AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Tracy Daugherty

This collection of stories explores moments of stillness in human relationships: moments during an argument when there is nothing to say, moments of quiet contemplation which precedes inevitable—and often unwelcome—life changes, moments of frustration, confusion, despair, and grace. In the chaotic lives of these characters, stillness is neither tranquil nor gentle. Rather it is an oppressive silence, heavy with the weight of the unspoken. Ultimately, the collection explores another kind of stillness too: a stillness of heart.

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Stillness

by

Steven Lont

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Steven Lont, Author

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June 1984

When I was growing up, we lived next to the railroad tracks in the city of Westland in a white house with narrow siding and peeling paint. My daddy worked for the Ford assembly plant in town until he was arrested and sent to Jackson State Pen. And I haven't seen him since they put him away. But until that June, Daddy, Mom, and I were all together—there in that house with the rumble of the trains carrying auto parts as they headed east and shiny new cars as they headed west. By September, Mom and I had left the house and moved to Florida. And when I drove through the neighborhood years later, I found they'd widened the street and the house was gone.

It all happened in the spring and summer of 1984, when the Tigers were dominating the American League. I was fifteen and going to school and working at Denny's, where my mother worked too.

Things had never been great at home, though I would miss it later. My father and mother fought when they were together. But that wasn't often. Mom usually worked the swing shift, and sometimes she worked third shift too. She had curly red hair and freckles, like me. Once, when I was emptying a bus tub from behind the lunch counter, the manager was watching her go from table to table: "Your mama moves just like a bird," he said. "She's one of our best, Mel. Take care of her."

He turned to me and smiled. I nodded and brought the tub to the dish tank. She liked her job, I knew. There were always new people to meet. She enjoyed chatting with the regular customers, who were, now that I think about it, the only people she was close to.

Unlike my mother, Daddy always went to extremes. He subscribed to six different sports magazines which he studied as if they were Bible chapters. He kept

notes and stats of the players in a green hardcover notebook. When we were watching a game, he'd shout out what records were broken even before the announcer would say it. "Well, Mel," he'd say, "that was Trammel's eighth pre-season home run—his personal record." When I had my friend Sammy over, Daddy'd ask us trivia questions. "Who pitched for the National League in the 1977 All Star Game?" He'd stare intently until we answered, as if he was concentrating for us. "When did the Dodgers move from Brooklyn?" "Who has the most home runs so far this season?" We'd guess to be polite, then we'd go on our way.

One Saturday during the playoffs, Sammy came over. We were going to ride our dirt bikes along the trail that followed the railroad tracks where there were ramps that some other kids had made by nailing plywood over pallets. If you had enough speed, you could get about three feet of air, which was a rush. But you had to be careful on the landing because if you messed it up, you could really rack yourself on the cross bar.

"You guys don't want to stay and watch the game?" Daddy said, standing up from the couch. He was wearing his Tigers hat. "The Bo Sox are hot. We've got to look out for them."

I looked at Sammy, who snorted. We'd just been talking about Dad in my room, calling him the Superfan. "No, Dad," I said. "Not today."

"C'mon, Sport," he said. "The Tigs need you." He had a beer in his hand and his fingers were orange from cheese-flavored Doritos. There were creases under his eyes and he looked tired and lonely. On the television, Sparky Anderson spat onto the ground and headed to the mound to talk to the pitcher.

"We're going to hit the trails," I said. "See you, Dad."

This is how things were until June of 1984, when things started to come undone. My dad had driven to Toronto for an away game one weekend. I'd been working, but it was slow, so the manager let me go early. I dropped by the card shop on my way home. I wanted to look at the new rookie cards, though I didn't have the money to buy any that day.

Daddy had a huge collection of cards, but he didn't buy new ones very often. He was interested in the rare ones, which he couldn't afford. Mom would nag him about them when she caught him: "We've got rent to pay, Mitchell. How do you expect us to get ahead if you waste our money like that?" Then he'd grumble about how much she spent on cigarettes, and the argument would go on until my mother went to bed.

Part of me agreed with my mother, that the cards were kind of pointless. You couldn't do anything with them, really. But part of me liked the idea that if you bought the right card one year, the next year it could be worth several times more. I'd made a point to get the cards of promising rookies. It was investing, like the stock market but with baseball.

When I got home there was a Nissan Stanza in our drive. I put my bike in the garage, like I always did and walked into the living room. My mother sprang up from the couch. A man sat up slowly. He had thin, black hair which was graying and wore a pink shirt with a collar. I recognized him from work. He'd order pie and coffee in the afternoons and sit by himself for hours, chatting with the servers when they had time for him.

"Melvin," my mother said. "Melvin, this is Luke." Luke smiled, then resumed his startled stare.

"Hi, Melvin. I've been hoping we'd get a chance to meet," he said.

I realized I was repeatedly nodding my head up and down. I stopped.

"Well," my mother said.

"I'm glad we finally met," said Luke. "Your mother says a lot about you—good things."

"Nice to meet you," I said, then looked back at my mother. The framed Monet poster on the wall behind them was slightly crooked. It had been that way for days.

"Well," my mother said.

"Maybe I should go," Luke said, standing up.

"No. We should get this out," my mother said.

I wished I had gone straight to Sammy's. I wished it'd been busier at work and I hadn't gotten cut. The neighbor's dog began to bark.

"Let's go out for dinner. Get to know one another," my mother said.

"When's Dad coming home?"

"Late," she said.

Luke drove us in his creme-colored Stanza, a Jap car. We never bought anything but Fords. In fact, I couldn't remember when I'd ridden in any car but a Ford. Daddy would've called this one a goddamn rice burner. It smelled brand-new. Mom lit a cigarette and rolled her window down. We passed strip malls and auto parts stores and fast-food chains. We passed discarded paper cups and napkins and bits of metal and colored glass.

Eventually, Luke pulled into the lot of a steak house. He looked back at me from the front seat after shutting off the ignition. "You like steak, Melvin?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then we're at the right place." He smiled.

Inside, Luke told me I could order whatever I wanted, but he suggested the sirloin. The steak house had vacuumed carpets and dim lights, a place where the busboys wore bow ties. I wondered how much they got paid.

"Your mom tells me you like baseball."

"It's all right," I said. My mom looked somber. "I'm not a superfan, though."

"Not a superfan, huh? That's good," Luke said. "You're a smart kid. That's what your mother tells me."

"Did she tell you she was married to my father?"

"Whoa, kid. Do we have to go there right now? Can't we have a nice dinner together before getting messy?"

"Let's just be honest with each other," Mom said. "That's what we need. If everybody is honest, everything will be okay. Isn't that right, Luke?"

"That's right. Right as rain."

Luke ordered a beer, and I started in on the table bread.

"Where did you meet Karen?" I said, half-chewed bread in my mouth. I never referred to Mom by her first name.

He put his hand on hers. "We met at Denny's."

"Melvin, your father and I are having problems. You know that."

"Are you getting a divorce?" I said.

Luke turned to my mother.

"We don't know yet," she said. An infant in a highchair on the other side of the dining room threw his rattle and handfuls of food on the floor. A woman picked him up.

"You'd be better off without him," Luke said. "You know, he doesn't care for you. He only cares about ball and beer. Even without me—take me out of the picture completely—you two are better off on your own."

"Let's not get into what I should or should not do," Mom said. "Now isn't the right time or place."

"Have you met my father?" I said.

Luke looked up from his steak. "No," he said.

I wondered if Luke was fucking my mother. My parents had separate lives, and Daddy often slept on the brown couch in front of the TV with the sports station on. They probably had stopped having sex. Luke might have been fucking her right before I came in after work, or maybe they were getting ready to when I walked in. I decided I didn't want to think about it. I thought of my dad, who was probably by himself in a crowded stadium or driving down the highway back toward Detroit, flipping through the AM stations.

"Do you think Dad has a girlfriend?" I said. A lock of hair fell in front of my mother's face. She pushed it back. For the first time, I noticed she wasn't wearing her wedding ring.

"I don't think so," she said.

"You can never tell," Luke said.

"How many times have you been married, Luke?" I said.

"Jeeze, kid," he said. "Why don't you ask me about my job or duck hunting or something. Everything's personal with you."

I glared at him.

"Twice," he said. "I've been married twice."

After Luke dropped us off, I went up to my room. I clicked the radio on AM because at night you could pick up stations from Chicago to Toronto and sometimes even farther. I wondered what it would be like to be completely grown up, out of Westland, far away from the Ford plants and the Detroit Tigers. I could hear a train

whistle in the distance. It was the 11:00 o'clock. I thought of how everybody living along the tracks must think of the train differently—our 11:00 o'clock was someone else's 10:30 or 5:15 or 2:37. It was always changing, like everything else in the world. The whistle moaned again, and I could hear the faint clack of the wheels against the seams in the tracks. I lay very still and listened.

Later, my mother came up to my room.

"How do you feel, Mel?"

"I feel fine."

"Good."

"I'm not going to work tomorrow," I said.

"I understand. I'll call off for you." My mother turned her head toward the window. The streetlamp reflected off her sweaty cheek. "But if you want to go anyway then maybe you should. It might take your mind off things."

"Okay."

"Tell me in the morning."

I watched light from the street move from one side of the room to the other. She was still standing in the doorway.

"Does Dad know about Luke?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"Are things going to stay the same?"

"Yes. Yes, they are."

It wasn't true, I knew. She was saying that to make me feel better, but it wasn't working.

"Do you feel bad about what you've done?" I said.

She shifted from one foot to another. "We need to stay friends, Mel," she said. "I feel bad about a lot of things, but I don't want to feel bad about you and me."

I didn't say anything, but rolled over, so my face was to the window and my back was to her. She stood in the doorway for a long time, then went to her room.

I knew that a tramp was a woman who went around with other men, like some of the other waitresses at Denny's did. That was what my mother was now, a tramp.

I lay in bed listening to cars cross the railroad tracks, listening to the neighbor's dog, and thinking of other things my father might call my mother when he found out.

Then I heard his key in the lock. His feet scuffled against the linoleum in the kitchen, like they always did when he came home.

I got out of bed. I could almost see myself do it. It felt automatic, as if I were getting up when the alarm clock went off.

Downstairs, my father was sitting on the couch flipping through the channels on the television. His face was blue in the light of the TV. I could see the lines in his forehead.

"Hey," he said, when he noticed I was there.

"How was the game?" I said.

"Good," he said. I wondered if he really had gone to a game at all. For all I knew he was having an affair too.

"We have to talk," I said. Reflected taillights moved across the textures of his face. "I thought a bar would be a good place to sit and talk," I said, "but they probably wouldn't let me in."

"No, they probably wouldn't," he said. "What'd you do, Sport, get some chick pregnant?"

"No," I said. "Can we take a walk?"

That night was cool, and the moon was shining on the tops of the rails that the trains polished every time they rolled past. I felt like I was dreaming, that none of this was real, but the sound of my father's boots against the railroad gravel was so distinct. First one foot, then the next, a soldier marching. It wasn't a dream. My life was falling apart and everything was very, very real.

We walked until we got to a bridge over a stream. There we sat down, our legs hanging over the edge.

"Dad," I said. He didn't say anything. "Dad, Mom's got a boyfriend. His name is Luke. I thought I should tell you." I was swinging my legs, and the moon in the water made it seem as if we were sitting on the back of a speeding boat. I wished we were on a boat moving far from this place, me and my dad. Maybe a fishing boat in Alaska or a cargo ship in the Great Lakes.

"You wanted to go to the bar. The bar is wherever your problems are," he said. "You're a smart kid, Sport. You've got good instincts." He opened his coat and took out a flask. I'd never seen the flask before. He unscrewed the top and took a long pull. He coughed. "I want you to know you've done the right thing, Sport. Don't ever doubt yourself. You've done the right thing."

He handed me the flask. "You're a good kid, Sport," he said.

I sipped it. It burned my throat.

"Things are going to be different now," he said. "Maybe even better."

The telephone call came in the morning, around five. The ringing, which woke me up, continued for a long time. I opened the door to my room, and it stopped. My bare feet were cold against the hardwood floor. It was still dark out.

I could hear my mom's voice, quiet at first, then shrieking frantically. Then there was silence. From the dark hall, I could make out a dim reflection of myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. My throat began to burn again.

I must have known that Dad was gone, but I quietly hustled down the stairs, hoping he might still be there, and that the call might be something else. The old brown couch was empty, except for a heap of blankets. The television was off. The car wasn't in the driveway.

Part of me wanted to go back upstairs and knock on my mother's door and see what was going on, but I couldn't. Maybe he went back to the bar and crashed our car after drinking all night.

I went to the sink and poured myself a glass of water. The pipes grunted in our still house. Through the ceiling I could hear my mother weeping.

Her door creaked and then she knocked on my door. "Mel," she said. The glass of water was cold against my hands. "Mel," she said again. I heard her open my door. "God. Not you too," she said.

"I'm down here," I said.

And then I could hear her feet on the stairs, then see her white bathrobe. She touched her cold hand to my face, the front of her robe falling open. I could see her cleavage. I looked away.

"It's your father," she said.

"Yeah," I said. I forced back tears, but my eyes and throat were stinging. Her grip on my chin tightened and she turned my face toward hers. Her green eyes were glassy, and the skin around them red and sagging.

"Baby," she said, "he's in jail."

"Yeah," I said, my voice higher now, cracking.

"I don't know what got into his head," she said softly. "He robbed a jewelry store."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No," she said. "It isn't your fault."

"Is he coming home?"

"Yes," she said. "We've got to post bail." She made a strange sound, a quiet, defeated whimper, and I knew that it was important for me to be here now, and I smiled, trying to feel good about that.

"I'll make you tea," I said. "Would you like that?"

"Yes," she said. "I would." She reached up again and placed her soft hand on my cheek, but I didn't look at her. We stood there for a while. I could smell her lotion, a sweet apple smell. The near wall was white and had a cluster of pin holes where previous tenants had pounded nails to hang decorations. Another car drove by. I turned toward her, and I could still see her cleavage in her open robe. This time I didn't look away, but imagined hundreds of hands caressing her breasts, white hands, black hands, brown hands, hands stained with motor oil and dirt, hands with filthy fingernails, the kind, rough hands of my father.

I forced the terrible images away. Tea. I would make tea. And then we would sit down, mother and son, and talk a little about what might happen, or maybe we would just listen to the city around us begin to awake.

Sledding

The hill was covered with children and ice and Bobby was getting cold. He'd come to the park after watching some after-school cartoons, eating spaghetti out of a tin can, and smoking a half-cigarette someone had left in his mother's house. Now Bobby was with Kyle, his new friend. Bobby's knees and butt hurt from rumbling down the hill on the red sled his mother had bought for him four months ago, when they'd left Miami for Michigan. But he hadn't been able to use the sled until January, because the snow didn't come until New Year's Day.

"I'm gonna surf," Kyle said.

"Go for it," Bobby said.

Kyle placed his feet at either end of the sled and wiggled his butt, trying to inch forward.

"Don't shake your ass like that. You look dumb," Bobby said. "There's a few chicks out here, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," Kyle said. "Give me a push."

Bobby placed his hands on the other boy's shoulders and gave him a quick shove. Kyle went forward, but the sled stayed planted in the rough snow.

"Shiiiit," he hollered as he slid, his voice trailing off, his body rolling ass-over-tea-kettle down the hill. Kyle was not particularly cool. They just lived in the same neighborhood, so the two of them hung out sometimes. Back in Florida, Bobby hadn't liked the kids at school and the men his mother knew, but here he didn't know anybody. His mother had said things would get better, that there would be white snow and hot chocolate, that they could start over.

The snow had been pretty at first, but the thawing and freezing made it hard and crusty, not like Bobby had expected it to be. He picked up a chunk and threw it down the hill toward Kyle, who had begun climbing back up. The snow skipped off a bump and smacked a huge tube with five people on it.

"What are you thinking?" a man in a blue snowmobile suit said. The man looked stupid, like he was some kind of a big kid, a retard. He stood next to Bobby. "Boy," the man said, "what's your name?"

"What's it to you?" Bobby said.

"Hey, have some respect." The man put his hands on his hips. He was wearing mittens which were connected to his snowmobile suit with an elastic cord—idiot strings, they called them at school.

"Beat it, dork," Bobby said. He thought he could push the man down the hill if he had to. That had worked last week when he had gotten into a fight with an eighth-grader.

"Kids," the man muttered, then turned away.

Bobby kicked a frozen chunk past the man, who stopped.

"I'm going to find out who your mom is," the man said. He was out of breath, so vapor steamed from his nose and mouth.

"I'm going to rape your wife."

"What?" the man said. "What did you say? I can't believe you said that, you little shit. You've got something coming." The man turned and walked toward the parking lot.

When Kyle got to the top of the hill he gave Bobby the finger.

