, I check my watch, then say, “Sure, okay.”

She drives us down the canyon to the river. It seems like we’re the only ones here. A hawk glides in the blue sky. Pines and oaks cling to the red dirt.

The river scares me a little. I'm not sure why. The smells make me feel unsafe, makes me want to be on the couch, warm at home. But I don't tell Hannah this. I look at the bluff way above me, thinking about the people in a wagon looking down the vertical-walled gorge, planning how they'd get to the bottom with ropes.

"Can you fucking believe Dan and Ty?" Hannah says as she shrugs her backpack off her shoulders and yanks open the zipper.

"I know." I'm wishing Hannah would sit closer to me, touch my hand or my face. But she's groping around in her backpack. She pulls out two cans of beer. When she opens one, foam sprays out.

"Yee haw!" she shouts. Her yell echoes into the canyon.

She hands me a lukewarm beer.

"Did you know," Hannah says as she yanks up the zipper on her backpack, "That the Indians helped guide over the mountains the very people who ended up stealing their land and killing them?"

"John Wayne movies, and all that," I say.

"No, this is reality."

I feel like an idiot. I never have the right thing to say.

"See," Hannah continues, "That's what I was trying to get at in class today. That it was fucking legal, I mean on the books, legal. Damn, that Greta Ford is hot!"

I look at her over the rim of my beer.

"How so?" I say, feeling that familiar pit in my stomach.

“She’s not going to put up with any alpha-male crap! That was so cool. Made me see her in a new light. With her hair down, I bet she’s pretty. She’s got gorgeous eyes.”

I sip at my beer and watch the gray river water. Some fool’s gold glints from the bottom.

When I get home, there’s a note from Dad saying he’s spending the night at Donna’s. Tempted to IM Hannah, I stay off the computer and instead turn on the TV, channel surfing until I can’t stand it anymore. I open the refrigerator and stare into it, then close the door. I open my closet and take all my men’s pajama bottoms off the wire hangers and fold them neatly, then put them in my dresser. At 9:30, as though my fingers have a will of their own, I call her.

“Hey dahling,” she says.

“What are you doing?” I’ve been feeling jittery all night, but just hearing her voice calms me.

“Listening to CDs and reading this really cool geology book. Did you know that three million years ago, the continent ended at Nevada? Our mountains have been under water longer than they’ve been on top.”

“How’d they get up top?”

“Volcanic and seismic activity,” she says in that soothing expert tone. I wish I had another question to ask about the book, or some comment to make about volcanic activity, but I don’t.

“My dad’s gone for the night.”

“Doing the Donna?” she says.

I laugh. “Yeah.”

“Want me to come over?” she asks.

My heart begins to race. “Sure, if you want to.”

“I’ll bring my pajamas.” She laughs into the phone and says she’ll be right over.

As soon as I open the door, she begins kissing me. Her lips are so soft, and she tastes like licorice. My body feels like it could just fall into her, like into a lake. My heart pounds so hard I’m sure she can hear it, but she doesn’t mention it. She just leads me to the bedroom, as though we’ve done this a million times before. Standing by the bed, Hannah runs her hands up under my shirt and pulls it off over my head. Then she takes off her own shirt. Our chests together feel amazing, breast on breast. When she removes my pants and touches me, I’m embarrassed at how wet I am.

“Damn girl,” she says to me, “You’re hot.”

Later, while she’s sleeping next to me, my mind plays her words over and over—that I’m hot, just like Greta Ford.

We get very little sleep and are tempted to cut school. I act nonchalant, like I can take school or leave it, even though I’d give anything to stay here with her in bed all day. But finally Hannah decides that we should go. So we get up and put on our tee shirts and baggy pajama bottoms, complete with fuzzy slippers.

When get to school, what looks like half the student body is out in the quad, wearing pajamas. Amanda Jones' mother, who writes for the local newspaper, is snapping pictures and talking to kids and writing things on a little pad. The principal and the two vice principals are standing by the flag pole with their arms crossed.

When the bell rings, people begin filing off to go to class. The principal has a clipboard and looks like he's taking some notes.

"What the hell does he think he's doing?" Hannah says. "Like he's going to get all our names?"

I act like I'm listening as she goes on about what a dork our principal is, but I don't hear much of the meaning; I'm just lulled by the rhythm of her voice. I wonder if I can talk her into cutting history class; I want to keep her away from Ms. Greta Ford as long as possible. I watch Hannah's hands move as she talks, the hands that were all over my body not too long ago, the hands that I want to keep as my own, not to share in a classroom where they shoot up assertively to ask a question, to make a point.

The Lesson

“Do whatever you like. You’re here for a full semester. I think it’s best if the kids think of you as the teacher,” said Mrs. Evers as she grabbed a ceramic apple off her desk and crammed it into her bulging satchel. “Just think of this desk, this classroom, everything as yours.”

Monica had showed up as planned, the first Monday morning of the new semester, at Valley View Middle School, a flat-roofed building surrounded by a chain-link fence. She parked in the faculty parking lot, official with her temporary parking pass, and walked into Room 7, gripping her shiny black briefcase. Now her spirits were flagging. More than that. She was on the verge of panic. Mrs. Evers looked like she was clearing out.

“My husband, Henry. He just retired. An attorney,” Mrs. Evers said, holding up a framed photo of a man in a suit for Monica to see before adding it to the satchel. She held up another photo, a yellowing school picture of a girl about ten years old, with crooked teeth. “My daughter, Megan. Just engaged, thank god, to a very nice young man.” She picked up several thick bridal magazines and shoved them into the overloaded satchel. “Research,” she said. “I have a lot to do. Megan’s not a very organized girl. Little details—like the floral designs and the caterer—would just elude her until it’s too

late. She thinks all you need to do is buy a dress and reserve a band. Some group called the 'Louisville Shuffle.' You ever hear of them?"

"No," Monica said, confused and overwhelmed by the patter. What was Mrs. Evers doing? Was she abandoning her? Monica thought she was here to observe her master teacher for a while, learn a little from her, and eventually teach a lesson or two of her own. After a while, when she was ready, Monica would take over the classes. Wasn't that what her professors said? That she could observe before actually teaching? While she dressed that morning, she pictured herself being introduced to the students, sitting in the back of the classroom, maybe circulating while they worked on an assignment, helping a few of them out. She'd brought nothing with her. Her briefcase was empty except for lunch. She had no lesson plans, no idea how to keep kids occupied for an hour, let alone a day.

"What's planned for the day?" Monica asked, hoping she misconstrued the packing up as Mrs. Evers's sudden desire to clean her desk.

"As I said, do whatever you like. It's just important that I'm not here. If the kids see me, they won't take you seriously." Mrs. Evers puckered her lips, gazed into her reflective letter opener, and applied pink lipstick. "We were doing parts of speech and free-reading before Christmas break," she said, gesturing over to a corner shelf filled with what looked like dusty, ratty paperbacks. "Oh, and sentence combining. The kids haven't been here in two weeks. It's the start of a new term. So they'll be open to a new teacher, new curriculum. I trust you. Professor Edwards has placed many excellent student teachers with me. I'm not worried. I know you're learning all kinds of new,

exciting things in your classes, aren't you?"

"Uh huh," she said. Her mind went blank. What was she learning? She'd just written a paper on theories of teaching English. What were those theories? Transactional. Student-centered. Something about experience—yes, experiential. What did it all mean? She'd written ten typed pages, quoting voluminously.

"Here's the seating chart for first period." Mrs. Evers handed Monica a manila file folder, opening it up to a grid printed on a piece of paper. She jabbed her finger at a few of the names in squares. "Don't let him, or her, or her, give you any guff. Remember, you're the teacher." Her pink lipstick glimmered in the florescent light. Black and gray strands announced themselves at the roots of her blonde hair.

"The grammar books are over there. They should be well versed on gerunds. You could always test them. They're used to having spelling tests on Mondays. The spelling books are here. But again, do as you wish."

"But I thought you were going to teach for a while, and I was going to watch, or assist—"

"Trust me, dear, you really don't want me to baby you. You've got to jump right in. That's the only way to learn to teach. Like driving a car. You can read all the manuals in the world, and watch people drive, but you never really learn how until you actually do it."

Something held Monica back from poking holes in that analogy. She didn't get into a car to drive alone the first time. That driver's training instructor with bad ear wax sat next to her, telling her to slow down, to speed up, to check her blind spot.

“What about literature?” Monica asked.

“As I said, last semester was free reading, from the F.R.U.I.T. cart. You know, Free Reading Uninterrupted Is Terrific. We had an inservice on it over the summer. It’s been the big thing this year.”

The thick black clock arm quivered, jerkily clicked backward, then slid forward to 7:45 a.m. Class would begin in fifteen minutes.

“Come into the faculty lounge afterward to tell me how it went. I could use a break from this wedding planning. It’s just so detailed, you have no idea.” She glanced at Monica’s empty left ring finger to confirm then lugged the heavy satchel up to her chest, holding it like a grocery bag. “And we can talk a bit, get to know each other. But I’m off before the students catch wind of me.” She yanked open the door and it sucked shut behind her on the power of an industrial spring.

Monica stood there in the silent, cold classroom. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself. Panic washed over her. What could she do for a whole class period with a group of sixth graders? How could she give them a spelling test when she didn’t even know the test words? What was sentence combining? Would they really read for an hour from the F.R.U.I.T. cart? She couldn’t do a grammar lesson. She had no idea what a gerund was.

She looked quickly around the room, searching for a clue, hoping something would jump out at her. Four small, rectangular windows high on the walls let in some January morning light but no heat. She stiffly worked her frozen fingers to button up her sweater. Specks of dust floated around in the weak, yellow light. Except for pinkish

spots where Mrs. Evers's framed pictures had rested, the teacher's desk was dirty brown. All the shelves and student desks looked grimy. Grayish-yellow chalk remains filled the chalk trays. The large square linoleum floor tiles were streaked with black shoe scuffs.

One bulletin board displayed a curled-edge poster titled in black block letters: "Sentence Combining." It sounded scientific. Monica examined the poster, praying for some help, an idea of what to do when the kids walked in.

Jake and Susan walked down the street.

They encountered a fair.

It was a street fair.

The fair was exciting.

Combined:

Walking down the street, Jake and Susan encountered an exciting street fair.

So that was Sentence Combining. Something about it made Monica numb in spite of her racing heart. Maybe the students would be willing to combine sentences, but what if they weren't? She didn't know enough about Sentence Combining to teach them to do it; she could only tell them to do it. Maybe that was enough.

She looked at the next bulletin board, hoping for more ideas. There hung a poster with students' names followed by a series of apple stickers representing the number of F.R.U.I.T. books they'd read. A girl named Gillian had read forty-three. Someone named Keesy was a close second, at forty. A boy named Donny had read what looked like one and-a-half, unless the half-apple was torn at random. Or maybe it was torn by

someone who disliked Donny. Or maybe Donny himself tore it. At any rate, it seemed likely that Donny had problems, was “at risk” as her teaching credential program professors said. Oh god, she thought, there were at-risk kids in this class. What would she do with them? What were teachers supposed to do with at risk kids? More eye contact? Closer physical proximity? Seating at the front of the room? Parent meetings? One full and one torn apple over four months seemed like a red flag. She tried to recall if Mrs. Evers had pointed to the name “Donny” on the seating chart. Monica wasn’t sure.

Another poster delineated five bell schedules: Regular, Rally Day, Testing Day, Half-Day, and Alternative. She didn’t know if today was a Regular Day or not. If it was, class would be starting in . . . she looked at the clock over the blackboard, and the thick black arm jumped around, settling down at two minutes earlier. She glanced at her watch and saw that it had stopped. Unbelievable. If she believed in omens, her watch battery dying on the first day of student teaching would have been a bad one. Fortunately, omens meant little to her. Metaphor, on the other hand, meant a lot. She could go a long way with this metaphor, but she didn’t have time. She had five, maybe eight, minutes before the students would arrive.

Panic, electricity surged through her veins. She breathed in deeply through her nose and, just as she was about to slowly expel through her mouth, her throat constricted into a hacking cough. Her eyes began to water as she gasped, trying to catch her breath. She had inhaled a lungful of dust, old classroom dust, dust that had collected during the two-week break and probably longer. Chalk dust, playground dirt, the shed skin cells of the students, and of students from last year, from years before, probably students who

now had children of their own.

As she hacked and wheezed, the door swung open and a group of students shuffled in. She tried to smile, to raise her hand in greeting, in the middle of coughing spasms. The group gathered in the corner near the shelf of F.R.U.I.T. books. A few looked over their shoulders at her. She tried to make eye contact through her blurred eyes, but they turned away, whispering to each other, giggling, pulling books off the shelves and thumbing through the pages. She wasn't sure if she could leave them in the room alone while she went out into the hallway to get a drink of water. She decided she had to take the risk, slipping out the door as a few more students entered.

A blast of cold air greeted her. The hallway roared with shouts of boisterous students and metallic slams of locker doors. Arms grazed hers as she weaved through the bodies, coughing, searching for a water fountain. She found one next to the girls' bathroom.

As she bent her head down and turned the knob, a small blob of water jumped out. A clump of old, gray chewing gum sat in the mouth hole like a tiny gray brain. Still coughing and desperate, she ran into the girls' bathroom and gulped water straight from the sink faucet. A group of girls stopped mid-hairspray, gawking at her. She did her best to ignore them, to look like she knew exactly what she was doing. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and gazed in the mirror. Glassy eyes, face a bit pink, not too bad. Maybe she could pull this off, walk back in there like she knew what she was doing. Make up something brilliant on the spot, something about *Leaves of Grass*—didn't she know some of it by heart? A few lines of *Beowulf*, or Emily's lines from *Our Town*?

Goodbye coffee brewing, goodbye clock ticking . . .

In the mirror she could see the girls behind her applying makeup. She focused back on herself. Her sweater looked odd. It clung with static electricity to her body, hugging the humps of her breasts and stomach. She looked fat, if not lascivious. She removed the sweater and saw something worse: under these florescent lights her white blouse was transparent, the outline of her bra like a flashing marquee announcing: “Breasts! Breasts!”

“Are you a new teacher?” asked a girl holding a mascara wand.

Surprised, Monica turned to her, quickly putting her sweater back on and pulling at the fabric in an attempt to stretch it out. “Yes, I am.”

“There are teacher bathrooms, you know.” Her compadres giggled as she waved her mascara wand in Monica’s direction as though to punctuate her sentence.

Monica flushed. She couldn’t tell if the girl’s comment was straight-forward information or a joke. Monica felt her spine stiffen. Her first day on the job she wasn’t wearing the teacher role any better than her sweater and blouse.

“No, I didn’t know,” she said. “Thank you for the information.”

She could hear more laughing as she left the bathroom. In the hallway, a boy and a girl kissed. Deeply, with tongue. Was that allowed? Was she supposed to say something? She wondered if they’d stop when she walked by, but they just kept going at it like drunk lovers at a bar.

In the classroom, the students hadn’t been bothered by Monica’s absence, it seemed. Gathered in clumps around the room, they chattered away, except for a few

loners who sat at their desks, staring off into space. She found a tissue in her coat pocket and, as discreetly as possible, blew her nose and wiped her eyes. Her heart galloped in her chest as her mind groped for direction. *I am no more than a pismire, no more than a leaf of grass . . . That's insane. It would make no sense to them. Whitman for sixth graders?* The door continued to open to more students. Some glanced Monica's way, but most of them were animatedly engaged in conversation. With each spring-aided slam of the door, a gust of icy wind blew into the classroom.

As the tardy bell rang, Monica wrote "Miss Best" in cursive on the chalk board. Gripping the chalk with her cold fingers wasn't easy. She wrote it slowly, hoping to soak up a few minutes, her heart racing, her mind as frighteningly blank as when Mrs. Evers asked her what she was learning in the credential program. Maybe today would be a F.R.U.I.T. day, all day. Yes, free reading all day. She upswung the chalk on a tightly formed "B," complete with curlicue. Could the students do a full hour of free reading? What would happen if they didn't want to? What else could Monica do? What happened to all those years she had practiced speeches, brilliant things to say on her first day about the wonders of literature, the way it helped you travel to new worlds, into the lives, minds, and spirits of those who would otherwise be strangers? She remembered the feeling of those speeches, but not the words. Her mind was as frozen as her fingers.

When she turned to face them, she was surprised to see the desks filled. The students were seated, facing her. Some had one of the ratty paperbacks on their desks. The students looked so small, all of a sudden, crouched in the desks. Sixty eyes bored into her. Towering over them, she felt huge. Fat, to be exact. She felt like a big, fat

Macy's parade balloon looming over them. She pulled at the bottom of her sweater.

"Where's Mrs. Evers?" asked a girl with wide dark eyes, her brown hair pulled tightly back on her skull with a thick silver barrette. If Monica had to guess, she'd bet the girl was Gillian, reader of forty-three books. Something about the train-speed confidence of her voice. But she couldn't be sure because the seating chart sat in that manila folder on the desk. She glanced over but didn't see it. Her eyes scanned the room. Where had she put it?

"She taught you last term, I'm teaching you this term," Monica said. They looked dubious, all thirty of them. It was like the air was leaking out of her Macy's parade balloon. She felt flabby in body and mind. Revealed. Naked somehow. She pulled at her sweater again. Standing in front of a classroom felt so different from sitting in a student desk, scrutinizing, obeying, listening to, examining the teacher and her ideas. She had always loved school. And now she had a terrifying thought. Had she confused her love of being a student with a desire to teach?

"Why?" asked another girl, whose thin white hair hung straight down, revealing too much scalp at the part.

"Because . . ." Monica didn't know how to answer without giving away the fact that she was a student teacher. Mrs. Evers had seemed pretty adamant about her not revealing that fact. *Don't want me to baby you . . . There's a teacher's bathroom, you know. . .*

She felt a tickle in her throat and feared another coughing fit. They were waiting for Monica to finish her sentence.

“Because Mrs. Evers has to get ready for her daughter’s wedding. So I’ve stepped in.”

To her surprise, no one challenged that unlikely, albeit partially true, explanation. She felt a sliver of confidence. If she told them anything with confidence, would they believe it?

“Are we going to do that stupid sentence combining some more?” asked Wide Part.

“I like sentence combining!” insisted Probably Gillian. More than insisted, yelled. She yelled her enjoyment of sentence combining at a high-pitched shriek at Wide Part who sat just two desks over.

“It’s retarded!” shouted Wide Part.

“No it’s not!” retorted Probably Gillian.

“Well you’re retarded if you like it!”

“You’re retarded! Dumb ass!”