"You asked me to give you a shove," Bobby said, grinning. He could see the man in his SUV, the dome light illuminating his red face. He was talking on a cell phone.

"I'm sick of this," Bobby said. "Come on. I've got a plan."

The two boys pulled their sleds along the line of trees that separated the park from the cemetery.

"You see that man?" Bobby pointed to the truck.

Kyle nodded.

"He's got a problem."

"What's that?"

"He's got a problem with his peter. He needs Viagra." They laughed. "He's unhappy with his sexual performance," Bobby said. They laughed again. The man was still talking and had not noticed them.

"He's a limp dick," Kyle said.

"He was being an asshole to me when you were going down the hill. You throw snowballs at his truck, and I'll let the air out of his back tires. If he chases after us, we'll run in different directions, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Don't be a chicken."

Kyle stood by a green yew bush, and Bobby crouched by the right rear tire and unscrewed the cap. A snowball splattered against the windshield. He could see Kyle duck behind the bush. Bobby had to hurry, but he couldn't press the valve down with his numb fingers. Another snowball flew against the windshield. Bobby took off his watch and used the metal clasp to press the valve down. The air hissed out. After another snowball, the man turned his headlights on and opened the door of the truck. Bobby pulled his watch back. He heard classical music. Maybe Kyle had the guts to pelt the stranger, even in the light.

Bang. Kyle had lobbed one which hit the hood.

"You little shit," the man said. He started toward the bush, his mittens flopping at his arms.

Bobby slipped from behind the truck and into the driver's seat. The orchestra on the radio was playing long, low notes. He shut the door and pressed the electronic lock, which snapped down. The keys were still in the ignition. Outside, Kyle was running and the man was chasing him.

Bobby turned the key and the engine started.

The man stopped.

Bobby stuck his tongue out.

Kyle paused, looked at Bobby, then tore off down the sidewalk.

The man was yelling and waving his hands. He tried the doors, then looked off in Kyle's direction, but the other boy was gone.

In the truck were building supplies: molding, tools, cans of varnish. Bobby opened the glovebox and found a flask. He waved to the man, opened the flask, then took a sip. It tasted like the peppermint schnapps his mother's boyfriends had given him. Now the man was pounding on the passenger window. If it broke, Bobby would have to run, but he thought he could run faster than the stranger who had gotten out of breath climbing the hill.

On the passenger seat sat the cell phone. Bobby picked it up and dialed his mother, but after seven rings, no one answered. He could call Kyle, but he probably wasn't home yet. The stranger was staring at him.

He dialed 911.

"Hi," he said.

The lady on the other end wanted to know what the emergency was.

"I think I'm being kidnapped," Bobby said. "I'm in the back of a van, and the man said that if I ran away he'd kill my mom. He wanted to smell my dirty socks."

"Where are you?" The woman sounded panicked.

"In the back of a van or truck."

Bobby grinned and gave the man the finger.

"Is he in the vehicle too?" she said.

"No, he's outside it, trying to get my friend to come in too."

"Stay calm, everything will be okay. Where is the truck parked?"

"At the park. We were sledding."

"Which park? What do you see outside? Which streets are you by?"

"I don't know. I'm scared."

"Everything will be okay, honey. What do you see in the lot?"

"There's a light post on top of the sledding hill."

"Great, we'll send someone right away. Now, honey, what color car are you in?"

"It's a red truck, a Jeep, maybe."

"Where's the man?"

"He's still talking to my friend in the parking lot."

"Now, sweetie, are you injured?"

"No, but I'm cold. I need to put my shirt and stuff back on." Outside, the stranger looked bigger than before, his eyes darker.

"Do you think you can get out of the truck without him seeing?"

"I don't want my mom to die. I . . .I don't have a dad."

"Stay calm, honey. Help will be there in a few minutes. Do you know the man's name?"

"No."

"Can you do us a favor? Open the glovebox and look at the papers. Do you think you can do that without him seeing you?"

Bobby pulled out the Michigan registration and proof of insurance. He read the man's name and registration number to the lady. He stuck his tongue out again.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're not hurt in any way?"

"My butt is sore," he said. He started crying, suddenly, unexpectedly. Bobby didn't think he was going to cry; he had been so strong. Now he was mad at himself and his mother and her boyfriends and that stranger out there, staring at him, waiting for him. He wanted to run him over.

"I'm fine," he said in a high voice, forcing the tears back. "They gave me peppermint schnapps. I'm fine. I want to go home."

In the static of the phone, he could hear the dispatcher's breathing, a sound that turned his stomach. He clicked the cell phone off.

Now the stranger was pressing his face against the window, his hands squished against the glass. He had blue eyes. Bobby sipped the flask, then rolled the window down, about an inch. The man stepped back. Bobby slipped the flask through the crack, and let it drop.

The man scooped the flask off the dirty parking lot snow. He smiled at Bobby, then winked—a quick wink, almost a twitch, but it made Bobby shudder. Then the man drained the flask in one long pull, its shiny silver glinting like newly frozen ice. When it was empty, he flung it high into the air, across the hill and the dark snow. The metal flashed twice as it spun, then disappeared.

Sig and Kelly are Postpartum

I don't think of myself as greedy. It's just that Kelly and I waited a while to have a child so we could be financially secure. Sure, I am thirty-five now, and Kelly is thirty-three, but we had to mature. Our parents had us when they were ten years younger, but times are different. It's not greed, it's responsibility.

We are ready now. . . now that the baby has come. We named her Chelsea. She weighs six pounds, seven ounces, and yes, I am a little nervous. We are subscribing to Tidy Baby, a cloth diaper delivery service which began three days ago when Kelly came back from the hospital—they showed up just to check in and explain how their operation worked. I was really happy to see them. I've even changed her diaper a few times. It isn't as bad as I had thought it would be, although the poop was a murky green. I didn't expect it to be green, and I called Kelly over but she said the color was natural.

I stand in the doorway of our bedroom. Kelly lies in our bed, lightly sleeping, covered with the quilt my parents gave us for our wedding, ten years ago. She has short, brown hair and a few freckles on her nose. Her bare arm rests on top of the quilt, below her covered breasts, which have swollen considerably. Chelsea sleeps, too, in the new crib I bought at Sears. This is a rare moment of peace. She cries more than I expected, and the phone's been ringing all the time—people calling to congratulate us. But when the phone starts, Chelsea starts, and she doesn't sleep much at night, so there's been noise all the time.

Kelly still has some of her fine features—that thin neck, elegant jaw, and slender nose, that brown beauty mark on her left cheek; although I can't say if anything

below the neck will be the same. Change is what I fear. And perhaps that is why I've been putting parenthood off. I'm comfortable with our lives—the cycles of working the week and enjoying the weekends together.

My parents have wanted grandkids for some time now, and that quilt, its light blue patches meticulously sewed by my mother, has been a reminder for the past ten years. She asked us before we were married what size bed we'd be sleeping in, so she could make one that fit. It was a hint. My brother, who lives on the west coast, is gay, so my parents could only hope that grandkids came from us. In many ways, the quilt has been a source of pride. It means I am the favored son. It means I am successful. Which I am, too. My dentistry practice is growing; Kelly's coffee house is doing well. We own a home three doors down from President Ford's here in East Grand Rapids; we have a Toyota SUV and a Mazda Miata. We are happy.

I sit on the edge of the bed. It is five p.m., which surprises me. Our life cycle has been so interrupted by recent events that my watch is the only way I know what time it is. I'm looking forward to being back to my regular schedule at the office in two weeks—I'm on a brief paternity leave.

I reach over and cup Kelly's bare shoulder, and place my finger on her collar bone. She has an elegant body, which I hope will return to its same elegant shape. I have been proud of her body. When I'd drop by her coffee shop and see her behind the cash wrap helping customers, I'd say to myself, "Look at that fine woman." She'd glide from the register to the pastry display case and hand patrons in business suits their orders, then smile at me. She is a beautiful, successful entrepreneur. She drives a yellow convertible—the Miata. Frankly, it is difficult for me to think of my sexy wife as a mother. This change will take some time. I realize this sounds a bit harsh. It's just that what attracted me to her in the first place, the reason I am so proud of her, is that

she displays two remarkable characteristics: she is both a smart, sophisticated business woman, one who radiates a certain power, and she is a sharp dresser with a fine body. The entire package is quite amazing. I am the first to say that I am a lucky man.

As I strike a match and light our oil lamp on the nightstand, Kelly turns slightly. We have saved this lamp for romantic encounters. This evening it doesn't seem very bright, for the sun's evening rays fill the room with soft yellow light. I undress and slide under the quilt, slip my left hand beneath Kelly's neck and shoulders.

I've been curious about breast-feeding. I wonder if most men have tasted their wife's milk. I could right now begin kissing her neck and move down and, well, get a taste. But this strikes me as wrong. I'm not sure why. I once saw a television program about the life of a boy in an African tribe who was jealous of his newborn sibling. The boy came to his sleeping mother and took his new brother and put him in a basket outside the hut. When the older boy came back, he suckled his mother dry, then fell asleep in her arms. When she awoke, she drove him out of the village.

"Are you still sore?" I ask softly. She has opened her eyes, slightly.

She mumbles something.

"Are you still sore?" I say again, cradling her toward me.

"You didn't light the sex lamp, did you?" she says. "I can smell it."

"Shh. The baby," I whisper. "We better not wake her up."

"Sig, you know what the doctor said. You've got some time to wait."

"I know," I say, and slide her nightgown open. I hold her and caress her stomach and kiss her neck. I can see tiny, tiny hairs on her cheeks. "I just want to touch you," I say. "Do your breasts hurt?"

"Yes," she says, then turns away.

I wonder why her breasts seem off limits. Would tasting her milk make me my child's sibling, make my wife my mother? I rub her stomach for a few minutes, feeling kind of awkward, wondering when her hormones will begin to behave like they used to, wondering if caressing her inner forearms still turns her on as intensely as before.

I am thinking of something appropriate to say to Kelly, some kind of compliment like *I love you,* only more original, when the baby begins to cry.

Kelly is up instantly and holding her, bouncing up and down, making Chelsea's little head wiggle back and forth. She stops crying and begins looking around the room at the shapes of the door and windows and paintings on the wall. Her eyes stop finally at the flickering oil lamp. She has an expression of wonder on her face. This is the first time that she has seen fire. I try to imagine what my life will be like sixteen or seventeen years from now, when she feels such a flame burning in her for a boy who now probably lies in a crib or playpen, the same burning I feel for her mother. For my baby daughter, I cannot imagine such a time. It seems too far away.

I suddenly feel cold now that I am alone in bed, so I tighten the quilt around me, and then change my mind. It isn't bedtime. I slip out of the bed and dress, then extinguish the flame. Chelsea doesn't notice. Her eyes are focused on her mother's.

The next day, I am getting ready to check on the coffee shop when Chelsea begins to cry. I drop the tee shirt I was about to pull over my head. I do not have the confidence to handle her the way her mother does. I stand over her crib, a little nervous—the same sort of feeling you get when you are petting a strange dog. Chelsea is lying on her back, waving her arms and legs. Her face is red and wrinkled with baby fat. I slide the blanket over her, thinking she might be cold. She pauses her crying to kick the blanket off and then resumes. Already developing an attitude, and less than a week old.

I pick her up, still amazed how light and tiny she is, and rock her gently, bouncing slightly at the knees like Kelly does. Chelsea begins to slap her hands against my bare chest, and I pull her closer to me. She opens her mouth; I can see her gums—in less then six months little white teeth will poke up, pure and straight, the enamel not violated by sugars. Her crying has become sobbing, the pitch slightly lower. The round shape of her open mouth reminds me of a salmon I caught last fall. Then, I feel her wet lips against my skin searching for a nipple. "Chelsea, honey, no," I say. She continues searching, a layer of drool connecting her lips with my chest. "I'm not your mommy. Look, kiddo, we've got to talk."

I hold her away from me and she begins to kick, just as Kelly steps out of the shower. "I think she's hungry," I say. My wife unbuttons her robe and takes her from me. Chelsea latches on and suddenly the room is quiet. I hear the furnace click in the basement and the low hiss of warm air rushing out of the vents.

"So what does it feel like?" I say.

"What?" Kelly says, looking up.

"You know, having her suck on you like that. Is it sexual?"

"Jeeze, Sig." I expect her to shake her head at me, but she doesn't. "I don't know. . . it feels, it feels natural. I'm nourishing our baby."

"Can you feel the milk coming out?"

"Yeah," she says.

"I'd do that for you," I say.

"You can't." Her voice is firm and frank, the tone she uses with her barristas.

I pick up my shirt from the floor, and slide it on, drying the baby slime off my own nipples. What good are male nipples anyway? Useless bits of flesh. My father had a buddy who served in Vietnam and was wounded in an incendiary grenade attack—the magnesium kind. The blast burned the skin off his chest, and when he got back

Stateside, he had a number of skin graft operations which left him without nipples. Now there was a real man. Full breasts or no breasts.

Late this evening, when I hear the baby cry, I get up. Time to change another dirty diaper. I bring Chelsea over to the changing board, unpin her, wipe her dirty bottom, and drop the diaper into the plastic bucket Tidy Baby provides. She is still crying, now almost screaming. I unstrap her from the changing table and rock her. Although I'm perfecting my technique, this time the rocking doesn't work. Maybe those tiny teeth are beginning to ascend. I put my finger in her mouth and she begins to suck. I can feel her tongue against the bottom of my finger, but she spits it out and starts again.

"Sig," Kelly calls. She slides her legs from under the quilt and sits on the edge of the bed. The streetlight shines through the window casting a shadow on the wall. "Let me have her."

I hand my wife my baby. I sit directly behind Kelly, my legs dangling on either side of hers, my chest pressed into her back. I slide my hand into her open robe and rub her stomach. In the mirror, I see the image of the three of us pressed together, sitting on my mother's quilt. I run my hand over Chelsea's back, and I begin to slip my fingers under Kelly's palms.

"Let me hold her," I say. My voice is muffled because my head is resting on Kelly's shoulder. Slowly, she lets her arms down.

I have the baby now. Against my hand I can feel the vibration of Chelsea's little swallows of milk. "Wow," I say. I hear her gulping now, and I can almost hear the milk pulsing out of my wife. I am breast-feeding my daughter.

"Sig."

I feel wet against my hand. She must be slobbering.

"Sig, she's peeing! Sig, Sig, let me have her. She's peeing." I feel Kelly's firm hands on mine trying to take Chelsea. I don't let go.

"Sig, let go," she says.

I pull the baby closer to my wife. As I laugh my chest tremors against her back. When the trickle stops, I let her hands take Chelsea.

"You better change your nightgown," I say. She isn't laughing, but hands me the baby and drops her nightgown to the floor.

"I don't get it," she says. She is beautiful, stretch marks and all. I begin to feel aroused, looking at her pure nakedness. She is a different woman, one I have never made love to.

"We have a family now," I say.

"Yes," she says. She turns and steps into the shower.

Unsanctioned

"Aren't you Mrs. Yamamoto's daughter?" the woman said, looking at Mayam, then at her janitorial cart, clearly puzzled that the daughter of the chair of the board would be cleaning the museum's bathroom.

"Yes," Mayam said. "I am Mrs. Yamamoto's daughter." She spoke forcefully, almost indignantly. The woman was Edith Henthorne, one of her mother's fellow board members.

Edith turned to the mirror and adjusted her hair with a pick, removed a few specks of lint from her gray blazer, then reapplied lipstick.

"I'm surprised to see you here. You're a chef, aren't you?" The two had met once before when Mayam had dropped by her mother's office to drive her to the car dealer to pick up her car.

"I quit that to go back to art school."

"Oh yes, your mother mentioned that. How could I have forgotten? She was so surprised." Edith dried her hands on the cloth towel that drooped from the dispenser in a continuous loop of dirty and clean. "And how are things now?" she said.

"Okay."

"Don't worry. I'm sure this is just temporary. You'll find something else soon, and I'm sure you'll have a show that's a hit one of these days." She patted Mayam on the back. "Hang in there," she said. "Besides, you're well-connected. That always helps."

It didn't help though—not in Mayam's case. The critics who judged entries for the museum's regional exhibition always rejected her work. She'd had a few openings at minor galleries, but never a solo show. A local Asian cultural magazine printed an

interview two years ago in its new artists column, but no one except her friends even commented on it. And Mayam took issue with the article's tone, because the author focused on how unusual it was that a woman in her late thirties would attempt a new career as an artist. Lately, she even had a hard time showing her assemblage reliefs in coffee houses.

"I like to show stuff that will sell, not something that's only making a statement," one coffee shop owner politely told her. "You have to look too hard to see that your stuff isn't junk. My customers only glance."

Her one success, the memory she held on to during the times when she felt she might be wasting her life, was her installation at the Minnesota Institute for Contemporary Arts. The work, *Set Me Free*, featured the implements of a nineteenth century mental institution, complete with a restraining chair and shock treatment machine. Her father, who after the divorce had become an antiques dealer, helped her find the materials. She had been working for him during school, attending his downtown store, answering customers' questions as best she could or calling her father on his cell phone. He began for the first time to take an interest in her life. He would show her the bizarre objects he found while hunting for treasures at flea markets and estate sales: a prohibition era still with a snaking copper heat exchanger, a wig of human hair five feet long, a sword with Old Norse writing in its hilt, the electrotherapy machine that prompted Mayam to consider the installation.

But the week of the opening he became ill again, and spent three days in the hospital. "I'm so sorry, Mayam," he said. His voice was hoarse over the hospital phone. "There'll be other openings, I'm sure. This is just the beginning."

A reviewer in the *Twin Cities Weekly* called the installation "a harrowing meditation on humanity's inherent cruelty, cruelty we see only in retrospect." The week

the review was printed, Mayam's mother phoned her: "My assistant handed me a clipping. Congratulations. Sounds like you're doing good."

"Did you go down and see it?"

"Not yet," she said.

"Please do," Mayam said. "You might even like it."

Her mother had not been supportive of her desire to go to art school in the first place. When Mayam discovered that the restaurant she had been working at for the last ten years hadn't been paying the produce and bread invoices, she began looking for other jobs, but as she updated her resume and thought about all the years she had spent slicing onions, making soup, and cutting and weighing cuts of meat, she knew that it was time for a change. While she liked managing her line cooks, most of whom where young men who loved to drink and laugh and tell racy jokes, she had always wanted to be a serious artist. Her room was full of charcoal drawings and sculptures she made in her spare time, many abstract nudes of boyfriends from the restaurant. She had an impressive portfolio, the art school admissions officer had said.

As she began applying, she started looking for people who could write letters of recommendation. She asked the senior manager at work, but Mayam needed someone who knew something about art, someone like her mother. She called Jamie, her mother's assistant, to get on her calendar for a lunch. Jamie set a date for the two to meet at Mayam's restaurant, the 2nd Street Bistro.

"You know you can call me at home. You didn't have to call Jamie," her mother said, as the two of them took a booth.

"I know how you operate. If I get on your calendar, I can count on you," Mayam said. "I've made us a special lunch."

"Well wonderful."

Mayam nodded to a server, who scooped up two bowls of soup and brought them with linen napkins and place settings of silverware.

"It's a chipolte tomato cream soup," Mayam said. "We roasted the tomatoes in the wood-fired oven. Used hickory logs. You like it?"

"It's smoky."

"Yes. We're having panninis for the main course."

"That's lovely," her mother said. "What is it that you want to talk about?"

Mayam looked around the half empty room, checking to see who was near.

"Well, I've been getting calls from our vendors."

Her mother nodded. "You're not in legal trouble are you?"

"Gosh, no. But I think we're about to go out of business."

"Well, you better start looking for another job. It can be very difficult to collect your last month's pay if they close. But you'll do fine. You're talented."

"It's nice to finally hear you say that. But what I really want is to go back to school, art school."

Her mother's spoon clinked against the porcelain plate. "Art school? Haven't you made enough mistakes already?— I'm sorry, that was harsh." She looked around the room, as if thinking of a tactful way to move the conversation along, but failing to find anything to say. "Thinking of graphic design?" she said. "There is a lot of work for talented designers out there, and even some agencies that wouldn't mind picking up some mature talent. Young designers can be, shall we say, unreliable. You might have an advantage."

"Mother," Mayam said in a harsh whisper. "I'm talking about fine art—getting an MFA."

"You're to old to be floundering like that. You have to be lucky to make it. And you just don't go from being a chef to being a darling of the art world. Real artists

make magic happen. I can see it in their eyes when I talk to them. They're so persistent, and so, so special. They're not like you or I, Mayam."

"I don't believe that bunk."

"Art is socially constructed. People like me and my colleagues on the board decide what is or isn't art. I know, Mayam. It's up to the galleries and the museums, not the people who want to call themselves artists."

"Mother, I just want a letter of recommendation, that's all. I can get one from my life drawing teacher at the community college. I don't need you. I just thought I'd ask, that's all. But I can see where we stand on this."

"Why don't you pursue your career as a chef? You're doing well." She raised the spoon to her mouth. "I like it, Mayam. Don't quit now that you've found such a suitable niche for yourself."

"Yeah, we're doing real well," Mayam said, gesturing to the empty seats. "I'm going to follow my dreams whether you like it or not. "

"Sure," Mrs. Yamamoto said. "You have my blessing. Just be smart about it. You still have some good opportunities. Don't blow them."

Mayam didn't end up asking again for the letter, though she hoped her mother would send one anyway, just to show her that she was behind her. But it didn't happen. Her life drawing teacher wrote a glowing letter, and she was admitted with a full fellowship. Her mother never brought the subject up, and merely gave Mayam a half-hearted congratulations on her acceptance.

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Now, as Edith Henthorne left the museum's bathroom, Mayam smiled at herself in the mirror, pleased that she had deceived the older woman—she wasn't a janitor at all. The blue Servicemaster shirt and the cleaning cart were stolen with the help of her friend Jane, who worked at the hospital.

The cart had been stocked with the chemical delights a custodian should have: quat sanitizer, industrial strength ammonia, stainless-steel cleaner, window spray. It hadn't been hard to get. When one of the janitors had been smoking a cigarette, Jane pushed the cart down the hall and around the corner to a service exit, where Mayam tossed it into the back of her Geo Metro. She drove off, the hatchback up and a roll of black trash bags trailing her, flapping like the tail of a giant kite.

Today in addition to the standard janitorial items, the cart carried a tube of red, non-toxic ink and a butterfly stamp, one Mayam had designed herself.

Mayam sprayed the mirror with glass cleaner and wiped the surface. With a bar of soap, she began to copy onto the glass the poem she'd brought. It had been written by an eight-year-old, sometime after the bomb destroyed Hiroshima. Her own mother had been a small child and living in a nearby town. Her grandfather, who Mayam only knew as Masakazo, had been in the city at the time. His wife searched the improvised refugee camps, and even tried to find the market. But it was gone. She returned badly burned from the ambient radiation that was all around and even fell from the sky, trapped in drops of rain.

In the bathroom, Mayam began to write:

I want to be a butterfly
With pretty wings of silk and lace
I want to fly away with you
To where we were before,
When we had a city and a home.

Mayam had found the poem in a book about the effect of the bombings on Japanese children. Lately, she'd been reading about the war to try to understand her origins and what it meant to flee to the country that destroyed your land. Her mother almost never talked about it, and probably never would. But it seemed like an important part of Mayam's heritage. Her grandmother's burns were why the two came to the United

States, why Mayam was here today. Her father agreed that this history, with an eye toward making art from it, was worth exploring.

When she finished copying the poem, she stamped a butterfly on the end square of toilet paper in each stall. She returned to the mirror, satisfied by the soap marks in front of her reflection, each chalky line reflecting itself, so the letters appeared to leap out as if they were three dimensional.

She dabbed a glob of polish on the stainless steel faucets, and rubbed them until they sparkled. Another woman entered the bathroom.

"Good morning," Mayam said.

The woman, like Edith Henthorne, was dressed for business, a navy skirt and blazer, a name tag. She nodded to Mayam, then noticed the poem on the mirror. She studied it briefly, then entered the stall.

Mayam buffed the door handle, then moved to the other metal trim. The bathroom was classy. The floor and counter were marble, the light fixtures on the wall made of stainless-steel bars and frosted glass panels. The woman in the stall farted, and sighed. Mayam took her time, humming as she worked. The woman sighed again, then tore tissue from the roll.

While she washed her hands, she studied the poem more carefully.

"Who wrote this?" she said.

"A child—a little Japanese girl."

The woman pulled some clean towel from the dispenser, looked at it as if expecting to see another butterfly, and then she wiped her hands.

"Have a nice day," Mayam said.

The woman nodded.

Over the next hour, ten or twelve more people used the bathroom. Most didn't say anything about the butterfly poem or the butterfly stamp on the toilet paper. When

each left the stall, Mayam re-stamped the image. One woman gave her a five-dollar tip after picking up the butterfly stamper, running her fingers over its grooves, and placing it on the cart exactly where it had lain before.

"Thank you," Mayam said.

"No," she said. "Thank you."

Then the real janitor—a middle aged woman in an identical blue Servicemaster uniform—pushed her own cart into the bathroom. She looked at Mayam, who was once again sweeping the floor.

"Hello," Mayam said, and smiled. On the woman's blue shirt, the name *Ginger* was embroidered in white cursive letters. Her own shirt didn't have a patch.

"Who the hell are you?" Ginger said, grinning. Mayam could see dark coffee or nicotine stains on her teeth. Her long coarse hair was dyed amber.

"I'm Mayam."

"When did they hire you?"

"They didn't."

"What? You ain't getting paid?"

"I did get a tip."

"Jesus," Ginger said. "This is weird."

Ginger scraped the mirror with her finger, then licked the white residue. "Soap?"

"Yeah," Mayam said. "I'll scrub it off at the end of my shift." Ginger reminded Mayam of the restaurant people she used to work with, people her mother didn't care to know. Since college, Mayam had occasionally overheard her mother avoiding questions like, "So what is Mayam up to these days?" She was too good to have a college

educated daughter working in food service. “She’s still finding herself,” she’d say. Only lately had she come to realize that Mayam was good at what she had been doing.

“Well, fuck,” Ginger said, putting her hands on her hips. “I’m supposed to be keeping this place clean.” She looked around the bathroom as if searching for other out-of-place things. “Well, fuck,” she said. “Nothing against you, but I've got to call my super on this one.” She pulled a black radio from her belt and held it to her mouth.

“Say, Gunners.” The radio hissed static until someone on the other end responded.

“Gunners, we've got a situation in the women's room off the lobby.”

“What you got?” the voice hissed.

“Just come down, you'll see.”

“Ain't water everywhere?”

“Nope, just come down.”

“You don’t mind that I’m helping out here, do you?” Mayam said to Ginger, after she placed her radio into its holster on her belt.

“No, I like weirdoes. I’m kinda weird myself. What’s this all about?”

Mayam began to explain about the poem, but then Gunners barreled into the women’s room. He was wearing a new pair of jeans and a denim shirt with a tie.

“What’s going on?” he said to Ginger. Ginger pointed to Mayam.

“Hello,” Mayam said and smiled.

“I'm Mike, director of facilities services. What seems to be the problem?”

Ginger snickered. “Look, Gunners. She's here. There's soap on the mirror. What do you want me to do?”

“Miss,” he said to Mayam. “Could you explain why you’re. . . uh. . . here?”

“There's red butterflies on the T.P.,” Ginger said. “Pretty weird.”

“I like art,” Mayam said.

"But in the bathroom?"

"I'm transfiguring the common space."

"Does the director know you're here?"

"Has the director used the women's room?"

Gunners reached up and scratched his balding head, then quickly pulled his hand away, as if he realized the gesture looked foolish. "Miss," he said. "If you're trying to get publicity, this isn't going to work."

"I'm trying to make people see differently—that's all."

Just then the door opened and a woman with a name tag gasped, then stepped back, the door closing in front of her.

"Great," Gunners said. "Step out here with me, please." Mayam came out with him, pushing her cart.

"Go ahead and use the ladies' room, ma'am," he said to the woman who was still standing in the hall. "And Ginger, get that soap off the mirror." The woman made an indignant grunt, then pushed the door open.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave," Gunners said. "I think what you're doing is interesting and all, but it will upset the patrons. Besides, there's a fundraising luncheon going on."

"I disagree," Mayam said. "It won't upset all of them, and some of them need to be shaken up a bit, don't you think? They'll ask 'What is art, anyway?' "

Then she saw her mother and another woman round the corner. She was talking and her head was turned away from Mayam. Mayam stepped back, so Gunners was in front of her, keeping herself concealed. But it was too late; she'd been spotted.

"Mayam?" her mother said.

"Hi Mom."

"This isn't what I meant when I told you to find a full-time job."

"I know. It isn't what you think."

"Are you doing this to embarrass me?" She turned to her companion and shook her head, "Sorry about this." Then she looked right at Mayam. "We'll talk later," she said.

"Excuse me," Gunners said, trying to butt in.

"My own daughter a janitor," Mayam's mother said to the other woman.

The two pushed into the bathroom. "She got her MFA from Minnesota two years ago, and I had hopes. She's had some tough times."

After the door closed Mayam could hear her mother's voice asking about the poem. She could hear Ginger talking about her. She heard her name.

"Gunners," Mayam said. "I'll go."

She pushed her cart out the main entry and into the bright noon light. Her mother wouldn't get it. She would only see a daughter getting back at a mother; she wouldn't think differently about janitors or art or public places; she probably wouldn't even think about the poem. Mayam pulled off her shoes, janitor shirt, and pants. Underneath, she wore a black body suit and a red leotard. She lifted two wire and red lace wings out of a large cardboard box in the back seat of her car. They attached to her back with two giant strips of Velcro—her father's idea. "It would make for a quick transformation," he had said. She shook her shoulders, making sure the wings were secure. The chrysalis phase of the performance was over.

***

Mayam's studio was in one of her father's buildings. He owned three antique stores in the greater Twin Cities area and an old warehouse that had once been a factory in the 1930s. In the warehouse, he stored the antiques that needed to be cleaned and priced before he made room on the crowded floors of his showrooms or contacted individual collectors. The warehouse was full of other junk too—antiques that didn't

sell, his personal collection of paperweights, a Model A pick-up which he hadn't gotten around to restoring yet, boxes of his books and personal belongings which he hadn't found a place for in his apartment.

Mayam's space was in a corner, by the truck dock. She had cordoned it off with bed sheets which hung from the ceiling, containing her stuff: the arc welder, boxes of tools, an easel, a desk, a poster of Kurt Cobain, a velvet painting of Elvis, three Smurfs, scraps of metal and wire, coffee cans of screws and bolts, a bison skull, a rototiller, a couch, a coffee maker, a refrigerator and freezer. She had wanted to give up her apartment and live here, but her father would not allow it, because of zoning and code regulations.

He did, however let her rent the studio space for a nominal fee, which she paid when she had the money.

While planning the butterfly performance, she had doodled in her idea book—the womb, she fondly called it. She was free-associating words and images relating to the butterfly poem she had discovered. She tilted back in her chair. She sketched a stick of butter with flies stuck in it. She wrote the word "shadow," thinking of the stone at Hiroshima, against which human figures had been burned by the blast, their images printed, a nuclear lithograph.

In the *Encyclopedia of Butterflies,* she looked for specimens in "zone 5," the Asian butterflies. She chose *Pullisa Giganteus,* a blue butterfly with hairy wings and black wing tips. The book called it a "giant among the lycaenids, and an impressive one." She began to sketch.

She liked the idea of becoming a butterfly, the idea of "becoming," specifically. First a chrysalis phase, then a butterfly phase—it was a processes of transfiguration. Much like art. Transforming objects, spaces, people. She was onto something, she knew. It was like going back to school to become an artist, leaving the kitchens behind.

"I want to be a butterfly," she said.

She opened the desk drawer, and recorded the poem with a Dictaphone and played it back.

But the project remained unclear to her. She wanted to do something with the poem, an installation or a performance. She had time to mull it over for the next few days. She always had plenty of time now, she told herself.

Then, the door to the warehouse slammed and she heard footsteps. Her father poked his head through the opening in the curtain.

"Hey, little girl," he said. "Working hard?"

"Butterflies," she said. "I'm thinking about butterflies."

"Are you building anything yet?"

"Not yet. It's going slow."

"Well, if you want to grab lunch, give me a holler. I'll be unloading."

She formed a small butterfly out of wire, then covered its wings with tissue paper. It looked as it if could have been made by a child. She liked how well it complemented the poem.

She continued free-associating and tinkering, and after an hour of getting nowhere, she found her father in the warehouse cleaning and oiling a black sewing machine with a shuttle.

"Burrito Boy?" he said.

"What about your stomach?" Mayam said.

"I'm fine," he said.

They drove in her car to a Mexican take-out stand, then came back to the warehouse. Mayam plopped down on a davenport, which was covered with plastic. Her father had grease on his hands from the sewing machine or something else that he was cleaning. His gray beard was trimmed, which was unusual for him.

He was Jewish and ABD in history. When Mayam was in high school, he was working on his MBA, but never finished that degree either. At the time, Mayam mocked him for his drifting, calling him hippie-turned-yuppie because he and her mom had once lived on a commune and used to practice yoga.

"How are the butterflies?" he said as he sat and crossed his legs. "You know, I run across butterfly collections sometimes. Now that is a peculiar hobby. You like butterflies so much you catch them, kill them, and skewer them with a pin, and put them under glass. I think I've got an old butterfly net in one of the stores. You could do a creepy installation with some of that stuff, like the asylum piece."