And before Monica knew it, other students chimed in, screeching. The classroom quickly manifested into a bad teaching dream. While many of the students shouted, a few had their heads on their desks, apparently under the impression that now was a good time for a nap. Wide Part and Probably Gillian continued to yell put-downs. Their feud seemed to have deep roots.

“Attention, please, everyone!” Monica said firmly, while attempting to maintain composure. “There will be no put-downs in this classroom.” Her sweater felt like it was strangling her. She stretched it out at the bottom. She couldn’t believe she’d said

“Attention, please, everyone!” like some parody of a sad-sack teacher. It didn’t matter, though, because no one listened. A few students looked at her out of the corner of their eyes. They knew Monica knew nothing. They were going to take it as far as they could, this chorus of degradation.

“STOP!” she screamed. Some of the students quieted, blinking at her like they just stepped out of a movie theater. A few others giggled and chattered. A boy caught a piece of paper a girl chucked over to him and began to unfold it at his desk.

“What’s that?” Monica asked.

“What?” he said, shoving the piece of paper up his sleeve. He slumped back in his seat, strands of his dark hair falling over his eyes.

“A love note, a love note, a love note,” chanted a large boy in the back of the room, making kissing sounds through puckered lips.

“Shut up, freak,” said Note Catcher, turning around quickly in his seat.

“No name calling—” Monica tried to say but was drowned out by Large Boy.

“Oh yeah?” yelled Large Boy.

“Yeah! Outside, man! Now!” yelled Note Catcher, jumping up from his desk. Large Boy jumped up too, knocking over his chair. They stood facing each other, glaring like two wild dogs. Monica was sure they were going to attack each other, and in that brief second she scanned the room for a phone, the blood draining from her face.

The boys stared each other down but didn’t move.

Then Note Catcher broke out into a kind of dance, his arms moving like they were made of rubber. Both boys burst out laughing. The rest of the class broke out into

laughter, too.

“Okay, very funny, very funny, have a seat,” Monica said in her best imitation of an adult who could take a joke. She felt dizzy. More than dizzy, faint. The laughter had subsided, but little noises emanated from all directions, papers ruffling, whispers.

Monica glanced at her name on the board. It felt like a lost cause to introduce herself now. She tugged at the bottom of her sweater, eyeing the room, and decided she would tell them all to get a F.R.U.I.T. cart book and begin reading.

“Is your sweater too small?” asked Probably Gillian, her hands now folded on her desk, looking for all the world like one of those evil baby dolls that commits serial murder in B movies. All the students hushed. No side chatting, no whispers. Teacher humiliation seemed to be a great way to quiet a class down. Monica felt a burn emanating from her stomach, traveling up her arms and neck and into her face.

“I guess it shrunk a bit in the wash ...” she mumbled. She couldn’t believe she had said that out loud. “And there’s also some static electricity in the air right now. Maybe it’s going to rain. I forgot to use a dryer sheet with my sweater. I shouldn’t have put it in the dryer, though, I should have laid it out to dry. But I was in a hurry.” The students were staring at her. She felt barely one word ahead of myself, like she was pulling each word out of a stack of flashcards and reading it as she went to form sentences.

“That’s a lesson to you all,” she said, embarrassed yet amazed at the direction her impromptu speech was taking. “Follow the washing directions on your clothing. This sweater said ‘hand wash,’ but I figured a cold cycle in the washing machine would be just

as good. I guess it wasn't."

What were the students thinking, Monica wondered? Did they realize how foolish this was? But she had their attention. Their complete attention for the first time. She felt a strange mix of humiliation and confidence. But she knew that crumb of confidence could disintegrate any minute. She needed to get the attention off her.

"Let's all examine a label on a piece of our clothing we have with us today. Read the cleaning directions to see if you clearly understand them."

To Monica's astonishment, students began to examine the labels in their coats. One girl turned her skirt around so she could see her own label. Others traded turns peeking at the labels at the necks of each other's shirts. The room buzzed. These kids didn't know Monica. She could have just sauntered into the room off the street and claimed to be a teacher, for all they knew. No one had challenged her request that they examine the labels of their clothes. They had just attacked the task. Did what they were told.

They still had twenty minutes, maybe, if this was a Regular Schedule day. And Monica knew that looking at labels wouldn't fill up the whole time. She began to write what students were saying to each other on the board:

"Machine wash, warm, with like colors"

"Non-chlorine bleach if needed"

"Tumble dry low, remove promptly"

"Hand wash separately in cold water"

"Do not wring, line dry."

A girl with a long blonde ponytail screeched at Large Boy. "Get your hands off me! Hey, you tore off my label! Retard!" Blond Ponytail slapped Large Boy's hand. He didn't retaliate, just stood there grinning at her. "Look, a hole in my sweater!" she screamed, feeling at her neck with her arms behind her. Monica saw Large Boy smiling, holding a piece of fabric. She rushed over and grabbed it out of his hand.

"Why did you do this?" Monica asked, flustered, anger rising in her throat. Maybe she could sew the label back on, hide the hole. The girl's mother was sure to call the school. She'd be fired. Could they fire an unpaid student teacher?

"I don't got labels," said Large Boy, still smiling. "Not one on my clothes."

"Yeah, his mommy cuts them out so they don't scratch him," said Note Catcher.

"Yeah, my mom loves me, but your mom loves the mailman."

"Your momma loves girls."

Monica stood between them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. "Stop. Please, stop. Please go back and sit down."

"Don't touch me," said Large Boy, shrinking away from Monica's hand.

"Evers never has us do such stupid things," Note Catcher as he slouched back to his seats.

Handing Blonde Ponytail her label, Monica said she could sew it back on, not to worry. She was getting warm. Her neck was wet with sweat. "Stay after class or come in during lunch," Monica offered. The girl didn't respond, just flopped her head into her arms folded on her desk.

Back at the front of the room, Monica looked at what she'd written on the board.

Speaking loudly over student chatter, she asked “So, what do you think ‘warm iron on reverse if needed,’ means?” The question sounded both ludicrous and authoritative. The students lapsed into silence. If you want silence, thought Monica, asking a question seemed to work as well as teacher humiliation. Someone scraped a chair on the floor. Someone else breathed hard through their nose.

“Do you think it means to iron it backward?” It flashed through Monica’s mind that she was doing exactly the opposite of what she was learning in teacher training: answering her own question with another question. Teachers were supposed to learn how to be comfortable with wait-time. Ask a question then count to ten slowly in your head. Give the students time to think. But now Monica realized when you ask a question and no one answers, the question seems idiotic. “Does an iron have a ‘reverse’ setting like a car? Does it mean I need to have my back to the ironing board?”

“I think it means,” said a girl with patches of brown freckles, “that you turn the blouse inside out to iron it.”

“Exactly!” Someone had answered Monica’s question, and answered it correctly. She felt a surge of validation.

“That’s girl’s stuff,” slurred a boy with striking green eyes and crust at the edges of his mouth. He slouched in his seat. The surge of validation was sucked out of Monica like gray water down a floor drain. Did she dare respond that it wasn’t girl’s stuff? That some men washed and ironed? Would a parent call if she said that? *What are you teaching my kid, to be a pansy?*

But Probably Gillian, bless her evil baby doll soul, said what was in Monica’s

heart: “Oh, really,” she drawled. “So unless you can find a woman to do your laundry, you’re going to walk around stinky and wrinkly your whole life.”

A few girls hooted out laughs. A few boys grumbled. Could the red-headed boy have given Probably Gillian the finger? She thought she saw so out of the corner of her eye, but so many of their comments and movements were like mosquitoes, buzzing by invisibly. Green Eyes slouched down even further, glaring.

“What are you, a lesbian?” he said, turning “lesbian” over in his mouth like a bite of raw steak.

“Yeah, lesbian, lesbian,” chanted a few boys.

“No name calling,” Monica said weakly, swallowing hard. “Let’s come back to our discussion of clothing label directions.”

Sitting back with their arms crossed, the boys looked angry. Monica lamely smiled at them, hoping to get back on track.

“I’m not a lesbian!” shrieked Probably Gillian, her face blooming red. The room was awash in humiliation. And it was getting hot. The windows were steaming up, beading sweat. The air smelled like wet socks. Monica began to pull her sweater off and got it halfway over her head, but then she remembered her blouse, her bra, her breasts. With her face still in the darkness of her sweater, she heard a boy whistle. The class erupted in laughter. She quickly pulled the sweater back down, pulling at the sweater hem, faint with heat and shame.

Wide Part raised her hand. She actually raised her hand. Monica pushed up her sweater sleeves; they clung damply to her sweaty arms.

“What’s dry clean mean?” Wide Part asked, a non-sequiter for which Monica was extremely grateful. Wide Part was getting things back on track. Maybe she knew she was doing Monica a favor.

“Dry clean, you know dry clean. Duh, retard,” said Probably Gillian, still stinging from the boys’ attack. Where was all this maliciousness coming from? Monica didn’t know what to do except to keep moving forward like it wasn’t happening.

“Just repeating the word doesn’t give us a definition,” Monica said, glancing at the clock. How much time did they have left? She hoped the bell would ring any minute. “Can anyone tell us what dry cleaning is?”

“Well,” said Probably Gillian. “It’s where you take clothes to a place and they clean them for you, with chemicals, special clothes like wedding dresses. Then they cover them with plastic.” The class appeared to be listening.

“Yes,” Monica said.

“My aunt and uncle own a dry cleaning store,” added Probably Gillian.

“Ah ha,” Monica said. “That’s why you know what dry cleaning is. To someone who had never had that experience, it would be like reading a term in a foreign language. You’re not dumb just because you don’t know something. It just means you might not have that experience.” Monica felt a little more stabilized as she strung together that many sentences. And she had come to Wide Part’s rescue. She glanced at Wide Part, expecting a look of appreciation, but she was staring out the window.

“It’s snowing!” screamed Wide Part. She really did scream, like she was taking a dive on a roller coaster.

The students jumped out of their seats, craning their necks up toward the windows. Fat flakes silently floated down. After a few minutes of Monica's begging that they return to their seats, they complied, a few at a time. She wasn't sure she really wanted them back in their seats, though. Asking them to be seated meant they would once again be staring at her. What could she have them do? Her label lesson had clearly lost steam.

"Please take out a piece of paper and a pencil," she said, trying to buy time. She would have them write something. Maybe something about their favorite book. What if they didn't have a favorite book?

A stream of moans and groans and complaints filled the air.

"Do we have to write?"

"I don't got a pencil."

"Mrs. Evers usually gives us paper."

Monica found a ream of dusty lined paper on a shelf and passed it out. She couldn't find any pencils, only a shoebox full of crayons.

"A crayon, you expect me to write with this?" said the boy with the crust on his mouth.

"Yes, please do," was all Monica could muster. He put his head on his desk.

"Okay," Monica said, getting another idea by glancing at all the clothing label phrases she had written on the board. "Combine some of these together for sentences. I mean, do some—some sentence combining with these." She pointed at chalkboard, wincing at the way she tripped over her tongue.

“Oh god,” said Wide Part. Probably Gillian smiled and began writing away.

“Please, please, please, please Miss Best,” said Wide Part. “Don’t make me do sentence combining.” Monica felt disoriented when called Miss Best. She realized that in spite of her ineptitude, this student thought of her as the teacher. Monica noticed the girl had written her name, Hayley, in the upper right corner of her paper. Neatly, where it belonged. And she had called her Miss Best. And earlier she had raised her hand.

“Just try it, Hayley,” Monica said, awkwardly testing out her name. “Can’t you just try it?”

“I hate sentence combining. It’s stupid. It’s boring.” That’s the last thing Monica ever wanted to be as a teacher—boring, stupid. And what did she do? She had students writing about clothing labels. She flashed her bra at them through her transparent blouse. She was awash in sweat, her mouth dry, her breath stale. She took one step back.

“Okay,” she half-whispered, glancing around the room. Just as when she’d asked the students to check their labels, most of the students were, to her surprise, focusing on their papers, their pencils or crayons moving, except for a few who had their heads down. At least Hayley didn’t have her head down. She wanted to write but just not to combine sentences. “Why don’t you write something about the snow?” Monica said, feeling a tad proud of herself at that spontaneous suggestion.

“The snow? What can I say about the snow?”

“Whatever you like. Describe the snowflakes. What do they look like? What do they feel like falling on your skin?”

“That’s dumb,” she said. Monica felt bruised.

“Well just write anything you like,” she said quietly. She didn’t know where else to go. She was barely running on less than empty.

As Monica walked around the room, she saw Probably Gillian writing: “When I machine wash clothes in bleach, I iron on the reverse side, adding fabric softener.” Next to her, a boy was drawing a man shooting someone, blood spurting from the victim’s neck.

The bell rang. Monica looked at her dead watch and then to the clock. The thick clock arms showed 8:45. So, they were on the Alternative Schedule.

No one said a word to Monica as they grabbed their things and, in a whirl of shouts, pushed out the door. A couple of boys kicked at each other as they exited.

Monica stood at the front of the room. The girl with the long blonde ponytail hadn’t bothered to stay behind so she could fix the label on her sweater. The students’ bodies were gone, but the echo of their words bounced off the dirty linoleum floor: *Is your sweater too small? Sentence combining is stupid! Lesbian! Retard! There’s a teacher’s bathroom.* A coat hung dejectedly over the back of a desk. Tattered paperback books were strewn on desks and the floor. She still gripped a piece of chalk in her hand.

She dropped the chalk in the chalk tray and gathered the books. *Charlotte’s Web. Jane Eyre. My Darling, My Hamburger.* Pages dog-eared, covers wrinkled. Maybe she should just do F.R.U.I.T. reading and sentence combining every day. *James and the Giant Peach. The Illustrated Man.* The more time they sat in their desks quietly reading, the fewer opportunities they’d have for yelling at each other. *Call of the Wild.* The spine

was tattered and a few of the pages were loose. A dog named Buck. Adventure in the Yukon. Maybe no one in the class had read it all the way through. They'd probably love it, thought Monica. No scenes of washing and drying clothes that she recalled. No women, even. Maybe she'd read it aloud to them, wearing her black suit. They'd sit quietly, not attacking each other. Maybe they'd have a discussion. She wouldn't have to resort to sentence combining, grammar drills. They could actually experience literature. Together.

She put the book in her briefcase. Outside, thick snowflakes fell. She located the seating chart on the floor behind the teacher's desk. It had a dirty shoe-print on it. She'd been right that Probably Gillian was, indeed, Gillian. The Green Eyed lesbian-hater was Donny Miller, the one with only one-and-a-half apples. Blonde Ponytail was Kristina Yarborough. Monica gazed at the little squares on the seating chart. After a free second period, she had four more classes, thirty students each, 120 more students. The disaster of her impromptu "check your labels lesson" burned in her body like a psychic tattoo.

She wanted to go home and change into her black suit. Or to sleep for twelve hours. Or to try, in the silence of her apartment, to write a lesson plan. Maybe Mrs. Evers would agree to come teach for the rest of the day. Monica could say she was sick. Or maybe Monica could stay to watch and learn. She didn't want Mrs. Evers to think she needed babying. But she knew you can't always just throw a non-swimmer into the pool. Some drown.

The bell had rung for second period to begin, so the school grounds were quiet and kid-free as Monica walked, looking for the teachers' lounge. Evidence of the kids

was everywhere—streaks of muddy running foot paths, a stomped-on knitted cap, a crushed plastic pencil case. The snow began to claim all this detritus with white. Little white heaps of aggressive child leftovers, getting buried. She thought about the nearby mountains, the pines boughs gathering snow. To be in the quiet, non-judgmental freeze of nature in winter. What did Whitman write? He left the classroom lecture of the learned astronomer and walked out into the night, to see the stars. Monica felt there was something awful about a classroom, about trying to contain all that wildness under florescent lights. Children flayed each other and the teacher. Her skin felt stripped.

The brief thought she'd had earlier returned to haunt her: Was she under the illusion all these years that she wanted to teach, when she just loved being a student? Her brain felt gummy, all twisted up. She wanted to escape into Whitman's night and stare up into the stars. Where did these eleven year olds learn to be so mean? Was she mean at age eleven?

Escape. All she could think of was escape. She yearned for her hiking boots, to be crunching alone, solidly, on a hiking path, not watching every step as she had to now, walking gingerly in her black pumps in the falling snow. She passed the portable classrooms, snow drifts accumulating on their metal porches. She pulled the sleeves of her sweater down to cover her hands. No gloves, no coat. She hadn't prepared anything, just her lunch, a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich. How pathetic, she thought. That morning, alone in her studio apartment while her roommate still slept, she had briefly glanced at herself in the mirror, under some pitiable illusion that the sweater and skirt and blouse looked just right. But the glare of reality proved otherwise. A transparent blouse,

bra straps, breasts. Clinging sweater. Chewed fingernails. A few hairs she'd missed when she'd haphazardly shaved poked out of her nylons.

She didn't know where to find the faculty lounge. She crossed over a patch of lawn, her new shoes slick on the slush. For fear of losing her footing, she walked very slowly, gripping each foot to the ground before moving the other foot. Her hair and clothes were wet by the time she made it to the shelter of a covered cement walkway. Gold light shone through the little chicken-wire reinforced window in a classroom door. A man with a thick mustache held a pointer to a map, mouthing something to the students. Wearing a white shirt and a dark tie, he looked like he knew exactly what he was doing. Monica wished she could wear a white button-down shirt and tie, a uniform that offered no doubt of authority. But she'd have to be a man to get away with that. A flat chest and white shirt made a person, somehow . . . objective. A clean slate. And important. Like a news anchor or a president.

Monica doubted that a student would ever say to this teacher, "Is your shirt too small?" What would he do if a student did? She watched his stern lips moving beneath his mustache. He would not deign to answer, she figured. That student would go right to the principal. How did that work, she wondered? How did a teacher send a student to the principal? The thought of sending someone to the office, of saying, "You must go to the principal," scared her. What if the student wouldn't go? She could feel anger building in her at the thought of that, of the imaginary student defying her so directly. She saw herself grabbing his arm, pushing him out the door.

She pushed her wet hair off her face, recaptured by the image of the mustached

teacher through the window. His stern mouth broke out into a smile. Now he looked like he was laughing. Yes, he was laughing. He took his pointer and waved it around, like an orchestra conductor's baton. Maybe Monica was wrong. If a student asked him, "Is your shirt too small?" perhaps he wouldn't send that student to the office. Maybe he'd respond with a great quip, a witty retort, to make the students laugh. He'd jokingly poke the student in the arm with the pointer. Even the student who asked the question would laugh, feeling a bit reduced but also appreciative of Mustache Teacher's brilliant wit. Then they'd get back to work.