She nodded. "My one big success."

"Why butterflies?" he said.

"I discovered this poem that a child wrote after Hiroshima. It's about flying away and transforming oneself while recognizing the past and that everything's changed. It reminds me of Mom, but I don't know what I'm doing with it. It's a struggle."

"Ah," he said. "Digging into your family's past, thematically speaking?"

"I've got the time, now."

"Well I can't wait to see it, whatever it is, even if it is about your mother."

"It won't be. She's not that interesting."

"Sure she's interesting. That's why I married her. Smart, sophisticated, and down right beastly sometimes—you know that as well as I." He laughed. "Some people are too good for us lovable mediocre folks. Your mother is wonderful, but she doesn't understand us. She never did."

"You still love her?"

"Hell yes," he said. "And it's killing me."

Later that day he interrupted her work again. "Mayam," he said, "we need to talk."

He led her up the stairs to his office which overlooked the street on the north side and the warehouse interior to the south. The ceiling tiles were stained yellow from leaking water. On the desk there was bright red phone, like the emergency call boxes in the park downtown.

"What's up?" Mayam said.

"I wanted to talk to you about a couple of serious things. You have a minute?"

She nodded and sat down. The desk between them was covered with papers.

"You know I've never been the most organized person, but there are a few details I wanted to clean up," he paused. "For my sake, of course."

She nodded again.

"I've been looking at my retirement plans and my will—those kinds of things."

On the street below them, a bicyclist was passing by.

"I'm leaving just about everything to you. Your mother is fine as she is—I mean financially." The two of them smirked. "I figure you could use some help when I go."

"You're not planning on checking out any time soon?" Mayam said.

"No, not at all. It's just that I want peace of mind, just in case this medical stuff gets complicated."

"Your doctor said it's just ulcers, right?"

"Yeah, that's their best guess. But it reminds me of how short life is, so I figure I better get this stuff taken care of. I wanted to ask you about your retirement plans."

"Me? I don't think about that stuff."

"Don't you have something from the kitchen?"

"Yeah, a 501(k)."

"Good," he said.

They looked at one another. She could hear him breathing. Their inhaling and exhaling synchronized. It hardly seemed real that either would one day cease.

"I even drafted a funeral plan. I'm getting a cremation." He grinned proudly.

She furrowed her brow. "What are you talking about?"

"Death," he was still grinning, and started to laugh. She started laughing too.

"I want you to spread my ashes on some good," he paused to gain control of himself, "fertile farm land—a small farm, preferably organic."

"But Dad, you eat non-organic meat. You'd contaminate the farm."

He hooted again, his body jerking violently, his hands slamming against the piles of papers. "Oh God, my side hurts," he eventually said. "Death is so damn funny. Everyone should talk about it."

When they had contained themselves, he opened the desk drawer and removed two keys and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. One key he put back, the other he handed to Mayam. "Safety deposit box," he said. "The official copy of my will is there. Sell the business if you aren't comfortable running it. My partner will be happy to buy you out, I'm sure. And he's an honest guy."

"Sure, Daddy," she said. "What aren't you telling me? Is it cancer or something?"

"Doctor doesn't know. Ulcers, he says. I'm just being prepared, that's all."

"Sure, Dad," she said, and squeezed the key.

In the parking lot of the museum, Mayam slammed her car door shut. Her wings sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. Barefoot, she skipped toward the main entry. She skipped past the startled ticket takers. *I want to be a butterfly,* she sang. *With pretty wings of silk and lace.* The people in the hall stared. She pushed past a security person and into the reception room where the board of directors and people who had donated

large sums of money were dining. A few looked up. There were fifteen or twenty round tables, each covered with a white cloth, a candle, and eight heaping plates. The diners were all well-dressed, and older than she thought they would be.

She skipped up the main aisle toward the podium, where a man had just spoken on the ethics of philanthropy. Her mother had recruited him from an Ivy League university. She continued singing: *I want to be a butterfly. With pretty wings of silk and lace.* Suddenly the clink of forks and knives on the china stopped and the crowd fell quiet. She sang softly, *I want to fly away with you, to where we were before.* Then her mother stood up, a napkin falling from her lap.

"Mayam," she said softly. Crows feet had formed at the corners of her dark eyes. Her black hair was graying. "I won't let you shame me."

"You've been ashamed of me all my life," Mayam hissed, barely audible.

Her mother stepped back quickly and touched her cheek, as if slapped. Mayam was suddenly aware that the high pitched whine in the back of room was a hearing aid. It sounded like a mosquito, only much, much louder. Then her mother gestured smoothly to the crowd. "Bob, will you stand up? It's Bob's birthday tomorrow, and we've got a singing telegram for Bob from someone with a sense of humor. Join us in singing, will you?" The crowd cheered and clapped, then broke into song. Bob was smiling at Mayam. He was a very old man, and suddenly she thought of her grandfather Masakazo, who she never knew. Would he have been this wrinkled and frail? Now she played along, waving her hands, walking up and down the aisle.

Bob was standing next to her mother, blushing. The crowd was clapping and cheering. Bob leaned on a cane, his body trembling, his face beaming. Mayam skipped up to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, dear," he said. Then as quickly as she came, Mayam slipped out the door, which thudded shut behind her.

She drove back to the warehouse and flopped onto one of the sofas. "Daddy," she shouted into dim room. "Daddy." Her laughter spilled into the cavernous, junk filled space. "A harrowing meditation on humanity's inherent cruelty," she said, laughing still, tears forming in her eyes.

Her father stepped out of the bathroom. He was holding a plastic prescription bottle. "Sounds like it went well?" When she saw the bottle she stopped laughing and studied his face. He was in pain. She could tell by his grimace which pulled the skin on his mouth and lips tight.

"It went well?"

"No," she said. "But I love you. We still have lots of time. We'll spend it together, because we can."

Catch & Release

Jackson was standing waist-deep in borrowed waders holding a borrowed fly-rod when he heard their laughter again. He looked along the bank for motion on the river-side trail, but no one was there. They were girls, young girls. Although he'd seen a few visiting their fathers in the reception room, he hadn't heard playful laughter in eighteen years.

Whipping his steelhead line into the air, he tried to find the rhythm that would keep it suspended above the surface of the water and below the trees—he let the cast go. The line and leader and fly shot across the water, missing the riffle where he thought a fish might be resting. It landed in a tree.

"Damn it," he muttered, then jerked the line, pulling the fly free, taking with it a clump of green moss and pale lichen which landed in the riffle and floated across the deep pool. Another useless cast.

A pair of ducks, mergansers, swam around the bend and squawked at the sight of him, then scurried for cover. Huge swaths of the hills around him had been clearcut in his absence, revealing exposed sections of crumbling volcanic rock surrounded by stubby Douglas fir. In the low places, snow remained. For a moment he thought the land had been cleared by fire, not the paper companies, but from his spot in the river, he could see smooth stumps.

He unhooked the moss, then tried the cast again. This time the fly landed where he aimed, and drifted on the current into the deep pool. He mended the slack in the line, flipping it upstream so the part in the current wouldn't speed the fly out of the pool. When the line caught up to his leader, he mended it again, but flipped the rod too quickly, and the fly popped out of the pool and smacked the surface.

It was the rod, a five-weight, and only eight feet long—not a rod for steelies. But it was March, the end of steelhead season, and the trout rod was the only one available. His elderly mother had borrowed it from a member of her church for his release. It didn't matter that he wasn't catching fish. He was here. On the river again.

He tried the pool once more, just because he could, then moved downstream. A rusty bridge came into view and he heard the laughter again.

When they released him, they gave him one hundred dollars, a bus ticket from Port Arthur to Portland, and, in a brown paper bag, his personal effects: a leather wallet with an old Massachusetts driver's license, a MasterCard which expired in '82, seventy-eight dollars and fifty-two cents, a digital watch with a dead battery, a movie stub for On Golden Pond, *a charge receipt for Ralph's American Grill, a pair of dirty jeans, Adidas sneakers. Then, they wished him good luck.*

As he rounded the bend, he saw the girls. They had spread a blanket along the bank. There was a picnic table, and a girl with braided, amber-colored hair sat on it. Two others were sitting on the blanket. They were drinking sodas. Their bikes leaned against the metal rail of the bridge.

Jackson stepped back, so he didn't have to see them. He'd been sure he'd be completely alone out here in the middle of the Coast Range. He pulled in his line and tied on a different fly, a smaller one, then cast upstream and watched it float past him. He wanted to be alone with the river and not think about the past or anything at all except what you have to do to fish well. He pulled the slack out of the line, then fed more out as the river washed it downstream.

Seconds later, he felt the tug. He pointed the rod tip up and set the hook. The rod bowed. He was very satisfied with the feeling of the taut, jerking line. His chest

fluttered and he held his breath—he hadn't felt this excitement in almost two decades. Keeping the rod tip high, through the guides he drew line, which collected in a tangle on the water in front of him. It was a small fish, he knew. A steelie would have bent the trout rod ninety degrees. As he brought it close, the fish jumped and shook, but he kept the line taught. The fish stayed on. It was a small cutthroat.

Jackson removed the hook with a pliers, then held the fish in the water by its bottom lip, letting the icy stream pass oxygen through its gills. The fish glistened; it had tiny black spots along its back, and its dorsal stood up proudly. Jackson could feel the fish's tiny teeth under his thumb. He let it go and it darted into the deep pool.

During the riot of '92, they killed our cellmate, Paul. The fighting began in the mess hall and spread everywhere. Half of cell block 43 , including Jackson and me, had been on grounds detail, shackled together in groups of three, looking for weeds in the lawn between the hot, twenty-foot perimeter fence, which surrounded the entire compound, and the razor-wire fence, which caged off the small exercise area. A guard with an M-16 and live rounds had been assigned to each group. Three of the four prisoners carried a plastic hoe with a six-inch handle and a serial number painted on it so none would go missing. But there weren't enough to be issued to each of us, so one in each group had to dig with his fingers.

When we heard the roar and the lock-down alarm, Jackson and Paul and I looked at one another. The guard stepped back, tightened his grip on the rifle, then glanced up at high watch on the turrets. But the high watch was responding to the riot in the exercise court, firing rubber bullets at the inmates.

Paul's fist smacked the guard's jaw, and he wrestled him down, the rifle between them. Jackson, who was chained to Paul, fell, and I fell with him. With the plastic hoe, Paul struck the guard, who was clenching the rifle, trying to throw our

cellmate off. The hoe cracked the guard's nose which began to bleed. Paul struck again and again, grunting with each blow. When the hoe snapped, he plunged the handle against the guard's chest, but then was struck in the back with a rubber bullet, and he fell, and lay on the ground with the rest of us. The guard coughed and rolled away.

Six hours later, when everyone had been locked down, three guards came for Paul. They cuffed his hands behind his back, escorted him into the hall. They attached a chain to a steel girder, then made him climb the step ladder. When his head was to the ceiling, one of the guards climbed up after him and locked the chain to his handcuffs then climbed back down. The big guard kicked the ladder away and Paul fell, screaming as his weight tore his arms back, dislocating both shoulders.

The cell block grew quiet. The other inmates and I peered into the hall, knowing the guards were making an example out of him, glad it was him and not us. They beat him to death with the butts of their rifles. When Jackson knew Paul wasn't coming back, he took the dead man's cigarettes from under his mattress. We split them because that seemed fair.

Jackson sniffed the fish slime on his hand, rinsed it in the water, then lit a cigarette. He would slip by the girls quickly, get a good glance at them to see who they were, then fish the rapids below them. His parole officer had said to stay away from kids anyway. When he rounded the bend again, two were standing at the bank, and the third, the one with the long amber hair, was in the river in her underwear and tee-shirt, bent over, reaching into the water.

Jackson stopped and took a drag off his cigarette. The water was too deep and swift to wade quickly.

"It probably washed downstream farther," one of the girls on the bank said.

"My dad's going to kill me," said the one in the river, feeling the rocky bed with her hand. "I can't see anything."

Jackson continued on carefully, the water up to the tops of his chest waders, a few splashes trickling inside, chilling his skin. When he was across from the girl, she started, then shrieked, losing her footing, slipping into the current. The river swept her, and the other girls screamed, too.

Jackson tossed his rod to the near bank and hurried downstream. The girl was drifting slowly, screaming for help, slapping the water with her hands. She could touch bottom, but the force of the mountain runoff was pushing her. When she reached the rapids, she grasped for a boulder, and for a second held onto it, panting, no longer screaming, but the white water sucked her from it, and she disappeared under the foam.

Because Jackson was sick of tick-tack-toe, Paul drew a larger square on the cell floor with the piece of chalk. Then he drew lines across it vertically and horizontally.

"A new game?" Jackson said.

"No, man. Checkers."

"What do you plan to use for pieces?"

Paul gestured to the stainless steel commode. A cockroach was circling its base.

"Cock-fucking-roaches, Paul?"

"You're smart as you're pretty, pretty boy," Paul said. He got off the bunk and wadded up pieces of toilet paper and placed them on the board. He picked a scab on his arm and marked one set with blood.

"Your move," he said.

"Get help," Jackson shouted over the roar of the rapids.

"Where?" The girls were crying.

"Anywhere, stop a car," he shouted. "On the highway. Can you do that?"

They nodded. He was angry at himself for letting his eyes move away from the foam. He scrambled over boulders and up the bank, his waders slowing him, but he didn't have time to take them off. He sprinted the fishermen's path as best he could. When he was beyond the white water, he waded back into the river. He was sweating. His knees hurt. She hadn't bobbed back up yet.

He peered into the rapids, looking for places where flotsam gathered, then saw pink movement in front of a downed tree: an arm.

Keep cool, he told himself. He wriggled out of the waders and dove in. The cold pulled the breath from his lungs. He coughed, and as the current tossed him downstream, he clawed maniacally at the water, knowing that if he didn't he wouldn't make it across.

He scrambled up the bank on the other side, a few hundred feet from the snag, then dashed along the river's edge, slipping on the volcanic bedrock, tripping over boulders, crushing caddis-fly larva under his stockings. A muskrat jumped into the water as he passed.

Once on the fallen tree, Jackson crawled across it on his hands and knees, grabbing at the branches and cracks in the bark. It was a pine. His hands were sticky.

The girl was still there. He pulled on the arm, and her face appeared from under the rushing water, her eyes and mouth open. He braced himself against a branch then heaved. The body came up a little farther. He tried to lift her onto the snag, but she slipped back, the current tugging her legs. He squeezed her wrist tighter, and crawled backward, pulling the body toward safety.

On the dry slab of basalt, he felt for breath. Nothing. He tipped her head sideways and opened her mouth. Water trickled out. He placed his hand on her stomach and pressed down quickly. More water spurted out of her mouth. It collected in a low spot on the rock. In the evening light, her skin was light blue, a frightening color. He heaved her waist over his shoulders and pounded her back.

He laid her down and pressed his lips to hers and blew. Her wrist was still. Locking his fingers together, he pressed down on her chest in pulses. He filled her lungs again; this time she coughed.

He compressed her chest, then breathed for her again. Another cough. He compressed, breathed, felt her mouth with the back of his hand. She was breathing now. She coughed gruffly, as if gravel had washed into her lungs. Her face was covered with freckles, her eyes half-closed. He put his ear to her mouth, making sure she was still breathing. Her pulse was stronger. Coughing, she rolled into a fetal position. He placed his hand on her side, then her stomach, and felt her muscles tighten with each coughing fit. She rolled onto her back and opened her eyes, which were brown, the pupils big.

"It's okay, honey," he said caressing her forehead. "You're alive."

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply then exhaled slowly. Jackson took off his vest and slipped it under her head.

Two weeks after he was sentenced rumors began to spread about his crimes. He tried to prepare himself for what he thought would happen. He wanted to know how he might get protection. He asked his cellmate, who replied I ain't your friend; You one sick motherfucker. *He asked around at the mess hall, and was directed to a big man who demanded a carton of cigarettes a week and a few occasional special favors. The two shook on it, and he phoned his mother to send the cigarettes.*

One evening, a guard opened his cell door and let two inmates in. They pulled him out of his bunk, and threw him to the floor. While the guard and one of the inmates held him, the other inmate pulled his pants down and raped him. The guard cheered. As the men in the cell block awoke and realized what was happening, that Jackson was getting it, they cheered too, like fans at a sporting event. When it was the other inmate's turn, he couldn't get aroused, so he shoved the guard's billy club up Jackson's ass, and grunted and moaned so the other inmates would think he was getting it on.

As they were about to leave, the guard noticed that the toilet was stopped up, so they picked him up off the floor, and dunked his head into the commode, until he coughed and inhaled the filth. They held him like that for two minutes.

They threw him back on the floor, and he coughed and gasped. After they had gone, his cellmate told him to clean up because the stench was keeping him awake.