Instead of working on assignments, Monica's students drew people shooting each other. A deep pit yawned in her stomach, an abyss. She had to find the teacher's lounge.

"Can I see your hall pass?" a deep voice asked her from behind. She turned around to see a man in a baseball cap, windbreaker, and bifocal aviator-style glasses. The mirrored lenses reflected a distorted image of Monica's face.

"Excuse me?" She didn't have a hall pass. Did she need one? She could go get her parking pass from her car.

"Oh, excuse me, Miss," he said, his words crisp. "From behind, I thought you were a student. Who are you?"

"Monica Best, Mrs. Evers's student teacher."

"Nice to meet you." He reached out and shook her hand. His glove felt warm against her icy skin.

"I'm Mr. Wally, school narc, as the kids say. Wallace Roddenbush is the real name." He had that formal friendliness of military men, the kind that suggests years of

male camaraderie in barracks or submarines. “I like to know everyone on campus. I’m surprised I didn’t receive notification of your presence. I’m supposed to be informed of all the comings and goings. I know almost all eight-hundred kids by name here, and if not by name, by face. I have a photographic memory. Last year I uncovered a marijuana-selling scheme because I identified by sight two boys on campus who did not attend this school.”

“Oh,” Monica said.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“To the teachers’ lounge. But I don’t know where it is.”

He offered to escort her. As they walked away, Monica glimpsed Mr. Mustache’s mouth moving again in a serious manner. Maybe that was the trick—serious lecturing to the kids, punctuated by moments of teacher-controlled humor. Then again, one of her university professors said teachers should adhere to the old adage, “Don’t smile until Christmas,” meaning for at least four months. She had already blown it by smiling at the group of angry boys, the boys who chanted “lesbian.”

“There’s where I got them,” said Mr. Wally as they walked past the quad. “The boys were there, in a circle. I knew something was up. I sniffed it out, like a detective, like a police dog.” It took Monica a moment to realize he was talking about his marijuana bust. “And then I saw those two strange boys, the two I knew didn’t attend here. It pays to have a photographic memory.”

Watching him walk with such stiff posture, Monica threw back her shoulders.

“And it turned out they weren’t really boys, they were young men, high schoolers.

They were infiltrating this campus, selling drugs to the younger ones. There's nothing more despicable than that."

His tone jarred her. Confidence with an undertone of aggression. He reminded her of the boys in the class, the boys that ganged up on Gillian, who postured like they were going to fight, who kicked each other in the doorway, who drew a man killing someone.

Mr. Wally opened the teacher's lounge door, shook her hand again, and turned sharply to walk away. A blast of cigarette smoke greeted her. At one table, three men sat together, smoking and talking. At another table sat Mrs. Evers, flipping through a bridal magazine.

"Oh, hello dear," she said, crushing a pink-lipstick scarred cigarette butt into an overflowing ashtray. "How did it go?"

"Fine," Monica said. It just slipped out of her mouth, like "I do" slips out of the mouth of a reluctant bride.

"I knew it would. What do you think of this?" She pushed the magazine toward Monica, pointing at a skinny model in a puffy teal bridesmaid's dress.

"It's pretty," Monica lied. She was aching to talk about first period but also wanting to push it aside. It made her look bad. Really bad. She was surprised Mrs. Evers took her "fine" for granted. Eventually Mrs. Evers would evaluate her. Would she take Monica's word for it and check off all the boxes as "fine"? Would Monica get her teaching credential by getting A's on her theory papers while sneaking around performing absurd lessons on clothing labels? The idea of another adult sitting in her

classroom, watching and judging her as she tried to teach, filled her with dread.

“Really? You think it’s pretty? Hm. I’m not sure about it.” Mrs. Evers reached into her purse, pulled out a lipstick, and swiped pink onto her lips, eyeing herself in the silver napkin container in the center of the round table. “It’s the best one I’ve seen, but one of my daughter’s bridesmaid’s is queen-sized, and I just don’t think this dress would work on her. Maybe I need something less form-fitting, but that would be a shame because the other young women have gorgeous figures that deserve a more fitted look.”

Under the table, Monica tugged at the hem of her sweater. *Is your sweater too small?*

“Gillian’s quite a lively girl,” Monica said, testing the waters for help.

“What did she do this time?” asked Mrs. Evers. The harsh, accusatory tone of her voice surprised Monica. She suddenly felt an illogical need to protect Gillian.

“Well, nothing really—”

“Don’t try to cover for her. She’s a smarty-pants. The minute she steps out of line, call her on it. Just because she has an IQ of 145 doesn’t mean she has the right to lord it over everyone. There’s another one just like her in third period, Ali Wong. Just don’t put up with it.”

“Third period—”

“And then in fifth, there’s Willow Jones.”

“Fifth—”

“Some girls. Well, I don’t have to tell you. You know. Oh, goodness, what a stunning dress.” Mrs. Evers held up a page of the magazine featuring a bride wearing a

billowing white dress. “I wish Megan wouldn’t have been so rash in her decision to buy the dress with the sweetheart neckline and shorter train. This one is a classic.”

The bride stood in a green field against an azure sky, her dress like a springtime snow-covered mountain. Head thrown back, eyes closed, she looked blissed out. Like she was at the pinnacle of experience, like she would never have another bad day in her life.

A Dance for Tracy and Richard

I'm wiping down the student desks when Mattie's mother walks in.

"Doesn't the janitor do that?" she asks, pushing her thick black hair back from her face and wrapping it into a knot with a rubber band she slides off her wrist.

"Not well enough," I say. I wipe my hand on a rag, shake her hand, and motion for her to sit down. I sit at my desk. She looks for a minute at the watercolors and student papers, matted to blue construction paper, pinned to the walls in rows.

I'm thinking she'll comment on the student work, but instead she says, "New sideburns?"

"Yes." Self-consciously I touch my sideburns. I'd been hoping they'd make my baby-face look a bit more mature.

"So, how's Mattie doing?" she asks.

"Here's her portfolio." I slide a manila folder across the desk. She opens it up to her daughter's strikingly neat cursive. "She has nice handwriting. Mattie's a great kid," I say, moving my stapler so it lines up with his tape dispenser. I'm wondering how she'll take the news.

"Thanks."

"But I don't feel she's ready to be advanced to fourth grade."

“Excuse me?”

“This can hardly be a surprise to you, Ms. Harris. I’ve sent home two notes and left you a message.”

“It’s Tracy,” she says. She pushes back a strand of her black hair that has escaped from the rubber band.

“Mattie has many, many strengths,” I assure her. “But she can’t finish work, can’t focus.”

“Notes? But I was just here a few months ago.”

“In November. It’s May.” I pull a piece of tape from the tape dispenser, fold it into a tiny square, and drop it in the wastebasket.

“My daughter can focus. What are you saying?” She blinks.

“All year she hasn’t finished her work. Most of the homework I’ve sent home hasn’t gotten done, not even the makeup work.” I try to make my voice soft, like when I’m talking to a child. Surreptitiously I glance at my watch. 3:15.

“Look at these long stories she’s written.” Tracy shoves some of the papers from the folder toward me, her voice escalating. “What do you mean she can’t finish anything?”

“She tested in the lowest quartile in all subjects. And anything that’s not creative, the real work, she doesn’t finish. Look at all of the worksheets. She just stops.” I have to try to get her to see reality. I show her multiplication worksheets with two problems completed. Spelling worksheets filled with doodling. Sheets of paper, the top half blank for a picture, the bottom half lined. On one of these sheets, Mattie drew a dog with

perked-up ears, sitting on a cratered planet with an elaborate school of multicolored fish swimming overhead. She wrote one line: “Once there was a dog that lived on Planet Fish.”

“Not being able to finish work, that’s a sign of her immaturity.” I try to sound like a doctor, with a careful diagnosis. “She’s just not ready for fourth grade. Mattie has so many strengths. Repeating third grade will help fill in the gaps.”

“You’re talking about a girl who can sit in bed all day and read. I’ve had to wrest books out of her hands so she’ll eat dinner.”

So this is it—*my child loves to learn at home but hates school*. Why does every parent claim this? They always seem to be blaming me, somehow.

“Then why,” I say, “after all the work I’ve done with her this year, does she insist on walking around the room during reading time?”

“Maybe she’s listening. Maybe she listens best that way. Have you thought of that?”

“Look,” I say, calmly, trying to allay the hysterical edge in her voice. I pull a piece of paper out of the portfolio. “On this standardized test, Mattie filled in the scantron bubbles to create a dog head.”

She doesn’t respond, just stares.

“And she missed twenty-two days of school this year. The most of all my students.”

“Mattie was talking at eight months,” she says, her voice catching, her eyes getting wet.

“There are standards kids have to meet to move to the next grade. I’m sorry, but Mattie hasn’t met them. That’s the bottom line.”

“The bottom line? My daughter’s not a ledger.” A single tear slides from her eye, her fingers gripping the side of the desk. I’m praying that’s the only tear I’ll see. And I’m wondering if I’ll have to go to the administration with this.

“Did you know her first words were a sentence?” she says. “Her first words were, ‘I remember all my life.’ She was only eight months, and I thought, How could she remember something all her life? Then I realized she was saying lyrics from a Barry Manilow song.”

“*Mandy?*” I ask. “She quoted the first line from the song *Mandy?*” Is she serious?

“You’re too young to know that song.” She smiles, thank goodness. The moment of crisis seems to have passed. Something about that smile makes her look a little like my mother somehow. I smile back, briefly.

“For eight months she’d just been sitting there soaking it in,” she says.

“Did she speak any words of her own? Or just lyrics?”

“Of course she spoke her own words, too. But she still loves Barry Manilow, practically the only thing she’ll listen to.”

“Well—” I say, hoping to wind this up. Another sneak look at my watch: 3:25. I want a glass of wine. Or two.

“Am I your last parent of the day?” she asks.

“What?”

“Are you meeting with more parents?” She reaches back and tries to pull the rubber band out of her hair, but it’s stuck. She yanks at it, making me cringe. That must hurt.

“No, no I’m not. We need to—”

“Why don’t you come over for dinner? Mattie and I would love to have you. We can continue this conversation.”

She’s the third parent this year who has invited me over for dinner. Maybe I should try it, just once go to the home of a student. But Mattie? “No, there’s really not much more to discuss. I just need your signature—”

“Do you like spaghetti?”

“It’s getting late—”

“With tofu meatballs? Are you a vegetarian?”

“Yes, actually, I am. Now, your signature—” I hand her the a document in triplicate. Her fingernails are short and jagged.

She doesn’t even look at the form, just folds it into a tight, thick square and sticks it down her shirt, into her bra. This is a first.

“If you still want me to sign this after dinner, I will.”

I thought Tracy had been exaggerating about the Barry Manilow thing, just being eccentric, but when I enter the apartment, Mattie is at the piano playing *Copacabana*. We step over cereal boxes strewn on the living room floor.

“Watch your step,” Tracy says. She puts her keys on a stack of books on the

table. I'm sure she wastes hours each week looking for her keys. I trip on a pair of scissors. To catch my balance, I grab at a chair, breaking off a doll arm that had been glued to the chair back.

At the Copa, Copacabana –

"Mattie, honey, look who's here, Mr. Stringfellow."

"Richard," I say.

"Richard? Isn't that a rather—old-fashioned name? Don't you go by Rich or something? Not Dick, of course, but—"

"Why is he here?" Mattie has stopped playing and turned around on the piano bench. She's wearing patchwork overalls and a tiara.

"He's our dinner guest," Tracy says.

"Hi, Mattie." I hold up my hand and realize it's still grasping the doll arm.

"Oh." Mattie turns back to the piano and plays some minor chords.

"I'll take that." Tracy holds out her hand. I give her the arm. "Here, have a seat." Tracy puts the doll arm on top of the piano and removes a stack of mail from a chair and motions for me to sit down. Then she disappears into what seems to be the kitchen, and I watch Mattie's back as she continues with Copacabana.

The hottest spot north of Havana—

The table is piled with what look like photos, or are they paintings? They look like large, surreal photographic negatives of baroque paintings. Some are matted, others have curled-up edges. One shows two ghostly figures—a man and a child, both nude—standing with their backs to each other, their arms stretched over their heads. Their

bodies are painted in swirls of pink and blue, colors that remind me of a bruise or a sunset.

“Mattie—” I begin, but a loud whirring—a blender?—coming from the kitchen, along with the piano and Mattie’s singing, drowns out my voice.

Here at the Copa—

I imagine Mattie as a baby, looking up at me from her crib, saying, “I remember all my life.” The image is absurd, like an adult mouth superimposed over a baby’s, a cinematic trick that’s meant to look silly, not real. I think of Mattie in class, walking in circles around the room as I read aloud *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Without raising her hand, Mattie had blurted out, “That Charlie is too good. No kid is good like that.” It’s hard to admit it, but I know she’s right. Maybe that’s why I’m here. Maybe there’s something I’m not seeing.

I look at the next painting, the same man and child, this time holding a beach ball between them. Their hair is painted light blue, their bodies dark blue, the beach ball pinkish-orange. I wonder if that child, her bare round belly pressed against the ball, is Mattie. If so, who is the man?

“Margarita? But I need to see an I.D. first.” Tracy, smiling, hands me a Minnie Mouse water glass filled to the salted brim with blended margarita. It’s not wine, but it’ll do.

“Is a margarita a million Marks, Mom?” Mattie asks, still playing the piano.

“What did she say?” I ask.

“Oh, she’s just teasing me. I work for Carol Marks Weight Loss Center. They

count Marks instead of calories.”

“Is that the same Carol Marks from that old T.V. show, *Suburbia*?” I ask. I used to love that show, pretending I lived in a world with sisters and brothers.

Mattie stops playing and turns to them. “I watch the reruns. She wasn’t fat when she was little. I’m fat, kind of. See my stomach?” Mattie picks up one of the pink-and-blue paintings and points to the little girl’s stomach.

“That’s you? Is it a painting or a photo?” I hope it’s a painting.

“It’s a painted photo,” Mattie says. “And that’s my Uncle Ted.” Mattie jabs her finger at the nude pink man then pushes back her tiara which has slipped onto her forehead.

“I’m lucky to have two willing models in the family. They’re naturals.” Tracy sips her drink.

Mattie pushes her bare feet along the hardwood floor and then drops to the splits. “Uncle Ted teaches dance class, so I get to go for free.”

My stomach is beginning to knot up. I look at my watch. It’s almost 5:00. I have an irrational feeling that I could lose my job over coming here. I won’t tell Dan, the vice-principal. We’ve been sleeping together for a month now, and I know better than to trust anyone I’m sleeping with.

“Yes, sweetie, it’s on the counter, next to the blender,” Tracy says.

“*Suburbia* really was the last, great family sitcom of its time,” I say, trying to suppress my growing discomfort. “It’s like it represents an era that will never be again, an era of families with two parents, when kids could ride their bikes around without

worries, although Oakville is still kind of like that, thank god.”

“One of my clients told me today that for her exercise she only walks the mall, never the river path because women are raped and murdered there.”

“You’d think if that was true it’d be in the news.” I’m beginning to wonder if this woman is even on the edge of reality. Maybe I should ask her right now to just sign that paper and get out of here. If she won’t, I’ll circumvent Dan and go right to Evelyn, the principal.

“Don’t you remember a few years back—a body was found near the bridge?”

“No. I don’t. I’m sure I would have remembered that.”

“Yep. Decapitated, a young woman.”

I glance around, glad to confirm that Mattie’s no longer in the room. I can feel warmth creeping up my neck from the margarita. The blue and pink pictures of the ghostly Mattie and her uncle seem like they’re emanating light from the table, up to my face.

“They never did identify her,” continues Tracy. “You’d think in this day of DNA they could. But I guess if she was never reported missing—”

“Excuse me for interrupting, but this is a dance for Tracy and Richard.”

Mattie stands in the doorway between the living room and the hall, wearing a red kimono, a cowboy hat, and tap shoes. She’s pretty good, quite coordinated, beyond her developmental years in that way, it seems. As she dances, I can see that she’s scuffing up the floor. I drink up the rest of the margarita. Tracy does, too. I’m sure Tracy’s fifteen or twenty years older than me. Strands of silver weave through her black unruly hair. I

wonder if the Retain-a-Year document is still in her bra.

Mattie ends her dance in the splits. We all clap, including Mattie, who then disappears back down the hall. Tracy asks me to join her in the kitchen so she can put dinner together. I squeeze by an easel and around an overflowing bookshelf, knocking a book to the floor.

“That’s okay, leave it,” says Tracy.

In the kitchen, she removes a stack of paper plates from a chair, pushes aside a bowl of tiny gears and wheels—clock parts?—and asks me to sit.

“More margarita?” she asks as she refills my glass.

“Thanks,” I say, feeling somewhere deep inside like I mean it. Part of me wants to run from this house, but, oddly, part of me wants to sit here and watch her cook. “So, tell me about your work, Tracy.”

“Barely minimum wage, even with commission. One week of vacation a year.”

“Oh. I meant your art.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What are you trying to achieve with it?”

Tracy has rinsed out the blender and now is crumbling in a block of tofu. Mattie begins playing the piano and singing again in the living room.

You came and you gave without taking –

“I want to make people into angels.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. Her art looks kind of angelic, kind of demonic. “Do you think you’re achieving that in your art? Are you happy with it?”

“I’m always on the edge of satisfaction.” She’s chopping onions, the fumes filling up the kitchen. “What do you think of it?”

“It—it looks like another world.” I’m beginning to feel like this house is swallowing me up, like I’m in the belly of a whale. It’s not an entirely bad feeling. It’s as though my own apartment, the address, the street it’s on, my classroom, my sense of myself as a teacher and boyfriend to the vice-principal, which I’m not sure is going anywhere—could it go anywhere?—it’s as though all of that is fading away, losing its immediacy, its gloss, like paint drying.

“Make yourself useful. Put some olive oil in the frying pan.”

It takes me a few minutes to identify the olive oil in the jumble of bottles crowded next to the stove. Each burner has a frying pan on it.

“Which one should I use?”

“Pick one. Live dangerously.” She’s up to her wrists in a bowl of mush.

Tracy directs me some more: get the tomatoes and butter from the fridge (I search through the mass of jars and Tupperware and unwrapped leftovers), grab some plates, wash off that knife, pour more margarita. Soon, as though by some miracle, I’m able to follow the directions more and more effortlessly. I even find the napkins without being asked, as though performing a well-rehearsed dance.

Oh Mattie, you kissed me and stopped me from shaking—

“Did she just sing *Mattie* instead of *Mandy*?” I ask.

“She always does,” Tracy answers, tossing noodles in the strainer.

Before eating we have to clean off the table: boxes, paint brushes, photo paper,

and random envelopes get piled in the corner by the sink. Then the doorbell rings, and Mattie comes into the kitchen holding the hand of a strikingly good-looking dark-haired man. I recognize him as the man in the painted photos.

“Just in time to barge in for dinner,” Tracy says, kissing the man’s cheek. “This is Richard Stringfellow, Mattie’s teacher. My brother, Ted.”

“Hey,” says Ted. As Ted lifts Mattie up over his head, I see his triceps bulging. He wears a tank top and dancing tights, his body looking almost more naked than in the photos. I flush, try to redirect my thoughts. I wonder if Ted will understand. Maybe after dinner I can bring up Mattie’s situation. Maybe Ted will ask Tracy to do what’s best for Mattie, to sign the form.

At dinner, Ted says, “So you’re the teach’, huh? What’s it like, teaching third grade?”

I glance at Mattie, who is pulling apart a tofu meatball with her fingers. Tracy wipes an old lipstick stain off a glass then pours red wine and says, “I just can’t imagine trying to teach a whole roomful of kids. So much chaos. Mattie tells me that sometimes kids are just climbing the walls.”

“Well, not quite—” I say.

“And she told us,” says Ted, “that some kid made you cry a couple of times. Shit, must be a real hard job.”

“Cry?” I gulp down some wine. This feels somewhere between empathy and sabotage. Mattie wipes her hands on her shirt.

“Hey, man, don’t be ashamed,” says Ted, his Adam’s apple ticking up and down

his long neck. “I teach dance to all ages, and I’ve had the tears come once or twice. Shit, it’s hard getting people to understand new stuff, to get them to do what comes easy to you.”

“Yes, it can be hard, but it’s rewarding.” I feel like I’m talking in an echo chamber, like my voice is very far away from my body. “I’ve been trained as a teacher.” I don’t know why I’m saying this, where I’m going with it. “Two years in a credential program.”

“More spaghetti?” Tracy asks as she slides more onto my plate.

“That must be fifty Marks!” says Mattie. “Let’s all get fat and go get help from Tracy!” Mattie puffs up her cheeks.

“Mattie, what do you like best about school?” I ask. Mattie jumps up from her chair and runs out of the room. The piano starts up.

“She really likes that piano,” I say. Tracy and Ted look at me, their chewing synchronized. I feel a pang of envy—brother and sister, sitting together. “Mattie’s clearly talented in many ways. It’s just that in academics she hasn’t mastered the requirements.”

“Academics? Requirements? It’s not college, it’s third grade.” Ted laughs.

“The standards for third grade are quite high,” I say. My voice doesn’t sound convincing. Even after all the food and drink, I feel oddly empty.

“She’s quite a reader,” says Ted.

“And a writer,” adds Tracy.

“And a dancer,” says Ted.

“And she has very neat cursive writing,” says Tracy.

“Listen,” I say. “There’s much more to the third grade standards than just that.

There are standards in science, math, social science, public speaking—”

“There are?” Tracy says.

“What do you mean?” asks Ted.

They are both looking at me like I can actually tell them something they don’t know. I take a drink of wine then lay it out: “Kids are required to show they can multiple and divide by multiple digits, that they can identify polygons, that they know the basics of gravity and geological processes and statistics, probability.”

“Oh,” says Tracy.

“They need to know how to make eye contact when speaking and listening. How to use the proper format when writing a letter. How to write an expository paragraph using supporting details.”

“A what paragraph?” asks Ted.

“Exposition, explaining. Non-fiction, not just stories.”

“You know all that stuff? And you can teach it?” Ted sounds impressed. “I don’t think I could pass third grade myself these days!” He laughs. Tracy’s face looks red. Reaching into her shirt, she pulls out the form. She unfolds it and hands it to Ted, who holds it gently in his long-fingered hands.

“Did you know that Mattie created a design on the bubbles of a school test rather than answering the questions?” Tracy asks.

“Oh, shit, really?” says Ted. “Man.” He pauses, looks at the form, then looks up

at me, his eyes sparkling. “Hey, man, you got something we need,” he says. “And I have something I think would be good for you. What if we made a trade?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I’ll give you some dancing lessons. I bet they’d be great for you, give you something new, a flow, a strength. And you tutor Mattie this summer. You could teach her all those high standards and things.”

“Now that’s a great idea, Teddy,” Tracy says. She grabs his hand and mine.

“What do you think, Richard?”

I’m not sure what I think, sitting here, feeling her warm hand squeeze mine, connecting Ted and me like we’re all part of the same family. “Well, I—”

“Think about it, man. Let’s do those photos now, Sis,” says Ted, dropping the document on the table and pushing back his chair.

“Come join us, Richard,” says Tracy. “We always like spectators. They add new energy to the whole experience. Bring your glass. I have another bottle.”

“About the form—” I begin, but Tracy and Ted exit, leaving the form amid a jumble of dinner dishes. The late afternoon light is faded, the house filled with shadows. The clock is stopped at 12:00. I notice that in a clutter of papers held to the refrigerator with magnets are the two notes I’d sent home. The piano playing has stopped. No one’s in the living room when I walk in, holding my wine glass.

“Richard, we’re in here!” I follow Tracy’s voice to the back of the house, into a bedroom that’s virtually bare but for a beach ball and a pink feather boa in the corner. Bright lights attached to the ceiling shine down. Ted and Mattie are taking off their

clothes.

“I need—” I mumble, not sure what I need, but Tracy interrupts me, saying, “Sit here.” She nudges me down with the edge of her camera, which she’s loading with film. I sit on the floor and Ted, who is now wearing only the feather boa, pours me more wine.

“Nice sideburns,” he says softly. I stare at the wineglass, feeling myself flush. I’m warm, somehow enveloped. In this bright room with the darkening windows, the wine looks like a blood ruby.

“Okay, Sister, do your thing,” says Tracy. I look up to see Mattie pick up the beach ball and toss it to Ted, who hugs it and looks toward the camera, then away.

“Hold there,” says Tracy. They freeze. She shoots a few frames, then they continue to move, to toss the ball, to do dance poses, as she takes more shots. The feather boa floats with Ted’s movements like a pink bird in the sun. They look like two wraiths in the bright light of another world. I almost forget they are naked.

Slowly, the warmth takes over, a full flush of warmth, like my own body is shining. Every click of the camera pulls me into a new world.

“Say your first words,” I hear myself murmur. The words seem to have come from someone else.

Tracy stops shooting. Ted and Mattie stop moving. They are looking at me.

“What did you say, man?” Ted asks, perspiration glistening on his upper lip, the boa swaying over his body.

“I said, ‘Say your first words.’”

Mattie walks over to me, her tummy thrust forward. I notice that she’s not

completely naked; she's wearing skin-colored ballet slippers.

"I remember all my life," she says.

"So it's true? Those were your first words?"

"Uh huh. Come be in the pictures, Mr. Stringfellow. Come on."

She tugs at my hand. Ted, in the boa, and Tracy, with her camera, are watching me. Slowly, as though I'm a man with all the time in the world, I begin to undress.

The Masher

Leah lost her virginity to a potato masher that was buried in the utensil drawer, tangled up with whisks, spatulas, ladles, tongs, candy and meat thermometers, and a hand blender. Her mother filled the kitchen drawers and cabinets with such mish-mash when she regularly came home with yard sale finds.

“Would you look at this, only fifty cents,” her mother would mutter to no one in particular as she unloaded chipped casserole pans and a broken waffle maker or two from a sagging cardboard box.

The potato masher’s smooth wood handle curved to Leah’s palm in a vaguely familiar way the first time she used it to mash potatoes for Thanksgiving dinner. Her mother had ordered a cooked stuffed turkey but forgot to order the side dishes. So Leah boiled carrots and made gravy and potatoes while her mother and Mr. and Mrs. Grant drank wine on the back porch, watching the November gray waves.

While Leah pushed down into the pot of sticky potatoes and milk, a pulsing echo ran up her legs and neck. The potato masher’s handle, its size and sway, flooded her body with the smell of the Camero’s vinyl seats and Chad’s hairspray. She could see him, bathed in the green glow of dashboard lights: perfect blond feathers of hair winging

back at his temples, his tiny white teeth behind shiny lips, a gold chain slinked at his throat.

She couldn't believe he had chosen her, that he had led her by the hand from Nancy Grant's loud living room keg party in full view of the cheerleaders and basketball players. She was astonished that he opened the door for her, sat with her in the dark with the radio on, lit a cigarette for her, and passed her a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20. He didn't speak, just drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as she sipped the harsh liquor that burned down her chest. When he reached over to take her hand, her heart jumped. To the steady beat of *Stairway to Heaven*, he reclined his seat and guided her hand onto him, directing the stroking until he sputtered onto the sun roof. She fished a tissue out of her purse, which he silently used. He got out, opened her door, and walked ahead of her back to the party.

After the turkey dinner, while her mother and the Grants had moved to the porch with their sherry, Leah cleared the table and carefully washed the potato masher, her heartbeat quickening. In her bedroom, she put Led Zepplin on the stereo, watched the needle drop to the spinning black disk, and undressed. The potato masher curved like Chad in her hand. On the floor, she positioned the handle upright and slowly lowered herself onto it, unfolding to invite him in.

Believing is Seeing

The day I discovered that the old queen had a ton of money hidden in a box behind his collection of Hummel figurines, Lance figured out a way I could take it. He decided I should give notice, make up a story about moving to my sister's to help her out with her kids. Leave on good terms, and take the money my last day.

Lance made all the plans—first we'd drive to Tahoe to celebrate, then off to Montana where we could live anonymously on acres and acres of cheap land. We'd buy or build a ranch, maybe get a couple of horses, drink champagne every night and eat lobster shipped in from Maine. He said he could show me a great life with that kind of money. I had a hard time picturing Lance's vision, but he told me to have faith in his mind's eye.

The last week, as I brought the old queen his tea and read his horoscope to him, I felt bad. I was the only person who spent any time with him—and that was because he paid me. But Lance convinced me it was all okay. He said it was meant to be that I found the money, that for all intents and purposes it belonged to us. He said the old guy was rolling in dough, that the money behind the Hummels was just one of many such stashes in his double-wide trailer. So he could easily get another caretaker and for certain pay them more than the paltry sum he paid me. Or he could buy his way into one of those old folks homes where they

plump your pillows and keep chocolates at your bedside and treat you like you're at a fancy hotel.

But I still felt funny about everything, especially when I saw the old guy staring out the window at the rain, not noticing that his oxygen tube had fallen from his nose onto his chest. His sad skinny legs stuck out from his lavender silk robe.

I suggested to him the day I gave my notice that he could go to the gay and lesbian community center on Thursday nights for the Plus-60 Coffee Chats. They even had someone who'd come pick you up if you didn't drive. Or he could afford a cab, for god's sake.

"David, you know I hate all that fake chatting about bullshit," he said, scratching the papery skin on his cheek with a bent yellowed finger. "Just because it's a bunch of homos getting together doesn't mean they have anything worthwhile to talk about."

"Well, Chester, what are you going to do with yourself now that I'm leaving?" I asked, pulling the tea bag from his cup and mixing in sugar.

"What do you care, you traitor?" He lifted the cup to his lips with a shaky hand.

That word hit me hard.

"What the hell is your sister's problem, anyway?" he continued. "Is she really worse off than I am?" Chester slammed his hand down on the end table, spilling tea on his robe. I grabbed a hand towel.

"Isn't she the one . . ." he paused for a breath as I dabbed at the spilled tea, " . . . who lives in that million dollar house?"

"A million dollars doesn't buy much in Atherton," I said.

"Fuck Atherton. Get me a straw."

I handed him a plastic straw from the package on the coffee table. He poked the straw into his tea cup and sipped.

“Can’t she hire herself one of those nannies?”

“Of course, but I’m family, so she trusts me. She needs me now that she’s got another kid on the way.”

“Too bad she’s not one of those sisters who doesn’t want her fairy brother near her little boys.” He set his tea down and leaned back in his barcalounger.

In reality, Gina was one of those sisters. We hadn’t talked since our mother’s wake, when between bites of egg roll she’d made it clear she didn’t want me alone with my nephew. I felt uneasy with how close to the mark Chester seemed to be. I could feel my armpits getting damp. I tried to change the subject.

“What about you? You can hire someone to replace me, right?”

Chester readjusted the oxygen canula in his nose, picked up the remote control, and turned on the T.V. to *The Price is Right*. I stood there for a few minutes until I realized he wasn’t going to respond. He just sat there, rattling out his exhale, his eyes on the frantic game show consumers.

I removed the feather duster from its hook and walked down the narrow, paneled hallway into the bedroom. There on the bookshelf stood all those Hummel figurines that he wanted me to keep dust-free, which was actually a satisfying activity. He didn’t even have a dresser in the bedroom, just a twin bed (that I rarely had to make since he often slept in his chair in front of the T.V.) and a massive oak bookshelf crowded with Hummels. He also had lots more in boxes stuffed in his closet. Every so often he’d ask me to hold his arm and walk

him to the bedroom, where he'd sit on the bed and direct me to take out box after box. He'd read aloud the title from the box then remove the figurine, holding it up for me to see. Last time he had me put up some Christmas Hummels.

"Making New Friends," he announced, holding up a ceramic boy in winter clothes and a hat, his scarf sticking straight back to simulate wind. The boy was building a snowman. The cute factor was sealed with the fact that the snowman towered over the kid who stood tiptoe on a stool, shoving a carrot nose into the snowman's face.

"Ride Into Christmas" portrayed another little boy in a knit cap seated on a sled holding a big Christmas present in his little arms. "The Gift" depicted a boy kneeling in the snow and offering a huge acorn to a tame squirrel.

"Do these remind you of when you were a kid?" I asked.

"You've got to be joking," he said. "They're not even dreams I could've had."

During this holiday setup I had noticed the box nestled behind the bookshelf. Later, when Chester was snoring in front of the T.V., I came back into his room to check it out. When I lifted the lid and discovered stacks of hundred dollar bills, a chill ran up my neck. Where did he get all the money? He couldn't have made much running a self-storage facility, the last place he told me he worked before he got too sick. I knew he was on Medicare and received a small check from Social Security each month.

And why did he keep so much cash here? Pleasant Sands Mobile Home Park was not a safe place. It backed up against the freeway, its only protection a joke: a flimsy chain link fence and a neighborhood watch staffed by octogenarians. The neighbors a few doors down had their T.V. stolen not too long ago when they went out to a doctor's appointment. And

cars parked at the curb rather than in carports often lost their radios and loose change at night.

I wondered if I should let on that I knew he was keeping the money here and maybe help him get it into a safety deposit box. I was tempted to take it out to count it, but I worried the old queen might have the bills in some kind of order and know what I'd done. I made sure I put the box back in the exact same spot. It never really crossed my mind that I could take the money until I told Lance about it.

But now, as I dusted the Hummels and bent down to touch the box, just to feel its presence, I figured that Lance was right. It was meant to be that the money had crossed our path, and we should grab this opportunity to change our lives.

Lance was reading when I came home, Liza curled up next to him. I wasn't too fond of this one-hundred pound black lab shedding and slobbering on the couch I'd inherited from my mother. But Liza was part of the Lance package.

"Hi hon." Lance looked up from his book and kissed the air in my direction. He wore his favorite possession, an old Madonna "Like a Virgin" tour sweatshirt that he found at the Goodwill. It had frayed cuffs and an orange stain on the shoulder.

"How'd the old man take the news?" he asked.

"Not too good," I said, leaning over him and kissing his neck. His five o'clock shadow scraped my jaw. "I'm worried about him."

I sat on the floor cross-legged. I could smell Liza's breath, even over the pine scent of our Christmas tree. The tree lights flashed off and on, lighting up Lance's face. He was

halfway through a bottle of chardonnay, which was dripping condensation onto the coffee table.

“Don’t worry about him. The universe is working as it should.” He tapped his book, *Seeing is Believing* by Dr. George Georgeson. Liza was working up a pant. I picked at black dog hairs on the carpet.

As Dr. Georgeson suggested in his books and tapes, Lance visualized and affirmed every morning. This involved lying in bed upon waking and (before opening his eyes) picturing himself surrounded by piles of greenbacks and gold bars. But, as he told me, he didn’t stop there. He visualized the kind of life he wanted: a big ranch tended by a handsome ranch hand; a small airplane to get to the city when he had country fever; and dinners with closeted movie stars at fancy homes in San Francisco and L.A., golden wine poured all evening. He’d become an expert at visualizing down to the last detail. Which was why he wasn’t surprised when I told him I’d come across the money. Dr. Georgeson swore that when you’re focused, getting what you really want is only a matter of time.

“How can you be sure that everything’s working as it should?” I asked, reaching over to slip a coaster under his wine glass.

“You have to have faith. Whatever path you lay out before you in your mind is the one you will follow. Come on, I’ve been talking for months about ways to think outside the box about money. Do you really think it’s a coincidence that a huge bunch of cash just crossed our path? And in a box! Get it? Outside the *box*!” Pleased, he patted Liza’s blocky head.

It was true that Lance had been obsessed with ways to make money. My pay from the old queen was our only income. Juggling our monthly credit card payments was getting tricky.

“And the key is to make money without working regular jobs,” he added. “Without selling our souls to some company. What is it with this country?”

I could hear in his voice that he was winding up.

“You have to work so many goddamn hours just to put food on the table. Not to mention medical care. We need socialized medicine, like the civilized countries, like Canada and all the European countries. There, people live life more slowly, more humanely. The French take three hours to eat lunch, which Americans would consider lazy. Everything here is rush, rush, rush. Buy, buy, buy. I want to live differently, and no capitalist system run by a bunch of Family Values breeders is going to force me into indentured consumerist servitude!”

He was shouting by now. Liza slinked off the couch and heaved her heavy body to the floor, leaving behind a wet slobber spot on the couch.

There was something really cute about Lance when he got this way: his skin pinked up, his blond hair framing his face. That’s what I loved about his look; it was so fresh, like he had just walked into a warm room after spending an hour shoveling snow. It struck me that resembled one of those Hummel figurine boys.

“See, Dr. Georgeson gets it.” He poured some more wine into his glass and sipped daintily but somehow dripped a few spots onto his sweatshirt. “Listen to this.”

He read aloud from the chapter titled, “How to Live Without Giving In and Selling Out.” It doesn’t take much courage or strength to live as society expects you to, Dr. Georgeson said in this chapter. It’s those who want to live differently, who are creative and free-spirited, who must not give in and sell out. And getting what you want is not necessarily a matter of working for it in the traditional sense. That kind of work—day in, day out—really doesn’t get you where you want to go if you want to fulfill your soul. The key is to tap into the energies of the universe that will take you where you are meant to go.