He scooped her up, walking slowly, careful not to rub her legs against the dead blackberry stalks which draped along the path. She was shaking. "Stay awake," he said. She opened her eyes and closed them again. "Cold," she said. She seemed so tiny, like a doll he could take home and set in his mother's rocking chair.

"Tell me your name," he said. "You have to stay awake."

"Malia."

"Hi, Malia," he said. He climbed up to the bridge, where he had first seen the girls. "You have to talk. You have to stay awake or your body will shut down."

"I'm tired," she said, her voice quivering with her body.

"Keep talking," he said.

He didn't know how far the dirt road was from the highway, and she needed shelter. The road was empty—no girls on bikes, no cars, no sheriff. He hurried across

and followed the path along the river toward his car, which was parked on a logging road. He was sweating, and cold too. It began to sprinkle.

"Are you awake, Malia?" he said.

"Yes."

She began to feel heavier and heavier. He set her down because his grip began to slip, then hoisted her back up again.

Back at the car, he placed her in the passenger seat. She was still shaking uncontrollably; her teeth were clicking. He started the engine, then turned the heater all the way up. "You're okay," he said. "You're going to make it."

"I'm cold, Daddy." Her eyes were half-closed again. Her hands, which hung limply between her legs, were light purple, the veins were blue. She had to get dry. Now. He peeled her tee-shirt off and unhooked her bra. "You'll be okay," he said, then looked for a towel or something to dry her with, but the back seat was empty. The picnic blanket—he should have grabbed that, he thought.

"Heat'll kick on in a minute," he said. "You're going to make it. Are you awake?"

She nodded.

Outside the car, he wrung her shirt out, then his. He took his jeans off too and squeezed them.

In the back of his mind, he'd been thinking about what he could do. But not with this one, of course. He had to save her.

He opened the car door. "Malia," he said.

She didn't respond.

"Malia." She was slumped over. He shook her shoulder. Her breasts were not yet fully formed. "Fuck," he said. He shut the door and pushed her forward in the seat

and slipped behind her, his legs on either side of her, and rubbed her stomach and the tops of her legs. "Wake up, kid," he said. He rubbed her cheeks, and her arms. Her body temperature was falling. "Why didn't you just leave it, whatever it was?" he said. He squeezed her tight, pressing his skin against hers, warming her. The heater was still blowing cold air. He squeezed harder, and kept rubbing.

It was raining hard now. An elk stepped into the dirt parking lot, walked across it, then disappeared into the woods. His pants and the two shirts on the hood of the car were getting soaked.

He touched the vent; finally the air was getting warm. He pressed his thumb under her jaw. Her heart was beating very slowly, but still beating. "C'mon, Malia," he said. "Pull through. A few more minutes."

In that stillness, the thoughts Jackson had been repressing flooded him, his chest pressed into her cold back, his hands rubbing her thighs and stomach and breasts, his feet on top of hers. The thought of the girls he used to know, the smell of their skin, the taste of sweat and lacquer and oil paint on their hands, the thrill of teaching them to paint the forbidden, the thrill of making dark secrets. Ashley, the one who told, would be in her early thirties by now. They all would be. He wondered if they were okay, if they were married, if they had children of their own, if they still painted.

He watched drips collect on the windshield, combine into big drops, and run down uneven paths. Had things been different, he'd be an artist. Maybe even have a family.

Then he thought of the sheriff. Snuggling a little honey like this would definitely get him back on the inside. He'd have to lie about his name, but that'd be okay. The sheriff would be focused on the girl he was helping, not Jackson. He'd be able to slip away.

As he rubbed her body, he began to feel very powerful, like he was a medicine man performing magic. He was giving her life, life which had been taken by the river. His warmth and spirit was entering her through his touch. He was tingling all over, now, adrenaline racing through him. He imagined the two of them flying above the coast range and along the ocean's shore, looking down at the cars on Highway 101, at the foaming breakers. They had nothing to worry about—they could just soar through the ocean air.

Then he felt a squeeze. "Malia," he said.

"Mm," she said.

"Come out of it. You've got heat now. You can live. Say something."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I'm going to hold you for a few minutes more, okay?" he said. "When you're more awake, we'll find help."

She nodded, and leaned her head against his shoulder. Then she kissed his cheek. Her lips were cold and sticky.

"You saved me," she said.

"You're okay."

She nodded again. "What's your name?"

"Jason."

"Jason," she said. "Thank you, Jason."

He wondered where the other girls had gone, if they'd found help, if the sheriff was searching the river for her right now. The rain pattered on the roof of the car, a sound he liked.

"Are you cold?" he said.

"I'm getting warmer."

“Good,” he said. He rubbed her arms and her legs again. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Thirteen.”

“That’s a good age to be. Don’t you think?”

She nodded.

“Shall we go?” he said. “They’re probably looking for you. We have to find your friends.”

“Keep me warm, Jason,” she said.

“I will.” The sun descended behind the mountain and the gray sky had already begun to darken. Geese called.

“I’m so sleepy,” she said.

“Stay awake. Tell me about your family. Do you have a dog?”

“A horse.”

“What’s your horse’s name?”

“Misty.”

“Like the weather outside?”

“Yup.”

He could hear the life come back into her voice. He rubbed her shoulders and arms, which were now warm, and he closed his eyes, and tried not to imagine making love to her.

“What color is Misty?” he said.

“She’s black.”

He was sweating.

“Where did you come from?” she said.

“I was fishing.”

The wind whistled in the trees and somewhere a branch cracked. She might like to be kissed by her rescuer, her hero. She might like to be touched.

"I'm going to let go of you now," he said finally. "The car's warm now. You'll be okay." He scooted over to the driver's seat and crossed his legs.

"Can I put my clothes back on?" she said.

"No," he said. "You have hypothermia. You need to keep your internal temperature from falling. You got so cold in the river your body couldn't keep up. You need to stay warm and dry. Do you feel warm?"

"I was warmer with you against me."

"Here," he said. "We'll check your internal body temperature. Would you like that?" She looked at him questioningly, her red eyebrows furrowed. The rain on the roof of the car was lighter now, and somewhere near, a power transformer hummed. He could have her, he knew. It had been so many long, aching years.

"Spit into my hand," he said.

She spit into his outstretched hand.

"More," he said. "I can't tell." She spit a big glob. "It feels warm," he said, cupping the saliva. "You'll make it home okay. I'm going to go relieve myself, then I'll drive you home."

Jackson stepped out of the car and into the rain, which was cold and felt good against his skin as it washed his sweat away. He slipped his slimy hand into his boxers and quickly walked into the woods, beyond this young girl's sight.

Still Life with Cut Flowers

Each winter, in late February, Lydia began the annuals, filling flats of plugs with rich seedling soil, dropping the tiny specks in each, and when in the mood, saying a blessing over them: "Grow well, my friends."

She germinated them in her tiny greenhouse, on the rotting plywood worktable among the stacks of terra cotta pots. She kept it hot and humid, so the air stunk like mold and river muck. Algae grew on the panes of glass. When she would spot a dot of green poking through the black, its cotyledons still partially trapped in the seed casing, she would breathe a sigh of excitement, and look for others, counting.

She transplanted them in the spring, carefully selecting the location for intensity of sunlight, fertilizing each hole with thick, smelly fish emulsion, pressing down around each stem firmly, until every seedling was snug in the earth.

In the summers she was home from school, where she counseled students. In the early mornings when the sky was just beginning to lighten, she would water, moving the hose from bed to bed, scattering bees and butterflies, soaking the herbs, the rosemary with its little purple blossoms, the thyme, the savory, the lavender; she'd move on to the vegetable patch, looking for hints of orange on the big green tomatoes, making note of the summer squash and cucumbers that were ready to pick.

After she had harvested the last vegetables of the season and after the frost withered the annuals, she would cut back the perennials—the roses, the dahlias, the fuchsia. She would pile decaying leaves around their stalks to protect them from the cold. Late in the year she would check the tilth of the soil and sometimes add dolomite limestone or plant a cover crop of clover or rye to rebuild the soil.

So when the letter came that April, the one that she would later think of as the beginning of the end, Lydia was working the soil, a maroon bandanna holding her hair back, her overalls muddy.

"Hey, Hon," her husband, Wayne, said. "You've got to sign for a letter."

She stood up and brushed a brown stem from her kneepads, one she had plucked last week. She crossed the lawn, and then removed her Birkenstocks and gloves.

"How are things out there?" he said. He was still in his robe, the newspaper in his hand, when he called to her.

"Fine," she said. He spent Saturday mornings inside the house reading the paper and drinking coffee. She knew he liked the garden, though. When they had people over, he'd show off the yard. Sometimes he'd ask her the plant names before guests arrived so he could point them out.

The letter carrier was standing in the doorway. The cat slipped by him, and he looked down at it, then up at Lydia, as if he thought he should have stopped it.

"He's okay," she said. "He takes care of himself."

The letter carrier handed her a small clipboard and a manila envelope, which bore the return address of an East Coast law firm. She signed, expecting bad news, and handed the pen back.

At the rolltop desk where she kept the bills, she sliced the envelope with a brass letter opener.

"Who's it from?" Wayne asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Some law firm. Are you filing an intent to divorce?"

"Yeah right," he said. "You get the house, I get the CD collection, the cat, and the subscription to *Time*."

"Sounds fair to me," she said, deadpan, as she unfolded the documents. "Where do I sign?" They had joked about divorce on and off since before their wedding. The documents were from a Mr. Pollard, the executor of the estate of Robert M. Blanchard, Lydia's great uncle, informing her that she had been named a beneficiary of the estate. The letter was written in cumbersome legal language, but Lydia gathered from it that she had inherited something, and that she needed to call Mr. Pollard.

A copy of the will was included with the letter. It was thick and the typewritten lines were numbered.

"What is it?" Wayne said, touching her shoulder.

"It looks like I've inherited something."

"What?"

"I don't know. Let me read through it first." Wayne picked up the cover letter as she looked through the will. Sums of $10,000 were to be distributed to each of Blanchard's children, along with specific possessions, including antique dishes, seven paintings by artists Lydia did not recognize, and a house on Long Island. Sums of $5,000 would go to each of the grandchildren. Several charities were to get larger amounts.

The last line of the will said that the remainder would go to her. This puzzled Lydia. She'd known her great uncle as a little girl—her parents often had eaten Thanksgiving dinner at his house—but she hadn't heard from him in years. Her mother had mentioned a few months ago that his health was failing, but that was to be expected. He had been an old man long ago.

Included with the documents was a photocopy of a handwritten note from Blanchard to his attorney. Blanchard explained that he had accidentally left his grand-niece, Lydia, out of the will and that she should get whatever was left, even if it was only a small amount.

"Gosh," Wayne said. "Out of the blue like that."

"I feel bad," she said. "I'd forgotten about him."

"How much are we getting?"

"Doesn't say. Whatever's left."

She handed him the documents.

"It looks like he was well-off. What did he do?"

"I don't know. He was retired when I knew him. I feel like I should have been writing him letters or something—calling him. I had forgotten about him until Mom said he was sick a few months ago. He must have been around a hundred. I wonder why he remembered me."

"Old folks remember odd things," Wayne said. "He was probably reminiscing about family gatherings or something like that. Maybe you dropped a cake or spilled gravy onto his lap." Wayne gestured as if he was bobbling a gravy boat. "So sorry, Uncle." He smiled.

She stood up. The cover letter was smudged. She looked at her hands: there was dirt under her fingernails and between the lines in her skin.

"I'll have Kennedy look this over on Monday," she said. She slipped the documents into their envelope, put them in the mail slot labeled "other," and slid the desktop shut.

In the garage, she sized up the striped maple she had purchased the evening before at an outdoor plant market. The species was rare, so the tree had been quite expensive. But Lydia liked the challenge of getting things to grow, and the satisfaction of looking over her garden in the mornings before heading to the high school.

She had already picked a space for the sapling that wasn't too shady or too sunny. If it survived the transplanting, it would be exquisite. Its leaves looked like gloves of lace and its bark grew in bands of light and dark.

She scooped the base with her arms, the roots wrapped in thick, moist layers of burlap. She wheeled it into the backyard, and set it down with a thud, which shook its leaves.

When she and Wayne had moved here five years ago, she'd cut terraced beds into the slope on the east side, and reinforced them with walls of fieldstone. The following year, she built a pond with a fountain sculpture of a little boy drawing water.

The stone boy always reminded her of the child she lost. She had never told Wayne about her high school pregnancy, which, somehow, she had known would end. It did, in the public library, two weeks after she took the pregnancy test that she hid from her mom in a sour cardboard milk carton that had been tossed two days earlier. The pain made her dizzy, but she made it to the bathroom stall, which seemed like the only place to go. As she touched the lever, she thought of the dead goldfish her mother made her flush, when she was ten. She had watched it swirl around and around until it dove into the darkness of the pipe, realizing for the first time, that the fish, Goldie, was gone forever.

In her garden, satisfied with the location she had chosen, Lydia began digging. The moist sod gave way easily, and she shoveled a clump into the wheelbarrow and continued widening the hole.

She had already fertilized and watered the sapling before her husband called her in for lunch.

"Shall we walk to the Adobe?" he said.

"Sure," she said. "Let me shower." She shook the trunk. It felt secure. The tree would live, she thought.

In the mud room, which was adjacent to the kitchen, she took her overalls and bandanna off, and found a clean pair of jeans in the dryer. Lydia took pride in how neat

the house and yard were. She tossed the overalls into the dirty laundry basket, then took a minute to scoop the cat box, which she did almost every time she passed by it. She'd been reluctant to get a cat because she thought it would be messy, but she gave in because Wayne really wanted a puppy, and compromising by getting a cat seemed like the best solution. A dog simply would have been too much. Shedding all the time, digging holes and shitting all over the backyard, spitting up on the carpet. She couldn't imagine housebreaking it.

In the shower, she scrubbed her face, but kept her hair out of the stream of water. She scrubbed her hands with a plastic brush and scoured under her fingernails. The gloves hadn't kept her hands clean. They never did.

After they were seated and had ordered, Wayne asked about the tree. "I don't want to start another argument—" He cut himself off.

She looked up and raised her eyebrows.

"—but I couldn't help but notice where you planted that tree."

"What about it?" she said.

"We had talked about putting a play area there eventually, remember? Now you've planted a tree."

"We agreed that I take care of the yard. That's a good place for that tree. It's a good tree. You should take a look at it. It has striped bark."

She sipped her coffee and looked out the window. A city bus drove by with an advertisement for cellular service painted across it.

"We need to save space for the kids to play, that's all."

"Wayne, we don't have kids."

"Someday."

"We said we'd think about it in five or six years, when we are financially secure." As she spoke, she knew he was thinking of the will, hoping.

"I know. That was three years ago. How long will the tree live?"

"A week, if I'm unlucky. They are tough to transplant. If they don't take to the new environment, they lose their leaves and die."

"I wish you would have asked me first," he said. "We're a couple."

"I'm not planting with children in mind. I don't think that way."

The waiter filled their water glasses and Wayne ordered a beer.

"Children would mean a major lifestyle change," Lydia said.

Wayne nodded. "Can the tree be moved?"

"No," she said.

Monday morning, while Wayne was in the shower, she called Mr. Pollard in New York. She spoke to a receptionist who didn't seem to want to put her through to Pollard, but Lydia told her about the letter that had come registered mail, so the receptionist asked her if she could hold. Orchestra music flowed into her ear. The receptionist came back and said that Mr. Pollard could take the call. Could she hold a minute more?

Lydia said yes and the music returned. She opened the slider and took the cordless and her coffee onto the deck. The sapling looked healthy. She tried to imagine a play structure integrated into the landscape of the garden—she couldn't. What would it look like? Prefabricated plastic in loud primary colors? Metal monkey bars? Wood beams, cedar like the tool shed and the fence?

Pollard came on the line, and she needed a pen to take notes, so she took the phone to the desk. She told him that she had received his letter, and thanked him for it, and asked him how much money she should expect.

“As policy, I couldn’t give you an unofficial estimate in writing,” Pollard said. “If we’d had a licensed appraiser assess the current market value of the personal property among the residual assets, then I would have included a copy of the assessment with the other documents.”

“I understand,” Lydia said.

“But over the phone, I can tell you my opinion.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course, the final amount is totally contingent on the results of the auction. And the probate judge. You never know what happens.”

“Uh huh. So what’s your ball-park figure?”

“I’d say around fifty grand, give or take a couple thousand. There are a couple of matured T-bills that will definitely go to you, but it’s early. I wouldn’t suggest that you plan on spending it yet—there’ll be taxes.”

“Gosh. This whole thing is such a surprise.”

“Yes, well congratulations. I suggest that you give those documents to your counsel and talk to him or her about being represented in probate.”

“Sure,” she said.

“Why don’t you have them call me?”

“I’ll do that,” she said.