“That money is ours,” he said. “It has crossed our path for a reason. Chester has no need for lots of money. He has no family. When he dies, that money will just go to the state anyway. Who deserves it more than two young love birds like us who have their whole lives ahead of them? If Chester wasn’t out of his mind like he is, he might even just give us the money and his blessings. Unfortunately, we can’t count on that happening.”

Lance always did make sense.

That night I lay awake in bed, listening to the Liza’s and Lance’s synchronized snores. The star appliquéés on the ceiling glowed green. Lance had plastered stars all over the house the minute he moved in. He said they made him feel one with the universe.

It seemed Lance always knew what he wanted, and now—with the help of Dr. Georgeson—was working on how to go about getting it.

What did I want? A trip to Tahoe sounded great. We could have a white Christmas. I loved watching the snow. But to be honest, I was a bit worried about the prospect of buying a Wyoming ranch. I didn’t know much about the outdoors, much less horses. They kind of

scared me the way they could just kick you off their back if they were sick of you, and you could get paralyzed.

And I was anxious about leaving my house, the house where I grew up, the house where I nursed my mother until she died three years ago. It felt like my house, even though we never owned it, just rented it all these years from the Swift family, first Randolph and now his son, Rick, who was a year ahead of me in school. I slept in the same bedroom my whole life. In fact, when I met Lance at a coffee shop and he moved in, spending night after night with him in my bed took some getting used to, as much as I loved him.

I was beginning to regret that I'd found the money and that I'd said anything to Lance. What did I want? I wanted Lance. I guess that meant that I had to want whatever he wanted. He was the strong one, the smart one. He knew the direction to go in. Before I met Lance, my life was focused on caring for the old queen, and my main goal was completing my collection of old 45s. I had collected almost all of Firefall, Toto, and Elton John. I loved to imagine I was at a concert in the front row, dressed in 1970's bellbottom cords. There were a few TV shows I looked forward to as well, and a few friends I liked hanging out with at Club Verbatim. But it had been a pretty empty life. I think. I couldn't remember it that well. Somehow it was impossible to recall life before Lance.

I turned to my side and snuggled up against him. I could hear the wind picking up outside. He moved his arm around me, and his snoring didn't miss a beat. I closed my eyes to try to visualize what I wanted. Images of the Christmas before my mother died played behind my eyes, my sister with her new husband at the table, me serving homemade chestnut

stuffing. But when I tried to switch the pictures, to visualize what I wanted for my future with Lance, all I saw were echoes of green ceiling stars.

Two strange things happened the morning of my last day working for the old queen, what Lance would call synchronicity. First, on the front page of the morning paper, was a story about the phenomenon of Dr. George Georgeson. How *Believing is Seeing* sold more books last month than the Bible. How his lectures were selling out to stadium-sized crowds.

There were detractors, though: from people who thought he was downright silly, to people who thought he was the antichrist. Much to Lance's and my surprise, those who thought he was the antichrist had two main reasons: His claim that we are all as powerful as God. And the rumor that he was gay. He was scheduled to be interviewed by Oprah next week on T.V. to confirm or deny the gay story.

"People are so hung up on these labels," Lance said, feeding Liza his toast crust, which the dog gulped down without chewing. "The guy is a fucking guru, and people are worried about who he screws. He's probably too evolved to even have sex. He's probably transcended the realm of the body."

Once again, Lance was putting new ideas into my mind. I had never before thought of the possibility that desiring sex meant you weren't very evolved.

"How could someone transcend the realm of the body?" I asked, wiping a spot of orange juice off the chrome dinette with my napkin.

“Lots and lots of mind and spirit work.” Lance was chewing and talking at the same time. He had a smudge of jam on his cheek. “It’s all about making reality through the mind.”

I leaned across the table and licked his cheek. “Mm, blackberry,” I said.

He smiled his amazing white-toothed smile. He twined my fingers through his and kissed my hand. My stomach flipped.

“Tonight, my love,” he said, “is the beginning of the rest of our new life.”

My throat got tight at the thought of what I had to do in a few hours at the old queen’s house. Before I could dwell on it though, the phone rang: the second synchronistic event of the morning.

“Hi David, it’s Gina.” It was my sister. Hearing her voice after three years shot fear through me. Had someone died? Had there been an accident?

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s okay.”

I took a deep breath. Out the kitchen window, I saw white frost sparkling on the lawn.

“Well, I’m just calling to say hi. It’s been so long since we talked.”

“Yeah, you basically told me to stay away, remember?” I felt a twinge of guilt for talking to her like that, but I didn’t want to make this easy for her.

“Oh, David, no I didn’t, I didn’t.”

“Really?”

She was breathing hard into the phone. I could see her so clearly, her round freckled face framed by thin brown hair, her French manicured fingernails, her skinny wrists.

“Okay, I did. I’m, I’m so sorry.”

The catch in her voice alarmed me. “You are? What’s going on?”

“Everett and I are getting divorced.” She began sobbing on the other end of the line. I heard a baby scream. She asked me to hold on for a minute. The phone clunked down. Now more than one child was crying over the line.

“Oh, god, I can’t talk now,” she said back at the phone. “But I really miss you. I miss you.” She choked out her words between sobs. The babies screamed so hard I held the phone out from my ear. “Will you please, please come see me? Harry is almost four now, and the twins are ten months. I’m so sorry.”

The twins? I felt dizzy. My sister’s voice in the same room with Lance—it was as if each represented a different world, two parts of me that had never before come together. I felt, as Lance would say, completely non-integrated. Like a photo cut in half. And on top of it all, could it be that in a few hours I was really going to steal a bunch of money from an old man and leave the only home I’d ever known?

Gina kept saying “please” over the screaming of the children. I flashed on Gina at age eight, riding on the handlebars of my bike, her hair getting all tangled up. Then at age sixteen, bringing a joint into my bedroom and talking me into smoking it with her; we stayed up half the night, playing slow games of backgammon.

“We’ll come by tonight, my boyfriend and me, around seven.” By throwing in “my boyfriend” so brazenly, I was testing her sincerity. Lance lifted his eyebrows at me as

though to remind me we were going to be criminals escaping town tonight and wouldn't have time for side trips. As if I needed reminding.

"Oh, yes, your, your boyfriend." She paused, sniffing. "Thank you, yes, David. See you soon."

An echo of the chaotic children buzzed in my ear after she hung up the phone. I was struck by the quiet of my life. The clock ticking on the wall. The refrigerator softly humming. Lance sitting there waiting for an explanation. I filled him in on the saga of Gina's life.

"How serendipitous that you told Chester you were leaving to be with your sister, and now, on the very day you're leaving the old guy, here she is, calling you with this news."

Lance's eyes wandered around the room as he spoke. "Hm."

"Are you saying I caused my sister's call to happen?"

"I'm saying that when you're on the right path, such synchronicity occurs." He slapped his thighs and Liza lugged her front legs onto his lap. He scratched her ears, and she drooled onto his jeans. "My question for you, however, is: how are we going to have time to visit your sister when we're supposed to be on our way to Tahoe?" He set his coffee cup down on top of the burn mark he'd created the week he moved in when he lit incense on the table.

"Just an hour. Let's just stop for an hour. Please, she needs me."

"Great, just great." He frowned. "The minute the little homophobic breeder calls, you're there. After how many years? And on the day that's supposed to be the first day of the rest of our perfect life. The breeders rule the world, no question. They get all the

medical benefits, legal rights, and social affirmation. Put 'Mr. and Mrs.' in front of anything, and somehow you walk on water."

But the minute he saw I had tears in my eyes, he stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, kissing my ear.

"It's okay, baby," he said. "One hour off-path will not implode the cosmos."

When I walked into Chester's house that morning, he wasn't in his barcalounger. I followed his oxygen tube to the back of the trailer, where he sat on his bed, staring at his Hummels. He looked up when I walked in.

"Hey Chester," I said. "How'd you get back here?"

"Walked, what do you think?" A string of snot hung from his nose. I handed him a tissue and he wiped it away.

"Now, Chester, you know you have to be careful about walking around for no reason when someone's not here with you. What if you fell?"

"I'd shout, 'Help, I've fallen, and I can't get up!'" He cackled at his joke, gasping for breath.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to get one of those Lifelines," I said. A picture of him on the floor, helpless, shot through my mind. I shook my head to try to get rid of the image.

"I was thinking," he said, "that I want to bring the Christmas ones into the living room." It took me a minute to realize he was talking about the Hummels.

“Okay, sure,” I said. “And I could get you a Christmas tree today, too, if you wanted.”

“Hate the smell,” he sneered. “And a fake one is just that. Fake.”

After he pointed out the Hummels he wanted me to bring into the living room, I helped him walk back to his barcalounger. While I arranged “Ride into Christmas” on the coffee table so that the sled was facing Chester, he flicked on the T.V. with the remote.

“This is such crap!” he yelled. I was astonished to see Dr. George Georgeson’s face on T.V, an advertisement for his upcoming interview with Oprah.

“That guy is a con artist. I don’t care if he’s a homo, he’s no good.”

For the second time that morning, I felt two split parts of my life bang together. Lance would say this was more serendipity. But to me it felt like shock treatment; my skin was crawling. I took a deep breath and tried to listen closely for a message that this moment could be sending to me.

“What do you mean he’s a con artist?”

“He’s just trying to make people feel good with all his mumbo jumbo.”

“So? What’s wrong with feeling good?”

I stepped into the kitchen to fill the tea kettle, my heart pounding. I could see him breathing hard through his open mouth.

“People don’t need to feel good!” he shouted in my direction. “They need to feel bad, to face reality. Feeling good just means jerking off, pure selfishness. Feeling bad means facing the world’s crap and trying to do something about it.”

I'd never heard him string that many words together in such a short time before. He sat there, panting, as I set down his tea. I thought about what made me feel bad: My sister alone in a cavernous house, strapped with those kids, trying to juggle all the divorce paperwork, mourning the loss of it all. Chester, alone and sick, falling down and helplessly flailing for hours, perhaps days, until someone arrived. And I thought about what made me feel good: Lance. Lance kissing my hand this morning at the table. Lance reaching out to hold me in bed.

The old queen hadn't even taken a sip of his tea. When I looked at him I could see he was asleep, breathing shallowly, his head lolling to the side. His silk robe looked like it was wilting.

I went to the bedroom and pulled the box out from behind the dresser and shoved it into my backpack. It was a tight fit. I thought he might notice how bulky my backpack looked, so I slipped out and tossed it in the trunk of my car. When I came back in the trailer my head was pounding. I took four aspirin and spent the next couple of hours washing the dishes, scrubbing the ring from the bathtub, and polishing up each Hummel so there wasn't a spot of dust in any of the crevices.

When Chester woke up, I told him it was bath time. As I helped him undress, he looked down at his concave chest, with its wiry gray hairs poking out, and his bony knees. He said, "This is the body that used to drive men mad, can you believe it?"

I lowered him into the tub. As I poured warm water over his shoulders, he closed his eyes and hummed a creaky verse of "Jingle Bells." I wondered what he was seeing behind his closed eyes.

When he was all clean and settled into his chair in the living room with a meatloaf T.V. dinner on his lap, he asked me to sit on the sofa.

“Here,” he said, shoving a manila envelope in my direction.

“What is it?”

“Can’t you read?” He took a bite of meatloaf, his dentures looking dangerously loose as he chewed.

I opened the envelope. Inside was his will. From what I could gather, he’d left a bunch of stuff to me. Sweat popped out of every pore on my body.

“Do you know how much all these Hummels are worth?” he asked, poking his fork at the gelatinous cherry cobbler. “Last estimate, about \$40,000. That doesn’t include the ones in my storage shed. And there’s much more. But you’ll just have to wait until I croak. And you get half of everything.”

“Chester, no, you really shouldn’t do this,” I stammered. “I mean, you’ve only known me for a couple of years. Isn’t there –”

“Shut up, or I’ll take it back and donate it all, instead of half, to Big Brothers.”

“But I don’t need –”

“Goodbye now, so long.” He waved his hand at me then shoved some mashed potatoes into his mouth. “Have a great life. Call me from your sister’s once in a while.” He fixed his eyes on the T.V. where a claymation Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer was attempting to placate the pointy-toothed Abominable Snowman.

Apparently I was dismissed.

I could barely squeeze in the front door with suitcases cramming the narrow entryway. Madonna's "Like a Virgin" blasted out of the boom box in the kitchen. The Christmas tree lights illuminated the bookshelf, which was bare except for little tufts of dog hair. The couch looked stranded next to the empty bookshelf. The couch where my mother used to sit and crochet Christmas stockings. The couch where Danny Evers pinned me down and stuck his tongue in my ear in seventh grade. The couch where I used to sit and sort out my 45's.

Lance came running into the living room and threw his arms around me, almost throwing me off-balance.

"Hi sweet thing," he said. He kissed me with warm wine breath.

"I don't have it," I said.

He dropped his arms from around my waist.

"I knew it. I knew you wouldn't be able to do it." His eyes shone red and green in the flashing Christmas tree lights. He took my hand and led me to the couch. We sat. He pulled a newspaper clipping from the pocket of his sweatshirt.

"Your horoscope this morning read: 'Keep options open; last-minute instructions command change of itinerary. Stick close to home. Decisions will be reached concerning money and possible change of residence.' That made it rather clear to me."

"I just couldn't take his money."

"I know. I know you think that way. Even if it's really just as much yours as his, in the big scheme. But you never read Dr. Georgeson. I left his books by your side of the bed, and you never cracked one. We just think differently, my love."

He stood and called to Liza, who lumbered after him into the kitchen. I followed them. Lance was placing a bottle of wine and a box of saltines into his knapsack while moving his feet to the music. He threw a few crackers to Liza, who crunched loudly, spraying crumbs on the floor. Then she lapped them up with her long red tongue.

I sat down at the dinette, my head aching.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I was hoping you’d drop me off in Cupertino on your way up to your sister’s. I have a friend there who will take Liza and me temporarily.”

“Who? What friend?” My face was burning.

“Just a friend, darling. It doesn’t matter anymore, does it?” He tied up the knapsack.

My mind turned to my backpack in the car. I could run out there and bring it in instead of returning it to Chester tomorrow. We could throw the money around the room like snow, then gather it to count it. We could load the car, jump in and take off to Tahoe. We could gamble all night long, drinking wine and singing Christmas songs. Then what? My mind drew a blank. I just couldn’t see the next step. The vision of the ranch, of eating exotic foods, of flying around in a private plane was like watching T.V. static.

As Lance rooted through the cabinets, pulling out cans of dog food, I put my pounding head in my hands and closed my eyes. In my mind’s eye, the static began to turn to snow, muted white drifting down. My sister and I were there. She held the twins, bundled in blankets. I was patting snow onto a snowman, building it with her son Harry, whose cheeks were pink and puffy as a Hummel boy’s. And somehow we were all encased in a snow dome, held in Chester’s hand. He watched us through the glass.

The Encounter Complex

Her name is Darla. She's golden, and I'm amazed that she's talking to me. Her energy glows through her sun-darkened face and sun-lightened hair, her cleavage creeping out from the depths of her red bikini top. She's going on and on about her job, teaching elementary school. It's her first year and she's feeling like they didn't teach her the truth in her teacher training program, that a room full of seven-year-olds is much more complex than their theories had in mind.

I'm beginning to sweat, and I'm wondering if I'll have the guts to take off my tee-shirt. I have a vestigial nipple on my upper ribcage. And my chest is hairless and sunken. As Darla tells me all about the second graders and how story time is their favorite and how sometimes trying to rope in the chaos of their bodies all over the room is like trying to herd cats, my mind is on the mirrors in my apartment. They're covered with newspaper. I know I can't ask her to come up to my place until I tear down the newspaper. I also know I shouldn't be sitting out here much longer without sunscreen, my skin susceptible to burning since I'm rarely outside. The most light I get is fluorescent, in the lab.

Girabaldi insisted I not come in this weekend because they're performing a radioactive check and cleanup. I don't need to be away for that—radioactivity exists

naturally in stones and sun, and since I'm rarely around either I figure it all balances out. But he wouldn't listen to me, even though I'm right on the edge of identifying proteins in the filopodial tip complex, which would cap my paper to send to *Cell*. And I'm at a crucial point where I can't write without more time at my lab bench. Giribaldi just clicked his ballpoint pen up and down, and said the lab was off-limits this weekend.

So here I am, two full days spread out before me. I brought Megenberg's 1482 *Buch der Natur* down to the pool. Even though the book's a facsimile of the original incunabula, it's rather valuable, so it's risky bringing it so close to water. But I thought it might add a burst of energy to my morning, especially since my German is getting a bit rusty. But that was before I knew that this gorgeous neighbor of mine would be burst of energy enough. I didn't even open the book because the minute I got down here, Darla appeared, smiling at me right away and saying hi. She began chatting voluminously about how tired she is because these second graders keep her on her toes.

I can see a curl of dark hair poking out of her low bikini bottoms as she turns rotisserie-like toward me to tan her side. Or maybe she wants to face me, which I have a hard time believing. Then again, she is chatting up a storm. My skin is so white it's almost blue next to hers. She's talking about using blocks, manipulatives, to teach second graders the basics of addition and subtraction. I was doing algebra and reading *Jude the Obscure* in second grade, but I don't tell her that.

I'm not sure she's the best person to be teaching today's future adults in that she speaks rather fast, blurring some of her words together, and she has mispronounced *pedagogy*. Children need more precision, it seems to me. But then again, she at least

tries out what the average person would consider difficult words. And unlike me at seven years old, most children would be unlikely to notice such mispronunciations. Perhaps her glowing energy is all most second-grade children need. I wouldn't know because my mother, with her dark eyebrows and social-economist meticulousness, taught me at home until I went to university at age twelve. Eighteen years later I have let my mother down by lingering at a post-doc position rather than heading up a lab and moving on my Nobel-hopeful way into the forefront of cell biology.

"And then there's this phonetics versus whole language thing," Darla is saying, her head propped on her hand. "Some children just cannot sound out words, and so what are we supposed to do? Not teach them the skills, the strategies that will help them get ahead in the world? It's all so political and it shouldn't be, since it's about kids. In my credential program? They told me I should be doing lots of free reading and stuff like that? But you should see these two kids I have, Yi and Brent, they should be reading by the time they get into second grade and they don't even know how to hold a pencil! See, their first grade teacher didn't believe in, what's the right word, debasing the kids by teaching them the basic skills or something."

I'm trying to ingest her train-speed chatter when she pops up off the lounge chair and announces, "God, I'm hot, I want to get into that pool."

She stands and stretches, her belly button at my eye level, her body swelling over mine. Feeling myself stir in my swim trunks, I turn my eyes away toward the chain link fence and think of something that disgusts me, and the first thing that pops in my head is killing a mouse in lab, opening up its body. That does the trick.

I hear a splash. Darla has dived in and is now swimming. She makes it across the pool with just a few strong strokes.

“You should come in, Paul!” She spouts some water out of her mouth toward me. She wouldn’t do that if she knew how many microorganisms thrived in pool water, in spite of the chlorine. But I refrain from informing her.

When she flips down to the bottom of the pool with her legs up in the air, her thighs sliding down into the glittering wet blue, I quickly slip off my tee shirt and jump in. I breast stroke to the edge of the pool, where I grip the side and keep as much of my chest as I can below the water. I watch her surface then submerge again. Swimming underwater, her arm then her calf brush by my leg. That can’t be a mistake, an accident.

“Look!” she says when she surfaces again. She floats on her back and slowly lifts one leg toward the sky. Her toe is pointed and sparkling water streams down her leg like liquid glass. “I used to be a synchronized swimmer,” she says. “This maneuver is called a ballet leg. Now watch this, this is a submarine.” And, with her leg still extended, she slowly sinks, until all of her disappears, even her toes. As her red suit and glossy brown hair blur by underwater, I think about the covered mirrors. When she surfaces, I decide to tell her I need to make a phone call but I’ll be right back.

“A phone call?”

“Yes, I need to call into the lab.”

“I heard you were a scientist, studying cancer.”

“You did?” This utterly throws me.

“Yeah, apartment building talk. So what kind of cancer are you working on?”

I want to tell her about the work I'm doing on the encounter complex. But laypeople don't get it. I wish I could tell her there are theories about two biological macromolecules coming into proximity, driven by Brownian motion in a series of collisions, rotations, and translations across each other's surfaces. Experimental evidence is almost nil, but I'm on the edge of changing that. My approach is to use antibody-antigen interactions as a model system for understanding the kinetics of encounter complex formation. I thought my approach was unique, but I found out recently that Thea Smith at the Foote Cancer Research Center in Tallahassee is doing something similar. I either need to get my paper out in the next month or two—or call Dr. Smith and invite her in a collaboration so she doesn't scoop me.

“Actually, my work would apply to a variety of types of cancer,” I say.

“Oh, really, that's fascinating,” she says, taking a few backstrokes. “I hope one day there will be a cure.”

A cure. That's everyone's focus. That makes sense, of course. But I wish, if only for a brief moment, people could understand the elegance of this kind of science, the magnificence of cells, how their logic weaves patterns in the chaos of exponential growth, how beautiful they are. People so often assume I'm a medical doctor, a mere technician applying the band-aids, trying to hype people into thinking they can live forever. They don't understand that what I do is something completely different, not a direct hit against cellular malfunction.

I overcome my brief disappointment at the pedestrian quality of her comment when she says, “Watch this, it's a crane,” and performs an elaborate movement with her

torso upside down in the water and her thighs and legs in the air, her muscular calves flashing.

When she surfaces, she says, “Do you think there will be a cure one day?”

“Most likely, yes,” I say, “perhaps not in our lifetime, though. But the treatments will continue to improve.”

She performs a few quick strokes and lands next to me at the pool wall. The upbeat look in her eyes has somehow drooped. There’s something else behind her questions, I realize. Cancer in the family, perhaps. Or maybe she’s getting a real look at me now, translating me—the way I look, the lab language I speak—from a foreign language into words she’d rather not hear. Perhaps this encounter is going to be as rocky as trying to tackle the book of nature, *Buch der Natur*, in my creaky German. Everything’s hard to translate. I’ve collided with several other golden girls in my time, but the language, the movement, has never succeeded.

“Do you live in a studio or one-bedroom?” she asks, leaning her head on the side of the pool and floating her legs to the surface.

“A one-bedroom.” I feel my blood go oddly prickly at the use of the word “bedroom” in her presence.

“You’re lucky. My studio is just so small. I was thinking of biting the bullet and transferring to a one-bedroom, but I’m not sure the extra two-hundred a month will be worth it. Can I come over and see your place?”

She still has that sad look in her eye, and I’m wondering if she really wants to see my apartment or if she wants to tell me about all the people she knows who have cancer.

Sometimes people treat me like a priest in a confessional. You'd think those stories would propel me, would animate my work, give it meaning. But no. They gum up the works, distract me, sometimes plunging me into the darkest of dark moods, where I wake with roaring headaches, where when I'm not in lab all I want to do is to watch TV with the blinds closed, ignoring my books.

"Okay," I say. "Let me just go make that phone call. Why don't you come over in about an hour? I'm in 202." That should be plenty of time for me to tear down the newspaper.

"I know you're in 202," she says, smiling. "See you in a hour." Her teeth are blindingly white against her tan face.

I wait until she pushes off the side and slides back under the water so I can get out of the pool without scrutiny of my body.

Buch der Natur has a splash on it. I am tempted to take it immediately to Isari, the rare book seller downtown, to see if there's anything he can do before it fully dries. But that would take hours. I can't ask her to wait that long. I notice that the splash has a design quite similar to the phenyl-oxazolone hapten, two hexagons meeting. I don't believe in deriving meaning from an arbitrary splash, but recognizing the design helps me live with it.

Avoiding my reflection, I rip the newspapers off the bathroom mirror. But I can't help seeing myself in the mirrored closet doors in the bedroom. The only thing going for me is that I'm tall. But I'm so skinny. My hair is receding early, and my facial features

are odd, I know that. My friend from college, Walter, told me they're all squished together, as though from all those hours of peering through a microscope. He also told me if I didn't start taking more showers no girl would get near me. Ever since I've taken a shower every other day. The danger is that sometimes the shower seduces me. I lean back against the cool tiles and imagine all kinds of golden girls. Then last week I used the shower, I must admit, as a delay tactic because I knew that day I'd have to go in and perform the one lab activity I absolutely hate (other than arguing with Giribaldi): killing a mouse. I always do my best to make sure other labs in our building can use the heart and lungs, the eyes, whatever it is that I can harvest but don't need. Still, there's that moment when I look into the mouse's eyes and know I'm about to drop the tiny guillotine. I hate dominating in a physical way. I'd prefer to do something like scoop Thea Smith, or actually win a major prize, not merely be nominated for the Nobel like my mother. Scoop my mother, now that's an idea.

Still, Walter's prediction has come true, basically. No girl, golden or not, has gotten to know me—in the Biblical sense. Some have literally come near me, swimming by like Darla in an encounter of proximity, brushing by me only to back away before we can experience the full encounter.

The mirror reflects my crooked knees, sunken belly button, vestigial nipple, obscenely short neck. With the newspaper removed, I stand there at risk of drowning. I know that and yet it's not easy to surface. I take off my swim trunks. My penis is drowning, too, in rich dark fur. It lies there, waiting. I wonder if Darla's even a possibility. The very notion stirs me and threatens to plunge me into one of those deep,

dark pits. So I pull myself away from the mirror and jump into the shower to take care of myself as best I can, an effort to purge any semblance of hope.

“Oh my god, look at all these books.” Darla, in white shorts and her red bikini top, runs her hand along some of my most precious incunabula, even the ones I wear gloves to read. “You’ve got so many old ones. Do you read Latin?”

Her question takes me by surprise. I had imagined her thinking that these books were filled with modern English.

“Yes,” I say, not adding how many other languages I speak.

“Vidi, vici, vini. I took two years in high school. Can you believe they taught it at my high school?” She plops down on my sectional couch. “There was this old guy who insisted on teaching it, Mr. Foote. He was so great, with his clear passion for his stuff and for teaching. He loved Latin and he loved every single one of us. Seems unlikely, huh? I mean, an old guy who loves Latin doesn’t seem like he’d be fuzzy with love for his students, but he was. I became a teacher because of him, really. I should write him a letter.”

She drifts away for a moment, her eyes briefly aloof. Then she reaches down to pick up the book on the coffee table, Tagmoliff’s *Developments in Protein-RNA Recognition*. I’m worried she’s going to look in the back, and sure enough she does, flips there right away.

“What’s this? Why is there a piece of paper taped over the picture of the author’s face?”

In the middle of her question I have stood up and gone to the kitchen. I shout back to her, “Do you want something to drink? I have some wine I could open.”

“No thanks, I don’t drink. Why is there a piece of paper taped over the picture of the author’s face?” She has shouted this much louder than she needs to for me to hear. And she doesn’t drink? That’s a surprise; she seems like she’d be a party girl. I don’t drink either, just keep it around, just in case.

I bring out two glasses of tap water and place one in front of her. Her breasts loom up at me. I look away.

“I don’t like my reading to be influenced by the author’s expression,” I say, knowing how weird that will be to her, knowing that this encounter will really be just about drinking tap water and showing her the size of a one-bedroom apartment.

“That’s so interesting,” she says, lifting the paper to peek at Tagmoliff’s face, which I briefly glimpsed before taping a post-it over it. I vaguely recall heavy eyebrows, a pronounced Adam’s apple.

“He’s not too bad,” she says. “I’m not sure he’d give me a feeling one way or another about—Protein-RNA recognition, whatever that is. And don’t bother explaining it to me. It would be just in one ear and out the other. I just don’t understand science, as much as I’ve tried. Good thing I really don’t have to teach it to second-graders. We talk about natural science, I guess, with units on animals and trees. But start getting into these abstract things about stuff you cannot see, and forget it, really. I need to be able to see what I understand. How can you,” she continues, hardly taking a breath, “spend so much time with abstractions?”

She's starting to sound like Hegel. She doesn't even know how deep her questions are. I want to tell her I hate facades and insipid reflections. That's what the non-science world is all about. That's why my encounters with women always end up like this. Even the act of sex, as I've seen in pornos that Walter has sent me, is not about depth. It's just about surfaces, as though penetration involves the mere skimming of the inside.

"Don't you like to read?" I ask.

"Yes, of course I do, why do you ask that?" A line forms between her eyebrows.

"Words are abstractions," I say. "So there's an example of an abstraction you enjoy."

"I suppose you could look at it that way," she says. "But I only like to read books that are in English, not in another language or scientific-ese. God, you guys have a whole other language for talking about things. As much as I loved Mr. Foote I just really didn't get into Latin, either. I have some students who speak Spanish, and they're always trying to teach me a word here, a word there, *leche*, *por favor*, things like that."

I'm finding myself lost in her words, confused by her transitions, stuck in her moribund philosophizing. Walter would tell me to get the hell out of my head, I know, if I really want to get laid. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe I don't.

"Your apartment is a good size." She stands and sweeps her hand over the books in the other direction as she walks toward the kitchen. I follow her. Her skin looks taut and reflective—flashes of light seem to emit from her.

She exclaims about the size of the kitchen, a four-burner stove instead of her two-burner. She opens the sliding glass door to the balcony and peers out at the other apartment building across the way, its fire escapes winding like strands of DNA.

“Can I see the bedroom?” she asks. I’m struck by how polite this is, that she doesn’t just help herself to my privacy as I thought she might. I feel a bit short of breath as I follow her in. She stands at the window, staring down at the concrete wall. Her storm of words has ceased, and I wonder why.

When she turns toward me, I see tears streaking her face.

She sits down on the futon and doubles over, her head in her hands. Now she is heaving, sobbing.

I glance out the window, half expecting to see a dead cat or an ex-boyfriend, some instigator for this sudden display of misery. Then I sit next to her on the low futon, my knees bending up almost to my chest. I put my hand on her back; her skin feels surprisingly dry.

“Oh, Paul,” she says, “God, I’m sorry. I just didn’t—” She uses the corner of a pillowcase to wipe her eyes.

“Are you okay?” I ask, removing my hand and placing it on my thigh, where it doesn’t seem to belong.

“No, no, I’m not. I’ve been diagnosed with breast cancer.” She’s looking down at her tan feet, her head in her hands.

“What?” That’s the only word that can come out of my mouth. This makes no sense. Is she making this up? It seems like it can’t be true, that I have some sort of prevaricating beauty on my bed.

“My mother and sister are both gone. Same thing. It’s how we’re rigged, I guess, set to explode at age twenty-three.”

I think about the incipient work being done by some of my colleagues, an attempt to bind small molecules selective to specific RNA targets in an effort to turn off cancer processes. Like a light switch. They’re not even sure it works yet with mice. I think about the defect in the p53 gene. Maybe that’s her family’s legacy.

“Look,” she says, and reaches around to unlatch her bathing suit top. Because of her tan, it looks like she’s wearing a ghost of a white bathing suit. She pulls her left breast over to show me the lumpectomy scar then lifts her arm to display the scars from node incisions. The surgeon was very skilled and careful, as though there was hope.

“Darla.” Her name feels full in my mouth. “Just because your mother and your sister—doesn’t mean you—”

“Is that true? That’s not what I’ve heard doctors say. Do you think I should get a double mastectomy? That’s what one doctor said, even though the cancer’s only in one breast. It might keep me safer.” Her face glistens with tears.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” I want to say I’m not a doctor. But I am, I’m a Ph.D. researching cell biology. And what good is that? What does that do for Darla? “I’ve heard there is a promising trial. A new chemotherapy—a colleague of mine I can call in Boston—”

“No, Paul, that’s okay.” She leans her head on my shoulder, lays her hand on my leg. I touch her hair, feel her head pressing into me. She reaches up and kisses my neck. I’m not sure this is right.

I stand up from the bed and face her.

“No really, I don’t mind,” I say. “I want to. It’s just that my own work—well, it’s not quite applied. It’s about an attempt to understand the kinetics of macromolecules, it’s called the encounter complex formation—”

She reaches out and touches my hand. I want her to see me, to see clearly that I know nothing.

I take off my shirt, presenting her with the truth of my white sunken chest, my ribs, my deformity, my ineptitude.

“What’s that?” She’s looking up to me, her face and nostrils shiny wet.

“It’s called a vestigial nipple. It’s like a third nipple. It grew here on my chest when I was folded in my mother’s womb.”

She reaches up and kisses it. It’s the first time anyone has touched it. She leaves a smear of tears on my stomach. Then she rises and nudges my arms so I’ll turn with her to face the mirrored closet doors. We stand side by side. As she reaches toward me, it’s like we’re underwater. I glimpse us moving together in the world of the mirror.

The Development

Blond stucco houses crowded the clean, new streets. The homeowners association required white window coverings installed within one month of move-in, so about half the houses wore uniform white blinds, closed like eyes. Many of the yards were still dirt, although they'd be landscaped with lawn and redwood bark and a few well-placed plants within the two-month-after-move-in landscaping requirement. Some of the houses had lawns rolled out, or halfway rolled out, bordered by a few vulnerable-looking pink or yellow flowers. Spindly trees dotted the tract, nearly indistinguishable from the sticks that held them up.

Three years ago, when bulldozers had begun appearing on this Northern California land, Violet spotted a mountain lion roving amid the weeds and oak trees. That flora was now replaced by cement driveways that spilled from each triple-car garage like flat white tongues onto freshly blacktopped streets: Whispering Winds Court, Babbling Brook Lane, Towering Oaks Drive. Violet knew she was supposed to report a sighting of a mountain lion. She'd heard stories that one had taken down a woman jogger and another had scared a group of kids on bikes. But she never believed for a minute a mountain lion would be released in the canyon after capture, as reported in the newspaper. Especially now that some politicians were reviving the debate to dam the

river and fill the canyon to the brim. Think of the fishing, boating, and lake-front homes, they argued.

Violet watched these cream-colored houses emerge behind her tiny old house on land that used to be a vast field—a kind of time-lapse photography as she took her 7 a.m. walk each day, year after year. Violet's sister, Donna, used to walk with her before the cancer, but now Donna didn't like to go outside. Sometimes Vincent would come if his haunches weren't sore, but this morning he didn't even move when Violet took down the leash. So she came alone.

When she first saw the green truck, its bed bulging with a tangle of belongings parked in front of a freshly landscaped house on Manzanita Terrace, she thought maybe someone was set to have a yard sale. She didn't know yard sales were against the homeowner association's rules, although if she'd thought about it, she might have guessed. Not parking a truck with visible cargo for longer than four hours was another rule on the verge of being broken. The truck seemed out of place—out of time, really. It had that rounded look of an old truck, like the trucks from her childhood. With no people around, the truck felt like a human presence, chatty in this muted place.

Violet stopped and gazed at the truck. She felt oddly warm. So many years ago her mother had driven their truck during that long trip away from the death of her father and—her mother had blindly hoped—away from the Depression. They all entertained visions of what their new town would be, the town with the promising name of Vista. On the truck's bench seat, her mother's bulky thigh grazed Violet's leg. Donna's little hand sometimes touched Violet's knee.

Violet had noticed that her mother's thick hands—so confident while scrubbing the washing or lifting a sack of potatoes—tentatively maneuvered the steering wheel. The truck lurched like a horse-ride. Donna, in her quiet voice, said, "My stomach feels funny."

"Hush up, now," their mother said.

So they sat quietly for a very long time, watching the quivering fields go by.

When they pulled over the first time, Violet lifted her dress and crouched by the side of the road, trying to shield herself with the truck's flank, even though not another soul was in sight. All their possessions—among them the rocker, the small oil stove, a bed and two quilts—towered over the truck. Violet felt a warm trickle slide down her leg and didn't know how to dry herself off. Still crouched, she looked around and was startled by a figure in the distance. A scream escaped her mouth before she knew it, and her mother came running.

"It's just a scarecrow, see?" her mother said. "See?"

Three days of driving later, the fields had melted away into the green and gold foothills landscape. There was not really a house waiting for them as Violet's mother had been promised. It was more of a shed with boards missing, like teeth. The sloping excuse for a house sat amidst hundreds of scrub oaks and other gnarled shade trees, along with squat, red trees and golden weeds that reached Violet's shoulders and Donna's head.

Their mother didn't cry when she first saw the house, Violet was astonished to realize years later. She just started working, hammering in enough boards to fill the gaps in hopes of keeping her girls dry.

Just a few months later they had chickens, a bony donkey, and a black dog named Slow. And a tiny lemon tree next to a garden (in the same spot where Violet and Donna, their mother long dead, still planted tomatoes each spring). Walking home from school they'd see raccoons as big as dogs scurry into dark spaces, and they often spotted deer walking stiffly through the shadowy fields. The truck sat rusting in the yard like it belonged to the earth.