“And Ms. Andersen,” he said, “I’m sorry about your loss.”

After she hung up, she jotted a note in her day planner to call Kennedy. She glanced over her appointments for the day: walk-ins from 8:00 to 10:00; Joey Benson from 10:30 to 11:00; several other students struggling academically and a few with discipline problems; a meeting with parents trying to get Ritalin for their son. She could call Kennedy on her lunch break or if there was an unexpected lull.

On her way in to work she got stuck in traffic on the Ross Island Bridge. There'd been an accident. Two ambulances drove past her heading west in the eastbound lane, which was blocked off. She clicked the radio on, heard part of a report about shelling in Gaza, a suicide bomber in Indonesia, and the death of a jazz singer she couldn't recall ever hearing. She clicked the radio off and gazed at the river.

By 10:30 Joey had not arrived. She called the front office and found out that his first hour teacher had reported him absent as well. She called Kennedy, but he was out and so she left a message with his secretary.

Later, when she was talking to an other student, Wendy, who wanted to know about the dangers of unprotected sex, the phone rang. Lydia pressed a button which directed the call to voice mail.

"Well, like, like what if you don't go all the way, you know?" the girl said. "What if you rub him off or just go down on him?" Wendy had an eyebrow ring and wore mascara and black eyeliner. When she talked, she would raise her eyebrows, and the ring would flip sideways. Generally, students went to the school nurse with these kind of questions, but Lydia had befriended Wendy when she left home and was living on the streets. Lydia's calls to the girl's mother and the sessions between the three of them had helped, and with some coaxing, Wendy had moved back in where she belonged.

Lydia gave her the standard information about what was more and less dangerous, and told her that protection was always a good choice if you were going to be sexually involved.

Wendy asked her about oral sex again, as if she hadn't heard Lydia right the first time.

"Look," Lydia said. "If you suck a guy off and you've got a sore in your mouth, little cuts from flossing or something—"

Wendy snickered when Lydia said *flossing*. "Sorry," the girl said, her cheeks turning red. "That's just what he calls it."

"What's that?"

"Flossing. That's what he calls it when he goes down on me. Get it?"

"Yeah."

"Go ahead," the girl said, folding her hands in her lap.

"Well you can absorb STDs through your mouth."

"Even if you don't swallow?"

"Uh huh," Lydia said.

"My friends say if you spit, you're, like, fine."

"Not true," Lydia said. "Use a condom or some other protective device. You should tell your friends too."

Wendy's eyes looked watery, as if tears had begun to well up, but then had stopped. "I'm glad you're here, Ms. Anderson," she said. "If I, like, asked my mom about this shit, she'd just give me so much shit about it. And she doesn't know anything, either. And the nurse just looks at you and makes you feel like some kind of slut or something."

"Thank you, Wendy."

"You're cool. A little serious, but cool." Wendy stood up and grabbed her bag. Lydia wanted to tell her she was too young, but what good would it do? She'd come for information, not because she wanted to be told what to do.

"Wendy," Lydia said as the girl was about to leave. Wendy turned. "Come in if you ever need to chat. I'm here for you."

The girl nodded and stepped out the door.

Lydia stood up and adjusted the picture on the wall across from her desk and looked at her appointments for the rest of the day. She checked her messages; Joey's social worker wanted her to call him.

"Bad news," the man said. "He was caught robbing a liquor store."

"Oh, Jesus," Lydia said.

"Yup. No fooling around this time. He'll do hard time—a mandatory minimum sentence."

"How much?"

"Fifteen. He did it with a knife, scratched up the clerk."

"Jesus, Bobby, why?" she said softly.

"Kids can be so stupid. There's nothing you can do now, except let the school know, drive the message home."

"Is she hurt ... the clerk?"

"The clerk? No. It was just a scratch, but it's assault nonetheless."

He went into the details of the crime, and repeated that she should make an example out of him, shake the students up.

After Lydia put the phone back in its cradle, she pulled out his file. He'd gotten an A- in geometry last term, his best grade. He was taking algebra this term, and she had thought with a little discipline he could go to college. She thought she'd convinced him of this too. She filled out a contact report summarizing the conversation with the social worker, then sent an email to his teachers and copied the principals. He was 17 now. He'd be 32 when he got out if he was convicted.

She wondered how her own child would have turned out. He'd be in 7th grade. She imagined him looking like Wayne did in his childhood photos, although Wayne

was not his father. "Stop," she said, looking at her thin reflection in the glass of the painting. "You stop this."

She drifted through the rest of the day, thinking about her uncle who she'd forgotten, about Joey, about the explosions in Gaza, the jazz singer, her little, imaginary boy. She took notes, smiled, and asked appropriate questions of the students and parents who sat in the chairs across from her desk. She checked each off as they left.

On her way home from work, she stopped at the gourmet food store to pick up salmon and greens for dinner. As she walked through the aisles of sparkling, wet produce, she told herself she was off duty now. She could relax and the heaviness could leave. She would grill the salmon and walk around the yard. She usually made dinner on Mondays and Wednesdays. Wayne did it on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They ate out on the weekends. She enjoyed this lifestyle, cooking infrequently enough to keep it a pleasant task. Maurice the butcher, knew her name, and that she came in every Monday and Wednesday for a cut of meat. Cooking was a hobby, like gardening. She chose the best ingredients and kept trying new cookbooks with new recipes, some of which Maurice suggested.

At home, she put the ingredients for the Caesar dressing in the blender: buttermilk, anchovies, garlic, mayonnaise, lemon juice. She blended them, then added the attachment for shredding cheese.

When Wayne came home, she was on the deck grilling the salmon. He opened the slider.

"What's for dinner?" he said.

"Blackened salmon Caesar," she said.

"Sounds good."

He was looking at the striped maple and not at her. She turned both pieces of fish 45 degrees to make a diamond pattern on the meat.

"How's work?" she said.

"Good," he said. "We've got some good candidates to choose from for Denny's position."

"That's good."

"Sure is. The first round of applicants didn't have any real code-writing experience."

"Yeah, you said that."

"I wish we could get Denny back. He was like family."

She flipped the fish, pleased with the diamond marks in the red blackening rub. They looked just like fish at Caprial's Bistro up the street.

He came over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Can I help?" he said.

"You can spin the romaine."

He nodded and stepped inside.

At the table, she opened a bottle of chardonnay, then retrieved two white wine glasses from the hutch. Wayne was already seated, his fork in the fish.

The bottle glugged as she poured.

"I heard a report on NPR about the world's fisheries," she said.

He nodded and bit into the fish. "Good," he said as he chewed, gesturing to his mouth with his fork.

"Most are being overfished by about 70 percent."

"Yeah?" he said. "Am I supposed to feel guilty?"

"No," she said. "But I wonder where it's all going, genetic engineering, species decline, global warming, terrorism, another Bush presidency."

He laughed, and lifted his fork up like a conductor about to begin a performance. "Enjoy your fish, Hon."

"Maurice says the Pacific salmon fisheries are strong, especially up in Alaska."

"Well, there you go," Wayne said. "Lighten up for once."

She forced a smile, then bit into the salmon. It was medium rare, as she intended it to be. The dressing was good too. She would be pleased with these things.

"Did you talk to Kennedy?"

"Yeah," she said. "And that Pollard fellow."

"So how much should we expect?"

"Not sure. Pollard said maybe around fifty thousand."

"No way," Wayne said. "That is wonderful news."

"It's going to court. Probate. And there'll be taxes. At this point we really don't know anything. Pollard said not to make any plans."

She rinsed her dishes and put them in the dishwasher. When he was finished, she rinsed his, too, then sat on the deck with her glass of wine. Wayne came out and read his book. They sat there until dark.

That evening, in bed, she felt his hand against her side. She was lying on her back trying not to think about anything so she could sleep. But she kept thinking about the students. Joey's life was probably ruined. She had even voted for the ballot measure that established the minimum sentences—it had been pitched as a "get-tough-on-crime" measure. Mothers whose children had been abused by paroled criminals had written letters to the *Oregonian* . It seemed like a good thing to vote for, something Lydia believed in.

She felt his hand moving now.

"Lydia," he said.

She mumbled in response.

"I'd like us to think about having a child sooner than we'd discussed."

She turned over and his hand fell from her side.

"No," she said.

"With the money that's coming, I think we could afford it."

She could hear the neighbor's wind chimes. "It's not a sure thing," she said.

"But if it comes."

"No."

She felt her body tighten at his breath on her neck. He let go.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I'm just saying we can think about it."

"Life is simply too hard," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'Life is hard'?"

"I'm not ready to have a child." She turned again, then sat up in bed, and slipped her feet into her slippers.

In the bathroom, she noticed the dental floss on the sink and put it in its place in the medicine cabinet. She put Wayne's toothbrush in its spot in the brass holder she'd installed when they moved in. The world was already full of Wendys, full of Joeys, too. They survived or they didn't. They grew up and needed therapy and drifted through life in a fog of depression, smiling at appropriate occasions, pretending to care, aching, never finding a place of their own. She swallowed two sleeping pills, then stepped onto the porch. She switched on the fountain and the garden lights, which lined a stone walkway. One light shone on the little stone boy, whose bucket was overflowing once again.

Lydia sat on the bench in front of the fountain. She came here every few weeks, even in the rain, when depression was crushing her and she needed to give in and allow herself to think about him.

That awful day, when she miscarried in the library bathroom, she had simply sat and stared at the graffiti on the stall door, lightly tingling like a limb that was beginning to fall asleep. She stared into the red water. The cramps and pain were gone now. She didn't know what to do. She sat, her eyes closed. It could have been her child. But she was relieved, too. This was what she wanted, wasn't it?

When the bathroom was empty, she slipped under the stall, keeping the door locked. She walked to the 7-Eleven next door, bought a soda from a clerk who asked her what was wrong. She poured the contents of her cup onto the cement. The puddle hissed and drained into the street, leaving the ice to melt in the spring sun.

Back in the library bathroom, she slid under the stall door, despite the peculiar glance from the woman applying lipstick at the sink. Lydia looked into the basin, studying the blood and membrane and tissue for hints of a fetus. On her knees, she dipped the cup in and filled it with what, perhaps, might have been her son. Then she closed her eyes and flushed.

The cup in her left hand, her bag in her right, she looked for a place to bury it. She found a freshly tilled flower bed in the park across the street. Rows of tulips past their peak had been there a week ago. She dug a hole with her hands, then took off her shoe and scraped away more dirt with its heel. Without ceremony, she poured out the water, blood, and tissue. She swept back the dirt with her hands.

Now when she awoke much later, the middle of her back ached and her robe was damp with dew. The statue seemed to be looking at her in the early morning light. She heard crickets and the splash of water as his bucket continually drained. He was

forever pouring her life out, she thought. That's what it was, her life. But she would struggle on, and face whatever was to come.

She climbed back in bed, and listened to the birds in the neighbor's trees and in the rhododendrons. Wayne was breathing as if he was awake. She heard him swallow and shift.

She opened the window next to the bed and could smell the scent of the lilacs that grew outside the window. She breathed in slowly, telling herself to appreciate the moment. They smelled good. They were good. She would take them with her, throughout the day, as she tried her best to help a few troubled kids.

At 5:00 Wayne got up, and Lydia lay in bed listening to him making coffee. A plastic lawn chair scraped against the deck. She dozed off for a spell, then got up too.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and looked out the slider to see Wayne in the yard, digging. She felt anger crawl up her spine, but she didn't yell. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled. He had moved the sapling and was filling the hole he had dug with dirt from the wheelbarrow. He had kicked off his slippers, which lay in the grass like a pair of dead rabbits. His robe fluttered in the wind as he worked. He looked completely ridiculous, the spade half-full, dirt landing on the grass around the hole. She sipped her coffee and watched. The tree would surely die. Too much direct light, trauma from being twice moved. She despised him.

When he saw her he stopped, dropped the spade, and slowly walked toward her. "My children," he said shaking his finger in the air, "my children will play right there like we decided. I'm ordering the equipment. They're going to love it back here. All the neighbor kids will come over to play."

She walked past him to the tool shed and removed the pruners from its hook and walked around to the front yard. Half the lilac blossoms were open; their fragrance thickened the air. She selected a stem and snipped, fully aware of how the hard metal pruners felt against her skin without the protection of gloves.

Then Wayne interrupted her. Although his face was red, he was calm. "I thought," he said, looking at her, then at the ground where three lilac leaves had fallen and already seemed to wilt. "I thought a baby might save us," he said.

Overhead a passenger jet roared beneath the cover of clouds. It banked left passing the skyscrapers downtown and headed toward the river. She looked back down at him, remembering the time in the stairwell of her dorm when he had first kissed her. She had wanted that kiss so badly, but it and everything else that followed was evaporating, drying up.

"You are so goddamn selfish," she said, her voice void of emotion. "You would bring a child into this world for us? That is despicable."

"I would," he said, dropping his head, exhaling a slow gravelly breath.

Paradise

My father was telling the same old story again. He was sitting at the kitchen table with his bourbon, the ice clinking against the glass.

"You remember Mitch and Blackie?" he said.

I nodded. I was curled up in a bean bag chair in front of the Franklin stove. Dad worked on the trawlers on Whitefish Bay and Lake Superior, pulled in the nets, sorted the fish, and mopped the decks afterward. But as the winter set in, he would work less and less, until the bay froze clear to Canada except for the shipping lane, which the Coast Guard kept open with icebreakers so freighters could continue the flow of ore from Duluth, through the Soo Locks, and on to the refineries in Chicago or Detroit.

"I tell you, Tyler," he said. "Winters like this one bring back memories."

Our house was lit by a bulb which hung from a wire in the ceiling. The wind seeped between the cracks in the wooden walls. I was cold. I wrapped the black shawl, which had once belonged to my mother, around me tighter.

"Well, when I was a boy and living in Mackinaw City, we had these two dogs, Mitch and Blackie. Mitch was the shape and size of a gray wolf, except he had a tan coat and was part English sheep dog and part everything else. Blackie was a lab." He paused. "You don't mind hearing it again do you?"

"Go ahead," I said.

"Me and Ernie were out ice fishing on one of the inland lakes, and the dogs were with us, of course. Well, we were looking out over the lake, and one of those shanties started to tip. We glanced at each other and it tipped and sank 'till there was nothing but a tin roof sticking out.

"Then Ernie dashed toward it. Must have thought there was people in it. I'm sure I hollered for him to stop 'cause it was a stupid move, real stupid. That shanty was

on thin ice, and I knew it was thin 'cause the color of the ice was dark, not white like we'd be fishing on. Anyway, the dogs took off after Ernie and shot ahead of him—I don't know what got into them. Well, Blackie broke through a few yards from the shanty. I thought he was a goner. The ice went crack, the dog skidded on all fours, trying to stop, and sploosh, he was under. A blessing though, had he not done that, it would a been my brother. A parakeet in a copper mine that Blackie was."

I nodded. I liked the rhythms of my father's deep voice, the way he told the story the same every time.

"Then ol' Mitch darted out, gonna rescue his buddy. And sploosh, he's in too.

"As the dogs tried to get back onto the solid ice, their weight broke more pieces off. They kept struggling, making the hole bigger and bigger. We ran to the edge of the lake where a ten-foot john boat had been left for the winter. It was half filled with snow. We dumped it out and hustled it over the ice toward the dogs. And by the time we were halfway to them they both had scrambled up on their own, first Mitch and then Blackie. Then we dried them off with our jackets and headed home."

"So, what's the point to it?" I said when he was finished. "The moral?"

"There is no point. It's just a story."

"There must be a point," I said. "You tell it all the time, at least once a year."

"There isn't. If God's given you common sense and some good luck, then that's what you've got. The story's got nothing to do with it."

"What if God's given you nothing?" I said.

"Don't talk that way. It's not true. We've got plenty."

I looked around at the cabin, the snowshoes hanging on the wall, the stacks of yellowed newspapers from the city that came in the mail after we'd already heard the news on the television or the radio, the old oil lamp, the stack of *Playboys* he no longer hid from me, a snowmobile carburetor soaking in gasoline on the table, a sack of

biscuit flour, the dirty yellow icebox stuffed with smoked fish, poached venison, and squirrel meat.

This is what Mom had left years ago. I knew the world was bigger than this cabin, bigger than this tiny town.

"Sure," I said, "plenty."

Bruce, my dog, looked up from in front of the stove and whined.

"I'm taking him out," I said.

"It's cold," he said. "Just let him out."

"I'm gonna walk him," I said, then pushed the door open. Bruce leaped up and darted out. The subzero air bit my cheeks. I looked up to see a clear sky and Orion.

We headed down the snowmobile track which wound its way through the hemlocks and jack pines. The snow was a deep blue in the light of the stars; it crunched loudly under my boots. When we got to the road, I stopped and listened to the cold night. A tree creaked, but beyond Bruce's panting, nothing but silence.