As Violet stared at the old green truck, a young man opened the driver's door, startling her. Dressed in a nice clean pair of pants and a button-down shirt, he had a black goatee and grayish sideburns. He looked like the kind of man Violet would have liked for a son or son-in-law. With a kind of rough force that surprised Violet, he began pulling items from the tangle in the bed of the truck: a plastic pink EZ Bake Oven, what looked like one of those fancy, expensive blenders, then a red chair. He began to set the chair down on the clean, white sidewalk but paused and lifted it over his head. Then he threw it toward the flawless lawn. It crashed down into a bed of freshly-planted peonies. Violet stepped back a few paces—she was just a couple of doors away, near the house with the massive fountain that, when plugged in, shot a water stream from the mouth of a concrete cherub.

A blue tricycle and what looked like a VCR came flying over next, a reckless delivery oddly subdued on the lawn. A plastic tub of Legos flew from the man's hands, a confetti of plastic showering down. Here it was, Sunday morning and no one seemed to be witnessing this spectacle except Violet. For a minute she wondered if the young man

might hurt her if he saw her watching. But he seemed so consumed in his work that she doubted it. Violet heard him muttering, “You wanted this place, this stuff. So here’s your stuff, and here, and here—”

Watching this man, Violet felt a vague thrill. But the thrill was followed by a surge in her bladder, a desperate pressure. Usually by now she’d be almost home from her walk and could make it to the front bathroom just in time. She had such a short spell, anymore, between drinking juice or tea and this urgency, which is why she planned her walks just right. But this circus of flying objects had derailed her.

Did she dare tap on one of these embossed doors and ask some strangers if she could use their facilities? She didn’t have much time. To her left, a white house’s white blinds were sealed shut. To her right, a cream-colored house’s windows stared blank as doll eyes, the yard a patch of dirt. It struck her that no one probably lived there yet. She scurried up the walk. In the wall, a small crater with wires jutting out marked where the doorbell would go. In the front window’s reflection, she saw the young man’s chaotic delivery system continue as some Tupperware flew by.

The door was locked. As she rushed around the side gate and into the backyard, she silently begged, *No, not yet.*

The backyard was a heap of red dirt with a pile of gray tiles stacked in the corner near a half-built redwood fence. Violet pulled down her sweatpants and sighed, watching a yellow stream clot in the puffy dirt. She had squatted just right and was dry as a pin.

When she got back out front, the green truck was gone, the menagerie of goods strewn in the silent neighborhood. Relieved and somehow sated, Violet headed toward

home. It was time to feed Vincent his scrambled egg mixed with lamb-based dog food. And it was time to bring Donna dry toast, which she wouldn't eat, and the paper, which she wouldn't read.

Maybe there will be more tomatoes ready to pick, thought Violet. And a few new lemons on the tree.

Blueprint

Chelsea's room was off-limits to Anna. But with Chelsea at a friend's for the day, Anna thought she might try putting a few things away. Purple bras and tie-dye shirts spilled out of the dresser. The half-open closet hinted at chaos inside: pairs of bell-bottom jeans with store tags hanging from the waists, a jumble of platform shoes, the blank button eyes of a stuffed monkey. She stared at her twelve-year-old daughter's unmade bed, the indigo and turquoise quilt bunched on the floor. Anna recalled her own mother making that quilt, steady fingers guiding a needle through blue cotton.

As Anna began to make the bed, she couldn't budge a corner of the quilt; it was held tight by something under the bed. She lowered her head, her eyes adjusting to the dark underside. Dinner plates with old food caked to their edges met Anna's gaze. And shoved against the plates was a pile of magazines.

Anna pulled out the magazines. A blonde woman ballooned from the pages, fingering her nipples. Another sat astride a motorcycle wearing only thigh-high black stockings. Anna turned page after page.

When Anna was twelve, she and her best friend locked the door of her bedroom, lifted their shirts, and touched breasts. Anna had felt a shock of warmth run up and down her arms for days afterward when she'd thought about her best friend. That melting

feeling, like warm water sliding under her skin, returned the next month when a dark-haired boy pushed her hair off her face and kissed her in the photography dark room.

Anna tore a page from one of the magazines. Then another and another. Soon she stood at Chelsea's open bedroom window overlooking the cobalt swimming pool. Glossy breasts and parted lips floated down, a snow of body parts. A glittering tank top dropped like an exotic leaf, followed by a rainbow of shirts, underwear, and mini-skirts. Shoes, one after the other, fell. A black and white bear bounced off the diving board. A confetti of game board pieces burst forth. A dinner plate shattered on the pool's edge, shards sinking like white stones.

Looking down to the colorful flotsam littering the pool, Anna cradled the blue quilt in her arms. When she let go, the quilt parachuted down, its block-pattern design a blueprint of home.

Leaving the Baby

The first time Michelle left the baby alone was unintentional. And brief. She'd forgotten about him for just a few minutes when she went out to get the mail and noticed a thick-stalked dandelion. Actually, not quite forgotten—but she experienced a moment when her body was her own. Her brain felt as squishy as Sammy's soft spot, and the cold sun was blinding. Their new house was so dark that going outside on a bright morning shocked the eyes.

She imagined the neighbors, especially the Bookmans, were none too happy with the sight of her and Lil's yard, all those weeds clashing with the stucco perfection of the rest of Whispering Winds development. The neighborhood was quiet and hygienic, nestled in the salt air. Skinny, erect trees neatly tied to sticks lined the newly minted asphalt road and ship-shape white sidewalks. Lil kept meaning to garden. But after the landscaping was complete, even with Michelle's reminders, Lil rarely touched the yard.

Michelle gripped the dandelion and pulled. It lifted out of the damp soil easily, its roots clumped in a ball of plush soil. How satisfying to take one small, decisive action and achieve solid results. The lavender bush looked dry and droopy, but still it exuded its sugared scent into the late winter air. The daytime moon floated in the sky. She dropped

to her knees and worked on some of the other weeds until her icy fingers began to numb and her neck to ache. Her breasts clenched with the release of milk.

When she went back into the house, she was blinded again—but into darkness. It took her eyes a moment to adjust. There lay Sammy in the bassinet, little fists twitching. He seemed none worse for her absence. She touched his cheek, smudging soil on his yielding skin then wet her finger in her mouth to carefully wipe off the dirt. Every few minutes she was reminded that they had wanted him, they had worked for him, and here he was.

She walked around the living room, switching on all the lights, the same in the kitchen, trying to wake herself up. It was 10 a.m. yet it seemed like late afternoon in the house. Something about the dark wood floors, the heavy draperies, the dark cabinets. Lil liked the dimness. She called the house their cave.

The cave was spanking new, Floor Plan #4, the Whispering Willow: 3,600 square feet of sepia-toned walls, brown carpets and wood floors, a cathedral ceiling with massive wood beams. Crackling monitors were installed all over the house so that no matter what room they were in they could hear the baby.

The minute she saw it, Lil told Michelle this house was meant for them. Before Sammy was born, she opened up her checkbook to a designer who filled it crown to jeweled toe in thick, heavy furniture. The baby, the house—the dream was all coming together for Lil. Michelle had been constantly morning sick and worried about leaving her two jobs, the one at the bookstore and the part-time teaching position. She thought all

of Lil's excitement would soon come to her, that she would feel sheltered, not lost, in a cave.

She sat at the table to open the morning mail, which included a request for a donation to S.O.S.O. (Save Our Sea Otters). A smiling otter floated on its back on the envelope, clacking at a shell with a piece of rock. It looked sturdy with its bulky fur and thick webbed feet. She'd once seen an otter sleeping on its back in the water, its feet up in the air as if wired in place. Whenever she was at the beach, if she saw a sea otter she felt lucky, the four-leaf clover of the sea. She made a mental note to get to the beach, soon—bundle up Sammy, and pack up the diaper bag, and somehow collapse that puzzle of a stroller and shove it into the car. The very thought exhausted her.

Sammy began peeping then let out a scream. Michelle's breasts throbbed, a kind of Pavlovian response, it seemed to her. Her breasts used to be centers of sexual pleasure. Now they were dogs sleeping by the fire, awakening when the master called.

That night in bed, she snuggled up to Lil.

How's work going? she asked, not really wanting to know, but it was either that or how many times Sammy pooped that day.

You don't want to know, Lil said. Kathy spent the first twenty minutes of our meeting this morning berating us for incorrect use of the copy machine. After that, it was all downhill.

Lil worked as an educational researcher. She studied things like: how well do teachers comply with the regulations put forth by administrators and California state legislators? Lil and her colleagues discovered a lot of subversion of the system and wrote

detailed analyses. They used expensive computerized statistical databases to explain human behavior, generating documents hundreds of pages long.

Lil wrapped an arm around Michelle and kissed her ear. The San Vicente District project, Lil said, was revealing some intriguing patterns about teacher behavior. Michelle imagined miniature teachers in little mazes like lab rats, stuck with electronic probes, little lesson plan books in their paws.

Michelle brushed her fingers across Lil's breast. Lil grabbed Michelle's hand and kissed it, a move to keep her away it seemed.

Maybe I'll work on the yard this weekend, Lil murmured, drifting off.

Michelle kept her eyes open in the dark. Sammy slept soundly beyond the hissing monitor. But soon he'd be calling to her with his cry and she'd struggle out of a half-sleep to get to him, thickly, as though through amniotic fluid, the salt water of her life.

Michelle watched lots of soaps. She couldn't keep the characters straight, and she felt continually drowsy. Maybe it had to do with the dark living room which encouraged a suspended state of hibernation. Or maybe it was the insubstantial soap opera doors that merely clicked when slammed shut. Or the women's purses that contained just one item—a kleenex, a last will and testament, a small gun—whatever they needed to extract for the scene.

During a commercial, she crouched on her knees in the kitchen patting blindly behind the refrigerator for Sam's binky, which had sprung from her hand to spite her. She couldn't find the binky but pulled out the crumb-encrusted ad for S.O.S.O., a damp-

eyed sea otter staring out at her. It seemed like the otter's sturdy paw was beckoning her to the sea. She could be there in fifteen minutes on her bike. If she spent just fifteen minutes there, scanning for an otter, the whole trip would last only forty-five minutes.

She stood over Sammy's basinet. His right arm lay over his head as he slept, kind of like the suspended appendages of the sleeping sea otter she'd once seen. Maybe Sammy had something in common with the otters, a kind of sturdiness combined with vulnerability.

She kissed his blanket-wrapped stomach. He twitched a little and his eyes fluttered briefly. Michelle thought of the lyrics from two old songs: *Baby, baby fallin' in love. And freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.*

She latched her helmet on her head, shoved her sneakered feet into the pedal straps, and rode five minutes out, just far enough to leave the development and get to the mini mall on the main road. The crisp air stung her face and fingers. She turned around at the diet center and bee-lined back, her heart thumping like a fist in her chest.

He lay there silently, looking at her, his suckling blister puckering his upper lip. She pulled him up and lifted her sticky shirt away from her sweaty skin. She winced as he latched on. His eyes scrunched shut and he drank away, her heart still throbbing. His soft spot pulsed. She clicked on the remote to a well-coifed, well-manicured woman with a shiny silver purse on her arm, pointing a gun toward the floor where lay a bleeding well-coifed man.

That weekend, the winter pinch in the air gave way to the looseness of spring. The morning fog burned off to a sapphire sky, and the weeds in their yard emitted the sheen of new growth. Lil sat at the brown kitchen table working on *A Statistical Analysis of Teachers' Enactment of the State Math Framework and Standards*.

I'm going out to do a bit of work in the yard, Michelle said.

Oh no, hon, I'll do it. Just after I finish this up, Lil said, her hand sweeping over piles of documents.

No really, I don't mind. Besides, we don't want to get fined by the homeowner's association.

Sammy's echoing scream blared from the monitor. Michelle's breasts tightened, sending a tired sting through her body. Over his scream, she yelled: Let's take a drive, okay? I'd like to look out for some sea otters.

Okay, Lil said. Yes, let me just finish this part.

Five hours later, walking out of the cave and into the muted light wasn't too hard on the eyes because dusk was settling in. They drove the five minutes to the beach.

Lil carried Sammy in the front pack. The water and sky shone opalescent as the sun descended into the water, toward the other side of the world. Michelle thought about how the sun was headed west and how she would like to follow it.

Michelle scanned for otters. Every shimmering bump in the kelp-strewn water had potential.

There, said Lil, there's one. She and Sammy gazed out to the gleaming surf.

Where? Michelle followed Lil's finger with her eyes, scanned, penetrated, peered. But she saw nothing. Lil kept insisting, but Michelle couldn't see what Lil saw.

Sammy kept sucking his fingers so once again Michelle searched the house for a binky. So many things seemed to get sucked up into the black hole of the dark house: binkies, papers, slippers, glasses. Michelle was always searching for things.

Sammy had just nursed and lay on his back, his eyelids half mast. Michelle searched for her keys and found them behind the coffee maker. She took one last look at the half-awake, half-asleep baby and said, or it seemed like she said, I'll be right back.

At the drugstore, Michelle had to ask the clerk where the binkies were.

Binkies? the clerk asked, her tongue pierce glinting in the florescent light. Her green crew cut stuck up like grass.

Yes, binkies, pacifiers.

Oh, pacifiers. For babies.

She walked Michelle to the aisle, her silver pocket watch chain swinging from beneath her green drugstore smock.

I like these Hello Kitty ones, she said, for baby girls. Is this for your baby? Boy or girl?

My baby? Michelle's skin prickled cold under the sheen of the florescent light. Her breasts were leaking into the sticky pads in her bra. She thought of fur, otter fur, something to keep her warm. The girl's tongue pierce flicked like an unrelenting ray of sun.

The girl held out a pink binky in one hand and a blue binky in the other.

I like the pink, Michelle said.

She had been gone twenty-two minutes. Sammy lay awake and murmuring. He seemed pleased to trade his fingers for the pink Hello Kitty binky.

Michelle made headway on the yard a day here, a day there. Once she left Sammy in his basinet, abandoning the dark cave and crackling monitors to work unaccompanied on the weeds for almost an hour. When she opened the thick, oak door into the darkness, he was wailing so she brought him back out with her. He grabbed at his feet on a blanket on the lawn.

He's getting big, said Georgia Bookman.

Michelle looked up, the sun blinding her momentarily. Georgia stood over Michelle in hiking boots, jeans, a tank top, and sparkling gold jewelry.

Oh, you think so?

Can I pick him up?

Michelle stood, her knees cracking. Georgia hoisted Sammy up.

You're such a big boy, a big boy! she said. He turned his head toward her breast.

Oh, you're hungry, huh? She smiled and handed him to Michelle, who peeled off her garden gloves and took him. He leaned warm and heavy against her.

We're going away for three weeks, Georgia said. I was hoping you could keep an eye out, you know. We'll have a dog sitter, but he won't be there all the time.

Georgia moved her head in the direction of her house.

Oh, sure, Michelle said. Where are you going?

John has finally agreed to take a vacation, can you believe it? We're going to Hawaii. Kona. Have you ever been?

Yes. I was there three years ago. Somehow that didn't feel like the truth, but it was. A vague memory floated by, an immersion in translucent water, a whole world submerged, the moon-rock coral reef, turquoise and yellow bulky fish bumping against her legs.

Oh, is that so? I'll have to pick your brain about that. When I have time.

Georgia smiled and looked at her watch. Sammy put a handful of Michelle's tee-shirt in his mouth.

We leave in three days. Talk to you soon? she shouted, her back to Michelle.

Sammy nestled up against Michelle, spit out the clump of tee-shirt, and began to wail.

After nursing him, Michelle turned on all the lights in the living room, kitchen, dining room, and family room. She felt like she could curl up on the couch and sleep forever. Instead she sat at the computer in the kitchen and typed "Kona" into a search engine. Palm trees, cobalt skies, couples embracing in hammocks, discount flights, discount hotels, package deals, come stay in paradise, dreamland, heaven.

For two weeks Michelle alternated breast feeding with bottle formula. Lil said it was too soon. Hadn't they agreed to a year of nursing? Michelle started using the bottle mainly when Lil was at work.

On a Sunday, Michelle left a note taped to the downstairs bathroom mirror. The note said not to worry, that she just needed a break, she'd be back soon.

I need to go to the store, Michelle said, scanning the kitchen counter for her keys.

Are you taking Sammy? Lil asked, her pen poised over *A Comprehensive Analysis of the Educational Outcomes of a Literacy Across the Curriculum Initiative*.

I just finished feeding him, Michelle said. I'll only be a few minutes.

She located her keys underneath a newspaper on the counter and before Lil could respond, Michelle stepped out the door. She stood for a moment with her eyes shut, the sun filtering through her eyelids. Her suitcase had been packed for two weeks, sitting in the trunk of her car. She opened her eyes to the dazzling light. The yard was now weedless. Clean, ordered. The lavender bush stood perky, next to a happy hydrangea. The neighborhood was quiet and empty except for a gardener who knelt on the redwood bark in the Bookman's front yard, picking at imperceptible weeds.

In the in-flight movie, a charming con artist and his cute eight-year-old son scammed people. Michelle sipped water and beer alternately, her hand so sweaty she could hardly grip the glass. A baby started to cry in the rear of the plane, and Michelle's breasts tensed. In the dark window's reflection, she watched her face crumple. It felt good to cry. It made her feel clean, awake. She felt like she'd never need to sleep again. Her wet eyes flashed in the dark window like lights.

Filled with Love

The President says time is drawing to a close.

Any mention of prospective bombing or troop formations or Middle East tensions or inspections floats Dan unconsciously to someone he hasn't thought about in more than twenty years, the boy named Sigmund emerging skinny shouldered from a van, his long basketball body unfolding. Dan had watched him from the booze-in-plastic-cups crowd that was jammed on the lawn of the house of some girl's parents who were out of town. Emboldened by keg beer, Dan had floated toward Sigmund, who guided Dan into the van and slam-dunked their mouths together. Apparently they had been thinking similar thoughts during class. They fell together like buildings finally giving way during an earthquake. They'd never talked about it again, but they continued to let each other surreptitiously glance at their quizzes in algebra, where they sat next to each other, their last names both beginning with L. It took weeks for the mustache-like bruise on Dan's upper lip to disappear.

Dan's wife Deb experiences bodily memories of her own, which have also been mysteriously surfacing lately, such as her first moments alone with Jessica Lin, also at a suburban parents-out-of-town party in some kid's bedroom on a Scooby Doo bedspread. Until Jessica moved out of town six months later, they had as many sleepovers as

possible. Deb spent hours her sophomore year nestled up to her powder blue princess phone in late-night talks with Jessica, hearing her mother, Margaret, snore contentedly from the bottom floor through the heater vent.