I suppose I had hoped Dad would get worried about me, or irritated that I hadn't stepped out just for a moment. I was sick of that shack, sick of living in the middle of nowhere. I never knew my mother, but I knew she had the smarts to leave when someone gave her the chance. My father never talked about this, but I imagined that she lived in a city, a big city, in a big apartment building with a cat in the window and a streetcar in front that she took to work. When I was younger I'd pray for her to write and invite me to come visit, but she never did.

As I walked, no cars passed. The road was gravel, and nobody needed to go up the bay to Whitefish Point except the light keeper and the few people who lived north of us. Soon I could see lights in the house up the street, Kathy Kremmer's house. We went to the same school in Newberry, an hour drive west of Paradise. Because only four of us from this town went to high school, they had been sending a car every

morning, but when Kathy turned sixteen, she began driving us in her mother's Buick. Kathy was overweight. Pretty-plus, they called her at school. One time when one of the Newman brothers said something about it, she slammed on the brakes, almost putting us all through the windshield. "What did you say?" she screamed, repeatedly. "Get out of the car. Both of you. Get out." To my surprise, they did, and we sped off, tires squealing.

Her father was a crewman on a cargo ship, so he was home at irregular hours. Her mother had a small store where she sold colorful Lake Superior stones—agates and fossils—along with regular tourist stuff—tee shirts and postcards. Vacationers heading to Tahquamenon Falls stopped coming after Labor Day, so she kept the store locked up during the off season.

Smoke was coming out of the chimney and I wanted to sit by the fire with a blanket wrapped around me. My toes were cold in my boots. Suddenly I wanted cookies. Kathy had given me some in the car once, when she said she was on a diet. I thought it might be rude to eat them in front of her, so I put them in my book bag. "Try one," she said, looking at me, instead of the road. I bit into the cookie. It was soft and chewy and tasted divine. My father only bought those horrid ones that came in plastic trays in the town store and were always stale.

"This is great," I said. "What is it?"

"Mom's homemade macaroons."

My cheeks were numb and I felt the moisture in my nostrils begin to freeze as I breathed in. I adjusted my scarf to cover my face. Then I realized I was standing outside her house and that someone might notice, so I turned back.

"What were you doing out there?" Dad said, as I stepped in. "You've been gone over an hour."

"We heard wolves," I said. "They were a few miles off, but we heard them." I patted Bruce's coat. "Ain't that right, old boy?"

"Probably after deer. I reckon there's quite a few weak ones this winter. All the ground cover is buried." My father squatted down and rubbed Bruce's back. He was always very affectionate with dogs, but not with people.

"When he heard them he perked his ears up and froze. And he kind of growled a little, under his breath."

"You shouldn't be wandering off on nights like this." He looked up at me. "If you'd a got lost, you'd a froze to death by morning." He rubbed his beard against Bruce's neck.

"I can take care of myself," I said. "Besides, he was with me." I patted my dog's head.

Once in my room, I turned on my transistor radio and found a station in Canada where the announcers were talking about hockey. I reached under my mattress and felt for the new *Playboy* I had intercepted. The cover said "Carefree Co-eds" and three beautiful women posed, each with a football helmet from her school. The one in the middle, Sasha, held a Michigan State Spartans helmet. I was so proud.

I flipped through the advertisements until I found the story. I always wondered where women like these lived. I had never seen them in the Upper Peninsula. I traced my fingers over Sash's curves. There were no women in Paradise except Kathy and a few middle-aged mothers. School was almost as bad. I knew a few girls there, but they all lived in Newberry and that was an hour away and I wouldn't be able to drive for another two years.

The article said that Sasha lived in an apartment in East Lansing and was studying to be a dentist. One of the photos showed her reclining in a dentist chair with

her legs crossed. "Open wide," the caption read. She looked to me like she would be a good dentist. I could tell by the expression on her face that she would be gentle and try not to make people's mouths sore.

I slipped the magazine under the mattress and listened to the hockey game, then fell asleep, wondering how big East Lansing was.

The next morning, I awoke to the sizzle and smell of bacon. My father was tying flies, the table covered with different colored neck hackles and patches of fur from animals we'd collected or shot. He held a spool of thread between his teeth as he attached the wing to a number 14 elk-hair caddis.

"Morning," I said.

He nodded, the spool still in his mouth. I looked at the bacon and tipped the pan so the grease ran to one side. My father sold flies and tying materials to a few bait shops in the area. Often he would drive into the national forests in Luce and Schoolcraft counties to hunt—a full grown turkey provided quills that we would pluck and package in bags, two to a bag. We could get at least thirty matching pairs to a bird. We plucked the soft marabou from the hindquarters, which worked well in wet patterns. The bird itself was good eating—the Lord's bounty, my dad always said.

When he would take an animal, he would say, "Look what the Lord has given us." He'd kneel and offer a prayer of thanks wherever he was—in a thick hemlock swamp, at the muddy banks of a stream. His ritual reminded me of the football players on television who prayed in the end zone after a touchdown.

Once when I was eleven, and just learning how to clean and hold a .22, I spied a fat fox squirrel. My dad used a technique called B.R.A.S.S: breath, relax, aim, slack, shoot. The squirrel sat on a maple branch, eating buds. I lined up the sites like he

showed me, breathed in, then letting my muscles relax, I took aim. She was a chubby one. I pulled the trigger.

"Damn it," I said. The kickback bruised my shoulder, like it always did until I grew strong enough to absorb the force. This was the first time I swore in front of him.

"What was that?" my father said. I felt my cheeks grow red. The squirrel scolded from up high, now. I didn't have a second shot.

"Cussing don't get you nowhere," he said.

The forest floor was soft from the melting snow. I could see our tracks, my father's deep tread marks.

"I want you to understand this," he said. "Look at me." I looked up. "If God wants to give you the squirrel, he'll give it to you. Swearing about it will only make matters worse." The lines in his face were deep, which made his eyes look sunken. "Without God, we have nothing. Do you understand that? No trees, no squirrels, no ammunition, no Bruce." Bruce looked up when he heard his name. "We respect what we kill. We don't waste, and we thank God for all of it. When you're older, you'll understand."

"I understand," I said.

"Good," he said.

When my father finished tying the caddis, he lifted the bacon out of the skillet. I could smell, now, the biscuits in the oven.

"Got plans for today?" he said, not scowling, but not smiling either. He set the bacon on a towel to let the grease drip, put the tongs back into the sink by last night's dishes, then drained the grease into an old coffee can.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Good," he said. "Next week I'm taking the snowmobile into Luce for a deer. I'm going to stop by Morgan's; he needs some tying materials. Could you clean the muskrat dubbing for me?" In the corner a muskrat skin lay. He'd already sheared her belly. The fur was in a box next to her. He wanted me to sift through it to remove the long dark coat hairs from the gray underbody hair.

"Come on," I said.

"You cut it out," he said. "I don't ask you to do much work around here. When it's clean, weigh it out. He wants fifty bags."

I sighed.

"This is nothing," he said. "You'll be cleaning fish or scrubbing the decks come the thaw."

Cleaning fur was different, though. I wanted a job, not a chore. Anyway, I didn't want to work the ropes. I didn't want to come home stinking of fish every night like he did. I wanted to live in a city where there were people—maybe Mackinaw, where Dad came from, or maybe Detroit, where I could make cars, or East Lansing, where Sasha lived.

"What if I don't want to work with fish?" I said.

"You'll want to," he said. "How else you gonna get a job?" he said. "'Cept through me. Better be thankful they'll take you and they will because you're my boy." I didn't want to work with him. He'd always be looking over my shoulder to see if I was doing it right.

"How are the eggs?" he said.

"What do we need a deer for?"

"I gave our meat to the Jacobsons. They lost everything in the fire and somebody needs to look after them. Besides, the deer are starving. I bet for each one I take, two are saved from starvation."

The biscuits tasted good. Nobody made biscuits like my father. I poured more sausage gravy over them.

"You know that for sure?"

"This winter's been rough on them."

"Where are the Jacobsons living?" They had a daughter who was still in elementary school.

"In their garage. The fire took the house and left the garage. They'll be okay. They moved their stove and ran a pipe out the window. That thing throws off a lot of heat. They're cramped, but they'll make it through the winter and rebuild in the spring.

"You want coffee?" he said. "At the wharf that's how they know if they'd hired a man or a boy. The men drink coffee."

"I'll wait," I said. I hoped they didn't expect me to drink whiskey, too. I'd tried it, and it tasted like diesel fuel, which I had actually gotten a mouthful of once, when we were changing a leaky tank on the truck and had to siphon it empty.

"We could shoot a deer here," I offered.

"No, I've got to head out and drop those tying supplies off, anyway. I'll only be gone overnight. I've got to keep those folks happy. They're my best customers."

Monday, Dad dropped me off in front of Kathy's house. As I walked up to the door, Mrs. Kremmer let me in.

"Awful nice what your father did for the Jacobsons," she said. Mrs. Kremmer was a big woman. She wore a red flower-print dress. "He's a real nice man, your father."

I thanked her.

"Kathy," she hollered. "Tyler's waiting on you." I could hear Kathy grunt from the bathroom.

Their house was a real house, not a shack, like ours. The walls were made of clean, white plaster. Ours gave you slivers if you bumped them the wrong way. The Kremmers had soft carpeting and real paintings on the walls and pretty mineral samples on the coffee tables.

Kathy came out of the bathroom wearing make-up, which made her look older than seventeen.

"Hello, Tyler," she said.

I said "Hi," then looked at the upright piano which stood against the wall. I wondered if Kathy could play. I was suddenly very sorry that the kids at school made fun of her.

"You're going to be a good man just like your father, aren't you, Tyler?" Mrs. Kremmer said.

"I suppose," I said. "He might be getting me a job at the wharf come spring."

"That'll be good. Just don't take to drinking. The men on the ships like to drink." She looked at her daughter, who clearly was a woman, almost like Sasha, except even in make-up, Kathy wasn't as pretty.

"Well," Mrs. Kremmer said, "don't be late."

"We won't," Kathy said, then stepped out into the cold. I followed.

"Does your father drink?" Kathy asked, when we were on 123, heading west.

"Sometimes," I said.

"Well, my mom thinks he's a prince. She should know that he drinks."

It had not snowed overnight, so the road was clear and covered with layer of sand from the county trucks.

"Does he get angry?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know," she said. "Does he come home drunk and throw stuff?"

"No," I said. I didn't want to be having this conversation. The sky was still dark and I wished I didn't have to be in school. I could tell Kathy was looking at me so I didn't look at her. We passed through Hulbert Corners and I saw one of the bait shops my father sold stuff to. We crossed the Fox River where my father and I had fished many times.

"I'm glad he doesn't get angry," she said. At least twenty minutes had passed. "You know, we should hang out more often. There isn't anyone else our age in town."

"Yeah," I said, but didn't mean it.

"How come you don't have a dog?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I don't know," she said. "We don't need one."

"Oh," I said.

"You like living here?" she asked. She sure was talkative. When the four of us school mates used to ride together, she would keep the radio on. The Nelson brothers didn't want to talk to her because she was Kathy. But she would nervously glance at them through the rear-view mirror to see if they were whispering. I'd been glad when she kicked them out for good.

"You like it here?" she asked again.

"No," I answered.

"Where do you want to live?"

"I don't know. Maybe Detroit."

"I want to get out of here, too," she said. "I want to go to California."

"What would you do in California?"

"Get away," she said. "Are you really going to work on the ships?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You were just a boy not too long ago. How'd you grow up so fast?"

"I don't know," I said.

On one of the rides to school that week, she talked me into coming over to her house Saturday morning. She said that we should do something nice for the Jacobsons. I asked her what, but she said we had to think about it. "We could make cookies," I offered.

"Sure," she said. "I'll have my mom leave us the recipe.

"She'll help?" I asked.

"She's driving to Chicago to see my father. He's got four days. They're doing some work on his ship." I wondered if a rumor might spread at school that we were going out. I hoped not. I decided it wouldn't start because I was a freshman and she was a junior and no one would know that we baked cookies together for a little girl whose house burned down.

That night I told my dad. He was packing boxes with fly-tying supplies and tallying up the value on a pad of paper.

"Will you let me drive one of the Snocats while you're gone?" I asked.

"Where you planning to go?"

"Kathy and I are baking cookies for Marcie Jacobson."

"That sounds like a good idea," he said. "Be careful. Don't take it too fast. We can't afford to bang it up. No hospital bills either."

"Okay," I said.

When he finished packing, he poured himself a little whiskey.

"Do you know Mr. Kremmer?" I asked. I was standing over the black and white television trying to adjust the rabbit ears so we could watch the hockey game on the CBN station across the Bay in Canada.

"Oh, not too well," he said.

"Ever see him at the Point Tavern?"

"When he's in town. Why? Is he back?"

"No. She said he's out."

He stood up, took the shotgun off the wall, and shuffled through the cabinet for his cleaning kit. At the table, he began to take the gun apart, like he had showed me many times.

"I'm glad you're making friends," he said.

I didn't say anything. If there were other people in town I'd have friends besides Kathy, but there weren't.

Saturday morning after breakfast, he told me he'd be back the next day, and he left in his pick-up, pulling the snowmobile trailer behind it. I went to my room to pick out a few clothes to wear. I decided on a clean pair of jeans and a nice sweater with a turtleneck. In my father's room I found his belt, the good one with the shiny brass buckle.

When I arrived at Kathy's house, she slowly opened the door, peeking around it as if she wasn't sure who was there.

"Hello, Tyler," she said. She was wearing a long skirt with a dark blouse. She wore make-up, like she did for school each day that week.

"Hello," I said. The house was warm. They had a fireplace, not a wood stove, and firelight danced all over the room. My stomach fluttered with it.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said. "I wasn't sure you would come."

She smelled nice. I tried to think of her as a chubby older sister, and not a girlfriend.

She poured me a mug of chocolate milk which she had warmed on the stove. I sat down at the kitchen table and looked up at the electric chandelier. Her parents made

a lot of money. The table was oak—I could tell by the knots and grain—so were the chairs and the cabinets.

"Ever baked before?" she said.

"Just biscuits," I said. I felt silly.

"How do you make them?" she said, as if quizzing me.

"Just flour, baking soda, baking powder, water, and, I think, salt."

"Oh, that's good. Most boys—" She paused. "Most boys don't know a thing about cooking."

That wasn't true. My father and I both could cook. I could make trout any way you wanted it. Venison too. My dad always said a man has got to know what to do with the game he catches.

I picked up a chunk of crystal from a coffee table and watched it sparkle in the firelight. It was purple.

"What's this?" I said.

"Amethyst," she said.

"It looks like it's worth a thousand dollars." I sounded immature and blushed.

"It's not. My mom found that."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "Rock hunting is part of her job. Sometimes she sells them to jewelers." I ran my fingers over the hundreds of crystal points.

"How many rings can you make out of this?" I asked.

"Oh, that one isn't gemstone-quality," she said. "The color isn't intense enough."

She asked me if I wanted to see some more and I did. She showed me her mother's workroom where hundreds of samples laid in rows of wooden boxes. She showed me machines too—a saw and a sander. She picked out a clump of sparkling red

crystals. "Garnet," she said. "A jeweler will buy these some day. These, too." She picked up a bottle of stones which were covered with water. "Uncut opals." She pointed to other samples and told me their names. "I found this one." She handed me a clump of crystal. "It's rose quartz." She picked up a chisel and hammer and skillfully broke a corner off and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said and squeezed the mineral in my hand.

We went back into the kitchen and began to make the cookies. She kept smiling and saying, "Isn't this fun." I kept nodding. Outside the window, a cardinal flew from a spruce tree and landed on the bird feeder and began to peck at seeds.

Kathy showed me how to scoop up a bit of dough with one spoon and drop it onto the cookie tray with another spoon. Once, our hands touched in the bowl and color came to her cheeks. I pulled my hand back.

After we put the cookies in the oven, we sat down on the couch. Rather, I sat down on the couch and she sat next to me, her spongy leg touching mine.

"Are you really dropping out?" she said mildly.

"Who said anything about dropping out?"

"You said you might get a job." She was right. I didn't know if my father meant part-time or full-time. There wouldn't be many hours after school because of the long drive.

"Maybe I'll just work during the summer."

"You said spring, before."

"I'm not sure what my father meant," I said.

"Don't you like school?"

"Not really."

"I like school. I just don't like the kids." She emphasized the word *kids* as if to suggest that I was not one of them. She continued telling me about the people who

would talk to her, and those who wouldn't. When she asked me about my friends, I told her that I liked to fish and that my dog, Bruce, was my best friend.

When the batch was finished, we slid the cookies off the baking sheet and onto a plate. They tasted just as good as the one I had a few months ago. It was almost noon when we got into Kathy's Buick and drove over to the Jacobsons.

As we pulled onto the small dirt road just south of town, I could see the charred wreckage of their house. The fireplace remained intact. So did the dirty foundation where the walls once stood. A blanket of snow covered these people's floor.

Wood smoke swirled out of the tin pipe which stuck out of the garage window. They had packed snow against the walls to insulate them.

When Kathy opened the car door, I immediately smelled char. It made me sick. This could easily happen to our wooden shack, if we weren't careful. What would we do then? I could see lumps in the snow where the remains of furniture stood—their davenport was nothing but a metal frame of wire coils; the cabinets and dishes were broken; and everything was covered with snow and ash. They lost everything—clothes, toys, fishing equipment—everything. My throat throbbed looking at it.

"At least no one died," Kathy said.

At the side door of the garage, she knocked. I was scared. What business did we have coming here?

Mrs. Jacobson opened the door a crack. She held the corner of the blanket which was wrapped around her.

"We baked cookies for your daughter," Kathy said.

"Thanks," Mrs. Jacobson said. She forced a smile, bringing lines to her forehead. Her eyes looked old and tired. Marcie peeked out from behind her mother, but then hid behind the blanket draped around her mother's shoulders. "I'd have you in

for a cup of tea, but the house is a mess," she said. "Besides, we don't have much to sit on." She thanked us again, then shut the door.

Back on the main road, Kathy turned to me.

"I can't believe she didn't invite us in," she said. It had begun to snow. The road was getting very slippery.

"She's probably ashamed," I said.

"Still," she said, "it's rude not to invite someone in who's bringing you something and thinking of you—even cookies."

"She didn't invite my father in," I said. I didn't know if this was true or not, but Kathy might feel better if she knew she wasn't the only one who didn't get invited in.

"That proves she's rude," Kathy said.

As we drove down main street, to my surprise Kathy pulled into the Paradise Diner. We sat down at the empty lunch counter on red stools with chrome trim. She said she'd pay, which was good because I didn't have any money. We ordered hamburgers from somebody who knew my father, but I couldn't tell if he recognized me. He wore a white cloth hat and was smoking a cigarette.

"Do you like whiskey?" Kathy asked while we were eating.

"No," I said.

"My mom says everybody at the wharf drinks whiskey."

"I know."

"It's good in Coke," she said. I tried to imagine what Coke and diesel fuel would taste like. It couldn't be good. "You'll have to learn to like it, if you're going to work at the wharf." The man behind the counter flicked the ash off his cigarette and asked us how the burgers were.

"Fine," she said. I looked down so he wouldn't recognize me. I leaned toward Kathy and asked her in a whisper if she knew him.

"Sure," she whispered back. "Fritz, I think. We come here often." Her mouth was so close that I could feel her lips brush against my ear as she spoke.

When we finished she asked me if I wanted to share a bowl of ice cream.

"What do you mean, share?" I said.

"Well," she said. "I'll buy one for you and I'll have a few bites." This sounded okay to me. My father did not buy ice cream ever. The sundae came in a bowl with two spoons and two cherries. But Kathy clearly was not having only "a few" bites. When she tried to feed me the cherry off her spoon, I drew the line.

"I don't like cherries," I said, pulling my head back. She ate the cherry, then scooped some chocolate onto her finger and put it front of my face.

"No thanks," I said, embarrassed. Fritz would ask my dad if I was his son—I just knew it.

When the bowl was empty, Kathy paid Fritz and we left.

Back at her house, I felt obligated to come in. She had, after all, just bought me lunch. I sat down on the couch again, and she disappeared into the kitchen for some macaroons. As I waited, I heard her open two soda bottles and put ice into glasses. A few minutes later she came in with a silver serving tray with two full glasses of Coke, and a plate of macaroons.

Smiling, she sat next to me and handed me a drink. I smelled liquor as I sipped it.

"Do you like it?"

"I don't know."

I tried it again. I could taste the whiskey, but it didn't taste like diesel as I had remembered. My throat stung just a little as I swallowed.

I ate a cookie. She slipped her arm around me and told me that she was happy. I didn't know how to react. I didn't want her touching me, but I didn't want to hurt her. I

sipped my drink and began to feel a little light and airy. We sat in silence for a few minutes. It was time to go, I knew. She was leaning into me, now. I felt her soft breast pressing against my arm.

Then I felt her warm, moist lips against my cheek. "You're beautiful," she said softly, resting her hand on my knee. I finished my drink and clapped my glass against the table.

"Bruce has to be let out," I said, sitting up straight. "I forgot about Bruce. He's been cooped up all day."

"Why do I ruin everything?" she said softly.

"It's not your fault," I said. "He has to pee. I have to let him out. It's my responsibility."

At the door, I told her I had a nice time and that I would see her Monday. I think she was crying when I left.

At home, Bruce did have to pee, so I let him out for a bit, then stoked the wood stove. That night, I watched television until late in the evening and tried not to think about poor Kathy.

The next morning, everything was white. The drive was covered, the Snocat, the branches of the trees. I was on my own today. The cabin was mine. I fried some bacon, then some of yesterday's biscuits in the fat, until they were brown and soggy with the grease.

I decided that if we needed to stock up on meat, I could do my share by catching pike or muskie. I put on my long underwear, my snowmobile suit, my boots, and stepped into the shed, which was attached to the back of our cabin. All the venison steaks in the chest freezer were gone. The two wild turkeys were gone. The stew we

had made in the stock pot was gone. The whitefish were gone. All to the Jacobsons. Only a few bags of frozen vegetables and some frosty meat scraps remained.

I shut the lid. The shed around me was full of fishing and hunting gear, car parts, oil cans, broken appliances, gardening tools, and stuff we hadn't thrown away because it might be useful some day. I looked around for the tip-ups and found them in the corner by the poles and a wooden sled built for dragging the ice fishing gear behind a snowmobile. I tied the sled to the Snocat, and packed the tip-ups, the ice auger, and the ax, and a bag with lunch.

In town, I bought four dozen minnows, then rode into the National Forest, following snowmobile tracks, not taking the turns too fast because the fishing sled might tip.

Out on the ice, the wind was blowing, kicking up powdery snow and twirling it in little devils which disappeared into the pines. I thought of my father's story about the dogs falling in and all, but this ice was solid because this was the dead of winter.

No one else was out on the lake, but after I parked the cat over the deep end, I saw dark marks where others had bored holes. These had frozen over, but with the auger, I easily drilled them out again, then set the tip-ups. I baited fifteen in all, running the big hook through the tough tail tissue like my father had shown me and not along the spine, so the minnows would stay alive for a long time and swim around, their movements attracting fish.

I set many more than the legal limit of two tip-ups, but we needed the meat and there was no way that a fish and game officer would come up here. Besides, they patrolled from pick-up trucks, not snowmobiles.

After I had set the last one, I noticed a tip-up a hundred yards away had sprung, and its orange cloth flag was flapping in the breeze. I hurried over to it and could tell from the tension that there was a fish on the end of the line beneath the slush that was

forming in the hole. I pulled the line and felt the fish dart below. I was excited now, and proud to be doing my part to stock the freezer.

I drew the line out of the hole slowly, letting the fish dart, so it would tire. When I got it near the surface, I saw a dark flash, but I couldn't tell what kind of fish it was. After a few minutes, it was in the water-filled hole in the ice, which was at least three feet thick. It tried to dive back down, but I'd taken all the slack out of the line, and I lifted gently, and swung the fish onto the ice. It was a pike, a good-sized one, about thirty-six inches.

I clubbed him hard and he flopped twice, then lay motionless, his slime glistening in the sun until the scales grew opaque with frost.

I caught ten fish by six o'clock that evening. I gutted them with my jack knife between strikes because if they froze solid, I'd have to thaw them back at the cabin. You simply can't clean a fish that's solid as a brick. I cut their heads off too, and dumped the offal in a pile at the side of the lake for the coons.

That evening as I headed back with the catch, I knew my father would be proud. But the truck and snowmobile trailer weren't in the drive. I was frustrated that I couldn't show the fish off right away. But I could wait, I told myself.

I wrapped the frozen filets in plastic and put them in the chest freezer. There was enough to last a good long while. With a deer or two, we'd be set 'till spring.

My father didn't come home that evening. I re-built the fire in the stove and made a peanut butter sandwich for dinner. When I went to bed, I figured he'd be home when I awoke.

But at four a.m. Monday morning, his bed was empty. I hugged Bruce. The dog's body was warm. He licked my face. I put some more wood in the stove and was angry that we didn't have a telephone.

Dad could have fallen in the woods or broken through the ice—maybe he had been crossing a spring-fed lake and didn't notice the color of the ice because of the blanket of snow. Maybe he hadn't been lucky this time. I opened the doors of the stove and stared into the flames. Bruce rested his front paws on my legs. I patted his head.

In front of that fire, I prayed to God that my dad was warm and safe, wherever he might be. I picked up the Bible from under the stack of pornos, and flipped through the Psalms. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," I read. I dozed off, then awoke, still alone, at seven, the time I was supposed to meet Kathy. I sped over to her house on the cat, and told her my father was missing. She hugged me. She was warm.

"I'm staying home to wait for him," I said.

"Okay," she said. "I guess I'll drop by after school."

I asked if I could use her phone, then called the bait shop in Newberry. A woman answered—Melvin's wife. She put him on the line, but he hadn't seen my father. I asked him what I should do. He gave me the number for the Luce County Sheriff's Department.

I called the sheriff, and the woman who answered said that people get delayed all the time and that I should not worry. She asked for my phone number.

"We don't have a phone," I said.

She took down my name and address and said to call her back the next day if he still wasn't home.

Kathy hugged me again, then drove off in her Buick. I sped back, hoping his truck was already in the drive. But it was empty except for the snow which already had covered my tracks heading out.

If he were dead, what would I do? His brother Ernie, who he always told stories about, had died in a drunk driving accident while on R & R in Korea. His father had died of a stroke in bed. His mother, a heart attack while mopping the floor. He was the

last of the family and now I was completely alone. I put another log on the fire, sending sparks swirling onto the floor. I stamped them out. I began to cry, thinking of the trips we took in the summers fishing the Manistique, the Fox, the Tahquamenon.

Around noon I heard an engine, but it was not a diesel engine. From the door I could see Kathy's Buick.

She hugged me again, then looked around the cabin.

"Not here yet?"

"No." I wondered if she would notice the magazines. I decided I didn't care if she did.

"This place is cozy," she said.

I sat in front of the fire. She sat next to me.

"Should we look for him?" she said. "I've got the car."

"I have no idea where he even went. Probably some place far off. Probably down a lot of winding dirt roads. Deer season isn't open. He wouldn't risk hunting where he could get caught."

"Well, let's just wait," Kathy said. "He'll come back."

"Yeah," I said. "I bet the truck got stuck and he had to walk to a main road for help."

"Yeah," she said. "That's what happened."

She slipped her arm around me. "Let's play checkers," she said, looking at the game on the shelf.

"What if he is dead?" I said.

She let go of me. "He isn't," she said. "I just know it." She set the checker board on the floor.

We played several games without talking much, except to say "Your move" or "Whose turn is it?" She won most of the time.

When we were both sick of checkers, she leaned against me, like she had on the couch in her house, but I was glad to be next to her this time.

"Did you know your mother?" she said.

"We haven't heard anything from her since I was six."

"That's terrible."

"Would you like to see her picture?" I asked.

"Sure," Kathy said.

I slid the curled photo from the corner of the mirror in my father's room where he always kept it. My mother had long black hair and was very thin. She held me, a newborn, wrapped in a checkered blanket. The background of the photo was blurry. I had never realized that she looked so young—just a school girl, not much older than Kathy.

Back on the couch, I handed it to her. "You were so tiny," she said. "And you're so grown-up now." She held me tighter and kissed the corners of my eyes, which I knew were salty. She kissed my cheek and then my mouth. "Poor thing," she said.

We slid off the bean bag until we were lying down. Her body was warm and soft, like I thought a woman's should be. I felt myself become hard. I hoped she wouldn't feel the bulge in my jeans.

"You don't mind me kissing you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I don't mind." At least I wasn't alone. I began kissing her in return.

She began unbuttoning my flannel shirt and feeling beneath my clothes with her moist hands. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything, except let her touch me.

She began to take her clothes off, too. I was glad. I knew the further we went the more trouble we'd be in when my father walked in, which made the possibility that

he would all the more likely. I swept our clothes away from the wood stove and ran my hands over the soft flesh of her breasts and stomach.

We held each other for a long time—I'm not sure how long. The hue of the fire shifted from the yellow of new flames to the orange and black of coals. I wondered what love was. I didn't love Kathy, I thought, but I liked her warmth and softness. I tried to think of the last time someone had touched me, really touched me. But besides her, I couldn't recall. Maybe her mom had hugged me—I didn't think so. If I didn't love Kathy, I knew I loved my father who was probably very cold right now. I shuddered, and Kathy tightened her grip on me. I wondered if he had ice in his beard—it was so cold out there.

I imagined my body melting into Kathy's warmth. Warmth was all I wanted. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Instead of sleeping, my mind wandered to my father, and I pleaded with God for his life.

Eventually, Kathy got up without speaking. I could hear her urine splashing into the basin, and I hoped we had toilet paper. Often we would run out and use tissues. It was so strange to have a naked woman in our house. She came back to me shivering, so I put the shawl around her and tossed a few more logs onto the fire, and then returned to her arms. I wanted to take her to my bed and fall asleep. I wanted to be tired.

"Don't worry," she said.

I kissed her cheek.

Later, we dressed, and she decided to make coffee. We sat at the table and waited. It was getting dark already. I opened the door to look out. Bruce darted past and lifted his leg against the maple and darted back to my side. The snow looked blue in the evening light. My stomach felt hollow and my warm tears left cold streaks on my face. I wiped my eyes and patted Bruce then sat at the table.

We waited, and when the coffee was ready, we waited some more. Kathy put milk in her coffee, so I put some in mine too. I watched her stir in two teaspoons of sugar. I did the same. My father always drank his coffee straight.

"We should talk," Kathy said. "That will make the time pass."

"Sure," I said.

She told me about journeys she and her mother would take to find minerals for the shop. She told me details I didn't understand, how they could look at types of rocks in an area to determine if there were any valuable stones near. I listened intently, trying not to think about my father and the temperature outside. The more I tried not to think about him, the more I did. Only a week ago he had told me if I had gotten lost I'd freeze to death. I watched Kathy's cheeks quiver as her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear her words. It was getting dark out. The sheriff had said not to call until tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning.

Kathy fell silent. My coffee was half gone; its flavor lingered in my mouth.

"You're quiet," she said.

I nodded.

"Do you want to talk about us?"

I didn't know what there was to talk about. "What do you mean?"

"You know," she said. "We just did it."

"I know," I said. I patted Bruce's head.

"Do you think you could love me?" Kathy said.

I looked up at her. "Love takes time," I said. I didn't know what that meant, but it wasn't a yes or a no; either would have been devastating. She smiled.

"Your dad's going to be just fine. I just know it."

We finished the coffee and sat down in the beanbag in front of the wood stove. I opened the doors so we could see the flames and feel the heat.

She told me a story about her father getting into a fight with another sailor in a bar in Toledo. It was a funny story and she gestured wildly as she told it. I tried to laugh. Then she asked me if I had any stories. I thought for a moment.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said. "Stories help the time pass, don't they?"

I nodded. It was true. That was why during the winter, when there was no work and the cabin was lonely—empty of any woman's presence except the tattered shawl—my father told those stories. They protected him from thoughts of my mother and how our lives could have been different.

"Yes," I said, "I know a story." Of course, I told her about Mitch and Blackie and the ice. When I was finished, I closed the stove and took her hand.

"Let's get some sleep," I said. "We've got to drive to the police station in the morning."

I took her to my bed, and she feel asleep beside me. But I did not sleep. I listened to the wind whistle through the pines. Images of his frozen beard entered and re-entered my thoughts. I replayed childhood scenes—the time he taught me to flyfish and my hat got swept downstream; the time we went canoeing; the time we drove across the Mackinaw Bridge and ate at a restaurant in Mackinaw City.

I lay awake for a few hours, listening to the cabin creak in the breeze, listening to the wolves singing, and then I heard the lock in the door. I bolted upright. Kathy remained asleep, a smile on her face.

My father stood in the cabin, wearing his old down jacket. His black beard was free of ice. His eyes were recessed and sad, like he hadn't slept for days.

I clamped my arms around him. He was alive. I didn't let go. I could feel his beard scratch against my cheek. His arms were strong and his chest and back were hard. Emotion welled up within me, burning my throat and staining my face.

"We've got a little bit of trouble," he said.

I loosened my grip on him. His cheeks were chapped and his eyes were ice blue.

"We never hug." I forced the words out, then quickly kissed his rough lips. He shrank back, startled, and raised his big hands as if to ward off an attack.