Dan's family moved from San Diego to Dallas years before Dan's adulthood homeland security worries, and years after the long-gone 1950s Cold War worries of his parents. He and Deb went to the prom together and a few years later sliced a sterling silver knife through a huge carrot cake frosted with pink and blue bells and danced their first husband/wife dance to Bobby Darin (retro was in) and spent a week on some beach in Maui, courtesy of Margaret. The blue-sky-palm-tree pictures they took are now curling in a shoebox in the bottom garage cabinet, their garage where no cars are parked because of the rusted camping equipment and boxes of baby clothes and old dog houses.

Two months ago Deb and Dan made their first trip to the sea in the seventeen years since their honeymoon, taking the drive to Corpus Christi, Deb in the back seat holding her mother's ashes, seventeen-year-old Justin (who has issues with car sickness) up front next to Dan.

Attention to the math bears out that Deb was pregnant with Justin when she and Dan married. Her morning sickness is the reason they didn't leave the Maui hotel room much, the reason that there are only six honeymoon photos in that box in the garage. On the floral bedspread in the air conditioned room, Dan fed her macadamia nuts and cold Pop Tarts, tender and excited for the baby that he planned to raise against the ravages of conformity. Deb, on the other hand, believed in some of the benefits of conformity.

Now Justin is the center of the basketball team and the student director of the school's gay-straight alliance. When "Faggot" was spray-painted on his locker, he told a reporter for the local paper that just because he is leading the group doesn't suggest he is gay *or* straight, and part of his allegiance to celebration of diversity and to ridding the world of homophobia is to be ambiguous about his sexual identity so that people will have to deal with him as a person not a label. He won president of student council after that, and his picture was splashed all over the yearbook.

Given his comments during the interview and his behavior since, Justin has an odd yet logical affinity for the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy and plans to enlist in the Army the minute he turns eighteen. Deb and Dan have asked him how an Independent-leaning-toward-Green-Party teenager with a retro (which is in again) Boy George tattoo and a tongue pierce can support a hawkish administration.

I have to take action, he says.

But there are plenty of other actions to take, Deb growls. She lists a series of them: peace marches and letters to the editor and becoming a legislative intern on the correct side of the issue and—

That's too simplistic, says Justin. Who knows better about war than someone who has been in one?

You are risking your life and the lives of other human beings to know killing is bad? This is Dan's contribution.

And what happened to your belief that our esteemed current President was not elected but staged a coup? asks Deb.

That's my point exactly—the power is on the inside. That's where I need to be in order to undermine, to subvert the system, Justin says, lightly patting his gelled hair spikes. He adds: And knowing and doing are not necessarily the same thing.

Oxymoronical thinking is not wisdom merely because it sounds smart, Deb grumbles.

Whatever, he says.

Justin, do you—do you have an affinity primarily for men or women? asks Dan when he comes into Justin's room to put away folded tee-shirts and clean socks. Dan hopes Justin owns up to an attraction to men. That way he can *out* his son to the military recruiter, and Justin would never make it to boot camp.

Dad, he says.

Maybe the newspaper doesn't have to know but I do.

Why, Dad?

Well I suppose we'll figure it out next month when you go to the prom.

Dan wishes he hadn't said this, that a boy-boy prom photo would be damning evidence to present to the recruiter.

Since when does who you take to the prom determine your sexual identity label? Justin asks, picking at his blue fingernail polish.

Since always, I think, dear son.

So you think the fags stayed away from the prom in your time? Get a grip, Dad.

Dan longs for the Justin of just a few years ago who wanted to know everything about Dan and Deb's adolescent years, the TV shows (all of which were idiotic, says Deb; many of which were funky and fun, says Dan), the music, the clothing styles—the Justin who fantasized about his parents' old friends entering the house as though from a time machine, with feathered, hairsprayed hair and Angel Flight polyester pants, boogying to the Bee Gees, disco balls gyrating in the living room.

In bed Deb says that the Orange Alert is the most ridiculous thing she's ever heard and that the Administration is not protecting the U.S. from terrorists but egging them on.

Do you think I should pick up some plastic sheeting and masking tape and air filters nevertheless? asks Dan, reaching under her nightgown.

But Deb doesn't seem to hear and shifts into talking about this week's case, a lawyer suing a lawyer, plaintiff and defendant virtually indistinguishable, a young woman reading a magazine under her coat in the jury box, an old man snoozing in the jury box, the way she must reprimand them during recess like a school teacher.

Dan smooths his hand over her legs that prickle with five o'clock shadow, and as she talks about Exhibition A, how the plaintiff tried to pull the wool over her eyes, he circles his hands over her thighs then slowly moves his body on top of hers, thinking about how he wants to tell her about Justin and the outing-to-the-recruiter idea if she would just take her mind off the bench for even a minute or two.

Images strobe through Deb's suddenly sleepy mind as she moves with Dan, images of war planes and Jessica Lin's long black hair and a ViewMaster slide of the sparkling Maui ocean.

Dan doesn't have a memory, exactly, just a visceral echo of that skinny basketball body, the smell of the inside of the van, the fierce, bruising kissing.

It seems improbable but the same week that Deb gets a call from Jessica, Dan gets an email from Sigmund. Both say things like remember me, I tracked you down, what are you doing now, what's your life like now?

Jessica is coming to town, must come for business, otherwise she wouldn't fly even though it's just over two hours from Chicago, with air travel so tentative these days, and the obligatory checking of shoes and maybe even body cavities, or so she's heard, especially if you have olive skin and dark hair as she does. Deb plans for Jessica to first see her in her judge's robe since she's embarrassed by the size of her thighs and stomach, doesn't want comparisons to her sleek fifteen-year-old body.

Dan wonders what was going through Sigmund's mind when he plugged "Dan Leigh" into a search engine, stunned that Sigmund remembers Dan's last name and probably the bruised face and algebra quizzes and the moment at the prom when, slow dancing with their dates, they exchanged a look.

That evening it rains so hard that the garage floods, ruining the curling, forgotten honeymoon pictures, which may sound foreboding, but it's not, it's just a coincidence.

Deb has been worried she's getting cancer because she's so tired all the time. She wonders if she should get that physical exam she's been avoiding for years and that thought makes her even more tired, so much so that she has to avoid watching the old man nodding off in the jury box because it puts her at risk of her own eyelids drooping.

Even Jessica's impending arrival isn't waking her up much. She can't reprimand the sleepy juror without a sense of hypocrisy. She thinks if it isn't cancer, it's radon in the courthouse or the phosphorescent lights or perhaps terrorists are really doing something with invisible chemical weapons. She doesn't have much stamina to think about it too long, as she has to finish up this case and get to the grocery store on the way home without falling asleep at the wheel because Dan needs frozen peas and powdered curry to complete dinner, as he said in the phone message recorded by the bailiff.

Jessica arrives early, sitting in a seat by the front door, grinning at whatever memories she sees as she stares at Deb in her judge's robe, the Honorable Deborah Smith-Leigh nameplate looming in front of her. How can it be that Jessica looks exactly the same except older, some creases around her eyes, a flash of silver in her black hair.

When they hug in the judge's chambers at 5:35 p.m., right after Deb has reiterated her speech to the jury to not talk about the case with anyone over the weekend, Deb feels heavily weighted to the earth in the middle of small talk—what have you been doing all these years, what brings you back to town. She tells the bailiff she'll lock up then shuts her office door. Rain is pounding at the roof.

Jessica says that on the way from the airport in the taxi she heard that the country was now at Red Alert and that the action is heating up on the Gulf. She stands close to Deb, holds both of her hands as though no time has passed.

Jessica also says, I'm so sorry, I heard about your mother, and I never, never stopped thinking about you.

Deb moves her cheek against Jessica's, in awe that Jessica is not different, Jessica just has a few embellishments—that flash of silver and a few lines like a successful addition that's architecturally organic to the original building. Deb can't believe it but Jessica begins to unzip her judge's robe. They pull back, look at each other, smile.

They move to the leather couch, the drowsy, Honorable Deb and the magically reappearing Jessica. Deb's sleepiness lifts for a moment so that the lines in Jessica's skin appear three-dimensional, like the gleaming ViewMaster ocean.

At that moment, Dan is reading his second email from Sigmund, who now lives with his lover, Robert, in Florida, where they're trying to adopt their foster children but are legally prevented from doing so. They are involved in a lawsuit against the state, but the lawsuit is not getting that much attention since everyone is so focused on the war, homeland security, terrorism. In the meantime, Sigmund and Robert are in danger of losing the son and two daughters, ages 3, 5, and 9, that they have raised since infancy. Especially the son, who has now been deemed HIV-negative, even though he was HIV-positive when they first became his foster parents. Sigmund has heard that Dan's wife is

a judge and former family law attorney who is known as a powerful child advocate who rarely loses a case—and he’s hoping that she might be able to help them out.

Deb and Dan’s city is one of several in the south that is quarantined the next day. It’s also the day Justin turns 18. People don’t quite understand what the quarantine means, and the TV, radio, and newspaper give conflicting reports. About twenty men and women from nearby towns have been hospitalized with some vague illness seemingly tied to a rare chemical called HR3 that may have been released through the mail, like that anthrax situation that seems like it happened eons ago, another life of terror.

The quarantine consists of road blocks and canceled flights and people being urged to stay calm and proceed with life as usual. There should be no concerns about going to work, going to the store. There should be no rush on anything, no buying to hoard because it’s likely this is just a preventative quarantine that will soon be lifted, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have extra batteries, food, water, and first aid supplies and a full tank of gas and extra plastic sheeting and tape, say officials, so stores are running low on the “suggested for personal homeland security” list that is splashed all over TV, the newspaper, and websites.

Justin’s birthday party is in the afternoon since he plans to go out dancing afterward even though his parents don’t want him out at night with the police acting like who-knows-what during this crazy quarantine time. Deb begs Justin to play the “my mom’s a local judge” card if needed, and he nods non-committally. His tongue looks

oddly bare without its silver stud, which he has removed in preparations for boot camp, although with the quarantine his departure is delayed.

Because of the quarantine, Jessica Lin's departure has been delayed, too, so she is at the birthday party, drinking champagne and eating cake with Justin's friends and from a distance, in her hip hugger jeans and glittery shirt, looking not much older than they do.

She seems really nice, Dan says to his wife as he sets a platter of miniature quiches on the table.

I'm glad you like her, Deb says, biting into a quiche and burning her tongue. Oh shit, she says, gulping champagne to relieve her scorching mouth.

So what do you think of Sigmund's email? Do you think you'll be able to help him out?

After pressing her tongue against the outside of her cool champagne glass she says: Perhaps. I emailed him back, asked him to send me as much documentation of the case as possible. We'll go from there.

Dan puts his arm around Deb's waist, squeezing her in approval. Then he lifts his glass and taps the cake knife against it.

The chattering stops and they all look to him, the Chicana student council treasurer and her multiracial pals the pep squad leaders in their tiny navel-baring tee-shirts, the gangly white and black members of the basketball team with fresh faces and backward baseball caps, and the pierced-and-tattooed white gay-straight alliance contingent, who, as it turns out, are attending the prom as a group.

Happy birthday, Justin, says Dan, holding his glass aloft. Eighteen is a watershed year. I wish I was sending you forth into a world of peace. But now it is up to you and all you young people here to make peace happen for the next generation, since unfortunately my generation has failed so miserably.

Here here, says Jessica Lin, downing her champagne.

Everyone else stands silent for a moment, holding their champagne glasses up toward the dusky late afternoon windows, as though listening to see if chemical weapons make a sound.

Gas is now twenty-two dollars a gallon, and the lines are long into the second week of the quarantine. No one knows what's happening with the people in the hospital reportedly exposed to HR3. A small town in Rhode Island is also quarantined, as are a cluster of suburban areas near Seattle. And the whole country remains on Red Alert.

The news reports that the country is still on the edge of war, with troops bulging in the Gulf. But the edge and the center are hard to distinguish since a few preemptory bombs have been dropped on a reputed munitions factory, which reportedly has been reactivated in total insubordination to American demands, says the President, his mouth held so tightly it looks like he's being ventriloquized.

The local recruits have been granted a quarantine exemption and will be transported out by the army tomorrow. In Jessica's hotel room, Deb breaks down, sobbing that her son is about to leave to war, how can it be, how can he choose to place

his tender body, the infant body she nursed, in harm's way. How fucking ironic, she cries, he wasn't drafted, he's choosing to go, how can it be, how can it be.

Jessica holds Deb, pushes back strands of hair wet from tears, moves her hands up and down Deb's back trying to relieve the tight sobbing. Deb lets Jessica undress her, and they hold each other under the scratchy hotel sheets. Deb falls asleep in the crook of Jessica's arm, and Jessica reaches over to the remote, clicks on the television. The preemptory bombs have hit their targets. The quarantine has lifted. The war has begun, explosions flashing in the sky all over the Middle East.

It costs almost four hundred dollars to gas up. As the radio ekes out the President's words about the war that began in earnest ten hours ago, Dan watches the headlights cast their light east. Deb sits between him and Jessica, the backseat filled with Justin's long frame, his back to the door, his legs sprawled across the seat, his handcuffed hands in his lap. No one had expected a judge to steal from the criminal court's storage closet.

I swear I'm going to throw up, Justin says.

You always threaten that, but we've never seen it, even when you were a kid, says Deb. That's what that bowl on the floor is for. If your puking really comes to pass, we'll figure out some other seating configuration.

Can you even believe how much your parents love you? Jessica says, turning to look at Justin, whose face looks broader with his buzz cut.

Yeah, this whole fucking world is just filled with love, he says.

—and justice will prevail—the President is chanting through the radio.

I wish my parents had loved me like this, says Jessica, nonplussed by Justin and the President. Her black and silver hair is illuminated by a passing car. My parents, she continues, seemed to hardly care if I lived or died. They were too wrapped up in their own problems, all the fights over their marriage, all their worries about money even though they had enough to buy another country with. Maybe that would have been a good idea—they could have each lived in their own self-purchased country. That might have precipitated fewer fights.

Or they might have just dropped bombs on each other, says Deb.

They were doing that anyway, Jessica says. Now your mother, Deb—her name was Margaret, yes?—was really amazing. She was walking, talking love.

Justin silently agrees. One memory comes to him, his grandmother spreading suntan lotion all over his face and arms, his riding shotgun in her convertible to Galveston and getting to drive the golf cart all weekend.

Dan, his hands on the wheel, remembers holding Deb's hand, sitting in the living room, telling Margaret he's gotten Deb pregnant, that they want to get married right away, and Margaret crying, kissing them both, and taking them out for margaritas, ordering a *virgin* margarita for Deb and laughing at the implications.

In Jessica's mind's eye she sees Margaret walking into Deb's room where Jessica and Deb stand naked, breast-to-breast, and Margaret apologizing for the intrusion and saying that dinner is ready, then serving them chicken and dumplings and telling them about Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

Deb's thoughts swirl all over the place, settling on her mother in bed, saying this dying thing is not all it's cracked up to be; saying, I know you work hard darling, and I'm proud, but don't let that take you out of the living, breathing world.

When Deb released her mother's ashes to the water, some gray and grainy bits caught in the wind and swirled onto the boat deck. It was as though her mother never stopped her resistance to leaving the world. It seemed that her mother's voice had told her to steal the handcuffs, so in a way she felt that her mother was there in the backseat with Justin. Sitting in this car, her son behind her and her mother vaguely present, Jessica's warmth pressing against her right arm, Dan's warmth pressing against her left, Deb feels hundreds of miles away from her drowsy courtroom self. She is finally wide awake.

After the all-night drive, Dan thinks at first it's Sigmund's lover, Robert, at the door, but it's Sigmund, Sigmund hugging him saying: Oh my god, it's you, you're here, how can this be?

Dan begins to see vestiges of Sigmund's basketball legs unfolding from the long-ago van in this older Sigmund's curly-haired thick legs that extend from Hawaiian-print shorts. The children, two girls and a boy, stand behind Sigmund, illuminated by the dazzling Florida sun.

Soon Justin, uncuffed and under promise of some thinking time, is stationed in the family room, playing video games with the voluble children, the smaller two fighting over his lap.

Dan, Deb, and Jessica sit on the back deck in the sun, drinking ginger iced tea with Sigmund and Robert, the swimming pool gleaming.

Our neighbors, says Robert, nodding his head toward the house with brilliant purple bougainvillea running up its side, have enough pills and powders to kill themselves and their children if there's a terrorist attack.

It's almost as though some people are hoping for the end of the world, Sigmund says, running his hand through his thinning black hair.

Time feels like it's collapsing on Dan. His arms prickle with an indeterminate energy as he sits here in the bright Florida light with his wife and the man whose body he'd once held next to his own, ensconced in the flashing possibility of death to all.

Explain to me, says Deb, Florida's defense of its gay adoption ban.

Sigmund talks about Florida's argument that the unequal treatment is justified because it's the state's way to express disapproval of gay people. Robert adds that the state says it's better for kids to be raised by a married mother and father, excluding them on two counts since they're a father and a father who are not allowed by law to marry.

They all feel a twinge of a pull toward the future, doing their best to allay terror attacks and neighborly suicides and children dying and burning oil fields and missiles screaming, as they bask in the fact that the Florida state appeals court has agreed to hear the case three months from now. Three months into the future.

Jessica kisses each man on the mouth and then kisses Deb, soft and long, in front of the idling taxi in the driveway. It's as though this kissing is not only allowed but

required, fueled by this morning's news about the thousands of dead civilians in the Middle East, and the police shooting into a peace rally in Boise that killed two young men, and the subway explosion in New York, cause unknown.

Jessica is sure her office has caught wind of the end of the quarantine, so she must go back to face inside sales, which have picked up significantly since her firm has procured a new contract with the war-fueled government.

As Jessica steps into the cab she says she will stay in touch and write letters to the editor in an attempt to get gay adoption some press in the Midwest.

Thank you, thank you say Sigmund and Robert, both a bit blurry-eyed as Jessica—who cooked a lasagna last night and who taught Justin some disco moves and who brushed out their daughters' hair this morning—rides away.

Deb says, let's go inside, we have a lot to do. I have to make some calls, and I want you guys to find those ACLU files and the copies of the Dade County depositions.

Dan hears screaming and splashing coming from the back of the house. Justin is in the pool again with the kids. Dan will put on his swimsuit and dangle his feet off the diving board and drink ginger tea. Or maybe he'll make margaritas, lifting his glass to toast swimming in the pool. He'll lick salt from the rim in memory of his mother-in-law, of Margaret's celebrating her unborn grandchild. He'll toast a long-ago algebra class morphing into a sunny Florida day, all the lucky-at-this-moment children playing in blue water.